

## THE FUTILITIES OF REFORMERS.

**T**HERE must be some good reason for the etymological contempt into which the very word "reform" has fallen. Nothing can condemn a party so certainly to defeat as the reform label. The reasons for this are many, and are perhaps to be sought for in the reformers themselves. Municipal government is honeycombed with corruption; there is speculation in the financial departments, irregularities in the tax office, collusion between the police and the gamblers and keepers of houses of ill repute. A spasm of virtue passes through the community; a group of well-meaning "reformers" starts out to set things right, usually by the utterly hopeless method of voting good men into office. Few reformers of this class perceive that the causes of municipal corruption lie deep; that they are economic rather than political, and that these abuses are surface indications arising primarily from the economic slavery of the individual, and secondarily from the apathy engendered in part by the denial to cities of the powers of self-government and the regulation and control of their own affairs. I say "in part" by reason of this denial of the city's natural self-governing functions, thus resulting in the loss of civic responsibility in the individual—but only in part. There is a broader reason. Good government or bad government means little to the average citizen. His rent is not higher if government is corrupt, nor lower if government is honest; therefore, he has little interest in higher taxes or lower taxes. Appeals to his sense of honesty may awaken a faint sentiment of hostility to the thieves in public office, because they *are* thieves, not because they injure him. This hostility may flame for a moment into what we term "righteous indignation," but it is the nature of indignation, whether righteous or otherwise, that is not founded on a sense of personal injury, to be short-lived; and this is the only basis for the temporary success of these reform movements, when they are successful at all.

We might perhaps trust the altruistic spirit to accomplish wonders if the majority of men were not too busy in a life-and-death struggle for a mere livelihood. But we are dealing with a world as it is, not a world as it ought to be. The man without property has, it is true, a very acute and direct interest as to how taxes should be imposed; but under present methods mere questions of percentages, of a higher or lower rate, do not concern him pecuniarily, and therefore will not interest him long morally.

To ask your reformer of a certain type to appreciate this profound fact in economic life is to ask too much of men whose only knowledge of the world is derived from their little familiar circle of business acquaintances, and their only knowledge of the laws governing society from the teachings, nebulously remembered, of their college text-books—teachings that indeed were best forgotten. Such reformers usually end by advocating the restriction of the franchise to property-holders instead of the more reasonable methods of substituting systems of taxation that will increase the number of direct taxpayers.

Let us go in imagination, as many of us have in reality, into some convention of reformers. Let us take a glance over the assembly and ask ourselves how in point of physiognomy it will compare with a convention of railroad presidents. Look at the faces. Which gathering would you choose as representing, in outward appearances at least, the average intelligence of the nation? The first would give you exceptional individuals, incomparably higher, spiritually and mentally, than the second, but the second would outrank it mentally on the average. In the first would be found an utter absence of any unity of policy or cohesiveness, or agreement upon what steps should first be taken—far more bickerings and little egotisms, petty ambitions to which the great aim is subordinated, and overwhelming self-consciousness.

Look at your labor leaders. The average is higher than it used to be, and I think is improving year by year. From Martin Irons to Sovereign, from Sovereign to Debs, and from Debs to Mitchell are gratifying steps in the upward progress;

but there is still much to be desired. The leaders of the reform movements are not intellectually the peers of the men they are attacking—the upholders of special privilege. And why should we expect it of them? It would be strange indeed if the men who are fighting for the retention of unjust privileges, unearned leisure, and inordinate wealth to command knowledge, should not have profited by these advantages. But no real good can be gained by closing our eyes to the facts.

I have known of but few reformers who were able to appreciate both the abstract and concrete sides of a problem. We sometimes speak of abstract questions, of concrete questions, but in reality all questions are of these two attributes; that is to say, every action involves the problem of concrete practicability, and the greater question of the universal laws of Justice and social well-being.

There is something almost feminine in the average reformer's appreciation of the impossible. One can almost fancy him clapping his hands with joyful enthusiasm at some incredible line of action, with the exclamation, "How delightfully impracticable!" I am at a loss to explain, except by reason of this attitude of mind, the policy, for example, of your anarchist and your "class conscious" socialist. I do not mean by anarchist the mythical person who wants to throw bombs at Mr. Rockefeller but the "philosophic" anarchist, so called on the principle of *locus a non lucendo*, who proposes to abolish all government, constructive as well as repressive, by—how shall we say?—a concerted action of society, since it cannot be done by the individual, but which inevitably involves an act of government. Of course, your "philosophic" anarchist does not mean what he says, since at his own meetings he helps to elect a chairman, and the chairman governs within rules, which again are acts of government. But if he does not mean what he says why does he say it? Merely because of the reformer's incurable love of paradox, not to speak of his confusion of things unlike which go under the same names. Government may mean one of many things—a President, a policeman, a

clean street, a town council, a public park, a jailer, or a hangman. Your anarchist condemns government *per se*, by which he means only the government he dislikes in contradistinction to the government he believes in, and which he sometimes calls "voluntaryism."

One defect reformers possess in common—extreme intellectual narrowness. This arises from the dwelling of the mental vision too exclusively upon one point. This habit of mind is indeed the origin of all monomania, and curious are the phases it takes in the minds of your social reformers; sometimes it is the very madness of impracticability. Take your "class conscious" socialist, with his infatuation for futility and failure. "Would you," said I to a representative of one of these, "work for the municipal ownership of public franchises if advocated by a party numerically strong enough to insure success at the polls?" "No," said this class-conscious idiot, "no class-conscious socialist would."

The error of the Single Taxers—far more intelligent and numerically more powerful than the Socialists—is of a different kind. Curiously enough, they err in the opposite direction. The Single Taxer is an earnest, persistent, and forceful advocate of his reform at all times except during an election. Then he is a Cleveland Free Trader, a Bryan zealot, a free silverite, or a Chicago Platform Democrat—anything but a Single Taxer. There were no reasons at all why the believers in the philosophy of Henry George should have supported Bryan in 1896. In the days of 1886, when Mr. George was electrifying the community by his campaign for the mayoralty, and later in the days of the Anti-Poverty Society, the Single Tax was a real movement. It has long since ceased to be a vital force to be reckoned with, omitting strong local manifestations. By allying themselves with the Democratic party, Single Taxers have earned the ill-will of many who sincerely desire social betterment, and they have not won to their cause a single influential Democrat. So little was their influence felt in the Democratic party, after eight years of active participation in its battles, that the question of taxation was ignored by the

Kansas City convention, and the introduction of the economically faulty income-tax plank was omitted from its platform by inadvertence—an omission rectified at the eleventh hour!

Those Single Taxers who, on the other hand, have chosen to follow the true policy of hewing to the line, letting the chips fall where they may, have received abundant justification for their course in the strong local manifestations we have indicated (in Boston and elsewhere); and the result furnishes a comparative estimate of the value of these two methods. It explains why, nationally, the influence of Single Taxers is absolutely *nil*, and why locally much real progress has been made. Where substantial victories in the influencing of public sentiment have been won they have been the result of singleness and directness of aim, and not of circumlocutory policies.

Compared with the policy of dissipation of effort pursued by Single Taxers, the method of your "class-conscious" socialist, though idiotic enough, seems positively heroic. But not only by their wellnigh unqualified indorsement of Democratic party principles have the Single Taxers accomplished nothing, but positively as well as negatively they have succeeded in injuring their own cause; and this they have done in two ways. By a passive acquiescence in the passionate lunacy of free silver, they have helped to perpetuate that policy, and by their own silence have seemed to approve the studied refusal of Mr. Bryan and the Democratic leaders to discuss the question of free trade—which if not logically bound up with the advocacy of the Single Tax as a political principle is at all events an indissoluble part of its great philosophy.

Among reformers engaged in the practical business of reform there is a want of that sureness of touch which characterizes the leaders in the hard and difficult world of trade and commerce. Too many of your reformers are erratic, unstable, lacking in poise and equilibrium, and intemperate and extravagant in action and speech. It is for this reason that the man who leads a strenuous mental life, who has absorbed that culture the latest fruits of which are poise and self-restraint and temperate if adequate modes of expression, is repelled.

The literary man and the artist, however much inclined to be social rebels, prefer to stand aloof from the hurly-burly of these passionate shouters who do not seem to have learned discipline, however real may be the wrongs against which they fulminate. This is why your artist is so seldom a reformer, save in the way of his art; and this is why the artist is so often accused, though sometimes with justice, of aristocratic aloofness. The artist of the days of Savonarola, however much his soul may have revolted against Florentine licentiousness, must similarly have stared aghast at Savonarola's vandalism. The man of artistic temperament at a later period would find himself more in unison with the thought of Erasmus than with that of Luther. If he did not shrink from Luther's crudity of thought, that episode of the ink bottle would decide him.

I sometimes wonder if many reformers do not cherish their reforms rather as pride of intellect than as a moral conviction to which they owe certain duties and responsibilities. I have rarely heard of any reformer of wealth leaving bequests in his will for the furtherance of the doctrines he believed in. Men give wealth to colleges, to hospitals, to poor relief, to private and public charity, but nothing to the cause of social amelioration and reconstruction, though organs and methods of propaganda languish for want of means. I have heard men of wealth depict in vivid colors the evils of discriminating and indiscriminating charity, and insist that nothing short of the abolition of the present social system could permanently benefit mankind, but to the first cause they gave generously and to the latter grudgingly. A few millionaires have distributed in endowments tenfold greater sums than were ever given to the cause of social reform, estimating the proportion relatively to the means of these two classes of donors.

There is some justification for the charge flung in the face of the reformer that he should first of all reform himself. Too many are oblivious of their own characteristic shortcomings; too many are conspicuous examples of partial failure because of one-sided individual development. We do well to attack with all the weapons at our command, and with all our might,

the evils of society, but we should first of all remember that it is as individuals that others will regard us; that our words will have weight only as we bear ourselves like men; that our personal usefulness is apt to be in the same ratio as our sense of personal responsibility. To reformers above all others is this lesson important; the carrier of the message must show himself superior to the faults and foibles that society, because it sees only superficialities, learns the soonest to detect and despise, and, despising the messenger for his defects of mind or character, grows to ignore the message, or justifies its rejection by indicating the individual's deficiencies.

And we are now brought to the immediate situation in this city of New York. In 1897 the Citizens' Union spent \$156,000 to defeat Tammany Hall—and was itself defeated. One hundred and fifty-six thousand dollars! How Croker must have smiled at that! Why, Tammany gives that and more to its district leaders to spend in ways that will do the most good. The foes of Tammany, rich men having much at stake, gave, some of them, as much as \$100, after a good deal of persuasion. The Tammany district leaders will spend that in one saloon in drinks for "the boys." One hundred and fifty-six thousand dollars to defeat an organization whose power rests upon public franchises in its gift or under its protection amounting in value to hundreds of millions!

Oh, it will be said, surely the expenditure of money by honorable, upright men in the manner Tammany expends it is not to be thought of. Well, how does Tammany distribute the funds it raises to influence and carry elections? It cannot be denied that the greater portion is spent legitimately, and of that which is not strictly so spent a very small proportion goes in the direct purchase of votes. It does not go in that way because it is really not needed. It is not the purchasable electorate that keeps the Tammany organization in power. A great deal of money expended is used to quicken and maintain enthusiasm among "the boys"; and it by no means follows that this necessarily involves its corrupt use.

But the chief point these honorable gentlemen who are op-

posing Tammany should bear in mind is this: If a thorough opposition organization to Tammany is to be kept alive, it must be supported by generous contributions. If New York is worth rescuing it is worth rescuing at a pecuniary cost, and if the Tammany opposition cannot match Tammany's expenditure dollar for dollar the reform movement will lack vitality. If reform is worth anything it is worth something in dollars and cents.

And then it will be of service to our good friends to inquire how it comes about that Tammany is willing and able to spend such large sums of money. A great deal is raised by that species of police blackmail which has always prevailed in this and other great cities. For that there is no one to blame but the community itself, which has made the inevitable vices and many of the harmless follies of men illegal. Another source of these contributions is to be found in the assessment of clerks and officeholders, but for this the community is again to blame in making public salaries higher than private salaries for the same grades of service. But this explains only a small part of the money after all. There are "bosses" who control nominations; there are men, the holders of valuable franchises, who are interested in getting the wrong kind of men nominated, and they are willing to pay for it. And right here is the answer to the New York *World's* question as to where Croker "got it." The larger source of bossism and most of the corruption of city government is to be sought for in the men *behind* Croker.

There are some people who think that reform means vice-hunting, and that the city's redemption is accomplished when you close up the saloons at one o'clock at night, or change a pool-room where people may openly enter and wager their money on a horse race into a club-room where they may do the same thing in greater secrecy. How very melancholy it all is! We will have corrupt government as long as people do not understand that the true function of government is not the reformation of the individual but the protection of rights. Every man feels instinctively that he has a right to drink as



he likes, to spend his money as he likes; he resents the impertinence of government interference—and in the main he is right. Grown men will be not better men, but worse, and public administration more corrupt, by every renewed attempt to suppress or regulate the inevitable vices and follies of men, nearly all of which spring from misgovernment and the denial of man's inalienable rights.

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