

## XX.

*CONCLUSION.*

I now invite the reader's courteous attention to some general thoughts about the subject we have been discussing. I do not profess to have solved the labor problem; I do not think it is to be solved on any system, or by any theory, which can be laid down either by a man or a body of men. I am an optimist to this extent; It seems to me that the system on which men have gradually been led to work in unison by merely following the course dictated by circumstances in each individual case works better than any which human ingenuity could have contrived. Studying the effect of governmental interference in the past we find that whenever it was dictated by any economic theory it retarded rather than promoted progress. We now look back with wonder upon the unwise policy of the Spanish government consequent upon the discovery of America. Yet it was dictated by the commercial theories

which then moved the world, though individuals never acted on them. We now see very clearly that the policy to which individuals were led merely by following their own interests, and acting as circumstance dictated, was wiser, and tended more to the public good, than any system which had received the sanction of government.

I think the same thing is true at the present time. Our posterity of a century or two hence will ask with wonder how the people of the United States in this nineteenth century could have believed, in the face of reason and facts, that the condition of the laborer would be improved by a policy designed to make everything necessary to his comfort scarce and dear, by levying protective tariffs upon everything he might import from foreign countries, by discouraging him from building ships and from engaging in many other forms of industry, and by persuading him to produce as few of the necessaries of life as possible.

As in the past the stern logic of facts has proved stronger than any theories of philosophers or people, so I think it will be in the future. The inherent tendency of the individual to do what is for his own good, will, in

the long run, overpower all other tendencies. This will lead to the very best results, because when every individual does what is best for himself the whole community will be doing what is best for the whole community.

I by no means claim that neither legislation nor regulation will enter as factors into the result. Our courts of law will see that no man is allowed to pursue his own selfish good at the expense of others, without rendering them a full equivalent for all he takes from them, and that corporations shall treat all men alike. We are approaching a new state of things, which will need new laws. Each new law framed to meet an evident emergency will probably be a wise law; if it is unwise that fact will soon be found out and the law will be changed.

If, then, I hold that the logic of events is wiser than the philosophy of men, why have I penned these chapters? I reply, to set forth that aspect of the question which seems most in need of being set forth. Our natural progress towards a healthy social state is retarded by the prevalence of false theories which permeate society and control legislation. The constant tendency towards unwise legislation

is the greatest difficulty society now has to encounter. It forms the only basis on which the so-called Manchester School of Political Economy can now rest, and the only obstacle to the introduction into legislation of those more liberal and philanthropic ideas which so many of our philosophers are disseminating.

Is it possible to get through Congress any legislation on the labor problem which will not be inimical to the interest of laborers? Judging from the past, the outlook is not encouraging. Let us add one more to the instances already given of unsound theories in legislation.

Why have we not American shipping and American ship-building? Because our laws throw obstacles in the way of an American citizen building a ship, or sailing one he has bought abroad under the American flag. If Congress should merely repeal all laws which in any way abridge the right of citizens of the United States to import all the material and machinery needed to build ships with, and all laws which in any manner restrict them in the purchase of ships already built, we should in a few years have an American mercantile marine of respectable propor-

tions. Please remember that no positive legislation is needed for this purpose, all we need is the repeal of adverse legislation.

The question whether state regulation of great organizations will be a feature of our coming policy turns on this very point. If we can ever get a system of legislation which shall be based on business principles and not on erroneous social theories, we may expect a continual enlargement of the functions of the state. There are many things which the state would do better than any corporation, could we only have it embody the wisdom of the nation.

The careful reader of this little book will see that (it is written entirely from the point of view of the interests of laborers.) I have nowhere considered the interests, and seldom the rights, of capitalists and employers. I look forward to the time when no one will have to labor more than eight hours a day to make a living. This time will come when a few more improvements are made in machinery, and when every boy shall be trained in doing something useful to his fellows, and be allowed the same rights whether he is or is not a member of a labor organization. It would approach very rapidly could we once get rid

of the theory that plenty and cheapness are evils, and high prices the only good.

[ Notwithstanding my optimistic views, I am not unmindful of the dark side of the case. The darkest feature of all is that the maximum of discontent has come with the maximum of prosperity among laborers. Never before could the industrious laborer make a living so easily as he can to-day, never before could he spend so much time and money in disseminating his views, and never has there been so much organized discontent the world over. I know it is sometimes said that the laborer is no better off for modern improvements in production, but this statement is so absurdly contrary to facts which anybody can know by merely opening his eyes and studying, that it can hardly be characterized as otherwise than reckless. When I walk out in the city of Washington on a Sunday afternoon I find the public parks and streets swarming with the children and wives of laborers, every one of them dressed in a style which, when I was a boy, was possible only to the rich. I suppose the same to be true in all our cities.

[ In saying this I do not claim that the condition of everybody is improved. There are

in every community large numbers of people who have not been trained to follow any special pursuit, whose wants are very few and simple, who are willing to go barefoot in summer and eat the cheapest food the year round, who want nothing but a hovel to shelter them, and nothing but rags to clothe them, and who will do just what is necessary to supply these simple wants, and nothing more. Of course, such people would never be any better off under any conditions that we could devise. They stay behind simply because they do not want to take the trouble to go ahead. It is useless to smooth the road before them because they will not walk upon it, no matter how smooth we make it.

A pessimist might claim that progress which results only in discontent is an evil; that the very fact of the laborer being discontented with his improved condition shows that it has improved too rapidly, that a social cataclysm is imminent which will once more reduce him to the state of coarse bread, rags, and a hovel, which was his lot in times past. All I can say in reply is, that I hope for the best.

THE END

