



A PLAIN MAN'S TALK
ON
THE LABOR QUESTION.

I.

TO THE READER.

I do not address you, dear reader, as an authority on this subject, propounding a code of doctrine which you are bound to accept. I am only a plain man, who has all his life tried to find out what he could, from study and observation, about the state of society in different countries of the world, and about the relation between the great operations of industry and commerce on the one side, and human welfare on the other. I do not expect to tell you anything which you cannot easily understand, and most of the facts I have to lay before you you must already know; or, at

least, you can easily verify. Of doctrine I have little, and of theory still less. Indeed, I am not a believer in any rigid theory of society, for the simple reason that any theory we may propound is liable to be modified by changes in the condition of society. The way I look at the labor question is this:

We find ourselves face to face with a state of things which no thinking person can contemplate without deep solicitude. Wide-spread dissatisfaction prevails among the laboring classes, not only in this country, but in the most enlightened countries of Europe. What gives gravity to the problem is, that these classes wield a power, social and political, which they never before wielded in the world's history. Their power is reinforced by a belief among the intellectual classes, and in society generally, that men have accumulated large fortunes by unworthy means, and that great corporations exert a power for evil which society ought not to tolerate. When we inquire how it is that great fortunes have been gained and dangerous powers acquired by compact bodies of men, we find it to be in pursuance of a certain way of doing business which we have inherited from our ancestors, and of which the

main feature is founded on the supposed right of every man to get as rich as he can by lawful combinations and bargains with his fellow-men, and to use the wealth thus acquired in the way that he thinks best. The question whether this system will, and ought to be, permanent, or whether it is unsuited to the new conditions of production which now prevail, is the great question of the day.

We see everywhere in society a deep-seated belief that there is something wrong in a state of society in which one man may be enormously rich while another has not a place that he can call his own in which to lay his head. The great object of the labor movement is to do something towards curing the wrong. Every right-feeling man must sympathize with this object because every such person must desire the good of all his fellow-men.

But it does not follow that, because labor-organizations desire to cure the evil, therefore all the measures they propose will have that effect. Suppose all their measures well adapted to getting out of the frying-pan, the proverb tells us where they may then find themselves. The interests of sixty millions of people make a very complicated whole, which

the mind cannot easily grasp; and when we try to promote them at one point, we may set them back at a hundred other points without knowing it. The only way to reach a satisfactory conclusion is, to study out all the facts of the case, beginning with the biggest ones, and going step by step to those which are smaller. Great and universal facts should form the basis of all our thought upon the subject, because they are of vastly more importance than the special facts, which, by their newness and force, strike our attention at the moment.

In accordance with this general method of viewing the subject, I have tried to see what is the greatest fact with which we have to deal, and I find it to be the one which forms the title of the following chapter.