

Seeking Sunlight With Lanterns

IN the last week of June the National Conference on Social Work met in Providence, R. I. There was an actual registry of three thousand delegates and an estimated attendance of five thousand persons interested in some of the topics treated at the numerous sessions. It was the Forty-ninth Annual Meeting of its kind, though the meetings have not all borne the same designation for a long time, being known as Conferences on Charities and Corrections.

The purpose of the gathering was to hear and discuss the most advanced theories on ways and means of remedying the evils which afflict society. In the past few years Social Work has taken on the dignity of a profession. Schools have been started to train novices. Ethical standards have been established. Persons engaged in it look forward to a life work at which a livelihood may be earned, even though a meagre one. Their attitude is much the same as that of the medical profession, whose members, though constantly inculcating maxims which would produce good health if practiced, realize that erring humanity will never fail to act in such a way as to require their professional service.

In a country like the United States, and especially in cities where the population is composed of such heterogeneous elements as to make impossible the growth of the normal agencies for mutual aid which develop spontaneously among people of like races and creeds, the need for such professing agencies and the service rendered by them cannot be seriously disputed by any humane person.

The effect upon social workers of constant contact with apparently unjustifiable misery depends naturally upon their mental bias. To some, who are confident and self-righteous the explanation of poverty, crime, disease and general inefficiency is to be found in personal deficiency; to others, and these are by far the more numerous, the trouble emanates from defects in the social order and they look to governmental action to legislate the causes out of existence. In a word, without being socialists in a party or philosophic sense, they develop the socialistic mind which believes in amelioration by regulation.

Very few indeed take the view that the evils which they combat are merely the symptoms of disease in a society based upon a fundamental injustice. It is no secret that at such gatherings, discussion of the Single Tax philosophy is taboo. It bears a resemblance to the injunction placed upon his successive wives by Bluebeard. Any other room in the mansion of social suggestion may be entered but not that one.

During the meeting of the Conference under discussion, the fact was brought out that a strike of 23 weeks duration, and still unbroken, was threatening with ruin whole sections of New England. Though a strike in form, it seemed really a lockout for the mill-owners could scarcely have expected the operatives to accept a wage cut of 42½% with an increase of hours of labor, which was what the cumulative

reductions in wages announced by the employers amounted to. Indeed the mill-owners admitted that the wages offered would not enable *a man* to support a family. The whole family to the extent of its capacity had to work in the mill to earn living wages. Is the fact that the cotton textile industry is one of the most vociferous claimants for tariff protection in order to maintain *an American standard of wages* an example of irony or effrontery?

Confronted with this dire situation, some members of the Conference actually took the rash step of asking for a Congressional investigation to bring together the conflicting parties. To people who know or who think they know what is the matter with society all this seems rather hopeless, just fighting shrapnel with feather dusters, but until more people in the world know what is the matter with society, palliatives must be tolerated. Not even the victims of social injustice know whose was the hand that struck them down. The warfare that we call human life, like the warfare of the battlefield, must have its Red Cross and its field hospitals, manned by people, actuated by the most various motives, but rendering indispensable services.

Whenever the time comes that a moderate percentage of the people understands that any system, which makes a major fraction of the human race mere tenants-at-will of a minority who privately own and control the sources of human sustenance, the problem, whose solution social workers seek will be found to be of extreme simplicity, but from present indications, it seems destined to grow more and more involved, until it may be feared civilization will give up in despair.