THE COMMONWEAL
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THE CONSCIENCE OF THE UPPER CLASSES

It seems to be universally admitted that the conference held on December 5th in the Memorial Hall, Farrington Street, on the prevailing distress in London was the direct outcome of the unemployed agitation, for joining in which so many poor men have been sentenced with a spite due to malversation, and so petty that it fairly sickens an honest man to think of it. These rich and well-to-do persons were driven to meet together by a fear which I do not say they all felt in their own persons, but which is certainly permeating their class, a fear so easily aroused that a few hundred destitute, unwarmed, peaceably behaved persons parading London streets could strike terror into the hearts of the well-to-do of the richest city of the most powerful empire in the world.

It is scarcely worth while to criticise the various schemes and opinions of the speakers at the meeting. In plain terms, the one person who said anything worth listening to was Cardinal Manning, and it is a curious sign of the times that a high official of the Catholic Church should give a lesson in sociology to Liberal and Radical politicians, humanitarian dissenting ministers, and professional philanthropists—the latter represented by Mr. Arnold White, who, one might think, would be glad, if he dared, to advocate a battle of the uselesse foreigners and quick-breeding Britons of London, after the fashion of the Spartan Helot-hunts.

Of the Cardinal it must be said that he showed none of that base and cowardly hatred of the degraded poor (the poor whose degradation is caused by the exclusive "refinement." of the rich) which is the ordinary feeling of the cultured classes, whether openly expressed or veiled under the pretext of poor-law philanthropy. Said he: "Thirty years ago I went into places where it was said the police dared not go, and found them very harmless."

Again, as a Catholic prelate he was not concerned to support the cheerful commercial optimism (about other people's troubles) which is the lining, so to speak, of the moral pessimism of the well-to-do; and he exposed their miserable evasion of setting down the greater part of the unemployed as independent and as criminals. Nor do they concede to them even the accusé of "society" being responsible for their existence. Lastly he attacked, however mildly, the ferocity of the philanthropists about out-door relief. In fact it is clear that he could see nothing else for dealing with the present distress but that very out-door relief in some form or other, the horror of which a few years ago had established itself firmly in the hearts of all philanthropists as a kind of holy dogma not to be questioned; a piece of altruistic piety invented to take the place of the new obsession "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." There is a great deal of virtue in the Latinisation of an English word: A God's name (or the Other One's) don't "pauserize" people! But you may carefully keep them poor and feel none the worse for it!

The Cardinal wound up with what may be regarded as an official tag, about "voluntary agencies," and the necessity of "visiting the homes of the poor." This was what his office compelled him to say and need not be noticed, if it were not of value as showing that we must not reckon on real help from the Catholic clergy. All that can be expected of them is the administration of charity in its less insulating and kindlier form, and the occasional startling of smug respectability from its after-dinner daze by the enunciation of some obvious social truth, which the genuine Catholic, with his contempt of human life on the earth as except for another, non-human life, finds it easy to see; but which is quite strange to the commercial religionist engaged in saving his own soul in the next at everybody else's expense.

For the rest nothing was proposed except a mere bundle of evasions of fact, that the system of production is blown down into ruin through its own triumph. Whatever middle-class rule has put before itself as an aim it has won; but the well-being of the worker was never its aim and could not be; his endurance and quietude only has been aimed at. But since the middle-class ideal is that there should be widely-spread comfort for those living wholly or partly on the labour of others, while those others should not be so sorely pinched as to rebel or refuse to work, the safeguards against the ruin of the system of slavery are disavowed; especially the chance safely to the organisation of labour; the widening of the basis of spoliation by making it as easy as may be for the worker to pinch and screw himself out of his class into that of the robbers of labour, has been thought safeguard enough in this direction; but this safeguard is now yielding to the increase in the pace of competition; and we are face to face with the consequences of the wholesale waste of labour which is sure to be inherent in a society composed of rich and poor in an epoch well equipped with mechanical resources.

We have been forcing the great mass of the workers to make things of no use to the workers (or to any one else for that matter), and we have assumed that we shall always be able to find people willing to take these pieces of manufacture from us in exchange for food and other necessaries which are produced by the workers, and not by the buyers of the useless things. When we come to think of the fact, that these buyers of inutilities have nothing to buy them with except the necessaries which they steal from the workers, part of which they must do out of them again as slave reckonings under the modern name of "wages," one need be no longer astonished that the scanty and seemingly harmless gatherings of the unemployed should have frightened the class that owns Society, and made them ask "What's to be done now?" They will not find an answer, though the answer will come; because any attempt they may make to limit the waste of labour will but act as a lever for the destruction of the Society which they are so eager to save.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

Jottings by the Bays of the Coast Seamen's Union of the Pacific Coast.

1. Be truthful and honest, generous and courageous. It is for these objects, also, that the Union is formed. Try and make yourselves men in every way.

2. Educate yourself on the Labour question, and try to become thoroughly acquainted with all the details of your occupation.

3. When you are on leisure, try to do your work well—first, because the best workman you are, the better man; second, because to be a Union man should be synonymous with being an able and ready seaman.

4. Avoid backbiting and jealousy of each other in the supreme curse.

5. Nothing so quickly breeds discontent and division as these low vices. Either speak well of your brother or be silent.

6. Consider it an honour to be a Union man, and a dishonour to be a liar, gaberlunzie, scandal-monger and mischief breeder.

7. Do not permit any member of the Union in your hearing to prophesy evil or defeat of the Union, outside of the meetings.