

RUMINATIONS.

BY F. W. FITZPATRICK.

THE world over are social economists and political economists prescribing wise measures to prevent strikes, to ameliorate the condition of the workingman, to destroy pauperism, to protect capital, to safeguard public interests. One is loud in the praise of compulsory arbitration, another sagely suggests a combination of labor and capital (!) and still another sees a cure positive for all our social ills only in the public ownership of everything; and each is conscientiously assured, satisfied in his own mind and labors to convince his disciples that, of course, all the other economists are wrong. And most of them, as well as the general public, seem to believe that the conditions about us today are brand new and require drastic, immediate and extraordinary treatment, they sigh for the "good old times when things were differently regulated," when the iron heel of the trusts did not crush the laboring man, when the individual amounted to something, when there was a premium upon skilled labor, an incentive for a man to do his best, for then there was a future before him. Ah, "the good old times"! What a fascination in the retrospect, what a charm and, withal, what a mystery in those words! And, alas, we must also add, what a mass of plain myth there is wrapped all about them! As a matter of fact are we not, all of us, generally satisfied with that wrapping, the outer husk; how often do we get right into the kernel of those alleged good old times?

European economists seem even more perturbed over the condition of things in America particularly than are our own sages. They see nothing but dire social calamities ahead of us. In fact with them today America is the uppermost subject of discussion, (we might add, too, that we are a serious cause of worry to more than their economists; our political and commercial moves are watched with breathless attention) and in their press and upon their rostrums

the concensus of opinion is that we are in a very bad way indeed, that we have fallen from grace, that our wealthy class has profited immensely by the War, the hard luck of Europe, (and that we actually expect Europe to pay us something of what she owes us seems to be the worst offense) and that our people, our workingmen, our poor have been improvident with their high wages of war time and are now in worse straits, more downtrodden, ridden by the rich than the same classes have ever been in, anywhere before. And some of these men stand high in the learned societies of their several countries!

True, extreme poverty seems the harder to bear in proportion as the luxuries of extreme wealth increase, and, I grant you, that our wealthy class *is* extremely wealthy and luxurious. The contrast is a painful one, but it seems to be an eternal law here below; it is not a new condition. Degraded misery has ever been hidden behind the splendors of great cities. Yet New York and Chicago cannot hold a candle to London or Paris in that respect, or to any of the European metropolae of those aforesaid good old times for that matter. In all the latter the chief effort seemed and seems to be to thoroughly hide that misery, while, thank God! with us more earnest and intelligent efforts are being made than ever to not only bring that misery to light and alleviate it but, chimerical as it may seem, to destroy it root and branch, and those efforts are meeting with noteworthy success.

But the contention that workmen, the humbler class generally and particularly in our country are worse off than they ever were, and that social conditions are growing from bad to worse is a most cruel libel, unjust, untrue and shows an unfamiliarity with history that is astounding, or else a deliberate perversion of facts.

Never before, or elsewhere, has the workingman been freer from extraneous fetters, let us call them. He has placed himself voluntarily under certain restrictions of freedom, but merely to the end of improving his ultimate condition; the law, his employer hampers his actions but little: and never before have there been such opportunities for advancement, such material incentive for individual effort, for never before has it been possible for man to rise to such heights by his unaided efforts and force of character.

The good old times, pshaw, what delusions! Let us glance at them, those wonderful old times when all men were true and brave and free and when all women were beautiful and, oh, so virtuous. The histories and records that the economists have at their elbow,

but that they seem never to consult, are open to us, clear to any who will but read. We have been taught that poverty, the individual and accidental fact, is of all times and climes, but that pauperism is a creation of modern times; that formerly, while there may have been abuses, even violences, there was, nevertheless, a well established tradition, an obligation, that bound those in high places to protect, to help those in the lower ranks; the Christian ages gave the industrial classes absolute peace for centuries at a time, a fixity of wages and stability of occupation and a solidarity of interests that, one would suppose, assured a most heavenly and beatific state of affairs; peace reigned supreme, there was perfect harmony of interests, the classes knew no rivalries, or jealousies or hatred, for holy Church dominated all and her influence kept her children, employers and employed, masters and serfs, great lords and humble retainers, in the proper spirit of love and charity. Would that those good old times were still with us!

So much for the teachings; let us glance over the records of fact, the histories indubitable and clear, that all may read who will. Fortunately in European countries county and district officers used to keep very careful record of the doings and condition of the people, their ability to pay the taxes, police records of behavior, deaths, births and what not, an infinity of detail that has come down to us in very good shape; they used good paper and a fair quality of ink.

First let us turn our attention to the agricultural classes of old, later we will look at the industrial records of the times. We find that in entire sections of England, France and Germany, even as late as the early seventeen hundreds, when actual serfdom no longer existed, the common people had meat but three or four times a year, their bread was of rye and oats, husks and all, salt was a great luxury, small fruits and mean garden stuff formed the bulk of their food, the ground was worn out and they had neither the implements nor the fertilizers nor the energy to work it properly. "We must not be surprised," adds a high sheriff reporting to his king, "if people so poorly fed lack force; they also suffer from nudity, three-quarters of them wear half-rotten cotton clothing winter and summer; they lack the strength to work and have degenerated into mere animals not unwilling to be rid of life. Those we draw for the army will have to be built up for a year before they are *fit to fight*...."

The Intendant of Limoges, a district then of about 110,000 people, writes under date of January 12, 1692: "Last year was bad enough, now it is worse, already 70,000 of the people of this district

are reduced to beggary, those too proud to beg live upon herbs and roots." Another officer writes that in his district 26,000 people are begging their bread "not counting those too proud to beg" (?) and in Basse Auvergne "thousands are dying of hunger." All this is in France, thrifty, fertile France. Even in the very zenith of its glory under Louis XIV, when that monarch revelled in a very surfeit of splendor, grim hunger stalked about the country. In Germany it was even worse. England's evil days were not over either.

Some impute these vicissitudes of the inherent vices of the old regimes, the crimes of the rulers and the errors of their policies. Rather should we, with Haussonville and Privoff, attribute them solely to the state of civilization that then obtained, the insufficiency of means of communication, the lack of system and the ignorance of the people. Not only was each people but each little province and county absolutely dependent upon its own resources; if they failed, thousands must perish before supplies could be gotten from elsewhere and in fact they seldom *thought*, even, of drawing upon distant points until far too late. In those "good old times" the peasant's condition was "singularly precarious and in the periodic crises, of, alas, too frequent occurrence, he fell far below the minimum of well-being that is assured him today". And that was written fifty years ago, since when we have raised the possible minimum of the peasant's state several notches higher.

As for the craftsmen, the workers in cities, we have splendid records of their condition from the time of Julius Caesar, and I do not think our workmen of today would willingly step back into the condition of any antecedent period, though they have always been better off than the peasantry, the workers of the field. To take the casual reader back to Julius Caesar with me, however, might be something of an infliction—upon the casual reader—so we will but cast a sweeping glance over the period since the XIII century. Prior to that time, let me assure you, conditions were not one whit better than since. For centuries at a time they were far worse than anything that we know of in the past 500 years, so let us dismiss the dim past, assuming that the "good old times" do not antedate 1200.

About that time associations, unions, began to spring into existence and rapidly grew into considerable importance. The Church takes credit for their birth, or, at least, as their foster parent. As a matter of fact she violently opposed them at first; she was jealous of them as she always is of any growing power outside of her domination. She forbade her children joining them and hurled eccle-

siastical bombs at their leaders. The Unions grew, nevertheless; they took on a semi-religious phase, adopted patron saints and contributed to the support of the clergy and Mother Church, always a graceful yielder under stress of circumstances when opposition is fruitless, took them to her bosom and swore she gave them birth. "

These societies did a great deal of good, they took care of the sick, their indigent, and unemployed, they promoted the interests of their members and gave men a certain solidarity theretofore unknown, but there was no harmony between them. It was a constant warfare between harness-makers and shoemakers, armorers and blacksmiths; every trade stood out against the other. Then there was strife and everlasting friction between employer and men. The unions though not organized for that end really were to the greater profit and advantage of the employers and the burthen of their support was upon the workmen.

Before these organizations sprang up there existed corporations, guilds of the different trades, associations of employers of labor. They established customs that the unions later adopted as laws of labor. Take but one for instance, apprenticeship, who was benefited by that? The unions bit at the bait imagining they would thereby restrict their numbers and consequently the competition in labor; the employer meantime got seven and even ten years of labor (that became skilled in two years) for nothing; yes, almost slavery! The two forms of organization began fighting within six years after the first union was established and the first recorded strife of importance was in "merrie old England."

The legitimate outgrowth of guilds and such associations of employers was a system of combinations, great manufacturing plants sprang from these, just as those plants were later merged, in our day, within still closer lines, trusts. It is all consistent with the very natural evolution of things. Up to that particular time each little employer had his little shop and little force of men, and competitions in prices and in qualities was "right livelie." Sully in France, Goeckel in Germany, and Smythe in England seem to have been the first to think of organizing such, for that time, mammoth establishments. These became privileged institutions, existing "under royal charters and enjoying rights," subsidies, immunity from taxes, etc., that simply wiped out the competition of the small fry. Around these factories were grouped the workmen, "articled" to *each*, their very existence depending upon the prosperity of that factory. Whatever sentiment there may have been was entirely wiped out, no

more unions, trade banners, patron saints or special chapels, but just plain business, "get all that can be gotten out of them for as little as can be paid them" was the motto—in that I find but little difference twixt the old and the new times. In other words men became pieces of machinery, the wages being in lieu of oil, that was the sole difference; that time saw the birth of the proletariat as we understand the word.

Stringent laws protected these factories, for were not the garments, the baubles, the arms, the fripperies of their sacred majesties made there? Those factories were nearly all purveyors or makers of something or other to the king. Wages were fixed by law, the men were articulated, they had to work *here*, or nowhere else. When work failed, the manufacturer stopped pay, or course; if the workman had saved money from his starvation pittance, well and good; if he had not why, he could go into no other trade or district, he stayed *there* and begged or starved.

We find such records as these; one a petition from a state officer to the king begging for a *special* dispensation allowing the men of a certain factory district to go elsewhere and work, or else send on royal provisions, for since the factory had closed down "already twenty-eight deaths had occurred in one day; but two died of disease the remainder passed away by the act of God and *lack of food*." Another officer complains most bitterly that "he had tried to encourage 300 women wig makers to be patient, that the factory would resume work, or else they would be allowed to go to the next town and find other employment, but they paid no attention to him, insulted him, crying out they were hungry and wanted bread or work, not words." And still another writes he has not sufficient forces at hand to prevent frequent and serious *desertions* from a factory in his district. Then we find another petition to a king to force his court to wear a certain kind of point-lace, that since the fashion had been not to wear it 6000 women were thrown out of work, these might have to be allowed to go into other trades elsewhere and that would cause desertion and disorder on the part of the men, the husbands who were employed in the petitioners' cloth factory that then had many large orders ahead!

Another record is interesting; it is a redeeming one, it shows that in those days at least investigations resulted in something. Voluminous papers go to show that a certain factory employing 1500 operatives had raised the price of their goods nearly 100 per cent. Living had become more expensive yet, by misrepresentations it had

secured the right to reduce the wages nearly half and that blessed record shows that the factory's privileges were cut off and the patronage of the court withdrawn for four years!

What think you of men being articulated to a factory from which they could not go farther than a league, and that for two years' period, under the pain of fine, imprisonment and even corporal punishment if the offense was repeated a third time?

And all this was in the good old times." Strange what a fascination the past has for us, what an irresistible tendency there is in us to paint it in brilliant colors and poetic terms. Disappointed with the present, fearful of the future, every generation seems to turn from its own bright sunlight to the past, seeking in the mists and uncertainties of yesterday to find that ideal to which the aspirations of man ever tend. But yesterday was no better than today. Suffering and strife have been of all times; that we have less of them than yesterday is very evident and we ought to be prayerfully thankful therefor. I doubt, however, if we owe it to the panaceas or nostrums of our economists. We must seek the cause elsewhere.

As a matter of fact—even if by the admission, we glorify the economists in conceding them if but the power of evil—I believe that much injury has been done the cause of humanity by the acceptance by not only individuals but even by states of the theories of Gournay, of Adam Smith, of Cobden and of Garnier not to mention the more recent authorities, such as the Professor of the Chicago University who, some years ago, discovered anew that Malthus was absolutely right and forthwith proceeded to study out some means of stopping the increase in our numbers. He found that checks must be put upon us. Not content with "race-suicide" or a "controlled" birth rate he felt that we had to be reduced rather in wholesale lots by "positive methods", wars, disease, and if necessary, immoral means as well as the privative or preventive means. And now since the devastations of the Great War, economists of equal standing, authorities too, are seeking some means of increasing our numbers! Some suggest Government premiums upon large families and some German high-brows, noting the preponderance of women in the population, sagely advise polygamy.

One thing we have to thank the economists for. Their agitations of the labor and other subjects started the people to think for themselves, not necessarily along the lines laid down for them by the sages, but along reasonable, sensible ones, and the result has been to influence the state to tamper less with the subjects than it ever did

before. It keeps aloof from legislation directly affecting those conditions and enforces existing laws, anent them, much as it would handle red hot coals. It realizes that it cannot prevent conflicts 'twixt labor and capital and endeavors only to keep those conflicts within the bounds of propriety.

As men are constituted today, and probably will be for several generations to come, such competition, rivalry and conflict are the inevitable consequences, accompaniments of industrial vitality. There where no such conflicts and rivalry exist, there will you find stagnation, decadence, a moribund industry.

The intervention of the state must perforce be measured most carefully, prudently and equitably, otherwise to attempt to regulate too much simply means spoiling it all, aye even self-destruction for that foolhardy state. But the state must intervene when one of the first principles of its very basis is involved, it must ever stand for the protection of the weaker, be it either side, in any controversy.

Some would have us cry for absolute liberty and liberty alone, and both sides to manage each its own interests as best seems. That cry of liberty is thrown at us from every corner, it seems to be the eternal refrain to every song. Yet, the game of "liberty" is a rough one; some of the players are bound to get hurt and the fatalities are not few. Absolute liberty means to let the great natural laws work out their own results. The law that seems to control the evolution of our material world is the "survival of the fittest", the everlasting conflict between the strong and the weaklings, resulting, of course, in the destruction of the latter. The chances are, therefore, that that very liberty, so insistently clamored for, works to the detriment, the undoing of the weak, though in it may also be found the weapons for their defense. But the state must not be constantly intervening in the vain endeavor to establish an artificial equilibrium. The moment it plants itself doggedly athwart the way of those natural forces and laws it but produces worse disorder than would they if left unopposed. Those laws, those forces, like electricity, may be gently guided, subjugated, carried into useful channels, harnessed for our use and greater good, and that is the province of the state in those questions: In times gone by, it attempted and alas, often today, it blunderingly attempts to handle them, so to speak, without rubber gloves, let alone any scientific knowledge of their power, nature and effects.

The sight of two great armies of Capital and Labor, ranged in battle array, face to face, is, I grant you, an alarming one. Seem-

ingly their constant and sole preoccupation is each other's destruction. It would also seem that there might be occasional armistice but never assured and lasting peace between them, and such cessations of strife occurring only when both needed time for the renewal of armaments or fresh drafts of men to continue the strife. To say the least it all does seem most senseless, nay, insane.

We used to think that preparedness for War rather discouraged actual belligerency, that the machinery was so appallingly effective neither side would really invoke its use but would take it out in talk. This was the general idea until the storm of 1914 since which we have come to the notion that preparedness begets war and our efforts are toward disarmament.

So with our economic struggle: both factions have precipitated trouble heretofore and upon very slight provocation. The experience has been costly, but it has been worth while. They have gauged each other's strength and increased mutual respect has been the result, greater concessions are made, arbitration is welcomed and the outlook for a better understanding is bright.

The great strikes of recent years have cost us billions of dollars of loss, upon the producer and upon the consumer and upon, in very great part, the laborer. Actual strife has been recognized as something not to be resorted to lightly. The handling of some of the more recent strikes speaks volumes for the steadiness and reasonableness of the labor leaders. Arbitration, adjustment conferences are becoming the fashion. In very many unions the blatant demagogue has stepped down and out, the leaders today generally are cool, sensible, business-men, gentlemen, the equals of any class in intelligence and real patriotism. All of which means another step toward better conditions. The more perfect organization of labor may impel some to make rash displays of their strength for a time, but better counsel will prevail; the more perfect and far-reaching the organization the quicker and surer will labor settle down into well defined and reasonable lines that will be accepted by all parties as standard.

On the other hand there is capital, proud, defiant, all-powerful, merging itself into trusts and threatening us with all sorts of dire calamities—if we are to believe our economists.

The history of great organizations, as that of great political parties, is written in few words. They grow and grow, absorbing all about them, their self-reliance and vanity make them top-heavy; they become unwieldy by their very size and inflation; there are

ruptures in the management, defections, personal jealousies, they split up into a half-dozen minor organizations and there is competition again. And later these contending forces, composed of new men with new ends in view, get together once more only to run over the selfsame course. History repeats itself. There are revolutions in our process of evolution, only today they usually are peaceful, figurative, commercial revolutions where they used to be bloody and real upheavals.

And there is where the government comes in with a judicious interference in "those things which conduce to the conservation of the entire commonwealth and must perforce modify those made for the welfare of particular districts and interests." If these combinations are hurtful—and it is generally conceded some are—and exist by reason of certain taxes or concessions created by legislation that has outgrown its usefulness, then, at the proper time legislation must remove those aids to those combinations, and, be assured, it will remove them. *Vox populi* is strong and will ultimately prevail, though certain gentlemen in Congress assembled may squirm mightily during the operation.

Things have a faculty of adjusting themselves or being adjusted at the right moment. This old world of ours is not such a bad place to live in after all, and we who live in this bright beginning of a new century have much to learn from the past, but nothing to pine for in those alleged good old times so much harped upon by certain of our economists.

Neither lord nor peasant, trust magnate nor laborer, has any right or reason to complain of the time he lives in, nor need he look back longingly at the times or conditions that are gone by. We have everything anyone ever had, and ten thousand times more to be thankful for. Rather let us look ahead, being the while content and appreciating and enjoying to the full our splendid advantages. And let us so sensibly arrange the education of our sons that they may be even broader minded than their sires, that they may forget that might was ever considered right, that they may awaken to the full realization of the true brotherhood of man and live to enjoy that peace that we and our father may have hoped for but that almost passeth our understanding.