

The Unemployed Question.

[By OTTO KRIPMAN.]

That the recent "unemployed agitation" differs both in character and magnitude from anything which New Zealand has ever previously experienced is an undoubted fact. It is impossible to deny that there are a large number of honest, deserving, and physically capable men who cannot find employment, and though the loafer may be interspersed among them he certainly does not predominate. The situation becomes alarming when observation and enquiry give rise to a conviction that it is by no means transient, and has given strong indications of having "come to stay." And because, it cannot fail to be realized by any reflective persons that the appearance of an unemployed class is, like the sore or ulcer, only a manifestation of disease within. Though the actual number of the unemployed, when considered in proportion to population, and compared with that existing in our sister colonies, does not rise to alarming dimensions, yet when we realize that their existence is ample proof that a far larger class are working either intermittently or for a bare subsistence wage, we cannot feel surprise at the general complaint of dullness of trade, as it is undeniable that "that section of society which forms the base and foundation of the social pyramid cannot be injured without the evil effects being felt by the whole structure."

It is to be regretted that occasions of this sort are too often used by party politicians to make capital out of, and to cast obloquy on their opponents. This is indulged in to such an extent by the Press of this colony that through continued iteration they often succeed in impressing a portion of the public with the idea that the actions and policy of such and such a Government were, economically, blunders; and the Ministry are responsible and accountable for conditions and effects, which have been produced by causes lying deeply-rooted in the fundamental principles upon which men's conceptions of sociology have been founded. This is exactly the case with the unemployed question. The general prevalence it has, clearly absolves New Zealand from the imputation of having committed any error which has not been peculiar to almost every other civilized nation. Indeed that a surplus population is common at the present time to nearly every nation, irrespective of its form of Government, shows plainly to what a small extent Government prevails in directing or controlling the real welfare of a nation, and illustrates how far the political world lags behind the economic world. France, Russia, America, Germany, and England all languish under the same complaint; and all are giving most serious and earnest attention to the problem, fully recognizing it as the seed of an internal danger more fearful and destructive to the life of a nation than the most calamitous war. Lord Rosebery in speaking on the subject lately said: "We ask you to rob no class, to rob no man, but we do say that unless effective means are taken to deal with this enormous, this incalculable population which is growing up around us, half unnoticed and half ignored, there is a danger for England, such as war has never brought, and from which it is the prayer of this Government that she may escape."

As the disease which often proves fatal to the strong man, passes lightly over the child, so a young and thinly populated country may pass through critical times and practically solve social problems, without much risk or trouble, which, in old and densely populated countries, hide-bound in old traditions, customs and ideas, are, if not quite insoluble, at least attended with infinite class friction, delay and danger. We New Zealanders can congratulate ourselves on having passed almost unscathed through our little troubles: the commercial depression consequent on our little land boom in the eighties, our labour troubles, and the great strike of ninety one. We have even seen the "women's franchise," and the new licensing elections practically operating, without as much as a broken head or a row. But success and happy escape in the past must not blind us to danger in the future, and the existence and steady increase of a surplus population constitutes a very grave danger, especially when we consider that a vast amount of political power has

passed into the hands of these people. Henry George says:—"For while rotten democracy may not in itself be worse than rotten autocracy, its effect on national character will be worse. To give the suffrage to tramps, to paupers, to men who must beg, or steal or starve, is to invoke destruction."

With regard to the suffrage, we have no choice. The barriers are down; our only safety lies in the possibility of our being able to prevent the growth of such a class. We must determine to place our country in such a position that no able-bodied, honest man willing to work shall be unable to obtain it. We must devise and "establish a means by which the poverty which is the result of economic action," can be discriminated "from that arising from drink, laziness, and other inherent vices." The life, the future, and the material well-being of every inhabitant in this hitherto happy and prosperous young country depend upon the solution of this problem.

With an unemployed class steadily on the increase, there can be little doubt that New Zealand will suffer in many ways, financially and morally. Without going deeply into the abstruse and much abused "dismal science," and, while fully admitting that the human affections, or humanity, does operate in our political economy, and prevents wages going below the level of a "bare subsistence," yet it is impossible to deny that the continued and severe competition for employment among the workers, which is necessitated by the very existence of this unfortunate class, must, in spite of all the trade unions can do, steadily reduce the normal standard of living, and through the consequent lessening of demand for commodities, acting against the abnormal increase of productive power, effect the most disastrous results on trade and commerce, resulting in a series of industrial depressions never before witnessed in "God's own country."

With regard to the moral interests that are at stake, let us take a single illustration. As Democrats, and as New Zealanders, we are justly proud of our national system of education. The children of all classes and denominations mingle here and acquire that spirit of religious toleration, and gain that absence of class prejudice which has been one of the happiest characteristics of this country. Now this very institution will, if we permit the unemployed class to increase, be the means of poisoning national life and degrading our man and womanhood at the very source from which it should obtain support and strength. If our children have to mingle with the children of persons whose misery, want, and despair have forced upon them the necessity of living by immorality, frauds, and other questionable methods, or has compelled them to live in a state of unhealthy, vicious, and indecent surroundings, what must be the inevitable result?

Clearly, the growth of this class must be prevented. But how? Carlyle, with his caustic satire, says:—"The old Spartans had a wiser method, and went out and hunted down their helots, and speared and spit them, when they grow too numerous. With our improved fashions of hunting, Herr Hofrath, now after the invention of fire-arms and standing armies, how much easier were such a hunt! Perhaps in the most thickly populated country, some three days annually might suffice to shoot all the able-bodied paupers that had accumulated within the year. Let Governments think of this." The existence of this evil and the dangers liable to emanate from it, are universally agreed on, but on the question of remedy every one seems divided. Between philanthropists and reformers, and again between the various schools of reformers, the strongest feelings and the most strained relations exist, which naturally increase the difficulty of applying any solution—but that which lies in the power of the class it is desired to assist, namely, that of appealing to the State. Which to their credit they do not exercise generally till "self help" has failed. Or rather, *I should say until private enterprise cannot employ them.* In any case it is certain that while people hold political power, by possessing a vote, they will not starve quietly.

In respect to the merits of the various panaceas offered as palliatives, and of the theories which are held to be the economic cause of such unwholesome social conditions, we do not feel called upon to pass an opinion as it is a matter which New