

THE RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF LABOUR.

LECTURE BY CARDINAL MORAN.

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(Concluded.)

There are sixteen such joint stock co-operative companies in France. One of them in particular carries out the principle in a most systematic way. The annual profits are divided in the proportion of 85 per cent to the shareholders and fifteen per cent to the employees. I trust that I have made it sufficiently clear that, claiming some share in the increase of the profits, the workers would not seek to rob the capitalist in any way; they would only claim as their share that which of right should belong to them.

No one in Australia will question the labourer's rights to associate with his fellow-men in every lawful society, and to enjoy all the benefits which such association or organisation may afford. In many countries, however, this right of association is still denied to the working man, and it was only after a painful and weary struggle that it was granted in England. It may be well to review the vicissitudes of the labourer in the past, thus to better understand the advantages which he enjoys in his present condition. In the mediæval times there were the various guilds, which corresponded in a certain measure to the trades unions of the present day. The economic principles which control the commercial world have undergone many changes since those days, and we may be disposed to find fault with many of the regulations which then were highly prized. At all events there was no need for poor-houses under the ancient guilds, and in the field of labour there was an equilibrium between the demand and supply, whilst in the workman's homestead there was comfort, abundance, and contentment. Under Henry VIII. and his son Edward VI. a terrible blow was struck at the prosperity and independence of the English labourer, when the guilds were suppressed, and the guild lands confiscated and appropriated by the Crown. Base money being issued to meet the requirements of the State, the prices of all articles were trebled, whilst the wages of labour remained unchanged. The Blessee More, towards the close of his Utopia, thus sketches the injustice prevalent in his day: "The richer sort are often endeavouring to bring the hire of the labourers lower, not only by fraudulent practices, but by the laws which they procure to be made to that effect; so that though it is a thing most unjust in itself to give such small rewards to those who deserve so well of the public, yet they have given these hardships the name and colour of justice, by procuring laws to be made for regulating them." In Queen Elizabeth's reign, the Justices of the Peace were empowered at Quarter Sessions to fix the price of labour, and to inflict severe penalties on those who gave and those who received more than the fixed standard. The Justices themselves belonged to the class of employers, and as a result the wages of labour were set at starvation point. By a subsequent law, any combination among workmen with the object of improving wages was to be promptly checked and sternly punished. At the same time severe laws were enacted against vagrancy. Sturdy beggars caught begging for the first time were to be whipped at the cart's tail; for the second time, were to have their ears slit, or bored through with hot irons; for the third time, were to suffer death as felons. Hard times these for the unemployed. Under Edward VI., in 1547, it was enacted that whoever lived idly and loitering for the space of three days, came under the description of a vagabond, and was liable to the following punishment:—Two Justices of the Peace might order the letter V to be burned on his breast, and adjudge him to serve the person who informed against him for two years as his slave. His master was bound to provide him with bread and water and refuse meat; might fix an iron ring round his neck, arm, or leg, and was authorized to compel him to labour at any work, however vile it might be, by beating, chaining, or otherwise. If the slave absented himself for a fortnight, the letter S was burned on his cheek or forehead, and he became a slave for life; and if he offended a second time, his flight subjected him to the penalty of death. Nor were these merciful threats. In one single year, during Elizabeth's reign, in Somersetshire alone, 40 persons were executed under these statutes, 35 were branded, and 37 whipped, and the contemporary writers tell us that Somersetshire was not singular in this severity. In the first quarter of the 18th century began the so-called work-houses—those centres and seedplots of vice and misery—hideous caricatures of charitable institutions for the poor, which, much improved in modern times, continue still to cast their shadow over the land. During the past two centuries all associations of workmen were under the ban of the law in England. As late as the 40th year of George the Third, all agreements between workmen for obtaining a rise of wages, etc. were declared illegal, and subjected the members of such combinations to a penalty of two months' imprisonment. The evil genius of oppression went even further and devised the doctrine of constructive conspiracy, so that the mere fact of entering into a labour partnership became a sufficient ground for transpor-

ation. In the meantime the price of provisions increased so much that the fixed wages did not suffice to ward off starvation. Nevertheless, the Justices of the Peace would not increase the wages of labour. They devised, instead, another scheme by which the labourer was merged in the pauper class, and an allowance from the poor rates was granted to the labourer in proportion to the number of children in his family.

The result of all this was an ever-increasing misery, with secret and criminal organisations, "Sullen, silent work, alternated with misery and drunken riot." The breaking of machinery, or burning of factories, became an every day occurrence. An eye-witness thus describes one of those scenes in Manchester:—"The burning building was surrounded by thousands of excited people, whose faces, reddened by the ascending flames, expressed a fierce and savage joy. As the fire forced its way from floor to floor, darting through the long rows of windows, cries of exultation were shouted by the crowd; and when finally bursting through the roof, it went roaring into the heavens, the maddened multitude danced with delight, shouting and clapping their hands, as in uncontrolable thankfulness for a great triumph." At length, however, enlightened statesmanship put an end to this most disastrous state of things.

I need not enter into the history of the Factory Laws and other beneficent Acts passed from time to time in the past half-century to protect the weak against the strong. The right of workmen to associate for the sake of bettering their condition was declared no longer illegal. The workman may now act in concert with his fellow-workmen, and enter into partnership with them with the object of enhancing the price of their labour. They are only doing what the shareholders in a bank, a railway, or any other joint stock company do with their capital, and the workman's strength and skill are quite as much capital as any other investment is.

It is unnecessary for me to dwell on the success which has hitherto attended the efforts of the men, thus associated, to better their material condition. I will only mention one of the moral advantages which may happily result from the trades union, but one which I regret to say is not always attended to. I mean the influence by which a trades union may react on the individuals associated in it. There will be men below the average, in energy, honesty, or sobriety. They may not be vicious, but may, nevertheless, be shiftless, irresolute, without thrift. Now, anyone who has to deal at times with the reforming of his fellow men well knows how difficult it is to make the drunkard sober, the idle man industrious, the irresolute man earnest and devoted to his trade. There can be no more efficacious means to attain such desirable results than to combine the benign influence of religion with the action and impulse of the men with whom he is associated, and if the trades unions would propose to themselves to attain this most desirable end, they would confer a lasting blessing on countless families, and on society in general. One feature of some of those trades unions merits special mention. In Germany a special law guarantees the Labour Insurance Union, to provide a competence for the workman or his family in case of sickness, accident, or death. One-third of the annual premium for the insurance is paid by the State, one-third by the employers, whilst the workman himself provides for the remaining third.

Before I quit this matter of the rights of labour, you will permit me to refer to the manifold advantages that accrue to the working man from the comfortable homestead. The home must have its due attractions, and for this purpose it should have all those appliances and associations that tend to promote and conciliate domestic happiness and domestic industry. The housing of the labouring class in many countries is little less than an outrage on our common humanity. I will not refer to the terrible disclosures which were made a few months ago in Darkest England. Suffice it to say that the Royal Commission on the housing of the London poor witnesses to the fact that a great portion of the labouring class in that great commercial capital of the world are forced to dwell in tenements quite unfit for human habitation, whole families huddled together in dark and dismal apartments, in rickety houses or in filthy rooms, the lodging of a family being too often not one room, but only one corner of a common room, with the result to brutalize thousands of human beings and to degrade them almost below the level of the brute. Let no one imagine that religion and morality have nothing to say to this condition of things. In such squalid homes, with their unhealthy and immoral surroundings, almost of necessity the unhappy inmates are led captive to crime and to criminal pursuits. A popular writer of our day has put the matter in a clear light in a few words as follows:—"So long as their bodies are treated as they at present are, to work for their souls is a hopeless, is even a ridiculous task. How shall they be pure and temperate, how shall they have any of the virtues which good Christians prize, so long as they are housed like pigs, and fed worse than swine,—so long as they have no knowledge and no leisure, and nothing from their childhood that so much as suggests happiness, except drink and things worse than drink? How shall you tell them to be clean, when they have only sewage to wash in?"

I will not venture to define what means would be most efficacious to attain the most desirable result of supplying comfortable