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LEO. XIII. to the N.Z. TABLET

THURSDAY, MARCH 22, 1906

**OLD AGE PENSIONS**



**L**AST week the British House of Commons affirmed the principle of providing old-age pensions out of funds raised from taxation. It was a more or less academic resolution. It binds parties to nothing, and it may possibly afford timorous or incapable political leaders a cheap means of putting off till to-morrow, and the day after, and many days after, the pressing social reforms that

they have not the courage or the brains to squarely face to-day. None the less, it is a sign of the times that such a resolution should emanate from a Parliament that within living memory—or a little beyond it—legislated the British worker into a state of abject slavery and of physical and moral degradation such as has never been witnessed in any age or country. We believe, with Boyle O'Reilly, in the ultimate triumph of the masses of the people in their struggle against the tyranny of modern feudalism for the God-given right to live humanly. The conquest of the full measure of natural rights may be here and there delayed. But (as the great Boston poet and seer puts it) it 'will end, as all natural contests must end, in the triumph of mercy, morality, and freedom, for these are the law of God.'

In no country has labor been more deeply wronged than in England; in no country is it entitled to demand a heavier reparation. The days of its degradation and impoverishment began—as it began in Germany—with the Reformation. In one of his lectures, Professor Thorold Rogers (the great authority on labor problems in history) points out the successive steps by which the beggary and ruin of the British worker was accomplished: by the extravagance of Henry VIII. and his dissolution of the monasteries; by the confiscation of the trades' unions' lands, the issue of a debased coinage, and the re-introduction and legalisation of slavery under Edward VI.; and by the savage repressive legislation of Elizabeth's days, which made England a physical hell-of-the-damned to the working man from the time of the 'Virgin Queen' till the nineteenth century had almost reached its meridian. We have more than once traced the story of the grinding degradation of labor in Great Britain from the evil days of 'the great Eliza' till close up to the year of grace 1850. It is a heart-riving story. Almost at the close of the first half of the 'century of light and progress,' Engel compressed the bulky volumes of official reports (1833-1812) into a tabloid story of 'children and young people in factories overworked and beaten as if they were slaves; of diseases and distortions only found in manufacturing districts; of filthy, wretched houses where people huddle together like wild beasts. We hear,' he adds—still compressing the Blue-Books and Reports—'of girls and women working underground in the dark recesses of the coal-mines, dragging loads of coal in cars, in places where no horses could go, and harnessed and crawling along the subterranean pathways like beasts of burden. Everywhere we find cruelty and oppression, and in many cases the workmen were but slaves bound to fulfil their master's commands under fear of dismissal and starvation. Freedom they had in name—freedom to starve and die; but not freedom to speak, still less to act, as citizens of a free State.' 'In fact,' says Gibbins in his 'Industrial History of England,' 'the material condition of the working classes of England was at this time in the lowest depths of poverty and degradation.'

The Reform Act, the growth of trades' unions, the Chartist movement, all contributed to win back for the British worker sundry, grudging instalments of the rights that were theirs as a matter of course in the days when England was at the same time Catholic and 'Merrie England.' But at this moment no great industrial country probably lags behind the van of humanitarian factory and labor legislation as does Great Britain. In no civilised country is pauperism (that dread heritage of the Reformation) so widespread an evil and so grave a problem. And there have been very few periods, if any, during the past fifty years when distress among the workers was so acute and general, and when the problem of the unemployed commanded to such a menacing extent the attention of the public. 'The wealth of a nation is not,' says an authority on political economy, 'to be measured by the amount of riches in the hands of a few, but by the degree of prosperity generally diffused throughout the population.' Hunger and cold and starving children must have been a terrible logic in the angry brains of the ten thousand workers that recently paraded the principal streets of London, singing the 'Marseillaise' and demanding work—not the pauper's dole. The New York 'Freeman' aptly translates the grim cry of anguish of this sodden mass of humanity in Swinburne's lines:—

'Ye whose meat is sweet  
And your wine-cup red,  
Us beneath your feet  
Hunger grinds as wheat,  
Grinds to make you bread.  
'Ye whose night is bright  
With soft rest and heat,  
Clothed like day with light,  
Us the naked night  
Slays from street to street.'

**HENRY HUGHES**  
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