

Russell Sage

Emma Goldman

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WHAT an indictment against Society! Impure and poisonous, indeed, must have been the soil that nurtured such a plant.

The champions of the capitalistic system assert that the majority will ever have to live in poverty and misery, and that millions of backs are to remain forever bent, to sustain the magnificent structure called civilization.

Were we all to toil to produce the mere necessities of life—they say—who would foster art, poetry, and literature? Surely, there must be a select few. By their culture and aestheticism, by their refinement and beauty, they illuminate and elevate those predestined to a life of darkness and despair.

Such is the philosophy of capitalism. But even this philosophy, absurd as it is, will fail to justify the life of Russell Sage. It would search in vain for even the faintest reflex of himself, or of his tremendous wealth, in the lives of those that dwell in the abyss.

Russell Sage! Accumulation, with him, was not a means, but rather the sole aim of life. The notion that the social mission of wealth is philanthropy and charity was brutally caricatured by the personality of this man. Not even his own life derived any benefit from his riches, let alone the lives of others. Indeed, he serves as the most striking proof of our social insanity, which suffers thousands to starve, that a few calculating human machines may pile dividends upon dividends, [2] Russell Sage undoubtedly considered himself indispensably valuable to society. Several years ago a man, crazed by poverty and exposure, came to his office with the intention of taking the valuable life of the great benefactor of the human family. Does a Sage outweigh the countless lives his greed has crushed ?

When Uncle Russell realized the character of his visitor's mission, he acted in a truly Christian spirit. He called his secretary and placed him between himself and the attacker. Naturally, the bomb did not strike the right person. Sage was saved and continued to indulge in his criminal proclivities; the secretary remained a cripple for life. The most humble human being would have felt indebted to the savior of his life, but dear Russell would have reproached himself for the rest of his existence, were he to waste money on his poor victim. The latter carried the case to the courts. But where are the men in American Halls of Justice that would dare to decide against a Russell Sage?

He left a hundred million dollars, but the case of his victim is still pending in the courts.

Sage was the most worthy, most consistent representative of our system of robbery and theft. Unlike the dilettant philanthropists, such as Carnegie and Rockefeller, he never feigned any hypocritical humanitarianism. In this respect, at least, Sage was superior to the Oil King of Sunday-school fame, and to the Homestead slave-driver, immortalized by libraries and the blood-bath of July 6, 1892. He never donned the garb of beneficence. Had he undertaken the building of the Panama Canal, for instance, he would not have called it a work of progress and civilization. His keen eye would have beheld only the long row of figures and the profits.

If an artist had suggested a great masterpiece as a memorial, Russell would have shown him the door. Why tins nonsensical enthusiasm for art and science? There is only one thing of consequence in life, and that is to “earn” the highest interest on money safely invested.

He was not far from the truth, with regard to his co-gamblers, Morgan, Rockefeller, and Carnegie. Probably he suspected that their pretended interest in art and science was but a feeble attempt to quiet their con-[3]-sciences. At least his attitude was more frank, more honest. And he was more self-centred. He was not so stupid as Morgan, who invests fortunes in poor copies of great masters, to the amusement of European artists and art connoisseurs.

This character-study of Russell Sage is, in a small measure, a portrayal of our social economy, — cold, cruel, heartless; with no other purpose than the accumulation of fortunes by the few, the grinding to death of the many.

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