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The Evolution of an Agitator

Lizzie M. Holmes

1904

Some years ago, a young minister of the gospel was given charge of a good sized church in the southwestern part of Chicago. He had shown such marked ability, such earnestness and enthusiasm in the care of a small village pastorate that his superiors thought he must have a larger field on which to expend his power, and resolved to promote him. So they placed him over this church situated in one of the most populous districts in the city, where the people were nearly all poor. If plenty of work was promotion, young DeWitt Stillman was certainly promoted; the neighborhood consisted of the so-called lower grade of workmen —they were indeed lower in point of pay—such as railroad grade hands, sewer diggers, stonebreakers, and the cheaper sort of hucksters and peddlers, with a large circle of hangers-on—men who had no trade or regular occupation, but did what they could find to do—honest or otherwise. Such a neighborhood promised plenty of work for an energetic and devoted disciple of the Lord.

His first great aspiration was for the “saving of souls.” To win souls from the sins of the world and have them sanctified for Heaven, seemed to him the greatest and holiest work he could engage in. And from the day he was ordained he sat in his study or

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paced the floor day after day searching for burning thoughts and burning words in which to express them. And here he renewed his efforts; he studied, he racked his brains, he wrestled with the Lord for strength and wisdom to present in vivid form the truths of the gospel. And for three successive Sundays he gave the brilliant results of his travail to the small congregation of respectable, well-to-do people who were scattered over the body of his comfortable church that for all, looked very big and empty. He was well liked and well praised as a bright and promising minister. But he was not satisfied; he felt that the people he talked to did not need his passionate devotion of soul. He wanted to reach the really wicked, the sinful, the wretched, the degraded. He felt that he had a message for them—and if they would not come to him he must go to them. He gave the subject a great deal of prayer and thought, and finally began to visit the most crowded, the poorest looking places in his district. It embarrassed him at first to intrude into these wretched homes with no errand which he could explain in the first few moments of greeting. The inmates gaped at him in wonder as though expecting him to state his business and “git out.” But he was too thoroughly in earnest to be long at a loss. Gradually he began to find out what to say to them, how to get in touch with them, how to encourage them to look upon him as their friend. They were a strange new people to him, a newly discovered race as it were, and he had their language to learn as well as to teach them his. And slowly, slowly, they began to talk to him, to let him into the tragic secret of their lives, their poverty, their ignorance, their helplessness in the vortex conditions which surrounded and overwhelmed them and which they could not understand. It was like receiving new revelations every day—of a new world, of new sensations, new experiences, new conditions—things he had never dreamed of before.

In the face of that he learned, it seemed impudent to ask them why they did not come to church. How would they be received by

his congregation were they to come into church in their rags as many of them must if they came at all? The railroad men

worked on Sunday when they worked at all, for corporations do not lay off men for Sabbath. Factory women worked all day Sundays for themselves or they could never be neat and whole; and many were too wretched and hungry to sit and listen to a sermon throughout a whole forenoon.

He was literally appalled—almost paralyzed at the poverty he found. The universal, dragging, haunting poverty—he had never dreamed of such things.

He had supposed, in a vague sort of a way that when people were overtaken by extreme poverty, it was due to some unusual misfortune, or their own carelessness or shiftlessness, or perhaps to drunkenness and evil habits. For surely, he had thought, in this land of plenty, no one need remain in a condition of squalor if he tries to get out. But he had seen enough with his own eyes.

He had seen strong men, able and eager to work, begging for a chance day after day in vain, growing more gaunt, more haggard, more desperate and less able to work as each one passed. He had seen frail women with strained, emaciated faces, fighting the fierce spectres of hunger from their little ones with a puny needle or washboard—almost in vain, for the spectres gnawed and snapped at their bodies and glared in at their windows at night despite their efforts. He had seen little children clawing over a slop barrel searching for something that might be eaten. He had seen men and women sink down in their harness and die, with overwork and too little nourishment.

He had not the face to go to such people and ask them to prepare for a future life. What chance had they had in this one? It could not be possible there was a future of torment for people whose whole existence was a struggle against the sufferings of want. God was good. He believed that yet.

And these conditions of poverty were not due to any unusual emergency or catastrophe—something that would pass away and

leave them in a normal comfortable condition in time. No, these men and women and children were constantly living on the verge of death and despair.

A hard winter was coming on; a great many men thronged the city who had no work and no homes, and were already crowding the police stations and the tunnels under the river for shelter at night. Something must be done! He could not bear it— he could not sleep at night for thinking of the misery. The rich must give of their abundance, these poor must be relieved. The wealthy must be made to feel the sufferings if burning words could do it, and this from hence should be his life work, he resolved anew. Others might save their souls—he would devote himself to saving their bodies— then their souls if he could.

He sent out a general request to his members to attend the next Sunday morning services, and then he prepared his sermon. In agony, in stress of soul and struggle of spirit he built up his great sermon, and the next Sabbath morning he poured it over the heads of his hearers like lava from a volcano. They were aroused, astonished, thrilled, and moved until they were ready to do—almost anything.

He proposed a Friday evening gathering to which his hearers should bring food, clothing, money—anything which the needy could use; and he appointed a committee to go out among the poor and bring in the most destitute, and to tell the people that whenever they were in great need of any of the necessaries of life and could not procure them by their own exertions, to come there on Friday evenings and their needs should be satisfied.

The people responded with wonderful alacrity and spirit. On the next Friday evening they came in throngs, bringing clothing, provisions, coal and even money to the amount of several hundred dollars, until it would seem that no one need go hungry and cold.

“Ah” he exclaimed joyfully, “that was all that was needed—a warm appeal to those who have for those who have not. I knew the world was not hopelessly selfish.”

But what else could he look to for real help to the poverty stricken masses? He had not been able to find the answer to the question of why poverty should ceaselessly exist in a world of plenty, either in the religion he had loved so well, in the study of ethics alone, or in charity or sympathetic sentiment, or in intellectual pursuits per se. In the field of economic research alone, was any possible chance of an answer to be found. And he must not be afraid of the answer: It might upturn every preconceived idea he had ever cherished; it might topple over all his gods, smash all his prejudices, destroy much that he had worshipped as beautiful and good. It would destroy friendships and loves, and he saw only a lonely, persecuted pathway ahead of him, saw himself maligned, misrepresented, neglected and unloved. *But he could not turn back.*

He gave up his honored position as a beloved minister of a popular conception of the gospel and went forth to preach—what is more nearly the gospel that Christ taught—and to receive more nearly the treatment accorded to him; but he is Helping the world to find the answer.

Presently the poor began to come. Shirkingly, doubtfully, at first, fearing some trap, so unused were they to such kindness. But when they found that the gifts were without condition except their need, they came in throngs, some with tears, some “with glad smiles, some humbly and some boldly and defiantly as though what they received was what they should have had long before. And the Friday evening meetings became an institution of the city that winter. People in other parts of the city heard of the movement and brought their gifts. And not from that district alone came the poor, but from every quarter of the city; homeless, haggard men, worn, wan, women, neglected children, the “worthy poor” and the unworthy, and none were sent away empty handed.

Only in extreme cases was money given, and then the cases were thoroughly investigated. Mr. Stillman believed he had his charities well systematized and he had faith in the goodness and usefulness of his work. Of course now and then some came who did not need charity; the professional beggar, the habitual drunkard, the shrewd gamin of the street, were often in evidence, and many a pitiful story was trumped up to get hold of some of the money. And of course the Rev. DeWitt Stillman was severely criticised by the wiser ones. He was spoiling the poor—they would never try to help themselves as long as they could come to the church for what they needed. And he was encouraging deceit and dependency. Mr. Stillman heeded criticism when he could. He organized a “Self Help Club” designed to help men out of employment into positions—and to show women and children what to do to earn a little money. And he instituted some lectures during the evening, while some were being waited upon in the rooms below, the audience room was thrown open for those who would listen to good speakers, who would give good advice, encourage his hearers to sobriety, industry, economy, etc.

But these efforts seemed fruitless. There was simply no work to be had any where. The few vacancies that occurred occasionally were snapped up by men who could yet make a respectable

appearance—they were not for the men from “Stillman’s Charity.” Every possible means of making a little money for women and children had already been utilized by hungry men. And the poor people who were so kindly advised, only cried helplessly and murmured, “Oh sirs, we do as we can and as we must. We can’t save when there is so little anyway, and as for the drop o’ beer of an evenin’ what else have we got to cheer us up?”

And worst of all—there seemed to be no end, no cessation of this terrible destitution. For all their marvelous work, the stream of poverty flowed on without any decrease that he could see. The poor woman with her four children, supplied on one Friday evening, was there again just as cold and needy the next Friday night. The out-of-work men turned up week after week as miserable and gaunt as ever,

the hungry children were as numerous and deplorable as in the beginning. Mr. Stillman began to realize that charity was no *remedy* for poverty—it might be a little relief. All he could pour into the vortex of misery that swirled round in the city, affected it as nothing.

It was a larger subject than he had dreamed of when he began the work; It required deep thought and study. What was the matter? This was supposed to be a great, rich, free country; the resources of nature were plentiful; men were eager to work and turn these resources into wealth. Why could they not do it?

Mr. Stillman made a new resolution. He decided to bring the men who claimed to know all about these problems to come and speak on Friday evening, subject to criticisms and questions. Surely the truth could be reached at last in some way.

As intemperance so often had been blamed for the poverty of the people, he asked a great temperance lecturer to fill the rostrum on the next Friday evening. He was very eloquent and brought tears to the eyes of many. But a critic in the audience showed that under the condition laboring men lived, either exhausted with toil or disheartened, hunting for a chance to toil, they were obliged to

go to the saloon; they needed some relaxation, and a nickle would bring them a little sociability, warmth and good cheer nowhere else as it would at the saloon. And back of the poor consumer was the army of men engaged in producing, in distributing, in dealing with liquors in various ways. If the temperance cause should be effective, what would become of these men? Was there room among the other wage workers for them? They all knew there was not.

He engaged a Single Taxer, who was likewise criticised and questioned but he gave much food for thought and Stillman was convinced that the earth ought not to be held as private property if poverty were to be banished.

He invited some noted philanthropists with cooperative and colonization schemes to offer, and these also started some deep thinking. He had able trade unionists who ably and effectively advocated the universal organization of all laborers as a remedy for poverty and involuntary idleness. Socialists, of all shades of belief, even anarchists occupied his platform at different times that winter and the next, while still the work of- charity was continued in the rooms below. Mr. Stillman became more and more interested in these radical, practical questions, and almost gave himself up to the study of them, but of all he heard he could not immediately make up his mind, which was correct, but some of the fundamental principles that underlay all of them, he was ready to accept. But meanwhile, his congregation was becoming dissatisfied and uneasy. Where was he leading them? What an amount of crazy, incendiary talk they had listened to in his lecture room, and how little of gospel doctrine he himself had given them in the last year. They were compelled to speak to him about it; and soon, Mr. Stillman found that he would probably be without a pulpit if he continued his present career. It was a serious problem to him, for he had not been brought up to do anything else but preach. He might find himself in the position of the men he had tried to help—forced to hunt in vain for a job.