

The Problem of the Enormously Wealthy

Lizzie M. Holmes

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I had just finished reading one of the new and popular novels, entitled "The Undercurrent," by Robert Grant, and had found it a very interesting and well-written book. I noticed that the author raised a number of vital and important sociologic and economic questions which intensely concern the people of this early twentieth century; but he seemed to have raised them merely for the sake of raising them, as he made no attempt at answering them. His characters suavely put aside every remedy that has ever been proposed, and the author suggests nothing but a sort of polite but indifferent liberalism which means nothing. His one socialist seems to be very weak-minded and not at all familiar with the best arguments of the socialists, and besides he is made the villain of the story, though he is very soon shelved. The author very ably brings up all the faults that can be found with the present capitalist system, but that is all he does; he seems to think the radical solutions of social revolutionists are not to be considered for a moment, and it is difficult to determine what he brings them up for at all, since he thinks that doing away with them altogether too extreme and too radical.

He solves but one problem. He has his heroine, a deserted wife and legally entitled to a divorce, after a long struggle with her conscience, finally make up her mind to marry the man she loves and be happy. But people nowadays are doing that anyway, when all other things are favorable.

His one great problem seems to be, "What should a generous, justice-loving, kind-hearted wealthy man or woman do with his or her wealth? How spend it Bo as to do the most good to their fellow beings, and to avoid being ostentatious, purse proud, tyrannical?" Robert Grant found no answer to the question, for his wealthy woman, who is kind, esthetic and poetical in her tastes, and very religious, doing good with her money whenever she sees an opportunity, fails dismally in the end, finds she has been treading gilded paths of beauty, art and luxury which other people down on their knees in the filth have kept clean for her.

I had recently read other works in which this same problem seems to be worrying the writers. One is by Frank Stockton, and is entitled "Mrs. Cliff's Yacht," in which a good, plain, kind-hearted woman comes in possession of a vast fortune and is much troubled how she is to spend her income wisely, honorably and suitably. Even after buying, furnishing and fitting out a splendid steam yacht and inviting fourteen worn-out, weary ministers to take a trip on it, she has to worry about her income piling upon her and overwhelming her. Poor soul! And on the other side of the picture, people worrying what to do with their wants, which pile up and overwhelm them without anything to satisfy them with.

Pondering over these subjects I fell asleep before the fireside. Presently I seemed to be in a new, strange land, where the people, who seemed smaller than usual, went about eager, restless, unsatisfied and always on the lookout for something, I could not tell what. I noticed several little men and women who seemed to be curiously encumbered, and who appeared to be unable to get about and among their fellow creatures on account of their burdens. Other people paid them great respect, flattered and fawned upon them, but seldom were frank, friendly and honestly kind. They had bags of various kind hung upon them from their shoulders, and presently I perceived coming to each, a small, thin, yellow stream, which poured into these bags and reached far out behind and was finally lost in the shadows in the background. These burdened little people kept changing the stuff which flowed into their bags from one to the other, and appeared to be greatly worried lest some of it get away or be grasped by anybody else, even while they were also perplexed as to how they should dispose of it to the best advantage.

I found presently that they exchanged piles of their yellow material for various other things, always giving as little of their possessions as possible in return, yet still embarrassed and overburdened with it. Food, clothing, books, houses to live in, were exchanged as a matter of course; but these exchanges made but little inroad on their piles. Their ingenuity was exercised to find ways of exchanging portions of their burden for new and unheard of, displays. Some had marvelous buildings put up, on fairy-like grounds, and wonderful landscapes about them. Some procured ships and trimmed them with gold and invited other idle, burdened people to sail on the waters with them, and were even then bored nearly to death. They decked themselves with the most gorgeous of fabrics, with shining stones, and yellow bands and rings, and when they wearied of them threw them into a furnace and burned them up and exchanged some of their yellow stream for more and brighter ones. They also gave a great deal of it away to other little people for waiting upon them, for standing about ready for anything required of them, for flattering and praising them and for going about sounding a trumpet in their honor. They poured a stream of it down a great hopper, which I understood led down into some machinery which seemed to control the source of the streams of yellow stuff in some manner. Still, some few of them were so weighted down that they could scarcely walk, much less run and leap and laugh and rejoice in nature's beauties as some of the unweighted ones did. "They got up fine dinners for dogs and monkeys; and sometimes kept coaches, coachmen, drivers and horses on purpose to give the animals their daily airing. They sometimes so wound themselves up in elaborate trappings, ribbons, elegant trinkets and shining baubles that they could not walk, move, act, rest, think in a natural manner, and looked worn and helpless, or wild and frenzied before they were past their youth.

Then I saw that a few of the weighted ones were trying to give away large portions of their burdens. Still, they seemed determined to give it away in a certain way, and were not satisfied to let it go wherever it might be needed. Even while handing over large portions of it to the other people who were banded together under the name of some charitable organization, they would strike a poor little creature over the head who tried to grab a pinch of the yellow material from their bags. The portion thus handed over would be generally divided between the organized officials, and the needy received very little of it.

One of these burdened people went about exchanging his yellow metal for books, which he handed to every one he could. I saw that many of those he tried to reach were too busy and others too sorrowful and wretched to take his books. I did not at first see why they were so busy and so miserable, but I did later. And the weighted people praised him and clapped their hands whenever he reached out a book and it was taken by any one. Other men seemed to feel uneasy and anxious

over the streams which continually flowed into the receptacles they carried about with them and showed some signs of trying to get rid of some of it; but usually they got somebody to write out a statement that certain individuals or institutions should have their stream of wealth when they died, and then they tried to feel easy and to seek happiness, something they all seemed to be doing without ever finding it. But when they did die, I saw that a good many little creatures, who looked like flies and vultures, would squabble and quarrel over the stream of yellow stuff until it would be all dissipated, and wasted.

After awhile it seemed that I got nearer these little people and could see them and their possessions much better. I noticed something peculiar on the volumes which the giver of books was handing out; I looked closer and saw that there were stains upon them and they looked like blood. I heard a still, small voice saying, "It is the blood of workingmen shed at Homestead!" I shuddered and turned away; but I jostled against a man who had almost more than he could carry and whose streams of yellow material was larger than most of the others. His bags of wealth were dripping with blood; and when I bent over to examine some of it saw that every part of it had a blood stain upon it. I stumbled upon another man who had a Bible in his hand and a crown upon his head upon which shone the words, "Sunday school superintendent." A large stream of the yellow stuff kept pouring itself into his bags; I put my hand into one and lifted as much as I could. It dripped with tears, with women's and children's tears, and I quickly let it fall.

It then came to me that I ought to follow up the streams of yellow material and see where they came from. I walked along the length of one as it wound beside meadows and woodland until it entered a dark, heavily shadowed forest, where the way was rough with jagged rocks and thorns. I could at first scarcely see anything, but presently my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and I saw myriads of little people hurrying and scurrying about, straining every muscle to accomplish something, I could not understand what. As I watched, I saw that they were manufacturing the yellow stuff that flowed down to the beautiful valley below. They apparently used some process by which their own vitality and sweat were combined with the soil on which they stood and the strange material came up from it. They seemed not to have any of it themselves, except the little that clung to their garments and fingers while they worked, and that no food, clothing, or shelter, could be procured except by exchanging the yellow stuff for it. I understood that even the ground upon which they stood and worked was not theirs by right, but that they could be pushed off it if for a moment they ceased their straining exertions. I noticed after awhile that on the outskirts of the solid ground on which the active creatures stood, a great swamp full of bogs and clumps stretched away in the darkness; that upon these bogs and little clumps of soil, a great many of the little creatures clung and crouched and crowded each other for standing room. Every little while one would lose his hold, fall into the back water and after a few terrible struggles sink and disappear. They had none of the yellow stuff, and their only chance of obtaining any was to crowd somebody off their position on the solid ground, or wait until death left a vacant place there. Once in a while a little was doled out to them in charity from the continuous streams of the people below, but their very existence was a constant problem.

The little struggling, straining beings on the solid ground, looked haggard and worn and rough; but they had little time to consider themselves or how they looked. Sometimes the blood oozed from their fingers as they toiled, and always their sweat and tears went into the making of streams they sent flowing below. And I looked again and I saw little children, down in the grime and dampness, working their life forces into the soil while their tender bones grew into distorted

shapes, and their faces lost the look of humanity. Women wept while they toiled and tried in vain to shield their little ones.

They created fast and they created long. A wonderful abundance grew out of their exertions, and sometimes a little more than usual would stick to their fingers; but when this was found out by the people below some new method of getting all that could be made away from the makers was put into practice. Many of them sank down while struggling and were quickly rolled to the edge of the swamp and pushed in, when they soon disappeared from sight.

Sometimes a few revolted, but the people of the valley hired some of the workers and some who stood on the swampy land to kill them, and so "peace and order" was maintained.

I wondered why the people did not stop their exertions and run down to the beautiful valley and take possession of it. There were enough of them, and it could have been done so easily. At least they could have breathed the pure air there, and held their faces up to the sweet sunlight. "But then the streams would stop flowing and there would be nothing for anybody," I thought some one said, and I looked around again. "Then why do they not keep the yellow stuff after they manufacture it, instead of turning it into the channels that flow down to those idlers?" I asked again.

The same vague voice replied, "The soil on which they work, the processes by which they manufacture the yellow material, the apparatus they use, do not belong to them; they are glad for an opportunity to make, for the chance of having a little stick to their hands and clothing while doing it. All those people on the swampy ground are only hoping to find a vacant space that they can crowd into, you see."

I looked on in amazement. What foolish little people! But I remembered, they knew no better and they were afraid. But there below were refined and intelligent people and they seemed anxious about spending their golden stream properly and so as to get the best results. Why do they not come up here to the sources of their overflowing streams, and stop the flow or give it back to the ones who made the stuff?" Why do they not expend their wealth on these suffering women and children who are giving up their very lives that the streams be kept up? Why don't they come back to the sources of their streams if they are really sorry for their fellow creatures and sincere in their desire to do good?"

I asked these questions frantically, hurriedly, for my heart was breaking with despair as I watched the wretchedness of the people under the shadows and in the swamp. "Hush!" some one said warningly, "your talk is dangerous and incendiary, and you will be locked up or hung if you do not be careful. Don't you know that such talk is very extreme and unreasonable? If any of these people who carry about so much yellow material should try to go up into those dark shadows and change the arrangements by which the stuff comes to them, it would uproot society, and revolutionize the whole world! Don't you see it would not do!"

"But if the present arrangements are such as to make thousands miserable through want and drudgery, and hundreds of others miserable from carrying around and taking care of so much of the yellow stuff, why shouldn't they be changed? Where is the harm? It seems to me every one would be happier, better off and more secure if such arrangements were altogether changed! Why dread it?"

"But what would you put in its place?" the voice questioned in reply.

"Would it be necessary to put anything in its place?" I asked in answer. "If it is natural that some of this yellow material is necessary to procure the necessities and comforts of existence, and essential that some one should mix up their life forces with the soil to get it, surely, if the

soil is free for all to go onto it, each will produce enough for his own wants without being forced to do so. And gradually the advantages of equitable co-operation would present themselves and be adopted voluntarily.”

No voice replied, and I bethought myself that I would go down to the rich people who were so worried as to how to dispose of their riches suitably, and talk to them. Surely an earnest appeal to such good, philanthropic people would not be unheeded.

I approached them and mounted a pile of rocks to address them. I had not said a hundred words until they screamed out, “Here’s another one of those awful iconoclasts! He wants to tear everything down and destroy the results of our ten-thousand-year-old civilization! To the gallows with him!”

I thought they all came running toward me, and that I struggled with them, hundreds of them, until they got me around the neck and were choking me to death. At last I tore myself free—and found myself on the floor with the chair cushion across my face.

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