

The Vital Question Again

Lizzie M. Holmes

1889

SOME Of your readers on this western side of the waters have misunderstood the drift of "A Vital Question," and think the writer advocates palliatives, reliefs, etc. How such a meaning came to be construed from the words I do not know; for certainly, to me, all ameliorative measures, charities, plasters of any kind, are only less mischievous than the exploiting schemes which make such things seem plausible. In urging on the attention of every thoughtful person the extreme misery which exists among the masses of the common people, there is no purpose of calling out temporary aid from the tender-hearted; it is impossible to take care of the drift-wood as fast as the whirlpool of greed and corruption casts it up, and I would not attempt it while the whirlpool is there. Even the "homes," "reliefs," and "institutions" which succour a few of the despoiled victims are mere conscience-salves, and serve, as well, to keep the wretched creatures from crowding too thickly around the luxurious palaces of the rich; and then, in the eyes of many, charity is a splendid substitute for justice.

I do not even urge political zeal. I do not believe the people can vote themselves bread and freedom, against a power which protects itself with prisons, scaffolds, soldiery, and guns, any more than they can brush back the sea with petty brooms. They are fooled, amused, kept quiet with something called the franchise; but if the time ever came when the majority-vote really endangered the privileges of the wealthy classes, the revolution would be precipitated. But the "right of suffrage," in America at least, is a farce from the primaries to the final count. The "State" is made up by a few men before ever a caucus is held; the platform settled, and a political catchword-which passes for principle-conjured up at the last moment, when everything else is done. Then the two parties "go in" to win, and the one which includes the shrewdest schemers, the most seared consciences, and has the biggest barrel, working through "voters" who have only a choice between a job and idleness, comes out ahead. "Men who are economically slaves cannot be politically free," Albert Parsons said, and it is in all countries and all times true.

It is the hope of many sincere State Socialists in this country that by taking up the wrongs and needs of the people one by one, urging them upon city councils, legislatures, and congresses without ceasing, by making political issues of the principal wants of the hour, and keeping up a constant agitation, that gradually and peaceably the government can be changed into a good, safe paternalism, warranted to secure justice to all. "The people" have secured about one little favourable law, to ten powerful edicts that strengthen the classes in their vested rights, in the last twenty years. Where one poor workingman has received a straw's benefit from a statute-law, a

hundred men have secured fat spoils through the "bills" our law-makers are paid to manufacture and pass. A sop is thrown to working-men now and then in the way of a law "looking to their interests," while "syndicates, "trusts," monopolies and corruptions, grow and swallow them all at a stupendous rate. It must look discouraging to one who hopes for relief through political action alone.

No; the "dear people" might vote till doomsday and not change the current of events; but there is another element creeping into the situation. The low ominous mutterings of discontent and desperation, coming with thrilling power through the false quiet, have struck the ears of the higher middle classes; they tremble and look about them, fearful lest the deluge may not wait to come after them. What can be done to stay the awful flood, which may sweep everything before it? What more easy than to grant a few of the measures demanded by many of the foremost agitators?

Place railroads, telegraphs, transportation lines in the hands of the government, pass more laws limiting land-ownership, and forbidding all money except government money. A "dangerous element" in society would be quieted, government be strengthened, the "ins" would be more securely in, the privileges of the "higher" classes would not be materially interfered with-indeed, they might find their interests greatly enhanced by having the means they must use to a great extent in one place, so as to secure them easily-and everything would be so lovely that "all might go on smooth and even" for another fifty years perhaps.

It may become a question in the near future whether it is best to take a few concessions, get the burdens shifted a little, and stave off a thorough, world-wide, radical revolution, or to ignore offered compromises and agitate for full and complete freedom.

If we do the first, we simply leave for our children the work we should do to-day. We "pile up wrath against a day of wrath." In the condition in which the world is at the present time, we ought to accomplish the great change in one generation. The commercial system is almost toppling over; the human race, all civilisation, is ready for a new regime. Of course the present system can be propped up, the miseries of the poor relieved, or rather, varied, and with a few changes we can drag along a short age more. But is it best? Can true lovers of perfect liberty and justice consistently work for a few concessions, then die and leave the world, with the day of reckoning yet to come? It is a question we should all ponder.

Any relief in the shape of charity is still worse. It seems to me that people who once submit to the receiving of alms, without a blush of shame, are doomed; they are hopelessly apathetic and degraded. The giving of alms satisfies the conscience of the rich exploiter, strengthens his position, widens the gulf between the classes, and renders the recipients more subservient and obedient than before. I confess I never had so little hope for the American people as since the recent occurrences among the starving miners of Illinois. The facts are appalling enough to thrill the stoutest heart; for here in this boasted land of the free, a country growing so rich and prosperous that it takes an eloquent orator three hours to expatiate upon it, are thousands of men, women, and children actually starving to death and dying of the diseases want engenders. The men are eager and willing to work, the coal lies in the earth in abundance, and the world's inhabitants need it; yet because some men own "the hole in the ground," poor people must freeze this winter, and the miners must go hungry all the time.

And so these workers must be kept barely alive by the kind charities of philanthropic people! When the relief trains came in, those starving men marched behind the "committee" riding in carriages (hired, it is supposed, out of the relief funds), headed by a brass band whose members

had not strength enough to blow out the tune they commenced! They had lived on the wind for some time, but had none to spare for their big brass horns. Think of it! Making a parade of their degradation! Able-bodied men holding a celebration over their deep humiliation! 'Not one indignation meeting had been held; not a resentful word murmured over such a state of affairs! Not with bowed heads and sorrow did they accept the bread they were forced to take or starve, but with a demonstration as if publishing their downfall to the world! [note]Lucy E. Parsons drew a strong picture of this scene at Voorwarts Hall, August 11th, for which she was promptly misrepresented and abused by all the leading dailies.[/note]

It has long been a fixed idea with many that the American workingman would never suffer starvation quietly; that when trodden upon too sorely he would turn and rend his destroyer; but the day has come, and he licks the hand that first withheld, then doled out in charity, while he capers and shouts to his master's honour with all the little remaining strength that he possesses!

More cruel, greedy monsters never existed than the coal corporations in this State. Human life is absolutely nothing to them in their rapacious grasping for wealth. Their victims suffer and die in the midst of their property, and not a stick or stone is touched. The company's stores, filled with all they need, stand undisturbed amidst the starving.

All but a few Anarchists and Socialists have persistently hushed any enquiries into causes. "These people want *bread*, not discussions and resolutions," they say; and so, as the citizens keep their "hands" fed and above the dangerous point, and do not question the justice of the situation, the soulless corporations rest calmly on their privileges and wait their own sweet will to set their drudges to work on a miserable pittance. Charity is a curse when substituted for justice. It is of no use expending it on those already lost-the wrecks of society must be society's charge. To teach strong independent men to accept it with public rejoicing is to degrade them many degrees below anything they have yet known.

But for the element of new thought awakened in the serious minds of middle-class people, the case would be well-nigh hopeless. So, again I urge greater zeal and earnestness; less care for conventionalities, respectability or personal consequences; more of the feeling of personal responsibility for the injustice and suffering society tolerates.

I do not point out your work, or ask you to take up any particular phase of economic action, because I know that with a thorough realising sense of the *vital question* deep in your soul, you must *do good*. Keep awake, and be in earnest!

Maywood, Ill., U.S.A.

LIZZIE M. HOLMES.

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