

Contagious Poverty

ONE of the oldest financial and commercial notions in the world is that people get rich by making others poor.

Salesmanship has always had the same psychology as thievery. "One man's loss is another's gain!" Such is the proverbial wisdom of a society bent on harassing customer, debtor or vanquished foe till his pockets are empty and his back bare.

This view, however, was long ago discredited in the matter of wages and employment. Employers at first thought it good policy to get all they could out of their help without concerning themselves with the welfare of the workingman. Then it became apparent that a sickly and underfed working class meant ruin for the nation. The era of social legislation began.

The same development is now taking place in the relations of merchant and customer. Sellers are finding that it pays better to enrich and fatten the buyer than it does to bleed him white. In a commercial civilization inexorable stripping of the consumer entails bankruptcy for producer and middleman. Thus historical materialism concludes with a justification of pity!

The war of 1914-18 proves the absurdity of basing the prosperity of one portion of the world on the impoverishment of another portion; and world unity in large measure comes about, not because men in their enlightenment have willed it, but through the pressure of material forces stronger than the greed of men. We finally realize that patriotic hatreds can subsist only under conditions of international poverty. Peoples were early on their guard against the contagion of diseases. It never occurred to anybody that the way to keep one nation free of small-pox was to produce and perpetuate an epidemic in an adjoining state. Not so in the matter of business. Everybody thought his nation would be richer if some other one were poorer.

Commercial internationalism of the pre-war type could still assert that it was to the interest of one nation to subjugate another. Now we see that a state in attacking its neighbor attacks itself. The Great War demonstrates empirically, in other words, the solidarity of mankind. Norman Angell's idea that war impoverishes all the belligerents, even the collector of the indemnity, is so true that we may go further and say that war unites its participants in repairing the damage they have done each other. It develops that you must lift the vanquished to his feet and fill his pocket-

book, before you can make anything by exploiting him.

Now France is loath to recognize this international solidarity which is not of her invention. This should not prove surprising. France has been reasoning that it is simple justice for Germany to make good the damage Germany is responsible for. Germany naturally wants to avoid this penalty and keep as much of her money away from France as she can. In both cases sentiment is blinding the public mind to a common interest.

Both were wrong originally in seeking pretexts for war with each other on historical grounds. Now both are wrong in discussing payments on grounds of justice. The error is not one of logic, but one of fact. They should look at the matter from the viewpoint of common profit. Here is the vicious circle: Germany must restore France, but before she can do that France must restore German wealth. The solution of this paradox, however, would not help either of them much if other nations, Austria and Russia, for instance, remained meanwhile in penury.

A clear definition of world unity has been furnished not by philosophy and ethics, but by business. Commerce forces us to a conclusion that religion has never been able adequately to impose: that war is an utterly stupid thing. Contempt for the merchant is an old-fashioned error due to aristocratic prejudice and to the attractiveness of the gentleman's calling. Among the numerous ways of classifying men that may be thought of, a most important one is to distinguish producers from middlemen. Producers act upon raw materials and add to these the value of their labor. Middlemen act upon people, from whom they derive a profit which comes to be added to the values of the goods produced. The closer men become associated, and the more widely civilization extends, the greater the control of seller over worker, of middleman over producer.

A nation without salesmen would be ruined by the fruits of its own labor, the very accumulation of which would reduce it to poverty. The world long suffered for lack of sufficient labor. Now it has come to suffer from the sheer wealth of its productivity. The advantage of the single individual alone by himself on an island is the bane of a collectivity, for the output of labor must be consumed, otherwise prices drop, and wages, equipment, national wealth itself, depreciate. From all of these evils the seller is our saviour.

The merchant is the great fraternizer of humanity. He does much more for world peace than any religion. Nevertheless, religion and commerce have been stupid enough to support armies and to seek their own prosperity in war. All nations have relied on God and economic competition to crush rival sellers and producers. Long before religions have come to the brotherhood of all the children of God, commerce has discovered that customers must be coddled. In driving the money changers from the temple, Jesus made a gross mistake in political economy; for business is today realizing that world brotherhood for which Christianity has appealed in vain.

The concept of world unity has made greatest progress among the commercial peoples—the Americans and the English. A country like the United States, a country that sells, can no longer shrug its shoulders if peoples such as the Poles or the Serbs go to war. Nothing that happens in Europe can fail to affect America. We used to say that people would be so disgusted with militarism, after the experiences of recent years, that they would be through with war forever. If, in fact, we are not entirely cured of our old pugnacity, we are at least blessed with a new commercial spirit that may prove to be the salvation of the world. After one attack of contagious poverty, the world is ready for a world-wide hygiene of peace. The epidemic of poverty at present raging is proof positive of world solidarity.

This actual experience of universalism is one of the greatest things in the history of civilization; for we are now confronted not with a vague aspiration, not with a utopian program, but with a fact. It takes facts of such magnitude and such impressiveness to make men think straight, understand things they never understood before, though they have been doing them for ages. Chemistry and mechanics used to claim that by increasing and perfecting the instruments of destruction they would first shorten and finally abolish war. The inventor of high explosives would be a benefactor to humanity by giving men an overdose of systematized slaughter, and hence a distaste for it. This hope has proved a disappointment. Homicidal science, turned to the service of international hatreds, has proved unable to exhaust the reserves of human spite. Can we now afford to entrust the salvation of the world to a scientific faith, as we once did to religion? The answer is that commerce has stolen a march on both science and religion, imposing world unity upon us.

Labor is still at cross-purposes with itself in its laws and in its theory. One moment it finds that war is necessary if it would sell its products; the

next it sees how foolish it is to kill and impoverish customers, along with a criminal wastage of natural riches. Scientific power may be already at work preparing for the next war. Commercial power is the only force actively at work to prevent such a catastrophe. For commerce has discovered the law of contagious poverty.

But what will the nations do when they have won back their wealth? Will they use it to reduce each other to poverty again? Economic internationalism may very well revive sentimental nationalism, the latter waiting until commerce has paid enough in taxes for the state to reconstitute its military system. As soon as Germany has recovered through industry and trade, she will want her military revenge. That is why France is bent on keeping her too poor ever to attack again. Can we get a solidarity of prosperity once we have issued from the solidarity of poverty? Penury leads to union through the humiliation of destroying nationalism. Abundance leads to combativeness through the exaltation of enriched nationalism. England wants a strong Germany to do business with. France wants a weak Germany incapable of starting another war. Can we revive commerce without reviving war?

The best guarantee of peace is the continuation of poverty until such time as the peoples of Europe can think in some other terms than those of the various nationalisms and historical hatreds and come to a union from which no one—French, German or Russian—is excluded.

Who, primarily, is standing in the way of this? What nation is the most self-centred, the most content to think of itself alone, the most inclined to distrust the creation of a truly European spirit and a truly humanitarian economic system? No one need be told that it is France. But we must sympathize with her before condemning. France is the last to welcome these new tendencies, because she would be the first to suffer should they prove fallacious. She would guarantee peace by the old-fashioned agencies of war. She would be the first in arms in order not to be the first attacked. She is not willing to take chances. She stands on her rights, and demands just what is due her. Juridically, here, she is unassailable. Humanly she is pitiable, drawing sullenly into her shell, and answering the assault of new ideas from the rest of the world by denying them without argument. Humanity is always looking for a faith. France is capable of nothing but character. Obstinate, curt of speech, doggedly certain of the unchanging nature of her history, she is the nation of Jeanne d'Arc rather than of the Revolution. Her whole soul is bent, not on preaching a philo-

sophy, but on resisting an encroachment. She points to the motto on her coat-of-arms: "Dieu et mon droit"—"God and my due!" and she comments, for the benefit of Germany: "Pay up!"

France has the soul of a creditor, and of a creditor not over-shrewd; because she is wasting her time and taxing the reserve energies of world opinion in demanding punishment for the guilty Germans—a punishment harder and harder to inflict the longer it is deferred. Peoples have to remember, in order to keep the vindictive spirit alive; and now they have something else to think of than their indignation; they have poverty. France is thinking soundly, but off the point. Her intelligence is stalled on a siding. It is not getting there on time. The men who perished on her battlefields took part of her mind with them to destruction. The mental enthusiasm that died with all these dead would perhaps have kept her broadly human, broadly sympathetic. In the name of those dead she is deliberately and stubbornly intractable. But she must not be hated for this momentary distraction. In the war just past she lost fortune, bodily health, philosophy.

And now, after she has given up a million and a half in killed, the world demands of her a new dispensation. She is asked for a Mirabeau and a humanitarian patriotism. She can give only a Poincaré and an anti-German patriotism. This situation may change, but only in so far as Germany herself expresses a German aspiration toward human brotherhood, a German faith in a new spirit, a German passion for democracy.

The world is longing for the end of contagious poverty; and it has one hope thereof—a hope it dares not express, though it has nourished it through the centuries, and though, without its realization, Europe will forever remain a house divided against itself. It is the hope of a Franco-German alliance—the basic condition for a United States of Europe and for peace in the world!

PIERRE HAMP.

He Walks with His Chin in the Air

Life in you is an incurious madness.
Tell me, how good is life that is not known
And is but felt, like wind against the temples,
Like touch beneath the feet, of turf or stone?

But do not hear me, Lover of life; an answer
Is burning like a sorrow in my breast:
There is flame in feeling, fineness in the knowing,
And who shall say which way of life is best?

Pass on, Seeker, seeking the touch of spaces.
Many the ways of life, and many a one
Is all too brief a fluttering of hours
To serve our purpose here beneath the sun.

HAZEL HALL.

Prison—and the American Scene

SUPPER is over, and we are back in our cells for the night. From five o'clock until seven the next morning, we shall be enclosed, two in each cell, two in each little stone and iron coffin, seven feet by three-and-a-half.

The guards walk softly and swiftly along the galleries, counting the men. The cell-house bell clangs twice sharply; the count is correct. No one has escaped. The human stock is all properly assorted and stalled.

Then come the "runners" with the evening papers. If you wish, and if you have the price, you may subscribe to a daily paper. All the political prisoners do so; and this is the cell-house where the "politicals" are housed.

There comes a silence, broken by a slight rustling. The boys are tearing the heart out of the evening's news. They are rushing down the columns, searching for certain headlines: "Russia," "Strike," "Labor," "West Virginia." And when they come to such a headline, they stiffen, bending forward, frowningly concentrated.

Perhaps tonight's news records a victory—a strike won; a victory of struggling Russia over the harassing Whites. Then you will hear a cry from some cell. Some prisoner wishes to tell a friend, in another cell, to read the item.

"Hey, there, Jack, in Number 52!"

"Yes?"

"Got the Star? Turn to page three—top of the second column!"

Everyone else on that side of the cell-block has heard this, of course; and there is a stirring and rustling as they all hunt for the article. For a few minutes there is silence; and then the voices flash out in happy comment. The guards order less noise. But it is some time before the unusual loudness dies down.

But then comes a silence deeper than that which usually reigns in this rectangular house of grayness. It is the reaction. Now the boys are thinking. . . . They are thinking of their own isolation from the thing which is to them the very core of life. The world whirls on; the molten stream of events flows on tempestuously; there are crashing conflicts and aching defeats and, here and there, a hard won victory. And they are out of it! Condemned to sameness and inaction, to the clogging sluggishness of prison.

And that night it is not just the hardness of the straw bed that keeps sleep from their eyes and unconsciousness from their gnawing minds. It is memory and yearning, and the sterile fever of hope.

This is a scene out of America. Many have been writing of the American Scene. But I can-