

The Suffering of the Poor

In the pamphlet "Economic Revolution", Cunninghame Graham describes the effects on a Irish village of the arrival of capital. The mill which was supposed to be the glory and prosperity of the place, reduces the villagers to serfdom, makes them poorer than before and upsets their happy, inconsequential way of living. It is the evil effects on people of prevailing economic theory and practice which spurs him to continual protest. He knew the sufferers.

Unforgettably, he points the moral of the current economic regime in this description of the funeral of Queen Victoria. the glory and panoply are set before us, and like a solemn drum-beat, throughout the writing, comes the assertion that the Queen was the mother of all her people, even of the least. When the funeral is over, a ragged tramp scavenges among the paper for scraps of food at which the dogs turn up their noses, and, pulling his poor coat around him, moves away, munching the discarded remnants.

On his readers he laid the demand of compassion for these the sheerest outcasts of society, the "strange and ragged loiterers" who have lost all semblance of dignity: "Mechanically they scratched themselves, their hands like the claws of many vultures, raking among their rags. Munching a hunk of dirty bread, they passed into the night, a silent menace to their well-fed brothers in the Lord. All that by day is hidden from our sight was out, giving the lie to optimists and to all those who make pretence to think that progress makes for happiness, and that the increase of wealth acts as a sort of blotting pad on poverty and sucks up grief"¹.

But his chief and constant concern is with ordinary people deprived of work, of freedom, of status by the place allotted to them in the social system, the practical outcome of the economic theory which governed the social system.

Such was the condition of the poor workers as he saw it, that is was almost useless trying to get them concerned with larger issues. Their life could not be more miserable under foreign dominion². They had no leisure, so could not be concerned with elevating their status:

"No self-improvement, moral or otherwise, is to be expected from a man who goes from bed to the work-shop and from the workshop to bed again, and who passes his life in an unceasing round of toil more fitted for mill horses than men"³. They had become: mere cog wheels in great machines, whose evolutions they could never make or mar, nor even hinder, protest they as they may...."⁴.

For them, wage-slavery had become natural. They meekly forged their own fetters by the very work which produced weapons of destruction used against others.

¹ "Success" p.110

² He makes this point often – e.g., in a speech in the House, March 5th, 1889, and a speech in the Temperance Hall, Coatbridge, before his election to parliament.

³ Speech on March 6th, 1889, Hansard.

⁴ "The Conquest of New Granada" p.73.

Enclosed in one of the scrap-books is the account of an observer¹ who investigated conditions at the chain making centre at Cradley Heath. He describes the situation, - men forced to work in ramshackle, draughty buildings, their wives working with them, stripped to the waist, their small children playing around in the dirt for want of anywhere else to go. He visited the hovels where they lived, found them open and bare, without a particle of food in evidence. Their wages for a working week of 60 hours were: men, 5/-d, women, 4/-d. Attention had been drawn to their condition previously by inspectors' reports, but the House had not bestirred itself. Cunninghame Graham became an agitator on their behalf, demanding "the most precious boon men can give one another - namely, sympathy"², sympathy expressed in terms of personal concern and altered wages and conditions. He asserts that there is as substantial slavery in Cheshire as in any part of Africa or the East³. In a speech at Coatbridge as a candidate, he describes the workman's lot:

".....simply the permission to toil all his life for twelve of thirteen hours daily for insufficient remuneration; and when at last, with joints crippled with rheumatism, and the system broken down for want of proper food, there was in reserve for the years of his retirement, the well-appointed luxury of the Christian workhouse".

Christians culpably gave in to this situation, uncritically accepting it⁴.

The condition of workmen in great cities claimed his attention chiefly. But we find him always ready to plead for the crofters, whose life was miserably poor⁵, and who were left unprotected, while the deer ate their crops and enjoyed full protection⁶.

Cunninghame Graham himself had known hunger in his wide journeyings. But his extremity was always temporary. He knew it would sometime be relieved. We can understand how first hand experience could produce his heartfelt agreement with the Spanish saying that every evil on God's earth is less with bread⁷, how he could look on bread as something sacred?⁸ But by what alchemy did a rich man like himself get such understanding not only of hunger but of the horror of unemployment, so that he knew its very marrow? Often quite alone in the House, feeling a sense of his own unworthiness to bear such a burden⁹, he urged the government to reduce hours of labour to absorb the unemployed, to undertake work which would give them jobs, - to put an end to a pestilential lack of sympathy. And when he wrote of an unemployed man, it is clear that he had made his experience his own:

"I take it that no desert journey in the East, nor yet the awful tramp of the man who left afoot, walks for his life, on pampa or prairie, is comparable in horror to the journey of the workman out of work..... the very dogs have their appointed place in the economy of the world, whilst he alone, willing to work, with hands made callous by the saw, the

¹ It might well be Cunninghame Graham himself though I think the internal evidence, on balance, is against this.

² Spoken in the House, March 6th, 1889. Hansard.

³ In the House in, March 1889. Hansard.

⁴ "Hernando de Soto" p.143, footnote.

⁵ Indicated, e.g., in a speech in the House on March 4th, 1889. Hansard.

⁶ Letter to the Press contained in a Scrap Book.

⁷ "Success" p.191.

⁸ Like the goat-herd in "Redeemed" p.125.

⁹ March 5th, 1889. Hansard.

hammer, file, the plough, axe, adze, scythe, spade and every kind of tool, a castaway, no use, a broken cog-wheel, endless account than is the cat which sits and purrs outside the door, knowing that it has its circle of admirers who would miss it if it died"¹.

He feels for the unemployed man, convicted of larceny at Tyneside, who wrote in his diary: "why don't they preach a substantial bodily sermon to poor devils like us....."². There was no bodily sermon. In Canning Town, about the same time, only 1,200 out of 5,000 men had regular employment; at the Dock Gates, hundreds stood for hours in bitter cold, so bent on getting a ticket for a few hours' work that they would climb lamp-posts and roll over the heads of their fellows to grab their chance. The rigid laws of the economic system took their course.

¹ "Success" pp. 193, 194, and 195.

² Extracts were included in a newspaper cutting preserved in a Scrap Book.