

LABOUR'S PRAYER.

BY C. BRADLAUGH.

"GIVE us this day our daily bread" is the entreaty addressed by the tiller of the soil to the "Our Father," who has promised to answer prayer. And what answer cometh from heaven to this the bread winner's petition? Walk amongst the cotton workers of Lancashire, the clothweavers of Yorkshire, the Durham pit men, the Staffordshire puddlers, the Cornish miners, the London dock labourers, go anywhere where hands are roughened with toil, where foreheads are bedewed with sweat of work, and see the Lord's response to the prayer, the father's answer to his children! The only bread they get is the bread they take; in their hard struggle for life-sustenance, the loaves come but slowly, and heaven adds not a crust, even though the worker be hungry, when he rises from his toil-won meal. Not even the sight of pale faced wife, and thin forms of half starved infants can move to generosity the Ruler of the world. The labourer may pray, but, if work be scant and wages low, he pines to death while praying. His prayer gives no relief, and misery's answer is the mocking echo to his demand.

It is said by many a pious tongue that God helps the poor; the wretchedness of some of their hovel houses, found, alas! too often in the suburbs of our wealthiest cities, grimy, black, squalid, and miserable; the threadbare raggedness of their garments; the unwholesomeness of the food they eat; the poisoned air they breathe in their narrow wynds and filthy alleys; all these tell how much God helps the poor. Do you want to see how God helps the poor? go into any police court when some little child-thief is brought up for

hearing; see him shoeless, with ragged trousers, thread-bare, grimy, vest, hardly hanging to his poor body, shirt that seems as though it never could have been white, skin dull brown with dirt, hair innocent of comb or brush, eye ignorantly, sullenly-defiant, yet down cast; born poor, born wretched, born in ignorance, educated amongst criminals, crime the atmosphere in which he moved; and society, his nurse and creator, is now virtuously aghast at the depravity of this its own neglected nursling, and a poor creature whom God alone hath helped. Go where the weakly wife in a narrow room huddles herself and little children day after day: and where the husband crowds in to lie down at night: they are poor and honest, but their honesty bars not the approach of disease, fever, sorrow, death—God helps not the line of health to their poor wan cheeks. Go to the country workhouse in which is temporarily housed the worn out farm labourer, who, while strength enough remained, starved through weary years with wife and several children on eight shillings per week—it is thus God helps the poor. And the poor are taught to pray for a continuance of this help, and to be thankful and content to pray that to-morrow may be like to-day, thankful that yesterday was no worse than it was, and content to-day is as good as it is. Are there many repining at their miseries, the preacher, with gracious intonation, answers rebukingly that God, in his wisdom, has sent these troubles upon them as chastisement for their sins. So, says the church, all are sinners, rich as well as poor, but rich sinners feel the chastising rod is laid more lightly on their backs than it is upon those of their meaner brethren. Week-day and Sunday it is the same contrast; one wears fustian, the other broadcloth, one prepares for heaven in the velvet cushioned pew, the other on the wooden benches of the free seats. In heaven it will be different—all there above are to wear crowns of gold and fine linen, and, therefore, here below the poor man is to be satisfied with the state of life into which it has pleased God to call him. The pastor who tells him this, looks upon the labourer as an inferior

animal, and the labourer by force of habit regards the great landowner and peer, who patronises his endeavours, as a being of a superior order. Is there no new form of prayer that labour might be taught to utter, no other power to which his petition might be addressed? Prayer to the unknown for aid gives no strength to the prayer. In each beseeching, he loses dignity and self-reliance, he trusts to he knows not what, for an answer which cometh, he knows not when, and mayhap may never come at all. Let labour pray in the future in another fashion and at another altar. Let labourer pray to labourer that each may know labour's rights, and be able to fulfil labour's duties. The size of the loaf of daily bread must depend on the amount of the daily wages, and the labourer must pray for better wages. But his prayer must take the form of earnest, educated endeavour to obtain the result desired. Let workmen, instead of praying to God in their distress, ask one another why are wages low? how can wages be raised? can we raise our own wages? having raised them, can we keep them fixed at the sum desired? what causes produce a rise and fall in wages? are high wages beneficial to the labourer? These are questions the pulpit has no concern with. The reverend pastor will tell you that the "wages of sin is death," and will rail against "filthy lucre;" but he has no inclination for answering the queries here propounded. Why are wages low? Wages are low because the wage-winners crowd too closely. Wages are low because too many seek to share one fund. Wages are lower still because the labourer fights against unfair odds; the laws of the country overriding the laws of humanity, have been enacted without the labourer's consent, although his obedience to them is enforced. The fund is unfairly distributed as well as too widely divided. Statutes are gradually being modified, and the working man may hope for ampler justice from the employer in the immediate future than was possible in the past, but high and healthy wages depend on the working man himself. Wages can be raised by the working classes exercising a moderate degree of caution in increas-

ing their numbers. Wages must increase when capital increases more rapidly than population, and it is the duty of the working man, therefore, to take every reasonable precaution to check the increase of population, and to accelerate the augmentation of capital.

Can working-men, by combination, permanently raise the rate of wages? One gentleman presiding at a meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science for the discussion of the labour question, very fairly said, "It is not in the power of the men alone, or of the masters alone, or of both combined, to say what shall be the amount of wages at any particular time in any trade or country. The men and the masters are, at most, competitors for the division at a certain rate, of a certain fund, provided by [themselves and] others—that is, by the consumers. If that fund is small, no device can make the rate of profit or rate of wages higher." This is in theory quite correct, if it means that no device can make the total divisible greater than it is, but not if it refers to the increase of profit or wages by partial distribution. In practice, although it is true that if the fund be small and the seekers to share it be many, the quotient to each must be necessarily very small, yet it is also true that a few of the competitors—*i.e.*, the capitalists, may and do absorb for their portions of profits an improper and unfairly large amount, thus still further reducing the wretchedly small pittance in any case receivable by the mass of labourers. It is warmly contended that the capitalist and labourer contend for division of the fund appropriable in fair and open field; that the capitalist has his money to employ, the man his labour to sell; that if workmen are in excess of the capitalist's requirements, so that the labourer has to supplicate for employment, wages cannot rise, and will probably fall; but that if, on the contrary, capital has need to invite additional labourers, then wages must rise. That is the law of supply and demand brought prominently forward. In great part this is true, but it is not true that capital and labour compete in fair and open field, any more than it is true that an

iron-clad war vessel, with heavy ordnance, would compete in fair field with a wooden frigate, equipped with the *materiel* in use thirty years ago. Capital is gold-plated, and carries too many guns for unprotected labour. The intelligent capitalist makes the laws affecting master and servant, which the uneducated labourer must obey, but has no effective voice to alter. The capitalist forms the government of the country, which in turn protects capital against labour; this government the labourer must sustain, and dares not modify. The capitalist does combine, and has combined, and the result of this combination has been an unfair appropriation of the divisible fund. Why should not the labourer combine also? The answer is truly that no combination of workmen can increase the rate of wages, if at the same time the number of labourers increases more rapidly than the capital out of which their wages must be paid. But the men may combine to instruct one another in the laws of political economy; they may combine to apply their knowledge of those laws to the contracts between employer and employed. They may combine to compel the repeal of unjust enactments under which an unfair distribution of the labour fund is not only possible, but certain. Organisations of labourers are, therefore, wise and necessary: the object of such organisations should be the permanent elevation and enfranchisement of the members. No combination of workmen, which merely dictates a temporary cessation from labour, can ultimately and permanently benefit the labourer; while it certainly immediately injures him and deteriorates his condition, making his home wretched, his family paupers. Nor can even co-operative combination, praiseworthy as it certainly is, to procure for the labourer a larger share of the profits of his labour, permanently benefit him, except in so far that temporarily alleviating his condition, and giving him leisure for study, it enables him to educate himself: unless, at the same time, the co-operator is conscious that the increase or reduction in the amount of wages depends entirely on the ratio of relation preserved between population and

its means of subsistence, the former always having a tendency to increase more rapidly than the latter. It is with the problem of too many mouths for too little bread that the labourer has really to deal: if he must pray, it should be for more bread and for fewer mouths. The answer often given by the workman himself to the advocate of Malthusian views is, that the world is wide enough for all, that there are fields yet unploughed broad enough to bear more corn than man at present could eat, and that there is neither too little food, nor are there too many mouths; that there is, in fact, none of that over-population with which it is sought to affright the working-man. Over-population in the sense that the whole world is too full to contain its habitants, or that it will ever become too full to contain them, is certainly a fallacy, but over-population is a lamentable truth in its relative sense. We find evidences of over-population in every old country of the world. The test of over-population is the existence of poverty, squalor, wretchedness, disease, ignorance, misery, and crime. Low rate of wages, and food dear, here you have two certain indices of relative over-population. Wages depending on the demand for and supply of labourers, wherever wages are low it is a certain sign that there are too many candidates for employment in that phase of the labour market. The increased cost of production of food, and its consequent higher price, also mark that the cultivation has been forced by the numbers of the people to descend to less productive soils. Poverty is the test and result of over-population.

It is not against some possible increase of their numbers, which may produce possibly greater affliction, that the working men are entreated to agitate. It is against the existing evils which afflict their ranks, evils alleged by sound students of political economy to have already resulted from inattention to the population question, that the energies of the people are sought to be directed. The operation of the law of population has been for centuries entirely ignored by those who have felt its adverse influence most severely. It is only during the last thirty years that any

of the working classes have turned their attention to the question; and only during the last few years that it has been to any extent discussed amongst them. Yet all the prayers that labour ever uttered since the first breath of human life, have not availed so much for human happiness as will the earnest examination by one generation of this, the greatest of all social questions, the root of all political problems, the foundation of all civil progress. Poor—man must be wretched. Poor—he must be ignorant. Poor—he must be criminal: and poor he must be till the cause of poverty has been ascertained by the poor man himself, and its cure planned by the poor man's brain, and effected by the poor man's hand

Outside his own rank none can save the poor. Others may show him the abyss, but he must avoid its dangerous brink himself. Others may point out to him the chasm, but he must build his own bridge over. Labour's prayer must be to labour's head for help from labour's hand to strike the blow that severs labour's chain, and terminates the too long era of labour's suffering.

During the last few years our daily papers, and various periodicals, magazines, and reviews have been more frequently, and much less partially, devoted than of old to the discussion of questions relating to the labourer's condition, and the means of ameliorating it. In the Legislative Assembly debates have taken place which would have been impossible fifty years since. Works on political economy are now more easily within the reach of the working man than they were some few years ago. People's editions are now published of treatises on political economy which half a century back the people were unable to read. It is now possible for the labourer, and it is the labourer's duty, to make himself master of the laws which govern the production and distribution of wealth. Undoubtedly there is much grievous wrong in the mode of distribution of wealth, by which the evils that afflict the poorest strugglers are often specially and tenfold aggravated. The monopoly of land, the serf state of the labourer, are points requiring

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energetic agitation. The grave and real question is, however, that which lies at the root of all, the increase of wealth as against the increase of those whom it subsists. The leaders of the great trades' unions of the country, if they really desire to permanently increase the happiness of the classes amongst whom they exercise influence, can speedily promote this object by encouraging their members to discuss freely the relations of labour to capital; not moving in one groove, as if labour and capital were necessarily antagonistic, and that therefore labour must always have rough-armed hand to protect itself from the attacks of capital; but, taking new ground, to inquire if labour and capital are bound to each other by any and what ties, ascertaining if the share of the labourer in the capital fund depends, except so far as affected by inequality in distribution, on the proportion between the number of labourers and the amount of the fund. The discussing, examining, and dealing generally with these topics, would necessarily compel the working man to a more correct appreciation of his position.

Any such doctrine as that "the poor shall never cease out of the land;" or that we are to be content with the station in life into which it has pleased God to call us; or that we are to ask and we shall receive, must no longer avail. Schiller most effectively answers the advocates of prayer—

"Help, Lord, help! Look with pity down!

A paternoster pray;

What God does, that is justly done,

His grace endures for aye."

"Oh, mother! empty mockery,

God hath not justly dealt by me:

Have I not begged and prayed in vain;

What boots it now to pray again?"

Labour's only and effective prayer must be in life action for its own redemption; action founded on thought, crude thought, and sometimes erring at first, but ultimately developed into useful thinking, by much patient experimenting for the right and true.