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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE THREE PHILANTHROPISTS

BY

ROBERT G. INGERSOLL.

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I.

“ Well, while I am a beggar, I will rail,
And say there is no sin but to be rich.”

MR. A. lived in the kingdom of ——. He was a sincere professional philanthropist. He was absolutely certain that he loved his fellow men, and that his views were humane and scientific. He concluded to turn his attention to taking care of people less fortunate than himself.

With this object in view he investigated the common people that lived about him, and he found that they were extremely ignorant, that many of them seemed to take no particular interest in life or in business, that few of them had any theories of their own, and that, while many had muscle, there was only now and then one who had any mind worth speaking of. Nearly all of them were destitute of ambition. They were satisfied if they got something to eat, a place to sleep, and could now and then indulge in some form of dissipation. They seemed to have great confidence in to-morrow—trusted to luck, and took no thought for the future. Many of them were extravagant, most of them dissipated, and a good many dishonest.

Mr. A. found that many of the husbands not only failed to support their families, but that some of them lived on the labor of their wives; that many of the wives were careless of their obligations, knew nothing

about the art of cooking, nothing of keeping house ; and that parents, as a general thing, neglected their children or treated them with cruelty. He also found that many of the people were so shiftless that they died of want and exposure.

After having obtained this information, Mr. A. made up his mind to do what little he could to better their condition. He petitioned the king to assist him, and asked that he be allowed to take control of five hundred people in consideration that he would pay a certain amount into the treasury of the kingdom. The king, being satisfied that Mr. A. could take care of these people better than they were taking care of themselves, granted the petition.

Mr. A., with the assistance of a few soldiers, took these people from their old homes and haunts to a plantation of his own. He divided them into groups, and over each group placed a superintendent. He made certain rules and regulations for their conduct. They were only compelled to work from twelve to fourteen hours a day, leaving ten hours for sleep and recreation. Good and substantial food was provided. Their houses were comfortable and their clothing sufficient. Their work was laid out from day to day and from month to month, so that they knew exactly what they were to do in each hour of every day. These rules were made for the good of the people, to the end that they might not interfere with each other, that they might attend to their duties, and enjoy themselves in a reasonable way. They were not allowed to waste their time, or to use stimulants or profane language. They were told to be respectful to the superintendents, and especially to Mr. A. ; to be obedient, and, above all, to accept the position in which Providence had placed them, without complaining, and to cheerfully perform their tasks.

Mr. A. had found out all that the five hundred persons had earned the year before they were taken control of by him—just how much they had added to

the wealth of the world. He had statistics taken for the year before with great care showing the number of deaths, the cases of sickness and of destitution, the number who had committed suicide, how many had been convicted of crimes and misdemeanors, how many days they had been idle, and how much time and money they had spent in drink and for worthless amusements.

During the first year of their enslavement he kept like statistics. He found that they had earned several times as much; that there had been no cases of destitution, no drunkenness; that no crimes had been committed; that there had been but little sickness, owing to the regular course of their lives; that few had been guilty of misdemeanors, owing to the certainty of punishment; and that they had been so watched and superintended that for the most part they had travelled the highway of virtue and industry.

Mr. A. was delighted, and with a vast deal of pride showed these statistics to his friends. He not only demonstrated that the five hundred people were better off than they had been before, but that his own income was very largely increased. He congratulated himself that he had added to the well-being of these people not only, but had laid the foundation of a great fortune for himself. On these facts and these figures he claimed not only to be a philanthropist, but a philosopher; and all the people who had a mind to go into the same business agreed with him.

Some denounced the entire proceeding as unwarranted, as contrary to reason and justice. These insisted that the five hundred people had a right to live in their own way, provided they did not interfere with others; that they had the right to go through the world with little food and with poor clothes, and to live in huts, if such was their choice. But Mr. A. had no trouble in answering these objectors. He insisted that well-being is the only good, and that every human being is under obligation, not only to take care of himself, but to do what little he can towards taking care of

others ; that where five hundred people neglect to take care of themselves, it is the duty of somebody else, who has more intelligence and more means, to take care of them ; that the man who takes five hundred people and improves their condition, gives them on the average better food, better clothes, and keeps them out of mischief, is a benefactor.

"These people," said Mr. A., "were tried. They were found incapable of taking care of themselves. They lacked intelligence, or will, or honesty, or industry, or ambition, or something, so that in the struggle for existence they fell behind, became stragglers, dropped by the wayside, died in gutters ; while many were destined to end their days either in dungeons or on scaffolds. Besides all this, they were a nuisance to their prosperous fellow citizens, a perpetual menace to the peace of society. They increased the burden of taxation ; they filled the ranks of the criminal classes, they made it necessary to build more jails, to employ more policemen and judges ; so that I, by enslaving them, not only assisted them, not only protected them against themselves, not only bettered their condition, not only added to the well-being of society at large, but greatly increased my own fortune."

Mr. A. also took the ground that Providence, by giving him superior intelligence, the genius of command, the aptitude of taking charge of others, had made it his duty to exercise these faculties for the well-being of the people and for the glory of God. Mr. A. frequently declared that he was God's steward. He often said he thanked God that he was not governed by a sickly sentiment, but that he was a man of sense, of judgment, of force of character, and that the means employed by him were in accordance with the logic of facts.

Some of the people thus enslaved objected, saying that they had the same right to control themselves that Mr. A. had to control himself. But it only required a little discipline to satisfy them that they were wrong.

Some of the people were quite happy, and declared that nothing gave them such perfect contentment as the absence of all responsibility. Mr. A. insisted that all men had not been endowed with the same capacity; that the weak ought to be cared for by the strong; that such was evidently the design of the Creator, and that he intended to do what little he could to carry that design into effect.

Mr. A. was very successful. In a few years he had several thousands of men, women, and children working for him. He amassed a large fortune. He felt that he had been intrusted with this money by Providence. He therefore built several churches, and once in a while gave large sums to societies for the spread of civilisation. He passed away regretted by a great many people—not including those who had lived under his immediate administration. He was buried with great pomp, the king being one of the pall-bearers, and on his tomb was this:

HE WAS THE PROVIDENCE OF THE POOR.

II.

“ And, being rich, my virtue then shall be
To say there is no vice but beggary.”

Mr. B. did not believe in slavery. He despised the institution with every drop of his blood, and was an advocate of universal freedom. He held all of the ideas of Mr. A. in supreme contempt, and frequently spent whole evenings in denouncing the inhumanity and injustice of the whole business. He even went so far as to contend that many of A.'s slaves had more intelligence than A. himself, and that, whether they had intelligence or not, they had the right to be free. He insisted that Mr. A.'s philanthropy was a sham; that he never bought a human being for the purpose of bettering that being's condition; that he went into the business simply to make money for himself; and that his talk about his slaves committing less crime than when they were free was simply to justify the crime committed by himself in enslaving his fellow-men.

Mr. B. was a manufacturer, and he employed some five or six thousand men. He used to say that these men were not forced to work for him; that they were at perfect liberty to accept or reject the terms; that, so far as he was concerned, he would just as soon commit larceny or robbery as to force a man to work for him. “Every laborer under my roof,” he used to say, “is as free to choose as I am.”

Mr. B. believed in absolutely free trade; thought it an outrage to interfere with the free interplay of forces; said that every man should buy, or at least have the privilege of buying, where he could buy cheapest, and should have the privilege of selling where he could get the most. He insisted that a man who has labor to sell has the right to sell it to the best advantage, and that the purchaser has the right to buy it at the lowest price. He did not enslave men—he hired them. Some said that he took advantage of their necessities, but he answered that he created no neces-

sities, that he was not responsible for their condition, that he did not make them poor, that he found them poor and gave them work, and gave them the same wages that he could employ others for. He insisted that he was absolutely just to all; he did not give one man more than another, and he never refused to employ a man on account of the man's religion or politics; all that he did was simply to employ that man if the man wished to be employed, and give him the wages, no more and no less, that some other man of like capacity was willing to work for.

Mr. B. also said that the price of the article manufactured by him fixed the wages of the persons employed, and that he, Mr. B., was not responsible for the price of the article he manufactured; consequently he was not responsible for the wages of the workmen. He agreed to pay them a certain price, he taking the risk of selling his articles, and he paid them regularly just on the day he agreed to pay them, and if they were not satisfied with the wages, they were at perfect liberty to leave. One of his private sayings was, "The poor ye have always with you." And from this he argued that some men were made poor so that others could be generous. "Take poverty and suffering from the world," he said, "and you destroy sympathy and generosity."

Mr. B. made a large amount of money. Many of his workmen complained that their wages did not allow them to live in comfort. Many had large families, and therefore but little to eat. Some of them lived in crowded rooms. Many of the children were carried off by disease; but Mr. B. took the ground that all these people had the right to go, that he did not force them to remain, that if they were not healthy it was not his fault, and that whenever it pleased Providence to remove a child, or one of the parents, he, Mr. B., was not responsible.

Mr. B. insisted that many of his workmen were extravagant; that they bought things that they did not

need; that they wasted in beer and tobacco money that they should save for funerals; that many of them visited places of amusement when they should have been thinking about death, and that others bought toys to please the children when they hardly had bread enough to eat. He felt that he was in no way accountable for this extravagance, nor for the fact that their wages did not give them the necessaries of life, because he not only gave them the same wages that other manufacturers gave, but the same wages that other workmen were willing to work for.

Mr. B. said—and he always said this as though it ended the argument—and he generally stood up to say it: “The great law of supply and demand is of divine origin; it is the only law that will work in all possible or conceivable cases; and this law fixes the price of all labor, and from it there is no appeal. If people are not satisfied with the operation of this law, then let them make a new world for themselves.”

Some of Mr. B.’s friends reported that on several occasions, forgetting what he had said on others, he did declare that his confidence was somewhat weakened in the law of supply and demand; but this was only when there seemed to be an over-production of the things he was engaged in manufacturing, and at such times he seemed to doubt the absolute equity of the great law.

Mr. B. made even a larger fortune than Mr. A., because when his workmen got old he did not have to care for them, when they were sick he paid no doctors, and when their children died he bought no coffins. In this way he was relieved of a large part of the expenses that had to be borne by Mr. A. When his workmen became too old, they were sent to the poor-house; when they were sick, they were assisted by charitable societies; and when they died, they were buried by pity.

In a few years Mr. B. was the owner of many millions. He also considered himself as one of God’s

stewards; felt that Providence had given him the intelligence to combine interests, to carry out great schemes, and that he was specially raised up to give employment to many thousands of people. He often regretted that he could do no more for his laborers without lessening his own profits, or, rather, without lessening his fund for the blessing of mankind—the blessing to begin immediately after his death. He was so anxious to be the providence of posterity that he was sometimes almost heartless in his dealings with contemporaries. He felt that it was necessary for him to be economical, to save every dollar that he could, because in this way he could increase the fund that was finally to bless mankind. He also felt that in this way he could lay the foundations of a permanent fame—that he could build, through his executors, an asylum to be called the “B. Asylum,” that he could fill a building with books to be called the “B. Library,” and that he could also build and endow an institution of learning to be called the “B. College,” and that, in addition, a large amount of money could be given for the purpose of civilising the citizens of less fortunate countries, to the end that they might become imbued with that spirit of combination and manufacture that results in putting large fortunes in the hands of those who have been selected by Providence, on account of their talents, to make a better distribution of wealth than those who earned it could have done.

Mr. B. spent many thousands of dollars to procure such legislation as would protect him from foreign competition. He did not believe the law of supply and demand would work when interfered with by manufacturers living in other countries.

Mr. B., like Mr. A., was a man of judgment. He had what is called a level head, was not easily turned aside from his purpose, and felt that he was in accord with the general sentiment of his time. By his own exertions he rose from poverty to wealth. He was born in a hut and died in a palace. He was a patron

of art and enriched his walls with the works of the masters. He insisted that others could and should follow his example. For those who failed or refused he had no sympathy. He accounted for their poverty and wretchedness by saying: "These paupers have only themselves to blame." He died without ever having lost a dollar. His funeral was magnificent, and clergymen vied with each other in laudations of the dead. over his dust rises a monument of marble with the words:

HE LIVED FOR OTHERS.

III.

"But there are men who steal, and vainly try
To gild the crime with pompous charity."

There was another man, Mr. C., who also had the genius for combination. He understood the value of capital, the value of labor; knew exactly how much could be done with machinery; understood the economy of things; knew how to do everything in the easiest and shortest way. And he, too, was a manufacturer and had in his employ many thousands of men, women, and children. He was what is called a visionary, a sentimentalist, rather weak in his will, not very obstinate, had but little egotism; and it never occurred to him that he had been selected by Providence, or any supernatural power, to divide the property of others. It did not seem to him that he had any right to take

from other men their labor without giving them a full equivalent. He felt that if he had more intelligence than his fellow men he ought to use that intelligence not only for his own good but for theirs; that he certainly ought not to use it for the purpose of gaining an advantage over those who were his intellectual inferiors. He used to say that a man strong intellectually had no more right to take advantage of a man weak intellectually than the physically strong had to rob the physically weak.

He also insisted that we should not take advantage of each other's necessities; that you should not ask a drowning man a greater price for lumber than you would if he stood on the shore; that if you took into consideration the necessities of your fellow man, it should be only to lessen the price of that which you would sell to him, not to increase it. He insisted that honest men do not take advantage of their fellows. He was so weak that he had not perfect confidence in the great law of supply and demand as applied to flesh and blood. He took into consideration another law of supply and demand: he knew that the working man had to be supplied with food, and that his nature demanded something to eat, a house to live in, clothes to wear.

Mr. C. used to think about this law of supply and demand as applicable to individuals. He found that men would work for exceedingly small wages when pressed for the necessaries of life; that under some circumstances they would give their labor for half of what it was worth to the employer, because they were in a position where they must do something for wife or child. He concluded that he had no right to take advantage of the necessities of others, and that he should in the first place honestly find what the work was worth to him, and then give to the man who did the work that amount.

Other manufacturers regarded Mr. C. as substantially insane, whilst most of his workmen looked upon

him as an exceedingly good-natured man, without any particular genius for business. Mr. C., however, cared little about the opinions of others, so long as he maintained his respect for himself.

At the end of the first year he found that he had made a large profit, and thereupon he divided this profit with the people who had earned it. Some of his friends said to him that he ought to endow some public institution; that there should be a college in his native town; but Mr. C. was of such a peculiar turn of mind that he thought justice ought to go before charity, and a little in front of egotism and a desire to immortalise one's self. He said that it seemed to him that of all persons in the world entitled to this profit were the men who had earned it, and the men who had made it by their labor, by days of actual toil. He insisted that, as they had earned it, it was really theirs, and if it was theirs, they should have it and should spend it in their own way.

Mr. C. was told that he would make the workmen in other factories dissatisfied, that other manufacturers would become his enemies, and that his course would scandalise some of the greatest men who had done so much for the civilisation of the world and for the spread of intelligence. Mr. C. became extremely unpopular with men of talent, with those who had a genius for business. He, however, pursued his way, and carried on his business with the idea that the men who did the work were entitled to a fair share of the profits; that, after all, money was not as sacred as men, and that the law of supply and demand, as understood, did not apply to flesh and blood.

Mr. C. said: "I cannot be happy if those who work for me are defrauded. If I feel I am taking what belongs to them, then my life becomes miserable. To feel that I have done justice is one of the necessities of my nature. I do not wish to establish colleges. I wish to establish no public institution. My desire is to enable those who work for me to establish a few

thousand homes for themselves. My ambition is to enable them to buy the books they really want to read. I do not wish to establish a hospital, but I want to make it possible for my workmen to have the services of the best physicians—physicians of their own choice. It is not for me to take their money and use it for the good of others or for my own glory. It is for me to give what they have earned to them. After I have given them the money that belongs to them, I can give them my advice—I can tell them how I hope they will use it; and after I have advised them, they will use it as they please. You cannot make great men and great women by suppression. Slavery is not the school in which genius is born. Every human being must make his own mistakes for himself, must learn for himself, must have his own experience; and if the world improves, it must be from choice, not from force; and every man who does justice, who sets the example of fair dealing, hastens the coming of universal honesty, of universal civilisation.”

Mr. C. carried his doctrine out to the fullest extent, honestly and faithfully. When he died, there were at the funeral those who had worked for him, their wives and their children. Their tears fell upon his grave. They planted flowers and paid to him the tribute of their love. Above his silent dust they erected a monument with this inscription :

HE ALLOWED OTHERS TO LIVE FOR THEMSELVES.

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