

**HARD TIMES AND WHAT
TO LEARN FROM
THEM: A PLAIN TALK WITH
THE WORKING PEOPLE**

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ROBT. ELLIS THOMPSON

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—AND—
**WHAT TO LEARN
FROM THEM.**

A PLAIN TALK WITH THE WORKING PEOPLE

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HARD TIMES are the times to think. When people are well off and at their ease, they get on without much thought. But when they are in trouble or in want, their minds go to work. The pain that even a child goes through in cutting its teeth, seems to have a good deal to do with the growth of its wits. It is smarter and brighter after every new tooth. And even grown people are thought to know more than they did, after they have cut their eye-teeth. Shakespeare shows his great knowledge of human nature by putting his grandest thoughts into the mouths of men who are aroused and excited by danger or distress.

If we come out of these Hard Times without having learnt anything, it must be because we are the sort of fools it is of no use to send to school. And when a people or nation are found to be unteachable, they are very soon wiped out to make room for something better.

Worse still than the failure to learn anything good from the Hard Times, would it be to learn only what is bad from them. They may teach us nothing but hatred and distrust of each other. They may cause different classes to dislike one another more heartily than ever. And, instead of working together more quietly and peaceably for the future, we may come to work against each other, and to stand each in the other's way. That is one of our great dangers in this second half of the nineteenth century—the danger of sinking into a nasty, brutish, wolfish state, in which every man's hand is against his neighbor.

Now it is true that all classes of society are exposed to this danger, but none are so much so as the working people, that is, the people who have manual labor and skill to sell, but nothing else. For this bad lesson is what they are taught by nearly all those who put themselves forward as their friends and their champions, their guides and their teachers. These men declare that all the blame of the suffering and distress falls on the rest of society, while the workingman is blameless. They find nothing in his conduct which calls for amendment, except, perhaps, that he has been too submissive to his oppressors. They say that the right attitude for the working classes is that of conflict, resistance and enmity to their employers and to all the rest of mankind who do not take their part against those employers.

Now there is that in every man, that baser self, which loves a pleasant lie more than a bitter truth, and likes to be told that "the rest of the world is to blame when things go wrong, but I and my class are altogether in the right." Rich men like to be told that as well as poor men; they run after false teachers who say that, just as the poor do. But in every man, be he rich or poor, there is also a something, a better self, which desires to know the truth, and to be blamed when blame is deserved. And the pity is that nearly all of those who are regarded as the workingman's friends and teachers, are men who speak to the baser and not to the better self in those who listen to them. And indeed they have no choice but to do so. They live by exciting strife and contention, which our baser self delights in. The peace and good-will which our better self loves, would take the bread out of their mouths. They must say, like Milton's Satan:

"Evil, be thou my good."

for what is good would be their destruction.

For this very reason, it can be hardly be wise for the workingman to follow these guides, since their interests, to

say the least, *may* be utterly different from his own. No sensible business man would employ a lawyer, who was continually urging and exciting him to quarrels and law suits. A lawyer who lived by such practices would be liable to punishment as "a common barrator," for the law requires him to think first of the interests of his client, and to desire the peace and harmony which will promote those interests. But what else than "common barrators" are these wordy champions of the workingman's rights? The only difference is that they go to work on a larger scale than do the rogues of the legal profession. The bad lawyer, for the sake of his fees, persuades a few individuals to "take the law" of their neighbors, and he of course opposes any compromise or understanding which would put an end to the lawsuit, and, with it, to his fees. The Labor Reformer arouses evil passions in large masses of men, and brings them into conflict with others, in order that he may live in idleness, and in the intoxication of continual excitement and gratified vanity. It is but natural in him to resist every approach to harmony, and to heap abuse upon those who advise milder and more peaceable measures. He lives by strife, and peace would ruin him. Unless, therefore, it is self-evident and beyond all doubt that the workman should be forever at war with his employer, it must be the height of folly for him to take counsel only or chiefly with those whose only interest is war. Let us suppose that it is proposed that the United States shall go to war with Spain, for the liberation and annexation of Cuba. What would be thought of a proposition to leave that question to a convention made up of all the inventors of torpedoes, revolving cannon, breach-loading rifles, and other instruments of slaughter, which have been forwarded to the Patent Office and are urged upon the attention of the War Department? It would be said at once, if we are to fight Spain, it must be after taking the advice of those who have no private interests to promote by the war.

Some of these men have doubtless taken to this bad trade from good motives, and do honestly believe the things they say. They are mostly persons who have been embittered and even maddened by misfortunes and failures of their own. They have long ceased to regard these questions with a sound mind and without prejudice. This is the best sort. Others are persons who have made the discovery, in some debating society or public meeting, that they could talk, and they have taken to talk as a trade. And as the business of Labor Reformer requires less preparation than any other that gives an opening for speech-making, they have taken to it as the easiest. They are become "champions of the workingman," chiefly because they think themselves too good to work as he does at an honest trade. They have no convictions deeper than their teeth; but they have caught up all the old phrases, and can talk about "the horny-handed sons of toil," although it would tax their memories to say when they did an honest day's work.

And if the working man could see some of these champions when are they off duty, he would find them lounging about the lobbies of our Legislatures, making bargains with those who need their influence, or perhaps drinking and smoking in the rooms of expensive clubs, or driving harlots behind blood horses "on the Avenue." These are men who eat the bread of idleness, and deny themselves nothing. They make speeches about the privations of the poor, while they live more sumptuously than the rich. The respect shown them by the laboring classes is their stock in trade, and the agitations of the labor market supply the wind to grind their private grist. For news comes that the bung-hole makers of Bungville are "out," and Mr. Labor Reformer is off to the place by the next train, but so changed that the very door-keeper of his club would no longer know him. His broad-cloth, his diamonds, his kid gloves, are gone, and he

now wears an old suit, with one leg of his trousers stuck into his unblacked boot, while his necktie and his hair are in a fine disorder, and his hands have stains which look like those of work. He is now every inch "the champion of the poor man." And this is no fancy picture.

Of course the Hard Times give such men plenty to talk about. They prosper by the unhappiness of their fellow men, while nothing is so fatal to them as general prosperity. But they do not tell the whole truth. They take great pains to keep the minds of those who listen to them fixed upon one side of the case, while they leave the other altogether out of sight. They say little of what employers have suffered, and nothing of the cases in which employers have made sacrifices and kept their works running at a loss, in order that their men may still get a living. They do not speak of the dividends "passed" by the great companies, and of the straits to which many families have been reduced because of this. They do not dwell on the general reduction of expenses, the luxuries given up, and the plainer style of living adopted. Nor do they mention employers reduced to utter poverty, and now glad to earn a living as salesmen or accountants. No! they can see one thing, and only one—the distress of the working classes. And they speak of that as if no one else had any feeling for it, whereas for sixty years back the condition of those classes, and the means of improving it without making the laborer a pauper or a dependent, has been constantly in the thoughts of all thinking people in Europe and America.

The hardships borne by a large part of the working classes are bitter enough, God knows. Men are walking the streets of our great cities, morning, noon and night, week after week, asking nothing but a chance to earn something, and asking in vain. Little mouths at home will have the less to eat, because no work is found. Perhaps the house, or the good rooms, in which family decency and privacy were