

A NEW CLASS OF LABOR IN THE SOUTH.

PROHIBITORY statutes directed against the labor of children in cotton factories are simultaneously pending in the legislatures of Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama, while bills of kindred purport are being pressed forward by members of the North Carolina and Mississippi Assemblies. In more than one of these States there will be no such legislation for several years; but it is fairly assured that before the twentieth century shall have completed its first decade no child under twelve years of age will be working anywhere in Southern cotton mills, nor, indeed, any boy under fourteen nor girl under sixteen, except with limitations as to hours and seasons. Compulsory education is also pressing close after such laws, which, even if they should many times fail to pass, will nevertheless before long find a path to the statute book.

Not the most ardent Southerner denies that our section has lagged far behind the East in many movements of profound import to race progress; but in regard to these child-labor laws, no one need be surprised that we are to-day going over ground covered by the lawgivers of New England half a century ago, and that public sentiment among us is only just now allying itself with practical considerations to promote the necessary legislation along this line. The fair-minded will reflect that the need for this legislation came to us late. Nineteen years ago there were only 667,000 spindles at work in all the cotton States; to-day the manufacturing records concede us 7,000,000 spindles in actual operation and another 1,500,000 planned for. The looms have more than kept pace with the spindles. All this means that the textile operatives of the South have grown, since the early '80's, from the most inconsiderable class in their section to a great and rapidly increasing army.

Whence comes this great aggregate of workers that has grown in a score of years from a scant 20,000, all told, to a quarter of a million beings, representing four times that number depending upon the fruits of their labors — a host that swells in size daily as this wide-reaching industry opens up more and more in various directions where natural fitness points the way?

The operatives in the new Southern factories, which means nine-tenths of the factories in the South, are all white, and they have come from the tenant farm, the cotton field, the hill-side corn patch, and the mountain hut. A strictly agricultural or pastoral people by the practice and traditions of many generations, they have been suddenly converted into a manufacturing population. Native to our soil as truly as were their grandsires before them, unmodified by any foreign element, or even by a single urban or communistic instinct, with the rustic vices of America strong upon them as the rustic virtues of America, and knowing nothing of community life, here they are, untrained and untutored, alien to their present occupation, yet strenuously adapting themselves to its demands, and laboriously acquiring the skill requisite to success in their new pursuit. For the present they are still a rural people in traits and tendencies. They have not been strengthened by resisting the evil of cities, or weakened by yielding to it. When another decade has passed, no one must expect the same thing to be true. There will be a better status or there will be a worse, — never the same. Every portent points to the former; for the dullest man can read the signs of an awakening to the rights of these people; their right to better wages, to better homes, to full educational and religious privileges.

But what brought about this movement into the factories? Every one must remember the predictions of Northern and English manufacturers of forty, thirty, and twenty years ago. To give a sample of their arguments, I quote from an address delivered in Connecticut in 1872:

“The attempt to establish cotton manufacturing in the cotton-growing States must continue to be a failure; for, aside from other inherent and invincible defects, the South has no mechanic class, scarcely a laboring class, indeed, save the agricultural, and its tillers of the soil are not convertible into textile operatives. The one solution would be to import mill hands, and other phases of the situation steadily oppose this.”

The speaker's assumption, that labor which is by ancestral instinct and personal predilection agricultural is the most difficult in the world to be diverted, was in the main correct. But there were unknown quantities conspiring to bring unexpected results before another generation was gone. If the markets of the world had not been manipulated until cotton was forced from its throne, the present situation would have been impossible. The clew to the anomaly is in commercial mutations.

The staple commanded \$1 per pound when the Civil War closed, — a tremendously inflated value, certainly. When it sank to its apparent normal, 15 cents, the vast plantations of ante-bellum days were being rapidly parcelled out into little farms, remaining, in general, the property

of one landlord; but the small plats were rented separately to the landless whites, to the native "cracker" element, and sometimes to the decayed gentry. The rent was always payable in a portion of the crops, cotton being usually required. This system of labor was called tenant farming; and, source of sore evils though it was, it yet seemed the only thing at the moment to take the place of the old labor system which was shattered. The freed blacks soon began to swell the ranks of the tenant farmers; and, the land being once more tilled, the number of millions of bales of cotton increased each year.

Soon the play of traffic, combined with Southern stubbornness and ignorance regarding the diversification of crops, became a serious menace to the cotton-producing States; and it was the tenant farmer who faced starvation first. Cotton had fallen to 8 cents, 7 cents, 6 cents; and the negro, stout of arm and revelling in the hottest sun, was crowding the farmer in the field. But in most cases the white worker doggedly held on, while his faithful but hopeless wife plodded the furrow beside him. The brood of little ones, barefoot the year round, stunted from lack of nourishment, did their share of labor also.

But when the once precious product had been forced down to $4\frac{3}{4}$ cents per pound, is it surprising that much of it was left ungathered in the field, that the tenant farmer was breaking ranks, that an industrial revolution almost without precedent was inaugurated? The small propertied class of this section had been learning its lesson. The sum of it was: We are ruined unless we can manufacture our own staple, and give the world the finished fabric at prices that will enable us, and those that come after us, to live.

Cotton factories were springing up like magic everywhere; and the managers were inviting the poor from all the countryside to come in and follow the new occupation at wages that seemed wealth to them, unable to make the crudest estimate of what the new expenses and needs would be. Young men and women without ties came first; then came widows and orphans in numbers; the tenant farmer himself held back no longer, for the driving behind him was hard enough to conquer the most radical ancestral traits and tendencies. Next came, though in far smaller numbers, the hill-country people, the highlanders, first peeping into the new homes of their one-time lowland neighbors, who, it was rumored, were now enjoying a fabulous prosperity. To look was often to be tempted. The sovereign freedom of the hill-tops was a dear price to pay for material comforts; but more than once even this price has been paid.

Thus have the Southern mills filled up; and the managers of more than two-score of them have assured me personally, in the last twelve months, of their own satisfaction with this class of labor. There are traits born of their past, a few philosophizing mill men have told me, that make these people "difficult." Independence often beyond all reason; a reserve that withholds even necessary confidences; and an inability to be coerced into measures, however good — these belong to them by the law of inheritance. Extravagance is theirs by the law of reaction. Unacquainted with money in the past, they regard their present earnings by contrast as well-nigh inexhaustible; and these are dissipated in the most improvident fashion. Fair weavers earn from \$7 to \$9 per week, fair spinners from \$4 to \$6.

When we bear in mind that large families are the rule among these people — a single family may have as many as eight workers in it, divided about equally between the spindles and the looms — we recognize that a household which, under the old conditions of the tenant farm or the hill pastures and patches, would have thought itself wonderfully fortunate to handle \$100 in cash per annum, may now bring home more than \$150 every month. The rent of its cottage is from \$4 to \$6 per month; fuel is not an important item in this climate; dairy and garden products and grain stuffs are cheap. Where does the bulk of these earnings go? Several such families which I visited were no more extravagant than other people might well have been under similar circumstances. Give their sense of proportion, of comparative values, a chance to grow, and see if they do not every year find better and better use for their hard-earned dollars! In spite of these and kindred traits, the mill managers find this class of labor really excellent in the main. A hard past has made brave workers of them when they are at work.

But these newly made operatives themselves, are they as well content as the mill owners? Productive industry should have its word no less than capital.

Having gone in and out familiarly for two years among these people, I find the varying strata among them that one must look for even when humanity draws into classes. I find content and discontent here as elsewhere, and each sometimes with, sometimes without, justification. Mills vary, mill managements vary, and the toilers themselves vary most widely. Many of the latter are thoroughly satisfied with what their next-door neighbors may feel to be a mere mess of pottage for which they have bartered their birthright. A few are setting their teeth grimly and hiding their dollars, preparatory to going back to the farms — God speed them!

Yet there is a better class than either — a class with vision that clears every day. Men and women are in it, young and old, some of whom have been in the mills a dozen years or more, some barely long enough to get accustomed to the whirl of the spindles and the throb of the looms. I have talked with boys and graybeards of this class, with little lasses and grandmothers, and they tell me the homely truths which, though they may have been found merely by accident, are yet proving safe guide-posts. "Our village is the best I've been in," said a widow to me at the Erwin Mills, North Carolina. "I hated to change so many times before, but I had to; I couldn't abear fur my gals to grow up in bad company. Now I hain't goin' to move no more, fur the young folks here is modest an' quiet, an' we've got ez good schools ez is in the land, an' the best Sunday-school an' church you ever could find. Mr. Erwin is superintendent of our Sunday-school his own self."

"I wouldn't go nowhar else now," said a young wife to me at the Caraleigh Mills, North Carolina, herself a former operative, now a new mother. "I b'lieve in lettin' well enough alone. There's good wages here, an' good cottages furnished to us, an' Mr. Moring treats us right. Besides, the men work here, an' keep their wives out of the mill when there's little uns to be looked after an' a house to be kep' neat. I want to raise my chillun here an' send 'em to school."

"Fur the chillun's sake!" Here is the keynote to whatever is best in the situation. It links the lowest to the highest.

They are an illiterate people, these operatives. Only 82.8 per cent of the adult workers in the factories of North Carolina can read and write, and the showing is much worse in Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi. How could it be otherwise when they had no schools, or only the "three-months'" county schools, in the past? Now a free school with an annual term of from five to ten months is within the reach of all. Religious privileges have been equally extended. They have bartered the independence of the soil, these workers in the new Southern industry. But if the example of Pelzer and Piedmont, of the Courtenay, Erwin, Tryon, Dallas, Eagle, and Phenix Mills is followed, if the workers are given everywhere, as at these, not merely schools, but the best of graded schools, with night and kindergarten classes; not only churches, but good free lectures and entertainments, as well as public libraries, reading- and club-rooms, technical instruction, and moral and domestic training; a great good to many millions of creatures will be the issue of this unprecedented industrial revolution.

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