

HOW NOT TO HELP OUR POORER BROTHER

Published in *Review of Reviews*
January, 1897

After the publication of my article in the September *Review of Reviews* on the vice-presidential candidates, I received the following very manly, and very courteous, letter from the Honorable Thomas Watson, then the candidate with Mr. Bryan on the Populist ticket for Vice-President. I publish it with his permission:

Hon. Theodore Roosevelt:

It pains me to be misunderstood by those whose good opinion I respect, and upon reading your trenchant article in the September number of the *Review of Reviews* the impulse was strong to write to you.

When you take your stand for honest government and for juster laws in New York, as you have so courageously done, your motives must be the same as mine - for you do not need the money your office gives you. I can understand, instinctively, what you feel - what your motives are. You merely obey a law of your nature which puts you into mortal combat with what you think is wrong. You fight because your own sense of self-respect and self-loyalty compels you to fight. Is not this so?

If in Georgia and throughout the South we have conditions as intolerable as those that surround you in New York, can you not realize why I make war upon them?

Tammany itself has grown great because mistaken leaders of the Southern Democracy catered to its Kellys and Crokers and feared to defy them.

The first "roast" I ever got from the Democratic press of this State followed a speech I had made denouncing Tammany, and denouncing the craven leaders who obeyed Tammany.

It is astonishing how one honest man may honestly misjudge another.

My creed does *not* lead me to dislike the men who run a bank, a factory, a railroad or a foundry. I do *not* hate a man for owning a bond, and having a bank account, or having cash loaned at interest.

Upon the other hand, I think each should make all the profit in business he fairly can; but I do believe that the banks should not exercise the sovereign power of issuing money, and I do believe that all special privileges granted, and all exemptions from taxation, work infinite harm. I *do* believe that the wealth of the Republic is practically free from federal taxation, and that the burdens of government fall upon the shoulders of those least able to bear them.

If you could spend an evening with me among my books and amid my family, I feel quite sure you would not again class me with those who make war upon the "decencies and elegancies of civilized life." And if you could attend one of my great political meetings in Georgia, and see the good men, and good women who believe in Populism, you would not continue to class them with those who vote for candidates upon the "no undershirt" platform.

In other words, if you understood me and mine your judgment of us would be different.

The "cracker" of the South is simply the man who did not buy slaves to do his work. He did it all himself - like a man. Some of our best generals in war, and magistrates in peace, have come from the "cracker" class. As a matter of fact, however, my own people, from my father back to Revolutionary times, were slave owners and land owners. In the first meeting held in Georgia to express sympathy with the Boston patriots my great-great-grandfather bore a prominent part, and in the first State legislature ever convened in Georgia one of my ancestors was the representative of his county.

My grandfather was wealthy, and so was my father. My boyhood was spent in the idleness of a rich man's son. It was not till I was in my teens that misfortune overtook us, sent us homeless into the world, and deprived me of the thorough collegiate training my father intended for me.

At sixteen years of age I thus had to commence life moneyless, and the weary years I spent among the poor, the kindness I received in their homes, and the acquaintance I made with the hardship of their lives, gave me that profound sympathy for them which I yet retain - though I am no longer poor myself.

Pardon the liberty I take in intruding this letter upon you. I have followed your work in New York with admiring sympathy, and have frequently written of it in my paper. While hundreds of miles separate us, and our tasks and methods have been widely different, I must still believe that we have much in common, and that the ruling force which actuates us both is to challenge wrong and to fight the battles of good government.

Very respectfully yours,
(Signed) Thos. E. Watson.
Thomson, Ga., August 30, 1896.

I intended to draw a very sharp line between Mr. Watson and many of those associated with him in the same movement; and certain of the sentences which he quotes as if they were meant to apply to him were, on the contrary, meant to apply generally to the agitators who proclaimed both him and Mr. Bryan as their champions, and especially to many of the men who were running on the Populist ticket in different States. To Mr. Watson's own sincerity and courage I thought I had paid full tribute, and if I failed in any way I wish to make good that failure. I was in Washington when Mr. Watson was in Congress, and I know how highly he was esteemed personally by his colleagues, even by those differing very widely from him in matters of principle. The staunchest friends of order and decent government fully and cordially recognized Mr. Watson's honesty and good faith - men, for instance, like Senator Lodge of Massachusetts, and Representative Bellamy Storer of Ohio. Moreover, I sympathize as little as Mr. Watson with denunciation of the "cracker," and I may mention that one of my forefathers was the first Revolutionary Governor of Georgia at the time that Mr. Watson's ancestor sat in the first Revolutionary legislature of the State. Mr. Watson himself embodies not a few of the very attributes the lack of which we feel so keenly in many of our public men. He is brave, he is earnest, he is honest, he is disinterested. For many of the wrongs which he wishes to remedy, I, too, believe that a remedy can be found, and for this purpose I would gladly strike hands with him. All this makes it a matter of the keenest regret that he should advocate certain remedies that we deem even worse than the wrongs complained of, and should strive in darkling ways to correct other wrongs, or rather inequalities and sufferings, which exist, not because of the shortcomings of society, but because of the existence of human nature itself.

There are plenty of ugly things about wealth and its possessors in the present age, and I suppose there have been in all ages. There are many rich people who so utterly lack patriotism, or show such sordid and selfish traits of character, or lead such mean and vacuous lives, that all right-minded men must look upon them with angry contempt; but, on the whole, the thrifty are apt to be better citizens than the thriftless; and the worst capitalist cannot harm laboring men as they are harmed by demagogues.

As the people of a State grow more and more intelligent the State itself may be able to play a larger and larger part in the life of the community, while at the same time individual effort may be given freer and less restricted movement along certain lines; but it is utterly unsafe to give the State more than the minimum of power just so long as it contains masses of men who can be moved by the pleas and denunciations of the average Socialist leader of to-day. There may be better schemes of taxation than these at present employed; it may be wise to devise inheritance taxes, and to impose regulations on the kinds of business which can be carried on only under the especial protection of the State; and where there is a real abuse by wealth it needs to be, and in this country generally has been, promptly done away with; but the first lesson to teach the poor man is that, as a whole, the wealth in the community is distinctly beneficial to him; that he is better off in the long run because other men are well off; and that the surest way to destroy what measure of prosperity he may have is to paralyze industry and the well-being of those men who have achieved success.

I am not an empiricist; I would no more deny that sometimes human affairs can be much bettered by legislation than I would affirm that they can always be so bettered. I would no more make a fetish of unrestricted individualism than I would admit the power of the State offhand and radically to reconstruct society. It may become necessary to interfere even more than we have done with the right of private contract, and to shackle cunning as we have shackled force. All I insist upon is that we must be sure of our ground before trying to get any legislation at all, and that we must not expect too much from this legislation, nor refuse to better ourselves a little because we cannot accomplish everything at a jump. Above all, it is criminal to excite anger and discontent without proposing a remedy, or only proposing a false remedy. The worst foe of the poor man is the labor leader, whether philanthropist or politician, who tries to teach him that he is a victim of conspiracy and injustice, when in reality he is merely working out his fate with blood and sweat as the immense majority of men who are worthy of the name always have done and always will have to do.

The difference between what can and what cannot be done by law is well exemplified by our experience with the negro problem, an experience of which Mr. Watson must have ample practical knowledge. The negroes were formerly held in slavery. This was a wrong which legislation could remedy, and which could not be remedied except by legislation. Accordingly they were set free by law. This having been done, many of their friends believed that in some way, by additional legislation, we could at once put them on an intellectual, social, and business equality with the whites. The effort has failed completely. In large sections of the country the negroes are not treated as they should be treated, and politically in particular the frauds upon them have been so gross and shameful as to awaken not merely indignation but bitter wrath; yet the best friends of the negro admit that his hope lies, not in legislation, but in the constant working of those often unseen forces of the national life which are greater than all legislation.

It is but rarely that great advances in general social well-being can be made by the adoption of some far-reaching scheme, legislative or otherwise; normally they come only by gradual growth, and by incessant effort to do first one thing, then another, and then another. Quack remedies of the universal cure-all type are generally as noxious to the body politic as to the body corporal.

Often the head-in-the-air social reformers, because people of sane and wholesome minds will not favor their wild schemes, themselves decline to favor schemes for practical reform. For the last two years there has been an honest effort in New York to give the city good government, and to work intelligently for better social conditions, especially in the poorest quarters. We have cleaned the streets; we have broken the power of the ward boss and the saloon-keeper to work injustice; we have destroyed the most hideous of the tenement houses in which poor people are huddled like swine in a sty; we have made parks and playgrounds for the children in the crowded quarters; in every possible way we have striven to make life easier and healthier and to give man and woman a chance to do their best work; while at the same time we have warred steadily against the pauper-producing, maudlin philanthropy of the free soup-kitchen and tramp lodging-house kind. In all this we have had practically no help from either the parlor socialists or the scarcely more noxious beer-room socialists, who are always howling about the selfishness of the rich and their unwillingness to do anything for those who are less well off.

There are certain labor unions, certain bodies of organized labor, - notably those admirable organizations which include the railway conductors, the locomotive engineers and the firemen, - which to my mind embody almost the best hope that there is for healthy national growth in the future; but bitter experience has taught men who work for reform in New York that the average labor leader, the average demagogue who shouts for a depreciated currency, or for the overthrow of the rich, will not do anything to help those who honestly strive to make better our civic conditions. There are immense numbers of workingmen to whom we can appeal with perfect confidence; but too often we find that a large proportion of the men who style themselves leaders of organized labor are influenced only by sullen, short-sighted hatred of what they do not understand, and are deaf to all appeals, whether to their national or to their civic patriotism.

What I most grudge in all this is the fact that sincere and zealous men of high character and honest purpose, men like Mr. Watson, men and women such as those he describes as attending his Populist meetings, or such as are to be found in all strata of our society, from the employer to the hardest-worked day laborer, go astray in their methods, and are thereby prevented from doing the full work for good they ought to. When a man goes on the wrong road himself he can do very little to guide others aright, even though these others are also on the wrong road. There are many wrongs to be righted; there are many measures of relief to be pushed; and it is a pity that when we are fighting what is bad and championing what is good, the men who ought to be our most effective allies should deprive themselves of usefulness by the wrong-headedness of their position. Rich men and poor men both do wrong on occasions, and whenever a specific instance of this can be pointed out all citizens alike should join in punishing the wrong-doer. Honesty and right-mindedness should be the tests; not wealth or poverty.

In our municipal administration here in New York we have acted with an equal band toward wrong-doers of high and low degree. The Board of Health condemns the tenement-house property of the rich landowner, whether this landowner be priest or layman, banker or railroad president, lawyer or manager of a real estate business; and it pays no heed to the intercession of any politician, whether this politician be Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Gentile.

At the same time the Police Department promptly suppresses, not only the criminal, but the rioter. In other words, we do strict justice. We feel we are defrauded of help to which we are entitled when men who ought to assist in any work to better the condition of the people decline to aid us because their brains are turned by dreams only worthy of a European revolutionist.

Many workingmen look with distrust upon laws which really would help them; laws for the intelligent restriction of immigration, for instance. I have no sympathy with mere dislike of immigrants; there are classes and even nationalities of them which stand at least on an equality with the citizens of native birth, as the last election showed. But in the interest of our workingmen we must in the end keep out laborers who are ignorant, vicious, and with low standards of life and comfort, just as we have shut out the Chinese.

Often labor leaders and the like denounce the present conditions of society, and especially of our political life, for shortcomings which they themselves have been instrumental in causing. In our cities the misgovernment is due, not to the misdeeds of the rich, but to the low standard of honesty and morality among citizens generally; and nothing helps the corrupt politician more than substituting either wealth or poverty for honesty as the standard by which to try a candidate. A few months ago a socialistic reformer in New York was denouncing the corruption caused by rich men because a certain judge was suspected of giving information in advance as to a decision in a case involving the interests of a great corporation. Now this judge had been elected some years previously, mainly because he was supposed to be a representative of the "poor man"; and the socialistic reformer himself, a year ago, was opposing the election of Mr. Beaman as judge because he was one of the firm of Evarts & Choate, who were friends of various millionaires and were counsel for various corporations. But if Mr. Beaman had been elected judge no human being, rich or poor, would have dared so much as hint at his doing anything improper.

Something can be done by good laws; more can be done by honest administration of the laws; but most of all can be done by frowning resolutely upon the preachers of vague discontent; and by upholding the true doctrine of self-reliance, self-help, and self-mastery. This doctrine sets forth many things. Among them is the fact that though a man can occasionally be helped when he stumbles, yet that it is useless to try to carry him when he will not or cannot walk; and worse than useless to try to bring down the work and reward of the thrifty and intelligent to the level of the capacity of the weak, the shiftless, and the idle. It further shows that the maudlin philanthropist and the maudlin sentimentalist are almost as noxious as the demagogue, and that it is even more necessary to temper mercy with justice than justice with mercy.

The worst lesson that can be taught a man is to rely upon others and to whine over his sufferings.

If an American is to amount to anything he must rely upon himself, and not upon the State; he must take pride in his own work, instead of sitting idle to envy the luck of others; he must face life with resolute courage, win victory if he can and accept defeat if he must, without seeking to place on his fellow-men a responsibility which is not theirs.

Let me say, in conclusion, that I do not write in the least from the standpoint of those whose association is purely with what are called the wealth classes. The men with whom I have worked and associated most closely during the last couple of years here in New York, with whom I have shared what is at least an earnest desire to better social and civic conditions (neither blinking what is evil nor being misled by the apostles of a false remedy), and with whose opinions as to what is right and practical my own in the main agree, are not capitalists, save as all men who by toil earn, and with prudence save, money are capitalists. They include reporters on the daily papers, editors of magazines as well as of newspapers, principals in the public schools, young lawyers, young architects, young doctors, young men of business, who are struggling to rise in their profession by dint of faithful work, but who give some of their time to doing what they can for the city, and a number of priests and clergymen; but as it happens the list does not include any man of great wealth, or any of those men whose names are in the public mind identified with great business corporations. Most of them have at one time or another in their lives faced poverty and know what it is; none of them are more than well-to-do. They include Catholics and Protestants, Jews, and men who would be regarded as heterodox by professors of most recognized creeds; some of them were born on this side, others are of foreign birth; but they are all Americans, heart and soul, who fight out for themselves the battles of their own lives, meeting sometimes defeat and sometimes victory. They neither forget that man does owe a duty to his fellows, and should strive to do what he can to increase the well-being of the community; nor yet do they forget that in the long run the only way to help people is to make them help themselves. They are prepared to try any properly guarded legislative remedy for ills which they believe can be remedied; but they perceive clearly that it is both foolish and wicked to teach the average man who is not well off that some wrong or injustice has been done him, and that he should hope for redress elsewhere than in his own industry honest and intelligence.