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Why Stand Ye Idle?

Cincinnati, Nov. 1.—“Why stand ye here all the day idle?” This was the text of a sermon by Herbert S. Bigelow in his pulpit at the Vine Street Congregational church today.

Mr. Bigelow spoke of the value of the parable to the student of history. He said that Jesus in inventing his parables was an unconscious historian. These little word-pictures of everyday scenes, he said, throw much light upon the manners and customs of the time; and he referred to the parable of the employer who went into the market place to hire workmen as throwing some light on the question of wages in that day. He said in part:

We learn from this parable that the customary wage for common labor was one penny, which is more properly translated shilling.

We might infer from this that the condition of labor was much worse then than now. But this would not be a safe conclusion. We may read of wages in India or China in ancient

richest vineyards and the most valuable mines and the enormous land values of cities gravitate into the hands of the few, and as population encroaches upon the land, these few have an increasing power to appropriate to themselves the products of labor; and as labor becomes more efficient through discovery and invention, the favored ones who monopolize the opportunities of labor reap the lion's share of the world's wealth.

It is only in new countries where the supply of unused labor is great in proportion to the population that wages are relatively high.

It is not our tariff wall, it is the abundance of free land that has made America the Eldorado of labor. But as population grows and this available land becomes monopolized, European conditions are bound to reappear in America and wages must go down to the dead level; and that is nature's penalty for the crime and the folly of land monopoly. And the two-penny statesman can no more avert this penalty without going down to the root of the evil than he can make fishes live in the air or men thrive in the sea.

The employer went into the market place and found men at the close of the day in the busiest time of all the year who were idle and waiting to be employed. This is a striking portrayal of our mal-adjusted organization of industry. Even now we hear the approaching steps of a panic. The shutting down of the copper mines of Montana is an industrial earthquake the rumblings of which will shake the continent. Butte is in the face of starvation. If a besieging army were lying at her gates, hunger could not be more imminent. Great industries have been in the hands of gamblers. Already securities have shrunk to two billions. Now comes a shock which affects the livelihood, directly or indirectly, of 200,000 men. Students of economic history know that this is only the beginning. Once again, as in the panic of ten years ago, that question of the parable will have a dreadful significance. One failure will bring another. The army of the unemployed will swell to monstrous proportions and hunger will ask as of old, “Why stand ye here all the day idle?”

I remember the troubled times of ten years ago. I was in Chicago the summer of the railroad strike. One could hardly walk the distance of a block without being accosted by a beggar. Along the lake shore on Mich-

igan avenue one could see a great multitude standing all the day idle.

But with those crowds, it was evident that while their hands were idle, hunger had prodded their minds on to some activity. Agitators were haranguing excited groups. The blue-coat paced the streets and the people followed them with sullen looks.

There, within reach of mansions which rivalled the glory of Solomon; there, at the feet of those stupendous works of stone which exfigured the energy and daring of a mighty city; there, amid luxury's flashing colors and trade's countless columns; there were hundreds of thousands, slinking in the alleys or begging in the streets, out of work and out of hope, and looking with eyes of envy and hearts of hate upon all that flaunted wealth and power.

That angry throng was the frown of civilization. Beholding it, I thought of Macauley's prophesy of the Huns and Vandals which he said would be bred in our slums and rise up to overwhelm us—and I looked at that dark cloud of gathering hate and then at those defiant marble walls and I marvelled, that since the day of Babylon's glory and Nineveh's vanity and Rome's pride we should have done so little to solve this greatest of problems—this labor problem, which is the rock on which the empires of the past have fallen and on which the republics of the future may perish.

“Why stand ye here all the day idle?” That is labor's riddle. Because no man has hired you? To be sure. But why has no man hired you? Why are there not more jobs than men? What do idle men want? If they want houses, are there no forests? If they want food, are there not fields? If they want fuel, are not nature's store-houses full? Why then should human labor stand idly by, or be wasted in misdirected and useless effort when all the materials are at hand from which wealth is made? Why is not the demand for labor always in excess of the supply? When the workman can answer that question, he may stand up and be a God on the earth and the land will be his dominion and joy will crown his toil.

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