

THE PRESENT ASPECT OF THE LABOUR QUESTION.

THE labour question, as it has been called, is one that affects more or less all classes of the community, for although there are men who affect to underrate the value of the working classes, and appear to think that their condition can have but little effect on the country at large. Yet it is a fact, that on the working classes depends the prosperity of a nation, and those men who affect to set but little value on them forget that the real wealth of a nation does not depend so much on the amount of gold and silver it has in its exchequer, as on the amount of bone and muscle it possesses. If, then, the toiling millions are contented and happy, receiving for their labour a fair remuneration, such as enables them to provide for themselves and their families a sufficiency of the necessaries of life and to leave something to lay aside for a rainy day, the probabilities are that all classes will feel a freedom and comfort they would not otherwise enjoy. Starting from this basis, let us discuss the labour question, not as affecting the working classes only, but as affecting the nation at large. And looking at this question at the present time in its most favourable aspect, it cannot be said to be cheering. We do not think, as some appear to do, that we have reached a climax in our prosperity as a nation, and that we will now commence a course of decadence, leaving other nations to take the lead in the world of commercial enterprise. We by no means take such a gloomy view of the present and prospective state of matters as that, but we do think we have reached a point in our history from which we will start to make new conquests, and keep, as we have hitherto done, the front rank as a commercial nation; or else we will be content to see others coming in where we were wont to be the sole occupants, and monopolising the trade which we were wont to consider our own. For the last few years we have enjoyed a prosperity unprecedented, but whether we have made a good use of that prosperity is quite another question, and one on which we do not intend to enter meantime; but it appears to us that we have reached a crisis, and that a reaction has set in that will tell on all classes, but more especially on the working classes of our country. If this is the case—and we think it is fully evident that it is—it would be folly to conceal it from ourselves, for the old proverb still holds true, if men would only lay it to heart—'to be fore-warned is to be fore-armed.' What, then, is the present aspect of trade in general? Dulness, from all quarters and from all branches of industry, comes as the complaint. Our great coal and iron trades are in a most unsatisfactory condition, and have been for a considerable time back. These, which we may say form the back-bone of our trade in general, and on which we depend more than any others, have been in a most unhealthy state for over twelve months. Coal has been at famine prices, and still continues so, with but little appearance of a speedy diminution to any extent, in the same. Iron, as a consequence of the rise in the price of coal, and also in a measure from over-speculation, has risen to an unprecedented rate, and shows but little sign of a speedy return to its normal condition. These two have affected our trade and commerce in every branch of industry; and although, on account of our prestige and enterprise, the effect has not been felt so much as it otherwise would have been, yet the strain has been considerable, and so long continued that it is now beginning to paralyse trade in all its branches; and such has been the check it has received that it must take some time ere it can recover and return to its wonted condition.

Besides these we have mentioned, there have been other causes at work which have tended to disturb our commercial prosperity, and notably amongst these have been trade disputes. These disputes have been more or less frequent for the last few years; and although we do not altogether condemn them—they being in many cases the only means of getting redress for tangible grievances, and as such were justifiable—yet we think there can be little doubt that many disputes have arisen from very frivolous causes, and very often for reasons that were undeserving of a moment's consideration. In this way there has been much money wasted, much valuable time lost, and an amount of suffering entailed on the innocent and helpless victims of these disputes that can never be reckoned up. Many of these disputes have been got up at the instigation of designing men, who lived and fattened on the quarrels they fomented. And often has it been that even in disputes which could be justified, through the overbearing, haughty spirit manifested by either party, or very often by both parties in the dispute, have these disputes been prolonged and intensified. These disputes have not affected trade so much by increasing the cost of production as they have done by giving greedy, grasping capitalists an excuse for raising the price of manufactured goods, and by shifting the blame on the shoulders of the workmen. And no doubt but that the mistrust they have begotten between employer and employed has tended to prevent enterprise, and turned capital into other channels, where it was not so likely to be affected by the caprice of any body of men.

Other causes, such as the unsettled state of France, and the Continent generally, and now this commercial crisis in America, have all had more or less to do with bringing about the present aspect in our commercial industries. No doubt some of these causes will soon be removed. America may soon get over her money crisis; but, meantime, she is sending home to this country many who had gone to seek employment there, but who are now forced to return, and coming at a time when the labour market, as already overstocked, they will yet further add to the glut, and to the dulness which is already too apparent. From almost every quarter we hear of furnaces being put out, factories being put on short time, some on half time, and being stopped altogether, while the building trades are in anything but a flourishing condition. With these facts before them the working classes have need to be careful how they act. There is no need to be alarmed, but there is less cause for viewing the present prospects of trade in general in this country or in America with indifference. It would be much better that we set our houses in order, and by a careful economy, and a conciliatory demeanour, coupled by a mutual desire on the part of employer and employed, to endeavour to tide over the present difficulties as best they may in hopes of better times coming soon. For we ought not only to consider ourselves in times such as these, but we ought to consider the welfare of others as well. If self predominates, and guides all our councils and actions, the best guarantee that times of difficulty will be of short duration, will be gone, and we will find, perhaps, when it is too late, that we have been pursuing an unmitigated policy, and find it harder to retrace our steps and undo the evil than it will be to begin well, and by mutual concessions, on good cause being shown for it on the part of the employer and employed, endeavour to bring about better times once more. All, from the highest to the lowest, are interested in our commercial prosperity, and although some people are rejoicing that now the working classes are likely to get a check in what they are pleased to call their high-handed dealings in the past, it is but short sighted policy to wish for, or rejoice in national calamity, because it is likely to punish a guilty few, supposing them to be guilty of the crime laid to their charge.