“BACK TO THE SOIL”

Is the significant title of a work of fiction recently published in Boston, which deals with one of the most important social problems of the present day: the question of relief for the city poor.

Those who, as their way has led them through the crowded tenement districts of our American towns, have felt themselves possessed by great sorrow and a complete sense of helplessness, will welcome this book as affording a promise of better things. And it is indeed an expression of timely solicitude and thought, since late statistics show that it is neither London nor Peking, but New York itself which, in certain of its quarters, contains the most densely inhabited area in the world: a single tenement in Third Avenue harboring three thousand persons, the population of a large village.

The severe student of Sociology may object to the work of fiction as a means of diffusing accurate ideas; but, on the opposite side, it may be urged that the emotional element has borne a large part in all reforms and progress. To draw an illustration from the same field of work, one has but to recall that the romance of Sir Walter Besant, “All Sorts and Conditions of Men,” had as its direct result the building of the “People’s Palace” in London and the improvement of the entire East End. By a singular coincidence, the Rev. Edward Everett Hale introduced the English novel in America, sixteen years since, and he to-day writes an eloquent foreword for the newer book which deserves to accomplish an equal amount of good in our own country. Dr. Hale asks the readers of “Back to the Soil” to receive it, not as another Utopia, but as a real contribution to the scientific sociological work of the new century. With the conciseness and point that are his characteristics, he sums up the difficulties of those who attempt to relieve the overcrowding of population; here quoting Mr.
Frederick Law Olmstead, the sanitary engineer and architect, who once said to him that much as he himself had been praised for his work in the ruralising of the cities, he considered the complementary work of the urbanising of the country to be an enterprise far more important in the life of America. Later, referring to the necessity of co-operation in this great labor for humanity, Dr. Hale reaches a climax of enthusiasm in the following inspiring sentence:

“It must be observed that whatever is done must be done in accord—by a considerable number of people, who are, from the beginning, to bear one another’s burdens, and whose success depends, as most success depends, on the victory of—together.”

Indeed, Dr. Hale and the book are so thoroughly unified, that the name of the venerable writer might be accepted on the title page, instead of that of its author, Mr. Bradley Gilman. For “Back to the Soil” but continues and develops, by the aid of the great advance in science, suggestions contained in the work of Dr. Hale’s middle life, notably in his short stories—like “The Rag Man and the Rag Woman”—which, under a humorous form, deal with aspects of city poverty.

Beside the introduction, Mr. Gilman himself offers a word of preface in which he quotes Carlyle as saying in his essay on “Chartism”:

“Our terrestrial planet—nineteenth of it yet vacant, or tenanted by nomads—is still crying, ‘Come and till me, come and reap me!’”

But the author recognizes that this cry of Mother Earth falls on deaf ears in the slums, since the desire for companionship overpowers all the material wants of the city poor. He therefore offers an ideal of a rural community of working-people, in which he employs a unique method of grouping the homes as closely as possible, and of adding “minor industries” and “small handicrafts” to relieve the monotony of farm
duties and give a wholesome and agreeable variety of work.

From his scheme of a farm-colony, Mr. Gilman rejects "Socialism," or "Communism," as destructive of the natural incentive to labor: that is, the hope and pride of ownership; setting correspondingly high therefore the principle of a free co-operative "Individualism," by which the people benefited become self-supporting, after a year or two of dependency and instruction.

The economic questions treated in "Back to the Soil" are the fundamental ones found in every primary work upon labor and capital; but presented as they are here with colloquial charm and even pathos, they take on a human interest which the college student would deny that they possessed.

The explanation of the "law of competition" as given by Mr. Gilman will serve as an example. He illustrates it by the concrete case of two rival printing-houses, one of which introduces labor-saving machinery, diminishes its force of workers, and so causes wide-spread misery. The statement is simple and probable; one indeed that might appear in a text-book, and which is comparable in dryness with the mathematical formulas introducing x and y. But it is ingeniously woven into a tete-a-tete of a husband and wife: a clergyman whose emotions are tempered with New England common sense, and a woman whose charitable work among the hopeless poor has doubled her natural powers of compassion. So, throughout the book, the characters are simply the organs of principles: theorizing, offering schemes, arguing with one another until some measure incident to the foundation or the furtherance of the farm-colony is accepted or rejected. But this continued narrative, devoid of the element of action, does not pall upon the reader, although it may now and then suggest the parts of the hero and the listening friend, as they are
played in the old drama. Here monotony is prevented by the seriousness of the subject, and the reader follows with interest from the first page to the last. The diversity of temperament in the projectors of the scheme is portrayed with no ordinary skill. The individuality of each is sharply defined, so that the work of each is clearly apparent in the combined result, just as in the Wagner opera, the orchestra makes known the progress of the action by the use of musical phrases, which describe each character and are invariably heard when he participates in the plot. Thus, for example, practical philanthropy is incarnate in Dr. Barton; finance is represented by a fine type of self-made man; the educational element by “a sweet girl graduate” and the connecting links between the benefactors and the beneficiaries by Patrick and Bridget, who epitomize all the best qualities of the Celtic race: alertness of perception, unfailing good humor, and resources of strategy and wit that are denied to other peoples.

The impression made by this assemblage of elements—for so one must call and consider the characters of the book—is an impression of practicality. Each of the persons having a voice in the direction of the farm-colony, has already proven his capability in similar work pursued for his individual interest. As an expert, he is entitled to respect and earnest attention. He has previously made the costly experiments sure to sadden the career of all intellectual toilers, by the expenditure of time, passion, or money. He is consequently careful of the rights, pleasures and property of his brother-man involved in his own action. It is, perhaps, this pervasive flavor of practicality which lends a readable quality to the book; for in works of fiction we are liable to scorn the didactic and the plainly pointed moral, demanding a degree of excitement for the imagination; just as in the sister art of painting, we do not seek for lessons in history and literature, but rather
for sensuous pleasure derived from the harmony of line and color.

Another attractive feature of “Back to the Soil” lies in the names of its chapters which announce questions in economics and sociology simply treated and adapted to the popular understanding. The interest of the book begins and centers in “A Lesson Drawn from a Pie;” this chapter giving the story of a family supper, at which the cutting of a pie into wedge-shaped sections suggests the general plan of the farm-colony, afterward known as “Circle City.”

This form,—each wedge representing the land occupied by a colonist,—is presented as obviating the worst conditions of rural life: that is, the isolation and loneliness which drive the slum-colonist back to his swarming tenement, and from which the strong native-born youth flee in desperation, leaving agriculture to the indolent and the old.

The farms of “Circle City” bear toward their apex a dwelling-house, from which they all run widening back to a certain point. Beyond this, the apportionments begin to vary; the grazing farms occupying a large area, while the market-gardens, which require careful working and much fertilising, are kept within narrow limits.

The circle is itself inscribed within a great square, allowing the farms to open like fan-sticks, which are not necessarily of the same width, but hold among themselves the fractional relations of halves, fourths, eighths and sixteenths.

The centre of the land—a comparatively small circle described within the larger one—is reserved for a park in which are situated a church, a club room, schools and a department store: in a word, all the necessities of modern civilization. And thus, the first great requisite of lower-class life being assured by
means of the thickly settled community, the dependent interests: water facilities, drainage, fuel supplies, lighting apparatus, means of communication and transit are assured with comparative ease. The funds are supplied and controlled through a syndicate formed and headed by the self-made capitalist, who to the instincts and desires of a money-getter joins the warm heart of a friend of humanity. Finally, the colonists are chosen from among both foreigners and native Americans, without distinction of race or creed; Patrick and Bridget largely selecting, as well as instructing the candidates, who at first are subjected to a government best described as a wise paternalism.

The perfected scheme in working order is shown in a chapter named "Ab urbe condita," the simple life of full activity and high purpose therein described putting to shame the frivolous existence of the fashionable street and the society column. At this stage in the life of the colony, the problems of citizenship and complete ownership are confronted, and paternalism is exchanged for a state of society tending to develop the latent capabilities, talents and tastes of the individual colonists; the communistic principle being in all things avoided, as one destructive to the sense of responsibility and the incentive to labor. And as in all attempts toward the betterment of social conditions, the chief hope is found to be in the children. For it is they who first receive and then give out and propagate the vitalizing effects of new truths. In the pages of "Back to the Soil," we find the children interesting their parents and elders in the wonderful life of nature which free space discloses and science explains. And so it is intimated that with these children of the proletariat—the class necessary to the state for the production of offspring—lies the approaching and happy solution of the great problem of city overpopulation.