HAS SUCCESS BECOME A CRIME?

EVERYWHERE of late, in downtown offices and directors' rooms, at dinners, at clubs, and wherever wealthy business men congregate, there has been heard an ignignant protest against what apparently has become the popular notion—that great success means nothing more nor less than a crime. This protest is honest, and in many cases well justified, for it comes from men whose success has been fairly gained and whose names are honorable before the nation and the world, as well as from those who have reason to shrink from investigation of the sources of their overgrown fortunes.

And the protest is not without grounds, for, led on by the sensational press, the people at large seem to hold almost as an article of faith that notable success in any big undertaking inevitably implies unfair methods, or special privileges that are equally unfair. The more conservative journals are apt to side with the capitalists, and these blame about equally the unswerving attitude taken by the President in the matter of investigation of suspected corporations, and what they term "the assaults of an unlicensed press upon the railways and great industries of the land."

It is pointed out with some bitterness by both capitalists and conservative journals that the attitude of the patriotic press in former days tended to stimulate the ambition of our boys and young men by holding always before them the examples of great material success which in popular estimation marked the highest point of achievement in this country. Every young man who read the newspapers with interest found plenty of food for his dreams of possible wealth and power in the unknown future, and boys were taught at school, at church, and at home that if they were sufficiently diligent and energetic they might, any one of them, become a rich and prominent man, honored and respected as well as an acknowledged power in the land. Now it is said these ideas have completely changed, and that the "yellow press" is chiefly instrumental in teaching the rising generation as well as the people at large to believe that it is practically impossible for a very rich man to have clean hands, or for a great corporation to keep strictly to the path of fair and honest dealing.

Yet the influence of the sensational press is a slight and passing thing compared to the trend of national thought. It is true that the inflammatory utterances which tend to increase circulation have a temporary effect upon people who are not given to thinking very deeply, and especially upon foreigners who have not yet become accustomed to American conditions or learned to consider themselves a part of the American nation. But the cause for the change in public feeling lies much deeper than
that. A generation ago our national ideal was material success, and our favorite heroes were men who had amassed great fortunes rather than men of great mental or moral achievement. It was, perhaps, not a very lofty ideal, but it was a natural and also a necessary one, born of the economic conditions of the times. With a great country sparsely populated and needing swift material development, what would be more inevitable than that we as a people should glorify achievements in the direction of bringing us what we most needed?

When most of these gray-haired capitalists of international fame were boys, the development of the seemingly limitless resources of the country was a matter of the first interest to every citizen. New paths were being hewn out in every direction. The Civil War came and passed, and left in its wake not only prosperity, but immense stimulus to the spirit of progress. The discovery of gold, years before, had filled the far West with the glamour of fabulous fortunes to be made. The opening of the country afterward to farming on a gigantic scale added to the demand for adequate facilities for transportation across the continent. New industries were poking up their heads in every direction, and yet nothing was complete and effective—nothing was as yet in working order. There was something in the very air of those days that called men to self-denial, hardship and unremitting exertion in the effort to subdue the land and make it fruitful. The pioneer spirit, although it had passed from the stage of discovery into that of organization, was strong; particularly in the West, whence many of our strongest men have come. These men led a hard life, of which every circumstance called out all the spirit of adventure and of aggression. The only help they found was in themselves. They were shifting about constantly from place to place, and ever pressing forward to conquer and exploit new lands. Facilities of any kind were few. There was no general organization and comparatively little labor-saving machinery such as has placed us at the head of the manufacturing world. It was the time when promoters and organizers were needed more than anything else, for the men who had the power to think out big and daring schemes and had enough of the gambling spirit to take big chances in putting them into operation were the men who alone could bring order out of chaos. They unquestionably made great fortunes for themselves, but they made the country great at the same time.

This epoch of swift development and gourd-like growth is passing. Things are beginning to be seen in something nearer to their true proportions, and the period of gigantic enterprises is giving place to a period of less spectacular, but more generally diffused, success. “Booms” have had their day. Mining camps and bonanza farms have alike served their turn. The promoter has done his work well, for the country once so huge, rich, and unmanageable is now covered with farms and factories as well as with a network of railroads that, like arteries and veins, keep life in the vast industrial system. And the industrial system itself is no longer a more or less chaotic thing of immense possibilities, but is organized to a degree that seems to justify the growing fear that the control of it will very soon be confined to the hands of a few men.

Public sentiment has changed because the times have changed. We are at a different and higher stage of our development as a nation. Our need is no longer for promoters and organizers, for the big mining camps have mostly vanished, the bonanza farms are being broken up into smaller holdings, and there is a growing reaction toward
smaller individual industries in the place of the huge organizations that we know as trusts. The pioneers have blazed the way. Now the people object to their claiming the lion’s share of the territory they have conquered and to their administering the affairs of the nation through the power of their great organizations.

As a natural result of the period that seems to be closing we are just now long on promoters and short on workmen and farmers. This is an inevitable result of what has been the national ideal, but conditions are no longer the same. We do not need more big combinations,—they have taught us their lesson, and have left industry in such a shape that it can be used to the best advantage,—but we do need farmers,—farmers who have the brains and the energy to avail themselves of all improved methods by which farming on a smaller scale can be made a success,—farmers who can give us a better quality and a greater quantity of farm produce than we have now, and at a more reasonable price, so that the cost of living will not be the great and growing problem that we find it. We do not need men who gamble in the stocks of certain big industries, but we do need mechanics,—thoroughly trained workmen whose equipment is as complete as that of the craftsmen of our own Colonial times, instead of factory hands whose only accomplishment is to run some one machine. We do not need more department stores, but we do need small shops noted for the excellence of the goods which are made there, under their own roof, and whose label is a guarantee of excellence to all who trade with them. We have these now, in small number, but we want more of them; we want shops which make things directly for their patrons and whose name stands for individuality as well as excellence, but we want more of them; we want them for all the people. We want to see our boys and girls learning their trades in places of this kind instead of being cogs in the machinery of a huge factory or department store. Also, we do not need politicians and lobbyists, but we do need statesmen who come from the people and who represent the people to the best of their ability and their knowledge of the needs of each locality.

These newly recognized needs are really at the root of the outcry against what is called the concentration of all the wealth of the country into a few hands. Many of the men upon whom the ban of public condemnation rests most heavily have been among those who have borne the burden and heat of the day. They have been hard fighters, and it is perhaps only natural that they feel justified in claiming the spoils of their victories. Looking at it in this way, it seems a little hard on them that with the fruit of their overwhelming success should come this tidal wave of public hatred and blame, especially as the blame is not always undeserved. Perhaps they have not fought fair, but they were reared in a school where the one thought was to win,—by fair means if they could, but win anyhow. They only obeyed the spirit of the times, and now that spirit has changed. What the country most needs just at present is fewer speculators and more producers, that living may be brought within our means and free industry may flourish. With things brought down once more to the solid basis of equal opportunities and fair competition, there will no longer be occasion for the successful man to ask bitterly if his countrymen really consider success to be a crime.

In a letter received a short time ago we were asked to give an opinion as to whether craftworkers should keep all their methods secret or whether it might...