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FREDERIK VAN EEDEN: POET, NOVELLIST AND PRACTICAL COMMUNIST: BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

"It is good and possible to have things in common, but what we do not know, and what I have tried with much patience and trouble to investigate is this,—what things do we have in common, can we have in common and ought we to have in common? I consider these among the greatest, the most urgent, the most important questions of our present life. And mind! These questions cannot be solved by clever reasoning, nor by any amount of reading and theories. They can only be solved by practice, by facts, by careful investigation and patient experiment, not by words alone, but by deeds, deeds, deeds!"—FREDERIK VAN EEDEN.

THEORIES of communism are familiar to all of us, for the dream of wise men and reformers for ages past has been an ideal state of society where privilege and opportunity should be the same to all, and where property should be owned in common and its benefits equitably divided. Yet so far the ideal commonwealth has been as remote from possible actuality as the millennium, for the reason that its existence presupposes a state of mental and moral equilibrium that mankind is very far from having attained, and every attempt to put communistic theories into practice has fallen to pieces before the apparently ineradicable selfishness, frailty and inconsistency of human nature. Even the degree of communism enjoined by tribal law in primitive states of society vanished before the advance of civilization, which is based upon class rule, the desire to accumulate private property, and the consequent exploiting of the many for the advantage of the powerful few. The increasingly complex conditions, as well as the mental habit ingrained by centuries, are hard to overcome, and so far the attempts to establish a sane and enlightened system of communism have not gone beyond the small groups of theorists who, to put their theories even
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partially into practice, have been obliged to separate themselves from the rest of the world.

But now comes a man whose chief aim in life is to find a practicable form of social organization, based on communism, that will spread naturally and inevitably through all classes of society and, without revolution or upheaval, will in time supplant the present disorder of things simply because it is based on common sense and appeals to the deep-lying instinct of self-preservation that actuates society as well as the individual. This man is Dr. Frederik Van Eeden, of Holland, poet, novelist, dramatist, physician, psychologist and originator of a theory of Christian and Economic Socialism which is the direct antithesis of Marxian Socialism in that it takes into account the strength and endurance of every phase of our present social order and aims at the modification rather than the overthrow of our present form of government and the organization on practical business lines of an economic commonwealth that shall slowly outgrow and finally supplant the political state.

It is a daring theory, but Dr. Van Eeden's own attitude toward it is shown by the quotation which heads this article, and is proven by his own successes and failures during the severe tests which he has given to the practical side of his great idea. It is this courage and unflinching honesty of his that carries conviction. He is an enthusiast and a dreamer, but he is also a man of science who rejects every theory as worthless unless it will stand the test of practical application and can be proven by actual facts.

UNTIL lately, we Americans have known little of Frederik Van Eeden beyond the fact that he was the author of two unusual and powerful novels, "The Quest" and "The Deeps of Deliverance,"—which have recently been translated into English and published in this country. Both are revelations of the quality of the man, the first being a foreshadowing of his dream of a social organization based on justice and righteousness, and the second a profound study of human nature, but his poems, dramas, essays on social reform and studies in experimental psychology, although they have borne a large part in bringing about a literary revolution in Holland, are little known outside that country and Germany for the reason that Dutch is one of the most difficult of languages to translate adequately. His career as physician and psychologist has made him famous among scientific men, but not with the general public outside of Holland, France and Germany, and his experiments in practical
COMMUNISM AND COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL COÖPERATION HAVE BEEN CONFINED SO FAR TO THE ATTEMPT TO BETTER CONDITIONS IN HIS OWN COUNTRY. THEREFORE, BEFORE OUTLINING HIS THEORY OF SOCIAL REORGANIZATION IT MAY BE WELL TO GIVE SOME IDEA OF THE MAN HIMSELF AND HIS MANIFOLD ACTIVITIES.

HE COMES HONESTLY BY THE STRAIN OF BUSINESS ABILITY AND SOUND COMMON SENSE WHICH BALANCES THE ARTISTIC, IMAGINATIVE AND SCIENTIFIC SIDES OF HIS COMPLEX AND EVENLY DEVELOPED MENTALITY, FOR HIS GREAT-GRANDFATHER WAS A KEEN, PROSAIC BUSINESS MAN,—A BULB GROWER OF HAARLEM. THE NEXT TWO GENERATIONS CAST ASIDE BUSINESS IN FAVOR OF ART, SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY, AND THIS WAS THE MENTAL ATMOSPHERE THAT SURROUNDED THE BOYHOOD AND YOUTH OF FREDERIK VAN EEDEN AND DETERMINED THE DIRECTION OF HIS OWN DEVELOPMENT. AS A CHILD, HIS ONE DESIRE WAS TO BECOME A POET AND A PAINTER, BUT LATER HE COMPROMISED ON THE STUDY OF MEDICINE, PARTLY BECAUSE OF HIS INTEREST IN THE NATURAL SCIENCES, AND PARTLY FROM AN UNDERLYING CONVINCING THAT A MAN’S WORK OUGHT TO BE OF GREATER SERVICE TO MANKIND THAN COULD BE COMPASSED BY EXCLUSIVE DEVOTION TO THE FINE ARTS. HE WENT THROUGH THE USUAL COURSE OF TRAINING, BUT IT WAS CHARACTERISTIC OF HIM THAT HIS CAREER AS THE CONVENTIONAL VILLAGE DOCTOR LASTED ONLY TWO YEARS. FEELING THE NEED OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND WIDER EXPERIENCE, HE ABANDONED HIS PRACTICE AND WENT TO PARIS AND NANCY TO STUDY THE LITTLE-KNOWN SCIENCE OF HYPNOTISM AND SUGGESTION AS APPLIED TO THERAPEUTICS. RETURNING TO HOLLAND, HE ASSOCIATED HIMSELF WITH HIS COLLEGE FRIEND, DR. VAN RENTERGHEM, IN OPENING THE FIRST CLINIC FOR PSYCHO-THERAPEUTICS IN THAT COUNTRY.

AT FIRST IT WAS A SHARP STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN THE NEW ENTERPRISE AGAINST THE PREJUDICES OF THE MOST CONSERVATIVE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD AND THE OPPOSITION OF ORTHODOX MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS, BUT IT FINALLY SUCCEEDED AND BECAME VERY POPULAR AND PROSPEROUS. WITH A MAN OF DR. VAN EEDEN’S TEMPERAMENT, THE EVEN ROUTINE OF A SUCCESSFUL AND HONORED PROFESSION SOON CAME TO MEAN STAGNATION, SO HE TURNED OVER HIS SHARE IN THE CLINIC TO DR. VAN RENTERGHEM,—WHO STILL CONDUCTS IT WITH DISTINGUISHED SUCCESS,—AND RETIRED TO HIS COUNTRY HOME TO DEVOTE HIMSELF TO THE WRITING OF POEMS, PLAYS, NOVELS AND SCIENTIFIC BOOKS AND ESSAYS, AND TO THE FREE EXERTION OF HIS POWERS TO HELP AND RELIEVE SUFFERING HUMANITY WITHOUT ANY THOUGHT OF FINANCIAL RETURN. THESE YEARS OF PARTIAL RETIREMENT, WHICH WERE SO RICH IN SIGNIFICANT LITERARY PRODUCTION, WERE ALSO YEARS OF TRAINING FOR THE STRUGGLE THAT WAS TO COME WITH HIS LARGER WORK IN EXPERIMENTAL SOCIOLGY AND IN TESTING THE PRACTICABILITY OF ORGANIZED COÖPERATION TO BRING ABOUT BETTER SOCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL CONDITIONS. THROUGH HIS PRACTICE
he had obtained a deep insight into human nature and a wide experience of human suffering, and, realizing the misery of a great part of the human race and the fact that out of a hundred individuals hardly one or two came to full and healthy development of mind and body, he came to the conclusion that the responsibility lay with our present social conditions and the defective structure of our community.

Having reached this conclusion, it was natural that his next step should be the purchase of an estate of about thirty acres, with a few houses on it, in the neighborhood of the place where he lived, and the starting of a small community with the avowed purpose of experimenting until he should find a practical basis for his theories concerning the possibility of reconstructing the social organism on what should be the sound business principles of justice, honesty and fair play, under a government recognized and supported by all. Being an admirer of Thoreau, although he by no means shared all his views, Dr. Van Eeden called his settlement “Walden,” and essayed with his associates to find a way of living that should be free from the abuses and faults of the present social organization.

The colony was started in eighteen hundred and ninety-nine, the policy of its founder being simply to look out for good workers and to try everything that could make the enterprise self-supporting. Although Dr. Van Eeden prudently kept the proprietorship in his own hands, he made no rules and left the colonists so far as possible to work things out for themselves. The principle upon which the colony was conducted was communistic as to the means of production and the revenues derived therefrom. Every member of the community worked, men, women and children, the idea being to educate the latter along practical lines which became more definite as the child advanced in years, until he found himself, almost without knowing it, a producing member of the organization and in receipt of a regular income. Dr. Van Eeden himself lent a hand in all the work of the settlement, thus gaining practical experience of the difficulties to be encountered in earning a living by manual labor, in selecting and organizing a group of good workers and in making the colony self-supporting. He devoted the revenues from his literary work to the aid of the enterprise, and for five or six years it advanced slowly but steadily toward the goal of sound organization and self-support. The settlement furnished an ideal environment, as the houses were widely separated and surrounded by gardens or groves, each family having the privacy of its own home.
In nineteen hundred and two a small bakery that had been started at Walden began to prosper, for the whole-wheat bread made there gained such a reputation that it commanded a good market all over the country. The colony also carried on market-gardening with such success that in three years from that time it was practically self-supporting. Believing it to be essential that any independent body of workers should produce as many different articles of common necessity as they could, Dr. Van Eeden had bought another farm of sixty acres a few miles distant from Walden, and there started a dairy farm, using the milk and butter not only for home consumption and to supply the market, but also for the Walden bakery, so that the products of the two farms were all utilized in the most economical and profitable way.

But a small colony, however well-organized, was not the end toward which Dr. Van Eeden was working. He wanted some means to make such an organization grow steadily larger, becoming always more practical in its methods of living and working and offering the opportunity to every able-bodied and well-meaning worker to become a member of it. So in the same year that Walden began to get on its feet as an industrial community he founded an association called “The Society for the Common Possession of the Land,” his purpose being to form a self-supporting organization of workers who should keep land and the means of production as common possessions and so exclude the curse of parasitism. The work of the society was to be, like the original enterprise, experimental, the object being to test out the impracticable features of communism with relation to land possession and to find out just how much of the theory would stand putting into effect on a comparatively large scale. This society still exists and is prospering, and its work has been of much value in pointing out practical and effective methods of realizing such an ideal. It now includes about ten different groups, and is growing quietly and steadily.

Walden, however, was getting into rough waters. From the beginning of the enterprise, its founder had encountered grave obstacles arising from the uncertain and impractical character of some of the people who wanted to join him. To quote his own trenchant description of the state of affairs with which he was obliged to wrestle: “A number of fanatics, semi-crazies, useless or shipwrecked people, artists who saw only the artistic side of the case, sentimentalists who wanted to go ‘back to nature,’ egoists who sought for a cheap and safe refuge, theorists who wanted everything to go
along their preconceived lines, well-meaning workers who were not aware of their incapacity—all these people flocked unto me.” Furthermore, the avowed socialists wanted to take all business into their own hands as a proof of their emancipation from wage-slavery, and Dr. Van Eeden, doubtful as he was of the probable result, gave them every chance to see how the theory would work by encouraging independent action as much as possible. But as the business grew it became evident that its worst foe was lack of definite organization under some one capable and acknowledged head. A manager was badly needed, and at last one was engaged, a capable and tactful man who was an acknowledged friend of the workman and a well-known socialist. After much opposition to any form of management, the colonists agreed to accept him, but as Dr. Van Eeden himself writes: “For most of them this meant the collapse of dearly cherished illusions, sown in their minds by socialist, Tolstoyan and other orators, who obviously never dreamt what their doctrines would mean when tried in hard earnest.” They refused absolutely to allow the manager even the modest salary he asked, or anything more than the average wages they all got, and met him with so much unfriendliness and opposition that his stay lasted only one day. Knowing that the enterprise was doomed to failure under such conditions, Dr. Van Eeden gave the malcontents the choice between accepting the manager whose rule would hold together and develop the business for the benefit of all, or leaving. The majority of them left, and started a new competing industry in the immediate neighborhood of Walden, leaving its founder with the large, expensive, recently built plant with electric power and machinery on his hands,—without workers and naturally without customers.

The difficulty was serious, but Dr. Van Eeden has no doubt that it could have been overcome and that the colony would now be flourishing, had not another and much larger enterprise which had grown up alongside of it met with such difficulties that all the property of this dauntless experimenter in social reform was swept away. The close of the great railway strike in Holland, in nineteen hundred and three, left more than two thousand families locked out and breadless. With characteristic energy, Dr. Van Eeden, who had stood by the strikers throughout, came to the rescue by constituting a commission of assistance for the unemployed. At first only contributions were sought, that the dreadful want might be in some measure relieved, but Dr. Van Eeden soon took measures
to turn the contributors into regular customers of a coöperative commercial organization which he formed from the unemployed. A shop was opened in Amsterdam and filled with a general line of goods, and the locked-out railway men were employed as clerks, collectors, and the like. The scheme won instant favor, and prospered so amazingly that in less than a year there were forty thousand contributors, a number which grew to seventy thousand by the end of the second year, when the business had grown to such dimensions that there were four shops in Amsterdam, two more in The Hague and Rotterdam, and agencies all over the country.

But the growth was too swift, considering the inexperience of the coöperators. Dr. Van Eeden tried his best to keep it within bounds, knowing the danger of over-expansion without adequate organization. He tried to get experienced business managers who would keep the concern in running order and manage it on economical business principles, but here he encountered precisely the same difficulty that broke up Walden. The workers for whose benefit the coöperative shops were started were all strikers and socialists, imbued with the feeling of class and rabid on the question of class struggle. They trusted in the man who had come to their aid, but in no one else, not even each other, and fought with all their power against the idea of any form of business management other than their own unregulated efforts and Dr. Van Eeden’s personal supervision. Under such conditions the enterprise soon grew beyond their grasp and reached a point where it faced the alternative of systematic management or failure.

Dr. Van Eeden called the men together and told them that they must accept a form of management based on strict business principles, or he would wash his hands of the whole matter. They accepted the management and an experienced business man was made manager. But he did not realize the material with which he had to deal and the urgent necessity for going slow. He favored even greater expansion, bought up a competing firm, opened still another shop, took on more employees, and the whole enterprise proceeded merrily until Dr. Van Eeden, who had gone to Germany for a much-needed rest and a little time to resume his neglected literary work, came back to find it in deep waters financially. In a short time it was necessary to call a meeting of creditors, and the upshot of it all is best stated in Dr. Van Eeden’s own words: “After a painful struggle of a few months, during which all my property became over-mortgaged and the fortune of generous members of my family drawn into the whirlpool, the
final crash came, leaving the different branches of the business in the hands of shrewder people, the employees under the old capitalistic rule, and myself, worse than penniless, a wiser and a sadder man."

Dr. Van Eeden’s own account of his experimental enterprises was published in the February Independent, and on March eighth he delivered his first lecture to an American audience in Carnegie Hall, New York, under the auspices of the Civic Forum, his subject being “Practical Communism, Work and Bread.” His stay in this country covered only a few weeks, but those were full of interest not only to the American people, but to himself. To the American people he brought a sane and practical theory, based on the result of his own experiments, of social reorganization and the extent to which common ownership of land, capital and the means of production might safely be carried. To him, the conditions in this country seemed to promise much greater hope for the future than is possible in the more settled and conservative countries of Europe, where solid and long-established tradition is at war with all the elements that threaten social upheaval.

The foundation for this hope is perhaps not so flattering to our national vanity as we would like, for it does not rest upon any overwhelming belief in the greatness and glory of our republican institutions as they exist, nor in our claim to a practical monopoly of liberty and of great commercial and industrial achievement, but upon the fact that we are a big, unamalgamated, chaotic community, full of ferment and unrest, but drifting in the right direction and therefore liable at any time to evolve a form of social organization that will be close to what the world is seeking. Dr. Van Eeden’s faith in communism as the ultimate solution is not at all shaken, but from the depths of hard experience he has brought the unalterable conviction that the all-commanding condition of communism is strict, powerful, perfectly functioning organization. While he stands firmly for communism on this basis, he does not hesitate to assert that private ownership in the hands of any good landlord is eminently preferable to common ownership in the hands of a badly trained and poorly organized community.

He believes, from the result of his own and all similar experiments, that the original form of communism as practised by the ancient Christians, according to the Gospel, is not only utterly impossible, but undesirable, and that the best way to convert the extremists who urge the abolition of all private property is to do as he did,—give
their theories a fair trial in hard earnest, under the conditions of modern life. But he also believes that it is possible to find out what ought to become common property in a well-ordered community, and how to deal in a just and rightful way with capital and rent,—not to do away with them, for civilized mankind could not exist without them, but to handle them ably, fairly and justly, for the good of all. He has nothing to say against wealth, which has always been the source of art, of science and culture, of beauty and wisdom, but urges that it be common wealth, which is a blessing, while unbounded private wealth is a curse which invariably and inevitably brings about the disintegration of the community in which it is allowed to flourish.

His favorite illustration of this point is drawn from the communism of the bees, which he declares is based upon fundamental principles which would be most valuable to human society. Bees are capitalists, he says; they accumulate immense stores, the bees born in spring die in autumn, and during their short summer life they not only work for themselves, but they perform an incredible amount of extra labor, and the fruits of this labor,—the surplus value,—they leave to the community for the benefit of the bees born in autumn, that they may live out the winter and reach the next spring. As a lesson in economy the system is perfect, but still more remarkable is the self-control shown by the fact that every single bee is constantly in immediate contact with vast quantities of honey and yet never uses more for his private want than is absolutely necessary. The hive is thus a perfect example of capitalism in combination with communism, and to follow out the thought is to see that such a combination is the only way to make both capitalism and communism practicable and useful for individual and community.

To Dr. Van Eeden's mind the establishment of the true commonwealth is possible only when people have realized this truth, and have trained themselves to live in private soberness in the immediate presence of vast common wealth. The ultimate possibility of this he does not doubt, for the fundamentally sound reason of the human race and its instinct of self-preservation will in the end teach mankind that individual self-control and limited private wealth are the only means to keep community and individual from demoralization and destruction.

The solution that he urges is the formation of a community which should keep in common possession those goods that, for the welfare and preservation of all, ought to remain common property,—and which moreover would not allow any of its capable members to
squad the common goods without giving useful work. A community which by these means would restrict the possibilities of extravagance, usury, parasitism and idleness, and on the other hand would suffer no pauperism, and would never let any capable and willing member starve for the want of work. The rule of the fanatic communist,—"labor according to inclination, award according to want," he denounces as untenable and pernicious, and at the present time absolutely impossible, but the rule of the coöperator, "labor according to capacity, award according to the work done," would lay the foundation for an economic commonwealth in which the means of production, common property and accumulation would be in the hands of the community, and the worker should receive according to his capacity, with this restriction only, that he should work so long as he remained in full working condition, and should never amass so much as to free himself and all his offspring from the obligation to be useful to the community.

The great question to be considered is, of course, the sort of community in whose hands it would be safe to trust the ownership of common goods. The present political state is a remnant of the times when every nation was an economical entity, subsisting by its own means and by what it could get by conquest from other nations. Before any form of common ownership is possible, this must be superseded by the commonwealth held together by economic means and not restricted to the confines of the political state.

The formation of such a commonwealth would necessarily be on the most practical business basis, with the end in view of obtaining a fair and honest exchange of goods for goods, of bringing about a peaceful commerce that should override all national and political boundaries, and of instituting organized coöperation for the common benefit,—for the full development of human life and powers. Such a commonwealth, he asserts, would not necessarily imply absolute equality, but it would imply equal opportunities for all, and no greater difference than would be necessitated by different inclination, aptitude and capacities. But to bring it into being would require a great leader, a commercial and organizing genius who would work for the good of humanity. Dr. Van Eeden says frankly that he is not the man, but that he is looking for him, and that he contributes his own experiences toward the general sum of endeavor and is content to await the leader who shall come.