ALS IK KAN
LIFE ON THE AUTOMOBILE BASIS AND WHERE IT IS LEADING US

At last, they say, we have got at the real cause of the increased cost of living, but the satisfaction we might feel over finding out finally what the matter is is somehow lessened by the fact that the name of that cause is legion. Senator Lodge's committee distributes the responsibility of the overwhelming bills we have to foot each month among many conditions and circumstances, of which the most important are:

"Increased cost of production of farm products by reason of higher land values and higher wages; increased demand for farm products and food; shifting of population from food-producing to food-consuming occupations and localities; immigration to food-consuming localities; reduced fertility of land, resulting in lower average production or in increased expenditures for fertilization; increased banking facilities in agricultural localities which enable farmers to hold their crops and market them to the best advantage, which results in steadying prices, but also tends to advance prices; reduced supply convenient to transportation facilities of such commodities as timber; cold storage plants, which result in preventing extreme fluctuations of prices of certain commodities with the seasons, but by enabling the wholesalers to buy and sell at the best possible advantage tend to advance prices; increased cost of distribution; industrial combinations; organizations of producers or of dealers; advertising; increased money supply; overcapitalization; higher standard of living."

It all sounds reasonable, and we have no doubt that each and every one of these causes bears its own share in the present stress and strain of living. But, after all, could not the whole list be summed up in the last item, the higher standard of living? We call it a higher standard for want of a better word, but we really mean a standard of ease and luxury that demands more money than the average man can possibly earn in a normal way. In the old days of moderate fortunes built up by hard work, necessities came first and luxuries were carefully considered with relation to the general income and the needs of the family before they were made a charge upon the yearly income. But now the carpenter or plumber who comes to your house if you happen to live in a suburban town or in the country, comes in an automobile, and you can hardly cross the highroads on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon for dodging the procession of flying motor cars. You see that the people riding in these cars are your neighbors and acquaintances, most of them families depending upon the earnings of a man in a salaried position or one who is in business for himself in a small way. Knowing something of the cost of a motor car and the steady expense of its upkeep, you are inclined to wonder how they manage it, until you read in an article on financial conditions in the West that: "the Western speculation in land was getting to be dangerous, but the banks have checked that. So was the hunger for automobiles. I never saw anything like the way Western farmers went after automobiles. They even mortgaged their farms to get them. I know of one Kansas City bank that held fifty-two mortgages on that number of machines." If you were to make a canvass of Eastern banks you would find precisely the same state of affairs. The majority of these people have either mortgaged their homes or borrowed money to buy an automobile which they can not afford to keep after they have got it, and the very fact that they have it sets the pace for expenditures all along the line.

It is hard for a man with a moderate income to order his life on the automobile basis unless he has some way of making money outside of his salary. If he is dishonest he naturally hunts opportunities for graft; if he holds to a higher standard of integrity he turns just as naturally to some form of speculation, whether in stocks, real estate or anything else that promises quick returns on a small investment. Then, when the market sags and the bottom drops out of prices, there is trouble all along the line, for all the ingredients of a panic are held in solution all the time, and it takes the veriest trifle to crystallize them into a genuine financial crisis.

In fact, we are all living at high pressure, and nothing but the maximum of speed will satisfy us. This is a truism that during the past two or three years has echoed from one end of the land to the other, but until people begin to take it seriously it can not be repeated too often. At one time it looked as if this problem of the higher cost of living was really going to be taken seriously
enough to bring about a change, but the American public, with its usual easy-going optimism, appears to have adjusted itself to the increased demands upon its pocketbook by the simple expedient of trying to make more money instead of spending less. The greatest difficulty for the man who has been accustomed to making easy money is to get down to solid hard work, and in nine cases out of ten his wife and family would infinitely rather plunge him up to his neck in debt than to cut off one item of the luxuries to which they also have grown accustomed.

This is the effect, but the cause lies deeper. The labor unions have worked steadily and indefatigably to get higher wages for laboring men, in the hope that by this means a more equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation might gradually be brought about, and believers in protection have built a tariff wall around our industries in order to insure a safe margin of profit to the manufacturer and dealer. Yet we find to our cost that it all comes to the same thing in the end. As wages have advanced, requirements have kept pace. What were once luxuries are now necessities, and the advance in prices has so lessened the purchasing power of a dollar that the present high wages go very little farther than the lower wages used to do.

So much for the practical end of the advance in wages and prices, but its deepest and most significant effect is on the character of the people. When a pinch comes, and retrenchment is necessary during a period of readjustment to the lower scale made necessary by hard times, the man who has the most suffers the most, and he who is accustomed to getting along on the least is not nearly so conscious of deprivation. The man who has had his wages doubled within the past few years has accustomed himself to regarding the higher rate as his fixed income, and nothing is quicker or easier than the growth of needs commensurate with the income. If a sudden depression should cause a cut in these wages, the workman could much less afford to reduce his expenses and make ends meet in the face of the prevailing prices for all necessities of life, than he could have done when he was working for much less. And the condition is cumulative. We are rushing ahead at breakneck speed, straining every nerve to make more money and spending it more and more recklessly. Unless something occurs to check this national tendency, it will not be long before we are face to face with the hardest times we have ever known.

Fortunately, the countercurrent is already setting in. The great mass of people are as yet unaffected by it, but we see its effect in the new spirit that is fighting for the control of politics and the big industries, and in the new interest that is being taken in agriculture and country life and in the training of our boys and girls for some form of productive work. It will take long years to change the national standard in this respect, but the beginning has been made, and if those who have a share in shaping public opinion will only keep at it hard enough and long enough, there is reason to believe that the American common sense will yet come to the surface and that instead of going forward from the automobile to the aeroplane, we may possibly take a step back from the automobile to the plow.

REVIEWS

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH: BY WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

Once during a political campaign William Allen White asked: “What’s the matter with Kansas?” and the phrase became a catchword throughout the whole country. Kansas has replied to that question in no uncertain terms, and so far as clean politics, thorough-going energy and fearlessness in trying out all sorts of experiments go, she has proven that “she’s all right.”

How much of this record is due to the energetic and ceaseless hammering at all sorts of abuses by the editor of the Emporia Gazette, is uncertain, for Mr. White does not stand alone in his community; he simply gathers together and expresses the convictions of all Kansas in expressing his own. Therefore, William Allen White has come to be known as one of the most prominent leaders of the reform movement in the Middle West, and when he wrote “The Old Order Changeth” he knew exactly what he was talking about. It is a plain, straightforward narrative of political conditions past and present in this country, given from the viewpoint of a man who is honestly optimistic because he sees much ground for hope in the swiftly changing conditions of the present period, especially as the nation is frankly facing and acknowledging its past mistakes.