GARDENS AND THE UNEMPLOYED

DO not see how the "problem of the unemployed" can continue to exist after the sap begins to run. Lately the newspapers have been full of all the troubles and sorrows of people out of work, and it seems to me that this question of unemployment is largely a metropolitan one. We cannot get opportunities for labor in our cities sufficiently great and varied to meet the immense number of inefficient laborers who complicate city statistics. There never has been and never can be, as I see it, labor enough to meet the demand of unskilled laborers in any seaport town; least of all in a town like New York which holds out such tremendous inducements to workers from foreign countries and to our own rural communities.

All our societies and personal efforts and public charities to adjust the problem of the unemployed are born of a more or less unthinking impulse—an effort to accomplish an impossible philanthropy. We may be able to help support the unemployed in cities, but at no time can we find sufficient work for them there. To me the solution is, and always has been, the Garden and the Farm. Once the frost is out of the ground there is labor enough in our orchards and vineyards and fields for every unemployed worker in our entire land. It is an extraordinary fact that the farmer has as much difficulty to get the laborer into the country as the laborer has to find work in the city, and if all the societies would form themselves into a bridge to connect the metropolitan poor with farmers’ employment bureaus in rural districts we should have a flourishing condition in the country and a less harrowing one in our cities.

In spite of the fact that Shakespeare believed that "there is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners," most of the new-comers to American soil seem to prefer the peanut stand to the plow, and this phase of the question has to be coped with. Most of the new-born "Americans" imagine that their chance of progress lies in the city, and they seem willing to sacrifice health, happiness and family life for a quick return from the little cart on the side street. What we really need in our cities is, in place of charity organizations, an educational campaign directed toward the immigrant, not only when he first arrives in this country, but as his children are growing up and as his boys are coming out of our public schools unprepared for practical existence. In addition to teaching the people the advantages of the country, we should plan actually to help those who are not needed in cities out to the land; we should make this effort so widespread, so intelligent, so practical, that America would become one great garden, supplying all her own needs, and those of foreign countries as well, with no more effort than is made today to cope with deadly city conditions and depleted farmsteads.

Of course something is already being done along these lines. Towns and cities have cooperated with the State in forestry, in park making, in road construction, all of which means employing labor. The State and the Federal effort to preserve our water supplies and natural landscape beauties, to develop college and experiment stations, the splendid work of the Department of Agriculture at Washington, all mean an understanding and a widespread effort to improve rural conditions by preventing the devastation of our natural wealth and beauty.

But not to any great extent as yet, has the surplus population of our cities been forced out into wholesome, sane, practical and profitable country life. Our city schools have made occasional efforts to interest children in gardening; here and there a city has casually organized a society for window-box and vine-planting and for garden-making in the poor quarters; but these sporadic efforts rather tend to make life more endurable for the poor in the city than to get them away from degrading metropolitan conditions. And the whole matter as it stands today is absolutely uneconomic. A supply of labor far beyond the demand is allowed to remain in cities and city suburbs, the result being that the price of labor is forced down, the price of food forced up; children sent into the factories, boys into the criminal courts and girls into the sweatshops.

Garden-making, from my point of view, can change all this. Indeed it seems to me that the redemption of the world, the social and economic world, can only be achieved through gardening. It has been shown by statistics that if the one-half million children who now work in factories were allowed to cultivate gardens they could produce (with very much less effort) an annual income of more than two hundred million dollars, earning more in a summer than they at present can during the entire year;
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thus reserving their winter months for adequate study and progress, leaving factory work for grown men and women; and gaining not only their living through their gardens, but health and that sure mental and spiritual development which labor with nature rightly wrought is bound to produce. This would release all our children from the factories and solve three economic problems, indeed a fourth—the health of the child, the high cost of living, the value of the factory product better-made, and in addition an increase in our farming output sufficient literally to change conditions throughout America. If in addition to reclaiming for the garden the factory children, whose bodies and souls are being stunted today, we should add a working force of all the unemployed of our cities and villages, we should have a standing army of farmers great enough to convert America into one blooming garden, to increase our export trade beyond easy calculation, to increase the health and happiness of the people, the strength and beauty of the nation.

If the miracle which the garden could work were fully comprehended, if it were taken in the right spirit, it would not only furnish occupation without sentimentality, but it would lessen throughout the world that thing most subversive of morality—idleness. The unemployed are likely sooner or later to accept idleness as a necessity. The two most disintegrating evils in modern civic conditions are idleness and charity, for idleness forces charity from the sentimental and charity produces idleness in the ignorant. Dionysius, the elder, must have realized this when he replied, to one who asked him whether he were at leisure, “God forbid that it should ever befall me.” There can be no development in civic progress where any number of the citizens are idle; whether the idle are rich or poor, makes no difference. Always when the body and mind and soul are unemployed the nation suffers.

We must see work in its true light, we must see “that honest labor bears a lovely face,” if we are to meet our problems in America by the development of gardens in America. If we are to reduce complexities and anxieties of civilization to order and beauty it must be through something as simple and natural as garden making. “Come forth into the light of things, let Nature be your teacher,” wrote Wordsworth, and we shall find after all our mistakes and our wanderings that as a nation it is to the universal mother we must go if we are to find a wise and sane fulfillment of our democratic aspirations.

Here in America it was through our original great need of organization, of capital, or machine-made commodities that forced upon us a world of cities, of machines, of books, of things; and this has become so powerful (in answer to our great need) that we are almost in the position of being managed by the terrific forces that we have created.

But alas, when we turn to this dynamic storehouse of food necessities, of shelter, of mechanical energy, and ask it for beauty of mind, for spiritual wisdom, for strength of body, for inspiration that our poets and artists may live, we are astonished and wounded to find that it gives us no response, that it stands above us and about us, immeasurable, implacable, immovable. It is only when we turn away from this man-made world and move back into our gardens, when we get up with the sun in the morning, and till the soil, when we watch the seeds develop, the stalks springing up, blossoms opening, that we find again real loveliness, real solace for our spirits, and “thoughts that often lie too deep for tears.”

All over America today there is an enormously increased demand for the product of the ground; Nature is in need of laborers as never before. We ourselves are complaining of the cost of living, we need more fruit, more garden truck, an enormously increased wheat production, we need the quick raising of poultry, live stock that will give us speedy returns. There has never been a time in America’s history when such enormous and profitable opportunities have been offered to the gardener and the farmer. If we could turn the tide of all our surplus city population toward our rural districts, labor would be found for every man, woman and child, profitable labor, and in addition to that, a better way of living,—health for the children, good schools and the use of humanity for the actual betterment of the whole world. And yet we hesitate and we form societies and organizations to support the people out of work, instead of forming societies and organizations to teach them where work lies, to help them to get to it, to train them to understand and believe in it.

It is our own fault if our cities are over-
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populated with the poor and the weak. We do not tell them the truth, we do not make them understand what the Garden holds for them. We are forever talking of our factories, we take our beautiful young life and thrust it into our sweatshops, we destroy by these very sweatshops and by our charity bureaus what we should develop for the nation's wealth. And when I say the nation's wealth, I mean the mental and spiritual wealth of America, as well as the increase of her gold. We need schools and societies and lectures to remind the people of every city in the Union that America is essentially an agricultural land, that we should be a people of the vastest agricultural interest in the world and that our foremost citizens should be our gardeners, our shepherds, our laborers in the vineyard.

We cannot expect our poor, our sick, our unfortunates in the city to get together and say how fine a thing it would be to live in the country, to train their children to be contented farmers,—this is quite beyond them; we have only to realize how far it is beyond ourselves even as thinking people. It is our business today if we know how to think, to go among these people with the message, to find out just what openings there are throughout the country, just what can be done with the city's hungry surplus, to form a connection between them and the new rural life and to see to it that not only it is made possible for them to become a part of this life, but to help them see the truth so that they want to get there, and that after they reach the promised land, it shall in truth make good to them.

It would be impossible to imagine anything more horrible than that we should awaken in the poor and needy a love of the country, that we should tell them the realities of what it holds for them and then in some dreadful way gather them up and take them away to God's heart only to exploit them for man's gain. This has been done many times to the poor who come to us from other lands full of hope and courage. We have exploited them in our mines, in our railroads, in our sweatshops; but let us make good to them in our Gardens; let Nature recompense them and reward them for coming to us; let Nature feed them when our cities fail, let our Gardens grow to be not only the hope of the poor, but the hope of the nation.

At the very start we could begin this work, in fact it has already been begun, by finding vacant city lots, roofs and backyards in which the city poor may work. This can be done with profit to the city, with wages for the poor; and if such work is properly supervised, the first lesson in gardening to men, women and children can be given in the environment of the city in which they have been starving. Already this has been proved practicable, and if the mayor of every town, the civic improvement societies, the schools, the employment bureaus, the owners of vacant land, the public spirited young and old, would join hands in a Universal Garden Movement, nothing could stay the success of the work. The breadline would become an ugly tradition and charity organizations a forgotten blight on our civilization. It is not necessary to speak of what would be accomplished in the way of actual health and strength and contentment. Every child belongs in a garden and every woman who is doing her own housework has a right to look through the window of her kitchen out into her garden and every man who cares for his wife and his children should eventually become a landowner with his house resting on the soil which he has won by his own activity. We have come a long way from such a condition as this, but the final prosperity of the country demands a return to it, or possibly an advance to it, for we do not wish to see again the old, sordid, sad New England farming days in which the people and the soil seemed struggling one against the other. We want the new garden spirit, where the people cultivate what the world needs and the world in return gives abundantly to the source of its comfort and profit.

"MY garden, with its silence and the pulses of fragrance that come and go on the airy undulations, affects me like sweet music. Care stops at the gates, and gazes at me wistfully through the bars. Among my flowers and trees Nature takes me into her own hands, and I breathe freely as the first man. It is curious, pathetic almost, I sometimes think, how deeply seated in the human heart is the liking for gardens and gardening. The sickly seamstress in the narrow city lane tends her box of sicklier mignonette. . . . The author finds a garden the best place to think out his thought. In the disabled statesman every restless thrill of regret or ambition is stilled when he looks upon his blossomed apple-trees."

ALEXANDER SMITH