

[Lecture 7]
The Beginnings of Modern Charity
[19th Century]

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It may be that I have misnamed this lecture, but what I wish to do is to trace the development of certain new ideas among the people of the more fortunate conditions, in England, and also to point out the appearance of similar notions in this country.

I pointed out in the last lecture how the invention of spinning mule and weaving machine and the adoption of the use of steam as a motive power had brought about a great revolution in the industrial life of England and also in this country. In place of the old Domestic System of Manufacturing the factory had sprung up like a mushroom. In place of the country villages and quiet hamlets, large manufacturing cities were huddling together in flocks and herds, human souls who were to be used in the new factories.

I must spend a few moments in refreshing your memory about the conditions into which the adoption of machinery and the building of factories faced the laboring man between the years 1785 and 1835 or thereabouts. These great manufacturing mills were producing goods in such quantities as to reap fortunes. Their profits sometimes were as great as 1,000 percent. The move of industrial prosperity ushered in by inventions of machinery made a great demand for coal and iron. But only were the factories running at full speed, but the iron smelters, and coal mines were no less active. Commerce too came in for its share. The imports and exports of England in 1780 were £21,319,000, in 1810 £87,741,000, an increase of more than 400%. (Gibbins, *Industrial England*, p. 455.¹)

¹ Henry De B Gibbins, *The Industrial History of England*, Methuen, 1904.

But the effect of the new factory system upon the laboring classes must be noted. For example, Dr. Aikin, a Lancashire physician, describes the conditions about Winchester in 1795 in these words,

The invention, and improvement of machines to shorten labor have had a surprising influence in extending our trade, and also to call in hands from all parts, particularly children, for the cotton mills. In these children of every age are employed, many of them collected from the work houses of London and Westminster, and transported in crowds as apprentices to masters resident many hundreds of miles distant, where they serve unknown, unprotected and forgotten by those to whose care nature or the law had given them. These children are usually too long confined to work, in close rooms after during the whole night. (Cited in Gibbins, *English Social Reformers*, p. 113.²)

These children, who came from the great workhouses of London and other southern cities, were treated as we would not allow an animal to be treated today. The mills were run night and day in those days. Says Gibbins,

One relay of children rose wearily from their beds as another relay came to throw themselves down in their places, in beds where vice, disease, and death grew rank as in a teeming ground. They were fed on the coarsest and cheapest food or rather were starved on it so that they often fought with their master's pigs for the refuse of the swine-trough. They were worked sixteen, eighteen, or even a larger number of hours in a stretch, "till many weary victims, young in years, but old in suffering, nightly prayed that death would come to their relief. ... Even young women, if only suspected of intending to run away had irons riveted to their ankles, reaching by long links and rings up to the hips, and in these they were compelled to walk to and from the mill, and to sleep."³

² Henry De B Gibbins, *English Social Reformers*, Methuen, 1902.

³ Henry De B Gibbins, *English Social Reformers*, Methuen, 1902, p. 114-115.

The children were cruelly beaten and forced to keep at their work during long hours by the sheer brutal treatment and physical torture at the hands of the overseers. The most inhuman cruelty of it all was the effect which it had of depriving the father of the opportunity of work, and compelling him to rely upon the wages of his children 6-years old or more to support himself and wife. The result of this was in many cases to so degrade and brutalize the father and mother as to make them anxious to produce children that they might live from the profits of their wages.

Added to these stray facts which represent the cruelties under which the laboring class worked in the mills, we have to recall the conditions in the coal mines, where women and children did the work of beasts of burden, crawling along on their hands and knees, dragging behind them carts of coal. Oh! If there is anything that will make the blood of a human being boil it is to read of the cruelties and indecencies suffered by those laboring people of the early years of the 19th century. Their lot was made still more unbearable by the operation of two laws, which still worked to their disadvantage. One was the old Law of Settlement which had remained substantially as adopted in 1662. This law forbid the laborer from moving from one parish to another in search of a better job and more pay. He must remain where he was put, a parish slave. This law punished about every laborer in England, and prevented him from selling his labor for the highest wages.

The second set of laws, were the Combination Laws which forbade the workmen to meet together in order to deliberate over their own interests, or to seek for a raise in wages. Says Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*, "We have no acts of Parliament against combining to lower the price of work; but many against combining to raise it."⁴

In 1800 an act was passed applying to workmen of all occupations which forbade all combinations, associations, or unions of workmen for the purpose of obtaining an advance in wages, or lessening the hours of work.

⁴ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776, with many editions published since then.

The fact is that the laborer was down, intellectually, morally, and economically. He could not stir one hand to help himself. He was prevented even from meeting with his fellow workmen for the sake of talking over their situation, which they all shared. Parliament was in the control of the manufacturers as the legislation of this period only too clearly shows. No hope was to come from that source. What could he do?

There comes a time in the life of many individuals when they are crushed below the border line, and lose their hold upon every rope by which they may pull themselves into safety and comfort, and decency. Their only hope is for a helping hand. In this condition the English laboring man found himself about one hundred years ago. The condition of the American workman was in many respects similar, but he had the great advantage of living in a new free country. But what was going to happen? As a matter of fact something was already happening. I cannot quite state just when it began, or what its sources were, but its appearance at this time is not to be denied. You will remember how the Methodist movement grew up based upon the idea that a man had the power to save himself by repenting, and believing. Well in 75 years' time that idea had been absorbed, and its natural successor was making its way to the surface. Not only can a man save himself, but he can help to save the other fellow, that life is a service.

While these very conditions of cruelty to the laboring class were at their worst, children were being born in whom the powers of the new movement was to find its flowering. The revival of the 17th century had taken the form of a fight for political freedom. The revival of the 18th century had been more religious in its nature, but the revival of the 19th was deeply moral and philanthropic. It expressed itself in the idea of philanthropic reform. I have called this lecture the beginnings of modern charity because in the great out-burst of philanthropic activity which swept over England and America in the years from 1830 on until the slave was freed in this country, we have the flowering of a plant which had been slowly growing up in our midst for centuries. It was the power of this movement that reached a helping [hand] to the laborer and it gave him the

first healthy, manly, decent help that the laboring man had received so far as I can discover since the first flush of Christianity was lost in the great Roman world. Alms there had been, to be sure, but they were given as an act of religious duty, or for purposes of ostentation. Perhaps that is too strong, but the loftiness of the new birth of the 19th century so intensifies and overshadows the philanthropy of earlier centuries that they fade before its power.

I wish to point out one or two of the names that were prominent, and at the same time to indicate something of their characteristics. The Wesleys and Whitefield were the personalities of the 18th century movement. Next in line is one who knew both the Wesleys, and in many respects carried on the real work which they began. This man was Wm Wilberforce, born 1759, son of a wealthy merchant. Went to Cambridge to study in 1776. Did not do much there. Leaving Cambridge, he entered upon his political life, and at the age of 21 found himself in Parliament. For the first few years he led the conventional life of a worthless MP. About 1784 or 85 he passed through a religious crisis and became interested in more serious problems. He turned his attention to the problem of abolishing slavery in the English domain. Feb. 24, 1791, John Wesley wrote to Wilberforce saying, "Go on, go on in the name of God, and in the power if his might, till even American Slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away before it." So Wilberforce gave his life to this work. By the results of his work and literary, political, supported by a staunch bond of followers, the curse of slavery was driven from England. His last years were spent in poor health, but he seemed to cling to life for the sole purpose of witnessing the triumph of the cause which had been so dear to him. On Friday July 26, 1833, the news was brought to him that the bill for the abolition of slavery had passed for its second reading in Parliament. "Thank God," he exclaimed, "that I should have lived to witness a day in which England is willing to give twenty million sterling for the abolition of slavery." On the following Monday, Wilberforce died. A great social reformer! Who had dedicated himself to a reform based upon the idea of disinterested benevolence.

One of the men who was greatly interested in the movement for the abolition of slavery was Richard Oastler, a Yorkshireman, born in 1789. One night while talking with a friend about his slavery reforms, he was interrupted by the remark, "I wonder you have never turned your attention to the factory system." "Why should I, I have nothing to do with factories." he replied. But he was met by the rejoinder, "Perhaps not, but you are very enthusiastic against slavery in the West Indies, and I assure you that there are cruelties daily practiced in our mills on little children which I am sure if you knew you would try to prevent."⁵

Oastler at once entered into the fight to relieve the conditions of the laboring classes. In throwing himself into this cause he had to give up his social position, break with all his old relations, but he was made of the stuff that reformers are made of, and was equal to the task. He grasped the situation, and started in on the long task of educating English people to more humanitarian views. The manufacturers began to show "their unimpeachable character and kindness as a class; to show the impossibility of making profits if hours were reduced; the overpowering force of foreign competition; and other hardships with which the manufacturer had to contend."⁶ To all this, and much more, Oastler replied to the workingmen of Yorkshire, "Let no promises of support from any quarter sink you into inactivity. Consider that you must manage this cause yourselves. Collect information, and publish facts. Let your politics be: Ten hours a day, and a time book."⁷

I will not go into the details of this long and bitter struggle for that belongs to the lecture of two weeks from tonight. But what I wish to point out is this, that here is a man of education, influence and position, who is willing to give up all and become a friend and a helper of the laboring class. Not that he gave alms, but he gave himself and helped them to help themselves.

⁵ This exchange is taken from Henry De B Gibbins, *English Social Reformers*, Methuen, 1902, p. 394.

⁶ Henry De B Gibbins, *Industry in England*, Methuen, 1897, p. 396.

⁷ Henry De B Gibbins, *Industry in England*, Methuen, 1897, p. 397.

There is one more man of this period of whom I wish to speak. That is Robert Owen. He is often passed over as a visionary dreamer of impossible things, but he is not to be disposed of so easily. At the age of 28 he purchased the New Lanark Mills. He began at once to improve the moral and physical conditions of his laborers, but he soon found that to do this he must relieve the pressure of their labor. He was one of the earliest advocates of shorter hours and an age limit for children. Perhaps his great idea was his plan for education in reading, writing, and arithmetic. This is entirely new, and it is for this reason that I have mentioned him among the last of the English Reformers, although he was really one of the first of the English factory reformers. He was so depressed by the stupendousness of the task which confronted him that he seemed to lose his judgement, or at least to let his ideals carry him so far away from his facts as to lose sight of his facts. He established communistic communities, and their failure deprived us of the efforts of a man who might have done more for the good of the working people if he had stuck to his slow process of education.

One more English person of this great philanthropic awakening that I wish to speak of. That is Elizabeth Fry of London. She was of Quaker influence, and many of these movements give us glimpses of Quaker influence in the background. Born in 1780. Married in 1800. She gave her life to visiting sick, poor, prisoners, seamen, outcasts, and people of the most vicious type. Her influence extended all over England, and many European countries. She was a great worker for prison reform, and in this connection did her greatest work unless it be that her large family may be of more importance. She is one of the great workers of England. So I might take you through Frederick Denison Maurice and Charles Kingsley's great work, culminating in the Christian Socialistic movement. They were just coming into view as these early reformers were settling down to work.

But what I want to point out is that from the helping hand that these people of better circumstances extended to the crushed and degraded workmen, came the help that was to assist them workingman to help himself. It was not alms,

not old cast-off clothing and such truck, but sympathy, education, and courage by the aid of which the working man might demand enough wages to live on and support a family. The history of the struggle to which this movement that I have called the beginnings of modern charity gave the impetus, comes later, and the volume of history which it is writing is not yet closed.

But I wish to mention two or three names who were the leaders in this country of the same movement. I cannot more than mention their names. There was Wm. Lloyd Garrison, the champion of the slave in this country. There was Dr. Samuel Howe, who was devoting himself to the problem of lifting the blind into a world of comfortable living. There was Doretha Dix whose life work was to reform the asylums and alms houses in which were confined the insane and other defectives.

There also was the noble Joseph Tuckerman settled comfortably in a well-to-do church in Boston. But the call of the poor and the outcast made him give up the comfortable church and direct his attention to the poorest and most vicious classes. In 1812 he organized the "Seaman's Friend Society" in the chapel in which in later years the famous Father Taylor preached.⁸ His work was of far reaching importance. In 1832 his report on Pauperism to the Mass. Legislature, became the basis of reforms not only here but in European countries. About this man gather a number of others of great importance in their work. I must not fail to mention Chas. Francis Barnard, the dancing Parson who ministered unto the poor children and in his honor the Warren Street Chapel still ministers to the poor children of Boston, for no other reason than that they are children of God, even if they are poor. Last of all Horace Mann.

The New England work presented the same characteristics as the work in England. It was not alms, but it was the help of a friendly helped [sic], a service of love to those in need. It is the beginning of modern charity, based upon

⁸ Joseph Tuckerman (1778-1840) in 1812 founded the Boston Society for the Religious and Moral Improvement of Seamen, perhaps the first sailor's aid society in the United States.

the idea that true help must be to help the unfortunate to help themselves.