

THE "LABOR QUESTION" ON THE PACIFIC COAST.

BY LEE MERIWETHER.

If I were asked what is the most striking feature of the Pacific coast industrial situation, I should answer, the extremely unsettled condition of labor. Labor is none too well "settled" anywhere, but it is less so on the Pacific coast than in the East. In the East every boy is told he may become President. He also listens to the story of the poor young man with a mouse-trap, who learned to make traps for larger game, and became a millionaire. The Eastern boy hears of these things as he hears of Aladdin and his lamp, then quits school and settles down to learn a trade or profession, which, generally speaking, he follows the rest of his life. On the Pacific coast it is different. It is not school-boys who dream of becoming Presidents and millionaires; it is men. And the dream is not a dream to them, but a sober reality that enters into their daily calculations, and shapes their daily course of action. In New York if a man becomes a street-car driver, the chances are he becomes so permanently; but in San Francisco your street-car driver of to-day may have been a lawyer yesterday, and may be a doctor to-morrow. At a fashionable ball a few years ago one of the guests was obliged to take leave of his hostess before the dancing ceased, as he explained, "because it was four o'clock, and he was required to be on his street-car every morning at five." In former times this car-driver had been a lawyer of both prominence and ability. I do not know his subsequent history, but it would not be rash to surmise that he either made a fortune in mines, stocks, or otherwise, or died a pauper, perhaps a suicide. At a public gathering you may sit between two men, one of whom, an ex-restaurant waiter, has now an income of a million a year, the other of whom was formerly wealthy, but has now to lay brick for a living. A resident in San Francisco for seventeen years, who has made and lost several fortunes, said that he could count on the fingers of one hand the men who are rich now who were also rich when he came to California in 1870. The master carpenter who superintended the erection of this gentleman's dwelling turned up six months later as a book agent, and offered to sell a "complete history of the world for the small sum of ten dollars and fifty cents." When next he appeared on the scene it was as owner of a fruit-tree nursery. In that capacity he chanced to make a hit, and having married the cook of the man for whom he built the dwelling, the ex-carpenter and book agent and the ex-cook now drive in their own carriage, and give entertainments that are attended by the élite of society. On trips in the interior of California I have come across men who could read Homer in the original and solve problems in conic sections working as farm-hands for a dollar and fifty cents a day. One man, a graduate of Yale College, and formerly a wealthy lawyer, was ploughing in company with a gang of Chinamen.

This unsettled condition of society incident to a new country, and in California augmented by other influences, has tended to produce what at first might seem an odd, but what is really a natural, result. Figures demonstrate the existence of certain facts. It is the business of the statistician to find out what has produced these facts. Careful inquiry shows that in California there is an unusually large amount of marital unhappiness; the number of divorces is unusually large in proportion to the population. This of course arises in part from the laxity of the law, from the ease with which divorce may be obtained, and from the fact that residents of other States come hither to obtain divorces. The fundamental reason, however, is the unsettled condition of labor and society. A marriage for money may be endured as long as the money lasts, but when the former millionaire has to take to carpentering or driving a milk cart, the matrimonial bonds become irksome, and there is a divorce case for the statistician to record. The trouble may also arise not from becoming poor, but from becoming rich. A physician who flourished in San Francisco several years ago had for a long time enjoyed a moderate practice, and lived contentedly with his "original" wife. One day he hung out a sign as specialist. He obtained reputation as a fine oculist; large fees poured upon him; he became rich, and promptly obtained a divorce. His wealth continuing to increase, he procured a divorce from the wife he had taken after his first divorce, in order that he might again marry to suit his new standard—a standard that did not become higher perhaps, but that changed with each increase in riches. It may seem whimsical, but it is nevertheless very probable that in San Francisco the climate is also in part responsible for the large amount of marital infelicity. During the whole year around it is just chilly enough to make it uncomfortable without a fire, but not quite cold enough to induce an economical person to burn his gas or coal. A working-man, when he comes home at night, does not sit with his wife in the doorway, as he would or could do in the East. It is too chilly; the fog is damp, penetrating. The San Francisco workman puts on his hat and goes somewhere to keep warm. When the house is put to rights, the wife must also keep in locomotion to prevent freezing. This constant gadding about of course has a bad effect, and if the matter could be traced, it would doubtless prove partly responsible for many of the divorces that burden the pages of the official dockets.

The remarks made concerning the unsettled condition of labor apply even more closely to working-women than to working-men. The latter are beginning to realize that all cannot become Presidents or millionaires, and are therefore beginning to learn trades, with some view as to permanency. But of several hundred working-girls personally interviewed, scarcely a dozen were

working from absolute necessity, nor did more than a dozen have any idea of following the occupation permanently. They live at home, work merely for spending-money or to buy fine clothing, and expect sooner or later—generally sooner—to marry, and let their husbands do the wage-earning. In San José I found a type-setter earning \$5 50 a week, living in an eight-room cottage with a beautiful lawn and orchard. The furnishings were handsome—carpets, paintings, piano, etc. The young lady's father, a well-to-do physician, was able to support his family, but this particular daughter wanted extra spending-money, and so sought work in a printer's office. In fruit-packing factories I have found girls preparing to become teachers. They pack fruit in summer merely to earn "pocket"-money. The average life of a California shoe-fitter is three years. After that period she either marries, returns home, or gives the shoe business up and goes to a canning factory, woollen mill, or anything, just so it is a change. Though change is the law of nature, particularly in California, the foregoing remarks must be understood to refer to American-born labor. The Italian and other foreign labor which has but recently settled on the Pacific coast works there, as at home, from dire necessity, and is not by any means to be included in the list who work "sporadically" for mere pin or spending money. In this connection it is interesting to note with what difficulty is information obtained from this imported labor. In their own country I found them as communicative as magpies; in America the same people are clams. By what almost seems a remarkable coincidence, in a certain large American factory I came across an Italian whom I had once met in Italy. There he told me everything I cared to know—how much he earned, what he spent, how he lived. In the American factory he refused to say a word, as I afterward heard, because he thought I intended to levy a poll-tax upon him. The "happy medium" of intelligence is by no means happy for the labor investigator. A working man or woman of considerable intelligence understands the value of statistics, and to throw light on methods of labor and the manner of living of laborers will submit to what might ordinarily seem an impertinent examination into private affairs. On the other hand, laborers of limited intelligence, men and women who through drudgery are become mere machines, will answer questions as they will do anything else they are bidden. But from that portion of the working community that has just enough sense and schooling not to be automatic-like machines, but not enough sense to comprehend the purposes of statistical inquiries—from that portion it is difficult to extract any trustworthy information whatever. Here are one or two samples of replies made by San Francisco working-girls of this class, in answer to questions as to the effect of the work on their health:

"Makes me feeble; troubled with corns."
"Very injurious work; gives me toothache in my left ankle."

"Sanitary conditions bad, a young man being across the way resulting in my having palpitation of the heart. Pass a law to remove that young man, or make him shave off his mustache, otherwise I shall die of heart-disease."

"Work is causing me to gradually grow one-sided. To keep a straight appearance am forced to stand on an oyster can."

Those girls doubtless giggled and felt highly amused at the humor they thought they were displaying; at the same time, if there really was anything injurious in their work, or if there were evils admitting of legislative remedy, they could have taken no better way to choke off inquiry, and the probable benefits that would follow an accurate and complete knowledge of the case.

Any description of the Pacific coast industrial situation without allusion to the Chinese would be as incomplete as *Hamlet* with the Prince of Denmark left out. The main outcry against the Chinese—at least the main outcry heard in the East—is that they work too cheaply. From a Chinese stand-point this, if a fact, would be just ground for discontent; but it is hard to see how it can be from the white man's point of view. Were it conceivable, through some extraordinary change in nature, that shoes, for instance, could be grown on bushes as cheaply as blackberries, would any sane man deplore the change? There would be a displacement of labor. Shoemakers would be compelled to do something else. But the energy now spent in shoeing the world would be released, would be free to apply itself in some productive direction, and the net gain to mankind would be enormous. In the same way, if shoes do not grow on bushes at a cost of nothing, but do grow out of the hands of Chinamen at a cost of next to nothing, the benefit to society at large is proportionately great.

This reasoning, however, is not necessary, for as a matter of fact Chinese "cheap" labor is more or less a myth. Chinese farm-laborers earn \$1 50 a day. Farm-laborers in Eastern States are glad to get \$25 a month and board. A New York house-keeper pays \$16 for a German house-girl and cook. In San Francisco a Chinese cook in a small family is paid as high as \$35 a month. A seventeen-year-old boy earns \$5 a week. Chinese cigar-makers and sewing-machine operators earn \$8 to \$10 a week. In a tin-shop I saw a Chinaman making tin cans and earning \$3 a day. These men have their unions, their boycotts, their strikes, quite in the same manner as white men. The Hong Tuck Tong (Chinese Cigar-makers' Union), of which the Hon. MAK YAN LANG is leading spirit and director, numbers 2000 members. Each pays \$1 initiation fee. There is no regulation as to hours of labor, but no member of the union is permitted to work for less than the union rate, nor to work with any one else who works for less. In a recent instance forty Chinamen struck because ten new hands offered to accept less than the union rate. The strike lasted four

days. At the end of that time the employer gave in, and the ten men were forced to join the union, and to pay a fine of \$50 besides. A cigar manufacturer who issued an order forbidding his employés taking for their own use the finest cigars, found himself the next morning without a single Chinese employé. The white men and girls were at work as usual, but the Chinese did not return until a promise was made to exempt them from the obnoxious rule. The anomaly was then presented of a white employer giving his Chinese employés privileges not granted the whites. In the same way, in a fruit-packing factory, there was a strike for permission to work sitting on benches. The white women failed, but not so with the Chinese. Their "Tong"—union—refused to let a Chinaman work for that factory until their demands were granted, and at the present time the Chinese sit, while in the same factory the white employés are required to stand.

The hall of the Hong Tuck Tong, in which meetings are held and scales of wages made, is handsomely furnished. The walls are hung with labor mottoes in good Chinese. The seats, unlike the wooden benches one would find in the hall of a white labor union, are made of smooth black wood, and ornamented with carving. At the end of the hall is a platform covered with straw matting, and provided with a complete opium outfit. Reclining here, with pipe in hand, the dignified MAK YAN LANG presides over the meetings and shapes the policy of his Tong. He spoke freely of the union, but refused the artist permission to sketch it, or the Joss which was kept in a separate room adjoining the hall. In reply to my objections that the big Joss, the public Joss, had been photographed, YAN LANG smiled serenely and shook his head: "Joss no likee. Big Joss no care; take care himself; but little Joss, him no likee."

There are few Chinese who do "likee." Bribes, entreaty, strategy, are often alike vain. "Chinaman no likee picture;" that is all there is to be had from them; and when the photographer sets up his tripod, and the artist takes out his sketch-book, they vanish. In a Chinese overall factory my artist held sole possession for two hours, while the hundred operators skulked around the alleys or corners, at a loss of \$25, rather than have their faces sketched. The Kam Yee Tong—Clothing-makers' Union—has 850 members. A white manufacturer, who employed members of the Kam Yee, once succeeded in getting his men to work for ten cents a dozen less than the union rate on his agreeing to keep a false set of books showing an ostensible payment of regular rates. This scheme prospered for a while; then it was discovered, the renegade members of the Kam Yee were expelled, and the manufacturer was black-listed—that is, was not furnished with more men by the union, but was left to the uncertain resource of "scab" Chinese and white labor. The gold and silver workers have a union, called the Hong Wo Tong, more exclusive than the other Tongs mentioned. To join this Tong \$10 initiation must be paid, and the applicant must have served a six-years' apprenticeship in his trade. When he has done this, he hires himself out by the year, at the rate of \$1 50 for each working-day.

There are only fifteen holidays in the year, so that, unless sick or voluntarily idle, the Chinese gold and silver worker makes \$525 a year. The hours of labor are from ten to twelve, from half past twelve to half past four, and again from eight until eleven at night. The intermissions at 12.30 and 4.30 are for lunch and dinner. Breakfast is eaten at nine o'clock, thus bringing all three meals close together. Another Tong, of more importance than any yet mentioned, is the "Chi Kung," of which NG AH FOOK is general manager. Members of the Chi Kung claim that they are like "Melican" masons, but those acquainted with its secret workings know that the Chi Kungs, or "High-binders," as they are commonly called, are a set of thugs and black-mailers. NG AH FOOK levies a tribute of five dollars a week from each gambling-house in Chinatown. If a Chinaman is to be gotten rid of, the High-binders for a consideration will undertake to "remove" him. An officer of the secret force, from whom I obtained much information on this subject, was himself once black-listed by the Chi Kungs, and a reward of \$800 offered for his head. Being a cool man, a good shot, and always armed, he has thus far escaped, though two or three midnight attacks and one murder has resulted from the attempts of the Kungs to remove their enemy.

Summing up the question, I should say that a careful survey of the industrial situation in California would not induce a logical mind to object to the Chinese from an economical stand-point. Considered from a moral point of view, it might be otherwise. The Chinaman is a thorn in the side of society—a foreign substance that seems incapable of assimilation and absorption into the body. The gambling hells, squalid hovels, dens of prostitution, slavery of women, exist in defiance of law, and on a scale that defies description and challenges belief. Hundreds of men and women burrow under the ground like rats. In a den sixteen feet long by two and a half wide and seven high, reached by an underground passageway fifty feet long, I found two rows of bunks separated by a two-foot aisle. The first tier of bunks was one foot from the floor, the second tier was three feet above the first, and the smoke-begrimed ceiling was three feet above that. Here in this foul, inky dark hole twenty-four persons were stretched, either asleep or smoking opium. The den rents for six dollars a month, making the daily price of lodging for each person the small sum of five-sixths of a cent. For the hovels of Naples the Italian working-men pay only one or at most two dollars a month; but if an Italian family of ten persons live huddled in one room, it is because compelled by necessity. The Chinese, however, seem to prefer squalor and darkness. In the den

above mentioned were several cooks for white families earning \$30 a month and board. In preference to the rooms offered by their employers they selected the quarters in which I found them, because at night "Chinaman likee be with Chinaman and smoke opium." A Chinese working-man's trousers and blouse cost \$1 50; his shoes cost \$1 40. Here is a tabulated statement of the earnings and spendings of a Chinese broom-maker:

Lives twenty feet under ground in den ten feet long, seven feet wide, and six feet high. Six men sleep in same den. Eats breakfast of rice and pork at nine o'clock; dinner at four, of rice and pork and tea. Earns 90 cents a day, \$315 a year.

Cost of Living.	Per Day.	Per Year.
Two pounds of rice a day.	10 cents.	\$36 50
Pork.	5 "	18 25
Bread.	3 "	10 95
Oil, vinegar, etc.	2 "	7 30
Food.	20 cents.	\$73 00
Clothing.		5 00
Lodging, @ ½ cent per day.		1 82
Two queues, @ 75 cents each.		1 50
Shaving head twice a month.		3 00
Total yearly cost of living.		\$84 92

To this actual cost of living must be added, in the vast majority of cases, a sum for opium about equal to the sum spent for food. The broom-maker works in the "Quong Sang Lang Co-operative Broom Factory." The Chinese idea of co-operation, however, does not, I think, extend beyond the sign over the door. The men are hired and paid so much per hundred brooms, just as they are paid in factories laying no claims to "co-operation."

No. 8 Bartlett Alley is a typical Chinese tenement rookery. Bartlett Alley is about the width of a boulevard in Naples—fifteen feet. No. 8 is entered by a passageway three feet wide. Ascend the narrow, rickety steps seven feet, and a sliding panel in the side of the staircase opens into the first tier of rooms or bunks, occupied by a family of eight. Continue to the top of the stairs and a nine by eighteen foot court is entered, with eight rooms opening into it, each room holding on an average seven persons. Another flight of rickety stairs leads to more layers of cramped, box-like compartments, each filled to overflowing with muddy-colored human beings. A hole five feet square in the centre of the court lets light down into the cellar, thirty feet below. Here, deep in the earth, are cells, dark, without ventilation, occupied by men who work, perhaps, two days out of seven, and the other five days smoke opium and sleep. By the aid of powerful calcium-lights photographs were taken of some of the lowest dens in Chinatown. The miserable occupants had never seen their own filth before. The light dazzled and blinded them. They hid their heads while the bright rays searched out every nook and corner, and photographed the scenes that it is impossible for pen to describe. Each of these dark cells rents for one dollar a month. The number of persons in each compartment averages six, so that the lodging costs each person five-ninths of a cent per day. In the centre of the cellar, under the square hole in the court above, is the brick oven, with as many compartments as there are cells. The tenants of each cell have the exclusive use of one hole in the oven, on which they set their kettle of rice and cook their five-cent meals. There is no chimney or smoke-stack, consequently the kitchen of a Chinese tenement-house is generally filled with an opaque atmosphere, which almost suffocates the unacclimated.

Chinese business places are on a scale similar to their dwellings. A shoe-store half a block from the lodging-house just described is precisely six feet deep, two and a half feet wide, and seven feet high. A ladder, which is set out on the pavement during the day, enables the two shoe merchants at night to climb up to their bunk over the shop. There, amid a pile of old shoes, rolls of sole-leather, pots, and kettles they sleep, apparently as contentedly as if in the Palace Hotel. Before climbing to their nest these pious Chinamen light a bunch of "punk" to keep the devil away. Punk, which burns very slowly, is an important adjunct to every Chinese workman's bench. If he has an imaginative mind, and sees spooks during the day, all he has to do is to reach over, light his punk, and the troublesome spook at once retires. It is a very strong-minded or very economical Chinaman who does not spend several dollars a year for "punk"; and many in addition seek the astrologers, or fortune-tellers, to be found on street corners. These Oriental Solons, for the trifling sum of ten cents, drive away evil spirits and tell your fortune besides. Punk, opium, and fortune-telling may be called the three principal weaknesses of the Chinese laborer. If he feels in a spending mood after indulging in these three luxuries he will buy a lottery ticket, or take a chance in some gambling game. Of course it is not possible to find out exactly how much is spent in this way, and no mention is made of these items in the foregoing tabulated expense account of the broom-maker, but from my observations of a number of Chinese workmen I should say at least from fifty to seventy-five dollars is spent per year on the three items of punk, gambling, and fortune-telling.

The bakery of NGIU NGWI TAI is in a cellar eight feet below the level of the street. At the further end of this black hole is a brick oven where the dough is placed and cooked by a charcoal fire—not under, but *over*, the oven—in a swinging iron basket. The dough is kneaded in as odd a manner as it is cooked. It is spread on the work-board and kneaded with a big bamboo cane fastened at one end of the board, making a sort of lever. When NGWI TAI has finished his day's labor he retires to a box in his bakery. His workmen sleep in adjoining boxes, or often on the work-bench, which is quite as comfortable, one would think, as the ordinary Chinese bed—a board covered with a thin layer of straw matting,

and lumbered up with opium-pipe outfits and household effects. The Chinaman's wardrobe is a sheet nailed loosely to the roof of his bunk. He stuffs his extra clothing, shoes, hats, etc., into this sheet over his head. The roof of a well-to-do Chinaman's bunk is often thus padded to a thickness of five or six inches. It is a very common custom for Chinese laborers to sleep and eat in the place where they work. This materially lessens the cost of living. A cigar or overalls maker earning \$40 a month will sleep in a bunk over his machine, eat rice and bread in the back part of the factory, and spend for the actual necessities of life not more than eight or nine dollars a month. In not a few factories do white girls work at the same benches with Chinamen. Often the dressing-rooms and closets are common to both sexes and races, and, moreover, are in the workshop, open to view, with no sort of privacy whatever. Such customs, of course, cannot but produce injurious results. At a shoe factory owned and conducted by Chinamen I found white girls with their sense of propriety so blunted they did not seem to mind in the least the free and easy customs around them. In Italy and several other of the southern European states the same conditions may be noted. In the government baths at Buda-Pesth, Hungary, the sexes bathe together without any pretence whatever of wearing bathing suits. While staring at the bathers who were in the pool at the time of my visit, a stout, red-cheeked peasant girl came in. She gave me an indifferent glance, then calmly took off her clothing, hung it on a peg, and was soon splashing and playing in the water. In the United States, aside from those Chinese factories employing white women, I have found nothing approaching the "promiscuousness" noted in Italy and Hungary. In New York tenement-houses there are many cases where the children of a family—grown sons and daughters—occupy the same sleeping apartments. There are, however, no public lodging-houses or baths in which the sexes are not separated, and no factories with dressing-rooms and closets that are not screened from the general view.

Such, in brief, is an outline of the social and industrial condition of the Chinese on the Pacific coast. Within the limits of a magazine article it is impossible to describe how women are imported for degraded purposes and held as slaves; how the "Six Companies" (representing the six chief provinces of China) import, or did once import, labor under contract, holding the laborer in absolute slavery until the lease he had given on himself expired; and how in San Francisco the Chinese have laws unto themselves, their secret courts executing even sentences of death, of which the State of California knows nothing. All this would require much space. Enough has been said to show that the Chinese do not assimilate with Caucasians; his presence is as the presence of a thorn, of a foreign substance—injurious in its effect just in proportion as the number of Chinese is large. It is this, and not "cheap labor," that is at the bottom of the dislike of white men for Chinamen. Whites and Chinese seem as incapable of mixing as oil and water. Their presence deters the immigration of more desirable labor from the East and from Europe. If that watchword of the California working-man, "The Chinese must go," can be sustained on any grounds, it will be because the Chinaman has no power of assimilation, because he is not a desirable citizen, and because he keeps away those who are desirable citizens. The objection that he works cheaply and lives economically cannot, as has been shown, be sustained either by justice or reason.
