

The Children of the Poor (January 15, 1911)

No fledgling feeds the father-bird,
No chicken feeds the hen,
No kitten mouses for the cat,
This glory is for men.

We are the wisest, strongest race,
Loud may our praise be sung,
The only animal alive
That feeds upon its young.

— *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*.¹

The wages of vast numbers of workingmen are so small that they and their families are reduced to the barest existence. Life means nothing to them but a hopeless struggle which ends only with death. Poverty is their lot and misery their heritage. Their sad condition is irrevocably fixed. They toil, skimp, worry, suffer, despair, and die. There is not much else in the “simple annals of the poor.”²

The children of these workingmen, who are poverty-stricken only because they are exploited of what they produce, come into life in an environment and under conditions that almost inevitably predetermine their wretched fate. Poverty is their sole inheritance. The cottage in which they are born, unless it chances to be a tenement or a hovel, is limited to the necessities of existence. The walls are bare, the bedding scant, the furniture cheap, the food coarse, and the clothing shoddy. The most rigid economy is self-enforced. Life is hard and hopeless here in poverty’s breeding pen.

The father returns after his day’s exhausting toil to revitalize himself for the next day’s slavish task — that is all that home means to him. The mother — prisoner of poverty that she is — knows nothing of the joys of home, the ecstasies of motherhood. She is not a mother at all in the sense in which that term is breathed in reverence, but only “a female that gives birth to young.”³

Love is not apt to dwell long in such a lair, if it enter here at all. And this is the unhappy lot of millions of laboring people who are fore-

doomed to such a bleak and barren existence, and from which there is no escape this side of the grave.

This condition of penury, want, and social debasement is fixed and permanent in the existing industrial system and no amount of maudlin sympathy or patronizing philanthropy can materially alleviate its horrors, a fact our dilettante charity-ball reformers unwittingly confess in their favorite and oft-repeated scriptural injunction, "The poor always ye have with you."⁴

It is under these harsh and gloomy conditions that the children of the poor come into life and are joined to misery at its very threshold. Denied all that makes home the haven of love and the abode of joy, deprived of all the sweet influences that fill childhood with rapture, and which the memory treasures in after years like a vanished dream, these children of the poor are at their very birth fated to struggle and perish among "Les Misérables,"⁵ the world's disinherited millions who, robbed of their birthright, are despised for their infirmities and scourged as wantons to dishonorable graves.

From the wretched habitations of the poor the children early seek escape instead of clinging fondly to their birthplace like fledglings to the parental nest. Under the cruel lash of poverty they are driven out into the world in their childhood. There is no time for health-giving and body-building recreation and no means for education, for culture, for mental training and moral enlightenment. They are but the children of the poor, fit only for menial service, which awaits them at the cradle and drags them in its relentless fetters to their graves.

What words can fitly describe the life tragedy of the children of the poor? Born to poverty, they walk in the darkness of ignorance, and is it strange that some go astray? Is it not a miracle that all do not become vicious and depraved?

Society's doors are all closed against them. They are but outcasts when they are "respectable." What a melancholy paradox! Those who rob the poor despise them. The pampered parasites hold in loathing and horror the deflowered victims whose ruddy life-drops glisten in their gaudy plumage.

These children of the poor find their way in increasing numbers to the haunts of vice and shame. The darkness of the hovel and the sweat-shop is relieved by the red light of the slums. The children of the poor are food for misery and crime. The vile groggery for the boys and the house of horror for the girls. So do millions of the children pass through this "Vale of Tears."⁶

And so it will ever be while capitalism is suffered to rob the children of the poor of their inheritance. Deplore it as you may, these are the conditions as they are, and only a new social system can change them. Child labor laws, factory inspection laws, and other remedial legislation may ameliorate in some degree the wrongs suffered by the children of the poor, but all such palliatives are powerless to end them. As long as labor is merchandise and production is carried on for profit, child labor will have preference and the children of the poor will be ground into luxuries for the children of the rich.

Socialism offers absolutely the only means for rescuing the children of the poor, and slowly but surely society is being pushed, by the underlying forces that move it, into the acceptance of its philosophy. The abolition of poverty is socialism's insistent demand and this demand proclaims the end of private property in the means of life.

The earth spreads out before us, rich in its resources beyond the power of the imagination. The inventive genius of man has captured the lightening, snatched the thunderbolts from the hand of Jove,⁷ and grasped all the forces of nature and converted them into titanic toilers for the children of men. The earth and its riotous abundance, and man with his miraculous productive power, scout the idea that poverty is to forever scourge the human race. The past, in the density of its ignorance and the night of its superstition, may be excused. But the living present with all its myriad available agencies for producing food, clothing, shelter, and for the education of the children and the diffusion of light and intelligence among the masses, can make no such plea.

There is absolutely no excuse for the widespread poverty that now scourges mankind. It is an affront to human intelligence and an impeachment of civilization. Child labor is not only unnecessary in this age but a crime against both the children and society. Every child ought to have, and in the triumph of socialism will have, time enough for physical growth, for the joy of healthy childhood, for education, and for everything else required in a truly enlightened age for the scientific rearing of the children, the progenitors of succeeding generations.

it is for this very reason that the poor and the children of the poor are turning toward socialism in increasing numbers all over the world. It is their movement, born of their travail and consecrated to their emancipation. Millions of them are already marching beneath its international banner and swelling with joyous strains the anthem of their coming deliverance. To them socialism is as a beacon lighting the shipwrecked mariner to his destined port. It is their sunshine and shower, their meat

and drink, their life and hope. It sheds its radiance in their dingy hovels and eases the ache in their numb and weary flesh.

The disinherited of every race and clime are here at home. They are in truth the people and to them of right belongs the earth.

Socialism is their gospel of economic and social salvation. In the name of its commanding genius they unite in greater and greater numbers — thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of them — keeping step to the same proletarian heartbeat, the heartbeat of international revolution, animated by the same social spirit, held steadfast by the same social conscience, their radiant faces turned forever toward the sunrise.

These are the children of the poor who have made the earth rich and are now moving toward their eternal inheritance. The love of comrades is in their hearts, the passion for freedom in their souls, and the light of victory in their eyes. The trials that beset their struggle but fit them for the coming freedom and for the infinitely higher life that lies beyond and holds out to them its eager, outstretched hands. They move steadily as gravitation in one direction — toward the light, the fulfillment of their historic destiny. The storms may beat upon them and the lightning smite them to the earth, but they will rise again undismayed, pressing on and on, with all the patience of fate and all the persistence of truth and justice.

No disappointment, however bitter, no defeat, however crushing, can dampen the ardor of their spirit, or quench the fire of their enthusiasm. All the forces of evil must yield to their unconquerable will. All the governments and all the armed forces of the world must recede and finally disappear before the march of these silent battalions — these intrepid soldiers of international peace, who bear not the arms of sanguinary conflict, but who, armored in the righteousness of their cause, proclaim to all the children of the poor the glad tidings of the coming Kingdom of Peace and Plenty over all the Earth.

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¹ From “Child Labor” [No. 2] by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935).

² From *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) by Thomas Gray (1716-1771).

³ In his December 10, 1905 New York City speech published as *Industrial Unionism*, Debs declared, "Victor Hugo once said that the wife of a slave is not a wife at all; she is simply a female that gives birth to young..." The source of this quotation from Hugo has not been successfully located. See: *Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 4*, p. XXXXX.

⁴ Words ascribed to Jesus in John 12:8. See also Mark 14:7.

⁵ Allusion to the 1862 novel by Victor Hugo (1802-1885).

⁶ A Christian phrase derived from the Latin *vallis lacrimarum*, popularized by the English translation of the ancient hymn "Salve Regina."

⁷ Jupiter, god of the sky, regarded as supreme deity in ancient Roman religion and mythology.