

THOUGHTS ON POVERTY

By NICHOLAS ROERICH.

"Paupertas, impulit audaz, Ut
versum facerem. . . ."

HORACE says: "Poverty impelled me to inspiration."

It is astonishing when we recall that so long as St. Francis was the rich middle-class citizen he did not attract anyone's attention. But as soon as he wedded Signora Poverty and entered upon his spiritual path, he became the world saint whose name and image kindled and inspired myriads of hearts towards achievement.

Perusing the pages of the most varied histories of men we always come to the same unwavering assertion, that wealth is not notable in history as the best means of achievement. Sheikh Humayun at the birth of his great son Akbar was so poor that he could not give more than a few grains of musk to his friends as the customary gift distributed on such occasions.

The bankers of Babylon were very rich, but history has not preserved their names. Such names are useless in the narrative of human achievement so long as they did not sponsor cultural work. The chronicle of the movements of humanity remains for the unprejudiced on-looker as something remarkable according to its inner justice.

Contemporaries create many lies and injustices, but time itself makes some significant changes in accordance with the laws of existence. Contrary to these contemporaries, these laws bring into relief all progressive movements and remove into the abyss everything illusory, accidental and transitory. After all, history does not forget, and sometimes after whole centuries, will accord due justice to heart-felt human striving towards general bliss.

The history of humanity in its essence remains human in the full sense of the word. Thought of gain, self-love, wrath, and cruelty always remain last in some shameful places, and no gold can conceal either ignorance or destruction. At the same time, each creativeness, each constructive striving remains unforgotten. Besides history, with touching attention, unknown though it comes, never forgets to stress everything selfless. Although in its own way, everything which strives towards the bliss of humanity is marked. The same history brings us a multitude of the most unexpected information which, when analyzed, makes an unusual mosaic, out of which much that is instructive for the future can be drawn by everyone.

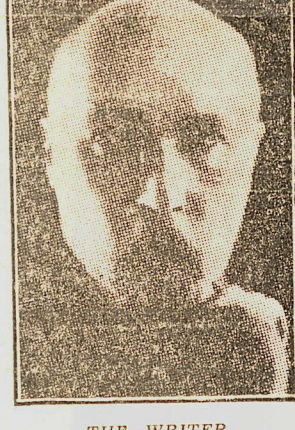
The Coin

Let us remember the most conventional token of human existence—the coin. In this question as well as in many others the history of China affords an unforgettable example. During the movements of our expedition in the remote regions of China we encountered an unusually curious situation in monetary tokens. First of all we were warned by experienced people not to accept silver bars, even though they were marked with government seals. For often, inside the silver bar, copper was skilfully inserted. We were frequently confused also by the current silver coins which were accepted and evaluated quite differently in various localities. In one city they preferred the coin with a head of Li Hung Chang with six letters; in another they wanted to have seven letters. Some preferred coins with feminine images and others did not wish to have Chinese moneys, demanding Indian rupees, or old Mexican dollars.

As a climax we were offered as change some wooden sticks with carvings, with the statement that these signs were the best because they were issued by gambling houses. Thus, above all the heads of Li Hung Chang the citizens suddenly placed their trust in the little sticks of the gambling house, finding them of indisputable value. With all the diversity of Chinese monetary symbols, the little sticks of the gambling house nevertheless remained unsurpassed in their originality.

Penetrating deeply into the history of China, we may truly find all types of curious examples of monetary symbols, but after the contemporary little sticks of the gambling house, the most startling perhaps and the most significant form in the money-knives of the Ju Dynasty, 715 to 431 B. C. Among the myriads of curious monetary forms corresponding to various aspects of trade, we have not encountered anywhere else

the form of a knife. Perhaps in our day of decadence, depressing budgetary failures, the inner meaning of the knife coin might be very significant. The debtor would say to the creditor: "Wait a bit, I shall return it you in knives." Or "I have saved quite a number of knives for you" How many misunderstandings would arise by reason of such knifely dis-



THE WRITER

ussion at the various councils of the League of Nations. But in the Chinese knife-moneys there was also maintained the traditional Chinese refinement. Their form is very beautiful. And the ring on the handle indicates that they could either be tied or strung to something and could be carried about with one. From our judiciary point of view, how many misapprehensions could such money create in the hands of robbers, who would try to convince one that those were penknives.

But it is significant that the refined fantasy of the ancients considered it possible to link the conception of a monetary symbol precisely with a knife. For no one has ever yet utilized for a monetary symbol some holy image as such, which could also serve some sacred purpose. True, upon later coins, there were images of deities but they were applied as symbols or as guardians of a certain city or country. Who knows, perhaps to some of our contemporary bankers, the image of a knife would be especially attractive and close.

Thus, the history of humanity in some seemingly foreboding tokens brings to us the correlation of symbols. The knife, more than any other, is a cruel symbol, a piercing one and crude. But the monetary sign with all its conventionality is like wise not divine.

History has not forgotten to relate that even Confucius, great in his love of peace and justice, was so persecuted by his contemporaries, that he had to keep ready a harnessed chariot and spent a great part of his life in forced migrations. But history has rejected into the names of these ignorant persecutors. But Confucius not only has remained in memory, not only has he lived through millenniums, but his name has become even more strengthened in the contemporary consciousness.

To speak of persecutions of contemporaries and of the just evaluation which followed would mean, first of all, to expound the history of contemporary religions, the history of all teachings of the world, the history of all creative striving. Already more than once, we have recalled that there should be issued parallel with the book "Martyrs for Science" also a book "Martyrs for Art," "Martyrs for Creativeness," "Martyrs for Bliss". Within recent times we were witness to the fact that Edison during a session of one of the academies, was called a charlatan for the invention of the phonograph.

The very same talk was supplied even very recently in the editions of some dignified encyclopedias to some very respected and remarkable names. It is instructive to observe how in subsequent editions, these denominations were shamefacedly eradicated. History itself began to set up its indisputable evaluation and the conventional ignorant judgments of contemporaries began to dissolve in shame giving place to more fitting denominations.

Generous Poverty

In all manifestations of life we constantly see this crystallization of values brought about by the cosmic consciousness. For some reason or other, some signs and symbols become obliterated, but others cross through unharmed and remain instructive through all the perturbations and tempests. The wise ancient Chinese for some reason linked the symbol of the monetary sign with the symbol of a knife. And this symbol, time has brought to us unblemished. So also untarnished and vivid, time has brought to us the images of St. Francis, St. Theresa and St. Sergius and all those heroes of achievement mighty in spirit, who having renounced all the conventionalities of an imperfect earthly life, strove towards true values. And the great poet, Horace, was not only unashamed, but spoke with great dignity of the significance of poverty for his inspiration. And the remarkable painter, Van Gogh in sending to his cruel landlord his cut-off ear instead of rent, seemed to remind him of the ear which should know how to listen. If people would only understand where are the true values, truly needed by them, where lives that generous poverty which is richer than any riches!

Certainly no one would state that trade is not needed. On the contrary, each barter within the limits of culture should be welcomed. Therefore in our World League of Culture is included the participation of industrial enterprise; only they should be directed along cultural paths. But one always ought to remark that the corner-stone does not belong to capital and trade, as was so often signified during these days of perturbation. In true co-operation, upon cultural standards, every labour, every trade and every production will only serve to enhance the Beautiful Garden.

In his "Nibelungen Ring", Wagner presents many cosmic moments. Unforgettable also remains the significant dialogue of Wotan with Mime in which Wotan permits Mime to ask him three questions. Wotan replies to all questions beyond the clouds and the underworld cunning questions of Mime, but, wandering far, Mime forgot to ask that which was most necessary for him. Wotan said to Mime, "Thou hast wandered far, thou hast risen to the clouds and penetrated under the earth, but that which was so needed to those, thou did not ask. And now thou wilt be mine." Has not humanity, in all its errands and waverings, forgotten to ask about, and to think of that which was so indeferably needed?

The book Fiery World says, "Thus the dark forces have brought the planet to such a condition that no earthly decision can restore the conventional welfare. No one can believe that the earthly standards of yesterday are applicable tomorrow. Thus, humanity is again in need of understanding the meaning of its short presence in an earthly state. Only by a basic definition of its existence in a dense condition and the understanding of the subtle and fiery world, can one strengthen one's existence. One must not think that a spectre of trade can even temporarily afford a firm existence. Life has turned into trade; but which of the teachers of life were traders? You know the great symbol of the driving of the money-lenders from out of the temple; but is not earth itself a temple? Is not Maha Meru the foot of the summit of spirit? Thus one can point out to the inhabitants of earth upon the destined peaks.

"Let us not forget that each moment must belong to the New World. The world of thought constitutes the living link between the subtle and the fiery worlds; it enters as the nearest impetus of the world of fire. Thought does not exist without fire, and fire is being transmuted into creative thought. The manifestation of thought is already realized. Likewise shall be realized the great Fire—Om."

The same book reminds us: "People affirm that before a war of calamity, forest fires and other conflagrations take place. It does not matter whether these always occur, but it is significant that the people's belief notes the fiery tension before world catastrophe. The wisdom of the people allots to fire a remarkable place. God visits the people in fire. The same fiery element was chosen as the highest court. The annihilation of evil takes place through fire. The manifestation of mishaps is followed by burning. Likewise, in the entire trend of people's thinking one can see fiery paths. People lighted the oil-lamps and people carry the torches manifested at services. Solemn is the fiery element in the people's understanding! Thus let us draw not from superstition, but from the people's heart."

Sincere self-perfecting is not egotism, but has world significance. The thought about improvement does only pertain to oneself; such thought carries in itself the necessary flame needed for many kindlings of the heart. As fire, brought into quarters filled with combustible substance, will always ignite, thus the fiery thought pierces the space and will inevitably attract to itself the questioning hearts.—Satyam, Sivam.

Sundaram.