

peonage system, and here I will only make general considerations regarding the wage-earners of Mexico and their present condition.

It is impossible to institute a comparison between a laborer of the United States and one of Mexico. Any such attempt would be futile; they are wholly different in habits of thought and in mode of life. Their ambitions are diverse, and their education and tendencies are dissimilar. There is no common plane of comparison. Mexico must be measured by Mexican standards. Erroneous conclusions would be reached were we to apply the English, French, German, or American systems to the Mexican laborer.

No one will dispute that the average American workingman is better off in many ways than his counterpart in Mexico. The public school educates the American workingman, and he has many wants to satisfy, and we are glad for it. Otherwise he would not be what he is, the most intelligent, on the average, of all the world's toilers. He is a great consumer of tropical products, and this fact makes him tributary to Mexico. The better his wages the more he will consume, and the better it would be for our hot-country planters.

The social and physical status of most of the Mexican toilers is very unsatisfactory, and is attributable to various causes. In the first place, they are the descendants of practically enslaved sons of the soil, conquered by the early Spaniards; in the second place, they have been practically and until recently living under conditions similar to feudalism; and, in the third place, education has not yet penetrated among the adult laborers. But public schools are multiplying all over Mexico, and in many regions the minds of the little children of the laborer are being trained and disciplined as well as informed. Railways, by making it easy for the laborer to go from one part of the country to another, are destroying the centuries-old state of serfdom among the laborers. Slowly, very slowly, but none the less surely, is the educational policy of the Mexican Government raising the level of the toilers of Mexico.

The laborer in Mexico is passing from peonage under the Spaniards, which was a very mild and tolerable form of feudal servitude, to absolute freedom of action, with a horizon that is continually expanding. He was contented in his former sphere, for the Spaniards, especially those engaged in agriculture, were generally good to their hands. They did not educate them nor attempt to elevate them, neither did they try to elevate themselves. The whole of Mexico was plunged into apathy, but it was the apathy of supreme indifference, not of despair. Now they can go where they like, serve whom they like, and return to their village when they like. And they use their liberty to the point of abuse. Yet still the horizon keeps enlarging. The rate of wages keeps moving upwards, and there is no sign that it has reached its limit. The number of Mexicans whose fathers were either virtual or

actual peons, and who are now receiving a dollar a day, is constantly increasing. It is easy to picture the satisfaction felt by a man whose boyhood was nurtured on the simple food of corn-cakes and beans, and who now receives a Mexican dollar, day in and day out, except upon Sunday, and then as well if he is willing to work on that day.

While the Mexican laborers are deprived of most of the comforts enjoyed by their brethren in the United States, it is the opinion of some thoughtful Americans who have visited Mexico that they are happier, because their needs are fewer, the necessities of life for them are cheaper, and their employment is constant—conditions which sometimes do not exist in this country.

*Mexican Peonage.*—Peon in Spanish means a laborer who performs rough work that does not require either art nor any special fitness, and it does not give at all the idea of servitude, but under the Spanish rule the conquerors were given the ownership of a certain territory, where they exercised quasi-feudal rights upon the natives living there, and as they required their services to till the land, a very mild form of servitude was established, consisting in the landlord's providing for the needs of his laborers; that is, furnishing them money, in the shape of an advance for future services, whenever they had any special need in the families, such as marriage, birth, sickness, death, etc., they, of course, being obliged to repay their indebtedness to their employer. In some cases this obligation passed to the descendant of the laborer, who had to work to discharge his parent's debt. Since Mexico achieved her independence this condition of things has changed very materially. I never knew or heard of any case in which the descendant of a man had to discharge with his labor the debts of his parents, and the Mexican laws from the beginning have been directed to destroy that system, as I will presently state. I can therefore say with perfect truth, that peonage, in the meaning in which it is understood in this country—that is, a kind of slavery—never existed in Mexico, and that even the Spanish peonage system is not now in existence, although there are some districts which still have slight remnants of peonage, as will be seen farther on, but the laborers suffer there no more than they do in some other countries, as up to the end of the last century laborers were everywhere, as a general rule, held in a kind of slavery or peonage.

The early history of the United States shows that even white men were held in bondage in all the States to work out debts, and to expiate offences, and it is only a generation back that slavery on a great scale was abolished. There are, to-day, the "convict-camp" abuses in the Southern States of the American Union, against which influential journals in that section are strongly protesting. In Pennsylvania, one reads of the poverty-stricken condition of the imported foreign miners, who try to maintain families on fifty and sixty cents a day.



In all countries there are plenty of abuses; children are overworked, and women forced into coarse pursuits. Mexico is able to show as good a record as any country in these matters, and a strong public opinion is growing there against all forms of oppression of human beings.

All over the civilized world men are becoming humaner in sentiment, the fundamental rights of men are more regarded, and the struggle against selfish greed on the part of the minority of employers is making good progress.

Peonage never meant a low system of wages, as is understood in the United States. The prevailing impression in this country regarding the Mexican peon is an erroneous one. It is supposed here that peonage is, as a matter of fact, sheer slavery, and that it extends throughout the whole country. I have shown that it is not slavery, and now I will say that it exists principally in a comparatively reduced area where laborers are very scarce, and this fact shows that, while the system is liable to abuse, it has some advantages for the laborer.

Meantime our peons are not starving, and are, for the most part, a quiet and philosophic people, enjoying their frequent respites from toil, and complaining very little, while a patriotic Government has their interests at heart and is planning for their welfare, and especially for that of their children.

What follows will show how much the evils of the peonage system in Mexico have been exaggerated, and how they all are being now radically corrected; but before proceeding any farther, I will state what is the condition of the Mexican farm laborer, or peon, in the different localities of Mexico.

The largest portion of the Mexican population is located on the mountains, central table-lands, and other high regions, which enjoy a cold and healthful climate on account of their elevation above the sea. Only the products of the cold zone can grow there, and these were formerly cultivated on a limited scale, solely for local consumption, as the high cost of transportation prevented their being carried to any distance. In this region labor is abundant, and until recent years it exceeded the demand; consequently, wages were low, and the peonage system only existed to a small extent; because of the number of working hands being greater than the demand, the laborers were exposed to disadvantages that fortunately are now beginning to disappear, as prosperity of the country increases the demand for labor.

The temperate region embraces the land situated at from three to five thousand feet above the level of the sea, and it is sparsely populated; but it yields valuable products, such as coffee, sugar, and other tropical fruits. It is very difficult to find in this region the necessary

hands to till the land on a large scale. For these reasons, and, above all, because of the high cost of transportation, tropical products could not be grown before the railways were built, except in a few places favorably located, and then in a limited quantity. This explains why some of these products commanded a higher price in some localities of the country where they are produced than in foreign markets, to which they are transported from great distances. Sugar, for instance, which is retailed in New York at  $4\frac{1}{2}$  cents a pound, costs in the City of Mexico from 12 to 18 cents, and it is not so well refined as the article sold here, although it probably has for that reason a greater amount of saccharine matter.

The hot region, which embraces the coast on both oceans and the low valleys situated in the interior of the country, is very sparsely inhabited; labor is therefore very scarce, and wages are higher here than in any other region. While in the high and cold regions wages were often  $12\frac{1}{2}$  cents a day and rations, on the coast they are sometimes \$1 a day. The inhabitants of the cold and temperate regions do not like to descend to the warm zone, because they are exposed to maladies prevailing there, such as yellow fever and intermittent and remittent fevers, and because they are terribly annoyed by mosquitoes, and they can hardly endure the heat. If at any time they do go down there, it is only to remain a few days. It has been thought that as the lowlands are the most fertile and rich, and are almost uninhabited, they could be cultivated only by means of negro or Asiatic labor; and this idea has induced some Mexican planters to try Chinese immigration, as Article II. of our Constitution grants to all men the right freely to enter and leave Mexico.

The laborers living in the warm lands have, on account of the smallness of their number, advantages which are not shared by their fellow-laborers inhabiting the higher regions. The first of these advantages is, as I have already stated, larger wages; the second is that they can obtain advances, in reasonable amounts, for any needs they may have, as marriages, births, sickness, or death in their families, since the small amount of their wages does not allow them to economize for such emergencies, and these advances are willingly made by their employers and set to the account of future services, without interest or security.

Unfortunately, the very advantages which the laborers living in the hot lands of Mexico enjoy, and the smallness of their numbers, which I have just mentioned, are sometimes the causes of great abuses on the part of some employers, of which the laborer is the victim on account of his ignorance and complete destitution, on the one hand, and the influence and wealth of his employer on the other.

I speak of this subject from personal experience, because, having



spent several years as a planter in the District of Soconusco, State of Chiapas, where these conditions prevail, I saw the practical workings of the peonage system. It was not possible to obtain there a laborer, either as a domestic or a field hand, without first paying the debt of from one to five hundred dollars that he had contracted with his former employer; so that it is easy to understand what an expenditure of money was required before a large number of hands could be obtained. Lapse of time increases the debt instead of diminishing it, since the laborer asks each week, as a rule, for more than the amount of his wages. Whenever the hands are displeased with their work—either because they quarrel among themselves, because their employer does not treat them well, because they do not get all the money advances they ask, or for any other reason—they have entire freedom to offer their services to anybody else, who willingly pays their debt, as everybody is always in need of help; but often, and especially when the employer does not live permanently in the country, as was my case when I was in Soconusco, laborers whose debts reach a considerable sum conceal themselves, fly to another district where they are not known, or in some other manner evade the payment of their indebtedness; with the result that it is a total loss to their employer. The same is the case when the indebted laborer dies or becomes disabled for work.

These are the practical results of the peonage system, so far as my experience goes, although I do not deny that it is liable to great abuse on the part of the employers, who are favored in a few cases by the tolerance of the local authorities and by the ignorance and poverty of the laborers.

There are some places—especially in the States of Tabasco and Campeche, where mahogany, cedar, ebony and dyewoods are cut in uninhabited spots, which change as the wood is exhausted—where the employer assumes, in the absence of any magistrate or other authority, and generally through an overseer, for he himself seldom remains at such places, all the powers of government. Of course, opportunities for doing injustice are very much increased, in view of the fact that there an employer is hardly ever called to account for abuse of authority. In most of these cases the employer is obliged to set up, for the convenience of his laborers—as I have heard, though I have no personal knowledge in the matter—a store where they can provide themselves, there being no other near by, with provisions, groceries, and such dry-goods as they may need in the ordinary course of life, paying for them with the scrip issued to them by the employer over his signature in settlement of their wages. It is easy to see how greatly this system is liable to abuse, since the laborer has to purchase at the store of his employer everything he wants, and at such prices as the

owner may think fit to charge, thus losing all the benefits of competition.<sup>1</sup>

But the peonage system has no legal existence in Mexico, because Article V. of our Constitution of 1857, enacted for the purpose of abolishing it, provides that "nobody should be obliged to render personal service without proper compensation and his full consent," and forbids the issuance of any law to authorize any contract which might have for its object the "loss or irreparable sacrifice of the freedom of man through work, education, or religious vows." This article was amended on the 25th of September, 1873, chiefly with a view of prohibiting the taking of religious vows in Mexico, and also of making it more explicit, and it reads now, so far as work is concerned, as follows: "The state cannot allow the fulfilment of any agreement, contract, or covenant which may, in any manner, impair, destroy, or irrevocably sacrifice man's liberty, either through work, education, or religious vows."

Whatever abuses might have been committed under the peonage system in Mexico in former years when laborers were abundant and occupation scarce, and the laborers were ignorant and destitute, they have either disappeared altogether or been very materially reduced with the changing conditions of the country, as labor is now in great demand, so much so that in very many places the demand exceeds the supply. The laborers began to be educated with the restoration of peace. The local authorities vie with each other to enforce the laws which guarantee the personal rights of every inhabitant of the country.

*Rate of Agricultural Mexican Wages.*—The broken surface of Mexico gives us all the climates of the world, frequently at very short distances from each other, and enables us to produce the fruits of all the zones, while placing at our disposal, at the same time, an immense hy-

<sup>1</sup> It seems that something similar to this is done in the United States, as is shown by the following extract from Gen. Rush C. Hawkins's article, entitled "Brutality and Avarice Triumphant," published in the June, 1896, number of the *North American Review*, page 660:

"One of the most facile means in the hands of avarice for cheating the poor and helpless is the 'corporation and contractor's' store. It is usually owned by corporations whose employees are the only patrons, and the rule is to sell the poorest possible quality of supplies at the highest price obtainable. In many instances employees are given to understand that they are expected to trade at the company and contract stores, or, failing to do so, will be discharged. This oppressive method of cheating is not confined to any particular part of the country, but prevails, with varying degrees of malignancy, wherever under one management, either corporate, partnership, or individual, any considerable number of employees are assembled together. Since the close of the Civil War many thousands of ignorant blacks have been made the victims of this common and heartless swindle, which has absorbed their scant earnings. At the end of each month, year in and year out, it has proved to their untrained minds an astonishing fact that the longer and the harder they worked the more they got in debt to their employers."