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A SHOP FULL OF FREE TRADERS.

By William McCabe.

The employees of a certain type foundry of New York City are not only in a state of mind, but they have become a unit on the tariff question. Very little of the widespread discussion opened up in the press, pulpit, and rostrum, and participated in by a large class of our citizens as a result of Mr. Cleveland's message, had found its way into this type foundry. Once in a while a man—sometimes a workman, sometimes a visitor—would in the course of conversation with the men express himself on the tariff question, either on the tariff reform or Protection side. He would be listened to pleasantly and patiently. Occasionally a Free Trader would give his views in their presence, but he would always meet with a cold reception There were no Free Traders in that foundry—only tariff reformers and Protectionists. The whole question of the tariff was to these employees a huge joke. But it is a joke no long·r. Five weeks ago, a rumor got to the ears of the employees of this foundry that has made them very much interested in the tariff question; and, singular to say, while there is not now a Protectionist in the foundry, excepting the Republican proprietor, neither is there a tariff reformer; they have all become absolute Free Traders. It came about in this way:

A number of British capitalists have conceived the idea of buying up all the large type foundries in this country. Their agent had been negotiating with the principal type founding houses with encouraging results, and had begun work on foundries of the second grade. In this category comes the foundry of which we have been speaking. The programme of the syndicate has been explained to the two partners as follows: When enough of the large foundries have agreed to sell out, a trust will be formed. This trust will maintain four foundries—two in the East and two in the West. All the other foundries belonging to the trust will be dismantled. Such foundries as attempt to do business on an independent basis will be stamped out. Then, when the trust has control of the business of the country, it will be able to regulate prices and the demand for its goods.

Now, the men would not have been particularly interested had a trust bought this particular foundry, with a view to making it one of the two to be continued in operation in the East when the new order should come about; but such is not the purpose. If the foundry is sold to the trust, it will be among those marked for dismantling; and, therefore, the men are very much interested, for they know that in that event they will all find themselves out of work.

It happened, just after the news of the probable change had reached the men, that a Free Trader with Single Tax proclivities called in at the office of the firm and left a memorandum of a list of articles needed for a new printing office, on which he wanted an estimate. He handed the list to the chief bookkeeper, who promised to fill it out and return it by mail on the following day. Four days passed, but still no estimate came. On the fifth day he went to the foundry office, and when the chief bookkeeper put in an appearance, the Free Trader rather sharply asked the reason for the delay in receiving his estimate. The bookkeeper, with a worried look, said he had neglected it, but would prepare it immediately. While engaged in doing so, he remarked that there was a great deal of trouble in the place.

"Is the firm in trouble?" asked the Free Trader.

"Oh, no," answered the bookkeeper; "the firm is all right. It's the workmen and the rest of us that are in trouble." Then he went on and told the story which we have narrated above; and he wound up by saying: "It will be a shame if the firm sells out to the trust, for it will throw on the streets about three hundred men, most of whom have been in their employ ever since they were boys."

"Does the syndicate offer a fair price for the foundry?" asked the Free Trader.

"Oh, yes," answered the bookkeeper; "they have offered a big price. One partner" (naming the Republican) "wants to take it, but ——" (the Democratic partner) "has refused so far, on account of the employees, to whom he is personally attached. He does not want to see them thrown out of work."

"Then," said the Free Trader, "—— is a very foolish man. This is a commercial age, Billy, and men, women or children must not be taken into account in business."

The bookkeeper turned and looked on the Free Trader, with amazement and anger depicted on his face. "You say this?" said he; "you who have always been known as a man fighting for the advancement of your fellow man? I'm astonished at you!"

"Well, you needn't be. I have known you and most of the people in this foundry for many years. I have often talked with you all about what your duty was toward your 'fellow men,' as you now call them, but none of you ever took the slightest interest in the matter. And you wouldn't now, only you see very clearly that a change in the ownership of this foundry will throw you all out of a job. If this is a commercial age in which human beings don't count, it is the fault of such people as you. The trouble with you, Billy, is that you have all of a sudden been kicked into recognizing the general condition of things by a threatened calamity to yourself, and you want the whole world to step into the breach to save what you, for the moment, believe to be your 'fellow men,' while in reality it is yourself and the men in this foundry. If this change of ownership does nothing else, it will, for a time at least, arouse such men as you to a consideration of things as they are."

The bookkeeper, apparently, was not listening; his head was bent low over the paper on which he was making out the estimate. The Republican partner came into the office, and, after greeting everybody pleasantly, went to his desk and sat down, at the same time inviting the Free Trader to take a chair by the desk. The bookkeeper soon after went up-stairs, leaving the Republican partner and the Free Trader chatting together, and they were just beginning to talk about the tariff, when the bookkeeper called down the stairs to ask the Free Trader if he would come up for a moment. The Free Trader arose to go, and the Republican partner said he would go, too. The bookkeeper asked the Free Trader to look at certain materials to see if they would suit, and on being told that they would he made a memorandum and started on his way down-stairs. A glance around the workroom convinced the Free Trader that the bookkeeper had told the men of the talk which had been held down-stairs; but there was no help for it. The Free Trader stood on the floor talking with the Republican partner, on the subject begun just before they had come up-stairs, when suddenly it struck him to ask the present price of what is known in printers' parlance as "long primer type."

"Forty-six cents a pound," answered the partner.

"Why," said the Free Trader, "I paid only forty-two cents for the last long primer I bought of you."

"Yes, that is so," said the partner; "but that was two years ago. Since then the price of the materials of which we make type have increased in price, and as a result the cost of the type has increased."

"What has caused the increased cost of materials?" asked the Free Trader.

"Oh, I don't know," answered the partner. Then, with a laugh, "I suppose it would suit you to death for me to get off that old chestnut of yours and say 'The McKinley bill.'"

"No, it would not, unless it is so," retorted the Free Trader. "But really, now, isn't the increased cost due to the thing you call an 'old chestnut?'"

"I don't know whether it is or not, and I don't care," answered the partner rather sharply.

The manner in which the answer was given nettled the Free Trader somewhat, and in order to get even with the partner, and at the same time strike at the men—for what the partner had said, and the manner in which he had said it, seemed to please the workmen—he remarked, with perhaps a sarcastic tinge in his words:

"And I suppose that another consideration which led you to increase the price of your long primer is that you have increased the wages of your men? That, I believe, was the principal blessing promised us by the advocates of the new tariff."

"There you go again," answered the partner, testily. "Ever since I have known you—never mind what the argument was about—you have always lugged in the wages question. Do drop on yourself."

"Well," answered the Free Trader, "I have only asked a simple question, which you, as an employer of labor, can answer. Now, have the wages of your men been increased since the new tariff law went into effect and the price of metals went up?"

"No, they haven't," answered the partner angrily, "and you know they haven't. You know just as well as I do that the tariff has nothing to do with raising wages."

The men working at the benches looked up from their work, their looks showing that the answer to the Free Trader's question had surprised them. The Free Trader noticing this saw his advantage, and he said, quietly:

"But you told me in 1888 that the success of the Republican party in the National election meant better times and higher wages, didn't you?"

"Perhaps I did. I don't remember whether I did or not; but I do know now that the tariff has nothing to do with raising wages."

The Free Trader didn't care to press that point any further, as he could see that the repetition of the partner's declaration concerning wages and the tariff had had an effect; so he turned the conversation by asking, "How's business?"

"Bad, very bad," answered the partner; "so bad that I am thinking of getting out of business. We have a good offer for the business from an English syndicate; and if ——— agrees, we will sell out."

"Isn't that syndicate trying to form a trust?" asked the Free Trader.

"Yes, I believe that's their idea," answered the partner.

"Well," continued the Free Trader, looking over the shop out of one corner of his eye, "suppose the trust buys up all the foundries, and shuts up all but four or five of them, will they lower the price of their goods then?"

"No, I don't think they will," answered the partner. "On the contrary, they will, as they will have a monopoly, increase prices if they are sensible business men; for, you see, the increased tariff under the McKinley law will keep out all foreign type and materials, so they can charge way-up prices."

"Do you think," asked the Free Trader, "that when the trust is in control of the business, and has raised the price of things, it will raise wages?"

"No, I don't think so. I think, on the contrary, that wages will fall; because, you see, there will be so many type workers thrown out of work by the reduction in the number of foundries, that they, applying in droves for a chance to labor, will of course make wages drop."

This pleasant bit of information made more than one of the workmen stare; and while it is cruel to say so, it tickled the Free Trader to see them stare. But he wanted to ask one more question, which he hoped would drive a thought into the thick heads of the workmen about him; so he said to the partner:

"Say, suppose you didn't have to pay the duty in addition to the cost of the metals you use in making type, how cheap could you make type?"

"Oh, for about one-half or two-thirds the present price," was the answer.

"Then, if type was cheaper, couldn't you sell more?"

"Oh, yes, considerable."

"Then, if you sold 'considerable' more, wouldn't you need more men to make it?"

"Certainly."

"That would lessen and not increase—as in the case of the trust—the number of men seeking for employment, wouldn't it?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then wouldn't the tendency be toward an increase of wages if we had no tariff on the metals you use?"

"There you go," exploded the partner, "back on your 'wages' again. I'm done; I'll talk with you no more," and he started for the stairs; but the Free Trader called to him in a loud voice:

"Do you think this proposed trust could monoplize the type business in this country if the tariff on type materials was taken off?

"Hang you and the tariff!" yelled the partner, as he disappeared down the stairs.

The Free Trader looked around at the men who had heard all that was said; and then he went down-stairs, too, convinced that he had left behind him a hard nut for them to crack.

A day or so after, the Free Trader met the bookkeeper, who told him that the answers given by the Republican partner to questions put to him had made Free Traders of every man on the workroom floor.