ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR ENSLAVEMENT.

I WISH to present here a view of the Italian life in this country as it is. This is the best way to counteract the false impression of it that now prevails. My aim is not so much to call to the bar of public opinion those Italians who are responsible for the unparalleled oppression of their countrymen as to win for the victims the sympathy of honest and thoughtful Americans. Would that the attention now bestowed upon the descendants of the discoverers of America might be of some benefit to them!

It is not, however, exclusively in the interest of my down-trodden countrymen that I write this article, but in what I conceive to be the interest of the American workmen and of this country in general as well. For such is the unity of human society that the evils of a few are the evils of the many, and no society can be prosperous and happy which suffers some of its members to be oppressed. The working classes are especially interested in the removal of the evils I am about to describe, for it is by helping the more unfortunate that they themselves can rise to a higher standard of living, or at least hold their own. Workmen have yet to learn how dearly selfishness and discord cost in their struggle with strong and disciplined employers.

My only claim to attention is the fact that the statements made here are founded on my own observation, not on mere hearsay. I will choose two typical characters of Italian immigrants for study—the peasant and his born master. As a rule, the peasant has contrived, by selling his little farm, or his mule, or some furniture, to bring over a handful of money. The *signore* brings nothing except, perhaps, a criminal record as a bankrupt merchant or commission-agent; or he may have been unsuccessful in one of the professions, or he may be a common adventurer. The farmer, with or without money, sets to work at once, and in his eagerness accepts almost any terms offered. The *signore* looks for a business which shall spare him the necessity of earning his bread by the sweat of his brow, and shall also enable him to gain more than bread alone. Since he has no chance to victimize the American workman, he looks on his humbler countryman as his legitimate prey.

Tradition, more than wealth, divides the Italian immigrants into laborers and contractors, and subjugates the laborers to the contractors. In the course of time some accidental changes may occur in the *personnel* of the two classes. The laborious and thrifty peasant of South Italy may become a shopkeeper and importer, and his son may graduate as a lawyer or a physician; the political exile from Romagna or Tuscany may become a saloon-keeper and a contractor; and teachers and members of other professions may turn street-sweepers or common laborers. Yet the initial differences in most cases become hereditary, and ultimately grow into social institutions.

The territorial divisions of Italy are reproduced by the distribution of the Italian immigrants through the States. The tailor from Naples and Palermo, the weaver from Lombardy, the hat-maker from Piedmont, all follow the tracks of those who have preceded them. When a workman earns enough to support a family and feels sure of steady employment, he generally buys a house on monthly payments and settles permanently in this country. But the common laborer—the house-painter, the stone-cutter, the job-printer—wanders from one State to another, contriving to live the whole year round on the small savings of a few working months. He has, therefore, little inducement to remain. The wages of the unskilled laborer are entirely arbitrary, the people from Southern Italy receiving as a rule lower wages than their Northern colleagues, even when working side by side with them.

The industry of the Italian laborer and the benefits to this country which accrue from his work cannot be disputed. He tills the soil, builds railroads, bores mountains, drains swamps, opens here and there to the industry of American workmen new fields which would not perhaps be opened but for his cheap labor. It is a mistake to believe that he causes the lowering of wages; this is due to the increase of the capitalists controlling great interests. It is equally unjust to speak of him as a pauper laborer. He becomes a pauper on landing because he receives no help, no guarantee of life and independence, and he necessarily falls a victim to the Italian contractor and the contractor's American partner or employer. There are people who would like to keep him out of this country; it would be more reasonable to keep out the contractor.

The Italian laborer does more than his share of work and receives less than his share of earnings; for as a matter of fact, the laws enacted with regard to this matter oppress the laborer and assist rather

than hamper the contractor. Even supposing that the contractor does not succeed in importing contract labor, he finds in the market a large number of men entirely at his mercy, with not even the weak support of a promise to defend themselves against his greed. The few dollars which the immigrant possesses on landing are skilfully taken out of his pocket by the hotel-keeper before the hotel-keeper gives him a chance to work. When he is reduced to absolute indigence, the lowest kind of work imaginable is offered him and he has to accept it. He walks through Mulberry Street and sees a crowd around a bar in a basement. He enters the basement and finds a man employing men for a company. He adds his name to the list without knowing anything about the work he will be called upon to do, or about the place where he is to be transported, or about the terms of his engagement. Perhaps, however, he passes a banker's establishment and stops to read on a paper displayed at the window a demand for two hundred laborers, supplemented with the significant assurance that the place of work is not far distant. He enters, enlists, takes his chances, and falls in the snare set for him.

I once witnessed the departure of a party of laborers and I shall never forget the sight. In foul Mulberry Street a half-dozen carts were being loaded with bundles of the poorest clothes and rags. One man after another brought his things; women and children lounged about, and the men gathered together in small groups, chattering about the work, their hopes, and their fears. For these men *fear*. They have heard of the deceit practised upon those who have preceded them and of their sufferings. Each man carried a tin box containing stale bread and pieces of loathsome cheese and sausage, his provision for the journey. Some had invested whatever money they had in buying more of such food, because, as they told me, everything was so much dearer at the contractor's store. The sausage, for instance, which, rotten as it was, cost them four cents a pound in New York was sold for twenty cents a pound at the place of their work. Presently our conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the contractor; the groups dissolved, the men took leave of their wives and friends, kissed once more their children, and made a rush for the carts. Then the train started for the railroad station, where the laborers were to be taken to their unknown destination. Of course, this destination and the wages and the nature of the work have been agreed upon in some informal way. But the contract is a sham. I do not believe there is a single instance in which a contract was honestly fulfilled

by the contractor. When we think of law-breakers we instinctively refer to the lowest classes. But the contractors are systematic law-breakers. As a rule, the laborer is faithful to the letter of his engagement, even when he feels wronged or deceived.

The contractor is sure to depart from the terms of the contract either as to wages, or hours of labor, or the very nature of the work. Contractors have been known to promise employment, to pocket their fees, and then to lead the men to lonely places and abandon them. Some employment agencies agree with the employers that the men shall be dismissed under pretext after a fortnight or two of work, in order that the agents may receive new fees from fresh recruits. As a rule, however, the men obtain more work than they want or can stand. The contractor, who has acted thus far as an employment agent, now assumes his real functions. Him alone the employer (a railroad or some other company) recognizes, and all wages are paid to him. He curtails these for his own benefit, first by ten or twenty per cent or more, and he retains another portion to reimburse himself for the money he has spent for railway fares and other items. Wages are generally paid at the end of the second fortnight; the first fortnight they remain unpaid till the end of the work, in guarantee of the fulfilment of the contract by the laborer. Meanwhile the men have to live, and to obtain food they increase their debt with the contractor, who keeps a "pluck-me store," where the laborers are bound to purchase all their provisions, inclusive of the straw on which they sleep. The prices charged are from twenty-five to one hundred per cent and upward above the cost of the goods to the seller, and the quality is as bad as the price is high. At sunset the work ceases and the men retire to a shanty, very much like the steerage of a third-class emigrant ship, the men being packed together in unclean and narrow berths. The shanty is no shelter from wind or rain. Only recently the shanty where the Chicago National Gas-Pipe Company huddled its Italian workmen, near Logansport, Ind., was blown down by a wind-storm and several men were killed. Neither the number nor the names of the dead were known, as Italian laborers are designated only by figures.

The brutality of the contractors toward their subjects baffles description. The contractor is a strongly-built, powerful man; he has acquired the habit of command, is well armed, protected by the authorities, supported by such of his employees as he chooses to favor, and, sad to say, by the people, who are hostile to the laborers. He

often keeps guards armed with Winchester rifles to prevent his men from running away. His power has the essential characteristics of a government. He fines his men and beats and punishes them for any attempted resistance to his self-constituted authority. On Sunday he may either force them to attend church service or keep them at work. I have been told of contractors who taxed their men to make birthday presents to their wives. A feudal lord would not have expected more from his vassals.

There are numerous cases where the contractor objects to paying wages. One day last July, as I was walking in King's Bridge, near New York City, I met two laborers loitering in the rear of their shanty. They were evidently afraid to talk, and it was with much difficulty that I learned from them that they were the only members of a gang of about two hundred who had dared to strike work, because their contractor had employed them for three months without paying them. I made my way to the shanty and entered into conversation with a woman who was engaged in cooking. She told me, with tears, that she had saved a little money and had invested it in feeding the men. "Now, if the contractor will not pay us," she said, "I shall be ruined." I denounced the outrage in the Italian press of New York, but ineffectually. A few days later some Italians who worked in a locality near Deal Lake, New Jersey, failing to receive their wages, captured the contractor and shut him up in the shanty, where he remained a prisoner until the county sheriff came with a *posse* to his rescue. I could mention a half-dozen more such cases, all recent. The latest came to my knowledge in Cleveland, Ohio. A contractor had run away with the money, and neither the press nor an attorney employed by the men succeeded in compelling the company which employed him to pay the workmen. Old laborers have the same tale to tell. Nearly all have the same experience. Every one will grant that robbing a poor man of his well-earned wages is a shameful crime; yet in no instance, to my knowledge, has a contractor been made to suffer for his fraud. He generally disappears for a few days and starts again in another place. In this way many, no doubt, have been enriched.

But this is not the worst form of outrage of which contractors are guilty. There have been cases where Italian laborers have suffered actual slavery, and in trying to escape have been fired upon by the guards and murdered, as happened not long ago in the Adirondacks. A similar case was told to me by one of the victims. He said:

"We started from New York on November 3, 1891, under the guidance of two bosses. We had been told we should go to Connecticut to work on a railroad and earn one dollar and seventy-five cents per day. We were taken, instead, to South Carolina, first to a place called Lambs (?) and then after a month or so to the 'Tom Tom' sulphate mines. The railroad fare was eight dollars and eighty-five cents; this sum, as well as the price of our tools, nearly three dollars, we owed the bosses. We were received by an armed guard, which kept constant watch over us, accompanying us every morning from the barracks to the mines and at night again from the work to our shanty. . . . Part of our pay went toward the extinction of our debt; the rest was spent for as much food as we could get at the 'pluck-me' store. We got only so much as would keep us from starvation. Things cost us more than twice or three times their regular price. Our daily fare was coffee and bread for breakfast, rice with lard or soup at dinner-time, and cheese or sausage for supper. Yet we were not able to pay off our debt; so after a while we were given only bread, and with this only to sustain us we had to go through our daily work. By and by we became exhausted, and some of us got sick. Then we decided to try, at the risk of our lives, to escape. Some of us ran away, eluding the guards. After a run of an hour I was exhausted and decided to stay for the night in the woods. We were, however, soon surprised by the appearance of the bosses and two guards. They thrust guns in our faces and ordered us to return to work or they would shoot us down. We answered that we would rather die than resume our former life in the mine. The bosses then sent for two black policemen, who insisted that we should follow them. We went before a judge, who was sitting in a bar-room. The judge asked if there was any written contract, and when he heard that there wasn't, said he would let us go free. But the bosses, the policemen, and the judge then held a short consultation, and the result was that the bosses paid some money (I believe it was forty-five dollars), the policemen put the manacles on our wrists, and we were marched off. At last, on April 1, we were all dismissed on account of the hot weather. My comrades took the train for New York. I had only one dollar, and with this, not knowing either the country or the language, I had to walk to New York. After forty-two days I arrived in the city utterly exhausted."

Very little capital is required to establish an Italian bank in New York. One has to rent a small place and advertise that money is received on deposit or for remittance to Italy. The illiterate laborer, who is at work during the week when the post-office is opened and cannot speak English, has no choice but to go to the banker on Sunday if he wishes to send a small sum to his wife and children who are starving in his native village of Calabria or Basilicata. The laborer brings dollars and the banker pays Italian *lire;* the *aggio* on the exchange, four or four and one-half per cent, as it may be, is appropriated by the banker to himself. After a few weeks, the laborer calls to inquire whether the receipt of the money has been acknowledged. The banker receives him roughly and tells him, "The letter

from Italy has not arrived yet." In spite of such a reception, nay, because of it, the confidence of the laborer in his banker increases. The banker is a *signore* from his own native province (there are as many banks in Mulberry Street as there are Italian provinces) and the laborer has an hereditary respect for him. Now he has saved a little money and brings it to the banker, foregoing any interest on it. Can he do otherwise? Can he take his savings with him? "He who keeps money on himself has death near him," a laborer once said to me. No wonder that murder may be resorted to as means to acquire it.

As a result of such circumstances the money flows to the bankers. The banker appropriates to his personal and speculative uses nine-tenths of every deposit, one-tenth being sufficient to meet eventual demands for reimbursement. The total amount of money so acquired by the Italian bankers of New York has been estimated by a trustworthy man (himself a banker) to be one million five hundred dollars. Yet there are bankers who are not satisfied with nine-tenths and contrive to get all the money of their customers. The Italian bankers, besides conducting a banking business, sell passenger tickets to and from Europe, exchange money, transact business as public notaries and attorneys, and deal in jewels and other commodities, regulating prices according to the ignorance and simplicity of their customers.

Some day a bank does not open. The neighbors begin to comment on the fact, the passers-by stop before the premises. A man complains that he has one hundred dollars in the bank. A new-comer has intrusted to it double that amount. The number of creditors increases at every moment; but the bank remains closed and the crowd becomes excited. The women cry, the men swear and make threats. At nightfall they all leave the place. Next morning or the following day it is announced that the banker has crossed the frontier to Canada, carrying with him the product of years of toil of hundreds of laborers.

There is one more device by which the people are fleeced—the lottery. This is a direct importation from Italy, a curious imitation of a governmental institution. Our home government extorts yearly more than sixty million *lire* from the poor, whom it promises to enrich. In Italy we look on the lottery as a heinous tax on distress and despair. Yet our lottery takes place only once a week. In New York people bet twice a day. In Italy five numbers are extracted out of ninety. Here twenty-four or twenty-six are extracted out of seventy. Both the chances and the temptation are greater than in Italy. In

both countries the bet is made either on a single number or on a combination of two, three, etc. To take the simplest example: for one dollar you bet a single number; the winner receives two dollars, his own and one more as premium. In this case the chances of the individual bettor are to those of the banker as twenty-four to forty-six or as twenty-six to forty-four. The transaction is made in the rear of a shop, the real character of which is hardly disguised by a show-window simulating commerce. At every corner of Mulberry and the neighboring streets there is a betting-place bringing on an average a net revenue of two hundred dollars per day. The police know these places, and I have seen an officer of the law openly joining in its violation. The sum wagered is recorded on a piece of paper, payments are made regularly, and no one seems to doubt that the transaction is *bona fide*, although it does not take place publicly and solemnly as in Italy, and no one seems to know where and how it is done.

There are days of great excitement for the multitude of habitual bettors, and on dull days ingenious devices are tried, to kindle the enthusiasm and revive the faith in fortune. Printed books may be consulted about the destinies of numbers and their relation to the daily events of life, and ready-made combinations meet every event. The betting-places belong to individual bankers, who, however, have united in a mutual society to insure themselves against loss. The banker cannot lose money, neither is he in danger of arrest, as he never appears at the office, and all the business is transacted by his employees, who eventually are the scapegoats.

At best, the workman, after years of hard labor, saves just enough money to purchase his return ticket, or possibly a hundred dollars more to pay off the debts contracted in his absence by his family, or to buy up the small farm which was foreclosed by the government because he failed to pay the land tax. The boss or contractor, the hotel-keeper, the saloon-keeper, and the banker accumulate fortunes and buy villas or palaces in their native towns, whither they eventually return after the time has passed when their sentence to punishment is no longer valid, covered with all the honor and glory accruing from the possession of wealth.

S. MERLINO.