

The Supreme Tragedy **(February 10, 1912)**

It is being enacted continuously and all around us. But most of us are blind and cannot see it, and our hearts are dead and cannot feel it.

The agony of our fellow beings, the poverty, suffering, and despair which have wrung all the joy out of their lives and left them hopeless to perish as if they were in a desert waste — these constitute the supreme tragedy that is being enacted before our twentieth century civilization.

We sit at breakfast and we are content if we have enough to satisfy our appetite. Across the way there may be a child dying of starvation. This is not our concern, or if it is, we may in our Christian charity that “surpasseth understanding”¹ organize a charity ball or a rummage sale for its relief.

If we were civilized, if we were really human beings, we would feel the hunger pangs of our fellow men and women and little children, even if we could not see them, and the food we eat while they are starving would choke us, and the great coats we wear while they are shivering would sear us to the very marrow of our bones.

But we are not civilized and human; we are capitalized and inhuman.

We have scarcely emerged from the caves and jungles. We have lost some of the savage instincts of our antecedents, but we have not replaced them with humane and generous impulses.

The individualism in which we were begotten and under which we grew to maturity has no ethical standard above its own belly line. It has developed the beak and claw, the fang and hoof, and not the soul and conscience of men, and the extent of their ambition to lord it over others with arrogant, heartless self-conceit, and glut their own low and vulgar appetites.

Yesterday morning I read in the papers of a little girl of twelve who had attempted suicide by throwing herself into a canal after she had been looking all day for work and was denied; and faint from hunger and without a friend in the world, she sought to end it all, this mere child, scared out of her babyhood, by destroying herself.

Just think of that, if you can, and see that child as you must, and then think of her as your own! What now of a civilization in which this monstrous crime against a child is not only of common occurrence, but scarcely provokes a passing thought!

The brutal misdeed of some poor black man lashes society into a perfect tempest of virtuous (?) indignation, but this same complacent Christian society can witness the starving of little children without the quiver of one of its painted eyelashes.

This morning in my own neighborhood, within a rod or two of where I was born and have lived all my days, a day laborer, long in enforced idleness through inability to find work, too meek to beg or steal, administered poison to his wife and babe, and then to himself. The neighbors found the poor woman half covered with a few rags and not a bit of fuel nor a morsel of food in the miserable den in which not an animal would have remained unless it was chained there.

I feel, and keenly feel, the humiliation and disgrace of this horrible social crime. I feel at least my full share for the awful responsibility, and it is with difficulty that I can restrain myself in giving utterance to my feelings.

The earth is ample and the fullness and fatness thereof sufficient for all the children of men, and that we should be so steeped in our sodden individualism and so dead to all the humanities that we should sit complacently by while the social iniquities and crimes are being perpetrated all about us is the utter denial of any claim we may have the effrontery to make that we are civilized human beings.

When I see and hear and read of these terrible happenings and then note in the press dispatches that a royal duke and a cardinal of the church of Christ are entertained by a plutocrat in such extreme luxury and extravagance that it defies description, and that over their sparkling goblets of wine they congratulate the host upon the "greatness and glory and prosperity of the country," all the drops of blood in my veins boil with revolutionary indignation.

Could I give any stronger reasons for being a socialist and in the name of socialism demanding in absolutely uncompromising terms the overthrow of capitalist misrule, under which the supreme tragedy is continuous, and the recreation of the whole social fabric upon a basis of mutualism, humanity, and brotherly love?

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¹ The phrase "surpasseth understanding" does not occur in the King James Bible, but was used in various Christian contexts during the nineteenth century, most commonly in regards to the incomprehensible characteristics attributed to heaven.