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# Equality's Struggles for An Existence

by G.E. Pelton

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In our anniversary edition of *IF* [*Industrial Freedom*] of Nov. 12th, 1898, I wrote a short sketch giving brief and cursory history of the BCC [Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth] and Equality up till the arrival of N.W. Lermond and other members of the National Board upon the scene, which event transpired during the month of March 1898.

A large number of pioneers came on and joined the colony during the months of March and April, '98, and the customary struggle between Socialism and Individualism which always occurs within every cooperative colony, association, or union of any kind began in dead earnest.

Right here will take occasion to remark that we Equalityites do not seek to hide the disagreeable fact that we have had a fair share of the trials and tribulations that almost invariably befall those who have the temerity to quit the beaten path trodden by the multitude and strike out boldly for themselves on a shortcut across lots towards a higher civilization.

The mainspring of all our troubles has been, as usual, the childish weakness of human nature, intensified by our poverty. Had we been made, altogether, of the stern stuff that is the composition of ideal pioneers most of our foolish troubles might have been averted, but, as a rule it was, except in theory, the average man that came to the colony, and it is a notorious fact that the average man is incapable of reason to any appreciable extent.

Our first serious trouble occurred over a disagreement with the National Board over the question of establishing new colonies, the Board desiring to go ahead and attempt the same without waiting developments at Equality, while the colonists contended that it was

unwise and dangerous considering the straitened condition of our finances to undertake the founding of other colonies until Equality had become nearly or quite self-supporting, and that to divert any portion of our energies to such a purpose would endanger the success of the whole movement, and almost surely would cause a breakdown that would leave us without any colony at all.

This controversy lasted nearly three months, and was finally settled by granting perfect autonomy to the colony in everything except in the holding of land titles, and the payment of monthly dues to the BCC.

The autonomy agreement left the National Board free to establish all the new colonies possible without protest from the colonists at Equality.

Aside from the above disagreement there has been nothing that seriously threatened the existence of the colony. Our troubles have been mainly of the minor order, but exceedingly irritating in their nature, and almost continual in their recurrence.

The underlying cause has been the indisputable fact that as socialists most of us were "pulled before we were ripe." We thought we had reduced socialism to a science before we had mastered the alphabet thereof. And furthermore we did not analyze our own natures to discover how much of the old competitive, murderous, individualistic spite yet lingered therein. A mistake, but a very common one.

The outcroppings of this spirit in Equality have been more comical than tragical in their manifestations, and the variations thereof have been as numerous as the persons affected.

One extremely prominent manifestation has been on the part of many a complete failure to realize the very simple fact that we are working for ourselves. The predominating thought until very recently seemed to be that the colony was a separate and distinct entity of which we individually were not a component part, and with which we had no connection. In fact this idea prevailed to the extent in some cases of a feeling that it was a sacred not-to-be-neglected duty to do anything to beat the colony "allege samee" trust or syndicate.

Of late there has been a remarkable gain in this respect. The word "they" formerly used in speaking of the colony is gradually losing ground and being supplanted by the more socialistic "we."

A few drones got mixed in to the human hive, from time to time, and caused almost no end of trouble. The mere loss of their labor being but a bagatelle compared with the pernicious moral effect their

conduct had upon others who were reasonably industrious under ordinary circumstances but not sufficiently philosophic to bear with the shirkings of others, and at the same time perform their own share of labor.

The result was that at times there was a chronic fear prevalent with a large number that most of the members were not doing their duty, and the amount of time and effort expended in watching one another for fear that the “other feller” wasn’t doing his part would have considerably increased our material wealth had it been applied to productive labor.

Less watching and growling and more working is becoming the order of the day in Equality, and in this connection it is proper to remark that some of those who since going outside have been foremost in denouncing the colony and its business methods were either a dead weight upon us, or worse still, an obstacle to our advancement while within its domain.

Over and over again has Equality been accused of unjustly treating its members, or certain ones of them, but to those familiar with the history thereof it is a fact that in several cases we practiced forbearance until it ceased to be a virtue. As an instance will mention one case where an applicant was admitted with wife and two children and forthwith declared his intention of doing no work except what he pleased, which was very near no work at all, and actually managed to put in between four and five months, until wintered out, before being expelled, although all the labor performed by himself and family during the above time did not exceed in value one month’s labor from one average worker, and the bad moral effect offset the benefits of their work in a ratio of “16:1”.<sup>1</sup> But he got his money back besides an allowance for the few days he labored.

Another bone of contention has been over members going out to work for themselves individually, failing to realize that those who remained behind were working for them in their absence. This matter is, however, in a fair way to being remedied, a better understanding having come about through frequent discussion of the subject.

Most our our people here at present realize to a greater or less extent that they are a part of the colony, and that its failure through any

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<sup>1</sup> This is a play upon the silver-to-gold ratio advocated by “Free Silver” populists, who advocated an expansion of the money supply by unlimited coinage of the white metal at this very favorable ratio to gold.

fault of the colonists would stamp each colonist as an individual failure also.

Brighter days are slowly dawning for the colony through the natural, gradual growth of the cooperative spirit among the people, and when that spirit is firmly implanted in each breast success will be attained and not before. "A house divided against itself can not stand."

A word regarding those who have invested capital and labor in the enterprise, and then after a time withdrew. At first sight it looks as though unless their investment was returned, such persons were defrauded. But there is another side to the story. Does any sane person suppose that any of us would have undertaken the work had we not supposed that, at least, the greater part of those joining intended to stay with the proposition and "fight her through?" There was a contract implied when we banded together, that we would support one another in carrying the load, and every useful member that dropped out left the burden that much heavier on the remainder. Had most of us realized that so many of our comrades would have failed us, we would have stayed where we came from and not have made the sacrifices we did in breaking up our homes and coming here.

The worst part of this dropping out business is the gratification it gives the enemies of Socialism who are continually encouraged in believing that they scent another "socialistic fizzle." Someone has to stick and "stand the gaff" or fizzle it would be, and we cannot afford any more such. They are becoming monotonous, and the plea can very plausibly be raised that if we make a fizzle of colony socialism, we would do the same in an attempt to establish state socialism, and we cannot controvert that statement.

The best way is to make a success of the smaller enterprise and tackle the larger as we come to it.

Now don't understand that I am advocating that people remain within the colony after becoming dissatisfied with their associates. Not by any means, for a lot of inharmonious, disgruntled people will soon create a "hell upon earth" for each other, and had better separate. The point I wish to make is that after coming in and leading the colony to believe that they can be depended upon to carry along the proposition it is rather hard to press the repayment of their fee on leaving, especially after they themselves have helped invest the capital in such a manner that it cannot be reached perhaps for years, being

generally expended making permanent improvements or maintenance during the first two or three years of pioneer life.

We should at least have the use of the invested capital for a reasonable length of time to offset the damage done by withdrawals, for I repeat again that we should not have made this venture, and run the risk of making ridiculous the sacred cause of socialism, to say nothing of breaking up and losing our individual homes had we not believed that most of our comrades would have proven to be thoroughbred bulldogs and stayed with us to the bitter end.

One great factor in bringing disappointment to many pioneers has been the fact that through reading Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and other idealistic works many have impressed upon their minds a beautiful picture of socialism that cannot possibly be realized short of National or International Socialism and coming to a rough backward colony with the usual repulsive surroundings the reaction is too great, and not possessing the necessary stamina to endure and assist in building up the ideal, gloom, homesickness, tears, reproaches, etc., naturally follow, and then comes departure, and perhaps a statement that Equality is a "fraud," and they have been "deceived."

Some expect \$10,000 conditions for a \$100 investment.

Some of our best people have left us for various reasons who were not at all dissatisfied with the people here. A number would have liked to remain but members of their families would not.

A colony is certainly a grand school for the study of human nature. Though seems to flow in waves, and gets in its work so suddenly that it is hard keeping track of it. You will meet a man at one moment and he will seem supremely happy, and in a short time without apparent provocation his expression will change to that of a lost soul or a walking cemetery.

Readers, you have all probably read or heard the statement that we are deceiving the people in regard to conditions here by painting them too rosy a hue. So if we have erred in that respect (which I don't believe), I will tell you who I, as an individual (not officially speaking), think should come to Equality.

The man or woman who is willing to work, who is not too jealous for fear that they will do more than their associates, are willing to go ahead and set a good example instead of waiting for the other fellow to do it, can say "we" instead of "they," who realizes that they are working for themselves, who believe thoroughly in cooperation whether working inside or outside the colony, and can see that while

working on the outside during the busy part of the year that the fellow on the inside is working for them, who has bulldog tenacity sufficient to bear the hard knocks and disagreeable experiences of this experimental proposition with equanimity, such a man or woman will do to come, but it is better that there should be no rush, for it is not easy to assimilate too many different natures all at once off the reel.

For the thousandth time we tell the world that we are “pioneering” and expect to be for two or three years yet, and will reiterate it upon the resurrection. We want it well understood so that we will not get thronged with a class of people who will serve only as a dead weight, dishearten us with their childish complaint, and so keep us pioneering that much longer.

One class who have left I have hardly touched upon. There have been a number here who were first class workers and willing cooperators but had not the requisite patience and self-control to put up with the weaknesses of others until through the process of natural selection they either reformed or squeezed themselves out.

And I must admit that it has been tough at times.

This is a rather gloomy picture that I have been painting, but is not the whole world a gloomy picture under the competitive system? And how can we expect much better, especially at first, in a colony which is under the same system and subject to nearly the same exploitation as is the individual?

The question may very pertinently be asked here, of what use then is a colony? Have not the time or space here to answer that question in full, may try to do so in some subsequent article, but will content myself for the moment with stating that as means to an end, a school of experience, and a center of agitation a colony is invaluable, in my opinion.

Readers, don't think for a moment that I am blaming our comrades who have left us. Far from it. Everyone has to act according to the way they are geared up until through experience they can change the gearing. It is all right anyway. “All is Good.”

*G.E. Pelton.*

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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