

Agriculture and National Life*

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EVEN thoughtful business men do not always realize the extent to which the products of the soil enter into the development of commerce and industry, and affect even such interests as banking. All the food of the world and a very large proportion of the raw materials for manufacturing come from the soil. The farmers, because of their numbers, must necessarily form the largest class of consumers of manufactured products. In many other ways the farmers in any country constitute the economic strength of the nation; the efficiency and welfare of soil workers, therefore, should be a matter of deep concern to business men.

Fortunately, during recent years business men have evinced a new interest in agriculture itself, and to some extent in the welfare of the farmers. Germany, years before the war, adopted a definite policy of assisting agriculture. England has done less practically than Germany, but her publicists have recognized the serious features of the steady decline of her agriculture as compared with her other industries. America for decades was dominantly agricultural, and for a time the development of her industries and the growth of her cities obscured her agricultural problems in the minds of business men. But to-day the business men of America are taking a keener and more intelligent interest in agriculture than they have ever done before. Now, the reasons for this new interest in agriculture on the part of business men in many parts of the world are an interesting commentary upon the significant relationships of agriculture and national life.

In the first place, it indicates the emergence of the food problem as a question of the first rank. Probably the war, more than any one factor, is responsible for this new emphasis because during the war the need for food became one of the most pressing problems of responsible statesmen. But in most industrial countries, even before the war, there was a growing concern on the part of workers, as well as the employers of labor, relative to the supply and cost of food. It is generally agreed that the largest single item in the cost of manufacture is labor, and that the largest single item in the expenditure of the laborer is for food. Since the war, and with the increasing cost of food, this problem has come to the very front in nearly every country. So we now have a world food-problem. The question of the world's demand for food and the world's prospective supply of food constitute an item of major importance, both in national and international life.

Moreover, there has been a growing realization of the importance of the farming group, of the significance of farmers as human factors in national development. The farmers have to provide the food, and the question as to whether they are using the land to the best advantage to the nation for this purpose, as well as getting a reasonable reward for themselves is a matter of increasing importance. And, too, there is a growing consideration on the part of business men of the

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extent to which manufacturers, for example, are dependent for their raw materials upon the farmers of the world. The farmers not only supply all the food of the world, but a very large share of the raw materials that enter into manufactures are grown from the soil. Even the materials of shelter are largely soil grown. Thus, the manufacturing interests, the transportation interests, the commercial and mercantile interests, and even the banking interests, are taking more and more into account what the farmers are doing or failing to do.

But, as trade develops, especially international trade, the importance of farmers as consumers of products is being recognized. For example, it has been stated that the farmers of the United States are the largest buyers of automobiles in that country, and it has even been asserted that they use directly and indirectly more than half the steel produced in the United States. The farmers constitute the overwhelming majority of the people of the world, and, if they are reasonably prosperous, their consumption of goods will form one of the great outlets of industry.

In fine, farming is to-day the world's biggest business. When measured by its importance to other industries, and to the people of the cities, as well as in terms of money value and product, agriculture is seem to be vital to all other business.

The recent restiveness of farmers is another reason why business men are taking account of the farmers' interests. In the United States to-day the farmers have the largest and most powerful organization they have ever had. In the United States Senate there is a bloc of more than one-fifth of the membership of the Senate pledged to legislation for the farmers' interests, and a similar influential group in the House of Representatives. A recent writer of distinction has stated that for a generation to come, in his judgment, the fate of Europe is in the hands of her peasants. There met in Paris last summer the "Green Internationale," an organization of peasants, radical in character and representing a determination on the part of peasants to assert themselves.

There are thoughtful statesmen who are recognizing another factor in the relationship of agriculture and national life, and that is the part which farmers must play in the development of democracy. The most acute questions that trouble society arise under modern conditions in the cities and in industry. But, as democracy develops and the people are depended upon to determine their own destinies, the farmers will play their part, partly because they are so numerous, and partly because of the fundamental character of their contribution to society. It may be even said that no country can become fully democratic unless its farmers are democratized, unless the rural folk have the intelligence and the organization and the economic capacity to take their full place in the national democratic life.

Sometimes the question has been asked:—What can business men do to help the farmer? The first thing they need to do is to understand the farmer and his problems, and the relationship of the farmer to the national life, and of course now, to international affairs. This intelligent understanding will go a long way toward bringing the farmers and other groups on to a common platform of interests. Doubtless, also, there are specific contributions which can be made by particular groups. For example, in the United States to-day, not only the American Bankers' Association, but more than two-thirds of the state bankers' associations have committee on

agriculture. There is a paper published called "The Banker Farmer," in which the inter-relations of banking and farming are recognized and discussed. The need of special forms of credit for the farmers has been laid before the bankers. As a matter of fact, a long list of helpful things has been done by these bankers' associations on behalf of the farmers of America. The business men can help the farmer by encouraging rather than discouraging business cooperation; by treating the farmer justly and fairly instead of exploiting him.

It is very interesting for a newcomer to go about China and to try to form conclusions relative to Chinese farming. Of course, in a four months' stay one cannot pass final judgment, but some observations may be ventured.

The permanence of China, her wonderful record of persistent national vitality, must be due in part to her farmers, who not only have provided the food for a rapidly increasing population, but have maintained the fertility of the soil of China for all these centuries. No other large country in the world has been cultivated for so long a period. It is a remarkable achievement, and the credit belongs to the Chinese farmer. It is not surprising that for ages the farmer in China stood next to the scholar in importance.

Apparently, however, there is no large interest on the part of business men in China in what the farmer is doing or is likely to do, or is likely to fail to do, for the country. One might suggest that there be means developed by which the business men of China will have an opportunity to study and discuss the questions that may arise in the near future concerning the relation of the Chinese farmer to the development of Chinese industry, transportation, domestic commerce, and international trade.

It is clear that the Chinese farmer is a very skilled worker, and yet there are real problems in Chinese agriculture. Seed selection, the improvement of varieties of plants and animals, in some places better methods of cultivation, protection against plant and animal diseases and pests, are all pressing questions. And then there are such gigantic problems as flood-prevention, irrigation, drainage, and afforestation—all of prime consequence to China.

There is no doubt whatever about the significance of agriculture in the China of the past, and it is almost as clear that agriculture must be reckoned with in the future national life of China; and it should begin to have careful attention from and the benefit of the help of the business men of China.