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[p. 4d]

‘The Tatler on the Persistence of Poverty.’

There was in the “Daily Chronicle” of Tuesday a powerful and trenchant letter over the signature of Alfred Russel Wallace—a man whose name carries weight, and whose arguments, in whatever connection they are made, are entitled to the greatest respect. Dr. Wallace undertakes the task of proving the assertion that the official statistics of pauperism are not to be relied upon as a basis of calculation in the Problem of the Poor. The interpretation of the “actual facts” which he sets against the comfortable optimism of those accustomed to rely upon the figures of official pauperism are grave indeed:

In view of the two classes of facts now briefly summarised, viz.—the great and continuous increase of private charity, resulting in a total aggregate probably not inferior to that of official pauperism, and the coincident increase of deaths in workhouses and by suicide—facts perfectly well known to all who care to know them—it is, in my judgment, little less than criminal to set forth with all the weight of authority the decrease in Official Pauperism as indicating a diminution of poverty and a real amelioration of the condition of the whole people. The actual facts, if they could be brought home to the public mind, would serve as a veritable “handwriting on the wall” denouncing the rottenness of our whole social system.

The ramifications of this great Sphinx riddle of the time, the Problem of the Poor, are wider than official statistics allow. This, it may be admitted, is no new discovery, but it is a discovery whose tremendous significance has not yet dawned upon the comfortable classes of the nation who will have the problem to face. Some day the masses of the poor will come to their awakening. Some day those who have long suffered in silence, who have hid their poverty within the four corners of their own dwellings, will join hands in desperation with those who shout and threaten. No one who has given a moment’s thought to a condition of things presented by ever-widening circles of poverty in a country the richest in the world will insult his intelligence by predicting its permanence. It cannot last for ever; it cannot last even for long. The yeast of discontent is working among the strata of society where destitution holds her grim levee, and draws human souls into the ante-chamber of disease and death.

I am not enamoured of Socialism as it is preached by many of the gossellers of to-day. Their incompetency to lead is not more evident than the impracticability of their methods. But it would be mental atrophy to refuse to see in them something more than they are, and much beyond what they appear to represent. They stand, in a dim and uncertain light maybe, but still they stand for a peaceful and orderly social revolution big with the promise of better things. As yet they are but a threatening and even fuming voice, a cult of bitter-tongued, full-blooded, purposeful enthusiasts with a mission. But they are other than mere dreamers of dreams and seers of visions. They speak the message of the poor of these times; they give utterance to thoughts which are rankling in the hearts of the unofficial and uncatalogued men and women who, sleeping or waking, are confronted by the gaunt spectre of Want. A strange mixture of the prophet and the swash-buckler the modern socialist leader is. But he is not evanescent. He has come to stay, for he is the natural and inevitable product of the social evolution which in a short space will reveal the dawn of a great emancipation day for the poor.

The Socialist ferment is eloquent of coming change in our manner of approaching the problem of the poor. We in England have long ago got past the brutal indifference of the Abbe Foulon who told the starving people of France that as they had nothing else to eat, they might eat grass. Nor can we pretend to the blissful ignorance of the Royal lady who said, when the hungry and desperate mob broke into the courtyard of Versailles, "Why do they cry for bread? If they have no bread, why don't they eat cake?" Wealth in this country knows enough of Poverty, for he may see her in rags any hour of the day or night within easy walking distance of his own door, to understand that neither Charity nor poor law can lift her permanently out of her misery. The problem is not to be tinkered at, as one tinkers at an old pan. Tinkering can only delay that large statesmanlike solution which is as inevitable as the rising of tomorrow's sun; it can only add new complications and new dangers to the complicated and dangerous elements of which it is composed. No ship was ever kept off the rocks by scraping her masts, or giving another coat of paint to her figure-head. The waves of the Atlantic were never yet swept back by a mop. And impotent too must be the blind fatuous policy which seeks when and if it seeks at all, a solution to the problem of the poor in patchwork.

It is a maxim of law that there is no wrong without a remedy. And what applies in law ought, and does, and must apply in social economics. And decry them how we will, the Socialist sees, and the poor feel, what our statesmen will not see, and what they cannot feel. They see as Dr. Wallace puts it, that "the labour expended each year, if properly applied and organised, would not only provide necessaries and comforts for all, but would also allow of ample leisure and a full rational enjoyment of life; and they are convinced that it is not beyond the wit of man to bring about this result." But, on the other hand, the apostles of the New Social Spirit, the leaders who find their inspiration in the acute social agonies of the poor, give no signs that they possess those statesmanlike qualities which their mission demands. They have yet to gain ballast, as they have to gain that mental stability and equipoise which alone can make the work they have to do of practical value. Mr. Keir Hardie with all his and with all his bitterness, and with all his banging of the personal drum has nothing to propose except a system of state charity. All such schemes as this, as the "Daily Chronicle" pertinently remarks, "merely extend the area of pauperism without adding one penny to the products of the country," and if they were realised "we should be on the way to be- [p. 4e] come like the people who earned a precarious living by taking in each other's washing."

But Mr. Keir Hardie notwithstanding, the wit of man will yet devise a solution, because ere long the problem will demand a "must" as well as an "ought." Meantime the social focus will become better adjusted as the problem becomes more and more pressing. What society means at the moment is that the devil make take the hindmost. The glaring and brutal injustice of the whole edifice is there. Charity covers a multitude of sins, but it does not cover this one. The poorest and the weakest are beaten in the struggle for existence by the wealthiest and the strongest. That this is the reflection of the mirror of "nature red in tooth and claw" may be admitted, but the ethical man, who has moulded physical nature to his needs, has within him the "power and potency" of moulding that society of which he is a part to higher ethical ends than he has as yet attempted to do. And one of these higher ethical ends must and will be that of a more perfected justice as between the rich and the poor, and which will involve, not an equal sub-division of wealth, not the robbery of those who have for the advantage of those who have not, but a readjustment of the wheels and cranks and levers by means of which wealth is produced. The solution is not an equality of product, but an equality of opportunity. A man is entitled to become as rich as Cræsus so long as in the getting of his wealth he is not taking wealth from others, or monopolising the

opportunities of others to get it. That which a man has made by toil of hand or brain is his as against the world, and it is robbery to take it, whether it amount to millions or to a single pair of boots. But while there are many who have more wealth than they need, many more know not where to look for the bare means of living, and yet day after day, year in and year out, a tremendous waste of productive forces is observable. We can produce more wealth. Hundreds of acres of land are lying idle. Thousands of able-bodied men are seeking employment. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of English capital are awaiting the time when they can be properly utilized. Thousands of people are wanting things which they cannot purchase, and yet the markets are full of those things. The persistence of poverty! Yes, poverty persists because we turn our faces away from the facts, and not because we have no knowledge of them.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2017.