

ARTICLE VII.

THE SOCIAL FAILURE OF THE CITY.

BY MRS. EMMA WINNER ROGERS.

A FRENCH novelist has called our modern civilization a "varnished barbarism," and we recognize the truth of this most when we know intimately the great cities. The barbarian hordes within their boundaries, of various tongues and temperaments and customs; the struggle for life and place; the primitive methods of lying, stealing, and killing confirm one's impression that civilization has not struck much below the surface as yet. One can talk of the city only in paradoxes, and it has been well described as the birthplace of civilization and the deathplace of the human race. But for the constant influx of sound and sane humanity from the hamlet and the country, physical and moral degeneracy would overtake the city in a few generations.

Potent influences both for good and for evil center in the city; pure and unselfish types of character develop side by side with debased and sordid types. Here we find the widest difference in conditions. Immense wealth and abject poverty, broad culture and dense ignorance, unbounded opportunity and grinding deprivation, mark the social conditions of the dwellers in cities and make the problem of the city the delight and the despair of the student of society. Woodrow Wilson in the *Atlantic Monthly*, writing of the fact that life in big cities is actually inhumane in its rush and grasping turmoil, asks: "Why should not the city seem infinitely *more* human than the hamlet? Why should not human traits the more abound where hu-

man beings teem millions strong?" And he replies to this very pertinently: "Because the city curtails man of his wholeness, specializes him, quickens some powers, stunts others. . . . Men have indeed written like human beings," he says, "in the midst of great cities, but not often when they have shared the city's characteristic life. . . . There are not many places that belong to a city's life to which you can 'invite your soul.' Its haste, its preoccupations, its anxieties, its rushing noise as of men driven, its ringing cries, distract you. It offers no quiet for reflection; it permits no retirement to any who share its life. It is a place of little tasks, of narrowed functions, of aggregate and not of individual strength."¹

It is doubtful if the conditions of life in our large cities will permit the development of a great literature, a great art, or great character. These grow where the clamor of trade and labor do not drown out the voices of God and nature and humanity. A certain serenity, a sufficient leisure for vision and human fellowship, contact with beauty and goodness, are in some measure the conditions in which the highest human achievement and development occur. Silver and gold and houses and lands can be won in the hasting and wasting conflicts of the modern city. Wonderful piles of brick and mortar and iron rise toward the sky, and every device of skill and energy on the material side of life make up the environment of the dwellers in our great cities. Only the man himself is dwarfed amid this superb development of material things. "The men we see are whipped through the world," as Emerson tells us: they are harried, wrinkled, anxious; they all seem the hacks of some invisible riders, . . . there are no divine persons with us, and the multitude do not hasten to be divine."²

¹ Art. "On Being Human," *Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1897.

² Emerson's *Essays, Domestic Life*, p. 103.

If the city fails to develop the highest and best in men of culture and leisure, it fails still more grievously to promote the physical and moral welfare of the common man, whose kind make up the great mass of urban dwellers. While all the citizens are directly or indirectly affected by the social conditions in the city, it is the poor, and the working-classes so called, who are the helpless victims of these conditions. And these classes are estimated to constitute from one-half to three-fourths of the population of the great cities. It is significant of the immense numbers of workmen in our cities that the last New York City directory is said to have omitted five hundred thousand names of hod-carriers and day-laborers, in order to make the volume of reasonable or usable size.

Bear in mind, then, that in discussing the social failure of the city our contention is that the city, the American city, fails to meet the physical and social needs of the majority of its population—the common people. That it fails also to stimulate and develop the highest type of character and achievement, or to provide an ideal environment for the leisured classes, is of infinitely less account. The excuse is sometimes offered that our cities have grown so rapidly as to make it impossible for their municipal governments to provide adequately for this rapid development. But the growth of American cities is matched by that of European cities and these last have seldom failed to provide for their expanding needs. Berlin has grown more rapidly than New York,¹ and Hamburg than Boston, and twice as fast as Buffalo, and Leipsic than St. Louis or San Francisco. A score of European cities might be named, the growth of which has kept pace or distanced the same number of our most rapidly growing American cities.

“In Europe,” says Albert Shaw, “the honesty and general efficiency of municipal government are not seriously

¹This does not apply to the Greater New York.

in question anywhere. Municipal government from Scotland to Hungary is exalting the bacteriologist and the sanitary inspector, fostering the kindergarten and the technical school, and inquiring anxiously about the housing of the people."¹ Social conditions in the city are largely a direct result of the management or government of the city. They stand related as cause and effect. When we concede, therefore, that municipal government in the United States is a failure, we grant the fact of the social failure of our cities. This failure of municipal government has long since been conceded; and I offer the testimony on this point of a distinguished American and an Englishman of equal note, only to refresh our memories as to the *extent* of the failure of our city governments. Andrew D. White declares: "Without the slightest exaggeration, we may assert that with very few exceptions, the city governments of the United States are the worst in Christendom, the most expensive, the most inefficient, and the most corrupt." And Mr. Bryce says: "There is no denying the fact that the government of cities is the one conspicuous failure of the United States." There is perhaps no severer commentary on our city governments than the fact that they are being obliged to abandon representative government, and to lodge absolute power in the mayor,—an undemocratic and un-American measure, only justified by the fact that the taxpayers find that boards of aldermen cannot be trusted with the government of cities.

It may not be without interest to point out certain specific instances of the social failure of our cities, and later to suggest one or two possible means for bringing a better state of things to pass. Mr. Bryce, in "The American Commonwealth," says: "Two tests of practical efficiency may be applied to the government of a city: What does it provide for the people, and what does it cost the people."² Ap-

¹ Municipal Government in Europe. ² Vol. i. p. 607; 1st ed.

plying these tests to our American cities, we find their governments do not provide an honest, intelligent, or efficient administration. City legislation is often bought and sold; the rights of the people in valuable franchises are generally set aside, and these figure in adding to the private gains of members of the city government. The tax system is unjust and demoralizing.

City and suburban transit has undergone a progressive revolution in recent years, and few are so poor as not to have benefited from this in some measure. But the benefit has been comparatively small in the case of the wage-earning people who make up the majority of the city's population. One of the sights of our great cities is to watch at morning or evening the endless stream of working men and women going to or from their work on the long avenues leading to the poorer quarters of the city. Ten cents a day for street-car fares is too great a tax on a poor man's small earnings, and he must walk to and from his work unless it is very remote. For the same cause few working-people can afford to live in the suburbs. They are tied to the crowded tenement and the slum neighborhood by their poverty, although every interest of the city is opposed to this massing of the poor in the central districts of the city. An efficient city government might readily secure for its working-people special rates, during certain hours, on street and steam cars as one item of compensation in exchange for the many rights and privileges granted the transit companies. But the cities have failed to do this, except in rare instances.

Clean streets and alleys are a sanitary necessity, but in most of the large cities the death-rate, especially of the poorer wards, is frightfully increased by the filthiness of the thoroughfares. New York, fortunately, has reformed in this particular; and with amazing sense and sympathy, began the reform in the tenement districts where it was

most needed. Chicago can still claim to be the dirtiest city in the world; and besides the filth and disorder of its streets and alleys, it permits such unpardonable acts as dumping the garbage of some of the best wards upon vacant lots in the poorest wards. Surely the destruction of the poor is their poverty!

Our cities fail generally to provide the people with pure and abundant water. Philadelphia has for years had a notably bad water-supply, and the water-supply of Chicago is frequently polluted by the sewage of the city, so as to render it unfit for use. The Chicago school-board ordered the water turned off from the public schools five months of this year, until a system of filters should be decided upon, and two hundred and twenty-five thousand children went thirsty for five months while the board wrangled over filter contracts. Public baths and wash-houses are practically unknown in most American cities, and the homes of the poor are only rarely equipped with bathrooms. The report of the government investigation of the Slums of Great Cities issued in 1894 showed that ninety-six per cent of the houses investigated in New York, and eighty-two per cent in Philadelphia, were entirely without bathroom accommodation.¹

The sewerage system and sanitary conditions of houses in tenement districts is no better than the bad street-service and polluted water-supply. Indeed the city's neglect of sanitary and livable conditions in the poorer districts is one of the crying evils of the time. The homes of the people are the chief factors in determining our present and future civilization, and the cities allow the building of insanitary houses, overcrowding on lots and in houses, and insufficient provision for comfortable or even decent home life.

It is a mere grasp-and-greed policy, benefiting no one but the landlord and the dishonest contractor, and it in-

¹ Seventh Special Report of U. S. Commissioner of Labor, 1894-95, p. 95.

creases the expenses of city government continually by filling the hospitals, almshouses, and prisons with the victims of the tenement-house. Our cities are hot-beds of crime as well as of disease, largely because of the wretched and overcrowded homes of the poorer citizens. Jacob Riis of New York, speaking of the origin of the criminal gangs in cities, says: "There is no more cause for wonderment about the 'gang' than there is about the excessive mortality in the homes of the poor. It is the tenement-house setting that accounts for both,"¹ and he quotes the prison statistics of the New York State Reformatory showing that of more than six thousand prisoners reported upon in 1893, over fifty per cent were shown to have come from homes reported as positively bad, while only nine per cent came from good homes,—the rest were put down as fair only.

From the masses huddled into tenements unfit for homes there comes forth a great army of physically and morally degenerate youth each year to prey upon society. Does city government interfere to reform these conditions? Very rarely! The degeneracy of those representative officers to whom the city delegates its responsibility is shown in the reply of the Chicago commissioner of public works to me last winter, on my protest against the building of tenements over the entire lot in all the poorer districts of the city, and my inquiry as to the ordinances respecting this wretched abuse. The commissioner declared that there was no law forbidding it; but if "I were a poor man," he added, "and had a mortgage on my lot, I would build a rear tenement covering the entire lot, law or no law." When reasonable intelligence and common regard for law are thus lacking in the city's high officials, the hope for improved social conditions seems very slight. The chief of police in the same city just recently met with oaths and utter indifference a

¹ Michigan Christian Advocate, May 5, 1895.

citizens' committee come to ask for enforcement of law against saloons in a residence district.

The city's disregard of its own laws and the toleration of institutions which foster crime and vice is forcibly illustrated in its attitude toward the saloon and gambling-den, which are systematic law-breakers, and schools of vice as well. Rigid enforcement of the ordinances as to Sunday and early closing, sale to drunkards and minors and the rest of the long list, would do much to curtail the evils growing out of these places, and tend to stem the tide of reckless disregard for law which is perhaps the most serious of our social disorders. Urgent as the need is for the total extinction of the saloon, it can hardly be demanded with justice in the present social condition of the city. The saloon is the poor man's only club, his sole refuge from the insanitary, dreary, and unsocial tenement-home. The saloon, with its free assembly halls and meeting-places, its free lunches, its public comfort stations, its banking facilities for the working-men, its warmth, light, and welcome for rich and poor alike, cannot be utterly condemned, and must certainly hold an important place in the social life of the city, until the municipal government, the church, or some other agency shall provide something equivalent for the masses of the people. The social reformer who denounces the saloon *in toto*, and demands its immediate extinction, must be prepared to offer in its place something to meet the legitimate social needs of the people. But we *can* justly demand a rigid enforcement of ordinances regulating the saloon and other vicious institutions. The gambling-den and the brothel are as heedless of the laws and ordinances as the saloon, and the police force of our cities, in collusion with these law-breakers, systematically levy tribute upon these establishments as the price for the privilege of breaking the law.

A walk or drive through the poorest city wards con-

vinces one that our cities have provided no parks or playgrounds for the tenement-house dwellers, the people who need them most. The parks, large and small, are in the region of the better class homes, where good streets, fine lawns, parkways, and trees abound; while the homes of the poor are in treeless deserts and generally out of walking distance of any green spot or breathing space. That there is an awakening conscience and the beginning of active steps for reform on the subject, is cause for rejoicing. Few of our cities realize "the truth," as Edwin D. Mead forcibly says, "that beauty has a claim upon the whole life, and should determine the whole environment of a rational people, shaping and ordering their homes, their school life, their shops and their cities; that the city of a rational, well-educated, and properly organized people must be a work of art, not an agglomeration of freaks, where the wise man and the fool is each alike permitted to rear what he will;—where there is no hint in the aspect of the whole city of any corporate consciousness or care for noble and beautiful effect." Health, comfort, and beauty alike demand that small parks and playgrounds should be set aside in the poorer and overcrowded wards, and that direct supervision should insure the enforcement of ordinances against insanitary overcrowding, and for making attractive and healthful the environment of the working-people.

But the public school atones for all the other ill conditions of city life for the masses, some one may exclaim. And the public school is certainly the greatest civilizing agency of our cities,—working over as it does, five days of each week and ten months of the year, the raw material from every country under the sun, in an attempt to "make" good American citizens. The cities come nearer to success in their conduct of the schools than in any other undertaking for the social welfare. But their success here is marred by their failure to provide for thousands of children of

school age, and their neglect to provide those best antidotes of youthful vice and crime—kindergarten and manual-training departments. In Chicago thirteen thousand children attend school only for half-day sessions for lack of room. The New York school-board estimates that forty thousand children are without school accommodation in that city, and the president of the New York school-board said in his inaugural last winter, that “perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the public school situation is the opportunity for improvement.”

The city fails nowhere more conspicuously than in the fact of its hundreds and thousands of unemployed citizens,—men and women willing to work, but unable to secure the means of a livelihood. The American statistical society published recently some records of the charity organization societies of New York, Baltimore, and six smaller cities as to the cause of need among the families whose condition was investigated last year, and it is a notable fact that *lack of employment* was shown to be the cause of distress in as many cases as sickness, intemperance, and shiftlessness combined. The rush of people to the cities has far outstripped the city's ability to employ them, and all temporary panaceas are worse than useless. Something fundamental has got to be done, and I hope the practical suggestions I have to offer later on will commend themselves as of that nature.

All this may seem a pessimistic and unfair indictment of the city in view of the splendid progress of our great cities in some directions,—their vast trade and manufacturing interests, their immense business blocks, large bank-clearings and increasing wealth, their splendid park systems, libraries, museums, and philanthropic institutions. I do not deny the glory of the city and its great achievements. I simply maintain that it fails to secure to the majority of its citizens tolerable social conditions in which to live and rear their families. I hold that the city fails to

meet the *first* test of practical efficiency by not providing for the *people* the first essentials for health and happiness.

How do our cities meet Mr. Bryce's second test of practical efficiency—which is: *What does it cost the people?* Our city government is very costly, and the cities are piling up immense debts, mortgaging the future and too often obtaining from this, small benefit in the present. The Greater New York will begin its municipal existence with a debt of two hundred million dollars. Boston's debt is nearly forty million dollars; Philadelphia and Cincinnati, about thirty million dollars each; and many smaller cities have proportionally heavy indebtedness. According to Professor Henry C. Adams' statement, "the cities in recent years have appealed to public credit regardless of consequences." The annual municipal expenditures for our great cities are on the same extravagant scale. It is certainly then, not a lack of money which is responsible for the social failure of our cities. They pay enough to secure efficient government. Comparing the great cities of Germany and America, Albert Shaw says: "They stagger under such heavy burdens of taxation and compulsory service to maintain the military arm of the general government, that the tax increment which can be spared for municipal purposes comes with pain, and is small compared with the revenues we can raise for local outlay in America. . . . And yet, in the face of disadvantages far greater than any that we can present as excuses, the German cities have grappled with the new municipal problems of the last quarter century, and have solved them far more promptly and completely than the American cities have done."¹

Large cities are undoubtedly to be permanent and increasing factors in our civilization, and a solution of the question of how they may grow into ideal city conditions, and be-

¹ *Municipal Government in Continental Europe*, p. 297.

come congenial places for broad and beautiful human living, is of infinite importance.

It goes without saying, that the ultimate improvement of the city's social condition depends most of all on the improvement of individual character and intelligence. Righteousness exalteth a city as well as a nation. A higher type of citizenship is indispensable. Brains and character applied to municipal government are a first essential. The unselfish citizen loving his neighbor as himself has got to multiply indefinitely before the new century will ring in the ideal city. Two practical and definite movements of our modern life seem to me to promise better things for the future of our cities. The first movement is the return of cultured and intelligent people, with alert consciences, to the heart of the cities, to the centers of poverty, ignorance, and crime. This is both an individual and a collective movement. In its collective form it is best represented by the University and Social settlements; and starting in these, the awakening of the social conscience is leading strong and sympathetic souls to share the life of the people who need them most, and to go into the midst of conditions which have resulted from neglect, poverty, and ignorance. Marcella and her husband, in "Sir George Tressady," going to live in lodgings in East London, and quietly learning the needs and possible remedies for the waste places and the human starvelings of their neighborhood are only the types of men and women in London and New York and Chicago and other cities who choose a very modern, practical, and eminently Christlike method of making the great city more righteous and a better place to live in.

The worst slum districts are generally the result of the desertion of the more intelligent and well-to-do people, thus leaving the poor and ignorant to their almost certain fate of moral and material degeneracy. The going of University men and women, of business men and women, of cul-

tured Christian families, into the poorest wards to share the common life and help uplift it ought to go on and increase tenfold. The coöperation of these with the more energetic and intelligent poor in their own wards cannot fail to bring about, as it is now constantly doing, improvements sanitary, social, moral, and intellectual, and to transform the environment of a multitude of people.

The second movement which promises good to the city and to the people is the *return to the country*. Blessed be the country! Man was made to dwell in a garden, and to tend it was his first and best occupation. The return to the country in these recent years is a real and wholesome movement, and one full of hope for the future of both city and country. The rich and the cultured are going back to the country, because a new sense of the glory and beauty of nature has opened their eyes to the pleasures of country life; because, with wealth and leisure and culture, a sensible following of the customs of the older nations is growing up in America. English country life is being more and more copied among us. It is a "fad," a wholesome "fad," to own a ranch, a farm, or a country place, where a large part of the year or the entire year may be spent. People of small means and some of the more energetic among the poor are also returning to the country, and this movement has followed close upon the great financial depression of the past five years. These periods of depression are usually followed by a return to the country of hosts of the supernumeraries who have flocked into the city during prosperous times. The utter fallacy that the city has work for unlimited numbers is plainly shown in periods of commercial depression which restore partially the equilibrium of urban and rural industries by necessitating a return of many to the land, the source of all wealth and prosperity. This movement countryward is just as natural as that which leads a multitude into city life, and I have little patience

with the social philosophers who pronounce that the cityward tendency is worldwide and inevitable, that we can do nothing to change it, and need only set ourselves to organize our city charities on a wider and more scientific basis.

Man's history and progress have been, and will always be, a struggle *against* natural tendency, and a training of natural inclination to submission to reason and wisdom. Our peace and arbitration conferences are attempts to change man's natural tendency to fight his fellow-man. The church, the university, the school, are institutions working eternally to change men whose natural inclination is to love darkness rather than light. It is an untenable theory that because a great urban movement has drawn rich and poor into the large cities, that no influences or agencies can change or modify this fact.

I hail with joy the countryward movement as a return to sanity, to the love of nature, and an appreciation of the beauty and simplicity of life. With our modern ideas and inventions, the country is bound to be the paradise of people with souls. The movement has started right, the rich and the well-to-do and the cultured leading the way. This makes it the more possible for the poor to follow, and to find life livable and human in the country, as in the town. "How much more likely does it appear," says Woodrow Wilson, "that we shall find men sane and human about the country fireside, upon the streets of quiet villages, than in the huge, rushing, aggregate life of a great city?"

To restore the proper equilibrium between rural and urban occupations is, I believe, one of the important factors in the solution of the city problem. It would require too much space to set forth the startling facts and figures concerning the decrease of the rural population, its effect upon the country, and its results upon the industrial conditions of the great cities. It has been estimated that fully four million people, or 1,333,000 breadwinners more than can

find urban occupation, have crowded into the cities during the past few years. The wisdom of getting this surplus population back to the land has not appealed to our social reformers and social philosophers heretofore; but it cannot fail to do so as the absolute impossibility of the city's giving employment to both its own and the country's quota of people is admitted, and as the fact is recognized that the land always offers a frugal living, at least, to the man or woman who will work. Reformers may well turn their attention to overcoming the prejudices against, and the real obstacles to, country life. The questions of good roads, free rural mail delivery, intensive farming and small farms as in France, the cheapening of labor-saving machinery, the improvement of the rural schools, are just as vital to a final right settlement of the social future of the cities as are questions about improved tenements, more trade schools, or what to do with the tramp. The fact that with hard work the land will reward those who return to it with a frugal fare and shelter and raiment, needs to be preached in our time. The struggling, weary, thin-blooded, overworked men of the city need to be inspired to return to the country and to a truer and more healthful kind of life.

"The first farmer was the first man," says Emerson, "and all historic nobility rests on possession and use of land. Men do not like hard work, but every man has an exceptional respect for tillage, and a feeling that this is the original calling of his race; that he himself is only excused from it by some circumstance which makes him delegate it for a time to other hands."¹

The wisdom of Emerson is a good wisdom for our day.

¹ Emerson's Essays, Farming.