

Who are the Poor?

BY THE REV. A. SMYTHE PALMER, D.D.,
Vicar of Hermon Hill, South Woodford.

WE are all getting heartily tired of never-ending discussions about the condition of the poor, and of the hasty, ill-considered nostrums recommended for its alleviation. A vast deal of false and sentimental economics, based on theories rather than on facts, has been confidently propounded. It may be welcome as a change to extend our somewhat parochial view beyond England and her Colonies, beyond even Europe and America, and adopt a wider and more philosophical outlook which will take in mankind at large and embrace the whole round world. We shall then come to see that the natural state of man upon this earth is one of poverty. We assume on insufficient grounds that the destiny of man, as an abstract entity, is to live in comfort and affluence, with enough and to spare. As Mr. Lloyd George, with his facile beneficence, puts it: "Poverty is not the fault of Providence, which provides abundance. There are millions of men, women, and children in this, the richest country in the world, who, through no fault of their own, go through life sodden in poverty, wretchedness, and despair." He implies that this is a dismal breach in the appointed order of things. But travellers and anthropologists who have surveyed mankind with the most extensive view tell a different story. They assure us that man's natural condition is a struggle for existence—that poverty is not the exception, but the rule, if we consider humanity in its entirety. The first command to primal man, while yet unfallen, was to "subdue" the earth, as if it were an adverse power against which he would have to match himself; and he is sent forth to the encounter naked and unarmed, with a pair of hands and a brain, but without so much as a spade or hook wherewith to wage the warfare, until he learns to forge such weapons for himself.

“ Of all God’s creatures Man
Alone is poor,”

says Mrs. Carlyle ; perhaps it would be more correct to say, he alone is conscious of it.

All early races, no doubt, like savages in the present day, in their lack of material equipment, began on this one dead level of destitution. They all started at first tool-less, fire-less, shelter-less, until some tribes of higher potentialities and native capacity sought out many inventions and attained to some measure of civilization. It was thus with the Aryan and the Semite, while the Hamite and the Polynesian lagged behind. But the teeming Hindu, content with a handful of rice as his daily ration ; the Chinese labourer, who lives on the brink of ever-impending starvation, whose yearly wage is said to be equivalent to ten shillings of our money, and whose one engrossing thought is “how to get over the day” ; the wandering Arab, who, when he heard from Doughty of the blessings of food and clothing commonly enjoyed by Englishmen, was filled with envious melancholy and deplored his own sad lot of life-long misery, of hunger, thirst, and homelessness ; the Ainus and Veddahs, but little removed in point of comfort from the apes who share the forests with them—these are but types and samples of the great majority of mankind.

This being so, the idea commonly entertained of the position of the poor may be shown to be erroneous. We are accustomed to speak of the degradation of the poor, as having “sunk” into want and misery, and very naturally from that conception look upon them as oppressed and unfairly treated. But it would be far more correct to say that the poor are the great majority who have failed to rise above the low level which is common to man. It is not that they have fallen back into degradation or sunk into poverty from the normal state of well-being which the fewer number have managed to preserve and maintain. The truth is that they have remained on the low plain which all men once occupied. They are the unfortunate ones who have remained stationary and failed to rise, while others have pushed

onwards and upwards. The well-to-do are they whose fathers or forbears contrived by their vigour and ability to lift themselves above the mere struggle for existence, and have kept the higher level thus attained.

To one cruising amid the multitudinous islands of the South Pacific—so many little palm-crowned paradises set in a great waste of waters—the thought might occur, “What a small proportion these bear to the immeasurable tracts of submerged land which lie beneath at the bottom of the sea, lost to sight and utterly useless!” But more mature reflection would correct that first impression. Many of these beautiful islets have only come to light in recent times. They all lay once beneath the same universal level of the ocean, till they were upheaved by the working of some great cosmic forces. The normal condition of the earth was to be covered with water, and it required the fiat of the Creator to cause the dry land to appear. Those fertile islets, therefore, are exceptions to the geographical rule that the greater part of our planet is overspread with water. They are only the mountain-summits which appear, while all the valleys and plains are buried beneath the superincumbent mass of ocean. And so it seems to be with the social condition of humanity. We speak with commiseration of the sad position of the “submerged” as if they had sunk or fallen below the normal standard of comfort and prosperity. But this is in every sense a superficial or surface view; it does not go to the bottom of things. It is not that the poor have gone down, but that they have not come up. The ordinary level of man is poverty. He is born poor, and he dies poor, and between those terminal points he generally lives poor. The wealthy are those who by the working of certain physical and ethical forces—superior strength and good health, industry and perseverance, unusual ability and intellectual power—have been successful in raising themselves above the dead level; or they are the children and descendants of those thus abnormally endowed, who, finding themselves born on the high ground, have kept themselves there. Of course many, through lack of the essential

qualities of character, intelligence, and bodily efficiency, do not maintain their inherited position. These do "sink" to the lower level and reinforce the great body of the poor—for poverty is only another word for human weakness and disability. It is only in civilized communities that the distinction between rich and poor becomes sharply accentuated. The mountain in the sunshine casts a cold shade upon the valley, which thus becomes conscious of its relative depression; on the plain no such inequalities are felt. Early communities were on that plain, all being on a pretty equal footing of want. Nature is a stern mother, and gives her prizes only to the strongest and fittest of her children. Those that are the best endowed come to the top and cease to be poor. In the spirit of Pistol, one more enterprising than his fellows proclaimed, "The world is my oyster," and, while they looked tamely on, seized his flint and proceeded to open it. Such as he conquer circumstances and rise superior to environment. They subdue the earth, possess it, and become the rich; while the weakly, lazy, and careless drop behind more and more, and consequently lack and suffer hunger. The result is what we see: though there is a subsistence for all, the strong force their way to the table where the meal is spread and carry off the best, while the weak are thrust aside and are not fed. The able and forceful become the rich, the unfit and unresourceful remain poor.

This unequal state of things, it is to be feared, is inevitable, because its source lies deep in the natural inequality of human beings. Social inequality is at bottom only one phase of physical and mental inequality. As long as one man is stronger than another, or healthier or cleverer than another, one man must be poorer than another. Always there will be the rich man and Lazarus in this world, existing continually side by side, though they may change their relative positions even in this life. Holy Writ itself recognizes the social axiom that "the poor shall never cease out of the land" (Deut. xv. 11). Though the great mass of mankind rise but slowly, we are glad to believe that there is a general advancement and tendency to equalization in

every civilized community. The labouring man nowadays is probably in some respects better off in point of comfort than was King Alfred with his flickering rushlight and draughty hut. The poorest is certainly not so badly off as his primitive ancestor who lived in a damp cave, with a bundle of flint-headed arrows as all his worldly possessions.

This, it may be said, is but a cheerless and pessimistic philosophy after all. The rich will accept it with wonderful equanimity as a condition of affairs that cannot be helped. But, even though it be true, no Christian State will be content to acquiesce in it as if there were no remedy, though it will hesitate to accept Mr. Lloyd George's empiric and Procrustean remedy of sacrificing the rich to help the poor, and doing harm in hope that some possible good may accrue. But it is a significant fact that the same chapter of Deuteronomy (xv. 11) which lays down the general principle that "the poor shall never cease out of the land," with a daring disregard of the charge of inconsistency teaches the Israelites, as God's chosen people, to look for a time "when there shall be no poor among you" (v. 4). While waiting for that ideal we will do well to remember that the needy are "God's poor," commended to the care of their happier brethren, as the objects and palæstra for calling out some of the finest of the Christian virtues, and giving us opportunity of "doing good" (Mark xiv. 7). As Sir Thomas Browne long ago observed: "Statists that labour to contrive a commonwealth without poverty take away the object of our charity; not only not understanding the commonwealth of a Christian, but forgetting the prophecy of Christ" (*Religio Medici*, 1642, Section xiii.).

