

THE ABOLITION OF POVERTY

If it were not for death, disease, and poverty, this world would be a perfectly satisfactory place of abode for man. Hitherto we have endeavored to make the best of it by studying physiology, therapeutics, and hygiene, so as to prolong life and ward off disease, as much as possible, and by trying to devise means for providing ourselves with the necessaries of life, in the greatest possible measure, by the use of our hands and our brains. Death and disease are not yet brought into discussion, under the general philosophy of the day, that everything on earth ought to be so as "to satisfy man's needs," but attention is demanded for grave discussion of means for abolishing poverty. Inasmuch as all that we have accomplished, in the way of conquering the minor ills of life, consists in the acquisition and application of wealth, the abolition of poverty would mean the distribution of wealth, and the summary and successful accomplishment of the struggle for existence, together with the annihilation of all the material cares and petty annoyances of human life.

Every invention or discovery ever made by man, which has been useful and welcome, has been so because it helped to abolish poverty. We hear a great deal about "the social problem," and "the labor question," and, at the end of all the labored discussion, we find that they are just what they have always been since the beginning of civilization, only the question is: how can we apply our energies to the task of living on earth so as to

get the maximum result for a given expenditure of energy? If now a device can be invented which will abolish poverty, it will accomplish the work of all inventions and discoveries at one stroke. All the devices of statesmanship which have ever been made, have at least pretended to work toward the enhancement of the welfare of human beings on earth. If now we can hit upon a device which will organize human society once for all so that poverty will be abolished, we shall have done the whole work at once.

At present, poverty is correlated with ignorance, vice, and misfortune — the slow and tedious processes which we have hitherto been invited to employ and trust, have aimed to abolish poverty by working against ignorance, vice, and misfortune. If we can abolish poverty by a device or contrivance introduced into the social organization, then we can divorce poverty from its correlation with ignorance, vice, and misfortune. We can let those things stand, and yet escape their consequences.

It is plain, however, upon a moment's reflection, that poverty and wealth are only relative terms, like heat and cold. If there were no difference in the command we have over the material comforts of life, there would be no poverty and wealth. As we go down in the scale of civilization we find the contrast less and less; so, on the contrary, as we go up in civilization, we find the contrast greater. There is every reason to suppose that this distinction will become more and more marked at every stage of advance. At every step of civilization, the rewards of right living, and the penalties of wrong living, both become far heavier; every chance for accomplishing something better brings with it a chance of equivalent loss by neglect or incapacity. An American Indian who had a bow and arrow was far superior in wealth to

230 EARTH HUNGER AND OTHER ESSAYS

one who was destitute of those things, but one who has a breech-loading rifle is separated from one who has not by a far wider interval. The men among whom there is the least social problem are those who are in the lowest stages of barbarism, among whom no one has such superiority over the others, in his emancipation from misery, as to make them, by contrast, feel the stress of their situation.

On the other hand, the well-to-do classes in the midst of the most civilized communities show how much has been done to enable any men to emancipate themselves and their children from the grossest ills and hardships of earthly life. But the strain is still in the same direction, and on the same lines, and by the same means; whatever can be proposed to help on the great struggle is to the purpose, and is what we want to learn from anybody who can teach us. The proposition to abolish poverty is a proposition to do the work all at once — to jump to its conclusion. In view of the slow and painful efforts of the past, this is certainly an ambitious proposal.

There is a sense in which it may be said that it is easy to provide a precept for the abolition of poverty. Let every man be sober, industrious, prudent, and wise, and bring up his children to be so likewise, and poverty will be abolished in a few generations. If it is answered that men, with the best intentions, cannot fulfil this precept, because they make innocent mistakes, and fall into errors in judgment, then the demand is changed, and we are not asked for a means of abolishing poverty, but for a means of abolishing human error. If it be objected, again, that sober, industrious, and prudent men meet with misfortune, then the demand is for a means of abolishing misfortune.

Young men among us always talk of the time when they will be rich, as if wealth were at least among the possibilities for each one. At middle life all but a few of us find that we shall never be rich — poverty is our lot. We are in the great crowd to whom, their whole life long, the struggle for material necessities must be the predominant or absorbing interest. If we can support our families and pay our debts, that becomes the horizon of our ambition. We either did not plan our fives correctly, or we have made errors of judgment, or we have misapprehended the facts of life, or we have neglected our opportunities, or we have met with misfortune. If now we could unite our failures and transmute them into success at the bidding of some social magician, and “abolish” the poverty with which we have been contending all our fives, what a grand thing it would be! It would then only remain to abolish disease and death, and all human woes would come to an end at once.

But when we turn to examine the means which we are invited to employ for this purpose, we find that it is only the same old proposal once more in a new disguise; we are invited only to take and waste what wealth there is; we are to abolish poverty by abolishing wealth. We are to go back, in fact, to the primitive barbarism, to the bliss which rests on ignorance, and the contentment which comes from savage stupidity; and the net final gain will be that our envy will no longer be excited by seeing anybody else better off than we.

The philosophizing which goes on about these things is one of the marks of the literature of our time. Most of it is as idle as it would be to write essays about the distress of excessive heat. When all is said, the only rational question is: what can we do about it? When we read the older literature, and note the efforts which

232 EARTH HUNGER AND OTHER ESSAYS

men of former generations made to read the signs of their times, and to interpret what they saw going on about them, we find that they never succeeded, and we may be very sure that we blunder in like manner when we try to do the same thing. The world will not turn backward, because some think that its going forward does not inure to the equal advantage of all; nor even because its going forward is attended by revolutions in industry which are harmful to very many of us. The only sensible thing to do, when such changes come about, which bring some ills upon us, is to seek out all the advantageous chances which the same changes offer us, and to make the most of those.