

The Canker at the Heart: Being studies from the life of the Poor in the Year of Grace 1905



WHAT is called the Problem of the Unemployed is, of course, a problem in economic science. So much wealth in such and such hands, so little in such other hands; so many men automatically displaced here, some few finding employment there; a great multitude perpetually forced upon the verge of starvation; neat arrangement of statistics; and ever the same result. We have all had the opportunity of acquainting ourselves with the figures. They represent a vast army of men and women who are perpetually prohibited from getting the means of livelihood. With the why and the how of that pitiless and immitigable prohibition, is the theory of the problem concerned. It is, of course, essential that the conditions of the theory should be clearly apprehended. But, the study of theory, essential as it is, does but beget theory. It is apt to be forgotten that the economic presentation of the matter must necessarily, for the sake of abstract lucidity, deal with living and suffering men and women as numerical units. They are conventionalized figures, like the men and women of Egyptian painting. They look at us from the printed page, silent and lifeless algebraical abstractions. And so their desperate case, as proved by mathematics, awakens no human sympathy. It is the theory appealing to the philosopher, rather than the living voice of men and women calling for help in a disastrous fight. But, they are the men and women and the children and the children who are the living realities. You shall never know their need, save by seeing it as it is. When the House of Commons refused to pass the provision of the Unemployed Bill, which gave power to raise and to expend public money in the employment of the workless, it was thinking, in all probability, of economic theory. It may have been right in its action, or it may have been wrong. I do not know. But, it is not untimely to recall the

parallel instance in Parliamentary history, which took place more than a hundred years ago. The long war, the heavy taxation, and the bad harvests had brought the poor to a desperate condition comparable with the condition resulting to-day from our industrial system. That condition was perfectly well known to William Pitt perhaps the greatest of Englands Prime Ministers. Indeed^ his life was not safe from the mob. But, he took no action; until, upon a day, a friend took him for a walk through a distressed part of the country. Pitt said never a word; but, he went home and drafted a Bill which, for boldness of conception and breadth of range, has never since been approached. The Benthamites, the men of economic theory, would not have it. Not even Pitt, the wisest, strongest, and most cunning of statesmen, could prevail against the principle of restricting the action of the State within fixed limits. So Pitts great measure was killed. To-day, we are visited with the consequences. I have much pleasure in acknowledging the courtesy of the proprietors of The Standard, who have given me permission to republish these studies.

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