



A Plea for Poor Law Reform.*

THE Poor Law was established to relieve and diminish poverty. It was the most humane of our institutions in its origin: in its administration it is so harsh and humiliating that most self-respecting workers prefer prolonged starvation, and many death, to accepting the relief it offers. The harshness might be justified if our industrial system were such as to secure to every reasonably thrifty person the means of providing for old age and misfortune without the aid of the Poor Law. But as a matter of fact, low wages and precarious employment make it difficult for the laboring class to live even in the humblest decency, and utterly impossible for them to save.

Each day in the year over 940,000 persons in the United Kingdom are driven to accept relief as paupers. In the course of every year about two millions of separate individuals are thus relieved.

At least one in five persons over 65 is a pauper.

In London alone in 1892 there was an average of 58,145 indoor and 45,792 outdoor paupers, over 200,000 separate individuals falling for longer or shorter periods into this condition in the course of the year.

One in every eight of deaths in London takes place in a workhouse or other Poor Law institution.

Poor Law administration, since 1834, has aimed at abolishing pauperism by deliberately increasing the miseries of poverty. By making public relief dishonorable, and disfranchising the receiver, it has reduced the number of applicants and relieved the Poor Rate; but it has done nothing to root out destitution; and it has often, in saving the ratepayers the expense of relieving a pauper, put upon them the expense of prosecuting and punishing a prisoner.

No distinction in treatment is made between the professional idler and the worker who, through accident, sickness, misfortune, or depression of trade, is thrown on the rates. No honor, but deliberate dishonor, is assigned to the old age of the poor. No sufficient care is taken to ensure that the destitute children of whom the State takes charge shall be reared as efficient and self-respecting citizens.

REFORMS NEEDED.

I.—Improved Education for Children.

Over 50,000 children in England alone are in the charge of the Poor Law authorities. Their treatment is condemned by the fact that many of them grow up to lead pauper lives. They should not be taught in workhouse schools, but in the public elementary

* See also Fabian Tracts Nos. 17 and 20, entitled "Reform of the Poor Law," and "Questions for Poor Law Guardians."

schools; and they should not under any circumstances live in workhouses. The present practice of placing them out as mere laborers, or as errand boys and domestic drudges, should be abandoned. They should be well started in life by putting them to some skilled trade. They must not be made to feel that their dependence is in any way criminal or disgraceful, and they must therefore not be marked out, either by dress or in any other way, from the children of more fortunate parents. The children of the State must be made a credit, not a disgrace, to its citizens.

II.—The Humanizing of the Workhouse.

At present the workhouse is too often made a prison. The aged and infirm within its walls are not allowed to go out except for a day or two in each month: they are deprived of their trifling indulgences, clothed in a pauper uniform, and made to feel themselves not honorable pensioners, but dishonorable burdens upon the community. The well-conducted aged poor should be allowed to go out on every fine day; they should be clothed in a way not marking them out as paupers; they should be allowed their tobacco and tea, and permitted to occupy themselves in any way not inconvenient to their comrades; and aged married couples should have every facility for living together as the law at present allows. The veterans of Labor should be made in every way to realise that they are enjoying the provision willingly made for them by the community which they have served.

III.—State Pensions for the Aged.

About 160,000 retired civil servants, military and naval officers and men, policemen, postmen and others, receive pensions. In all these cases the pension is given from the State as a matter of right; and the pensioner enjoys, in addition, whatever he may have saved out of his pay. But an ordinary wage-earner who has saved a little out of his wages, is not allowed to do this. If he has saved less than enough to live on, he must actually spend all his little capital before the Guardians will come to his assistance; for until he is absolutely destitute the law refuses him outdoor relief. This is a hardship all round: it increases the burden of the rates, and makes the laborer feel that it is useless for him to practise the "thrift" that is preached to him so freely. Every worker directly or indirectly contributes, whilst he works, towards the rates and taxes. Every citizen should have the right, when he can work no more, to a pension from the State—after the age, say, of 65.

IV.—Public Aid for the Sick.

Every sufferer from serious illness should be entitled to free treatment in hospital. In London nearly two-thirds of our hospital accommodation is maintained from public funds, although the citizens have practically no control over it and do not even know that they contribute to it otherwise than by private voluntary subscription. The existing distinction between the so-called voluntary and

the rate-supported hospitals ought to be abolished, and the whole public provision for the sick and insane placed under an elected public authority.

The provision for the sick should be separated entirely from the Poor Law administration.

V.—Reform of the Casual Ward.

The casual wards have encouraged a class of habitual vagrants, who make no attempt to better their condition. Habitual casuals and demoralised loafers should be sent to a reforming labor colony, where they could earn their subsistence by the performance of some useful work. Willing workers of good character, when the uncertainty of employment under our present industrial system forces them to resort to the casual ward, should be helped to find employment.

VI.—Improvement of the Administrative Machinery.

Reform of Poor Law machinery is much needed, especially in London. For the election of Guardians an elector has from one to six votes, according to his rating. An occupying owner has votes both as owner and occupier. Thus one person often has twelve votes. The legislative reforms immediately needed are:—

1. Abolition of plural voting; no person to have more than one vote.
2. Disfranchisement on acceptance of Poor Law relief to be abolished.
3. Elections to be triennial and by ballot on a combined County Council and Parliamentary register.
4. Removal of the remaining £5 rating qualification for Guardians.
5. Exclusion of the present ex-officio Guardians (Justices of the Peace).

The Boards of Guardians should sit at times when workers can attend. A **Poor Law Council** should be elected triennially for the whole of London, to have supreme control over all asylums, work-houses, and, so long as they are retained, the Poor Law schools. In its hands should be the fixing of a Poor Rate for the whole metropolis, thus doing away with the present gross inequality between rich and poor neighborhoods.

A Royal Commission is now sitting to enquire into the condition of the aged poor. Now is the time to press forward demands for reform.

Before the election for Guardians comes on, get from the Fabian Society the "Questions for Poor Law Guardians," and form your judgment of the fitness of the candidates by the answers they return. Wherever possible, run Democratic candidates.

The figures in the above are obtained from Local Government Board Reports, C 6725, p. vi.; C 6745, pp. 378, 376, 380; C 6801, p. 4; and "Pauperism and Old Age Pensions," by C. Booth, p. 130.

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