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HOUSING OF THE VERY POOR,

BY

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MUCH has been done and is still being done since the War to make up for the years when house building had to be put on one side for more vital matters. Although the supply of houses is by no means adequate, yet it does seem as if in the not too far future there might be a hope that every man who is in regular and steady employment might be the owner or tenant of a house of his own.

Little is being done, however, for:—

- (1) The large and unfortunate class of casual worker.
- (2) The big family, of whom for many years to come the father will be the only wage earner.
- (3) The newly married couple.

The rents of the houses now being erected are beyond the means of the first two of these classes. With regard to the third class, the newly married couple, the five-roomed house which is the most popular type is more than they at present need, and there is the temptation to sub-let part of the house, which all who have had any experience as landlord or his agent know, is the source of continual friction and even misery to both the tenant and the sub-tenant. It is very easy to find fault with what is being done, and far more difficult to find a solution to the problem of housing the poorest of the community. There seem to be three ways of helping:—

- (1) By building large blocks of flats.
- (2) By raising money for part cost of building houses by subscription and so charging the tenant a lower rent.
- (3) By putting old houses into a decent state of repair and converting them as far as possible into self-contained flats.

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With regard to the first suggestion, the block system of flats has many drawbacks and there is also the heavy cost of building and the scarcity of available sites to delay much being done in this way. The second suggestion is being applied by such charitable bodies as the Church Army and naturally will be very limited.

The third proposal seems to offer the most likely hope of meeting the difficulty eventually of housing the very poor. There are in most boroughs certain streets of fairly large houses that could without a prohibitive outlay be so adapted. At present these houses are generally let to a single tenant who has the power to sub-let, and who often does so to his own financial advantage. It would be far better for the landlord, where he can do so, to make each family in the house his own direct tenant. It would not necessarily follow that the families would all live peacefully who occupied the same house, but it would give the landlord more control over the number of occupants of his houses and it would give the lodger a better standing as a direct tenant, and would probably cause him to regard his rooms more as a home of his own than he can now do holding only the status of a lodger.

So many old houses are condemned as unfit for habitation by the uninitiated simply because they are old, but these houses have generally very valuable assets. They were well built originally and with a certain outlay can be put into a decent state of habitation. Roofs can be rendered watertight, water can be brought up to each floor and a sink put on the landings at not too great a cost. A small cooking range can be put in the living room of each letting, a more healthy and satisfactory arrangement than allowing a gas stove on the landing, as is so often found in houses where sub-letting is allowed. Walls can be stripped and thoroughly made good and disinfected before the rooms are re-decorated. With regard to the latter point it would be advisable, from a health point of view, if rooms were fumigated more often than is now done, and landlords took more advantage of the help the Sanitary Authorities give in this respect when rooms are being re-papered. It should also be imperative that in all cases the walls should be stripped and made good before re-papering; in many old houses it is still possible to find as many as eight relays of paper on the walls. The vermin difficulty is a very real one, but here the main remedy lies with the tenant. So long as there are people who do not mind vermin, so long will rooms be infested with them. It is useless to blame the

landlord here; tenants who have been in occupation of their houses for very many years are themselves only to blame if they can still complain "the bugs are so bad." It might be as well also to point out that it is of small use the landlord stripping the walls, the Borough spraying them with insect destroyer and the landlord then re-papering, if the bedding, probably the main source of the trouble, remains undealt with.

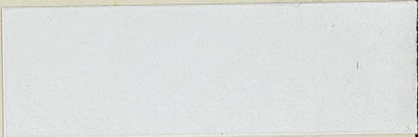
The main difficulty in adapting the old houses lies rather in the sanitary arrangements. Here the only thing that can be done is to build one or more extra water-closets in the yard or garden at the back. It is far better from a health point of view to build them outside than to try to find a corner for them inside which had not been intended to be shut off.

Granted the cost of adapting the houses and bringing them into a fit state of repair is high, even so it is possible to do so and arrange an eight-roomed house to take two moderate, or even three small families, in each case as a direct tenant of the owner of the house, and let the rooms at a much lower figure than is possible in the new houses.

There is one essential point, however. Houses so let should be regularly and frequently visited. The Octavia Hill system of management, which arranged for the collection of rents to be undertaken by trained women, covers this difficulty. Those parts of the house that are common to all the people in the house, and are thus of least importance in their eyes, should be inspected at least weekly, and who can do this better than the agent who visits the house to collect the rents and who is responsible to the landlord for the upkeep of his property and to the tenant whose welfare is of equal importance?

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