

The Urgency of the Housing Problem

MAYOR R. PRIEUR, Pointe-Aux-Trembles.



The "powers that be" are beginning to realize the urgency of the housing problem, especially with regards to the laboring class, but an educational campaign, intensive and continuous, will be necessary to awaken the general public to the realization of the urgency of the problem and open the hearts to the humanitarian aspect of this all-important question.

The governments, throughout the world, knowing full well that the degree of civilization of a nation is judged by the housing of its people, have been untiring in their efforts to secure better facilities for the masses.

England has given us an excellent example of what should be done. There is not another country that has given as much thought to social hygiene as has Great Britain. During the last twenty years, law after law was adopted, decree after decree was promulgated and regulation upon regulation made in order to lend a helping hand to the poorer populations by creating garden-cities where conditions are bad, at a cost within his means. Even to this very day, when England is still bleeding from the many wounds received during the world conflict and is still staggering under the burden of an enormous public debt, she does not hesitate to call upon the public treasury for million upon million to continue the fight against the hovel and its evil effects.

The United States have also given practical thought to the humanitarian aspect of the housing problem and in the neighboring republic, the legislators and the capitalists have worked hand in hand to create numerous industrial cities, the good appearance, cleanliness and comfort of which have been the subject of universal admiration. We, in Canada, are astounded when we hear that, during the last twenty years, the various American housing associations have erected more than 400,000 houses to be used as comfortable homes by the great laboring classes.

France, Italy, Belgium, Germany and Hungary have their garden-cities which are not only admired by all visitors to these countries, but afford comfortable social centres for the workingmen and their families.

Every great country has given deep thought to social hygiene—except Canada.

Why should our country be indifferent to human suffering? Why are we so apathetic?

Can it be said that the housing conditions which have been found defective in Europe and the United States and which all other countries have endeavored to correct, are ideal in our own country? Can it be said that the houses inhabited by our laboring classes are built according to the latest dictates of scientific construction and are all that can be desired from the double point of view of hygiene and comfort? Can it be truly said that our large cities contain no hovels for human habitations?

No, a thousand times no! We should blush in shame when we recall to mind the scathing comments made by Harry Vivian less than ten years ago, concerning conditions in our own country. This eminent sociologist who is also member of parliament for Birkenhead in the British House of Commons, stated in a lecture given in 1910, at Ottawa, under the distinguished patronage of Earl Grey, our former Governor-General, that he had seen in Montreal, in Toronto and in Winnipeg, slum districts that were worse than those of London and Dublin. His concluding

remark was that "in most Canadian towns, less science and forethought is given to the care of human beings than a modern farmer gives to the raising of his pigs."

Should not this lashing remark from an expert on social hygiene have the same effect upon us as would a cat-o'-nine-tails upon our bare backs? Why should we fail so utterly in the accomplishment of our plain humanitarian duty to that part of the urban population which numerically predominates the laboring classes?

Yet, since 1910 what have we done to secure healthier conditions in the dwellings of the less fortunate of our co-citizens? Nothing, or at least very little if we consider what we should have done and the enormous task which has been left untouched.

In a preceding article we have said that the unsanitary and over-crowded condition of the home, with its unpleasant atmosphere, is responsible for driving many men to the more congenial surroundings of the bar-room, with the result that the army of drunken degenerates increases alarmingly.

Basing our statements on the results of careful investigations of medical and social science, we now have no hesitancy in stating that the narrow, ill-ventilated, unsanitary dwelling is responsible for more cases of that dreaded disease, tuberculosis, than any other cause. And this dreadful plague, it must be remembered, affects mostly adults between the ages of twenty and forty, the very time of life when they should be most useful to society. It is further proven that there are less cases in the rural districts than in the city and that in the houses that are ill-ventilated and overcrowded there is greater danger for tuberculosis than in other dwellings.

These indisputable facts plainly show that unless we take means to combat the white plague, it will prove disastrous to the very core of our population.

Vital statistics for the Province of Quebec show that in 1915, 3,300 persons died of tuberculosis. Of this total, 1,923 lived in the cities and 1,277 in the country districts. As we are well aware, the rural population exceeds by far the urban population. Why then should there be more deaths from tuberculosis in the cities than in the rural districts? Simply because sanitary and hygienic conditions are not the same in both cases.

Tuberculosis is an affection caused by poverty in all its various forms and aspects. It is developed mostly by unsanitary surroundings and chief among these is the overcrowded, ill-ventilated dwelling; the hovel where a half-dozen or more individuals live in dangerous promiscuity in narrow rooms, without a ray of sunshine in the day time and without ventilation at night—where the microbes can develop and thrive and cause the man, the woman, the child to wither away like a plant that is deprived of air, water and sunshine. Can there be greater misery than this?

As stated by an eminent French sociologist: "The doctor treats tuberculosis, but he does not prevent it."

Preventative means are the surest and social means the most effective in checking this plague.

This is a truth which is everywhere understood — except in Canada.

It is, thanks to sanitary dwellings, well-aired, well ventilated and where sunlight has easy access, that, during the last few years, deaths caused by tuberculosis in England have decreased by 50 per cent.

Germany has obtained similar results by adopting a policy of preventative and social hygiene.

During the last few years there has been a decrease of more than a half in the cases of tuberculosis in England, and Germany. The number of cases in France, in Italy, in Belgium, in Denmark, in the United States has also decreased. In fact, there has been a notable decrease of cases wherever a war has been conducted on the hovel and the unsanitary dwelling.

During the same period the number of tuberculosis cases in the Province of Quebec has increased!

Why? Madame Fiedler, who has visited every country in the world in her crusade against the white plague, gave us the reason for this disastrous condition a few years ago: "Never have I filled my lungs with purer air