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TORONTO, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1878.

## THE QUESTION OF THE POOR.

THE question as to the best method of solving the problem of the poor was raised by Rev. Mr. Macdonnell in his very practical and instructive sermon delivered in St. Andrew's Church on Thanksgiving Day. It is a subject in which we are all deeply interested. It touches us on every side, and we cannot shake it off. Every right-thinking person is conscious of a sentiment approaching the point of intense agony, as he or she remembers the amount of human suffering that necessarily exists. This is the humane point of view. But we quickly pass from this to think of the matter from motives of self-interest. The social fabric is endangered by a too great preponderance of the poor. The holders of property can no longer feel secure in their possessions. There is danger at every moment of the unemployed joining the ranks of modern Socialists, and waging a bitter warfare against good government and every public and private interest. The industrious classes must consider the subject, whether they will or not.

It is very evident that much of the distress which prevails arises from idleness, want of thrift, inability for skilled labor, and from intemperance and other vicious habits. Even during the harvest, when labor can command its own price, there is a vast number of persons who would rather be on the streets than go to the honest toil of the field. There are others, again, perhaps willing enough to work, but who, whenever they become possessed of a dollar, spend it upon some needless luxury rather than upon the necessities of food and clothing. How many, too, whose labor on the field, in the warehouse or the household is completely worthless. They have no perseverance. They are wanting in skill. They seem to be entirely destitute of brains even to conceive what ought to be done, let alone to do it. The work were better left undone, than be attempted by such untrained hands. Then it is plainly evident that from intemperance arise the evil results of idleness, and thriftlessness, and too frequently we witness skilled labor becoming, through drink, worse

than useless. And then whatever money is earned is squandered upon drink. There is too often little or none left for hapless wife or starving children. Or the skilled, industrious husband finds a millstone around his neck in the shape of the useless drunken wife, who spends the hard-earned wages upon the damning cup, and leaves nothing to feed and clothe the wretched offspring.

What is to be done with the mass of poverty arising from such causes as these? That is a most difficult question. It is an awful problem to solve. There is nothing more evident than that, in our highly developed civilization, which involves the freedom of the individual until it is forfeited by the commission of some recognized crime, the condition of the class described is something worse than that of slavery. Nay, the state of bondage was for the most part a paradise compared with this. We could then deal with all such persons and put them to work whether they liked it or not; and if their labor yielded nothing in return, society would be the gainer by their enforced imprisonment. But while it is impracticable to reduce the idle and intemperate to servitude, it is questionable whether it is wise not to treat many of these as criminals. It is no doubt coming to this, that if we cannot convict because of intemperance, we shall be forced to treat as criminal, the neglect, that arises from vice, to provide for children and other dependents. A woman would be shut up in prison for striking her husband or suffocating her child while in a state of intoxication; and can any solid reason be advanced for not punishing her when she does worse than inflict a physical blow—squander on beastly gratification the hard-earned money which ought to be expended on food and clothing? Why should a husband and father, who wilfully lets his family starve, escape from an equal punishment to that which would befall him were he committing a breach of the peace? The idle, thoughtless man should be dealt with as a criminal, especially where his conduct involves the suffering of others. This line of treatment would effectively deal with a large class of the so-called suffering poor; and the charitable societies, or even the State, could protect the hapless children or unfortunate wife, who were thus thrown helpless upon the world.

Mr. Macdonnell referred to the question of tramps, but left it there as a problem with which he could not grapple. A city like this is constantly being invaded by the army of tramps. It has been said that the United States is a nation of tramps; and if so our reputation in this respect is certainly not far behind that of our neighbors. What is to be done with tramps? That is a profound problem. The difficulty is to discriminate between honest tramps and dishonest, between idle tramps (though tramping seems far from being idle) and those that are looking for work. The honest, or those who want to do something, will, we think, be speedily discerned, and we are rather afraid that they will be a handful in comparison. The question then resolves itself, What are we to do with idle and dishonest tramps? We think there might be inaugurated a system of rough, "Jeddart justice" that would just meet their case. Let us provide some kind of shelter, however rude, and a certain amount of food,

on condition that these are to be earned. The alternative must be presented to all such—either work or starve. Put down begging either by the arm of the law or by a concerted refusal on the part of the citizens to give relief. We are speaking of the sound and hale tramp, and not of the sick and infirm, however unworthy he may be. For the latter, kindly treatment in the hospital and bringing to bear upon him Christian influences, may work wonders. But for the tramp who is able but not willing to work, let him have the fair offer, and by that let us abide, either to labor or tramp, and we make sure that a wholesome cure would speedily be provided for a monstrous and pressing evil. At all events, this line of treatment is worthy of the thoughts of the best minds, to whom Mr. Macdonnell earnestly appeals for the solution of this social problem.

There is still the class of the deserving poor to be considered. If we could only get at some method of knowing such and of becoming acquainted with the cases, our benevolently-inclined would greatly rejoice. It is not the want of the will to help, it is the difficulty of finding out those who need and deserve relief, that is the pressing question of the hour. This problem was undoubtedly solved by Dr. Chalmers and his noble band of workers in the parish of St. John's, in Glasgow. By a system of visitation, thoroughly carried out, every resident family, and every individual in a population of nearly one hundred thousand, were known by name, residence, and their circumstances. The deserving poor were thus reached. But at what a cost! Not of money, but of genius, of sacrificing efforts, of time. It was such a cost that Dr. Chalmers had to retire to the scholastic cloister of St. Andrew's University, after having nearly broken down from his Herculean task. It was at such a cost that the experiment has hardly ever been repeated, except in other methods by Dr. Guthrie and Norman MacLeod. But might not this plan be put into execution without its main burden falling upon one or a few? Could not all the congregations in a city unite for this desirable end? Could not the city be divided into districts, to be visited and cared for by the benevolent societies connected with the churches? Of course, much is done by the Ladies' Relief Society, and that in the right direction,—a society that is worthy of public confidence. Still, it is liable from various causes to be well done in one quarter and left undone in another. Let there be concerted action on the part of all Churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic; and substantial results would follow. But even this co-operation, perhaps, presents a more difficult problem than ever.

Meanwhile, winter is upon us. There is much distress in every city. There is suffering that is out of sight and covered up. It will not do to be merely theorizing. Something must be done. At the very least, the congregations can be doing their best for their own poor.

## IRISH PROTESTANT BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES.

IN another article we have dealt with the general question of the poor; in this we wish simply to direct attention to the Irish