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THE POPULATION QUESTION.

BY JOHN M. ROBERTSON.

In most of our large towns, as many people have noticed, you may generally gauge the degree of poverty of the inhabitants by the number of the children seen playing in the streets. Without going to the worst slums, where perhaps the misery acts as a special check on the numbers, you can always reckon that they swarm most in the streets inhabited by the more poorly-paid workers. In that stratum there is just enough bread and butter to feed them, just enough of wages to keep them passably clothed. Often they strike a passer-by as surprisingly healthy. That is because they are so much in the open air, though it is the air of the street, their chief play-ground. But if you study closely, you will see that in general they are not really good specimens of the human animal. Fed mainly on bread and tea, they are mostly undersized to begin with. And yet those you see are the survivals of a much larger number born, a great percentage of infants being unable to struggle through the first few years of unhealthy conditions. Take the average family as a whole, and you find this state of things: an overworked mother, prematurely old; small and stuffy rooms, with little comfort in them, so that the father is always tempted to spend his few hours of leisure outside; bad air, inferior food, and poor clothing for the children, and such a number of young ones that the mother cannot attend to them, and the little girl of six or seven is burdened with the care of the younger ones whom she can barely carry, a weary toiler before her time. Everybody in the family is the worse off because there are so many. A number of infants die; but a number live, destined to grow up as cheap labor for the labor market; and the father, like the mother, is aged before his time by his burden. Were there only three or four children altogether, at intervals of a few years, the whole household could be better fed, better tended, better housed. It may even happen that the mother brings forth a dozen children in eighteen years, yet rears only one or two of them to maturity. She has all the dolour and almost none of the joy of motherhood. But with all the enormous sacrifice of life, there is preserved enough of cheap life to make cheap labor.

The main facts are not disputed even by those who dispute what is called "the law of population." That law is just this—that mankind tends to breed faster than it increases its food supply. This does not