

OLD AGE PENSIONS.

Extracts from an Eloquent Address.

The address of Mr. W. Manly, President of the Institute of Actuaries, to the members of that body in London, on the 28th ultimo, is referred to in our editorial columns. Mr. Manly when dealing with the subject of Old Age Pensions said:—

There is one subject on which I should like to address a few words to you—a subject which has been exercising the minds of politicians, economists, philanthropists, social reformers and actuaries for some time, and a satisfactory solution of which seems almost as far off as ever; I refer to the subject of Old Age Pensions. I know I am treading on dangerous ground, because your president is expected to avoid questions of a controversial nature, and there is no question of recent years on which so many dogmatic opinions have been expressed. We are also very careful to avoid here all reference to politics, but it is agreed that this is not, in its present stage, at least a political question. It is true, as Sir William Harcourt, in his robust, blunt manner, declared one night in the House: "We are all Socialists now," and we should all like to see the lot of the toiler in his old age made more pleasant, if it can be done without destroying the energy, independence and manly self-reliance of the working population. In his elegant and masterly speech at the Jubilee Dinner, Mr. Courtney said: "In the midst of their comfort and luxury, they could not help but feel some sympathy with those members of the proletariat, and with these who were a rank above them in the social scale, who contemplated the dreary round of ill-paid toil, old age coming with limited powers, with no resources, and with years of want coming as a necessary sequel to a manhood of fully occupied industry. If they could in any way alter the dismal features of that picture, the legislature would be most proud to accomplish the task. They could not do it without the assistance of the actuaries. Whether it was possible or not, he was very slow to say, because they had to reconcile what appeared to be two inconsistent laws. They wanted to maintain and develop the strength of individual character, and unless the penalty of want followed upon the sin of improvidence, they lost one of the best incentives to thrift." The problem is undoubtedly one of very great difficulty; and the report of Lord Rothschild's Committee does not aid us very much. Their reference was "To consider any schemes that may be submitted to them, for encouraging the industrial population, by State aid or otherwise, to make provision for old age;" and the Committee, at the end of their report, say: "We approached our task with a deep sense of the importance of the question into which we were charged to inquire, and of the benefit which would be conferred upon the community if a scheme could be elaborated giving encouragement to the industrial classes, by the exercise of thrift and self-denial, to make provision for old age, while it fulfilled the moral conditions pre-

scribed by the terms of our reference. It is only very slowly, and with very great reluctance, that we have been forced to the conclusion that none of the schemes submitted to us would attain the objects which the Government had in view, and that we ourselves are unable, after repeated attempts, to devise any proposal free from grave inherent disadvantages." This, coming from a very strong committee, on which three Actuaries and the Registrar of Friendly Societies set practically decides that the question cannot be solved from the point of view of the reference; and, after reading the evidence, I do not see how it was possible to come to any other conclusion.

But, even if the Committee could have found their way to recommend any scheme, it would only have effected the *elite* of the working classes—skilled craftsmen, who receive good wages and are in constant employment, probably about one in three of the male members of the industrial population. If that were the only class which had to be dealt with, I do not think it would be impossible to find some means of helping them if it were proved necessary; but the problem which we are anxious to solve is a far more important and difficult one than that. How are we to help the helpless and thriftless; that large army of unskilled labourers, whose occupations are often intermittent, and whose wages barely suffice for their daily needs, and those who have not got the self-control to save, even when they are in receipt of good wages? How to provide for them in their old age without discouraging thrift; for most assuredly if State pensions were given as a right, without any discredit attaching to the recipient, the praiseworthy efforts that are now being made by the better portion of the workers would immediately cease, and the nobility of the man, his self-reliance and strength of character would disappear. It is very well for Mr. Courtney to say that unless the penalty of want followed upon the sin of improvidence they lost one of the best incentives to thrift. It is a proposition to which we should all agree, and which we should gladly act upon, if everyone had the means wherewith to make provision. But every man has not, and certainly not every woman.

Again, it must not be forgotten that the best, and, indeed, the first duty of a citizen to the State, is to provide for himself and family, and educate his children in skilled craftsmanship, and so make them good and useful citizens, rather than spend his money in purchasing a deferred annuity for himself. I agree with Sir Spencer Walpole in his memorandum, that "an elaborate scheme for bribing the working classes to insure against old age, in preference to other forms of saving, is, in reality, a scheme for nurturing the egoistic and restraining the altruistic qualities of mankind." One of the most pleasing and hopeful paragraphs in the report of the Commission is the one on the question of thrift: "No evidence given before the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor was more conclusive than that which related to the enormous and rapidly-increasing amount of the accumulated sav-