

Our Duties to the Poor

Many successful people in easy circumstances refuse to admit that they have any duties to the poor. They agree with Tennyson's "Northern Farmer" when he said, "The poor in a lump is bad." They comfort themselves with the belief that all poverty is due to laziness, drink, or stupidity, and is, therefore, the fault of the poor themselves.

Even if this were true, we should still have a duty to the poor; for it is the duty of the wise, the strong, the industrious and the virtuous, to help the weak, the idle, the foolish and the vicious, to change their mode of life.

But it is not true; at any rate it is only a part of the truth. For in modern civilization, a great deal of the terrible poverty that exists is not due to any fault of the poor themselves, but to the organization of society, for which the individual poor are not responsible. Whether a man is born rich or poor is a matter of chance. Many of the rich have simply inherited their wealth, and have in no way earned it; and many of the poor have in like manner inherited their poverty, and have in no way deserved it.

It matters not how idle and worthless the rich man is: he remains rich. And similarly, it matters not how industrious and sober and able a poor man is, for under present conditions he is too often doomed to a life of poverty.

Leaving aside, therefore, cases of poverty that are really due to idleness or vice, there is a large mass of poverty for which the modern social organization is responsible. These poor are therefore a legitimate burden on their more fortunate rich brothers, whose duty it is to relieve them in their distress.

Usually, the duty of the rich to the poor is summed up in the word alms giving, or charity, it certainly is the duty of those who have to give of their abundance to those who have not, according to their needs.

But indiscriminate alms giving, and even organized charity, is no solution of the problem of poverty; and the mere giving of money to the poor does not relieve a rich man of all further responsibility.

Nor is it enough to throw all the responsibility of the poor on the state. In England, the government provides workhouses for the old people who are past work, for orphans, and even for able – bodied men out of employment.

But in order to discourage pauperism, these work- houses have to be made so undesirable that no poor people will willingly resort to them until they are forced to do so.

The poor require something more than money. They want intelligent sympathy they want moral help, which no money can buy; they want to be treated as human brothers, and not as creatures of another race, and as dirt under our feet.

To give these things to the poor requires a larger heart, a broader mind, and more personal sacrifice, than most rich people are prepare to give. Yet we shall never be able to relieve the poor in any real way until we can give them our hearts as well as our money.

Finally, the chief duty of the rich is to so reorganize society that no man need be poor if he is industrious, sober and honest. This is a very difficult and complicated problem, which cannot be solved by any simple measures.; but if a nation as a whole is resolved to abolish all poverty that is not due to individual vice and idleness, it will be able to find a way.