

POVERTY AND POPULATION

By W. R. Lester, M.A.

Miss Adelyne More contributes articles on population to the June number of the *CAMBRIDGE MAGAZINE*. She writes strongly in support of the theory propounded by Malthus, maintaining with him that population tends to outrun the means of subsistence, that poverty is the result, and that the world is faced with disaster unless steps are forthwith taken to limit human fertility. She appears to have diligently studied German writers, and presents us with a long list of authorities from that country who take a like view.

It appears to us that the arguments of writers like Miss More are vitiated at the outset by the simple fact that they do not begin at the beginning. They look out on society as they find it to-day and see certain tendencies at work. These tendencies, without further inquiry, they take to be natural tendencies—part of the natural order—whereas they are in reality the consequences of human laws which vitiate the natural order. Before assuming that the tendencies we discern to-day are natural tendencies, it is surely our first duty to make certain that the laws of man which mould our society do not run counter to the laws of nature. But we find no attempt in Miss More's long articles on over-population and poverty to do anything of the kind. It is as if a physiologist in investigating the action of the heart were to make a man with heart disease the subject of his experiments, and after elaborate investigation, finding its action both distressful and defective, were solemnly to declare as a general truth that the heart is an organ which causes distress and defective circulation. Such a physiologist would be mistaking symptoms which accompany disease for what would happen in normal health, and it is precisely this mistake of which both Malthus and Miss More are guilty when they deal with social questions. They take a human society made unhealthy by laws and customs, which deny men their natural rights, and finding in this society that the means of subsistence at the command of large numbers are not sufficient for their support, straight-way jump to the conclusion that population has a *natural* tendency to grow more quickly than the means of subsistence. One would have thought that before attributing the trouble to any natural law they might at least have inquired whether unjust human laws, the products of greed or of ignorance, do not deprive these unfortunates of the fruits of their toil so that mouths and bodies appear to be more plentiful than food and clothes. Was it not the Duke of Marlborough who, in pointing out the danger of over-recruiting among agricultural labourers, claimed them as worth to the country £250 per man per year? Perhaps one day the agricultural labourer may ask why he does not get the £250, and we presume Miss More's reply will be "over-population." Carlyle was nearer to it when he said: "law and rent"

The widow is gathering nettles for her children's dinner: a perfumed Seigneur delicately lounging in this Oil-de-Boeuf, has an alchemy whereby he will extract from her the third nettle, and name it "rent and law."

Before sensible people can be persuaded that population either does or ever will press on the means of subsistence, making limitation of birth necessary if poverty is to be avoided, it will first have to be proved that all men enjoy equal opportunity to make use of those resources with which Providence has furnished mankind. It will have to be proved that no legal barriers come between man and the bounties of nature's table. Before we can lay at the door of Nature a tendency to bring into the world more human beings than can be provided with food, clothing, shelter and warmth, we shall have to be assured that not a field, not a quarry, not a building site, not a mineral deposit, which men would use if free to do so, remains unused.

So long as we can look around and see locked-up resources

on every hand it is idle indeed to write learned articles on the over-population peril. The remedy is not restriction of births, but removal of these obstacles which the restrictions of landlords and the taxation of industry have placed between man and the earth. So long as some enjoy the untaxed power to forbid the use of the earth to their fellow creatures the mass of them will be faced with the problem of scarcity, but let us hope we shall not always find writers like Miss More to father the trouble on the processes of Nature. Why, under such conditions, were there but two men in existence, one of whom "owned" the planet and could prevent the other from using it, symptoms of over-population and poverty would be there precisely as we see them to-day! What we really want to be told is what would happen in human society were every man free to enjoy the full fruits of his labour, and we challenge the over-population theorists to show that in such a society there could exist any symptoms of over-population or unmerited poverty. It is vain for them to take society, as we know it, with its landlords, its monopolists, and its legalised tolls on labour, and attribute poverty to over-population.

Do writers like Miss More suggest that continents like America or Australia, with their scanty population and millions upon millions of acres of unused—but not un-owned—fertile land, are really within sight of any tendency to over-population? Yet these are the very countries where limitation of birth is specially advocated and practised. It is certain that immensely larger populations than they at present contain could live in comfort on these continents, were the fields, mines, and forests freely available to those who would use them; as it is, wherever men turn they find themselves faced by monopolist corporations, who levy toll on Nature's bounties or even deny access altogether. We put it to the Malthusians that their attitude is that of the old-time defenders of landlordism, who refuse to admit or silently ignore the fact that private property in land spells robbery of the fruits of labour and economic injustice. The burden of proof is on them to show that increasing population means diminished production per head. They have to face the fact that where population is densest, there wealth is in greatest abundance and poverty direst. They have no explanation of the extremes of poverty and wealth, and stand out as the apologists of injustice. They have further to prove not only that the growth of population *will be* a disaster, but that *existing* poverty is due to existing population being too great.

They are fond of appealing to the analogy of the lower animal world in which they allege over-population and starvation to occur. We question very much whether, even there, it does. We do not believe there is any species of animal which regularly increases to the very limit of food supply. We believe they have all developed an instinct which causes them automatically to adapt their numbers to their environment long before they have reached that point. But when isolated cases have been found where the means of subsistence are not sufficient, some beasts may die, but *all* the rest are emaciated. In these circumstances one does not find in a herd of cattle or a shoal of herring some sleek and over-fed, while others are starving. *All* of them suffer. If the means of subsistence are not sufficient for us human kind, why does not the famine hit us all equally? Why should it be that many of those are manifestly working and producing are in the worst case, while many of those who produce nothing are in the best case? And the analogy between men and the lower animals fails in another way. Animals do not produce their means of subsistence—men do. As Henry George said, "Both foxes and men eat chickens, but the more foxes the fewer chickens: while the more men, the more chickens." Food exists for men because they are here, but beasts are here because food for them exists.

In *PROGRESS AND POVERTY* Henry George gives the

most masterly analysis and refutation of the Malthusian theory that has ever appeared in print. It is hard to think that any unbiassed man can read it and not be convinced that the Malthusian theory is not proved by the reasoning with which it is supported, and that any danger that human beings may be brought into a world where they cannot be provided for, arises not from the ordinances of Nature, but from social maladjustments which, in the midst of wealth, condemn men to poverty.

Though there is no evidence in Miss More's articles that she is familiar with George's arguments in any way but at second hand, she attempts to dismiss them without further notice as "the superficialities of Henry George," though she laments their "astonishing vogue." The gibe is a ridiculous one, and we were entitled to look for something better from a contributor to a production of the standing of THE CAMBRIDGE MAGAZINE.

SAILORS AND SOLDIERS ON THE LAND

Report of the Departmental Committee

Part II. of the Final Report (Cd. 8277) of the Departmental Committee on Settlement and Employment of Sailors and Soldiers on the Land was issued during July. Part I., a review of which was published in LAND VALUES of March last, dealt mainly with the question of settlement on the land and its recommendations have taken shape in the Small Holdings Colonies Bill now before the House of Commons. A criticism of the provisions of this extraordinary measure will be found elsewhere in this issue.

In Part II. the Committee confine themselves to the question of employment as distinct from settlement. There is a Majority and a Minority Report which come to the same conclusions on most points and hold the same opinion upon what can be done for soldiers and sailors in particular and for the distressed conditions of the agricultural population in general. They admit that the cost of acquiring and equipping large areas of land will limit the number that can be settled in colonies within the next few years and accordingly "only a small proportion of the ex-Service men, who desire occupation on the land, can be settled as small-holders, and the great majority will have, in the first instance, to gain their living by means of employment," *i.e.*, as labourers under the large farmers. Naturally, if the method of land settlement is to be by purchase, the fate of soldiers and sailors or any one else seeking access to land is sealed beforehand, and it is just as well that this is frankly recognised by the Committee. But as to the alternative, precarious employment as agricultural labourer—the only alternative this pro-landlord committee can see in front of it—we imagine the nation will give short shrift to such ideas. The evils that are responsible for the great estates, the deserted countryside, the cottage famine, and the poverty of the labourer are too well understood to delay for long the breaking up of land monopoly and the imposition of such taxation as will effectually penalise those who now allow "thousands of acres," in the words of Mr. Prothero, "of tillage and grass land to lie comparatively wasted, under-farmed and under-manned."

The difference between the two reports submitted by this Committee is that the Majority do not think it practicable to do much now, while the minority recommend immediate legislation to be passed during the war so that the agricultural industry may be prepared to absorb great numbers of the men whom demobilisation will suddenly throw on the labour market. The Minority make the complaint that the Majority "express general approval of the policy we advocate, but are unwilling to advise the measures by which alone, in our opinion, it can be carried out." They especially criticise the Majority for rejecting proposals for enacting a minimum wage and

except for their observations on that subject and their declarations as to exactly how much should be given to farmers in the way of bounties and bonuses, their report is very largely a repetition of the opinions entertained by the Majority. The attempts to say something new or to say the same thing in more vigorous and even flamboyant language are at times quite diverting.

The Committee, as a whole, labours the self-evident truth that great tracts of what was formerly arable land have been laid down to grass, that agricultural employment can only be increased by bringing under the plough a large area of the land now devoted to pasture, and that agricultural decline and depopulation is associated with the absence in rural districts of (i) a satisfactory wage, (ii) adequate housing accommodation (iii) village amenities and (iv) reasonable prospects of men improving their position in life. The prime cause of these unfortunate developments is stated to be the fall in the price of produce and the remedy, according to the Committee, is "a change in policy" which would make agriculture more profitable and limit this country's dependence on imported food stuffs. Thus, automatically, farmers would be able to afford higher wages and many thousands of additional men would be employed.

Both reports are well up to the standard of tariff reform arguments in economics and politics, but as that of the Minority is more concrete and more emphatic it will be more to the point to put their recommendations or suggestions on record:—

We do not consider it within our functions to give definite advice as to the particular method by which the Government should give such stability to the industry and security to the farmers as is necessary for the better conditions of employment which we desire and for the breaking up of the grass land. But we venture to put forward certain considerations affecting the various alternative methods of carrying out such a policy. If the method of guarantee were adopted, we should, for permanent purposes, advise a guarantee of from 40s. to 42s. per quarter extending over a period of 10 years. If this were done we should hope that it would result in large additions being made to the arable land of this country. The advantages of this method would be that—(a) The price of wheat to the consumer would not be raised; and (b) the farmer would be given a strong inducement to cultivate his wheat land intensively, so as to secure as large a yield per acre as possible.

In addition to guaranteeing the minimum price for wheat, it has been suggested to us that the State should offer a Bonus to every farmer who is willing to break up land which is at present "permanently" under grass, and to cultivate it properly. If this plan were adopted, we believe that £2 per acre would be an adequate sum to offer, the payment to be spread over four years.

There is no doubt that most farmers are at the present time, as they have always been, in favour of stimulating the home production of food by the imposition of Import Duties on foodstuffs. What they want is security against excessive fluctuations of the market caused by the importation of foreign supplies at very low prices. . . . We assume that if any general system of protecting home products against foreign competition is adopted by Parliament, full consideration would be paid to the claims of the farmers to share in such protection for all his products which are seriously affected in price by such competition.

If the import duties were sufficiently heavy they would have the effect of increasing the production in this country of wheat and of any other protected articles, and if they were not confined to grain and flour, it would be possible to give assistance to every class of farmer. If continued for a series of years, they would undoubtedly lead gradually to the increase of arable land and more employment in agriculture, and in any case the State would have a new source of revenue instead of a new liability as under the proposals for a guarantee and bonus.

In the attempt to anticipate the objections to these proposals there is no hint of what their real effect would be.