# CHAPTER XXVII

## POVERTY AND PAUPERISM

**1. Essence of Poverty.**—It is probable that in the whole range of social ills there is none from which so many people feel that they suffer as poverty. Taking official and private activity together probably more attention has been given to the relief and cure of poverty than to any other social ill even including crime. The reason for the prominence of poverty is that it affects the primary interest of life, namely, the economic interest, the maintenance of life itself.

Poverty is one of the many words referring to social relations which are used carelessly not only in every-day conversation but in many supposedly scientific discussions. The first step in the study of the subject must be to assign a definite meaning to the word poverty and to point out the distinctions which separate the idea of poverty from several other ideas with which it is commonly confused. There will be general agreement that the word poverty conveys the idea of lack or scarcity of the sources of happiness. In its most general sense this lack may apply to any sort of useful thing, tangible and intangible. For instance we may speak of a poverty of ideas, a poverty of brains, etc. It is clear, however, that this is a broader meaning than is usually given to the word in its every-day use. As commonly used, poverty refers specifically to a lack of material goods. We may, therefore, say that poverty is an insufficiency of wealth. But since practically everybody feels that he has an insufficiency of wealth, the next question is: what degree of insufficiency of wealth actually constitutes poverty?

This brings us to a clear recognition of one of the fundamental features of poverty, namely, that it is a purely relative term and a purely relative condition. It is quite impossible to say where poverty ceases and the absence of poverty begins. An amount of wealth which one man considers poverty, another may regard as riches. An amount of wealth which in one society would be generally considered to represent poverty, in another society might be regarded as affluence. The same is true of the same society at different times and of different parts of a society at the same time. An amount of material wealth which would be regarded as poverty in a prosperous rural section of Iowa would be looked upon as a competence in some of the remote mountain regions of Kentucky or Tennessee. The fact is that poverty in its broad sense is essentially a subjective condition, that is, it exists in the mind of the individual. Poverty is the possession of so little wealth that one feels poor.

One's feelings with respect to wealth are determined almost entirely by the prevailing situation of the community of which he is a part. If all my friends and companions are wearing their last year's garments, I do not feel particularly poor if I have to do the same. If nearly all those with whom I associate light their houses with kerosene lamps, I do not feel poor on account of using the same method of illumination, even tho one or two fortunate individuals in the community have gas or even electricity. On the other hand, if the financial situation of all my neighbors improves over a period of years while my own remains stationary, the same command of wealth which at first was entirely satisfactory to me, now leaves me oppressed with a feeling of poverty. These illustrations show the relative character of poverty in the broad sense and the impossibility of reducing it to

terms definite enough to serve as a basis for scientific analysis or treatment. They also demonstrate the practical impossibility of ever eliminating poverty in this sense. As long as the principles of individual liberty and initiative survive, it is impossible to conceive of a state of society where the existing wealth will be so evenly distributed that no one will feel poor.

2. **Destitution.**—It is clear then that when people talk about the abolition or cure of poverty, they have in mind something narrower than what has just been discussed. An analysis of the question shows that in the use of the word "poverty" people very frequently have in mind one or the other of two conditions which are sufficiently definite and objective to be treated on a scientific basis. These are destitution and pauperism. Let us examine each of these briefly.

Destitution may be defined as the lack of a sufficient amount of wealth to provide for the maintenance of health, economic efficiency and happiness according to reasonable expectations. So stated, it becomes clear that destitution is primarily a family rather than an individual situation, since most individuals live in families and since the family is the primary economic unit. With these facts in mind it is possible to define destitution as the inability to maintain the standard of living of the social group to which a family belongs. It does not mean that a family which is not destitute may not be discontented, but it does mean that destitute families are in a situation which merits social consideration and perhaps social care.

Remembering the definition of standard of living, it will be seen that the destitute families in any group are those whose resources fall below the average. Further-

more, in a society where there are a number of economic groups with differing standards of living, the general standard of destitution will be established by the standard of living of the lowest economic group. For example, we do not speak of a banker's family as being destitute simply because its standard of living is below the average of all bankers' families. The same thing is true of merchants or lawyers or doctors or any of the upper economic groups. We do, however, say that a family is destitute when it cannot approximate the customary standard of the great unskilled labor group in this country. In other words, the standard of destitution is fixed by the poorest of the main economic groups, and a given family is considered destitute on the basis of this standard, whether or not it belongs to that particular group. At the same time a destitute family in this country may be better off than the average of doctors or school teachers in some less favored country.

3. **Pauperism.**—The state of pauperism is even more definite and objective than destitution. A family is in a state of pauperism when it is not able to maintain itself without assistance from outside sources. An individual becomes a pauper when he is not able to provide for himself and cannot be provided for by relatives naturally and socially responsible for his support. Pauperism is sometimes so defined as to include only those who are supported at public expense, excluding those who are maintained by private charity. This distinction, however, is unnecessary and misleading. Pauperism is an economic situation on the part of a family or an individual. It consists in the necessity and existence of outside support. It is a matter of little significance whether the support comes from official or unofficial sources. If

necessary, the distinction may be carried out by the use of the terms public paupers and private paupers.

It is clear that the condition of destitution always verges more or less closely upon pauperism. As far as the actual living conditions of the family are concerned, the border line may be faint and indistinct. Many families who are merely destitute are worse off as regards material goods than other families which allow themselves to pass into a state of pauperism. The mental or spiritual distinction, on the other hand, is a very sharp and vital one. The influence of pauperism upon those who experience it is very harmful. This is fully realized by most destitute families, who will fight off the approach of pauperism by every possible means.

For families with ordinary self-respect the final step of appealing for financial aid from either public or private sources is taken only after the point of desperation is reached. When the step is once taken, the results upon the character of the family are immediate and serious. How deep they go and how permanent they are depends of course both on the character of the family and the duration of the state of pauperism; also upon the skill and discrimination with which the relief is administered. These facts are clearly recognized by social workers who do everything in their power to assist a family in other than financial ways in the hope of staving off the actual step into pauperism, and who seek to minimize as far as possible the impression created by such financial relief as must be given. Relief to destitute families should always be given if possible in the form of work or in some way to make them feel that they are self-supporting. Society has a very direct interest in this matter, because the habit of pauperism readily becomes chronic and a thoroly pauperized family or indi-

vidual is about as hopeless an element in society as can be imagined. In fact it is more difficult to make a confirmed pauper into a useful member of society than in the case of a criminal. The qualities of the pauper are almost entirely negative, while success as a criminal demands some positive qualities even tho they express themselves in anti-social ways.

**4. Social Causes of Destitution.**—The treatment of pauperism and destitution is, therefore, scarcely second in its social importance to the treatment of crime. As in every case of social abnormality, the scientific treatment involves an investigation into the causes and effects and the means of cure and prevention. Since from the economic point of view destitution and pauperism are merely different degrees of the same condition, it follows that the causes must be virtually identical. These causes, as in other cases of social abnormality, may be divided into social and individual. The social causes of destitution include all those institutions and conditions, the tendency of which is to make it difficult for the less able and less fortunate members of society to attain even the minimum reasonable standard in the community.

The ultimate cause of all destitution is of course the natural variations in the ability of individuals and the differing opportunities which present themselves to different individuals. As far as differences in native ability are concerned, these have always existed and probably always will. It may never be possible to eliminate them, and it would probably be unfortunate if they were. The same may probably be said also of differences of opportunity. At the same time any society which wishes to reduce its amount of destitution must see to it that the conditions which prevail tend to

give at least an equal, if not a better, chance to those who are naturally handicapped in the matter of ability or opportunity. Any society which allows its institutions to develop in such a way as to permit both advantages and disadvantages to be cumulative, may be certain that it is opening the way for an excessive amount of destitution. It is a rule of life that advantages are prolific while "the destruction of the poor is their poverty." But the conscious effort of an intelligent society should be to counteract this principle, not to accentuate it.

**5. An Economic Fallacy.**—There can be little question that the United States, along with other civilized nations, is open to grave criticism on this account. Altho a democratic nation in our form of government, and a nation where opportunity is supposed to be equal for all, there is no doubt that social conditions have been allowed to develop which tend to give added advantages to those who start ahead and to impede the progress of those who begin with a handicap. Toleration of these conditions traces back to the doctrine of *laissez faire* (meaning, the let-alone policy) which came into prominence at just the time when the institutions of modern society were taking definite shape and dominated social, economic and political thought for most of the succeeding period.

The essence of this doctrine is in brief as follows: The goal of social effort is human happiness. The greatest amount of human happiness exists when every individual is as happy as possible. Each individual will secure the greatest amount of happiness if he is allowed by society to do the thing which he can do best and which he will, therefore, prefer to do. By doing the thing which

he can do best, he will render the greatest service to society which can therefore in turn give him the largest recompense. Every man is the best judge of what he can do best, and if he does not hit upon it in the first instance, he will eventually find it out by the process of trial and error. The ideal state policy, accordingly, is to impose the fewest possible restrictions upon the activities, particularly the economic activities, of individuals, allowing them to fight things out for themselves. By this process the functions of society will fall into the hands of those best fitted to perform them, who will in turn receive the highest possible recompense.

This doctrine which seemed logical in the abstract was later supported by an unfortunate and unjustifiable application of the theory of the survival of the fittest worked out by Darwin. It got a tremendous hold upon the popular consciousness and only an overwhelming demonstration of its practical fallacy could succeed in overthrowing it. This demonstration has at last been accomplished and the doctrine of *laissez faire* has been modified and reduced to the position of relative importance where it belongs. Its results, however, will be with us for a long time to come.

The principal weakness of the doctrine of *laissez faire* lies in the fact that it tends to give extra advantages to those who already possess some, and extra burdens to those who are handicapped. Because of the characteristics of human nature, men who have power, if left unchecked, will inevitably use that power in ways injurious not only to other individuals but to society at large. If economic competition is left free and unhampered, it is certain that it will exert itself on a constantly lower and lower plane of ethics and morality. The process of taking away from those who have not,

even that which they have, goes on with ever increased ruthlessness. The fittest to survive in an unrestrained economic competition are proved to be those fit only for survival, not for any genuine social utility.

Society eventually finds that while its work is perhaps being done to a certain extent by its ablest members, it is being done in a way which conduces only to their individual prosperity, not to the welfare of the community at large. Furthermore it finds that to a very large extent its work is not being done even by the ablest individuals, because there are many cases of socially useful work for which the type of ability required is not the ability necessary to maintain oneself in a fierce economic competition. This is true for instance in the matter of bearing and rearing children, in the cultivation of music, painting and other arts, in education, religion and many other of the most important departments of life. The earliest and most startling demonstrations of the fallacy of *laissez faire* were furnished by the deplorable conditions which resulted in England from the application of this doctrine during the early stages of the industrial revolution.

**6. State Interference.**—As already observed many of the conditions established by the application of the *laissez faire* doctrine have continued and will continue long after the abandonment of the doctrine itself. (This is one of the unfortunate consequences of a mistaken social theory.) Many of them are exemplified in our economic organization, under which buyer and seller, employer and employe, producer and consumer are left to carry on their inevitable conflicts with a minimum amount of state control. Of course, as every one knows, we long ago learned that certain modifications in the

let-alone policy were absolutely necessitated on the grounds of social welfare. These lessons have found their expression in the regulations governing the employment of women and children, the provision of safeguards in dangerous trades, the control of railroads and other public utilities and in many other provisions which have now become commonplace. Nevertheless, the influence of the *laissez faire* doctrine is still felt. Each of these regulations has been accepted as a grudging concession, and each new extension of state control has been consistently opposed by those affected, as if no previous breach had ever been made in the ramparts of *laissez faire*. Our customary attitude in the matter is reflected by the very term we use in reference to it—state "interference." This situation affects the whole modern labor problem which will be discussed in a later chapter.

Other results of the *laissez faire* doctrine which have a bearing upon destitution, altho less directly economic, are those related to matters of morality and conduct in general. Many of these are associated with the doctrine of individual rights and liberties, which was a harmonious contemporary of the *laissez faire* theory. One of the most prominent of these was connected with the matter of the use of alcohol in which it was maintained for generations and centuries that the individual had a right to make an irresponsible beast of himself if he chose. This question has been finally settled in the United States as previously observed. Other illustrations are gambling and various forms of vice and of recreation. It has been very clearly demonstrated that if recreation is permitted to be developed on the commercial basis without governmental supervision, the inevitable tendency is that the whole enterprise will be drawn down to the level desired and tolerated by the

least conscientious and most unscrupulous individuals engaged in the business. The same thing is true in the matter of housing. Without adequate housing laws it is likely that tenements of the poorer class will fall to lower and lower levels, until conditions incredibly out of harmony with modern resources and standards become prevalent.

7. **The Society's Protection.**—In all these matters the evil results are about equally attributable to the frailties of both parties concerned. Prohibition was necessitated no more by the cupidity of brewers and saloon keepers than by the weaknesses of the consumers of alcoholic liquors. Dance halls must be regulated as much because of the immodesty and shamelessness of the patrons as the greed of the proprietors. Insanitary and degrading tenements are the result of the indifference, ignorance, shiftlessness and penuriousness of the tenants as well as the rapacity of the landlords. In all these matters society is concerned not with the location of the blame but with its own protection. It opposes measures which tend to produce pauperism not only because it has sympathy for people who are poor, but because the burdens of pauperism must be borne by society at large. It cannot tolerate unnecessary destitution because destitute people are too unhappy to make good citizens and are too ill nourished to be efficient producers.

From the point of view of social causes, accordingly, social action must take the form of the repression or elimination of those institutions, habits or practices which tend to interfere with the fullest development of the weakest and most unfortunate members of society. Even tho this action necessitates the limitation of the privileges and opportunities of those who are more