

From the book:

The Foundations of Freedom: The Land and the People / 1912

CHARITY.

By Bolton Hall

"There are not charitable institutions enough to supply the demand for charity; that seems incapable of being supplied. But there are enough, at least, to show every thinking woman and every thinking man that it is utterly impossible to eradicate poverty by charity, to show everyone who will trace to its root the cause of the disease that what is needed is not charity, but justice—the conforming of human institutions to the eternal laws of right.*'—Henry George.

It is time for the charity contributor to ask himself why he gives and what is the result of his giving. It is true that with poverty, sickness, and misery all about, we cannot let men suffer and die without doing something, but that is no reason for doing the wrong thing. If, in all these years of giving to "improve the condition of the poor," we have not materially improved their condition nor lessened the demands in their behalf, should we not pause to consider whether we have been working toward a solution of this problem? If we have relieved the poor by reducing the industrious to poverty; if we have fostered dependence and destroyed independence; if we have cured one form of misery by creating other forms, In what way have we improved conditions? What hope have we of improving them by keeping on in that same course?

It is not possible or desirable that we should close our eyes and ears to the claims of the poor, but it is both necessary and desirable that we should recognize that charitable relief is at best a temporary makeshift.

The indefinite multiplication of free eating-houses or other supplies of food, cannot better the condition of society. They make living cheaper and enable the workman to offer his services for less and less return, affording him a more and more degraded

“living.” According to Dr. Richard T. Ely, “Plague, pestilence, and famine together could not work such irreparable harm as fifty free soup-houses. The danger in gifts and clothing is that people will cease to exert themselves and will become miserable dependents on the bounty of others, losing their self-respect and manhood.”

And let us never forget that when we provide such free aids we attract more people willing to work, to marry and raise children on the very lowest of wages, because they know that when work and wages fail, they can depend upon the soup kitchens. Though there be but one more worker than can be employed, he will lower all wages by bidding against the others; therefore, as the man who uses the soup-kitchens the most freely can exist upon the least pay, he will get the job.

Workers understand this. Hence their clamour when someone shows a cooking stove or other device which lowers the cost of living for a family of eight persons to four shillings per day. They know that if it were proved that four shillings per day was sufficient, then that would be the standard of wages. Landowners would increase rents so as to absorb anything over that rate, for whatever else fails, rents go on increasing so long as there are more tenants than tenements.

While overcrowding in tenements and in the labour market continues, free meals, soup kitchens, even charitable Christmas gifts, will surely bring down the rate of wages. They make living cheaper and add attractions to the city that draw more people there prepared to work for the lowest wages. As long ago as 1892 the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor issued a circular “Concerning Unemployed Labour,” in which it was said: “A large number of people without means of support or family ties, constantly tend to the city and diminish by their competition the meagre earnings obtainable by a large class of resident workpeople. They do not know that by coming to the city they probably incur destitution, disease, and suffering. Worse than these, a multitude of vagrants are allowed to come to the city and permitted to remain here, who by idleness, debauchery, and disease add to the pressing demand upon charitable persons and

associations. In addition to the destitution caused by these incompetent or worthless people from outside, the unskilled resident labourers of our city can earn sufficient for self-support only by continuous work and frugal habits. Their labour is precarious, being interrupted by loss of jobs and inclement weather; for the average time of their occupation, as indicated by a report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labour dealing with permanency of employment, is about 266 days in a year. Illness or accident renders them temporarily unable to support their families.”

The problem will not be solved by raising the standard of living. So long as the amount of work to be done, or the amount to be paid for it is limited, to increase desires and to raise the standard of living is but to increase hardships and immorality. With this higher standard and no increase of pay, men will be unable to keep wives as they are used to being kept, so they will keep establishments without keeping wives.

Nor does the remedy lie in model tenements or suburban homes. If model tenements were increased in number, they would attract still greater crowds to the cities. These houses improve their neighbourhoods and increase surrounding rents. As they take up more space than the rookeries which must be torn down to build them, they drive the occupants into other slums, crowding them still more, and further raising rents, for those accustomed to slums are not the people who live in model tenements.

Overcrowding not only raises rents, it also lowers wages, by increasing competition for work. Where there is competition for labourers, wages rise nearer to the full value of the thing produced, but where there is competition for an opportunity to labour, there wages tend to fall to the point of the accustomed living. All wages are based on what the poorest labourer earns and the basis of that labourer's wages all over the world today is the minimum sum upon which he can sustain ordinary life and reproduce his kind.

Charity often deliberately reduces wages, because its managers do

not see the far-reaching effect of their course. They recognize the need of present aid, but are blind to the causes of poverty; they see that alms degrade the recipient, so they teach that the small pittance they can offer must serve as "wages" for labour done. An annual of the Dorchester (Mass.) Conference says: "We strive to make every applicant for aid feel that work of any kind is better than idleness, and that to accept the smallest compensation and to perform the least service well, not only helps to supply present needs, but is the surest way to something better."

Charity interferes with legitimate business. The London coffee stands, which are run for profit, give as cheap a meal as the St. Andrew's Guild, and support those who manage them. These people are sure to beat the charitable establishments. It is their living; hence all their time, strength, and ingenuity are brought to bear in the competition. But because the loss in the charity business comes out of the pockets of its wealthy patrons, it competes unfairly with men earning their living, and reduces their earnings, just as it reduces the profits of the coffee stands. Dispensaries where medicine is given free or sold at cost make living very hard for the small druggist and young doctor. All these devices are merely different ways of distributing burdens. They do not lessen the burdens either in weight or in number.

Free hospitals, although held in high regard, foster improvidence, and moreover, because people who are able to pay, take advantage of free treatment, they cultivate the spirit of pauperism. Under natural conditions people would be able to take care of their own sick; it is the custom of the poor to do so even now. District visitors know that ten times the present hospital beds would not accommodate all the sick in the tenements of New York.

Unselfish care of the dependent, whether dependent from age or illness, is one of the ennobling influences in life; but free hospitals and homes for the aged and infirm, work against such good influences. The selfishness of relegating an old, infirm mother to the routine of institutional life cannot fail to degrade the whole family. Her years of self-denial have been forgotten and her chance of happiness is gone. Besides, there could not be enough of

these homes to provide for all these infirm people.

Present laws and conditions lead to an enormous increase of idleness and crime. Accordingly certain philanthropists make a business of securing positions for discharged prisoners to give them "another chance." But they get this chance at the expense of an honest man, because today, for every man who gets a position another is crowded out. Indeed, while our apprentice system prevents an honest boy from learning a trade, it is unfair to teach a trade to convicts. Just so is it an injustice to carry prison reform to such an extreme that the class from which criminals are recruited learn that the easiest way to secure warmth and food is to join the ranks of petty criminals. Under present conditions, thousands do this every winter.

The same objections apply to the employment of women in men's positions at a lower wage. Frequently women can accept this lower pay simply because there is some man upon whom they can partly depend for support; but the effect upon the labour market is bad. When equal pay for equal work is the rule, things will be different, but at present, charities which teach women free to do some work at less than market rate, are doing gross injustice to those who have honestly paid for an education. Even to supply relief to women and children deserted by husbands and fathers has been found to encourage men, when the pinch begins to be felt, to desert their families. Sometimes this is done carelessly, and sometimes with the collusion of the wife, who knows she will be better cared for in his absence.

All gifts have similar results. In the "Gospel of Wealth," Andrew Carnegie says: "There is something far more injurious to our race than poverty; it is misplaced charity. Of every thousand dollars spent upon so-called objects of charity, it is not an overestimate to say that nine hundred of it had better have been thrown into the sea. It is so given as to encourage the growth of those evils from which spring most of the misery of human life. The relations of human society are so complex, so interwoven, that the creation of a new agency intended to benefit one class almost inevitably operates to the injury of another. The latter being the growth of

natural causes is by far the most important to preserve.”

Early in the nineteenth century pauperism and taxes had so increased in England that allowances were made from the parish treasury for insufficient wages and a standard fixed to which the income of paupers was raised. The Act was justified on the ground that it was cheaper partially to support parish dependents than wholly to support them. But the results were disastrous. There was a general reduction in wages that brought the most industrious to the brink of starvation and destroyed any motive for self-support.

It is but a matter of little time before charity will abandon nearly all its present works. Even now there is unrest and uncertainty. Men who stop to think give in terror, lest, by giving outright, the recipient be degraded, and by granting loans or pensions he be taught dependence and his spirit of self-help discouraged.

The hospitals, asylums, missions, and free meals are free in name only; they are really paid for in heavy taxes. They better none and tend to impoverish all, by increasing the cost of living and decreasing labour's return. They foster dependence on the one hand and condescension on the other, thus emphasizing class distinctions.

As the farmer raises vegetables, so communities raise paupers. The process is the same. The first step is to sow the seeds through charity; for there is no doubt that the amount of pauperism depends, not so much upon the circumstances of the labourer, as upon the ease with which he can secure free aid.

It is almost impossible to believe that promoters even of church fairs and charity balls, for instance, can be deceived about their real character. If a man gives to a charity because he believes it a worthy object likely to do some real good, he needs no opportunity to indulge in eating or dancing as a reward for his contribution. If in the name of charity he pays a fictitious price for a useless article, it is but the reverse of paying labour less than it honestly earns, and just as objectionable. The promoters seem to forget

that He who gave “the earth to the children of men,” says, “the silver and the gold are mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.” He needs not that money be contributed for His work after this fashion: yet it may be that the promoters realize that the conditions calling for relief are not of God’s making, and so the means of affording relief do not need His sanction.

Of all the 2,333 charitable agencies in Greater New York, nothing is so popular as the “fresh air” fund. It has been called “the most beautiful charity of modern times,” and so far as there can be any beauty in charity, this merits the superlative degree. It is difficult to bring one’s self to attack a charity that in the main adds to the happiness of so many children, and therefore, commends itself to all sympathetic persons, but it is not difficult to show its futility as an end in itself. It is about like giving a box of candy, a book, or matinee tickets to a vagrant child. It affords a passing pleasure and may do some lasting good.

Too much emphasis cannot be laid upon the desirability of giving children all the pleasure possible, but giving it must not be considered an equivalent for justice or for help.

Although during 1909 nearly fifty thousand New York City children were taken to the country for two weeks, death in childhood has not become old-fashioned in New York. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent by newspapers and subscribed funds, but the death rate is still one in two among the children of the slums.

When there is mutiny in the Russian army the custom is to stand the soldiers up in line and kill every tenth man. But we do worse than that. We place all the tenement district babies under five years of age in line, and kill every second one!

And really when one comes to think of the conditions under which they live, death is not the worst thing that could happen to them. If they remain in the slums they cannot be said to grow up at all: they merely graduate into the hospitals, the prisons, and the brothels. Our remedy for that is two weeks of fresh air!

And though all the children should be given this outing and win renewed health, not a tithe of their woes would be relieved, nor of their dirt-born diseases healed.

Besides, what is the effect of any fresh store of health given? It increases population and increases the price of land. For all improvements, whether in the people or their environment, go to the profit of the landowner. Prof. Warner says that "In England it has been found that in many parishes rents are increased by the fact that those who live in those particular parishes can obtain doles from the great endowments." It is self-evident that any improvement in the condition of the earth, whether agricultural, mechanical, political, ethical, educational, or even religious, must go eventually and mainly to the benefit of the owners of the earth.

It is even a question whether the fresh air excursion is the truest kindness to the children. It opens up to them a new life, and to the sensitive and imaginative ones at least, must make the slum life unendurable afterwards. So that what was good and desirable in itself might easily lead to suffering, where there is no escape from a return to the slums. Our affection and sympathy for children will not avail if not directed in right channels.

We can never do all that there is to be done in this one little field of outings. Not only the children need to be taken into the country for a fortnight, but whole families should go, and but few societies can afford to take whole families even for a day. Though we raised money enough to take all the slum-dwellers to the country permanently, it would be of no lasting good, for whilst conditions are as they are, others would come to fill their places, the slums would not be empty long—and most of the old dwellers would drift back.

Our charities are so generally regarded as a proof of a highly philanthropic civilization, that few recognize them as a symptom of a disease. We think of them as the result of the experience of 1800 years, but they are really attempts to escape from the lessons of these 1800 years.

To relieve present misery is the best that charity can do. To talk of making men holy before securing them against want, is idle pretence; to teach contentment with present unjust conditions because there is hope of better conditions in another world, is a mistake. To cry out that it is all right because we are better off than ever; that we are improving; or else that it is the will of God that we should be in this condition is blasphemous. This attitude of mind helps to mask the worst symptoms of injustice and misery, and also to uphold those who have forgotten God as a factor in their dealings.

After all, the main indictment against charity is that it darkens the understanding of the giver as well as the receiver, preventing him from seeing where the real trouble lies and what is the real remedy.

No change for the better will result from our present course. The love that might redeem the world is set to distributing soup-tickets.

Were men free to use the opportunities liberally provided by Nature, but are shut up by monopoly and speculation in land, they could do all the things charities aim to do much better for themselves; and were they left the wealth they create and which is now taxed away from them, involuntary poverty would disappear and the condition of the poor be improved beyond recognition.

Nor is it necessary to support charities in order "to do something to help." There are many movements that at least strive to cure causes instead of symptoms and that do not increase burdens; for instance, vacant lot cultivation, political education and economic reform.

While men go on increasing charities they forget that almsgiving is in itself a proof of injustice somewhere in the social system. As Tolstoy said, "If you can afford to do so much for your poor, you must have robbed them pretty thoroughly first." Instead of recognizing that charity is only a hold-over measure while

underlying causes are being investigated, we come to regard it as inseparable from civilization. This blunts our moral sense and lowers the whole--tone of living. The search for causes is discontinued and the injustice becomes more strongly entrenched.

While tills is so, it is next to impossible for men generally to grasp the great underlying principles of a just and righteous social system.

As John Ruskin says: "Men will be unwisely fond, vainly faithful, unless primarily they are Just; and the mistake of the best men through generation after generation has been that great one of thinking to help the poor by almsgiving, and by preaching of patience and hope, and by every other means, emollient and consolatory, except the one thing which God orders for them—Justice."