

A PRESSING SOCIAL PROBLEM.

BY CYRIL ABDY GREAVES, D.C.L.

WE are constantly hearing of the distress of the London poor, and of plans for its relief, or, if possible, extinction. Earl Compton, in the *Fortnightly* of January last, shews by statistics that the London pauper class has increased during the past three years by 6,000 souls. This is appalling!

Three causes may be given for this state of things:—

1. The general depression of trade.
2. The special depression of the landed interest.
3. The enormous increase of population.

(1) Under the first head little needs here be said; except that when men live, as so many do, from hand to mouth, every occasional slackness of trade pushes numbers over the barrier which divides poverty from pauperism.

(2) The second cause is more fraught with ill for London than is generally believed. I can

testify from experience, drawn from residence in several counties, that the number employed on the land is yearly lessening: the reason being that their employers' capital (whether tenant farmer or landowner) is itself lessening.

I leave to abler minds the side-question whether Free Trade in corn is a blessing or the reverse *on the whole*; suffice it to say that it has rendered agriculture an unproductive industry, and flooded the towns—especially London—with starved-out rustics.

(3) But the third cause is the most serious: it is a *constant*, not a *variant*.

Those who have had much to do with the poor know that they think that to have a “*long*” family is the common lot of all men. They marry early, and look for one. Their lives are consequently mere struggles for existence, and when, in premature old age brought on by overwork and care (how old your poorer poor look at fifty!), they can no longer do a fair day's work, the children they have brought up seldom keep them, because, forsooth, they the children have families themselves to toil and slave for; and so *ad infinitum*.

But must this wretched series be expanded *ad infinitum*, or till this poor old planet of ours becomes a cold stone, or at least till its inhabitants have all been reduced to such a dead-level of poverty that Divine Providence intervenes with the pruning-hook of pestilence and famine?

I think not. There is a Remedy. Is it Celibacy? No.

Celibacy is well enough for those who have the forethought to postpone present gratification to insure future comfort; and it deserves more respect than it gets; but celibacy—real, continent celibacy (any other is worthless)—involves too much self-denial to be largely practised.

What, then, for the great mass of ordinary men and women? This is a delicate subject, hitherto mainly whispered in the ear; but I have the courage of my opinion, so wish to proclaim from the house-top that there *are* ways by which married persons may limit the number of their children, or even have none at all. Much good could be done if the clergy of all creeds would forget their *odium theologicum* and the faculty their *odium medicum*, and join in a crusade against Starvation.

But it is not in great cities alone that the curse works. It is a far cry from London to Lewis; but what do we hear from that largest Hebridean isle? We hear that the crofters are violently seizing land and driving away tenants' stock, in order to have more land to squat upon and run out (as they have done their own) by unscientific tillage. Is not over-population the real reason of the troubles of a larger island than Lewis? Land hunger comes from common hunger. The seed of most revolutions is in the stomach.

The primæval impetus, "Increase and multiply," has run on till the prediction of the Holy Founder of Christianity, "Blessed are the barren that bear not," is getting a perpetual, not an occasional fulfilment: if we are not to go on as "creatures without reason, born mere animals" (2 Peter ii., 12, *Revised V.*) we must look the matter in the face; else one needs not be inspired to predict that petty wars will be as common in the twentieth century of grace as they were in the tenth, and infanticide become as recognised an institution in Europe as now it is in China. Both which may Heaven avert!

I have hitherto spoken of the *poor* only; but, inasmuch as the increase of the children of the rich aggravates the pressure on the poor, I wish my strictures to apply to all sorts and conditions of men, whether they live in the hovel or in the palace.

PRICE ONE HALFPENNY.