



12 Dec 1867

**THE DISTRESS IN EAST LONDON.**

**TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.**

Sir,—The distress at the East-end affects so many thousands of our countrymen, that I trust you will allow me to give some account of it in your columns, and to discuss the question whether private benevolence ought to be called upon to aid in its relief, or whether it should be left entirely to the State. The statistics which I shall use are drawn from official sources, and the other facts have been collected by myself in personal visits to the distressed districts, and by inquiry from house to house.

I. East London is a term which everybody knows, but of which few have a very distinct idea. The distressed district known by that name is an irregular square, containing about seven square miles, on the north of the Thames, extending along the river from the Tower of London to the Isle of Dogs, and bounded on the north by the Regent's-canal from Gray's-inn-lane to Victoria-park. Near the city it is full of narrow streets and crowded buildings; nearer the suburbs it expands into wider roadways and neater lines of houses. By the river it includes the docks with their wide sheets of water, their lofty warehouses, and their shipping; and it is studded with iron works, timber yards, sugar refineries, and tall-chimneyed manufactories of every species. It comprises Clerkenwell, Shoreditch, Bethnal-green, Whitechapel, St. George's-in-the-East, Stepney, Mile-end Old Town, and Poplar. Its population is 636,000; being twice as great as that of Manchester, and equal to the combined inhabitants of Leeds, Sheffield, Bradford, Halifax, and Huddersfield. The vastness of its industry will be evident from the fact that the engine and machine-makers, shipwrights, mast and sailmakers, and carpenters numbered in 1861 more than 12,000 adult men, or a population, including women and children, of 50,000. The tailors, shoemakers, and cabinet-makers were nearly 16,000 adult males, showing a population, including women and children, of nearly 65,000. The dockyard and other unskilled labourers amounted to more than 18,000 adult males, giving a population, including women and children, of more than 70,000. For some years previous to 1866 all this population was in a state of prosperity, earning high wages, the artisans 35s. to 45s. a week for about 40 weeks in the year, and the labourers less than half that sum. The artisan families occupied two or even three rooms at rents of 6s. to 9s. a week, had good furniture and clothing, and lived well. There was a large influx of workmen, a great deal of building, and a continual increase of the population.

II. In the spring of 1866 the conclusion of the American war stopped the shipbuilding trade. The commercial disasters that followed the fall of cotton and the financial crisis broke up a large number of other establishments. The majority of the workmen were dismissed. Building stopped, the small tradesmen were ruined, and almost every kind of employment, such as carpentering, tailoring, shoemaking and the like, came to a standstill. The distress last winter was severe, and was relieved by public subscriptions. The summer gave no increase of work, the hop-picking and harvesting were unusually unproductive, and the population is now at the commencement of a second winter with its re-

sources entirely exhausted. The continued decrease of employment may be judged from the fact that the men at work for the eight principal firms at Millwall on the 31st of October, 1866, were 6,170; but that on the 31st of October, 1867, the number was reduced to 3,450; while, except in the case of one firm, there is no present prospect of increase. But the returns of paupers are still more significant. The workhouses have been full during the whole time. The out-door relief has increased in the seven unions in an alarming proportion. On the 30th of November, 1865 (before the distress), the number relieved was 13,874; on the 30th of November, 1866, it rose to 20,665; on the 30th of November, 1867, it was 24,163. Mr. Solater Booth, the Secretary of the Poor Law Board, stated in the House of Commons last Friday "he was sorry to say that the distress was now rather upon the increase, and seemed to have reached a better class of people than those ordinarily in receipt of relief from the rates."

Personal inquiry confirms the truth of these statements. Ask the tradesmen of Limehouse or Poplar, or anywhere in the more distressed portions of the district; ask the clergy or their visitors; ask the employers of labour; it is always the same answer—"There is very great distress; there is no work to be had, the better class of workmen have pawned all their property and are reduced to starvation." Walk along the streets with any person acquainted with the inhabitants and visit their dwellings. Before us stands a well built row of houses of two stories, occupied by workmen. Instead of two or three rooms a family has nominally one. The room is clean and tidy, but there is not furniture. A broken chair, a small rickety table, and a bare bedstead are all it contains. Lift the coverlet, and there are no blankets. Look at the fireplace, and there are no coals. Inquire of the wife

if she has enough clothing, and it will probably be found that she has pawned her petticoat. Examine the children; they are shoeless and in rags. Ask for the food; they have had part of a loaf and a few sprats. Ask about work; the husband has got a day last week, and another day the week before, and so backwards for months. Their sole wealth is in pawntickets. The same experience, with varying details, and with more or less resources from work or the parish, will meet you all down the street. Half the shops are shut up. Return after dark, and five-sixths of the windows are unlighted.

III. The Poor Law Guardians are exerting themselves vigorously to relieve the distress, and, so far as I could ascertain, on the following system:—They meet once a week to receive applicants, when they hear the cases one by one and direct the relief to be given. As the number attending is large, this process occupies some hours. The relief varies in different parishes, but is on something like the following scale:—An able-bodied man must work in the stone-yard and break five bushels of stones during the day, or must pick an equivalent quantity of oakum. He then receives 6d. per day and an allowance of bread varying with the number of his children. For a wife and two children he receives a half-quarter loaf daily; for a wife and six children eight quarter loaves per week. In some places he has 1s. and a quarter loaf per child per week instead of the daily wage and allowance. Widows have 6d. per day and no bread. Sick persons have meat and wine in addition, or whatever is ordered by the doctor. But all must come or



send for their allowance once or oftener a week, at times appointed for all the recipients, and must wait in the crowd until their turn arrives. A few cases where there is no one to send are the only exceptions.

A glance at these regulations will show the nature of the system. Everything is done in a crowd, and without house-to-house distribution. It is said that the numbers requiring relief render this unavoidable, and that the cost of a house-to-house visitation would entail too heavy an addition to the staff of officers and too large an increase in the rates. But it is admitted that the house-to-house system is the proper one, and that much hardship is caused to women and weaker men by the crowded distribution. The relief itself, when the price of bread is considered, is from 6s. to 9s. per week per family; and is, perhaps, as much as a public dole ought to be. In Poplar Union, I understand the relief has just been raised to 1s. 10d. per head per week. It would not be right to make it too high for the sake of the poor ratepayers, who are themselves struggling on the verge of poverty. Blankets are also to be lent in cases of extreme destitution. But, after all, this public dole is necessarily scanty, and only just sufficient to keep body and soul together. The poorest room can scarcely be had for less than 3s. 6d. a week, which absorbs all, or nearly all, the money allowance. The food is dry bread, and scarcely enough to support the man at his work. Obtaining the relief entails crowding, pushing, and the greatest publicity. The man can look out for no other work; if he obtains a single day's employment elsewhere he forfeits the remainder of his week's allowance, and can get nothing more till the next weekly meeting of the guardians. I do not write these particulars complaining of the guardians. I believe they administer their system with zeal and diligence, and with a sincere desire to do the best for the people. But I do say that the system is necessarily and unavoidably a system of hardship, and a system which presses with peculiar severity on the better class of workmen and tradesmen, who, after long months of struggling, have exhausted their resources, and are now forced upon the rates. I cannot agree with the Secretary of the Poor Law Board when he stated in Parliament that "he hoped and expected that there would be no necessity for the organization of relief committees."

What is the opinion in the district itself? I have asked those who are best acquainted with the distress, and most competent to give an opinion. Clergymen, employers of labour, and tradesmen, all tell me that Mr. Selater-Booth is mistaken, and that there is a necessity for supplementary relief committees. They say that the best class of the destitute will not accept parish relief. They will rather starve than do so. They are starving rather than do so; and for the following reasons:—

1. They have a strong feeling that to become a pauper is degrading. Who can discourage such a feeling? They say that they are pointed at and taunted by the lower class for having come down to the same level as themselves.

2. They assert that the ordeal of going before the guardians, and of going to the overseers for the weekly bread and money is not fit for decent people. I asked the wife of a sick man in receipt of parish relief for her experience. "Well," she said, "I'll tell you all about it. First I had to go to the Board on a Tuesday, and stand among a crowd to wait my turn. There would be one or two hundred of them, pushing and using bad language. If a decent woman goes there, their language is shameful. If my hus-

band's life did not depend upon the meat and wine, I could not go there. It is the same thing when I go every Friday for the provisions, but then we get away sooner because we are called alphabetically." I next asked a clergyman of another parish. "It is quite true," said he, "I have seen our town-hall crowded with 200 to 300, all waiting to get before the guardians. They are a rough lot. The stronger push the weaker and the women to the wall. A woman in my district only last week had her breast injured by the elbow of a violent fellow, and it has now suppurated. I have seen them waiting there all day for their turn, and then to receive their allowances. It would be evening before the last of them could get away."

3. They say that the relief given prevents them from looking for work, and that they would rather hold out and try for employment. I visited a very respectable man, who had been constantly employed in a large establishment now bankrupt, and who has only had occasional days' work for about 18 months. Nothing could exceed his destitution of clothes, food, and every necessary of life. Why don't you apply for relief? "Well, Sir," he replied, "it would cut me off from all chance of employment. The 3s. a week would only just pay my rent. The bread would scarcely support myself and my children. I would rather starve and keep the chance of getting work again."

Look at the case of starvation at Bromley, in the Poplar Union, mentioned in a letter in your columns this morning. That is an extreme case, but a representative one. Your correspondent asks for contributions for that family; but he ought to ask for contributions for hundreds of families verging towards the same condition. The evidence at the inquest showed that George Henry Pritchard had seen better days, and that he died from the want of the necessities of life. He was found by the Visiting Committee cold and dead on the floor, and his wife lying like a bundle of rags, all but dead, beside him. The Rev. Mr. Lance said that the deceased and his wife were very high-minded people, and shrank from making their destitution known. The deceased's little boy said that he had four little sisters; the family had long been without food; for a long time past they had nothing but half a loaf in the morning and another at night to live on. They had no furniture. His mother had been ill for some weeks. She had pawned her last skirt to get food. Can harrowing details go further; and can anything more be wanted to show the necessity for some system of relief in addition to that of the Poor Law?

4. Among the remedies suggested is emigration, which formed one chief object of the East-end Relief Committee of last year. But emigration is too costly to apply to the thousands now starving, and cannot be put in practice during the winter months. There is also the resource of migration, that the workmen should seek employment in other parts of the country. But how in their destitution are they to go? Where can they find the money for the journey? What district, during the present depression of trade, can give them work? I am assured that the attempt has been made, and been unsuccessful; and that it is impossible for them to find work. There remains the resource of private benevolence, invoked by the Relief Com-

mittees. For such misery can we refuse it? If East London were Kensington, or St. George's, Hanover-square, or Hampstead, where there are resident gentry, the distress would at once be relieved by public subscription. No squire of a country parish would allow his poor to starve without sending liberal aid from his own pocket. East London has no resident gentry, they have all migrated to the West-end; but is this a reason why wealthy Londoners should not do the same?

I should like to take your readers to the top of the hills of Hampstead, and on this bright, frosty morning to show them the great metropolis spread out in panorama before them. To the right hand lie the mansions of Belgravia and the West-end. To the left, but connected by an unbroken mass of buildings, are the multitudinous roofs of the East London district. If we could look inside the houses how different the condition of the inhabitants. In the west there are comfortable apartments, bright fires, warm and beautiful clothing, luxurious food, happy children. In the east of the same city are tens of thousands of bare rooms, without furniture, without warmth, without sufficient clothing, without necessary food, but with cold and starving children. By the operation of our laws the wealthy districts do not contribute to the poor-rates of the destitute parishes. The West-end and the city are not compelled to pay one penny piece towards the out-door relief of Stepney and Poplar. But can the West-end and the city refuse their voluntary aid? Will they fold their hands and ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?" We heard a great deal last year about the "Enthusiasm of Humanity." There is now an opportunity of putting it in practice. There is also an opportunity of putting in practice the duties of citizenship. We are all parishioners of the great parish of the metropolis, and bound by every tie of duty and interest to aid in relieving its distress.

I am, your obedient servant,

Hampstead, Dec. 11.

R. DUDLEY BAXTER.