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LARGE OR SMALL FAMILIES?

ON WHICH SIDE LIES

THE BALANCE OF COMFORT?

BY AUSTIN HOLYOAKE.

To be publicly known as a Freethinker is not respectable, to be suspected of Atheism is monstrous, and to be an avowed Malthusian is detestable! These are weighty reasons why a man who wishes to be "thought well of by his neighbours," and who is "quite sure the world will go on well enough without his interference," should hold his peace, make money, and die in the odour of respectable sanctity "universally regretted by a large circle of acquaintances." But to some men conscience is higher than consequence. This may be their misfortune, but they are afflicted with the infirmity of speaking out what they think, because they are infatuated enough to imagine that what they have to say may benefit others. There are the names of many men in history who have done this thing, generally to their own loss, but to the world's great advantage.

Without the vanity of insinuating that what *I* may say will ever be recorded in history, and knowing that the force of the argument of the present paper can only apply to certain states of society in certain countries, I wish to record for the first time convictions which I have entertained for many years, believing and hoping sincerely that they will be productive of benefit and not of evil to others.

That most delicate of all subjects, the Population Question, the newspapers generally shun lest they should lose caste, and the medical periodicals are dead against it. But then it is a question which presses for solution more and more every day, and which underlies the happiness of the great mass of the population in all old and over-populated countries; it therefore becomes imperative that some one should endeavour to point out a remedy, or at least a palliative for the widespread misery, suffering, and disease which are kept up and perpetuated from generation to generation. This topic has been dilated upon by men whose names *will* be remembered in history, and all honour to them for their courage. The Rev. Mr. Malthus, though his views in some respects I believe to have been radically defective, did more good by the attention he called to this question, than by all the dogmatic sermons he ever preached. Robert Dale Owen, the worthy son of a worthy sire, wrote his invaluable tract entitled "Moral Physiology;" Dr. Knowlton published his pamphlet "Fruits of Philosophy;" and later has appeared a work—to which is due the honour of having revived the subject which had become dormant from the close of the Socialist agitation in 1844, till the time of its appearance—"The Elements of Social Science." Other works treat upon population, from Mr. John Stuart Mill's great treatise on "Political Economy," down to a penny tract entitled "Poverty: its Cause and Cure." This question is the political problem of to-day, and he who solves it will be the most useful man of his age.

Various schemes are propounded for the amelioration of the growing want and misery of this country, such as Home Colonisation, Emigration, Co-operation, Trades' Unions, and the like. All writers and statesmen admit the fact of an increasing population, and consequently an increasing poverty, pauperism, and starvation. But this may be taken as an absolute truth, that no one scheme could supply an universal remedy, the causes of poverty and suffering in our civilised mode of life being so multifarious. I do not intend to travel over the whole field of politics, or out of this small country of ours. I wish to narrow the question to a very small compass, and to *individualise* it; *here* is the root of the evil, and when the root is diseased, neither branches nor leaves can be healthy.

England is a small island, and, in proportion to the land under cultivation for human food, it is over-populated. No one disputes that fact. The over-population produces disease, suffering, starvation, and death. If instead of thirty, we had twenty millions of human beings, would there not be a better chance of health and food for all? Home colonists say that as long as there is land in this country, it ought to be cultivated, and then double the present number could be maintained. This is not to be disputed. But supposing that by some grand act of legislation, the whole land of this country were to be suddenly distributed to the people, and made to maintain double the present population, how long would society be in a better state than it is now? Just twenty-five years! But supposing it took longer, still the inevitable result would ultimately come, unless some system of regulating the population were adopted. This island is limited, and unless the people on it consent to limit their numbers, the evils from which we now suffer, will not only not diminish, but will go on increasing.

I am not unmindful of the disproportions and inequalities which abound, and which must be considerably modified before anything approaching to a rational state of society can obtain. I have always warred against the injustice of our societary arrangements, and I believe the efforts of the social reformers of this century have been productive of lasting good to our race. But in the present day, in spite of all the teaching and preaching we have had during the last half century, we find ourselves in the midst of a more widespread misery and starvation than perhaps England has ever known before. We talk of the sacredness of human life, but human life shares the fate of every other "article" which glutts the market—it becomes depreciated in value; and it will, as a matter of course, never rise in value so long as the supply is abundant. England's weakness at this moment is her overwhelming population. We devise schemes of emigration to get rid of those who are compelled to abandon the place of their birth, and sever the ties of kindred and home, and seek for a subsistence in the uncultivated wilds of a foreign land thousands of miles away from the associates of their youth and the friends of their maturity. Let those who think it is a good thing that the Anglo-Saxon race should people the world, watch the poor emigrants as the ships leave our shores, and also look into the faces of the relatives and friends whom the expatriated are parting with for ever, and then say if it would not be more humane to prevent so much agony in the world. Granted there may be plenty of beautiful spots on this globe which are suitable for new colonies, still it is the last duty I should consider incumbent upon me to send my children to inhabit them. It is no concern of mine, or any man's in particular, whether these places are populated or not. The aborigines of every sparsely peopled country that the Anglo-Saxon race have seized upon to which to carry the "blessings of rum and true religion"—

whether it be Africa, America, Australia, New Zealand, or elsewhere—have never had reason to believe in the righteousness of the “pale faces” over-running their land; for wherever Englishmen go, there they spread vice, disease, and death among the “untutored savages,” and never rest till they have exterminated the ancient possessors of the soil.

More than nine-tenths of the natives of England would prefer to remain in the land of their birth, if they could be ensured a moderate return for their industry. The “roving Englishman” is generally a person of means, who travels about the world for his own amusement, knowing he can return at any moment he feels “home sick.” The great majority of people object to leave even the town in which they have been reared, hence the crowding of large cities, London especially. And if this question were confined to the town-life aspect of it alone, there would be much to be said in favour of limitation. In fact, it is here that it presses with such peculiar force upon the thoughtful artisan, the small tradesman, and the professional man.

A working man in London, with a large family, if he be reflective, and a person of some refinement, cannot have a happy home. The conditions of happiness to him do not exist. He has no privacy, and the proper deficiencies of domestic life are not at his command. His children are not surrounded by the necessary conditions to ensure their healthy training, either physically or mentally. His eldest boy may be his pride, and he thinks he would make a bright man *if* he could be sent to a good school for a number of years; but then there are five or six others to be considered, and in justice to them he cannot spend money in the education of one, which is required for the food and clothing of the others. And so that wish of his heart is thrust down, and the boy, instead of becoming a brilliant man in some profession, is made a carpenter, a shoemaker, or blacksmith, and is known in after years as “Harry Despond, who would have been a clever fellow if he had been educated when young?” And in times of trade disputes, when the toiler is impelled to resist some reduction in his wages, trifling though it may seem, but which will make the difference to him between subsistence and semi-starvation—who is it who holds out longest in “strikes” (those battles of the poor swarms against the rich few), he who has one or two children, or the man who “has a large number depending upon him?” The thoughtless working man supplies the weapons for his own defeat.

The small tradesmen—that large section of the population of England who form what is called “the lower middle-class”—are influenced in the same degree, though in a different way. At periods of public excitement—it may be a municipal election, or a general election, or when some daring attempt of a retrograde Government is made to wrest from the people one of their dearly-bought liberties—if you appeal to the small tradesman for his active co-operation in the popular cause, you are constantly met by the reply, “I would if I dared, but then you know I have a *large family* dependent upon me; I would not care for myself, but I am bound to think of them. My sympathies are entirely with you, but I am obliged to keep quiet, for it is as much as I can do to pay rent and taxes, and keep the wolf from the door.” And so the ever-present obstacle in this island, “a large family,” stands in the way of education, reform, social comfort, and a thousand necessary and desirable changes. But to what do we mainly owe this state of things? Why, to that pestilential doctrine derived from the Bible, “Increase and multiply,” which is taught in our churches as an “ordinance of God,” and which has been the cause of more crime

and anguish in England than any other false doctrine that ever cursed the land. No one is bound to increase and multiply, excepting it be perfectly agreeable to him and suitable to his circumstances in life. No man is master of his fate so long as he keeps on multiplying "circumstances" which control him at every turn.

The class of clerks in London are numbered by the thousand. They may be in Government departments, in lawyers' offices, in banks, in merchants' warehouses, and other places. They have to sustain the external appearance of gentlemen, and their incomes are fixed, or if they increase, it is only by slow degrees, providing they remain in *one* establishment for a number of years. But as domestic matters are usually managed, their responsibilities multiply yearly, and there is no corresponding increase of means. And all know what a misery genteel poverty is. During the first three or four years of the married life of a poor professional man, he can manage to live in a decent neighbourhood *in town*; but as time goes on, he must either remove into an inferior locality, or move out of town into the suburbs, as, having a number of children, he is "objected to on account of his family" in every desirable house where he wishes to occupy apartments only. And let every man reflect how much he loses of rest, of time, of money, and of opportunities of instruction, of amusement, or of friendly intercourse, by being obliged to "catch a train" or an omnibus every night of his life; and the same anxiety and excitement have to be repeated every morning, when he who has to pursue a daily occupation in town is compelled, by economical considerations, to live out of it. A physician some time ago gave it as his experience, that the mortality among city men who lived out of town, was greatly in excess of that among those who lived only a walking distance from their places of business, owing to the excitement induced by anxiety to catch the train or omnibus night and morning.

Hitherto I have viewed this question almost entirely from the man's point of view. But that is not the whole aspect of the case. There is the woman's, which is quite as important, as the happiness of the world may be said to be in her keeping. The marriage state is the only rational and moral state for the vast majority of adult human beings, and anything that prevents or even hinders that, injures the individual and society. But then the advocates of unlimited families do not hesitate to praise the prudence of the young man who says "he cannot marry until he has made a position in the world." They surely cannot reflect upon the many evils arising from delay. Look at the state of our streets, and read the proceedings of the coroners' courts. We are taught to regard with horror the custom in China of regulating their population by killing a certain proportion of the female children; but what is the condition of London, where, Dr. Lancaster says, the hands of thousands of mothers are imbrued in the blood of their infants, and where specimens of "God's image" done to death may be picked up in the squares, on door steps, and fished out of the river between the rising and setting of every sun? Is this a state of things to be pleaded for, and is there no remedy to be devised to put an end to so much brutalising demoralisation? If persons understood that it was possible to have early marriages and small families, a marked change would be visible in society in a few years. In the present state of the population in England, if every adult male were to take a wife, there would then remain an enormous number of women without husbands. Some persons think they see in the plan of Dale Owen and others, the door opened to wide-spread immorality. This fear would be entitled to respect

if the present state of society were perfect. There is no plan on any subject that may not be abused. In spite of the deadly consequences arising from immorality now, thousands upon thousands of reckless and vicious people abound who dare all consequences. Everybody agrees that the social problem wants solving, and that "some remedy ought to be devised," but very few have the courage to broach this population question, owing to the sneers and odium they have to encounter. The remedy now proposed can be adopted by every individual as soon as its expediency is seen.

All men, generally speaking, not only admire their own wives, but are gratified when other people speak approvingly of their healthy and pleasing looks after years of married life. But those men who admire their wives most, are too often reckless of the charms which win admiration. Constantly do we hear it said by persons when speaking of married women — "Ah, I knew Mrs. — before she was married. She was one of the prettiest girls in our neighbourhood a few years ago; but she has had children so fast, that she is a complete wreck of her former self." This is of so common occurrence, that almost every adult person knows a case in point. But how cruel all this is to the woman. No man, however philosophical he may be, or however "high" his moral principles, feels the same interest in a faded wife, as he does in a bright and healthy one. There are exceptions, of course, but in the overwhelming majority of cases, the deterioration of the wife arises from the selfishness of the husband. Man first destroys the greatest charm of his life, and then has the "consolation" of knowing that he is the author of his own misery. He who is blessed with a wife who retains the bloom of youth through a number of years, glides into the vale of life unconscious of a thousand troubles which rack the souls of men not so fortunately circumstanced. There is much talk about conservatism in politics; but if there were a little more thought devoted to conservatism in domestic life, it would be better for the human race. In married life, the domestic affections may be more perfectly realised by a small family than a large one, and the truest love and the most generous consideration go hand in hand.

It has been frequently maintained, that the children of large families make better men and women than those of small ones, because, having to go out into the world from the earliest age, they learn to "rough it," whereas the children of small families are brought up more tenderly, and are apt to be a little pampered. It is undeniable that two children only in a family are more likely to be better nurtured than four or six, but that they are always spoiled thereby, is no more true than that the roughly "dragged up" always make industrious and useful citizens. If there be any truth in the alleged refining influence of education and good surroundings, the balance of probabilities is against the roughly trained being so useful in the world as the cultivated. And at what a cost is this "rough and vigorous" member of society produced. The mother of a numerous progeny risks her life eight or ten times, besides passing the best portion of her existence in continual suffering. A grave charge made by opponents is, that to check the population is an "abnormality," and must impair the health of both man and woman. This is not true; but if it were, it would be easy to show that the ailments forced upon women in a "natural" way, far exceed any possible to arise from an exercise of prudence. In hundreds, nay thousands of families in this country, the doctor and the undertaker are constantly in attendance; and where such is the case, who can say that there is a "home," in the true sense of that term, for either the father or mother? With a large family, the

father is never free from the harassing care of providing the means for their bare subsistence. A working man who has to support six or eight besides himself, has little leisure and small desire to cultivate his own mind, and this is a fact worthy of consideration by all who wish well to the *present* generation. The most delightful impulses of our mature years are excited and called forth by the love of children, but the impulses are always checked, and sometimes almost obliterated, when anxiety and deprivation enter the house. To preserve the happy medium is a wise economy of the small share of happiness which falls to the lot of man. (It must not be forgotten, that the whole of my arguments have special reference to the *working* classes, of whatever degree.) Duggan, the man who recently murdered his wife and six children, and then committed suicide, might have been alive and comparatively happy, and the world have been saved the remembrance of an appalling crime, if he had had two children instead of six. He was a journeyman silversmith with a moderate wage, and for eight persons to be sustained out of so limited an income, meant semi-starvation, with no education for the children, and perpetual drudgery for the mother, for how was she to maintain a servant out of her scanty weekly allowance? Duggan was a man of weakly body, and possibly weakly mind, and had he been relieved of sixty-six per cent. of his "responsibilities," in all probability he would have been able to have borne his burden through life.

Children who are well cared for and gently reared, experience in their early days the purest and most unalloyed happiness that life can give. But how few members of large and poor families ever wish to pass their childhood over again. And if one or both parents should die early, how rarely is it that more than two or three out of a family of six or eight ever "do well." Their number is a bar to their prospects, and their relatives being totally unable to provide for such a "swarm," they are left to the tender mercies of an already over-stocked society, and their destiny becomes impossible of calculation.

It is urged, that to interfere with the domestic relations, will be to press with peculiar hardship upon the poor. I think this is a mistaken notion. I have been endeavouring to show that the tradesman and professional man, as well as the artisan, would be more independent with fewer "encumbrances," as the supposed child-loving population designate children; but the poor man, in consequence of his poverty, has most to gain by prudence. The real objection underlying the opposition, though it is not openly expressed, is the idea of the deprivation of pleasure supposed to be involved. But this by no means follows. And if it were so, I think I have shown that it would be but the substitution of one advantage for a greater. Earl Russell, in a non-Parliamentary address, said, a few years ago, that life was a "compromise." He was certainly right, look at life as we may. The same passion or desire, though felt by all, does not operate in all with the same intensity. Some require more sleep than others, but they cannot indulge in it if their position in life does not admit of it. One man has an inordinate craving for drink, but when he gratifies it at the expense of his means and his sobriety, all "society" condemn him. Another has a dainty appetite, and must have expensive dishes and plenty of them—he is an epicure. A sluggard who is selfish, will only work half a day, when he ought, to keep his family in decent circumstances, to labour a whole one—him we shun as lazy. But the man who has ten children, when he can only keep two, we pity, and subscribe for, and regard as unfortunate.

But where is the difference? Why should one passion or desire have more immunity than the others?

Some opponents of the practice of limiting the population, urge that the future state of society should be considered, and profess to dread the prospect of the world being without inhabitants. I confess that this consideration does not disturb me. In fact, I do not consider it incumbent upon me to provide for a "possible" future. I am interested in the improvement of the present state of society, and I feel perfectly assured the future populations of this globe will be more likely to know how to regulate their own affairs than we are. The present generation being anxious to control the future, is like a miser wishing to dispose of his wealth even after his death. The great difficulty in politics is how to get rid of the laws and restrictions bequeathed to us by our ancestors, who were no doubt very solicitous that people in after ages should be "well governed," forgetting that every new generation has fresh ideas and fresh requirements.

I never heard but one argument, from a national point of view, against limiting the population, which struck me as possessing any force, and it is this. It is said, and said justly, that the thoughtful people who are capable of self-control, are the best citizens; and if they reduce their own numbers, by limiting their families, they are virtually abandoning society to the vicious and improvident classes—the swarms who generate and overspread the land like some of the prolific lower animals. This is a little startling to the man who is desirous, not only of improving present society, but that which is to follow. But hitherto the competition between the two classes has not been very encouraging, for while "every day a wise man dies, every minute a fool is born." Of course it will be urged, why seek to lessen the chances of the inferior classes being counter-balanced by the superior? I think the prudence inculcated by the system of early marriages and small families will not have that effect, for it is not exclusively from the lower, or even the lowest class that all criminals spring. The younger sons and daughters of middle and upper class parents, having the notions of "gentility" without the means, frequently have recourse to questionable practices to keep up "appearances."

This question, viewed physiologically, to the student of human nature is a most interesting one. Our present system of haphazard marriages is productive of a great deterioration of the human race. Unions are daily contracted between people who ought never to come together, and if the evil could be limited to the contracting parties, it would be of inestimable advantage to society. There are also others who are attracted to each other by the strongest feelings of love, and to prevent their marriage would be a real hardship; but for such people to become parents is a crime. Robert Owen was a firm believer in the influence of circumstances in the formation of character, and advocated the surrounding of every individual at birth with superior associations, in order to develop the good, and suppress the evil, tendencies of their natures. This is sound and rational. But a vast amount of disease and vice would be prevented if the "education" commenced earlier—namely, if parents were only to have children when they themselves were perfectly healthy, and when their means would allow of their properly nurturing and educating all their offspring alike. The late Pierrepont Greaves was a strong advocate of this system of regenerating the world, and was somewhat opposed to Robert Owen's doctrine of circumstances. Robert Owen's celebrated saying was this—"Man's character is formed for him and not by

him." Mr. Greaves formulated his thesis thus—"As *being* is before *knowing*, so education can never remedy the defects of birth." There is a world of truth in both sayings, and if Greaves were acted upon first, and Robert Owen afterwards, a few generations hence would be the heritors of sound bodies and sound minds; and the enormous sums now spent in doctors to cure diseases which need never exist, in parsons who flourish out of the superstition engendered by ignorance, and the policemen and jailors who are employed to punish the vice and crime arising from defective organisations and immoral training—might be devoted to schools where real knowledge would be taught, and in the purchase of necessaries for domestic happiness, without which no family is free to develop to the full its mental and moral attributes.

There is no possibility of gainsaying the fact, that this country is overpopulated, that at our usual rate of increase it must always remain so, and not only not improve, but gradually grow worse. There is only one of two ways of relieving the over-stocked labour market, and that is by death or emigration, and either one is a calamity from which we all instinctively shrink. I have not considered the state of any other country than England, and I have not directed my remarks to any other, whether continental or American. The social problem at home presses for solution, and in adding this as a remedy for much of the evil which threatens to overwhelm us, I do not pretend that it is free from objection, but I do submit that it is worthy of serious consideration.

In this tract I have endeavoured to show, that persons of a "philosophical" turn of mind may marry early and avoid the evils of delay; may cultivate the domestic affections at a moderate cost of health and anxiety; may conserve the charms which yield the keenest joy in wedded life; may ensure to their offspring sound bodies and sound minds; may train those minds to the fullest extent and under the happiest circumstances; may keep their children around them and get them well placed; may control their own fate and maintain their independence; and if my conclusions be sound, there can be little doubt on which side lies the balance of comfort.

[Those who are not acquainted with the practical remedies, will find all necessary information in the little tract "*Poverty: its Cause and Cure*," price one penny.]

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