

**ESSAYS ON THE
DWELLINGS OF THE POOR,
AND OTHER SUBJECTS**

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Essays on the Dwellings of the Poor, and Other Subjects by Rufus Usher

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COTTAGES OF THE RURAL POOR.

AMONGST the various forms in which human misery is found to exist, whether arising from unavoidable misfortune, the result of unseen and fortuitous events, or the more calamitous effects of debasing habits; whether assuming a mental or physical form, there are but few, if any, instances but admit of alleviation or mitigation from the hands of humanity.

Absolute poverty, or indigence, being one amongst many nameless evils which "flesh is heir to," and one also of a most prominent character, it must ever claim a considerable share of attention from those who have accustomed themselves to reflect on the nature of human happiness and misery; and to procure the elevation of that class of persons who are its victims, nothing which affords the slightest chance of success ought to be considered a matter of indifference. The scantiness of the pecuniary resources of many of the labouring poor, viewed abstractedly, is one of the great ruling causes of the apparent wretchedness existing amongst them; and although the state of society renders it improbable that any considerable addition will be made to these resources, it is still some satisfaction to the philanthropic mind to recognize, independently of this, additional funds of comfort, which may be added without subjecting the possessors of property to those sacrifices which so few are willing to make on behalf of their less fortunate fellow beings.

Next to the blessing of a more extended education, as a means of improvement amongst the poor, nothing is

more highly calculated to effect a desirable change in their condition than an attention to the commodiousness of their dwellings. Few errors of greater magnitude, or more fatal in their effects, have been committed by society, than those which relate to the structure and situation of the cottages of the poor; indeed, I know of nothing which reflects greater discredit on the wealthy, than the inattention shown in this respect to their domestic comforts. It is of no avail, as an argument against this charge, to say that the cottages of the poor are appropriate to their standing in society, or that they are as good as they can afford to occupy; for I shall, I hope, be able to show that the improvement of these huts would increase the wealth of the owners, as well as add to the enjoyment of the occupier. It is, indeed, a most erroneous notion, to suppose that every benefit conferred, and every attempt made to improve the social condition of the poor, must necessarily be attended with the sacrifice of wealth; on the contrary, it may be taken almost as a rule, that all improvements in the physical and moral condition of the poor are but so many indirect means of opening to the higher classes of society a new field of acquirement.

It is not coming to a fair conclusion to say, that because a person's income is extremely limited, he is making the best of that little by renting as small a house as he can obtain at the lowest possible rent; for its real value will depend, even then, upon the comforts and conveniences it affords him. A very cheap cottage is, in many respects, not unlike a very cheap garment; it is very well as regards its original cost, but if, from its immediately becoming threadbare, it adds nothing to the comfort of the wearer, or if, from its continual want of fresh outlay, an additional expense is incurred, it proves in the end but a sorry bargain. The worst description of cottages, such for instance as are found in great number in Bucking-

hamshire, have but one room, in which the inmates eat, drink, and sleep; but as these beggar all description, I will leave them to their wretched occupants, and attempt a comparison between the next class and cottages of a superior order. We will take, as an example, the cottage at one shilling per week, and the one rented at fifteen or eighteen pence per week. The first of these, we will suppose, as is generally the case, to have but one small room on the ground-floor, and one sleeping-room of the same dimensions, but neither garden nor out-house. The other may be supposed to have one and sometimes two rooms on the ground-floor, two bed-rooms, with a hovel and garden in addition.

Previously to the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act, it was not to be expected that cottages of a very superior order would be built for the accommodation of that class of the poor who might peremptorily demand a dwelling as their legal right; nor is it to be wondered that the members of select vestries, on whom the entire government of the poor then devolved, should, when repeated applications were made to them for houses, and they were under the necessity of erecting new ones, have exercised that economy which the great majority of them so plainly indicate to have been observed. I should be sorry, therefore, in endeavouring to recognize and point out the evil of such buildings, to tax individuals with thoughtlessness and neglect, where the system under which they acted was most to be blamed. On the other hand, making due allowances for the defectiveness of those laws which operated in lessening the attention of the public to the domestic comforts of the poor, those who have framed so many of these wretched huts on their own private account are not to be exonerated from some blame, because it was necessary, even under the old system, that some outward distinction should have existed

to recognize the independent labourer, renting on his own account, from those who, to the fullest extent, claimed the indulgence of parish relief. The evil is, however, still in existence, and, as it is being still perpetuated, its effects ought to be fully considered.

This is, most unfortunately, a subject that can scarcely be judged of, or represented by analogy, because it is difficult to give any definite idea of the inconveniences to which the inmates of small cottages are subject, by a comparison drawn from similar evils existing in the other classes of society. Many a tradesman, however, who has at one time occupied such small premises as scarcely to be able to place one foot before the other without committing some depredation on his own property, and who has fortunately exchanged them for others of more capacious extent, can at least form some idea of the vast difference that must exist between the situation of one family being crammed into a room nine or ten feet square, in which all the drudgery of the house must be performed; and that of another, having two rooms on the ground-floor, or if but one, having in addition a hovel or out-house, with one or two extra bed-rooms; and he can also form some idea of the superior advantages which nearly the same weekly income must give the one over the other.

Taking the specimens of cottages from those tenanted by agricultural labourers, it will generally be found that, from ninepence to one shilling per week, they are of a most wretched character; whilst those from fifteen to eighteen pence are neat, and have at least some conveniences. The fundamental difference may then be stated at sixpence, or at most at ninepence per week; and to a family whose average weekly income is not more than fourteen or fifteen shillings, it is an important consideration: but in the cottage of the poor, as well as that

of the tradesman, losses are incurred on the one hand, and gain is originated on the other, from scantiness of room connected with the one, and from capaciousness belonging to the other. Many a poor woman is seen to outstrip her neighbour in point of decent appearance, in the extent of her pecuniary resources, and in the credit she obtains. The most common sentence pronounced on the contrast so often observed in the appearance of two poor families is, that the mother of the one is more industrious, and a better manager, than the mother of the other; and this sentence may sometimes be correct: but I have frequently observed, where the different appearances exist, that the one is in possession of a comfortable house, whilst the other is confined to a wretched hut, which does not afford her a chance of placing herself in competition with the former. The one has plenty of room to take in washing; has a proper place for drying and airing clothes; and can always command room enough for any work unconnected with her own domestic affairs; whilst the other is deprived of every similar advantage connected or unconnected with her own household duties. The wives of most agricultural labourers are glad to engage themselves to assist in washing, or in any other house-work for which their services may be required; and this, in numbers of instances, produces a considerable addition to the weekly income of the family; and it will, I think, be found that the char-woman is often selected from her neighbours on account of those very appearances which a good cottage is calculated to produce—such as neatness of appearance in herself and children, and other praiseworthy qualities, no less the result of more favourable external advantages.

A commodious cottage sometimes affords the mother of a large family an opportunity of keeping a small school; to another, perhaps, an opportunity of instructing a number