

THE CRIME OF POVERTY

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The Crime of poverty by Henry George

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HENRY GEORGE

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OF POVERTY**

The Crime of Poverty

BY
HENRY GEORGE

AN ADDRESS

Delivered in the Opera House, Burlington, Iowa, April 1, 1885,
under the auspices of Burlington Assembly, No. 3135,
Knights of Labor, which afterwards distributed
fifty thousand copies in tract form



THE JOSEPH FELS FUND OF AMERICA
Cincinnati, Ohio

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The Crime of Poverty

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: I propose to talk to you tonight of the Crime of Poverty. I cannot, in a short time, hope to convince you of much; but the thing of things I should like to show you is that poverty is a crime. I do not mean that it is a crime to be poor. Murder is a crime; but it is not a crime to be murdered; and a man who is in poverty I look upon not as a criminal in himself so much as the victim of a crime for which others, as well, perhaps, as himself, are responsible. That poverty is a curse, the bitterest of curses, we all know. Carlyle was right when he said that the hell of which Englishmen were most afraid was the hell of poverty; and this is true, not of Englishmen alone, but of people all over the civilized world, no matter what their nationality. It is to escape this hell that we strive and strain and struggle; and work on oftentimes in blind habit long after the necessity for work is gone.

The curse born of poverty is not confined to the poor alone; it runs through all classes, even to the very rich. They, too, suffer; they must suffer; for there cannot be suffering in a community from which any class can totally escape. The vice, the crime, the ignorance, the meanness, born of poverty, poison, so to speak, the very air which rich and poor alike must breathe.

I walked down one of your streets this morning, and I saw three men going along with their hands chained together. I knew for certain that those men were not

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rich men; and, although I do not know the offense for which they were carried in chains through your streets, this, I think, I can safely say, that, if you trace it up you will find it in some way to spring from poverty. Nineteenths of human misery, I think you will find, if you look, to be due to poverty. If a man chooses to be poor, he commits no crime in being poor, provided his poverty hurts no one but himself. If a man has others dependent upon him; if there are a wife and children whom it is his duty to support, then, if he voluntarily chooses poverty, it is a crime—aye, and I think that, in most cases, the men who have no one to support but themselves are men that are shirking their duty. A woman comes into the world for every man; and for every man who lives a single life, caring only for himself, there is some woman who is deprived of her natural supporter. But while a man who chooses to be poor cannot be charged with crime, it is certainly a crime to force poverty on others. And it seems to me clear that the great majority of those who suffer from poverty are poor not from their own particular faults, but because of conditions imposed by society at large. Therefore, I hold that poverty is a crime—not an individual crime, but a social crime; a crime for which we all, poor as well as rich, are responsible.

Two or three weeks ago I went one Sunday evening to the church of a famous Brooklyn preacher. Mr. Sankey was singing, and something like a revival was going on there. The clergyman told some anecdotes connected with the revival, and recounted some of the reasons why men failed to become Christians. One case

he mentioned struck me. He said he had noticed on the outskirts of the congregation, night after night, a man who listened intently, and who gradually moved forward. One night, the clergyman said, he went to him, saying, "My brother, are you not ready to become a Christian?" The man said, no he was not. He said it, not in a defiant tone, but in a sorrowful tone. The clergyman asked him why, whether he did not believe in the truths he had been hearing? Yes, he believed them all. Why, then, wouldn't he become a Christian? "Well," he said, "I can't join the church without giving up my business; and it is necessary for the support of my wife and children. If I give that up, I don't know how in the world I can get along. I had a hard time before I found my present business, and I cannot afford to give it up. Yet, I can't become a Christian without giving it up." The clergyman asked, "Are you a rum-seller?" No, he was not a rum-seller. Well, the clergyman said, he didn't know what in the world the man could be; it seemed to him that a rum-seller was the only man who does a business that would prevent his becoming a Christian; and he finally said, "What is your business?" The man said, "I sell soap." "Soap!" exclaimed the clergyman, "you sell soap? How in the world does that prevent you becoming a Christian?" "Well," the man said, "it is this way; the soap I sell is one of these patent soaps that are extensively advertised as enabling you to clean clothes very quickly; as containing no deleterious compound whatever. Every cake of the soap I sell is wrapped in a paper on which is printed a statement that it contains no injurious chemicals, whereas the truth of the matter is

that it does, and that though it will take the dirt out of the clothes pretty quickly, it will, in a little while, rot them completely out. I have to make my living in this way; and I cannot feel that I can become a Christian if I sell that soap." The minister went on, describing how he labored unsuccessfully with that man, and finally wound up by saying, "He stuck to his soap, and lost his soul."

But, if that man lost his soul, was it his fault alone? Whose fault is it that social conditions are such that men have to make that terrible choice between what conscience tells them is right, and the necessity of earning a living? I hold that it is the fault of society; that it is the fault of us all. Pestilence is a curse. The man who would bring cholera to this country, or the man who, having the power to prevent its coming here, would make no effort to do so, would be guilty of a crime. Poverty is worse than cholera; poverty kills more people than pestilence, even in the best of times. Look at the death statistics of our cities; see where the deaths come quickest; see where it is that little children die like flies—it is in the poorer quarters. And the man who looks with careless eyes upon the ravages of this pestilence, the man who does not set himself to stay and eradicate it, he, I say, is guilty of a crime.

If poverty is appointed by the power which is above us all, then it is no crime; but if poverty is unnecessary, then it is a crime for which society is responsible, and for which society must suffer.

I hold, and I think no one who looks at the facts can fail to see, that poverty is utterly unnecessary. It is not by the decree of the Almighty, but it is because of our

own injustice, our own selfishness, our own ignorance, that this scourge, worse than any pestilence, ravages our civilization, bringing want and suffering and degradation, destroying souls as well as bodies. Look over the world, in this hey-day of nineteenth century civilization. In every civilized country under the sun you will find men and women whose condition is worse than that of the savage; men and women and little children with whom the veriest savage could not afford to exchange. Even in this new city of yours, with virgin soil around you, you have had this winter to institute a relief society. Your roads have been filled with tramps, fifteen, I am told, at one time taking shelter in a round-house here. As here, so everywhere, and poverty is deepest where wealth most abounds.

What more unnatural than this? There is nothing in nature like this poverty which today curses us. We see rapine in nature; we see one species destroying another; but as a general thing animals do not feed on their own kind; and, wherever we see one kind enjoying plenty, all individuals of that kind share it. No man, I think, ever saw a herd of buffalo, of which a few were fat and the great majority lean. No man ever saw a flock of birds, of which two or three were swimming in grease, and the others all skin and bone. Nor in savage life is there anything like the poverty that festers in our civilization.

In a rude state of society there are seasons of want, seasons when people starve; but they are seasons when the earth has refused to yield her increase, when the rain has not fallen from the heavens, or when the land has been swept by some foe—not when there is plenty; and