

THE PROBLEM OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND IDLE LANDS.

BY JOSEPH FELS.

Following is part of a notable article in a recent issue of the *London Times* in which Mr. Fels gives some account of his remarkable work in organizing in London a form of relief which has been tried with such signal effect in so many of the cities of the United States. The success attained has a special interest for Single Taxers, since it shows that the immediate need of civilization is access to land and that this is all that is required to solve the problem of disemployment. Mr. Fels, who, with the extraordinary energy that characterizes him in the work of well doing, has set himself to the task of helping London's unemployed in this practical way, does not, of course, regard this as a permanent solution of the labor problem. But it must serve two very useful purposes—one as a means of immediate industrial relief to the many who avail themselves of the opportunities so offered, and the other, as furnishing to those who can be induced to think an object lesson of profound significance.—Editor *Single Tax Review*.

The question of finding remedies for the prevalent and serious state of unemployment is one of the most complex problems of the day. It has many aspects and viewed as a whole, the solution appears so difficult that many well-meaning but pessimistic persons incline to regard it as an indication of general decadence in our trade and condition. If only a fraction of the time that is spent in lamentation about the subject from this point of view, or in writing doleful details for the press, were spent in attacking the matter from the most available side, some good would certainly result which might, with energy, be steadily multiplied. In every business, either on a large or a small scale, what is the first and most reasonable course of procedure when it is discovered that the total receipts do not compare favorably with the total expenditure? Is it not to search for any possible source of waste which is causing a leakage in the funds, and to stop it as promptly as means permit? Then we can next endeavor to find fresh outlets for our goods or produce, or to ascertain which of those already at command can be most readily extended with a prospect of profit.

The greatest and most deplorable source of waste in Britain is to be found in the land, which should in itself be the origin of the wealth, or at least the maintenance, of its inhabitants. There are hundreds of thousands of acres at the present moment not yielding a tenth of their possible produce owing to imperfect and antiquated methods of cultivation. Worse than this, too, is the fact that there are millions of acres of land capable of yielding a profitable return for the labor expended upon it, which are lying either in an absolutely waste and useless state, or are so near that condition as to be practically valueless as a national asset.

Here then, is one aspect of the unemployed problem, and no adequate or far-reaching attempt has been made to deal with it in a way that should be nationally beneficial. We have a huge surplus in land, and a corresponding surplus in labor; does it not appear obvious that a scheme which shall unite the two forces must, under a proper system of organization, result in all-round improvement?

AMERICAN VACANT LOTS.

It is difficult to move the authorities in the direction of extensive schemes connected with the work on the land, and, in consequence, much is left to public and private action. Even in the United States where the same problem exists, it has been found necessary to proceed beyond the ordinary stereotyped relief works provided by States or towns, and to find additional means of employment of a more permanent character. Recognizing the fact that it is better to do something to help on a small scale at once than to wait indefinitely for opportunities to start extensive undertakings, societies have been formed in America under the title of Vacant Lots Associations, which, in several of the largest cities, such as Philadelphia, New York, Cleveland, Buffalo, etc., have accomplished some wonderfully good work, and they are progressing at a highly satisfactory rate.

In Philadelphia in particular the results have been remarkable, and as the society has now a record extending over 12 years, the position is not only well assured, but the power for substantially good work is increasing every season. From the 11th annual report we learn that about 300 acres are under the cultivation of unemployed and partly employed men, thus providing some relief for about 1,000 families, comprising, say, 5,000 persons. In 1907 vegetables and other garden produce to the total value of \$67,500 (£13,500) were raised upon the area named, showing an average of \$225. (£45.) per acre. The total cost to the society was £1,500, so that, for every £1 subscribed to the funds, £9 worth of produce was returned to the holders and cultivators of the land. Less than £2 per family was expended to ensure this result. Well indeed might the association adopt the following verse as its motto, for it admirably expresses the idea which underlies the object of the undertaking:—

“I gave a begger from my little store
Of well-earned gold. He spent the shining ore
And came again, and yet again, still cold
And hungry as before.
I gave a thought, and through that thought of mine,
He found himself a man, supreme, divine,
Bold, clothed, and crowned with blessings manifold,
And now he begs no more.”

LONDON VACANT LAND.

Knowing so well what has been accomplished in America, in which work I have taken part, I am founding a similar organization in England. The start was made last spring, when, as the result of a meeting in Toynbee hall, the London Vacant Land Cultivation Society came into existence, and is now extending its influence and its work in every available direction.

METHODS.

The method adopted is to obtain the loan of unoccupied land as near the centres of congested population as possible. This is marked out into plots of about one-eighth of an acre, say 20 square rods (that size being found convenient in many respects), and these are allotted to suitable men who are in irregular and partial work which only brings in a small sum each week. It is felt that the benefit is greater to those so placed, because, if their small earnings are supplemented by the produce of such plots, it prevents the men drifting into the ranks of the absolutely unemployed, or becoming a charge upon the ratepayers. If there is any truth in the old adage, "Prevention is better than cure," it should apply here with double force.

When the first digging is completed to the satisfaction of the superintendent, a small sum is paid to each man as an encouragement, and this enables him to provide himself with the necessary tools, seeds, or plants.

Up to that stage, the society supplies what tools, manure, or seeds are needed, and at all times gifts of these essentials are distributed amongst the men without charge. The society also provides for superintendence and instruction free of cost to the men; in fact, it strives to help them and their families in every reasonable way to employ their many otherwise wasted hours to the best advantage in a healthful and pleasant occupation. How keenly these privileges are appreciated is proved by the statement that the applications for plots far exceed the number at the disposal of the society, and, with effective financial support, it would be easy to find cultivators for a thousand acres of land.

At the present time the society has under its control land at Fulham, Balham, and Canning Town, providing for over 200 plot-holders, and, though some of this has only been in cultivation for a few months, it is astonishing what results energy, perseverance, and care have produced. A large proportion of the land was of a very difficult character, and much labour has been required to bring it into the right condition. Fully 90 per cent. of the men have kept to the work extremely well, following directions with due attention, though it is a form of labour that few are familiar with. In the case of men who have been in defective health the improvement has been conspicuous, and they speak most thankfully of the benefits they have derived. The marginal 10 per cent. have either found the work too much for them, or they have secured other employment. In the latter respect some of the men have been very fortunate, and they refer to it as a curious coincidence that, since taking up these plots, they have had more casual work than they have had for a long period previously. We wish it applied to more of them, for many have a severe struggle to face all their responsibilities, and have found the few shillings they have realized by the sale of produce a most welcome addition to their poor resources.

A short time since a paragraph went the round of the papers referring to a lady farmer in Essex who had secured 320 bushels of peas to the acre; but

this total was far surpassed by one of the "Vacant Lotters," who had never grown peas before in his life, on soil from which he had removed some tons of bricks, stones, and rubbish before it was fit for seed of any kind. He had an excellent crop of telegraph peas, large pods well filled, and the total, estimated by the acre, would have exceeded 450 bushels, worth £64 for the same area and at the rate he sold them—which might have been easily exceeded—and he could have sold ten times as many. Other varieties on adjoining plots were almost equally good; and when it is remembered that this represented a return for about 10 weeks in the summer months, it is a striking instance what the land will produce under spade cultivation.

The amounts realized are such that a professional market grower with all expenses of rent, rates and labor to pay, could clear a living profit. How much more beneficial they must be to men who are relieved of these charges entirely—for their time would have been otherwise lost—can be readily understood.

There is the further advantage that the men's independence is preserved; they are encouraged to work for the best results because they reap the full benefits. Moreover they are learning something of the power of the land as a producer of useful and valuable crops under the best treatment.

THE SERVANT IN THE HOUSE, SINGLE TAX AND SEGREGATION,

SOME RAMBLING REMARKS MAINLY FOR WOMEN.

(For the Review)

By GRACE ISABEL COLBRON.

Our brothers for justice, the Socialists, have stolen a march on us. They have taken spiritual possession of the one really important drama our stage has seen for some time—seen as a popular success, that is—and have proclaimed it to be the mouthpiece of their doctrines. Their newspapers have arranged for special tickets for their clientele; clubs and societies have filled the galleries; and the spiritual greatness of socialism was proclaimed as the reason for the spiritual beauties of this great play.

Now as a matter of fact, there was nothing in *The Servant in The House*, that we Single Taxers might not have claimed with equal right. The play preached the doctrine of a church founded on brotherly love, of a religion of justice, and inculcated hatred of worldliness, of selfishness, of greed masquerading in the name of goodness. These are doctrines that lie at the bottom of every true religion of reform, of every endeavor for a nobler spirituality in material things. The preaching of these doctrines in the play was so strong