

CHRISTIANITY AND POVERTY.

BY A. W. METCALFE.

"Nothing is clearer than that, if we are all children of the universal Father, we are all entitled to His bounty; no one dare deny that proposition. But the men who set their faces against its carrying out say, virtually: 'Oh, yes, that is true; but it is impracticable to carry it into effect!' Just think of what this means: This is God's world, and yet such men say that it is a world in which God's justice, God's will, cannot be carried into effect. What a monstrous absurdity! What a monstrous blasphemy! If the loving God does reign, if His laws are the laws not merely of the physical, but of the moral universe, there must be a way of carrying His will into effect, there must be a way of doing equal justice to all His creatures."—Henry George.

Christianity is essentially practical. It is high time we admitted the full light of its teaching, and that of the Old Testament too, upon the laws and institutions of the nation. Poverty, with its attendant suffering, appeals strongly to the hearts of Christians, but does it appeal as it should to their intellects? A little sanctified common-sense would make clear to us that much, in fact most, of the prevailing poverty is due to a disregard by us, as a Christian nation, of certain fundamental principles.

The Christian Church should direct its attention to "justice" as well as to "temperance and the judgment to come." It is easy for most of us to thank God for His mercies, but what of the thousands who are chiefly outside the pale of our Churches, whose lives are spent in a monotonous round of toil and hardship, with little prospect of relief on this side of the grave? Why are they not favoured like ourselves? In most cases certainly not because they are less deserving than we. With most of us is it not true that our better circumstances can be traced to privileges which we have inherited or acquired, and which the laws of the State enable us to use for our own benefit?

A large proportion of the poor are in that condition from lack of opportunity to earn a competence by their labour. If the Carpenter of Nazareth came to this place in search of work would He ever become prosperous, not to say rich, by His industry as a workman? Would He not be continually standing aside to let some other poor man get His job who had a wife and children to work for?

To the vast majority the only condition of making a bare livelihood is to submit to what must be characterised as a wage-slavery, whilst a privileged few are, through their labours, enabled to live in luxurious idleness. If Christians cannot do something to alter this state of things they may as well give up their title to the name. We have no right to willingly participate in a condition of things which is clearly contrary to the designs of the Creator, and not use our influence to alter it. Look at our land. The country districts are being denuded of people, as we may see in Scotland and many parts of England, not to mention Ireland, in many cases just to make sport for the wealthy. Our cities are filled to congestion with teeming populations, herded together like beasts, or worse, whilst in close proximity to the overcrowded areas are many vacant unused spaces waiting for a ransom price to acquire them.

All this points to one thing, a vast, unbridled monopoly in the land of our country, whereby the many are robbed of their rightful inheritance by the few. Moses in his day instituted private possession of the land, but not monopoly—individual rights subject to the rights of others. But in our day most of those born in these islands have no legal right to live an independent life; they must first satisfy the demand of some private owner for the use of a bit of God's earth.

The people sacrifice their blood and treasure to protect their native land. Then why should a tiny minority of their number be allowed to own it without rendering to their fellow-countrymen an adequate return for the privilege?

Whilst in strictest equity the land should belong to all, the present owners have appropriated it, and entrenched themselves behind ancient laws made by their own class, and altered from time to time to favour their own interests. Formerly the whole burdens of State were borne by them; now they bear but a very small proportion, and in local matters the landowner may be wholly exempted from all burdens, whilst drawing thousands of pounds every year in rentals.

The natural result of this has been to foster in the owners a condition of irresponsibility. They can easily withhold land from use, and thereby restrict the supply so as to enhance the value. In doing so they prevent labour from having the access it should have to natural opportunities. A very little thought will show that we have now put our finger on the principal cause of the great mass of involuntary poverty and overcrowding, because land monopoly interferes with employment and prevents the natural distribution of the people upon the land. "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field till there be no room."

In seeking for the cure of this state of things we need to observe one great fact, that the value of land depends almost entirely upon the people about it and on it. Let the people vanish and the site value vanishes too. Here we have surely a God-given measure by which to determine the responsibility of every owner for the privilege he enjoys of reserving a part of the nation's soil to his own use. It is by no means necessary to dispossess an owner, but to make him pay to the community a tax proportional to the value of his monopoly. As a result he will either use his land well, or seek for someone else to use it for him.

This would interfere with no canon of equity, but would be the first step towards restoring a condition of equity between the few in possession and the many dispossessed. It would not be confiscation, but the undoing of a system which is at present confiscatory in its operation. The present system causes an inequitable distribution of God's bounty. It hands over to the almost irresponsible few vast stores and revenues of wealth, whilst it dooms the many often to a precarious existence of toil and poverty, and it is necessarily accompanied by a certain proportion of unemployment. If we regard this "iniquity" in our hearts, if we secretly or openly uphold it, and do nothing to abolish it, because it may cause us some loss, then let us not be surprised if "the Lord will not hear us" when we call upon Him.

A VISIT TO FAIRHOPE.

BY JOSEPH FELS.

I have just visited Fairhope, the Single Tax town and colony in Baldwin Co., Ala., U.S.A., and fronting on Mobile Bay. I have been interested in the colony for about 10 years, and have visited it several times, the last time previous about a year ago. Evidences of growth and increasing prosperity have always been apparent on my visits, and, in spite of heavy damages to public and private property by a disastrous storm of September, 1906, the growth during the past year of this valuable object-lesson has been most encouraging. During these "hard times" throughout the United States, which have caused an almost entire cessation of building enterprises in many directions, Fairhope is experiencing an unusual building activity. A fine addition to the public school building has just been made. A new, though small, library building of concrete construction is about completed. About a dozen new buildings have been built within the past two months, are now building, or are planned for immediate erection. The wharf, swept away by the storm referred to, has been replaced by another and far

better one, and another wharf for the cheap handling of manure from Mobile for the farmers, shipment of wood, ties, &c., is to be built at once, as also one or two barges for transportation purposes.

Best of all, the people seem to be hopeful and united to a degree which I have never noted before.

It seems to me, and has for years, that Fairhope has not received quite the recognition from land reformers that it deserves. It numbers among its members some of the clearest-headed followers of Henry George it has ever been my pleasure to meet, and they have shown, and still show, a zeal and willingness to sacrifice, if need be, for the cause which has not been surpassed in any cause or country in modern times.

With the imagination to plan and the enthusiasm to undertake so unique a method of at once applying the principle of equal right to the use of the earth, they have combined a patience under trying conditions, and perseverance against difficulties expected and unexpected, which are indeed remarkable.

Probably most of your readers know something of the colony and its policy. Briefly, the plan is to collect as rent the rental value of land which Henry George would have taken in taxation, and to apply the rent to the payment of the State and County taxes and for local public improvements.

A strong point in favour of their plan, in addition to its being the only one yielding immediate results, is that it gives the power to take the full rental value. Even where the greatest progress is made in educating the people to the truth that land values belong to the public, progress toward taking them will necessarily be gradual, by the dropping off of other taxes and progressive increase of the land taxes.

Fairhope was founded upon the proposition that all the land value belongs to the people, and all is taken for them. There is no piecemeal or partial work about it. I do not see how any believer in the justice or sufficiency of this policy can doubt that it must bring good results, however accomplished. Certainly the land reformers of Fairhope have shown no doubt of the results which must follow, and one has only to visit the community to see that their faith is being vindicated.

There is no land speculation in Fairhope. People who want lands for use can get them in the most desirable sections at a rent which, to one familiar with the price of land elsewhere, seems merely nominal. People who hold vacant sites or lands which they intended to use, but for any reason decide not to do so, are glad to surrender them—which they are always at liberty to do—and they are at once available for others.

Few people hesitate to improve their lots or add to stocks of goods on account of an increased tax, for the rent, their sole payment, is the same regardless of their improvements. There is no rent-absorbing class in Fairhope holding the choice sites at the expense of later comers, none being without work from investments in town lots or farm lands. This is a powerful aid to a genuine democracy. There are no classes in Fairhope based upon landed possessions. Wealth counts for nothing socially, and people are valued for their personal worth to a degree unknown elsewhere. The average of intelligence is extraordinarily high. With some opportunities for observation, I believe it to be higher than in any other community of like size in the world. The knowledge that the whole people will share in every public improvement fosters public spirit. The people plan and work for the common good almost as they plan and work for their private benefit. The problem of unemployment is practically unknown. Men may not always get work they want to do, but they always have the land to go to, and land as good as any within two and one-half miles of the centre of the town can be had for 35 cents an acre annual rental.

HOW WE COLLECT THE LAND TAX.

BY A LAND TAX COMMISSIONER.

The Meeting of Commissioners.

Three times a year I am summoned to Greenwich to perform my duties as a Commissioner of Land Tax. I do not often go. In fact, to tell the honest truth, I have been but once. But at last I made up my mind that I must really see how great a loss to the good government of the realm was being caused by my neglect, and, one fine morning, I cycled across Blackheath to the annual meeting of the Commissioners. The agenda seemed unusually important. We were to appoint our own chairman, and to appoint also the collectors for the whole of the Blackheath Division, which includes the parishes or districts of Deptford, Greenwich, Lewisham, Kidbrooke, Lee, Woolwich, Plumstead, Eltham, Crayford, and Erith.

Thirteen or fourteen Commissioners trooped into the office at Royal Hill, and with them the Clerk and sundry subordinate officials. One white-haired old gentleman proposed another for chairman. He was accepted unanimously, and declared his patriotic determination to do his level best. Then came the business of appointing collectors. We had a hectographed paper put before us showing who the collectors were, and what was the remuneration they received. The Clerk mentioned the fact that they were willing to continue in office for the forthcoming year. The Chairman murmured something, the gentleman next him said "Agreed." "What was agreed?" I asked. It was agreed that the collectors be reappointed. So I asked if we had any option, whether we might have appointed others instead. Yes, I was told, we might, but the idea of making a change unless a death or something terrible had happened was not to be contemplated. I asked them if we had any choice as to the amount of remuneration. No. That was settled by the Inland Revenue Commission. Still anxious to learn, I went on asking questions, and learnt that there are forty Commissioners for Land Tax for the Blackheath Division, and that two form a quorum.

Collectors and their Pay.

Then the collectors came in, stood in a long line against the wall, and solemnly accepted the duties and remuneration of their office. They are paid by salary and commission. The commission is threepence in the pound. The salary varies, but averages between eight and nine pounds a year per man. In one case it is only £1. The whole land tax of Kidbrooke is collected for a salary of £2 and a commission of 4s. 9d. The Plumstead collectors get £8 in salary and one guinea in commission—from which the arithmetically-minded can calculate the amount of land tax raised, on a nominal 4s. in the pound of annual value, from the landowners of Plumstead. It amounts to £84 5s. 11½d. Ridiculously small as the pay of collectors appears, the local expenses of collection absorb fully one-eighth part of the produce of the tax. The whole business strikes me as a ridiculous waste of time and organisation. One wonders why the Inland Revenue Department cannot get in the money without this parade of honorary Commissioners; or, which perhaps would be better, hand over the whole thing to the local authorities, the collection to the rate collectors, and the produce of the tax to the Borough or District Council.

What the Tax brings in.

Just in proportion as institutions are senseless for the purposes of to-day, they are apt to be interesting historically. So it is with the Land Tax. First we note that the tax has nothing to do with the present value of land. The quota for each property is fixed by "38 Geo. III.,"