THE ANTI-POVERTY SOCIETY.

There is something very melancholy in the enterprise which Dr. McGlynn and Mr. Henry George set on foot at Chickering Hall on Sunday evening. Ever since society has been organized on an industrial basis it has been fairly well understood that the conditions of prosperity in the world were industry and frugality. Those grew rich above their neighbors who worked harder and denied themselves more sternly than their neighbors. The average condition has been that of living from hand to month, as the saying is, simply because the average man has refused to do more work than would supply his immediate needs, and has been incapable of the self-denial required to make provision for the future. Those who have fallen below the average and have become burdens upon the workers of the community have done so because they have been incapable of even the average of industry and self-denial. Whether they are disabled in mind or body from doing their share of the world’s work, or willfully shirk it, the result is the same.

Of course there are exceptions. As there are men who are poor by unmerited calamity, so there are men who grow rich by fraud. But the truth that prosperity comes from hard work and self-denial and that poverty is the result of laziness and self-indulgence is none the less patent to every man and woman in the United States. It is a lesson which experience teaches them daily, and it is a most wholesome and useful lesson. It is the real explanation and the only explanation of “Progress and Poverty,” and it is recognized to be so by everybody who does not delude himself or is not deluded by others.

Nevertheless, it is an explanation very distasteful to those who are discontented with their lot and who find it bitter to admit that their fortunes correspond to their deserts. As these persons comprise almost all mankind, a man who offers another explanation by which prosperity is made irrelevant to merit, not as the exception, but as the rule, is sure of an eager hearing, even from those whose own experience emphatically contradicts his teachings. He appeals, in the first place, to that envy which is one of the meanest of human sentiments, and of which those who cherish it have generally the grace to feel ashamed. They are more than ready to be persuaded
that they ought not to be ashamed of it, and that their envy of the prosperous is not a malicious dislike of intelligence and industry greater than their own, but a noble indignation against trickery and fraud. If they are told that rich men have become rich and that poor men have become poor by “sharp practice” exercised upon the latter by the former, and that riches are not merely accidental but wrongful, they will incline much more readily to this doctrine than to the doctrine of a man who tells them that those who are chiefly anxious to reduce their hours of labor cannot compete with those who are willing to increase them.

Upon educated persons who do not spend much of their time in envying those who are richer than themselves the panacea for poverty prescribed by Mr. Henry George has made no impression. They declare that his diagnosis of society is incorrect and his remedy preposterous; that the possession of even great riches by one man is neither on the face of it nor in fact an injury to another who does not possess them, and that inequality of fortune is not “wrong” in any sense in which inequality of intellect is not wrong, or a deluge or a drought or any other operation of nature.

Uneducated persons who are also envious persons are apt to be much more deeply affected by the touchings of Mr. George, whether promulgated by himself or by Dr. McGlynn. They do not care about the processes by which the conclusion is reached, but the conclusion is deeply gratifying to them. As it is interpreted by them, this conclusion is that they “ought” to be richer, and that they are to become rich by acquiring wealth now in the possession of some one else. Nothing could be better adapted to gratify envy than this proposition, and nothing, therefore, could find a readier acceptance from the envious when it is preached to them with an air of authority by men who are better educated than themselves and whom they may be pardoned for regarding as authorities. But when one thinks of the effect of such a doctrine, of the nourishment it gives base passions, of the contempt it inspires for the old and humdrum and painful methods of attaining prosperity, and of the incitement it furnishes to wholesale robbery, the responsibility of the preachers becomes simply frightful to contemplate.