

AMERICAN SOCIAL PROGRESS SERIES

# MISERY AND ITS CAUSES

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## PREFACE OF THE EDITOR

PROFESSOR DEVINE'S "Misery and its Causes," like Professor Patten's "New Basis of Civilization," with which this series began, attempts to articulate a new social philosophy, pragmatic, economic, and socially adaptable to the existing conditions of American life. Both volumes contain in substance the Kennedy lectures for the year of their respective publication, as prepared for the School of Philanthropy on a foundation made possible through the generosity of Mr. John S. Kennedy, for the express purpose of creating a literature of social work which shall guide, inspire, and make more efficient the busy practical worker who must replenish from time to time the sources of his energies in order to serve with power.

With fascinating realism, with astonishing concentration, with the keenest insight and interpretation of the results of an unusually rich, deep, and varied personal experience, and with a charm of style and a perfectly irresistible optimism in treating some of the saddest facts of human life, Professor Devine has placed

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us all under lasting obligations not only for a better understanding of the causes of misery, but also for the realization of the fact that there is a prophylaxis of misery and the promise of a real world in which it will be reduced by social control to manageable proportions.

SAMUEL McCUNE LINDSAY.

NEW YORK CITY,  
*April 20, 1909.*

## PREFACE

FOR a little over a dozen years it has been my duty and my opportunity to know something of the misery of the poor in New York. I am quite aware that there are many to whom that span of experience will seem brief and inconclusive. Let me avert this objection by a disclaimer against the inference that I am relying for my conclusions entirely upon my own personal experience and observation.

First of all I have had the benefit of the daily experiences of my associates in the General Work of the Charity Organization Society; of my associates in the publication offices of *Charities and the Commons*,<sup>1</sup> who are gathering in assiduously, week by week, a worldwide experience in social work; of my associates in the School of Philanthropy, directors, instructors, research fellows, and students; and of my colleague, the director of the Department for the Improvement of Social Conditions, and his staff.

This survey of modern misery has thus a somewhat

<sup>1</sup> This journal has been rechristened *The Survey* while this volume is in press.

## PREFACE

broader basis than any one personal experience with dependent families, illuminating and instructive as that case work alone would be if it could be fully analyzed and interpreted. It so happens, further, that within the past two years I have had some personal connection with three special inquiries, each of which reveals certain aspects of the lives of workingmen which do not necessarily and regularly enter into the experiences of the charitable societies and which are yet to be considered in any study of modern misery. I refer to the Pittsburg Survey, carried out by the Charities Publication Committee, to the investigation of the Standard of Living, under the auspices of the State Conference of Charities and Correction, and to an investigation of the need for an employment bureau in New York City.<sup>1</sup> There have been numerous other inquiries which throw light upon our subject, but I refer to these three because it happens to have been my duty to be intimately in touch with them and to know their results. I shall not attempt to present their results in these lectures, but it is only reasonable to point out that such views as I set forth as to the character and causes of the misery which we encounter in the tenements of New York and other modern com-

<sup>1</sup> These three investigations were made possible by appropriations by the Russell Sage Foundation.

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munities have been hammered out on the anvil indeed of my own observation and such capacity as I have for getting the general bearing of things, but by the sledge-hammer blows of facts recorded by agents and visitors as a result of their daily visits, and of investigations made under different auspices and by wholly different methods which have no other purpose in view except to disclose facts as they are.

For valuable suggestions in all parts of this study, for the analysis of the five thousand family records on which much of it is based, for the preparation of the diagrams, and for revision of proof sheets, I am under deep obligations to my assistant, Miss Lilian Brandt.

E. T. D.

NEW YORK,  
*March, 1909.*

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## CHAPTER I

### POVERTY AND MALADJUSTMENT





## I

**L**IKE the blind old Puritan of whose birth we have but lately celebrated the three hundredth anniversary, I seek the causes of human misery. Milton's theme is my theme — though you may think his theological and mine sociological. He with poetic license, with spiritual vision, with an assumption of dogmatic authority, and withal with revolutionary audacity, examined the phenomena that brought death into the world and all our woe. I am attempting, without dogma, without the warrant of other inspiration than that which guides the humblest disciple of science, and with no poetic invention, to examine with you the circumstances which bring premature, unnatural — what Metchnikoff calls violent — death among the children of men; and the causes of that misery which, whatever its origin, though it may indeed be the fruit of man's first disobedience, prompted by the guile of the infernal serpent, is nevertheless being perpetuated by the present voluntary actions of men, and so is a proper subject for our frank and earnest deliberation.

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If this were not so, if misery were inevitable, then there would be no justification for the new view of charity. If it is justified, it carries us irresistibly beyond the remedial agencies, beautiful and healing though they may be, to the consideration of the causes which bring them their tasks.

Although misery is our theme rather than poverty, or dependence, or pauperism, yet it is obvious that there are causes of misery that lie beyond the boundaries of this inquiry. Remorse over some past misconduct, the total failure of some high ambition, disappointment in love, the loneliness which comes from the inability to make friends, the silent anguish of a parent's broken heart, and a vast number of other such experiences which are familiar enough, do not readily lend themselves to social investigation or to conscious remedial social endeavor. There is, however, no sharp line between such mental anguish as lies in these experiences and that which is directly traceable to preventable disease and accident, to loss of employment and a low standard of living, to intemperance and vice and crime, to ignorance and inefficiency, and to the other well-recognized causes of dependence and misery among the poor.

We are to consider, then, not all misery, but such misery as gives external, objective indication of its

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existence and its extent and its character. We shall seek not the ultimate explanation of misery which shall correlate the unhappy millionaire with the penniless outcast, and measure on the same scale their merit and their rewards, their shortcomings and their punishments; but rather such obvious and, if you please, more superficial explanations as will enable us to understand the surplus misery of those whose hardships bring them demonstrably to public attention.

## II

The pictures of misery made familiar to us by Milton and Dante, and by many a sermon and novel, have this in common — that the misery of which they speak is punishment. It is the result of depravity, of the deliberate choice of evil. It is eternal, not to be ended, not to be mitigated, and still not to be borne. It is without hope, though the human mind refuses to compass the thought of the soul without hope. The misery of the infernal regions, especially as it is depicted by the Italian poet, is the logical working out of qualities of human character. There is an appropriateness, a poetic justice, about each of the various states of the fallen spirits, because they are but the projection of desires which have been indulged, of tendencies which have been encouraged, of appetites which have been fed, of passions to which control has been given over the lives of men.

This is one view also of the misery which we find here on earth, in prisons and hospitals, in homes and highways, in the haunts of vice and the hidden places of sorrow and shame. There is comfort for those who

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are not miserable in the theory that misery is but the natural working out of human character, that it is due to natural depravity, to deliberate wrong-doing and a conscious choice of evil ways, in the theory that suffering is proof of sin; and because of this satisfaction this view becomes the conventional, orthodox view. The sufferings of the tormented in hell by sound theology are imputed to wickedness on earth. It is an easy transition to impute the sufferings of the poor on earth to the same cause. Here, however, theology fails us, and the orthodoxy which insists upon this explanation is not of the religious kind, though it may seat itself in the church pew. It is rather the orthodoxy of a certain social philosophy against which every great religious teacher lifts his voice in indignant protest, against which every scientific observer records his testimony.

The assumption that misery is moral rather than economic; that those who are in distress for the lack of necessities of life are to be considered, without further evidence, as needing discipline even though they may need relief also, does not, it is true, rest exclusively upon the feeling of personal superiority to which I have attributed it. It is a stern doctrine thoroughly interwoven into a vast quantity of literature and into almost the whole of our charitable tradition.

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This connection that is assumed between the need of assistance and some form of personal depravity or shortcoming appears, superficially at least, to have much justification when we are considering the out-cast, the criminal, and the extreme type of parasitic dependent. Here, apparently, the effects of evil and undisciplined living are so plain that no one may miss them. Reasoning from cause to effect in such cases seems an easy and simple process. We may see plainly in the very countenance the effects of vice, of intemperance, of cringing helpless dependency. From this very elementary reading of character, and reasoning from effect to cause, we imagine that we rise to the perception of the earlier, subtler, less easily recognizable evidences of other faults and evil tendencies which, if unchecked, lead to the more deplorable conditions. We discover, or think we discover, that unemployment is the first step toward vagrancy; that poverty in which there are no discernible signs of degeneration is an intermediate stage between independence and pauperism; that suffering and privation naturally attendant upon widowhood, orphanage, acute illness, or friendless old age, are suspicious circumstances, justifying disciplinary measures even though also demanding palliative relief; and finally, that every application for charitable assistance, for what-



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ever reason made, is to be looked upon as the occasion, not for lightening the burden of the one who asks aid, but for being sure that the burden is heavy enough for the discipline which is assumed, as a matter of course, to be required. This attitude, it is obvious, is one which is natural for high-minded, conscientious, and intelligent persons. It rests upon an inability to trust human nature under generous treatment, and yet it may have no trace of smug hypocrisy. On the contrary, it may represent a high degree of personal responsibility, a genuine concern for the more permanent welfare of those who are in trouble, and steadfast determination not to do anything that will injure the character of another, even though at the request of that other himself. It may even be compatible with a sympathetic and considerate attitude. It may represent a desire to consider the souls rather than merely the bodies of the poor. I have come to believe, nevertheless, after some years of careful, candid, and open-minded consideration of the subject, that this entire view of poverty is one which rests upon an unproved and unfounded assumption.

The only thing that we are warranted in taking for granted when a family asks for assistance is that they believe themselves to be in need of assistance. They may be right or wrong about the fact; they may have