

**Excerpt from *Poverty: Social Conscience in
the Progressive Era (1904)*¹**
Robert Hunter

In the previous chapters I have only touched here and there upon the struggle with poverty which the poor themselves make. We are perhaps too prone to think of those in poverty as effortless beings, who make no fight for themselves and wait in misery until some one comes to assist them. Such an opinion is without any foundation. It is based upon knowledge gained by acquaintance with the pauper and vagrant, and is in no wise applicable to the workers in poverty. It is small wonder that workers who are underfed, underclothed, and poorly housed, are sometimes won from their hard and almost hopeless toil by sensual pleasures. Nor is it surprising that they are driven to despair by the brutal power of the economic forces which dominate their lives. Without the security which comes only with the ownership of property, without a home from which they may not be evicted, without any assurance of regular employment, without tools with which they may employ themselves, they are pathetically dependent upon their physical efficiency,—their health and strength, and upon the activity of machinery, owned by others, and worked or left idle as the owners consider it wise or profitable. In their weak and unorganized condition, they are unlike the skilled workers, made powerful by their unions and by their methods of collective bargaining; they are fighting alone, each one against another. In watching during the last few years the struggle with poverty of this poorest class of workers I have again and again read the allegory with which Dante begins his great poem, each time feeling more and more how wonderfully it pictures this struggle. The bewildered traveller, weary and terrified, is toiling up a steep and uncertain path of a mountain. His eyes are lifted to the "rose of dawn," which sends to him a glow of hope and leads him on. As he laboriously toils upward, a leopard (significant of sensuality), bright and beautiful, almost irresistibly attracts him; and from time to time, as he wearily pauses for rest, "that fair creature with the spotted hide" fills him with sensations of pleasure. Suddenly his heart is filled with terror by a lion, fierce and terrible, which threatens to devour him; and from another quarter appears a lean and hungry she-wolf with "all ill-greed defiled." Losing all hope, he turns and flees from the dangers which beset his "life's course."

It would be absurd to think that Dante meant to picture the problem of poverty. The statesman, the theologian, the psychologist, has each made the allegory serve a purpose, according to the bias of his thought. And, in the same way, reading our own thought into the lines, there could hardly be a more powerful picture than this one of the dangers and difficulties which beset those of our people who are in poverty, or of the almost hopeless struggle which presents itself as life to those of our people who are underpaid, underfed, underclothed, badly housed, and overworked.

To make the matter clear, a few words—and these, unfortunately, too much of a personal nature—are perhaps necessary. Having been drawn, about twelve years ago, to some interest in the problems of poverty, there happened to me the common experience of all those of like interests. The poor in the broader sense of that word were busily at work and trying rather to

¹ Robert Hunter, *Poverty: Social Conscience in the Progressive Era*, Peter d' A. Jones, ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 318-340.

conceal than to make evidence of their poverty; while the beggars, vagrants, idlers, and dependents of all sorts were more or less always pressing forward their necessities. It was natural, therefore, for me to confuse the problem of poverty with that of pauperism and to take up with some enthusiasm the ideas which are a part of the propaganda of many useful charitable organizations. To the charitable workers these problems of vagrancy and pauperism seem possible of solution. Many reforms—among which wise giving, friendly visiting, work-rooms, work-tests, model lodging-houses, rent-collecting, etc., are a few—were, in the early nineties, making rapid headway. They were, at that time, ranked first in importance in the category of organized movements for diminishing the evils of pauperism. Many committees were at work promoting these reforms, and in different cities I was able to help in their efforts. The result of their work was not discouraging, but in every instance they came hard up against one almost insurmountable obstacle. The pauper and the vagrant were not dissatisfied; they clamored for alms, but they did not wish to alter their way of living. Even those who possessed the capacity for industrial usefulness and who might have become self-supporting did not wish to go back again into the factories, mills, or mines. In fact, so far as one could see, they were as unwilling as the others to alter their ways of living. However miserable their lot seemed to those of us on the Committees, to them it seemed to be, on the whole, acceptable enough to bring a certain sort of content. However malarious and poisonous and undrained, they loved their valley of idleness and quiet; they hated the hill upon which they were constrained to toil; they shrank from its disappointments, its bruises, its weariness and bitterness, while its meanness and ugliness of life were but slightly less mean and ugly than their own. The children, bred into the ways of pauperism, nearly always took up the vices of their parents. They were pleasure-loving, and whatever was toilsome seemed abhorrent to them. The girls took the easier path; it appeared unquestionably more desirable to their childish standards, and for a time at least it gave them more of everything, for which most human beings seem to hunger,—finery, leisure, and a kind of pleasure. The men and boys liked vagrancy, and those who were not attracted to these ways settled down into a satisfied, imperturbable pauperism. They lived in God only knows what misery. They ate when there were things to eat; they starved when there was lack of food. But, on the whole, although they swore and beat each other and got drunk, they were more contented than any other class I have happened to know. It took a long time to understand them. Our Committees were busy from morning until night in giving them opportunities to take up the fight again, and to become independent of relief. They always took what we gave them; they always promised to try; but as soon as we expected them to fulfil any promises, they gave up in despair, and either wept or looked ashamed, and took to misery and drink again,—almost, so it seemed to me at times, with a sense of relief. I am reminded now of a vagrant whom I knew well and for many years believed to be sincerely trying to become "a man," as we used to say. He has turned up wherever I have happened to be—in Chicago or New York. He has always looked me up, and together we have conspired to overcome his vagrant instincts. We have always failed, and after a few weeks' work Jerry disappears, and I know what has become of him. At last, in his case as in many others, I have become convinced that he is more satisfied and content with the life of a vagrant than with the miserable lot of an unskilled, underpaid workman.

But as long as one works with, or observes only, the dependent classes, the true, or at least what seems to me the true, explanation of this apparent satisfaction of vagrants and paupers remains in the dark. It was not until I had lived for several years among the toilers in a great industrial community that the reason for the content of the dependent classes became clear to me.

In this community of workers several thousand human beings were struggling fiercely against want. Day after day, year after year, they toiled with marvellous persistency and perseverance. Obnoxious as the simile is, they worked from dawn until nightfall, or from sunset until dawn, like galley slaves under the sting of want and under the whip of hunger. On cold, rainy mornings, at the dusk of dawn, I have been awakened, two hours before my rising time, by the monotonous clatter of hobnailed boots on the plank sidewalks, as the procession to the factory passed under my window. Heavy, brooding men, tired, anxious women, thinly dressed, unkempt little girls, and frail, joyless little lads passed along, half awake, not one uttering a word as they hurried to the great factory. From all directions thousands were entering the various gates,—children of every nation of Europe. Hundreds of others—obviously a hungrier, poorer lot than those entering the gates; some were most ragged and almost shoeless, but all with eager faces—waited in front of a closed gate until finally a great red-bearded man came out and selected twenty-three of the strongest, best-looking of the men. For these the gates were opened, and the others, with downcast eyes, marched off to seek employment elsewhere or to sit at home, or in a saloon, or in a lodging-house, until the following morning, when they came wistfully again to some factory gate. In this community, the saddest in which I have ever lived, fully fifty thousand men, women, and children were all the time either in poverty or on the verge of poverty. It would not be possible to describe how they worked and starved and ached to rise out of it. They broke their health down; the men acquired in this particular trade a painful and disabling rheumatism, and consumption was very common. The girls and boys followed in the paths of their parents. The wages were so low that the men alone often could not support their families, and mothers with babies toiled in order to add to the income. They gave up all thought of joyful living, probably in the hope that by tremendous exertion they could overcome their poverty; but they gained while at work only enough to keep their bodies alive. Theirs was a sort of treadmill existence with no prospect of anything else in life but more treadmill. When they were not given work in the mill, they starved; and when they grew desperate, they came to my office and asked for charity. Here was a mass of men whose ways of living were violently opposed to those of the vagrant or the pauper. They were distorting themselves in the struggle to be independent of charity and to overcome poverty. That they hated charity must be taken without question. The testimony of scores of men is proof of it, even if, indeed, their very lives were not. But despite all their efforts they lived in houses but little, if any, better than those of the paupers; they were almost as poorly dressed; they were hardly better fed.

In other words, these men, women, and children were, to my mind, struggling up the face of a barren precipice,—not unlike that up which Dante toiled,—sometimes in hope, sometimes in despair, yet bitterly determined; the abyss of vice, crime, pauperism, and vagrancy was beneath them, a tiny ray of hope above them. Flitting before them was the leopard, persistently trying to win them from their almost hopeless task by charms of sensuality, debauch, and idleness. The lion, predatory and brutal, threatened to devour them; the she-wolf (Greed), hungry for them, enriched herself by their labors. Some were won from their toil by sensual pleasures, some were torn from their footholds by economic disorders, others were too weak and hungry to keep up the fight, and still others were rendered incapable of further struggle by diseases resulting from the unnecessary evils of work or of living.

This may seem to many persons an overdrawn simile; so, at any rate, it would have seemed to me several years ago. But it is a true picture, and I am convinced a just simile of the conditions in which the mass of those workers live who are already defined as being in poverty.

At any rate, two or three things seem clearer to me now, after arriving at the conclusion so well represented by Dante's picture. It is easier to understand the reason for the abhorrence which the pauper and the vagrant and the prostitute have for that terrible struggle with poverty, and only less easy is it to understand their apparent willingness to live on rubbish or alms. Furthermore, it is clear that the poverty which undermines the workers is the great and constantly active cause of the fixed states of degeneracy represented by the pauper, the vagrant, the inebriate, etc. In other words, when the working people, by reason of whatever misery poverty brings, once fall into the abyss, they so hate the life of their former struggles and disappointments and sorrows that almost no one, however well-intentioned or kindly, can induce them to take it up again. In the abyss they become merely breeders of children, who persist in the degeneration into which their fathers have fallen; and, like the tribe of Ishmael or the family of the Jukes, they have neither the willingness nor the capacity to respond to the efforts of those who would help, or force, them back again into the struggle.

However merciful and kind and valuable the works of the charitable and the efforts of those who would raise up again the pauper and the vagrant, they are not remedial. In so far as the work of the charitable is devoted to reclamation and not to prevention, it is a failure. Not that any one could wish that less were done in the direction of reclamation. The fact only is important that effort is less powerful there than in overcoming the forces which undermine the workers and those who are struggling against insurmountable difficulties. It is an almost hopeless task to regenerate the degenerate, especially when, if the latter are to succeed, they must be made to take up again the battle with those very destructive forces which are all the time undermining stronger, more capable, and more self-reliant men than they. The all-necessary work to be done is not so much to reclaim a class which social forces are ever active in producing, as it is to battle with the social or economic forces which are continuously producing recruits to that class. The forces producing the miseries of pauperism and vagrancy are many, but none are so important as those conditions of work and of living which are so unjust and degrading that men are driven by them into degeneracy. When the uncertainties, hardships, trials, sorrows, and miseries of a self-supporting existence become so painful that good, strong, self-reliant men and women are forced into pauperism, then there is but little use in trying to force the paupers and the vagrants back into the struggle.

It is not necessary to debate the relative importance of individual or social forces, or of heredity or environment, upon the extent of poverty, in order to prove that social forces are constantly and everywhere active in bringing poverty to a great mass of people. Leaving all such questions out of the discussion, we can nevertheless be certain that obstacles can be too great for even the strongest of men to overcome. And this is almost precisely what happens to the masses in poverty. As a class they have the longest hours of work, they have the lowest pay—often not even living wages; they have competition of the severest kind to face—unskilled workers from every land come to seek their employment; they are oppressed by sweating methods, their employment is irregular; their tenements are the most insanitary, and their rents relatively the highest that any class pay; the prices for food and fuel are exorbitant, because they must buy in small quantities; when they find it necessary to go into debt they are fleeced by loan sharks; they are most often ill; they bear the burden of more deaths than any other class; and being without savings, they are in actual distress as soon as they are unable to work, or as soon as they are unemployed as a result of economic or other causes. Furthermore, the children are prevented from having fair opportunities to master the difficulties which ruined their fathers. Their health is

imperilled and not seldom destroyed by insanitary homes; they are injured morally and otherwise by a *necessary* street life; their food is in many cases so poor that it will not feed the brain, and they are consequently unable to learn; they are early pressed to do a man's labor and are often ruined physically and blighted in other ways by this early and unnatural toil. With all of these and many other obstacles and disadvantages working their ruin, only the strongest and most fortunate are able to put forth the struggle necessary to master their fate. For the others, their life's course lies up an almost baffling precipice.

About a half-century ago there were so many persons in London becoming paupers, vagrants, mendicants, etc., that a group of people organized together to make the way of the pauper, vagrant, and mendicant so thorny and difficult that the workers, toiling up the precipice, would hold the abyss beneath them in even greater aversion than it was thought they were in the habit of doing, and that the able-bodied dependents in the abyss would be forced to turn from their way and seek again the path of self-support. This may, in certain places and at certain times, be necessary; but would it not seem a more wholesome, not to say kindlier, policy to see that the obstacles—the unnecessary obstacles, now preventing the rise of those workers in poverty—be removed?

This, however, is not by any means easy of accomplishment. The first difficulty lies in the complex nature of the problem itself. It is inextricably woven in with all other social and economic problems. If what Charles Booth says is true (and many economists agree with him), that our "modern system of industry will not work without some unemployed margin, some reserve of labor "; if it is necessary, as another economist has said, that "for long periods of time large stagnant pools of adult effective labor power must lie rotting in the bodies of their owners, unable to become productive of any form of wealth, because they cannot get access to the material of production"; and if at the same time "facing them in equal idleness are unemployed or under-employed masses of land and capital, mills, mines, etc., which, taken in conjunction with this labor power, are theoretically competent to produce wealth for the satisfaction of human wants,"—if these things are essential to our modern system of production, then the poverty of this large mass of workers must continue unrelieved until the system itself is reorganized. As a matter of fact, it would be useless to deny or ignore the fact that much of our poverty is directly due to a whole series of economic disorders which seem actually to make waste of human life necessary. And, in so far as poverty is a result of such deeply seated and fundamental economic disorders, due either to the method by which industry is organized or to the present ownership of the means and materials of production, it will, in all probability, find a solution only through struggles between the workers and the capitalists. No one who watches the trend of the times can doubt that these struggles, both in the industrial and in the political field, are growing more and more serious. Furthermore, in so far as poverty is a result of individual weaknesses, not themselves due to social causes, it can be dealt with only by moral and personal forces. But complex as the problem is, and varied as the remedies must be, we may be sure that poverty is, to a considerable extent, due to social causes which are clearly to be seen and which are possible of remedy.

Besides the complexity of the problem, there is still another, perhaps an even greater, obstacle firmly set in the path of constructive reform. And this is a political difficulty; namely, the anarchic principle of state rights which divides this country into two score and more small legislative areas. National problems of the character herein dealt with cannot therefore be treated in a national way, as they are in most countries abroad. Legislation concerning child labor, tuberculosis, tenements, factories, dangerous trades, sanitation, etc., must be of a variety of kinds,

often warring with each other, throwing industrial advantages now to this state and now to that. The child-labor laws which have been won in the Northern states by years of vigorous agitation give an advantage to the parasitic industries of the South. It is even likely that the textile industry may move to the South partly at least in order to have the privilege of employing little children.² Manufacturers threaten the state legislatures (more often, to be sure, than they carry out the threat) that they will move into another state if any laws protecting the workmen are passed. There is perhaps a certain business justification for such protests, for, unquestionably, by reason of our legislative anarchy, a parasitic industry in one state may thrive while an industry in another state, shorn of its parasitic privileges by legislation, may remain at a standstill, if it does not actually lose its trade. For this reason social and industrial legislation is usually more difficult to obtain in America than in any other great industrial country. Our political machinery itself, therefore, seriously retards and perhaps renders impossible any national standard of education, of sanitation, of working or of living conditions, etc. It is probable that there can be no national solution of some of these more remedial of the problems of poverty.

Another obstacle stands in the way of justice. The selfish interests of capitalists and land-owners too often either prevent good legislation or vitiate, by their influence, its enforcement. One can understand the determined opposition of men to socialistic measures seriously changing or violating the so-called rights of property; but it is not so easy to understand opposition to measures which, while affecting property interests, do not destroy any rights which may be exercised without injury to another. When property rights become property wrongs by injuring others, especially when they cause the physical degeneration and the human misery represented in poverty, they may for a time, but will surely not always, stand in the way of remedial action. The sense of justice may for a time be so warped and distorted as to value property more than human life, but only for a time. The real cause of our present errors of judgment in this matter lies in the corruption of our political institutions. The business and propertied interests have bought the bosses of our political machinery, and at present our laws are made and enforced in the interest of the owners. When the shame of our cities is notorious; when state and national governments are in the hands of corrupt politicians, owned by corporate interests; when "the laws which should preserve and enforce all rights are made and enforced by dollars;" when "it is possible... with dollars to 'steer' the selection of the candidates of both the great parties for the highest office *in our Republic*,... so that the people, as a matter of fact, must elect one of the 'steered' candidates;" when "it is possible to repeat the operation in the selection of candidates for the executive and legislative conduct and control of every state and municipality in the United States, and with a sufficient number of dollars to 'steer' the doings of the law-makers and law-enforcers of the national, state, and municipal governments of the people, and a sufficient proportion of the court decisions to make absolute any power created by such direction;" when the country is being daily betrayed by the "enemies of the republic,"—it seems utopian to appeal to these powers to do justice to their workers. This may seem a dark view to take of our political institutions, but, considering the great mass of evidence accumulated in the last few years, it is surely warranted. So far as the problem of poverty is concerned, we can perhaps hope for little in the way of justice

² Apart from cheap labor the South enjoyed the locational advantages of abundant water supplies and its own production of raw cotton. These advantages were tentatively exploited in the 1840's but came to little until Northern capital and improved transportation facilities became available in the 1880's. (See Jack Blinksilver: *Cotton Manufacturing in the Southeast: An Historical Analysis*, Studies in Business and Economics, Bulletin No. 5, Georgia State College of Business Administration, Atlanta, 1959.)

or reform during the next few years. For, by the help of this corruption, reform is fought at three stages: in the legislature, in the courts, and at the time of its enforcement.

In consequence of this temporary perversion of our democratic institutions pessimism runs high. Professor Franklin H. Giddings, our most distinguished sociologist, says: "We are witnessing to-day, beyond question, the decay—perhaps not permanent, but at any rate the decay—of republican institutions. No man in his right mind can deny it. A president of one of our greatest universities prophesies that we shall have an emperor in the United States in twenty-five years. Charles Fourier may have been right when he prophesied one hundred years ago that "vast joint-stock companies, destined to monopolize and control all branches of industry, commerce, and finance, would establish an industrial or commercial feudalism that would control society by the power of capital, as did the old baronial or military feudalism by the power of the sword" and "by the monopoly of the land." Or again we may have Mr. Ghent's "benevolent feudalism."³ If this be the tendency of the times, the poverty of the ten million people of this country will receive scant attention. Indeed, poverty will become wider spread and grow more distressing. Even the moderate proposals for reform made in this book will, if viewed solely from the standpoint of their effect upon property, seem radical, and, in so far as they affect property interests, unjust. This is not mere speculation. I could mention a score of incidents connected with efforts to get child-labor or tenement-house legislation in Illinois and New York to prove that this is even now true. Progress on these reform lines has been so slow in the last decade as to seem almost no progress. Much of the best legislation has been won only after a bitter fight with the propertied interests; and legislation, once secured, simply cannot, in most cases, be enforced because the political machine is owned by the propertied classes. Furthermore, when any so-called reform administration does enforce the laws, the corporate interests lump their campaign donations and punish the reformers with ignominious defeat.

However, the difficulties which lie in the way of any progress along social reform lines are beside the purpose of this book. That purpose is largely satisfied when the problem is stated, and, in so far as possible, I have summarized it in the following sentences. There are probably in fairly prosperous years no less than 10,000,000 persons in poverty; that is to say, underfed, underclothed, and poorly housed. Of these about 4,000,000 persons are public paupers. Over 2,000,000 working-men are unemployed from four to six months in the year. About 500,000 male immigrants arrive yearly and seek work in the very districts where unemployment is greatest. Nearly half of the families in the country are propertyless. Over 1,700,000 little children are forced to become wage-earners when they should still be in school. About 5,000,000 women find it necessary to work and about 2,000,000 are employed in factories, mills, etc. Probably no less than 1,000,000 workers are injured or killed each year while doing their work, and about 10,000,000 of the persons now living will, if the present ratio is kept up, die of the preventable disease, tuberculosis. We know that many workmen are overworked and underpaid. We know in a general way that unnecessary disease is far too prevalent. We know some of the insanitary evils of tenements and factories; we know of the neglect of the street child, the aged, the infirm, the crippled. Furthermore, we are beginning to realize the monstrous injustice of compelling those who are unemployed, who are injured in industry, who have acquired diseases due to their occupation, or who have been made widows or orphans by industrial accidents, to become

³ W. J. Ghent, 1866-1942: prominent journalist and social reformer of the day; editor of the *American Fabian* (1897-98), founder-member of the Social Reform Club of New York (1894) and President of the Rand School (1909-11). *Our Benevolent Feudalism* was published in 1902.

paupers in order that they may be housed, fed, and clothed. Something is known concerning these problems of poverty, and some of them at least are possible of remedy.

To deal with these specific problems, I have elsewhere mentioned some reforms which seem to me preventive in their nature. They contemplate mainly such legislative action as may enforce upon the entire country certain minimum standards of working and of living conditions. They would make all tenements and factories sanitary; they would regulate the hours of work, especially for women and children; they would regulate and thoroughly supervise dangerous trades; they would institute all necessary measures to stamp out unnecessary disease and to prevent unnecessary death; they would prohibit entirely child labor; they would institute all necessary educational and recreational institutions to replace the social and educational losses of the home and the domestic workshop; they would perfect, as far as possible, legislation and institutions to make industry pay the necessary and legitimate cost of producing and maintaining efficient laborers; they would institute, on the lines of foreign experience, measures to compensate labor for enforced seasons of idleness, due to sickness, old age, lack of work, or other causes beyond the control of the workman; they would prevent parasitism on the part of either the consumer or the producer and charge up the full costs of labor in production to the beneficiary, instead of compelling the worker at certain times to enforce his demand for maintenance through the tax rate and by becoming a pauper; they would restrict the power of employer and of ship-owner to stimulate for purely selfish ends an excessive immigration, and in this way to beat down wages and to increase unemployment.

Reforms such as these are not ones which will destroy incentive, but rather they will increase incentive by more nearly equalizing opportunity. They will make propertied interests less predatory, and sensuality, by contrast with misery, less attractive to the poor. Or, in the terms of our simile, the greyhound—which Dante promised would one day come—will come to drive away the lion, the leopard, and the she-wolf. This does not mean that there is to be no struggle,—the mountain must still remain,—but rather that the life of the poorest toiler shall not be a hopeless thing from which many must turn in despair. In other words, the process of justice is to lift stony barriers, against which the noblest beat their brains out, and from which the ignoble (but who shall say not more sensible?) turn away in despair. Let it be this, rather than a barren relief system, administered by those who must stand by, watching the struggle, lifting no hand to aid the toilers, but ever succoring those who flee and those who are bruised and beaten.