

HOUSING CONDITIONS IN CANADA

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TWO years ago, owing largely to the interest which His Excellency Earl Grey took in the social and national welfare of Canada, a prominent English housing reformer, Mr. Henry Vivian, M.P., visited Canada, and, after careful investigations, gave a series of lectures on the housing conditions here, which did much to dispel our not unnatural belief that it was impossible for the slums of the Old World to have been already reproduced in this land of promise. That the evils of improper housing, so far-reaching in their effects on the individual and the nation, physically, morally, and economically, have got a start, not only in the larger cities but in the rural districts as well, is due partly to the rapid growth of the country, partly also to the apathy and indifference of the many who are making such haste to get rich that they have no time to pause and consider how and where their poorer neighbours are living. Ignorance that is due to indifference or selfishness can never justify wrong conduct, but now we have not even that excuse, for the startling statements made by Mr. Vivian have been followed up and investigated by various charitable organizations, by public-spirited citizens, and finally by the provincial and municipal authorities, who one and all tell us that conditions have been revealed in Canada quite as bad in *character* as any in either European or American cities, though, fortunately, they are thus far limited in *extent*.

But what, it may be asked, is meant exactly when one talks of bad housing conditions? Unfortunately, they are known only too well to the health inspector and the individual investigator; the typical attributes of slum life repeat themselves with wonderful regularity wherever ignorance or indifference has allowed the growth of insanitary districts. Thus we find houses that are almost inaccessible from the public street, devoid of light and air, generally surrounding a back-yard or lane of indescribable filth, which is at once the store place of junk and the receptacle of all the refuse of the houses; these back-yards become actual swamps in the spring and autumn, and are inches deep in germ-laden dust in summer, which only awaits a favourable wind to be blown broadcast over the city. No amount of sanitary by-laws could make these places

habitable without radical structural alterations. There are also numbers of houses in the small cities, and even more in the bigger ones, which, although situated on or near streets possessing full sewerage and water connexion and up-to-date plumbing, have, nevertheless, no sink, drain of any sort, or water installed. A very common way of building small property has been to build as many houses as possible round a common yard or along a narrow lane, to put in one outside tap, nearly always frozen up in winter, for the common use of all the tenants, while the ordinary toilet arrangements are of the most primitive kind. In all the reports mention is made of the absolute inadequacy and filth of the outside closets, ranging from more or less "possible" privy-pits to those consisting merely of boxes with no seats, all of which are in an overflowing condition; one was reported as not having been cleaned out for eleven years, a serious menace to health and decency.

Others of the houses investigated are structurally unequal to the duties of a house, because they fail to shelter the inhabitants from the cold and wet, a most necessary attribute of any dwelling in the rigorous climate of Canada. Others, too, are damp because they are built flat upon the ground or a little below it, without cellars or foundations. Yet these places are filled to overcrowding, as all reports seem to show. One of these, from the medical officer of health for Hamilton, may be quoted: "Within the last few weeks we have had occasion to take summary proceedings against several nests of most objectionable rookeries. In one of these clusters, abutting on an unpaved and unsewered alley, a house of about 18 x 20 contained four families, two upstairs and two below. All the rooms were ill-lighted, unclean, and impregnated with the pungency of ammoniacal odours. A small bedroom in one of the downstairs apartments was the sleeping allotment for four persons. The kitchen contained a sofa where one man slept; what small space remained was utilized for cooking and eating purposes. There was no lathing or plaster, the shabby paper, faded and torn, being pasted on the rough boards; the sills of the doors, both front and back, were several inches below the level of the alley, so that in times of storm the water poured in like a miniature river and flooded the whole place. The roof furnished ample evidence without minute inspection of being in disgraceful repair. The revenue from the unfortunates who occupied these premises was about twenty-five dollars per month."

On the other hand, where there are cellars and basements in these houses, they are only too often sub-let for a variety of pur-

poses, though generally damp and unfit for use. The medical health officer of Toronto says: "Damp basements are found in all the districts investigated. One dwelling had four inches of water in the cellar; another, which rented for twenty dollars a month, had four feet of water in the cellar. In the cellars and back-kitchens, hens, ducks, and dogs are sometimes kept. Another basement is the sleeping-place of two boys, twelve and fourteen years of age respectively. It has not air or light enough for the purpose. There is at the door of this sleeping-place a dirty water-closet, and a sink which is out of order; the whole basement is damp. In another basement in this district twelve people live."

Cellars are never a suitable dwelling, nor are "dark" rooms, i.e., rooms which have no direct access to the outside air. These rooms are practically always used as sleeping apartments, a dangerous practice and one of the leading causes of tuberculosis, which continues and will continue to baffle the efforts to exterminate it so long as housing conditions remain as they are. The International Congress of Tuberculosis held in Paris in 1905 declared that "the problem of healthy dwellings will always rank first in the prophylaxis of tuberculosis." This aspect of the housing problem is important, particularly in view of the fact that the tendency is for the number of these rooms to increase, not only in so-called slum property, but actually in the modern and otherwise luxurious apartment buildings which are springing up on every side in the better class of residential districts. Dark rooms in *all* houses should be strictly forbidden, not only for the benefit of the present inhabitants, and the effect which their health has on the health of the community, but also because "history repeats itself," and on every side, as cities grow older, we see the well-to-do citizens moving to the outskirts, and houses, once inhabited by them, being converted into tenement buildings and common lodging houses, forming the slum homes of the less fortunate. This tendency to sub-divide houses, built for single families, is one full of dangers. The health authorities of London (England) recognize its evils, as is shown from the following interesting quotation: "There has been proceeding for a number of years a change of usage more than a change of actual property. Whole streets and squares of houses formerly occupied by single and often good-class families, are now occupied as separate dwellings on separate floors. The private house has become a tenement house. There is a common passage and a common staircase, both of which are open to the public. The history of such a house is a dismal record of degeneration. Year by year its state slowly but surely

becomes worse. The sanitary conveniences were designed for one family and now provide for four families; the same must be said of the water-supply and wash-house accommodation. There can be no doubt that the ill ventilation and the difficulty of access to the sanitary conveniences, scullery, wash-house, or dust-bin, may indirectly act as causes of ill-health and undesirable habits. Hence it comes about that both house and tenants degenerate." The same process is going on in all the Canadian towns and cities, and the remodelling and subdivision of existing houses must be watched with the greatest care, as it offers a tempting way of growing rich quickly to the unscrupulous landlord. Sometimes it is cottages which are subdivided: "In district No. 4 there were last year two little five-roomed cottages. They are now four cottages, in each of the four dwellings there is a dark room. One of these rooms is absolutely dark . . . the other three have a glazed opening into the kitchen in the next house, thus affording a little light, but no air and no privacy. The rents of these houses total forty-two dollars per month; before subdivision the rents totalled twenty-two dollars." Sometimes it is small hotels or old and roomy houses which undergo the dangerous transformation into common lodging-houses, usually overcrowded with foreigners, not necessarily poor, but quite ignorant of all laws of sanitation or of the risks which they and their neighbours incur by sleeping in overcrowded quarters. The sub-letting of such lodgings is a very lucrative business, and is usually carried on by aliens, who either pay a normal rent to the owner for the house and sub-let it to as many tenants as can possibly be crowded in, or else let out part of the house which they themselves own and in part of which they live in circumstances not calculated to render them very sensitive to the well-being of their tenants. Mr. J. S. Wadsworth, in his book, "Strangers Within Our Gates," gives instances of this crowding in Winnipeg. One man, he says, "managed to accommodate forty-three occupants in five rooms where only fourteen could hope to find sufficient atmosphere for healthy respiration." Another had twenty-four in one room, where only seven should have been. Again: "Yablonovish, a teamster, who owns his own house and several lots, lives with his family in two rooms and has five roomers. . . . The attic is full of pigeons," while "Klenbyel, his wife and six children, and from fifteen to twenty boarders, live in four rented rooms."

Some people still look to the erection of model tenement houses as the solution of down-town housing problems; but, judging from

the experience of the European countries and also of New York, the housing of large sections of the population in tenement buildings is not only very expensive, but fraught with many serious physical and moral considerations. Certain it is that tenement buildings are inimical to family life, which is the backbone of a nation, and that the denizens of the "packing-case houses" never regard them as "home," while a perusal of any one of the many laws in existence for controlling the administration of tenement buildings in different countries and cities reveals, by the nature of the regulations which all find it necessary to make, some of the moral difficulties which result from herding many families in such close quarters.

But perhaps the most "damnable" form of overcrowding is to be found in the one-roomed dwelling as a family residence. Sidney Webb speaks of the "soul-destroying conditions of the one-roomed dwelling, which makes decent life impossible," and certainly both body and soul must be injuriously affected by life in a room, used night and day by persons of all ages and both sexes, and which is absolutely the only place for cooking, food-storage, toilet, washing and drying of clothes and people, eating, sleeping, and recreation. The lack of proper ventilation fosters disease, the lack of restfulness creates a thirst for excitement, and the lack of privacy leads to all the roads opening out from immodesty and want of self-respect. Thoreau tells us that "there are a thousand people lopping off the branches of an evil for every one striking at its roots." May it not be that we are spending money, time, and energy in trying to cleanse the endless streams of physical and moral degeneration which are fouling our national life, when we should be directing our attention to purifying the fountain-head of family life and home conditions?

One is apt to imagine that single-roomed dwellings are confined to the congested areas of large cities, but one has only to visit the shack-towns of the suburbs and the colonies of immigrants of different nationalities which form the "Little Italys," the "Little Hungarys," or the "China-towns," that are scattered about the country districts, to find sanitary conditions rivalling even those of Quebec itself. This type of slum can be seen in the Italian colony near Sault Ste. Marie, of which the following is the report of the provincial officer of health: "This colony is crowded into a lot of miserable shacks, filthy both inside and out; no cellars, no drainage, closets on the surface of the ground, vile beyond description; water from shallow wells, which were dirty and unfit for use, and most of them located within a few feet of the closets."

Enough has been said to convince even a prejudiced reader

that the housing conditions of Canada are not ideal. It may be asked how these conditions came to be, and why the inhabitants of slums and shacks allow themselves to be robbed of such high rents. The answer to both these questions is partly to be found in the inexorable law of supply and demand. The richness and prosperity of Canada is attracting working-class immigrants hither at the rate of over a thousand a day. This is not the ordinary natural growth of population, where one baby is born into a home already existing, but it is a surging crowd, all requiring new homes, which they must find at once, and at any cost, because of the severity of the climate. Hamilton is a typical example of this process; during the last ten years it has experienced a great wave of industrial prosperity, due in the first place to the investment of large sums of American capital in the manufacture of agricultural machinery. This was followed by the introduction of other extensive industries, employing in the aggregate many thousands of operatives. "The expected results have followed. The demand for additional housing accommodation has become steadily more urgent and pressing, until every available four walls surmounted by a roof, that under normal conditions of city growth would never be accused of being a house, is eagerly seized upon and occupied at an outrageous rental."

The economic situation is at present all on the side of the greedy landlord, and, unfortunately, there are always some to be found who are willing to take an unfair advantage of the needs of their fellows. What is the remedy? We cannot fix rents, but we can, by constant inspection and wise by-laws rigidly enforced, see that a proper return of decency and sanitation is given for the rent obtained, without any fear that we are robbing the landlord or chief tenant of a fair interest on his investment. Many of the provincial and municipal authorities are beginning to realize their power in this direction. In most places the medical officer of health has the right to declare a house to be "unfit for habitation" and to order it to be made inhabitable, or, if *that* order is not obeyed, to close the house and placard it as "unfit." The difficulty in the past has been, not so much a want of housing by-laws, though these are described in some places as "crude and antiquated," but the power to enforce them, and this can only be done by an adequate, properly trained staff of inspectors who can investigate such property at least four times a year, or, better still, once a month, for, between such frequent visits, few evils would have time to grow acute. These inspectors would also endeavour, by advice and instruction, to increase the knowledge of sanitation among the tenants and 'to

carry on the education in hygiene, without which no scheme for healthy homes will be complete in a land whose population is being augmented by so many immigrants of a low sanitary standard.

But in all towns of a growing country there is more to be done than merely to keep the centres free from slums. The outskirts are being developed daily, and the village of to-day is the crowded city of to-morrow. Great Britain and Germany have already passed legislation enabling local authorities to control the way in which property in their districts is developed, and Canada should not hesitate to follow their good example. So far as can be ascertained, British Columbia is the only province with any town-planning regulation in its municipal code. It is as follows: "All future surveys into building lots of property within a city, or of property which is contiguous to the boundaries of a city, by owners and others, shall be subject to the approval of the city engineer and the mayor when the city has a city engineer, or the approval of the mayor when the city has not a city engineer; and no plan of such survey shall be registered unless it bears a certificate of such approval, but such approval shall not be unreasonably withheld." The other provinces of the Dominion would do well to have some such long-sighted law with regard to existing cities and all alike should demand from new townships that, before they can obtain incorporation, they must submit some satisfactory plan of the general future development of the area as a guarantee that the mistakes of the past will not be repeated in the future.