

## On the Inquiries into the Condition of the Poor in London and York by Messrs. Booth and Rowntree.

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### II.—DRINK.

(Continued from page 378.)

As all workers amongst the poor would expect, indulgence in alcohol is shown by both our authors to be very frequently the cause of poverty in a household. According to Mr. Booth, there is now less drunkenness but more drinking than formerly, and it is this form which tells the most in the family budget (in this Dr. Newsholme agrees—see Medical Officer's report on Brighton, 1903). The amount spent regularly and as a matter of course on drink by working men and their families is out of all proportion to their earnings, 6s. to 6s. 10d. per week—that is, about one-sixth of the income—being calculated as an average amount. As wages increase, and in seasons when trade is good, there is abundant evidence that more money is spent on alcohol rather than on the necessities of life.

One deeply regrets to note how emphatically both observers declare the habit of drinking to be on the increase with women. In London it is said that this is so with all classes, but in York it would seem that women of the respectable artisan class rarely drink. In this connection both writers dwell at some length upon the dulness and monotony of the lives of the married women, and this is especially noticeable amongst the more respectable artisans' wives. These lead intensely busy lives, but their interests and activities are bounded entirely by the four walls of home. The most respectable streets are the duller; in this all agree. I well remember a poor old woman in Brighton, whose husband's circumstances had permitted a move out of a slum court into a fairly respectable street, deploring her evil plight one very hot day. The summer before she used to take her chair into the yard, and sit there peeling her potatoes or knitting, whilst, at the same time, able to enjoy a gossip with her neighbours similarly employed. This was not, however, permitted by public opinion in the "scratic" (aristocratic) quarter to which she had moved; the neighbours all "kept themselves to themselves," and the old woman sighed deeply after the old freedom, "fresh air," and company.

Both books show clearly how very largely the public-house enters into the social life of the poor, and this is held to account in a great measure for the increase of drinking habits amongst women. According to Booth, these "rarely drink alone, but treat each other very much." Both writers agree that young men and women do much of their courting in public-houses, and that girls seldom drink before marriage.

The musical entertainments given in many public-houses are great attractions; during these Mr. Rowntree noticed "an air of jollity and an absence of irksome restraint which must prove very attractive after a day's confinement in factory or shop." I commend these words to the consideration of managers of church and other philanthropic clubs:

The discomforts of a badly-managed home drive

both men and women to spend their evenings in the warm and brilliantly-lighted public-house. The unpopularity of service amongst girls before marriage is a great factor in creating a comfortless home; they learn neither cooking, cleanliness, nor household management in the shop or factory, and have no idea of the value of a clean and cosy kitchen and an appetising meal as a means of tempting the men-folk to withstand the seductions of the public-house round the corner.

Drinking clubs are a universal evil, and productive of much misery, but women are never admitted to membership, or, indeed, inside the doors of these establishments.

### FOOD.

Just at the present moment, when the whole country is ringing with the fiscal controversy, and debating the expediency of taxation of food-stuffs, one turns with especial interest to that part of Mr. Rowntree's volume in which he summarises his attempts to find out what proportion of our poor are so badly paid that they cannot purchase in sufficient quantity those articles of food necessary to keep them in a condition of working efficiency.

He calculates that in order to keep a family of father, mother, and four children in a thoroughly "fit" condition at least 26s. per week is required, and this if there be nothing spent upon drink or holidays, and no pence put by for "thrift," for under these circumstances "money saved means necessary food foregone." We hear much of the deterioration of race amongst our town dwellers, and the evidences of this in the puny and miserable physique of our army recruits. Surely in the two books before us there are reasons enough to account for it, and prophetic warnings against the result of a continuance of the present economic order of things.

Mr. Rowntree shows that, although the labourer and his family may not actually go hungry, their diet consists so very largely of bread, butter, and tea, and is so deficient in protein, that it is not only inadequate for the work they have to do, but it also tends to enfeeble the consumer's whole constitution, thus making it little able to resist, or convalesce quickly after, disease.

"If these sober and industrious families of the labouring class receive only about three-quarters of the food required for physical efficiency, how serious must be the malnutrition of families with small incomes in which money is wasted on drink."

Perhaps the most pathetic part of the books is the frequently repeated statement in "Poverty" from the lips of many poor women that when anything beyond the usual weekly expenses is required it must be purchased out of the food money, and, as the wage-earner cannot be allowed to run the risk of losing what working power he possesses, the wife and children are of necessity the ones "to go short."

Although both Mr. Booth's and Mr. Rowntree's works deal solely with urban life, and that only in two special cities, it is quite true that the bulk of the labouring class in the country are no better off, and in many districts their food is equally deficient in quality. It is a matter of common knowledge that in many villages it is almost impossible for the poor to obtain milk, this being all sent to the nearest market town.

Before leaving this subject (the food of our working

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