

DECEMBER, 1924

35 CENTS

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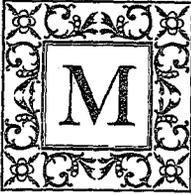
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Reflections of a Settlement Worker

BY GAYLORD S. WHITE

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MORE than twenty years ago I resigned from the pastorate of a city church to take a position as head resident in a social settlement. As I look back over these years, I am conscious of a shifting of my point of view with respect to certain matters. Life and work at the settlement have opened my eyes to a fresh range of social phenomena. I can say, as was said by a certain man of old: "One thing I know; that whereas I was blind, now I see." I may not be able to interpret the significance of all that I have seen; but I know that life presents a new face to me. Its whole aspect has been altered. That this is, in large part, the result of settlement experience I cannot doubt. When I came to the settlement, I had served for several years as a minister among working-class people. I thought I knew something about them. During my pastorate the work of the church had been reorganized along so-called "institutional" lines, and a new building erected admirably adapted to the needs of a social ministry. I mention this to show that I was already in sympathy with the growing social movement and committed to its ideals. I did not seem to myself, therefore, to be making what could be described as a radical change when I moved from my church to take up settlement duties.

At this point I ought to confess that I entertained certain notions about settlements and their work that might be more accurately described, as I look back upon them, as prejudices. For example, I shared the common impression that most settlements were "godless" institutions. I felt that the settlements that were not making it plain that they stood for the value of religion, if not giving it expression in organized form, were missing an

opportunity and failing at a vital point. I had a dread of being accused of "hiding my colors." I sometimes went out of my way to make clear just where I stood; as when I experienced a certain sense of satisfaction in appearing at the outdoor games of the settlement athletic club on a Sunday afternoon, while I was still very new to the work, in a clerical waistcoat. Back of all this there was a worthy motive, but as I see it now I see that I was carrying into my new work my professional attitude as a minister. This was an egregious mistake. It violated the very essence of the settlement idea. Gradually this dawned on me. I began to understand that the ideal of the settlement resident is simply the ideal of the Good Neighbor. I learned to think of the settlement as a home and the residents as members of a "family," resolved to do their part as good neighbors in promoting the welfare of the whole neighborhood. I saw that this did not involve professionalism; that there was nothing professional about it; that the settlement resident was just one neighbor among many; one who perhaps had had greater advantages than some of the others, but one who, if he had much to contribute, had also much to learn. I found that there was no cut-and-dried programme that each settlement must follow, but that the work of each must be governed by the local neighborhood needs.

I learned, furthermore, that I was not there to profess anything—any social or political or theological creed, but rather to do my part as a decent citizen in co-operation with others to raise the standard of the neighborhood life and help to realize a true democracy, that people might "have life and have it abundantly." It came to me with something of a shock when I discovered that I had been looking at life as a Protestant parson and not as a simple-hearted human being. And there is really a vast difference between these

two points of view. When I came to myself, I began to see the people and the life about me from a new angle. The people ceased to be potential church members or attendants, or Sunday-school scholars, people who must be visited and humored, encouraged and scolded, held up to their duties to the organization, and so on. They became just "folks," common people, with whom I was brought into contact by common human interests. This proved to be a most refreshing experience. I felt that I was coming to know people as they were and not as they wished the minister to think they were. I knew, of course, that people often were not frank with me as their pastor. They felt convinced that I would not approve all their standards, and they were quite right. But it was annoying and discouraging to have them dissemble and cloak their ways.

Because of the neighborly character of the settlement, one gets an opportunity to come into contact with all sorts of people. One of the valuable results of settlement experience came to me through just this fact. It introduced me to elements of the population about which I had had no personal knowledge. For instance, before I went to the settlement, I do not suppose that I had an acquaintance with as many as half a dozen Jews, and there was no Jew whom I could call a friend. Now I live in the midst of a large Jewish population—100,000 of them all about me, and I count many Jews my friends. The same is true with reference to the Italians. And just this chance of getting acquainted with all sorts and conditions of men is in itself a wonderful experience. Broadening one's knowledge of people deepens and clarifies one's understanding of them. It is here, as I have already intimated, that the settlement resident has an advantage over the representative of a profession. The worker of a relief society is prone to see in every poor family a need for case-work treatment, while the trained eye of the doctor will detect some signs of physical abnormality and the clergyman will be on the lookout for indications of moral instability and aberration of soul. But the settlement worker gets a broader view; he is not controlled by any specialized interest. He can truly say: "Nothing which relates to man can be a

matter of unconcern to me." He is first of all a neighbor, desiring to help other neighbors, to bring within the reach of all a larger, fuller life. And so he is bound to be interested in all that interests his neighbors. He wants to know what are their problems and their aspirations. It is in this way that he comes to know and to understand a phase of life which the average man of education usually knows little about.

To speak again of my own experience, I do not think that I had much appreciation as a minister of the part which economic factors played in the life of the people to whom I was ministering. I knew, of course, that it was important to poor people to have a job, but somehow I did not realize that pretty much everything hinges on getting and holding the right kind of job. I failed to appreciate the full significance of the question of employment and a living wage, how it bore on every other interest—self-respect, church attendance, civic duty, spiritual idealism. In my preaching I tried to hold up high ideals of life and of service; and when people failed to respond I did not realize that in many cases income, or rather the lack of it in sufficient quantity, had much to do with their apathy. I do not think that I was exceptional in my rather dull comprehension of the significance of the wage question. As a matter of fact, few people were paying very much attention to it. We had not yet begun to hear discussions of the "standard of living." Even today it is doubtful if many people understand what this wage question means, who have not been brought into some sort of direct and human contact with working people. How many persons, for instance, can make vivid to their minds the implications of the fact that while the cost of maintaining a family just before the war at a minimum standard of decency and efficiency in an industrial community in the East had been estimated to be from \$750 to \$1,000 a year, four-fifths of the adult male workers were receiving less than \$750, and 95 per cent less than \$1,000? What do these dry figures mean? Well, they simply mean that hundreds of thousands of fathers and mothers in this country—not in Thibet or Timbuctoo, but in these United States

—were unable without charity, either private or public, to give their children enough to eat and to wear and keep a roof over their heads. How can such parents hope to bring up their children in a way to make them efficient members of society? There have, of course, been changes since the war in wage scales and living costs, and it is often assumed that wages are relatively higher than before the war, that the purchasing power of the dollar is greater. We are told, however, that this is by no means always the case. For example, from a recent government report on wages of railroad employees it appears that from a quarter to a half million of them now receive an income insufficient to enable them to maintain an adequate standard of living. How many persons know that there are probably ten million people in this country living below the "poverty line," the level of income at which a bare subsistence, not an adequate standard of living, can be maintained? Or if they know it, how many give the matter a second thought unless it is brought home to them through some concrete case, through their knowledge of particular families, the Joneses, the Hennessys, the Onoratos, the Smolenskys, people we know, people who are struggling with just such problems and endeavoring to bring up a family on an insufficient income? Here is where settlement experience comes in. You *know* these people. You can better visualize the big problem because you have seen it in the small, concrete example. Is it any wonder that such conditions sap the physical and moral energy of the family? When it comes to church work, can you expect such people to listen with undivided attention and understanding hearts to the preaching of the Gospel and to be active workers in the church? Nor, incidentally, does it temper their distress to know that at times they are exploited by employers who stand out prominently in the community as church members?

It is poverty which is at the root of most of our social maladjustment; and some of the consequences of poverty present themselves to the poor in very concrete forms. They are encountered as problems in the bringing up of a family, problems of health, of education, of recre-

ation. The question of health comes to the front, for example, in selecting a home. In a city like New York this means for a poor family renting a flat in a tenement-house. Those who must seek a low rent naturally have to put up with the poorest provision for light and air. This, of course, puts a handicap upon the children and heightens the chances that they will grow up with low resistance and make ready victims for tuberculosis and other diseases. In the case of education, the children of the poor must leave school as soon as the law allows and begin to contribute to the family income. A little more schooling, a little vocational or technical training might fit them to earn a higher wage and make further progress; but poverty is an inexorable tyrant and condemns many a child to fruitless work in a "blind-alley" occupation. Or consider what a difficult situation a tenement-house mother has to face who knows the value of the right kind of social life for her children but finds herself utterly unable to provide for it in the narrow limitations of the home. Even if there were physical space, the necessity of living "all in a clutter" makes a self-respecting family unwilling to have strangers come into the home. And this being so, the various forms of commercial recreation offer the only opportunities for multitudes of young people to enjoy that social life every normal human being craves and which, if rightly provided, can be such a strong influence for character. Those who know what the influence of the average dance hall is (and dancing is the most popular form of recreation for young people) will realize that those who frequent such places are incurring serious moral danger. Take the case of a young Italian girl which recently came to our notice. The father called at the settlement to tell us that his daughter of about twenty had not come home the night before. Could we help them find her? To make a long story short, it transpired that she had yielded to the allurements of a young man who sought her ruin and later, at his solicitation, had submitted to a criminal operation by a midwife. Finally, as the situation preyed on the girl's mind, she went in desperation to the police and made a complaint against the man. She

herself was put under arrest as well as the man and the midwife. The report from the protective agency where the girl was cared for said that she was a girl of fine possibilities and was expected to make good. From her own story, pathetically unfolded to one of our workers, her downfall seems plainly due to the rigid attitude of her parents, who thought the only proper thing for a girl to do was to earn all she could, bring all her money home to her mother, stay in the house evenings, and have nothing to do with young people who went gadding about every night. She stood this as long as she could; then threw off restraint, accepted favors from a young man she met at a dance, let him pay for her good times, and before long she had lost her balance and the inevitable fall followed. Largely a case, humanly speaking, of lack of proper recreation. And only a sample of tragedies that are happening by the score.

I have seen time and again how easy it is for a boy to slip into a criminal career with no real viciousness of heart, but chiefly because of his environment. Sometimes it is simply through seeking that outlet for exuberant spirits and the desire for adventure which manifest themselves in boys of another class in what we term "college pranks." I knew very well the family of a boy who is serving a life sentence in Sing Sing just because he happened to be standing on a corner with a bunch of fellows when a drunken man happened to come along; and when some one happened to trip the man up, he happened to be less drunk than the boys supposed, and showing fight, he received a fall that happened to fracture his skull; and as the police felt obliged, it was alleged, to fix the crime on some one, it happened that they selected the particular boy to whom I have referred, who may or may not have been the actual offender. You see it all "just happened," but would it have happened if that boy's home had been a different place, a more attractive place for a boy to spend his evenings? That, of course, would have taken more rent, and that would have taken more wages than came into that home, and that, perhaps, would have meant more and better education, and so it goes in an almost endless sequence.

Another question which presents a very different aspect to one who views it from the standpoint of a tenement-house neighbor from that which it presents to the pastor of a church, is the Sunday question. Whatever one's personal conviction regarding the use of Sunday, it is futile to expect, for example, that the people of a Jewish neighborhood will observe the Christian Sabbath in the traditions of the New England manner. When prosperous Protestant Christians have departed far from the custom of their fathers in this matter, and with infinitely less reason, we can scarcely expect those who live in tenement-houses to take a stand for a strict observance of the day. Living in such congestion as poor people do in populous cities and working under such conditions as they are obliged to, Sunday simply must be a time for recreation. We may have our ideas of the uses of Sunday which, in the long run, would bring the largest returns in health of body, refreshment of mind, and quickening of spirit; but we cannot be blind to conditions as they are. We may deplore the popular passion for Sunday baseball, Sunday dances, Sunday movies and the like, but it will be folly to put on the lid, at least until we can provide in some constructive way for a better use of Sunday leisure, and at the same time one that will make a popular appeal. It is far better, for instance, to have young men and boys working in the gymnasium or enjoying a cross-country run or a game of baseball on a Sunday afternoon than to have them loafing on the street corners, or in the pool-rooms, the candy stores, and other "hang-outs" with which such neighborhoods are liberally provided. At present this is the inevitable alternative.

There are other reactions one gets from living among poor people as a neighbor, but I have said enough to indicate why I have changed my point of view in a good many respects. Out of this experience certain convictions have emerged. Let me state them briefly.

First of all, I am convinced that pastors and their churches ought to cultivate a sense of responsibility for their neighborhoods as a whole, and not confine their feeling of responsibility so much to the people who are already in the church or

who may be potential church members. This is simply to apply the settlement principle. It would mean, for example, that the minister would be concerned for the young people who could never reasonably be expected to come to his church, that he would feel it his duty as a neighbor to do what he could to see that safeguards were thrown around the commercialized forms of recreation and better provision made for social needs generally. It would mean that he would feel responsibility for the housing and health conditions in the neighborhood, for better opportunities of education, for whatever will contribute to enrich life and give to each individual a chance for the fullest development of which he is capable.

Secondly, I have come to the conclusion that moral and spiritual qualities are intimately associated with, and bound up in, the physical. This has been borne in upon me by case after case where moral failure has seemed directly related to a deficiency of those things which fathers and mothers, in more favored walks of life, consider that *their* children must have simply as a matter of course. There is no argument about it; their children's welfare demands these things. I mean such things as nourishing food, suitable clothing, attention to teeth and tonsils, and all the other things that have to do with health, and then such other good things as education, wholesome companions, a proper social life, the right kind of recreation, and so on. Some of these are material things but they have a very direct relation to character building. This is really so obvious that it is a little humiliating to have to confess that it took me some time to see its significance. Now, I am far from saying that all our social troubles would vanish if every one had a sufficient income to provide for the essentials of health, education, and recreation; but I have come to give vastly more importance to the question of wages in relation to character than I ever did as a pastor. The same is true with respect to the question of recreation, as I have already intimated. As a pastor I looked upon all forms of commercialized recreation, the public dance especially, as vicious competing interests, tending to draw my young people away from the

church. I looked with much concern, and not without reason, upon those of my young people who sometimes attended such resorts. The trouble was that I failed to see that there is a large area of life that the church seldom touches, and yet one that cannot be ignored if we have any regard for our duty as neighbors. I fear I conceived my work to be only the building up of my church by gathering in whom I could from the world without and striving to promote their growth in Christ. It was the life-boat theory, "rescuing the perishing," without attempting to attack the conditions that put people in peril of life. I did not see clearly that the influence of the church ought to be thrown strongly on the side of those who were working to provide, for example, better opportunities for social pleasure, and, if necessary, to initiate some such movement, all with a view to building up a better type of social life for the community as a whole.

Thirdly, I have become convinced that there must be a great reserve of goodness in just the ordinary run of human beings. As a pastor I fear I had a tendency to rate people to some extent by their relation to the church and, if they were members, by their activity in the work of the church. I do not think I was conscious of this, but as I look back across the years it seems to have been the fact. I suppose I was not a very progressive pastor, although at the time I thought I was. I remember saying disparaging things about "ethical culture," and people who were satisfied with "mere morality." Ethical culture does not, to my mind, offer a satisfactory philosophy of life; but I am bound to say that I know some splendid people who appear to be bringing forth the "fruit of the spirit, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, meekness, faithfulness, self-control"—yes, every one of these—on an ethical-culture basis. Then I know many people who have nothing to do with any church or organized religious body, many of them Jews, who are constantly, and in the most matter-of-fact way, manifesting those virtues which we think of as characteristically Christian. The idealism of multitudes of Jewish young people is widely recognized. But this is not what I have in mind. Just now

I am thinking of concrete cases of love, devotion, unselfishness, sterling self-dependence—all the fine traits of character which are so familiar to those who have come close to poor people. I know, for example, a Jewish mother who is sacrificing herself to the limit that her two girls may get a high-school education. But, of course, mothers are always doing this sort of thing. There is nothing, you say, extraordinary about it. Perhaps not. But here is something that to me is always extraordinary, although it happens often enough, and that is for a tenement-house family to share its home, already crowded to the limit, with a family that has been dispossessed, until the guests can make other arrangements. These are homely incidents, but what is their significance? How does it happen that the majority of boys and girls seem to grow up into pretty decent men and women, with courage, honesty, generous impulses, and a readiness to sacrifice when the best in them is appealed to? Of course, all this is mixed up with a good deal of selfishness at times. I am not disposed to take a sentimental, indulgent, easy-going view of human beings. Sometimes one feels inclined to subscribe to the doctrine of total depravity (in others), but nevertheless a fairly long experience of just the average run of people convinces me that every individual probably possesses a certain amount of ineradicable goodness. If "love is of God and every one that loveth is begotten of God," it looks to me as if He were somehow working in much unpromising material, and as if from time to time the evidence were flashing out in unexpected quarters. This may be unorthodox. Doubtless it is

very poor theology. But if what I have observed are facts, may we not be obliged to revise some of our theological doctrines? Or may we perhaps find some support in the statement of the Westminster Confession of Faith, that the Spirit "worketh when and where and how He pleaseth"?

It is possible that some one might infer that the result of my settlement experience has been to produce a shallow optimism, a comfortable feeling that after all there is so much good in the world that it is hardly worth while to worry over the situation, for things will be bound to come out all right in the end. But this is far from being the case. There is evil enough in the world, and in every one of us, to dispel any such fantastic idea. It is encouraging, however, to believe that God is working out his purposes in what seem to us rather unconventional ways. This does not mean that our more conventional ways may be abandoned. While we may be thankful for every evidence of the growth of good-will in unorganized forms, I see no reason to think that the organization of those who are trying to build up a brotherhood for the redemption of the world and the extension of the Kingdom of God will not continue to be essential for a long time to come. And that to me means the Church of Christ. As nearly as I can assess the results, I feel safe in saying that a wider experience of life, a more intimate acquaintance with all sorts and conditions of men, have given me fresh hope, more trust in God, a stronger faith in just ordinary "folks," and a deeper conviction that the spirit and the teachings of Jesus point the way to the ultimate solution of the social problem.

