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LETTER

OF THE

RT. HON. G. J. GOSCHEN,

PRESIDENT OF THE POOR LAW BOARD.

ON THE

RELIEF TO THE POOR IN THE
METROPOLIS.

DATED 20TH NOVEMBER, 1869.

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RELIEF TO THE POOR IN THE METROPOLIS.



THE published statements of metropolitan pauperism have for some weeks past shown a considerable increase in the number of the out-door poor, not only as compared with previous weeks, but as compared with the high totals of 1867 and 1868. At the same time it has come to the knowledge of the Board that many persons (especially in the East-end of London) who two winters ago were most eager in soliciting charitable contributions, have now expressed the opinion that the large sums spent then in charity tended to attract pauperism to those districts where money flowed most freely, and that they deprecate a repetition of the system then pursued. Under these circumstances, the Board consider it equally important to guard on the one hand against any alarm which might arise on the part of the public, and result in an indiscriminate distribution of charitable funds, and on the other hand to take such precautions and make such preparations as may enable Boards of Guardians and charitable agencies to work with effect and rapidity, if any emergency should arise. And, indeed, without considering the question of an increase in the num-

bers of the out-door poor, and looking simply to the present expenditure on poor relief, it appears to be a matter of essential importance that an attempt should be made to bring the authorities administering the poor laws and those who administer charitable funds to as clear an understanding as possible, so as to avoid the double distribution of relief to the same persons, and at the same time to secure that the most effective use should be made of the large sums habitually contributed by the public towards relieving such cases as the poor law can scarcely reach.

The question arises, how far it is possible to mark out the separate limits of the poor law and of charity respectively, and how it is possible to secure joint action between the two.

One of the most recognized principles in our poor law is, that relief should be given only to the actually destitute, and not in aid of wages. In the case of widows with families, where it is often manifestly impossible that the earnings of the woman can support the family, the rule is frequently departed from, but, as a general principle, it lies at the root of the present system of relief. In innumerable cases its application appears to be harsh for the moment, and it might also be held to be an aggravation of an existing difficulty to insist that, so long as a person is in employment and wages are earned, though such wages may be insufficient, the poor law authorities ought to hold aloof and refuse to supplement the receipts of the family, actually offering in preference to take upon themselves the entire cost of their maintenance.

Still, it is certain that no system could be more dangerous, both to the working classes and to the ratepayers, than to supplement insufficiency of wages by the expenditure of public money.

The fundamental doctrine of the English poor laws, in which they differ from those of most other countries, is that relief is given, not as a matter of charity but of legal obligation, and to extend this legal obligation beyond the class to which it now applies, namely, the actually destitute, to a further and much larger class, namely, those in receipt of insufficient wages, would be not only to increase to an unlimited extent the present enormous expenditure, but to allow the belief in a legal claim to public money in every emergency to supplant, in a further portion of the population, the full recognition of the necessity for self-reliance and thrift.

It is clear, therefore, that the poor law authorities could not be allowed without public danger to extend their operations beyond those persons who are actually destitute, and for whom they are at present legally bound to provide. It would seem to follow that charitable organizations whose alms could in no case be claimed as a right would find their most appropriate sphere in assisting those who have some, but insufficient, means, and who, though on the verge of pauperism, are not actual paupers, leaving to the operation of the general law the provision for the totally destitute.

It is, however, important not to ignore the fact that, even in the case of the destitute, whose main-

tenance the poor law authorities avowedly take upon themselves, there is a great disposition on the part of charitable persons, in what may be known to be deserving cases, to add to the *minimum* relief granted as a matter of legal obligation. At the same time, so long as the almoners of charities know that the amount of any allowance made by them to a poor family will be considered by the poor law authorities in determining the scale of outdoor relief, they are likely either to withhold the money altogether, as only given in alleviation of rates, or, what is more probable, to give it without the knowledge of the local authorities. The first course stops the flow of charity; the second is demoralizing, and opens the door to many abuses. The best means to meet the difficulty would seem to be that in all those cases where the Board of Guardians are granting relief—and in all such cases the relief must, by law, be adequate—the almoners of charities should abstain from giving food or money, or supplying any such articles as the guardians are themselves strictly bound to grant, and especially from giving their charity in such a manner as would constitute a regular increase of income. If the charitable agencies wish to interpose at all in such cases, they should confine their assistance to donations of bedding or clothing, or any similar articles which the Guardians may not consider themselves bound to provide at a particular moment, and which can be easily distinguished from other relief. It may be well to add that Boards of Guardians cannot legally give relief—

1. In redeeming tools or clothes from pawn;
2. In purchasing tools;

3. In purchasing clothes (except in cases of urgent necessity);

4. In paying the cost of conveyance to any part of the United Kingdom;

5. In paying rent or lodging;

so that assistance rendered for any of these purposes will not interfere with the action of the Guardians.

The general principle to be borne in mind seems to be that the obligations of the Guardians should not be curtailed, and that where the charitable associations consider it within their province to deal at all with persons on the parish lists, they should do so, not by affording additional means of income, but by supplying once for all such articles as do not clash with or overlap the relief administered by the Guardians. It should, however, be clearly understood that no invitation is suggested to the charities to come, even in an indirect way, to the assistance of those for whom the Guardians are bound "to provide adequate relief." What is suggested is that where the charities, as a matter of fact, do come in contact with that class of poor, they should act on the principles indicated, and, as far as practicable, in concert with the Guardians.

A cordial understanding between the Poor Law authorities and the charitable organizations, based upon arrangements of the kind suggested, does not appear to be hopeless.

It remains to consider by what means such an understanding can be brought about.

The first point is that there should be every opportunity for every agency, official or private, engaged in relieving the poor, to know fully and accurately the details of the work performed by all similarly engaged. The lists of the relieving officers would form the natural basis for the necessary information. No funds are at the disposal of the Poor Law Board with which they could appoint a staff and provide offices for organizing a general registration of metropolitan relief. Other means must therefore be sought for providing that a public registering office should be established in every large district, where registers should be kept of all persons in receipt of parochial relief, with such particulars attached as might guide others in their inquiries. The clergy of all denominations, and the representatives of all the charities in the neighbourhood, should be invited to send in their lists to such offices, and to make themselves acquainted with the other lists deposited there, by which means an accurate dictionary or reference book might be framed which would supply the necessary information about almost every person who had once received relief, either parochial or charitable. In the absence of any sufficient legal power in the Poor Law Board to enforce an organization of this kind, the working of the plan must mainly depend on the voluntary action of the Guardians and of the various charitable bodies, but the Poor Law Board will be happy to afford any aid that may be in their power, and to authorize such expenditure as may fall within legal limits. They would be prepared—

1. To authorize the Guardians to print weekly

lists, containing the names and addresses of outdoor paupers, and the sums given in relief of each case.

2. To authorize any reasonable remuneration for extra work to officers whom the Guardians may employ to carry out this arrangement.

3. To instruct their inspectors to facilitate the communication between the official and private agencies, where such interposition may be of any service, and to assist in systematizing as far as possible relief operations in various parts of the metropolis.

It is evident that the suggestion made may be acted upon in all those unions where the Guardians may be prepared to adopt them, without waiting for the adhesion of any union which may be less disposed to co-operate in the scheme. The successful working of the plan in even a few of the largest and most pauperized districts would in itself be of great value, and undoubtedly secure a similar organization throughout the metropolis.

When the means of communication are established it might be possible to agree on certain regulations which the charities might with much advantage engage to observe, not indiscriminately or as an inflexible rule, but as a general practice. They might undertake—

1. To abstain from giving money or food to those in receipt of parish relief.

2. To inform the relieving officers of any gifts of blankets or clothing, upon the understanding that these gifts should not be taken into account for the purpose of curtailing the ordinary relief.

3. They might apply to the relieving officer on behalf of all such totally destitute persons whom in the course of their operations they might find unrelieved, but who properly fall within the sphere of the relieving officer. On the other hand, when the relieving officers are applied to for relief, and are bound to refuse it because the applicants are not actually destitute in the strict sense of the term, they might pass on the names and addresses to the charitable agencies where they think that the cases are likely to fall within the class which the charity undertakes to assist.

It will of course be understood that the Poor Law Board have no power in this matter to act beyond granting the necessary authority for the expenditure incurred on a part of the organization required as described above. They can only invite the various charitable agencies and the Boards of Guardians to consider the suggestions which they have made. In 1867 great advantage resulted in the East-end of London from the understanding established between the Guardians, on the one hand, and the representatives of the charities on the other, with the co-operation of Mr. Sclater-Booth, then Secretary to the Poor Law Board, and Mr. Corbett, Poor Law Inspector. At the time of the cotton famine the Poor Law authorities and the administrators of charities also worked together with great success.

These precedents justify the belief that great benefits would result to the metropolis if a cordial understanding could be arrived at, and arrangements made between all parties engaged in relieving the poor, based on practical and systematic rules, in conformity with the general plan sketched in this Minute.

GEORGE J. GOSCHEN.

Poor Law Board,
November 20th, 1869.





