

(January 17th, 1912.)

## Settlement Work in New York.

BY DR. JOHN L. ELLIOTT.\*

AT a regular meeting of the Canadian Club held on the 17th January, 1912, Dr. John L. Elliott said:

*Mr. President and Gentlemen*,—I am really to speak this afternoon on the subject of home conservation, saving up the waste products of humanity. But before I take that large theme, I want to say this, that it is a peculiar pleasure to me to be present at a luncheon of the Canadian Club, because many years ago I met a young man in New York who was, I think, instrumental in the foundation of the Canadian Club movement, a man who at the same time was one of the strongest, finest, whitest, best citizens of any country I ever met, Mr. Sanford Evans, and I bring out of my thought no memory that is more dear to me than the memory of the years that we spent together practically when students in New York city.

In speaking of human conservation, I want to start with a little figure. Where the great American desert is being made to bloom, that country where my people live, in New Mexico, when you stand on any of the many mountains a splendid panorama is offered to the eye. But a few years ago there was there only some little stream or stagnant pool, and you or I would hardly think we could live there; but to-day men more and more are living there. They would come and take up a quarter section, go and get the Government to put in a well or dig an irrigation ditch, at the cost of a few thousands of dollars, sinking a well a few thousand feet, and thus they have transformed that hard and barren land so as to form homes for a free and happy people. If ever you have looked into a great American city such as New York from a height such as the Metropolitan tower, you will have seen great stretches even more dreary and more uninviting to live in than any stretches of the great American desert. My theme is that they have to be transformed just the same. There is not human power enough, or money, or intelligence enough, that you can get to transform this human desert, save as you send down a well into the intellectual, financial, spiritual depths of the people themselves, and make the city desert transform itself.

\*Dr. John L. Elliott, Ph.D. (Heidelberg and Cornell), is a notable authority upon social betterment work. He stands high in the Ethical Society of New York, and is a foremost leader in the Hudson Guild.

I don't know how far a man went into New Mexico carrying water in a bucket, but he would never get a farm that way, he would starve. I don't know how far a single worker could go in bettering conditions in the city, but working with the best will in the world he will never do much to affect the city desert. This has to be done by foresight in the use of money and the use of scientific method, which brings the people themselves into co-operation and uses them in transforming the city desert. Too long we have regarded the objects of philanthropy and charity merely as objects of philanthropy and charity, merely as so much material on which to work. Man has thought the main object was looking after his own advancement. He has said, "Let me go into business, law, the professions, and let the women and the weak-minded do the philanthropy and the charity." We are most of us cursed with the lack of imagination; we don't see human beings as human beings. How many of you, when you see the letter carrier walking down the street, think of him at any time as other than a letter carrier? Who ever thought of a letter carrier as getting a letter himself, opening and reading it? There is simply not the capacity for imagination: we don't enclothe that object as a man. It is that attitude that does not enclothe the settlement man or the settlement woman and think, "There is a man, a woman."

I was looking, just after my return from Europe this summer, at about five thousand people watching a moving picture exhibition. We have given these exhibitions regularly twice a week, and there are commonly five thousand people present, including about fifteen hundred children. As I looked at those fifteen hundred children sitting on the ground there, I recognized to my horror that most of them were the waste products of the human race, to be thrown on the human scrap heap. The words came to me, "Gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost." That is the command, but our societies taken as a whole do not follow it. In consequence too many go to the jail, the alms house, the asylum. What we have to do is to find some new kind of method to get at that waste product and save it.

In New York we pay \$36,000,000 for our public school system. I cannot help feeling that a very large part of that money is wasted, when we consider what the results are. Why? Take these children from the tenements. I think they get a little more than enough about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and of German and French that they will never use. I was in a school one day where the teacher was drilling a whole class of tenement boys on the sign of the plu-

perfect! (Laughter.) She found it hard to get an answer from them, till at last an Irish boy, Ikey Einstein (Laughter), spotted the plu-perfect and the class went on with its business! The sign of the plu-perfect I am afraid they would find a weak and broken reed to lean on in time of trouble. Yet this is the kind of education so many get in our public schools. It is barbarism! The children are not taught to use their hands, but go through public school without a training to fit them for life; and when the boy climbs onto the delivery wagon the sign of the plu-perfect is completely forgotten; the girl has not the sense of independence developed.

I looked at a little girl who was looking at the pictures. The chances were all that she would be lost; at any rate she had already seen the best part of her life. Walking down Ninth Avenue I saw a youngster coming down with a woman, with his arm around her waist. I thought that here was an unusual sign of affection, but on looking again I saw that the woman was reeling drunk, and this boy, her son, was taking her home. Of course in New York City there are many saloons on the corners, and as they came near one of these the woman wanted to go in but the boy tried to dissuade her. In the argument and the struggle over it, her hat fell off, and she, in trying to recover it, fell down and rolled into the gutter. The little youngster leaned up against a lamp post and cried. I ask you, what chance has a boy brought up in that kind of home, to keep from being thrown onto the human scrap heap? I say to you, no human power can save most people, save that power which is in themselves. They must be educated, enlightened, taught to work with hand and head. People who have got on realize that people have to do something for themselves. The settlement is just a little beginning, an open door to take in everybody. It does not deal with an economic crowd, but helps people just as people.

Play is just as essential to a child as air or food, and no city in the world adequately provides for this human need. The settlement spends part of its strength in protest against this neglect,—it does teach the boy to play. It gets educational value out of play. In the second place, it tries to help boys and girls to be economically independent and able to earn a living. That is not given to most children of the poor. But the economic power that is in them! Talk about conservation of energies and resources!—the greatest undeveloped power in the West is in the people, and there are gold mines of power yet undeveloped in the masses of the people, which we have not found out which we should bring out.

I went into a club in our own place the other day, and saw two girls. The minute I saw those girls I knew they were of the fast kind, from the way they had their hair done—girls of that class will spend three-quarters of an hour dressing their hair, and ten minutes on all the rest of their toilet. They get into that sort of life partly from their lack of skill, and the hardness of factory life, and the employer too often takes the attitude that these girls are materials, tools, with which to make money; yet they are human beings! We are trying to offer them something attractive in the way of parties and dances and that kind of amusement, to get them to come where we could throw better influences about them. We give no Christmas presents, but we give each girl in our House the opportunity to bring any little children that they know, and we furnish presents for the children. It was one of the most beautiful sights I ever saw in my life when last Christmas there were these hard, difficult girls, as gentle, loving, and fine, as any girls you could find in the entire city. Somehow or other the church did not get hold of them; the school could not reach them, but generally when you ask them to help a little child, you can win them; the love of the little child will lead this world into a better world if you make the right appeal! Give even these girls and the mothers of the tenements a chance to do for the children—that motive won't fail. There never was a corrupt, bad woman in the city yet that would not work hard for her children, and in so doing become better herself. And so it is with the man. If you show him he can help his children and his wife there is scarcely a man that won't respond to any reasonable appeal that can be made. Practically any man not utterly sodden will stand by an organized work when he believes the welfare of his family, his wife and his children, are at stake.

So we are trying to get the people of the neighborhood to look after themselves; not for the reason of lifting up the fallen; not with the object of charity; but as a source of well-being. I am perfectly sure that you would find less difficulty in solving the problem of the people of the submerged tenth, that you could save them, by pointing out to them the fact that they can be of help in their neighborhood, by appealing to the vital motives within practically every human being, to save himself from mental and moral deficiency.

We have a self-governing House. I am gone from it now two weeks, but there will not be a bit of trouble; there are a man and a woman in charge who will look after affairs well in my absence. Every Sunday the House is open. There are no paid workers. We organize our neighborhood by blocks, and

are trying to get the women of that neighborhood to see that no child shall die unnecessarily in the slum. We live in a neighborhood rotten with consumption. I am sick and tired of going to the bedsides of boys and girls there and watching them die, with eyes like those of an animal caught in a trap, as I don't doubt they are dying in your own city. We seek to get people to co-operate and open the windows, to make them feel that that is part of their business. For the people in a poor neighborhood will co-operate with the Departments of the city in keeping order. We have a good Irish neighborhood; notwithstanding they co-operate with the police in keeping order (Laughter.) Of course there should not be very much talk, but mostly work—this is the doctrine of setting people to work!

Dealing with boys—I was talking to a class of boys about some one who was very unsocial, and I was trying to show them what a horrible character Nero was. It was a hot, dripping night. I told them how he burned Rome, and murdered his mother. And I asked them, "What do you think of him?" Well, it was too hot to think! I asked one boy, "You, Butsey, how do you feel towards that man?" "He never did nothin' to me," was the reply! (Laughter.) Gentlemen, it is very little use just talking, what you want to do is to put people to work! Show them an object. They will not come into any little class to hear you or me talk about Rome or the characters of history. Try hard to interest them in the work of men and women. Someone was asking what it was to be a good neighbor; one child said, "To be like Martha Washington;" another, "Like Helen Gould;" Barney answered, "Like Mary McDillon" (Magdalene), and when the teacher asked why, he replied, "She was no quitter, she never went back on her friend."

The House Committee actually governs the House. One little woman, whose husband has been sent away to be tried for murder, is here with her child; she can handle a case of inceptive tuberculosis as well as I can. I never appeal to the girls' and boys' clubs but they respond generously. Some scrubwoman will come up with a crumpled dollar bill in her hand and say to me shamefacedly, "Here is something to help, you know the people that need it." There is a great spiritual depth and power of sacrifice in these people. Everyone knows the charity of the poor for the poor. It needs education, but the power is there. I have seen nothing that more affects me on earth than that sight of the scrubwoman, ignorant, helpless, standing there wet to her knees, a bedraggled figure, yet with the wonder light of what she was doing, and what she was

doing it for. It was nothing to help her. Yet a woman will stand up to fight the world for her children. There is a depth there of moral power! There is no knowing what a woman will do for her children, when you show her how; or what a man will do for his family when you let him see how it will help them. The men and women of our neighborhood knew there was no chance for their children to bathe except in the river, where they were in danger of getting drowned, so they went to work to get a bath-house built, and to-day a \$200,000 bath is being put in. They came to realize that the park needed light, that there were dangers to their children in the dark places, and owing to their efforts lights are being put in. There among the men and women there is this social work going on, day after day, week by week.

That is what I say—you have to sink the irrigation well into the depths of the people themselves. Now two words on the value of this work. One is that of democracy. Usually we regard people in offices and shops just on the side of value, what they can do or produce; that is hardly the point of view of democracy, which regards every human being as having indefeasible worth in himself or herself. A settlement is just an attempt to bring out the worth there is in every human being—the application of the true democratic spirit to the life of a poor community we are trying to save.

Another thing: we say to the men and women, "You have to do something,—you workingman you have to do right by your family." He answers, "I have to have a chance to do right." The objection to the whole thing is, as many people in our community say, they haven't the chance to lead a moral life. Isn't that true? Go to the prisons, and you will find out. However, we are not asking for comfort for these people. Nobody is very comfortable, but the appeal is made on the side of the people of the community, that they be given a chance to live a decent life. Let this be said of any city that it dodges that question, that it denies to a number of its people the right to lead a moral life. I don't think that any community can dare to dodge that question.

There is an old fable which tells of a party of men lost in the desert. One of the oldest of them, seeing that they were in danger of perishing for lack of water, walked off by himself to look if he could find any signs of water anywhere. He saw a little plant, and coming back to the party said to a young man, "Dig there; you will find that where a plant is there is water." He dug, but did not for some time find anything, but at last came to a rock, and the older man laid his ear to it and heard a rushing and gushing. He told the young fellow to

take up the stone, and there under it they found water, and were saved. Out of my eighteen years of experience, I point to the little results I have seen in the life of the poor, and I say, "Dig there—you will find water."

I was in one of the cheapest theatres—a place where they cried, screeched or hollered for a prize of the value of about \$3,—you can smoke there, but you can't breathe! and if you don't like the actor or singer you may shout out your disapproval—it is the original place of "Get the hook!"—all of a sudden I began to feel better, for I saw that one of those actresses on the stage had commenced to sing a song which everybody knew, and instead of the lack of interest that had marked them before, all that great audience was joining in the chorus, not each one trying to force his voice above that of others but rather to keep it below; the whole company was singing that simple song. To me it was like the music of a choir, not like the music which signifies foolishness. It comes as an echo out of the people themselves, that which is the real music. And so as I go back to live among these people it seems, though the neighborhood is sodden, and drunk, and rotten with horrible disease, I know, sometime or other, though these things flourish in every city under God's sun, there is a power there that, if we can only get at it day by day, will save these poor wrecks of children, such as you have in your own city—for they are here too. Will that method be followed? Will that power become the source that can redeem our communities? Answer, O years to come! Answer, Canada! Answer, this city! Answer, you! (Applause.)