

THE PUBLIC WELL-BEING—(continued)

and see for himself the appalling conditions which are the inevitable breeding-grounds of immorality and which must defy, as long as they are allowed to persist, every effort of the public-health organisation to combat or prevent disease. On this very subject Mr. J. H. Thomas delivered a striking speech a few days ago at Portsmouth.

Local authorities who institute prosecutions for overcrowding are beginning at the wrong end. People have to live somewhere; and the obvious remedy is not by way of prosecutions, which can only mean turning them out into the streets, but by finding real homes for them. In Germany the Government decided long ago that all empty houses should be "commandeered" to provide accommodation for homeless people, and no person was allowed more rooms in a house than was sufficient for the needs of his family. Without asking our own Government to go to the length of compelling householders to share their premises with other families,

it is surely time that the thousands of houses, large and small, which for various reasons (but chiefly to obtain a high purchase price) are lying empty in all parts of the country should be made available for the public necessities. This would not itself solve the house problem. That is apparent. But it would ameliorate the lot of a large number of unfortunate people and do much towards removing a genuine source of discontent and irritation.

A MIDDLE-CLASS PLEA.

It has been suggested in more than one responsible quarter that the new Bill should be amended by making it compulsory for local authorities to take over all empty houses, without regard to their size or quality, from the date of the passing of the measure, and to offer them to the public at a standard rent. Whatever is done, the prevailing house-hunger is a disease which no Government can afford to disregard indefinitely.

Perils of the Restaurant.**THE DECLINE OF HOME COOKING.**

AN important and interesting question with regard to restaurants and eating-houses is raised by Dr. Charles Porter, the medical officer of health for Marylebone, in his annual report for 1919. For a variety of reasons the number of premises in St. Marylebone in which meals are provided or food is sold ready cooked or is prepared for sale is very large, and include restaurant, dining-room and coffee-shop kitchens, tea-rooms and pastry-cooks, hotel kitchens, fried-fish shops, and fish-curers. In addition, there are a number of shops in which meat, ham, sausages, etc., are cooked and sold only over the counter.

None of these premises, he says, is, or is required to be, registered, and apart from fish-curing and fish-frying premises, which are required to be in compliance with certain requirements contained in by-laws of the London County Council, none of them is subject to any very special provisions. Any individual, in short, may take any sort of premises, and proceed to cook and prepare food for sale; no notice to the local authority is required, and unless complaint is received, or infectious or suspicious illness occurs, or the premises are visited by an inspector, the fact that they are so used may never be discovered.

That this is so appears to be at least unsatisfactory. On account of changed conditions the

amount of home cooking done is steadily diminishing, and more and more the cook-shop, the restaurant, and the cooked-food shop are being resorted to. In the poorer quarters of the borough the extent to which the fried-fish shop, for example, is depended upon may be judged from the number of children making purchases during the school dinner-hour, and the number of adult and child customers in the evenings. In the evenings, too, the busiest shops in the main thoroughfares are those where cooked foods are retailed over the counter.

Legislation, which did not foresee these changes, contains no provision for dealing properly with the premises, and the Legislature has made no attempt to obtain control over them. Such places as the law, as it now stands, requires to be registered or licensed are mainly those in which uncooked food is dealt with, e.g., slaughter-houses, cow-sheds, milk-shops, etc.

Having regard to the changes the law should be extended in order to provide for registration of the cooked-food premises also. Before establishing a restaurant or eating-rooms of any description, a cook-shop or a cooked-food shop, it should be necessary for application for registration to be made to the local authority, and registration should not be granted until the premises had been inspected and passed as suitable.

What Smoke Costs.

ALMOST as many estimates have been made as to the economic cost of the smoke nuisance as treatises have been written and speeches made on the discomfort and unhealthy conditions produced by smoke—though there are serious smoke advocates who seem to think that the atmosphere of a town of a thousand factory chimneys is as health-giving

as the air of a mountain-top. The best known estimate of the losses arising from soot and smoke suspended in city atmosphere is probably that of £5,000,000 made twenty years ago by the Hon. Rollo Russell, who regarded this as the actual cost per annum that London had to pay for its smoke.

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