

MEN'S SOCIAL WORK, LONDON

THE MIDDLESEX STREET SHELTER

The first of the London Institutions of the Salvation Army which I visited was that known as the Middlesex Street Shelter and Working Men's Home, which is at present under the supervision of Commissioner Sturgess. This building consists of six floors, and contains sleeping accommodation for 462 men. It has been at work since the year 1906, when it was acquired by the Army with the help of that well-known philanthropist, the late Mr. George Herring.

Of the 462 men accommodated daily, 311 pay 3d. for their night's lodging, and the remainder 5d. The threepenny charge entitles the tenant to the use of a bunk bedstead with sheets and an American cloth cover. If the extra 2d. is forthcoming the wanderer is provided with a proper bed, fitted with a wire spring hospital frame and provided with a mattress, sheets, pillow, and blankets. I may state here that as in the case of this Shelter the building, furniture and other equipment have been provided by charity, the nightly fees collected almost suffice to pay the running expenses of the establishment. Under less favourable circumstances, however, where the building and equipment are a charge on the capital funds of the Salvation Army, the experience is that these fees do not suffice to meet the cost of

interest and maintenance.

The object of this and similar Shelters is to afford to men upon the verge of destitution the choice between such accommodation as is here provided and the common lodging-house, known as a 'kip house,' or the casual ward of a workhouse. Those who avail themselves of these Shelters belong, speaking generally, to the destitute or nearly destitute classes. They are harbours of refuge for the unfortunates who find themselves on the streets of London at nightfall with a few coppers or some other small sum in their pockets. Many of these social wrecks have sunk through drink, but many others owe their sad position to lack or loss of employment, or to some other misfortune.

For an extra charge of 1d. the inmates are provided with a good supper, consisting of a pint of soup and a large piece of bread, or of bread and jam and tea, or of potato-pie. A second penny supplies them with breakfast on the following morning, consisting of bread and porridge or of bread and fish, with tea or coffee.

The dormitories, both of the fivepenny class on the ground floor and of the threepenny class upstairs, are kept scrupulously sweet and clean, and attached to them are lavatories and baths. These lavatories contain a great number of brown earthenware basins fitted with taps. Receptacles are provided, also, where the inmates can wash their clothes and have them dried by means of an ingenious electrical contrivance and hot air, capable of thoroughly drying any ordinary

garment in twenty minutes while its owner takes a bath.

The man in charge of this apparatus and of the baths was one who had been picked up on the Embankment during the past winter. In return for his services he received food, lodging, clothes and pocket-money to the amount of 3s. a week. He told me that he was formerly a commercial traveller, and was trying to re-enter that profession or to become a ship's steward. Sickness had been the cause of his fall in the world.

Adjoining the downstairs dormitory is a dining and sitting-room for the use of those who have taken bed tickets. In this room, when I visited it, several men were engaged in various occupations. One of them was painting flowers. Another, a watch repairer, was apparently making up his accounts, which, perhaps, were of an imaginary nature. A third was eating a dinner which he had purchased at the food bar. A fourth smoked a cigarette and watched the flower artist at his work. A fifth was a Cingalese who had come from Ceylon to lay some grievance before the late King. The authorities at Whitehall having investigated his case, he had been recommended to return to Ceylon and consult a lawyer there. Now he was waiting for the arrival of remittances to enable him to pay his passage back to Ceylon. I wondered whether the remittances would ever be forthcoming. Meanwhile he lived here on 7-1/2d. a day, 5d. for his bed and 2-1/2d. for his food. Of these and other men similarly situated I will give some account presently.

Having inspected the upper floors I descended to the basement, where

what are called the 'Shelter men' are received at a separate entrance at 5.30 in the afternoon, and buying their penny or halfpennyworth of food, seat themselves on benches to eat. Here, too, they can sit and smoke or mend their clothes, or if they are wet, dry themselves in the annexe, until they retire to rest. During the past winter of 1909 400 men taken from the Embankment were sheltered here gratis every night, and were provided with soup and bread. When not otherwise occupied this hall is often used for the purpose of religious services.

I spoke at hazard with some of those who were sitting about in the Shelter. A few specimen cases may be interesting. An old man told me that he had travelled all over the world for fifty years, especially in the islands of the South Pacific, until sickness broke him down. He came last from Shanghai, where he had been an overseer on railway work, and before that from Manila. Being incapacitated by fever and rheumatism, and possessing 1,500 dollars, he travelled home, apparently via India and Burma, stopping a while in each country. Eventually he drifted to a lodging-house, and, falling ill there, was sent to the Highgate Infirmary, where, he said, he was so cold that he could not stop. Ultimately he found himself upon the streets in winter. For the past twelve months he had been living in this Shelter upon some help that a friend gave him, for all his own money was gone. Now he was trying to write books, one of which was in the hands of a well-known firm. He remarked, pathetically, that they 'have had it a long time.' He was also waiting 'every day' for a pension from America, which he considered was due to him because he fought in the

Civil War.

Most of these poor people are waiting for something.

This man added that he could not find his relatives, and that he intended to stop in the Shelter until his book was published, or he could 'help himself out.'

The next man I spoke to was the flower artist, whom I have already mentioned, whose work, by the way, if a little striking in colour, was by no means bad, especially as he had no real flowers to draw from. By trade he was a lawyer's clerk; but he stated that, unfortunately for him, the head partner of his firm went bankrupt six years before, and the bad times, together with the competition of female labour in the clerical department, prevented him from obtaining another situation, so he had been obliged to fall back upon flower painting. He was a married man, but he said, 'While I could make a fair week's money, things were comfortable, but when orders fell slack I was requested to go, as my room was preferable to my company, and being a man of nervous temperament I could not stand it, and have been here ever since'--that was for about ten weeks. He managed to make enough for his board and lodging by the sale of his flower-pictures.

A third man informed me that he had opened twenty-seven shops for a large firm of tobacconists, and then left to start in business for himself; also he used to go out window-dressing, in which he was

skilled. Then, about nine years ago, his wife began to drink, and while he was absent in hospital, neglected his business so that it became worthless. Finally she deserted him, and he had heard nothing of her since. After that he took to drink himself. He came to this Shelter intermittently, and supported himself by an occasional job of window-dressing. The Salvation Army was trying to cure this man of his drinking habits.

A fourth man, a Eurasian, was a schoolmaster in India, who drifted to this country, and had been for four years in the Colney Hatch Asylum. He was sent to the Salvation Army by the After Care Society. He had been two years in the Shelter, and was engaged in saving up money to go to America. He was employed in the Shelter as a scrubber, and also as a seller of food tickets, by which means he had saved some money. Also he had a £5 note, which his sister sent to him. This note he was keeping to return to her as a present on her birthday! His story was long and miserable, and his case a sad one. Still, he was capable of doing work of a sort.

Another very smart and useful man had been a nurse in the Army Medical Corps, which he left some years ago with a good character. Occasionally he found a job at nursing, and stayed at the Shelter, where he was given employment between engagements.

Yet another, quite a young person, was a carman who had been discharged through slackness of work in the firm of which he was a

servant. He had been ten weeks in the Institution, to which he came from the workhouse, and hoped to find employment at his trade.

In passing through this building, I observed a young man of foreign appearance seated in a window-place reading a book, and asked his history. I was told that he was a German of education, whose ambition it is to become a librarian in his native country. He had come to England in order to learn our language, and being practically without means, drifted into this place, where he was employed in cleaning the windows and pursued his studies in the intervals of that humble work. Let us hope that in due course his painstaking industry will be rewarded, and his ambition fulfilled.

All these cases, and others that I have no space to mention, belonged to the class of what I may call the regular 'hangers-on' of this particular Shelter. As I visited it in the middle of the day, I did not see its multitude of normal nightly occupants. Of such men, however, I shall be able to speak elsewhere.