

## THE GREAT PETER STREET SHELTER

### WESTMINSTER

This fine building is the most up-to-date Men's Shelter that the Salvation Army possesses in London. It was once the billiard works of Messrs. Burroughes and Watts, and is situated in Westminster, quite near to the Houses of Parliament. I visited it about eight o'clock in the evening, and at its entrance was confronted with the word 'Full,' inscribed in chalk upon its portals, at which poor tramps, deprived of their hope of a night's lodging, were staring disconsolately. It reminded me of a playhouse upon a first-night of importance, but, alas! the actors here play in a tragedy more dreadful in its cumulative effect than any that was ever put upon the stage.

This Shelter is wonderfully equipped and organized. It contains sitting or resting-rooms, smoking-rooms, huge dormitories capable of accommodating about 600 sleepers; bathrooms, lavatories, extensive hot-water and warming apparatus, great kitchens, and butteries, and so forth. In the sitting and smoking-rooms, numbers of derelict men were seated. Some did nothing except stare before them vacantly. Some evidently were suffering from the effects of drink or fatigue; some were reading newspapers which they had picked up in the course of their day's tramp. One, I remember, was engaged in sorting out and

crumpling up a number of cigar and cigarette ends which he had collected from the pavements, carefully grading the results in different heaps, according to the class of the tobacco (how strong it must be!) either for his own consumption or for sale to other unfortunates. In another place, men were eating the 1d. or 1/2d. suppers that they had purchased.

Early as it was, however, the great dormitories were crowded with hundreds of the lodgers, either in bed or in process of getting there. I noticed that they all undressed themselves, wrapping up their rags in bundles, and, for the most part slept quite naked. Many of them struck me as very fine fellows physically, and the reflection crossed my mind, seeing them thus in *puris naturalibus*, that there was little indeed to distinguish them from a crowd of males of the upper class engaged, let us say, in bathing. It is the clothes that make the difference to the eye.

In this Shelter I was told, by the way, that there exists a code of rough honour among these people, who very rarely attempt to steal anything from each other. Having so little property, they sternly respect its rights. I should add that the charge made for accommodation and food is 3d. per night for sleeping, and 1d. or 1/2d. per portion of food.

The sight of this Institution crowded with human derelicts struck me as most sad, more so indeed than many others that I have seen, though,

perhaps, this may have been because I was myself tired out with a long day of inspection.

The Staff-Captain in charge here told me his history, which is so typical and interesting that I will repeat it briefly. Many years ago (he is now an elderly man) he was a steward on board a P. and O. liner, and doing well. Then a terrible misfortune overwhelmed him. Suddenly his wife and child died, and, as a result of the shock, he took to drink. He attempted to cut his throat (the scar remains to him), and was put upon his trial for the offence. Subsequently he drifted on to the streets, where he spent eight years. During all this time his object was to be rid of life, the methods he adopted being to make himself drunk with methylated spirits, or any other villainous and fiery liquor, and when that failed, to sleep at night in wet grass or ditches. Once he was picked up suffering from inflammation of the lungs and carried to an infirmary, where he lay senseless for three days. The end of it was that a Salvation Army Officer found him in Oxford Street, and took him to a Shelter in Burne Street, where he was bathed and put to bed.

That was many years ago, and now he is to a great extent responsible for the management of this Westminster Refuge. Commissioner Sturgess, one of the head Officers of the Army, told me that their great difficulty was to prevent him from overdoing himself at this charitable task. I think the Commissioner said that sometimes he would work eighteen or twenty hours out of the twenty-four.

One day this Staff-Captain played a grim little trick upon me. I was seated at luncheon in a Salvation Army building, when the door opened, and there entered as dreadful a human object as I have ever seen. The man was clad in tatters, his bleeding feet were bound up with filthy rags; he wore a dingy newspaper for a shirt. His face was cut and plastered over roughly; he was a disgusting sight. He told me, in husky accents, that drink had brought him down, and that he wanted help. I made a few appropriate remarks, presented him with a small coin, and sent him to the Officers downstairs.

A quarter of an hour later the Staff-Captain appeared in his uniform and explained that he and the 'object' were the same person. Again it was the clothes that made the difference. Those which he had worn when he appeared at the luncheon-table were the same in which he had been picked up on the streets of London. Also he thanked me for my good advice which he said he hoped to follow, and for the sixpence that he announced his intention of wearing on his watch-chain. For my part I felt that the laugh was against me. Perhaps if I had thought the Salvation Army capable of perpetrating a joke, I should not have been so easily deceived.

This Staff-Captain gave me much information as to the class of wanderers who frequent these Shelters, He estimated that about 50 per cent of them sink to that level through the effects of drink. That is to say, if by the waving of some magic wand intoxicants and harmful

drugs should cease to be obtainable in this country, the bulk of extreme misery which needs such succour, and it may be added of crime at large, would be lessened by one-half. This is a terrible statement, and one that seems to excuse a great deal of what is called 'teetotal fanaticism.' The rest, in his view, owe their fall to misfortune of various kinds, which often in its turn leads to flight to the delusive and destroying solace of drink. Thus about 25 per cent of the total have been afflicted with sickness or acute domestic troubles. Or perhaps they are 'knocked out' by shock, such as is brought on by the loss of a dearly-loved wife or child, and have never been able to recover from that crushing blow. The remainder are the victims of advancing age and of the cruel commercial competition of our day. Thus he said that the large business firms destroy and devour the small shopkeepers, as a hawk devours sparrows; and these little people or their employes, if they are past middle age, can find no other work. Especially is this the case since the Employers' Liability Acts came into operation, for now few will take on hands who are not young and very strong, as older folk must naturally be more liable to sickness and accident.

Again, he told me that it has become the custom in large businesses of which the dividends are falling, to put in a man called an 'Organizer,' who is often an American.

This Organizer goes through the whole staff and mercilessly dismisses the elderly or the least efficient, dividing up their work among those

who remain. So these discarded men fall to rise no more and drift to the poorhouse or the Shelters or the jails, and finally into the river or a pauper's grave. First, however, many spend what may be called a period of probation on the streets, where they sleep at night under arches or on stairways, or on the inhospitable flagstones and benches of the Embankment, even in winter.

The Staff-Captain informed me that on one night during the previous November he counted no less than 120 men, women, and children sleeping in the wet on or in the neighbourhood of the Embankment. Think of it--in this one place! Think of it, you whose women and children, to say nothing of yourselves, do not sleep on the Embankment in the wet in November. It may be answered that they might have gone to the casual ward, where there are generally vacancies. I suppose that they might, but so perverse are many of them that they do not. Indeed, often they declare bluntly that they would rather go to prison than to the casual ward, as in prison they are more kindly treated.

The reader may have noted as he drove along the Embankment or other London thoroughfares at night in winter, long queues of people waiting their turn to get something. What they are waiting for is a cup of soup and, perhaps, an opportunity of sheltering till the dawn, which soup and shelter are supplied by the Salvation Army, and sometimes by other charitable Organizations. I asked whether this provision of gratis food did in fact pauperize the population, as has been alleged. The Staff-Captain answered that men do not as a rule stop out in the

middle of the winter till past midnight to get a pint of soup and a piece of bread. Of course, there might be exceptions; but for the most part those who take this charity, do so because it is sorely needed.

The cost of these midnight meals is reckoned by the Salvation Army at about £8 per 1,000, including the labour involved in cooking and distribution. This money is paid from the Army's Central Fund, which collects subscriptions for that special purpose.

'Of course, our midnight soup has its critics,' said one of the Officers who has charge of its distribution; 'but all I know is that it saves many from jumping into the river.'

During the past winter, that is from November 3, 1909, to March 24, 1910, 163,101 persons received free accommodation and food at the hands of the Salvation Army in connexion with its Embankment Soup Distribution Charity.