

## THE FREE BREAKFAST SERVICE

### BLACKFRIARS SHELTER

On a Sunday in June I attended the Free Breakfast service at the Blackfriars Shelter. The lease of this building was acquired by the Salvation Army from a Temperance Company. Behind it lay contractors' stables, which were also bought; after which the premises were rebuilt and altered to suit the purposes to which they are now put, the stabling being for the most part converted into sleeping-rooms.

The Officer who accompanied me, Lieut.-Colonel Jolliffe, explained that this Blackfriars Shelter is, as it were, the dredger for and the feeder of all the Salvation Army's Social Institutions for men in London. Indeed, it may be likened to a dragnet set to catch male unfortunates in this part of the Metropolis. Here, as in the other Army Shelters, are great numbers of bunks that are hired out at 3d. a night, and the usual food-kitchens and appliances.

I visited one or two of these, well-ventilated places that in cold weather are warmed by means of hot-water pipes to a heat of about 70 deg., as the clothing on the bunks is light.

I observed that although the rooms had only been vacated for a few

hours, they were perfectly inoffensive, and even sweet; a result that is obtained by a very strict attention to cleanliness and ample ventilation. The floors of these places are constantly scrubbed, and the bunks undergo a process of disinfection about once a week. As a consequence, in all the Army Shelters the vermin which sometimes trouble common lodging-houses are almost unknown.

I may add that the closest supervision is exercised in these places when they are occupied. Night watchmen are always on duty, and an Officer sleeps in a little apartment attached to each dormitory. The result is that there are practically no troubles of any kind.

Sometimes, however, a poor wanderer is found dead in the morning, in which case the body is quietly conveyed away to await inquest.

I asked what happened when men who could not produce the necessary coppers to pay for their lodging, applied for admission. The answer was that the matter was left to the discretion of the Officer in charge. In fact, in cases of absolute and piteous want, men are admitted free, although, naturally enough, the Army does not advertise that this happens. If it did, its hospitality would be considerably overtaxed.

Leaving the dormitories, I entered the great hall, in which were gathered nearly 600 men seated upon benches, every one of which was filled. The faces and general aspect of these men were eloquent of want and sorrow. Some of them appeared to be intent upon the religious

service that was going on, attendance at this service being the condition on which the free breakfast is given to all who need food and have passed the previous night in the street. Others were gazing about them vacantly, and others, sufferers from the effects of drink, debauchery, or fatigue, seemed to be half comatose or asleep.

This congregation, the strangest that I have ever seen, comprised men of all classes. Some might once have belonged to the learned professions, while others had fallen so low that they looked scarcely human. Every grade of rag-clad misery was represented here, and every stage of life from the lad of sixteen up to the aged man whose allotted span was almost at an end. Rank upon rank of them, there they sat in their infinite variety, linked only by the common bond of utter wretchedness, the most melancholy sight, I think, that ever my eyes beheld. All of them, however, were fairly clean, for this matter had been seen to by the Officers who attend upon them. The Salvation Army does not only wash the feet of its guests, but the whole body. Also, it dries and purifies their tattered garments.

When I entered the hall, an Officer on the platform was engaged in offering up an extempore prayer.

'We pray that the Holy Spirit may be poured out upon these men. We pray, O God, that Thou wilt help them to take fresh courage, to find fresh hope, and that they may rise once again to fight the battle of life. We pray that Thou mayst bring to Thy feet, this morning, such as

shall be saved eternally.'

Then another Officer, styled the Chaplain, addressed the audience. He told them that there was a way out of their troubles, and that hundreds who had sat in that hall as they did, now blessed the day which brought them there. He said: 'You came here this morning, you scarcely knew how or why. You did not know the hand of God was leading you, and that He will bless you if you will listen to His Voice. You think you cannot escape from this wretched life; you think of the past with all its failures. But do not trouble about the years that are gone. Seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you. Then there will be no more wandering about without a friend, for I say to you that God lives, and this morning you will hear from others, who once were in a similar condition to yourself, what He has done for them.'

Next a man with a fine tenor voice, who, it seems, is nicknamed 'the Yorkshire Canary,' sang the hymn beginning, 'God moves in a mysterious way.' After this in plain, forcible language he told his own story. He said that he was well brought up by a good father and mother, and lost everything through his own sin. His voice was in a sense his ruin, since he used to sing in public-houses and saloons and there learnt to drink. At length he found himself upon the streets in London, and tramped thence to Yorkshire to throw himself upon the mercy of his parents. When he was quite close to his home, however, his courage failed him, and he tramped back to London, where he was picked up by

the Salvation Army.

This man, a most respectable-looking person, is now a clerk in a well-known business house. In his own words, 'I knelt down and gave my heart to God, and am to-day in a good situation.'

Next a Salvation Army soldier spoke. Four years before he had attended the Sunday morning meeting in this hall and 'found the friendship of God. He has helped me to regain the manhood I had lost and to do my duty. For two years now I have helped to support an invalid sister instead of being a burden to every one I knew, as once I was.'

After the singing of the hymn, 'Rock of Ages,' another man addressed the meeting. He had been a drunkard, a homeless wanderer, who slept night after night on the Embankment till fortune brought him to this service and to the Penitent-Form. Since that time, two and a half years before, no drink had passed his lips, and once again, as he declared, he had become 'a self-respecting, respectable citizen.'

Then a dwarf whom I had seen at work in the Spa Road Elevator, and who once was taken about the country to be exhibited as a side show at fairs and there fell a victim to drink, gave his testimony.

Another verse, 'Could my tears for ever flow,' and after it, in rapid succession, spoke a man who had been a schoolmaster and fallen through drink and gambling; a man who, or whose brother, I am not sure which,

had been a Wesleyan preacher, and who is now employed in a Life Assurance Company; a man who had been a prisoner; a man who had been a confirmed drunkard, and others.

Always it was the same earnest, simple tale of drink and degradation, passed now for ever; of the Penitent-Form; of the building up of a new self, and of position regained.

More singing and an eloquent prayer which seemed to move the audience very much, some of them to tears; an address from a woman Salvation Army Officer, who pleaded with the people in the name of their mothers, and a brief but excellent sermon from Commissioner Sturgess, based upon the parable of the Marriage of the King's Son as recorded in the 22nd chapter of St. Matthew, and of the guests who were collected from the highways and byways to attend the feast whence the rich and worldly had excused themselves.

Then the great and final invocation to Heaven to move the hearts of these men, and the invitation to them to present themselves at the Penitent-Form. Lastly a mighty, thundering hymn, 'Jesu, Lover of my soul,' and the ending of the long drama.

It was a wonderful thing to see the spiritually-faced man on the platform pleading with his sordid audience, and to watch them stirring beneath his words. To see, also, a uniformed woman flitting to and fro among that audience, whispering, exhorting, invoking--a temptress to

Salvation, then to note the response and its manner that were stranger still. Some poor wretch would seem to awaken, only to relapse into a state of sullen, almost defiant torpor. A little while and the leaven begins to work in him. He flushes, mutters something, half rises from his seat, sits down again, rises once more and with a peculiar, unwilling gait staggers to the Penitent-Form, and in an abandonment of grief and repentance throws himself upon his knees and there begins to sob. A watching Officer comes to him, kneels at his side and, I suppose, confesses him. The tremendous hymn bursts out like a paeon of triumph--

Just as I am, without one plea,

it begins, the rest I forget or did not catch.

Now the ice is broken. Another comes and another, and another, till there is no more room at the Penitent-Bench. They swarm on to the platform which is cleared for them, and there kneel down, and I observed the naked feet of some of them showing through the worn-out boots.

So it goes on. At length the great audience rises and begins to depart, filing one by one through a certain doorway. As they pass, Officers who have appeared from somewhere wait for them with outstretched arms. The most of them brush past shaking their heads and muttering. Here and there one pauses, is lost--or rather won. The

Salvation Army has him in its net and he joins the crowd upon the platform. Still the hymn swells and falls till all have departed save those who remain for good--about 10 per cent of that sad company.

It is done and the catcher feels that he has witnessed the very uttermost of tragedies, human and spiritual.

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Mere common 'revivalism!' the critic will say, and it may be so. Still such revivalism, if that is the term for it, must be judged by its fruits. I am informed that of those who kneel here experience shows that but a small percentage relapse. The most of them become what in the Salvation Army cant--if one chooses so to name it--is known as 'saved.'

This means that from drunkards and wastrels stained with every sort of human fault, or even crime, they are turned into God-fearing and respectable men who henceforward, instead of being a pest to society and a terror to all those who have the misfortune to be connected with them, become props of society and a comfort and a support to their relatives and friends.

Thus is the mesh of mercy spread, and such is its harvest.

The age of miracles is past, we are told; but I confess that while



watching this strange sight I wondered more than once that if this were so, what that age of miracles had been like. Of one thing I was sure, that it must have been to such as these that He who is acknowledged even by sceptics to have been the very Master of mankind, would have chosen to preach, had this been the age of His appearance, He who came to call sinners to repentance. Probably, too, it was to such as these that He did preach, for folk of this character are common to the generations. Doubtless, Judea had its knaves and drunkards, as we know it had its victims of sickness and misfortune. The devils that were cast out in Jerusalem did not die; they reappear in London and elsewhere to-day, and, it would seem, can still be cast out.

I confess another thing, also; namely, that I found all this drama curiously exciting. Most of us who have passed middle age and led a full and varied life will be familiar with the great human emotions. Yet I discovered here a new emotion, one quite foreign to a somewhat extended experience, one that I cannot even attempt to define. The contagion of revivalism! again it will be said. This may be so, or it may not. But at least, so far as this branch of the Salvation Army work is concerned, those engaged in it may fairly claim that the tree should be judged by its fruits. Without doubt, in the main these fruits are good and wholesome.

I have only to add to my description of this remarkable service, that the number netted, namely, about 10 per cent of those present, was, I

am told, just normal, neither more nor less than the average. Some of these doubtless will relapse; but if only one of them remains really reformed, surely the Salvation Army has vindicated its arguments and all is proved to be well worth while. But to that one very many ciphers must be added as the clear and proved result of the forty years or so of its activity. Whatever may be doubtful, this is true beyond all controversy, for it numbers its converts by the thousand.

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The congregation which I saw on this particular occasion seemed to me to consist for the most part of elderly men; in fact, some of them were very old, and the average age of those who attended the Penitent-Form I estimated at about thirty-five years. This, however, varies. I am informed that at times they are mostly young persons. It must be remembered--and the statement throws a lurid light upon the conditions prevailing in London, as in other of our great cities--that the population which week by week attends these Sunday morning services is of an ever-shifting character. Doubtless, there are some habitués and others who reappear from time to time. But the most of the audience is new. Every Saturday night the highways and the hedges, or rather the streets and the railway arches yield a new crop of homeless and quite destitute wanderers. These are gathered into the Blackfriars Shelter, and go their bitter road again after the rest, the breakfast, and the service. But as we have seen here a substantial proportion, about 10 per cent, remain behind. These are all

interviewed separately and fed, and on the following morning as many of them as vacancies can be found for in the Paper Works Elevator or elsewhere are sent thither.

I saw plenty of these men, and with them others who had been rescued previously; so many, indeed, that it is impossible to set out their separate cases. Looking through my notes made at the time, I find among them a schoolmaster, an Australian who fought in South Africa, a publican who had lost £2,000 in speculation and been twelve months on the streets, a sailor and two soldiers who between them had seen much service abroad, and a University man who had tried to commit suicide from London Bridge.

Also there was a person who was recently described in the newspapers as the 'dirtiest man in London.' He was found sitting on the steps of a large building in Queen Victoria Street, partly paralysed from exposure. So filthy and verminous was he, that it was necessary to scrape his body, which mere washing would not touch. When he was picked up, a crowd of several hundred people followed him down the street, attracted by his dreadful appearance. His pockets were full of filth, amongst which were found 5s. in coppers. He had then been a month in the Shelter, where he peels or peeled potatoes, etc., and looked quite bright and clean.

Most of these people had been brought down by the accursed drink, which is the bane of our nation, and some few by sheer misfortune.

Neither at the service, nor afterwards, did I see a single Jew, for the fallen of that race seem to be looked after by their fellow religionists. Moreover, the Jews do not drink to excess. Foreigners, also, are comparatively scarce at Blackfriars and in the other Shelters.