

THE WOMEN'S SHELTER

WHITECHAPEL

This is a place where women, most of them old, so far as my observation went, are taken in to sleep at a charge of 3d. a night. It used to be 2d. until the London County Council made the provision of sheets, etc., compulsory, when the Army was obliged to raise the payment. This Shelter, which is almost always so full that people have to be turned away, holds 261 women. It contains a separate room, where children are admitted with their mothers, half price, namely 1-1/2d., being charged per child. There is a kitchen attached where the inmates can buy a large mug of tea for a 1/2d., and a huge chunk of bread for a second 1/2d.; also, if I remember right, other articles of food, if they can afford such luxuries.

The great dormitory in this Shelter, it may be mentioned, was once a swimming-bath. Some of the women who come to this place have slept in it almost every night for eighteen or twenty years. Others make use of it for a few months, and then vanish for a period, especially in the summer, when they go hop or strawberry picking, and return in the winter. Every day, however, fresh people appear, possibly to depart on the morrow and be seen no more.

I asked whether the aged folk had not been benefited by the Old Age Pensions Act. The lady Officer in charge replied that it had been a blessing to some of them. One old woman, however, would not apply for her pension, although she was urged to take a room for herself somewhere. She said that she was afraid if she did so, she might be turned out and be lonely.

I visited this Shelter in the late afternoon, before it was filled up. A number of dilapidated and antique females were sitting about in the rooms, talking or sewing. One old lady was doing crochet work. She told me that she made her living by it, and by flower-selling. Another informed me that it was years since she had slept anywhere else, and that she did not know what poor women like her would do without this place. Another was cooking the broth. Her husband was a sea captain, and when he died, her father had allowed her £1 a week until he died. Afterwards she took to drink, and drifted here, where, I was informed, she is doing well. And so on, and so on, ad infinitum. The Hanbury Street Women's Shelter is not a cheerful spot to visit on a dull and rainy evening.