

## THE SLUM SETTLEMENT

### HACKNEY ROAD

Slum work is an important branch of the Social labours of the Salvation Army, Thus last year the Slum Sisters visited over 105,000 families, over 20,000 sick, and over 32,000 public-houses, in which work they spent more than 90,000 hours of time. Also they attended 482 births, and paid nearly 9,000 visits in connexion with them.

There are nine Slum Settlements and Posts in London, and nineteen others in England, Scotland, and Ireland. The old system used to be for the Sisters and Nurses to live among the lowest class of the poor, lodging in the actual tenements in which their work was carried out. This, however, was abandoned as far as possible, because it was found that after the arduous toil of the day these ladies could get little rest at night, owing to the noise that went on about them, a circumstance that caused their health to suffer and made them inefficient. Now out of the 117 Officers engaged in Slum work in Great Britain, about one-half who labour in London live in five houses set apart for them in different quarters of the city; fifteen Officers being the usual complement to each house.

The particular dwelling of which I write is a good specimen of them

all, and from it the Sisters and Nurses who live there work Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Whitechapel, and the Hoxton and Hackney Road districts. It is decently furnished and a comfortable place in its way, although, of course, it stands in a poor neighbourhood. I remember that there was even the finishing touch of a canary in the window. I should add that no cases are attended in the house itself, which is purely a residence.

To this particular Settlement two qualified midwives and a nurse are attached. While I was there one of the midwives came in, very tired, at about half-past eleven in the morning. Since three o'clock on that same morning she had attended three confinements, so no wonder she was tired. She said that one of her cases was utterly unprovided with anything needful as the father was out of work, although on the occasion of a previous confinement they had all they wanted. Now they lived in a little room in which there was not space 'to swing a cat,' and were without a single bite of food or bit of clothing, so that the baby when it came had to be wrapped up in an old shawl and the woman sent to the Infirmary. The Sister in charge informed me that if they had them they could find employment for twice their strength of nurses without overlapping the work of any other charity.

The people with whom they deal are for the most part those who have a rooted objection to infirmaries, although the hospitals are much more used than was formerly the case. The system of the Army is to make a charge of 6s. 6d. for attending a confinement, which, if paid, is

generally collected in instalments of 3d. or 6d. a week. Often, however, it is not paid, and the charge remains a mere formality. She added that many of these poor people are most improvident, and make no provision whatsoever for these events, even if they can afford to do so. The result is that the Army has to lend them baby garments and other things.

The Sister said in answer to my questions that there was a great deal of poverty in their district where many men were out of work, a number of them because they could find nothing to do. She thought that things were certainly no better in this respect; indeed, the state of depression was chronic. Owing to the bad summer of 1909, which affected the hop-picking and other businesses, the destitution that year was as great during the warm months as it usually is in the winter.

The poor of this district, she said, 'generally live upon fried fish and chips. You know they cannot cook, anyway they don't, and what they do cook is all done in the frying-pan, which is also a very convenient article to pawn. They don't understand economy, for when they have a bit of money they will buy in food and have a big feast, not thinking of the days when there will be little or nothing. Then, again, they buy their goods in small portions; for instance, their coal by the ha'p'orth or their wood by the farthing's-worth, which, in fact, works out at a great profit to the dealers. Or they buy a farthing's-worth of tea, which is boiled up again and again till it is awful-looking

stuff.'

I asked her what she considered to be the main underlying cause of this misery. She answered that she thought it was due 'to the people flocking from the country to the city,' thereby confirming an opinion that I have long held and advanced. She added that the overcrowding in the district was terrible, the regulations of the Public Health Authorities designed to check it being 'a dead letter.' In one case with which she had to do, a father, mother, and nine children lived in a room that measured 9 ft. by 9 ft., and the baby came into the world with the children looking on!

The general weekly rent for a room containing a family is 5s., or if it is furnished, 7s. 6d. The Sister described to me the furniture of one for the use of which this extra half-crown is charged. It consisted of a rickety bed, two chairs, one without a back and one without a seat, and a little shaky table. The floor was bare, and she estimated the total value of these articles at about their weekly rent of 2s. 6d., if, indeed, they were worth carrying away. In this chamber dwelt a coachman who was out of place, his wife, and three or four children, I wonder what arrangement these poor folk make as to the use of the one chair that has a bottom. To occupy the other must be an empty honour. With reference to this man the Sister remarked that as a result of the introduction of motor vehicles, busmen, cabmen, and blacksmiths were joining the ranks of her melancholy clientele in numbers.

This and some similar stories caused me to reflect on the remarkable contrast between rents in the country and in town. For instance, I own about a dozen cottages in this village in which I write, and the highest rent that I receive is 2s. 5d. a week. This is paid for a large double dwelling, on which I had to spend over £100 quite recently to convert two cottages into one. Also, there is a large double garden thrown in, so large that a man can scarcely manage it in his spare time, a pigsty, fruit trees, etc. All this for 1d. a week less than is charged for the two broken chairs, the rickety bed, and the shaky table! Again, for £10 a year, I let a comfortable farmhouse; that is, £3 a year less than the out-of-work coachman pays for his single room without the furniture. And yet, as the Sister said, people continue to rush from the country to the towns!

Nor, it seems, do they always make the best of things when they get there. Thus the Sister mentioned that the education which the girls receive in the schools causes them to desire a more exalted lot in life than that of a servant. So they try to find places in shops, or jam factories, etc. Some get them, but many fail; and of those who fail, a large proportion go to swell the mass of the unemployed, or to recruit the ranks of an undesirable profession. She went so far as to say that most of the domestic servants in London are not Cockneys at all, but come from the country; adding, that the sad part of it was that thousands of these poor girls, after proper training, could find comfortable and remunerative employment without displacing others, as

the demand for domestic servants is much greater than the supply. These are cold facts which seem to suggest that our system of free education is capable of improvement.

It appears that all this district is a great centre of what is known as 'sweating.' Thus artificial flowers, of which I was shown a fine specimen, a marguerite, are made at a price of 1s. per gross, the workers supplying their own glue. An expert hand, beginning at eight in the morning and continuing till ten at night, can produce a gross and a half of these flowers, and thus net 1s. 6d., minus the cost of the glue, scissors, and sundries. The Officers of the Army find it extremely difficult to talk to these poor people, who are invariably too busy to listen. Therefore, some of them have learnt how to make artificial flowers themselves, so that when they call they can join in the family manufacture, and, while doing so, carry on their conversation.

For the making of match-boxes and the sticking on of the labels the pay is 2-1/2d. per gross. Few of us, I think, would care to manufacture 144 matchboxes for 2-1/2d. I learned that it is not unusual to find little children of four years of age helping their mothers to make these boxes.

The Slum Sisters attached to the Settlement, who are distinct from the Maternity Nurses, visit the very poorest and worst neighbourhoods, for the purpose of helping the sick and afflicted, and incidentally of

cleaning their homes. Also, they find out persons who are about sixty-nine years of age, and contribute to their maintenance, so as to save them from being forced to receive poor-law relief, which would prevent them from obtaining their old-age pensions when they come to seventy.

Here is an illustration of the sort of case with which these Slum Sisters have to deal; perhaps, I should say, the easiest sort of case. An old man and his wife whom they visited, lived in a clean room. The old woman fell sick, and before she died the Slum Sisters gave her a bath, which, as these poor people much object to washing, caused all the neighbours to say that they had killed her. After his wife's death, the husband, who earned his living by selling laces on London Bridge, went down in the world, and his room became filthy. The Slum Sisters told him that they would clean up the place, but he forbade them to touch the bed, which, he said, was full of mice and beetles. As he knew that women dread mice and beetles, he thought that this statement would frighten them. When he was out selling his laces, they descended upon his room, where the first thing that they did was to remove the said bed into the yard and burn it, replacing it with another. On his return, the old man exclaimed: 'Oh, my darlings, whatever have you been doing?'

They still clean this room once a week.

The general impression left upon my mind, after visiting this place at

Hackney Road and conversing with its guardian angels, is, that in some of its aspects, if not in all, civilization is a failure. Probably thoughtful people made the same remark in ancient Rome, and in every other city since cities were. The truth is, that so soon as its children desert the land which bore them for the towns, these horrors follow as surely as the night follows the day.