

THE PICCADILLY MIDNIGHT WORK

GREAT TICHFIELD STREET

I visited this place a little before twelve o'clock on a summer night.

It is a small flat near Oxford Street, in which live two women-Officers of the Army, who are engaged in the work of reclaiming prostitutes. I may mention that for the last fourteen years the Major in charge, night by night, has tramped the streets with this object.

The Titchfield Street flat is not in any sense a Home, but I saw a small room in it, with two beds, where cases who may be rescued from the streets, or come here in a time of trouble, can sleep until arrangements are made for them to proceed to one of the Rescue Institutions of the Army.

This work is one of the most difficult and comparatively unproductive of any that the Army undertakes. The careers of these unfortunate street women, who are nearly all of them very fine specimens of female humanity, for the most part follow a rocket-like curve. The majority of them begin by getting into trouble, at the end of which, perhaps, they find themselves with a child upon their hands. Or they may have been turned out of their homes, or some sudden misfortune may have reduced them to destitution. At any rate, the result is that they take to a loose life, and mayhap, after living under the protection of one

or two men, find themselves upon the streets. Sometimes, it may be said to their credit, if that word can be used in this connexion, they adopt this mode of life in order to support their child or children.

The Major informed me that if they are handsome they generally begin with a period of great prosperity. One whom she knew earned about £30 a week, and a good many of them make as much as £1,000 a year, and pay perhaps £6 weekly in rent.

A certain proportion of them are careful, open a bank account, save money, retire, and get married. Generally, these keep their bank-books in their stockings, which, in their peculiar mode of life, they find to be the safest place, as they are very suspicious of each other, and much afraid of being robbed. The majority of them, however, are not so provident. They live in and for the moment, and spend their ill-gotten gains as fast as they receive them.

Gradually they drift downwards. They begin in Piccadilly, and progress, or rather retrogress, through Leicester Square on to Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street, and thence to the Euston Road, ending their sad careers in Bishopsgate and Whitechapel. The Major informed me that there are but very few in the Piccadilly neighbourhood whom she knew when she took up this work, and that, as a rule, they cannot stand the life for long. The irregular hours, the exposure, the excitement, and above all the drink in which most of them indulge, kill them out or send them to a poorhouse or the

hospital.

She said, however, that as a class they have many virtues. For instance, they are very kind-hearted, and will always help each other in trouble. Also, most of them have affection for their children, being careful to keep them, if possible, from any knowledge of their mode of life. Further, they are charitable to the poor, and, in a way, religious; or, perhaps, superstitious would be a better term. Thus, they often go to church on Sundays, and do not follow their avocation on Sunday nights. On New Year's Eve, their practice is to attend the Watch Night services, where, doubtless, poor people, they make those good resolutions that form the proverbial pavement of the road to Hell. Nearly all of them drink more or less, as they say that they could not live their life without stimulant. Moreover, their profession necessitates their walking some miles every night.

For the most part these women lodge in pairs in their own flats, where they pay about 35s. a week for three unfurnished rooms. The Officer told me that often some despicable man, who is called a 'bully,' lives on them, following them round the streets, and watching them. Even the smartest girls are not infrequently the victims of such a man, who knocks them about and takes money from them. Occasionally he may be a husband or a relative. She added that as a class they are much better behaved and less noisy than they used to be. This improvement, however, is largely due to the increased strictness of the police. These women do not decrease in number. In the Major's opinion, there

are as many or more of them on the streets as there were fourteen years ago, although the brothels and the procuresses are less numerous, and their quarters have shifted from Piccadilly to other neighbourhoods.

The Army methods of dealing, or rather of attempting to deal with this utterly insoluble problem are simple enough. The Officers walk the streets every night from about twelve to two and distribute cards in three languages according to the nationality of the girl to whom these are offered. Here they are in English, French, and German:--

Mrs. Booth will gladly help any Girl
or Woman in need of a friend.

APPLY AT

79 Great Titchfield Street,
or 259 Mare Street, Hackney, N.E.

Vous avez une amie
qui est disposée à
vous aider.

(S addresser)

Madame Booth
79 Great Titchfield Street,
Oxford Street,
Londres, W.

MADAM BOOTH will herzlich gerne Jedem
Mädchen oder Jeder Frau helfen, die sich
in Noth auf eine Freundin befinden.

259 Mare Street, Hackney,
70 Great Titchfield Street, W.

Most of the girls to whom they are offered will not take them, but a good number do and, occasionally, the seed thus sown bears fruit. Thus the woman who takes the card may come to Great Titchfield Street and be rescued in due course. More frequently, however, she will give a false address, or make an appointment which she does not keep, or will say that it is too late for her to change her life. But this fact does not always prevent such a woman from trying to help others by sending young girls who have recently taken to the trade to the Titchfield Street Refuge in the hope that they may be induced to abandon their evil courses.

Occasionally the Army has midnight suppers in its Regent Hall for these women, who attend in large numbers, perhaps out of curiosity. At the last supper nearly 300 'swell girls' were present and listened to the prayers and the exhortations to amend their lives. Sometimes, too, the Officers attend them when they are sick or dying. Once they buried one of the women, who died whilst under their care, holding a midnight funeral over her at their hall in Oxford Street.

It was attended by hundreds of the sisterhood, and the Major described the scene as terrible. The women were seized with hysterics, and burst into shrieks and sobs. They even tried to open the coffin in order to kiss the dead girl who lay within.

Amongst many other cases, I was informed of a black girl called Diamond, so named because she wore real diamonds on her dresses, which dresses cost over £100 apiece. The Army tried to help her in vain, and wrote her many letters. In the end she died in an Infirmary, when all the letters were found carefully hidden away among her belongings and returned to the Major.

The average number of rescues compassed, directly or indirectly, by the Piccadilly Midnight work is about fifty a year. This is not a very great result; but after all the taking of even a few people from this hellish life and their restoration to decency and self-respect is well worth the cost and labour of the mission. The Officers told me that they meet with but little success in the case of those women who are in their bloom and earning great incomes. It can scarcely be otherwise, for what has the Army to offer them in place of their gaudy, glittering life of luxury and excitement?

The way of transgressors is hard, but the way of repentance is harder; at any rate, while the transgressor is doing well. On the one hand jewels and champagne, furs and motors, and on the other prayers that

talk of death and judgment, plain garments made by the wearer's labour, and at the end the drudgery of earning an honest livelihood, perhaps as a servant. Human nature being what it is, it seems scarcely wonderful that these children of pleasure cling to the path of 'roses' and turn from that of 'thorns.'

With those that are growing old and find themselves broken in body and in spirit, who are thrust aside in the fierce competition of their trade in favour of younger rivals; those who find the wine in their tinsel cup turning, or turned, to gall, the case is different. They are sometimes, not always, glad to creep to such shelter from the storms of life as the Army can offer, and there work out their moral and physical salvation. For what bitterness is there like to that which must be endured by the poor, broken woman of the streets, as scorned, spat on, thrust aside, she sinks from depth to depth into the last depth of all, striving to drown her miseries with drugs or drink, if so she may win forgetfulness even for an hour?

Sometimes, too, these patient toilers in the deep of midnight sin succeed in dragging from the brink those that have but dipped their feet in its dark waters. *Nemo repente fuit turpissimus*--no one becomes altogether filthy in an hour--runs the old Roman saying, which is as true to-day as it was 2,000 years ago, and whether it be spoken of body or of soul, it is easier to wash the feet than the whole being. When they understand what lies before them certain of the young shrink back and grasp Mercy's outstretched arms.

One night about twelve o'clock, together with Lieut.-Colonel Jolliffe, an Officer of the Army who was dressed in plain clothes, I accompanied the Major and the lady who is her colleague, to Leicester Square and its neighbourhood, and there watched their methods of work, following them at a little distance. Dressed in their uniform they mingled with the women who marched the pavements, and now and again, with curiously swift and decisive steps glided up to one of them, whispered a few earnest words into her ear, and proffered a printed ticket. Most of those spoken to walked on stonily as people do when they meet an undesirable acquaintance whom they do not wish to recognize. Some thrust past them rudely; some hesitated and with a hard laugh went their way; but a few took the tickets and hid them among their laces.

So far as the work was concerned that was all there was to see. Nothing dramatic happened; no girl fled to them imploring help or asking to be saved from the persecutions of a man; no girl even insulted them--for these Officers to be insulted is a thing unknown. All I saw was the sowing of the seed in very stony ground, where not one kern out of a thousand is like to germinate and much less to grow. Yet as experience proves, occasionally it does both germinate and grow, yes, and bloom and come to the harvest of repentance and redemption. It is for this that these unwearying labourers scatter their grain from night to night, that at length they may garner into their bosoms a scanty but a priceless harvest.

It was a strange scene. The air was hot and heavy, the sky was filled with black and lowering clouds already laced with lightnings. The music-halls and restaurants had given out their crowds, the midnight mart was open. Everywhere were women, all finely dressed, most of them painted, as could be seen in the glare of the electric lights, some of them more or less excited with drink, but none turbulent or noisy. Mixed up with these were the bargainers, men of every degree, the most of them with faces unpleasant to consider.

Some had made their pact and were departing. I noticed one young girl whose looks would have drawn attention anywhere, whispering an address from beneath an enormous feathered hat to the driver of a taxicab, while her companion, a pleasant-looking, fresh-coloured boy, for he was scarcely more, entered the vehicle, a self-satisfied air upon his face. She sprang in also, and the cab with its occupants glided away out of my ken for ever.

Here and there stalwart, quiet policemen requested loiterers to move on, and the loiterers obeyed and re-formed in groups behind them; here and there a respectable woman pushed her way through the throng, gathering up her skirts as she did so and glancing covertly at this unaccustomed company out of the corners of her eyes.

While watching all these sights we lost touch of the Salvation Army ladies, who wormed their way through the crowd as easily and quickly as a snake does through undergrowth, and set out to find them. Big

drops began to fall, the thunder growled, and in a moment the
concourse commenced to melt. Five minutes later the rain was falling
fast and the streets had emptied. That night's market was at an end.

No farmer watches the weather more anxiously than do these painted
women in their muslins and gold-laced shoes.

Meanwhile, their night's work done, the Salvation Army ladies were
tramping through the wet back to Titchfield Street, for they do not
spend money on cabs, and the buses had ceased to run.