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A Bright Spot in Slumdom.

Achievements of a Preston Mission.

(BY OUR COMMISSIONER.)

To bring healing to the sick, refuge to the homeless, and food to the hungry are among the most manifest evidences of practical Christianity. Yet, men and women engaged in the beneficent offices of charity among the poor and downfallen complain much of the Laodicean and lethargic attitude of present-day society to evangelistic enterprises. It is hard to get funds let alone personal help towards the solution of the awful problem of the "submerged tenth." Much is done by a few people, and the sense of obligation on the part of the majority and the well-to-do is lamentably weak. It is sad that a work of the philanthropic value of that pursued in the slums of Preston by Mr. Williamson and his coadjutors should stand in need of appeal, and that any debt should be permitted to hang over their heads.

Shortly before Christmas I spent a night among the impoverished children who nightly receive a good supper in the Shepherd-street Mission Room. It reminded me very much of the touching episode of Bob Cratchit's Christmas party, and I then promised myself the pleasure of going round some night to see the other aspects of helpfulness which are embraced in Mr. Williamson's unpaid enterprises. The suppers will stop this week-end. They have been varied and nutritious, and as a wind-up coffee and buns in plenty have been provided each night this week as a change from the savoury soups usually provided. On Tuesday no less than 400 wretched and ragged little ones were gathered in, and as one surveyed their grateful faces over the steaming basins the words burned deep in one's heart, "Thou shalt be blessed, for they cannot recompense thee." Trade is bad in Preston; many of the

children are in extreme poverty, and if sufficient help is forthcoming Mr. Williamson proposes to provide a number of ragged children who will otherwise suffer the pangs of hunger, with a good dinner for a month or two to come. Surely the better circumstances of Preston will enable him to carry out this intention.

Shepherd-street and its arteries were, for years, the worst parts of the borough as regarded sin and crime, the black blot on the map of Preston. Many of the cottages, with their unspeakable slums, have been razed for business enterprises, and many of the "birds of the night" have flown to other alleys. Still, many of the Magdalines are left, and there are numerous families most impoverished and helpless. The mission of Mr. Williamson has done much for these. It has rescued many of the fallen and established their goings on pure paths. It has reformed many men and women, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, and taken comforts and consolations to the sick and dying.

It is a wide, many-sided enterprise, which began in 1876, when Mr. Williamson began his work in a cottage lent to him by a blind man. Three years later an old handloom shop was taken in Shepherd-street to accommodate 100 people. In 1892 the building partially collapsed, and the present Mission Hall, to accommodate 250 people, was erected. Boys being reared in immoral surroundings were rescued and sent to other towns and to Canada, where they are doing well. Two years later were rented, and afterwards purchased, three cottages in Laurel-street, one for a men's shelter, another for a boys' home, and the third as the residence of the superintendent. Work was found for the boys in the day-time chopping wood. In 1898 two houses were rented in Berry-street to accommodate the boys. The property in Laurel-street was pulled down, and a men's shelter erected on the site. A large shelter was used for wood chopping, and here the men earned the price of their lodging and food. Still, there were many destitute children clamouring for help, and in 1900 there was purchased Crow Hill House, Oxford-street, where over 30 boys and girls can be provided for. In 1901 25 children were fully maintained; 11,058 men received a night's lodgings, for which they paid by the proceeds of their wood chopping, and nearly half of them a meal also; and by this means 205,202 bundles and 1,750 bags of firewood were prepared and sold. The adult part of the organisation is self-supporting, and the children's part of it is maintained at remarkably small cost, a fact due to Mr. and Mrs. Williamson giving their whole time without a cent of recompense, and even providing their own sustenance. An appeal was issued before the Guild

for the erection of new workshops, to clear off the debt on the men's shelter, and the children's home. The sum of £2,500 was asked for, but the amount subscribed was not anything like adequate. Still, a good workshop was erected. There is still a total debt of over £2,000 on the buildings and estate, and one cannot help thinking that there are some hundreds of people in this district who could, with greatest ease and self-satisfaction, put down £1 each, and thus extinguish the liabilities and establish the goings of this noble mission. The Earl of Derby has promised his help, and doubtless other noblemen and gentlemen in Northern Lancashire will follow his generous example. The work is developing, as shown by the fact that last year 228,862 bundles of firewood were sold; a night's shelter had been provided for 12,646, and supper or breakfast for 5,316. A new shelter, which will cost £1,000, and for which there is abundant land, is a real necessity.

Anyhow, I am on my second tour. The sun, wonderful to relate, lighted up the dingy streets and the malodorous courts. Mr. Williamson walks along, and faces wan and unwashed brighten as he passes. He has brought sunshine into many a sad heart hereabouts. Lux in tenebris!

We make for the workshop, an open timbered, cement-floored building, with stacks of chopped wood, in wired bundles, to the right. One of the permanent workmen was drawing nails out of old timber, and a few boys were wiring bundles and clearing off the debris made by the 24 men who had, in sets of four, with a carrier to each set, been chopping firewood from the square blocks sliced off by a circular saw driven by a gas engine. The work, which takes from one to two hours, was practically over. We peeped into Mr. Williamson's office, went into the yard with its heaps of old woodwork, and then, through a clean cottage, we pass the old wood-chopping cellar, down a passage, and enter the shelter, comfortably warmed by steam pipes. The place was almost filled by the woodchoppers—all men on the road and out of work. They had been refreshed with tea and food. Sometimes they are given soup. They were of all ages and classes. There was not a habitual tramp among them. "The tramps don't work," said Mr. Williamson; "they eat the bread of idleness, and live by begging and trickery." I talked to the men. Many were ironworkers who had been out for various periods. A few were operatives. One was promised weaving on the morrow. Another, an old "Darrener," was a partially paralysed spinner. Some were labourers. There was a sprinkling of young fellows, but the facial expression of every one was that of the man of sorrows. What tragedies of life were represented!

How true it is that one-half the world does not know how the other half lives! They were glad to sit huddled on the forms in a warm atmosphere and talk to one another, sheltered from the east wind. There are no beds. The shadows of night were falling ere I left them, and they would soon lie down, side by side, on the floor, to dream maybe—of work and the old house at home! Sad pariahs and outcasts, grateful for the shelter of a warm room!

And now to the cherubs! We transfer ourselves in a few minutes to Crow Hill House, where some 30 boys and girls are being maintained and brought up under the most healthy conditions. Some are orphans, others consigned by written consent of parents—worthless and often drunken parents—to Mr. and Mrs. Williamson who, acting in "loco parentis," train the little ones with loving solicitude. What a lot of pasts and presents I could cite. Some were taken in dirty, ragged, and pale and pinched—a few were living skeletons. And look at them now! Plump and rosy, clean and merry. They were playing by the gardens which environ the house—shuttlecock, top, and hop-scotch. They cluster affectionately round Mr. Williamson in exuberant groups. Tea was being prepared; then lessons; next night prayers; bed at seven to rise refreshed in a sweet pure home at seven next morning, when they are washed, breakfasted, made tidy, and sent off to the school of the denomination to which they belong. No questions of creed are asked here. "You are my angels aren't you?" observed Mr. Williamson, as we passed through the place, and they laughed and shyly said "Yes, sir." The dormitories are spotless, all the windows were open, the breezes playing over the beds and cots, and the arrangements for the refection of the little ones were most complete. As the youngsters grow up they are sent away to learn trades and employments amid healthy surroundings, and some are got off to Canada. In every case the report is satisfactory. There is quite a pretty expanse of well-kept gardens and flower-beds about the place, and in a long stretch of glass are vines and tomato houses—the fruit from which is sold for the benefit of the poor. This, then, is the outcome of my tour in the heart of Preston Slumdom this week. "By their fruits shall you know them." Here is the very glory of Christian enterprise—rescuing the fallen, taking to your arms the children of sin and squalor, and elevating their lives. People often express their sorrow at suffering. It is very easy, but very cold comfort. The crowd assembled near London Bridge were full of sorrow the other day when the coster's donkey fell dead. A Quaker came up and quietly remarked to a man profuse in his regrets, "Friend I'm a pound sorry, How much art thou?" Verbum sap.