

CHILDREN OF WANT.

ANGEL OF COMPASSION IN PRESTON SLUMS.

Pathetic Details of Shepherd Street Mission.

BY OUR COMMISSIONER.

"Is there a peculiar flavour in what you sprinkle from your torch?" asked Scrooge.

"There is, my son."

"Would it apply to any kind of dinner on this day?" asked Scrooge.

"To any kindly given; to a poor one most."

"Why to a poor one most?" asked Scrooge.

"Because it needs it most."

Scrooge, the squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner—Scrooge, whom children shunned and from whom the blind men's dogs tugged their owners away; Scrooge, who had sent poor Bob Cratchit home on Christmas Eve with hard words and a heavy heart, awoke from his sleep! He had seen Marley's ghost, the ghost of Christmas present and the three spirits. He had seen himself revealed in his nakedness—his freezing coldness, his nipping cruel selfishness, his sour dour soul, which gloated in penury and in giving pain to others.

It was Christmas morning.

I say Scrooge awoke. His face was deluged with tears. He shook with horror.

"Spirit, hear me! I am not the man I was! I may yet change these shadows! I will live in the future."

The charity of heaven mercifully descended into Scrooge's heart. It had been shrunken like a withered apple. It now burst into the ripe bounty of a truly benevolent man. Out he went into the streets. He patted poor children on the head, questioned and helped beggars, and found that everything could yield him real pleasure. Never had he had a walk so full of happiness.

BENEATH THE SURFACE.

The poor we have always with us—the ragged, hungry, homeless, and helpless. Take off your fine clothing, and go, quietly and modestly clad, into the malodorous streets, the slums and alleys, where the sins of parents have fallen on the third and the fourth generation. The privation and suffering of adults is serious enough, and command the benign influences of reclamation; but the children, who are the victims of cold, hunger, nakedness, and friendliness, appeal to us with a piteous cry which all kind hearts must heed. On the surface of society there is apparent prosperity. The bulk of people have good homes and lots of comforts, kind friends with whom to converse, recreations and pleasures; but the submerged tenth are in sorrow, and to them comes the fierce temptations and degradations of environment. Nowadays hearts are being quickened in all directions to the sufferings of those who are being punished for no fault of their own, and at this time of Christmas, especially, does the duty appeal to all.

Now, heaven-born Charity! thy blessings shed;
Bid meagre want, appear her sickly head;
Bid shivering limbs be warm; let Plenty's bowl
In humble roofs make glad the needy soul.

So wrote Gay, of the Yuletide season, when Santa Claus goes forth to fill the long stockings hung over the children's cots. That is the duty of everyone possessing the means to help, in every town and village, and the obligations of the season should quicken into generous life our dispositions.

Mr. Williamson, of the Shepherd-street Mission, Preston, does not weary in well-doing. Many a man would have tired long ago of a life in the slums where the voices cry from the depths; but his courage never falters, his missionary and protective efforts never slacken. There his life is spent without money and without price, so far as he is concerned. All he gets he gives to the poor. By day, by night, he is with them, and with him a little group of working men and women are associated in the hours they have to spare from daily toil. Their faith is very simple. They have no Gothic temples, no stained-glass windows, no mosaic floors. They have bare walls and bare benches, and pinched, wan faces. "Rags and tatters, dollars and dimes, an empty pocket's the worst of crimes"—here they come, the Olla Podrida of poverty.

THE EXPECTANT PROCESSION.

It was the night for soup. The Shepherd-street Mission covers quite a number of avenues of Christian effort in its work, but I always put the help given to the poor little children in the first place. This year, as last, suppers are being given almost nightly all through the winter. They began in November, and from 300 to 500 are fed in a night. I went down to see them the other evening, as I did one night last winter. It was a spectacle to bring lumps into your throat if you have the gift of human sympathy. "As ye did it to the little ones!" The divine admonition falls on us all, and by our heed or heedlessness shall we be tested and tried.

There was a long line hugging the ins and outs of the buildings for a distance off Shepherd-street. There were signs of pinching and starvation in many faces and great eagerness to taste the hot soup whose grateful fragrance was borne swiftly by on the wings of the north-east wind, which cut like knives as it swept every crevice and roared down the lines of the little guests of the Mission, nipping their noses and blueing their hands and legs. The ages of the children varied from two years to 13 or 14. Poor little boys were there in rags—bright eyes set in pale, clean faces—somebody's lads, with the wind ruthlessly flapping the tatters. Little mites of girls with scanty, thread-bare skirts, and frames shivering with the cold. What sidling and edging up! Soon they sing snatches of "Annie Rooney" and other songs, and if you talk to them you will get some smart exchanges of wit and sundry bits of sound sense. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you will learn wisdom. Up go the lights; the double doors of the Mission Room sail open, and the procession comes in boisterously and swiftly.

A TWO AND A HALF-HOURS' WAIT.

A most pathetic incident I witnessed. I saw in the first three children entering the school a very sweet-faced girl. Her eyes glistened as she was escorted by Mr. Williamson and his assistants—a grand-hearted group of men and women—to the front row. She was very hungry, she said, and had been waiting at the door from half-past four. "I olus comes at half-past four," she said to me shyly. "Why do you come so early? I asked. She answered, "To get in the first, sir." She had washed her face and hands, and looked a wee, winsome lassie, despite her poor clothing. Forward the children come, in and out, twisting about, on with a rush, in they crush—Saxon and Celt, Italians too, a juvenile "congress of nations."

Tinkle! Tinkle! Tinkle! The bell rings out to silence the chatter, and Mr. Williamson calls out "Order." The place is full. They they are, open-mouth'd, like chub and trout, each with a basin. Great buckets of rich pea soup are carried in from the bubbling boiler in the school yard, and the assistants fill the basins with rapidity. Then the spoons are handed round; but so eager are the perishing kiddies that they risk scalding their mouths by sipping the boiling hot soup out of the basins. They have lots of bread, and as much soup as they can put by.

One night a very small toddler was brought by her brother. It was the bun and coffee night. Mr. Williamson said, "You shouldn't have brought this tiny one. He can't take bread and coffee. Seeing the disappointed eye, he said, "Well, come along." Couldn't Tiny Tim eat buns and drink coffee—couldn't he? He had eaten two buns before his elder brother had one. He had been famished.

SAD STORIES.

I went among the children and chatted with them. They were of all denominations. None are cast out. A fair number were Church, some were Catholic, and many were from parents who did not belong to any church or chapel. In very many of the cases I found there are large families—in many six, in a fair number eight or nine. A most refined, tidy, well-spoken, very respectable young woman, who I should think has had a very good home, brings her four nice little children every night to have their stomachs filled. She told me her husband had been out of work for some time. She had her youngest child on her knee, and both had as much soup and bread as they wanted. One lad told me there were seven children at their house, and only his father working at a small wage.

Another lad said there were six children at home, and only 17s. a week coming in. They never knew what a warm dinner was.

Almost all the children I spoke to said that they had only had bread and margarine, or potatoes and salt for their dinners. One poor mite said he had three sisters and a brother, and one was in the Infirmary. "Hoo's gotten her leg took off," he said, sorrowfully. Another lad said, "We've nine at our house; father dead, and my mother nobbut weak, and can't earn much."

The children come from all parts of the town. One was an orphan lad. "What's thy father do?" I asked him. His eyes drooped sadly. "I haven't one." "Then, I suppose, your mother will keep you?" "No," he sadly said, "my mother's—hoo's dead too. I've only myself, and I chop sticks." Poor lad! Another bright-eyed Milesian was in rags. "How would a new suit do?" I cheerfully asked. His eyes flashed, he jumped up, and eagerly said, "Champion, sir!" Who is going to send me that little suit for a ragged lad of seven? What well born lad is going to make a sacrifice this Christmas?

GOING TO BE MAYOR.

"And what will you be?" I asked a lad I saw last visit.

"Me!" "Yes, you." "Oh, I'm bahn to be th' Mayor!" he said laughing.

"Come. That's a bit of all right," I said, and he answered, "It is that." "And when you are the Mayor, what will you do?" "Oh, I'll buy a donkey and cart." "What for?" "Why to go to Blackpool with." "And what would you do at Blackpool?" "Oh! well; oh! I know—I'd have a swim." And his next door neighbour, a red-headed lad, said with a bit of sly sarcasm, "Swim! Aye tha'd swim like a brick! Tha'd hev no moor soup!"—I'll keep my eye on the coming Mayor. One boy, the son of a rag gatherer, sells matches; another lad said there were five at their house all dependent on 5s. 9d. a week he earned as a tenter. Despite Preston's prosperity, I found below the crust a sad lot of poverty.

After one lot had been served another lot came in. When they had amply "filled their programmes," I found some of them "nid, nid, nodding" like little black ragged cherubs. They went off home comfortably full, and ready for the bit of cover they will have over them this bitter night. Then in came a bobby of poor tramps from the Mission wood-chopping yard. There is a lot of soup to-night. Gray-bearded old men and young fellows, some habitual tramps, others—"one more unfortunate," all face the text, "He that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." One very respectable man of 52 looks up, and I saw tears raining down his face. I spoke to him. He said he was a stoker by trade. I said, "Have you a wife?" He said, "She's dead." "Any children?" I sympathically asked. His lips quivered, and he simply said, "Aye." I could stand it no longer, and I left him. They were all well fed. It is all over—this God-like night. So

On with your caps, and out with the lights,
Weariness bids the world good night.

WORDS TO THE WELL-TO-DO.

Ye who pay your offering to this big Mission boiler—do you realise the good you are doing? Count your blessings—count them one by one, and let your biggest be a Christmas gift to these poor homes. It is called the Shepherd-street Mission—I call it the Mission of the Good Shepherd—the Shepherd who knoweth his Sheep, and who will ask you at the end, not what you have professed, not how often you have made broad your Philacteries, and sat in broadcloth on velvet seats toying morocco prayer books with a gilt edge and a pleasant perfume; not how often the lady has sallied out with the garb of a goddess, but what you have sacrificed, what you have put yourself out to do for those who are born in the valley and the shadow of life.

The legend of this proud town is "Princeps Pacis"—Prince of Peace. How are you men and women, you lads and lasses, lapp'd on the knees of prodigality—how are you going to sing your Christmas glorias to the great Prince of Peace? There are ragged, starving children among you. As you think in your carpeted homes of the music sweet of little feet that patter on your floors, think generously of these poor children of the slums. You are sorry—are you? How much?