

Pastor and People.

THE SHADOW OF A GREAT CITY.

The *Christian World*, noticing in flattering terms the visit of Rev. J. B. Sikox, of Winnipeg, to England, publishes the following from his pen. Its perusal will open up to many undreamt of phases of human life.

The greatness of London appals one. It is great in every direction; in poverty as in wealth, in vice as in virtue. An American gentleman said to me the other day, "This is the only city I ever failed to compass. It is too big for me. I cannot take it in." It is an education to see London. No man should allow himself to live thirty years in this world without visiting it, even if he had to come 5,000 miles to see it, as I did. There are certain places here that every stranger is expected to visit. I need not enumerate them. I had visited many of these Meccas. I had seen the Queen and Mr. Gladstone, had heard Joseph Parker in the Temple, Charles Spurgeon in the Tabernacle, and Henry Irving in the Lyceum. I had reverently looked on the relics resting in the British Museum, had stood in wonderment before St. Paul's Cathedral, and had tried to absorb some of the beauty looking down on me from the walls of the National Gallery. But there was another side of London life that I was anxious to look upon. One of the theatres was daily advertising, as an attractive drama, "The Shadows of a Great City." To see the shadow side of London I did not go to the theatre, but took a more direct route, for it was not the shadow of the shadow but the substance of the shadow that I wanted to see. I had read "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London," and knew somewhat of the relief work undertaken by the London Congregational Union, and had welcomed to my far away Western city some who had been rescued by the Self-help Emigration Society. Through the kindness of Rev. Andrew Mearns, who has done so much to awaken and direct the thought of Christian men and women to this good work of reclaiming the outcasts, it was arranged that I should spend a day with the missionaries working in the south-east of London, and also spend a night on the streets and lanes of London. It is the night tramp that I attempt to describe in this article. According to agreement, I met Mr. Gates at midnight, at Piccadilly Circus. Here we saw what is perhaps the saddest sight, the darkest shadow of this great city. In a short walk of five minutes we counted 150 victims of man's inhumanity to woman. They were young, and, as a rule, beautiful in form and feature. They might have adorned homes of wealth and culture. Alas! "it might have been."

As we pass from this shadow of death, we can hear the pitiful heart-cry of many an unfortunate saying, "Can you help me to a better life; can you show me the way back?" What response does the Church of Christ make to that importunate appeal? Turning our steps eastward, we meet a youth of sixteen shuffling aimlessly along the streets, with his hands in his pockets. Addressing him, we find him to be a quiet, modest-appearing boy, with a sad, hungry face. His father is dead. He had left his stepmother in the country, and had come to London for work—a printer by trade, but now out of work and homeless. We gave him a ticket to Collier's Rent Hall, where he could have a chair to sleep on and a breakfast in the morning. His face brightened at the prospect, and with a quickened pace he started for what to him was a "Bonanza."

To stand on Trafalgar Square in the daytime is an inspiration. It makes one proud that he belongs to so great a nation as Great Britain. Here the spectator is reminded of the magnificent achievements of Nelson, Napier, Havelock, and others of England's heroes. What splendid triumphs of art and arms, of commerce and religion, gird one on every side. But at night the shadow falls, and the scene is changed. Such a picture of squalid poverty and degradation I never before looked on. In the square surrounding the base of Nelson's Monument we counted 312 human beings huddled together like hogs, taking Nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep.

I am not wholly a stranger to "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" land. I have seen the Ojibway Indians of Dakota in their wigwams, have visited the Sioux in his tepee, where a dozen men, women and children lay around almost as nude as many of the pictures that adorn the art galleries. Strange how Nature in her coarseness and Art in her refinement meet and overlap! I know by actual observation how filthy and degraded the Indians live; but the Indians over our prairies are clean and comfortable compared with the mass of humanity heaped together on this square in the centre of Christian London.

It was a pitiful spectacle to look on. There were mothers with babes at their bosoms, sleeping in the damp night air, the hard stone their only bed and pillow. Let me briefly sketch some of the characters we met. There is a boy lying on his back sound asleep. The gaslight shining on his upturned face shows a bright, intelligent beautiful face. There are mothers in the palace homes near by who would be proud to

call such a boy their son. What possibilities of manhood lie sleeping in his soul. But what will his future be? Would that this lad could be saved before sinking to lower levels! An old man of nearly seventy is shivering on his seat. He has been out four nights in succession. "I'm almost done up, sir," he said. He looked it, as well as said it. At the morning breakfast I saw the same wearied, wasted face again.

Curled up against the stone wall, we find a woman apart from the rest, as though she shrunk from such companionship. As she slowly opened her eyes, we saw her to be a woman about fifty, with a quiet, gentle lady-like address. Her clothes were poor, but clean and neat. She sold chickweed for a living—had her unsold bundle at her side. She was not often out at night. "I went to day," she said, "to see my brother at Battersea, but found that he was sick in St. Thomas's Hospital. My day's sales were not sufficient to procure a bed, so I was compelled to sleep on the streets."

Sleeping side by side on a seat is a man and his wife. While Mr. Gates talks with the man, I speak with the woman. Unable to get work in the country, they had tried the city. The woman keenly felt her position. "I never expected to come to this, sir. It's a terrible hard life, and sometimes I almost wish I was dead." After the morning breakfast I observed Mr. Gates talking with them, and planning to get them some work.

A discharged soldier—and, by the way, we met many of this class in our nocturnal ramble—tells us that he was "in the army nineteen years for nothing," and wishes he could get back to Africa, where there is always plenty of work to be got.

There is a woman talking in a semi-preaching style to the motley crowd around her. Here are a few specimen sentences that I caught as I stood looking on the weird scene at two o'clock in the morning: "God made you in His own image. God loves you. What does drink do for you? Drink is your curse." I asked a young man at my side what she was doing. "She is talking religious, sir." "Do you know much about religion?" "No, sir." "Don't you ever go to church?" "I was in once, sir, a little while." And this home-heathen was born in a land of churches.

To a young Scotchman I expressed surprise to find one of his nationality in such a sorry plight. He had come some three weeks ago from the North of Scotland, expecting to get work, but failing in this, was compelled to sleep, like Jacob, with a stone for a pillow. Leaving the square, we wended our way toward Charing Cross, stumbling on men who were lying around everywhere.

"Why are you here?" we say to a man curled up against a wall. "Well, sir, like other unfortunate wretches, I have no work. Times are hard. Surely the Government should do something. The Jubilee didn't do us much good. The aristocracy don't care whether we live or die. They would let us starve in the ditch, and kick us for dying." This seemed to me to be a severe criticism on the aristocracy. Repeating it, a few days ago, to a prominent Congregational minister of London, he said: "I regret that the man's words are too true. Those high up have really little or no sympathy with those who are low down." My own idea is that if those who have the control of London possessed an ordinary measure of sympathy and fairness they would clean the narrow streets of South-East London as well as the streets of the West and Central parts. One needs a nose-protector to walk through many of those streets.

If I were an artist I would put on canvas some of the pictures we saw that night in the streets of London. Here is a rough sketch of one scene. We are in Covent Garden. It is half-past two o'clock. The gray morning light is breaking through, and driving back the night. A mother lies on the hard stone pavement, her tired head resting on an upturned basket for a pillow. Her little boy, about five years old, has wakened. He has a thin, sorry little face. But he is making the best of the situation, for with a little broken toy in his hand he is playing with a kitten. What a little hero he was, to be able to extract mirth from such surroundings, and what a pleased, gratified look the little fellow gave me when I handed him a penny!

An old Irishwoman, sitting near by, tells us that she was only able to earn fivepence shelling peas, and some of the poor women, she said, "were not able to make that much." After a little friendly talk we pass on. Her parting words are, "Thank you, gentlemen, for the ticket; but I'm really more thankful for the little conversation we have had than for the breakfast even." These people are human, and are hungry for human sympathy.

We wakened a young woman, about eighteen years old, sleeping soundly on the hard stone. I saw her after breakfast in the mission-hall, and she told me the story of her life. Father and mother had died when she was young. She had a brother and a sister somewhere in London, but "they don't care for me now since I'm down in the world," and her lips quiver and the fear forces itself to her cheek. The woman in the mission-hall persuades her to stay behind, and she will get her in the home, and after a while find a place for her.

But I must stop describing the characters we met. Along the Thames Embankment we found its seats filled, and also the recesses in the bridges. At four o'clock life begins to move again. The "cheap breakfast" stalls are open to make an early penny from the hungry out-door sleepers. We are near our journey's end. South and east of London Bridge we turn off a main street, into Angel Court, passing the old Marshalsea Prison, familiar to the readers of Dickens as the birthplace of Little Dorrit. Entering the mission-hall, we find it full of our invited guests, who have one by one gathered in during the night. What a strange, sad sight! If one could know the causes that led to this poverty, what a wise man he would be. The theologian accounts for it on the theory of total depravity and the solidarity of the race, the political economist and socialist affirms that it all arises from a wrong adjustment of labour and capital; Henry George avows that it is the natural result of vicious, unjust land laws; the teetotaler is quite sure that nine-tenths is traceable to the liquor-traffic; the don't-care-man of the world, looking on the scene, says it all comes from "pure cussedness" that it is their own fault, and serves them right.

What cause or combination of causes has brought these people to this low level I don't presume to say. But here they are. If we believe the first chapter of the Bible, these people were made in the image of God, are our brothers and sisters, and we are their keepers. From conversation with many of them, I am persuaded that a large number are honest English working men and women who cannot get work, and are therefore driven to the streets. England has done much to Christianize and civilize the world. Her statesmen and philanthropists have given freedom to slaves and have elevated whole empires. If she will, she can remove the blighting shadow that rests on her own great city. London is full of monuments, columns, statues, commemorating the heroic deeds of those who lived nobly and died gloriously for England's honour on sea and land. Will not men, and men of equal self-denial and valour, arise to deliver the land from her internal foes, ignorance, poverty, irreligion and drink? More men of the Shaftesbury and Peabody type are needed.

I have not space to describe the breakfast scene. After breakfast Mr. Gates gave out the hymn, "What a Friend we have in Jesus!" That hymn will always have a fuller meaning to me. I noticed that nearly all sang it. Over yonder a woman's clear voice rises above the others singing, "Have we trials and temptations?" When the line "We should never be discouraged" is reached, I notice that the woman who sold chickweed has stopped singing. Her tears are her song. A man not far from me began to sing, but his head soon dropped, and I could see him struggling to hide his emotion. Who can tell what memories, what repentances, swept through the soul as they sang "Are we weak and heavy laden?" etc.? Does not their present condition arise as much from their weakness as from their wickedness?

These people are recoverable. The lost silver is silver still. If the preachers don't teach this the novelists do. Victor Hugo, in "Les Misérables," and Charles Reade, in "Never too Late to Mend," have preached the Gospel to us. Bret Harte's "Outcasts of Poker Flat," and "Miss," the ignorant child of "Old Bummer Smith," have the germs of noble manhood and womanhood in them, so also have the "Outcasts of London," whose "Bitter Cry" should touch the hearts and call forth the humane efforts of all who love their kind. These men and women are recoverable. As I was looking at a babe in a mother's arms that morning, she said to me, referring to his sore eyes, "My little boy has got the blight, sir." Yes, poor mother, your boy has got the blight in a deeper, darker sense than you mean. The shadow of a great city's poverty and vice has fallen on him and on many more. The gladness and gratitude of those who that Sunday morning received a breakfast, and a few words of warm Christian sympathy, are full reward for those engaged in this Christly work of feeding the hungry. If any one has doubts about the wisdom of giving a free breakfast to guests that must be personally invited and gathered in from the highways and alleys of London, let him go once and witness the scene; let him hear the miracle of Christ feeding the multitude, as I heard it read that Sunday morning by Mr. Gates; let him hear the fervent expressions of gratitude from those to whom this kindness is shown, and all doubts will for ever be banished, and the doubter will become a helper. As a policeman said to me that night, "It's a great mystery to see men and women in such a plight. I suppose God knows all about it, and why it is. I don't." As I have walked the streets and lanes of London, and looked at the vast mass of men and women struggling for a livelihood, I have reverently pondered the question, and offered the prayer:—

When wilt Thou save the people?

O God of mercy, when?

The people, Lord, the people!

Not thrones and crowns, but men!

Flowers of Thy heart are they, O Lord,

Let them not pass like weeds away;

Their heritage a sunless day;

God save the people.