

GENTLEWOMEN WHO DEVOTE THEIR LIVES TO THE POOR.

PART IV.
EYES TO THE BLIND.

"Infinite is the help which man can yield to man."—*Carlyle*.



It is more than a quarter of a century ago that the lady I am about to introduce to you took up the special work of caring for the blind poor who live in and wander about the streets of London.

Seeing that their needs were so great and their condition so forlorn, she gave herself heart and soul to their service, and through all these long years they have been her care and her joy, and what she has been to them can only be known fully to Him who gave her the work to do, though something may be learned from the blind themselves.

She visits them in their homes; she knows the character and condition of each individual among them; she is acquainted with their needs and how best to supply them; she sympathises with their sorrows and understands how to comfort them; and in times of sickness her help and her presence cannot be overrated. She provides them with medical advice and medicine free of charge. She sends those who are weak and ailing to the seaside, and she strengthens and supplements every effort at self-help.

She has drawn towards her many girls of good position with time and talents at their disposal who, under her guidance, visit and read to the blind poor.

To enter fully into the details of this Christ-like work would fill a volume, and certainly would be out of place in a sketch like this; still, I have a plan for showing you this lady in the midst of her blind people, which will interest you greatly if I am not mistaken.

I propose to take you to one of the poorest districts in the neighbourhood of King's Cross, where, in a large hall obtained from a chapel at a small rent, this woman-worker holds a reception every Thursday evening.

She started it when she first began her work, and, with but few exceptions, it has never been put on one side for any other engagement whatever. From one end of London to the other these gatherings are known as "Mrs. Starey's Thursday evening receptions," and stand quite alone in their power of giving and receiving pleasure. Invitations are eagerly accepted, and it must be a serious thing indeed which prevents the arrival of any guest. The hours are from seven till nine, and as a rule they are very punctual. A peculiarity is that the guests never drop in one by one, but always two at the time and, no matter what the weather, they come on foot. It cannot be for the refreshments they hope to partake of, for, except the blind people who come from the workhouses and the very poor who walk long distances, not even a cup of coffee is provided, and yet they will tell you that Thursday evening is the bright spot of their week.

Many of them come very long distances, viz., from Westminster, Lambeth, Hampstead, and Edgware Road, and they would not miss coming for any consideration.

A little time ago I took some friends of my own to the reception, and as we walked up the street leading to the hall, we noticed several dark figures, each attended by a smaller one, walking rapidly in the same

direction; indeed, so rapidly and unhesitatingly were they moving along, that one could scarcely believe they were deprived of sight.

Arriving at our destination, we walked up the hall, already crowded with blind people, noticing as we did so many old acquaintances whose faces we were familiar with in our streets. Mrs. Starey received us and directed us to the platform, where the "sighted" were accommodated, and went on to welcome her special guests, to whom she spoke a few kind words while guiding them to the chairs arranged in rows across the hall, which were nearly all occupied although it still wanted a quarter to seven. The hall is anything but beautiful, yet it is called by the guests "The hall of light for the blind," a name given to it by a blind Chinese boy, whom Mrs. Starey's blind people support by their free offerings in the school at Chinchew.

Each blind person is bound to have a guide—generally a child—to bring him or her to the reception. Therefore Mrs. Starey allows threepence a week to each blind person as guide-money—an item which amounts to considerably over £100 per annum.

While waiting for the clock to strike seven we chatted with some of the guests, first to a girl who told us she earned something towards her keep by type-writing; then to a man with a most intelligent face, who raised his eyes towards ours as he spoke in such a way that we thought it impossible he could be quite blind. He gave us a good deal of interesting information about the employment of the blind. He also said that, no matter what privations the blind are called upon to endure, they will cheerfully bear all to preserve their home life, such as it is; their objections to being sent to a home or institute are simply insurmountable. Ninety cases out of a hundred have become blind by accident or through illness, so that a small number only are born blind.

Many of those in the hall, he told us, had seen better days; but blindness soon reduces them; indeed, it is difficult to realise the enormous obstacles in the way of blind people earning a living.

We were specially struck with the face of a man sitting a few rows back from the platform; it had an abiding sadness on it, as if at some time or other it had been suddenly struck with some intense sorrow. I called on him a few days later in his room, which was very clean, for he had a "sighted" wife. I found him knitting stockings.

He speaks even now with reluctance of the time when he lost his sight. He said, "Just at the time when this awful sorrow fell upon me, which is some fourteen years ago, I had about as happy as a man could be. I had married the woman I loved, I had bought a little business with our savings, and we were to start in it in a day or two, when I had finished up some work for my old master; this I was doing when the accident occurred which deprived me suddenly of my sight and every hope at the same time. I dare not even now think of the despair which took hold of me body and soul, and deprived me of faith in the good God and urged me to take my life."

"How did help come?" I asked.

His answer was—

"Mrs. Starey came to us."

With a sad smile he said, "Fancy a man who was going to do such good work in the world sitting here knitting stockings! But it is the only way in which I can contribute to my keep."

This is only one of the many visits I paid to those who had interested me at the reception. I went to one house soon after the birth of a

baby, and the mother attacked me at once. "Oh, ma'am, are my child's eyes right? What colour are they? Is my baby pretty?"

After answering these questions satisfactorily, I asked in my turn, "Who looks after you and your family while you are in bed?" Her response was, "Oh, Mrs. Starey provides help for me."

I was very interested to note while visiting the blind in their homes how very clever some of the blind mothers are: they will alter a dress given them by a friend, and make it to fit the child and put quite good work in it; they will do the washing and cooking almost as well as those who have their sight.

To come back to the reception: the clock was striking seven, and as the last sound died away a blind man seated himself at the piano, while another with sightless eyes and earnest face gave out in a clear, firm voice the first verse of the hymn, "Brightly beams our Father's mercy," which was sung by all in that crowded hall. As the second verse was in a like manner given out and sung, one line struck us as very pathetic and filled our eyes with tears, considering that all those singing it would never see anything again in this world; it was "Eager eyes are longing, Watching for the lights along the shore."

This done, the blind man who gave out the hymn offered a very short prayer for them all; and then came a few bright, cheery words from the hostess, who then described the "sighted" visitors on the platform who had come to help her entertain the special blind guests. She did this in such a way that they had no difficulty in picturing us in their minds. She next introduced a gentleman who was about to give a description of his travels in Switzerland. It was, I believe, very interesting, but the truth is that my every faculty was engaged in watching its effect upon the audience. While he addressed them many of the women worked, some were making lace, others doing fine needlework, their little guests merely threading the needles for them, while a few were crocheting petticoats. All paid the greatest attention to the speaker, the slightest noise being at once hushed, while all the faces were directed towards him as though they could see him. We were specially interested in three men who sat close to the platform and who were not only blind but deaf as well. One, however, was not absolutely deaf, for by the help of an ear-trumpet he now and then was able to catch a phrase or two; whenever he did so he conveyed the meaning to the other two by a peculiar method of touching their hands, and they asked each other questions in the same wonderful manner. The lecturer would have found it difficult not to be satisfied with his audience; they seemed to understand every turn. When the address was over any one among the audience was permitted to get up and say a few words, and this two or three of them did in very good English and with common sense.

At length the roll was called by our hostess with the assistance of one of the blind; and now occurred what to us was the most curious part of the proceedings.

As she called out the names, those present answered "Here"; sometimes after the call of a name there was a silence broken by her blind helper, who would look round the room and say, "She has been here but has left," or "No, he is not here this evening," or "She is coming in." His knowledge of the audience seemed to us almost uncanny.

Since we last heard him taking part in the "calling of the roll" he has "sighted the Golden Gate."

After a verse of "God save the Queen" the