

SOUNDING THE DEPTHS.

BY THE REV. C. J. WHITMORE.

"You have been hearing of 'The Bitter Cry of the Outcast Poor,' and you wish to see and hear for yourself, do you?" asked an East-end minister of a visitor who had called on him for that purpose. "Well, it is very easy to gratify your wish; you have only to indicate what portion of the poor you desire to visit among, and I shall know what to do."

"I should like to see, and hear, and examine for myself, under your guidance," said the visitor; "and this bag here is not unfurnished with means to make our visit one of something more than curiosity, go where we may."

"I am glad of that," rejoined the minister; "for while many just and righteous sermons may be preached on the poverty of the poor, oftentimes the most trying part of my work is going to it empty-handed."

"That will not be the case to-day," said the visitor, "so let us get as quickly as possible on our way."

"Where shall we begin?" asked the minister.

"I have heard and read much of the match-box making," replied the visitor, "and should like to see something of that on our way."

"By all means," was the reply; "meanwhile we will take things as they come on the road thither. Let us look first into this common lodging-house in the court."

The two friends entered, as he spoke, into the sitting-room of a "home for travellers." It consisted of the whole of a court, which was entered by a narrow arch under a house, the various houses on each side of the court constituting the "home," so far as bedrooms were concerned, one large kitchen being set apart for the common eating and living-room of all the inhabitants of both sexes.

As they entered they were faced by an enormous fire of coke in the ruins of a large cooking stove. On one side was a huge boiler with a long tap, which was for common use; on the other and in front of the fire were various cooking utensils.

The seats were roughly divided into compartments like those in an ordinary coffee-house, and the occupants were of the most varied character. They were nearly all wrecks; of women, of men, of all trades and professions; wrecks of physicians, surgeons, solicitors, clergymen, shopmen, clerks, mechanics, laborers and (so-called) gentlemen. There was scarcely a single specimen of fresh springing life in the room; faded, withered, broken wreckage the prevailing characteristic. A more hopeful gathering it would be hard to find, and just as plain as the hopelessness as the one source of it all—strong drink. Thoughts of this kind passed rapidly through the minds of the minister and the visitor as they looked around them.

"What about the old women and her sixpence, minister?" asked one of the tenants. "I think there are a good many here to-day who would be the better for treatment of that kind, seeing there is a decided majority of mouths over dinners among us."

"How comes that about?" asked the minister.

"Out o' luck," replied another; "nothin' to do if we offer to do it for nothin'."

"Nothing stirring but stagnation," added a third.

"Been looking for envelope-directing at three shillings a thousand, all the morning," said a fourth, "and none at that hard work-upon-empty-stomach figure."

The conversation was interrupted for a moment by a man stumping into the kitchen with a wooden leg, which he coolly took off, let down his flesh leg from his nether garments, and sat down to a plentiful meal which he brought in with him, in which a large bottle held a prominent place. He looked up at the minister, glanced keenly at the visitor, but he uttered never a word.

"How have you got on to-day, Dick?" asked the minister of a lank-looking man almost covered with mud.

"Awful bad!" replied Dick. "I was doing a fit on the kerb, and had just gathered a fine squad of women with 'tin' round, when the 'copper' came up, and I had to hook it without earning even a penny."

"And how have the 'appeals' been doing?" he asked another, who wore a decidedly broken-down clerical appearance.

"Not much to boast of," replied he; "I had a bishop for a sov. at the beginning of the week, but since then the product of honest and laborious industry has been nil!"

The visitor seemed utterly bewildered, until the minister whispered, "One of the best (or worst) begging-letter writers in London."

"And how is your baby!" he asked, turning to a woman with two black eyes.

"Blow the babies!" replied the women; "they are rising in price so much as not to be worth taking out. I used to be able to get any amount on 'em for threepence a day; but since they have opened the day nurseries, I can't get a good-lookin' kid under eighteenpence, and I have to pay sixpence for any sub-nosed little beast, as ugly as sin."

"Borrows babies to go begging with," again explained the minister.

"Another entry into the kitchen; a woman with very small, bright eyes, who also produced a good meal and a bottle.

"The most artful of them all," whispered the minister; "she can

turn up her eyes till the white only is visible, and she wears an inscription round her neck—'Pity the poor blind!'"

A young girl followed into the kitchen, with some matchboxes in her hand and loose matches in her dirty apron.

"She waits for elderly ladies and gentlemen, knocks up against them, scatters her matches on the pavement, and sets up howling that her father will beat her to death! Does a very prosperous trade too," again explained the minister.

"Do you wish me to open my bag here?" inquired the visitor.

"By no means," replied the minister; "the money would be in the publican's till in a very few minutes after our departure."

"Then I have seen too much, and we will go," he replied; and they took their departure.

"Is that kind of thing part of 'The Bitter Cry?'" asked the visitor.

"If I were to state my own opinion clearly and unreservedly," replied the minister, "it would be this—that about nine parts of every ten of the Bitter Cry is due to strong drink, and that if, as an experiment, no strong drink could be procured for the next year, at the end of that time, or very soon after, there would be no charity needed. Here, where I labor, if I had the revenues of the public houses, I could pay for all schools, hospitals, prisons, workhouses, doctors in sickness, and food for the really unemployed, and have a very handsome allowance for myself, and I believe it would be the same all over London."

"Then are there no real cases of misfortune and need?"

"Plenty! as I will show you; but the revenue from moderate drinking would more than meet them all."

"Now," continued the minister, as they entered a house not far from the lodging-house, "here is a case of real need at present. There are three children locked up in this room; the father was a carpenter, and he kept his wife and children respectably; he became consumptive, laid on his bed for fifteen months, wife went to work at a laundry, he minding the children, sick as he was; not long since he died, and the widow now earns twelve shillings per week, upon which she and the children exist. Will you open the bag if I send for the mother?"

"Surely!" replied the visitor; "this is what I came to see."

The mother was sent for; strong, cheerful, and making a good fight of it for herself and little ones. Quiet inquiries by the minister brought out the acknowledgment of a few weeks' rent due before her husband's death, she had not been able to pay; the bag was opened, and they left the widow uttering the music of a heartfelt "God bless you, gentlemen."

"Now come in here," said the minister, "and see one of the most trying cases with which I have to deal."

He knocked at the door of a back room at the top of the house, and they entered.

A woman, evidently once respectable, now ragged and hopeless, and a girl of about eight, suffering and pallid from want of proper and sufficient food, were the occupants. There was no fire in the grate, no food in the cupboard, no hope in the woman's face or life.

"Where is your husband?" asked the minister.

"Out somewhere," she replied, "as usual; he is just the same as ever he won't work! and that's the cause of all our trouble."

"Shall I open the bag?" inquired the visitor, in a low tone.

"You must judge for yourself," said the minister; "this wife and child are ragged and starving, through the father's utter laziness. He could work and get it to do, if he would do it, but he will not. He does not drink nor will he work; and the wife and child starve. It seems hard on one hand to minister to his idleness by feeding his wife and child, hard on the other hand for the wife and child to starve through him. This is the truth; you must balance and judge for yourself."

The bag was opened a very little way; and as they departed the minister said, in a tone that left no doubt as to its truth—

"If I had my way that man would do a large amount of work under efficient supervision for at least six months to come."

They came, as he spoke, upon a gathering of men and women, girls and lads, waiting outside a match-factory. The minister and his friend joined themselves to the small congregation, which consisted of three men, three women, four lads, and a girl. One of the men was indulging in the luxury of a pipe; another, with a gaunt look upon his hopeless face seemed to be wishing in vain for similar enjoyment.

"What are these?" inquired the visitor.

"Match-box makers, who work at their own homes," was the reply; "all except the lad in front, who thinks it better to live without honest labor of any kind."

One of the women was speaking violently as they approached, her right hand on her hip, her left fore-finger held oratorically before her.

"It was bad enough before," she said; "it was only slow starvation at two-three fardens a gross. Now they have taken off another halfpenny, through the competition of them Germans; and what we are to do now, heaven knows—I don't; it's enough to drive a poor woman to make a hole in the water."

"If yer think so, better do it and not make a row about it," replied the man with the pipe; "them as make a row about it never does it."