LONDON SLUMS.

The Rev. Richard Free's Varied Experiences on the Isle of Dogs.*

THE Rev. Richard Free of the Church of England complained one day to his Bishop of feeling tired of preaching to silks and satins, and expressed a desire for rags and tatters as a change. The Bishop sent him as a pioneering missionary to the "Isle of Dogs." To this savory London district he went, accompanied by his wife. It is his experiences in the London slums which he presents in "Seven Years' Hard." "The Isle of Dogs," he tells us, lies near the heart of London, and to most people in the metropolis is almost an unknown country. Sometimes it goes by the name of Millwall. The author calls it "a city of desolation." All day long and far into the night, big and little bells are clanging, and steam whistles scream through the fog. The Thames flows through a part of Millwall, "but its waters have become loathsome by human selfishness and folly." When Mr. Free first entered the quarter, work day was just over, and there streamed into the street a motley crowd; boys black as sweeps, who had been all day shoveling coal in close boiler rooms, and girls with red eyes and hacking coughs, which "testified to the pungent atmosphere in which they had been toiling since dawn," and a great crowd of men, "ragged, suffering, gaunt, weary with every conceivable kind of work, relieving their pent-up feelings with coarse jests or blasphemous oaths." So down the road they swept, "like a turbulent, ill-conditioned stream." The streets were filthy and the smells abominable.

It was in January, 1897, that Mr. Free delivered his first sermon, and the congregation numbered two women and three children. He made a collection, borrowing a dinner plate for the occasion, and the contribution amounted to several pennies. The service was orderly, but that of the evening was not peaceful. Mrs. Free was at the door of the church when a gang of lads demanded admission "in less than polite terms." "'Ere, out o' that!" shouted one. "Shove 'er over if she won't letcher pass!" cried another. "I say, miss," piped a third young man, who appeared to be the wit of the party, "where's the bloke with the nightgownd on?" Speech was not nice, habits were of the worst. It was difficult to open a school, and for fifteen weeks the missionary tried to form a boys' club. Rowdyism was rampant, and sometimes Mr. Free felt like locking the door and giving up. The amount of work he had to do every day was enormous.

> In those days I was a pluralist of the most hopeless character. I occupied almost every official position known to the Church; sacristan, server, reader, district visitor, Sunday school Superintendent, magazine editor, brigade captain, choirmaster, secretary of lads' clubs, missionary priest, and preacher. Well do I remember pausing in the midst of my work in the church and wondering what sundry fashionable friends would think of me and my wife, for she was scrubbing the floor of the sanctuary and I was nailing down the carpet in the choir.

Out of chaos there came in time something like order. Matters improved when a mission building was reared, but it was without furniture, for there was not a chair to sit on. The West End was appealed to, but the results were meagre. The poor and suffering were helped, however, by a guild which paid a penny a week. A working man sent this letter:

> Smoking no cigarettes for the past three weeks, I am able to send you 6d. in stamps. Perhaps some gentleman smoking cigars will send a little more.

Money must always be the great question. There is a chapter devoted to the children of the slums. There was a naked infant that would always sit on the mat before the open door of the missionary's house. At the least advance he would crow with delight and nothing could stop his screaming when his removal was attempted. If it had not been for these east side children, Mr. Free declares, he would have given up his work in despair. At an early age their devotion to their mothers was wonderful. Alas! that when the time came for them to work a sad change took place.

There seems to be in this part of London entire absence of religion. Public opinion is against it. A belief in God is looked upon with scorn. Hooliganism is rampant in Millwall. This "animalism unchecked" is born from the overcrowded home. In some measure Mr. Free thinks it may develop from the want of proper control of the boys and girls, particularly in such quarters which are under the sway of philanthropic women. He declares that with the best intentions in the world they have systematically coddled and pampered young ruffians who stand in need of nothing so much as a man's firm standing. Quintin Hogg's strong arm did much in correcting rowdyism. There is no home training. A woman has an unruly son and she tells Mr. Free: "I dusn't say a word to my son or he'd turn me out of the house." The all-besetting sin of the East Ender is intemperance. The habit of drinking is universal. Boys and girls of not more than thirteen may be seen in the open streets in a maudlin condition. To get drunk on Christmas seems to be imperative for both sexes. The havoc brought about by intemperance is incredible. Ninety-nine out of every hundred cases of destitution can be directly traced to the terrible vice. It might do some good were Mr. Free's ideas on the public house read without prejudice. The late movement in New York is in the direction Mr. Free advises.

> The public house is the workman's club, and, however badly managed, will remain the club until a better is forthcoming. The most sensible policy is to attempt to reform the public house, not to annihilate it. To convert the present beer shop or gin palace, with its moral and physical debasement, into a real "public" house, decent, habitable, comely, where pure liquor is sold, where there is no compulsion to drink too much, and where one may take one's wife and children and meet one's clergyman and doctor; this is the ideal toward which every practical reformer should strive.

Millwall is a great hive of industry, the factories being all over the district. Mr. Free finds great fault with the heads of these industries. As he describes it, the boys, and, especially the girls, are overworked and receive only a pittance for the longest possible hours.

That problem of the roof tree is the one which seems, thus far, to await its solution. Mr. Free writes that there are a million Londoners who want decent housing and 400,000 whose family life is spent in the narrowness and stuffiness of single rooms. Appreciation of the settlement work is somewhat wanting on the part of the author. Mr. Free seems to hold to the opinion that the clergyman of a parish should be the supreme ruler. He is hardly in sympathy with the aristocratic but charitable Miss Granville, who becomes offended because a note is addressed to her as "Miss Granvile," as there was a sausage manufacturer who spelled his name that way, and yet Miss Granville's ambition was to be loved by the poor. Mr. Free's conclusions are not very hopeful. "Christianity," he writes, "does not count in the East End." The Church of England is not liked, and for the parson there is no respect. Dissent the East Ender does not look at with favor. To him "it is an attempt to silence the divine discontent within him with sensational claptrap and halfpenny buns."

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