

The Story of a Coffee Palace

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Among places of popular resort in the East of London a year ago, the “Edinburgh Castle” had an unenviable notoriety for its demoralising entertainments as a gin-palace and music-hall. It has now become a centre, of missionary operations among the working classes of that densely populated neighbourhood. When we last visited the place the words “God is love” shone out brightly in large letters of flaming gas over the entrance through which hundreds had once passed to debasing pleasures and the shades of death; and in the large hall which had once resounded with idle songs there were nearly a thousand people—a mixed audience of the poorer class, some of them, too plainly, once the slaves of vice—listening to the words of eternal life read out in clear, loud tones from the Bible—a sight which might be seen every evening in the week. The completion of the changes necessary to adapt the building to its new objects was celebrated not long since by a great meeting in this same hall, over which the Earl of Shaftesbury presided. The facts which were then stated are full of encouragement to others who may be working in unpromising fields, where the heathendom of England lies beyond the reach of all ordinary ecclesiastical agencies.

Working men's clubs and temperance rooms have usually the appearance of second-rate coffee-houses; but it was resolved to. make the “Edinburgh Castle” under the new *regime* as attractive in appearance and comfort as it had ever been; and its interior now, as far as is fitting, is bright with crystal gaseliers, and with colour and tasteful decoration. There are rooms, apart from the large hall, provided with newspapers and periodicals, and with every comfort, where be letters may written, or men nay rest and talk, which are open to subscribers for twopence a week. “Friendship,” “Sobriety,” “Happiness,” are mottoes over the doorways. The flaunting gin-palace is, in fact, transformed into a Coffee Palace, which name it now bears. This event, which East Londoners look upon with wonder and thankfulness, is not an isolated result of Christian effort. An unusual history attaches. to the work of which it is the last outcome—a patient, prayerful work of some years quietly pursued in dependence upon God.

The movement may be said to date back from the time when ragged schools were attempting to solve, in their humble way, the difficulties with which statesmen and school boards have since tried to

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grapple. Among the most energetic teachers of those days was a young medical student, who acquired his first experience in Ireland, and, coming to London, threw himself heartily into work among the destitute children of the East End. Dr. Barnardo found that in ragged schools, generally speaking, the teachers too seldom laboured as if they expected the conversion of the lads and girls under their care. Too frequently even ardent Christians are satisfied if temporal and mere social changes are effected in the young. He was gradually led to devote himself to the more hopeless class, whose reckless ways defied all rule, in the belief that the gospel of Christ has power to subdue the most hardened. As the work grew under his hands, prayer was its chief instrument, and love the energy by which it prevailed. It was soon felt that the intervals between the religious teaching of the Sundays, in which the children were exposed to

every evil influence, weakened impressions which more frequent intercourse might deepen. A little room was taken and opened for boys every night in the week. It was presently crowded with rough, noisy lads, who scandalised the neighbourhood. People so complained of the uproar that removal after removal was made. With but one helper, Mr. Barnardo held firm to his purpose. At length he was enabled to secure possession of two cottages in a fitting locality, and there the work began on a larger scale.

The audiences that gathered were of the roughest order. Strange scenes occurred. There was hooting, yelling, fighting. Boys would throw pepper on the fire, or begrime the faces of comrades with soot. Outsiders jeered, and threw mud or stones at the teachers; but the blessing of God followed their perseverance. In due time there was a change. Not unfrequently the hardened offender would quail under the steady eye and the more piercing word. A lad has been known to go out and say, “He did not care for 'bobby' or 'beak,' but could not stand that.” Often the truth went deeper. Big fellows, who used to curse and fight, became willing helpmates. Another cottage was taken, and the work steadily expanded. Presently there were more than seven, hundred scholars in the schools. Night after night the little services were continued. Fathers and mothers became interested. Soon a hall was built for adults to meet in; there were numerous conversions, and the enthusiasm of a genuine revival was felt in the neighbourhood. Gradually other means of usefulness were added to the original work. Schools for secular instruction were opened, sewing-classes were established, a system of weekly dinners provided for the destitute, and other machinery of an extensive mission set in operation.

Dr. Barnardo has himself, in a touching narrative, published in “The Christian,” told the incident which was mainly instrumental in shaping his own course, and leading him to abandon other plans for this work. One evening, after the ragged school, a little boy loitered behind, and begged for leave to sleep in the room. Conversation brought out the fact that he had neither father nor mother, and that he was in the habit of sleeping out in the streets where he could find a nestling-place, and that the night before he had slept in a hay-cart. The talk of this tiny lad of ten years opened at that moment quite a new sense of the appalling destitution to be found in the streets of wealthy London. Mr. Barnardo was then comparatively inexperienced. “Were there many such boys sleeping out?” he asked; and the little fellow replied, “Oh yes, sir—lots, 'caps on 'em—more'n I could count!” He took the boy home, sat him down at his bachelor table, and let him talk under the novel inspiration of coffee and a warm fireside. It was a sad story he had to tell—how mother had died, and he had lived on a barge with Swearing Dick, who beat him cruelly, but at last enlisted, in a drunken fit, when the boy ran away; and how since he had picked up anything he could in the streets. Then the conversation turned to brighter things. They talked of heaven, and “Our Father” there. “But, sir—” and then suddenly came a look of earnest inquiry into the child's face, “Will Swearin' Dick be there? and will there be any bobbies?” What a depth of pathos in this fear of the homeless street-boy! “Every one that goes there must love Jesus,” was the reply. “Have you ever heard of Him?” The child nodded assent; but it soon appeared that his knowledge was total ignorance. He listened attentively to the story of the cross. When he heard of the scourging and the crown of thorns, he eagerly asked, “Were they the perlice, sir?” And he burst into crying as he heard, for the first time, the history of the crucifixion. Little Tim led the way that midnight to the sleeping quarters of some of his companions. Mr. Barnardo followed through lane and court to a long shed, which served as a market-place in the day. Time for cast-off clothes; and, climbing the high dead wall at one end, in the footsteps of the nimble

lad, he found eleven boys huddled together in deep sleep on the roof. It was enough; he would not wake them till he could help them. It was an easy thing to make provision for Tim; and in after days he amply repaid the care that surrounded him from that time. But there was a greater work to be done; and this sight of the sleeping boys so impressed itself on the vision that all other aims seemed now, subordinated to the rescue of these outcasts. Yet such a sight was not a rare one to men who knew the darker side of London life. On a subsequent occasion, as many as seventy-three children were found lying closely packed together, under a tarpaulin in an unfrequented street by one of the river wharves.

The next step was to open a Home for Working and Destitute Lads, and this was accomplished in September, 1870. A house was taken in Stepney Causeway, an unattractive bye-street, and fitted up for the purpose. During the first year eighty-nine boys were admitted; but as means allowed, another house was added, and fresh accommodation provided, so that there are now one hundred and thirty-five boys in the institution, and from the commencement nearly three hundred have passed through it. Boys are received who come from the country, or are engaged in work, and have no friends in town, on payment of a small sum from their weekly wages; but, from the first, two-thirds of the whole space has been devoted to the really destitute boys of the street. A strange history attaches to some of these lads, who have been picked up in all parts of London, in rags and filth, and with the deeper stains of vice upon them. On their first admission they are placed at the top of the house, and sleep on a simple bed of canvas sacking, with one blanket to wrap them, in a well-ventilated, orderly, room, which is a mansion

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to them after their out-door experiences; and as they descend lower, as vacancies occur and good behaviour warrants, their privileges and comforts increase. No boy enters the institution but through Dr. Barnardo's room, and from his entrance he is taught to feel that there is hope before him.

No difficulty has been experienced in maintaining discipline. Private expostulation is often found to be more effectual than open punishment. The “father,” who presides in the house, is an old ragged-school teacher; the “mother” shares his oversight. One schoolmaster suffices. The boys, as they are old enough, are taught useful trades—brush-making, shoe-making, tailoring—in convenient shops on the premises; they make all the shoes and clothes of their companions, and do much work beside. Some have emigrated, but the majority are trained for home occupations; and the demand for the lads at present exceeds the supply of efficient hands. The severer employments of the day are enlivened by cheerful exercises, such as singing and drilling. And so the work goes forward, the religious motive being always paramount. The funds, which are dependent upon variable contributions, have never failed, though sometimes low, and sometimes for awhile insufficient; fresh building operations have sometimes been suspended, but debt has never been incurred. The principle which has so effectually sustained, Mr. Muller in his great work at Bristol appears to have been relied upon in this instance, with corresponding results. It is now in contemplation to do something for little destitute girls.

Meanwhile, the earlier work of the ragged-schools has been maintained, and other agencies have clustered round it. These schools are the head-quarters of a Wood Cutting Brigade for

boys, and a City Messenger Brigade, which keeps seventy lads, all clothed in uniform, running about on daily errands. There is a laundry for the women; and there are sewing-classes; and, during the colder weather, a soup kitchen is in constant operation. There are also other agencies, which we need not enumerate, but we should mention among them a shop for the distribution of pure literature.

During the last summer, a large tent was erected, in which religious services were held every evening, and the simple truths of the gospel preached by those accustomed to deal with the working classes. The kind of persuasion exerted may be inferred from the fact that during these months more than two thousand persons signed the total abstinence pledge; but it is due to say that the claims of spiritual religion were never subordinated to resolutions for social reform. It was at this time that the opportunity offered for acquiring the “Edinburgh Castle,” which was at once seized by Dr. Barnardo. The place was offered for sale, and the amount required was forthcoming as soon as the facts were known. Within a fortnight a large sum was sent in to Stepney Causeway; but scarcely had the deposit been paid, and a day fixed for the completion of the transaction, than some one in the interest of the drink-traffic offered another 500l.; and the building would have passed to the highest bidder, if the whole of the purchase-money had not been forthcoming on the appointed day. It is a singular fact that on the morning of that day the sum in hand amounted to 4,090l., but that a gentleman then unexpectedly called and said he wished “to fire a hundred-pounder at the 'Castle,’” and that the post subsequently brought another 10l., making in all 4,200l., the exact sum needed, within the hour required. So the purchase was effected, and the transformation made. A considerable sum has since been contributed and spent in the necessary adaptations. The Coffee Palace is now opened at five o'clock every morning, and working men who are early abroad can have their cup of coffee without the two pennyworth of rum, which is the usual infusion of the public-houses. All day long its rooms are at their command; but the great “music-hall” is reserved for religious services. The rector of the parish was present at the opening meeting, when the hall was crowded with two thousand people, and expressed his deepest regret that he had not had the honour to stand forth at an earlier period and take part in this work, which filled him now with thankfulness and wonder. The following inscription is emblazoned across the wall of the principal coffee-room: “The 'Edinburgh Castle,' formerly used as a Gin Palace and Concert Room, was opened on Friday, Feb. 14th, 1873, as a Working Man's Club and Coffee Palace, by the Right Hon. the Earl of Shaftesbury.”

Prepared for the web by Rob & Michelle Bradshaw, April 2012.

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