THOMAS ARCHER

ABOUT MY FATHER'S BUSINESS

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Thomas Archer
About My Father's Business / Work Amidst the Sick, the Sad, and the Sorrowing

THE RARITY OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY

Would it not be useful to ask ourselves the question whether we are forgetting the true meaning of "charity" in the constant endeavour to take advantage of organized benevolent institutions, about the actual working of which we concern ourselves very little? As the years go on, and what we call civilisation advances, are we or are we not losing sight of "our neighbour" in a long vista of vicarious benefactions, bestowed through the medium of a subscription list, or casual contributions at an "anniversary festival?"

At the speeches that are made on such occasions, when the banquet is over, and the reading of the amounts subscribed is accompanied by the cracking of nuts and a crescendo or decrescendo of applause, in proportion to the liberality of the donors, we are so frequently reminded of "the good Samaritan," that we begin to feel that we may claim some kind of relationship to him; and may shake our heads with solemn sorrow at the inexcusable conduct of the priest and the Levite. It would be worth while, however, to ask ourselves whether we quite come up to the mark of him who, finding the man wounded and helpless by the wayside, dismounted that he might convey the sufferer to the nearest inn; poured out oil for his wounds and wine for his cheer; left him with money in hand for the supply of his immediate needs; and did not scruple – with a robust and secure honesty – even to get into debt on his behalf: since the crown of good-will would be the coming again to learn of the patient's welfare. The debt was a pledge of the intention.

That was the Lord Christ's way of looking at charitable responsibility, and at benevolent effort; and even granting that He illustrated the answer to the question, "Who is my neighbour?" by an extreme case of sudden distress, the longer we look at the peculiar needs of the man who was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho, the more perhaps we shall be convinced that there are greater, far greater evils, and more terrible accidents, than to fall among thieves, who temporarily rob, strip, and disable their victim.

The present fashion of dealing with such an unfortunate traveller would very much depend on which particular class of philanthropists the modern Samaritan who found him by the road-side happened to belong to.

Of course, it would be a scandal to our Christianity to follow either priest or Levite, although our cowardly sympathies might lie between the two; so, in order to make all safe, we hit on a compromise, and, according to our circumstances, try to find a medium line of conduct between Samaritan and Levite, or Samaritan and priest. We are ashamed to pass on without doing something, and so we call at the inn on our way, and leave the twopence there, in case anybody else should think fit to bring on the man who is lying, stunned and bleeding, in the roadway. Or else, having contrived to rouse the poor fellow to a little effort, we borrow an ass and take him back with us, to find some organised institution for the relief of those who fall among thieves, where the wine and oil are contracted for out of the funds. And there we leave him, without remembering anything whatever about the twopenny contribution which would represent our own share in the benefaction.

It is an awful thought, and one which it may be hoped will soon become intolerable, that, with the mechanical perfection of means for relieving the necessities of those who are afflicted, there seems to grow upon us a deadly indifference to the very deepest need of all – that personal, human sympathy, without which all our boast of benevolence is but as the sounding of brass and the tinkling

of a cymbal. Can it be possible that we are approaching a condition when, refusing to have the poor and the afflicted, the widow and the orphan always with us, we shut them away out of our sight, leaving the whole duty of visiting them, of clothing them, of giving them meat and drink, to be done by an official committee; a charitable board, distributing doles, exactly calculated, on a carefully devised scale, and divided to the ounce or the inch, in supposed proportion to the individual need of each recipient? Will there ever come a time when we shall persuade ourselves that we fulfil the law of Christ by paying so much in the pound for a charity rate, and leaving all the actual "relief" to be effected by an official department, or a series of official committees?

The present aspect of charitable administration would be truly appalling if this were likely to be the result, for there are far too many evidences of that deadly indifference which will get rid of all real personal responsibility by paying a subscription, and will pay handsomely, too, at the same time smiling grimly, and half satirically, at the recollection that there are a number of people who always have on hand "cases," of whom they are anxious to rid themselves by placing them in any institution that will receive them without payment.

Let it not be imagined that these latter words of mine are intended to apply to those workers among the poor, who, with small means of their own, cannot do much more than speak words of advice and comfort, and give their earnest help to better the condition of sordid homes and of neglected children. There are scores of true, tender-hearted women who, spending much time amongst the sick and the afflicted, feel their hearts sink within them as they see how much more might be done, if they had but the wherewithal to appease the actual physical needs of those to whom they try to come spiritually near.

If but the miracle so easy to others were first performed, and the five thousand fed, then indeed might follow that still greater miracle, the earnest listening of the once turbulent multitude to the words of the Bread of Life.

But there are those who pursue what they regard as "charitable work" as an excitement – an amusement – just as children are sometimes set to play with Scripture conversation cards, and puzzles out of the Old Testament, with a kind of feeling that the employment comes nearly to a religious exercise. There is as much danger of these persons missing the true work of charity as there would be in the employment of paid officials – indeed, the latter would have one advantage; they would be less likely to be imposed upon by those who to obtain some special advantage would cringe and flatter.

The first great difficulty in visiting and temporarily relieving the lower class of destitute poor, is to disabuse their minds of an inveterate notion that the benevolent visitor and distributor is paid by some occult society, of which the recipients of bounty know nothing, and for which they care very little. Unfortunately, the sharp determined amateur visitor, who "does a district" as other people with leisure do a flower show or a morning concert – but, alas! these very words of mine show how common is that lack of true charity of which I designed to speak. Who am I that I should sum up the disposition and the heart of my brother or my sister? Only I would say that this suspicion on the part of the ignorant poor, which is so often complained of – the notion that their interviewers are paid for the work of charity – can only yield to the conviction that the work itself is undertaken with warm living human sympathy. Before the true relief shall come to any man, it must come by faith. "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness," and *in* righteousness also.

The two tendencies that are driving us away from charity to a kind of selfish economy, are the habit of "relieving our overcharged susceptibilities by secreting a guinea," and thinking we have thereby fulfilled the claims of religion and humanity, and the practice of going about seeking where we may find candidates for other people's guineas, and so becoming a kind of charitable detectives, with an eye to reputation and advancement in the force.

We are forgetting that heartfelt sympathy, that clasp of the hand and beam of the eye which will make even a cup of cold water a benefaction, if we have no more to give, or if the need goes no further than a refreshing draught, that shall be turned from water into wine by the power of loving

fellowship. Or we may be saying, "Be ye clothed, and be ye fed," trusting to some other hand to do the necessary work, without having ourselves first wrought for the means of taking our part in it, either by a deep personal interest in the relieving institution or in the destitute recipient.

"Yet one thing thou lackest," – even though out of thy great possessions a large proportion is given to the poor; "follow thou me." "Go about doing good," do not think to have fulfilled the law without love – that which you call charity; the mere *giving*– is but to offer a stone when bread is required of you, unless it be done with love in your heart – personal, human, and therefore Divine love. "If ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?" Use the benefits of institutions – even though you use them only for others – as you would use your own property. Recommend only cases that are known to you to be worthy and necessitous, and, should the institution depend on voluntary support, let a contribution accompany your "case," if you can any way afford it, as an act of justice as well as of mercy.

Don't join in the traffic in votes, and never go begging for "proxies," in order to have an exchangeable stock on hand, that you may secure a candidate for any particular institution. This kind of gambling is a cancer that is eating the heart out of genuine, pure, charitable effort, and is making way for the cold impersonal system of distribution, which is now being advocated by those who would make the relief of human wretchedness and distress a mechanical organisation without the soul of love. At the same time, let us not forget that no charitable effort which would be efficacious in affording relief to the widely-spread distress by which we are surrounded, could be even so much as attempted without associations established for the express purpose of relieving particular forms of suffering. This, indeed, is the glory of our country, that humanity is so strong among us as to lead us not only to combine, but to emulate. The absolute concentration and centralization of charitable effort would be a calamity. The breaking up of the best of our institutions, which have grown from small beginnings in almsgiving into wide and influential centres of benevolent effort, would be destruction.

If anything that may be written hereafter concerning some representative (large and small, but still truly representative) efforts to do the work that Christianity demands as its first evidence of reality, should lead to a deeper and wider personal interest in their behalf, it will be matter for rejoicing. The larger the number of people who ask what is being done, the greater will be the desire to continue the good work, or to declare it. The attention that might in this way be directed to the mode of affording relief would exercise so keen an influence in the reformation of abuses, and the adoption of improvements, that all our charities would soon become truly "public." With the more earnest conviction of the duty of personal inquiry, and real sympathetic interest in the individual well-being of our poorer brother or sister, would come the satisfaction that we belonged to an association, or to a chain of associations, which will afford to him or to her the very relief which otherwise we should despair of securing.

I purpose in another chapter to ask you to read the story of an institution that was in its day wonderfully illustrative, and even now serves to take us back for two centuries of history. Only yesterday I was speaking to some of its inmates. One of them had nearly completed her own century of life, most of them had seen far more than the threescore years and ten which we call old age; but they come of a wonderful race, the men of fire and steel; the women of silent suffering – the old Huguenots of France.

WITH THE CHILDREN OF THE STRANGER

A hundred and eighty-seven years ago a French army invaded England and effected a landing at various places on the coast. Smaller divisions of that army had previously obtained a footing in some of the chief towns of Great Britain; and for about fifty years afterwards other contingents arrived at intervals to find the compatriots settled among the people, who had easily yielded to their address and courage, and by that time were apparently contented to regard them as being permanently established in the districts of which they had taken possession. The strange part of the story is, that for a large part of this time England was successfully engaged in war with the country of the invaders, and not only with that country, but with a discarded prince of its own, who, having received assistance from France, strove to regain the throne which he had abdicated by raising civil war in Ireland. Then was to be seen a marvellous thing. A detachment of the French army of occupation in England went with King William to the Boyne, and when the mercenaries who were at the back of James in his miserable enterprise came forth to fight, they beheld the swords of their countrymen flash in their faces, and heard a well-known terrible cry, as a band of veteran warriors cut through their ranks, fighting as they had been taught to fight in the Cevennes and amidst the valleys and passes of Languedoc. For the army that invaded England in 1686, and for four or five years afterwards, was the army of the French Huguenots, against whom the dragoons of Louis XIV. and the emissaries of Pope and priests had been let loose after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

Four hundred thousand French Protestants had left their country during the twenty years previous to the revocation of that pact, which had been renewed after the siege of Rochelle, and though the attempt to escape from the country was made punishable by the confiscation of property and perpetual imprisonment in the galleys, six hundred thousand persons contrived to get out of France, and found asylums in Flanders, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, and England, after the persecutions were resumed.

Comparatively few of the men who came in the second emigration had fought for the religion that they professed. They had learned to endure all things, and with undaunted courage many of them had suffered the loss of their worldly goods, the burning of their houses, hunger, poverty, and the imprisonment of their wives and daughters in distant fortresses, because they would not forswear their faith. Hundreds of their companions were at the galleys, hundreds more had been tortured, mutilated, burned, broken on the wheel. Women as well as men endured almost in silence the fierce brutalities of a debased soldiery, directed by priests and fanatics, who had, as it were, made themselves drunk with blood, and seemed to revel in cruelty. With a resolution that nothing seemed able to abate, pastors like Claude Brousson went from district to district, living they knew not how, half famished, in perpetual danger, and with little expectation of ultimately escaping the stake or the rack. Nay, they refused to leave the country, while in the woods and wildernesses of the Gard great congregations of their brethren awaited their coming, that they might hold services in caves and "in the desert," as they called that wild country of the Cevennes and of Lozére. These men were non-resistants. They met with unflinching courage, but without arms. Those of them who remained in France stayed to see the persecutions redoubled in the attempt to exterminate the reformed faith. They were the truest vindicators of the religion that they professed. Up to the time of the siege of Rochelle, and afterwards, Protestantism was represented by a defensive sword, but these men discarded the weapons of carnal warfare. Only some years later, when the persecutors (rioting in the very insanity of wrath because their declaration that Protestantism was abolished was falsified by constant revivals of the old Huguenot worship) directed utter extermination of the Vaudois, did the grandeur of the non-resisting principle give way before the desperation of men who came to the conclusion that, if they were to die, they might as well die fighting.

It must be remembered that some of them knew well how to fight. Some of their leaders – men of peace as they were, and men of an iron determination, which was shown in the obstinacy with which they refused to take up the sword – had come of stern warriors and were *Frenchmen*– Norman Frenchmen – Protestant Norman Frenchmen. A rare combination that; – cold hard steel and fire.

But it was not till some time afterwards that these men became the leaders of the peasantry, the chestnut-fed mountaineers who came down from their miserable huts and joined what had then become an organised army of insurrection. Before this time arrived a strange aberration seemed to move the people. The old simple non-resisting pastors had been done to death by torture and execution, and the people met, it is true, but often met amid the ruin of their homes, or in desert places, and as sheep having no shepherd. Then a wild hysterical frenzy appeared among them. Men, women, and even children claimed to be inspired, and at length fanaticism leaped into retaliation. On a Sunday in July, 1702, a wild mystic preacher, named Séguier went down with a band of about fifty armed men to release the prisoners. They were confined in dungeons beneath the house of one Chayla, a priest, who directed the prosecutions, and invented the tortures which he caused to be inflicted for the conversion of heretics. The Protestants broke open his door, forced the prison, and ultimately set fire to the house, in attempting to escape from which Chayla was recognised and killed. This was the beginning of a series of retaliations by the tormented people, the success of which changed the whole attitude of the Protestants of the district. They had formerly endured in silence; now they were desperate enough for insurrection. And the insurrection followed. Séguier was captured, maimed, and burnt alive; but others took his place. The war of the "Camisards" had commenced. Then it was that the leaders of the Protestant army in the Cevennes arose; – Roland and Cavalier, and the men who for a long time waged successful warfare against the royal forces, till defeat came accompanied by a new *régime*.

The rumbling of the revolutionary earthquake was already shaking the throne and the persecuting church. Voltaire, educated by the Jesuits, and hating religion, was helping to deliver the martyrs of the Protestant faith even before he began to "philosophise."

The struggle of the Camisards can only be said to have ceased when the persecutions were nearly at an end, and France itself was tottering. But what of that great Huguenot contingent which had invaded Britain, and was growing in number year by year as the *émigrés*, leaving houses and land, shops, warehouses, and factories, fled across the frontier, or got down to the shore, and came over the sea in fishing-boats and other small craft, in which they took passage under various disguises, or were stowed away in the holds, or packed along with bales of merchandise, to escape the vigilance of the emissaries who were set to watch for escaping Protestants? It is a little significant that of these non-combatant Protestants eleven regiments of soldiers were formed in the English army; but the truth is that of the vast number of *émigrés* who left France, some 30,000 were trained soldiers and sailors, and doubtless a proportion of these came to England, though probably fewer than those of their number who served in the Low Countries. At any rate, in 1687, two years after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, there arrived in England 15,500 refugees, some of whom brought with them very considerable property, and most of them were men of education, or skilled in the knowledge of the arts, or of those manufactures and handicrafts which are the true wealth of a nation. At Norwich and Canterbury they quickly formed communities which became prosperous, and helped the prosperity of the districts, where they set up looms, and dyeworks, and other additions to the local industries. In London they formed two or three remarkable colonies, so that when Chamberlain wrote his "Survey of London," there were about twenty French Protestant churches, the greater number of which stood in Shoreditch, Hoxton, and Spitalfields – in fact, above 13,000 emigrants had settled in or near the metropolis. The one French Protestant church founded by Edward VI. was, of course, inadequate to receive them, and their immediate necessities were so great that a collection was made for their relief, and a sum of 60,000*l.* was by this means obtained in order to alleviate their distress.

Among these *émigrés* were many noblemen and gentlemen of distinction, who, with their wives, were reduced to extreme poverty by the confiscation of their property. These had learned no trade, but with characteristic courage many of them set themselves to acquire the knowledge of some craft by which they might earn their bread, while some of their number learned of their wives to make pillow-lace, and so continued to support themselves in decent comfort.

To those who knew the "old French folk," as they came to be called in after years, when the later emigration had again increased the number of the weavers' colony in Spitalfields, nothing was more remarkable than the cheerfulness, one might almost say the gaiety, that distinguished them. Reading the account given by French writers of the old Huguenots in France, one might be disposed to regard them as stern and sour sectaries, but that would be a very erroneous opinion. Perhaps the sudden freedom to which they came, the rest of soul, and the opportunity to endeavour to serve God with a quiet mind raised them to a tranquil happiness which revived the national characteristic of light-heartedness; but however it may have been, the real genuine old French weaver of Spitalfields and Bethnal Green was a very courteous, merry, simple, child-like gentleman. The houses in which these people lived, some of which are still to be seen with their high-pitched roofs and long leaden casements, were very different to the barely-furnished, squalid places in which their descendants of to-day are to be found; and, indeed, the Spitalfields weaver even of seventy years ago was usually a well-to-do person; while in the old time he could take "Saint Monday" every week, wear silver crown-pieces for buttons on his holiday coat, and put on silk stockings on state occasions. This was in the days when French was still spoken in many of the little parlours of houses that stood within gardens gay with sweet-scented blooms of sweet-william, ten-weeks-stock, and clove-pink. When there was still an embowered greenness in "Bednall," and Hare Street Fields were within a stone's throw of "Sinjun" – St. John, or rather St. Jean Street, – or of the little chapel of "*La Patente*," in Brown's Lane, Spitalfields. Even in later times than that, however, I can remember being set up to a table, and shown how to draw on a slate, by an old gentleman with a face streaked like a ruddy dried pippin. I was just old enough to make out that the tea-table talk was in a strange tongue; but I can remember that there were evidences of the refinements that the old refugees had brought with them across the sea. Not only in their neat but spruce attire, in their polite grace to women, in their easy, good-humoured play and prattle to little children, in their cultivation of flowers, their liking for birds, and their taste for music, but in a score of trifling objects about their tidy rooms, where the click of the shuttle was heard from morning to night, these old French folk vindicated their birth and breeding. By tea-services of rare old china, rolls of real "point" lace, a paste buckle, an antique ring, a fat, curiously-engraved watch, a few gem-like buttons, delicately-coloured porcelain and chimney ornaments; by books and manuscript music, or by flute and fiddle deftly handled in the playing of some old French tune, these people expressed their distinction without being aware of it. It has not even yet died out. Unfortunately, many of their descendants – representatives of a miserably paid, and now nearly superseded industry – have deteriorated by the influences of continued poverty; and even so long ago as the evil war-time of Napoleon I., many of the old families anglicised their names in deference to British hatred of the French, but there are still a large number of people in the eastern districts of London whose names, faces, and figures alike proclaim their origin.

But we must go back once more to the time when the great collection was made. It is at least gratifying to know that the £60,000 soon increased to £200,000, and was afterwards called the "Royal Bounty," though Royalty had nothing to do with it during that reign. In 1686-7 about 6000 persons were relieved from this fund, and in 1688 27,000 applicants received assistance, while others had employment found for them, or were relieved by more wealthy *émigrés* who had retained or recovered some part of their possessions. But there were still aged and sick people, little children, widows, orphans, broken men, homeless women, and lonely creatures who had become almost imbecile or insane through the cruelties and privations that they had suffered. For these a refuge was necessary,

and at length – but not till 1708 – an institution was founded in St. Luke's, under the name of the French Hospital, but better known to the "old folks" as the "Providence."

Of what it was and is I design to tell in another chapter.

WITH THE CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

That great invading French army of nobles, gentry, artists, traders, handicraftsmen, of which some account has already been given, was added to from time to time, even as lately as the Revolution, and the restoration of the dynasty after the downfall of Napoleon, when a strange reaction against the Protestants was commenced, partly as a pretence for concealing political animosity. The department of the Gard was once more the scene of horrible atrocities, against which Lord Brougham invoked the aid of the English Parliament, and obtained the help of Austrian bayonets to protect the people, who were being murdered, tortured, or outraged, in defiance of feeble local authorities. But by this time there was a new generation of the first great Anglo-French colony in London. Spitalfields had grown to the dimensions of a township. Bethnal had begun to lose its greenness. There was, as there still is, a remarkable settlement about Soho. "Petty France" was as well known as the exhibition of needlework in Leicester Square, or Mrs. Salmon's wax figures in Fleet Street.

Those poor refugees who fled to escape from the horrors of Sainte Guillotine, or the ruthless cruelties at Nismes, came to brethren many of whom had never seen the glowing valleys and golden fields of Languedoc, whence their forefathers escaped only with life and hands to work. They had preserved their national characteristics; they attended churches and chapels where the pastors still spoke their native tongue, and where they had established schools for their children; but they had settled down to a quiet, though a busy life, in the heart of the great workshop of the world, and only a few of them – principally the gentry, some of whom had regained a portion of their property – felt frequent or urgent impulses to return. More than a hundred and twenty years had elapsed since the "Royal Bounty" had been expended in the relief of the 27,000 *émigrés* who yet were without any permanent refuge for the destitute, the sick, the aged, and the insane among their number. This was in 1688, and it was not till nearly twenty-eight years afterwards that any regular institution was organized. The earlier refugees had become aged or had died, after having obtained such temporary help as could be afforded by subscriptions or the large benefactions of their more wealthy fellow-countrymen. Still, the later emigrations increased the number of applicants for permanent relief. At last, in 1718, a great concourse of French refugees assembled in a chapel which formed a special portion of a building only just completed, but which had already received the dignity of forming the subject of a Royal charter granted by His Majesty King George I. to his "right trusty and right well-beloved" cousin, Henry de Massue, Marquis de Ruvigny, Earl of Galloway, and a number of trusty and well-beloved gentlemen, all naturalized refugees, who made the first governor and directors of the "Hospital for Poor French Protestants and their descendants residing in Great Britain;" otherwise known as the French Hospital, but soon to be spoken of with simple pathetic brevity as "La Providence."

The idea of founding such a charity was due to a distinguished refugee in Holland – no less a personage than M. de Gastigny, Master of the Hounds to Prince William of Orange; a ruddy, jovial-looking gentleman withal, whose portrait, should you go to see it, will set you wondering whether he could ever have been classed among the "sour sectaries" to whom it was the fashion to attribute a disregard of social pleasures. A bequest of a thousand pounds sterling from the bluff keeper of the kennels was to be divided into equal sums – £500 for the building, and the interest of the remaining £500 to be spent on its maintenance.

Not a very adequate provision, truly, for any such purpose; but sufficiently suggestive to set the more prosperous members of the great Anglo-French colony to increase the amount. The astute Master of the Hounds must surely have foreseen this result when he left this legacy to the management of the trustees of the already existing relief fund, still miscalled "the Royal Bounty." They exhibited that prudence in money matters which is a French characteristic, and let the thousand pounds accumulate for eight years, after which a general subscription was invited from successful merchants and traders, while with a just appreciation of the benefits which had been conferred by

these good citizens on the land of their adoption, some wealthy Englishmen added their contributions to the general fund.

Thus it came about, that a piece of land was purchased in the Golden Acre – a queer old half-countrified precinct of St. Giles, Cripplegate – that a building was erected for the reception of eighty poor persons, that a charter was granted, and that the new charitable association was consecrated in the new chapel by Philippe Menard, the minister of the French Church of St. James's and secretary of the enterprise.

This was, indeed, something worth working for. The aged or afflicted poor among the refugees were no longer mere mendicants living on precarious alms. Out of their abundance the more prosperous gave cheerfully. In 1736 another adjoining site was purchased, and another side of the great open quadrangle of garden ground was built upon, so that by 1760 the "Providence" numbered 230 inmates. This, however, was its culminating point of usefulness. Religious persecution had diminished, and at length may be said to have ceased altogether. Even as early as 1720 only 5000 persons required relief from the "Bounty," so that eventually the trustees were enabled to devote part of it to the assistance of those who fled from the Revolution – many of whom were the descendants of those who had been the persecutors of the Protestants. The great industrial colony, prudent, temperate, and industrious, had almost grown beyond its earlier needs – and all that it required was that some adequate provision should be made for infirm or aged men and women, who being widowed or unmarried, and without means of support, required a refuge in which they might peacefully end their days. The same causes which had diminished the number of applicants had also reduced the amount of current subscriptions, so that some portion of the building was removed, as being no longer necessary, and in order to secure a sufficient endowment an Act of Parliament was obtained, empowering the directors to let their land on building leases. By that time the neighbourhood was known not as "the Golden Acre," but as St. Luke's, and on the ground once purchased by the Marquis de Ruvigny and his trusty and well-beloved companions, grew Radnor Street, Galway Street, Gastigny Place, and part of Bath Street, while the number of inmates was reduced to sixty – that is to say, about twenty men and forty women, all of whom were to be above sixty years of age, of French extraction, and professing the Protestant religion. It was a queer old range of building, that retreat; pleasant enough, perhaps, when as a rather blank series of red brick houses, it looked across its own formal walled garden to the pleasant fields and open country, but strangely silent, and with a crumbling, dreary look about it, when the lunatic asylum of St. Luke's dominated all the surrounding tenements of a crowded, sordid neighbourhood. Only the initiated could easily find the little low black door that opened in the bare wall, and led to the large irregular space, which was laid out in weedy beds and stony borders, distinguished by an air of decay rather than of production – especially where in certain dank corners a tangle of sapless stalks and tendrils indicated some faintly hopeful attempt to rear an arbour, in which persons of robust imagination might fancy they were sheltered from impending blacks that issued from the manufactory chimneys close by. The visitor to this out-of-the-way corner of the great city, seeing the old people walking up and down the paved causeway in front of the row of crooked-paned lower windows, or airing themselves at the doorsteps, might be excused for the fancy that they had the imaginative faculty of children; and were expected to "make believe" a good deal before they could quite reconcile themselves to the notion that this dingy area of quadrilateral plots and paths, in which the wet stood in small puddles, was ever a "pleasaunce" gay with garden blooms, and smelling of knotted marjoram and fragrant thyme. Yet there were still evidences of the invincible cheerfulness of the old French nature, among the old creatures with faces streaked like winter apples, and hands which, even though they trembled, were swift of gesture and of emphasis.

There were old fellows there who had still about them indications of true comeliness and grace that distinguished them from all vulgar surroundings; – ancient gentlemen, who would go out on wet days to sweep away any rainpools that might lie before the doors of the old ladies, and so besmirch an otherwise immaculate shoe. It should be remembered, too, that there was no livery there. Those who

had some one to help them to the garb of gentility wore what pleased them; those who were dependent on the charity for clothing, were neither bound in one pattern, nor condemned to the uniform of poverty. Neat or lively cotton prints, or warm stuff gowns, with proper hose and caps and kerchiefs, for the women; plain Oxford mixture, black, steel grey, or brown, for the men, and each one measured for his suit. Those who entered there were not the recipients of a dole grudgingly conceded. It was no poorhouse, but the "Providence." Only eleven years ago there were some evidences of the old meaning of the place in the remnants of the antique furniture which adorned the queer rooms. They were not wards or dormitories, but veritable bedrooms; and each one had its own peculiarities, even in the bedsteads with spindle posts and dimity hangings, the boxes and cupboards, and special chairs which distinguished it from the rest. Some of these things had evidently been heirlooms either of the institution or of the individual; and, indeed, the preservation of individuality was a cheerful feature of the place, despite its dim and somewhat dreary surroundings.

The Board Room was, in its way, one of the most extraordinary apartments in London: with its tables supported by a tangled puzzle of legs, its high-backed, polished chairs with leather seats, worn till they reminded one of the cover of an antique ledger bound in unfinished calf; its wonderful old black-framed prints representing the meetings of the Huguenots in the Clerk's field in the times when men and women carried their lives in their hands, and dragoons rode congregations down and slashed them with sabres as they fell. Its dimly-seen portraits of the noble, broad-browed, dark-eyed Ruvigny (the first governor), who refused to go back to France even at the invitation of the King; of the gentle Pastor Menard, with high, capacious forehead, and calm, strong mien; of hale, shrewd, ruddy Gastigny; and of some men of later date, with Frenchman written in every line of their finely-marked faces.

The little room set apart as a chapel – a barely-furnished place enough, with desk and raised platform and plain seats – was venerable because of all the meaning that lay in its studied absence of all ornament, and because of the significance it must once have had to the sad-eyed men who crowded into it, some of them thinking, perhaps, how it had come about that they could stand there in peace and without a hand upon the hilt of a sword.

There were, even at that later time, old men and women in the dim old building who could repeat family legends of the emigration – for they lived to a great age, these French folk, many of them being still alert of eye and ear, and foot, even though they had heard the click of the shuttle and the rattle of the loom eighty years before.

Some of them have survived the old place itself; for while they are in a new home, the ancient building has changed, if even it be not altogether dismantled. The leases paid good interest, and eight years ago a new French hospital arose – away from the dingy old precinct of the Golden Acre.

To see this later "Providence" aright, you must come through the very heart of that neighbourhood which was once the great Silk Colony, thread the bye-ways of Poverty Market, note the tall silent houses where the looms no longer rattle, nor the sharp whirr of the shuttle stirs cage-birds to sing; pass across the debatable land lying on the edge of Shoreditch, where human beings live in sties built in the backyards of other houses, in streets that are still with the blank silence of misery and want. You should walk amidst pigeon and dog fanciers; call in at certain dingy, slipshod taverns, where at night a slouching company will meet to hear bullfinches pipe for wagers, and where starving men and women stand and drink away the pence that are all too few to buy food for the starving brood at home, and so are flung upon the sloppy counter in exchange for the drugged drink that feels like food and fire in one. Through Bethnal Green, with its "townships" and its "Follies," extending in sordid rows of tenements built to one dreary pattern. Over districts which, only a few years ago, were fields and open spaces, leading to farm lands and hedgerows, and so away to the great expanse of marsh land where the dappled kine wade knee-deep in the lush pastures, and the stunted pollards stand like patient fishermen upon the river's brink.

Yes, the present "French Hospital" – New Providence – was built ten years ago in the borderland beyond the Weavers' Garden, that great garden and pleasure-ground known as Victoria Park. It is the only garden left to the descendants of those old craftsmen who once dwelt in houses every one of which had its gay plot of flowers, its rustic arbour, or its quaint device of grotto-work, built up of oddly-shaped stones and pearl-edged oyster-shells. Do you think there is now no remnant of the old French folk left? Come for a stroll among the grand beds and plantations of this East-end playground, and you shall see. On holidays and alas! on those days when (to use the expressive term handed down from prosperous times) the weaver is "at play" – that is to say, waiting for woof and weft, and so wiling away the sad and often hunger-bringing hours – you will see him, with his keen well-cut face, his dark appreciative eye, his long delicate hands, his well-brushed, threadbare coat and hat; and the mark of race is plainly to be noted in his intensity of look and his subdued patient bearing. He comes of a stock which had it not been of the hardiest and the most temperate and enduring in the world, would have disappeared a century ago. On Sunday mornings, when the bells are sounding round about him, he is to be met with lingering (with who shall say what inner sense of worship) by the strange shrubs and flowering plants, or standing with a pathetic look of momentary satisfaction on his lean, mobile face, to mark the rare glow and gush of colour made by the blooms in a "ribbon" device of flowers on a sunny border by a dark background of cedar. But come and see what his forefathers might have called, in their Scripture phraseology, "the remnant of the children of Israel;" the old inmates of that French Hospital founded so long ago when De Ruvigny was the "beloved cousin" of George I., and Philippe Menard preached at St. James's; when the Duchess de la Force brought donation after donation to the work, and Philippe Hervart, Baron d'Huningue gave £4,000, all in one splendid contribution, to the building fund. Could they have seen (who knows that they have not?) this great French château rising beyond the park palings in a neighbourhood fast filling with houses, but still open to the air that blows from the Weavers' Garden and from the great expanse of land leading towards the forest, they would have recognised the familiar style of those grand mansions which in France succeeded the castles of the feudal nobility when Henry Quatre was king. The high-pointed roof with its irregularly picturesque lines, the quaint towers and spires, the slate blue and purple, and rosy tints of colour in slope and wall and gable; the various combinations of form and hue changing with every point of view, make this modern copy of the old French château a wonderful feature in any landscape, and the unaccustomed visitor seeing it as it stands there in its own ornamental ground, surrounded by a quaint wall decorated in coloured bands, wonders what can be the meaning of a building so full of suggestion; while if he be of an imaginative turn, he may fall into a daydream when he peers through the gate that stands by the porter's lodge.

But let us pass through this gate, and so up to the entrance-hall, and we shall seem to leave behind us not only the Weavers' Garden, but most things English. The hall itself, paved with encaustic tile, leads to a flight of broad, shallow steps, beneath an arched ceiling of variegated brick and two screen arches. These steps conduct us at once to a central corridor, extending for the entire length of the building, and rising to the greatest height of the open roof of timber with its lofty skylights. In front of us is a double stone staircase, one branch being for the old ladies, the other for the men; and immediately at the foot of the former division is the entrance to the refectory, a large handsome dining-hall, where, at two long tables, this wonderful company assemble, only the very infirm having their meals carried to the upper ward, where they are waited on by paid attendants. Separate staircases are provided for the servants of the establishment, whose rooms are in the tower above the main wards – or rather, let us say, principal apartments, for they are not so much wards as a series of twenty-two large bedrooms, linen-rooms, and two bath-rooms. The steward of the hospital, a venerable gentleman with the courteous air and speech of some seneschal of olden time, has also his own apartments, reached by a third stair, his sitting-room and office occupying a space close to the entrance. On the right of the main staircase and at the end of the corridor is the ladies' sitting-room, a fine high-windowed light and lofty place, admirably warmed, as indeed all the building is, and so furnished

that at each large square table four old ladies can sit and have not only ample space for books or needlework, but on her right hand each can open a special separate table-drawer with lock and key, wherein to keep such waifs and strays – shreds, patches, skeins, and unconsidered trifles – as children and old women like to accumulate. There is another day-room beside this, and a similar, though not quite so large an apartment is provided for the men, both rooms being furnished with sundry books and a few sober periodicals of the day.

It must not be forgotten though that many of the old gentlemen have grown accustomed to the use of tobacco, and here in the basement is a smoking-room, quite out of the way of the ordinary sitting and dining-rooms, and not far from the laundry and drying-rooms, which form an important part of the establishment.

But, hush! there is a hymn sounding yonder in the refectory; a hymn sung by voices, many of which are yet fresh and clear, though the singers number more than eighty years of life, and of life that has often been hard and full of heaviness.

It is the grace before meat, and the hot joints, with the fresh vegetables from their own garden, have just come up from the big kitchen by means of a lift to the serving-room.

There are no servants to wait at table, and the family dinner-party is a private one, inasmuch as it is the custom here for the most active of the inmates to agree among themselves who shall be butler, or *beaufetière*, for each day during the week. So the dinner-time goes pleasantly and quickly, the meat, the vegetables, and the capital household beer, of which each man has a pint twice a day, and each woman half a pint, being the only articles that require serving.

The good old-fashioned family custom of everybody having his or her own teapot is observed here. A great gas-boiler stands on one side the refectory, and a row of convenient lockers on the other; and each inmate has tea and coffee from the stores, while bread and butter are also served out for consumption according to each individual fancy, and not in rations at each meal time. Thus those old ladies and gentlemen who have spending money, or friends to bring them some of the little luxuries that they so keenly appreciate, can add a relish to their breakfast or to the evening beer.

We will not go in while they are at dinner, for there are those here yet who "might have been gentlefolk" but for the mutability of mortal affairs. Stay! here come the old ladies, with old-fashioned curtseys, which are more than half a bow, and not a mere vulgar "bob." There is no mistaking some of their faces. You may see their like in French pictures, or in old French towns still. Some of them with eyes from which the fire had not yet died out; with deftly-moving fingers; with a quick, springy step; with an inherited remnant of the French *moue* and shrug, as they answer a gentle jest about their age and comeliness.

"Eighty-four; and I don't know how it is, but I don't seem to see so well in the dark as I used. When I went out to see my brother-in-law, I was quite glad he came part of the way home with me."

"Turned eighty, but I can't get upstairs as I used to do."

"You speak French, madame?"

"Pas beaucoup, monsieur;" this from one of the only two actual French women now in the establishment, the rest being lineal descendants only. The oldest, who is now going quietly and with a very pretty dignity out of the refectory, is ninety-four, and can not only hear a low-toned inquiry, but answers it in a soft, pleasant voice. She bears the weight of years bravely, but the burden has perhaps been heavy; and she speaks in a mournful tone, as one looking forward to a mansion among the many – to a house not made with hands, may sometimes speak when even the grasshopper becomes a burden.

As to a young person of sixty-five or thereabout, nobody regards her as having any real business to mention such a trifling experience of life; while of the men – most of whom seemed to have filed off for their pipe or newspaper – one remains finishing his dinner, for he has been on duty for the day, and is now winding up with a snack of bread-and-butter and the remainder of his mug of porter – a stoutly-built, hale, stalwart-looking gentleman who, sitting there without his coat, which hangs on the back of a chair, might pass for a retired master mariner, or a representative of some position

requiring no little energy and endurance. I fancy, for the moment that he must be an official appointed to serve or carve and employed on the establishment.

"Eighty-four," and one of the old weaving colony of Bethnal Green.

There can be no mistake about it. Every inmate provides certificates and registers enough to make the claim undoubted; and as to the right by descent, half the people here carry it in their faces, and to the initiated, are as surely French, as they are undoubtedly weavers.

The morning here begins with family prayers, which the steward reads from a desk in the refectory, and so the day closes also. The Sunday services are in the chapel, and such a chapel! To those who remember the dim, barely-furnished room in the old building at St. Luke's, this gem of architectural taste and simple beauty at the end of the main corridor comes with no little surprise. Its beautiful carved stone corbels, mosaic floor, and charming ornamentation; its broad gallery entered immediately from the upper floor, so that the feeble and infirm may go to worship directly from their sleeping-rooms; its glow of subdued colour and sobered light from windows of stained glass; its simple decorations, and its spotless purity, are no less remarkable than the plainness which characterises the general effect. It is to be noticed, too, that there is no "altar," but "a table;" that neither at the back of the communion nor on the carving of the lectern, nor even in the windows, is there to be seen a cross. Where the Maltese cross would occur amidst the arabesques of the stained glass, we see the fleur-de-lis. French Protestantism, has perhaps, not yet lost its intense significance, at all events here, in this chapel where the service of the Church of England is observed, and an ordained clergyman ministers to the family of the children's children of the ancient persecuted people of Languedoc, the symbol under which the Protestants were burned and tortured and exiled has no place. This is probably in accordance with the traditions left by De Ruvigny, by Gastigny, by Menard, and by their successors, whose portraits still hang in the fine board-room of the new "Providence."

Of course, no contributions or subscriptions are now asked for to support this old French charity. With it are associated one or two gifts of money, such as that of Stephen Mounier for apprenticing two boys; and the bequest of Madame Esther Coqueau for giving ten shillings monthly to ten poor widows or maidens; but the directors do not seek for external aid. To the charity when it was first chartered was added a portion of the accumulations of the benefactions of the French Church at Norwich, and it may here be mentioned that at Norwich, where a contingent of the army of refugees had settled, the Society of Universal Goodwill was also established by Dr. John Murray, a good physician, who strove to extend to a large organisation a plan for relieving distressed foreigners. This was but ninety years ago, and it was less successful than its promoter desired, so that part of the funds accumulated were judiciously handed to another admirable society in London, of which I shall have something to say, "The Society of the Friends of Foreigners in Distress."

WITH THE STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

Do we ever try to realise the full meaning of the declaration that they who are afar off shall be made near by the blood of Christ? Surely it does not stop at the nearness to God by redemption, for the only true redemption is Christ-likeness, and nearness to God assumes nearness to each other in the exercise of that loving-kindness which is the very mark and evidence of our calling.

It would be well if we sometimes ceased to separate by our vague imaginations "the next world," or "the other world," from the present world, which is, perhaps in a very real sense, if we could only read the words spiritually, "the world to come" also; – as it is obvious that the world means the people around us – ourselves, those who are near and those who seem to be afar off; and no world to come that could dispense with our identity would be of any particular significance to us as human beings.

Let us then, for the present purpose, try to see how effectually Christ-likeness should bring near to us those who are afar off, by taking us near to them; how He who came not to destroy but to fulfil, looks to us to entertain strangers; and to "be careful" in the performance of that duty, as to Him who will say either, "I was a stranger, and ye took me in," or the reverse.

At the beginning of the present century, with the exception of the French Protestant organisation, there existed in London no established association for the relief of destitute foreigners who, having sought a refuge here, or being, as it were, thrown upon our shores, were left in distress, hunger, or sickness, – unheeded, only obtaining such temporary casual relief as a few charitable persons might afford, if by any chance their necessities were made known to them. At that time the foreign Protestant clergy, to whom alone many of these destitute men and women could apply for relief, were themselves mostly the poor pastors of congregations consisting either of refugees or of artisans and persons earning their livelihood by precarious labour connected with the lighter ornamental manufactures. The means at their disposal for charitable purposes outside their own churches were consequently very small, and they were unable to render any really effectual assistance, even if they could have undertaken, what would at that time have been the difficult task of verifying the needs for which relief was claimed.

Some attempt had already been made by Dr. John Murray, a good physician of Norwich, to extend to London the benefits of his "Society of Universal Goodwill;" but the scheme had been only partially successful. To him, however, the credit is due of having striven to give definite shape to an association which was afterwards to take up the good work of caring for strangers. The foreign Protestant clergy settled in London met to consider how they might best organise a regular plan for relieving the wants of those who had so often to apply to them in vain; and having settled the preliminaries, which were heartily approved by several foreign merchants, and others, who were willing to assist in any scheme that would include inquiry into the circumstances of those who sought assistance, called a public meeting in order to found a regular institution. This was on the 3rd of July, 1806, and the result of the appeal was the formation of the society of "The Friends of Foreigners in Distress." By the following April, a committee had been formed and the Charity was in working order, nor were funds long wanting with which to commence the work in earnest. The cases requiring relief were so numerous, however, and the demands on the society's resources were so constant, that though some large donations were afterwards obtained from senates, corporations, wealthy merchants, ambassadors, noblemen, and Royal benefactors, a considerable subscription list became necessary in order to enable the society to grant even partial relief to cases, the urgent claims of which were established by careful inquiry.

There is a wonderful suggestiveness in the list of "Royal Benefactors (deceased)," headed by his late Majesty King William IV., and her late Majesty the Queen Dowager Adelaide. More than one of the Royal donors themselves died in exile; and several of those who shared their misfortunes, and were their faithful followers, have shared the small benefits which the Society had to bestow.

"His late Majesty King Charles X. of France" contributed £300; "His late Majesty Louis Philippe," 100 guineas; the unfortunate Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico, £25; and his late Imperial Majesty Napoleon III., £50: while their Magnificencies the Senates of the Free German Towns, as well as the humbler companies of London's citizens, appear to have given liberally. Notwithstanding all this, however, the Society has not been able to retain funded property to any considerable amount, and it is to the annual subscription list – to which our Queen contributes £100, the Emperor of Germany £100, and the Emperor of Austria £100 – that the charity must look for support.

Unhappily there are evidences that these annual subscriptions are fewer than they should be. There seems still to be some reluctance on the part of the general public steadily to support an effort which has a very distinct and pressing claim upon Englishmen, who pride themselves, justly enough, upon the free asylum which this country affords to foreigners, and who appear ready to give largely in the way of occasional aid. The disparity between the number of handsome donations and of very moderate annual subscriptions is a painful feature of the Society's report, and even public appeals have hitherto been followed rather by increased applications from persons recommending cases for relief, *without accompanying the recommendation with a subscription*, than by any decided augmentation of the funds. The Friends of Foreigners in Distress are principally to be found amongst prosperous foreigners in London, and doubtless this is no less than just; but until larger aid is given by the English public, we have no particular reason to include this association in any boastful estimate of British charity.

That the committee does its work carefully, and that cases of distress are relieved only after due inquiry, and with no such careless hand as would encourage idle dependence or promote pauperism, is evident enough to anybody who will take the trouble to inquire into the method of assistance. Let us go and see.

Perhaps not one Londoner in a thousand could tell you offhand where to find Finsbury Chambers. It is probably less known even than Prudent Passage, or what was once Alderman's Walk; and may be said to be less attractive than either, for it is a dingy, frowsy, little out-of-the-way corner in that undecided and rather dreary thoroughfare – London Wall. It is, in fact, a space without any outlet, and looks as though it ought to have been a builder's yard, but that the builder took to erecting houses on it as a speculation which never answered, even though they were let out as "chambers;" that is to say, as blank rooms and sets of offices, the supposed occupiers whereof committed themselves to obscurity by causing their names to be painted on the doorposts, and leaving them there to fade till time and dirt shall wholly obliterate them.

And yet it is in one of these lower rooms, occupying the ground floor of No. 10, that a good work is going on; for here, in an office almost representatively bare and dingy even in that place, the Society of Friends of Foreigners in Distress holds its weekly meetings of directors, and the secretary, Mr. William Charles Laurie, or his assistant, Mr. C. P. Smith, gives daily attendance (Saturdays excepted), between eleven and one o'clock. Assuredly, the funds of the charity are not expended in luxurious appointments for its headquarters. Even a German commission agent just commencing business could scarcely have a more simply-furnished apartment. The objects which first strike the visitor's attention are a row of japanned tin candlesticks, meant for the use of the board at any of their Wednesday meetings which may be prolonged till after dusk. The furniture, if it was ever new, must have been purchased with a regard for economy in the very early history of the society. The work is evidently so organised as to require no long daily attendance. The place is furnished only according to the temporary necessities of business quickly dispatched. Neither in official salaries, nor in expensive official belongings, are the funds of the institution wasted.

The system is, in fact, simple enough, and is conducted on the principles laid down by the first meetings of the committee above seventy years ago, with one important exception. Formerly, applicants for relief must have been for some time resident in England; but changes in transit, and the more rapid intercommunication of nations, have made it necessary that some ready aid should be

granted to those who find themselves cast upon the terrible London wilderness without a friend to help them, ignorant to whom to apply for help, and little able even to make known their sufferings.

Every Wednesday, then, the directors meet for receiving applications for relief, and reports of cases that have been investigated by the Visiting Committee.

The plan adopted is to issue to the governors of the charity a number of small tickets, each of which, when signed and bearing the name of the applicant for relief, entitles the latter to apply to the weekly committee for an investigation of his case. Every subscriber of a guinea is regarded as a governor for a year, and there are, of course, life governors also. Both these are entitled to recommend cases either for what may be termed casual relief, or for election as pensioners to receive weekly assistance (of from 2*s.* to 5*s.*, and in cases of extreme old age or great infirmity, 7*s.* 6*d.* a week), sick allowances, or passage money to enable applicants to return to their own country.

It may easily be believed how a small weekly contribution will often save a destitute man or woman, or a poor family, from that utter destitution which would result from the inability to pay rent even for a single room; while in cases of sickness, the regular allowance even of a very trifling sum will enable many a poor sufferer to tide over a period of pain and weakness, during which earnings, already small, are either reduced or cease altogether.

In cases of urgent necessity four superintendents are appointed from the board of directors, with the power to grant immediate relief; and of course many applicants receive temporary assistance from the governor who recommends them, until their case is investigated by the committee, and they are on the list of the worthy and indefatigable "visitor."

After the expulsion of the Germans from Paris during the late war, that little dingy quadrangle in London Wall was filled with a strange crowd of lost and helpless foreigners, whose condition would admit of only a temporary inquiry, and indeed needed little investigation, since want and misery were written legibly enough in their faces. For a large number of these, passage money had to be paid, and the relief was continued till the press of refugees from France abated. There was a special subscription for the relief of these poor creatures, raised chiefly among German merchants living in London, and even now the Society has to extend a helping hand to some who still remain.

Any one wandering by accident into Finsbury Buildings on a Wednesday forenoon, would wonder what so many subdued and rather anxious-looking men were waiting about for in such an out-of-the-way locality – some of them leaning against the wall inside, others sitting in the bare room, just within the barer passage. Every one of these has had his circumstances carefully inquired into, and is in attendance to receive what may be called temporary relief. During the official year of my latest visit 150 homeward passages had been paid, and in the two years from 1871 to 1873 the number of persons who received relief was 21,333, who with their wives and families represented a considerable community of poverty. During the year 1,983 grants were made of sums varying from less than 10*s.* to 1,324 persons, 10*s.* to 431, 15*s.* to 47, £1 to 135, and so on to £5, which was allowed in a few instances, while sick allowances were granted in 292 cases. One important and suggestive feature of this excellent Society is that it numbers among its members not only subscribers to other charitable institutions, but members of the medical and legal professions, who frequently render their aid to applicants free of expense, in order either to relieve them from suffering, or to protect them from the errors or impositions to which their ignorance and helplessness might expose them.

There is no restriction either as regards creed or nationality, and though each case is matter for inquiry, the only persons disqualified for receiving relief are those who are detected as impostors – persons who are deemed to have sufficient support from any other source, those who cannot give a good reason for having come to this country, and proof of their having striven to obtain work and to labour for a maintenance, those who are proved to have been guilty of fraud or immoral practices, and beggars, or drunken, dissolute persons.

As regards the numbers of persons who have received relief since the institution was founded, there is the tremendous total of 21,645 applicants on behalf of 129,299 individuals. What an army

it represents! Of these Germany (which till recently included Austria, Hungary, and Bohemia) represents 71,913; Sweden and Norway, 9,422; Holland, 8,878; France, 7,339; Russia, 7,006; Italy, 5,415; Belgium, 4,578; Denmark, 4,215; the West Indies, 1,716; Switzerland, 1,685; and so on in a diminishing proportion till we come to "Central Africa!" – a very recent case, no doubt.

Can any one question the good that has been effected by an institution so careful not only to relieve with rigid economy, but also to do its work on so truly voluntary a principle? If the temporary and comparatively casual aid afforded to poor and destitute strangers works so beneficially, however, the pensions, to which only very extreme cases are elected, are even still more in the nature of help given to those who are ready to perish, Here are some specimen cases:

A watchmaker of Frankfort, seventy-four years old, and nearly seventy years in this country, disabled by paralysis, with a wife, who is a waistcoat maker, unable to compete with the sewing-machine; one son, twenty years old, who, having some small situation, lives with them, pays the rent, and "does what he can;" a boy of fourteen who works as an errand boy.

An Italian looking-glass maker, seventy-three years old, and fifty-three years in this country. Has lately lived by making light frames, but health and strength fail, and he is suffering from asthma. His wife, an Englishwoman, and aged sixty-six, works as a charwoman. He has two sons, each married and with large families, so that they can do nothing for him.

A French widow, sixty-seven years old, and thirty-two years in this country, and paralysed for the last thirteen years. Her only daughter who is in delicate health, earns her "living" by needlework, but can only gain enough for her own maintenance.

These are only three of the first cases in the official report of pensioners, and they are not selected because of their peculiarly distressing character. When it is remembered that this society has not, in a general way, sufficient means to grant more than *two shillings a week* in the way of relief, and when we take the trouble to observe that in the majority of cases where a pension is granted the recipients have been so long resident here that they may be said to have lost their nationality in ours, will it be too much to ask of England – alike the asylum for the persecuted and the teacher of liberty and of charity – that the "Friends of Foreigners in Distress" shall be regarded as the friends of all of us alike in the name of Him of whom it was said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

But I have not quite done with the pensioners. I must ask the reader to go with me to Lower Norwood, where amidst a strange solitude, that is almost desolation, we will visit three ladies of the *ancien régime*, one of whom, at least, began life nearly ninety years ago as a fitting playmate for the daughter of a king.

WITH THOSE WHO ARE LEFT DESOLATE

There is something about the aspect of Nature as seen from the railway station at Lower Norwood on a damp and misty day which, if not depressing, can scarcely be regarded as conducive to unusual hilarity. I speak guardedly because of my respect for the district, and lest I should in any way be suspected of depreciating any particular locality as an eligible place of residence. In the latter regard I may mention that the immediate neighbourhood of Lower Norwood Station is not at present converted into a small township by the erection of long rows of tenements on freehold or long leasehold plots. My remarks apply only to the general outlook from the road, amidst an atmosphere threatening drizzle, and beneath a sky betokening rain. As far as houses are concerned, there seemed to me, on the occasion of my last visit, far more probability of pulling down than of building. In fact, I went for the purpose of inspecting a whole series of very remarkable tenements which I had heard were soon either to disappear from the oozy-looking green quadrangle of which they formed three sides, or were to be converted to another purpose than that of the dwelling-places of a few elderly ladies who occupied one dreary side, whence they could look at the desolation of the closed houses on the other.[1]

It will not be without regret that I shall hear of this intention being carried out, for the houses are devoted to the sheltering of alms-folk; and the alms-folk are the elder pensioners of that admirable association, the Society of the Friends of Foreigners in Distress, which, for above ninety years, has been doing its useful work among those who, but for its prompt and judicious aid, would feel that they were "alone in a strange land."

As a part of its original provision for the relief of some of the applicants who, after long residence in this country, had fallen into a distressed condition at an age when they were unable any longer to maintain themselves by their own exertions, the society instituted the almshouses at Lower Norwood. There is now an impression among the directors of the charity that their intentions may be carried out in future by some better method than placing a number of aged and frequently infirm persons in a comparatively remote group of dwellings, where they are peculiarly lonely, and lack frequent personal attention and general sympathy. There can be no doubt that almshouses have frequently been associated a little too closely with that monastic or conventual practice with which they mostly originated, and that the retirement, almost amounting to seclusion, into which the inmates of such places are removed, may be very far from affording to the aged the kind of asylum which they most desire. Alas, in many instances, to be placed in an almshouse is to be put out of the way, – to be conveniently disposed of; with the inference that every possible provision has been made for comfortable maintenance. Thus, susceptibilities are quieted. The aged pensioners are supposed to be periodically visited; their wants attended to by somebody or other who "sees that they are all right," and the whole matter is conveniently forgotten, except when a casual traveller passes a quaint, ancient, mouldy-looking, but still picturesque block of buildings, and inquires to what charity they belong; not without a kind of uneasy fancy that there is a custom in this country of burying certain old people before their time – shutting them out of the light and warmth of every-day companionship; or, to change the metaphor, making organised charity a kind of Hooghly, on the tide of which the aged, who are supposed to be nearing the end of their mortal life, are floated into oblivion until the memory of them is revived by death.

It is no part of my intention to represent that the almshouses at Lower Norwood bore such a significance, but the conditions to which I have referred appear to be so inevitable where places like these are concerned, that I cannot question the good sense of the directors of the Charity in determining to supersede them, and to carry on the work by annual or monthly pensions only. On behalf of the few remaining inmates of these queer, half-deserted, and failing tenements, it was desirable that the proposition should be acted on at once, and a more comfortable provision be made,

at least, for those who wait on, with constantly deferred hope, doubly heart-sickening when so little time is to be counted on, in which something will be done before the houses themselves, crumbling to decay, become but a type of their own forlorn old age.

It is with some such thoughts as these that I stand at the entrance to the green, with last year's weedy aftermath still dank and tangled with wind and rain. The queer little one-storied dark-red houses of the quadrangle bear a melancholy resemblance to a set of dilapidated and discarded toys, the box for which has been lost. They are built, too, on a kind of foreign-toy pattern, with queer outside staircases, leading to street-doors under a portico, which is the only entrance to the upper storey, the lower doors in the quadrangle communicating only with the ground-floor. The crunch of my footsteps along the moist path, gives no echo; the place seems to be too dull and lifeless even for that kind of response. The left wing and far the greater portion of the centre block are still with the silence of desertion. Peering through the dim leaden casements, I see only small, bare, empty rooms. There is a sense of mildew and of damp plaster peeling from the walls, – of leaky water-pipes, and a humid chill, which no glowing hearth nor bright July weather could utterly subdue. Such is the feeling with which the whole place strikes me on this leaden wintry day, when the vapour from the engine on the railway trails slowly upward to meet the ragged edge of the dun cloud that streams slowly downward; when a big, black dog crouches on the threshold of the village chandler's shop, to get out of the drizzle; and the butcher, who has sold out, closes his half-hatch, with the certainty that he may take his afternoon nap by the fire, undisturbed by customers.

Even when I pause before one of the little narrow portals to which I have been directed, there are few more signs of life, except that at the same moment I hear other footsteps behind me, and a baker stop to deliver a loaf. This is promising, as far as it goes, and enables me to present myself unostentatiously, under cover of the baker's basket, to a lady who opens the door. Unless I am greatly mistaken, that lady has a French face, and as it is a French lady for whom I am to inquire, I begin to think I have come to the end of my quest. It is evident, however, from the surprised questioning look which greets my appearance, that visits from strangers are not of very frequent occurrence there. I can trace in the rather shrinking recognition accorded to my request to see the lady to whom I bring an introduction, the sensitiveness that belongs to that kind of poverty which has learned to endure in seclusion reverses that would be less bearable if they were exposed to a too obtrusive expression of sympathy. It is a positive relief to be left alone for a minute, standing in that narrow lobby, looking into a room which has the appearance of a disused scullery, while my errand is made known in another room on the right, to which I am presently bidden. It is a poor little place enough; poor, and little, and dim, even for an almshouse, and scarcely suggestive of comfort though a bright fire is burning in a grate, which somewhat resembles a reduced kitchen-range, and though the table which stands beneath the casement bears some preparations for the evening meal, and the cheap luxury of a cut orange on a plate. The walls are dim, the ceiling cracked and discoloured by the evident overflow of water in the room overhead; the furniture consists of a kind of couch which may do duty for a bed by night, and of two or three Windsor chairs, one of which has already been placed for me. It is a poor place enough; and yet the lady to whom I am at once introduced is ready to do its honours with a grace and dignity that well become her appearance and her name. Madame Gracieuse B – , for more than forty years resident in England, and speaking English with a purity of accent that is only rivalled by the more perfect music of the French in which she addresses me, has passed the threescore years and ten which are counted as old age. Yet seeing her sweet, calm face; her smooth, broad, intelligent brow; the mild, penetrating scrutiny of her gentle eyes; the soft hair put back under the quaint French cap, shaped like a hood; those years remain uncounted; until, with a pleasant smile, only just too placid for vivacity, she tells how she came to this country in 1830, after the ruin of the fortunes of her house by the revolution which dethroned Charles X., and made her a governess in England, where so many of the old nobility sought a refuge and a home.

But before this is said, she has presented me to a third lady – to whom, indeed, my original introduction extended – already long past the limit of that short period which we call long life; for she is more than eighty years old, and by reason of the infirmity which has lately come upon her, does not rise to receive me, but remains seated in the couch by the fire. It is a very limited space in which to be ceremonious; but were this lady sitting in one of a suite of grand rooms in some aristocratic mansion, with all the surroundings to which her birth, her high connections, and the recollection of her own personal accomplishments entitle her, she might not lack the homage which too often only simulates respect.

It is possible that she may long ago have learned to assess it at its true value, for she has seen it at a court where it could not save a king from banishment; and if we may judge from a face with strong determined lineaments, a brow of concentrated power, and eyes the light of which even the recent paralysis of age has not extinguished, she has been one who could undergo exile, poverty, and even the sadder calamity of being forgotten, with a wonderful endurance.

Yes, Madame la Comtesse Maria de Comoléra, friend and fellow-student of that Madame Adelaide whose name has become historical, when your father was Monsieur l'Intendant of the Duc d'Orléans, and when you lived within the atmosphere of the French court, spending quiet days at the easel in your painting-room, or preparing the delicate *pâte* of Sèvres porcelain, on which to paint the roses and lilies that you loved, the grim visions of exile and poverty may never have troubled you. When the house of Bourbon crumbled, and you escaped from the ruin it had made, you had still your art left to solace, if not to gladden you; and for a time at least you lived by it, and took a new rank by the work that you could do. There were flowers in England, and your hands could still place their glowing hues on canvas. Witness those pictures of yours that now hang on the walls of the gallery of the Crystal Palace, or adorn some private collections. Witness, too, the recognition of some of our own painters when Sir Charles Eastlake was president of the Royal Academy, and when you found a friendly patron in Queen Adelaide of gentle memory. Alas, the hand has lost its cunning; and if its work is not altogether forgotten, those who look upon it are unaware that you are living here in this poor room – pensioner of a charity which, were it but supported as it might be, could better lighten your declining years. Yet I will not call you desolate, madame. Two faithful friends are with you yet. The sunset of your calm life, whereof the noon was broken by so terrible a storm, is dim enough; but it goes not down in complete darkness. Gentle and admiring regard survives even in this dull place; and with it the love that can bring tears to eyes not over ready to weep on account of selfish sorrows, and can move ready hands to tend you now that your own grow heavy and feeble.[2]

As I become more accustomed to the subdued light of the room, I note that amidst the confusion of some old pieces of furniture or lumber there are pictures, unframed and dim, leaning against the walls. One of them – a large painting of some rare plant, formerly a curiosity in the Botanical Gardens at Regent's Park, while the rest are groups of flowers and fruit. Just opposite me, on the high mantel-piece, the canvas broken here and there near the edges, obscured by the dust and smoke that have dulled their surface, are two oil-paintings which I venture to take down for a nearer inspection. Surely they must have been finished when madame was yet in the prime of her art. Exquisite in drawing, delicate in colour, and with a subtle touch that gives to each petal the fresh crumple that bespeaks it newly-blown, and to fruit the dewy down that would make even a *gourmet* linger ere he pressed the juice. It is almost pain to think that they are left here uncared for; and yet, who knows what influence their presence above that dingy shelf may have upon the wandering thoughts and waning dreams of her who painted them when every new effort of her skill was a keen delight?

Nay, even as I hold them to the light, and in a pause of our chat (wherein Madame la Comtesse speaks slowly and with some difficulty) say some half-involuntary words of appreciation, she has risen, and stands upright by the fire with an earnest look in her face and a sudden gesture of awakened interest. The artistic instinct is there still, after more than eighty years of life, and the appreciation of the work animates her yet. Not with a mere vulgar love of praise (for Madame is still la Comtesse

Comoléra even though she spends her days in an almshouse), but with a recognition that I have distinguished the best of the work that is left to her to show. I shall not readily forget the sudden look of almost eager interest, the effort to speak generous words of thanks, as I bow over her hand to say farewell, and feel that I have been as privileged a visitor as though madame had received me in a gilded *salon*, at the door of which a powdered lacquey stood to "welcome the coming – speed the parting guest."

And so with some pleasant leave-takings, and not without permission to see them again, I leave these ladies – the fitting representatives of an old nobility and an old *régime*– to the solitude to which they have retired from a world too ready to forget.

If by any means for the solitude could be substituted a pleasant retirement, and for the sense of desolation and poverty a modest provision that would yet include some grace and lightness to light their declining days, it would be but little after all.

WITH THEM THAT GO DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

It is possible that those portions of the sacred history which have reference to the association of our Lord Jesus Christ with ships, and the wonderful portions of the great narrative where the Divine Voice seems, as it were, to come from the sea, may have a special attraction for us who live in an island and claim a kind of maritime dominion.

Surely the words "Lord, save me, or I perish," and the instant response of the outstretched hand of the Saviour of men, must have been read with an awful joy by many a God-fearing sailor on the homeward voyage. "It is I, be not afraid," must have come with an intensity of meaning to many a heart which has known the peril of the storm, wherein the voice of man to man has been almost inaudible.

There is something very solemn in the prayers we send up for those at sea. Most of us feel a heart-throb when we lie awake listening to the mighty murmurs of the wind, and waiting for the shrill shriek with which each long terrible blast gathers up its forces – a throb which comes of the sudden thought of lonely ships far out upon the ocean, where men are wrestling with the elements, and looking with clenched lips and straining eyes for the lingering dawn.

Yet, with all this, it is a national reproach to us that until a comparatively recent date we have done little or nothing for our sailors – little for those who have been ready to maintain the old supremacy of our fleet – almost nothing for that greater navy of the mercantile marine to which we are indebted for half the necessaries and for nearly all the luxuries which we enjoy.

A national reproach, because not only have charitable provisions for destitute, sick, infirm, or disabled sailors been neglected, but subscriptions demanded by the State from seamen of the merchant service were never properly applied to relieve the distress of those for whom they were professedly received. Considerably over a million of money has been contributed by merchant seamen, by deductions of sixpences from their monthly pay for the maintenance of Greenwich Hospital, and in addition to this there have been accumulated in the hands of the Government the examination fees of masters and mates passing the Board of Trade examination, and the penny fees paid by common seamen on shipment and unshipment, while the unclaimed wages and effects of seamen dying abroad are calculated at about £8000 a year.

Now there can be no doubt that Greenwich Hospital was originally intended to include merchant seamen in its provisions, for the preamble to the original scheme of William III. recites, "Whereas the King's most excellent Majesty being anxiously desirous to promote the Trade, Navigation, and Naval strength of this Kingdom, and to invite greater numbers of his subjects to betake themselves to the sea, hath determined to erect a hospital," &c. For this purpose sixpence per man per month was to be paid out of the wages of all mariners to the support of the Hospital, and every seaman was to be registered. Why? That the charity might be "for the relief, benefit, or advantage of such the said registered Marines, or Seamen, Watermen, Fishermen, Lightermen, Bargemen, Keelmen, or Seafaring Men, who by age, wounds, or other accidents shall be disabled for future service at sea, and shall not be in a condition to maintain themselves comfortably; and the children of such disabled seamen; and the widows and children of such of them as shall happen to be slain, killed, or drowned in sea service, so far forth as the Hospital shall be capable to receive them, and the revenue thereof will extend."

So far as words went, therefore – and subsequent Acts of Parliament confirmed them – Greenwich Hospital was open to all registered seamen. The fact has always been, however, that it was barely able to meet the claims made by the disabled and infirm sailors of the Navy alone, and therefore the mercantile marine was practically excluded, while the payments were still demanded.

Now let us see what past Governments did for the relief of those old, infirm, or disabled men who having "seen wonders on the great deep," came home and sought help.

A charitable trust, called the "Merchant Seamen's Fund," had been established by merchants and shipowners of the City of London, who gave large sums to it, in order to try to make up for the injustice by which these sailors were virtually excluded from Greenwich Hospital, to which the men of the mercantile marine still had to pay sixpence a month. By a remarkably knowing piece of legislation, an Act was passed (the 20th of George II.) which incorporated the Merchant Seamen's Fund, appointed president and governors, and gave authority to purchase land for building a hospital, to help pay for which another sixpence a month was claimed from the pay of merchant seamen and masters of merchant vessels.

Not till the year 1834, by an Act passed in the reign of William IV., were the merchant sailors relieved from compulsory payment to Greenwich. They had contributed to the hospital for 138 years without having derived any direct benefit from it; and though they were not unwilling to subscribe for their brethren in the Royal Navy, the injustice which demanded their contributions, though their own fund was inadequate to pay for the promised building for which it was intended, became too glaring to be continued. It was therefore determined that a grant of £20,000 should be made to Greenwich Hospital out of the Consolidated Fund, and that the merchant sailors should go on paying their shilling a month for their own benefit (masters paying two shillings), and that a provision for widows and children should be included in the charity, the benefits of which were to be extended to Scotland and Ireland.

The hospital never was built. The Board of Trade taking the management of the contributions, appointed trustees, who were altogether incompetent, and did their duty in a perfunctory or careless manner. In 1850, only £20,000 was distributed among old, infirm, and disabled seamen, while £41,000 was bestowed on widows and children; the allowances varying at different ports from £1 to £7, each place having its own local government. Of course a collapse came. The fund was bankrupt; and in the following year an Act was passed for winding it up – for, says the Board of Trade Report, "the Government has had no control over the matter. The London Corporation and the trustees of outports could not by any management have prevented the insolvency of the fund, as long as they were guided by the principles which the several Acts of Parliament laid down … the whole system was vicious."

By the winding-up Act of 1851 compulsory contributions ceased; but those who chose to continue to subscribe voluntarily might do so. It is hardly to be wondered at that the merchant seamen lost confidence in the paternal protection of the Board of Trade. A few thousand pounds were left from the compulsory contributions, and when this came to be inquired for, nobody knew anything about it. It had somehow slipped out of the estimates, and nobody could tell what had become of it.

That is what past governments have done for poor mercantile Jack.

What has the great British public done for him? Not so very much after all. The truth is, that the sailor, who has always been spoken of as "so dreadfully improvident," has been practically regarded as being most self-helpful. All the time that we have been shaking our solemn heads, and lifting up our hands at the improvidence, the folly, and the extravagance of these frequently underpaid and sometimes overworked men, we have made even the help that we were willing to extend to them in their deeper necessities partially dependent on their own constant and regular subscription to the same end.

Poor improvident Jack! – poor thoughtless, incorrigible fellow! – it was necessary for the Government of his country to look after him, in order to protect him against his own want of forethought, and the result has been to run the ship into shoal water, and go hopelessly to wreck without so much as salvage money.

Jack ashore! Don't we all still look at the sailor in the light of the evil war-times, when the king's men were said to draw pocketsful of prize-money and to spend it in low debauchery or wild wanton folly? Even now we repeat the stories of frying watches along with beefsteaks and onions, or eating

bank-note sandwiches. Nay, to this day in the fo'c's'le of merchant vessels some of the melancholy old songs in which sailors are wont to satirise themselves are occasionally sung, telling how

> "When his money is all spent,
> And there's nothing to be borrowed and nothing to be lent,
> In comes the landlord with a frown,
> Saying, 'Jack! get up, and let *John* sit down,
> For you are *outward* bound.'"

There's a world of meaning in that grim suggestive summary; but, thank God! it has less meaning now than it once had. Until quite lately, sailors of merchant ships could be kept for days waiting to be paid, and, sickened with lingering for long weary hours about the office of the broker or agent who withheld their money, fell into the hands of the harpies who were, and still are constantly on the look-out to plunder them. Men with all the pure natural longing for home and reunion with those near and dear to them, were compelled to loiter about the foul neighbourhood of the dock where their ship discharged its cargo, lodging in some low haunt with evil company, and liable to every temptation that is rife in such places, till too often so large a portion of their hardly-earned wages had been forestalled, that in a dreary and desperate madness of dissipation they were tempted to fling away the small balance remaining to them, and to awake to reason only when, naked and nearly destitute, they were compelled to go to sea again, with a slender stock of clothes, and a week's board and lodging paid for with advance notes.

From long confinement and monotony on shipboard, the sailor even now comes to a sense of temporary freedom, giddy with the unaccustomed sense of solid ground and the wild toss and uproar of the ocean of life in a great city. What are still the influences which in many seaports await him directly his foot touches the shore, and sometimes even before he has come over the vessel's side? With a boy's recklessness, a man's passions, and the unwonted excitement of possessing money and boundless opportunities for spending it, a shoal of landsharks are lying ready to batten on him. The tout, the crimp, and all the wretches, male and female, who look upon him as their prey, will never leave him from the time when they watch him roll wonderingly on to the landing-stage, till that desperate minute when he flings his last handful of small change across the tavern counter, and calls for its worth in drink, since "money is no use at sea."

This was far more frequently the termination of mercantile Jack's spell ashore, before the new regulations as to prompt payment of seamen's wages came into force. At that time you had only to take a morning walk across Tower Hill, where the bluff lay figure at the outfitter's door stands for Jack in full feather, and thence to America Square, or the neighbourhood of the Minories and Rosemary Lane, to see dozens of poor fellows lounging listlessly about the doors of pay-agents, waiting day after day at the street-corners, with an occasional visit to the public-house, and the perpetual consumption of "hard" tobacco. It was easy afterwards to follow Jack to Ratcliffe, Rotherhithe, Shadwell, and the neighbourhood, where his "friends" lay in wait for him to spend the evening; in the tap-rooms of waterside taverns, where he sat hopelessly drinking and smoking during a hot summer's afternoon; to frowsy, low-browed shops of cheap clothiers, to hot, stifling dancing-rooms, to skittle-alleys behind gin-shop bars, where a sudden brawl would call out knives, and the use of a "slung-shot" as a weapon would make a case of manslaughter for the coroner; to very minor theatres, where he could see absurd caricatures of himself in the stage sailors, dancing hornpipes unknown at sea; to the dreadful dens of Bluegate Fields and Tiger Bay – to any or all of these places you might have followed Jack; and may even yet follow his fellows who have not yet been redeemed from the evil ways of those bad times, when there were no homes for sailors amidst the bewildering vice and misery of maritime London, and other seaport towns of this great mercantile island.

It so happened that I made my first intimate acquaintance with the one real, publicly representative "Sailors' Home" in Well Street, near the London Docks, after having seen Jack under several of the terrible conditions just referred to, so that, with this painful knowledge of him and his ways, it was with a kind of delighted surprise that I suddenly walked into the great entrance-hall of the institution, where he and his fellows were sitting on the benches by the wall with the serious, contemplative, almost solemn air which is (in my experience) the common expression of sailors ashore, and during ordinary leisure hours. There they were, a good ship's crew of them altogether, sitting, as I have already said, in true sailor fashion – stooping forward, wrists on knees, lolling on sea-chests and clothes-bags, taking short fore-and-aft walks of six steps and a turn in company with some old messmate, smoking, growling, chatting, and generally enjoying their liberty; not without an eye, now and then, to the smart officer who had come in to see whether he could pick up a brisk hand or two for the mail service.

This was some five or six years ago, and it is a happy result of the plan on which the Home was first established (which was intended ultimately to make the institution self-supporting, if the cost of building were defrayed) that the whole scheme has been so enlarged since that time, that anybody who would see what our mercantile seamen are like, may now go and see them, in a largely increasing community, in this great institution. So many come and go and reappear at intervals represented by the length of their voyages, that 10,120 officers and men had partaken of its inestimable benefits during the year from the first of May, 1872, to the end of April, 1873.

But the institution itself was founded in earnest faith, and built with the labour that is consecrated by prayer. Both to the Home and to its companion institution, the Refuge for Destitute Seamen – we will pay a visit on our next meeting.

WITH THEM WHO WERE READY TO PERISH

On the 28th of February, 1828, a very terrible calamity happened in the place known as Wellclose Square, Whitechapel. A new theatre called the Brunswick, had been erected there on the site of a former building, known as the Old Royalty. It had been completed in seven months, and three days afterwards, during a rehearsal, the whole structure gave way and fell with a crash, burying ten persons amidst the ruins, and fearfully injuring several others. Such a catastrophe was very awful, and the people of the neighbourhood looked with an almost solemn curiosity at the wreck of an edifice in which they themselves might have met with death suddenly.

Very soon, however, they began to regard the heap of ruins with surprise, for early one morning there appeared two officers of the Royal Navy, surrounded by a gang of labourers with picks and shovels, and before these men (some of whom were Irish Roman Catholic) began to work they listened attentively while one of the officers offered up an earnest prayer to God for a blessing on the results of the labour they were about to undertake. Morning after morning their labour was thus sanctified, and evening after evening it was celebrated by the voice of thanksgiving, till at length the ground was cleared, and on the 10th of June, 1830, the first stone of a new building was laid. The building was to be a Home for Sailors, and as a necessary adjunct to the Home, it was intended to establish a Destitute Sailors' Asylum.

The two naval officers were Captain (now Admiral) George C. Gambier, and Captain Robert James Elliot, now gone to his rest, who with Lieutenant Robert Justice afterwards Captain, and now with his old comrade, in the heavenly haven, had been seeking how to ameliorate the condition of seamen, numbers of whom were to be seen homeless, miserable, and frequently half naked and destitute, in that foul and wretched neighbourhood about the Docks and beyond Tower Hill.

The task was a difficult one, and might have daunted less brave and hopeful men, for it was intended to demolish the piratical haunts where the enemies of the sailor lay in wait for his destruction; where crimps and thieves and the keepers of infamous dens held their besotted victims in bondage, while they battened on the wages that had been earned during months of privation and arduous toil.

It was necessary, therefore, first to provide a decent and comfortable lodging-house for the reception of sailors coming into port, – a place where they might safely deposit their clothes and their wages, and where they could "look out for another ship" without the evil intervention of crimps or pretended agents. It was a part of the intended plan also to establish a savings bank, for securing any portion of their wages which they chose to lay by, or for safely transmitting such sums as they might wish to send to their relations. In short, the design was to provide a home for the homeless, and hold out helping hands to those who were ready to perish.

Those ruins of the theatre stood on the very spot for such an establishment, and the two captains, Gambier and Elliott, began by buying the ground and the wreck that stood upon it, not by asking for public subscriptions, but mostly with their own money, to which was added a few contributions from any of their friends who desired to join in the good work.

It is impossible to use more earnest or touching words than those in which the late Rear-Admiral Sir W. E. Parry spoke of the labours of his friend and fellow-supporter of the Sailors' Home, in an address to British seamen at Southampton, in 1853. "And now," he said, "let me just add that, from the first moment in which Captain Elliot stood among the ruins of the Brunswick Theatre, till it pleased God to deprive him of bodily and mental energy, did that self-denying Christian man devote all his powers, his talents, his influence, and his money, to this his darling object of protecting and providing for the comfort of sailors. Connected with a noble family, and entitled by birth, education, and station, to all the advantages which the most exalted society could give hm, he willingly relinquished all, took up his abode in a humble lodging, surrounded by gin-shops, near the 'Home:' denied himself most of the comforts, it may almost be said some of the necessaries of life, in order the more effectually

to carry out his benevolent design; and for eighteen years of self-denial and devotion, made it the business of his life to superintend this institution."

For the noble officer lived to see the building for which he had wrought and prayed, complete and successful. In 1835 300 sailors could be received and welcomed there. The piratical lairs began to empty of some of those who had been shown a way of escape, and the good work went on. In the adjoining Seamen's Church the congregation was largely augmented by the boarders from the Sailors' Home, while the Honorary Chaplain and the Missionary attached officially to the institution, became not only parson and preacher, but friendly adviser and instructor, ready to speak, to hear, and to forbear. The addition of a book depository, where various useful publications may be purchased, and Bibles are sold at the lowest possible prices, and in various languages, was a valuable auxiliary to moral and religious instruction, and at once increased the home-like influences of the place.

The institution having gone on thus prosperously, under the direction of a goodly number of officers and gentlemen, added to its possessions by acquiring other plots of freehold ground, extending backward to Dock Street; and in 1863 Lord Palmerston laid the stone of an entirely new block of building, which was inaugurated by the Prince of Wales in 1865, since which time 502 boarders can be received, each being provided with his separate cabin.

Since the opening of the institution in 1835 it has received 246,855 seamen of various countries and from all parts of the world. Of these 72,234 have been old or returned boarders, and most of them have conducted their money transactions through the "Home," and have made good use of the savings-bank.

There are 270 inmates under that protecting roof as I step into the large entrance hall in Well Street to-day; and the two hundred and seventy-first has just gone to look after his kit and sea-chests, which have been carefully conveyed from the Docks by one of the carmen belonging to the institution, who has "The Sailors' Home, Well Street," worked in red worsted on his shirt, and painted on the side of the van from which he has just alighted.

It is evident that our friend No. 271 has been here before, for he knows exactly where to present himself in order to deposit some of his more portable property with the cashier or the superintendent. He scarcely looks like a man who will want an advance of money, for he is a smart, alert, bright-eyed fellow, with a quiet air of self-respect about him which seems to indicate an account in the savings-bank; but should he be "hard-up," he can ask for and receive a loan not exceeding twenty shillings directly his chest is deposited in his cabin. Just now the chest itself, together with its superincumbent bundle, stands against the wall along with some other incoming or outgoing boxes, more than one of which are associated with brand new cages for parrots, and some odd-shaped cases evidently containing sextants or other nautical instruments. There is a whole ship's crew, and a smart one too, in the hall to-day; while a small contingent occupies the clothing department, where one or two shrewd North-countrymen are being fitted each with a "new rig," knowing well enough that they will be better served there than at any of the cheap outfitters (or the dear ones either) in the neighbourhood. Fine blue broadcloth, pilots, tweeds, rough weather, and petershams are here to choose from "to measure," as well as a wonderful collection of hats, caps, underclothing, hosiery, neckties, boots, and shoes so unlike the clumsy specimens that swing along with the tin pots and oilskins in some of the little low-browed shops about the district, that I at once discover the reason for the smartness and general neatly-fitted look of most of the men and lads now pacing up and down, talking and smoking. It is quiet talk for the most part, even when half a dozen of the inmates adjourn to the refreshment-room, where they can obtain a glass of good sound beer (though there is a much more general appreciation of coffee) and sit down comfortably at a table like that at which two serious mates are already discussing some knotty point, which will probably last till tea-time.

Tea-time? There is the half-past five o'clock signal gong going now, and light swift steps are to be heard running up the stairs into the large dining-hall, where the two hundred and seventy-one, or as many of them as are at home, sit down like fellows who know their business and mean to do

it. It is a pleasant business enough, and one soon despatched; for there are so many big teapots, that each table is amply provided by the alert attendants, who dispense bread-and-butter, watercresses, salads, and savoury bloaters and slices of ham and tongue, the latter having been already served by a carver who is equal to the occasion. It is astonishing how quickly the meal is over when its substantial quality is taken into account; but there is no lack of waiters, the number of attendants in the building being sixty-five, some of whom, of course, belong to the dormitories and to other departments.

The meals here are, of course, served with the utmost regularity, and without limit to quantity. Breakfast, with cold meat, fish, bacon, and general "relishes," at eight in the morning; dinner at one: consisting of soup, roast and boiled meats, ample supplies of vegetables, occasional fish, stupendous fruit-pies and puddings, and a good allowance of beer. After tea comes a substantial snack for supper, at nine o'clock, and the doors of the institution are kept open to half-past eleven at night; those who wish to remain out later being required to obtain a pass from the superintendent.

Of course it is requested that the boarders come in to meals as punctually as possible; but those who cannot conveniently be present at the regular time, can have any meal supplied to them on application. Indeed, two or three belated ones are arriving now, as we go to the end of the long and lofty refectory to look at the crest of the late Admiral Sir William Bowles, K.C.B., which, supported by flags, is painted upon the wall, as a memorial of a gallant officer and a good friend to this institution and to all sailors.

Leaving the dining-hall, we notice a smaller room, set apart for masters and mates who may desire to have their meals served here; and on the same extensive storey is a large and comfortable reading-room well supplied with periodicals, and containing a capital library consisting of entertaining and instructive books.

The board-room is close by, and is of the size and shape to make an excellent mission-room, where week-night services and meetings of a religious character are held, and well attended by men who, having seen the wonders of the Lord upon the great deep, join in His reasonable service when they are at home and at rest. This vast floor also contains two dormitories: but most of the sleeping cabins are in the second and third floors.

There are few sights in London more remarkable than these berths, which are, in fact, separate cabins, each closed by its own door, and containing bed, wash-stand, chair, looking-glass, towels, and ample space for the seachest and personal belongings of the occupant. The cabins extend round a large area rising to a great height, and surrounded above by a light gallery reached by an outer staircase, round which are another series of berths exactly resembling the lower ones; so that there are, in fact, double, and in one or two dormitories treble tiers of cabins, and the upper ones may be entered without disturbing the inmates of those below. One of the three-decker areas is of vast size, and, standing in the upper gallery and looking upward to the lofty roof, and then downward to the clear, wide, open space between the lower rooms, the visitor is struck by the admirable provision both for light and ventilation; the former being secured at night by means of properly distributed gas jets, which are of course under the care of the night attendants, who are on watch in each dormitory, and may be summoned at once in case of illness or accident.

Not only is there provision against fire by a length of fire-hose attached to hydrants on each storey, but the water supply to lavatories and for other purposes is secured by a cistern holding 4,000 gallons at the top of the building; so that there is complete circulation throughout the various parts of the building.

It is time that we paid a visit to the basement of this great institution, however; for, in more senses than one, it may be said to be at the foundation of the arrangements. Yes, even with respect to the amusements provided for the inmates – for while chess, draughts and backgammon are to be found in the library and reading-room, and billiards and bagatelle hold their own on the great landings of the first storey, we have down here a skittle-alley of a character so remarkable, that some of us who have read Washington Irving think of the reverberations of the giants' pastime in the mountains,

while we wonder where sailors can first have acquired a taste for this particular amusement. It is a good and healthy one, however, and is wisely provided, since it adds one more efficient inducement to the men to take their pleasure among their true friends instead of seeking it amidst the evil influences of a filthy tavern, or in the garish heat of some vile Ratcliff Highway bowling-alley, where men are maddened with drugged drink, and greeted with foul imprecations by the harpies who seek to rob and cheat them.

There is much to see in this basement, and to begin with here is No. two hundred and seventy-one sending his chest up by the great luggage-lift to the second floor, where he will find it presently in his cabin. We cannot stay to speak to him, however, for we are on the very verge of the kitchen, to which we are, as it were, led by the nose; for wafted thence comes an appetising perfume of new bread just taken from one of the great ovens devoted to the daily baking. There are lingering odours also of today's dinner, though the meat ovens and the great boilers and hot plates are clean and ready for the morrow. The pantry door, too, is open, and there are toothsome varieties of "plain-eating" therein, while the storerooms savour of mingled comforts, to which the gales of Araby the blest offer no parallel, and the butcher's shop has a calm and concentrated sense of meatiness which is suggestive to a robust appetite not already satiated with a chunk from one of a whole squadron of soft, new currant-cakes. After a peep at the large and busy laundry with its peculiar moist atmosphere, the coal and beer cellars, the pumping machinery and boiler-room may be passed by, and little curiosity is excited by this long and convenient apartment where hot and cold baths are prepared to order at a merely nominal charge. There is a door close by, however, where we stop instinctively, for there is a cheerful light inside, and a sound of easy and yet interrupted conversation which can belong to only one department of society. There can be no mistake about it – a veritable barber's shop, and a gentleman with a preternaturally clean chin complacently surveying himself in a looking-glass of limited dimensions, while another waits to be operated upon by the skilled practitioner who carries in his face the suggestion of a whole ropery of "tough yarns," and was – or am I mistaken – tonsor to the *Victory*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.