

THE ROYAL HOME FOR LADIES.



CHARITY is a word to which meaning may be given according to temperament and individuality. But by usage it has grown to be considered chiefly as alms-giving to institutions, or to deserving indigence in a lower walk of life. Poverty, with its unredeemed ugliness, strikes the eye of the most unobserving; the fluttering of its rags, the uncouthness of its speech are patent facts before which the loosening of purse-strings is only a natural impulse. The poverty, however, that screens itself behind a barrier of pride and reserve, that is clothed in the garments of more prosperous days; whose manner of speech is refined, is passed by on the other side: it is not sufficiently obvious. To the humble poor, poverty is an ever-present condition, always terrible, but with its terrors mitigated by too near acquaintance. To those who have known all the comforts as well as the necessities of life, its horrors cannot be magnified, its miseries exaggerated.

Crying as are the needs of home missions and of similar charities, the claims of the poor of their own order should appeal more nearly to the wealthy. The charities existing for their benefit are few and only in rare cases well supported, but of them all there is none more deserving than the Royal Home for Ladies with Limited Income at Wandsworth.

For twenty years this admirable institution has been pursuing a course of quiet benefaction to ladies whose income is so small that they are perpetually hovering on the verge of actual starvation. Being unendowed and entirely

dependent upon voluntary subscriptions for its income, the Home can only accommodate twenty-seven ladies at Wandsworth and seven in the Wimbledon Branch Home, and even this it is unable to do unless a minimum income of £20 a year is possessed by each lady. An income of over £50 a year disqualifies any applicant.

The idea originated with Miss Jessie Lee, who had herself been a governess, and had learnt by experience the discomforts and perils so often attendant on the older age of this class, and on that of other poor ladies who from family money troubles or other unforeseen calamities are left without proper means of support at a time when their working days are over. Originally called "The Wandsworth Homes," the four houses at Wandsworth and the branch at Wimbledon are now known as "The Royal Homes for Ladies of Limited Income."

The Homes at Wandsworth are four substantial-looking villas, in which twenty-seven old ladies are spending their declining years in an atmosphere of comfort, refinement, and friendly intercourse, absolutely impossible under the conditions the narrowness of their income would impose upon them if living alone. Each lady has one room which she is expected to furnish, but should she be unable to do so, the committee stretch forth a kindly hand and provide her with the necessary furniture. The rooms are necessarily bed-sitting-rooms, but the bed in the day-time rarely looks anything but a large couch. Each

occupier is expected to make her own bed and keep her room tidy, to wash her breakfast, tea, and supper things, greasy plates and dishes being washed by a servant who also cleans the fire-places, lays the fires, and puts the rooms in order in addition to cleaning them thoroughly once a week. There is no common room, the lady inmates taking their meals alone; they are thus able to choose their own foods, the dinners being cooked separately in the kitchen for them. In cases where a lady's income only reaches the minimum amount prescribed by the rules of admittance it is supplemented by the committee, but in the cases of larger incomes the committee only supply the room, coal, gas, attendance and other comforts. A cosy little pantry is attached to each room, in which food and crockery are kept, and where all washing-up is done.

These little domestic duties are a very wise provision, since no rough and heavy work is entailed, and a morning occupied in household affairs doing more to soften the edge of dependence and create an interest in personal surroundings than no matter how great a realisation of the blessings afforded by the protection of the Home. In the afternoon the ladies work or read—a subscription having been made to Mudie on their especial behalf by a friend of the Institution—or pay one another visits and drink tea. Then their own friends may come to see them, or they walk; but whatever they do the day is always well-occupied and full of interests, the daily papers affording ample material for pleasant gossip.

The twenty-seven ladies living at Wandsworth form an ideal community. Each lives her individual life, her freedom of thought and action are absolutely unfettered, she is as independent as if she lived in her own house. No retirement from the stress and storm of life could be more restful, no old age more dignified or more honoured than in these pleasant havens for those whom Fortune has buffeted, and to whom the world has not been kind.

To the visitor to the Homes, the word "charity" never suggests itself. The committee are full of consideration and tact in their dealings with the ladies whom misfortune brings before them and into their care, and this spirit communicates itself to the recipients of their kindness. A more charming set of old ladies cannot be imagined than those occupying the Homes. One or two of them have resided there almost from the foundation, whilst others run them very close in point of occupation. In all, sixty ladies have passed through the Home, some having been removed by death, and others by the betterment of their financial position.

A visit to this delightful retreat is not without sadness. When one sees these placid women surrounded perhaps by the flotsam and jetsam of a superb home, or the carefully-treasured possessions of years, when work was a pleasure and old age a milestone out of sight, one cannot help thinking of the tears those patient eyes have shed, or of the misfortunes that have lined those serene faces. But if it is easy to imagine the despairing struggle against the rapid descent to semi-starvation, it is equally easy to imagine the joy and unceasing comfort of such surroundings as are provided by the sympathy and forethought of Miss Jessie Lee, whose kind, amiable face looks out from one of the walls of the reading-room, and whose death is still regretted by those who have succeeded her.

There is no more deserving charity than this, there is none which appeals so peculiarly to women of the upper classes; it is their duty to support it by the best means at their disposal.

FRANK HIRD.