

OPEN LETTERS.

Three Years' Experience in Managing a Tenement-House.*

ABOUT four years ago my attention was called by chance to the neglected condition of a large tenement-house in one of the poorer wards of Boston, and in November, 1879, a friend agreed to take with me a lease of the building for one year, at a rental of one thousand dollars, in order to see whether by careful management and constant supervision we could improve the character of its occupants, and at the same time secure a sufficient pecuniary return for the time and money invested in the enterprise. We were encouraged to believe that such results were possible by the previous experience of Octavia Hill and Mrs. Miles, who—the one in London and the other in New York—have demonstrated clearly that a very effectual means of helping the poor is by establishing a definite relation with them, such as is secured by the positions of landlord and tenant.

The house in which our experiment has been tried successfully for more than three years contains in all twenty-seven tenements, fourteen of which were occupied when it came into our possession. Although originally called a "model building," it had fallen greatly out of repair, and its moral character had degenerated in proportion to its decay. When we first examined the property, with a view to hiring it, we were told that the house had a bad name, and was half empty, because of the desperate character of some of its occupants. Certainly the foul sinks, dirty entries, and ill-kept stairs bore evidence of great neglect.

Our landlord generously agreed to paint the house and to make the necessary repairs, among which were included a means of lighting and ventilating the sinks, and of devoting one room on each landing to the construction of suitable wood-closets for the tenants, who had previously been obliged to keep their fuel in the cellar of the building. The torn and moldy paper in the entries was also replaced by a fresh coat of plastering, which from year to year we are able to renew by whitewashing, thus giving to the house a clean and cheerful appearance.

Under these favorable circumstances we began our first year of work, and we were very successful. The building is in a central locality, and is open to the air on three sides, to which advantages was largely due the fact that the rooms were soon let, and in most instances to worthy families. Though very curious in regard to our motive in taking the house, our tenants manifested no unwillingness to have new and untrained landladies in place of their former rent-collector, and I can remember no instance of any lack of courtesy in welcoming us to their homes on rent-day.

Our printed rules in regard to the daily sweeping of the stairs and entries and the care of the sinks were rigorously enforced, until after a time the fact that it was a common benefit seemed to dawn upon

the tenants, and the necessity for daily supervision in these matters diminished.

The punctual payment of rent was insisted upon, except in cases of sickness or great distress, when it was our experience that a little delay was keenly appreciated, and resulted in no ultimate loss to us.

Habitual drunkenness we never tolerated; but when it was possible by threats or expostulations to make some impression on the general character of the offender, we had patience with occasional transgressions, believing that such leniency, when not carried too far, was productive of good results.

Some of the reforms which we instituted were very acceptable to the tenants—noticeably the custom of giving a receipt for rent received. One woman told me she had paid rent in the building for eleven years, and had never had any receipt to show for it.

The tenants also learned in time to appreciate the advantage of having the street-door locked at night, each tenant being supplied with a pass-key. It had been no unusual occurrence for men and women to sleep in the entries; and, although at first both lock and door were frequently broken, the greater privacy and safety secured to the tenants by the rule of locking the door at ten o'clock gradually brought about the result that they themselves became responsible for the regular performance of this duty.

It was our custom to visit either the former home or the employer of any person who applied to us for rooms; and we found that the invariable rule, "references required," saved us much trouble and expense by excluding the more degraded class of tenants.

At the close of the first year there was a balance on hand of \$111.67. During the year \$1,257.05 had been collected. Of this only \$10.50 had been spent for repairs, as the house was already in good order; \$61.45 had been paid out for scrubbing and general care of the house and drains; and the water, gas, and other bills amounted to \$73.43. The rent paid for the building was \$1,000. The balance, therefore, amounted to eleven per cent. on the rent we had to pay, or six per cent. after allowing for the cost of a paid agent, an expense which we were saved because we preferred to collect the rents ourselves.

We also considered it important to keep another sort of balance-sheet, where we estimated the loss we had sustained because of the advantages we offered to our tenants over and above those they could have obtained elsewhere. It was one of our rules, in order to prevent overcrowding (which is one of the great evils of the tenement-house system), to allow a family to hire a second tenement for very much less rent than they paid for the first one. If for the first tenement of two rooms they paid \$1.25, we gave them the second tenement for seventy-five cents additional. Our loss, as compared to the actual rental of these rooms at their full value, was in the first year \$145.99; but we considered it very necessary, from the outset, to inculcate ideas of cleanliness and decency by encouraging families to occupy a number of rooms.

* (Read at a general conference of the Associated Charities of Boston, Nov. 23d, 1883.)

As a premium on prompt payment, we also allowed ten cents weekly to be deducted from the usual rental if the rent was prepaid. This rule has worked admirably. The amount deducted being the same for all, the proportion was larger and the gain more important for the poorer tenants than for the richer ones; and though it involved to us a loss of \$27.90 in the year, we considered it a desirable stimulus to thrift and industry. We have often heard the remark, "I wish I could get ahead again; that ten cents a week helps me a good deal."

Through rooms that were unlet we lost \$186.

For the greater convenience of those who are interested in the financial result of the experiment, I will call attention to the comparative statement of the three years' receipts and expenses, which want of space obliges me to give without detail at the close of this report. The various fluctuations which will be observed are due to the inevitable changes which take place from year to year. For a number of months in 1882 we were obliged to employ a paid agent, and there have been incidental expenses of painting and plastering or whitening. It will be seen, however, that notwithstanding the low rates at which we leased the rooms, our profit has always been over eleven per cent. on the rent we had to pay (or six per cent. after allowance for an agent), and this, too, in a building which we do not own, but are under the necessity of hiring.

Of the surplus which we have had yearly, a portion has been reserved as a fund for any unforeseen emergency, and a small amount has been expended for the benefit of the tenants. During the second winter we gave the children a stereopticon exhibition; the following year we distributed blankets among the various families; and last Christmas a pitcher, bowl, and washstand were supplied to each household. Recently we have changed or renewed the papers in many of the rooms, but only on condition that the tenants themselves should first clean and prepare the walls. We have never found that these efforts to increase their comfort tended to pauperize the tenants.

We have had occasion in these three years to raise the rent twice, but as the advance in each instance was only twenty-five cents weekly on a tenement of two rooms, the measure was accepted cheerfully, and recognized as just, in view of the improvement in the times.

I have endeavored to set forth our financial position, in order to show that such an undertaking as this need not involve a loss to its managers; but there is a far more important side to any such work, and of this I cannot speak too earnestly.

A tenement-house need not be a den of disease and iniquity. Our house has been very healthy during the years of our tenancy, and we have been fortunate in securing a respectable class of tenants, although the prices asked for our rooms are almost the lowest in the city.

We have had time in our three years of experience to see the slow but steady improvement in some of our tenants, and noticeably in the general tone and character of the house. Just as we have seen that from the weekly scrubbing of the entries, on which we have insisted, and for which we have paid, it has come about that almost every tenement is voluntarily

cleaned and scrubbed on Saturday, so we have seen that a certain degree of improvement is manifest in the homes and manners of the tenants.

Of course there are many instances where this is not the case, because of the unavoidable changes which take place. In any large tenement-house, which is intended to meet the needs of the poorest classes, the population must of necessity be somewhat floating, and so less subject to improvement than if it were more permanent; but, on the whole, the result has been very encouraging. There are at present eighty-three souls in our building; and of the nineteen families which compose that number, only five have been with us since the time that we first took the house.

We have seen that in dealing with the poor there is nothing which is so important as to help them to preserve their self-respect, and this is a delicate and difficult task. We have had to stand by and see many a desperate struggle with poverty, many an instance of such self-denial as is unknown in a richer class; and yet no lesson has been so impressed upon us as that the best way to help these people is to allow them to help themselves. Those tenants who receive outside assistance for which they do not give a fair equivalent in labor, are almost invariably the most difficult class with which we have to deal.

We have seen a young woman rise from a position where she could not afford to buy meat at eight cents a pound, to a point where she can command by her honest labor ten dollars a week; and we have watched a workman who was literally in the depths of poverty struggle for, and obtain in time, a modest competence which enabled him to remove his family from the city; but only once have I infringed our rule and given a dollar in charity. Their independence and self-respect are worth more than food or home to these people, and surely any one who interferes with their right to provide for themselves assumes a grave responsibility.

There are, however, other ways in which they can be helped. There are many matters about which they are glad to have kindly and disinterested advice, and they often ask it with a frankness which goes far to prove that their feeling toward us is a friendly one.

Then there are the sick to be cared for, perhaps a child to be taken to the dispensary or hospital, or a young girl to be placed in a safe and desirable situation; or work is to be found, or we are asked to speak a good word for a deserving mechanic. Occasionally we have been able to secure prompt payment for some one of our people whose employer withheld the hard-earned wages, although such cases are rare. In short, there are various ways in which we can help our tenants, and we always find them grateful for such assistance.

It is not my intention to present too bright a side of a picture where we all know there is a reverse. There are many trials and discouragements to be met with in any such work. How can it be otherwise when the evils of ignorance and superstition, and most of all intemperance, are so active in the world?

All I claim is, that it is of much value for men and women of the better educated classes to know something of, and do something for, their less fortunate brethren.

If the rich, who can afford to own tenement-houses,

would give a little more of their attention to the poor who would be glad to be their tenants, better results would certainly follow than where the management of the homes of the poor is left to landlords who are but little higher in position, and occasionally even more steeped in ignorance, than the tenants themselves. That tenement-houses are an evil, none will deny; that they are in most large cities a necessary evil, we are all obliged to admit. What I wish to urge is, that those who are willing to help the poor would do so by being to them kind and equitable landlords, thus establishing a relationship in which there should be a common interest and a mutual sympathy. To any one who wishes to undertake such work I would say:

Choose a central locality; let no one become your tenant whose previous history you have not investigated; make a few strict rules and adhere to them closely; and you are sure of success, if your heart is in your work.

Of course, experience is of service; but so far as our own individual work is concerned, we feel that the greatest value of the experiment is, that it may induce others to come forward to profit by its success, and in this hope we have presented the report of what has been done.

Alice N. Lincoln.

BOSTON, May, 1883.

	Receipts.	Repairs.	Care of house.	Sundries.
1879-80.....	\$1257.05	\$10.50	\$ 61.45	\$ 73.43
1880-81.....	1422.05	59.17	87.54	117.87
1881-82.....	1441.77	40.00	118.60	166.89

	Rent.	Total of expenses.	Balance on hand.
1879-80.....	\$1000.00	\$1145.38	\$111.67
1880-81.....	1000.00	1264.58	157.47
1881-82.....	1000.00	1325.49	116.28

	Loss by allowance on extra rooms.	Loss by prepayment.	Loss by rooms unlet.
1879-80.....	\$145.99	\$27.90	\$186.00
1880-81.....	159.20	29.70	70.75
1881-82.....	133.45	31.50	47.50

Since the above was written a second tenement-house has been taken in the same neighborhood, and has been managed substantially in the same way for nine months with gradually increasing prosperity and success.

Though hired by the Boston Co-operative Building Company, this building has been under the same control and subject to the same rules as the one to which the article refers; and it is gratifying to find that an experience of even three or four years has been of much service in undertaking a second enterprise of the same nature.

That "Hurricane Reform."

Among the "Open Letters" in the December CENTURY, I have read with great interest the article of my friend Dr. Washington Gladden entitled "Hurricane Reform." I happen to be one of the three hundred and twenty thousand in Ohio who do not agree with him on that subject; and, feeling that it is a matter of grave importance to this State, I beg the privilege of a friendly reply.

1. The first point of Dr. Gladden's argument against constitutional prohibition is that it would "forestall public sentiment and prevent the free expression of the popular will in legislation." Now, if this means that it would prevent free popular discussion on this subject, preparatory to legislation, I fail to see any force in the language. For example, we have had for thirty years a constitutional provision forbidding

license. Does Dr. Gladden intend to say that such provision has prevented the free expression of the popular will on that subject? If I mistake not, there has always been, and especially for the last ten months, the freest possible expression of the popular will in regard to license. Why should it not be so if the Constitution should forbid the existence of the liquor traffic itself? The truth is that the free expression of the popular will, preparatory to legislation, never has been and never can be prevented by anything in the Constitution.

If the above language means simply that the Legislature would be "shut up to one method," and not at liberty to try any other experiment, it is pertinent to ask, in the first place, how long, and to what extent? The Constitution is not the laws of the Medes and Persians. It can be changed whenever the popular will sees fit, and the Legislature chooses to submit a proposition for that purpose. In the second place, the Legislature would always have the utmost room for the play of ingenuity in perfecting legislation for the execution of the organic law. And it could hardly damage the Ohio Legislature to be shut up for a season to this one method, now that it has tried license for fifty years, and regulation without license for thirty more, and has ignominiously failed in both either to reduce or to mitigate the evils of the liquor traffic. Our fathers, in deciding to have a Constitution at all, seemed to think it important to have some things settled long enough to fairly test their efficiency. Indeed, the great advantage of constitutional over statutory prohibition is that it would, so far as law is concerned, lift this, the greatest moral question of the age, above the fluctuations incident to party scrambling for office and power. It may seem to the people of this State that, after three-quarters of a century of legislative trifling with this infinite evil, a few years of something else would be a blessing.

2. The second point of Dr. Gladden's argument is that prohibition would not work if secured. "It could not be enforced." This is a prophecy which has been repeated by many good men, together with the whole liquor fraternity, for many years in this State. On what is it based? What does it mean, to say that, among a certain class of citizens, constitutional law "cannot be enforced"? It means that the liquor fraternity are *law-breakers*, that they will not be governed by righteous laws. It means rebellion. Dr. Gladden knows that the average saloon-keeper in Ohio is a law-breaker, not simply as an individual, but by organized conspiracy against all law that tends to restrain his business. This admission is just as fatal against regulation as against prohibition.

Has it come to this, then, that the law-abiding majority of Ohio must succumb to the law-breaking minority? Is anarchy to be our rule for the future? I submit that, if law cannot be enforced among such men, that is a reason for striking at the existence of the traffic itself by constitutional enactment, rather than for playing at legislation any longer with professional criminals. To say that public sentiment will not sustain prohibition even if it were carried, means one of two things: either that it would be carried by a minority, which is impossible, or that it would not be sustained by the public sentiment of the law-breakers, which is not to be expected. It seems to be for-