



THE CITY CLERK, AND WHAT MAY BE DONE FOR HIM.

THE external appearance of that vast contingent of London labour which comes into the City every morning by railway-train and omnibus, is not a true evidence of the social position of its members. To dress well, to wear sound clothes and whole boots, clean linen and glossy hats, involves no small part of the struggle that young men engaged in City offices have to undergo. Let it be understood that we refer more particularly to the "junior clerks," as they are termed, the young beginners in the warfare of life. To estimate accurately how much they can afford for their daily food, and yet provide the necessary stock of clothes, is very often a calculation more difficult than any that they have to make at the office. When they have paid for lodging and washing there can be but a small available balance for the daily dinner, that is represented by a slice from the joint, with bread and potatoes. In this matter of dining, the City clerk is well catered for by some of those enterprising firms who can convert ancient palaces into great banqueting halls, and serve even a tenpenny dinner of meat, bread, and potatoes, with clean and elegant accessories, and with a promptitude that enables many a hungry customer to obtain a good meal in the few minutes which can be snatched from business in the middle of the day.

But there are still hundreds of youths to whom a dinner like this is but an occasional luxury. Six shillings a week spent in food during the business hours, and, say, twelve and sixpence a week for lodging, plain breakfast, tea, and bread-and-cheese supper (which is about the lowest price, including Sunday's dinner, for which a decent provision can be made, even where several young men lodge in the same house) amount to eighteen and sixpence a week. There are whole battalions of youths, working hard all day in warehouses, stores, and offices, who necessarily do not receive more than from thirty to forty pounds a year, while even those who have had three or four "rises" can still command no more than sixty pounds, so that it is easy to see how large a proportion of those who are known generally as "City clerks" must bear a constant anxiety as to the way to make out a living. Happily, they have youth, hope, courage, and a large average of them have health on their side, so that such trouble sits lightly on them. But it must be remembered that there are temptations and difficulties which are associated with these very qualities, and that there are also legitimate and virtuous desires, for society, for recreation, for bodily exercise, for study, for music, and for the blessed enjoyments of life, without which work seems barren to the young. There is also a keen and craving appetite for food, which a shifting dinner and a bread-and-butter tea will not always fully satisfy; and in order to obtain partial board and lodgings, the clerk must now go into one of the suburbs, which is beyond a walking distance for

those whose work in the City begins early, so that the eighteenpence left between eighteen and sixpence and twenty shillings is absorbed in riding one way, and nothing is left for clothes, washing, mending, books, recreations, or subscription to literary institution or young men's society.

It would be well indeed if only from among young and unmarried men the ranks of clerkdom were filled, but there are veterans in that large army, who have been all their lives engaged in a hand-to-hand fight to keep a position, and as they grow older are in constant dread lest younger candidates, who perhaps "know French and German," or such smatterings thereof as pass muster in superficial conversation, should push them from their stools. Nay, there is a supplementary host, an irregular contingent of young men, married and unmarried, who never having been brought up to any real definite calling, but writing a fair hand, and being accurate in common accounts, or in inditing a short letter with or without the help of a dictionary, are "in collar" or "out of collar," according to the demands of the employé market. One of these, who was evidently better informed than many of the class, wrote to the newspapers not long ago on this difficult question.

For nearly nine months he had been trying to obtain employment in the City, but without success. Day after day he answered advertisements, but nothing came of them, and meanwhile he had a wife and child to support. He never had a permanent engagement, but had been employed as "supernumerary clerk," "temporary assistant," &c., at wages varying from one to two pounds a week. He left no stone unturned to get a berth, but it was always the old story—a host of applicants were in the field against him. Sometimes he tried to steal a march on his competitors by applying an hour earlier than the time stated in the advertisement, but there were generally a dozen unfortunates there before him, with all of whom it was painfully apparent that they had made a struggle to look "decent." Each, too, seemed to endeavour to excel his rivals in the air of indifference he assumed, as if it was of no consequence whether he got the berth or not, although it was a matter of almost life or death to him.

The writer says in conclusion, "I seriously doubt whether anything can be done for us, we are so many."

How many anxious mothers or fathers in country homes—knowing little of London except that it is a great wilderness of brick and mortar, full of temptations—wish that they had some experienced friend who could instruct them where to place their boy, that he might have some sort of kindly guardianship, somebody of whom to ask advice, some observant eye, some gentle yet restraining hand! Who is to know what may be the repulsive dreariness of some dull London lodging, where the landlord and landlady have enough to do to make a living out of the rent, without undertaking half-parental responsibilities? Who can estimate the too fatal attractions of the music-hall, the

billiard-room, the sporting tavern, the casino, entered at first from curiosity, or the necessity to find some place of recreation after a day's monotonous work?

Now, we would ask, why should there not be in and near this great City of London "Inns" for clerks; which might in a quiet humble way combine something of the features of what the Inns of Court once were to young law students, and something of what the present reformation in expenditure and the freer admission of undergraduates are effecting in a few of the colleges in our Universities?

In the old days the Inns were places for young clerks (as clerks were then understood) to live in at their own charges, under the safe superintendence of a council or society, which regulated their affairs for them, provided commons, and a table in hall, lodging, necessary attendance, and even the loan of furniture at a rate consistent with small incomes; and at Oxford and Cambridge mere boys—for in those days degrees were taken by lads of fourteen and fifteen—went into residence and lived in community under the direction of potent, grave, and reverend seigneurs, who made sustenance easy for them, and provided the material at a very moderate rate—an easy matter enough where hundreds are lodged and catered for day by day. Let us take one of our colleges at Oxford now—say Keble College, for instance—where for about £50 a year a resident has the privilege of the common hall and can draw his commons at pleasure, lodging in a comfortable room, for which plain furniture can be hired cheaply, and having all the advantages of high education under some of the most distinguished tutors in England. In one or two previous numbers of this Magazine, the question of the cost of residence and non-residence at the Universities has been entered into fully enough, and we need not follow too closely the strict collegiate notion in asking why we cannot found clerks' Inns in London. Surely there should be no lack of able, kindly, and wealthy men who would undertake to bless the leisure which partial retirement from business and easy fortune have given them, by becoming active promoters of such foundations under the general supervision, let us say, of the Corporation of London, the City members, and others forming a general council. More than one noble institution has arisen under such guardianship, and is now maintained efficiently and honourably, and there is such an evident desire to extend the truly useful functions of local self-government, that clerks' Inns would not be long a-building if the notion were once taken up in earnest.

We all know how the demand for industrial dwellings has resulted in half-a-dozen great edifices, and there is surely some land on the City borders where, after the fashion of the colleges, plain substantial buildings, consisting of comfortable rooms—dining-rooms, lecture-rooms, recreation-rooms, butteries, servants' quarters, reading-rooms, and even billiard and smoking-rooms—might surround a quadrangle with its trees and garden. Surely thousands of young men in London would rejoice to join such an institution, admission to which would itself be a mark of good character; and

professors and tutors would work willingly enough amid such promising souls as could be gathered from counting-house and warehouse to revive the schooling they had almost forgotten, and extend it to the advantage of society, and the benefit of their own lives here and hereafter. The scheme need not be weighted with the burden of charity in a pecuniary sense. It could be made self-supporting, just as "sailors' homes" are, for the numbers to be provided for would so reduce the cost of actual provision as to bring the necessary annual payment for partial or entire board, lodging, washing, and hire or purchase of furniture within the means even of the very poorly paid—while education and courses of lectures might well be included in the fees. Even the expense of clothing might be considerably diminished by the acceptance of contracts with tailors, hosiers, bootmakers, &c., of acknowledged reputation, who would hold the privilege of supplying residents who chose to deal with them, under certain conditions. Of course it may be said in reply that this would be interfering with the regular course of trade, that the residents would possess an advantage over the general public. And why not? Let us remember that we are dealing with an altogether exceptional class—exceptional because of poverty, youth, and friendlessness; because of the need of support and guidance—of an authority to which to appeal for help and protection.

We provide for such needs at colleges and public schools, where corporations or councils organise and sustain an association which secures enormous advantages. At one of our great and increasing London schools, where above twelve hundred boys attend daily, about half their number dine well for sixpence, with sufficient meat, bread, and vegetables to satisfy hungry lads; and the whole great assembly, sitting in its large dining-hall, finds the meal hot and ready—a long table being appointed for each kind of meat or savoury dish, so that the choice is made and the place taken at the same moment. The meal lasts less than half-an-hour, and parents often find it cheaper than to keep a dinner ready for their boys, and certainly healthier than that growing lads should fast or make out on sandwiches or bread-and-cheese till school is over, when they have a long journey home.

This is mentioned to show what may be done in this one direction, and it should be remembered that the dinner is provided by a caterer who makes a fair profit on it. It is unlikely that even at a clerks' Inn the members would all dine in common hall at a fixed time, but breakfast, tea, and supper, or commons from the kitchen and buttery, could be served either in hall or lodgings. Crudely as the idea is here suggested, it is worthy of being entertained at a time when co-operative schemes for less worthy objects are constantly pursued with success, and when we consider that a vast multitude of our best youth, wanting the power and the opportunity to combine among themselves, are liable to be perverted, wronged, and ruined in mind, body, and estate, for the want of some definite plan by which they might become a national strength and pride.