

## A PLEA FOR PUBLIC BATHS.



T may, at first sight, almost seem superfluous in the present day to put forth a plea for the institution of public baths. Those who have not given much thought to the subject might, perhaps, ask, "Have we not baths almost everywhere; and does not every one recognise the importance of cleanliness?" In reply to such a question, it may be frankly admitted that in the matter of cleanliness we have, if we regard the English nation as a whole, certainly very much improved upon the habits of our predecessors. We have greater facilities for indulging the practice of ablution, and there are many more people who avail themselves of these facilities now than formerly—the increase being due, not merely to the natural increase of population, but to a greater appreciation of the benefits derivable from the admirable and health-giving practice.

Unfortunately, however, the improvement indicated has been almost wholly confined to the upper and middle classes. We need not go very far back in our history, in order to point to a period when amongst these classes personal cleanliness was by no means the rule—even king and courtiers thinking it no disgrace, apparently, to go for long periods with unwashed skins. Now, the case is certainly very different. It has fortunately come to be regarded as a certain indication of vulgarity and ill-breeding, to be seen in polite society without a clean face and clean hands, or with finger-nails "in mourning." Too often it is to be feared, even amongst society-goers in the present day, the marks of cleanliness are merely external. Scrupulous care is taken to subject face, arms, and hands to a rigorous application of washing-pad, flesh-brush, and towel; but there the process frequently ends, and it is not considered to be as much a duty to put the whole body through the same course at the same time, and with equal frequency and regularity.

I will venture to say—though by many persons it may be considered a bold assertion—that a majority even of those people in this country who are scrupulously particular in the matter of keeping clean hands and faces do not make it a daily habit to use the bath, whether it be a warm or cold bath, a "plunge," a "shower," a "hip," or a "sponge" bath. I mean that though they daily, and perhaps several times a day, apply soap and water to their hands and faces, they do not apply even water to the whole surface of their bodies. No doubt, a bath is regarded by the better classes in the present day as a necessary part of the furniture of a house; but how often, when it is in the house, is it used? Perhaps once or twice a week—daily it may be—in the summer, but much more sparingly, and at much longer intervals, during the frosts of winter. Why, however, is this? Simply, it is answered, because a really healthy appetite for ab-

lution is wanting. This appetite should be a natural one; but, as a matter of fact, it is an acquired one, and the fact that it is indulged to so small an extent, points to a glaring defect in sanitary education. In all well-ordered households, children are accustomed from their earliest infancy to the constant use of the bath. The baby at first has a semi-aquatic existence by reason of continuous "tubbings," and for several years afterwards immersion in the bath once, at least, daily is the rule—the immersion being accompanied on each occasion with a liberal use of soap. Who can venture to question the immense value to a child of such an education as this? In the first place, there is nothing like daily "tubbing," so potent as a means of warding off the attacks of the epidemic and other diseases, which some people are so foolish as to think are necessarily incidental to childhood; and, in the next place, the benefits which will accrue in after-life through the inculcation of such habits of cleanliness are invaluable. It is almost an impossibility that the child who from the first day of its birth, and during the first dozen years of its life, has been subjected, winter and summer, to the beneficial influences of the daily bath, under the careful and watchful superintendence of its mother, or other trustworthy guardian, can become in after-years uncleanly in habits. Under such circumstances, a clean skin would be felt to be as necessary to comfort as clothing on a winter's day.

But in how many households, even amongst the upper and middle classes, is the system of daily and rigorous "tubbing" carried out? Undoubtedly, in many more now than formerly, although, if statistics could be taken, it would probably be found that there is a lamentable want of thoroughness in carrying out this system, even in what may in general be regarded as "well-regulated households." Why is it that when an epidemic is raging, certain families in particular streets, even in the most open and healthy districts, appear to be, as it were, selected by the disease as its victims? Who can say that the result has not much to do with the personal habits of the members of such families? I do not propose to enter into any discussion of the question of contagion; it is a mysterious question, but I believe it has been pretty clearly established that the rapidity with which contagion spreads amongst a population largely depends upon their cleanly or uncleanly habits, and that a clean skin is an important factor in determining the power of resistance to the influence of contagion. When an epidemic comes, disinfectants are largely employed in many households to keep it at a distance. But it is not sufficiently remembered that the best of disinfectants is a wholesome skin; and that not only on its own account, but because its existence presupposes, for the reason that it induces, encourages, and promotes, cleanly habits in regard to everything.

Still, after all that I have said, I adhere to my original admission that there has been great progress during the last two or three centuries in the direction

of more cleanly habits amongst the upper and middle classes. There has also been some improvement of the same kind amongst the working classes and the poor, but not in so great a degree. The improvement in these classes has taken the form of a somewhat greater attention to external marks of cleanliness, but the bath amongst them is an institution which has been almost wholly ignored, except during, perhaps, a few weeks each year of the hottest summer weather. It is, indeed, an unfortunate fact that there are hundreds of thousands of our working men, employed both in the great town centres and in the rural districts, who either have never subjected their bodies to entire immersion in water, or have only done so a few times during the whole course of their lives. Great numbers of them—more especially, of course, those who are employed in dirty occupations—scarcely even wash their faces and hands from week's end to week's end; and to such the idea of taking a bath, if it has ever occurred to them at all, has presented itself in the light of a most alarming ordeal—in the light, in fact, of a shock to the system.

Now this, it must be admitted, is a very sad state of things, the existence of which, as we have seen, largely promotes other uncleanly habits than that indicated by the neglect of the bath, and largely increases the ravages of disease amongst the working classes. But what are the reasons for the existence of a state of things which is certainly discreditable to our modern civilisation, and altogether inconsistent with the progress which sanitary reform has made in other directions? They are chiefly two—the absence of facilities for bathing, and the absence of a healthy appetite for ablation. When during our summer seasons the thermometer registers an unusual degree of heat, a considerable number of people, washed and “unwashed” alike, are glad to avail themselves of any existing facilities for bathing, and at such times the bathing-places in or near populous districts are besieged by eager crowds, anxious to seek the temporary relief from the oppressiveness of the weather afforded by a plunge into cold water. On such occasions the temperature develops a sudden and natural appetite for bathing in people who have for months before been totally indifferent concerning the matter of clean skins. Proof of this can be had from any bathing-station in a populous district; and some remarkable instances of the way in which people “come out” in their thousands to bathe during the sweltering heats of summer are afforded in the London parks. In one of these—Victoria Park—it was determined, not very long since, to try the experiment of departing from the long-established park rules, to the extent of allowing one of the smaller lakes to be open for bathing during certain hours of the evening, for a fixed period during the summer months. Previous to this, bathing had only been allowed in this lake each morning between the hours of four and eight. The result of the concession was the exhibition of a remarkable spectacle. During the first few weeks of “evening bathing” the water literally swarmed with bathers, its surface being almost hidden by a sea of human heads. It was

obvious that thousands of these evening bathers had been strangers to a bath of any kind for a very long period prior to their first dip in the Victoria Park lake. After the first trial, however, during one bathing season of this experiment, the permission to bathe in the evening had to be withdrawn, because, the lake being small and there being no adequate means of draining it of its contents, the water was speedily brought into a filthy condition, in consequence of the vast number of people who bathed in it. But this result only proved the existence of a great want on the part of a vast working population—a want that could not be met by an adequate supply. Still, the vast numbers of people who crowded to this bathing-place on those hot summer evenings were only influenced by a temporary craving for a bath; for during the colder days of the same summer the banks of the lake were almost deserted by bathers—a fact which proves that “the great unwashed” who came out on the hot evenings were not influenced by a really healthy appetite for bathing. But the absence of such an appetite cannot be wondered at, when it is remembered how sadly neglected is the physical education of the children of the labouring poor. If the children are not from their infancy taught both by precept and example the value of cleanliness, how can it be expected that they shall grow up cleanly men and women?

What, then, is the remedy for the existing state of things? I reply, the general and systematic institution of public baths under State authority in every populous district, whether in town or country. It happens that there is an Act of Parliament in existence (the Baths and Wash-houses Act, 9 & 10 Vict., c. 74) which “empowers” the local authorities in cities and towns to provide public baths wherever they may be needed. But this Act is practically almost a dead letter. Its admirable intentions, however, may be gathered from its provisions. In the preamble it is set forth that “it is desirable, for the health, comfort, and welfare of the inhabitants of towns and populous districts, to encourage the establishment therein of public baths and wash-houses, and open bathing-places.” It was especially for the benefit of the poorer inhabitants of populous districts that this Act was passed; for it was considered, and very justly, that in cases where the upper and middle classes had not baths in their own houses they could better afford to pay for the necessary accommodation than their poorer fellow-citizens. Still, as it was decreed that wherever baths were established under the Baths and Wash-houses Act, the expenses of erection and maintenance should be borne by the entire body of rate-payers, it was necessary not to omit some provision for the higher classes in towns. It was therefore stipulated in the 36th clause of the Act that the number of baths to be provided in any building erected under the Act for the labouring classes should be not less than double the number to be provided for persons of a higher class.

The tariff of charges for bathing scheduled in the Act is admirably adapted to meet the wants of the

poor "in populous cities pent." For persons other than very young children—that is to say, persons over eight years of age—the charge for a cold bath, including the use of "one clean towel," is to be one penny only; for a hot bath, with the use of a towel, twopence. For several children, not exceeding four, including the use of a clean towel for each child, the charge for a cold bath is fixed at twopence, and for a warm bath, fourpence. Where, in such bath-houses as may be erected under the authority of the Act, open bathing-places are provided for the use of a number of persons at one time, the charge for each person bathing is to be one halfpenny.

The majority of the public are, I believe, ignorant of the provisions, if not of the very existence of this excellent Act—excellent, unfortunately, only in so far as its provisions are concerned, but defective on account of the circumstance that these provisions are permissive. Being simply permissive, they have proved to a large extent, as we have seen, to be a dead letter. And why is this? The answer is, that our local authorities, in a very large number of instances, have not yet been educated up to the point of appreciating the inestimable benefits to be derived from a regular and systematic use of the bath. In a few towns, it is true, some very excellent public baths have been erected under the powers of the Baths and Wash-houses Act. But, where this has been done, the wants of the poor have not in the majority of instances been sufficiently considered, for the bath-houses have been mostly placed out of the immediate reach of the poor, and have been constructed rather with a view to ornamental effect than to use. To encourage the poor to use them, they should be built near their houses, and it should be as much the duty of medical officers of health, and other public sanitary officers, to inculcate the necessity—nay, the duty—of a constant resort to the bath, as to insist upon obedience to the provisions of the Public Health Acts.

It seems to me that there is a great and good work in this direction to be performed by our School

Boards, which are now entrusted with the education of the children of the poor. Fortunately, the mistaken notion which used to prevail, that education merely concerned the acquisition of a certain amount of book-knowledge, has been exploded, and the importance of physical education is being duly recognised. Military drill, for instance, now forms a part of the physical curriculum in a large number of the elementary schools of the country; and the London School Board some time since, I am glad to say, sought from the Commissioners of Public Works, for the children of some of its schools, the special permission to bathe in the public parks.

Why should it not be as compulsory upon the children in our Board Schools to receive the inestimable benefits resulting from the daily use of the bath, as to receive the advantages of instruction in the three R's? If proper facilities for bathing were provided, it would be as easy each day to subject the children to the process of ablution as to put them through their daily course of ordinary school instruction. But, for all classes and all ages, every possible opportunity should be given for indulging in the daily practice of the bath. And the central Government should lead the way in the promotion of this vitally necessary reform. Public baths should be erected throughout the length and breadth of the land, not by a permission, but by a binding enactment. This should be as much a public duty as the construction of town drainage or the making of public roads; and when this duty has been performed, every possible inducement should be offered to the people of all ages and sexes—due and proper provision being made for each—to avail themselves of the advantages which the State had placed within their reach. If the reform which is here earnestly advocated were carried out, untold blessings would be heaped on the heads of the crowded populations of our towns, as the result would be a measure of comfort, health, and happiness, which it is beyond the power of the pen adequately to describe.

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## THE GATHERER.

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### Transformation Window-Blinds.

Among recent patents for the improvement of household furniture is one dealing with window-blinds, window-screens, louvres, fire-screens, and other articles of a similar kind. By means of it, the light in a room may be varied in several different ways; it will prove very convenient in suiting the light to the complexion of a sensitive visitor, or maybe in showing off a new dress to the best advantage. A window-screen, for example, is constructed of slips of glass of suitable length, width, and thickness, say eighteen inches by one inch by a quarter of an inch; these are arranged, either vertically or horizontally, at

a proper distance apart, in a frame, so that each slip can be rotated upon its axis. Slips of two different colours are used—say yellow and blue—and these are placed alternately. By this simple means a screen is obtained capable of producing five distinct effects—first, when all the yellow slips are arranged with their flat sides to view, and the blue with their edges to view, the whole screen will present a yellow appearance; secondly, when all the blue slips present their flat sides, and the yellow their edges to view, the whole appearance will be blue; thirdly, when they are all oblique and parallel, the appearance will be stripes of yellow, green, and blue, the green being caused by the