



CHILDREN'S HAPPY EVENINGS.

By MRS. JEUNE.

Illustrated by H. S. PERCY.

PROBABLY no more fortunate name was ever devised for an association than that which heads my paper, for it describes accurately the work and results it accomplishes. It has been in existence so short a time, and its rules and aims are so little known—its operations being entirely confined to the metropolis—that a short account of it may not be uninteresting, especially to those who may wish to carry on similar work in other large towns or country villages. The work has two distinctive peculiarities which distinguish it from most charitable undertakings, namely, its extremely economical character and its being a purely voluntary undertaking.

The Children's Happy Evenings must not be confounded with that of a kindred association of a somewhat similar nature, the Evening Recreation Classes in Board Schools, for though recreation plays an important part in the work of the latter, it is always subordinated to that of education. The primary object of the Evening Recreation Classes is continuing the education, which has been interrupted in the case of its members by the necessity of earning their daily bread. "Half-timers," boys and girls who have gone to work, but who still desire to continue their education, are the students the Evening Recreation Classes prefer, and the support they receive from the public is given by those who consider education the most valuable possession a working man or woman can acquire. The Children's Happy Evenings have no such aspiration; they also believe in the value of a good education, but with education they feel something more should be understood than the three R's and the bare knowledge that is the result of the study of books.

The system of education carried out among the children of the "masses" in this country fails lamentably in one important particular in contrast to that pursued by the "classes"; namely, that while the children of the rich are taught to play as well as to work, the children of the poor are only trained to labour; and the effects of such training has been shown in a curious and yet sad way amongst those belonging to the poorest parts of London, who, when brought into the schools to play, knew nothing whatever of any games or amusements, and had really to be taught to enjoy themselves. The games which richer children enjoy and romp at with all the delight and energy of their nature were quite unknown to these poor little mites, whose experience of amusement was limited to sitting on the kerbstones of the dirty streets and playing with stones for marbles. "Puss-in-boots," "hide-and-seek," "blindman's-buff," were unknown, and their little wondering and puzzled faces on being started to play were comical and yet intensely pathetic.

It is obvious that wholesome recreation is a much more necessary and important element in the education of the poor than among the rich, for their chances of amusement are so reduced when left to their own resources, that they are often of the

lowest and most demoralizing kind. Where we find large families of seven, eight, and nine persons living in one or two rooms, where the strictest economy as to light and warmth has to be practised, there is no place for the children to play in but the streets, and when we think of the sights and sounds the streets present in the lowest and poorest parts of London, we can realize how degrading and demoralizing the effects on the children must be. And it is in the worst parts of our large towns, where the poorest dwell, and the struggle for life is hardest, that the children are perforce driven into the streets to play, that being the only place where an unlimited space for amusement is to be found.

Long after the passing of the Education Act the large school houses with their fine halls and rooms stood silent and empty nearly every night of the week; the closed gates and the high walls surrounding them reminding the children of restraint and discipline rather than of any more pleasant association. To people interested in work among children, the school-rooms presented a constant succession of tantalizing possibilities of what might be done for them in the way of recreation if they could only be utilized for that purpose. The Evening Recreation Classes was the first step in

the right direction, for they created a precedent that might be worked into something practical.

The difficulty in utilizing the school buildings as places of evening recreation arose from the natural feeling that it would not be just or right to expect the teachers to give more of their already heavily-taxed time to superintending this branch of education, unless their helpers were largely increased. Paid help for such a purpose could not be provided by the ratepayers, and the school authorities bent on economy could hardly be expected to suggest so unnecessary an expenditure, while it was equally obvious that the children could not be allowed to use the rooms without proper supervision. The happy thought of starting the Children's Happy Evenings' Association is due to two ladies well known as practical workers among the poor. Miss Ada and Miss Edith Heather Bigg took the matter in hand, and under their



A HIGHLAND SCHOTTISCHE.

auspices a "happy evening" was started in the large Board School in Waterloo Road, of which Miss Bigg was a manager, where with the co-operation of the teachers and the clergymen of the district, the experiment was made, and the inaugural work of what may prove to be a vast and useful movement was explained by Lady Dilke. After the opening proceedings came to an end the restrictions as to quiet were withdrawn and the children told to play, and, from 7.30 to 9.30, when the evening closed, they obeyed their instructions most obediently. Games of all kinds, dances, songs, followed each other in rapid succession, or, as was more often the case, proceeded simultaneously; and when the last good-bye was said and the National Anthem sung, the givers of the entertainment had nothing to do but congratulate themselves on what they had achieved. The good behaviour of the children, the enthusiastic co-operation of the teachers, impressed the hosts of the evening with the conviction that that party could never be their first and last, but that in developing their scheme they were laying the foundations of a work which might have a most important influence on the lives of the children, and at Miss Heather Bigg's suggestion a small committee was formed for the purpose of increasing the scope of her endeavours and for organizing such meetings all over London.

The Association consists of a central committee, to which is affiliated local committees for the districts in which the schools are situated where the evenings take place.

The local committees are chosen from among the school managers and teachers and other ladies and gentlemen, who undertake to be personally responsible for the supervision of the children and the general conduct of the entertainment during the evening ; and each local committee when formed has one member of the central committee belonging to it, whose business is to keep the central committee informed of what happens at each centre.

The Association from the first informed the teachers that they did not expect any personal assistance from them, knowing how hard worked they were during the day ; but many of the teachers have shown their appreciation of the advantages of the evening to their children by giving up the hours of leisure, which they so much need, in order to take part in their amusements, while kindness must much increase their influence with their pupils.

From the first the Association decided that there should be no instruction, religious or secular, introduced during the two hours, but that the whole evening should be devoted to recreation. The form the entertainments take are, however, left entirely to the discretion and capacities of each committee ; but the principal point is to teach the children how to amuse themselves, and the programme generally consists of good old English games and dances, varied with stories, music, and games. Any attempt at instruction is rather resented, and even a magic lantern, unless of a purely frivolous nature, is unpopular. Dancing is undoubtedly what the children love best, and in which they join with the greatest zest, Sir Roger de Coverley and the Highland schottische being apparently the most popular.



THE CHORUS.

The older scholars of the Board Schools are those who benefit most by the evenings, the children selected being over ten years of age, for it is children of that age to whom the streets present most dangers ; and if after leaving school and going to work they desire still to attend, the Association allow them, being very desirable that the influences for good and the friendships formed under its auspices should not be severed at the most critical period of their lives, when they have to face the world as bread-winners. The School Board have welcomed the Association in the warmest way, and placed the school-rooms at their disposal wherever a responsible committee has been formed, and the divisional members and managers have taken the greatest interest in their special localities ; but what is still wanted, and wanted greatly, is volunteer help.

In the richer parts of London there is not much difficulty in getting workers ; the schools are near their homes, and an hour or two in the early part of the evening does not interfere with the helper's amusements, which begin much later ; but when a "happy evening" entails going to Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, or further still, to Clapton, it is a much more serious undertaking, and it is in the distant localities that workers are wanted. There are a few enthusiastic people whose energy and enthusiasm overcome all such difficulties, but in the busy world of London every one's time is now so fully occupied, the work remains more or less stationary, because, with no lack of funds or sympathy, practical help in the form of personal supervision is not forthcoming.

At the commencement of the "happy evenings" the separation of the boys and girls was considered essential, and the first time a proposal was made that they should participate in the same entertainment it was looked on as a dangerous experiment. But the Chelsea local committee proved right in their belief that such a party could be conducted with decorum and yet not prevent the children enjoying themselves ; and the

"happy evening" held in the large hall of the Board School in Cook's Ground, Chelsea, was perhaps the most successful of any that had been attempted. It was a real case of "boys and girls come out to play," for the boys and girls who joined in the dances and games, and whose lusty little throats gave out such noisy shouts of gratitude, were as well-behaved as if they had been princes and princesses, and perhaps for aught we know, a great deal better. In the class-rooms off the big hall many of the older and quieter children enjoyed themselves with quiet games and picture-books, while some of the hosts contributed to their further amusement by singing them comic songs, for singing in chorus is an amusement dear to a London child. "White Wings," "Golden Slippers," "Who's dat a-Callin'?" and such-like songs found a chorus so noisy as to be almost deafening.

The evenings have been most successful in those schools which have a large central hall, for they have more space, and the class-rooms leading out of them afford a retreat to the children who like more sedate amusements than dancing, racing, and blindman's-buff, &c.

In the smaller schools, where there is no hall and the class-rooms are provided with rows of desks which cannot be moved, it is extremely difficult to keep order or to amuse the children, for there is little room, and they keep tumbling over each other and jumping and scrambling all over the forms. The only way in which they can be managed is by dividing them into parties of thirty or forty and entertaining them in different rooms; when the days lengthen and become fine the playgrounds can be utilized and the roofs of the school houses. In one of the schools in Shoreditch where the inside accommodation is very cramped, as soon as the weather admitted of it, the evening's entertainment was held on the roof, where it was enjoyed vastly by the children, and an outside view of the proceedings obtained by all the inhabitants of the poor dingy streets surrounding the school, while the more active school children and boys played bowls and cricket in the playground. The selection of the children who are invited to participate in the evening's amusement is left to the teachers, who are careful as to their choice, but preference is given to those who make the most attendances, and it has been found a great incentive to



THE MYSTERY OF BATTLEDORE AND SHUTTLECOCK.

more regular attendance. In some schools the improvement has been remarkable; for instance, in the schools in Stanhope Street, Euston Road, the attendance has increased materially, so that it has secured the double purpose of amusing the children and bringing them to school.

The Association has now six centres at work in London—in Marylebone, Clapton, Southwark, Chelsea, Lambeth, Shoreditch, and others are being opened; but the real difficulty, as I said before, that the committee have to contend with is that of finding workers who can be depended upon to attend regularly the different localities with which they are affiliated. Money is of course needed, but not to so large an extent, as the extreme simplicity of the amusements, and the cheapness of the toys used does not entail any great expense. There ought not to be such a dearth of workers, for it is an occupation that young girls might undertake, as it is free from so many of the obvious drawbacks of charitable work in London, and young people have a great power of amusing children. The hours are convenient, 7.30 to 9.30, and do not interfere with later amusements nor postpone the hours for going to bed. One

of the greatest expenses connected with the evenings at their commencement, namely, hiring a piano for each evening has been removed by the decision of the School Board that every school with a large hall should have one provided by the Board.

The class of children attending the evenings vary with the locality. In Clapton and Marylebone they are tidily even smartly dressed, very clean and refined in appearance, and children evidently of the better class of working men. In Chelsea they are about the same in appearance and manners. In Lambeth and Southwark they are nice and clean, but of a poorer class. It is not till we get to Shoreditch and Bethnal Green that we see how very poor and miserable masses of London children can be. In all cases they come with clean faces and hands, but their clothes are ragged and well-worn, and their boots hardly to be dignified by the name. It was among these children that we found they knew hardly any games; even tops, battledore and shuttlecock were mysteries to them, and one lady describes with much pathos how surprised some of the boys were when she showed them how to start some most simple games. What a picture of the blankness and emptiness of the lives of these poor little souls this describes, where no harmless, healthy recreation has ever come into their existence, and where even the most elementary pleasures of children are unknown.

There may be many and divers opinions as to the desirability of giving free dinners to school children, or the wisdom of doing away with school pence, but there can be none to the proposition that the poor children have as much right to healthy recreation and amusement as our well-to-do little ones. Their lives must be hard and weary whatever happens, and if we can shed a little sunshine and happiness on their pathway through the world we ought to snatch at the opportunity.

All who work among the poor and know them must realize that very little, if anything, can be done to raise them out of a condition mainly brought about by their own weaknesses. Their lives are made and must run their course as they have begun, and we can do little or nothing to modify or improve them; but with children it is quite different. Youth is a time of hope and possibilities, when everything is bright, when the mind receives impressions it never loses, and when belief in God and the desire for perfection is strong and unconquerable, and the amusement and recreation provided for children give them a taste and a desire for higher things, and a memory that remains with them all their life.

There are many ways in which my readers can help the movement without any great effort on their part. In the first place, they can open such evenings in the schools near where they live, and they can if they live in the country carry out the same work there, for if country children have greater opportunities and facilities for recreation than the town children, they equally need the sympathy and help which comes from association with those happier and better off than themselves. And apart from the pleasure and enjoyment we can give the children, association in their enjoyment brings us into closer sympathy with them, and they come to look on us as friends, associating us with all the events of their lives, regarding our friendship as a privilege, and in all the events of their career expecting our advice and support, considering it as a preliminary to any important step they may take in life. This, no doubt, will be one of the results of the work and the most important, and the fact that £10 a year will support a happy evening twice a month during the year—must encourage many to try and help on a work that costs so little and gives pleasure out of all proportion to its expense; remembering also that association with those more fortunate than themselves, and who they see are anxious to bring more sunshine and comfort into their lives, is a greater boon to the poor than many of the more commonly accepted means of helping them, for it unites them with us in a common bond of sympathy, and that sympathy is part of the golden chain of Christ's love for suffering humanity, of which our work is but one small link.