

RAGGED SCHOOLS—OLD AND NEW.

BY G. HOLDEN PIKE.



"ALL IN!" A SKETCH AT NELSON STREET SCHOOL.



WE can easily imagine that to the future historian one of the most striking characteristics of the Victorian era will be that gradual transformation of London which has taken place before the eyes of persons who have now arrived at middle age.

One well-known writer on the old times and the new has shown to his own satisfaction that the shadow and the influence of the eighteenth century really extended to the end of the reign of William IV. According to this view, the accession of the present Queen really introduced a new order of things—the era of progress and of philanthropy with which we are so pleasantly familiar. So familiar, indeed, have we happily become with a number of things now reckoned among the common-places of our everyday life, that we may sometimes be disposed to forget that it was not always so; that not only is education on a national scale a new thing, but that widespread missionary zeal, whether at home or abroad, is also peculiar to our modern life—something that our forefathers would have regarded as impracticable, or quite Utopian, before the nation's religious life became quickened by its catching some of the divine enthusiasm of the New Testament. It is quite impossible for us, with our present surroundings, to realise what London was when there was an Alsatia between Fleet Street and

the Thames; when St. Giles's retained its rookeries intact; when the East End had its bands of robbers, who were dangerous even in the light of open day.

When the Ragged School crusade commenced, more than forty years ago, our great capital, though only half its present size, remained what it had been for generations; and the amount of squalor, ignorance, and crime to be seen, made up an outlook which dismayed, or even seriously alarmed, the boldest adventurers in the new enterprise. Now, the conditions have altogether altered; and having grown with the times, the teachers have to adapt themselves to the altered requirements of the situation. The creation of the School Boards has rendered old methods of work in some degree obsolete; but, nevertheless, the distinctive religious teaching of the Ragged School Union is still a necessity, and will remain a mighty power so long as fifty thousand boys and girls are found in the schools of London alone on every Sabbath day.

While what may be called the transformation of London is one of the most characteristic things associated with the present reign, there are spots here and there which retain their old-time face, and these aid the social explorer to realise what the more hidden parts of the great city were like half a century ago. Of course, since the creation of local Boards of Health sanitation has made sufficient progress for it to be impossible for things ever really to be again what they once were; but although drainage and the water

supply have improved, there are purlieus which in general outward features still greet us with their old-time face. Perhaps one of the most remarkable of these comparatively little-known by-ways is Kent Street, Southwark, which in other days, before the construction of Great Dover Street, was the only entrance into London from the Old Kent Road. This is the identical highway that the Canterbury Pilgrims must have taken when they set out from the old Tabard Inn on their memorable pilgrimage. Five hundred years ago, when the fields of Surrey came up to within a few hundred yards of London Bridge, what afterwards became known as Kent Street would of course be a country lane; but in course of time the thoroughfare became so remarkable for its squalor, that Londoners who were visited by distinguished foreigners were scandalised at the city in which they took so much pride having to be approached by such a miserable street. Then, in about the middle of this century, the Lord Mayor in semi-state laid the first stone of the present Lansdowne Place school, which still remains, and which is apparently as much needed as ever. Persons interested in the subject, and who may wish to study what are, in some measure, photographs of the past—London as it was—should visit this district in the south, and Nichol Street, Bethnal Green, in the east.

Thus the transformation of London, which has been in progress for half a century, means that the



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conditions of Ragged School work have altered; and that they have altered for the better. The present generation of teachers are reaping the fruits of the seed-sowing of those pioneers who, as Lord

Shaftesbury often insisted, found in their work a service of danger. The rags, the extreme filth, which at first characterised the majority of the scholars; their untamed hilarity, which suggested all kinds of horse-play, even in school hours—are things of the past; and boys and girls who are still, in conventional language, classed with the ragged, are decently clad, and are as teachable as those who go to boarding schools. This is so much gain—a matter for congratulation all round, so long as the public do not rush to the conclusion that the work of the Ragged School Union is obsolete. This would be to throw up the work because success has begun to attend it, or to turn back the tide of blessing which is coming in. It would not be difficult to show that the necessity for the work carried on by this band of teachers is greater than ever, and that never before did the expenditure of labour yield so encouraging a return. Even now to support the cause of the Ragged School Union is the most ready all-round method of benefiting the poorest people of all ages.

If the times have changed, how shall the teachers adapt their operations to the altered needs of their still teeming constituency?

In a number of instances they are doing this by rebuilding the schools. In other days, anything was thought to be good enough for a Ragged School; or rather, such was the crying need of their pitiable scholars, that teachers who began the work were content to gather their classes in any buildings that could be procured—a loft or a disused stable, lighted or warmed in a very primitive fashion, being readily and even thankfully appropriated. The teachers bore with the inconvenience, while to the uncivilised scholars there was nothing incongruous in the roughest accommodation. Even under these conditions such a wonderful harvest was gathered that Lord Shaftesbury is not supposed to have exaggerated when he said that the Union had been instrumental in saving three hundred thousand young persons from lapsing into crime.

But though wisdom was shown by beginning with the smallest possible capital, the shifts that did for other days would now simply ensure absolute failure. Thus the movement may be said to have entered on a new era; and in the conveniently arranged school-houses that have arisen in various quarters we have the best possible evidence that the work is not dying of inanition, but has, in reality, renewed its youth. The Ragged School in no sense disputes the ground with the School Board; it is rather its ally. It is, indeed, the complement of our national system of education. The houses in which the classes are now gathered would have struck the old pioneers with astonishment; but although we can imagine their confessing that Christian teachers among the poor were now enabled to walk in silver slippers, the buildings are by no means ahead of modern requirements.

Thoroughly to judge of the advances made, and of what is now being done, interested persons should visit such representative institutions as that in Nelson Street, Camberwell, and that in King Edward Street,

Spitalfields. The first, which is one of the oldest institutions of its kind in London, being associated in its early days with Cranfield and the Duke of Sussex—is now superintended by Mr. John Kirk, secretary of the Ragged School Union, of Exeter Hall, Strand; while that in Spitalfields is looked after by Mr. Charles Montague, who was formerly a scholar in the school,

in its growth, sends out continually new fruit-bearing branches. No class of workers among the poor have been more ingeniously inventive than Ragged School teachers, and from the earliest days of the enterprise to the present time they have uniformly proved themselves to be the benefactors of the poorest of the people of all ages. Should any serious epidemic



AN OLD-TIME RAGGED SCHOOL.

To our mind, modern philanthropy can show no greater triumph than for a school in this way to rear its own superintendent, a man who has certainly proved himself a benefactor to the whole district.

Having thus provided school-houses more worthy of the times—a portion of the cost of which is supplied by the Shaftesbury Fund, established by the Committee of the Ragged School Union for that purpose—the teachers are endeavouring in every possible way to adapt their mode of operation to the requirements of the times. The Ragged School is compared to a fruitful tree which, as a reward to those who attend to its culture and show interest

break out, we find them on the track of the destroyer, attending to the sick and supplying what is wanted. They teach the people the value of sanitation, and supply lime-wash and brushes to such as can be prevailed upon to use them. Poor women, who could not otherwise leave home comfortably to go to work, have their young children taken care of during the day; the "lowest down" of all are encouraged at Sunday morning breakfasts to make one more endeavour to rise; and in many other ways the helpful hand is held out to such as will take advantage of what is offered. For forty years or more, the Ragged School has even proved itself to be one of the best



of emigration agencies, and in all of our flourishing colonies its *protégés*—who, by doing well for themselves, have proved an honour to their country—are to be found. Then it should not be forgotten that the shoeblack brigades represent a Ragged School experiment, the thought of which originally occurred to the mind of Mr. John Macgregor ("Rob Roy") in 1851, when all London was excited over the Great Exhibition. Not that cleaning boots in the streets has ever been looked upon as a permanent occupation; it is merely temporary, a stepping-stone to something better. At the same time, it is not a business to be despised, in face of the fact that the Protestant brigades alone earn nearly £1,000 a month in the streets of London.

One of the things to which the teachers are enabled to give special attention with great advantage is that of pure literature. In the past, when children came to the schools to begin with the alphabet, there was no danger of their being injured by bad reading. But it is far otherwise to-day, when one and all are taught to read in Board-schools, and when, to meet the demand for reading thus created, the market is too plentifully supplied with that which can only enervate the taste and corrupt the morals. Newsvendors will testify that whereas, in other days, children gathered around shop-windows to look at the pictures in the papers, they now, having the ability to read, buy them for themselves. We all know what this means. The presses of St. Giles's, which of old

supplied patterers and "flying stationers" with songs, broadsides, and chap-books, are now supplemented by other adventurous printers, who carry on business on a larger scale; and one of the most dangerous plagues of our modern life is represented by penny novels and cheap serials of a debasing kind, which are poured forth by hundreds of thousands every week. To check the progress of this plague, it is necessary not only to provide something better, but to make an effort to ensure that the children shall read something better when it is provided. This is what the Ragged Schools are doing, and the more that is done in this department, the easier will boys and girls find it become to rise to creditable situations in life. Again and again has it been proved, both in and out of the police-courts, that there is no greater snare to the young than bad reading, and nothing which more effectively trains them for a course of crime and ruin. When we know it to be a fact that one school will extend its influence to a thousand families, we can, in some measure, realise how great a work can be achieved in this department. Its importance will be further seen when we consider that unbelief in its varied phases is much more aggressive than it was a generation ago; and by every means, both fair and unfair, it is seeking to bring the common people within its toils. Atheism and Secularism are making efforts to identify themselves with the cause of the common people, and by means of a sham philanthropy to create prejudice in their own favour and against Christianity.

Then, more than was ever the case before, the Ragged School of to-day is endeavouring to retain its hold of the elder scholars; and to do this, rooms for evening classes and recreation have to be provided. It is therefore, in its own way, doing the work of a Young Men's Christian Association among youths of humble social station, who have no facilities for reading and amusement in their own homes. Lads and young men who would otherwise have to loiter away their hours in the street, or seek entertainment in questionable or even vicious places, are held together, and have conferred upon them positive good. A few may even be prevailed upon to continue their too scant education at the evening classes, and thus lay the foundation of future prosperity and usefulness. All this is a development which the pioneer teachers could hardly have foreseen when bent upon their original enterprise of rescuing a few miserable subjects from the pains of squalor, ignorance, and crime.

Another branch of the ragged-school tree which has been long instituted but recently developed is that of summer country holidays for children, who naturally pine for the fresh air of woods and fields which ought to be theirs by birthright. The time-honoured institution of "A Day in the Country" is, of course, still maintained, otherwise crowds of children would hardly see the country at all; but, in addition to this, the establishment of convenient holiday homes in attractive and salubrious districts within fifty miles of London has conferred greater benefit on poor children than can readily be told. At East

Grinstead, Thursley Common, and elsewhere, these pleasant haunts—all of which seem to be remarkably well adapted for their purpose—invite the inspection of the friends of children, and the contributions of those who desire to confer on children health and pleasure. Throughout the summer, successive batches of visitors are received, who come for a fortnight at a time, very great care in selection being exercised in every instance. While it is necessary to avoid taking any who are suffering from disease, care is taken to select such as are most likely to benefit by the change. The experiment may be pronounced a success all round, and the more so because, as a rule, the children's relatives bear some small proportion of the expense.

The testimonies which come to hand of the extreme joy with which the country is greeted by the little holiday-keepers, and of the marked improvement in health which many of the most delicate show when their fortnight has expired, are a reward as well as an encouragement to those who take upon themselves the trouble of the enterprise. This movement also shows a disposition to expand; and it is not improbable that it may become more and more self-paying when the industrial classes of the better kind

realise more the advantage which comes of their children spending a fortnight among bracing and educating scenes during a time when both the moral and physical nature are most susceptible of genial influences.

Hence the Ragged School Union is adapting itself to altered circumstances; but while this is so, the original idea which the great Earl of Shaftesbury and his heroic band of pioneers had in their minds is not for a moment lost sight of. The Ragged School is still both a preventive and a rescue agency; but unlike some other enterprises which give undue prominence to this department, it mainly exists to diffuse a knowledge of true religion among the people. The Union is therefore the fitting almoner of those who desire that their money shall go to benefit the poor in what one may call a thoroughly all-round fashion. To maintain the enterprise of such a comprehensive institution is not only the truest charity: it shows discerning wisdom as well as a large heart. It is wisdom which refuses to accept the notion that what is conventionally called Ragged School work is obsolete; the Christian work being, in point of fact, more needful than ever, now that secular education on a national scale has been undertaken by the State.