

“JESUS OF NAZARETH PASSETH BY.”
From a drawing by the Hon. Miss Egerton.

“Such as Sit in Darkness.”

By Our Own Charity Commissioner.



HERE is a procession approaching. Let us stand and see it pass. A banner precedes it bearing the legend, “Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on us.” The procession consists of men, women and children, walking four abreast. See how piteously they hold each other’s hands; how they lean towards each other for support; how tremulous and hesitant is their step. It is a procession of the blind. Let us stand still and count them as they pass. An hour has gone by. Are you weary? Stay but a little longer. Surely the end will come soon. Another hour, and yet the interminable ranks file past. At last! The end of this sad procession of darkened ones is in sight. We have stood three hours, and during that time the twenty thousand poor, blind folk to be found in these Islands alone have passed us in review. A few seemed prosperous, did they not, for blindness comes to rich and poor, and the possession of wealth cannot always keep this dreadful affliction of darkness from the lives of our best beloved, but the vast majority looked poor and neglected. The lack of sight has meant the lack of much more, for the handicap in life’s race has been too severe for the competitors. Think of it! twenty thousand! and yet you and I, having the blessing of sight and being unable to imagine life without it, perhaps never give

this awful fact a thought, except when we drop a penny into a blind mendicant’s box and pass on pluming ourselves upon our generosity and kind-heartedness.

Blindness seemed to appeal very specially to the Master’s pity and healing power. The opening of the eyes of the blind is peculiarly typical of His mission of mercy and enlightenment, and yet it is in comparatively late years that the Christian world has learned from the Master’s beautiful object lessons of love and mercy, that the blind have a special claim upon Christian benevolence.

There was a time when the blind poor had the choice of but two alternatives—to be a burden or a beggar. That day is past. A real and effective effort has been made, during the last few years especially, to furnish the blind with the means of earning a livelihood. This is all in the right direction, for self-help is ever the best help. But when all this has been done, there is still a terrible residue of misery, poverty, and helplessness. With respect to the blind it might almost be said that, if Providence decree blindness, it were a mercy to decree it early, so that preparation may be made for a disability which must be lifelong. But what of those who, never having learned the art of seeing with the hands and the feet, are suddenly plunged into a darkness that only death will end?

I am looking down a long list. Here is a man at Lowestoft, suddenly smitten blind by an explosion; a quarryman in Scotland,



BLIND, POOR, BUT HAPPY.

similarly blasted into darkness; a promising young workman, earning his living and supporting his wife and child, smitten with irremediable blindness by disease, and, perhaps the most helpless and most hopeless of all, an old man blind with age, whose only refuge is the workhouse!

Surely any charity which can deal with such cases as these, and can bring even a

little light into sunless lives, is worthy of the support of all who love their fellow-men, and especially of those who are blest with a superfluity of riches.

And there is such a charity. It is called "The National Blind Relief Society," and its mission is a Christ-like and beneficent one.

I called on the Rev. J. Pullein-Thompson,

who, besides being the hard-working vicar of Christ Church, Chelsea, and a man of many and various activities, is the Secretary of this Society.

I sat with him in his study, which contained all the visible accessories of this great work, while he told me the story of its rise and progress.

The "Christian Blind Relief Society," now called the "National," was founded fifty-eight years ago by Thomas Clark. A London tradesman lost his sight by an explosion. He was one of the first inventors of Congreve matches, and it was while occupied in their preparation that the explosion occurred which cost him so dear. His misfortune plunged him into poverty and ruin, and it was his case that touched the heart of Thomas Clark and led to the inception and establishment of the Society.

"Strangely enough," said Mr. Thompson, "Thomas Clark, who remained the Secretary for over forty years, was eventually obliged to relinquish the work on account of blindness, and later his wife was also obliged to give it up owing to a like cause."

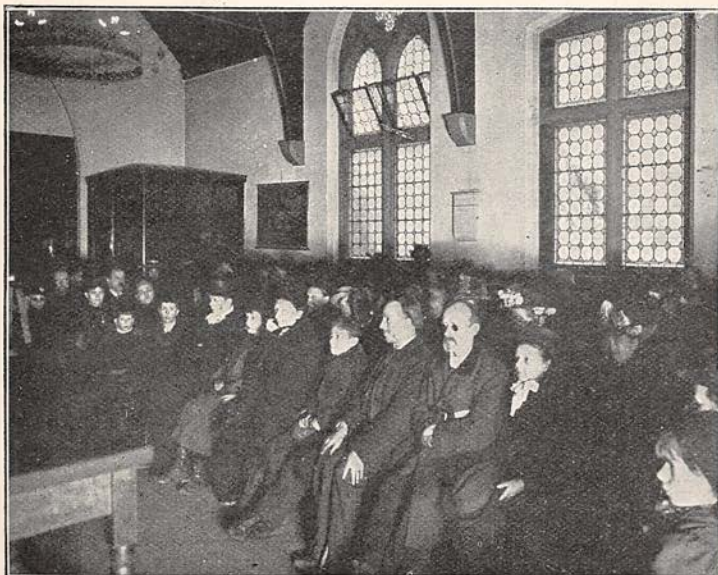
"It is to be hoped," I remarked, "that this fate is not an appendage to the office?"

"Well," laughed Mr. Thompson, "there are no present indications of it; but, even if it were so, the joy of the work is worth the sacrifice. Ours is a Society for the granting of little pensions, and these are given to the poorest of the poor. The only qualifications

we require from our candidates are poverty, worth, and—blindness."

"You are a clergyman of the Church of England," I said. "Do you make membership of your own Church a condition of a candidate's acceptance?"

"By no means," said Mr. Thompson, with emphasis. "The Society is National in every sense of the word, for our pensioners are to be found from John o' Groat's to Land's End, and they are at perfect liberty to worship God according to their own conscience. I don't read that Jesus Christ asked blind Bartimæus what his creed was, and I



BLIND PENSIONERS WAITING TO RECEIVE THEIR MONTHLY INSTALMENT.

Photo by Geo. Newnes, Ltd.

am well content if I can but follow, even at a distance, in the Master's footsteps.

"The most outstanding fact with regard to this Society," went on Mr. Thompson, "is that it has no working or office expenses. Mrs. Clark was a member of my congregation when I worked in the East End of London, and, as the Society seemed at that time in danger of collapsing for want of a secretary, I took it in hand along with the rest of my work. I need scarcely say that I have never reaped any monetary advantage from it, and I should never think of doing so. The Committee meet in my dining-room, and all inquiries into the merits of each applicant, and all payments of the pensions are undertaken voluntarily by members of the Committee."

"He helps twice who helps quickly," I said. "I have heard of charitable societies keeping their beneficiaries waiting for years before the promised help was bestowed."

"That is so," said Mr. Thompson, "and this has been the rock of which I have always striven to steer clear. During my time, no pensioner who has been accepted has been kept longer than twelve months before entering upon the benefits of the Society. All applicants for pensions are considered in their turn. There is no favour, or uncertainty as to what pension the applicant will receive, or whether the applicant has sufficient influential friends to secure one at all. The only qualifications, as I said before, are blindness, good character, and need. Applicants gaining their livelihood by mendicity, or by playing a musical instrument in the streets or ale-houses, and applicants who are in possession of an income of £20, if single, or £30, if married, are ineligible to receive any benefit, so that you will see we cannot fail to benefit the poorest of the poor."

"And how much do you give to each person?" I asked.

"One pound a month is our highest figure, and ten shillings a month is the most general. There are people who have lifted their hands in astonishment when I have told them this, exclaiming 'What a very small sum!'

but it is really wonderful what a difference this 'very small sum' makes, when the total income is reckoned rather in pence than pounds. The lady who gives fifteen guineas for her bonnet and spends a hundred pounds in flowers for table decoration, finds it difficult to understand how any one, even in possession of all his senses, can make ends meet on fifteen



ONE OF THE 20,000.

shillings a week, but if they had lived for years in the East End of London, as I have, they would appreciate the difference an extra shilling a week makes to the comfort, not only of an individual, but of a whole family.

"It means in winter time a fire in place of a cold, cheerless hearth, or the ability to purchase some little luxury such as tea, sugar and



THE COMMITTEE OF THE NATIONAL BLIND RELIEF SOCIETY—MEETING IN THE REV. PULLEIN-THOMPSON'S DINING-ROOM, TITE STREET, CHELSEA.

Photo by Geo. Newnes, Ltd.



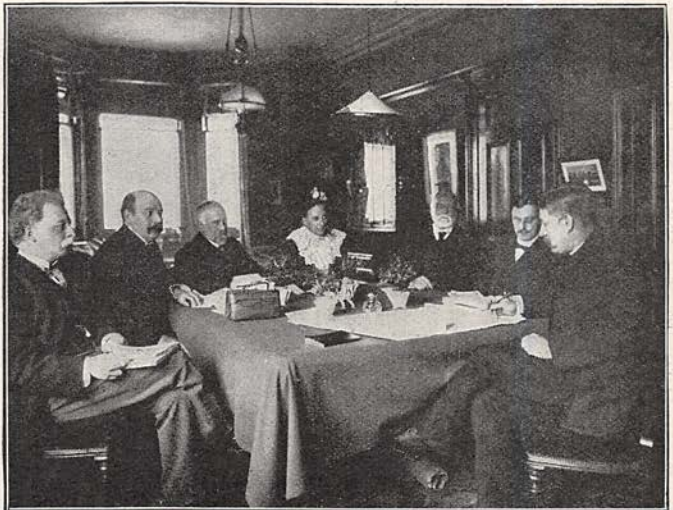
THE REV. J. PULLEIN-THOMPSON, M.A., IN HIS STUDY.
Photo by Geo. Newnes, Ltd.

the like, which for want of that shilling they would have to go without. Let those who toss their shillings about as if they were nothing, remember that one such coin means a competence to some poor, blind, struggling one, and then ask themselves if it is right to waste money on worthless pleasures when some of God's children, in addition to their sad physical affliction, are lacking the bare necessities of life, for, as Miss Rhoda Broughton said to me once, 'The pitiful may cease to be pitiful, but the blind are blind always.'

"Many generous donors pass away and neglect to leave behind them a mite for the blind poor. Perhaps the reason is that we have not much outward show, no splendid offices or grand gala day. Why, even our yearly blind tea-party in the People's Palace has had to be abandoned for lack of funds; so we are forgotten. This thoughtlessness is exceptionally

hard when those who are called away have pensioners on the books of the Society. Their death leaves a sad blank, and I often think it would be a thoughtful and generous act on the part of our subscribers, not only to care for the blind while living, but in passing away to leave some afflicted one provided for. Surely the blessing of poor, suffering humanity would follow them to the grave and ascend as incense before the throne of God.

"During the last nine years six hundred and eighty-one pensioners have been elected. Three hundred and seventy-five have had their pensions doubled, and we have now six hundred and eighty-one pensioners on our books. But we want to extend our operations. We have only touched the fringe of our possible helpfulness. Anyone paying a donation of fifteen guineas and guaranteeing an annual subscription of two guineas can nominate a candidate for immediate relief. Is not this a God-sent opportunity for someone who has never yet tasted the blessedness of giving? Yet the work is progressing. Ten years ago the Society was only paying about one thousand per annum in pensions, and now its disbursements exceed three thousand five hundred, and in my time £40,000 has been raised. But the well of misery is deep. It will require a far more copious and more constant stream of charity ere it is filled. Nay, it never will be filled until the day when God wipes away all tears."



A MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE FOR ARRANGING THE KING'S CORONATION DINNER TO THE BLIND—THE REV. J. PULLEIN-THOMPSON IN THE CHAIR.

The following Societies are represented:—Ebury-street Mission, Home Teaching, Indigent Blind, Annuities for Adults, Hampton's Mission, Promoting General Welfare, Indigent Blind Visiting Society.

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