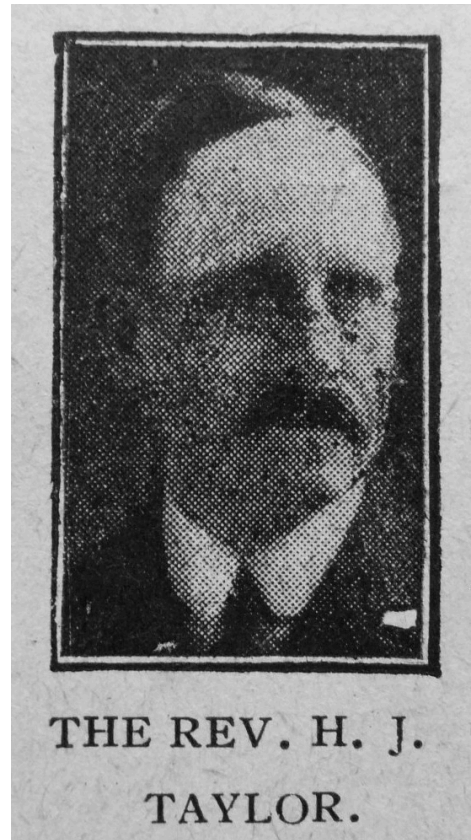


The South East London Mission

Transcription of article published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. Raymond Taunton

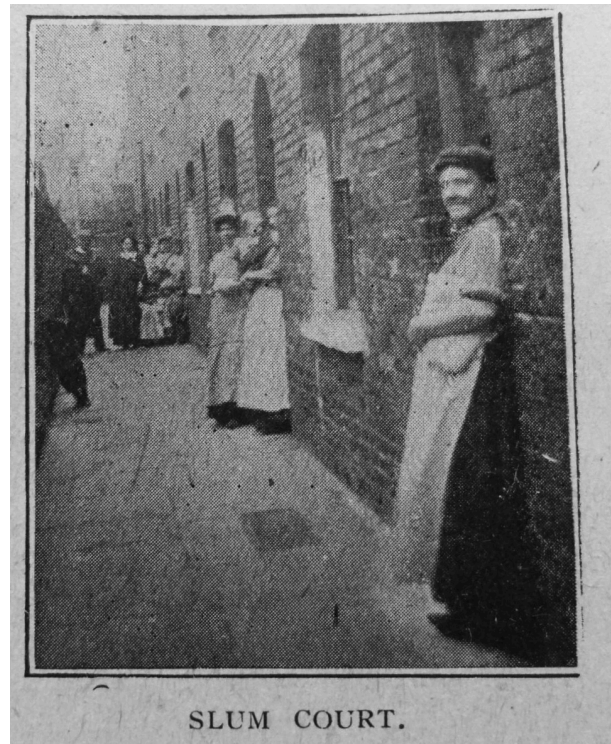
THERE are so many Londons in London that it is difficult to say what one thinks about it. You may see the centre, where the architecture is, you may visit the places about which the guide books have their little say, and you may return to your village with real cause for feeling that London is a very grand place. But if you are of a homely temperament, liking a quiet, cosy corner, you will say that you would not like to live there— “there” meaning where those gigantic buildings are, and where the traffic is at flood. “But you would not live there in any case,” says a Londoner. “That is only the home of officialdom, by day; and at night it is only the home of policemen and the ghosts of history—and perhaps a few angels of beauty.” So then, this proud Londoner would take you to parts where people really do live; and there would be pleasant houses, and roads green with trees, and many neat gardens and parks close by, “just like the country.” And you would say, “Why! it is airier, and roomier, and lovelier than it is in our little town! London is a beautiful place; I should like to live here myself!” And perhaps you would go this way, and go that way, and find vast areas all like that —quiet and pleasant. You would find London to be literally a gathering of towns, and, say how remarkable it was that the air should be so good, and that so much beauty should have been both preserved and created, in green leaf and in shaped stone.



But some day, perhaps, you would get temporarily lost, finding yourself in parts of London where the Londoner did not take you. You may have stayed out all night, and so have found yourself gazing toward the sun as he struggled to climb over the roofs first thing in the morning. You might walk towards him, keeping fairly near to the river; and whether you were north of the river, as it spreads itself to meet the sea, or south of it, you would come upon streets to shock you. You would turn your nose up, and feel hurt by ugliness, depressed by the presence of so much dirt and the seeming permanence of the dirt. You would find that there was quite a lot of this kind of thing; that although London hid the worst away fairly well, yet she had in her very breast an awful, festering, and large sore. For if London faces the sea, across which she speaks to the world, then this is her breast, and, where she ought to be tender and beautiful, she is foul. If only these two easterly banks of the Thames were what they might be! From her springs away back in the hills she comes down among meadows, and when she is entering London there are houseboats, and dainty gardens, but what a 'shock it must be to her when she has left classic Oxford, and restful Windsor, and the lawns of Richmond behind, to have to receive the filth of these easterly banks, and to slink along to the sea in shame instead of gliding out with beauty and cleanliness to attend her! There must needs be

merchant shipping about, but the homes of the people near by need not be what they are. London hides her worst. But hiding it is not removing it.

Perhaps you have got beyond London Bridge, on the south side. Being lost, you remember that St. George's Hall must be somewhere about, and you then remember "Old Kent Road." You cannot, forget that; you find it and walk along it, trying to recall the old song, until you pass the end of New Kent Road, and there, on the other side, you see at last St. George's Hall. You stop and look up at it. "So this is the home of the South-East London Mission!" You like the vigorous, businesslike front which it has. "It is a credit to us," you say. . . You stop and read announcements and "sayings," for St. George's Hall is not dead in front; somebody inside evidently likes to tell passers-by a few



informing and helpful truths. It is a splendid thing to do! You want to see this "somebody inside," but for a little while longer something holds you outside. You try to get the exact position, and to estimate the effect of St. George's Hall upon London at large. The traffic is growling in your ears; London is busy; has it time to *notice* the South-East London Mission? The 'buses that creep across the road, and the trams that await their turn in close procession bear names that give one a sense of the heavy vastness of the capital. What can one do with it all? What institution can affect it as a whole for good? Are not groups of idealists overwhelmed by it? Will it not be for ever the same? You turn and look at a few of the many folk along the pavements as if you would ask someone whether anything could be done with London—whether *all* of it might not be a pride to us instead of a shame? Suddenly the thought strikes you that something might be done with people one at a time! Some of these along the pavements look wrecks; and if people are transformed, is not London changed? That is the Mission's method. A Christian cannot leave London alone; and the South-East London Mission means that a group of Christians plant themselves down where the worst is and inject the best lovingly, for Christ's sake. They really affect all London; in fact, all the world, for good, but the task they undertake is to wash, and clothe, and feed, and teach all of the most poverty-stricken ones in Bermondsey and Southwark. You have seen watercress packed into baskets; you have seen fish in boxes one above another, on railway platforms; that is how people live in Bermondsey and Southwark! There are three hundred and twelve thousand of them. Is not that in itself a whole city? Yet the Mission gives itself to them all, especially to the most broken. It is dusty where you stand, with papers blowing about, and food exposed. You lose your appetite when you look at it; and the worst is "round the corner." Yet it is here that the Mission hands out the clean Bread of Life and the Living Water, and it is here where Christ's touch is healing.

You cannot stay outside any longer; you want to see. Upstairs to the left, into the office; here we are! All of the usual office sounds are here—the slither of papers, the rap-tap of the typewriter. This is the modernised version of the story of the good Samaritan. You do not hear the feet of the Samaritan as

he jumps to the road from his beast of burden, but you hear this rap-tap of the typewriter; they both mean the same thing. All these papers mean help, and hope, and light, and life. They mean the binding up of broken hearts, the making the lame to walk, the feeding of the hungry. All day long and every day, the work goes on, and a newspaper of information to friends by the thousand is sent out every month, and those who live close by need no newspaper, for they see with their eyes. The mayors, the doctors, the schoolmasters—they all know what is done; they say so. And the “common people” themselves look to the Mission as their friend in their midst. The mothers bring their babies to the INFANT WELFARE CENTRE to be examined, regularly weighed, and sometimes to be clothed. The Mission receives a report of every birth in given parts of Bermondsey



and Southwark, and is on the track of every child—every single one—in the first days of its life. (O England, are you grateful for this? And some of you little ones, will you remember, when you grow up, that the Mission knew you before you knew yourselves, and kept your little lives together?) The Medical Officer says that this is one of the best Infant Welfare Centres in all London; and while lifting the toddlers up into health, in the modern way, the Mission is also leading them nearer to the controlling arms of Christ. This is the newest undertaking at St. George's Hall, only they will be undertaking something still newer before you can say so!

Over five hundred children come to the Sunday school, with its eighty teachers, and young people attend evening meetings, some for recreation, some for devotion, some for instruction, as in first aid. Grown-up men and women attend for clubs, and devotional classes; they come to the office with troubles, and consult the Poor Man's Lawyer upon more awkward problems, without having, to pay him—which must be delicious!—for, without being a Primitive Methodist, he does this work for love, and out of admiration for the Mission. He makes many a rough place plain, many a crooked problem straight—and the straightened way even Christ may come and tread. Cripples abound distressingly, with limbs that cannot be straightened, but these come under a specially warm wing of the Mission, and there, in a hall all to themselves, are taught and cheered.

There are no means of measuring the good that is being done; you cannot measure sunshine and the air of the hills. The Mission is embedded in Bermondsey like a crystal of moral and spiritual radium, and it gives off rays of light, rays of healing power, rays of life, with explosive energy, but steadily, instead of spending all of itself with a bang like most explosives. It is a lump of vitality which must seem like an active star set in Bermondsey to those who look from heaven—even James Flanagan must smile to see how well the work which he founded shines to-day. So successful is the energy of the Mission that sometimes it drives some of its children away for good—out into better parts to live. Others it sends for a while into the country looking for rosy cheeks, and just to see what sort of

earth God really gave to the children of men; or it sends them to ITS OWN HOLIDAY HOME AT WESTCLIFF, to learn what kind of sea and land God made—for God didn't make Bermondsey! The children for these trips are picked out of the most needy in the elementary schools and homes, and not only do masters and teachers, sing the praise of the benefits, but the children come to couple religion with beauty, and cleanliness, and freshness, and joy. Think of the gain there!—that religion has something to do with a home by the sea!

The work is always flowing; its waves roll and break every day with awakening spray; but there are two high tides. One is in the summer when every guild, class and club has its jolly outing into some green spot, and when batches of singing children are packed off, with more enthusiasm than money, for one of the holidays. The other great tide is in the depth of winter, especially the Christmas days. This winter tide means fire and food; it is food now that raises the cheers of the alert street-arabs that line up at the doors of the Hall more than an hour before time. Hundreds of them—for free dinners—and over two thousand to the Waifs' Festival! The delight of those who serve arises out of comfort in the heart, which is glowing and burning because Christ is also present; the delight of the "big family" means comfort, somewhere else—behind those torn waistcoats with one button on them, where for once there is warm food, and sufficient. Bless them!

From one point of view, the South-East London Mission looks like a piece of machinery. It goes with the hum of a business. But from another point of view she is a hen gathering a great brood under her wings. There are both efficiency and tenderness; it is the organised form of the Christian heart and mind; and the mind does not become mechanical, nor the heart formal; the one remains sensitive, the other richly generous. Women, are very necessary at St. George's Hall, and you find them there, hard at it. The Sisters—Elsie, May, Dora, Mabel, Isabel, Eva, and Kathleen—are alike in purpose, penetrating into the neighbourhood (farther in than a man could get), with invisible love and with the visible signs of it carrying light into darkness; and each one has also an individuality which means some specialised service to the Mission, besides adding to its, human wealth, all marshalled, to the praise of the watchful, by Sister Elsie, the Sister-in-Charge. An additional motherly touch of great value comes from Mrs. H.J. Taylor, who loves to be actively in all this work for its own sake, and who has the confidence of the Sisters and all the women of the Mission. She and her husband—the "Chief"—the Rev. H.J. Taylor, give a fine lead, regarded from any viewpoint. The Mission has a heart; the women form a large part of the heart; Mr. Taylor forms the rest of the heart, and he is certainly the mind of the Mission. The whole staff thinks the world of him, and "tik-rap-tap-tik" goes the typewriter all the more merrily for that! You have listened and watched, here in the office, and there in the institute, and down in the school, and round in the neatly ordered Sisters' Settlement, and suddenly you discover that there is some amazing cheerfulness here at St. George's Hall that is not everywhere. It is partly because of the quiet gladness that comes (whether ministering angels or ministering fairies bring it) to these who do generous things; and it is partly because of the pride everybody has in the abilities of the "Chief." He understands. His heart is in the right place. He seeks the main end. He is too broad and natural to make much of denominational labels; he helps all whom Christ would help. He tells a company of men to take music into the courts and back alleys; and their brass band, twenty-five strong, admirably does it. Meanwhile he himself is preaching, in the Hail — preaching with a modern note, fresh alive, far-seeing, keeping a hand on the times and an eye on the future. He lifts and he broadens those who worship with him, and guides the reading of those young people of to-day whose minds are being so much shaped by books.

Mr. Taylor's lieutenant is the Rev. Wilfrid Harper. In preaching he adds to the power of the Mission, and in Christian service he is at one with the rest in devotion and enthusiasm. How wide is the effect of what this group of Christians in London accomplishes!. Their own membership has increased this year. All Primitive Methodism is the better for the South-East London Mission.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1919/687

[Census Returns and Births, Marriages & Deaths Registers](#)