

THE WORK OF QUEENS' COLLEGE IN PECKHAM.



QUEENS' COLLEGE, anxious to take some part in the work for South London, has since October 1901 undertaken the support of a club for lads in the parish of St Chrysostom, Peckham, which had been in existence since May 1899, and was in danger of extinction owing to lack of funds, though from other points of view it had accomplished much.

To one who passes from any of the London bridges to New Cross Gate, one fact that forces itself upon his notice is the immense number of lads too old to go to school who at every street corner are endeavouring to earn a precarious living by vending newspapers, or anything else that the British public can be made to buy. Over and above these a larger number, more or less in evidence, lounging round the outside of each public-house, have not even this employment to fall back upon.

Such an individual type forms indeed but one part of the kaleidoscope of human life which passes before the traveller's eye as he rides through the main arteries of South London

traffic ; but some, perchance, may wonder as they note this number of boys (for you can scarcely call them men), who they are ? where they come from ? how they live ? and what are their prospects either for this life or that which is to come ?

As in the parish in which I work many such live, and I am myself acquainted personally with some 500 boys of this class, and as Queens' College, Cambridge, is helping in an effort to humanize and Christianize lads like these, I can perhaps give an account of the sort of life such lads lead, and describe one effort to alleviate the conditions of their existence and to lead them on to better things.

The conditions of their life in the side-streets and alleys of South London are deplorable in the extreme. Call to mind a picture, if you can, of a child born into a home, or what we will call a home, in which the well-springs of human love are tainted irretrievably by the national curses of immorality and drink. Conceive of that child brought or rather dragged up under housing conditions of the worst kind. One of the tenements consists only of three rooms and a scullery to form an abode for 21 human beings. I know of another home where 8 or 9 adults of a coster's family exclusive of children reside in 4 small rooms, the eldest son is dying of consumption in one, and a horse and a donkey have to pass in by the front door through the kitchen every time they go in and out of the stable.

In such homes these lads live, their playground is the street or alley, they know but little if anything of the meaning of love, their parents too often regard them in their earlier years as a nuisance and in their after-life as wage-earning machines, if in this latter capacity they fail it is no uncommon thing for their own fathers and mothers to cast them destitute and friendless on the streets. One of the original members of my club, now doing five years' penal servitude for a terrible offence, was, though the only child of his parents (both of them drunkards), turned out friendless and penniless to face the world at 16½. In such surroundings and under such conditions it is scarcely strange that the most elementary conceptions of right and wrong are often unknown. Stealing is not seldom regarded as a pastime, in connexion with which the only sin is being found out. One of the club members was also a member of a gang of roughs calling themselves "the forty thieves," who

were *obliged* to steal within stated periods *as a condition of membership*. The first time the club went for a day's outing some of the members were most anxious to secure some apples from a tree in a private garden, but were prevented by a high hedge, and when I pointed out that the fruit belonged to someone else one boy quickly replied, "We knows all that, but they only aint ours 'cos we can't get at 'em."

In May 1899 work began on material so unpromising as boys of this class, and in undertaking it it was necessary to boldly strike out on a line for ourselves regardless of many considerations that are essential in most similar societies. Accordingly in that month a club for rough lads was started.

In a room in the High Street, Peckham, on one night in each week, we began with 15, many of whom I had first got to know in the streets. The first few nights were most peaceful. Then we introduced a pair of boxing-gloves, and with startling rapidity our numbers ran up to 70, 80, and even 90; such boys simply delight in boxing and it requires great firmness to prevent the club from becoming a boxing class pure and simple. At one time unfortunately we had in a professional of the lowest order and he brought many others. For some months we had a truly awful time, though we managed to gain order at last. It is almost impossible to convey an idea of the club, yet imagine 60 to 70 boys and youths crowded into one room, shouting, singing, playing mouth-organs, and generally *enjoying themselves*. Then disputes over the games, quarrels over the gloves, and through it all the subtle perfume of oranges, fried fish and 'taters, and strong, very strong 'baccy. I well recollect my first attempt to give them some refreshments, the very words "eat and drink" caused a thrill; I made them sit round and presently returned with a tray on which were lemonade in glasses and buns with which I proposed to regale them. With one wild rush the whole club made for me to a man or rather a boy, and in one instant lemonade, tray, glasses, buns, and myself were hurled to the floor beneath an inextricable mass of struggling humanity. Poor chaps, they are always hungry and when they do get food their appetites are almost past belief. One Christmas 113 consumed at one meal 91 lbs. of beef, 75 lbs. of potatoes, 1½ gallons of pickles, 250 pastries from Lockhart's, 50 lbs. of nuts, 250 oranges, 350 cups of coffee, 20 loaves of bread, and 350 cigarettes.

Supper nights are great institutions. At the beginning we could only manage sandwiches and coffee, but since Queens' have come to our aid knife-and-fork suppers are the rule. On the first appearance of these useful implements, one boy picked up a knife and remarked to his neighbour, "No pinchin' knives and forks to-night, Bill, Lockhart's name on every 'andle."

I have stated that the club began in a small way but soon increased in numbers; to such an extent indeed that it nearly came to an end for lack of funds. Before this actually happened, however, Queens' College, Cambridge, came to our aid in Oct. 1901. They have taken the financial strain off us; and not only so but their assistance has enabled us to extend our operations. We were able to renew at once our stock of games and to open the club on three evenings in each week instead of one, and on those nights from 7.30 to 9.30 from 50 to 80 boys still make the same noises and bring in the same perfumes as ever.

It was a little difficult to get the lads to see the new relation to the Cambridge College. When I first spoke about it and said that the club would be visited by a committee of undergraduates, they expected to see some strange specimen of the human race. However when the committee did arrive the lads were quite polite and only murmured softly "nobs" behind their backs, and since then have so far risen to a true appreciation of the position that their relations with the Queens' men are extremely friendly. Such terms of friendship are of the utmost value to these dear lads, and already a great deal of good has been done. To no class of people is such personal influence fraught with so much promise of good, no section of the community needs it more.

Indeed those who know Blue Anchor Lane, one of our worst streets, will tell you that in consequence of the existence of the club the boys who reside there confess it to be a nicer place to be in, and others corroborate their testimony.

Such is the outward and social aspect of the Queens' College Boys' Club. Were this all we might claim to have attempted something, we could say we had stayed for a time the headlong rush to ruin in some few lives, this—and no more, but from the very first the raising of such youths in the midst of a life of terrible temptation lived in the

worst surroundings has never for an instant been lost sight of. One power and one power alone can keep such lives true and good under such conditions as these lads have to face,



MEMBERS OF THE CLUB.

and that is the power of the Living Christ, hence the spiritual side of the work has always been regarded as a matter of the first importance. To start such a club with an idea of one day introducing a Bible Class is wrong: as a rule *that day never arrives*. Both Bible Class and club must start at the same time. More uncompromisingly rough material on which to begin spiritual work can scarcely be imagined; in addition further difficulties occurred from the migratory habits of the class to which these lads belong; there is a constant river continually passing through the club, most of the boys are here to-day and gone to-morrow, and only the few are permanent residents in the neighbourhood.

In addition it involves much hard work to keep up the numbers at a Bible Class, the greater part of one evening each week has to be spent in walking up and down the club getting hold of boys either as recruits or as lapsed members. It is sometimes only after months of this that at last on a Sunday afternoon one you have been angling for shyly sidles into an obscure corner, and then filled with a sense of the great favour he has conferred in acceding to your request he promptly takes several months' holiday on the strength of his virtuous action and you have to begin all over again.

Still, by constant work the Boys' Bible Class on Sunday afternoons has kept up its numbers very well. It was on a Monday that the Boys' Club was first opened in May 1899 ; on the succeeding Sunday the first Bible Class was held and has continued ever since : it was a strange spectacle that first start ! Proceedings began with three hymns sung with immense fervour in all kinds of voices and in several different keys, then we had for about half-an-hour a reading from a story-book of good wholesome tone, during which smoking was allowed. At the conclusion of this a short religious address was given, and then the meeting was closed with prayer. From this beginning the class has gone on till at the present time the average attendance is 65, and its duration at the boys' own request extended to an hour and a half. It is most wonderful to see 70 boys standing absolutely quiet with closed eyes while the Collects are said, and then joining with every outward sign of reverence in the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Even thus it might be urged that no permanent results could be expected, but such was, by God's help, not the case. Fifteen months after the class was started we told the boys that those who wanted to know more might come to a week-day Bible Class, and here they received more definite Church teaching. As a result of this second class, held on Thursday evenings, several have been led on to confirmation ; and no one who was present will ever forget the day on which we offered the first-fruits of our club to God, when on the first Sunday after Easter 1901, three of our senior boys offered themselves for Holy Baptism and were afterwards confirmed on the following Thursday. This was $2\frac{1}{2}$ years ago. Since then nine others have been confirmed ; and at the present time twenty are receiving instruction with a view to presenting themselves

as candidates. Nor must it be thought that to these boys confirmation was or is a mere form, some six or seven are at the present time regular communicants. One of the three mentioned has never failed to make his monthly communion since he was confirmed, and now at his own suggestion comes once a fortnight. Those who are communicants meet every Tuesday evening for a Bible Class, and it is noticeable that there is every sign that these are honestly and truly making an effort with some measure of success to fight the good fight of faith under conditions of life that bristle with frightful temptations : God bless them and keep them true !

Thus the method is clear : first the club with its social side, the Bible Class, then the preparation for confirmation, then the communicant stage, and then, well then, the stern cross to bear, and then please God the crown to be received.

It may be interesting to state that many of our lads pass into the army. We have boys in Japan, India, South Africa, Malta, and in many English and Irish barracks, but they always come back to the club when they set foot in Peckham ; one of our communicants enlisted last July, after six months' absence he returned on his first furlough, arriving in Peckham late on Saturday night ; he was at Holy Communion at 8 o'clock on Sunday morning. This was due to a friend in the club who had corresponded with him during the interval and met him on his return. We are making a great effort to keep the club in touch with those who have thus left, by letters which are much valued and exercise an excellent influence.

The relations between the club and Queens' College are most friendly. I cannot but express here my sense of the immense benefit that comes to these lads, not only in the financial matters of their club, but also through the real interest that the members of the College take in them, and through the influence that is thus brought to bear on lives that might easily become the despair of the reformer.

One difficulty however still faces us. It is a question how far it is wise to allow those who have been confirmed and are honestly striving after better things to continue to mix with the rough new material which is constantly flowing into the club ; for instance, we kept back 25 of the roughest for bread and cheese and coffee in order to obtain an opportunity of urging them to attend a Sunday Bible Class, and one youth of

about 19 said to me as he went out, "I reckon you've got some of the biggest blackguards in London in there." Of that 25, one boy who had not been in prison at all was regarded as quite a wonder; many had been in "the King's Hotel" as they call it 4 or 5 times, and were quite moderate, two had over 15 convictions against them, and one *at the age of 22* had lost count of his at some number over 20. We hope that some extension of our work in the near future may solve our difficulty.

Such work as this, to take these dear lads by the hand and lead them upward till they are brought to God, is one section of the Home Mission work of the Church which may well enlist the best men of Cambridge as its wholehearted supporters, men who will give not their financial help only, but themselves to the work. It may appear to some to demand too much of self-denial; the man who has set his hand to the plough has no such thought, the truer, brighter lives of those for whom he serves more than compensate for the work involved.

On their behalf I cannot but render thanks to God who led a Cambridge College to undertake this work. It may seem but a small thing in itself, but it is one more of the links that bind the Colleges of Cambridge University to South London, one more bridge across the gulf that separates class from class, and much more than this, one more effort towards the extension of the Kingdom of God and of His Christ.