

The Tramp Problem in Baltimore

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By Margaret Sutton Briscoe

Much lies among us convulsively, nigh desperately, struggling to be born.
—Carlyle.

“**C**HARITY is centralized; offices are hired; societies founded, with secretaries, paid or unpaid. The hunt of the deserving poor goes merrily forward,” says Robert Louis Stevenson. The sheep and the goats are separated with an abundant care, and then—what of the goats? The Bishop of Maryland, in a late address to his clergy, has asked this question with some sternness.

Those who have been busy throwing out life-lines into the sea of sinking humanity, and in organizing life-saving stations, are sometimes startled on realizing that close by their feet, and within reach of their very arms, hands have emerged from the depths of depravity, and are, without aid from above, finding a way to the light.

A few steps off from one of the most crowded thoroughfares of Baltimore City there has been such an uplifting of hands for two years, almost alone and unrecognized. There, in what is called the “Fayette Street Narrows,” stands an old church which for many years sheltered a large and influential congregation. As the dwellings around it gradually changed into warehouses, the bustle of trade rose higher and higher, until the church and the chapel beside it were reduced to silence and closed. When the chapel opened again, it was to admit a widely different assembly. Dives went out and Lazarus came in, and worse than Lazarus; for *his* sores were confined to the body.

A curious and pitiful sight awaited those who looked into the hall of this chapel on any cold night in the past winter. A huddled mass of sleeping humanity lay on the bare boards of the floor, with arms, heads, and legs in what seemed an entanglement so hopeless as to make it difficult to realize that this was not an awful monstrosity of aggregate flesh and blood. Yet they were all separate beings with separate souls, and, alas! separate responsibilities, to be parted with the morning; each bedfellow (if the term be not mockery) moving on in his own individual path, upward or downward as it might be, and according as the efforts of those who labor among them bore fruit. For this is now the headquarters of “The Free Sunday Breakfast and Rescue Association,” the purpose of which is told in its charter, granted February, 1892: “Incorporated for religious and charitable purposes; and its aim will be to secure food, clothing, shelter, and employment for the poor and unfortunate, and to aid to elevate and save the fallen by means of the Gospel; and it shall be absolutely undenominational and unsectarian.”

In the hall of this chapel as many as two hundred men have been fed, taught, and sheltered in a night. The average attendance has been about a hundred. Lodging was not a part of the original plan. That, and indeed the whole Association, has been an evolution, meeting needs as they arose. The cellar was first pressed into service as a shelter, and, despite its large stove, makes about the order of sleeping quarters that might be expected underground—damp and impure, though scrupulously clean.

In the emergency of a stormy night, when the cellar was full, and the tramps still came pouring in from the cold street, pleading for refuge, the floor of the hall was offered them; and the precedent established thus became a nightly custom. Here collects the tramp element of the city, and here their bodily and moral needs are met as far as is possible by the officers of the Association and their assistants, who are all unsalaried laborers, animated only by a great enthusiasm for humanity.

The work depends wholly on the voluntary contributions of these workers, and on what they can collect from outside. On this Apostolic basis the Association rests, for it is but little known by those in a position to assist financially. Yet, undoubtedly, in that very circumstance has lain the power of growth.

From the people themselves striving upward this move-

ment has had its origin, and it is the expression of a heavenly sympathy for the erring on the part of those who have themselves known the bitterness of such a life. The reformed have become the reformers. The raw material is wrought into the image of a self-respecting man by those to whom every inch of the process is a personal experience.

To the effort of one man, now the Superintendent, the Association owes its direct birth, and he founded it literally on faith. Walking home one night from a meeting at a mission station in the lower part of the city, he paused before this silent church, and stood looking at it regretfully. To use his own words, “As I stood there I suddenly heard a voice say, ‘Bill! you open up this place.’”

And he was not disobedient. The next day he presented himself at the door of a bank whose President he knew through some mutual mission interest. There, without backing of any description, he asked the loan of one hundred dollars.

“For what purpose?”

“For the Free Sunday Breakfast Association.”

“What is that?”

As it was then nothing but a name, naturally the request was not granted.

“Lend me ten dollars, then, on my own account, and let me see what I can do,” was the next proposition, which was acceded to.

Bread, ham, and coffee were given by others to the same unassociated Association. Those in power granted the use of the chapel building, free of charge, until it might rent to a more profitable tenant. Thus, on Sunday morning, November 16, 1890, the “Free Sunday Breakfast Association” opened.

The first effort was disappointing. The table was set for the guests from the waysides and hedges, but only five of those bidden appeared, and the sandwiches and coffee which the Superintendent had spent half the night in preparing were in a large part wasted. But from this beginning the Association has reached its present point of progress. It is now open every night for supper, teaching, and shelter. Its reading-room stands open all day, and a separate room has been fitted up with comfortable beds for individual cases.

The methods of work are extremely simple and fundamental. Prominent among the texts and inscriptions hanging on the walls of the hall is one which gives the system in a nutshell. It stands thus:

SOAP
OUP
ALVATION

Bath-tubs and facilities for washing clothes are freely provided to such as wish to avail themselves of them; then follows the supper in the hall, consisting of a roll and a cup of coffee served by the workers—an inexpensive entertainment, which yet forms a platform enabling the workers to get alongside of the men, and, as they frankly admit, attracting many who might not come at all otherwise; but once there, they are often taken hold of and rescued from the mire.

At one of the meetings a nicely dressed young man was heard speaking to a worker aside:

“You don’t remember me, sir?”

“No; have I seen you before?”

“I was a Free Breakfast man. I have work now.”

“And you are doing nicely? Well, I am glad that I was not able to recognize you.”

The evening ends with prayer and exhortation; those who have been “picked up” are seated on the platform at the end of the room, and rise one by one to testify to their change of life in the face of an inscription which reads: “Testimonies short, sharp, and to the point.” One rises who had not wandered far away when rescued. He was on the downward path chiefly because it seemed the only

way open to him. Another speaks from the platform of a "body full of whisky, and no coat on his back," when he struggled into the hall and safety. "I was as low as the lowest among you," he says simply, and you look around the strange assembly of faces, all more or less degraded, many repulsive, expecting to see offense expressed, but you find only interest.

The exhortations are earnest and direct. Men speak as only men who *know* can speak. Driven upward themselves by the implacable gadfly of a desire for good, they have proven their possession of a spark of the divine, else the gadfly might have stung in vain; and it is on their belief in this birthright in others that they base their efforts.

The language is rough at times, and a spade is always a spade, but it is the speech that is understood by the listeners. You feel sure that no silver-tongued orator could touch these ears so delicately. They listen, and nudge one another when hard hit; some only half liking it, some enjoying it, with a callous lack of self-consciousness, and a few of the younger men distinctly sheepish. All are interested in one way or another, and the attention is held. The people seem to know the secret of reaching the people as no political economist could have taught them. There is a pulse of life indescribably felt throughout.

As the workers mingle with the crowd, and as one or another gives them reason to think that his heart is touched and his dead aspirations quickened, they keep him in sight, and when the benches are piled up on the platform in preparation for the night, he is withdrawn from the human scramble on the floor, and given a bed in the separate room before mentioned: his first upward step. There he lodges till he can be returned to his home, or be respectably settled elsewhere with work. It may be that he has been drinking for days, and is rum-soaked to the core. In that case the key is quietly turned in the lock, and the poor besotted carcass nursed from the brute into manhood again. When he can once more eat and sleep and reason, his choice is given him. There is the sty, if he will return to it; and here is a coat for his back, and decency of life.

The money expended for the passage home, for the decent clothing that made seeking and securing work a possibility, or for the new start in life, has not always found its limit. Again and again these sums, refunded with scrupulous care, come back to aid the next poor stumbler. Some of the "cures" are passed on to the church or mission to which they belong, but many still linger about the spot where they first looked up to a different existence, and become the most efficient workers among the new-comers.

Although the Association is now a proven factor for good, there must of necessity come times of discouragement, when its workers, were they hirelings, might be tempted to leave all and "go a-fishing." Case after case arises that could only have been treated successfully through the father's fathers. The sour grapes have been eaten.

"What is your per cent. of success?" one of the workers was asked.

"It is small; we work with the lowest grade of material, and the per cent. in product, as every practical man knows, must be low in consequence. With a higher grade of material comes a higher per cent. of product." Another slum worker has said: "We cannot expect garbage-picking to pay well."

That the results in this case have been what they are is, as has been stated, undoubtedly due to the fact that the Association has been let alone to work out its own way to the light. That they are comparatively unknown, and that they do not themselves appreciate the advantage of this, is proven by a clipping from their monthly bulletin, which states with some feeling that ten dollars expended in sending out to the various churches appeals for aid met a return of three dollars and twenty-five cents. Those who have tested the liberality of the same churches know that, when properly approached, the response has been widely different.

But with the growth of the Association, with the necessity for music at the meetings, with the opening of the reading-room and Bible classes, has arisen a serious ques-

tion. New workers were called, and among them came men of a different culture and wider knowledge. With rare tact and far-seeing self-control, they have taken the position of subordinates and assistants only, but they are in touch with another world, where "organized charity" has wisely taught that, for all that is given, the tale of bricks must be exacted in one form or another. The very name of "Free Breakfast" smacks of pay without work in ears thus educated. In a natural line of growth, a wholesome fear of pauperizing has been aroused in the Association, and the need of providing work for the men who come for shelter and food is now recognized. But this involves a different home, and one of less uncertain tenure; and lodgings, if worked for, must rise above a standard which, in spite of cleanliness, just escapes a charge of lack of decency.

Growth calls for nourishment, which, calling in turn for the wherewithal, must inevitably bring into touch with the Association a social element hitherto almost excluded. With the difficulty of saying in the same breath "Give plenteously" and "Hands off," and with the danger of weakening which lies in any other policy, opens a new and equally interesting chapter of this social experiment.