The Reformer

By CHARLES M. SHELDON,
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It has been said that no living being ever successfully described Bowen street so that a person who never saw it could have even the faintest conception of its truth. Mr. Marsh had never seen anything like it, and all his reading had never given him any idea whatever of the reality. He stared at it all now in a bewildered, almost frightened manner that grasped only a part of the terrible significance of it all.

Finally he turned to John Gordon and said with a tone in which irritation was the dominant note:

"Why don't some of these children go over and play in the Hope House playgrounds instead of rolling in this awful filth? I understood you to say that Hope House had a playground."

John Gordon looked at Mr. Marsh at first with a feeling of indignation, which rapidly changed to one of sadness.

"How many children can play in a space shut in and bounded by a lot less than 50 feet wide and 100 feet long? It is crowded to overflowing now. Do you know how many years Miss Andrews pleaded and begged and prayed and turned mountains of selfish indifference and commercial greed to get that little playground?"

"I have no idea. Hadn't we better go inside now?" Mr. Marsh replied feebly. "Let's get through with it. I had no idea it was all so horrible. Of course this is unusually bad, isn't it?"

"There are fifty other streets as bad or worse within two miles of Hope House."

"Why don't they get new garbage boxes at least?" Mr. Marsh exclaimed in the same irritated manner. He had begun by being sick at the sight of the fearful conditions. He was now growing angry.

"Who do you mean by 'they,' Mr. Marsh?" John Gordon said, with some bitterness. "The landlords? The city ordinance makes it obligatory on the landlords to furnish and keep in good repair garbage boxes sufficient in size to accommodate the number of families in their tenements."

Mr. Marsh looked at the box in front of his own double decker and said nothing.

It was a rotten apology for what had once been a small box. It had only three sides and no cover. It was filled to overflowing, and crowning the heap of stench was a dead chicken swarming with maggots. It was a fair sample of every other box in Bowen street, and in its loathsome and naked uncleanness it stood there in the blaze of the pitiless sun a dumb but ghastly and overwhelming witness against the cultured indifference of the men who are not willing to be their brother's keepers so long as they can live luxuriously on their brother's needs at a distance from all suffering and responsibility.

They went into the narrow court that separated the rear from the front of the building, and John Gordon pointed out the deadly nature of the construction.

"There is no direct sunlight in any of these rooms that open on the court. All light and air must enter either where we did or come in from the top!"

He uttered the word in time to prevent Mr. Marsh from stumbling over a projection in the shape of a raised platform built out from the side wall, shortening the distance between the main walls of the court. The use of the platform was, as he afterward learned, to furnish a little additional room for hanging out clothes, which were suspended above the platform on a series of racks.

The floor of the court or passageway between the two wings of the "dumbbell" was slippery with filth of every description. In the semidarkness which prevailed in spite of the sun's glare outside could be seen pale, tired women with sallow, dirty faces, peering out from doorway and window. The heat was stifling, as not a breath blew in at either end of the passage, and the odor was overpowering.

Mr. Marsh hesitated.

"I don't know that I care to go in," he said almost in a tone of fear.

"Too late to back out now, Mr. Marsh. Come! It will do you good. Make you more contented with your home on the boulevard," John Gordon said grimly.

He greeted the group of women in the doorway, and they returned his greeting civilly enough, for he was wearing his regular inspector's badge, authorized by the board of health, and besides all that he had already in the course of his brief study made friends in the block.

Almost the first step they took from the doorway plunged them into darkness. Gordon had hold of Mr. Marsh's arm and was silent until they came to the first flight of stairs at the end of the passage.

"Have to be a little careful here, sir," he cautioned. "This is an old part, joining your part from the rear. It was on the lot when your agent looked over the space, and he built up to the limit and a little more. In fact, he broke six distinct ordinances in using up the space that ought to have been left open between the new building and the old. But that was nothing to him, for it added six feet to the double decker, and that meant twelve additional bedrooms. Have care here. Some of the stair treads are broken."

Mr. Marsh uttered an ejaculation, and Gordon stopped.

"I feel ill. I don't believe I can go on, Gordon. This is terrible. It is past belief that human beings can live in such conditions."

"They don't all live, sir. Some of them die. But it's almost as bad to die in here as to live. You ought to see a funeral in one of these tenements."

"God forbid!" exclaimed Mr. Marsh emphatically. "Honestly, Gordon, it may seem absurd to you, but I am growing sick from the awful stench here. I doubt my ability to go on."

Gordon made no answer. After a moment Mr. Marsh said feebly:

"All right. I'll try to stand it."

Without any reply John Gordon, still keeping his hand on his companion's arm, began to go up the stairs. Under their feet they could feel the slimy filth that had accumulated for weeks. Half way up something passed them going down. It was a little girl about eight years old carrying in her arms a baby. In the dim light which filtered through the hall at the top of the flight the two men could hardly make out this child of the tenements, burdened long years before the time with a human responsibility, robbed of playground and childhood and thrust into a world of suffering and discomfort. Poor mournful creature, a woman in gravity and a child in years, bending your dirty face over the gasping little sister in your slim arms, sitting on the steps late into the night with the bundle that may actually die in your arms, and no one but yourself feel much grief if it does. Child of the tenements, you do not know it, but it is a beautiful world that God has made. There are trees and flowers and clear water and perfumed zephyrs and grass dotted with bloom. But oh, for you, little sister, who shall reveal its beauty, who shall discover to you its glory, O child of the tenements, in the great city by the lakes?

At the top of the stairs John Gordon paused a moment and then turned to the left and led his companion along to a doorway opening on a corridor looking out on the airshaft. A railing ran around this corridor, and leaning over it were a number of persons, mostly women, some of them holding babies, others doing some kind of work. One woman at the end of the corridor was preparing some dish for supper. The stench that rose from the court below was made doubly intolerable by the smoke from the chimneys of the rear tenements on the adjoining lot, which drifted into the corridor and swept into every doorway.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Caylor. How is the little boy today?"

"Poorly, sir. Will you go in and see him?" Then she glanced suspiciously at Mr. Marsh and added: "But you can't do anything for him. Better leave him be."

"This is Mr. Marsh, Mrs. Caylor. He is the owner of the building. He wants to see some of the rooms. We can go in?"

The woman's face lighted up just for a second, then all died out to that dull indifference which has long ago lost all hope of anything better farther on.

"I don't care," she answered with sullen indifference.

John Gordon at once turned into the room, and Mr. Marsh reluctantly followed. There were two windows, but both opened on the corridor. Gordon walked across to an opening and turned to beckon to Mr. Marsh, who had stopped.

"I want you to see a specimen of a dark bedroom, Mr. Marsh. You don't need to visit more than one. But it is worth knowing that there are hundreds more like this one."

Mr. Marsh came across to Gordon's side.

"This is more terrible than I ever dreamed," he said in a whisper.

"Nothing when you get used to it, sir. Let's step in. There isn't much to see."

They entered the room, which was absolutely dark except for the light that entered through the room they had just left. Gordon felt his way until his hand touched something, and then he said gently:

"Louie, how are you today?"

"Not very well. That you, Mr. Gordon?"

"Yes. I've brought you something. Here. Catch on, little man."

"It's fine!" the thin eager voice exclaimed. "Don't tell mother. She'll take it away."

"No, no, Louie. She won't. The doctor will let you have it," John Gordon said reassuringly, and then he was silent. Mr. Marsh was close by, and both men stood still a moment.

In the stillness a distinct rustling sound could be heard. It was like the rustling of tissue paper or the scratching of small mice.

"What's that?" Mr. Marsh asked.

"Wait a minute; I'll show you," Gordon answered quietly. "Shut your eyes, Louis. I'm going to light a match."

He struck the match and held it up. The pale light revealed in the few seconds that the match burned a broken bedstead and a ragged, filthy mattress on which lay a child about ten years old. The walls of the room had once been papered before the double decker had been constructed so that some of it had blocked up the windows that had once opened on the rear lot. This paper now hung in festoons and strings all over the ceiling, and Mr. Marsh, looking in horror at the sight, in that brief moment, not too brief to tell one whole story of the tenement house hell, saw countless swarms of bugs and vermin crawling over the paper. It was that that had made the noise.

The match flickered and went out. There was a moment of silence, broken by Gordon, who said cheerfully:

"All right, Louis! Keep up good heart. I'll try to get in and see you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. Gordon."

Mr. Marsh pulled at Gordon's arm.

"For God's sake, Gordon, let's get out of here. I'm growing sick. I shall faint."

"Come out into the fresh air!" Gordon said ironically.

They went out into the corridor, and Mr. Marsh in his eagerness to get out of the building did not even stop to reply to several of the women who had learned from Mrs. Caylor that he owned the double decker and crowded up to complain about the garbage boxes and the drainpipes. While Gordon was talking with Mrs. Caylor about Louis, Mr. Marsh went down, hurried as fast as he dared through the lower court, and when John Gordon came out he found him seated on the outer steps, deathly pale and actually sick.

Gordon grimly eyed him.

"It's only 4 o'clock. We'll have time to do the other. There are some features of No. 97 that are peculiar. I would like to have you see them."

"I cannot go, Gordon. It's out of the question. I am too ill."

"Let's go over to Hope House, then," John Gordon said gravely.

Mr. Marsh, with difficulty, walked over to Hope House. On the way Gordon said:

"There is an ordinance which says that there shall be spaces between front and rear tenements, graduated according to the height of the building. If the tenement is one story high, there must be ten feet between front and rear; if two stories, fifteen feet; if four stories, twenty-five feet, etc. Your agent deliberately ignored this law and built your double decker so as to cover all the space. In doing so he deliberately established a condition that permitted of no light in a dozen bedrooms like the one we went into. More than that, he created conditions that breed anarchy, for if the rich and cultured citizens of this municipality for their own gain selfishly trample on the laws of the city what can they expect from the poor and the desperate and the ignorant but hatred of all society?"

"I'm too sick to discuss it," Mr. Marsh groaned. Gordon saw that he was actually suffering severely, and when they entered Hope House he gave him careful attention.

It was only a temporary indisposition, however, and after resting an hour Mr. Marsh recovered sufficiently to sit up and expressed some mortification at the way he had behaved. But his manner was very grave, and the experience of his visit to the building was evidently making a profound impression on him.

To Gordon's disappointment, Miss Andrews had been called away and was not present at the evening meal. Mr. Marsh was able to be at the table with the residents and was a close listener to the talk, although he said little.

"Do you feel equal to a little work this evening, Mr. Marsh?" Gordon asked after the residents had adjourned to the library and had begun to scatter for their several duties.

"I think so; yes," Mr. Marsh answered. He was really ashamed of his inability to endure unusual sights of disagreeable human suffering.

"Then perhaps we had better visit one of the vaudeville halls. I want you to see how the saloon, as a political institution, comes in to supplement the absence of home life. Perhaps it will help you to understand better, if you want to, why the tenement house conditions are not interfered with and why it is to the interest of the politician that the people suffer as far as endurance will go in the matter of no homes."

At 9 o'clock, in company with an officer in citizen's clothes who was detailed to look after Hope House district, Gordon and Marsh entered one of the vaudeville halls joining a corner saloon on Bowen street. Mr. Marsh was unusually excited. His university training, his exclusive, refined culture, his sensitive habits, were all the exact opposite of everything he had felt and seen since he entered Hope House district. He went in with Gordon, and they took seats in the rear of the sawdust covered floor in a hall that would hold 200 persons. They faced a gaudily painted curtain, which let down in front of a small stage. The hall rapidly filled up with men and boys. The air was heavy with the fumes of beer and tobacco. The night was sultry, and at the saloon bar, which was visible through the doorway opening into the hall, could be seen a long line of men and women drinking, while others stood behind the line reaching their hands over for glasses or waiting their turn to get up to the bar itself.

Three violins, a harp and a piano began to play, and the curtain went up. At that very moment in Christian homes all over America good women kneeled at clean beds by the side of pure hearted little children to repeat the evening prayer to the good God. But will the time speedily come when little voices shall swell the thunder of the good God's wrath against an institution that carries into homeless deserts of the great cities the plague of death, the foul touch of lost virtue for the sake of gold?

CHAPTER V.

THE moment Gordon and Mr. Marsh had taken their seats in the hall a man with a white apron came up and, standing direct-

"I've seen all I care to."

ly in front of them, said, "What 'll you have?"

"Cigars for three," said the officer. And as the man slowly moved away after giving the three visitors a sharp look the officer said in answer to the question from Mr. Marsh: "Oh, the show's free. So's the lunch. But everybody is expected to take something. The saloons ain't doing this for their health nor for the love of the people, not if they know it."

"What if we refused to buy either cigars or beer?" Gordon asked, for he had never entered one of the vaudeville halls but once before and had then gone in to hunt for one of the young men who had been attending the night classes at Hope House. His knowledge of the character of the entertainment was gained from Ford, the university resident.

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"They'd make it mighty uncomfortable for you before you got out or got in again. The saloon may be a social necessity to the poor devils in the double deckers, but it don't furnish social amusements without getting mighty well paid for it. It's free, but it's expensive," said Officer Roberts.

As he finished speaking, the bartender came back with the cigars and a tray loaded with beer and whisky. The liquor was distributed around on little tables at which the boys and men in the audience were mostly seated. As the curtain went up to the music of the orchestra there were about 150 in the room and a stream of newcomers noisily entering. Before the first song was finished, the hall was filled to suffocation.

As the entertainment, if it could called such, went on, John Gordon's soul was stirred deep with a red blooded indignation. After the first two or three vulgar songs, which were followed by some suggestive dances, he sat there practically hearing and seeing nothing on the stage. The audience had become the absorbing study for him. The people! There they were! His choice! To serve and to love! But was it worth while?

The majority of the company was composed of young men between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. They were as a type pale, listless and astonishingly dull of expression. John Gordon was irresistibly drawn to imagine the exact appearance of the rooms that these young men probably called home. He then began to raise a host of questions concerning their parentage, their occupations, their wages, the amount they probably spent on the saloon and the places they went to on Sunday. The absolute absence of anything interesting or elevating in their lives impressed him with tremendous reality. All the churches in the city were on the fine streets miles away. There was not a religious institution, with the possible exception of Hope House, that had any influence in the lives of these apathetic, coarsened, dissipated young men. The vaudeville and the saloon touched their lives, but the church never did. Yet it was the sinner that Jesus came to save. Was the church realizing her responsibility to neglect this awful swarm of youth that bred like disease in the tenement, and cursed God and died in the impure atmosphere of these polluted walls? God have mercy on them! Are they more sinned against than sinning? Can a boy or girl grow up pure in tenements like these we have here in this greed smitten city? And the one social institution that comes forward to minister to the social instincts is the saloon! It says to the tired workingman who has no place worthy to be called a home, "Come, enjoy a social glass in a handsome, well lighted, cheerful room!" It says to the men whose appetite is never satisfied with ill prepared food: "Come, enjoy a free lunch! Only of course you will want beer or whisky to wash it down." And without saying this to the man, only to itself, the saloon, with devilish foresight, reckons on getting back by means of the free lunch 100 per cent in the actual sale of drinks. Truly Officer Roberts is right when he says, "It's free, but it's expensive."

It says to the young man who has no healthy outlet for physical life because he is born without playgrounds and without home pleasures: "Come! In the vaudeville I will amuse you. The songs and the dances will be suggestive, and the young women who furnish the amusement are fallen, but vice is a necessity to civilization, and we stand ready to furnish what the church and other religious organizations will never give you!"

"Surely," John Gordon meditated, "the saloon in its day and generation is wiser than the children of light. The devil must dance in glee over the sight of the tenement and slum districts in the city as he sees his finest agents occupying the field of social panderers to a human necessity, while the solemn, empty stone edifices called churches stand stately and still up on the grand boulevards and open their doors once or twice a week to receive proud men and women, clothed in purple and fine linen, who fare sumptuously every day, who enjoy their religion, but do not enjoy practicing it among sinners—at least not among sinners like those who are born in tenements and get their nourishment in saloon and vaudeville. Surely the saloon is giving the churches pointers on how to reach the masses. Will the churches take the broad hint and act on it, or will they still allow the saloon to pre-empt the corner lots and under the hypocritical guise of catering to a social craving damn with physical and moral damnation lives that have never known any other gospel but the gospel of beer and free lunches as long as they are able to pay for them?"

His meditation was going deeper, and he was beginning to philosophize not bitterly, but with genuine sadness, when he saw Mr. Marsh suddenly arise and clutch his arm hard.

"I can't bear any more of this," he said as Gordon glanced up at him. "I'm going out. It's too revolting. I've seen all I care to."

"And when you've seen one of 'em you've seen all of 'em," said Officer Roberts with a shrug. Gordon looked toward the stage. A dance that was simply revolting in its indecency was being performed. A roar of brutal laughter rose from the audience. It was like a picture taken from some scene of the "Inferno." Gordon's spirit flamed up in holy wrath at the sight of it, but he got up and went out with Marsh and the officer.

Once outside, even in the tainted, beer poisoned air that floated out of the saloon, all three of the men breathed easier. Officer Roberts looked toward Gordon with an air of resignation.

"Does your friend wish to continue? I may be allowed to say the show is the same one place as another—same songs, same dances"—

"No more for me," Mr. Marsh interrupted quickly. "Gordon, I'm simply sick of it all. Let us go back to Hope House. I should like to meet Miss Andrews before going home. You thought she would be back after supper?"

"Yes, but I want you to see Bowen street by night; just two or three blocks, and I'll not ask any more."

"Very well." Mr. Marsh reluctantly consented. He was evidently laboring under great stress of feeling. His sensitive nature had suffered in ways that were very unusual.

"It won't be necessary for you to go along, Roberts," Gordon said as the officer stood waiting.

"Much obliged, sir," Roberts answered with a look of relief. "I'm at your service of course. Miss Andrews gave special orders to me to be of any help to you that I can."

"It will not be necessary, Roberts. Much obliged. We'll simply walk through the street and not attempt any inside work tonight."

"All right, sir." The officer turned back to Hope House playground, which he had overseen ever since it had become an important institution, and Gordon, taking Mr. Marsh's arm, walked down Bowen street for three blocks, then turned and came back on the opposite sidewalk.

If the street had been full during the day, it was running over at night. The stoops were literally packed with people. The child of the tenements, with her little sister in her arms, was there, bending over the armful, sitting on the steps in various degrees of discomfort and unconscious misery, but cheerful, resigned and apparently born to her task.

The night was breathless, and yet out on the wide boulevard it was not stifling. Down here, however, not a single sigh of fresh air came. The garbage boxes rotted visibly. On the covers of those few boxes that still retained covers were lying men and boys, trying in the midst of the unnatural, feverish noises peculiar to tenement districts to get a little rest. On the stones and mud and offal of the street itself scores of people were lying, some on a few rags thrown down to soak up the liquid filth, others with no covering between their horrible clothing and the foul street. Twice they had to stop and pick their way between the figures that lay in the street, panting for a breath of air, wearily, but with the indifference of years of accustomed discomfort, counting the time when the dark sleeping rooms inside should become a little less unbearable.

During the entire walk neither Gordon nor Marsh said anything but once, when Mr. Marsh asked a question:

"Some of these children seem far better dressed and cleaner, more attractive than others. Are these some of the Hope House converts?"

"No," replied John Gordon dryly. "Those are saloon keeper's children."

Mr. Marsh did not ask any more questions until they were going into Hope House entrance. Then he turned to his companion and said:

"I have seen things today I never could believe if I had been told. It is all too horrible, too horrible. I shall dream of it tonight. Why have you made me look at it?"

They paused a moment under the archway.

"Would God, Mr. Marsh, that every business man in this city could see what you have seen, and what you have seen is nothing compared with the horrors you will never even dream about."

"It has sickened me," Mr. Marsh repeated irritably, and John Gordon could see by his manner that he was nervously affected by the day's experience. Before he could say anything Miss Andrews came in through the archway.

"I understand you have been looking about today. Come into the library and tell me about it."

She had greeted Gordon in her usual quiet, calm but delightful manner as he introduced Mr. Marsh.

(To be continued.)