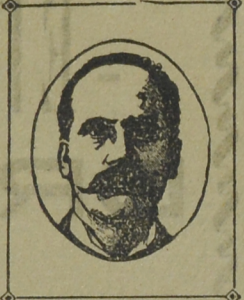


The REFORMER

By CHARLES M. SHEDDON.

Author of "In His Steps," "Robert Hardy's Seven Days," Etc.

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(CONTINUED).

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 "dumb-bell" 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

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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 drahtpipes. 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:

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The Marks of Genius.

"He has the stamp of genius on his brow."

"Yes. Also the gloss of genius on his coat."

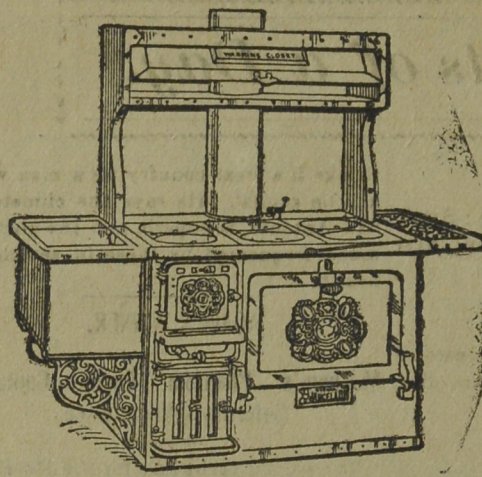


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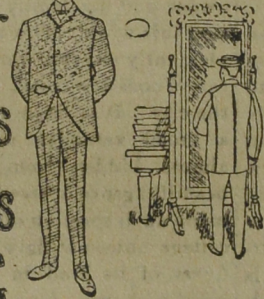
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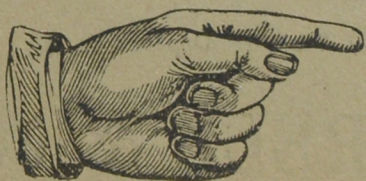
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