"And yet these people have much to be thankful for. They are at least well. What of the sick, the people confined to their beds in the tenements?

"Enter this dimly lighted hall. If the streets were close and warm, what is this? We climb up flight after flight, past open doors where the gas burns hotly, for the tenement-house people never sleep in the dark. The air seems more dense and it is stifling. A heavy weight presses upon our lungs, and the odour from the air-shafts and dirty hallways seems pestilential. We wonder how humanity can hold out against such heavy odds. Surely, these people must be very strong, but—that is a baby's cry, and we stop to see what is the matter. Oh! to be sure, 'summer complaint.' All the children have it, but 'the baby takes it hard.' On a miserable, broken couch lies a white, wasted little figure with large heavy eyes and fever-parched body. 'She has been sick three weeks,' says the mother, 'and the milk is so bad, but what can poor people do? *The air is so thick she can't breathe,* but I haven't the money to take her into the country,' and the tears roll down her cheeks as she once more bends over the child.

"Climb one more flight of stairs to the roof. More people are up here trying to sleep, and more sick babies—all with a similar tale of 'summer complaint.' Here are babies partially dressed and babies with only little torn shirts on, tossing and moaning. Babies crying lustily, and babies too weak to cry, lying listlessly on improvised beds, made of pillows brought up from the hot rooms below. Here are men and children fast asleep, while the mothers watch over their little ones and do what they can to soothe and quiet their suffering.

"Pass over to another house, this time going downstairs instead of climbing up. We meet an anxious father hurrying back with a bottle of medicine. We ask a few questions and follow him to the bedside of his only child. In a tiny swinging crib is a pitifully thin baby, twenty months old, with great anxious blue eyes that seem to beg for help, and poor little lips all cracked and bleeding. . . . Yesterday an abscess was opened in the neck, and the left hand and arm are swollen to twice their natural size. The haggard woman is the mother. 'Do you think my baby will live?' she asks.

"Down more stairways we grope our way through more stifling halls, and once more reach the street that seemed hot when we left it, but now by contrast seems cool and fresh. We can view the street now from the standpoint of the tenement-dwellers themselves, and no fact seems more striking than the efforts the fathers and mothers have made to lessen the suffering of their children. Mothers are walking up and down, carrying babies in their arms or wheeling them in carriages. Children are asleep on beds made on two chairs, some on quilts that have been laid on the stone walks, and more on the bare stones or stretched on the door-sills. And everywhere the mothers are close by. Some sit beside the baby carriages, but many lie on the stones with the children, dozing themselves. In one place a woman has made a bed on a chair for one baby and spread a quilt on the walk for another and has fallen asleep at her watch. In another place three small boys are asleep outside the show-windows of a small shop, on a shelf where merchandise is exhibited during the day.

"Walk through the streets in the morning, with these people thronging to their work after such a night. Their movements are too mechanical to seem human, their faces expressionless of anything except dumb endurance."

Such an experience wrings the hearts of those possessed with a spirit of humanity, who, in endeavouring to mitigate the sufferings of their poorer neighbours, are painfully conscious that they do but alleviate; they cannot touch the root of the trouble until housing and overcrowding problems are effectively dealt with. Here is an opportunity for those who object to charity on the principle that "Charity creates one-half of the misery she relieves, but cannot relieve one-half of the misery she creates." The adequate housing of the community is no matter of charity, but an act of ordinary justice which should appeal to every civilised nation.

The Passing Bell.

The sad death of Miss Gertrude L. Leeks, a trained nurse, while staying at Brighton, is an instance of the dangers of overstrain. Miss Leek was in the habit of spending her holidays with friends at Brighton, and is described as being of a very cheerful disposition, so that she was known as "the sunshine of the house." On her last visit she could not sleep, and seemed very depressed, saying that she felt unequal to her duties as a nurse. In a letter found after her death she said that she felt hopelessly out of place in a post in a Staffordshire hospital, and that she was feeling quite distracted. Not having slept one night she was resting on the sofa next day when her friends, uneasy at her continued silence, withdrew the blanket with which her head was covered. It was then found that life was extinct, due to suffocation and strangulation.

Most nurses know something of the depressing effect of want of sleep, for in the course of their work there are not unfrequently occasions when they are unable to obtain a sufficient amount. But the habit of sleeplessness is always a danger signal, and medical advice should be obtained by anyone who suffers from it. It is an imperative indication of the need for rest and treatment, and should on no account be neglected.

previous page next page