

IN THE MAGDALEN'S HOME.

NELLIE BLT'S VISIT TO AN INSTITUTION FOR UNFORTUNATE WOMEN.

A Wicked Girl's Chances for Reformation—How Poor Creatures Abuse a Noble Charity—Marion Barry's Experiences—The Girl Who Refused to an Talacky Cat—The Toboggan Slide of Sin.



Q UITE recently the thought was forced upon me by an incident which I witnessed in the street: Do women who have started thoroughly on the downward path ever reform?

I could recall hundreds of cases where men had been pointed out to me as having "once been wild, but had now reformed," but I could not remember an instance of a woman spoken of as reformed. As one thought struck another, I began to speculate on a woman's chances of reforming.

Decided to start the character I wished to represent, I went late one evening to East Eighty-eighth street. I saw an old-fashioned building surrounded by a high brick wall, and I knew without looking for the number that it was the institution I wanted.

ENTERING THE HOME.

I heard footsteps. A chain rattled heavily against the gates, a key was turned, and before me, candle in hand, stood a meek-looking, little, neat woman.

"Is this the Magdalen Home?" "Yes," she answered, and holding the gate but not offering me admittance. "Well, I came to see if I could stay a few days," I stammered.

"We don't take any one in here for a few days. They must stay six months. But you had better come in and see," she said, nothing my disappointed look.

"Every one who comes here stays for six months," she answered. "There are other homes you can go to for a shorter time." "Six months is a good while," I said, determined not to hear anything about other homes.

"It's not very long to those who really wish to reform. Have you been doing wrong?" "Well, I thought it might do me good to get out of the city a while," I answered, non-committal.

"You know, I suppose, that we have here only sinners and those who have strayed? You should know that as well for you to be among them, if you have done enough to merit it."

"I began to think that for once I had fallen in my attempt to dress the character I wished to represent. I had even put whiskey on my coat to color the impression that the color of my nose was due to the weather."

"I am very seldom, I am sorry to say. They come here and what they did not know before others do."

"Any one can come here," I asked. "Yes, any girl who wishes to reform can come here and after she tells her story and it is decided that she is a fit inmate for the Home she remains for six months. Clothing and food are furnished free to all. We give them every chance to do right. It is a very discouraging work though. I have spent years at it and I find we make very few, indeed the very fewest reformations. If you do not think you would like to stay six months you can stay any way to-night and have a talk with the matron, Mrs. Burr, in the morning. She went to the Florence Mission to-night to attend the wedding of one of our girls."

"They do marry, then?" I said. "Oh, yes. That girl who is here for six months and when she went out she fell in with bad company again. While intoxicated she met another girl who tried to induce her to go to some place. She replied that she was bad enough and she would not get any worse. The other girl then, who had been persuading her to go to this place, said, 'The Florence Mission is the place for you,' and took her there. Just think of a bad girl taking any one to a mission! Well, the girl got converted, and to-night she is marrying a very good man. I will see if I can get you a room for to-night, and by morning you will know whether you want to stay or not."

She went into the hall, and I could hear her talking with the little jester who admitted me. I think the jester had taken a dislike to me, and was trying that I be sent elsewhere. At any rate, they talked a long while, and I began to feel weary. Again the bell rang, and I heard the door open. "What did you come back for?" "I didn't like the place," said the new-comer. "It was in the country, so I wouldn't stay," and then they told her what had to be said, and I heard her go heavily up the uncarpeted stairs.

What you tell me, my dear, no one else ever hears, but you must know your history before we can say you are fit subject for the home; otherwise you will come here and learn more wickedness than you could elsewhere. "I asked, to avoid discussing the first person singular. "Well, they will judge on you and want to know if you can stand to keep any longer there. I will tell you about my own case. You can think it over and I will talk with you in the morning. We have seventy girls at present, and I will have to put you in with another girl, but I believe she is truly converted."

"I was again at the mercy of the little jester. She wanted to make me carry a lamp, along some narrow hallway. She may be my weak point, as I have already said, but I think that if the house can't I shall never be able to find my way out of those narrow passages. Entering a room she set the lamp down on a wash-stand as she called out, 'John, I have a wish on a bed-fellow.' The girl turned and came around and opening her large black eyes looked at me.

HOW THE NIGHT WAS SPENT.

This was not made me a prison or an asylum, there were no iron bars or locks of charity. What a difference in the treatment of women who have erred and of the poor creatures who are allowed through no fault of their own! The room in which I went to spend the night was of good size.

"Six months is rather a long time to stay here. I spent as long as I could and I hope to be in here again in six months here to an eternity in hell." "I dropped my book in astonishment and looked at her. She rose to herself to a sitting position in the bed. Her hair was tossed, and her eyes gleamed unnatrally. 'I really couldn't say, you know,' I stammered. 'I never spent any time in either place.' At this moment the jester came for the lamp, as she went out the door she gave this parting salutation: 'John, don't throw her out the window before morning.'

"Oh, no," replied Johann; "she is a very nice little girl. The door closed and we were left in the dark. She asked me all about myself, and I in turn questioned her. 'I make artificial flowers. I learned the business when I was a child. I need to make \$5 a day, but I can only earn \$7 a week. We are paid by the amount of work we do.' 'Where do you live?' I asked. 'I rent a small room in a top floor in the locality of Hester street for \$1.50 a week. It has a single bed in it and I own an obdurate chair in which I do my cooking. No, I cannot save any money. By the time I pay rent and for fuel and buy my food I have but little left for clothing myself.'

"What do you not tell me some of these charitable homes? I would imagine it is easier for them to live as you do." "I am tired really weary, and the only people who go to charitable homes are miserable. I want to get it out of my system and I want for a while to have a room, a clean board, and homes are generally full of vice, so I would not patronize them."

"Have you been there long?" "I have been here a year now. I had gone to every attempt in my power, but as a last remedy, I came here. I am so glad, for I have seen the folly of my former life and am now an anxious to live better."

A DAY IN THE MAGDALEN.

I was about ready to go to sleep when the rising bell rang. I had passed the night in a restless manner and was glad to find it ended. Johann got up and sat on the edge of the bed while I put on my gown. We were ready to go down to the stairs. I followed her along the narrow hallway and into the sitting-room. It was a good-sized room with white walls, benches and a desk. It looked exactly like a country school-room. A large stove occupied the centre of the room, and disheveled around it were some twenty girls. They were plain colored dresses and some wore aprons. They looked at me as curiously as I looked at them. One of the number made room for us and we joined the circle.

"How many new ones came last night?" asked a girl. "Three," responded several. "Did she?" inquired one, "come herself?" asked another of Johann, who sat in the affirmative. "What other Homes have you been in?" some one asked me. "None, this is my first," I replied. "Bell, Minna," they called out in chorus to a new-comer with a youthful face and short gray hair. "Why don't you sleep all day?" "Sleep? I haven't closed my eyes all the night. I have slept for a week, and if they don't soon give me something they'll have to send me to the crazy-house on Blackwell's Island," said Minna, complainingly.

Gradually the circle increased around the stove and the real talk began, which always makes a rush for the hall. There were no notes of regulations to be observed, and every one rambled at will. I followed in the train down to the dining-room, which is in the basement. The matron, Mrs. Burr, was there. The room was filled with girls who were eating a meal of thanks, after which they repeated a prayer, and then began on the simple meal before them. It consisted of bread, butter, molasses and a bowl of coffee. One woman who sat at our table would not eat her bread, which she broke in bits and passed to some one else's plate. This raised a disturbance, and Mrs. Burr sent her from the table as one who was making a nuisance of herself. She was very quiet, Mrs. Burr always spoke in the most gentle and quiet manner to the unruly ones.

HOW THE PLACE LOOKS.

I made a survey of the place. The ceiling was low but nicely whitened. On the walls were notices that would not harm people to see. The most interesting ones were notices of newly arrived girls in the room; the youngest a pretty possessed and cream-complexioned miss of not more than sixteen years, and the eldest a feeble woman who looked not less than seventy.

"How do you spend the day?" I asked a girl. "Just as we please," she said. "We read or we can work on mough-to-ling or in the laundry. Some knit or crochet." We generally please ourselves. "Girls must have very nice here?" I remarked. "My aunt says it is an encouragement to laziness and crime," interposed a girl who had been listening to us.

"Well, I would think some are reformed by being here," I said. "Oh, yes," answered another; "there is one here now who has been here four times, and she says it has done her good every time." "What makes her come back if it does her good?" I asked.

"Well, when she gets out she falls in with bad company and goes back to her old ways; then she gets into trouble and comes back here. I could not see how the matron benefited her if it did not last after she got out. From the conversation of some of the girls I learned that they had been making the rounds of the charitable homes since childhood, and I don't doubt that their mothers had the same before them. Two of them even spoke of being in Homes in other cities. Johann was the only one I found who had the least remorse for what she had done. The others were as indifferent about it as if it were an honor to them.

"X was where the girls came to the sitting-room with pieces of bread, so that I knew they never suffered from hunger. A large space of ground surrounds the Home, enclosed of course, by the fence. The laundry work is done for the neighbors by such girls as are willing to work. It is done at reduced prices in order that the inmates may have something to employ their time. Each girl is her own washwoman. They have perfect liberty in everything except to go out the gate. The Home is non-sectarian, although Protestant services are held every Sunday. The girls are offered every chance of reformation, but the saddest accept. This life is like a toboggan slide. Once they start, it is impossible to stop until they reach the end, which is death. They creep up the rounds from the streets to the corner, to the island, to the Home, and to the streets again—year after year.

In the afternoon of my day there the ambulance came to take a sick girl to the hospital. The girl rushed to the front of the house to get a possible opportunity to see the ambulance. They said, and were in the ambulance, passed the gate. One girl who was in the crowd by assuming that she was wanted to go in. "There are many peculiar characters at the Home. The most interesting one was probably a little creature whom the girls call Vanderbilt, because she invariably runs the house. Vanderbilt is herself up in a comical style, but she is a good-natured. When she first came to the Home some patients who had been there had pained while cat green. The poor creature seemed distressed. It became Vanderbilt's charge. She nursed it and tended it until the pain wore off—and she was sent back to the other. When she came down she jumped on her lap and displays more of her peculiarities. The poor creature is almost as much as a cat, and his tail gives him pleasure of once again wearing it. "I was rather pleased to hear the superintendent girls tell what 'right' the most common of them was converted to them. When spoken to of the alacrity of such beliefs, one said: "Well, I know they are true. One day I was on the floor and I heard that for change of mind, and the next morning I was in the Court." THAT WAS CONTINUING.

THE MATRONS' MATRON.

Towards evening Mrs. Burr took me into the reception room. She asked if I had yet concluded that I would like to stay six months. I did not incline to for so long an interval, especially as I had gathered all the information I could, even if it should last a month. I had but little sympathy for those women who do wrong and have to do so; and I thought I would like to go to the Home as soon as possible. I saw the time was passing, and that instead of being benefited by remaining here, I should learn more wickedness. She said: "Other Homes I could go to and stay a shorter time, but here the women here are bad," she said.

"We got the very worst. A great number of them have served their terms in the penitentiary and workhouses. We offer shelter to any woman who wants to reform and we teach her all we can, but it is not encouraging work."

"Do they ever reform?" I asked. "Well, even if they wish to reform they are almost impossible. We had a woman here who was once of a very wealthy family. She was well educated, but she fell in love and it ruined her. She had to be of the very worst before we got her. She repented and wanted to do right, but we could give her no chance. She had no recommendations and at every place she asked for work she was compelled to tell her history. No one would have her after that. One charitable woman said she would give taken her for a nurse, but she had two sons coming home from college and she could not care to have in the house. Girls often leave here with a desire to do better, but they have no money, no trade, no character, and in a while they get discouraged and go back to their old habits. The majority of them are not fit for reform. They come here because it offers them a refuge where they can have now here else to go. We endeavor to do all we can for them."

"I was going to see the receiving committee of the Home or to some other mission. I left the Matron, I tell you the path of sin is like a toboggan slide; once we start down there is no stopping until we reach the end." NELLIE BLT.

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"I have been here a year now. I had gone to every attempt in my power, but as a last remedy, I came here. I am so glad, for I have seen the folly of my former life and am now an anxious to live better."

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