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## FREE FOOD FOR ALL COMERS.

### "OPEN HOUSES" THAT VAGRANTS LOVE.

IT is the easiest thing in the world to get food for nothing. A man need not cadge importunately for it; he need not even ask for it. All that is necessary is that he present himself at certain places, and then edibles will be freely given to him without anything whatever being required in return, and without—advice. If a man owned a pair of the famous seven-leagued boots, and could visit those places in quick succession, he could beat hollow the starveling who lived on six-

pence a day. He would get to the irreducible minimum—nothing.

One of the oldest of those institutions where free food is dispensed is the Hospital of St. Cross, near Winchester, famous throughout England for its dole of bread and beer, which has been given to every wayfarer for five centuries. Passing into the gateway, the visitor enters the inner porch, and stands at the porter's gate, whereupon the historic quantum of beer and bread is presented to him on a tren-



EATING PORRIDGE OUTSIDE MONASTERY AT RUGEY (p. 47).

(Photo: Cassell & Co., Ltd.)

cher. Some years ago the King (then Prince of Wales) was shown over the hospital, and he had his half-pint of beer in a horn mug just like an ordinary visitor. The malt liquor for the refreshment of wayfarers is kept in a barrel, which must not be filled more than once a day.

At an institution better known to Londoners—Nazareth House, Hammersmith—food is just as readily forthcoming for callers. As a rule, if not invariably, it is in the form of bread. And the same custom obtains at all other settlements of the Little Sisters of the Poor, who, though they never give money to wayfarers, do not turn them empty away. At every conventual establishment, in fact, food is waiting for all comers.

Anybody who is hungry may call at a monastery with no less certainty of being relieved. Questions are not asked, nor are any conditions imposed. In general a man rings the bell at the gate, or, if there is an open refectory, walks in, whereupon a monk comes, silently hands him food, and he can go on his way.

The largest monastery in England, that at Parkminster, Sussex, is quite closed to wayfarers; but the Carthusians succour all who

come to their door. Sometimes a man is given a loaf only, and others a penny in addition. Or, if he calls late in the evening, he may have nothing but a copper passed to him through the wicket. Only one thing is certain, and it is that he never applies at the great establishment in vain. The bread is given out by whoever is on duty as doorkeeper, and often one of the workmen is thus employed.

At Buckfastleigh, North Devon, where there is a fraternity of French Franciscans, charity is dispensed on a more systematic and more liberal scale. An open refectory is kept for the relief of wayfarers, in which they can eat and rest. Just the same kind of guest-house forms a part of the monastery of Mount St. Bernard, in Charnwood Forest, Leicestershire. This is one of the best-known free restaurants in the British Isles, and thousands of waifs and strays have visited it, some of them more than once. There are vagrants, indeed, who get most of their food at it for months at a stretch, making it, as they do, their headquarters and abusing the monks' charity with the most brazen effrontery.

The refectory door at Mount St. Bernard is always open. On entering it, the visitor finds himself in a plainly-furnished room, on



DISTRIBUTING FOOD TO POOR, NAZARETH HOUSE, HAMMERSMITH

(Photo: Cassell & Co., Ltd.)

the walls of which hang several religious pictures. He sits down on a form, and in a few moments a trap-door behind him is opened and food is passed through. A brother seems to be always in attendance, so that refreshment may be supplied to callers without delay. Not

milk, no matter when they call. The soup is a peculiar concoction, since it commonly contains bread, vegetables, bits of cheese, odds and ends of bacon, and a host of other incongruous viands. It is not at all suited to a fastidious palate; but of its wholesomeness



RECEIVING FOOD AT THE MONASTERY OF ST. BERNARD, CHARNWOOD FOREST, LEICESTERSHIRE (p. 46).

(Photo: Walter Bale, Kibworth.)

a word does he speak, nor does he expect visitors to say anything. In fact, he closes the door immediately he has pushed forward the food. As soon as that is done, the caller rises, conveys it to the table, eats it, and departs.

Upon the hour of the day depends the nature of the food supplied in the refectory. It is either a basin of soup or a pan of warm milk with a slice of excellent monastery-made bread. Children are usually given bread and

and its "lasting" nature there can be no question.

A third system of relieving wayfarers is in force in the monastery at Rugby, porridge flavoured with carrot being dispensed in generous portions at three o'clock in the afternoon. Probably a man who sought assistance in the morning would be given bread or other food at once; but those who call about, or soon after, dinner time are asked to wait.



RECEIVING FOOD AT THE HOSPITAL OF ST. CROSS NEAR WINCHESTER (p. 45).

(Photo: Cassell & Co., Ltd.)

One of these three modes of dispensing charity is practised at every monastery in the country, and as a consequence numbers of travellers, regular and otherwise, are daily fed at such institutions. Formerly the monks were still more hospitable, in many cases giving wayfarers free beds as well as free food, and in some instances supplying them with clothes besides. The result was that they were both insulted and injured. Not content with laughing at them, the beneficiaries damaged their property, often, for instance, tearing up sheets for "toe rags." So now the monks generally confine their hospitality to the giving away of food.

Attempts have been made to induce them to stop even that on the ground that the practice has a tendency to increase vagrancy. Again and again the police have made representations to this effect, and on one occasion an over-zealous constable went so far as to enter a monastery in the wake of a vagrant and order him out. Great was then the fall of the active and intelligent officer. A stalwart brother

told him to begone, whereupon he became insolent. Without standing on ceremony, the burly monk caught hold of him, took him to the gate, and gently deposited him in the road.

Boards of guardians have also exerted themselves with a view to putting an end to the indiscriminate hospitality offered at monasteries. In no case, however, have the joint efforts of the police and the Poor-law authorities been successful. Believing that it is a religious and social duty to succour the poor, the monks refuse to cease from giving food to all comers, irrespective of age, sex, and creed.

The class of people who benefit by monastic charity are of a very varied character. Sailors tramping from port to port; Irish harvestmen on their way to fresh fields of labour; "travelling tradesmen," or mechanics in search of work; musicians, hawkers, touts, etc., proceeding to or from the seaside; whole families (including the cat) migrating from one part of the country to another; nondescript negroes and Italian organ grinders; thorough-paced roadsters who would pine away like a hot-house flower if cooped up in the slums of a big city—all these are to be met with at monasteries, a score of types sometimes sitting down together in a refectory or standing outside the gate. Clearly, therefore, monastic hospitality is not extended to the undeserving alone.

At many country houses also free food is available for all comers. In general money is given at "marks" of this kind, as it was, and may be still, at Hawarden Castle. But at numbers of them the occupiers offer a good feed, sometimes insisting that the recipients shall eat on the premises, and at others allowing the food to be taken away.

Perhaps the most distinctive of such places is a certain hall situated near Ashbourne, in Derbyshire. When a tramp goes up to the gate, the lodge-keeper admits him and asks him to sit down on one of the stone seats near the entrance. Then he retires, returning presently with a liberal measure of either beer or milk. Nobody is refused this dole. For many years it has been freely given to every applicant, who has only had to present himself to receive it.

There lately died, however, an eccentric sportsman who assisted wayfarers on a system of his own. Every itinerant calling at his country seat went away with a huge piece of meat pie at least. That was the fixed, invariable gift in the way of food. When, however, the occupier was at home he generally

received his visitor himself, and if that chance caller told him a good yarn—a yarn that made him laugh—he was given half-a-crown or five shillings besides the pie.

This circumstance was so well-known that all the artistic liars in the vagabond army—and there are battalions of them—"called" at the sporting gentleman's residence at some time or other. Occasionally he had the pleasure of receiving about a dozen of them in a single day.

A curious variant on the practice of keeping open house for the benefit of wayfarers is in operation at Broughton-in-Furness. Over the door of a little baker's shop may be read: "One piece of bread, to be eaten on the premises, given to anyone passing through Broughton direct until 10 p.m." The time limit is noteworthy. Practically all travellers are eligible for the dole, since very few are on the road after ten o'clock at night.

The singular signboard was fixed on the shop about ten years ago by a local gentleman, who pays the baker for the bread which he disposes of through exhibiting it, and who probably had it placed there to save his servants the trouble of attending to wayfarers. It would be interesting to know the amount of his yearly bill. No doubt it is large, for the shop is a favourite calling place for tramps, as well as for out-of-work artisans who are on their way to Barrow-in-Furness, twelve miles from Broughton.

Many free feeds, moreover, are obtainable in particular towns and villages on particular days. There are hundreds of charities similar to that at Biddenden. As most people know, flat cakes, having stamped on them the figures of two females joined together like the Siamese twins, are distributed to all comers at Easter. For the hungry wayfarer, however, there is a much more substantial gift, a quartern loaf and  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. of cheese, enough to keep him going for a time. By storing up in his memory the names of the many places where some such distributions take place annually, a vagrant can be pretty sure of a square meal at least once a fortnight.

Having regard to the existence of these and many other sources where free food can be obtained, it is truly amazing that any people die of starvation in this country. Vagrants have an axiom that bread can be obtained anywhere. So it can, and very often something more besides.

T. W. WILKINSON.

#### A Telling Postscript.

MISS JONES was ill and in great haste to go out of town. She wrote to the proprietor of a mountain farmhouse that had been recommended to her to engage board. This is the reply: "Miss Jones.—My terms are \$5 a week each, where two occupy a room; \$6 when occupied by one. House is very near the river, and a large brook runs through the place. Table of the best, with milk and cream in abundance. Plenty of shade about the grounds. Horses and wagons at disposal of guests." But it was the postscript that went to the heart of the matter (and of Miss Jones). It read: "I could not accommodate you this year, as my house was burned to the ground last May."

ARCHIE: "It's always in damp places where mushrooms grow, isn't it, father?"

Father: "Yes, my boy."

"Is that the reason they look like umbrellas, then?"



RECEIVING FOOD AT THE PARKMINSTER MONASTERY (p. 46).

(Photo: Cassell & Co., Ltd.)