

Experiments I have Made.

IV.—MEN'S FIRESIDES.

THERE are few things which appeal more strongly to the happy-homed Englishman on a winter's night than his own fireside. If it were not for the firesides of England, clubs and pubs and the multiple other ways in which attraction, entertainment and amusement are offered in these days, would draw men in even greater numbers than they do. A happy home, a bright fire, a cosy chair, a pipe (for some), a book, the family around, the day's work done, and tens of thousands are content.

It was realisation of this well-known fact which, some few years ago, led a young and eager Primitive Methodist minister in Northampton, who was keen to break new ground among men, to hit on the happy title of "Men's Fireside" for an effort he was making to reach them. He called a meeting to which less than a score came. They sat around a fire, chatted and smoked as men do at their own firesides, sang, as the wise do in their own homes, and he unfolded his ideas: a week-night gathering for men characterised by freedom and friendliness, where they could smoke and express their minds without let or hindrance, where matters of moment and interest could be frankly discussed, and where men from different walks in life could rub shoulders and get to know one another, where employed men could find through actual contact that all employers are not hard-hearted rogues with no concern save profits, and where in like manner employers could discover that all employees are not out to get the most they can for the least they are willing to give, whilst religion should be there as an all pervading influence and find expression in a closing act of worship.

The idea caught on and quickly began to take shape. The first small vestry where they met for discussion soon became inadequate, and before the first session was over the large schoolroom, holding over four hundred, was in use. From a fact the fireside changed into a symbol, represented by electric lamps and red paper, but its warming power grew with the passing days. The form of gathering, whilst not fixed and stereotyped, in outline is this. A first half-hour of music (community singing is still popular though the craze for it has

passed). Then an address on some topic of interest, religious, social, moral, travel. (It was soon found that party politics engendered more heat than light.) The address is followed by twenty minutes discussion. Only on rare occasions is the time allotted enough for those who wish to take part. Then follow coffee, tea and biscuits (a box at the door defrays expenses, and those who have no money are not made uncomfortable by a collection, whilst the warmth of the fireside usually melts the stony-hearted). The whole is brought to a close by family worship. The first Fireside has now been running some six years, and some results can be tabulated. Three to five hundred men gather week by week. There are scores coming regularly to church and some in office in the church, who for years had not been inside a place of worship. The founder of the movement, the Rev. C. L. Tudor, frequently told the writer that some of his finest and most loyal workers had come from it. They found in religion a radiant freshness which some who have been all their days in the church seem to miss.

Let no one run away with the idea that Firesides are going to solve the problem of the men. This first Fireside had certain distinct advantages. Its founder is a man of strong and attractive personality. It had a fresh field to cultivate, a large new churchless district of the town. Trying out the same idea in the centre of the town in a business quarter we met with nothing like the same success, though even there some very good work was done, particularly among a number of unemployed men, who found our Fireside a real haven. Organisations have nothing like the same power of appeal as personalities. But given the right type of man for leadership, here undoubtedly is a type of organisation which should prove of great value in any residential area. To get the best out of it, it is essential to mix the personnel as much as possible, to get not only different men but different classes together, professional, business, artizan, to show in practice that the Christian Church is a family which has room for all.

The Church is suspect with many, and some are outside simply because they are shy. They are not accustomed to going to places of worship and wonder how they would be received. The "Fireside" dissolves a good many barriers and creates an altogether better feeling. It gives a new opportunity and it all depends on minister and people how they use it.

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