

One of the greatest difficulties that a criminal has to encounter, is in getting employment after fulfilling his term of imprisonment. He is willing to work, and determined to be honest. But the policeman knows his whereabouts, and gives information against him. He is immediately turned off, and forced back upon his old habits. Thus it becomes almost impossible for a quondam prisoner to return to honesty. Thomas Wright, the philanthropist of Manchester, distinguished himself as the true friend of forlorn prisoners. He was a man of no position in society. He possessed no wealth, excepting only a rich and loving heart.

Though he was imperfectly educated, he received strong religious impressions in early life from his mother. At length the time came when he was loosened from her apron-strings, and had to face the world, with its labours, its pleasures, and its vices. He very soon got mixed up with the wickedest men and boys in Manchester. That lasted for some time ; but at length his mind and conscience revolted against the blasphemy of his companions. The lessons imbibed from his mother's lips came to his help. He made the acquaintance of a religious young man, and began regularly to attend a place of worship.

At fifteen he was apprenticed to an iron-founder at Manchester. His wage at first was five shillings a week.

Being a steady, sober, diligent fellow, he gradually worked his way up, until, at twenty-three, he became foreman of the moulders, at a weekly salary of £3 : 10s. This was his highest income, but the good that he afterwards did was altogether independent of his money wages.

His attention was early awakened to the criminal classes, the most hopeless of objects. The convict, when let loose from gaol, can very rarely get employment in his old place. New masters will not employ him without a character, which he cannot give. Imprisonment has probably made him worse. It has brought him in contact with more vicious persons than himself. He is thus thrown back upon his former associates, and begins his criminal career as before.

One day a man called at the foundry, and obtained employment as a labourer. He was a steady, careful, and industrious workman. But it oozed out that the man was a discharged convict. Thomas Wright was asked whether he was cognisant of the fact. He was not, but he promised to ascertain. In the course of the day Wright incidentally asked the man "where he had worked last?" "I've been abroad," was the man's reply. At last, after some further pressing inquiries, the poor man, with tears running down his cheeks, admitted that he was a returned convict, that he was desirous of not relapsing into his old ways, and that he hoped, by perseverance, to wipe out his evil character.

Mr. Wright believed the man. He was convinced that he was sincere in his intentions. He acquainted the employers with his history, and offered to place £20 in their hands as a guarantee for his future good conduct. The promise was then given that the convict should be retained; but on the following morning the man was missing, the order for his dismissal having, through inadvertence, not been countermanded. A messenger was at once sent to

the man's lodging to bring him back to work. But the man had already left his lodging, taking with him a bundle containing all his worldly belongings.

Having ascertained that the man had set out in the direction of Bury, Mr. Wright immediately followed him on foot. He found the fugitive sitting by the roadside, a few miles from Manchester, heart-broken, wretched, and despairing. Wright lifted him up, shook him by the hand, told him that he was retained in his employment, and that everything now depended upon himself, whether he would maintain his character as a respectable workman. They returned together to Manchester, they entered the shop together, and the future conduct of the man amply and nobly justified the guarantee into which the foreman had entered.

This circumstance greatly affected Mr. Wright himself. He saw how much could be done by sympathy and human affection to rescue these poor criminals from the depths of misery into which they had fallen. He felt that they should not abandon all hope of recovery, and that it behoved every Christian man to give them a helping hand towards re-entering industrial life. This subject became the great idea of his soul. It was his mission, and he endeavoured to fulfil it. He was as yet without a helper. But he had strong faith, and he persevered until he succeeded.

Mr. Wright lived near the Salford prison, and desired to have access to the prisoners. For a long time he failed in his application. At last one of the young men in the foundry, whose father was a turnkey in the gaol, obtained for him an introduction to the governor. He was then permitted to attend the Sunday afternoon services. He was not permitted, as yet, to see the prisoners individually. But he had the patience to wait.

At length, one Sunday afternoon, the chaplain stopped Mr. Wright on leaving the prison chapel, and asked him if he could procure a situation for a prisoner whose term of office had nearly expired, and who desired to have the chance of proving the reformation of his character. "Yes," said Wright; "I will do my best, I will endeavour to find a situation." He succeeded, and work was found for the discharged prisoner.

The governor now gave him a freer run of the gaol. He allowed him to visit the prisoners personally. Wright advised and counselled them. He strengthened their determination to amend. He conveyed messages home to their families, and made himself their friend and benefactor in many ways. He made it a practice to meet the prisoners on their discharge. He took them to their homes, and helped them, out of his scanty means, to subsist, and then he endeavoured to find employment for them.

He was in most cases successful. Employers of labour came to believe in Thomas Wright. They knew him to be a good and benevolent man, and that he would not counsel them wrongly. He took the employers into his confidence, and they usually employed the released felons. Where they had doubts, he guaranteed their fidelity by deposits of his own money—gathered together out of his foreman's wages of seventy shillings a week.

He went on quietly and unostentatiously in this way—preferring that no notice should be taken of his name, lest it might interfere with the good that he was doing; until he had succeeded in a few years in finding employment for nearly three hundred discharged prisoners! He even succeeded—the worst task of all—in reclaiming women from drunkenness. He would sometimes go miles into the country, to plead with husbands, even on his knees, to

take back the wife who was no longer drunken, but was penitent and longing for home.

A remarkable case is mentioned by one of his friends.* A man who had been undergoing penal servitude at Portland was discharged, and repaired to Manchester with a ticket of leave and a letter from the chaplain to Thomas Wright. Employment was found for him as a scavenger. Mr. Wright had him promoted to be a mender of roads; and here also his conduct was approved. He obtained admission for him to the late Canon Stowell's Sunday and week-day night schools, in both of which he became a teacher. He showed so much capacity for learning that Canon Stowell felt a great interest in him. The Canon was made acquainted with his antecedents. Nevertheless he made arrangements for "reading" with him, and in due time the Portland convict was ordained a clergyman.

In another case a young man, engaged in a position of trust in a warehouse, had fallen into bad company, and embezzled his employer's money. The theft was discovered, and he was about to be prosecuted. The young man's father besought the mediation of Thomas Wright. He immediately went to the employer, and succeeded in eliciting a promise not to prosecute, but to give the youth another trial. "Give him another chance," was often Thomas Wright's urgent advice. The young man was taken on again. His behaviour was most satisfactory. He gave himself more to business pursuits than before. He was at length taken in as a partner, and eventually became the head of the firm. He never ceased to bless the name of Thomas Wright.

After he had been thus working on for years, his voluntary labours at length obtained official recognition. Captain Williams mentioned him in his annual reports on

* The author of *Lives that Speak*.

the state of prisons. He says, "To show the extent to which this humble and unassisted good man has carried his benevolence, and the success with which it has been crowned, it is but necessary to state that out of ninety-six criminals befriended by him, and re-established in life, only four have returned to a prison. It is delightful to witness the implicit confidence and reliance reposed in him by the guilty and wretched, and which seem to be wholly induced by his simple, unassuming, and truly fatherly way of doing good."

There were many cases in which Mr. Wright could not get employment for the released prisoners. In such cases he either lent them money of his own, or raised a private subscription among his friends, to enable them to emigrate. In this way he assisted 941 discharged prisoners and convicts to go abroad, and to begin life under new circumstances and separated from their old companionships. In many cases the discharged prisoners themselves helped him in his philanthropic labours. They got employment for their friends, or they helped to raise subscriptions to enable others to emigrate. Thus charity begot charity.

One of these forlorn emigrants, who had been sent to North America, wrote to Mr. Wright in 1864, addressing him as "My dear adopted father." He enclosed £2 as a contribution to the London Male Reformatory. The emigrant, who was now a prosperous man, said, "To your never-to-be-forgotten fatherly aid I owe my present success. You were indeed my best, my kindest, and my sole advising friend on this earth. You rescued me from a life of vice by your own unaided help. When all others had turned their faces from me as a miscreant and a vagabond, you, like the prodigal's father of old, welcomed me back to the paths of virtue and integrity of life, consoling my youthful heart with the hope of brighter days yet in store, and blend-

ing your fatherly counsel with a still purer hope beyond the grave. God bless you, dear father! God bless you for all your kindness! Tears of kind remembrances fall from my cheeks as I think upon all your noble efforts for your poor fellow-men."

In the meantime, Mr. Wright was working daily at the foundry—working from five o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night; and sometimes to a still later hour. All his evening leisure and most of his Sundays were devoted to his self-imposed services; either in the gaol, the penitentiary, the ragged Sunday schools, or at the homes of the unfortunate and the criminal. He was now sixty-three years old, and his health was beginning to fail. He had saved nothing. All his surplus earnings had been devoted to the relief and emigration of discharged prisoners. He frequently reduced himself to the lowest means of subsistence—always considering that while he had the means, he would not be justified in withholding them from those who were in distress.

The Government of the day, recognising the value of his services, offered Mr. Wright the post of travelling inspector of prisons, at the salary of £800 per annum. Here, it would seem, was a method by which he could lay by a little money, and at the same time extend the sphere of his operations. But he unhesitatingly refused the offer. He said that it would limit his power of doing good, as he felt convinced that if he once became a Government official, he would soon cease to be regarded as *The Prisoner's Friend*.

Accordingly, the attempt was made by the people of Manchester to raise a sum for the purchase of an annuity equal to the amount of his weekly wages—a mere tithe of the amount which his exertions had saved to the State. A sum of £100 was allotted from the Royal Bounty Fund in

aid of the subscription. The Manchester people did the rest. They raised a sum which provided Mr. Wright with an annuity of £182, the exact amount which he had before earned by his daily toil.

In connection with the testimonial, an admirable picture of "The Good Samaritan" was presented by Mr. G. F. Watt, R.A., to the Manchester Corporation, "as an expression of the artist's admiration of, and respect for, the noble philanthropist, Thomas Wright." The picture was placed in a prominent position in the Manchester Town Hall. It is a testimony at once to the kindness and generosity of the artist, and to the nobility of the character whom his painting represented.

Mr. Wright still continued in his works of mercy. He went from town to town, like Howard, visiting the gaols of the country. He inspected the Field Lane Night Refuge, the Redhill Industrial Schools, the hulks and convict establishments at Millbank, Pentonville, Portland, Portsmouth, and Parkhurst. He worked hard in the establishment of Ragged Schools. He wished to train the poor boys to earn an honest livelihood, and thus to prevent their becoming criminals. He regarded ignorance and bad example as the fruitful parents of all evil; and he did what he could to eradicate them by secular and religious instruction. He urged upon Mr. Cobden, who was then engaged in advocating a system of National Education, that it should be made compulsory, as the primary means of diminishing crime and pauperism. Besides his Ragged Schools, he instituted Reformatory Schools, Penny Banks, and the Shoeblack Brigade. Wherever a good work was to be done, his hand and help were never wanting. He loved to have every moment occupied. His motto was—"Work, work, whilst it is called to-day; for the night cometh."

Thus he went on to the end. When he had arrived at eighty-five years of age, his health rapidly failed. Yet he was always ready to receive those who wished to see him—especially poor persons, discharged prisoners, or returned convicts. His life gradually faded away. The twenty-third psalm was continually on his lips, and at the end of each day's illness he felt himself "a day's march nearer home." He had fought the good fight, and was about to finish his course. He passed peacefully and calmly to his rest on the 14th of April 1875. This was surely a "life worth living."

Wright reformed criminals by trusting them. Trust is confidence. By trusting men you bring out the good that is in them. Their heart responds to the touch. Except in the worst cases, where young people have been carelessly and dishonestly brought up, the trust will be reciprocated. Always think the best of a man. "To think the worst," said Lord Bolingbroke, "is the sure mark of a mean spirit and a base soul." You may be deceived, it is true. But better be deceived than unjust.