

Among those who are still writing for the sake of charity, sweet charity, is Walter Besant, one of whose latest works, "The Children of Gibeon," has been styled a prose "Song of the Shirt."

The author's object in writing this intensely interesting story was to improve the physical condition of the poor.

The plot is simple, but well carried out.

We are first introduced into the home of Mrs. Monument, a washerwoman, who has a large family to support, and whose husband is serving a term in prison for burglary; but only the mother and the oldest son are aware of this disgrace.

As the years roll on, Mrs. Monument becomes blind, and Lady Mildred Eldridge, whose nurse she has once been, adopted the youngest child, "little Polly," and provides for the education of the smaller children. She also obtains admission for the mother into a very pleasant English almshouse, or home for those who need such care.

Lady Mildred has a daughter about the age of Polly, and from the fact that they bear a striking resemblance to each other, she decides to bring them up together. They are called Valentine and Violet, and only the mother and the family solicitor can identify them.

Lady Eldridge decides to keep them ignorant of their true position until they become of age; and upon that day the world is to know which is the washer-woman's daughter, and which is the baronet's daughter; a very important piece of knowledge in this selfish age of the world.

Mrs. Monument's other children are trained in different branches of life. Joe, her oldest son, is a common laborer; Sam, a schoolmaster and socialist of the extreme type; Claude, whom Lady Mildred has educated, a young attorney, who promises to become famous in the judicial world; and Melenda, an ill-paid sewing girl. The last-named is one of the most important characters in the story, for it is through her and her two companions that Besant works out his theme.

These three girls live, or exist, we had better say, in one of the most wretched parts of London, where drunken brawls and scenes of brutality are but common occurrences. The girls work from twelve to fifteen hours each day, and even then their wages barely keep them alive. A more pitiful existence could not be imagined, and Besant gives so vivid a description of it that it must be a hard heart that is not moved to pity upon reading the story.

Valentine, after visiting these girls, "went

about with a grisly spectre always before her eyes—the spectre of the workgirl, half-starved, overworked, resigned, in a rage, uncomplaining." She very soon decides to go to live with these girls to see if she cannot help them. Her mother gives her consent, realizing the many useful lessons her daughter will learn. How much good she did for those poor girls, I will leave you to imagine, for if she but try, what cannot a brave, true-hearted girl do?

The novel ends after the approved style, "and they lived happy forever afterwards;" yet it can not fail to make a profound impression upon all its readers.

One of the many charms of the story is the simplicity and smoothness of its language and its beauty of sentiment. In speaking of Death, Besant says, "To feel and to understand that nothing remains in life; that everything has been enjoyed or endured; that the work is all done; that there will be no more wages, no more promotions, no more hopes; no more rewards, no more failures; that there remains only the short downward slope which may be perhaps taken with a run or a leap—this alone is a serious and awful thing, though it is the common lot, and therefore one fain would think cannot be bad for man."

Although the story is exceedingly pathetic, it is not without delicate humor. Joe's manner of talking and Sam's bombastic ideas are amusing in the extreme.

Besant has been compared to Dickens, but critics say that in problems relating to social life, Besant strikes a note sincerer and more true. Dickens wrote upon the crying abuses of the poor, while Besant is always inventing schemes for their improvement.

Aside from the pleasure of reading the story, we gain from it a great many ideas upon Socialism. Sam, the socialist, tells of the wonderful things that are to happen in a few years, when there shall be no capitalists, no employers, no idlers. Everybody must work, for, as Sam says, the working is the backbone of the country. We are tempted to ask if this is not one of the sources of Bellamy's schemes worked out in "Looking Backward."

How can a change in the condition of the working class be effected? How much Besant's heroine did for the poor! How much can each of us do? How much do we do? But it is not too late to begin, and by sowing the seed now, we may hope that an early harvest shall be reaped in good to those who need help.

S. C.