

RED LETTER DAYS.

FOUR times a day the Board school bell rings out its summons, and as the children hear the familiar sound, they quicken their pace in order to be in time to receive a red or black mark. Some of these little people appear to be warmly clad and well fed, and have a general air of comfort about them. But the greater number have an occupied and anxious look upon their young faces, as if they were already acquainted with the cares and privations of life. The desire to give these poor little ones an opportunity of indulging in childlike enjoyment suggested a plan by which they might have a short time of real fun.

Three years ago some kind-hearted ladies obtained the readily granted permission of the London School Board to use one of their buildings during three days of the Christmas holidays, for the amusement of children attending the school. The experiment proved to be very successful. Ladies and gentlemen responded heartily and generously to the request for their personal help, and loans or gifts of toys and picture-books. The children themselves behaved admirably. There was an entire absence of roughness or peevishness, and the good humour with which they resigned their toys when asked to do so was very remarkable. They were gentle in their manner to their lame or weakly schoolfellows, and were careful to see that they had a full share of toys and picture-books. Indeed, it would be hard to say whether entertainers or guests most enjoyed these delightful Red Letter Days. The following description will, perhaps, convey to those who had not the good fortune to be present a faint idea of what really took place.

The longed-for day at length arrived! No late sleep for parents on that morning. They were awakened by the oft-repeated question, "Mother, isn't it time to get ready for the party?" Then followed a scene of unwonted excitement. Faces had to be soaped and polished until they shone. Hands had to be scrubbed—sure never before had little fingers looked so hopelessly black. And then the hair! every tangle had to be disposed of, and there seemed to be more than usual, and the brush was unsparingly used, for "We are going to play with real ladies," said one little girl.

The invitation was timed for ten o'clock, but in spite of the cold, groups of eager visitors were assembled long before that hour at the school gate. They had been asked to supply themselves with cups or mugs, and where these boasted handles, their owners' names were attached to them. The comparison of these various vessels, which were composed of china, crockery ware, tin, and in one instance of a publican's can, formed an animated topic of conversation and discussion which helped to while away the time.

At last ten o'clock arrived! The children were admitted into the playground, and a teacher marched them in order up the stairs, the children singing:—

"Before all lands, in east or west,
I love my native land the best."

On the landing they were received by a goodly array of entertainers, who welcomed them into a well-warmed and gaily decorated schoolroom. Imagine the pleasure these children felt on being treated as guests, with the most delightful addition of all that goes to make a child's heart glad.

After singing a lively school song, as a sort of outlet for their excited feelings, the girls were arranged on their seats—the little ones in the front—and were supplied with coffee and cake. The distribution of the cake was easily managed, but the serving of the coffee was an undertaking which demanded no small amount of tact from the entertainers. The remarkable differences in the size of the drinking vessels,

too, made it a difficult matter to ascertain the relative proportion of liquid to be justly allotted to each child. Much deftness, too, was needed in passing the cups and mugs across a forest of outstretched hands, without spilling the contents on the way. The proceedings were enlivened by a continued chorus of "Teacher (all the entertainers were called "teacher"), "that's my mug." "No, not that one, that there one." "Teacher, that's mine, that with blue flowers," etc., etc.

After the repast was ended the cups and mugs were carefully collected and placed out of danger, and the children dispersed in order to take part in the various enjoyments provided for them.

All the books and pictures had been carried to one end of the long schoolroom, which portion received the name of the literature room. This reading (?) room was much frequented by the elder and more thoughtful pupils. Here was placed a large rocking-horse, which had been lent for the use of the children. No quadruped, even in lands where the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is unknown, was ever so hard worked before—he had not a minute's rest from his labours. The children stood in a line and each had a five minutes' ride in turn, to the tune of "See Saw," sung by the entertainers superintending the horsemanship.

The other end of the room was devoted to round games of every description, which were carried on with great spirit and indefatigable vigour, and the children gave full play to their supple limbs.

In the class-room, or "toy-room," as it was called for the time, were collected all the toys which had been sent for their amusement. Shops, with small articles for weighing and selling (?) to customers, were greatly in request. One of the little guests, in a letter describing the "Red Letter Days," says—"We had lots of playthings and picture books, a rocking horse and skipping ropes. It was very nice. We had a large doll's house, and there was a table and two chairs, plates, and knives and forks. Then we pretended to light the fire and get the dinner . . . and we went home very happy with the games we had."

But, perhaps, of all the toys the dolls with removable clothes were the greatest attraction. Both with the girls and infants the game of "fathers and mothers" was a very popular part of the entertainment. One could not fail to be touched on observing the little pale faces flush with pleasure as the little hands eagerly received the doll. It was something

on which to lavish their pent-up affection. "I am always wishing for a doll in long clothes to imitate a baby," said one of the children.

As, however, the supply of dolls was rather limited, they were lent to their respective parents for about a quarter of an hour. Those philanthropists who have interested themselves in "boarding out" will realise the grief and reluctance with which these little foster-parents resigned their charges into the care of other hands.

At twelve o'clock all the girls went quietly home, expressing a grateful appreciation of the kindness which had been shown them. One child remarked, "Thank you for treating us in such a nice way. It was better than playing in the streets."

The afternoon was devoted to entertaining the younger children, or, as they were called, "infants and elderly infants! Most of the elderly boys preferred to play at horses, and these were supplied with whips and reins, and dismissed to the covered playground. The little people who remained upstairs were particularly lively. Their favourite game was "A ring, a ring of roses;" to which was sung the chorus, "We all fall down." This intimation was carried out literally, again and again, to the evident enjoyment of the children, and the quickened pulses and heightened temperatures of their entertainers.

But everything must have an end, even the children's "Red Letter Day." At four o'clock the infants received a cup of coffee and some cake, and, on the last afternoon, each child carried home a toy as a souvenir of the Christmas party. Mothers came punctually for the young folks, and their careworn faces were bright with smiles as they warmly expressed their thanks for the hospitality which their children had received.

A few children from a Board school in another neighbourhood had been invited to share in the pleasure of entertaining, and the following extracts from accounts written by these girls will give the children's view of the "Red Letter Days":—"Some of the little girls were very poorly dressed, but they all seemed very happy indeed." A second remarks: "And the thing we noticed was, that they were so willing to give up their toys to each other, and no girl quarrelled with another." A third child says: "One thing I noticed was, how the children gave up their toys and dolls . . . and they all went home looking very happy, and like happiness itself."

M. E. H.

THE TWO RIVERS.

By GEORGE WEATHERLY.



BESIDE the river of Life they sat,
Two lovers full of gladness,
And the song of the stream was borne to them
With never a note of sadness—
"Flow, flow! Ripple and flow!
Never a wave of strife!
Hand in hand to the golden land
Of everlasting life!"

Beside the river of Death they stand,
But for a short space parted,
For one has crossed to the farther side,
And one is broken-hearted!
"Flow, flow! Peacefully flow!
True husband and true wife
Shall meet again on the golden plain
Of everlasting life!"