



God's Hostels.

Two Ancient English Almshouses.

[By I. Giberne Sieveking.]

(Continued from page 59, Vol. 12.)

The other Almshouse to which I made an expedition, is at Chichester, and is called St. Mary's Hospital. It was founded about 700 years ago. Originally it was intended that poor travellers should be housed for one night—a veritable God's Hostel—also that it should be used as an infirmary. Nowadays there are eight old women who live there, and sixteen out-pensioners. The number of the pensioners, the Chaplain says, will soon be increased, as the lands in Sussex, which were given by the founders for maintenance of the Almshouse, have risen in value. Each inmate gets, besides coal and firewood, 10/- a week, and they are allowed to have friends to come in and see them and a nurse if they are ill. The only restrictions on their freedom are these, that they should be in their rooms by nine every evening, by which time the outer door is locked (each of the inmates seemed, I noticed, to have an outside key), and that they must go to service every day in the chapel, which is part of the building.

To the man or woman who sees St. Mary's Hospital for the first time, there comes, if he or she is accustomed to look for the inner meaning of things, a flash of sudden intuition as to what was the idea of the founder, all those decades ago. This idea clearly was, this is God's Hostel for the infirm, the disabled, the maimed. He is their host, and so at the end of the long building is the Chapel, with its altar shut off by a very old, beautifully carved rood screen, and its fine miserere stalls of carved oak; the inmates are to feel, as it were, a near sense of the Presence of their Host; and, as in old days, on a raised dais above the salt, sat the lords, so there is for these old people the Altar of their Home, and the Host at the head of the table, while they themselves sit below the salt—the Bread and Salt which He has given them during their last meal of

Life, before they leave for another country. In former days each inmate, if unable to get up, could yet hear from his bed daily Mass being said at the altar in the chapel.

The building consists of but one large hall with the chapel at the end. On each side of the middle passage is the little living room and sleeping room for each inmate. Quite small it is true, but still, as it seemed to me, capable of being made very cosy. Formerly the inmates consisted, as at the Quainton Almshouses, of men as well as women, now there are only women. On the wall of one of the little rooms which I was shewn, I noticed the date 1680. Part of the original window in the chapel has evidently been blocked up, probably in the days when the use of glass was evaded wherever possible, owing to the tax upon it. The beams in the roof are still blackened from the charcoal braziers which, in early days, used to be slung from them, for the purpose of warming the hall; and one can plainly see the grooves worn by the chains by which they were suspended. The chimneys were built after the braziers were done away with, and were put in at regular intervals in the shape of four large blocks. The fireplaces apparently were originally made to face the centre of the hall, but these are now blocked up. The Chaplain said that the little rooms were made, and divided up, after the adding of the chimneys. It is believed that there is only one other hospital or almshouse extant built like this one at Chichester, and that this other one is at Lübeck. It is true that there used to be similar ones in Bruges, but these are not in existence now, nor have been for some time past. Between the archway leading into St. Martin's Square at Chichester and the entrance of St. Mary's Hospital is a sweet, sunny strip of garden between the walls, quiet, dreamy and restful; where the old people can sit and call up old pictures of the long ago, while they wait out, patiently, if sometimes wearying, for the days to be over—the days which Dante called so suggestively, the "time of their debt." "Let us hold on as long as we can," was the attitude in which Jean François Millet faced Life. The men and women who pause before the last long journey at one of these resting-places—call them what we will, Almshouses, God's Hostels, Hospitals,—understand fully the thought which underlies these words, and are just waiting to go "off duty."