

CHAPTER LXX.

The Men that "Sell the Books."

Every year, in the month of May, the colporteurs employed by the Metropolitan Tabernacle Colportage Association assemble at headquarters, to report progress concerning the work of the previous twelve months, to consult with the Committee as to future service, to praise the Lord for His blessing upon their labours, and to plead with Him for a continuance of His favour. At these annual gatherings, Mr. Spurgeon's address to the men, on the Monday afternoon, was always eagerly anticipated, enthusiastically received, and joyfully remembered and quoted many months, or even years, afterwards. On one of these occasions, the beloved President referred in detail to the various branches of the colporteurs' work,—preaching the gospel, conducting Sunday-schools and Bible-classes, visiting the sick, distributing tracts, advocating the cause of temperance,—and then, as a refrain to each part of his subject, he added, "But, whatever you do, brethren, mind that you *sell the books*." This exhortation so impressed both speaker and hearers that, in all the later years when they met, the expression became a kind of motto briefly describing the colporteurs' main business, and it is therefore perpetuated in the title of the present chapter.



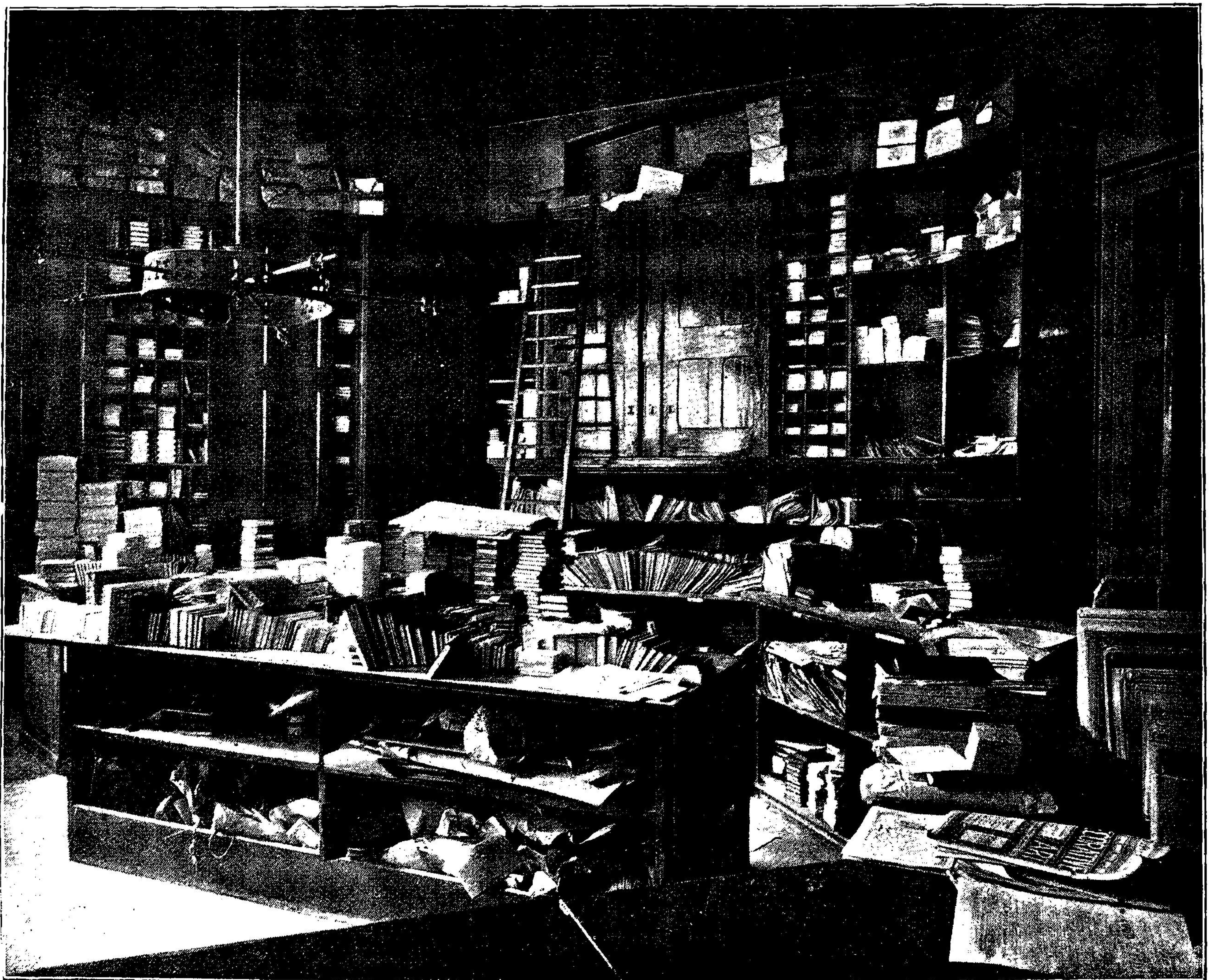
IN August, 1866, Mr. Spurgeon published, in *The Sword and the Trowel*, an article which he had written, entitled, "The Holy War of the Present Hour." That paper was destined to be more memorable than probably even the writer of it anticipated, for not only did it become the means of the formation of the Colportage Association and the Stockwell Orphanage, but it contained such a striking forecast of his position in "The 'Down-grade' Controversy" that, after he was "called home," it was reprinted as "A Chapter of Autobiography." In the article, after describing the "disguised Romanism" which was even then making rapid advances in the country, Mr. Spurgeon showed how he had done what he could to combat the evil by means of the preachers trained in the College, for whom he asked his readers' prayers and support, and then added:—"Next to this, we would urge the propriety of a very large distribution of religious literature bearing upon the Puseyite controversy. Very little has been done in this respect. Tractarianism owed its origin to tracts, as its name implies; why may not its downfall come from the same means, if well used? If several millions of copies of forcible, Scriptural testimonies could be scattered over the land, the results might far exceed all expectation. Of course, controversy would arise out of such a distribution; but this is most desirable, since it is only error which could suffer by the question being everywhere discussed. We should like to see the country flooded, and even the walls placarded, with bold exposures of error and plain expositions of truth. We will take our own share in the effort if any friends should be moved to work with

us ; at the same time, we shall be equally glad if they will do the work alone ; only let it be done, and done well, and at once. If the expense of the tracts should involve a sacrifice, it will be sweet to the true heart to serve the Lord with his substance, and none will desire to offer to Him that which costs them nothing. . . . Brethren in Christ, by the love you bear to the gospel of Jesus, be up and doing for the Lord's cause in the land. If not in these ways, yet by some other methods do meet the enemy of souls, and seek to tear the prey from between his jaws. If every hair of our head were a man, and every man had a thousand tongues, every one should cry out against the Anglican Antichrist. No greater plague can break forth among our people than the plague of Puseyism. If there be any human means unused, by which the flood of Popery may be stemmed, let us use it ; and, meanwhile, with heart and soul let us approach the throne of grace, and cry unto the Lord to maintain His own truth, and put His enemies to confusion."

The following number of the Magazine announced that, in answer to Mr. Spurgeon's appeal, one gentleman had written, offering generous aid in establishing Colportage work. This was E. Boustead, Esq., a member of the church at the Tabernacle, who had become acquainted with the successful service of the colporteurs employed by the Religious Tract and Book Society of Scotland, and who was willing to contribute freely towards the support of a similar agency in England. Accordingly, on September 3, 1866, the Pastor invited a few friends to meet him, to consider the advisability of forming an Association having for its object, "to extend the circulation of the Scriptures, and to increase the diffusion of sound religious literature, in order to counteract the evils arising from the perusal of works of a decided Romish tendency." At that meeting, eight gentlemen were requested to form themselves into a Committee, with power to add to their number, and they at once set to work energetically framing the needful rules and regulations, and arranging their plans, in which they were materially assisted by the Scotch Society.

During the first few months, or perhaps years, the work was necessarily very much of an experiment, and every effort was made to find out the best methods of procedure. At the outset, it was intended to conduct the Association upon Baptist lines, only having agents whose denominational views were akin to those of the Tabernacle members. It was soon found, however, that this restriction was not a wise one ; and, within a year, it was decided to have an undenominational basis, with the proviso that all the colporteurs engaged should be men of sterling Christian character, firmly holding the great Evangelical doctrines. In the beginning, it was proposed to carry on the enterprise with honorary officers only, the responsibilities of the different departments being shared amongst the Committee ; but it was speedily discovered that the undertaking was too heavy to be properly carried out

by gentlemen who were occupied in their various callings during the day, and, almost within the first twelve months, the appointment of the first paid officer of the Association was contemplated. It is a somewhat remarkable coincidence that the only name selected for nomination at that period was that of the present secretary, Mr. Stephen Wigney, who was unaware of the fact until more than thirty years later when, in the providence of God, he was called to fill that important position. Ultimately, in 1872, Mr. W. Corden Jones was elected, and he remained the secretary until he resigned in 1894. On the completion of the Pastors' College, the Colportage *dépôt* was transferred to the room still occupied in that building.



METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE COLPORTAGE DÉPÔT, COLLEGE BUILDINGS.

From the date of its formation until the death of Mr. Boustead, that gentleman was by far the largest contributor to the work, and in his will he left a very considerable amount for the same purpose. Through his generosity, at one period in the history of the Association, colporteurs were sent to several districts which could only

guarantee £20 a year ; but this was merely a temporary arrangement, and in later years it has been found needful to require £40 or £45 to ensure the services of a colporteur. That amount, of course, does not cover the cost of the good man's labour ; the deficiency is met by the profit on the books he sells and by contributions to the General Fund of the Association.

Mr. Spurgeon was, from the first, a liberal supporter of the Colportage movement, and by voice and pen he advocated its claims upon the Christian Church. It was always a source of surprise and sorrow to him that the work was not more generally adopted and maintained. He wrote concerning it :—" I believe it to be one of the most efficient and economical agencies in existence ; and, as education increases, it will be more and more so. The sale of vicious literature can only be met by the distribution of good books : these can best be scattered, in rural districts, by carrying them to the houses of the people ; and, even in towns, the book-hawkers' work greatly stimulates their sale. The colporteur not only endeavours to 'sell the books,' but he visits from door to door ; and, in so doing, converses with the inmates about their souls, prays with the sick, and leaves a tract at each cottage. He is frequently able to hold prayer-meetings, open-air services, and Bible-readings. He gets a room, if possible, and preaches ; founds Bands of Hope, and makes himself generally useful in the cause of religion and temperance. He is, in fact, at first a missionary, then a preacher, and by-and-by in the truest sense a pastor. We have some noble men in this work."

Mr. Spurgeon always took the deepest interest in the colporteurs, and their annual Conferences were as enjoyable to him as they were to the men themselves. It was with the utmost delight that he listened to the account of their adventures and experiences, narrated in the dialect of their different districts ; and he was specially cheered when they related instances of conversion through the reading of his sermons and other published works. Probably, not one of their yearly gatherings was held without many such testimonies being given ; and every agent of the Association still treasures his own happy recollections of those who were led to the Saviour by the beloved President's printed words. Out of the scores—or, perhaps, hundreds—of such stories that have been told by the colporteurs, one specimen may be inserted here.

Describing a poor fallen woman, who had been brought to a sense of her sinfulness in the sight of God, and who was afterwards in a despairing condition, the brother said :—" I drew her attention to many of the promises and invitations of the gospel, sold her Mr. Spurgeon's sermon on 'The Gentleness of Jesus,' and asked the Lord to bless the reading of it to her soul. If I could find language sufficiently expressive, I would describe my visit to her on the following

day. Holding the sermon (No. 1,147) in her hand, her voice tremulous with emotion, and her face radiant with happiness, she read upon page 703 the following words :—‘Hearts are won to Jesus by the silent conviction which irresistibly subdues the conscience to a sense of guilt, and by the love which is displayed in the Redeemer’s becoming the great substitutionary sacrifice for us, that our sins might be removed. In this way, conversions are wrought ;—not by displays of human zeal, wisdom, or force : “Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”’ Then, still holding the sermon in her hand, she said to me, ‘Blessed be the Lord for ever, I have found Him ; or, rather, He has found me ! I am saved, pardoned, forgiven, accepted, and blessed, for Christ’s sake. Now I know what the poet means,—

“ ‘Nothing in my hand I bring ;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.’ ”

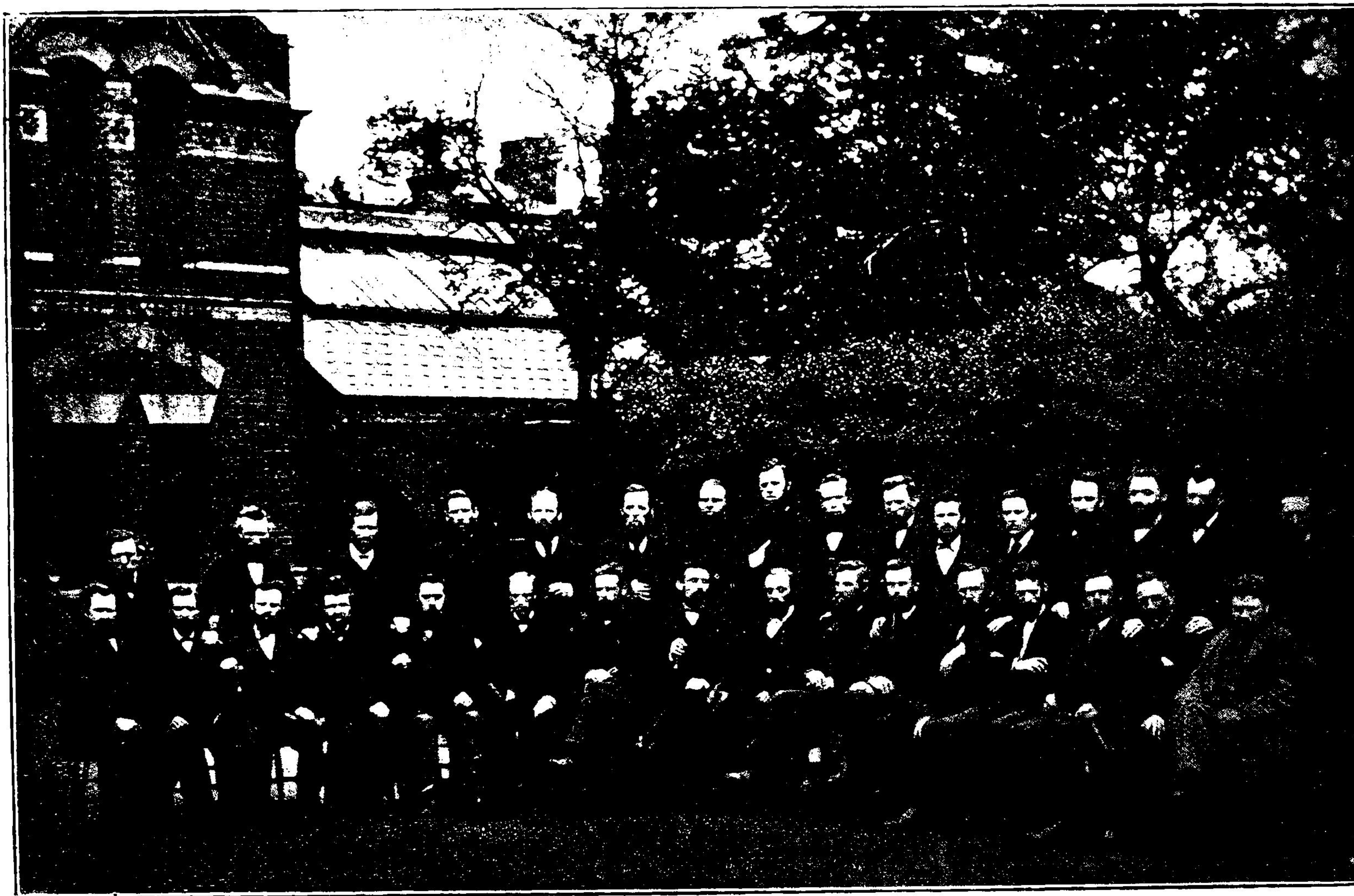
“ ‘Yes, yes ; Jesus died for me, and I live through Him.’ ”

The colporteur has to be a man who has all his wits about him, and to be ready of resource to meet every emergency. The annual public meetings of the Association, held in the Tabernacle, have been enlivened by the recital of some of the strange or amusing incidents that have happened to the men on their rounds ; but, one night, there was a practical illustration of a brother’s quickness to take advantage of an opportunity placed within his reach which, at least, proved his fitness for the position he was called to occupy. Mr. Spurgeon usually asked one of the selected speakers for the Monday evening to come on the platform, with his pack on his back, just as he starts out for his daily tramp. On this occasion, as the colporteur was making his way to the front, the President said to him, “Let the people see how you sell the books.”

The words were hardly uttered before the pack was transferred to the table, opened, a suitable book selected, and the man began addressing the chairman :—“Dear Mr. Spurgeon,—I have a work here that I can very highly recommend you to buy. I can speak well of it, for I have read it, and derived great benefit from it. The author is a particular friend of mine, and he is always glad to hear that the colporteurs sell his books, for he knows that they are full of the gospel. The title of the volume is *Trumpet Calls to Christian Energy*, the author is C. H. Spurgeon, and the price is 3s. 6d. ; will you buy it ?”

To the great delight of the large and enthusiastic audience, the beloved President entered into the spirit of the situation, paid the man the money, took the book, and then said, “That’s the way to show how it’s done ; a colporteur who can sell a writer one of his own works can surely persuade anybody to buy the rest of the books he has in his pack.”

On November 1, 1866, the first agent was appointed; two months later, three were at work; but, for a while, so slow was the rate of progress that another year elapsed before three more men were engaged. From 1873 to 1878, the date at which the present volume of Mr. Spurgeon's "Standard Life" ends,—the advance was rapid and continuous; in the latter year, 94 colporteurs were engaged, their sales for the twelve months amounted to £8,276, and they had, during that period, paid 926,290 visits. The accompanying illustration represents about one-third of the men then employed, as they had assembled at the Stockwell Orphanage in preparation for their annual Conference.



METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE COLPORTEURS AND SECRETARY.