

CHAPTER XIX--THE GHETTO

Is it well that while we range with Science, glorying in the time,
City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city slime?
There among the gloomy alleys Progress halts on palsied feet;
Crime and hunger cast out maidens by the thousand on the street;

There the master scrimps his haggard seamstress of her daily bread;
There the single sordid attic holds the living and the dead;
There the smouldering fire of fever creeps across the rotted floor,
And the crowded couch of incest, in the warrens of the poor.

At one time the nations of Europe confined the undesirable Jews in city ghettos. But to-day the dominant economic class, by less arbitrary but none the less rigorous methods, has confined the undesirable yet necessary workers into ghettos of remarkable meanness and vastness. East London is such a ghetto, where the rich and the powerful do not dwell, and the traveller cometh not, and where two million workers swarm, procreate, and die.

It must not be supposed that all the workers of London are crowded into the East End, but the tide is setting strongly in that direction. The poor quarters of the city proper are constantly being destroyed, and the main stream of the unhoused is toward the east. In the last twelve years, one district, "London over the Border," as it is called, which

lies well beyond Aldgate, Whitechapel, and Mile End, has increased 260,000, or over sixty per cent. The churches in this district, by the way, can seat but one in every thirty-seven of the added population.

The City of Dreadful Monotony, the East End is often called, especially by well-fed, optimistic sightseers, who look over the surface of things and are merely shocked by the intolerable sameness and meanness of it all. If the East End is worthy of no worse title than The City of Dreadful Monotony, and if working people are unworthy of variety and beauty and surprise, it would not be such a bad place in which to live. But the East End does merit a worse title. It should be called The City of Degradation.

While it is not a city of slums, as some people imagine, it may well be said to be one gigantic slum. From the standpoint of simple decency and clean manhood and womanhood, any mean street, of all its mean streets, is a slum. Where sights and sounds abound which neither you nor I would care to have our children see and hear is a place where no man's children should live, and see, and hear. Where you and I would not care to have our wives pass their lives is a place where no other man's wife should have to pass her life. For here, in the East End, the obscenities and brute vulgarities of life are rampant. There is no privacy. The bad corrupts the good, and all fester together. Innocent childhood is sweet and beautiful: but in East London innocence is a fleeting thing, and you must catch them before they crawl out of the cradle, or you will find the very babes as unholily wise as you.

The application of the Golden Rule determines that East London is an unfit place in which to live. Where you would not have your own babe live, and develop, and gather to itself knowledge of life and the things of life, is not a fit place for the babes of other men to live, and develop, and gather to themselves knowledge of life and the things of life. It is a simple thing, this Golden Rule, and all that is required. Political economy and the survival of the fittest can go hang if they say otherwise. What is not good enough for you is not good enough for other men, and there's no more to be said.

There are 300,000 people in London, divided into families, that live in one-room tenements. Far, far more live in two and three rooms and are as badly crowded, regardless of sex, as those that live in one room. The law demands 400 cubic feet of space for each person. In army barracks each soldier is allowed 600 cubic feet. Professor Huxley, at one time himself a medical officer in East London, always held that each person should have 800 cubic feet of space, and that it should be well ventilated with pure air. Yet in London there are 900,000 people living in less than the 400 cubic feet prescribed by the law.

Mr. Charles Booth, who engaged in a systematic work of years in charting and classifying the toiling city population, estimates that there are 1,800,000 people in London who are poor and very poor. It is of interest to mark what he terms poor. By poor he means families which have a total weekly income of from eighteen to twenty-one shillings. The

very poor fall greatly below this standard.

The workers, as a class, are being more and more segregated by their economic masters; and this process, with its jamming and overcrowding, tends not so much toward immorality as unmorality. Here is an extract from a recent meeting of the London County Council, terse and bald, but with a wealth of horror to be read between the lines:-

Mr. Bruce asked the Chairman of the Public Health Committee whether his attention had been called to a number of cases of serious overcrowding in the East End. In St. Georges-in-the-East a man and his wife and their family of eight occupied one small room. This family consisted of five daughters, aged twenty, seventeen, eight, four, and an infant; and three sons, aged fifteen, thirteen, and twelve. In Whitechapel a man and his wife and their three daughters, aged sixteen, eight, and four, and two sons, aged ten and twelve years, occupied a smaller room. In Bethnal Green a man and his wife, with four sons, aged twenty-three, twenty-one, nineteen, and sixteen, and two daughters, aged fourteen and seven, were also found in one room. He asked whether it was not the duty of the various local authorities to prevent such serious overcrowding.

But with 900,000 people actually living under illegal conditions, the authorities have their hands full. When the overcrowded folk are ejected they stray off into some other hole; and, as they move their belongings by night, on hand-barrows (one hand-barrow accommodating the entire

household goods and the sleeping children), it is next to impossible to keep track of them. If the Public Health Act of 1891 were suddenly and completely enforced, 900,000 people would receive notice to clear out of their houses and go on to the streets, and 500,000 rooms would have to be built before they were all legally housed again.

The mean streets merely look mean from the outside, but inside the walls are to be found squalor, misery, and tragedy. While the following tragedy may be revolting to read, it must not be forgotten that the existence of it is far more revolting.

In Devonshire Place, Lisson Grove, a short while back died an old woman of seventy-five years of age. At the inquest the coroner's officer stated that "all he found in the room was a lot of old rags covered with vermin. He had got himself smothered with the vermin. The room was in a shocking condition, and he had never seen anything like it. Everything was absolutely covered with vermin."

The doctor said: "He found deceased lying across the fender on her back. She had one garment and her stockings on. The body was quite alive with vermin, and all the clothes in the room were absolutely grey with insects. Deceased was very badly nourished and was very emaciated. She had extensive sores on her legs, and her stockings were adherent to those sores. The sores were the result of vermin."

A man present at the inquest wrote: "I had the evil fortune to see the

body of the unfortunate woman as it lay in the mortuary; and even now the memory of that gruesome sight makes me shudder. There she lay in the mortuary shell, so starved and emaciated that she was a mere bundle of skin and bones. Her hair, which was matted with filth, was simply a nest of vermin. Over her bony chest leaped and rolled hundreds, thousands, myriads of vermin!"

If it is not good for your mother and my mother so to die, then it is not good for this woman, whosoever's mother she might be, so to die.

Bishop Wilkinson, who has lived in Zululand, recently said, "No human of an African village would allow such a promiscuous mixing of young men and women, boys and girls." He had reference to the children of the overcrowded folk, who at five have nothing to learn and much to unlearn which they will never unlearn.

It is notorious that here in the Ghetto the houses of the poor are greater profit earners than the mansions of the rich. Not only does the poor worker have to live like a beast, but he pays proportionately more for it than does the rich man for his spacious comfort. A class of house-sweaters has been made possible by the competition of the poor for houses. There are more people than there is room, and numbers are in the workhouse because they cannot find shelter elsewhere. Not only are houses let, but they are sublet, and sub-sublet down to the very rooms.

"A part of a room to let." This notice was posted a short while ago in a

window not five minutes' walk from St. James's Hall. The Rev. Hugh Price Hughes is authority for the statement that beds are let on the three-relay system--that is, three tenants to a bed, each occupying it eight hours, so that it never grows cold; while the floor space underneath the bed is likewise let on the three-relay system. Health officers are not at all unused to finding such cases as the following: in one room having a cubic capacity of 1000 feet, three adult females in the bed, and two adult females under the bed; and in one room of 1650 cubic feet, one adult male and two children in the bed, and two adult females under the bed.

Here is a typical example of a room on the more respectable two-relay system. It is occupied in the daytime by a young woman employed all night in a hotel. At seven o'clock in the evening she vacates the room, and a bricklayer's labourer comes in. At seven in the morning he vacates, and goes to his work, at which time she returns from hers.

The Rev. W. N. Davies, rector of Spitalfields, took a census of some of the alleys in his parish. He says:-

In one alley there are ten houses--fifty-one rooms, nearly all about 8 feet by 9 feet--and 254 people. In six instances only do 2 people occupy one room; and in others the number varied from 3 to 9. In another court with six houses and twenty-two rooms were 84 people--again 6, 7, 8, and 9 being the number living in one room, in several instances. In one house with eight rooms are 45 people--one

room containing 9 persons, one 8, two 7, and another 6.

This Ghetto crowding is not through inclination, but compulsion. Nearly fifty per cent. of the workers pay from one-fourth to one-half of their earnings for rent. The average rent in the larger part of the East End is from four to six shillings per week for one room, while skilled mechanics, earning thirty-five shillings per week, are forced to part with fifteen shillings of it for two or three pokey little dens, in which they strive desperately to obtain some semblance of home life. And rents are going up all the time. In one street in Stepney the increase in only two years has been from thirteen to eighteen shillings; in another street from eleven to sixteen shillings; and in another street, from eleven to fifteen shillings; while in Whitechapel, two-room houses that recently rented for ten shillings are now costing twenty-one shillings. East, west, north, and south the rents are going up. When land is worth from 20,000 to 30,000 pounds an acre, some one must pay the landlord.

Mr. W. C. Steadman, in the House of Commons, in a speech concerning his constituency in Stepney, related the following:-

This morning, not a hundred yards from where I am myself living, a widow stopped me. She has six children to support, and the rent of her house was fourteen shillings per week. She gets her living by letting the house to lodgers and doing a day's washing or charring. That woman, with tears in her eyes, told me that the landlord had increased the rent from fourteen shillings to eighteen shillings. What

could the woman do? There is no accommodation in Stepney. Every place is taken up and overcrowded.

Class supremacy can rest only on class degradation; and when the workers are segregated in the Ghetto, they cannot escape the consequent degradation. A short and stunted people is created--a breed strikingly differentiated from their masters' breed, a pavement folk, as it were lacking stamina and strength. The men become caricatures of what physical men ought to be, and their women and children are pale and anaemic, with eyes ringed darkly, who stoop and slouch, and are early twisted out of all shapeliness and beauty.

To make matters worse, the men of the Ghetto are the men who are left--a deteriorated stock, left to undergo still further deterioration. For a hundred and fifty years, at least, they have been drained of their best. The strong men, the men of pluck, initiative, and ambition, have been faring forth to the fresher and freer portions of the globe, to make new lands and nations. Those who are lacking, the weak of heart and head and hand, as well as the rotten and hopeless, have remained to carry on the breed. And year by year, in turn, the best they breed are taken from them. Wherever a man of vigour and stature manages to grow up, he is haled forthwith into the army. A soldier, as Bernard Shaw has said, "ostensibly a heroic and patriotic defender of his country, is really an unfortunate man driven by destitution to offer himself as food for powder for the sake of regular rations, shelter, and clothing."

This constant selection of the best from the workers has impoverished those who are left, a sadly degraded remainder, for the great part, which, in the Ghetto, sinks to the deepest depths. The wine of life has been drawn off to spill itself in blood and progeny over the rest of the earth. Those that remain are the lees, and they are segregated and steeped in themselves. They become indecent and bestial. When they kill, they kill with their hands, and then stupidly surrender themselves to the executioners. There is no splendid audacity about their transgressions. They gouge a mate with a dull knife, or beat his head in with an iron pot, and then sit down and wait for the police. Wife-beating is the masculine prerogative of matrimony. They wear remarkable boots of brass and iron, and when they have polished off the mother of their children with a black eye or so, they knock her down and proceed to trample her very much as a Western stallion tramples a rattlesnake.

A woman of the lower Ghetto classes is as much the slave of her husband as is the Indian squaw. And I, for one, were I a woman and had but the two choices, should prefer being a squaw. The men are economically dependent on their masters, and the women are economically dependent on the men. The result is, the woman gets the beating the man should give his master, and she can do nothing. There are the kiddies, and he is the bread-winner, and she dare not send him to jail and leave herself and children to starve. Evidence to convict can rarely be obtained when such cases come into the courts; as a rule, the trampled wife and mother is weeping and hysterically beseeching the magistrate to let her husband off for the kiddies' sakes.

The wives become screaming harridans or, broken-spirited and doglike, lose what little decency and self-respect they have remaining over from their maiden days, and all sink together, unheeding, in their degradation and dirt.

Sometimes I become afraid of my own generalizations upon the massed misery of this Ghetto life, and feel that my impressions are exaggerated, that I am too close to the picture and lack perspective. At such moments I find it well to turn to the testimony of other men to prove to myself that I am not becoming over-wrought and addle-pated. Frederick Harrison has always struck me as being a level-headed, well-controlled man, and he says:-

To me, at least, it would be enough to condemn modern society as hardly an advance on slavery or serfdom, if the permanent condition of industry were to be that which we behold, that ninety per cent. of the actual producers of wealth have no home that they can call their own beyond the end of the week; have no bit of soil, or so much as a room that belongs to them; have nothing of value of any kind, except as much old furniture as will go into a cart; have the precarious chance of weekly wages, which barely suffice to keep them in health; are housed, for the most part, in places that no man thinks fit for his horse; are separated by so narrow a margin from destitution that a month of bad trade, sickness, or unexpected loss brings them face to face with hunger and pauperism . . . But below this normal state of

the average workman in town and country, there is found the great band of destitute outcasts--the camp followers of the army of industry--at least one-tenth the whole proletarian population, whose normal condition is one of sickening wretchedness. If this is to be the permanent arrangement of modern society, civilization must be held to bring a curse on the great majority of mankind.

Ninety per cent.! The figures are appalling, yet Mr. Stopford Brooke, after drawing a frightful London picture, finds himself compelled to multiply it by half a million. Here it is:-

I often used to meet, when I was curate at Kensington, families drifting into London along the Hammersmith Road. One day there came along a labourer and his wife, his son and two daughters. Their family had lived for a long time on an estate in the country, and managed, with the help of the common-land and their labour, to get on. But the time came when the common was encroached upon, and their labour was not needed on the estate, and they were quietly turned out of their cottage. Where should they go? Of course to London, where work was thought to be plentiful. They had a little savings, and they thought they could get two decent rooms to live in. But the inexorable land question met them in London. They tried the decent courts for lodgings, and found that two rooms would cost ten shillings a week. Food was dear and bad, water was bad, and in a short time their health suffered. Work was hard to get, and its wage was so low that they were soon in debt. They became more ill and more despairing

with the poisonous surroundings, the darkness, and the long hours of work; and they were driven forth to seek a cheaper lodging. They found it in a court I knew well--a hotbed of crime and nameless horrors. In this they got a single room at a cruel rent, and work was more difficult for them to get now, as they came from a place of such bad repute, and they fell into the hands of those who sweat the last drop out of man and woman and child, for wages which are the food only of despair. And the darkness and the dirt, the bad food and the sickness, and the want of water was worse than before; and the crowd and the companionship of the court robbed them of the last shreds of self-respect. The drink demon seized upon them. Of course there was a public-house at both ends of the court. There they fled, one and all, for shelter, and warmth, and society, and forgetfulness. And they came out in deeper debt, with inflamed senses and burning brains, and an unsatisfied craving for drink they would do anything to satiate. And in a few months the father was in prison, the wife dying, the son a criminal, and the daughters on the street. Multiply this by half a million, and you will be beneath the truth.

No more dreary spectacle can be found on this earth than the whole of the "awful East," with its Whitechapel, Hoxton, Spitalfields, Bethnal Green, and Wapping to the East India Docks. The colour of life is grey and drab. Everything is helpless, hopeless, unrelieved, and dirty. Bath tubs are a thing totally unknown, as mythical as the ambrosia of the gods. The people themselves are dirty, while any attempt at cleanliness becomes howling farce, when it is not pitiful and tragic. Strange,

vagrant odours come drifting along the greasy wind, and the rain, when it falls, is more like grease than water from heaven. The very cobblestones are scummed with grease.

Here lives a population as dull and unimaginative as its long grey miles of dingy brick. Religion has virtually passed it by, and a gross and stupid materialism reigns, fatal alike to the things of the spirit and the finer instincts of life.

It used to be the proud boast that every Englishman's home was his castle. But to-day it is an anachronism. The Ghetto folk have no homes. They do not know the significance and the sacredness of home life. Even the municipal dwellings, where live the better-class workers, are overcrowded barracks. They have no home life. The very language proves it. The father returning from work asks his child in the street where her mother is; and back the answer comes, "In the buildings."

A new race has sprung up, a street people. They pass their lives at work and in the streets. They have dens and lairs into which to crawl for sleeping purposes, and that is all. One cannot travesty the word by calling such dens and lairs "homes." The traditional silent and reserved Englishman has passed away. The pavement folk are noisy, voluble, high-strung, excitable--when they are yet young. As they grow older they become steeped and stupefied in beer. When they have nothing else to do, they ruminate as a cow ruminates. They are to be met with everywhere, standing on curbs and corners, and staring into vacancy. Watch one of

them. He will stand there, motionless, for hours, and when you go away you will leave him still staring into vacancy. It is most absorbing. He has no money for beer, and his lair is only for sleeping purposes, so what else remains for him to do? He has already solved the mysteries of girl's love, and wife's love, and child's love, and found them delusions and shams, vain and fleeting as dew-drops, quick-vanishing before the ferocious facts of life.

As I say, the young are high-strung, nervous, excitable; the middle-aged are empty-headed, stolid, and stupid. It is absurd to think for an instant that they can compete with the workers of the New World. Brutalised, degraded, and dull, the Ghetto folk will be unable to render efficient service to England in the world struggle for industrial supremacy which economists declare has already begun. Neither as workers nor as soldiers can they come up to the mark when England, in her need, calls upon them, her forgotten ones; and if England be flung out of the world's industrial orbit, they will perish like flies at the end of summer. Or, with England critically situated, and with them made desperate as wild beasts are made desperate, they may become a menace and go "swelling" down to the West End to return the "slumming" the West End has done in the East. In which case, before rapid-fire guns and the modern machinery of warfare, they will perish the more swiftly and easily.