

CHAPTER XXIII--THE CHILDREN

"Where home is a hovel, and dull we grovel,
Forgetting the world is fair."

There is one beautiful sight in the East End, and only one, and it is the children dancing in the street when the organ-grinder goes his round. It is fascinating to watch them, the new-born, the next generation, swaying and stepping, with pretty little mimicries and graceful inventions all their own, with muscles that move swiftly and easily, and bodies that leap airily, weaving rhythms never taught in dancing school.

I have talked with these children, here, there, and everywhere, and they struck me as being bright as other children, and in many ways even brighter. They have most active little imaginations. Their capacity for projecting themselves into the realm of romance and fantasy is remarkable. A joyous life is romping in their blood. They delight in music, and motion, and colour, and very often they betray a startling beauty of face and form under their filth and rags.

But there is a Pied Piper of London Town who steals them all away. They disappear. One never sees them again, or anything that suggests them. You may look for them in vain amongst the generation of grown-ups. Here you will find stunted forms, ugly faces, and blunt and stolid minds. Grace, beauty, imagination, all the resiliency of mind and muscle, are

gone. Sometimes, however, you may see a woman, not necessarily old, but twisted and deformed out of all womanhood, bloated and drunken, lift her dragged skirts and execute a few grotesque and lumbering steps upon the pavement. It is a hint that she was once one of those children who danced to the organ-grinder. Those grotesque and lumbering steps are all that is left of the promise of childhood. In the befogged recesses of her brain has arisen a fleeting memory that she was once a girl. The crowd closes in. Little girls are dancing beside her, about her, with all the pretty graces she dimly recollects, but can no more than parody with her body. Then she pants for breath, exhausted, and stumbles out through the circle. But the little girls dance on.

The children of the Ghetto possess all the qualities which make for noble manhood and womanhood; but the Ghetto itself, like an infuriated tigress turning on its young, turns upon and destroys all these qualities, blots out the light and laughter, and moulds those it does not kill into sodden and forlorn creatures, uncouth, degraded, and wretched below the beasts of the field.

As to the manner in which this is done, I have in previous chapters described it at length; here let Professor Huxley describe it in brief:-

"Any one who is acquainted with the state of the population of all great industrial centres, whether in this or other countries, is aware that amidst a large and increasing body of that population there reigns supreme . . . that condition which the French call *la misere*, a word

for which I do not think there is any exact English equivalent. It is a condition in which the food, warmth, and clothing which are necessary for the mere maintenance of the functions of the body in their normal state cannot be obtained; in which men, women, and children are forced to crowd into dens wherein decency is abolished, and the most ordinary conditions of healthful existence are impossible of attainment; in which the pleasures within reach are reduced to brutality and drunkenness; in which the pains accumulate at compound interest in the shape of starvation, disease, stunted development, and moral degradation; in which the prospect of even steady and honest industry is a life of unsuccessful battling with hunger, rounded by a pauper's grave."

In such conditions, the outlook for children is hopeless. They die like flies, and those that survive, survive because they possess excessive vitality and a capacity of adaptation to the degradation with which they are surrounded. They have no home life. In the dens and lairs in which they live they are exposed to all that is obscene and indecent. And as their minds are made rotten, so are their bodies made rotten by bad sanitation, overcrowding, and underfeeding. When a father and mother live with three or four children in a room where the children take turn about in sitting up to drive the rats away from the sleepers, when those children never have enough to eat and are preyed upon and made miserable and weak by swarming vermin, the sort of men and women the survivors will make can readily be imagined.

"Dull despair and misery

Lie about them from their birth;
Ugly curses, uglier mirth,
Are their earliest lullaby."

A man and a woman marry and set up housekeeping in one room. Their income does not increase with the years, though their family does, and the man is exceedingly lucky if he can keep his health and his job. A baby comes, and then another. This means that more room should be obtained; but these little mouths and bodies mean additional expense and make it absolutely impossible to get more spacious quarters. More babies come. There is not room in which to turn around. The youngsters run the streets, and by the time they are twelve or fourteen the room-issue comes to a head, and out they go on the streets for good. The boy, if he be lucky, can manage to make the common lodging-houses, and he may have any one of several ends. But the girl of fourteen or fifteen, forced in this manner to leave the one room called home, and able to earn at the best a paltry five or six shillings per week, can have but one end. And the bitter end of that one end is such as that of the woman whose body the police found this morning in a doorway in Dorset Street, Whitechapel. Homeless, shelterless, sick, with no one with her in her last hour, she had died in the night of exposure. She was sixty-two years old and a match vendor. She died as a wild animal dies.

Fresh in my mind is the picture of a boy in the dock of an East End police court. His head was barely visible above the railing. He was being proved guilty of stealing two shillings from a woman, which he had

spent, not for candy and cakes and a good time, but for food.

"Why didn't you ask the woman for food?" the magistrate demanded, in a hurt sort of tone. "She would surely have given you something to eat."

"If I 'ad arsked 'er, I'd got locked up for beggin'," was the boy's reply.

The magistrate knitted his brows and accepted the rebuke. Nobody knew the boy, nor his father or mother. He was without beginning or antecedent, a waif, a stray, a young cub seeking his food in the jungle of empire, preying upon the weak and being preyed upon by the strong.

The people who try to help, who gather up the Ghetto children and send them away on a day's outing to the country, believe that not very many children reach the age of ten without having had at least one day there. Of this, a writer says: "The mental change caused by one day so spent must not be undervalued. Whatever the circumstances, the children learn the meaning of fields and woods, so that descriptions of country scenery in the books they read, which before conveyed no impression, become now intelligible."

One day in the fields and woods, if they are lucky enough to be picked up by the people who try to help! And they are being born faster every day than they can be carted off to the fields and woods for the one day in their lives. One day! In all their lives, one day! And for the rest of

the days, as the boy told a certain bishop, "At ten we 'ops the wag; at thirteen we nicks things; an' at sixteen we bashes the copper." Which is to say, at ten they play truant, at thirteen steal, and at sixteen are sufficiently developed hooligans to smash the policemen.

The Rev. J. Cartmel Robinson tells of a boy and girl of his parish who set out to walk to the forest. They walked and walked through the never-ending streets, expecting always to see it by-and-by; until they sat down at last, faint and despairing, and were rescued by a kind woman who brought them back. Evidently they had been overlooked by the people who try to help.

The same gentleman is authority for the statement that in a street in Hoxton (a district of the vast East End), over seven hundred children, between five and thirteen years, live in eighty small houses. And he adds: "It is because London has largely shut her children in a maze of streets and houses and robbed them of their rightful inheritance in sky and field and brook, that they grow up to be men and women physically unfit."

He tells of a member of his congregation who let a basement room to a married couple. "They said they had two children; when they got possession it turned out that they had four. After a while a fifth appeared, and the landlord gave them notice to quit. They paid no attention to it. Then the sanitary inspector who has to wink at the law so often, came in and threatened my friend with legal proceedings. He

pleaded that he could not get them out. They pleaded that nobody would have them with so many children at a rental within their means, which is one of the commonest complaints of the poor, by-the-bye. What was to be done? The landlord was between two millstones. Finally he applied to the magistrate, who sent up an officer to inquire into the case. Since that time about twenty days have elapsed, and nothing has yet been done. Is this a singular case? By no means; it is quite common."

Last week the police raided a disorderly house. In one room were found two young children. They were arrested and charged with being inmates the same as the women had been. Their father appeared at the trial. He stated that himself and wife and two older children, besides the two in the dock, occupied that room; he stated also that he occupied it because he could get no other room for the half-crown a week he paid for it. The magistrate discharged the two juvenile offenders and warned the father that he was bringing his children up unhealthily.

But there is no need further to multiply instances. In London the slaughter of the innocents goes on on a scale more stupendous than any before in the history of the world. And equally stupendous is the callousness of the people who believe in Christ, acknowledge God, and go to church regularly on Sunday. For the rest of the week they riot about on the rents and profits which come to them from the East End stained with the blood of the children. Also, at times, so peculiarly are they made, they will take half a million of these rents and profits and send it away to educate the black boys of the Soudan.