

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE CHILDREN OF THE LOST.

Whatever may be thought of the possibility of doing anything with the adults, it is universally admitted that there is hope for the children. "I regard the existing generation as lost," said a leading Liberal statesman. "Nothing can be done with men and women who have grown up under the present demoralising conditions. My only hope is that the children may have a better chance. Education will do much." But unfortunately the demoralising circumstances of the children are not being improved—are, indeed, rather, in many respects, being made worse. The deterioration of our population in large towns is one of the most undisputed facts of social economics. The country is the breeding ground of healthy citizens. But for the constant influx of Countrydom, Cockneydom would long ere this have perished. But unfortunately the country is being depopulated. The towns, London especially, are being gorged with undigested and indigestible masses of labour, and, as the result, the children suffer grievously.

The town-bred child is at a thousand disadvantages compared with his cousin in the country. But every year there are more town-bred children and fewer cousins in the country. To rear healthy children you want first a home; secondly, milk; thirdly, fresh air; and fourthly, exercise under the green trees and blue sky. All these things every country labourer's child possesses, or used to possess. For the shadow of the City life lies now upon the fields, and even in the remotest rural district the labourer who tends the cows is often denied the milk which his children need. The regular demand of the great towns forestalls the claims of the labouring hind. Tea and slops and beer take the place of milk, and the bone and sinew of the next generation are sapped from the cradle. But the country child,

if he has nothing but skim milk, and only a little of that, has at least plenty of exercise in the fresh air. He has healthy human relations with his neighbours. He is looked after, and in some sort of fashion brought into contact with the life of the hall, the vicarage, and the farm. He lives a natural life amid the birds and trees and growing crops and the animals of the fields. He is not a mere human ant, crawling on the granite pavement of a great urban ants' nest, with an unnaturally developed nervous system and a sickly constitution.

But, it will be said, the child of to-day has the inestimable advantage of Education. No; he has not. Educated the children are not. They are pressed through "standards," which exact a certain acquaintance with A B C and pothooks and figures, but educated they are not in the sense of the development of their latent capacities so as to make them capable for the discharge of their duties in life. The new generation can read, no doubt. Otherwise, where would be the sale of "Sixteen String Jack," "Dick Turpin," and the like? But take the girls. Who can pretend that the girls whom our schools are now turning out are half as well educated for the work of life as their grandmothers were at the same age? How many of all these mothers of the future know how to bake a loaf or wash their clothes? Except minding the baby—a task that cannot be evaded—what domestic training have they received to qualify them for being in the future the mothers of babies themselves?

And even the schooling, such as it is, at what an expense is it often imparted! The rakings of the human cesspool are brought into the school-room and mixed up with your children. Your little ones, who never heard a foul word and who are not only innocent, but ignorant, of all the horrors of vice and sin, sit for hours side by side with little ones whose parents are habitually drunk, and play with others whose ideas of merriment are gained from the familiar spectacle of the nightly debauch by which their mothers earn the family bread. It is good, no doubt, to learn the ABC, but it is not so good that in acquiring these indispensable rudiments, your children should also acquire the vocabulary of the harlot and the corner boy. I speak only of what I know, and of that which has been brought home to me as a matter of repeated complaint by my Officers, when I say that the obscenity of the talk of many of the children of some of our public schools could hardly

be outdone even in Sodom and Gomorrha. Childish innocence is very beautiful; but the bloom is soon destroyed, and it is a cruel awakening for a mother to discover that her tenderly nurtured boy, or her carefully guarded daughter, has been initiated by a companion into the mysteries of abomination that are concealed in the phrase—a house of ill-fame.

The home is largely destroyed where the mother follows the father into the factory, and where the hours of labour are so long that they have no time to see their children. The omnibus drivers of London, for instance, what time have they for discharging the daily duties of parentage to their little ones? How can a man who is on his omnibus from fourteen to sixteen hours a day have time to be a father to his children in any sense of the word? He has hardly a chance to see them except when they are asleep. Even the Sabbath, that blessed institution which is one of the sheet anchors of human existence, is encroached upon. Many of the new industries which have been started or developed since I was a boy ignore man's need of one day's rest in seven. The railway, the post-office, the tramway all compel some of their employés to be content with less than the divinely appointed minimum of leisure. In the country darkness restores the labouring father to his little ones. In the town gas and the electric light enables the employer to rob the children of the whole of their father's waking hours, and in some cases he takes the mother's also. Under some of the conditions of modern industry, children are not so much born into a home as they are spawned into the world like fish, with the results which we see.

The decline of natural affection follows inevitably from the substitution of the fish relationship for that of the human. A father who never dandles his child on his knee cannot have a very keen sense of the responsibilities of paternity. In the rush and pressure of our competitive City life, thousands of men have not time to be fathers. Sires, yes; fathers, no. It will take a good deal of schoolmaster to make up for that change. If this be the case, even with the children constantly employed, it can be imagined what kind of a home life is possessed by the children of the tramp, the odd jobber, the thief, and the harlot. For all these people have children, although they have no homes in which to rear them. Not a bird in all the woods or fields but prepares some kind of a nest in which to hatch and rear its young, even if it be but a hole in the sand or a

few crossed sticks in the bush. But how many young ones amongst our people are hatched before any nest is ready to receive them?

Think of the multitudes of children born in our workhouses, children of whom it may be said "they are conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity," and, as a punishment of the sins of the parents, branded from birth as bastards, worse than fatherless, homeless, and friendless, "damned into an evil world," in which even those who have all the advantages of a good parentage and a careful training find it hard enough to make their way. Sometimes, it is true, the passionate love of the deserted mother for the child which has been the visible symbol and the terrible result of her undoing stands between the little one and all its enemies. But think how often the mother regards the advent of her child with loathing and horror; how the discovery that she is about to become a mother affects her like a nightmare; and how nothing but the dread of the hangman's rope keeps her from strangling the babe on the very hour of its birth. What chances has such a child? And there are many such.

In a certain country that I will not name there exists a scientifically arranged system of infanticide cloaked under the garb of philanthropy. Gigantic foundling establishments exist in its principal cities, where every comfort and scientific improvement is provided for the deserted children, with the result that one-half of them die. The mothers are spared the crime. The State assumes the responsibility. We do something like that here, but our foundling asylums are the Street, the Workhouse, and the Grave. When an English Judge tells us, as Mr. Justice Wills did the other day, that there were any number of parents who would kill their children for a few pounds' insurance money, we can form some idea of the horrors of the existence into which many of the children of this highly favoured land are ushered at their birth.

The overcrowded homes of the poor compel the children to witness everything. Sexual morality often comes to have no meaning to them. Incest is so familiar as hardly to call for remark. The bitter poverty of the poor compels them to leave their children half fed. There are few more grotesque pictures in the history of civilisation than that of the compulsory attendance of children at school, faint with hunger because they had no breakfast, and not sure whether they would even secure a dry crust for dinner when their morning's quantum of education had been duly imparted. Children thus hungered, thus housed, and thus left to grow up as best they can without being fathered or mothered,

are not, educate them as you will, exactly the most promising material for the making of the future citizens and rulers of the Empire.

What, then, is the ground for hope that if we leave things alone the new generation will be better than their elders? To me it seems that the truth is rather the other way. The lawlessness of our lads, the increased license of our girls, the general shiftlessness from the home-making point of view of the product of our factories and schools are far from reassuring. Our young people have never learned to obey. The fighting gangs of half-grown lads in Lisson Grove, and the scuttlers of Manchester are ugly symptoms of a social condition that will not grow better by being left alone.

It is the home that has been destroyed, and with the home the home-like virtues. It is the dis-homed multitude, nomadic, hungry that is rearing an undisciplined population, cursed from birth with hereditary weakness of body and hereditary faults of character. It is idle to hope to mend matters by taking the children and bundling them up in barracks. A child brought up in an institution is too often only half-human, having never known a mother's love and a father's care. To men and women who are without homes, children must be more or less of an incumbrance. Their advent is regarded with impatience, and often it is averted by crime. The unwelcome little stranger is badly cared for, badly fed, and allowed every chance to die. Nothing is worth doing to increase his chances of living that does not Reconstitute the Home. But between us and that ideal how vast is the gulf! It will have to be bridged, however, if anything practical is to be done.

---