

DRAWN FROM THE LIFE.

IV.—A LONDON SLUM.



WENTY thousand people huddled together in a maze of foul courts and alleys, extending for a square quarter of a mile in the midst of the greatest and most opulent city of the world!

It is a powerful text to preach from on the need of sanitary legislation, and a good many people may be startled by it, when they hear that the houses in this acreage of poverty and wretchedness are either mere hovels, or at the best

only small tenements, many of them let out in single rooms, each room containing one or more families.

It requires a real practical acquaintance with London slums to correct the notion that the laws against overcrowding have been effectual in preventing that terrible condition of the London poor, the reports of which ten years ago stirred district surveyors and other authorities into temporary activity. The truth of the matter is that such neighbourhoods have no laws but those of necessity, and even "regulations" cannot be enforced against a whole population which demands shelter, and has to live on pence earned by poorly paid industries, or by labour which would be lost if it had to be sought from a distance.

Nine years ago I wrote of one such district: "It is but one painful and monotonous round of vice, filth, and poverty huddled in dark cellars, ruined garrets, bare and blackened rooms, teeming with disease and death, and without the means, even if there were the inclination, for the most ordinary observances of decency or cleanliness.

"In neighbourhoods where the inhabitants follow poor trades the condition is but little

better—a few streets where there is a more cleanly appearance do but lead to a repetition of the horrors just witnessed, and from garret to cellar whole families occupy single rooms, or if they can find a corner of available space, take a lodger or two.

"In some wretched *cul-de-sac*, partly inhabited by costers, the fœtid yards are devoted to the donkeys, while fish are cured and dried in places which cannot be mentioned without loathing.

Band-box and lucifer-box-makers, cane-workers, clothes-peg-makers, shoe-makers, French-polishers, chair-makers, and tailors, mostly earning only just enough to keep themselves from absolute starvation, swarm from roof to basement. And as the owners of such houses have generally bought the leases cheaply, and spend nothing for repairs, the profits to the landlords are greater in proportion than those on a middle-class dwelling."



THE GIN-SHOP.



ROOM IN A LONDON SLUM.

This was in reference to the district lying between Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, and the same words might be repeated of some of the places in that neighbourhood at this day.

There are numerous instances in which the earnings of a family, consisting of four or five persons, only enable them to pay half-a-crown a week for their single foul room, bare of all furniture except a broken chair or two, a heap of ragged bedding, and some

straw or shavings thrust into a tattered sack, occupying a place on the floor in each corner. I should be sorry to say that the number of such spectacles has not diminished, but I know that in many places where our boasted "clean sweeps" have been made, they still exist, or have been driven thence to add new horrors to other neighbourhoods, or even to deprave some more reputable adjacent locality.

The question is, what can be done in order to provide decent dwellings for these people? It is of no use here to quote the saying of old John Knox, who, when he advocated the demolition of monasteries, grimly remarked, "Pull down the nests, and the rooks will fly away." Where are houseless families, with scarcely a truck-load of furniture, and a few pence, barely sufficient to buy the next meal, to find shelter, even if their last week's rent be forgiven them? Remove them from within easy access to the places where they are employed, or whence they obtain work at some poor handicraft, and they must either starve or become chargeable to the parish.

With all the large sums which have been expended for the purpose by benevolent persons—administrators of charitable trusts which are to pay a percentage on the outlay, or co-operative associations which combine reasonable interest on capital with practical philanthropy—no scheme has been extensively carried out for providing dwellings for these poorest of the poor.

But are there not model lodging-houses? Could not vast piles of buildings be erected on the open spaces made by the demolition of entire neighbourhoods—buildings, the original cost of which might be a permanent investment, yielding a sufficient profit to represent reasonable interest on the capital?

Without asking what is to become of hundreds of ejected tenants while such places are being built, let us pay a visit to any one of the already existing model lodging-houses, and see who the model lodgers are.

It is true that one such pile of building has a large contingent of model lodgers, consisting of the men (and their families) who go out to work at a large factory close by; but this is exceptional, and it is doubtful whether the provision of a suburban workman's village, with cheap trains to and from a station near the factory, would not supersede the model lodging-house. At any rate, there are no dwellings for "the poor" in this establishment; and I may confidently say that, except as casual tenants, the class which now chiefly occupy the London slums are never likely to become model lodgers on the present system.

The misery entailed on thousands of men, women, and children by the very existence of some of the vile places in which they live is obvious enough, but it is equally obvious that the erection of vast costly edifices, in a style of building composed of that of the union workhouse and the barrack order of architecture, and intended to gather a great aggregate of families under one roof, will not be the remedy.

The model lodging-house may be made to pay as a philanthropic investment, because the rents charged—from half-a-crown a week for a single room at the top of the building, to eight and sixpence for three rooms

on the lower floors—may come within the means of single or married craftsmen earning fair wages, or may offer inducements to porters and packers employed at warehouses, to a few clerks and others who recognise in the neat and orderly apartments, and the convenient appliances in the various corridors, advantages not to be obtained in the ill-conditioned houses appropriated to "genteel poverty;" a few postmen and messengers, and even policemen, may also become model lodgers; but in what sense can such places be said to ameliorate the condition of the poor—that is to say, of the class who now live in dirt and squalor, and find it almost impossible to pay the rent for two rooms, even though they may number eight in family?

The truth is that managers of model lodging-houses do not admit such tenants; or if they admit them, soon give them notice to quit. They will not conform to the rules. They have a habit of driving nails into the trim "cut brick" or smoothly plastered walls; they litter the corridors, they are unaccustomed to be orderly, and even if they submit for a time to the restrictions imposed upon them, soon become restless and take their departure. As they walk down the rectangular passages leading to the rooms right and left, they mentally compare the place to "the house," by which they mean the workhouse, and some of them have gone so far as to say that they "might a'most as soon be in gaol."

It may be doubted whether the model lodging-house will ever become a chosen institution even of the English working class. A few families recognise the value of lavatories, laundries, drying floors, dust shoots, and all the excellent contrivances for ventilation and sanitary conditions; the rooms kept in good repair, with windows that will open, and doors that will shut; the comfortable little "living room," with its oven and boiler range, and even the respectability of having a door-keeper in a lodge at the bottom of the common staircase which represents the street. It is even possible that some matter-of-fact people may ask what is the difference, when you have only to regard the said staircase as a main thoroughfare set up on end, and the corridors as so many smaller turnings leading to so many street-doors? People somehow will not accept this sort of community as representing "home." Probably the working man's notion of home is a little place with three decent rooms and a kitchen, a bit of garden, with some sort of summer-house or arbour, and a back washhouse where "the missis" can do a bit of ironing, or he himself can do a bit of carpentering.

He likes to have a place of his own, which he can lock up, putting the key in his pocket, and asking a neighbour to give an eye to the street-door while he goes out for a walk with "the little uns."

If he can't get such a house—and he can very seldom get it if he has to live near his work—he goes as near to it as he can, and is lucky if he can keep out of a slum by paying a moderate rent.

It is for such as he that efforts have hitherto been made; but what is done, and what is likely to be done effectually, for those who are some degrees beneath him?

Now, it is quite possible, if it be effected gradually, to acquire portions of the present slums bit by bit, and to erect thereon plain, ordinary, but substantial houses, each large enough for only two or three families; to provide neat lime-whited or stencilled rooms, with plenty of window-space, ample water-supply, and strong fittings, adapted to rough use. A square of such houses, with a central play-ground for the children, and a corner for a laundry and baths, would be a good beginning; but a great deal might be done at once in many instances to improve existing dwellings. All the houses in London slums are not absolutely ruinous, and their foulness is the consequence of want of drainage and water-supply. Even a pail or two of whitewash, a cheap wall-paper, and a little carpentry, will do wonders in restoring a room to decent condition; and if a determined attack were made upon local authorities, and drains were rendered perfect, water-butts abolished for constant-supply cisterns, windows made to open, and fire-places to be fitted with grates—a whole neighbourhood might be renovated, and the first germs of restored self-respect would appear in the tenants. In some of the streets of Mile End, a few benevolent men and women started a ragged-school and church, and a refuge for destitute girls, some years ago. Connected with these institutions were lady district visitors who, in the time of a fearful epidemic, carried food and medicine and clothing to the poor.

More than this, however, the promoters of the benevolent work, after a long struggle, succeeded in arousing the local authorities, and, much against the will of the landlords, and even of the tenants, insisted on a system of drainage and better water-supply being adopted.

This district now presents a very different appearance to some of the surrounding streets. The very pavement in front of the houses is clean; the women standing at the doors are neater and better dressed, and more civil and good-humoured; the children are more comfortably clothed, and evidently know the daily use of soap and water. Cleanliness coming with the means of godliness has wrought wonders. The church and the schools have influenced the whole neighbourhood—and it has practically ceased to be “a slum.”

Lord Shaftesbury has adopted the plan of renovating houses in some of the worst districts of London, and has proved its value; but it needs to be followed by authoritative and more widely extended effort, wherever a moral and religious influence can also be set up. The very mention of Lord Shaftesbury takes me back to the point whence I started—a district where there needs both renovation and demolition, but where hasty destruction may work much evil—a place where a widely extended religious and benevolent influence has wrought a wonderful change on the people. It is the locality wherein the Earl lately boasted of having been made a costermonger, and his barrow is carefully housed in a shed close to the coal stores at the back of the mission-room. For at Golden Lane it is especially “a costermonger’s mission;” and there are not only

tea-meetings, and Bible-classes, and ragged-schools, and benevolent distributions of food and clothing, and religious services, and popular lectures, and a penny savings-bank, and a dozen other means of usefulness, but a barrow club.

Further still towards Saint Luke’s and Bunhill Fields, the maze grows closer, and almost more terrible in its silence and squalor. One of the entrances to it is Chequer Alley, and I have named the whole foul area the Chequers. It means a whole zigzag neighbourhood—an agglomeration of courts and alleys intersecting as wretched a district as can be found in all London—a puzzle-map of poverty—a maze of misery in which the unaccustomed visitor might grow sick and dizzy, in the attempt to thread his way amidst a tangle of hovels and close yards, of which a key is not to be found except by reference to the mission-room map, or the guidance of a youthful inhabitant, who takes you round by the “Three Pigeons”—a strangely suggestive tavern, with a way for the initiated through a passage leading from one alley to another.

It is in this vast sty in the midst of London, close to the Charterhouse, within a stone’s-throw of that glory of the Corporation, the Metropolitan Meat Market, and quite uncomfortably close to Finsbury, of which it was doubtless once an appanage, that 20,000 human beings lately herded together in a condition so wretched, that if a report of such a community had reached us from a heathen land, we should begin to ask for missionary effort. I say “lately 20,000,” because quite recently a “pulling-down” has been effected for the purpose of building some blocks of warehouses (ground-rents will rise now, no doubt), and about 2,000 poor people were evicted, to crowd the remaining houses more closely, or to find some other neighbourhood as nearly as possible like the one they were compelled to leave. I will put the population of this square quarter of a mile as 18,000 to-day, and ask what is to be done for them?

Do you see that enormous structure of brick-and-mortar on the right there, just out of Golden Lane itself? It might be one of the warehouses for any beauty there is in it; but in fact it is a comparatively old institution here. Would you like to go inside—to walk through the corridors, and peep into the rooms, some of them now undergoing repairs? Surely this will be one of the means of rescuing the people of this wretched area; for it is a Model Lodging House, and nearly all the rooms are tenantless. Yes, and have been so, except for a short time, ever since it was built. It cost above £30,000, and nobody will stay in it for long together—nobody, that is, who represents “the poor.” For poverty here cannot pay even the half-crown a week for a top room without attempts at overcrowding, and to recover the half-crown requires a broker with a threat of distraint, or an immediate notice to quit on non-payment. If I wanted to give an example to those who may have to give effect to the proposed measure for improving the dwellings of the poor, I think I would ask my Lords and Gentlemen to take a walk with me from Golden Lane to Chequer Alley.