

DRAWN FROM THE LIFE.

VI.—KNOWN TO THE POLICE.



HAT "criminal class," which is alike the problem and the terror of our present social condition, is, to some extent, the result of the poverty and misery of that part of the population, some phases of whose lives I have lately tried to depict

in these pages. Chronic pauperism has been appreciably diminished, if we are to take the poor-law returns as trustworthy indications of a decrease in the number of persons receiving parochial relief or taking up a temporary abode in workhouses; but our prison statistics offer few such encouraging suggestions. One reason for this lamentable state of things is not far to seek. We may discover it any day in our streets, any night in our great thoroughfares, or in the approaches to theatres, railway stations, and places of public resort, in casual wards of workhouses, in the bare rooms of common lodging-houses, at the outskirts of markets, and about steamboat piers, cabstands, and every place to which boys and girls are sent out to beg or to "pick up" the price of a meal.

Is it not worth while, when we think of the tremendous machinery provided to punish the juvenile thief, whose existence as a starving, ignorant, and abandoned child is ignored until he awakens justice by committing a crime, to remember also what a robust virtue we demand of him, when we expect him to remain honest in spite of his constant needs, and of the frequent companionship of those who have learnt how the State places a premium on stealing?

He becomes of greater importance directly he is brought before a magistrate, on some comparatively insignificant charge, and the active and intelligent constable declares him to be "known as an associate of thieves and bad characters, your worship." Something may be done for him *then*, even though as a desolate and starving child he may previously have been beneath public notice. Perhaps he will be sent to a reformatory school, if there should happen to be a vacancy in one of the two or three Government establishments of that kind. Whether he be sent to this kind of imprisonment or to gaol, however, he will be a recognised unit amidst a whole row of unconsidered fractions not yet raised to any other dignity

than that of a common denominator. The chances are he will be sent to prison, and there his education will begin. I have seen mere infants in the House of Correction, boys too young even to be set to work to scrub the forms and floors of the prison ward; and as I have noted the round chubby faces and clear open eyes of some, the pinched looks and artful glances of others, neither of whom could be supposed to estimate the consequences of the offences for which they were being punished, I have thought of the thousands of children, in English homes, where the penalty for a no slighter fault would be deprivation from some luxury which those poor little ones had never possessed in all their lives; have thought too of the gaol-brand placed thus early upon a child's character, of the career to which it points, where "respectability," aided by the law, erects barriers against the complete reclamation even of the child who has "been in prison."

Ah, but it is said that the School Board is to alter all this, to reclaim these deserted children of the streets, to consign them to the great new costly buildings, where they will be instructed in all the elements of useful knowledge and—well, the arrangements are not exactly complete just at present, but, some of these days, let us hope that the provisions of the Act may be extended even to those who are now without care or guardianship. There is sore need of this extension, and of a care for the bodily wants of the poor children; for, as I have said already,



INNOCENCE.

what permanent advantage can be expected from collecting, in a big room, a number of children, some of them moderately well fed and decently clad, and others literally starving, cold, and naked, and going through

certain routine instructions which all are expected to profit by alike?

The numbers of really destitute children—of boys and girls committed to the evil lessons of the streets—already dealt with are comparatively few, but taking as an example those for whom parents have been compelled to pay a trifle weekly, we shall find that in more than one of the newest buildings provided for the education of such children, the physical necessities of the pupils are so pressing, that till some method is discovered for relieving their bodies, there will be little hope of effectually cultivating their minds.

As a matter of fact, however, the London Arab must still run wild. There is no Act of Parliament for him, except the Penal Code. At present the complaint against School Board inspectors is not that they take in those who most need the provisions of the Education Act, but that they use their efforts to fill the schools with children from a class for which it is doubtful whether those provisions were ever intended.

At present many of our schools exhibit two evils—they necessarily exclude the destitute, but they by no means exclude the vicious, and in this the great defect of our whole system is perpetuated even in the matter of education. Just as the poor little vagabond of the streets is disregarded until he commits a crime, when he at once becomes of importance, because he has acquired the right to be considered amenable to State interposition—so the boy or girl who is friendless as well as ignorant has no claim to that national education of which we hear so much, while children who are already corrupted may be admitted, if their parents can be forced to pay for them. To speak broadly, property qualification is regarded as the real claim to State recognition, and Board as well as magistrate can only assist those who have somehow been so qualified, even though in the latter case the claim may have been secured by crime.

For it is an enormous error to suppose that juvenile crime is always, or even chiefly, associated with utter ignorance of the elements of merely "secular" education. The frequent disclosures at police courts of the influence of cheap criminal literature on the young desperadoes who "take in" and read the histories of boy-highwaymen, and the adventures of juvenile pirates and smugglers, are sufficient to disprove such a notion.

Only the other day a very determined and artful burglar was effected by a gang of boys, one of whom at

least had received a tolerable education; and from time to time we hear of organised gangs of young thieves and desperadoes, who set the police at defiance and live a life of brigandage in the very midst of civilisation, and the most enlightened city in the world.



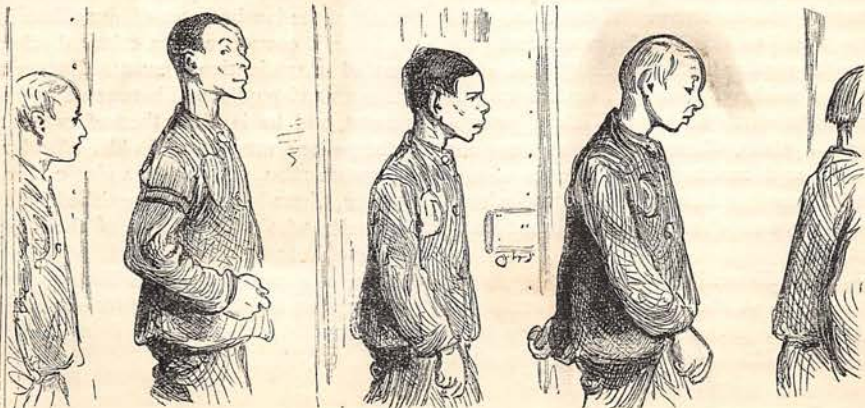
TAWDRY FINERY.

It is not very long since such a band of juvenile ruffians, known as the "Kent Street Gang," committed constant depredations in the neighbourhood of the Borough, under the direction of a leader who was only sixteen years old. The police were for a considerable time baffled, and it was only with great difficulty that they at last succeeded in capturing this redoubtable ruffian.

What lesson could be taught to the thousands of ignorant and destitute lads who are to be found in London streets, that would be half so potent to induce them to set the law at defiance?

"Send me to a reformatory," said this wretched lad to the magistrate before whom he was tried. Perhaps the poor boy had heard what would be the probable result of his being committed to prison, where he would be with evil-doers more advanced in crime than himself. It is possible that the evil knowledge which he had gained included the conviction that to send him to prison would be to stamp him with crime, and that, in a burst of emotional desire to

begin a new life, he may have pleaded for a better chance. But he was too old for either of the Government reformatories; though they deal only with boys convicted of crime,



OLD OFFENDERS.

the hardened wretch of sixteen could not be admitted within their walls.

The Ordinary of Newgate, in his last report, says on this subject:—

“To reform juveniles, or, better still, to prevent those who show a disposition for waywardness, wilfulness, and vice, I have always considered a most important part of my work; and I have endeavoured to utilise to this purpose and end various opportunities which have occurred. The powers given to the School Board I have always regarded as the most available to reach and control unruly boys who set home authority at defiance, and also to deal with those unnatural, selfish parents who refuse or neglect to do their duty to their children, by taking the matter out of their hands, giving the children proper instruction, and compelling the parents to pay the cost. The weakness or indifference of parents towards their children has been a most prolific cause of juvenile depravity. It is true that numbers of boys leave their homes because they dislike the wholesome restraints which are put upon them there, but many more are thrust out by some brutal parent because the child's earnings are small.”

What chance has any boy or girl who once becomes “known to the police” as the companion of thieves? With a legislature practically proceeding on the principle that every destitute and homeless juvenile is to be suspected of guilt till he can prove his innocence, what probability of reclamation is there for the abandoned child, deserted by its natural protectors, used by infamous cadgers as a medium for obtaining an easy income as a member of a band of infantine beggars, hunted from post to pillar, taught defiance and hypocrisy as the only means of opposing public injustice, driven to share the very offal of the streets with hungry dogs, who go about masterless—what chance has the young Arab “known to the police,” except the one that converts him into the “well-known juvenile thief, on whom the constable has had his eye for some time past?”

When he grows a little older, the threepence that he spends for a bed in a common lodging-house may introduce him to an instructor who will “make a man of him”—such a man as those who fill our prisons, and help to tax us beyond what we can bear, and are at once our sorrow and our terror. There is no need to follow such a lad as this in his career from the trifling theft to the regular trade of filching, and so on to petty larceny, robbery, burglary, or the various degrees of crime, in which he has no lack of preceptors, in and out of prison, where he costs us more for his “discipline” and maintenance than we should have expended in sending him to a boarding-school, where he would have acquired the usual branches of English education.

Take a walk along Shoreditch on any Sunday morning, or attend either of the police-courts, and note the lookers-on, as the prison-van—which they have nick-named Black Maria—draws up to the door

leading to the cells; enter the gallery of some East End music-hall; loiter about the wheel-stalls of Clerkenwell and Lambeth; get an introduction to the labour market in Spitalfields, where, under a railway arch, poor and ignorant but honest boys and girls stand to be hired for assistants in some of the wretchedly paid trades which are carried on in the district. At the outskirts of poor, honest effort, as well as in the broad thoroughfares and in the London slums, there is a boy and girl population constantly, as it were, on the borders of crime, and unable so to separate themselves from its influences that they will not be in danger of becoming “known to the police.”

Is it any wonder that many of them should be drawn into the criminal class? that the girls should grow evil-tongued and bold-eyed, and should flaunt themselves in cheap gaudy clothes, such times as they are not in rags and misery? that the boys, with old, pinched, artful faces, furtive looks, and a half-impudent, half-slinking manner, should haunt street-corners, toss for halfpence, hang on the outskirts of crowds, walk with an affectation of preoccupation and indifference, which is belied by the covert glances they bestow on every passer-by, and the anxious, shifty expression that flits over their faces when they reach a turning where a policeman may appear?

These are the youths who are already “known to the police”—these, and the more truculent fellows who, still alternating between casual labour and dishonesty, form so terrible an element of ruffianism in a London crowd; and their education is going on. They are likely to develop into “old offenders,” against whom previous convictions are proved; and so, step by step, to “habitual criminals.”

But they are so known at a very early age, some of these unfortunate wretches, and are committed to prison, where the evil influences are continued. What is worse still, even the infant offenders, who—because the magistrate despairs of being able to deal with them otherwise, and knows of no means for taking them from the utter abandonment of the streets, except by a criminal conviction—are sentenced for “unlawful wandering,” or for begging, are consigned either to gaol or to an industrial school, where they are still liable to the companionship of more advanced criminals. The child who by almost involuntary or enforced breach of the law becomes of immediate importance to the State, is committed to a criminal school, where the want of classification prevents distinctions between prisoners and pupils, and between discipline and punishment, and he is likely thenceforward to be known to the police: much as the older offender—who, after the commission, perhaps, of a single crime, is sent to a prison, where he is undistinguished from the habitual criminals, who talk to him of their exploits—is in danger of becoming a gaol-bird.

This is a matter which is becoming more serious year by year, and calls loudly for our earnest attention and sympathy. Are we not doing a little too much “by deputy?”