



## SOME BOARD SCHOOL CHILDREN.

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With Illustrations by HUGH THOMSON.

IF you wanted to describe all the types of children attending our London Board Schools you would have to make a big book ; for the types vary from district to district and even from street to street. The genuine arab from the Greenwich division is very different from the arab of Drury Lane or Golden Lane ; the Greenwich youth gets down to the riverside, and into the park ; he may be stunted for food, but he has his share of fresh air, whereas the little creatures who live in the heart of the city are often like blighted weeds, and thus the ragged boy who



SOME BABIES.

dances and yells under the windows of the Trafalgar Hotel looks quite a powerful personage compared with the drooping, battered wretches, who manage to exist in certain parts of the Tower Hamlets, Clerkenwell, and the Borough. The smart children who go to the high-priced schools are of course, interesting and charming in their way, and it is pleasant to teach them and pleasant to be among them, but they are just like the youths who attend private academies, and I do not fancy there is any need to say much about them. Any one of the sixpenny schools under the Board offers a delightful spectacle of good discipline, cleanliness, quiet order and general happiness ; and the infants' schools especially would be visited as show places by tourists if people only knew to what perfection the

science and art of education have been brought by some of the mistresses. All the old notions about discipline have long passed away ; teachers nowadays aim at making school a happy place, and they are marked as failures if they do not succeed in keeping their classes joyously and steadily at work. I should think that if only the Government Code and the "Results" and "Returns" were out of the way there could hardly be any task so fascinating as that of teaching well-fed, clean, brisk children whose exuberant spirits never become tiresome or offensive. But when one has to deal with starvelings there is not much fun in the business ; and the teacher whose duty is performed in a slum has a sorrowful, weary life, and I sometimes have a sort of shudder as I think of the times when the Board's pioneers



broke ground in 1871. The smart children are pretty well cared for, and I shall only talk about some of the unlucky ones.

You and I can very soon reach Orange Street School, Southwark, from the Strand, and that is the best place to visit if you want to see a representative lot of children ; because Mrs. Burgwin, of the Girls' Department, has contrived for many years to obtain influential help, and the company of gentlemen who obey her commands, are able to serve out something like 200,000 meals to starving youngsters every winter. Day by day the unhappy little souls are fed, and the whole dreary region sends members of its juvenile population, so that one may look at a picture of London poverty on any given day. Strangers who wish to know something of the work should contrive to secure Mrs. Burgwin's guidance ; the indomitable, cheerful lady knows her district so well that she can convey more information by a few curt

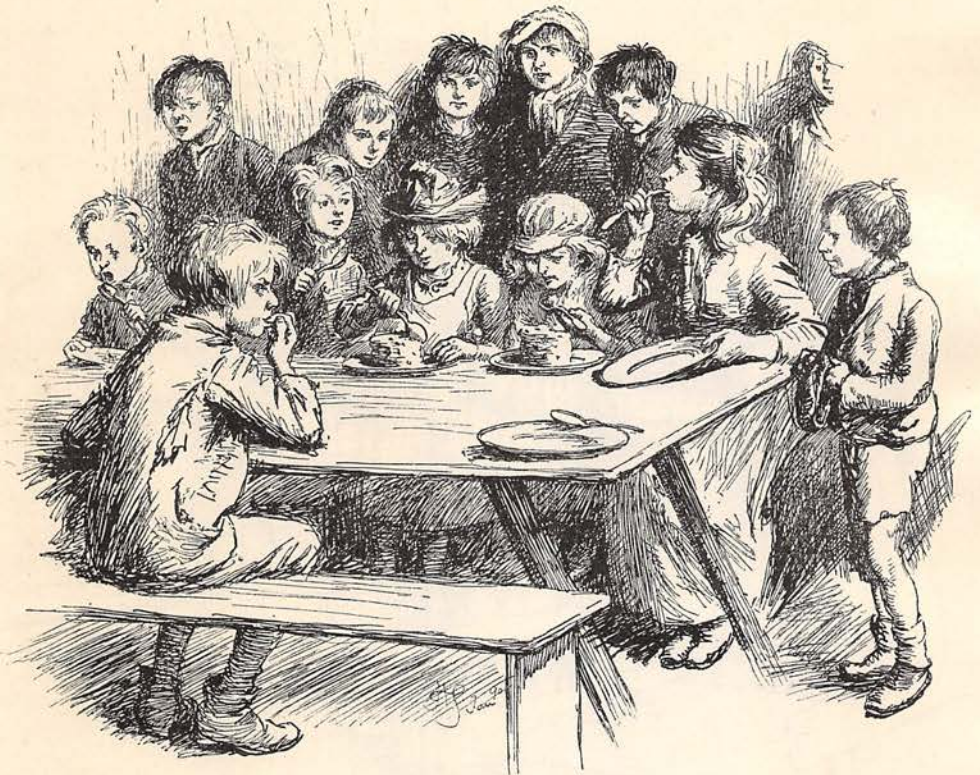


A CLASS OF GIRLS.

sentences than ever could be picked up by the curious pilgrims who go round with policemen. When Mrs. Burgwin first went into that awful place it was not safe for any woman to pass down one of the streets without an efficient escort ; but the influence of the school has transformed the populace so far as their manners are concerned, and the teachers are regarded as friends and counsellors. Yet the woeful poverty remains, and the thought of it weighs on my heart so badly, that I can hardly force myself to go on writing about it. The last time I went from the sweet country to the dolorous Borough, Mrs. Burgwin casually said to me, "Consumption is our great scourge here. People could hardly believe us if we told how many we lose from that one disease." Well, I knew that, and yet the quiet, emotionless speech affected me poignantly ; for there were one or two stricken beings in front of me at the time, and I seemed to be gaining a new experience. In Orange Street you may learn all essentials concerning the girls of the slums. Some of Mrs.



Burgwin's pupils are quite healthy and rosy ; a few are beautiful, and I lost my heart to a lovely couple who were working together in one of the upper standards. One girl is dark, the other fair, and both are singularly refined. Then there are chubby, merry creatures whose very smile seems to hint at pleasant stories of parental love and self-sacrifice. But the weeds, the weeds ! The sight of them is sorrowful. Just look at a few of the imbecile division. The children are harmless, well-meaning mites, but hunger, cold, nameless privation have stunned their minds, and you might just as well try to teach troglodytes. One girl comes from a family whereof not one member has ever been able to learn arithmetic ; her eyes are not absolutely destitute of speculation, but she looks as if a severe blow had dazed her. Another little thing is completely idiotic and must be treated like a dumb animal, while a few others, without being blank in intellect, are so weak and dim that they can hardly be counted among rational



THE MID-DAY MEAL.

beings. I can remember the time when you could not see one healthy, intelligent child among a score of girls from the slums, but Mrs. Burgwin's upper standards are quite equal to the children in ordinary elementary schools, and, if you go to the dining-room, you may soon learn the reason for the improvement. It is almost entirely a matter of food and clothing. The boys and girls who crowd at mid-day into the room where meals are served look gaunt and sorely beaten with famine in many cases, but they would be indescribable—or perhaps dead—if it were not for the blessed aid which they receive. I heartily abhor the screeds of writing which are called dreadful and moving and all the rest of it, or I might reel off a catalogue of dull horrors regarding the forlorn little ones who come to be fed up at the beginning of the bitter season. Sometimes I have wondered whether it was worth while keeping them alive at all ; and yet the sight of their feeble, animal enjoyment of food makes one glad that succour has been found for them. I notice that some thinkers are very much afraid of encouraging dissolute parents ; these thinkers have an idea that to feed the children only lets the fathers and mothers have all the more money to spend on drink. Perhaps a



few scores of bad folks might be picked out whose way of life justifies the stern philosophers, but there are not so many of the brutally selfish wastrels after all. The parents of the children who are fed at the various centres are mostly people compelled to live in a state of semi-starvation, and their ceaseless struggle does not leave them anything to spare for alcohol. Watch the women of the industrious class, and you will soon learn to know those who stand in dire need of help; there is a wonderful sameness about their appearance. The flat breasts, peaked shoulders, drawn faces, weak necks, are cruelly significant, and when a chance eddy of wind flutters the scrimped gown you can see that the skeletons are only draped enough to be barely decent, and sometimes

even that standard is scarcely reached. Such women would feed their children if they could, but it cannot be done, and hence about forty per cent. of the boys and girls who attend school go without breakfast. Then the little people are not clad so as to give their starved blood a chance of circulating with any approach to freedom; boots are expensive, and our poor waifs must either remain barefooted or put their raw and cracked feet into broken leathern cases which are constantly squelchy when the mud lies on the streets. Just go to Johanna Street School, Lambeth, and have a look at the dreadful company that straggle in every morning; there is not a sign wanting to prove the existence of poisoned or impoverished blood in the weazened bodies of half the mournful assembly. Many suffer from a bad form of ophthalmia, others are so weak that they seem to dwell in a dream, and their misshapen limbs are so rickety that you would wonder how the miserable carcasses were ever borne from place to place on such tremulous, emaciated supports. Of the children on the rolls of the school, thirty-five per cent. stay away every day, and the reason for their absence is that they are too limp from hunger, or too weak to turn out of doors, even from the fœtid and leaking dens which they call home. They would be warm enough in school, but the risk and exertion of getting there are too great for their nerveless and pined bodies. A meal per day for such woe-stricken fellow creatures means life. Go and see some of them eat and you will receive a queer lesson. I reckon that consumption makes away with an ugly percentage of these children, and the unclad or half clad limbs account for the sacrifice. Anybody who is able to send the most trifling article of cast-off clothing to Mrs. Burgwin or the Rev. A. Jephson may be pleasantly certain that he has done something toward saving a life.

Near the gate of the docks there is a school where many of the infant children during the late strike were kept alive by some good souls who sent regular supplies of condensed milk. If you look at those infants, the gradual degradation of the race in the East End may be understood. A few pictures of typical Board School infants can do no harm, but I should hardly advise anybody to go into the strike district just now; the memory of the little starving children is not easy to shake off. Some paragraphist started a story about a strike of Board School children. What rubbish! Do those shadows of humanity look like striking or doing anything else that implies vitality? Why, the teachers took infinite trouble to feed the children while the dockers were out; those



CULPRITS.



whose Government Inspection was near were almost compelled to help their starvelings, because many of the youngsters had got so low that intellectual exertion was impossible. The strike of the men has done much to increase the affection and sympathy which, for years, has existed between teachers and poor parents. Every Board School is an academy which educates adults as well as youths; and the coarsest of men and women have learned to regard teachers as their best friends.

Regent Street School, Deptford, offers rather a hopeful study. I started the school myself seventeen years ago. The business seemed hopeless to me, but the present master is not so thin-skinned, and his ragged regiment succeed in doing work quite up to the mark of the crack schools. The little rascals look wild enough, but they are brought under perfect discipline, and Mr. Mould has wrought quite a revolution in his district. When he first went to Regent Street the use of soap was almost unknown among the juveniles; but now even those who cannot afford a comb make an attempt at cleanliness. The Regent Street lads are the sons of costers, labourers, and hawkers; they are bitterly poor, of course, and I have often wondered how it is that their vitality is so high and their cleverness so much above the average. The school is one of special difficulty, but all the difficulties—barring rags and hunger—have been mastered.

Golden Lane, Barbican, is a terrible place to work in, and the man who has the boys' school in hand needs some nerve. Some time ago I wrote very indignantly about a certain official who thought that the Fine Art teaching—the drawing—in the school was bad. Fine Art! It is a wonder that some twenty per cent. of those despairful bairns manage to live on from week to week. Compare them with the merry, clever little fellows who attend the Medburn Street Schools in St. Pancras, and fancy the absurdity of measuring the two schools by one standard.

When I began I thought of going into minute details, but I have grown frightened of making harmless people completely miserable. Let me merely ask those who understand ever so dimly the bite of famine and cold to send a little help to Mrs. Burgwin at the Orange Street Schools, Southwark. Old clothes will be specially welcomed, and nobody should care much about the reasoners who are so frightfully scared at the notion of pauperising folks. I should wager something heavy that if the most indifferent of all living men could have one good look at a child that was livid with hunger and cold, if he could watch that child shuddering along a greasy street in the foul coldness of a foggy morning, if he could trace the one child's school day and realize the difficulty of learning anything under such conditions, he would never heed a philosopher any more. I will very gladly act as guide to any party who choose to arrange a visit to Southwark, and then they may see how the little ones are fed.

