



A WHITECHAPEL STREET.

By E. DIXON.

Illustrated by HUGH THOMSON.



It is a common superstition that, without exception, every East-End child of eight or ten years old—

“children small,
Spilt like blots about the city,”—

is a prematurely aged and careworn being that does not know how to laugh and has never learned to play. All superstitions die hard, even in this enlightened “so-called nineteenth century,” and one that comes in useful in sundry forms when the sensation-monger in search of “copy” is on the prowl, perhaps takes rather an exceptional “deal of dying.” Let me then try and drive another nail into its coffin.

I live in Whitechapel and enjoy it, in the face of unbelieving critics who allege, assert, and aver that no one can really like doing so, but only says he does to keep up appearances. Not so. The very heterogeneous democracy of the East is infinitely more interesting than the *blasé* aristocracy of the West, if you take it the right way. The right way, it may be parenthetically remarked, is not that of the professional slummer; equally is it not that of the West-Enders who, often with good intentions, yet with an almost unconscious—but at the same time very unjustifiable—assumption of “superiority,” occasionally makes a pilgrimage to the East with a curiosity to see what sort of creatures “the people” are. Whether you mix with those of your fellows who represent unsophisticated vulgar human nature, often generous and kindly, in the thronged and flaring Whitechapel Road on Saturday night, or among the Jewish traders and Gentile loafers in malodorous Petticoat Lane on Sunday morning, or watch unobserved from some coign of vantage the amusements of the children who swarm *passim*, there is an almost inexhaustible fund of interest in Whitechapel to him who has eyes to see, ears to hear, nostrils not too fastidious, and some sort of sensibility to be touched.

My street is one which has been entirely rebuilt within the last few years on the site of a noisome and happily demolished rookery. Though it now ranks among the best streets—apart from the great thoroughfares—of the neighbourhood, I am told that in its unregenerate days it was a most disreputable and unsavoury hole. If this is the case its present respectability is certainly a weighty argument in favour of the theory that when a street “goes wrong” there is no help for it short of utter demolition and rebuilding on a different plan. The street is now a quiet one, fairly wide, airy and well paved throughout; one side is nearly occupied by a long low range of public buildings and by part of a Board School playground, the other by the enormous and outwardly unlovely, though internally fairly comfortable and well-appointed, block of Artisans’ Dwellings to which I have the honour to belong. We are a somewhat mixed community from the point of view of domestic finance—some with careful management being tolerably prosperous, others having to reckon on the carking element of

irregularity in their labour. Teachers in elementary schools, policemen, clerks, skilled artisans, are among the inhabitants; others follow the trades of tailoring, bootmaking and mending, dressmaking, hawking, and mangling. This street is certainly a



JEW TRADERS IN PETTICOAT LANE.—“HERE YE ARE! HERE YE ARE! ANY PRICE YOU LIKE!
I DON'T CARE!”

pleasant contrast to many of those further east—the narrow and filthy alleys crowded behind more respectable thoroughfares, ill-lighted, of considerable antiquity, where vice and violence may flourish with impunity beyond the ken of the public opinion of the neighbourhood; and to those districts of small streets where the only building

which breaks the dreary monotony is an occasional Board School, representative of aspiration in more senses than one. The block of buildings to which I refer is situated in the Jewish quarter, which may perhaps account for the comparative prosperity of its inhabitants, and altogether cannot house much less than one thousand human beings. Of these a considerable proportion are "children small," and when they are not in the Board School opposite, or in its playground, which is happily open within certain limits out of school hours—all such playgrounds ought to be—they swarm about the streets. Let the pessimist who classes all young East-Enders together as despairing and broken-hearted juveniles come and live here for six months; let him lean over the balcony and watch these wiry, if generally pallid, youngsters at their play; let his ears be gladdened by the lusty sounds issuing from the lungs of the urchins who are vigorously playing football over the resounding stones in the street with a superannuated tin kettle. He will depart a wiser if not perhaps an altogether exhilarated man.

What do the children play at? That depends rather on the season. There are fashions in the games in this street, just as there are in the larger world outside. Perhaps some of us can still recall how at some far-distant period of our life we too had sundry "fads," which vexed the kind souls of mothers, or roused the ire of house-masters; how at one time life seemed scarcely worth living uncheered by a couple of dozen of sickly silk-worms, or by the tame rat which we surreptitiously kept in our desk in school, and which we had to dig out when it burrowed behind the wainscot of the class-room, or by a white or "plum-coloured" mouse which we carried about—*nefas dictu!*—in our trousers pockets; how at a later period we had a consuming desire for "collections" of all kinds, from "conqueror" chestnuts to postage-stamps. Even so there are "fads" in the amusements of this street, though the children have—it is a fact to be regretted—few things perhaps that they can call "their very own." Children are not however necessarily to be pitied because they have no toys, as such. Mr. Ruskin, as readers of *Præterita* will remember, was once at a tender age presented by a benevolent aunt with a Punch-and-Judy, which his mother forthwith abstracted and relegated to some mysterious and undiscoverable limbo, gravely remarking that it was "not right that he should have it." O wise mother, and *unblasé* child! The future sage of Brantwood consoled himself and unconsciously developed his latent artistic perceptions by tracing out the pattern of the dining-room carpet with a bunch of keys.

But to return. A few months ago there was a perfect epidemic in this street of whip and peg-tops. Every second or third child, boy and girl alike, amused its leisure hours, or diverted its attention from "minding" the baby rather smaller than itself which had been entrusted to its charge, much in the same way as did the small boys of Mantua or Verona, whose play in the sunny *cortile* or *atrium*, the Augustan counterpart of the dingy asphalted treeless courtyard behind the Artisans' Dwellings of the nineteenth century, Virgil seems to have watched to such good purpose:—

"Ceu quondam torto volitans sub verbere turbo
 Quem pueri magno in gyro vacua atria circum
 Intenti ludo exercent; ille actus habena
 Curvatis fertur spatiis; stupet inscisa supra
 Impubesque manus, mirata volubile buxum."

Just now however tops are rather at a discount. The little girls squat on the kerbstone or sprawl over the pavement, and play—very skilfully, some of them—at knuckle-bones with discarded "winkle" shells; the boys' chief delight is in cricket, or in climbing over the high gate of the Board-School playground. Cricket in a small, a very small, way is much in vogue. The wickets are planted tripod-fashion on the pavement, the heads being kept together by string or an india-rubber band; the players and onlookers are noisy urchins in various stages of respectability or dilapidation as regards integuments, from the young gentleman aged perhaps seven, who sits as an interested spectator with his back to the wall, untroubled by nurse or governess,—*id genus omne* who might want to wash his face—airily and of course in warm weather comfortably attired in a shirt that at some remote period has been white, a pair of corduroys with abundant room for growth, and a fraction of a brace (boots, socks, and cap being considered wholly superfluous) down, or up, to the boy who is the happy possessor of a suit of flannels and a cricket belt, and who is duly proud of that

stupendous fact. Other boys patronize hopscotch and marbles—a large marble sometimes has to do duty for the cricket-ball—or rake in dirty gutters for possible treasures: some of the bigger lads seem to find roller-skating a nice cool summer game. Skating on the asphalt or wood in Leadenhall Street or Cheapside in the evening is rather a favourite amusement with lads living within or near the City boundary. Gambling with halfpence and other amusements of an equally questionable character are unhappily not unknown.

During the recent Dock Strike, the children marched in processions about the streets of Whitechapel, parading diminutive pocket-handkerchiefs, attached in orthodox banner fashion to two sticks, with string attached to the free ends and held down to keep the banner from fluttering. On the banner was scrawled—in ink?—a notice to the effect that the bearers were “out on strike,” and that they would take “sixpence an hour” and “no surrender.” As the procession passed along, the youngsters, who enjoyed the fun greatly, sent round the hat to the passers-by, after the manner of their elders.

The Board-School gate is a source of attraction regarded by the small boys with

unflagging interest. They seem to consider it a sort of perennial challenge thrown down, or rather up, to them on the part of the authorities. By placing spikes on the top of the wall the Board has intimated its belief that the orthodox way to enter a playground is through the gates. Tommy's views on the subject do not, however, coincide with those of the Board, and he promptly conceives that nothing can be more entirely desirable from all points of view than to make surreptitious entries into the playground when



A GAME AT FOOTBALL

that particular gate and no other happens to be locked. The interest is enhanced if this mode of getting in involves the danger so dear to the juvenile Briton of breaking his neck, and the thrilling possibility of being caught and flogged by an irate care-taker. The wisdom of the authorities who were responsible for this piece of brick and mortar caused them, as I have said, to surmount it with a row of spikes. Now these spikes are just the right size to be safely grasped by small hands, and just wide enough apart to admit a small corduroyed knee. At the top of the gateway is a nice smooth stone some six feet long by one or two wide—a pleasant spot on which to lounge and contemplate things in general on Sunday afternoon, though liable to interruption, as in the good old game of “King of the Castle.” Underneath is the iron gate whose ornamental work, so conveniently placed, affords excellent foothold to the restless town youngster whose energies would, in the country, be bestowed on climbing trees.

Then comes that universal East-End amusement, dancing. I have watched many dancers in this street, and believe that here dancing is almost instinctive among the young people, and that it is pursued almost or quite entirely for the keen enjoyment derived from the rhythmic motion. It is very rare to see anything in the least approaching to rudeness or horseplay. No sooner does a piano-organ strike up than numerous couples are waltzing on the pavement or in the road, from grown people down to the merest babies.

“Maidens speed these simple orgies,
Betsy Jane with Betsy Ann—”

that is, unless, as Dr. Jessopp assures us is the case, they have all been transformed

into Edith Evangelines. Betsy Jane dances with Betsy Ann, and, as likely as not, a little way off you also see 'Arry dancing with Bill.

No, whatever else the Whitechapel children, as represented in this street, may be, they are not *blasés*. When "treats" do come they are almost enough to turn a small child's head, as in the case of the boy aged about six, leading a smaller boy aged perhaps three, whom I met wandering about last Christmas near the hospitable gate of Toynbee Hall, and who nearly choked himself in his excitement with trying to ask "where the party was." It is rather the West-End child, with its bewildering heap of toys, that is to be pitied. "The faces of their children come to me pleading, pleading—every bit as much as the children of the city poor—pleading for one touch of nature—of children who have been taught to eat and drink, and dress, and sleep, in unbelief and against all their natural instincts—and in all things to mingle the disgust of repletion with the very thought of pleasure—till their young judgments are confused and their instincts actually cease to be a guide to them."

The small Whitechapeler is not *blasé*. But his horizon is narrow, and his nature is apt to be cramped for want of the occasion to make it expand. If he gains in physical sturdiness and self-reliance from his noisy play in the street, he also learns there some



CRICKET.

things which children—and grown people for the matter of that—were better without. And there is another side to the picture. All East-End streets are, as has been already said, by no means so well built, well paved, and fairly secluded as this. Far from it. There are still far too many old and narrow and dirty streets and rookeries "coagulated" together, in spite of the demolition and rebuilding that have, in this parish, taken place of late years. Careful parents do not like their young children to play in streets of this kind, from a moral point of view, to say nothing of the risks to life and limb; and small tenement houses have no courtyard at the back. So the children are kept indoors, perhaps in a small room that is the living room of a whole family. No wonder their faces are pale, and they are "always ailing." A country holiday opens possibilities to such children—and they are many, and the owners of insanitary small tenement property, together with the beautiful industrial system of Unlimited Competition, are largely responsible for these facts—before undreamed-of: mental, moral, and physical.¹ There was once a boy who had never been out of Bethnal Green in his life. His schoolmaster took him for a day in the country. When they reached the fields the boy seemed to be rapidly taking leave of his senses. The master asked what was the matter. "Oh," gasped the boy, "there is a great long street with nary house, and it's the colour of a barrow!"

¹ The Secretary of the Children's Country Holiday Fund, 10 Buckingham Street, Strand, W.C., will welcome any subscriptions, however small or great.

As I return home this evening, I meet my small friend Tommy—or if his name isn't Tommy, it ought to be—a grimy, but sweet-faced little rascal, playing about in the street with a piece of bread-and-butter in his hand, as happy as a king. Tommy has



THE BOARD SCHOOL GATE.

never yet ventured on a remark, but whenever I meet him he bestows on me a wholly gratuitous and benevolent smile. Another and more chubby little neighbour, who has an obstructively affectionate way of embracing one round the leg—height does not admit of more—and whose affections, it must be confessed, were stolen with flowers, is squatting at the foot of the common staircase, and forthwith acquaints me with its wish to be “jumped off two steps.” The small person has its jump, and I pass up to the tenement which is my castle, whence one can command a fine uninterrupted view of the smoky chimneys and *campaniles* of Whitechapel and Spitalfields, and of the “children small, spilt like blots”—rather, like rays of sunshine—down below.