

James Ewing Ritchie

Crying for the Light: or, Fifty Years Ago. Volume 2 of 3



James Ritchie

**Crying for the Light: or, Fifty
Years Ago. Volume 2 of 3**

«Public Domain»

Ritchie J.

Crying for the Light: or, Fifty Years Ago. Volume 2 of 3 /
J. Ritchie — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER XI.	6
CHAPTER XII.	14
CHAPTER XIII.	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

J. Ewing Ritchie
Crying for the Light; Or,
Fifty Years Ago. Vol. 2 [of 3]

“This is the condition of humanity; we are placed as it were in an intellectual twilight where we discover but few things clearly, and yet we see enough to tempt us with the hope of making better and more discoveries.” – Bolingbroke.

CHAPTER XI. THE STRUGGLES OF A SOUL

There comes to us all a time when we seek something for the heart to rely on, to anchor to, when we see the hollowness of the world, the deceitfulness of riches; how fleeting is all earthly pleasure, how great is the need of spiritual strength, how, when the storm comes, we require a shelter that can defy its utmost force. Out of the depths the heart of man ever cries out for the living God. The actress Rose felt this as much amid the glare of life and the triumphs of the stage as the monk in his cloister or the hermit in his desert cell. Like all of us, in whom the brute has not quenched the Divine light which lighteth everyone who cometh into the world, she felt, as Wordsworth writes:

‘The world is too much with us, late and soon;
Getting and spending we lay waste our power.
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away a sordid boon.’

She felt, as we all must feel, that there is something more than this feverish dream we call life – something greater and grander and more enduring beyond. To her the heavens declared the glory of a God, and the firmament showed forth His handiwork. To her day unto day uttered speech, and night unto night showed forth knowledge. She had no wish to shut out Divine speech. Her labour was how best to hear it, and most quickly to obey. The history of humanity testifies to this one all-pervading desire in ages most remote, in countries the most savage. As the great Sir James Mackintosh wrote to Dr. Parr in 1799, after the loss of his wife: ‘Governed by those feelings which have in every age and region of the world actuated the human mind to seek relief, I find it in the soothing hope and consolatory reflection that a benevolent wisdom inflicts the chastisements, as well as bestows the enjoyments of human life; that superintending goodness will one day enlighten the darkness which surrounds our nature and hangs over our prospects; that this dreary and wretched life is not the whole of man; that an animal so sagacious and provident, and capable of such science and virtue, is not like the beasts that perish; that there is a dwelling-place prepared for the spirits of the just, and that the ways of God will yet be vindicated to man.’ Our actress felt the same; she had, she felt, a soul to be saved, a God to be loved, a heaven to be won.

But how? Ah! that was the question. Naturally she turned to the old Church of Christendom, the Church that calls itself Catholic and universal. She went to the priest; he showed her a bleeding Saviour, and a burning, bottomless pit. She trembled as she stood in the old dim cathedral, where no light of heaven ever came, where no voice of mercy ever penetrated, where the whole air of the place was redolent of priestcraft and artifice and sham.

‘You,’ screams the priest, ‘are all unjust, extortioners, adulterers, dead in trespasses and sins. Give me money, and I will make it right with the Almighty. Down on your marrow-bones, eat fish on a Friday, count your beads, confess to me – a man no better than yourself – pay for Masses. In my hand is the key to eternal joy; pay my fees, and the door shall be unlocked, and you shall straightway go to paradise.’

Refuse, and he shows you an angry Jehovah, in His rage destroying a fair world which He Himself had called into being and filled with life, and sweeping millions into torments that never end. The sight is awful. Happily, reason comes to the rescue, and the priest and the cathedral, and the Mass and the music, the incense and wax lights, disappear.

Enter the State Church, not of the Romanist, but the Protestant, where you are told you are made a child of God in baptism, where the cure of souls is sold in the market-place, and where the Bishop, or overseer of the Church, often is put into his high position because he is a relative of a lord, or is a firm supporter of the Minister of the day. There is no room for the anxious inquirer in a Church which rejoices in the Athanasian Creed, and which regards all Free-Church life as schism. With its pomp and wealth and power, with its well-paid clergy, in time past on the side of the rich against the poor, of abuse and privilege against the rights of the people and the progress of the nation, the Church has left the masses whom it was paid to teach and save little better than heathen. You ask, What has it to do with the religion of Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son? What is it but an institution to give an air of respectability to life, to confer a prestige on the church-goer, and to lend an additional charm to a State ceremony? Is it not there emphatically that, as a rule – to which there are splendid exceptions —

‘The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed;’

that is, if they need something more than a musical performance or a conventional observance?

‘Do you mean to say,’ said the actress to a clergyman's wife, ‘that you can follow the psalms of the day, and ask God to crush your enemies and make them perish for ever?’

‘Oh,’ said the lady, ‘I always repeat them all. You know, one does not believe exactly all one says. All you have to do is to give a general assent.’

This was what the actress could not do. Her Bible was a constant difficulty. She could believe it was the Word of God, but not all of it. Its contradictions puzzled and perplexed her. Give it up, said her worldly friends. Be happy in Agnosticism. Leave off thinking about the hereafter and a God. Believe what you see and hear. Life is short; it has not too much of joy in it. Be happy while you may.

In her distress she consulted a clergyman of the class more common now than they were then, who reject the term Protestant, and whose aim is the revival of what they call the Church Primitive and Apostolic.

‘You must be baptized,’ he said.

‘But I have been.’

‘Where?’

‘In a chapel.’

‘A mere form,’ was the reply. ‘Our Church teaches that man is made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven, in and by holy baptism.’

‘I cannot see that.’

‘Then you are shut out, unless you are baptized, from the sacrament in which the body and blood of Christ are given to every one who receives the sacramental bread and wine.’

‘How do you prove that?’

‘Prove it: I don't want to prove it. I fear you are in grievous error. Your duty and that of everyone is to obey the Book of God: a book not to be dealt with upon the same rules which are applicable to the works of man.’

And then they parted; he stern and resolved, she sorrowful and sad; he intimating something about it was a pity that people could not remain satisfied with the station of life in which they were born, which did not pour balm into a wounded soul. Happily for herself, however, she could exclaim with Sir Thomas Browne, ‘As for those mazy mysteries in divinity and airy subtleties in religion which have unhinged the minds of many, they have never stretched the *pia mater* of mine.’ But to gain this position was a work of time.

With an aching heart, once more the actress sought a clergyman. He was a Broad Churchman. There were no difficulties for him. In antiquated forms, in vain repetitions, in decaying creeds,

there were difficulties, it might be; but one was not to bother one's self about them. It was true that one had to conform to outward form, but the spirit was greater than the form. The time would come when the Church would burst its bonds, but at present all they had to do was to make the best of a bad situation. It seemed to her such church-worship was a sham. The man in the pulpit, the man in the pew, alike ignored the dead creed, and instead revelled in glib phraseology, in poetical nothings, in much-sounding rhetoric and ecclesiastical show and ritual. The chief things were the music, the millinery, and the show – the white-robed choristers, the dim religious light.

Then she thought of her old training among the Dissenters, and went to a chapel. She was staying at an old country mansion, when one Sunday morning the gentlemen were going to have the usual smoke in the stables, and examine the horses and the hounds, and to make a few bets about a forthcoming race, and there was a smile of perfect horror as she expressed her intention of going to the village meeting-house, while the ladies were inexpressibly shocked. No one went to meeting; it was low. One could not be received in society who was known to go to meeting.

'I show myself once or twice in a year at church just to keep myself on good terms with society,' said the gentleman of the mansion.

The actress went to the chapel, as nowadays the meeting-house is termed. It was as Gothic in style as it was possible to be. The singing was good. The preacher was a man of culture, and was dressed as much like a clergyman as was possible. The hearers were of the respectable middle class; the working man was conspicuous by his absence. But, alas! it was known the next Sunday that the quiet lady who had attended the previous Sunday was an actress from town. She found every eye turned towards her. There was quite a crowd to see her arrive and depart, and further attendance was impossible.

When are we to have a rational change in the land? We have had a Reformation that, incomplete as it was, freed us at any rate from the worship of the Mass. When is our religion to be free of Church creeds – of the Assembly Catechism – of the iron fetters of chapel trusts – of the traditions of the elders – of the influence of the fables and traditions and superstitions of the Middle Ages? When is a man to stand up in our midst and honestly utter what he believes, careless of his ecclesiastical superiors, of the frowns of deacons and elders? When are we to get rid of conventional observances and conventional forms? There is no place of worship in which it would be proper for me to enter without the chimney-pot hat, or take a brown-paper parcel in my hand. If I did so, I should be set down as little better than one of the wicked – as wicked as if I were to read the *Weekly Dispatch* on a Sunday, or spend an hour or two in a museum or a picture-gallery. When are we to realize that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath? Why are Churches to be less tolerant than the Master, who invited all to come, and who rebuked His ignorant disciples when they would have put obstacles in their way? It is hard to think how many souls have been thus driven away. You are an actress, said the Church to her; you must give up your profession. She felt that was wrong; that on the stage she could be as good a Christian as anywhere else. It was her happiness to believe in a

'Father of all, in every age,
In every clime, adored —
By saint, by savage, or by sage,
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord.'

Toleration is the great need of our day. But we need more: we need less of prayer that is not worship; of hymnology that makes men utter on their tongues what is rarely, if ever, in their hearts. We want more of honesty in all our public services, to whatever denomination we belong. We have far too much of indifference; too much of dogma; too much of silly sentimentalism; too much mysticism; too much morbid faith. Our missionaries often make converts, who are the worse,

and not the better, for the use of their primitive creeds. The shapeless block of wood, hideously carved and fantastically ornamented, that I, in the sunlight, may look upon with scorn, my brother, living in the dark places of the earth, may look upon as the very highest type of his ideal god, and as such he may gaze upon it with reverence, and worship it with awe. And who am I that I may say that he is not the better for so doing? Who am I that I am to laugh as my happy sister prays, or to deprive her of a faith that ‘scorns delights and lives laborious days’? Would the savage be less a savage had he not before him that type of a Divine ideal? Would he be a better man if I were to blot that out of his being? Would that make him less selfish, less cruel; more kindly in act, more ready to do good? Would he be happier in the sunshine, braver in the battle and the storm? Yes, it is more religious toleration that we need, though we have, rather against the grain, ceased to burn heretics. And that comes only as knowledge increases, and the torch of science throws its light over the dark mysteries of Nature and her laws.

The difficulty with the actress was not faith, but the form; not with the Spirit, but with its manifestation in so-called Christian churches and among Christian men; not with the Divine idea, but its human expression. And that is the giant Difficulty of our day. It is impossible for any Church to realize its truest conceptions. It is in vain that finite man seeks to grapple with the problem of the infinite. It is told of St. Augustine, how once upon a time he was perplexed about the doctrine of the Trinity while he was walking on the seashore. All at once he saw a child filling a shell with water, and pouring it out on the sand. ‘What are you doing?’ said the old saint. ‘Putting the sea into this hole,’ was the reply. The child’s answer was not lost on the saint if it made him feel the main essence of Christianity is not a dogma, but a life.

The Church service day by day gets more ornate, more artificial, more of a show, and men and women go to it as a theatre. But, any rate, it is devotional so far as devotion is displayed in form, in the Free Churches, as they are called, or, rather, love to call themselves, for freedom is as much to be found in the Church service as in that of the chapel; the pulpit and the man who fills it play a more important part. The vanity which is in the heart of all of us more or less is gratified more than in the Church service, which has a tendency to sink the man and to exalt the function. The whole tone of the chapel service is personal. The man in the pulpit is the great ‘I am.’ The deacons have more or less the same spirit. Positively it is amusing: you enter before the time of commencing worship. Presently a man ascends the pulpit stairs. Is he the preacher? Oh no, he is only the man to carry up the Bible. Again the vestry door opens, and in the conquering hero comes. A deacon reverently follows. Is he going to assist? Not a bit of it. He merely shuts the pulpit-door, and sinks back into his native insignificance. The sermon over, then comes the collection. It seems, apparently, that this is the great thing after all. I remember once going into a chapel; the minister had a weak voice, I could not hear a word of the prayer or the sermon. The only thing I did hear, and that was pronounced audibly to be heard all over the place, was, ‘The collection will now be made.’ Organization is carried to excess, till it becomes weariness and destructive of the spirit. What is wanted is something simpler. Listen to the minister as he announces from the pulpit the engagements and arrangements for the week; and as to the sermon, how often is it a pamphlet, or an essay, or a newspaper leader! One feels also prayer is too long and wearying, and that the personal element is somewhat intrusive. It is there the Church has the advantage; the chapel-goer is disgusted if the minister does not call on him, if the deacon does not shake hands with him, if he himself has not some official standing as a member of some committee or other. The poet tells us,

‘God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform.’

Not so says the Evangelical; it is by means of our fussy activity and mechanical organization that His wonders are performed. ‘It is,’ exclaims the Methodist, ‘a penny a week, a shilling a

quarter, and justification by faith.' No wonder that there are good Christians who never darken church or chapel doors. 'It conduces much to piety,' said the late Earl Russell to his wife, 'not to go to church sometimes.' And the actress was a Christian, godly, if not according to the godliness of Little Bethel. I don't know that she kept the Sabbath holy; she loved that day to get away from town and the world, and to worship Him whose temple is all space and whose Sabbath all time. In the Roman Catholic or Protestant cathedral alike, she could worship, and from occasional attendances she often returned refreshed, but she could identify herself with no particular body. In the freer Churches of Christendom she would enter, and could leave all the better for the service, even if the preacher had, as preachers often do, proved unequal to her state of mind. Here she listened to an essay logical and profound, which touched on no matter of earthly interest, and was as vain and worthless as questions as to how many angels could stand on the point of a needle, or what were the songs the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women. There a raw youth thumped the pulpit, as he complacently dwelt on the doings of a God of whom his very idea was a caricature. Then there were ingenious clerics who spoke upon the 'little horn' in Daniel, and who, while ignorant of Cheapside and the City, could unfold the Book of Revelation, and to whom the prophecies were as easy as A B C. A good deal of what is commonly called good preaching was but to her an idle dream as preachers painfully tried to realise the past, and talked of distant lands, and worthy old patriarchs who had been dead thousands of years, and grand old prophets, who though able forces in their own times and amongst their own people, had little to do with the passions and prejudices of the living present. Even when the preacher was morbidly sentimental, as so many of them were – and that is why the men stop away, or only attend to please their wives – or too prone to take for granted fables which cannot stand a moment's rational investigation, even, though they were more or less common to the mythology of every nation under the sun, poor Rose boldly faced the situation and sat it all out, though for all practical purposes she felt that she might just as well have listened to a lecture on the Digamma. One admits the force in many cases of associated worship, the charm of the living voice, of a good delivery, of a pleasing figure; and yet a man is not to be condemned as one of the wicked because his pew is empty at times, because he reads the Bible and says his prayers alone, because he is distracted by the delivery of stale religious commonplace.

But the Free Churches, are not they the home of free thought? Are they not leaders in religious reform? Alas! they all have their dogmas and creeds to the believer in which they promise eternal life, while to the unbeliever, no matter how honest he may be, or how pure in heart and life, there is anathema maranatha. If the Church of England apes the Church of Rome, what are we to say of the conventicle, with its antiquated creed and its obsolete theology? Are they not still, in spite of their boasted freedom, under the rule of St. Augustine and the monks? Nor can it well be otherwise. You take a young man, ignorant of the world, unversed in human nature; you shut him up in a college with others as ignorant as himself. You teach him theological conundrums rather than real life. Can such as they minister to a mind diseased? Am I to be saved by listening to such as they? Ah, no!

'In secret silence of the mind,
My heaven, and there my God, I find.'

It was so with Rose as she wandered drearily from one church door to another, seeking rest and finding none. It was clear to her that there was no room for her in the narrow circle of the Churches.

As long as you are an actress, as long as you get your living by following the stage, said they all, you cannot be a church-member, forgetting that the stage itself was, in a prior age, but the child of the Church.

One day she tried the Quakers, but there the silence was too oppressive – nor did she feel called upon to make herself singular by a display of Quaker dress or Quaker speech.

One Sunday she was in Edinburgh, staying at the house of one of the University professors. She had heard much of Scotch piety, and she wanted to see what it was like. A grand scientific gathering was being held, and the house was full of men of science. In the morning she went to church. Again she was taken to church in the afternoon, very much against the grain; but she was in Rome, and had to do as the Romans did. In the evening there was a dinner-party. As they repaired to the drawing-room, the lady of the house said:

‘It is very questionable whether we shall see any more of the gentlemen to-night. If they rise from the table sober, they will come into the drawing-room. If they take too much, they will go up by the backstairs to bed.’

The lady of the house said this as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but it shocked Rose to find that, in the city where the Sabbath is observed more strictly than anywhere else, this was how the Sabbath night was spent, and, naturally, she had little respect for the piety which could attend church twice a day on the Sunday, and make the Sunday night a convivial carouse.

What was she to do? She went to many a Congregational, or Baptist, or Unitarian, or Episcopalian church in London, where she heard much that was helpful to her spiritual life – much that it did her good to hear.

‘You can’t join my church,’ said a popular divine to her.

‘Why not?’

‘Because you are an actress. My deacons would not hear of such a thing.’

‘Have you ever been to a theatre?’

‘Never!’ was the emphatic reply.

‘How, then, can you condemn that of which you are ignorant?’ asked the actress.

‘Well,’ said the preacher, ‘I can go by popular report. Look at the lives of the professionals. Was not Kean a drunkard? Did not the Duke of So-and-so keep an actress? Did not So-and-so’ – naming a popular actor – ‘run off with another man’s wife?’

‘What of that?’ said Rose. ‘I am told your predecessor in your very chapel did the same.’

The preacher did not know what to say, except that there were black sheep in all professions, and that there was a Judas even among the Apostles, and it became them all to judge in charity of one another.

‘That is what I want of you,’ said the actress.

But the preacher did not respond to her appeal, and again she left the church for the world.

Another day she tried the Methodists. Unfortunately, as she stepped in they were singing:

‘And be the business of my life
To cry, “Behold the Lamb!”’

In that church she saw some Wesleyan tradesmen whom she knew. Was that the business of their lives? Of course not. Man comes into the world to get a living and to make the most of it. The secular life is not superseded by the religious life – only adorned and purified by it.

‘You must give up your calling,’ said they all.

Indignantly she asked herself, Why? Her acting was her one talent. Was one to hide it in a napkin? Certainly not, said common-sense, and for once common-sense was right. Was she not doing good in her way, finding people innocent amusement, and teaching them, as she repeated nightly the great words of the great dramatist of our land, something of the wonder and grandeur and pathos and mystery of life? Hers was not an art to be despised. Hers was not a course of life to be abandoned at the command of a bigot, be he Roman monk or Protestant preacher. There was a

time when the stage was the teacher of the people; why should it not be so now? she asked herself. It was her resolve that it should be so, as far as it was in her power. For as Tom Campbell wrote:

‘Ill can poetry express
Full many a tone of thought sublime;
And painting, mute and motionless,
Steals but one glance from Time.
But by the mighty Actor brought,
Illusion’s wedded triumphs come;
Verse ceases to be airy thought,
And Sculpture to be dumb.’

‘Ah!’ wrote Wentworth to her, ‘we need not despair of Divine mercy. Christ is bigger and broader than the Church. You in your way, and I in mine, have wandered far in search of such happiness as earth can give, and found it to be of little worth, and the sects look on us as sinners, because we refuse to bow to the image they have set up, or to utter their Shibboleth. I know not that it matters much. I know not that it matters anything at all. How can any man or any set of men pretend to have penetrated the full meaning of Scripture, or that they can bid stand back those as humble and patient in the pursuit of truth as themselves?’

One day when Robert Hall had been having a conversation with Sir James Mackintosh, he told a friend: ‘Sir, it was the Euphrates pouring itself into a teapot.’ If a great orator like Hall could say that of a fellow-man, what can we say of such Divine revelation as comes to us either by the experiences of actual life or by the world of nature around us, or by the written Word which was and is Life? How can we grasp it? How can we cut it up into dogmas and creeds? How can we say to any brother man, Believe as I believe, or be damned? The Churches have tried to do so and failed, even when they had at their back the terrors of Inquisition or the sword of the Civil Magistrates. They are beginning to understand that it is all up with priestcraft, and that the Church as it exists to-day everywhere is in danger; that they cannot stop the onward march of the people; that they cannot say to the waves of free thought, ‘Hitherto shall ye come, but no further, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed.’ It is a kindly light that leads on, and we cannot stop. Take all the creeds, pile them one upon the top of another, and there is still a void, for the finite cannot grasp the Infinite, and man cannot by searching find out God. At the best we can but guess; at the best, and may we ever be that, we are but children crying for the light. Here we see through a glass darkly; let us humbly do our duty, and wait the time when all mystery shall be unravelled, when we shall stand face to face, when we shall know even as we are known.

Wentworth and Rose had resolved to become one in life, as they had been in years of struggle and endeavour. As she rose she dragged him upward and onward. God had come to him as his Father and his Friend. He was of no Church. He needed the aid of no priest. He distrusted the emotional sensationalism of what is called religious life. It had done little for him in the past – only helped him to his fall. Church members he had found no better than other men; church life just as worldly as that of the wicked. It needed not that he should enter man’s churches to see in all His glory and tenderness and love the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; Him who had wept over impenitent Jerusalem, and had tears and pity for such frail women as Mary the Magdalene; who had said as He walked the crowded streets of Jerusalem, beneath the proud pillars of the Temple itself: ‘Come unto Me all ye that are weary and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest’; the lustre of whose life and the music of whose voice had bettered and brightened all time and space. It was no Agnostic’s dream that had made Wentworth a new man, but a great spiritual reality, of which he felt as sure as he did of his own existence, as he wrote:

‘O Thou, the God of life and light,
In whom all heaven and earth unite,
Fain would I raise my humble voice
And with all people round rejoice.

‘I cannot see Thee as Thou art,
I only know Thee with the heart.
All language fails me when I try
To shadow forth Thy Deity.

‘I love, I worship, I adore —
Can man give less, can God ask more?
That love in life I would translate,
And freely trust Thee with my fate.’

CHAPTER XII. IN LOW COMPANY

Nothing was blacker than the outlook in this land of ours fifty years ago. The parson droned away on Sunday, preaching a gospel which had not the remotest reference to living men, and good people sighed placidly as the preacher dwelt apparently *con amore*— and without the slightest sign of regret — on the torture and the flame to which the wicked would be eternally condemned. The hearer, if well to do, went home complacently to his Sunday dinner and glass or two of port; while the poor sinner preferred to sleep off the Saturday night's debauch, leaving the missus and the children to go to a place of worship, on the condition that the dinner should not be forgotten. But it was chiefly the small shopkeepers who came to attend what were called the means of grace. I remember a parish clerk who made a point of attending the Wesleyan chapel in the evening. In time the old vicar died and a new one reigned in his stead. In his wisdom he proposed to have evening service in the parish church to hinder the sheep from roving in forbidden pastures.

But said the parish clerk, when his vicar suggested the idea: 'Oh no, sir; that will never do. You will deprive me of the means of grace altogether.'

Surely when Queen Victoria commenced her reign the sun never shone on a darker land than ours. Ignorance, poverty, intemperance, licentiousness ran riot — in spite of the fact that good people were subscribing their tens of thousands to spread the Bible all over the world and to convert the heathen, who many of them lived more decent lives than our own people. Not far from the scene of which I write, a noble lord, who had been a sailor and had a fine gift of swearing, presided over a local meeting of the British and Foreign Bible Society. As a chairman he laboured under many difficulties, but he managed to make a short speech, in which he assured his hearers that the society was a d-d good one and deserved to be d-d well supported. The country life of the gentleman was just what we see it in 'Tom Jones.' In the towns things were little better. Lives were shortened by intemperance and neglect of all sanitary requirements. The employer had no thought for the people he employed. The peasant and the workman had little done for them, the pauper had even less. There were no cheap newspapers to stir up the sleeping intellect of the country. If such a thing as a national conscience existed it was very feeble — eaten up with pride. The Englishman was dead to the needs of the times. The bitter cry of the distressed had not then sounded over the land.

Little children from four to eight years of age, the majority of them orphans, the rest sold by brutal parents, were trained as chimney-sweeps. In order to make their skins tough and not to suffer as they climbed they were rubbed with brine before a hot fire. They were liable to what was called chimney sweeper's cancer. They were often suffocated by soot and died when at work. Often they were stifled by the hot sulphurous air in the flues; often they would stick in the chimney and faint from the effects of terror, exhaustion and foul air. Lighted straw was used to bring them round, and if that failed they were often half killed, and sometimes killed outright, by the efforts to extricate them. Sailors were sent to sea in ships heavily insured — and great was the loss of valuable life — in order that some shipowners might reap a hellish profit. It was reckoned that at that time the preventible mortality of the country was annually 90,000. In 1843 there were 1,500 young persons of fourteen and upwards engaged as milliners and dressmakers in the Metropolis. Their hours were from fifteen to eighteen a day, with only a little interval of rest, and the consequence was that consumption and impaired eyesight were terribly prevalent among them.

As late as 1854 a gentleman who commenced a religious service in one of the largest cottages on his estate for the benefit of the dense population around him of miners, had to give up the good work, as he was threatened with a prosecution for the breach of the Conventicle Act. Churchyards

in overcrowded districts were allowed to spread disease and death all around. The houses in which the poor were forced to herd were almost destitute of sewage drainage and water supply.

It was found that in the fourteen houses of which Wild Street, Drury Lane, for example, consisted, nearly one thousand persons found shelter, and that the very staircases were crowded nightly with poor wretches, to whom even the pestilential accommodation of the rooms was an unattainable luxury. It was said that more beggars were to be encountered in a walk from Westminster Abbey to Oxford Street than in a tour from London to Switzerland, whether by Paris or the Rhine. There were 80,000 in the common lodging-houses of the City, and no authority to see that decency and proper sanitary conditions were applied to any of them. Nor were the homes of the agricultural peasants much better.

When Lord Ashley became Earl of Shaftesbury, and took possession of the family estate, he writes: 'Inspected a few cottages – filthy, close, indecent, unwholesome.' All England was a whited sepulchre, full of dead men's bones. But the climax of wickedness was only to be seen in a low London lodging-house; let us enter one.

Mint Street, Borough, was better known than trusted some years not very long ago. It was a nasty place to go down of a night, especially if you happened to be the owner of a watch or had a sovereign or two in your pocket, nor did the police much care to explore its mysteries. Somehow or other the place bore a bad name, and has ever done so since the days of Jonathan Wild and his merry men, who at one time are reported to have resided there. In its low lodging-houses were to be found the very scum of the earth – the virtuous and deserving poor, as they would have us believe they are, always in search of employment, which they unfortunately never find – who are dishonest, and lazy, and improvident, and drunken, and dissolute, very much against their own inclination, and to their own intense disgust – the victims of the wicked landlord or wicked capitalist. They live in the lodging-houses of the district, which are generally pretty full, at the rate of fourpence a night, except when the hop-picking is on, when away the inmates tramp by the hundred down to the pleasant hop-gardens of Kent, or Sussex, or Hampshire, carrying with them all the filth and squalor of the town, tainting the air and polluting the fair face of Nature as they pass along. It is true that now the city missionary follows in their steps, otherwise it would be a bad look-out indeed.

Turning down into the street, avoiding the policeman who happened to be on duty at the time, one summer evening might be seen a man and a woman. They were tired and dusty, and had evidently travelled far. On both was the mark of Cain, and they were fleeing from justice to quarters where guilt and shame find convenient repose. They knocked at a door, where, after they had been surveyed through a wicket, they were received on the payment of such small sum as the deputy-keeper was legitimately entitled to charge. It was a big room into which they entered, with a great fire at one end, at which various cooking operations were going on; and on the benches at the side some slept, or smoked, or talked, or read, as the fancy suited them. Behind was a yard, in which one or two were engaged in the process familiarly known as cleaning themselves up.

Neither the place nor the company would have been attractive to a decent working man. There was a foulness in the air and talk of the place which would have revolted him, yet in that crowd of needy and disreputable creatures were men who had been to college and had had the benefit of a University education, and women who had known something of the sunshine of life; alas! all – all were given over to evil, utterly lost and reprobate. It was not ignorance, not misfortune, not a wicked world, that had made them what they were. They had been the architects of their own lives. They had to lie on the beds they had made. Society is much troubled about them. What if society were to leave them alone, and to look better after the really deserving poor, who are always present with us – who are so low down in the world as to be compelled to take wages on which they cannot possibly live – who require and deserve the utmost sympathy from all classes of the community in their sorrow and distress and struggles? These are the weak, whose burdens the strong are bidden, in the Book to which most of us appeal for instruction and guidance, to bear.

‘Why, ye’re soon back again,’ said one of the inmates, engaged in the interesting operation of frying a Yarmouth bloater – ‘you’re soon back again; I thought you was down at Sloville.’

‘Lor’ bless you! we han’t been near Sloville for years.’

‘Ah, I remember, I heard you were in the Black Country.’

‘Yes, we was there, but the fact was we had to hook it!’

‘Oh, I see, up to the old trick!’ said he with a smile.

‘Perhaps,’ was the reply.

The fact was that one afternoon the tramp and the woman met with an old farmer coming home from market a little the worse for liquor, and him they had kindly relieved of his watch, as he was far too gone to be able to take proper care of it himself. The old farmer, naturally, was aggrieved, and tried to defend himself. This led to a little compulsory action on the part of his friends, and he was left senseless by the roadside, while they made the best of their way out of the neighbourhood.

Fortune always favours the brave, and our friends were in this respect no exception to the general rule. They had had rather a successful campaign – visiting lonely lanes untrodden by the police, and robbing romantic young ladies fond of the country of what jewellery they might happen to wear. People are always asking us to pity the poor worn-out tramp. I am rather inclined to pity his victim.

‘But where’s the kid?’

‘Oh, we left him behind. But, lor’ bless you, we know where to find him again. He’s safe to be in Parker’s Buildings, or somewhere thereabout.’

‘Got any money about you?’

‘Not much worth speaking of – not quite done for, either,’ continued the tramp. ‘Look here,’ said he, peering cautiously about, and drawing out of his coat-pocket a very dirty and ragged handkerchief, in which was wrapped up a watch – an old-fashioned one, but real silver, nevertheless. Seeing no one was looking on, he proudly exclaimed: ‘What do you say to that?’

‘A beauty, but why didn’t yer spout it at once? Suppose the peeler had collared yer – what a mess ye would have been in.’

‘Lor’ bless ye, I wa’nt such a flat as that. What could I ’ave got for it on the tramp? Now, it is good for a round sum.’

‘Shall I go and spout it?’ said the old acquaintance.

‘Yes, me and missus have walked enough to-day; but ain’t it rather late?’

‘Yes, but there is the shop at the corner. You know they are not particular.’

And that was quite true. The head of that respectable establishment generally contrived to do a good deal of business, in spite of the law and the police, and, if the receiver is as bad as the thief, was a very bad man indeed. In a little while the messenger returned, bearing with him a bottle of gin, a couple of pounds of rump steak, and the other materials for a good supper, and a certain amount of cash, which he handed over to the new-comer, and which seemed perfectly satisfactory. As eagles round the carcase gathered the few casuals that happened to be present. Most of them were old gaol-birds, all of them were the slaves of drink – quarrelsome or good-tempered according to their respective temperaments. They were ready for any feat, or not averse to any crime, if it could be done in a sneaking, underhand manner. Literally their hands were against everyone, and everyone’s hands against them. But now they were all on the best of terms. There was a little drink going on; who knew but what a drop might fall to their share. At any rate they were all glad to see Carrotty Bill as they called him once more in their midst; in the line of life they affected his ruffianism made him a hero.

That night was an extra scene of festivity at the lodging house; one of the inmates had been bagged, and had served his time, and had come back resolved to qualify himself as soon as possible

for another term of imprisonment, at the expense of the unfortunate taxpayer. And there was a good deal of sociable enjoyment in accordance with the old saying, that when the wine is in the wit is out.

‘Anybody been in trouble, since I was here?’ asked our friend the tramp.

‘No, nothing particular – drunk and disorderly, that’s all. But we’ve had some narrow shaves, and the sergeant told the guvnor last night that ’e’s got his heye on hus.’

‘His eye be blowed! But who is yon cove?’

‘Oh, a poor banker’s clerk.’

‘And the fellow he’s talking to?’

‘Him with the red nose? Oh, we call him the Professor. He’s from Oxford University he says, and gives himself very high and mighty airs when he’s in his cups. But they’re all right.’

‘I’ll soon let you know who I am,’ said a lad who was listening to the talk.

‘Well, who are you?’

‘I am a thief, and not ashamed to own it.’

Here there was a general cry of ‘Bravo!’

‘I ain’t done a day’s work in my life, and don’t mean to. Wot’s the good on it? A fellow ain’t a bit the better for it at the year’s end. He’s a deal to bear. He’s got to put up with his master’s whims; to put up with his foreman and his mates; to toil from morning to night, never to have a day’s pleasure; to be a poor slave. No, I know a trick worth two of that.’

Again there were cries of ‘Bravo!’

‘Why should I work hard for a master to make money by me! Here I can lead a free life. If I am hill, can’t I go to the ’ospital? If I ain’t got a shot in the locker, can’t I nurse up at a soup-kitchen? At the worst I can go into the work’ouse, and get my keep out of the parish. And then when I’m in luck, what a life I can have at the music-halls and with the gals! I heard the chaplain of the gaol preach a sermon about honesty being the best policy. That’s all very fine, but somehow or other I did not seem to see it.’

Here there was more applause.

The speaker continued:

‘I’ve done nothing wot’s good. I know I’m a bad un.’

‘Yes, we all know that.’

‘And why?’

‘Ah, that’s the question!’ said the interested group of listeners.

‘I’ll tell you for why. I han’t no father – at any rate, I never knowed one. My mother turned me out o’ doors at the age of thirteen. I then stole a pair o’ boots, and was sent to prison for one month for it. What could I do when I came out but go back to thievin’? In a little while I was convicted for stealing out of a till, and sent to prison for three months. Arter a little spreein’ about, and a few ups and downs, I came to grief again in an attempt to steal a watch, and this time got six months. After I came out I renewed my wicious courses’ (here a laugh went round the room), ‘and I got four months for stealin’ a purse. As soon as I came out I run agin a perliceman, against whom I had a spite, as he was always ’avin’ his heye on me, and got fourteen days’ imprisonment for assault. The next time I had three months for an attempt to rob a drunken old sailor in the Borough. Then I ’ad six months for stealin’ a watch. And the next time – and that I did not like – twelve months for stealin’ a purse. However, when I came out I enjoyed my liberty, and did not make a bad use o’ my time. Arter that I got a long sentence, and now for good behaviour I am out with a liberty ticket.’

‘Well, well, such is life!’ said the red-nosed curate, who had been listening attentively. ‘I suppose we’re all villains of necessity, and fools by a divine thrusting on. What’s the odds as long as we’re happy? Look at my learning, my abilities, my virtues – where am I the better? Are we not all on the same low level? All, if I may be pardoned the phrase, a little shaky, a little down in the world? Let’s liquor up,’ said he, bringing out of his side pocket a bottle of rum, and passing it round, often tasting with evident gusto its contents.

In the midst of the excitement a gent came in apparently much excited. I say gent, as he was not a gentleman. He had too red a nose and too sodden an appearance to be taken for anything of the kind. He was a perfect picture of a human wreck as, unwashed and unshaven, with a short pipe in his mouth, he joined the drinking group.

‘Hollo, parson,’ they all exclaimed, ‘wot’s the row? Anythink up?’

‘Nothing particular, only a highway robbery in the Black Country, and a farmer left for dead.’

‘In the Black Country? Where’s that?’ asked the tramp. ‘Whoever heard of such a place?’

‘Why, you just said you’d been down there,’ said one of the party.

‘Well, what if I did? You don’t suppose I had anything to do with the job?’ said the new-comer angrily.

‘Of course not,’ was the universal reply.

Harmony being restored, the bottle of gin was drunk, and another sent for. The fun grew fast and furious. The conviviality was of the choicest character, or rather it degenerated into an orgie. Does the reader recollect that splendid passage of Lord Bacon, in which he tells us, ‘In Orpheus’s theatre all the birds assembled, and forgetting their several appetites – some of prey, some of game, some of quarrel – stood all sociably together, listening to the concert, which no sooner ceased, or was drowned by some louder noise, but every beast returned to his own nature.’ The gin in the low lodging-house had produced a similar effect. While it lasted the partakers for the time being had forgot their several appetites – some of prey, some of game, some of quarrel – and stood or sat all sociably together. No sooner had the supply of liquor ceased than the good-fellowship became changed into hate and discord, as the various natures of the guests reasserted themselves.

The tramp’s female companion became suspicious. She was not so drunk as the rest, and had become conscious that there was a reward of ten pounds offered to anyone who should give such evidence as might lead to the conviction of the perpetrator or perpetrators of the recent outrage. The company she knew comprised more than one individual who was quite ready to earn a ten-pound note in such a way, and she determined, as far as it was in her power, not to give them the chance. Unperceived she slipped out, and fled as fast as she could and as far as she could. All at once there was a cry on the part of the tramp and his friends, ‘Where’s Sal?’

Some searched for her under the table, others investigated the sleeping apartments, others the back premises, which were of the most capacious kind, but no Sal was to be found.

The curate summoned up all his dignity, and, approaching the inebriated tramp, said to him:

‘My friend, I have a painful revelation to make.’

‘A wot?’

‘A painful revelation.’

‘I don’t know wot yer mane; but out with it, old man, and don’t stand there as if you was chokin’.’

‘Your wife has bolted.’

‘Oh, has she? Let her bolt. She’s no wife of mine. There are others as good as she.’

‘You don’t seem much affected by the loss,’ replied the Oxonian. ‘You’re quite a philosopher. You seem perfectly aware how *femina mutabile est*.’

‘Now, don’t come that nonsense with me,’ said the man angrily. ‘When I drinks, I drinks; and I don’t bother my head about anything else. Why should I? As to women, they’re like all the rest of us – here to-day, gone to-morrow.’

‘Ah, I see you’re a man of the world.’

‘I believe yer, my boy,’ said the tramp, who felt flattered at the intended compliment.

‘You don’t think she’s gone to split,’ whispered one of the party in the tramp’s ear.

‘No, I should think not. Let me catch her at it!’

‘Or me,’ added his chum. ‘We’ll be sure to mark her, and serve her d- well!’

The sentiment being favourably received, more exhilarating liquor was circulated. That which cheers and inebriates at the same time by many is much preferred to that which cheers alone. In that long room and low company it was intoxicating liquor that had done the mischief. Without character, without clothes, without food, without money, filthy and fallen, these poor wretches had given up all for drink. For that the mother was ready to sell her child, or the husband his wife. For that the criminal was ready to give up an accomplice, and to turn King's evidence, or to commit any deed of shame. In time the drink supply was stopped, and the drinkers staggered upstairs to the crowded bedrooms, redolent of filth and blasphemy.

'I say,' said the tramp's friend, 'where do you think that woman's gone?'

'Gone; how should I know? Perhaps she's gone back to Sloville.'

'To Sloville! why?'

'To look after the boy.'

'A child of hers?'

'What do you want to know for?' said the tramp angrily. 'You're too inquisitive by half,' said he, in a drunken tone, and in the next moment he sank into a drunken sleep. And the questioner – he, too, in a moment was in the Land of Nod, dreaming of the days of innocence, when he was a bright, happy boy, guarded with a mother's love and father's care, in a well-appointed home, with gardens where grew fruits and flowers, and musical with the song of birds; where the sun shone bright and the air was balmy; in a home where care and filth and sorrow and disease and want and woe seemed almost unknown. His pals carried him off to bed. Suddenly he woke up and asked himself where he was. Presently he lifted himself up in bed and looked around. At the far end a dim gas-light helped him to realize the horrors of his situation. He was in a long, filthy, evil smelling, low room, with thirty beds in a row, side by side, packed as close together as sardines in a box. Every bed was occupied. And as he gazed on the sad faces near him he gave a scream which drew down on him many a curse.

'Hush! why can't you be quiet?' said the deputy keeper, ever fearful of the police.

But the scream was renewed.

'Why, I'm blessed,' said one, 'if he ain't got the D.T.!''

Could anything be more horrible, as the angry keepers mocked and jeered and maddened him? Struggling and shrieking, he was borne off by men stronger than himself to the nearest hospital, and for awhile there was peace.

CHAPTER XIII. CONCERNING SAL

And where had the woman gone? Westward, we are told by the poet, the course of empire takes its way. She had gone west, and very naturally; not at first, she was too artful for that – her old man, as she called him (she did not know his proper name), might be after her, and she had had enough of him, and wanted to be free. In this case she had not two strings to her bow. She was not thinking of accepting a new keeper in the case of the one cashiered. She simply wanted to be free – at any rate for awhile. As to the child left behind, she had no thought of that. Somebody would give it a crust and a night's lodging. Then it would roam into the streets to be picked up by the police, and supported by the British taxpayer.

We are a very humane people. The more people neglect their offspring, the more ready are we to look after them. If Sal, as she was called, had been a true and tender-hearted woman, she would have dragged the little fellow out with her into the cold, raw night away from Sloville. He might have caught his death o' cold, and then and there ceased to be a blessing to her or anybody else. As a waif off the streets he had a better chance of being clothed, and fed, and educated, and cared for, and planted out in life. It is thus we reward our rascals. It is thus we relieve fathers and mothers of their responsibility, do our duty, ease our consciences, and offer a premium to vice.

Finding the way clear, our Sal emerged from her hiding-place, and made her way, as much hidden as possible by the dark shades of lofty walls, towards Waterloo Bridge. She was a remarkable woman, was our Sal. Her father was an agricultural labourer, earning his ten or twelve shillings a week, and bringing up a numerous family on that exceedingly limited sum. At the National school she had learned, in a very imperfect way, to read and write, to do a little needlework, and to curtsy to her betters.

As she grew up, she displayed alike her good looks and good manners. As to morals, they were not to be expected of a girl who lived in a cottage with but one sleeping room for the entire family, and whose good looks exposed her to the bucolic amativeness of the Bœotians of the district. All her ambition was to go to London in service in a superior family. She had known girls leave that district and come back real ladies, though they were as low down in the world as herself. One of the girls, a little older than herself, had gone to London, and turned gay; and what was the result? That she was living with the son of a lord, and she and all the other girls, who soon learned the story, were quite eager to be off to win, if possible, a similar prize.

Surely that was better than hard work, or remaining satisfied with the station in which God had placed them, as they were told every Sunday they ought to be – if that only meant marriage with Hodge, and the workhouse when she and Hodge would be past work. It was all very well to be called a good girl by the Rector's wife, to be confirmed, whatever that might mean, as a matter of course, by the Bishop, to sing in the parochial choir, and once a year to be admitted to the privileges of the Sunday-school treat; but that did not buy her a new bonnet, or prevent her wearing her old clothes, or save her from doing a lot of drudgery at times when she preferred romping in the hayfields with Farmer Giles's sons, strapping young fellows, just as rustic and as ignorant as herself.

A time came when she went out to service at a country house just by. A London lady of fashion saw her, was attracted by her appearance, and got her to come to town. The illustrious aristocrat she married was taken with the kitchen wench, as her ladyship indignantly termed her, and then there was a row, and the poor girl was ignominiously discharged to hide her head where she could, and to give birth to an illegitimate child. That aristocratic admirer was Sir Watkin Strahan.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.