

BENJAMIN WAUGH

SOME CONDITIONS OF
CHILD LIFE IN ENGLAND

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Benjamin Waugh

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SOME CONDITIONS OF CHILD LIFE IN ENGLAND

***[A Paper read by Rev. Benjamin Waugh
at the Meeting of the Baptist Union,
Thursday, October 10, 1889, at Birmingham.]***

My subject is Some Conditions of Child Life in England. And ought we not to expect some of these to be sad? No one who reflects can fail to see the fact that in this country to-day many conditions contribute to make ill-living people; and to make them regard children as nuisances. Vagrant habits; gambling; extravagant self-indulgence; idleness; unmarried parentage, and unfaithfulness in married parents; habitual drunkenness—all these disturb, and some destroy, the natural parental instinct. There is, too, a growing anti-population theory of which we have not heard much, but which is a kind of open secret, which regards

that man as a fool who said of children, "Blessed is the man that hath his quiver full of them," and the statement of the Prayer Book Marriage Service as to the divine objects of marriage as shameful and degrading. Because the results of all wrong and sinful life in man fall heaviest upon his God and his children, we ought to be prepared to find calamities which follow conditions like these, and to deal with them. They all tend to hurt children, chiefly the youngest.

Side by side with these conditions there is an increasing tendency to regard human beings as protoplasm; to shake off the idea of Jesus as to a living God, the Father of us all, and to account for human life by molecules; to count His judgment day and a supreme judge of robust and wholesome righteousness as superstitions. And this is all full of danger to child life. Child life and happiness are bound up with the Kingship of God. There is but one Supreme to whom they are "the greatest;" but one hand which has a millstone for the necks of those who offend them, and the depths of the sea. Church-goers and chapel-goers may sin against childhood, and men who disclaim churches and chapels may love it. But, though no hard-and-fast line can be drawn between men on this ground, it remains certain that Jesus is the world's most august protector of a child. The man who leaves its limbs naked, its sickness untended, He sends down to hell.

I

What, then, should His followers think of such deeds as these, taken more or less at random, from the list of offences for which, through the action of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, by its London Committee alone, two hundred men and women have been tried and convicted?

Making an ill and dying step-child live in a damp, dark back-kitchen, while the "own" children in the front kitchen sit round a bright winter's fire; shutting up another step-child to sleep in the coal-cellar, three others to sleep next the unceiled roof with one quilt, in their night-gowns, wind and sleet and rain finding them; sending a child at ten o'clock on a February night, recovering from diphtheria, a mile to an inn for beer; sending two starved, almost naked, little girls for half a hundredweight of coals in rain and sleet twice the same December night; laying a baby close to the fire to get rid of it through thirst; putting another in a thorough draft to get rid of it through cold; leaving a girl in bed covered with sores, infested with lice, under one scab a maggot, never washed or tended, lying in her own excrements; strapping a deaf and dumb boy because it was so extremely difficult to make him understand; drawing a red-hot poker before the eyes of a blind girl, and touching her hands with it (this was done by her brutal brother, but in the presence of the parents, and for fun); after beating, locking-up for the night in a coal-cellar

with rats; immersing a dying boy in a tub of cold water, “to get his dying done;” making another dying boy get out of bed to help to wash, and knocking him down because he washed so little; breaking a girl’s arm while beating her with a broomstick, then setting her to scrub the floor with the broken arm folded to her breast, and whipping her for being so long about it; hanging a naked boy by tied hands from a hook at the ceiling, there flogging him; savagely beating a girl on her breasts, felling her with fist, then kicking in the groin, on the abdomen, and the face with working boots; lashing a three-year-old face and neck with drayman’s whip; a three-year-old back with whalebone riding-whip; throttling one boy, producing partial strangulation; thrusting the knob of a poker into the throat of another, and holding it there to stop his screams of pain?

“Once I saw her put the poker in the fire,” said a neighbour (speaking of an own mother and her child of four and a half), “to get it red-hot. The child had vexed her. She held him down to the bed, and tied a cloth round his mouth; when the poker was hot she lifted his little petticoats up, and held the poker on the bottom of his back.” One baby cooed in the cradle, and was startled with a loud thunderous curse; one cried of teething, and was beaten savagely with its father’s big hand; two did the same, and were strapped, hanging by the heels from the strapper’s hand. Besides canes, straps, whips, and boots, belts, and thongs of rope, the instruments of torture have been hammers; pokers, cold, and red-hot; wire toasting-forks—in one case the prongs of the fork

hammered out, the stem untwisted a little up, making a sort of a birch of frayed wire; a file, with which the skin on projecting bones had been rasped raw; a hot stove, on which the child's bare thighs were put; hot fire-grates, against which little fat hands were held.

Never were even churches put to such Christian purposes as were Her Majesty's prisons, when they held the doers of such deeds as these, and were making their backs to well ache with hard labour.

You are shocked at that horrible catalogue. But is it not strange that in not one of all these cases did anybody, who was troubled about them, ever think of going to tell a minister of the gospel—you people who claim to be the successors of the man of Nazareth? Nor did they go to a City missionary! Of the 1400 cases sent into the office of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in London during its five years' existence, not one has come from a City missionary. When speaking of the starvation of children to one of them, he said to me, "Yes, I knew two cases last winter, one after another; they were just starved to death. It was a shocking affair." To which I replied, in surprised indignation, "Why did you not tell us?" "Oh," he replied with a perfectly satisfied air, "if I were to meddle in things like that, I could not do my more spiritual work."

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