

BIRD ISABELLA LUCY

NOTES ON OLD
EDINBURGH

Isabella Bird

Notes on Old Edinburgh

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Notes on Old Edinburgh

PREFATORY NOTE BY THE REV. DR. HANNA

Was ever a more vivid picture of more revolting scenes offered to the reader's eye than that which the following pages present? If any doubt creep into his mind as to the accuracy of its details, he has but to read the reports of Dr. Littlejohn and Dr. Alexander Wood, in which everything here stated, not vouched for by the writer herself, is authenticated. Can nothing be done, shall nothing be done, to wipe out such foul blots from the face of our fair city? One effort among others is being made in this direction by the Association recently organized for improving the condition of the poor. It is in the hope of winning for this Association the support of all the humane among us that these "Notes" are published. It would be a happy, and not surely hopeless issue, if, by the combined and concentrated endeavours of all interested in the welfare of the poor, such a change were effected that, fifty years hence, it were doubted or denied that ever such a state of things existed as is here so graphically portrayed.

W. H.

6, Castle Terrace,

Jan. 20, 1869.

CHAPTER I

It has been my fortune to see the worst slums of the Thames district of London, of Birmingham, and other English and foreign cities, the “water-side” of Quebec, and the Five Points and mud huts of New York, and a short time ago a motive stronger than curiosity induced me to explore some of the worst parts of Edinburgh – not the very worst, however. Honest men can have no desire to blink facts, and no apology is necessary for stating the plain truth, as it appears to me, that there are strata of misery and moral degradation under the shadow of St. Giles’s crown and within sight of Knox’s house, more concentrated and unbroken than are to be met with elsewhere, even in a huge city which, by reason of a district often supposed to have no match for vice and abjectness, is continually held up to public reprobation. The Rev. R. Maguire, rector of St. James’s, Clerkenwell, accompanied me through a portion only of the district visited, and he expressed his opinion then, and since more formally in print, that more dirt, degradation, overcrowding, and consequent shamelessness and unutterable wretchedness, exist in Edinburgh than in any town of twice its size, or in any area of similar extent to the one explored, taken from the worst part of London. With this opinion my own convictions cordially concur. We have plenty of awful guilt-centres in London – as, for instance, the alleys leading out of Liquorpond Street and the New Cut, but even the worst are broken in upon by healthy neighbourhoods. Here there is a loathsome infectious sore, occupying a larger area than anywhere else – a district given up in great measure to moral degradation, which extends from the Lawnmarket to Holyrood, from Holyrood along the parallel streets of the Cowgate, the Grassmarket, and the West Port, including most of the adjacent wynds and closes, and only terminating with Cowfeeder Row.

My object was to compare a certain section of Edinburgh, both by day and night, with a similar area in the city before alluded to. In company with two philanthropic gentlemen, who did not hesitate to expose these social plague-spots, and guided in one mysterious locality by one of the lieutenants of police, I explored at various times several closes in the High Street, Cowgate, and West Port, going by “house-row.” In all cases the people were civil and willing to admit us, and few allowed us to depart without expressing a hope that some good would come out of the efforts proposed to be made for them. In many houses only the children were at home, but they answered our questions with such quick comprehension and painfully precocious intelligence that we were not left in doubt as to the circumstances of their parents.

It was a dry, warm morning. No rain had fallen for some weeks. There was a rumour of cholera on the Rhine, and under its salutary influence various sanitary precautions, such as lime-washing closes and stairs, had been recently resorted to. The district might have looked cheerful had cheerfulness been possible, so great was the contrast between its aspect now and its look on a wet, murky, autumn day. The appearance of the lower part of the High Street was as little pleasant as usual. Knots of men who never seem to “move on” stared at the passers-by on the South Bridge, bold girls lounged about and chaffed the soldiers, careworn women, and little girls hardly less careworn, stood round the well with their pails – some of the last, we learned, having stood there for two and three hours. There were dirty little children as usual rolling in the gutter or sitting stolidly on the kerb-stone; as usual, haggard, wrinkled, vicious faces were looking out of the dusty windows above, and an air of joylessness, weariness, and struggle hung over all. Truly has this street been named the *Via Dolorosa*.

The above-named well, close by John Knox’s house, is a sign of one of the standing grievances of this district of Edinburgh. It is the “water supply” of the large population living in those many-storeyed houses which give the immediate neighbourhood its picturesqueness. If it could tell the tale of one day, we should have plenty of the sensational element, but it would be the true tragedy of the real, suffering, everyday life of the poor. From six in the morning till nearly midnight, it is the centre of a throng, feminine mainly, but often essentially unwomanly in its language and manners. As a horde of thirsty pilgrims struggles for the first draught of the water of the bright oasis of the

desert, so this crowd often struggles for the first turn at the tap. In its more usual condition, it is sad rather than belligerent, feeble in its scuffling, loud-voiced in its abuse. Here the weakest go to the wall. Here children carrying buckets nearly as big as themselves are sometimes known to wait from one to five hours for the water which is to wash the faces, cook the food, and quench the thirst of the family for the day. Here they wait, losing time and gaining a precocious familiarity with evil from the profanity and depravity of the talk and chaffing around them. To this well the aged widow, who struggles hard to keep up appearances, with her white mutch and neatly-pinned black shawl, totters with her pail down her dark stair of 150 steps, up the steep close, and down the street, waiting with the patience born of necessity in the heat, or rain, or snow, as the case may be, till the younger and stronger have got their “turn,” and then stumbles with failing breath up her stair, the water, which is precious as that of the well of Bethlehem, spilling as she goes. At what a cost does she buy the whiteness of her mutch! Hither comes the young, weary-looking mother, having locked up her young family in her eyrie. Heavily burdened with care she looks. We may trust she forgets the perils of fire and window at home; she scuffles feebly; street brawling is a new and uncongenial thing to her, and she usually ends by losing the best part of the morning. She is slowly dropping out of her cleanly habits. Can we wonder? She thinks twice at least about scrubbing the floor, and it isn't much use to wash her children's clothes when they have no place to play in but the gutter. Here also come the small children with jugs, and hang about for a frolic, learning to curse and swear and imitate the vices of their elders, if they have not learned them before.

It is a pitiful sight in the street, but followed to the homes this lack of water helps to degrade, pity for the sufferers mingles with indignant surprise that proprietors of the *best paying property* to be found (for so the closes are) have not been compelled ere this to have at least a pipe and tap in every close. Outside the great Reformer's house is the well of pure water, difficult of access for most, nearly inaccessible at times to the feeble, the diffident, and the old. Under the same house is the whisky-shop, easy enough to reach, and the whisky all too easy to procure – only the laying down a few pence, and the fluid which makes life brighter for an hour is at the lips without waiting or scuffling. How can our sad and sorely-tempted ones escape the snare? Limited water and unlimited whisky, crowded dens and unwholesome air; we need nothing more to make a city full of drunkards.

We followed this water grievance into thirty-seven houses that day, and there was scarcely one in which it was not enlarged upon. Did our eyes wander round a room ever so stealthily, its occupier was ready to forestall the glance by saying, “Ah, sirs, it's the dirt ye're looking at, but how's puir folk like us to be clean as has to haul every drop of water from that well?” Did we shrink ever so slightly from a child whose head and clothing were one mass of dirt, the movement was perceived, and the want of water, the distance from the well, and the long long stair, were the apologies offered.

I merely give one instance, which might be multiplied almost indefinitely, of the distress arising from this comparatively little thought-of cause. In a wretched den on the seventh storey, none the brighter or lighter for being nearer the skies, for it had no direct light, a family, consisting of father, mother, and child of three years old, were fighting a hard battle for life. On the floor, on a straw bed, the husband had been “down with fever” for six weeks. He was wandering and murmuring incessantly, “Drink! drink!” clutching all the time at a tin pitcher by his side which contained water. He was too weak to lift it, and his wife, who expected shortly to become a mother, was helping him to it every three or four minutes. The bairn was crippled and mentally deficient, and kept crawling into the ashes, so that between it and her husband the poor woman had not a moment's rest. On a line across the room a half-washed sheet was hanging, steaming as it dried. The atmosphere in the room was poisonous. The woman said, “Ah, you are feeling the smell. Sometimes I think he'd get better if we could have things clean about us. He's got bed-sores, and you see they run a good deal, and I'm such a weak body, I can't haul water enough to wash it out of the sheets. He drinks nearly all I bring – quarts a day. He was always so fond of the water, he never tasted the whisky in his life. He's been a good husband to me; and since we've come here I can't get the water to keep him clean.” In answer

to inquiry, she said she had waited half an hour at the well the night before, and in coming up the long dark stair a drunk man had pushed against her and upset the whole pailful. On our expressing some sympathy, she burst into tears, sobbing out, "Oh, God only knows what it is to *slave* after the water – it's killing me and him too, *and in the glen we came from the bonnie burn ran by the door.*" In that moment, some cruel memory contrasted that foul steaming sheet, whose poisonous fumes nearly overcame the strong, with the linen washed on the grass by the burn, over which the birch and harebell trembled, and bleached afterwards by the sun to the whiteness of snow. They were evicted crofters from Perthshire, and misfortune, not drink or vice, had brought them so low. Our sanitary reforms are too late for them, for both went shortly afterwards to the land where "they shall thirst no more."

Travellers have often enlarged upon the hardships suffered by the fellaheen of Egypt in carrying water for irrigating purposes. It is from the free, pure Nile they draw it at will, and over the pure alluvial soil they carry it. But this water grievance, which exists not only in the Canongate and High Street, but in the Cowgate, the Grassmarket, the West Port, and elsewhere, involves *female slavery* in Edinburgh of the most grinding description, and consequences from which the moralist and the philanthropist may well shrink. This want of water involves not alone a slavery which in many cases knows no Sabbath, and dirt which is a help to degradation, but an absence of all arrangements for decency. Looking at this subject from a stranger's stand-point, it seems perfectly credible that the lack of all proper water supply in these crowded districts, the impossibility which it creates of preserving physical self-respect, and the evil influence on the young of the "wait" at the wells, is one among the many causes of the lapsing of the masses in Edinburgh. The subject of the water supply is beset with difficulties, but there is a possibility of grappling with and overcoming them. The matter is more closely connected with moral reform than we might think at first sight. In England we have a proverb, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," and without indorsing it fully, we may agree that physically filthy habits and moral impurity, among the poor at least, are intimately associated. *It is impossible for these people to be clean in their dwellings, clothes, or persons under present circumstances.* It is inevitable that infectious diseases of the most fatal kind must be generated and diffused. It is certain that the spirit of murmuring against God is fostered by this lack of an element which these female water-carriers suppose should be free to them as light and air. The evil is becoming worse and worse as a larger and larger population crowds into these subdivided dwellings, there, perforce almost, to fall into habits lower than those of the beasts. It is well known that drunkenness, disease, and degradation are the results of a deficient water supply. It is more difficult to estimate statistically the broken health and hearts of the female water-carriers. There is an economy of water and a most prodigal expenditure of human suffering.

CHAPTER II

In the Old Town, where the population of a village or a fashionable square is constantly crammed into the six or seven storeys of one house, *room-to-room* visitation, for it is nothing else, affords a visitor in one morning a glimpse of a state of things without a parallel. In no other city could tenements be found without gas, without water-pipes, water-closet, or sink, or temporary receptacle for ashes, and entered only by one long dark stone stair, which return such enormous profits to their owners as from 45 to 60 per cent. Scarcely elsewhere does one roof cover a population of 290, 248, 240 persons, living in dens, honeycombed out of larger rooms, without ventilation, without privacy, and often without direct light. In no other city is the respectable mechanic compelled, for want of house accommodation of a proper kind, to bring up his family in a tenement which deserves indictment as a nuisance, or to pay £5, £6, or £8 a year for a den swarming with vermin, with only a wooden partition to keep off the sights and admit all the sounds of haunts of the most degraded vice. In Edinburgh, which, in more respects than one, is set on a hill and cannot be hid, there are 13,209 families, comprising not only the vicious and abject, but large numbers of the poorer labouring class, living in houses of but one room, and of these single rooms, 1530 are inhabited by from six to fifteen persons! Further, by the last census, 120 of these *shelters*, for they are not houses, were reported as without windows, and 900 were cellars, nearly all of them dark, and many damp. *These* figures give the astounding result that the families living in one room, and often herding together in closer proximity than animals would endure, comprehend 66,000 persons, or considerably more than one-third of the population of Edinburgh!¹

The notes which follow are merely a commentary upon the above facts. My room-to-room visitation on a single day included thirty-seven families residing in a close south of the High Street and ten families in a close south of the Cowgate. I do not give the names of either, in deference to the feelings of respectable persons who are compelled by various causes to reside in them.

The entrance of the close which we selected is long and narrow, and so low as to compel a man of average height to stoop. It is paved with round stones, and from the slime in which they were embedded, and from a grating on one side almost choked up with fish heads and insides, and other offal, a pungent and disgusting effluvium was emitted. The width of this close is four feet at the bottom, but the projecting storeys of the upper houses leave only a narrow strip of quiet sky to give light below. A gutter ran along one side of the close against the wall, and this, though so early in the day, was in a state of loathsomeness not to be described. Very ragged children, infinitely more ragged and dirty than those which offend our eyes in the open street, were sitting on the edge of this gutter, sitting as if they meant to sit there all day; not playing, not even quarrelling, just *stupefying*. Foul air, little light, and bad food had already done their work on most of them. Blear eyes, sore faces, and sore feet were almost universal. Their matted hair and filthy rags were full of vermin. Their faces were thin, pinched, and precocious. Many of them had been locked out in the morning when their mothers went to their hawking, washing, and other occupations, and might be locked out till midnight, or later, as we found on the following night. There they sat, letting the slow, vile stream in the gutter run over their feet, and there they were sitting three hours later. They were from three to ten years old. It is all the same if the rain or snow is falling, except that they leave the gutters to huddle together in the foul shelter of the stair-foot. Some of these will die, many will be educated into the hardened criminality of the often-imprisoned street boy, many will slide naturally into a life of shame, and a fortunate few will be sentenced to reformatories, from whence they come out decent members of society at the rate of 70 per cent. “God help them!” exclaimed a mother, so drunk that her own babe seemed in peril in

¹ Report on the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Edinburgh, 1868, p. 19.

her arms. Ay, God help them! But our Father which is in heaven charges the responsibility of their destiny on the respectable men and women of Edinburgh.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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