James Ewing Ritchie

Crying for the Light: or, Fifty Years Ago. Volume 1 of 3

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Ritchie J.

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Содержание

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"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 I.
PARKER'S PIECE, SLOVILLE

Upon my word, I don't know a more desirable residence from the pauper's point of view than Parker's Piece, an awful spot in the very heart of the rising town of Sloville. I can't say, as regards myself, that the place has many attractions. It is too crowded, too dirty, too evil-smelling, too much inhabited by living creatures, including insects which delicacy forbids mentioning. I like living in the country, where I can hear the birds sing their morning anthem. I like to see the buttercups and daisies, and the green grass, and the blue sky, and the sunshine, which makes everyone feel happy; and when winter comes, how much do I love the sparkling diamonds on the frosted trees, and the pure white snow which robes the earth with a loveliness of which the dweller in towns has no adequate idea! I like to breathe fresh air, and not town smoke; and so, individually, I had rather not reside in Parker's Piece; but there are those who live there, and much enjoy it. Mostly they are a ragged lot – tramps and vagrants and the ever growing army of the unemployed – who make it their headquarters, as it is full of old houses and corners where the peelers cannot penetrate, and public-houses where the sot may drink as long as his or her money lasts out; where, as regards the spot in question, there is a special encouragement to do so, seeing how much money was left ages ago by a pious founder, who had made money in some way which was not exactly right, and who thought it just as well, when it was of no further use to him, to leave it partly to the priests to pray for his soul, and partly to the poor, that future generations might call him blessed; and as the poor all round were well aware of the fact, there was never a house or room that stood empty long – unhealthy as was the place, and dilapidated as were the buildings.

One building, however, was an exception to the others, as regards age. Originally it had been started as a boot and shoe manufactory, but that did not pay; then it became a depot for pure literature and well-meant publications, but no one came to buy; then it came into the hands of a Town Councillor, who, disgusted that the Corporation would not purchase it at an extravagant rate, to pull it down, vowed that he would never lay out a penny on the place, only get out of it what rent he could. As he let it out in tenements, the rents of which were collected by a somewhat unscrupulous agent, the fact was, the locality became less respectable and less cared for every day. It was avoided by the police as much as possible. If there was a quarrel – as there was almost every day – between its wretched inmates, it was hard to say who was to blame. Passing down there one day, I saw a man savagely assaulting his wife. To my remonstrance he replied that if he did not let her know that he was master, she would stick a knife into him; and, according to the public opinion of the place, he was right. Only on Sunday morning was the place quiet, and that was not because the dwellers there were at church or chapel, but simply because the weary were enjoying an extra hour's sleep, or the dissipated had not, as yet, overcome the effect of the previous evening's debauch.

All at once Parker's Piece became known far and near. One night a little one, happily, died, instead of making a feeble and ineffectual struggle to live; an inquest was held, and the result was a revelation of misery and wretchedness which made all Sloville stand aghast. A London radical newspaper sent down an artist to give a rude drawing of the place, and a special correspondent, whose report was as sensational as could be desired. Parker's Piece became as well known to the British community as the Mansion House, or St. Paul's, or Westminster Abbey, or the Houses of Parliament. Money showered down on the place, little to the advantage of the deserving, who are the last to proclaim their needs, but greatly to that of the publican and sinner. It was felt by everybody something must be done. A grand church was erected at one corner, to which, however, no one went; a mission hall was started at the other by a speculative philanthropist, on his own hook, while a building was secured for a similar purpose by the leading people of the leading Congregational Church in the town.

It was a real case of line upon line, and precept upon precept. The plan was to catch sparrows by putting a little salt on their tails, and the plan succeeded to admiration. There was a free tea, which was a great success; then there was a regular breakfast on a Sunday morning, which answered still better. The men looked rather sheepish at first, but the women were too many for them. The fleshpots of Egypt prevailed, and there was a good attendance, a state of resignation when the talking began, and some awful singing afterwards. On the day of which I write, there was a little extra excitement in the place. Christmas was coming, and all the good people for miles around had determined to give a treat to the wretched ruffians in the very worst part of the place – the big building to which I have already referred. When the leading man of the place, Carroty Bill, heard it, he swore that there should be no psalm-singing there. But his better-half modified his rage as she drew a lovely picture of creature comforts to be had – the boots for the children, the flannel for herself, and the extra money they would have for a jolly spree after all.

'I 'ave been to one of their meetin's,' said she, 'and we 'ad a rare good time of it, I can tell yer; tea, and coffee, such heaps of bread-and-butter, and plum-cake, and great meat-pies; it was well worth while a-settin' an hour or two in a warm room while the parsons were a-talkin'; and rally you'd ha' thought as how the ladies and gentlemen seemed to think as we were brothers and sisters. We wos quite a 'appy family, we wos.'

'And then to be preached to,' said Carroty Bill, 'arterwards. I'm blessed if I'll go.'

'Well, I'll take the children.'

'Not Joe; yer can't take him.'

'Why not? he ain't yer child.'

'I know that, but I wants him – that's enough.'

Carroty Bill kept his word; he had an idea of his own in his thick head, and he was determined to carry it out.

Unfortunately, at that time there was a good deal of antagonism between Church and Dissent. Generally, we know, it is otherwise, and they love each other as fellow-Christians ought – a love that does you good to contemplate. As the Dissenters gave the feed, it occurred to the Vicar and his curates to make a house-to-house inspection – to see for themselves the nakedness of the land, and to relieve it accordingly. At the bar of the White Horse the new move was announced, and Carroty Bill, as he sat smoking and drinking, hit on a plan of which he said nothing to his female partner – for wife she never was – till the time had come to carry it out. Said he, when he heard the Vicar was to come:

'Here, Joe, you come along with me.'

'No; I want to go with mother.'

'You come along with me, or it will be the worse for yer, I can tell yer,' said Carroty Bill, with a look which forbade all further thought of disobedience on the part of the poor boy.

'You'll make the boy as bad as yerself,' said the woman, 'let him come along with me.'

'Not if I know it,' said the ruffian.

'Why, wot's up?' asked the woman.

'Wot's that to you? The boy must come.'

And with a swelling heart, and a tear in his eye, the boy went. He was filthy, and ragged, and half starved. Yet there was something noble about the little lad's face; had he been washed, and well dressed, and well fed, with his curly hair and fine forehead and bright blue eyes, he would have been as handsome a little fellow as was to be seen in the town.

'Don't lead him into mischief,' said the poor woman imploringly.

'In course not, my dear,' said Carroty Bill sarcastically: 'he's a gentleman, ain't he? and he'll behave as such.' Then, turning to the boy, who was still lingering by the woman's side, he said, 'Come here, you little warmint, or I'll break every bone in your body.'

This conversation was carried on at the White Horse, where the speaker was mostly to be found. The woman gave way; the speaker took the boy to Parker's Piece. Arrived there, he sought out his

own apartment, and with the help of the lad cleared it of everything it possessed in the shape of chairs or clothes or table, leaving only a little straw, on which the family were to lie. A dealer just by purchased his household chattels for a song, about as much as they were worth, and Carroty Bill had just time to get a drop at the White Horse and return in an unwonted state of sobriety before the Vicar and his curates entered.

'Dear me,' said the kind-hearted Vicar, 'what wretchedness! How is it you are so badly off?'

'Wife ill, and I got no work to do. It's very hard on a poor fellow like me,' said our carroty friend.

'Ah! it is indeed,' said the Vicar.

'Yes, I little thought as I should have come to this,' said the man, in a desponding tone.

'Ah, well,' said the Vicar, 'perhaps we can help you a little.'

'Thank you, sir, kindly,' said the hardened hypocrite.

'Dear me!' said the Vicar, 'what wretchedness – not a stick in the place! We must do something to relieve this distressing case. What say you?' said he to his companions.

'Oh, a pair of blankets and a hundredweight of coal at the least.'

'Yes, and a loaf of bread.'

'Oh yes! and a little warm clothing for the wife and child in the corner. That's a bright little fellow,' said he, pointing to Joe; 'is that your eldest?'

'No, sir, he ain't one of ours,' said the woman. 'We keep him out of charity. His mother is dead.'

'Dear me!' said the Vicar; 'who would have thought it? What true benevolence! How it does shame us who are better off! How beautiful it is to see the poor so ready to help one another!'

'Ah! it is little we can do, but we allus tries to do our duty,' said Carroty Bill, with the look of a saint and the courage of a martyr, while the forlorn woman seemed the picture of resignation and despair.

'I am sure we might leave a little money here as well,' said the Vicar.

'Oh, certainly,' said both the curates who declared they had never seen more unmitigated poverty anywhere.

And then they went off.

And thus relieved with a little ready cash and food, and cheered with the prospect of blankets and coals and clothes, for which tickets had been left, Carroty Bill was enabled at leisure to rejoice over the effects of his artful dodge, which was told to a crowd of applauding vagabonds, as rascally as himself; while the landlord of the public, already referred to, could not find too much to say on behalf of that Christian charity by which he expected to benefit more than anyone else in that dingy and poverty-stricken locality. The Vicar was quite justified so far as appearances went. It was an unhealthy habitation which he visited, and all the inmates looked sad and ill.

As the Vicar left the apartment of Carroty Bill he knocked at the next door, inhabited by a hard-working shoemaker of freethought tendencies, who hated him and all his ways. The Vicar beat a hasty retreat, as he knew the sharpness of the shoemaker's tongue.

'We don't want none of your cloth here,' said the disciple of St. Crispin. 'If there were a God, should we be as wretched as we are?'

'Yes, there is. I am His servant,' said the Vicar.

'You His servant? Why yer father bought yer the living, and a nice living it is; you are yer father's servant, not the Lord's.'

'But, my good man – ' said the Vicar.

'Don't "good man" me,' was the angry reply.

'But we come for your good.'

'That's what you all say; and I'll believe it when I see you and the likes of you give up that part of the tithes which was intended for the poor.'

'I come in the name of the Lord as His messenger,' said the Vicar in his most commanding tones.

'The Lord's receiver, I think,' said the shoemaker cynically, 'for you get all you can in His name.'

'It is no use leaving anything here,' said the Vicar to his curates.

Nor was it. The shoemaker had been made an infidel, as many are, by hard work and poor pay, by want of human sympathy, by the greatness of his life-long sorrow. Wounded and bruised and fallen among thieves, the Jew and the Levite had passed by, and no Samaritan had come to his aid. The Gospel of glad tidings has been preached for ages by the Churches, chiefly to the rich and the respectable as they are called, and the poor have been sent empty away. Christian ministers of all denominations have hard work to do to make up for the shortcomings of the past.

As the Vicar and his curates were leaving – and they were anxious to get out into the fresh air, as the smell of the place was awful – a door opened, and a thin and worn and weary elderly woman entered, who had to earn her living by needlework, and was one of the many to be met everywhere, who have seen better days, and who, friendless and alone, have to die in a garret, while the rich thoughtlessly array themselves in purple and fine linen and fare sumptuously every day. Surely there is something amiss in our nineteenth-century civilization when such is the case. It is well to tell such suffering ones that there is a better world, and a Father in heaven who shall wipe all tears from every eye, and where sorrow shall be unknown. But surely our rich need not be so very rich nor our poor so very poor, nor the cup of human suffering be, to many, so overflowing. Surely we need not wait till we have entered the golden gates and walked the pearly streets of the new Jerusalem to set such matters right, or till the Saviour, as some Christians tell us, comes to reign as a temporal Prince, in a world He once blessed with His presence and brightened with His smile. Human laws and misgovernment have had a good deal to do with the appalling inequality which meets us on every side, and which jars strongly with the Bible lessons read at our churches on a Sunday and the utterances of our pulpit orators. But let us return to the poor woman, weary with hard work, with disappointed hope; weary of the bitter past and of contemplating the dark future, on the black cloud of which she could see, as she gazed at it steadily from year to year, no silver lining. She makes no complaint, utters no moan, is never visible in the streets; yet her lot is hard – harder than she can bear – harder than that of the improvident and thoughtless and vicious. All the sunshine is gone out of her, and her heart is broken, though mechanically she accomplishes her daily task. She had a husband, but he died, and it was to give him decent burial that she had to part with her little all; her son had been lost at sea; her daughter had married, and had gone to live in a far-off colony, and a voyage thither would kill her, as she had no stamina left in her emaciated body. Look at her shrunken form, her pale cheeks, her lacklustre eye, her hand worn to the bone! Her hold on life is slender indeed. One of the silent ones is she, who accept their sorrow, and never speak of it as of a burden too heavy to be borne.

'Good-morning, my friend,' said the Vicar with a benevolent smile. 'We have just been visiting your poor neighbours and relieving their distress. They seem in a very bad way – nothing in the house. It is sad to think what would have become of them, if we had not called in the very nick of time. It is really shocking, the amount of misery in this unfortunate neighbourhood.'

'Yes, there is indeed a lot of it here,' said the poor woman. 'It is hard work to be happy here.'

'But you look as if you had employment.'

'Yes, sir, I have, I am thankful to say, though it brings me in but little; at any rate, I earn enough to keep me off the parish. Perhaps, gentlemen, you would like to walk in.'

They did so.

'How neat! how clean!' said the Vicar, as he looked admiringly around. 'What a view you have! Positively good; quite commands the place.'

'Yes, sir, but the chimneys give me a little more smoke than I care for. It is rarely I dare open my window, for fear of the blacks.'

'Ah, my good woman, it is so with all of us! There is always something amiss – something we should like to get rid of – a fly in the ointment,' as Solomon says. 'Now, there are my curates: they are happy young men, but I have no doubt they would like to be in my shoes' – a remark so

true that the curates could not contradict it, only by a deprecatory smile and shake of the head. 'Dear me!' continued the Vicar, as he turned from the window to the interior. 'Why, you have a sofa here, with an antimacassar!'

'Pardon, sir, that is my bed.'

'Ah, well, it is quite a model – quite a model. Why, we could dine here off the floor. What a nice little bit of carpet! What a nice little looking-glass! Oh, woman, how strong is the ruling passion! And bless me!' he said, turning, as he made a still longer inspection, 'why, here are flowers – positively flowers – and flowers cost a deal of money at this season of the year!'

'Excuse me, sir, they are artificial.'

'What! ah, yes, I see they are; but artificial flowers cost money.'

'They cost me but very little. I made them myself, to sell, if possible, but I could not get a customer, and so I kept them to make the room a bit cheerful.'

'Ah, I see you are one of the better class of workpeople – what I may call the aristocracy. I am awfully sorry. I should really have liked to have helped you, but our funds are small, and the amount of distress in the town is so large that we are obliged to be very particular – very particular indeed. It is a duty we owe to the parish and to the kind friends who have subscribed the money. They have the greatest confidence in us, and we must not abuse that confidence.'

'Pray, sir, don't think of it. If there are any poor people much worse off than myself, why, I pity 'em,' said the poor woman.

'Worse off, my good woman! Oh, the town is full of such! Look at your poor neighbours in the next room – a most shocking case; yet, in all their poverty, taking charge of a little waif that, somehow or other, came into their hands.'

The woman said nothing. She could have said a good deal, but she knew the family, and she also knew the value of peace and quietness.

'Perhaps you will like to accept of this little tract,' said the Vicar, who wished to show his sympathy, but who did not exactly know how. 'It is prettily got up, and I rejoice to say it has been found greatly useful. You will, perhaps, read it with more interest as it was written by myself. And here is another, by my daughter, "On the Blessings of Poverty."'

'On what, sir?'

'"On the Blessings of Poverty."'

'Well, I never heard of them. I am sure I shall like to read that.'

'Here they are, then,' said the Vicar, handing them smilingly. 'And now we must wish you good-morning; our time is precious, and we have a good deal to do yet.'

'Had you better not give her something to eat?' said one of the curates in a low voice as they were turning away.

'Oh dear no!' said the Vicar; 'that would be very wrong – very wrong indeed.' Then in an undervoice he added: 'Our intrusion here is quite a mistake. This is not a case in which we can interfere. But we wish you a good-morning, with the compliments of the season; and I will get my daughter to call with a few more tracts, and perhaps she might like to buy some of your artificial flowers.'

'I am sure I should be glad to see her.'

'Well, well, we shall see. You know me, of course; I am the Vicar of the parish. Of course, you have often seen me at church.'

'Well, I can't say that I have.'

'Why, you don't mean to say you don't go to a place of worship? You are not a heathen, are you?'

'I hope not, sir; but I have to work so hard all the week that I am thankful for a little more rest on a Sunday, and when I go out I go to chapel.'

'To chapel! How is that?' said the Vicar, in a by no means pleased tone. 'Don't you know all Dissenters are schismatics? My good woman, I am sorry for you.'

'Well, sir, I go to chapel because I was brought up to it, and it seems more homelike.'

'Well, then, the chapel people must look after you. You are not in my charge at all. It is a pity, and I am sorry for it. Perhaps, if we saw you at church we could help you a little, if ever you did require any aid. But we can't discuss that question. It is clear we have no further business here, have we, Mr. Jones?'

The curate with that uncommon name replied to his reverend superior, 'Certainly not.'

'Certainly not,' replied the poor woman, with a shade of disappointment over her pale face, and a little more of pardonable acidity in her tone; 'certainly not. I am no beggar.'

'Just so, my good woman,' said the Vicar, as he tripped with his curate downstairs. 'Just so; as I have said, we have to exercise the utmost care in the disposal of our funds.'

More of a Samaritan than the Vicar, the poor woman kept the door open till she had heard the last of his steps down the creaking stairs, or he might have had a fall, a not uncommon circumstance on that dilapidated staircase, and then she turned away to her loneliness and misery with her broken heart. The lamp flickered in the socket, the end was very near; life for her had no charm, death no terror.

That night was one of extra jollity as far as the inhabitants of Parker's Piece were concerned. The police had not had so much trouble in the place for a long while, nor had the publicans and pawnbrokers done such a roaring trade. No one couple in all that squalid district was more drunk that night than Carroty Bill and his better-half.

That night was one of intense cold – the coldest, in feet, of the year, the coldest of many years – and, as such, noted by distinguished meteorologists. The cold was everywhere; in the palace of the prince, as well as in the hut of the peasant. It crept into Belgravian homes, where the lord and master lined himself with extra good cheer, and warmed himself with extra fires; it made dainty maidens and high-born matrons wrap themselves in extra fur as they drove home from dinner-party or theatre, or concert or ball. In railway carriages there was an extra demand for foot-warmers, and at every refreshment bar there was an incessant demand for a glass of something hot. It was the same in all the publics and gin-palaces; and it was a curious fact, the poorer the people were, the more eager was their consumption of potent fluids; and how they lingered around the places where they were sold, even when their money and their credit were gone, as if loath to do battle with the cold without as it pinched their gloveless hands or shoeless feet, or as it found its way into their cheerless garret or cellar as the case might be! In the homes of the well-to-do how the fires blazed, as the fond mother clasped tightly her babe to her bosom for further warmth. In some of the best constructed conservatories the frost nipped off many a tender plant, and as costly as tender, while out-door gardeners suffered losses bewailed bitterly for many a long year. There were muscular young Christians who enjoyed that cold amazingly, as, well fed and well clad, bearing torches, they skated along the Serpentine, or in Regent's Park, and laughed hugely when any of their weaker brethren or sisters complained. But, nevertheless, the night's frost played sad havoc with the old, the feeble, and the tender. It crept into that attic in Parker's Piece, where that poor needlewoman lived. There was no fire in her empty grate to keep it out, no extra blanket for her bed, no vital warmth in her attenuated frame to withstand its fatal power; and when the early sunbeams made their way through the frosted window with difficulty, they lit up, not the pale face of a living woman, but of a corpse. She had been sorely tried that day. The last straw had broken the camel's back. Christian charity – while it relieved the undeserving, while it had feasted the reprobate – had passed by her, because, poor as she was, she was a real woman with all a woman's self-respect and sensitiveness to shame, not a drunken, dissipated wretch of brazen face and fluent tongue. Her heart was broken already, and she fell an easy prey to the cold as it stiffened her withered limbs and stopped her poor heart's action and dried up the feeble current of her blood. Again the coroner came to Parker's Piece, and an intelligent jury returned a verdict of 'Death from the visitation of God.' Dear reader, you and I know better; she was murdered, and a day will come when some one will have to suffer for that deed – murdered she was, as surely as

if her throat had been cut by the assassin's knife. There are thousands in this land of churches and chapels and abounding charities who die in this way every year, and someone, statesman, or parson, or philanthropist, or master, or neighbour, is to blame. As regards each of us, it is as well that we pray with David, 'Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God of my salvation.' It is only as we realize the spirit of that prayer that we can save the perishing. That is the remedy, and not the dream of the Utopian, or the Socialist, or the mad result of anarchy and crime.

CHAPTER II.
THE ACTRESS AND THE WAIF

A lady – a genius, beautiful in face, well formed in person, one of Nature's nobility if of doubtful pedigree – had been giving a Shakespearian reading or recitation, it matters not which, to a highly respectable audience in a highly respectable county town. The leading county families had, as they were bound to do, put in an appearance on the occasion. Wealthy manufacturers, who did not much care about that sort of thing themselves, had sent their women-folk, always delighted to show that they could dress as well, and look as grand, as the wives and daughters of men whose ancestors had fought at Agincourt or at the Battle of Hastings. Bevies of sweet girl graduates, from the neighbouring female academies, had come to listen and admire; while a few of the superior class of tradesmen and local magnates had kindly condescended to patronize the star that had suddenly appeared in their midst, and whose portrait for some weeks previous had ornamented their walls and shop windows – in the case of the latter by means of photographs, while big lithographs were available for posters. The audience were deeply affected, some with the loveliness of the actress, others, a more select and elderly party, with her dramatic power. According to local journals, the actress was greeted with an ovation as she resumed her seat. All eyes were turned on her as she retired from the scene of her triumphs, fevered with excitement, wearied with her physical exertion, flushed with the applause she had honestly won, her brain still reeking with excitement, her whole figure quivering with emotion, her eyes still glistening with the light that never shone on sea or shore.

By the side of the public hall was a small committee-room, into which our heroine was led, having previously effected a change in her dress and put on her bonnet.

'How far is it to the railway-station?' she asked of the committee who had managed the undertaking, and who, as the model men of the town, embalmed or embodied in themselves all those superior virtues which we invariably associate with respectability and wealth, as they stood in a semicircle round her chair, timidly and admiringly – timidly, for they were all respectable married men and had characters to lose; admiringly, because for two hours the actress, by her magic art, had opened up to them something greater and grander than even the busy life of Sloville town itself.

'How far is it to the railway-station?' repeated the Mayor, with an anxious and troubled visage, as if such a question had never been put to him before.

'A carriage will take you there in less than ten minutes,' said the Town Clerk, rushing, as he was bound to do, to the relief of the august head of the Corporation.

'My mare will take you there in five minutes,' said the old church Vicar, not willing to hide his light under a bushel, and at the same time glad to say a good word for the animal in question. His reverence, it is to be feared, was not much of a theologian, but there were two things which everyone admitted he did understand, and they were – horses and wine.

'My brougham is quite at your service,' said the Mayor, who was of the party, and who began to fear that unless he asserted himself he would be left out in the cold altogether.

'Thank you, gentlemen, but I'd rather walk,' said the actress.

She had passed her childhood in that town, and she was anxious to see what alterations had been made by Time's effacing fingers since she had last looked wistfully at its shop-windows, or with girlish glee had walked its streets.

'Walk!' all exclaimed, in a tone which intimated not a little surprise at the absurdity of the idea.

'Yes,' repeated the lady calmly, 'I'd rather walk. Why shouldn't I? there is plenty of time, and the weather is beautiful. I really should enjoy it.'

'Well, madam,' said the Mayor, 'if you insist upon it, of course we cannot be so rude as to prevent it. I think I may also say, on behalf of the Corpo – I beg pardon, on behalf of the committee, that if you do walk we shall all be delighted to accompany you to the railway-station.'

'And so say all of us,' said the Town Clerk, blushing as soon as he finished, fearing that the levity of his speech might not be acceptable to the Vicar. He was, however, delighted to find his remark received with universal assent.

'You're very kind,' said the lady; 'I am sorry to give you so much trouble.'

'No trouble at all, madam,' was, of course, the polite reply of the whole party.

'You will take a little refreshment before you go?' said the Mayor. 'Let me offer you a glass of wine.'

'No, I thank you, I'd rather not. I am a teetotaler.'

'You don't mean that,' said the Mayor, who was a brewer, and who had ridden into place and power by means of his barrels; 'you don't think a glass of wine wicked, I hope?'

'Oh no! I'm not so absurd as all that.'

'Such an exciting life as yours must really require a little stimulus; let me give you half a glass,' said the Vicar.

'Not a drop, thank you.'

'Then you have taken the pledge?'

'Oh no!' said the lady, laughing; 'I am not so bad as to require that. I am never tempted to drink. If I thought it would do me any good, I would take a glass of wine; but I find I am better without it, and so I don't.'

'What, then, will you take?'

'A cup of tea.'

'A cup of tea – how provoking! That's about the only thing we can't give you here.'

'Well, then, I will put up with a glass of water and a sandwich.'

The Mayor was shocked; he had never heard such a request from a lady before. In his distress he appealed to the Vicar for aid. His reverence was equal to the occasion, actually going so far as to quote St. Paul, and to tell how he recommended Timothy to take a glass of wine for his stomach's sake and his often infirmities. His reverence did more: he enforced his argument by example, taking a glass himself, and at the same time recommending the rest of the committee to do the same. 'Fine port that,' said he, smacking his lips and holding up the glass to the light to see the beeswing.

'Yes,' said the Mayor; 'it was a present to the Corporation from Sir Watkin Strahan.'

The lady coloured as she heard the name. It was observed by the committee, whose inferences were not of the most charitable construction. Everyone knew that Sir Watkin was rather fast, and was supposed to have great weaknesses as far as actresses were concerned. The situation was becoming embarrassing.

'Had we not better be moving?' asked the lady, rising from her seat.

'Well,' said the Mayor, 'if we start at once, we shall get to the station in ample time.'

The procession was then formed, the Mayor and the lady walking first, the Vicar and the Town Clerk bringing up the rear. Only one of the committee had gone home. He was new to his office; he had made a lot of money in the shoe trade, and had recently retired from business, and was rather doubtful as to the propriety of being seen by daylight walking with an actress in the streets.

On they went. The general public, consisting of school-boys out of school, and of the usual loafers who stand idle all the day long in the market-place, or at the corners of public-houses and livery stables, were not a little shocked as the actress from the Royal Theatre, Covent Garden, walked along the streets as an ordinary Mrs. Jones or Brown might have done.

'Well, I would 'ave 'ad a cab, at any rate,' said the ostler of the leading hotel in the town, as the party passed, a remark cordially accepted by his hearers, a seedy and bloated set of horsey-looking men, who seemed to have nothing particular to do, and took a long time to do it in.

"Ow the dickens are fellows like me to get a livin' if tip-top actresses like that 'ere young ooman take to walkin'? It's wot I call downright mean. She's been 'ere and took a lot of money out o' the town, and han't spent a blessed bob on a cab.' Here the speaker, overcome with emotion, dived into the pockets of his ragged corduroys, and finding unexpectedly there the price of a pot of beer, repaired to the neighbouring bar, there to solve the question he had anxiously asked; or to forget it, as he took long draughts of his favourite beverage.

Meanwhile the actress and her attendant guardian angels continued walking, she rapidly striving to recollect old shops and old faces, whilst they mechanically uttered the unmeaning nothings that at times – and the present was one of them – are quite as acceptable as real talk. As if by magic, the news spread that the actress was walking to the station, and great was the joy of the young men who served in all the fine shops in the market-place, who had never seen a real live actress from London in the daytime before, and whose remarks were of a highly complimentary order. The shop-girls, who stared, were equally excited, but perhaps a little more disposed to be critical. Further from the town centre the excitement was less evident. People in the genteel villas scarce deigned to turn their heads. To be emotionless and self-possessed is the object of gentility all the world over. People in genteel villas are not easily excited. In the low neighbourhood nearer the station, inhabited by guards and porters and stokers and signalmen, where engines are perpetually whistling and screaming and letting off steam, there was no excitement at all. In such places, during business hours, one has something to think of besides actors and actresses, and so the station yard was very quickly gained. Only were to be seen a few young swells of the town, who turned very red if the actress looked their way, simply gazing respectfully from afar, wishing that they had been walking with the actress instead of the Town Clerk, the Vicar, or the Mayor. The latter worthy was a little proud of his position. He had by his side and under his protection one whom he remarked, aside to his friends, was not only an actress, but a deuced fine woman. The influence of a fine woman on the male mind, especially in the provinces, where overpowering female beauty is scarce, is marvellous. Even the reverend Vicar was not insensible to its fascination; while the Town Clerk, who was a bachelor, was, therefore, very legitimately in the seventh heaven, wherever that may be; and when Sir Watkin Strahan's family coach, with the three old maids of that old family, drove up, those excellently disposed ladies, to whom all Sloville was in the habit of grovelling, for the first time in their lives almost found themselves slighted, though as to what there was extraordinary to look at in that actor-woman from London they could none of them see.

Suddenly the aspect of affairs was changed.

Just outside the railway-station, on the bare earth, sweltering in the summer sun, was a bundle of rags. The actress was the first to perceive it

'What is that?' she exclaimed,

'A bundle of rags,' said one.

'And of very dirty ones too,' said another.

'Good heavens,' said the lady, 'it is a living child.'

'A child! Impossible.'

'Yes, I tell you it is, and we must save it.'

The actress led the way to the bundle of rags. They were the only clothes of a little lad who, hatless and shoeless and shirtless, was lying on the ground – to be trampled on by horses or men, it seemed to matter little to him. To him approached the awfulness of respectability as embodied in the persons of the Mayor and the Vicar, but he never moved; he was too tired, too weak, too ill to rise. Half awake and half asleep there he lay, quite unconscious, as they looked in his face – thin with want, grimy with dirt, shaded with brown curling hair. Presently the lad got upon his legs with a view to running away – that's the invariable etiquette on the part of ragged boys in such cases – but it was too late. Already the enemy were on him. Holding his right hand across his brow so as to shade his eyes, he plucked up his courage and prepared for the encounter.

'Hulloa, you little ragamuffin, what are you up to here?' said the Mayor, in a tone which frightened the poor boy at once.

'Pray don't speak so, Mr. Mayor,' said the actress; 'you'll frighten the poor boy.'

'Dear madam,' said the august official, 'what are we to do?'

'Save the child.'

'Ah! that's easier said than done. Besides, what is the use of saving one? There are hundreds of such lads in Sloville, and we can't save 'em all.'

'Quite true,' said the Vicar, professionally shaking his head.

'What's the matter, my poor boy?' said the actress, as, heedless of the remarks of her companions, she stooped down to kindly pat the head of the little waif, who was at first too frightened to reply.

Slowly and reluctantly he opened his big blue eyes and stared, then he screwed up his mouth and began to cry.

'Come, my little man,' continued the actress, in her gentlest tone, 'tell us what is the matter with you.'

'Yes, tell the good lady what's the matter with you!' said the Vicar, who thought it was now high time for him to say something.

Even then the boy sulked. He was of a class apparently for whom respectability has few kind words or looks, who, in this wicked world, get more kicks than half-pence. Respectability has quite enough to do to look after her own children, especially now that taxes and butchers' bills and School Board rates, to say nothing of coals, run up to such formidable items, to give herself much trouble about the children of other people. I have myself little pity for the heartless vagabonds who bring children into existence merely that they may rot and die. Of the devilish cruelty of such fathers and mothers no tongue can give an adequate idea; hanging is too good for them. It is to them we owe the pauperism which, apparently, it is beyond the power of the State to cure. I am sick of the cant ever uttered of population *versus* property; one is born of self-denial, industry, foresight, all the qualities which we as a nation require, while population is too often the result of unspeakable vice or consummate folly, qualities against which it becomes the nation to set its face.

But I must not forget the actress. More tenderly and coaxingly she repeated the question. To the charm of that voice and manner resistance was impossible.

Swallowing the rising tear with a great effort, slowly opening his eyes and mouth at the same time, and looking terribly frightened all the while, the poor lad replied:

'Oh, ma'am, I've got such a pain in my head.'

'Of course you've got a headache, lying like that in the sun. Why don't you get away and run home?'

'I ain't got a home.'

'Then, what are you doing here?' said the Mayor.

'Nothin',' said the boy.

'So it seems,' said the Vicar.

'Where's your father?' asked the actress,

'I ain't got one.'

'Then, where's your mother?'

'Gone off with a tramp, and she took brother with her.'

'But why did not she take you as well?'

''Cause she said I was big enough to earn my own wittles and drink. But I must be off; here comes a bobby,' said the boy, frightened at the appearance of one of the town police. Alas! he was too weak to run; he had had no food all day, and his only bed by night had been under some old waggon or in some old barn or loft, and, barefooted, he fell an easy prey to the representative of law and order.

'Now, you young rascal,' said the policeman, as he gave the lad a good shaking, apparently in order to test the strength of his ragged clothes, and, if possible, to make matters worse, 'get out of this, and be off,' an order which the poor lad would have obeyed had not the actress held his hand.

'You know him,' said she to the policeman.

'Know him! of course I do. It was only last week I had him up before the magistrate.'

'What for?'

'For sleeping in the open air, and now here he is again. 'Tis very aggrawatin'. What's the use of trying to do one's duty if this sort of thing goes on?'

'Is it a crime to sleep in the open air?' asked the actress.

'Well, you see, ma'am, it ain't allowed by the magistrates; leastwise, not inside the borough.'

'Poor little fellow!' said the actress as she looked at the lad; 'I'll take him myself to the workhouse. There he would be out of harm's way, and washed and fed, and made clean and comfortable.'

'I beg your pardon, ma'am, that ain't no use; you ain't got a horder, and it is as much as the porter's place is worth to take anyone in without a horder.'

'Then, what's to be done with the poor boy?'

'Ah, that's the question,' said the policeman, and he was right there. What's to be done with our boys, rich or poor, good or bad, is a question some of us find increasingly hard to answer.

'Then you can't help me?' said the actress.

'Oh no, mum; we've plenty of such boys about.'

'What's to be done?' said the lady she still looked at the poor boy. 'Is it right to leave him thus?' There was a tear in her voice as she spoke. All seemed so hard and unmoved, and the urgency was so pressing.

'Dear madam,' said the Mayor, who felt himself bound to say something, 'the case is a hard one, but there's no help for it. We can't encourage such hoys as that. If we did, the town would be overrun with them. They are always begging.'

'I wasn't beggin',' said the boy, who now began to feel interested in the discussion. 'I don't want to go beggin'. I want a job.'

'Ah, all the boys say that,' said the Vicar, 'the young rascals! If I had my way, I would give them a good whipping all round.'

'Yes, and if we listened to all these stories the bench would have to sit all day long,' said the Town Clerk, giving the boy a copper and ordering him off.

'Off,' said the actress – 'where to?'

'To Parker's Buildings,' said the Mayor. 'That's where these young rascals live. There is not a worse place in the whole town.'

'Nor in the country nayther,' said the policeman. 'It would be a good job if the whole place were burnt down.' The policeman always backed up the opinions of his worship the Mayor, as, indeed, he did those of all his betters. It was a habit that paid.

'Well, the poor boy looks really ill; can't you get him into the hospital?' asked the actress.

'I am sorry,' said the Vicar, 'but the committee of the hospital don't meet for a week, and we can do nothing in such a case. If it had been winter we could have sent him to the soup-kitchen; but in the summer-time we are not prepared for such an irregularity.' At length a happy thought struck him. Turning to the boy, he said, 'What's your name, my little man?'

'Little Beast.'

'Little Beast! Good heavens! what a name for a child. Who gave you that name?'

'Mother. Mother allus calls me Little Beast, 'cause I won't let her hit brother.'

The boy spoke honestly, that was clear. There was some good in him; the devil had not yet got him in his grip. Was he to be saved? The Mayor, and the Town Clerk and the Vicar seemed inclined to answer that question in the negative. A passage of Scripture – a word of the Master's –

came into the actress's recollection as she looked at the little waif, ragged, half starved, filthy, in their midst. Said the Master, when His disciples asked Him which should be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, taking a little child and setting him in their midst, 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and whoso receiveth one such child in My name receiveth Me. Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones, for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven.'

'Save the child,' whispered the woman's heart of the actress; 'to-morrow it will be too late, and human law, with all its terrors, will track him, and he will be a rebel against man and God.'

'Excuse me,' said the Mayor, 'but the train has been signalled, and will be in in a few minutes.'

'I am ready,' said the lady, 'but the child goes with me.' The child seemed to nestle under her wing, as it were. He was frightened by the others.

'You don't mean that!' 'It is impossible!' 'What an idea!' were the respective utterances of Mayor, Vicar, and Town Clerk, who simultaneously stepped back a step or two, as if doubting whether the lady were in full possession of her senses and were desirous to settle that question by a fuller survey a little further off. It is astonishing how great a sensation is produced in this Christian country when anyone tries to reduce Christianity to practice, to get it to talk modern English, to bring it down from the clouds, and to make it walk the streets. Just then the station bell rang.

'Now, my little man, won't you come along with me?' said the actress to the lad. The little fellow opened his eyes – they were fine ones, and testified to the beating of a clear, undefiled, honest heart within – and joyfully assented.

'Please get him a glass of milk, and some sandwiches and biscuits; put them on a tray,' said the actress to the stolidly staring policeman, who was so overcome that, quite unconsciously, he found himself holding the ragged boy by the hand, and administering to him what little refreshment there was to take, and putting him in a first-class carriage, having first carefully covered him over with one of the actress's shawl's, that the shame of his nakedness might not appear, as if he were a young nobleman's son.

'They are rum critters, them actresses,' said the policeman on recovering his dazed senses, as the train moved off, leaving the local dignitaries rather crestfallen, as they stood on the platform bidding adieux with their hats in their hands, and their uncovered, bald heads glistening in the summer sun.

'They are indeed, Jenkins,' said the Mayor, wiping his hot face with his pocket-handkerchief, evidently pleased that the actress had gone and relieved the town of one juvenile difficulty.

'At any rate, to whom does this boy belong?'

'Why, to Widow Brown, who is off on the tramp; but I don't believe it is her boy, after all.'

'Very likely not; but we are well rid of the lad and his mother, I think I know her.'

'Of course you do. There has been scarcely a Monday all this summer but she has been brought up as drunk and disorderly. I believe she is perfectly incorrigible; and yet she was a tidy, decent sort of woman when she first came to live here,' said the Town Clerk. 'She took to drinking when her husband died, and she has been going from bad to worse ever since.'

Ah, when one is low, and wants to forget one's wickedness, and poverty, and misery, there's nothing like a drop of drink. It may be rather cowardly to take it, but we are not all heroes; and as long as the drink lasts, you are in a world of sunshine and good fellowship. There is a magic power in drink to make the old young, the sick whole, the poor rich. No wonder the homeless and destitute take to it. Till the people are better lodged and better fed, intemperance must be the curse of Great Britain.

CHAPTER III.
GOING UP TO TOWN

In these degenerate days a first-class carriage in an express may be considered as the perfection of travelling, the balloon at present being unmanageable, and the sea as wilful and variable as woman. Time was when we rattled cheerily over the land on the top of a coach-and-four, but that was when men drank brandy-and-water, and wore many-caped coats, and were far more horsey than this smug and mild black-coated generation. Rarely now does the scarlet-clad guard tootle the much-resounding horn as the four corn-fed steeds trot steadily up hill and down, wakening the far-away echoes, while open-mouthed rustics stop and stare, and rosy-cheeked landladies smile wickedly at the jovial outsiders, who, not having the fear of their own lawful-wedded wives before their eyes, seem to regard their day's journey as a frolic, as, indeed, it was in the good old coaching days, when the driver, an inborn aristocrat, was hail-fellow-well-met with all on his bit of road, and when every passenger had his story to tell or his joke, which, if not brilliant, at any rate helped to pass the time away, and to keep everyone in good humour. What a time that was, for instance, at Barnet, when the town was kept alive night and day, as coach after coach came up at full gallop, changed horses at the Red Lion or the Salisbury Arms in the twinkling of an eye, and then made its way on to the great Metropolis, or away to the big cities of the North, with such telling news as that Queen Caroline was dead, or that the Lords had thrown out Reform! It was merry England then, and no mistake; pure air filled the lungs, and sylvan beauty fed the eye, and the further he travelled the better was the traveller in health and spirits. I am not surprised that Mr. Carnegie, the great American capitalist, in order to give his friends an idea of England, and thoroughly to enjoy himself, packed them all on the top of a four-horse coach, and I can well believe that they saw a loveliness in this old land of ours as they drove past ancient castles and ivy-clad churches, and by the side of well-kept parks, with the mansions of our nobles peeping in and out among the trees, and through smiling villages and busy towns, and across wide commons scented with yellow furze or purple with heather, which they could have acquired in no other way. Boxed up in a railway carriage, the roar of the train deafening your ears, and the smoke and the steam of the engine intercepting the view, what can you do but groan over the memory of departed joys? But I must return to Sloville, which, like every other town of its size, has its railway, with its average number of accidents. In a very few minutes the little country town was left behind, in a very few minutes the actress and the boy began to look at one another, and by the time he had eaten up his sandwiches and biscuits he began to feel quite at home.

'You are not frightened?' said the actress.

'No, not a bit.'

He could not well be, with so fair a face opposite his own. Presently he said:

'Ain't this jolly! a deal better than going on the tramp! The old man and mother are allus on the tramp.'

'Then you have no home.'

'Home! What do you mean?'

'Ah, I see you haven't,' said the lady, with a sigh, 'or you would not have asked me that question. Can you read?'

'No – what's that? Anything to eat?'

The actress took out a newspaper.

'There, what does that mean?' she asked.

'Blest if I knows.'

'Ah, I'm afraid you've a good deal to learn. What can you do?'

'Oh, all sorts of things; stand on my head, 'old 'osses, do the Catherine wheel business. Shall I show you?' said the little fellow, emerging from his wrap, and preparing to display his gymnastic powers. 'Dash my buttons! the place ain't big enough,' said the boy with a disappointed air.

Presently the train came to a halt, and in a minute the boy was under the seat, exclaiming in a fright:

'Oh, crikey! there's a peeler.'

'Well, he won't hurt you.'

'Oh, won't he; I know better than that!'

'No; you be a good boy, and sit still, and he won't do you any harm; he is coming to look at the tickets.'

The railway official having departed, the lad began to look out of the window, enjoying the way in which the train rattled along through tunnels and over rivers, through fields and villages and towns.

'Now tell me,' said the actress, 'did you ever hear of God?'

'No; where did he live?'

'Nor of Christ?'

'Oh yes, I've often heard mother say "Oh, Christ!" when father came home drunk.'

'I'm afraid you're a bit of a heathen.'

'Oh yes,' said the boy, with pride; 'people often call me that.'

After that the conversation dropped; the actress had much else to think of, and the boy fell asleep.

It was late when the train reached London, and the actress and her charge were deposited at the King's Cross railway-station. The little fellow had slept all the way up, and sorely were his eyes dazzled with the glitter of the gas lamps, and his ears stunned as cab after cab drove away.

Muffling herself as much as possible, and dragging the little fellow after her, the actress rushed along the platform to where a neat brougham was drawn on one side, waiting for its owner.

'Oh, you're here, Jarvis, are you?'

'Yes, ma'am,' was the reply, as the coachman touched his hat. 'Drive home, ma'am?' said he interrogatively.

'Oh no; drive me to Clifford's Inn. Jump in, my little man,' she said to the poor boy, and, following herself, the brougham was soon spinning along Gray's Inn Road.

'I hope Wentworth will be at home,' said the lady to herself.

'I wonder what lark missus is up to,' thought Jarvis, as the brougham made its way amongst the cabs and omnibuses, chiefly burdened with a pleasure-loving and theatre-going community returning from their night's amusements.

Jarvis had one special virtue – unbounded confidence in his mistress. He had been a valued coachman in a gentleman's family, but in an ill hour for himself he had unwittingly got mixed up with bad companions, through meeting them in a public-house; and when they had been detected and tried at the Old Bailey, he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment as one of the gang, though he had no more to do with their crime than the man in the moon. The policemen, however, had others of the gang who had sworn that he was one of themselves, and he was taken off to Holloway, where, as he asserted his innocence, and refused to be comforted, the chaplain, who wanted him to see that Providence had some good end in view in his unjust incarceration, had come to regard Jarvis as a very wicked fellow indeed. In time, however, he managed to make his innocence clear to the Home Office, having devoted to that purpose all the savings of his life, and he was suffered to go free. As he was leaving, there was a little crowd at the prison gate of pals waiting to welcome the emancipated and to rejoice with those that rejoice, at the nearest public-house. Benevolent people also were there, inviting the released to a little breakfast and a religious service close by.

Jarvis accepted the invitation; but as the address took rather a personal turn and assumed him guilty when not, he walked out of the room in no pleasant state of mind, and in the raw, cold, foggy

morning stumbled against one of the men who had borne false witness against him. An altercation ensued, which ended in his knocking down his quondam acquaintance, and in his being collared by the police. For that offence he was straightway taken before the magistrate and let off with a fine, which quite exhausted the little sum given him that morning on leaving gaol. In his desire to earn an honest penny he went to his old master, only to find him dead, and the place shut up. In vain he sought out all whom he knew in the days of his respectability; they received him coldly, were sorry to hear of his misfortunes, and hoped he might meet with some employment, but could do nothing for him themselves.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.