

ASPECTS
OF THE
SOCIAL PROBLEM

BY VARIOUS WRITERS

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MARRIAGE IN EAST LONDON¹

By H. DENDY

OPPOSITE my study window stands the parish church, and the shady path leading from the gates up to the church door is strewn as white as if snow had fallen with rice, which will lie there until a shower of rain has softened it sufficiently to make an acceptable meal for the sparrows. It is Bank Holiday, the fashionable wedding-day in our part of the world, and large numbers of lads and lasses have celebrated it in the most approved way by getting married. All the morning there has been a noisy crowd round the church gates, and a row of the shabbiest vehicles and most broken-down horses in London has stood waiting to carry off the wedding parties to the railway station or to the nearest public-house. The path down from the church doors is a fairly long one, and affords ample opportunity for the boisterous merrymaking which is universal on these occasions, and which often degenerates into something very like a free fight—though generally of a good-humoured nature. Some twenty or thirty couples have chosen this way of spending their holiday, and it is interesting, if somewhat sad, to see their first start into the new life which awaits them. The majority have chartered an old cab; sometimes they rise to two or three, while sometimes two or three couples crowd into one. Five shillings a cab, to hold any number,

¹ From the *Contemporary Review*.

is the standard charge for a wedding; and a "walking wedding" is the exception. Into these vehicles they ascend with what dignity they can preserve amongst the mingled chaff and admiration of the ragged spectators, and it is significant of future relations that the brides generally sit with their backs to the horses, while the bridegrooms light their pipes as they drive away. If it is a walking wedding, the party separates into two groups: the men, including the bridegroom, lounge off smoking and shouting, followed by the group of excited, chattering women. In this way they will spend the day, "sampling" the public-houses and making merry among their friends, until any lingering traces of the sobering effects of the morning ceremony have been well washed away. One such party I have watched followed up and down the streets by a practical joker with a hand-bell, who was greatly appreciated by the corner-men and street arabs. The toilets are wonderful to behold. They range through all varieties, from the orthodox white veil and flowing train to the glowing greens and purples of the coster-girl, whose wedding dress and hat will make patches of dirty brightness up and down the slums for years to come. The men are hardly less wonderful in the varieties of their ready-made or second-hand suits; and figures which are passable enough as they stand behind their barrows, collarless and in shirt-sleeves, become deplorable spectacles of self-conscious awkwardness when attired for the first time in a complete suit, and adorned with a floral button-hole.

One wonders, watching them, at the light-hearted way in which they take this step. For the girls especially it means burdens which seem almost too heavy to be borne—of care and sickness and poverty, of hopeless squalor or unceasing toil, leading to premature old age or death. By the time they are twenty-five all the elasticity and vigour of youth are crushed out of them, and those who maintain their self-respect have nothing to look forward to but drudgery. These early marriages are the curse of the poor, yet the causes which lead to them are often almost inconceivably slight—a fit of pique, a taunt from some

companion, the desire for a lark, or a bet; frequently there is no more substantial foundation than this in their choice of a life-companion, and the consequences cannot fail.

Among the more thoughtful, and more carefully brought up, there is, of course, a sort of courtship; but it is quaintly different from that which takes place in the higher ranks of society. From the first glimmerings of inclination there is no secret about it; Jack and Jane are "going together"; and when this going together passes into a formal engagement it is difficult to say—generally, I think, not until the day is fixed. It is a preliminary probation, rather than an engagement, and the experiment can be given up without much blame attaching to either side. "You wouldn't have us take the first that comes?" a girl will say; "and how can we know whether we like them unless we go with them?" How, indeed! in the crowded homes of the poor there is little room for quiet social intercourse, and parents have no time, if they had the inclination, to superintend the matrimonial ventures of their daughters. So acquaintance begins in the course of work or at some festivity, and ripens on trips to Kew Gardens and Hampstead Heath, is fostered by treatings to the theatre or music hall, and culminates when Jack gets a rise in wages and Jane has saved up enough for a wedding dress and her share of the furniture.

Such a pair will, perhaps, have as good a chance of happiness as any; they have learned to know each other under the ordinary routine of workaday life, and it is not left to marriage to divulge the failings of temper and character on either side. From a worldly point of view their position will not seem much to boast of to young people who regard money in the bank and a fixed income as indispensable conditions of life. Capital they have none, beyond what they may possess of skill and strength. Any little savings will be invested in the home, which—like Traddles—they mostly pick up bit by bit; beginning even before they have turned their attention towards any particular mate. The girl, if she is of the better sort, will

probably have managed to get a sewing-machine on the hire system, and this will go a long way towards furnishing the single room in which they start life together. During the first year, while the wife is still earning, many little articles of luxury will be added, which will gradually disappear as the family increases and troubles accumulate. Have you never wondered, on looking in at the pawnbroker's windows, where all the gaudy little overmantels, and elaborate tea-services, and numberless plated spoons and forks come from? They are the harvest of the first "bad times" after marriage. It is not quite such a tragedy as it appears, though sad enough; "selling the home" is with East Londoners a recognised method of raising money, and many articles are avowedly bought with a view to being handy for the pawnbroker. It is a part of their principle of life, the subordination of future needs to present fancies, and they argue that it is better to enjoy luxuries while they can than to have money lying idle in the savings-bank.

Were it not for this false economy of borrowing from the future which vitiates all poorer London (and makes co-operative stores an impossibility) young people of this class might find it no bad venture to throw in their lots together, and trust to their own right hands to pull them through life. But at a little lower level we find courage degenerating into foolhardiness, and self-confidence into a childish inability to foresee even the inevitable claims of the future. What is to be said for instances like the following, which are to be numbered, not by tens or hundreds, but by thousands?

A. B. is aged twenty-one, and has a wife and three children to support; he does it by turning a piano-organ to the accompaniment of a tin whistle. His story is that he was put to work at fourteen, got tired of it, ran away to sea and got tired of that; he came home, and at sixteen married a girl of fifteen, and was obliged to do whatever he could to keep her. He is a well-made, active, rather intelligent young fellow, capable of doing better things by nature, but hopelessly dragged down by the responsibilities he has so recklessly assumed.

C. D. is of another sort; dull mentally and feeble physically, he has never supported even himself for a whole year, but has always been kept by his widowed mother through the winter. Last year he married a girl of eighteen, rather pretty and as helpless as a baby. He explains that he thought that two could get along as well as one, and "perhaps something might turn up." Something has turned up, and there are now three to keep; the mother declines the addition to her already heavy burden, and the Workhouse looms large before them.

Couples such as these will not even wait to get a decent home together. An old bedstead and bedding, two rickety chairs and a table to match, a strip of greasy carpet and two or three cracked cups and saucers—these will be collected from sympathising neighbours, or picked up for a few halfpence from the costermongers' stalls, and will satisfy the highest expectations of the young people. There are thousands of such homes which have not cost 10s. to get together, and would not realise 5s. if sold, and these afford all of decency and comfort at which their owners aim.

Another, and no less fatal, kind of recklessness is illustrated by the following case:—E. F., a young man already advanced in consumption, marries a crippled girl, incapable of doing anything beyond a little needlework. He had a little business, and was doing fairly well, but shortly after marriage was told that his only chance of life depended upon his passing the next winter in a milder climate. He sold the business, and handed over the greater part of the proceeds to his wife for the support of herself and the child during his absence; but she, resenting the thought of being left, invested the whole amount next day in a "melodeon" (from what I can gather, a large and expensive kind of musical box), and defied him to go and leave her destitute. He did not go, and from that time forward they sank lower and lower, picking up a living in the streets, buying old clothes and selling them again, and supported largely by charity, until he died and left her with two children to bring up as best she may.

What can be expected of lives in which the responsibilities are met in this spirit? You will find the results most manifest in the lower class Board Schools. The troops of ragged, dirty, stunted little urchins, neglected, and crippled in mind and body, that you will see there, are the offspring of these reckless marriages. Follow them home, and you will see the ruined lives of their parents; the mothers are either worn-out drudges before they have reached middle-age, or have developed into the careless slatterns who live on the doorstep gossiping with like-minded neighbours; the fathers, with all self-respect crushed out of them, are reduced to picking up odd jobs at the street-corner, and live more in the public-house than in their wretched homes. When we think, further, what the children brought up in such surroundings must become, this question of improvident marriage shows itself as one of the most serious of modern social life.

One root of the mischief lies in the overcrowding in our large towns. Too often marriage is accepted as the only way of escape from conditions which have become unbearable. Family life, which is carried on in one or two rooms, is bad enough when the family still consists of children; as they grow up to be young men and women it becomes intolerable. Nor is it a simple matter for the young people to be independent, even when they are earning sufficient to support themselves. There are very few amongst the less educated classes who can endure the solitude of living quite alone, even if it were an easier matter than it is to break away from the home-life without some obvious excuse. For girls, moreover, it is hardly desirable; while to young men the prospect of preparing their own meals and doing their own household work is not an attractive one. The same overcrowding which makes family life difficult makes boarding in most cases impossible, and the one solution they have found to the problem is to look round for a more or less suitable companion. How far well-conducted boarding-houses for young men and women may meet the difficulty is an experiment yet to be tried; the great point will be to ensure their being well conducted without making

them too oppressive for natures little wont to discipline and much given to self-indulgence.

Much of the evil is due also to false ideas about life which are not peculiar to the people of whom we are speaking. It is not only in the lower classes that girls are allowed to think, and even made to feel, that a woman's life has no legitimate interests outside those of marriage, and that, therefore, to lose an opportunity of getting married may be to miss all of good which life has to offer. Nor are those who should be the teachers of the young on such important matters wholly without blame; their doctrine that to discourage early marriage is to encourage immorality is a gross injustice to the great majority of the poor—perhaps, if they did but know it, the greatest of which they have as a class to complain at the present day. Evil enough there is, as all know who have much to do with the poor; but those amongst whom these marriages take place are just those who still have a respect for such obligations as they have been taught to recognise, and they are far more likely to sink to a lower level in consequence of their imprudence than they would be in consequence of judicious teaching and warning. As it is, they are acting up to the highest standard which has been set before them, and we have no right to assume that if they are shown one still higher they will not aim at that also. To realise that the people have a capacity for rising as well as falling is the next step towards the Social Utopia in which no one will enter upon the responsibilities of marriage without a fair prospect of being able to bring up a family in decency and comfort.