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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SOME CONDITIONS OF CHILD LIFE IN ENGLAND ***

***NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF
CRUELTY TO CHILDREN.***

SOME CONDITIONS OF CHILD LIFE IN ENGLAND.

BY

REV. BENJAMIN WAUGH,

HONORARY DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL SOCIETY
FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN.



**Head Office and Shelter:
7 HARPUR STREET, THEOBALD'S ROAD, LONDON.
1889.**



THE STEP-CHILD.

SOME CONDITIONS OF CHILD LIFE IN ENGLAND.

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[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.

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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?

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"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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"I know several children marked for death," said a London vicar's daughter, and his district visitor, the other day, "but I cannot give their parents' names. We should be subject to such persecution if we were to interfere." The fact that

There's a friend of little children,
Above the bright blue sky,

ought to fall like a warning thunderbolt out of heaven on such people's ears! I have repeated these two sayings, because they speak volumes on the "religious" surroundings of tortured child life in England. Both of them referred to children being deliberately starved to death.

I will give you a sample of the condition in which some of these starved children, unseen, and quietly, die.

It was in winter, in a bare room. The child, a girl of seven, lay on a mattress, had but two garments on: a chemise and a print frock. There was no blanket, no coverlet, no sheet. The window was curtainless; the nights were frosty. There was no fire in the grate, nor had there ever been through all the long illness. There was no food, no physic, not even a cup of water to drink. Her bones almost protruded through the bed-sores, which added misery to her misery. She lay with her eyes shut all day, occasionally moistening with her dry tongue her still drier lips. Downstairs sat the pair with whom she had lived from her birth—her father

and mother. They brought her no share of their tea nor crumb of their bread. They had blankets for *their* beds, and fire for *their* meals. Their house was still. You pass a door like theirs; all is clean. The curate nods as he goes by; and the district visitor calls; and the child hears the church bell on Sundays, till she can hear it no more. For she is starving to death in a Christian country.

It is little children who are made most to suffer.

The ages of the victims of the most atrocious cases is almost always low. Nor are small families exempt. The size of families in which the most horrible outrages take place is never large, being mostly two, or even one. Poverty is never great. Dwellings are often miserable enough, though not always that. Two pounds ten a week and three pounds a week are received by artisans whose one room for the family costs four and sixpence per week, and even this a toiling wife has in some cases to pay. But some live in "Model Dwellings." Neither is it ignorance, in the common meaning of ignorance, which tends to produce cruelties to children. Skilled artisans, with a smattering of knowledge beyond their class, considering the proportion they bear to the common run of labourers, are in excess in number and obstinacy of cases. Nor does higher social position exempt from this evil. Some of the cruel are industrious, and some are idle. Some drink, some do not. Some can talk of protoplasm; and some cannot spell their own names.

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The truth of the matter is, that cruelty is wholly independent of surroundings and wages. It is the work of haters of children; of sullen, pitiless, intolerant, dispositions; of men whom there is no pleasing, who resent tiny baby's little blunderings, or even pretty ways with all the physical power of a grown man, in manners which, if shown by an officer of justice to a convict, would excite the indignation of the whole country.

It is impossible, within my limits, to do justice to the work the new Society has had to do for drunkard's children, tramp children, stolen children; acrobats and performing children; step-children, little hawkers, and friendless apprentices; children insured and in baby farms.

As regards our "baby farms," many of them would be a scandal to a savage land: they are mere baby shambles. And as regards infantile insurance, that is worse. While in the baby farm, where a child is killed for profit, it is a stranger who kills, in the bad family, where it is killed for insurance money, it is the parent who kills. Neither here in this matter, nor in the statements I have already made, do I make charges against English parents. Most of them would die rather than injure, or even neglect, their child. But there are un-English parents, tens of thousands of them, who, for "a drink," pawn their baby's only garment and leave it foodless in a fireless room. To these, insurance money can be nothing else than a motive for more or less passive child murder. And other types, it familiarises with the idea of baby's death and of getting old scores paid off when it happens; which in the insured child's ailments acts as an incitive to the reverse of whole hearted care for its life. The system itself is a kind of gambling: a parent bets a penny a week against the insurer's thirty shillings that his child won't live. The insurer's chances are, the general good character of the English parent, and the known penalties of the law for murder.

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I regret that I cannot inform you that all these wronged children are black, and their wrongdoers, heathen inhabitants of heathen lands; that we have founded a missionary Society to send missionaries to these demons of wickedness, in Africa or New Guinea. I regret it chiefly because it is such a shame to us all that these things exist in our own beloved land; but I regret it, still more, because you will, I fear, care the less to remedy it.

II.

The remedy lies in numerous directions. Many laws and customs and doctrines have been (many of them are still) on the side of the torture of a child.

1. Unhappily, Courts of Law, by their rules of procedure, have not been on the side of the child. They have rather lent security to the inflictor of its sufferings. A mother who has to screen her children from the madness of their drunken father at midnight, since such midnight orgies were introduced into England, has never been allowed—that is, if she were a married mother—to give evidence of the fact in an English Court. Boys and girls under ten who witnessed atrocities committed on a brother or sister, they, too, were excluded from Courts. And who can estimate the number of families in which wrongs to children were thus made, legally, absolutely safe!

Here is a sample of such excluded cases:—Before the baby was many days old its father soused it on its mother's knee with the contents of a pail of cold water. On another occasion he seized it while suckling at her breast, and flung it violently against the wall at the other end of the room. When its mother was out, he took it into the yard and put it overhead in a tank of cold water, holding it under till it was with difficulty recovered. "What do you feed the little devil for?" he would ask his wife. He was for ever assaulting her for her care of it. As it got older he pitched it on the floor, and struck it with the legs of a chair. It grew to dread the sound of his footsteps on the stairs, and would hide under the bed and lie breathless till he had gone. Such a brute's wife always, and his family generally (often the only witnesses of a crime against a child), were, till recently, all excluded from Court.

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2. And everybody else was excluded from the scene of his wickedness. His house was "his castle," not to be entered even by a warrant, save if he had stolen a watch.

3. Even when the facts were got at, and legal proceedings taken, every injustice was done to the little sufferer on whose behalf they were taken. It could never be removed from its torturer's custody. Even when after the hearing of the case, it was committed for trial, still for a period possibly of three months the child had to be left in the custody of the culprit to pamper, to coax, to warn and threaten into the denial of everything on which a conviction could be obtained.

Is it wonderful that, under these conditions of the law, one-half of the brutes towards English children were unpunishable brutes, and practised their damnable deeds in safety?

Happily, every one of these conditions is changed.

4. One practice of Courts—an almost universal one—I must mention in passing, as most unjust to a child—viz., the custom of accepting testimony against it without any confirmation; and that, too, from the person who has ill-treated it. Men who are cruel to a child easily add to their cruelty a damaging false witness, which, being only against a child, nobody ever prosecutes. In consideration of lies, the sentence is often admittedly reduced. After 400 wronged children have spent two, three, four, and six months in our Society's Shelter whilst their maligners were in prison, speaking generally, I may say that charges pleaded in excuse, and accepted in extenuation of outrages, have proved to be mere inventions of cowardly malice. When the grave, frightened little looks with which they came had passed away, they were full of the ways of sunny childhood. More pleasant docile children, or children more ready to twine their arms around your neck, you seldom find, than have been some little people who had been called liars, thieves, vixens (even infants in arms have been called vixens), and the like—by savages before magistrates as pleas for their mercy. And from every quarter to which children have been sent, the same testimony comes as to the untruthfulness of the charges their parents made in Court, against the children and for themselves.

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III.

There are many other things yet to be changed, both in the laws and in the customs of this country, before child life in it will be what it ought to be.

1. The shops of England abound with poisons specially prepared for children. "Syrups" and "foods" as unsuitable for a baby's stomach, and as fatal, as a bullet would be to its brain or a knife to its throat, are sold to all comers. In some cities, coroners and medical men have a hundred times denounced things in common use as poison to babies; and the Press a hundred times has carried their denunciations into every street, with absolutely no effect on the extent of their use. Boiled bread, corn-flour, sago, "tops and bottoms," these soon make a strong, week-old baby a sight to see.

2. Still further. Where inhuman parents by such death-dealing agents have done their work, coroner's juries join hands against the child with the infants' food and syrup shops, and make fatal suffering quite safe to inflict. Almost the only persons who commit infant slaughter whom these tribunals send to trial are those who in their tender mercies commit it hastily and sharply. For long drawn weeks of agony in dying, inflicted by sham foods, their custom is to request the coroner to pronounce a censure. The coroner then congratulates the parents on the "mercifulness" of the jury. So the grand prerogative of mercy, even, is made to serve against wronged children.

3. But it plays its hypocritical part not at inquests alone. After a disclosure as to conduct to a child which would have made true men indignant, too many magistrates mildly say, "We have taken a merciful view, and shall let you off this time." "Mercy," is this! Mercy! to whom? To the man's suffering child? To the suffering child of other like-minded men in the locality? The magistrate who cures a brute of his brutality, that is the merciful magistrate—merciful to the culprit, to the country, and to the child! Parliament has passed, and the Queen has sanctioned, a new law, which has well been called the Children's Charter. Yet a canting woman before the bench, with the corner of her white apron and a tear, can wipe it all out. Even a little cant on an idle man's lips—"no work to do"—will make some J.P.'s disloyal to both Parliament and Crown.

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If I happen to be speaking to a magistrate, let me say that no man can show "mercy" to an offender save where he is himself the person offended. That a magistrate should forgive a parent for making a baby's back bleed is impossible. He may lack justice towards him; he may do that, and then slander the "twice blessed" name, by calling it Mercy. But mercy is impossible to a magistrate to whom an appeal is made on behalf of a suffering child, save as he is the indignant champion of the child.

4. Medical men, too, but with far more cause than all the rest, have made child slaughter safe. Dispensaries give death certificates, knowing nothing of the case save from the possible criminal's own mouth. And before coroners, they certify the final not the real cause of the child's not being alive.

5. Even charity (so called) has lent its patronage against little children. In no country as in England do children so directly appeal to human sensibilities; and in no other country are pitiful charities so readily shown to them. And so it comes about, that for persons using puny and ill children for the purposes of gain in the streets, England is perhaps the most scandalous country in the world. A child's bad cough, two sore eyes, or emaciation through wasting disease, is a living to its owner. To move charity, children are made to tramp and stand about on cold stone pavements, weary and hungry, all day long. Parents, who ought to be flogged for such ways with children, are, because of them, kept in comfort and idleness. For them to cure their child of its ailments, even to nurse it, or to give it reasonable food and rest, would be to lose bread and cheese, and pipe and beer; a sacrifice they do not think of making. And why should they think of making it, while "lovely charity" gives its patronage!

Take one illustrative case:—A baby nine months old, dying of starvation, was the other day taken from the arms of a woman who was exposing its ghastly face and thin limbs to the passers-by in Whitechapel, pleading that she was a widow, and her child was starving. Under the new law, the child was taken from her. It was found not to be her child. She had the loan of it, and night after night, till eleven o'clock, she moved the compassion of the passers-by, and out of baby's shivers, dying, she made her living. She knew how blind and lazy "charity" patronises a wrong-doer to a child. The wickedest, it patronises the most.

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Charity has still further been against the suffering child. By its institutions for the ill-used and destitute, in not a few cases it has been an inducement to their ill-usage and destitution. Whilst the kind and honest poor may do as best they can for their children, the vicious have had theirs maintained, taught trades, and the drum and fife; and fairly started in life. The soundest charity is not that which provides food and homes for the destitute, but treadmills for those who make them destitute. Not that the one ought not to be done, but that the other ought not to be left undone.

6. Even the Gospel has been pleaded as a reason for letting the savage have his way with his child. "Get men converted; you cannot change hearts by laws," it is said. This is wholly true. But what is needed is not to change hearts, but to change conduct; to make men keep blows and boots off babies' limbs, and to put bread into sadly empty little stomachs. And a free use of the treadmill, though it cannot do more, can do that; and does it gloriously. And where it fails, I would use the cat. God has put a cuticle under the skin as the final resort of argument. Where every other part of the man is "past feeling," it is a divine duty to get at that. The first object of a Christian nation is to protect a baby's skin, not a man's. People speak of flogging as degrading. Degrade! can you, a man who will batter into a shapeless thing a baby face with his fist?

It will be impossible to even mention the hosts of those especial defilements and injuries done to girl children. They are vast in number and incredible in kind, and include large numbers of own fathers as the fearful criminals. Degrade *these* men! *Degrade* them!

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IV.

Besides these changes already mentioned, there needs to be a great change in the national sentiment on the subject.

All these wrongs of a child are the result of the low estimate which prevails as to the rights of a child. There seems to be little or no interest in a child as a subject of the Queen and an object of the law. I must except Her Majesty's judges, and the best legal magistrates. To hear cases for children, I would always rather have a lawyer on the bench than a Sunday-school teacher. The religion of pious J.P.'s seems to be to let people off—adults I mean. It is not always so when it is a child who is charged. What is wanted in the interests of every form of unhappy English child life in this country to-day is righteousness, the robust righteousness of God; and His indignations at neglect of the hunger, or the sickness of a child. The shameful sufferings of English children to-day are jointly the work of the English bench and the English brute: of mawkishness on the bench, of cruelty in the brute.

On this subject of children hurt and killed the Church too has acted in grievously strange ways. It has taught what happened in the worship of the Syrian Moloch: it has not even known what is done in the worship of the English Bacchus. Much horror has it felt at the destruction of baby life on the Ganges; and little, if any at all, at the destruction of it on the flabby bosoms of English women whom men have made mothers, and to whom they have given no bread. As an argument for Christianity, it has pointed to the children abandoned in Pagan Rome, oblivious of the 20,000 a year abandoned in our own cities and villages, to death, or the parish. Of the five-and-twenty or thirty little boys once massacred at Bethlehem, it holds annual mournful commemorations. Of the hundred times that number of little boys and girls annually smothered within sound of its church bells it says nothing. When I think of the Church and of child-suffering and slaughter in England, I cannot help remembering the Biblical saying, as to whose eyes it is that "are in the ends of the earth." For the "soul" of children, whatever that may mean, the professional religionist eyes are at home; but for their suffering and slaughtered bodies, they are away in far times and far lands. And its purse, and its heart has gone there too.

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A grand opportunity is now afforded to stamp cruelty to children out of the land. The law has

come to be grandly right. Will the men who wear the name of that greatest friend of children the world ever contained meet the opportunity, find the money to discover the crimes and to enforce the law against them?

I hear you murmur, "The police! It is the work of the police to do that." That is not true. It is not the work of the police to discover anything, nor to initiate proceedings for anybody. They are a brave good body of men; but they have their set work to do, and their strict rules for doing it. But, were it so, when you stand before the judgment throne of Him whose will, Jesus says, is that not one little one should either suffer from hunger, or nakedness, or be sick and perish, will you dare to tell Him that you knew that that was His will, but that you left it to the police?

The new law has been created by Christian labour. It is the expression of Christian sentiment. It must be enforced by Christian money.

To enforce the splendid new law, the Society is seeking to raise its income to £15,000 a year. In the enforcement of the Factory Acts £30,000 a year is spent. In the enforcement of the Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals £29,000 is annually spent. Is it too much to ask for half these sums for the enforcement of the law for Children, when, without it, their sufferings must continue? Contributions may be sent to JOHN FAULKNER (*Secretary*), 7 Harpur Street, Bloomsbury, London, W.C.

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The Society consists of Annual Members, subscribing £1 and upwards yearly; of Associates, subscribing less than £1, but 5s. and upwards yearly; of Life Members, subscribing not less than £10 in one payment; and of Patrons, subscribing not less than £50 in one payment.

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