

## A POPLAR-LEAF

**L**AST time I spoke at St. Dominic's Priory, Haverstock Hill, to a crowd of boys, one of them had a fit. This shows how far from suited I am to talk to or even about boys. (However, when I was there before, someone lost his false teeth . . . . I was accused . . . . but no matter. Perhaps it's an affair of place rather than person. Or, just fate. To resume . . . .)

I am not going to speak so much about boys, as about anyone who grows up in a place like Poplar, London, E. 14; and though I shall talk about Poplar, I am not selfishly forgetting other desperately poor parishes in London, or in many another city, Glasgow for example; Bristol. I suppose that much the same happens everywhere as in Poplar. For example, the parents, either because they must or because they are short-sighted, send their children out to do such work as children can, immediately after they leave school and even before. (I knew a boy who made quite a good business, between whiles, by stealing leafy twigs and sticking them in flower-pots (also stolen) and selling them to old ladies in the suburbs on the assurance that 'they would flower in October.' . . . He had already learnt how to steal enough milk out of doorstep-bottles to supplement his insufficient breakfast. But he was an angel-child in school . . . .) Well, at sixteen the young labourer is sacked, because he has to be insured. What has he seen, heard, learned, during those two years? Nothing that develops him as citizen or Christian. What is he likely to find or even seek henceforward as a job? Nothing that needs skill or that endures; for, he will not possess the skill; and, he has not learnt, himself, how to endure. He therefore lounges across his adolescence. In Edinburgh, in Cardiff, I have had pointed out to me whole categories

## *Blackfriars*

of the population that could not work because they had *never* worked : and again, older men who, having by dint of interlocked strikes been for long without a job, had found their muscles soften and refuse to toughen themselves again, so that hard work had become out of the question. But it is more with young men who have never worked hard and do not see why, let alone how, they should begin, that I am concerned.

The proverb said that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives. I think it was usually applied to the ignorance in which one may be about one's next-door neighbour. But I feel sure that it applies especially to the ignorance of one class of men in regard of other classes. And the difficulty with regard to the Poplar 'class' would seem to be due not only to its invisibility, but to the violent contrasts of every kind that you find amongst it. For example, one young man, on seeing a crucifix, observed that he had seen them things before and asked me what it was. I told him that it was Christ, asked if he had heard of Him, and said that His fellow-men had killed Him. 'If they done *that* to Him,' said he, still looking at the crucifix, 'He hadn't got much to learn.' Text fit for a hundred sermons! Christ's experience is exhaustive, and 'at all points' was He tested. At the other extreme to this total ignorance of Jesus Christ was the soul of a lad whom I took to be an exceptionally rough docker. He looked heavy almost to the point of brutality. I made his acquaintance properly in a retreat, to which, to my surprise, he came. Towards the end of the retreat we had Exposition, and each man watched before the altar for a quarter of an hour. I always wondered whether the time would drag terribly for those young men. I asked the docker, later, whether he'd liked the retreat. 'It were all right.' 'Which part did you like best?' 'When I was in there on me own.' 'What did you do?' 'I took out me book

with the prayers to the Sacred Heart in it.' 'Yes. Well, on the whole I'd have liked you to talk to Our Lord out of your head.' 'Oh, I didn't need to say no more than "O Sacred Heart!" after that it were all right.' Who knows what passed, 'after that,' between them? '*Je le regarde : Il me regarde.*' And betwixt and between, you get material for less rarefied astonishment, so to say. A young seaman had always sheered off, grinning widely, when I approached, however remotely, to the subject of religion or of prayer. He came to say good-bye the day before sailing to South Africa, and I said: 'Anyway, now I really do want to know whether you say any prayers!' 'Course I do,' he said, and extracted a tattered prayer book from his pocket. Then he produced a second from another pocket. It was the same sort of book. 'What do you want two for?' I said. 'I use *this* one,' answered he, 'when I says prayers for you.' And I who had been wondering whether he ever prayed at all! His incidental pleasures were seeing if he could break through padlocks. Padlocks always annoyed him. And, getting angry enough to fight. He stared uncomprehendingly at me when I suggested that half the point of boxing was, not getting angry. 'Boxing?' he said with contempt, 'I wouldn't sink to it. I *fight*; and I couldn't, not if I weren't angry.'

I confess that the whole topic of 'breaking padlocks,' so to say, has puzzled me. I had half expected to find a good deal of 'immorality' in the narrow sense among these lads, and frankly, did not find it. Their sense of what is comic is robust, nor could be otherwise; but sexual immorality either comes later on, or has been left behind when they were fifteen or so. (I pass over the fact that to be 'engaged' seems to count for many of them, practically, as being married.) But as for a sense of property! what they will 'pinch' off one another is still obscure to me: but when it is taken

## *Blackfriars*

off a rich person, or a firm, or the man who is your 'mate' merely because he is juxtaposed to you in the works, this, they seem to think, does not matter. They will not argue it. 'She's rich : she can get another.' 'It's up to the boss to see as we don't pinch, if 'e don't want us to.' 'It don't belong to no one—*it belongs to the Company* '! 'I take off him—course I do. He'd take what he could off me, wouldn't he?' The breaking of padlocks was simply high spirits : but the rest seems to me to imply something far nearer to 'occult compensation' than to communism, anyway!

A symptom, however, that causes me real anxiety is what I can only call nerves. A docker with nerves? Certainly. I suppose that the extraordinarily erratic character of their meals—the least nourishing stuff nibbled at queer hours off coffee-stalls—coupled with a great deal of smoking, accounts for part of it. But not for all. A sort of fundamental instability reveals itself. 'Got on me nerves' is a formula you are always being offered, and it is held to account sufficiently for the chucking of jobs good quite as much as bad. Anyhow, you can very soon discern the frayed nerve, the exasperated imagination—and it is not so much due to the cinema and the 'Edgar Wallace,' whose phrases none the less are continually upon the lip, as due to these things impinging on minds and fancies that are not prepared for them. How 'not prepared'? Don't they go to Catholic schools? Yes; but behind the schools, lie the homes. The last census of Poplar was taken in 1921, it is true; I cannot tell how much improvement there is since then; not much, I seem to understand. In the worst-housed Ward, there was .66 room per person; in the best, .86 : the average was .76. Again, 1,400 families containing seven persons per family had under .3 rooms per person; 4,753 families containing seven per family, had had .3 and .5 rooms per person. Thirty families of fifteen and over had .3

rooms per person; and the total population in Poplar having under .3 rooms per person was 5,018. The largest section of the population, 54,344 persons, had between .5 and .7 rooms per person.<sup>1</sup> The Borough Medical Officer of Health reports that 1,141 houses were affected by the over-flowing of the Thames. In an article like this, many statistics would be out of place, and the above ones hardly create the due impression, which is, that an enormous number of people have to live three, five, seven in a room; ages and sexes mixed and without privacy; and drink, that seems to affect the younger lad or girl so little, becomes hideously obvious in middle-age, when nobody cares much more for anything. (I cannot but quote one more sentence that I have already, too often, quoted. 'Well, Miss, thank you; I'm not so very well. But then I couldn't expect to have good health at my age, could I?' She was thirty-six).

From such considerations, however, three facts are abundantly clear to me—you *must* have something other than the home (out of which mothers will simply beg even little children to get, that they may have a chance of cleaning up or drying clothes, etc.), and something after school; and you *must* have *individual* knowledge of and friendship with boys and girls who have left school. The parish priest at Poplar has quite six thousand homes to look after. He cannot transform homes by any magician's wand: even could he single-handed create all the usual Catholic institutions, he could not know *all* 'his sheep by name,' let alone so as to get to the 'inside' of souls which is where the

<sup>1</sup>Only last night I was hearing from a lawyer about a man, his wife and their three tuberculous children whom the person responsible was trying to turn out of their *one* room because they could not pay sixteen shillings a week for it. The lawyer, tears in his throat, told me what *he* paid for his house, and how many rooms it had.

## **Blackfriars**

Holy Spirit wishes to meet with man's co-operation. There is a good convent in Poplar which gives superior teaching to the tiny minority of girls whose parents can pay for it—and I hope they do. There is also the Settlement of the Holy Child, which for years has done a massive and persevering work. There is, I know, the S.V.P.; there are the Knights. But Providence, I gratefully acknowledge, has brought me into contact with the Settlement, and even now I am continually discovering the variety and intensity of the work its too-few residents do. When I see just its bulk, I am appalled. Hospitals, gaols, probation, employment, holidays, athletics, gym. and classes, visiting of individual families, baby welfare, mothers' welfare. The thought of that *weight* of work crushes me when I try to do my own. But when I recall its *intricacy*, due to its having to be done for individuals, each special, each with his or her special and often floating mind, with the instability I mentioned above ever there to defeat you in the very hour of success, I wonder how the Settlement workers keep free from insanity.

When I see where they live, especially the club-rooms of which I now will speak, I wonder how they avoid so humble a thing as pneumonia. . . . There are two club-rooms, endways on; one small, which though cold, ugly and inconvenient, at least stands up; the other quite large, has a roof that leaks torrentially, floor so broken into holes that boxing is dangerous, dancing impossible, and at such a slope that billiards could not be played had we a table. The walls are naked brick; heating hardly exists; the light is gas, insufficient and ill-placed. Moreover, the building, I now find, *has no foundations at all*. It rests on earth. And the walls are beginning to bulge. It must come down, and is coming down! For, it had long been my wish to brighten up these rooms. But examination

proved that neither brightening nor even patching would be any good. The Council, composed of ex-pupils of the Holy Child Schools, bravely decided to rebuild what they could at once. The schools themselves have been generous. But they cannot do it by themselves: I have been trying hard, and am trying, to help. I have sworn to myself—the impossible is always attractive—to get £750 between Christmas and Easter. Then I shall have £2,000. For that, we can thoroughly re-build the bigger room, so as to possess at once a flat play-ground roof for the children, else in the streets, and later, a second storey. For I maintain that no such building can suffice without four rooms—entrance room for canteen, offices, and so forth (the small room will do for that); large room, for gym., boxing and rougher games; above these, smaller room for library, reading and quiet games; large room for dancing, lectures, or classes. (Girls use the rooms twice a week; boys of different categories, three times. But at present the club cannot be used for dancing; girls go elsewhere; nor, with safety, for boxing, let alone for classes or quiet.) For the above sum, we can properly heat, light, ventilate, and even decorate the larger room, and have a fair margin over.

Hence it is that I begged the Editor to allow me to write this article, and to ask his readers, very earnestly, if they will help me towards my £750. I beg now without a blush! I beg very hard. The Editor gave me full leave to do so. . . . When I think of the equipment at Haverstock Hill, and the lines of photographs that prove the long service of the Dominicans there, given so generously on their mountain peak to lads that there, too, need them, I ache with desire that we in the Thames mud and by grim docks could emulate them. Observe, dear readers! Though I am quite incompetent to create 'classes' and to teach those boys anything regularly, at least I find there, as I sit

## *Blackfriars*

on tables and watch such boxing or football as proceeds, the very chance, so much desired, of listening and talking to individuals. What don't they talk about! Free will; wages; birth control; even sterilisation and infanticide . . . foreign countries (so many go to sea); priests; Mass; films; the graft prevalent in their trades (when any); to most of it I have no knowledge for replying. But you do make friends, and it is amazing how pacified a lad may become, if he thinks you sympathise. 'Well, I got it off me chest to you, so it'll be all right now!' Pathetic trust. And your joy may be crowned by some long overdue confession, heard in the dark, tiny garden. That sort of acquaintanceship is not a palliative, as so much 'social' work must be: nor, having the Holy Child Society at its back, is the Settlement destined to be impermanent. And, as consciences wake up, I think that a race of Catholic girls ready to devote almost as a duty one fortnight, one month of each year, one day in each fortnight regularly, to working in that Settlement is being created. Forgive so much 'I.' It is only for the sake of 'them.' And 'they,' for the sake of Him who identified with Himself the least of His little ones. And no one is less than the least!

C. C. MARTINDALE, S.J.