

CHILDREN OF THE GHETTO

A Study of a Peculiar People

BY

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1914

Preface to the Third Edition.

The issue of a one-volume edition gives me the opportunity of thanking the public and the critics for their kindly reception of this chart of a *terra incognita*, and of restoring the original sub-title, which is a reply to some criticisms upon its artistic form. The book is intended as a study, through typical figures, of a race whose persistence is the most remarkable fact in the history of the world, the faith and morals of which it has so largely moulded. At the request of numerous readers I have reluctantly added a glossary of 'Yiddish' words and phrases, based on one supplied to the American edition by another hand. I have omitted only those words which occur but once and are then explained in the text; and to each word I have added an indication of the language from which it was drawn. This may please those who share Mr. Andrew Lang's and Miss Rosa Dartle's desire for information. It will be seen that most of these despised words are pure Hebrew; a language which never died off the lips of men, and which is the medium in which books are written all the world over even unto this day.

I.Z.

London, March, 1893.

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PROEM.

Not here in our London Ghetto the gates and gaberdines of the

olden Ghetto of the Eternal City; yet no lack of signs external by which one may know it, and those who dwell therein. Its narrow streets have no specialty of architecture; its dirt is not picturesque. It is no longer the stage for the high-buskined tragedy of massacre and martyrdom; only for the obscurer, deeper tragedy that evolves from the pressure of its own inward forces, and the long-drawn-out tragi-comedy of sordid and shifty poverty. Natheless, this London Ghetto of ours is a region where, amid uncleanness and squalor, the rose of romance blows yet a little longer in the raw air of English reality; a world which hides beneath its stony and unlovely surface an inner world of dreams, fantastic and poetic as the mirage of the Orient where they were woven, of superstitions grotesque as the cathedral gargoyles of the Dark Ages in which they had birth. And over all lie tenderly some streaks of celestial light shining from the face of the great Lawgiver.

The folk who compose our pictures are children of the Ghetto; their faults are bred of its hovering miasma of persecution, their virtues straitened and intensified by the narrowness of its horizon. And they who have won their way beyond its boundaries must still play their parts in tragedies and comedies—tragedies of spiritual struggle, comedies of material ambition—which are the aftermath of its centuries of dominance, the sequel of that long cruel night in Jewry which coincides with the Christian Era. If they are not the Children, they are at least the Grandchildren of the Ghetto.

The particular Ghetto that is the dark background upon which our pictures will be cast, is of voluntary formation.

People who have been living in a Ghetto for a couple of centuries, are not able to step outside merely because the gates are thrown down, nor to efface the brands on their souls by putting off the yellow badges. The isolation imposed from without will have come to seem the law of their being. But a minority will pass, by units, into the larger, freer, stranger life amid the execrations of an ever-

dwindling majority. For better or for worse, or for both, the Ghetto will be gradually abandoned, till at last it becomes only a swarming place for the poor and the ignorant, huddling together for social warmth. Such people are their own Ghetto gates; when they migrate they carry them across the sea to lands where they are not. Into the heart of East London there poured from Russia, from Poland, from Germany, from Holland, streams of Jewish exiles, refugees, settlers, few as well-to-do as the Jew of the proverb, but all rich in their cheerfulness, their industry, and their cleverness. The majority bore with them nothing but their phylacteries and praying shawls, and a good-natured contempt for Christians and Christianity. For the Jew has rarely been embittered by persecution. He knows that he is in *Goluth*, in exile, and that the days of the Messiah are not yet, and he looks upon the persecutor merely as the stupid instrument of an all-wise Providence. So that these poor Jews were rich in all the virtues, devout yet tolerant, and strong in their reliance on Faith, Hope, and more especially Charity.

In the early days of the nineteenth century, all Israel were brethren. Even the pioneer colony of wealthy Sephardim—descendants of the Spanish crypto-Jews who had reached England *via* Holland—had modified its boycott of the poor Ashkenazic immigrants, now they were become an overwhelming majority. There was a superior stratum of Anglo-German Jews who had had time to get on, but all the Ashkenazic tribes lived very much like a happy family, the poor not stand-offish towards the rich, but anxious to afford them opportunities for well-doing. The *Schnorrer* felt no false shame in his begging. He knew it was the rich man's duty to give him unleavened bread at Passover, and coals in the winter, and odd half-crowns at all seasons; and he regarded himself as the Jacob's ladder by which the rich man mounted to Paradise. But, like all genuine philanthropists, he did not look for gratitude. He felt that virtue was its own reward, especially when he sat in Sabbath vesture at the head of his table on Friday nights, and thanked God

in an operatic aria for the white cotton table-cloth and the fried sprats. He sought personal interviews with the most majestic magnates, and had humorous repartees for their lumbering censure.

As for the rich, they gave charity unscrupulously—in the same Oriental, unscientific, informal spirit in which the *Dayanim*, those cadis of the East End, administered justice. The *Takif*, or man of substance, was as accustomed to the palm of the mendicant outside the Great Synagogue as to the rattling pyx within. They lived in Bury Street, and Prescott Street, and Finsbury—these aristocrats of the Ghetto—in mansions that are now but congeries of "apartments." Few relations had they with Belgravia, but many with Petticoat Lane and the Great *Shool*, the stately old synagogue which has always been illuminated by candles and still refuses all modern light. The Spanish Jews had a more ancient *snoga*, but it was within a stone's throw of the "Duke's Place" edifice. Decorum was not a feature of synagogue worship in those days, nor was the Almighty yet conceived as the holder of formal receptions once a week. Worshippers did not pray with bated breath, as if afraid that the deity would overhear them. They were at ease in Zion. They passed the snuff-boxes and remarks about the weather. The opportunities of skipping afforded by a too exuberant liturgy promoted conversation, and even stocks were discussed in the terrible *longueurs* induced by the meaningless ministerial repetition of prayers already said by the congregation, or by the official recitations of catalogues of purchased benedictions. Sometimes, of course, this announcement of the offertory was interesting, especially when there was sensational competition. The great people bade in guineas for the privilege of rolling up the Scroll of the Law or drawing the Curtain of the Ark, or saying a particular *Kaddish* if they were mourners, and then thrills of reverence went round the congregation. The social hierarchy was to some extent graduated by synagogal contributions, and whoever could afford only a little offering had it announced as a "gift"—a vague term which might equally be the covering of a reticent

munificence.

Very few persons, "called up" to the reading of the Law, escaped at the cost they had intended, for one is easily led on by an insinuating official incapable of taking low views of the donor's generosity and a little deaf. The moment prior to the declaration of the amount was quite exciting for the audience. On Sabbaths and festivals the authorities could not write down these sums, for writing is work and work is forbidden; even to write them in the book and volume of their brain would have been to charge their memories with an illegitimate if not an impossible burden.

Parchment books on a peculiar system with holes in the pages and laces to go through the holes solved the problem of bookkeeping without pen and ink. It is possible that many of the worshippers were tempted to give beyond their means for fear of losing the esteem of the *Shammos* or Beadle, a potent personage only next in influence to the President whose overcoat he obsequiously removed on the greater man's annual visit to the synagogue. The Beadle's eye was all over the *Shool* at once, and he could settle an altercation about seats without missing a single response. His automatic amens resounded magnificently through the synagogue, at once a stimulus and a rebuke. It was probably as a concession to him that poor men, who were neither seat-holders nor wearers of chimney-pot hats, were penned within an iron enclosure near the door of the building and ranged on backless benches, and it says much for the authority of the *Shammos* that not even the *Schnorrer* contested it. Prayers were shouted rapidly by the congregation, and elaborately sung by the *Chazan*. The minister was *Vox et praeterea nihil*. He was the only musical instrument permitted, and on him devolved the whole onus of making the service attractive. He succeeded. He was helped by the sociability of the gathering—for the Synagogue was virtually a Jewish Club, the focus of the sectarian life.

Hard times and bitter had some of the fathers of the Ghetto, but

they ate their dry bread with the salt of humor, loved their wives, and praised God for His mercies. Unwitting of the genealogies that would be found for them by their prosperous grandchildren, old clo' men plied their trade in ambitious content. They were meek and timorous outside the Ghetto, walking warily for fear of the Christian. Sufferance was still the badge of all their tribe. Yet that there were Jews who held their heads high, let the following legend tell: Few men could shuffle along more inoffensively or cry "Old Clo'" with a meeker twitter than Sleepy Sol. The old man crawled one day, bowed with humility and clo'-bag, into a military mews and uttered his tremulous chirp. To him came one of the hostlers with insolent beetling brow.

"Any gold lace?" faltered Sleepy Sol.

"Get out!" roared the hostler.

"I'll give you de best prices," pleaded Sleepy Sol.

"Get out!" repeated the hostler and hustled the old man into the street. "If I catch you 'ere again, I'll break your neck." Sleepy Sol loved his neck, but the profit on gold lace torn from old uniforms was high. Next week he crept into the mews again, trusting to meet another hostler.

"Clo! Clo!" he chirped faintly.

Alas! the brawny bully was to the fore again and recognized him.

"You dirty old Jew," he cried. "Take that, and that! The next time I sees you, you'll go 'ome on a shutter."

The old man took that, and that, and went on his way. The next day he came again.

"Clo! Clo!" he whimpered.

"What!" said the ruffian, his coarse cheeks flooded with angry blood. "Ev yer forgotten what I promised yer?" He seized Sleepy Sol by the scruff of the neck.

"I say, why can't you leave the old man alone?"

The hostler stared at the protester, whose presence he had not noticed in the pleasurable excitement of the moment. It was a Jewish young man, indifferently attired in a pepper-and-salt suit. The muscular hostler measured him scornfully with his eye.

"What's to do with you?" he said, with studied contempt.

"Nothing," admitted the intruder. "And what harm is he doing you?"

"That's my bizness," answered the hostler, and tightened his clutch of Sleepy Sol's nape.

"Well, you'd better not mind it," answered the young man calmly. "Let go."

The hostler's thick lips emitted a disdainful laugh.

"Let go, d'you hear?" repeated the young man.

"I'll let go at your nose," said the hostler, clenching his knobby fist.

"Very well," said the young man. "Then I'll pull yours."

"Oho!" said the hostler, his scowl growing fiercer. "Yer means bizness, does yer?" With that he sent Sleepy Sol staggering along the road and rolled up his shirt-sleeves. His coat was already off.

The young man did not remove his; he quietly assumed the defensive. The hostler sparred up to him with grim earnestness,

and launched a terrible blow at his most characteristic feature. The young man blandly put it on one side, and planted a return blow on the hostler's ear. Enraged, his opponent sprang upon him. The young Jew paralyzed him by putting his left hand negligently into his pocket. With his remaining hand he closed the hostler's right eye, and sent the flesh about it into mourning. Then he carelessly tapped a little blood from the hostler's nose, gave him a few thumps on the chest as if to test the strength of his lungs, and laid him sprawling in the courtyard. A brother hostler ran out from the stables and gave a cry of astonishment.

"You'd better wipe his face," said the young man curtly.

The newcomer hurried back towards the stables.

"Vait a moment," said Sleepy Sol "I can sell you a sponge sheap; I've got a beauty in my bag."

There were plenty of sponges about, but the newcomer bought the second-hand sponge.

"Do you want any more?" the young man affably inquired of his prostrate adversary.

The hostler gave a groan. He was shamed before a friend whom he had early convinced of his fistic superiority.

"No, I reckon he don't," said his friend, with a knowing grin at the conqueror.

"Then I will wish you a good day," said the young man. "Come along, father."

"Yes, ma son-in-law," said Sleepy Sol.

"Do you know who that was, Joe?" said his friend, as he sponged

away the blood.

Joe shook his head.

"That was Dutch Sam," said his friend in an awe-struck whisper.

All Joe's body vibrated with surprise and respect. Dutch Sam was the champion bruiser of his time; in private life an eminent dandy and a prime favorite of His Majesty George IV., and Sleepy Sol had a beautiful daughter and was perhaps prepossessing himself when washed for the Sabbath.

"Dutch Sam!" Joe repeated.

"Dutch Sam! Why, we've got his picter hanging up inside, only he's naked to the waist."

"Well, strike me lucky! What a fool I was not to rekkernize 'im!" His battered face brightened up. "No wonder he licked me!"

Except for the comparative infrequency of the more bestial types of men and women, Judaea has always been a cosmos in little, and its prize-fighters and scientists, its philosophers and "fences," its gymnasts and money-lenders, its scholars and stockbrokers, its musicians, chess-players, poets, comic singers, lunatics, saints, publicans, politicians, warriors, poltroons, mathematicians, actors, foreign correspondents, have always been in the first rank. *Nihil alienum a se Judaeus putat.*

Joe and his friend fell to recalling Dutch Sam's great feats. Each out-vied the other in admiration for the supreme pugilist.

Next day Sleepy Sol came rampaging down the courtyard. He walked at the rate of five miles to the hour, and despite the weight of his bag his head pointed to the zenith.

"Clo'!" he shrieked. "Clo'!"

Joe the hostler came out. His head was bandaged, and in his hand was gold lace. It was something even to do business with a hero's father-in-law.

But it is given to few men to marry their daughters to champion boxers: and as Dutch Sam was not a Don Quixote, the average peddler or huckster never enjoyed the luxury of prancing gait and cock-a-hoop business cry. The primitive fathers of the Ghetto might have borne themselves more jauntily had they foreseen that they were to be the ancestors of mayors and aldermen descended from Castilian hidalgos and Polish kings, and that an unborn historian would conclude that the Ghetto of their day was peopled by princes in disguise. They would have been as surprised to learn who they were as to be informed that they were orthodox. The great Reform split did not occur till well on towards the middle of the century, and the Jews of those days were unable to conceive that a man could be a Jew without eating *kosher* meat, and they would have looked upon the modern distinctions between racial and religious Jews as the sophistries of the convert or the missionary. If their religious life converged to the Great *Shool*, their social life focussed on Petticoat Lane, a long, narrow thoroughfare which, as late as Strype's day, was lined with beautiful trees: vastly more pleasant they must have been than the faded barrows and beggars of after days. The Lane—such was its affectionate sobriquet—was the stronghold of hard-shell Judaism, the Alsatia of "infidelity" into which no missionary dared set foot, especially no apostate-apostle. Even in modern days the new-fangled Jewish minister of the fashionable suburb, rigged out, like the Christian clergyman, has been mistaken for such a *Meshumad*, and pelted with gratuitous vegetables and eleemosynary eggs. The Lane was always the great market-place, and every insalubrious street and alley abutting on it was covered with the overflowings of its commerce and its mud. Wentworth Street and Goulston Street

were the chief branches, and in festival times the latter was a pandemonium of caged poultry, clucking and quacking and cackling and screaming. Fowls and geese and ducks were bought alive, and taken to have their throats cut for a fee by the official slaughterer. At Purim a gaiety, as of the Roman carnival, enlivened the swampy Wentworth Street, and brought a smile into the unwashed face of the pavement. The confectioners' shops, crammed with "stuffed monkeys" and "bolas," were besieged by hilarious crowds of handsome girls and their young men, fat women and their children, all washing down the luscious spicy compounds with cups of chocolate; temporarily erected swinging cradles bore a vociferous many-colored burden to the skies; cardboard noses, grotesque in their departure from truth, abounded. The Purim *Spiel* or Purim play never took root in England, nor was Haman ever burnt in the streets, but *Shalachmonos*, or gifts of the season, passed between friend and friend, and masquerading parties burst into neighbors' houses. But the Lane was lively enough on the ordinary Friday and Sunday. The famous Sunday Fair was an event of metropolitan importance, and thither came buyers of every sect. The Friday Fair was more local, and confined mainly to edibles. The Ante-Festival Fairs combined something of the other two, for Jews desired to sport new hats and clothes for the holidays as well as to eat extra luxuries, and took the opportunity of a well-marked epoch to invest in new everythings from oil-cloth to cups and saucers. Especially was this so at Passover, when for a week the poorest Jew must use a supplementary set of crockery and kitchen utensils. A babel of sound, audible for several streets around, denoted Market Day in Petticoat Lane, and the pavements were blocked by serried crowds going both ways at once.

It was only gradually that the community was Anglicized. Under the sway of centrifugal impulses, the wealthier members began to form new colonies, moulting their old feathers and replacing them by finer, and flying ever further from the centre. Men of organizing ability founded unrivalled philanthropic and educational

institutions on British lines; millionaires fought for political emancipation; brokers brazenly foisted themselves on 'Change; ministers gave sermons in bad English; an English journal was started; very slowly, the conventional Anglican tradition was established; and on that human palimpsest which has borne the inscriptions of all languages and all epochs, was writ large the sign-manual of England. Judaea prostrated itself before the Dagon of its hereditary foe, the Philistine, and respectability crept on to freeze the blood of the Orient with its frigid finger, and to blur the vivid tints of the East into the uniform gray of English middle-class life. In the period within which our story moves, only vestiges of the old gaiety and brotherhood remained; the full *al fresco* flavor was evaporated.

And to-day they are all dead—the *Takeefim* with big hearts and bigger purses, and the humorous *Schnorrers*, who accepted their gold, and the cheerful pious peddlers who rose from one extreme to the other, building up fabulous fortunes in marvellous ways. The young mothers, who suckled their babes in the sun, have passed out of the sunshine; yea, and the babes, too, have gone down with gray heads to the dust. Dead are the fair fat women, with tender hearts, who waddled benignantly through life, ever ready to shed the sympathetic tear, best of wives, and cooks, and mothers; dead are the bald, ruddy old men, who ambled about in faded carpet slippers, and passed the snuff-box of peace: dead are the stout-hearted youths who sailed away to Tom Tiddler's ground; and dead are the buxom maidens they led under the wedding canopy when they returned. Even the great Dr. Sequira, pompous in white stockings, physician extraordinary to the Prince Regent of Portugal, lies vanquished by his life-long adversary and the Baal Shem himself, King of Cabalists, could command no countervailing miracle.

Where are the little girls in white pinafores with pink sashes who brightened the Ghetto on high days and holidays? Where is the

beauteous Betsy of the Victoria Ballet? and where the jocund synagogue dignitary who led off the cotillon with her at the annual Rejoicing of the Law? Worms have long since picked the great financier's brain, the embroidered waistcoats of the bucks have passed even beyond the stage of adorning sweeps on May Day, and Dutch Sam's fist is bonier than ever. The same mould covers them all—those who donated guineas and those who donated "gifts," the rogues and the hypocrites, and the wedding-drolls, the observant and the lax, the purse-proud and the lowly, the coarse and the genteel, the wonderful chapmen and the luckless *Schlemihls*, Rabbi and *Dayan* and *Shochet*, the scribes who wrote the sacred scroll and the cantors who trolled it off mellifluous tongues, and the betting-men who never listened to it; the grimy Russians of the capotes and the earlocks, and the blue-blooded Dons, "the gentlemen of the Mahamad," who ruffled it with swords and knee-breeches in the best Christian society. Those who kneaded the toothsome "bolas" lie with those who ate them; and the marriage-brokers repose with those they mated. The olives and the cucumbers grow green and fat as of yore, but their lovers are mixed with a soil that is barren of them. The restless, bustling crowds that jostled laughingly in Rag Fair are at rest in the "House of Life;" the pageant of their strenuous generation is vanished as a dream. They died with the declaration of God's unity on their stiffening lips, and the certainty of resurrection in their pulseless hearts, and a faded Hebrew inscription on a tomb, or an unread entry on a synagogue brass is their only record. And yet, perhaps, their generation is not all dust. Perchance, here and there, some decrepit centenarian rubs his purblind eyes with the ointment of memory, and sees these pictures of the past, hallowed by the consecration of time, and finds his shrivelled cheek wet with the pathos sanctifying the joys that have been.

BOOK I.

CHILDREN OF THE GHETTO.

CHAPTER I.

THE BREAD OF AFFLICTION.

A dead and gone wag called the street "Fashion Street," and most of the people who live in it do not even see the joke. If it could exchange names with "Rotten Row," both places would be more appropriately designated. It is a dull, squalid, narrow thoroughfare in the East End of London, connecting Spitalfields with Whitechapel, and branching off in blind alleys. In the days when little Esther Ansell trudged its unclean pavements, its extremities were within earshot of the blasphemies from some of the vilest quarters and filthiest rookeries in the capital of the civilized world. Some of these clotted spiders'-webs have since been swept away by the besom of the social reformer, and the spiders have scurried off into darker crannies.

There were the conventional touches about the London street-picture, as Esther Ansell sped through the freezing mist of the December evening, with a pitcher in her hand, looking in her oriental coloring like a miniature of Rebecca going to the well. A female street-singer, with a trail of infants of dubious maternity, troubled the air with a piercing melody; a pair of slatterns with arms a-kimbo reviled each other's relatives; a drunkard lurched along, babbling amiably; an organ-grinder, blue-nosed as his monkey, set some ragged children jigging under the watery rays of a street-lamp. Esther drew her little plaid shawl tightly around her, and ran on without heeding these familiar details, her chilled feet absorbing the damp of the murky pavement through the worn soles of her cumbrous boots. They were masculine boots, kicked off by some intoxicated tramp and picked up by Esther's father. Moses Ansell had a habit of lighting on windfalls, due, perhaps, to his

meekest manner of walking with bent head, as though literally bowed beneath the yoke of the Captivity. Providence rewarded him for his humility by occasional treasure-trove. Esther had received a pair of new boots from her school a week before, and the substitution, of the tramp's foot-gear for her own resulted in a net profit of half-a-crown, and kept Esther's little brothers and sisters in bread for a week. At school, under her teacher's eye, Esther was very unobtrusive about the feet for the next fortnight, but as the fear of being found out died away, even her rather morbid conscience condoned the deception in view of the stomachic gain.

They gave away bread and milk at the school, too, but Esther and her brothers and sisters never took either, for fear of being thought in want of them. The superiority of a class-mate is hard to bear, and a high-spirited child will not easily acknowledge starvation in presence of a roomful of purse-proud urchins, some of them able to spend a farthing a day on pure luxuries. Moses Ansell would have been grieved had he known his children were refusing the bread he could not give them. Trade was slack in the sweating dens, and Moses, who had always lived from hand to mouth, had latterly held less than ever between the one and the other. He had applied for help to the Jewish Board of Guardians, but red-tape rarely unwinds as quickly as hunger coils itself; moreover, Moses was an old offender in poverty at the Court of Charity. But there was one species of alms which Moses could not be denied, and the existence of which Esther could not conceal from him as she concealed that of the eleemosynary breakfasts at the school. For it was known to all men that soup and bread were to be had for the asking thrice a week at the Institution in Fashion Street, and in the Ansell household the opening of the soup-kitchen was looked forward to as the dawn of a golden age, when it would be impossible to pass more than one day without bread. The vaguely-remembered smell of the soup threw a poetic fragrance over the coming winter. Every year since Esther's mother had died, the child had been sent to fetch home the provender, for Moses, who

was the only other available member of the family, was always busy praying when he had nothing better to do. And so to-night Esther fared to the kitchen, with her red pitcher, passing in her childish eagerness numerous women shuffling along on the same errand, and bearing uncouth tin cans supplied by the institution. An individualistic instinct of cleanliness made Esther prefer the family pitcher. To-day this liberty of choice has been taken away, and the regulation can, numbered and stamped, serves as a soup-ticket. There was quite a crowd of applicants outside the stable-like doors of the kitchen when Esther arrived, a few with well-lined stomachs, perhaps, but the majority famished and shivering. The feminine element swamped the rest, but there were about a dozen men and a few children among the group, most of the men scarce taller than the children—strange, stunted, swarthy, hairy creatures, with muddy complexions illumined by black, twinkling eyes. A few were of imposing stature, wearing coarse, dusty felt hats or peaked caps, with shaggy beards or faded scarfs around their throats. Here and there, too, was a woman of comely face and figure, but for the most part it was a collection of crones, prematurely aged, with weird, wan, old-world features, slipshod and draggle-tailed, their heads bare, or covered with dingy shawls in lieu of bonnets—red shawls, gray shawls, brick-dust shawls, mud-colored shawls. Yet there was an indefinable touch of romance and pathos about the tawdriness and witch-like ugliness, and an underlying identity about the crowd of Polish, Russian, German, Dutch Jewesses, mutually apathetic, and pressing forwards. Some of them had infants at their bare breasts, who drowsed quietly with intervals of ululation. The women devoid of shawls had nothing around their necks to protect them from the cold, the dusky throats were exposed, and sometimes even the first hooks and eyes of the bodice were unnecessarily undone. The majority wore cheap earrings and black wigs with preternaturally polished hair; where there was no wig, the hair was touzled.

At half-past five the stable-doors were thrown open, and the crowd

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