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Barrack Rooms

By JAMES CUMMINGS

HOW miserable and disgraceful it is to see the agglomerated mass of human souls known as the working class overcrowded in those Ten by Twelve feet boxes, known as "barrack rooms."

Their state of living can be seen in their faces, their bodies, and even their gait. There seem to be an expression of care-worn fatigue on their countenances. They are so dull and uninteresting. It is as though the sun never threw its healthful ray on their faces The reason for their unhealthy aspect few seem to care about.

What are the barrack-rooms in which these unfortunate victims of Dame Fortune live? They are like the boxes horses are shipped in. A long line of ten by twelve feet boxes, nailed together with a window and a door allotted to each. The outward appearance is enough to give one a shuddering sense of repulsion. It has a striking resemblance to the "Black Hole" of Calcutta.

The walls are dirty and the roof which is about twelve feet high from the elevated part to the rotten flooring is black and sooty from want of paint. Through the absence of this, the people are rendered poorer, for the life of their good clothes, their furniture, their curtains and valances are of shorter duration. Instead of improving their situation they are always buying the same things. Of course the majority of these people are not as badly off as the poverty-stricken ones we read about in Charles Dickens' "Hard Times," but they are subjected to much of the same privations. They have the undying ambition to keep a decent home, but where is the room for such? Their small bed for no more than two, is barred off by a cloth screen, or a wooden blind about six feet high covered with wall paper. The balance of this little room can only contain a little table for dining storing kitchen utensils and laundering, by which they are able to earn a living. The more ambitious of these run a cloth screen across the table to form a dining room, and with four or five chairs make the best of it.

Flies and mosquitoes seem to be the only insects the Health Departments know to be detrimental to health. They are blind to the fact that the paper, the people dining storing kitchen utensils and laundraing, by which they are able to earn a living. The more ambitious of these run a cloth screen across the table to form a room is covered with a carpet of moss. This evil is also caused by soap bathing.

In some of the yards where there are two-storied houses, the "downstairs-tenants" are put to the inconvenience of sweeping after those upstairs to avoid the rain which falls into the canal, but forms mud pools in the front of the door. The sanitary inspectors are right, but what must be done? When the roofs are frustrated by the agents, who order them to be taken down or the tenant be sued for damages. Others are told by sanitary inspectors that by so doing the water no longer falls into the canal, but forms mud pools in the front of the door. The sanitary inspectors are right, but what must be done? When the rain begins to fall, both window and door must be closed to avoid the room being wet, and to have to inhale the odour of a boiling pot is beyond human endurance.

At night a most obnoxious smell prevails after the tenants have retired. The space between the roof and the door is so small, that the wire netting placed there for ventilation is practically useless. The low partition which divides one room from another is made up for by bars about four feet long by three inches wide, set about three inches apart, thereby enabling the carbonic acid gas from one room to pass to another and be breathed again. This process of breathing is made doubly dangerous if the occupants of a room consist of a large family. The bed-rooms and the drawing-rooms are so small, that the furniture has to be packed away in a corner for some of the children to sleep outside, and the others below the bed.

In some of the yards where there are two-storied houses, the "downstairs-tenants" are put to the inconvenience of sweeping after those upstairs to avoid the dust, and put their furniture in the yard to avoid their being spoilt when they are scrubbing. At times the downstairs tenants are bathed [p. 22] in urine through the children sleeping on the floor.

And worst of all are the dirty yards these houses are placed in. Most of them are just dirt, and the awful mess caused by rainfall can be easily imagined. Even the boards the tenants place about to walk on, sink after a time, leaving them to carry mud into their rooms, ground itch in their toes, and to be bitten by the mosquitoes the dirty water is bound to breed. Some of the cellars are so low that the water which settles in the holes dug by the poultry is unable to be taken out. Domestic animals make their lavatories there and some of them even die there to the gross inconvenience of the tenants.

The sewerages and bathrooms come in for as much insanitation as the places aforementioned. The stained basins and the dirty floor make a most appalling picture. The bath rooms are just the same. Through lack of space and shade the tenants are obliged to wash in there, with the result that the whole interior of the room is covered with a carpet of moss. This evil is also caused by soap bathing.
When the yards are in such a beastly condition, where are the children to play? Must they grovel in the muddy yards as hogs and ducks, or go into the streets to be crushed by cars or arrested by the constabulary and made into future criminals?

Of what use is a dust-bin to a yard containing eight rooms or more? When the dust from the roof and the dirt from the yard is swept out of the room, together with the stuff in the front of the door of the respective tenants, can the bin hold all? Of course not! It is impossible. These barrack rooms also have a great moral influence on the children. Parents are unable to train their off-springs as their want, on account of the series of opinions in the yards. Brothels characterize most of these yards. All sorts of conversations are vociferously exchanged between the tenants in the presence or absence of children.

Gossip is the half-mark of these people. The District Court is material evidence of the immorality which prevails among them. And the sad thing is that an immoral life is almost inevitable to a young girl who is reared in such surroundings. Here prostitution is born and here, too, prostitution flourishes. In some of the yards many sleepless nights are passed through the gaming, liquor-drinking and prostitution of some of the neighbours. The little children are shown the regrettable step to degradation. Many an ambitious one's posterity has been hampered through the reputation of some of these barrack-room tenants. The authorities should not await the tenants' complaint for they will never say anything. They are afraid of the agents and conscious of the fact that although they are the victims of tyranny they have no alternative but to submit. They should be encouraged to step out boldly and use an iron hand, regardless of influential owners or agents, in an effort to alleviate the disgraceful and abominable barrack-room nuisance.