

A PLEA FOR THE CHILDREN OF THE UNFORTUNATE

Ethel C. Meyer

We who have passed through the "Gates of Childhood" into the wide world to make or mar our lives as we will carry with us one of the thirteen great things of Life—Memory. And as we stand at the threshold of the world of strife the memory of our parents seems to hover 'round us, guiding and protecting; the joy of our childhood seems to cloak us in its radiance, and the atmosphere of our homes, pleasant and beneficent, seems to envelope us; and so we are protected against the cold biting air of life itself. We, ourselves, feel, as we square our shoulders, that the world, bathed in sunshine, is at our feet and we realize that we are starting out fresh and with every fair chance for making ourselves good men and women, physically and morally. But having journeyed thus far, we become immersed in the intricacies of everyday existence, and we forget that there are boys and girls growing up with surroundings that will not make very pleasant recollections, or even tend to make them good men and women; boys and girls being thrust into our world of strife before they are developed physically or mentally to battle with Life and for Life, unprotected in any way, deprived of Childhood itself. These children are to take our places some day in the ranks of men and women: it must be, for generation has always succeeded generation, but how will they do it? They have had no fair chance, work has made them old before their time and weaker than they should be; and how can weak children make strong adults? We who have had every opportunity should show what our advantages have done for us, and refuse to allow laws which tie Childhood to the machines of the factory, to be passed. We should bring to their senses men who want to allow children ten years old to work in canning factories. And if, for a while, we go with "eyes that see not," our other senses are of necessity more acute and we must hear the prayers for mercy that ascend from all sides; but above these prayers we hear the voice of early Youth, singing and dancing, as it should be, and of Childhood oppressed and world-weary, deprived of all its rights.

And as this cry pierces our inner consciousness, our eyes open instinctively to the poor and their children.

Yes, our eyes open to these struggles for existence, these battles for life; they open to lost illusions and shattered hopes; to anxiety and despair; but through it all we hear that cry, first of Childhood, exuberant, not with health, but with animal spirit. Early Youth knows no disappointment, no privation; the sun shines brightly and the breezes blow caressingly upon all Childhood alike. To Childhood, riches do not bring happiness. The child of the slums is happier with a more spontaneous happiness than the child of the rich, but they are both "pleased with a rattle and tickled with a straw," and we would take even that only chance of happiness from them by not allowing them to be children for long.

These children of the poor are the rays of sunshine in homes where sunshine never pierces the dirty windows nor shines upon the battered cradle. It is the innocence of Childhood which keeps the tenements from being impenetrable depths of darkness, and the clear laughter of Childhood which makes the oases in the sad stretches of monotonous days. It is their baby words of comfort which sustain hope in the heart of the tired mother, and their feeble cries for food which arouse her to new energies. These parents view their children through mists of tears, but their question, "What will become of them, dear God?" does not fall upon the consciousness of the children. And when these older people find their prayers unanswered, they become stolid and indifferent, and we, the favored of Nature's bounties, say they don't care. Who are we to thus coolly dismiss the subject? We, who don't know what it means to stretch forth empty hands when our children ask for bread that they may live; we, who don't give our children bread, but cake; we, who give them not clothes for warmth, but for adornment and as a background for their immature beauty? But these little children must huddle together for warmth and eat dry crusts as

an assuager of starvation. And yet they are happy because of Youth, and we would deprive them even of that. We say they are used to hardships, that hardships won't hurt them; but we would shudder to think of one of our own boys or girls raised in the same environments; we would not take them down to the slums to see their less fortunate sisters or brothers for fear of contagion of some sort; we would not even tell them of these little children for fear of clouding their happiness. We can see no connecting link between these children and our own; we don't see the injustice of child-labor for them, but it would be more clear to us if it embraced all Childhood, for then ours, too, would labor and toil amid the deafening roar of the factories. We don't see the need of a good education for them, but ours must go through colleges and universities; we don't even see the need of play for them, but ours need recreation and even supervised play, lest the burden of studying shall be too oppressive. We can't realize that the men and women of the future will be, not our children alone, but all children, and that not only from our ranks, but from the ranks of the poor, have come some of our greatest and most famous men and women. These little children called into the world, and yet unwelcomed and unwanted, surrounded by a mother-love intense in its passion and in its animal-like defense, rich only in Childhood's inherent happiness but poor in material things; these little children must go out into the world before they can realize that it is a world of shadow as well as light. Work that dwarfs them physically and mentally, and responsibilities that make them old before their time cause their little shoulders to droop and stamp indelibly upon their faces the shadow of coming events; and while their baby hands are toiling, their eyes, although heavy with sleep, are gazing with sophistication and the morbid curiosity of the young upon evil sights and cruel things. And yet we must not judge the parents too harshly. Fate has not dealt kindly with them; they are ignorant of what they are doing to their loved ones, and the money earned at such a great price helps them to exist.

But why should we, who are not ignorant of this great wrong allow these

things? Why, now that our eyes are open, do we not keep these little children from battling with Life so early; why do we not see that, when at the proper age, they stand at the threshold of the world of strife, they are equipped, not only physically, but mentally and morally to cope with temptations? And they can only do this if they are surrounded and protected by their memories of parental solicitude and guidance and the recollections of a care-free Childhood as a foundation. If their parents cannot do this for them, let us make laws that will at least keep them from working at such a youthful age as ten years. Let us make the voice of Childhood exuberant and happy and full of spirit as it should be. And if we don't do this for the children's sake and for their futures, let us do it for ourselves, for

What would the world be to us,

If the children were no more?

We would dread the desert behind us

Worse than the darkness before.

THE INDUSTRIAL TRAINING OF THE BOY.

By Prof. W. A. McKeever. Macmillan.

"For many ages," says Professor McKeever in the preface of his new book, "we attempted to build society upon the basis of a selected few superior individuals. But now we are planning a democracy of the common man, and I for one have much faith in the outcome of the issue. But in order to reach this highly desirable goal we must undertake a few very distinctive things in the matter of training the young. (1) All able-bodied boys and girls must be trained in at least one of the trunk-line industries, and this discipline must be considered a part of the ordinary schooling; (2) the industrial training must be required of all alike, not so much in thought of making a living as in thought of the higher purpose of making a life; (3) in the carrying forward of the two foregoing purposes the work and industry assigned to the growing young will be emphasized more as a means of building up their characters, and less in respect to the mere money-earning results. Self-support, or the ability to make a living, may be regarded as a necessary and happy incident of every forceful, rightly developed personality."

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