

"Child Eyes"

A SILHOUETTE FROM LIFE IN THE CITY OF LONDON

By J. MAUD BECKETT, Author of "A Girton Girl," "Those Rubies,"
"That Slip of a Girl," "Eliza," etc.

"CAN yer spare a copper, laidy?" The words were spoken in a weak, faltering voice, and two big, blue, child eyes looked up out of a pinched, weary little face into the beautiful, proud eyes of Blanche, Lady Stinsford, as she swept, with all the grace for which she was renowned, out of the fashionable draper's shop, with its window display of chiffons, and silks and laces, and gorgeous raiment. By her side was a pretty, fair-haired, aristocratic-looking little boy.

But Blanche, Lady Stinsford, heeded not the pitiful question that had been addressed to her, nor did she glance for more than a moment down into the pleading eyes; she only drew her costly velvet and sables closer to her.

"What a dirty, disreputable little object!" she thought languidly, as she stepped into the perfectly-appointed brougham, with its pair of beautiful horses, and gave the word "Home" to her supercilious footman. The little ragged figure on the pavement, with a famished, desperate appeal in his eyes, came nearer.

"Laidy, I ain't 'ad a crust since—" But the well-appointed footman gave the boy a push, and glanced critically at his gloves to see if they had been harmed in the contact; and then, under his breath, so that the words should not reach the refined ears of his stately mistress:

"It's always the same lying tales the likes of you tells. Just you take your hook, you little rascallion, you, or I'll send a bobby after you!" Then he climbed with all the proper and correct amount of agility to his seat beside the portly coachman, and, with a bound forward, the high-stepping horses bore the brougham away.

The small, shivering figure, after casting a longing, wistful, and famished look at the retreating carriage, dragged his poor, starved little body onwards, with the poor little tired feet, all blue and red and swollen with the chilblains that had nothing to protect them from the freezing pavement and the bitter wind. People passed quickly to and fro, women wrapping their comfortable cloaks round them, and the men turning up the collars of their coats.

It was after five o'clock, and night was closing in. It had been a bitter day; since early morning the pitiless north wind had swept the streets, howling and whirling before it everything that came in the course of its wild race. The clouds had been gathering, and now the sky looked leaden and dull, as if it were charged with a sulky burden. Presently the snowflakes began to fall, silently, very softly at first, and then faster, and still faster, and the people hurried their steps, thinking of the warm fires and the cosy dinner or tea awaiting them at home.

Not one of them all stopped to give the little ragged boy a copper.

Doubtless there were many kind hearts among those passers-by, but they were all busy with their own thoughts, and they simply did not notice him; and yet he was such a tiny, helpless little fellow—only seven years old—to be all alone in the world, homeless, and, worse still, motherless.

The child dragged on his tired, aching feet, his little pinched face growing paler and more wizened, and the blue eyes more lifeless, with a dull apathy born of long and continued suffering.

Along Regent Street and through Trafalgar Square he passed, until he reached the Strand. People were even in still more of a hurry and bustle here, but he felt more

at home among them, and the shops were not at all so big and grand-looking. Down one of the narrow side streets that led southward to the river he turned. At the corner stood a barrow with a charcoal fire burning in a stove, above which, sticking up on spikes, were displayed big, tempting-looking potatoes to roast.

What sumptuous fare would one of those prosaic potatoes on that humble barrow have seemed to this hungry little one! What warmth it could have put into his aching little body! He stretched his frozen hands out eagerly towards the bright, ruddy glow, and the owner of the barrow looking down at him said:

"Freezin' cold, ain't it, young 'un?"

He was a kindly man, and he had little children of his own, whom perhaps he found it hard enough to keep alive in this bitter weather; but he did not think to offer one of his potatoes to the child, who was too proud to beg for one, though his blue eyes looked so wistfully at them.

To ask a grand lady, wrapped up in her costly furs, to spare a penny out of all her plenty was all right; but this man, one of the struggling poor, with whom the parting of a copper was a serious business, was a different matter.

He was only seven years old, this little scrap of ragamuffin humanity, but into those few short years was crowded the shrewdness and wisdom of half a century's experience of poverty, wretchedness and misery.

And then the potato-man took up his barrow to move on. He did not wish to drive the little chap away from the warmth, but business was very slack just there, and he must try fresh fields.

Fast and surely the snow continued to fall, lying only a moment in all its pure whiteness before it was trampled on and defiled by the feet of hurrying, scurrying humanity. The cold seemed more intense to the boy when the bright fire had gone, and his aching limbs grew worse. He crept on a little further down the narrow street, and sank down on the sheltered doorstep of an imposing-looking office building. Here at last was a refuge. Surely no one would disturb him; he could do no harm there. His tired head fell back, and the blue eyes closed.

"Now then, young 'un, move on." It was a policeman who spoke, not roughly or unkindly, but simply dispassionately; he had said the same thing many times before that night, and he would probably have to say it many times again. He was so accustomed to encountering street arabs on doorsteps that the sight did not move him at all—it all came in the day's duty.

But for that wretched little being, always those same dreaded words, "Move on," until they had come to sound in his ears day and night.

On the whole of God's earth there was no place for this weary little one.

The boy shrank off with the guilty look of a beaten cur. He moved as quickly as his feeble strength would let him, casting furtive glances round, as though he expected to see some dreadful thing dart out from the black corners round him. From time to time he strove to pull his dirty rags closer to him, but the bitter north wind, which blew in gusts, driving the snowflakes before it, was merciless; it took up his rags and shook them angrily, penetrating through their thin flimsiness to the poor, weak chest, racking the tiny frame with the choking cough.

Poor little chap! He had had no food for two days,