



THOMAS OKEY (1903)
(From a drawing by Alphonse Legros)

*A Basketful
of Memories
An Autobiographical
Sketch
by
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London & Toronto

J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. MCMXXX

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Chapter I

EAST LONDON IN THE 'FIFTIES AND 'SIXTIES

I WAS born in 1852, the period immediately preceding the Crimean War, and I remember my father telling how nearly he was tempted to enlist by a recruiting officer who ranged the streets beating a kettledrum on which golden sovereigns rattled to entice men to pick up one and enlist. The earliest turn of memories educational brings me, a child borne on the yardman's shoulders, from my grandfather's house in Quaker Street, Spitalfields, to a dame school in Fleur-de-lis Street, where I learned my letters. Quaker Street in the early 'fifties, where my grandfather, of high repute for the excellency of his wares, carried on the industry of basket-making, was far from presenting its present aspect. The Great Eastern Railway

had not then ploughed through a congeries of insanitary courts and alleys at the eastern end, the haunt of thieves: I recall the tears I shed as a small boy when a new cap was snatched from my head on passing Farthing Alley.

It was in a Spitalfields court that Dickens bought the intelligent goldfinch. In our neighbours' cellars cocks and hens roosted, and lived dangerously amid the street traffic. Tame pigeons nested in, and were flown from, dormers on the roofs of the houses. Pegging for chaffinches was a favourite Sunday amusement, and the captive songsters were waged against each other in public-houses—a cruel sport, in some cases involving the quenching of the birds' eyes with red-hot wire to stimulate their singing.

My grandfather's dwelling (in which my parents occupied a room), with its counting-house, yard, warehouse, and the workshop where my father was employed as a journeyman basket-maker, no longer exists. The district was settled in former times by a colony of the thirteen thousand Huguenot refugee silk-weavers exiled by the Edict of Nantes, outside the Norton Folgate and near the site of the old shambles—the navvies as they

'Fifties and 'Sixties

excavated the hinterland of our house in Quaker Street for the extension of the Great Eastern Railway disinterred large *caches* of bullocks' horns which they transubstantiated into beer and tobacco.

The French name of the street where my dame school was situate and the older houses in Quaker Street, with their characteristic broad windows built to accommodate the silk-weavers' looms, were evidences of the status of the early immigrants. One well-built stately mansion opposite our house, let out in tenements, was obviously once the home of a prosperous Huguenot silk merchant.

Our neighbours consisted mainly of the • "unlovely proletariat," with whom the two or three surviving descendants of the early settlers, venerable, dignified, self-respecting craftsmen, still bearing their French names, formed a striking contrast. Rough, and lacking the courtesies of life, were our neighbours, and our slumbers were not infrequently disturbed by shrill female cries of "Murder! Murder!" when our next-door neighbour was chastening his wife, and she shrieking in protest. Indeed the marks of man's affection were frequently visible in the darkened orbits of the women's

eyes one met in the streets. Another street incident remains in memory, that of a group of rowdy children mocking, pelting, hounding along Quaker Street a poor demented old creature to cries of "Bundle old witch! Bundle old witch!" No one intervened.

I well remember, when working later in life on the plank in my grandfather's workshop, where much of the men's conversation might be hinted at as *feminæ nihil a me alienum puto*, the talk once fell on an absent shopmate and the unhallowed relation between him and the partner of his couch, and how happily the unwedded state worked out. "Why," said one of the men, in order to clinch his testimony to their happiness, "he knocks her about just as if she was his wife!"¹

The story has its pathetic side, and is not without bearing on the attitude of the human male in those days to the female.

Life was drab enough in our Spitalfields home. Playmates were none, for we children were carefully screened from the streets or from association with our neighbours. Kinsfolk were few—very few. Besides our grand-

¹ The cause of the shopmate's absence was a thumb put out of joint in emphasizing his affection.

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parents at Quaker Street, a great-grandfather, the founder of the basket-making industry, originally in White's Row, Whitechapel, and a great-grandmother, together with a bachelor great-uncle and a maiden aunt lived in retirement in the Mile End Road, then a London suburb. Their home had a fair-sized garden, where a vine flourished which furnished the table with a thin home-made wine, and us small children, in favourable summers, with bunches of sweet grapes. (Giordano Bruno tells that when in London he ate grapes from local gardens.¹)

Other relatives on our father's side there were none. On our mother's side, an aunt in domestic service (as indeed was our mother before her marriage) widowed by the death of the bread-winner, an able seaman who fell from the mast-head in a heavy sea; an uncle, a wire-weaver, an old Chartist, of whom we saw little, and two nieces, the younger who died as a child and the elder married to a carman: these were the sum of our contemporary kinsfolk, with the exception of an uncle (a hatter in South-east London) and

¹ *Cena de le Ceneri*. 1583: questo anno ho mangiato dell' uva dagli orti di Londra.

aunt two or three times removed, whom we very rarely visited.

It was a time when the wearing of top hats was general by all classes, when the guardian of public order, the "peeler," policed the streets in a top hat, and we basket-makers went in shabby top hats to our work. Great was the consternation of the professional hatter when the bowler threatened to become the normal wear of the upper as well as the lower classes of society. To meet the peril to their interests, our uncle and certain other hatters of London subscribed to a fund, which they employed in the purchase of bowler hats and distributed them among a gang of low-down loafers and down-at-heels whom they sent strolling about the West End in order to bring the bowler into disrepute.

The religious atmosphere of school and home was of the narrowest Victorian evangelicalism, although I remember none of our elders who attended service in church. We elder children, however, born in Spitalfields, were not baptized, not from any lack of orthodoxy, for later additions were held at the font, and I recall that our mother went through the ceremony of churching. The

'Fifties and 'Sixties

conventional theology had, in some of its aspects, a baneful effect on a sensitive boy's imagination; when Donati's comet of 1858 shone, night after night, through our bedroom window, with its sinister glow, the child trembled with the terror of coming doom, and during many a sleepless hour I lay in fear lest I might have unwittingly committed that mysterious, undefined, unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost, and that hell fire were my portion.

The first chapter educational ends when the advent of children in biennial sequence (the full quiver came to number eight¹) made the presence of a growing family in one room of a six-roomed house undesirable, and a trek was made to Middleton Street, Bethnal Green. Of my schooling during the brief period of our domicile there I retain small memory. A Sunday School excursion to Epping Forest I recall from the fact that the third-class accommodation provided by the Eastern Counties Railway—its terminus was then in Shoreditch—took the form of open trucks known colloquially as "pig boxes," before the proudly advertised luxury of covered third-class

¹ The whole octet are still living.

East London in 'Fifties and 'Sixties

carriages was introduced by the railway companies, and even then first and second class only were lighted, and those by oil lamps. (It was to a railway journey from Brighton in an open third-class "box" on a starry night in March, during the early 'fifties, that we owe one of Dickens's most charming *Household Words* stories—"The Child's Dream of a Star.") No train ran during Morning Service, 10.45 to 1 o'clock on Sundays.

Chapter II

AT SCHOOL IN BETHNAL GREEN. HARD TIMES.
EARLY INTEREST IN LANGUAGES

SUCH formal education as I have had began, when we moved farther north-east in Bethnal Green, at St. James-the-Less National Schools in Sewardstone Road, where, with two sisters, I was entered, a boy of eight or nine years of age, at a fee of fourpence weekly.

That part of Bethnal Green was then really green. Bishop Bonner's Fields were fields indeed, and many a labourer's house had a garden, in which a pig was reared. Great was the excitement at school when a pig was to be slaughtered in a boy's father's garden, and favoured chums were invited to witness the bloody spectacle. (Open slaughterhouses still existed in Butchers' Row, Whitechapel, and for us boys had a horrible fascination.) Here we passed from the more densely populated area, whose denizens, crowding Bethnal Green Road to witness a royal procession,

At School in

were designated by George Augustus Sala, describing the scene in the *Daily Telegraph*, as having the appearance of being fed on “gin and lucifer matches”—a phrase that cost the *Telegraph* a local outburst of protest and a boycott.

An excellent school of the pre-School Board type was that entrusted to its admirable and hardworked master, Mr. Hayes, in Sewardstone Road. Grossly understaffed, according to present-day requirements, discipline was maintained by not spoiling the child. The curriculum was mainly confined to the three R's, and education was imbued with the so-called religious atmosphere. We learned to repeat the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert, the miracles and parables, and to draw an outline map of the coast of Palestine. This and one of the east coast of England were the only maps I remember to have constituted our geographical drawing.

Religious education was supplemented at Sunday School. After an hour in the morning at school given to further instruction in the Scriptures and their interpretation by amateur theologians, we were marched to church and packed in galleries—boys on one side, girls on

Bethnal Green

the other, of the organ, under the vigilant eyes of a teacher who sat facing us. Woe to the boy who moved a lip: he was reported and paid the penalty on the morrow.

The services were of the dreariest, barest low-church type. The preacher, tall, gaunt, in a black cassock, severely theological, evoked no response from us. The only interest the sermon had lay in the number of leaves of MS. the preacher would turn over before the cheering "Now to God the Father" was heard—nine, ten, eleven. We hoped for the lesser infliction and our purgatory began at the ninth turn. The text, however, had to be remembered, since we might be asked to repeat chapter and verse at home.

The result was that as soon as our school-days were over some of us boys revolted to the brighter services, the stirring, picturesque oratory, the more rousing hymns at a neighbouring Methodist chapel where our Scripture studies were supplemented (during the long extempore prayer that preceded the sermon), in the gallery where we sat, by a group of girls who relieved the boredom by passing along their Bibles to us boys opened at certain mysterious passages in the Old Testament

At School in

which do not form part of the lessons in school or of the church services—passages which the boys endeavoured, but less successfully, to cap. Impressions, however, on the puerile mind are received *ad modum recipientis*. References in our reading to certain much reviled creatures we mentally phoneticized as “wores”; and the wicked Mrs. Potiphar, we learned, victimized the good Joseph because he would not tell a lie with her.

An incident related to me by the Rev. Ronald Bayne, Vicar of St. Jude’s, White-chapel, admirably illustrates the mind of the child in its exegesis of Scripture. Unwilling to entrust the elementary education of his boy to one of the three neighbouring Board-schools, all classed as Jewish under the regulations then in force, himself took over the task at the vicarage. The little pupil was taught the elements of zoology from a publication illustrating in vivid colours the animal kingdom and issued for advertisement purposes by “Colman’s Mustard” people. In this the lion was portrayed a mild inoffensive-looking specimen of the carnivora, while the tiger ravened on the page, a fierce beast, with red, open jaws, and great fangs, fearful to behold.

Bethnal Green

A few days later it fell out that during the Scripture lesson the good vicar dealt with the story of Daniel in the lions' den, and enlarged on the moral; how that Daniel was a good man, who, in defiance of the heathen counsellors of the king, was faithful and prayerful, prostrate three times a day before the true God, and that when the king cast him into the lions' den and rolled a big stone before it, God was able to save him, even from the lions' jaws. A pause ensued . . . the little fellow sat silent. The lesson was sinking in, when: "Daddy!" "Yes, my son." "*I fink that king'll try tijers next time!*"

The range of our studies at St. James-the-Less schools was limited enough, but at least we were taught to read intelligibly and to write legibly. Our arithmetic carried us as far as practice and vulgar fractions, but stopped short of decimals. Like a famous Chancellor of the Exchequer, "I could never understand those damned dots!" Some history (mainly names and dates) and geography we learned; music was taught on the Tonic Sol-Fa system, to my subsequent regret, in spite of having gained the "Crimson Prize" from the hands of the genial inventor, Mr. Curwen, himself.

Hard Times

The time had far better have been devoted to elementary training in the ordinary notation.

Those were days of payment by results, and shortly before the Government inspection was due the brighter and more advanced boys were set to coach the dull and backward that the grant might not suffer.

One priceless privilege I owed to my school and to its excellent master. During the last few months of my schooldays Mr. Hayes had discovered a M. Fouquet, who taught the elements of the French language at a small extra monthly fee (strained out of the domestic economy) on Saturday mornings. The class sat in a gallery, and we learned pronunciation by means of a lilt or chant, such as was then sung in French elementary schools.

Poverty is a hard monitor in the discipline of life. One cruel disappointment during the brief career of my school age was hard to endure. M. Fouquet, with the co-operation of some friends, had organized an evening performance of a French play in the school-room, tickets for which were priced at one shilling. At the end of lessons on that eventful day our master, Mr. Hayes, called for volunteers to sell programmes. Quivering with

Hard Times

excitement, I, among other boys, held up my hand, straining it high and yet higher to attract attention as I was passed by and others more fortunate were chosen. At length the last choice was made, and my exclusion was manifest. I had eagerly looked forward, and, as one of the leading boys in the class, had made certain of being chosen.

Broken-hearted, I went home and made tearful appeals to be endowed with the price of a ticket which, naturally enough, was refused, for shillings were shillings in those days in our household economy. Later, I learned the cause of my failure to be chosen—the clothes I wore were too shabby. And obviously so, for the one suit in my wardrobe was made by our mother (as indeed were all the garments, under and over, worn by us children) from grandfather's discarded coats and trousers. Truly has it been said that marriage to a working man's wife is equivalent to a sentence to hard labour. There was no fifteen-hour, or even twelve-hour working day for our heroic mother; all the work of the house, the nursing and care of the children in health and in sickness, the providing, the preparation and the cooking of the food, the

Early Interest

making and repairing of the clothing, and, hardest of all, the balancing of the domestic budget, fell upon her.

Never do I remember her having a holiday, nor any help, except for a month during confinements, until after I had gone out to work, and our father's status had risen from that of journeyman to that of master. Scarcely less hard was the lot of the daughters. My two elder sisters were withdrawn from school at eleven years of age to assist in the work of the home.

Those were hard times at home, times of tightening the belt and reduction of sleeping space—that, too, a practical education in the social problem. Owing to a street accident our father lay six months with a compound fracture of the leg in the London Hospital—those were the days before antiseptic surgery—and we were reduced to the weekly sick-pay, three months, one pound; three, ten shillings, from the Loyal United Friends' Benefit Society, to which careful workmen then subscribed against a rainy day; but with the aid of the avuncular friend of the poor, at the Sign of the Three Gilded Balls, we pulled through. Truly if, as our French

In Languages

neighbours say, one element of success in life is—*il faut manger de la vache enragée*—that experience has not been lacking.

What mysterious impulse awakened my interest in foreign tongues (which took the form of an ambition to open a shop for the sale of baskets and proclaim *Ici on parle français*), or, indeed, in literature, I cannot tell. Already in my Middleton Street days, a boy of eight years, I had caught sight of an old French dictionary among some books in a second-hand furniture shop. With my hoard of savings, fourpence, I entered and asked the price. It was sixpence. Crestfallen I turned sadly away, when the good bookseller—Heaven rest his soul!—touched by the abject disappointment of the boy, handed over the volume for the fourpence.

Chapter III

PRECOCIOUS READING HABITS

NOR can I account for my early love of books. No bookseller's shop existed in the East London I knew. I was repelled at home, rather than encouraged to read, and I never remember to have seen a book in my elders' hands. Literature was limited to the *Daily Telegraph*. To read in secret I escaped to the washhouse, and I well remember during early apprenticeship days at Spitalfields, my grandfather, catching sight of me reading there a copy of Dicks's shilling edition of *Shakespeare*—the whole, a marvellous feat of cheap publishing—sternly reproachful, exclaimed: "Ah, Tom, *that*'ll never bring you bread and cheese!"¹

The only books I remember seeing as a small child were an old copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and one of the Bible, including the Apocrypha, brought out of their hiding-places on Sunday evenings at Spitalfields to amuse the child with pictures, for both were illustrated

¹ As a fact it led in later years to a much more varied diet.

Precocious Reading Habits

—the *Book of Martyrs* with realistic engravings of the horrible tortures inflicted on the faithful Protestant. “Bel and the Dragon” in the Bible, too, was a favourite picture.

Readers of my generation owe a great debt of gratitude to the enterprise of Messrs. Dicks.¹ My first introduction to great fiction dates from the publication by them of Scott’s novels in threepenny paper-covered volumes, easily pocketable, when my apprenticeship, in its early stages, consisted of sorting and picking—wearisome, dull, mechanical, solitary work. The appearance of *Waverley* marked an epoch. I read it and its succeeding volumes with absorbing interest, stealing at times scraps of hours which should have been devoted to my work.

Another stage in my literary pilgrimage remains in memory. Later I had determined to spend a Whit-Monday at the Alexandra Palace, and on my way thither bought an eighteen-penny copy of Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. Arriving at the Palace I sat down in a quiet corner to look through its pages. Fascinated, I read and read; hour succeeded hour; swings and roundabouts passed into oblivion.

¹ I have before me a copy of Dicks’s People’s Edition, price sixpence, of *Bleak House* (unabridged like all Dickens’s works in the issue) with forty illustrations by H. K. Browne.

Precocious Reading Habits

The favourite literary pabulum of us boys at school, however, was less classical: "Penny Bloods" and other Weeklies issued in penny sheets, such as *Sweeny Todd the Barber*. Romantic stories of highwaymen circulated freely from boy to boy until reduced to rags: Dick Turpin, Spring-heeled Jack, the gallant Claude Duval, gracefully dancing on the greensward with the ladies he had robbed, Edith the Captive, Edith Heron, with what impatience we awaited the issue of the next number, with what absorbing interest we followed the thrilling adventure! Demoralizing literature? Well, none of us in after life adopted highway robbery as a profession, although each desired to possess a Black Bess and to effect exciting escapes from pursuing Bow Street Runners by "rides to York." What it did was to evoke the reading habit, and to one boy at least that was a valuable endowment. Nor did the *Boys of England* proffer a much healthier pabulum to the hunger of the young barbarian for extra-lawful adventure. I can even to-day visualize the number I read with the lovely alliterative title of its opening story, "Alone in the Pirates' Lair"—and the front-page illustration—Jack Harkaway, sitting before the

Precocious Reading Habits

pirate on the island, open-eyed, drinking in the recital of his hazardous deeds; he, the pirate, pointing to the indentations on the blade of the cavalry sabre held in his hand, each of which commemorated a skull split in the exercise of his profession. It was not until the later 'seventies that the publication of the *Boy's Own Paper* provided periodical literature of a high literary and ethical standard for boys.

A certain distrust of general literacy and of increased facilities for reading still survived—a distrust which in earlier days regarded Hannah More's proposal, that the poor should be taught to read the Bible, as dangerous; for if the poor were taught to read the Bible their reading wouldn't stop at that. So hostile was the feeling against increased facilities for reading that Spedding wrote from the Colonial Office in 1840, in answer to Carlyle's invitation to lend his name to the proposed formation of the London Library, "my prospects of advancement in the Office might be seriously injured by taking a forward part in an enterprise of this kind."

Later, when Board-schools were instituted, and compulsory elementary education became the law of the land, much outcry was raised

Precocious Reading Habits

against the base standard of reading such education engendered among the "lower orders." I well remember, at the time (1891) when the "Whisky Money" was deflected to technical education and led to a general creation of technical institutes in provincial towns—I remember being called to Cambridge to act as judge at an exhibition of basket-work at the local institute. My office concluded, I strolled about, admiring the beauty of the architecture of the colleges and the charm of the riverside. Passing by the back of King's College I caught sight of a punt lying along the river bank wherein lounged two reading undergraduates. Now, thought I, will be evident the ennobling standard of reading which public school and university teaching develop in the upper classes. I drew near and looked. *They were reading the "Pink 'Un!"*

The more serious defect in national school education was the absence of any playing-field games—games organized by the boys themselves—with their fine training in rapidity and alertness of judgment, in self-reliance, in self-command, in the meaning of the phrase "That 's not cricket," in taking punishment, in the give and take of life, in the evocation of

Precocious Reading Habits

the team spirit and of school patriotism and emulation. Physical training there was none. Football and cricket were unknown. The limited area of the gravelled playground, bounded by the school-windows, permitted only of such ego-centric games as marbles and tops. The most thrilling of the latter was the game of "growlers," and the boy who could boast of the largest spoils that fell to his peg of steel was as proud as Achilles of his spear, or a redskin brave of his string of scalps. The playing-fields of East London for us poorer boys were the streets; but from the associations of the streets we children were rigorously withheld. Swimming, the only athletic exercise I was able to practise, I had learned when at Middleton Street, in the scented and opacous waters of the Regent's Canal at the price of a narrow escape from drowning.

On one memorable occasion a few of us boys were caught playing in the disused churchyard that lay between the school and the church. We were kept in during the dinner-hour and made to write forty times on our slates, "The churchyard is consecrated ground and I must not play therein."

Chapter IV

WHAT TO DO WITH THE BOY? A BASKET-
MAKER'S APPRENTICE. THE CELLAR IN
HART STREET

THE next rung of the ladder brings me at twelve years of age to the end of schooldays, and the problem then arose: What to do with the boy? Evidently I was an apt pupil, for, later, on being measured for a suit of clothes at an East End tailor's, the cutter who measured me asked, when I gave my name, did I as a boy attend St. James-the-Less schools, for the name recalled memories of one of that name who was first in the school for two years in succession when he was at school there—a fact I had forgotten.

The question soon came to be debated between my parent and grandparent (the latter could well have met the cost)—Should the boy be sent to continue his education at a boarding school? It was before the excellent Rector of Bishopsgate — “Hang-Theology-Rogers” —

A Basket-Maker's Apprentice

had provided secondary education for East London by the institution of Bishopsgate School, to which my two younger brothers were sent. The prenominal adjective arose in this way. At the first meeting of the promoters, one raised the question of religious difficulties. "Oh!" said the rector, who was in the chair, "Hang Theology, let's get to business."

There was no doubt, however, at Spitalfields as to the reading of the Church Catechism. The future conditional tense found no favour there. My appointed station in life *was* that of a basket-maker, and straightway I was set to work at the elementary stages, as an informal apprentice at eighteenpence a week with dinner and tea—a welcome addition to the family budget. Hours were long: a day of twelve hours for us boys. For men, the workshop hours, before the general swarming of the working classes to the suburbs, were from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. except for a brief period at the spring and autumn equinoxes, when lighting-up time ended or began: the latter event being celebrated by the men with a sing-song held in the workshop to the stimulus of beer and tobacco.

A Basket-Maker's Apprentice

As a boy I failed adequately to appreciate the rejoicing, for it meant a reversion to the longer hours. To the men, however—all work was paid by the piece—it meant a return to normal earning facilities. Leaving-off time on Saturday was five o'clock. The workman paid for his light, and gas-money was deducted from his wages. Devotion to St. Monday, with greater or less piety, was general, but on Fridays the nose-bag was put on in compensation. The working day of 1930 would have seemed to us of the 'sixties and 'seventies a Saturday half-holiday with its eight o'clock to five, and the week, a week of Saturdays. Fifteen hours was the normal day in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the Factory Act of 1850 reduced the working-day of 6 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. to 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. only so far as concerned young persons and women.

Wages ranged from about thirty or less shillings to two pounds (exceptional and rare) a week. Men lived near their employment. Wife or child brought the breakfast and other meals to the shop; the master knew the womenfolk and children of his men; he was the deliverer of his people and advanced money for confinements, which was paid back

A Basket-Maker's Apprentice

in instalments; he knew and sympathized with the vicissitudes of their lives—a more human relation between master and man than that of the cash nexus of modern times.

Membership of a benefit society was general and, by an unwritten law of the workshop, the lighter forms of work were reserved for the older men. When powers failed—the workhouse. I had the good fortune to be trained under Dan Murphy, a fine specimen of the Irish race, generally reputed to be the best craftsman in London, the Michael Angelo of the art, for whom masters would compete to have in their shop. He was a rapid, as well as an economic and excelling worker, and never “put the Roman ¹ in.” The value of such a pacemaker and master-hand to me was inestimable.

The “lady basket-maker” in those days was unknown, for the greater part of the work then made demanded the use both of feet and hands, and feminine costume, unlike now, was inappropriate. One sturdy wench, however, used to buy bolts of watered luke at our grandfather's, which she made at home into

¹ It would be interesting to know the origin of this workshop locution for scamped work, such as dropping a stake or two and coarsening the slewing.

A Basket-Maker's Apprentice

alligators,¹ and sold at Billingsgate Fish Market. This lady was reputed to possess an adequate command of the local idiom known as "billingsgate," and to be able to hold her own in objurgatory contests with the fish porters.

How often is the direction of one's life determined by the sport of chance! During schooldays, as a chorister in a Crystal Palace concert of five thousand voices, organized to demonstrate the value of the Tonic Sol-Fa system of musical notation, I, after the concert, fooling about as boys are wont to do with some exhibits of machinery, crushed my right thumb in the cogs and was taken to a surgeon for treatment by a neighbour of ours who fortunately happened to be near. The surgeon advised amputation, but our neighbour refused consent, and decided on temporary treatment. On reaching home our local doctor's advice was to trust to the *vis medicatrix naturæ*, and the thumb was saved. Now, the thumb is the one essential part of the basket-maker's anatomy, as indeed, the poet Emerson tells:

The sallow knows the basket-maker's thumb.

Had amputation been performed, whatever

¹ Long shallow baskets for packing and transit purposes.

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function I might have served in life, it would not have been that of a basket-maker.

The latter part, however, of my apprenticeship days, from fifteen years of age onwards, was passed at a cellar, opposite Seething Lane, where Pepys lived, and St. Olave's Church in Hart Street, Crutched Friars, where Pepys worshipped and where one Lord's day in 1660 the parson, Mr. Mills, "did nibble at the Common Prayer." There, my duties, until promoted to a journeyman's plank, included the delivery by truck, or on head or shoulders, of loads of the hampers, oak and deal laths, sawdust, etc., which we supplied to the various wine and spirit merchants' cellars in the neighbourhood, not infrequently to be rewarded with a glass of port or sherry by the cellarmen. Many a glass of sherry had I in the cellars of the famous old firm of Ruskin, Telfourd and Domecq, in Billiter Street. Cellarmen treated wine with the familiarity that breeds contempt, and greatly preferred a glass of ale. Water, in the professional terminology of the cellar, was never water; it was always referred to as liquor.

At my initiation, conditions at Hart Street were primitive. A brick drain ran through

The Cellar in

the unpaved, rat-infested cellar; lighting was supplied by a tallow candle or a rush-light fixed in a cleft stick with a pointed end, which was thrust into the brickwork. We sat at work on elm planks laid on bare mother earth, until later, owing to complaints of bad smells by the tenants of the offices above, the ground was cemented over. Measurements of common slewed hampers and other coarse work, even as late as the London Basket-maker's Wages List of 1865, were specified in *nails* and the measure then in use was literally a *yard-stick*—a stick studded at intervals of $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches with brass-headed nails. The weekly Dr. and Cr. account between man and master, of work reckoned and work turned out, was chalked on a blackened tablet of wood, 10 inches by 3, which was suspended over the man's plank in the workshop. No fire was provided in the coldest weather.

In 1868 we again found ourselves domiciled at Quaker Street with our now widowed grandfather. Domestic conditions at Spitalfields were primitive. No lavatories, no baths were provided in houses of our status: the necessary retreat was at the end of the yard. Once a year only, our father, or grandfather,

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indulged in a tub—a great occasion—that of the yearly journey by train to Berkshire to deal for a crop of osiers at a farm at Twyford, because “if there were an accident¹ on the railway it would be so disgraceful not to be found clean when undressed.”

It was but a few years since the united parishes of St. George-the-Martyr and St. Andrew's, Holborn, held a poll to decide whether or not to build baths and washhouses for the poor. The proposal was defeated by a majority of 174. A story even to-day goes the round of Oxford and Cambridge to the effect that the members of a certain college sent a deputation to the Master praying that baths might be provided for the undergraduates in residence. “Baths! Baths!” exclaimed the Master. “What do they want baths for? The men are only here eight weeks at a time.”

In earlier days, by the way, an osier bed was rented at Chiswick and over the mantelpiece at Quaker Street were suspended the stirrups and pistol used by our grandfather when the journeys thither were made on Paddy, the old Irish horse's back. The osiers were floated

¹ Travelling by rail was still regarded as involving risk to life and limit.

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down the Thames in barges to Kennet Wharf and delivered to our yard. It was a great time for us children when in the early spring the bolts of green osiers came in with the golden-hued male catkins in bloom. The willow is a dioecious plant, and so far as I remember the male sex was chiefly cultivated.

My working days at the cellar in Hart Street, where I passed fifteen years of my working and student life, brought me into relation with Golbourn, the venerable old foreman there (an excellent and trusted servant of my grandfather), who had been a follower of Robert Owen. He, as a boy working there soon informed me, with hushed voice, was a man "what didn't believe in no God." As a fact he was a theist of the Paine and Voltaire type, who remembered buying a copy of the *Age of Reason* at a shop in the Strand, which was delivered to him by means of a sliding box, let down a shaft from above, in which the purchase money was placed and the book sent down to the buyer.

It was then a criminal offence to sell the *Age of Reason*. Richard Carlile in 1819 had been fined £1500 and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for publishing and selling

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Paine's works. On 31 December, 1792, Paine was burned in effigy on Market Hill, Cambridge,¹ and in 1842 George Jacob Holyoake, a founder of the Co-operative Movement, was sentenced at Gloucester to six months' imprisonment for blasphemy—the revolting story of his sufferings may be read in *The Last Trial by Jury for Atheism in England*, published in 1851.² I knew well the venerable old reformer. He was with us until 1906.

Golbourn was a man of high character and integrity, educated above the average basket-maker of the time, not all of whom were even literate—one who read *The Times* each night, a copy of which he borrowed from a public-house near his home at the cost of a penny.³

Meals at Hart Street, too, were either brought with us, or by wife or child, and eaten on the plank. Dinner, however, in that part of the city was attainable at extremely low

¹ For his *Rights of Man*.

² Holyoake could hardly have foreseen that as late as the eighties of the nineteenth century the editor of the *Freethinker*, G. W. Foote, would suffer imprisonment for blasphemy. Holyoake was the most tolerant and urbane of freethinkers, one who daily read the Bible to his aged mother during her declining years.

³ Golbourn retained many locutions now obsolete. "Gallows" was a common emphatic. Such a deed was "a gallows shame." Such a one was a "gallows fine fellow." At the Quaker Street workshop the Dickens popular locutions survived among the older men.

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charges, and for sixpence a good meal could be had by the purchase of half a pound of beef-steak, fourpence, and bread, one penny, which one took to a public-house in Savage Gardens where for the outlay of another penny for half a pint of beer, the use of a fire was found in the tap-room and a gridiron on which one broiled the steak; knife and fork and plate were also furnished by the good host. At a coffee-house of the old sordid type in Catherine Alley with tall pew-like boxes one could be served with a hot beef-steak pudding, fourpence, known as a bomb-shell, bread, and half a pint of coffee, twopence. The place was not too clean, for the coffee on one occasion betrayed a specimen of the *oniscus murarius* floating on its surface.

Promotion at Hart Street was rapid. In a brief time I qualified for a plank at the usual apprentice wage of two-thirds of my earnings, and, later, on the death of our excellent foreman, whose duties consisted of entering in a day-book and a cash-book the daily transactions of business at a wage of one shilling a day over and above the piecework earnings on the plank, I entered on his duties, by that time a full-blown journeyman.