## The

# Heart of the Empire

DISCUSSIONS OF PROBLEMS OF MODERN CITY LIFE IN ENGLAND. WITH AN ESSAY ON IMPERIALISM

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## **ANALYSIS**

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with some show of reason be regarded as "not so very bad," as writes Mr. Charles Booth, "that a tenth of the population should be reckoned as very poor . . . but when we count up the 100,000 individuals (in East London alone), the 20,000 families, who lead so pinched a life among the population described, and remember that there are in addition double that number who, if not actually pressed by want, yet have nothing to spare, we shrink aghast from the picture. The divergence between these two points of view, between relative and absolute, is in itself enough to cause the whole difference between optimism and pessimism. To judge rightly we need to bear both in mind, never to forget the numbers when thinking of the percentages, nor the percentages when thinking of the numbers. This last is difficult to those whose daily experience or whose imagination brings vividly before them the trials and sorrows of individual They refuse to set off and balance the happy hours of the same class, or even of the same people, against these miseries; much less can they consent to bring the lot of other classes into the account, add up the opposing figures, and contentedly carry forward a credit balance. In the arithmetic of woe they can only add or multiply; they cannot subtract or divide. In intensity of feeling such as this, and not in statistics, lies the power to move the world." And the same writer is emphatic upon the secondary effect being the real crux of the problem of poverty in great cities. "To the rich," he says, "the very poor are a sentimental interest. To the poor they are a crushing load. The poverty of the poor is mainly the result of the competition of the very poor." "The disease from which society suffers is the unrestricted competition in industry of the needy and helpless." And so convinced is he that this is the key to the whole position, that he advocates drastic remedies, the intervention of the State and the organisation of semi-socialistic labour communities, to ensure, even at enormous cost, the elimination of the unfit.

2. The second of the special scourges is the Overcrowding. While men slept the evil has swollen into colossal dimensions; until now suddenly awakened we find ourselves jammed in hopeless numbers within a limited area and fiercely elbowing ourselves for room to live. Laissez faire has here presented an object-lesson which he that runs may read: the squalid inequality of unchecked private enterprise, operating through the greater part of the nineteenth century, has bound an almost insupportable burden upon the shoulders of the succeeding generations. From every part the cry arises: increasing rents, ravaging the family income; poor and insufficient accommodation, houses split up into tenements, tenements into rooms, rooms sublet or crowded with relays of sleepers. A population of nearly a million—larger than the total white population of South Africa-is living in London at the present time illegally overcrowded. The whole would be turned into the streets in a few weeks' time if the local authorities were to insist on the enforcement of the law. Of what these figures mean when converted into specific individual cases only those can testify who have actually lived in the congested districts. Fourteen living in one small room, one of whom was sickening for the small-pox; a little girl dying and her body kept a week in the sleepingroom of the family; a man, wife, and children driven from house to house and finally precipitated into the streets on a January night, able to pay for rooms but unable to find any—these are actual cases in the limited experience of the present writer. But apart from certain staggering examples, it is easy to discern the general effect upon the average population. Overcrowding occurs per room; well-meant attempts to remedy this have caused overcrowding per area; the snatching of every available vacant space, the erection of gigantic buildings many stories high, the conversion of large tracts of the town into a Peabody-and-asphalte city. No one observant of even the superficial characteristics of the ghetto population could fail to note the result of these two forms of overcrowding: the listlessness and lassitude so manifest in the people of our crowded streets; the anæmia of town life so strikingly prevalent in our city children, limited in exercise to the playground of the street in the heavy. "twice-breathed air." Before the virility and health of the country life that has been entering the city during the past half-century, the street-reared population crumples up almost without a struggle. The higher walks of labour are almost all trodden by men who can trace in the second or third generation a country ancestry. Partially concealed by this impetuous influx, the results of the congestion are but now commencing to show themselves. As the proportion of the town bred to the country bred increases these will become more widely manifest. The death-rate, indeed, steadily falls; but this appears due far more to improved sanitation and increased medicinal skill than to an improved vitality. More of the unfit now drag out a stunted existence, and transmit the bloodless, ineffective type to succeeding generations. Phthisis and zymotic diseases ravage our packed populations. passing in and out of the dwellings, and especially those intimately acquainted with the children, can testify to a perpetual presence of a multitude of minor maladies weariness, small nervous disorders, irritability, digestive disorganisations, producing a sum total of preventable suffering never heard of outside the boundaries of our dwellings, the tax paid by the poor for the new life of the

The repair of the desolation of past neglect will demand the energies of the best minds of England for at least a century. At present the restorative forces are scarcely, if at all, holding their own. Statesmen utter platitudes, philanthropists wring their hands, litterateurs call for a But meanwhile public bodies peck at the dictator. problem, urbanely gratified if they can house a few thousand persons in a city of four millions. Business extension more than destroys the accommodation these annually supply. The mere natural increase of population continually deepens the evil. On the edges and outskirts of the city private greed creates great working-class suburbs of jerry-built houses, which will form in the future a problem as desolate as the problem now resident in the central districts. The centre of Imperialism, as Lord Rosebery is never tired of reiterating, rests in London. With a perpetual lowering of the vitality of the Imperial Race in the great cities of the kingdom through over-crowding in room and in area, no amount of hectic, feverish activity on the confines of the Empire will be able to arrest the inevitable decline.

3. The third of the particular scourges of the labouring quarters is the drink traffic. Here, again, widespread illusion exists. The poor as a whole are not drunken. proportion, small compared to the immensity of numbers, does indeed habitually exceed; and the permanent squalor of many a slum, and the records of the police-court missionary and magistrate, and the tragedies of ruined homes are to be found scattered with too manifest existence throughout the whole dark area. But far the greater number of the inhabitants lead a sober life, only breaking out into occasional excess on "mafficks" of authorised national rejoicing, on the days of public holiday, or on the last night of the year, and other periods of unusual solemnity. The real injury of the drink traffic as a factor in the social conditions of our great cities is not the occasional drunkenness but the habitual soaking. Despite the reduction in the number of licensed houses, the drink bill steadily rises. Despite the increasing complexity of wants in the new town-life, the percentage of the family income spent in this unproductive luxury shows no diminution. Men never drunk are yet found in a perpetual sodden or fuddled condition; and there can be no doubt that the "moderate drinking" is an enormous yearly tax on the productiveness of British industry. It is not for nothing that in America, which even now is seizing our place as the leader in the world's manufactures, the consumption of alcohol per head is less than half that found in England; and this despite higher wages, a more exacting and strenuous life, and a far superior standard of comfort. However admirable alcohol may be as a stimulant to bodily welfare or good fellowship, any one at all intimately acquainted with the life of the ghetto must perforce acknowledge that "moderate" drinking is a curse to our packed populations, reducing the whole standard of life and terribly handicapping our