

THE DOOM OF THE GREAT CITY

BEING

THE NARRATIVE OF A SURVIVOR

WRITTEN A.D. 1942

BY

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"— How can I
Repress the horror of my thoughts, which fly
The sad remembrance?"
Sir J. Denham

TAPUAEHARURU, TAUPO, N.Z.,
February 2, 1942

MY DEAR GRANDCHILDREN.

It is with feelings of no little pleasure that I take up my pen on this my eighty-fourth birthday, and sit down to write to you collectively. I am about to give effect to a narrative that has been long desired on your part, as it has been long promised on mine, for I feel that if delayed any longer, it may be that I shall pass away without having told it. But first, you will be glad to hear that I am still hale and hearty; and how could it be otherwise, living as I do in the most beautiful climate of the world, surrounded with every comfort, and content to bear my weight of years, living again in the joys and pleasures of the numerous family with which I have been blessed? And what a family it is, to be sure, when you come to think of it! There were no less than forty-three of them, old and young, big and little, who came to bid , "Grandfather" good morning to-day, and to wish him all the customary felicitations; and then, too, what a pile of letters have I had from all of you who are at a distance in your various homes scattered over Australasia! We have had quite a fete all the morning, turning the assemblage to a profit by setting everyone to work at picking fruit in the peach-orchards and orangeries, which is just in proper condition for market; and splendid fun there was, I can assure you, and no little flirtation either among the youngsters. So you see that, at any rate here in Zealandia we keep to our old-fashioned ways of combining business with pleasure. My *great*-granddaughter, little Laura, who, as you know, is my constant companion, acted as mistress of the ceremonies, and very well, I must say, did she perform her part. At dinner, after they had drunk my health and I had responded, it was little Laura who stood up and proposed the toast of "Our absent friends, all round Lake Taupo," — which I need not say was drunk enthusiastically. But I will not go further into these details, for I have set myself to write about another and far different subject.

It was after they had all gone some to catch the last train, and others to take one or other of the lake steamers, which all depart from Tapuaeharuru before sunset — that Laura came to me and., standing demurely before me with her hands crossed behind, made this pretty little speech, in which I dare say she had been carefully coached by her elders:—

"Dear Grandpapa," she said, "your children, grand-children, and great-grandchildren, who love and revere you so much, earnestly and humbly implore you to tell them the story of the GREAT EVENT of your life."

And then the dear little puss kissed me and ran away.

Well, of course I was a little shocked, for you know what my feelings have always been upon this subject; but I cannot say I was wholly unprepared for such a request. Hints have often reached me from many of you to the same effect, and particularly of late have I been admonished to break the silence I have so long imposed upon myself. I am one of the very few survivors now living, of the greatest calamity that perhaps this earth has ever witnessed, and there are doubtless many besides yourselves who would be glad to hear all I have to say about it. Sixty years ago to-day it is since the event happened, and for nearly the same number of years I have forborne to speak or write anything referring to it, in the endeavour to cloud my memory, if I might, by so doing. It was from the same reason that I came here so many years ago came to what was then almost a solitude, almost a virgin

wilderness, though now one of our most populous rural districts. But the fateful remembrance of that long-ago catastrophe is still as fresh in my mind as it was fifty-nine years back, and even now, as I recall the scenes I witnessed, and marshal my recollections for you, nature recoils in horror, and I shudder at the task before me.

I shall confine myself simply to narrating so much as fell directly within my own observation which is what you desire, I think for the full accounts are matters of common information; while your histories will tell you, better than I could, of preceding events, and more particularly of those great changes which followed and partly resulted from the stupendous accident.

To-day, besides being my birthday, is a sad and solemn anniversary, commemorative to the whole world of an awful fatality, and carrying me, who was myself a partaker in it, back to the dread event now buried under sixty years of time. It has always been my practice to spend the night of the 2nd of February in prayer, in meditation and in communion with Nature in her calmest and most peaceful aspects; to-night I shall spend it in transcribing my terrible reminiscences for you, My grandchildren. Coming from me, your progenitor, and from an actual eyewitness, this relation will bear to you a more vivid reality, though it is probable I can tell you nothing that you have not already learnt through other sources. I am sitting in my comfortable little study, or "libery," as Laura calls it, surrounded by my books, my collections of objects of art and science and natural history, and the numberless little things that by reason of their various associations become priceless relics to an old man. Everything speaks to me of love, of affectionate regard, and of the dear home ties that through all these years have grown up around me here. The French windows are open, and through them comes just a breath of sweet-scented air, just a soft whiff of summer wind, that faintly stirs the honey-suckle and clematis and creepers that twine along the verandah trellis. I look out through the dusky branches of beautiful trees across the fields below, and catch a glimpse of our famous lake sleeping in the moonlight, and the dim outlines of the distant hills beyond. All this tells of peace, of calm rest, and well-earned happiness. And yet as I sit and muse, things present grow obscure; I am again a young man just entering upon the battle-field of life, striving with poverty, struggling with a crowd of others. I am transported back to the land of my birth across the intervening ocean a land of chill and sour skies, where the sun has forgotten how to shine; a land of frost and rain, of mist and snow. I am young, but I am scarcely hopeful, for I am oppressed with many cares; I live amid noise and bustle, amid a throng of idlers and workers, good men and bad, rich and poor; I work hard at employment that demands my best energies and absorbs my young strength, and that yields me but scant repayment; I dwell shut in by bricks and mortar, and crushed by stony hearts; I am one among many, a single toiler among the millions of London!!

At the commencement of the fateful year 1882, my widowed mother, my sister, and I, dwelt together in London. I was a merchant's clerk, and had been so for several years, ever since my father's death, by depriving us, of the means of existence, had altered my prospects from university life and a learned profession *in posse* to business and a high stool *in esse*. My mother, and my sister, who was some years younger than I, had accompanied me to London, when it was settled that I should go into the counting-house of a merchant to whom I had been introduced by a mutual friend. There was a little money in hand, but very little, and we were glad to accept an offer that was made us. This was that we should inhabit the basement floor of a large building in the very heart of the City, receiving our accommodation free of rent and taxes, in consideration of taking care of the rest of the house which was divided into offices and board-rooms, Here we had lived for some half-dozen years, up to the time I am writing of. My income had been fifty pounds a year at first, and was now augmented to eighty: to this was added forty pounds a year, being a sum allowed to my mother by some of her relations. Latterly my sister had begun to add a few shillings every week to the general

stock by fine needlework, so that we were more comfortable than we were at first. But this united income that was now something short of £150 per annum, was little more than sufficient to provide us with the bare-necessities of existence, while every day things seemed to be growing dearer. To us, who had been accustomed all our lives before to all the comforts and little luxuries of modest competence, our straitened means were a sore trial while a residence in the murky atmosphere, the dingy gloom, and the incessant roar of the City, was a piteous exchange from the sweet pastoral quiet, of my father's pleasant rural vicarage. I think our great and absorbing affection for one another supported my mother under all our difficulties, and enabled my sister and me to become pretty well reconciled to the dismal change. We had but few friends in London, for neither our means nor our mode of life were compatible with visiting or receiving visitors. Still we were tolerably happy in each other's society, occasionally recreating ourselves with a trip to the suburbs, or a visit to a theatre. Of the three, I was the only one who showed discontent. I was restless in spirit, and chafed under the irksome restraints of my position. I was passionately fond of the country and country pursuits, and wearied unutterably of the monotonous drudgery of my City life, which I likened to the "hard labour" of a prison; moreover, I endured constant torture of mind at the sight, of my dear ones undergoing hardship, which, despite my most ardent efforts I was powerless to relieve, for, in the words of the Scottish poet, Burns:—

"In many a way, and vain essay, I courted fortune's favour, O,
Some cause unseen still stept between, to frustrate each endeavour, O;
Sometimes by foes I was o'erpowered, sometimes by friends forsaken, O,
And when my hope was at the top, I still was worst mistaken, O."

And there were other causes around us, that,, to my then high spirit and carefully nurtured mind, increased the loathing I felt at our whole situation in life. Such was the position of your grandfather at the eventful epoch of 1882.

I do not think you will find it easy to realize the monstrous proportions of the "Great City." For miles and miles around us on every side were streets and squares and endless ranks of houses, ever extending outwards, and absorbing suburb after suburb beneath stone and brick. The population — some four millions in number — was a nation in itself, and, like nations, the population of London had its individual characteristics. The tendency of modern times has been to curtail the inordinate increase of large cities, and you can best picture London to your minds by supposing an aggregation of our towns and cities, seaports and villages, massed together in one vast conglomeration along the banks of the ancient Thames. Various parts of London had their own distinctive peculiarities, differences in both body and spirit, so to speak. There was a wide contrast in the city of splendid mansions at the West End, for instance, and the factories and artisans' dwellings at the East; while the tone and sentiment in politics, religion, or taste, was strongly adverse in such opposite quarters as Chelsea and Whitechapel; just as the manners and customs of Mayfair differed from those of Walworth. The quarter where we lived, "The City," was a large central area, being the portion of London devoted exclusively to business of every kind; it was the great emporium of the vast commerce of the country, the universal mart or exchange of Britain. By night the "city" was but sparsely populated, while in the day-time the press and throng in every corner of it was something prodigious. But descriptions of London are plentiful, and every school-boy is familiar with them, while much also has been written about its inhabitants at that period; yet I would fair add something to what has been said. It was the opinion I formed at the time, and the opinion I still continue to hold, that London was foul and rotten to the very core, and steeped in sin of every imaginable variety. I was far from being a purist then, and yet I thought so; judge if I should not think so now far more strongly, when simplicity and

openness of manners, truth, and honesty, are of a verity the inheritance of my children's children. Utterly unversed in open vice, from the very nature of your surroundings and bringing up, you could not contemplate the Londoners of those days without a feeling of disgust and loathing springing up within you. And yet London was esteemed as a great centre of religion; hundreds of Christian sects, enthusiastic and sincere, existed within it, and among their votaries were doubtless many who acted upon the principles they professed. They were followers of false gods, perhaps, and, indeed, so we now esteem them; but what of that? Pagan piety and Pagan virtue are piety and virtue still. I might write a long essay upon the singular anomalies of that old-world city, but such is not my present purpose; yet something I will add of what I saw around me to incline me to the belief in the black enormity of London sin.

I was in business, and business I found was an elaborate system of fraud, chicanery, and deceit. He was esteemed an upright man who never broke the *letter* of the law, no matter how he might tamper with its *spirit*, while morality and honest principle in commerce were abstractions of which the law took little notice, and business men less. He was called "smart," and "a sharp, sound, practical' man," who knew how to take advantage of others, and who could enrich himself by impoverishing his fellows in "fair business." In the learned professions — so called — things were much the same. The laws were good, though inordinately cumbrous, and lawyers administered them for their own advantage, and at the expense of their unhappy clients. The law was a terrible engine of justice, but its intricate machinery was clogged with rusty "precedents," and could not be got to move without a liberal oiling in the shape of fees. Hence arose the saying, that the law had one interpretation for the rich, and another altogether for the poor. The medical profession was conducted upon similar principles; the doctor — if he knew how — would keep his patient ill in order to increase his fees, and making suffering and death his daily sport, traded upon them for his own profit. Clergymen and ministers of religion, whether belonging to the State Church or to independent bodies, made "the cure of souls" a means of livelihood; they quoted the maxim, "the labourer is worthy of his hire," applying its point to themselves; they kept alive "religious feeling" among the masses by incessant and endless quarrels among themselves on points of dogma and doctrine, extorting money in the cause of "truth" from the public, and either keeping it themselves or squandering it in various foolish and useless ways. And they made one religion for the rich and another for the poor, as anyone might learn by comparing a sermon preached before a fashionable congregation with one delivered to paupers. The merest infraction of moral integrity in one of the humbler classes was visited as intolerable; among the rich and high-born sin flourished under the hallowing sanction of religion, and vice luxuriated in the shadow of the Church. Purity of life was a simple impossibility, and chastity of soul would have been sought for in vain amongst Londoners. Theatres, music-halls, and similar institutions, appealed to the most depraved appetites; people flocked to gaze admiringly at a fashionable courtesan and her attendant harlots, or thronged to listen to obscene and filthy songs, or to witness indecent exhibitions, especially if these involved the risk of life or limb to the performers. Money flowed into the treasuries when such were the inducements, and eager rivalry in their production was the inevitable consequence. Clergymen, aristocrats, and art professors joined in extolling the stage as "the educator of public taste," while young girls crowded to enter the ballet as the proper road to a life of delightful immorality. The press groaned daily under the weight passing through it of novels which tinctured absolute crimes with poetry and romance, which clothed the worst sensuality in the white robes of innocence, and which taught and argued in favour of every vice. Serial journals adapted to every class, rested their claims to attention on the obscenity, scurrility, or blasphemy of their pages, disguised under a film of moral platitude. Such were some of the causes at work, here were some of their immediate results. Among the higher ranks of society

immorality was so common as to excite but small attention; frequent divorce suits proved this; scandalous disclosures of high life were of common occurrence; they gratified the public taste while serving to show the deeper depths below. Pleasure-seeking being the only employment of the wealthy and governing class, they elevated it into a "cult," and wearied with the tameness of mere harlotry, gluttony, and show, brought "art" to their aid and invented "aestheticism" as a cloak for higher flights of sin. The men of the "upper ten thousand" were trained from their cradles for a life of sensuous enjoyment. They held themselves aloof from commoner clay as from an inferior race, and they looked upon inordinate luxury as their paramount right. In their code of honour the payment of just debts had no place, unless the debt were contracted by gambling among their fellows. The "golden youth" were banded together into social guilds, bearing imbecile insignia, and using mysterious passwords, whose vicious meaning only the initiate might know. They had peopled a whole suburb with the villas of their concubines, whom the stage and the streets had furnished, while their elders sought amusement from almost infantile charms. Strange and unnatural were the crazes and fashions that pervaded this society: wearied with dissipation carried to excess, they were ever seeking new varieties, new emotions, new vices; they worshipped beauty, but it was not the beauty of created Nature, but that of art — and such art! — that most enchanted them. Ladies were divided into two "mondes," the proper and the improper, but it was by no means easy to define the exact limits of either grade. The Phrynes of the period held their court and received adoration from the men, though not recognised by their high-born sisters; yet these were eager to copy the manners, dress, and accomplishments of the courtesan, styling themselves "professional beauties," or veiling their hyper-passionate sensibilities under the pseudonym of "intensity;" while matrimony, even among the most externally decorous, was as much a matter of business as downright mercenary prostitution. The members of this highest rank lived in the very perfection of luxuriousness; their mansions, equipages, and servants, all were on a scale of magnificence as great as could be compassed. Dresses and furniture were splendid and costly. They fared sumptuously every day. Poverty was carefully excluded from their view, and came not within their cognisance, and ultra-extravagance was commended from the pulpit as a means of wisely diffusing wealth, and as an "encouragement to trade." It was said that the spendthrift vanities and caprices of the wealthy were a source of good, promoting industry, and developing arts and sciences among the workers; "wherefore," said these reasoners, "lavish and profuse prodigality is the commendable duty of the rich, as thereby they foster trade and benefit those who minister to their enjoyment." When such theories were generally received, it is needless to say that politicians were blind to comparisons drawn from the history of the latter days of Rome, of Venice, or of Bourbon France. And this state of things had, of course, its dire and disastrous effects upon all grades of society below. People of the next rank, whose wealth had been gained from other sources than that of passive hereditary accumulation, busied themselves in the endeavour to gain admission within the pale of "polite society;" they sought to imitate with exactness every eccentricity of the nobles, and courted ruin to effect their purpose. A step lower, and the same procedure was invested with the grotesque addition of "vulgarity." This abstraction consisted mainly, as I conceived, in a lack of "refinement:" it meant a want of ease and inherent use in forms of speech, manners, and usages; it conveyed the idea of eagerness where cold indifference should have been felt; or it displayed a sense of actual pleasure, where blasé and captious disdain ought only to have been manifested. Throughout the great masses of the middle class, so styled, there beat the mighty pulse of Loudon life. In this section was contained business and professional men of every degree and kind, from the wealthy banker, the opulent trader or manufacturer, and the sordid promoter of bubble companies, down to the struggling professional man, the actor, and the ignoble clerk. It was divided into a multiplicity of grades or strata, the lowest mingling

with the vast democracy of labour below, the highest, by dint of golden passports, passing current among the aristocracy. It was in this division of the social system that the real life of the great city was mainly manifest; here were to be found the chief law-makers and the chief law-breakers; here was every vice most obnoxious to the senses; here, too, was to be found what was left of virtue and goodness. Down through the middle class filtered every evil of aristocratic birth, losing nothing in the process, we may be sure, save the semblance of polish and the grace of courtly elegance; while up from the lowest depths there constantly arose a stream of grosser, fouler moral putrescence, which it would be a libel on the brutes to term merely bestiality. Do not think there was no good in London; there was, much; but it was so encompassed and mixed with evil as to be barely recognisable; while the influences of exuberant vice were such as to warp the integrity of men's ideas of what was right, to benumb their perceptions of moral turpitude, and to lower the standard of excellence to the very mud. Besides, I only set out to tell you something of the wickedness I saw and knew and felt in London; merely a brief epitome, such as might serve to sustain the view I propounded of the guilt of that city. Have I said enough, my grandchildren? But a few words more, and I pass to the dread narrative itself.

There are some of our modern essayists who argue that "London was not such a bad place after all!" There are others, more profound, who yet are blinded by their pity for the sufferers in the fearful tragedy, to such a degree that they fail to see the odious colours of the evil that lies hidden behind the awful pall. Sadly, solemnly, grievingly, I must repeat — the old metropolis of England harboured Vice and Sin as its dearest, most cherished inhabitants. Evil! It was surely seen in the crowded police-courts it was surely seen in the public-houses that stood thick on every street, in the infuriate or imbecile wretches who thronged their bars, in the thousand victim-votaries of Bacchus who reeled daily and nightly to and fro among them, in the huge extent of the traffic in strong drink, in the potency of "the trade" as a political engine, and in the intemperate and misdirected zeal of "temperance" advocates; it was seen most flagrantly on the "day of rest" — a day of horrors to sober citizens when crowds of the democracy pervaded suburbs, parks, and streets, flooding them with a riotous mob, making day and night hideous with the roaring of licentious songs, swearing and obscenity, turning for inspiration to the public-house — their only refuge — and not to the church, and holding nothing and nobody sacred from their ruffianly horse-play and outrageous mischief; why, certain great thoroughfares — notably on the Surrey side were perilous for decent pedestrians after dark on any night, but especially on Sundays, and the lady had need of stout protectors who ventured to encounter the gangs of blatant ruffians that asserted supremacy within them. Prostitution — I do not like to enlarge upon such a topic, but I must if I am to paint the picture faithfully prostitution flourished so abundantly in London as scarcely to be looked upon as a vice at all, except by the most rigorous. Women of this class haunted the busier streets at all hours of the day, while evening drew them forth in legions, into all parts where pleasure-seekers congregated. Nor were they confined to the streets: they thronged into every place of entertainment, music halls were specially devoted to their interests, at casinos and dancing rooms they were constant attendants; certain theatres — by no means inferior ones — were little better than brothels behind the scenes, while even churches were invaded by these daughters of the horse-leech. They, too, had their social organisations, their infinite variety of cliques, their nice dividing-lines, their numerous distinctions; there was a wide gulf between the concubine of a wealthy patrician herself, perhaps, the nominal lessee, manageress, and leading actress of a popular theatre and the coarse creature who haunted the purlieus of Ratcliffe Highway; while the strata between these two extremes were of endless diversity. Several reasons there were for the growth of this shocking sin in London; a necessary evil in great towns, it had here reached extraordinary limits as an outcome of a false social system, as a result of unwise Governmental regulations,

partly owing to the uncurbed licentiousness of the men, and perhaps due most particularly to the inordinate passion for dress that had eaten up the whole minds of the women of that age. Was this no evil? Feminine indulgence in extravagance of attire was the bane of London at that era. Ladies of the wealthy classes placed no bounds upon their love of dress, and women of every rank imitated those above them. London women, young and old, rich and poor, comely and ugly, were prepared to sacrifice fathers, brothers, husbands, relatives and friends, their homes, religion, consciences, virtue and honour everything, in short — so long as they could flaunt in gorgeous costumes. And men were human then as now, and not too scrupulous in London, as I have said; so what wonder if prostitution flourished rampantly, while Chastity laid down her head and died! Evil! — one seemed to see it everywhere! In those latter days there had been past years of terribly bad weather, destroying harvests, and adding to the iniquity of the land-system of the country a very close cause of distress for all agriculturists; there had been long and severe depression in trade, augmented by the fact that the manufacturing industry of the country was fast going from her, owing to the want of public spirit and the avaricious selfishness that had supplanted the old British feeling, owing also to continual strife between capital and labour. Such distress as was then felt throughout the rural districts of the United Kingdom had seldom before been equalled; it reacted upon the urban populations, and peculiarly on that of London; every profession, trade, or mode of earning money was over-crowded in its ranks and was curtailed in its action; while, if positive destitution overtook the already existing poor, it also touched ranks that had been heretofore far removed from its approach; extensive emigration palliated but could not cure the disease; and the piteous efforts of the thousands who were struggling with adversity in manifold paths of life were something sad to see, sad to remember. Two trades alone seemed to gain where others lost. The sale and consumption of intoxicating drink attained frightful proportions; the traffic that women offered in themselves appeared daily on the increase; both the publican and the prostitute flourished and grew fat. Was not this an appalling spectacle? Yet there was money in London; for the swollen city was at once the richest, and the poorest in the world: side by side with the direst degradation of poverty there existed the superbest opulence. And, you will ask, was there then no charity? had religion no practical work to do? As it seemed to me, looking on the surface and at what was public, religion was occupied with priestly dreams of heaven and of hell, with the building of churches and the multiplication of chapels, with sectarian strife and conflicting dogmas, with cumbrous "proofs" of itself, and with proselytising in distant lands. The poor asked for dinners, and religion handed them divinity; the rich sought pleasure, and were offered purgatory. Occasionally, some hysterical "revival" gave a brief frenzied interest to a particular creed, and left only well-filled asylums as a memento on its subsidence. This was not the religion that London wanted in those days. And charity — it was curiously understood and diabolically practised in its public aspects., Mendicancy was a misdemeanour by law, and paupers were treated worse than felons. The rich man grudgingly doled a meagre crumb from his abundance, denying himself no jot or tith of his accustomed enjoyment, whatever the misery that cried to him for aid; the wealthy trader placed his name high upon subscription lists, and booked the sum he gave among his outlay for advertisements. Societies were formed, cursed with legal strength and status, to "organise" public benefactions, to divert private benevolence into their own channels, to steal ninepence from every shilling that was given for the poor, to stamp out poverty by oppressive measures, and to drive and grind the poor man down into a moral-hell! Such were the public charities of London; yet there were deeds of love and kindness done in the obscurity of that city, that breathed the true spirit of the religion erst preached on the shores of Galilee; and it was often the poor man who was his fellow's best and only benefactor. God knows what it all might have come to under a different train of circumstances; even the lamb-like reverence for his "superiors" of the Briton might

have been worn out at last. Already Republicanism was whispered in the public-houses, and Socialism was not unknown in London, though these were chiefly of exotic growth; while there were men of a different type — men who dared to think for themselves, who looked for the coming of some social cataclysm, and who were heard to compare the "Great City" to those Cities of the Plain that the old Biblical legend tells of as being destroyed by fire from heaven.

Enough! Even a great-grandfather's garrulity must be checked in its reminiscent flow.

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