

THE NEWEST BOOKS.

Prison Houses of Dunedin's Slums

A Mother and Her Children In A Two-Roomed Hovel in Athol Place
—Starvation While "Dick" Seddon Talked of "God's Own
Country"—"Children of the Poor," a N.Z. Slum Story.

SLUMS! Yes, slums in a country scarcely a century old!

Women and children living their lives in hovels—Auckland with its area of squalor and poverty in the neighbourhood of Freeman's Bay, Wellington with its misery paraded in the very shadow of the new National Art Gallery, Christchurch with its urchins and prematurely-aged women in the vicinity of Madras Street and the railway station, Dunedin with its poverty in those places mentioned in New Zealand's first slum story, "Children of the Poor." This book (which Bernard Shaw compares favourably with Lionel Britton's remarkable story, "Hunger and Love"—the book that was meat too strong for 13 of London's publishers) was sent to the publishers, T. Werner Laurie, Limited, by Upton Sinclair, and is the work of a man who is well-known in New Zealand affairs to-day—it is even said that he sits in the House of Representatives. But in the meantime, despite Bernard Shaw's personal plea to him to come out into the open, he prefers to remain anonymous.

"Children of the Poor" is dedicated to "daughters of the poor; to errant brats and guttersnipes; to eaters of left-overs, the wearers of cast-offs; to slaves of the wash-tub and scrub-brush, whose children, nevertheless, go to hell; to teachers who adopt, through compulsion or desire, the methods of the barrack square; to juvenile culprits fleeing from the inescapable hand of the law, sometimes called justice; to that world of superior persons whose teeth have never been sharpened by deprivation, whose sensibilities have never quivered from the shame of their poverty; in particular, to those whose birth—inexcusable audacity—may have offended against Holy Law, whose life, against man's. This story of the gutter."

The book takes one back to the beginning of the century when things were far from easy in New Zealand. The population had grown, but not the markets; there was plenty of unemployment but no such thing as sustenance; there were charitable organisations presided over by flint-eyed women who believed that the poor should be kept "where they belonged"; there was exploitation of labour, and women were kept over wash-tubs and at floor-scrubbing for a few pence a day. Slums had already sprung into existence to house the families who knew nothing but left-overs and cast-offs—and all this in a country that "Dick" Seddon was describing at the time as "God's Own Country."

The author conjures up a picture of his first memories of Dunedin:

I was born in Athol Place, between Hanover and St. Andrew Streets, on Hallows' Green . . . The house consisted of two rooms with a detached lavatory. It still exists, but I never linger when I pass. Memory of the poverty in this house chills my spine. Every brick tells of hunger and

of grinding poverty . . . Every morning there came a parade of prisoners from the city gaol, marching to labour on a piece of Government land at the north end of the city . . . In Athol Place our prison house was our poverty . . . We were fed largely on left-overs. Pledishes containing the remnant of some sweet, bones with some meat still adhering, were given to my mother, who brought them home in paper



JOURNALIST UNMUZZLED.—Robin Hyde, the young New Zealand writer, whose book, "Journalese," was reviewed on this page last week. "Journalese" deals with great men and large ladies and, while it may make one or two New Zealand personalities squirm a little, it will provide bright and interesting reading for the majority.

parcels or wrapped in a shawl. Stale scones, cold, mashed potatoes, odd jugs of soup, all came to our bellies from the tables of the privileged . . . All of which indicates that, although Dunedin was one of the most prosperous and God-fearing cities in the new and rich country of New Zealand, there was poverty in the land and that we were poor even amid poverty.

Albany Porcello (for so the writer calls himself in this story) never knew his father, nor did his mother ever mention him. He had a sister, Rose, who was two years older than himself, and a younger brother, Douglas. His mother spent her days washing and scrubbing, and her children had to fend for themselves almost from the cradle. But she was as good a mother as she could be . . . she toiled her life away in a grim struggle to keep her pitiful little home together. That she failed was not her fault . . . circumstances and poverty made her daughter a Chinaman's whore at the age of 11, and sent this child to her grave before she was out of her teens, and the same conditions sent young Albany to Burnham when he was scarcely 14 years old.

Perhaps the happiest time in this child's unhappy boyhood was the period he spent with his maternal grandparents at Riversdale, that small village

set on a rolling plain some miles from Dunedin. Here life was happy enough, marred only by the drunken outbursts of his grandmother, a lovable soul, despite her weaknesses.

"Poor old Alice MacDonald, God bless her erring soul," if one may use that phrase for its sentimental richness rather than to assert one's faith. Dear old Alice MacDonald, her craving made away with the cash, the furniture, the home, her children's future, and it whetted her husband's roving spirit, easily destroying his ambition. Periodically, she had bouts of sordid drunkenness. Her habits reduced the home to penury, her children to despair, caused her husband to become a wanderer drifting from job to job, always forgiving and pitching a tent anew with the promise of his wife's reformation, a promise and penitence inevitably followed by a fresh outbreak.

But in her sobriety Alice MacDonald was a good wife and a loving grandmother to Albany—Big Mother, he called her. She taught him the folk songs of her own loved Scotland, she told him of the miracles of Nature, she brought to this starved slum-child's spirit something that it would never have found in the squalid hovel in Athol Place. But, in a night, life at Riversdale fell to pieces. Alice MacDonald plunged the household so helplessly into debt in her craving for liquor, that there was nothing left to do but to pack bags and baggage and leave. And so back to his mother was young Albany sent.

Soon after this an event occurred which was to set the faces of Dunedin's righteous more than ever against the Porcello family. A baby was born, a girl, and although the children were delighted with this new plaything, people talked, for Mrs. Porcello was known as a widow. Albany Porcello recalls a Sunday School incident:

A boy came to me at Sunday School and took me aside with triumph in his face. How well I remember, for the incident threw me into internal chaos.

"I want to show you a verse in the Bible."

I looked and read.

"A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that your sister will go to hell."

The sister dies—it was possibly more merciful for the little mite—and Albany is thrown into a state of mental anguish at the thought of the Old Testament's decree. He gets a job as a newspaper runner, but he flees a few pence, and is sacked. He takes to stealing wood and coal to keep a handful of fire burning through the winter. He gets a job in a boot-shop—and loses it again. He is employed in a paper factory, and is happy. But his sister's life—"Is Rose Porcello your sister?"—obtrudes, and the cruel laughter of the men who have sought her favours becomes too much for him and he leaves. He is caught stealing old metal from a factory and is brought before the court.

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