The Day of Silence

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For a week the mid−day thermometer had marked eighty or more in the shade. Golden weather for those who could lie and watch the lazy breakers on a rocky shore, or tread the turf of deep woodland, or drink from the cold stream on some mountain side. But the by−ways of Southwark languished for a cloud upon the sun, for a cooling shower, or a breath from its old enemy, the east. The cry of fretful children sounded ceaselessly. Every window was wide open; women who had nothing to do lounged in the dusk of doorways and in arched passages, their money all gone in visits to the public−house. Ice−cream men found business at a standstill; it was Friday, and the youngsters ha'pence had long ago come to an end. Labourers who depended upon casual employment chose to sleep through the thirsty hours rather than go in search of jobs; a crust of bread served them for a meal. They lay about in the shadowed spots, shirt and trousers their only costume, their shaggy heads in every conceivable attitude of repose.

Where the sun fell the pavement burned like an oven floor. An evil smell hung about the butchers' and the fish shops. A public−house poisoned a whole street with alcoholic fumes; from sewer−grates rose a miasma that caught the breath. People who bought butter from the little dealers had to carry it away in a saucer, covered with a piece of paper, which in a few moments turned oily dark. Rotting fruit, flung out by costermongers, offered a dire regale to little ragamuffins prowling like the cats and dogs. Babies' bottles were choked with thick−curdling milk, and sweets melted in grimy little hands.

Among the children playing in a court deep down by Southwark Bridge was one boy, of about seven years old, who looked healthier and sweeter than most of his companions. The shirt he wore had been washed a week ago, and rents in it had obeyed the needle. His mother−made braces supported a pair of trousers cut short between the knee and ankle, evidently shaped out of a man's garment. Stockings he dispensed with; but his boots were new and strong. Though he amused himself vigorously, he seemed to keep cool; his curly hair was not matted with perspiration, like that of the other youngsters; the open shirt in this time of holiday coat and waistcoat were put away to be in a good condition when school began again showed a body not ill−nourished, and his legs were of sturdy growth. A shouting, laughing, altogether noisy little chap. When his shrill voice rang out, it gave his playmates the word of command; he was ready, too, with his fists when occasion offered. You should have seen him standing with arms akimbo, legs apart, his round little head thrown back and the brown eyes glistening in merriment. Billy Burden, they called him. He had neither brother nor sister a fortunate thing, as it enabled his parents to give him more of their love and their attention than would have been possible if other mouths had clamoured for sustenance. Mrs. Burden was very proud of him, and all the more decent women in the court regarded Billy with affectionate admtion than would have been possible if other mouths had clamoured for sustenance. Mrs. Burden was very proud of him, and all the more decent women in the court regarded Billy with affectionate admiration. True, he had to be kept in order now and then, when he lost his temper and began to punch the heads of boys several years older than himself; but his frank, winsome face soon overcame the anger of grown−up people.

His father, Solomon Burden by name, worked pretty regularly at a wharf on the Middlesex side, and sometimes earned as much as a pound a week. Having no baby to look after, his mother got a turn of work as often as possible, chiefly at warehouse−cleaning and the like. She could trust little Billy to go to school and come home at the right time; but holidays, when he had to spend the whole day out−of−doors, caused her some anxiety, for the child liked to be off and away on long explorations of unknown country — into Lambeth, or across the river to the great London streets, no distance tiring him. Her one fear was lest he should be run over. To−day he

had promised to keep well within reach of home, and did so. At Mrs. Burden's return from a job in Waterloo Road he was found fast asleep on the landing. She bent over him, and muttered words of tenderness as she wiped his dirty face with her apron.

Of course, they had only one room — an attic just large enough to hold a bed, a table, and Billy's little mattress down on the floor in a corner. Their housekeeping was of the simplest: a shelf of crockery, two saucepans, and a frying−pan supplied Mrs. Burden with all she needed for the preparation of meals. Apparel was kept in a box under the bed, where also was the washing−basin. Up to a year ago they had had a chest of drawers; but the hard winter had obliged them to part with this.

When Mrs. Burden unlocked and opened the door, the air within was so oppressive that she stood for a moment and drew a deep breath. The sound of the key wakened Billy, who sprang up joyfully.

'Ain't it been 'ot again, mummy!' the boy exclaimed. 'There was a 'bus−horse fell dead. Ben Wilkins seen it!'

'I a'most feel as if I could drop myself,' she answered, sinking upon the bed. 'There ain't no hair to breathe: I wish we wasn't under the roof.'

She stood up again and felt the ceiling — it was some six inches above her head.

'My gracious alive! It's fair bakin'.'

'Let me feel — let me feel!'

She lifted him in her arms, and Billy proved for himself that the plaster of the ceiling was decidedly warm. Nevertheless, sticks had to be lighted to boil the kettle. Father might come home any moment, and he liked his cup of tea.

As she worked about, the woman now and then pressed a hand to her left side, and seemed to breathe with difficulty. Sweat−drops hung thick upon her face, which was the colour of dough. On going downstairs to draw water for the kettle she took a quart jug, and after filling this she drank almost the whole of it in one long draught. It made her perspire still more freely; moisture streamed from her forehead as she returned to the upper story, and on arriving she was obliged to seat herself.

'Do you feel bad, mummy?' asked the child, who was accustomed to these failings of strength when his mother came home from a day's work.

'I do, Billy, hawful bad; but it'll go in a minute. Put the kittle on — there's a good boy.'

She was a woman of active habits, in her way a good housewife, loving moderate cleanliness and a home in order. Naturally, her clothing was coarse and begrimed; she did the coarsest and grimiest of work. Her sandy hair had thinned of late; it began to show the scalp in places. There was always a look of pain on her features, and her eyes were either very glassy or very dull. For thirty years — that is, since she was ten years old — struggle with poverty had been the law of her life, and she remained victorious; there was always a loaf in the house, always an ounce of tea; her child had never asked in vain for the food demanded by his hearty appetite. She did not drink; she kept a guard upon her tongue in the matter of base language; esteemed comely by her equals, she had no irregularity of behaviour wherewith to reproach herself. Often enough at variance with her husband, she yet loved him; and Billy she loved more.

About seven o'clock the father came home; he clumped heavily up the stairs, bent his head to pass the doorway, and uttered a good−natured growl as he saw the table ready for him.

'Well, Bill, bwoy, can you keep warm?'

'Sh' think so,' the child answered. 'Mummy's bad again with the 'eat. There ain't no air in this bloomin' 'ouse.'

'Kick a 'ole in the roof, old chap!'

'Wish I could!'

Solomon flung off his coat, and turned up the sleeves of his shirt. The basin, full of water, awaited him; he thrust his great head into it and made a slop over the floor. Thereat Mrs. Burden first looked, then spoke wrathfully. As his habit was, her husband retorted, and for a few minutes they wrangled. But it was without bitterness, without vile abuse. Domestic calm as understood by the people who have a whole house to themselves is impossible in a Southwark garret; Burden and his wife were regarded by the neighbours, and rightly, as an exemplary pair; they never came to blows, never to curses, and neither of them had ever been known to make a scene in public.

Burden had a loud, deep voice; whether he spoke angrily or gently, he could be heard all over the house and out in the court. Impossible for the family to discuss anything in private. But, like all their neighbours, they

accepted such a state of things as a matter of course. Everybody knew all about everybody else; the wonder was when nothing disgraceful came to listening ears.

'Say, Bill,' remarked the man, when he had at length sat quietly down to his tea, 'how would you like to go in a boat tomorrow afternoon?'

'Shouldn't I just!'

'Old Four−arf is goin' to have a swim,' Burden explained to his wife; 'wants me to go with him; and I feel it 'ud do me good, weather like this. Bunker's promised him a boat at Blackfriars Bridge. Shall I take the kid?'

Mrs. Burden looked uneasy, and answered sharply.

'What's the good 0' asking when you've spoke of it before the boy ?'

'Well, why shouldn't I take him? You might come along, too: only we're a−goin' to strip up beyond Chelsea.'

This was kindness, and it pacified the wife.

'I couldn't go before six,' she said.

'What's the job?'

'Orfices near St. Bride's — Mrs. Robins wants 'elp; she sent her Sally over to me this mornin'. It'll be an all−day job; eighteen−pence for me.'

'Bloomin' little, too. You ain't fit for it this weather.'

'I'm all right!'

'No, you ain't. Billy just said as you'd been took bad, an' I can see it in yer eyes. Have a day at 'ome, mother.'

'Don't you go fidgetin' about me. Take Billy, if you like; but just be careful. No puttin' of him into the water.'

"Tain't likely.'

'Cawn't I bathe, dad?' asked Billy.

'Course you cawn't. We're going to swim in the middle of the river, Jem Pollock an' me — where it's hawful deep, deep enough to drownd you fifty times over.'

'The other boys go bathin',' Billy remonstrated.

'Dessay they do,' cried his mother, 'but you won't — so you know! If you want for to bathe, arst Mrs. Crowther to lend you her washin'−tub, and fill it with water. That won't do you no 'arm, and I don't mind if you make a bit of a splash, s'long as you don't wet the bed through.'

After all it was a home, a nesting place of human affections — this attic in which the occupants had scarcely room to take half−a−dozen steps. Father, mother, and child, despite the severing tendency of circumstances, clung together about this poor hearth, the centre of their world. In the strength of ignorance, they were proof against envy; their imaginations had never played about the fact of social superiority, which, indeed, they but dimly understood. Burden and his wife would have been glad, now and then, of some addition to the weekly income; beyond that they never aspired. Billy, when he had passed the prescribed grades of school, would begin to earn money: it did not much matter how: only let the means be honest. To that the parents looked forward with anticipation of pride. Billy's first wages! It would warm their hearts to see the coins clutched in his solid little fist. For this was he born, to develop thews and earn wages.

It did not enter into their conception of domestic happiness to spend the evening at home, sitting and talking together. They had very little to say: their attachment was not vocal. Besides, the stifling heat of the garret made it impossible to rest here until the sun had long set. So, when tea was finished, Billy ran down again into the street to mingle with his shouting comrades; Mrs. Burden found a seat on the doorstep, where she dozed awhile, and then chatted with bare−armed women; and Solomon sauntered forth for his wonted stroll 'round the 'ouses.' At ten o'clock the mother took a jug to the neighbouring beerhouse and returned with a 'pot' — that is to say, a quart — of 'four ale', which she and Solomon drank for supper. The lad was lying sound asleep on his mattress, naked but for the thin shirt which he wore day and night; the weather made bedclothes a superfluity.

Saturday morning showed a change of sky. There were clouds about, and a wind blew as if for rain. At half−past six Solomon was ready to start for work. Billy still slept, and the parents subdued their voices lest they should wake him.

'If it's wet,' said Mrs. Burden, 'you won't go on the river — will you?'

'Not if it's thorough wet. Leave the key with Billy, and if we go you'll find it on the top of the door.'

He set forth as usual: as he had done any day these eight years, since their marriage. Word of parting seemed unnecessary. He just glanced round the room, and with bent head passed on to the landing. His wife did not look

after him; she was cutting bread and butter for Billy. Solomon thought only of the pleasant fact that his labour that day ended at one o'clock, and that in the afternoon he would perhaps have a swim. Mrs. Burden, who had suffered a broken night, looked forward with dreary doggedness to ten hours or more of scrubbing and cleaning, which would bring in eighteen−pence. And little Billy slept the sleep of healthy childhood.

By mid−day the clouds had passed, but the heat of the sun was tempered; broad light and soft western breeze made the perfection of English summer. This Saturday was one of the golden days of a year to be long remembered.

When he came home from work, Solomon found Billy awaiting him, all eagerness. They went up to the attic, and ate some dinner which Burden had brought in his pocket — two−pennyworth of fried fish and potatoes, followed by bread and cheese. A visit to the public−house, where Billy drank from his father's pewter, and they were ready to start for Blackfriars Bridge, where Solomon's friend, Jem Pollock — affectionately known by the name of his favourite liquor, 'Four−half' — had the use of a boat belonging to one Thomas Bunker, a lighterman. It was not one of the nimble skiffs in which persons of a higher class take their pleasure upon the Thames, but an ungainly old tub, propelled by heavy oars. Solomon and his friend, of course, knew that the tide would help them upwards; it wanted about an hour to flood. He was a jovial fellow, this Jem Pollock, unmarried, and less orderly in his ways of life than Sol Burden; his nickname did him no injustice, for whenever he had money he drank. A kindly temper saved him from the worst results of this bibulous habit; after a few quarts of ale he was at his best, and if he took more it merely sent him to sleep. When Solomon and Billy found him on the stairs at the south side of the bridge he had just taken his third pint since dinner, and his red, pimply face beamed with contentment.

'Come along there!' he roared from below. 'Brought that bloomin' big son of yours for ballast, Sol?'

'He can steer, can Bill.'

'He won't 'ave a chawnce. There ain't no bloomin' rudder on this old ship.'

Billy stepped into the boat, and his father followed; but their friend was not yet ready to depart. The cause of his delay appeared when a lad came running down the stairs with a big jar and a tin mug.

'You don't s'ppose I'm a−goin' without a drop 0' refreshment,' Pollock remarked. 'It's water, this is; the best supplied by the Lambeth Water Company. I've took the pledge.'

This primitive facetiousness helped them merrily off. Billy sat in the stern; the men each took an oar; they were soon making good way towards Westminster.

Their progress was noisy: without noise they could not have enjoyed themselves. The men's shouts and Billy's shrill pipe were audible on either bank. Opposite the Houses of Parliament they exchanged abusive pleasantries with two fellows on a barge; bellowing was kept up until the whole distance between Lambeth Bridge and that of Westminster taxed their lungs. At Vauxhall Jem Pollock uncorked his jar and poured out a mugful of tawny ale, vastly to the boy's delight, for Billy had persisted in declining to believe that the vessel contained mere water. All drank. Solomon refused to let Billy have more than half a mug, to the scorn of Jem Pollock, who maintained that four−ale never did anything but good to man, woman, or babe.

At Chelsea the jar was again opened. This time Pollock drank an indefinite number of mugs, and Solomon all but quarrelled with him for continuing to tempt Billy. The child had swallowed at least a pint, and began to show the effect of it: he lay back in the stern, laughing to himself, his eyes fixed on the blue sky.

A sky such as London rarely knows: of exquisite purity — a limpid sapphire, streaked about the horizon with creamy cloudlets. All the smoke of the city was borne eastward; the zenith shone translucent as over woodland solitudes. The torrid beams of the past week were forgotten; a mild and soothing splendour summoned mortals to come forth into the ways of summer and be glad.

With the last impulse of the flowing tide they reached the broad water beyond Battersea Bridge, where Solomon began to prepare himself for a delicious plunge. The boat could not be left to Billy alone; Pollock was content to wait until Burden had had the first swim. Quickly stripped, the big−limbed fellow stood where his boy had been sitting, and of a sudden leapt headlong. Billy yelled with delight at the great splash, and yelled again triumphantly when his father's head rose to the surface. Solomon was a fair swimmer, but did not pretend to great achievements; he struck out in the upward direction and swam for about a quarter of a mile, the boat keeping along with him; then he was glad to catch hold of the stern. Pollock began to fling off his clothes.

'My turn, old pal!' he shouted. 'Tumble in, an' let's have a feel of the coolness.'

Solomon got into the boat, and sat naked at one of the oars, Billy managing the other. Five minutes saw Jem

back again: he had wallowed rather alarmingly, a result of the gallon or two of ale which freighted him. Then Burden took another plunge. When he had swum to a little distance, Pollock whispered to the boy:

'Like to have a dip, Bill?'

'Shouldn't I just! But I can't swim.'

'What's the odds? Go over the side, an' I'll 'old you by the 'ands. Orff with yer things sharp, afore yer fawther sees what we're up to.,

Billy needed no second invitation. In a minute he had his clothes off. Pollock seized him by both arms and let him down over the side of the boat. Solomon swam ahead, and, as the tide had ceased to drift the boat onwards, he was presently at some distance. With firm grip, Pollock bobbed the child up and down, the breadth of the tub allowing him to lean cautiously without risk.

Then the father turned to look, and saw what was going on. He gave a terrific shout.

'Damn your eyes, Jem! Pull him in, or I'll ——'

"Old yer jaw,' roared the other, laughing. 'He's all right. Let the kid enjoy hisself — cawn't yer?'

Solomon struck out for the boat.

'He's a−comin'!' said Pollock, all but helpless with half−drunken laughter.

'Pull me in!' said the child, fearful of his father's wrath. 'Pull me up!'

And at the same moment he made an effort to jump upon the gunwale. But Jem Pollock also had bent forward, and the result of the two movements was that the man overbalanced himself. He fell plump into the water and sank, Billy with him. From Burden sounded a hoarse cry of agony. Already tired with swimming, the terrified man impeded himself instead of coming on more quickly; he splashed and struggled, and again his voice sounded in a wild shout for help.

There was a boat in sight, but far off. On the Battersea side a few people could be seen; but they had not yet become aware of what had happened. From the other bank no aid could be expected.

Pollock came to the surface and alone. He thought only of making for the boat, as the one way of saving Billy, for he had no skill in supporting another person whilst he himself swam. But the stress of the moment was too much for him: like Burden, he lost his head, and by clutching at the boat pulled it over, so that it began to fill. A cry, a heartrending scream, from the helpless child, who had just risen, utterly distracted him; as the boat swamped, he clung madly to it; it capsized, and he hung by the keel.

Billy was being wafted down the river. Once or twice his little head appeared above the water, and his arms were flung up. The desperate father came onwards, but slowly; fear seemed to have unstrung his sinews, and he struggled like one who is himself in need of assistance. Once more his voice made itself heard; but Pollock, who was drifting with the boat, did not answer. And from the drowning child there came no sound.

A steamer was just putting in at Battersea pier — too far off to be of use. But by this time some one on the bank of the old church had seen the boat bottom upwards. An alarm was given.

Too late, save for the rescue of Jem Pollock. Burden had passed the boat, and was not far from the place where his child had gone down for the last time; with ordinary command of his strength and skill he might easily have kept afloat until help neared him; but he sank. Only his lifeless body was recovered.

And Billy — poor little chap — disappeared altogether. The seaward−rushing Thames bore him along in its muddy depths, hiding him until the third day; then his body was seen and picked up not far from the place whence he had started on his merry excursion.

This disaster happened about four of the clock. Two hours later, Mrs. Burden, having done her day's work and received her pay, moved homeward.

Since noon she had been suffering greatly; whilst on her knees, scrubbing floors and staircases, she had several times felt herself in danger of fainting; the stooping posture intensified a pain from which she was seldom quite free; and the heat in this small−windowed warehouse, crowded among larger buildings in an alley off Fleet Street, was insufferably oppressive; once or twice she lay flat upon the boards, panting for breath. It was over now: she had earned the Sunday's dinner, and could return with the feeling of one who had done her duty.

On Monday she would go to Guy's Hospital and get something for that pain. Six months had passed since her last visit to the doctor, whose warnings she had heeded but little. It won't do to think too much of one's ailments. But they must give her a good large bottle of medicine this time, and she would be careful to take it at the right hours.

She came out into St. Bride's Churchyard, and was passing on towards Fleet Street when again the anguishing spasm seized upon her. She turned and looked at the seats under the wall of the church, where two or three people were resting in the shadowed quiet. It would be better to sit here for a moment. Her weak and weary limbs bore her with difficulty to the nearest bench, and she sank upon it with a sigh.

The pain lasted only a minute or two, and in the relief that followed she was glad to breathe the air of this little open space, where she could look up at the blue sky and enjoy the sense of repose. The places of business round about were still and vacant, closed till Monday morning. Only a dull sound of traffic came from the great thoroughfare, near at hand as it was. And the wonderful sky made her think of little Billy who was enjoying himself up the river. She had felt a slight uneasiness about him, now and then, for Jem Pollock was a reckless fellow at all times, and in weather like this he was sure to have been drinking freely; but Solomon would look after the boy.

They would get back about eight o'clock, most likely. Billy would be hungry; he must have a bit of something for supper — fried liver, or perhaps some stewed steak. It was time for her to be moving on.

She stood up, but the movement brought on another attack. Her body sank together, her head fell forwards.

Presently the man who was sitting on the next bench began to look at her; he smiled — another victim of the thirsty weather!

And half−an−hour passed before it was discovered that the woman sitting there in the shadow of St. Bride's Church was dead.

That night Jem Pollock went to the house in Southwark where Solomon Burden and his wife and his child had lived. He could hear nothing of Mrs. Burden. The key of the attic lay on the ledge above the door; no one had been seen, said the neighbours, since father and son went away together early that afternoon.

In the little home there was silence.