

Miss Newfield

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Life in the Ward

The district that lies between College and Queen Streets, Yonge Street and University Avenue is generally regarded by the respectable citizens of Toronto as a strange and fearful place into which it is unwise to enter even in daylight, which after dark - no sane person would dream of running such a risk! The danger that lurks in these crowded streets is not always clearly formulated in the minds of those who fear it, perhaps it is the dagger of an Italian desperado of which they dream - perhaps the bearded faces of the "Sheenies" are sufficient in themselves to inspire terror - but at any rate the fear remains and probably it could best be analyzed as Fear of the Unknown. For to those who know the Ward and its inhabitants it is the safest and friendliest place on earth. It is impossible for us to pass through its streets without being hailed on all sides with enthusiasm by the children, some of whom usually attach themselves as an escort, being stopped by Italian mothers seated in their doorways to admire a healthy baby or express concern over a sick one; or by men "looking for the job", who think you must surely be able to find them work; the tailor next door bows profusely from his window as you go by while all and each express the liveliest concern in your business and interest in your welfare.

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Life in the Ward is never to become monotonous. It is a custom that all quarrels should be staged on the street and in the neighborhood of feast days many Jewish ladies may be seen gathered around chicken coops and disputing in violent tones as to the ownership of the chicken inside. For no Jewish feast is complete without a chicken and chicken must be bought alive and killed by the "Rabbi" in orthodox fashion. As a consequence the Ward at these times resounds with the squeaks of the unfortunate birds the operation which we are accustomed on a dead chicken to discover how plump it is, they have to submit to when alive. An accident even of a fairly harmless character arouses the most intense agitation in the Ward. On one occasion a woman was knocked down by a street car her arm being fractured and her face slightly bruised. She was carried into a store where she was immediately surrounded by shrieking women who made no attempt to help her in any way while a crowd of women immediately collected outside, moaning, wailing, rushing wildly to and fro, who refused to believe that the injured woman was not going to die immediately and who when questioned as to who she was replied in agonized tones "I do not know her name Oh! Oh! Oh!" When the victim was born out on a stretcher, the shrieks redoubled as the crowd surged wildly forward to see her while an old woman a relation of some kind, rushed madly forward, tearing her hair and absolutely refusing to be comforted, screaming hysterically. The Anglo Saxon onlookers came to the conclusion that if they must be run over they would not change Teranley Street for the scene of the accident.

The friends that one makes in the Ward are many of them people with remarkable histories who in quaint broken English can tell tales by the hour of their experiences in Russia or Poland and of the customs that prevail in those countries. Most interesting of these are the marriage customs "In old country", we were told by a Polish Jew, "there is no such thing as a person not married, every man he is born when he is little, he grow up

person
 marry; then a lit' while and he die. I never hear of no not marry
 old country. In Canada no good- too many old girls". Over which cal-
 amity he shook his head solemnly. "Some day when the war is over I will
 make it here like the old country. Many men will come to Canada after the
 war, I get a book, I make one book with all the girls names, in an another
 book I put all the men's names, I take the girl's names to the men, they
 choose a girl, I fix them all up". And the gentleman has the utmost con-
 fidence that the marriages he makes in this way will be happy ones. "In
 old country no have all the trouble between married peoples, that I see in
 Canada". He assures that he himself was engaged to ^{us} a girl who became
 his wife when he was fifteen years old and that he never saw her until the
 night that they were married.

The religious customs and rites of the Jews are a constant source of
 interest to the "ignorant Gentile". The "Shabes Candles" that are lit before
 dark on Friday that the family may need not to make a light on the Sabbath
 day, the little huts erected in the back yards, covered with rushes or
 clothes on the Feast of Tabernacles.

Glimpses caught of the men in the Synagogue, chanting prayers in their
 black and white striped prayer shawls, the rigid adherence to the Law of
 Moses which it necessary to separate meat from milk in the preparation
 and serving of food to such an extent that separate dishes must be kept
 for "fleischug" and "milichug" meals, all these things both astonish us and
 command our respect, for to the Jew his religion is a vital and important
 thing. He practises as well as professes it, so much so that many Jews
 remain poor pedlars instead of taking up a more remunerative occupation
 because that would necessitate them working on Saturdays and holidays.

The Italians bestow upon the Ward an air of gaiety and a touch of
 music. On warm nights they walk the streets strumming on their guitars
 and often accompanying the music with song and dance. Their dramatic
 nature would lead the uninitiated to suppose that a violent quarrel is

in progress when they are really indulging in a little friendly gossip on the street corner. Life is not always cheerful and pleasant for these people however- it has its darker side such as a family reduced to living on dandelions dug out of the lawns at Queen's Park. Italians are a marvellously frugal people and live cheerfully on macaroni at the best of times, and their honesty is almost alarming to the more sophisticated person who is accustomed to the ways of high society. After a long spell of unemployment they continue to starve and stint themselves in every direction in order to pay off bills at the "Store" which they have run up during the hard times. It is also sad to see an Italian woman, a widow with eight children, reduced to the necessity of begging simultaneously at two missions and the Roman Catholic Church and even with the combined proceeds being unable to feed and clothe them properly. And one is uncertain whether to laugh or cry when all the churches interested display righteous indignation on discovering that the family was not content to subsist upon the contribution they had made and had been so deprivileged as to turn to other sources for help.

Another pathetic story is that of a Polish woman who, deserted by her husband, is left to support her family in a strange land. Agencies which have contributed to her support for a short while find that the case is likely to become a burden and refuse to continue their aid- whereupon the woman is forced to go out and find work as best she can, while her baby to whom she is passionately devoted is left at the Creche and her two older children, ten and twelve, must shift for themselves as to meals. And here another difficulty arises for the woman has been so weakened by undernourishment during a long period that she is not equal to the heavy work which is the only thing she has the skill to do, especially when it must be supplemented by work of a similar nature at home.

All these things lead us to wonder, as we watch them happening around us, what is the meaning of it all? These foreigners, so queer in outward appearance, have the same feelings, the same qualities, both good and bad, that are found in other ranks of society, their needs physical, mental and moral, are the same of ours, but their circumstances are so very, very different, and the opportunities that are open to them are so few in number and so limited in extent, that one often wonders how they manage to "make good" in the way that they do, and why they remain kind and friendly to all instead of becoming embittered and resentful, when they see the painful contrast between the things that life has given them so grudgingly, and the things that have been strewn so lavishly in the paths of others. And we are forced to ask what right have "the others" to the advantages that they enjoy? More especially what right have they to pride themselves upon their superiority and despise ^{to} the "Sheeny" and "Dago" the dirtied dirt and the downtrodden, for dare they think that, had the circumstances been reversed they would be able to rise above them

and then let be cast in the Ward that they, by their virtue, would have ^{present} their present heights of wisdom & goodness.

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