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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Vigorous Protest:
The Art of Hesba Stretton

by

Elizabeth Green

A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled **VIGOROUS PROTEST: THE ART OF HESBA STRETTON** submitted by ELIZABETH GREEN in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

Patricia Demers
Supervisor

Janice Blakley
Second Supervisor

Date 21 September 1988

To my mother, and the memory of my father.

ABSTRACT

Writing within the genre of religiously didactic literature, Hesba Stretton was extremely popular with the newly literate, especially those emerging from ragged schools and Sunday Schools--children, working class adults and the poor generally. The serious nature of her subject matter indicates that she also wrote for the educated adult and middle classes. Sales of her best known works, Jessica's First Prayer and Little Meg's Children, surpassed those for books in the accepted canon of Victorian children's literature, such as Alice in Wonderland and The Water Babies. She represents, therefore, a unique form of literature which must be taken as seriously today as it was then, simply because not to do so is to distort the perspective on Victorian fiction. Yet the usual approach to Victorian children's fiction ignores writers like Stretton and so discounts the favourite books of an extremely wide readership and loses the opportunity of throwing new light on canonical works. Once lionized, now forgotten, Hesba Stretton invites more than the synoptic treatment she has received; her works await exhumation. In the absence of any detailed analysis of the art of Hesba Stretton, this study looks at the portrayal of the protagonists in eight of her books for children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Since the works of Hesba Stretton are not easily accessible I had to rely heavily upon the services of the Inter-Library Loan Office, as well as on the resources of special libraries. My thanks are due to Margaret Maloney of the Osborne and Lillian H. Smith Collection at Toronto Public Library, and A.M. Carr, in the Local Studies Department of Shrewsbury Library. I would like to express my very special appreciation to Professor Patricia Demers for her advice and constant encouragement.

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Introduction

Hesba Stretton (the pen-name for Sarah Smith, 1832-1911) was one of the most successful writers for children in the latter half of the nineteenth century--that period known as the "Golden Age of Children's Literature." These were the years that saw the unprecedented growth and development of books written not only especially about children, but, more significantly, for children. Authors generally associated with this era are from the established canon of greatness, and include Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, Charlotte Yonge, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and R.L. Stevenson. Hesba Stretton is virtually unknown, yet her works outsold them all.

The sales of Jessica's First Prayer (1867) reached over two million, and two of her other works, Little Meg's Children (1868) and Alone in London (1869), "together obtained a circulation of three quarters of a million copies" (Friederichs, 327). In an essay celebrating the "exuberance and energy of the publishers" during these abundantly productive years, Brian Alderson states that by the "end of the century" Jessica's First Prayer had sold "nearly ten times as many [copies] as Alice in Wonderland, published just two years earlier" ("Tracts, Rewards and Fairies," 268). Alderson makes yet another remarkable claim for Jessica's

First Prayer: that the publication of "this little volume . . . was to have a profound influence not simply on children's books, but to some extent upon children's lives" (267).

Yet, in spite of commanding a readership greater than that of the 'superior writers' and being credited as having important literary significance, the works of Hesba Stretton receive only passing reference in standard anthologies and an occasional chapter in books on the period or the genre. A study of the art of Hesba Stretton does not exist.[1] Nonetheless, the few critics of Victorian children's literature who have singled her out for special commentary, J.S. Bratton, Margaret Cutt and Lance Salway, all respect her as one of the most successful writers of tract fiction.

Cutt's study of nineteenth century evangelical writing for children includes Hesba Stretton as one of four authors "conspicuous among the tract tales writers of the century" (xiii). Setting her chosen writers firmly in the events of their times, Cutt demonstrates the close relationship between their best known works and current issues. Although two out of the eleven chapters are devoted to Stretton, the book deals with four other prolific authors: Maria Charlesworth, Charlotte Tucker (A.L.O.E.) and Mrs. O.F. Walton, and so the attention paid Hesba Stretton is limited.

Lance Salway also stresses the influence Stretton's work

had on the social attitudes of the Victorian reading public. He mentions a few of her books, but concentrates his remarks on Jessica's First Prayer, claiming that this one book alone "qualifies both the story and its author for special consideration in the study of literature for children" (45).

"Special consideration" is afforded by J.S. Bratton, who attempts a critical literary evaluation of Victorian children's fiction, believing this to be "the only legitimate way of looking at these books in the final analysis" (Impact, 22). Compelled to be extremely selective, by the "thousands of children's books which are extant from this period," Bratton concerns herself only with those writers, and their books, which are "representative or influential" (24). Stretton is one of them. As well as taking into account the historical context and authorial intention, Bratton treats the chosen works in a "schematic fashion" linked to Northrop Frye's notion of romance story-telling in The Secular Scriptures.[2] She also relies upon the "spectator role" theory of James Britton,[3] to arrive at an assessment of the material.

Identifying "recurring motifs" in Stretton's works, which she links to patterns in romance writing, Bratton maintains that all the works preceding Jessica's First Prayer (and, strangely enough, many of those after) were "interesting experiments" in this form. With Jessica's First Prayer,

however, she claims that Stretton achieved the "pattern which was to become archetypal" (86). Since she attempts to impose the romance pattern onto all those books of Stretton's she discusses, as well as onto Stretton's overall style of development, her analyses are frequently forced. However, Bratton does provide a very detailed and clear insight into the important role played by the two main religious publishing houses of the time, the Religious Tract Society (RTS) and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), in shaping the kind of writing which was produced.

In Childhood's Pattern, Gillian Avery takes a very pragmatic line in discussing "heroes and heroines from 1770 to 1950." Covering such a huge time-frame, Avery inevitably gives many of the writers short shrift. Thus, Hesba Stretton is labelled of the "street arab school," and her popularity and success are attributed to "luck," which enabled her "to hit the jackpot" (115). Similarly, in Nineteenth Century Children, Avery's critical comment on some of Stretton's best-known works is cursory and often inappropriate, especially where she misinterprets an incident in Jessica's First Prayer to show Stretton's "surprising lack of sensitivity" to "the sufferings of the poor" (95). She does, however, link Hesba Stretton the philanthropist with Hesba Stretton the author, and rightly surmises that she "no doubt

drew on experience rather than fancy in her writing" (94).

Another critic who seems to have missed the point completely in Jessica's First Prayer, and in Stretton's work generally, is Margaret Maison. Referring to Stretton as "the Evangelical dove," she describes Jessica as "a typical Evangelical tale" about "the little daughter of a wicked actress . . . who is rescued by a kindly coffee-stall owner" (116). Robert Lee Wolff recognizes that far from 'typical,' Stretton

> sounded a new note in Evangelical fiction . . . bringing the harsh facts home to those children of the well-to-do who were previously acquainted only with the pious, subservient, rural poor of Ministering Children (242).

Generally, modern criticism is divided between those who consider Hesba Stretton's work deserving of close study, and those who manipulate her books to fit into particular literary overviews. The more penetrative criticism avoids the risk faced by the latter kind, that is, of falling prey to the temptation to be flippant about religiously didactic material which, as Lance Salway admits, today "probably produces smiles" ("Pathetic Simplicity," 38).

Religious intent is at the core of Stretton's writing, and nineteenth-century views of her work are polarized around religious, rather than literary, attitudes. Those of an evangelical frame of mind are impressed with the level and the effect of emotive responses it produces; while those with

more conservative leanings are critical of its overt persuasive intent.

The outstanding nineteenth century evangelical philanthropist, the Earl of Shaftesbury, praises Jessica's First Prayer as a "literary effort" that would "hardly find a rival for nature, simplicity, pathos, and depth of Christian feeling," and Hesba Stretton's "singularly minute and accurate knowledge [of] the class of ragged children" about whom she wrote. Whereas Charlotte Yonge, much more inclined towards fact than feeling, and manners than missionaries, admits Stretton's story-telling abilities, but is generally very wary of her purposiveness. Yonge, writing in What Books to Lend and What to Give, is also anxious to point out that children abandoned, or left to the care of older siblings (a common situation in Stretton's works), are "a thing of the past" (20), which is an indication of how far removed she was from the world Hesba Stretton knew.

Perhaps the most significant contemporary reaction to Stretton's work is the encouragement she received from Charles Dickens, who published her first story, "The Lucky Leg," in Household Words, March 19, 1859. The relationship between Stretton and Dickens' periodical (renamed All the Year Round in 1859) continued until 1869, during which time she was one of a few writers invited to contribute to the Christmas numbers. It is evident from Bratton's article on

Stretton's journalism that Dickens welcomed her material, but was selective and constructively critical.

While writing short stories and factual articles to meet the requirements of a range of magazines, Stretton was developing her own particular authorial talent with her first full-length books. Fern's Hollow, (1864), its sequel The Children of Cloverley (1865), Enoch Roden's Training (1865), The Clives of Burcot (1867) and Paul's Courtship (1867) (both adult novels) and Pilgrim Street(1867) were all produced concurrently with her journalistic submissions. It was clear that this was the direction her creative energies were taking her. The Religious Tract Society, who had published Fern's Hollow, began soliciting her for manuscripts at a rate which made it impossible for her to continue with occasional pieces, and the overwhelming success of Jessica's First Prayer, which made its initial appearance in serial form in 1866, in Sunday At Home, an R.T.S. publication, launched her as one, if not the chief, of their major authors. Thereafter, Stretton devoted herself to a full-time career as a writer.

It is difficult to compile a definitive list of all her publications, journalistic and full-length fiction. She wrote six novels for adults; the rest of her books were for children. Most of these, however, contain very direct messages to society, and the obvious authorial intention, therefore, is that they, too, will be read by adults.

Rarely simple, Stretton's stories function at many levels. She writes to show children the Christian way, but her tales are not childish, and may be enjoyed equally as well by newly literate adults (as Yonge testifies). She also writes to reveal onerous social conditions, especially those affecting children, and appeals to her readers to redress the social wrongs she puts before them. So, Stretton writes to excite public sympathy for the poor in the hope of initiating changes. At the same time, she exhorts her readers to take up the Christian calling--to be both believers and doers in the true evangelical sense.

Admittedly, writers such as Dickens and Gaskell also wrote to arouse the public conscience, but they did not face the problem of doing it through literature which would appeal directly to children. Oliver Twist addressed the nature of workhouses, and portrayed a young child to strengthen its cause; Mary Barton examined Chartism. Both novels were socially forthright, but, intended as they were for an adult audience, they did not have to be concerned with the child's perspective, or with his soul.[4]

Like Dickens and Gaskell, Stretton is specific in her attacks on oppressive legislation and inhumane institutions, and on the attitudes behind them, as responsible for precipitating devastating social and moral circumstances. Fern's Hollow exposes the misery attendant on the laws of

enclosure, which deprived rural families of their homes and livelihood, and also draws attention to the landowner-employer class, who, guided by avaricious desires, neglect their social responsiblities. The shameful threat and pitiless conditions of the workhouse are examined in many of her books; In Prison and Out and Under The Old Roof bring home to the reader the horror felt by the poor at this fate worse than death. An uncaring and incompetent legal system, which fails to mete out any kind of justice to the poor and uninformed, is the focus of In Prison And Out and No Place Like Home. Stretton returns, with vigour, over and over again, to the complex issues raised by legal inadequacies, pointing up their shortcomings through depicting young lives wrecked by the law courts. Lack of hospital provision brings premature death in Alone In London; and the disease-ridden dwellings of the poor, with their cholera infected second-hand clothing, form part of the setting of A Thorny Path. The church also comes under her scrutiny. In Jessica's First Prayer, the minister and the pew keeper are stumbling blocks, not helpers, in Jessica's search for God. But whatever the particular issue Stretton confronts, the bedrock of her books is the misery of the homeless, poor and neglected children who suffer as the result of society's carelessness.

Salway sees Stretton as "a chief chronicler of social

iniquity . . . skilled at describing the sufferings of the poor" ("Pathetic Simplicity," 37). But she is much more than a recorder of wretchedness; she dramatizes the conditions of the destitute to put them before the public eye, and makes the essential causal connections. In addition, she strives to find cures. Her suggestions for an alternative to the damning penal detention imposed upon young offenders in In Prison And Out are practical and forward looking. Unlike many of her predecessors and contemporaries in the genre (authors like Hannah More, Mrs. Sherwood, Mrs. Trimmer, Mary Louise Charlesworth and Mrs. Castle Merrick Smith ['Brenda']), Hesba Stretton does not write to insist that the lower classes endure their lot, so much as to appeal to the Christian social conscience to work to improve those circumstances which both determine and perpetuate it. Courageously outspoken, Stretton writes to those labouring in appalling misery, or under the burden of sin, to raise them up, and also to those who could, and should, assist them.

The invigorating quality of her work stems largely from its semi-autobiographical sources. Stretton was very responsive to the different environments she lived in, and she writes her experiences into her stories, bringing them to life with details which have very obviously been observed rather than invented. I think that this is a crucial factor to be considered in looking at her work. Where she lived,

and what she saw and did, also modified her own particular kind of evangelicalism, which in turn dictated the characters and plots she created.

She was born Sarah Smith, in 1832 (the year of the First Reform Bill) in a small town in Shropshire, in the west of England, where her father was a master printer and bookseller, and First Postmaster. It was a strong dissenting family; mother was a strict methodist and father a lay preacher. On her father's retirement, Stretton moved to Manchester in 1863 to earn her living by writing. Her first four publications for children, written while she was in Manchester, all depend upon her intimate knowledge of the rural communities and small industrial towns of Shropshire, apart from The Fishers of Derby Haven, which is set in the Isle of Man (a favourite family holiday place). They are also heavily didactic, shaped by her evangelical upbringing and tied to scriptural images.

Manchester provided the experience which marked a turning point in Stretton's writing. She had always depended upon first-hand knowledge for her material, and in this city of the classic slum of industrial Victorian England, the nature of her knowledge changed, and her writing took on an emotional intensity which had not been there before. The conditions of the industrial metropolis took over from the rural, small town scene as the setting in her books, and the

social purposiveness of her messages broadened. For, in Manchester, she attended Union Chapel and listened to Dr. Alexander MacLaren preach his own special brand of socio-Christianity, that is, a religion of responsible, brotherly love. He was a man of outstanding moral courage, and in the heart of a city given over to commercial enterprise and exploitative labour conditions, where industrial barons were also pillars of society and the churches, he charged that "The sins of professing Christian countries are largely to be laid at the door of the Church" (The Best, 141). Much of Stretton's writing from here on, including Jessica's First Prayer, shows the extent of his influence on her own Christian philosophy.

In 1867 Stretton settled in London, where her philanthropic activities thrived. A number of her articles, including "A Christian Patriot," "A Thieves' Supper" and "Three Hours With The Boys' Beadle," as well as forthright introductions to her own, and other people's books, show the extent to which she became personally involved in seeking out causes and injustices to bring to her readers' attention. She worked alongside people like Dr. Barnardo and Angela Burdett Coutts, and publicly canvassed for a London Branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, writing two letters to The Times. These experiences gave credence to her characters and settings, as well as a caustic

edge to her pen.

Brian Alderson contends that it is her portrayal and treatment of children whose stories are "rooted in harsh realities," that not only accounted for her success, but was influential in creating a new and "far more forceful literature of poverty" (269). In the absence of any detailed analyses of Hesba Stretton's characters or settings, this study will examine the portrayal of her protagonists, relating them to location and to social issues. Important in understanding the nature of the development of her work, this approach will show a didactic pattern, which has a more substantial claim than Bratton's notion of experimentation with patterns of romance writing.

Her writing seems to fall naturally into three chronological stages and each of the following three chapters deals with one of these stages: "The Early Period," comprising the first four children's books; "The Middle Period," made up of the two major city waif tales, Jessica's First Prayer and Little Meg's Children; and "The Later Period," typified by works of strong social protest. Of necessity this study must be selective, and I have chosen to limit the final chapter to Pilgrim Street and In Prison and Out. Although there is a chronological overlap here, since Pilgrim Street was written between the two waif tales, I am coupling it with In Prison and Out, as its protagonist and major themes unmistakably

look forward to that book.

I shall look at the symbolic significance of Stretton's child characters as well as at their realistic presentation. James Janeway, one of the earliest writers for children, used real children's experiences to instruct his readers. A Puritan, he presented children as naturally wicked, and under the constant threat of going to hell. The child Eppie, in Eliot's Silas Marner, is naturally good; but she is barely believable. Dickens' heroes and heroines were also symbols of saintly innocence: Oliver and Little Nell. In Stretton, the child plays all of these roles. He is the embodiment of the Christian virtues and the means of redemption; he is also the symbol of cruel social injustices suffered by the weak and helpless in that he is the victim of their damaging effects. But above all, the child figure is an instrument of revelation and change, and his voice is the voice of social protest. The religious transformations of the protagonists take place within the texts themselves. The changes in social circumstances, or in attitudes, however, may not happen in the course of the tale. Stretton's purpose is to initiate these changes outside the fictional realms of her books, in the world of fact.

CHAPTER I

The Early Protagonists: Children Of The Lord

Hesba Stretton's first four books for children share stylistic features serving to bind them together in a homogeneous group and, at the same time, setting them distinctly apart from her fifth and most successful publication, Jessica's First Prayer. J.S. Bratton sees the difference between them and Jessica primarily in terms of plot and setting: the first books being experiments with various combinations of story and scene before arriving at the "formula upon which the rest [of her books] were to be compounded" (Impact, 81). Bratton's analysis is acceptable, but rudimentary, leaving much unexplored. One of the aspects she does not develop is the portrayal of the child characters. Yet the strong didactic message of those early works rests almost entirely on the presentation of the protagonists.

Of the four protagonists, the three heroes--Stephen Fern of Fern's Hollow, Peter Killip in the Fishers of Derby Haven, and Enoch Roden, in Enoch Roden's Training--all take their names from New Testament characters. Their stories, too, are derivative. Annie, from The Children of Cloverley, is only marginally different. For although not based upon a biblical character, she is fashioned around an idealized version of a

young Stretton family member.

As the titles suggest, three of the characters are associated closely to specific locations. And the author's strong, and often sentimental, sense of place frequently plays an important function in both the plot and the portrayal of character. Fern's Hollow and Cloverley are in the same geographical area, Stretton's beloved home county of Shropshire: "just upon the border of Wales, but within one of the English counties" (Fern's Hollow, 5). Derby Haven is the name of a favourite holiday place for the Stretton family in the Isle of Man. Enoch Roden's story is played out in a small town, and against the backdrop of a printing shop. Again, the connection is personal; Benjamin Smith, Stretton's father, had been a printer and publisher before becoming Postmaster at Wellington.

The boys are all of an age: "about fourteen years"; Annie is young, "around eleven". Stretton seems to favour the early teens, at least for her boy characters. David from In Prison and Out is fourteen, as is Tony in Alone in London, and Tom Haslam in Pilgrim Street, as well as Max Kromer. Although Bratton puts Stretton foremost in the category of "reward writers", whose audience she surmises as children "aged four or five upwards" (Impact, 63), it is clear from Stretton's tone, and more importantly, her subject matter, that she had an older readership in mind. The question of

her readership; in fact, raises interesting issues. At this early stage, it is clear she directs her stories primarily to those in need of spiritual guidance, both children and adults. But she also introduces matters of a wider social nature, such as enclosure (Fern's Hollow), and unemployment (The Children of Cloverley), which indicates she had an adult audience in mind. The early adult years, however, seem to be the 'means' she prefers.

Adolescence is a time of self-questioning and change, of heightened emotional awareness; a "period between youth and manhood, or womanhood" (OED). According to Paul Sangster, writing about the religious education of children during the years of Wesley's ministry, adolescence was also a spiritually vulnerable age and "a common time for conversion, possibly the commonest" (Simplicity, 171). The transition from childhood to adulthood is a popular literary theme, one that lends itself readily to dramatising the evangelical concept of the spiritual journey, or pilgrimage. Stretton's writing is purposive, not allegorical: to persuade the reader to conversion, and also to provoke thought and action on social issues centred on children. Adolescence, therefore, is the age group which gives her greatest scope in appealing to the questing spirit of youth and the thinking adult.

Growing up for the Victorian working-class child had an

intensity difficult to imagine; childhood was very brief. The Children's Employment Commission reported children as young as five working until they fainted from exhaustion (Engels, 216). And even though the Factory Act of 1844 had set the minimum age of employment in the cotton industry at eight years, much younger children toiled long and arduous hours in other industries. (Stretton makes a point of telling the reader that Stephen Fern began working in Botfield coalmine when he was eight, [Hollow, 44] and that the work was dangerous and death never far from his thoughts [94]). As well as being abused by industry, children were also economically exploited by their parents, who used them as a means of income, or of security for their old age. (Killip has this attitude towards Peter.) For the children of the poor, learning about life was not a leisurely undertaking assisted by vicarious experiences through nursery games or school books. The world itself was the schoolroom for the children about whom Hesba Stretton wrote; they learned "on the job." Her books combine this notion with that of life on earth being the spiritual training for life in Heaven. Captain Bakewell tells his daughter Annie on her deathbed that she "has learned the last and hardest lesson," and that there is no need for her "to stay longer in this school" (Cloverley, 149). Stephen, Peter and Enoch are all at the start of their journey into adulthood. What

evolves in each case is their particular "initiation story." Adhering to the original mandate of the Religious Tract Society, that every book must give "some account of the way of a sinner's salvation" (Impact, 33), Stretton combines the trials of growing up with the development of a personal religious faith. Annie's story is different; essentially she remains the same. From the very beginning she is the epitome of Gillian Avery's "sinless child": the Christian child, whose exemplary behaviour effects changes in the people and world around her.

Deriving from the Bible, the three boys function symbolically, as well as realistically. Stephen is the first Christian martyr. As the hostile crowd stones him to death he kneels and cries out "to the Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts, 7:60). The disciple Stephen courageously faces his enemies, those officials who have banned him from preaching in the synagogue, and Stephen Fern confronts the master, James Wyley, on being turned out of his own "temple" --his home. And, when persecuted by them, and by jealous fellow workers, he endeavors to enact "the most difficult commandment of all: 'love thy enemies'" (Hollow, 85).

Peter Killip, like Peter the disciple fisherman, earnestly desires to serve his Master. But he, too, has a strong, and fiery disposition, and, like his biblical

counterpart, swings from heartfelt affirmations of belief when in the presence of his Captain to oathful denials when he is threatened or afraid. Deeply remorseful and anxious to show his loyalty, Peter Killip is finally able to prove his devotion to the Master he betrayed when he puts his own life before Aggie's in the shipwreck.

Enoch is a far less familiar figure, and his name means "initiated". Intended for God's ministry, he is one of the early Christians Paul exhorts in Hebrews 11 to hold fast the faith. Enoch Roden's faith is severely tested when his hopes of becoming a student or missionary are dashed, and he fails to find work that will enable him to feed his family, and keep his grandmother from dying in the workhouse.

By setting up circumstances which elicit and test the characteristic weaknesses and strengths of the originals, and by frequent use of apposite texts and references, Hesba Stretton builds the associations between her fictional characters and the Bible characters from which they derive into her stories through the plot line. The essence of the Bible messages is transcribed onto the pages of fiction through the actions of her young protagonists, and tied to the real world through her use of setting.

In Stretton's books, the real world is the one she personally knows; and her love of the landscape and eye for detail lends warmth to the backdrop of her stories, lifting

them and her characters out of the commonplace. Stephen Fern is a West Midlands country lad from an agricultural and mining area "upon the borders of Wales" (Hollow, 5). His home of "turf and rough-hewn stones," just below the brow of the hill, stands on the site of the original hut built by his grandmother's own hands. In Wordsworthian fashion, the hut, and the family within, are bound physically and emotionally close to the land: "The thatch, overgrown with moss, appears as a continuation of the slope of the hill itself, and might almost deceive the simple sheep grazing around it" (Hollow, 9). The passage of time since grandmother's first dwelling place, more than twenty years, has given the Ferns "squatters' rights" to their property. This is their refuge, isolated on the "smooth sloping dell" over two miles from the mining village of Botfield, where Stephen works.

The first glimpse of him, as a lonely figure coming over the brow of the hill in the evening light, characterizes his solitary stance throughout the book. His "very long-shadow" precedes him and dwarfs his "slight, thin, stooping" figure (11). Deftly drawn, the picture works through contrasts: the long shadow is misleading, for it is a frail youth, not a full-grown man, who emerges; and, instead of walking upright, he is "bending rather wearily," under the sack of coals on his back. The image is of submission, and the coals weighing heavily upon Stephen's back prefigure the responsibilities

looming ahead. The boy has learned to restrain his youthful spirit which longs to be "out on the free hill-side", for he accepts that he must work in "the dark passages underground" instead (11). Stephen is part of an "enclosure system" like the one which will threaten his family's existence and happiness. His young life is curbed in the mine by the owners who wish to limit his freedom on the hillside. At the end of the first chapter Stephen lifts the latch of his home, and Stretton invites us to "enter with him" (11), linking our sympathies to his and to the fate of his home, which will be the focus of the drama. The scene is narrowed from the hillside to the hearth, and the deathbed of James Fern, whose place Stephen will shortly take.

Peter, in The Fishers of Derby Haven, is introduced in a similar manner. From a bird's eye view over the island the reader is brought close up to the fishing hamlet and the shore where Peter is sitting. Hesba Stretton visited Derby Haven five months before she started to write this story. Her enthusiastic Log Book entries show her robust response to the wild and blustery weather: "Great rains", and "the waves magnificent; got wet through coming back", she writes (July 13, 1865). She links Peter closely to the rocky, windswept island, and to the seascapes, which play metaphorical, as well as dramatic, roles in his story. As Stephen's shadow preceded him, so Peter's shrill, clear, hymn-singing voice

announces his eager spirit, and at the same time contrasts with the deeper sound of Ned Kelly's mature notes. Like Stephen, Peter is also an isolated figure. His parents were drowned off the coast when he was an infant, but he was saved and left a "homeless and friendless orphan" (Derby Haven, 96). The nature of his isolation, however, is different from Stephen's; and the difference controls the effectiveness of his characterization.

Stephen has made his dying father a promise that he and his older sister Martha (strongly suggestive of the bustling, domestic New Testament Martha) will look after their senile grandfather and little sister Nan, and that he will never give up Fern's Hollow. The great divide between being a boy and becoming a man faces Stephen as he sits with his back to the "dismal" room and his dying father and looks out over the green hills. He is pictured on the threshold between the past and the future, and

> The deep sense of new duties and obligations that had come upon him . . . made him feel that his boyhood had passed away . . . There could be no more play-time for him; no bird's nesting among the gorse bushes; no rabbit-hunting with Snip . . . he must be a man, with a man's thoughtfulness, doing a man's work (17).

Stretton emphasizes his isolation in terms of family responsibilities and untiring endeavour:

> He must get up early and go to bed late, and labour without a moment's rest, doing his utmost from one day to another, with no

> one to help him, or stand for a little while in his place (17).

Stephen's position is that of a young orphaned boy called upon to act as the mainstay of his family. A heart-rending figure, he contemplates the "burden" now fallen on his shoulders and "for a few minutes, his brave spirit sank within him, and all the landscape swam before his eyes" (17). Those under his care are very old and very young; their dependency is total and gives an added dimension to Stephen, who stands alone, and for the family. The test will be in fighting the enclosure of Fern's Hollow. The Wyleys are waiting on James Fern's death so that they have to contend only with a mere boy.

The Wyleys are formidable opposition. Authority, education and age are on their side. Stephen's position is made even more vulnerable because his negligent father drank away his income and let his children "grow up without the learning [he] could have given them" (16). Destitute of the world's survival skills, Stephen must depend upon his spiritual strength to protect his family and home.

Stephen's physical separation up on the hillside, away from the community down in the valley, mirrors his spiritual isolation. He is different from his pit-mates, for he is intent on trying to follow the teachings of the Bible he has just begun to puzzle over. His trials begin when the scriptural messages are at odds with what seems fair, and he

must accept the connivances of the Wyley brothers as they use their positions to promote their own ends over the family's legal rights. A dual battle must be fought: against personal doubt and despair, and against the social manifestations of evil in James and Thomas Wyley--two unscrupulous masters.

James, as the mine owner and the agent of the lord of the manor, can throw Stephen out of his job and his home. Thomas, as the relieving officer of the union workhouse, can deny the Fern family the assistance he has the authority to dispense. In addition, he threatens to split up the family so that they never see each other again. These two brothers are powerful figures and represent the authorities on which the lives of the poor depend, as well as volatile contemporary social issues. In their pursuit of monetary gain at the expense of the helpless lower classes, they pose a terrifying threat. Here, Stretton is taking a national situation and particularizing it in James and Thomas. Industrialists, like James Wyley, were guilty of encroaching on common land and they also disregarded the safety regulations pertaining to worked-out pits which were introduced in 1862. Nan's death is directly attributable to James' neglecting to cover the disused mine-shaft.

So, in Stephen, Stretton creates a powerful force. He is a concentration of social and Christian conflicts. As head

of his family suffering from, and opposing, the Wyleys' actions, Stephen embodies the workers' protest against callous, oppressive overlords, and serious social problems. As a young Christian, he fights inner, spiritual battles as he tries to live by his Bible, harbouring no hate and loving his enemies. (In all these endeavours he is aided by Anne, James Wyley's niece.) But he is never a mere cipher. His character is drawn with warmth and sensitivity, for Stretton is as much interested in him as she is in the plot.

Stephen's religion helps him understand, and withstand, an unjust system of authority. The power which he is up against can destroy him, in terms of home and livelihood, but, like his biblical namesake, he is willing to put his life on the line. The situation is one of protomartyrdom. Stephen is Stretton's first child protagonist and is arguably one of the best examples of the genuine child personalities Avery felt were emerging with the early Victorians (Nineteenth Century, 65). His lively characterization is even more remarkable since he is yoked to such a heavy didactic burden.

Unlike Stephen, Peter is not battling a social system; his struggles are entirely personal and so is his isolation. He is alone within the walls where he lives--Killip's cottage. This is where he was left when he survived the shipwreck. Killip is only interested in the work he can get

out of the boy. A cruel tyrant, he ill-treats Peter, not just physically, but also mentally, forcing him, under threat of death, to forswear his Christian activities and friends--the only source of fellowship and kindness he knows. The poignant and sharply bitter feelings evoked by this domestic loneliness are outside Stephen's experience. Peter's situation lends itself to a portrayal which is piteous in a way which Stephen's cannot be. Habitually barred from the cottage during Killip's foul moods, Peter creeps to the oxen's manger in the yard at the back of the cottage to find comfort sleeping there. At other times he lies on a shelf above Killip "cramped and still, not daring to toss about on his chaff bed for fear of disturbing Killip" (93). Frequently the boy sits gazing out to sea in "solitary sadness," and his misery is increased by the sense of his own "cowardice"--failure to stay loyal to his earlier declaration that "Jesus will be [his] King" (11).

In the absence of confrontations with social issues, Peter's struggles remain at a singularly personal level. His resolve and courage must stand up to the murderous will of another man. The figure of authority in this case is parental, not political. The principles involved are almost exclusively religious. (The qualification must be made, for Stretton's concern for abused children, manifested in active volunteer work later in life, is apparent here.) Without

direct social significance, however, the character of Peter is narrower, more confined to an emblematic tradition. He fights the enemy outside [Killip] who mirrors the "enemy" within:

> He [Peter] was a liar and a swearer. There could be no such character in the blessed kingdom of which he had caught a passing glimpse, only to be shut out of it altogether. He had shut himself out . . . He was just to fall back into his old ways, and grow up to be a man like Killip, whom everybody dreaded and disliked (28).

Peter is bound closely to his biblical namesake, and Ned Kelly spells it out:

> 'many and many a time I've thought thee something like thy namesake in the Bible--as like a fisher lad in Derby Haven, Isle of Man, could be like the grown-up fisherman Peter. He was just the same bold and timmersome creature as thee . . . he did just as thou hast done: he said he did not know the Lord, and he began to curse and swear about it' (128).

Captain Seaforth arrives to complete Ned's sermon: Jesus' disciple, he explains, had denied Jesus because he was not then truly converted. Seaforth tells Peter "except ye be converted ye shall not enter the kingdom of God" (129). This is the essence of Peter's story; it is the conversion story in the classical Calvinistic manner. Later on, Peter's "heart cried out to God to give him the Holy Spirit" and "the burden that had weighed upon him so heavily was rolled away" (131). Peter, the Victorian fisher boy, lives out the story of Peter, the apostle.

The portrayal is simplified because it is the unequivocal description of the individual's spiritual progress along the way to salvation. By the same token, it is far less compelling than Stephen's. And, although the sense of Peter's wretched loneliness is captured, the overbearing religiosity of his role inhibits attempts at a convincing, or absorbing characterization. J.S. Bratton's complaint that he is "too articulate about his search for Christianity" (84) is legitimate. Peter becomes merely a vehicle for the dramatization of the conflict between "trust and dread" (143).

Annie is not a biblical derivative, but she is like Peter and Stephen inasmuch as she is an isolated figure. Although later in the book she is surrounded by the comfort and strength of Stephen Fern (from Fern's Hollow), now married and a community leader, and his family, her situation is initially more dramatic than those of the earlier protagonists, for she is geographically dislocated. When her mother dies, and her father has to rejoin the war in the Southern States, he sends her and her brother Ben ("almost fourteen") from their home by Lake Huron to their aunt in England. The children must learn to adjust to, and accept, the changes in their lives not only as part of growing up, but also as a religious act of submission to the will of God.

Their difference from the community is emphasized by their quaint American homespun; and the children are further

defined by sharp contrast with each other. Although Annie is the younger, she is the heroine; but the trials are really Ben's, and he is by far the more interesting. His is the independent pioneer spirit, rebellious against cissy English ways and a life which denies him the opportunity for the kind of hard work and responsibility he was used to on the homestead. He longs for manhood of an earthly kind, but what he must attain is spiritual maturity. Ben has "angry eyes" but Annie has a "patient face" (32), and she does not suffer Ben's frustration.

> A little troubled she might feel, and she might shrink a little from the disappointments she met but in the depths of her spirit there was a peace which no storm from without could reach, and even now, alone and weary and anxious, the child's heart rested in simple trust upon the will of the Father in heaven (Cloverley, 34).

From the opening of the book, Annie is aligned with the angels. Her mother sometimes "would fancy that her little girl's face had caught the pure and heavenly expression of those angel children" in the painting over the fireplace (11). As well as physically resembling the heavenly spirits, Annie talks about heaven and the angels "in such a way that it seems more like her real home . . . than her own earthly home" (12). While writing The Children of Cloverley Stretton was living in Manchester where she enjoyed, and was much influenced by, the sermons of Alexander MacLaren. Her Log Book entry for July 31, 1864 reads: "A grand sermon from

McLaren [sic] about angels." The text that day had been Genesis 32, where Jacob is met on the road by angels; and he calls them "God's army." MacLaren believed that in the round of everyday tasks, and in the paths which God has ordained, His "visitants" were to be found (MacLaren, 96). In living out her mother's motto, "The will of the Lord be done," Annie walks with the angels; Ben resists.

As a character, Annie is the least easy to accept. However, her angelic attributes manifest themselves in response to the spiritual needs of the community around her, and this makes her a little more palatable. She does not just save souls; she is instrumental in saving the area from economic disaster through converting the elderly spinster, Miss Reynolds, who subsequently gives her money towards speculative drilling for a new coal seam at the worked-out mine. Annie's influence continues posthumously when schools for the local children are established in her name in Cloverley, and at her home by Lake Huron.

Annie, then, acts as a catalyst for spiritual, intellectual and economic regeneration. However, Annie's sublime goodness and gravity sit awkwardly on her young years, even though she is rooted in a strong literary tradition of religious precocity, wherein children converted adults and worked remarkable beneficial changes. Accounts are given of children bringing the Sunday School message home

to their parents, and of teaching their elders to read the Bible. Paul Sangster writes that "By the time the Evangelical Magazine [founded in 1793] was publishing such 'Anecdotes' as 'Conversion of a Father by means of his Child,' and 'The Swearer Reproved by an Infant,' the influence of children on parents--ungodly ones especially--had become almost a matter of course" (84). Little Annie perched on a stool teaching six old, coarse and unemployed colliers to read provokes Mr. Ludlow to exclaim: "A little child shall lead them" (63). Even so, such goodness and accomplishments tend to work against Annie, detaching her from the reader's sympathy.

As a result, her suffering, when she is lost in the snowstorm, does not touch us like Stephen's, or Peter's. Stephen's heart is broken when his dog is spitefully killed; and he is devastated by Nan's death. The relationships which are built around Stephen are warm and human, and therefore engaging. Peter comes close to suicide in his painful loneliness and despair. Enoch's shame and frustration at his enforced idleness incite sympathetic indignation. Annie, so far above the feelings of the common man, cannot convince us of any personal trial or suffering. Miss Reynolds, "single and solitary," realizes that "to Annie no spot could be desolate or lonely, for every empty place was peopled with the society of angels" (86).

Annie's isolation, therefore, serves to place her, quite literally, in a setting where she can "do God's work" (23). It does not set her where she must stand alone to face hostile forces. She is not really engaged in any struggle with life, and realistic descriptions of her are consequently at a minimum. Unlike Stephen or Peter, she is sustained by a devout faith which was learned at her mother's knee and which only needs to grow through service. Annie is further along in the Christian life than any of the other protagonists. Stretton seems to have set herself the task of trying to make Annie fit into both worlds--the convention and reality, and the combination of such spiritual maturity with such tender years makes for an unsatisfying literary creation. There are serious inconsistencies between Annie who was "neither very clever nor very amusing," and who said much that was "so uneducated and trifling, that she might have been taken for a much younger child than she was" (86); and Annie, who, with Mrs. Ludlow, "bore a heavier weight of thought upon [her] mind than either the boys or Dora . . . for the welfare of the poor people at Botfield" (89).

As Cutt (Ministering, 135) and Bratton (Impact, 83) point out, many of the characters in The Children of Cloverley are drawn from the author's own family. Annie is the namesake of Hesba Stretton's brother's young daughter, Annie Bakewell Smith, who died in Canada in 1865, the year the book was

written. Neither J.S. Bratton nor Margaret Cutt makes it clear, however, that Annie's death did not occur until after the book was finished. The Log Book announces "The Children of Cloverley finished" on August 26; and, "Dear little Annie Bakewell died on the 21st of September." is the entry for October 16. So that although the portrayal of Annie is highly sentimentalized, it cannot be regarded as an eulogy, even though the final memorial at the dedication of the schoolhouse to "that beloved child whom God sent to live amongst us for a little while" (154) is extraordinarily tempting. There is no suggestion of sin or depravity in Annie; and, lacking any personal conflicts or failures, she fits into Elizabeth Jay's category of "those pallid juvenile protagonists . . . whose appeal relied merely on a winsome and wholly incredible goodness" (56). However, she is the exception rather than the rule in Stretton's work, and so does not support Jay's naming Stretton as one of those writers of "Evangelical style fiction" guilty of such enfeebled creations. On this rare occasion, Hesba Stretton has sacrificed her sense of literary integrity to family feeling.

What Stretton tried to do was to endow the image of her faraway niece with the characteristics of the child evangelist, a theme which was "in the full flowering of tract literature in the second half of the nineteenth century,"

according to Avery (Nineteenth Century, 82). Children's soul-saving, exemplary lives and, more frequently, inspirational deaths, were the staple fare of earlier books for children, such as those by James Janeway, Mrs. Sherwood and Hannah More. And although Avery's comment suggests that the child saviour was a theme popular only with the tract writers, the same sentiment is quite evident in the works of more secular writers of the times, Dickens and Eliot, for example. In many respects Annie resembles Eppie (Silas Marner was published in 1861), particularly as the rejuvenating force of an old, embittered and lost soul who was withdrawn from the community. Like Silas, Mrs. Reynolds had secluded herself from human contact. Eppie and Annie are the means of re-forging the links with life-giving sources.

It is clear from the beginning that Annie is too good to live. Her insistence on going up to Stephen's cottage in the middle of winter to teach her Sunday School class ends in her getting lost in a snowstorm on her return journey home, and becoming fatally ill. Her protracted illness is a means of leading the other children to acknowledge their faults and turn to Christ for salvation; it also allows time for a new coal seam to be found and her father to return after the end of the Civil War.

Of all these early works this is the weakest, and the flaw is in the characterization of Annie. Charlotte Yonge

may well have had Annie in mind when she criticized "the weak religious tale . . . the little child who goes about asking people whether they are Christians . . . the equally unnatural one who is always talking about its white robes" (Tillotson, 61). Charlotte Yonge objected to this kind of pious child as "unreal and unpractical." Tillotson adds the wry comment that its unreality is obvious, and it is "also unpractical in the intended moral effect, since the inevitable conclusion for young readers is simply that 'it is very dangerous to be good'" (Tillotson, 62). Fortunately, the dullness of Annie's unbelievable goodness is mitigated by Ben's convincing boyish stubbornness and Dora's adolescent preoccupation with her dream-world of artistic ambitions.

Although Stretton does come close to creating another "Annie" in Enoch Roden's Training in the character of the orphaned Lucy, she keeps her as a secondary figure. Hesba Stretton's home town and the family printing business are the setting for Enoch, but, although to some degree autobiographical, the allusions are not as personal or as stultifying as with Annie. Using the same techniques as in her other books, the author "leads [us] down into a long narrow court [to] . . . the cottages in Hill's Close" (1) and inside the poor, but respectable cottage of Susan Roden, a washerwoman. We hear about Enoch before seeing him and introduction is coloured by contrast. Titus, Enoch's older

brother, is his mother's "east winds" (3); but Enoch "is a comfort" to her, "so steady and solid-like" (4). He is set apart from the popular notion of the working-class boy by virtue of his "deep reverence for learning and wisdom" (9). Enoch's aspirations are far beyond his beginnings; "I'd rather be a student at college, and perhaps a missionary, than anything else in the world," (9) he confesses to the printer to whom he has just been apprenticed. The association with Mr. Drury, the printer, ends when the firm goes bankrupt; and the 'apprenticeship' for his vocation as a missionary begins. This is the basis of Enoch's story, and it resembles Peter's inasmuch as it is inward-looking, dealing with the struggles of his own soul and vicissitudes of his immediate surroundings. But there are facets of Enoch's battles which link his personal predicament to the world around him in a way Peter's is not.

Enoch's story is played out against a polemic on Christian economic responsibilities in the home and in the workplace. Hard-working Susan Roden believes that "God helps those who help themselves" (7). Mr. Drury's business fails because of his imprudence and his indulgent interpretation of the scriptures on God's providence; "take no thought for the morrow," consoles him (6). His death leaves his two daughters destitute. Esther becomes a governess and Lucy is taken in by Enoch's mother.[1] Susan's work prospers; Enoch

can study at home as well as attend classes at the "mechanics institute" (62). This peaceful, happy existence comes to an end when Susan injures her spine. "You must be a man now," Susan tells Enoch. Finding himself the sole provider for his mother, grandmother and Lucy (Titus has run away to sea), he

> is not afraid; for there sprang up in his heart a strangely glad feeling of courage and strength . . . He was ready to prove that his faith was no mere profession, but a real living confidence in the Father's love and wisdom (65).

However, Enoch cannot find work and as he sees his family suffering from the cold and going hungry, his trust in God "grows less and less firm and his faith [begins] to suffer . . . sinful unbelief prevails" (67). God seems not to care and Enoch's spirit rebels with bitterness against such injustice. But he must learn to be patient and not expect immediate divine intervention to make everything right. God's providential will must be trusted absolutely.

In many ways, Enoch and Ben resemble each other, and in each of them Stretton captures the impatient angry spirit of youth, linking it with the initiate Christian. Very soon after his arrival in England, Ben, who felt his manhood denied him, burst out:

> I'd give the world to be back home again. I feel as if I could not breathe here . . . I'm big enough and strong enough, ay! and sharp enough to get my own living; and if it was not for you [Annie] I'd go straight ahead to some town and work my own way (Cloverley, 33).

It is not only the situation which frustrates Ben; Annie's unfailing patience also provokes him. Similarly, Enoch, wanting to be the provider for his family, is prevented by circumstances which he blames on someone else--God. He sees his plight as helpless, and cannot endure the hardships with the same equanimity as the women around him. The two young adolescent boys strain against self-discipline and authority --in religious terms, the will of God. The final blow comes when granny dies in the workhouse where Enoch has been forced to take her to receive the food and warmth he cannot provide at home. Enoch's anger is human, but he must learn to "rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him" (123). His youthful impatience is contrasted with granny's Job-like philosophy. Yet, in spite of his spiritual shortcomings, the young boy's worthy aspirations and battling spirit have heroic qualities. Besides that, the social dimensions of his trials add flesh to his spiritual, and literary, bones.

Through Enoch, Hesba Stretton attempts to deal with the dilemma facing Victorian social fiction writers which Joseph Kestner identifies: having to confront the discrepancy between "the sufferings of the workers and a providential divinity" (25). Enoch's outrage is the protest of the reluctantly unemployed starving poor against a harsh world and seemingly indifferent God. He poses the universal question: "But why does God let such things be?" (118).

(So, too, does Stephen Fern in Fern's Hollow.) Hesba Stretton's answer may not be acceptable to everyone, but she does not try to avoid this difficult issue, as Mr. Kestner suggests religious writers do. Unlike Mrs. Walton, she does not try to justify all experience in religious terms, but relates circumstances and events to social attitudes. Enoch must learn that he is "in truth the agent and representative of God's providence" in caring about Susan and Lucy (97), and that God had not stopped caring for them all in the common everyday things which are taken for granted. Alexander MacLaren makes the point in one of his sermons:

> Often God's delays seem to us inexplicable, and our prayers to have no more effect than if they were spoken to a sleeping Baal. But such delays are merciful. They help us to the consciousness of our need. They let us feel the presence of sorrow . . . They test and increase desire for His help. They throw us more unreservedly into His arms (MacLaren, 97).

Enoch experiences God's merciful ways through being poor and being tested; he becomes solely dependent upon God, thus stronger in faith and ready to learn to teach others to trust in God. One of his final comments is that he has "many things to learn besides Latin" (134). Enoch's emphasis is where Hesba Stretton's is, on the living, rather than theoretical, faith.

In marrying biblical heroes with contemporary children and issues, Stretton makes this point, that the Bible is

still relevant. She produces protagonists and stories which are different from the run-of-the-mill reward or Sunday School variety being published in the 1850s and 1860s. Admittedly it is very purposive writing--to teach the Christian way; but is not marred with sudden and unconvincing conversions, or with cardboard cut-out figures. She guides her characters to spiritual maturity, and the stories of their growth are brought to life with analyses of their predicaments and detailed and careful observations of physical settings. More significantly, the additional social dimensions give added appeal to the prototypes and a serious, practical focus of interest to the dramas.

An integral part of each character is the setting. Stretton's blending of natural surrounding with human actions is Wordsworthian (it is seen in her novels on a much larger scale, The Clives of Burcot and The Doctor's Dilemma particularly). The open hillside is part of Stephen's story and character; Peter's personality and problems are paralleled by the unpredictable, stormy sea; Enoch's studious aspirations and secular bent are tied to the worldliness of the printing shop and its show of learning. Through these associations each of the characters is freed from his biblical original and made individual. The different circumstances enhance the scriptural identities while freeing them from the confines of "Bible stories." Although Annie is

the exception in this early group, even she shares similarities with the others. All of them are isolated in some way and are the Victorian equivalent of the alienated youth in today's children's fiction.

The attractiveness of the lonely or abandoned child was as alive then as now. Patricia Beer's account of what she enjoyed reading as a child in the 1920's testifies to the appeal of the orphaned or fatherless/motherless child figure. From the short-lived popularity of mid-Victorian family stories, Avery surmises that readers found tales of "orphans fighting their lone battles" far more exciting stuff (Childhood's Pattern, 224). The latter is the scenario which Hesba Stretton favours, perhaps because it echoes the classic 'lone pilgrim' scene. But she does not adopt the idea exclusively; and while the protagonist may struggle 'alone' there is usually a wholesome family nearby. In this way, she usually avoids the exaggeration of melodrama which tends to surround the lost, lone battling soul. Annie Wyley is at hand to guide Stephen and to stand by him against her own uncle if need be. Ned Kelly and Captain Seaforth point Peter on the right way, but they cannot always be counted on to be there at the right time; and when they doubt his word he is lonelier than ever. Enoch's mother and grandmother are his spiritual mentors.

The responsibility for making decisions and taking

action, however, still rests finally on the children themselves. Margaret Cutt makes the important point that Stretton regarded the child "as a soul, and felt justified in making him as important as an adult and equally capable of spiritual understanding" (Ministering, 134). Stephen, Peter and Enoch are interesting characters because they try to work out their own spiritual dilemmas. But they are not entirely self-centred, as the traditional pilgrim was, for, while wrestling with the inner spirit, they confront the outside world. Their dramas, therefore, move beyond the child's circle to encompass adult society.

Although Stretton provides these boy protagonists with spiritual mentors, the children are basically good and internally directed towards striving after right. Their roles not only point up the need of pastoral help from Christians tried in the faith; they reveal another side of the adult world--grown-ups as spiritual enemies, and parents as incompetent. Peter and Stephen pit their youthful innocence against mature sinfulness, showing the wrong-thinking and corruption of their elders. These are very different portrayals than say Hannah More's or Maria Edgeworth's, Mrs. Walton's or Mrs. Molesworth's. In all of these writers' works, A.L.O.E. included too, the adults closest to the children are always their trustworthy Christian friends; the adult world was for them sacrosanct.

Stretton's children also portray the plight of the oppressed. Stephen is the squatter; Enoch, the poor and unemployed, while in The Fishers of Derby Haven Peter is closely linked with Brigid, the submissive, female figure cowering in the confines of her cottage, dutiful as Killip's wife. An "habitual expression of fear" is on Brigid's face (22). (Stretton provides a similar picture of wifely oppression in No Place Like Home, where Ruth has to arrange clandestine meetings with her wrongly condemned son, Ishmael, because her drunkard husband forbids any contact with him.) The woman and the struggling new disciple are placed side by side--each one's predicament illuminates the other's. Joseph Kestner and Patricia Stubbs contest that as restricted and repressed members of society, women writers wrote out their protests through literature, and strongly identified with the oppressed poor and working class. The pulpit for religious truth was also the thinking unfranchised woman's political platform. Stretton may not have been posturing as a feminist, but she was certainly a protestor.

Annie, unlike the boy protagonists, is unwaveringly strong, and is good from the outset: "It seems," her father says, "you have been trying to do the will of God all your life" (20). Like Anne in Fern's Hollow, Susan, Grandmother and Lucy in Enoch Roden's Training and Christian in The Fishers of Derby Haven, Annie provides vital support to young

Christians, the men and the boys. The faith and strength of these women underpin the stories. Annie is old beyond her years; moving amongst the sailors and passengers on the ship with her "helpful, womanly ways" (24); but she is in the same tradition as Maria Charlesworth's Ministering Children, published in 1854. Lucy, too, although only ten, gives womanly advice and comfort, as well as Latin lessons, to Enoch. Little blind Aggie offers friendship, as well as the opportunity to be protective, to Peter. In these early books the women are the providers; the boys, the recipients. Stretton's portrayals here are along traditional lines.[2]

Although the Sunday School and moral traditions are strongly evident in these early characters, there are also signs of departure from them. Avery's observation that the moral tale for the cottage child had to be "hammered in" because he was "coarse-fibred" and "thick-headed" (Childhood's Pattern, 77) only applies to these early wo as far as the 'hiccupping' use of scriptural passages goes. The characterizations are not crude. Stephen, Peter and Enoch are sensitively drawn, fleshed out with real feelings, frustrations and shortcomings and placed in different and believable situations. Interestingly, Stephen, Hesba Stretton's first child hero, is the most imaginatively developed of the group. It is possibly because he is the centre of social, as well as spiritual conflict, where

Stretton's unique concerns are.

Hesba Stretton's message, acted out by her child figures, is one of patience, fortitude and good sense. Hardships faced the right way, the Christian way, will be solved in a world guided by Divine providence. But she does not preach passivity; learning to accept God's will does not mean learning not to act. Stephen's right behaviour places him finally in a position to take positive action; any other choice at the crucial moments of decision would have embroiled him in self-destructive liaisons. Cause and effect relationships are clearly and realistically unfolded and neither Stephen's (nor Enoch's, nor Peter's, for that matter) personal growth can be plotted in a simple linear fashion. His experiences are painfully human, and also adolescent, inviting reader identification and involvement.

Stretton makes no bones about the difficulty of living the Christian life. As a deeply committed believer, she wrote into her children's actions the struggles and frustrations of learning how to love one's enemies, or of accepting the unfolding of God's will. Her child characters 'instruct' the readers in how to achieve the highest goals through their own actions, adventures and failures; they are not just mouthpieces for theoretical lessons. In these books they are "morally earnest," but they are not the "virtually sinless" children Gillian Avery finds in Sunday reading, or

"pious tales" (Nineteenth Century, 81). Neither do they resemble Charlotte Yonge's pictures of drawing-room decorum. Their muttering and resentfulness, stubbornness, wilfulness and fits of passionate anger--peaks of highs and lows--make them remarkably believable. What is stressed is the fight to live rightly on earth rather than the waiting for transportation to heaven. Admittedly, Stretton's success in portraying real individuals is not sustained. At this stage there is only so much that is possible, for she has chosen to deal with Bible models and spiritual perfection. But, within these severe limitations, she manages to develop very different children in very different circumstances, and this distinction is enough to mark out her characters from the general run found in deeply religious books of the time.

Stretton gives natural dimensions to well-worn stereotypes, extending them and their religious experiences into the world of social reality. It is this link between the individual soul and the social context which is the vital life-line, feeding energy into her creations. Stephen's family is reinstated in its rightful home and corrupt authority is defeated; Killip lives amicably with Brigid; the starving conditions of the miners' families are relieved through brotherly co-operation. In all these situations the children are the agents of visible change; they are never the mere distributors of charity or messengers of a creed.

CHAPTER II

The Middle Period: Children of the City, Jessica and Meg

Jessica

The year after The Children of Cloverley was published, Jessica's First Prayer appeared. Before issuing it as a book in 1867, the Religious Tract Society serialized it in their magazine, Sunday at Home--an indication of their recognition of the story's appeal. Its remarkable success has already been noted, and although Hesba Stretton's works continued to be popular, none was ever received with such enthusiasm. There is no mention in her diaries of working on the book, but an entry made after its publication reads: "My dentist . . . hoped I should have a place next to Lord Byron in the next world, a marvelous compliment!" (May 18, 1867). (The remark reveals the book's fame and the author's ironic sense of humour.)

Part of the immense popularity of the book was its depiction of city slum life. Since the 1840's, publications and investigative reports had been arousing public interest and concern over conditions among the urban poor. Carlyle's Past and Present (1843), Disraeli's Sybil (1845), Engels' Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844, Mayhew's Morning Chronicle articles (later, London Labour and the London Poor, 1864) fired the imaginations and social

consciences of numerous writers besides Dickens, Gaskell and Elizabeth Browning, (Kestner and Stubbs deal with some of the less well remembered). But they all make the labyrinthian streets and the corrupting influence of industrial cities the stuff of adult fiction. The novel of social protest frequently included the plight of child workers and working-class children of the city, but not until the 1860's, with Kingsley's The Water Babies, (1863), for example, did this material become the subject matter of books written for children. Little poverty-stricken Jessica, therefore, alone in the urban jungle, was not only a fascinating main character; she was a literary phenomenon. Different from anything Stretton, or any other religious children's writer had ever created[1], she established Stretton's superiority as a writer of street Arab tales.

At a meeting held by Lord Shaftesbury in 1872, Barnardo, whom Hesba Stretton met when she moved to London, spoke to leading mission workers in the East End of London. He defined the terms 'gutter' and 'arab' children. They should only be applied, he said, "to those who were thoroughly destitute and homeless, 'nobody's children'" (Barnardo, 50).

All Stretton's early protagonists contribute in some way to Jessica, but the fundamental ways in which they differ from her point out her uniqueness. The boys are all associated with biblical personalities. Their stories are

the stuff of religious heroes even though they are related in secular terms, and so they are clothed in a kind of spiritual armour and given to quoting innumerable texts and delivering sermons. As a result, the worldly and the heavenly sometimes sit awkwardly side by side. Admittedly, the boys conform to this description to varying degrees. Peter and Enoch, for example, are far more self-conscious proselytes than Stephen. Nevertheless, as characters, they are often either suppressed beneath the heavy hand of didacticism, or loom larger than life in their acts of remarkable faith and goodness. Annie, too, although not of saintly origin, is invested with deeply personal associations which idealize her as closer to a heavenly spirit than a child.

Jessica is cast in a completely different mould from any of these early child characters. Freed from the blue-print of a scriptural counterpart, and from familial adoration, she is drawn with an objective detachment which is able to invest her with a personality all of her own. And, not being bound to any emblematic role, she can grow along with her story far more naturally than if she had to fit a pre-figured part.

In addition, unlike any of her predecessors, she is a city waif from the innermost heart of the metropolis. Stephen, Peter and Annie are all country children, relics of the cottage-literature tradition of which Avery speaks.

Nature also tends to soften and sentimentalize these children--perhaps because the author places them all in settings which have nostalgic, favourable, childhood associations for her. Recalling "A Summer Day on the Wrekin," Hesba Stretton reveals a romantic and passionate affinity with the countryside of her youth: "Numberless associations with it [the Wrekin] are woven into the web of our lives, as into the lives of thousands who live within ken of it" (Leisure Hour, Sept. 17, 1864); the familiar sight of it would reduce her to tears on returning after a time away (603).

There is no softening greenery around Jessica. She was created out of Stretton's stay in Manchester (1863-66), the heart of industrial England and the city which fired her indignation at the plight of the nation's neglected children. In the book, Hesba Stretton places her in London--the devil's playground--but does not give the city a Dickensian auxiliary role in the story. The city is not, as it was for Oliver or David Copperfield, a testing ground; it is Jessica's home. In all her wretched poverty, Jessica, like Jo of Bleak House, is a product of the city, not a pilgrim passing through it. Her vital spirit has survived the squalid environment.

In the opening scene, Jessica's pathetically inadequate covering of rags and bare feet belie the cockney cheerfulness and saucy, familiar charm she packs into her assault on dour

old Daniel at his coffee stall. Famished and cold, she finds the aromatic scent of Daniel's hot coffee irresistible. Stretton centres all the reader's attention on this perky little piece of humanity as Daniel "suddenly become[s] aware of a pair of very bright dark eyes being fastened upon him and the slices of bread and butter on his board" (2). Stephen's shadow prefaced his appearance; Peter's voice announced his. Similarly, Jessica is an image of parts:

> A thin and meagre face belonged to the eyes, and was half hidden by a mass of matted hair hanging over the forehead and down the neck, the only covering which the head or neck had. A tattered frock, scarcely fastened together with broken strings, was slipping down over the shivering shoulders of the little girl (3).

Shivering, hungry, eyeing the buns, sniffing the coffee and smacking her lips, Jessica is all senses; she is vibrant even though starving. Above all, she has a sense of the ridiculous which places her in a league of her own. In the face of going without breakfast for the umpteenth time, she can laugh at her own joke that the policeman has stopped "worriting" her because he must think she is one of the customers. At this point in the story, just a few paragraphs in, this little nameless urchin has gripped the reader's imagination as none of the other protagonists does.

As in the earlier books, contrast is used to define the main character. Daniel is the foil for Jessica. He is "tall, spare, elderly . . . with a singularly solemn face,

and a manner which was grave and secret" (2). Jessica is little, young, curious, talkative, direct and open. She has nothing to conceal and nothing to lose, unlike Daniel, who fears that keeping the coffee stall--the means of amassing considerable savings--will cost him his respectable position as pew-opener at a fashionable city church. Seemingly, Jessica has nothing to give, whereas Daniel does. The meagreness of what he does give her, however, a little left-over coffee and a "few crusts," is made more pathetic by Jessica's enthusiastic response. "I wish I could stay here for ever and ever; just as I am," she cried (10). Later Hesba Stretton was to write: "How many are there among us who ever strive to realise the condition of those who lack everything?" (Introduction, Children Reclaimed, xiii). At the very beginning of this unlikely relationship, Stretton sets up the irony which underlies the story throughout giving it its particular poignancy and power. To Jessica, if not to the astute reader, it appears that Daniel is in control of the situation at this point.

However, Jessica shows no sign of being subservient or submissive. While she is polite to "Mr. Daniel," she is not deferential. Even sitting amongst the wealthy congregation later on, "Jessica was happy, but not in the least abashed" (39). Starving though she is, she will not beg, and she even enjoys a sense of superiority given her by the knowledge

that she is more experienced than Daniel in at least one aspect of life--going without dinners (6). This is a strikingly different working-class child from the "ideal [poor] girl . . . modest and submissive" and dull-witted, whom Gillian Avery identifies in Victorian children's books (Childhood's Pattern, 79), or who is found in works of other religious writers.

None of Stretton's previous children shows such a sense of autonomy either. Jessica possesses an air of self-reliance which is close to defiance; she is the street-wise urchin who has learnt to survive. Hesba Stretton, realizing it took sheer strength to do this, draws her with spirit, and gives her a potency which contrasts with both Daniel's and the minister's impotency. Although the minister's heart is moved when he visits Jessica's bare room, he is at a loss as to how he can really help her. His suggestion, that he ask her mother to "let [her] go to school in a pleasant place down in the country" (49), is utterly naive. Jessica, on the other hand, is eminently sensible, and she instructs him on what he may do: "only let me come to hear you of a Sunday, and tell me about God . . . You cannot do anything more for me" (50).

Given her appalling living conditions, Jessica's survival is a miracle. Her home is an old hayloft over a stable housing costermongers' donkeys. The entrance is through a

trap door in the floor of the loft, reached by a wooden ladder with "crazy and broken" rungs. There is a "litter of straw for the bedding, and a few bricks and boards for the furniture" (18). "The tiles were falling in and the broken window panes were stuffed with rags and paper" (48). Charlotte Yonge might not have had exactly this kind of scene in mind when she urged that children's books should be "strong, true and real" (What Books to Lend, 6), but Hesba Stretton's description is all of these. Testimonies to Jessica's life fill the pages of the Blue Books and of Henry Mayhew's works; they are recorded by Engels and were recounteded first-hand to Stretton herself (Lord's Pursebearers, Introduction). Jessica shares this place with a violent, drunken mother who would pawn her daughter for the money for gin if she could (18). Long-neglected, Jessica must earn or beg her own scraps of food. Stephen, Peter and Enoch are poor, but their lives in no way match Jessica's deprivation.

Stretton is presenting Jessica as one of those, who, by their very survival in the most devastating conditions prove their indomitable spirit, and thereby qualify for all the aid society can give them. In her introduction to Godfrey Holden Pike's account of Dr. Barnardo's work in the East End of London, Stretton pleads these children's case against the Malthusian-Darwinists of the day by turning their own

arguments against them:

> There are philosophers among us who teach that it is unwise to stretch out a helping hand to those who are struggling for existence; that nature selects the strongest and fittest for survival, and if we interfere with her we do so at the cost of perpetuating an enfeebled and deteriorated race. But these boys and girls, fathered out of the streets into the Homes, are the very individuals whom nature has selected for existence, who prove their selection by having outlived the innumerable perils of their hard life (xiv).

Stretton lets Jessica speak for herself. Her very being is a testimony to "the condition of England" question; it is a statement and a challenge.

The obvious temptation to a writer would be to create a totally pathetic creature whose appeal would be its despairing deprivation, as Mrs. Castle Merrick Smith does with Froggy and Ben in Froggy's Little Brother. Stretton skillfully avoids this pitfall. Jessica's bright and determined spirit in spite of overwhelmingly grim circumstances makes her doubly attractive. Her endeavour and animation speak of hope--of the divine life-giving spirit in each individual, even in children of the gutter. This is the unspoken that reaches out and touches Daniel, that moves him to call her back after ordering her off, that opens the door to human communication and, eventually, salvation.

Jessica's spiritual state at the beginning of her story is quite unlike the other children's. Stephen and Peter have

a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible and of Christian principles, enough to act as a kernel of growth and to worry their consciences. Enoch and Annie are endowed with deeply religious families to nurture them. They all sin and suffer the consequent shameful self-analysis, except Annie, who is the "virtually sinless Romantic" child (Nineteenth Century, 81). Jessica does not wrestle with temptations of doubt, fear or despair; she is not on the verge of a soul-searching pilgrimage. On the contrary, she is without any kind of Christian influence at all. She is close to Blake's child of innocence. Her soul is as naked and vulnerable as her body and it must respond to good or to evil; it cannot remain untouched, unimpressed. This is Hesba Stretton's challenge to the reader. Jessica will grow up. "Grow up to be what?" Stretton asked of the poor children she saw in London's East End (Introduction, Children Reclaimed, xiv).

Such portraiture is exceptional in tract literature and defies categorization. Stretton resists attaching Calvinistic notions of natural depravity to Jessica, for her condition is society's sin. In an existence which is a running battle with disease and starvation Jessica lives by her wits and adopts a very practical set of values. Her notion of goodness is a two-edged sword to Daniel. Confidently, she assures Daniel he is "a very good man," and

explains the means of her assessment: "You make good coffee; prime! And buns too! . . . and the police leaves you alone, and never tells you to move on" (13). The unintentional thrust finds its mark; Daniel realizes his 'goodness' amounts to no more than that.

Stretton continues to develop the ironically revealing nature of Jessica's morality. As if to get his own back, Daniel plays a trick on Jessica to test her goodness. It rebounds and lashes him further into a sense of his own moral inferiority. He deliberately drops a penny near to Jessica and watches for the child's reaction--judging her every movement. Although Daniel's first response is pain as she unobtrusively draws the coin towards her with her bare foot, it is momentary, and swiftly supplanted by a sweeter, self-congratulatory feeling of "having entrapped the young thief" (13). His self-righteous indignation at having been treated so badly after showing her "more kindness than he had shown to any fellow-creature in many a long year" (14), is cut short by Jessica's placing the coin on the stall next to his hand. (Stretton's touch is masterful here as Jessica "picks up the coin from amongst the mud [and rubs] it bright and clean upon her rags" [14]). For an instant, the temptation had been too much for Jessica, who had "only had a penny of [her] very own but once" (14). But the thought of Daniel's kindness had proved stronger than the attraction of the

penny, and she tearfully confesses, knowing that this "sin" will cost her her weekly visit to "paradise"--the comfort of Daniel's warm corner. Suspecting no deviousness, but convinced of Daniel's goodness, Jessica misinterprets his remark: "I could never have done it myself," as reproof, and not as Daniel's admission of weakness. Nothing is more important to Daniel than money, and he is chastened by the thought of the "struggle that must have passed through her childish mind" (15), a struggle he could never have endured.

In this respect, Jessica functions as a catalyst, bringing a new spiritual awareness to Daniel, but in a quite different way from Annie (who awakened Miss Reynolds' Christian feelings). Jessica works her spiritual influence unconsciously, primarily through one of her most natural and endearing traits--her eager curiosity. Stretton exploits this childlike characteristic to the full, using it as a catechetical device. In a simple and straightforward manner Jessica directs candid questions to Daniel and the minister about the wonderful new world which is opening up before her eyes. Her enquiries probe to the depths uncomfortable issues in her "teacher". "What do you want such a deal of money for?" she asks of Daniel, "do you give it to God?" (45). "What is pray? . . . What is a minister and God?" (23). Jessica's innocent ignorance is a powerful tool in her author's hands. As an unwitting child evangelist, Jessica is

relieved of the burden of didactic monologues, or awkward scriptural recitations and forced conversations, and so, far more believable than the usual Sunday-reading heroines and certainly than angelic Annie.

Jessica's only "sin" was initiated by Daniel. Jessica was the victim; Daniel the tempter. In The Fishers of Derby Haven, Peter was forced to sin by Killip. While there are obvious parallels, the significant difference is that Killip was a professed heathen, Daniel a respected church-going man. Hesba Stretton is treading on new ground, not just in her own writing, but in the tract tradition where authority generally, but particularly religious authority, was above reproach.

The only authority figure in Jessica's life is her alcoholic mother who 'cuffs' her and leaves her alone to fend for herself, or turns her out onto the streets when she goes "on a spree". Her loneliness is worse than Peter's; he does have comfort in Aggy and Ned, even from Brigid. Jessica wanders out of the land of the unwashed heathens up to the representative of respectable Christianity, Daniel the pew-keeper; the irony is, she is impressed. Her pleasure in the warmth of his coffee corner and appreciation of his "goodness" turns the tables on his sense of social and moral superiority, revealing to him the poverty of his own faith and the deficiency of his Church.

Always astute in matters of economy, Hesba Stretton's awareness of the impact of the commercial spirit upon the soul of man was heightened by her time in Manchester. Daniel shows the deleterious effect on the spiritual life of commercial enterprise. At the Union Chapel, which Stretton attended in Manchester, Alexander MacLaren preached these words:

> What will a Manchester man that knows nothing except goods and office work, and knows these only in their superficial aspect, and not as related to God, . . . what will he do with himself when he gets into a world where there is not a single ledger . . . ? (The Best, 166).

Daniel is the fool and Jessica, the innocent heathen.

Jessica follows a different path to salvation from Hesba Stretton's earlier heroes. Their paths were fraught with spiritual difficulties; Jessica's road is a process of discovery which is unique in its freshness. The earlier major characters, including Annie, are all involved in refining their religious conditions; their stories are indeed lessons, giving religious instruction to the reader. Jessica's story is one of wonderment, not of self-chastisement; her progress is plotted by gradual revelations, not texts.

Taking full advantage of the artistic possibilities this less restricted route offers, Hesba Stretton captures the beauty of the inexplicable, spiritual experience in a manner

very much like that in the sensitive writings of Mary Howitt in Little Cristal, (1863). Howitt portrays Cristal as having close-to-divine intuition. He creeps unseen into a church and is so "entranced" by the stained glass window of Christ blessing some children

> that he dropped upon his knees instinctively, and . . . gazed at the Saviour with a hungering and thirsting . . . after the blessing. All at once, he saw that his little dirty hands, his breast, and all his poor clothes, were covered with a glorious light as of rubies and emeralds and transparent topaz (14).

Stretton uses a similar situation, replacing glorious light with glorious music, to dramatize Jessica's spiritual awakening. Jessica steals after Daniel on his way to church one wintry evening. Unwittingly, he leads her inside the partially dark building, where, as he kindles each gaslight, the grand interior and glittering, golden organ pipes are slowly revealed to the spellbound child. When Daniel tells her it is not for her, and she must "run away," she is prevented by the sight of a policeman at the gate, and the knowledge of Daniel inside. Jessica conceals herself behind a door where she is trapped by the arrival of the congregation. When the organ music reaches her, she is overcome by the power of spiritual joy which moves her.

> After a while the organ began to sound, and Jessica, crouching down in her hiding place, listened entranced to the sweet music. She could not tell what made her cry, but the tears came so rapidly that it

> was of no use to rub the corners of her eyes with her hard knuckles; so she lay down upon the ground and buried her face in her hands, and wept without restraint (20).

She is unable to dwell on these new feelings because she must leave before Daniel catches her. So, with "a feeling of weariness and sorrow; and thinking sadly of the light and warmth and music that were within the closed doors, she stepped out into the cold and darkness . . . with a heavy heart" (20). Her banishment from the light of God's house into the outer darkness by God's own congregation is the source of her unhappiness.

Jessica's isolation has a dimension which the other protagonists' does not. Jessica is an outcast; pictured on the edge of the coffee stall crowd and the congregation, she is unwelcome. Without family or friends, except the uncommunicative Daniel, Jessica is quite alone in London. The literary forerunners are easily traced: Oliver Twist and Jo. What makes Jessica's loneliness more pathetic and more urgent than say Little Nell's or Oliver's, or any of Hesba Stretton's own earlier characters, is that there is no place for her even among Christian people. The scriptural analogy for Jessica, and Peter, is unmistakable: Peter sleeps in a manger, Jess above the stable. In tract fictions, Hesba Stretton's included, a frequent reminder to the poor is that Christ, too, was "despised and rejected of men"; his lot is their lot, and in this thought of shared hardships they

should find comfort and succour. That they were called upon to endure more than seemed humanly possible, was not unrealistic; and the fact that they did endure is witnessed by the accounts of the philanthropists who worked among them.

Ragged clothes, bare feet and matted hair also set Jessica apart. The class distinction is clearly made by Stretton, but not in the manner that Avery contends. Her criticism that Hesba Stretton is one of those writers showing "surprising lack of sensitivity" towards the poor and their suffering (Nineteenth Century, 95) is entirely unfounded. Avery attempts to substantiate the claim by specific reference to Jessica's First Prayer, but betrays a serious misreading of the narrative itself, let alone its implications. Not only is her synopsis of the story quite wrong, she reduces its message to the minister solving Jessica's problem of what to wear "so that she presented a somewhat more respectable appearance in the eyes of the congregation" (from Jessica, quoted in Nineteenth Century, 95). Avery's conclusion is that "Hesba Stretton would have us believe that she was indifferent to how cold the poor were in the streets as long as their appearance did not offend the wealthy in church" (96). This could not be further from the truth.

Ironically, the problem Jessica's appearance presents is not hers but the Church's. "Dirty and neglected," Jessica

poses a perplexing question to the minister's older daughter's sense of propriety when young Winnie invites her into their pew. But, remembering a text used by her father, Winnie sees no difficulty. In her innocence she looks indignant and reproachful as she refers her sister to the New Testament passage:

> "For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor stand thou there or sit here under my footstool; are ye not then partial in yourselves and are become judges of evil thoughts?" (32).

Winnie explains: "If we don't take this little girl into our pew, we 'have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . with respect of persons'" (33). This is Hesba Stretton's text, and she clearly points out the answer to the Church's dilemma in Jane's response: "The Bible seems plain; but I'm sure papa would not like it" (33). The Bible <u>is</u> plain to Stretton, and her severe indictment of the Church's attitude towards the likes of Jessica is equally plain.

Margaret Cutt wonders if the sympathetic minister is based upon Dr. MacLaren (<u>Ministering</u>, 137). There is a sermon of MacLaren's, "Christ's Touch," expounding those Christian ideals advocated in <u>Jessica</u>, and so close in its imagery to the scene where the minister takes Jessica "by the hand in the face of all the congregation" and leads her into

the vestry (40), as to make Cutt's idea very attractive. Speaking of Christian pity and love, MacLaren preaches practical Christianity:

> No good is to be done by any man to his fellows except at the cost of true sympathy which leads to identification and contact. The literal touch of your hand would do more to some poor outcasts than much solemn advice, or even much material help flung to them as from a height above. (The Best, 140).

Although Cutt and Salway recognize Hesba Stretton's "holier than thou" warning to fastidious church members, Gillian Avery is not alone in her contrary interpretation. Recalling reading Jessica's First Prayer as a favourite book when young, Patricia Beer was struck by the "patronizing" attitude towards the poor. It seemed to her that the characters "kept harping on the difference in station" between the rich and the poor (Mrs. Beer's House, 106). Unlike Avery, Beer knows her text well enough, but the lightly mocking tone that she adopts for her childhood memories, she carries over to her literary criticism, thematically grouping the prevalent patterns of plot and character with a flippancy which lacks clarification and misses the fine details. For example, to demonstrate the superior manner of the minister's children, the scene already described between Jessica and the two daughters is recounted thus: "Miss Winnie and Miss Jane read texts aloud to each other in front of Jessica about rebuffing the poor" (Mrs.

Beer's, 106). This is neither a fair account of what happened, nor a thoughtful assessment of the passage's purpose.

Beer also objects that Hesba Stretton denies Jessica any upward social mobility by the nature of her "poor reward" (107)--helping Daniel at his coffee stall, and cleaning up the Chapel. But Jessica's benefits are far greater than Beer is prepared to admit. For she is adopted by Daniel as his own daughter, which not only provides her with a pleasant home, but makes her sole heir to his small fortune. (In the book's sequel, Jessica's Mother, she inherits the money and moves in with the minister to be treated as one of the family.)

The earlier protagonists also benefit socially as well as spiritually; Stephen becomes the land agent for Miss Annie; Enoch realizes his ambition to be a minister, and Peter takes on the work of a missionary. Bratton suggests that it is Stretton's own socially mid-way position which enables her to write with far less regard of the rigid delineations of class status than is shown in the works of her predecessors, or contemporaries, who kept their characters very much in their places.

This is true, and her semi-autobiographical stories, "The Postmaster's Daughter" and "A Provincial Post-Office", show her involvement in the lives and business of a wide cross-section of the people of Wellington and the surrounding rural

communities. She also had to write for her living, which gave her experiences outside the range of other privately supported tract writers. But it is also true that she must have known that there was only so much that was feasible in terms of achievement for the lower working classes, and she keeps her characters in the realm of possibility while setting their feet upwards on the social ladder.

Jessica is a real child, and an important aspect of her naturalness is the irony of her position. She believes she has found her mentor in Daniel; whereas, it is she who reveals the truth to him. Here, Stretton takes that "irresistible combination of youth and age" (Ministering, 109), popularized by Dickens twenty years earlier with Little Nell and her Grandfather, and revitalizes it. However, in the case of Daniel and Jessica, there is not that heavy dependence of one on the other. Neither Daniel nor Jessica is infirm or frail; they meet as two quite independent people. But, the social and material advantages are on Daniel's side. In addition, he is the church-goer; Jessica is the heathen. But what first promises to be a reversal of the 'older female mentor, young boy disciple' patterns found in the earlier books turns out not to be so. Both Daniel and Jessica contribute to the book's moral purpose.

For a while, the pair are a case of the blind leading the blind. Daniel unwittingly leads Jessica to the chapel;

Jessica unknowingly leads him to self-examination. The stumbling block to Daniel's faith--his selfish greed--is exposed and contrasted with Jessica's generous nature (her first prayer is to ask God to repay Daniel for her "sups of coffee" [74]). Finally, when Jessica's need of Daniel awakens new feelings of love in his heart, "such as he had not felt for years" (100), the friendship which follows epitomizes the religion of Christian brotherhood.

Although the relationship between Daniel and Jessica is more complex, and at the same time, more balanced, than any of the other pairs seen so far in Hesba Stretton's work, Jessica is still the more powerful figure. Her potency derives from being both the saved and the saviour.

The attractions of Jessica are manifold. While combining some characteristics of Stretton's previous creations, she cannot be seen as a mere progression of types. The earlier protagonists, similar to each other in their scriptural derivations, do not show a strong developmental progression. In fact, Peter, the fourth protagonist is a far less satisfying character than Stephen, the very first. The only mould which existed was didactic: the protagonists, while in the process of being saved, suffered trials of the spirit which were mirrored by domestic or social misfortunes. They came alive and out of their strident strait-jackets only intermittently. Hesba Stretton broke that mould when she

came to Jessica. She did not make Jessica a fledgling Christian or unconvincingly good, but drew her along the lines of a blameless innocent, investing her with a lively wit and fertile curiosity.

The years in Manchester caused Stretton to write about adolescence in a way hitherto untried. As well as seeing first-hand something of the miserable lives of the very poor, she listened to the sermons of Alexander MacLaren, who fre-quently dwelt on the "Christian duty of vigorous protest" (The Best, 91). "A silent abstinence is not enough," he preached.

> A dumb church is a dying church, and it ought to be. For Christ has sent us here in order . . . that we may bring Christian principles to bear upon the actions of the community, and not be afraid to speak when we are called upon by conscience to do so (The Best, 91).

Jessica is Hesba Stretton's means of speaking out, both on behalf of children like her and to stir into action the Christian community. Jessica continues to hold attention. In 1968, Patricia Beer wrote of the "vividness [with which] speeches and sentences of Jessica" still come back at her (114). And over one hundred and twenty years after its first publication, the book appeared as a paperback in Ontario. In her portrayal of Jessica, Stretton combined the spiritual with the secular to produce a new and vigorous religious realism. And therein lies the secret to her success.

Meg

Hesba Stretton's experiences in Manchester and in London became germane to her work, and from Jessica's First Prayer onwards her writing was devoted primarily to investigating the lives of destitute children, mostly from the city slums. With Jessica, she moved away from the stereotypic evangelical initiation story, presenting the resolution of deeply personal religious conflicts, and looked, instead, at the very particular conditions of just one child. She also relocated her story, as she had relocated herself, from the country to the town.

Meg was the only other figure besides Jessica who was as popular with the readers: Little Meg's Childre, published in 1868, the year after Jessica's First Prayer, sold "over 10,000 copies" in the first few weeks (Log Book, Nov. 19, 1868). The two heroines have many similarities. Like Jessica, Meg is an isolated but determined little girl, living in the same labyrinthian city. She also finally attains "rightful security and love" (Ministering Angels, 167). But, although Meg, like Jessica, is one of those "unsullied" heroines Gillian Avery recognizes, she is neither "untaught" nor "uncared for" (Nineteenth Century, 93). Instead, she personifies Christian integrity, and is, herself, the source of Christian knowledge and comfort to others. Her strength and resourcefulness, as surrogate

mother of two young siblings, derive from the fragile, but essential, early Christian influences in her life--a fundamentally good mother, snatches of scriptures learned from occasional attendance at a ragged school, and a view of God as a loving and giving father.

Although Meg's story is different from Jessica's, this controlling textual theme is the same. J.S. Bratton misquotes "God seeing all his children" as being the text underpinning Little Meg's Children (Impact, 88). But this quotation, popular with the early moralists, conveys a far more threatening concept of God than Hesba Stretton would ever have intended. Her deity is above all a loving and forgiving figure; for Meg and Jessica he is their surrogate father.

Setting Meg's story apart from Jessica's, and from any other previous story, is its seeming lack of purposiveness. Meg is not a means of pointing up ineffectual Christianity, or of calling attention to any particular social issues. Her tale teaches a lesson of simple faith withstanding the pressures of extreme hardship, and working a gentle influence among a handful of people. However, this exemplary life is lived in the midst of the most appalling conditions of poverty. Herein is the essence of the story's purpose. Little Meg's Children is tied more closely, and more deliberately, than any other work to its setting and to a

very specific location and event.

The environs of Meg's squalid home, Angel Court, are not a mere figment of the author's ironic imagination, but a place which existed and which she personally knew of. Margaret Cutt goes through a tortuous process of identifying Angel Court, and of establishing Hesba Stretton's acquaintance with it. She notes, from A Dictionary of London, that "there were at different times, sixteen Angel Courts" in London. Linking this information with a description by Henry Mayhew of Rosemary Lane, and a reference from Miss Stretton's Log Book, Feb. 17, 1868, to a visit made with a policeman to the East End of London to see "some disgusting streets," she states that "the impressions received during this visit formed the background of the story" (Ministering, 143).

While Cutt's ingenious research methods, and her conclusion, are admissible, they fall a long way short of making the very strong connection which exists between the location and the story. Cutt is obviously unaware of a piece of Hesba Stretton's own writing which spells out in detail a visit to the area where little Meg lives. In "Three Hours with the Boys' Beadle," Hesba Stretton tells of "picking [her] steps carefully along [the] dirty pavement" of Rosemary Lane, in Whitechapel, which leads finally into Cherubim Court (125). She was clearly horrified at the misery and ugliness of the extreme poverty all around her, and writes of it in

terms very close to Engels'. It is worth quoting the passage extensively, for it includes information and descriptions which are directly transcribed onto the pages of Little Meg's Children. Moreover, it reveals Hesba Stretton's innermost response to the experience; and it is this response which finds expression in little Meg.

> It [Rosemary Lane] was a narrow, squalid street, with odd-looking shops on each side . . . The people had, all of them, a sallow, unwashed, and unwholesome aspect; and the children playing about were dressed in a grotesque mixture of raggedness and faded finery, a bare-footed girl, wearing an old hat with a scarlet feather in it, being a type of all the rest. (126)

The image of the little girl and her outfit stayed with Stretton. She uses the same phrase, "faded finery," to describe the well-worn items hidden under mother's bed: a "bright-coloured shawl, and showy dress and velvet bonnet" (Little Meg, 13), and Meg's own "best clothes": a "red frock and her bonnet with green ribbons" (36). And she makes Meg, dressed in her mother's black silk bonnet "now brown with years, and the old shawl . . . pinned over the ragged bodice of her frock . . . th[illegible]rn at the edges", a "grotesque mixture of raggedness [illegible]ed finery" (Little Meg, 36). Later, when Meg is forced to pawn the precious clothes for money for food, she takes them to a "small, dingy" pawnbroker's shop in Rosemary Lane (Little Meg, 76).

Rosemary Lane leads into even "closer and dirtier"

streets ("Three Hours," 126). "We went down two or three of them," Stretton records, "keeping in the middle of the roadway, which could not have been wide enough for two carts to pass one another" (126). In "the smaller and closer streets" around Meg's home "there is room spared only for the passage to and fro of single carts" (Little Meg, 8).

Stretton's original impressions of the stench-filled, claustrophobic darkness of the district are recorded in harsh tones. "There opened here and there," she writes,

> . . . a blind alley, or a court, so narrow that it seemed as if the lower stories of the houses must always be plunged in darkness . . . there was a pervading wretchedness and filthiness about them, an indescribably depressing and hopeless vileness; bad being the best there. The very atmosphere, elsewhere fresh, and sweet with frost, was heavy with sickening smells; and the daylight seemed almost cruel for shining upon scenes so miserable and base. ("Three Hours," 126)

The description is softened for the children's story:

> . . . here and there may be found an alley so narrow that the neighbours can shake hands, if they would, from opposite windows. Many of the houses are three or four stories, with walls, inside and out, dingy and grimed with smoke, and with windows that scarcely admit even the gloomy light which finds a way through the thick atmosphere, and down between the high, close buildings. (Little Meg, 8)

Finally, the guide brings Stretton into "Cherubim Court," and as she looks into it, the incongruity of its name strikes her:

> a strange name truly . . . there was a flagged pavement, thick with old mud which the rain had not altogether washed off, and with the dust and soot of a dry day, and about it were crawling half-naked children of all ages and sizes covered with grime and dirt; while their drunken mothers lolled in the door-ways, or upon the window sills, gossiping and quarrelling with one another. ("Three Hours," 126)

Hesba Stretton transposes this scene into Little Meg's Children, taking full advantage of its contrasting possibilities. Newly motherless, Meg "softly" draws the sheet over her mother's face, and "gently" covers the sleeping baby before putting her arm around Robin to keep him "safe" on the attic window sill, from where

> they could see down into Angel Court, and into the street beyond, with its swarms of busy and squalid people. Upon the stone pavement far below them, a number of children of every age and size, but all ill-clothed and ill-fed, were crawling about, in and out of the houses, and their cries and shrieks came up to them in their lofty seat. (20)

The contrasting notion of good and bad is extended into Robin and Meg's discussion on whether angels ever did, or ever could, live in Angel Court. "I don't think they ever could . . . folks is too bad," is Meg's sad conclusion (24). The children's conversation mirrors the one between Hesba Stretton and the Beadle, at the end of her visit, when she asks, "Do you think any decent person whatever could live in these places? . . . Is there no Christian living here?" ("Three Hours," 126). The Beadle's reply goes further than

Meg's, "They couldn't . . . It would be impossible" (126).

Although knowing, from what she has seen, the reasonableness of her guide's response, Stretton's evangelical convictions will not allow her to leave it at that. She pursues the idea in her imagination; "I knew it was impossible," she confesses, "yet I felt that was what was needed most; the little leaven hidden among them till the whole mass was leavened" (126). Meg, is, of course, that "little leaven." Meg is the missionary who dwells among "the whole mass." In this respect she fits the pattern favoured by traditional Sunday writers more closely than Jessica.

Charlotte Yonge approves of Meg. Recommending "books fittest for the purpose of lending, reading aloud or giving" (What Books to Lend, 13) she singles out just two from the "multitudes of . . . street Arab tales:" Little Meg's Children and Froggy's Little Brother, (121). There is no mention of Jessica's First Prayer. In view of its immense popularity, the omission is interesting. The introduction to What Books to Lend makes it clear that the chosen books exclude "tales that have any dissenting bias, or which appear to involve false doctrine " (13). Although written by a Methodist, Jessica's First Prayer does not present any religious bias, nor does it preach "false doctrines"; it does, however, admonish the church and its members. This, and its purposiveness, most likely offended Miss Yonge's

strong Anglican sense of propriety. Her aversion to such writing is obvious in a comment made on Bede's Charity where she follows an otherwise favourable review with a reprimand to its author: ". . . all her [Hesba Stretton] tales are not equal, and some are written for special purposes" (What Books, 80). Furthermore, spirited Jessica, perkily directing the line of conversation with a strange adult, and hiding from a policeman to creep into places banned to her, is not Yonge's kind of heroine. Little Meg is. She may be held up as a model of all that Miss Yonge sought to promote.

It was Yonge's desire to raise literary tastes and to promote books which would elevate and inform the readers so that they could improve themselves. "Useful" is her byword. Books must contain good, sound practical advice, and offer to girls in particular, "high romance or pure pathos" to "absorb them" (6). Little Meg and her story meet all these conditions. She is found suitable for Junior readers, from eight to ten years, and also for reading aloud at "Mothers' Meetings," where factual subjects such as domestic economy, the management of children and "sanitary habits" are discussed (77).

There is no question that Meg is a conscientious mother. After her mother's death "she sets her heart upon" accomplishing two things before her father comes home from sea: "to teach Robin his letters and baby to walk alone"

(29). Her approach is skillful and methodical: bread and treacle held just out of arms' reach tempts baby's first steps a "dozen times a day", and Robin's reading lessons from the Testament are also repeated "two or three times a day" (33). The squalid conditions of Angel Court do not deter Meg from carrying cans of water up three flights of stairs to fill a tin bath tub, or scrub the floor. When she is forced to find work, Meg makes the best baby-sitting arrangements she can. Meg's life revolves around keeping her family inviolate from the violence and criminality of Angel Court, safeguarding them as earnestly as she does the treasure entrusted to her by her dying mother.

Cutt sees Meg's capable domesticity as "subtly flattering to childhood," considering that she is "only ten" (144). But that is a very present-day perception. Childhood for the poor Victorian child was very short indeed. He, or she, frequently shouldered adult responsibilities at a very young age. As Norman Longmate comments in his study of the work-house: "Sometimes quite small children had struggled valiantly to keep a home going" (165). He continues with the report of a London Relieving Officer, made in 1859, of "ten-year old Biddy, who sold watercress in the streets to support her bed-ridden mother, only entering the workhouse when her mother died" (166). The depiction of Meg supporting her family is neither flattering nor atypical; it is very

plausible.

This is the side of Meg which appeals to Yonge, who seeks to endorse decent personal living standards and proper behaviour. In addition, Meg may also be seen as fitting into Yonge's reading list for girls as a romance heroine, enduring suffering and overcoming obstacles to attain the final goals. Bratton describes the tale as "a perfect romance story of the heroine's quest, trial and reward, her innocence shining forth like a jewel from the city jungle" (The Flowering, 88), and Cutt sees it as dovetailing "perfectly into the traditional fairy and folk tale." (Ministering Angels, 167).

While it is true that Meg combines a mixture of the real and the imaginary, I do not think that she fits as neatly into the romance heroine role as Bratton would have.[2] Neither is she really from the world of make-believe, where things appear to be what they are not, or more glamorous than they are. Rather, the element of romance in Meg conveys what really is, and works towards defining Meg's feelings and her spiritual condition besides evoking sympathetic reader response. The interpretation of Bratton and the perspective of Cutt both miss the quintessential nature of Meg. Little Meg is the heroine of what Anne Wilson more accurately describes as a "hybrid" tale, combining narrative, realism and moral purpose. And as such, she is a complex combination of roles.

More than any other of Stretton's characters, Meg is defined by her setting. Meg's attic room lifts her high above the coarseness of the slums she lives in, and her favourite window-sill seat links her closely with heaven. When Meg sits up at the window at night, and the fog blanks out the lights of the street lamps below, she seems "to herself to be dwelling quite alone with Robin and the baby, in some place cut off both from the sky above and the earth beneath" (31). The reality here becomes emblematic rather than graphic. In this other world, midway between earth and heaven, Meg dwells on thoughts of God's love. Here, she is closer, "physically" and spiritually, to the angels of heaven than to the inmates of Angel Court (the devil's playground). She is also the means of connecting earth and heaven--the instrument of God's love, and so, is the angel of Angel Court.

But there are social, as well as religious, dimensions to Meg. She is separated in the attic from the rest of mankind: "the vast city, with its myriads of fellow-beings all about her" have no "knowledge of her loneliness, or any sympathy with her difficulties" (31). Meg's loneliness is not just the loneliness of a little parentless girl; it is an expression of the isolation of the very poor. Segregated in ghettoes they are ignored, or simply forgotten about. They function outside of the main stream of society. "The London

waif is the tenant of a little world of his own," writes Godfrey Holden Pike, a well-known contemporary commentator on the life of the urban poor (Children Reclaimed, 41). He goes on to describe how the poor perceive themselves in relation to the rest of society. Different boundaries circumscribe their existence; they seem to be governed by a different set of rules.

Stretton conveys this otherness of the poor through the eyes of the children when they all go to Temple Gardens for Robin's birthday treat. The journey takes them into another world, a well-to-do district of London. In the Gardens, light, space and beauty lift the children's spirits. But the joys of the outing lead to a painful awareness of the sad realities of their own lives. On her way to the park, Meg has imagined that she might be mistaken for a nanny with her charges. But, in the park she sees real nursemaids with their children, and feels "there was some untold difference between her and them" (46). Meg's fantasy cannot stand up to its genuine counterpart; it can only exist in the maze of dirty backstreets. Knowing that she and the children do not belong in that world makes Meg ill at ease. Temple Garden's sparkling fountain and multi-coloured blooms appear wonderful to the children, but they expose the children's shabbiness and disturb their sense of well-being. Even Robin, who responds at once to the beauty of the place by running about

in ecstacy, is forced to face the reality of his own impoverished life. He sits, "very quiet for some time," watching two lavishly dressed children playing in front of their adoring and laughing mother. Then tears roll down his face. "Nobody laughs to me, Meg," he says (47).

The poignancy of this scene is subtly sharpened by two points being played off against each other. Robin is not hankering after the boy's splendid highland outfit, or exciting dirk, as the reader naturally might expect; he craves undivided attention and its accompanying feeling of warmth, which seems to be reserved for the well-to-do. Although Meg protests that she does laugh at Robin, the truth is that no matter how hard she tries to take the place of both parents and look after her family, they cannot escape the inherently sad quality of the lives of poor and parentless children.

The emotional state of Meg is very different from that of Jessica. And it is surprising that none of the commentators on these books has discussed that. Meg's life is altogether more anxious and sad. The differences are obvious in physical terms. Both girls are ragged street urchins, but Jessica is physically more attractive and light-hearted. Bright-eyed and quick-footed she darts about the streets and Daniel's coffee stall. Meg is never described in a way to suggest she is pretty, or even youthful. As a

little mother, she is a child old before her time.

> a small, spare, stunted girl of London growth, whose age could not be more than ten years, though she wore the shrewd, anxious air of a woman upon her face, with deep lines wrinkling her forhead, and puckering about her eyes. Her small, bony hands were hard with work; and when she trod to and fro . . . her step was slow and silent, less like that of a child than of a woman, who was already weary with much labour (11).

Meg also cries much more than Jessica, but even then, like an adult, holding back, under the severest strain. When she suspects that the baby may die, "two or three tears of extreme anguish rolled down little Meg's face; but she could not cry aloud, or weep many tears" (109.) It is Robin who sums up the utter despair which comes from loneliness and deprivation when he tells Kitty he is "crying for everything" (119).

Gillian Avery criticizes Hesba Stretton's street waifs as being "pious", and as lacking "the ring of truth". She feels that they " may just be a device to improve the reader and woo his tears" (69). At best, there is some justification for this comment, but only inasmuch as it states the obvious. Hesba Stretton did write to convey the Christian message, and to evoke the readers' sympathy for the poor. At worst, it is a blanket statement revealing a remarkable lack of understanding of the use she makes of her characters. The criticism simply cannot be applied to Jessica, and it is a

superficial and dismissive reading of Meg, serving only to tailor her to fit into one of Avery's categories--that of the "sinless child." Meg is a deceptively simple character. A careful look at her shows how multifaceted she is and the mileage Stretton is able to get out of her.

MacLaren's influence on Stretton's religious views, and therefore, her writing, has already been seen in Jessica's First Prayer. Little Meg's Children, published two years later, shows the affiliation even more strongly. After she left Manchester, in 1866, Stretton spent over a year travelling abroad. She was not directly involved in the life of the industrial city, and the pressures of earning a living were relieved by the success of Jessica's First Prayer. It is as though, given the time to be more contemplative, she took the teachings of MacLaren and wrought them into a story with a setting similar to her most famous one. But it was a different kind of story--a parable, showing MacLaren's Christian principles in practice through the life of one child.

The result was a book far softer in tone than Jessica, which at times was quite barbed. In Jessica, there are two worlds: Jessica's and 'theirs'. Jessica upsets the complacent Christians, and revitalizes their faith through the excitement of her own wonderful discovery of it. Jessica's influence strikes roads inwards, whereas Meg is the

centre of the world she must create on being left alone, and her influence is seen radiating outwards. There is very little overt didacticism, or authorial intrusion, and when the writer does step in, it is with a reflective, rather than pedantic, voice. Little Meg's Children is a spiritual guide in the most unobtrusive manner. Too unobtrusive for the RTS, for, according to Bratton, "they wanted an addition to its religious teaching" (Impact, 89). One of the controlling principles of the story, and the style, is Christian meekness. This is not the same as being "mealy-mouthed"; Stretton was not afraid of speaking out, as we shall see later with Kitty. It is an attitude of humility, a predisposition which Alexander MacLaren sees as essential in missionary work. MacLaren exhorts Christians to oppose "all palpable existing evils" by standing "aloof" from wrong doers (90). But do it, he urges, "in the spirit of the Master, which is in meekness" (91). He warns against adopting an attitude of "superior righteousness," since such a condescending manner would only "weaken the testimony" (91). "We patronize when we should sympathize, and lecture when we should beseech," he tells his hearers (141). Stretton conceived of Meg as the missionary in her corner of London; following his advice to the letter, she keeps Meg in her attic room, aloof from the "bad crew" all around her, but at the same time portrays her as the caring Christian. By

making Meg the vehicle for MacLaren's Christian philosophy, and writing, for the most part, from the child's perspective, she avoids an off-putting, condescending authorial stance.

This achievement alone puts Stretton's writing and, of course, her characters in a different class entirely from most of her contemporaries' in the field. In Froggy's Little Brother, the other arab tale considered worthy of mention by Charlotte Yonge, the author's stentorious voice booms from the pages. Brenda's readers are not meant to identify with Froggy, his brother, or any of the other child characters, only to pity them--and that, from a very safe distance. Right at the beginning of the book, the author makes it vividly clear that this slum child is hardly of the human race. Tommy is called Froggy, the reader is told, "because he was so often cold, and croaked sometimes when he had a cough, like those little creatures who live in the ditches, and have such very wide mouths and large goggle eyes" (10). And at the end of the story, the author is still on her lofty podium, urging parents and little children to send their money to help London's slum poor, who "may be street Arabs but . . . have immortal souls " (223). Brenda's audience is middle class, and her manner is patronizing both to them and to the poor. She writes sermons about not stories for children, and the holier-than-thou tone which permeates Froggy's Little Brother could be the reason why, on some occasions of

its being read aloud to working class groups, they "virtually hissed it by inattention" (What Books to Give, 21).

Brenda's sense of what can be done for the poor is limited to "mitigating" their "sorrow and the sin" by giving money (223). This notion is anathema to Hesba Stretton, whose practical turn of mind wants action in the field. In Little Meg's Children, that action which eases sorrow and sin comes from the women in the district. Meg, Kitty and Mrs. Blossom are each agents of salvation. Meg is the means of saving Kitty, and Mrs. Blossom saves Meg's family from starvation. But what is most remarkable is that Kitty is also portrayed as having the power to save. She goes to the docks to find out news of Meg's father, and negotiates a fair price for the inexperienced Meg at the pawnshop. To Meg, Kitty is the "tenant of the back attic, who had been in jail for six weeks" (51), but the audience, reading between the lines, knows that Kitty is a prostitute. She has run away from the country to London, where she has lost her honest name. Her mother had called her Posy, but in London she is known as Kitty, Madcap or Puss. She is very familiar with the haunts of sailors, and she has "companions," one of whom gives Meg's baby a fatal overdose of something to keep it quiet.

Stretton was not afraid of dealing with strong issues in books for children. Kitty is guilty of what Miss Yonge

termed "the sin we most carefully keep from children's knowledge" (Children's Literature, 451). Her 'profession' is not deeply concealed by Stretton. Even the young and ignorant Patricia Beer realizes that "Posy [is] a bad girl," for the character comes across "in all its innuendo" (Mrs Beer's House, 110). That Stretton faced these issues may be ascribed to her own straightforward nature, spurred on by Alexander MacLaren's outspoken manner in the pulpit. He rejects, as a hypocrite, the person who "glows with virtuous indignation when a Christian man speaks out" about shocking "immoral things" (92). She speaks out, but does it with delicacy, and defends its place in the tale by referring to Jesus befriending the "guilty, outcast woman, reviled and despised by all" (130). She also uses Kitty to show the mysterious workings of the ways of God through little Meg. Kitty is cynical about the way Meg's God is taking care of her, since, if she had not interfered in the pawnshop, Meg would have been cheated. But Meg points out that God took very good care of her; he sent Kitty into the shop just in time! In turning the situation around like this, Meg poses a spiritual dilemma for Kitty, who has to wrestle with the knowledge of her own sin and the fact that through her act of kindness, she has become an agent of God's. Without knowing it, she has performed a Christian act. "All bad" Kitty is the proof that "the little leaven" is working, and that God's

goodness, inherent in everyone, just needs Christian influence to give it a means of expression. Even the very bad elements of Angel Court can be part of his purpose.

For the working classes, the idea that God's plan is achieved through practical means is appealing. None of the women in this story resembles the Victorian image of females as "frail vessels"; they are all carers and doers. Meg shares her shilling with Kitty; Mrs. Blossom offers work to Meg; Kitty protects Meg from the cheating pawnbroker; Meg is Mrs. Blossom's means of comfort and hope.

All this activity is played out against the prolonged wait for the sailor's return. His protracted arrival should not be seen as an unconvincing plot-line, for it is really a very purposeful dramatization of the Christian idea of "the delay of the Lord." Meg waits for her father who will bring deliverance from care and need. On the day she thinks he will come, Meg goes down to the docks and searches for him in the darkness and thick fog. The expression of her intense longing is in unmistakable biblical images: "Oh if he would but speak out of the darkness," she thinks (63). "She leaned forward to pierce, if possible, the thick veil which separated her from her father" (64). Mrs. Blossom is also "watching, always watching" for the return of her lost daughter (93). Father's delayed homecoming means grave hardships for Meg, but it is also the means of her working for

Mrs. Blossom and befriending Kitty, and finally, of reuniting everyone. "God's delays" may "seem inexplicable" says MacLaren, but they are "merciful".

The "sinless child," or the child character showing only his pleasing side, is neither an adequate, nor an apt, description of Meg. At first sight, she may invite comparison with Annie, but she is written in a very different style. Meg has to fight to live; Annie slips effortlessly to death. Meg is a unique character in Hesba Stretton's works. She is not tempted (even to steal the gold she is guarding when she and Robin are starving), as are all the other protagonists, and she does not struggle with her conscience. But, and this is where she differs from Annie, she is not a vapid goody-goody either. She was born in her creator's imagination as she looked at the tragic sight of slum life in Cherubim Court. And even though Meg is the "impossible" single Christian, the "little leaven hidden" amongst the squalor of poverty, she is tied in so strongly to her surroundings, and portrayed so straightforwardly, that Beer, as an intelligent child reader, found no difficulty in believing in her. In fact, she was "horrified" in later life to find Little Meg's Children described as a "goody, goody children's story" (Mrs Beer, 111). Meg faces the practical concerns of every day with a saintliness made palatable by the MacLaren approach to Christianity. "Many an

hour consecrated to devotion," says MacLaren, "has less of the manifest presence of God than is granted to some weary heart in its commonplace struggle with the little troubles and trials of daily life" (96). This is the low key realism of little Meg's story. It is a consolidation of Dr. MacLaren's spiritual philosophy, worked out against the backdrop of London. The spiritual and the real merge and emerge in her; and she is drawn strongly enough to carry the tale along, convincingly, to the end, in a manner sometimes akin to the irresistible fairytale.

CHAPTER III

The Later Period: Children As Victims

Jessica's First Prayer and Little Meg's Children are easily linked by their attractive, isolated heroines, their inner city settings and their "happy-ever-after" endings. But they do not follow chronologically. In between them Stretton published a book which is remarkably different and which looks forward to the grimmer works she produced in the seventies and eighties. Pilgrim Street, published in 1867, shows a far darker side to the lives of poor children than either Jessica's First Prayer or Little Meg's Children, or indeed, any other preceding book. Focusing on child abuse and crime, it can be seen as the forerunner of the even bleaker book, In Prison and Out, published in 1878. The dual nature of Stretton's writing has been traced from her very first book, Fern's Hollow, where socio-political issues provided points of interest in the stories of those seeking salvation, through to Jessica's First Prayer, which introduced Stretton's critical tone towards the behaviour of church-going Christians. In Pilgrim Street, set in Manchester, her social concerns became so marked that the R.T.S. asked her to make "alterations . . . to strengthen its religious message" (Impact, 88). By the time she wrote In Prison and Out her reputation was firmly established, and in

this book the call for reform is often uppermost.

Heightened outrage over the nation's neglect of its poor children is one of the characteristics which distinguishes the works of this period. The settings are urban rather than rural, and the characters and plots draw heavily on the writer's widening range of social concerns, displaying her intimate knowledge of the sordid and complex problems which damaged the lives of the young in Victorian England. Moreover, the protagonists do not always end up "happily ever after." Their human endeavours are frustrated by negligent adults and institutions insensitive to their needs; and their broken spirits can look only to the next life for relief from pain, since this world offers them little joy.

That side of Hesba Stretton which makes her stand out from her contemporaries in children's fiction, and places her closer to the ranks of the social protest writers of her time (writers such as those female novelists Kestner identifies in the sub-strata of Victorian social protest fiction), becomes very clear in these books. She is not guilty of that drawing room naivety which presented the protagonist's acceptance of Christ as a social, as well as a spiritual, panacea. Nor does she address the desperate needs of these children by referring them to the comfortable upper classes as role models, as does Brenda in Froggy's Little Brother.[1] Both Pilgrim Street and In Prison and Out portray

teenage boys who, in spite of their efforts to respond to the Christian influences in their lives, cannot overcome the crushing odds of their social predicaments. Both books deal with criminality, and the insidious effects, especially upon children, of an indiscriminate legal system. And both books examine children's responsibilities towards abusive parents. Finally, although both 'heroes' turn to crime, they are portrayed as victims and not as criminals. It is Christians and Christian society who play very significant roles in the boys' downward spirals of defeat.

Thomas Haslam and David Fell are each thirteen years old at the beginning of their respective stories but, by the time they are fourteen, they are worn down by the cumulative ills which grow out of their circumstances, and over which they have increasingly little control.

Right at the beginning of his story Tom seems defeated, awaiting trial for a robbery he did not commit. Although he is not guilty of the crime, his innocence is clouded since he has pleaded guilty to the charge. In the dock, just behind two adult criminals, Tom stands bewildered and intimidated by the awesome atmosphere and the baffling process of law. The situation prefigures Tom's own throughout the book: he has been set up by false friends; later, he is similarly abused by his own criminal father. And, the God he is to learn about from Banner, is as frightening and inaccessible to him

as the law.

The harmful and oppressive forces which seem to control Tom's life are conveyed in a Dickensian description of the court building (a place Stretton knew well). The perspective is magnified and dramatized through the eyes of Tom's young brother, Phil, who has come to look for him. Structurally imposing and lavishly decorated, the building symbolizes the city's wealth. It all appears very grand to the small, ragged, rain-drenched lad, but as he gazes up at it, the stonework becomes menacing, and it seems as if

> there bent over him a great image of a man--or more likely one of the giants of whom he had felt a vague but chilling fear whenever he had to steal alone through the streets at night; and this image held an immense stone in his hand, as if he would hurl it down from his great height and crush any miserable creature who should venture to enter into the grand portico below (7).

Further on, there is yet another "sight which filled [Phil] with a nameless terror"; this time it is "the image of a fierce and cruel woman" and she holds in "her cruel hands . . . the figure of a murdered child" (8). The carved figures suggest, respectively, Banner's merciless and punitive God and Tom's abusive parent.

Tom is portrayed as one condemned from the outset. He is cowed to the point of pleading guilty to a robbery he knows nothing about simply because he has learned that "the judge knows nought about poor folks like [him]" (18) and so "it

doesn't pay for a poor boy . . . to tell the truth every time he speaks" (19). Stretton admonishes those like Banner, the policeman, who believe that poverty is synonymous with sin, and that ragged children are "born and bred liars and thieves" (15). Up until now all the protagonists have had to face difficulties of varying degrees from the outset, but none has appeared as defeated as Tom. There is hope in Stephen's shouldering responsibilities like a man, and in Enoch's having high resolves, and hope, too, in Jessica's lively curiosity. Only Tom appears apathetic and resigned to failure.

Manchester afforded Stretton an insight into the lives of the underprivileged outside anything she could have known in Wellington. The evidence and, more importantly, the far-reaching effects of the chronic poverty she saw in the city, shocked her into writing Tom's story. The book has a second part to its title: A Story of Manchester Life.

After ten years in London Stretton wrote David Fell's story, which is far more socially didactic than Tom's. In Prison and Out also has a sub-title: Facts on a Thread of Fiction. David's tale is the thread stringing together the facts Stretton learned from her active association with those working in ragged schools and with criminals in London's East End, but especially from her friendship with Dr. Thomas Barnardo.

The fifties and sixties were decades of intense charitable social work in London. The 1851 census revealed that less than half the population were Christian, and in the East End, the proportion of those with any religious knowledge was even smaller. London's East End, therefore, replaced the foreign lands as being in greatest need of missionary work. Dr. Barnardo's efforts there provided shelter and training in Christian environments for thousands of homeless and wayward children. His cause was close to Stretton's heart. She wrote the introduction to Godfrey Holden Pike's account of Barnardo's work, Children Reclaimed For Life (1875), and admits having been "already interested, with a very great and deep interest, in the welfare of our street-children" when she first met Barnardo in 1871 (Intro. Children Reclaimed, x). Her concern, in fact, goes back at least as far 1864, for, in a letter to The Times, dated January 7, 1884, she writes: "for the last twenty years I have interested myself deeply in the condition of the children of the poor." Children Reclaimed for Life chronicles incidents which Stretton very probably heard about from Barnardo himself, and it is the story of Willie which provides the framework of In Prison and Out.[2]

Unlike Tom, David is not alone when we meet him, but part of a loving family. He lives with his thirteen-year-old sister and widowed mother in one "back room" in an

overcrowded tenement house. Although Mrs. Fell takes in washing, the family, like those Gaskell writes about in Mary Barton, exists almost at starvation level: "always trying to trick Nature, who never ceased to demand urgently more than they could give, but who consented to take less than her claim, even though the landlord would not" (In Prison, 2).

In a manner similar to that in Pilgrim Street, only much more terse, Stretton reveals the thrust of the book through the opening setting. The cryptic description of the Fell home, a "small back room . . . not much larger than a prison cell, and in point of cleanliness, light and ventilation . . . far inferior to it" (1), focuses immediately on the ironic contrast between life in prison and life outside. The state, Stretton felt, was instrumental in precipitating a life of crime for poor children, and David's story shows this. Money is spent to provide in jail those very things which, if given to the poor outside of jail, would lessen the chances of their turning to crime, and furthermore would help ensure good citizens.

To keep her family in their unhealthy dwelling, Mrs. Fell has worked all her life. She has also provided loving care and instilled a sense of right living in her children. But, when she develops cancer, her efforts prove insufficient to enable them to survive. With cold, ledger-like precision, Stretton documents the family's impossible financial

position, and the state's inhumane part in it. Mrs. Fell's appeal for poor relief brings in four shillings and eightpence a week, an amount carefully calculated by the relieving officer as being less than it would cost to put her and her daughter into 'the house' (no provision at all is made for David). So with an income far below subsistence, less than fourpence a day for three people after paying the rent, Mrs. Fell is forced to go on working illegally, and in great pain, in order to keep her family together.

Watching his mother suffer the pangs of a gnawing hunger made worse by her disease is more than David can bear. He gives his own spare rations to her and earnestly looks for odd jobs all day, but he cannot earn enough to bring her any relief. With reluctance and dread he turns to begging as "the best [he] can do" (7). This is David's position at the beginning of the book.

Through David Fell, Stretton presents a study of frustrated, young potential caught in a trap of society's making. His mother has done her share for her children, but the state has been worse than negligent. David has the makings of a fine citizen; he feels "a protecting tenderness" towards his mother and has ambition to become a carpenter, like his father. But there is no way he can realize his hopes to care for his mother or to work for his living.

Stretton criticizes as inappropiate the rudimentary literary skills, taught to David "after a fashion" in night school. She knows he needs something far more practical. "But" Stretton complains, "there was no school where a ragged boy like him could learn any kind of handicraft, by which he could earn a livelihood. If there had been," she continues, "how gladly would he have gone to it" (7). She reiterates the point through David, who only receives any worthwhile training on being committed to prison, when it is too late for him to benef t from it. He mourns the fact that he is "not sixteen yet, and [has] been to gaol three times; and nobody ever taught [him] how to get a livin' till [he] went to gaol" (155).

This is an interesting move away from the strong evangelical stance in Pilgrim Street, where teaching Tom to read is of paramount importance because then he will be able to read the Bible for himself. David is as ignorant of the scriptures as is Tom, yet Stretton sees his plight in far more pragmatic terms. By the time she wrote In Prison and Out, Stretton had seen Barnardo's Home for Working and Destitute Lads, in Stepney Causeway, where industrial training was an integral part of life, and she had become increasingly sensitive to the all-round needs of the poor. In one of her short stories dealing with a child who cannot attend to his lessons because "all his thoughts were fixed

on the bun in his teacher's pocket" ("An Hungered," 19), she is thirteen years ahead of a report stating that "the Churches are awakening to the important fact that it is more than useless to preach a Gospel of love and pity to starving men and women" (Mearns, 58).

Inadequate poor relief and impractical training programs however, are not the only, or most serious, factors which bring about David's downfall. There is a crime which Stretton feels is more heinous than blatant social negligence, and it is one which dresses itself up in the guise of benevolence: that is, the act of giving alms to beggars.

David begs out of love for his mother, and out of dire need. But according to the Vagrancy Act of 1824, begging is a crime. Those who give to David are guilty on two counts: encouraging him on a downward criminal path, and more importantly, avoiding their own Christian duty of facing the real issue--what they can do for him as a fellow man in need. Stretton had argued these points vehemently in the introduction to Pike's book, and she was to take it up again, as she says, with "even deeper and stronger convictions" in the preface to her own harrowing tale, <u>The Lord's Pursebearers</u>, written in 1882. The force of her anger rivals any protest prose:

> Nothing is worse for ["street-children"] than the easy method of gratifying our emotional

> pity, and pacifying our conscience, by simply taking money out of our purse, and dropping it into their outstretched little hands. Better to drop a live coal upon the quivering palm! If we can do nothing more than this, for Christ's sake let us refrain from doing them this injury (Intro. Children Reclaimed, xv).

Stretton uses almost the same phraseology when David sets out so shyly to beg. He is still anxious to try any job,

> but very few persons took the trouble to find him work to do. It was much easier to take a penny out of the purse, drop it into his hand and pass on, with a feeling of satisfaction of at once getting rid of a painful object and of appeasing the conscience, which seemed about to demand that some remedy should be found for abject poverty like his. (14)

Begging out of extreme want is the first step propelling David into a miserable life of shame and crime. His story verifies Stretton's warning and incriminates the irresponsible, self-congratulatory benefactor as well as the state itself.

Tom's unhappiness stems primarily from fear and from the absence of love. He and young Phil have been on their own since Tom was five, when both parents were sent to jail. At times he was forced to steal food for them both, and he is convinced he can only grow up to be a thief like his father (a self-fulfilling prophecy brought to fruition by society). Tom is not afraid of jail, where he would get food, a bed and be taught to read (the same point is made here as in In Prison and Out, that life for the poor is better in jail than

outside); his greatest fear is that "of being put with father," of whom he is terrified (36).

On being released from court Tom is given the chance to make a living, and the policeman Banner is asked to keep an eye on him and teach him about God. This could be Tom's lifeline. But Banner, like Daniel in Jessica's First Prayer, is an obstacle, not a helper. A Christian and representative of the law, Banner becomes a major factor in Tom's descent to self-loathing and consequent crime. For the policeman has a concept only of God's justice, not of his love. His attitude towards Tom, therefore, is superior and unloving. He preaches to Tom the stern Puritan message of hell fire and damnation, impressing upon him his utter sinfulness and worthlessness. Before leaving Tom alone in his lodgings--a windowless, empty cellar, with a pile of straw under the steps for a bed--he conjures up a vivid picture of God as an all-seeing, powerful and merciless judge, who has been "counting up [Tom's] sins ever since [he was] born . . . not one of them forgotten or left out". Crushing a moth between his finger and thumb to show Tom how easily God can kill him, and throw his "body and soul into hell," (54) he leaves the boy alone in the dark, as afraid of God as he is of his father.

Stretton sets up Tom as one of "Christ's poor" who can only be reached through love. She rejects harsh Christianity

and shows Tom's mental and emotional state as being too fragile to bear it. When Banner "drew fearful pictures of the consequences of sin . . . Tom would drink in every word, and tremble and grow pale with terror" (70). Although Banner is pleased with this response and thinks "Tom is a brand which he had plucked from the burning" (71), the true effect of Banner's teaching is to make Tom's "heart at first miserable, and then hard" (71). Tom's perspective is given with sympathy and insight, and it expresses a very common line of resistance to faith: "If God did all things in heaven . . . then it was he who had put him into this position, and given to him such a wicked father. His laws were too difficult to keep" (71).

Denied the gospel of love, Tom is left spiritually destitute when Phil, whom he dearly loves, goes away to school. "Having nothing else to care for, [he gives] himself up to business, like many a thousand more of the people dwelling in the great city" (68). Tom's life now symbolizes godless commercialism. As his profits grow his bank book becomes more precious to him than his Bible. He is another "Daniel the pew keeper" in the making.

So set on profit, Tom succumbs to temptation and cheats a customer out of her change. When Banner confronts him with his crime, Tom runs away to Liverpool where he experiences

the depths of despair, and decides finally to return home to die. This is the spiritual turning point for Tom, and also for Banner, who finds the starving boy and responds with loving tenderness to him. From here on Tom's story follows the fairly conventional pattern of spiritual growth occurring in inverse proportion to physical deterioration. But Stretton adds the dimension of parental abuse.

Haslam comes out of jail on a ticket of leave and moves back home with Tom. He claims Tom as his rightful property, and lives lavishly off Tom's savings and earnings whilst giving the boy mere scraps to eat. Haslam is one of those parents "who are no parents" (Children Reclaimed, Chapter II, 3). He is a familiar enough figure to Barnardo, and also to Stretton herself, but her letter urging support for the establishment of a London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, shows that she realizes "few people have any idea of the extent of active cruelty, and still more of cruel neglect, towards children among our degraded and criminal classes". Tom is a means of putting before her readers the reality of the effects of parental abuse.

David is also abused, but it is a delinquent society that deals out unmerited punishment and shame, not a delinquent parent. David's crimes

> had been--begging for his mother when she was dying of hunger; and resenting--hotly, perhaps, but bravely--a slur upon his mother's good name, when that was maligned by

> the man who had robbed her. (124)

For these offences he serves six months in prison.

Stretton's criticism of those societal attitudes which differentiate between the behaviour of the poor and the rich, and which are reflected in the legal system, is severe and unremitting. She draws the analogy between David and the "sons of the well-to-do" from Tom Brown's School Days:

> oh, the scrapes those boys got into, and got out of! The crimes against English law they committed! Had the same measure been meted to them that every day was meted to these desolate, degraded, uncared-for street lads, how many a brave and worthy English gentleman . . . and magistrate--of the present day must now have been a grey-haired convict in penal servitude. (125)

While recognizing an overworked legal system (one which gave each of David's cases less than four minutes and mistook him for a previously convicted felon), Stretton is most anxious to drive home the devastating effect these harsh and unjust sentences had upon David. Although he receives vocational training in prison, he is irreparably psychologically damaged. He becomes "sullen, moody . . . insolent and refractory" (141). Stretton involves her readers directly in David's confusion and mental anguish by forcing them to take up a position on David's case. He has been presented as

> honest and truthful--yet he was branded a thief and a liar . . . He was intensely ignorant--yet he was punished for actions which would have been applauded in a gentleman's son. (141).

David's courage has been turned into "defiance of the laws and of the society which had dealt so cruelly with him. . . which had left him to live in degradation and forced idleness." The reader is asked the questions that David asks of himself: "What did he owe to society? Why should he keep its laws? . . . His consent had not been asked when they were made, and why should he be bound by them?" (149).

David is irretrievably lost; there no escaping, now, the inevitable descent to a full-time life of wretchedness and crime. When released from his fifth prison sentence there is no-one to meet him and nowhere for him to go, so he falls into the company of the hardened criminal, Blackett, who takes over as the negligent 'parent' from the negligent system. (Stretton championed and visited the mission centres set up to assist newly discharged prisoners, like the one she wrote of at Coldbaths Field Prison ["Thieves' Supper"].) The final crime, robbery, puts him back into jail, where although comforted with the story of the thief cruficied with Jesus, he dies.

But this is not the entire story of <u>In Prison and Out</u>; things could have been very different for David. What might have been, what should have been, is shown in the story of Roger Blackett, which forms the major sub-plot of the book. In both this book and in <u>Pilgrim Street</u> Stretton uses a device she had not tried before; she sets up shadow

protagonists. The stories of Roger Blackett and Philip Haslam more sharply define the deprivation of the main characters, but they also provide some relief from their grim stories by proposing solutions to the questions raised by the main characters. Roger is forced to be an accomplice to a robbery with his father, but at the trial there is timely and caring intervention by a Christian philanthropist, John Dudley, and Roger is sent to a training ship not to a prison. All then goes well for Roger. Tom's young brother Phil is spared the rags, starvation and cruelty of life with his criminal father by being found a place at a residential ragged school by Mr. Hope, the Christian judge. There, he is given a stable background and, above all, loving care. He, like Roger, thrives.

The miserable lives and untimely deaths of Tom and David are both attributed to need and to negligence, and they in turn are blamed on individuals and on society. Both boys are born into the depths of poverty and are lacking those things most essential for physical and spiritual well-being. Tom's story stresses the results of spiritual deprivation; David's shows the effects of a more practical kind of neglect. Tom's need for love can really only be met by individuals; and Stretton shows his dependence upon a truly Christian friend, and reciprocally, the Christian's responsiblity towards each of "Christ's poor." As in Jessica's First Prayer, it is Tom

who ironically is the means of teaching the true meaning of love to Banner, the professed Christian. Although the religious side of Pilgrim Street dominates, Tom also speaks for the cause of abused children. He suffers every deprivation in the hands of his father, but, through his own faith, is finally able to withstand him--and eventually to give his life to try to save him. The point is: Haslam kills Tom. David's story rests far more heavily on social issues than Tom's, but is directed to the Christian conscience behind the laws of the land relating to children. David does not 'save' anybody, but he is the means of projecting the cause: "No gaol for children." In her Postscript Stretton refers her readers to a book called The Gaol Cradle: Who Rocks It? (208). At the very end of David's story, she answers this seemingly rhetorical question: "You and I" (208). The negligence of the sole Christian in Pilgrim Street becomes the negligence of the state in the later book, and this progression illustrates the nature of Stretton's broadening experience of the needs of city children. Like John Dudley, of In Prison and Out, her "blood boiled and [her] heart ached with mingled indignation and sorrow" (123) at what she saw, and her writing was aimed to reclaim these children for life.

Conclusion

Hesba Stretton's strength is in her ability to combine realism and religion with a strong philanthropic purpose, yet write within the range of children. This study, therefore, has kept these factors in focus while discussing the presentation of the protagonists in eight of her children's books (the first seven and one other). Such an approach reveals a distinct line of development which is tied closely to Stretton's first-hand experience.

In the first four books: Fern's Hollow, The Children of Cloverley, Enoch Roden's Training and The Fishers of Derby Haven the religious message dominates. All the protagonists are scriptural derivatives, except Annie, who is angelic. Above all, they teach the truths exemplified by the lives of the early Christians whose names they bear. Stretton gives their characters added dynamism by re-working their stories into settings she grew up in. The outdoor, hillside life expresses Stephen's opposition to enclosure; learned books and Latin lessons point up the dearth of Enoch's spiritual wisdom and stormy seas parallel Peter's life. Intended to reach the unconverted, these early protagonists are picturesque proselytizers, set against the English countryside.

Jessica and Meg are different, establishing Stretton's stance as a writer for reform as well as for conversion. Both

heroines are studies in pathos, yet they defy the depressing effects of their dulling and degrading milieux. Their resourcefulness and fortitude receive greater emphasis than their spirituality. MacLaren's sermons on Christlike sympathy for the poor give social direction to their religious messages, aimed, now, at the Christian reader as well as the unconverted.

Finally, Tom and David are linked by the severity of the deprivations they suffer: for each of them, the only escape is through death. They reveal the necessity for child protection, education and training schools, and a legal system mindful of the needs of children. In the cases of Tom and David, Christian compassion is not enough. Emerging as they do from Stretton's own sheer anger, these protagonists are meant to provoke a similar outrage and specific action.

"Perhaps there is nothing more pitiful than the painful want of words to express that which lies deepest within us," Stretton observes in her own favourite book, Michel Lorio's Cross. "This need is greatest," she continues, "in those who have had no training in thus shaping and expressing their inmost thoughts" (15). Because this is the situation of most of the children her stories represent and many of the readers she wrote for, Stretton uses her child protagonists at two levels: as messengers of spiritual salvation, and as mouthpieces, speaking for those who cannot raise their own voices in "vigorous protest."

Notes

Introduction

1. Alicia Walker's unpublished M.A. thesis (1977) makes a comparative study between street children in the works of Stretton and Dickens. Walker argues that Stretton "echoed" the themes of youth which Dickens introduced in his writings. The emphasis is on Stretton as a follower in the Dickensian tradition.

2. Writers such as Stretton, Bratton contends, subsumed the romance pattern of story-telling through their own experience of the literary tradition, and reproduced it in their own writing. The "secular scripture" is a story in which the protagonist undertakes a journey or quest and moves "from one level of existence to another and either returns, or passes through to find a further, final resting place" (Impact, 28). Bratton assumes that child readers would respond favourably to moral tales because they would strike a chord made familiar to them by the traditional romance narrative.

3. James Britton proposes that the child goes through stages of responding to stories; and that between the ages of seven and thirteen the story is a very powerful influence but neither all real, nor all fiction to him. In this stage, the child is a "spectator" and may learn cultural values and expectations through the fiction he reads.

4. In this, and in similar contexts, "his" stands for both male and female.

Chapter I

1. The Drury's family situation mirrors Stretton's own, which is thinly disguised in "The Postmaster's Daughter." On their father's retirement Hesba Stretton and her sister Elizabeth left for Manchester to earn their own living. They both took posts as governesses.

2. The women are not always portrayed so positively. Jessica's mother is abusive and negligent, and Tatters, in The Lord's Pursebearers, is contemptible in her persistent use of the starving child Fidge as a 'prop' to increase her appearance as a beggar.

Chapter II

1. There were other street waifs before Jessica, Mary Howitt's Little Cristal, for example. But none as worldly, independent, or a-religious as Jessica.

2. Meg is the combination of Stretton's response to Cherubim Court and MacLaren's sermons, "The Christian Attitude to Social Sins". "The presentation of a Christian life is the Christian man's mightiest weapon in his conflict with the world's evil," he preaches. And "the best way in circumstances to convict the darkness is to shine" (The Best, 91). Meg is the light that shines "to reveal the darkness to itself" (The Best, 93).

Chapter III

1. Froggy's Little Brother is set in the winter of 1873, "one of the hardest ever known, because of the great strikes in the Welsh coal mines, which raised the price of coal" (57). Brenda describes little Froggy and Ben as being "nearly starved with cold and hunger," and then intrudes to remind the reader of the example set by "some of the wealthiest houses in the land [that] began to knock off any fires they were able to do without" (58).

2. The source of Willie's story is the Ragged School Union. This thirteen-year-old boy cannot find work to buy food for his sick mother. He is rewarded with what he thinks is sixpence when he rescues an old gentleman's hat in the storm; and the reward turns out to be half a sovereign and he is arrested for such a suspicious amount. The old gentleman finds his purse is missing when he arrives home and informs the police-station. Willie is sent to prison "to associate with thieves". In the meantime, the purse is discovered in the lining of the old man's pocket and Willie is released. But "the state had unwittingly laid its hand on an innocent one" as it had many times before, and "crushed him to despair" (Children Reclaimed, 12).

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