CLASSICS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Jessica's First Prayer

by hesba stretton

and

Froggy's Little Brother

by brenda

a new critical edition of the classic texts
edited by **elizabeth thiel**

Jessica's First Prayer and Froggy's Little Brother

Palgrave Macmillan Classics of Children's Literature

This series brings back into print some of the most important works in children's literature first published before 1939. Each volume, edited by a leading scholar, includes a substantial introduction, a note on the text, suggestions for further reading, and comprehensive annotation. While these full critical editions are an invaluable resource for students and scholars, the series is also designed to appeal to the general reader. *Classics of Children's Literature* presents wonderful stories that deserve a place in any adult's or child's library.

Series Editors:
M. O. Grenby, University of Newcastle, UK
Lynne Vallone, Rutgers University, USA

Maria Edgeworth, *Selected Tales for Children and Young People*
Edited by Susan Manly

E. Nesbit, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* and *The Wouldbegoods*
Edited by Claudia Nelson

Little Goody Two-Shoes and Other Stories: Originally Published by John Newbery
Edited by M. O. Grenby

Hesba Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer* and Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother*
Edited by Elizabeth Thiel

Jessica's First Prayer and Froggy's Little Brother

Hesba Stretton (*Jessica's First Prayer*)

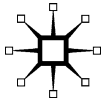
Brenda (*Froggy's Little Brother*)

Edited with an Introduction by

Elizabeth Thiel

Formerly Senior Lecturer, University of Roehampton, UK

palgrave
macmillan



First published 2013 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries

ISBN 978-0-230-36054-9 ISBN 978-1-137-34113-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-137-34113-6

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Contents

Acknowledgements

A number of people have generously given their time and shared their knowledge of Hesba Stretton and Brenda to assist in the production of this volume. Thanks are owed, in particular, to Elaine Lomax for help with my research on Stretton and to Brenda's great granddaughter who has so willingly provided me with invaluable access to Brenda's texts and memorabilia and who entrusted me with a signed first edition of *Froggy's Little Brother* for this project. Much gratitude is also due to Joanne Noble, who gallantly and enthusiastically helped with the task of comparing editions and to whom this volume is dedicated, and to my colleagues at the University of Roehampton for their encouragement. Finally, my thanks to series editors Matthew Grenby and Lynne Vallone for the opportunity to be a part of this important series.

Introduction

Our perceptions of mid- to late-nineteenth century children's literature have been shaped largely by the period's canonical texts; as historical artefacts, they have also informed and extended our understanding of the past, exposing the ideologies and preoccupations of the period in which they were written. However, knowledge gleaned solely in this way is limited. To achieve a more accurate comprehension of Victorian life and culture, it is vital to access children's literature beyond the canon and it is through the popular, non-canonical literature of the nineteenth century, in texts such as Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) and Brenda's *Froggy's Little Brother* (1875), that additional insights into the Victorian world can be gained.[1] The 'street arab' genre,[2] to which both texts belong and which they exemplify, offers images of childhood

[1] To avoid confusion, Sarah Smith will be referred to throughout as Hesba Stretton and Georgina Castle Smith as Brenda.

[2] The term 'street arab', used extensively in nineteenth-century social commentary and retained as common parlance into the twentieth century, was apparently coined by Lord Shaftesbury to describe the children of the streets. In *Street Arabs and Guttersnipes*, George Needham offers a description of the nomadic Arab as 'uncertain, vindictive and selfish ... the source of apprehension to every traveller ... living in clans or hordes, for self-protection' before stating that 'it was with acute discernment that ... Lord Shaftesbury discovered the resemblance. To this noble Earl ... we are indebted for the epithet, so unique and suggestive, of STREET ARAB [sic]'. George Needham (1884) *Street Arabs and Guttersnipes: The Pathetic and Humorous Side of Young Vagabond Life in the Great Cities, with Records of Work for their Reclamation* (Boston: Guernsey, 1884), p.22. As Kimberley Reynolds comments, 'street arab' is a telling label, 'it exposes a way of thinking about poor city children that refused to see them either as part of British society or as children. It marked these street children as outcasts ...'. Kimberley Reynolds, '*Froggy's Little Brother*: Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Writing for Children and the Politics of Poverty', in *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Literature*, ed. by Julia Mickenberg and Lynne Vallone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.255–74 (p.257).

that differ to those of many canonical works; its focus is rarely the middle-class child of, for example, Robert Michael Ballantyne or Lewis Carroll, although a middle-class reader and middle-class mores may be implied, but the child of the inner-city streets who is parentless and destitute, or whose home conditions are presented as a travesty of the nineteenth-century domestic ideal.[3]

While there were hundreds of street arab tales, *Jessica's First Prayer* was undoubtedly the most commercially successful and is commonly acknowledged as the archetype; street arab tales typically focus on a poor and potentially endangered child who is rescued from the streets and destitution and relocated to a safe, Christian and, frequently, middle-class environment. In Stretton's story, Jessica, the young daughter of a destitute and wayward mother, is left alone to wander through London. Appearing one day at the coffee stall of churchwarden Daniel, Jessica befriends the elderly man who grudgingly provides her with coffee and food. Jessica secretly follows Daniel to his church, meets the minister and his daughters, and so learns about Christ and prayer. She is finally rescued and adopted by Daniel after he visits her dilapidated home and finds her abandoned and near to death.

It is for *Jessica's First Prayer* that Stretton is best remembered, although she was the author of some 60 books, as well as stories and articles for journals, including Charles Dickens' *Household Words*. Born Sarah Smith in 1832 in Shropshire and taking the initials of her siblings' names and the village of All Stretton in her home county to create her pseudonym, Stretton helped to found

[3] Anna Davin notes that 'in their religious aspect waif stories belong to the "tract fiction" discussed by Nancy Cutt in *Ministering Angels* (1979) and to the "Sunday School literature" about which Gillian Avery and J.S. Bratton have written.' The concerns of waif stories had been heralded in Puritan writings and more recent models existed in early nineteenth-century didactic writing for children. She suggests that authors influencing waif fiction include Mrs Sherwood, Mary Howitt, Charlotte Tucker and Maria Charlesworth and that the Religious Tract Society, through publication of fiction in *The Sunday at Home*, was 'a major player in the production of the genre, while the multiplying Sunday Schools were an important part of its market'. Anna Davin, 'Waif Stories in Late Nineteenth-Century England', *History Workshop Journal,* 52 (2001), pp.67–98 (p.67).

the organisation that was to become the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. An extensive traveller, both at home and overseas, Stretton remained unmarried, living with her sister, Elizabeth, and dying in Ham, Richmond in 1911 after a long illness.

By the time of Stretton's death, some two million copies of *Jessica's First Prayer* are believed to have been printed and the tale was translated world-wide within five years of publication.[4] There were magic lantern slides, a Service of Song – an adaptation featuring both narrative and songs for Sunday school performance – and two silent film versions produced in 1909 and 1921, the latter by the Seal Film Company. A memoir on Stretton in *The Sunday at Home* of December 1911 'records "strong men" reduced to tears and rough sailors "choking red eyed" over *Jessica*' and Lord Shaftesbury 'declared the story unrivalled for its "simplicity, pathos, and depth of Christian feeling" '.[5] In the Literary Gossip section of *The Athenaeum* on 14 October 1911, the unnamed author commented that the success of the book had been 'immediate and astonishing'.[6]

There are no surviving publisher's records for *Froggy's Little Brother* and so only limited information about its publishing history is available, but Brenda's text, the most renowned of her 23 novels, was widely read by different social classes and new editions continued into the twentieth century; sold as a Sunday school prize and for Sunday reading, it was admired by middle- and upper-class readers.[7] Protagonists Froggy and Benny, raised as Christians by their mother, are orphaned early in the novel – their mother dies from illness and their father is fatally injured.

---

[4] Nancy Cutt, *Ministering Angels: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Writing for Children* (Wormley: Five Owls Press, 1979), pp.135–6.

[5] Elaine Lomax, *The Writings of Hesba Stretton: Reclaiming the Outcast*, (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), p.57.

[6] Anon, 'Literary Gossip', *The Athenaeum*, 14 October 1911, p.460.

[7] *Froggy's Little Brother* was also made into a film by Oswald Stoll in 1921, but Benny did not die in this version and Brenda was reportedly upset by the changes. Liz Thiel, 'The Woman Known as Brenda', in *A Victorian Quartet: Four Forgotten Women Writers*, ed. by Liz Thiel, Elaine Lomax, Bridget Carrington and Mary Sebag-Montefiore (Lichfield: Pied Piper Publishing, 2008), pp.147–208 (p.163).

Froggy strives to support himself and his sibling, Benny, and resists becoming a thief as he struggles to earn money for food and fruitlessly petitions the Queen for help, but Benny weakens and dies. However, Froggy is rescued from poverty and is finally settled safely in a home for boys.

Like Stretton, Brenda adopted a pseudonym for her writing; she was born Georgina Meyrick in London in 1845 and took a *nom de plume* chosen by her mother. Her first publication, the street arab story *Nothing to Nobody*, was produced in 1873 by John F. Shaw and Company, who published the majority of her texts. Married to solicitor Castle Smith in 1875, Brenda raised her five children in London as she continued to write and publish, but she and her husband left the city during the early 1900s and lived on the Isle of Wight before moving to Lyme Regis in Dorset, where Brenda died in 1933. Her writing career spanned some 59 years and while her texts often explored social issues, her work extended beyond street arab stories to include domestic narratives for children.

However, and despite the breadth of her oeuvre, it was for *Froggy's Little Brother* that Brenda was consistently acclaimed. Arthur Gore, writing to Brenda's husband after her death, commented, 'I do not think that anything in English literature – even that written by Dickens – can equal the pathos of "Benny's" life and death', while for Beatrice Rochdale, wife of Colonel George Kemp, Baron of Rochdale, the book was 'beloved by countless people'.[8]

Although *Jessica's First Prayer* and *Froggy's Little Brother* display the characteristic formula adhered to by numerous other authors of street arab tales, they differ in their religious emphases. Stretton's text centres on the spiritual conversion of the child and Jessica's influence on the hypocritical Daniel, while Brenda's novel, although imbued with Christian doctrine and replete with hymns, seeks salvation for Froggy and his brother primarily through the philanthropic interventions of existing charitable institutions. However, both reflected the nineteenth-century axiom that children and adults, however wretched, might be 'saved' if they turned to God and so each text echoed the religious theme prevalent in many earlier texts for children, albeit

[8] Thiel, 'The Woman Known as Brenda', in *A Victorian Quartet*, ed. by Thiel et al., pp.160–1.

less dogmatically. James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1672) had forcefully proclaimed God and repentance as the only route to heaven, an exhortation mirrored over 100 years later in Mary Martha Sherwood's *History of the Fairchild Family* (1818) with its hint of damnation for those who did not repent. The nineteenth-century rise in Evangelical Christianity, coupled with concern for the urban poor, resulted in a literature that again urged the reader to look to their own redemption through God, but also to work for the salvation of those less fortunate than themselves. The evangelical Religious Tract Society, founded in 1799, was particularly productive in the second half of the nineteenth century, with publications for children by a number of popular authors, including Stretton.

Stretton's and Brenda's narratives are located within the general context of nineteenth-century evangelicalism, child poverty and mid-century London, although *Froggy's Little Brother*, published eight years after Stretton's text, incorporates numerous contemporary references (detailed in the footnotes to the text) and thus self-consciously and continuously strives for additional realism. As Kimberley Reynolds comments, in the final section of the text the narrator's question, 'You will like to know what became of poor little Froggy, will you not?', answered in the present tense and explaining that Froggy is in a home, learning to be a carpenter 'gives the impression that the story is both absolutely current and based on events from life…. The immediacy it provides helps Brenda keep the pathos of her story at a high pitch while simultaneously assuring readers that changes for the better in the way the poor were cared for are in hand'.[9]

It is inevitable, perhaps, that the two texts are sometimes compared in scholarly discourse and this is not always to Brenda's advantage. In *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction* (1981), Jacqueline Bratton praises Stretton's work: 'it is a skilfully constructed narrative whose strength lies in its apparent simplicity…she has achieved the transformation of the available materials, both in terms of current social problems and specific

[9] Reynolds , '*Froggy's Little Brother*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Literature*, p.268.

motifs in which they are embodied, into a pattern which was to become archetypal.'[10]

She is, however, less complimentary about Brenda's text and is particularly critical of what she sees as the self-validation of the middle-class reader:

> Froggy and little Benny ... pull with such determination at the reader's heart-strings that they lose all artistic decorum .... The whipped-up emotion is then, at the end of the book, turned into fuel for a homily to the reader ... [and] [t]hese passages highlight the other artistic pitfall of her work. Their assumption is that the reader is well-off, comfortable, completely insulated from the story; Froggy and his brother, therefore, and all the detail of their lives, are a display put on to prove our tears and our generosity, to each other and especially to them.[11]

Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* is undoubtedly a skilfully written, spare but effective narrative and Bratton comments that it is 'one of the first books in which one can imagine the Sunday School reader fully understanding and accepting the moral notions the author has to convey, and, moreover, not feeling threatened or diminished by those notions'.[12] Her judgement is justified; Stretton's narrative is never patronising and the street child is endowed with intelligence and agency and Bratton's criticism of sentimentality in Brenda's text is similarly fair. For Bratton, *Froggy's Little Brother* is 'a very long way ... from *Jessica's First Prayer*', but her assertion that it 'is difficult to imagine a ragged school child finding Froggy anything but a sham, indeed an insult'[13] fails to take account of Brenda's intended readership. A ragged school child might certainly have experienced such feelings, but the implied reader of Brenda's text is not a ragged school child and so marketing of the text to Sunday Schools for the poor may well have been inappropriate (if profitable for the publishers). *Froggy's*

---

[10] Jacqueline Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1981) pp.85–6.

[11] Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction,* pp.99–100.

[12] Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*, p.86.

[13] Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*, p.100.

Little Brother is explicitly addressed throughout to the more affluent classes, often through use of an intrusive narrator, and this is particularly evident in its closing paragraphs: 'Parents and little children, you especially who are rich, remember it is the Froggys and Bennys of London for whom your clergyman is pleading, when he asks you to send money and relief to the poor East End!'[14] In this way Brenda's text urged the monied reader to embrace her cause and like Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer*, and perhaps because of its sentimentality, clearly engendered concern for the plight of destitute children in England's inner-city slums among upper-class readers such as Gore and Rochdale (see p.x).

The children of the streets

Although *Jessica's First Prayer* and *Froggy's Little Brother* are set in London, the plight of its child characters was evident in cities throughout the country. As Nancy Cutt comments, 'Hesba Stretton's picture of slum life ... tiny in scale, is essentially true. Surrounding the situation in the book was the whole complex matter of slum poverty, worst in Manchester, Liverpool and London – the poverty described by Engels and Mayhew, interpreted by Dickens and Mrs Gaskell, analysed by Charles Booth.'[15]

Dickens was the most celebrated writer who emphasised the pitiful condition of London's poor and 'was both a model and supporter of many of those who wrote street arab fiction'.[16] Stretton's and Brenda's protagonists are certainly in the Dickensian mould and Froggy's story, in particular, would seem to pay homage to both *Oliver Twist* (1837–8) and *Bleak House* (1853) with Froggy's unwitting involvement with pickpockets and his work as a crossing sweeper, the latter reminiscent of Dickens' Jo. However, Jessica and Froggy are also fictional and sympathetic representations of the thousands of children who lived on the city streets in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

---

[14] Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother* (London: John F. Shaw, 1875), p.169.

[15] Cutt, *Ministering Angels*, p.136.

[16] Reynolds , '*Froggy's Little Brother*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Literature*, p.267.

In reality, sympathy for such children was not always unqualified. James Greenwood, writing in *The Seven Curses of London* in 1869, asserted that

> daily, winter and summer within the limits of our vast and wealthy city of London, there wander, destitute of proper guardianship, food, clothing or employment, *a hundred thousand* boys and girls in fair training for the treadmill and the oakum shed, and finally for Portland and the convict's mark.[17]

His subsequent assertion locates the street child not as a victim, but as a social contaminant, fecund and uncontrolled:

> There is no present fear of the noble annual crop of a hundred thousand diminishing. They are so plentifully propagated that a savage preaching 'civilization' might regard it as a mercy that the localities of their infant nurture are such as suit the ravening appetites of cholera and typhus. Otherwise they would breed like rabbits in an undisturbed warren, and presently swarm so abundantly that the highways would be over-run, making it necessary to pass an Act of Parliament, improving on the latest enacted for dogs, against the roaming at large of unmuzzled children of the gutter.[18]

In his introduction to Greenwood's text, Jeffrey Richards comments that Greenwood 'settled on the exploitation of children' as his primary explanation for the situation, although modern research suggests that the 'armies of neglected' children were the result of high birth and death rates, family break-up through hardship, death and homelessness, migration within and into cities and a shortage of work for children.[19] Whatever the explanation for such numbers of children, Greenwood's declaration exposes a common anxiety that clearly existed in parallel with the agenda

---

[17] James Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p.3.

[18] Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London*, p.5.

[19] Jeffrey Richards, 'Introduction', in Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p.xii.

to 'save' such children from degeneration and that in many ways exemplified the numerous paradoxes within Victorian society; as *The Times* remarked, 'This Metropolis certainly is the strangest place in the world. It is a place where extremes meet, and where splendour is next door to misery.'[20] The work of social reformers such as Lord Shaftesbury had resulted in a reduction in child labour and the establishment of Ragged Schools in the cities, but as the London *Daily News* noted:

> A Ragged School may, at its first institution, include a good many of the perishing and dangerous class; but in a little while the character of the attendance rises, and the most wretched class drops out at the bottom. The young creatures are off in their wildness to prey upon their kind – the girls to haunt fairs and markets ... and the boys forming gangs, and drawing in and training little children of half their own age.[21]

Inherent in the *News* commentary is the notion that the child of the streets is prey to corruption, a notion that, at its roots, invests wholeheartedly in the concept of the innocent child. For both social commentators and writers of street arab stories, the child was vulnerable and at risk from the influence of degenerate parents and companions. Within these dangerous environments, the once innocent creature would become sullied and, as the *News* suggests, would then infect younger, vulnerable children. George Needham's *Street Arabs and Guttersnipes: The Pathetic and Humorous Side of Young Vagabond Life in the Cities with Records of their Work for their Reclamation* (1884) was, he wrote, 'a plea on behalf of neglected and destitute children ... too often educated in crime by unnatural parents or vicious guardians; or who, through the stress of circumstances, are forced into a course of life which tends to the multiplication of criminals and the increase in the dangerous classes'.[22]

---

[20] Anon, 'Juvenile Mendicancy – Lord Shaftesbury's Bill', *Ragged Schools Union Magazine*, 6, 61 (1854), p.165.

[21] Anon, 'Juvenile Mendicancy', *Ragged School Union Magazine*, p.167.

[22] George Needham, *Street Arabs and Guttersnipes: The Pathetic and Humorous Side of Young Vagabond Life in the Great Cities, with Records of Work for their Reclamation* (Boston: Guernsey, 1884), p.iii.

Needham, writing of both England and America, emphasised the dangers of allowing children to remain in what he perceived as 'sinful' environments:

> Go into the low quarters of Glasgow, the filthy back streets of Liverpool, the foul fever-slums of almost any of our great cities, and there you will see bright-eyed, tattered, ill-fed children growing up amid the reek of gin and amid scenes of blasphemy, in low, infamous rooms, and in low, infamous streets, dirty, dissolute and depraved – the very seed-plot of our future criminals ... many a drunkard's child in England is being trained up deliberately in the habits of sin.[23]

Thus it was imperative that the inherently innocent child of both fact and fiction be rescued and relocated far from such influences, whether this was at home or overseas. The child emigration programme that climaxed in the second half of the nineteenth century and that saw thousands of children sent to Canada and South Africa, among other places, served to control, through practical means, the ragged, seemingly unmanageable children that roamed the streets. It was however vaunted primarily as a rescue mission of innocents and so the idealised, nineteenth-century image of childhood was effectively maintained while the problem was, to some degree, resolved.[24]

---

[23] Needham, *Street Arabs and Guttersnipes*, p.464.

[24] The dual purpose of the emigration programme as both rescuer and eradicator of street children is explicit in a poem from *Our Waifs and Strays*, 1887, entitled 'The Departure of the Innocents', cited in Pamela Horn, *The Victorian Town Child* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), n.p.

> Take them away! Take them away!
> Out of the gutter, the ooze and the slime,
> Where the little vermin paddle and crawl,
> Till they grow and ripen into crime.
>
> Take them away from the jaws of death,
> And the coils of evil that swaddle them round
> And stifle their souls in every breath
> They draw on the foul and fetid ground.

The innocent child, an image derived from Rousseau and Romanticism and epitomised in William Wordsworth's Ode on *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (1807), was invariably the construct that predominated in street arab fiction. Sometimes depicted as a means of salvation for others – Jessica 'saves' Daniel when she guides him to an authentic, rather than a superficial Christianity – the child protagonist generally displays an inherent goodness that validates him as worthy of rescue; Brenda's Froggy resists corruption because of his moral sensibilities and is horrified when he realises that he is in the company of thieves: '... oh! what would father and mother think if they were looking down at him from their home in heaven?'[25] Indeed, parents are significant within many street arab tales and are depicted very occasionally as a positive force for the child, as is seemingly the case in *Froggy's Little Brother*. More commonly, however, they are portrayed as inept or degenerate individuals whose failures impact dangerously on the development and potential future of the young boy or girl.[26]

Take them away! Away! Away!
The bountiful earth is wide and free,
The New shall repair the wrongs of the Old –
Take them away o'er the rolling sea!

Monica Flegel discusses the tension between the street child and Victorian ideologies of the child, commenting that '[a]s the construction of childhood as properly a sanctified, protected space became increasingly dominant in England ... the "savage" child primarily elicited concern. When writers were confronted with the animalistic child of the streets, their response was therefore often one of horror: "Can these be *children*?"... . A child that was allowed to be unrestrained and unlawful, was a child that questioned the sanctified space of childhood itself'. Monica Flegel, *Conceptualising Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-century England: Literature, Representation and the NSPCC* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp.53–4.

[25] Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother,* p.96.

[26] See Elizabeth Thiel, *The Fantasy of Family: Nineteenth-century Children's Literature and the Domestic Ideal* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008) for a more detailed discussion of parenting and family in nineteenth-century children's texts.

The sins of the parents

Family life in *Jessica's First Prayer* and *Froggy's Little Brother* is presented as in striking opposition to the idealised, sacrilised domestic state perpetuated in much nineteenth-century discourse; John Ruskin's 'place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division' bears little resemblance to Jessica's hayloft or Froggy's attic.[27] Froggy's family live

> in a very bare garret, at the top of a dark, dingy house, the upper part of which was scorched and blackened from the effects of a fire which had occurred several years ago, on the opposite side of the way, and which had damaged more or less all the panes of glass in the neighbouring windows.[28]

Jessica, whose mother is often 'out on a spree',[29] returns to 'a single room, which had once been a hayloft over the stable of an old inn … . The mode of entrance was by a wooden ladder, whose rungs were crazy and broken … . The interior of the home was as desolate and comfortless as that of the stable below … . Everything that could be pawned had disappeared long ago'.[30] Both dwellings are potentially highly dangerous; the Shoreditch garret displays the effects of a neighbouring fire, while Jessica is obliged to climb a 'crazy' and 'broken' ladder to access her hayloft. The neighbours are similarly undesirable. Froggy and Benny are not explicitly abused by others in the building, although Benny is often left with landlady Mrs Ragbon who is rumoured to beat her own children when she is drunk.[31] Jessica, however, claims to be subject to frequent physical abuse; she tells Daniel, '"It's Jess here, and Jess there … And they think nothing of giving me smacks, and kicks, and pinches. Look here!" Whether her arms

---

[27] John Ruskin, 1865. 'Of Queen's Gardens', in *Sesame and Lilies, the Two Paths and the King of the Golden River* (London: J.M.Dent, 1901), pp.48–79 (p.59).

[28] Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother*, p.44.

[29] Hesba Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1867), p.28.

[30] Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer*, p.11.

[31] Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother*, p.52.

were black and blue from the cold, or from ill-usage, ... [Daniel] could not tell.'[32] Daniel is shown to doubt the veracity of Jessica's statement, although her later, honest response to his test of leaving a penny on the pavement suggests that her claim of abuse may have been true.

Moreover, the children's situation is depicted as the direct result of parental failure. Jessica's mother is the more explicitly culpable and is entirely in contravention, of the idealised image of womanhood and the natural mothering tendencies that Victorian ideology attributed to the female. Finally abandoning her sick child because Jessica's illness may be contagious – '[t]he neighbour informed ... [Daniel] that the child's mother had gone off some days before, fearing that she was ill of some infectious fever'[33] – Jessica's mother has consistently neglected Jessica and has denied her a childhood by forcing her to beg, scantily clad, on the streets. Her former identity as an actress, known as 'The Vixen', and her predilection for 'always get[ting] very drunk of a Sunday'[34] is further evidence of Jessica's mother's failure as a parent, while her attempt to involve Jessica in the then often notorious theatre world by permitting her to play 'a fairy in the pantomime' consolidates her degeneracy.[35] The trope of the drunken mother is a familiar one in street arab narratives and Lomax notes that

> [t]he image of drunken irresponsibility which attaches to the mother in the *Jessica* narratives ... mirrors stereotypical perceptions which find increasing expression in novels, 'melodramatic' temperance tracts, journalistic articles and visual texts, as the period progresses. Associated with the transmission of solely negative values, it represents the antithesis of feminine respectability, maternal propriety and nurturing qualities.

Lomax also observes that although such figures may lack individual identity, Jessica's parent is given a voice in the sequel, *Jessica's*

---

[32] Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer*, p.6.
[33] Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer*, p.34.
[34] Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer*, p.28, 26.
[35] Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer*, p.20.

Mother (1867), although, ultimately excluded from the story, she is 'destined to be renounced and "cast out" from the narrative'.[36] In this way she is silenced and metaphorically denied any further opportunity to impede Jessica's transition from waif to respectability, or to serve as a catalyst for conversion.

The failure of Froggy's parents, Jeanie and Harry, while less explicit than that of Jessica's mother, is nevertheless the catalyst for Froggy and Benny's destitution. Indicative of what might be perceived as the passive approach to parenting displayed by the poor, Jeanie has little to offer her sons as she lies on her deathbed, other than her preoccupation with 'the Better Land';[37] her primary legacy to Froggy is his enforced adoption of her maternal role as he struggles to care for his younger sibling. Father Harry's fragile income with the Punch and Judy show, the family's sole means of survival, is destroyed when Harry dies beneath the wheels of a drag cart and the show is 'smashed to pieces. Poor Froggy! his heart sank at this. Without the friendly old Punch and Judy, which had kept the wolf from the door and fire in the grate all these years, what was to be done? How was he to get food for Benny?'[38] Thus Harry bequeaths nothing of practical use to Froggy and Benny and the destruction of the Punch and Judy show assures their impoverishment. However, and significantly, *Froggy's Little Brother* also suggests that poor children with parents fare little better than Froggy and Benny. Mac Ragbon, the son of a violent, neglectful mother who drinks and consequently has been

[36] Lomax, *The Writings of Hesba Stretton*, p.141. Lomax contextualises the image of the drunken woman within a broader range of historical references: '[Jessica's] ... mother's fate evokes the downward spiral associated with the evils of drink represented in images ranging from the inebriate, negligent mother of Hogarth's much earlier "Gin Lane" (1751) to the dramatic sequences of Cruikshank's *The Black Bottle* (1847) and *The Drunkard's Children* (1848). The "fall" and apparent drowning [Jessica's mother falls from a bridge] are reminiscent of Cruikshank's caricature of a woman throwing herself from a bridge – one of many artistic and literary or journalistic evocations of the "river suicide", among them Thomas Hood's "The Bridge of Sighs" (1844) and the engravings of Gustave Doré, which respond to the actuality and bolster the myth of the fallen woman' (pp.141–2).

[37] Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother*, p.50.

[38] Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother*, p.57.

deserted by her husband, turns pickpocket and is finally arrested in connection with a jewel robbery. Other children die and there is a sentiment akin to laissez-faire in the attitudes of the mothers and fathers who gather at Debbie Blunt's coffin:

> 'Oh my dear, I wouldn't fret about it overmuch if I was you,' said one poor woman [to Mrs Blunt] .... 'Life's a sad business, take it altogether from cradle to grave and it's worse I ses for women than for men. We don't likes to lose 'em when we've got 'em; no more we does, bless their innocent hearts, but depend upon it children's best out of it all!'
>
> 'Yes, that they be,' said an older neighbour mournfully. 'Robert and me, we've had seven, and we've buried 'em all, and we thank the Lord for it now, though we grieved terrible at first!'[39]

A similar image of the poor as ineffectual and incapable parents had appeared two years previously in Stretton's *Lost Gip* (1873). Protagonist Sandy attempts to keep his new sister healthy, aware that the other babies produced by his overly-fecund mother have died:

> He had a vague notion that there was someone, somewhere, who could save the new-born baby from dying .... In the streets he had seen numbers of rich babies, who did not want for anything and whose cheeks were fat and rosy .... But how it happened, whether it was simply because they were rich, or because there was somebody who could keep them alive, and cared more for them than the poor, he could not tell.[40]

This suggestion that the poor cannot care for their children is echoed in the fatalistic approach of Mrs Blunt and her neighbours in *Froggy's Little Brother* and evident in the comment that 'children's best out of it all'. Those who live in poverty are shown to be inadequate parents and although the influence of Froggy's mother is displayed in the boys' dedication to prayer and in Froggy's nursing of

[39] Brenda, *Froggy's Little Brother,* p.120.
[40] Hesba Stretton, *Lost Gip* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1873), p.11.