This appealing account appeared in the first edition, titled *East London*, of Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour* in 1889. By “buildings” the author is referring to what Americans would call apartment buildings—a new form of housing in London where few dwellings were over four stories high.¹ The “T. Buildings” is not the block of buildings that Beatrice Potter mentioned in her *Pall Mall Gazette* article of February 18, 1886, “A Lady’s View on the Unemployed in the East,” and I have been unable to go beyond the Booth piece’s pseudonym.² Some possible candidates, all of whom lived for at least a time in model dwellings in East London, are Margaret and Henry Nevinson, Margaret Harkness, Constance Black (Clementina’s sister), and Ella Pycroft. The historian Rosemary O’Day, an expert on the Katharine Buildings—a set of model dwellings in East Smithfield—has tentatively nominated Margaret Harkness, who lived in the Katharine Buildings for a time and had a tendency to disguise her identity.³ My guess is Margaret Nevinson, who, with a small baby to care for, was probably at home more than the others (see chapter 15).

**Notes**

3. Personal communication, August 4, 1999; see also Rosemary O’Day, “How Families

“A Lady Resident”

Sketch of Life in Buildings

Life in “Buildings,” we may say, depends more on the class of inhabitants than on structural arrangements. It is curious, on the principle of “like to like,” how quickly a Building forms for itself a certain character—Jews’ Buildings, rowdy Buildings, genteel Buildings, &c., all being estimated as such by public opinion. And public criticism, it may be added, resting on strong prejudices, may be trusted to define sharply and to perpetuate the distinctions between the tenants of different Buildings. Racial prejudices keep the Christians apart from the Jews, and a taste for cleanliness or for quietness determines folk who can afford to indulge it to spend a little more on rent for the sake of mixing with those who are “particular,” and who “keep themselves to themselves.”

T. Buildings, where I lived for a year, is a pretty red brick building, with five storeys of tenements, two sides of a square, and enclosing a good-sized asphalted court. My dwelling consisted of two tiny rooms, about 9 ft. square, opening into one another. The front door, with its separate number and knocker, opens out of the front room into a common open balcony; and the back door out of the back room into a tiny private balcony, about a yard or so square, leading to the sink, &c. These little balconies are often turned to good account with flower boxes and hanging baskets, and one woman had rigged up a pigeon-house, and kept pigeons very successfully there. Each tenement is complete in itself, except for the want of a tap; to fetch water the tenants have to take their buckets to a common tap on each balcony. Though so small, the rooms are fresh and very clean, brightly coloured and painted once every year. The asphalted court provides a large and safe playground for the children, and the flat roof is utilized for wash-houses and a drying ground. Each tenant is bound in turn to clean and whiten a part of the balcony and stairs, and each in turn on her fixed day enjoys the use of a wash-house and the roof to dry her clothes. These common rights and duties lead, of course, to endless contention. (I may quote the remark of a neighbour on the ferocity of the combatants in a washing-
day dispute: “Why, they’d tear you to pieces; bull-dogs I call ’em.”) In the summer, T. Buildings was very pretty, with its red bricks and white stairs and balconies and flowers in most of the windows.

S. Buildings, in which I also lived for nearly a year, was on a much larger scale, and the rents were higher. The tenants were of the most varied description. The Buildings were in the form of a quadrangle, enclosing a very large asphalted square; a few miserable shrubs flourished, or rather decayed, in the centre. The various tenements opened on steep ill-lighted staircases and dark narrow corridors; the rooms inside were a great improvement on those in T. Buildings, large and well-fitted with every convenience; but in spite of advantages in this respect, S. Buildings could not compare with my former quarters. I am convinced that nothing is of more importance to the inhabitants of towns than light and colour; T. Buildings is built to admit as much air and sunshine as possible; S. Buildings to exclude them; and I think the great difference I noticed in the cheerfulness and temper of the children must have been largely due to this cause.

The very large number of tenements (200 to 300) destroyed the feeling of neighbourly responsibility and interest which was strong in T. Buildings; and the narrow resounding passages and stairs made domestic disputes and crying children more disagreeably prominent.

The character of a Building is also largely influenced by the character of the caretaker in charge, and in this respect S. Buildings was unlucky. If indifferent order is kept, and the few regulations are not enforced, the convenience of the majority has to give way to the small element in every community who are entitled to the name of public nuisances.

A short sketch of an average day in T. Buildings will give some idea of the way of life.

At 5 o’clock in the morning I hear the tenant overhead. Mr. A., getting up for his day’s work. His wife, who does a little dressmaking when she can get it from her neighbours, was up late last night (I heard her sewing-machine going till 1 o’clock), so he does not disturb her. He is a carman at the Goods Depot of a Railway Company, and has to be there at 6 o’clock, so he is not long getting his breakfast of tea and bread and butter. But before he has done, I hear a child cry; then the sound of a sleepy voice, Mrs. A., recommending a sip of tea and a crust for the baby. The man, I suppose, carries out the order, for the crying ceases, and I hear his steps as he goes downstairs. At eight o’clock there is a good deal of scraping and raking on the other side of the wall. This means that my neighbour, Mrs. B., an old woman partly supported by her dead husband’s savings, partly by the earnings of two grown-up daugh-
ters, is raking out and cleaning her stove. Then the door is opened, the dust is thrown down the dust-shoot, and a conversation is very audibly carried on by two female voices. Among other topics, is the favourite one of Mrs. A.’s laziness in the morning—though Mrs. B. knows perfectly well that Mrs. A. has been up late at work, having indeed repeatedly complained of the noise of the sewing-machine at night, and though Mrs. C. openly avows that she will not say anything against Mrs. A., as she has always been very nice to her.

At half-past eight I hear the eldest child of the A. family lighting the fire and dressing her two little brothers for school. With the departure of the children there is a lull. At ten Mrs. A. gets up, and at eleven she sallies out to make sundry purchases. Before she goes, however, Mrs. A. has a brisk gossip on her threshold with Mrs. C., the tram-conductor’s wife, who has looked in to return the head of a loaf borrowed on the previous Sunday night. In the dialogue, which lasts more than five minutes, I hear Mrs. B.’s name repeated a good many times, and catch also the phrase “spiteful old cat,” and I believe that Mrs. B.’s remarks at 8 o’clock are being now repeated with Mrs. C.’s artistic variations.

Soon after twelve there is a great hubbub of children’s laughter and shrieking in the courtyard under my window. The children have returned from school and they seem to have a good deal of fun together till we begin to hear the mothers calling them in to dinner.

In the afternoon a certain torpor falls upon the Buildings, only broken by the jingling cans and cat-calls of the afternoon milk-boys. But this is the favourite time for the women to call upon one another, and I can catch various fragments of conversation relating to the bad turn Mrs. D.’s illness is taking, to the uncalled-for visit of the curate to a lady who dislikes curates, to the shocking temper of little Maggie (Mrs. C.’s child), who is reported to be the tease and torment of all the children in the place. Looking out of window I do not see the unhappy Maggie, but find myself watching instead a spirited game of cricket between four girls on one side and three boys on the other. The wickets are chalked up against the wall and a soft ball is used. The game, however, collapses, for the boys, who are smaller than their opponents, refuse to go on, saying “it isn’t fair,” and the girls retire triumphant, but disgusted.

At 6 o’clock a row in the street calls a crowd of the inhabitants out on to the balconies, where we can look down exactly as from boxes in a theatre on to the stage. The parties to the quarrel are a man and his wife in a distinctly lower walk of life (like all the inhabitants of houses in the street) than any of the tenants of the Buildings. They are eventually separated after much “old English” on both sides.
The general impression among the spectators is in favour of the man, but the incident is soon forgotten.

Very soon after, various savoury smells begin to float out on to the landings. The favourite meal of the day, the “tea,” is being prepared against the husband’s return. All is comparative peace and harmony, the children’s hands are washed, the room is tidied, and the cloth laid. The A.’s have sprats, as I have good reason to know. Mrs. A. is aware of my partiality for this fish, and in a neighbourly spirit sends me in a plateful by her most careful child, from whom I learn that Mrs. D. is much worse and wandering in her head, and that “mother is going to sit up with her.” Mrs. D.’s husband is a night watchman, so he is at hand by day to look after her, and the neighbours are taking turns to nurse her at night.

In the evening some of the men go out to the neighbouring “Club” and sing songs or talk politics, one or two drop into the bar of the favourite “pub,” but the majority simply stay at home with the wife and children. Mr. A., the carman, is essentially a family man, and he makes a point of going through some gymnastic tricks with his boys and putting them to bed. Occasionally he receives a visit from a mate, but this is rare; and generally he retires not later than 9.30. Mr. C., the tram-conductor, has a liking for the Star, and reads aloud striking passages after tea.

A not unfrequent incident in S. Buildings about midnight or later would not have been tolerated in T. Buildings. A man there on several occasions went to bed and locked out his wife, who returned home doubtfully sober. To her repeated knocks and entreaties, he maintained a sullen silence; then exasperated she thumped and kicked at the door, screaming, and rejoiced when a sarcasm at last evoked a reply. The whole side of the Building must have been awakened, but nobody made the least sign; it was not etiquette. In T. Buildings the quarrelling was more decent; such disturbances would lead to general complaints of the offenders, and they would soon be expelled.

The advantages of living in Buildings in my opinion far outweigh the drawbacks. Cheapness, a higher standard of cleanliness, healthy sanitary arrangements, neighbourly intercourse both between children and between the grownup people, and, perhaps above all, the impossibility of being overlooked altogether, or flagrantly neglected by relatives in illness or old age, seem to be the great gains; and the chief disadvantage, the absence of privacy and the increased facility for gossip and quarrelling, though it may sometimes be disagreeably felt, introduces a constant variety of petty interest and personal feeling into the monotony of daily life.