

CHAPTER IV--A MAN AND THE ABYSS

"I say, can you let a lodging?"

These words I discharged carelessly over my shoulder at a stout and elderly woman, of whose fare I was partaking in a greasy coffee-house down near the Pool and not very far from Limehouse.

"Oh yus," she answered shortly, my appearance possibly not approximating the standard of affluence required by her house.

I said no more, consuming my rasher of bacon and pint of sickly tea in silence. Nor did she take further interest in me till I came to pay my reckoning (fourpence), when I pulled all of ten shillings out of my pocket. The expected result was produced.

"Yus, sir," she at once volunteered; "I 'ave nice lodgin's you'd likely tyke a fancy to. Back from a voyage, sir?"

"How much for a room?" I inquired, ignoring her curiosity.

She looked me up and down with frank surprise. "I don't let rooms, not to my reg'lar lodgers, much less casuals."

"Then I'll have to look along a bit," I said, with marked disappointment.

But the sight of my ten shillings had made her keen. "I can let you have a nice bed in with two hother men," she urged. "Good, respectable men, an' steady."

"But I don't want to sleep with two other men," I objected.

"You don't 'ave to. There's three beds in the room, an' hit's not a very small room."

"How much?" I demanded.

"Arf a crown a week, two an' six, to a regular lodger. You'll fancy the men, I'm sure. One works in the ware'ouse, an' 'e's been with me two years now. An' the hother's bin with me six--six years, sir, an' two months comin' nex' Saturday. 'E's a scene-shifter," she went on. "A steady, respectable man, never missin' a night's work in the time 'e's bin with me. An' 'e likes the 'ouse; 'e says as it's the best 'e can do in the w'y of lodgin's. I board 'im, an' the hother lodgers too."

"I suppose he's saving money right along," I insinuated innocently.

"Bless you, no! Nor can 'e do as well helsewhere with 'is money."

And I thought of my own spacious West, with room under its sky and unlimited air for a thousand Londons; and here was this man, a steady and

reliable man, never missing a night's work, frugal and honest, lodging in one room with two other men, paying two dollars and a half per month for it, and out of his experience adjudging it to be the best he could do!

And here was I, on the strength of the ten shillings in my pocket, able to enter in with my rags and take up my bed with him. The human soul is a lonely thing, but it must be very lonely sometimes when there are three beds to a room, and casuals with ten shillings are admitted.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Thirteen years, sir; an' don't you think you'll fancy the lodgin'?"

The while she talked she was shuffling ponderously about the small kitchen in which she cooked the food for her lodgers who were also boarders. When I first entered, she had been hard at work, nor had she let up once throughout the conversation. Undoubtedly she was a busy woman. "Up at half-past five," "to bed the last thing at night," "workin' fit ter drop," thirteen years of it, and for reward, grey hairs, frowzy clothes, stooped shoulders, slatternly figure, unending toil in a foul and noisome coffee-house that faced on an alley ten feet between the walls, and a waterside environment that was ugly and sickening, to say the least.

"You'll be hin hagain to 'ave a look?" she questioned wistfully, as I went out of the door.

And as I turned and looked at her, I realized to the full the deeper truth underlying that very wise old maxim: "Virtue is its own reward."

I went back to her. "Have you ever taken a vacation?" I asked.

"Vycytion!"

"A trip to the country for a couple of days, fresh air, a day off, you know, a rest."

"Lor' lumme!" she laughed, for the first time stopping from her work. "A vycytion, eh? for the likes o' me? Just fancy, now!--Mind yer feet!--this last sharply, and to me, as I stumbled over the rotten threshold.

Down near the West India Dock I came upon a young fellow staring disconsolately at the muddy water. A fireman's cap was pulled down across his eyes, and the fit and sag of his clothes whispered unmistakably of the sea.

"Hello, mate," I greeted him, sparring for a beginning. "Can you tell me the way to Wapping?"

"Worked yer way over on a cattle boat?" he countered, fixing my nationality on the instant.

And thereupon we entered upon a talk that extended itself to a public-house and a couple of pints of "arf an' arf." This led to closer intimacy, so that when I brought to light all of a shilling's worth of coppers (ostensibly my all), and put aside sixpence for a bed, and sixpence for more arf an' arf, he generously proposed that we drink up the whole shilling.

"My mate, 'e cut up rough las' night," he explained. "An' the bobbies got 'm, so you can bunk in wi' me. Wotcher say?"

I said yes, and by the time we had soaked ourselves in a whole shilling's worth of beer, and slept the night on a miserable bed in a miserable den, I knew him pretty fairly for what he was. And that in one respect he was representative of a large body of the lower-class London workman, my later experience substantiates.

He was London-born, his father a fireman and a drinker before him. As a child, his home was the streets and the docks. He had never learned to read, and had never felt the need for it--a vain and useless accomplishment, he held, at least for a man of his station in life.

He had had a mother and numerous squalling brothers and sisters, all crammed into a couple of rooms and living on poorer and less regular food than he could ordinarily rustle for himself. In fact, he never went home except at periods when he was unfortunate in procuring his own food. Petty pilfering and begging along the streets and docks, a trip or two to

sea as mess-boy, a few trips more as coal-trimmer, and then a full-fledged fireman, he had reached the top of his life.

And in the course of this he had also hammered out a philosophy of life, an ugly and repulsive philosophy, but withal a very logical and sensible one from his point of view. When I asked him what he lived for, he immediately answered, "Booze." A voyage to sea (for a man must live and get the wherewithal), and then the paying off and the big drunk at the end. After that, haphazard little drunks, sponged in the "pubs" from mates with a few coppers left, like myself, and when sponging was played out another trip to sea and a repetition of the beastly cycle.

"But women," I suggested, when he had finished proclaiming booze the sole end of existence.

"Wimmen!" He thumped his pot upon the bar and orated eloquently. "Wimmen is a thing my edication 'as learnt me t' let alone. It don't pay, matey; it don't pay. Wot's a man like me want o' wimmen, eh? jest you tell me. There was my mar, she was enough, a-bangin' the kids about an' makin' the ole man mis'rable when 'e come 'ome, w'ich was seldom, I grant. An' fer w'y? Becos o' mar! She didn't make 'is 'ome 'appy, that was w'y. Then, there's the other wimmen, 'ow do they treat a pore stoker with a few shillin's in 'is trouseys? A good drunk is wot 'e's got in 'is pockits, a good long drunk, an' the wimmen skin 'im out of his money so quick 'e ain't 'ad 'ardly a glass. I know. I've 'ad my fling, an' I know wot's wot. An' I tell you, where's wimmen is trouble--screechin' an' carryin'

on, fightin', cuttin', bobbies, magistrates, an' a month's 'ard labour back of it all, an' no pay-day when you come out."

"But a wife and children," I insisted. "A home of your own, and all that. Think of it, back from a voyage, little children climbing on your knee, and the wife happy and smiling, and a kiss for you when she lays the table, and a kiss all round from the babies when they go to bed, and the kettle singing and the long talk afterwards of where you've been and what you've seen, and of her and all the little happenings at home while you've been away, and--"

"Garn!" he cried, with a playful shove of his fist on my shoulder. "Wot's yer game, eh? A missus kissin' an' kids clim'in', an' kettle singin', all on four poun' ten a month w'en you 'ave a ship, an' four nothin' w'en you 'aven't. I'll tell you wot I'd get on four poun' ten--a missus rowin', kids squallin', no coal t' make the kettle sing, an' the kettle up the spout, that's wot I'd get. Enough t' make a bloke bloomin' well glad to be back t' sea. A missus! Wot for? T' make you mis'erable? Kids? Jest take my counsel, matey, an' don't 'ave 'em. Look at me! I can 'ave my beer w'en I like, an' no blessed missus an' kids a-crying for bread. I'm 'appy, I am, with my beer an' mates like you, an' a good ship comin', an' another trip to sea. So I say, let's 'ave another pint. Arf an' arf's good enough for me."

Without going further with the speech of this young fellow of two-and-twenty, I think I have sufficiently indicated his philosophy of life and

the underlying economic reason for it. Home life he had never known. The word "home" aroused nothing but unpleasant associations. In the low wages of his father, and of other men in the same walk in life, he found sufficient reason for branding wife and children as encumbrances and causes of masculine misery. An unconscious hedonist, utterly unmoral and materialistic, he sought the greatest possible happiness for himself, and found it in drink.

A young sot; a premature wreck; physical inability to do a stoker's work; the gutter or the workhouse; and the end--he saw it all as clearly as I, but it held no terrors for him. From the moment of his birth, all the forces of his environment had tended to harden him, and he viewed his wretched, inevitable future with a callousness and unconcern I could not shake.

And yet he was not a bad man. He was not inherently vicious and brutal. He had normal mentality, and a more than average physique. His eyes were blue and round, shaded by long lashes, and wide apart. And there was a laugh in them, and a fund of humour behind. The brow and general features were good, the mouth and lips sweet, though already developing a harsh twist. The chin was weak, but not too weak; I have seen men sitting in the high places with weaker.

His head was shapely, and so gracefully was it poised upon a perfect neck that I was not surprised by his body that night when he stripped for bed. I have seen many men strip, in gymnasium and training quarters, men of

good blood and upbringing, but I have never seen one who stripped to better advantage than this young sot of two-and-twenty, this young god doomed to rack and ruin in four or five short years, and to pass hence without posterity to receive the splendid heritage it was his to bequeath.

It seemed sacrilege to waste such life, and yet I was forced to confess that he was right in not marrying on four pounds ten in London Town. Just as the scene-shifter was happier in making both ends meet in a room shared with two other men, than he would have been had he packed a feeble family along with a couple of men into a cheaper room, and failed in making both ends meet.

And day by day I became convinced that not only is it unwise, but it is criminal for the people of the Abyss to marry. They are the stones by the builder rejected. There is no place for them, in the social fabric, while all the forces of society drive them downward till they perish. At the bottom of the Abyss they are feeble, besotted, and imbecile. If they reproduce, the life is so cheap that perforce it perishes of itself. The work of the world goes on above them, and they do not care to take part in it, nor are they able. Moreover, the work of the world does not need them. There are plenty, far fitter than they, clinging to the steep slope above, and struggling frantically to slide no more.

In short, the London Abyss is a vast shambles. Year by year, and decade after decade, rural England pours in a flood of vigorous strong life,

that not only does not renew itself, but perishes by the third generation. Competent authorities aver that the London workman whose parents and grand-parents were born in London is so remarkable a specimen that he is rarely found.

Mr. A. C. Pigou has said that the aged poor, and the residuum which compose the "submerged tenth," constitute 71 per cent, of the population of London. Which is to say that last year, and yesterday, and to-day, at this very moment, 450,000 of these creatures are dying miserably at the bottom of the social pit called "London." As to how they die, I shall take an instance from this morning's paper.

SELF-NEGLECT

Yesterday Dr. Wynn Westcott held an inquest at Shoreditch, respecting the death of Elizabeth Crews, aged 77 years, of 32 East Street, Holborn, who died on Wednesday last. Alice Mathieson stated that she was landlady of the house where deceased lived. Witness last saw her alive on the previous Monday. She lived quite alone. Mr. Francis Birch, relieving officer for the Holborn district, stated that deceased had occupied the room in question for thirty-five years. When witness was called, on the 1st, he found the old woman in a terrible state, and the ambulance and coachman had to be disinfected after the removal. Dr. Chase Fennell said death was due to blood-poisoning from bed-sores, due to self-neglect and filthy surroundings, and the jury returned a verdict to that effect.

The most startling thing about this little incident of a woman's death is the smug complacency with which the officials looked upon it and rendered judgment. That an old woman of seventy-seven years of age should die of SELF-NEGLECT is the most optimistic way possible of looking at it. It was the old dead woman's fault that she died, and having located the responsibility, society goes contentedly on about its own affairs.

Of the "submerged tenth" Mr. Pigou has said: "Either through lack of bodily strength, or of intelligence, or of fibre, or of all three, they are inefficient or unwilling workers, and consequently unable to support themselves . . . They are often so degraded in intellect as to be incapable of distinguishing their right from their left hand, or of recognising the numbers of their own houses; their bodies are feeble and without stamina, their affections are warped, and they scarcely know what family life means."

Four hundred and fifty thousand is a whole lot of people. The young fireman was only one, and it took him some time to say his little say. I should not like to hear them all talk at once. I wonder if God hears them?