

CHAPTER V--THOSE ON THE EDGE

My first impression of East London was naturally a general one. Later the details began to appear, and here and there in the chaos of misery I found little spots where a fair measure of happiness reigned--sometimes whole rows of houses in little out-of-the-way streets, where artisans dwell and where a rude sort of family life obtains. In the evenings the men can be seen at the doors, pipes in their mouths and children on their knees, wives gossiping, and laughter and fun going on. The content of these people is manifestly great, for, relative to the wretchedness that encompasses them, they are well off.

But at the best, it is a dull, animal happiness, the content of the full belly. The dominant note of their lives is materialistic. They are stupid and heavy, without imagination. The Abyss seems to exude a stupefying atmosphere of torpor, which wraps about them and deadens them. Religion passes them by. The Unseen holds for them neither terror nor delight. They are unaware of the Unseen; and the full belly and the evening pipe, with their regular "arf an' arf," is all they demand, or dream of demanding, from existence.

This would not be so bad if it were all; but it is not all. The satisfied torpor in which they are sunk is the deadly inertia that precedes dissolution. There is no progress, and with them not to progress is to fall back and into the Abyss. In their own lives they may

only start to fall, leaving the fall to be completed by their children and their children's children. Man always gets less than he demands from life; and so little do they demand, that the less than little they get cannot save them.

At the best, city life is an unnatural life for the human; but the city life of London is so utterly unnatural that the average workman or workwoman cannot stand it. Mind and body are sapped by the undermining influences ceaselessly at work. Moral and physical stamina are broken, and the good workman, fresh from the soil, becomes in the first city generation a poor workman; and by the second city generation, devoid of push and go and initiative, and actually unable physically to perform the labour his father did, he is well on the way to the shambles at the bottom of the Abyss.

If nothing else, the air he breathes, and from which he never escapes, is sufficient to weaken him mentally and physically, so that he becomes unable to compete with the fresh virile life from the country hastening on to London Town to destroy and be destroyed.

Leaving out the disease germs that fill the air of the East End, consider but the one item of smoke. Sir William Thiselton-Dyer, curator of Kew Gardens, has been studying smoke deposits on vegetation, and, according to his calculations, no less than six tons of solid matter, consisting of soot and tarry hydrocarbons, are deposited every week on every quarter of a square mile in and about London. This is equivalent to twenty-four

tons per week to the square mile, or 1248 tons per year to the square mile. From the cornice below the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral was recently taken a solid deposit of crystallised sulphate of lime. This deposit had been formed by the action of the sulphuric acid in the atmosphere upon the carbonate of lime in the stone. And this sulphuric acid in the atmosphere is constantly being breathed by the London workmen through all the days and nights of their lives.

It is incontrovertible that the children grow up into rotten adults, without virility or stamina, a weak-kneed, narrow-chested, listless breed, that crumples up and goes down in the brute struggle for life with the invading hordes from the country. The railway men, carriers, omnibus drivers, corn and timber porters, and all those who require physical stamina, are largely drawn from the country; while in the Metropolitan Police there are, roughly, 12,000 country-born as against 3000 London-born.

So one is forced to conclude that the Abyss is literally a huge man-killing machine, and when I pass along the little out-of-the-way streets with the full-bellied artisans at the doors, I am aware of a greater sorrow for them than for the 450,000 lost and hopeless wretches dying at the bottom of the pit. They, at least, are dying, that is the point; while these have yet to go through the slow and preliminary pangs extending through two and even three generations.

And yet the quality of the life is good. All human potentialities are in

it. Given proper conditions, it could live through the centuries, and great men, heroes and masters, spring from it and make the world better by having lived.

I talked with a woman who was representative of that type which has been jerked out of its little out-of-the-way streets and has started on the fatal fall to the bottom. Her husband was a fitter and a member of the Engineers' Union. That he was a poor engineer was evidenced by his inability to get regular employment. He did not have the energy and enterprise necessary to obtain or hold a steady position.

The pair had two daughters, and the four of them lived in a couple of holes, called "rooms" by courtesy, for which they paid seven shillings per week. They possessed no stove, managing their cooking on a single gas-ring in the fireplace. Not being persons of property, they were unable to obtain an unlimited supply of gas; but a clever machine had been installed for their benefit. By dropping a penny in the slot, the gas was forthcoming, and when a penny's worth had forthcome the supply was automatically shut off. "A penny gawn in no time," she explained, "an' the cookin' not arf done!"

Incipient starvation had been their portion for years. Month in and month out, they had arisen from the table able and willing to eat more. And when once on the downward slope, chronic innutrition is an important factor in sapping vitality and hastening the descent.

Yet this woman was a hard worker. From 4.30 in the morning till the last light at night, she said, she had toiled at making cloth dress-skirts, lined up and with two flounces, for seven shillings a dozen. Cloth dress-skirts, mark you, lined up with two flounces, for seven shillings a dozen! This is equal to \$1.75 per dozen, or 14.75 cents per skirt.

The husband, in order to obtain employment, had to belong to the union, which collected one shilling and sixpence from him each week. Also, when strikes were afoot and he chanced to be working, he had at times been compelled to pay as high as seventeen shillings into the union's coffers for the relief fund.

One daughter, the elder, had worked as green hand for a dressmaker, for one shilling and sixpence per week--37.5 cents per week, or a fraction over 5 cents per day. However, when the slack season came she was discharged, though she had been taken on at such low pay with the understanding that she was to learn the trade and work up. After that she had been employed in a bicycle store for three years, for which she received five shillings per week, walking two miles to her work, and two back, and being fined for tardiness.

As far as the man and woman were concerned, the game was played. They had lost handhold and foothold, and were falling into the pit. But what of the daughters? Living like swine, enfeebled by chronic innutrition, being sapped mentally, morally, and physically, what chance have they to crawl up and out of the Abyss into which they were born falling?

As I write this, and for an hour past, the air has been made hideous by a free-for-all, rough-and-tumble fight going on in the yard that is back to back with my yard. When the first sounds reached me I took it for the barking and snarling of dogs, and some minutes were required to convince me that human beings, and women at that, could produce such a fearful clamour.

Drunken women fighting! It is not nice to think of; it is far worse to listen to. Something like this it runs--

Incoherent babble, shrieked at the top of the lungs of several women; a lull, in which is heard a child crying and a young girl's voice pleading tearfully; a woman's voice rises, harsh and grating, "You 'it me! Jest you 'it me!" then, swat! challenge accepted and fight rages afresh.

The back windows of the houses commanding the scene are lined with enthusiastic spectators, and the sound of blows, and of oaths that make one's blood run cold, are borne to my ears. Happily, I cannot see the combatants.

A lull; "You let that child alone!" child, evidently of few years, screaming in downright terror. "Awright," repeated insistently and at top pitch twenty times straight running; "you'll git this rock on the 'ead!" and then rock evidently on the head from the shriek that goes up.

A lull; apparently one combatant temporarily disabled and being resuscitated; child's voice audible again, but now sunk to a lower note of terror and growing exhaustion.

Voices begin to go up the scale, something like this:-

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

Sufficient affirmation on both sides, conflict again precipitated. One combatant gets overwhelming advantage, and follows it up from the way the other combatant screams bloody murder. Bloody murder gurgles and dies out, undoubtedly throttled by a strangle hold.

Entrance of new voices; a flank attack; strangle hold suddenly broken from the way bloody murder goes up half an octave higher than before; general hullabaloo, everybody fighting.

Lull; new voice, young girl's, "I'm goin' ter tyke my mother's part;" dialogue, repeated about five times, "I'll do as I like, blankety, blank, blank!" "I'd like ter see yer, blankety, blank, blank!" renewed conflict, mothers, daughters, everybody, during which my landlady calls her young daughter in from the back steps, while I wonder what will be the effect of all that she has heard upon her moral fibre.