

CHAPTER VI--FRYING-PAN ALLEY AND A GLIMPSE OF INFERNO

Three of us walked down Mile End Road, and one was a hero. He was a slender lad of nineteen, so slight and frail, in fact, that, like Fra Lippo Lippi, a puff of wind might double him up and turn him over. He was a burning young socialist, in the first throes of enthusiasm and ripe for martyrdom. As platform speaker or chairman he had taken an active and dangerous part in the many indoor and outdoor pro-Boer meetings which have vexed the serenity of Merry England these several years back. Little items he had been imparting to me as he walked along; of being mobbed in parks and on tram-cars; of climbing on the platform to lead the forlorn hope, when brother speaker after brother speaker had been dragged down by the angry crowd and cruelly beaten; of a siege in a church, where he and three others had taken sanctuary, and where, amid flying missiles and the crashing of stained glass, they had fought off the mob till rescued by platoons of constables; of pitched and giddy battles on stairways, galleries, and balconies; of smashed windows, collapsed stairways, wrecked lecture halls, and broken heads and bones--and then, with a regretful sigh, he looked at me and said: "How I envy you big, strong men! I'm such a little mite I can't do much when it comes to fighting."

And I, walking head and shoulders above my two companions, remembered my own husky West, and the stalwart men it had been my custom, in turn, to envy there. Also, as I looked at the mite of a youth with the heart of a lion, I thought, this is the type that on occasion rears barricades and

shows the world that men have not forgotten how to die.

But up spoke my other companion, a man of twenty-eight, who eked out a precarious existence in a sweating den.

"I'm a 'earty man, I am," he announced. "Not like the other chaps at my shop, I ain't. They consider me a fine specimen of manhood. W'y, d' ye know, I weigh ten stone!"

I was ashamed to tell him that I weighed one hundred and seventy pounds, or over twelve stone, so I contented myself with taking his measure.

Poor, misshapen little man! His skin an unhealthy colour, body gnarled and twisted out of all decency, contracted chest, shoulders bent prodigiously from long hours of toil, and head hanging heavily forward and out of place! A "'earty man,' 'e was!"

"How tall are you?"

"Five foot two," he answered proudly; "an' the chaps at the shop . . . "

"Let me see that shop," I said.

The shop was idle just then, but I still desired to see it. Passing Leman Street, we cut off to the left into Spitalfields, and dived into Frying-pan Alley. A spawn of children cluttered the slimy pavement, for all the world like tadpoles just turned frogs on the bottom of a dry

pond. In a narrow doorway, so narrow that perforce we stepped over her, sat a woman with a young babe, nursing at breasts grossly naked and libelling all the sacredness of motherhood. In the black and narrow hall behind her we waded through a mess of young life, and essayed an even narrower and fouler stairway. Up we went, three flights, each landing two feet by three in area, and heaped with filth and refuse.

There were seven rooms in this abomination called a house. In six of the rooms, twenty-odd people, of both sexes and all ages, cooked, ate, slept, and worked. In size the rooms averaged eight feet by eight, or possibly nine. The seventh room we entered. It was the den in which five men "sweated." It was seven feet wide by eight long, and the table at which the work was performed took up the major portion of the space. On this table were five lasts, and there was barely room for the men to stand to their work, for the rest of the space was heaped with cardboard, leather, bundles of shoe uppers, and a miscellaneous assortment of materials used in attaching the uppers of shoes to their soles.

In the adjoining room lived a woman and six children. In another vile hole lived a widow, with an only son of sixteen who was dying of consumption. The woman hawked sweetmeats on the street, I was told, and more often failed than not to supply her son with the three quarts of milk he daily required. Further, this son, weak and dying, did not taste meat oftener than once a week; and the kind and quality of this meat cannot possibly be imagined by people who have never watched human swine eat.

"The w'y 'e coughs is somethin' terrible," volunteered my sweated friend, referring to the dying boy. "We 'ear 'im 'ere, w'ile we're workin', an' it's terrible, I say, terrible!"

And, what of the coughing and the sweetmeats, I found another menace added to the hostile environment of the children of the slum.

My sweated friend, when work was to be had, toiled with four other men in his eight-by-seven room. In the winter a lamp burned nearly all the day and added its fumes to the over-loaded air, which was breathed, and breathed, and breathed again.

In good times, when there was a rush of work, this man told me that he could earn as high as "thirty bob a week."--Thirty shillings! Seven dollars and a half!

"But it's only the best of us can do it," he qualified. "An' then we work twelve, thirteen, and fourteen hours a day, just as fast as we can. An' you should see us sweat! Just running from us! If you could see us, it'd dazzle your eyes--tacks flyin' out of mouth like from a machine. Look at my mouth."

I looked. The teeth were worn down by the constant friction of the metallic brads, while they were coal-black and rotten.

"I clean my teeth," he added, "else they'd be worse."

After he had told me that the workers had to furnish their own tools, brads, "grindery," cardboard, rent, light, and what not, it was plain that his thirty bob was a diminishing quantity.

"But how long does the rush season last, in which you receive this high wage of thirty bob?" I asked.

"Four months," was the answer; and for the rest of the year, he informed me, they average from "half a quid" to a "quid" a week, which is equivalent to from two dollars and a half to five dollars. The present week was half gone, and he had earned four bob, or one dollar. And yet I was given to understand that this was one of the better grades of sweating.

I looked out of the window, which should have commanded the back yards of the neighbouring buildings. But there were no back yards, or, rather, they were covered with one-storey hovels, cowsheds, in which people lived. The roofs of these hovels were covered with deposits of filth, in some places a couple of feet deep--the contributions from the back windows of the second and third storeys. I could make out fish and meat bones, garbage, pestilential rags, old boots, broken earthenware, and all the general refuse of a human sty.

"This is the last year of this trade; they're getting machines to do away

with us," said the sweated one mournfully, as we stepped over the woman with the breasts grossly naked and waded anew through the cheap young life.

We next visited the municipal dwellings erected by the London County Council on the site of the slums where lived Arthur Morrison's "Child of the Jago." While the buildings housed more people than before, it was much healthier. But the dwellings were inhabited by the better-class workmen and artisans. The slum people had simply drifted on to crowd other slums or to form new slums.

"An' now," said the sweated one, the 'earty man who worked so fast as to dazzle one's eyes, "I'll show you one of London's lungs. This is Spitalfields Garden." And he mouthed the word "garden" with scorn.

The shadow of Christ's Church falls across Spitalfields Garden, and in the shadow of Christ's Church, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I saw a sight I never wish to see again. There are no flowers in this garden, which is smaller than my own rose garden at home. Grass only grows here, and it is surrounded by a sharp-spiked iron fencing, as are all the parks of London Town, so that homeless men and women may not come in at night and sleep upon it.

As we entered the garden, an old woman, between fifty and sixty, passed us, striding with sturdy intention if somewhat rickety action, with two bulky bundles, covered with sacking, slung fore and aft upon her. She

was a woman tramp, a houseless soul, too independent to drag her failing carcass through the workhouse door. Like the snail, she carried her home with her. In the two sacking-covered bundles were her household goods, her wardrobe, linen, and dear feminine possessions.

We went up the narrow gravelled walk. On the benches on either side arrayed a mass of miserable and distorted humanity, the sight of which would have impelled Dore to more diabolical flights of fancy than he ever succeeded in achieving. It was a welter of rags and filth, of all manner of loathsome skin diseases, open sores, bruises, grossness, indecency, leering monstrosities, and bestial faces. A chill, raw wind was blowing, and these creatures huddled there in their rags, sleeping for the most part, or trying to sleep. Here were a dozen women, ranging in age from twenty years to seventy. Next a babe, possibly of nine months, lying asleep, flat on the hard bench, with neither pillow nor covering, nor with any one looking after it. Next half-a-dozen men, sleeping bolt upright or leaning against one another in their sleep. In one place a family group, a child asleep in its sleeping mother's arms, and the husband (or male mate) clumsily mending a dilapidated shoe. On another bench a woman trimming the frayed strips of her rags with a knife, and another woman, with thread and needle, sewing up rents. Adjoining, a man holding a sleeping woman in his arms. Farther on, a man, his clothing caked with gutter mud, asleep, with head in the lap of a woman, not more than twenty-five years old, and also asleep.

It was this sleeping that puzzled me. Why were nine out of ten of them

asleep or trying to sleep? But it was not till afterwards that I learned. It is a law of the powers that be that the homeless shall not sleep by night. On the pavement, by the portico of Christ's Church, where the stone pillars rise toward the sky in a stately row, were whole rows of men lying asleep or drowsing, and all too deep sunk in torpor to rouse or be made curious by our intrusion.

"A lung of London," I said; "nay, an abscess, a great putrescent sore."

"Oh, why did you bring me here?" demanded the burning young socialist, his delicate face white with sickness of soul and stomach sickness.

"Those women there," said our guide, "will sell themselves for thru'pence, or tu'pence, or a loaf of stale bread."

He said it with a cheerful sneer.

But what more he might have said I do not know, for the sick man cried, "For heaven's sake let us get out of this."