

CHAPTER IX--THE SPIKE

First of all, I must beg forgiveness of my body for the vileness through which I have dragged it, and forgiveness of my stomach for the vileness which I have thrust into it. I have been to the spike, and slept in the spike, and eaten in the spike; also, I have run away from the spike.

After my two unsuccessful attempts to penetrate the Whitechapel casual ward, I started early, and joined the desolate line before three o'clock in the afternoon. They did not "let in" till six, but at that early hour I was number twenty, while the news had gone forth that only twenty-two were to be admitted. By four o'clock there were thirty-four in line, the last ten hanging on in the slender hope of getting in by some kind of a miracle. Many more came, looked at the line, and went away, wise to the bitter fact that the spike would be "full up."

Conversation was slack at first, standing there, till the man on one side of me and the man on the other side of me discovered that they had been in the smallpox hospital at the same time, though a full house of sixteen hundred patients had prevented their becoming acquainted. But they made up for it, discussing and comparing the more loathsome features of their disease in the most cold-blooded, matter-of-fact way. I learned that the average mortality was one in six, that one of them had been in three months and the other three months and a half, and that they had been "rotten wi' it." Whereat my flesh began to creep and crawl, and I asked

them how long they had been out. One had been out two weeks, and the other three weeks. Their faces were badly pitted (though each assured the other that this was not so), and further, they showed me in their hands and under the nails the smallpox "seeds" still working out. Nay, one of them worked a seed out for my edification, and pop it went, right out of his flesh into the air. I tried to shrink up smaller inside my clothes, and I registered a fervent though silent hope that it had not popped on me.

In both instances, I found that the smallpox was the cause of their being "on the doss," which means on the tramp. Both had been working when smitten by the disease, and both had emerged from the hospital "broke," with the gloomy task before them of hunting for work. So far, they had not found any, and they had come to the spike for a "rest up" after three days and nights on the street.

It seems that not only the man who becomes old is punished for his involuntary misfortune, but likewise the man who is struck by disease or accident. Later on, I talked with another man--"Ginger" we called him--who stood at the head of the line--a sure indication that he had been waiting since one o'clock. A year before, one day, while in the employ of a fish dealer, he was carrying a heavy box of fish which was too much for him. Result: "something broke," and there was the box on the ground, and he on the ground beside it.

At the first hospital, whither he was immediately carried, they said it

was a rupture, reduced the swelling, gave him some vaseline to rub on it, kept him four hours, and told him to get along. But he was not on the streets more than two or three hours when he was down on his back again. This time he went to another hospital and was patched up. But the point is, the employer did nothing, positively nothing, for the man injured in his employment, and even refused him "a light job now and again," when he came out. As far as Ginger is concerned, he is a broken man. His only chance to earn a living was by heavy work. He is now incapable of performing heavy work, and from now until he dies, the spike, the peg, and the streets are all he can look forward to in the way of food and shelter. The thing happened--that is all. He put his back under too great a load of fish, and his chance for happiness in life was crossed off the books.

Several men in the line had been to the United States, and they were wishing that they had remained there, and were cursing themselves for their folly in ever having left. England had become a prison to them, a prison from which there was no hope of escape. It was impossible for them to get away. They could neither scrape together the passage money, nor get a chance to work their passage. The country was too overrun by poor devils on that "lay."

I was on the seafaring-man-who-had-lost-his-clothes-and-money tack, and they all condoled with me and gave me much sound advice. To sum it up, the advice was something like this: To keep out of all places like the spike. There was nothing good in it for me. To head for the coast and

bend every effort to get away on a ship. To go to work, if possible, and scrape together a pound or so, with which I might bribe some steward or underling to give me chance to work my passage. They envied me my youth and strength, which would sooner or later get me out of the country. These they no longer possessed. Age and English hardship had broken them, and for them the game was played and up.

There was one, however, who was still young, and who, I am sure, will in the end make it out. He had gone to the United States as a young fellow, and in fourteen years' residence the longest period he had been out of work was twelve hours. He had saved his money, grown too prosperous, and returned to the mother-country. Now he was standing in line at the spike.

For the past two years, he told me, he had been working as a cook. His hours had been from 7 a.m. to 10.30 p.m., and on Saturday to 12.30 p.m.--ninety-five hours per week, for which he had received twenty shillings, or five dollars.

"But the work and the long hours was killing me," he said, "and I had to chuck the job. I had a little money saved, but I spent it living and looking for another place."

This was his first night in the spike, and he had come in only to get rested. As soon as he emerged, he intended to start for Bristol, a one-hundred-and-ten-mile walk, where he thought he would eventually get a

ship for the States.

But the men in the line were not all of this calibre. Some were poor, wretched beasts, inarticulate and callous, but for all of that, in many ways very human. I remember a carter, evidently returning home after the day's work, stopping his cart before us so that his young hopeful, who had run to meet him, could climb in. But the cart was big, the young hopeful little, and he failed in his several attempts to swarm up.

Whereupon one of the most degraded-looking men stepped out of the line and hoisted him in. Now the virtue and the joy of this act lies in that it was service of love, not hire. The carter was poor, and the man knew it; and the man was standing in the spike line, and the carter knew it; and the man had done the little act, and the carter had thanked him, even as you and I would have done and thanked.

Another beautiful touch was that displayed by the "Hopper" and his "ole woman." He had been in line about half-an-hour when the "ole woman" (his mate) came up to him. She was fairly clad, for her class, with a weather-worn bonnet on her grey head and a sacking-covered bundle in her arms. As she talked to him, he reached forward, caught the one stray wisp of the white hair that was flying wild, deftly twirled it between his fingers, and tucked it back properly behind her ear. From all of which one may conclude many things. He certainly liked her well enough to wish her to be neat and tidy. He was proud of her, standing there in the spike line, and it was his desire that she should look well in the eyes of the other unfortunates who stood in the spike line. But last and best, and

underlying all these motives, it was a sturdy affection he bore her; for man is not prone to bother his head over neatness and tidiness in a woman for whom he does not care, nor is he likely to be proud of such a woman.

And I found myself questioning why this man and his mate, hard workers I knew from their talk, should have to seek a pauper lodging. He had pride, pride in his old woman and pride in himself. When I asked him what he thought I, a greenhorn, might expect to earn at "hopping," he sized me up, and said that it all depended. Plenty of people were too slow to pick hops and made a failure of it. A man, to succeed, must use his head and be quick with his fingers, must be exceeding quick with his fingers. Now he and his old woman could do very well at it, working the one bin between them and not going to sleep over it; but then, they had been at it for years.

"I 'ad a mate as went down last year," spoke up a man. "It was 'is fust time, but 'e come back wi' two poun' ten in 'is pockit, an' 'e was only gone a month."

"There you are," said the Hopper, a wealth of admiration in his voice.

"'E was quick. 'E was jest nat'rally born to it, 'e was."

Two pound ten--twelve dollars and a half--for a month's work when one is "jest nat'rally born to it!" And in addition, sleeping out without blankets and living the Lord knows how. There are moments when I am thankful that I was not "jest nat'rally born" a genius for anything, not

even hop-picking,

In the matter of getting an outfit for "the hops," the Hopper gave me some sterling advice, to which same give heed, you soft and tender people, in case you should ever be stranded in London Town.

"If you ain't got tins an' cookin' things, all as you can get'll be bread and cheese. No bloomin' good that! You must 'ave 'ot tea, an' vegetables, an' a bit o' meat, now an' again, if you're goin' to do work as is work. Cawn't do it on cold wittles. Tell you wot you do, lad. Run around in the mornin' an' look in the dust pans. You'll find plenty o' tins to cook in. Fine tins, wonderful good some o' them. Me an' the ole woman got ours that way." (He pointed at the bundle she held, while she nodded proudly, beaming on me with good-nature and consciousness of success and prosperity.) "This overcoat is as good as a blanket," he went on, advancing the skirt of it that I might feel its thickness. "An' 'oo knows, I may find a blanket before long."

Again the old woman nodded and beamed, this time with the dead certainty that he would find a blanket before long.

"I call it a 'oliday, 'oppin'," he concluded rapturously. "A tidy way o' gettin' two or three pounds together an' fixin' up for winter. The only thing I don't like"--and here was the rift within the lute--"is paddin' the 'oof down there."

It was plain the years were telling on this energetic pair, and while they enjoyed the quick work with the fingers, "paddin' the 'oof," which is walking, was beginning to bear heavily upon them. And I looked at their grey hairs, and ahead into the future ten years, and wondered how it would be with them.

I noticed another man and his old woman join the line, both of them past fifty. The woman, because she was a woman, was admitted into the spike; but he was too late, and, separated from his mate, was turned away to tramp the streets all night.

The street on which we stood, from wall to wall, was barely twenty feet wide. The sidewalks were three feet wide. It was a residence street. At least workmen and their families existed in some sort of fashion in the houses across from us. And each day and every day, from one in the afternoon till six, our ragged spike line is the principal feature of the view commanded by their front doors and windows. One workman sat in his door directly opposite us, taking his rest and a breath of air after the toil of the day. His wife came to chat with him. The doorway was too small for two, so she stood up. Their babes sprawled before them. And here was the spike line, less than a score of feet away--neither privacy for the workman, nor privacy for the pauper. About our feet played the children of the neighbourhood. To them our presence was nothing unusual. We were not an intrusion. We were as natural and ordinary as the brick walls and stone curbs of their environment. They had been born to the sight of the spike line, and all their brief days they had seen it.

At six o'clock the line moved up, and we were admitted in groups of three. Name, age, occupation, place of birth, condition of destitution, and the previous night's "doss," were taken with lightning-like rapidity by the superintendent; and as I turned I was startled by a man's thrusting into my hand something that felt like a brick, and shouting into my ear, "any knives, matches, or tobacco?" "No, sir," I lied, as I lied every man who entered. As I passed downstairs to the cellar, I looked at the brick in my hand, and saw that by doing violence to the language it might be called "bread." By its weight and hardness it certainly must have been unleavened.

The light was very dim down in the cellar, and before I knew it some other man had thrust a pannikin into my other hand. Then I stumbled on to a still darker room, where were benches and tables and men. The place smelled vilely, and the sombre gloom, and the mumble of voices from out of the obscurity, made it seem more like some anteroom to the infernal regions.

Most of the men were suffering from tired feet, and they prefaced the meal by removing their shoes and unbinding the filthy rags with which their feet were wrapped. This added to the general noisomeness, while it took away from my appetite.

In fact, I found that I had made a mistake. I had eaten a hearty dinner five hours before, and to have done justice to the fare before me I

should have fasted for a couple of days. The pannikin contained skilly, three-quarters of a pint, a mixture of Indian corn and hot water. The men were dipping their bread into heaps of salt scattered over the dirty tables. I attempted the same, but the bread seemed to stick in my mouth, and I remembered the words of the Carpenter, "You need a pint of water to eat the bread nicely."

I went over into a dark corner where I had observed other men going and found the water. Then I returned and attacked the skilly. It was coarse of texture, unseasoned, gross, and bitter. This bitterness which lingered persistently in the mouth after the skilly had passed on, I found especially repulsive. I struggled manfully, but was mastered by my qualms, and half-a-dozen mouthfuls of skilly and bread was the measure of my success. The man beside me ate his own share, and mine to boot, scraped the pannikins, and looked hungrily for more.

"I met a 'towny,' and he stood me too good a dinner," I explained.

"An' I 'aven't 'ad a bite since yesterday mornin'," he replied.

"How about tobacco?" I asked. "Will the bloke bother with a fellow now?"

"Oh no," he answered me. "No bloomin' fear. This is the easiest spike goin'. Y'oughto see some of them. Search you to the skin."

The pannikins scraped clean, conversation began to spring up. "This

super'tendent 'ere is always writin' to the papers 'bout us mugs," said the man on the other side of me.

"What does he say?" I asked.

"Oh, 'e sez we're no good, a lot o' blackguards an' scoundrels as won't work. Tells all the ole tricks I've bin 'earin' for twenty years an' w'ich I never seen a mug ever do. Las' thing of 'is I see, 'e was tellin' 'ow a mug gets out o' the spike, wi' a crust in 'is pockit. An' w'en 'e sees a nice ole gentleman comin' along the street 'e chucks the crust into the drain, an' borrows the old gent's stick to poke it out. An' then the ole gent gi'es 'im a tanner."

A roar of applause greeted the time-honoured yarn, and from somewhere over in the deeper darkness came another voice, orating angrily:

"Talk o' the country bein' good for tommy [food]; I'd like to see it. I jest came up from Dover, an' blessed little tommy I got. They won't gi' ye a drink o' water, they won't, much less tommy."

"There's mugs never go out of Kent," spoke a second voice, "they live bloomin' fat all along."

"I come through Kent," went on the first voice, still more angrily, "an' Gawd blimey if I see any tommy. An' I always notices as the blokes as talks about 'ow much they can get, w'en they're in the spike can eat my

share o' skilly as well as their bleedin' own."

"There's chaps in London," said a man across the table from me, "that get all the tommy they want, an' they never think o' goin' to the country. Stay in London the year 'round. Nor do they think of lookin' for a kip [place to sleep], till nine or ten o'clock at night."

A general chorus verified this statement

"But they're bloomin' clever, them chaps," said an admiring voice.

"Course they are," said another voice. "But it's not the likes of me an' you can do it. You got to be born to it, I say. Them chaps 'ave ben openin' cabs an' sellin' papers since the day they was born, an' their fathers an' mothers before 'em. It's all in the trainin', I say, an' the likes of me an' you 'ud starve at it."

This also was verified by the general chorus, and likewise the statement that there were "mugs as lives the twelvemonth 'round in the spike an' never get a blessed bit o' tommy other than spike skilly an' bread."

"I once got arf a crown in the Stratford spike," said a new voice.

Silence fell on the instant, and all listened to the wonderful tale.

"There was three of us breakin' stones. Winter-time, an' the cold was cruel. T'other two said they'd be blessed if they do it, an' they didn't; but I kept wearin' into mine to warm up, you know. An' then the

guardians come, an' t'other chaps got run in for fourteen days, an' the guardians, w'en they see wot I'd been doin', gives me a tanner each, five o' them, an' turns me up."

The majority of these men, nay, all of them, I found, do not like the spike, and only come to it when driven in. After the "rest up" they are good for two or three days and nights on the streets, when they are driven in again for another rest. Of course, this continuous hardship quickly breaks their constitutions, and they realise it, though only in a vague way; while it is so much the common run of things that they do not worry about it.

"On the doss," they call vagabondage here, which corresponds to "on the road" in the United States. The agreement is that kipping, or dossing, or sleeping, is the hardest problem they have to face, harder even than that of food. The inclement weather and the harsh laws are mainly responsible for this, while the men themselves ascribe their homelessness to foreign immigration, especially of Polish and Russian Jews, who take their places at lower wages and establish the sweating system.

By seven o'clock we were called away to bathe and go to bed. We stripped our clothes, wrapping them up in our coats and buckling our belts about them, and deposited them in a heaped rack and on the floor--a beautiful scheme for the spread of vermin. Then, two by two, we entered the bathroom. There were two ordinary tubs, and this I know: the two men preceding had washed in that water, we washed in the same water, and it

was not changed for the two men that followed us. This I know; but I am also certain that the twenty-two of us washed in the same water.

I did no more than make a show of splashing some of this dubious liquid at myself, while I hastily brushed it off with a towel wet from the bodies of other men. My equanimity was not restored by seeing the back of one poor wretch a mass of blood from attacks of vermin and retaliatory scratching.

A shirt was handed me--which I could not help but wonder how many other men had worn; and with a couple of blankets under my arm I trudged off to the sleeping apartment. This was a long, narrow room, traversed by two low iron rails. Between these rails were stretched, not hammocks, but pieces of canvas, six feet long and less than two feet wide. These were the beds, and they were six inches apart and about eight inches above the floor. The chief difficulty was that the head was somewhat higher than the feet, which caused the body constantly to slip down. Being slung to the same rails, when one man moved, no matter how slightly, the rest were set rocking; and whenever I dozed somebody was sure to struggle back to the position from which he had slipped, and arouse me again.

Many hours passed before I won to sleep. It was only seven in the evening, and the voices of children, in shrill outcry, playing in the street, continued till nearly midnight. The smell was frightful and sickening, while my imagination broke loose, and my skin crept and crawled till I was nearly frantic. Grunting, groaning, and snoring arose

like the sounds emitted by some sea monster, and several times, afflicted by nightmare, one or another, by his shrieks and yells, aroused the lot of us. Toward morning I was awakened by a rat or some similar animal on my breast. In the quick transition from sleep to waking, before I was completely myself, I raised a shout to wake the dead. At any rate, I woke the living, and they cursed me roundly for my lack of manners.

But morning came, with a six o'clock breakfast of bread and skilly, which I gave away, and we were told off to our various tasks. Some were set to scrubbing and cleaning, others to picking oakum, and eight of us were convoyed across the street to the Whitechapel Infirmary where we were set at scavenger work. This was the method by which we paid for our skilly and canvas, and I, for one, know that I paid in full many times over.

Though we had most revolting tasks to perform, our allotment was considered the best and the other men deemed themselves lucky in being chosen to perform it.

"Don't touch it, mate, the nurse sez it's deadly," warned my working partner, as I held open a sack into which he was emptying a garbage can.

It came from the sick wards, and I told him that I purposed neither to touch it, nor to allow it to touch me. Nevertheless, I had to carry the sack, and other sacks, down five flights of stairs and empty them in a receptacle where the corruption was speedily sprinkled with strong disinfectant.

Perhaps there is a wise mercy in all this. These men of the spike, the peg, and the street, are encumbrances. They are of no good or use to any one, nor to themselves. They clutter the earth with their presence, and are better out of the way. Broken by hardship, ill fed, and worse nourished, they are always the first to be struck down by disease, as they are likewise the quickest to die.

They feel, themselves, that the forces of society tend to hurl them out of existence. We were sprinkling disinfectant by the mortuary, when the dead waggon drove up and five bodies were packed into it. The conversation turned to the "white potion" and "black jack," and I found they were all agreed that the poor person, man or woman, who in the Infirmary gave too much trouble or was in a bad way, was "polished off." That is to say, the incurables and the obstreperous were given a dose of "black jack" or the "white potion," and sent over the divide. It does not matter in the least whether this be actually so or not. The point is, they have the feeling that it is so, and they have created the language with which to express that feeling--"black jack" "white potion," "polishing off."

At eight o'clock we went down into a cellar under the infirmary, where tea was brought to us, and the hospital scraps. These were heaped high on a huge platter in an indescribable mess--pieces of bread, chunks of grease and fat pork, the burnt skin from the outside of roasted joints, bones, in short, all the leavings from the fingers and mouths of the sick

ones suffering from all manner of diseases. Into this mess the men plunged their hands, digging, pawing, turning over, examining, rejecting, and scrambling for. It wasn't pretty. Pigs couldn't have done worse. But the poor devils were hungry, and they ate ravenously of the swill, and when they could eat no more they bundled what was left into their handkerchiefs and thrust it inside their shirts.

"Once, w'en I was 'ere before, wot did I find out there but a 'ole lot of pork-ribs," said Ginger to me. By "out there" he meant the place where the corruption was dumped and sprinkled with strong disinfectant. "They was a prime lot, no end o' meat on 'em, an' I 'ad 'em into my arms an' was out the gate an' down the street, a-lookin' for some 'un to gi' 'em to. Couldn't see a soul, an' I was runnin' 'round clean crazy, the bloke runnin' after me an' thinkin' I was 'slingin' my 'ook' [running away]. But jest before 'e got me, I got a ole woman an' poked 'em into 'er apron."

O Charity, O Philanthropy, descend to the spike and take a lesson from Ginger. At the bottom of the Abyss he performed as purely an altruistic act as was ever performed outside the Abyss. It was fine of Ginger, and if the old woman caught some contagion from the "no end o' meat" on the pork-ribs, it was still fine, though not so fine. But the most salient thing in this incident, it seems to me, is poor Ginger, "clean crazy" at sight of so much food going to waste.

It is the rule of the casual ward that a man who enters must stay two

nights and a day; but I had seen sufficient for my purpose, had paid for my skilly and canvas, and was preparing to run for it.

"Come on, let's sling it," I said to one of my mates, pointing toward the open gate through which the dead waggon had come.

"An' get fourteen days?"

"No; get away."

"Aw, I come 'ere for a rest," he said complacently. "An' another night's kip won't 'urt me none."

They were all of this opinion, so I was forced to "sling it" alone.

"You cawn't ever come back 'ere again for a doss," they warned me.

"No fear," said I, with an enthusiasm they could not comprehend; and, dodging out the gate, I sped down the street.

Straight to my room I hurried, changed my clothes, and less than an hour from my escape, in a Turkish bath, I was sweating out whatever germs and other things had penetrated my epidermis, and wishing that I could stand a temperature of three hundred and twenty rather than two hundred and twenty.