

## CHAPTER X--CARRYING THE BANNER

"To carry the banner" means to walk the streets all night; and I, with the figurative emblem hoisted, went out to see what I could see. Men and women walk the streets at night all over this great city, but I selected the West End, making Leicester Square my base, and scouting about from the Thames Embankment to Hyde Park.

The rain was falling heavily when the theatres let out, and the brilliant throng which poured from the places of amusement was hard put to find cabs. The streets were so many wild rivers of cabs, most of which were engaged, however; and here I saw the desperate attempts of ragged men and boys to get a shelter from the night by procuring cabs for the cabless ladies and gentlemen. I use the word "desperate" advisedly, for these wretched, homeless ones were gambling a soaking against a bed; and most of them, I took notice, got the soaking and missed the bed. Now, to go through a stormy night with wet clothes, and, in addition, to be ill nourished and not to have tasted meat for a week or a month, is about as severe a hardship as a man can undergo. Well fed and well clad, I have travelled all day with the spirit thermometer down to seventy-four degrees below zero--one hundred and six degrees of frost {1}; and though I suffered, it was a mere nothing compared with carrying the banner for a night, ill fed, ill clad, and soaking wet.

The streets grew very quiet and lonely after the theatre crowd had gone

home. Only were to be seen the ubiquitous policemen, flashing their dark lanterns into doorways and alleys, and men and women and boys taking shelter in the lee of buildings from the wind and rain. Piccadilly, however, was not quite so deserted. Its pavements were brightened by well-dressed women without escort, and there was more life and action there than elsewhere, due to the process of finding escort. But by three o'clock the last of them had vanished, and it was then indeed lonely.

At half-past one the steady downpour ceased, and only showers fell thereafter. The homeless folk came away from the protection of the buildings, and slouched up and down and everywhere, in order to rush up the circulation and keep warm.

One old woman, between fifty and sixty, a sheer wreck, I had noticed earlier in the night standing in Piccadilly, not far from Leicester Square. She seemed to have neither the sense nor the strength to get out of the rain or keep walking, but stood stupidly, whenever she got the chance, meditating on past days, I imagine, when life was young and blood was warm. But she did not get the chance often. She was moved on by every policeman, and it required an average of six moves to send her doddering off one man's beat and on to another's. By three o'clock, she had progressed as far as St. James Street, and as the clocks were striking four I saw her sleeping soundly against the iron railings of Green Park. A brisk shower was falling at the time, and she must have been drenched to the skin.

Now, said I, at one o'clock, to myself; consider that you are a poor young man, penniless, in London Town, and that to-morrow you must look for work. It is necessary, therefore, that you get some sleep in order that you may have strength to look for work and to do work in case you find it.

So I sat down on the stone steps of a building. Five minutes later a policeman was looking at me. My eyes were wide open, so he only grunted and passed on. Ten minutes later my head was on my knees, I was dozing, and the same policeman was saying gruffly, "'Ere, you, get outa that!"

I got. And, like the old woman, I continued to get; for every time I dozed, a policeman was there to rout me along again. Not long after, when I had given this up, I was walking with a young Londoner (who had been out to the colonies and wished he were out to them again), when I noticed an open passage leading under a building and disappearing in darkness. A low iron gate barred the entrance.

"Come on," I said. "Let's climb over and get a good sleep."

"Wot?" he answered, recoiling from me. "An' get run in fer three months! Blimey if I do!"

Later on I was passing Hyde Park with a young boy of fourteen or fifteen, a most wretched-looking youth, gaunt and hollow-eyed and sick.

"Let's go over the fence," I proposed, "and crawl into the shrubbery for a sleep. The bobbies couldn't find us there."

"No fear," he answered. "There's the park guardians, and they'd run you in for six months."

Times have changed, alas! When I was a youngster I used to read of homeless boys sleeping in doorways. Already the thing has become a tradition. As a stock situation it will doubtless linger in literature for a century to come, but as a cold fact it has ceased to be. Here are the doorways, and here are the boys, but happy conjunctions are no longer effected. The doorways remain empty, and the boys keep awake and carry the banner.

"I was down under the arches," grumbled another young fellow. By "arches" he meant the shore arches where begin the bridges that span the Thames. "I was down under the arches wen it was ryinging its 'ardest, an' a bobby comes in an' chyses me out. But I come back, an' 'e come too. 'Ere,' sez 'e, 'wot you doin' 'ere?' An' out I goes, but I sez, 'Think I want ter pinch [steal] the bleedin' bridge?'"

Among those who carry the banner, Green Park has the reputation of opening its gates earlier than the other parks, and at quarter-past four in the morning, I, and many more, entered Green Park. It was raining again, but they were worn out with the night's walking, and they were down on the benches and asleep at once. Many of the men stretched out

full length on the dripping wet grass, and, with the rain falling steadily upon them, were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.

And now I wish to criticise the powers that be. They are the powers, therefore they may decree whatever they please; so I make bold only to criticise the ridiculousness of their decrees. All night long they make the homeless ones walk up and down. They drive them out of doors and passages, and lock them out of the parks. The evident intention of all this is to deprive them of sleep. Well and good, the powers have the power to deprive them of sleep, or of anything else for that matter; but why under the sun do they open the gates of the parks at five o'clock in the morning and let the homeless ones go inside and sleep? If it is their intention to deprive them of sleep, why do they let them sleep after five in the morning? And if it is not their intention to deprive them of sleep, why don't they let them sleep earlier in the night?

In this connection, I will say that I came by Green Park that same day, at one in the afternoon, and that I counted scores of the ragged wretches asleep in the grass. It was Sunday afternoon, the sun was fitfully appearing, and the well-dressed West Enders, with their wives and progeny, were out by thousands, taking the air. It was not a pleasant sight for them, those horrible, unkempt, sleeping vagabonds; while the vagabonds themselves, I know, would rather have done their sleeping the night before.

And so, dear soft people, should you ever visit London Town, and see

these men asleep on the benches and in the grass, please do not think they are lazy creatures, preferring sleep to work. Know that the powers that be have kept them walking all the night long, and that in the day they have nowhere else to sleep.