

CHAPTER XI--THE PEG

But, after carrying the banner all night, I did not sleep in Green Park when morning dawned. I was wet to the skin, it is true, and I had had no sleep for twenty-four hours; but, still adventuring as a penniless man looking for work, I had to look about me, first for a breakfast, and next for the work.

During the night I had heard of a place over on the Surrey side of the Thames, where the Salvation Army every Sunday morning gave away a breakfast to the unwashed. (And, by the way, the men who carry the banner are unwashed in the morning, and unless it is raining they do not have much show for a wash, either.) This, thought I, is the very thing--breakfast in the morning, and then the whole day in which to look for work.

It was a weary walk. Down St. James Street I dragged my tired legs, along Pall Mall, past Trafalgar Square, to the Strand. I crossed the Waterloo Bridge to the Surrey side, cut across to Blackfriars Road, coming out near the Surrey Theatre, and arrived at the Salvation Army barracks before seven o'clock. This was "the peg." And by "the peg," in the argot, is meant the place where a free meal may be obtained.

Here was a motley crowd of woebegone wretches who had spent the night in the rain. Such prodigious misery! and so much of it! Old men, young

men, all manner of men, and boys to boot, and all manner of boys. Some were drowsing standing up; half a score of them were stretched out on the stone steps in most painful postures, all of them sound asleep, the skin of their bodies showing red through the holes, and rents in their rags. And up and down the street and across the street for a block either way, each doorstep had from two to three occupants, all asleep, their heads bent forward on their knees. And, it must be remembered, these are not hard times in England. Things are going on very much as they ordinarily do, and times are neither hard nor easy.

And then came the policeman. "Get outa that, you bloomin' swine! Eigh! eigh! Get out now!" And like swine he drove them from the doorways and scattered them to the four winds of Surrey. But when he encountered the crowd asleep on the steps he was astounded. "Shocking!" he exclaimed. "Shocking! And of a Sunday morning! A pretty sight! Eigh! eigh! Get outa that, you bleeding nuisances!"

Of course it was a shocking sight, I was shocked myself. And I should not care to have my own daughter pollute her eyes with such a sight, or come within half a mile of it; but--and there we were, and there you are, and "but" is all that can be said.

The policeman passed on, and back we clustered, like flies around a honey jar. For was there not that wonderful thing, a breakfast, awaiting us? We could not have clustered more persistently and desperately had they been giving away million-dollar bank-notes. Some were already off to

sleep, when back came the policeman and away we scattered only to return again as soon as the coast was clear.

At half-past seven a little door opened, and a Salvation Army soldier stuck out his head. "Ayn't no sense blockin' the wy up that wy," he said. "Those as 'as tickets cawn come hin now, an' those as 'asn't cawn't come hin till nine."

Oh, that breakfast! Nine o'clock! An hour and a half longer! The men who held tickets were greatly envied. They were permitted to go inside, have a wash, and sit down and rest until breakfast, while we waited for the same breakfast on the street. The tickets had been distributed the previous night on the streets and along the Embankment, and the possession of them was not a matter of merit, but of chance.

At eight-thirty, more men with tickets were admitted, and by nine the little gate was opened to us. We crushed through somehow, and found ourselves packed in a courtyard like sardines. On more occasions than one, as a Yankee tramp in Yankeeland, I have had to work for my breakfast; but for no breakfast did I ever work so hard as for this one. For over two hours I had waited outside, and for over another hour I waited in this packed courtyard. I had had nothing to eat all night, and I was weak and faint, while the smell of the soiled clothes and unwashed bodies, steaming from pent animal heat, and blocked solidly about me, nearly turned my stomach. So tightly were we packed, that a number of the men took advantage of the opportunity and went soundly asleep

standing up.

Now, about the Salvation Army in general I know nothing, and whatever criticism I shall make here is of that particular portion of the Salvation Army which does business on Blackfriars Road near the Surrey Theatre. In the first place, this forcing of men who have been up all night to stand on their feet for hours longer, is as cruel as it is needless. We were weak, famished, and exhausted from our night's hardship and lack of sleep, and yet there we stood, and stood, and stood, without rhyme or reason.

Sailors were very plentiful in this crowd. It seemed to me that one man in four was looking for a ship, and I found at least a dozen of them to be American sailors. In accounting for their being "on the beach," I received the same story from each and all, and from my knowledge of sea affairs this story rang true. English ships sign their sailors for the voyage, which means the round trip, sometimes lasting as long as three years; and they cannot sign off and receive their discharges until they reach the home port, which is England. Their wages are low, their food is bad, and their treatment worse. Very often they are really forced by their captains to desert in the New World or the colonies, leaving a handsome sum of wages behind them--a distinct gain, either to the captain or the owners, or to both. But whether for this reason alone or not, it is a fact that large numbers of them desert. Then, for the home voyage, the ship engages whatever sailors it can find on the beach. These men are engaged at the somewhat higher wages that obtain in other portions of

the world, under the agreement that they shall sign off on reaching England. The reason for this is obvious; for it would be poor business policy to sign them for any longer time, since seamen's wages are low in England, and England is always crowded with sailormen on the beach. So this fully accounted for the American seamen at the Salvation Army barracks. To get off the beach in other outlandish places they had come to England, and gone on the beach in the most outlandish place of all.

There were fully a score of Americans in the crowd, the non-sailors being "tramps royal," the men whose "mate is the wind that tramps the world." They were all cheerful, facing things with the pluck which is their chief characteristic and which seems never to desert them, withal they were cursing the country with lurid metaphors quite refreshing after a month of unimaginative, monotonous Cockney swearing. The Cockney has one oath, and one oath only, the most indecent in the language, which he uses on any and every occasion. Far different is the luminous and varied Western swearing, which runs to blasphemy rather than indecency. And after all, since men will swear, I think I prefer blasphemy to indecency; there is an audacity about it, an adventurousness and defiance that is better than sheer filthiness.

There was one American tramp royal whom I found particularly enjoyable. I first noticed him on the street, asleep in a doorway, his head on his knees, but a hat on his head that one does not meet this side of the Western Ocean. When the policeman routed him out, he got up slowly and deliberately, looked at the policeman, yawned and stretched himself,

looked at the policeman again as much as to say he didn't know whether he would or wouldn't, and then sauntered leisurely down the sidewalk. At the outset I was sure of the hat, but this made me sure of the wearer of the hat.

In the jam inside I found myself alongside of him, and we had quite a chat. He had been through Spain, Italy, Switzerland, and France, and had accomplished the practically impossible feat of beating his way three hundred miles on a French railway without being caught at the finish. Where was I hanging out? he asked. And how did I manage for "kipping"?--which means sleeping. Did I know the rounds yet? He was getting on, though the country was "horstyl" and the cities were "bum." Fierce, wasn't it? Couldn't "batter" (beg) anywhere without being "pinched." But he wasn't going to quit it. Buffalo Bill's Show was coming over soon, and a man who could drive eight horses was sure of a job any time. These mugs over here didn't know beans about driving anything more than a span. What was the matter with me hanging on and waiting for Buffalo Bill? He was sure I could ring in somehow.

And so, after all, blood is thicker than water. We were fellow-countrymen and strangers in a strange land. I had warmed to his battered old hat at sight of it, and he was as solicitous for my welfare as if we were blood brothers. We swapped all manner of useful information concerning the country and the ways of its people, methods by which to obtain food and shelter and what not, and we parted genuinely sorry at having to say good-bye.

One thing particularly conspicuous in this crowd was the shortness of stature. I, who am but of medium height, looked over the heads of nine out of ten. The natives were all short, as were the foreign sailors. There were only five or six in the crowd who could be called fairly tall, and they were Scandinavians and Americans. The tallest man there, however, was an exception. He was an Englishman, though not a Londoner. "Candidate for the Life Guards," I remarked to him. "You've hit it, mate," was his reply; "I've served my bit in that same, and the way things are I'll be back at it before long."

For an hour we stood quietly in this packed courtyard. Then the men began to grow restless. There was pushing and shoving forward, and a mild hubbub of voices. Nothing rough, however, nor violent; merely the restlessness of weary and hungry men. At this juncture forth came the adjutant. I did not like him. His eyes were not good. There was nothing of the lowly Galilean about him, but a great deal of the centurion who said: "For I am a man in authority, having soldiers under me; and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it."

Well, he looked at us in just that way, and those nearest to him quailed. Then he lifted his voice.

"Stop this 'ere, now, or I'll turn you the other wy an' march you out, an' you'll get no breakfast."

I cannot convey by printed speech the insufferable way in which he said this. He seemed to me to revel in that he was a man in authority, able to say to half a thousand ragged wretches, "you may eat or go hungry, as I elect."

To deny us our breakfast after standing for hours! It was an awful threat, and the pitiful, abject silence which instantly fell attested its awfulness. And it was a cowardly threat. We could not strike back, for we were starving; and it is the way of the world that when one man feeds another he is that man's master. But the centurion--I mean the adjutant--was not satisfied. In the dead silence he raised his voice again, and repeated the threat, and amplified it.

At last we were permitted to enter the feasting hall, where we found the "ticket men" washed but unfed. All told, there must have been nearly seven hundred of us who sat down--not to meat or bread, but to speech, song, and prayer. From all of which I am convinced that Tantalus suffers in many guises this side of the infernal regions. The adjutant made the prayer, but I did not take note of it, being too engrossed with the massed picture of misery before me. But the speech ran something like this: "You will feast in Paradise. No matter how you starve and suffer here, you will feast in Paradise, that is, if you will follow the directions." And so forth and so forth. A clever bit of propaganda, I took it, but rendered of no avail for two reasons. First, the men who received it were unimaginative and materialistic, unaware of the

existence of any Unseen, and too inured to hell on earth to be frightened by hell to come. And second, weary and exhausted from the night's sleeplessness and hardship, suffering from the long wait upon their feet, and faint from hunger, they were yearning, not for salvation, but for grub. The "soul-snatchers" (as these men call all religious propagandists), should study the physiological basis of psychology a little, if they wish to make their efforts more effective.

All in good time, about eleven o'clock, breakfast arrived. It arrived, not on plates, but in paper parcels. I did not have all I wanted, and I am sure that no man there had all he wanted, or half of what he wanted or needed. I gave part of my bread to the tramp royal who was waiting for Buffalo Bill, and he was as ravenous at the end as he was in the beginning. This is the breakfast: two slices of bread, one small piece of bread with raisins in it and called "cake," a wafer of cheese, and a mug of "water bewitched." Numbers of the men had been waiting since five o'clock for it, while all of us had waited at least four hours; and in addition, we had been herded like swine, packed like sardines, and treated like curs, and been preached at, and sung to, and prayed for. Nor was that all.

No sooner was breakfast over (and it was over almost as quickly as it takes to tell), than the tired heads began to nod and droop, and in five minutes half of us were sound asleep. There were no signs of our being dismissed, while there were unmistakable signs of preparation for a meeting. I looked at a small clock hanging on the wall. It indicated

twenty-five minutes to twelve. Heigh-ho, thought I, time is flying, and I have yet to look for work.

"I want to go," I said to a couple of waking men near me.

"Got ter sty fer the service," was the answer.

"Do you want to stay?" I asked.

They shook their heads.

"Then let us go and tell them we want to get out," I continued. "Come on."

But the poor creatures were aghast. So I left them to their fate, and went up to the nearest Salvation Army man.

"I want to go," I said. "I came here for breakfast in order that I might be in shape to look for work. I didn't think it would take so long to get breakfast. I think I have a chance for work in Stepney, and the sooner I start, the better chance I'll have of getting it."

He was really a good fellow, though he was startled by my request. "Wy," he said, "we're goin' to 'old services, and you'd better sty."

"But that will spoil my chances for work," I urged. "And work is the

most important thing for me just now."

As he was only a private, he referred me to the adjutant, and to the adjutant I repeated my reasons for wishing to go, and politely requested that he let me go.

"But it cawn't be done," he said, waxing virtuously indignant at such ingratitude. "The idea!" he snorted. "The idea!"

"Do you mean to say that I can't get out of here?" I demanded. "That you will keep me here against my will?"

"Yes," he snorted.

I do not know what might have happened, for I was waxing indignant myself; but the "congregation" had "piped" the situation, and he drew me over to a corner of the room, and then into another room. Here he again demanded my reasons for wishing to go.

"I want to go," I said, "because I wish to look for work over in Stepney, and every hour lessens my chance of finding work. It is now twenty-five minutes to twelve. I did not think when I came in that it would take so long to get a breakfast."

"You 'ave business, eh?" he sneered. "A man of business you are, eh? Then wot did you come 'ere for?"

"I was out all night, and I needed a breakfast in order to strengthen me to find work. That is why I came here."

"A nice thing to do," he went on in the same sneering manner. "A man with business shouldn't come 'ere. You've tyken some poor man's breakfast 'ere this morning, that's wot you've done."

Which was a lie, for every mother's son of us had come in.

Now I submit, was this Christian-like, or even honest?--after I had plainly stated that I was homeless and hungry, and that I wished to look for work, for him to call my looking for work "business," to call me therefore a business man, and to draw the corollary that a man of business, and well off, did not require a charity breakfast, and that by taking a charity breakfast I had robbed some hungry waif who was not a man of business.

I kept my temper, but I went over the facts again, and clearly and concisely demonstrated to him how unjust he was and how he had perverted the facts. As I manifested no signs of backing down (and I am sure my eyes were beginning to snap), he led me to the rear of the building where, in an open court, stood a tent. In the same sneering tone he informed a couple of privates standing there that "'ere is a fellow that 'as business an' 'e wants to go before services."

They were duly shocked, of course, and they looked unutterable horror while he went into the tent and brought out the major. Still in the same sneering manner, laying particular stress on the "business," he brought my case before the commanding officer. The major was of a different stamp of man. I liked him as soon as I saw him, and to him I stated my case in the same fashion as before.

"Didn't you know you had to stay for services?" he asked.

"Certainly not," I answered, "or I should have gone without my breakfast. You have no placards posted to that effect, nor was I so informed when I entered the place."

He meditated a moment. "You can go," he said.

It was twelve o'clock when I gained the street, and I couldn't quite make up my mind whether I had been in the army or in prison. The day was half gone, and it was a far fetch to Stepney. And besides, it was Sunday, and why should even a starving man look for work on Sunday? Furthermore, it was my judgment that I had done a hard night's work walking the streets, and a hard day's work getting my breakfast; so I disconnected myself from my working hypothesis of a starving young man in search of employment, hailed a bus, and climbed aboard.

After a shave and a bath, with my clothes all off, I got in between clean white sheets and went to sleep. It was six in the evening when I closed

my eyes. When they opened again, the clocks were striking nine next morning. I had slept fifteen straight hours. And as I lay there drowsily, my mind went back to the seven hundred unfortunates I had left waiting for services. No bath, no shave for them, no clean white sheets and all clothes off, and fifteen hours' straight sleep. Services over, it was the weary streets again, the problem of a crust of bread ere night, and the long sleepless night in the streets, and the pondering of the problem of how to obtain a crust at dawn.