CHAPTER XIV--HOPS AND HOPPERS

So far has the divorcement of the worker from the soil proceeded, that the farming districts, the civilised world over, are dependent upon the cities for the gathering of the harvests. Then it is, when the land is spilling its ripe wealth to waste, that the street folk, who have been driven away from the soil, are called back to it again. But in England they return, not as prodigals, but as outcasts still, as vagrants and pariahs, to be doubted and flouted by their country brethren, to sleep in jails and casual wards, or under the hedges, and to live the Lord knows how.

It is estimated that Kent alone requires eighty thousand of the street people to pick her hops. And out they come, obedient to the call, which is the call of their bellies and of the lingering dregs of adventure-lust still in them. Slum, stews, and ghetto pour them forth, and the festering contents of slum, stews, and ghetto are undiminished. Yet they overrun the country like an army of ghouls, and the country does not want them. They are out of place. As they drag their squat, misshapen bodies along the highways and byways, they resemble some vile spawn from underground. Their very presence, the fact of their existence, is an outrage to the fresh, bright sun and the green and growing things. The clean, upstanding trees cry shame upon them and their withered crookedness, and their rottenness is a slimy desecration of the sweetness and purity of nature.

Is the picture overdrawn? It all depends. For one who sees and thinks life in terms of shares and coupons, it is certainly overdrawn. But for one who sees and thinks life in terms of manhood and womanhood, it cannot be overdrawn. Such hordes of beastly wretchedness and inarticulate misery are no compensation for a millionaire brewer who lives in a West End palace, sates himself with the sensuous delights of London's golden theatres, hobnobs with lordlings and princelings, and is knighted by the king. Wins his spurs--God forbid! In old time the great blonde beasts rode in the battle's van and won their spurs by cleaving men from pate to chine. And, after all, it is finer to kill a strong man with a clean-slicing blow of singing steel than to make a beast of him, and of his seed through the generations, by the artful and spidery manipulation of industry and politics.

But to return to the hops. Here the divorcement from the soil is as apparent as in every other agricultural line in England. While the manufacture of beer steadily increases, the growth of hops steadily decreases. In 1835 the acreage under hops was 71,327. To-day it stands at 48,024, a decrease of 3103 from the acreage of last year.

Small as the acreage is this year, a poor summer and terrible storms reduced the yield. This misfortune is divided between the people who own hops and the people who pick hops. The owners perforce must put up with less of the nicer things of life, the pickers with less grub, of which, in the best of times, they never get enough. For weary weeks headlines

like the following have appeared in the London papers.-

TRAMPS PLENTIFUL, BUT THE HOPS ARE FEW AND NOT YET READY.

Then there have been numberless paragraphs like this:-

> From the neighbourhood of the hop fields comes news of a distressing nature. The bright outburst of the last two days has sent many hundreds of hoppers into Kent, who will have to wait till the fields are ready for them. At Dover the number of vagrants in the workhouse is treble the number there last year at this time, and in other towns the lateness of the season is responsible for a large increase in the number of casuals.

To cap their wretchedness, when at last the picking had begun, hops and hoppers were well-nigh swept away by a frightful storm of wind, rain, and hail. The hops were stripped clean from the poles and pounded into the earth, while the hoppers, seeking shelter from the stinging hail, were close to drowning in their huts and camps on the low-lying ground. Their condition after the storm was pitiable, their state of vagrancy more pronounced than ever; for, poor crop that it was, its destruction had taken away the chance of earning a few pennies, and nothing remained for thousands of them but to "pad the hoof" back to London.

"We ayn't crossin'-sweepers," they said, turning away from the ground, carpeted ankle-deep with hops.

Those that remained grumbled savagely among the half-stripped poles at the seven bushels for a shilling--a rate paid in good seasons when the hops are in prime condition, and a rate likewise paid in bad seasons by the growers because they cannot afford more.

I passed through Teston and East and West Farleigh shortly after the storm, and listened to the grumbling of the hoppers and saw the hops rotting on the ground. At the hothouses of Barham Court, thirty thousand panes of glass had been broken by the hail, while peaches, plums, pears, apples, rhubarb, cabbages, mangolds, everything, had been pounded to pieces and torn to shreds.

All of which was too bad for the owners, certainly; but at the worst, not one of them, for one meal, would have to go short of food or drink. Yet it was to them that the newspapers devoted columns of sympathy, their pecuniary losses being detailed at harrowing length. "Mr. Herbert L--- calculates his loss at 8000 pounds;" "Mr. F---, of brewery fame, who rents all the land in this parish, loses 10,000 pounds;" and "Mr. L---, the Wateringbury brewer, brother to Mr. Herbert L---, is another heavy loser." As for the hoppers, they did not count. Yet I venture to assert that the several almost-square meals lost by underfed William Buggles, and underfed Mrs. Buggles, and the underfed Buggles kiddies, was a greater tragedy than the 10,000 pounds lost by Mr. F---. And in addition, underfed William Buggles' tragedy might be multiplied by thousands where Mr. F---'s could not be multiplied by five.

To see how William Buggles and his kind fared, I donned my seafaring togs and started out to get a job. With me was a young East London cobbler, Bert, who had yielded to the lure of adventure and joined me for the trip. Acting on my advice, he had brought his "worst rags," and as we hiked up the London road out of Maidstone he was worrying greatly for fear we had come too ill-dressed for the business.

Nor was he to be blamed. When we stopped in a tavern the publican eyed us gingerly, nor did his demeanour brighten till we showed him the colour of our cash. The natives along the coast were all dubious; and "bean-feasters" from London, dashing past in coaches, cheered and jeered and shouted insulting things after us. But before we were done with the Maidstone district my friend found that we were as well clad, if not better, than the average hopper. Some of the bunches of rags we chanced upon were marvellous.

"The tide is out," called a gypsy-looking woman to her mates, as we came up a long row of bins into which the pickers were stripping the hops.

"Do you twig?" Bert whispered. "She's on to you."

I twigged. And it must be confessed the figure was an apt one. When the tide is out boats are left on the beach and do not sail, and a sailor, when the tide is out, does not sail either. My seafaring togs and my presence in the hop field proclaimed that I was a seaman without a ship,

a man on the beach, and very like a craft at low water.

"Can yer give us a job, governor?" Bert asked the bailiff, a kindly faced and elderly man who was very busy.

His "No" was decisively uttered; but Bert clung on and followed him about, and I followed after, pretty well all over the field. Whether our persistency struck the bailiff as anxiety to work, or whether he was affected by our hard-luck appearance and tale, neither Bert nor I succeeded in making out; but in the end he softened his heart and found us the one unoccupied bin in the place--a bin deserted by two other men, from what I could learn, because of inability to make living wages.

"No bad conduct, mind ye," warned the bailiff, as he left us at work in the midst of the women.

It was Saturday afternoon, and we knew quitting time would come early; so we applied ourselves earnestly to the task, desiring to learn if we could at least make our salt. It was simple work, woman's work, in fact, and not man's. We sat on the edge of the bin, between the standing hops, while a pole-puller supplied us with great fragrant branches. In an hour's time we became as expert as it is possible to become. As soon as the fingers became accustomed automatically to differentiate between hops and leaves and to strip half-a-dozen blossoms at a time there was no more to learn.

We worked nimbly, and as fast as the women themselves, though their bins filled more rapidly because of their swarming children, each of which picked with two hands almost as fast as we picked.

"Don'tcher pick too clean, it's against the rules," one of the women informed us; and we took the tip and were grateful.

As the afternoon wore along, we realised that living wages could not be made--by men. Women could pick as much as men, and children could do almost as well as women; so it was impossible for a man to compete with a woman and half-a-dozen children. For it is the woman and the half-dozen children who count as a unit, and by their combined capacity determine the unit's pay.

"I say, matey, I'm beastly hungry," said I to Bert. We had not had any dinner.

"Blimey, but I could eat the 'ops," he replied.

Whereupon we both lamented our negligence in not rearing up a numerous progeny to help us in this day of need. And in such fashion we whiled away the time and talked for the edification of our neighbours. We quite won the sympathy of the pole-puller, a young country yokel, who now and again emptied a few picked blossoms into our bin, it being part of his business to gather up the stray clusters torn off in the process of pulling.

With him we discussed how much we could "sub," and were informed that while we were being paid a shilling for seven bushels, we could only "sub," or have advanced to us, a shilling for every twelve bushels. Which is to say that the pay for five out of every twelve bushels was withheld--a method of the grower to hold the hopper to his work whether the crop runs good or bad, and especially if it runs bad.

After all, it was pleasant sitting there in the bright sunshine, the golden pollen showering from our hands, the pungent aromatic odour of the hops biting our nostrils, and the while remembering dimly the sounding cities whence these people came. Poor street people! Poor gutter folk! Even they grow earth-hungry, and yearn vaguely for the soil from which they have been driven, and for the free life in the open, and the wind and rain and sun all undefiled by city smirches. As the sea calls to the sailor, so calls the land to them; and, deep down in their aborted and decaying carcasses, they are stirred strangely by the peasant memories of their forbears who lived before cities were. And in incomprehensible ways they are made glad by the earth smells and sights and sounds which their blood has not forgotten though unremembered by them.

"No more 'ops, matey," Bert complained.

It was five o'clock, and the pole-pullers had knocked off, so that everything could be cleaned up, there being no work on Sunday. For an hour we were forced idly to wait the coming of the measurers, our feet

tingling with the frost which came on the heels of the setting sun. In the adjoining bin, two women and half-a-dozen children had picked nine bushels: so that the five bushels the measurers found in our bin demonstrated that we had done equally well, for the half-dozen children had ranged from nine to fourteen years of age.

Five bushels! We worked it out to eight-pence ha'penny, or seventeen cents, for two men working three hours and a half. Fourpence farthing apiece! a little over a penny an hour! But we were allowed only to "sub" fivepence of the total sum, though the tally-keeper, short of change, gave us sixpence. Entreaty was in vain. A hard-luck story could not move him. He proclaimed loudly that we had received a penny more than our due, and went his way.

Granting, for the sake of the argument, that we were what we represented ourselves to be--namely, poor men and broke--then here was out position: night was coming on; we had had no supper, much less dinner; and we possessed sixpence between us. I was hungry enough to eat three sixpenn'orths of food, and so was Bert. One thing was patent. By doing 16.3 per cent. justice to our stomachs, we would expend the sixpence, and our stomachs would still be gnawing under 83.3 per cent. injustice. Being broke again, we could sleep under a hedge, which was not so bad, though the cold would sap an undue portion of what we had eaten. But the morrow was Sunday, on which we could do no work, though our silly stomachs would not knock off on that account. Here, then, was the problem: how to get three meals on Sunday, and two on Monday (for we could not make another

"sub" till Monday evening).

We knew that the casual wards were overcrowded; also, that if we begged from farmer or villager, there was a large likelihood of our going to jail for fourteen days. What was to be done? We looked at each other in despair--

--Not a bit of it. We joyfully thanked God that we were not as other men, especially hoppers, and went down the road to Maidstone, jingling in our pockets the half-crowns and florins we had brought from London.