

CHAPTER XVII--INEFFICIENCY

I stopped a moment to listen to an argument on the Mile End Waste. It was night-time, and they were all workmen of the better class. They had surrounded one of their number, a pleasant-faced man of thirty, and were giving it to him rather heatedly.

"But 'ow about this 'ere cheap immigration?" one of them demanded. "The Jews of Whitechapel, say, a-cutting our throats right along?"

"You can't blame them," was the answer. "They're just like us, and they've got to live. Don't blame the man who offers to work cheaper than you and gets your job."

"But 'ow about the wife an' kiddies?" his interlocutor demanded.

"There you are," came the answer. "How about the wife and kiddies of the man who works cheaper than you and gets your job? Eh? How about his wife and kiddies? He's more interested in them than in yours, and he can't see them starve. So he cuts the price of labour and out you go. But you mustn't blame him, poor devil. He can't help it. Wages always come down when two men are after the same job. That's the fault of competition, not of the man who cuts the price."

"But wyges don't come down where there's a union," the objection was

made.

"And there you are again, right on the head. The union cheeks competition among the labourers, but makes it harder where there are no unions. There's where your cheap labour of Whitechapel comes in. They're unskilled, and have no unions, and cut each other's throats, and ours in the bargain, if we don't belong to a strong union."

Without going further into the argument, this man on the Mile End Waste pointed the moral that when two men were after the one job wages were bound to fall. Had he gone deeper into the matter, he would have found that even the union, say twenty thousand strong, could not hold up wages if twenty thousand idle men were trying to displace the union men. This is admirably instanced, just now, by the return and disbandment of the soldiers from South Africa. They find themselves, by tens of thousands, in desperate straits in the army of the unemployed. There is a general decline in wages throughout the land, which, giving rise to labour disputes and strikes, is taken advantage of by the unemployed, who gladly pick up the tools thrown down by the strikers.

Sweating, starvation wages, armies of unemployed, and great numbers of the homeless and shelterless are inevitable when there are more men to do work than there is work for men to do. The men and women I have met upon the streets, and in the spikes and pegs, are not there because as a mode of life it may be considered a "soft snap." I have sufficiently outlined the hardships they undergo to demonstrate that their existence is

anything but "soft."

It is a matter of sober calculation, here in England, that it is softer to work for twenty shillings a week, and have regular food, and a bed at night, than it is to walk the streets. The man who walks the streets suffers more, and works harder, for far less return. I have depicted the nights they spend, and how, driven in by physical exhaustion, they go to the casual ward for a "rest up." Nor is the casual ward a soft snap. To pick four pounds of oakum, break twelve hundredweight of stones, or perform the most revolting tasks, in return for the miserable food and shelter they receive, is an unqualified extravagance on the part of the men who are guilty of it. On the part of the authorities it is sheer robbery. They give the men far less for their labour than do the capitalistic employers. The wage for the same amount of labour, performed for a private employer, would buy them better beds, better food, more good cheer, and, above all, greater freedom.

As I say, it is an extravagance for a man to patronise a casual ward. And that they know it themselves is shown by the way these men shun it till driven in by physical exhaustion. Then why do they do it? Not because they are discouraged workers. The very opposite is true; they are discouraged vagabonds. In the United States the tramp is almost invariably a discouraged worker. He finds tramping a softer mode of life than working. But this is not true in England. Here the powers that be do their utmost to discourage the tramp and vagabond, and he is, in all truth, a mightily discouraged creature. He knows that two shillings a

day, which is only fifty cents, will buy him three fair meals, a bed at night, and leave him a couple of pennies for pocket money. He would rather work for those two shillings than for the charity of the casual ward; for he knows that he would not have to work so hard, and that he would not be so abominably treated. He does not do so, however, because there are more men to do work than there is work for men to do.

When there are more men than there is work to be done, a sifting-out process must obtain. In every branch of industry the less efficient are crowded out. Being crowded out because of inefficiency, they cannot go up, but must descend, and continue to descend, until they reach their proper level, a place in the industrial fabric where they are efficient. It follows, therefore, and it is inexorable, that the least efficient must descend to the very bottom, which is the shambles wherein they perish miserably.

A glance at the confirmed inefficient at the bottom demonstrates that they are, as a rule, mental, physical, and moral wrecks. The exceptions to the rule are the late arrivals, who are merely very inefficient, and upon whom the wrecking process is just beginning to operate. All the forces here, it must be remembered, are destructive. The good body (which is there because its brain is not quick and capable) is speedily wrenched and twisted out of shape; the clean mind (which is there because of its weak body) is speedily fouled and contaminated.

The mortality is excessive, but, even then, they die far too lingering

deaths.

Here, then, we have the construction of the Abyss and the shambles. Throughout the whole industrial fabric a constant elimination is going on. The inefficient are weeded out and flung downward. Various things constitute inefficiency. The engineer who is irregular or irresponsible will sink down until he finds his place, say as a casual labourer, an occupation irregular in its very nature and in which there is little or no responsibility. Those who are slow and clumsy, who suffer from weakness of body or mind, or who lack nervous, mental, and physical stamina, must sink down, sometimes rapidly, sometimes step by step, to the bottom. Accident, by disabling an efficient worker, will make him inefficient, and down he must go. And the worker who becomes aged, with failing energy and numbing brain, must begin the frightful descent which knows no stopping-place short of the bottom and death.

In this last instance, the statistics of London tell a terrible tale. The population of London is one-seventh of the total population of the United Kingdom, and in London, year in and year out, one adult in every four dies on public charity, either in the workhouse, the hospital, or the asylum. When the fact that the well-to-do do not end thus is taken into consideration, it becomes manifest that it is the fate of at least one in every three adult workers to die on public charity.

As an illustration of how a good worker may suddenly become inefficient, and what then happens to him, I am tempted to give the case of M'Garry, a

man thirty-two years of age, and an inmate of the workhouse. The extracts are quoted from the annual report of the trade union.

I worked at Sullivan's place in Widnes, better known as the British Alkali Chemical Works. I was working in a shed, and I had to cross the yard. It was ten o'clock at night, and there was no light about. While crossing the yard I felt something take hold of my leg and screw it off. I became unconscious; I didn't know what became of me for a day or two. On the following Sunday night I came to my senses, and found myself in the hospital. I asked the nurse what was to do with my legs, and she told me both legs were off.

There was a stationary crank in the yard, let into the ground; the hole was 18 inches long, 15 inches deep, and 15 inches wide. The crank revolved in the hole three revolutions a minute. There was no fence or covering over the hole. Since my accident they have stopped it altogether, and have covered the hole up with a piece of sheet iron. . . . They gave me 25 pounds. They didn't reckon that as compensation; they said it was only for charity's sake. Out of that I paid 9 pounds for a machine by which to wheel myself about.

I was labouring at the time I got my legs off. I got twenty-four shillings a week, rather better pay than the other men, because I used to take shifts. When there was heavy work to be done I used to be picked out to do it. Mr. Manton, the manager, visited me at the hospital several times. When I was getting better, I asked him if he

would be able to find me a job. He told me not to trouble myself, as the firm was not cold-hearted. I would be right enough in any case . . . Mr. Manton stopped coming to see me; and the last time, he said he thought of asking the directors to give me a fifty-pound note, so I could go home to my friends in Ireland.

Poor M'Garry! He received rather better pay than the other men because he was ambitious and took shifts, and when heavy work was to be done he was the man picked out to do it. And then the thing happened, and he went into the workhouse. The alternative to the workhouse is to go home to Ireland and burden his friends for the rest of his life. Comment is superfluous.

It must be understood that efficiency is not determined by the workers themselves, but is determined by the demand for labour. If three men seek one position, the most efficient man will get it. The other two, no matter how capable they may be, will none the less be inefficient. If Germany, Japan, and the United States should capture the entire world market for iron, coal, and textiles, at once the English workers would be thrown idle by hundreds of thousands. Some would emigrate, but the rest would rush their labour into the remaining industries. A general shaking up of the workers from top to bottom would result; and when equilibrium had been restored, the number of the inefficient at the bottom of the Abyss would have been increased by hundreds of thousands. On the other hand, conditions remaining constant and all the workers doubling their efficiency, there would still be as many inefficient, though each

inefficient were twice as capable as he had been and more capable than many of the efficient had previously been.

When there are more men to work than there is work for men to do, just as many men as are in excess of work will be inefficient, and as inefficient they are doomed to lingering and painful destruction. It shall be the aim of future chapters to show, by their work and manner of living, not only how the inefficient are weeded out and destroyed, but to show how inefficient are being constantly and wantonly created by the forces of industrial society as it exists to-day.