CHAPTER XX--COFFEE-HOUSES AND DOSS-HOUSES

Another phrase gone glimmering, shorn of romance and tradition and all that goes to make phrases worth keeping! For me, henceforth, "coffee-house" will possess anything but an agreeable connotation. Over on the other side of the world, the mere mention of the word was sufficient to conjure up whole crowds of its historic frequenters, and to send trooping through my imagination endless groups of wits and dandies, pamphleteers and bravos, and bohemians of Grub Street.

But here, on this side of the world, alas and alack, the very name is a misnomer. Coffee-house: a place where people drink coffee. Not at all. You cannot obtain coffee in such a place for love or money. True, you may call for coffee, and you will have brought you something in a cup purporting to be coffee, and you will taste it and be disillusioned, for coffee it certainly is not.

And what is true of the coffee is true of the coffee-house. Working-men, in the main, frequent these places, and greasy, dirty places they are, without one thing about them to cherish decency in a man or put self-respect into him. Table-cloths and napkins are unknown. A man eats in the midst of the debris left by his predecessor, and dribbles his own scraps about him and on the floor. In rush times, in such places, I have positively waded through the muck and mess that covered the floor, and I have managed to eat because I was abominably hungry and capable of eating

anything.

This seems to be the normal condition of the working-man, from the zest with which he addresses himself to the board. Eating is a necessity, and there are no frills about it. He brings in with him a primitive voraciousness, and, I am confident, carries away with him a fairly healthy appetite. When you see such a man, on his way to work in the morning, order a pint of tea, which is no more tea than it is ambrosia, pull a hunk of dry bread from his pocket, and wash the one down with the other, depend upon it, that man has not the right sort of stuff in his belly, nor enough of the wrong sort of stuff, to fit him for big day's work. And further, depend upon it, he and a thousand of his kind will not turn out the quantity or quality of work that a thousand men will who have eaten heartily of meat and potatoes, and drunk coffee that is coffee.

As a vagrant in the "Hobo" of a California jail, I have been served better food and drink than the London workman receives in his coffee-houses; while as an American labourer I have eaten a breakfast for twelvepence such as the British labourer would not dream of eating. Of course, he will pay only three or four pence for his; which is, however, as much as I paid, for I would be earning six shillings to his two or two and a half. On the other hand, though, and in return, I would turn out an amount of work in the course of the day that would put to shame the amount he turned out. So there are two sides to it. The man with the high standard of living will always do more work and better than the man

with the low standard of living.

There is a comparison which sailormen make between the English and American merchant services. In an English ship, they say, it is poor grub, poor pay, and easy work; in an American ship, good grub, good pay, and hard work. And this is applicable to the working populations of both countries. The ocean greyhounds have to pay for speed and steam, and so does the workman. But if the workman is not able to pay for it, he will not have the speed and steam, that is all. The proof of it is when the English workman comes to America. He will lay more bricks in New York than he will in London, still more bricks in St. Louis, and still more bricks when he gets to San Francisco. {3} His standard of living has been rising all the time.

Early in the morning, along the streets frequented by workmen on the way to work, many women sit on the sidewalk with sacks of bread beside them. No end of workmen purchase these, and eat them as they walk along. They do not even wash the dry bread down with the tea to be obtained for a penny in the coffee-houses. It is incontestable that a man is not fit to begin his day's work on a meal like that; and it is equally incontestable that the loss will fall upon his employer and upon the nation. For some time, now, statesmen have been crying, "Wake up, England!" It would show more hard-headed common sense if they changed the tune to "Feed up, England!"

Not only is the worker poorly fed, but he is filthily fed. I have stood

outside a butcher-shop and watched a horde of speculative housewives turning over the trimmings and scraps and shreds of beef and mutton--dog-meat in the States. I would not vouch for the clean fingers of these housewives, no more than I would vouch for the cleanliness of the single rooms in which many of them and their families lived; yet they raked, and pawed, and scraped the mess about in their anxiety to get the worth of their coppers. I kept my eye on one particularly offensive-looking bit of meat, and followed it through the clutches of over twenty women, till it fell to the lot of a timid-appearing little woman whom the butcher bluffed into taking it. All day long this heap of scraps was added to and taken away from, the dust and dirt of the street falling upon it, flies settling on it, and the dirty fingers turning it over and over.

The costers wheel loads of specked and decaying fruit around in the barrows all day, and very often store it in their one living and sleeping room for the night. There it is exposed to the sickness and disease, the effluvia and vile exhalations of overcrowded and rotten life, and next day it is carted about again to be sold.

The poor worker of the East End never knows what it is to eat good, wholesome meat or fruit--in fact, he rarely eats meat or fruit at all; while the skilled workman has nothing to boast of in the way of what he eats. Judging from the coffee-houses, which is a fair criterion, they never know in all their lives what tea, coffee, or cocoa tastes like. The slops and water-witcheries of the coffee-houses, varying only in sloppiness and witchery, never even approximate or suggest what you and I

are accustomed to drink as tea and coffee.

A little incident comes to me, connected with a coffee-house not far from Jubilee Street on the Mile End Road.

"Cawn yer let me 'ave somethin' for this, daughter? Anythin', Hi don't mind. Hi 'aven't 'ad a bite the blessed dy, an' Hi'm that fynt . . . "

She was an old woman, clad in decent black rags, and in her hand she held a penny. The one she had addressed as "daughter" was a careworn woman of forty, proprietress and waitress of the house.

I waited, possibly as anxiously as the old woman, to see how the appeal would be received. It was four in the afternoon, and she looked faint and sick. The woman hesitated an instant, then brought a large plate of "stewed lamb and young peas." I was eating a plate of it myself, and it is my judgment that the lamb was mutton and that the peas might have been younger without being youthful. However, the point is, the dish was sold at sixpence, and the proprietress gave it for a penny, demonstrating anew the old truth that the poor are the most charitable.

The old woman, profuse in her gratitude, took a seat on the other side of the narrow table and ravenously attacked the smoking stew. We ate steadily and silently, the pair of us, when suddenly, explosively and most gleefully, she cried out to me,--

"Hi sold a box o' matches! Yus," she confirmed, if anything with greater and more explosive glee. "Hi sold a box o' matches! That's 'ow Hi got the penny."

"You must be getting along in years," I suggested.

"Seventy-four yesterday," she replied, and returned with gusto to her plate.

"Blimey, I'd like to do something for the old girl, that I would, but this is the first I've 'ad to-dy," the young fellow alongside volunteered to me. "An' I only 'ave this because I 'appened to make an odd shilling washin' out, Lord lumme! I don't know 'ow many pots."

"No work at my own tryde for six weeks," he said further, in reply to my questions; "nothin' but odd jobs a blessed long wy between."

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One meets with all sorts of adventures in coffee-house, and I shall not soon forget a Cockney Amazon in a place near Trafalgar Square, to whom I tendered a sovereign when paying my score. (By the way, one is supposed to pay before he begins to eat, and if he be poorly dressed he is compelled to pay before he eats).

The girl bit the gold piece between her teeth, rang it on the counter,

and then looked me and my rags witheringly up and down.

"Where'd you find it?" she at length demanded.

"Some mug left it on the table when he went out, eh, don't you think?" I retorted.

"Wot's yer gyme?" she queried, looking me calmly in the eyes.

"I makes 'em," quoth I.

She sniffed superciliously and gave me the change in small silver, and I had my revenge by biting and ringing every piece of it.

"I'll give you a ha'penny for another lump of sugar in the tea," I said.

"I'll see you in 'ell first," came the retort courteous. Also, she amplified the retort courteous in divers vivid and unprintable ways.

I never had much talent for repartee, but she knocked silly what little I had, and I gulped down my tea a beaten man, while she gloated after me even as I passed out to the street.

While 300,000 people of London live in one-room tenements, and 900,000 are illegally and viciously housed, 38,000 more are registered as living in common lodging-houses--known in the vernacular as "doss-houses." There

are many kinds of doss-houses, but in one thing they are all alike, from the filthy little ones to the monster big ones paying five per cent. and blatantly lauded by smug middle-class men who know but one thing about them, and that one thing is their uninhabitableness. By this I do not mean that the roofs leak or the walls are draughty; but what I do mean is that life in them is degrading and unwholesome.

"The poor man's hotel," they are often called, but the phrase is caricature. Not to possess a room to one's self, in which sometimes to sit alone; to be forced out of bed willy-nilly, the first thing in the morning; to engage and pay anew for a bed each night; and never to have any privacy, surely is a mode of existence quite different from that of hotel life.

This must not be considered a sweeping condemnation of the big private and municipal lodging-houses and working-men's homes. Far from it. They have remedied many of the atrocities attendant upon the irresponsible small doss-houses, and they give the workman more for his money than he ever received before; but that does not make them as habitable or wholesome as the dwelling-place of a man should be who does his work in the world.

The little private doss-houses, as a rule, are unmitigated horrors. I have slept in them, and I know; but let me pass them by and confine myself to the bigger and better ones. Not far from Middlesex Street, Whitechapel, I entered such a house, a place inhabited almost entirely by

working men. The entrance was by way of a flight of steps descending from the sidewalk to what was properly the cellar of the building. Here were two large and gloomily lighted rooms, in which men cooked and ate. I had intended to do some cooking myself, but the smell of the place stole away my appetite, or, rather, wrested it from me; so I contented myself with watching other men cook and eat.

One workman, home from work, sat down opposite me at the rough wooden table, and began his meal. A handful of salt on the not over-clean table constituted his butter. Into it he dipped his bread, mouthful by mouthful, and washed it down with tea from a big mug. A piece of fish completed his bill of fare. He ate silently, looking neither to right nor left nor across at me. Here and there, at the various tables, other men were eating, just as silently. In the whole room there was hardly a note of conversation. A feeling of gloom pervaded the ill-lighted place. Many of them sat and brooded over the crumbs of their repast, and made me wonder, as Childe Roland wondered, what evil they had done that they should be punished so.

From the kitchen came the sounds of more genial life, and I ventured into the range where the men were cooking. But the smell I had noticed on entering was stronger here, and a rising nausea drove me into the street for fresh air.

On my return I paid fivepence for a "cabin," took my receipt for the same in the form of a huge brass check, and went upstairs to the smoking-room.

Here, a couple of small billiard tables and several checkerboards were being used by young working-men, who waited in relays for their turn at the games, while many men were sitting around, smoking, reading, and mending their clothes. The young men were hilarious, the old men were gloomy. In fact, there were two types of men, the cheerful and the sodden or blue, and age seemed to determine the classification.

But no more than the two cellar rooms did this room convey the remotest suggestion of home. Certainly there could be nothing home-like about it to you and me, who know what home really is. On the walls were the most preposterous and insulting notices regulating the conduct of the guests, and at ten o'clock the lights were put out, and nothing remained but bed. This was gained by descending again to the cellar, by surrendering the brass check to a burly doorkeeper, and by climbing a long flight of stairs into the upper regions. I went to the top of the building and down again, passing several floors filled with sleeping men. The "cabins" were the best accommodation, each cabin allowing space for a tiny bed and room alongside of it in which to undress. The bedding was clean, and with neither it nor the bed do I find any fault. But there was no privacy about it, no being alone.

To get an adequate idea of a floor filled with cabins, you have merely to magnify a layer of the pasteboard pigeon-holes of an egg-crate till each pigeon-hole is seven feet in height and otherwise properly dimensioned, then place the magnified layer on the floor of a large, barnlike room, and there you have it. There are no ceilings to the pigeon-holes, the

walls are thin, and the snores from all the sleepers and every move and turn of your nearer neighbours come plainly to your ears. And this cabin is yours only for a little while. In the morning out you go. You cannot put your trunk in it, or come and go when you like, or lock the door behind you, or anything of the sort. In fact, there is no door at all, only a doorway. If you care to remain a guest in this poor man's hotel, you must put up with all this, and with prison regulations which impress upon you constantly that you are nobody, with little soul of your own and less to say about it.

Now I contend that the least a man who does his day's work should have is a room to himself, where he can lock the door and be safe in his possessions; where he can sit down and read by a window or look out; where he can come and go whenever he wishes; where he can accumulate a few personal belongings other than those he carries about with him on his back and in his pockets; where he can hang up pictures of his mother, sister, sweet-heart, ballet dancers, or bulldogs, as his heart listeth--in short, one place of his own on the earth of which he can say: "This is mine, my castle; the world stops at the threshold; here am I lord and master." He will be a better citizen, this man; and he will do a better day's work.

I stood on one floor of the poor man's hotel and listened. I went from bed to bed and looked at the sleepers. They were young men, from twenty to forty, most of them. Old men cannot afford the working-man's home. They go to the workhouse. But I looked at the young men, scores of them,

and they were not bad-looking fellows. Their faces were made for women's kisses, their necks for women's arms. They were lovable, as men are lovable. They were capable of love. A woman's touch redeems and softens, and they needed such redemption and softening instead of each day growing harsh and harsher. And I wondered where these women were, and heard a "harlot's ginny laugh." Leman Street, Waterloo Road, Piccadilly, The Strand, answered me, and I knew where they were.