

CHAPTER XXI--THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF LIFE

I was talking with a very vindictive man. In his opinion, his wife had wronged him and the law had wronged him. The merits and morals of the case are immaterial. The meat of the matter is that she had obtained a separation, and he was compelled to pay ten shillings each week for the support of her and the five children. "But look you," said he to me, "wot'll 'appen to 'er if I don't py up the ten shillings? S'posin', now, just s'posin' a accident 'appens to me, so I cawn't work. S'posin' I get a rupture, or the rheumatics, or the cholera. Wot's she goin' to do, eh? Wot's she goin' to do?"

He shook his head sadly. "No 'ope for 'er. The best she cawn do is the work'ouse, an' that's 'ell. An' if she don't go to the work'ouse, it'll be a worse 'ell. Come along 'ith me an' I'll show you women sleepin' in a passage, a dozen of 'em. An' I'll show you worse, wot she'll come to if anythin' 'appens to me and the ten shillings."

The certitude of this man's forecast is worthy of consideration. He knew conditions sufficiently to know the precariousness of his wife's grasp on food and shelter. For her game was up when his working capacity was impaired or destroyed. And when this state of affairs is looked at in its larger aspect, the same will be found true of hundreds of thousands and even millions of men and women living amicably together and co-operating in the pursuit of food and shelter.

The figures are appalling: 1,800,000 people in London live on the poverty line and below it, and 1,000,000 live with one week's wages between them and pauperism. In all England and Wales, eighteen per cent. of the whole population are driven to the parish for relief, and in London, according to the statistics of the London County Council, twenty-one per cent. of the whole population are driven to the parish for relief. Between being driven to the parish for relief and being an out-and-out pauper there is a great difference, yet London supports 123,000 paupers, quite a city of folk in themselves. One in every four in London dies on public charity, while 939 out of every 1000 in the United Kingdom die in poverty; 8,000,000 simply struggle on the ragged edge of starvation, and 20,000,000 more are not comfortable in the simple and clean sense of the word.

It is interesting to go more into detail concerning the London people who die on charity.

In 1886, and up to 1893, the percentage of pauperism to population was less in London than in all England; but since 1893, and for every succeeding year, the percentage of pauperism to population has been greater in London than in all England. Yet, from the Registrar-General's Report for 1886, the following figures are taken:-

Out of 81,951 deaths in London (1884):-

In workhouses	9,909
In hospitals	6,559
In lunatic asylums	278
Total in public refuges	16,746

Commenting on these figures, a Fabian writer says: "Considering that comparatively few of these are children, it is probable that one in every three London adults will be driven into one of these refuges to die, and the proportion in the case of the manual labour class must of course be still larger."

These figures serve somewhat to indicate the proximity of the average worker to pauperism. Various things make pauperism. An advertisement, for instance, such as this, appearing in yesterday morning's paper:-

"Clerk wanted, with knowledge of shorthand, typewriting, and invoicing: wages ten shillings (\$2.50) a week. Apply by letter," &c.

And in to-day's paper I read of a clerk, thirty-five years of age and an inmate of a London workhouse, brought before a magistrate for non-performance of task. He claimed that he had done his various tasks since he had been an inmate; but when the master set him to breaking stones, his hands blistered, and he could not finish the task. He had never been used to an implement heavier than a pen, he said. The magistrate sentenced him and his blistered hands to seven days' hard labour.

Old age, of course, makes pauperism. And then there is the accident, the thing happening, the death or disablement of the husband, father, and bread-winner. Here is a man, with a wife and three children, living on the ticklish security of twenty shillings per week--and there are hundreds of thousands of such families in London. Perforce, to even half exist, they must live up to the last penny of it, so that a week's wages (one pound) is all that stands between this family and pauperism or starvation. The thing happens, the father is struck down, and what then? A mother with three children can do little or nothing. Either she must hand her children over to society as juvenile paupers, in order to be free to do something adequate for herself, or she must go to the sweat-shops for work which she can perform in the vile den possible to her reduced income. But with the sweat-shops, married women who eke out their husband's earnings, and single women who have but themselves miserably to support, determine the scale of wages. And this scale of wages, so determined, is so low that the mother and her three children can live only in positive beastliness and semi-starvation, till decay and death end their suffering.

To show that this mother, with her three children to support, cannot compete in the sweating industries, I instance from the current newspapers the two following cases:-

A father indignantly writes that his daughter and a girl companion receive 8.5d. per gross for making boxes. They made each day four gross.

Their expenses were 8d. for car fare, 2d. for stamps, 2.5d. for glue, and 1d. for string, so that all they earned between them was 1s. 9d., or a daily wage each of 10.5d.

In the second ewe, before the Luton Guardians a few days ago, an old woman of seventy-two appeared, asking for relief. "She was a straw-hat maker, but had been compelled to give up the work owing to the price she obtained for them--namely, 2.25d. each. For that price she had to provide plait trimmings and make and finish the hats."

Yet this mother and her three children we are considering have done no wrong that they should be so punished. They have not sinned. The thing happened, that is all; the husband, father and bread-winner, was struck down. There is no guarding against it. It is fortuitous. A family stands so many chances of escaping the bottom of the Abyss, and so many chances of falling plump down to it. The chance is reducible to cold, pitiless figures, and a few of these figures will not be out of place.

Sir A. Forwood calculates that--

1 of every 1400 workmen is killed annually.

1 of every 2500 workmen is totally disabled.

1 of every 300 workmen is permanently partially disabled.

1 of every 8 workmen is temporarily disabled 3 or 4 weeks.

But these are only the accidents of industry. The high mortality of the

people who live in the Ghetto plays a terrible part. The average age at death among the people of the West End is fifty-five years; the average age at death among the people of the East End is thirty years. That is to say, the person in the West End has twice the chance for life that the person has in the East End. Talk of war! The mortality in South Africa and the Philippines fades away to insignificance. Here, in the heart of peace, is where the blood is being shed; and here not even the civilised rules of warfare obtain, for the women and children and babes in the arms are killed just as ferociously as the men are killed. War! In England, every year, 500,000 men, women, and children, engaged in the various industries, are killed and disabled, or are injured to disablement by disease.

In the West End eighteen per cent. of the children die before five years of age; in the East End fifty-five per cent. of the children die before five years of age. And there are streets in London where out of every one hundred children born in a year, fifty die during the next year; and of the fifty that remain, twenty-five die before they are five years old. Slaughter! Herod did not do quite so badly.

That industry causes greater havoc with human life than battle does no better substantiation can be given than the following extract from a recent report of the Liverpool Medical Officer, which is not applicable to Liverpool alone:-

In many instances little if any sunlight could get to the courts, and

the atmosphere within the dwellings was always foul, owing largely to the saturated condition of the walls and ceilings, which for so many years had absorbed the exhalations of the occupants into their porous material. Singular testimony to the absence of sunlight in these courts was furnished by the action of the Parks and Gardens Committee, who desired to brighten the homes of the poorest class by gifts of growing flowers and window-boxes; but these gifts could not be made in courts such as these, as flowers and plants were susceptible to the unwholesome surroundings, and would not live.

Mr. George Haw has compiled the following table on the three St. George's parishes (London parishes):-

	Percentage of Population Overcrowded	Death-rate per 1000
St. George's West	10	13.2
St. George's South	35	23.7
St. George's East	40	26.4

Then there are the "dangerous trades," in which countless workers are employed. Their hold on life is indeed precarious--far, far more precarious than the hold of the twentieth-century soldier on life. In the linen trade, in the preparation of the flax, wet feet and wet clothes cause an unusual amount of bronchitis, pneumonia, and severe rheumatism; while in the carding and spinning departments the fine dust produces lung

disease in the majority of cases, and the woman who starts carding at seventeen or eighteen begins to break up and go to pieces at thirty. The chemical labourers, picked from the strongest and most splendidly-built men to be found, live, on an average, less than forty-eight years.

Says Dr. Arlidge, of the potter's trade: "Potter's dust does not kill suddenly, but settles, year after year, a little more firmly into the lungs, until at length a case of plaster is formed. Breathing becomes more and more difficult and depressed, and finally ceases."

Steel dust, stone dust, clay dust, alkali dust, fluff dust, fibre dust--all these things kill, and they are more deadly than machine-guns and pom-poms. Worst of all is the lead dust in the white-lead trades. Here is a description of the typical dissolution of a young, healthy, well-developed girl who goes to work in a white-lead factory:-

Here, after a varying degree of exposure, she becomes anaemic. It may be that her gums show a very faint blue line, or perchance her teeth and gums are perfectly sound, and no blue line is discernible. Coincidentally with the anaemia she has been getting thinner, but so gradually as scarcely to impress itself upon her or her friends. Sickness, however, ensues, and headaches, growing in intensity, are developed. These are frequently attended by obscuration of vision or temporary blindness. Such a girl passes into what appears to her friends and medical adviser as ordinary hysteria. This gradually deepens without warning, until she is suddenly seized with a

convulsion, beginning in one half of the face, then involving the arm, next the leg of the same side of the body, until the convulsion, violent and purely epileptic form in character, becomes universal. This is attended by loss of consciousness, out of which she passes into a series of convulsions, gradually increasing in severity, in one of which she dies--or consciousness, partial or perfect, is regained, either, it may be, for a few minutes, a few hours, or days, during which violent headache is complained of, or she is delirious and excited, as in acute mania, or dull and sullen as in melancholia, and requires to be roused, when she is found wandering, and her speech is somewhat imperfect. Without further warning, save that the pulse, which has become soft, with nearly the normal number of beats, all at once becomes low and hard; she is suddenly seized with another convulsion, in which she dies, or passes into a state of coma from which she never rallies. In another case the convulsions will gradually subside, the headache disappears and the patient recovers, only to find that she has completely lost her eyesight, a loss that may be temporary or permanent.

And here are a few specific cases of white-lead poisoning:-

Charlotte Rafferty, a fine, well-grown young woman with a splendid constitution--who had never had a day's illness in her life--became a white-lead worker. Convulsions seized her at the foot of the ladder in the works. Dr. Oliver examined her, found the blue line along her gums, which shows that the system is under the influence of the lead.

He knew that the convulsions would shortly return. They did so, and she died.

Mary Ann Toler--a girl of seventeen, who had never had a fit in her life--three times became ill, and had to leave off work in the factory. Before she was nineteen she showed symptoms of lead poisoning--had fits, frothed at the mouth, and died.

Mary A., an unusually vigorous woman, was able to work in the lead factory for twenty years, having colic once only during that time. Her eight children all died in early infancy from convulsions. One morning, whilst brushing her hair, this woman suddenly lost all power in both her wrists.

Eliza H., aged twenty-five, after five months at lead works, was seized with colic. She entered another factory (after being refused by the first one) and worked on uninterruptedly for two years. Then the former symptoms returned, she was seized with convulsions, and died in two days of acute lead poisoning.

Mr. Vaughan Nash, speaking of the unborn generation, says: "The children of the white-lead worker enter the world, as a rule, only to die from the convulsions of lead poisoning--they are either born prematurely, or die within the first year."

And, finally, let me instance the case of Harriet A. Walker, a young girl

of seventeen, killed while leading a forlorn hope on the industrial battlefield. She was employed as an enamelled ware brusher, wherein lead poisoning is encountered. Her father and brother were both out of employment. She concealed her illness, walked six miles a day to and from work, earned her seven or eight shillings per week, and died, at seventeen.

Depression in trade also plays an important part in hurling the workers into the Abyss. With a week's wages between a family and pauperism, a month's enforced idleness means hardship and misery almost indescribable, and from the ravages of which the victims do not always recover when work is to be had again. Just now the daily papers contain the report of a meeting of the Carlisle branch of the Dockers' Union, wherein it is stated that many of the men, for months past, have not averaged a weekly income of more than from four to five shillings. The stagnated state of the shipping industry in the port of London is held accountable for this condition of affairs.

To the young working-man or working-woman, or married couple, there is no assurance of happy or healthy middle life, nor of solvent old age. Work as they will, they cannot make their future secure. It is all a matter of chance. Everything depends upon the thing happening, the thing with which they have nothing to do. Precaution cannot fend it off, nor can wiles evade it. If they remain on the industrial battlefield they must face it and take their chance against heavy odds. Of course, if they are favourably made and are not tied by kinship duties, they may run away

from the industrial battlefield. In which event the safest thing the man can do is to join the army; and for the woman, possibly, to become a Red Cross nurse or go into a nunnery. In either case they must forego home and children and all that makes life worth living and old age other than a nightmare.