

## CHAPTER III.

### THE HOMELESS.

Darkest England may be described as consisting broadly of three circles, one within the other. The outer and widest circle is inhabited by the starving and the homeless, but honest, Poor. The second by those who live by Vice; and the third and innermost region at the centre is peopled by those who exist by Crime. The whole of the three circles is sodden with Drink. Darkest England has many more public-houses than the Forest of the Aruwimi has rivers, of which Mr. Stanley sometimes had to cross three in half-an-hour.

The borders of this great lost land are not sharply defined. They are continually expanding or contracting. Whenever there is a period of depression in trade, they stretch; when prosperity returns, they contract. So far as individuals are concerned, there are none among the hundreds of thousands who live upon the outskirts of the dark forest who can truly say that they or their children are secure from being hopelessly entangled in its labyrinth. The death of the bread-winner, a long illness, a failure in the City, or any one of a thousand other causes which might be named, will bring within the first circle those who at present imagine themselves free from all danger of actual want. The death-rate in Darkest England is high. Death is the great gaol-deliverer of the captives. But the dead are hardly in the grave before their places are taken by others. Some escape, but the majority, their health sapped by their surroundings, become weaker and weaker, until at last they fall by the way, perishing without hope at the very doors of the palatial mansions which, maybe, some of them helped to build.

Some seven years ago a great outcry was made concerning the Housing of the Poor. Much was said, and rightly said—it could not be said too strongly—concerning the disease-breeding, manhood-

destroying character of many of the tenements in which the poor herd in our large cities. But there is a depth below that of the dweller in the slums. It is that of the dweller in the street, who has not even a lair in the slums which he can call his own. The houseless Out-of-Work is in one respect at least like Him of whom it was said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head."

The existence of these unfortunates was somewhat rudely forced upon the attention of Society in 1887, when Trafalgar Square became the camping ground of the Homeless Outcasts of London. Our Shelters have done something, but not enough, to provide for the outcasts, who this night and every night are walking about the streets, not knowing where they can find a spot on which to rest their weary frames.

Here is the return of one of my Officers who was told off this summer to report upon the actual condition of the Homeless who have no roof to shelter them in all London :—

There are still a large number of Londoners and a considerable percentage of wanderers from the country in search of work, who find themselves at nightfall destitute. These now betake themselves to the seats under the plane trees on the Embankment. Formerly they endeavoured to occupy all the seats, but the lynx-eyed Metropolitan Police declined to allow any such proceedings, and the dossers, knowing the invariable kindness of the City Police, made tracks for that portion of the Embankment which, lying east of the Temple, comes under the control of the Civic Fathers. Here, between the Temple and Blackfriars, I found the poor wretches by the score; almost every seat contained its full complement of six—some men, some women—all reclining in various postures and nearly all fast asleep. Just as Big Ben strikes two, the moon, flashing across the Thames and lighting up the stone work of the Embankment, brings into relief a pitiable spectacle. Here on the stone abutments, which afford a slight protection from the biting wind, are scores of men lying side by side, huddled together for warmth, and, of course, without any other covering than their ordinary clothing, which is scanty enough at the best. Some have laid down a few pieces of waste paper, by way of taking the chill off the stones, but the majority are too tired, even for that, and the nightly toilet of most consists of first removing the hat, swathing the head in whatever old rag may be doing duty as a handkerchief, and then replacing the hat.

The intelligent-looking elderly man, who was just fixing himself up on a seat, informed me that he frequently made that his night's abode. "You see," quoth he, "there's nowhere else so comfortable. I was here last night, and

Monday and Tuesday as well, that's four nights this week. I had no money for lodgings, couldn't earn any, try as I might. I've had one bit of bread to-day, nothing else whatever, and I've earned nothing to-day or yesterday; I had threepence the day before. Gets my living by carrying parcels, or minding horses, or odd jobs of that sort. You see I haven't got my health, that's where it is. I used to work on the London General Omnibus Company and after that on the Road Car Company, but I had to go to the infirmary with bronchitis and couldn't get work after that. What's the good of a man what's got bronchitis and just left the infirmary? Who'll engage him, I'd like to know? Besides, it makes me short of breath at times, and I can't do much. I'm a widower; wife died long ago. I have one boy, abroad, a sailor, but he's only lately started and can't help me. Yes! its very fair out here of nights, seats rather hard, but a bit of waste paper makes it a lot softer. We have women sleep here often, and children, too. They're very well conducted, and there's seldom many rows here, you see, because everybody's tired out. We're too sleepy to make a row."

Another party, a tall, dull, helpless-looking individual, had walked up from the country; would prefer not to mention the place. He had hoped to have obtained a hospital letter at the Mansion House so as to obtain a truss for a bad rupture, but failing, had tried various other places, also in vain, winding up minus money or food on the Embankment.

In addition to these sleepers, a considerable number walk about the streets up till the early hours of the morning to hunt up some job which will bring a copper into the empty exchequer, and save them from actual starvation. I had some conversation with one such, a stalwart youth lately discharged from the militia, and unable to get work.

"You see," said he, pitifully, "I don't know my way about like most of the London fellows. I'm so green, and don't know how to pick up jobs like they do. I've been walking the streets almost day and night these two weeks and can't get work. I've got the strength, though I shan't have it long at this rate. I only want a job. This is the third night running that I've walked the streets all night; the only money I get is by minding blacking-boys' boxes while they go into Lockhart's for their dinner. I got a penny yesterday at it, and twopence for carrying a parcel, and to-day I've had a penny. Bought a ha'porth of bread and a ha'penny mug of tea."

Poor lad! probably he would soon get into thieves' company, and sink into the depths, for there is no other means of living for many like him; it is starve or steal, even for the young. There are gangs of lad thieves in the low Whitechapel lodging-houses, varying in age from thirteen to fifteen, who live by thieving eatables and other easily obtained goods from shop fronts.

In addition to the Embankment, *al fresco* lodgings are found in the seats outside Spitalfields Church, and many homeless wanderers have their own little

nooks and corners of resort in many sheltered yards, vans, etc., all over London. Two poor women I observed making their home in a shop door-way in Liverpool Street. Thus they manage in the summer; what it's like in winter time is terrible to think of. In many cases it means the pauper's grave, as in the case of a young woman who was wont to sleep in a van in Bedfordbury. Some men who were aware of her practice surprised her by dashing a bucket of water on her. The blow to her weak system caused illness, and the inevitable sequel—a coroner's jury came to the conclusion that the water only hastened her death, which was due, in plain English, to starvation.

The following are some statements taken down by the same Officer from twelve men whom he found sleeping on the Embankment on the nights of June 13th and 14th, 1890 :—

No. 1. "I've slept here two nights; I'm a confectioner by trade; I come from Dartford. I got turned off because I'm getting elderly. They can get young men cheaper, and I have the rheumatism so bad. I've earned nothing these two days; I thought I could get a job at Woolwich, so I walked there, but could get nothing. I found a bit of bread in the road wrapped up in a bit of newspaper. That did me for yesterday. I had a bit of bread and butter to-day. I'm 54 years old. When it's wet we stand about all night under the arches."

No. 2. "Been sleeping out three weeks all but one night; do odd jobs, mind horses, and that sort of thing. Earned nothing to-day, or shouldn't be here. Have had a pen'orth of bread to-day. That's all. Yesterday had some pieces given to me at a cook-shop. Two days last week had nothing at all from morning till night. By trade I'm a feather-bed dresser, but it's gone out of fashion, and besides that, I've a cataract in one eye, and have lost the sight of it completely. I'm a widower, have one child, a soldier, at Dover. My last regular work was eight months ago, but the firm broke. Been doing odd jobs since."

No. 3. "I'm a tailor; have slept here four nights running. Can't get work. Been out of a job three weeks. If I can muster cash I sleep at a lodging-house in Vere Street, Glare Market. It was very wet last night. I left these seats and went to Covent Garden Market and slept under cover. There were about thirty of us. The police moved us on, but we went back as soon as they had gone. I've had a pen'orth of bread and pen'orth of soup during the last two days—often goes without altogether. There are women sleep out here. They are decent people, mostly charwomen and such like who can't get work."

No. 4. Elderly man; trembles visibly with excitement at mention of work; produces a card carefully wrapped in old newspaper, to the effect that Mr. J.R. is a member of the Trade Protection League. He is a waterside labourer; last job at that was a fortnight since. Has earned nothing for five days. Had a bit of bread this morning, but not a scrap since. Had a cup of

tea and two slices of bread yesterday, and the same the day before; the deputy at a lodging house gave it to him. He is fifty years old, and is still damp from sleeping out in the wet last night.

No. 5. Sawyer by trade, machinery cut him out. Had a job, haymaking near Uxbridge. Had been on same job lately for a month; got 2s. 6d a day. (Probably spent it in drink, seems a very doubtful worker.) Has been odd jobbing a long time, earned 2d. to-day, bought a pen'orth of tea and ditto of sugar (produces same from pocket) but can't get any place to make the tea; was hoping to get to a lodging house where he could borrow a teapot, but had no money. Earned nothing yesterday, slept at a casual ward; very poor place, get insufficient food, considering the labour. Six ounces of bread and a pint of skilly for breakfast, one ounce of cheese and six or seven ounces of bread for dinner (bread cut by guess). Tea same as breakfast,—no supper. For this you have to break 10 cwt. of stones, or pick 4 lbs. of oakum.

Number 6. Had slept out four nights running. Was a distiller by trade: been out four months; unwilling to enter into details of leaving, but it was his own fault. (Very likely; a heavy, thick, stubborn, and senseless-looking fellow, six feet high, thick neck, strong limbs, evidently destitute of ability.) Does odd jobs; earned 3d. for minding a horse, bought a cup of coffee and pen'orth of bread and butter. Has no money now. Slept under Waterloo Bridge last night.

No. 7. Good-natured looking man; one who would suffer and say nothing; clothes shining with age, grease, and dirt; they hang on his joints as on pegs; awful rags! I saw him endeavouring to walk. He lifted his feet very slowly and put them down carefully in evident pain. His legs are bad; been in infirmary several times with them. His uncle and grandfather were clergymen; both dead now. He was once in a good position in a money office, and afterwards in the London and County Bank for nine years. Then he went with an auctioneer who broke, and he was left ill, old, and without any trade. "A clerk's place," says he, "is never worth having, because there are so many of them, and once out you can only get another place with difficulty. I have a brother-in-law on the Stock Exchange, but he won't own me. Look at my clothes? Is it likely?"

No. 8. Slept here four nights running. Is a builder's labourer by trade, that is, a handy-man. Had a settled job for a few weeks which expired three weeks since. Has earned nothing for nine days. Then helped wash down a shop front and got 2s. 6d. for it. Does anything he can get. Is 46 years old. Earns about 2d. or 3d. a day at horse minding. A cup of tea and a bit of bread yesterday, and same to-day, is all he has had.

No. 9. A plumber's labourer (all these men who are somebody's "labourers" are poor samples of humanity, evidently lacking in grit, and destitute of ability to do any work which would mean decent wages). Judging from

appearances, they will do nothing well. They are a kind of automaton, with the machinery rusty; slow, dull, and incapable. The man of ordinary intelligence leaves them in the rear. They could doubtless earn more even at odd jobs, but lack the energy. Of course, this means little food, exposure to weather, and increased incapability day by day. ("From him that hath not," etc.) Out of work through slackness, does odd jobs; slept here three nights running. Is a dock labourer when he can get work. Has 6d. an hour; works so many hours, according as he is wanted. Gets 2s., 3s., or 4s. 6d. a day. Has to work very hard for it. Casual ward life is also very hard, he says, for those who are not used to it, and there is not enough to eat. Has had to-day a pen'orth of bread, for minding a cab. Yesterday he spent 3½d. on a breakfast, and that lasted him all day. Age 25.

No. 10. Been out of work a month. Carman by trade. Arm withered, and cannot do work properly. Has slept here all the week; got an awful cold through the wet. Lives at odd jobs (they all do). Got sixpence yesterday for minding a cab and carrying a couple of parcels. Earned nothing to-day, but had one good meal; a lady gave it him. Has been walking about all day looking for work, and is tired out.

No. 11. Youth, aged 16. Sad case; Londoner. Works at odd jobs and matches selling. Has taken 3d. to-day, i.e., net profit 1½d. Has five boxes still. Has slept here every night for a month. Before that slept in Covent Garden Market or on doorsteps. Been sleeping out six months, since he left Feltham Industrial School. Was sent there for playing truant. Has had one bit of bread to-day; yesterday had only some gooseberries and cherries, i.e., bad ones that had been thrown away. Mother is alive. She "chucked him out" when he returned home on leaving Feltham because he could'nt find her money for drink.

No. 12. Old man, age 67. Seems to take rather a humorous view of the position. Kind of Mark Tapley. Says he can't say he does like it, but then he *must* like it! Ha, ha! Is a slater by trade. Been out of work some time; younger men naturally get the work. Gets a bit of bricklaying sometimes; can turn his hand to anything. Goes miles and gets nothing. Earned one and two-pence this week at holding horses. Finds it hard, certainly. Used to care once, and get down-hearted, but that's no good; don't trouble now. Had a bit of bread and butter and cup of coffee to-day. Health is awful bad, not half the size he was; exposure and want of food is the cause; got wet last night, and is very stiff in consequence. Has been walking about since it was light, that is 3 a.m. Was so cold and wet and weak, scarcely knew what to do. Walked to Hyde Park, and got a little sleep there on a dry seat as soon as the park opened.

These are fairly typical cases of the men who are now wandering homeless through the streets. That is the way in which the nomads of civilization are constantly being recruited from above.

Such are the stories gathered at random one Midsummer night this year under the shade of the plane trees of the Embankment. A month later, when one of my staff took the census of the sleepers out of doors along the line of the Thames from Blackfriars to Westminster, he found three hundred and sixty-eight persons sleeping in the open air. Of these, two hundred and seventy were on the Embankment proper, and ninety-eight in and about Covent Garden Market, while the recesses of Waterloo and Blackfriars Bridges were full of human misery.

This, be it remembered, was not during a season of bad trade. The revival of business has been attested on all hands, notably by the barometer of strong drink. England is prosperous enough to drink rum in quantities which appall the Chancellor of the Exchequer but she is not prosperous enough to provide other shelter than the midnight sky for these poor outcasts on the Embankment.

To very many even of those who live in London it may be news that there are so many hundreds who sleep out of doors every night. There are comparatively few people stirring after midnight, and when we are snugly tucked into our own beds we are apt to forget the multitude outside in the rain and the storm who are shivering the long hours through on the hard stone seats in the open or under the arches of the railway. These homeless, hungry people are, however, there, but being broken-spirited folk for the most part they seldom make their voices audible in the ears of their neighbours. Now and again, however, a harsh cry from the depths is heard for a moment, jarring rudely upon the ear and then all is still. The inarticulate classes speak as seldom as Balaam's ass. But they sometimes find a voice. Here for instance is one such case which impressed me much. It was reported in one of the Liverpool papers some time back. The speaker was haranguing a small knot of twenty or thirty men:—

"My lads," he commenced, with one hand in the breast of his ragged vest, and the other, as usual, plucking nervously at his beard, "This kind o' work can't last for ever." (Deep and earnest exclamations, "It can't! It shan't") "Well, boys," continued the speaker, "Somebody'll have to find a road out o' this. What we want is work, not work'us bounty, though the parish has been busy enough amongst us lately, God knows! What we want is honest work. (Hear, hear.) Now, what I propose is that each of you gets fifty mates to join you; that'll make about 1,200 starving chaps—" "And then?" asked several very gaunt and hungry-looking men

excitedly. "Why, then," continued the leader. "Why, then," interrupted a cadaverous-looking man from the farther and darkest end of the cellar, "of course we'll make a——London job of it, eh?" "No, no," hastily interposed my friend, and holding up his hands deprecatingly, "we'll go peaceably about it chaps; we'll go in a body to the Town Hall, and show our poverty, and ask for work. We'll take the women and children with us too." ("Too ragged! Too starved! They can't walk it!") "The women's rags is no disgrace, the staggerin' children 'll show what we come to. Let's go a thousand strong, and ask for work and bread!"

Three years ago, in London, there were some such processions. Church parades to the Abbey and St. Paul's, bivouacs in Trafalgar Square, etc. But Lazarus showed his rags and his sores too conspicuously for the convenience of Dives, and was summarily dealt with in the name of law and order. But as we have Lord Mayor's Days, when all the well-fed fur-clad City Fathers go in State Coaches through the town, why should we not have a Lazarus Day, in which the starving Out-of-Works, and the sweated half-starved "in-works" of London should crawl in their tattered raggedness, with their gaunt, hungry faces, and emaciated wives and children, a Procession of Despair through the main thoroughfares past the massive houses and princely palaces of luxurious London?

For these men are gradually, but surely, being sucked down into the quicksand of modern life. They stretch out their grimy hands to us in vain appeal, not for charity, but for work.

Work, work! it is always work that they ask. The Divine curse is to them the most blessed of benedictions. "In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat thy bread," but alas for these forlorn sons of Adam, they fail to find the bread to eat, for Society has no work for them to do. They have not even leave to sweat. As well as discussing how these poor wanderers should in the second Adam "all be made alive," ought we not to put forth some effort to effect their restoration to that share in the heritage of labour which is theirs by right of descent from the first Adam?