

CHAPTER IV.

THE OUT-OF-WORKS

There is hardly any more pathetic figure than that of the strong able worker crying plaintively in the midst of our palaces and churches, not for charity, but for work, asking only to be allowed the privilege of perpetual hard labour, that thereby he may earn wherewith to fill his empty belly and silence the cry of his children for food. Crying for it and not getting it, seeking for labour as lost treasure and finding it not, until at last, all spirit and vigour worn out in the weary quest, the once willing worker becomes a broken-down drudge, sodden with wretchedness and despairing of all help in this world or in that which is to come. Our organisation of industry certainly leaves much to be desired. A problem which even slave owners have solved ought not to be abandoned as insoluble by the Christian civilisation of the Nineteenth Century.

I have already given a few life stories taken down from the lips of those who were found homeless on the Embankment which suggest somewhat of the hardships and the misery of the fruitless search for work. But what a volume of dull, squalid horror—a horror of great darkness gradually obscuring all the light of day from the life of the sufferer—might be written from the simple prosaic experiences of the ragged fellows whom you meet every day in the street. These men, whose labour is their only capital, are allowed, nay compelled, to waste day after day by the want of any means of employment, and then when they have seen days and weeks roll by during which their capital has been wasted by pounds and pounds, they are lectured for not saving the pence. When a rich man cannot employ his capital he puts it out at interest, but the bank for the labour capital of the poor man has yet to be invented. Yet it might be worth while inventing one. A man's labour is not only his capital, but his life. When it passes it returns never more. To utilise it,

to prevent its wasteful squandering, to enable the poor man to bank it up for use hereafter, this surely is one of the most urgent tasks before civilisation.

Of all heart-breaking toil the hunt for work is surely the worst. Yet at any moment let a workman lose his present situation, and he is compelled to begin anew the dreary round of fruitless calls. Here is the story of one among thousands of the nomads, taken down from his own lips, of one who was driven by sheer hunger into crime.

A bright Spring morning found me landed from a western colony. Fourteen years had passed since I embarked from the same spot. They were fourteen years, as far as results were concerned, of non-success, and here I was again in my own land, a stranger, with a new career to carve for myself and the battle of life to fight over again.

My first thought was work. Never before had I felt more eager for a down-right good chance to win my way by honest toil; but where was I to find work? With firm determination I started in search. One day passed without success and another, and another, but the thought cheered me, "Better luck to-morrow." It has been said, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." In my case it was to be severely tested. Days soon ran into weeks, and still I was on the trail patiently and hopefully. Courtesy and politeness so often met me in my enquiries for employment that I often wished they would kick me out, and so vary the monotony of the sickly veneer of consideration that so thinly overlaid the indifference and the absolute unconcern they had to my need. A few cut up rough and said, "No; we don't want you." "Please don't trouble us again (this after the second visit). We have no vacancy; and if we had, we have plenty of people on hand to fill it."

Who can express the feeling that comes over one when the fact begins to dawn that the search for work is a failure? All my hopes and prospects seemed to have turned out false. Helplessness, I had often heard of it, had often talked about it, thought I knew all about it. Yes! in others, but now I began to understand it for myself. Gradually my personal appearance faded. My once faultless linen became unkempt and unclean. Down further and further went the heels of my shoes, and I drifted into that distressing condition "shabby gentility." If the odds were against me before, how much more so now, seeing that I was too shabby even to command attention, much less a reply to my enquiry for work.

Hunger now began to do its work, and I drifted to the dock gates, but what chance had I among the hungry giants there? And so down the stream I drifted until "Grim Want" brought me to the last shilling, the last lodging, and the last meal. What shall I do? Where shall I go? I tried to think. Must

I starve? Surely there must be some door still open for honest willing endeavour, but where? What can I do? "Drink," said the Tempter; but to drink to drunkenness needs cash, and oblivion by liquor demands an equivalent in the currency.

Starve or steal. "You must do one or the other," said the Tempter. But I recoiled from being a Thief. "Why be so particular?" says the Tempter again. "You are down now, who will trouble about you? Why trouble about yourself? The choice is between starving and stealing." And I struggled until hunger stole my judgment, and then I became a Thief.

No one can pretend that it was an idle fear of death by starvation which drove this poor fellow to steal. Deaths from actual hunger are more common than is generally supposed. Last year, a man, whose name was never known, was walking through St. James's Park, when three of our Shelter men saw him suddenly stumble and fall. They thought he was drunk, but found he had fainted. They carried him to the bridge and gave him to the police. They took him to St. George's Hospital, where he died. It appeared that he had, according to his own tale, walked up from Liverpool, and had been without food for five days. The doctor, however, said he had gone longer than that. The jury returned a verdict of "Death from Starvation."

Without food for five days or longer! Who that has experienced the sinking sensation that is felt when even a single meal has been sacrificed may form some idea of what kind of slow torture killed that man!

In 1888 the average daily number of unemployed in London was estimated by the Mansion House Committee at 20,000. This vast reservoir of unemployed labour is the bane of all efforts to raise the scale of living, to improve the condition of labour. Men hungering to death for lack of opportunity to earn a crust are the materials from which "blacklegs" are made, by whose aid the labourer is constantly defeated in his attempts to improve his condition.

This is the problem that underlies all questions of Trades Unionism, and all Schemes for the Improvement of the Condition of the Industrial Army. To rear any stable edifice that will not perish when the first storm rises and the first hurricane blows, it must be built not upon sand, but upon a rock. And the worst of all existing Schemes for social betterment by organisation of the skilled workers and the like is that they are founded, not upon "rock," nor even upon "sand," but upon the bottomless bog of the stratum of the Workless. It is

here where we must begin. The regimentation of industrial workers who have got regular work is not so very difficult. That can be done, and is being done, by themselves. The problem that we have to face is the regimentation, the organisation, of those who have not got work, or who have only irregular work, and who from sheer pressure of absolute starvation are driven irresistibly into cut-throat competition with their better employed brothers and sisters. Skin for skin, all that a man hath, will he give for his life; much more, then, will those who experimentally know not God give all that they might hope hereafter to have—in this world or in the world to come.

There is no gainsaying the immensity of the problem. It is appalling enough to make us despair. But those who do not put their trust in man alone, but in One who is Almighty, have no right to despair. To despair is to lose faith; to despair is to forget God. Without God we can do nothing in this frightful chaos of human misery. But with God we can do all things, and in the faith that He has made in His image all the children of men we face even this hideous wreckage of humanity with a cheerful confidence that if we are but faithful to our own high calling He will not fail to open up a way of deliverance.

I have nothing to say against those who are endeavouring to open up a way of escape without any consciousness of God's help. For them I feel only sympathy and compassion. In so far as they are endeavouring to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and above all, work to the workless, they are to that extent endeavouring to do the will of our Father which is in Heaven, and woe be unto all those who say them nay! But to be orphaned of all sense of the Fatherhood of God is surely not a secret source of strength. It is in most cases—it would be in my own—the secret of paralysis. If I did not feel my Father's hand in the darkness, and hear His voice in the silence of the night watches bidding me put my hand to this thing, I would shrink back dismayed;— but as it is I dare not.

How many are there who have made similar attempts and have failed, and we have heard of them no more! Yet none of them proposed to deal with more than the mere fringe of the evil which, God helping me, I will try to face in all its immensity. Most Schemes that are put forward for the Improvement of the Circumstances of the People are either avowedly or actually limited to those whose condition least needs amelioration. The Utopians, the economists, and most of the philanthropists propound remedies,

which, if adopted to-morrow, would only affect the aristocracy of the miserable. It is the thrifty, the industrious, the sober, the thoughtful who can take advantage of these plans. But the thrifty, the industrious, the sober, and the thoughtful are already very well able for the most part to take care of themselves. No one will ever make even a visible dint on the Morass of Squalor who does not deal with the improvident, the lazy, the vicious, and the criminal. The Scheme of Social Salvation is not worth discussion which is not as wide as the Scheme of Eternal Salvation set forth in the Gospel. The Glad Tidings must be to every creature, not merely to an elect few who are to be saved while the mass of their fellows are predestined to a temporal damnation. We have had this doctrine of an inhuman cast-iron pseudo-political economy too long, enthroned amongst us. It is now time to fling down the false idol and proclaim a Temporal Salvation as full, free, and universal, and with no other limitations than the "Whosoever will," of the Gospel.

To attempt to save the Lost, we must accept no Limitations to human brotherhood. If the Scheme which I set forth in these and the following pages is not applicable to the Thief, the Harlot, the Drunkard, and the Sluggard, it may as well be dismissed without ceremony. As Christ came to call not the saints but sinners to repentance, so the New Message of Temporal Salvation, of salvation from pinching poverty, from rags and misery, must be offered to all. They may reject it, of course. But we who call ourselves by the name of Christ are not worthy to profess to be His disciples until we have set an open door before the least and worst of these who are now apparently imprisoned for life in a horrible dungeon of misery and despair. The responsibility for its rejection must be theirs, not ours. We all know the prayer, "Give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with food convenient for me"—and for every child of man on this planet, thank God the prayer of Agur, the son of Jakeh, may be fulfilled.

At present how far it is from being realised may be seen by anyone who will take the trouble to go down to the docks and see the struggle for work. Here is a sketch of what was found there this summer: —

London Docks, 7.25 a.m. The three pairs of huge wooden doors are closed. Leaning against them, and standing about, there are perhaps a couple of hundred men. The public house opposite is full, doing a heavy trade. All along the road are groups of men, and from each direction a steady stream increases the crowd at the gate.

7.30. Doors open, there is a general rush to the interior. Everybody marches about a hundred yards along to the iron barrier—a temporary chain affair, guarded by the dock police. Those men who have previously (*i.e.*, night before) been engaged, show their ticket and pass through, about six hundred. The rest—some five hundred—stand behind the barrier, patiently waiting the chance of a job, but *less than twenty* of these get engaged. They are taken on by a foreman who appears next the barrier and proceeds to pick his men. No sooner is the foreman seen, than there is a wild rush to the spot and a sharp, mad fight to “catch his eye.” The men picked out, pass the barrier, and the excitement dies away until another lot of men are wanted.

They wait until eight o'clock strikes, which is the signal to withdraw. The barrier is taken down and all those hundreds of men, wearily disperse to “find a job.” Five hundred applicants, twenty acceptances! No wonder one tired-out looking individual ejaculates, “Oh dear, Oh dear! Whatever shall I do?” A few hang about until mid-day on the slender chance of getting taken on then for half a day.

Ask the men and they will tell you something like the following story, which gives the simple experiences of a dock labourer.

R. P. said: —“I was in regular work at the South West India Docks before the strike. We got 5d. an hour. Start work 8 a.m. summer and 9 a.m. winter. Often there would be five hundred go, and only twenty get taken on (that is besides those engaged the night previous.) The foreman stood in his box, and called out the men he wanted. He would know quite five hundred by name. It was a regular fight to get work, I have known nine hundred to be taken on, but there's always hundreds turned away. You see they get to know when ships come in, and when they're consequently likely to be wanted, and turn up then in greater numbers. I would earn 30s. a week sometimes and then perhaps nothing for a fortnight. That's what makes it so hard. You get nothing to eat for a week scarcely, and then when you get taken on, you are so weak that you can't do it properly. I've stood in the crowd at the gate and had to go away without work, hundreds of times. Still I should go at it again if I could. I got tired of the little work and went away into the country to get work on a farm, but couldn't get it, so I'm without the 10s. that it costs to join the Dockers' Union. I'm going to the country again in a day or two to try again. Expect to get 3s. a day perhaps. Shall come back to the docks again. There is a chance of getting regular dock work, and that is, to lounge about the pubs where the foremen go, and treat them. Then they will very likely take you on next day.”

R. P. was a non-Unionist. Henry F. is a Unionist. His history is much the same.

“I worked at St. Katherine’s Docks five months ago. You have to get to the gates at 6 o’clock for the first call. There’s generally about 400 waiting. They will take on one to two hundred. Then at 7 o’clock there’s a second call. Another 400 will have gathered by then, and another hundred or so will be taken on. Also there will probably be calls at nine and one o’clock. About the same number turn up but there’s no work for many hundreds of them. I was a Union man. That means 10s. a week sick pay, or 8s. a week for slight accidents; also some other advantages. The Docks won’t take men on now unless they are Unionists. The point is that there’s too many men. I would often be out of work a fortnight to three weeks at a time. Once earned £3 in a week, working day and night, but then had a fortnight out directly after. Especially when there don’t happen to be any ships in for a few days, which means, of course, nothing to unload. That’s the time; there’s plenty of men almost starving then. They have no trade to go to, or can get no work at it, and they swoop down to the docks for work, when they had much better stay away.”

But it is not only at the dock-gates that you come upon these unfortunates who spend their lives in the vain hunt for work. Here is the story of another man whose case has only too many parallels.

C. is a fine built man, standing nearly six feet. He has been in the Royal Artillery for eight years and held very good situations whilst in it. It seems that he was thrifty and consequently steady. He bought his discharge, and being an excellent cook opened a refreshment house, but at the end of five months he was compelled to close his shop on account of slackness in trade, which was brought about by the closing of a large factory in the locality.

After having worked in Scotland and Newcastle-on-Tyne for a few years, and through ill health having to give up his situation, he came to London with the hope that he might get something to do in his native town. He has had no regular employment for the past eight months. His wife and family are in a state of destitution, and he remarked, “We only had 1 lb. of bread between us yesterday.” He is six weeks in arrears of rent, and is afraid that he will be ejected. The furniture which is in his home is not worth 3s. and the clothes of each member of his family are in a tattered state and hardly fit for the rag bag. He assured us he had tried everywhere to get employment and would be willing to take anything. His characters are very good indeed.

Now, it may seem a preposterous dream that any arrangement can be devised by which it may be possible, under all circumstances, to provide food, clothes, and shelter for all these Out-of-Works without any loss of self respect; but I am convinced that it can be done, providing only that they are willing to Work, and, God helping me, if the means are forthcoming, I mean to try to do it; how, and where, and when, I will explain in subsequent chapters.

All that I need say here is, that so long as a man or woman is willing to submit to the discipline indispensable in every campaign against any formidable foe, there appears to me nothing impossible about this ideal; and the great element of hope before us is that the majority are, beyond all gainsaying, eager for work. Most of them now do more exhausting work in seeking for employment than the regular toilers do in their workshops, and do it, too, under the darkness of hope deferred which maketh the heart sick.