

DRAWN FROM THE LIFE.

II.—THE UNDERPAID.



He differs from his neighbour in poverty, the unemployed, chiefly in the fact that he has obtained more or less regular work. His condition is but little bettered thereby at first sight; but, after all, the advantages of being able to calculate on a probable weekly income are obvious, even though each day's wages has to be reckoned in pence instead of in shillings, and he may have to forego the possibility of a casual "lucky job" making him so "flush of

money" that he can afford to treat his acquaintances at the gin-shop.

This "regular" work, representing a certainty to secure which is justly regarded as an effort worth considerable sacrifice, does in truth help very materially to separate a large body of the underpaid from what are called the dangerous classes. The more resolute and ambitious among the unemployed speak of it as the immediate means of "keeping them square," and we have reason to admire the fortitude with which hundreds and thousands of the inhabitants of our great towns endure constant privations, and even suffer want, and at the same time keep fast hold of the honesty and decency which they have learned to associate with constant and recognised employment, however badly it may be paid for.

The most hopeless aspect of the condition of these people is, first, that the callings which they follow are either unskilled labour, or such poor trades as require little learning, but may be "picked up" by any ordinary youth. Several of these are in fact far more readily acquired than some descriptions of common toil. It demands,

perhaps, more practical experience than to be a ploughman than to learn the commonest kind of French polishing, or chair finishing. A sawyer works harder, and maybe requires greater intelligence, than the man who collects haybands for stuffing cheap furniture; and many comparatively skilled employments, such as chair caning, cheap paper staining, whitewashing, and the rest of the underpaid trades, are so easily learned after a slipshod fashion, and there is such a multitude ready to avail itself of these means of living, that wages paid for the inferior work are always at starvation point.

I do not intend now to refer to the weavers. Theirs is so eminently a skilled industry, that nothing but its having become almost extinguished in London by the operation of large factories in the provinces, and the removal of the duty on French and German silks and velvets, would have made it so wretched a business. The weavers, however, patient, careworn, almost starving as their remaining representatives may be, have no relation to the dangerous classes, except, alas! when, in despair of bringing their children up to the same impoverished handicraft, they leave them to join the already crowded ranks of the underpaid in other and equally unprofitable industries.

Unlike the unemployed, it is not at all certain that the underpaid will be discerned during the course of



GOING FOR LAUDANUM.



CASUAL HANDS.

an ordinary daily walk. The inquirer who wishes to look upon some of the most painful sights in all great London, will have to seek them where they may be distinguished from the poverty which has gone over the boundary-line of crime, and the pauperism that has become chronic.

Not among the shambling youths and truculent vagabonds who haunt street-corners, and are to be seen about the doors of taverns; nor amidst the sellers of newspapers, or the casual porters; but in a score of employments where the wages are kept down to the lowest farthing, and even constant work is barely sufficient to find a family in food, without the addition of that outdoor relief from the parish which, strive against it as they may, the broken-down man or the sick woman must seek at a pinch, or in times of dear provision or of failing health.

Let us go, for instance, to the gates of one of our great docks, and note the group of ragged, haggard, unshorn men who stand talking together moodily, or sit on the pavement, their hands clasping their knees, or lean doggedly huddled up against the wall, sucking the few remaining whiffs from their black tobacco-pipes. They will wait for a whole morning on the chance of extra assistance being required, because of a ship being warped into dock, and casual hands called on at fourpence an hour. How they envy the regular labourers, who have a ticket, and are taken on at their half-crown a day for eight hours, with the usual half-hour for lunch! With what hungry, wistful eyes they regard the cans and barrels of beer that are entering the dock-gates, the pie-men and baked potato merchants ready to do business when the signal-bell at noon is followed by a rush of the men at work inside, who have earned the right to eat!

One or two of this dejected party may have a couple of slices of the workhouse loaf, spread with a bit of dripping, tied up in a cotton pocket handkerchief, and so may contrive to hold on till all hope is gone of obtaining even an hour's work that day. Even those who have been more fortunate, and are now inside the gates, may be compelled to mortgage an hour's earnings for a few mouthfuls of food, and a half-pint from that brisk potman who wheels in the midday porter on a truck. Week after week it is known that some of these poor fellows try to hold out with only just as much coarse food as will barely satisfy their hunger, and yet makes a large slice out of the family loaf, a large percentage of the ten or twelve shillings which even the luckiest of them can count as their wages for six days' labour. Yet there are men among them who have been not ill-taught, and by no means roughly nurtured: unfortunates who have gone under in the struggle, poor fellows who have been brought up to a superseded industry, and are too old to begin a new apprenticeship, with wives and children looking to them for bread. At one time a large contingent of these dock-labourers were weavers, whose soft hands and delicate touch had made the choicest fabrics that even Spitalfields could boast.

Indeed, one of the most painful convictions which this spectacle brings to us, is that many of the ordinary

occupations of the lower class of working people are so little better than casual labour, that to go to the docks is regarded as an obvious substitute, and the man who has had the good fortune to obtain a regular ticket is not likely to resume the handicraft which is scarcely more certain or more remunerative.

The worst of this condition is, that in order to supplement insufficient wages, the poverty-stricken districts in which these people mostly live are burdened with a monstrous tax which, the equal distribution of the poor-rates not having been accomplished, is exacted from people many of whom are themselves struggling to maintain even a decent position, and some of whom, unable to withstand the pressure of claims which increase in proportion to the slackness of trade, themselves sink to the ranks of the underpaid. In the case of the dock-labourer the social anomaly takes a more definite and comprehensible shape than where an ordinary employer of labour is concerned. Wages are reduced to a point at which the labourer and his family cannot live; and the obvious answer of political economy is that there is a definite market value for labour as for other things, just as there is a definite value on investments of capital.

Doubtless; but where there is a large supplementary reserve fund in the shape of a contributed poor-rate, a whole series of questions present themselves, which will ere long have to be answered; the first of them being:—On what principle are private capitalists or shareholders in prosperous companies to be permitted to add to their profits by a reference to the public purse to adjust the labour market?

With some experience of the conditions and the occasions of poverty and crime in London, I declare that I regard this alternative pauperism as one of the most effective means of augmenting the ranks of the "dangerous" legion. Beginning with a kind of angry shame that they should be compelled secretly to ask for parochial relief, the men and women who receive the workhouse dole, and learn that they are ticketed with the workhouse badge in the printed list published to the ratepayers, begin to lose self-respect, and so frequently learn to look at society with a kind of defiant stare, and at last with a grin that says, "I mean to make the best of it, and to get as much without working for it as the law will give me." Visit the homes of the lowest of the people who have thus become degraded, and you will see comparative plenty. The husband, the wife, and even the children have learnt the defiant stare, the sneering laugh of the chronic pauper. He works only when he cannot live on charity; she has learnt, with wonderful aptitude, all the most readily available sources of benevolent distribution in the neighbourhood. The room in which they live may be bare and dilapidated, the house a hovel, the street a foul and pestilent slum; but the grate is not fireless, the cupboard seldom empty, even though it may only contain a replenished gin-bottle and a cracked mug. Step by step, and not slowly, they have become a serious charge on the rates, and find it is much easier, and perhaps far more comfortable, to supplement

constant parish relief by a good deal of cadging among local charities, and a little occasional work, than to earn fourpence an hour when they can get it to do, and only to take a reluctant bite of the union loaf when the proverbial wolf is showing his grim muzzle at their children through the half-open door.

But there are others among the underpaid who too often threaten to become dangerous. Entering some of those wretched houses where the underpaid and the unemployed herd together—where whole families huddle amidst beds of sacks and straw, and coverlids of rags—where the means of decency and health are denied to them and their children;—where wife must go out charing, and even infants begin to make match-boxes or work for halfpence as soon as they can run alone—entering one of these places, I say, do we wonder to find that father or mother has gone to the corner where the gin-shop flares so bright and warm, and the door is always invitingly on the swing?

“Yes, to spend their miserable earnings in drink, and so to rob their starving children of bread.”

Not so! To spend something in drink, yes; but not necessarily for drunkenness or for the love of drink itself. That curse may come; nay, it is approaching with rapid strides; but there are some who, in the desperate knowledge that the fiery dram which may be bought for three-halfpence is potent for a time to allay sickening hunger, or that the dry bread some way seems to gain sustaining power from beer, have learnt to take drink which can be cheaply and instantly purchased, in place of food which is far enough off to need waiting for, and cannot be bought for the last twopence, even if it were ever so near.

It is common enough to rail about the besotted craving for drink among the poor, and there is dreadful truth in the accusation; but let us all remember whence that craving often comes. Of the stifling streets, the freezing cellars, the foul and filthy dens, the noisome hovels which defy Boards of Works and Acts of Parliament; of the utter destitution of means of preparing food, or of obtaining fire and utensils wherewith to cook it, even if it could be bought for pence; of the wonderful organisations for keeping our abundant supplies of fish and other cheap nourishment from the mouths that hunger most; of all the difficulties which beset even honest, self-reliant poverty, and its efforts after cleanliness, and a sufficiency of coarse food and decent clothing; and then of the facilities for obtaining the terrible substitute of a dram—before we begin to moralise too severely.

Ask the doctor, the City missionary, the district visitor, whose experience has enabled them to trace, step by step, the degradation of the “underpaid” to the “dangerous,” and they will tell you something that should check the mere common-places of blame and reproach.

Ask the chemist, who, as you see yonder emaciated, decrepit-looking woman slink out of the shop with slow step and faltering gait, answers your mute and painful inquiry by the one word, “Laudanum,” and goes on to tell you how some feeble women, who have long borne the burden of daily work, such as charing or washing, come in at night and take a dose of the stupefier. And let us ask ourselves whether it is not possible to find a remedy for many of the evils we have seen—whether we cannot really benefit these wretched “underpaid,” by helping them to help themselves.

COMING HOME.



CROSS the turf, across the surf, across the
flying foam,
Across the ice-bound Kentish hills,
The naked trees and frozen rills,
From foreign shores and foreign ills
I gaily journeyed home.

I knew the Hall was lighted all with Yule logs heaped
on high;

That berries, waxen white and red,
Hung kiss-provoking overhead;
And madcap maids, none loth to wed,
Tripped lightly, sprightly by.

The stars were out, and all about the frost-flakes filled
the air—

A light was in the church tower nigh,
Whence bells would ring out by-and-by.
The faces of the family
Seemed painted everywhere.

I enter in—a welcome din uprises all around;
The girls quick clustering round to greet,
And kiss me in confusion sweet—
Save May, who in the window-seat
Is lost to every sound.

For cousin Fred, with down-bent head, is whispering
soft and low,

While rose-red blushes swiftly chase
The white rose shadows from her face,
Like sunset in a silent place
Where lithe white lilies blow.

Well, sisters will be fickle still; and lovers have their
day.

My mother's face of startled joy,
My father's welcome to his boy,
Will wake them from their sweet employ
The bells! 'Tis New Year's Day!

THEO. GIFT