

WORKERS BY NIGHT.



JUST for once in a way, you know—only once. Stop that yawn, and put back the watch you have so carefully wound up, strictly obeying the watchmaker's orders to hold it steady the while. Don't think about your bed, with its soft pillow and snowy sheets; nor of the hand-candlestick, with its extinguisher which you so exactly drop over the flaming wick, ere you burrow into that trench you love to punch in the tick-covered feathers. Never mind all this, nor the sensations which keep whispering to you, "Sleep, sleep, and rest;" but shake off dull sloth and—don't go to bed at all.

Pray don't be shocked: this is no invitation to dissipation, nor the striking in of the thin end of the wedge that may open a way to evil habits. I merely want you to forego your well-earned rest for one night, and come with me to learn how mistaken you have been in your notions that with the coming of night London goes to sleep.

For that idea is quite wrong. London never sleeps: its heart is always pulsating, and just as one part of the great monster's body sinks into quietude, the other awakens and begins to work.

Never mind the hour, but come along. It is summer-time, but there is a chilly wind blowing, and the stars look cold as we pass along the streets, seeing, but unnoticed, as we follow a couple of broad-shouldered men hurrying along with a fresh step that betokens anything but weariness. They wind through several byways, and enter at last a main street where an iron pipe stands up like a flagstaff, from which blows forth, fluttering loudly in the wind, a yellow ensign with dashes of blue near its ragged ends. It casts a strangely weird light upon heaps of rudely-turned earth, lying for a hundred yards behind a barrier, to which, here and there, are attached red-glass lanterns, tended by a heavy-looking, solemn man, who has rigged himself up a kind of shanty, within which is a glowing brazier of coke.

The ragged ensign is a flaring jet of gas, and as we approach the long mounds of earth, we see that they are in layers. First there is concrete, which supported the paying-stones—for we are in a main artery of the great metropolis; then comes a foul-looking black earth, which smells atrociously of gas; next, a stratum of rubbish, mingled with brick, mortar, rotten wood, and pieces of stone; and then, some twenty feet down, sand—pure soft yellow sand; so clean has it been thrown up as to show that it has never before been touched by the hand of man.

Following our two friends, who, as seen by the flaring gas-jet, are evidently bricklayers, we descend with them ladder after ladder, to platform after platform, down a narrow deep cutting, whose sides

are lined with planks kept in their places by sturdy short cross-timbers; for if this were not done, the sand at the sides would crumble in, and some of the busy men below us would perish from that most horrible of deaths—buried alive.

It is very dark down here, and the lanterns burn dimly. Overhead we see a network of cross-pieces and great pipes—this for gas, that for water—between us and the flaming ensign, while below comes up the strange whispering, gurgling sound of water. There is an unpleasant mephitic upset-the-tea-kettle-on-the-kitchen-fire kind of odour, mingled with the clink, clink of trowels.

For our friends are bricklayers on the night-shift, busy on the repairs of a vein of the main drainage scheme; and as we stand beside them, seventy feet below the street, they are building up the finest of yellow bricks with the finest of cement, and forming an egg-shaped drain leading into another and greater egg-shaped drain, down which we peer with a shudder to see the lantern's light glimmering on an inky-black stream, which goes on whispering and gurgling in its darkness, carrying London's liquid filth towards the sea.

Egg-shaped? Yes, exactly. Cut an egg in two the long way on, and set one half up on its narrow end; this will give you the figure exactly of the drains of London—the shape proved by experience to be the least likely to harbour sediment, and the easiest to be washed clean.

"Smells bad, sir?" says one man. "It's a deal worse in hot weather. I don't know as it does one any harm; but look at that."

He pulls out an old smooth-backed silver watch, and then a couple of shillings from his pocket, to show that the vapour which arises from the sewage turns silver black as ink.

The clink of the trowels is heard as we gain the street, and next we find ourselves floating quietly down the Thames, below-bridge, in a police-galley.

The river looks as inky as the sewers; gas-lights twinkle here and there, and there are lights hanging at the bows of the great vessels that seem to loom up on either side of us, with their rigging dimly seen against the sky.

The water hisses and gurgles more loudly here, but without the mysterious cavernous echo of down below; but as we near vessel after vessel, we see that the mooring-chains are attached to great floating buoys, and all, like the prows of the great vessels, reeking with muddy slimy refuse from far above.

And all night long these silent row-boats glide in and out amongst the tiers of shipping, barges, and lighters; past clumsy-looking barques and brigs waiting to enter the timber-docks; past long, narrow, snaky screw-steamers, that unload their grain-cargoes in the river; and, above all, most watchfully by the tarpaulin-covered barges deeply laden with the precious cargo of some discharging vessel.

For these Thames police-galleys are on the alert for the river-pirates. No bold buccaneers these, but a set of amphibious scoundrels, whose mission it is to pick and steal everything upon which they can lay their hands, from a package of raw silk down to a ship's bell or a few yards of rope.

Sometimes—not very often—they come upon something floating down with the tide—something which is diligently taken on shore, covered with tarpaulin, and kept to await the coroner's inquest; while a small handbill is posted up at the police-stations, bearing the heading, "Found Drowned."

Earlier in the night we might have stood in the back yard behind one of the police-stations, and seen the row of great-coated men, each with his tightly-rolled oilskin cape, and bull's-eye giving a glassy stare like some monster, attached to the constable's waist-belt. If we followed the line of men who march out with military step on night-duty, we should see one fall out here, another there, till all had gone on their beats—beats which cross and intersect at various points at certain hours, when the sergeant can be there to check his men and see that they are on duty. If, then, we follow the first one who drops out, and goes along a dark street, we shall see the cold steely-looking bull's-eye flash suddenly into light, and glare and stare in all directions—peering down areas, into dark entries, and searching with unwearying diligence in every suspicious place, while the indwellers are fast asleep. As the glowing eye directs its light on all sides, the constable's hands are busy: doors are tried, shutter-bars shaken, cellar-flaps examined, and no nook left unexplored—in spite of the cry so often raised, "Where are the police?"

The answer is—Busy on their beat, under severe supervision.

Something at last—a figure curled up in a doorway.

Asleep? Dead? A shudder passes through our frames as in a moment imagination paints a thousand horrors, amongst which is the fancy that this poor creature—a woman too—has tramped the stony streets to lie down at last and die.

The glowing eye is directed upon her, to reveal rags, tangled hair, and a face buried in her breast.

Alas! it is no romantic case of misery, but one of the very common events of London nights—a wretched soul enslaved by a vile habit.

"Oh, yes, no doubt of it—drunk," says the constable.

"But—such cases have happened—might it not be a fit? It would be very horrible if the poor creature," &c. &c.

"Very, sir," says the constable grimly; "but people don't have apperplectic fits with gin-bottles in their hands. Look at that!"

He draws aside the ragged shawl, and displays a bottle tightly clutched in one hand, after which he shakes the woman, who mutters incoherently, in a way that confirms the constable's words.

He lets her subside, walks down a side-street, and we follow to see what he does; and the next minute, in the distance, see another flitting light, as a brother-constable is performing his duty

A signal brings him up, and he goes off, while we return with our first friend to the doorway, where the figure is still lying snoring heavily.

In a few minutes we hear a regular tramp, and a couple of policemen, followed by a third, come along, bearing something that looks like two thin sides of a narrow bedstead with the sacking hanging down between.

It proves to be a stretcher, upon which the wretched outcast is decently lifted and secured, raised upon the shoulders of the constables, and marched off to the station; while we follow, learning as we go why London streets are not dirtier than they really are; for, working away in a quiet ghostly fashion, one behind the other, and never speaking, we see gang after gang of men in dark blue short smocks, and armed with great cane brooms, sweeping the streets, following one another like mowers down a meadow; while as each street's filth is swept to the side, a huge lumbering cart, drawn by a splendid horse of mammoth proportions, follows, and the refuse is swiftly shovelled away. Each parish has its gang of sweepers, and though perhaps it is not realised, all the streets are swept in the watches of the night, looking wonderfully clean till the shop-boys begin to sully them in the early morn with the sweepings of each business-place.

They are a strangely silent gang, these sweepers, wielding their brushes with slow steady strokes; and before their presence has been well realised they are gone, and at work in the next street.

Meanwhile we reach the station, and follow the bearers into the presence of the inspector on night-duty—an official who looks, by the bright gas in the clean white-washed office, as fresh as if it were mid-day. He is seated at a desk, behind a great book, in which he enters the report of the constable who found the woman. Then he comes out and looks at the poor wretch himself, while his subordinate watches him with inquiring eye.

"Yes, the old story," he says, with a nod; for experience has told him that there is no need for the doctor to be called in; and the woman is carried to one of the cells, placed in a position in which she can easily breathe, and there she is left, but not neglected; for from time to time one of the glowing eyes is turned upon her to see that she is breathing easily, and meanwhile other reports are brought in to the quiet inspector, whose book by morning makes a pretty good show of night-work.

We did not stay, for we hurried off to the little sentry-like box in the next street, where the man was sitting the night through beside that long, curious thing, half ladder, half monstrous cannon, on its high wheels. We meant to have a chat with him, but he has had a warning, and we come up to see him throw off his flat-topped sailor-cap, clap on his brass helmet, and the next moment he has unhooked his machine from the ring in the pavement, and, with a policeman at his side, they are trundling the fire-escape at a round trot towards a neighbouring street, where there is the whirring sound of a rattle going.

We are none too soon. It is a shop on fire, and smoke and flame are coming out of the holes in the shutters. Alarmed by the policeman on his beat, the inhabitants are at the second-floor window, shrieking for help; while one woman, in her night-dress, who seems to have retained her presence of mind, tells the policeman below that the staircase is on fire, and that retreat is cut off.

"No, no!" shouts the escape-man to one frantic woman. "Keep still! don't throw yourself out—I'm coming!"

As he speaks, he has run his machine, with its wire-bellied ladder, up against the house, and lashed the wheels so that they cannot run back.

But the ladder only reaches a little above the first floor, leaving a dozen feet between the top and the second-floor windows of the lofty modern house.

A wire cord is pulled, however, and a second ladder rises from the first, reaching well to the upper floor; and over these the escape-man steadily, and without a symptom of hurry, ascends.

In our excitement we are angry with him for his leisurely movements; but he knows his business, and the value of the motto, *Festina lente*. So he "hastens slowly;" for he is an old sailor, and feels that in cases of life and death a calm head will win, where an excited brain will lose.

The poor creatures are shrieking wildly; for the fire is burning below them with a fierce roar, and the escape-man and the first-floor windows are hidden in a dense cloud of lurid smoke; but he is soon by their side, and instinctively seizing the most frantic of the party, he says a few words of advice, and descends the slight ladder to where the wire shoot commences—a perilous journey, for the woman he holds with one arm round her, struggles in her fear. The ladder bends and shakes beneath the double weight, but he reaches the part he seeks in safety, places the trembling woman in the wire, and she glides down—to be thrust by the police into a four-wheeled cab that has just come up.

Meanwhile two boys have boldly descended the ladder themselves, and glide down the shoot, leaving the gallant fellow to save two more, the brave woman coming last.

It is none too soon, for as the fireman reaches the shoot and pulls the fly-ladder away, it is already scorching; but the wood can be repaired, and it has done, with its manager, a good night's work before the escape is dragged away.

There is no one in the street besides the cabman and two policemen, but already there is a distant rattle of wheels and the tramping of horses, which leave a train of sparks behind from their hoofs and the engine fire as they tear along. One policeman runs to fetch the turncock, and another to telegraph for more engines; and it is quite time, for the house is blazing furiously, and there is a timber-yard across the way.

Here come half a dozen of the workers by night,

though, followed by a dozen idlers. The gas flashes on shining helmets and a red engine, and the horses are pulled up short. The steam is up already, the hose are soon attached; a half-dressed man runs up to draw a plug, and a geyser of water shoots up in the street, supplied by which the panting little steam fire-engine is soon sending columns of water in at the burning windows, and cooling the smoking piles of wood in the opposite yard.

Leaving these watchful toilers of the night to finish their task, we follow a hansom cab, whose shabby horse tells that it is one devoted to the night.

The cabman knows his work, and paying no heed to the tipsy hail of a man who has been wrecked in the street, and is clinging to a lamp-post as if it were the mast of his craft, which alone stands firm in the midst of, to him, heaving billows of flagstones and rocks of area railings—cabby drives steadily on, noting the time—half-past two—by the illuminated clock that looms up like a great moon over the Parliament Houses. Over it a bright star shines, which tells that the House is still sitting, so the cabman knows he has yet time; and pausing a short distance from a building whose windows are well lit, he hails a comfortable motherly-looking woman, who erected her stall and lit her fire at twelve o'clock precisely, and works by night, behind her glistening coffee-cans and shining cups and saucers.

Here, while the cabman is partaking of a hot cup and a couple of thick slices of bread-and-butter, a busy man runs by with five thin sheets of paper in his hand, on which, by means of a style and carbonic paper, he has written at one operation five paragraphs, detailing the alarming fire, and gallant rescue of the inhabitants, and now all depends upon getting to the newspaper offices in time. He rushes into the well-lit building by us, darts out, and pants along the street to other offices, congratulating himself on his speed; and probably he is rewarded by seeing all in the morning papers a few hours later. Great lumbering red post-office vans hurry in the same direction, to bear the leather bags to St. Martin's-le-Grand, which is ablaze with light, and full of busy silent sorters, who seize bag after bag, turn out its contents, and make them ready to distribute to the London that soon will begin to wake.

The coffee-stall keeper does a busy trade, and when the cabman has paid for his cheap meal, he goes and waits near the well-lit building for an expected fare.

As he goes a cab drives up to another great building that he passes, and two policemen lift out an insensible figure, which they bear into a well-lit hall, where sits a porter, who touches a bell, and a few minutes later the insensible man—run over by a cab—is lying upon a table, while a loud bell is clanging, summoning dressers to be present as the night-surgeon performs an operation which will save the sufferer's life—otherwise he would die; and all this while London is supposed to be asleep!

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