

Slaves of the Docks

Manchester Chronicle: I don't know whether I'd rather be Maxim Gorky's "Dock thief" than any one of the fellows I saw tearing themselves to pieces this morning in the struggle for cheap bread, cheap beer, and a more or less insanitary home.

I was watching some dock laborers pulling, pushing, twisting, and wrenching themselves in getting some thick and long logs of wood from the hold of an old ship in No. 16 dock.

"Good God!" I thought to myself, "and the best of us may have to come to it after all—one never knows!"

You must not suppose for a moment that all dock laborers—Godforsaken as they may look in their industrial hades—are the Sikes and Hooligans of society. Nothing of the kind.

They help more than any other class, I admit, to keep up the petty criminal annals of all our big, busy ports. Police courts there are black with the crimes of dock laborers. And the Jago of the docker is no less thrilling than that of Arthur Morrison's.

And what of the record of dock tragedies and dock heroism, which one might cull from the unimaginative documents in the alcoves of the corners' courts? I have glanced through these at one of the courts. I came away thinking what a fine opportunity of adding one more piece of realism to his numerous volumes Emile Zola missed through not being acquainted with the conditions of English dock laborers. Still the material is there for any English Zola who cares to come forward.

But, there are among the docks examples of pluck which some men will show to be independent of the help of friends, relatives or charity. "Facllis est descensus Averni!" And often when men begin to sink morally and socially, when they begin to sink through this or that, or some other misfortune, they gravitate towards the docks, towards that grim, grey world of the casual laborer, fearing the descension, as if they were going to the devil before their time.

A Scholar.

Why, one time a man—a man of good breeding, education, and opulent relatives—used to come and regale his classical knowledge with me o' nights—o' nights sometimes when the wind was whistling and thundering about the docks. And at 4 o'clock in the morning you might have seen him wending his way towards the grain warehouses skirting some dock or other, to earn just enough to keep himself, his wife, and his children on mere bread and butter and cheap potatoes.

"It's easy," he used to exclaim, "to sink to that level"—pointing to the docks. "But, my good man, once in, how to get out is the trouble!"

Well, I say, I was watching some dockers tear themselves to pieces. There was a noise behind me as of men rushing somewhere.

I followed and as I did so the pursuers increased. They ultimately settled at a stand adjoining No. 14 dock.

Of course I knew what they were after. They were after a job.

The arrival of a cotton ship was expected, and fifty-six men were wanted to help to unload the bales for the Lancashire spinning mills. Fifty-six men were wanted, and here were, at least, one hundred fellows. One hun-

dred fellows for sixty-six men's jobs! That is the kind of thing which is the cause of so much tragedy in dock life; of so much poverty, profanity, and hellishness in the homes, and the streets, and the jerry-shops of the dockers.

The Consciousness of Strength.

And there they were—one hundred men!—young men, middle-aged men, and old men. Broad-shouldered men, pale-faced men, crippled men, hungry-looking men, and strong men—strong men buoyed up by an air of confidence. They were buoyed up because they knew that physical strength there was more than character. They knew that here they—the young and muscular—were the fittest to survive. They had, day by day, seen their weaker brothers, their older brothers pitilessly tumbled to the wall.

And an overseer, with a red face, a well-fed body, a book and a pencil, came to select the fifty-six men he wanted; he came to select them much as he would select cattle for the shambles, or just as an eastern plutocrat, in the old days, chose his women slaves from the public market-place.

The fifty-six needed men were chosen. The others—the rejected, the human overflow—they "slunk" away as if they had committed some crime against society. No doubt the poor beggars had, but whether society was the aggressor or not—well, that's a knotty problem.

They "slunk" away. And it is in those that have to "slink" away that one may measure much of the cause of crime, the cause of immorality, the cause of starvation, of intemperance, of insanity, of physical inefficiency, and of the unemployableness of middle-aged men in a city of docks and ships and casual labor.

"Where'er yer goin' to, Bill?" one of them asked his mate, standing near to me.

"I dun know," said Bill, with a snarl, "an' it don't matter, either," his under lip protruding beyond the upper.

And I learned that Bill had been to four stands that morning, and had failed on each occasion to get a job. He started the round breakfastlessly, and ended so.

Dead to Emotion.

But Bill took it all as though it had to be—couldn't be helped. He took it all as though it were part and parcel of his fate, part and parcel of what experience had convinced him to expect.

Those emotions that bring tears to the eyes of some men were dead enough in Bill and his mate.

"Can yer give us a nip o' tobacco, guvner?" said Bill to me, taking advantage of my apparent interest in him and his mate. "So help me, I ain't had a smoke today, guvner!"

Probably Bill was uttering an untruth, but I'm not going to blame him. Bill and his equally unfortunate pal plunged into my pouch, filled their dirty pipes, felt in all their pockets without discovering a match.

"Match, guvner?" asked Bill. I handed him a box. They lit their pipes and smoked them, not as men smoke in an easy chair after a sub-

stantial meal. They lit their pipes and puffed at them like men who want to stifle hunger.

I was wondering why they had been rejected. Of course, I had an idea.

Bill's mate, through a hard and harsh and somewhat inhuman life had been made old before his time, been made old at forty. He was thin and pale, and weak in the legs.

As for Bill himself, he said: "I ne'er bin the same, guvner, since the smash on the —," and he mentioned a ship's name. "Yer never heard o' the smash, guvner? Yer see, there were six ov us workin' on the deck, when the main jib ov a crane gav' way, an' drop slap-bang on six on us. Michael O'Flaherty was knocked to the bottom o' the hold, sir. An' they brought him up dead—ah, Mike was dead as the jib itself, he was, was Mike."

And Bill's mate nodded in assent, and said: "He was, Bill."

"Yes, Mike was dead," repeated Bill. "He was dead, and owid Bill Barley, what keeps the 'Dockers' Spit'—well, Mike was dead an' he owed Billy two-an'-four for a night's spree, an' his pals paid it awf in memory o' Mike what was dead—as dead as the jib itself, guvner!"

"He was, Bill," again said Bill's mate.

"Well, yer see, guvner, I was carried to the big place there"—pointing to the hospital—"an' I lay there for eight weeks with all my innerds awry—never been the same bloke since, guvner—can't do a day's work the same; an' these divvils"—meaning the stevedores and foremen—"knows it; they knows it, guvner!"

And Bill re-lit his pipe and scratched his chin with the uncharred end of the match. He re-lit his pipe, drawing at it as if he wanted to suppress the hunger which was driving him not to tears, but to profanity and desperate thoughts.

An "All-in" Fight.

He struck another of my matches, and as the light glowed in his hard, wrinkled, thick-skinned face, those who had been selected for the job filed past us, towards the incoming ship, filed past us laughing, jesting and caring not a—nearly said a damn—well not caring the snap of the finger for the uncertain outlook of the rejected.

They knew that it was all in the fight. They knew that they might be hurled at one side on the morrow. They knew that it was no use being in the dumps about what was inevitable.

And Bill said, "Don't care that much for miself, guvner!" and he waved his dirty, knarled fingers in the air. "Don't care that much for miself, guvner! I knows, an' my mate knows, wheer we can pinch a meal. We mebbe cop't—but waat odds! Don't chre for miself, guvner—it's the wife at 'ome, and' the kids at 'ome!"

And Bill paused. Afterwards he exclaimed, "My Gord, guvner, what'll they do when I goes 'ome an' tells 'em as I've had no luck agen? Do yo' think I can face it sober? Blast 'em! They winnat have me now—the stev-dores. But before the smash—I told yo' about the smash, guvner—I were woth three or four 'o these divvils"—and he pointed toward the weird procession—the "Jolly Beggars"—wending and winding towards the expected cotton-ship.

"I could make my six bob a day then, guvner—an' never be short ov a job, never! But like my mate—what's called Bill like miself—I don't earn six bob a wik now!"

And Bill stepped on one side to let a lurry pass heavily laden with foreign goods.

"But what about gettin' something to eat?" I asked.

"Ah, well now," said Bill. "Ah, well now," he repeated. "Thar's somethin', o' course, that mun be done. But there's only three ways, guvner—either take stinking charity, steal, or send the missus—send the missus out!" Then in a whisper: "Do yo' know what that means, guvner?"

I was too dumfounded at the moment to say anything. The suggestion was not new to me. A few weeks' investigation into the social and domestic conditions of dockers had opened my eyes to the meaning before. But never before had I heard it from the lips of a man who confessed that he had done it!

Since the Smash.

Bill had been made hard—as hard as nails—by rough experience. And since the "smash" there appeared no ordinary crime to which he had not been forced to stoop. Remember, since the "smash."

"But what odds," he kept on saying to me; "I was a bit of all right before the smash!"

And so he might have been. "Give us a copper, guvner," he asked me as I showed signs of leaving him and his mate.

"And you'll take some of it home to the wife and children?" I said.

"S'elp me God, guvner, I will!"

But do you think he did? Not he. It doesn't matter how I got to know, but Bill and his mate had a good hour or so with the money; they treated one or two of their pals in the bargain.

Mothers! Mothers!! Mothers!!!

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"What a hard wretch!" you say. No doubt. But don't forget the nasty trick that fate had played upon him, and the way that society had neglected him.

I know that when I've seen Bill and his like in another dock—the police court dock—I've, somehow or other, had a sort of sympathy for them!

Tolstol in His Home.

Flynt in Success! By all odds the most interesting feature that Russia allowed me to see was Count Tolstol. And yet I had never read any of Tolstol's novels before meeting him, and my notions of his altruism were vague, indeed—about what the ideas are of people who have never been in Russia or seen Tolstol, and who, on learning that you have been there and met him, ask immediately: "Say, on the level, is he a fakir or not?"

Once and for all, so far as my simple intercourse with him is concerned, it may be most boldly declared that he never was a fakir—no more of one when he was sampling all the vices he could hear of, than he is now in urging others not to follow his example as an explorer of Viceedom.

The man at Yasnaya Polyana, in 1896, was a fairly well preserved old gentleman, with white beard, sunken gray eyes, overhanging bushy eyebrows, and a slight stoop in the shoulders, which were carrying, I think, pretty close to seventy years of age.

The place looked neglected and unkept in many respects, but the two remaining wings of the old mansion were roomy and comfortable. Eight children of the original sixteen were living at the time of my visit, ranging in years from thirty and over to fourteen. The countess was the "boss" of the establishment in and out of the house. What she said of a morning constituted the law for the day, so far as work was concerned. She had assistants, and I think a superintendent, to help her, but she was the final authority in matters of management.

The count did not appear to take any active part in the direction of affairs. He spent his time writing, riding, walking, and visiting with the guests, of whom there were a goodly number. At one time he may have worked in the fields with the peasants, but in July of 1896 he did not share any of their toil—at least I personally did not see him at work among them.

What the countess really thought about the whole business I never found out. We had one short conversation about the count and his work, during which she delivered herself of these remarks: "You will hear many things here that I do not agree with—I believe it is better to be and do than to preach." I judged from these sentiments that Tolstoism as a cult had not captured her. But that she thought much of the count as a man and husband was evident from her solicitous care of him.

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