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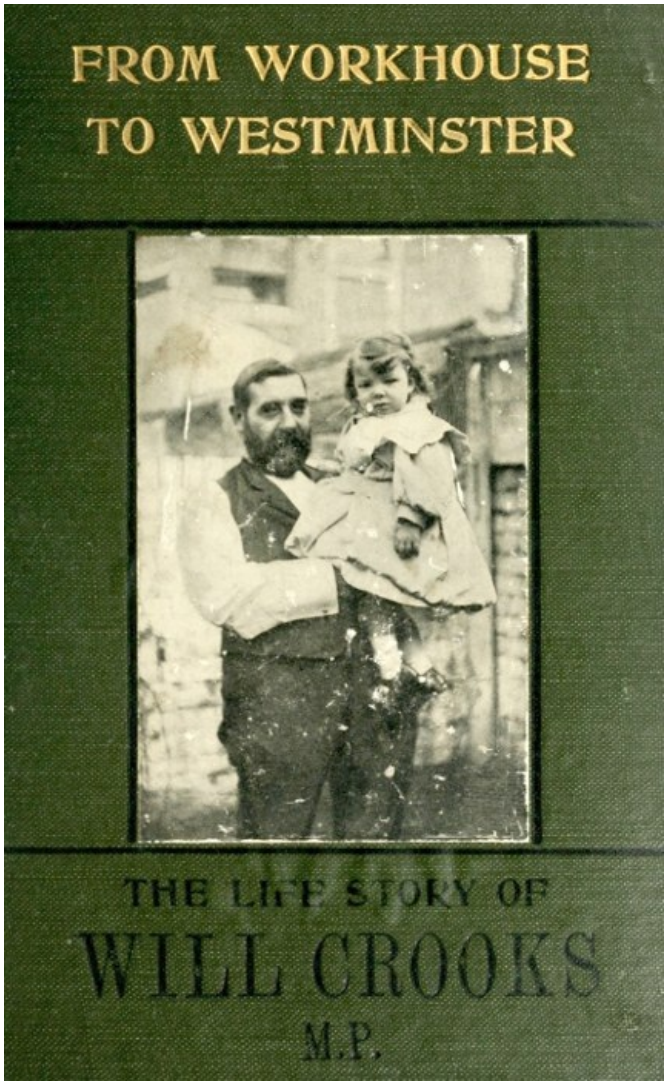
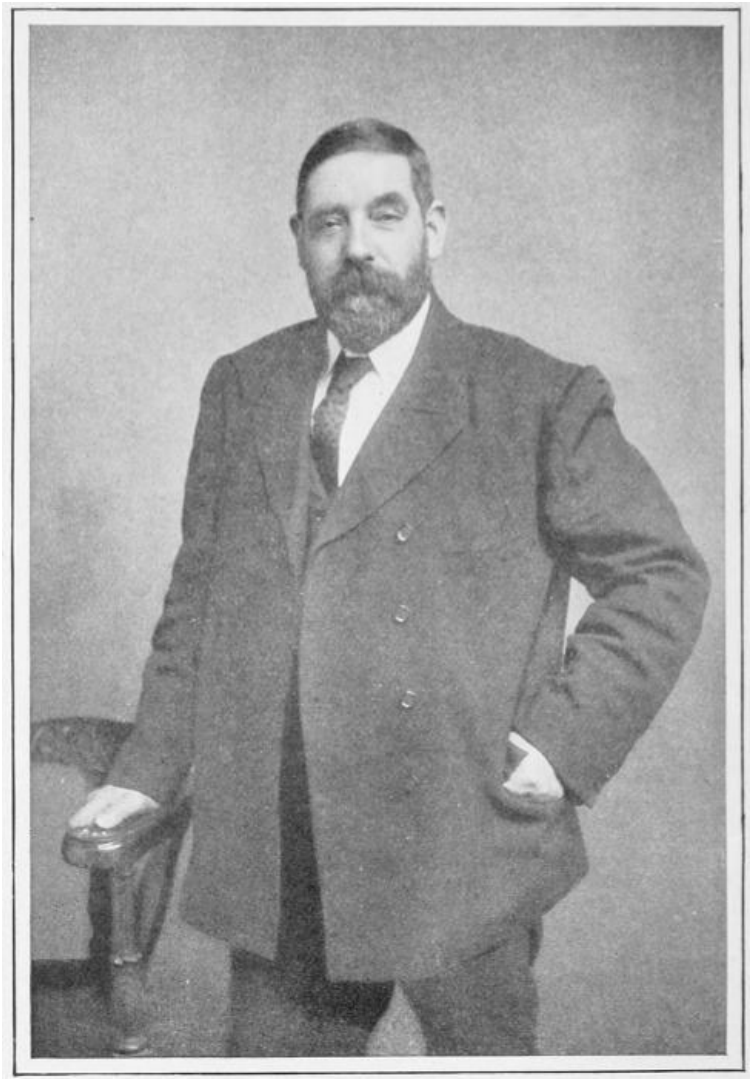
FROM WORKHOUSE TO WESTMINSTER





WILL CROOKS, M.P.

Photo: G. Dendry.

FROM WORKHOUSE TO WESTMINSTER

The Life Story of WILL CROOKS, M.P.

By GEORGE HAW

WITH INTRODUCTION BY G. K. CHESTERTON

FOUR FULL-PAGE PLATES

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TO

MRS. WILL CROOKS

THIS SLIGHT RECORD OF HER HUSBAND'S CAREER

IS DEDICATED BY THE AUTHOR

PREFACE

[Pg vii]

This record of the career of a man whom I have known intimately in his public and private life for over a dozen years can claim at least one distinction. It is the first biography of a working man who has deliberately chosen to remain in the ranks of working men as well as in their service. From the day in the early 'nineties when he was called upon to decide between a prospective partnership in a prosperous business and the hard, joyless life of a Labour representative, with poverty for his lot and slander for his reward, he has adhered to the principle he then laid down, consistently refusing ever since the many invitations received from various quarters to come up higher. There have been endless biographies of men who have risen from the ranks of Labour and then deserted those ranks for wealthy circles. Will Crooks, in his own words, has not risen from the ranks; he is still in the ranks, standing four-square with the working classes against monopoly and privilege.

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This book would have been an autobiography rather than a biography could I have had my way. Nor was I alone in urging Crooks to write the story of his life, as strenuous in its poverty as it has been in its public service. He always argued that that was not in his way at all—that, in fact, he did not believe in men sitting down to write about themselves any more than he believed in men getting up to talk about themselves.

So I have done the next best thing. Since the interpretation depends upon the interpreter, I have tried, in writing this account of his life, to make him the narrator as often as I could. Most of the incidents in his career I have given in his own words, mainly from personal talks we have had together during our years of friendship, sometimes by our own firesides, sometimes amid the stress of public life, sometimes during long walks in the streets of London. Nor do any of the incidents lose in detail or in verity by reason of many of those cherished conversations having taken place long before either of us ever dreamed they would afterwards be pieced together in book form.

Not to Crooks alone am I indebted for help in compiling this book. I owe much to members of his family, to my wife, and to other friends of his.

GEORGE HAW.

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INTRODUCTION

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Mr. Will Crooks, as I know him in his own house at Poplar and in that other House at Westminster, always seems to me to be something far greater than a Labour Member of Parliament. He stands out as the supreme type of the English working classes, who have chosen him as one of their representatives.

Representative government, a mystical institution, is said to have originated in some of the monastic orders. In any case, it is evident that the character of it is symbolic, and that it is subject to all the advantages and all the disadvantages of a symbol. Just exactly as a religious ritual may for a time represent a real emotion, and then for a time cease to represent anything, so representative government may for a time represent the people, and for a time cease to represent anything. But the peculiar difficulties attaching to the thing called representative government have not been fully appreciated. The great difficulty of representative governments is simply this: that the representative is supposed to discharge two quite definite and distinct functions. There is in his position the idea of being a picture or copy of the thing he represents. There is also the idea of being an instrument of the thing he represents, or a message from the thing he represents. The first is like the shadow a man throws on the wall; the second is like the [Pg xiv] stone that he throws over the wall. In the first sense, it is supposed that the representative is like the thing he represents. In the second case it is only supposed that the representative is useful to the thing he represents. In the first case, a parliamentary representative is used strictly as a parliamentary representative. In the second case a parliamentary representative is used as a weapon. He is used as a missile. He is used as something to be merely thrown against the enemy; and those who merely throw something against the enemy do not ask especially that the thing they throw shall be a particular copy of themselves. To send one's challenge is not to send one's photograph. When Ajax hurled a stone at his enemy, it was not a stone carved in the image of Ajax. When a modern general causes a cannon-ball to be fired, he is not understood to indicate that the contours of the cannon-ball represent in any exact way the curves of his own person. In short, we can in modern representative politics use a politician as a missile without using him, in the fullest sense of the word, as a symbol.

In this sense most of our representatives in modern representative government are merely used as missiles. Mr. Balfour is a missile. Mr. Balfour is hurled at the heads of his enemies like a boomerang or a javelin. He is flung by the great mass of mediocre Tory squires. He is flung, not because he is at all like them, for that he obviously is not. He is flung because he is a particularly bright and sharp missile; that is to say, because he is so very unlike the men who fling him. Here, then, is the primary paradox of representative government. Men elect a representative half [Pg xv] because he is like themselves and half because he is not like themselves. They elect a representative half because he represents them and half because he misrepresents them. They choose Mr. Balfour (let us say) half because he does what they would do and half because he does what they could never do at all.

We are told that the Labour movement will be an exception to all previous rules. The Labour movement has been no exception to this previous rule. The Labour Members, as a class, are not representatives, but missiles. Poor men elect them, not because they are like poor men, but because they are likely to damage rich men: an excellent reason. Labour Members are the exceptions among Labour men. As I have said, they are weapons, missiles, things thrown. Working-men are not at all like Mr. Keir Hardie. If it comes to likeness, working-men are rather more like the Duke of Devonshire. But they throw Mr. Keir Hardie at the Duke of Devonshire, knowing that he is so curiously shaped as to hurt anything at which he is thrown. Unless this is thoroughly understood, great injustice will necessarily be done to the Labour movement; for it is obvious on the face of it that Labour Members do not represent the average of labouring men. A man like Mr. J. R. Macdonald no more suggests a Battersea workman than he suggests a Bedouin or a Russian Grand Duke. These men are not the representatives of the democracy, but the weapons of the democracy. They are intended only to fulfil the second of those functions in the delegate which I have already defined. They are the instruments of the people. They are not the images of the people. They are fanatics for the things about which the people are good- [Pg xvi] humouredly convinced. They are philosophers about the things which are to the people an easy and commonplace religion. In a word, they are not representatives; they are not even ambassadors. They are declarations of war.

Such being the problem, we must reconcile ourselves to finding many of the Labour Members men of a definite and even pedantic class; men whose austere and lucid tone, whose elaborate economic explanations smack of something very different from the actual streets of London. This economic knowledge may be very necessary. It may remind us of our duties; but it does not remind us of the Walworth Road. It may enable a man to speak for the proletarians, but it does not enable a man to speak with them.

Now, if a man has a good rough-and-ready knowledge of the mechanics of Battersea and the labourers of Poplar; if the same man has a good rough-and-ready knowledge of the men in the House of Commons (a vastly inferior company); he will come out of both those experiences with one quite square and solid conviction, a conviction the grounds of which, though they may be difficult to define verbally, are as unshakable as the ground. He will come out with the conviction that there is really only one modern Labour Member who represents, who symbolises, or who even remotely suggests the real labouring men of London; and that is Mr. Will Crooks.

Mr. Crooks alone fulfils both the functions of the representative. He is a representative who, like Mr. Keir Hardie and the others, fights, cleaves a way, does something that only a man of talent [Pg xvii] could do, expresses the inexpressible, sacrifices himself. But also, unlike Mr. Keir Hardie, and the rest, he is a representative who represents. He is a picture as well as a projectile; he is the stone carved in the image of Ajax. He is really like the people for whom he stands. A man can realise this fact, merely as a fact, without implying any disrespect, for instance, to the Scotch ideality of Mr. Keir Hardie, or the Scotch strenuousness of Mr. John Burns. They are expressive of the English democracy, but not typical of it. The first characteristic of Mr. Crooks, which must strike anyone who has ever had to do with him, even for ten minutes, is this immense fact of the absolute and isolated genuineness of his connection with the working classes. To all the other Labour leaders we listen with respect on Labour matters, because they have been elected by labourers. To him alone we should listen if he had never been elected at all. Of him alone it can be said that if we did not accept him as a representative, we should still accept him as a type. I need not dwell, and indeed I feel no desire to dwell, on those qualities in Mr. Crooks which express just now the popular qualities of the populace. I feel more interest in the unpopular qualities of the populace.

The greatness of Mr. Crooks lies not in the fact that he expresses the claims of the populace, which twenty dons at Oxford would be ready to express; it is that he expresses the populace: its strong tragedy and its strong farce. He is not a demagogue. He is not even a democrat. He is a demos; he is the real King. And his chief characteristic, as I have suggested, is that he represents especially those popular good qualities which are unpopular in modern discussion. Will Crooks is [Pg xviii] to the ordinary London omnibus conductor or cabman exactly what Robert Burns was to the ordinary puritanical but passionate peasant of the Scotch Lowlands. He is the journeyman of genius. All that is good in them is better in him; but it is the same thing. Walt Whitman has perfectly expressed this attitude of the average towards the fine type. "They see themselves in him. They hardly know themselves, they are so grown."

In numberless points Mr. Crooks thus completes and glorifies the common character of the poor man. Take, for instance, the deep matter of humour: humour in which the English poor are certainly pre-eminent among all classes of the nation and all nations of the world. By all politicians, including Labour politicians, humour is only introduced exceptionally and elaborately;

by all politicians the comic anecdote is led up to with dextrous prefaces and deep intonations, as if it were something altogether unique and separate. All politicians take their own humour very seriously. Mr. Crooks recalls the real life of the streets in nothing so much as in the fact that humour is a constant condition. He and the poor exist in a normal atmosphere of amiable irony. If anything, they have to make an effort to become verbally serious: something of the same kind of earnest that it costs an ordinary member of Parliament to become witty. Anyone who has heard Mr. Crooks talk knows that his permanent mood is humorous. He is never without a story, but his face and his mind are humorous before he has even thought of the story. He lives, so to speak, in a state of expectant reminiscence. The man who said that "brevity was the soul of wit" told a lie; [Pg xix] nobody minds how long wit goes on so long as it is wit. Mr. Crooks belongs to that strong old school of English humour in which Dickens was supreme; that school which some moderns have called dull because it could go on for a long time being interesting.

I have merely taken this case of popular humour as one out of a hundred. A similar case of Mr. Crooks's popular sympathy might be found in his pathos, which is equally uncompromising and direct. Even his political faults, if they are faults, against which so much criticism has for a time been raised, have still this pervading quality, that they are essentially the popular faults. This instinct for a prompt and practical and hand-to-mouth benevolence, this instinct for giving a very good time to those who have had a very bad time, this is the very soul of that immense and astonishing altruism at which all social reformers have stood thunderstruck: the kindness of the poor to the poor. This attitude may or may not be the great vice of the governors; there is no doubt that it is the great virtue of the people. The charity of poor men to poor men has always been spontaneous, irregular, individual, liable therefore in its nature to some faults of confusion or of favouritism.

It is the misfortune of Mr. Crooks that alone among modern philanthropists and social reformers he has really been the typical poor man giving to poor men. This quality which has been seen and condemned in him is simply the quality which is the common and working morality of the London streets. You may like it; you may dislike it. But if you dislike it you are simply disliking the [Pg xx] English people. You have seen English people perhaps for a moment in omnibuses, in streets on Saturday nights, in third-class carriages, or even in Bank Holiday waggonettes. You have not yet seen the English people in politics. It has not yet entered politics. Liberals do not represent it; Tories do not represent it; Labour Members, on the whole, represent it rather less than Tories or Liberals. When it enters politics it will bring with it a trail of all the things that politicians detest; prejudices (as against hospitals), superstitions (as about funerals), a thirst for respectability passing that of the middle classes, a faith in the family which will knock to pieces half the Socialism of Europe. If ever that people enters politics it will sweep away most of our revolutionists as mere pedants. It will be able to point only to one figure, powerful, pathetic, humorous, and very humble, who bore in any way upon his face the sign and star of its authority.

G. K. Chesterton.

FROM WORKHOUSE TO WESTMINSTER

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I
EARLIEST YEARS IN A ONE-ROOMED HOME

Difference between "Will" and "William"—Early Memories—Crying for Bread—An Aspersion Resented—A Prophecy that has been Fulfilled—Will earns his First Half-Sovereign.

Will Crooks!

In the little one-roomed home where he was born at No. 2, Shirbutt Street, down by the Docks at Poplar, it was the earnest desire of all whom it concerned that he should be known to the world as William Crooks. The desire found practical expression in the register of Trinity Congregational Church in East India Dock Road close by. Thither, within a few weeks of his birth, in the year 1852, he was carried with modest ceremony and solemnly christened by a name which everybody ever since has refused to give to him.

For somehow "William Crooks" does not sound like the man at all. Looking at it gives you no suggestion of the good-humoured, hard-headed Labour man, known as familiarly to his colleagues in the House of Commons as he is to the great world of wage-earners outside by the [Pg 2] shorter and more expressive name of Will Crooks.

Born in poverty, the third of seven children, Will Crooks, who is blessed with keen powers of observation and a good memory, can carry his mind back to the days before he was put into breeches.

"I remember before my fourth year was out," I have heard him tell, "something of the public rejoicings on the declaration of peace after the Crimean War. The following year was also memorable to me as the time I witnessed troops of soldiers marching to the East India Docks on

the outbreak of the Mutiny."

Those were days of want and sorrow, as were many days that followed, in the little one-roomed home in East London. His father was a ship's stoker, who lost an arm by the starting of the engines one day when he was oiling the machinery as his vessel lay in the Thames.

"My very earliest recollections are associated with mother dressing father's arm day after day. I was only three years old at the time, but I know that all our privations dated from the day of this accident to my father, because he was forced to give up his work.

"It must have been with the aid of some good friends that at last my father got an old horse, hoping to earn a little by leading and carting; but nothing came of this small venture, and in time the horse had to be sold to pay the rent. Almost the only work of any kind that father, being thus [Pg 3] disabled, could get to do was an odd job as watchman.

"Those were very lean years indeed, and I don't know what we should have done but for mother. She used to toil with the needle far into the night and often all night long, slaving as hard as any poor sweated woman I have ever known, and I have known hundreds of such poor creatures. Many a time as a lad have I helped mother to carry the clothes she had made to Houndsditch. There were no trams running then, and the 'bus fare from Poplar to Aldgate was fourpence, a sum we never dared think of spending on a ride.

"My elder brother was as clever with the needle as many a woman, and often he would stay up all through the night with mother, helping her to make oil-skin coats."

One night, as the mother worked alone, young Will woke up in the little orange-box bedstead by the wall where he slept with a younger brother. Silently he watched her plying the needle at the table until he noticed tears trickling down her cheeks.

"What are you crying for, mother?"

"Never mind, Will, my boy. You go to sleep."

"But you must be crying about something, mother."

And then, in a doleful tone, she said, "It's through wondering where the next meal is coming from, my boy."

The little chap pretended to go to sleep soon after; but now and again he would peep cautiously [Pg 4] over the side of the box at his mother silently crying over her work at the table. And he puzzled his young head as to what it all meant.

"My mother crying because she can't get bread for us! Why can't she get bread? I saw plenty of bread in the shops yesterday. Do all mothers have to cry before they can get bread for their children?"

It was the first incident that made him think.

There was one morning, the morning after a Christmas Day of all times in the year, when his mother refused to let him or the others get up, even when she left the house. It was not until she returned after what seemed a long time, bringing with her a portion of a loaf, that she allowed them to get out of bed.

"It was many years afterwards before I learnt the reason for her strange conduct that Boxing Day morning. Then I found out that she had made a vow that her children should never get up unless there was some breakfast for them.

"We were so poor that we children never got a drop of tea for months together. It used to be bread and treacle for breakfast, bread and treacle for dinner, bread and treacle for tea, washed down with a cup of cold water. Sometimes there was a little variation in the form of dripping. At other times the variety was secured by there being neither treacle nor dripping. The very bread was so scarce that mother could not afford to allow the three eldest, of whom I was one, more than three slices apiece at a meal, while the four youngest got two and a half slices. Whenever [Pg 5] we could afford to buy tea or butter, it was only in ounces. Once my brother and I were sent to buy a whole quarter of a pound of butter—it turned out that auntie was coming to tea—and on the way we speculated seriously whether mother was going to open a shop."

Perhaps the first occasion upon which Crooks as a lad showed something of that spirited resentment at aspersions on the poor which ultimately led him into public life was one that arose in a cobbler's shop. He was about eight years old, when his father sent him back with a pair of boots that had been repaired to ask that a little more be done to them for the money.

"I don't know what he wants for his ninepence," said the cobbler, referring to the lad's father; "but, there!"—throwing the boots to his man—"put another patch on. He's only a poor beggar."

There was an angry cry from the other side, of the counter. "My father's not a poor beggar!" shouted the boy. "He's as good a man as you, and only wants what he has paid for."

If the boy thought much of the father the father thought much of the boy. It had often been his boast that "Our Will will do things some day."

One little fancy of the old man's was brought to my notice the morning after Crooks was first

returned to Parliament for Woolwich. His elder brother told me then of a little incident that took place over forty-five years before.

"We children were playing in the home together when young Will said something which made the dad look up surprised. And I heard him say to mother, 'That lad'll live to be either Lord Mayor of London or a Member of Parliament.'" [Pg 6]

The poverty deepened and darkened in the little one-roomed home during Will's boyhood. It soon became impossible even to spend an odd ninepence on boot repairs. The mother met this emergency as she met nearly all the others. She became the family cobbler, as she had all along been the family tailor. Often would she go on her knees, hammer in hand, mending the boots. The children could not remember the time when she did not make all their clothes.

"God only knows, God only will know, how my mother worked and wept," says Crooks. "With it all she brought up seven of us to be decent and useful men and women. She was everything to us. I owe to her what little schooling I got, for, though she could neither read nor write herself, she would often remark that that should never be said of any of her children. I owe to her wise training that I have been a teetotaller all my life. I owe it to her that I was saved from becoming a little wastrel of the streets, for, as a Christian woman, she kept me at the Sunday School and took me regularly to the Congregational Church where I had been baptised.

"I can picture her now as I used to see her when I awoke in the night making oil-skin coats by candle-light in our single room. Youngster though I was, I meant it from the very bottom of my heart when I used to whisper to myself, as I peeped at her from the little box-bedstead by the wall, 'Wait till I'm a man! Won't I work for my mother when I'm a man!'" [Pg 7]

He thought he was a man at thirteen, when he could bring home to her proudly five shillings every week, his wages in the blacksmith's shop. There came a memorable Saturday night when, having worked overtime all the week and earned an extra five shillings, he was paid his first half-sovereign. He threw on his coat and cap excitedly and ran all the way home from Limehouse Causeway, the half-sovereign clenched tightly in his hand, until he burst breathlessly into the little room, exclaiming:

"Mother, mother, I've earned half a sovereign, all of it myself, and it's yours, all yours, every bit yours!"

CHAPTER II
AS A CHILD IN THE WORKHOUSE

[Pg 8]

With an Idiot Boy in the Workhouse—Life in the Poor Law School at Sutton—At Home Once More—A Fashionable Knock for the Casual Ward—A Bread Riot.

But we must go back a few years—to the evil day when, the father being a cripple, the family have to enter the workhouse.

The mother had before this been forced to ask for parish relief. For a time the Guardians paid her two or three shillings a week and gave her a little bread. Suddenly these scanty supplies were stopped. The mother was told to come before the Board and bring her children.

Six of them, clinging timidly to her skirt, were taken into the terrible presence. The Chairman singled out Will, then eight years of age, and, pointing his finger at him, remarked solemnly:

"It's time that boy was getting his own living."

"He is at work, sir," was the mother's timid apology. "He gets up at a quarter to five every morning and goes round with the milkman for sixpence a week."

"Can't he earn more than that?"

"Well, sir, the milkman says he's a very willing boy and always punctual, but he's so little that he doesn't think he can pay him more than sixpence yet." [Pg 9]

And the little boy looked furtively at the great man in the great chair, never dreaming that the time would come when he would occupy that chair himself, and that almost the first order he would issue from it would be one putting an end to the bad practice of making mothers drag their young children before the Board.

On that unhappy afternoon the Guardians, firm in their resolve not to renew the out-relief, offered to take the children into the workhouse. The mother said 'No' at first, marching them all bravely home again. Stern want forced her to yield at last. The day came when she saw the five youngest, including Will, taken from home to the big poorhouse down by the Millwall Docks. The crippled father was admitted into the House at the same time.

They were put into a bare room like a vault, the father and two sons, while the three sisters were taken they knew not where. There the lads and their dad spent the night and the next day until the doctor saw them and passed them into the main workhouse building. Then Will lost sight of his father, though he was permitted to remain with his young brother and share with him the

same bed.

In the dormitory was an idiot boy, who used to ramble in his talk all through the night, keeping the others awake. Sometimes Will succeeded in coaxing his young brother off to sleep, but as for [Pg 10] himself, he would lie awake for hours listening to the strange talk of the idiot boy, and thinking of his mother. Often in the night the idiot boy would cry out for his own mother, leaving Will wondering who she was and where she was, and whether the plaintive cry of her imbecile child ever reached her ears in the night's stillness.

The lad was ravenously hungry all the time he spent in the workhouse. He often felt at times as though he could eat leather; yet every morning, when the "skilly" was served for breakfast, he could not touch it. Morning after morning, spurred on by hunger, he forced the spoon into his mouth, but the stomach revolted, and he always felt as though the first spoonful would turn him sick.

Somehow his father, away in the men's ward, got to know that young Will, who he knew could relish dry crusts at home with the best of them, was not able to eat the fare provided in the workhouse. The men occasionally got suet pudding, and one dinner-time the old man secretly smuggled his portion into his pocket. In the afternoon he made over to the children's quarters, hoping to hand it to Will. The pudding was produced, the lad's hungry eyes lighted up, when, behold! it was snatched away, almost from his very grasp. The burly figure of the labour master interposed between father and son. This was a breach of discipline not to be tolerated in the workhouse.

"But the boy's hungry, and this is what I've saved from my own dinner," argued the father (all in [Pg 11] vain). "You don't know how that boy likes suet pudding."

For two or three weeks the Crooks children were kept in the workhouse, before being taken away in an omnibus with other boys and girls to the Poor Law School at Sutton. Then came the most agonising experience of all to Will. They parted him from his young brother. In the great hall of the school he would strain his eyes, hoping to get a glimpse of the lone little fellow among the other lads, but he never set eyes on him again until the afternoon they went home together.

"Every day I spent in that school is burnt into my soul," he has often declared since.

He could not sleep at night nor play with the other boys, haunted as he was by the strange dread that he must have committed some unknown crime to be taken from home, torn from his young brother, and made a little captive in what seemed a fearful prison. The nights seemed endless, and were always awful. He whispered his fears on the fourth day to another Poplar boy who was there.

"Ah! you just wait until Sunday," said the other lad. "Every Sunday's like a fortnight."

When Sunday did come it proved to be one lasting agony. He thought time could not be made more terrible to children anywhere. They had dinner at twelve and tea at six, confined during the yawning interval in the dull day-room with nothing to do but to look at the clock, and then out of the window, and then back at the clock again.

During the week, after school hours, he hung about in abject misery all the time. From the day he [Pg 12] went in to the day he left he never smiled. One afternoon he was loitering in the playground as the matron showed some visitors round.

"Who is that sad-faced boy?" he heard one of them ask.

"Oh, he's one of the new-comers," the matron answered. "He'll soon get over it."

The new-comer said to himself, "I wonder whether you would soon get over it if you had been taken from your mother and parted from a young brother?"

How long he stayed in the workhouse school he has never been able to tell. It could not have been very long in point of time, but to the sensitive lad it seemed an age. An indescribable burden was lifted from his shoulders when one day at dinner someone called him by his name.

He sprang to his feet.

"Go to the tailor's shop after dinner and get your own clothes."

"What for, sir?"

"You are going home!"

His heart leapt up. The boys crowded round him, wishing they were in his place. Poor miserable lads, he parted from them with feelings of the deepest pity.

At the gate he met his young brother and sisters again, and they were taken back to Poplar, to be welcomed with open arms by their mother. She had worked harder than ever to add to the family [Pg 13] income in order to justify her in going before the Guardians to ask that her children be restored to her own keeping.

Not until thirty-three years later could he command the courage to enter that same workhouse school again. Many changes for the good had been made, but the sight of the same hall, with the same peculiar odour, brought back the same old feeling of utter friendlessness and despair. And

he saw in imagination a sad-faced boy sitting on the form, straining his eyes in the vain search for his young brother.

The mother had moved to a cheaper room when the children returned home from the workhouse school. It was in a small house in the High Street, next door to the entrance to the casual ward, with the main workhouse building in the rear. This was Will's home for the rest of his boyhood.

There, with the workhouse surrounding him as it were, he got daily glimpses of the misery that hovers round the Poor Law. Men and women would sit for hours huddled on the pavement in front of his home waiting for the casual ward to open. Will came bounding out of the house in the dull dawn to go to work as an errand boy one morning, when he kicked violently against a bundle of rags on the pavement.

There was a cry of pain in a woman's voice, and the lad pulled up sharp, filled with remorse:

"I'm *so* sorry, missus; I am really. I didn't see you."

"All right, kiddie. I saw you couldn't help it. I'm used to being kicked about the streets." [Pg 14]

But the lad could not forget it. And when he came home at dinner-time, "Oh, mother," he said, "I kicked a poor woman outside our door this morning, and I wouldn't have done it for anything, had I known."

Sometimes a poor wayfarer would knock at the door, mistaking it for the entrance to the casual ward. In answer to a series of sharp raps one night Will raced to the door with the mother of another family who rented the front room. She got there first and opened it, to find a tramp on the step.

"Is this the casual ward?"

"The casual ward!" cried the woman in disgust, turning away and leaving Will to direct him. "That's a nice fashionable kind of knock to come with asking for the casual ward!"

It was from this house that he saw a bread riot in the winter of 1866, when he got the first of many impressions he was to receive of what a winter of bad trade means to a district of casual labour like Poplar. Hundreds of men used to wait outside the workhouse gates for a 2-lb. loaf each. The baker's waggon drove up with the bread one afternoon while they waited. The ravenous crowd would not let it pass into the workhouse yard. They seized the bread, frantically struggling with each other. Almost as fiercely they tore the bread to pieces when they got it and devoured it on the spot.

Sights like these of his childhood, with the shuddering memories of his own dark days in the workhouse and the workhouse school, made him register a vow, little chap though he was at the time, that when he grew up to be a man he would do all he could to make better and brighter the lot of the inmates, especially that of the boys and girls. [Pg 15]

Some children's dreams come true, and this was one of them.

CHAPTER III [Pg 16]
SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS

> The School of Life—Borrowed Magazines—Reading Dickens—Crooks's Humour and Story-Telling Faculty—Discovering Scott—Declaiming Shakespeare—Books that influenced him.

Little education of the ordinary kind came into Will's life as a lad. We have seen that he turned out before five o'clock every morning at eight years of age to take milk round for a wage of sixpence a week. Soon after coming out of the workhouse he got a job as errand boy at a grocer's at two shillings a week. At eleven he was in a blacksmith's shop, where he stayed until at fourteen he was apprenticed to the trade of cooper.

"In a sense, my training for becoming a servant of the people has been better than a University training," he tells you. "My University has been the common people—the common people whom Christ loved, and loved so well that He needs must make so many of us. The man trained as I have been amid the poor streets and homes of London, who knows where the shoe pinches and where there are no shoes at all, has more practical knowledge of the needs and sufferings of the people than the man who has been to the recognised Universities.

"I am the last to despise education. I have felt the need of more education all my life. But I do protest against the idea that only those who have been through the Universities or public schools are fit to be the nation's rulers and servants. Legislation by the intellectuals is the last thing we want. See to what extremes it sometimes leads. There was a case under the Workmen's Compensation Act when eight leading lawyers argued for hours whether a well thirty feet deep was a building thirty feet high. Finally they decided solemnly that it was not. That was legislation by the intellectuals being carried out by the intellectuals." [Pg 17]

He once complained in the House of Commons that Mr. Balfour—then Prime Minister—was using

a dead language in answering a Labour Member's question. He had asked whether the Aliens Bill would take precedence over Redistribution. Mr. Balfour replied that the two things were not at all *in pari materia*.

"Will the right hon. gentleman please speak in English?" pleaded the questioner. "It is well known both inside and outside this House that I do not know Latin."

Mr. Balfour said that what he meant to convey was that you could not compare resolutions with a Bill, because a Bill involved a number of different stages, while the other dealt with the matter as one substantive question.

"A very loose translation," remarked a Member, amid the laughter of the House.

Crooks was learning life at the time other lads are usually learning Latin. And his knowledge of [Pg 18] life, carrying with it an unbounded sympathy with suffering, an intense love of truth and justice, has proved more useful to him and to the class he serves than any knowledge of a dead language would.

Yet it was a pleasure to him to go down to Oxford in the early part of 1906 to speak on the need for University men taking up social work. It was a greater pleasure to receive on his return the following letter from one in authority at Christ Church College:—

> I am writing a line thanking you again for your kindness in coming and speaking here on Saturday. From all sides I hear nothing but commendation of your speech. There was a considerable number of our men present, and as I surveyed them I was glad to see that some who are really thinking about things were impressed.

Crooks always tells you that his best "schoolmaster" was his mother, the righteous working woman who could not read a line or write a word.

She and one of her boys spent nearly three hours one evening preparing a letter to a far-away sister, the mother painfully composing the sentences, the lad painfully writing them down. The glorious epistle was at last complete, the first great triumph of a combined intellectual effort between mother and son. Proudly they held the letter to the candle-light to dry the ink, when the flame caught it, and behold! the work of three laborious hours destroyed in three seconds. It was more than they could bear. Mother and son sat down and cried together.

THE CROOKS FAMILY.

(*Will is the second child from the right, looking over his father's left shoulder.*)

"I have nothing but praise for my other schoolmaster," says Crooks. "I mean the schoolmaster at [Pg 19] the old George Green schools in East India Dock Road. They were elementary schools then, and we paid a penny a week, though even that small sum for all of us meant a sacrifice for mother. The schoolmaster there was essentially a kind man. He had me under his teaching in the Sunday school as well as in the day school. During the few years I was with him prior to my workhouse days I learnt much that has been of service to me ever since."

Neither books nor papers found their way into Shirbutt Street. The first paper he remembers reading was *The British Workman*, brought occasionally to the little house in High Street just after the workhouse days. Then came a short spell of penny dreadfuls, from among which "Alone

in a Pirate's Lair" stands out in memory riotous and reeking to this day.

Though the mother could not read herself, she encouraged her children by borrowing occasional magazines and inviting them to read the contents to her and her neighbours.

"I was about ten or eleven when *The Leisure Hour* and *The Sunday at Home* were started, and mother and the neighbours used to get these and ask us boys to read the stories to them.

"I owe something to an old man who went round the poor people's houses selling books. From him I got some of Dickens's novels. I suddenly found myself in a new and delightful world. Having [Pg 20] been in the workhouse myself, how I revelled in Oliver Twist! How I laughed at Bumble and the gentleman in the white waistcoat! I have seen that white waistcoat, pompous and truculent, administering the Poor Law many times since.

"After the unceasing hunger I experienced in the workhouse, you can guess how I sympathised with Oliver in his demand for more. I thought that a delightful touch in one of our L.C.C. day schools the other day. The teacher asked a class what books they liked best.

"'Oliver Twist,' came one little chap's answer.

"'Why?'

"'Because he asked for more.'"

This early reading of Dickens may have helped to develop his own quaint, rich humour. Will Crooks often reminds one of Charles Dickens. He knows the Londoner of to-day, his oddities, whimsicalities, his trials, humours, and sorrows, as thoroughly as Dickens knew the Londoner of fifty years ago. Many a time I have journeyed with him down to his home in East London, after he had finished a hard day's work in Parliament or on the London County Council, possibly having been defeated on some public question in a way that would make many men despair; and yet how easily he has put aside all the worries and work, and made the journey delightful by his unfailing fund of Cockney anecdotes. He is one of the rare story-tellers you meet with in a lifetime. The charm, too, of all his stories is that they never relate to what he has read, but always to what he [Pg 21] has heard or observed himself.

Some unknown friend at Yarmouth, who doubtless had heard him speak, seems to have been impressed by this ready way he has of taking his illustrations from the common things around him. Under the initials A. H. S. he sent the following "Limerick" to *London Opinion*:—

> We smile when he's funny, or witty,
> We yawn when he's wise: more's the pity,
> For this best of the "Crooks"
> Draws from life, not from books,
> When he pleads for the people or city.

After Dickens the lad discovered Scott. "It was an event in my life when, in an old Scotch magazine, I read a fascinating criticism of 'Ivanhoe.' Nothing would satisfy me until I had got the book; and then Scott took a front place among my favourite authors.

"I was in my teens then, reading everything I could lay hands on. I used to follow closely public events in the newspapers. Not long ago I met a man in a car with whom I remonstrated for some rude behaviour to the passengers. He looked at me in amazement when I called him by his name.

"'Why,' he said, 'you must be that boy Will Crooks I knew long ago. Do you know what I remember about you? I can see you now tossing your apron off in the dinner-hour and squatting down in the workshop with a paper in your hand.'"

Crooks was still an apprentice when, as he describes it, the great literary event of his life [Pg 22] occurred.

"On my way home from work one Saturday afternoon I was lucky enough to pick up Homer's 'Iliad' for twopence at an old bookstall. After dinner I took it upstairs—we were able to afford an upstairs room by that time—and read it lying on the bed. What a revelation it was to me! Pictures of romance and beauty I had never dreamed of suddenly opened up before my eyes. I was transported from the East End to an enchanted land. It was a rare luxury to a working lad like me just home from work to find myself suddenly among the heroes and nymphs and gods of ancient Greece."

The lad's imagination was also fired by "The Pilgrim's Progress."

"I often think of that splendid passage describing the passing over the river and the entry into Heaven of Christian and Faithful. I can sympathise with Arnold of Rugby when he said, 'I never dare trust myself to read that passage aloud.'"

While in the blacksmith's shop he learnt many portions of Shakespeare, with a decided preference for Hamlet. Often in the little forge the men would say, "Give us a bit of Shakespeare, Will." The lad, nothing loath, would declaim before them, more often than not in a mock heroic strain that greatly delighted his grimy workmates.

Like many other members of the Labour Party, he was greatly influenced in his youth by the principles of "Unto this Last" and "Alton Locke." Later in life he was set thinking seriously by a [Pg 23]

course of University Lectures on Political Economy delivered in Poplar by Mr. G. Armitage Smith.

Quietly he began building up a little library of his own, supplemented in later years by an occasional autograph copy from authors whose friendship he had made. Father Dolling, for instance, sent him a copy of his "Ten Years in a Portsmouth Slum," inscribed:—

> Will Crooks.—The story of a kind of trying to do in a different way what he is doing.—With the author's best Christmas wishes, 1898.

In the flyleaf of this book Crooks keeps the following letter, received after his election to Parliament from the author's sister:—

> Dear Mr. Crooks,—I have just seen the papers, and must send you a word of congratulation on your success. If, as I believe, the blessed dead are allowed to watch over and help us, I am sure my dear brother is thinking of you and praying that in your new sphere of usefulness you may be helped to do God's will.—Truly yours, Geraldine Dolling.

The book that he values most to-day is a pleasant little story for boys called "Joe the Giant Killer." It was given to him by the author, Dr. Chandler, Bishop of Bloemfontein, when rector of Poplar. The reason he values it so is because the printed dedication reads:—

"*To* WILL CROOKS, L.C.C.
In memory of many years
Of delightful comradeship in Poplar."

When, after the big victory in Woolwich, Crooks was able to add M.P. as well as L.C.C. after his name, there came among hundreds of other congratulations a cabled cheer from South Africa. It was signed "Chandler." [Pg 24]

CHAPTER IV [Pg 25]
ROUND THE HAUNTS OF HIS BOYHOOD

> Proud of his Birthplace—Famous Residents at Blackwall—Memories of Nelson's Flagship—Stealing a Body from a Gibbet—A Waterman who Remembered Dickens.

Of many interesting days spent with Crooks in Poplar, one stands out as the day on which he showed me some of the haunts of his boyhood.

Poplar is always picturesque with the glimpses it gives of ships' masts rising out of the Docks above the roofs of houses. With Crooks as guide, this rambling district of Dockland, foolishly imagined by many people to be wholly a centre of squalor, becomes as romantic as a mediæval town.

It was not always grey and poor, as so many parts of it are to-day, though even these are not without their quaint and pleasant places.

We wended through several of its grey streets, making for the river at Blackwall. Everywhere women and children, as well as men, whom we passed greeted Crooks cheerily.

"Can you wonder so many of our people take to drink?" And he pointed to the shabby little houses, all let out in tenements, in the street where he was born. "Look at the homes they are forced to live in! The men can't invite their mates round, so they meet at 'The Spotted Dog' of an evening. During the day the women often drift to the same place. The boys and girls cannot do their courting in these overcrowded homes. They make love in the streets, and soon they too begin to haunt the public-houses." [Pg 26]

He changed his tone when we entered the famous old High Street that runs between the West India Docks and Blackwall. He pointed out the house where he spent many years of his boyhood after his parents moved from Shirbutt Street. The old home is associated with his errand-boy experiences. In those days he finished work at midnight on Saturdays, and knowing that his parents would be in bed, he often lingered in the High Street into the early hours of Sunday, playing with other lads who, like himself, had just finished work.

As we continued our way down the High Street together, he surprised me by his wonderful knowledge of the neighbourhood. Here was a Poplar man proud of Poplar. He told me that the now silent High Street was at one time a sort of sailors' fair-ground, like the old Ratcliff Highway. It was there, he said, that Poplar had its beginning, according to the historian Stow. There shipwrights and other marine men built large houses for themselves, with small ones around for seamen.

Not for these people alone were the houses built. Worthy citizens of London lived down there. Sir John de Poultney, four times Lord Mayor, lived in a quaint old house in Coldharbour, at Blackwall, that stood until recently. This same house once formed the home of the discoverer, Sebastian Cabot. It was there that Cabot made friends with Sir Thomas Spert, Vice-Admiral of England, who also had a house at Poplar, and promised Cabot a good ship of the Government's [Pg 27]

for a voyage of discovery. And, later still, Sir Walter Raleigh is said to have been the tenant, and of course legend credits him with having smoked one of his earliest pipes there.

Gone are the old houses now, with the old traditions, the old gaiety, the old mad enthusiasm for the sea. In his day the Blackwall seaman was a dare-devil, efficient man, eagerly coveted by shipowners and captains alike. Never did a ship sail from Blackwall during Crooks's schooldays without most of the boys staying away from school, regardless of results to their skins the next morning, in order to join in the farewell cheering from the foreshore. The welcome home to the Blackwall ships was something to remember. It was always a bitter disappointment to the boys, since it robbed them of an opportunity of playing truant, if a ship came home and docked during the night, having come up, as the old tide-master used to say, and brought her own news.

Little remains to suggest the sea in Poplar High Street to-day. The old highway has lost its old glory. The old folks have forsaken the old homesteads. Of the few old buildings that remain, nearly every one has been cut up into small shops and tenements. One or two general dealers still pose as ships' outfitters, and an occasional shop remains as a marine store, as though in a final feeble struggle to preserve the old traditions. [Pg 28]

Crooks recollected well the period that costermongers thronged this riverside highway. They came about the time seamen were deserting it, so that the street for some time lost nothing of its noise or bustle. The day came when they, too, departed, seeking a more profitable field in Chrisp Street, on the northern side of East India Dock Road, where to this day they still hold carnival. That they carried away something of the seafaring character of their former highway is borne out by the nautical turn they give to some of their remarks.

"Here," cried a fish-dealer of their number the other day, holding aloft a haddock, "wot price this 'ere 'addick?"

"Tuppence," suggested a woman bystander.

"Wot! tuppence! 'Ow would you like to get a ship, an' go out to sea an' fish for 'addicks to sell for tuppence in foggy weather like this?"

As we passed down that portion of the High Street that skirts the Recreation Ground, Crooks pointed out the quaint old church of St. Matthias. He told me it was the oldest church in Poplar, built as a chapel-of-ease to the mother church of East London, St. Dunstan's. Then it was that all the parishes that now go to make up the teeming Tower Hamlets were comprised in Stepney. As the Port of London in those days was confined to the Pool and lower reaches and to the riverside hamlets of the East End, that was why people born at sea were often entered as having been born in the parish of Stepney. [Pg 29]

St. Matthias' Church afterwards became the chapel of the old East India Company. Poplar people sometimes call it that to this day. The Company's almshouses were near, and the chapel ministered to the aged almoners alone. According to tradition, the teak pillars in the church served as masts in vessels of the Spanish Armada. Upon the ceiling is the coat-of-arms of the original East India Company. Adjoining the church is the picturesque vicarage, where Crooks pointed out the coat-of-arms adopted by the United Company a hundred years later on the amalgamation with the New East India Company.

This chapel contains a monument to the memory of George Green, who stands out as Poplar's worthiest philanthropist. Schools, churches, and charities in Poplar to-day testify to his generosity. He was one of the owners of the famous Blackwall Shipbuilding Yard, that turned out some of the sturdiest of the wooden walls of England. They were proud in the shipyard of the *Venerable* and the *Theseus*, the former Lord Duncan's flagship at the battle of Camperdown, the latter at one time Nelson's flagship, in the cockpit of which his arm was amputated.

The people of old Poplar had at times unpleasant things to tolerate. Sometimes the pirates hung at Execution Dock, higher up the river, would be brought down, still on their gibbets, and suspended for a long period at a place near Blackwall Point, as a warning to all seafarers entering the Port of London. [Pg 30]

One of the old East India Company pensioners used to tell Crooks's father how one of the bodies hanging on a gibbet was stolen during the night, under romantic circumstances. An old waterman at the stairs was startled at a late hour by a young and ladylike girl coming ashore in a boat and asking him to lend a hand with her father, who, she said, was dead drunk in the bottom of the skiff. A youth was with her, and the waterman assisted them to carry the supposed drunken man to a carriage which was waiting. Not until the pirate's body was missing in the morning did the old waterman know the truth.

We reached the river ourselves from the Blackwall end of the High Street, while Crooks was giving me these entertaining glimpses into the past of his native Poplar. The sight of Blackwall Causeway and the river crowded with craft instantly reminded him of the last mutiny in the Thames, of which he has gruesome recollections, associated with bad dreams as a lad, caused by the knowledge that dead seamen lay in the building adjoining his home. It was here at Blackwall Point that the crew of the Peruvian frigate mutinied in 1861. He relates graphically how the eleven men who were shot dead on the ship were brought ashore and laid in the mortuary next his mother's house by the casual ward.

The old watermen at the head of the Causeway, waiting to row people across to the Greenwich [Pg 31]

side, welcomed Crooks with a cheerful word as we approached. They were soon full of talk. The eldest told how he went to sea as a boy in the famous wooden ships turned out of Blackwall Yard. His aged companion remembered the stage coaches coming down from London to Blackwall. He was proud also of a memory of Queen Victoria's visit to the neighbourhood to see a Chinese junk.

The two ancient watermen soon overflowed with reminiscences. One remembered his grandfather telling how King George the Fourth would come down to see the ships built at Blackwall, and how on one occasion a sailor who had come ashore and got drunk took a pint of ale to his Majesty in a pewter and asked him to drink to the Army and Navy.

"Ah!" exclaimed the other, fetching a sigh; "but don't you remember that old Yarmouth fisherman who used to bring his smack round here from the Roads and sell herrings out of it on this very Causeway?"

"Remember! What do *you* think? That was the old man who would never keep farthings. In the evening, when he'd got a handful in the course of the day's trade, he would pitch them in the river for the boys to find."

"Likely enough," interposed Crooks. "I mudlarked about here myself as a lad."

The eldest of the ancient watermen would have it that this old boy from Yarmouth was the original of Mr. Peggotty, and that it was at Blackwall Dickens first made his acquaintance. He [Pg 32] said he had often seen Dickens himself about those parts.

We ventured a doubt.

"Why, bless my life!" he cried; "ain't I talked to him at the Causeway here many a time?"

This, of course, was unanswerable, so we asked what Dickens did when there.

The ancient waterman thought a moment.

"What did Dickens do?" he ruminated. "Now, let me see. What *did* Dickens do? I know: Dickens used to go afloat!"

The other declared that Dickens did more than that: he would often go into the fishing-smack.

We immediately assumed that it was the fishing-smack of the old Yarmouth salt that was meant. We were wrong. It was another "Fishing Smack," one of the quaint old taverns by the river still standing in Coldharbour.

[Pg 33]

CHAPTER V
IN TRAINING FOR A CRAFTSMAN

Three years in a Smithy—Provoking a Carman—Apprenticeship—Winning a Nickname—Activity of an Idle Apprentice—"Not Dead, but Drunk"—A Boisterous Celebration—The Workman's Pride in His Work.

The three years in the blacksmith's shop in Limehouse Causeway, that commenced at the age of eleven after the errand-boy period, were years of hard work and long hours. The lad's working day began at six in the morning and often did not close until eight at night. Working overtime meant ten and twelve midnight before the day's work was done. He was paid for the overtime at the rate of a penny an hour.

He was kept hard at it all the time. Once, in the excitement of a General Election, in the days of the old hustings, he stole away from the forge for an hour. The smith had returned in his absence, and inquired angrily where he had been.

"Only to see the state of the poll."

"*You'll* know the state of the poll on Saturday, young fellow."

He did. A shilling was taken from his week's wages.

It was a heavy blow. It delayed a promised pair of new trousers. The need for a new pair was [Pg 34] constantly being brought to his notice in a more or less personal way. The biggest affront came from a tall boy at a shop he passed on the way home.

"Hi!" this youth would call after him. "Look at the kid wot's put his legs too far frew his trowsis!"

Nevertheless, the little chap in the short trousers was immensely proud to be at work. He would blacken his face before leaving for home so as to look like a working man.

Many a long day's search had he before getting that job. He spent hours one morning in calling at nearly all the shops in the two miles' length of Commercial Road between Poplar and the City. But nobody wanted so small a boy. On his way back, not yet wholly disheartened, he turned down Limehouse Causeway and peeped in at the smithy.

"Can you blow the bellows, little 'un?" he was asked.

Couldn't he; you just try him!

They tried him for an hour, then told him he was just the boy they wanted.

They got a lot of smiths' work in connection with the fitting out of small vessels in Limehouse Basin and the West India Docks. The first job at which Will assisted was on board the barque *Violet*.

The Causeway where the smithy stood was so narrow that carts could not pass each other. Two carmen driving in opposite directions met just outside the smithy door one afternoon. Neither would give way, and they filled the air with lurid fancies. Young Will came out of the smithy and [Pg 35] took the part of the one whom he believed to have the right on his side.

Seizing the bridle of the other driver's horse, he commenced to back the cart down the lane. The man's flow of language increased as he tried to get at the lad with his whip. Will dodged first to one side and then to the other, then under the horse's nose, eluding the lash every time. At last he got the cart backed right out of the lane, allowing the other driver to pass in triumph.

The enraged carman sprang down and chased the lad back into the smithy. Will had just time to spring behind the big bellows out of sight before the other appeared foaming at the door. With many oaths the man swore he would have vengeance on the boy some day, come what would.

Some years afterwards Crooks found himself at work in the same yard as his burly enemy, but time, which had made little difference to the man, had transformed the boy out of all recognition. Crooks asked him if he remembered the event.

"Yes; and if I came across that youngster to-day I'd break every bone in his body."

"I don't think you would, Jack," Crooks replied, preparing to take off his coat.

Then the carman understood.

In his third year at the smithy Will was getting six shillings a week, with something more than a penny an hour for overtime. Small though the wages were, they were very welcome at home; and [Pg 36] it meant a great deal to his mother when she sacrificed more than half this amount in the lad's best interest.

She was as determined that her boys should learn a trade as that they should learn to read and write. She took Will away from the smithy and his six shillings a week, when she found he was not to be taught the business but to be merely a smiths' labourer, and she apprenticed him to the trade of cooper at a weekly wage of half a crown.

"The sacrifice of a few shillings a week," says Crooks, "which mother made in order that I should learn a trade was only one of the many things she did for me as a boy for which I have blessed her memory in manhood many times. I really don't know now how she managed to feed us all, after losing my three-and-six a week. I know that she always put up a good dinner in a handkerchief for me to take to work. It may have got smaller towards the end of the week, like many of the men's. I remember one Monday dinner-time flopping down on a saw-tub and opening my handkerchief as the foreman passed.

"'That looks a good meal to begin the week on,' he said. 'I see how it is;—

It's Monday plenty,
Tuesday some,
Wednesday a little,
Thursday none,
Don't worry about Friday,
You get your money on Saturday.'"

Among the workmen was a thinker and reformer far ahead of his times. It was dangerous in those [Pg 37] days for workmen to give expression to advanced views, and as he was a married man he made no display of his opinions. He seems to have seen promise in young Will, for he talked to him freely on social and political matters, encouraging him to read by lending him books and papers, and inspiring him with an enthusiasm for the teaching of John Bright.

So much so, that at home Will was nicknamed Young John Bright. An uncle, looking in on the eve of the General Election of 1868, said jokingly, "Now, young John Bright, tell us all about what is going to happen." Nothing loath, Will delivered a long speech on the political situation, and foretold, among other things, that the Liberals would sweep the country, and that one of their first acts would be to disestablish the Church of Ireland. The prophecy, needless to say, was fulfilled.

Will was one of half-a-dozen apprentices in the coopering establishment. While still the youngest among them he made his mark by acting as spokesman in a sudden emergency. The lads thought they had a grievance under the piece-rate system. They went in a body to the head of the firm, the eldest primed with a well-rehearsed speech stating their case.

If Will saved the situation, he began by nearly bringing disaster upon it. It happened that the spokesman's father was an undertaker in Stepney, and that on Sundays the lad, with becoming gravity, frequently walked as a mute at funerals.

Just as the solemn procession of aggrieved apprentices was about to enter the office, the employer's wondering eye upon them through the window, Will called out in a stage whisper: [Pg 38]

"Now, Joe, put on your best Sunday face!"

The fearful tension was broken. All the boys burst into laughter. The lads tumbled over each other in their eagerness to get outside the passage. When the head of the firm opened his door Will alone remained.

"What's all this about, Crooks?"

The youngest apprentice thereupon briefly ran over the lads' grievances, and on being asked why the deputation fled in laughter, he explained the meaning of the Sunday face.

The employer laughed as boisterously as his boys. He told Crooks to go back to work, promising that the lads should have fair play. That very day he issued orders placing the apprentices under better conditions.

One of the lads, with an unconquerable liking for lying in bed, had not turned up by nine o'clock on a certain morning. The other apprentices stole out with a barrow and went to his house with the object of wheeling him to work.

Half an hour later the lad rushed into the cooperage panting and dishevelled, his clothes torn, his hat missing.

"Done 'em!" he gasped, after the manner of Alfred Jingle. "I rushed out o' the back door, got over the wall, over the next wall, fell on a flower-bed, man came out (such langwidge!), climbed his [Pg 39] wall afore he could ketch me, landed clean on a dog kennel, dog tore me clothes, got over another wall—into the street at last—boys caught sight o' me, howling chase with barrow, woman let me run through her house, over another wall. Done 'em!"

Something more than laziness explained the occasional absence of others from work. Certain of the men would be missing for two or three days. During an unusually long absence of one of the older coopers, the men and lads rigged up a dummy figure, dressing it in whatever clothes of their own they could spare. They placed the dummy in an improvised coffin by the side of their missing comrade's bench, with an imitation tombstone at the head, bearing the inscription, "Not dead, but drunk."

The morning came when the delinquent turned up. A deep silence fell over the workshop as he entered. Men and apprentices alike suddenly appeared to be absorbed in work. The late-comer pretended not to see the effigy by his bench. With quiet deliberation he took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and lighted the furnace-fire. No one spoke. The old man brought two handfuls of shavings and piled them on the fire until it roared again. Then suddenly he seized the dummy figure and hurled it on the flames.

Everybody sprang forward to snatch his garments from the fire. One rescued his coat, another his vest, another his cap, another his muffler, another his pair of boots, the old man belabouring [Pg 40] each in turn.

"Ah!" he cried with a chuckle, as the singed garments were dragged away. "I knew that would find you all out."

Quaint and boisterous customs were observed when an apprentice was out of his time. The greater part of the day was given up by men and boys alike to revelry and horse-play.

The ceremonies began at about eleven o'clock in the morning, to be kept up for the rest of the day. First, the apprentice was seized and put into a hot barrel. Round him stood some fifty men and boys checking every attempt he made to get out, tapping him with hammers on the head and fingers and shoulders every time he made an effort to escape. When his clothes—the last he was to wear as an apprentice—had been singed in the barrel out of all further use, he would be dragged out and tossed in the air by about a dozen of the strongest men.

Only once did the employer try to stop these boisterous interludes. He never tried again. The men laid hold of him, and for about five minutes treated him to a vigorous tossing.

It then became the bruised and singed apprentice's privilege to pay for bread and cheese and drink. In the afternoon the men turned the yard into an imitation fair. Flags and bunting were put up and side shows were improvised. One feature was to persuade the fattest men to walk the tight-rope.

On the whole, Will had a happy time as an apprentice, working hard and laughing hard, more [Pg 41] than once threatened with dismissal because his spirit of fun led him into mischief. He became a good craftsman, and to this day boasts of being as skilful at his own trade as any man. He attributes this to the old spirit of craftsmanship that held good in his day. One incident during his apprenticeship helped to make him take a pride in what he made with his own hands. An old workman in the shop, after finishing a piece of work, set it in the middle of the floor and walked round it admiringly several times.

"'Pon my honour, one would think you'd made a thousand-horse-power engine," said the apprentice.

"Never you mind, sonny," replied the old workman. "Whether it's a thousand-horse-power engine

or not, *I made it myself*!"

"That is the spirit I want to see revived among workmen to-day," Crooks told the Labour Co-partnership Association in 1905, relating the incident at their annual exhibition at the Crystal Palace. He went on to say:

> I want to see workmen proud of what they make with their own hands. That is impossible in many workshops to-day because of the soulless way in which they are conducted. Many workmen have got the idea they only exist for what other people can get out of them. I blame employers as much as workmen for this state of things. There are in the country some excellent employers. Unfortunately, they are becoming fewer. The individual employer is going out, and the limited liability company coming in, having as its one object the making of profit, utterly regardless of the bodies or souls of the men or women from whom the profit is wrung. The result of running works and factories for company dividends only has destroyed the old school of masters and men, both of whom had a pride in their work, both of whom stamped their work with the mark of their own individuality. [Pg 42]
>
> To get back to a better state of things workmen must become their own masters, and the Co-Partnership Association is showing men the way. It is teaching them to live and work with and for each other. I want men who groan under the injustice of so much in our industrial system to understand that they can do much for themselves. By combination and co-operation they can run businesses of their own. But they must first take to the water before they can swim. It means discipline, but trade unionism has meant discipline. The administrative capacity of workmen can be developed to an enormous extent yet.
>
> How are we going to train our men and women workers to take on the responsibilities of regulating their own lot in a better manner? Trade unionists are now learning that instead of spending money on strikes it is better to spend it in starting workshops of their own. The time has come when Labour leaders and others might well cease talking to the workers about their power and begin talking to them about their responsibilities.

The day after this speech he received the following letter from George Jacob Holyoake, a few months before that veteran co-operator passed away:—

> "Against my will I was prevented from being present at the Crystal Palace, but that does not disqualify me from expressing my thanks for the wise and practical speech you made—in every way admirable."

CHAPTER VI
TRAMPING THE COUNTRY FOR WORK

[Pg 43]

> Marriage—Dismissed as an Agitator—Home broken up—"On the Road"—Timely Help at Burton—Finding Work at Liverpool—Bereavement—Back in London—A Second Tramp to Liverpool—Feelings of an "Out-of-Work."

On a grey morning in the December of 1871 two young people came out of St. Thomas's Church, Bethnal Green, man and wife. Both were only nineteen years of age. The husband was Will Crooks; his wife the daughter of an East London shipwright named South.

They set up their home in Poplar, near the coopering yard where Will was employed. At first they had to be content with apartments; then came a small tenement; soon after a little house of their own.

It was fair and pleasant sailing for the first two or three years. He got a journeyman's full wages the first week he was out of his apprenticeship. It seemed as though he were to have an unbroken run of good fortune. The bright hopes soon collapsed.

Good craftsmanship and trade unionism, blended as they were in Crooks, made him rebel against certain conditions of his work. Finally he refused to use inferior timber on a job, and objected to excessive overtime. Although the youngest among them, he addressed the workmen on the subject. A few days afterwards he was dismissed. [Pg 44]

He took his notice lightly enough, confident that as master of his trade he could soon secure work again.

It was not to be. Every shop and yard in London was closed to him. Word had gone round that he was an agitator.

Try as he did, he could not break through the barrier that had been raised against him. Wherever he applied, whether in Rotherhithe, Battersea, Hackney, or Clerkenwell, he was known as the young fellow who would not work with shoddy material and talked other men into the same view.

The experience was the same at every place of call.

"What's your name?"

"Crooks."

"Of Poplar?"

"That's me."

"We don't want anyone."

From several of these places he heard afterwards that the instant he was gone other men were taken on.

Since London was a closed door to him, he turned his back upon it, and set out tramping the country in search of work. With a fully-paid-up trade union card, he knew he could count on an occasional half-crown to help him on the way at those towns where his society had branches.

His home had to be broken up. His wife with their child went to her mother's, there to await for [Pg 45] weary weeks the result of her husband's first quest into the country.

The only piece of good news came from Liverpool. Not until he reached that city did he get a job. He tramped into Liverpool from Burton-on-Trent. Never in his life, either before or since, did a silver coin mean so much to him as the half-crown given by a member of his own trade to help him on the road as he set out from Burton for Liverpool.

Twenty-nine years later Crooks was speaking at a meeting of co-operators in Burton when he recognised his former benefactor on the platform. He told the audience of his last visit to their town, remarking how on that occasion no one but this man offered him hospitality, whereas now, if he lived to be a hundred and fifty years of age, he would not be able to accept all the invitations he had received from friends and would-be friends to spend week-ends with them. His regret was, he told the meeting, that those good people did not begin to ask him earlier and that they did not think of asking other poor men in a similar plight to his when he first entered Burton.

By the time he dragged himself into Liverpool he was without a sole to his boots. The journey was completed on the uppers of his boots, with the aid of string, a device he had learnt from friendly tramps on the road. Having got what looked like a promising job, he invited his wife to join him [Pg 46] with their child, enclosing the fare from his first week's wages.

This work in Liverpool had not been obtained without much weary searching. A good friend to the young fellow in his distress was the Y.M.C.A. in that city. Nearly thirty years later he addressed a crowded public meeting in the large hall of the Liverpool Y.M.C.A. He had an enthusiastic welcome when he rose to speak.

> I am very grateful to you for your kind welcome of me to-night. This hall has carried my memory back to 1876 when I first visited Liverpool. I was then looking for work, knowing what it was to want a meal many a day. I don't know what I should have done without the many kindnesses I met with from Liverpool people, and from none more hearty and truly helpful than I received here in this building.

But Liverpool is associated with one of the saddest memories in his life. This is how he refers to it:—

"My wife joined me, bringing our little girl, a bonny child of whom we were immensely proud. The little one pined from the day it reached Liverpool and died within a month. I thought my wife would have followed the child to the grave within a day or two. I never saw her so much affected in all my life. She pleaded to be taken away from that place. 'Anywhere,' she said, 'only let's get away.' So we buried our little girl in Liverpool one rainy Saturday afternoon, and came back to London to seek work the same night."

It was the most miserable railway journey of his life. If anything, the misery was increased when [Pg 47] as the dull dawn crept over London he and his wife stepped out of the train and walked the seven miles of silent streets between Euston and Poplar.

No better fortune awaited them in London. The young husband sought work with no success. News reached him that his trade was thriving again in Liverpool, so he set out to tramp there a second time.

"It is a weird experience, this, of wandering through England in search of a job," he says. "You keep your heart up so long as you have something in your stomach, but when hunger steals upon you, then you despair. Footsore and listless at the same time, you simply lose all interest in the future.

"I have always been drawn towards Canon Liddon since reading an address of his in which he said that the roughest tramp upon the road was, in his eyes, one who might come to be numbered among those favoured by Christ, and that the most brilliant and distinguished guest he had ever met had no higher possibility than that.

"Nothing wearies one more than walking about hunting for employment which is not to be had. It is far harder than real work. The uncertainty, the despair, when you reach a place only to discover that your journey is fruitless, are frightful. I've known a man say, 'Which way shall I go to-day?' Having no earthly idea which way to take, he tosses up a button. If the button comes

down on one side he treks east; if on the other, he treks west.

"You can imagine the feeling when, after walking your boots off, a man says to you, as he jingles [Pg 48] sovereigns in his pocket, 'Why don't you work?' That is what happened to me as I scoured the country between London and Liverpool, asking all the way for any kind of work to help me along."

I remember Crooks recalling his experience at a dinner-party given by the Hon. Maud Stanley at her Westminster house. Crooks was then a fellow-member with Miss Stanley of the Metropolitan Asylums Board, and she invited us on that occasion to meet her friend Professor Wyckoff, the American author, who wrote "The Workers." In "The Workers" the author tells the story of how for a time he turned his back upon his usual well-to-do haunts in order to find out what earning one's own living by tramping from place to place doing manual work was actually like.

Crooks, who, perhaps unconsciously to himself, had become the chief entertainer at table, showed Mr. Wyckoff in a moment that, realistic though his experiences had been, he could not possibly enter into the feelings of the real out-of-work who had nothing but sixpence between him and starvation. However hard up Mr. Wyckoff might have been at times, he always had the consolation that if the worst came to the worst, funds awaited him at home. The ordinary workman tramping the country, said Crooks, had no such feeling of a sure foundation somewhere, and it was only when you felt—as he had often felt when tramping for work—the utter hopelessness and loneliness of things, made doubly worse by the knowledge that wife and [Pg 49] children were suffering too, that you could enter fully into the feelings of an out-of-work.

Evidently Mr. Wyckoff had not thought of this view before, but it seemed to me to mark the all-important difference between the amateur and the real sufferer. There are some things no man can play at, and the game Mr. Wyckoff, with the best intentions in the world, and with a good deal of self-imposed suffering, tried to play was one of them. There are some experiences of life which no one can ever have for the seeking only. They come; they can never be commanded.

[Pg 50]

CHAPTER VII
ONE OF LONDON'S UNEMPLOYED

A Casual Labourer at the Docks—A Typical Day's Tramping for Work in London—Demoralising Effects of being Out of a Job—Emptying the Cupboard for a Starving Family—Work found at last—Doing the "Railway Tavern" a Bad Turn.

In Liverpool again the prospect was not what he had been led to believe. An odd job here and an odd job there still left him in want. At last, in response to the earnest entreaties of his wife, whom nothing could persuade to revisit Liverpool, he returned to take his chance again in London.

This time Crooks determined to try to find work outside his own trade. He went down to the Docks, where, by the aid of a friendly foreman, he got occasional jobs as a casual labourer.

The sight of so many other poor fellows struggling at the Dock Gates proved more than he could bear. He turned away from the eager mass of men one morning, resolved never to join in the demoralising scrimmage again. With a trade of his own he felt he had no right to take a job for which so many men, more helpless than himself, were daily striving.

The morning he turned away finally from the Docks was the very one on which his friend the [Pg 51] foreman had promised him a job if he turned up at the gates by noon. The piteous appeals of the hundreds of other men for the half-dozen places offered so affected him that he hung back and sat down out of sight. He saw the foreman scan the crowd, looking for him, and then engage the number of men he wanted and go inside. Crooks went off to seek work in other quarters.

One typical day of tramping for work in London he described to me thus:—

"I first went down to the river-side at Shadwell. No work was to be had there. Then I called at another place in Limehouse. No hands wanted. So I looked in at home and got two slices of bread in paper and walked eight miles to a cooper's yard in Tottenham. All in vain. I dragged myself back to Clerkenwell. Still no luck. Then I turned towards home in despair. By the time I reached Stepney I was dead beat, so I called at a friend's in Commercial Road for a little rest. They gave me some Irish stew and twopence to ride home. I managed to walk home and gave the twopence to my wife. She needed it badly.

"That year I know I walked London until my limbs ached again. I remember returning home once by way of Tidal Basin, and turning into the Victoria Docks so utterly exhausted that I sank down on a coil of rope and slept for hours.

"Another day I tramped as far as Beckton, again to no purpose. I must have expressed keen disappointment in my face, for the good fellows in the cooperage there made a collection for me, [Pg 52] and I came home that night with one and sevenpence.

"There are few things more demoralising to a man than to have a long spell of unemployment with day after day of fruitless searching for work. It turns scores of decent men into loafers. Many a confirmed loafer to-day is simply what he is because our present social system takes no

account of a man being out of work. No one cares whether he gets a job or goes to the dogs. If he goes to the dogs the nation is the loser in a double sense. It has lost a worker, and therefore a wealth-maker. Secondly, it has to spend public money in maintaining him or his family in some kind of way, whether in workhouse, infirmary, prison or asylum.

"A man who is out of work for long nearly always degenerates. For example, if a decent fellow falls out in October and fails to get a job say by March, he loses his anxiety to work. The exposure, the insufficient food, his half-starved condition, have such a deteriorating effect upon him that he becomes indifferent whether he gets work or not. He thus passes from the unemployed state to the unemployable state. It ought to be a duty of the nation to see that a man does not become degenerate."

In his own unemployed days, he awoke every morning with the half-suppressed prayer: "God help me to-day. Where shall I look for work to-day? Where can I earn a bob?"

Actual starvation was only kept away by occasional help from his own and his wife's people and by the few shillings out-of-work pay which his Trade Union allowed him every week. Even in those days he was never so hard up as not to be ready to help others in greater privation. He was out one morning when he met a man whom he knew slightly near his own house. He could see that he looked ill and that he wanted to speak. So he went up to him and said: [Pg 53]

"Well, mate, what's amiss?"

With tears in his eyes the man told his tale—his tale of starvation. He was afraid or ashamed to ask for relief, and there had been no food in his house for over twenty-four hours.

Crooks told the man to go home, promising to come to him presently. He himself went back to his own home and told his wife.

"Let's see what we've got," she said.

All she found was a portion of a packet of cocoa and a loaf of bread. She made a large jug of cocoa and gave her out-of-work husband that and the loaf to take round to the other man's family.

"It's all we have in the house," she said; "but we've had our breakfast, and they haven't."

Work came at last in an unexpected way. He was returning home after another empty day when he hailed a carman and asked for a lift.

"All right, mate, jump up," was the response.

As they sat chatting side by side, the carman learnt that his companion was seeking work.

"What's yer trade?" he inquired.

"A cooper."

"Why, the guv'nor wants a cooper." [Pg 54]

So instead of dropping off at Poplar, Crooks accompanied the carman to the works, and he who had tramped the country and London so long in search of a job was at last driven triumphantly to work in a conveyance, "like a Lord Mayor or a judge," as he afterwards described it.

On the first pay day, glad at heart, he was about to start for home. The men stopped him.

"We always go to 'The Railway Tavern' on Saturdays. A decent chap keeps the 'Railway.' Come and join us."

"Not me."

"Won't the missus let you?"

"No, she won't."

Throughout the next week he was mercilessly "chipped" in the workshop and referred to as the man whose missus was waiting for him at the other end. At the close of the next week he was asked after pay-time—

"Did the missus meet you last week?"

"Yes, and she'll meet me this week too."

"Come along, old chap, no kid, have a parting glass."

"No, I can part without the glass."

At the end of the third week a fellow-workman whispered: "What time are you going home, Will?"

"Same time."

"Let me leave with you, will you?"

"Certainly. Your missus been at you?"

"Yes; the fact is, Will, I stayed drinking down here until I'd blown eight bob last week. It meant [Pg 55]

my two little girls had to go without their promised pairs of new boots."

"All right, Jim; I'll give you a whistle when it's time to go."

At the end of six weeks the "Railway" was without a customer from that shop.

That work was a stepping-stone to another and a better job at Wandsworth. His new employer urged him to leave Poplar and take a house near the works.

"But suppose you pay me off when the busy time passes?" said Crooks.

"I shan't do that," was the answer. "I like your work too well."

The day came when Crooks was offered work nearer Poplar. When he handed in his notice the Wandsworth employer became wrathful.

"Never mind, I'll come back here when I'm out of work again," said Crooks good-naturedly.

"Will you? I can promise you there'll be no more work for you here. Leaving me like this!"

"Oh, yes, there will. You haven't kept me on for love, you know. I like you, and I'll come here for another job directly I'm out of work again."

It was not to be. Crooks was never out of work again in his life.

Years later he found himself sitting next to his old Wandsworth employer at a public dinner.

"You never came back to claim that job," said the good-natured old man.

"I will when I'm out of work—as I promised."

"Ah! you don't know how often I wished you would come back. You may have talked to the men a good deal about the rights of Labour, but I never knew the rights of employers to be observed so honourably. You seemed to keep the men more sober and the work up to a higher level of efficiency than I had ever known before. That's why I wanted you to come and live near, thinking to make sure of you. That's why I was so angry when you handed in your notice." [Pg 56]

CHAPTER VIII [Pg 57]
THE COLLEGE AT THE DOCK GATES

Commending himself to his Employers—"Crooks's College"—His Style of Teaching—Specimens of his Humour—Admonitions against Drink and Betting.

With regular work well assured, Crooks was able to give more time and study to public affairs and to the Labour Movement. For an unbroken period of ten years he held a good position in a large coopering establishment in East London, where he was held in high esteem by men and masters alike, the latter more than once intimating to him they would make it worth his while to remain in their service all his life.

Crooks was always proud of the good standing he held in his employers' eyes. He knew it was due solely to his skill as a workman, for it certainly did not tell in his favour that he was beginning to be known more widely than ever as a Labour agitator. This, as a term of derision, used to be applied to all Labour leaders in the 'eighties and long afterwards. Certain writers and speakers who wished to be particularly derisive would refer to them as paid agitators. Even to this day an occasional echo of the cry reaches the ears. The offenders belong to the same school as the lady who withdrew her money from the bank after the General Election of 1906 because so many Labour members had been returned. [Pg 58]

It was during these years of regular work that Crooks founded his famous College. He began a series of Sunday morning Labour meetings outside the East India Dock Gates, which have been continued ever since. The place in association with these Sunday meetings came to be known among Poplar workmen as Crooks's College.

Many a useful lesson has he driven home to his working class audiences at his College at the Dock Gates. He generally leads off with some little humorous fancy.

"If you fellows only have a quid a week, don't despise your share in the country's government. You needn't go the length of the Cockney taxpayer who rowed out to a man-o'-war at Portsmouth.

"'Ship ahoy!' he shouts. 'Ship ahoy!'

"At last he makes someone hear.

"'Is the captain aboard?' says he.

"'What d'yer want with the captain?' asks a bluejacket.

"'Feller,' says the taxpayer, big-like, 'just tell your captain that one of the owners of this 'ere ship wants to come aboard, and look slippy about it.'

"The captain invites him on the deck, and he goes round the ship sniffing at this and complaining about that until the ship's carpenter gets riled.

"'Don't you know that I have a share in this ship, feller?' says the taxpayer.

"'Oh, have yer?' says the carpenter, handing him a chip. 'You just take your share then, and get over the side double quick, or I shall be under the necessity of showing you the way.'" [Pg 59]

When the East End was suffering from one of the water famines that used to be fairly common before the supply was taken over by a public authority, he never tired of calling the attention of his Dock Gate meetings to the fact that the company went on charging the same rates, whether there was water or not.

"When I got home last night, my wife said, 'Will, the water's come on at last; but just look at it—it's not fit to drink!' So I went to the tap and saw a lot of little things swimming about in the water. The wife was alarmed, and asked what we should do. 'My dear,' I replied, 'for goodness sake don't say anything about it to anybody. If this gets to the ears of the company they might charge us for the fish as well as for the water.'"

Never was instruction at college imparted with so many human touches and humorous sallies. He noticed that many of the men slunk away when the public-houses opened. He made it a practice to commence his own address a few minutes before the public-houses threw open their doors. In this way he kept most of the men about him. The waverers among them were shamed into staying by little thrusts like these:—

"Some of you chaps imagine you can only be men by taking the gargle. If you could see yourselves sometimes after you've been indulging you would jolly soon change your opinion. Perhaps you've heard of the man who asked for a ticket at the railway junction. [Pg 60]

"'What station?' asked the booking clerk.

"'What stations have you got?' he stammered, clinging to the ledge for support.

"But even that chap was not so bad as the railway guard who went home a bit elevated. He saw the cat lying on the hearthrug, and chucked it in the oven, slamming the door and yelling, 'Take yer seats for Nottingham.'

"I've heard men say they only take it because the doctor orders it. One of these chaps was caught having secret nips of whiskey. 'Bless yer heart!' he says. 'Don't yer know I has ter take it for me health? I suffers wiv tape worms.'

"One of the chief reasons some of you chaps booze is because you are too sociable-like in standing treat. A rattling boozer was once screwed up to the point of signing the pledge. He writes his name, puts his hand in his pocket, and asks how much?

"'Nothing to pay,' says the young lady, smiling.

"'What? Nothing to pay?' he repeats in amazement. 'Do I get it for nothing? Do you mean to say that I, a working man, am offered something for nothing?'

"'Nothing to pay,' repeats the young lady.

"'Well, 'pon my honour, this is the first time I've ever got anything for nothing. Come and have a drink.'"

"Some of you fellows who live on the Isle of Dogs have seen the allotment system started there. I asked one of the publicans of the neighbourhood why he complained about the allotments. 'Why,' said he, 'the men used to come in and have a gargle on Saturday afternoons, but now they go and dig clay.' [Pg 61]

"But ask the men's wives what they say about the allotments, and you will hear a different story. The men now have time not only to cultivate their plots, but to look after their families.

"How many of our poor women who give way to drink can trace their descent to the neglect of the men who married them. It may be hard to be burdened with a drunken wife, but often enough a good deal of the fault is on the side of the husband because of his early neglect. He should have strengthened her. He should have shared her sorrows as well as her joys. We ought not to leave a woman to bear all her own burdens. Many a young wife breaks down because of early neglect at a time when she ought to be built up, when it would be real manliness on the husband's part to put up with a little trouble for her sake.

"Some of you giggle when you see a man nursing a baby in long clothes. What is there to giggle at? I carried a baby in long clothes up the stairs of Shadwell Station the other day, because I saw it was too much for the poor mother who was struggling along.

"'Here,' I said, 'hand it over; I'm used to that sort of job.'

"My wife heard of it before I got home, and she said to those who told her, 'Well, if the woman didn't thank him, I shall when he comes home.' [Pg 62]

"Perhaps you thought I looked a fool clambering up the stairs with a baby in long clothes. I don't think so. I satisfied myself by doing what evidently wanted doing."

He hurried away from his college by the Dock Gates one Sunday morning to keep an appointment to address the Isle of Dogs Progressive Club. He found less than a dozen men in the lecture hall, while the bar and the billiard room were crowded. He walked out without a word and sat down in the club garden.

"This is all right. I'm enjoying myself perfectly here," he told the bewildered secretary. "If they prefer to play at billiards and to drink beer, let them. I am quite content to enjoy this garden."

In ten minutes time not a man remained in the bar or billiard room. The lecture hall was filled.

"We deserve your reproach, Will," shouted someone from the audience when at last he stepped on to the platform.

If he was severe on drink he was more severe on betting.

"Many a man here," he told one of his Sunday morning audiences at the Dock Gates, "can tell me the pedigree of half-a-dozen race-horses. It shows you can think if you like. But that kind of thinking is what I call thinking off-side."

Crooks had a hundred happy illustrations for urging upon his working-class hearers the duty of citizenship and co-operation. [Pg 63]

"We chaps are like the old lady's cow that gave a good pail of milk regular, but often kicked it over. We have built up trade unions and friendly societies and co-operative societies that stand for the best working class organisations in the world. But we have a weakness for kicking the pail over. How? Because we are constantly spoiling our own good work by allowing other classes to do all the governing of the country.

"It reminds me of a group of boys I saw coming home from a football match.

"'How did yer get on?' they were asked by other lads in the street.

"'Won.'

"'How many?'

"'Seven to nothing.'

"'Been playing a blind school?'"

And then Crooks would go on: "Well, we workers have been the blind school, and we have been allowing other classes to score goals against us all the time. If we haven't been blind we've certainly been blindfold. Tear the bandage off your eyes. Be men."

Behind all his banter there was a serious message in all his Sunday morning addresses.

"Labour may be the new force by which God is going to help forward the regeneration of the world," he told his hearers. "Heaven knows we need a little more earnestness in our national life to-day, and if the best-born cannot give it, the so-called base-born may. We common people have [Pg 64] done it before. Who knows but what it is God's will that we should do it again? We can all afford to laugh at that dear lady, bless her, who could not bear the idea that some of the Apostles were fishermen, and who solemnly asked her minister whether there was not some authority for believing that they were owners of smacks.

"We working men are gaining power. Let us see that we also gain knowledge to use the power, not to abuse it. Parliament is supposed to protect the weak against the strong. It doesn't pan out like that. After all these years of popular education, isn't it about time we taught the dialectical champions in the House of Commons that the people are the creators of Parliament, and that we demand as its creators that Parliament should be at the service of the people and all the people, instead of at the service of the powerful and the wealthy?

"But don't think that Parliament and municipality can do everything. They are not going to make the world perfect. What they can do and what we should insist on their doing is to make it easier to do right and more difficult to do wrong. They can deal with those 'who turn aside the needy from judgment and take away the right of the poor of My people,' but they cannot make good men and good women. That must depend upon ourselves."

That College at the Dock Gates can point to some notable achievements. The Blackwall Tunnel, [Pg 65] which has its entrance at the very spot where the meetings take place, was one of the earliest things the College agitated for. Between the dock wall and the tunnel is a large municipal gymnasium and recreation ground, the scheme for which was first unfolded by Crooks at the College, when the ground was a waste and the children were without play-places.

Crooks's College began the campaign for a free library. The well-equipped public library that now stands in the High Street was its first achievement. The College founded the Poplar Labour League, which first introduced Crooks to public life. Crooks's College first created the demand for a technical institute for Poplar. The institute is now an accomplished fact, comprising the best municipal school of marine engineering in the country. Crooks's College started the campaign for the footway tunnel under the Thames between the Isle of Dogs and Greenwich, which now serves the daily convenience of thousands of work-people. Crooks's College began that policy of humane treatment of workhouse inmates which had a great deal to do with improved administration of the Poor Law all over the country. Crooks's College was the originator of the farm colony system

in this country. Crooks's College stood out for the welfare of Poor Law children. Crooks's College broke down the corrupt practices on three of the old municipal authorities in Poplar.

And perhaps the greatest occasion in the history of the College at the Dock Gates was that Sunday morning in June, 1906, that followed the opening of the Local Government Board Inquiry into the administration of the guardians. For the week previously the Press and the local Municipal Alliance had done their best to poison the mind of Poplar against its long-trusted Labour man. [Pg 66]

How would the College fare now? The attendance at the Dock Gates that morning was one of the largest on record. Thousands of ratepayers were there, and when Crooks walked through their ranks to the little portable rostrum he had one of the great receptions of his life. He urged them not to be discouraged because their cause seemed to be under a cloud, but to strengthen his hands in maintaining the integrity of public life and to possess themselves in quietness, confident that before long the accused would become the accusers.

CHAPTER IX
THE COLLEGE AT THE DOCK GATES

[Pg 67]

The Dock Strike of 1889—"Our Dock Strike Baby"—At the Point of Death—Discouraging a Missioner—Before a House of Lords Committee—Entrance upon Public Life—A Widower with Six Children—Second Marriage.

The great Dock Strike of 1889 nearly brought Crooks to his grave. Much of the brunt and burden of that famous struggle fell upon his shoulders. Months before, he had prepared the way by his Dock Gate meetings. When at last the disorganised bands of dock and river-side labourers startled the industrial world by standing together as one man for better conditions of work and a minimum wage of sixpence an hour, Will Crooks was one of the half-dozen Labour Leaders who directed the campaign to its historic triumph.

Seldom, while the strike lasted, did he take his clothes off. He worked at his own trade during the day and gave nearly the whole of the night to the strikers. The outdoor meetings he addressed kept him going up to midnight. The early morning hours saw him lending a hand at the organising offices and relief stations until the dawn called him to his ordinary daily work again.

There were times when he gave both day and night to the dockers, preferring to lose time at his own work rather than miss an opportunity of lending a hand to his less fortunate fellows. Sometimes he would accompany the men in their demonstrations through the City and the West-End. [Pg 68]

Those daily marches of the dock labourers opened London's eyes. The orderliness of the ragged battalions, headed by "the man in the straw hat," who was afterwards to take a seat in the Cabinet—John Burns—was as impressive as their numbers. They were forbidden to use bands of music in the City streets, so the men conceived the ingenious device of whistling. It had a curious effect, some fifty thousand men whistling the "Marseillaise" all the way from Aldgate to Temple Bar.

When Crooks did get home for an hour or two in the evening it was not to rest, but to sit by the bedside of his ailing wife and tend the youngest of his children. Ill though his wife was, little though she saw of him during the strike, she urged him from her sick bed to keep on helping the dockers.

"Don't mind me, Will," she told him, when he would peep in anxiously after many hours' absence. "I shall be all right if you can only pull those poor dockers through."

He came in one night after nearly two days' absence, having arranged to spend the whole of that evening by her bedside. She had just given birth to a son—"our Dock Strike baby," as he came to be called for long afterwards, now a promising apprentice in a Thames shipbuilding yard. She was very happy at the good news he brought of the progress of the strike. She was happier still at the prospect of his being spared for his first evening at home. Presently the sound of hurrying footsteps was heard in the street. Something important had happened. The men wanted Will Crooks. Would he come again? [Pg 69]

He looked at his wife. She must decide.

"Go, Will," she said. "Never let it be said your wife kept you from helping those in need."

The reaction came after the victory. When the dockers in their thousands were back at work rejoicing at having won their sixpence an hour, Crooks lay at the point of death in the London Hospital in Whitechapel Road. It was the first time he had been ill in his life. Friends feared this first illness was to be his last. Not until after a struggle of thirteen weeks could he be pronounced out of danger.

He is fond of telling this incident that occurred in the hospital:—

"When I was approaching convalescence, and naturally fairly happy at the thought of soon being

able to get out and return home, a missioner, as I think he was called, came to see me as I lay in bed in the hospital. He said to me quite bluntly, 'Are you not a miserable sinner?'

"I said: 'No; I may be a sinner, but I am not a miserable one just now.'

"The missioner left my side in disgust, and then returned and asked to be allowed to send me a Testament. I consented, and received in a day or two one marked in several places with red ink, apparently intended to impress upon me what a depraved and miserable creature I was. [Pg 70]

"The missioner called again, and questioned me as to whether I had read the marked passages and what I thought of them.

"I told him that, as applied to me, they were not true.

"I shall never forget the look I received, and I expect I was given up as a lost man.

"A few minutes after he had left my ward a patient from another ward came to see me, and said:—

"'I say, Twenty-five, that's the way to get rid of them.'

"I said, 'What have *you* done to get rid of him?'

"'Oh,' he answered. 'The missioner said, "Are you not a miserable sinner?" and I said "Yes"; and then he said, "Thank God for that," and went away.'"

Soon after Crooks came out of the hospital he made his first appearance in a public capacity in Parliament. He was invited on July 11th, 1890, to give evidence before the Committee of the House of Lords on the Infant Life Insurance Bill. It was seriously argued at the time that working class parents deliberately neglected their children for the sake of the insurance money. The Bill actually proposed that the insurance money be kept out of the hands of the parents altogether and paid to the undertaker. The offending clause disappeared after Crooks's evidence. [Pg 71]

The *Evening News*, which headed its report of the day's proceedings "A Working Man shows the Weak Points in the New Bill," summarised what Crooks told the Committee thus:—

> A journeyman cooper from Poplar, evidently a thoroughly straightforward and independent working-man of more than average intelligence and facility of expression, gave evidence yesterday before the Committee of the House of Lords, presided over by the Bishop of Peterborough.
>
> He said he objected to the provision in the Bill for the payment of insurance money to the undertaker. It was not merely to cover the actual expenses of burial that the working man insured his child, but to provide "black" and to meet other unavoidable expenses. If insurance were abolished workmen would be obliged to fall back on the old practice of "Friendly Leads," which generally led to drinking at public-houses.
>
> He knew thousands of families of working people, and was perfectly certain that there was not among them one mother lacking maternal affection. There was no sacrifice the poor would not make for their children, and it would be felt as a great reproach to say that a child had not been properly cared for. In other cases bad mothers would be bad mothers under any circumstances, and it was for the criminal law to find them out; but if there was one bad in a thousand he did not see why nine hundred and ninety-nine respectable persons should be punished.
>
> To stop child insurance, witness said in reply to Lord Norton, would punish honest parents and do no good whatever.

It was about this time that the working people of Poplar began to urge him to go into public life. They elected him a member of the Poplar Board of Trustees, in regard to which he had recently unearthed a notorious scandal. Then he was made a Library Commissioner in recognition of the prominent part he had taken in persuading Poplar to adopt the Act. Soon afterwards he was returned as one of the two Poplar representatives to the London County Council. [Pg 72]

The cloud that had hung over his home all through the Dock Strike was to grow yet darker. He had not been on the County Council many weeks when his wife died. She had barely recovered from the illness that kept her bedfast during the exciting days of the strike. Then there came the three anxious worrying months as her husband lay between life and death in the hospital. The worry wore her out, and a brave God-fearing woman of the people went down to her grave commanding her husband to work on.

Thus, at the commencement of his public career and while still in his thirties, Crooks found himself a widower with six children on his hands, the youngest a baby.

Among the many letters of sympathy that poured in upon him, that which got nearest to his heart came from one whose acquaintance he had but recently made, who described himself as "a fellow sufferer under a like bereavement." The writer was Lord Rosebery, then Chairman of the London County Council.

All that first year of Crooks's public life was gone through while he was bearing heavy burdens at home. His new duties as London County Councillor, the many urgent calls to help the Labour movement in other quarters, now that he was beginning to be known far beyond the bounds of [Pg 73]

Poplar, kept him away from home often until a late hour. All this added greatly to his domestic cares, since he had to be both mother and father to his children. The eldest daughter, fourteen years of age, managed bravely; but many a night he turned away from addressing the cheering multitude of a crowded, glittering hall and went to a cheerless home to find the youngest children crying. He would help to wash them, to mend their clothes, and to cook for them.

A year's experience convinced him that neither he nor the children could go on in that way. His aged mother rendered all the help her growing infirmities would allow. The old lady, with her married children's aid, now lived in modest comfort in a little house off the High Street. There lodged with her a young nurse engaged at a neighbouring institution, whose maiden name was Elizabeth Lake, a native of Gloucestershire. Crooks laid his case before her. She consented to become his wife and bring up his children. They were married in Poplar Parish Church in 1893.

The union has been a singularly happy one. Mrs. Crooks has done more than bring up the children. She has guided and inspired her husband in all his public life. So much so, that when some eight years later he laid down his robes of office after a successful year as Mayor of Poplar, he stated publicly in acknowledging a presentation to himself and the Mayoress:— [Pg 74]

"Without my wife's aid I would have been of little use in my public work. Whenever I return home troubled or anxious, or defeated on some pet scheme, I never have from my wife anything but cheering and encouraging words. She it is who has made my public life possible. She it is who deserves your thanks far more than I."

CHAPTER X [Pg 75]
A LABOUR MEMBER'S WAGES

> The Will Crooks Wages Fund formed—The Poplar Labour League—Crooks's Election to the London County Council—Friends outside the Labour Movement—Money no Substitute for Personal Service—Refusing highly-paid Posts—Offer of a House rent-free for Life declined—Not Risen from the Ranks.

How came it that a working man like Crooks was able to give his whole time to public work?

It was simply because his fellow workmen wished it. They went to him in deputation in the early 'nineties, and said to him in effect:—

"Look here, Crooks. You can be more useful to us in public life than at the workman's bench. We want you to stand for the London County Council and some of the local bodies. Give up your work and we'll raise for you from among ourselves an amount equal to your present wages."

To which Crooks replied:—

"All right, mates, since you wish it. But understand! as soon as you tire of me, no grumbling behind my back. Come forward and say so plainly, and I'll go back to the bench at once."

So the Will Crooks Wages Fund was formed by the Poplar Labour League. The first treasurer was the Rev. H. A. Kennedy, of All Hallows', Blackwall. Afterwards the then Rector of Poplar (Dr. Chandler) was invited by the working men to become treasurer of the fund, and he held the office until called away to a Colonial bishopric. [Pg 76]

We have seen how the Poplar Labour League came into being. It was one of the first achievements of Crooks's College by the Dock Gates. Originally it was named the Poplar Labour Election Committee. Its first executive consisted of the Rev. H. A. Kennedy and local representatives of the London Trades Council, the Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Union, the Watermen's Society, the Dockers' Union, the Philanthropic Coopers' Society, the East London Plumbers' Union, the Federated Trade and Labour Unions, and the Gasworkers' Union.

The League was one of the pioneers of Labour Representation in this country. Long before the British Labour Party organised the present system of paying its Members of Parliament, this little League in Poplar for an unbroken period of a dozen years had shown how men from the ranks of Labour could be maintained in public life. The League had a motto: "The aim of every workman, whatever his task, whether he labours with axe, chisel, or lathe, loom or last, hammer or pen, hands or head, should be the ideal, the best, the perfect."

The League was successful from the start. Its earliest effort was put forth at the London County Council election of 1892. The result of that effort can be judged from the following remarks in the League's first annual report:— [Pg 77]

> The return of Will Crooks to the London County Council marks an epoch in the life of industrial Poplar.
>
> From time immemorial this hive of industry has been represented by employers of labour and wealthy capitalists. Their record is now broken. Labour has awakened to a sense of its duty. We hope the awakening will be permanent, and that worthy representatives may be found to fill the vacancies on the various administrative and legislative bodies.

> We suggest to all working men's societies that wherever and whenever it is possible they should subscribe to the Labour Member's Wages Fund, for be it remembered that our Member is a representative of all classes and not of one particular individual class; and so long as he retains our confidence it is our duty to support him to our utmost ability.

The response of the trade societies and workmen and friends generally was such that within a few months the League by a unanimous vote decided to raise the Labour Member's wages from £3 to £3 10s. a week to meet his travelling expenses. For the first seven or eight years of his public life that was absolutely the only source of Crooks's income.

The League remained faithful to its early pledge all the time. Through good and ill report, through all the changes and dissensions which such an organisation was bound to cause, the League never once faltered in its support of Crooks. Regularly at its annual meetings the League passed a vote of thanks to "our representative on the L.C.C. for his untiring devotion to Labour's cause and his perseverance in initiating social reform so beneficial to the working classes. They [Pg 78] further desire to record their perfect confidence in him and congratulate him on the success of his work."

Many trade societies other than those on the original list became subscribers to the Wages Fund through their local branches. Among them were the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Stevedores' Labour Protection League, the London Saddle and Harness Makers' Society, the Postmen's Federation, the London Carmen's Trade Union, the Friendly Society of Ironfounders, the Municipal Employees' Association, and the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants.

Certain admirers of Crooks outside the Labour Movement also sent subscriptions to the League for the Wages Fund. Canon and Mrs. Barnett and Dr. Clifford were occasional subscribers; so were Mrs. Bernard Shaw, Mr. Cyril Jackson, Mrs. Ruth Homan, Mr. G. W. E. Russell, Mr. Sidney Webb, Sir Melville Beachcroft, Canon Scott Holland, Mr. Fred Butler, the editors of two or three London newspapers, and both Conservative and Liberal Members of Parliament.

Occasionally working men in distant parts of the country who had heard Crooks speak or watched his public work would send in their mite, generally anonymously. One such contribution, sent during the Woolwich by-election, consisted of four penny stamps, stuck on a torn piece of dirty paper, on which were written the words:—

> Will you please except four stamps toward the expens of will Crooks election and may [Pg 79] god bless him in being successful in winning the seat for Labour
>
> from a working man.

That was all. Crooks keeps the stamps and the note to this day.

This may be the proper place to make public another fact bearing on his financial position. Many people have sent cheques to him direct, some of these marked for his own personal use, some for helping the poor as he thought best, others containing nothing beyond a brief note without name or address like the following:—

> This is sent by a well-wisher, who believes that you are an honest, straightforward fellow with a large heart for those less fortunate than yourself.

Every sum received in this way Crooks has given to the poor. He has neither taken a penny for his own personal use nor allowed a penny to pass into the coffers of the Labour League. In one distressful winter over £300 was thus sent to him and his wife. With the co-operation of a local committee, the whole of this sum was spent in employing out-of-work women and girls in making garments for their needy neighbours. By these means dozens of families were saved from the workhouse.

Crooks discourages those who give money only. "Give part of yourself rather than part of your wealth," he tells them.

He has little sympathy with people who give money and then run away. A person once called at [Pg 80] his house during a bad winter and offered him £500.

"I am anxious about the poor people, Mr. Crooks," said the visitor, "so I've brought down this money for you to help them."

"Have you?" was the response. "But what are *you* going to do?"

"Oh, I'm going to the south of France. I cannot bear England in the winter."

"Then I advise you to take the five hundred pounds with you."

"Do you refuse it?"

"Absolutely. It is cowardly for a man like you to offer five hundred pounds and then run away. You ought to do more than give it; you ought to spend it. Come down and see that the proper people get it. It is not so hard to raise five hundred pounds for the poor as it is to distribute it properly among the poor."

The Labour League did more than send Crooks to the London County Council. It secured

representation on the local Poor Law and municipal bodies. It promoted social life as well as public life among the working classes of Poplar. By entertainments, lectures, and excursions it carried brightness and pleasure into the lives of the workmen, their wives, and children. At Christmas time it acted as a kind of Santa Claus to the poorest children of the district. It established a Loan and Thrift Society, which soon had an annual turnover of £2,000. Throughout it all the League never for a moment deserted its Labour Member.

Crooks in his turn remained faithful to the League in face of several alluring offers. The one that tempted him most came from his own trade. Before he quitted the workshop for public life a future managership had been hinted at. He had not been on the County Council more than a few months when a vacancy in his former workshop occurred. At once he was approached and urged to give up the L.C.C. [Pg 81]

The post offered him carried with it a salary of £500. He had six children to bring up. There was the uncertainty as to the Labour League being able to keep up the Wages Fund. He pondered over the matter carefully. His decision changed the current of his life. A manager, no matter how sympathetic, could not have remained long in the Labour Movement. Besides, in this case there were hints of a future partnership. Then it was that he decided calmly and deliberately to give his life not to money-making, but to the service of the people. He deliberately chose to remain a poor man in the service of poor men. Having been made to bear so much of the care of this world, he determined that he would know nothing of the deceitfulness of riches.

Nothing has ever shaken him from that decision. From various quarters since then other good offers have come his way. One of them, a Government post, must be regarded as a singular tribute to his worth, since the offer came from a Conservative Cabinet Minister.

The manager of a large firm engaged in carrying out public works to the value of over a million sterling, gave me at the time a frank opinion of Crooks from the employers' standpoint. [Pg 82]

"I can't help liking that chap Crooks. But it's a pity he's on what I call the wrong side. He's been negotiating with our firm until he has compelled us to pay our men several thousand pounds a year extra in wages. And a lot of thanks they give him for it! I overhear them sometimes talking at work. They say he wouldn't have got them more money if he hadn't been getting something out of it himself. Now if Crooks would only place his ability on the employers' side he could earn a thousand a year easily."

For ten years after he entered public life Crooks was content with the same five-roomed house in Northumberland Street where the deputation of working men found him when they came to invite him to stand for the County Council. When he did move it was into a neighbouring street, Gough Street, where the upgrown family had the advantage of an additional room. That remains his home to this day.

One of his ardent admirers in Poplar, a well-to-do man, on learning he was moving from Northumberland Street, offered him a house of his own rent free. It was a large and pleasant house in East India Dock Road, boasting a garden front and back. The owner implored him to take it for the rest of his life, "as a small tribute from one who appreciates the splendid public services you have rendered to Poplar."

"It would never do for me to live in such a house," was Crooks's reply in thanking the well-wisher. "My friends among the working people would fear I was deserting their class, and would not come to me as freely as they come now. My enemies would say, 'Look at that fellow Crooks; he's making his pile out of us.' A Labour man like me must leave no opening for his enemies." [Pg 83]

We have seen, then, that the only source of Crooks's income during the first years of his public life was the £3 10s. a week paid by the Poplar Labour League. After six or seven years this salary was increased to £4 in view of his greatly widened sphere of public service. This payment was stopped in 1903, when Crooks joined the official Labour Party in the House of Commons. Then he received the usual payment of £200 a year, given to each member of that party by the Trade Unionists of the country. A small additional sum has since been voted to him annually by the Poplar League and the Woolwich Labour Representation Association to meet the out-of-pocket expenses inseparable from a Member of Parliament's life. In addition he has received an occasional fee for a public address.

Let these simple facts, then, be the answer to those people who, surprised at the amount of public work he carries out, keep asking suspiciously how he does it. Crooks himself never hesitates to speak out, either in public or private, as to his financial position.

"How do I do it?" Crooks repeats to his working class audiences. "As a pioneer of paid Labour representation I have been confronted with this question through the whole of my public career. All well and good; but why is the question not put to other politicians and public men? You working men have been the worst offenders. You never think of asking the question of such men seeking public positions as monopolists, food adulterators, scamping contractors, property sweaters, bogus company promoters, and others who fleece you at every turn. You never dream of asking it of young untried men fresh from the Universities, who in many cases are only after the spoils of office. You are inclined to regard all these people as gentlemen. But let a man from your own ranks offer to serve you in public life, and always there are a crowd of objectors, generally thickest at public-house bars, who want to know where the Labour man gets his money from? Talk about the fierce light that beats upon a throne, what is it to the fierce light turned upon a Labour representative? [Pg 84]

"How often, as I go about, do I hear of people saying sneeringly: 'Look at that fellow Crooks. Who is he? He's only one of us, who has risen from the ranks.' You just tell these people that Will Crooks has not risen from the ranks; he is still in the ranks, standing four-square with the working classes against monopoly and privilege."

CHAPTER XI
ON THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL

[Pg 85]

The Labour Bench at the L.C.C.—Its First Party Meeting—The Programme—Crooks's First Speech in the County Hall—The Trade Union Wages Principle Adopted—One of the Master-builders of the New London—Retrospect—Chairman of the Public Control Committee—Keeping an Eye on the Coal Sack—The End of Baby-farming in London.

When Crooks entered the London County Council in 1892 he was a stranger to almost all outside the little circle of Labour men sent up from other divisions.

As a pioneer in Labour representation in London he had more than the usual amount of suspicion and opposition to surmount. In those days a Labour representative was often subjected to fierce personal attacks both from the class he represented and from the better-off classes whose domains for the first time working-men were entering. His every word and act were under a double microscope. He had to be a Spartan in endurance and a saint in character.

"Imagine," he once said to me during his early days on the Council, at the time when one of its members, a peer, was associated with a notorious case in the High Court, "imagine what an outcry there would have been up and down the land if that Councillor, instead of belonging to the [Pg 86] House of Lords, had been a Labour representative."

The Labour bench at the County Council set the standard for sound and steady municipal administration to the Labour Party of the entire country. John Burns sat at one end of the bench, Will Crooks at the other. Between them sat, at different times, men like Will Steadman, secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress and M.P. for Stepney and later for Central Finsbury; J. Ramsay Macdonald, secretary of the Labour Party and M.P. for Leicester; Isaac Mitchell, then secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions; H. R. Taylor, of the Bricklayers' Society, at one time Mayor of Camberwell; C. W. Bowerman, of the London Society of Compositors and M.P. for Deptford; George Dew, of the Carpenters' and Joiners' Society and secretary of the Workmen's Cheap Trains Association; Harry Gosling, of the Watermen's and Lightermen's Society; and W. Sanders, of the Fabian Society and Independent Labour Party.

Crooks took the minutes of the first party meeting of the Labour Bench, and he holds the document to this day. The meeting was held at the offices of the Dockers' Union in the Mile End Road on April 26th, 1892, a few weeks after the election which first made a L.C.C. Labour Party possible. A line of policy was laid down that looks quite modest to-day, now that it has become an integral part of ordinary L.C.C. administration. At the time it was regarded by people outside the [Pg 87] Labour Movement as rank revolution.

In the dull and dingy room in Mile End this little band of Labour men declared for direct employment of labour and municipal workshops. The L.C.C. Works Department, the first of its kind in the country, was the result. They agreed on a minimum wage of sixpence an hour for labourers and ninepence for artisans, with a maximum working week of fifty-four hours. In many L.C.C. departments higher wages were afterwards secured, and in others an eight-hour day was introduced. They demanded a system of retiring pensions for workmen as for officials. This, too, in certain departments soon became practical politics on the County Council.

A few days later Crooks was making his first speech at the County Hall. He took part in the debate on the Fair Wages Clause, the final form of which was settled on the principle he laid down. Up to the birth of the London County Council, which was only three years old when Crooks joined it, municipal bodies knew nothing of Fair Wages Clauses in contracts. The London County Council set an example which has since been followed by public authorities all over the kingdom.

This triumph for Labour was not won without a keen struggle. All kinds of proposals were discussed with a view to defining a fair wage. It looked as though the Labour Bench were in danger of losing the day, when the situation was saved by what John Burns afterwards told [Pg 88] Crooks was a happy inspiration.

The County Council was about to adopt what the Labour Bench regarded as an unsatisfactory resolution. Crooks hastily wrote out an amendment which ultimately formed the basis of a settlement. He showed it to Burns, as leader of the Labour Party, and the latter immediately got up and moved it. The words are worth repeating, since they supplied the foundation for a Fair Wages Clause destined to become famous:—

> That all contractors be compelled to sign a declaration that they pay the trade union rate of wages and observe the hours of labour and conditions recognised by the London Trade Unions, and that the hours of labour be inserted in and form part of the contract by way of schedule, and that penalties be enforced for any breach of agreement.

Before long this was the only proposal before the Council. The original motion was withdrawn, while amendment after amendment directed against the proposal Crooks had prepared was thrown out. Moderate and Progressive members got up to say that to enforce trade union wages was to fly in the face of political economy. It was this remark that drew from Crooks his maiden speech. How little he was known then may be judged from the fact that the *Daily Chronicle's* report the next day referred to him as Mr. Brooks. Thus:—

> Mr. Brooks said that political economy never took humanity into account, but unless humanity was considered there could be no justice to the worker. No contractor had ever been ruined by paying trade union rates of wages. The best wages had always meant the best workmen. Trade unions were anxious that the surplus labour of the [Pg 89] country should be employed, and they only asked the Council to fix a minimum rate of wages. The sooner the Council employed men direct the better. In the name of humanity and Christianity he appealed to the Council to adopt trade union rates of wages.

The day this report appeared Crooks received the following letter from "Marxian," of the *Labour Leader*, his friend George Samuel:—

> My dear Crooks,—Are you the Mr. Brooks of to-day's *Chronicle* report? If so, permit me to congratulate you on your speech. It struck the one true note in all the weary debate. The awakened consciousness of man has already interfered pretty considerably with the economic "law of population" and must interfere even more drastically with the economic "law of supply and demand." Both laws are for semi-brutes and not for men. To say that supply and demand shall settle wages is brutal. You may not be a very learned man, friend Crooks, but at any rate you are not weighted with that false learning which slays the heart to feed the head.

The fair wages debate went on from week to week at the County Hall, not wearily, as Crooks's correspondent suggests, but with much spirit and party feeling. Finally Lord Rosebery, as chairman, advised the Council to hold a special meeting to settle the question. Before that meeting took place the chairman invited Crooks to discuss the matter with him with a view to arriving at a compromise likely to commend itself to the majority. Crooks refused to withdraw his claim for trade union wages, and after the two had had a long informal talk on the question, Lord Rosebery accepted the Labour member's view.

When the special meeting assembled the late Lord Farrer (then Sir Thomas Farrer) carried an [Pg 90] amendment to the trade union motion. By this amendment the word "London" was deleted from the motion, and it was made to read that contractors should "pay the trade union rate of wages and observe the hours of labour and conditions recognised by the trade unions *in the place or places where the contract is executed*."

It will be seen, then, that the principle of trade union wages as laid down by Crooks remained intact. On this principle the L.C.C. Fair Wages Clause was established. It stipulates that the "rates of pay are to be not less nor the hours of labour more than those recognised by associations of employers and trade unions and in practice obtained." It provides further that "where in any trade there is no trade union, the Council shall fix the rates of wages and the hours of labour."

The Labour Councillor for Poplar was soon on the warpath again. He called the Council's attention to the low wages paid to some of the park attendants. He instanced the man in charge of Red Lion Square, who was receiving no more than thirteen shillings a week.

"The man's not worth more," shouted a member. "He's got a wooden leg."

"Yes, but he hasn't got a wooden stomach," came the retort from the Labour Bench.

And the man with the wooden leg, as well as other park attendants, had their wages brought up [Pg 91] to the living standard.

Crooks soon became a good all-round municipal administrator, as well as a Labour representative. He had stated in his first election address:—

> As a workman I should seek especially to represent the interests of the working classes who form three-fourths of the ratepayers of Poplar, while giving every attention to the general work of the London County Council and to the general interests of Poplar.
>
> I am heartily in favour of what is known as the London programme—of Home Rule for London, as enjoyed by other municipalities; of the relief of the present ratepayers by taxing the owner as well as the occupier; and of the equalisation of rates throughout London for the relief of the poorer districts.
>
> I am in favour of municipal ownership or control of water, tramways, markets, docks, lighting, parks, and the police.
>
> I would support all measures which would help to raise the standard of life for the poor, especially in the way of better housing and a strict enforcement of the Public Health Acts.

Crooks, in fact, became one of the master-builders of the New London which the L.C.C. created. In face of heavy opposition he was one of that strenuous band of stalwarts who in the 'nineties raised London out of the chaos and darkness that reigned before the County Council was called into being, and gave the capital for the first time a sense of civic unity.

In later years the claims of Parliament turned much of his energy into other useful channels. But to this day he still remains a member of the London County Council, and though now so much [Pg 92] engrossed in national politics, he is none the less proud of his record in the service of London. He never looks back to the strenuous 'nineties on the County Council without being thankful.

"I believe we put new life into the municipal politics of the whole country in those days," he tells you. "The London County Council showed the people of England what great powers for good lay in the hands of municipalities. We became a terror to all the monopolists who had fattened on London for generations. We struck at slum-owners, ground landlords, the music-hall offenders, food adulterators, and those who robbed the poor by unjust weights. We swept the tramway and water companies out of London, and by substituting public control gave the people better and cheaper services. We broke down the contractors' ring and started our own Works Department, the worst abused but the most successful and the most daring municipal undertaking of the last quarter of a century.

"They were glorious days. That ten years' struggle between the people and the monopolists was a strife of giants. The victory we gained in London was a victory for progressive municipal government all over the country.

"We on the Labour Bench were in the front of the battle all the time. While the big campaigns were going on we were not neglecting the smaller duties. We carried the County Council right into the working-man's home. We not only protected poor tenants from house-spoilers and [Pg 93] extortionate water companies, we gave a helping hand to the housewife. We saw that the coal sacks were of proper size, that the lamp oil was good, the dustbin emptied regularly, that the bakers' bread was of proper weight, that the milk came from wholesome dairies and healthy cows, that the coster in the street and the tradesman in the shop gave good weight in everything they sold."

For several years Crooks was a member and at one time chairman of the Public Control Committee of the London County Council. It was this committee that looked after these numerous small duties bearing so important a relation to the working-man's home. Crooks kept a keen eye on the coal sack. It was found that all over London coal was being delivered in sacks too small to hold the prescribed weight. There was consternation among the offending dealers when the County Council began to pounce down upon them.

In reference to this matter Crooks tells a quaint story. During one of the L.C.C. elections he heard a couple of lads in heated altercation.

"The County Council! Don't you talk to me about them people," one of them cried. "They oughter be all at the bottom of the sea. They nearly ruined my pore ole dad."

"That's bad. How was it?"

"Afore the County Council was heard of a two-hundredweight sack didn't have to be no bigger 'n that"—holding his hand on a level with his chest—"but now they have to be this size"—and his [Pg 94] hand went above his head. "Nearly ruined the pore ole man," he added. "He ain't got over it yet."

The Public Control Committee did more than ensure proper weight; it saw to it that dealers did not deliver coal inferior in quality to that described on the ticket. It recovered damages from a merchant who misrepresented the quality of his coals. When the case was reported to the L.C.C. one of the older members, to whom this kind of thing was wholly a new exercise of public duty, declared that he supposed the Council would next be insisting that the workman's Sunday joint consisted of nothing but good meat.

"And why not?" asked Crooks, who followed him in the debate. "If the man pays for fresh meat and receives bad meat, and is too poor to take action himself, it is the duty of the public authority to see that he gets justice."

There is no more ardent believer than Crooks in Ruskin's dictum that when a people apologises for its pitiful criminalities and endures its false weights and its adulterated food, the end is not far off.

One at least of the pitiful criminalities of our modern civilisation—baby-farming—was dealt a blow during his chairmanship of the Public Control Committee from which it is not likely ever to recover. He represented the L.C.C. before the Committee of the House of Commons which considered the Infant Life Protection Bill promoted by the Council. That was before his own Parliamentary career began. Day after day the Labour man strove with barristers and Members [Pg 95] of Parliament in the Commons Committee Room to safeguard infants of misfortune from cruelty and neglect. His advocacy prevailed. The Bill was passed. Baby-farming as then existing in London came to an end.

CHAPTER XII
TWO OF HIS MONUMENTS

> Testimony from Sir John McDougall and Lord Welby—Declining the Vice-chairmanship of the L.C.C.—How Crooks Lost His Overcoat—Work on the Technical Education Board—The Blackwall Tunnel—Chairman of the Bridges Committee.

From the first, Crooks has shared the representation of Poplar on the London County Council with Sir John McDougall. The retired merchant was at the top of the poll in 1892, while the Labour man found himself elected as the second member with a thousand majority over the two Moderate candidates. At every L.C.C. election since Crooks has headed the poll.

Two such men, of course, differ in their public policy widely. This notwithstanding, Sir John paid his Labour colleague a striking tribute during the parliamentary by-election in Woolwich. Sir John was Chairman of the London County Council at the time. This is what he wrote to the Woolwich electors a few days before the poll:—

> Mr. Crooks has been my colleague on the London County Council for the last twelve years, and during the whole of that time he has worked with great zeal and ability for the good of London.... His zeal is great, and his wisdom is as great as his zeal. I doubt whether anyone in London has done so much as he in all the measures which tend to the uplifting and the good of the people. [Pg 97]

Lord Welby, another of his colleagues on the County Council, seized the same opportunity to tell the electors what he thought of their Labour candidate. The two opinions, coming from men who had often opposed his policy, and whose walks of life lay so widely apart from his own, form no small tribute to the worth of his municipal work. Said Lord Welby:—

> Mr. Crooks's knowledge, his experience, his courage, his readiness of humour, his good temper, and, above all, his devotion to the work he has undertaken have made him one of the most useful, as well as one of the most popular, members of the London County Council.

His devotion was shown by his attendance. For thirteen years in succession he never missed a single Council meeting. Until Parliament began to claim his time his record of attendance every year, both at Council and Committee meetings, stood among the half-dozen highest.

After such a long unbroken service, it was bitter to be kept at home by an illness one Tuesday, the day the L.C.C. meets. Only one other councillor—Sir William Collins—had kept pace with him during those thirteen years. Crooks wrote to his friendly rival from a sick bed:—

"To-day you go ahead in this long and pleasant competition between us. I cannot help thinking that after all it is a case of the survival of the fittest, for I cannot leave my room."

"I hate to win under such conditions," said Sir William in his cheering reply. [Pg 98]

At one time the Progressive party proposed to nominate him as vice-chairman, a position entitling the holder to the L.C.C. chairmanship in the year following. The honour was declined. He believed he could be more useful as an independent member.

So the sequel proved. As a member of the Parks Committee he never wearied in working for more open spaces and children's play-places in the poorer parts of London. It had long been a grievance to the working classes of London that nearly all the parks lay in the West End and the suburbs. Since the poor districts were now too thickly covered with houses ever to permit of spacious parks being provided in their midst, Crooks was one of the most earnest in pleading that the Council should make amends by rescuing every vacant plot of land that remained and converting it into a recreation ground, no matter how small.

His strenuous plea secured for the East-End alone three splendid open spaces. These are the Bromley Recreation Ground, the Tunnel Gardens at Poplar, and the Island Gardens that take their name from the Isle of Dogs. To visit any one of these, and see therein children playing and tired people finding rest, is to feel deeply what a benign influence has fallen over these poor neighbourhoods.

Crooks obtained this recreation ground for Bromley at the cost of his overcoat. The open space [Pg 99] was formed out of something like a morass by the banks of the Lea. It lay hidden away in that labyrinth of sterile streets stretching southwards from Bow Bridge to the spot where the lesser river loses itself in the Thames.

He had persuaded a party of his County Council colleagues to go with him to the neighbourhood. They all left their overcoats in the private omnibus that took them down from the County Hall, while he showed them over the unwholesome little waste, as it then was, and pointed out its possibilities as a recreation ground. When they returned they learnt that one of the overcoats had been stolen.

"I see it's not mine," said Lord Monkswell, pointing to his astrachan.

"Nor mine," added the Hon. Lionel Holland, then M.P. for the division, as he picked up one lined with fur.

"No," said Crooks; "people about here daren't wear overcoats like those. If there's one missing, it's bound to be mine worse luck."

He laughed at the loss then and many times afterwards, though he had a private reason for lamenting it; it was a recent gift from half a dozen working-men admirers. He laughed because he found he was able to make use of the incident in his long agitation on the L.C.C. to get the waste reclaimed.

Whenever his colleagues inquired where was this mysterious outlandish place he was so anxious to convert into a recreation ground, he would make reply:—

"It's the place where they preferred my coat to Lord Monkswell's." [Pg 100]

It came to be so well known on the County Council as the place where Crooks lost his overcoat, that when finally he got a definite proposal to buy the ground brought forward there was nothing but a good-natured acquiescence from every member.

On the formation of the L.C.C. Technical Education Board, he pleaded the cause of good craftsmanship with some effect. He carried a resolution conferring special facilities for technical instruction upon working-class districts.

Long after he retired from the Board he received from a working-man's son a little proof of the practical results of his efforts. It came in the following letter:—

> You will probably remember how some years ago you pleaded my case on the L.C.C., and how, through your influence, I was enabled to complete my studies in naval architecture at Greenwich College.
>
> I am sure you will be glad to know that I have now passed my final examination and have just been admitted a member of the Royal Corps of Naval Constructors. My official appointment is that of Assistant Constructor in one of the principal Government Dockyards, where I have been on probation for the last twelve months or more. The final examinations were held last July in London and occupied more than three weeks, with an exam, almost daily.
>
> I feel that I owe you a debt of gratitude for pleading my cause at the time. My father had spent his all on me while I was at the college, and he being a toolsmith with seven children, you can well understand that what he had by him he could ill afford on me.
>
> My father and the others of the family desire to join with me in this letter of thanks and gratitude to you. [Pg 101]

Mention has already been made of how Crooks and the Poplar Labour League originated at the Dock Gate meetings the scheme for a technical institute for his native borough. So many times was this project delayed that he often told his Poplar audiences he feared he would go down to posterity as the man who talked of an institute that never came. It was not until the early part of 1906 that the institute was opened. There is a reference to it in the annual report of the Poplar Labour League for that year:—

> Some years ago the League mooted the idea of a technical institute for Poplar. Mr. Crooks took it up and carried it to official quarters, never letting the subject drop, until it stands at last an accomplished fact. A School of Marine Engineering and Nautical Academy has recently been opened in Poplar.
>
> A handsome building has been erected in High Street, and in it will be taught seamanship and navigation, marine engineering and naval architecture and propulsion, general mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, pattern making, carpentry and woodwork, and theoretical and practical chemistry, physics, and mechanics. Nothing more appropriate could have been built in Poplar. It is mainly due to the tireless efforts of Mr. Crooks that it exists, and it will stand as a monument to him.

But Poplar boasts a greater monument to its Labour Councillor. He was on the L.C.C. Bridges Committee during the making of Blackwall Tunnel. In its day the largest subaqueous tunnel in the world, its construction involved years of anxious labour.

The tunnel carries vehicular and passenger traffic under the Thames between Poplar and Greenwich, five miles below the nearest bridge, that at the Tower. Before it was made the two million Londoners living east of the bridges were without any public means of crossing the river. To build an ordinary bridge was impossible with so many ships passing night and day to and from the London Pool. It was decided to take the traffic under the Thames by descending roadways leading to a tunnel some seventy feet below high-water mark. [Pg 102]

From the time he joined the Council to that day in May, 1897, when the King as Prince of Wales went down to Poplar to open the tunnel, on behalf of Queen Victoria, Crooks was among the keenest of the public men engaged in carrying that great engineering feat through. He made himself so thoroughly master of the details that he was in great demand all over London as a lecturer on the tunnel. The chief engineers on the works who heard the lecture congratulated him on the way he made intelligible and interesting the complicated system by which the tunnel was bored through the clay within a foot or two of the river bed.

So satisfied were his fellow County Councillors with the practical work he did at Blackwall that on its completion they elected him Chairman of the Bridges Committee. In that capacity he steered through the Council and through a Committee of the House of Commons two other schemes for tunnels under the Thames, one for foot passengers only between Greenwich and the Isle of Dogs, and the other for general traffic between Shadwell and Rotherhithe, designed on a larger scale than the tunnel at Blackwall. Interest in these schemes, however, can never be so great as it was in the Blackwall experiment, the first of its kind attempted. [Pg 103]

In the special Blackwall Tunnel number issued by the *Municipal Journal*, Crooks figures among those described as "the men who made the tunnel." Following sketches and portraits of Sir Alexander Binnie (then the L.C.C. engineer, who designed the tunnel), of Sir Weetman Pearson, M.P. (the contractor who executed the work), of Sir William Bull, M.P. (who was then chairman of the Bridges Committee), is a reference to other members of the Committee who took a prominent part in the work. The first place after the chairman is given to Crooks. The *Municipal Journal* says:—

> Mr. Will Crooks, more than any other man, has made Londoners acquainted with the tunnel. His popular lecture on Blackwall Tunnel has been given in all parts of London to all kinds of audiences, and everywhere the clear, picturesque description Mr. Crooks has given, aided by the lantern and his own genial wit, has made intelligible to Londoners, old, young, rich, and poor, what is, after all, a somewhat dry and difficult subject.
>
> This only goes to show how closely Mr. Crooks himself has been identified with the construction of the tunnel. As one of the representatives of the Poplar district, he has turned his membership of the Bridges Committee to good account by giving to the tunnel his special attention. No Councillor has been so frequent a visitor to the various works, and it is doubtful whether any outsider went so many times into the compressed air. [Pg 104]
>
> The workmen had just cause to bless the Poplar County Councillor. It was owing to Mr. Crooks's efforts that a revised schedule of wages was adopted. The result of this was that the contractors paid an additional £26,000 in wages. With all his zeal for the workmen, Mr. Crooks never once came in conflict with either the contractors or the engineers. Men and masters at Blackwall have all held the worthy Labour Councillor in the highest regard, and both are sorry that their long and cheerful connection must now be severed.

The same number of the *Municipal Journal* contained an article by Crooks himself, entitled, "A Labour View of the Blackwall Tunnel." The article displayed with what tact and modesty the Labour member had safeguarded the interests of his own class without neglecting the interests of the people of London. It bore out the statement made in his first speech to the Council, that no contractor ever lost by paying the trade union rate of wages.

[Pg 105]

CHAPTER XIII
THE TASK OF HIS LIFE BEGINS

> Elected to the Poplar Board of Guardians—Bumbledom in Power—Prison preferred to Workhouse—Poverty treated like Crime.

Six months after his return to the London County Council, Poplar elected Crooks to the Board of Guardians. When he took his seat as a member in the very Board-room where thirty years before he clung timorously to his mother's skirt he knew that the task of his life had begun.

He and his friend George Lansbury were elected together—the only Labour men on a Board of twenty-four. They were the firstfruits of the reduced qualification for Guardians introduced by Mr. (afterwards Lord) Ritchie, at that time President of the Local Government Board.

To Crooks belongs much of the credit for this welcome change. He felt keenly that working-men and women could never become Guardians of the Poor so long as the £40 property qualification remained. He persuaded the Poplar Trustees, of whom he was one, to ask the Local Government Board to make it possible for workpeople to become Guardians. Mr. Ritchie, ever sympathetic towards the East-End, a division of which he was then representing in Parliament, met this request from Poplar by lowering the qualification to £10. His successor at the Local Government Board, Sir Henry Fowler, abolished the property qualification altogether. [Pg 106]

At the time of Crooks's election the dissatisfaction felt by ratepayers with the old Guardians was deep and bitter. The Local Government Board has evidence in its possession that poor people of the district were saying at the time that if you wanted out-relief you must move into such and such a street, where rents were collected by someone who had influence with the Board.

Inside the workhouse Crooks found a state of things that seems incredible to-day. Bumbledom held sway over paupers and Guardians alike.

There were Guardians who had never been inside the workhouse once. When Crooks attempted

to enter as a Guardian he found that the Master had power to shut the gate upon him. Without the Master's permission, except on the regular House Committee days, Guardians had no legal right inside the workhouse at all.

The two Labour men raised such a hubbub over this anomaly that Sir Henry Fowler issued an order giving a Guardian the right to enter the workhouse at any reasonable hour. As a result there began, not only in Poplar but all over the country, a marked improvement in the treatment of old people in workhouses.

Here was a distinct score at the first venture. With the right of admission established, Crooks made full use of it. He found most of the officers hostile. So much so, that during a fire that broke out in the workhouse bakery, bringing the brigade engines round, one of the officers exclaimed, in the presence of the others when the fire was at its height:— [Pg 107]

"The only thing wanting now is that Crooks and Lansbury should be put on the top of it."

The cheers with which this remark was received were soon to give way to grave concern. It was clear the two Labour men meant to put an end to many things. Several of the officers were summarily suspended by Crooks one morning when he appeared on the scene unexpectedly.

A woman inmate had contrived to escape from the workhouse. She came round to his house and knocked him up. In consequence of an alarming story she told him respecting the conditions under which a fellow inmate had died in her arms that very night, Crooks hurried round to the institution and suspended certain of the officers on the spot.

The officers whom Crooks had suspended were dismissed by the Board. Nor were they by any means the last to be dismissed or to take their departure, for other scandals were brought to light.

"We found the condition of things in the House almost revolting," Crooks stated in evidence before the Local Government Board Inquiry of 1906. "The place was dirty. The stores were empty. The inmates had not sufficient clothes, and many were without boots to their feet. The food was so bad that the wash-tubs overflowed with what the poor people could not eat. It was [Pg 108] almost heart-breaking to go round the place and hear the complaints and see the tears of the aged men and women.

"'Poverty's no crime, but here it's treated like crime,' they used to say.

"Many of them defied the regulations on purpose to be charged before a magistrate, declaring that prison was better than the workhouse.

"One day I went into the dining-room and found women sitting on the long forms, some sullen, some crying. In front of each was a basin of what was alleged to be broth. They called it greasy water, and that was exactly what it looked and tasted like. They said they had to go out and wash blankets on that. I appealed to the master to give them something to eat, as they said they would sooner go to prison than commence work on that. Those women, like the men, were continually contriving to get sent to prison in order to escape the workhouse. After a few heated words between the master and me he gave them some food, and none of them went to prison that day.

"A few weeks later I was in the workhouse when these same women were creating a fearful uproar.

"'Ah, there you are,' said the master, meeting me. 'Go and look at your angels now! A nice lot they are to stick up for!'

"I went to the dining-room. There was a dead silence the moment I entered. [Pg 109]

"'I am right down ashamed of you,' I said. 'When you were treated like animals, no wonder you behaved like animals. Now that Mr. Lansbury and I have got you treated like human beings, we expect you to behave like human beings.'

"They said not a word, and later in the day the ringleaders, without any prompting, came to me and expressed their regret. From that day to this no such scene among the workhouse women has ever been repeated.

"The staple diet when I joined the Board was skilly. I have seen the old people, when this stuff was put before them, picking out black specks from the oatmeal. These were caused by rats, which had the undisturbed run of the oatmeal bin. No attempt was made to cleanse the oatmeal before it was prepared for the old people.

"Whenever one went into the men's dining-room there were quarrels about the food. I have had to protect old and weak men against stronger men, who would steal what was eatable of their dinners. There was no discipline. The able-bodied men's dining-room on Sundays gave one as near an approach to hell as anything on this earth. It was everybody for himself and the devil take the hindmost. If a fellow could fight he got as much as he wanted. If he could not, he got nothing. Fights, followed by prosecutions at the police courts, were common. The men boasted that prison had no worse terrors than that place. They were absolutely beyond control. They [Pg 110] wandered about all over the place, creating all kinds of discord, and even threatening to murder the officers. Two labour masters nearly lost their lives in trying to control them.

"The inmates were badly clothed as well as badly fed. Not one of them had a change of clothing.

Their under-clothes were worn to rags. If they washed them they had to borrow from each other in the interval.

"The inmates' clothes were not only scanty, they were filthy. On one occasion the whole of the workhouse linen was returned by the laundry people because it was so over-run with vermin that they would not wash it.

"One of the inmates—a woman—who was doing hard work at scrubbing every day, asked me whether she couldn't have a pair of boots.

"'Surely,' I said, putting her off for the time, 'nobody here goes without boots?'

"A second and a third time when I came across her scrubbing the floors she pleaded for boots. She raised her skirt from the wet stone floor, and showed two sloppy pieces of canvas on her feet, and that was all she had in the way of boots."

Crooks went on to relate that he walked along the corridor and saw a female officer. "There's a woman over there who has asked me three times to get her a pair of boots," he said.

She drew her skirt round her and said, "Oh, why do you worry about these people; they are not our class." [Pg 111]

"Worry about them!" Crooks rejoined. "What do you mean by our class? We are here to see these people properly clothed. I do not want to quarrel, but that woman must have a pair of boots to-day."

CHAPTER XIV
THE MAN WHO FED THE POOR

[Pg 112]

Chairman of the Poplar Board of Guardians—Bumbledom Dethroned—Paupers' Garb Abolished—Two Presidents of the Local Government Board Approve Crooks's Policy.

This, then, was the state of the workhouse when Crooks went on the Board. It was soon evident that a strong man had arrived. He whom some of the Guardians at first described as "a ranter from the Labour mob" soon proved himself the best administrator among them.

Within five years of his election he was made Chairman. The Board insisted on his retaining the chair for ten consecutive years. During that time he wrought out of the shame and degradation he found in the workhouse a system of order and decency and humane administration that for a long time made the Poplar Union a model among Poor Law authorities, and one frequently recommended by the Local Government Board.

Of course he made enemies. Some of the old Guardians whom he had turned out of public life nursed their resentment in secret. Others joined them, including contractors who had fared lavishly under the old *régime*. Presently a Municipal Alliance was formed, and though it could do nothing against Crooks at the poll, since the ratepayers would persist in placing him at the top, it found other methods of attacking him, of which more hereafter. [Pg 113]

One of the first things he aimed at was a change in the character both of officers and of Guardians. He saw no hope for the poor under the old rulers. At each succeeding election his opposition brought about the defeat of the worst of them.

The officers could not be dealt with so publicly. Some of the officers in the infirmary, addicted to drunkenness, were able to defy the Guardians for an obvious reason. It was one of their duties to take whisky and champagne into the infirmary for the delectation of some of the Guardians, whom a billiard table often detained into the early hours. Crooks and Lansbury raised such indignation in the district as to make it impossible for this state of things to continue.

In 1894 the Master and Matron resigned. Gradually the old school of workhouse officials who had run the place as they liked were weeded out. A more intelligent, more sympathetic, better disciplined staff grew up in their place. Bumbledom was dethroned. The sick were nursed better. The inmates were clothed better. All, both old and young, were fed better.

The tell-tale pauper's garb disappeared altogether. When the old people walked out they were no longer branded by their dress. They wore simple, homely garments. They all rejoiced in the change save a few like the old woman Crooks came across one afternoon on her day out. She was looking clean and comfortable, and he asked how she liked the new clothes. [Pg 114]

"Not at all, Mr. Crooks. Nobody thinks you come from the workhouse now, so they don't give you anything."

His greatest reform had reference to the food. "Skilly" went the way of "greasy water." Good plain wholesome meals appeared on the tables.

"And became more expensive," say the critics.

"Yes," Crooks retorts; "but to economise on the stomachs of the poor is false economy. If it's only cheapness you want, why don't you set up the lethal chamber for the old people? That would be

the cheapest thing of all."

Let us see what he actually gave these people to eat, since for feeding the poor he was afterwards called to the bar of public opinion.

First he developed the system of bread-baking in the workhouse, in order to get better and cheaper bread than was being supplied under contract from outside. Under the direction of one or two skilled bakers, the work provided many of the inmates with pleasant and useful occupation. They made all the bread required in the workhouse for both officers and inmates, all the bread required in the children's schools, all the loaves given away as out-relief.

Instead of being likened to india-rubber, as it used to be in the old days, the bread now came to be described by the *Daily Mail* as equal to what could be obtained in the best restaurants in the West-End. Yet they were making this bread in the workhouse cheaper than it was possible to buy ordinary bread outside. [Pg 115]

And then, for the benefit of the infirm old folk, Crooks persuaded the Guardians to substitute butter for margarine, and fresh meat for the cheap stale stuff so often supplied. He held out for milk that had not been skimmed, and for tea and coffee that had not been adulterated. He even risked his reputation by allowing the aged women to put sugar in their tea themselves, and the old men to smoke an occasional pipe of tobacco.

Rumours of this new way of feeding the workhouse poor reached the austere Local Government Board. First it sent down its inspectors, and then the President himself appeared in person. And Mr. Chaplin saw that it was good, and told other Boards to do likewise. He issued a circular to the Guardians of the country recommending all that Poplar had introduced. More, he proposed that for deserving old people over sixty-four years of age "the supply of tobacco, dry tea, and sugar be made compulsory."

This humane order of things, you may be sure, did not commend itself to all Guardian Boards; and when later there came further instructions from headquarters that ailing inmates might be allowed "medical comforts," the revolt materialised. A deputation of Guardians went to Whitehall to try to argue the President into a harder heart. Crooks and Lansbury were there to uphold the new system. Mr. Walter Long had succeeded Mr. Chaplin then. He listened patiently to ingenious speeches in which honourable gentlemen tried to show that it was from no lack of love for the poor they had not carried out the new dietary scale, but—— [Pg 116]

"Gentlemen," Mr. Long interrupted at last, "am I to understand you do not desire to feed your poor people properly?"

Then all with one accord began to make excuse. It was the difficulty of book-keeping, they said. It appeared they were prepared to stint the poor rather than add to the book-keeping.

From that day an improved dietary scale was introduced into our workhouses. The man who fed the poor in Poplar saw the workhouse poor of the kingdom better fed in consequence.

What kind of food was it that Poplar dared to give to the poor? Those "luxuries for paupers" down at Poplar, about which the world was to hear so much, what were they? A working-man had appeared, and after years of unwearied well-doing had got rid of "skilly" and "greasy water," substituting, with the approval of two Presidents of the Local Government Board, the following simple articles of food.

Observe the list carefully, for the kinds and quantities of food here set out were precisely those supplied to the able-bodied inmates during the outcry that arose over "paupers' luxuries" at the time of the Local Government Board Inquiry in 1906. The list is the official return of the food supplied in one week to each inmate.

A MAN'S DIET FOR A WEEK. [Pg 117]

(Cost, 4s. 2d.)

Breakfasts	Bread	3½ lbs.
	Butter	3½ ozs.
	Coffee	7 pints.
Dinners	Mutton	13½ ozs.
	Beef	4½ ozs.
	Bacon	3 ozs.
	Irish stew	1 pint.
	Boiled pork	4½ ozs.
	Bread	14 ozs.
	Potatoes and greens	4½ lbs.
Suppers	Bread	3½ lbs.
	Butter	3½ ozs.
	Tea	7 pints.

A WOMAN'S DIET FOR A WEEK.

(Cost, 4s.)

Breakfasts	Bread	2⅝ lbs.
	Butter	3½ ozs.
	Coffee	7 pints.
Dinners	Mutton	12 ozs.
	Beef	4 ozs.
	Bacon	3 ozs.
	Irish stew	1 pint.
	Boiled pork	4 ozs.
	Bread	1¾ lbs.
	Potatoes and greens	3 lbs.
Suppers	Bread	2⅝ lbs.
	Butter	3½ ozs.
	Tea	7 pints.

When you read down that list and think of the scare headlines that appeared in London daily papers during the Inquiry—"Splendid Paupers," "Luxuries for Paupers," "A Pauper's Paradise"— [Pg 118] you may well ask, Are we living in bountiful England? Or have we fallen upon an England of meagre diet and mean men, an England that whines like a miser when called upon to feed on homely fare its broken-down veterans of industry?

Dickens is dead, else would he have shown us Bumble reincarnated in the editors of certain London newspapers.

CHAPTER XV [Pg 119]
TURNING WORKHOUSE CHILDREN INTO USEFUL CITIZENS

A Home for Little "Ins-and-Outs"—Technical Education for Workhouse Children—A Good Report for the Forest Gate Schools—Trophies won by Scholars—The Children's Pat-a-Cakes.

After he had fed the old people and clothed the old people, and in other ways brought into their darkened lives a little good cheer, Crooks turned his care upon the workhouse children.

The Guardians' school at Forest Gate lay four miles from the Union buildings at Poplar. With five or six hundred children always under training in the school there still remained varying batches of neglected little people in the workhouse. The greater number of these belonged to parents who came into the House for short periods only.

These little "ins-and-outs" were getting no schooling and no training save the training that fitted them for pauperism. What to do with them had long been a perplexing problem. If they were sent to Forest Gate one day their parents in the workhouse could demand them back the next day and take their discharge, even though they and their children turned up at the gates for re-admission within the next twenty-four hours.

When Crooks proposed the simple expedient of sending these children to the surrounding day- [Pg 120] schools everybody seemed amazed.

The idea had never been heard of before. The London School Board of the day did not take kindly to it at all. It poured cold water on the project at first. The neighbouring schools were nearly all full, and the Board thought it would hear no more of the matter by suggesting that if the Guardians could find vacant places they were at liberty of course to send the children.

Crooks framed an answering letter that it was the School Board's duty to find the places, and that, come what would, the Guardians were determined to send the children to the day schools.

Soon places were found for all. The little people who, through neglect and idleness in the workhouse, had been getting steeped in pauperism, were now dressed in non-institution clothes, and they went to and from the neighbouring schools, playing on the way like any other children.

That was the beginning of a system destined to have a far-reaching effect on Poor Law children all over the country. Other Unions, faced with the same problem, seeing how well it had been dealt with at Poplar, went and did likewise.

The Labour Guardian did not rest there. The children were a great deal better for coming in daily contact with the outside world, but much of the good work was undone by their having to spend every night in the workhouse. He wanted to keep them away altogether from its contaminating [Pg 121] influence. He persuaded the Guardians to purchase a large dwelling house about a quarter of a mile away from the workhouse. This became a real home for the children. There they are brought up and regularly sent to the public day schools outside, entirely free from workhouse surroundings.

So long as the mark of the workhouse clings to children, so long, says Crooks, will children cling to the workhouse. That is what makes him so keen in getting rid of the institution dress and of everything else likely to brand a child.

He helped to banish all that suggested pauperism from the Forest Gate School. The children were educated and grew up, not like workhouse children, as before, but like the children of working parents. With what result? Marked out in their childhood as being "from the workhouse," they often bore the stamp all their life and ended up as workhouse inmates in their manhood and womanhood. Under the new system, they were made to feel like ordinary working-class children. They grew up like them, becoming ordinary working-men and working-women themselves; so that the Poor Law knew them no longer.

"If I can't appeal to your moral sense, let me appeal to your pocket," Crooks once remarked at a Guildhall Poor Law Conference. "Surely it is far cheaper to be generous in training Poor Law children to take their place in life as useful citizens than it is to give the children a niggardly training and a branded career. This latter way soon lands them in the workhouse again, to be [Pg 122] kept out of the rates for the rest of their lives."

How far the principle was carried out at Forest Gate may be judged from the report made by Mr. Dugard, H.M. Inspector of Schools, after one of his visits. Thus:—

> There is very little (if any) of the institution mark among the children.... Both boys' and girls' schools are in a highly satisfactory state, showing increased efficiency, with increased intelligence on the part of the children.... They compare very favourably with the best elementary schools.

In all that related to games and healthful recreation Crooks agreed in giving the scholars the fullest facilities. The lads were encouraged to send their football and cricket teams to play other schools. The girls developed under drill and gymnastic training, and became proficient swimmers.

In fact, the scholars at Forest Gate began to count for something. They learnt to trust each other and to rely upon themselves. They grew in hope and courage. They learnt to walk honourably before all men. In consequence, thousands of them have become merged in the great working world outside, self-respecting men and women.

I met Crooks looking elated one evening, and he told me he had just come from the Poor Law schools' swimming competition at Westminster baths.

"There were three trophies," he said. "The first, the London Shield, was for boys. Poplar won that [Pg 123] with 85 marks, five more than the next best. The second, the Portsmouth Shield, was for girls, with a Portsmouth school competing. Our Poplar girls won that with 65 marks, the two next schools getting only 35 each. The third trophy, the Whitehall Shield, for the school as a whole with the highest number of marks, was also won by Poplar. I feel as pleased as though I'd done it myself."

The best administration in an out-of-date building is always hampered. Forest Gate belonged to the old order of Poor Law schools known as barrack buildings. Although the Guardians made the very best of the school, there were structural defects that hindered the work seriously. It was therefore decided to build cottage homes at Shenfield in Essex, where a special effort is being made to train the girls as well as the boys in rural pursuits in order to keep them out of the overcrowded cities.

The Parliamentary Committee on Poor Law Schools that sat in 1896 invited Crooks to give evidence. Many of the things he urged were included in the Committee's recommendations. Among them was the extension of the full benefit of the Education Act and the Technical Education Acts to all Poor Law children.

"The wine and spirit dues that provide the technical education grants," he told the committee, "might be said to belong to Poor Law children by right, because it is always being urged that it is owing to drunken parents that these children get into the workhouse. I don't believe it, but there [Pg 124] is the claim."

At that time the Poor Law schools received no benefits in the way of scholarships or technical education grants. It was largely due to his advocacy that the scholars were at last given the same opportunities as other children. One of the great moments of his life was when he opened a letter from the headmaster at the Hunslet Poor Law school, telling him that "in consequence of what you have done, one of our boys has just taken a County Scholarship—the first Poor Law child to benefit under the Technical Education Acts."

Crooks would like to go much further. Until Poor Law children are taken entirely away from the control of Guardians he will never be satisfied. Why should the authority that looks after workhouses for the old and infirm be entrusted with the task of training the young? The two duties lie as far apart as East from West. He would place these children wholly under the education authority.

No matter where, he is always ready to put in a word for Poor Law children on the least opportunity. It was news to his colleagues on the London County Council when, in the course of a debate in the summer of 1894, he told of his own experience in a Poor Law school. He seems to have made a deep impression by his speech on that occasion, judging by the following comment made shortly afterwards by the *Municipal Journal*;—

> Those who heard Mr. Crooks's speech in the Council Chamber, when the subject of the [Pg 125]

training of Poor Law children came up on a side issue, will not readily forget it. One of the daily papers, in its admiration the next day, declared it to be the best speech heard at the Council. Be that as it may, the speech, coming spontaneously with the pent-up indignation of a soul that had suffered sorely from a pernicious system, was a marvellous one, producing a marvellous effect. Councillors in the front benches turned round and visitors in the gallery stretched forward to catch a glimpse of the short dark figure on the Labour bench pleading so powerfully for the children of the poor.

Nor had he been in the House of Commons long before his voice was heard there on behalf of workhouse children. Speaking in a debate in 1903 on the various methods of dealing with these children, he said:—

> At one time there was no stronger advocate of boarding-out than myself. It is an ideal system in theory, but its success by practical application has yet to be proved. Many requests are made by country people to be allowed to adopt children on charitable grounds, but when inquiries come to be made into the incomes of these people the Guardians generally find it is hoped to make a profit out of the children. I have visited a village where a widow boarded four children—two more than the law allows. For these children she was paid sixteen shillings a week. She lived in a district where the labourer's wages were only eleven shillings.
>
> In regard to another case I personally investigated, I asked how the boy was getting on.
>
> "Oh, all right; but he is growing so big and eats such a lot that I wish you would take him away and send me a smaller boy."
>
> The boarded-out children, so far from losing the pauper taint, are more frequently known by the name of the Union from which they come than by their own names. In [Pg 126] fact, in some villages, I found "boarding-out" a staple industry. Boarding-out is all right in good homes; the difficulty is to find good homes.

Not long after he made this speech, there was an outcry in a section of the Press over "an amazing example of extravagance" at Poplar. It appeared in the form of a letter from a correspondent. The correspondent—who turned out to be a member of a firm of contractors—waxed virtuously indignant over the Guardians' tenders because they included, he alleged, supplies of luxuries for paupers. The so-called luxuries for the most part proved to be medical comforts ordered by the doctor for the ailing. Among the other items was 1 cwt. of pat-a-cake biscuits, and these were singled out specially as a specimen of how the workhouse inmates were pampered.

I met Crooks in the Lobby of the House of Commons at the time of the outcry, and asked what he thought of it all.

"Perfectly true," he said. "We in Poplar are guilty of the great crime of inviting tenders for the supply of a few pat-a-cakes; but our horrified critics are in error in assuming that the pat-a-cakes are for the workhouse inmates. They are for the children. We order 1 cwt. for the half-year, which I believe works out at the rate of a cake for each child about once a week. There's extravagance for you! Isn't it scandalous? Just imagine our kiddies in the workhouse school getting a whole pat-a-cake to eat!

"That's not the worst of it. Those youngsters of ours, not content with getting an occasional pat-a- [Pg 127] cake, have actually been overheard to sing the nursery rhyme on the subject. We shall be having a Local Government Board inspector sent down to stop it if it leaks out. You should hear the little ones holding forth!

> Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man,
> Bake me a cake as fast as you can!
> Prick it, and pat it, and mark it with T,
> And put it in the oven for Tommy and me.

"The youngsters lie awake at nights, wondering when their turn will come again to have a farthing pat-a-cake. One of the little girls came running up to me in the playground the other day, exclaiming: 'Oh, Mr. Crooks, what do you think? I had a pat-a-cake for tea last Sunday. They promised it to us the day before, and I was so pleased when I went to bed that night that I nearly forgot to go to sleep.'"

[Pg 128]

CHAPTER XVI
ON THE METROPOLITAN ASYLUMS BOARD

> Mr. Chaplin's Humane Circular to Poor Law Guardians—Crooks Appointed a Member of the Metropolitan Asylums Board—Chairman of the Children's Committee—His Knack of Getting His Own Way—Reorganising the Labour Conditions of the Board's Workmen.

We have seen that the policy of Poor Law reform which Crooks was carrying out at Poplar won

the good-will of the Local Government Board. Soon after Mr. Henry Chaplin took his seat in Lord Salisbury's Cabinet of 1895 he sent for Crooks, and the two spent a whole morning discussing the weak points in our Poor Law system. Mr. Chaplin made many notes during the conversation, and at parting good-naturedly remarked that Crooks had given him enough work to occupy the next two or three years.

Shortly afterwards, the Minister and the Labour man made a personal investigation of Poplar and other East-End workhouses and infirmaries. The visit to each institution was a surprise one. When the two men entered the children's ward of the Mile End workhouse, they found the nurses absent and the children screaming. In about half a minute Crooks had all the children laughing.

"What's the secret of your magic?" asked the President of the Local Government Board. [Pg 129]

"It comes natural when you are used to them," said Crooks.

As already shown, Mr. Chaplin declared emphatically for the Poplar policy. His notable circular to Poor Law Guardians, for which as President of the Local Government Board he will perhaps be best remembered, gave the support of the Government of the day to that policy of humane administration of the Poor Law which Crooks had established at Poplar. It laid down three principles which the Labour man had urged upon the President at their first meeting:—

1. Children to be entirely removed from association with the workhouse and workhouse surroundings.

2. Old people of good character who have relatives or friends outside not to be forced into the workhouse, but to be given adequate out-relief.

3. Old people in the workhouse of good behaviour to be provided with additional comforts.

Mr. Chaplin further showed his confidence in the Labour Chairman of the Poplar Guardians by inviting him to become one of the Local Government Board's representatives on the Metropolitan Asylums Board. The work meant a heavy addition to Crooks's public duties, with the London County Council and the Poplar Guardians demanding so much of his time. There was no hesitation, however, in accepting the new office when he found it afforded further opportunities to serve the afflicted poor and help neglected children. Mr. Chaplin's successor at the Local [Pg 130] Government Board, Mr. Walter Long, twice re-nominated Crooks to the same position.

Although the Asylums Board comes but little before public notice, except in times of epidemic, it has far-reaching powers. It is the largest hospital authority that any country can show. It has fourteen infectious disease hospitals with accommodation for nearly seven thousand people. It maintains six thousand imbecile patients in four asylums. It looks after the welfare of several hundred boys on a Thames training-ship, and of some two thousand children in various homes.

The members, or "managers," as they are called, are all nominated either by London Boards of Guardians or by the Local Government Board. An indirectly elected body is the last that expects to see a representative of Labour. Imagine, therefore, the amazement of this somewhat select company when, in May, 1898, a Labour man walked into their midst as the nominee of a Conservative Cabinet Minister.

He was eyed at first with suspicion. The suspicion soon changed to curiosity. The Labour man never spoke. The managers expected a torrent of loud criticism, and here was immovable silence. For the first five months Crooks never opened his mouth at the Board meetings.

"What's your game?" asked a friendly member in an aside one afternoon.

"I'm learning the business," was the quiet reply. "This is an old established Board with notions of [Pg 131] its own, and it's not going to be dictated to by new-comers. But you wait, my friend, and you'll find before long I'll be getting my own way in everything here."

So it proved. During the two or three years that he was Chairman of the Children's Committee and of a special committee that reorganised the hours and wages of the Board's large staff, he never lost a single recommendation he brought before the Board.

"How is it, Mr. Crooks, that whatever you ask this Board for you always get?" he was once asked by Sir Edwin Galsworthy, for many years the Board's Chairman.

Crooks returned the sally that it was because he was always right. His real secret was—convert the whole of your committee. A majority vote in committee never satisfied him. Nothing short of the support of every single member would suffice. Many times in committee has he adjourned the discussion rather than snatch a bare majority.

"Let's take it home with us," he would say jocularly from the chair. "Perhaps after a week's thought you'll all come back converted to my view. If not, then you must come better prepared to convince me that I am wrong than you are now."

The difficult and delicate work of reorganising the Labour conditions of the Board's workmen and attendants was at last brought to a triumph. He came out of the chair with the goodwill of the whole staff and of the entire Board of Managers. His colleagues included large employers of [Pg 132] labour, eminent medical men, and retired army and navy officers. All agreed that he had settled for them Labour difficulties which had created nothing but confusion and perplexity before.

Working on his invariable rule that it pays best in every department of work to observe fair conditions, he scored a signal success on the very body where before his coming Labour members were regarded as revolutionaries. As at Blackwall Tunnel, he gained his points without losing the trust or friendship of the employers of labour.

The task put his administrative ability to a test which only able statesmen can stand. The rare faculty he has of obtaining the maximum of reform out of existing agencies carried him safely over every shoal.

Crooks is every inch an Englishman as well as every inch a Labour member. He applies his Labour principles on typical English lines; hence his success among all bodies of Englishmen, no matter what their party or class.

Few men have higher ideals or feel more deeply the injustice of much in our present-day social system, but Crooks recognises that the only way to get reform is to put your hand to the plough with things as they are, and not wait for the millennium before getting to work.

He sees the crooked things of this life as keenly as anyone, but because the things cannot be put wholly straight in his own day he does not hold aloof. He does what he can in the living present to [Pg 133] put them as nearly straight as existing machinery makes possible, trusting that the next or some succeeding generation will continue the work until the things are put perfectly straight at last.

CHAPTER XVII
A BAD BOYS' ADVOCATE

[Pg 134]

> Efforts on behalf of Diseased and Mentally-deficient Children—Altering the Law in Six Weeks—Establishing Remand Homes for First Offenders—London's Vagrant Child-Life —Reformatory and Industrial Schools—The Boy who Sat on the Fence—Theft of a Donkey and Barrow—Lads who want Mothering.

Soon the call of the children reached his ears again.

He had barely finished reorganising the labour conditions on the Asylums Board when he undertook a great task in the interests of the two thousand children who had just been placed under the Board's care. These children were all sufferers from some physical or mental trouble, and it was because they required special treatment that a Parliamentary Committee had recommended that they be transferred from the London Guardians to the Asylums Board.

A comprehensive scheme had to be framed by the Board for looking after its new charges. Crooks gave three hard years to these children's well-being. During that time, as Chairman of the Children's Committee, he wrought some remarkable changes in the lot of the diseased and mentally-deficient little people handed over to the Board's keeping.

New homes were set up in the country and at the seaside for the afflicted and convalescent [Pg 135] children. The little people's meals were made pleasant, their clothes deprived of the institutional taint. They were free to be merry, and their laughter was better medicine than the doctor's.

The sad lot of the mentally-deficient children, some of them little better than imbeciles, appealed greatly to the strong, clear-brained Labour man from Poplar. There were three or four hundred of these, all from London workhouses, the sight of whom so often reminded Crooks of the idiot boy who slept in his dormitory when he, as a child, was an inmate at Poplar.

The Asylums Board was not allowed to keep these mentally-deficient boys and girls after sixteen years of age. The children had thus to be sent away only half trained, often direct to the workhouse again, from which they never emerged unless to be taken to an institution more hopeless still.

Crooks conceived the idea that if the Board kept these luckless little people until they completed their twenty-first year it might be possible to give them such a training as would enable them to look after themselves outside, and live useful lives, instead of being a life-burden to the State and of no use to anyone. The Local Government Board agreed, and the managers now train these youthful charges till they reach manhood and womanhood.

The experiment has already justified itself. Many a youth and maid who would have been left in [Pg 136] mental darkness all their lives have by this longer period of training gained a glimmering of light. Their limited intelligence has been sufficiently developed to enable them to assist at earning their own living and to look after themselves.

Other children under the Board's care might be said to suffer from an excess rather than from a lack of intelligence. On the Asylums Board they are known as remand children. In the police courts they are known as first offenders. They consist of boys and girls who, having been charged before a magistrate with offences which render them liable to be sent to an industrial or a reformatory school, get remanded for inquiries.

At one time, pending the inquiries, these youthful offenders used to be detained in prison. When Crooks joined the Asylums Board they had been transferred to the workhouse. The influence for

evil was little better in the one place than in the other. The one introduced them to criminality, the other to pauperism.

"These children want keeping as far as possible from both prison and workhouse," argued Crooks with his colleagues. "We ought to put them in small homes and give them school-time and playtime, like other children, until their cases come before the magistrate again."

So two or three dwelling-houses were taken in different quarters of London and adapted as Remand Homes. Crooks headed a deputation from the Asylums Board to the London magistrates at Bow Street to urge them in future to commit all remand children to the Homes. The magistrates were sympathetic enough, but showed it was their duty to carry out the law, and that the law clearly laid it down that youthful offenders under remand must be sent to the workhouse. [Pg 137]

"We'll alter the law, then," was Crooks's reply. "For I'm determined these youngsters shall no longer be sent to the workhouse."

In the record time of six weeks the law was altered. It sounds miraculous to those who know the ways of Whitehall. Crooks's resource proved more than equal to red-tapeism.

First the Asylums Board wrote to the Home Office. Then the Home Office sent the usual evasive reply. The correspondence would have gone on indefinitely had not Crooks waited on the Home Secretary in person.

As the Labour man expected, Mr. Ritchie knew nothing about the matter, the Home Office officials having settled it without consulting the Secretary of State. Always willing to co-operate in anything that promised to keep children away from the workhouse, Mr. Ritchie asked Crooks what he had to suggest. The visitor pointed out that the Juvenile Offenders' Bill was at that very moment before Parliament, and that the insertion in that measure of an additional clause of half a dozen lines only would keep remand children away from the workhouse for all time. The Home Secretary seized the idea at once, and Crooks's suggestion became law the following month.

The first of the Remand Homes was opened at Pentonville Road for the convenience of children charged at the police courts of North London and the East-End. Sometimes as many as fifty young offenders, boys and girls, can be seen there at the same time. [Pg 138]

Instead of loafing about the workhouse, as before, and becoming inured to pauper surroundings, they are now taught as in a day school. They have play in the open air and recreation indoors in the way of games and books. Moreover, the girls are taught to sew and knit, the boys instructed in manual work. Though seldom there more than a fortnight before being taken back to the police court, they go away cleaner, better informed, not without hope. And the magistrates now feel justified in sending about 80 per cent. of them back to their parents.

A visit to this Remand Home at Pentonville will teach you disquieting truths about the vagrant child-life of London. These wayward youngsters tell their tales with startling frankness.

That bright-faced lad of twelve—why is he here?

"Stealing," he answers us.

"What did you steal?"

"Some stockings outside a shop."

"Why?"

"To get money for sweets."

"Where did you sell the stockings?"

"In a pub."

"Have you ever stolen before?"

"Yes."

"How often?" [Pg 139]

"A good many times, but never been caught before."

Two of the oldest lads approached, and we questioned them.

"I was took up for begging," said No. 1. "But I weren't begging—on'y looking for work."

"Where?"

"At King's Cross—me and him," pointing to his neighbour. "We was offering to carry people's bags when the copper come and took us up."

The teacher explained that boys soliciting passengers around the big railway stations were becoming such a nuisance that the police sometimes had to take them into custody.

"We didn't get hold of a man's arm and say, 'Give us threepence,' as the copper said," the youthful informant went on. "We was on'y looking for work."

"How long have you been looking for this kind of work?"

"We goes an' looks for it every day," said No. 2 (in shirt sleeves, like his pal). "And sometimes we makes half a crown, and sometimes three shillings a day, carrying gentlemen's bags. I've been a-doing of it five months. It pays better than reg'lar work, where I used to make ten shillings a week."

No. 1 could not forget his grievance against the police.

"Puts us in the cell all night," he interposed, "and gives us coffee and two thick slices of bread for supper. And takes us in a bumpy ole van to the police court in the morning along of a lot of others. Then we was sent here, where we has to write and read—just like going back to school again." [Pg 140]

Another lad was there for "stopping out all night," according to his own rendering. When we asked "Why?" the answer came prompt enough, "'Cos I likes it."

"How many nights did you stay out?"

"Me and them," indicating others higher up the room, "we slept behind the fire station four nights and then went home."

"What happened then?"

"Mother said nofink, but she got a stick——"

He paused sufficiently long for us to take the sequel for granted, then added quietly:—

"So I stopped out the next night."

"And then?"

"Then the copper came."

Yes, they need "homes," indeed, these wayward youngsters, ensnared by the temptations of London's streets. Some are here for gambling in the gutter, many for playing truant, some for sleeping out, and others for felony. Generally they are sent home if it be a first offence, or to a reformatory if the case be a bad one.

There are girls here, too. What of them?

"Me and my sister was taken up by the police for sleeping on a doorstep," said one sad-eyed little maid in a blue frock.

"Why on a doorstep?"

"Father left us, and when mother died the landlord turned us out." [Pg 141]

True enough, and the sisters will be sent to a girls' home shortly.

That is the best that can be done for the girls, especially the large number that are brought away from houses of ill-repute.

The boys who get committed to reformatories still find themselves under Crooks's eye. While the Asylums Board looks after them when under remand, the London County Council becomes responsible once the lads are committed. This dual control Crooks is trying to get rid of, in the hope that the duty will be given wholly into the hands of one authority.

For several years he was a member and at one time Chairman of the L.C.C. Committee that looks after the industrial and reformatory schools. The committee meets at Feltham, where is the largest of the institutions under its charge. It was rare for Crooks to be absent during his membership of the committee.

He and Colonel Rotton, who was also Chairman for a period, could generally make the lads on arrival understand them without much parleying. Every lad, on being committed to the school by a magistrate, had to appear before the committee. Here are some characteristic dialogues:—

"Well, my boy, what are you here for?"

"Burglary." The burglar was nine years of age.

"Well, you can't be a burglar here, but you can be a good lad. Everyone can be a good lad here if he likes. If he doesn't like we make him. What will you do?" [Pg 142]

"I fink I'll like, sir."

Generally the lads do not admit their offence so readily. They are not always so frank as you find them in the Remand Homes. Most of them, when before the Committee, find excuses, like the boy who was caught with others stealing in a railway goods yard.

"Please, sir, it weren't me at all."

"We always get the wrong boy. What are you supposed to be here for?"

"Fieving, sir. But I didn't do it. I were on'y sitting on the fence."

"Then let this be a lesson to you. Never sit on the fence. Do you know the Ten Commandments?"

"No, sir."

"Can you say the Lord's Prayer?"

"No; we wasn't taught it at the school wot I used to go to."

"But you didn't go to school."

"The boy wot did go told me."

"Well, we'll see to it that you do go to school now."

Another new-comer excused himself more ingeniously:—"Me and my mate we found a donkey and barrer at Covent Garden. We saw a man's name on the barrer, and fought if we went off wif the donkey we would git a shilling the next day for taking it back to him. But a copper stopped us as [Pg 143] we was leading the donkey over Waterloo Bridge. So we hadn't a chance to take it back, as we was going to."

"Very well, you must stay with us until you learn that donkeys in barrows are not necessarily lost."

Crooks believed in giving the boys plenty of play and plenty of work. Nearly all their offences he believed to be due to excess of vitality. They had never had a chance of working it off in a proper way before. Besides, many of the lads needed mothering. It was always his regret that he could not persuade his colleagues on the Committee to adopt a system he found in vogue in the Moss Hill industrial school in Glasgow. When visiting that institution he was agreeably surprised to find about a dozen "mothers" on the staff. If a lad tore his coat or pulled off a button, he knew which particular "mother" to run to in order to be patched up.

"I have always said, and shall always continue to say," he states, "that reformatory schools ought to be made a State charge entirely. If there is any part of the community that can be called a national debt, it is this class of poor, misguided lads who, if they were properly cared for, would soon become a valuable national asset."

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CHAPTER XVIII
PROUD OF THE POOR

The Handy Man of Poplar—Peacemaker among his Neighbours—Piloting the Author of "In His Steps" through the Slums—Difference between a Street Arab and a Prince—Object Lesson for a Professor of Political Economy—How the Poor help the Poor.

During these years the saying grew up among his neighbours that nothing happens in Poplar without someone running to Will Crooks about it. His little house at 28, Northumberland Street, to the north of East India Dock Road, was the gathering ground of all kinds of deputations and of troubled individuals seeking advice on every subject under the sun. He was a court of appeal in family troubles as well as on public questions.

A small girl came to the door one night with the announcement:

"If you please, father's took to drink again, and mother says will Mr. Crooks come round and give him a good hiding?"

Appeals like that of an old labourer who could neither read nor write became common. The old man stood sobbing on the step without a word when Crooks's youngest daughter opened the door. Instinct told her it was her father that was wanted, and she called him.

"Well, old Charley, what's the matter now?" when Crooks recognised his caller. [Pg 145]

"She's turned me out again," came the words between sobs. "If you would on'y go and speak to her, Mr. Crooks, and put in a word for me! She ain't half a bad wife, you know. It's on'y her temper and me as don't agree."

He invited the aggrieved husband inside, going off himself alone, to return in half an hour with the news that the road was now clear.

About a month later in the main road he was hailed from over the way. The old labourer came hobbling towards him.

"Ah, Mr. Crooks, I don't know what yer said to my ole woman that night, but she's bin a perfect angel since."

What Crooks had said was simple enough. On reaching the court he found the good wife gossiping.

"Here's Mr. Crooks!" cried the little company of women as he approached.

He spoke no word, but with a mysterious air beckoned the aggressive wife aside.

"Heard the news about your old man?" he asked with a long face.

Assuming the worst, she immediately began to weep into her apron.

"It's my fault, Mr. Crooks," she whimpered. "He often threatened to drown hisself, but I never thought he'd go and do it!"

And then again, amid broken sobs:—"I've al'ays bin a good wife to him, Mr. Crooks."

"Yes, I know you have; and he knows it, too. He's often told me what a splendid wife you are. But you shouldn't cheek him so. You take my advice and coax him a little; coax him, and then you'll find you can do what you like with him afterwards. Why, bless you, if it hadn't been for some of us he might have drowned himself to-night. Now you just give him a good supper, like a sensible woman, when we send him home, and begin coaxing him from this very night. And, mind, not a word about this to anyone, for fear you excite him again." [Pg 146]

When again he met the old labourer it was evident the good relations were growing.

"Give her a treat last Saturday afternoon, Mr. Crooks—a fair knock-out. Took her for a 'bus ride to Ludgit Circis, and showed her the Thames Embankmint. Never seen anyfink so fine in all her life. Nearly made her faint. When she got home she dropped into a chair and said, 'I feel I could die now, Charlie, after that.'"

"And you?"

"I said, 'If you talk like that I'll go for Mr. Crooks again.' That fetched her round, 'pon me honour."

The good people of Poplar expect Crooks to meet all their needs. It was not very inspiring to be knocked up in the middle of the night and find a carman groaning at the door.

"Oh, Will, I'm that bad with the spasms!"

"Why don't you go to the doctor?"

"I've bin to him and he ain't done me no good. I thought as how if you'd come along with me he'd be sure to give me the right stuff." [Pg 147]

Later in the same week the man's wife arrived breathless in the early morning. "Would Mr. Crooks come at once?"

"What's happened now?"

"Dick took a drop too much at the 'Ship' last night, and when he come in, me having gone to bed, he mistook the paraffin oil bottle for his medicine. Two whole spoonfuls he took, Mr. Crooks, and we've only found it out this morning. He says he must see you now afore he dies."

Curious ideas are held as to what Crooks's duties are. One irate citizen declared to his mates that he was done with Will Crooks for ever. He was appealed to for the reason.

"Why," said he, "there's our sink bin stopped up nigh on three weeks, and he ain't bin round yet!"

All who labour and are poor in Poplar look upon Crooks as the unfailing friend. The coal-man crying coals in the street all in vain, one morning hails him in passing:—

"Wot's wrong with people this morning, Mr. Crooks? One would think I was selling tombstones!"

Another day it is the chimney-sweep who stops him.

"Talk about the County Council's schools in Poplar, Mr. Crooks; I calls it a scandal, I does."

"What's the matter?"

"Sending their chimbleys up to Bethnal Green to be swept instead of employing local labour!" [Pg 148]

The callers at his house were in no sense confined to his neighbours. One day it would be C. B. Fry, the cricketer, another day G. K. Chesterton the critic—neither of them for the first time; and again George R. Sims, Beerbohm Tree, Lord and Lady Denbigh, Miss Gertrude Tuckwell, Father Adderley, Bernard Shaw, Earl Carrington, and the Rev. Charles Sheldon from the United States—to mention but a few of the men and women of widely different walks of life who are pleased to number him among their friends.

Mr. Sheldon called soon after the great boom of "In His Steps." On several occasions Crooks piloted him through the slums of the East End. While looking round a typical court the American minister asked one of the women when they had seen a parson there.

The answer came, "We ain't seen no parson down here since we lived here, fifteen years."

"I don't wonder that people are bad," remarked Mr. Sheldon to Crooks. "The wonder is that people are so good as they are."

Before returning to America Mr. Sheldon sent Crooks a parting note, ending, "I shall always remember you as you stand, 'in the thick of it,' for the rights of little children and brother men."

Outsiders who visit Crooks find him precisely the same man as his neighbours find him. He has personal friends in the Peers' House as well as in the Poor's House, but his manner changes not in the company of either. [Pg 149]

This characteristic trait in Crooks led Mr. Chesterton, in his book on "Charles Dickens," into an instructive comparison:—

> The English democracy is the most humorous democracy in the world. The Scotch democracy is the most dignified, while the whole *abandon* and satiric genius of the English populace come from its being quite undignified in every way. A comparison of the two types might be found, for instance, by putting a Scotch Labour leader like Mr. Keir Hardie alongside an English Labour leader like Mr. Will Crooks. Both are good men, honest and responsible and compassionate, but we can feel that the Scotchman carries himself seriously and universally, the Englishman personally and with an obstinate humour. Mr. Keir Hardie wishes to hold up his head as Man, Mr. Crooks wishes to follow his nose as Crooks. Mr. Keir Hardie is very like a poor man in Walter Scott. Mr. Crooks is very like a poor man in Dickens.

A little incident bears out Mr. Chesterton to the letter. While Crooks was showing a party of titled people at their request round some of the dark corners of Poplar he was greeted as usual by all the children playing in the streets. Seizing the blackest of them he presented the youngster to one of the ladies of the party, a well-known peeress.

"If this little chap," said he, "was as clean as I could wash him and as well dressed as you could dress him, what difference would there be between him and a little prince?"

After the party had finished their round of inspection somebody suggested tea.

"It's no use looking for swell tea shops in Poplar," said Crooks. "But if you care to come with me, [Pg 150]
my wife will just be getting tea ready for the children coming home from school, and no doubt we can find a corner for you at the same table."

And straightway he led them to Northumberland Street and into his own house without warning, where they shared with the children at the deal table in the kitchen.

Sometimes for whole weeks together in the black days of distress he could never finish his breakfast without being called to the door to advise an out-of-work man or some sorrow-laden woman, or to deal with some case of starvation that brooked no delay.

Of course he often defied the laws of political economy. That is sometimes the only way to prevent people dying from want. A learned professor of political economy, whose name I am not at liberty to mention, was converted to some part at least of Crooks's view in a single morning. The Professor called on him during a winter of hard times, and Crooks showed him how some of his neighbours were living.

"Hunger we can sometimes stand, 'cos we gets used to it," they heard from one woman, surrounded in her bare tenement by lean and shivering babies; "but to be frozen with cold on the top of the hunger—that's the thing that makes yer squirm, guv'nor—ain't it, Mr. Crooks?"

Then the Labour man led the Professor to a slum court. On the muddy ground in the far corner a [Pg 151]
woman sat weeping.

"She ain't been living here long, Mr. Crooks," volunteered another woman from her doorstep. "Her husband's no work, and this morning she were a-sending her four children to school without a bite, so I calls 'em in here, and shared out wot we was having for breakfast."

"And what was that?" asked the Professor.

The woman seemed to resent the question from a well-dressed stranger.

"It weren't ham and eggs," she said, curtly.

"Tell my friend here what you gave them, Mrs. B——" Crooks requested.

"Well, it's just like this here, Mr. Crooks," she said apologetically. "My man's out of work hisself, and we on'y had one loaf, so I cuts it up between her children and mine."

"Why is she crying now?"

"She ain't been used to it like some of us, and it's all along of her wondering where the children's next meal is a-coming from."

As the two men came away, "I'm proud of the poor," said Crooks. "And I declare it's a dirty insult for outsiders to say that these people are degraded by the feeble efforts I make as a Guardian to give bread to the hungry. It's nothing to what they do for each other. That woman sharing her last loaf with another woman's children is typical of what you'll find in every street and corner of Poplar where the pinch of hunger is felt."

The Professor walked on silently.

"What are we to do for them?" resumed the Labour man. "Sometimes people as badly off as these [Pg 152]
we have just seen come to my house in the early morning, begging me as a Guardian to give their children bread before they send them to school. Sometimes they bring their children with them as though to prove by their hungry eyes the truth of what they tell me.

"And I say to them, 'You shouldn't come to me; you should go to the relieving officer.'"

"And they reply, 'But what are you Guardians for? We've been to the Mayor, and he refers us to the Guardians. We go to the Guardians, and they refer us to the relieving officer. We go to the relieving officer, and he tells us to attend the relief committee. We inquire about the relief committee, and find it doesn't meet for two or three days. Meanwhile, what are our children to do for bread?'

"Do you think," Crooks went on to ask the Professor, "that I can finish my own breakfast, or that any other man could with a spark of feeling in him, after being called to the door to listen to these pleadings morning after morning? Do you think, after these daily experiences, that I care how the outside public and the Press attack us because we as Guardians dare to spend public money in saving these people from starvation?

"What is a Board of Guardians to do, with its awful responsibilities and its awful obligations, during such distressful winters as Poplar sometimes witnesses? Remember, we Guardians live among the poor. We are not carriage folk who can return to the West End and talk about the poor [Pg 153] over dinners of a dozen courses. What else can we do but try to keep the bodies and souls of these poor people together in times of trade depression and cold weather?"

CHAPTER XIX [Pg 154]
THE FIRST WORKING-MAN MAYOR IN LONDON

Elected Mayor of Poplar—"No Better than a Working-man"—Shouted Down at the Mansion House—The Lord Mayor Defends Him—Refusing a Salary—Slums and Fair Rent Courts—Fighting the Public-House Interests—Crying not for the Moon, but for the Sun.

In November, 1901, Crooks was chosen to be Mayor of Poplar. In this, as in all his public offices, he was not the seeker, but the sought-after. Of the many public positions he has filled, not one has come of his own seeking. It has always been at the earnest solicitation of others that he has gone into office. Moreover, the request in every instance but one has come from working-men.

The proposal to put him forward for Mayor was made to him before he had been a member of the Poplar Borough Council many months. The Labour Party was barely half a dozen strong on the Council, so that even with the support of the Progressives it was extremely doubtful whether he could command a majority of votes. This he pointed out in reply to his party's entreaties. Since his arguments were all unavailing, he agreed at last to be nominated, making one very emphatic condition. That condition was, that were he elected there should be no talk of paying the Mayor a [Pg 155] salary.

Any of the London Borough Councils can vote a salary to the Mayor, and in some of the boroughs £300 and £500 a year was being paid. Crooks felt he could better retain the confidence of his neighbours, and better meet the criticisms of opponents, by refusing a Mayoral grant entirely. Besides making this the condition of his nomination, he influenced the Borough Council, some few days before the Mayor was to be elected, to pass a resolution declining to pay a salary.

On the night the new Mayor was elected there were some curious scenes both inside and outside the Municipal Buildings. To be Mayor in Coronation Year seemed to be the desire of half the public men in the kingdom. There were several aspirants in Poplar, and when the number was reduced to two, Crooks's name was one of them.

Twice amid the greatest tension in the crowded Council Chamber the voting on the two names resulted in a tie. Twice the retiring Mayor appealed to the Council to come to a decision without his casting vote. Since nothing would alter the equality of the votes, the Mayor finally hit upon the device of writing both names on separate slips of paper and drawing one at random from a covered bowl.

Meanwhile, the tension had become too much for some burly working-men in the public gallery. They could be heard blubbering. When you looked up you saw them mopping their grimy faces [Pg 156] with red-spotted handkerchiefs or the ends of their scarfs.

These men, with many of their mates, had crowded into the Council Chamber on their way home from the engineering yards and railway goods sidings in Millwall and from all the neighbouring docks. Those who could not get inside formed a dense crowd in the streets below. As the news was brought out from time to time, how two ballots had been taken and the votes were still equal, a silence strange and solemn fell upon the massed crowds surging round the Municipal Buildings in the lamp-lighted streets.

Soon the silence gave way to a roar of working-men's voices.

"Crooks has got it!"

"Our Will's made Mayor!"

"God bless the Mayor!"

Among that rough-jacketed company could be seen men falling on each other's necks. And as

they streamed homeward in all directions the streets of Poplar echoed with the cry that lingered far into the night, "Will Crooks is Mayor!"

He was the first Labour Mayor in London. As such he did not make the mistake of trying to fill the office like the ordinary middle-class man. He faced all the world essentially as a working-man Mayor. He showed how well a workman can carry out the administrative and ceremonial duties inseparable from the office. In doing that he dispelled for ever the old illusion that only men of means can become mayors.

"What d'yer think?" he overheard a tradesman's wife ask another in disgust. "They've made that common fellow Crooks Mayor! And he no better than a working-man." [Pg 157]

"Quite right, madam," he interposed, raising his hat as she turned round, crimson, and recognised him. "No better than a working-man!"

It was evident, too, that at first certain of the other metropolitan mayors thought him a common fellow, far beneath their notice. The first occasion that saw him in their midst was a conference of mayors at the Mansion House. It was convened by the Lord Mayor to consider arrangements for the Coronation Dinner to the Poor. Crooks listened for an hour to all kinds of suggestions put forward by men who knew little about the poor before rising at last to make a proposal of his own.

The instant he rose there was a howl of disapproval.

"Sit down—sit down!" "Who are you?" "We want none of your opinions." "Sit down—sit down!"

The wrath of some of these funny little functionaries at the idea of a Labour man daring to address them was something he laughed at for a long time after. Several of them had lost their heads entirely at being invited to discuss a matter which so closely concerned the King and Queen. The very presence of a Labour man at such an august gathering was felt to be an insult.

They drowned his voice each time he attempted to speak, until it began to dawn upon them that instead of gaining favour with the Lord Mayor, who was in the chair, they were incurring his displeasure. [Pg 158]

"Gentlemen," he cried, "I protest against this conduct. I call upon *my friend*, Mr. Crooks, to speak."

You should have seen their faces then! They had forgotten that the Lord Mayor (Sir Joseph Dimsdale) and Crooks had been colleagues together for years on the County Council.

Having got a hearing, the Labour man spoke evidently very much to the point. Sir Thomas Lipton, who represented the King at that and the subsequent conferences, declared afterwards that the one mayor in London who seemed to know what was wanted was the working-man Mayor of Poplar. At any rate, the final arrangements for the King's Dinner were left to a small sub-committee, of which Crooks was unanimously elected one by the body that first tried to howl him down.

The illusion that working-men cannot make mayors died hard. It lingered last in the columns of the *Times*. Crooks had been in office several months when that journal called public attention to the fact that the Mayor of Poplar lived in a house "only rated at £11 a year." From this circumstance the *Times* drew the rash conclusion that a man so poor could not necessarily fill the office of mayor properly.

After this, nobody could be surprised at the wild mis-statements that followed. The *Times* went on to say that before Crooks's election the Labour Party of Poplar seemed to think his income of £3 10s. a week insufficient for the mayoralty, and that they started a movement "in favour of paying future mayors of the borough a salary at the rate of from £500 to £1,000 a year." [Pg 159]

How completely the facts tell a different story has already appeared. What movement there was in Poplar for paying a salary originated with the previous mayor, Mr. R. H. Green, a large employer of labour. Mr. Green did not wish for a salary himself, being a man of means; he was only anxious that his colleagues should understand that he favoured the principle. His successor, the Labour man, was equally anxious his colleagues should understand that he did not favour payment.

The real facts were placed before the *Times*, but although its original mis-statements were copied into several other newspapers and led the *St. James's Gazette* to publish a foolish leader on the subject, the *Times* offered neither an explanation as to how it fell into its culpable error nor an apology for its amazing exhibition of bad taste.

In reality, his position as Mayor was strengthened by his refusal to take a salary. He stated in an interview in the *Daily Telegraph* towards the end of his year of office:—

> I have only had to do what I have done in every other position I have held—let people understand that I have nothing to give away. Since my position has become generally known people have let me alone, except when I get an appeal like this one—to support a football club as a lover of British sports and pastimes. Nobody seems to think the worse of me for refusing.

To the last, however, he was not forgiven by many people for daring to be poor. A worthy lady at [Pg 160]

a church sewing-party in a London suburb became very indignant at the mention of the name of the Labour Mayor of Poplar. One of the members present—to whom I am indebted for the incident—happened to make an incidental reference to Crooks. "It's a shame, I say, to let such people be made important," cried the good lady with much feeling, stopping for a moment her work of making garments for the church bazaar. "Look how they interfere with business. My husband used to get fifteen per cent. from his Poplar property before they made that man Crooks Mayor. Now, what with being compelled to spend so much on repairs and new drains, it's as much as he can do to get ten per cent."

When Crooks heard of the incident, he said he had little doubt the husband was an ordinary decent man who invested in poor property, because, as house investment agencies sometimes state in their advertisements, it pays better than any other kind.

"Probably he is one of that large class who leave the collection of the rents and all control to agents. That is why slum property has paid so well in the past. It has been neglected. Nothing has been spent on ordinary repairs. Whatever expense we as a Municipal Council may put the owners to in order to make their property healthy, is strictly regulated by law. We cannot go beyond the letter of the law. The reason why investors in slum property have reaped such a rich harvest in [Pg 161] the past is because neither they nor the local authorities have carried out the law.

"No man with ordinary sentiment can own slum property and collect his own rents. A flint-hearted agent generally has control. I know such a one well. If the tenant does not pay up by Saturday he waits and watches round the corner on Sunday morning. As soon as he sees the wife turn out to buy a piece of meat or a few vegetables from a coster's stall for Sunday's dinner, he pounces down on her and demands her few pence on account.

"It's so easy to run away from responsibility by simply saying, 'This is a mere investment, and I am not concerned with the tenants.'

"A very wealthy man who owns a lot of small houses in Poplar had his attention called to the hardship inflicted by the heavy increase in rents. He was told that a widow whose rent had just been doubled would have to seek parish relief if the new demand were enforced. 'My dear good fellow,' said the owner, 'I leave these matters to my agent. I don't want the woman's money. Look here,' pulling a handful of sovereigns out of his pocket. 'Why should I care about the woman's rent? I leave these trifles to my agent, and never interfere.'

"Can you wonder that so many of our people are driven to drink and immorality?" Crooks went on after telling this incident. "Sweated as they are for rent in this way, they begin to live in an unholy state of overcrowding. House speculators, Jewish and English, gamble with the people's [Pg 162] homes. Nearly every time a house changes hands the rent is raised. The overcrowding is thus made worse than ever. The family living in three rooms takes two. The family in two rooms pushes its furniture closer together and goes into one.

"Surely something should be done by the State to prevent this gambling with poor people's rents. I would like to see Fair Rent Courts, where the rents could be fixed in fair proportion to the value of the house. Something of the kind has been done in Ireland; why not in England?

"One thing is certain: the more crowded the home is, the more convenient becomes the public-house, with its welcome light and deceptive cheerfulness tempting the wretched. Of course, in theory it is easy to argue that the poorer the man the more reason there is that he should not place in the publican's till the money that ought to be spent on food. I fear few of us would retain the moral courage to resist if we had to eat, live, and sleep in the same room, sometimes in the company of a corpse for several days."

Property owners were not alone in their opposition to the Labour Mayor. The publicans almost in a body were ranged against him. Nor was this only because of his uncompromising attack on the drink interests as such. It was mainly because he insisted on public-houses being rated on the same principle as the grocer's shop or the working-man's dwelling-house.

For several years before his mayoralty he had been Chairman of the Poplar Assessment [Pg 163] Committee. He found that while small tradesmen and householders were rated to the full market value of their shops and dwellings, public-houses were very much under-assessed. He therefore persuaded the Committee, in face of all that the publicans said and threatened, to raise their assessments to the proper scale. The publicans brought the whole strength of their organisation against him, briefing counsel in appeals and subsidising opposition candidates at the local elections. This kind of thing had no fears for Crooks. His policy prevailed.

Sorely though the problem of housing vexed him, he rarely came away from a slum visit without some instance of quaint humour. On one occasion he was called into a tenement when the woman told him to mind the hole in the floor.

"Why don't you ask the landlord to repair it?" he asked.

"I did tell him about it," she answered in despair, "but he only said, 'What! the floor fallen in? Why, you must have been walking on it!'"

He feels keenly that we are allowing the English working-class home to be broken up by the gambling of speculators. By the time the gamblers are finished, it will be found they have broken more than the poor man's home. It will be found they have broken the English race.

The cost to the municipality of preventing the existence of slums is small, he maintains, [Pg 164] compared with the cost to the Poor Law authority of dealing with the human wreckage that slums create. He brought out this fact in a striking way in a paper he read before the Central Poor Law Conference at the Guildhall. His subject was "Pauperism and Overcrowding." He estimated from a study of the official returns that overcrowding and insanitation in the homes of the poor threw an additional expenditure on the Poor Law every year in London of about £134,000. He obtained this figure by estimating the number of people forced into workhouse infirmaries or requiring the outside attendance of the parish doctor owing to sickness solely caused by slumdom.

As regards the inmates of public asylums, he showed that London was involved in a still heavier yearly outlay. The number of such inmates per thousand inhabitants of London varied from 1.9 in the healthy districts to 10.1 in the overcrowded districts. The mean rate was 4.7. The numbers above this mean rate were all found in the slum quarters. By adding them up he arrived at a total of 2,700 people who were forced into asylums as the results of ill-housing. It cost London £70,000 a year to maintain this number in asylums. He further argued that an additional sum of half a million sterling must be put down as representing the cost of providing the necessary asylum accommodation for these 2,700 inmates, the creation of our slums.

"So if the public refuse to spend a few hundreds on improving the homes and conditions of the [Pg 165] poor, they are compelled to spend tens of thousands after the slums have robbed their denizens of health and reason. I know some of the poor do not live the cleanest and best lives. They live down to their environment. And if we don't improve the environment, then, apart from all the higher considerations, we are penalised for our neglect by having to pay for their care and keep in asylums and infirmaries.

"We Labour men are sometimes accused of crying for the moon. No; we are crying for the sun, and before we are finished we mean to get a little more sun into the homes and hearts of the people."

CHAPTER XX [Pg 166]
THE KING'S DINNER—AND OTHERS

A Dinner to the Labour Mayor—The Mayoress—The King's Twenty-five Thousand Guests—The Prince and Princess of Wales at Poplar—Organising a Coronation Treat for Children—A Little Girl's Thanks—At the Lord Mayor's Banquet in a Blue Serge Suit—The Mayor of Poplar's Carriage at St. Paul's—A Testimonial on Quitting Office.

Since the Labour Mayor was debarred by what he called his "chronic want of wealth" from entertaining at his own expense, the Poplar Labour League decided to entertain him at a dinner on their own part by way of commemorating his election. Directly the project was talked about, friends of his of all classes expressed a wish to attend.

The dinner was given on January 11th, 1902. An old Chartist was in the chair, Mr. Nathan Robinson, one of the Mayor's colleagues on the London County Council. Lord Monkswell sat at the same table with stevedores and gas-workers. Some of the Mayor's fellow-workers on the Asylums Board fraternised with some of the Mayor's fellow-workers on the Labour League. Nearly every trade and every church in Poplar were represented. Dean Lawless of the Roman Catholics, the Rev. Mr. Nairn of the Presbyterians, and Father Dolling of the Anglicans, sat at meat together for the first time in their lives, drawn by the engaging personality of the Labour [Pg 167] Mayor.

"I must just write a word of congratulation on our dinner of Saturday," wrote Dolling from St. Saviour's Clergy House a couple of days later. "I think it was just splendid. It is given to few men to gain the respect, confidence, and esteem—I might say the affection—of friends and foes, colleagues and opponents. God grant you strength and perseverance."

The same spirit breathed through a letter from the Roman Catholic Dean:—"God bless you and God speed you; and also your gentle wife, the Mayoress."

Mrs. Crooks, by the way, filled the office of Mayoress with a quiet dignity and grace that won everyone's regard. As her husband stood primarily as a working-man Mayor, she too as Mayoress made no pretence at being other than a working-man's wife. She could be seen cleaning her own doorstep as housewife in the morning and taking part in some public function as Mayoress in the afternoon.

The day the appointment was announced a journalist from an evening paper went down to Poplar, hoping evidently to find the new Mayoress greatly elated. He seemed surprised to find her so busy in the kitchen preparing the children's dinner that she had barely time to grant him the interview he sought.

"Why should you think it would make any difference to us?" she asked him, with natural [Pg 168] simplicity. "Dad will just be the same plain and cheery Will Crooks that he has always been. Of course, we'll do our best as Mayor and Mayoress, but it will simply be as ordinary working-people."

With perfect self-possession and a modest, dignified bearing, which remained the same when she was receiving the Prince and Princess of Wales as when attending a conference of working women, Mrs. Crooks carried out her duties as Mayoress of Poplar and won good opinions on every hand.

The unbounded pride of the poor in their Mayor was something to remember. For the first time they became conscious of a personal tie between themselves and a public office that previously had always seemed far removed from them. They followed him admiringly. They hovered about his door until the Mayoress despaired of keeping the step clean. If they could obtain a momentary glimpse of him in his robes and chain, or better still, pass a few words with him, it was something to boast of. Speculation as to where he kept the mayoral chain reached the length of one wild suggestion that he put it under his pillow at night.

On the Sunday morning that the Mayor and Council went in state to the parish church, nearly all Poplar turned out to honour the occasion. The streets were lined with spectators as for a royal pageant. Work-people alone would have filled the spacious church of All Saints four or five times over could they have obtained admission.

Even the children at the Poor Law school at Forest Gate, four miles away, joined in the chorus of congratulations. [Pg 169]

"The boys and girls here have toasted your election as Mayor with cheers that you might almost have heard at Poplar," wrote the superintendent. "We all feel that in a way we have some share in your new dignity."

Coronation year was a busy year for the London mayors. Crooks, who had a great share in organising the King's Dinner to the Poor of the whole of London, carried through the local arrangements in Poplar for feeding twenty-five thousand without a hitch. It is notorious that the deplorable muddle which marked the dinner arrangements in some of the West End boroughs brought a Royal request to the mayors for an explanation.

The King had made known his intention to visit Poplar during the dinner. It is known how his illness prevented him from leaving Buckingham Palace on the memorable Saturday. The Prince and Princess of Wales, on behalf of the King, attended the two or three centres he had arranged to visit. Much to the consternation of metropolitan mayors in wealthier districts, who were competing among themselves to secure the Royal visitors, the Prince and Princess went to Poplar.

The King's guests, we have seen, numbered twenty-five thousand in Poplar alone. Of these, three thousand dined under a great awning in the Tunnel Gardens, one of the open spaces Crooks had secured for the borough. The Mayor passed among the motley throng like a benediction, receiving the good-natured chaff of the men and their wives concerning his gold-laced hat and scarlet robe. Only one of the three thousand, a steward, was inclined to be cantankerous, though not in the Mayor's hearing. Pointing to Crooks with a carving-knife he said to his companion:— [Pg 170]

"I wonder he ain't ashamed of himself. Why couldn't we have had a gentleman for mayor like Morton? I've been a sheriff's officer myself, and I call it a disgrace to Poplar."

He changed his tone when the Prince and Princess of Wales arrived and were formally received by the Mayor and Mayoress, before going round the tables, chatting and joking with Crooks.

"Well, that takes the cake!" said the ex-sheriff's officer in amazement. "There's the Prince of Wales talking to that fellow Crooks just as though he was talking to a gentleman!"

Later on the mayors of other London boroughs, chiefly out of their own private purses, gave a special Coronation treat to the children. It looked as though the children of Poplar, in the absence of a wealthy mayor, would receive no such favours.

Crooks met the need by a public appeal. Nearly £300 was subscribed, chiefly by local employers and residents, enabling the Mayor to entertain about eight thousand children. Some five thousand were divided among four garden parties. Infants to the number of three thousand were entertained at their own schools. All the crippled children in the borough were taken in brakes to Epping Forest for the day. [Pg 171]

A couple of days later Crooks received through the post an unsigned letter in a child's large round hand-writing. This is what it said:—

> All the little boys and girls in our school want to thank you for the very nice party we had in honour of the King's Coronation. Some of us had chocolate and very nice medals, and all the school had cakes, lemonade, fruit, sweets, and a little medal. We had sports in the playground and prizes for those who won the races. And we all enjoyed it very much.
>
> Please accept the best thanks from the children of the Infants' School, Wade Street.

He tells many amusing stories about the mayoralty. An ardent admirer chased him over half of Poplar one night, following him from the Town Hall to a chapel bazaar and from the bazaar to a Labour meeting, guarding carefully under his arm a brown paper parcel. At last he saw his chance of getting a private word with the Mayor.

"Pardon me, Will, but I've just heard as how you've been asked to dine at the Mansion House with all the other mayors. And I thought I'd like to offer to lend you my ole dress suit. I couldn't abear the thought of our Mayor not looking as good as the other blokes. 'Tain't much to speak of, Will"—unfolding the parcel—"but perhaps your missus can touch it up a bit."

Crooks did not go to the City banquet on that occasion. It was not until three years later that, on the invitation of Lord Mayor Pounds, he attended the Ninth of November banquet at the Guildhall. Then he turned up in his blue serge suit, which, in a way, made him one of the most [Pg 172] conspicuous figures present, since all the other guests were in Court dress, uniform, or ordinary evening dress. A crowded company in the reception room broke out into rounds of applause when the Labour man in his plain attire walked down the room after being announced. He was received in the most cordial way by the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress.

He had an amusing experience in connection with a State service at St. Paul's, to which he was invited as Mayor of Poplar.

"I took train to the City, and was walking towards the Cathedral when a cabman from my own district accosted me.

"'I say, Mr. Crooks, let me give you a lift up to the Cathedral, so that I can get a chance to see what's going.'

"'All right,' said I; and I got into his cab, and was driven up with as much dignity as the cab and horse could command.

"The cabman then rode away and took up his position in waiting. The service over, all the titled people crowded out, and there was an eager demand for carriages. A stout policeman at the door called out the names.

"'The Duke of ——'s carriage.' 'The Mayor of Westminster's carriage.' 'Lady ——'s carriage.' And so on, as each swell conveyance rolled up. Then, when the policeman learnt who I was, he yelled, 'The Mayor of Poplar's carriage.'

"Up drove my cabby with his growler.

"'Take that thing away!' shouted the policeman. 'Make room for the Mayor of Poplar's carriage.' [Pg 173]

"'Who yer getting at?' said cabby mischievously. 'This *is* the Mayor of Poplar's carriage.'

"'All right, constable,' I said, as I went down the steps; 'that's my cab.'

"The policeman immediately began to apologise. Cabby said he wouldn't have missed the fun for fifty quid."

At the Coronation ceremony at the Abbey, to which all the London mayors were invited, Crooks asked to be exempt from wearing Court dress. The King sent him the exemption he asked for.

"I attended the Abbey in my mayoral robes, and when the ceremony was over I escaped from the crowd as quickly as I could, and was going to a house near by to take off my robes. I found myself in Dean's Yard, which was quiet and almost deserted, save for a few youngsters.

"'I say, Tom, here's the King,' I heard one of them remark as I approached.

"'That ain't the King,' said a second youngster; 'that's the Dook of Connort.'

"'Garn! he ain't no royalty!' said another of the lads. And looking up into my face, he asked, 'Who is yer, guv'nor?'

"The question was more than I could stand, and I had to hurry away laughing heartily."

His year of office was pronounced by opponents and supporters to be a triumphant success. From the very first the Labour Mayor proved that he knew his duties. He had not been in office long [Pg 174] before he obtained a gift of £15,000 for the building of three additional public libraries for Poplar. As an administrator he brought about many changes in the Borough Council's methods of doing work, introducing into the municipal life of Poplar something of the business-like methods of the L.C.C.

How far his efforts succeeded is shown by the presentation made to him and Mrs. Crooks at the close of the mayoral year. All parties on the Borough Council combined in a gift of silver plate to the Mayoress, and an illuminated address to the Mayor.

"Had we only known what a good mayor you would have made, Mr. Crooks," said one of the Conservative members, "we should never have opposed your election."

In thanking his colleagues on behalf of himself and his wife, Crooks closed his speech with these words:—"We are as poor now as when we began, but money cannot buy the satisfaction we possess. We have had opportunities of being useful, and we have done the best we could with our opportunities. As I have lived, so I hope to end my days—a servant of the people."

CHAPTER XXI [Pg 175]

THE MAN WHO PAID OLD AGE PENSIONS

> Address to the National Committee on Old Age Pensions—Paying Pensions through the Poor Law—A Walk from West to East—The Living Pension and the Living Wage—Scientific Starvation under Bumbledom—Defending the Living Pension at the L.G.B. Inquiry—Poplar "a Shining Light."

With several other Labour leaders, Crooks was invited to join the National Committee on Old Age Pensions that arose out of Mr. Charles Booth's Conferences at Browning Hall. Mr. Richard Seddon, on his last visit to England, described at one of the conferences the New Zealand experiment.

It was news to all the members of the Committee to hear Crooks unfold the details of a scheme differing largely both from Mr. Booth's and Mr. Seddon's. It was one that had been forced upon him after much reflection and experience.

"For two or three generations the working classes of this country have been asked to vote for Doodle or Foodle and Old Age Pensions. The elector of to-day, like his father and grandfather before him, is still waiting for the fulfilment of the promise. It seems a vain hope. He, too, like those before him, may die of old age still waiting, perhaps ending his days in the workhouse.

"Now I for one have got tired of waiting. I've commenced to pay pensions already. I maintain that [Pg 176] it is both lawful, and right to pay pensions through the Poor Law. And I intend to go on paying them, and to urge others to pay them, until Liberal and Conservative politicians cease deluding the people by promises and establish a State system."

He put forward his scheme before many other assemblies. To the argument that this is only a system of "glorified out-relief," he makes answer, "So are most pensions. At the risk of outraging the feelings of economists, I hold that out-relief to the poor is no more degrading than out-relief to the rich. We hear no talk of endangering the independence of Cabinet Ministers or of Civil Servants when they are paid old age pensions.

"It is argued the poor have the workhouse provided for them. True; but was it not Ruskin who pointed out that—

> The poor seem to have a prejudice against the workhouse which the rich have not; for, of course, everyone who takes a pension from Government goes into the workhouse on a grand scale; only the workhouses for the rich do not involve the idea of work, and should be called playhouses. But the poor like to die independently, it appears. Perhaps, if we make the playhouses pretty and pleasant enough, or give them their pensions at home, their minds might be reconciled to the conditions.

"Look down as you may on these veterans of almost endless toil, but don't forget they have made our country what it is. They have fought in the industrial army for British supremacy in the commercial world and obtained it. The least their country can do is to honour their old age." [Pg 177]

The twofold character of Crooks's Poor Law policy has already appeared. While he wants to make life in the workhouse less like life in prison, he is also anxious that all worn-out old men and women, who have friends to look after them, should be kept as far from the workhouse as possible.

"To do that means the granting of a pension. Call it outdoor relief if you like, but at the same time call the Right Honourable Gerald Balfour's and Lord Eversley's pensions outdoor relief.

"At any rate, relief must be on a more generous scale than it usually is if you are going to keep honourable old people out of the workhouse. Failing that, out-relief has a tendency to perpetuate sweating. Mr. Chaplin was not alone in deprecating inadequate out-relief. The Aged Poor Commission, of which the King was a member, reporting in 1895, called attention to the ill-effects of inadequate out-door grants and suggested that the amounts be increased."

In one of our many walks together about the streets of London, I remember with what animation and depth of feeling he discussed this subject. We began somewhere in Westminster with the intention of taking a 'bus at Charing Cross. We found ourselves still walking eastward as we passed Temple Bar, and then agreed to mount a 'bus at Ludgate Circus. We were still on our feet as we went through St. Paul's Churchyard, so decided to walk on to the Bank. But he forgot [Pg 178] everything but the poor again until we stopped our walk for a moment at Aldgate Church. Before a 'bus could arrive he was deep in the subject again, and almost mechanically resumed walking. And so, on through Whitechapel and Stepney and Limehouse into Poplar, he discoursed earnestly all the way on the need for poor people's pensions.

"Since I prefer to call out-relief a pension," he said, "I'm going to see that it is a real pension, and not a dole. Inadequate out-relief gives the sweater his opportunity. A sympathetic half-crown a week to a worn-out old woman making shirts at ninepence the dozen has the effect of dragging the struggling young widow with a family of children down to accepting the same price. It sometimes takes a whole week to earn one-and-six, so little wonder that the pinch of hunger sends many a young widow to the devil. We may preach that the wages of sin is death, but life isn't worth living at all to many people. An unknown hell has no more terrors to them than an awful earth.

"How would I stop this? I would stop it by making it impossible for the old woman to be the unconscious instrument in encompassing the ruin of the young woman. The old woman cannot live on a half-crown dole from the Guardians; so to make a shilling or two more she undercuts the young woman, and the sweater gets them both at reduced wages. Now if the old woman deserves help at all, the help ought to be sufficient to keep her without the necessity of falling into the [Pg 179] sweater's net and dragging others with her. The help must be a pension on which she can live. It ought not to be a dole on which she starves."

"Then you stand for the Living Pension as well as for the Living Wage?"

"Precisely. But nearly all pension schemes, like most out-relief systems, fix the allowance at a starvation figure. Sums of four or five shillings won't save old people from hardship. For example, we have in the Poplar workhouse old pensioners who received as much as six shillings a week. They found they couldn't live outside on that, and so had no alternative but the House. Only the other day there was another six-shilling pensioner admitted to the House. He had struggled on outside in his one room, selling and pawning his few things bit by bit to eke out a living until he hadn't a stick left. So, although receiving a pension of six shillings a week, he was forced into the workhouse."

"Do you find the same thing happening in regard to old people assisted by a friendly society or a trade union?"

"Occasionally we do," answered Crooks. "The other day, for instance, a superannuated trade unionist came before the Board, an old man blunt in speech and not without independence.

"'We understand you have a pension of six shillings a week,' says the Chairman.

"'That's all right, guv'nor. But how could you pay three shillings a week out of that for the rent of [Pg 180] our one room and then you and the wife live on the rest?'

"Take another case," resumed Crooks as we crossed Commercial Road. "A fine-looking old woman enters the relief committee room, scrupulously clean but poorly clad—a splendid specimen of a self-respecting honourable old English woman.

"'Now, my good woman, what can we do for you?'

"'Well, sir, we've nothing left in the world, and I've come to see if you can assist us?'

"'Where's your husband?'

"'He's ill in bed to-day. He's turned seventy-three. I'm seventy-five myself. We've been living on his club money until now. He had six months' full pay and six months' half-pay. That's as much as the club allows. Now we've got nothing. He worked up to a little more than a year ago; At seventy-three he can't work any longer.'

"'We are very sorry,' says the Chairman, 'but the Poor Law practice is to ask old people like you to come into the workhouse.'

"'Anything but that, sir,' pleads the old lady tearfully. 'Both of us over seventy; we should feel it so much now after working all our lives. We can look after ourselves outside if you can give us a little help.'

"Here, then, you have an honest, hard-working old couple still faced with nothing but the workhouse, although they have been thrifty and done everything which the political promoters of old-age pensions say ought to be done. We made full inquiries, and for a time at least we thought [Pg 181] we would meet their wishes and let them live outside. We gave them six shillings a week, and watched the case carefully. We saw that to eke out existence, one by one their articles of furniture were going. Struggle and strive as they did on their six shillings a week, they would have been compelled to come into the House ultimately after a few further stages of this system of scientific starvation if we hadn't found outside help for them from another quarter."

"You want, then, to base out-relief, like an old-age pension, on the Living Wage principle?"

"No other plan will work. No other plan is just," he said in his earnest way. "The out-relief ought to be the pension. There are a lot of old people receiving out-relief grants of three or four shillings. What is the result? They toil and struggle and pine outside on an amount which barely keeps body and soul together. They reach the workhouse at last, as a rule, through the infirmary. That means they break down and have to get medical orders for admission. It has been proved that thirty per cent. of the people in Poor Law infirmaries are suffering ailments of some kind or other due to want of proper nourishment.

"That is what I mean when I say that the present Poor Law, as Bumbledom would administer it, has nothing better to prescribe than scientific starvation to old people who refuse the House. If [Pg 182] one is foolish enough to grow old without being artful enough to get rich, this world is the wrong place to be in.

"When old age comes to working people, both thrifty and unthrifty have in most instances to turn to one of two things—precarious charity or the Poor Law. Charity is a splendid exercise for many people, but no law or custom exists compelling its practice. Now the Poor Law can be enforced; only it has been used to terrorise the poor. The State sets up a system to save old people from starvation, and then allows it to be used to perpetuate starvation.

"It won't do. So long as we have this system, I'm going to make not the worst use of it, but the best use of it. And I believe in paying old-age pensions through the Poor Law. The Poor Law ought not to degrade any more than the Rich Law degrades under which Ministers and officers of the State receive their pensions. Why do I say pay pensions through the Poor Law? Because it is here. It is something to begin with at once. It is the thin edge of the wedge of a system of universal old-age pensions, free and adequate."

Pending the adoption of some national system, he practises in Poplar the policy he urges in public, that of paying a living pension through the Poor Law.

His policy received unexpected endorsement in a letter sent to him by an old woman of eighty-three in a provincial town. She wrote to him in the summer of 1906 at the time others were [Pg 183] attacking him for his policy.

> Your noble efforts on behalf of penniless old people like me I see are being condemned in some of the papers. They can't know the facts. I was managing very comfortably until the Liberator crash took away my income. I started a small school and maintained myself until I was seventy. After that I was no good for work. What I should have done I don't know had it not been for a few friends who, like yourself, believe in out-relief grants of sufficient amount to keep a person living; and they persuaded the Guardians to help me. I thank you for the fight you are making on behalf of hundreds of helpless old people like myself. May the King soon call you Sir Will Crooks.

He was examined at some length on his Living Pension policy at the Local Government Board Inquiry into the Poplar Guardians' administration. He admitted that old people over sixty receiving out-relief in Poplar were costing the borough a sixpenny rate.

"I say it is wicked to compel us," he stated in evidence, "to maintain out of our local rates these old people who ought to be a charge—as I have said hundreds of times, and repeat—for the whole metropolis or for the nation rather than the locality. These industrial veterans are thrust upon us in Poplar to maintain, notwithstanding that most of the wealth they created has been enjoyed by people who live elsewhere, and thus escape their share of the burden of maintaining their old workers in old age. But because this unjust state of things exists, are we, with a full sense of our responsibility, to tell these broken-down old workers that we refuse to bear the burden ourselves, [Pg 184] and that they must do the best they can?"

Then followed a rapid fire of questions and answers between himself and the legal representative of the Poplar Municipal Alliance.

Q.—Is not that rather a dangerous doctrine? If local authorities generally allowed their sympathies to carry them into acts not contemplated by their constitution and their powers, what do you think the general result would be?

A.—It *is* contemplated by our constitution. We are here to relieve distress. We are created for that purpose.

Q.—Do you say there is any machinery or power in the Poor Law which authorises you to give allowances which are, in fact, old age pensions to these people?

A.—It allows us to give out-door relief. You can call it what you like.... We cannot refuse to give people help and assistance in old age.

Q.—I am not quarrelling for a moment with the proposition in the abstract; I am quarrelling with your method of carrying it out in your local machinery.

A.—Tell me what you would do—leave them to starve on the streets?

Q.—I suggest, is it not a dangerous doctrine for local authorities to exceed their statutory powers?

A.—I assure you we have never done anything of the kind, and I challenge you to prove it.

Q.—I ask you to show me any authority for a grant continuously of, say, ten shillings a week to [Pg 185] these old people?

A.—The Local Government Board issued an order dealing with the matter.

The Inspector:—You rely on Mr. Chaplin's circular?

A.—Yes, with regard to the treatment of the aged and deserving poor. That circular reads:—

> It has been felt that persons who have habitually led decent and deserving lives should, if they require relief in their old age, receive different treatment from those whose previous habits and character have been unsatisfactory, and who have failed to exercise thrift in bringing up their families or otherwise. The Local Government Board consider that aged and deserving persons should not be urged to enter the workhouse at all unless there is some cause which renders such a course necessary, such as infirmity of mind or body, the absence of house accommodation, or of a suitable person to care for them, or some similar cause; but think they should be relieved by giving adequate outdoor relief. The Board are happy to think it is commonly the practice of Boards of Guardians to grant outdoor relief in such cases, but they are afraid that too

> frequently such relief is not adequate in amount. They are desirous of pressing upon the Boards of Guardians that such relief should, when granted, be always adequate.

That is our authority for what we are doing.... For once in a way one can say this Inquiry at least will be an enlightening one.

Q.—I hope it will, Mr. Crooks.

A.—I am sure it will.

Q.—To other places than Poplar?

A.—I hope so indeed. Poplar will be a shining light in the days to come.

CHAPTER XXII
ELECTION TO PARLIAMENT

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> Labour Candidate for Woolwich—Lord Charles Beresford describes Crooks as a Fair and Square Opponent—How the Election Fund was Raised—Crooks recommended by John Burns as "Wise on Poor Law"—Half-loaf and Whole Loaf—"Greatest By-election Victory of Modern Times."

On the morning of February 19th, 1903, the Press stated that considerable excitement was created in London on the previous day by the announcement that Lord Charles Beresford had been offered the command of the Channel squadron, and that he was about to resign his Parliamentary seat in Woolwich.

A few days later the genial admiral, from a public platform, was bidding good-bye to his constituents and introducing to them the Conservative candidate in the person of Mr. Geoffrey Drage. He took occasion to throw out the warning that the opposition candidate was a strong man, whom he knew to be a fair and square opponent.

The reference was to Crooks. He had been adopted as Labour candidate some few weeks previously. The invitation sent to him by the Woolwich Labour Representation Association was a unanimous one. It surprised him to receive it, since his association with Woolwich—on the other side of the Thames two miles below Poplar—was a very slight one. When he accepted the invitation it was believed there would be at least two years to prepare for the General Election. The Labour candidate had barely made his *début* before the by-election was announced.

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Nobody but the little band of Labour men in the constituency believed in Crooks's chances. The honours had fallen so easily hitherto to the Conservatives. Lord Charles Beresford got the seat without a contest. Sir Edwin Hughes before him was returned unopposed in 1900, while for sixteen years previously he held the seat by majorities averaging more than two thousand. The majority at the previous contest (which took place in 1895) reached 2,805.

Faced with this formidable figure, Crooks entered upon the contest with all his usual zeal and good humour. There was first the difficulty of the election expenses. The Labour Association quickly raised £200 from among its members. It soon became evident, however, that before the Labour Party could get in touch with the sixteen thousand voters on the register and meet the returning officer's fees, a sum four or five times as large as that would be needed.

An appeal to the public was sent out by the Association, signed by S. H. Grinling, M.A. (chairman), W. Barefoot (treasurer), and A. Hall (secretary). The appeal was taken up by the *Daily News*, which opened a Woolwich Election Fund. In about a fortnight that paper raised £1,000. Contributions poured in from all classes, in every part of the kingdom, accompanied by a chorus of well-wishes of which any public man might indeed be proud.

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As from day to day the amounts were acknowledged in the *Daily News*, one saw side by side with the modest two shillings from "Four workers" £10 from Lord Portsmouth. Among the shillings and sixpences from working women and girls appeared £5 from Lady Trevelyan, and a list of subscriptions from Father Adderley, containing one "From a lady in lieu of a new hat." The day "Two Chalfont lads" sent "a bob each," two sums of £50 were acknowledged from the Right Hon. Sydney Buxton and Mr. George Cadbury. The authors of "The Heart of the Empire," with a gift of £25, shared the same spirit with "A Leominster working-man," who forwarded three shillings, and "Four working men of Cirencester," who sent four shillings between them. Dr. Clifford, the Rev. Stopford Brooke, and Canon Scott Holland swelled the list, together with old Labour Members of Parliament like Mr. T. Burt and Mr. H. Broadhurst.

"A fellow worker of Mr. Crooks on the Asylums Board" was responsible for £10, while colleagues of his on the London County Council contributed about £100 between them.

From Porchester Square came a substantial cheque with an unsigned note written in the third person, to this effect:—

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> The lady who sends the enclosed is nearly eighty-four, and therefore cannot offer any help in person, but she most heartily wishes Mr. Crooks success in his brave fight, as

she has for a long time past desired to see more Labour representatives in the House of Commons.

The campaign went on merrily. The magnetic personality of the Labour candidate drew to his side every Progressive section in the constituency. It was not only that working-men threw themselves into the fight with Herculean energy, but the temperance societies and the churches of nearly every denomination became enthusiastic in his support.

They seemed to share the same estimate of the candidate as Mr. Keir Hardie, who wrote to the electors describing Crooks as "a first-class fighting man, and the best of good fellows, who would, if returned, bring credit and honour to the constituency."

Mr. John Burns went down to Woolwich to pay his tribute in person. With the Labour candidate he addressed a mass meeting of over five thousand electors in the Drill Hall, while crowds surged outside the doors, delaying the tram traffic in the streets. Mr. Burns fell into glowing periods in his eulogy of his old colleague:—

> Woolwich has in Mr. Crooks a man who not only carries a banner which typifies a cause, but honours the army for which he works. By his tolerance and sweet-tempered geniality, he has united the Progressive forces of Woolwich as they have never been united before. In securing what is possible to-day, Mr. Crooks never forgets his ideal, but with a brotherly love and Christian charity pursues the line of least resistance in a way which Labour has not always shown. [Pg 190]

Before sitting down, Mr. Burns took occasion to tell his five thousand hearers that among other reasons why he was there to commend their candidate was because Crooks was "wise on Poor Law."

As the contest developed, Crooks found that much the same kind of thing was being said against him as he had heard during his mayoralty in Poplar. He told one of his public meetings:—

"Lovely ladies are already going about with lovely stories. As they canvass for my opponent they tell the elector or his wife that the rates will go up if a Labour candidate is elected. They say that because he is a poor man he will have to be paid a salary of £500 a year out of the rates. You tell these alluring ladies that Will Crooks has been in public life for fourteen years, and has never had a penny from the rates all the time. Tell them further that if he remains in public life another fifty years, he will still never have a penny from the rates."

Evidently those good ladies had not read his election address. There he stated:—

"I have no desire to enter Parliament unless it be for the opportunities it may afford me of continuing and extending my life's work. If I can further the well-being of my country by assisting in the developing of a nation of self-respecting men and women, whose children shall be educated and physically and mentally fitted to face their responsibilities and duties, I shall be content.

"I therefore ask those of you who believe that the greatness of our Empire rests on the happiness and prosperity of its people to consider carefully the importance of the present election. [Pg 191]

"I am of opinion that a strong Labour Party in the House of Commons, comprised of men who know the sufferings and share the aspirations of all grades of workmen, is certain to exercise greater influence for good than the academic student."

As the day of the poll (March 11th) drew near, confident hopes of victory began to be entertained by many outside the Labour Party. The most telling election cry used by his supporters was innocently supplied by the opposition candidate, Mr. Drage, a gentleman who at one time sat with Crooks on the Asylums Board. At one of his public meetings early in the campaign, Mr. Drage attempted to justify certain low wages paid in the Woolwich Arsenal by remarking that half a loaf was better than no bread.

The Labour Party seized upon the words at once. "No half-loaf policy for us; we want the whole loaf," was their immediate retort.

From that moment the loaf became the feature of the fight. As Free Trade and Protection were also to the front, the loaf had a double significance. Crooks's supporters carried about the streets, on the end of poles, loaves and half-loaves to represent the rival policies. "F. C. G.," in one of his *Westminster Gazette* cartoons, represented Crooks standing firm and solid on the whole loaf, while his opponent balanced himself with some temerity on a tottering half-loaf. [Pg 192]

Polling day dawned hopefully. Sunshine illumined the streets, while the Labour candidate's carriages filled them. For once a Labour man out-classed a Conservative in the number and style of his conveyances. Friends of Crooks sent four-in-hands, motor cars, two-horse carriages, traps, drags, vans, coal-carts, and donkey shays. The bakers of the district had made thousands of miniature loaves about the size of walnuts, which were in evidence everywhere. With stalks through them, these loaves were sold in the streets and shops for a penny. Men wore them in their buttonholes, boys in their caps, and women on their dresses as a symbol of the Labour man's policy of the whole loaf.

Victory had been hoped for, but victory such as that achieved was beyond the wildest dreams. A Conservative majority of 2805 was turned by Crooks into a Labour majority of 3229—"the

greatest by-election victory of modern times," as the *Speaker* described it. The actual poll was:—

Crooks (Labour)	8687
Drage (Conservative)	5458
Majority	3229

WILL CROOKS ADDRESSING AN OPEN-AIR MEETING IN BERESFORD SQUARE DURING THE WOOLWICH BYE-ELECTION IN 1903.

To the little company of supporters of both parties assembled in the counting room of the Town Hall, Crooks turned after the declaration of the result, and proposed the usual vote of thanks to the returning officer. He added:— [Pg 193]

"May I say, now that I am elected Member for Woolwich, that it will be my aim and desire to serve all sections of the people of Woolwich, including, of course, those who voted for Mr. Drage, as well as those who voted for me. So far as Mr. Drage and myself are concerned, we shall still retain the same friendship we have had for years."

In seconding the vote, Mr. Drage congratulated Mr. Crooks on the great victory he had won, and assured him that their friendship had not been shaken by the campaign.

A roar from the streets told that the news had reached the waiting crowds. The new Member with his wife and a few friends passed out of the Town Hall into the midst of the multitude. It was only by the aid of the police, who opened a passage through the serried ranks, that Crooks was able to reach the market square by the Arsenal gates, where it had been arranged he should speak.

It was then nigh on midnight, but when he mounted a cart he looked out on a sea of faces in the glare of improvised torches and the street lamps such as had never been witnessed at that hour in Woolwich before.

Amid the exuberant joy of this multitude, it was in vain he tried to speak. One sentence only, sharp and clear, broke in between the cheering:—

"To-night Woolwich has sent a message of love and hope to Labour all over the country."

Not another word could be heard. Finally he gave up the attempt to speak. The crowd was content to roll out its cheers. These increased in volume when someone from the dark mass passed up a large bouquet of flowers to Mrs. Crooks. [Pg 194]

So the curtain fell on a great fight. Mrs. Crooks, with her presentation bouquet, the happiest woman in England. The crowd of workers, who felt that a workers' battle had been won and a new hope arisen. And the new Member of Parliament, very tired, cheery, undisturbed, desirous only that the efforts of those who had assisted should be gratefully acknowledged and no undue credit given to the vigorous and magnetic personality who had focussed all the enthusiasm and driven it forward into an unprecedented victory.

CHAPTER XXIII
ADVENT OF THE POLITICAL LABOUR PARTY

[Pg 195]

Congratulations—A Letter from Bishop Talbot—Bar-parlour Opinion—The Press on the Victory—The Birth of a Party—An Opponent of the South African War.

Before Crooks went down to the House of Commons on the following day, he had a busy morning opening telegrams to the number of two or three hundred.

Mr. John Burns, Mr. Keir Hardie, Mr. David Shackleton, wired their congratulations from the House of Commons. Other messages came from trade unions and groups of working-men and working-women in various parts of the country. Among them were telegrams from dockers at Middlesbrough, coopers at Birmingham, postmen in London, engineers at Newcastle, and cycle-makers at Coventry.

These well-wishes from the ranks of Labour poured in simultaneously with congratulations from Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Hon. Maud Stanley, Lord Tweedmouth, Mr. Beerbohm Tree, and many ministers of religion.

The late Sir Wilfrid Lawson, as was his wont dropped into verse. He wired from Carlisle:—

[Pg 196]

Hurrah! The future brighter looks;
We worry on by hooks and Crooks.
Oh, what a heavy, heavy blow
Last night you struck on Jingo Joe!

From the Bishop's House, Kennington, S.E., Dr. Talbot wrote:—

I wish, as one to whom, as its Bishop, the affairs of Woolwich are of great interest, to offer you my sincere good wishes for your Parliamentary course.

I am aware that by so writing at this moment I may risk misunderstanding and seem to "worship the rising sun," and that you may not care for words when there were not deeds in support.

But I venture to risk this: and to trust you to take as genuine what is genuinely said. I think you are the man to do this.

I cannot but feel and I desire to express great satisfaction that the needs and interests of Labour should have their representative in one who has given such proof of desire to work and suffer for the welfare of his fellow-men as you have done.

All that I have heard of you commands my admiration and respect. It will be a great pleasure to find there are occasions when we may co-operate for the public welfare in Woolwich.

Had the Bishop of Bloemfontein—Chandler—been in England, I might have asked him for an introduction to you; as it is, may our common friendship for him serve the purpose.

You will come into Parliament with great power from your character and experience, and as the representative by such a majority of such a place. May you seek, and may God Almighty give you, the wisdom and strength to use rightly this great position.

To turn from the Bishop to the bar-parlour will help us to preserve the balance of things human. While Dr. Talbot was sending his blessing from the Bishop's House, there came a chorus of good-wishes from nearly every public-house in Woolwich. This was all the more remarkable because Crooks had made the constituency hold its sides with laughter over the innumerable stories he told during the campaign against beer-drinkers. Those who laughed the loudest were the drinkers themselves, admitting while so doing they had never heard a teetotaler put the case against them so well before.

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It was a great delight to Crooks to learn that even the regular tipplers were saying among themselves that "although that chap Crooks don't spare us blokes, he's the man for our money."

One conversation reported to him from a public-house a few days after the election was certainly quaint and amusing. The narrator was the best of mimics. He told how the subject of the election was introduced by "a long thin man with a sheeny nose," who had just come in.

"Well," began the new-comer, without any preliminary, "I've read 'The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World,' but I tell you Woolwich licks the lot."

"What about Napoleon Bonaparty?" ventured one of the company.

"Bonaparty? What did Bony do? Why, ten years after Wellington won Waterloo things was back worse than they was before."

"I thought Bill Adams won the battle of Waterloo," called out a voice from the corner bench.

"You shouldn't think; it might hurt yer head."

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"D'yer reckon as Crooks is bigger nor Bony was?" inquired the first questioner.

"Certainly I do," said the long thin one, severely. "What did Bony do? Why, he made men fight for him. But what did Crooks do? Why, he taught men to fight for themselves and their families. See? Bony built his house on the sands, and the tide of humanity has washed it away. Now Crooks taught us men to build our own house, and nothing can destroy it while we stick together."

To the new Member there came in due time congratulatory messages from Europe, America, South Africa, and Australia. Children also sent him their well-wishes—children are always writing to Crooks—one letter being signed by a whole family of them in Plumstead with their ages set out like stepping-stones after each signature. This "little household," as they called themselves, told him how eagerly they had "watched the papers," and how glad they were he had won.

One only of the many letters that poured in sounded a despondent note. It was signed by two desolate old women who lived together in Poplar.

"We have just heard," they wrote, "you have been elected Member for Woolwich. Does this mean you are going to leave Poplar? If so, please give up Parliament, for who have we to look to for help if you go away?"

Some of his supporters were anxious to serve him in a practical way. The workers at a tailoring establishment in Woolwich asked him to allow them to make him a suit of clothes "as a thank-offering for the splendid victory." When a fortnight later they sent the suit it was with an expression of "regret that it is not like our esteem—warranted not to wear out." [Pg 199]

The Press all over the country was profoundly impressed by the result. The Liberal papers for the most part were too eager to hail it as a blow at the Conservative Government to see its true significance. The Conservative papers, in attempting to lessen its effect on their own party, got nearer to the real meaning that lay behind the victory.

As the *Times* put it:—

> The result ... means that the questions bound up with the existence of an organised Labour Party which have been hitherto regarded as chimerical are coming to the front in practical politics.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* also got near the mark:—

> Mr. Crooks's return is first and most obviously an indication of the growing strength of the idea of an organised Labour Party, such as under the name of Socialism is so potent a force in Continental politics.

For Woolwich was the first manifestation to the public of the birth of the political Labour Party.

The election came within a few weeks of the famous Newcastle conference of the Labour Representation Committee, whose delegates represented over a million organised workmen in the country. That was the conference which decided on the absolute independence of the Labour Party. Almost the first duty of its secretary, Mr. J. R. Macdonald, on his return from Newcastle was to issue an appeal "to everyone in London interested in the formation of a Labour Party in the House of Commons to go to Woolwich to help Mr. Crooks." [Pg 200]

The best explanation of the striking Labour triumph was given by Crooks himself in the *Daily News*:—

"The workman is learning after years of unfulfilled pledges and broken promises of the usual party stamp that before he can get anything like justice he must transfer his faith from 'gentlemen' candidates to Labour candidates. The workman has seen how the 'gentlemen' of England have treated him in the last few years—taxed his bread, his sugar, his tea; tampered with his children's education, attacked his trade unions, made light of the unemployed problem, and shirked old-age pensions.

"What the workman has done in Woolwich, you will find he will do in other towns."

His prophecy was fulfilled within three years. The General Election of 1906 saw Labour men for the first time returned for two or three dozen constituencies, some with the greatest majorities known to political history. As the amazing results poured in from day to day, with their three and five and even six thousand majorities, a prominent public man declared at the time:—"This is the Party that was born at Woolwich."

One significant phase of the Woolwich by-election was emphasised by the *Speaker*. Here, in a district where the majority of workers earn their daily bread in the Government Arsenal, a man was elected who had bitterly opposed the South African war, which from the material standpoint had brought a period of prosperity to Woolwich without parallel. The *Speaker* went on to say:— [Pg 201]

> Mr. Crooks was among the sturdiest and most outspoken opponents of the war and its objects, and a man who survived that ordeal may be trusted to stand to his colours in the next emergency. He was a conspicuous member of what was called the "Pro-Boer" party. He was one of the orators at the famous Trafalgar Square meeting that the jingoes broke up.

In the pages of the same weekly journal the new member for Woolwich wrote an article on the Labour Party. "The Labour Party," he said, "is quite a natural result of the failure of rich people legislating for the poor. The one hope of the workman is a strong Labour Party.... The Labour Member has nothing but his service to give in return for support. Perhaps he is dependent on his fellows for his maintenance until Payment of Members is secured. The continued selection of rich men for working-class constituencies is a perversion of representation, and quite as absurd as it would be to attempt to run a Labour candidate for the aristocratic West-End division of St. George's, Hanover Square."

CHAPTER XXIV
THE LIVING WAGE FOR MEN AND WOMEN

[Pg 202]

> Crooks's Maiden Speech—A Welcome from the Treasury Bench—Demand for a Fair Wage in Government Workshops—Advocating the Payment of Members and the Enfranchisement of Women—Crooks's Hold upon the House.

A fortnight after his election to Parliament, Crooks made his maiden speech. He called attention to the fact that the Government was allowing portions of the national workshops at Woolwich Arsenal to remain idle while it was giving work that could be done in them to outside contractors.

"I do not know how it appears to other hon. members," he told the House, "but it seems to me that every department of a Government which claims to be a business Government ought to have the right to make the first use of all the resources which the nation has placed at its disposal before considering outside contractors.... The contractors have fairly good representation in this House, and many things are to be said in their favour; but the Government has no right to use the money of the nation in building machinery and then to allow it to stand idle in the interests of outside firms, no matter who they are or what influence they may have."

[Pg 203]

In the opening words of his reply, the Minister for War (Mr. Brodrick) said he was sure that whatever their opinion as to the views of the hon. member (Mr. Crooks), all sections of the House would welcome his appearance in debate on a subject on which he was so fully informed.

The same day Crooks called the attention of the House to the low wages paid to labourers in the national workshops.

"I maintain that it is not cheap for the Government to pay men 21s. per week, although other employers may be able to get them for that amount. If the men had more money they would be able to get better house accommodation, and the ratepayers would be saved the substantial sums now paid under the Poor Law for medical orders for people brought up in over-crowded homes. The President of the Local Government Board knows that in consequence of over-crowding in London, hundreds of such medical orders go to people living under unhealthy conditions, impossible to avoid when the family depends on this weekly wage of 21s. paid to Government employees. Such earnings are barely sufficient for food, let alone shelter. An order has been issued by the Local Government Board instructing Guardians to feed the inmates of workhouses properly. The minimum scale laid down for persons in workhouses is of a character that no man with a family can approach if he is only earning 21s. a week. What I urge is that the men in the employment of the State should have a Local Government Board existence, if nothing else—that the men in the national workshops should no longer have to live on a lower food scale than that prescribed for workhouses."

[Pg 204]

Before he had been in Parliament a month, he got an opportunity to introduce a proposal in favour of the payment of members. The House was well filled when he rose to move the following motion:—

> That, in the opinion of this House, it is desirable and expedient that, in order to give constituencies a full and free choice in the selection of Parliamentary candidates, the charges now made by the returning officer to the candidates should be chargeable to public funds, and that all members of the House of Commons should receive from the State a reasonable stipend during their Parliamentary life.

He addressed the House at some length on this motion. Here is a summary of his speech:—

> There was a good deal of talk about there being absolute equality in this country, but there was, as every member knew, only one way of getting into the House, and that was by spending substantial sums of money. A considerable sum of money was spent in securing his election, but he did not have to find a farthing of it. The cash was subscribed openly and freely. But he had often heard it asked when a poor man was standing: "Who is finding your money?"
>
> Only the other day he saw the following advertisement in the *Yorkshire Post*:—
>
> > M.P.—A gentleman, thirty, holding a responsible position in London, desirous of entering Parliament, wishes to meet with an affectionate and wealthy lady, view matrimony. Genuine. Highest credentials.

[Pg 205]

It might be suggested that men would go into the House of Commons simply to make a living out of it. But was there not in the present House more than one member who made a pretty good thing out of the privilege of being able to attach the magic letters "M.P." to their names? However that might be, he ventured to assert that the administrative capacity of this country had never yet been properly tapped.

It was said a man needed to be trained for political life. Yes, but where? Was it at the University? Was it by taking a double first at Oxford or Cambridge that he would turn out a great law-maker, or was it by constant contact with humanity? He had seen in the Press an observation to the effect that it was all very well for Labour to have its representatives in Parliament, but what did they know of those great historic and important questions which so vitally affected the interests and welfare of the nation? His answer to that was that it was infinitely more important to the average industrial worker of this country that the conditions of life should be bettered, and that an opportunity should be given for men to enter the House who knew what he wanted.

He was one of those who believed that practical knowledge of working men would prove exceedingly helpful in the deliberations of the House. There were too many academically-trained men and too few practical men engaged in the government of the country. He had been in touch with working-men for years and years; he had sat with them on administrative bodies, and his experience was that one touch of nature was worth infinitely more than all the academic training Oxford or Cambridge could give.

The speech was listened to with sympathetic interest, frequently producing laughter and cheers. The motion, however, was talked out by the Government's supporters. [Pg 206]

In his election address Crooks had shown that he wanted women to have the vote. It was with much satisfaction, therefore, that he introduced the Women's Enfranchisement Bill prepared by the Independent Labour Party. The second reading not having been reached when the Session closed, the Bill fell through. Similar measures which have his support have been introduced since. He hopes they will be brought forward regularly until a woman's right to the franchise is recognised.

He gave in the *Review of Reviews* his reasons for introducing the Bill that bore his name:—

"It is because in all my public work I aim at making the people self-reliant, able to think and act for themselves, that I want women to have the power and the responsibility that the possession of the vote gives. It is by this rather than by any consideration of how their votes would be used that I ask for woman's suffrage. At the same time I believe that the cause of progress has nothing to fear from this reform. We entrust to women as teachers and as mothers the all-important work of educating the future citizens. How absurd, then, to hesitate to give to women the rights of a citizen. As regards the women of the working-class, I point out constantly that all the many social questions that are pressing for settlement affect these women as much as, if not more than, they affect their husbands. We must give women a share in settling such questions."

He went on, in the course of further remarks in the same magazine, to lay great stress on the importance of organisation and of agitation in order to secure the vote for women. There should be local workers in every constituency. Every member of the House of Commons should have strong pressure brought to bear upon him. No woman, he urged, should work for any candidate who is not a supporter of women's franchise. If the candidate put forward by her own political party cannot support this, she should work for the candidate who can, no matter to what party he belonged. [Pg 207]

"If women are in earnest on this question," he added, "they must prove it by putting principle before party, and making the enfranchisement of their sex the first object of all their political work."

On political platforms he often mentioned an incident that arose in connection with a protest he made against the low wages paid to women in the Government's Victualling Yard at Deptford.

"It's starvation," he told one of the responsible officials, "to pay widows with families 14s. a week."

"But it's constant," said the amazed official.

"So, you see," Crooks adds in telling the incident, "that Government officials think starvation's all right so long as it's constant. Do you think this system of constant starvation would be tolerated for a day if women had the vote?"

Before Mr. Balfour's Government came to an end, Crooks had become one of the popular speakers of the House. He brought into Parliament a lively conversational style rarely found in that assembly. His quaint witticisms, his telling illustrations from the every-day life of the people, together with his downright sincerity, his tolerance and restraint, won him the good-will of both sides of the House. Whether pleading for underfed school children, for the unemployed, or speaking against the taxation of the people's food, he was generally admitted to be bright and forceful. He never spoke without bringing a new point of view to the debate. "Jehu Junior," writing in *Vanity Fair*, said of him:— [Pg 208]

His tact and common-sense served him as well in the House as they had done in

settling Labour disputes at Poplar. By never debating any subject but those on which he has special knowledge, and by his perfect good temper and modesty, he became one of the men whose politics arouse no personal animosity on the "other side."

Of him and the other Labour men in that Parliament—the small band of stalwarts who were reinforced so strongly at the General Election of 1906—Mr. John Morley, addressing his own constituents at Montrose, said:—

> Will anybody, who has watched the life of the House of Commons, say that in moderation of demeanour, in decency of manners, in self-respect, in freedom from swagger and assumption, these men have shown themselves inferior to men sitting by their side who have had all the opportunities of wealth, education, and culture? If I were leaving the House of Commons to-morrow, and were called upon to adjudicate a prize, I would impartially give the prize for good manners, for self-respect, for moderation of statement, for respect for the audience they addressed in the House of Commons, to the dozen Labour men whom we have had the pleasure of having among us rather than to a dozen gentlemen I could name if I liked.

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From the other side of the House came the testimony of Sir John Gorst. The ex-Conservative Minister brought out his book, "The Children of the Nation"—wherein he argues that it is the duty of the State to see that the nation's children are well fed, well housed, and well clothed—with the following dedication:—"To the Labour Members of the House of Commons in token of my belief that they are animated by a genuine desire to ameliorate the condition of the people."

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CHAPTER XXV
FREE TRADE IN THE NAME OF THE POOR

> M.P.'s Investments and their Votes—A Lecture from a Lady of Title—Urged to give up some of his Public Work—Defending Free Trade throughout the Country—Ridiculing Tariff Reform at Birmingham—A Brush with Mr. Chamberlain—Real "Little Englanders."

"Show me where a man has his money invested and I will tell you how he will vote."

Such was Crooks's way of summing up the House of Commons before he had been a Member many months. Someone had expressed surprise to him that both Liberal and Conservative Members should have combined to support the proposed Electric Trust for London when the L.C.C. was promoting a municipal scheme.

"The first lesson one learns in Parliament," he replied, "is that the two great parties generally forget their political differences when the just claims of the people threaten their pockets."

It amused him to find that many Members preferred the smoking room and the Terrace to the House. It was on the Terrace he overheard a Conservative Member ask a Liberal:—

"Are you in favour of this Bill?"

"I think I am," came the halting reply.

"That's all right, then; I'm against it. We needn't go up to vote—we'll pair."

[Pg 211]

And Crooks left those British legislators smoking on the Terrace, since it was too much trouble to them to go inside and vote.

It was on the Terrace one afternoon that a party of titled ladies, taking tea, sought his acquaintance. They immediately began to lecture him on his duty to the poor.

"I think you are supremely stupid to bother about the poor as you do, Mr. Crooks," said one of the dames from behind her fan. "I am told they are always coming to your house to consult you about their troubles. If they came to my house I should order them away."

"I'm sure you would, madam."

"And if those dreadful people were only like me they wouldn't listen to what you tell them."

"I'm sure they wouldn't, madam."

"You needn't be sarcastic, Mr. Crooks. I would send them to the Poor Law officers or the Charity Organisation people."

And then, as another honourable member joined the party, the good lady turned to him:

"I'm just teaching Mr. Crooks his place."

"Indeed," said the Labour man, "I thought I was teaching you yours."

It was more agreeable to him when accosted by one of the policemen on duty in the House.

"Well, Mr. Crooks, how's Poplar?"

"You know Poplar?"

"Yes, I used to be stationed that way. I well remember your Dock Gate meetings. I liked the Poplar people better than the West Enders. You take it from me, Mr. Crooks, there's far more respect for law and order in Poplar than there is in the West End." [Pg 212]

He still kept his College by the Dock Gates going, notwithstanding his election to Parliament. Indeed, he was still as much the servant of Poplar as of Woolwich.

Parliament, of course, added enormously to his work. Friends urged him to give up several of his public posts. He was advised to retire from the Asylums Board, and doubtless would have done so but for a powerful appeal sent to him not to desert the Board's children. He wanted to resign from the Poplar Board of Guardians, of which he had then been Chairman for half a dozen successive years; but all parties in the borough pleaded with him to remain, and the Conservatives and Liberals withdrew their candidates in his ward in order that he might be returned unopposed. He was showered with requests to remain for the sake of the poor. At last he agreed, on the understanding that he should give less time to the work. This was perhaps an unwise decision, for owing to the slackening of his personal vigilance the administration was besmirched by irregularities which of course laid the Chairman's Poor Law policy open to the attacks of his opponents.

The only post he gave up was that on the Poplar Borough Council. The Labour League would not hear of his resigning from the London County Council, and within a year of his election to Parliament, Poplar re-elected him to the L.C.C. with a majority of over 1,600. [Pg 213]

The demands made upon him to address public meetings in other parts of the country became terrific after Woolwich. I found him one afternoon turning over the pages of his engagement book with a worried look.

"I'm just wondering whether I can do it," he said. "I find I'm booked to speak at thirteen different meetings at different places within the next fortnight, and I've just got a pressing appeal to speak at another within the same time."

The appeals came from the churches, from temperance societies, from Adult Sunday Schools, from P.S.A.'s, as well as from Labour organisations.

The Labour Party, which was then organising for its great political triumph of 1906, had his first consideration always. He addressed Labour meetings all over the country, nearly always with an audience of three or four thousand. He was at Glasgow, Birmingham, Leicester, Plymouth, Liverpool, Exeter, Darlington, Ipswich, Chatham, Newcastle, Blackburn, Barnard Castle, Huddersfield, Edinburgh, Cardiff, all within a few months.

Everywhere he turned Mr. Chamberlain's tariff proposals into ridicule. He made his great Birmingham audience laugh the loudest. He told that and other audiences:—

> Mr. Chamberlain has shown you two loaves, the Free Trade loaf and the Protection loaf. [Pg 214]
>
> "There's hardly any difference between them," he tells you. "Why make all this fuss?"
>
> Let him take the two loaves down a Birmingham court and ask a poor woman with children to cut them up. She'll soon tell him the difference between the solid Free Trade loaf and the spongy Protectionist loaf. You trust the mother of a family to know the difference between good bread and blown-out pastry.
>
> "Ah, but we must make sacrifices in the interest of the Empire," says Mr. Chamberlain.
>
> Let him come down our way and talk like that in Poplar. I tried it the other day.
>
> "Times is awful bad just now, Mr. Crooks," said one of a party of women who stopped me on my way to the House of Commons.
>
> "Yes," I said, "but don't you know the new kind of comfort the Imperialists have found for you? They say you belong to an Empire on which the sun never sets. It's so filling, isn't it, when you're hungry?"
>
> "An Empire on which the sun never sets!" cried one of the women, pointing towards her slum tenement. "What's the good of talking to us like that? Why, the sun never rises on our court!"
>
> "That may be," I say, "but you've got to pay more for your bread and your meat, all in the interests of the Empire. You've got to learn to make sacrifices for the Empire."
>
> "Look here, Will," says the eldest among them; "I've known you since you was in petticoats, and you've never deceived me yet. Wot's the use of talking to us about sacrifices when we can't make both ends meet as it is?"
>
> "Both ends meet!" exclaimed one of the women. "We think we are lucky if we can get one end meat and the other end bread."
>
> "Wot's it all about, Mr. Crooks?" asked another. "Here's bread gone up a ha'penny a loaf. And sugar and tea's gone up. And the children say they don't get so many sweets for a farthing now as they used to." [Pg 215]

"And," I added, "meat's likely to go up too—all in the interests of the Empire. Twopence a pound more for Colonial mutton."

"What!" they cried in a body. "Twopence more for mutton!"

"Haven't you heard?" I went on. "The Tariff Reformers have a great scheme to bind the Empire together by letting the Colonies charge us more for our food. If you don't agree with them they'll call you little Englanders."

"That's just it," said one of the women. "If I'm to pay another twopence a pound for meat my children will soon be Little Englanders!"

Then turning suddenly from his anecdotal style, Crooks would go on to ask his audience how a worthy Imperial race was to be built up on a lack of food?

The Empire begins in the workman's kitchen. The imposition of new duties on food imports, though no more than a penny or twopence, means to many a poor housewife the difference between having and going without.

I know one large family where the recent addition of a half-penny on the loaf robbed the children of a slice of bread a day. Do you know what that means? Have you ever lived in a family where the slices have to be counted, and where every child could eat twice as much as its allowance? I belonged to such a family as a child, and when a clergyman came round once and found my mother crying over an empty cupboard, he said:

"Ah, well; God sends the bread for all the mouths."

"That's all very fine," my mother said; "but He seems to send the mouths to our house and the bread to yours."

The policy of Preference came in for his banter equally with that of Protection. Under any scheme of Preference, the relation of this country, with its large imports, to our Colonies, which take comparatively few of our exports, he used to say reminded him of a boxing-match between a thin man and a fat man. After the first round or two the fat man stops and says: [Pg 216]

"This ain't fair; you've got more to strike at than I have."

"Very well, then," says the thin man, "let's chalk my size out on your body, and all blows outside the chalk mark don't count."

Mr. Chamberlain seems to have heard how Crooks was riddling with ridicule his Protection and Preference policies up and down the country. At any rate, the ex-Minister began his favourite policy of Retaliation. At some of his public meetings he supported his argument by representing Crooks as having said at Leith that the poor of this country were worse off than the poor of any other country.

As soon as Crooks heard of this he wrote to Mr. Chamberlain:—

SIR,—I do not for a moment think you deliberately misquoted the words I used at Leith, but whoever sent you the information is absolutely without excuse for the blunder. For what I said I have said in twenty different parts of the kingdom to tens of thousands of our fellow-countrymen—viz. "that even if, as Mr. Chamberlain suggests, the Colonies do desire Preference, it is no reason why the poor of Great Britain should pay more for their bread to help those Colonies which have no poor, or certainly no poverty compared with the poverty we have in this country." [Pg 217]

This, as you will note, makes a very great difference in the reading of your quotation of what I really did say.

I am, yours truly,
WILL CROOKS.

In reply Mr. Chamberlain sent a tardy apology, thus:—

SIR,—I have your letter of December 17th, and in reply I beg to say that the statement which you say you have repeatedly used is in no sense inconsistent with the statement which you were reported to have made at Leith, and which referred not to the Colonies but to foreign countries. Unfortunately, I have only the extract which was sent to me and not the whole speech, and of course if you deny having used the words which I quoted I most readily accept your contradiction.

I am, yours faithfully,
JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN.

A fallacy very popular with Protectionists was neatly dealt with by Crooks at a meeting of the London County Council. One of the Moderate members asked whether an assurance could be given that certain tramway materials would be of British manufacture.

The reply was that since the Council worked under Free Trade conditions, no such assurance could be given.

"Will not trade union conditions be observed?" inquired another Moderate member.

"Yes."

"Do you call that acting on a Free Trade basis?"

"Some members," interposed Crooks, "seem to identify trade union conditions with Protection." [Pg 218]

"Quite right too," shouted the Moderate.

"Yes," came Crooks's retort; "but the one kind of Protection is the protection of the workers against the sweater, and the other kind is the protection of the sweater against the workers."

CHAPTER XXVI
PREPARING FOR THE UNEMPLOYED ACT

[Pg 219]

Principles for dealing with Unemployed—Twenty-four Per Cent. of Poplar's Wage-earners out of Work—Folly of Stone-breaking and Oakum-picking—Public Warning by Crooks and Canon Barnett—How Crooks used a Gift of £1,000.

Crooks's three years in Mr. Balfour's Parliament had a remarkable triumph in the Unemployed Act. No one needs reminding that the measure was introduced by the Government; but as the sequel will show, it is doubtful whether it would have seen the light, and it is certain it would never have been passed but for his untiring advocacy.

This was so far recognised at the time that one of the bitterest opponents of the measure, Sir William Chance, a stern disciple of the Charity Organisation Society, described it as "a Poplar Bill framed to meet Poplar's needs."

So it was. For Poplar's needs just then were the needs of the unemployed. And the unemployed's needs were the same all the country over. The Bill was introduced about the time the Poplar Guardians took a census of the unemployed in typical working-class streets in the district, revealing over twenty-four per cent. of the wage-earners out of work.

The Bill was based on the principle which had guided Crooks in all his dealings with the unemployed. The only sound way to help an unemployed man, he maintains, is by work rather than by relief. The condition he imposes on the provision of such work is that it must be useful. He will have nothing to do with "works" provided only as "relief." Work that is not useful can never relieve. [Pg 220]

His agitation in Parliament put the crown on fifteen years of laborious striving to make the State admit a duty to its unemployed citizens.

As far back as September, 1893, he was appealing in the *Daily Chronicle* to the Board of Trade and the Thames Conservancy to help in allaying the threatened distress of the coming winter by reclaiming foreshores. His appeal was taken up at the time by other papers, which complimented him upon the practical common-sense character of his proposals.

Somewhere in the archives of the Board of Trade that scheme of his doubtless lies buried to this day. He is still confident it will be carried out some time. He is fond of saying that it takes Parliament seven years to grasp a new idea and seven more to carry it out.

Compressed into a few lines in his own words, the story of his effort runs in this way:—"It was in the November of 1893 that in consequence of what I had been saying at public meetings and in the Press, I was urged to lay the scheme before Mr. Mundella, who was President of the Board of Trade at the time. There was great suffering that winter, and the Local Government Board advised all the local authorities to put in hand as much public work as possible. Well and good, I said, but let the Government do the same. I pointed out that under the Foreshores Act of 1866 the Board of Trade had power to reclaim land. Again, under an Act of 1857 the Thames Conservancy could reclaim miles of foreshore in and below London. I showed that this was just the kind of work to absorb unskilled labour, and supplied examples of the success of reclaiming land on the banks of the Forth and the Tay and on the Lincolnshire coast." [Pg 221]

As his Poor Law duties crowded heavily upon him he had opportunities as a Guardian of carrying out in his own district his guiding principle in regard to the provision of useful work. He found the usual "task" work going on in the workhouse. He saw its degrading uselessness and abolished it. In place of oakum-picking and stone-breaking he substituted useful and profitable work like clothes-making, laundry work, bread-baking, wood-chopping, painting, and cleaning.

For every ton of oakum picked in the workhouse the ratepayers were involved in an expenditure of £10. The Guardians were often glad to get rid of the oakum when picked by returning it free to the firm supplying it. At the best they got 2s. 6d. per ton for it.

To a man like Crooks, holding firmly to Ruskin's theory that the employment of persons on a useless business cannot relieve ultimate distress, all work of that kind was wicked as well as wasteful. [Pg 222]

He told his own Board so very plainly in 1895. It was a bitter winter. River and docks were frozen for weeks, closing the door against work to half the men in Poplar. The Guardians were besieged by starving families. Well-nigh in despair the Board arranged that the relieving officers should send the out-of-work men to break stones at three stoneyards specially opened in different parts of the district.

"It's a mistake," he argued. "You are putting men to break stones which nobody wants. You are wasting men and money by inventing work which is utterly useless. Plenty of useful work can be found with care and organisation."

After six disastrous weeks the Guardians admitted he was right. Only the worst class of men went into the stoneyards. He showed that this work of breaking stones was costing £3 2s. 6d. per yard, whereas the work could be done outside at trade union rate of wages for 2s. 6d. per yard.

When the stoneyards were closed and it became known to the loafers thriving under the system that Crooks was responsible, they threatened his life. These men knew they had been sent to the stoneyard simply to justify the Guardians in paying them wages. They grumbled and idled most of the time. Self-respecting men out of work refused to mix with them.

Some time later Crooks joined with Canon Barnett, George Lansbury, and others in a letter to the *Times* and the Press generally, uttering a note of warning to municipal authorities against "made work" for the unemployed. This joint letter stated:— [Pg 223]

> Made work tends to be regarded as a source of relief rather than of earnings. It is often as tempting to the idler as it is repugnant to the self-respecting workman....
>
> We would therefore submit that the municipalities which may decide to take part in meeting present needs could best do so by leaving distinctively "relief" duties to Guardians and other agencies; by starting and carrying on, as good employers, works which have a definite public advantage, and by requiring of each worker the best work during a continuous period under thorough supervision.

The most successful scheme for relieving distress with which Crooks was associated in the severe winters of the early 'nineties was one on which a dozen years later the Unemployed Act was based. It represented co-operation between a committee of citizens and the local authorities.

The Committee was formed in the first instance as a relief committee by the Rector of Poplar. When Crooks joined at the rector's request and found himself sitting among none but parsons, representing every denomination in the district, he told them their first duty was to widen their ranks.

"You will never do anything so long as your committee is confined to gentlemen like these," he told the clerical chairman. "What you need is to get hold of trade union secretaries and the secretaries of the friendly and temperance societies and members of working men's clubs. They will soon discriminate between the waster and the deserving man. The waster is always boasting that parsons are so easily deceived." [Pg 224]

Besides the Labour men, representatives of other classes were invited to join the committee. The Bishop of London and Canon Scott Holland backed up the Committee's appeal to the public for funds, and about £5,000 was raised to meet Poplar's needs.

It was amusing to see how often the working men members had to undeceive the parsons. One good vicar tearfully brought forward several cases which the Labour men proved had been manufactured for him by professional cadgers.

"I have never known a distress committee to equal that one," was Crooks's verdict.

It taught him that a shilling given to an unemployed man for work done was better than a sovereign given simply as charity.

Ever since he has steadily worked for the unemployed under that conviction. He changed that committee from a relief committee into a committee for providing work.

In its second winter he received an offer for the unemployed of £1,000 from Mr. A. F. Hills, of the Thames Ironworks, on condition that he should raise a similar sum. He took the offer at once to the Poplar District Board, the precursor of the Borough Council. They agreed to vote another £1,000, and to put men to work on repaving roads and lime-whiting courts and alleys. So far was the local authority satisfied with the way the work was done that, after spending Mr. Hills's £1,000 in wages and the second £1,000 they themselves had promised, they voted another £3,000 during the prevalence of the distress. [Pg 225]

Meanwhile, Crooks had brought about co-operation between the rector's Distress Committee and the local authority. The Committee went on as usual investigating the condition of families, with the great advantage of now being able to offer a job rather than relief to the out-of-work husband.

"When we came to starving families, as we did very often, we fed them up until the man was able to go to work. As soon as a man was able to work we sent him to the local authority. If he failed to turn up for the work, but came round later for relief, he got this answer: 'We can't afford to play the fool in this business. If you won't turn up to work you can't be in distress. All we can do

for you now is to put you at the bottom of our list. When we reach your name again we'll give you one more chance. If you don't take the work then, don't come here any more.'

"Of course, the cost of the labour to the District Board was somewhat higher than it would have been in the hands of skilled road-makers. You must always allow for a loss due to the want of experience (as well as the want of food) when you engage unemployed men. But remember we had a free gift of £1,000 from Mr. Hills, which more than met the extra expense, so that the ratepayers lost nothing. On the other hand, the community got something that it needed. How much better, then, to pay this little difference in price by employing out-of-work men on public works than by giving them relief under the guise of stone-breaking, which costs the community over £3 per ton when it can be done in the open market for 2s. 6d. a ton." [Pg 226]

The winter that witnessed this scheme was described as "a red-letter one in the history of the unemployed difficulty in the East End of London." The words appear in the report of the Poplar District Board. In summing up what had been done, the Board further stated that "on every ground much good has been accomplished and a valuable lesson learned." The Board also thanked the local Relief Committee and Mr. Hills and Crooks personally for their co-operation.

The lesson that had been learned saw fruit in the Unemployed Act a dozen years later.

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CHAPTER XXVII
AGITATION IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

How the Workless Man Degenerates—Pleading the Cause of the Unemployed in the House—Creation of the Central Unemployed Committee—Feeding the Starving out of the Rates—"Would a Hen bring 'em off?"—A Letter from the Prime Minister—Crooks's Rejoinder.

The interval was one of unwearied agitation. Of all his other pressing public duties he gave first place to this of urging the State to deal with the unemployed.

"This unemployed question is a terrible worry, Crooks," said a Conservative member, walking with him out of the House of Commons into Palace Yard one evening.

"Yes," Crooks replied as the other stepped into his motor car, "it is a terrible worry when you have it for breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper."

It was the beginning of the winter of 1904. He had spent the afternoon in one of his interminable battles in Parliament urging that preparations should be made to act wisely instead of waiting until panic-stricken, and that the usual wild schemes for helping the unemployed would once again result in waste and demoralisation.

"I stood for a minute or two interested in the hurry and scurry of people hastening to clubland, to dinner parties, and to theatres," he afterwards remarked when recalling the incident. "Then, turning my back on the West End, I wended my way eastward. Yes, a terrible worry the unemployed, and yet how few people seemed to realise it. Never-ending lines of conveyances, long queues of pleasure-seekers thronging the theatre doors, all the externals of my surroundings pointed to everything but unemployment. But straight in front of me was my home in Poplar, and I knew that in a few more minutes I should be hearing a tale of some family's misery, considering myself a lucky man if I spent a few minutes indoors without someone calling to ask, 'Can you help to get me a job?' [Pg 228]

"Truly to some of us the unemployed are a terrible worry, not only in December, January, and February, but summer and winter, night and day, all the year round. But more terrible than the unemployed themselves is the heart-breaking carelessness of the British public, which, generous to a fault, will not make up its mind until stirred by sensational appeals.

"'Oh, but,' some of my political opponents say to me, 'the unemployed are generally such a shiftless, good-for-nothing class. What good can you expect to do with such men? I quite sympathise with your keenness, but they are a very worthless, thankless lot, and you are wasting a lot of time over them.'

"Well, suppose we allow that as a class the unemployed retain a large measure of original sin. I know other classes possessing the same weakness, but neither class prejudices nor racial hatreds interest me very much. So, for the sake of argument, we will say that the unemployed are very imperfect. This is one of the reasons why my Labour colleagues and I want to press home the importance of England making a praiseworthy effort to grapple with the problem. We see how quickly a workless man deteriorates. A person out of work in October, unless promptly dealt with, is in danger of becoming by the following March that social wreck known as a loafer. And I object to loafers at both ends of the scale, whether in Park Lane or in Poplar." [Pg 229]

In the issue of *Vanity Fair* containing "Spy's" popular cartoon of Crooks, the Labour member himself had an article on the unemployed.

"If *Vanity Fair* will train the rich, the Labour men will guide the poor," he wrote. Further: "Old England is as dear to the Labour man with poverty for his birthright as to the hereditary

legislator with a county for a heritage. But wealth, and the carelessness that wealth often induces, are blind to the causes which heap misery and discontent upon the people from generation to generation. To the wealthy the whole business is a social phenomenon, but to us it is a permanent terror.

"And so, whatever our differences may appear to be, our Labour hopes are concentrating upon sound practical methods by which the conditions and opportunities of the people shall be improved.

"You who read this are invited to remember that organised work is the first step which will [Pg 230] separate the workman from demoralising charity, his wife from the pawnshop, and his children from the streets. Sentiment and sympathy need no longer be the prey of the fawning cadger, or the victim of hypocritical distress.

"To keep England in the forefront of the nations of the earth we must begin in the homes of our people, there to raise a truly Imperial and patriotic race of good, healthy, honest men and women. The task is admittedly a difficult one, for social reconstruction is as much moral as economic, but helping hands stretch out in every direction. The one great need is to change a national apathy into keen, sympathetic, well-balanced criticism."

His agitation for the unemployed in the House of Commons, which formed the main part of his parliamentary life for a couple of years, began with the opening of the Session of 1904. He seconded Mr. Keir Hardie's amendment to the Address, regretting, "in view of distress arising from lack of employment," that no proposal was made for helping out-of-work men.

Crooks began his speech by declaring that mere relief schemes encouraged the loafer. He knew well both the loafer and the man who was born tired. The wife of one such got up early and wakened her husband in time for work.

"Is it raining?" the man asked from the folds of the bedclothes.

"No." [Pg 231]

"Does it look like raining?"

"No."

"Oh, I wish it was Sunday."

With a sudden change of tone and manner, Crooks then went on to tell the House that if an able-bodied man out of a job was driven into the workhouse, he generally remained a workhouse inmate for the rest of his life. It degraded and demoralised him. It took away his muscle to stand up and fight for himself. If the Local Government Board would permit Guardians to take land, this man could be put to useful work. Even able-bodied men of the "in-and-out" type would be better for being put to work on the land under powers of compulsory detention. Of course, these men should be allowed to go out if they really desired to look for other work. What they should not be allowed to do was to drag their wives and children about the country, vagrants bringing up more vagrants. Employment on farm colonies would quickly get rid of the tramp difficulty. Such men, trained in useful agricultural work, if they felt they had little chance in this country, would then have some equipment for the colonies. A country like Canada, for instance, had no use for men who had simply been loafing about English towns, but would very quickly find work for men who had had a little training and discipline on the land. It would be better for the whole community that something of this sort should be done than that we should go on with the present system of [Pg 232] doles and relief, whose effects, like idleness, only demoralised.

The appeal to the House on that occasion fell on deaf ears.

The winter of 1904 was made memorable to him by the creation of the Central Unemployed Committee. For several years he had urged that the Poor Law Unions of London should be empowered to form a central committee to deal with the unemployed on well-organised lines. With the several Unions acting separately, confusion and waste followed on well-meaning efforts. The genuine unemployed received little real help.

Few public men took his scheme for a central organisation seriously at first. He was well-nigh worn out with his failures when unexpectedly the then President of the Local Government Board came to his aid. Crooks, with several other Members of Parliament, had waited upon Mr. Long in deputation. The result was the calling together of the famous Unemployed Conference at the Local Government Board on October 14th, 1904.

To that Conference the Poplar Guardians sent Crooks and Lansbury, armed with a series of carefully-thought-out proposals. Some of them found a ready acceptance on the part of Mr. Long. Others were adopted by the succeeding Government.

Since those Poplar proposals have already figured prominently in unemployed schemes and promise to appear in projects yet to be framed, the substance of them is here set out:—

1. The President of the Local Government Board to combine the London Unions for the [Pg 233] purpose of dealing with the unemployed and the unemployable.

2. Such central authority to take over the control of all able-bodied inmates in London workhouses.

3. Farm colonies to be established by the central authority for providing work.

4. Local Distress Committees to be also set up, consisting of members of Borough Councils and Boards of Guardians, to work on the lines already laid down by the Mansion House and the Poplar Distress Committees.

5. The cost to these local committees of dealing with urgent need occasioned by want of work to be a charge on the whole of London or on the National Exchequer, instead of being a charge on the locality, "always provided that the payment given be for work done on lines similar to those adopted by the Mansion House and the Poplar Distress Committees."

6. Rural District Councils to be asked to supply the Local Government Board with information when labourers are wanted on the land, such information to be sent to the Local Distress Committees.

7. Parliament to take in hand the question of afforestation, the reclamation of foreshores, and the building of sea walls along the coast where the tide threatens encroachment.

Almost immediately after the Whitehall Conference Mr. Long formed a Central Unemployed Committee for London, personally arranging that Crooks and Lansbury should become members. He also advised the formation of local Distress Committees by the Poor Law and Municipal authorities.

While Crooks was calling the nation's attention in Parliament and at public meetings throughout the country to the wasteful and disorganised way in which we met these recurring periods of distress, he was making reasonable use of the local machinery at his hands. [Pg 234]

Little could be done through the newly-formed committees in the way of providing work during that winter. Want was felt keenly all over the East End. Distress brooded over West Ham, for instance, like a black cloud. To such a plight was that district reduced owing to lack of work that the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily News* between them raised £30,000 for relief.

West Ham's neighbour, Poplar, was in an equally bad plight, but there the Guardians made an attempt to deal with the distress themselves. They grappled boldly with a terrible state of things. The newspaper funds, by bringing bread to West Ham, saved that district, according to the testimony of the local police superintendent, from serious rioting. Poplar, too, said the *Daily Mail* at the time, was only saved from a series of bread riots by the promptness of Will Crooks.

He talked into calmness a lean and clamorous crowd of starving men who swarmed into the Guardians' offices one day. He promised that their claims should be considered and their cases investigated, and advised them to go away quietly.

Poplar fed its starving poor, and in doing so the Guardians did not hesitate to raise the rate for the time being by fourpence. In no single case, however, was money given to families where the out-of-work husband was under sixty years of age. All they got was a few shillings' worth of food, just enough to keep body and soul together until the husband found work again. Had food not been given in this way, scores of families would have been forced into the workhouse, where the cost of their keep would have been four or five times greater. [Pg 235]

In the following winter, in face of similar distress, the same policy was followed. It was mainly for thus feeding the starving that the Poplar Board was afterwards so violently attacked. But, given the like distress, Crooks stoutly maintains he will apply the same remedy.

"The Poor Law is entrusted to us to prevent starvation," he holds. "My dead friend and neighbour Dolling used to say that 'the law that safeguards the poor is always in the hands of those who do not put it into force.' So long as I live that shall not be said of Poplar."

With all the pressing claims of Poplar and his daily duties in Parliament, together with the calls made upon his time by the London County Council and the Asylums Board, he was yet constant in his attendance at the Guildhall meetings of the Central Unemployed Committee. He and Lansbury spared themselves in nothing on that Committee. They believed that on its success depended the future of State-aid for the unemployed. They believed that such a crisis as they were grappling with in Poplar in the winter of 1904 would never recur once they got the State to recognise its duty to assist in organising useful work for hard times.

"The lesson of all our work on Mr. Long's Unemployed Committee was this," he told me. "The only way to deal properly with the unemployed in winter is to make your preparations in summer. The test of the Central Unemployed Committee will be the character of its organisation in good times. Only by being well organised when there is little distress will it prove a success when times are bad. It is far harder to organise useful work for the unemployed through public bodies than it is to raise money for their relief." [Pg 236]

Crooks himself had seen the dark shadows of that winter creeping up ominously in the previous summer. Before Parliament adjourned in August he uttered a warning note in the House of Commons. He asked the Prime Minister whether the various Government Departments could not do something to prepare for the exceptional needs. Mr. Balfour's reply was to the effect that inquiries would be made.

"Ah, those inquiries!" said Crooks, recalling the promise at a public meeting in Woolwich. "I've seen a good many inquiries and Royal Commissions in my time, and they always remind me of the East Ender who went down Petticoat Lane on market day. He saw on a barrow some hard-boiled eggs which had been dyed various colours, evidently for children. He'd seen nothing like them before.

"'Wot kind of eggs is them?' says he.

"'Them? Them's pheasants' eggs,' says the coster.

"'Would a hen bring 'em off?' [Pg 237]

"'Rather!'

"'How much for a sitting?'

"'Eighteenpence and half yer luck.'

"A month or two later the same man was down that way again. The coster saw him.

"'Ain't you the bloke as bought them pheasants' eggs?'

"'Yes.'

"'How'd yer get on?'

"'Well,' he says mournful like, 'that old hen sat and sat and sat until I'm blowed if she didn't cook them pheasants' eggs at last.'

"And," added Crooks, "I have never known a Royal Commission or a Government Inquiry yet that didn't sit and sit and sit until its report was cooked by the time it had done with it."

As the distress deepened with the approach of winter, the Poplar Guardians pressed for an Autumn Session of Parliament. They wrote to the Government welcoming Mr. Long's scheme of Distress Committees, but doubting their efficacy unless power was granted to raise a halfpenny rate for providing the unemployed with work.

As Chairman of the Board, Crooks himself wrote a long letter to the Prime Minister on November 21st. He supplied official figures, showing the exceptional distress then prevailing, and pointed out that the Guardians' request for an Autumn Session was supported by fifty-six other Poor Law Unions and no fewer than eighty municipalities throughout the country.

To that letter Mr. Balfour sent the following reply:— [Pg 238]

10, Downing Street, Whitehall, S.W.
November 28th, 1904.

DEAR MR. CROOKS,—

I am well aware that in many parts of the metropolis—and more particularly, I fear, in the district in which as a Guardian you are immediately concerned—much temporary distress prevails at the present moment.

How best to deal with the situation thus created has, as you know, been the subject of most anxious consideration on the part of the President of the Local Government Board; and Mr. Walter Long has established a scheme—now, I understand, in actual working—which will have the effect of organising and generalising methods which local experience has already proved to be useful, thereby greatly increasing both their economy and their efficiency.

You are, I gather, of opinion that this by itself is not sufficient, and you suggest that a special Session of Parliament is required to meet the emergency. I would venture, however, to make two remarks on this project. In the first place, I think we ought to wait and see how far the new machinery fulfils the hope of its designers; and, in the second place, I think we should abstain from basing exaggerated hopes upon anything which may be immediately accomplished by Parliamentary debates. These are invaluable for the purpose of criticising legislative proposals or executive action. They may educate the public mind. They may prepare the way for a constructive policy. They can hardly, however, frame one. And, so far as I can judge, an abstract discussion upon the general situation would not only be of little present value to those whom it is intended to benefit, but it would do them a positive injury. Organised effort would be paralysed till the decision of Parliament was known; and between the beginning of our debates and the moment when their result could be embodied in a working shape much preventable suffering would inevitably have occurred. [Pg 239]

Yours very truly,
ARTHUR JAMES BALFOUR.

In his reply on behalf of the Guardians, Crooks said:

"From a purely academic standpoint your argument is doubtless correct; but while Mr. Long's scheme does, in a general way, show a departure in the direction of making London a unit for dealing with the unemployed, yet it has no power to enforce contributions from anyone. Thus all

poor parts, where work-people are aggregated, have to bear abnormal burdens which should be shared, if not by the nation, then at least by the metropolis.

"The position in this district has reached a stage where something immediate has to be done, and the only course open to the Guardians is to meet the numerous applications made to them by grants of out-door relief. The total amount of out-door relief now being granted by the Guardians exceeds £690 per week, and is borne entirely by local rates, which already stand at 10s. in the £, and will considerably increase by the addition of this extra relief.

"If the public were assured that the problem would be seriously taken up by his Majesty's Government at an early date, funds might be forthcoming to bridge over the present period of anxiety.

"The Guardians desire to emphasise the fact that this question of dealing with the unemployed has been several times before Parliament, and if the Government really desire to grapple with this great evil, they could, in a short time, with the expert advice at the disposal of the Government, set in operation a great deal of work useful to the nation. The Guardians, therefore, sincerely hope that their previous representations will be acted upon, and that you will give an assurance that the matter shall be laid before Parliament at the earliest possible moment." [Pg 240]

CHAPTER XXVIII [Pg 241]
THE QUEEN INTERVENES

A Breakdown from Overwork—Health Permanently Impaired—Appointment of a Royal Commission on the Poor Law—Saving the Unemployed Bill—Need of Money to Work the Bill—Mrs. Crooks heads the Women's March to Whitehall—Mr. Balfour's Sympathetic but Unsatisfactory Reply—Queen Alexandra's Intervention—A Vote of Money in the New Parliament.

The labour and anxiety, the long arduous days and the sleepless nights Crooks endured that winter for the unemployed, culminated in a sudden and serious illness.

The attack was short, but dangerous. His doctor reported that unless a change took place within a few hours it would be a case for confinement to bed for at least three months. Fortunately, the welcome change came.

A few days before he took to his bed he got a severe shaking by a fall while jumping off a 'bus in the Strand. That was not the cause of his illness, however. The real cause, as his medical man declared, was nervous breakdown due to overwork. His overwork had all been in the direction of trying to get work for the unemployed.

He fretted himself into a worse condition during the first few days of his illness. Every night, instead of sleeping, he was mentally putting hosts of unemployed men to work. [Pg 242]

The sympathy and affection shown during his illness by his neighbours at Poplar affected him deeply. All day long callers of all sorts and conditions were making inquiries and leaving messages of good-will. Labourers, mechanics, widows, children, tradesmen, public men, officials, Free Church ministers, Anglican clergymen, Roman Catholic priests, and Sisters of the Poor were among those who came to the door once the news leaked out that the man from their midst, whom they had so often delighted to honour, lay sick and in danger. Their sympathy was intensified by the knowledge that Mrs. Crooks herself had not wholly recovered from a serious operation that had kept her for weeks in hospital.

That breakdown shattered him for life. He has never been the same in health since, and knows he can never be the same again. Sometimes for weeks together he endures agonising nervous pains, deprived of sleep and rest, yet all the time steadily refusing to slacken his labours for those whom he is fond of calling "the people at our end of the town."

As soon as he was able to get out again in the New Year (1905), he took up the case for the unemployed, if not with all his former zeal, certainly with all the zeal he could then command.

Towards the end of January he had so far recovered as to be able to attend the Liverpool Conference of the Labour Representation Committee. He was then in a position to make public for the first time that the King's Speech at the opening of Parliament in the following month would in all likelihood promise an Unemployed Bill. On his motion the Conference decided: [Pg 243]

> That the policy of the Labour Party in Parliament relating to unemployment should be to secure fuller powers for the local authorities to acquire and use land, to re-organise the local administrative machinery for dealing with poverty and unemployment, to bring pressure on the Government to put the recommendations of the Afforestation Committee into effect, to undertake forthwith, through the Board of Trade, the reclamation of foreshores, and to create a Labour Ministry.

His forecast of the King's Speech proved correct. An Unemployed Bill was promised. It was introduced on April 18th by Mr. Gerald Balfour, who had succeeded Mr. Long at the Local

Government Board. The Bill confirmed Mr. Long's scheme of Distress Committees in London, and provided for the formation of similar bodies in provincial towns. It granted the principle of State aid by permitting the cost of organisation, including the provision of farm colonies, to be charged to the rates, leaving it to voluntary subscriptions to provide a fund for paying the men's wages.

That Session was made memorable to Crooks in another sense. A Royal Commission on the Poor Law was appointed, and although it was little faith he had in Commissions generally, he believed that, whatever came of the recommendations of this one, it would help the people of England to [Pg 244] see, while its investigations were going on, something of the cruelty and folly of a system which had been ruthlessly thrust upon the voteless labouring people by the middle class individualists who came into power after the Reform Act of 1832. His fellow Guardian, George Lansbury, was appointed a member of the Commission—a notable compliment to Poplar, which for a dozen years had striven to make this soulless system humane and helpful.

Although the Unemployed Bill passed second reading with a majority of 217, the Session dragged wearily on with little prospect of its getting through the Committee stage and becoming law. When August dawned and the House found itself within a week of adjournment, everyone but Crooks despaired of getting the measure through. The Prime Minister told the House there was no time for the Bill. Several of Crooks's Labour colleagues declared the Bill to be too meagre a thing to fight for.

"I admit its faults and shortcomings as readily as anyone," he argued with his Party; "but it contains the germ of a great principle—State recognition of the need and State aid in carrying out the organisation."

Almost alone he fought for the Bill in the last days of the Session. He urged the Government to save the unemployed from foolish and useless rioting by holding out to them the hope which the passing of the Bill would convey.

By a dramatic coincidence, on the very afternoon he was thus warning the Government the police [Pg 245] were charging a crowd of desperate unemployed in Manchester.

"The Prime Minister urges the plea that there is no time," Crooks went on to tell the House. "What would the business men of this House think, when they went down to their offices to-morrow, if they were told by the manager that grouse-shooting would begin on the Twelfth and that therefore business would have to be suspended? Does the Government prefer grouse-shooting to finding work for honest men? Was this Bill of theirs only introduced to kill time—to wait until the birds were big enough to be shot? I don't want to stop your holidays. Go and kill your grouse and your partridges. But are you going to put dead birds before living men?

"There was the day on which the Eton and Harrow match was played. What will the unemployed say when they hear that the Government could not find time to discuss this Bill because Ministers wished to see two schools play cricket? Do you think the working man gets a day off to see his sons play cricket in the public parks? Unlike many hon. members of this House, workmen do not live by dividends. They have nothing to sell but their labour. When out of work a little help often saves them from ruin and pauperism. They are only asking to be given an opportunity to fulfil the Divine curse by earning their living in the sweat of their brow."

His appeal went home. The following day the Government sprang a surprise on the House. The [Pg 246] Bill would be taken that week. It was passed within a few days. "H. W. M.," in his parliamentary sketch in the *Daily News* of August 5th, referring to what he called "the strange story of the passing of the Unemployed Bill," said:

> At the end of last week its chances seemed to have disappeared. To-day it has passed Committee, and Monday will see it through the Commons. The Member chiefly responsible for this issue is Mr. Crooks, who has shown undoubted subtleness as a Parliamentary tactician.

In his final speech on the Bill, Crooks argued that even the loafer would become a better man by being given, not the charity that demoralised, but a day's work for a day's pay. Such a man, by being put on a farm colony for a few months, would be turned into a good citizen. He stood for discipline in Labour as the Government stood for discipline in the Army and Navy. He wanted to preserve the manhood of the nation rather than to see it degraded, as it was by the present system of despising an unemployed man. The type of men who hung idle about all our large towns was the type that filled the workhouses and prisons. Take them in their early stages of unemployment, put them under proper discipline on the land, and he was prepared to prophesy they would become useful citizens. It was a loss to the nation that men and women should be going about without the common necessaries owing to being out of work.

So the Bill went through, and people of all classes agree with his old friend, Mr. A. F. Hills, a [Pg 247] large employer, who wrote to him a letter on the subject, ending with the words: "I believe that generations yet unborn will in the years to come rise up and call you blessed."

In the opinion of many people well able to gauge the distress and discontent of the country, the Act came just in time to prevent serious disorders in the large towns. For the winter that immediately followed found the unemployed in a worse plight than ever.

Promptly the Distress Committees formed under the Act got to work. The London Committees found themselves at first stranded for funds. The weak point in the Act was that which allowed

only the expense of organisation to be made a public charge. The Committees found themselves asking, What was the use of organising work for the unemployed when there were no means of paying wages? It looked as though public subscriptions were not to be forthcoming. Was the Act, so hardly won, to fail on its first trial?

Again Poplar fought the cause of the poor for the whole country. This time the workless men's wives took action. The women of Poplar met in the Town Hall, Mrs. Crooks in the chair, with the object of urging Parliament to vote money to the Distress Committees set up under the new Act.

Mrs. Crooks, as reported in the *Times*, said:

> They were endeavouring to enlist the help and sympathy of those in high places to give some little time to the consideration of the claims of the wives and children of men who were willing to work, but who were unable to find the wherewithal to feed those near and dear to them. The Queen had more than once shown her desire to help. Was it, then, too much to expect that their wealthy sisters would use their influence with their all-too-powerful husbands to appeal, with the women of Poplar, to the King and Government to call Parliament together with a view to passing estimates to enable work to be undertaken—work that would give them their daily bread? Theirs was a cry for national defence, and Parliament must see to it.

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The meeting decided to petition the King to instruct the Prime Minister to call Parliament together. In acknowledging a vote of thanks to his wife for taking the chair, Crooks said the mothers and sisters had remained too long indoors, suffering in silence. If the King could see that meeting it would make him realise what unemployment meant to the wives and mothers of his industrial army, and he would no doubt do something to ensure that they should not lack the sustenance needed to bring up strong daughters and strong sons as faithful and loyal citizens. They had got the machinery, and they had got certain powers, but they needed funds. They had got an organisation that could gather up all the information as to useful work that needed doing —work that would be profitable and inspiring to the men who did it, instead of being degrading, like the foolish and useless and expensive task-work which was all the Poor Law had to offer.

Mr. & Mrs. WILL CROOKS

Photo: G. Dendry.

About a month later took place the memorable women's march to Whitehall. The day, November 6th, was truly a tragic and historic one in the social life of London.

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Headed by Mrs. Crooks and the then Mayoress of Poplar (Mrs. Dalton), some six thousand poor women gathered on the Thames Embankment, near Charing Cross Bridge, and marched to the offices of the Local Government Board in order to back up their appeal to the Premier to aid their out-of-work husbands and brothers. The women came not only from Poplar, where the march had been organised by George Lansbury, but from Edmonton, Paddington, West Ham, Woolwich, and Southwark. Some carried infants in arms; others had children dragging at their skirts.

"Work for our men—Bread for our children." So ran the appeal on the banner that floated above the Southwark contingent, led by Mrs. Herbert Stead.

The Embankment was deep in mud, and, as the women trudged bravely through it—those carrying babies unable to save their skirts from dragging in the road—the scene was one that filled you with an indignant shame. Even those other women in motors and carriages, who had driven down to see the sight out of curiosity, sank back into their cushions aghast, sickened, ashamed at this spectacle of their sisters' plight.

In Whitehall the processionists told off a dozen of their number to form the deputation to Mr. Balfour. The women were accompanied into the Local Government Board offices by Crooks and Lansbury and two or three other men from the Central Workers' Unemployed Committee.

The object of the visit was explained by Lansbury, and then a working woman from Poplar read the women's memorial. The memorial spoke of the misery, degradation, and desperation of the women which had driven them to determine to bear their lot in silence no longer. They thought that Parliament should make it impossible for unscrupulous employers to grind the faces of the poor. The Government had gone to the aid of the tenantry of Ireland. The plight of the poor in London was worse. If war were threatened, ways would be found for raising money. The country was faced with a worse evil than war in the presence of starving citizens. In the name of their country, their homes, and their children, they appealed to the Prime Minister not to send them empty away. [Pg 250]

Several of the workless men's wives who, it had been arranged, should speak broke down; so Mrs. Crooks explained they had not come to utter words only; they had come as Englishwomen, driven to despair, in the hope that the Premier, as the chief Minister of the King, would no longer leave them in a worse condition than that of his dogs and horses.

Mr. Balfour was sympathetic, but had nothing to suggest. He saw no hope of Parliament voting money. The deputation came away sullen and disappointed. For the time it looked as though the women's march had been in vain. But, before a week passed, another woman spoke. The need was met by Queen Alexandra. On November 13th her Majesty issued her famous appeal: [Pg 251]

"I appeal to all charitably disposed people in the Empire, both men and women, to assist me in alleviating the suffering of the poor starving unemployed during this winter. For this purpose I head the list with £2,000."

Before the winter was over the public, in response to this appeal, subscribed £150,000—a sum that proved sufficient that winter to keep Distress Committees going in London and elsewhere during the time of greatest privation.

The needs of the next winter were provided for by the State. The new Liberal Government had not been in office many months before it voted £200,000 to the Distress Committees appointed under the Unemployed Act.

Poplar had done its work. The women had marched to victory.

CHAPTER XXIX [Pg 252]
HOME LIFE AND SOME ENGAGEMENTS

Crooks becomes a Grandfather—A Glimpse of his Home Life—Mr. G. R. Sims on "A Morning with Will Crooks"—Crooks's Daily Post-bag—Sample Letters—Speaking at Religious and Temperance Meetings—On Adult Sunday Schools—On the Licensing Bill—A Homily to Free Churchmen.

By this time Crooks had moved from Northumberland Street to Gough Street, a few minutes' walk away. The change was from a five-roomed house to a six-roomed house, "with exactly three and a half feet more space for a garden at the back," as he jocularly described it.

His two eldest daughters had both married, and his eldest son, who was doing well at the same trade his father learnt—that of cooper—had also settled down to married life in Poplar. This son had the pleasure one day of telephoning to his father at the County Council offices, just after the latter had passed his fiftieth birthday, "You became a grandfather this morning. Cheer up!"

Another daughter qualified at the Cheltenham Training College as a school teacher. The youngest daughter elected to be "mother's right hand at home." The youngest son was apprenticed in a Thames shipbuilding yard.

Of his children he would often remark, during the controversy over religious education in [Pg 253]

schools, that they seemed to disprove the theories of both contending parties. One of his daughters and a son, who were educated in Board Schools, became communicating members of the Church of England, while two daughters educated in Church of England schools afterwards became Nonconformists.

A glimpse of his home life was given in the "Celebrities at Home" series, published in the *World*. The writer described Gough Street as a row of tiny houses so much alike that the only difference between one and another was the number on the door.

> But if you did not know Mr. Crooks's number, you could guess his house by waiting at the corner of the street. Because, between half-past nine and half-past ten, the door-knocker of No. 81 will beat a tattoo twelve or twenty times to the hour, when all the other knockers are silent. For this is the hour when Mr. Crooks is at home and receives his visitors, while he takes his breakfast in a spasmodic and interrupted manner—bad, one feels sure, for his digestion. They are not social callers. They come because they want something—an order for free medicine or for an artificial limb, for advice as to a likely quarter to get work, for a hundred and one needs of poor people who have no resources of their own.
>
> They are pleasant rooms in which the Labour member finds the best happiness of his life. They are not large. They are not handsomely furnished, for a Labour member has no need of luxury; but to Mr. Crooks every little adornment in them has its own story to tell and its own pleasant memory. On one of the walls are two oil paintings of ships in distress—"good or bad," says Mr. Crooks, "I'm no judge," But they are valuable to him, because they were painted by a man down on his luck, as a thanksgiving for a good turn done to him by the only friend he had. [Pg 254]
>
> "Bless you," says Mr. Crooks, "they all bring me little things, and I can't refuse them. See that champagne glass on the piano? That was given me by a poor old lady I used to look after a bit. That wine glass on the other side came from another old friend. Someone will bring me a China shepherd, another a vase or candlestick, or a comic pig. It's pleasant, you know!"...
>
> Mr. Crooks is one of the pleasantest and most interesting men to visit. If you take him at the right time—half-past nine o'clock—it means an early journey from the West!—he will sit you down to a plate of porridge and give you more information about the life of the working-classes in the course of an hour than the most laborious reading of Blue-books will do in a lifetime.
>
> The visitor must be prepared for interruptions. In a corner of the breakfast-room is a member of the family who likes to have his say. It is a poll-parrot—"as cunning as a barge-load of monkeys," says his owner affectionately. He has a peculiar habit of cracking invisible filbert-nuts at the back of his throat, rather disconcerting to a stranger; and although he dotes on Mr. Crooks, it is a little game of his to snub the Labour member by depreciatory remarks and scornful whistles of derision. But he always has an affectionate "Goo'-bye, Will!" for his master when he puts on his hat in the morning. To Mrs. Crooks he is always courteous. "Goo'-morning, mother!" he says, when the lady comes down to breakfast, and thrusts his beak out for a kiss. Then he calls "Tilly! Tilly!" in a shrill voice, like an elderly landlady, and is not satisfied till Mrs. Crooks's pretty, black-eyed daughter has given him his morning greeting.
>
> "He has his little prejudices, like the rest of us," says Mr. Crooks. "He can't abide babies, and squawks at them fearfully."

Mr. George R. Sims gave a sketch of "A Morning with Will Crooks" in the *Daily Chronicle* of May 2nd, 1906. He suggested that if 81, Gough Street—Crooks's Castle, as he called it—had a brass plate on the door, the most appropriate device to be inscribed upon it would be, "Inquire within upon everything." [Pg 255]

> It was twenty minutes past ten when I arrived. At half-past ten we were due at the relieving office. But before we started, some three or four pathetic narratives had found their way into the little hall for Mr. Crooks to mark, learn, and inwardly digest.
>
> I appreciated the situation, and expressed sympathy.
>
> "It is depressing," said the people's M.P., "but, after all, somebody's got to listen and somebody's got to help."
>
> We went out into the street. In the hundred yards that we walked to our destination six sad riddles of life were submitted to Mr. Crooks for solution.
>
> The broad-shouldered, black-bearded, smiling politician of the people had a cheery word of advice for all applicants, and scarcely had these pavement consultations ended before we were seated in the relieving office listening to tales of woe told by a procession of poor petitioners with whom the world had gone woefully wrong.
>
> The committee of relief were generous and sympathetic. Poplar has a reputation for generosity in this matter. It struck me that at times the committee might have impressed a little more earnestly upon the recipients of out-relief the other side of the

situation; but I am bound to admit that undeserving cases—cases which had a history of drink and thriftlessness—were dismissed with no illusions....

We went to the workhouse at the dinner hour. A comfortable place certainly, and the dinner probably better than a good many of the inmates had been accustomed to when they were earning their own living....

A pleasant hour with Mr. and Mrs. Crooks and their daughters at the castle, a stroll in the little garden which is Mrs. Crooks's delight, a short interview with Tommy the Tortoise, and it is time for the Member for Woolwich to start for Westminster and take his place in the National Assembly. [Pg 256]

He takes up a leather case containing some sixty or seventy letters to be answered, and we go out into the street, which is happily bathed in sunshine. We get on the top of an omnibus, and I listen to the merry stories merrily told until we arrive at Aldgate Station and bid each other good-bye.

I have spent a most interesting and instructive morning with a typical Englishman, a man who has laboured with skill and used his brains as well as his hands to good purpose—a man who has fought his way up from boyhood, a man whose heart is as big as his shoulders are broad.

Beyond his sterling common sense and his sympathy with suffering, Will Crooks has one golden quality in a tribune of the people. He has a sense of humour. It does your eyes good to see him smile. And he has a laugh that makes you feel the sunshine even when the north wind blows.

Sometimes the Labour man has nearly a hundred letters a day to deal with. First attention is always given to those from people seeking counsel or help in Poplar and Woolwich.

An old man of ninety-four asks him to visit him for old times' sake. A widow has lost her property—will Mr. Crooks see her righted? A sick woman wants to know how she can get into a convalescent home. An anxious father asks him to speak to a wayward son, because "the lad sets such store by what you say, Mr. Crooks." Again, it is a distracted mother who writes, maybe about a son or a daughter who has run away or fallen into trouble. [Pg 257]

Amusing letters come sometimes, varying the note of sorrow sounded in so many of the others. This, for instance, from a sympathetic Frenchman, who evidently imagines that a place called Poplar must be studded with trees of that name and surrounded by open fields. "I see," wrote this sympathiser from across the Channel, "that you are doing much for the unemployed, and I have pleasure in sending you enclosed cheque for them. I would suggest, in view of the importance of the poor children having pure milk, that the money be spent in putting unemployed men to work in cleaning out the ponds in the fields and lanes of Poplar where the cattle drink."

While Crooks is essentially a home-loving man, counting it one of his chief joys to have an evening free or a week-end to call his own, he regards it as a duty to speak at religious and temperance meetings, and on behalf of other movements not necessarily allied with the Labour Party.

One day finds him with the Bishop of London at the Mansion House meeting of the United Temperance Council. Another day he is speaking with the President of the Baptist Union, the Rev. John Wilson, one of his best supporters in Woolwich, at the Union's annual gathering. Another day he is congratulating Canon Hensley Henson, at the annual meeting of the London Wesleyan Mission, on having "six of his parishioners on the platform"—a reference to the presence of half a dozen members of Parliament, Canon Henson being rector of the House of Commons. [Pg 258]

After addressing the Baptist Union on a second occasion, a letter came to him from the secretary, the Rev. J. H. Shakespeare:—

On behalf of the Council of the Baptist Union and on my own behalf I beg to thank you most warmly for the magnificent services you rendered to us last Tuesday night. It was delightful to hear you. I personally was very curious to see you managing a dense crowd of men. It does not seem to me that there is any reason why you should ever stop drawing from the rich and endless resources of your eloquence and wit and your wise sayings.

I feel very deeply indebted to you for having kept your engagement under such trying circumstances, and I hope you were not too fatigued afterwards.

A different letter was one from his old friend the Hon. and Rev. J. G. Adderley, announcing his call to Birmingham:—

Alas! I leave dear old London on November 2nd. Thank you for all you have been to me during my time here. I have known you now fifteen years.

The many occasions on which he addressed working men at adult Sunday schools in different parts of the country forced him to this conclusion, to which he gave public expression:—

The adult school movement has, I do sincerely believe, done more to make men

> understand that Brotherhood is not merely a word, but a real living thing, than any other movement of recent days. Men under the influence of adult schools now begin to see that their whole life on earth does not consist merely in eating, drinking, and working and going to a place of worship, but in taking a living part in God's work personally—in a word, in striving for some of Christ's ideals on earth as in Heaven. [Pg 259]

He assisted at conducting something like an adult school in Poplar. Besides the Sunday morning meetings at the Dock Gates, the Labour League, in conjunction with the Rector of Poplar, carry on a winter series of addresses at the Town Hall on Sunday afternoons, to which Crooks and his friend, Mr. Fred Butler, give a good deal of their time. Of these Town Hall meetings he wrote in the article he contributed to the volume of essays on "Christianity and the Working Classes":—

> The meetings are always crowded with working-men and their wives and working girls and lads. The rector or myself takes the chair—often we are both on the platform together. The gatherings are not religious in the orthodox sense, nor is any attempt made to teach religion, but I venture to say they have as much influence for good on the work-people of Poplar as many of the churches. We nearly always begin with music by singers or players who give their services, and then we have a "talk," generally by a public man, on social questions, on education, on books, and authors, and citizenship. Some of our speakers take Biblical subjects.
>
> Thus every week we get together a good company of work-people who ordinarily attend no place of worship on Sunday; and if nothing more, we keep them out of the public-house, we make them think for themselves, we awaken some sense of citizenship. The presence of the rector has convinced many, who were formerly hostile to all parsons, Anglican and Nonconformist, that the Churches and Labour can work in harmony. Without pretending to be this, that, or the other, our gatherings have made for the love of one's neighbour, and therefore for the cause of Christ.

Nearly every P.S.A. and adult school and men's Sunday meeting in London wanted him. He would be at the Whitefield Tabernacle one Sunday, at the Leysian Mission another, at Dr. Clifford's church another. [Pg 260]

The demands made upon him by temperance bodies redoubled after the introduction of the Licensing Bill of 1904, of which he was an uncompromising opponent. In nearly all his temperance addresses, full as they were of his humorous fancies, he denounced the practice, followed by so many temperance reformers, of making cheap jests at the men or women whom drink has degraded.

"We who can overcome temptation should be the last to make light of those who have failed to overcome temptation. Rather should we use our greater power to assist them."

What he said from public platforms he did not hesitate to repeat on the floor of the House of Commons. Speaking after Mr. Balfour, in one of the debates on the Licensing Bill, he said:—

"I wish to take the opportunity, while the Prime Minister is in the House, to say a few words on the question of temptation, because the impression left on my mind by the remarks of the right hon. gentleman is that every man who indulges in drink is capable of taking care of himself and of overcoming the drink habit by his own efforts. I hold that there are thousands of our fellow-men and women who cannot resist temptation when the opportunity to drink is put in their way. No doubt if everyone had the moral fibre of the Prime Minister there would be little need for a [Pg 261] measure of temperance reform. Those hon. members who attend prayers at the opening of the proceedings of this House listen to the words, 'Lead us not into temptation.' I ask the Prime Minister whether he has ever thought that the thousands of people in our asylums through drink are there because they are capable of looking after themselves? No; it is because temptation has been too much for them. Does not that involve an obligation on the State to take temptation out of their way?"

The National Free Church Council invited him to address their annual gathering in 1906. The Council met in Birmingham in March, and the President (the Rev. J. Scott Lidgett), in introducing Crooks, said the invitation to him had not been given lightly. It was a deliberate recognition of the claim that Labour had upon the thought, energy, and prayer of the Free Churches. Then, turning to Crooks, he clasped his hand. "Thus," said the President, "Labour and the Free Churches are joined in their endeavour to solve some of the great human problems."

"The world," said Crooks in his opening remarks, "could be divided into two classes—some willing to work and the rest willing to let them." He went on to ask the representatives of the churches to put it out of their heads that the workman who did not go to a place of worship was a man utterly without religion. Such a man often had greater faith and more works to his credit than many regular worshippers.

Shortly afterwards the Free Church Council asked him to the banquet given at the Hotel Cecil in celebration of the return of nearly two hundred Free Churchmen to the House of Commons. [Pg 262]

"You Free Churchmen," he said in his after-dinner speech, "have to come out of yourselves a great deal more in the future than you have in by-gone days. You cannot live for Sunday alone. You have to live for all the seven days of the week, and we expect you to come out and take a share of the work of social reorganisation. You are all of you, or the majority of you, a little bit

ashamed of South Africa, and some of you wish you had got your tongues loose two or three years ago instead of now. You can imagine how I feel about this. A few of us at that time had to take our lives in our hands because we dared to say that that was a wicked war. Remember, the Empire does not consist in yelling about the Union Jack; the Empire begins in the workman's kitchen....

"I have been told plenty of times that our men and women are not God-fearing. Aren't they? I know the stories they tell you parsons sometimes; but down at the bottom of their hearts is a deep religious feeling which some of us would be better for having. Why can I always get the truth from the poor, who so often deceive you parsons? Why, because they feel I am a brother, and they have a doubt about you. You have got to wear that doubt off. You have got to make the humblest of our brothers and sisters understand that you do really care for them, that you intend to use the Parliamentary machine to abolish sweating and slumdom. We have got to promote [Pg 263] industry in such a way that every honest worker may find useful work to do. We have to deal with the shirker whether he wears a top hat or hobnail boots."

CHAPTER XXX [Pg 264]
COLONISING ENGLAND

Signs of Progress—a Crown Farm Cut Up into Small Holdings—The Colony Experiment at Laindon—How it was Killed by the Local Government Board—The Hollesley Bay Farm—A Minister for Labour Wanted.

After nearly twenty years of hard public service, Crooks saw some of the things for which he had striven so strenuously adopted as part of the policy of two successive Governments.

Woolwich re-elected him at the General Election with over nine thousand votes, some three or four hundred more than it gave him at the famous by-election three years before. He saw the new Government back up the Unemployed Act. He saw the Poor Law Commission at work. He saw the appointment of another Commission to consider the question of coast erosion and the reclamation of foreshores, which makes him believe there is still a chance for the scheme he laid before the Board of Trade in 1893.

Meanwhile, he believes he has done something practical in Parliament for the unemployed in another direction. He discovered that of the 70,000 acres of agricultural Crown lands, about 5,000 had been lying idle for many years. Thereupon he promptly reminded Sir Henry Campbell- [Pg 265] Bannerman's Government, in the early days of its first Session, that at the General Election they had talked about the need for colonising England. Here, he told the House, was a chance to give effect to the promise. Cut up the idle land into small holdings, and it would let at once. Make better use of the other land by dividing it into smaller farms. Further, why not try a scheme of afforestation on some portion of these Crown lands, which, after all, were the lands of the people?

He exacted a promise from the Government that the question of giving the Board of Agriculture some control of Crown lands, instead of leaving them in the hands of the Department of Woods and Forests, would be considered.

Something was done sooner than he expected. The President of the Local Government Board (Mr. John Burns) informed the House that a scheme of afforestation would be started on Crown lands the succeeding year. Moreover, Lord Carrington, whose encouragement of small holdings on his own estates Crooks had commended in the Commons, was added to the Commission of Woods and Forests in his capacity as President of the Board of Agriculture. A start was immediately made by cutting up into small parcels a Crown farm of 916 acres at Burwell in Cambridgeshire.

This quiet little reform Crooks hails as affording further means of solving the problem of unemployment.

"Whatever may be said to the contrary," is his way of putting it, "I maintain that even the town [Pg 266] wastrel takes more kindly to the land than to anything else. Of course, I know that before he can be made of any use on the land he must be trained; but then it is well known that I favour farm colonies for training him."

Since he entered Parliament he had seen farm colonies for the unemployed become realities. His own Board of Guardians was the pioneer of the modern farm colony in this country. For nearly a dozen years the Guardians pleaded with the Local Government Board to be allowed to take a farm. Consent was at last obtained in 1903, when the Guardians had an offer of 100 acres at Laindon, in Essex, rent free for three years. The offer was made by Mr. Joseph Fels, a London manufacturer, who had been favourably impressed by a system he had seen in Philadelphia, whereby unemployed men were put to cultivate vacant land.

At first the Guardians' experiment was confined to able-bodied men from the workhouse. Its scope was widened with the coming of winter. The Poplar Unemployed Committee, which had the Mayor at its head and Crooks and Lansbury among its members, agreed on the suggestion of these latter to send a number of out-of-work men to this farm, meeting the expenses by a public appeal.

The need for giving out-of-work men proper training on the land was being urged at the same time by Mr. John Burns. That winter, as chairman of the Unemployed Conference called by the London County Council, Mr. Burns and Canon Escreet, the vice-chairman, signed a report urging [Pg 267] that every opportunity should be taken to provide such training on the land as would fit the workers for efficient labour. The report went on:—

> Efforts in this direction are already made in the case of emigrants to the Colonies, but it does not seem altogether reasonable that special efforts should be made which would have the effect of providing the colonies with specially trained labour if no efforts in this direction are made on behalf of the Home Country. It is not suggested that training for colonial life should not be provided, but merely that the needs of the United Kingdom should be equally borne in mind.

"I've seen wastrels," says Crooks, "who were going from bad to worse in our back streets in Poplar regain health and strength when sent to our farm at Laindon, and as they felt their muscles strengthening turn to work like men. I have seen many a decent unemployed man tided over hard times by being sent to work on our farm. The result of our first winter's experiment was that twenty-five of the men emigrated to Canada, the better for the training we had given them on the land. A dozen obtained work on their own account. And then, as the winter passed and trade got better, we began to discharge the men gradually. Over one hundred of the discharged men have never asked for relief from the Guardians since. If we had taken them into the workhouse at the time of their destitution, as the Poor Law prescribes, the greater part of them would have become permanent charges on the rates for the rest of their lives."

This promising experiment was killed by the Local Government Board. The Local Government [Pg 268] Board refused to allow the farm to be continued except as a branch workhouse. Mr. Fels, at the end of the three years' trial, wrote to the Guardians:—

> I desire to emphasise that my offer of the farm in the first instance was not for the purpose of establishing a branch workhouse, and in that way perpetuating stone yards, oakum picking, and corn grinding, and other useless tasks, which seems to be all the Local Government Board want to do.
>
> On the contrary, I hoped that your Board would be allowed to try to re-establish men who were down on their luck. I never for one moment dreamed that your Board would be forced by the Local Government Board to keep 150 men on one hundred acres of land, it being obvious to me then, as now, that neither men nor staff could have a chance in such conditions. Although the Local Government Board has stifled this experiment, I am convinced that some such Poor Law reform is bound to come.

The Poplar experiment certainly satisfied Mr. Long when he was at the Local Government Board. He expressly stated, when suggesting the formation of his Central Unemployed Committee, that farm colonies represented one means by which the Committee could assist men out of work.

One of the first things the Committee did was to take the Hollesley Bay Farm, where both Crooks and Lansbury as active members of the Committee helped to develop the work. Mr. Fels again assisted, this time building a number of cottages with a view to drafting off some of the colonists into a position of independence, joined by their wives and families from London. The hope is [Pg 269] entertained that some proportion of them may become small holders. Hollesley Bay Farm, which had been an agricultural training college for the sons of rich men going to the colonies, thus became a centre for training poor men to colonise their own country.

All these practical schemes for helping the unemployed and saving the cities from recurring periods of distress, which Crooks had done so much to set going, lend colour to his claim that the time has come for the addition to all future Cabinets of a new member to be styled the Minister for Labour. For nearly twenty years we have seen this labouring man, content with his three or four pounds a week, in a working-man's house in a working-man's neighbourhood, devising and carrying out social measures for the well-being of the nation that ought rightly to have come from the Government.

"The first thing a Labour Minister would do," he says, "would be to take over the Labour Department and other more or less allied departments of the Board of Trade. The present Labour returns of the Board of Trade are no good to anybody. I would have the Labour Minister obtain from all the local authorities a statement of what they regard as useful public works for their own districts. As soon as a spell of bad trade set in in any particular district our Minister of Industry would turn up the suggestions that had reached him from the affected quarter and make a national grant towards starting the local works.

"Then again I should leave to his Department rather than to the Local Government Board the [Pg 270] duty of controlling farm colonies. I want to see the Government responsible for three separate kinds of labour colonies. First I want a farm colony for the habitual able-bodied pauper. He needs to have his muscles hardened and to be trained to work. The tasks set such a man in the workhouse are wasteful, and do him no good. You might have a combination of Poor Law Unions interested in such a colony. The second class of farm colony would be for habitual tramps. These men need to be kept entirely separate from able-bodied paupers. The third class would be voluntary colonies, to which unemployed men could be sent and trained in market gardening and farming.

"In fact, the practical work a Minister of Labour could do is endless. He could settle differences between masters and men before a strike was thought of. To him could be referred disputes as to machinery, questions as to safeguards, matters affecting hours, meal-times, overtime, and women's work. He would be the most useful Minister in the Cabinet."

CHAPTER XXXI
THE REVIVAL OF BUMBLEDOM

[Pg 271]

Crooks's Poor Law Policy Attacked—How a Local Government Board Inquiry was Conducted—Crooks's Mistake in Remaining Chairman of the Board of Guardians—The Inspector's Report—Why the Poor Die rather than go to Poplar Workhouse.

It is easy to understand that the humane spirit Crooks had infused into Poor Law administration, and the fact of his having made the State recognise a duty to the unemployed, was not acceptable to the old order of Poor Law administrators, nor to some of the officials of the Local Government Board.

When Crooks entered upon Poor Law work he found it bound hand and foot by red tape. The men elected by the people did not rule at all. They were little more than the servants of paid officials, whether in the person of Bumble in the workhouse or of Bumble at the Local Government Board.

We have seen how he fought against Bumble administration, and how successive Presidents of the Local Government Board lent him their support. Mr. Ritchie, at the request of Poplar, reduced the qualification for Guardians. Sir Henry Fowler abolished it, and, again at Poplar's request, deprived workhouse masters of the power to refuse admission to Guardians. Mr. Henry Chaplin ordered "workhouse comforts" and "adequate out-relief." Mr. Walter Long improved the [Pg 272] dietary scale and formed the Central Unemployed Committee. Mr. Gerald Balfour passed the Unemployed Act.

All these reforms were more or less unwelcome to Bumbledom. One can understand how impatiently those who stood for the old harsh order of things waited for an opportunity to break into revolt. Their opportunity came in June, 1906, at the Local Government Board Inquiry into Poplar's Poor Law administration.

Crooks, who was still Chairman, courted the fullest and most open investigation. Directly he heard that the Poplar Municipal Alliance was making charges against the Guardians to the Local Government Board, he appealed for a public Inquiry.

On the opening day of the public Inquiry at Poplar Crooks and his colleague George Lansbury felt it to be their duty to protest against its being conducted by an Inspector who, they alleged, had his verdict in his pocket. They wished to make no reflection upon the Inspector's personal integrity, but they declared then and afterwards that it appeared to them to be "quite unjust to appoint so extreme an opponent of their policy to conduct the inquiry."

For fifteen out of the twenty days that the inquiry lasted the Inspector allowed the Municipal Alliance practically to direct the proceedings. They did their best to discredit Crooks's Poor Law policy on account of the malpractices of some of his colleagues, of which, up to then, owing to the [Pg 273] pressure of his other public duties, he had been ignorant.

The Inspector, whose knowledge might have taught him how far from true many of the innuendoes were, made no attempt to stop them. He appeared to think it quite right to allow statements to go forth to the public that paupers were being fed on all kinds of delicacies, and that serviettes, pocket handkerchiefs, and outfits for girls going to service were for the use of the ordinary inmates of the workhouse.

The public did not know at the time that the "Linen Collars for Workhouse Inmates," blazoned forth in the Press as an example of Poplar's extravagance, were simply what were supplied to the boys in the school, that they too, like the girls, might go out into the world no longer branded, but self-respecting.

All through the Inquiry the public was given to understand that Poplar was an example of what happens under Labour administration. Since the two most prominent Guardians, Crooks and Lansbury, were known everywhere as Labour leaders, the whole Board was wrongly supposed to consist of their followers. In reality, out of a Board of twenty-four members only ten were Labour representatives, and not half of these Socialists. The majority of the Guardians were Conservatives and Liberals.

The policy of Crooks and Lansbury did to a large extent dominate the Board, due no doubt to their ability and personal magnetism. But between the *policy* of these two men and the [Pg 274] *administration* of certain of their colleagues lay a gulf that neither the Inspector nor the Press seemed to see at the time. These two were held responsible for certain faults of administration committed by individual members of the Board belonging to the Liberal and Conservative parties. They were actually held up to reproach and ridicule for faults and follies committed by colleagues who had bitterly opposed their policy at every step.

The Inquiry taught Crooks his mistake in consenting to remain Chairman of the Board after his election to Parliament. We have seen that his consent to remain was given reluctantly, and on the understanding that he should devote less time to the work. He little thought that some of those who pressed him to stay would take advantage of his relaxed attention to bring discredit on the Board's administration. He therefore seized an early opportunity in the succeeding year of resigning the office, informing the Board by word of mouth, and the people of Poplar by circular letter, that in doing so, owing to the press of other public duties, he did not propose to abandon in the smallest way any part of that policy of Poor Law reform to which the best years of his public life had been devoted. He also publicly declared in Poplar repeatedly that he would do his best to expose and turn out of public life any person guilty of corruption, and even while the Inquiry was going on he appealed to the Inspector more than once to order a prosecution of [Pg 275] suspected Guardians and contractors.

After the dust and din caused by the Municipal Alliance had died down, that body found itself largely discredited in Poplar. One of its members wrote to the Press:—

> Over this Inquiry we have already made many enemies.... It would be difficult to define what the Alliance set out to do, but the methods employed in doing it were, to say the least, unworthy....
>
> I did not think, when we embarked on this expensive trip, that we were going to attempt to cover with ridicule men who, it must be admitted, have devoted a considerable portion of their time to the affairs of the Union, and are now proved to have been thoroughly honest in their policy.

The Alliance was to receive a heavier blow from the Poplar people. To them an insult to Crooks was an insult to Poplar. The Borough Council Elections followed soon after the Inquiry, the Alliance throwing all its weight into the local campaign. In nearly all the other London boroughs the Progressives and Labour men were badly beaten. In Poplar the Labour Party went back larger in numbers and backed by a stronger vote of the electors than they had ever had before. Lansbury defeated the Chairman of the Alliance.

"That," said Crooks at the time, in an interview in one of the daily papers, "is the answer of the people of Poplar to the slanders and misrepresentations levelled against me. The people of Poplar know the truth about my policy, whatever may have been the shortcomings of some of my [Pg 276] colleagues; the people of London do not know—they only have the Yellow Press version."

Again, when a few weeks later the triennial election for the London County Council took place, the people of Poplar stood by their Labour member. Progressive and Labour seats fell all over London in March, 1907, but Crooks was re-elected for Poplar at the top of the poll with 3,504 votes, though the Alliance strained every nerve to oust him.

Then it was that his outside accusers began to suspect they had been misled. Here was a prophet in his own country indeed—accused and slandered outside, but trusted and honoured by his neighbours. And when a month later the election of Guardians took place, and Poplar, put to a third test, declared more emphatically than ever for the Crooks policy by defeating about two-thirds of the Alliance candidates and electing an increased number of Labour men, the eyes of the public were opened.

But the revival of Bumbledom was not yet at an end. The Local Government Board Inspector's report came out three and a half months after the inquiry closed. The unusual course was followed of publishing it before the evidence. When the evidence did appear it disproved many of the Inspector's conclusions.

The Inspector was bound to say there was no reflection upon the "personal integrity of Mr. Crooks and Mr. Lansbury."

While deprecating the standard of comfort in the workhouse, the Inspector made no reference to [Pg 277] the doctor's statement that he did not think the inmates were too well fed or clad. Rather, he tried to undermine Crooks's policy by remarks of this kind:—

> Mr. Crooks in his evidence admitted that the dietary in the workhouse was better than could be obtained by the independent labourer in the borough with a wife and two children to keep who received anything under 30s. a week.

The evidence gives a different version. What Crooks said (page 389) was:—

"A man with 30s. a week with a wife and two children can only just keep himself in decency. When he gets below that he gets below the Local Government Board diet.... The men in the workhouse get a bare subsistence, and no man outside ought to be paid wages less than enable him to get that kind of living. What you have to prove is that we are giving the people in the workhouse such luxury as a man in ordinary work at from thirty to forty shillings a week could not get at home. But what he" [the legal representative of the Municipal Alliance] "does not say is that we are dealing with the very aged in the workhouse—the able-bodied, as you know, are exceedingly limited in number—but he does not appreciate for a moment that after all a man's liberty is worth something. Liberty has not fallen in value. It is a priceless something. A man will die for it. And our people will die—a good many of them—rather than go into the workhouse."

It happened that the people of Poplar were dying for it about that very time. While the Local [Pg 278]

Government Board was harassing Crooks for his efforts to save the poor from starvation, another Department of the State was in correspondence with the Guardians over two cases of people who had died from starvation in Poplar. This was the Home Office.

It is a theory of the British Constitution that no person in the kingdom should die of starvation. Yet in London alone forty-eight people died of starvation in the winter of 1905-6. Whitechapel, which gives no out-relief, and is held up as a model by the Inspector who conducted the Poplar inquiry, had ten deaths from starvation within its borders during the year. Poplar, where the Guardians are said to be too generous in their treatment of the poor, was unable, with all its zeal, to prevent two people dying from want of food.

One of the victims was a child whose father refused to go into Poplar workhouse—this so-called "palace of luxury"—because he thought he might still be able to earn a trifle outside. Out-relief in the way of food was given to the value of 3s. 6d. a week, but that not being enough for a family of five, the youngest defied the British Constitution by quietly slipping into the grave—"Died of asthenia and bronchitis," was the coroner's verdict, "due to mother's want of food, accelerated by want of proper clothing."

Shortly afterwards a married labourer in Old Ford, faced with starvation, refused to apply to the Poplar Guardians because it had become common talk among the poor of the district that the [Pg 279] Local Government Board would no longer allow the Guardians to assist people outside the workhouse. And one morning this unemployed man had to run to the nearest doctor's because one of his children was "took queer." What followed was told by the doctor in evidence a few days later at the Poplar Coroner's Court. He related how he was knocked up in the early morning, and how, when he went to the house, he found no sign of food, no fire, and, lying on some scanty bedding, a girl-child, who had been dead about an hour. Death, he added, was due to exhaustion from want of sufficient food. He was so shocked with the poverty of the home that he gave the parents five shillings out of his own pocket, and sent them something to eat.

CHAPTER XXXII [Pg 280]
APPEAL TO THE PEOPLE

> Crooks Appeals to the Public—"This Insult to the Poor"—Resentment all over the Country—A Voice from the Hungry 'Forties—Cheering Letters—A Government Department's Blunder—Poplar's Appeal to Crooks.

The day after the report of the Local Government Board Inspector was published, Crooks sent his decision upon it to the Press. He wrote from the House of Commons, where, as he stated in his letter, "the unfairness and injustice of the report in its bearings on my Poor Law policy are so far recognised that to-day I have been told by members of all parties that the report is not only wicked but brutal." He further stated in his letter to the Press:—

"Will you permit me to make it public through your columns that I accept the challenge thrown down in the Local Government Board report? Against all its strictures I intend to maintain my stand on that policy of humanising the Poor Law, to which I have given the greater part of my life. And in doing so I propose to appeal from the Local Government Board to the public.

"If the public upholds this insult to the poor I shall be painfully surprised. After twenty days of a searching inquiry, and after twice twenty pages of a strained attack on Mr. Lansbury and myself, [Pg 281] there is nothing to show that we have done anything against the actual orders and regulations of the very Board that now rises in mock-heroic wrath to slay us. Our only crime is that we have humanised a system framed in 1834, when the voteless working classes were dragooned by a middle-class majority....

"My present duty is clear. The public may remember that at Mr. Chaplin's request I went as a nominee of the Local Government Board on the Metropolitan Asylums Board. It may remember that I was co-opted on the Central Unemployed Body on the suggestion of Mr. Walter Long. Now that the Local Government Board, under the new Government, has seen fit to attack me and my Labour colleagues, and to flout the poor as I venture to say they have never been flouted by that Department before, I can no longer hold those two positions. I propose to resign. Nor until its attitude towards the poor and the unemployed changes will I ever consent to represent the Local Government Board on any public body again. I prefer to represent the people....

"The faults of administration at Poplar, so grossly magnified in this report, are common to all such bodies, and Poplar will do its best to avoid them. But the policy will not change. By that we stand or fall."

The reason for that policy was briefly explained in a special report issued by the Poplar Guardians and signed by Crooks as Chairman. It formed part of the Board's reply to the [Pg 282] Inspector's report. Thus:—

> This policy was never put in force with the idea that it would lead to a reduction in rates or in the number applying for relief. No one imagines that decent treatment of the poor will choke off applicants in the manner that harsh treatment will, but we claim that under the Act of Elizabeth, the poor (not merely the destitute, but the poor) are

entitled to come to society in time of need.

The State provides all kinds of services for the community, such as roads, sewers, light, police, army, navy, education, etc., and we all enjoy those privileges. The State pensions its well-paid Cabinet Ministers and officials; and we claim that the poor, whose charter is the 43rd of Elizabeth, instead of being penalised when needing help, should receive such help in an ungrudging measure and in a manner which would most effectively preserve their self-respect.

Finally, we would again repeat that our pauperism is due to our poverty, that our policy is based on the claims recognised by statute as the due right of the poor. We neither palliate nor excuse any lapses either on the part of members or officers of the Board, but we claim that as a Board we have carried out our duties as efficiently and as economically as we were able, that we have never given indiscriminate relief either in or out of the workhouse, and in the main have usefully tried to do our duty both to the poor, who have our first claim, and to the ratepayers.

We have never ceased to urge for the past ten years that the poor are a metropolitan charge, that unemployment is a national question, that the Poor Law should be reformed. We are glad to know that our work, despite this present attack, has been successful, and that the poor of Poplar are better cared for, and not only the poor of Poplar, but the poor of the United Kingdom generally, as a result of our effort.

His appeal to the public won an inspiring response. Bumbledom was against him, but the people were with him. While a section of the Press was attacking him, it was so far ignorant of what the people of England were thinking as to know nothing at all of the tremendous meetings he was addressing all over the country. [Pg 283]

His meetings in Poplar and Woolwich, where he was supported with rousing enthusiasm, were the largest he had ever had in those boroughs. At Chesterfield he addressed an open-air meeting of nearly twenty thousand Midland miners, when his reference to his Poor Law policy was cheered to the echo. The Cleveland miners were equally enthusiastic when he went up to their annual gathering. It was the same at public meetings in Newcastle, Burton, Huddersfield, Rossendale, Stockport, Batley, Sunderland, Penarth—the man who had stood out against one of Bumbledom's fiercest onslaughts had the good-will and confidence of the working people of England. At his indoor meetings there were rarely fewer than two thousand people present. Often he had audiences of four and five thousand.

It looked as though a recurrence of his old illness would prevent him from keeping an appointment to speak on his Poor Law policy at Bradford. Such was the strength of the appeal sent to him, however, that he determined to risk it. He had to be helped by his wife on the journey, and when at the meeting it was found he was unable to stand there was a unanimous call that he be allowed to keep his chair while speaking. Seated in the middle of the platform, he held an audience of two or three thousand people for upwards of an hour. The response he wrung from the crowded hall moved him deeply. Bumbledom never had a worse hour. [Pg 284]

Of course his first public meeting after the publication of the Local Government Board's report took place at the Dock Gates in Poplar.

"We never had a better meeting," he wrote to me the next day. "The audience backed me to a man and woman—and, by the way, we never had so many women present before. It did me good."

At some of his provincial meetings there were people who well-nigh worshipped him. Old men in particular who had known the Hungry 'Forties would come up to him after the meeting and say:—

"Let me shake you by the hand, Mr. Crooks. We read about it in the papers, but the papers don't understand. We've been through it, and know. Don't be down-hearted, Mr. Crooks. God bless you!"

At a small country town a bed had been reserved for him at the little hotel outside the railway station. He arrived about midnight, and found the place in darkness. He knocked loudly for some time. At last a man's voice was heard from the railway line.

"Is that Mr. Crooks? Lord love yer, we knew you'd be late, and gone again early in the morning, and so that I shouldn't miss seeing you I told the hotel-keeper to go to bed and let me have the keys, so that you couldn't get in without me shaking you by the hand." [Pg 285]

His first public meeting in Woolwich after the Local Government Board Inquiry drew an audience of over five thousand people to the Drill Hall. His colleague Lansbury shared in the inspiring reception and addressed the meeting.

Crooks told the audience it was no wonder that Lansbury and he got angry at times over our iniquitous Poor Law system. Such was the injustice of the rating system in London that Poplar—which was spending out of the rates per head of population less than half what West-End districts like Kensington and Marylebone were spending—appeared to outsiders to be extravagant. If those West-End Boroughs had Poplar's poor to look after, their rates, instead of being about 7s., would be about 15s. in the pound. The poor of Poplar were London's poor; yet the cost of looking after them was borne mainly by the people of Poplar. London was the only city in the world where those who grew rich on the labour of the poor were able to segregate themselves in favoured quarters, and escape their obligation to help the aged poor unable to work longer.

He went on to show the iniquities of our Poor Law system from a national standpoint. About £28,000,000 a year was raised in the name of the Poor Law. Of this only £14,000,000 had any connection with the Poor Law at all. And how were the fourteen millions spent? The poor got seven and a half millions, while the remaining six and a half millions were spent in administrative [Pg 286] charges. That meant that every 5s. given to the poor out of the rates cost the ratepayers another 4s. 9d. to give it. No wonder that Bumbledom became nervous when Guardians urged that the poor rather than officials should receive more of this money raised for the poor. The Local Government Board Inspector, when deploring that Poplar's expenditure on the poor had gone up during the last ten years, might have added that during the same period the cost of collecting rates in the City had gone up from £11,000 to £23,000. It seemed to be all right when officials got the money, but all wrong when the poor got it.

"I believe in being a true Guardian of the poor, and not merely a Guardian of the Poor Rate. We in Poplar have preferred to save the lives of the poor rather than the rates. Even then we have administered with remarkable economy; for Poplar's rates would not be high if London as a whole paid its proper share towards maintaining London's poor. We in Poplar, however, have not allowed an unjust rating system to prevent us from doing our duty to broken-down old people, to the starving and to the unemployed. We agree with Carlyle that 'to believe practically, that the poor and luckless are here only as a nuisance to be abraded and abated, and in some permissible manner made away with, and swept out of sight, is not an amiable faith. To say to the poor: Ye shall eat the bread of affliction and drink the water of affliction and be very miserable while here, requires not so much a stretch of heroic faculty in any sense as due toughness of bowels.'" [Pg 287]

From Stockport, where he had been addressing one of a series of public meetings in the Midlands, he wrote:—

"How good the people are! Whenever I mention Poplar, it is truly inspiring to hear the magnificent response. Last night the moment the word passed my lips an audience of two thousand cheered like one man. It sometimes overwhelms me almost. Who am I to deserve it?...

"I am sometimes told that I affect to despise my critics. You know better, of course. But, really, after such experiences as these, I can't help laughing at them when I think of their ponderous official pronouncements against my policy and of the equally ponderous lectures read to me by certain sections of the Press and the Church. When will the Press and the Church, and 'all who are put in authority over us,' come to learn what the mind of the people really is, and begin to interpret it rightly? I know the heart of the people to be true. That is why I laugh and go on my way confident that the little piece of well-doing I have aimed at on behalf of the poor and the unemployed will in the end put to 'silence the ignorance of foolish men.'"

If his meetings were inspiring, the same can be said of his correspondence. Public men, in various parts of the country, including Guardians, wrote to congratulate him on the brave stand he had made against the forces of Bumbledom. From other quarters he had many encouraging [Pg 288] letters.

Canon Scott Holland wrote: "You know how your friends feel for you in this cruel trouble. We need not tell you how we trust you, and believe in you, and stand by you."

"You have made many lives happier and better by your work on behalf of the poor," wrote a high official from a central Poor Law establishment. "I thought it might be a comfort to you to know we feel indignant that you have been rudely assailed."

It was encouraging also to receive a note from a prominent Woolwich Conservative. The writer commenced by saying that although he was a political opponent, and would continue to be so, he had the greatest respect for Crooks personally, and wished to assure him that he did not agree with the attacks that had been made on his Poor Law policy.

"Cheer up," came a message from the Rev. A. Tildsley, pastor of the Poplar and Bromley Tabernacle. "Don't get off your high pedestal to go down to your opponents' level. Leave the mud alone. The sun shines daily, and will soon dry it. Then it will drop off itself. All good men have to pay the price. This is not your first baptism of fire in defence of the poor."

From the Oxford House Settlement, Bethnal Green, the Rev. H. S. Woolcombe wrote:—"I am perfectly certain that this attack cannot do you any permanent harm, and that you and Lansbury are both men too big to let it abate your courage and determination to go on with your work." [Pg 289]

Letters came to him from abroad long after the Inquiry. Unknown friends in America, France, and other countries sent him sympathetic letters. He told one of his Woolwich meetings—according to the report in the Labour Party's weekly newspaper, the *Woolwich Pioneer*:—

> He had had a few letters that were not sympathetic (Laughter, and a voice, "Rub it in for Robb"). Well, he had rubbed it in as well as he could. Mr. Robb [the legal representative of the Alliance at the Inquiry] was not a bad chap at all. A man must earn his money, and Mr. Robb had earned his very well. He (Mr. Crooks) had not a word to say against anybody. Some mud had been thrown, but it would easily brush off. After all, there still remained the obligation to look after those who were unable to look after themselves, and to give to the poor and little children left to their care and mercy the best of their ability and service. They were proud that God had given them the opportunity to do the work they had done. And they were not ashamed.

It is noteworthy that when the Local Government Board was investigating the Guardians' contracts something was brought to light which even the Inspector records to the credit of Poplar. He found that some years previously the Guardians, recognising that the system of dealing with contracts by Poor Law authorities was a faulty one, liable to abuse, had appealed to the Local Government Board to establish a central authority for dealing with all Poor Law contracts in London, thus removing from the local Guardians the temptation towards favouritism and loose administration.

That appeal was disregarded, though it is understood the Local Government Board will shortly be [Pg 290] compelled to carry out Poplar's suggestion, because of the demoralisation which the loose system has created. Had the appeal been heeded at the time—originated as it was by the Labour Members at Poplar—much of the corruption brought to light in several Poor Law Unions in respect to contracts could never have taken place. The Local Government Board's own loose system, therefore, has been indirectly responsible for corruption on Poor Law bodies.

This fact doubtless influenced Canon Barnett to pass very severe strictures on the Local Government Board's gross neglect of duty. "The inspectors of the Local Government Board," he stated in the *Daily News*, "hold inquiries into scandals for which they are themselves largely responsible. Why did they not discover and report these matters years ago? We ought to have independent inquiries, in which the inspectors are subjected to examination, for it is their perfunctory inspection which has allowed the growth of such evil."

Defeated over the Inquiry the Local Government Board carried out a minute analysis of the Guardians' accounts. The ordinary Local Government Board audit occupies only three days. In the case of Poplar, it was on this occasion extended over three months. Every item was carefully examined in accounts representing an expenditure of over a quarter of a million sterling. On the [Pg 291] whole of this sum, the auditor, after his three months' investigation, only found half a dozen trifling items that he could question. These represented a few shillings for "Guardians' and other persons' teas," and about £5 in respect to excessive fares under the head of travelling expenses. These items were surcharged to the individual Guardians responsible, of whom Crooks, needless to say, was not one. Indeed, he as Chairman assisted the auditor in bringing to light what he considered the excessive fares which had been charged by some of his colleagues on the Board.

The surcharge for the teas revealed Bumbledom at its worst. The "other persons' teas" referred to included the occasional afternoon cup offered to the ladies of the Brabazon Society on their visiting days. Bumbledom, which connives at Guardians' six-course dinners at five shillings per head in other Unions, proved itself to be so far embittered against Poplar that it actually objected to a cup of tea and a lunch biscuit to lady visitors belonging to a society which has given thousands of pounds from the private purses of its members for brightening our workhouses.

It happened that these ladies were presenting their yearly report on Poplar Workhouse about the same time the Local Government Board attack took place. These good women are not influenced by the Local Government Board or by Municipal Alliances or by the party differences among the Guardians. Their opinion is that of a quiet body of independent, intelligent women. In their report [Pg 292] on Poplar Workhouse they say:—

> During the year forty-six meetings have been held, and at each some part of the House has been visited. The year has been singularly free from complaints, all the inmates seeming happy and contented.
>
> The nurses in charge are kindness itself, and are uniformly good-tempered and active. The whole House is kept beautifully clean, and each ward is a picture of cosiness and comfort.
>
> Every useful aid is procured for the infirm, to help them to move about easily. The sick are kindly tended, and the little children's health and comfort carefully supervised.

Observe, in connection with this three months' audit, that not a penny was surcharged in respect to the out-relief grants. Notwithstanding all the wild charges that had been made, not a single case could be found where Crooks's policy of helping the poor could be proved to be illegal. After all the hubbub, a three months' scrutiny under the eye of a capable Government auditor proved that Poplar had simply been carrying out the law relating to the poor.

The Local Government Board was badly beaten in its attempt to discredit Crooks's policy. Finally, it was argued on the Board's behalf, as though in a last grasp at a straw, that the decrease in the amount of out-relief during the year of the Inquiry was in itself a justification of the Local Government Board's action. Everybody outside the Board knows differently. The year referred to (1906) was the most prosperous this country has ever experienced. If anything, the industries of [Pg 293] Poplar shared in that prosperity to a larger extent than other parts of the country. The primary cause of the decrease was not the Inquiry, but the lessening of want brought about by an extraordinary trade revival.

"Give us," Crooks has repeatedly stated in public, "the same terrible state of things that we had in some of the previous winters, and I shall apply the same remedy again. The law is there for the sake of the poor, not for the sake of officials. My policy is not a haphazard one. It is the outcome of years of experience. It is fundamentally sound, and will one day become a national policy."

Crooks had indeed played a part for the poor of the whole nation. Before the echoes of the Bumbledom agitation had died away the very Government which allowed one of its Departments

to be made an instrument in that agitation was promising to carry out the very reforms for which Crooks had striven and suffered—Old Age Pensions, Amendment of the Poor Law, and Equalisation of London Rates.

The Government, however, shirked a discussion of the Poplar Report in the House of Commons. The Labour Party, backed by Conservative Members, pressed the Prime Minister for an opportunity to discuss the report. Mr. Keir Hardie and Crooks pointed out that, as the report stood, an injustice was done to a popularly elected body, the effect of which would be to deter other Boards of Guardians from carrying out the Poor Law in a humane spirit. They further maintained that the country was now without guidance as to how to treat poor people out of work [Pg 294] and in need of food.

But the Government had learnt by this time that a departmental blunder had been committed by associating the Poor Law policy of Crooks with the faulty administration of some of his colleagues. The Prime Minister got out of the difficulty by informing the House that the report was not made by the Local Government Board, but to that Board by one of their officers, "and," he added, "I don't understand that it is proposed to call in question any action of my right hon. friend the President in regard to the report."

Indeed, the President of the Local Government Board assured a friend of Crooks in a conversation in the Lobby that there had been a misunderstanding somewhere. He sought an early opportunity of giving Crooks a similar assurance.

It was said of Crooks in Poplar about that time that he was going to leave the neighbourhood never to return. Working-men came round to him in solemn deputation, and women and children stopped him in the street, in order to hear from his own lips that the bodeful rumour bore no meaning. The rumour, which never had the smallest basis of truth, reached the workhouse, where he had not been seen for two or three weeks, weighed down as he was by a hundred public attacks, his own wearing illness and a heavy domestic trouble. But one afternoon he found time to go and see the inmates again. And old men hobbled towards him and clutched his arm [Pg 295] and hand as they broke down in their efforts to tell him what was in their hearts. When he entered the women's wards there was a chorus of almost tearful appeals. "Say it isn't true, Mr. Crooks." "Don't go away and leave us, Mr. Crooks."

Sitting alone at the end of a bench was one old dame talking to herself in that vague, mumbling way common to many old women in our workhouses. As she rambled on in her talk she took up the cry:—

"Don't leave us, Mr. Crooks. For over seventy years I worked hard, Mr. Crooks, ever since I was eight years of age. Brought up a family of ten—two boys died in the wars, one drowned at sea. All the others left me long ago, and I don't know where they are. And my man was buried in 'eighty-nine—buried near the brickfields where we worked together thirty years before. And I kept myself outside for fifteen years, a lone old woman; and you helped me, Mr. Crooks, until I couldn't look after myself any longer, and then you made me comfortable here. So now I count the days between your coming to see us to cheer us up. So please don't leave us, Mr. Crooks. Don't—don't leave us, Mr. Crooks."

CHAPTER XXXIII [Pg 296]
"THE HAPPY WARRIOR"

A Cheerful Invalid and his Neighbours—The Starving Children in the Schools—Public Confidence in Crooks—Left Smiling.

Shortly afterwards he was laid low for two or three weeks, the victim of his old enemy, muscular rheumatism.

"Some of my ancestors must have been aristocrats," he used to tell his visitors good-naturedly from his sick bed in explanation of his recurring complaint.

As usual, the knocker at No. 81, Gough Street, knew no rest during his illness. Hundreds of people called to leave sympathetic little messages of goodwill. From Woolwich came a telegram from a party of children. An old bedridden man laboriously penned a letter, brought round by his aged wife, to say that Mr. Crooks might like to know that an "ole bloke as is pegging out fast" was thinking of him all day, and hoping he would soon get well.

This message cheered the invalid greatly, and he sent back a reply that renewed the old man's youth for weeks. For Crooks never lost his cheerfulness when lying bandaged in bed. He used to [Pg 297] banter his wife and daughters, and his Labour colleagues in Parliament who came to visit him, until they had to hold their sides with laughter. His cheery doctor used to store up good stories for the invalid's delectation; but he always had to admit that Crooks could cap them all with better ones.

Once back at work again, Crooks threw all the time and energy he could spare from Parliament

and his Labour meetings into a campaign for feeding starving school children. Perhaps the best instance of the people's trust in him was supplied by what happened in consequence of a powerful plea for hungry children he made on the London County Council. The Moderates were then in power, and he pleaded with them to persist no longer in their policy of refusing to exercise their powers under the Necessitous School Children's Act, which enables them to spend public money on food for starving scholars.

It was nigh on midnight before he got an opportunity of raising the question, and then—according to the *Daily Mail*, which had often been one of his bitterest opponents—he "electrified his sleepy colleagues as he expressed the agony of hungry children and the despair of parents unable to satisfy their cravings. The speech was spoken without a single note; it came from his heart. When Mr. Crooks sat down, exhausted by the effort—he was far from well—there was a moment of dead silence. Then there broke out the applause which relieved the tension. There [Pg 298] was scarcely a dry eye in the Council chamber."

In the course of his speech to the Council Crooks said:—

> There are no hard-hearted men and there are no hard-hearted women; there are only men and women ignorant of the need. Only the other day a teacher in one of our schools showed me a letter from a mother of three fatherless girls. It ran:—
>
> > Dear Teacher,—Will you allow my little girls to come home at half-past three? I shall have earned sixpence by then, and shall be able to give them something warm to eat. They have had nothing all day.
>
> Here are we, satisfied after a good dinner. Yet I know that this very night hundreds of little children have gone to bed with nothing but a cup of cold water for their supper, and that in the morning they will have nothing but water for their breakfasts. What do you expect them to become? What sort of citizens of this great Empire City will they make?
>
> I have seen the poor as they live, and I tell you that, much as they may forgive you for many things, they will never forgive you for neglecting the children—the children stunted in body and mind for want of food, old before their time, with the souls, not of children, but of old men and women.
>
> A nation which neglects its children is damned. You are neglecting London's hungry children by leaving the provision of meals to private subscriptions which all over London have failed to meet the little people's need. You never talk of running the Army and Navy and the defence of the Empire generally by means of private subscriptions and charitable doles. Yet the thing that is of greater importance at the present moment than the Army and Navy to us, as an Imperial people, is that the children who are going to inherit the responsibility of the government of our vast Empire should be properly [Pg 299] fed and clothed *now*.
>
> What have you to say to facts like these? A woman, early the other morning, as soon as the shutters were down, entered a pawnbroker's shop, and took from under her shawl, in a shamefaced manner, a small bundle. The pawnbroker's assistant unrolled the bundle, and there, clean washed and scarcely dry, was the woman's chemise. She had taken it off her body, washed and partly dried it, and to the pawnbroker's assistant she said:
>
> "For the love of God, lend me sixpence on this."
>
> "I cannot," said the assistant. "It's not worth it."
>
> "Then give me threepence," pleaded the woman. "I must give my children a mouthful before they go to school this morning."
>
> You object to feed the children because it would increase the rates. Yes, it would increase the rates by a farthing. But indirectly you are increasing the rates to a far greater extent by starving the children. By neglecting them now you will be compelled to feed and shelter them later in life in workhouses and infirmaries.
>
> I appeal to you to rise to a sense of your responsibilities, and see that these children are fed. If it meant that I should be driven out of public life by feeding starving children out of the rates, I should feed them out of the rates. I should then have done my duty.

The appeal moved the Council deeply, but on a party vote he was defeated, many of the Councillors who voted against him crowding round him afterwards to assure him of their individual sympathy.

The sequel came the day after his speech was reported in the Press. From all parts of London he and his wife had cheques and postal orders showered upon them from people in all walks of life, [Pg 300] from little children to old people. Nearly £200 in all came to hand, together with huge parcels of boots and clothing, every donor leaving it entirely in Crooks's hands as to how the money and the things were distributed, so long as the needy children got them.

This is just the kind of thing that he deprecates, but, public bodies having failed to meet the need, he and his wife set to work, and did their best to meet it in their own neighbourhood. With the aid

of a few friends they got in touch with some of the poorest schools in the East End, and soon thousands of hungry school children were fed and hundreds of the naked clothed.

Crooks gave the London County Council no rest on this subject. He went on agitating until the Moderate majority in the succeeding winter at last gave in and agreed to make the feeding of necessitous scholars a public charge.

Thus we leave him, still in the ranks fighting. We must part from him with a smile, since that is how he likes best to leave both friend and enemy. And those who heard him speak in the winter of 1908 at the City Temple smile every time they think of the occasion—a mass meeting of the London Federation of Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Brotherhoods.

No written word can adequately describe the hilarious effect of Crooks's speech. Without the man behind them, the words alone convey little, as I many times have been made to feel keenly while writing this narrative. Indeed, one of Mr. Crooks's colleagues in Parliament, a staid, dull man of much wealth, accosted him in the House one afternoon with the remark: "How is it, Mr. Crooks, that when I repeat your stories to my constituents, they never laugh?" [Pg 301]

At the City Temple Crooks told his great audience how delighted he had been to observe the growth of the religious and civic spirit among the working classes since this movement for Sunday afternoon meetings began.

"At the meetings in the early days," he said, "you know how you used to be troubled with the irrelevant questioner. I was present once when the speaker, after narrating his experiences abroad, was asked whether he was in favour of compulsory vaccination! Another time a man got up, and after reading out a list of parsons who had been sentenced asked me what I had to say to that?

"'A bad lot,' I answered, 'but it doesn't shake my faith in Christianity any more than to-day's fog shakes my faith in the sun."

"On another occasion a man asked me what I meant by condemning betting, seeing that the aristocracy backed horses.

"'But the aristocracy know no better. You do. So set them an example.'

"Then there was the heckler who wanted to know whether I objected to a man leaving money for the propagation of atheism.

"'If he likes to do it, let him,' I answered. 'He's sure to regret it as soon as he is dead.'

"And that reminds me," continued Crooks, "of what happened at the last County Council election. A local undertaker, who had always supported me before, stopped me in the street to say he was going to vote on the other side this time. [Pg 302]

"'Tain't as I don't believe in you, Mr. Crooks. I likes you as well as ever I did; but men in our calling must keep an eye on the party that best helps business, you know!'

"I told him I did not understand.

"'Why,' said the undertaker, 'I could make a decent living when the death rate was 20 per 1,000. I can even get along nicely when it's 18; but since you've bin on the move, Mr. Crooks, I can't make a living nohow, with a death rate no more'n 14.'"

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