

What the War on the Kip House Means.

The Amazing Life in the 10 Cent Roosting Places of San Francisco Described by a Man Who Has Lived in Them



somewhere near 30,000 per night; in Chicago the number runs close to 20,000, because Chicago is a good "kip town," while in San Francisco and the cross bay cities fully 5,000 men at the present time of financial stringency resort to these sleeping dumps. The temptation which such human material, all too willing to sell its birthright to any bidder, offers to corrupt municipality rulers is evident. That such material is bought wholesale is an undisputed and readily proven fact, known to all those interested in city politics. This is one of the prime reasons for the agitation of the reformers against such propagating grounds and consorting pens of vagabonds as the "kip" houses afford. Under present conditions 10 cents is too little to pay for an bed, these reformers contend; the man who pays that amount and continues to be satisfied with such a bed is to express it conservatively, an undesirable citizen at the best—a contaminating, vote selling, disease spreading element of which an ambitious and careful society must rid itself of at once.

A word about the individual stalls, the private rooms, of these lodgings. They are invariably little wooden boxes some six or seven feet in each dimension, roofed over with fine wire mesh so that the safety of the guest and his valuables, clothes, etc., are insured, thereby making it possible for the lodger to have the added comfort of a very unwise thing to do in the unprotected general dormitories, whose bunks are not protected by walls and wire netting. These stalls cost from 15 to 25 cents, and are usually occupied only by those occasional who drift into the underworld for a day or two; who have some money and some article of clothing or other matter in their possession that they value. Either this or they are too exclusive even in their fallen estate to come into too close contact with the mass of pained has been to whom that estate has become a matter of course.

The depositing of one's valuables with the clerk often develops ludicrous episodes. I have known some

THE current agitation against the tramp and against any municipal condition which tends to propagate him conducted by the reform element of all the larger eastern cities will no doubt shortly result in the entire eradication of the derelict's chief consorting ground, the dirty, dangerous 10 cent lodging house of the slums and the tenderloin, which in his own peculiar argot he knows as the "kip" or "flop."

The roosting tree of the vagabond must go, cry these reformers, and so it will, most likely, for these hard hearted agitators evidently mean business. Flabby American sympathy and sentiment, which heretofore have always been too ready to open their arms and purse strings to anything that limped or whined or had a horror tale to tell, seem at last to be developing a spinal column. Even erstwhile vagabonds, now turned litterateurs, seem to take an unholy zest in reminiscently muck raking the vile old dormitories where they once cursed themselves to sleep; selling their hideous memories to the magazines and news sheets for column space rates.

With the passing of the "kip," the flock of broken winged crows whose roosting tree it has been in the congested parts of the city they infest will no doubt greatly diminish in numbers. The theory that if you make a man pay 25 cents for a bed he will earn it is undoubtedly sound. This assumption will soon find at least experimental embodiment in municipal statutes, after which, unless he wants to sleep out, the bum will have to turn workingman.

Of criminals. Here and there apart sat some lonely wail, unable or unwilling even temporarily to put himself on a level with his fellows in misfortune. And through these shifting groups a distorted being, both legs gone at the hips and the scars of fire horribly red across his features, made his way restlessly about the floor on his hands, cursing at one who got in his way or good naturedly chaffing another whom he knew, just as the whim seized him. Unreal and exotic as some subterranean chamber peopled by Haggardian creatures the place seemed to me; and, indeed, it was quite another world from that in which I had moved before I had made my way down into these caverns of men jarred loose.

I had paid 10 cents for the right to a bed in the barracks, a steaming big cup of black coffee, and compulsory attendance at the religious meeting which was soon to be called in the basement of the hall. I had secured my bed check, had drained the coffee from the cup, and now sat waiting the compulsory part of the program. One could renounce either the bed or the coffee, or both, but the dose of religion one must take. It was best to take it good naturedly, so I waited patiently the appointed time, watching the grim show about me.

Occasionally some bum would enter from the street, shamble up to the office desk, near which I had pre-empted a chair, and in an apologetic monotone whisper his plea for charity to the hawk-eyed clerk. Some of them, fakers, readily recognized as such by the young man to whom they appealed, were sent away with a gruff ultimatum; others, carefully appraised of the twinkling of an eye, were given bed checks on the cheapest ward of the barracks, where they would presently be permitted to roll up in a single blanket on the floor to find rest as best they might. It is almost uncanny the way in which these clerks of the "kips" can size up the men with whom they have to deal. They rarely make a mistake and pride themselves on their almost unnatural insight.

roosting on our respective bunks, disrobing, tucking our clothes securely under our pillows, for no man may be trusted here, rolling final cigarettes to be smoked surreptitiously when the porter left the dormitory, luxuriating in the feel of the blankets beneath our weary bodies, even though they were stale, unwashed, evil smelling rags.

The bunks in all these houses are arranged alike, in tiers of two or three, as they are in the fo'castle of a ship, packed in to fill every available space in the room, leaving only little alleys between the tiers. The beds are either canvas cots or wooden boxes in which usually a straw mattress and a single blanket are arranged. Sometimes there are sheets and pillows, the bedding is invariably unclean and vile with the accumulated smells of dirty bodies that have rested in them. The army barracks usually make a pretense at keeping their beds passably clean and wholesome—that was why I always selected an army barracks whenever possible while in the underworld. But this one I found a horrible exception to the general rule.

He told me the whole story frankly: that he had wandered into those regions of the city which ever hold such irresistible attraction for masculine guilelessness, and how he had, during the first night of varied experiences there, been relieved of his watch by the harpies that prey upon his kind.

"Twenty cents he had found in his watch pocket after the dizziness had left his head and he had come to his senses, lying in a deserted alley. With this pittance he had found his way to a bed loft and secured a bunk similar to the one on which we now sat. Now he plunged directly into the horror of his first experience in one of these vile holes, so doubly horrible to his fine, clean, country nurtured nature.

came in, but I noticed that none of the others did so and thought better of it myself after I caught some of the hard faces looking at me—faces that look at my more or less expensive clothes and shoes. We all crawled between the stinking blankets, clothes and shoes on, just as we had come in from the street. A couple of the bums did take off their shoes because their feet were sore and bilaterated, but I noticed they tucked them very carefully under the blankets on which they were lying.

"The air kept getting hotter and thicker. The lamps were open kerosene lamps that heated the small room like a stove. There wasn't even a fan to stir the air. The door that could be opened, much less a window. It was sure a black, hot mine filled with the poisonous breath of half a hundred human beings!

During some years' sojourn with the "lost nerves" of the nether world I have frequented hundreds of these "kip" houses all over the states, including a number along the western coast, and in San Francisco particularly. I, too, am not averse to resting of some columns of reminiscences dealing with the life in the 10 cent bunkhouse for the consideration of column space rates. I still retain in some measure the instinct of the underworldling for "locating an easy find," as some of my former yegg associates would put it.

The Wise, Wise Clerk

"I don't think I have been stung half a dozen times since I have been in this business in regard to the money I pass to the free ward," the clerk boasted when I commented on his judgment a little later. He had been with this barracks for over three years and had passed judgment on at least a score of charity seekers every night during that period.

At 8 o'clock a bell sharply jangled its summons. One of the army captains made his appearance to guide the men to the assembly room, two floors below. With much low grumbling and profane muttering, slack footed and hesitant, the men stopped their games and discussions to file in a long line down the stairs, led by a captain in uniform, the rear being brought up by a sergeant. Just ahead of me in the line the cripple inched along on his hands with queer little jumps, saying caustic things about religion. He looked up at me with a strange smile, that was hardly a smile so distorted was it, and asked me in a low voice if I wanted to get out of going to the exercises.

"I liked to smothered up there in that hole! The place was a sort of half story way up under two floors of tenements, and underneath another story on top sandwiched in and pressed flat between the upper and lower crush in a dark, unventilated seam that my dog at home would not sleep in. It was like nothing else than a dark seam in the depths of a mountain. Over in the middle in Shasta county—a deep copper mine crowded with a number of sweating, struggling men, working hard to loosen the damp, black rocks over their heads without seeing the mass to fall on them. The flicker of the mine candles shining on their wet faces and then throwing them in black shadow, the whack of their picks, like thunder, the splash of their boots in the slush underfoot. In all this, the once called quick as I could. That's just how I felt in that low celled, cramped bunkroom, with its filthy beds and its filthier men—seared and stoked!

At 7 o'clock next morning we were routed out of our bunks by the porter. Seven o'clock is the sleeping time limit of these "kips" in a few it is eight. All must turn out at that time, no matter how much or how little they may have slept. This is one of the iron clad rules of the cheap lodging. If it were not so the majority of the bums would lounge in the beds all day long.

Boiling up in the laundry room.

misery monger with his everlasting tales of woe and his everlasting threat for tub bears; the man with the respectable past, perhaps far up the ladder at one time, whose lamentations I have heard in every cheap lodging house all over the states; sailors, lumber jacks, longshoremen and followers of similar fitful occupations, nomadic workmen with perhaps a dollar or two saved up in their clothes somewhere, waiting for the next uncertain job; confessed and unabashed wanderers whom the wanderlust drives about the world, and men whom criminal acts have driven to these shadowy caves of the nether world for shelter. All of them with the brand of failure seared upon them! The outcast and the near outcast; and sometimes I think the lot of these latter is more bitter and undesirable even than that of the unmodified, unabashed wail who has neither pride nor fear nor sensibility, and sleeps in lumber pile, straw heap or sawdust bed beneath the hot boilers of an all night power house with equal equanimity and equal dumb thankfulness.

Some were playing cards at tables provided for that purpose, while others made pretense at reading the old papers, ever and anon letting their eyes cruise across the top of the sheet to size up some fellow wail that interested them. In one corner, slightly removed from the others, as though in silent assertion of caste, a group of frowzy and rather illiterate socialists were gesticulating over some argumentative point of their creed. Little groups of stolid listeners ranged themselves about talkative individuals whose conversation ever tended plaintively toward discussion as to why men cast themselves or are cast into this nether world of failures, of drifters and

As we came opposite a small door in the wall at the second landing, the cripple suddenly put his weight against it, swung it open inwardly and lowered himself by his arms into the darkness beyond. I followed without hesitation, found my feet touching a floor about three feet down, and in a moment had closed the door tight behind me. I found myself, after becoming accustomed to the darkness, in a passageway leading down into the coal bunkers at the rear of the building. Here my crippled friend and I remained and smoked away the long hour of the service beyond the petition in the basement, the crippled man occasionally breaking into a rich, low accompaniment of some familiar song the impressed army was voicing, until we heard the line of men come marching up the stairs again. We joined them as we had left their ranks an hour previous, limping our entry well into the middle of the file and climbed to the loft, where the bedrooms were now open and ready for occupancy. Our little escapade had put me into exceedingly good humor and I was wide awake despite the soreness in my bones, observant of every movement and development about me.

The Tale of a Novice

Presently through the wrangle I noted a silent, frightened man, the light illuminating in part his drawn features, stealing through the mass of the larger cities (not the better sort) when he came near I invited him, tugged to it by some strain of pity stronger than the reserve born of much harsh experience in the world of bums and thams, to sit on my bunk until we could locate the porter and time about finding him a place. He seemed more than grateful for the invitation and clambered up beside me on the top bunk of the tier. We sat there, most of the night, watching the jetsam about us, talking, opening up to each other as men will some times under these circumstances. Soon I had his story. I had known from the first, "kip" the night before, his first night in the underworld, and his story of that night's experience, told with wide, almost childlike spreading of the eyes and with naive though intelligent narration of the upper class of country folk, is a thing I will long remember for its dramatic intensity. He was one of those who are so out of place in a "kip" that their presence there is almost startling; the average bum holds aloof from such a one through a cer-

Repulsive as the "kip" may be as a bedchamber, the time yet comes when every man in the city who has become wail through choice or compulsion is driven to resort to it for his nightly rest. Fear drives some to the shelter it offers, sickness drives not few, the ache for companionship of one's kind many; but most all are rounded up by the simple elemental fact of the cold. When the cold of night begins to smother to your bones and your flesh gets blue with the frost, you will sell your immortal soul for a roll of blankets and consider the price cheap.

Driven by the Cold

Repulsive as the "kip" may be as a bedchamber, the time yet comes when every man in the city who has become wail through choice or compulsion is driven to resort to it for his nightly rest. Fear drives some to the shelter it offers, sickness drives not few, the ache for companionship of one's kind many; but most all are rounded up by the simple elemental fact of the cold. When the cold of night begins to smother to your bones and your flesh gets blue with the frost, you will sell your immortal soul for a roll of blankets and consider the price cheap.

very real fun to develop among the bums as a result of such deposits, ostensibly valuable, made with loud comment to attract the attention of the less fortunate to the affluence of the depositor, likely enough some old stiff with his bare toes protruding from his shoes but wearing an air of pompous importance as the clerk takes his dime tests it with his teeth and stows his bundle in the locker. Some of these inimitable mummies will deposit the cheapest watches and old broken knives carefully wrapped in their bandanas, principally to conceal them, I believe.

Some were playing cards at tables provided for that purpose, while others made pretense at reading the old papers, ever and anon letting their eyes cruise across the top of the sheet to size up some fellow wail that interested them. In one corner, slightly removed from the others, as though in silent assertion of caste, a group of frowzy and rather illiterate socialists were gesticulating over some argumentative point of their creed. Little groups of stolid listeners ranged themselves about talkative individuals whose conversation ever tended plaintively toward discussion as to why men cast themselves or are cast into this nether world of failures, of drifters and

There was a tremendous, good natured rush for the beds, a stampede of unkempt men for the best blankets, for lower bunks, where the atmosphere would be a little less heated and fetid as the night wore on, and for the bunks near windows, though why these latter should have been chosen is a puzzle to me, because the windows of these barracks are seldom if ever permitted open, on account of the prevalence of throat and lung trouble among their inmates. In a few minutes, like so many crows, we were

at the night before, his first night in the underworld, and his story of that night's experience, told with wide, almost childlike spreading of the eyes and with naive though intelligent narration of the upper class of country folk, is a thing I will long remember for its dramatic intensity. He was one of those who are so out of place in a "kip" that their presence there is almost startling; the average bum holds aloof from such a one through a cer-

at the night before, his first night in the underworld, and his story of that night's experience, told with wide, almost childlike spreading of the eyes and with naive though intelligent narration of the upper class of country folk, is a thing I will long remember for its dramatic intensity. He was one of those who are so out of place in a "kip" that their presence there is almost startling; the average bum holds aloof from such a one through a cer-

at the night before, his first night in the underworld, and his story of that night's experience, told with wide, almost childlike spreading of the eyes and with naive though intelligent narration of the upper class of country folk, is a thing I will long remember for its dramatic intensity. He was one of those who are so out of place in a "kip" that their presence there is almost startling; the average bum holds aloof from such a one through a cer-

at the night before, his first night in the underworld, and his story of that night's experience, told with wide, almost childlike spreading of the eyes and with naive though intelligent narration of the upper class of country folk, is a thing I will long remember for its dramatic intensity. He was one of those who are so out of place in a "kip" that their presence there is almost startling; the average bum holds aloof from such a one through a cer-

at the night before, his first night in the underworld, and his story of that night's experience, told with wide, almost childlike spreading of the eyes and with naive though intelligent narration of the upper class of country folk, is a thing I will long remember for its dramatic intensity. He was one of those who are so out of place in a "kip" that their presence there is almost startling; the average bum holds aloof from such a one through a cer-