The WORLD SET FREE!

CHAPTER II.
"Work, Not Charity."

BARNET wandered down into the thronging gayer parts of London in which a year or so ago he had been numbered among the spenders.

London, under the visible smoke law, by which any production of a visible smoke with or without excuse was punishable by a fine, had already ceased to be the somber, smoke darkened city of the Victorian time; it had been, and indeed was, constantly being rebuilt, and its main streets were already beginning to take on those characteristics that distinguished them throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. The insanitary horse and the plebeian bicycle had been banished from the roadway, which was now of a resilient, glasslike surface, spotlessly clean; and the foot passenger was restricted to a narrow vestige of the ancient footpath on either side of the track and forbidden, at the risk of a fine, if he survived, to cross the roadway. People descended from their automobiles upon this pavement and went through the lower shops to the lifts and stairs to the new ways for pedestrians, the rows, that ran along the front of the houses at the level of the first story and, being joined by frequent bridges, gave the newer parts of London a curiously Venetian appearance. In some streets there were upper and even third story rows. For most of the day and all night the shop windows were lit by electric light, and many establishments had made, as it were, canals of public footpaths through their premises in order to increase their window space. Barnet made his way along this night scene rather apprehensively, since the police had power to challenge and demand the labor card of any indigent looking person, and if the record failed to show he was in employment dismiss him to the traffic pavement below.

But there was still enough of his former gentility about Barnet's appearance and bearing to protect him from this; the police, too, had other things to think of that night and he was permitted to reach the galleries about Leicester square—that great focus of London life and pleasure.

He gives a vivid descripton of the scene that evening. In the center was a garden raised on arches lit by festoons of lights and connected with the rows by eight graceful bridges, beneath which hummed the interlacing streams of motor traffic, pulsating as the current alternated between east and west and north and south. Above rose great frontages of intricate rather than beautiful re-enforced porcelain, studded with lights, barred by bold, illuminated advertisements and glowing with reflections. There were the two historical music halls of this place, the Shakespeare Memorial theater, in which the municipal players revolved perpetually through the cycle of Shakespeare's plays, and four other great houses of refreshment and entertainment, whose pinnacles streamed up into the blue obscurity of the night. The south side of the square was in dark contrast to the others; it was still being rebuilt, and a lattice of steel bars surmounted by the frozen gestures of monstrous cranes rose over the excavated sites of vanished Victorian buildings.

This framework attracted Barnet's attention for a time to the exclusion of other interests. It was absolutely still; it had a dead rigidity, a stricken inaction; no one was at work upon it and all its machinery was quiet, but the contractors' globes of vacuum light filled its every interstice with a quivering green moonshine and showed alert but motionless—soldier sentinels.

He asked a passing stroller and was told that the men had struck that day against the use of an automatic riveter that would have doubled the individual efficiency and halved the number of steel workers.

"Shouldn't wonder if they didn't get chucking bombs," said Barnet's informant, who hovered for a moment and then went on his way to the Alhambra Music hall.

Barnet became aware of an excitement in the newspaper kiosks at the corners of the square. Something very sensational had been flashed upon the transparencies. Forgetting for a moment his penniless condition, he made his way over a bridge to buy a paper, for in those days the papers, which were printed upon thin sheets of metallic foil, were sold at determinate points by specially licensed purveyors. Half over he stopped short at a change in the traffic below and was astonished to see that the police signals were restricting vehicles to the half roadway. When presently he got within sight of the transparencies that had replaced the placards of Victorian times he read of the great march of the unemployed that was already in progress through the west end, and so without expenditure he was able to understand what was coming.

He watched, and his book describes this procession which the police had considered it unwise to prevent and which had been spontaneously organized in imitation of the unemployed processions of earlier times. He had expected a mob, but there was a kind of sullen discipline about the procession when at last it arrived. What seemed for a time an unending column of men marched wearily, marched with a kind of implacable futility, along the roadway underneath him. He was, he says, moved to join them, but instead he remained watching. They were a dingy, shabby, ineffective looking multitude, for the most part incapable of any but obsolete and superseded types of labor. They bore a few banners with the time honored inscription "Work, Not Charity," but otherwise their ranks were unadorned.

They were not singing, they were not even talking, there was nothing truculent nor aggressive in their bearing, they had no definite objective, they were just marching and showing themselves in the more prosperous parts of London. They were a sample of that great mass of unskilled, cheap labor which the new, still cheaper mechanical powers had superseded for evermore. They were being "scrapped"—as horses had been "scrapped."

Barnet leaned over the parapet watching them, his mind quickened by his own precarious condition. For a time, he says, he felt nothing but despair at the sight; what should be done, what could be done for this gathering surplus of humanity? They were so manifestly useless—and incapable—and pitiful.

What were they asking for?

They had been overtaken by unexpected things. Nobody had foreseen—

It flashed suddenly into his mind just what the multitudinous shambling enigma below meant. It was an appeal against the unexpected—an appeal to those others who, more fortunate, seemed wiser and more powerful, for something—for intelligence. This mute mass, weary footed, rank following rank, protested its persuasion that some of these others must have foreseen these dislocations—that anyhow they ought to have foreseen—and arranged.

That was what this crowd of wreckage was feeling and seeking so dumbly to assert.

"Things came to me like the turning on of a light in a darkened room," he says. "These men were praying to their fellow creatures as once they prayed to God. The last thing that men will realize about anything is that it is inanimate. They had transferred their animation to mankind. They still believed there was intelligence somewhere, even if it was careless or malignant. It had only to be aroused to be conscience stricken, to be moved to exertion. And I saw, too, that as yet there was no such intelligence. The world waits for inteligence. That intelligence has still to be made, that will for good and order has still to be gathered together, out of scraps of impulse and wandering seeds of benevolence and whatever is fine and creative in our souls into a common purpose. It's something still to come."

It is characteristic of the widening thought of the time that this not very heroical young man who in any previous age might well have been altogether occupied with the problem of his own individual necessities should be able to stand there and generalize about the needs of the race.

But upon all the stresses and conflicts of that chaotic time there was already dawning the light of a new era. The spirit of humanity was escaping, even then it was escaping, from its extreme imprisonment in individuals, Salvation from the bitter intensities of self, which had been a conscious religious end for thousands of years, which men had sought in mortification, in the wilderness, in meditation and by innumerable strange paths, was coming at last with the effect of naturalness into the talk of men, into the books they read, into their unconscious gestures, into their newspapers and daily purposes and everyday acts. The broad horizons, the magic possibilities, that the spirit of the seeker had revealed to them were charming them out of those ancient and instinctive preoccupations from which the very threat of hell and torment had failed to drive them. And this young man, homeless and without provision even for the immediate hours, in the presence of social disorganization, distress and perplexity, in a blazing wilderness of thoughtless pleasures that blotted out the stars, could think as he tells us he thought.

"I saw life plain," he wrote. "I saw the gigantic task before us, and the very splendor of its intricate and immeasurable difficulty filled me with exultation. I saw that we have still to discover government, that we have still to discover education, which is the necessary reciprocal of government and that all this—in which my own little speck of a life was so manifestly overwhelmed—this and its yesterday in Greece and Rome and Egypt were nothing, the mere first dust swirls of the beginning, the movements and dim murmurings of a sleeper who will presently be awake."

And then the story tells, with an engaging simplicity, of his descent from this ecstatic vision of reality.

"Presently I found myself again and I was beginning to feel cold and a little hungry."

He bethought himself of the John Burns relief offices which stood upon the Thames embankment. He made his way through the galleries of the booksellers and the National gallery, which had been open continuously day and night to all decently dressed people now for more than twelve years, and across the rose gardens of Trafalgar square, and so by the hotel colonnade to the embankment. He had long known of these admirable offices, which had swept the last beggars and matchsellers and all the casual indigent from the London streets, and he believed that he would as a matter of course be able to procure a ticket for food and a night's lodging and some indication of possible employment.

But he had not reckoned upon the new labor troubles, and when he got to the embankment he found the offices hopelessly congested and besieged by a large and rather unruly crowd. He hovered for a time on the outskirts of the waiting multitude, perplexed and dismayed, and then he became aware of a movement, a purposive trickling away of people, up through the arches of the great buildings that had arisen when all the railway stations were removed to the south side of the river, and so to the covered ways of the Strand. And here in the open glare of midnight he found unemployed men begging, and not only begging, but begging with astonishing assurance, from the people who were emerging from the small theaters and other such places of entertainment which abounded in that thoroughfare.

This was an altogther unexampled thing. There had been no begging in London streets for a quarter of a century. But that night the police were evidently unwilling or unable to cope with the destitute who were invading those well kept quarters of the town. They had become stonily blind to anything but manifest disorder.

Barnet walked through the crowd unable to bring himself to ask; indeed, his bearing must have been more valiant than his circumstances, for twice he says that he was begged from. Near the Trafalgar square gardens, a girl with reddened cheeks and blackened eyebrows, who was walking alone, spoke to him with a peculiar friendliness.

"I'm starving," he said to her abruptly.

"Oh, poor dear!" she said, and with the impulsive generosity of her kind glanced round and slipped a silver piece into his hand.

It was a gift that, in spite of the precedent of De Quincey, might under the repressive social legislation of those times have brought Barnet within reach of the prison lash. But he took it, he confesses, and thanked her as well as he was able, and went off gladly to get food.

A day or so later—and again his freedom to go as he pleased upon the roads may be taken as a mark of increasing social disorganization and police embarrassment—he wandered out into the country.

He speaks of the roads of that plutocratic age as being "fenced with barbed wire against unpropertied people," of the high walled gardens and trespass warnings that kept him to the dusty narrowness of the public ways. In the air happy rich people were flying, heedless of the misfortunes about them, as he himself had been flying two years ago, and along the road swept the new traffic, light and swift and wonderful. One was rarely out of earshot of its whistles and gongs and siren cries even in the field paths or over the open downs. The officials of the labor exchanges were everywhere overworked and infuriated, the casual wards were so crowded that the surplus wanderers slept in ranks under sheds or in the open air, and since giving to wayfarers had been made a punishable offense there was no longer friendship or help for a man from the rare foot passenger or the wayside cottage.

"I wasn't angry," said Barnet. "I saw an immense selfishness, a monstrous disregard for anything but pleasure and possession, in all those people above us, but I saw how inevitable that was, how certainly if the richest had changed places with the poorest that things would have been the same. What else can happen when men use science and every new thing that science gives and all their available intelligence and energy to manufacture wealth and appliances and leave government and education to the rusting traditions of hundreds of years ago? Those traditions come from the dark ages, when there was really not enough for every one, when life was a fierce struggle that might be masked, but could not be escaped. Of course this famine grabbing, this fierce dispossession of others, must follow from such a disharmony between material and training. Of course the rich were vulgar and the poor grew savage and every added power that came to men made the rich richer and the poor less necessary and less free. The men I met in the casual wards and the relief offices were all smoldering for revolt, talking of justice and injustice and revenge. I saw no hope in that talk nor in anything but patience."

But he did not mean a passive patience. He meant that the method of social reconstruction was still a riddle; that no effectual rearrangement was possible until this riddle in all its tangled aspects was solved. "I tried to talk to those discontented men," he wrote, "but it was hard for them to see things as I saw them. When I talked of patience and the larger scheme they answered, 'But then we shall all be dead,' and I could not make them see what is so simple to my own mind, that that did not affect the question. Men who think in lifetimes are of no use to statesmanship."

He does not seem to have seen a newspaper during those wanderings, and the chance sight of the transparency of a kiosk in the market place at Bishop Stortford announcing a "Grave International Situation" did not excite him very much. There had been so many grave international situations in recent years.

This time it was talk of the central European powers suddenly attacking the Slav confederacy, with France and England going to the help of the Slavs.

But the next night he found a tolerable meal awaiting the vagrants in the casual ward and learned from the workhouse master that all serviceable trained men were to be sent back on the morrow to their mobilization centers. The country was on the eve of war. He was to go back through London to Surrey. His first feeling, he records, was one of extreme relief that his days of "hopeless battering at the underside of civilization" were at an end. Here was something definite to do, something definitely provided for. But his relief was greatly modified when he found that the mobilization arrangements had been made so hastily and carelessly that for nearly thirty-six hours at the improvised depot at Epsom he got nothing either to eat or to drink but a cup of cold water. The depot was absolutely unprovisioned, and no one was free to leave it.

CHAPTER III.
The Last War.

VIEWED from the standpoint of a sane and ambitious social order it is difficult to understand and it would be tedious to follow the motives that plunged mankind into the war that fills the histories of the middle decades of the twentieth century.

It must always be remembered that the political structure of the world at that time was everywhere extraordinarily behind the collective intelligence. That is the central fact of that history. For 200 years there had been no great changes in political or legal methods and pretensions; the utmost change had been a certain shifting of boundaries and slight readjustments of procedure, while in nearly every other aspect of life there had been fundamental revolutions, gigantic releases and an enormous enlargement of scope and outlook. The absurdities of courts and the indignities of representative parliamentary government, coupled with the opening of vast fields of opportunity in

(continued on page 5)