

HOW MEN BECOME TRAMPS.

CONCLUSIONS FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS AN AMATEUR TRAMP.¹



ABODY of vagrants, twice as large as the standing army of the United States, has compacted itself together in this country by common aims, methods of action, and manner of speech. Little is known of it, in whole or in part; for it is like the Irishman's flea, or the "little joker" of the gambler—no sooner discovered than lost. To study it, one must become joined to it, part and parcel of its manifestations.

There can be no doubt that the tramp is, in a certain sense, the maker and chooser of his own career. The writer's experience with these vagrants has convinced him that, though they are almost always the victims of liquor and laziness, fully four fifths of America's voluntary beggars have begun their wild and restless ways while still in their teens, and have been furthered in their wrong tendencies by unwise treatment applied to them when young. Year after year, even month after month, trampdom is increased by squads of youths who will soon take and hold the places of their elders, who will naturally drop away with the years. These boyish roadsters are more often illegitimate than lawful children, and consequently proper subjects for state care and guardianship. And the fact that every tramp in the United States has spent some part of his youth in a reform school, or, worst of all, in jails, demonstrates that there is a failure somewhere in our system of correction and reformation, and makes it necessary and only fair that the sociologist as well as the reformer should know the tramp from boyhood to manhood. Superficial and unsympathetic studies of his character, with shallow theories about remedial measures, have so far failed signally in checking his malign influence upon society.

The best places in the United States in which to study tramps are the jails. The student of social statistics can learn here just where trampdom gets its recruits, and why it is so successful in drilling them into voluntary vagrancy. He can find here the full-fledged rover who for long years has never found anything more congenial to his soul than a haphazard, vagabond existence; the thief who, when discour-

aged, so often drifts into vagrancy as a last resort, either to hide his identity or to find companions; the "town rough," imprisoned perhaps for drunkenness or petty thieving—a pliable subject for a tramp to win over to the fraternity; and, saddest of all, the boy who is being tutored in all that is vile and contemptible. In fact, until the evils attendant upon the present jail system are eliminated, roving beggars will be plentiful in the United States.

The worst feature of the county prison life is the customary throwing together of offenders of all ages, opinions, and practices. The writer is familiar with more than a dozen jails, in as many States, and in every one of them young boys are to be found imprisoned with tramps, ex-convicts, and men who are awaiting their trials for all sorts of crimes. These youths soon become contaminated with criminal and vagrant ideas, and before they are released learn all that can be told them of a tramping and thieving life. They hear the tramps discuss the affairs "of the road," and more than once I have heard lads talking intelligently with their older comrades in the jail about prisons, noted tramps, easy railroads for dead-beats, good towns for beggars, the latest additions to the fraternity slang, how to beg money in the streets, how to get "kids" away from the reform schools and make "good travelers" of them, where the latest government job was started, and what chances a tramp had there, when the next "pay-days" with different railroads would occur, and whether the workmen receiving the wages were easy to beg from, and what men had been killed, or sentenced to long imprisonments. Plans are made also for going "on the bum" the moment they are free. Children are even branded, under the very eyes of the law, as tramps; for often there will be some man in a crowd of prisoners who understands tattooing; and if he has his implements with him he is only too willing to practise his art on his youthful companions.

Tramp slang is another apparent necessity in a jail. A general conversation of prisoners would in many instances be quite unintelligible to the uninitiated listener. But it may be depended upon that the boy is only too alert in gathering in a new phraseology, and it is not long after his entrance into the jail until he is as fluent in his newly acquired lingo as any professional. He learns all about "bumming on

¹ See previous articles by the same author in *THE CENTURY* for October and November, 1893, and February, March, and October, 1894.—EDITOR.

the roads," "battering for chewing," "hitting the Galway for punk," "rushing the growler for his jigger," "chewing the rag," and other eccentricities of language too numerous to mention. After becoming proficient in this, it is but a step to learn the tricks of the trade. His tutors tell him about "playing the light-fingered act," how to work the "jimmy" when prying open a window or door, how to escape from the reform school if he should ever be sent there, how to steal clothes from clothes-lines, how to play the "three-card trick," etc. Very often he will attempt deceptions and tricks before he regains his freedom. And, sad to relate, the chances for this are too frequent, because visitors to a jail appear to have no conception of judgment or tact in doing favors for the inmates. Besides, it often occurs in moderately large towns that the Young Men's Christian Association secretary is interested in jail work, and I have seen this man swindled time after time by boys who told him soft stories which he believed. Holding religious services on Sundays, as he does, and having, as a rule, too kind a heart, he soon becomes deeply interested in his unfortunate "brothers," and they become just as interested in him, though on widely differing grounds; and he must be clever, or else they will have him bringing them clothes, delicacies, tobacco, and other things quite foreign to jail fare. When the men fail in "working the man," they instruct the boy — if there is one in the prison — how to do it, and the child is soon an arch-beggar and deceiver.

With all respect to those men who have at heart the interests of their fellows who are in bonds, I nevertheless believe that very often more harm than good is done when they attempt the regenerating of jail-birds; for the very first impulse of these fellows is to fleece whoever comes nigh them. And if they can do it by being "converted," they will have no scruples; and youthful prisoners, seeing an older companion doing this, will soon find it a profitable business to be converted just as often as there is an opportunity.

The reader may wonder why it is that boys are allowed in jails, and not confined in institutions exclusively devoted to their needs. It certainly is a matter of surprise that the penologists in America have been so backward in instituting a plan by which young offenders can be separated from callous men waiting for trial or undergoing a short imprisonment. Especially is it astonishing that police justices are willing to confine a tramp and his "kid" in the same jail; yet this is nearly as frequent a procedure as sending a boy to the reform school. I have even known a justice to commit a tramp's "kid" to a jail, and two days after to grant him a discharge when the

tramp had paid the boy's fine. And yet people wonder "where in the world all the tramps come from"! Carelessness in the strict enforcement of law is too often a trait of police justices and policemen. And it may be depended upon that tramps not only increase their numbers and strength when allowed to evade laws, but become all the more insolent and daring. During an eight months' sojourn with tramps, I have seen policemen and justices time after time simply order roving vagrants "out of town," when there was plenty of evidence to have punished the fellows in workhouses and jails. And the reader must not forget that whenever a tramp comes before a justice on a charge of begging or vagrancy, the taxpayer is mulcted even though the tramp is allowed to leave town.

The rougher elements of our larger towns, especially youths between fifteen and eighteen years of age, form another source from which trampdom draws life and sustenance. Whenever a tramp or a crowd of beggars stop for a short time in some good-sized town friendly to roadsters, the young roughs of the place invariably mix with the gathering, and as far as possible enter into the spirit of the meeting. I have never been in a town a day (with the exception of a few New England places) without becoming acquainted with some of the "town kids," who are probably termed by their neighbors "bad boys." For a long time it was a question with me why these young fellows found any interest in a tramps' meeting, as often it is impossible to get them to leave their homes and become beggars. While traveling out West, however, I noticed that they were much more easily persuaded to go on the road. I cannot explain this otherwise than that the Western youths are more adventurous. At any rate, they entered much more heartily into tramp conversations than did Eastern boys. As a rule, tramps make it their custom to spend Sundays in some town celebrated for its hospitality. They gather about the railway watering-tank or "section shanty," talk, gamble for pennies if they have any, read stray newspapers, and interest the town adventurers with tale after tale. Sometimes a member of the crowd will be a tattooer, and as the "town fellows" are usually anxious to be decorated, this man will very often pass away an entire Sunday in painting pictures of the most objectionable sort on their backs, breasts, legs, and arms. That the reader may understand more intelligently how youths are converted to trampdom at these Sunday meetings, I shall give a description of a "revival" held in Madison, Wisconsin, one Sunday, at which I was a hanger-on, although not an exhorter.

I had stopped here with Illinois Blackie (a

notorious tramp and lover of "kids"), to wait till Monday, if possible. My companion was very anxious to find a boy to travel with him and beg for him. So on Sunday morning, while looking for his breakfast, he was careful to suggest to every likely young "mucker" that he met to come over to the railway watering-tank, where a crowd of tramps were stopping. In the afternoon some thirteen boys appeared at the "hang-out." They were of all ages: the youngest was twelve and the oldest nineteen years old. As far as I could learn, they were the scum of Madison's lowest society. One of them had already been in a reform school, and all were probably candidates for that institution. They were very much interested in the stories and adventures, and most of them said that they were constant visitors at the watering-tank gatherings. The afternoon passed away in story-telling and lying. Blackie was so anxious to "snare" a colored boy that he told the most fanciful stories I have ever heard in my life. And it was ludicrous indeed to see with what wonder and credulity the little chap listened to them. It was clear that the old tramp made the greatest impression on the lad when telling him how he could ride on freight-trains for nothing, and explained to him all the intricacies of adventure, from a journey on the trucks of an express-train to a peaceful jaunt on top of a slow-going "way-freight." It is this possibility of "riding everywhere" that brings many a boy into trampdom.

A very definite proportion of the recruits gained every year by trampdom is traceable to the reform schools. In making this statement I do not by any means intend injustice to institutions which are capable of so much benefit to society; but it is a fact worthy of minute and earnest consideration that nearly all tramps have during some part of their lives been charges of the State in its reformatories. Before attempting a description of the defects of the present reform-school system, which directly and indirectly forces boys into trampdom, it seems best to find out what sort of boys are usually sent to these schools.

In America the moment a parent is willing to commit a boy to the care of the law—a justice or judge seems to have but one duty to perform—to send him to a reformatory. Perhaps the boy is an illegitimate one, and the mother, none too anxious to care for him, claims that he is incorrigible; maybe he is a truant at school and in every way mischievous, or perhaps he has committed some petty theft. It matters not; for when the parents cannot guide and protect him, the State must come to the rescue. As a rule, it is the boy who has teased and annoyed society, and not criminally offended it, that one finds in a reform school. It

is, indeed, seldom that we find in such an institution lads who have done anything worthy of penitentiary punishment, even if their age forbids their going there. And the few instances which the criminal calendars afford us of boys perpetrating heinous crimes cannot show, as a rule, that there was malice aforethought in the act: so that to consider a reformatory boy a confirmed criminal is to do him the greatest injustice. In many instances, too, we find boys in reform schools who in reality have never broken a law—unless it be an offense to be a homeless child. For it is well known how often irresponsible parents simply turn their children into the streets, and make them find an existence as best they can. I think it can be safely said that more than half of the so-called young offenders have by no means sinned so much as they have been sinned against. Nevertheless, they are forced to run all the risks which a reform-school life offers. One of the greatest defects that I have found in reform schools is the apparent inability to hinder the inmates from using a criminal slang and from attempting to pose as penitentiary birds. I am not sure how popular the custom is; but I have found it in vogue in five different States. Many times I have seen boys between thirteen and fifteen years of age enter a school innocent of everything except homelessness and enforced vagrancy, who, when they had been four weeks in contact with those who were well acquainted with all the "ins and outs" of the institution knew nearly as much of tramp lingo as any youngster on the road to-day. When this criminal and vagrant vernacular is once learned, it is but a step to attempt deceptions in the very place where the boy is supposed to be reformed. It is almost impossible for a boy of spirit and companionable inclinations to keep from acquiring reformatory slang. For if the well-initiated inmates discover that he is unwilling to enter into all their schemes and customs, they call him a "sucker" or "softy," and shun his company for fear that he will "tattle on them" and tell the instructor or superintendent about their misdemeanors. Then there is the class called "tough," to be a member of which is the ambition of every mischievous boy. The newcomer must ally himself with one of these. If he is found with the "suckers" or "softies," his life will be miserable; and if he becomes a member of the tough crowd, he stands a fair chance of being demerited and punished until his hope of release before he is of age is almost extinguished. It is nearly impossible to huddle together all sorts of boys convicted of various nuisances and misdemeanors without injurious results; and the sociologist would do well to acquaint himself with the reform-school boy before he studies the tramp begging at his door.

In talking with lads on the road and in reformatories, I have often noticed an unbounded eagerness to discover, if possible, exactly what chances of success they might have either as tramps or thieves. And in every large gathering of tramps, accidental or arranged, the relation of experiences, and the discussion of prospects, hold fast the attention of the younger members of the crowd. They are bound to learn and understand both the failures and fortunes of their elders. Now, although it may momentarily frighten the moralist and the wise penologist, I would suggest that boys be taught in connection with their other studies at reformatories, all that is to be known about their chances for success in following crime or tramping as a vocation. The writer is well aware how contrary this is to present customs; but the chronicling of a few facts may lessen the apparent absurdity of the suggestion. In the first place, it cannot be overlooked that boys are already being informed in both jails and reformatories about roguery and rascality, by teachers qualified only by experiences in wrong-doing. Nothing will draw a crowd of reform-school boys together quicker, and keep them quieter, than a conversation about criminals and tramps; and among tramp "kids," of whom a great number go to reformatories, I have never found one who did not know as much about Jesse James and Blinkey Morgan as any second-rate thief. This being true, why should it be a startling innovation for the teachers themselves to explain all that is known about crime, its possibilities and its failures, pointing the lessons with practical and moral conclusions from which, if the work were well done, the lads must necessarily gather impressions favorable to a clean life? Before this can be done, it is of course necessary that the teacher make a thorough study of crime and its statistics, in order to treat the subject scientifically as well as popularly. He must know the life of the criminal thoroughly, must trace him back to his birth and early training, study his first mischievous offenses and petty crimes, his first imprisonments, know what he did with his ill-gotten gains, and how quickly all thieves run through their stolen money. He must be specially careful in telling his hearers just how long such men have their liberty. Nor would this be so difficult as is generally supposed, for tramps and thieves discuss these subjects in jails more than anything else. I remember a conversation that I heard in a jail in New York State concerning the length of time a thief can ply his trade successfully. Tramps, "kids," and men waiting for trial took part in the discussion. It seemed to be the general opinion of eight prisoners, with one exception, that six months was as long a time

as a thief could naturally expect to be at liberty. One old fellow, who claimed to have been a criminal for over fifteen years, said that eight months had been his experience, but the others considered that phenomenal. When the conversation turned on the keeping of stolen money, I was indeed surprised. Although none of the prisoners were first-class thieves, yet apparently they had all attempted thefts, and were willing to tell what they did with stolen property. Each man declared that his money left him even quicker than it came; and one man, who had already served a term in the penitentiary, said that he could never keep stolen money long enough even to buy a suit of clothes. It went either in drink or gambling.

Let the sociologist acquaint himself with all such information in every possible way, and explain to boys who are being reformed what slim chances there are for criminal success. I am certain that it would do much to dispel the fascination of a roving and criminal life if vivid accounts of the lives and deaths of well-known contemporary scoundrels could be given by wise instructors to reform-school boys, and if they could be brought by such well-pointed lessons to see how overwhelmingly the odds are against a successful career in vagrancy and crime.

The foregoing suggestion of course is not intended to apply indiscriminately to the inmates of reform schools, for often these schools are graded, and some divisions are composed of children hardly yet in their teens. It is not necessary that these should be instructed and tutored on the same lines as boys from fourteen to eighteen years of age.

Simple fascination is also answerable for a good many vagabonds. There is something about a tramp's life which is remarkably attractive to certain people, and especially to people endowed with what the Germans call *Wandertlust*—the love of wandering. I have known men on the road who were tramping purely and simply because they loved to tramp. They had no appetite for liquor or tobacco, and, so far as I could find, also were quite out of touch with criminals and their habits; but, somehow or other, they could not conquer their passion for roving. In a way, this type of vagabond is the most pitiful that I have ever known; and yet it is the truest type of the genuine voluntary vagrant. The drunkard, in a certain sense, is sometimes an enforced vagabond; he cannot live in any other sphere of life. This is also quite true of certain criminals. There are men who have the criminal instinct, but not the criminal's skill, and they drop down into tramp life as a last resort. They find that they lack criminal wit, and take up with vaga-

bondage because it comes the nearest to their ideal. Such a man is occasionally an enforced tramp in the same way that the drunkard is; but the *Wanderlust* vagabond is far different. He is free from the majority of passions common among vagrants, and yet he is the most earnest vagrant of all. To reform him, it is necessary to kill his personality, to take away his main ambition. And this is a task almost superhuman. Even when he is reformed he is a most downcast person.

There is one other cause of vagrancy more potent than all I have described, and its name is — whisky. The love of liquor brings more men and women into trampdom than anything else, and until this fact is more conscientiously recognized there can be no thorough treatment of the tramp. There is no need to enter into details on this subject: all that I can do is to report the fact. The public needs to realize more fully than it now does the awful effects of strong drink on vagabonds. A realization of this fact is likely to be productive of some remedy for the evils it represents. If the tramps of America could be freed from the bondage into which whisky has brought them, there would not be very many vagrants in the country. That the American tramp is the result of the fluctuations of the labor-mar-

ket, as some claim, I do not believe. The American tramp does not want work, as a rule; but I know that he does want to be free from liquor. And if this can be accomplished, I feel safe in saying that he will go to work. Under the influence of drink he becomes a sort of voluntary idler; but if he were temperate, he could be made a valuable citizen.

The principal causes or sources of vagabondage, as I understand them, may be briefly recapitulated:

I. The love of liquor.

II. *Wanderlust*.

III. The county jail, owing to the promiscuous herding of boys and homeless wanderers with criminals.

IV. The tough and rough element in villages and towns.

V. The comparatively innocent but misguided pupils of the reform school.

Though not, properly speaking, a cause of vagabondage, the non-enforcement of law is its nursing mother, and misguided and misapplied charity its base of operations. The tramp evil is not so much a disease as a symptom of public ill-health. As such, and all the more because it is such, it deserves to be more thoroughly investigated, more reasonably apprehended, and more boldly treated.

Josiah Flynt.

A RECESSIONAL.

NOW along the solemn heights
 Fade the autumn's altar lights;
 Down the great earth's glimmering chancel
 Glide the days and nights.

Little kindred of the grass,
 Like a shadow in a glass
 Falls the dark and falls the stillness,—
 We must rise and pass.

We must rise and follow, wending
 Where the nights and days have ending—
 Pass in order pale and slow
 Unto sleep extending.

Little brothers of the clod,
 Soul of fire and seed of sod,
 We must fare into the silence
 At the knees of God.

Little comrades of the sky,
 Wing to wing we wander by,
 Going, going, going, going,
 Softer than a sigh.

Hark! the moving shapes confer—
 Globe of dew and gossamer,
 Fading and ephemeral spirits
 In the dusk astir.

Moth and blossom, blade and bee,
 Worlds must go as well as we,
 In the long procession joining—
 Mount and star and sea.

Toward the shadowy brink we climb,
 Where the round year rolls sublime—
 Rolls, and drops, and falls forever
 In the vast of Time:

Like a plummet plunging deep
 Past the utmost reach of sleep,
 Till remembrance hath no longer
 Care to laugh or weep.

Charles G. D. Roberts.