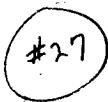


THE TRAMP

BY
JACK LONDON



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THE TRAMP

JACK LONDON

Mr. Francis O'Neil, General Superintendent of Police, Chicago, speaking of the tramps, says:* "Despite the most stringent police regulations, a great city will have a certain number of homeless vagrants to shelter through the winter." "*Despite*"—mark the word—a confession of organized helplessness as against unorganized necessity. If police regulations are stringent and yet fail, then that which makes them fail, namely, the tramp, must have still more stringent reasons for succeeding. This being so, it should be of interest to enquire into these reasons, to attempt to discover why the nameless and homeless vagrant sets at naught the right arm of the corporate power of our great cities, why all that is weak and worthless is stronger than all that is strong and of value.

Mr. O'Neil is a man of wide experience on the subject of tramps. He may be called

*The Saturday Evening Post, Nov. 23, 1904.

a specialist. As he says of himself: "As an old-time desk sergeant and police captain, I have had almost unlimited opportunity to study and analyze this class of floating population which seeks the city in winter and scatters abroad through the country in the spring." He then continues:

"This experience reiterated the lesson that the vast majority of these wanderers are of the class with whom a life of vagrancy is a chosen means of living without work." Not only is it to be inferred from this that there is a large class in society which lives without work, for Mr. O'Neil's testimony further shows that this class is *forced* to live without work.

As he says: "I have been astonished at the multitude of those who have unfortunately engaged in occupations which practically force them to become loafers for at least a third of the year. And it is from this class that the tramps are largely recruited. I recall a certain winter when it seemed to me that a large portion of the inhabitants of Chicago belonged to this army of unfortunates. I was stationed at a police station not far from where an ice harvest was ready for the cutters. The ice company advertised for helpers, and the very night this call appeared in the newspapers our station was packed with homeless men who asked for shelter in order to

be at hand for the morning's work. Every foot of floor space was given over to these lodgers and scores were still unaccommodated."

And again: "And it must be confessed that the man who is willing to do honest labor for food and shelter is a rare specimen in this vast army of shabby and tattered wanderers who seek the warmth of the city with the coming of the first snow." Taking into consideration the crowd of honest laborers that swamped Mr. O'Neil's station house on the way to the ice-cutting, it is patent, if all tramps were looking for honest labor instead of a small minority, that the honest laborers would have a far harder task finding something honest to do for food and shelter. If the opinion of the honest laborers who swamped Mr. O'Neil's station house were asked, one could rest confident that each and every man would express a preference for fewer honest laborers on the morrow when he asked the ice-foreman for a job.

And finally, Mr. O'Neil says: "The humane and generous treatment which this city has accorded the great army of homeless unfortunates has made it the victim of wholesale imposition, and this well-intended policy of kindness has resulted in making Chicago the winter Mecca of a vast and undesirable floating population." That is to

say, because of her kindness, Chicago had more than her fair share of tramps; because she was humane and generous she suffered wholesale imposition. From this we must conclude that it does not do to be *humane* and *generous* to our fellow men . . . when they are tramps. Mr. O'Neil is right, and that this is no sophism it is the intention of this article, among other things, to prove.

In a general way we may draw the following inferences from the remarks of Mr. O'Neil: (1) The tramp is stronger than organized society and cannot be put down. (2) The tramp is "shabby," "tattered," "homeless," "unfortunate." (3) There are a "vast" number of tramps. (4) Very few tramps are willing to do honest work. (5) Those tramps who are willing to do honest work have to hunt very hard to find it. (6) The tramp is undesirable.

To this latter let the contention be appended that the tramp is only *personally* undesirable; that he is *negatively* desirable; that the function he performs in society is a negative function; and that he is the by-product of economic necessity.

It is very easy to demonstrate that there are more men than there is work for men. For instance, what would happen tomorrow if one hundred thousand tramps should become suddenly inspired with an overmaster-

ing desire for work? It is a fair question. "Go to work" is preached to the tramp every day of his life. The judge on the bench, the pedestrian in the street, the housewife at the kitchen door, all unite in advising him to go to work. So, what would happen tomorrow if one hundred thousand tramps acted upon this advice and strenuously and indomitably sought work? Why, by the end of the week one hundred thousand workers, their places taken by the tramps, would receive their time and be "hitting the road" for a job.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox unwittingly and uncomfortably demonstrated the disparity between men and work. She made a casual reference, in a newspaper column she conducts, to the difficulty two business men found in obtaining good employes. The first morning mail brought her seventy-five applications for the position, and at the end of two weeks over two hundred people had applied.

Still more striking was the same proposition demonstrated this past summer in San Francisco. A sympathetic strike called out a whole federation of trades unions. Thousands of men, in many branches of trade, quit work—draymen, sand teamsters, porters and packers, longshoremen, stevedores, warehousemen, stationary engineers, sailors, marine firemen, stewards, sea cooks, and so

forth and so forth, an interminable list. It was a strike of large proportions. Every Pacific coast shipping city was involved, and the entire coasting service from San Diego to Puget Sound was virtually tied up. The time was considered auspicious. The Philippines and Alaska had drained the Pacific coast of surplus labor. It was summertime, when the agricultural demand for laborers was at its height, and when the cities were bare of their floating populations. And yet there remained a body of surplus labor sufficient to take the places of the strikers. No matter what occupation—sea cook or stationary engineer, sand teamster or warehouseman—in every case there was an idle worker ready to do the work. And not only ready, but anxious. They fought for a chance to work. Men were killed, hundreds of heads were broken, the hospitals were filled with injured men, and thousands of assaults were committed. And still surplus laborers, "scabs," came forward to replace the strikers.

The question arises: *Whence came this second army of workers to replace the first army?* One thing is certain: the trades unions did not scab on one another. Another thing is certain: no industry on the Pacific slope was crippled in the slightest degree by its workers being drawn away to fill the places of the strikers. A third thing

is certain: the agricultural workers did not flock to the cities to replace the strikers. In this last instance it is worth while to note that the agricultural laborers wailed to high heaven when a few of the strikers went into the country to compete with them in unskilled employments. So there is no accounting for this second army of workers. It simply was. It was there all the time, a surplus labor army in that year of Our Lord, 1903, a year adjudged most prosperous in the annals of the United States.

And this particular strike is analogous to all other strikes. Always, no matter what or where the strike, or how far-reaching, always have the tools dropped by one set of men been taken up by another set of men.

THE SURPLUS LABOR ARMY.

The existence of the surplus labor army being established, there remains to be established the economic necessity for the surplus labor army. The simplest and most obvious need is that brought about by the fluctuation of production. If, when production is at low ebb, all men are at work, it necessarily follows that when production increases there will be no men to do the increased work. This may seem almost childish, and if not childish, at least easily remedied. At low-ebb let the men work shorter time; at high-flood let them work over-time. The main objection to this is

that it is not done, and that we are considering what is, not what might be or should be.

Then there are great irregular and periodical demands for labor which must be met. Under the first head come all the big building and engineering enterprises. When a canal is to be dug, or a railroad put through, requiring thousands of laborers, it would be hurtful to withdraw these laborers from the constant industries. And whether it is a canal to be dug or a cellar, whether five thousand men are required or five, it is well, in society as at present organized, that they be taken from the surplus labor army. The surplus labor army is the reserve fund of social energy, and this is one of the reasons for its existence.

Under the second head, periodical demands, come the harvests. Throughout the year huge labor tides sweep back and forth across the United States. That which is sown and tended by few men, comes to sudden ripeness and must be gathered by many men; and it is inevitable that these many men form floating populations. In the late spring the berries must be picked, and in the summer the grain garnered, in the fall the hops gathered, in the winter the ice harvested. In California a man may pick berries in Siskiyou, peaches in Santa Clara, grapes in San Joaquin, and oranges in Los Angeles, going from job to job as the season

advances and traveling a thousand miles ere the season is done. But the great demand for agricultural labor is in the summer. In the winter, work is slack, and these floating populations eddy into the cities to eke out a precarious existence and harrow the souls of the police officers until the return of warm weather and work. If there were constant work at good wages for every man, who else would harvest the crops? And society, after the centuries, cannot say who else.

THE LASH OF THE MASTER.

But the last and most significant need for the surplus labor army remains to be stated: This surplus labor acts as a check upon all employed labor. It is the lash by which the masters hold the workers to their tasks or drive them back to their tasks when they have revolted. It is the goad which forces the workers into the compulsory "free contracts" against which they now and again rebel. There is only one reason under the sun that strikes fail, and that is because there are always plenty of men to take the strikers' places. This is indisputable.

The strength of the union today, other things remaining equal, is proportionate to the skill of the trade, or, in other words, proportionate to the pressure the surplus labor army can put upon it. If a thousand

ditch-diggers strike it is easy to replace them, wherefore the ditch-diggers have little or no organized strength. But a thousand highly skilled machinists are somewhat harder to replace, and in consequence the machinist unions are strong. The ditch-diggers are wholly at the mercy of the surplus labor army, the machinists only partly. To be invincible, a union must be a monopoly. It must control every man in its particular trade and regulate apprentices so that the supply of skilled workmen remain constant—this is the dream of the "Labor Trust" on the part of the captains of labor.

Once, in England, after the Great Plague, labor awoke to find there was more work for men than there were men to work. Instead of workers competing for favors from employers, employers were competing for favors from the workers. Wages went up, and up, and continued to go up, until the workers demanded the full product of their toil. Now it is clear that when labor receives its full product capital must perish. And so the pigmy capitalists of that post-Plague day found their existence threatened by this untoward condition of affairs. To save themselves they set a maximum wage, restrained the workers from moving about from place to place, smashed incipient organization, refused to tolerate idlers, and by most barbarous legal penalties punished

those who disobeyed. After that, things went on as before.

THE ANCHOR OF CAPITALISM.

The point of this, of course, is to demonstrate the need of the surplus labor army. Without such an army our present capitalist society would be powerless. Labor would organize as it never organized before, and the last least worker would be gathered into the unions. The full product of toil would be demanded, and capitalist society would crumble away. Nor could capitalist society save itself as did the post-Plague capitalist society. The time is past when a handful of masters, by imprisonment and barbarous punishment, can drive the legions of the workers to their tasks. Without a surplus labor army, the courts, police and military are impotent. In such matters the function of the courts, police and military is to preserve order and fill the places of strikers with surplus labor. If there be no surplus labor to instate, there is no function; for disorder only arises during the process of instatement when the striking labor army and the surplus labor army clash together. That is to say, that which subserves the integrity of the present industrial society more potently than the courts, police and military, is the surplus labor army.

It has been shown that there are more men than there is work for men, and that the surplus labor army is an economic necessity. To show how the tramp is a by-product of this economic necessity, it is necessary to inquire into the composition of the surplus labor army. What men form it? Why are they there? What do they do?

THE INEFFICIENTS.

In the first place, since the workers must compete for employment, it inevitably follows that it is the fit and efficient who find employment. The skilled worker holds his place by virtue of his skill and efficiency. Were he less skilled, or were he unreliable or erratic, he would be swiftly replaced by a stronger competitor. The skilled and steady employments are not cumbered with clowns and idiots. A man finds his place according to his ability and the needs of the system, and those without ability or incapable of satisfying the needs of the system, have no place. Thus, the poor telegrapher may develop into an excellent woodchopper. But if the poor telegrapher cherishes the delusion that he is a good telegrapher, and at the same time disdains all other employments, he will have no employment at all, or he will be so poor at all other employments that he will work only now and again in lieu of better men. He will be among the

first let off when times are dull, and among the last taken on when times are good. Or, to the point, he will be a member of the surplus labor army.

So the conclusion is reached that the less fit and less efficient, or the unfit and inefficient, compose the surplus labor army. Here are to be found the men who have tried and failed, the men who cannot hold jobs—the plumber apprentice who could not become a journeyman, and the plumber journeyman too clumsy and dull to retain employment; switchmen who throw trains, clerks who cannot balance books, blacksmiths who lame horses, lawyers who cannot plead; in short, the failures of every trade and profession, and failures many of them in divers trades and professions. Failure is writ large, and in their wretchedness they bear the stamp of social disapprobation. Common work, any kind of work, wherever or however they can obtain it, is their portion.

But these hereditary inefficients do not alone compose the surplus labor army. There are the skilled but unsteady and unreliable men, and the old men, once skilled but, with dwindling life, no longer skilled. And there are good men, too, splendidly skilled and efficient, but thrust out of employment of dying or disaster-smitten industries. In this connection it is not out of

place to note the misfortune of the workers in the British iron trades who are suffering because of American inroads. And last of all, are the unskilled laborers, the hewers of wood and drawers of water, the ditch-diggers, the men of pick and shovel, the helpers, lumpers, roustabouts. If trade is slack on a seacoast of two thousand miles, or the harvest light in a great interior valley, myriads of these laborers lie idle or make life miserable for their fellows in kindred unskilled employments.

A constant filtration goes on in the working world, and good material is continually drawn from the surplus labor army. Strikes and industrial dislocations shake up the workers, fetch good men to the surface and sink men not so good. After the Pullman strike a few thousand railroad men were chagrined to find the work they had flung down taken up by men as good as themselves.

But one thing must be considered here. Under the present system, if the weakest and least fit were as strong and fit as the best, and were the best proportionately stronger and fitter, the same condition would obtain. There would be the same army of unemployed labor, the same army of surplus labor. The whole thing is relative. There is no absolute standard of efficiency.

THE TRAMP NECESSARY.

Comes now the tramp. And all conclusions may be anticipated by saying at once that he is a tramp because some one had to be a tramp. If he left the "road" and became a *very* efficient common laborer, some *ordinary* efficient common laborer would have to take to the "road." The nooks and crannies are crowded by the surplus laborers, and when the first snow flies and the tramps are driven into the cities, things become overcrowded and stringent police regulations are necessary.

The tramp is one of two kinds of men: he is either a discouraged worker or a discouraged criminal. Now a discouraged criminal, on investigation, proves to be a discouraged worker or a descendant of discouraged workers; so that in the last analysis the tramp is a discouraged worker. Since there is not work for all, discouragement for some is unavoidable. How, then, does this process of discouragement operate?

The lower the employment in the industrial scale, the harder the conditions. The finer, the more delicate, the more skilled the trade, the higher it is lifted above the struggle. There is less pressure, less sordidness, less savagery. There are fewer glass blowers proportionate to the needs of the glass-

blowing industry than there are ditch-diggers to the ditch-digging industry. And not only this, for it requires a glass blower to take the place of a striking glass blower, while any kind of a striker or out-of-work can take the place of a ditch-digger. So the skilled trades are more independent, have more individuality and latitude. They may confer with their masters, make demands, assert themselves. The unskilled laborers, on the other hand, have no voice in their affairs. The settlement of terms is none of their business. "Free contract" is all that remains to them. They may take what is offered or leave it. There are plenty more of their kind. They do not count. They are members of the surplus labor army and must be content with a hand to mouth existence.

The reward is likewise proportioned. The strong, fit worker in a skilled trade, where there is little labor pressure, is well compensated. He is a king compared with his less fortunate brothers in the unskilled occupations where the labor pressure is great. The mediocre worker not only is forced to be idle a large portion of the time, but when employed is forced to accept a pittance. A dollar a day on some days and nothing on others will hardly support a man and wife and send children to school. And not only do the masters bear heavily

upon him, and his own kind struggle for the morsel at his mouth, but all skilled and organized labor adds to his woe. Union men do not scab on one another, but in strikes or when work is slack it is considered "fair" for them to descend and take away the work of the common laborers. And take it away they do, for, as a matter of fact, a well-fed, ambitious machinist or coremaker will transiently shovel coal better than an ill-fed, spiritless laborer.

Thus there is no encouragement for the unfit, inefficient and mediocre. Their very inefficiency and mediocrity make them helpless as cattle and add to their misery. And the whole tendency for such is downward, until, at the bottom of the social pit, they are wretched, inarticulate beasts, living like beasts, breeding like beasts, dying like beasts. And how do they fare, these creatures born mediocre, whose heritage is neither brains nor brawn nor endurance? They are sweated in the slums in an atmosphere of discouragement and despair. There is no strength in weakness, no encouragement in foul air, vile food, and dank dens. They are there because they are so made that they are not fit to be higher up; but filth and obscenity do not strengthen the neck, nor does chronic emptiness of belly stiffen the back.

For the mediocre there is no hope. Medi-

ocricity is a sin. Poverty is the penalty of failure—poverty, from whose loins spring the criminal and the tramp, both failures, both discouraged workers. Poverty is the inferno where ignorance festers and vice corrodes, and where the physical, mental and moral parts of human nature are aborted and denied.

DETAILS OF THE PICTURE.

That the charge of rashness in splashing the picture be not incurred, let the following authoritative evidence be considered: First, the work and wages of mediocrity and inefficiency, and second, the habits.

The *New York Sun* of February 28, 1901, describes the opening of a factory in New York City by the American Tobacco Company. Cheroots were to be made in this factory in competition with other factories which refused to be absorbed by the trust. The trust advertised for girls. The crowd of men and boys who wanted work was so great in front of the building that the police were forced with their clubs to clear them away. The wage paid the girls was \$2.50 per week, sixty cents of which went for car fare.

Miss Nellie Mason Auten, a graduate student of the department of sociology at the University of Chicago, recently made a thorough investigation of the garment

trades of Chicago. Her figures were published in the *American Journal of Sociology* and commented upon by the *Literary Digest*. She found women working ten hours a day, six days a week, for forty cents per week (a rate of two-thirds of a cent an hour). Many women earned less than a dollar a week, and none of them worked every week. The following table will best summarize Miss Auten's investigations among a portion of the garment workers:

	Average Individual weekly wages.	Average Number of weeks employed.	Average yearly earnings.
Dressmakers	\$.90	42.	\$37.00
Pants finishers	1.31	27.58	42.41
Housewives and pants finishers	1.58	30.21	47.49
Seamstresses	2.03	32.78	64.10
Pants makers	2.13	30.77	75.61
Miscellaneous	2.77	29.	81.80
Tailors	6.22	31.96	211.92
General average	\$2.48	31.18	\$76.74

Walter A. Wyckoff, who is as great an authority upon the worker as Josiah Flynt is on the tramp, furnishes the following Chicago experience:

"Many of the men were so weakened by the want and hardship of the winter that they were no longer in condition for effective labor. Some of the bosses who were in

need of added hands were obliged to turn men away because of physical incapacity. One instance of this I shall not soon forget. It was when I overheard, early one morning, at a factory gate, an interview between a would-be laborer and the boss. I knew the applicant for a Russian-Jew, who had at home an old mother and a wife and two young children to support. He had had intermittent employment throughout the winter in a sweater's den, barely enough to keep them all alive, and, after the hardships of the cold season, he was again in desperate straits for work.

"The boss had all but agreed to take him on for some sort of unskilled labor, when, struck by the cadaverous look of the man, he told him to bare his arm. Up went the sleeve of his coat and his ragged flannel shirt, exposing a naked arm with the muscles nearly gone, and the blue-white transparent skin stretched over sinews and the outline of the bones. Pitiful beyond words were his efforts to give a semblance of strength to the biceps which rose faintly to the upward movement of the forearm. But the boss sent him off with an oath and a contemptuous laugh, and I watched the fellow as he turned down the street, facing the fact of his starving family with a despair at his heart which only mortal man can feel and no mortal tongue can speak."

Concerning habitat, Mr. Jacob Riis states that in New York City in the block bounded by Stanton, Houston, Attorney and Ridge streets, the size of which is 200x300, there is a warren of 2,244 human beings.

In the block bounded by Sixty-first and Sixty-second streets, and Amsterdam and West End avenues, are over four thousand human creatures—quite a comfortable New England village to crowd into one city block.

The Rev. Dr. Behrends, speaking of the block bounded by Canal, Hester, Eldridge and Forsyth streets, says: "In a room 12x8 and 5½ feet high, it was found that nine persons slept and prepared their food. . . . In another room, located in a dark cellar, without screens or partitions, were together, two men with their wives and a girl of fourteen, two single men and a boy of seventeen, two women and four boys—nine, ten, eleven and fifteen years old—fourteen persons in all."

Here humanity rots. Its victims, with grim humor, call it "Tenement-House Rot." Or, as a legislative report puts it: "Here infantile life unfolds its bud, but perishes before its first anniversary. Here youth is ugly with loathsome disease and the deformities which follow physical degeneration."

THE CALL OF THE "ROAD."

These are the men and women who are what they are because they are not better born, or because they happen to be unluckily born in time and space. Gauged by the needs of the system, they are weak and worthless. The hospital and the pauper's grave await them, and they offer no encouragement to the mediocre worker who has failed higher up in the industrial fabric. Such a worker, conscious that he has failed, conscious from the hard fact that he cannot obtain work in the higher employments, finds several courses open to him. He may come down and be a beast in the social pit, for instance; but if he be of a certain calibre, the effect of the social pit will be to discourage him from work. In his blood a rebellion will quicken, and he will elect to become either a felon or a tramp.

If he has fought the hard fight, he is not unacquainted with the lure of the "road." When out of work and still undiscouraged, he has been forced to "hit the road" between large cities in his quest for a job. He has loafed, seen the country and green things, laughed in joy, laid on his back and listened to the birds singing overhead, unannoyed by factory whistles and bosses' harsh commands; and, most significant of all, *he has lived*. That is the point! Not

only has he been care-free and happy, but he has lived! And from the knowledge that he has idled and is still alive, he achieves a new outlook on life; and the more he experiences the unenviable lot of the poor worker, the more the blandishments of the "road" take hold of him. And finally he flings his challenge in the face of society, imposes a valorous boycott on all work, and joins the far-wanderers of Hobo-land, the gipsy-folk of this latter day.

But the tramp does not usually come from the slums. His place of birth is ordinarily a bit above, and sometimes a very great bit above. A confessed failure, he yet refuses to accept the punishment and swerves aside from the slum to vagabondage. The average beast in the social pit is either too much of a beast, or too much of a slave to the orthodox ethics and ideals of his masters, to manifest this flicker of rebellion. But the social pit, out of its discouragement and viciousness, breeds criminals, men who prefer to be beasts of prey over being beasts of work. And the mediocre criminal, in turn, the unfit and inefficient criminal, is discouraged by the strong arm of the law and goes over to trampdom.

These men, the discouraged worker and the discouraged criminal, voluntarily withdraw themselves from the struggle for work. Industry does not need them. There

are no factories shut down through lack of labor, no projected railroads unbuilt for want of pick and shovel men. Women are still glad to toil for a dollar a week, and men and boys to clamor and fight for work at the factory gates. No one misses these discouraged men, and in going away they have made it somewhat easier for those that remain.

CONCLUSIONS.

So the case stands thus: There being more men than there is work for men, a surplus labor army inevitably results. The surplus labor army is an economic necessity; without it the present construction of society would fall to pieces. Into the surplus labor army are herded the mediocre, the inefficient, the unfit, and those incapable of satisfying the industrial needs of the system. The struggle for work between the members of the surplus labor army is sordid and savage, and at the bottom of the social pit the struggle is vicious and beastly. This struggle tends to discouragement, and the victims of this discouragement are the criminal and the tramp. The tramp is not an economic necessity such as the surplus labor army, but he is the by-product of an economic necessity.

The "road" is one of the safety valves through which the waste of the social or-

ganism is given off. And *being given off* constitutes the negative function of the tramp. Society, as at present organized, makes much waste of human life. This waste must be eliminated. Chloroform or electrocution would be a simple, merciful solution of this problem of elimination; but the ruling ethics, while permitting the human waste, will not permit a humane elimination of that waste. This paradox demonstrates the irreconcilability of theoretical ethics and industrial need.

And so the tramp becomes self-eliminating. And not only self! Since he is manifestly unfit for things as they are, and since kind is prone to beget kind, it is necessary that his kind cease with him, that his progeny shall not be, that he play the eunuch's part in this twentieth century after Christ. And he plays it. He does not breed. Sterility is his portion, as it is the portion of the woman on the street. They might have been mates, but society has decreed otherwise.

And while it is not nice that these men should die, it is ordained that they must die, and we should not quarrel with them if they cumber our highways and kitchen stoops with their perambulating carcasses. This is a form of elimination we not only countenance but compel. Therefore let us be cheerful and honest about it. Let us be

as stringent as we please with our police regulations, but for goodness' sake let us refrain from telling the tramp to go to work. Not only is it unkind, but it is untrue and hypocritical. We know there is no work for him. And though we may not know, we should know that it is our duty to know, that he is, in a way, a hero. As the scapegoat to our economic and industrial sinning, or to the plan of things, if you will, we should give him credit. Let us be just. He is so made. Society made him. He did not make himself.

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