

Pictures

Jack London

“What do it matter where or ’ow we die,

So long as we’ve our ’ealth to watch it all?”

—Sestina of the Tramp-Royal

Perhaps the greatest charm of tramp-life is the absence of monotony. In Hobo Land the face of life is protean—an ever changing phantasmagoria, where the impossible happens and the unexpected jumps out of the bushes at every turn of the road. The hobo never knows what is going to happen the next moment; hence, he lives only in the present moment. He has learned the futility of telic endeavor, and knows the delight of drifting along with the whimsicalities of Chance.

Often I think over my tramp days, and ever I marvel at the swift succession of pictures that flash up in my memory. It matters not where I begin to think; any day of all the days is a day apart, with a record of swift-moving pictures all its own. For instance, I remember a sunny summer morning in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and immediately comes to my mind the auspicious beginning of the day—a “set-down” with two maiden ladies, and not in their kitchen, but in their dining room, with them beside me at the table. We ate eggs, out of egg-cups! It was the first time I had ever seen egg-cups, or heard of egg-cups! I was a bit awkward at first, I’ll confess; but I was hungry and unabashed. I mastered the egg-cup, and I mastered the eggs in a way that made those two maiden ladies sit up.

Why, they ate like a couple of canaries, dabbling with the one egg each they took, and nibbling at tiny wafers of toast. Life was low in their bodies; their blood ran thin; and they had slept warm all night. I had been out all night, consuming much fuel of my body to keep warm, beating my way down from a place called Emporium, in the northern part of the state. Wafers of toast! Out of sight! But each wafer was no more than a mouthful to me—nay, no more than a bite. It is tedious to have to reach for another piece of toast each bite when one is potential with many bites.

When I was a very little lad, I had a very little dog called Punch. I saw to his feeding myself. Some one in the household had shot a lot of ducks, and we had a fine meat dinner. When I had finished, I prepared Punch’s dinner—a large plateful of bones and tidbits. I went outside to give it to him. Now it happened that a visitor had ridden over from a neighboring ranch, and with

him had come a Newfoundland dog as big as a calf. I set the plate on the ground. Punch wagged his tail and began. He had before him a blissful half-hour at least. There was a sudden rush. Punch was brushed aside like a straw in the path of a cyclone, and that Newfoundland swooped down upon the plate. In spite of his huge maw he must have been trained to quick lunches, for, in the fleeting instant before he received the kick in the ribs I aimed at him, he completely engulfed the contents of the plate. He swept it clean. One last lingering lick of his tongue removed even the grease stains.

As that big Newfoundland behaved at the plate of my dog Punch, so behaved I at the table of those two maiden ladies of Harrisburg. I swept it bare. I didn't break anything, but I cleaned out the eggs and the toast and the coffee. The servant brought more, but I kept her busy, and ever she brought more and more. The coffee was delicious, but it needn't have been served in such tiny cups. What time had I to eat when it took all my time to prepare the many cups of coffee for drinking?

At any rate, it gave my tongue time to wag. Those two maiden ladies, with their pink-and-white complexions and gray curls, had never looked upon the bright face of adventure. As the "Tramp-Royal" would have it, they had worked all their lives "on one same shift." Into the sweet scents and narrow confines of their uneventful existence I brought the large airs of the world, freighted with the lusty smells of sweat and strife, and with the tangs and odors of strange lands and soils. And right well I scratched their soft palms with the callous on my own palms—the half-inch horn that comes of pull-and-haul of rope and long and arduous hours of caressing shovel-handles. This I did, not merely in the braggadocio of youth, but to prove, by toil performed, the claim I had upon their charity.

Ah, I can see them now, those dear, sweet ladies, just as I sat at their breakfast table twelve years ago, discoursing upon the way of my feet in the world, brushing aside their kindly counsel as a real devilish fellow should, and thrilling them, not alone with my own adventures, but with the adventures of all the other fellows with whom I had rubbed shoulders and exchanged confidences. I appropriated them all, the adventures of the other fellows, I mean; and if those maiden ladies had been less trustful and guileless, they could have tangled me up beautifully in my chronology. Well, well, and what of it? It was fair exchange. For their many cups of coffee, and eggs, and bites of toast, I gave full value. Right royally I gave them entertainment. My coming to sit at their table was their adventure, and adventure is beyond price anyway.

Coming along the street, after parting from the maiden ladies, I gathered in a newspaper from the doorway of some late-riser, and in a grassy park lay down to get in touch with the last twenty-four hours of the world. There, in the park, I met a fellow-hobo who told me his life-story and who wrestled with me to join the United States Army. He had given in to the recruiting officer and was just about to join, and he couldn't see why I shouldn't join with him. He had been a member of Coxey's Army in the march to Washington several months

before, and that seemed to have given him a taste for army life. I, too, was a veteran, for had I not been a private in Company L of the Second Division of Kelly's Industrial Army?—said Company L being commonly known as the “Nevada push.” But my army experience had had the opposite effect on me; so I left that hobo to go his way to the dogs of war, while I “threw my feet” for dinner.

This duty performed, I started to walk across the bridge over the Susquehanna to the west shore. I forget the name of the railroad that ran down that side, but while lying in the grass in the morning the idea had come to me to go to Baltimore; so to Baltimore I was going on that railroad, whatever its name was. It was a warm afternoon, and part way across the bridge I came to a lot of fellows who were in swimming off one of the piers. Off went my clothes and in went I. The water was fine; but when I came out and dressed, I found I had been robbed. Some one had gone through my clothes. Now I leave it to you if being robbed isn't in itself adventure enough for one day. I have known men who have been robbed and who have talked all the rest of their lives about it. True, the thief that went through my clothes didn't get much—some thirty or forty cents in nickels and pennies, and my tobacco and cigarette papers; but it was all I had, which is more than most men can be robbed of, for they have something left at home, while I had no home. It was a pretty tough gang in swimming there. I sized up, and knew better than to squeal. So I begged “the makings,” and I could have sworn it was one of my own papers I rolled the tobacco in.

Then on across the bridge I hiked to the west shore. Here ran the railroad I was after. No station was in sight. How to catch a freight without walking to a station was the problem. I noticed that the track came up a steep grade, culminating at the point where I had tapped it, and I knew that a heavy freight couldn't pull up there any too lively. But how lively? On the opposite side of the track rose a high bank. On the edge, at the top, I saw a man's head sticking up from the grass. Perhaps he knew how fast the freights took the grade, and when the next one went south. I called out my questions to him, and he motioned to me to come up.

I obeyed, and when I reached the top, I found four other men lying in the grass with him. I took in the scene and knew them for what they were—American gypsies. In the open space that extended back among the trees from the edge of the bank were several nondescript wagons. Ragged, half-naked children swarmed over the camp, though I noticed that they took care not to come near and bother the men-folk. Several lean, unbeautiful, and toil-degraded women were pottering about with camp-chores, and one I noticed who sat by herself on the seat of one of the wagons, her head drooped forward, her knees drawn up to her chin and clasped limply by her arms. She did not look happy. She looked as if she did not care for anything—in this I was wrong, for later I was to learn that there was something for which she did care. The full measure of human suffering was in her face, and, in addition, there was the tragic expression of incapacity for further suffering. Nothing could hurt any more, was what her face seemed to portray; but in this, too, I was wrong.

I lay in the grass on the edge of the steep and talked with the men-folk. We were kin—brothers. I was the American hobo, and they were the American gypsy. I knew enough of their argot for conversation, and they knew enough of mine. There were two more in their gang, who were across the river “mushing” in Harrisburg. A “musher” is an itinerant fakir. This word is not to be confounded with the Klondike “musher,” though the origin of both terms may be the same; namely, the corruption of the French *marche ons*, to march, to walk, to “mush.” The particular graft of the two mushers who had crossed the river was umbrella-mending; but what real graft lay behind their umbrella-mending, I was not told, nor would it have been polite to ask.

It was a glorious day. Not a breath of wind was stirring, and we basked in the shimmering warmth of the sun. From everywhere arose the drowsy hum of insects, and the balmy air was filled with scents of the sweet earth and the green growing things. We were too lazy to do more than mumble on in intermittent conversation. And then, all abruptly, the peace and quietude was jarred awry by man.

Two bare-legged boys of eight or nine in some minor way broke some rule of the camp—what it was I did not know; and a man who lay beside me suddenly sat up and called to them. He was chief of the tribe, a man with narrow forehead and narrow-slitted eyes, whose thin lips and twisted sardonic features explained why the two boys jumped and tensed like startled deer at the sound of his voice. The alertness of fear was in their faces, and they turned, in a panic, to run. He called to them to come back, and one boy lagged behind reluctantly, his meagre little frame portraying in pantomime the struggle within him between fear and reason. He wanted to come back. His intelligence and past experience told him that to come back was a lesser evil than to run on; but lesser evil that it was, it was great enough to put wings to his fear and urge his feet to flight.

Still he lagged and struggled until he reached the shelter of the trees, where he halted. The chief of the tribe did not pursue. He sauntered over to a wagon and picked up a heavy whip. Then he came back to the centre of the open space and stood still. He did not speak. He made no gestures. He was the Law, pitiless and omnipotent. He merely stood there and waited. And I knew, and all knew, and the two boys in the shelter of the trees knew, for what he waited.

The boy who had lagged slowly came back. His face was stamped with quivering resolution. He did not falter. He had made up his mind to take his punishment. And mark you, the punishment was not for the original offence, but for the offence of running away. And in this, that tribal chieftain but behaved as behaves the exalted society in which he lived. We punish our criminals, and when they escape and run away, we bring them back and add to their punishment.

Straight up to the chief the boy came, halting at the proper distance for the swing of the lash. The whip hissed through the air, and I caught myself with a start of surprise at the weight of the blow. The thin little leg was so very thin and little. The flesh showed white where the lash had curled and bitten, and then, where the white had shown, sprang up the savage welt, with here and there along its length little scarlet oozings where the skin had broken. Again the whip swung, and the boy's whole body winced in anticipation of the blow, though he did not move from the spot. His will held good. A second welt sprang up, and a third. It was not until the fourth landed that the boy screamed. Also, he could no longer stand still, and from then on, blow after blow, he danced up and down in his anguish, screaming; but he did not attempt to run away. If his involuntary dancing took him beyond the reach of the whip, he danced back into range again. And when it was all over—a dozen blows—he went away, whimpering and squealing, among the wagons.

The chief stood still and waited. The second boy came out from the trees. But he did not come straight. He came like a cringing dog, obsessed by little panics that made him turn and dart away for half a dozen steps. But always he turned and came back, circling nearer and nearer to the man, whimpering, making inarticulate animal-noises in his throat. I saw that he never looked at the man. His eyes always were fixed upon the whip, and in his eyes was a terror that made me sick—the frantic terror of an inconceivably maltreated child. I have seen strong men dropping right and left out of battle and squirming in their death-throes, I have seen them by scores blown into the air by bursting shells and their bodies torn asunder; believe me, the witnessing was as merrymaking and laughter and song to me in comparison with the way the sight of that poor child affected me.

The whipping began. The whipping of the first boy was as play compared with this one. In no time the blood was running down his thin little legs. He danced and squirmed and doubled up till it seemed almost that he was some grotesque marionette operated by strings. I say “seemed,” for his screaming gave the lie to the seeming and stamped it with reality. His shrieks were shrill and piercing; within them no hoarse notes, but only the thin sexlessness of the voice of a child. The time came when the boy could stand it no more. Reason fled, and he tried to run away. But now the man followed up, curbing his flight, herding him with blows back always into the open space.

Then came interruption. I heard a wild smothered cry. The woman who sat in the wagon seat had got out and was running to interfere. She sprang between the man and boy.

“You want some, eh?” said he with the whip. “All right, then.”

He swung the whip upon her. Her skirts were long, so he did not try for her legs. He drove the lash for her face, which she shielded as best she could with her hands and forearms, drooping her head forward between her lean shoulders, and on the lean shoulders and arms receiving the blows. Heroic mother! She knew just what she was doing. The boy, still

shrieking, was making his get-away to the wagons.

And all the while the four men lay beside me and watched and made no move. Nor did I move, and without shame I say it; though my reason was compelled to struggle hard against my natural impulse to rise up and interfere. I knew life. Of what use to the woman, or to me, would be my being beaten to death by five men there on the bank of the Susquehanna? I once saw a man hanged, and though my whole soul cried protest, my mouth cried not. Had it cried, I should most likely have had my skull crushed by the butt of a revolver, for it was the law that the man should hang. And here, in this gypsy group, it was the law that the woman should be whipped.

Even so, the reason in both cases that I did not interfere was not that it was the law, but that the law was stronger than I. Had it not been for those four men beside me in the grass, right gladly would I have waded into the man with the whip. And, barring the accident of the landing on me with a knife or a club in the hands of some of the various women of the camp, I am confident that I should have beaten him into a mess. But the four men *were* beside me in the grass. They made their law stronger than I.

Oh, believe me, I did my own suffering. I had seen women beaten before, often, but never had I seen such a beating as this. Her dress across the shoulders was cut into shreds. One blow that had passed her guard, had raised a bloody welt from cheek to chin. Not one blow, nor two, not one dozen, nor two dozen, but endlessly, infinitely, that whip-lash smote and curled about her. The sweat poured from me, and I breathed hard, clutching at the grass with my hands until I strained it out by the roots. And all the time my reason kept whispering, "Fool! Fool!" That welt on the face nearly did for me. I started to rise to my feet; but the hand of the man next to me went out to my shoulder and pressed me down.

"Easy, pardner, easy," he warned me in a low voice. I looked at him. His eyes met mine unwaveringly. He was a large man, broad-shouldered and heavy-muscled; and his face was lazy, phlegmatic, slothful, withal kindly, yet without passion, and quite soulless—a dim soul, unmalicious, unmoral, bovine, and stubborn. Just an animal he was, with no more than a faint flickering of intelligence, a good-natured brute with the strength and mental caliber of a gorilla. His hand pressed heavily upon me, and I knew the weight of the muscles behind. I looked at the other brutes, two of them unperturbed and incurious, and one of them that gloated over the spectacle; and my reason came back to me, my muscles relaxed, and I sank down in the grass.

My mind went back to the two maiden ladies with whom I had had breakfast that morning. Less than two miles, as the crow flies, separated them from this scene. Here, in the windless day, under a beneficent sun, was a sister of theirs being beaten by a brother of mine. Here was a page of life they could never see—and better so, though for lack of seeing they would never be able to understand their sisterhood, nor themselves, nor know the clay of which

they were made. For it is not given to woman to live in sweet-scented, narrow rooms and at the same time be a little sister to all the world.

The whipping was finished, and the woman, no longer screaming, went back to her seat in the wagon. Nor did the other women come to her—just then. They were afraid. But they came afterward, when a decent interval had elapsed. The man put the whip away and rejoined us, flinging himself down on the other side of me. He was breathing hard from his exertions. He wiped the sweat from his eyes on his coat-sleeve, and looked challengingly at me. I returned his look carelessly; what he had done was no concern of mine. I did not go away abruptly. I lay there half an hour longer, which, under the circumstances, was tact and etiquette. I rolled cigarettes from tobacco I borrowed from them, and when I slipped down the bank to the railroad, I was equipped with the necessary information for catching the next freight bound south.

Well, and what of it? It was a page out of life, that's all; and there are many pages worse, far worse, that I have seen. I have sometimes held forth (facetiously, so my listeners believed) that the chief distinguishing trait between man and the other animals is that man is the only animal that maltreats the females of his kind. It is something of which no wolf nor cowardly coyote is ever guilty. It is something that even the dog, degenerated by domestication, will not do. The dog still retains the wild instinct in this matter, while man has lost most of his wild instincts—at least, most of the good ones.

Worse pages of life than what I have described? Read the reports on child labor in the United States,—east, west, north, and south, it doesn't matter where,—and know that all of us, profit-mongers that we are, are typesetters and printers of worse pages of life than that mere page of wife-beating on the Susquehanna.

I went down the grade a hundred yards to where the footing beside the track was good. Here I could catch my freight as it pulled slowly up the hill, and here I found half a dozen hoboos waiting for the same purpose. Several were playing seven-up with an old pack of cards. I took a hand. A coon began to shuffle the deck. He was fat, and young, and moon-faced. He beamed with good-nature. It fairly oozed from him. As he dealt the first card to me, he paused and said:—

“Say, Bo, ain't I done seen you befo'?”

“You sure have,” I answered. “An' you didn't have those same duds on, either.”

He was puzzled.

“D'ye remember Buffalo?” I queried.

Then he knew me, and with laughter and ejaculation hailed me as a comrade; for at Buffalo his clothes had been striped while he did his bit of time in the Erie County Penitentiary. For that matter, my clothes had been likewise striped, for I had been doing my bit of time, too.

The game proceeded, and I learned the stake for which we played. Down the bank toward the river descended a steep and narrow path that led to a spring some twenty-five feet beneath. We played on the edge of the bank. The man who was “stuck” had to take a small condensed-milk can, and with it carry water to the winners.

The first game was played and the coon was stuck. He took the small milk-tin and climbed down the bank, while we sat above and guyed him. We drank like fish. Four round trips he had to make for me alone, and the others were equally lavish with their thirst. The path was very steep, and sometimes the coon slipped when part way up, spilled the water, and had to go back for more. But he didn’t get angry. He laughed as heartily as any of us; that was why he slipped so often. Also, he assured us of the prodigious quantities of water he would drink when some one else got stuck.

When our thirst was quenched, another game was started. Again the coon was stuck, and again we drank our fill. A third game and a fourth ended the same way, and each time that moon-faced darky nearly died with delight at appreciation of the fate that Chance was dealing out to him. And we nearly died with him, what of our delight. We laughed like careless children, or gods, there on the edge of the bank. I know that I laughed till it seemed the top of my head would come off, and I drank from the milk-tin till I was nigh waterlogged. Serious discussion arose as to whether we could successfully board the freight when it pulled up the grade, what of the weight of water secreted on our persons. This particular phase of the situation just about finished the coon. He had to break off from water-carrying for at least five minutes while he lay down and rolled with laughter.

The lengthening shadows stretched farther and farther across the river, and the soft, cool twilight came on, and ever we drank water, and ever our ebony cup-bearer brought more and more. Forgotten was the beaten woman of the hour before. That was a page read and turned over; I was busy now with this new page, and when the engine whistled on the grade, this page would be finished and another begun; and so the book of life goes on, page after page and pages without end—when one is young.

And then we played a game in which the coon failed to be stuck. The victim was a lean and dyspeptic-looking hobo, the one who had laughed least of all of us. We said we didn’t want any water—which was the truth. Not the wealth of Ormuz and of Ind, nor the pressure of a pneumatic ram, could have forced another drop into my saturated carcass. The coon looked disappointed, then rose to the occasion and guessed he’d have some. He meant it, too. He had some, and then some, and then some. Ever the melancholy hobo climbed down and up the steep bank, and ever the coon called for more. He drank more water than all the rest of

us put together. The twilight deepened into night, the stars came out, and he still drank on. I do believe that if the whistle of the freight hadn't sounded, he'd be there yet, swilling water and revenge while the melancholy hobo toiled down and up.

But the whistle sounded. The page was done. We sprang to our feet and strung out alongside the track. There she came, coughing and spluttering up the grade, the headlight turning night into day and silhouetting us in sharp relief. The engine passed us, and we were all running with the train, some boarding on the side-ladders, others "springing" the side-doors of empty box-cars and climbing in. I caught a flat-car loaded with mixed lumber and crawled away into a comfortable nook. I lay on my back with a newspaper under my head for a pillow. Above me the stars were winking and wheeling in squadrons back and forth as the train rounded the curves, and watching them I fell asleep. The day was done—one day of all my days. To-morrow would be another day, and I was young.

Downloaded from www.libraryofshortstories.com

This work is in the public domain of Australia. Please check your local copyright laws if you live elsewhere.