

TALES TRAMPS TELL.

THEIR WAILS OF WOE MUST OFTEN BE
VERITABLE WORKS OF ART.

By a Special Contributor.

BESIDES studying the persons of whom he begs and to whom he adapts his "ghost stories" as their different natures require, the tramp also has to keep in mind the time of the day, the state of the weather, and the character of the community in which he is begging. The amateur blunders on regardless of these important details, and asks for things which have no relation with the time of the day, the season, or the locality.

It is bad form, for instance, to ask early in the morning for money to buy a glass of whisky, and it is equally inopportune to request a contribution toward the purchase of a railway ticket late at night. The "readerfoot" is apt to make both of these mistakes; the expert never. The steady patrons of beggars—and all old hands at the business have such—seldom realize how completely adjusted to local conditions "ghost stories" are. They probably think that they have heard the story told to them time and again, and in the same way, but if they observe carefully they will generally find that, either in the modulation of the voice or the tone of expression, it is different on rainy days, for instance, from what it is when the sun shines. It takes a trained ear to discriminate, and expert beggars realize that much of their success is lost, even on persons who give to them, but they are artists in their way, and believe in "art for art's sake." Then, too, it is always possible that they will encounter somebody who will appreciate their talent, and this is also a gratification.

Seasonable Begging.

Speaking generally, there is more begging done in winter than in summer, and in the East and North than in the South and West, but some of the cleverest begging takes place in the warm months. It is comparatively easy to get something to eat and a bed in a lodging-house when the thermometer stands 10 deg. below zero. A man feels mean in refusing an appeal to his generosity at this time of the year. "I may be cold and hungry some day myself," he thinks, and he gives the beggar a dime or two. In summer, on the other hand, the tramp has no pressing weather to help him out, and has to invent excuses. Even the story of "no work" is of little use in the summer. This is the season, as a rule, when work is most plentiful, and when wages are highest, and the tramp knows it, and is aware that the public also understands this much of political economy. Nevertheless, he must live in summer as well as in winter, and he has to plan differently for both seasons.

The main difference between his summer and winter campaigns is that he generally travels in summer, taking in the small towns where people are less "on to him," and where there are all kinds of free "dosses" (places to sleep) in the shape of barns and empty houses. In November he returns to the cities again to get the benefit of the cold-weather "dodge," or goes South to Florida, Louisiana and Texas.

Probably 15,000 eastern and northern tramps winter in the South every year. Their luck there seems to be entirely individual; some do well and others barely live. They are all glad, however, to return North in April and go over their old routes again.

An amusing experience that I had not long ago illustrates the different kind of tactics necessary in the tramp's summer campaign. So far as I know he has never made use of the story that did me such good service, and that was told in all truthfulness, but it has since occurred to me that he might find it useful, and I relate it here so that the reader may not be taken unawares if some tramp should attempt to get the benefit of it.

A Clever Tramp's Scheme.

In the spring of 1898 I had to make an inspection for a railroad company of the tramp situation on some railroads in the Middle West. During the first month of the investigation I lived like a veritable tramp, so far as traveling was concerned, but I paid for my meals out of funds sent to me in small installments by a friend in the East. Once the remittance from the East was delayed a little, and I found myself one day at dinner time down to my last nickel.

I was traveling in quite a company of rounders, and on the day in question we were "beating" our way on a freight train toward a town where there was a poorhouse night shelter. Noon time found us all hungry, and we got off the train at a small village to look for lunch. It was such a diminutive place that it was decided that each man should pick out his particular "beat," and confine his search to the few houses it contained. If some failed to get anything, those who were more successful were to bring them back "hand-outs."

My "beat" was so sparsely settled that I hardly expected to get so much as a piece of bread, because the entire village was known to hate tramps, but an inspiration came to me as I was crossing the fields, and I got a "set down" and a "hand-out" at the first house I visited.

The interview at the back door ran thus: "Madam," she was rather a severe-looking woman, "I have exactly five cents in my pocket, and I am awfully hungry. I know that you don't keep a boarding-house, but I have come to you thinking that you will give me more for my nickel than the starkeeper will over in the village. I shall be obliged to you if you will help me out."

A look of surprise came into the woman's face. I was a new species to her, and I knew it, and she knew it.

"Don't know whether we've got anything you want," she said, as if I were a guest rather than a wayfarer.

"Anything will do, madam, anything," I replied, throwing into my words all the sincerity of which a hungry man is capable. She invited me into the dining-room, and gave me a most satisfying meal. There were no conversational interruptions. I ate my meal in silence, and

the woman watched me. The new species interested her.

Just as I was finishing she put some sandwiches, cake and pie into a newspaper. I had made a good impression.

"There," she said, as I was about to go. "You may need it."

I held out my nickel, and thanked her. She blushed, and put her hands behind her back.

"I don't keep a hotel," she said, rather indignantly.

"But, madam, I want to pay you. I'm no beggar."

"You wouldn't have got it if you had been. Good-by."

Each Has His "System."

The tramp's methods of begging, as has been said, are largely regulated by circumstances and experience, but even the amateurs among them have theories about the profession, and they are never more interesting than when sitting around some "hang-out" campfire, discussing their notions of the kind of "ghost stories" that go best with different sorts of people. Indeed, the bulk of their time is passed in conferences of this character. Each man, like the passionate gambler, has a "system," and he enjoys "chewing the rag" about its intricacies. The majority of the systems are founded on the tramp's knowledge of women. Taking the country at large, he sees more of women on his begging tours than of men, and it is only natural that his theoretical calculations should be based mainly with women. Some tramps believe that they can tell to a nicety what a blonde woman will give in excess of a brunette, or vice versa, and the same of a large woman in contradistinction to a small one. Much of their theorizing in these matters is as futile as the gambler's estimate of his chances of luck, but certain it is that after a long apprenticeship they become phenomenally accurate in "sizing up" people; and it is he who can correctly "size up" the greatest number of people at first glance and adapt himself to their peculiarities, that comes out winner in the struggle.

Next in importance to the ability to appraise correctly the generous tendencies of his patrons and to modulate his voice and to concoct stories according to their tastes, comes the tramp's clothes and the way he wears them. It probably seems to most persons that the tramp never changes his clothes, and that he always looks as tattered and torn as when they happen to see him, but the expert has almost as many "changes" as the actor. Some days he dresses very poorly; this is generally the case in winter, and on other days he looks as neat and clean as the ordinary business man. It all depends on the weather and the "beat" he has chosen for the day's work. Every morning before he starts out on his tour, he takes a look at the weather and decides upon his "beat." The "beat" selected, he puts on the "top" which he thinks suits the weather, and away he goes for better or for worse. In New York City there are probably a hundred scientific beggars of this character, and they live as well as does the man with a yearly income of \$3000.

Sunday On the Road.

Sunday is the dullest day in the week to the average tramp, the beggar who is content with his three meals a day and a place to lie down in at night. But a few men who go on a tramp for the first time expect that Sunday is going to be any different from any other day in the week. They usually reach "the road" on a week day, after a detour, and they find that their soiled clothes and general unkempt condition differentiate them in public thoroughfares very little from hundreds of workmen. No policeman worries them with suspicious glances, and in large cities they pass unchallenged even in the dead of night. Indeed, they receive so little notice from any one that they wonder how they had ever imagined that outcasts were such marked human beings.

Then comes their first Sunday. They get up out of their hayloft, or wherever it may be that they lay down the night before, prepared to look for their breakfast just as they did on the day before, and after brushing off their clothes and washing themselves at some pump or public faucet, they start out. In a small town they feel that something is wrong before they have gone a block, and by 9 o'clock in large towns they decide to go without their breakfast, if they have not yet got it. A change has come over the earth; they seem out of place even to themselves, and they return through back streets to their lodging-houses or retreats on the outskirts of the town, sincerely regretting that they are travelers of "the road."

A number of men in the world have to thank this Sunday nausea that they are today workers and not tramps. The latter feel the effects of it to the end of their days; it is as unescapable as death, but, like certain sea-faring men who never get entirely free of seasickness and yet continue as sailors, so old vagabonds learn to expect and endure the miserable sensations which they experience on the first day of the week. These sensations are due to the remnant of manhood which is to be found in nearly all tramps. The bulk of them are for all practical purposes outcasts, but at breakfast time, on Sunday morning, they have emotions which on week days no one would give them credit for.

It was my fate, some years ago, to be one of a collection of wanderers who had to while away a Sunday in a "dug-out" on a black prairie in Western Kansas. We had nothing to eat or drink, and practically nothing to talk about except our dismal lot. Toward nightfall we got to discussing in all earnestness the miserableness of our existence, and I have always remembered the remarks of a fellow-sufferer whom we called "West Virginia Brown." He was supposed to be the degenerate scion of a noble English family, and was one of the best educated men I have ever met in Hoboland. He took little part in the general grumbling, but at last there was a lull in the conversation, and he spoke up.

"I wonder," he said, "whether the good people who rest on Sunday go to church and have their best dinner in the week, realize how life is turned upside down for us on that day. There have always been men like us in the world, and it is for us as much as for any one, so far as I know, that religion exists, and yet the day in the week set apart for religion is the hardest of all for us to worry through. Was it, or wasn't it, the intention that outcasts were to have religion? The way things are now we are made to look upon Sunday and all that it means with hatred, and yet I don't believe that there's any one in the world who

tries to be any squarer to his pain than we do, and that's what I call being good."

The last "the road" knew of Brown he was serving a five-years' sentence in a Canadian limbo. His lot cannot be pleasant, but methinks that on Sunday, at least, he is glad that he is not outside.

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