

## An Ex-Hobo Looks at America

by Jim Tully

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It has been fifteen years since I left the road and entered the prize ring in an attempt to make the long bulge upward. I became a "road kid" at fourteen years of age. I remained on the road, or near it, until I was beyond twenty-one.

A road kid is, perhaps, the most vicious product of underworld America. Springing as he does from a wretched environment, where force and cunning are the only laws, he becomes suspicious of everything and learns to look for motives even behind kindness itself. The road kid begins as a disgruntled adventurer. He usually has qualities which, if rightly directed, would make of him a valuable middle class American citizen. Ingenuity, force, initiative, and a swaggering bravado he must combine in plenty if he expects to survive. He generally ends in the penitentiary—a dominating yegg, rebellious to the last. Once in a while he becomes a pugilist, like Norman Selby, Jack Dempsey, and Stanley Ketchell. On several occasions he has become a writer— Josiah Flynt, Jack London, and myself.

A man is what the winds and tides have made him. If he spends a year on the road as a youth, he is stamped forever. The ungifted and cunning Flynt was a hobo to the end. After he had published "The Powers That Prey" which was directed against the New York police, and in which he invented the word "graft" as used in common speech today, he had learned enough resourcefulness as a road kid to enable him to avoid every net which the minions of the law spread for him in the heart of the metropolis.

Flynt was a nephew of Frances E. Willard. He dropped the latter name after he became a young hobo. A weazen little cigarette fiend, the hardships of the road and the jail had early sapped his vitality. He died at thirty-eight.

Jack London, at midnight, walking the roads of his vast estate and meditating suicide, went to the eternal railroad division point at forty, a disillusioned vagabond. His psychology remained that of the road kid, grown wealthy.

The quality which I now possess as a writer is the same as that of my early comrades of the road who became yeggs and burglars—ruthlessness tinged with irony and contempt.

A reading of Gorky's "Lower Depths" will reveal the same quality.

Vagabonds are early shrewd observers. Observation, once the wanderlust is under control, is perhaps, the vagabond writer's finest attribute. Gorky is unerring in his observation; London the same. They also learn never to look steadily at an object or person. Their gaze is always furtive. The hunted of society, they continually look about them for an angry dog or policeman. To this day if I meet a

policeman unexpectedly my first impulse is one of escape. For an instant I wonder what forgotten sin the officer has heard about. The war between society and the hobo never ceases. The tattered stragglers of a world into which they do not fit, they resent laws and lawgivers, and blue-coated upholders of the law.

My greatest mental and spiritual battle was not in learning to write, though it required nearly eight years to complete my first novel. Rather was it one of developing a sanity toward life—to purge my heart of bitterness—and to fit myself into a social scheme in which softer and more cautious thinking was the order of the day. For be it remembered, I was forced to develop a ragged Nietzschean quality that I might survive. I had early read a line of "What does not kill me, strengthens me." It helped greatly in the formative years.

By some craving of the mind, and with no guidance whatever, I early read the great masters of all literatures. As my world was one in which their names were unknown, I meditated upon their books a great deal, but did not discuss them. I also read Carlyle's "French Revolution." As I was always angry at the world in my youth, I was long in getting away from the dyspeptic Scotsman's declamatory style.

My love of reading saved me from most of the time killing vices of my environment. It made hunger, degradation, and the jail less poignant. It saved me at last from the prize ring when I was beginning to acquire a national reputation as a bruiser. I left the ring, not after I became wealthy, but when the golden meadows stretched ahead of me.

It was only a year ago that a man my own age stepped up to me after a lecture in a Middle Western city. He held out his knuckle-cracked hand and said:

"You don't know me, do you, Jimmy?"

I replied without evasion:

"No—I don't."

"Well," he smiled, "I'm-----."

You remember me now."

I embraced him at once. It had been a dozen years since we had fought two vicious battles in the ring. In the intervening years his features had been battered beyond all recognition. Oblivious of all around us, we heard the swishing of blood and water-soaked gloves again, and the crowd in our ears.

Upon retiring from the ring I looked more closely about me and realized how impossible it was for a young fellow of the middle or lower class to obey cultural background worthy of the name. Everywhere he was given the same advice in family, school, or college. Syndicated platitudes were as common as fog in London. I could see youthful minds reeling under the staggering burden. They were seldom strong enough to survive its monotonous weight. It made of them types and not individuals. Banker, merchant, tailor—the viewpoint of America was the same.

It has not changed. I have reached the point where people utter platitudes about my success. I accept them with a dreary smile. My servant is obsequious. Even my long ago comrades have changed. They have become too humble. I alone remain the same.

Having fought my way out of one world, I am unable to fit myself into another one. My nature, never plastic, cannot be remoulded. Having been forced to become more or less antisocial through a combination of circumstances, I am thus given time to reflect more on the unchanging jumble of civilization that is about me.

In groping for light, I tried many isms. I have since discarded them all. Out of the weird chaos there is slowly evolving a philosophy which I hope will make more serene the second span of my life. I have learned that real Christianity cannot flourish in a money-mad nation. One may as well try to organize a Building and Loan Society among the gypsies.

Before my desk is a large bronze statue of Buddha. His feet are twisted about his knees in a strange manner, giving evidence that the sculptor knew little of anatomy. There is a picture close by of which I am not certain of the title. Christ, in the garb of a carpenter, stands before a High Priest. There is in His face the essence of strength and compassion. About me are also pictures of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Whitman, Gorky, Hardy, Shakespeare, and Mark Twain.

I have gained much from such men when my lamp of bravery burned low. And now, when Rotarians and Kiwanians invite me to appear before them — I do not accept. I am a confirmed agnostic in everything - believing that in doubt lies growth. My religion does not include service for profit. I expect nothing from the middle class of humanity. They are but so many sheep nibbling at the withered grass of life. I lean on its higher spirits—the men whose souls were of oak —who were often misunderstood and rejected. I have never seen the picture of Jesus in the office of the most pious banker.

I have long thought that Women's Clubs are the greatest streams of unused power in the nation. They are the middle-class reflexes of American life. They strain at gnats and swallow hordes of camels.

I recall that Edgar Lee Masters once gave a reading before a prominent Women's Club. He read of bankers and such before the childlike women, many of whom lived on the profits of banks, and had no sense of humor. But, of course, neither had the brilliant and mighty-hearted Masters. It was a case of irresistible force meeting an immovable object. The ladies were haughty—as comes smugness. After the lecture—they snubbed him. Masters, a sensitive soul, was deeply hurt by their conduct.

I was much younger then mentally, and I resented such middle class treatment of one of America's greatest men. I spent three hours with Masters the next day, and saw deep lines of sorrow on face of this man, who, born nearly two thousand years after Christ, had still arrived many years too early.

Shortly after, a Hollywood Women's Club invited me to talk to them about children. Having been brought up in an orphanage under the terrible care of inhibited women, I was still foolish enough to feel that I might succeed in in the ladies more than a superficial interest in other people's children. I told them of how many hundreds of thousands were working in America— under fourteen years of age. The ladies sat quite still until I had finished. When the painful business was over, they arose, and hurried out

of the auditorium. One came up on the platform to talk to me. She had the price of the lecture in an envelope.

It was the noon hour. I recall vividly the odor of beef stew. I did not remain, but walked quickly from the building, vowing never to talk again on a sociological subject before club-women. But aftermath was not yet.

My lecture manager, in the course of my tour, had booked me for three lectures in Chicago. One of them was later cancelled. A leading club-woman there had received a letter from a lady friend in Hollywood which told her that I talked about "children, tramps, and things."

But, to be fair, I later appeared before fifty of the wealthiest women in Chicago. They listened with attention and apparent interest, treated me cordially, and seemed to feel beneath my groping utterance — at least, sincerity.

This was a new experience. I have since come to the conclusion that the most intellectually restless people in America are the aristocrats at the top and the radicals at the bottom.

The lawyer and the doctor and other professional men have often a touch of civilization. The banker and the merchant seldom. The latter types are the models of the great middle class—who think only in terms of money.

The middle layer of the cake, which comprises, in my opinion, more than two-thirds of the populace, is composed of bigoted, conceited, and literally glossed-over barbarians.

I recently travelled across the nation with a capitalist high in the councils of the nation. A slight shift in the cards of fate kept him from becoming President of the United States on the Republican ticket in 1924. Judging from the way the political winds are blowing at present he may still attain that high honor. I spent many hours with him. He was, save in a superficial sense, as devoid of culture as a New York pawnbroker. He had all the qualities of the road kid, combined with a knowledge of compound interest and economics. One of the leaders of the great middle class, he is blood of their blood and faith of their faith. The magnitude of Whitman's dream of democracy was beyond him. He talked in syndicated platitudes. I have since wondered what Woodrow Wilson's secret opinion of such a man would be.

There will be those who will claim that I have prejudice. My reply is that I have fought for years to overcome an underworld psychology in my judgment of humanity. I do not expect the sheltered lady to arrive at my conclusions. But I do expect her to be tolerant of a genius like Masters.

Masters, like every sincere artist, is a lonely figure in America. I am not thinking of the Greenwich Village brand — but of the genuine creator who seeks to model the thundering discords of life into thrumming beauty and passion. His critics, for the most part, are marooned economic failures. This in itself would be wonderful, had failure given them compassion and understanding. But failure, in spite of copy-books, is not noble. It more often pollutes than clarifies the judgment. They hack at a writer's English and forget his soul. Trained in middle-class obscurity, they find it in a man like James Joyce; and quarrel with the lion because he is not a rabbit like themselves.

Christ and Buddha looked downward. The middle class never. Their standard magazine fiction has no laborer for a hero. He is generally the son of a wealthy banker or merchant who has taken up civil engineering to show his father that he is a man among men.

I have said before — I am not one who believes in any ism as a panacea for humanity. Judge Gary is as necessary as Karl Marx. One an exploiter of the races, the other a broken idealist, each in turn are but bubbles in the evolutionary ocean of mankind. Posterity will say which man played the more sublime role.

During my wandering boyhood I learned that most of our criminal population was made up of those who had committed crimes against property. This condition has not changed. Our criminals are merely the stragglers in the great American forward march, the leaders of which are those who believe

"That they shall get who have the power,  
And they shall keep who can"

It was Samuel Untermyer, I think, who said that the Republican Party was for the rich, and the Democratic Party for the great middle class.

Upon being asked concerning the poor he replied: "Oh well, all you can do with the poor is give them work."

Brutal as this may seem, it is direct American psychology.

But my quarrel the middle class, led by the banker or the captain of industry or the merchant, is not one of ethics. Rather I might call it one of literacy. They are narrow-minded and egotistic. The magazines they read glorifies them. The short stories are always "business fiction," so-called. In it the materially successful man is always the hero.

Such a type is often called a "man of vision" by journalistic hack writers. Being, as a rule, a man with little imagination or introspection, he believes it. As a consequence, he is an opinionated, dull, and swaggering bore. If he were really a man of vision he would be able to look about him and realize that the very number of his type makes him common.

Nearly every successful man in America believes in half-truths. He inoculates his family with the same ideas, and they, being more or less reflexes of their illustrious founder, carry on the same notions. Thinking is a laborious business. The great mob unconsciously know this, and allow Doctor Frank Crane to dilute Emerson for them, or Arthur Brisbane to give them weak doses of Schopenhauer and Buckle, diluted to their capacity with ingredients from Theodore Roosevelt and Harold Bell Wright. The great thinker is unknown to the generality of business men. Indeed it is more than true:

"How few think justly, of the thinking few,  
How many think who think they do"

America, controlled by the banker, the lawyer, the merchant, and the thief, is the most reactionary nation on earth. I write, not as socialist or radical, for I am in accord with Anatole France that no idea is worth a term in jail. Rather do I write as one who has observed during a long wandering. The very air of America is charged with and self-satisfaction.

All conversation turns sooner or later to money. Seldom is one of my books mentioned unless the question is asked, "Did it sell well?"

The fact that I am widely advertised as a "hobo writer" is evidence of a national psychology. No Russian ever speaks of Gorky as having been a tramp. I am besieged by Ladies' Clubs to appear before them, not for what I may have written— for the vast majority of women read Hergesheimer and other romantic gentlemen. They are curious to see an ex-hobo who has become articulate.

America is quick to punish all who deviate from the established order. Vividly do I remember a trial I attended several years ago. Fourteen Industrial Workers of the World were tried in a Los Angeles court for criminal syndicalism. This law has long been considered unconstitutional by many humane and wise men.

The jury was selected from the great middle class small property owners and others. The chief witness for the state was a man who had been a burglar and who had served time in the San Quentin Penitentiary. Having joined the organization as a spy he was employed by the state to testify against his fellows, over whom a blanket indictment had been made, which charged them with belonging to the I. W. W. and likewise criminal syndicalism.

The prisoners were full of the fanaticism of reform.

The trial was about to begin as entered the court-room accompanied by a young lady — a graduate of an Eastern college. We were both at that pathetic period in our lives when we thought that all the injustice in the world was committed by one class of society.

A soiled American flag was behind the judge's desk.

A few friends of the prisoners were in the court-room. They were roughly working people; weary with labor of the world. A half-dozen paper men in the press row.

The judge entered and looked at the gathering before him with half-closed eyes. He was senile. His every attitude on the bench was one of prejudice. In justice to him it must said that his task was not easy. As prejudice was rampant, the men were not represented in court. They their own attorneys.

Some of the accused were out on bail and mingled with relatives and friends.

A young assistant prosecuting attorney had told me of the enormity of the crimes committed by I. W. W. The crimes had not been committed by precisely the men in the courtroom, but a blanket indictment was the only mans of punishing who were said to be guilty.

Here were all the battlements of society arrayed against fourteen fanatical men who needed but understanding and kindness.

During recess the "wabblies" out on bail gathered about me. I had never been one of them, and had ridiculed many of their notions. In spite of all this, they knew I was their friend.

When my newspaper saw that I was friendly with the agitators they withdrew from me. Prejudice dies hard in America. Neither would the young lawyer have more to say to one who consorted with potential murderers.

The trial attracted no attention. Though of deep sociological significance, the courtroom was never crowded. Leading parlor radicals, anxious to in the public print, gave it a wide berth. The adjoining courtroom was crowded. People stood in the doorway. A popular murder trial was in progress.

The trial of the I W. W. dragged through many days, and the fourteen laboring "lawyers" tried the patience of the judge and jury, the prosecuting attorneys, the bailiffs, and ex-burglar.

Under cross-examination, each "lawyer" was allowed to ask questions.

The fourteen men took particular delight in questioning the ex-burglar. One by one they rose, and saluted "His Honor" with glaring contempt. As the State had set the punishment for their offense, if found guilty, at from one to fourteen years, the judge was powerless to punish them more.

He winced each time a "lawyer" saluted him. The agitators asked the ex-burglar informer many questions. Anxious to get his answers correctly, they would, each in turn, become very conciliatory and ask, time after time:

"Was this before or after you served a sentence in San Quentin, Mr. Dimond ? "

The witness would explain.

Thomas Lee Woolwine, the brilliant district attorney, busily engaged in the courtroom adjoining, stopped during recess to talk to a "wabby" who stood near me.

"Well, how is the trial going ?" he asked.

"You know how it's going, Mr. Woolwine. We've got one-way tickets for San Quentin for fourteen years, and you know it."

Woolwine, not an unkind man, and a thoroughly civilized one, replied: "Well, well, it's too bad. Isn't life strange ? Here I am in charge of prosecuting men all of whom I have never seen. I may break their lives."

He turned to me, whom he knew, with "What a muddle America is!" and passed on with head down.

There was a giant among the agitators who reminded me of Danton. He rose once for a point of order. He was told to remain quiet. His great fist pounded the table before him as he said something like "I will not be quiet ... you can railroad me to jail . .. you are all unfair..."

The man was silenced.

A World War veteran on trial read excerpts from a newspaper published by his radical organization. It gave the migratory laborers' side of the case.

The veteran had been gassed. His face was drawn until it resembled that of a scared bird. As he read of the unsanitary beds in which they often slept, a masculine woman, glasses on the end of her nose, leaned forward in her jury-chair and interrupted the prisoner loudly with:

"How dare you complain of unsanitary conditions ... you to whom the good God has given clean water."

He who had fought for democracy stammered in confusion. The court-room was silent. The judge sat with half closed eyes. No word was said. After a few moments the veteran resumed reading.

There was one man by the name of Bailey. His hearing had been impaired by a blast in a mine. His eyesight was nearly gone. He was past the prime of life.

"Oh, well," I said to him by way of consolation, "you'll only be in San Quentin a year or so. It will be a good rest."

He became indignant.

"Is that so?" he asked loudly. "I'll stay the whole fourteen years and be sure of my coffee and beans every day. I may be in the pen, but I'll not have to listen to my master's voice (the alarm clock) every morning." He raved on and on against what he termed "the employing class."

When the judge passed sentence on the men he allowed Bailey to go free, as he might become a charge to the State.

As the traveling salesman joins the Elks or Masons, or any lodge by which he betters himself, so does the average migratory laborer join the Industrial Workers of the World.

One of the young men on trial had but recently joined the movement. He was in Los Angeles for a few days and called at a friend's room. The friend was also an I. W. W. The police raided the room and both men were placed under arrest.

No card was found on the young man.

"Are you an I.W.W.?", the police asked.

"I haven't an identification card and you could never prove it on me — but I'll not lie — I am."

This young laborer was sentenced to the penitentiary along with the rest.

This incident and others have made me doubt that America has a sense of justice.

But each man must break his heart differently. I am by nature an Irish spinner of fairy-tales and a poet whom a hard life twisted into a hobo, a pugilist, and a realistic writer.