

A SWAGGER'S LIFE IN NEW ZEALAND.

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BY ONE OF THE DECLASSIFIED.

I do not write this by way of apology. I own that when a man has become a tramp he can sink no lower. But we all get sick of hearing the oft-repeated question, "Why don't you work?" We do work sometimes for a day or two to make money for our tobacco and beer; but we don't like work. Others may think our reasons for being tramps are trivial; to us they are very real. But, of course, there are swaggers and swaggers. There is the old-fashioned swagger who still hits the track with billy in hand and bluey on shoulder. There is the up-to-date swagger who travels on bicycle, sends his swag on by train, and is a member of the Agricultural-Farm Labourers' Union. Then there is the swagger who travels exclusively by train. There are swaggers who work and swaggers who don't work. There are those who have just got out of gaol and will soon return there again. Members of the so-called criminal class, they are foot-sacked by a zealous and watchful police from the town into the country, from the country into the town, chivvied about from post to pillar, their only home the gaol and the road. There is a large class, who, partly from heredity, partly from environment, and largely from want of controlling their naturally strong passions, grow up into an army of restless wandering wastrals. Some degenerate into chronic loafers, cadgers, and vagabonds; others become casual labourers, capable of working hard spasmodically. They do spurts of work, odds and ends of jobs, and then, when times get hard, they drift back again into the class of tramps and cadgers from which they sprang. Their wandering spirit may be put down to softening of the brain. Whether due to heredity, to chronic hard luck, or to both, it amounts to the same. Their brain is in such a state that they find it impossible to endure much annoyance or vexation. They are short-tempered. They fly from trouble from place to place, lacking those qualities which enable a man to get a living and put up a good fight in life's battle.

Whatever the reasons for our being on the road, it is not the life that anyone need envy us. In the first place, there is the swag, weighing 40lbs and over, and this to be carried from 12 to 18 miles a day. I have in my possession at the present time the third swag of the past twelve months. The first I lost through my own carelessness. The second, which I valued at £4, was stolen from me, and though I laid a complaint with the police at the nearest township, "I am not a lost luggage office" was the only consolation I received. Our swags are often the only things between us and crime, and when anyone stoops so low as to deprive us of our only property their sin is greater than they know of. It was worse than sacrilege. Then there is the suffering and ill-health from exposure, from cold, from bad weather. In the North Island sometimes for three and four days at a stretch I have not had a dry stitch on me. Wet through to the skin I was with incessant rain. In the King Country I once had to lie out all night without covering. I built a big camp fire and lay on a log, and when the morning came at last I could scrape the hoar frost from the log on which I had lain. In the South Island, too, when the night comes on you may not always strike an empty hut or whare, and you may not be lucky enough to have a tent. You may not find a cockey or a station that will be willing to give you a "shake-down," for nowadays you are not by

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any means sure of getting “a doss” from either cockey or squatter. Station-owners are generally more hospitable, but even they are gradually shutting down on swaggers. There are some stations that give out tucker, but refuse to give shake-downs. There are others who refuse both tucker and “shakes.” It was different in the old times. In those days a night’s “doss” was regarded as a swagger’s right.

In those mansions used to be
Free-handed hospitality.
Their great fires up the chimney roared,
The stranger feasted at their board.

But things are different now. Why! you must remember the story of the weary swagger who was reported to have shot himself because of the dreadful shock he received on being refused a night’s accommodation. I have stayed at the farm at which this tragedy occurred, but the ownership has changed since those days.

Among the troubles of the swagger one of the worst is the penance of the hair shirt. It is a delicate subject, but if one would know our troubles this we must speak of. You have heard of the hair shirt; you know of the exquisite torture it inflicts with the continual irritation and chafing of the fuzzy hirsute fabric against the skin. Did it ever occur to you that the swagger has his hair shirt too as a necessary part of his existence, causing as exquisite torture but without the merit of voluntary ascetic penance? Just imagine for one moment a small fraction of those hairs that cause so much agony to the penitent and ascetic endowed with life. Picture them alive and kicking and at liberty to roam at will all over the body. Well, that is the living hair shirt of the tramp. Indelicate! I know it is; but too true, too true. The agony is intense. Day and night one gets no rest. The torment has been known to drive an unfortunate mad. And how to get rid of these parasites? That is the puzzle. They cling to the miserable wretch for months and months. They cling to his clothes. Wash them? No good. Boil them up? Equally useless. The only thing to do is to burn them. One bath? Half a dozen baths won’t cure them. “How do we get them?” you ask. Well, you get them in the camps, the empty huts and whares, where you are compelled to sleep at night. There are numbers of men on the road who never wash, and never take a bath from one year’s end to the other. Old, some of them; others diseased brain, and that sort of thing. The parasites are only one of the presents you get by universal subscription on the road.

When we’ve tramped our few miles and the sun gets low, we roll up at the nearest homestead, hunt up the owner if he is residing on the station; if not, the station manager. Then we strike him for a job.

“Any chance of a job, boss?” is the correct and well-worn “spiel.” – Suppose he “turns you down” and tells you he has no job, you then strike him for a shake.

“Can I have a shake-down for the night, boss?” That is the talk.

“How far have you come to-day?” he may ask. “Oh, twelve miles,” “Eighteen miles,” as the case may be.

“Well, go to the cook and tell him I sent you.” That is all. In some stations you have to get a ticket from the clerk or manager to show to the cook before the oracle works. You go to the cook, who points out the travellers’ whare, and you make down your swag for the night. When the men have done eating you sneak in for supper, and generally you get a good square meal. Next morning you get your breakfast, and, if the cook is a good fellow, he sends you away rejoicing with a little bread and meat or a lump of “browney” for lunch.

The huts one gets to sleep in vary in their comfort. Some are warm, with snug, roomy bunks on the “tween-decks, double-decker” principle. Others are disgraceful (even on big stations that I could name)—cold, damp, with great holes and gaps under the eaves and in the roof that let in the wind, rain, and snow, and, worst of all reeking with filth and vermin. I remember well the pitiful complaint of a swagger who dossed one night in one of such whares. He had just come from the town, where he had had the luck to get a complete new rig-out. He had cleaned himself, donned his new suit of clothes, and started off “on the swag.” “Oh! I’m ruined entirely,” was his pitiful lament when he woke up in the morning. “They’re on to me, they’re on to me. They’re all over me: The beautiful new suit that I only put on the day before yesterday is completely done for. I might just as well burn it.” And he was right; he might just as well.

Then our treatment by the cockeys is not all that it might be. We are often refused both a “hand out” and a “shake” by them, and when they do give you a hand-out it is only two or three skimpy little jam sandwiches or bread and butter—no meat, nothing with any substance in it. As for their “shake,” they generally stow you away in some filthy stable, chaffhouse, or harness room, sodden with manure and squirming with rats and vermin. On some farms they not only refuse you a hand-out, but they set the dogs on to you. I have been bitten twice on the leg by cockeys’ curs.

To appreciate the feelings of swaggers on the subject you have, only to look into some of their empty huts and whares and read the doggerel effusions of varying literary merit decorating the walls. The favourite legend is a jeremiad invariably terminating with the bitter denunciation:

The squatter’s paradise, the swagger’s hell,
Land of merinos, fare ye well!

But those are not by any means all our troubles. Take the way in which we are treated on the road—the insults, the contempt with which we meet. Why, the very children in the street run away from us. “Boo—hoo,” they cry when they see a swagger. “Boo—hoo, the swagger man, the drefful swagger man, he’s going to take me,” and they run off howling to their mothers. They are brought up from earliest infancy to fear the swagger as the Russian children fear the wolves. As for the older boys, it is nothing unusual for them to throw stones at us from behind the hedges as they return from school. We are made to feel in its fullest and bitterest intensity that a swagger is an outcast and the lowest thing on earth. Why, even the very convicts in gaol consider themselves out superiors, as aristocrats compared to us. Then there is the perpetual anxiety weighing on the mind. One meal finished, and we do not know where the next is to come from. Every night, as the darkness falls, we never know where we are to get our bed. It is the feeling of dependence on others, the shame and humiliation of begging one’s bread, which eat into the very heart, sapping its energies and vitality. The iron enters the very soul, weakening the brain and breaking us all up. I don’t think there is a man on the road who wouldn’t acknowledge, if he were asked, that he would rather thief than beg. He is not smart enough though. Well did Burns single out independence as the best gift, the most glorious privilege which money could confer. That’s just where it is: it is the canker of mendicancy which saps the virility and manhood, and bit by bit, like the drip of water on the stone, wears away the brain.

You may blame us for our position, and put it down to drink. It is always put down to drink. People forget that drink is oftener the effect than the cause. If we have weaknesses from the beginning which trip us up in the race of life, if we have limitations, physical or mental, then who put them there? Once on to the road through illness, hard luck, ineptitude for work, mental inaccuracy, physical weakness, laziness, drink, drugs, vice or crime, and it needs more than human power to get back for long into the respectable walks of life. The fact that we have been forced to take to tramp life means that there is something fundamentally wrong physically, mentally, or morally, and it is useless for people to talk of work, reform, and honest living. It was a long road, often enough, to what we are, and it was downhill; it is equally long back to where we were, and it is uphill. Moreover, it is seldom we meet with people who would help us on our upward journey. Perhaps they are right. We are too far gone. Take the way in which a swagger, a man down on his luck, or even a shabbily-dressed customer, is treated in the big towns. Why, I have gone into a big New Zealand town with a cheque for over £5 in my pocket made at fencing, and I have tried seven hotels, one after another, and been refused a night's accommodation at every one. I was dressed in rough, shabby clothes, being just in from the country, and at the seventh hotel as I was being jostled roughly out into the street by the irate publican, who affected to be insulted with my "cheek," a policeman turned up and soon had me in gaol for being drunk. In another small town I experienced similar treatment. There were four hotels and three boarding-houses. I had come in from harvesting with a little money in my pocket, and I tried every hotel and every boarding-house in that town. "Full up, very sorry; full up, full up!" was the cuckoo-like retort, and with over £4 of hard cash in my pocket I was obliged to sleep that night under a straw stack. They may say what they like; I'll always maintain that it is not money but clothes that make the man.