

THE ETHICS OF LOAFING AROUND

E. W. NICHOLS.

THE problem of definition, according to some authorities first raised by Socrates, has not yet been finally settled, as anyone who follows the proceedings of courts and councils and legislatures and other assemblies of power and dignity can testify. Careless people there are who would inadequately translate "to loaf" as "to idle"; how inadequately, it requires little penetration to decide. If one is idle, has no regular occupation, it is impossible to find a background in one's life against which to contrast the periods of loafing. It is not the same thing as resting, though one of its results may in proper circumstances be relaxation and recuperation. But rest is a thing generally necessary to man and beast, whereas loafing is the gift of a kindly providence to certain favoured people, a much richer and more subtle thing than merely resting. It is not the mischief-making of the busybody, the meddling of the impertinent. That frame of mind in which men and children or even women justify the saying about Satan finding some mischief has nothing to do with loafing, properly understood; it is a form of *hubris*, a much less amiable pursuit of far less desirable people than the true loafer. It is not that painful state of mind between toil and rest in which one worries about everything and accomplishes nothing; the state of mind in which the writer stares hard at pen (or keys) and paper and puts down nothing at all. There is humour about loafing, and a kinship with comedy, not tragedy. The weight of all this unintelligible world does not press too hard upon the loafer; it is there somewhere, the insoluble problem of existence, but in the background, impinging on consciousness rather as a shifting shadow than as a weight, no crushing burden, a mere hint of distant menace. To describe the condition of loafing by negatives necessarily implies a positive somewhere; but that is not so easy to come at. It is, at any rate, to use James's phrase, a moral holiday. One may think of it as a mood, a state of mind; perhaps better, especially in the gifted, as a spiritual diathesis.

If one had properly defined the term "to loaf", there would still remain the problem of its use with "around". How does the one differ from the other? Which is the more complimentary? It is one of those little, subtle problems that make the intimate

study of idiom so fascinating. Does "around" add a touch of concreteness to the picture? Is it more likely to call up a vision of Jack or Tom and the corner store, or the woodshed on a rainy day, or some spot carried in memory for many years, where as a child or youth one escaped from some not too pressing task to find congenial company or solitude? It is, at any rate, a study too obscure and difficult for the present paper.

If the mere idler can scarcely grasp the idea of loafing, and the driving worker who regards leisure as merely a temptation to sin cannot attain unto it, it is no less hard to achieve for those cultured souls who preach the desirability that leisure be filled up with good works of moral or aesthetic value. It would be an interesting study to consider who among the great men in history are worthy to be enrolled in the ranks of the loafers. Socrates on occasion must have been qualified, though an unfortunate pertinacity in asking questions, some of which nobody has since answered, would have detracted from the enjoyment of his society on the part of the other loafers. Some of Homer's characters must have loafed gloriously, at such time as they did not take their fighting and their merrymaking too seriously. Marcus Aurelius was a good man who could not loaf; that sad Stoic virtue unfits one for loafing and for some other good things. Horace, whose value to posterity has not been less than that of Aurelius, knew how it was done—*domesticus otior*.—It is probable that Petronius did not; his elegant trifling was too much of a system, conscious and self-imposed. Shakespeare goes without saying; he could not miss one of the richest of human experiences. It may seem strange to class Milton in this company, and perhaps he should not be so classed; his deficiency in humour was a serious drawback. Yet he had music in his soul, and when he says

To-day deep thoughts resolve with me to drench
In mirth that after no repenting draws

he is giving evidence of great possibilities. Dr. Johnson is an interesting case. On his own confession he spent much idle time, which tells nothing at all about his capacity for loafing. He was perhaps too little humorous and too much laden with a sense of sin to reach the casual irresponsibility of the loafer; yet his cheerful acceptance of the humours of his friends and his "I'll have a frisk with you, you dogs", should prevent anyone from deciding hastily against him. Boswell could loaf when he forgot about his sins and his desire for virtue and his serious and honourable ambition to know great men. But the natural loafer is not likely to be eager to figure in the pages of history; his ambition, so far as he has am-

bition, is a purer and wiser thing than that. Herein lies a paradox; for correct principles of loafing may lead a man to spend time only in those activities in which he wishes to spend time. And the activity which one finds most pleasing may be cards, or slumming, or prize-fighting, or higher mathematics, or literary criticism; so that the loafer, if he would maintain his status, must be careful not to allow himself to systematize his leisure, to spend it in some one pursuit, perhaps to become a famous artist or scientist. He might even produce a treatise on contract bridge, or the fourth dimension, or the theory of the complex variable. He must remember that he is an artist, but that his art is merely that of living; that he is a philosopher who retains the child's sense of wonder, and regards the occupation of the serious adult, so-called, as not more important than the sport of other children. He gains thus a certain power that may be employed in those adult games. Those who have examined the Forsyte family closely will recognize in old Jolyon a trace of the irresponsibility of the true loafer; a spark that fired the dull clay of stolid Forsyteism, and made him the most powerful and dangerous of the lot.

If one deserts the philosophy of loafing to consider it as an art in actual practice, the question may properly be raised whether for the loafer, the city or the country is the more suitable neighbourhood. It would seem at first that in the city, club life furnished a suitable atmosphere. But it may be questioned whether club life is sufficiently removed from the excitement of strenuous work and play. One reads magazines and is inveigled into discussions on politics and business, and is carried off to share in games that other people have devised and wish to pursue. One can hardly shut one's ears and mind against all these things without being driven in self-defence upon some arduous pursuit as a pretext for non-conformity. If a man has a genius happily blended by nature to refuse while seeming to accept, and to enjoy the antics of his fellows without becoming entangled in them, he could, perhaps, divert himself by loafing at a club as easily as elsewhere. But it would be a dangerous experiment for all but the perfect in virtue.

Apart from the club, where shall a man loaf in the city? How could anyone loaf properly in a boarding house? Where is the requisite independence to be found in a rented apartment? No man, moreover, can loaf properly in the house with his family, no matter if the house is a palace. The city home lacks proper barns and woodsheds, and the garage is but a feeble substitute. In the city the old corner grocery and its comfortable stove do not exist. In a city store one is only in the way if one sits down to talk. There

is no proper place for whittling; tobacco is scarcely used in the orthodox way. Standing around the street corner is somewhat disreputable, and the true loafer, who may be tramp or peer, does not look on his pursuit as disreputable. It is an honourable way for an honourable man to occupy his time. Professional men with offices in reasonable proximity have the best chance; but with them clients are always likely to interfere. Perhaps the true loafer, like the born poet, can grow to his proper stature anywhere, but the country and the small town offer him the greatest advantage; especially the country, for in the small town loafing is apt to degenerate into vice, and the vicious man has lost the freedom of soul necessary to loafing.

Into the country store the news drifts all day long. The old days were best in this respect, before the auto had become ubiquitous. The auto begets haste and prohibits thought, certainly that higher form of thought known as meditation. A loafer must not hurry, and must spend much time in meditation. His meditations may, according to his mental capacity, resemble the soliloquy of a capable horse or dog, or the dialogues of Plato; they require equal detachment from the speed and noise and smell of the auto. In the old days, still to be found in some quiet hamlets, when the old horse drew up in expectant mood beside the store, there was occasion for rational conversation, even for gossip; and it must be confessed that loafing has a certain affinity for gossip; not indeed for spiteful gossip such as energetic workers sometimes hurl at each other. There is a philosophical brand of gossip which is much higher and not nearly so obvious; the brand that really active and noisy gossips could not detect at all. This is the amusement of the true loafer, and much of it floated, mingled with coarser and duller talk, around the store. By evening it had floated in with other things all day long; and in the evening the neighbours drifted along to absorb the atmosphere. It seems to be a requisite of loafing that one should drift with no definite and positive aim. A difference between the loafer and the mere *akrates* is that the latter has no boundaries, no limits except his own incapacity and the compulsion of nature and the laws. The loafer is to a point unfettered by convention, a follower of impulse and whim. But he has definite boundaries set, and not by law, beyond which he does not go. Vice and meanness are no proper part of his equipment. He knows, when his mind is ripe, (and until then he is not properly qualified for his art) the value of the great conventions that, imposed as a rule of conduct in youth, reveal themselves in the passing of years as necessary principles of spiritual growth. In the audience

at the store there is no one who cares less for the ephemeral dicta of the censorious elders; and no one who is less likely to violate his own genuine creed. He mingles there with his neighbours, is one with them; at the same time contemplating himself and them equally as all God's creatures, and a very interesting show to the impartial observer. They are all God's creatures, but the loafers are the impartial observers.

At times the audience is worth impartial observation. In the long winter evening the store often fills up early. There is a sort of sliding scale that may be applied to assist in the computation of the probable population of the store on any given night. On a fine night there is no great temptation for the young fellows to sit in the store, and those that live nearby, of any age, can easily venture further afield for their amusement; if indeed they leave their own firesides. On the other hand, people from a distance may venture so far, usually bringing with them some genuine errand. On a night of mild inclemency, too bad to stay out and not bad enough to keep healthy men at home, the audience may be various. On those rare occasions when the weather is actually a sort of risk to those who are abroad, risk of frozen ear and nose, of drenching wet, or of impassable drifts, the gathering will be most select. There are many less interesting places than the store on a night when the wind howls with rage around the corners of the building; the snow comes hard as small shot against the windows, driven by the great gusts; outside the drifts pile high, making the way hopeless for autos, and weary even for the patient horse. It is easier for the stalwart traveller on foot. Inside the flame in the kerosene lamp leaps and shudders as the building shakes. The great stove roars with fierce glee. A bed of rich red coals encourages somebody to throw in junks of green beech; they will burn under the strong draught with surly vehemence and much hissing. After supper the store fills up, and a discussion flows on amid the eddying currents of tobacco smoke. On a night so inclement the guests will be mostly near neighbours, and everyone knows the opinion of everyone else anyhow. This fact merely makes the conversation more interesting. One can worm one's way into a subject better after a few hundred discussions. The preliminaries can be taken for granted. A good talk, like a good book, is better at the twentieth repetition. Politics passes into theology, and theology, being a practical subject comes somehow back to the day's news or the day's task. Cows and oxen, the price of cordwood and the best cure for rheumatism, the necessity of immersion and the certainty of predestination, all are likely to come up in the course of the evening.

See the two hearty old fellows who sit back of the big stove. They are friends, are not theologically minded, hold different opinions on politics, and settle down to their own favourite conversation. Ill-natured people might call their talk boastful, but nothing is further from either man than any thought of vainglory. One man knows that he was, and still in his measure is, a singularly strong and agile man, whose feats in work and play are beyond the capacity of common men. The other realizes that of all the splendid cattle and horses and hogs that have come into the country for years, his own have been far the best. Neither man is concerned about the province the other takes for his own. So they talk together happily for hours, sometimes both at once.

This is a good company for a loafer to sit among. He might be any one of them on that night. Some of them, perhaps, are hardy puritans in their ordinary business. But no one is likely to be eager for strenuous labour on a night like that. Men then realize dimly what every properly trained loafer knows all the time, that the main thing is not to do anything but to be somebody. Any one of them might qualify for the seat of the loafer then. He enjoys himself hugely to the tune of the east wind, and buffets his way home through the drifts with great content.

In summer when the days are long it is different. Then each evening, as long as the twilight lingers, everyone can do something about his place. Anyone may come to the store on an errand, or sit for a moment of rest. But now the earnest, puritan souls can be distinguished from the others. Now they realize that at all times except mealtime one should, if in good health, be sleeping or working at least on weekdays. If a man sits down to refresh his soul on the stoop of the store, he will hear, each in its season, the sound of the assiduous hoe as it strikes against a stone; the swish of the scythe from a nearby field, the hum of a distant mower; even the cry of a ploughman on the hillside as he urges his team on in the cool of the evening. Always there is the noise of some late worker at his chores. Then a man who wishes to loaf properly must have the courage of his convictions. He will almost certainly be taken for an idler. Let him drift into the store on some fine afternoon and smoke peacefully. Unless he is an idler, he is a contradiction in terms. If he were not sick, he would be at work; and if he were sick, he would not be smoking. He smokes and thinks of his sins of omission and takes comfort therein. It is necessary for his soul's health that he should at times hurl defiance at any cast-iron system of conduct, and vindicate the essentially romantic nature of the universe. He will not be imprisoned be-

neath a sky of brass and grind out his life in orderly routine. It is part of his intellectual equipment that he should recognize the importance of routine and refuse to be a slave to it. So it is necessary for him to smoke on the shady side of the store and think happily, even though the content of his thought be of work neglected and bills unpaid. Sometimes, too, he smokes under the stars and in his own company; the stars, too, appear to have very little to do, though they occupy their places with monotonous regularity, like policemen forever revolving upon a peaceful beat. Perhaps the occasional falling or shooting star is due to a fit of celestial insanity caused by the sameness of the orbits, and might have been saved by a wholesome spell of loafing.

But the store is not the only place that offers opportunity to the loafer. Consider the sawmill. Here, indeed, he may enjoy one of the purest of human pleasures; the pleasure of sitting in idleness and watching other men at work. The great logs are fastened by means of a chain, and hauled in out of the pond with mechanical unconcern. One at a time they lie upon the inexorable carriage and are subjected to the ministrations of the big saw. The head sawyer is a great man. He treats his dangerous tool lightly as a plaything, but watches it as carefully as a wild beast not too securely chained, one bite of which may easily be death. Here is something to watch, interesting as any play. There is pure aesthetic pleasure in looking on. There is the steady and variegated noise of the saws, a general underground hum of smoothly running machinery, the screaming whizz of the little saws, the deep, fierce buzz of the big one, sometimes rising to a roar as the relentless teeth encounter some unyielding knot. There is the rapid metamorphosis of the logs, from the status of a sort of dead and waterlogged crocodile in the pond, to that of neat and carefully piled boards on their way to become a house or barn for someone. The sound of the water over the dam has its soothing and soporific effect; there one might sit for hours and contemplate the sweat and toil of other men. The sense of satisfaction is no doubt that of '*Suave mari magno*'—and no one can say much more in interpretation of it; but he who has not shared the danger and toil can never fully appreciate the peace and joy of contemplating it. Here again one may differentiate the mere idler from his betters. And at noon when the whistle gives its welcome invitation to man and beast, one moves on with a sense of loss. Except for a young fisherman or a hardened philosopher the prolonged meditation over passive and lonely machinery is not to be highly recommended.

Or consider the barn on a fine autumn evening when the workers are caring for the stock. Here one may sit in blameless peace

against the hay-mow. There is general sense of security and comfort, and the old barn becomes a fortress for defence against a world growing dark and cold outside. Within are fragrant odours and genial noises. The cattle devour their evening meal with Cyclopean joy. There is charm in watching the noiseless motion of the cat, stealing elusively around the corner—no doubt in her own mind no loafer, but cruelly intent on mice; there seems a new and vital quality in the immense yawn of the dog as he stretches himself from his warm corner to seek outside he knows not what—perhaps to continue his secular dispute with the slender moon, now a mere suspicious shadow stealing behind the clouds. The lights gleam from the windows of the house, and the sound of kindling beneath the axe comes from the wood-shed. One knows that it is time to move on. Hospitality will be offered, and that is no part of the true loafer's business to accept while practising his vocation. No longer could he stand aside and look on as a spectator; he must then subordinate his own meditations and observations to the exigencies of courtesy and conversation.

Perhaps the best place to loaf artistically and uninterruptedly for a reasonable space of time is at the threshing-mill in season. There are circumstances that make for the conversion of men of inveterate and over-weening industry. Hither in the busy time of the year comes load after load of grain. Sometimes there may be seen around the yard and along the road twenty or even thirty loads of grain, each load waiting its turn; the owner may be anywhere around, confident and secure of the justice of the miller. Of course, if one leaves one's grain and goes away, one may be careless and miss one's chance: absentees are not regarded. And where there are so many loads to choose among, the miller must with the best intentions sometimes be confused as to which is entitled to come next. Sometimes there will be loose among a number of honest men one or two sharpers who think it a clever thing to get ahead of a neighbour. They are not loved. The ethic of the threshing mill in this respect resembles the ethic of a London queue, not that of a pushing mob around the Eiffel Tower. Yet one may make to oneself many excuses for staying peaceably somewhere near one's team, and making sure of not being absent when needed. Besides the need of watching one's turn, one may say that it is not unlikely to rain; there are clouds in the sky, or if there are not they may easily come into it while one is on the road. Some men will bring their grain several miles behind a team of oxen. Therefore the time of transit must be carefully kept in mind. A man who has his grain under his eye can no doubt find somewhere a kindly

neighbour to lend him a barn-floor if it is impossible for him to get home with it. But that poor soul who goes off home leaving his load under the open sky in his trust, may in the morning come back to find it sodden and drenched. Of course, the genuine loafer cares nothing for these excuses. When he feels like sitting around the mill, he sits around the mill. But, as was indicated before, the industrious puritan who wishes to excuse himself to himself can here find causes to allege why he should wait six or even eight hours rather than to attempt the journey home again. The main thing is to get home safely sometime with undamaged grain and dry straw. Provided that is done no one, not even one's own conscience, will hold inquisition on the length of the time spent.

So on a fine afternoon one puts one's team into a place of comfortable retirement, and settles cheerfully into the shade to let the hours pass as they will. One reclines on clean straw, and treats with tolerant and not effusive courtesy the neighbours who stroll by to stretch themselves and swap a bit of gossip. Here it is pleasant just to be. From the mill comes the insistent 'pant, pant,' of the engine. Few threshing mills are run by water. In somewhat earlier days horse-power was the usual thing. There was a great treadmill, and two mighty horses toiled, weary as Sisyphus, up a hill that still slid downward beneath their feet. Then one heard the heavy thud of the horses' feet and the steady 'clump, clump' of the treads as each fell over the end on its ceaseless journey, like the sun in mythology, going underneath the ground to rise again at the other end of the course. But there is an element of cruelty in enjoying the discomfort of the brute creation, even so mild a cruelty as that inflicted on a horse by making him climb an ever slipping floor. So the sound of the engine, impertinent little 'chug' as it is, comes more pleasantly to the ear. The beater pounds lightly along when the straw is dry and clean; with a heavy sullen stroke when it is wet and full of weeds. Machinery finds out the sins of the careless farmer. The air grows crisp as the sun moves downward, and there seems a freshened vitality in the landscape. Boys drop in on their way home from school, to watch the wonders of the mill. The loafer, or even his hesitating acolyte, can see it all with his eyes shut. The mountain of straw is hurled helpless against the fierce beater, torn limb from limb by the spikes, and dumped contemptuously from the tail of the mill, a broken and dejected mass, even the straw that waved joyfully on the hill-side, and rustled in the breeze and glistened in the sunshine a week ago. At the side a steady stream of clean oats pours into its receptacle; but when the measure is full a careful hand dams the stream

while another measure is substituted. Further along toward the descending straw a second measure catches the tailings—a mixture of grain and broken straw and weed-seeds that is turned back to go through the winnower again. Now and then a stick of some magnitude crashes its splintered course through and on rare occasions a stone hidden in the straws may damage the remorseless beater even to the destruction of a spike. Meantime in the field across the road the turnips hold up their plumes with a glossier green as the sun ceases to oppress them; over in the orchard apples glisten among the leaves; and one can guess that beyond along the old fence the tangle of bushes holds rich ripe blackberries. From the tail of the mill a team occasionally draws away with its load of crushed and dishevelled straw, surmounted by the prosperous bags of oats or barley. People do not raise wheat now, and it is too early for buckwheat. A tenth of the grain remains with the miller as his due. The driver sits aloft as the cattle step briskly homeward. Men who will ride at no other time will ride home from the mill. Finally comes the turn of the loafer, who puts his grain on the table with greater alacrity because of his soul-satisfying defiance of all the precepts of frugality and industry. He goes home pure in heart and happy, ready for a solid week of toil.

Though one can never lack the opportunity for neglecting one's duty, some ways of doing it are pleasanter than others. There are occasions of minor loafing that may be ideal. On a fine afternoon in June one sees men working among their crops all around the neighbourhood. Here are turnips to be thinned, potatoes to be hoed, even a little late planting to be done. One may see an obviously industrious man straighten his back at the end of the row and deliberate for a moment whether to carry his hoe with him or leave it behind, then drop it gently between the rows and start for his neighbour's fence. He strolls cheerfully up to his busy friend, and seats himself upon a hill of potatoes, moving when the exigencies of conversation and the insistence of his neighbour's hoe require. This conversation flows on unimpeded between the apparently idle and the obviously industrious, neither offering rebuke or criticism of the conduct of the other. The hoe, too, remits nothing of its vigorous strokes. Here is seen in small compass the summit of achievement of the loafer. He is doing nothing in comfort, sharing his knowledge of the fact with a worker, and stimulated by the thought of necessary work undone; in addition to all of the threats that malign fate may have in store for him next day. This is the true, happy, ideal condition of the loafer; to be doing nothing pleasantly, by casual chance of weather and contiguity, and to

have on hand something that furnishes evidence of obvious but not too serious neglect of duty. The neighbours can all see the neglect; not the spiritual necessity therefor or the tonic effect thereof. The man is tolerant, industrious in spite of appearances, less prone to ill temper than other people, reaping the results of his seeming idleness in a richer and fuller life.

There are a few of the opportunities and advantages of the loafer who is content to follow the life in the country; or were, until autos and radios and other curious mechanical devices changed to an extent not yet possible to determine the folkways of the land. And there are others. But there is one field of opportunity that does not depend strictly upon locality, rural or urban; that is the academic. It must not at any time be forgotten that genuine loafing is possible only against a background of solid work; and censorious critics may say that there is in college no such background against which the loafer may display his activities. This is mere spite. Gildersleeve well remarks that much of the criticism of the B. A. is due to envy. There are glorious opportunities at college for the artist in loafing. In fact, even a man without much talent may make a respectable start. One may go to sleep in lectures—much the best thing to be done with most lectures anywhere; one may judiciously cut lectures; one may refrain from study and develop the highest degree of ignorance that even college can foster. But then, unfortunately, it will frequently happen that the promising neophyte falls a victim to football or bridge, a much more imperious and degrading slavery than any that the classroom could impose. It is difficult at college as elsewhere to find a man of tolerance and insight who can comprehend the relative value of things, and shun the excesses of strenuous work and still more strenuous play.

After all, herein lies the virtues and essence of loafing. One may so easily get into the habit of thinking oneself and one's work so important; whether that work be governing an empire or putting soles on shoes. The opportunity that the loafer really gets is an opportunity to look on at things as a disinterested spectator. Nothing is better calculated to reduce conceit, foster the habit of fair judgment, and prevent one from taking either oneself or one's neighbours with too great seriousness. Far too much time is spent in this world on unproductive labour, that is labour that produces nothing but money and material things. These are good in their way, but after the mere necessities of daily life have been procured they are of very little real importance. Loafing teaches any man of correct habits of thought and spiritual insight to distinguish between the useful and the useless, and to learn not to

confuse himself with unnecessary details. This lesson is hard to get for one submerged among the eternal bits of business that the environment forces upon one. It is almost a necessity for anyone who wishes to keep sane. There is an ancient saying "We toil in order to be at leisure, and make war in order to have peace". The idea of making war in order to have peace seems to be no longer valid, and too often men toil for leisure that does not or is not allowed to come; it is the great virtue of the loafer that he does not allow himself or his neighbours to forget how to live. He will not be caught by death just as he supposes himself to be about to begin to enjoy life, for he has taken time to observe the values of things, to realize that work and play are relative terms and in themselves not very important, and that to postpone life to some hypothetical future is never to live at all. Every argument that can be brought against the loafer can in the same way be brought against all liberal human activities. For the loafer, this fact is a valid and sufficient apology.