

WAR AND UNREST

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IN the midst of a war, men often asseverate that when it is over they will for ever be more than content, be glad, to stir not at all from their homes. A comfortable bed and to potter in the garden and sit in the easy chair is all, say they, that they desire. But many who speak so are merely expressing, unaware, a mood of the moment.

The Civil War in America was the cause of much restlessness among men. The easy chair and the comfortable bed that had seemed utterly desirable on campaign soon bored a great number of the returned soldiers. They wanted to be moving, marching, "going places," though not to battle—just moving again. Parties of ex-soldiers went roving then even into the secluded valleys of British Columbia. The impulse was simply that of the new restlessness, though the stated object—to others, and to oneself also, one has to give some reason for foolish whims!—was the discovery of gold. Flumes built by these men, for they did look for gold as well as fish and hunt and camp and move on, have been found in the sand of the dry belt of the Upper Columbia Valley in recent years, and sluice-boxes and the like without nails, just held by wooden pegs. It has even been said that the beginning of hobodom was just after the close of the Civil War and a result of it.

We hear it said often regarding some man, "He is possessed of a demon of restlessness." Happy, perhaps, are they who feel no impulse to wander when looking at maps or on hearing the sound of running streams, no urgent desire to see what lies round the bend of a road, or on the other side of a hill. For the wander-fret can be as a consuming vice.

In my early days, when I worked in the lumber camps and railway camps of the West, I met many men thus afflicted. "Afflicted" seems at times to be the fitting word. They were not *hoboes* in the true sense. They would not beg as the hoboes did. But one side of vagrancy that lured the hoboes lured them also—the wandering, going round the bend of the road, over the hill into the next valley—and they looked little different, if at all, "hitting the ties" with blanket-rolls on shoulder. And

they did not only hit the ties. Like the hoboes, they stole rides on trains.

Jobs were easy to find in those days, but as soon as they had made enough money to replenish their wardrobes, if they needed replenishing, and to purchase a few essential provisions, they were off again. There was a sense of freedom, while summer lasted, in journeying through the land with blankets and frying-pan, a sack of flour and a hunk of bacon and a few fish-hooks in the hatband. A willow-wand cut from a creekside shrub served for fishing-rod. The smell of wood-smoke, the odour of trout and bacon sizzling in the pan, the smell of the woods, the sound of running water sufficed for them. To be sure they realised, if not that age would come at last, that winter came yearly; and as the Indian summer drew near an end and nights were chill, they took jobs that they intended to hold a while—to hold till the snows melted and the tamaracks were dusted again with new gold.

In their movements from job to job they often shared a campsite with professional tramps—those who refused all work—or found themselves in a box-car with some of the fraternity. It was wise then to say nothing of the labours they had been employed upon. The consummate hoboes had a hatred of the men who ever took up pick and shovel to earn a few dollars; they had a name for these, called them "gay-cats." I have heard of a gay-cat, his depravity in working discovered, being flung out of a box-car by the hoboes in it.

In the old West I came across several young men whose rovings were extensive. In Australia they had shouldered their swag and carried their billy, as in British Columbia they packed their blankets and carried their can. They had worked their way from Sydney to Vancouver, one as a sailor before the mast, I remember, another as a stoker, another as a dish-washer on a liner. In a water-front restaurant of Vancouver I heard one of the breed spout the whole of Kipling's "For to admire and for to see . . ." poem, to an attentive and appreciative audience.

I recall a little lecture given to me by Allan Urquhart, boss of the extra gang at a gravel pit near Savona, where I had been working in the year 1900. He had made out my time-checke for presentation to divisional headquarters at North Bend, and not mine only, but two others for men in whose company I was leaving the camp.

"Scotty," said he, "be careful." You haven't worked here long. I'm sorry you have decided to quit. These two fellows you are going off with have the itching-foot disease, and are on the fair way to becoming hoboes. Be careful. I know their kind, and they'll introduce you to beating your way on the trains. It's not only that you may break your neck that I'm thinking of. It's the life. This itching foot gets a fellow before he knows. You're not always going to be young. This wandering from place to place is maybe all right when you have health and strength, but you don't lay up anything for the years to come."

The years to come: As I write these words, I recall a young man I met in one of the railway camps. He had, as well as the blanket-roll, a heavy little bundle that he used sometimes to touch in an affectionate manner. It made me think of an Indian's "medicine bag" by the way he treated it. One day I discovered what it contained. The contents were a soldering outfit, soldering iron, one or two pliers. When he grew weary of work with pick and shovel in the railway camps, he went off among the settlements mending pots and pans. He was an educated man, but the lure of the roads and the creeks had got into his system. Had that been all his trouble, all might have been not too bad for him. He confided to me that he hoped some day to have saved enough to buy a horse and a wagon and go in style, a king of tinkers, from British Columbia to Mexico. But, alas, he was what they called a "booze fighter" also. He had, as they say, "a past", and too often tried to drown it, and so could never save enough to finance his sober project.

Twelve years later I saw him again. He had gone down and down. He soldered no more; he worked no more. He was not even a "gay-cat." He was walking along the main street of Kamloops, "touching" people for "the price of a meal"—and the price of a meal, when he had culled enough, would go (it was as plain as print in his demented eyes) to buy a bottle. It hurt to see him.

Another I met after the lapse of some years who had fared little better. When I knew him first, all that ailed him was the itching-foot malady, and he was a merry youth. What drew him from place to place and made him work but briefly was, it seemed, no more deplorable than what moves the nature poet to lyrics of the sky and the sky-mirroring water. He did not merely move along the railway track from place to place. He used to leave the track and go on trips into wilderness on the

old Indian trails. He would stand before a map in the waiting-room of the little "water-tank burg" near where we worked, and plan future wanderings. He talked happily of chipmunks he had tamed in his camps. He had an eye for a scene. He could "stand and stare." He could watch hawks and dragon-flies with curious and enraptured gaze.

But he went the same way, lost his pride. When I saw him a few years later, he had just come in from the "jungles" near a little western town, to "touch" the passers-by for a dime or a quarter. And not only his pride had he lost, but his merri-ment also. Itching-foot, as I said, had seemed to be all that was wrong with him in the past; and seeing what he had come to, I had, along with my regret for his sordid condition, a bit of the feeling of "But for the grace of God, there I go;" for I have known that malady myself, acutely!

Allan Urquhart was right: "It gets a fellow before he knows." After this war there will be more men unsettled. Home they will come and be glad to be home, but a day will arrive for many when they will feel a fever in their blood. To settle down will be agony to them. They will walk from room to room. They will sit down and get up and walk round the house and come in again, and repeat the performance. I know the symptoms. I have marked them of old on various men after the last war, and at other times. I have displayed them myself, and have indeed a suspicion that partly to ease myself a little of the recurring fever I have written this!
