

Cosmopolitan
March, 1908

Some Adventures With the Police

EDITOR'S NOTE.—In this, the concluding installment of "My Life in the Underworld," Mr. London relates his adventures with the official representatives of law and order. We trust that our readers have realized the value of these memoirs apart from their intrinsic interest. They reveal Jack London's initiation into the real mysteries and tragedies of existence. In those youthful experiences was developed that remarkable sympathy for those who are brought into strenuous contact with the harsher problems of life, which has made him one of the most popular and sincere fiction writers of the day.

IF the tramp were suddenly to pass away from the United States, widespread misery for many families would follow. The tramp enables thousands of men to earn honest livings, educate their children, and bring them up God-fearing and industrious. I know. At one time my father was a constable and hunted tramps for a living. The community paid him so much a head for all the tramps he could catch, and also, I believe, he got mileage fees. Ways and means was always a pressing problem in our household, and the amount of meat on the table, the new pair of shoes, the day's outing, or the text-books for school were dependent upon my father's luck in the chase. Well I remember the suppressed eagerness and the suspense with which I waited each morning to learn what the results of his past night's toil had been—how many tramps he had gathered in and what the chances were for convicting them. And so it was that when, later, as a tramp, I succeeded in eluding some predatory constable, I could not feel sorry for the little boys and girls at home in that constable's house; it seemed to me that I in a way was defrauding them of some of the good things in life.

But it's all in the game. The hobo defies society, and society's watch-dogs make a living out of him. Some hoboes like to be caught by the watch-dogs, especially in winter-time. Of course such hoboes select communities where the jails are "good," wherein no work is performed and the food is substantial. Also, there have been, and most probably still are, constables who divide their fees with the hoboes they arrest. Such a constable does not have to hunt. He whistles, and the game comes right up to his hand. It is surprising, the money that is made out of stone-broke tramps. All through the South—at least there were when I was hoboing—are convict camps and plantations, where the time of convicted hoboes is bought by the farmers and where the hoboes simply have to work. Then there are places like the quarries at Rutland, Vermont, where the hobo is exploited, the unearned energy in his body, which he has accumulated by "battering on the drag" or "slamming gates," being extracted for the benefit of that particular community.

Now I don't know anything about the quarries of Rutland, Vermont. I'm very glad that I don't, when I remember how near I was to getting into them. Tramps pass the word along, and I first heard of those quarries when I was in Indiana. But when I got into New England I heard of them continually, and always with danger-signals flying. "They want men in the quarries," the

passing hoboes said; “and they never give a ‘stiff’ less than ninety days.” By the time I got into New Hampshire I was pretty well keyed up over those quarries, and I fought shy of railroad cops, “bulls” (policemen), and constables as I never had before.

One evening I went down to the railroad yards at Concord and found a freight-train made up and ready to start. I located an empty box-car, slid open the side door, and climbed in. It was my hope to win across to White River Junction by morning; that would bring me into Vermont and not more than a thousand miles from Rutland. But after that, as I worked north, the distance between me and the point of danger would begin to increase. In the car I found a “gay-cat” (a tramp new to the road), who displayed unusual trepidation at my entrance. He took me for a “shack” (brakeman), and when he learned that I was only a stiff he began talking about the quarries at Rutland as the cause of the fright I had given him. He was a young country fellow, and had beaten his way only over local stretches of road.

The freight got under way, and we lay down in one end of the box-car and went to sleep. Two or three hours afterward, at a stop, I was awakened by the noise of the right-hand door being softly opened. The gay-cat slept on. I made no movement. A lantern was thrust in through the doorway, followed by the head of a shack. He discovered us, and looked at us for a moment. I was prepared for a violent expression on his part—for the customary “Hit the grit, you son of a toad!” Instead of this he cautiously withdrew the lantern and very, very softly slid the door to. This struck me as eminently unusual and suspicious. I listened, and I heard the hasp drop softly into place. The door was latched on the outside. We could not open it from the inside. One way of sudden exit from the car was blocked. It would never do. I waited a few seconds, then crept to the left-hand door and tried it. It was not yet latched. I opened it, dropped to the ground, and closed it behind me. Then I passed across the bumpers to the other side of the train. I opened the door the shack had latched, climbed in, and closed it behind me. Both exits were available again. The gay-cat was still asleep.

The train got under way. It came to the next stop. I heard footsteps in the gravel. Then the left-hand door was thrown open noisily. The gay-cat awoke, I made believe to awake, and we sat up and stared at the shack and his lantern. He didn’t waste any time getting down to business.

“I want three dollars,” he said.

We got on our feet and came nearer to him to confer. We expressed an absolute and devoted willingness to give him three dollars, but explained our wretched luck that compelled his desire to remain unsatisfied. The shack was incredulous. He dickered with us. He would compromise for two dollars. We regretted our condition of poverty. He said uncomplimentary things, called us sons of toads, and things that are worse. Then he threatened. He explained that if we didn’t dig up he’d lock us in and carry us on to White River and turn us over to the authorities. He also explained all about the quarries in Rutland.

Now that shack thought he had us cornered. Was not he guarding one door, and had not he himself latched the opposite door but a few minutes before? When he began talking about quarries, the frightened gay-cat started to sidle across to the other door. The shack laughed loud and long. “Don’t be in a hurry,” he said; “I locked that door on the outside at the last stop.” So implicitly did he believe the door to be locked that his words carried conviction. The gay-cat believed and was in despair.

The shack delivered his ultimatum. Either we should dig up two dollars or he would lock us in and turn us over to the constable at White River—and that meant ninety days and the quarries.

But the door was unlocked, and I, alone, knew it. The gay-cat and I begged for mercy. I joined in the pleading and wiling out of sheer cussedness, I suppose. But I did my best. I told a “story” that would have melted the heart of any muff; but it didn’t melt the heart of that sordid money-grasper of a shack. When he became convinced that we didn’t have any money, he slid the door shut and latched it, then lingered a moment on the chance that we had fooled him and that we would now offer him the two dollars.

Then it was that I let out a few links. I called *him* a son of a toad. I called him all the other things he had called me. And then I called him a few additional things. I came from the West where men knew how to swear, and I wasn’t going to let any shack on a measly New England “jerk” beat me in vividness and vigor of language. At first the shack tried to laugh it down. Then he made the mistake of attempting to reply. I let out a few more links, and I cut him to the raw and therein rubbed winged and flaming epithets. Nor was my fine frenzy all whim and literary; I was indignant at this vile creature who, in default of a dollar, would consign me to three months of slavery. Furthermore, I had an idea that he got a “drag” out of the constable’s fees.

But I fixed him. I lacerated his feelings and pride several dollar’s worth. He tried to scare me by threatening to come in after me and kick the stuffing out of me. In return, I promised to kick him in the face while he was climbing in. The advantage of position was with me, and he saw it. So he kept the door shut and called for help from the rest of the train-crew. I could hear them answering and crunching through the gravel to him. And all the time the other door was unlatched, and they didn’t know it; and in the meantime the gay-cat was ready to die with fear.

Oh, I was a hero—with my line of retreat straight behind me. I slanged the shack and his mates till they threw the door open and I could see their infuriated faces in the shine of the lanterns. It was all very simple to them. They had us cornered in the car, and they were going to come in and manhandle us. They started. I didn’t kick anybody in the face. I jerked the opposite door open, and the gay-cat and I went out. The train-crew took after us.

We went over—if I remember correctly—a stone fence. But I have no doubts of recollection about where we found ourselves. In the darkness I promptly fell over a grave-stone. The gay-cat sprawled over another. And then we got the chase of our lives through that graveyard. The ghosts must have thought we were going some. So did the train-crew, for when we emerged from the graveyard and plunged across a road into a dark wood, the shacks gave up the pursuit and went back to their train. A little later that night the gay-cat and I found ourselves at the well of a farmhouse. We were after a drink of water, but we noticed a small rope that ran down one side of the well. We hauled it up and found on the end of it a gallon can of cream. And that is as near as I got to the quarries at Rutland, Vermont.

The finishing touch to my education in bulls was received on a hot summer afternoon in New York City. It was during a week of scorching weather. I had got into the habit of throwing my feet in the morning, and of spending the afternoon in the little park that is hard by Newspaper Row and the City Hall. It was near there that I could buy from push-cart men current books (that had been injured in the printing or binding) for a few cents each. Then, right in the park itself, were little booths where one could buy glorious, ice-cold, sterilized milk and buttermilk at a penny a glass. Every afternoon I sat on a bench and read, and went on a milk debauch. I got away with from five to ten glasses each afternoon. It was dreadfully hot weather.

So here I was, a meek and studious milk-drinking hobo, and behold what I got for it. One afternoon I arrived at the park, a fresh book-purchase under my arm and a tremendous buttermilk thirst under my shirt. In the middle of the street, in front of the City Hall, I noticed, as I came

along heading for the buttermilk-booth, that a crowd had formed. It was right where I was crossing the street, so I stopped to see that cause of the collection of curious men. At first I could see nothing. Then from the sounds I heard, and from a glimpse I caught, I knew that it was a bunch of gamins playing pee-wee. Now pee-wee is not permitted in the streets of New York. I didn't know that, but I soon learned it. I had paused possibly thirty seconds, in which time I had learned the cause of the crowd, when I heard a gamin yell, "The cop!" The gamins knew their business. They ran. I didn't.

The crowd broke up immediately and started for the sidewalks on both sides of the street. I started for the sidewalk on the park side. There must have been fifty men, who had been in the original crowd, who were heading in the same direction. We were loosely strung out. I noticed the bull, a strapping policeman, coming along the middle of the street, without haste, merely sauntering. I noticed casually that he had changed his course, and was heading obliquely for the same sidewalk that I was heading for directly. He sauntered along, threading the strung-out crowd, and I noticed that his course and mine would cross each other. I was so innocent of wrong-doing that, in spite of my education in bulls and their ways, I apprehended nothing. I never dreamed that bull was after me. Out of my respect for the law I was actually all ready to pause the next moment and let him cross in front of me. The pause came all right, but it was not of my volition; also, it was a backward pause. Without warning, that bull had suddenly launched out at me on the chest with both hands. At the same moment, verbally, he cast the bar sinister on my genealogy.

All my free American blood boiled. All my liberty-loving ancestors clamored in me. "What do you mean?" I demanded. You see, I wanted an explanation. Bang! His club came down on top of my head, and I was reeling backward like a drunken man, the curious faces of the onlookers billowing up and down like the waves of the sea, my precious book falling from under my arm into the dirt, the bull advancing with the club ready for another blow. And in that dizzy moment I had a vision. I saw the club descending many times upon my head; I saw myself, bloody and battered and hard-looking, in a police court; I heard a charge of disorderly conduct, profane language, resisting an officer, and a few other things, read by a clerk; and I saw myself across on Blackwells Island. Oh, I knew the game. I lost all interest in explanations. I didn't stop to pick up my precious, unread book. I turned and ran. I was pretty sick, but I ran. And run I shall, to my dying day, whenever a bull begins to explain with a club.

Why, years after my tramping days, when I was a student at the University of California, one night I went to the circus. After the show and the concert I lingered on to watch the working of the transportation machinery of a great circus. The circus was leaving that night. By a bonfire I came upon a bunch of small boys. There were about twenty of them, and as they talked I learned that they were going to run away with the circus. Now the circus-men didn't want to be bothered with this mess of urchins, and a telephone message to police headquarters had "coppered" the play. A squad of ten policemen had been dispatched to the scene to arrest the small boys for violating the nine-o'clock-curfew ordinance. The policemen surrounded the bonfire, and crept up close to it in the darkness. At the signal, they made a rush, each policeman grabbing at the youngsters as he would grab into a basket of squirming eels.

Now I didn't know anything about the coming of the police, and when I saw the sudden eruption of brass-buttoned, helmeted bulls, each of them reaching with both hands, all the forces and stability of my being were overthrown. Remained only the automatic process to run. And I ran. I didn't know I was running. I didn't know anything. It was, as I have said, automatic. There was no reason for me to run. I was not a hobo. I was a citizen of that community. It was my

home town. I was guilty of no wrong-doing. I was a college man. I had even got my name in the papers, and I wore good clothes that had never been slept in. And yet I ran—blindly, madly, for over a block. And when I came to myself I noted that I was still running. It required a positive effort of will to stop those legs of mine.

No, I'll never get over it. I can't help it. When a bull reaches, I run. Besides, I have an unhappy faculty for getting into jail. I have been in jail more times since I was a hobo than when I was one. I start out on a Sunday morning with a young lady on a bicycle ride. Before we can get outside the city limits we are arrested for passing a pedestrian on the sidewalk. I resolve to be more careful. The next time I am on a bicycle it is nighttime and my acetylene-gas lamp is misbehaving. I cherish the sickly flame carefully, because of the ordinance. I am in a hurry, but I ride at a snail's pace so as not to jar out the flickering flame. I reach the city limits; I am beyond the jurisdiction of the ordinance, and I proceed to scorch to make up for lost time. And half a mile farther on I am "pinched" by a bull, and the next morning I forfeit my bail in the police court. The city had treacherously extended its city limits a mile into the country, and I didn't know it, that was all. I remember my inalienable right of free speech and peaceable assemblage, and I get up on a soap-box to liberate the particular economic bees that buzz in my bonnet, and a bull takes me off that box and leads me to the city prison, and after that I get out on bail. It's no use. In Korea I used to be arrested about every other day. It was the same thing in Manchuria. The last time I was in Japan I broke into jail under the pretext of being a Russian spy. It wasn't my pretext, but it got me into jail just the same. There is no hope for me. I am fated to do the Prisoner-of-Chillon stunt yet. This is prophecy.

I once hypnotized a bull on Boston Common. It was past midnight, and he had me dead to rights; but before I got done with him he had given me a quarter and the address of an all-night restaurant. Then there was a bull in Bristol, Pennsylvania, who caught me and let me go, and heaven knows he had provocation enough to put me in jail. I'll wager I hit him the hardest he was ever hit in his life. It happened this way. About midnight I nailed a freight on the Pennsylvania out of Philadelphia. The shacks ditched me. She was pulling out slowly through the maze of tracks and switches of the freight-yards. I nailed her again, and again I was ditched. You see, I had to nail her outside, for she was a through freight with every door locked and sealed.

The second time I was ditched the shack gave me a lecture. He told me I was risking my life, that it was a fast freight, and that she went some. I told him I was used to going some myself, but it was no go. He said he wouldn't permit me to commit suicide, and I hit the grit. But I nailed her a third time, getting in between on the bumpers. They were the most meager bumpers I had ever seen—I do not refer to the real bumpers, the iron bumpers that are connected by the coupling-link and that pound and grind on each other; what I refer to are the beams, like huge cleats, that cross the ends of freight-cars just above the bumpers. When one rides the bumpers he stands on these cleats, one foot on each, the bumpers between his feet and just beneath.

As the freight got out of Philadelphia she began to hit up speed. Then I understood what the shack had meant by suicide. The freight went faster and faster. She was a through freight, and there was nothing to stop her. On that section of the Pennsylvania four tracks run side by side, and my east-bound freight didn't need to worry about passing any west-bound freights, nor about being overtaken by east-bound expresses. She had the track to herself, and she used it. I was in a precarious situation. I stood with the mere edges of my feet on the narrow projections, the palms of my hands pressing desperately against the flat, perpendicular ends of the cars. And those cars moved, moved individually, up and down and back and forth. Did you ever see a circus rider

standing on two running horses, with one foot on the back of each horse? Well, that was what I was doing, with several differences. The circus rider had the reins to hold on to, while I had nothing; he stood on the broad soles of his feet, while I stood on the edges of mine; he bent his legs and body, gaining strength in the arch in his posture and achieving the stability of a low center of gravity, while I was compelled to stand upright and keep my legs straight; he rode face-forward, while I was riding sidewise; and also, if he had fallen off he'd have gotten only a roll in the sawdust, while I'd have been ground to pieces beneath the wheels.

Roaring and shrieking, that freight swung madly around curves and thundered over trestles, one car-end bumping up when the other was jarring down, or jerking to right at the same moment the other was lurching to the left, and with me all the while praying and hoping for the train to stop. But she didn't stop; she didn't have to. For the first, last, and only time on the road I got all I wanted. I abandoned the bumpers and managed to get out on a side ladder; it was ticklish work, for I had never encountered car-ends that were so parsimonious of hand-holds and foot-holds as those car-ends were.

I heard the engine whistling, and I felt the speed easing down. I knew the train wasn't going to stop, but my mind was made up to chance it if she slowed down sufficiently. The right of way at this point took a curve, crossed a bridge over a canal, and cut through the town of Bristol. This combination compelled slow speed. I clung on to the side ladder and waited. I didn't know it was the town of Bristol we were approaching. I didn't know what necessitated the slackening in speed. All I knew was that I wanted to get off. I strained my eyes in the darkness for a street-crossing on which to land. I was pretty well down the train, and before my car was in town the engine was past the station and I could feel her making speed again.

Then came the street. It was too dark to see how wide it was or what was on the other side. I knew I needed all of that street if I was to remain on my feet after I struck. I dropped off on the near side. It sounds easy. By "dropped off" I mean just this: First of all I thrust my body forward as far as I could in the direction the train was going—this to give as much space as possible in which to gain backward momentum when I swung. Then I swung, swung out and backward, with all my might, and let go, at the same time throwing myself backward as if I intended to strike the ground on the back of my head. The whole effort was to overcome as much as possible the primary forward momentum the train had imparted on my body. When my feet hit the grit my body was lying backward on the air at an angle of forty-five degrees. I had reduced the forward momentum some, for when my feet struck I did not immediately pitch forward on my face. Instead, my body rose to the perpendicular and began to incline forward. In point of fact, my body proper still retained much momentum, while my feet, through contact with the earth, had lost all their momentum. This momentum the feet had lost I had to supply anew by lifting them as rapidly as I could and running them forward in order to keep them under my forward-moving body. The result was that my feet beat a rapid and explosive tattoo clear across the street. I didn't dare stop them. If I had, I'd have pitched forward. It was up to me to keep on going.

I was an involuntary projectile, worrying about what was on the other side of the street and hoping that it wouldn't be a stone wall or a telegraph pole. And just then I hit something. Horrors! I saw it just the instant before the disaster—of all things, a bull, standing there in the darkness. We went down together, rolling over and over; and the automatic process in that miserable creature was such that in the moment of impact he reached out and clutched me and never let go. We were both knocked out, and he held on to a very lamblike hobo while he recovered.

If that bull had any imagination he must have thought me a traveler from other worlds, the man from Mars just arriving; for in the darkness he hadn't seen me swing from the train. In fact, his first words were, "Where did you come from?" His next words, and before I had time to answer, were, "I've a good mind to run you in." This latter I am convinced was likewise automatic. He was a really good bull at heart, for after I had told him a "story" and helped brush off his clothes, he gave me until the next freight to get out of town. I stipulated two things: first, that the freight be east-bound, and second, that it should not be a through freight with all doors sealed and locked. To this he agreed, and thus, by the terms of the treaty of Bristol, I escaped being pinched.

I remember another night, in that part of the country, when I just missed another bull. If I had hit him I'd have telescoped him, for I was coming down from above, all holds free, with several other bulls one jump behind and reaching for me. This is how it happened. I had been lodging in a livery-stable in Washington. I had a box-stall and unnumbered horse-blankets all to myself. In return for such sumptuous accommodations I took care of a string of horses each morning. I might have been there yet, if it hadn't been for the bulls.

One evening, about nine o'clock, I returned to the stable to go to bed and found a crap game in full blast. It had been a market day, and all the negroes had money. It would be well to explain the lay of the land. The livery-stable faced on two streets. I entered the front, passed through the office, and came to the alley between the rows of stalls that ran the length of the building and opened out on the other street. Midway along this alley, beneath a gas-jet and between the rows of horses, were about forty negroes. I joined them as an onlooker. I was broke and couldn't play. A coon was making passes and not dragging down. He was riding his luck, and with each pass the total stake doubled. All kinds of money lay on the floor. It was fascinating. With each pass, the chances increased tremendously against the coon's making another pass. The excitement was intense. And just then came a smash on the big doors that opened on the back street.

A few of the negroes bolted in the opposite direction. I paused from my flight a moment to grab at the money on the floor. This wasn't theft; it was merely custom. Every man who hadn't run was grabbing. The doors crashed open and swung in, and through them surged a squad of bulls. We surged the other way. It was dark in the office, and the narrow door would not permit all of us to pass out to the street at the same time. Things became congested. A coon took a dive through the window, taking the sash along with him and followed by other coons. At our rear the bulls were making prisoners. A big coon and myself made a dash at the door at the same time. He was bigger than I, and he pivoted me and got through first. The next instant a club swatted him on the head and he went down like a steer. Another squad of bulls was waiting outside for us. They knew they couldn't stop the rush with their hands, and so they were swinging their clubs. I stumbled over the fallen coon who had pivoted me, ducked a swat from a club, dived between a bull's legs, and was free. And then how I ran! There was a lean mulatto just in front of me, and I took his pace. He knew the town better than I did, and I knew that in the way he ran lay safety. But he, on the other hand, took me for a pursuing bull. He never looked around; he just ran. My wind was good, and I hung on to his pace and nearly killed him. In the end he stumbled weakly, went down on his knees, and surrendered to me. And when he discovered that I wasn't a bull, all that saved me was that he didn't have any wind left in him.

That was why I left Washington—not on account of the mulatto, but on account of the bulls. I went down to the station and caught the first blind out on a Pennsylvania Railroad express. After the train got well under way and I noted the speed she was making, a misgiving

smote me. This was a four-track railroad, and the engines took water on the fly. Hoboes had long since warned me never to ride the first blind on trains where the engines took water on the fly. And now let me explain. Between the tracks are shallow metal troughs. As the engine, at full speed, passes above, a sort of chute drops down into the trough. The result is that all the water in the trough rushes up the chute and fills the tender.

Somewhere between Washington and Baltimore, as I sat on the platform of the blind, a fine spray began to fill the air. It did no harm. “Aha!” thought I; “it’s all a bluff, this taking water on the fly being bad for the hobo on the first blind. What does this little spray amount to?” Then I began to marvel at the device. This *was* railroading! And just then the tender filled up, and we hadn’t reached the end of the trough. A tidal wave of water poured over the back of the tender and down upon me. I was soaked to the skin.

The train pulled into Baltimore. As is the custom in some of the great Eastern cities, the railroad ran beneath the level of the streets. As the train pulled into the lighted station, I made myself as small as possible on the blind, but a railroad bull saw me and gave chase. Two more joined him. I was past the station, and I ran straight on down the track. I was in a sort of trap. On each side of me rose the steep walls of the cut, and if I ever essayed them and failed, I knew that I’d slide back into the clutches of the bulls. I ran on and on, studying the walls of the cut for a favorable place to climb up. At last I saw such a place. It came just after I had passed under a bridge that carried a level street across the cut. Up the steep slope I went, clawing hand and foot. The three railroad bulls were clawing up right after me.

At the top, I found myself in a vacant lot. On one side was a low wall that separated it from the street. There was no time for minute investigation. They were at my heels. I headed for the wall and vaulted it. And right there was where I got the surprise of my life. One is used to thinking that one side of a wall is just as high as the other side. But that wall was different. You see, the vacant lot was much higher than the level of the street. On my side the wall was low, but on the other side—well, as I came soaring over the top, it seemed to me that I was falling, feet first, plump into an abyss. There beneath me, on the sidewalk, in the light of a street-lamp, was a bull. I guess it was nine or ten feet down to the sidewalk; but it seemed twice that distance.

I straightened out in the air and came down. At first I thought I was going to land on the bull. My clothes did brush him as my feet struck the sidewalk with explosive impact. It was a wonder he didn’t drop dead, for he hadn’t heard me coming. It was the man-from-Mars stunt over again. The bull did jump. He shied away from me like a horse from an auto; and then he reached for me. I didn’t stop to explain. I left that to my pursuers, who were dropping over the wall rather gingerly. But I got a chase all right. I ran up one street and down another, and at last got away.

After spending some of the coin I’d got from the crap game, I came back to the railroad cut, just outside the lights of the station, and waited for a train. My blood had cooled down, and I shivered miserably in my wet clothes. At last a train pulled into the station. I lay low in the darkness, and successfully boarded her when she pulled out, taking good care this time to make the second blind. No more water on the fly in mine. The train ran forty miles to the first stop. I got off in a lighted station that was strangely familiar. I was back in Washington. In some way, during the excitement of the get-away in Baltimore, running through strange streets, dodging and turning and retracing, I had got turned around. I had taken the train out the wrong way. I had lost a night’s sleep, I had been soaked to the skin, I had been chased for my life; and for all my pains I was back where I had started. Oh, no, life on the road is not all beer and skittles. But I didn’t go

| back to the livery-stable. I had done some pretty successful grabbing, and I didn't want to reckon up with the coons. So I caught the next train out, and ate my breakfast in Baltimore.