

The Eternal Whither

There was once an old cashier in some ancient City establishment, whose practice was to spend his yearly holiday in relieving some turnpike-man at his post, and performing all the duties appertaining thereunto. This was vulgarly taken to be an instance of mere mill-horse enslavement to his groove -- the reception of payments; and it was spoken of both in mockery of all mill-horses and for the due admonishment of others. And yet that clerk had discovered for himself an unique method of seeing Life at its best, the flowing, hurrying, travelling, marketing Life of the Highway; the life of bagman and cart, of tinker, and pig-dealer, and all cheery creatures that drink and chaffer together in the sun. He belonged, above all, to the scanty class of clear-seeing persons who know both what they are good for and what they really want. To know what you would like to do is one thing; to go out boldly and do it is another -- and a rarer; and the sterile fields about Hell-Gate are strewn with the corpses of those who would an if they could.

To be sure, being bent on the relaxation most congenial to one's soul, it is possible to push one's disregard for convention too far: as is seen in the case of another, though of an earlier generation, in the same establishment. In his office there was the customary ``attendance-book," wherein the clerks were expected to sign each day. Here his name one morning ceases abruptly from appearing; he signs, indeed, no more. Instead of signature you find, a little later,

writ in careful commercial hand, this entry: "Mr --- did not attend at his office to-day, having been hanged at eight o'clock in the morning for horse-stealing." Through the faded ink of this record do you not seem to catch, across the gulf of years, some waft of the jolly humanity which breathed in this prince among clerks? A formal precisian, doubtless, during business hours; but with just this honest love of horseflesh lurking deep down there in him -- unsuspected, sweetening the whole lump. Can you not behold him, freed from his desk, turning to pursue his natural bent, as a city-bred dog still striveth to bury his bone deep in the hearth-rug? For no filthy lucre, you may be sure, but from sheer love of the pursuit itself! All the same, he erred; erred, if not in taste, at least in judgment: for we cannot entirely acquit him of blame for letting himself be caught.

In these tame and tedious days of the policeman rampant, our melancholy selves are debarred from many a sport, joyous and debonair, whereof our happier fathers were free. Book-stealing, to be sure, remains to us; but every one is not a collector; and, besides, 'tis a diversion you can follow with equal success all the year round. Still, the instance may haply be pregnant with suggestion to many who wearily ask each year, what new place or pursuit exhausted earth still keeps for the holiday-maker. 'Tis a sad but sober fact, that the most of men lead flat and virtuous lives, departing annually with their family to some flat and virtuous place, there to disport themselves in a manner that is decent, orderly, wholly uninteresting, vacant of every buxom stimulus. To such as these a suggestion, in all friendliness: why not

try crime? We shall not attempt to specify the particular branch -- for every one must himself seek out and find the path his nature best fits him to follow; but the general charm of the prospect must be evident to all. The freshness and novelty of secrecy, the artistic satisfaction in doing the act of self-expression as well as it can possibly be done; the experience of being not the hunter, but the hunted, not the sportsman, but the game; the delight of comparing and discussing crimes with your mates over a quiet pipe on your return to town; these new pleasures -- these and their like -- would furnish just that gentle stimulant, that peaceful sense of change so necessary to the tired worker. And then the fact, that you would naturally have to select and plan out your particular line of diversion without advice or assistance, has its own advantage. For the moment a man takes to dinning in your ears that you ought, you really ought, to go to Norway, you at once begin to hate Norway with a hate that ever will be; and to have Newlyn, Cromer, or Dawlish, Carinthia or the Austrian Tyrol jammed down your throat, is enough to initiate the discovery that your own individual weakness is a joyous and persistent liking for manslaughter.

Some few seem to be born without much innate tendency to crime. After all, it is mostly a matter of heredity; these unfortunates are less culpable than their neglectful ancestors; and it is a fault that none need really blush for in the present. For such as they there still remains the example of the turnpike-loving clerk, with all its golden possibilities. Denied the great delight of driving a locomotive, or a

fire-engine -- whirled along in a glorious nimbus of smoke-pant,
spark-shower, and hoarse warning roar -- what bliss to the palefaced
quilldriver to command a penny steamboat between London Bridge and
Chelsea! to drive a four-horsed Jersey-car to Kew at sixpence a head!
Though turnpikes be things of the past, there are still tolls to be
taken on many a pleasant reach of Thames. What happiness in quiet
moments to tend the lock-keeper's flower-beds -- perhaps make love to
his daughter; anon in busier times to let the old gates swing, work
the groaning winches, and hear the water lap and suck and gurgle as it
slowly sinks or rises with its swaying freight; to dangle legs over
the side and greet old acquaintances here and there among the
parti-coloured wayfarers passing up or down; while tobacco palleth not
on the longest day, and beer is ever within easy reach. The iron
tetter that scurfs the face of our island has killed out the pleasant
life of the road; but many of its best conditions still linger round
these old toll gates, free from dust and clatter, on the silent liquid
Highway to the West.

These for the weaker brethren: but for him who is conscious of the
Gift, the path is plain.