

The Human Drift

By

Jack London

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THE HUMAN DRIFT

"The Revelations of Devout and Learn'd
Who rose before us, and as Prophets Burn'd,
Are all but stories, which, awoke from Sleep,
They told their comrades, and to Sleep return'd."

The history of civilisation is a history of wandering, sword in hand, in search of food. In the misty younger world we catch glimpses of phantom races, rising, slaying, finding food, building rude civilisations, decaying, falling under the swords of stronger hands, and passing utterly away. Man, like any other animal, has roved over the earth seeking what he might devour; and not romance and adventure, but the hunger-need, has urged him on his vast adventures. Whether a bankrupt gentleman sailing to colonise Virginia or a lean Cantonese contracting to labour on the sugar plantations of Hawaii, in each case, gentleman and coolie, it is a desperate attempt to get something to eat, to get more to eat than he can get at home.

It has always been so, from the time of the first pre-human anthropoid crossing a mountain-divide in quest of better berry-bushes beyond, down to the latest Slovak, arriving on our shores to-day, to go to work in the coal-mines of Pennsylvania. These migratory movements of peoples have been called drifts, and the word is apposite. Unplanned, blind, automatic, spurred on by the pain of hunger, man has literally drifted

his way around the planet. There have been drifts in the past, innumerable and forgotten, and so remote that no records have been left, or composed of such low-typed humans or pre-humans that they made no scratchings on stone or bone and left no monuments to show that they had been.

These early drifts we conjecture and know must have occurred, just as we know that the first upright-walking brutes were descended from some kin of the quadrumana through having developed "a pair of great toes out of two opposable thumbs." Dominated by fear, and by their very fear accelerating their development, these early ancestors of ours, suffering hunger-pangs very like the ones we experience to-day, drifted on, hunting and being hunted, eating and being eaten, wandering through thousand-year-long odysseys of screaming primordial savagery, until they left their skeletons in glacial gravels, some of them, and their bone-scratchings in cave-men's lairs.

There have been drifts from east to west and west to east, from north to south and back again, drifts that have criss-crossed one another, and drifts colliding and recoiling and caroming off in new directions. From Central Europe the Aryans have drifted into Asia, and from Central Asia the Turanians have drifted across Europe. Asia has thrown forth great waves of hungry humans from the prehistoric "round-barrow" "broad-heads" who overran Europe and penetrated to Scandinavia and England, down through the hordes of Attila and Tamerlane, to the present immigration of Chinese and Japanese that threatens America. The Phoenicians and the

Greeks, with unremembered drifts behind them, colonised the Mediterranean. Rome was engulfed in the torrent of Germanic tribes drifting down from the north before a flood of drifting Asiatics. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, after having drifted whence no man knows, poured into Britain, and the English have carried this drift on around the world. Retreating before stronger breeds, hungry and voracious, the Eskimo has drifted to the inhospitable polar regions, the Pigmy to the fever-rotten jungles of Africa. And in this day the drift of the races continues, whether it be of Chinese into the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula, of Europeans to the United States or of Americans to the wheatlands of Manitoba and the Northwest.

Perhaps most amazing has been the South Sea Drift. Blind, fortuitous, precarious as no other drift has been, nevertheless the islands in that waste of ocean have received drift after drift of the races. Down from the mainland of Asia poured an Aryan drift that built civilisations in Ceylon, Java, and Sumatra. Only the monuments of these Aryans remain. They themselves have perished utterly, though not until after leaving evidences of their drift clear across the great South Pacific to far Easter Island. And on that drift they encountered races who had accomplished the drift before them, and they, the Aryans, passed, in turn, before the drift of other and subsequent races whom we to-day call the Polynesian and the Melanesian.

Man early discovered death. As soon as his evolution permitted, he made himself better devices for killing than the old natural ones of fang and

claw. He devoted himself to the invention of killing devices before he discovered fire or manufactured for himself religion. And to this day, his finest creative energy and technical skill are devoted to the same old task of making better and ever better killing weapons. All his days, down all the past, have been spent in killing. And from the fear-stricken, jungle-lurking, cave-haunting creature of long ago, he won to empery over the whole animal world because he developed into the most terrible and awful killer of all the animals. He found himself crowded. He killed to make room, and as he made room ever he increased and found himself crowded, and ever he went on killing to make more room. Like a settler clearing land of its weeds and forest bushes in order to plant corn, so man was compelled to clear all manner of life away in order to plant himself. And, sword in hand, he has literally hewn his way through the vast masses of life that occupied the earth space he coveted for himself. And ever he has carried the battle wider and wider, until to-day not only is he a far more capable killer of men and animals than ever before, but he has pressed the battle home to the infinite and invisible hosts of menacing lives in the world of micro-organisms.

It is true, that they that rose by the sword perished by the sword. And yet, not only did they not all perish, but more rose by the sword than perished by it, else man would not to-day be over-running the world in such huge swarms. Also, it must not be forgotten that they who did not rise by the sword did not rise at all. They were not. In view of this, there is something wrong with Doctor Jordan's war-theory, which is to the effect that the best being sent out to war, only the second best, the men

who are left, remain to breed a second-best race, and that, therefore, the human race deteriorates under war. If this be so, if we have sent forth the best we bred and gone on breeding from the men who were left, and since we have done this for ten thousand millenniums and are what we splendidly are to-day, then what unthinkably splendid and god-like beings must have been our forebears those ten thousand millenniums ago!

Unfortunately for Doctor Jordan's theory, those ancient forebears cannot live up to this fine reputation. We know them for what they were, and before the monkey cage of any menagerie we catch truer glimpses and hints and resemblances of what our ancestors really were long and long ago. And by killing, incessant killing, by making a shambles of the planet, those ape-like creatures have developed even into you and me. As Henley has said in "The Song of the Sword":

"The Sword Singing--

Driving the darkness,
Even as the banners
And spear of the Morning;
Sifting the nations,
The Slag from the metal,
The waste and the weak
From the fit and the strong;
Fighting the brute,
The abysmal Fecundity;
Checking the gross

Multitudinous blunders,
The groping, the purblind
Excesses in service
Of the Womb universal,
The absolute drudge."

As time passed and man increased, he drifted ever farther afield in search of room. He encountered other drifts of men, and the killing of men became prodigious. The weak and the decadent fell under the sword. Nations that faltered, that waxed prosperous in fat valleys and rich river deltas, were swept away by the drifts of stronger men who were nourished on the hardships of deserts and mountains and who were more capable with the sword. Unknown and unnumbered billions of men have been so destroyed in prehistoric times. Draper says that in the twenty years of the Gothic war, Italy lost 15,000,000 of her population; "and that the wars, famines, and pestilences of the reign of Justinian diminished the human species by the almost incredible number of 100,000,000." Germany, in the Thirty Years' War, lost 6,000,000 inhabitants. The record of our own American Civil War need scarcely be recalled.

And man has been destroyed in other ways than by the sword. Flood, famine, pestilence and murder are potent factors in reducing population--in making room. As Mr. Charles Woodruff, in his "Expansion of Races," has instanced: In 1886, when the dikes of the Yellow River burst, 7,000,000 people were drowned. The failure of crops in Ireland, in 1848, caused 1,000,000 deaths. The famines in India of 1896-7 and

1899-1900 lessened the population by 21,000,000. The T'ai'ping rebellion and the Mohammedan rebellion, combined with the famine of 1877-78, destroyed scores of millions of Chinese. Europe has been swept repeatedly by great plagues. In India, for the period of 1903 to 1907, the plague deaths averaged between one and two millions a year. Mr. Woodruff is responsible for the assertion that 10,000,000 persons now living in the United States are doomed to die of tuberculosis. And in this same country ten thousand persons a year are directly murdered. In China, between three and six millions of infants are annually destroyed, while the total infanticide record of the whole world is appalling. In Africa, now, human beings are dying by millions of the sleeping sickness.

More destructive of life than war, is industry. In all civilised countries great masses of people are crowded into slums and labour-ghettos, where disease festers, vice corrodes, and famine is chronic, and where they die more swiftly and in greater numbers than do the soldiers in our modern wars. The very infant mortality of a slum parish in the East End of London is three times that of a middle-class parish in the West End. In the United States, in the last fourteen years, a total of coal-miners, greater than our entire standing army, has been killed and injured. The United States Bureau of Labour states that during the year 1908, there were between 30,000 and 35,000 deaths of workers by accidents, while 200,000 more were injured. In fact, the safest place for a working-man is in the army. And even if that army be at the front, fighting in Cuba or South Africa, the soldier in the ranks has a better chance for life than the working-man at home.

And yet, despite this terrible roll of death, despite the enormous killing of the past and the enormous killing of the present, there are to-day alive on the planet a billion and three quarters of human beings. Our immediate conclusion is that man is exceedingly fecund and very tough. Never before have there been so many people in the world. In the past centuries the world's population has been smaller; in the future centuries it is destined to be larger. And this brings us to that old bugbear that has been so frequently laughed away and that still persists in raising its grisly head--namely, the doctrine of Malthus. While man's increasing efficiency of food-production, combined with colonisation of whole virgin continents, has for generations given the apparent lie to Malthus' mathematical statement of the Law of Population, nevertheless the essential significance of his doctrine remains and cannot be challenged. Population does press against subsistence. And no matter how rapidly subsistence increases, population is certain to catch up with it.

When man was in the hunting stage of development, wide areas were necessary for the maintenance of scant populations. With the shepherd stages, the means of subsistence being increased, a larger population was supported on the same territory. The agricultural stage gave support to a still larger population; and, to-day, with the increased food-getting efficiency of a machine civilisation, an even larger population is made possible. Nor is this theoretical. The population is here, a billion and three quarters of men, women, and children, and this vast population

is increasing on itself by leaps and bounds.

A heavy European drift to the New World has gone on and is going on; yet Europe, whose population a century ago was 170,000,000, has to-day 500,000,000. At this rate of increase, provided that subsistence is not overtaken, a century from now the population of Europe will be 1,500,000,000. And be it noted of the present rate of increase in the United States that only one-third is due to immigration, while two-thirds is due to excess of births over deaths. And at this present rate of increase, the population of the United States will be 500,000,000 in less than a century from now.

Man, the hungry one, the killer, has always suffered for lack of room. The world has been chronically overcrowded. Belgium with her 572 persons to the square mile is no more crowded than was Denmark when it supported only 500 palaeolithic people. According to Mr. Woodruff, cultivated land will produce 1600 times as much food as hunting land. From the time of the Norman Conquest, for centuries Europe could support no more than 25 to the square mile. To-day Europe supports 81 to the square mile. The explanation of this is that for the several centuries after the Norman Conquest her population was saturated. Then, with the development of trading and capitalism, of exploration and exploitation of new lands, and with the invention of labour-saving machinery and the discovery and application of scientific principles, was brought about a tremendous increase in Europe's food-getting efficiency. And immediately her population sprang up.

According to the census of Ireland, of 1659, that country had a population of 500,000. One hundred and fifty years later, her population was 8,000,000. For many centuries the population of Japan was stationary. There seemed no way of increasing her food-getting efficiency. Then, sixty years ago, came Commodore Perry, knocking down her doors and letting in the knowledge and machinery of the superior food-getting efficiency of the Western world. Immediately upon this rise in subsistence began the rise of population; and it is only the other day that Japan, finding her population once again pressing against subsistence, embarked, sword in hand, on a westward drift in search of more room. And, sword in hand, killing and being killed, she has carved out for herself Formosa and Korea, and driven the vanguard of her drift far into the rich interior of Manchuria.

For an immense period of time China's population has remained at 400,000,000--the saturation point. The only reason that the Yellow River periodically drowns millions of Chinese is that there is no other land for those millions to farm. And after every such catastrophe the wave of human life rolls up and now millions flood out upon that precarious territory. They are driven to it, because they are pressed remorselessly against subsistence. It is inevitable that China, sooner or later, like Japan, will learn and put into application our own superior food-getting efficiency. And when that time comes, it is likewise inevitable that her population will increase by unguessed millions until it again reaches the saturation point. And then, inoculated with Western ideas, may she not,

like Japan, take sword in hand and start forth colossally on a drift of her own for more room? This is another reputed bogie--the Yellow Peril; yet the men of China are only men, like any other race of men, and all men, down all history, have drifted hungrily, here, there and everywhere over the planet, seeking for something to eat. What other men do, may not the Chinese do?

But a change has long been coming in the affairs of man. The more recent drifts of the stronger races, carving their way through the lesser breeds to more earth-space, has led to peace, ever to wider and more lasting peace. The lesser breeds, under penalty of being killed, have been compelled to lay down their weapons and cease killing among themselves. The scalp-talking Indian and the head-hunting Melanesian have been either destroyed or converted to a belief in the superior efficacy of civil suits and criminal prosecutions. The planet is being subdued. The wild and the hurtful are either tamed or eliminated. From the beasts of prey and the cannibal humans down to the death-dealing microbes, no quarter is given; and daily, wider and wider areas of hostile territory, whether of a warring desert-tribe in Africa or a pestilential fever-hole like Panama, are made peaceable and habitable for mankind. As for the great mass of stay-at-home folk, what percentage of the present generation in the United States, England, or Germany, has seen war or knows anything of war at first hand? There was never so much peace in the world as there is to-day.

War itself, the old red anarch, is passing. It is safer to be a soldier

than a working-man. The chance for life is greater in an active campaign than in a factory or a coal-mine. In the matter of killing, war is growing impotent, and this in face of the fact that the machinery of war was never so expensive in the past nor so dreadful. War-equipment to-day, in time of peace, is more expensive than of old in time of war. A standing army costs more to maintain than it used to cost to conquer an empire. It is more expensive to be ready to kill, than it used to be to do the killing. The price of a Dreadnought would furnish the whole army of Xerxes with killing weapons. And, in spite of its magnificent equipment, war no longer kills as it used to when its methods were simpler. A bombardment by a modern fleet has been known to result in the killing of one mule. The casualties of a twentieth century war between two world-powers are such as to make a worker in an iron-foundry turn green with envy. War has become a joke. Men have made for themselves monsters of battle which they cannot face in battle. Subsistence is generous these days, life is not cheap, and it is not in the nature of flesh and blood to indulge in the carnage made possible by present-day machinery. This is not theoretical, as will be shown by a comparison of deaths in battle and men involved, in the South African War and the Spanish-American War on the one hand, and the Civil War or the Napoleonic Wars on the other.

Not only has war, by its own evolution, rendered itself futile, but man himself, with greater wisdom and higher ethics, is opposed to war. He has learned too much. War is repugnant to his common sense. He conceives it to be wrong, to be absurd, and to be very expensive. For

the damage wrought and the results accomplished, it is not worth the price. Just as in the disputes of individuals the arbitration of a civil court instead of a blood feud is more practical, so, man decides, is arbitration more practical in the disputes of nations.

War is passing, disease is being conquered, and man's food-getting efficiency is increasing. It is because of these factors that there are a billion and three quarters of people alive to-day instead of a billion, or three-quarters of a billion. And it is because of these factors that the world's population will very soon be two billions and climbing rapidly toward three billions. The lifetime of the generation is increasing steadily. Men live longer these days. Life is not so precarious. The newborn infant has a greater chance for survival than at any time in the past. Surgery and sanitation reduce the fatalities that accompany the mischances of life and the ravages of disease. Men and women, with deficiencies and weaknesses that in the past would have effected their rapid extinction, live to-day and father and mother a numerous progeny. And high as the food-getting efficiency may soar, population is bound to soar after it. "The abysmal fecundity" of life has not altered. Given the food, and life will increase. A small percentage of the billion and three-quarters that live to-day may hush the clamour of life to be born, but it is only a small percentage. In this particular, the life in the man-animal is very like the life in the other animals.

And still another change is coming in human affairs. Though politicians

gnash their teeth and cry anathema, and man, whose superficial book-learning is vitiated by crystallised prejudice, assures us that civilisation will go to smash, the trend of society, to-day, the world over, is toward socialism. The old individualism is passing. The state interferes more and more in affairs that hitherto have been considered sacredly private. And socialism, when the last word is said, is merely a new economic and political system whereby more men can get food to eat. In short, socialism is an improved food-getting efficiency.

Furthermore, not only will socialism get food more easily and in greater quantity, but it will achieve a more equitable distribution of that food. Socialism promises, for a time, to give all men, women, and children all they want to eat, and to enable them to eat all they want as often as they want. Subsistence will be pushed back, temporarily, an exceedingly long way. In consequence, the flood of life will rise like a tidal wave. There will be more marriages and more children born. The enforced sterility that obtains to-day for many millions, will no longer obtain. Nor will the fecund millions in the slums and labour-ghettos, who to-day die of all the ills due to chronic underfeeding and overcrowding, and who die with their fecundity largely unrealised, die in that future day when the increased food-getting efficiency of socialism will give them all they want to eat.

It is undeniable that population will increase prodigiously-just as it has increased prodigiously during the last few centuries, following upon the increase in food-getting efficiency. The magnitude of population in

that future day is well nigh unthinkable. But there is only so much land and water on the surface of the earth. Man, despite his marvellous accomplishments, will never be able to increase the diameter of the planet. The old days of virgin continents will be gone. The habitable planet, from ice-cap to ice-cap, will be inhabited. And in the matter of food-getting, as in everything else, man is only finite. Undreamed-of efficiencies in food-getting may be achieved, but, soon or late, man will find himself face to face with Malthus' grim law. Not only will population catch up with subsistence, but it will press against subsistence, and the pressure will be pitiless and savage. Somewhere in the future is a date when man will face, consciously, the bitter fact that there is not food enough for all of him to eat.

When this day comes, what then? Will there be a recrudescence of old obsolete war? In a saturated population life is always cheap, as it is cheap in China, in India, to-day. Will new human drifts take place, questing for room, carving earth-space out of crowded life. Will the Sword again sing:

"Follow, O follow, then,
Heroes, my harvesters!
Where the tall grain is ripe
Thrust in your sickles!
Stripped and adust
In a stubble of empire
Scything and binding

The full sheaves of sovereignty."

Even if, as of old, man should wander hungrily, sword in hand, slaying and being slain, the relief would be only temporary. Even if one race alone should hew down the last survivor of all the other races, that one race, drifting the world around, would saturate the planet with its own life and again press against subsistence. And in that day, the death rate and the birth rate will have to balance. Men will have to die, or be prevented from being born. Undoubtedly a higher quality of life will obtain, and also a slowly decreasing fecundity. But this decrease will be so slow that the pressure against subsistence will remain. The control of progeny will be one of the most important problems of man and one of the most important functions of the state. Men will simply be not permitted to be born.

Disease, from time to time, will ease the pressure. Diseases are parasites, and it must not be forgotten that just as there are drifts in the world of man, so are there drifts in the world of micro-organisms-- hunger-quests for food. Little is known of the micro-organic world, but that little is appalling; and no census of it will ever be taken, for there is the true, literal "abysmal fecundity." Multitudinous as man is, all his totality of individuals is as nothing in comparison with the inconceivable vastness of numbers of the micro-organisms. In your body, or in mine, right now, are swarming more individual entities than there are human beings in the world to-day. It is to us an invisible world. We only guess its nearest confines. With our powerful

microscopes and ultramicroscopes, enlarging diameters twenty thousand times, we catch but the slightest glimpses of that profundity of infinitesimal life.

Little is known of that world, save in a general way. We know that out of it arise diseases, new to us, that afflict and destroy man. We do not know whether these diseases are merely the drifts, in a fresh direction, of already-existing breeds of micro-organisms, or whether they are new, absolutely new, breeds themselves just spontaneously generated. The latter hypothesis is tenable, for we theorise that if spontaneous generation still occurs on the earth, it is far more likely to occur in the form of simple organisms than of complicated organisms.

Another thing we know, and that is that it is in crowded populations that new diseases arise. They have done so in the past. They do so to-day. And no matter how wise are our physicians and bacteriologists, no matter how successfully they cope with these invaders, new invaders continue to arise--new drifts of hungry life seeking to devour us. And so we are justified in believing that in the saturated populations of the future, when life is suffocating in the pressure against subsistence, that new, and ever new, hosts of destroying micro-organisms will continue to arise and fling themselves upon earth-crowded man to give him room. There may even be plagues of unprecedented ferocity that will depopulate great areas before the wit of man can overcome them. And this we know: that no matter how often these invisible hosts may be overcome by man's becoming immune to them through a cruel and terrible selection, new hosts will

ever arise of these micro-organisms that were in the world before he came and that will be here after he is gone.

After he is gone? Will he then some day be gone, and this planet know him no more? Is it thither that the human drift in all its totality is trending? God Himself is silent on this point, though some of His prophets have given us vivid representations of that last day when the earth shall pass into nothingness. Nor does science, despite its radium speculations and its attempted analyses of the ultimate nature of matter, give us any other word than that man will pass. So far as man's knowledge goes, law is universal. Elements react under certain unchangeable conditions. One of these conditions is temperature. Whether it be in the test tube of the laboratory or the workshop of nature, all organic chemical reactions take place only within a restricted range of heat. Man, the latest of the ephemera, is pitifully a creature of temperature, strutting his brief day on the thermometer. Behind him is a past wherein it was too warm for him to exist. Ahead of him is a future wherein it will be too cold for him to exist. He cannot adjust himself to that future, because he cannot alter universal law, because he cannot alter his own construction nor the molecules that compose him.

It would be well to ponder these lines of Herbert Spencer's which follow, and which embody, possibly, the wildest vision the scientific mind has ever achieved:

"Motion as well as Matter being fixed in quantity, it would seem that

the change in the distribution of Matter which Motion effects, coming to a limit in whichever direction it is carried, the indestructible Motion thereupon necessitates a reverse distribution. Apparently, the universally-co-existent forces of attraction and repulsion, which, as we have seen, necessitate rhythm in all minor changes throughout the Universe, also necessitate rhythm in the totality of its changes--produce now an immeasurable period during which the attractive forces predominating, cause universal concentration, and then an immeasurable period during which the repulsive forces predominating, cause universal diffusion--alternate eras of Evolution and Dissolution. And thus there is suggested the conception of a past during which there have been successive Evolutions analogous to that which is now going on; a future during which successive other Evolutions may go on--ever the same in principle but never the same in concrete result."

That is it--the most we know--alternate eras of evolution and dissolution. In the past there have been other evolutions similar to that one in which we live, and in the future there may be other similar evolutions--that is all. The principle of all these evolutions remains, but the concrete results are never twice alike. Man was not; he was; and again he will not be. In eternity which is beyond our comprehension, the particular evolution of that solar satellite we call the "Earth" occupied but a slight fraction of time. And of that fraction of time man occupies but a small portion. All the whole human drift, from the first ape-man to the last savant, is but a phantom, a flash of light and a flutter of

movement across the infinite face of the starry night.

When the thermometer drops, man ceases--with all his lusts and wrestlings and achievements; with all his race-adventures and race-tragedies; and with all his red killings, billions upon billions of human lives multiplied by as many billions more. This is the last word of Science, unless there be some further, unguessed word which Science will some day find and utter. In the meantime it sees no farther than the starry void, where the "fleeting systems lapse like foam." Of what ledger-account is the tiny life of man in a vastness where stars snuff out like candles and great suns blaze for a time-tick of eternity and are gone?

And for us who live, no worse can happen than has happened to the earliest drifts of man, marked to-day by ruined cities of forgotten civilisation--ruined cities, which, on excavation, are found to rest on ruins of earlier cities, city upon city, and fourteen cities, down to a stratum where, still earlier, wandering herdsmen drove their flocks, and where, even preceding them, wild hunters chased their prey long after the cave-man and the man of the squatting-place cracked the knuckle-bones of wild animals and vanished from the earth. There is nothing terrible about it. With Richard Hovey, when he faced his death, we can say: "Behold! I have lived!" And with another and greater one, we can lay ourselves down with a will. The one drop of living, the one taste of being, has been good; and perhaps our greatest achievement will be that we dreamed immortality, even though we failed to realise it.