CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

THE homeless man has probably figured as a member of human society since its beginning. He is mentioned in earliest tradition and history; he appears in the literature of every race and nation. We cannot conceive of a period in which men have not been forced to ask aid of their fellows, or in which old age, sickness, and death have not acted as causes of dependence. It is probable, too, that from the very beginning faults of character led some to depend upon others from choice and not from necessity. The "sturdy beggar" was by no means unknown to the ancients, and laws for his suppression very early appear upon the statute books of nations.

The modern tramp also had his prototype in earlier centuries. In fact, in the nomadic days of the race whole nations took to tramping. Later, the ranks of the crusaders as well as the ships of the early navigators contained men impelled to embark by the love of adventure quite as much as by the ardor of religion and patriotism. The

vagrant of today has but inherited the wanderlust of the past.

But though the beggar and the tramp are not peculiar to our own time and nation, it is none the less true that there has been a remarkable increase in the number of these men in the United States during the last two decades. Previous to the Civil War, the word "tramp" did not appear upon the statute books of any state in the Union. Today nearly all recognize his existence and endeavor to cope with the problem he presents. Twenty years ago a few small cheap lodging houses, built for the accommodation of homeless working men, might have been found in some half dozen of our largest cities. Today there are a number of such lodging houses in every large city in the country; they house not only hundreds and thousands of "homeless" workingmen, but also large numbers of tramps, beggars, and petty criminals.

A number of theories have been advanced in recent years to account for this increase of the homeless and vagrant in America. Various methods of solving the problems due to this increase have been suggested, none of which have as yet been very generally adopted or have proved strikingly successful when tried. Certain cities and towns by rigid enforcement of severe laws have been able to rid themselves for a time of these vagrants, but invariably other nearby cities have received those who have been cast out and the problem as a

whole has remained unsolved. The army of tramps has continued to increase.

That this will be the case until similar laws are passed and similar methods used in almost or quite all the states of the Union, is now coming to be generally recognized by those who must deal at first hand with these men. Just what these laws and methods should be, however, in order to be effective, is still open to debate. The chief difficulty, perhaps, lies in the fact that, familiar figure as the tramp has become, very few persons really know much about him or about the conditions under which he exists today, nor do they know the causes of his vagrancy or the results of such efforts to reform or reinstate him as have already been made in different parts of the country. It was with the hope of discovering facts that might throw light upon these questions and aid in bringing about a more general understanding of them that the present study was undertaken.

The term "homeless man" might be applied to any man who has left one family group and not yet identified himself with another. It might include hundreds of men living in clubs, hotels, and boarding houses, and its use would not necessarily imply a forlorn or penniless condition. But for the purpose of this study the term will be used to designate those men of the homeless class who live in cheap lodging houses in the congested part of any large city; and the particular thousand chosen for this study were applicants at the Chicago

Bureau of Charities for some form of assistance during the years 1900 to 1903 inclusive. By no means were all these men really homeless. A number were married men with homes elsewhere, who had come to Chicago for work or for other reasons and who had met with misfortunes which finally led to their application for assistance. Often the only request of such men was for transportation back to their homes. Included, also, among the thousand were runaway boys, criminals, deserting husbands, and other applicants who for various reasons did not wish to return to their homes; the majority, however, were unattached single men to whom the term "homeless" could be rightly applied.

The histories of these men, both before and for some time after they asked charitable help, have been traced. Many had applied for aid in a dozen or more cities and many have reapplied since 1903; a number are still known to the Bureau. The later histories of others who have not made recent application, have been investigated by correspondence and by personal interviews during the preparation of this volume; so that, while the original applications of the men occurred from seven to ten years ago, the study of their cases has extended to the present period. A number of the facts brought out by this investigation have been tabulated and classified and are here presented. Some account is also given of the efforts that the organization made to put the men applying for its

help on their feet, or to secure adequate assistance for those incapable of self-support. These efforts were restricted by the laws and the facilities for dealing with dependents which now exist; that better laws and better facilities are urgently needed if better results are to be hoped for should be demonstrated by the chapters that follow.

Little attempt has been made in the study to point out the causes of dependence or vagrancy in the individual cases. The contact of the charity agent with applicants is too brief and in the majority of instances his knowledge of their real histories too superficial to warrant making very positive deductions. Moreover, even in cases that are carefully inquired into, opinions as to causes undergo frequent changes. In the first interview, a certain cause may be the most apparent; investigation brings to light another far more important. A few months' acquaintance with the man may lead the agent to change both his first and his second impression as to cause, and after an experience of several years, during which one plan of help after another has been tried and has failed, and traits and characteristics unsuspected at first have been found to bear important relation to the man's inability to adjust himself to the world in which he lives, the agent may realize that all his earlier impressions were wrong, and that only now is he able to estimate fairly the many elements which have contributed to the man's dependence.

Only when a considerable number of men of like characteristics or habits are studied together is it practicable to say with any degree of certainty that some particular social or industrial cause or some individual trait produces vagrancy. In fact, even in such groups the individuals who compose them present contrasts in matters of physical and mental health, of training, temperament, and moral standards, so striking and so extreme that any but very broad generalizations as to causes are necessarily precluded.

A study of the homeless men who apply to a charitable society will inevitably produce different results from a study of the men who apply at a municipal lodging house, at a down town mission, or at a soup house. The proportion of the mentally or physically handicapped will be greatest in the group soliciting relief; able-bodied workmen will be most numerous among those who seek shelter at the municipal lodging house; the proportion of frauds and parasites will probably be largest among the applicants at the mission or at the soup house. Those who frequent the cheap lodging houses would probably supply the greatest variety of types; but since it is impossible to make a study there, the applicants at a well equipped charity office which works with modern methods will doubtless include a greater variety of types of lodging house men than are accessible to investigation through any other channel.

All large cities and some small ones in these

days have cheap lodging houses in which men may secure a night's lodging at a cost of from ten to twenty-five cents. With the exception of Greater New York, the city of Chicago has a greater number of such houses and a larger floating transient population than any other city in the United States. The reasons for this are many. Situated in the heart of the Mississippi Valley at the foot of Lake Michigan it attracts to itself during a part of the year thousands of harvest hands from the Northwest, deck hands from the lake boats, railway construction laborers, men from the lumber camps of the North, and men from all over the Central West who are employed in seasonal trades of many sorts.

In normal times men of this class who come to Chicago need not long remain unemployed if they wish work. One seasonal trade may soon be fitted into another. The period between the closing of navigation in the autumn and the beginning of work in the lumber camps is not long. In February the ice-cutting season opens and this furnishes employment to thousands of men at a time of year when in many other cities work for unskilled laborers is especially scarce. The growth of Chicago is so rapid and constant that public works and private building practically never cease. One form of work resulting from this growth is what is designated as "wrecking." Old buildings, or sometimes comparatively new and good ones, are torn down to make way for newer

and larger structures. The amount of such work in Chicago is considerable and gives employment to large numbers of men. During the course of the ordinary winter there are numerous heavy snowfalls, and the removal of snow from the down-town streets affords temporary employment for hundreds.

On either side of Clark and State Streets on the South Side; on Canal, Desplaines, and Madison Streets on the West Side, and on lower Clark and Wells Streets on the North Side, there are rows of cheap lodging houses. For the man who lacks even the small amount required for admission to these, the Municipal Lodging House doors are always open, and every man who comes to Chicago honestly seeking work knows, or soon finds out, that he will have little difficulty in securing food and shelter without the need of begging for them in the interval before he finds employment. The Municipal Lodging House of Chicago has probably done more extensive work than any other institution of its kind in the country in finding positions for men who apply for lodging. Altogether, no city in the United States offers more favorable opportunities for winter employment for the unskilled, or cheaper food and shelter than does Chicago. It is not strange, therefore, that the city attracts unemployed labor from all over the country.

Among tramps and vagrants also Chicago is a favorite rallying place. It is the greatest railway

center in the country; trains from all points of the compass hourly pull into its freight and passenger stations and bring their quota of homeless men. Many of these make it their headquarters for the greater part of the year. The vagrancy laws are as a rule rather laxly enforced and begging is a safe as well as a lucrative business. And here, as in most other large cities, politicians are likely at election times to add to the comfort and security of a floating population whose votes may usually be counted upon in return for small favors. In this as in other cities, too, there are mingling with the less harmful tramps the more dangerous yeggmen and petty criminals, numbers of whom find it comparatively easy to hide themselves among the homeless throngs in the lodging houses.*

Altogether, viewing the population of the cheap lodging houses from the standpoint of the social worker, it may be stated that it includes four distinct though constantly merging classes of men.

* No exact census of the total number of homeless men of various types in the lodging house districts of Chicago has been taken, but 40,000 is considered a conservative estimate by several careful students of the question who are closely in touch with local conditions. This number is somewhat increased at election times and very greatly increased when word goes out, as it did during the winter of 1907–8, that relief funds were being collected and free lodgings and food would be furnished to the unemployed. In December, January February, and March of that winter all private lodging houses were filled to overflowing and the Municipal Lodging House, its annex, and two other houses which it operated gave a total of 79,411 lodgings to homeless men as compared with 6930 for the same months of the winter before, an increase of 72,481. The Health Department, which took charge of the municipal lodging houses and made a careful study of local conditions during the winter of 1907–8, estimated the number of homeless men then in Chicago to be probably not less than 60,000.

These classes may be summarized as follows:

(1) Self-supporting. All men of whatever trade or occupation who support themselves by their own exertions. Some are employed all the year; some are seasonal workers; others casual laborers; but all are independent.

(2) Temporarily dependent. Runaway boys; strangers who lack city references and are not yet employed; men who have been robbed; victims of accident or illness; convalescents; men displaced by industrial disturbances, or by the introduction of machinery; misfits; foreigners unacquainted with the language and not yet employed, and other men without means who could again become self-supporting if tided past temporary difficulties.

(3) Chronically dependent. Contains many of the aged, the crippled, deformed, blind, deaf, tuberculous; the feeble-minded, insane, epileptic; the chronically ill; also certain men addicted to the continuous and excessive use of drink or drugs, and a few able-bodied but almost hopelessly inefficient men.

(4) Parasitic. Contains many confirmed wanderers or tramps; criminals; impostors; begging-letter writers; confidence men, etc., and a great majority of all chronic beggars, local vagrants, and wanderers.

The first group is composed of able-bodied men who work all or most of the year and who expect to support themselves by their own exertions. In the second group are men capable of self-support, but temporarily and in many cases quite accidentally dependent. In the third are men who formerly belonged to the first and second groups but who, on account of age or chronic physical or mental disability, or for other reasons, such as the excessive use of drink or drugs, or extreme ignorance and inefficiency, have become continuously dependent

upon the public for support. Men of this class may sometimes again become at least partly self-supporting and are not parasitic in spirit. In the fourth group are the parasites, the men, whether able-bodied or defective, who make a business of living off the public and who apparently do so from choice rather than from necessity. Some are thieves and criminals, some clever impostors and beggars who live by their wits; still others are only "tramps," not necessarily criminal, but nevertheless anti-social.

This classification takes the self-supporting, self-respecting, able-bodied lodging house resident of average morality as the type nearest approaching the normal citizen. Men of the second group fall temporarily below this normal standard but may be brought back to it unless they are forced by circumstances still farther below normal and into the third group. All three of these groups are constantly contributing to the fourth, the distinctly abnormal, with which society must deal along corrective and repressive lines.

In the study of individual cases which follows, it will be seen that men of all four classes are included, and attention will frequently be called to the steps by which the men of the first two classes descend to the ranks of the chronically dependent and parasitic. But for convenience in considering so large a group as a thousand, and also, it is believed, for greater clearness, the men will not be classified for study according to the degree and

character of their dependence but will instead be divided according to some common characteristic into small groups, such as insane men, aged men, boys, beggars, etc.

In every group will be found men who belong to each of the four classes mentioned. Among the aged men, for instance,* some are self-supporting, some temporarily dependent, some continuously dependent, and a few have been tramps or vagrants since their youth and are still dependent quite as much from choice as from necessity. By studying in a group by themselves the cases of all those over sixty, a clearer picture of homeless old men is presented than would be the case if they were classified with others according to the nature and amount of their dependence.

In explanation of the fact that several important phases of vagrancy are barely mentioned in these pages, and that methods of prevention and cure of certain evils closely related thereto have hardly been considered, it should be stated that this work is not presented as a general treatise on the subject, or as a study of the methods of dealing with vagrants in this country, or as a solution of the problems involved in their treatment. In order to cover the ground at all adequately, it has been necessary to hold closely to the immediate subject and to omit the description and discussion of many interesting matters relating to the vagrancy problems as a whole. This was an investigation of

* See Chapter VII, Homeless Old Men.

typical homeless men in the second city of America; the conditions there were the conditions under which such men live in many American cities; the efforts made in their behalf were made under the laws and with the facilities then and now available. No inductive treatment of investigated cases of individual homeless men has ever been attempted as a means of throwing light upon the general problem of vagrancy in America. It has seemed worth while, therefore, not only to make this study but to present its results in a form so detailed as to enable each reader to appreciate for himself its bearing upon the larger subject.