

BROWN of DENVER

CAPITALIST-VAGABOND, Who, in Getting His Facts First Hand, Has Mingled with the Very Dregs of Poverty, Tells of the Homeless Man in American Cities

"Brown of Denver," capitalist, tramping the country from end to end in vagabond guise, asks, "What of the homeless man?" He finds him treated as a criminal, and in many cities even the officers of charity travesty the name of that gentlest of the virtues. He would see emergency homes started, in which the wanderer may be strengthened and then restored to society.

The problem with which he has wrestled at first hand is the same as that which confronts sociologists of the present day, for with all the millions which are spent on so called "relief" it is found that the machine for aiding the indigent does not fully serve and breaks down where it should be an effective instrument. Is the vagrant who is such either by choice or hard necessity a being who should be arrested and committed to prison because of his condition or his misfortune?

Is it not time that the persons who have been content to give a few dollars to some charitable organization and then to forget consider that the land teems with the errant and the unclassified?

The views and the experiences of "Brown of Denver," contrasted with the observations of James Forbes of the National Association for the Prevention of Mendicancy and Charitable Imposture, who has for many years made a special study of this subject, present a vivid picture of American social conditions which sooner or later must be dealt with by the states or the nation.

On a bitter cold night a little more than a year ago Edwin A. Brown, a capitalist, was accosted in the streets of Denver by a young

municipal lodging houses, flops and jails. He is either the victim of a habit or of circumstances, and generally the latter in the beginning. We encourage him in his progress toward vagabondia by our blatant, ill advised and useless charity. We aid him to lose his self-respect and then we offer him nothing.

"Do you know that 90 per cent of the men I met in the parks, streets, missions and jails of the country are honest men?" This was more an exclamation than a question, as the speaker shifted his gaze quickly around the rotunda of his fashionable hotel. "Yes, sir; I found all but 10 per cent of the homeless to be honest men."

"The situation is truly grave," he continued. "I have just concluded a tour of our country. Everywhere I found hundreds of men homeless. In but few places did I find any decent method in vogue for their assistance. I discovered certain cities' institutions of charity to be jokes; I met rebuffs from religious bodies ostensibly existing for the sole purpose of helping mankind; I found that everybody but the moneyless man who has no place to lay his head receives some respect from the law; I have found prison conditions so vile that none but man could endure them even for a while; I have found generally a state of affairs which spells anarchy—and that sooner than may be imagined—if one part of our society does not cease living entirely and thoughtlessly at the expense of the other."

"You say that Brown of Denver has come to be known as a strenuous advocate of certain reforms. Having seen and felt what I have, is it strange that I should be a revolutionist? And, knowing the menace of the situation and dreading its effect, it is not to be wondered at that I urge the peaceful solution of the

work, some just having been set adrift, others nursing prospects and still others jubilant because they were to go to work again next day. None with whom I talked but who winced when I mentioned the word charity. They were men who wanted to work for what they got, and their self-respect suffered when this was not permitted them.

CONDITIONS IN NEW YORK

"From Chicago I went to New York, where I spent some time in investigation. The homeless are better treated there than in any other city I visited, especially in the far west. The Mills hotels, the other numerous clean and well lighted and ventilated lodging houses where a dime will procure accommodation, the city hotel and many other depots for assistance of the homeless are about the average. I had some very interesting experiences there, but I shall not go into them."

"In Washington, where I stopped on my return to Denver, I discovered a surprising inadequacy in the municipality's departments of charity, so called. In the capital of the country, which should be a model city in every respect, I hold, I could not get a bed. At one Christian institution after another I was told that it would either cost me anywhere from 10 to



EDWIN A. BROWN.
PHOTO BY HALL'S STUDIO.



Mr. Brown Garbed for "Poverty Row."



In the Portland City Jail.

man asking for money enough to pay for a night's lodging.

Rather impatiently he bade the youth seek some charitable institution. The young man quickly retorted that there was no such place that would shelter him. Brown shrugged his shoulders and hurried on his way.

The experience of being importuned for assistance was no new one to Brown. Known as a man of wealth, he received in his daily mail scores of begging letters and very often in the streets was the mark for all sorts of pleas. And Brown was a victim many times. He was far from being hard hearted. Yet, like any man, he hated to be imposed upon. He determined to find out the truth of the young man's statement. According to his own testimony he asked himself over and over again whether or not the young man had told him the truth.

The next night, dressed as a poor working man and without a penny in his pockets, he sought a free bed in the charitable institutions of Denver. He found none. On every hand he was directed to the city jail. Finally, with others of his kind, he went there and was locked up for the rest of the night with a motley crowd of prisoners from drunkards to desperadoes. The following morning he was released, but he was a different Brown from the self-complacent person who had attempted an interesting experiment the night before.

In the 14 months since that morning "Brown of Denver" has become known from coast to coast. Traveling as a poverty stricken laborer he has visited practically all of the big cities of the land, painstakingly investigating the lot of the homeless and then reporting before municipal officers and public spirited citizens to advocate this and that and the other reform. He has left a string of awakened mayors and "charity" superintendents along his trail. "Emergency industrial homes," as he is pleased to call them, are in the making or the remodeling in every community to which he has given his attention. In two states there is an agitation for general prison reform. His is no longer a one man crusade. He counts his workers into the thousands.

It was not easy to imagine "Brown of Denver" in the small, well groomed, ruddy checked, blue eyed man who invited the writer to be seated. He seemed to fit more snugly into a club window than the role of strenuous reformer. Not one in a thousand would have picked him out as the capitalist-vagabond who in broken shoes, overalls, hickory shirt and tattered hat has spent the last year in a shoulder to shoulder experience with the homeless of the land.

SELDOM A TRAMP

When he spoke, however, the quiet earnestness of his voice betrayed more of the real man. He chose his words carefully. It was as if he tried to suppress a quite natural enthusiasm, especially when he spoke of results accomplished. But at all times there was an unmistakable tone of sureness in what he said. He had seen for himself. He knew what he knew.

"The homeless American is seldom at heart a tramp," he began, in answer to a question. "It is not of his choosing that he frequents park benches,

problem, is it? I can not be far wrong, then, when I call myself a 'peace revolutionist,' can I?"

"I did not believe the young man who stood shivering in the Denver streets one night in February, 1909, and told me that he could not get a bed free in the city. I went my way rather piqued that he should have taken me for an easy mark. But I could not forget him and his story, and the following night I experimented for myself."

"In what they call the brick oven, in the city jail, I was at last forced to spend the night. I could find no one to give me shelter. Institutions I had long naturally supposed looked out for the homeless turned me away from their doors because I had no money. I was surprised and shocked, but did not lose my spirit and so went the limit—rather, did what many others had to do—went to prison and was locked up."

"That was an awful night—my first behind steel bars. We, the homeless, rated, I found, with the drunkard, the dope fiend, the thief and the desperado. All were turned in together, willy-nilly. The air was about as foul as possible. Vermin were everywhere. The beds were stone floors, and there were ceaseless wrangling and cursing and crying aloud among the inmates. We, the homeless, did not do much sleeping, you may be sure."

"By morning my mind was made up. I would make a tour of the land in the interest of the destitute—would see for myself the conditions and then promote reforms. I started at once."

"Chicago was my first stop. I found the municipal lodging house there to be in good hands and well conducted as far as its limited resources permitted. I slept in the 'overflow' room one night, my shoes for my pillow. There were really more petitions for assistance and shelter than could be attended to. Most of the 'guests' I found were earnest seekers after 30 cents, or that the place was full, or that their

accommodation was not for such as I. When my report was given to the press of that city there was a strong outcry among the people against its possible truth. But it brought about other investigations and my story was proved. I cherish as a result of this visit a commendatory note from President Taft himself."

"After my return to Denver my first trip was to Pueblo. There I spent an awful night in the 'bull pen.' At no other place could I, apparently an impoverished workman, obtain any shelter. And this 'bull pen' was the worst place I had yet seen. As in Denver, young and old, good and bad, unfortunate and criminal, were herded together in a place too small to permit any seclusion or even free movement, and so noisome and foul with filth, bad air and blasphemy that the heart of the stoutest turned sick. It was a monstrous outrage, this treatment."

"I went from there to Kansas City, St. Louis and Boston. In all three cities I found great distress among my adopted class on account of the carelessness, thoughtlessness, incompetency—call it what you will—of the city officials. In the last city my attention was most strongly drawn to our prison conditions by overhearing a wordy wrangle between an Irishman and a Swede on a bench in the common. They were arguing whether the earth was round or flat, the Swede for the former and the Irishman the latter. I could not help listening to their conversation until by some unanswerable challenge the Irishman won the day and the Swede sulkily took his departure. I then spoke to the victor."

"It seemed that he had just been released from Deer Island, which corresponds to Blackwells island in Manhattan. He had been an unruly prisoner, evidently, for he told me that he had been in a dungeon most of the time, and, said he: 'Them's the worst holes in all the world, too. Solid steel doors; no light; just enough air to choke on; bread and water. Before I went in I saw men taken out of them blind. I saw men coming out raving mad.

I saw men come out physically wrecked for life. And I saw 'em take some out dead. They buried 'em in the prison yard; certificate, 'heart failure.' They didn't keep me in long."

"I had been told much about Pittsburg being an exceptionally hard place for the out of work and homeless man; so there I went, donned my working clothes, slipped out the side door of my hotel and began to look for work or a bed or both. A long time I tramped about the streets of the smoky city with no success whatever. Finally I was told that there was a park across the river in Alleghany where I might rest."

"I happened to have 1 cent in my pocket and with this paid my way across on a bridge. The park I readily found, but it was no place for rest. Even as I entered several 'cops' were beginning to drive the sleepers out and to prod into extra wakefulness those who were managing somehow to keep their eyes open. I did not stay there long."

ON THE BENCH

"Near the far end, where I went out, I saw an old man, probably 60 years of age, sitting on a bench with his head in his hands, sound asleep. At that moment there was no 'cop' to be seen, so I touched him on the shoulder. With an inarticulate cry he sprang up, his eyes wild with fear. When he saw that I was not an officer he shakily resumed his seat. 'What do you want?' he asked in a high, cracked voice."

"Why don't you lie down on the bench? I answered. 'You can rest much more easily and there is no one about now.'"

"He gazed about him apprehensively for a full minute, then, with a sigh, stretched his feeble frame upon the wooden slats and almost immediately was fast asleep."

"Then, as if by prearranged signal with fate, a 'cop' made his appearance. As I went on my way I saw him go toward the sleeper. I knew what would happen. Poor old man! 'Near the far gate I saw a dog asleep under a bush. I stopped and petted him and he licked my fingers and looked up into my eyes fearlessly. There was no 'cop' to disturb his slumbers. 'From Denver I started west on my next trip, and in the last few months I have covered Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland, Spokane,

Tacoma, Seattle, St. Paul and Minneapolis. I found conditions much worse in the west than in the east. Day and night the streets were full of 'moochers' (beggars); men besieged the employment offices in the waking hours, and after 6 p. m. the flops and even the jails.

"In San Francisco I was finally able to get into a mission—the ask and ye shall receive' flop—but not by way of the door, mind you. Oh, no. I received the usual reply there to my question. If I did not have any money they had no room for me. I got in by means of a manhole in the sidewalk, which some friendly young fellow showed me. He said all I had to do was to drop and drop I did—into a black depth that I knew nothing whatever about. It was not much of a fall, however, and I hit on my feet in the midst of the nest of human rats that perforate called this underground hole home."

"I did not stay long there, though. They found me quickly, and out I went again into the night. I made for the city prison then."

"In both San Francisco and Los Angeles the city prisons, which I know only too well, are on par with the one at Pueblo. My hours in them were wretched nightmares. They were experiences I never wish to repeat. The horror of them will always be with me."

"Portland, Spokane, Seattle and Tacoma offered nothing better, and in many phases something much worse. In these young, growing cities there is a congestion of common labor, from which deplorable conditions naturally result. In Seattle the only accommodation for the homeless is located in the center of the toughest part of the tenderloin. Above, below, on every side oriental and occidental gaming halls run day and night; houses of questionable, or rather unquestioned, repute are in operation. It is into the most evil and degenerating atmosphere of the city that boys and men temporarily out of work are sent to find rest. Better were there no shelter offered at all!"

New York, July 2.
"I know Brown of Denver well," said James Forbes, agent of the Society for the Prevention of Mendicancy and Charitable Imposture, at his office, at No. 26 West Twenty-second street, "and I have a high regard for his earnestness and for his unselfish devotion to the homeless. I can not agree with him that 90 per cent of the wanderers are honest, for in many cases they succumb to temptations to steal. There are many honest men, however, who are reduced to vagabondage. A large class lacks the courage to steal anything of value or to commit crime, while many will, of course, when hungry filch milk and bread from doorsteps, which is larceny under the law."

"This, however, is a detail merely, for the great question concerns the treatment of the homeless man. It is not just, no matter whether his plight be his fault or his misfortune, that he should be considered a criminal. Even granting that many are lazy and inefficient, society owes it to itself and to them to aid them by building up their characters."

"No man becomes worthless or vicious all at once. Many through ill luck or sorrow or unfortunate and intemperate habits lose their grip on life. They do not become beggars in a day, for that is a gradual process which results finally in the breaking down of self-respect. There is little or no danger of any man who knows the ropes ever starving to death in this city, and many who make use of various religious and charitable agencies manage to get along and be fairly well fed."

"There is plenty of machinery in this city for aiding the homeless man if it were co-ordinated and applied, which, I regret to say, it is not. What is needed most of all is the humanizing of charity. I would not wish to say that any plan which I suggest will solve so great a problem all at once, but I think that the establishment of a few small homes in various parts of the city, where the wanderers may be received and aided in rehabilitating themselves, would be of much benefit."

"Here there could be diversified industries, so that a man could either practice the craft which he had learned or master a new one. If his condition is due to physical defects—a missing leg or arm, for instance—he could be aided to overcome or minimize the handicap. Some of these homeless ones, through excessive drinking or disease, have not enough brains or will left to make it worth the trouble of trying to make them useful, and for them some kind of a farm institution, where they may be kept, would solve the problem. Better have them there than prowling about city and country spreading vermin and disease."

"The shiftless and the lazy may be helped, and there is a good chance for the man who through misfortune or unfavorable circumstance has lost his hold on life. New York has one of the best municipal lodging houses in the world, a fact which impressed Mr. Brown when he visited it, but it is also provided that a man who is seen there more than three times a month shall be arrested and sent to the workhouse. That treatment may do for hardened offenders, but it only corrupts and degrades the man who is worth the saving. More elasticity is what is needed in the whole system."