

THE CRIMINAL TRAMP.

The question of the tramp is one of increasing and urgent importance in rural England (says the "Spectator,") and it has risen to the proportions of a great problem in some of the American States, as the New York comic journals abundantly testify. Our highways and byroads are continually echoing to the steady tramp, tramp of a growing class of a most undesirable, often extremely vicious, type. The tramp is sometimes a decent person who, for some reason or other, cannot get work, though he is honestly desirous of it, but in a much larger number of cases he is a vagabond pure and simple, who would not work under any circumstances so long as he could demand or persuade the weak or the easy-going to furnish him with the means of living. In many cases the habit of vagabondage is united with criminal instincts, more or less developed, some tramps being persons who have already done their "time" in prison, others being persons who are obviously on the way thither, and whose criminal dispositions are fostered by the tramp life. Not a few lonely cottages dread the advent of the tramp, who may proceed to help himself if the inmates do not help him, thus constituting himself an additional burden on the honest poor. In America the tramps have become so important a part of the community that they have their annual congress, when the business of the past year is reviewed, and the plan of campaign for the ensuing year is fully discussed. Mr. McCook, who has studied the American tramp at first hand with much care and great insight, has told us, as the result of his investigations, that the calling of a tramp is one deliberately taken up, as one might adopt the calling of a grocer or a teacher. The real average tramp is not, according to Mr. McCook, a poor, ill-used mechanic out of employment, but a kind of half-civilised wild man of the woods, with a sort of philosophy of life of his own akin to that of the Bvachols and Caserios whose deeds on the wider stage of the great world have caused such consternation. He cannot, or will not, live a civilised, orderly, settled life, but looks on society as his fair game. Lombroso and others of the Italian school of criminology have hinted that such men are simply keeping alive in the civilised world of to-day the barbarian instincts of earlier ages—i.e., that they are not so much criminals as "survivals;" and one or two anarchist sympathisers have even suggested that tramps of this class form a needful corrective to an over-civilised and too highly elaborated society. How men who will not do any work, who produce nothing, who consume savagely and greedily what the labour of others has produced, whose instincts call up the savagery from which the race as a whole is painfully emerging, can be said to be useful in any sense is a puzzle too ridiculous to call for serious treatment. It is part of a merely æsthetic view of life which ignores the dirt and villainy of the Neapolitan lazzaroni because they are "picturesque" and look well in a sketch.

Serious men, whatever may be their theory as to the origin of the world, hold with Aristotle that man is a "social animal," and that the whole process of things is inevitably carrying him out of the state of savagery into that of responsibility and ordered life. Our half-sincere disciples of the newly taught gospel according to Nietzsche may prate as they like about the "return to Nature," and the strong, vigorous primal man "living his own life." But society will not permit it; too much is at

vigorous primal man "living his own life." But society will not permit it; too much is at stake. We do not want to see society reduced to a mere automatic machinery where volition and genius and individual character are all subordinated to collective wisdom (or folly), and where every man is expected, on a wholly false theory of pure, undiluted altruism, to sacrifice himself as a willing victim on the altar of a desecrated public "good." But neither can we afford to permit wandering vagabonds and loafers to shirk their social tasks, to levy blackmail on the industrious, to refuse to adjust their individual passions to the social environment. If such social degenerates commit murder, we must hang them; if they break in and steal, we must give them hard labour; and if they idly tramp about levying contributions on working people, we must forcibly restrain them. We must always be just, even to the worst criminal, but we must never sentimentalise over him as do many foolish women in America, who send flowers and pictures to the "interesting" murderer's cell. The community which, as a whole, refuses to discipline its refractory members is already in a condition of moral decline.

Such being the general principles of action with reference to those who harbour deep-rooted anti-social instincts, what is to be our concrete method of dealing with that particular anti-social person, the tramp? We mean, of course, the real average tramp, as Mr. McCook has found him in America, and as an equally patient and sagacious observer might find him here—viz., the habitual tramp and vagrant. There is only one method of dealing with such a person—compulsory detention and compulsory work. To this the sole objection that can be offered is the objection of interference with liberty. But is liberty a mere fetish to be adored as though we were Congo savages, or a rational and conditioned ideal? If liberty is to mean that every person save a convicted criminal, an infant, or a lunatic is to do exactly as he likes, civil society is at an end. Clearly, liberty must be conditioned; it must be a means to social good, it cannot be an end in itself. There are probably many tens of thousands in London alone entirely unfit for liberty; indeed, there are said to be seventy thousand thieves "known to the police," and it is only the merest travesty of democracy to demand for such persons absolutely equal consideration with Mr. Gladstone or the Archbishop of Canterbury. We gladly concede the vital importance of individual liberty as a main source of British strength and influence, but we have always held that liberty is an ideal to work up to rather than an absolute basis to start from. If the tramp is a kind of variant of the natural man, then we must point out that the natural man enjoys no rational liberty, but is the slave of the wild forces of Nature; and he is as truly so to-day as in the days of Neolithic man. Does the tramp secure for himself food, protection, clothing, shelter? Not he; he secures these things, so far as he does enjoy them, from the industry of those who have submitted themselves to the social restraints which he will not bear. Were it not for the help given him by the society of which he is the enemy, he would starve to death. So that it is rational restraint which gives real liberty, and it is the nominal liberty of primal life which means very real slavery. Now, we contend that the discipline involved in compulsory detention and compulsory work may have the effect of converting our sullen, depraved, quasi-criminal tramp, who neither enjoys real liberty nor is fit for it, into a free citizen, free because industrious and useful and because

real liberty nor is fit for it, into a free citizen, free because industrious and useful, and because under a restraint which is not arbitrary but social, contrived for man's good. We have been a little too lavish of liberty, a little too forgetful of what a "noble thing," as the old poet said, liberty is,—a prize to be won rather than a cheap possession to be trampled in the dirt by every drunken loafer and idle vagabond incapable of social life.

We would have the habitual tramp, then, compulsorily detained, and compelled, under fairly severe penalties, to do such work as was, after examination of his capacity, assigned him. We think that here the principle of the "indeterminate sentence," as carried out at Elmira, in New York State, might be of value. Under that sentence discharge is only possible on good conduct and efficiency in work. What is needed is to break down the vicious habit. At first compulsory work is probably awful to the confirmed vagabond, the most dreadful punishment he could meet with. But as with children at school, when it is known that the task must be done the latent energies of the nature rise to the occasion. A new habit of life is formed, new possibilities are opened up, there is a break with the past. The work should not be too exacting, for, as Bertillon and others have proved beyond question, an anemic and diseased physique is frequently, if not universally, found in the quasi-criminal and loafer class; but it should be fixed and adhered to—obedience to law should replace the wild following of lawless desire as the first element in discipline. To teach a man that he is not to live by sponging on others, to teach him industrious habits, to cleanse his body and strengthen his weak character,—these seem to us the means by which the habitual tramp may be largely, if not wholly, eliminated from society. If this is inconsistent with absolute liberty, we must decide whether we prefer an empty phrase to positive social good. As regards the children of the tramp our course is clear. The man who teaches his child begging as a profession is an enemy to the future of the child, and has forfeited moral claim over it just as truly as those positively cruel parents whom our law has already deprived of the guardianship of their offspring. On this point a precedent has been set which no worshipper of liberty would wish to see abolished. Dens of cruelty called in irony "homes" have been broken into, and children's claims to humanity conceded by law. Have we no duty to the miserable child of the dragg-

tailed loafer, compelled to wander about on the highroad, to associate with thieves, to grow up a pest to society? The habitual tramp should be deprived of his child as of his liberty till he learns to respect both. Do we hear that the discipline urged is cruel? Let us remember, as Mr. Spencer says, that nature is often a little cruel in order that she may be very kind. Kindness does not consist in the universal distribution of lullipops or in the universal toleration of evil. True regard for human good is as far removed as the poles asunder from mere sentiment, vague, timid, divorced from reason. Character is the end of human life, and the most merciful treatment we can mete out to men is that which tends to build up character.
