

Only an Industrial Outcast

Lizzie M. Holmes

1901

A homelike cottage, low, rambling, vine-clad and well shaded, faced toward the hills in the south, with the long, low, green valley and its winding stream in the center lying between, and the towers, steeples and chimneys of a village peeping above the trees at the western end. Behind the cottage rolled away broad fields, now nearly stripped of their harvests, and nearer stood well-filled barns and granaries, while on either side orchards and gardens showed the thrift and plenty of the owners.

On the broad porch of the house sat two middle-aged men, lazily smoking and occasionally exchanging a desultory word. On the steps below them sat a girl of thirteen, with a book in her hand, which she was not reading.

Some one was coming slowly down the road—some one they did not know. Nathaniel Richards tried to make out if he were some old friend, when he came into full view, and his suspicions were verified—it was only a tramp; a typical, dusty, dilapidated, footsore tramp. He paused at the gate, but opened it and came up the walk, looking wistfully and conciliatingly at the men.

He limped; his clothes were as bad as they could be; his face was thin, bronzed by the sun, and not at all clean; but his blue eyes seemed mild and beseeching, and he did not look “bad” or dangerous. He removed his old hat as he approached and said, hesitatingly:

“I am very tired and hungry and I am looking for work. Would you kindly give me something to eat tonight, and give me some directions—”

Mr. Richards spoke up sternly.

“You aren’t looking for work. It’s your own fault if you’re hungry. I don’t mean to encourage such people by givin’ ‘em anything.”

“Mister, I’d be glad to do any work you give me—tomorrow, for I am too tired to work tonight. If I had supper, and could rest somewheres around.” He trailed off into incoherency from either physical or mental weakness.

“No, I’ve been deceived too often. Can’t find work? Why, we’ve been beggin’ and prayin’ for harvesters, these last four weeks and couldn’t get ‘em. Tramps are good for nothing—we’ve got to get rid of ‘em. This state of Pennsylvania is going to pass a law to ride them out of the state. They’re an idle, drunken, low-down set, or they wouldn’t be in the condition they’re in. They like it better than work, or they would work.”

The man slowly put on his hat, and dejectedly turned away. He saw that further entreaty was useless.

The group on the porch remained silent until the tramp regained the road and limped away. Then the other man, who was a distant relative visiting from an eastern city, said slowly:

“If Pennsylvania chased her tramps out of her borders, and all the other states should do the same, where would they finally be dumped?”

“I don’t know; but if they found there was no place for them they’d—they’d quit being tramps.”

“I wonder how? Could this man ‘quit’ anytime?”

“Yes; let him go to work.”

“But you will not give him a chance to work. Who will?”

“He never should have got into this condition. There’s a lot of these good-for-nothings all over the country. They leave their homes and good jobs and start out just for adventure. They keep getting worse until they land in the penitentiary. We’ve got to drive ‘em out of the country.”

“Where? Will Canada or Mexico be expected to receive the wrecks of this rich and mighty nation? Shall we send the ruins of our civilization to colonize new lands to show them the results of our enlightenment?”

“Well, they might be kept at home, taken prisoners and made to work.”

“Yes; but whatever they are put at, they compete with and wrong free labor. Prison labor does no one any good.”

“Work for their own consumption, then.”

“That’s what all the world ought to do. The problem would be settled if that plan could be put into practice.”

“Well, they could all find work if they wanted it,” grumbled Nathaniel Richards, moving about in his chair a little restlessly.

“If you’d seen as much of the world as I have, you might doubt it. Labor-saving machinery, trusts and consolidations, are throwing men out of employment all the time. You know, forty years ago we scarcely ever heard of a tramp. There are thousands of them now. Even if we can’t find them loitering about when we want two or three for a week or so—we can’t expect them to be hanging on our gateposts the year round waiting until we want them—they are tramping by thousands back and forth over all our rich land. How is it, if they are individually to blame, that so many such beings have suddenly come into existence? If they are hungry and homeless because they are idle and worthless, what is the matter with society that it raises all at once such a harvest of reprobates?”

Meantime, Tavia Richards had disappeared. She had listened intently to a part of the conversation between her father and “Uncle Dave,” but she had also watched the tramp as he limped away, and saw that at the corner he climbed the fence and took his way behind the wild shrubbery down to the stream. Surmising that he would stop at the creek, she quickly formed a plan. Getting up very quietly, she entered the house and rapidly made her way to the kitchen, where she found a dish of cold pork and beans, a half loaf of bread and a jug of milk. Taking these with her, she set out for the creek and found the tramp sitting close to it, leaning against a tree; his arms folded and his head, with the slouch hat pulled low over his eyes, bent on his breast. His lame foot was bare and hanging in the water.

“See here, man!” she cried out, impulsively; “I’ve brought you something to eat!”

He started and stared at her in astonishment for a moment; then rose as quickly as he could to his feet and removed his hat. Tavia noticed how white and well shaped was his forehead, and that his hair was brown and curly.

“Did you come down here to bring me food?”

“Why, of course I did.”

“But aren’t you afraid? I’m a tramp—a creature women and children run away from.”

“I guess you’re a man and a hungry one. Here, eat this.”

The man thanked her respectfully and sat down before the food. Although very hungry he did not eat ravenously or uncouthly. Tavia leaned against a tree some feet distant and looked at him with a grave, practical air.

“My pa says that every man who wants to can get work. How does it come that you can’t? I don’t ask to be impudent, but I’d like to know about these things.”

“Well, Miss,” the tramp answered respectfully, “I will have to tell you a part of my history in order to explain it. I am the son of parents who worked in a shoe factory in Massachusetts all their lives. I was sent to school until I was twelve and got a pretty good start, and as I always liked to read I have gained a little since. Then I went into the factory. I worked there steadily until about a year ago. I know how to make a fraction of a shoe and I don’t know how to do another useful thing on earth. My muscles are all trained to one set of motions and are not strong at anything else. When they put in a new machine which threw out of work about fifty of us, I was one to go. I started to look for other work. Sometimes I got odd jobs, sometimes I tried farm labor, but I was not as strong as I should be and was awkward, and no one ever kept me long. I worked in the harvest field a few days, but the man wouldn’t keep me. So I have been going, getting a little worse off all the time.”

“But if you are energetic and industrious and sober you will be sure to get on,” said Tavia in imitation of her father’s manner.

“Well, I’m not over and above energetic and clever. I don’t know how to posh myself ahead. I haven’t the faculty for over-reaching others and taking their jobs away. I did my work in the factory faithfully and well, but I’m not one of the kind to catch on quickly at a new thing. Still I am willing to work at whatever I can, if they’ll only let me.”

“Then you don’t like to be a tramp?”

“No, little girl, I don’t. Why, I went three days without a mouthful of food before I could bring myself to ask for a meal.”

“I am sorry. I can’t understand things. It seems to me the world is full of good things to eat—and everything. I don’t see why anybody should go hungry or want a home. But most tramps would rather be tramps than anything else, wouldn’t they?”

“There may be men who get started in that line and find they can live without working long hours under a hard boss for very little pay, and so don’t really try to get work. But that is after all their self-respect has been snubbed out of them.”

The man had nearly finished his meal, and in the conversation and the consolation of his supper nearly forgot himself and was holding up his head like a man and glancing at the young girl now and then as though talking to an equal. Tavia was very much interested, leaning forward so as not to miss a word. A slight sound attracted their attention and looking up, in the gathering dusk, they saw a portly figure looking down upon them. It was Tavia’s father.

Mr. Nathaniel Richards was not the cold, unsympathetic man that his words would seem to indicate. At heart, he was too kind to dismiss a hungry man without a mouthful and feel easy over it. The weary, disheartened look of the dismissed tramp haunted him. When Uncle Dave left, Mr. Richards sauntered down towards the creek, surmising the tramp would go there, and if he could give a fairly good account of himself, the farmer determined to bring him back to the

house and give him a supper and a bed. Very much surprised was he to find his daughter and the man engaged in an absorbing conversation.

The two were startled at his sudden appearance, but Tavia, never greatly abashed, soon spoke:

“Now pa, don’t scold! I believe you have come down here yourself to give this man a supper. You couldn’t stand it to think of his going away hungry any more than I could.”

“Octavia, go home this minute! You had no business to come out here anyway, without asking anyone.”

The girl laughed, knowing well that her father’s “bark was worse than his bite,” patted his arm, and went home. The farmer sat down, had a talk with the tramp which resulted in bringing him back to the house, giving him some hot coffee, a chance for a bath and a bed where the farm hands slept. Mr. Richards told them at home that the new man’s name was Phillip Morland and that he would stay and work a few days.

Next morning the men were early to the front. Morland was assigned his work, and after a good night’s rest and a hearty breakfast, felt equal to anything that might be required of him and determined to do his best. In half an hour the sweat was pouring down his body and his unaccustomed limbs were trembling. Still he kept doggedly on, though the sun seemed like a terrible furnace just above his head, and the air a hot gas instead of something to breathe. Presently this first weakness passed away and he moved more steadily and mechanically; he had got his “second wind.” Mr. Richards came along and thought to himself, “the tramp’s doing pretty well, if he is a little awkward.”

Men who have never performed labor which calls forth all their physical strength and puts every muscle into play; whose only exercise for months is walking, whose nourishment for weeks has been irregular installments of cold scraps, are not in a condition to do prolonged and steady manual labor.

Phillip Morland had never been a lusty, powerful man; but he was no more to blame for this than he was for not being-above the average in cleverness and intelligence. His toil grew harder and harder. Before noon he seemed to be burning up, his limbs were mere bundles of suffering nerves. There was a roaring in his ears, black spots danced before his eyes. His head throbbed with intense pain. However, he managed to keep moving until the call came for dinner, when he dragged himself with the others to the house where a substantial meal awaited them. Phillip thought he would feel better after eating, but when he tried found that he could not swallow a mouthful. He went out and lay down under a tree until time to go to the fields, when, still dizzy-headed he staggered away with the others. He worked after a fashion for an hour or so, then the great green and black shadows ‘grew deeper) before his eyes, the world whirled away from him and he knew no more.

Mr. Richards soon after passed that way but could not see his tramp harvester, who lay behind a shock of oats in a little hollow. He looked around with a sweeping glance, then muttered:

“He’s like the rest of ‘em after all. Worked about as long as he could stand it, I s’pose, got filled up with three square meals, and skipped out.”

But presently another hand came along and found the man lying on his back, unconscious. He thought at first that he was drunk or shamming, but on a closer investigation knew he was actually overcome by heat and exhaustion. Mr. Richards was informed and feeling a little remorse for his hasty conclusion of a few minutes before had Morland carried to the house, where he was laid on a comfortable bed in a cool, darkened room, restoratives applied and then left to rest.

Morland insisted on going to work the next day, although the farmer told him to take another day to “rest up.” By working more slowly, steadily and evenly he soon performed his share of labor very well. He remained at the farm until the field was harvested, always quiet, steady, willing and accommodating even when the others rather superciliously ordered him about. The family slowly began to like him, but were not quite ready to treat him as an equal and a friend.

On the evening when the harvesting was done he sat under the trees in the back yard. He was thinking that on the morrow he would have to commence his weary wanderings again, for the farmer would probably have no further work for him to do.

Phillip Morland was just an average man. Without being remarkably clever, strong or capable, he was conscientious, steady, faithful in what he had to do or could do. He loved a home and a “steady job.” In everything he understood he could be absolutely relied upon. His work was done here. What should he do next?

He felt a vague, resentful sorrow at the idea of beginning his wanderings anew, and wished that he might remain in this quiet place.

The other men were lolling under the trees a little apart from him, chatting and joking, in keen enjoyment of the rest in the cool twilight. Suddenly the sound of swiftly galloping hoofs struck on their ears. Morland knew that Tavia had ridden out on her spirited young horse about an hour before, and he instantly thought of her. He sprang to his feet, and before the others caught the idea that someone might be in danger, was out in the street.

He saw the horse tearing furiously toward him, and Tavia with a pale face and hair flying, still sitting well and bravely, trying to control him. Morland did not know that he possessed the necessary strength to bring the horse to a standstill; but the task was there for him to do or die in the attempt, and he did not hesitate. He made a dash for the bridle as the frightened animal flew by him, and caught it. He was flung from side to side and struck by the horse’s hoofs, but never released his hold; and at last the horse gave up, slackened speed, and stopped.

Tavia waited for no help, but sprang to the ground to see if her rescuer was badly hurt. By this time the other men were out in the road, eager, curious and ready to help now that they realized the danger. The father and mother hurried out of the house, frightened and anxious, to clasp Tavia in their arms and thank God that she was safe. Then they turned gratefully to Morland, who though conscious was at first unable to rise. But it was found presently that he was not seriously hurt, and in a few minutes he could walk to the house with the help of two of the men.

Mr. Richards and his wife could scarcely express their thankfulness to Morland.

“Why, Matilda,” said the farmer, “he’s got the right stuff in him after all. Without knowing much about handlin’ horses, with being undersized and half-nourished, he’s done what not one o’ these great, strapping fellows hadn’t the quick wit or gumption to even try. We’ll keep him, mother.”

So Morland found a “steady job,” and very thankful he was. They all began to respect and like him, and Tavia believed there was no one so brave, good and reliable as Phillip. His manner toward Tavia is almost one of reverence; and as she will not acknowledge that anywhere in the world are there the equals of her father and Phillip Morland, it is very easy to surmise how their story “will come out.”

After all, in the history of most lives, the important point is—an opportunity. There is a germ of greatness in every man’s nature. Pushed by the great wheels of our industrial system to the outer edge of society, deprived of all that goes to develop true manhood, what wonder that so many wrecks, so many distorted, dwarfed, misshapen creatures are cast away with the driftwood

of wild human currents? When now and then a chance comes, even these average commonplace men become useful, worthy, happy and capable of bestowing happiness.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Lizzie M. Holmes
Only an Industrial Outcast
1901

Retrieved on 26th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *The American Federationist* 8, no. 8 (August 1901): 295–298.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net