A NEW ENGLAND VAGABOND
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A NEW-ENGLAND VAGABOND

THERE may usually be found in the best-regulated minds some concealed liking for a vagabond, the relic of days when we thought it would be a very pleasant thing to run away with a circus or to sleep under a haystack. And even apart from this, it is certain that the lives of vagabonds often afford the very best historical material. We have in copious profusion the letters and public documents of the able and upright men who organized and carried through the great revolt of the American Colonies against the Crown ; but many events of that epoch are still imperfectly understood for want of adequate memorials of the scoundrels. Points of the greatest historical importance, such as the difficulties encountered by Washington in organizing the army at Cambridge, the frequent depletion of that army through desertion, the depreciation of the Continental currency, the startling outbreak of Shays's Rebellion, can never be understood except by studying the revelations of the reprobates. Such confessions are very rare : there is, so far as I know, but one book which fully and frankly proclaims them ; of that book I have seen but one copy, now in possession of the Worcester, Mass., Public Library ; and this condition of things furnishes ample reason for bringing to light once more the wholly disreputable and therefore most instructive career of Henry Tufts.

He was a man whose virtues might doubtless have been very useful to us, had he possessed any, but whose great historical value lies, strange as it may seem, in his vices. His dingy little book derives its worth from the very badness of the society into which it brings us ; it reveals the existence, behind all that was decent and moral in that period, of a desperate and lawless minority. Henry Tufts was born at Newmarket, N.H., June 24, 1748 ; and he not only belonged to the true race of vagabonds, but was indeed the first thourough and unimpeachable member of that fraternity recorded amid our staid New-England society. Previous examples, such as Morton of Merry Mount, and Sir Christopher Gardiner, Knight, were mere exotics, the consummate flower of

an elder civilization. Our interest in them is to see how they bore the transplantation, and how the scene of transplantation bore them. But Henry Tufts was indigenous ; purely a home product. Indeed, he belonged distinctly to what Dr. Holmes once called the Brahmin blood of New England ; for he claims that his grandfather was a clergyman who apparently graduated at Harvard College in 1701. But if of clerical blood, the grandson came also of the breed of Autolycus, and his autobiography belongs essentially to what has been called the " picaresque" literature,– that which includes Gil Blas, Guzman d'Alfarache, and Meriton Latroon.

It is indeed unsurpassed in that department, for it contains a smaller portion of any thing but vagabondism than any similar work known to me in any language. His whole book records hardly a trace of honest industry, unless we include his service in the Revolutionary army; and even there his labors seem to have been strictly in the line of those afterward performed by Sherman's bummers. All else is unmitigated but not unvaried rascality. In some lives, theft is an incident ; with him it was the stated means of support. Whatever he had, he stole. He can hardly be said to have invariably stolen his lodgings, for he often slept in haymows, and one night in a family tomb ; but for all else–food, drink, and clothing–he relied upon what he graphically calles the rule of thumb. He would have fulfilled Falstaff's longing, " Oh for a fine young thief!" It was needless to inquire of him, as Charles Lamb asked of his Australian correspondents, what he did when he was not stealing. He was thieving all the time, unless we separate the periods when he was running away with his booty, or being taken to prison, or breaking out of it, which he did again and again.

He began his career in the usual manner of country boys who take to bad courses,–by robbing orchards and hen-roosts. At fourteen he planned with two companions to steal bread, cheese, and cucumbers, and to hide them in the woods. The others provided the bread and cheese, and he the cucumbers, stripping a whole patch. Being dissatisfied with the provision the others had made,

he resolved to frighten them out of their share ; so he raised an alarm, when they all took fright, after which he came back and carried off all the supplies. Not content with this, he informed his companions that the farmer they had robbed had captured him, and had exacted of him three days' labor ; so that each of the other boys gave him a day's work on his father's farm as their share of the imaginary penalty. This early incident gives the key to his whole life, which was spent in first defrauding others and then his own accomplices. When he was twenty-one he began the more public practice of his profession by stealing his father's horse and selling it for thirty dollars.

In the active pursuit of his vocation he travelled habitually between Canada and Virginia, having a line of confederates, like a trapper's line of traps, through the whole route. His system of living reached a singular perfection. Whan he needed food he took it, wherever he found it ; not confining himself to the necessaries of the table, but adding the luxuries, as when he stole a beehive, and carried it some distance ; on which occasion he must have discounted, so to speak, the stings of remorse. When he needed a pair of boots, he looked out for a shoemaker's shop, and contrived to be near it at nightfall. In respect to linen, for him the land seemed as covered with clothes-lines as now with telegraphic wires; and once, when he needed small-clothes, he spied through the window of a church a suitable pulpit-cushion, stole it, sold the feathers, and made a pair of breeches of the green plush.

It is needless to say that in him horse-stealing–which has been in all ages, as Scott says of treason, " the crime of a gentleman "– rose to the dignity of a fine art. Some fifty separate thefts of this kind are recorded in his book. He asserts that he could go into a stable at night, and select a particular horse by his way of eating his hay. He could so disguise an animal by paint, that his former owner, riding by his side, did not know him. He would steal a horse, ride him twenty miles, and exchange him for another, and make two more exchanges before reaching one of his homes

again ; for he had lamost as many homes as horses. In one case he took a neighbor's horse, sold it for fifty-one dollars, and, on being detected, guided the neighbor to the place where it was sold, hoping to find it and steal it back again. Not finding it, they each stole another horse, were caught, and were punished with thirty-five lashes apiece from a cat-o'-nine-tails. In another case a man boasted that his horse had a special guard every night, and could not be stolen. Tufts accepted the challenge, gave the guards rum and opium, and rode the steed away. Nor was this talent limited to horses. While travelling up the Merrimac River, he stole a valuable dog, sold it at Newbury for ten shillings, and then crossed the ferry. The dog swam the river, and rejoined him. Aided by this happy suggestion, Tufts sold him twice more, at Newburyport for six shillings and at Bradford for a dollar; the dog each time swimming the river, and rejoining his unwearied salesman.

His whole life was spent either in eluding pursuers, or giving them reason to pursue him anew. He was so constantly suspected, that he was often arrested when he had done nothing. The shop of Mr. Jacob Sheafe, in Portsmouth, had been robbed ; and Tufts was stated to have been seen carrying a bundle through the streets in the evening. That was enough ; and he was confined in Exeter jail some days, and then released. The same winter he was arrested under a similar suspicion in Newmarket, went to Exeter jail again for a week, and was again discharged. For the first of these detentions he was paid by Mr. Sheafe at the rate of a dollar per day. The jail thus became not only his lodging, but the source of a moderate income, the most innocent perhaps that he ever enjoyed. The dollar a day was a sort of retaining-fee for not thieving. It is observable that these unjust detentions happened always in the winter, and that he never complained of them ; it was only when he deserved to be in jail, that he repined under it.

It is said that hypocrisy is the homage that vice renders to virtue, and that counterfeit money vindicates the true. It therefore throws no discredit on two learned professions when I point

out the obvious fact that medicine and theology always prove attractive to vagabonds. Tufts tried both. He says of himself, in his usual Micawber strain, " Destitute of a single shilling in the world, it was requisite to levy contributions on the public [*Il faut vivre, monsieur!*], so that I might elude ' haggard poverty's cruel grasp.' In some places, therefore, I practised physic, in others told fortunes, and in others again I discharged the sacerdotal office. I could turn my hand with equal facility to either of these scientific branches, and acquired some celebrity in them all." Accordingly, like another New-England vagabond,–Stephen Burroughs,–Tufts combined preaching with his other pursuits. " Having a mind to view the country and try my skill as a preacher, I purchased me a new suit of black, a large Scotch-plaid gown, and cocked-up beaver." This was, therefore, the clerical costume in 1777, and the sect to which he proposed to minister was known as New Lights. It is a good instance of what is called feminine intuition, that the only person who ever found him out in this character was a young girl. He being a Little Falls, Me., was invited, because of this clerical dress, to speak at a week-day meeting; and the officiating clergyman declared that he had preached such a sermon as to prove him " an incarnate saint, if ever there was one upon the footstool." Upon this, Tufts says, a young woman named Peggy Cotton, a church-membetr, rose and said " He a saint? So is the Devil incarnate. For my own part, I have no belief in his pretended sanctity, let him profess what he will." Being severley taken to task, the plain-spoken young woman proceeded to explain that on his first entrance into the meeting, this gentleman of clerical appearance had surveyed her from head to foot in such a carnal manner that she " perceived that he had the devil in his heart." Great was the confusion ; the speaker was severely rebuked by the officiating clergyman, followed by Tufts himself, who says, " As two against one are odds at tennis, so poor Peggy, finding her ground untenable against both, presently withdrew." Tufts, triumphant against her, became the clergyman's guest, and preached daily through his whole tour, undisturbed by the fear of man or woman.

His medical practice was really impaired by the same drawback with his preaching ; for in one case a young girl whom he had brought back almost from the grave fell in love with him, and insisted on his eloping with her, which indeed required no great persuasion. He had a little more preparation, however, for medicine than for theology, taking the latter only by what is now called " heredity" from his grandfather, while to the former he devoted three years of exceedingly irregular study among the Indians. He was fond of all athletic feats, and, having injured himself severly when about twenty-four, was advised by Capt. Josiah Miles, " the great Indian fighter," to visit the aborigines at " Sudbury Canada," who would cure him if any one could. Sudbury Canada was not a Canadian village, but one of the townships in Maine allotted to soldiers who had served in an expedition against Canada. Thither he went, therefore, by way of Pigwacket, in Maine, a region famous in the Indian wars, this being about fifty miles from the place of his stay among the savages. For three years (1772-1775) he remained with them, and at first was visited daily by Molly Orcut, whose name is still preserved in memory as the most noted of Indian doctoresses. He observed her methods, took her medicines, and received her bounty ; for patients came to her from far and near, and she always had a considerable sum of money in her house. Besides her there were other renowned docturs, such as " Sabattus " and " Old Philips ;" and Tufts took great pains to study what he calls " Indian botany and physic," and thus gained a knowledge of simples, on which he frequently traded for the rest of his life. He added an Indian wife to the two or three others whom he had already accumulated ; and he has left in his autobiography a very clear and compact account of the whole way of living among these people a hundred years ago,–their mode of hunting, their habits in winter, their sleeping on the snow before a fire, their torturing punishment of their own criminals by putting thongs through the tendons of their arms and legs, and stringing them up between two saplings to die.

On his return from the Indian settlement he found the country plunged in a war, and now begins what is historically the

most valuable part of his record. In him we have the reverse side of the Revolutionary soldier ; he shows vividly the worst part of that material out of which Washington had to make an army,–the two months' men. Tufts enlisted, he tells us, because he thought it an easy life, and more honorable than thieving ; "though," as he justly remarked, and proceeded to exemplify, "a soldier may be a thief." He enlisted first under a Capt. Clark, marched to Portsmouth, N.H., worked at building barracks, serving, as he tells us with admiration, " through the whole term of his enlistment without desertion." Here he met Gen. Sullivan and Col. Cilley. Later he enlisted with one Capt. Benbo for two months, and was marched to Winter Hill near Boston. " Here," he says, " our troops fared at times so slenderly that we had to atone for the dearth of allowance by stealing pigs, poultry, and such articles." Then follows a series of descriptions of thefts and cajoleries, all aided and abetted by the captain, who, if any one came to him with a complaint, allowed his troops to drive the complainant out of camp with snowballs. Then Tufts went home, staid a while, and re-enlisted for a third term of two months, being first quartered at Winter Hill, then at Harvard College, and helping to build forts at Lechmere Point, now East Cambridge. The troops had half allowance of food, and had to spend their pay to eke it out, while Tufts's peculiar genius took the form of cheating the commissary, and getting a double share of pork. " As our wants had been pressing, the officers of the company were by no means offended at my successful stratagem. Justly Concluding that we should want a moderate quantity of rum while devouring this acquisition, I told them I would undertake to provide this desideratum likewise." He accordingly found an ignorant man, took an old summons for debt,–of which he doubtless had many about him–and gave it to this man as a four-dollar bill, telling him to go to the sutler, buy rum, and bring back the change. He sent somebody else to fetch the rum before the cheat was discovered ; and says that they " regaled themselves like lords," soldiers, officers, and all, apparently, while he " received the applause of every guest as well for my [his] zeal as ingenious contrivance."

It was, no doubt, after dealing with some such company as this, that Washington wrote those expressions of despair, which have been so often quoted, about his troops at Cambridge.

At a later time Tufts was arrested by mistake for a namesake, who had enlisted " for the Ohio" as a soldier, but he was discharged. Then he went on a stolen horse to visit his brother, near West Point, at a place called " Soldier's fortune." He carried to his brother, who was apparently a soldier, two shirts, doubtless from somebody's clothes-lines ; the brother accepted one only, having already a supply, and probably asking, like the little boy who had but one, " Do you suppose a man needs a thousand shirts?" But the other shirt brought Tufts into trouble, as he sold it to Sergeant Hodgdon for seventeen cartridges and a quarter-pound of powder. Buying or selling soldier's powder was then a capital offence ; and he was presently brought before one Col. Reid, who had the long-roll beaten, and four companies of foot paraded under arms. Luckily every man proved to have his allowance of ammunition ; so Tufts was dismissed. Then he made his way homeward among such a variety of French deserters, and other men who were hunting deserters, and murderous Tory tavern-keepers, that it all seems like a chapter out of Cooper's "Spy." Later, he enlisted for three years, under Capt. True, for the regiment of Col. Crane at West Point, and was four weeks, with three hundred others, at the Castle in Boston Harbor, now Fort Independence. Then They went to Watertown, where he deserted ; then he was captured, and sent to Exeter jail, his old retreat. He escaped, was again captured, again escaped, and though closely followed,–showing, as he says, the great need of soldiers in those days,–he never again rejoined the army. In 1781, to be sure, he was taken as a deserter, and carried nearly to West Point ; but the whole party contrived to escape, and he made his way home on stolen horses, as usual.

It was while he was a deserter from the army, in the year 1780, that an event occurred which throws much light from below, as I may say, on the whole history of the Continental currency. He

had rambled from West Point to Vermont, when the whim took him, he says, to visit " in rotation "–a good name for his mode of life–the town of Charlemont, in order to gain sight of Sally Judd, whom he had married when he had another wife living. He there put up at Spencer's tavern. A stranger rode to the door, a genteel, well-looking man, who dismounted to refresh himself, but declined to stay longer. On being pressed by Tufts, who liked his company, he said that his money was almost hout, and he must be getting home. Tufts, who describes himself as being always generous when flush of money, offered to pay the bill. So his guest staid all night, and they shared the same room. In the darkness of the night the stranger made a confession. His name was Whiting, " and he had long been an agent for the British, who had engaged him for an emissary to explore the country and circulate counterfeit money." " As Congress had issued a paper medium to raise armies and pay off their troops, it imported their adversaries to discredit the currency as much as possible. And as such large quantities of paper had been issued already, the speediest way to effect the entire dissolution of the system was to inundate the country with counterfeit bills." It accordingly proved that this genteel stranger, who had not enough of good money to pay his landlord, had fifty thousand dollars of counterfeit Continental money in his pocket, one thousand dollars of which he gladly transferred to Tufts in exchange for " a little silver to dischage bills in particular places." Mr. Whiting rode away after breakfast, having had a distinction which belonged to few men, of teaching to Henry Tufts a wholly new line of roguery.

It is of historical interest to know how this fresh branch of industry succeeded. To all appearance, admirably. He says, " On the same day of my receiving the spurious bills, curiousity prompted me to make experiment of their currency. On trial, I found not the slightest difficulty in passing them Indeed, my bills were such an exact imitation of the genuine ones, that a man must have had more penetration than ordinary to have discerned the slightest difference." Accordingly, as the currency daily depreciated, he made haste to invest his hoard in something permanent ;

" bought a good horse, a new outfit of clothes, and materials for a complete suit of female apparel," which last he sent as a present to the yet unseen Sally Judd, intending it as a kind of atonement for the damage her character had suffered through his acquaintance. It is interesting to know that it brought Sally to an immediate interview, though a stormy one, closing with a further atonement in the shape of fifty counterfeit dollars, which she accepted, though not relaxing her wrath. He then departed, and says, " I had not travelled many miles before I had the address to traffic away my horse for money and goods, which articles I transported, like an honest man, to my own family." Even Henry Tufts, it seems, had his standard of what constituted an honest man.

In the spring of 1793, Tufts got into serious difficulty. He bought, as he says, a silver tablespoon and five teaspoons, which turned out to have been stolen ; for this he was tried for burglary, then a capital offence. The trial took place in 1793, James Sullivan being the prosecuting attorney. Tufts applied to the celebrated Theophilus Parsons to defend him ; but he declining, Messrs. Sewall and Dana undertook the cas,–probably James Sewall, then of Marblehead, afterward a member of Congress, and Francis Dana, afterward chief-justice, and father of the poet. Twice the jury disagreed, and were sent out again ; but they finally brought in a verdict of guilty, and Tufts was sentenced to death. After several attempts to escape, he resigned himself to his fate ; and his cell at Ipswich was cheered by visits from a man who offered him seventy dollars for authority to write his life, and from another who bid two guineas for his skeleton. He was to be hanged Aug. 13, 1795. Great efforts were made for his reprieve, and the Harvard students signed a petition for it ; but it was not till the very hour of execution had arrived, that the order came from Gov. Samuel Adams. Tufts says, " The people who had collected to the number (it was said) of three thousand, dispersed in the same manner as they came ; but, seeing their gathering had been but little gratifying to my feelings, I was far from regretting their departure."

Gov. Adams afterwards, at the petition of Tufts's nominal wife, Nabby, commuted his sentence to imprisonment for life ; and he was sent to the Castle in Boston harbor, then used as a jail. There were thirty pieces of artillery, and what he calls a " company" of soldiers. There were fifty prisoners,–French, English, Dutch, Spanich, Irish, and American,–giving an impression of greater variety than one would have supposed. He was five years in this imprisonment ; and when in 1798 (June 23) the Castle was turned over to the United States Government, he was transferred to Salem jail, where the jailer apparently had no wish to be troubled with him, and remarked, Tufts says, that " the room was in a slender predicament, wherefore I must behave peaceably if I intended to stay long." He took the hint, got out within half an hour, and walked away, " musing upon the versatility of human affairs." Resolving to turn over a new leaf, " forswear sack, and live cleanly," he debated for some time which of his wives,–the old Lydia or the new Abigail,–he should carry out these virtuous purposes. Deciding on the old one, he followed her to the State of Maine, whither she had removed ; first writing a high-sounding letter to Abigail, whose years of fidelity he thus repaid. Thenceforward he lived in Maine, " marching to and fro in the quality of an Indian doctor ; " and thenceforward never, as he declares, although tradition does not confirm this, " taking clandestinely from man, woman, or child, to the value of a single pin." This did not, however, prevent his stealing from a farmer his daughter,–who was not worth the proverbial row of pins, at any rate, by his account,–and wandering into the wilderness in his old way ; but they were captured. He himself returned to the long-suffering Lydia, and seems to have passed his declining years as decently as his nature and habits permitted. He died, it is said, at Limington, Me., Jan. 31, 1831, in the eighty-third year of an uncommonly misspent life.

" At length," he says, in the preface too his book,–" at length have my crimes and misdemeanors become antiquated, and the effects of them by lapse of time been done away. I no longer dread the scourge of future punishment, for on me has been exhausted

its almost every species." " The major part of the following account was digested from the storehouse of memory, where it long lay quiescent in dormancy." This preface was dated at Limington, Me. (which he callse Lemington), in 1807 ; but the book was published at Dover, N.H. The titlepage reads: " A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels, and Sufferings of Henry Tufts, now residing at Lemington, in the District of Maine. In substance as compiled from his own lips. *Ab ovo usque ad mala.*–Ovid *Meliora video, proboque, deteriora sequor.*–Idem."

As has been already made obvious, the style of the book, whoever wrote it, is to the last degree high-flown and amusing " Now had the more vertical rays of propitious Phoebus subdued the rigors of the inclement year, and transformed the truly hiemal blasts into pleasing zephyrous gales. Already had he renewd the beauties of the vernal bloom, and restored to the animate world the festive joys of a mild atmosphere." As my friend Mr. Charles Francis Adams would no doubt remark, he who wrote this had studdied the classics. He accordingly speaks of Virgil and Cicero, also of Milton and Dr. Cullen and Corporal Trim. He has peculiar names for places,–names which hava geographical interest: " Number Four" for Charlestown, N.H., and the " Lily Mountains" for the White Mountains. He has slang phrases now vanished : " hot-foot," " tanquam," " troynovant," " the rule of thumb" for thieving, and " to dance Sallinger's round" for immoral indulgences. He gives a very interesting catalogue of some seventy words in the thieves' jargon, or " flash language," which is thus shown to have come to this country in the last century. About half thes words re-appear in the similar catalogue of Capt. Matsell, of the New York Police, printed in 1859; and one phrase, " You're spotted," which Tufts defines, " Your are likely to be found out," is now familiar, but is wrongly stated by Bartlett, in his " Dictionary of Americanisms," to be of very recent origin. If this singular book were not interesting as the record of reprehensible actions, it would have a certain philological value as fixing the date of many reprehensible words.

I hope to have made it plain that it is not solely for the love of bad company that I have rescued from oblivion this irreclaimable old sinner. The historical value of the book is manifest. His whole picture exhibits to us at a most interesting period a wholly distinct and almost undescribed phase of New-England society. If by a transformation scene the Continental Congress, with all its members sitting in tie-wigs, were to vanish from view and to disclose a scene from the " Black Crook," the change would hardly be greater than to turn, let us say, from Washington's correspondence to Henry Tufts's autobiography. The latter discloses to us the under-world of the Revolutionary period,–a world of sharpers and whipping-posts, of drunken tavern-keepers and loose women. Tufts found an old acquaintance, always a scoundrel, in every piece of woods, and obtained without the least difficulty a mistress in every town. Drunken Barnaby's ride to London hardly brought him into more objectionable companionship. The whole book is like a Kirmesse of Rubens or Teniers, and many passages will not bear quotation. Tufts seems to have been given to liquor,–perhaps he found, like Bret Harte's gamblers, that it interfered with business,–but his taste for all loose company was inexhaustible ; and after he was fifty or more, and had, by his own account, utterly given up stealing, he was still at the mercy of every disreputable female that came along ; and they often came. Of course it is easy to say that he lied ; that probability must steadily be kept in view at every page ; but the general atmosphere of a book is unmistakable, and here the course versimilitude is very great. No one can read these pages, and not recognize that there must have been distributed throughout a large part of the narrow region known as the United States, in those days, a stratum of society like that still found in some isolated and degraded settlements among the mountains,–hamlets whose wandering inhabitants are habitually called gypsies, although without gypsy blood. Nor can it be read without the comforting conclusion that the standard of morals, as well as that of education, has perceptiibly risen during the last hundred years.