



Another



THE BALL AND CHAIN GANG

1903

From the Revised Statutes of New Jersey

1901

The hobo or tramp, commonly known as Weary Waggles, spent his vagabond days dodging work and the village constable. He was an artful dodger. He came to the back door, hat in hand, and humbly asked for a hot cup of coffee and a slice of bread. If offered a substantial meal in exchange for a half-hour's work, he tearfully complained of a weak back and hurried away in search of friendlier folks. He avoided houses when "the old gent was in." If well fed, he was most grateful and, on leaving the premises, marked the gate post or front walk for his pal who was coming that way soon. A mark X meant "Free grub here"; an O meant, "Cheese it, the woodpile!"

But for the village Constable and the Law, life would have been one sweet song for the Weary One. He feared the Constable as a chicken fears the Cooper Hawk. There was no telling when he would spring from behind a tree and seize a poor bloke by the scruff of the neck and drag him before Squire Jaques for trial and certain conviction. What chance did a poor bloke have? He was a beggar and looked the part.

The Squire read the Law to him. "If it is proven that the defendant has no legal settlement in this place, that he lives idly and without employment, that he refuses to work for the usual wages given for the

kind of labor provided; if he places himself in the street to beg or gather alms and can give no account of himself or his business, he shall be adjudged a disorderly person."

"Now, yer honor, I wuz lookin' fer me lost brudder an'—"

"You'll find him where you're going—down the line for ninety days," rudely interrupts the Squire; and the prison door is opened to receive the Weary One. If that were all—just to snooze in a cell—it wouldn't be so bad. But—curses on the luck! he has to "engage in hard labor upon the county farm or the roads of the village, or in the poorhouse, workhouse, jail or penitentiary, and if suitable work cannot be provided in one place, he will be moved to another." Still worse, if he be a second offender (as he often was) he must spend six months in prison, and perform "the labor specified with a ball and chain fastened to his leg" . . . The Board of Freeholders, in each county, "shall provide a sufficient number of balls and chains" for the Weary One and his pals.

Now, we ask you, was that a nice way to treat a Knight of the Road who was accustomed to spend his winters basking in the warm southern sunshine, and his summers dozing blissfully in Elder Cory's meadow?

—Chapter 2: 203-1—Tramps.