

The Life Story of a Hungarian Peon.

[The following true story was told by Mike Trudics to Alexander Irvine. Mr. Irvine spent several months last winter as a manual laborer in the lumber and turpentine camps of the South. In a café in Pensacola Mr. Irvine entertained Mike and Mr. Sandor as they exchanged experiences. Mr. Sandor was then on his way to prison for his share in Mike's involuntary servitude.—EDITOR.]

“I AM going to America!”
The words of my father startled us that night, for we were so quiet—out there two hours' walk from B—. It was to us like saying he was going to be hung.

My father and mother were farmers. There were four of us children—two boys and two girls. John was ten, Annie twelve, I was seven and Mara sixteen.

We were at supper, but my father was not eating. “It is the best I could provide,” my mother said, thinking it was the food.

“It is not that,” he said. Then he spoke of America, and we all looked at him with our mouths wide open.

Mother stopped eating and we children had more black bread that night than we could eat. After supper we gathered closely around the open fire. All of us got very close to father. Annie sat on his knee, I sat on the hearth with my arms around his leg, while John and Mara leaned their heads against him. Mother rocked and rocked, looking with big eyes into the fire all the time.

“Even if I owned a farm,” father said, “what difference would it make? I need a mule, I need a plow—I need many tools. It breaks my back to do a mule's work, and the best I can do brings but black bread, and not even enough of that.”

I did not understand what all this

meant; I only knew in a dim kind of way that something had gone wrong. My father was a different man to me. My mother, too, looked strange. Her eyes were large, and she would look a long time at one place.

Our hearts were heavy. They were heaviest at night, but during the day I saw my mother weep and kneel for long periods at the ikon. We had all been baptized in the Russian Church, and one day the priest came and said a blessing for my father.

“Yes, yes,” my father said when the priest was gone, “prayers are all right, but they are not black bread. They do not pay the rent. The priest says prayers and I sweat and give my blood; that is different.”

My mother made the sign of the cross and said, “God is good! God is good!”

When my father picked us up one by one to say goodbye, he kissed us many times. Then, to please my mother, he went over to the ikon in the corner, and dropping on his knees crossed himself. We all sobbed aloud.

Nikof Jaros, our neighbor who lived alone, came with his mule to take father and his box; but we all cried so loud that he had to take us all. The journey was a fine holiday for us and we forgot our trouble on the way. It was different coming back.



MIKE.

"In two months," my father said, "I will send for you." We hugged him tight and hollered, tho there were crowds of people around. My mother still wept quietly and said, "God is good! God is good!"

"America is great," Nikof told us on the way home. "It is not a land of fat priests and skinny people. Everybody has plenty and every man is a lawyer. The people make whatever laws they like."

We thought Nikof was very wise—except when he was drunk.

We were very lonely. When the wood fire burned brightly on the hearth at night we all sat around it just thinking, thinking about father. Mother used to gather us around the ikon every night and make us say our prayers. John cut a nick in the door-post for every day the ship was at sea. One day, when the posts on each side of the door were covered with nicks, a letter with George Washington's picture on it came to B—. John got it. None of us could read it, but the feel of it was very nice and we all handled it in turn. We handled it over and over. Mother wept over it before she knew what was in it. Nikof was sent for—he can read. He came at night. It was a great night for us. We believed more than ever that Nikof was really a great man. He read the letter over to us. Indeed he read it so often that we could all repeat it by heart. For so much paper there seemed to be very little communication. It just said father was well and making a fortune very fast.

A week afterward the priest came to our house, and after telling him the good news, mother gave him the letter. We all watched his round, red face. There were so many expressions on it in a minute.

"Nikof is a liar!" he said. "Jan Trudics is dead! This letter is from a friend of his who says Jan walked the streets of New York looking for work until his feet were blistered. It says that at the end of a week he was taken ill and died. It says he died of a broken heart!"

My mother began to cry, and that started all of us.

"Be quiet!" the old priest said sternly. "God will be a father to the orphans. He

will succor the widow in her distress!" But we cried all the louder. That night we gathered closely about mother.

John brought in extra wood and we sat silently by the fire watching the red flames as they leaped up the old chimney. Mother's face made us all cry. It was so pinched. Her lips were white and her eyes were sunken deep into her head, and for long hours she just looked steadily into the fire. We cried until one after another we went to sleep, and mother carried us to our bed in a corner.

Mother pined and prayed and spent much time before the ikon. As the days passed there was less and less black bread. Nikof came often, and always brought something to eat. He seemed to know our affairs, tho nobody ever told him. We liked him very much even tho he did read the letter backward. "For stupid peasants," Nikof said, "knowledge is a great curse. The less we know, the less we need." When he cursed the old priest only one of us agreed with him—that was Mara.

A year from the time my father went away my mother was in her grave, and the old priest and the doctor said that she, too, died from a broken heart. When we gathered around the fire again, we were a quiet, sorrowful lot. Nikof came and sat up late with us. He chopped plenty of wood and made some cakes with his own hands. He told us plenty of stories—good stories, stories about God and another world than this, where father and mother were. "There," he said, "we will all be spirits and we will have no stomachs at all."

"The priest does not say we shall have no stomachs," said Mara.

"I know," Nikof said. "He is always making me out a liar—he is all stomach, the old—"

Mara put her hand on Nikof's mouth and stopped him.

Some kind-hearted folks in B— took John and somebody took Annie. Mara and I were unprovided for. One day Nikof hitched up his old mule and took us for a ride. It was a long ride to the city, and Nikof and Mara seemed to have all the conversation to themselves. But I was glad of the ride anyway. And when we drove up to the old priest's door

Nikof left me mind the mule while he and

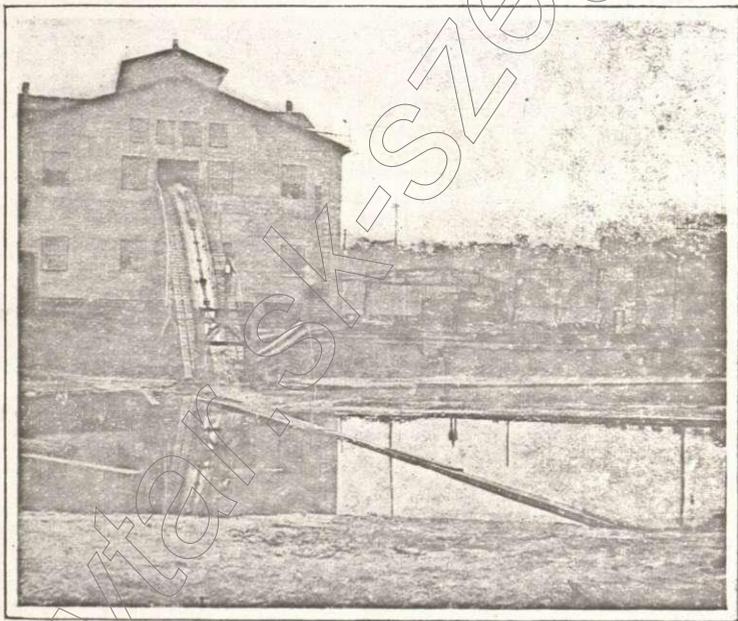
Mara went inside. When they came out again Mara's face had a different look. She looked as she did before father went away, and I was very glad. I thought she had gone for a blessing to the old priest, but Nikof said:

"That is not it at all. We have just got married."

I was very glad. Nikof took us to his own little farm a few miles from our old home and we lived there happily with him for a year. In a year Nikof got drunk just once. It was when he was

churches and other fine buildings. I staid there until I was twenty years of age. Then I worked at a number of things—at times a common laborer and again as a teamster.

After I was twenty I attended meetings of different kinds. I heard a lecture once on America by a man who had gone there as a poor emigrant and returned a rich man. He said America was a country of magic. He told of wonderful things men had done, but all the time I was thinking, thinking of my father.



THE MILL AT LOCKHART.

with a soldier in the city. They got too much brandy and on the way home lay down in the snow. They found the soldier dead and Nikof had both his legs sawed off later.

I was taken to the city and given away. I was nine at the time. I did not see Mara for years after that, tho we were only two hours' walk apart. One day they told me that Mara had gone crazy and that she had left Nikof.

At fifteen I became apprenticed to a molder. It was a place where were made

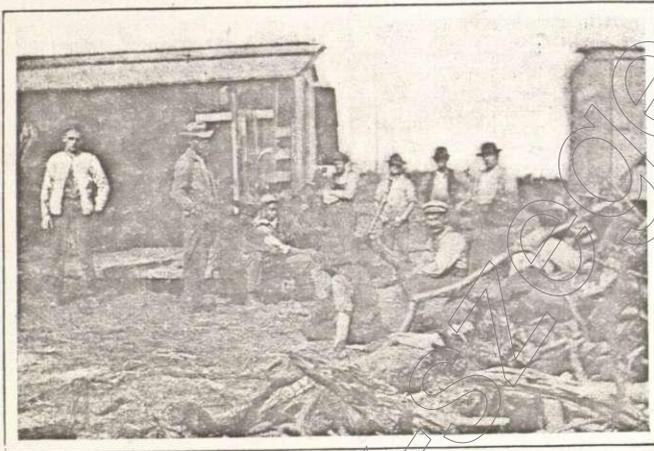
Cornices, - cornices of tin and zinc for

of his blistered feet and broken heart. It was not his talk, however, but a book by Louis Kossuth that stirred me up to go to America. It took me nearly a year to get enough money to come. I about half starved myself to do it.

It was in May, 1906, that I came to New York. I was then twenty-four years of age. It certainly did look wonderful from the ship! A well dressed man who spoke our language told us that the big iron woman in the harbor was a goddess that gave out liberty freely and without cost to everybody. He said the

thing in her hand that looked like a broom was light—that it was to give us light and liberty too. I thought he talked

bulge out of my head. I saw only tenements, however. Maybe they were barracks. I was much bewildered by these



THE NOON HOUR.
Awaiting Archie's order, "Pull 'em out, boys!"

like Nikof Jaros. Especially when he told us a man could stand inside the broom.

I thought the rich people lived in the big, tall houses, but he said that was a mistake; they just did business there. He said they lived in palaces that would make our eyes bulge out if we could see them.

At Ellis Island they put my life in a book and asked me a lot of funny questions. Did I believe in law? Was I in favor of government? etc.

When I got away from them I found my way to my mother's brother on East Third street, near the river. My uncle was a brass polisher, but altho he had been many years in New York, he had not performed any miracle; he had not seen any magic. He had an ordinary kind of a job that he held in an ordinary kind of a way for a number of years. I expected, of course, to find him rich, but he laughed loudly at that, for he had that idea himself when he first landed.

The man my uncle lived with was an old friend of my father's. He gave me a corner in one of the two rooms. It was a good corner and I was happy in it.

Of course I looked around for the dwellings that were to make my eyes

big houses. They looked like big stone caves and the people were so crowded that they knocked each other about the streets. Indeed they rushed along as if they were crazy.

I got a job with my uncle at \$10 a week. That seemed a very big price to get for my labor, but the price of board was so many times larger than it was in the old country. However, I was getting along very well until the factory was destroyed by fire. Then I had the experience of looking for work. It was easy as long as I had money to pay my board, but when my money had gone and I was dependent on my uncle and my father's old friend, I felt it very keenly indeed. I kept going, going, going, until my legs were very tired. Then a feeling of home-sickness came over me, and I came to the place where my father had been—I mean the condition he had experienced eighteen years ago. But I was young and had no one dependent upon me. I dreaded debt, and I would rather be beaten than called a loafer. Yet work I could not get. I ran up a board bill of \$2. That worried me and I determined to go away and fight it out

alone. I wrote a note and left it on the table. I promised to pay the bill



As soon as I got work and asked them not to think unkindly of me because I left in a hurry.

I met on the street a Hungarian who had arrived on the same ship. He told me of an agency where they wanted men. So together we went there. The names of the employment people were Franks & Miller. My friend and I did not have much clothing, but what I had was good and strong.

"You will work in a sawmill," they said, "and you will get \$1.50 a day and your food."

That seemed all right and I counted up on paper how much I could save in six months. It seemed big—very big. All my fellow laborers seemed pleased. I thought of my father: how fortunate for him if he had found an agency like this!

The railroad fare was \$18. That, of course, was paid for us by the agency, so they said, and we were to pay it back at the rate of \$3 a month, and if we liked the work and staid for so many months we would not have to pay it at all.

months!" said Lanniger, a Hungarian friend I had met on the voyage. I determined to do so too.

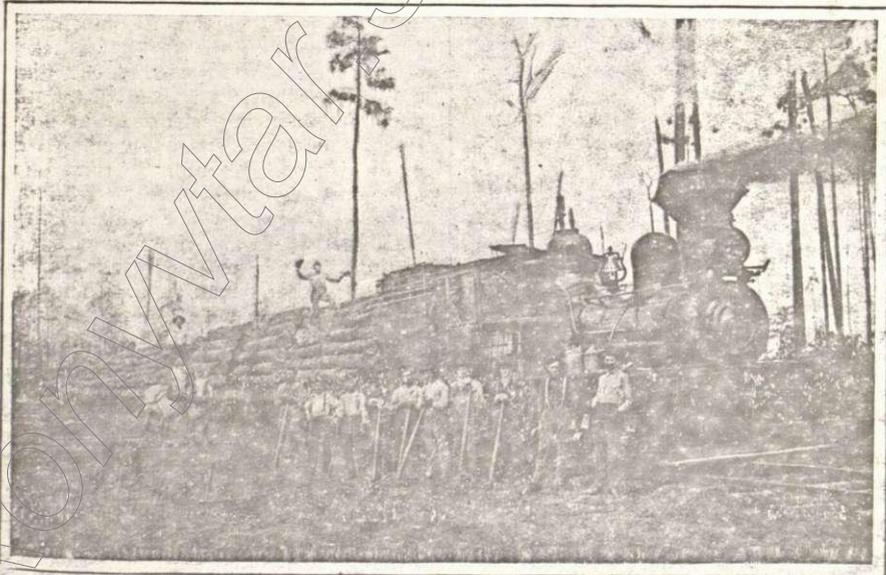
Eighteen dollars seemed a lot to save by just holding on to a fine job, and the very thought of \$45 a month made me laugh with joy. I imagined myself going back to Hungary rich!

We looked a queer lot as we went to the boat. There were so many nations represented and we were so differently dressed.

I had good, stout boots and woolen socks; a fine cap; a cotton shirt with cotton collar and a bright new tie. My clothes were strong and whole.

I was one of a gang. There were all sorts of men in it. We shipped from New York to Savannah by boat and from there to Lockhart by rail. A young man whom they called "doctor" met us at Savannah. I liked the look of him. He had large eyes and a fine, kindly face. It was July 18th, 1906, when we arrived at Lockhart. The first thing we saw was an immense saw-mill.

"This is our place," said Lanniger.



THE TRAIN-LOAD OF LOGS.

We looked at each other with wide open eyes.
"You bet I'm going to stay three

"Good!" I said I am glad to be
to me as a good, long job. I am tired out.
But we stayed there only an hour. Car

tain men were picked out to stay and others were ordered on board a little engine. I was of the latter, and soon we were crashing noisily thru the forest to the camp. The journey was about seven miles. A sort of dread seized me as we tore along. I was filled with suspicion, but I did not tell anybody. The camp was a train of box cars and around the camps were a lot of wooden sheds, stables and shops. My contract called for work in a saw-mill. I got enough courage to speak up.

"My contract says saw-mill," I said.



SANDOR.

Gallagher, the boss, was chewing a toothpick while he looked us over. He paid no attention, but just looked at me as if I were crazy.

"My contract"—I would have said more, but he waved me aside.

Gallagher is a stout little man with a revolver sticking out of his hip pocket, and before we were an hour in the camp we heard some examples of his fearful profanity.

"Put him on the railroad, Charlie," he said to the underboss. The men standing around laughed.

The food in the camp was very good and there was plenty of it. We sat down

to meals in a box car around a long table. The table was covered with good things—pork, meat, potatoes, bread and cake. We had tin cups and tin dishes.

The bunks in the car were too close together and too many men slept in them. I could not rest easily. My mind was disturbed.

The hours of labor were from six to six.

The work in the woods sawing logs was hot—too hot and too heavy for me. I learned that the pay was a dollar a day. I told them how the agency had told me that the pay was one dollar and fifty cents a day and food. They smiled at that.

So here we were, out in a wild place, helpless and at the mercy of men who laughed at contracts and out of whose hip pockets bulged revolvers. I did a lot of thinking. I talked to Lanniger.

"I'll run the first chance I get!" Lanniger said.

"I won't wait for a chance," I replied. "I'll make one and go!"

Next day before it was daylight I left the camp—not knowing where I was going. I knew the lumber company was big and powerful and that I was less to them than a log of wood. I was afraid most of the time. I walked all the forenoon, not knowing where I was going. Every time I saw any one coming I hid in the woods. About noon time I saw some men coming along the road in a buggy. When they approached I knew Gallagher. Sandor, the Hungarian interpreter, was there, as was also Dr. Grace, the camp veterinary. They had three bloodhounds with them.

"There's the son of a—," I heard him say as he leaped from the buggy and rushed at me.

The doctor was at his heels in a moment and seized me with his right hand, while he pointed a revolver at me with his left. Gallagher had a horse-whip and at once struck me on the hips. He coiled the lash around my back at every stroke. Sandor sat in the buggy. I screamed in Hungarian to him, but he dared not move or interfere. After a dozen strokes my back was raw and the lashes sank into the bloody ruts of their predecessors. It made me howl with pain. Gallagher whipped me until he was exhausted.

Then they drove me like a steer at the point of a revolver along the road toward Lockhart. I appealed in my native tongue again, but Sandor told me that just as surely as I ever attempted to run away again, they would kill me. I believed him. In the woods they can do anything they please, and no one can see them but God.

When we arrived at Lockhart, where the sawmill is, I again protested and showed my contract, for I thought I was in a town where perhaps there might be some law or civilization. But I soon discovered the kind of law lumbermen are accustomed to. Gallagher whipped me a second time—whipped me until my shirt was glued to my back with my blood. Then they tied me in the buggy by the arms and legs, and with a drawn revolver and yelping bloodhounds, we drove away thru the woods to the camp. That night armed guards kept watch over the laborers in the box cars. Hardly a day passed after that without some one being run down by the bosses or the bloodhounds and returned and whipped. There were some ghastly beatings in the broad daylight, but most of it was done in the barn.

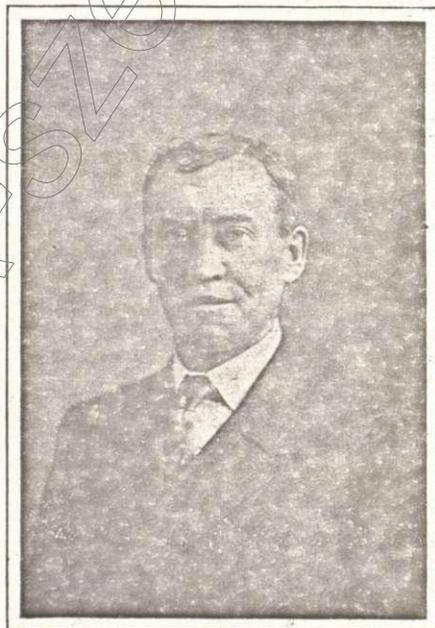
In the daytime I had no time to think, but at night as I lay awake in my bunk, I made up my mind that not only most men, but most books also, were liars. I thought of that first picture of Washington on our letter at home; how Nikof thrilled us all with interest in it. I remembered the burning words of Kossuth on his impressions of America. But here I am with my own feet on American soil. I hear with my own ears; I see with my own eyes; I feel with my own feelings the brutality.

The bosses of the lumber company were put on trial and we told our stories; at least those of us who were still remaining. Of all the things that mixed my thinking in America, nothing was so strange as to find that the bosses who were indicted for holding us in peonage could go out free on bail, while we, the laborers, who had been flogged and beaten and robbed, should be kept in jail because we had neither money nor friends. We were well treated, of course, but at first I felt like a criminal. I am not sorry now for that jail exper-

ience, for I learned more about America than I would have learned in a year in a night school.

Foster was an American. He had fought in the Spanish-American War. He told us about graft and politics. "To get on," he said, "you must be a grafter here. Honesty never pays. A tip to the lumber bosses that we would lie on the stand and we would be out of here by noontime."

Lanniger was with me. We laughed



GALLAGHER.

at the queer ideas of free men. We talked all day, every day.

"Is Gallagher a grafter?" I asked.

"No," Foster said. "He is just a common slave-driver."

"Do they flog men everywhere in this country?"

"No, just down here in the South where they used to flog niggers. Thirty thousand laborers are sent South every year. They come down to mines, they fill the camps of all kinds, but they never stay."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, for the same reason that none

of us will stay—small pay and nothing to see.”

I learned much English from Foster, especially slang. When conversation was dry I got very tired of iron bars and jingling keys. They hurt my mind.

“Say, Mike,” Foster said, “you’re dead in luck to be here. In the stockades you’d dig five tons of coal a day, and for a lump of black rock found in your coal they’d flog you raw. Over there across the way in the city prison you’d be squeezed in an iron cage seven by three feet”—he measured it off for me—“and you’d be forced to sleep in the excrements of the hobos that were there ahead of you. I’ve been there; I know.”

Then I was more content with the county jail. The trial came off in November, 1906, and we went every day for weeks to the big Government building. In the trial I learned that there was

law in America, but its benefits to the poor were accidental. I was glad to see Gallagher get fifteen months in prison. I think he deserved much more. But Foster said he’d never serve a day. I asked him why, but he merely said “Graft.”

Old Jordoneff and I got work on Fort Pickens in the Gulf of Mexico as laborers in the repair of forts, where I am working now. We have very good pay—dollar and a quarter a day and our board.

The boss is a gentleman.

We work eight hours a day and get a day off every two weeks. But the men we work for, even the under-bosses, are humane and kind. Therefore we do far more work and far better work, and work is a pleasure.

Shall I become a citizen?

Why should I?

