

THE CONFESSIONS OF A CONSUMPTIVE

TRANSCRIBED BY ROBERT J. NEWTON

I am a "Lunger."

If I had the gifts of a Dickens or the talent of a Jack London I might be able to give you some faint idea of just how much hell there is in that word.

We who are so described are shocked when we hear the word "lunger"; we learn to hate it, but we finally begin to use the word in speaking of ourselves, because it fits as no other word can possibly fit the outcasts who wear it. I have gone beyond the point where I care about most things, but even now as I pick this out, one-finger fashion, on a discarded typewriter, I shudder at the sight of the word in cold type.

We are the outcasts of America's civilization, the discards and the rejected, the unfit and the proscribed. We are the people from those cities of the East which violate all the laws of God and humanity—and but very few man-made laws—in the housing of their people, or in the sanitation of their working-places; the cities with filthy streets and alleys, with unclean food-shops; the cities with their governments and their people exploited by politicians; with their grasping and avaricious "best citizens," owners of dives and tenements. We, the "lungers," are only a part of the by-products of modern American municipalities. We are the small per cent. of the million or more of American consumptives who have had enough ambition, or money, or wanderlust, or hatred of the place of our infection, or bad medical advice, or philanthropy of misguided friends, to cause us to come West to prolong our lives.

I was—but never mind that. It is what I am now that counts. I am now about one hundred pounds of flesh and bones, mostly bones. And I am a tramp. Not the "bo" with which you are familiar, but the type that exists in the Southwest. I live off the charity societies. When they will no longer aid me I work the churches. Then I "panhandle" among the stores and business houses. A coughing consumptive can easily secure a dime or a quarter if he will only move on quickly. But sooner or later some business man will complain to the police and I am picked up and told to "move on." Then I go to the county or city officials to get a ticket to the next place.

I am now at the end of my rope. I mean physically. I could go on indefinitely as I have gone, but my strength has failed, and next week I shall enter the county poorhouse to await my finish. And I know it will not be long delayed.

I came West ten years ago. By doing so I prolonged my life just about eight years. The possibility of so doing was very attractive to me then. But many times since I have regretted it. It has not been worth while, and I always lacked

the courage to end it myself, as some of my comrades of the "Rainbow Trail" have done.

The chase for a cure is a rainbow hunt. Like the children who search for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, we hunters for health go on and on, seeking always that will-o'-the-wisp, the place that will heal our torn and bleeding lungs. As our strength fails we will not admit to ourselves the change in our bodily condition, but attribute the decline to the "climate" of the place where we happen to be, and start for another place, though it be only fifty miles away.

I could have died decently at home eight years ago. My family would have cared for me to the end and have given me decent burial. And I could have died respected by those who knew me and by myself. Now I shall die a pauper, a drunkard, a dope-fiend, feared by all who come in contact with me, and despised by myself. And I shall be buried in some Potters' Field at an expense to the taxpayers of about \$15.00. It will be worth that amount or more to them to put me out of their sight.

My family believe I died five years ago. At that time my better nature was still in the ascendant. I recognized the changes that were taking place in my moral nature. I realized that I was on the down-grade morally and spiritually as well as physically. I had some slight conception of the depths to which I would sink, and to spare them the agony of sharing, even at long distance, the travail of the downward path, I induced a friend, a fellow-sufferer, to assume my name and identity when he entered the hospital to die. His body was not shipped home, my family collected the insurance and mourned for me. Since then I have not heard of them.

Whether my wife is living or dead, is still mourning for me, or has married again I do not know, and I cannot find out without arousing a suspicion in their minds which might be followed up and reveal the truth. It was kinder to deceive them than to have them see me now or learn of my condition. I shall enter the place where I shall die under an alias and with a faked record of my birthplace, previous place of residence, etc. When I am dead they will find at the hospital that I have lied to them, but what difference will it make then?

When I came to the West I was full of hope that a short stay would restore my health and that in six months or a year I could return to my family and my business. So every "lunger" thinks and hopes. But few are able to do so. If they get well they have to stay in the West, for in most cases return to the home climate is followed by a relapse, and often a hemorrhage will cause immediate death. The returned "lun-

ger" also finds it hard to "fit in" again, for the fact of his pilgrimage to the West to be cured of consumption is well known to all his former friends, who are suspicious of his "cure" and fear the possibility of infection. It is not easy for him to get back his job or to resume his social standing, no matter how well he looks. And sooner or later he has to turn his face to the sunset, warned by a loss of weight and by afternoon fever that the disease is again active and that his time is growing short. On the contrary, if he remains in the West, if he has the money and the intelligence to make the fight, and can spend at least a year in some sanatorium, he may regain his health, he may even become a unit in the business and social life of the community and live far beyond his normal span of life. The West is full of such people and their families, and they have contributed much to the building up of the country.

But God help the man or woman who comes expecting to "live off" the country; to get a job doing light out-door work, or roughing it on a ranch, as the Eastern doctors are so fond of prescribing for those patients whose money or vitality is running low. Some doctors will care for patients gratis when their money is exhausted; many will not, and then the doctor, to get rid of the patient, will recommend a change of climate. Doctors do not like to sign death certificates, for it reflects upon their skill, so they think. When the poor consumptive is told that his only chance for life is to go to the Southwest, it often means that the end is a few weeks off and that some other doctor will be compelled to record the death of the poor unfortunate. This explains why so many consumptives die on the trains going to health-resort cities, and why over ten per cent. of the consumptive migrants die within thirty days of their arrival at resort cities. Unfortunately, there is no way to reach the doctor who is guilty of such cruelty.

The consumptive becomes a "lunger" as soon as he arrives in a Southwestern city; and the people know what to do with, or to, "lungers." He gets his first shock when he goes to a first-class hotel (if he has the price). If he wears the visible signs of his disease there is no room available for him. Or if he gets by the room clerk, his cough soon betrays him. This will happen to a "lunger" no matter how many hotels he goes to, or how many towns he visits. He is not wanted among healthy people; and they do not hesitate to notify the hotel management of his presence and insist upon his removal. Now the second-class and even the third-class hotels are being compelled to adopt the same policy. Some hotels in the smaller resort towns place placards in their office to the effect that none but healthy people are received there. After experiencing this several times, or finding his money running low, the "lunger" decides to find a boarding-house. He secures the daily paper and scans the furnished-room list. He notes at once the repetition of the phrase, "No sick taken," and he begins to wonder where a consumptive can lay his head.

Some cities require boarding-house keepers who propose to care for consumptives to register that fact with the health department and pro-

hibit their taking any healthy guest in the same house. If one goes to the health department to get the list of places where consumptives may board or room, it will be found that few, if any, such places are registered, even in cities where thousands of consumptives live.

As a result of such legislation and the phtisio-phobia that prevails in the West, the "lunger" becomes a liar, a hypocrite, and a danger to the public health. In self-protection he conceals the fact of his disease, if possible. He contracts "stomach trouble," "pleurisy," "asthma" and various other chronic or constitutional ailments, but never tuberculosis. He finds landladies who will take him in for a price somewhat in excess of that paid by their healthy guests, and who for the excess will cheerfully lie to the healthy guests as to his condition. He learns that he must take absolutely no precaution against infecting his fellows, for the use of the sputum cup or spitting into a handkerchief or a rag, or the use of a disinfectant in a cuspidor in his room or at his place of employment, brands him as one of the unclean, and he loses his job or his temporary home. When he moves, as he often does, the people of the Southwest are almost as competent to diagnose the disease as some physicians. When they detect his ailment they often unite against his continuing as a guest in the same house with them, or as a fellow employe. There is no disinfection of the place and no renovation. Another "lunger" or a healthy person goes into the same place and undergoes the risk of infection or reinfection.

There has been a superstition in the Southwest that the natives were immune from infection; that the marvelous climate, the bright sunshine, the pure air, the dry atmosphere, were unfavorable to the development of the disease. But sad experience has proven this a fallacy. The new theory of childhood infection and the development of the disease in later life is finding strong confirmation here. The children of the families who years ago took consumptives into their homes for a price, or because of relationship, are now grown into adult life and are meeting the strain of business competition, or the drain of dissipation, the pangs of childbirth, the weakness occasioned by illness; all of these are often followed by the development of tuberculosis from the germs implanted in childhood. This explains the fact that so many of the children of consumptives die of the disease, and gave rise to the fallacy of tuberculosis being an inherited disease.

By bitter personal experience I learned what awaits a "lunger" in the several years in which I was able to do some work and live in comparatively decent places. At first the thought of being responsible for the sickness and death of others as a result of my own careless disposition of my sputum, laden with the germs of the disease, was horrifying to me. But eventually this feeling wore off. I did not care. Why should I? Some one had caused my sickness and suffering by his criminal carelessness. Why should I try to protect others? And especially when the very protection I tried to give them branded me as a leper, as a pariah, and made of me an Ishmael, with the hand of every man

against me. For years now I have not taken any precaution. As a result I am doubtless a murderer. Others are following me to the grave because of my indifference and carelessness. Now as I come nearer to the end, I think the mists of dope and drink in which I have lived for so long, where I have found it at least temporary surcease from my mental and physical suffering, are clearing away. I am beginning to realize what I have done, and the realization makes me suffer all the more. Now I shall welcome the grave as a respite from the agony of mind and body which is more than I can bear.

The time came when I could not work. I could no longer live in any but the cheapest lodging-houses, and I was compelled to beg the price even for their filthy accommodation. I tried to get odd jobs of grass-cutting, cleaning of yards, and similar work, but no housewife wanted such as I upon her premises for fear of contamination. The only place where I could work was in a saloon. No other place of business would have me around, because of my condition. I had begun to drink before this; now I became a drunkard.

At last, kicked out even of this place of refuge, I became a wanderer. I had begged from every possible source in the town in which I lived, and had exhausted possibilities of support. I was well known as a drunkard and a vagrant. Yet because of my affliction they had borne with me, and I had not received the treatment usually meted out to such characters. So when the Mayor stopped me on the street one day and offered to give me a ticket to —, I gladly accepted it and the dollar he gave me and left for a new field. His Honor told me that there was a free hospital in this place where I could get treatment, which was a strong inducement to me to go.

"Passing on" the sick is a favorite method of treatment in the West. County and city officials figure that it costs less to do so than to care for the patient in a hospital. So whether a community boasts of a hospital or not, when the sick stranger is at last brought to the notice of an official the first thought of the latter is to pass him on to the nearest large town. This is often done even in the case of citizens and natives of the place who may become public charges. The charity societies of the larger cities have many cases thrust upon them by the adjacent smaller towns. The idiot and insane, the aged and the physically disabled, and even the bed-ridden, are sent away from the community which is morally responsible for their care, or for securing state care for them, to another place which has absolutely no responsibility in the case, and often has not the money or the proper institutions for their care. It is sometimes even found that relatives have sent away members of their own families to avoid the burden of their support. The sense of community and family responsibility is lamentably weak in America, as this practice is not limited to one section of the country.

So I went on my way. I secured admission to the hospital and stayed there until I gained some strength, at least enough to justify them in discharging me. There I gained something

else—the "dope" habit. They gave me a drug to ease me. I don't blame them. They had more cases than they could take care of. It made the work easier for them, and it made life easier for me—temporarily.

I left the hospital. I did not try to work. I knew an easier way to live, and I knew that the length of my life depended upon the way in which I secured the means of existence. Work, physical effort, would hasten death. Therefore I became a beggar. Dope and drink would give me temporary ease, and thereafter I would gain what ease I could by the use of both.

My systematic business training helped me here. I made a schedule of my prospective supporters—the different churches, the charity societies, including the Jewish Relief and the St. Vincent De Paul, the stores and offices, the factories, etc. I was all things to all men. I belonged to any church and believed in any creed. I had worked in every line of business. I was whatever the prospective donor of my next meal happened to be. Being a man of intelligence, I found little difficulty in getting my living, such as it was.

Each day was sufficient to itself. When I had secured enough food and money to satisfy my need of food and lodging, drink and dope, I did nothing the rest of the day. And to this practice and to my intelligence and business ability I attribute the fact that I have long outlived those with whom I came into contact in the first years of my life in the West.

I must pay my tribute to the people of the West. Their sympathy and their charity have been boundless. They have done much for us of the East who have come among them and asked them to support us while we sowed the seeds of death among them. Seldom was I refused in my pleas for aid. And this was the experience of my fellows. Why the West stands for the imposition of thousands of consumptives upon them is beyond me, accustomed as I, an Eastern business man, am to the organized, scientific, and often cold-blooded charity of the East. This is my only criticism of the West. Their charity is long-suffering and kind. But it is not wise. It often defeats its own ends. It demoralizes and makes paupers. Organization of towns and states and an interstate organization would soon put a stop to the plague of consumptives who now go from city to city and from state to state, living off the country and spreading their disease. I was one of them and I know.

As a general thing my word was taken as to my condition. I was seldom "investigated." And when I was it was easy to go on to the next town where they were not so efficient. County and city officials very often do not work in cooperation with charity societies, which made it easier to work both and to work the public. Transportation was always forthcoming for myself and for my "wife," if I happened to have one. For I was also guilty of this.

I was always attractive to women, and to this day I have tried to make a decent appearance and to keep myself clean as to body. There are women "lungers" as well as men, though not in such large numbers. They find it harder to get a living than men do, and some of them are re-

duced to trading upon their sex. It was never hard to find one willing to share what little I had. Tuberculosis seems to intensify the baser passions and I did not deny myself the comfort of a woman's companionship when I could have it. And several children, abandoned as their mothers were abandoned, are now inmates of orphanages, or perhaps have been given a home by some one. I do not know. I can only hope that they will not inherit any of their father's defects, moral or physical.

Seldom did I leave a town without knowing all I needed to know about the town to which I was going. In the places where we "lungers" lived we met with those who had been in the towns to which we wished to go; we exchanged information and lists of names of people who could be depended upon to give us the means of existence; we learned from each other the best avenues of approach to produce the best and quickest results. So we smoothed the way for one another and learned to avoid places and people that were unproductive or not easily touched. We strove to live along the line of least resistance and did so.

And so the years have passed. Life has been one town after another, varied by numerous but short stays in hospitals to recuperate my strength. Home I had none. After the first year I do not believe there was ever any hope of cure for me. I believe that \$1,000, or perhaps less, would have saved me if I had had it when I came to the West. I could have entered a sanatorium where I could have received good care, medical attention, and nourishing food for a year or more. And this, in the wonderful climate of this Western country,

would have cured me, for I had the will to live, and the intelligence to follow the doctor's instructions. But after providing as best I could for my family when I left home I had little left wherewith to make the fight and I did not know the odds against me. In the ten years I have lived since I came to the West I have cost society many times the thousand dollars that might have saved me.

My story is the story of thousands, varying only in length of time and degree of suffering. I have read that a national organization which is making a study of tuberculosis estimates that ten thousand to fifteen thousand hopeless consumptives come to the West every year, and that fifty to sixty per cent. of them become a charge upon the public. They might as well add another cipher to their figures, for they, better than any one else, can tell just how many of us start the pilgrimage each year.

"America, we who are about to die, salute you." And we wonder how long you will permit us to go on. How long will it be before the people realize that they who are gathered together in one county or city are as one family, and should unite to care for their own, who for any reason are not able to care for themselves? How long will it be before the great National family will do something for us who, because of absence, have lost our claim upon the cities and states of our nativity but still have some claim upon our country? As I meet the death which I have long evaded, in a poorhouse ward, among strangers, I wait for the answer, though I know I shall not live to hear it.

ENVOI

(With apologies to Kipling)

When my last day of chasing is over
And my lungs are healed and dried,
When the oldest scar has faded
And the youngest bug has died,

I shall play, and, faith, I shall need it,
Quit chasing for a year or two,
Till a few lingering bugs that were sleeping
Shall set to work anew.

Then if I'm good I'll be happy,
I shall sit in an easy chair:
And wonder why I am so foolish
As to leave my Doctor's care.

I shall have a good nurse to bring me
Eggs and milk when I call,
I shall chase for a year at a sitting
And never grow tired at all!

And only my Doctor shall praise me
And only my Doctor shall blame,
For it was he who had all the trouble
Of making me play the game.

He taught me the joy of chasing,
And now, in my little bed,
I'll chase the cure as he tells me
Till all my bugs are dead!

M. W. H., Colorado Springs.