

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Lizzie M. Holmes
Society Notes from the People's Quarters
How the Workers of the City "Spend the Summer."
1907

Retrieved on 28th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *The Blacksmiths Journal* 8 no. 9 (September 1907):
29–31.

theanarchistlibrary.org

Society Notes from the People's Quarters

How the Workers of the City "Spend the Summer."

Lizzie M. Holmes

1907

The heated months have not abated the activities of the tenement house habitants to any great extent. Several prominent functions have taken place (luring the last week which were well attended by the best known people in Alley L. The first was a fire, the next a funeral and the last was a street fight and an arrest. Mother McFarden was present at the first in a becoming gold colored night-gown which displayed her well-rounded arms and ample ankles to good advantage. Several other prominent ladies of the district were present in costumes gotten up regardless of appearances.

The funeral of Mrs. Thompson's baby, who died from bad milk and lack of care while its mother was out washing, was attended by a small and select crowd, who were very sympathetic, and wore their best clothes, some very nicely laundered gowns being in evidence.

The fight occurred between two well known young men in the vicinity, one of whom is the son of Mrs. Van Smythe, the pleasing vendor of apples and peanuts on the corner of Eighth and B streets,

the other Mr. James Browne, familiarly known as "Scrappy Brown." Both young men are at leisure just now owing to the closing down of the Jones machine shop, and young Browne playfully purloined three apples from Mrs. Van Smythe's stand, whereupon young Van Smythe rather forcibly protested and an interesting engagement ensued. Browne accused Mrs. Van Smythe of selling without a license, when Van Smythe promptly called him a liar and "punch" was liberally served. The police happened on the scene and the woman and two young men were taken to the station, Mrs. Van Smythe that her right to sell her wares might be investigated. She will probably invest some of her capital in a fine, and a new and expensive license.

Young Mrs. Backwater is spending the heated term in the south-east corner of a large clothing manufactory; an unshaded window allows the full rays of the sun to fall upon her finely formed head where they light up her Titianesque locks to a radiant splendor. Her youngest child, Amanda, accompanies her, as, since his sixth birthday, her boy, Jack, sells papers on the street, and the four-year-old girl cannot be left all day alone. The situation has begun to affect the pretty little Amanda, and the stifling, sweltering air filled with particles of coarse lint does not seem to agree with her. The mother is thinking of taking a vacation of a week and giving Amanda the benefit of the country breezes. But she only thinks of it. The firm for which she works would have been willing to give her a "lay off" of three months during the summer, but this meant a cessation of income, and so Mrs. Backwater began on wrapper making at \$1.25 a dozen, which was all the house could give out. She needed a rest from the heavy work of spring, but found it imperative to work harder than before and live on less. She lives on stale bread and weak tea; ice, and fruit and rich milk she has decided to cut out from her daily menu. Some of her friends predict that the mother and daughter will hardly pull through until the cooler days and better paying work come.

none will be without any. Now, the great dread of the laborer is that he will get a "vacation," for that means an indefinite "lay off" or an actual discharge. Then they are haunted with an inexorable dread, and there is no rest under the driving anxiety. "Everybody is out of town," means that the children in the factories, the women running sewing machines with tremulous, nervous haste, the girls in the department stores, the shops, the restaurants are being driven harder than ever, for they are paid less and must strive with every nerve to make up for it. The "dull season" to them is a time of nervous haste, over exertion, anxiety and worry. How inexcusable and unreasonable! The race is, however, slowly but surely growing up to the time when all shall see that we are brothers and that none can be happy while some are suffering under injustice. Vacation days must come for all as well as time for healthy, useful labor which is necessary to every living soul as much as recreation and play.

From San Francisco it is reported that the employers' associations are preparing for a life and death struggle with the unions and are collecting a fund that will mount into millions for that purpose. Van Cleave, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, has sanctioned the move. It is planned that if any union calls another strike of any importance it will be the signal for a general lockout. All employes are to be thrown upon the streets and permitted to hunger until they get ready to forswear their allegiance to trade unions. The ring leaders of the laborhaters declare that inside of two months the workers would be starved into submission and be glad to return to their jobs under any conditions.

hensive love than mothers know. She cared for him and kept him clean and well, going out and earning his living besides.

Her trim little figure in its well brushed and neatly mended black gown and small black bonnet is familiar to the habitants of this particular part of the city. No one who has a cent to spare refuses to purchase something of her, for her smiling face and cheery manner brighten one up for the rest of the day if one does not need soap or face cream. She goes out every day for a little while rain or shine, and one never speaks to her that she has not a smile and a good word for the weather, the day or the place, and no complaints of anything. God is good, whatever happens, and it seems that her trust is not in vain, for she is never unhappy and that is more than the rich who are always seeking to be amused can say.

But poor soul, of late her face is looking a little thin and pale, and one feels that she ought to have a rest. She deserves a vacation, a few weeks of leisure and freedom from care with others to wait on her, while she sits in sweet reverie, recovering the vitality she has expended for others. But there is no way open for her to do that under existing conditions. The useful, the ones who need rest and ought to be able to afford it most of all, are seldom so situated that they can take a respite. Those who by the beginning of summer are jaded with balls, parties, operas, functions of all sort, may resort to the ocean or the springs and go through a modified form of all that made them weary in a new way, and imagine they are "recuperating." A little useful, vigorous work would do them more real good than all their expensive and fashionable amusements. Perhaps they will learn this some day and it will become a fad to labor a little. Or wisdom may come to the whole human race and they will know that a judicious mixture of work, amusement, and study would benefit every living individual, and some system whereby everyone shall work some, and no one shall drudge all their lives through, without rest or recreation, will be inaugurated. It will mean a great change, for then labor will be the only guarantee for wealth, and no one will have so much they will not know what to do with it, and

The big box factory on the corner of 9th and C streets has closed down for a couple of months on account of a slack market, and the men are enjoying a vacation. They will spend the good old summer time lying on the free spaces at the park, or lolling on the streets or in the saloons. Mr. Janowicz, who with his wife and baby has been living in a fifth floor room in the Roosevelt Tenement, had departed on a pedestrian trip through the northern part of the state, seeking a good place to invest his—labor power. During his absence, his wife and child will reside with her sister in a picturesque, tumble down cottage in Tin Alley, which before her arrival sheltered a family of six. Mrs. Janowicz is a rather delicate little woman, but she has already secured an office to scrub out daily while her sister's children attend to her baby, and thus she will be enabled to nartly pay for her keep while her husband is away.

Mr. Thomas Martin is still at his post, mending the dilapidated footwear for our society members. He has brought his bench close to the side of his lame son's cot, where he can watch him, answer his faint questions and give him now and then a sip of the weak lemonade for which he cannot afford to buy ice. Little Tommy has been growing weaker and weaker since the warm weather set in. Big Tom intended to take him away for a few days before he got so low, but work had not been plentiful and he had bought the boy a few little luxuries to enable him to bear his weary lot better, and the wee pile of savings has never grown large enough to take them both to where the cool breezes blow and the smell of growing things makes the heart glad. His friends see that little Tom is failing fast and will not last until the cool wave strikes us. but not so big Tom. livery morning he says, "Oh, Tommy, you're lookin' brighter this mornin' and ye'll be settin' up before the day is over," and every evening he says "he'll feel lots better in the morning." So he bends industriously over his work and gives Tommy an encouraging glance now and then, as he lies so patiently on his soiled pillow. Sometimes they both gasp for breath, and reach out toward the open door longingly only to receive the heated, noisome, stan-

gant stuff floating about that barely preserves life at all. And this is how the Martins are “spending the summer.”

And young Tip Walker has accepted a position under the street commissioner. It was necessary for him to accept it as he could not command any of the facilities for getting something for nothing which the more favored members of society possess. He has to handle a pick and hammer, and stand in the glaring, broiling sun on the heated cement streets all day long, and often it seems that he must fall to the ground and rise no more. But he must work or tramp and beg or steal, and he can not make up his mind to do either of these last, and so he works away slowly, enduring it minute by minute, until the day is done and he can crawl away to his stifling boarding place, satisfy his hunger with the tasteless food and lie down to rest as he can. He is not anticipating a pleasant trip to the mountains or to the sea this year.

Several of our acquaintances are “passing the summer months” in the iron foundries and smelters where the roaring, scorching heat makes hades seem a practical fact. They hurry to and fro in the glaring red light, half naked, streams of perspiration streaking through “the coal’s black stain,” looking like demons from another world. They will hurry on like this all the rest of the summer, only now and then will they catch an hour to get a glimpse of cool shade trees, the green grass, the refreshing waters or to catch a breadth of clean, invigorating air. The owners of the mills, so the other society notes have it, have gone up to the cool lakes of Wisconsin to fish and “recuperate” for the busy fall season. The men who do the actual hard work of the mills cannot afford it—but the owners can.

We have nearly forgotten to chronicle the doing of Mrs. Curtis Scott, of Dinner Pail avenue, whose movements are of interest to many in our community. The dear old lady is pursuing her avocation as usual and does not think she will leave town this summer. She declares the city is delightful, especially when she reaches the one lone tree on the avenue, and stops to rest in its shade, and to breathe a whiff of the air which just there does not seem to be

completely dead from the heat and dust of the mills over which it passes.

One can meet the cheerful little old lady, almost any day in the year, carrying a small black bag on her arm or pushing a little go-cart before her, wherein sits her pretty little grandchild of a little less than two years old, and then the small black bag is in the cart at the baby’s feet. Mrs. Scott sells fine soaps and various toilet articles to the ladies—to gentlemen also if they will be pleased to buy. Her husband is a carpenter, but is now quite old and somewhat disabled with rheumatism. Still, now and then, he gets an easy job when he is well enough to do it, and it is on these occasions that the pleasant little woman trundles the baby cart before her, as the child is too young to be left at home alone. When grandpa cannot work, the two can be tolerably well left to wait upon one another.

There is a sad little story connected with the child. The old couple had a daughter, the youngest of three children, one of whom was dead and the other married and gone far away. And this daughter they had loved dearly and tried to give unusual advantages, and once, when the father was able to work they had been quite comfortable, and had been able to do a great deal for their idol. But the girl deceived her fond parents, and ran away with an idle, good-looking, careless but not a badhearted fellow, and for a year they heard nothing of her. But at the end of that time, she came home looking weak and haggard, still refusing to say a word against her husband, only that he was “awful unlucky” and “couldn’t seem to get ahead any.” That her baby might be born under a shelter and receive the care necessary to its existence, she crept back to her mother and begged her forgiveness. This her mother readily granted and the father said nothing against her remaining. But the girl seemed discouraged and sad and no word came from her husband. What she may have suffered she never told, and she lived but a few weeks after her boy was born. And so the kind little old lady took him into her heart of hearts and loved and cared for him as only grandmothers can often with a tenderer and more compre-