TRUE STORIES OF THE NEWS.

XXII.

A YOUNG DESPERADO.

The Career of a Hardened Criminal of Sixteen Years, Now Held in the Tombs for Burglary.

AN EXTRAORDINARY CASE FOR THE STUDENT OF CRIME.

A Runaway at Seven, a Tight-Rope Walker in a Circus, a Cabin Boy, a Sailor Before the Mast, a Keen-Witted, Small-Beer Burglar, Who Has Defied the Police for Six Months.

Young Tommy Cook, the "boy burglar," as the dime novels would characterize him, is now safely locked in behind the walls of the Tombs, and the chances are that he will spend the remainder of his minority in the reformatory. The lesson will be a salutary one, but it is a question if even years of prison discipline can change an individuality warped as his has been from the cradle.

He is no "hero," as several newspapers have termed him, but a harp, agile-witted youth, who has lived, in fact, on his wits all his life. He rather glories in it, too. He is only sixteen years old.

His career is an interesting one to the student of criminal history. His father died when he was nineteen months of age. When he was seven years old he ran away from his mother and joined a circus. Ever since that time he has been thrown upon his own resources. His life has been spent among rough sailors on the seas, and on shore he was a comrade in the low joys of a sailor's holiday. Is it a wonder that he has landed in a jail?

He is a good-looking boy and nimble-witted. Properly trained, he might have made an honest citizen. He is impressionable, receptive, apt. And here comes in the question that interests the student. Apt and impressionable as he is, is he simply he result of his education and environment, or is there an evil fibre in the boy that must needs grow to its fulfilment? But here is his story as carefully gathered yesterday by the writer of the "True Stories of the News:"

According to his own statement, he was born in Wilmington, N. C., Feb. 20, 1875. So he yet lacks something of sixteen years. His father was a shoemaker and died when he was a baby. He lived with his widowed mother till he had arrived at the mature age of seven and then ran away.

A SEVEN-YEAR-OLD RUNAWAY.

He found himself in Augusta, Ga. How he got there he hardly remembers now. He has seen and done so much in the time that has passed since then that it seems years and years ago to him. Yet it was only in 1882. The circus was managed by John B. Doris, and he travelled with it to the Pacific coast and back.

He was catlike on his feet and he took a fancy to tight-rope walking. He would become a proficient in that. That was a harmless ambition in itself. But look to what it leads! He became a child-expert at the business. That was the second step in his career.

He became identified with a set of people who lived a loose, ill-conditioned kind of life, and he tried to be as big a man as any of them. He could spit out oaths and smokeland take his beer like a major. Some one flogged him one day, and then he deserted. He was asserting himself.

He then joined another circus, run by Lord de Haven. He travelled about with it for a time, perfecting himself in tripping over a tight rope. He was perfecting himself in many another art also that it would have been better had he never learned.

Next he went over to a show conducted by a man named McFlynn. He had got so by this time that he could give open-air performances and throw in a song-and-dance act to boot. And side by side with all this he was keeping pace with his other education—the tutelage of a criminal.

HE LEAVES THE CIRCUS FOR THE SEA.

He had seen something of the world and he wanted to see more. He caught the fever that all boys of his age have who have fed on dime-novel literature. He was restless and would go to sea. That's where he would find adventure.

Some strolling player had told him of the fun you could have in the ports of the Levant. He didn't know just where the Levant was, but it was off across the water somewhere. He would set sail for those fairy-lands.

He was in Charleston, S. C. There was a vessel trimmed for a voyage and he shipped on board. The bark was named the Calliope, and she was bound for Greenock, Scotland. He was a cabin boy. He knew some bad habits before. He learned more aboard ship. What the mountebanks, jumpers, circus-riders and camp followers of circuses had neglected to teach him the sailors taught him. He was progressing rapidly.

He got to Greenock, and he set foot for the first time on European ground. He wasn't such a very bad boy then. He was still very young, but he had a choice vocabulary of sailors' oaths, he could smoke with any of them and he was running at a Maud S. pace on the road to make him bad. From Greenock he worked his passage on a vessel bound for Norway, and then he came back to Scotland once again.

HE VOYAGES TO THE ORIENT.

Then, he says, he took a voyage to Hong Kong and Calcutta. He shipped this time as an ordinary seaman. He was quick as a cat in the rigging. He had served an apprenticeship on the tight-rope. The Zoll brought him back, to Glasgow, and thence he set out on a new cruise in the ship Margaret, bound for Calcutta. He changed vessels a fourth time, this time shipping on the brigantine Rising Sun, and that was the way he came to his native country once more. That was last July, and it was the month in which he came to New York.

When he landed here he first found work at Hall's stables, No. 96 James street. His restless circus and sea-faring mode of life had unfitted him for any steady humdrum pursuits. He remained at the stables only a short time. Then he secured employment with the Oil Seed Press Company, at Nos. 27 and 29 Water street. His education had been up to this time in good part theoretical. He was now ready to put some of his teachings to practice.

He says that he found it slow work pegging away every day at routine duty and money coming in at the end of the week only, and that small money. He began to look around for an easier method, and one that had more "go" about it. We have said that he was nimble-witted. He began to use his wits.

HIS FIRST THEFT.

He had noticed that in a certain drawer in the office there was always kept some loose coin. Why shouldn't he put his hands on that? There were a lot of ways to spend it about Cherry Hill and it would eke out his little stipend. So one Saturday evening, instead of going away as he pretended to do, he hid himself in the building and waited till the place was locked up for the night.

He tackled the drawer. He was successful. He broke it open easily. He found $6 there. That was far easier than working a whole week for less than that sum. He had plodded away for forty days at Hall's, and the proceeds were infinitely less in proportion. Why shouldn't he try the thing again? He would do so. And he would buy a jimmy; that would make matters even simpler.

He went out, closed the doors behind him and spent the money. He purchased the jimmy and a cold chisel. His education was finished. He was a thief.

HE BECOMES A SMALL-BEER-BURGLAR.

He waited till there was another convenient opportunity, and he secreted himself again in the same way. Again success and again another haul. He got, he says, about $12 the second time. Why, really, the business was so simple that it was wonderful the other boys didn't try it. He would go tell "Tony" and Benny Wiener. Tony Cameraro and Benny Wiener were his boon companions.

He took his $12 and spent the most of it in the purchase of a pair of tights and some other actors' toggery. Then he went to his room and pranced about in them. He was only a boy yet, you must remember.

Then he put on the tights, rigged a taut rope and began practising on it again. He had not forgotten the art. He had found out, though, the way to get rich without working. Now he would have more sport in life!

He had the audacity, too, so he says, to tell his employer that somebody had been prowling about the building on Saturday night—the evening of the first theft. The second time they suspected him.

But nothing could be proved against the young Jack Sheppard, so they let him go. But he didn't care. He had a jimmy and a cold chisel, and with them he could make more money in a single night than he could by slaving with the printers for a week.

HE OPERATED ALONE.

And then he began his small-beer depredations, which he kept up successfully for six months. He boasts that he made between $500 and $600 by his operations. And, young as he was, he did it alone.

"They jugged Tony de Greek and Benny Wiener," he said to a WORLD reporter yesterday, "but they ain't in it at all. Tony was too clumsy. He couldn't do anything. I used to work de racket all alone."

Young Cook is almost a handsome fellow. He has a shock of fair hair that is nearly golden, and it grows luxuriantly about his head. He has, too, a fair skin and remarkably fine blue eyes that are dull when in repose, but they expand and grow bright in talking.

He is well built and sturdy. If it were not for a suspicion of heaviness about the chin he would pass for a frank, honest school-boy. If he were neatly dressed and cared for he would deceive anybody, for it is the slovenliness of his person and his unkempt hair alone that mark him.

HE DOES NOT FEAR THE POLICE.

He does not seem to have any idea of the word fear, nor any apprehension of the consequences of his acts. He displays a curious smile when speaking of the police, as if they were a poor lot anyway. Alone he worked against them for half a year.

He sat in the corridor of the Tombs Prison yesterday and chatted with THE WORLD reporter as unconcernedly about himself and his prospects as if he were talking of the weather. He held in his fingers the stump of a cheap cigarette. There was no devil-may-care air about him, but rather an atmosphere of indifference. A jailer asked him how he liked the idea of going up the river.

He answered with the utmost nonchalance, "Oh, I don't believe I shall go up. I think I shall get out all right."

His manner of speech is odd. It is a mixture of the Bowery dialect and the Southern drawl.

THE YOUNG THIEF TELLS HIS OWN STORY.

And in this odd dialect he told THE WORLD man the following story:

"I had to earn money some way, and so I took to stealing. I didn't run up against any stumps and I kept on. I used to try and crack some place every night. I generally hid myself in some house when the clerks were shutting up, and when everything was still I began to look about to see what was worth jumping on. Sometimes I entered the same place twice.

"When I first came to New York I lived in Concord street, Brooklyn. There was a Southern family there and I boarded with them. You know I am from the South. Oh, yes, when I lived with them I used to go out nights and put my hands on whatever I could. I was living there when I began. Then I came over to New York to live. I have lived in James street and Cherry street and Water street. When I was arrested I was living with a friend at No. 16½ Hamilton street.

HE MAKES A HAUL IN BROOKLYN.

"I got along well enough. I used to get something every night. It was generally money. Once in Brooklyn I broke into a shop and got a diamond ring and almost $100. I took the ring and put it in hock immediately. I got $17 for it. Then I sold the ticket for $3.50. The money I spent in drink? No. I don't drink much. But I had a good time.

"'What did I generally steal?' Oh, anything that I thought would bring in money. I once got hold of some gold-rimmed spectacles, and I used to take plain gold rings when I found them. I took them to the pawnbroker's and got money on them. I bought a revolver with some money I got in this way. With some more of it I bought burglars' tools. I used to get most of my meals down at Tony Peembro's restaurant, No. 6 James slip. That's where the coppers 'pulled me in' last Thursday evening.

THE ROBBERY AT DAVIDSON'S.

"But let me tell you about the robbery at Davidson's. I think the number is 14 James slip. I went into so many places I can't remember them all exactly. I tried to crack the safe there. It was my first job. I did break into one. But I didn't find anything. Then I tried another. There was a big black cat that followed me round and kept rubbing up against me. It bothered me. I heard a noise and I took out my revolver and fired at her. Then I scooted. I climbed up through a skylight and intended to steal out into the street through another shop. I thought the sound of the shot would arouse the copper on the beat.

"But I listened awhile and heard nothing. I went back and began on the safe again, when I heard the police this time sure enough. I climbed up on the top of the building, but I was scared to go about on the roof for fear they would spot me. I heard them groping around and I could see a lantern. I heard them coming up and I hid behind a wheel. I kept very low and after a half hour or so everything was quiet. Then I got out of the place—it must have been about 1 o'clock—and slipped out.

HE SALUTES THE POLICEMAN.

"I met the copper on beat and said, 'How are you' to him. He didn't know I was de feller," said young Mr. Cook scornfully.

"Another time an officer got on to the fact that something was wrong in a shop at another number in James slip. It was me that was wrong. He came into the store and began snooping around. He looked out in the back yard and I saw him. I got behind a fence and kept very silent. Then he went away. I thought he was going out to get help and so remained steady a long time. Pretty soon he came back with another 'cop' and they began to hunt in the yard. When they were gone back into the shop I jumped up on the fence, walked along it and jumped into another back yard. Then I went into an opposite house, ran up to the roof and got off in that way."

SCARED BY SKELETONS.

"'At No. 141 Maiden Lane?'" he echoed. "Oh, I remember that very well. I saw a case of skeletons on the third floor and I threw my hammer at them. It made a fearful noise. The glass in the cases created a fearful racket. I thought I would have an easy time there, for I was locked in and knew the copper would never find me. But I got rattled somehow. But when I saw those things I didn't care to go any further, and I slid down a fire-escape. I had been there before and hauled over $35. The second time I only carried away a lantern."

All this is only a reduced statement of the long story that the young thief told the writer. Perhaps he embroidered a good deal of the lace of his tale. Perhaps, sometimes, it was fashioned out of pure lies. But it was manufactured out of truth in a general way, and the fact is that for several months there has been going on below City Hall square a systematized series of robberies that the police could not fathom by fair means nor foul.

This fair-haired, blue-eyed youth was the culprit, and he has been carrying on his petty thefts unaided. He admitted nonchalantly yesterday that it was to his unaided, single-handed labors that he attributed his success.

HE ESCAPED THE POLICE CORDON.

And the truth is that, unaided and single-handed, he has circumvented the detectives ever since July. On two occasions police were ordered out and a block of buildings was surrounded to cut off the escape of the thief, who was believed to be shut up somewhere in the block. The thief was young Cook, but he got away.

And in talking of his escapades he remarked yesterday to the writer: "When I was up in the court-room one of the men whose safes I had blown said to me: 'Young fellow, if you will let me know when you will call again I will leave the doors open.'

"And another said: 'I will give you all there is in my safe; but don't, for heaven's sake, try to burst it open.'"

And then he added, with a strange laugh: "I picked that safe"—referring to the latter—"and I guess I spoiled it. But I didn't get anything. I was scared away."

Cook was brought before Justice White Saturday and was remanded for examination. He has a mother in Augusta, Ga., and a brother, who is a railroad conductor, at Charleston, S. C. Perhaps they do not know of his predicament; perhaps they do not care. But in any event here is this boy on the hands of the city, held in $1,000 bonds to await examination.

As THE WORLD man left him yesterday his remark was: "I have jumped out of higher windows than these before."

He was looking at a prison aperture twelve feet above his head and was thinking of his numerous escapes from the police.

IS HE NATURALLY BAD?

And this young burglar—as cool as Jimmy Hope and as plucky and blasé as any "old-time operator" on Hounslow Heath—is only sixteen years of age.

Is he the result of his environment or is he inherently bad?

He does not seem to know the difference between good and evil.

His youth and his engaging manner might excite your sympathies. But does he deserve them?

Only sixteen, to be sure, but even at that age a reckless adventurer and a hardened criminal, old in iniquity before his years.

One thing at least is clear to the student of crime. His associations from seven years on, at the formation period of a boy's character, were wholly bad. What they were before that is not known. That is an important missing link, for the formation of character begins at the cradle.

This youngster is only one of many such. There are thousands of boys in this town at the parting of the ways to criminality or decent manhood.

This case is worthy of your attention, Messrs. Philosopher, Clergyman and Social Scientist. It is accentuated but typical.

Can you find no potent lymph for this disease of crime?