

THE DAYS OF THE SWAGGER

THE first edition of Mrs. Wilson's autobiography, "My First Eighty Years," was sold out shortly after publication a few months ago. Several passages were deleted from the manuscript to keep the book to a suitable length. This article is one of them, and others will be printed later.

OF all the institutions that have been handed down to us from the past there is none so indefensible, and even absurd, as that of the swagger—men with all their worldly goods wrapped in a blue blanket strapped on their backs, "going to and fro on the earth and walking up and down in it," looking for work. Yet this custom was an integral part of country life as far back as I can remember. In the Mackenzie Country we called them "sundowners" from their habit of appearing at the homestead too late for work and just in time for the evening meal. These were often Australians, relics of the gold-mining days, usually old derelicts who had no home, no money, no purpose in life. A more vigorous type later used to tramp the roads.

One would have supposed that this source of itinerant labour would have been welcomed and appreciated by the farmer. On the contrary, they were distinctly hostile to the swagger. "Looking for work and praying the Lord they won't find it," was the common jibe and, undoubtedly, it was true of a great many of them. These were professional wanderers, men who loved the open and free life, sleeping in hedges, haystacks, or in old deserted houses. (Yes, there were such things when timber was cheap.) They, of course, took seasonal work and odd jobs; for the rest they "lived off the land"; that is to say, they

cadged meals from homes along their route. But by no means all of them were the loafers and spongers the settlers dubbed them, as I have proved for myself. It must be remembered that there was no other recognised way by which a man wanting work could obtain it. I have heard a wife say, "My husband's on the road. He knocked about town for five weeks and got nothing, so I said, 'That's enough, now. You take your swag and go and look for work.'" Naturally, as often as not he walked past the farms where labour was needed; and yet everyone seemed to acquiesce in this foolish system.

I remember that my husband did once suggest that the Farmers' Union should set up bureaux at the post offices and stores of small townships, but before the scheme was really considered the 1914 war came and that considerably thinned the roads.

THOUGH much abuse was hurled at the tramps and stories told to the effect that if you asked them to cut a bit of wood they would deliberately break your axe handle, yet they were seldom refused food. There was cer-



by HELEN WILSON

tainly a case reported in the papers of a swagger who had asked for food at a farm house late in the afternoon. He was refused and found dead the next morning at the refuser's gate. This shocked the conscience of the farmers and many of them boasted that no man or beast ever left his gates hungry.

I had more than my share of these hikers, especially at one time when our home stood at the end of a long road just where it turned into the township of Levin. The town was not visible from the road before turning the corner, the prospect was an eternity of farm lands, so naturally the men turned in to get nourishment where they could. They

came in such numbers that I have often been obliged to make scones on Sunday afternoon because the travellers had emptied my bread tin.

I understand that at a later date they came demanding food, but then (in the early years of the century), they always began by asking for work. Our home then was not a farm but a house with a few acres attached, so no work save gardening could be offered. There were, however, at the front gate two large clumps of pampas grass which I disliked. When a man was fed, I used to take him to look at the pampas and suggest that he took them out. Invariably he found that he had an appointment in the town, was hoping for a job at the sawmill, or was meeting a man along the road and would come back tomorrow morning. The story was so regular I hardly listened. One day came a very little man with very short legs, a very long beard and a cheerful, pock-marked face. I went through the usual routine—food and the pampas. He told the usual tale and quite in the right order said he would come back in the morning. I was awakened next day with a pleasant smell of burning vegetation. "Look," I cried to my husband, "the pampas have gone," and true enough, a fire was crackling on the road and the little man was wheeling home the barrow full of the tools he had used, and well raked earth had taken the place of the pampas.

After breakfast he said his name was "Ed'ed, usually called 'Ted,'" and that he had a job as cook to a draining gang; but because of the bad weather the work had to be stopped for a few weeks. He was just wanting a bit of work so that he would not spend his money. He had been, he said, a steward on a liner, "a real first-class liner where everything had to be done proper and right up to the knocker, if you understand m'meaning. That's what makes me so natty. I'm real natty in the house." He was indeed. I had no maid at the time so he took charge of the kitchen and no woman could scrub, shine and polish as he could. The children coming home for the holidays christened him "the Teddy bear," and they immediately fell for him. The stove was polished like a shrine, the lino was dangerous, and brass, copper and silver twinkled like the sun. He dug out old brass candlesticks from stowed away places, shone them, trimmed them with pink paper frills and stood them as ornaments on the kitchen mantelpiece. Knives that used then to be cleaned on gritty boards were his delight. He could cook, too—grills, pancakes, fritters, scones, omelettes, and pikelets were all within his power. When he had finished in the house he would find something to do in the garden.

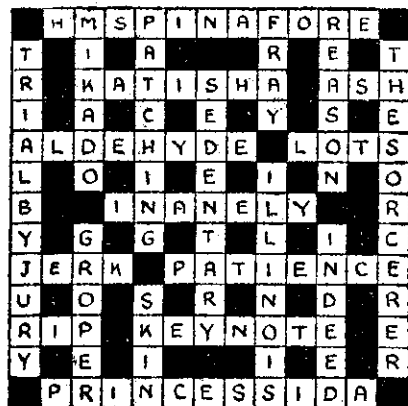
He told us that the big liners had no place for the stewards to eat and nowhere provided for them to sleep. "Do? Oh, you didn't need for food when you'd get plenty off the plates before you took'm in and when you was takin'm out." You could find a good enough place to sleep in a liner when you could find the time to do it. "The gentlemen," he said, "would be calling for drinks and what-not all the early part of the night, and you could get a nap as soon as they went off to their cabins, then there was plenty of places to sleep."

So far from feeling these things a hardship he was sure that the liner was the highlight of his life, and if only he hadn't got smallpox in Hong Kong and

(continued on next page)

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

(Solution to No. 547)



Clues Across

1. Part of a zinc helmet.
3. 16 across pot well mixed gives you this part.
8. Rubs clean, or washes out.
9. Nomads offer a kind of plum.
11. Coward.
13. Far from the mark.
15. Put off until tomorrow what should be done today.

Clues Down

1. You'll find them on monuments.
2. Often found with Bill?
4. Inverted part.
5. Change into beast—this is pig-headed.
6. If in these, you are behind-hand.

7. Find Ben, Elsie (anag.).

10. Die sane (anag.).

12. This naturally contains cocoa.

14. Couplet.

18. Run before the wind.

21. Alternative to pole or perch.

No. 548 (Constructed by R.W.C.)

