

# Middle-Class Misery

By JOHN PAUL JONES

**T**HE plight of the farmer, the wage-earner and the lower paid white-collar worker is pretty well known. We may not be able to do much about it, but it is generally recognized that these are the greatest sufferers from the depression. Yet there is another group which is tragically affected. It is made up of those who belong to the upper fringe of the middle class, especially those in the everyday business world. This is the group of the fairly well-to-do who have been accustomed to think of life more or less in terms of comforts and advantages which are bought with money. They are the executives, technical experts, efficiency men, promoters, lawyers, advertisers, managers and the like. Economic chaos soon sweeps them to the border-line and before long pushes them over. The kind of readjustment which they are called upon to make is heroic. They undergo months of torture before they darken the door of a relief agency.

It is not difficult, however, to discover from physicians, clergymen, social and relief workers plenty of evidence of their tragic condition. Let us look at several typical cases.

The first concerns a man who for twelve years had been a factory superintendent. Three years ago a business merger was consummated that promised to result in advantage to everybody. But what happened in 1930 and 1931 upset all calculations. It was soon evident that the personnel in the enlarged factory must be cut down. The superintendent was let out. It was an incredible experience, but it had to be endured. Fortunately or unfortunately, as the future will tell, he owned his own home and had some money invested. An immediate adjustment was made. The children were taken out of private school and put into the public school. Help in the house was dispensed with. An automobile went to the second-hand dealer. Fortified by years of experience and many personal friendships, the man set out to seek a new job. That was a year ago. He is still looking. His faith in life and people wavers.

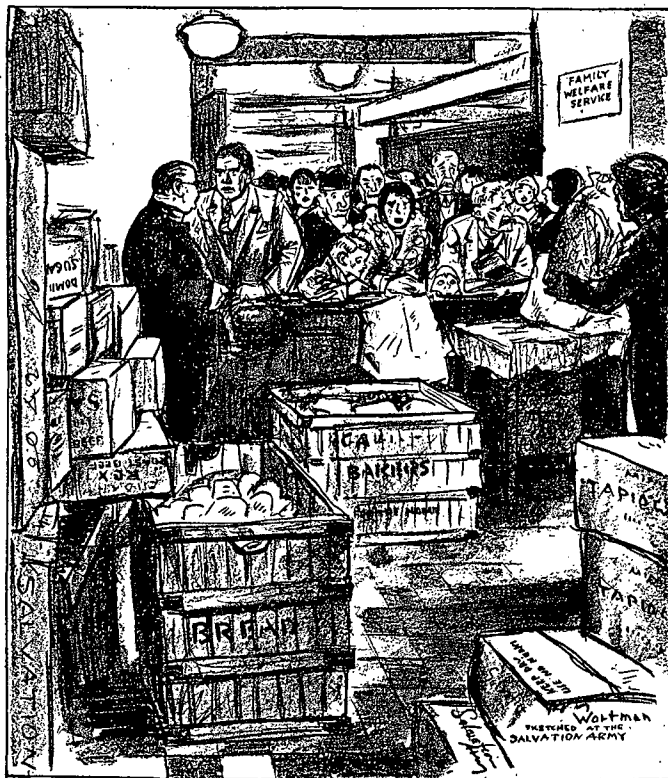
The second case involves an electrical engineer who, more than a year ago, received his last pay-check. He began immediately seeking another job within his profession. He quickly discovered that he was part of a large company of electrical men who were no

longer needed. He made an immediate adjustment. He moved his family to a comfortable summer home belonging to relatives near a village in the country. That was in the spring. He continued diligently to search for work. The summer home became an autumn home. It turned out also to be a winter home. The children had a taste of the rural school. The wife, separated from her friends and without her accustomed comforts and conveniences, faced the inevitable, but without much happiness. She at first declared she would not stay all winter, and one wonders what may happen with a second and third winter in prospect. A sort of bewildered resentment, on her part, makes for uneasiness in the home. Her husband made use of his practical ingenuity and was soon the handy-man of the village in matters of plumbing, heating and general odd jobs requiring more than unskilled attention. As yet there is no evidence that he will have any other employment.

A couple of years ago, a man in his fifties was offered a fine increase in salary in a line of work somewhat different from his accustomed business. He declined the offer. He said, "I have been with Company A for twenty years. I have put in my best efforts with them here at home and even established their business abroad. I am too old to change. I am with Company A for life." But in these two years Company A has had to merge with a rival company and even that has not restored economic health. One day the man who thought he was fixed

for life went out of the office with a dismissal paper in his hand. Even after several weeks, he could hardly grasp what had happened. Yet he is aware that his experience and associations are such that he ought to land a job if anybody can. He says that he does not worry, but confesses to a suppressed uneasiness lest his business career may be over. Standpat Republican all his days, he now says he doesn't blame people for turning radical.

College people of the better type are also involved. There are living today, with their three children, the youngest a baby, in a most unattractive apartment surrounded by uncongenial people, a man and his wife, both graduates of prominent colleges. Not so many months ago they lived in an almost pretentious suburban home. The husband was a supervisor for an investment house. There is no need to explain the loss of his job



Sketched at the Salvation Army by  
Wortman of the New York World-Telegram

*"I've never had to ask for food before; I don't quite know how to begin"*

and on top of that, considerable money was lost in an out-and-out swindle. Sensing the situation at once, they sold much of their furniture and established themselves in their present quarters. They borrowed money from the husband's mother and later from the wife's sister. The search for a job was persistent and courageous. None was found. Resources of relatives and friends exhausted, the man and his wife came to a relief bureau with one simple question, "What are we to do?"

They had at that time actually no food in the house. A social worker was sent at once with some provisions. She realized immediately that she was dealing with sensitive and refined people. The situation was desperate, but their spirits were not yet broken. The wife and mother, accustomed to maid-service all her life, did not know how to plan; how to get the most from grocery money; not even how to use electric lights with economy. She responded splendidly, however, to all suggestions from the relief worker and adjusted herself to the situation so well that an extra allowance of money and milk was granted by the relief station. The husband, searching for any kind of work, finally came in late one night, his face flushed and excited. He had landed a block-aid job at \$24 a week. He explained in a burst of enthusiasm, "We are going to put this over 100 per cent."

The case of a ship broker is typical of another group of sufferers. This man has been in business for himself, buying small ships, reconditioning and selling them. He got caught with too many boats on his hands but was shrewd enough to get rid of some at a small loss. One contract looked especially promising. He sold a large boat under agreement to put it in first-class condition. He invested all of the money he had left in this one affair and borrowed in addition for the repair work. Then the prospective buyer met reverses and could not take the boat. The ship broker found himself unable to sell or to borrow more money. He couldn't carry on his business; he couldn't get funds to run his home. All of his immediate friends had been unable to loan him enough to meet personal requirements. He has sold every loose article that was saleable and appealed to a relief agency for the payment of rent, light bills and money for food. The family jewelry, including a diamond engagement ring, are in pawn. When he will get a "break" nobody knows. His inferiority complex grows more and more noticeable.

**S**TILL another case is cited because it represents a group who appear to be incapable of making any adjustment to their changed status. This concerns a husband, wife and seventeen-year-old boy who have always had a good many of the luxuries of life. The husband held a managerial position in a plumbing establishment. He lost his job. About the same time, the boy developed a serious bone disease requiring an operation and a long period of convalescence. Without the resources to maintain their somewhat pretentious home, they nevertheless refused to leave it. A brother came to the rescue, and, for a time, paid the rent. The sister of the wife also has resources and has helped. Hospital bills were also paid by these relatives. The husband, unable to find work and reduced to desperate circumstances, finally had to appeal to a relief agency.

He took a three-dollar-a-day job, but soon gave it up with the excuse that he had to take care of the boy at home. The wife is continually calling the relief agency in utter bewilderment. She thinks it is terrible that someone doesn't find a "position" for her husband—she refuses to consider a "job." When the relief worker over the telephone said she had a five-dollar-a-day job the wife replied, "There is no use for my

husband to take that kind of a job; why our doctor costs five dollars a day." They refuse free medical services. The wife calls up the relief agency frequently and weeps over the phone. Canned vegetables sent in were rejected at first with contempt. Their invalid boy simply could not eat such things. The husband is more sensible, but the wife dominates the situation. She spends her time in bewildered despair, insisting that nobody cares. The relief agency struggles along as best it can. What the future holds, nobody can predict.

Perhaps a list of typical cases would not be complete without mention of an insurance broker who is pretty sure to face arrest for embezzlement of funds. Unable to secure enough out of his business to live on, he has used money paid in for insurance, which should have been forwarded at once to the home office. Affairs at home were so desperate and the promise of certain unfinished business ventures so encouraging, at least to his own mind, that he used this money against his better judgment. The promises have not materialized and in trying to work out of this situation he has, as usual, made matters more difficult. Now, only a very generous friend, unlikely to be found, can save him from an ultimate prison term.

**L**AYING aside for the moment the matter of the mental and emotional reaction of these formerly well-to-do, let us ask, What does the future hold for them? Their incomes have been so drastically cut that they are no longer significant, or they have been lost altogether. What can they do by way of recovering their former status? Better to face the truth with them than offer any sort of pollyanna doctrine.

The first element of the truth which they have to face is indeed bitter. Many of them are never going back into the business or profession from which they have been removed. At least for another generation, if not permanently, the business world is going to do without them. Mergers, bankruptcies and bank failures, the concentration of business together with the lessened business activity, will leave multitudes of professional men permanently without employment. Even if employment in their lines increases, thousands of young men in training will have the advantage when the re-assignment comes. One bit of irony in the whole situation has been that some of the most efficient of these men have so organized business and demonstrated the possibility of doubling up that they have worked themselves and their fellows out of jobs.

Where, then, shall these people turn for a livelihood? Many will seek positions on lower business levels. This, however, will prove no solution, for the lower levels of employment are already crowded. A great number will be forced to depend upon friends and relatives for temporary support. This, of course, again is no solution, except that in a good many cases it will result in children permanently supporting their parents.

Not a few will find their way into some phase of selling. Certain professional people have always resorted to this in an emergency. For example, the minister out of a job proverbially turns to life insurance. With enough work and persistence, selling usually brings some reward, though the price paid may be terrific. Anyone who rings enough doorbells with any sort of useful commodity will secure some sort of return. The man cited in my first case is selling supplies required in everyday usage by certain building-trades workers. He makes acquaintances and shows his samples during the day and uses the telephone at night. "I looked for over half an hour for a telephone booth with a seat in it," he said to me. "Then I

made twenty calls, and I got some orders too." Quite likely in the immediate future a greater variety of commodities will be sold at the door. This is robbing the storekeeper of his legitimate business, but it is a process of bringing about a re-distribution of income.

Not everyone who tries will succeed at the selling game. What else is left? One might as well admit there is a good deal of illegitimate or outlawed business which presents an alluring temptation. There are rackets of all kinds, and some of my friends tell me that I would be surprised to know the people who are bootlegging. It is not difficult, however, to understand people stooping to this sort of thing when they come to feel that they have been unjustly used. In fact, some unemployed people today bitterly reflect that their honesty has been their undoing. A buyer who recently lost out in a merger, grimly remarked that he might have lined his pockets so that he would not have needed another job.

As far as I can see there is only one other possibility for this class of business people whose services are no longer required. They may be able to invent, or to create, some new form of service to society, and thus find new employment. Necessity is the mother of invention, and possibly something may be born out of our desperation. I happen to know of a widow whose supposedly sound investments failed her while her three children were still in college. She remembered that as a girl she was an expert with a needle and loved it. Very much on the quiet, she has been able to gather a large group of girls from her immediate neighborhood into her home where she teaches them fine sewing. The remuneration she gets from this is not large but it helps.

I have been told also of the ingenuity of another woman, whose husband's business, badly shaken for years, collapsed in the present muddle. They now live in a modest home and the maids are gone. The husband is one of those who probably cannot again find a place in a productive enterprise, but she has taught the community how to use a woman's exchange, both for convenience and profit—a new form of service to her community. She gains her recompense as its manager.

I know also of two men who have set up a different kind of investment agency. They offer to people on a voluntary basis without any definite charge, expert advice on the present rating and probable future of securities. People may take the information or leave it and they may or may not pay for it.

ONE by-product of the situation may be significant. Some of the people who have turned their backs on the country for the "big city" are coming home. The village, and the country town—even the farm, stand in better favor just now. There were other factors involved in the steady drift to the city, but the promise of comfort and money were to the front. But without employment the city dweller's comfort is gone and he may long for the simpler life of his childhood where the garden and cow and homespun ways could tide one over in an emergency.

Recently, I paid a brief visit to the farm and village where I was reared out on the open acres of the Middlewest. One morning I discovered the townsmen in groups here and there, discussing what appeared to be a major event. The details were not altogether clear, but one of "the boys" had come home. He had been away for several years in one of our great cities. He had found his stride. He had been living affluently. Then his job vanished. He couldn't get another. An humble cottage at the edge of town was to house a new family. As I went about the two or three towns of my acquaintance near

the old home where my parents still live, I was surprised. Not a few of the people who had gone out to the cities and had been in good positions, were back home. And they were still coming. While agriculture is still a sick industry, it must remain forever essential. Moreover, the automobile, good roads and better school systems are only some of the things which have reduced the disadvantages of rural life. May there not be a reversal of the population drift?

Of course, many are returning home because they cannot help it and must throw themselves on the mercy of relatives and friends. They are marking time until they can go back. But, some are thinking seriously on the relative merits of our complex civilization as contrasted with the ways of yesterday. Some are going to experiment with the simple life. The difficulty, of course, is that not many are trained in the high art of simple living.

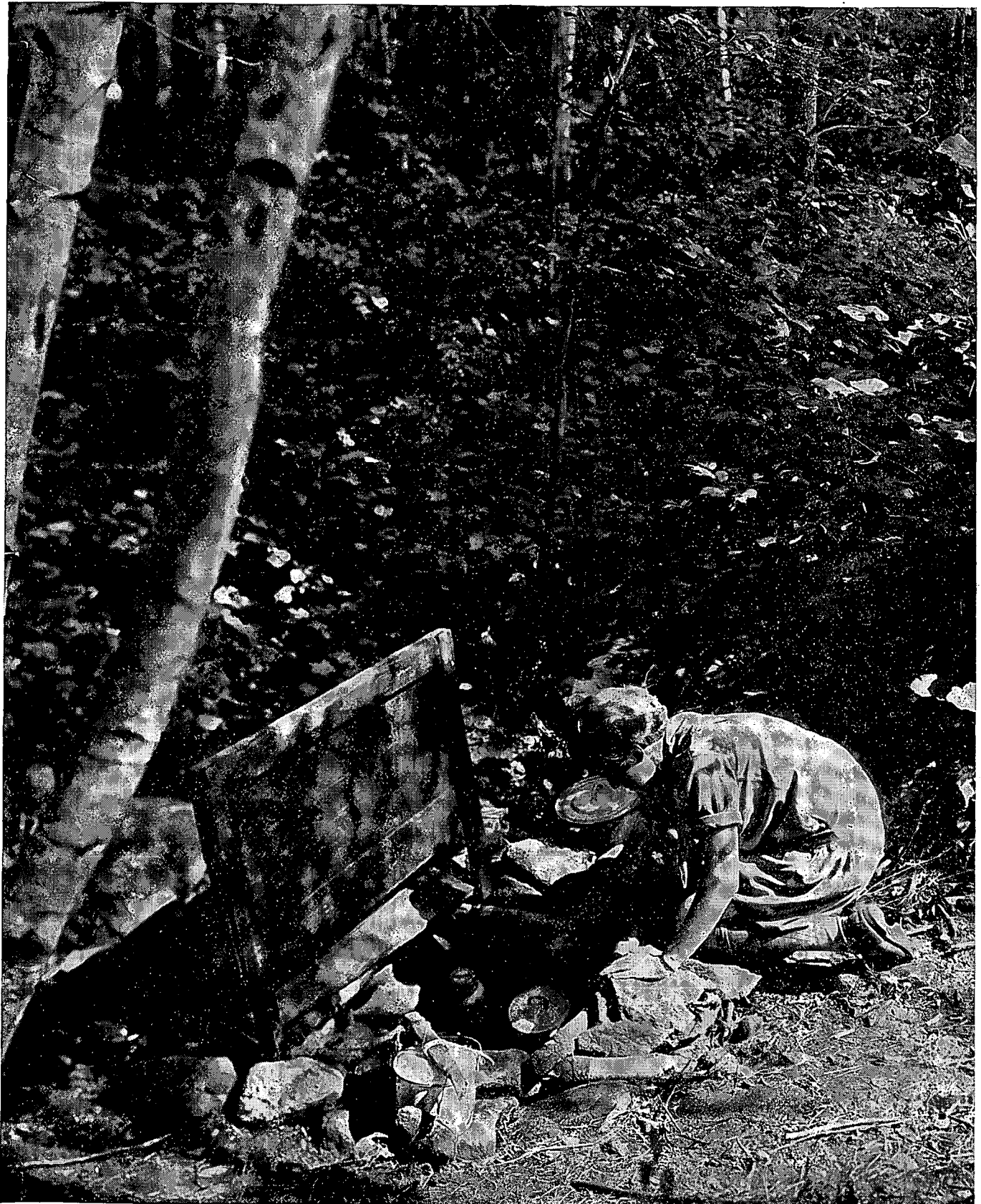
VIEWED even from the most hopeful angle, the plight of the formerly well-to-do unemployed is tragic beyond description. Vast multitudes of them have lost financial security forever. In bewilderment and bitterness they will seek a sign of hope and no sign will be given. Some will give up and end it all, but a great majority will go on living some kind of broken and frustrated lives.

This is tragedy enough, but it is not the worst. More serious yet is the silent but ominous comment upon our civilization implicit in such a state of affairs. America, the land of promise, has betrayed many of its most trustful and believing sons and daughters. From the beginning, it has taught its children to believe in the sure rewards of industry and thrift. It has implied by its every emphasis that respectability and security are the fruits of education and vocational training when honestly applied. It has boasted of a democracy where the good life is meant for all. It has set a high premium upon diligence in productive endeavor. Today, its promises have gone to the four winds. Millions find their services unwanted and the materials of life, which their efforts have produced, under lock for which they have no key. They feel that some kind of monstrous trick has been played upon them. Incredible as it may seem, after wearisome and painful rehearsals, the show has been cancelled so far as they are concerned. The bright dream of youth has turned into a nightmare.

But in a more serious sense than this, their civilization has failed them. It has utterly unfitted them to face up to life all the way round. It has failed to equip them with a culture rooted in things which cannot be shaken. It leaves them to suffer in bewilderment or bitterness because they do not know what to do with adversity or defeat. Their civilization has debauched them with a superficial culture based upon a philosophy that the good life depends pretty much upon an abundance of comforts and possessions. It has left fundamental resources of personality undeveloped, almost forgotten.

There has always been a certain fascination for me in the better English and French novels of the last century. In them one discovers certain admirable characters who possess spirits that are serene and self-reliant in the best sense of the word. They have achieved a discipline, or culture, through which the resources of personality are made available. In sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want they find life immensely worth living. The fireside and the countryside, books, friends, conversation, ideas and ideals, furnish the stuff of their daily bread. American culture is not yet conducive to that sort of thing. Prosperity brings scant happiness; without prosperity misery is our portion.





Courtesy Girl Scouts, Inc.

## CACHE AND CARRY