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Drift.

I met Will Semple first in a London doss-house, on his eternal pursuit of the phantom, work. He would have been embarrassed if success came to him, for he was long past the stage when work seems a desirable thing. But the fiction that he was really in search of a living gave him an object in life—and the most aimless man likes that illusion. It created a grievance, too, for there must be something wrong with England, as he said nightly, when there was no job for him. He was ready to talk endlessly, and in his muddled way had theories about things. So it happened that I got to know a good deal about Will and how he became unemployable, or had "hard luck," as he put it.

He was the son of a waterside laborer in South London, a shiftless kind of man, who found a wife and five children too great a burden, and quietly went off one day to start life with a clean sheet. Mrs. Semple bore the loss with great cheerfulness and managed to support the family that was left, even though she had now no husband to keep as well. She consoled herself with port wine,—as did the other ladies of Dwyer's Rest, where she lived. It was port that had never seen Portugal, but all agreed that it was a lady-like drink. Will tumbled up somehow. He used to crane out of the window and look over the dim monotony of London roofs. But what fascinated him was the tin-factory below the window. An endless stream of tins seemed to proceed from the building, sliding smoothly down a canvas shoot to the ground, where men piled them on a lorry. Then they were drawn out into the streets and vanished. This drift of tins, coming from the inexhaustible recesses of the factory and going he knew not where, imprinted itself deep on his imagination. And then he was going down the common stair one day, but couldn't for fat old Mother Slape's coffin had got stuck at a corner. Where was she going out of his sight? His mother's answer was too brief and too theological to be of help. So he grew up with a puzzle about all these things and people that drifted into sight and out again. The streets, too, seemed to stretch endlessly and the traffic along them made a sort of maze that bewildered the boy. But the Board school put such silly notions out of his head. He learned a little discipline with others, and how to be respectful to masters and to answer back at any one else, till his fourteenth birthday, when he promptly left, and got a job as van-boy at seven shillings a week. It was a jolly life dangling legs over the tail-board of the van, and chaffing policemen about the size of their feet, as Tom, the driver, pulled up for a drink. But there was nothing much to think about save the receding vistas of the streets—and that was always the same. So he continued for four years, changing his work when the whim took him, and