

LIFE ON RELIEF

ANONYMOUS

Nor many months ago I got a job as a New York City relief investigator at \$27.50 per week. These jobs are supposed to be hard to procure, but mine was not, for some reason which I do not yet comprehend. I wrote a letter to a personnel manager; I received an answer; I was interviewed, mildly; I made out an application blank; and, one morning about a month after I started the ball rolling, I reported to the transformed business loft where I and those who were entering the service with me were to receive a two-weeks course in the administration of home relief. I had understood, in a vague way, that I would have three bosses: the city, which pays one quarter of the relief costs; the state, which also pays one quarter; and the federal government, which pays the residual half. At the start my boss was a middle-aged former social service worker. She inducted her class of fifty future investigators, insurance adjusters, and nutritionists in a languid manner which suggested that she either was not interested in what she said, or that she didn't know what she was talking about.

For two weeks we conducted rambling discussions of subjects which began on some concrete point in the work before us, and quickly slid into vague sociological and ethical arguments. All along, we had the sensation of miners waiting in a pit elevator for the drop which would lead us into a subterranean world, the nature of which we could but vaguely surmise. To-

ward the end of the two weeks of instruction this feeling of bewilderment grew, as more and more we failed to find weapons for the coming struggle. When the formality of the training course came to an end, I had armed myself with little more than the following information: (a) that under the Wicks law, society may supply certified paupers with rent, food, gas, light, soap, clothing and medical attention; (b) that if all New York's 1,250,000 women and children who depend on public welfare were lined up forty deep and in files one foot apart, the column so formed would be about twenty miles long; and (c) that I was in for it.

My first two weeks of work in the converted public school, which was one of New York's thirty-eight precinct relief offices, increased rather than diminished the confused and unnerved state of mind into which I had fallen. The 350 employees of the relief station worked in six large chambers, roughly partitioned into offices. There was the reception hall, to which came a steady stream of plaintive relief clients from morning until night, filing before a force of half a dozen receptionists, and to which came new families and individuals to fill out application blanks. There were never less than two or three hundred humans in this room. Then there were the bookkeeping offices, the medical office, the insurance office, the occupational division and the three great unit-rooms, to one of which I belonged as an investigator.

Everywhere, conditions were the same. Wooden or steel tables, stacked and heaped with blanks, envelopes, folders, notebooks and odd papers of every variety of color, size and value, among which burrowing employees worked desperately against time. File cases often were orange crates or cigar boxes. Some of us had and still have chairs, but most sat and still sit on wooden benches or upturned soapboxes. There was a steady murmur of conversation to accompany the rattle of many typewriters. The halls were thronged with people running about on errands, and all of our rooms were full of the effluvia of the human body. After two weeks spent in distributing yellow tickets and having them signed, at conducting something called a coal-survey, and at doing other errands, I received my case-load.

A case-load is two things. In the first place, it consists of about eighty manila folders, each of which contains the history and the essential bookkeeping of a family, or case. In the second place, it consists of the same eighty families, who live in eighty apartments distributed in twenty buildings, all in the same block if the block is a busy relief neighborhood. The relief workers, from the lowliest messenger through ticket writers, bookkeepers, allocators, unit clerks, aides, supervisors and the administrator, know the case-folders. Only the investigators know the families. The case-folder is the heart of every case, and a printed form called the PRC card is every case's soul. In other words, one out of every six Americans is tended by the state, the church and the law. The soul is this PRC card, in the custody of an investigator who governs it and its attached body with the combined jurisdiction of priest, policeman, employer, medical advisor, psychiatrist, and judge.

The activities of every six investigators

are controlled by an aide; five aides work for a supervisor, and there are four supervisors to an administrator, and thirty-eight administrators in New York City. Also, at the top, one commissioner. All of these functionaries, however, see the case-load on paper rather than in the flesh. There is little checking on what the investigator writes; so that it may be said, in a sense, that three-fourths of New York City is governed by Mayor LaGuardia, and that the remaining one-fourth is governed by about 3000 investigators. From these facts it can be seen that there are now two kinds of life in New York City and in the United States. One kind is ordinary life, and the other is relief life. The second has been in existence for about four years. In that time its growth on a mass scale has been so tremendous, and its variations and peculiarities and conventions and psychology have been so diverse and strange, that I will not attempt to draw it in perspective. I will merely sketch the outline under the rough divisions of rent, food, gas, light and soap. The word "you" in the following paragraphs means both yourself and the average family, which statistically consists of 4.1 persons.

II

We will say that you lost your job quite a while ago, that you are two months behind in your rent, that you owe money to many friends, that you have exhausted your bank account, that the grocery store has closed out your credit, that you have sold the family car, and that all you have left is a houseful of furniture and clothes, an insurance policy whose cash value you do not know, and a ten-dollar bill. The landlord talks about eviction. Ominous letters are coming from the gas company and the electric company, and the milkman says

that this week is the last. Suppose you don't lose your pride—although you can no longer convince yourself that you have enough to eat—until a dispossession writ lies on the living room table. At this juncture, a neighbor who is already on relief tells you the location of the local station. Then you finally take the leap which leads from normal life to relief life.

After waiting in line for a certain time, a receptionist administers a few test questions and hands you an application blank, with instructions to take it home, fill it out, and bring it back. The blank covers the essentials of your life, with the exception of moral aspects. Some of the questions are likely to prove embarrassing. Under the heading of Relatives, you fail to include an uncle or a sister-in-law who still possesses a bank account. You also omit from the blank one or two of the places where you have worked in the last ten years.

Your blank when returned is cleared through the Social Service Exchange, which furnishes your charity record, if any. After a week of preliminary red tape, a new manila folder lands on a certain aide's desk, earmarked for a certain investigator. This means that the case, in our language, has been allocated.

We will say that I am the investigator. My aide tells me that I have a new "pending." Some days I receive as many as three or four new pendings, all in my block. It happens that my daily routine is jammed with all sorts of "specials": someone's rent has been skipped, someone needs an emergency coal book, someone's light has been cut off, and so on. I finally get around to your case after a week has passed. I drop by to see you late in the afternoon, unpleasantly near five o'clock, which is the hour when my work should be done. There is a sense of strain between us as I call all the members of your family together, go

to the living room or kitchen, and begin to ask questions as pleasantly and quickly as possible.

The first item on the program is residence verification. The Wicks law says that your creed, race or political affiliations do not matter; but you must have resided in the state for two years and in the city for one year before I can consider your case. You can convince me that you meet these requirements by displaying four documents, dated six months apart. Rent receipts or gas and light bills are the most commonly used. If you have thrown away all household papers, you are out of luck. If you have lived away from the state for more than a year within the last two years, you are out of luck. If you are a single man and your address is Central Park, you are out of luck. In this last case you had better locate a bed with an address affixed and settle down for two years. Meanwhile you can go to the private welfare agencies.

After fifteen minutes of conversation I know more about you and your family than ever you did. If I notice a diamond ring on your wife's hand, I probably will not comment, but I will draw my own conclusions. Throughout the interview you probably have been telling me that you never thought you would come to this, that what you want is a job. I reply that you must be officially on relief before procuring a job from us, and that most of the jobs we pass out are those involving a pick and shovel. As I walk out, you ask "How long?"

"Oh, don't worry," I answer. "If everything goes all right, about a week or ten days."

That night at home I write up your case. I refer to myself as relief worker and to you as client, family, man, or woman, and to your children as John, 4, and Mary, 8. If you could read what I write you would

be disgusted at its dry unemotional tone and its ungrammatical language.

Before I can pass on your case I must collect a minimum of two "collaterals." This entails visits to your relatives, in order to ask them to support you; telephone calls to your friends, visits to your grocery store, and so on. I also send out additional forms to your previous employers, forms to your bank, and wherever else it occurs to me that I may check. The crux of the case is your ability to account for the manner in which you have lived since you last held a steady job. If you fail to show enough assets for this period to convince me that you have made the grade, I conclude you are concealing resources and recommend that your case be rejected. If you show too many, I conclude you have been getting along all right so far, and that you can get along in the same way a little longer without the aid of the HRB. If you own a car, or any kind of property, it's just too bad. See you later.

After I have completed your case I pass it on to my aide. He shows it to the supervisor, who says yes or no. However, my recommendations are accepted in almost every case. And suppose I happened to be unscrupulous, and suppose I didn't like the slant of your nose? Well, you could always reapply in another month or so.

The one question I have not asked is how much it takes you and your family to live. However, that is something we know already. The family of four receives up to \$12 a month for rent, no bath and no steam. With bath, \$15 a month; with bath and steam, \$17. The single man or woman is given a flat, \$10 maximum rent. Next is food. This is computed biweekly on an individual basis. Three dollars and thirty cents for men; \$3.10 for women. Two dollars for infants, \$2.40 up to the age of fourteen, \$2.60 up to the age of sixteen. Pregnancy

draws sixty cents biweekly. Undernourishment (certified at a clinic in writing), twenty-five cents biweekly for cod-liver oil; bottle to be inspected by me. Diet supplement: Single, fifty per cent extra; two in family, twenty-five per cent; three in family, fifteen per cent. Gas, seventy cents biweekly. Electricity, sixty cents. Soap, which we call "household needs," five cents a week per person. We pay your rent by voucher, good only to the landlord, once a month. Food, gas, electricity and household needs come via a city check, good for cash, twice a month. The first food ticket you receive is voucher-relief, acceptable only at grocery stores in order that you purchase food, and food only.

Altogether, with four in your family, you will be drawing almost \$38 per month. If you are single, you receive about \$20. However, I have seen budgets as high as \$70 for a family of nine.

III

It sometimes happens that a family which applies for home relief is not altogether destitute. The man of the family may procure an occasional day of work. One of the sons may be running errands. Someone may even possess a steady job at \$12 a week or more. Such incomes are deducted from the budget—either from the rent voucher or the food ticket. Most are taken from the latter so as to avoid evictions if we leave the payment of rent to the family. Cases of this kind are called supplementary relief cases. Legally, a family may be accepted for relief if its income falls only \$1 below our standards.

Let us say, then, that a given case has been accepted. The first batch of tickets comes through. In extraordinary instances, I have heard of a case being completed within twenty-four hours after the filling

out of the application blank; but ordinarily a client waits from two to five weeks. The investigator calls on his new client with identity cards, food ticket, coal book, and gas and light notices to inform the utility companies that the HRB is paying all bills. The case now is in order. Once a month the investigator will be given a rent voucher for delivery. Twice a month an agent from the Department of Finance calls with the food ticket. The case next settles down to drab routine which in many instances consists of a drawn-out duel between the client and the investigator. The client wants to conceal the dribble of income which he may earn on the outside, and the investigator is determined to close the case with all the means at hand.

At this point it is necessary to return to the subject of bookkeeping. All cases belong either to an A or a B week, and each case has its particular "feeding day." This means that twice a month each folder is taken from the master files and given to its investigator, who describes his past visits in the case history, makes changes in the budget and in general sees that the case is up to date. After the investigator has passed on the budget, the PRC card is given to the posting clerks, who prepare it for the ticket, check, coal and surplus food auditors. This work keeps the investigator busy about half the day. He spends the balance of it in his territory making the rounds, for every family must be visited at least twice a month.

One of these write-ups, made in the client's home before his eyes, might read "6/18/35. SW&2K. MOLFW. HOK. Sophie, 15, IB. WAFC. W said M has no work in sight. OU. RRBC." Translated this signifies: "Saw woman and two kids. Man out looking for work. Health of family average. Woman said man sees no chance of employment. Sophie, 15, at hospital for

cardiac treatment. Otherwise no change. Recommend relief be continued."

This is the average write-up, but there are infinite variations. Something is always going on within the family circle which tends either toward the appearance of employment, or greater dependence on relief. The investigator likes to see every one at home when he calls. Then he can be sure that no one in the family is employed. If a son or daughter at work has not been registered, it is up to the investigator to remain in ignorance, or learn the facts and close the case. Again and again he is told that Man is out looking for work, or that Henry, 21, is taking a walk in the park, or that Man just went downstairs, and so on. If the investigator makes regular visits, he is likely to find the entire family at home, but otherwise the relief recipients may be scattered. Suspicion then is aroused.

In addition to the due budget, each family is accorded coal and surplus food. These are distributed by separate stations in each precinct. Coal comes in the form of a booklet containing eight yellow tickets, each being good for 100 pounds. The life of the booklet is one month. After this time has elapsed, new booklets are delivered. At present, little or no system of coal delivery exists, although such projects have often been formulated. Twice a week the relief recipient journeys to the coal station—which may be a mile distant—waits in line, and carries home a 100-pound bag of coal. If he can spare fifteen or twenty cents, he may rent one of the fleet of push-carts and baby carriages parked with their operators near the stations, but there is no guarantee that the coal will reach home under this arrangement. There are even wagons engaged in the delivery system, but they are equally untrustworthy. If the relief recipient is decrepit and knows of no one who can perform the errand, it is

possible, with much effort on the part of the investigator, to add \$2.40 to the monthly food ticket. Of course if the needy person has steam heat, he will be free of the whole nuisance. It is surprising, however, the great number of apartments in the heart of New York which are heated by coal stoves. Something like half the metropolis's relief hearths are warmed by this method.

The surplus food book is good for three months. It contains twelve tickets, one for each week. On the client's first visit to the surplus food station he is assigned to a weekday, on which and only on which he may thenceforth call. What he receives during these visits varies according to the size of his family, and the supplies on hand. The three staples are canned drought-beef, potatoes, and rice, although butter, cheese, frozen beef, frozen veal, and other commodities are sometimes issued. The average ration is a five-pound bag of potatoes, two pounds of rice, and a two-pound can of beef. This meat is inferior to the bully-beef issued during the World War. It is not inedible, but families a month or so on relief are likely to forget it altogether.

God help the client who expects the Emergency Home Relief Bureau to procure for him a set of false teeth, a wig, a glass eye, or a wooden leg. We go as far as eyeglasses, but there we stop. We can issue vouchers worth \$6 for mattresses, in cases where invalids are sleeping on bed-springs covered by overcoats. If some one has just conspicuously died on a mattress, we can provide a new one. We can also occasionally go so far as special shoes for paralytics, and medical corsets, if the prices do not exceed the limits of reason. Anything else is up to the outside charity agencies, whose specialties, however, are psychiatry, vocational guidance and domestic problems, rather than cash, clothes or food.

IV

Insurance may also be considered an extra. We have learned that the overwhelming majority of our clients have policies. Most of these are of the industrial type—and life rather than endowment. Yet in a large number of cases the policies lapsed quite a few years back. The new investigator is generally amazed by the sense of value which his relief families attach to the policies, no matter how long ago they expired, for Potter's Field presents, to the indigent, an ever-present threat.

We will say that you own a policy worth \$800 on which you have been paying \$1.50 per week. A week after your case has been opened, the insurance adjuster sends word to appear at his office with any policies you possess, no matter their state. After you have been summoned three times and have failed to appear, you receive a letter warning that this is the last call. If you still fail to put in an appearance, your case will be closed. But generally you show up. The adjuster notes the number of your policy and sends it to the Liability Insurance Adjustment Board. In a few weeks your investigator announces that you will shortly receive a check for, say, \$100. He also decides how this money is to be spent. If there are four in your family, you are allowed \$40 for clothing. As your monthly budget comes to \$40, your case is therefore suspended for a month and a half until the remaining \$60 of the adjustment has been consumed. If the amount of the adjustment is over \$200, your case will be closed, on the assumption that when this sum is gone you will have found a job.

In the meantime, what has happened to your policy? Before long, it is returned, paid up to date. It now is worth \$250, and you pay only twenty-five cents per week on it.

Clients take various attitudes towards the HRB's insurance program, ranging from anger to thankfulness. Those who think their commercial agent has been cheating them for years feel as if our adjustments are a godsend. Others believe they have been robbed. Most misunderstandings result from the fact that our clients do not understand that relief is only for paupers — genuine paupers who have nothing of value but a houseful of secondhand furniture.

Clothing also is an extra budgetary allowance. During the brief but vast growth of the HRB, many schemes have been employed to solve this problem. At one time the bureau furnished clothing. If your wife wanted a slip, a housedress and a pair of shoes, she told her investigator and the required articles were procured. Attending to the sartorial needs of 1,000,000 people, however, was found to be too complicated when handled in this manner. Lately, checks and vouchers have been distributed for the direct purchase of clothing. Every few months, investigators are told that they can spend perhaps \$100 on their case-load. The efficient investigator makes a rapid survey of his families and spends eighty per cent of his funds on underwear and shoes for children. Averaged over a period of nine months, the 400 individuals whose needs I supply have received exactly \$1 cash. Of course, it does not work out exactly this way. The hundred neediest received \$4 each, and the others nothing.

Blankets also come under the heading of clothes. Occasionally they are obtainable after a special job of bookkeeping at the surplus food stations. Figures show, in general, that every other family receives one blanket yearly.

The complications attendant on the handling of extra allowances are many. Whenever an investigator procures a

blanket for three of his families, he can be sure that the rest of his case-load will raise a howl, and the same is true of clothing. Clients are prone to argue that if they did not have to sleep without sufficient covering, we would have smaller doctors' bills to pay. One old lady told me that if we sent her a set of false teeth, she could cure her stomach trouble, and we would not have to add a diet supplement to her food ticket.

The HRB pays for doctors at the rate of \$2 per visit. Drugstore bills also are paid — up to reasonable amounts. We do not handle matters dealing with expensive hypodermics and similar treatments. These are for the city hospitals.

I can not say that my case-load is in a particularly healthy state. Rheumatism, arthritis and cardiac trouble, as well as throat and nose ailments, are the most common complaints. Goiter, syphilis, rickets, tuberculosis and varicose veins also are prevalent. Entire families are cardiacs. I am not well-informed on this subject, but it seems to me that the damp, dark and poorly heated rooms in which my clients live, together with the limitations of their diet, must have considerable to do with the prevalence of cardiac trouble.

Beyond the existence of ordinary disease, malnutrition in clients of all ages is the most overwhelming complaint. I know a receptionist who has worked in the same precinct and handled the same thousands of clients for two years. She tells me that it is possible to see the progress of malnutrition from month to month. The experts who calculated our budgets worked them out to the last calorie, but I am afraid that the best housewife is no such scientific authority. If she weakens and buys a spanking sirloin on her feeding day, the whole system is wrecked for the following two weeks.

On my case-load I have eighty-five home-relief and ten work-relief families. I see little of the latter, since we do not pay their rent. My work-relief clients are employed mostly in the parks and on various recreation projects and civic developments, all of which are non-commercial in character. Nearly all my working clients are pick and shovel men, whatever their past trades. They work three days a week and receive \$12, with the exception of one timberman, who works two days a week for \$12, and a housewrecker who labors forty-nine hours a month at \$1 per hour. From these figures it may be seen that work-relief salaries are pretty well scaled to \$50 per month. Single men may not "go on W.R.," and only one W.R. job may be allotted any one family. In cases where the monthly budget is higher than \$50, we pay the families the difference. These work-relief jobs do not seem to last; six months is exceptional.

Relief is granted on a basis of need, not moral merit. It is taken away for reasons of self-sufficiency, and not immorality. Wife-beating and drunkenness — two practices which seldom occur separately — are not punished. The family concerned merely goes on voucher-relief. In other words, grocery vouchers are substituted for cash tickets. Voucher-relief is no joke for either investigator or client. The latter sees not five cents in cash from month to month. As for the investigator, it becomes his duty to collect gas and electric bills and arrange for payment. Prostitution is not considered sufficient reason for closing a case, unless the investigator is certain that it shows profit. Such practices as adultery, marihuana smoking, gambling, petty thievery and rowdiness seldom worry the investigator. As long as vice does not upset the budget of the relief family, it might as well not exist insofar as relief routine is concerned.

V

In the early days the relief agents were recruited from the unemployed themselves, upon the theory that the lame may tend the lame, but before long it was learned that the lame led the lame rather poorly. Since that time, the administration of relief has been made a non-relief project. In other words a millionaire can procure a job as an investigator if he has the qualifications. The cry of the personnel departments has been for more "educational background types," so that soon it may be possible to find all the staff above the rank of investigator possessing college degrees, or some varieties of special training, or both. Former charity workers, professional men and schoolteachers are the main axles in our machine.

Unfortunately it seems that our work does not permit us to have a high morale or a complacent state of mind. There is nothing cheerful about our jobs. The merchandise in which we deal is human merchandise and highly fragile, capable of any sudden vagary of revolt or decay. We are one-third messenger boy, one-third soul doctor, and one-third detective. The confusion produced by blending these functions produces a pathetic cynicism, tempered with nervous strain which, particularly in the case of women, is apt to produce hysteria. Every day or so some girl bursts into tears for no apparent reason.

Our greatest thrill comes when we catch fakers red-handed, or when we get the goods on an inveterate grumbler who has been collecting home-relief and at the same time holding a job on work-relief, and driving a taxi at night. Our greatest pleasure comes when we finish our work early — once in a while. We are most annoyed when we are transferred to a precinct miles away from where we live, when we are

shifted from case-load to case-load, when we take a pay cut, or when we are fired. All these things occur with a frequency unknown in private business.

As I have indicated, there is no home relief program which is free of rackets. The main racket of course is concealing jobs. Charwomen, taxi drivers, actors, musicians and others who work at night are the hardest to apprehend for the investigating staff's day ends at five o'clock. Garment workers also are elusive since their trade compels them to be in the market all day if they want to procure an occasional hour or week of work. Part time, a curse to the employed, is a blessing to relief clients. As for peddlers, it is not difficult to discover if they are at work, but it is practically impossible to learn their earnings, if any. Men and women who work at night spend a good part of the day in bed, but they explain that by saying they have colds or headaches.

The complaints which the bureaus receive come from two main sources—anonymously letters and neighborhood quarrels. We will say that Mrs. Jones's boy, Harold, musses up Willie, Mrs. Smith's little boy, on the sidewalk. Mrs. Smith waits until her investigator arrives and then tells him that Mr. Jones drives a milk wagon, that he has \$3000 in the bank under his wife's maiden name, that he pays \$3 per week to an insurance agent, that he owns a car and an expensive radio, that his wife has a diamond ring, that his father receives an old age pension, and that he owns half-interest in a grocery store in Long Island City. We receive so many of these complaints that we have special employees to take care of them.

Information received orally or in writing is never altogether correct, and never altogether wrong. It would be simple to check the facts if the complainant knew the address of her erring neighbor's place of em-

ployment, his wife's maiden name, or the location of the property he owns, but such is seldom the case. Not infrequently I wring an admission from someone that he makes enough, say, to pay the rent. Several months later this client is likely to display a dispossession writ in order to convince me that although he may occasionally peddle, he makes no profit. Whether I believe him or not, I resume the rent vouchers.

The HRB has never been able to halt the sale, at discount, of rent vouchers, food vouchers, coal books and surplus food books, and eight-cent milk. Clients never reveal these rackets to the investigator. They do, however, besiege him with endless tales about coalbags full of bricks, rotten meat and potatoes, coal station and food station employees who take three tickets when they should take only two, and sell the third. Last winter it was a common practice for coal station employees to sell clients an extra bag for forty cents, twenty cents, or whatever could be procured. Certain investigators have taken bribes to conceal the existence of an insurance policy, or a job, or other assets. One individual, recently dismissed, had a messenger boy in his employ; as for himself, he only visited homes where he could collect.

It will be seen therefore that our relationships with our clients are not always of the best. The investigator may have secured an actual degree of friendship with his client, but when he gives a clothing voucher or a blanket to a needier neighbor, the friendship is irretrievably ended. It is impossible to convince the average client that the bureau is not capable of giving anything requested. Rents are often late, or skipped altogether, according to the efficiency of the bookkeeping department. In such cases the blame automatically falls on the investigator.

On my rounds I can seldom progress more than a hundred feet without being waylaid by a client who thinks he has been deprived of necessities. People call from windows, stop me on stairways, and send their children to fetch me with all manner of stories. I have come to accept this as a part of the daily routine, recording all demands in writing, no matter how fantastic they seem. This appears to afford my clients some degree of satisfaction.

Thus home relief does not make possible a reasonable state of mind, or a healthy outlook, or decent family relationships. Rather than generating confidence in the recipient's mind, it afflicts him with mistrust, doubt, envy, and smoldering anger. If the American system of relief entailed the formation of bread lines before the precinct offices, it hardly seems necessary

to say that there would be serious trouble.

The most regrettable effect of home relief is its tendency to disrupt family life. A wife may never understand why her husband cannot procure work. The fact that he spends most of his time around the kitchen table is enough to strain marital relationships. The husband, having already lost confidence in himself as a man, and forced to spend hours every day looking for work or sitting in the parks, begins to lose confidence in himself as a human being.

No matter if all America's millions of relief cases were given jobs tomorrow, the wounds of public maintenance upon their self-respect would not heal, and hundreds of thousands of wedges driven into American family life could never be extracted.



A DOUBLE STAR

BY DAVID McCORD

UNDER one star, now, or under two?
 We can't be wrong if we choose them both:
 For a binary light is more than true
 When it's twice itself—on the skyman's oath.

And choosing a star of double strength,
 As half to follow and half to share,
 No matter the square of the light-year length,
 It will fall on the road with a beam to spare.

Two stars, two people: alike or not,
 An orbit in common has much to show
 In the darkest night of the brightest spot,
 And the eyes to see, and the way to go.