

Just a Little Lesson in Mendicacy

Experience and Denouement of Two Would-be Knights of the Track

There's a couple of Jerry's ridin' the cushions," remarked the chronic loafer as the long west-bound freight rolled past the depot. "Pretty well fixed for standing room," he resumed, after engaging the attention of the traveling man seated on a trunk nearby, "but if old Bob finds 'em, they'll have to move out in a hurry."

With a jerk and a heavy groan of protest relayed along the entire body of the train from the engine to the caboose, the big freight came to a standstill. Two tanned and tattered tourists, whose arrival had been already noticed and commented upon by Wilsonville's most accomplished loafer, swung themselves out from between a couple of box cars and alighted upon terra firma. Their limbs having been stiffened as a result of a long and exhausting ride, they stood for a moment unsteadily, watching the spitting up and switching evolutions of the freight. Then in silence they turned away to make the acquaintance of their surroundings.

Before them stretched the dismal vista of the single main street of the place, baked in the oppressive rays of a July sun and lined on each side with houses that reared to view the blighting and disfiguring ravages inflicted upon them by time and weather. A few stunted cottonwoods and poplars shamelessly exhibited their seared and dust-covered foliage in a too palpable attempt to look respectable. A voracious horse-fly with a vacuous feeling in his dinner division, buzzed noisily about, showing that he at least did not resent the intrusion of the newcomers.

Overcoming an impulse to lie down in the road and go to sleep, they wandered down the avenue, uninviting though the prospect seemed. Stopping at a small weather-beaten building, which constituted the leading store and supply depot of the place, they purchased some crackers and cheese. This done they wandered out into the country munching their lunch as they went, glad to leave behind these sad evidences of human habitation and to strike the open country. On either side of the road stood waving fields of half-grown corn and rustling areas of small grain, over whose even surface a slight breeze rustled. The grasshoppers were tremendously active, doing the high jump in excellent style and alighting upon the platform afforded by the brim of one of the wayfarers' hats, roosted there until assisted to depart. A dyspeptic meadow-lark disturbed the ether with plaintive trills and squeaks; and a cow by the wayside stared mildly at them, her sad and sorrowful countenance proclaiming the exquisite misery that existence was costing her.

Thus far they had hardly exchanged a word of conversation, but plodded along in somber silence. Near the corner of a section a farm house came into view, and the pedestrians crawled under the shade of an indulgent willow by the roadside to consult. Overlooking their general conversation for a few moments, it might be well to note something of their dimensions, capacities, physiognomy and whatever "B" or "T" types they seemed to possess. Both were of medium height, square build and tanned—apparently beyond redemption, even beyond the restorative powers of erosive cosmetics. One had brown, curly hair and the other had black; the dark eyes of one looked into the green eyes of the other. Faint lines of intellectuality and weakened spirituality were discernable in the general make-up of their features. From the style of their dress, it would appear that they had been given their choice from a rag-pile and chosen the worst they could find. But there was an air about them that suggested that they may have seen better days. At least it is to be hoped that they had not seen worse ones. There was something familiar, too, about the songs they sang and the names they mentioned, but upon this point subsequent events will throw some light.

A recast of surroundings. They were under a willow tree, not far from a farm house. Both were hungry, and each desired to be served by the other. Both were anxious for a hand-out, but neither wished to deprive the other of the pleasure of going after it. After an energetic exchange of compliments

and slangistic appellations, they compromised by agreeing to go together. Upon entering the yard they braved the defiance of a saffron-colored cur, which owed its life to the fact that everyone was too busy to shoot it. They approached the door and knocked. "We're travelin' through the country, and we're plumb out of money," explained the one whose turn it was, "and we'd like to have something to eat."

The good farm wife mechanically opened the screen door and admitted them, at the same time vaguely wondering if there was any butter in the crock on the floor of the pantry. Seating them at the kitchen table, she rummaged the house in search of fragments of by-gone repasts and extracted a portion from the pie for the next day's dinner. This done, she delivered the spoils to the ravenous pirates, who began the assault upon them with vicious energy. The massacre was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the lord of the mansion. He glared so frantically at the visitors that they wondered whether the guarantee to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness was really bona fide or not. The great man sat masticating the tips of his moustache in silence, while within his manly bosom there brewed a storm of threatening aspect. Finally in some form of articulation between a grunt and a grumble, he muttered:

"Where you fellers from?"

One of them hastened to explain: "We're from Mason City, Iowa, and we're going up to Colorado where we expect to work in the mines."

This explanation seemed too stiff and formal, and a suspicious look stole into the eye of the interlocutor. Looking at them he pursued his inquiries.

"Uster to know some people myself in those parts," he said. "Know the Adkinsons?"

"Yes, think I remember hearing of them. Don't recollect much about 'em."

"Know Bill Tyler?"—this with a meaning glance at his wife.

"Well, yes. Saw him frequently."

"What's he doing now?"

"Elected county treasurer just before we left."

"Old Bill Tyler! County treasurer? Why, he was headed for the poor house when I knowed him."

"Mebbe it was another Bill Tyler."

"Perhaps it was. How's Tom Webster getting along? Is he still active?"

"Yes, he's got a good start and sells groceries by the carload."

"Sells groceries! Good Lord! The man I knowed was a preacher. Sure there wasnt another Tom Webster?"

To this question there was no response and for a moment the shrewd farmer sat eyeing the youths with a baleful penetrating stare, while the objects of his attention shifted uneasily in their chairs, helpless in face of the storm that they knew must burst. Finally he started again.

"How's Tom Didders getting along?" he asked with an expectancy in his tone that seemed to solicit a full and detailed account of him.

"Well, he's making it out all right, I guess," was the reply. "Tom met with a rather serious accident and—"

The youth stopped. There was something in the man's face that startled him. It actually beamed with malicious triumph, as he raised his forefinger decisively and addressed the wretched youths:

"Met with a serious accident! What d'you think of that, Sally? Moved west and settled on this farm. Terrible accident, that! If you don't know it already, Dodder's my name, and I ain't sufferin' so bad from my serious accident but what I can see that you fellers have been tryin' to codfish me all along!"

"Well, maybe it was another Tom—" came in weak tones.

"Oh, hang it, kid! Ring off!" interrupted the triumphant Didders. "What's the use. I lived back there a great many years and knowed all the people. And you ain't told a single thing straight. Own up, now; you're a brace of first-class liars. Ain't that a fact?"

This was a cruel speech and it did its work. Completely trapped, the two youths sat in a state of hopeless men-

tal catalepsy, staring helplessly at him. He had them at their wit's end, and eyed them mercilessly. Then one nervously stole a glance at the other, something seemed to pass between them, and then in spite of themselves—they grinned. That was their undoing. Everything was off. For five minutes straight they rolled and tossed in helpless laughter, checking themselves now and then, only to break loose again worse than ever. In helpless imbecility they laughed as if their lives depended upon the effort. Like a fat man gone daft over an ancient and time-worn joke, they laughed—till they could laugh no more. Finally, recovering their reason, they awaited developments.

Their persecutor was glaring at them with baleful energy. Misery and jollity were never so closely connected. The suspicion on his face and the utter ridiculousness of the thing had an unbalancing effect. The youths felt inclined to burst forth again, but restrained themselves.

Not a word did their persecutor say. He simply sat there looking keen, sullen and malevolent—all in a bunch. The atmosphere was oppressive, so the guests sought the outer air. And new more trouble was yet to come. Trouble, red-eyed and ever vigilant, swooped down upon them from another quarter, exulting in the success of his first assault.

They were about to turn the corner of the house and dash for liberty, when as a final and crushing blow their denouement was accomplished. They met a familiar figure—the worst that could happen.

"Why, hello, Jackson! Hello, Hobbs!" it exclaimed. "Where did you blamed guys get that rig? Did you pick that up at the Uni?"

People are sometimes glad to meet old acquaintances, but little cordiality was exhibited here. The two masqueraders felt the present experience to be the most humiliating they had ever encountered. Already they had made a show of themselves and here was more of it. Here was this senseless Didders to cap the climax. Didders—the red topped barb who used to sit in the back seat and chew the rag in the Math. class. Anyone else would have done.

Not delaying to satisfy the curious Mr. Didders, they pushed past him into the open country, leaving him standing there looking witless and surprised. They pushed along with accelerating speed until several miles had been covered. Finally they halted and bivouaced under a cottonwood. There they sat in silence, mopping their heated brows. Finally one spoke:

"Say Hobbs, you make a first-class hobo, but a blamed poor spiler. Say, don't you feel like kickin' yourself?—Honest now, don't you? That blamed Didders! Had to blunder 'round and fix us worse than ever. What will the fellows say if they ever hear of this? Oh! Holy Moses! Tell you what, Hobbs, the world's a mighty small place."

"Nebraska is, anyhow," assented the addressed Hobbs with a sigh.

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