

Dobbins, the Subway Delver

By William Hamilton Osborne

Copyright, 1933, by William Hamilton Osborne.

IT WAS late in the evening. Dobbins, a man in working clothes, emerged from the bowels of the earth and hailed a car. This particular portion of the subway was being rushed to completion, and Dobbins helped to rush it. He was grime from head to foot. But he didn't care for that, for within his one sound pocket there was good money lying—money that meant food for many days.

"This business," he laughed softly to himself, "pays just a bit better than the other."

The car he took was empty—almost. Not quite, either. It held just three people beside himself. One of these three sat upon one side of the car and the other two across the way. He looked first at the two across the way. They were men. And because they were staring at the third passenger, he also looked that way. Then he stepped up front and took a coat in the corner of the car. He was tired, and he was about ready to close his eyes, but he didn't. Surreptitiously and unnoticed by anyone he glanced at the third passenger.

She was a girl, one of the working class. She was dressed as simply as any girl could be dressed, and she carried a small worn satchel. Dobbins had seen many working girls, but never one like this. It wasn't altogether her face that took his fancy, nor her manner, nor any one thing about her. It was the girl herself.

The two men opposite not only seemed attracted, but they were demonstrative as well. They were an excellent amount of jewelry and their neckties and high silk hats were the real thing. Dobbins smiled as he glanced at them. But he did not smile long, for he saw that they were annoying the life out of the girl. They didn't do it very neatly, but their efforts to make an impression were nevertheless indefatigable. They did not confine themselves to looks. They resorted to the expediency of words. Their attempts had apparently no effect upon the girl. She looked calmly past them out of the window into the street beyond. Her face was flushed and she was plainly angry—and startled a bit perhaps—but she gave no other sign.

But though without effect upon the girl, these demonstrations were not lost upon the subway man, who huddled, apparently exhausted, in a corner of the car. Dobbins had both seen and heard, and once or twice, when the girl instinctively looked his way, he attempted, in his honest way, by the merest glance, to indicate that he understood and that he would see her through.

However, as the car proceeded north, the girl seemed to become more and more agitated. Dobbins realized the trouble. She was nearing her destination, and she was afraid for once of the dark, and the two men. Suddenly she signalled the conductor and the car came to a stop. Four people alighted at that crossing. One of them was the girl. Two of them were the two men. The fourth man was Dobbins, the subway man. Dobbins made for the dark side of the street and slunk along in the shadow. He saw the two men follow close upon the track of the girl. Then suddenly he heard the sound of their voices, and, for the first time, the sound of a woman's voice. The girl had spoken. He listened for an instant to be sure that he was right, and then he strode across the street.

"I beg pardon," he said to the girl, "can I assist you?"

The girl breathed a sigh of relief. She was almost on the verge of tears. Dobbins looked from her to the two men. The two men looked at Dobbins. Dobbins' clothes did not exactly show him up to great advantage. The men looked at him contemptuously.

"Say, young fellow," they said to him, "clear out! Understand?"

Incidentally they jostled up against him and trod upon his toes. Dobbins never noticed it—he once more looked at the girl.

"Can I assist you?" he repeated.

The girl half bowed. "You—you can," she replied uncertainly.

No sooner had she said it than Dobbins raised his voice. "You fellows," he exclaimed in a determined tone, repeating what they had said to him, "you fellows clear out! Understand? If you don't—"

That was as far as he got. The two men, with a variety of oaths, rushed upon him. Somehow, at the start, Dobbins had seemed thin and shrunken. It was but an optical delusion. Now he felt the muscles of his arms swell and harden against the sleeves of his coat. He had the smell of battle in his nostrils. As the two men came for him he stepped to one side. And then, by some sudden trick which was easier imagined than described, he leaped upon these two men from behind and twisted their bodies and their arms and legs and necks into all sorts of shapes, and at one and the same time dealt them stunning blows. It was not one man against two. Dobbins was a dozen men at once. He was superb—he was sublime.

It was soon over. Dobbins, standing upon his prone and defeated opponents—one foot upon each—now looked a veritable Hercules. He drew a sharp breath.

The girl stepped forward. "I—I want to thank you," she said, in a trembling voice. "I—never had such things happen to me be-

fore. I—in a trembling voice. "I—never had such things could happen on the cars or on the street. But, oh!" she continued, with a hysterical laugh, "how did you ever do it? It was fine."

Dobbins reached into his inside pocket. "You would prefer that I do not see you home?" he asked.

The girl nodded. "It is better not," she said. "I shall get along all right." Dobbins produced a card and handed it to her. The girl looked at it. Upon it appeared these words: "F. Vreeland Dobbins, Studio No. — E— street, Manhattan." The girl gasped. "You—you are an artist!" she exclaimed. He looked down at his clothes. Then he laughed.

"What you have seen tonight," he answered, pointing to the vanquished two, "what you have just seen I learned in the Quartier Latin—er—the Latin Quarter, in the city of Paris, France." He bowed again.

The girl held out her hand. "Thanks," she said simply.

Then she went. On his way home Dobbins encountered a policeman. "Say, old man," he suggested confidentially, back there in the middle of the block are a couple of drunks or dead men, I don't which. Perhaps you'd better see to them. I haven't time." And then he went home.

Francis Vreeland Dobbins was an artist, although he lived and moved and had his being in one room on the floor of a tenement house. He had been devoted to art. But art had not been devoted to him. He had filled canvas after canvas with ideas that to him seemed exquisite—but there was some difficulty somewhere—they would not sell. Canvases and paints cost money, so does food. Dobbins had had a limited amount of money, but his capacity for food and paints and canvas had been unlimited. He had moved from studio to studio—from room to room—and one morning he had awakened to the realization that even the landlord of a miserable tenement house insists constantly upon good hard cash.

He had gone into the streets to look for work. He had found it in the hardest kind of manual labor down in the bowels of the earth. His soul had groaned. But the work kept him warm, fed him with good food. Covered him with a roof. So he piled his unsold paintings against the wall of his little room, covered them with bits of cloth, and started in to do his share in tunneling a great metropolis.

Dobbins went home. It was late, but he felt a strange elation. He had money in his pockets; he had thrashed a couple of rowdies; he had earned the gratitude of a girl. Obeying a sudden impulse, he drew forth his last canvas and his palette. With bold dashes he hastily sketched a head. For three full hours that night he worked upon it—the head of a girl that had struck his fancy.

That head gave him an idea. And the money he earned enabled him to carry it out. He carried home with him mental pictures of the men who worked with him on the subway—Italians, Irish, Poles—men in their working clothes, wielding picks and shovels, drinking out of battered pails and smoking superannuated pipes. When he had some of them finished he sat down and admired them.

"There's no harm," he assured himself. "In admiring them, for they certainly will please no one else." Then, when he soured

on his luck a bit, he would bring out the head of the girl and touch it up here and there.

One night there was a tap at his door—or rather a resounding rap. "Come in!" he yelled. Somebody walked in—a bluff, prosperous looking man of the world. He stood there uncertainly and looked at the artist. The artist was still in his working clothes.

"Mr. Dobbins?" queried the newcomer as he stepped in.

The artist nodded. "Dobbins," he corrected. "My name is Dobbins. Are you looking for me?"

"I think I am," returned the other; "you are an artist, and the man I am looking for is an artist. Your name was mentioned by—say, do you know William J. Peterson of the university?"

Now Dobbins was never so foolish as to deny acquaintance with anyone. He said guardedly that he believed he had met Mr. Peterson.

"He told me about you," the other man continued, "and when I said I wanted a thing or two to hang up in my Staten Island place—I'm building down there—he said he thought I could get something of you that was respectable—and cheap. The question is, what have you got?"

F. Vreeland Dobbins jumped almost out of his skin. Here, then, was the chance that he had waited for so long. He had some fine things that he had taken months to do that he was sure would please the visitor. He trotted them out.

"Here's something really good," he said. "The Seine in Moonlight." Here's another, 'Fishers at Bays End.' And this little sketch is no end of a gem." Thus he proceeded, cracking up his wares in the most businesslike way. His visitor glanced at them most doubtfully.

"Um—um," was all he said for a long while. Finally, growing more at home he drew out some pictures from their resting place against the wall with his own hands.

"Great Scott!" he finally exclaimed, "what's this?"

Dobbins laughed. "That," he answered, "why, that's Jimmy Murphy of the subway taking a drink of beer out of an old tin can."

"Jimmy Murphy," said the visitor, "and I'll bet it looks like Jimmy, too. Got any more of these?" Dobbins had. He produced them.

"Of course," he explained, "these are not finished pictures like that moonlight scene. They're just little things I have dashed off lately. My hand is kind of out, you see."

"Hello," exclaimed the visitor finally, "what the devil's this?"

Dobbins blushed. "That," he returned, "is the portrait of a—a girl."

"Pretty fair," returned the visitor, "what will you take for it?"

Dobbins shook his head. "It's my sister," he answered, lying without the slightest compunction, "and I can't very well part with it—sort of a family pride, you see." The visitor rummaged around for awhile and then said he must go, but that he would come again and decide upon something. He came once or twice more.

He came gradually to understand that everything in the place was at his service at his own price—excepting, of course, the picture of the girl. Finally his choice narrowed down to the "Seine in Moonlight" and to four of the pictures of subway men.

"I'll pay you three hundred for the lot," he said. "Three hundred," Dobbins gasped,

but he held his own. "Not a cent less than five hundred," he answered. "Give me five hundred and they're yours."

"Throw the girl in," said the man, "and I'll give you five hundred." But Dobbins wouldn't. So they haggled about it. Finally they compromised upon four hundred dollars. Dobbins laughed out loud as he thought of it—of having four hundred dollars in his clothes, and of having good clothes to put them in.

"I'll come around tomorrow with a fellow and take 'em away," said the man. "Shall I bring you a check?"

Dobbins coughed. "The—the bills would do just as well," he returned somewhat suspiciously. "All right," exclaimed the other, "I'll see you tomorrow."

But he didn't see him on the morrow. For when Dobbins reached his room on the following day he found that his room had been entered. As it afterward transpired, the janitor, awed by the prosperous appearance of the visitor, had opened the door for him. And the visitor had carted off, not only the pictures in question, but also—worse luck—the portrait of the girl.

"The confounded rascal!" exclaimed Dobbins in a rage, "to take that girl's head. And—and," he added, as an idea occurred to him, "the thief never paid for any of them, either."

But he had, for there was a sealed blue envelope resting under Dobbins' pillow, and within were three crisp \$500 bills.

Dobbins waltzed himself around the room. He sang aloud in his delight. Then a sudden thought striking him, he grasped the bills and rushed out to see if they were good. They were. Then he came back with many good things to eat and drink and feasted like a prince.

Suddenly he thought of the girl's head. "Confound the fellow!" he exclaimed, "I'll get after him. I'd rather have that head than all these bills." But this may have been mere airy persiflage upon the part of Dobbins.

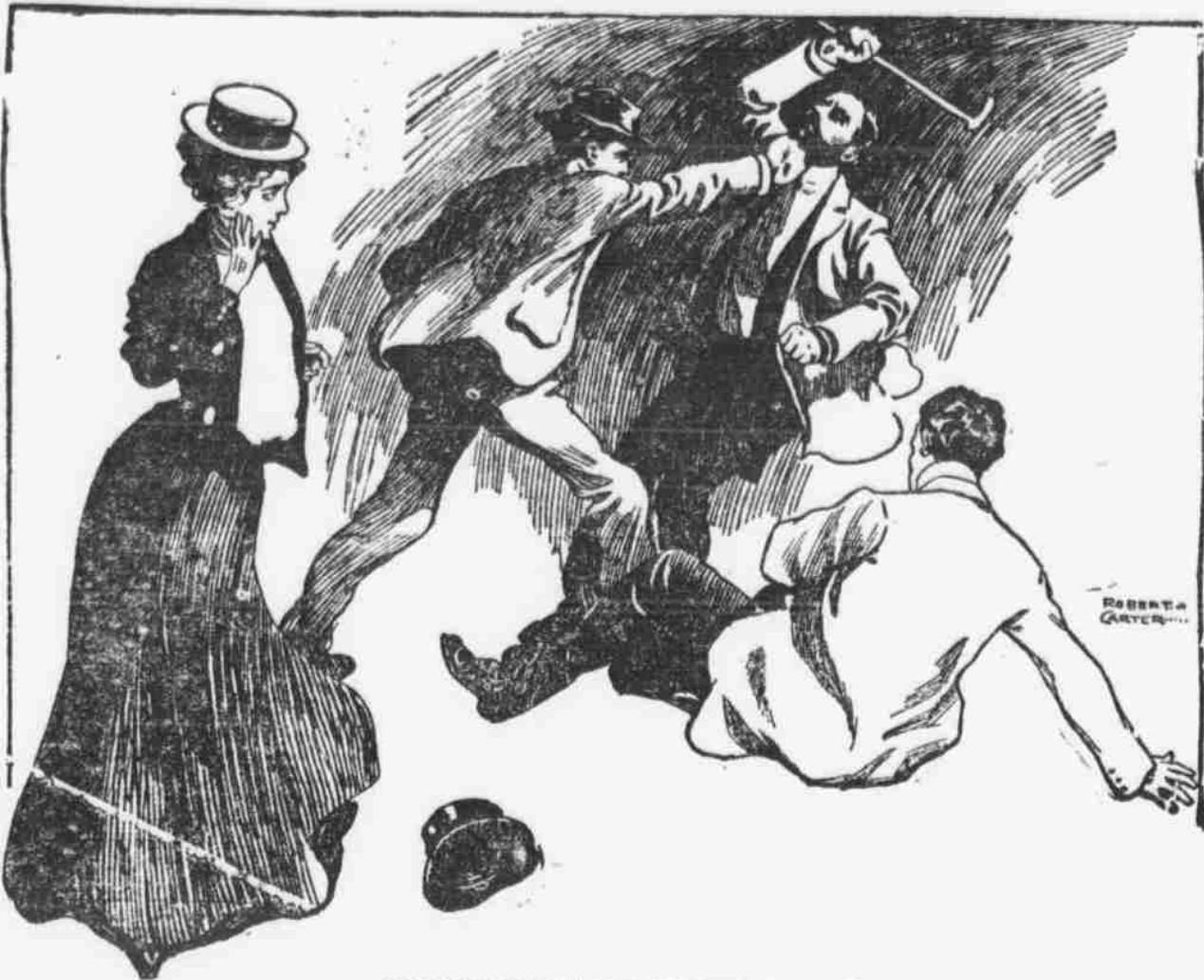
Time went on. Dobbins gave up his subway job and moved into a better room. He painted more Jimmy Murphys and Abramovitches and Valentis and other characteristic subway sketches. One day he started on a tour through Staten Island—he was looking for the house of the man who had robbed him of the head of the girl. But he never found it. He kept watching for the girl upon the cars. But he never found her.

One day he glanced down the art column in a daily paper and this strange paragraph met his eye:

"Loan Exhibition on West Side.—Henry F. Waite and other well known patrons of the arts residing on the Drive have organized a private loan art exhibition upon the ground floor of the new Lyceum building. Among the contributions are . . . and a few very clever things by F. V. Dobbins, a new man, whose star, from the admiration provoked by his subway pictures, seems to be in the ascendant. One of the contributors seems to have a corner in this new artist's work, etc."

The following week, F. Vreeland Dobbins, having provided himself with a very elegant frock coat and all the accessories, hastened up to the Lyceum. A few stylish equipages were scattered around the street, as Dobbins ran lightly up the steps. The major dome at the door stopped him.

"I'm a member of the press," whispered Dobbins to him, with unblushing effrontery,



DOBBINS WAS A DOZEN MEN AT ONCE