

The Cruise of Box Car 8049

BY RUTHERFORD CORBIN.

(There being this much of truth in Army Slim's narrative, that between three and four hundred navy deserters worth twenty dollars apiece, have drifted past the Nevada and Utah country constables in the past three weeks. For the solace of the gentlemen in question we will state that they all rode freights and wore navy shoes and that the navy shoe is a black laced, high-top, with a heavy tip. Also that the last one has by now beaten it further east.)

Of the cavaliers of fortune who infest the transcontinental highway none is better known in the under world than my friend Army Slim.

Slim has long since outgrown as to waistline his original designation. He has a typical tramp convexity of bodily profile. The militant modification was added because of his vituperative attitude of dislike toward our regular establishment. This we believe to have been cordially reciprocated.

In short, the individual in question, originally a deserter in time of war is, in time of peace, an illfavored, pecculative, lying, adhesive hobo of the most virulent and incurable type. He has operated the whole range of "The Stem," which means the acquisition of other people's money without a quid pro quo, from petty larceny in cities and high grading in the Nevada camps to simple "battering" of back doors for a meal or the tearful panhandling of two bits along the main thoroughfares of most of the cities of this continent. He was responsible that time you called the milkman and newsboy down for forgetting your number. He is long on visits to your backyard on wash day. Last night he stopped you on the corner of First South and told you his wife was dead so pathetically that you felt responsible. You gave him a quarter. When I met him later he had three dollars in his pocket. While he talked to you he kept one hand in his pocket that what he already had might not jingle.

And yet, like Ulysses, "he has seen men and cities." In his judgments of them he uses the detached viewpoint of the true philosopher. Living yet of no part of the fellow human life about him.

Last night just after he left you I met Slim turning into Second South. If you will remember he was well clad. The process of acquiring sufficient respectable attire to avoid arrest on the main thoroughfare he calls "getting a front." Like most language coined from the rough for immediate usage tramp talk is consistently equally descriptive. He had a collar which albeit, frazzled, was clean, a good suit and a clean shave. The collar he had acquired at a laundry, the shave at the "Barbers' college," where the hobo fresh from the road contributes his countenance as a practice ground for aspiring tonsorial apprentices. Of all this I was informed in that bar room on the street of Commerce patronized chiefly by the mendicant and itinerant. I had always wondered where old collars went and how persons learned to be barbers. "But Slim," I asked, "when the striped trousers and the spike tailed coat?"

Slim spat. "Them? Why them," he answered apologetically, "I mooched them from th' stiff artist th' next street up. I'd been botherin' a sky pilot for a front so he sicked me onto his assistant."

Thus I gathered that he had tried to get clothes from a minister of the gospel and had been referred to an undertaker's establishment.

"Whose were they, Slim," I asked.

He became profane. "How th' hell do I know, I ain't been reading the death notices for the last week. At least not in this burg."

"Where from, Slim?" I asked, and dropping an

other beer in the slot obtained the following sweet music:

"Well, pal, y' might say Bountiful an' y' might say Frisco bein' as I've been in both places lately, an' then y' might say Chi or Los or San Berdu, or mos' anywhere, for all that, but startin' some recent. . . I blew from Frisco. Wit' th' fleet," he added.

As he was clearly pausing for argumentative stimulants I state aggressively that the fleet, if he referred to Admiral Evans', not being equipped with Akron, Ohio, rubber tires had left Frisco by water.

"Th' hell it did," said Slim profanely, obviously stimulated and pleased by the opposition. "The hell it did. Wots a fleet? I ask. Is a fleet just a corrugated iron free lunch cage with guns and a brig in it, or is it the men behind the guns? Wots a fleet, I asks, an' I answer: wots a fleet, but its crew. There's th' turrets an' guns wot goes to Seattle and there's the fleet wot don't, I says."

"Meaning," I suggested, "that Admiral Evans' report that there were very few desertions in Frisco may be ill founded?"

"Huh? Wot? Well I ha'nt got nothin' agin Ol' Gyp, whose th' best of a bad lot, but, Bo, for th' las' month th' Union Pacific east has been looking like an Atlantic avenue ferry when its Liberty day at the Brooklyn navy yard* Why," Slim added querulously, "a man can't hardly travel east in any sort of comfort. . . . Wot with worrying the sheriffs an' th' railroad bulls with their uneducated moochin' an' worrying th' shacks by rubbering out of empties when the paper collar private is on the same sidin' . . . and," added Slim reflectively, "worrying th' bums by spoiling a lot of ragtime none but a locoed sailor could hope th' run of. . . It ud make a man sick," said Army Slim.

"Tell me about it," I asked, buying.

"Well, bo, ye see it was jest like this. I mooches Frisco thorough until it gets chuck full of fleet seers whose money to take them home don't come and they gets to bothering the regulars considerable and I concludes to blow. A blanket stiff tol' me Rawhide wuz good, but they ditches th' bunch at Hazen fer fair an' believe me, Bo, there was nothin' doin'. Hazen is a junction wit' a few shanties laying about like the fall off from an overloaded express wagon going over a bumpy road. The shacks, same bein' wat you call the brakemen, has orders to ditch th' boss there an' the sheriff of the town bein' a mild mannered little man with a yaller moustache and gat, same bein' wot you calls a gun, as big as a frying pan, has orders to clean out the town of bums. Th' result is we walk. It was only forty miles to th' next stop an' there wasn't any reason for a stop at that. Two 'houses an' a hundred bums. I didn't stop to mope around. 'Holy murder,' says I to meself, 'I got to beat this, shack or no shack, an' I sidesteps th' bunch, which is being frisked off th' rods by the con and shacks, and makes a head-long dive for th' bumpers."

"I hit in between a refrigerator and a box with the window some loose. The train was hiking about fifty per and the air was sure rendolent of language and bos. I seed wot was to be done and done it. I didn't do no burglary, but I sure helped fit that box car, she was C. and N. W. 8049, wit' a Chi manifest for the rip track; an' through an end door that had somehow got busted projects myself onto a mess of lumber and young children. 'Wot the hell,' says I, some surprised, but complacent, hearing the shack clumping overhead toward the engine. 'Wot th' hell,' says I. 'Stow it aft there,' says a youthful voice, 'an', it adds, 'man a crew to fix th' gadget abaft th' gangway.' Th' line of language struck me as being some pecu-



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