IMPRESSIONS OF A HOBO

By George Butler

I have traveled as a hobo something better than seven thousand miles. I have found that hoboes were just men out of work, that they were not tramps, because they were merely transient workers temporarily out of employment. Frankly, I liked the hoboes. I consider myself a hobo because I sympathize with them and because I have shared in their common experiences. To me hoboes represent the effort made by labor to adjust itself to ever changing labor conditions.

February, 1915 found me in my home town, Yakima, Washington. Forced to quit school on account of lack of money I was carrying papers and trying to live. My meals consisted of ten cent ones bought at a Jap restaurant and even at that I was forced to postpone a few.

March was well started and still I saw no steady work in sight. Hearing that a great many men were soon to be needed in Montana, I decided to go there and try to get work in the electrification of the Milwaukee railway. Accordingly I sold my bicycle and packed a suit case with such articles as I expected to need. I also packed my rifle, thinking of what great times I would have tramping over mountainous country on Sundays. That afternoon I expressed my belongings to myself at Butte.

At midnight I nervously awaited the arrival of No. 2, the eastbound passenger. I had fourteen dollars all in paper scattered about my person, a five-dollar bill sewed under my collar, four dollars in one sock and five in the other. I expected this money to last me until I would be working.

A whistle and a light in the distance told me that she was approaching. A frost-clad, steam-breathing monster, the train stopped at the depot platform. I awaited in darkness, until she was almost ready to start and then climbed in

between the second and third coaches. A "shack" (hobo for brakeman) passed with his lantern, and as the light exposed me clinging between the coaches, he stopped.

"Hi! There! Where you going?" he yelled.

"To Spokane."

"Got any money?"

"No."

"Get off then. I can't carry you for nothing."

I made a move as if to get off, but wasn't in any hurry. The shack looked me over again, turning his lantern towards me.

"You haven't anything to drink on you, have you?", he asked, in a hopeful tone.

I handed him the half pint of whiskey a friend had given me saying that it would come in handy. The brakeman drank most of it and made a move as if to return the bottle but I told him to keep it. He did, hastily telling me to look out for the "Yard Bull" at Pasco, the next division point, as the train started to move.

I clung to two iron bars, standing erect with my feet firmly placed on a little iron projection. I was conscious of a feeling of pleasure not unmixed with pure joy of living as I stood there and watched the dim outlines of farmhouses flit by and listened to the click of the rails beneath my feet. However, my hands soon became numb and cold so I climbed up the side of the coach and lay on top, thinking that I could ride more comfortably there. The top was cold though and I was suffering quite a little by the time the train crossed the bridge to Pasco. I resolved to "make the tank" out of Pasco (ride the flat surface above the water on the coal car). Accordingly I hid behind a pile of ties while the train went through inspection. When a fresh engine came back from the round-house I carefully made my way along the coaches and caught her between the engine and the baggage car in

what is known as the "blind baggage." Getting on the tank as soon as she got out of town I found that there were other passengers besides myself. Two young fellows, well dressed, and pretty well under the influence of liquor greeted me. I took a sup from a bottle they offered and warmed somewhat I stretched out on the wet coal. My fellow passengers informed me that they got on at Pasco and were merely out on a lark. A friend who was with them stayed at Pasco, they stated.

Hours passed by. It was getting well towards daylight. I lay on the wet coal and almost went to sleep. Gradually I got cold and got up, flapping my arms and kicking my feet to get warm. As this did not help much I went down and passed coal for the fireman. This warmed me up and I enjoyed the ride as day became lighter and lighter. I had visions of being in Spokane by morning.

Suddenly, about six o'clock in the morning the train slowed down and stopped. A tall, well built man with a wide rimmed hat climbed up on the tank, brandishing a revolver like a frightened woman.

"Come down off there; come on every one of you," he cried, meanwhile handling his revolver as if he thought we were dangerous. We lined up by the watertank, the two young fellows, a Swede who had been sleeping in the tool box, and myself.

As the train pulled out, the sheriff, now somewhat composed, informed us that a man had been killed coming out of Pasco and that he would quarter us in the county jail until he could communicate with the authorities to see that we were not responsible for the tragedy. He conducted us through the streets of the town (Ritzville, Washington) into the jail and locked us in a steel cage.

The next hour and a half seemed long and tiresome. We were tired and hungry. The Swede had given the sheriff a

strong hint to the effect that it was customary for the county to feed its "jail birds." There were beds in the cell but it was the general concensus of opinion that the quilts were inhabited so we sat on the cement floor and talked in a drowsy fashion. Conversation touched chiefly on the following subjects: the filthy condition of the jail; the amateurishness of the sheriff; the probable identity of the dead man and cause of his death; breakfast.

About eight o'clock the sheriff returned with a smile, opened the cage and let us out. It had developed that the victim was the other companion of the two young men who were out for a lark; he had made the second blind in an intoxicated condition and fallen off. As nothing was said about breakfast we parted at the jail doors, each going about his own business; the Swede made some remark about "begging a lump" (hand out) somewheres and the young men walked off gloomily. I went to a restaurant black and dirty as I was and bought a warm breakfast.

A local freight pulled in and I caught it, riding a gondola full of coal. I was sleepy; I went to sleep. I woke up feeling about eighty years old. I heard the voices of near-by children in play. Looking around I found that the local had cut off my car on a side-track in the town of Sprague. It was two-thirty in the afternoon. I laughed at the humor of the situation.

A local passenger was scheduled at two-fifty according to the bulletin in the depot. A dim smoke was already perceptible in the distance. Soon the passenger pulled in and while the expressmen unloaded a few articles and loafers floated around the depot to see who came in, I walked around on the other side, crawled underneath the third coach and stretched my frame over the rods.

She rattled off, now and then stopping at small towns, but I had not more than begun to get tired of my cramped

position before the crossing and recrossing of endless sidetracks indicated that I was in Spokane at last. Finally she stopped and I carefully crawled from beneath and dodged here and there among the cars until I was out of the yards. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon as I hurried along the streets of Spokane. I went in a saloon, washed up, and took off my overalls and jumper. The suit that I wore gave me a fairly respectable appearance. I learned from fellow-travelers and switchmen that two railroad bulls rode all passengers out to Yardly, a suburb about three miles out, and that the only way to make the passenger would be to walk out there and catch it as it stopped to let the detectives off.

Accordingly I walked out of town, picking up with a young fellow who was walking along the track for the same purpose that I was. He said that he lived in the East, had come to see the Fair at 'Frisco. It was so dark that I couldn't see his face very plainly but from his conversation I concluded that he had a good education combined with a fine view of the best things in life, but had sown his wild oats too freely and was now reaping the results when he had ample time for reflection. We arrived at the switch where the train would stop about one in the morning. We sat and talked in the darkness, until a light and whistle in the distance brought us to our feet. She approached, slowed down, stopped. The detectives got off—we got on—but the brakeman saw us and yelled at us. One of the bulls put me off at the point of a revolver. Soon my companion followed at the shack's request. The bulls stood by us warning us that it would not be well to try to make her. She started, so did my companion. He didn't go far. He was clubbed and beaten by the cops. They took him off groaning as the train departed in the distance. I never saw him again; I never really saw his face plainly but I remember his personality.

Not in very high spirits I shambled down the track think-

ing of the events of the evening and decided that I had better wait till morning and get out on a freight. Closer to the round-house of Yardly I noticed some fires and went to them thinking that I would get warm, as the March night was far from being warm. The fires proved to be of burning ties. About ten men were around the largest one; they were strewn around on the ground promiscuously, some were asleep while others were talking in undertones and smoking. I received only passing notice as I curled up near the fire and went to sleep.

When I awoke I found every one busy around me. A couple of "blanket stiffs" were rolling up their blankets; a pot of coffee was boiling on the fire; "boes" were coming out with edibles of all sorts and were preparing to make a "mulligan."

"Don't go away, we're going to pull off the big eats pretty soon," one of them said, noticing that I had awakened.

I stayed and ate with them. A spirit of good fellowship prevailed and in spite of the condition we were all in, everyone seemed to be as jolly as he could under the circumstances.

Soon a freight pulled in; there was only one empty—we got it. There were about twenty of us in one car. The "con" went by inspecting the seals. He pulled the side door open, looked in, laughed and entered. He looked us all over carefully, and walked out, shutting the door behind him, and telling us to keep it shut. We all agreed that the crew was good. The rear shack soon came and paid us a visit. He looked us all over, put a couple off (fellows who were evidently not looking for work) and a foreigner "hunyak." Many men look upon a foreigner as the cause of many of our labor troubles. The shack went out with the remark, "I don't suppose there is a nickle in the crowd."

All that day we traveled through beautiful scenery, but nothing happened—not even a square meal; so we were all

pretty hungry when we arrived at Sandpoint, the next division point, about six in the evening.

I soon got out of Sandpoint, traveling on the outside of a gondola loaded with timbers. The train crew was "hostile" so I had to be careful to avoid discovery when the long "drag" rattled around sharp curves. Lying on the timber just at dusk, traveling through beautiful mountain scenery I received impressions I shall never forget. The evening air was just sharp enough to stimulate my enthusiasm. Going by Hope, Idaho, I saw about a hundred Indians fishing in Lake Pend d'Oreille. It was a beautiful picture that was presented to me as I flitted by to see them fishing from their canoes at dusk with the evening sun setting over the mountain pines on the other side of the lake.

But as it grew darker and colder my enthusiasm for the scenery died out and my thoughts took a more material and far less pleasant trend. I was hungry but there was no town that the freight would stop at. Soon it rained a mixture of sleet and snow. Try as I would I could not protect myself from the downpour. Soon I was wet to the skin and it was getting colder and colder as we approached the Rockies proper. Here there was snow on both sides of the track and it was so cold. My feet seemed to be frozen. I tried to warm my body by flapping my arms and stamping my feet but the odds were against me with my wet clothing. I was truly suffering intense agony. I longed to get to Paradise, Montana, the next division. Finally when I got there I was so weak I could hardly navigate. I clumb off and stumbled over the sidetracks till I got to the business part of town. My teeth chattered till I thought they would break. It was after one o'clock but there was a light in one of the restaurants so I entered, ate a warm supper, and drank several cups of warm coffee. I knew that I could not stand to go any farther that night so I went down and slept in the boiler room of the round-house.

In the morning I found that one of my shoulders was so stiff that I could hardly raise my arm above my head. I was sore and stiff all over. I traveled all day, making Missoula about noon and Garrison in the afternoon. At Garrison I changed to the Milwaukee and rode the remaining thirteen miles to Deer Lodge, the home of the Montana State Penitentiary, and a division point on the Milwaukee.

About eight o'clock in the evening I caught the blinds on a passenger. As I sat on the tank with clouds of smoke and fire streaming over my head I was thrilled with pleasure. In an hour I would be in Butte. For about twenty miles I could see the brilliant cluster of lights that marked out the smelter city, Anaconda. As the beautifully lighted hill of Butte loomed out I felt like jumping up and waving my hat for sheer joy. Here was the unique notorious city of which I had heard so much. There was the hill from which $60,000,000 in copper ore is taken annually. Here was the city where I would get work.

When the train began to slow up for the station I climbed down from the tank and swung up on the iron rods at the side of the coal car. I jumped off and walked rapidly out of the yards into the street. Near by was a saloon. I went in, washed up, took off my overalls, and went to go out in the street, but the bartender stopped me by putting a glass on the bar and saying, "Have one on the house."

This surprised me because he had never seen me before, knew that I had come in on "the bum," and that I was very probably broke. But soon I found that Butte realized as few other cities do the importance of the hobo. I drank the beer in silence and asked the bartender where I could get a good room cheap. He told me. I got a room on lower Main street and paid my room rent a week in advance. That night I slept the sleep that is supposed to be enjoyed by the just, whoever they are.

In the morning I went to the express office and got my suitcase and rifle. Then I went to the Park Saloon where the electrical workers hang out. There were, I found, over two hundred of them waiting for the Milwaukee job to start. Many of them were broke.

A week passed by and after paying my room rent again I had just fifty cents left. Men would not be needed for about two weeks more; there were thousands of men in Butte out of work; the mines had been closed ever since the trouble of the previous August. Hundreds of men were sleeping in the never-closing saloons and eating at soup kitchens maintained by the unions. I began to think that work wasn't so plentiful after all. I sold my rifle and got four dollars for it. This kept me a couple of days, then I put up my watch at a restaurant for a meal ticket. I had a hard time keeping my economic independence the next week. I missed a few meals but I thank God that I have yet to accept charity.

Finally I got work at the opening of the mines. I worked at the High Ore Mine for about ten days and quit at the first opportunity to go out with one of the Milwaukee camps. I worked with Camp 7 for about three months, taking out an A. F. of L. card in the meantime. The men were a jolly lot, all hoboes and Americans. They spent their money as soon as pay day came around. Most of them became economically independent and quit at the end of two months' work. So by the time I had been there two months I had the distinction of being both the oldest and youngest man on the job, youngest in point of age and oldest in point of service.

I liked the men; they were honest-hearted and had a clear sense of economic morality. The hard life they led had not effaced the essentials of manhood from their characters. There were a few men in the gang at any time that I would not trust. One thing that distinguished the men particularly from other men that I had known was their utter disregard of money as

an end of human endeavor. Most of them had been up against it that very winter but they did not hesitate to throw dollars to hoboes going by in boxcars. I asked old "Denny" McManus why he had given his first pay check almost entirely to bums in the light of the fact that he, Denny, had been dependent on the soup kitchen a good part of the previous winter for his meals.

This is what he said: "Son, when I'm working I wouldn't feel right if I turned down a stiff on the bum. No, lad, you never want to think that just because you're working that you're any better than the boes who pass by every day on the rattlers. You never know when it'll be your turn."

Along in June each day found my thoughts wandering back to Washington. The novelty of the work I was doing began to wear off, the men began to seem less interesting, I began to replace the mountain scenery of reality with the peach orchards of my imagination. Even at the table I spent most of my time thinking of Yakima and how I would like some fresh strawberries or peaches. I realized that I had been in one place too long, that I had too much money to care specially for my job. I had over a hundred dollars and every time I thought of it I thought that I would rather be working in a peach orchard in Washington. It required more will power each day to keep from calling for my time.

One day I was filling slug holes in a particularly disagreeable swamp. In spite of my boots my feet and legs were wet. A swarm of bloodthirsty mosquitoes kept my thoughts pinned to realities. I grew more dissatisfied than ever.

A jolly voice hailed me. "Keep it up, Slim. That's the way I got my start."

I looked up and laughed. There was Jack Reeves. He was a pleasant sight to look at as he stood there with his wardrobe rolled up under his arm and a million dollar smile on his honest face. Jack and I were friends. He was one of

the best mechanics on the job, a good hobo, and a natural comedian. I stood with my muddy hands on my hips and looked him over. I knew he had quit.

"What's the matter? Too much money or is it the call of the bar?" I asked.

"I didn't quite have her made [meaning his stake] but the new boss got too important so I cussed him out and quit. I'm going to Butte for a couple of days and then I expect to get in with Homer Haggerty's gang out of Great Falls."

I filled my pipe, tightened my belt, pulled off my boots, threw the shovel I had been using into the slughole, put on my coat, and we started for camp as I made the remark that I was through with the job for a while at least and that I intended to go back to Yakima where the mosquitoes weren't so thick.

The timekeeper made the remark as he figured up my time that I didn't have much reason for quitting but I think that when a fellow's work gets too monotonous and irksome that he is wasting his time if he continues work just to be working. I like to enjoy my work and the conditions that surround it.

That noon I shook hands with all the boys and told them goodbye. Many of them gave me money to purchase articles in town with and mail out to them as the commissary was not very complete. This fact impressed me that they would trust me with such responsibilities when they knew they would probably never see me again. But hoboes seem to put more faith in each other than do many business men.

That afternoon Jack and I caught the local passenger at the water tank and rode her to Three Forks, the first stop, and a division point. We intended to get the Olympian at seven o'clock and be in Butte that night but Jack got to drinking too freely so it was decided to ride the cushions. We went in the smoker and attracted no little attention with our working clothes from some more or less snobbish gentlemen who hap-

pened to be well dressed. Jack was still quite talkative and he made the remark that one would find a more decent crowd riding the tank. It was snowing when we crossed the divide, and some Dakota farmers got out to gather snowballs at a water tank.

We arrived at Butte at eleven o'clock that night and went to the hangout at the Park Saloon. There were a number of men we knew there and as the drinks got to coming too fast I went out. The next morning I saw Jack leaning over the bar in the same position that he was in the night before. He told me that he had spent and given away most of his money. I did the shopping for the fellows out at camp and stayed around town two days more. Then I registered a letter to myself and sent my money ahead of me—all except a few dollars.

That night at midnight I walked down a hill to the Milwaukee yards. It was pitch dark. A long freight pulled in; it proved to be a string of empties bound for Seattle. I climbed in a side door, lit a match, looked the floor over and sat down in a corner. I lit my pipe and smoked quietly while waiting for the engine to whistle the "highball." The con went by checking up his cars. He pulled the side door open that I had taken pains to shut. He stuck his head in the doorway and peered into the corners as he flashed his lantern. Finally the light rested on me.

"Hey there! What you riding on?"

I got up rather unconcerned; I knew that I would get out of town even if he put me off. He looked at my card and pulled the door shut, yelling "Empty," as he hit the door with his stick.

In a few minutes the engine whistled the "highball," a long and a short whistle that means "All hoboes aboard." The steam tightened, one succession of bumps was telegraphed down the string of empties, then no noise except the clicking

of the rails, the rattling of the cars, and the steady puff of the engines. I lay curled up in the corner and thought of the job that I had left, of Butte, of my destination. I felt lonely. As far as I knew I was the only passenger on the entire freight.

After what seemed like a couple of hours she slowed down and stopped. I was getting cold by this time so I got out. I was in Deer Lodge. In about an hour she started out again and I held her down all day and night getting off only at division points for meals. I found that there were between fifteen and twenty hoboes scattered about various parts of the train. Many had been on the train ever since she left St. Paul. Most of them were going to Washington to harvest the fruit and grain crops.

Soon I was traveling through the picturesque route that the Milwaukee boasts of. The hobo gets a better chance to appreciate the beauty of the route than the man that travels on the limited. We were all sitting in the doorway, and looking over the freight I could see feet hanging out of almost every boxcar.

At a stop a shack went by and seeing us all hanging out of the side doors yelled, "What the hell do you fellows think this is—an open air picnic?"

We grinned and shut the doors, but as soon as she started the doors would invariably be opened again. We pulled into Avery, Idaho, about four-thirty in the afternoon and when I returned from eating dinner the train was already made up and ready to start. I jumped into a side door "Pullman" hurriedly. A man of about forty-five was sitting in the far corner. He was what we call a "blanket stiff": that is, he carried a roll of blankets and canvas. He had a fine honest-looking face, clear blue eyes, a sandy complexion, and red hair. He was dressed in a wellworn pair of overalls, a wool shirt, and a tattered coat. I liked his appearance and we were soon talking of labor conditions.

We were passing through some of the most beautiful scenery that I had ever seen. The train rumbled on for miles and miles along the St. Jo river. As we sat with our feet hanging out of the side door one could almost see the fish in the clear water as we went by. I have seen uneducated men admire beautiful scenery before but this man was all enthusiasm. I encouraged him and he grew confidential. This is the substance of what he said, although I can not describe the look of boyish joy and enthusiasm on his face as he spoke.

"Son, I'm what you call a scenery bum. I used to get drunk on whiskey, now I get drunk with scenery. I've been working up in the mountains for about two months, I've got a little stake saved up, and I'm going to drop off at a little town a few miles down the line and live as close to God and nature as I can. I want to fish and swim again. I love these mountains. When my supply runs out I'll go to work and do it all over again."

After he had dropped off, true to his word, I envied him in his philosophy. I wondered if he didn't get as much pleasure out of life as many people do of wealth and position who let the material things of the world worry them.

I traveled on, arriving at Ellensburg the following afternoon, and from there I caught a passenger on the N. P. for the remaining thirty-five miles to Yakima. That ended that trip. I felt glad that I had made it and started another and much longer one in about ten days after I had arrived in Yakima.