

## CHAPTER VI

**A**s we walked to our boarding house I told my father the whole story of my job in the cigar store, my collecting for the milkman, my arrest, and our rescue of Julia. He listened without comment, and when I was done, said: "Well, John, you'll be what you'll be, and I cannot help or hinder you. Go back to your job in the morning if you like."

Those were his last words to me. They were kind, and I have always remembered them and their ring of fatality. I never saw him again. I learned later that he lived out his life orderly and died decently. He went away the next day, and when he returned I was far away, westbound in search of adventure.

I was tired of Tex and his tribe and their smoky back room and cheap cheating. I was sick of the sight of the crabby widow at the boarding house. It was springtime. Sundown found me miles away on a country road, walking westward. Yes, I was going in the right direction. There was the sun going down away off in front of me. Darkness was coming on, but it did not strike me as unusual that I had no supper or no room for the night.

I came to a bridge and stopped when I heard voices below. I looked over the side and a voice came up: "Come on down, kid. Don't be leery, we're only a couple of harmless bindle stiffs."

I picked my way down to the level place beside the small creek where they were. One of them was unrolling a "bindle" of blankets, the other was washing a large tin can in the creek.

"Throw out your feet, kid, and get some wood before it gets too dark. We'll have a fire and a can of Java, anyway."

Wood was plentiful. I soon returned with an armful. The other bum came up with the can from the creek and began breaking up some twigs to start the fire. He barely looked at me. "Take a look around the jungle, kid, and see if you can find a pan," he ordered.

"What in hell do you want a pan for?" asked the one that sent me after wood. "Are you going to fry some water?" The other was on his hands and knees blowing up the weak fire. He stood up and looked at the speaker

with a most superior air. "Not so fast, brother, not so fast. I've got a gump in my bindle."

He unrolled his blankets and produced a live chicken, big and fat.

The other bum was humbled. "A gump!" he muttered, "and me carryin' a fryin' pan with me for the last week." He dived into his bindle and got the pan.

The owner of the chicken took the pan and held it between his eye and the fire looking for holes in it. "It'll do," he said. "More wood, kid," they both ordered.

We were three strangers well met under the bridge; one had a chicken, one coffee and a stale loaf of bread. I had nimble legs and gathered the firewood.

The gump was picked, cleaned, unjointed, and put in the pan with neatness and despatch that would have done credit to any chef. The coffee boiled fragrantly in the tin can. The owner of the stale loaf hacked it into three equal parts with his strong pocketknife, while the chicken man deftly turned sections of the bird with a sharp-pointed stick.

"This is a pretty snide jungle," he said, "no cans. Throw your feet, kid, and get some cans for the Java."

I scurried around and was lucky to find one small can in the dark. The cook inspected it. "Go down and wash it, bring it back half full of water an' I'll boil it out."

I washed the can and brought it back. The chicken and coffee were cooked and cooling near the fire. The cook scalded out the small can and filled it with coffee. He held out the pan of chicken to the other bum and then to me, helping himself to a piece last. The small can of coffee was now cool enough to drink, and was handed around in the same order. The first bum took several swallows and passed it to me. I handed it to the cook without drinking any. He looked at me for the first time.

"Say, brat, listen. If you was some kind of a rank dingbat you wouldn't have been invited down here. Don't think because you couldn't hustle a can that you ain't entitled to your coffee."

"You're right at that, Jack," said the bum that furnished the coffee. "Go ahead, kid."

I drank my coffee and passed the can along. We ate in silence. The chicken and bread soon disappeared. My companions lit up their pipes and smoked while we finished the coffee.

I was learning fast. I took the frying pan, filled it with water, and put it on the fire, without waiting for orders. When the water boiled I washed

it at the creek, scrubbed it with sand, and returned it to the owner.

“Where you from, kid?”

“The city,” I answered.

“How long you been on the road?”

“This is my first day.”

“Got any people?”

“No, they are all dead.”

“Where you goin’?”

“Oh, just west, anywhere, everywhere.”

“Got any pennies?”

“No pennies. I’ve got a couple of dollars.” I looked from one to the other. “Do you want any of it, either of you?”

“No,” from both of them. “But,” said the cook, “if we was in the city I’d take fifty cents of it purty pronto and get myself a four-bit micky.”

“A what?” I asked, mystified.

“A four-bit micky, a fifty-cent bottle of alcohol—Dr. Hall, white line,” he translated in disgust. “If you’re goin’ west you better learn to talk west.”

“Yes,” said the other, “and ‘pennies’ don’t mean pennies. It means money, on the road.”

They didn’t talk much between themselves; they had probably compared notes before I arrived at the bridge. They were both past fifty, wore clean overalls, substantial shoes, and clean-looking blue shirts. A month later I could have classified them correctly as professional bums, too old to ride the trains, satisfied to throw their feet along the “star routes,” or country roads, where food was seldom refused, and to sleep in their binnies, or blankets, under the stars.

It was time to “flop.” They took off their shoes and coats. The shoes were neatly placed together on a level spot; the coat was folded and placed on top of them making a fair pillow, and at the same time protecting them from theft. Each of them threw me a piece of blanket. I made a pillow of my coat and shoes, rolled up in the blankets, and was soon asleep.

A farmer’s team crossing the bridge woke us at daylight. I got up at once, cold and sore from the hard ground, and made a fire. The other two crawled out of their blankets and went down to the creek to wash. I followed them. They both had soap wrapped in paper. One of them gave me his piece. I washed and returned it. He placed it on a rock till it was dry, then wrapped it up and put it in his coat pocket. They also had pocket combs and small round mirrors.

We went back to the fire and discussed breakfast. “Nothing but Java,” said the bum that had the coffee.

“I’ll go to the farmhouse,” I volunteered, “and buy something.”

“Nix, nix,” said one; “buy nothin’,” said the other, “it’s you kind of cats that make it tough on us, buyin’ chuck. They begin to expect money. You go up to that house,” pointing to a place on a small rise, about fifteen minutes’ walk, “and tell the woman you and two other kids run away from home in the city three days ago and you ain’t had nothin’ but a head of cabbage that fell off a farmer’s wagon between youse since you left. Tell her you are on your way back home and the other two kids are down by the bridge so hungry they can’t walk. On your way up there git a phony name and street number ready in case she asks you questions. She’ll give you a sit-down for yourself, chances are, but bring back a ‘lump’ for us. You’re a decent-lookin’ kid; she might git worked up about your troubles and ask a lot of dam’ fool questions. Cut her off. Tell her you’re ashamed to be settin’ there wasting time and the other boys starvin’ under the bridge.”

Before I got to the house a couple of dogs dashed out, barking savagely. A healthy, matronly woman came out and quieted them, looking at me inquiringly. I told her myself and two boy friends, runaways from home, were hungry and I wanted some food, that I would be glad to pay her for anything she could spare, and if she would wrap it up I would hurry down to the bridge with it, where my chums were waiting.

“Yes,” she said kindly, “come in. I haven’t much here, but maybe I can find enough.” She gave me a seat outside near the kitchen door, where I waited and made friends with the dogs. In no time she came out with a large parcel, and refused the money I offered. I thanked her and went down to the bridge with my “lump.”

The bums had coffee boiling. We found enough tin cans to drink from and opened the parcel. It contained cold, fried chicken, cold biscuits, and half a pie.

“You’re a good connector, kid; sure you didn’t pay for this?” one of them said.

“No, and I didn’t have to answer any questions. It was easy except for the dogs.”

“Don’t let dogs worry you, kid; they’re cowards. I ought to know, I’ve been battlin’ ’em twenty years. They’ll bite you if you turn your back or run away, or if there’s a pack of ’em they’ll pull you down. If you get up against a hostile dog, rush him and he’ll weaken. I never got bit but once an’ that was in the town of Pueblo. I was just after gettin’ a six months’

floater out of Denver an' went down to Pueblo to do a little D.D.ing with lavender for myself. I got myself a bunch of lavender and a ducat."

The other bum laughed, his mouth full of chicken. "You're talkin' Chinook to that kid. What does he know about the D.D. and lavender and ducats."

"You're right," I said. "I don't know what he is talking about." I was anxious to learn, but didn't like to ask questions.

"Well, it's this way," he went on. "I was dummy-in' up, see? Imitatin' a deaf an' dumb man. D.D.ing, see? You surely know what lavender is—stuff women put on clothes. You put about a spoonful in a small envelope. You've got a pocketful of the envelopes ready when you go out to make your 'plunge.' Then you get your ducat, see? That's the main thing. I got a bartender to write it for me on the back of a lawyer's card. When the women opens the door you slip her your ducat and she reads:

"I am deaf and dumb. I got hurt by a street car and just came out of the county hospital. I am trying to get seven dollars to pay my fare home to Cheyenne. Please take a parcel of lavender and give what you can."

"Sometimes they take your lavender an' sometimes they don't, but they generally give up something, an' they can't ask you a lot of questions, and if a copper grabs you you've got an out. You ain't exactly beggin'.

"As I was sayin' about dogs. I was battering the privates, see? Private houses. A woman had just slipped me a dime an' was standin' in the front door watchin' to see that I got off the premises. I'm about halfway to the gate when I heard a dog snarlin', an' comin' up behind me. I'm D.D., see, an' don't want to round on the damn dog an' give myself a bawl-out in front of the woman, so I stand my ground figgerin' she'll stop him. The next thing I know he's got half my pants leg ripped off an' a chunk out of one of my shins. Anyway, I run him under the house. The woman took me in an' fixed me up with arnica an' a bandage. Then she gets me a good suit of her old man's clothes, gives me two dollars, and holds the dog under the house till I get out the front gate. That's dogs for you," he finished, "an' women."

I had a question, but the other bum asked it for me. "What do you do if you bump into a natural dummy when you're D.D.ing?"

"Well," said the dog expert, "I never bumped into one, but if I did I suppose I'd do what everybody else does when they're wrong an' get caught at it. I'd get mad an' cuss hell out of 'em."

Breakfast over, the bums shaved. Both had razors. All bums carry razors for shaving, fighting, or cutting through a sleeper's clothing to get into his pocket. One of them had a big silk handkerchief that he stropped his razor on, the other used his belt. They heated water in a tin can, lath-

ered their hands, and rubbed it on their faces. One used his mirror, the other used none. After shaving they dried their blades carefully and secreted them about their persons. Blankets were rolled up, and the bums were ready to take the road. The D.D. man was going into the city for a few days. "So long." He scrambled up the bank to the road.

The other was traveling in my direction and volunteered to direct me to a junction where I could make a westbound train.

"You're welcome to travel with me, kid, if you want to jungle-up for a month or two," my companion said. "The fruit will be gettin' ripe soon, and there'll be green corn and new spuds and the gumps are fat already. I promise myself some famous mulligans around these parts."

Many boys would have jumped at this chance, but I declined. Maybe it was a dislike for begging, or ambition, or my imagination pulling me westward. I don't know; but it wasn't the hardships, I'm sure. At the junction we parted.

"So long, kid. May see you out West next fall when I make the poultice route."

"What's that?" I asked.

"That's southern Utah, kid, the land of milk and honey. You're always sure of a big pan of milk and a fresh loaf of home bread—the poultice route, see? So long."

A long, heavy westbound freight train was slowly pulling out when I got to the railroad yards. A car of lumber, clean and white, piled halfway to the roof, the door invitingly open, came along. Nimbly I swung up and in.

Inside the car I looked about for a place to secrete myself. The lumber was about six feet shorter than the car, which left a large space at one end. I dropped down into it, took off my coat, and stretched out on the floor, feeling sure of a long ride. No brakeman would crawl over that pile of lumber even if he knew there was a hiding place at one end.

Along in the afternoon, after one of the many stops, I heard a scrambling above and a young fellow about my own age dropped lightly down beside me. I had been in the car so long that the half light was enough. I saw he was ragged and frightfully dirty, road dirt—coal smoke, cinders, ashes, grease. His coat, too large for the thin frame, was full of holes and its lining hung in tatters. His trousers were greasy and full of hot-cinder holes. His calico shirt was open in front, his skin was dirty. He was sharp-eyed and thin-faced. He eyed me wolfishly.

"How long you been here?"

"All day."