

Robbing Peter

by Charles Dorian

SMIKES had the presence of one born to lead, and that was the best recommendation for his engagement as Fuel Foreman at Haplo. This title is conferred upon the man in charge of a group of coal shovellers, and whose duty it is to see that sufficient coal is hoisted into the hoppers which feed the big locomotives of the Railway Company to keep those locomotives in fuel until the next coaling station is reached. Smikes soon proved to be an efficient foreman, but he had other qualifications which fitted him for the realm of adventure. He "handled" his gang on a humanitarian plan; his chutes were kept running in all kinds of weather with the smoothness of pocket-picking and the company called him a valuable man. Smikes wanted them to prove it, and wrote them a long letter—but that comes later.

He was giving better satisfaction than any of his predecessors. He made the cost of handling coal three-tenths of a cent a ton cheaper. Smikes grew up to the enviable position of a "living example."

The head of the department paid his annual visit, and he noted with pride that Smikes' chutes were the tidiest on the System, that his men worked most rhythmically, and that Smikes himself was the suavest of suave foremen.

"How do you manage it, Smikes?" asked the Head.

"Oh, a little oil and holy water" was the best way Smikes could explain it. Smikes thought he saw a look of suspicion on the face of the Head. This was to be expected, because such good results were usually the outcome of stern man-handling. Smikes smiled as he read the other's thoughts. The smile was contagious, and, well, it was results the Head was after anyway.

Smikes led the way through the deepening snow to the living quarters of the Italian laborers, and here, again, the Head marveled. It was the usual worn-out box car set off its trucks, too far gone for traffic but good enough still for shelter. There was nothing dilapidated about this one, however, as the Head had expected, comparing it with the others he had seen. It had been newly painted outside. The others merely had the numbers painted out with a splash of red lead. True, one might see the outline of the number, 23402, upon close examination. It was the rarity of a laborers' shelter being painted at all that drew forth exclamations of wonder. The interior was fitted up with cupboards, and finished bunks and the walls sheathed, another marvel. And there was actually a thick linoleum on the floor! It had conveniences too. A pipe from the wash-trough carried waste water out to the culvert forty feet away and two other pipes brought in hot and cold water. A standard van stove stood in the middle of the floor, radiating cheer to all corners. The two windows were partly opened for ventilation, and the six bunks at one end were neatly spread with clean, grey blankets, the top one thrown back, exposing a restful bed.

Again the question came into the eyes of the Head, and again he smiled in response to Smikes' smile. Nowhere on the System had he seen the laborers' quarters so neatly arranged. Smikes, himself, bunked in the shack used as an office, and this, too, was comfortably fitted up. The Head went away well pleased.

The Head was the best hated man in the service. The reason for this perverted affection was the extreme economy practised by the department over which he presided. Work was to be done cheaply as well as efficiently. Every item of supplies beyond bare necessities was criticized without mercy, and more than one foreman gave up his job because of the constant sting of that recurring interrogation, "Why?"

Why ten gallons of oil more this month than last? Why two more coal scoops? Why this special requisition for a new cable? So persistent were

the "whys" that a foreman with an extra-sensitive spot invariably added another: "Why am I working for this measly, miserly, hay-wire, one-horse outfit?" Rather than seek the cause of the leaks he would quit. It did not strike him as the foreman's business. How often might he see his men dangling their torches beside them, describing a milky way of blazing leaks, and feel it too mean to check them about it? If the men were light-hearted why run the risk of souring their dispositions with this petty call for economy? They would probably shovel more coal if allowed to revel in their wastefulness. The laborer is touchy upon his failings—and one of them is disregard for economy. "Beeg-a-da-Compane," he reasons, "lots o'money." To his mind there is lot of waste running a railroad anyway, and why should a rich company mind his little extravagances?

Smikes had been through the mill. He answered the "whys" for a month, and then stopped—there were no more "whys" to answer. Less supplies were used in the operation of his chutes than at any other point—according to the records. That naturally made it harder for the other foremen who were one and all besought with rigid insistence to follow the pace set by Smikes.

Upon the same afternoon that the Head parted from Smikes a stranger arrived.

The stranger approached Smikes with bubbling grace, and after some preliminaries talked about the handling of coal at small cost. Smikes was suave, and the stranger had to come down to brass tacks in the end and tell what he really wanted. He was a special service man come to look for a car which had mysteriously disappeared. He had a list of several such cars, but one particularly was last reported on the chute siding of Haplo, where Smikes functioned as foreman.

"There were two boarding cars here last winter, and one was set off its trucks and the number painted out. That was 23402. It's here yet—I see you've painted it standard green. But 16548, when was it lifted?"

"No car has been lifted to my knowledge," declared Smikes. He took the stranger down to his office, and showed him that he had no records which would show what became of 16548. The stranger went away seemingly satisfied.

At closing time Smikes walked home with his little gang, chaffing with them in broken Italian as they went.

At nightfall he paid them a visit. Archangelo Zanata received him with brotherly fervor. These visits seemed to be understood and appreciated by the men. They all smiled expansively.

Smikes sat on the edge of the bench and leaned over to explain the purpose of his visit. "Big wreck up west," he told them. Their eyes dilated greedily and they slid along their bench to huddle closer to him.

"Nice caboose," elaborated Smikes, "one end all broke in. Too bad, boys, to see a nice van like that with the end all broke in."

"We go fix!" they responded. They jumped about making preparations. Smikes smiled at their childish glee. "Don't make a noise outside," he warned them, "and watch out for the yardmen and car repairers—and spotter!" This last word was whispered ominously, and they went out hushing each other.

Smikes waited thirty minutes, and then opened the door to look out. It was a black, moonless night, and the snow was cloaked with coal dust. Waiting engines chugged heavily, and wheels creaked ruefully on the frosty rails. Presently a sound different from these, and evidently expected by Smikes, came to his ears. He stepped out and welcomed back the returning sextet and helped them with their burdens.

Next morning, Mr. Special Service man paid Smikes another visit. He was less genial in his preliminary greetings,

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