

Wondering When the War Will be Over

German Prisoners in France Understand Better than the Germans Along the Rhine What is Getting to be the Matter with the Prussian War Machine along the British Front



A Dream Man Who Had a Lot of Ashes

Another of My Peregrinations in Potash

By JACOB HOLDFAST

ON a drab November day I started out with the double-box waggon to gather ashes for Ezra Bump. It is important to recall the picture I made that morning, because it was one of the most auspicious moments of my life when I was about to demonstrate in a commercial way that I was an accredited partner of Ezra Bump in the business of making potash. I sat on a hickory-spring seat which had a box of soap on the left-hand end. My feet just touched the top dashboard of the double-box waggon, in which the "bushel" basket and the scoop shovel danced several figs as the rackabones team went trotting away and the hickory-spring seat teetered with me on it like a large bird on a bough.

I had several miles to go before striking any ashes because Bump had wisely cleaned them all up within four miles any direction the last time he went hauling in the spring; and the summer was a poor time to accumulate ashes except in saw-mills and in the places where they burned log heaps clearing the land. But that only gave me the more time to reflect upon the dignity of my position as an ash-man.

It was quite ten o'clock when I drove into a lane at the turn on to somebody's side-road. Bump knew all the people about here and had established himself as a pretty shrewd sort of tradesman as I knew. I knew the old rascal had never taken to calling out his wares like a rag and bone man, but that morning I was so impressed with the poetry of driving into all sort of folks' lanes and prying into the family secrets contained in the ash-barrels that I took to calling out in a sort of rapture.

"Ash—es? Ash—es? Got any ashes to-day? Fine brown soap for ashes, five cents a bushel—Ashes?"

"Some out in the gum yunder," said a red-faced woman who might have been Irish. "Mighty good ashes too."

The gum was part of a hollow tree standing on end with a roof on the top and a small hording door at the bottom. With great gusto I rammed in the shovel. The ashes were dry. So according to Bump's advice, when I felt sure the lady wasn't looking, I jammed them down a bit with my left foot in the basket. It was a heavy tug heaving them into the box, but in that first place I got six bushels and with great consequence bustled to the kitchen door with six bars of brown resin soap.

"Oh, that all there wuz?" said the woman.

"Six bushel, mum," says I.

"Only a bar fer a bushel?" says she.

"Regular price, mum."

"Taint enough. Bars ain't big enough. You folks cheat. Needn't come here no more."

Now that same woman, as I knew, would have been as placid with Ezra Bump as a purring kitten. But seeing that I was a new man and a greenhorn she thought she might few me on up on the price, though, thank heaven, she said nothing about the size of the bushel.

"Sorry, mum," I told her as I traipsed away to the

waggon again. "I'll tell Mr. Bump."

And away I went, just a bit angry with the woman. I began to ask myself why I should be defending a man whom I knew to be a gouger. But I remembered that I was now a partner of Ezra Bump and could not afford to have my senior calumniated without just cause. So at the next house I was a bit more peremptory. This woman had three old barrels full of ashes.

"Who be you?" she wanted to know.

"I'm Mr. Bump's junior partner, mum."

"Oh? Big a scalawag as he is I'll warrant," she snapped. "That soap's terrible. I declare I c'n make better myself when I hev time. Eats holes in the clothes. I spose he makes it himself."

I assured her loftily that the business of the firm was making potash—not soap; that we bought the soap wholesale.

"Oh—same as the ashes I guess," she ventured as I got back to the waggon.

She seemed a very acrid person. What a long-suffering old martyr Bump must have been if he endured such cynical remarks as everywhere I went that forenoon seemed to be the lot of the ashman. Even the dogs seemed to regard me with doubt. They knew me not. Bump they had known; perhaps would not have growled at him—for he was a good hand at making up to dogs and getting round the cantankerous ways of certain women who persisted in believing that an "ashcat," as they called me, was worse than a lightning rod pedlar, because everybody didn't have to buy lightning rods, whereas everybody had ashes to sell. I had no wiles whatever. With a small heap of ashes in the waggon by noon and a great hunger in my being I was becoming conscious that it is sometimes harder to buy things than it is to sell some other things.

When at length, about two o'clock, I was able to unhook the team and feed them their pack of oats from under the axle and go in to a dinner of fat pork and beans, I was getting pretty well convinced that to be a buyer of ashes was no business for any one with a tender conscience.

Would I ever get that waggon-box full? By half-past two there was a heap in the middle that could be seen from the road. But the ends of that heap were great gaunt caves of emptiness. Only in the rear did the ashes crawl out to the end of the box.

Luck was not so good in the afternoon; or perhaps my manner was becoming crusty. By three o'clock I had less than half a load. It would be dusk in two hours and I was miles from home. For two miles I was told,

"No ashes to-day."

Which led me to conclude that some rival had been along in this part of Bump's territory and had stolen a march. This was discouraging. To go home my first

day with less than a full load would be to incur a terribly sarcastic drubbing from Bump and if repeated too often might terminate my partnership which had begun to seem so auspicious.

About half an hour this side of dusk I drove in a long lane to a brick house that had three chimneys. This was some prosperous person I felt sure who probably had a fine lot of ashes, which meant plenty of fires. There was a man close to the house husking corn; a sharp faced, quick-spoken man who when I asked him about the ashes said:

"Yep, I got enough in that gum over here to fill up y'r box. Wanta take'n?"

"I certainly do," I emphasized.

"All right. What's the price?"

"Five a bushel or one bar of soap," I said.

"What kind o' soap?"

I held up a bar.

"That's O. K. I guess. No kick on the soap, Bub. Help yourself," said he. "If you c'n git'm all in the wagin. If yeh don't—come agin."

I said unto him—quite brokenly with emotion as I reached for the basket and scoop,

"Mister—you must be the Dream Man, I guess."

He went shucking away for a bit, tied a bundle of fodder with basswood bark and came over to watch me benignly whilst I filled the basket again and again with those beautiful hardwood ashes of which there seemed to be in that prostrate buttonwood gum a limitless store. Out of respect for his benignity and the fact that the basket was pretty big I did not heap it up as I usually did and did not tramp them in at all, though to be sure they were middling dry. But they were lovely ashes and the man made nice kind observations as I scooped them out, helping me to take every basketful to the wagon and heave it in.

Presently the Dream Man and myself had Bump's double-box heaping full from dashboard to tail-board, one of the handiest loads of ashes ever seen in those parts, as the man admitted.

"Well, sir, the nex' thing is to pay for 'em I guess," chuckled I, climbing blithely to my hickory spring seat and the soapbox. After rummaging a bit I said to the Dream Man who was rubbing at a spavin on my nigh horse's leg,

"Mister—we tuk seventeen bushels out o' that gum by my tally. That'll be seventeen bars o' soap."

I reached down the soap, five bars at a time; three fives and a two. He took them with a queer smile on his face, which I knew must be a kind smile, because I had never been quite so industrially happy in my life, and I could go home to Bump with a swagger and a song. The Dream Man stacked the soap on the ground and rammed both hands in his pockets.

I was about to reach for the lines and to lean over to

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