

Rex Beach Adventure Stories

"Bitter Root" Billings, Arbitrator

By REX BEACH

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BILLINGS rode in from the Junction about dusk and ate his supper in silence. He'd been east for sixty days, and, although there lurked about him the hint of unwelcome ventures, etiquette forbade its mention. You see, in our country that which a man gives voluntarily is oftentimes later dissected in smoky bunk houses or roughly handled round flickering campfires, but the privacies he guards are inviolate. Curiosity isn't exactly a lost art, but its practice isn't popular nor hygienic.

Later I found him meditatively whittling out on the porch, and as the moment seemed propitious I inquired admiringly, "Did you have a good time in Chicago, 'Bitter Root'?"

"Bully," said he, relapsing into weighty absorption.

"What'd you do?" I inquired, with almost the certainty of appearing insistent.

"Don't you never read the papers?" he inquired, with such evident compassion that "Kink" Martin and the other boys snickered. This from "Bitter Root," who seems literature outside of the "Arkansas Printing," as he terms the illustrations!

"Guess I'll have to show you my press notices," and from a hip pocket he produced a fat bundle of clippings in a rubber band. These he displayed jealously, and I stared agape, for they were front pages of great metropolitan dailies, marred with red and black scum heads, in which I glimpsed the words, "Billings, of Montana."

"'Bitter Root' on Arbitration." "A Lechvar Out of the West" and other things as puzzling.

"Press notices," echoed "Kink" scornfully. "Wouldn't that rope you? He talks like Big Ike that went with the Wild West show. When a puncher gets so lazy he can't earn a living by the sweat of his pony he grows his hair, goes on the stage busting glass balls with shot cartridges and talks about 'press notices.' Let's see 'em, Billings. You punch 'em as close to your stummick as though you held cards in a strange poker game."

"Well, I have set in a strange game, amongst aliens," said Billings, disregarding the request, "and I've held the high cards; also I've drawn out with honors. I've sailed the medium high seas with nutny in the stokehole. I've changed the laws of labor, politics and municipal economies. I went out of God's country right into the heart of the decaying east, and by the application of a running noose in a hemp rope I strangled oppression and put 8,000 men to work." He paused ponderously. "I'm an arbitrator?"

"The deuce you are!" indignantly cried "Reddy," the cook. "Who says so?"

"Reddy" isn't up in syntax, and his unreasoning loyalty to Billings is an established fact of such standing that his remarks afford no conjecture.

"Yes; I've cut into the nation's perill and the 'rying evil' good and strong, walking out from the stinks of the Union stockyards of Chicago into the limelight of publicity via the 'drunk and disorderly' route.

"You see I got those ten carloads of steers into the city all right, but I was so blame busy splattering through the tracked up wastes of the cow pens and inhaling the sewer gas of the west side that I never got to see a newspaper. If I'd 'a' read one, here's what I'd 'a' found—namely, the greatest, stubbornest, riotingest strike ever known, which means a heap for Chicago, she being the wet nurse of labor trouble.

"The whole river front was tied up. Nary a steamer had whistled inside the six mile crib for two weeks, and 8,000 men was out. There was hold-ups and blood shedding and picketing, which last is an alias for assault with intents, and altogether it was a prime place for a cowman on a quiet vacation—just homelike and natural.

"It was at this point that I enters, busting out of the smoke of the stockyards, all sweet and beautiful, like the gentle heroine in the play as she walks through the curtains at the back of the stage.

"Now, you know there's a heap of difference between the stockyards and Chicago—it's just like coming from Arkansas over into the United States.

"Well, soon as I sold the stock I hit for the lake front and began to ground sluice the coal dust off of my palate.

"I was busy working my booze hydraulic when I see an arid appearing pilgrim 'longside looking thirsty as an alkali flat.

"Get in," says I, and the way he obeyed orders 'looked like he'd had military training. I felt sort of drawn to him from the way he handled his lecker; took it straight and running over, then sopped his hands

on the bar and smelled of his fingers. He seemed to just soak it up both ways—reg'lar human blotter.

"You lap it up like a man," says I— "like a cowman full-groved. Ever been west?"

"Nope," says he; "born here." "Well, I'm a stranger," says I, 'out absorbing suh beauties of architecture and free lunch as offers along the line. If I ain't keeping you up I'd be glad if your company."

"I'm your assistant lunch buster," says he, and in the course of things he further explained that he was a tugboat fireman out on a strike, giving me the following information about the tieup: "If all come up over a dose of dyspepsia."

"Back up," interrupted "Kink," squirming. "Are you plumb bug? Get together! You're certainly the Raving Kid. Ye must have stone bruised your heel and got concussion of the brain."

"Yes, sir—indigestion," Billings continued. "Old man Badrich of the Badrich Transportation company has it terrible. It lands on his solar every morning about 9 o'clock, getting worse steady, and reaches perihelion along about 11. He can tell the time of day by taste. One morning when his mouth felt like about 10:45 in comes a committee from Firemen and Engineers' local No. 21 with a demand for more wages, prodding him with the intimation that if he didn't ante they'd tie up all his boats.

"I s'pose a teaspoonful of baking soda, assimilated internally around the environments of his appendix, would have spared the strike and cheated me out of being a hero. As the poet might have said, 'Upon such slender pegs is this our greatness hung.'"

"Oh, Gawd!" exclaimed Mullins plonely.

"Anyhow, the bitterness in the old man's inner tubes showed in the bile of his answer, and he told 'em if they wanted more money he'd give 'em a chance to earn it—they could work nights as well as days. He intimated further that they'd ought to be satisfied with their wages, as they'd undoubtedly feller the same line of business in the next world and wouldn't get a cent for feeding the fires neither.

"Next morning the strike was called, and the guy that breathed treachery and walkouts was one 'Olly' Heegan, further submerged under the titles of president of the Federation of Fresh Water Firemen; also chairman of the United Water Front Workmen, which last takes in everything doing business along the river except the wharf rats and typhoid germs, and it's with the disreputableness of this party that I infected myself to the detriment of labor and the triumph of the law.

"D. O'Hara Heegan is an able man, and inside of a week he'd spread the strike till it was the cleanest, dirtiest teup ever known. The hospitals and morgues was full of nonunion men, but the river was empty all right. Yes; he had a persuing method of arbitration quite convincing to the most calloused, involving the laying out of the lead pipe.

"Things got to be pretty fierce by and by, for they had the police befalood, and disturbances got plentier than the casualties at a butchers' picnic. The strikers got hungry, too, finally, because the principles of unionism is like a rash on your mechanic, skin deep—inside, his gastrics works three shifts a day even if his outsidies is idle and steaming with socialism.

"'Olly' fed 'em dry loads of eloquence, but it didn't seem to be real filling. They'd leave the lectures and rob a bakery.

"He was a wonder, though; just sat in his office and kept the shipowners waiting in line, swearing bitter and refined cuss words about 'ignorant fiend' and 'cussed pedagogue,' which last, for 'Kink's' enlightenment, means a kind of Hebrew meeting house.

"These here details my new friend give me, ending with a eulogy on 'Olly' Heegan, the 'idol of the idle.' "If he says starve we starve," says he, "and if he says work we work. See! Oh, he's the goods, he is! Let's go down by the river. Mebbe we'll see him." So me and Murdock hiked down Water street, where they keep mosquito netting over the bar fixtures and spt at the stove.

"We found him, a big mouthed, shifty kind of man, 'bout as cynical looking in the face as a black bass and full of wind as a toad fish. I exchanged drinks for principles of socialism and doing so happened to display my roll. Murdock slipped away and made talk with a friend; then when Heegan had left he steers me out the back way into an alley. 'Short cut,' says he, 'to another and a better place.'

"I follers through a back room; then as I steps out the door I'm grabbed by this new friend, while Murdock bathes my head with a gas pipe billy, one of the regulation, strike promoting kind, like they use for decoying members into the glorious ranks of labor.

"I saw a 'burning of Rome' that was a dream and whole cloudbursts of shooting stars, but I yanked Mr. Enthusiastic Stranger away from my surcingle and threw him agin the wall. In the shuffle Murdock shifts my balast, though, and steams up the alley with my greenbacks, conveyed by his friend.

"'Wow-ow,' says I, giving the distress signal, so that the windows rattled and reaching for my holster. I'd 'a' got them both, only the gun caught in my suspender. You see, not anticipating any live bird shoot, I'd put it inside my pants band, under my vest, for appearances. A 45 is like fresh air to a drowning man—generally has to be drawn in haste—and neither one shouldn't be mislaid. I got her out at last and

blazed away just a second after they dodged around the corner; then I hit the trail after 'em, letting go a few sky shots and getting a ghost dance holler off my stummick that had been troubling me. The wallop on the head made me dizzy, though, and I zigzagged awful, tacking out of the alley right into a policeman.

"'Whee!' says I in joy, for he had Murdock safe by the bits, bucking consid'rably.

"Stan' aside and le'mme 'lectrocute 'im," says I. I threw the gun on him, and the crowd dodged it into all the doorways and windows convenient, but I was so weakminded in the knees I stumbled over the curb and fell down.

"Next thing I knew we was all bouncing over the cobblestones in a patrol wagon.

"Well, in the morning I told my story to the judge, plain and unvarnished; then Murdock takes the stand and busts into song, claiming that he was coming through the alley toward Clark street when I staggered out back of a saloon and commenced to shoot at him. He saw I was drunk and fanned out, me shooting at him with every jump. He had proof, he said, and he called for the president of his union, Mr. Heegan. At the name all the loafers and stew bums in the courtroom stomped and said, 'Hear, hear!' while up steps this Napoleon of the hoboes.

"Sure, he knew Mr. Murdock, had known him for years, and he was perfectly reliable and honest. As to his robbing me, it was preposterous, because he himself was at the other end of the alley and saw the whole thing, just as Mr. Murdock related it.

"I jumps up. 'You're a liar, Heegan. I was buying booze for the two of you,' but a policeman nailed me, chocking off my rhetoric. Mr. Heegan leans over and whispers to the judge, while I got chilblains along my spine.

"Look here, kind judge," says I, real winning and genteel, 'this man is so good at explaining things away, ask him to talk off this bump over my ear. I surely didn't get a buggy spoke and laminate myself on the nut.'

"That'll do," says the judge. "Mr. Clerk, \$10 and costs. Charge, drunk and disorderly. Next!"

"Hold on there," says I, ignorant of the involutions of justice, 'I guess I've got the bulge on you this time. They beat you to me, judge. I ain't got a cent. You can go through me and be welcome to half you find. I'll mail you ten when I get home though, honest."

"At that the audience giggled, and the judge says: "Your humor doesn't appeal to me, Mr. Billings. Of course you have the privilege of working it out.' Oh, glory, the 'privilege!'"

"Heegan nodded at this, and I realized what I was against.

"Your honor," says I, with sarcastic refinements, 'science tells us that a perfect vacuum ain't possible, but after watching you I know better, and for you, Mr. Workingman's Friend, us to the floor,' and I run at Heegan.

"Pshaw! I never got started, nor I didn't rightfully come to till I rested in the workhouse, which last figger of speech is a pure and beautiful paradox.

"I ain't dwelling with glee on the next twenty-six days—\$10 and costs, at four bits a day—but I left there saturated with such hatred for Hee-



"I got her out at last and blazed away."

gan that my breath smelled of 'em. "I wanders down the river front, hoping the fortunes of war would deliver him to me dead or alive, when the thought hit me that I'd need money. It was bound to take another ten and costs shortly after we met, and probably more, if I paid for what I got, for I figgered on distending myself with satisfaction and his features with uppercuts. Then I see a sign, 'Nonunion Men Wanted—Big Wages.' In I goes and strains langwidge through a wire net at the cashier.

"'I want them big wages,' says I. "'What can you do?' "'Anything to get the money,' says I. 'What does it take to liquidate an assault on a labor leader?'"

"There was a white haired man in the cage who began to sit up and take notice.

"'What's your trouble?' says he, and I told him. "'If we had a few more like you we'd bust the strike,' says he, kind of sizing me up. 'I've got a notion to try it anyhow,' and he smites the

desk. 'Collins, what d'ye say if we tow the Detroit out? Her crew has stayed with us so far, and they'll stick now if we'll say the word. The unions are hungry and scrapping among themselves, and the men want to go back to work. It's just that devil of a Heegan that holds 'em. If they see we've got a tug crew that'll go they'll arbitrate, and we'll kill the strike.'

"Yes, sir," says Collins. "But where's the tug crew, Mr. Badrich?" "Right here! We three and Murphy, the bookkeeper. Blast this idleness! I want fight!"

"I'll take the same," says I, 'when I get the price.'

"That's all right. You've put the spirit into me, and I'll see you through. Can you run an engine? Good! I'll take the wheel, and the others 'll fire. It's going to be risky work, though. You won't back out, eh?"

"Reddy" interrupted Billings here loudly with a short of disgust, while "Bitter Root" ran his fingers through his hair before continuing. Martin was listening intently.

"The old man arranged to have a squad of cops on all the bridges, and I begin anticipating hilarities for next day.

"The news got out, of course, through the secrecies of police headquarters, and when we ran up the river for our tow it looked like every striker west of Pittsburg had his family on the docks to see the barbecue, accompanied by enough cobblestones and scrap iron to ballast a battleship. All we got going up was repartee, but I figgered we'd need armor getting back.

"We passed a hawser to the Detroit, and I turned the gas into the tug, blowing for the Wells street bridge. Then war began. I leans out the door just in time to see the mob charge the bridge. The cops clubbed 'em back, while a roof went up from the docks and roof tops that was like a bad

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Medical

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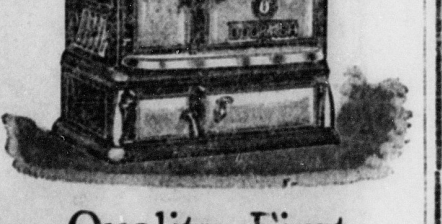
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