

How He Stopped the Blacklist (September 1902)

It was on a mixed train on one of the mountain roads in the Western states. The conductor and both brakemen had already shown me their old ARU cards, which they treasured with almost affectionate tenderness. The soiled, illegible scraps were souvenirs of the “war,” and revived a whole freight train of stirring reminiscences. The three weather-beaten trainmen were strangers prior to '94; they were off of three separate roads, and from three different states.

Each of the brakemen had told the story of his persecution after the strike. The companies had declared that no ARU striker should ever have another job on a railroad, and they were doing their level best to make good their brutal avowal. These two brakemen had to suffer long in the role of the “wandering Jew.” Again and again they had secured jobs, under assumed names and otherwise, but as soon as they were found out they were dismissed with the highly edifying information that the company no longer needed their services.

They were on the railroad blacklist. Only they know what this means who have been there. Many times had these brakemen been hungry, many times ejected from trains, often footsore after a weary walk to the next division point. But they bore it all and made no complaint. Fortunately they were both single men and their privations were at least free from the harrowing thought that wife and child were being tortured by their merciless persecutors. They finally conquered the blacklist and were once more allowed to become the slaves of the railroads.

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It was about noon when the conductor tapped me on the shoulder and invited me into the baggage end of the car to have dinner with the crew. They had their own kitchen and cooking utensils and had managed to dish up a most appetizing bill of fare. I was first served with a steaming platter of “mulligan,” a popular dish with the mountain men. Then followed cold

meat, bread and butter and hot coffee, topped off with a quarter section of pie.

The pipes were next lighted and a lively exchange of reminiscence followed.

The conductor was obliged to leave us for a time and while he was gone the two brakemen told me how he had "stopped the blacklist." It is a short but immensely suggestive story. The conductor, like all brave men, was too modest to tell it himself. Here it is :

Bill, that was the conductor's name, was running a train on the S—Railway when the strike of '94 came. He was also chairman of the local grievance committee. He lost out with the rest and took his medicine without a whimper. When he left home to look for a job his wife had the cheerful assurance that she and the two children would soon hear from him and that they would be united again at an early day.

Bill secured five jobs in straight succession. He was a first class railroad man and could fill any kind of position. But as fast as he got a job he lost it. The black demon was at his heels. He had offended his former master and now he and his loving wife and innocent babes must die.

The last job Bill had held good for some days before he was spied out and discharged. He drew \$15, but he did not send it to his wife, nor did he use it on himself. Bill had a grim determination written in every line of his swarthy face when he pocketed that \$15 and his discharge, and started toward the city. He stopped short before a hardware store and his eyes scanned the display in the window. In less than five minutes he had entered, investigated and emerged again.

With rapid strides the blacklisted man hurried toward the railroad station.

We next see Bill on the streets of his old home. His friends, if any remained, would scarce have recognized him. Upon his wan features there was an ugly look that boded ill to someone, and in his hip pocket a load six-shooter was ready for action.

The superintendent turned deadly pale when Bill entered. He instinctively read his indictment in Bill's grim visage before a word was spoken.

"What can I do for you, Mr. ——?" tremblingly asked the pilloried official.

"Not a damned thing," replied Bill, in a strange, hoarse voice.

“You know what I’m here for,” continued the victim of the blacklist, “and if you’ve got any prayers to offer before I make a lead mine of your carcass, you’d better begin at once.”

While Bill spoke the superintendent looked into the murderous pistol pointed at him by the desperate man, and an instant later his office was turned into a prayer meeting. Such piteous pleas were rarely heard from such coward lips.

Bill’s heart was touched; he would give the craven assassin another chance.

Withdrawing the weapon and shoving it into his pocket, Bill looked the official straight in the eye and in a steady voice said: “You have beaten me out of five jobs and you are responsible for my wife and babies being homeless and hungry. You know that there is not a scratch upon my record as an employee, nor a stain upon my character as a man. You have deliberately plotted to torture and kill an innocent woman and two babies who depend upon my labor, and by God, you deserve to die like the dog you are. But I’m going to give you another chance for your life — mark me, just one. I shall get another job, and I shall refer to you as to my service record.

If I lose that job, God damn your black heart, you’ll do your blacklisting in hell, not here, for I’ll send you there as sure as my name’s Bill.”

The superintendent drew a long breath of relief when Bill turned on his heels and left him alone. He did not doubt Bill’s word. It is hardly necessary to say that the blacklist was ended. Bill got the job and holds it to this day. Not a man on the road is more respected than he, especially by the officials.

Bill did not appeal to the courts. He took no chances on a brace game. His nerve and his six-shooter settled the case and there were no costs to pay.

Bill and his two brakemen are now socialists. The three hours I spent with those three men rolling over the western mountains I shall remember always with interest and satisfaction.

Published in *Wayland’s Monthly* [Girard, KS], September 1902, pp. 7-8. Reprinted as “Stopped the Black List” in *Debs: His Life, Writings, and Speeches*. Girard, KS: Appeal to Reason, 1908; pp. 297-300.