

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 unwonted ventures, etiquette forbade its mention.

Later I found him meditatively whittling out on the porch, and as the moment seemed propitious I inquired adroitly, "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 scorns 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 scare heads, in which I glimpsed the words, "Billings of Montana," "Bitter Root" on Arbitration," "A Lechnivar 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 punch 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 ca'tridges and talks about 'press notices.' Let's see 'em, Billings. You place '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 mutiny 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 peril' and the 'crying evil' good and strong, walking out from the stinks of the Union stockyards of Chicago into the Hmelight 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, stinnorrest, 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 intent, 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-slice the coal dust off of my 'tote.

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

"Get in," says I, and the way he showed others looked like he'd had sanitary training. I felt sort of drawn to him from the way he looked so ricker; took it straight and handing 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 tap it up like a man," says I—'like a cowman full-growed. Ever been west?"

"Nope," says he, 'born here.' "Well, I'm a stranger," says I, 'out absorbing such beauties of architecture and free lunch as offers along the line. If I ain't keeping you up I'd be glad of 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 temp: 'It all come up over a dose of dyspepsia.'—

"Back up," interrupted "Kink," squirming. "Are you plumb bug? Get together! You're certainly the Having 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 piously. "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 foller 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 'Oily' 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 tieup ever known. The hospitals and morgues was full of nonunion men, but the river was empty all right. Yes; he had a persuading method of arbitration quite convincing to the most calloused, involving the laying on of the lead pipe.

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

"'Oily' 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 'Oily' 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 split 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 surging and thrashed him agin the wall. In the shuffle Murdock shifts my ballast, though, and steams up the alley with my greenbacks, convoyed 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.

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

"'Stan' aside and lemme 'lectrocute 'im,' says I. I throwed 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 buns in the courtroom stomped and sahl, 'Hear, hear!' while up steps this Napoleon of the loafers.

"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, chucking off my rhetorics. Mr. Heegan leans over and whispers to the judge, while I got chillblains 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.

"'Fahaw! 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 Heegan.



"I got her out at last and blazed away." "I got 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 aising me up. 'I've got a notion to mislaid. I got her out at last and

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 snort 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 secretcies 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 roar went up from the docks and roof tops that was like a bad dream. I couldn't see her move none, though, and old man Badrich blowed again, expurgating himself of as nob by a line of cuss words as you'll muster outside the cattle belt.

"'Soak 'em,' I yells. 'Give 'em all the arbitration you've got handy. If she don't open, we'll jump her, and I lets out another notch, so that we went plowing and boiling toward the draw.

"It looked like we'd have to hurdle it sure enough, but the police beat the crowd back just in time. She wasn't clear open, though, and our barge crummed off the spiles. It was like a nigger butting a persimmon tree—we rattled off a shower of missiles like an abnormal hailstorm. Talk about your coast defense; they heaved everything at us from bad names to railroad iron, and we lost all our window glass the first clatter, while the smokestack looked like a pretzel with crumps.

"When we scraped through I looked back with pity at the Detroit's crew. She hadn't any wheeshouse, and the helmsman was due to get all the attention that was coming to him. They'd built up a barricade of potato sacks, chicken coops and bric-a-brac around the wheel that protected 'em somewhat, but even while I watched some Polack filtered a brick through and laid out the quartermaster cold, and he was drug off. Oh, it was refined and aesthetic!

"Well, we run the gantlet, presented every block with stuff ranging in tensile strength from insults to asphalt pavements and noise. Say, all the racket in the world was a whisper. I caught a glimpse of the old man leaning out of the pilothouse where a window had been, his white hair bristly and his nostrils h'listed, embellishing the air with surprising flights of gleeful profanity.

"'Hooray, this is living!' he yells, spying me shoveling the deck out from under the junk. 'Best scrap I've had in years.' And just then some baseball player throwed in from center field, catching him in the neck with a tomato. Gee, that man's an honor to the faculty of speech!

"I was doing bully till a cobblestone bounced into the engine room, making a billiard with my off knee. Then I got kind of peevish.

"Rush street bridge is the last one, and they'd massed there on both sides, like fens on a razorback. Thinks I, 'If we make it through here, we've busted the strike,' and I glances back at the Detroit just in time to see her crew pulling their captain, into the deck house limp and bleeding. The barricade was all knocked to pieces, and they'd flunked absolute. Don't blame 'em much either, as it was sure death to stand out in the open under the rain of stuff that come from the bridges. Of course with no steering she commenced to swing off. I yells: "Grab that wheel! Grab it quick! We'll hit the bridge! But it was like deaf and dumb talk in a boiler shop, while a wilder howl went up from the water front as they seen what they'd done and smelled victory.

"'We've got one chance,' thinks I, 'but if she strikes we're gone. They'll swamp us sure, and all the police in Cook county won't save enough for to hold services on.' Then I throwed a look at the opening ahead and the pessimisms froze in me.

"I forgot all about the resiliency of brickbats and the table manners of riots, for there, on top of a bunch of spiles, ca'm, masterful and bloated with perjuries, was 'Oily' Heegan, dictating the disposition of his forces, the light of victory in his shifty little eyes.

"'Ten dollars and costs!' I shrieks, seeing red. 'Lemme crawl up them spiles to you.'

"Then inspiration seized me. My soul riz up and grappled with the crisis, for right under my mit, coiled, suggestive and pleading, was one of the tug's heaving lines, 'bout a three-sighths size. I slips a running knot in the end and divides the coils, crouch-

ing behind the deck house till we come abeam of him; then I straightened, give it a swinging heave, and the noose sailed up and settled over him fine and daisy.

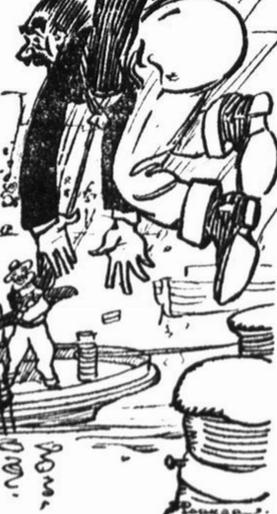
"I jerked back, and 'Oily' Heegan did a high dive from Rush street that was a geometrical joy. He hit kind of amateurish, doing what we used to call a 'belly buster' back home, but quite satisfying for a maiden effort, and I reeled him in astern.

"Your Chicago man ain't a gamy fish. He come up tame and squirting sewage like a dissolute porpoise, while I played him out where he'd get the thrash of the propeller.

"'Help!' he yells. 'I'm a drownding.'

"Ten dollars and costs," says I, letting him under again. 'Do you know you're drinking with this time, hey?'

"I reckon the astonishment of the mob was equal to Heegan's. Anyhow, I'm told that we was favored with such quietness that my voice sounded four blocks, simply aching with satisfaction.



"'Oily' Heegan did a high dive."

factions. Then pandemonium tore loose, but I was so engrossed in sweet converse I never noticed it or noticed that the Detroit had slid through the draw by a hair and we was bound for the blue and smiling lake.

"For God's sake lemme up," says Heegan, splashing along and looking strangely. I hauls him in where he wouldn't miss any of my ironies.

"I just can't do it, 'Oily.' It's wash day. You're plumb nasty with boycotts and picketings and compulsory arbitrations. I'm going to clean you up, and I sozzled him under like a wet shirt.

"I drag him out again and continues: "This is Chinamen's work, 'Oily,' but I lost my pride in the bridewell, thanks to you. It's tough on St. Louis to laundry you upstream this way, but maybe the worst of your heresies 'll be purified when they get that far.' You know the Chicago river runs uphill out of Lake Michigan through the drainage canal and into the St. Louis waterworks. Sure it does. Most unnatural stream I ever see about direction and smells.

"I was getting a good deal of enjoyment and infections out of him when old man Badrich ran back enameled with blood and passe tomato juice, the red in his white hair making his top look like one of these fancy ice cream drinks you get at a soda fountain.

"Here, here! You'll kill him," says he, so I hauls him aboard, dripping and clingy, wringing him out good and thorough—by the neck. He made a fine mop.

"These clippings," continued "Bitter Root," fishing into his pocket, "tell in beautiful figures how the last seen of 'Oily' Heegan he was holsystoning the deck of a sooty little tugboat under the admonishments and feet of 'Bitter Root' Billings of Montana, and they state how the strikers tried to get tugs for pursuit and couldn't and how all day long from the housetops was visible a tugboat madly cruising about inside the outer cribs, busting the silence with joyful blasts of victory, and they'll further state that about dark she steamed up the river, tired and draggled, with a bony looking cowboy inhaling cigarettes on the stern bits, holding a three foot knotted rope in his lap. When a delegation of strikers met her, inquiring about one D. O'Hara Heegan, it says like this." And Billings read laboriously as follows:

"Then the bronzed and lanky man arose with a smile of rare contentment, threw overboard the cigarette and, approaching the boiler room hatch, called loudly, 'Come out of that!' and the president of the Federation of Fresh Water Firemen dragged himself wearily out into the flickering lights. He was black and drenched and streaked with sweat; also he shone with the grease and oils of the engines, while the palms of his hands were covered with painful blisters from unwonted intimate contact with shovels and drawbars. It was seen that he winced fearfully as the cowboy twirled the rope end.

"He's got the makings of a fair fireman," said the stranger. 'All he wants is practice.'

"Then as the delegation murmured angrily he held up his hand and in the ensuing silence said: "Boys, the strike's over. Mr. Heegan has arbitrated."

CHRONICLINGS The best books are read by the best people. Blessed are the benevolent, who are also beneficent. No friend is worth anything that is not worth much. Meanness is petty cruelty, and cruelty grand meanness. Music's function is to be the Ponce de Leon fountain of the soul. It is a beautiful trait in a Christian character to think no evil, as well as to speak and do no evil.

ACCORDING TO UNCLE ABNER

The best way to find out how little any feller knows is just to listen to him.

A Prince Albert coat don't git a feller as far in a business way as it used to.

There is no use in claiming that you bought an umbrella, for nobody will believe it.

We never saw a mortgage shark who looked as though he ever enjoyed a good laugh.

When the average man gets sick he lays it to everything except whisky or tobacco.

One thing a kid can't understand is how his father kin use language that is wrong for him to use.

Very few up-to-date fellers nowadays carry their false teeth in their pocket wrapped up in a silk handkerchief.

I never yet have seen a society woman who could drink out'n a bubbly fountain and look as though she enjoyed it.

I have seen lots of fellers who could wear derby hats in the summer and be happy. It all depends upon the point of view, after all.

There is always work for willing hands to do. When a feller gets through mowing his lawn he kin start right in and mow it over again.

A feller finds out more about the true inwardness of automobiles in five days after he buys one than he found out in five years of looking at 'em and reading about 'em.—Chicago Journal

SOME POSTSCRIPTS

Tasmania boasts the richest tin mine in the world.

A household novelty is a lifter for removing jars from high shelves.

About 30,000,000 of the world's inhabitants use the Portuguese language.

Horseshoes attached by bolts around the hoof have been patented in England.

There are estimated to be at least 200,000 motor-boats in use in the United States.

The sixth international fisheries congress will be held at Ostend, Belgium, this month.

A patent has been granted to cover the manufacture of dog biscuits in the shape of bones.

To an area of more than 26,000 square miles Tasmania has a population of less than 200,000.

To keep dust out of the eyes and nose a silk gauze face shield for motorists has been invented.

Norway is to have one of the world's greatest hydroelectric plants, developing 216,000 horsepower.—Houston Post.

GINGER SNAPS

Love has many disguises; hatred few.

Prize fighting is boxing in a virulent stage.

A coming-out party is one who has just been fired.

Learning what not to do is in itself a liberal education.

Men admire clever women, and sometimes marry them.

When we say a man loses his temper we mean he finds it.

If some of us wait to be just before being generous we will never be generous.

Magazine poets have one great advantage over other writers—they do not have to think.

An insane asylum must be an attractive place—so many people are crazy to stay there.

Many would-be prophets have tried to bring the world to an end, but with poor success thus far.

If labor ever secures a divorce from capital the demand for alimony will be vigorously contested.