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HOBO JIM

By Harry Irving Greene

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DOWN the long, grey country road an ex-convicted came whistling ahead of a cloud of dust that trailed away behind it like smoke from a bush. In the middle of the road half a dozen little boys were congregated, long of neck, long of limb, fat of body, juicy, tempting—looking in the full sunlight. But deep there was a rattling gobble from the barn of the machine, an evening gobble from the throats of the turkeys, a cloud of feathers in the air and the man at the wheel passed on with a backward grin at the fowl as if he fattening by his wayside. Now more gobbler gathered to the central point," he chuckled.

From out of the long grass that filled the wayside a man arose, lean and hungry, and stood looking at the still jeering vehicle. Then he drew a huge, old-fashioned silver watch from his pocket and glanced at it. "Just dinner time, and I haven't had a taste of food for a year. Guess this is my lucky day!" he soliloquized. Then he picked up the bird and started for the house near by.

He opened himself for the beast and commenced devouring his find, loading handfuls of feathers to the winds, feasting of the juicy body with grifle of satisfaction. Then all at once he looked up to a near faced man with a big star on his vest was standing over him. "Come with me!" he commanded.

"To where?" gasped Hobo Jim.

"To the place where all turkey thieves go—down to the coop."

"But I didn't steal this bird—" Jim began, but was stopped short. He was startled into the open countenance of a dozen men, all leveling revolvers at his dropping face and—"All right, I'll go," he said, meekly.

Night had succeeded the country side and from out of it the snow was coming down in hard, frozen particles like tiny blind winds. Across the fields the wind came shrieking like a sharp knife in the cold, and Hobo Jim glanced anxiously about through the gloom. He had been in heaven from the "coop" only that day after two months of confinement in a dark hole caught with a dead turkey in his possession, and he shivered a bit beneath his thin clothes as he hurried along the lone road. He was more hurt by worse he was hungry, broke and friendless, and to be hungry, broke and friendless upon Christmas eve is hard enough luck for any man. Then as he peered, he saw through the darkness of the road side a glimmer of light that twinkled before him like a star, like a great star of hope and he hurried with his gaze fastened steadily upon it.

With a sudden groan of long experience he glanced quickly to the back of the building and peered through a window. It could see little inside the room from here, and as he gazed and sniffed at a rich and deep within him his stomach began clamoring like a famished wild cat for within a dozen feet of him was a table piled high with good things—the table about it the gorged family still sat nibbling. There is enough left for a dozen hungry and cold things to throw away," he muttered as his eyes roved over the board. Much encouraged by the sight he stretched forth his knuckles on the door sap, then pulling on his most sorrowful face stood awaiting his raps with a heart that fluttered anxiously.

The door opened and a man stood before it peering into the darkness. And as the lamp light from within fell upon the hobo cringing form, the face of the man upon the threshold darkened until it matched the night. "He is a vagabonding around here and looking for more of my turkeys," he said threateningly. "I have a notion to run you in again some night, also. Get out of here, thief."

"But I didn't steal that bird—" whined the caller. Then he paused suddenly, for once more he was staring into the mouth of that same unpleasant looking revolver. "Oh, I'll go all right," he added hastily.

Up the road he went hurrying, angry, disappointed, hungrier and cold of that ever. In the bottom of a pocket where he had plunged a hand for warmth his big, old-fashioned watch lay ticking and his fingers closed about it fondly. It was his only possession of slightest value. Twenty years ago it had been given to him upon a Christmas eve—twenty years ago in the days of his boyhood, and he had carried it with him intensively throughout all his wanderings. "I suppose I could get the price of a meal and a bed from that old thief," he mused, then his jaw set. "But I wouldn't part with it for the weight in greenbacks. It is the last thing she ever gave me, and I'll hang on to it if I hang for doing it. I'll beg, starve—yes, or help myself when nobody is looking before I'll part with it." He shoved it deeper into its place and bent forward against the wind.

Five minutes later he again paused suddenly. By the wayside another light was shining, and with a quick glance up and down the road he stood listening. Nothing came to his ears but the low growl of the wind and he hesitated no longer. Breaking into the yard with foot that fell as softly as the snowflakes themselves he once more peered through a window. There was no hobo table here, but instead he saw a bed upon which lay a white faced boy with a woman close beside him. He put his ear to the pane and listened. It was not long before he learned that the two were alone in the house, and at that good news Hobo Jim smiled approvingly.

He passed quietly to the kitchen door and tried the latch. The door was not locked and he entered with the stealth of a pantber. A store bed room with door ajar was adjoining and forming his place as he stealthily slipped along the wall. Here in darkness, he would hide beneath the bed, wait until all was still, and then in the early morning hours fill his stomach and pockets from the pantry of satisfaction. Then all at once he looked up to a near faced man with a big star on his vest was standing over him. "Come with me!" he commanded.

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