

## *A Wanderer's Scrapbook*

*A writer who has lived in thirty countries tells of his early struggles.*

By James Francis Dwyer

**I**N New York I had a hard time at first. Work wasn't plentiful, so I took a job as a streetcar conductor. After five days of "breaking-in," I was given charge of a car. The motorman looked me over and put a question out of the corner of his mouth. "Are you here for the job or for what you can make?" he asked.

I didn't understand the question, so I dodged a direct answer with a grin. That grin brought me trouble. The motorman thought that I was on the cars to thief, and to help me, he "dragged the road" by keeping as far as possible from the car ahead, so that I could find plenty of passengers.

I took sixty-one dollars in fares, and I turned the money over to the clerk at one in the morning. The motorman was waiting outside the office. When I came out, he asked for his share of the money I had thieved. When I said I hadn't thieved a nickel, he said: "Wot the 'ell did yer grin for when I asked you this mornin' wot you were on for? I want five dollars for draggin' the road for yer!"

I hadn't five dollars to give, and I wouldn't stand his abuse. We went behind the car-barns. He was a well-fed husky, that motorman. He gave me the finest thrashing that any man could desire. . . .

While working for the car company I was arrested for manslaughter. Running across town at midnight, the car hit a drunk who stumbled out of a saloon doorway. A policeman arrested the motorman and tried to arrest me, but the orders of the car company to conductors were strict on one matter: Each conductor had to get the names of five witnesses to an accident; it didn't matter whether these witnesses were for or against the company. The cop ran me round and round the car while I was scribbling down the names of men who said they had seen the accident. Finally I was grabbed and taken to the police station.

I gave my name. "Where are you from, Jim?" asked the station sergeant.

"Sydney, Australia," I answered.

"Glory be to God!" said the sergeant. "My two sisters, Mary and Bridget, are living in Sydney! Tell me all about the place." He spoke to the policeman who had brought me in. "What the devil did you arrest this boy for?" he cried. "He wasn't running the car! He was on the tail end of it. It's a head of mud that you've got on your two fat

shoulders! Now then, Jim, tell me what Sydney is like."

He ordered in coffee and crullers, and I stayed yarning with him till daylight. The five witnesses said the drunk met his death through his own stupidity, and the motorman was released.

**O**N my first morning in New York I turned down the first job offered to me in the U.S. A theatrical chap made me an offer of a dollar and a half a day to stand in costume of the twelfth century before a theater in Forty-second Street where they were playing "The Road to Yesterday." I told him I wanted the road to tomorrow.

An hour later I was wrapping circulars with twenty other men in the office of the Cananea Mining Company. It was, on account of newspaper experience, a game I was smart at, and my quickness drew a rebuke from a villainous "bum" who objected to speed. The wage of ten cents an hour in his opinion did not encourage speed, and he made spiteful remarks about my efforts.

The office boss noticed that I understood the business. At ten o'clock he spoke to me. "You get fifteen cents an hour if you can move these fellows," he said. "You're boss of the table."

"You're fired," I said to the bum who had been abusing me. I was pleased. This matched up with my dreams of America. On my first day in the country I was boss of twenty men and getting a nickel an hour extra! I worked there till ten that night, drew one-dollar-eighty and went back to the dosshouse. I had great dreams.

Each day for fourteen days I found a new job. Not great jobs. Sufficient for food and a bed only.

During the lunch hours I ran around the newspaper offices. Now and then I managed to speak to a reporter. I told them I was a newspaper man who had come to the U.S. to write stories. They were amused. One or two bought me a drink so that they could listen to my accent! They were good fellows, but they told me I had the same chance of writing salable stories as a Bowery bum had of becoming King of England.

Well, in thirty years, I have sold hundreds of tales to American editors.

**W**HILE in New York I attempted the stage. There was a music hall on Third Avenue where one night in each week was given over to amateur tryouts. If the public liked you a lot, you got five dollars; if you didn't you "Got the Hook." When the audience howled, a long stick with a hook in the end was thrust out from the wing, and you were ignominiously pulled into the darkness.

I was hungry, and I went there with a man who told me about the five-dollar prize. He was, so he said, a fine tenor, and he was going to try for the money.

He tried, all right, but the crowd thought little of it. He was hauled back into the wings, and then hunger pushed me forward.

I couldn't sing, but as a youngster I had been presented with a lot of trashy books as prizes for reciting. I offered to recite "Rio Grande's Last Race."

They were evidently not believers in the occult. At the top of my lungs I shouted:

*"Dead men on horses long since dead—  
They clustered on the track,  
The warriors of the days long fled,  
They moved around with noiseless tread—  
Bay, chestnut, brown, and black!"*

"The hook!" screamed the crowd. "Give it to him! The hook!"

I got it. It curled around my neck and I was dragged into the darkness.

"You've got the manner," said the proprietor, consolingly, "but they don't like the way you talk. You're some sort of a furriner, ain't yer?"

Next day it was snowing heavily, and as snow shovelers were getting twenty-five cents an hour, I applied for a job. The boss thought I lacked the physique.

As I was moving away, he said: "S'y, do you allus talk like dat or wus yer jest puttin' it on?"

I admitted that it was my usual manner of speech, and he kindly offered me advice. "A boid who talks like dat'll get nowhere here," he said. "Now, I'm from Noo Joisey, an' you see de difference immejitly in my chatter an' yours."

I admitted that I did. He was so pleased at my immediate recognition of his superior diction that he gave me a quarter and told me to come back next day, when he might be able to place me.

I didn't go back. I got a job at window-cleaning.

**A**LITTLE later a nice old lady offered me a job. She was seventy-three years of age and had the sweetest face I have ever seen. I did a few odd jobs for her during my second week in the United States, and one day she called me in for a private conference. Was I broke? I said I had fifteen cents. Was I game? I grinned and answered that I was game enough to run when the odds were against me.

"And you want to get on in America?" she murmured.

"Sure," I answered.

She leaned toward me and spoke in a whisper. "These two houses I own," she said. "A firestick thrust into them one night would bring me twenty-five thousand. A bright boy like yourself could do it. It'd be a ten-dollar bill in your empty pocket."

That was a ten-dollar bill I let slide. But I still think of her sweet old face!

**I**N 1916 I went back to America. Taking a walk in New Jersey, I spoke to a farmer who had never been more than ten miles from his own house. We yarned by the roadside, and I am frank enough to say that I bragged about my own travels and what I had seen.

"Well, well," said the farmer, "everything seems to have happened to you, and nothing has ever happened to me."

A youth of eighteen called him to his lunch at that moment, and I shouldered my knapsack to walk on. The farmer rubbed his head and looked at the boy. "The night he was born, something happened that you might like to hear, mister," he said.

I heard it, went back to New York, typed it quickly and sold it to a magazine. Here it is in a few words: There was a snowstorm on that particular night, and when the farmer had walked three miles to call the doctor, he found that the medico, who was a bachelor and a ladies' man, had been shot through the thigh and was dying on the floor of his surgery.

The farmer, at the doctor's direction, tied the severed artery, took the physician on his shoulders and carried him the three miles to the house. The boy was born half an hour after his arrival, and an hour later the doctor died in the parlor of the farm house. "You'll pass his grave on the road to Whippany," said the farmer. "My ol' woman goes down there every week and puts flowers on it."