

1933

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Jack Williamson

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Recommended Citation

Williamson, Jack. "We Ain't Beggars." *New Mexico Quarterly* 3, 3 (1933). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol3/iss3/12>

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"We Ain't Beggars"

By JACK WILLIAMSON

HE took the crushed stale bun out of his overalls pocket. It was the last of the four he had bought in Ft. Worth for six pennies. He had meant to save it for tomorrow . . .

The dog lying against him whined and licked at his hand.

In the cold faint moonlight that fell through the half-open door of the box car he broke the dry bun carefully in half.

"Here, Tige, ol' man. It ain't much. But we'll git to Uncle Jethro's tomorrow, shore."

The bony dog gnawed and gulped the piece of bread. Slowly, with lingering joy, the boy ate his own share, chewing each frugal bite until it became a sweetish liquid in his mouth.

The car lurched and jolted. The boy's body was sore at hips and shoulders from lying on the bare splintery floor. Through the door rang the incessant rumble of the wheels, and a white arm of moonlight moved back and forth to rest on one or another of the untidy men sleeping with their heads on paper bundles. In worn overalls and thin blue shirt the boy's slight body was cold; he was glad for Tige's warm body against him.

A man groaned and rose. A match lit a weary, unshaven face, cast uncertain shadows over motionless bodies. Reek of cheap tobacco filled the car. The man shook out a dusty vest that had been rolled up under his head; he put it on, and walked across the sleepers to close the door.

The roar of the wheels was a little diminished; but yet it filled the car, mighty and unending.

In the new inky darkness the boy felt slightly warmer. He turned over, and drew Tige's rough body closer to him. He tried to go to sleep, and wished that he had another bun.

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He licked fragments of the last from the corners of his mouth and chewed at them and swallowed.

The hammering of the wheels grew slower and ceased. The train had stopped. In the new silence the boy could hear the snores of sleeping men. The car started again, with a jerk that slid his sore body over the rough planks, stopped as abruptly.

The door had been flung open; the man in the vest peered out furtively.

"Wake up, you guys," he called. "The dirty hogheads have set us out, to hell and gone from no place!"

Men stirred and yawned and groaned. They struck matches that lit the car fugitively, rolled cigarettes, moved toward the door with their bundles.

The boy slipped out of the door and took Tige in his arms to set him down. Cold dry air struck through his thin cotton garments. In the dead light of the narrow waning moon he saw that the car stood on a siding, in a string of empties.

"She's coupling up over yonder," said the man in the vest.

He walked away, wearily cursing. The boy followed him through the line of cars, calling to Tige.

He saw the train on another track, the engine headlight blazing on telegraph poles and a section shack. A man with a flashlight was coming back along the cars.

"A damn shack," muttered the man in the vest. "Get out of sight."

He and the boy stepped back between two cars.

"He'll play hell keeping me off. I'm riding this damn rattler to the end of the division. And then I'm going to eat. Ain't had a sit down since I left K. C."

There was a pause, while they shivered in the cold moonlight that struck through between the cars. The man looked cautiously out. Then the boy asked:

"You got folks waitin' for you?"

"Hell, no. I stem what I get."

Curiously, the man looked at the thin, proud childish face, pallid and grimy in the moonlight.

"Don't you bum, kid?"

The boy shook his head.

"Hell, it's easy. Just stick with me and we'll stem hell out of the next dump."

"I ain't no beggar."

The dog put his velvety head up¹ against the boy's hand, and whined. The boy looked down at him quickly, and patted the soft fur.

"Tige and me are hungry," he said. "But we ain't goin' to beg. We got folks."

His slight shoulders stiffened as he looked back to the man.

"Don't be a fool, kid. We can mooch enough in an hour to last two days. Hell, it's easy. No sense starving. You'll get weak, and fall under the wheels."

"We ain't beggars. I'm goin' to my Uncle Jethro."

The man started to laugh. Then the whistle sounded two blasts and the train began to move.

"Them sons of bitches set out all the empties," he grumbled. "We gotta ride on top."

He swung on the end of a car as it passed.

The next was a tank car. The boy lifted Tige in his arms and set him on the running board. The dog seemed very heavy; he staggered a little beneath the weight.

"Easy, ol' man. I'm a-comin'."

He climbed on the steps at the end of the car and walked back along the narrow plank to Tige. By the ladder at the middle of the car he sat down, swinging off his feet. He grasped a rung of the ladder with one hand, and curved an arm around Tige's body.

The boy felt a little queer and dizzy, but he set his jaw and held up his chin.

"We ain't beggars, are we, ol' man?" he whispered at last to the dog. "I reckon he was right about me gittin' weak. An' I'm shore sorry about you havin' to go without. But I can't beg. An' we got Uncle Jethro."

The train gathered speed. The wind grew stronger. Most of the buttons were gone off the shirt, and the wind whipped it away from the boy's body. He was colder than he had been in the box car.

The car swayed and lurched. The sound of the wheels was the clangor of sledges on a thousand anvils. Ceaseless, powerful, terrible. A demoniac yell that never ended.

The black edge of the grade raced endlessly back at his feet, and interminable rows of weeds. Sometimes cinders rained on him. When one got in his eye, he forgot the cold until tears had washed it out. The arm with which he grasped the ladder was stiff and numb, but he dared not move to exercise the cold and the cramp from his body while the train plunged rocking through the night. He or Tige might fall, and the screaming, inexorable wheels were very near. . .

Dull eternities dragged away, and he clung shivering to the cold iron.

Lee Haskell came of a proud breed. His mother he knew only as a tight-mouthed face on a fading photograph. He and his father had always lived in lonely independence in the pine shack at the edge of the stony forty acres. Lee did not remember when he had been too small to go with his father to the cotton patch.

A proud and lonely breed. They asked no favors, and fate had given them none. All the year before Lee's father had been too infirm to help in the field. Lee did his stubborn best. But cotton was five cents, and the boll weevil got into the crop. His father sold the best half the forty, and could not pay the taxes on the rest. He would not ask for a loan.

That spring he was feebler still. Lee put in the crop

alone. When the cultivation was but well begun, Toby, the old mule, foundered himself when he broke into Jim Cole's green corn, and died. Jim Cole, owner of a rich bottom farm, came next day, driving a team of grays to a riding cultivator. He found Lee's father sitting on a rickety chair in the shade of the lone peach tree by the shack.

"I'm right sorry about your mule foundering," he said. "Colonel,"—the stiff pride of the old man's bearing must have won him the title, for he had seen no military service—"Colonel, I'm going to loan Lee my outfit to plow out his cotton."

The old man stiffened in his chair.

"Thankee, sir," he said. "But I reckon we can make out."

"Why, I won't be needing them for a week, Colonel. We just got through this morning."

"We ain't askin' nothin', sir, from nobody."

Jim Cole laughed. "I know you didn't ask, Colonel. But I'd be glad to loan you the team."

"Thankee, sir. But we don't want it."

When Cole had abandoned his efforts to lend the team and driven away, the old man called Lee out of the shack where he had been preparing their meal.

"Did you go beggin' Jim Cole for help, boy?" his shrill voice cracked accusingly. "Ain't you got no pride? Beggin'! An' off a damn Yankee!"

"I didn't ask him, Pa. I ain't spoke a word to him since Toby died."

"I'm glad to hear it, Lee my son. We ain't no poor white trash. And I reckon we can get along without askin' help from nobody. You jest finish choppin' out the cotton, Lee. An' then get what weeds you can with the hoe. An' don't be thinkin' of beggin'!"

During the summer, as Lee toiled in the shrunken, weed-grown field, the old man took by degrees to his bed. One flaming noon, when the boy trudged in from the field,

sweat-streaked and dusty, worn hoe on his shoulder, he found Mrs. Cole standing in the door of the shack. A large, energetic, jovial woman; Lee had always liked her. In a basket on her arm were a pail of milk and loaves of white bread and a pat of new butter.

"You're a sick man, Colonel Haskell," she was saying. "I tell you corn pone and salt meat ain't best for you. You're stomach ain't as strong as it used to be. It calls for lighter victuals."

Lee's father was sitting up on the rusty iron bed.

"Thankee, ma'm," he said. "But I reckon Lee and I can take care of ourselves. We ain't beggars."

Three weeks later he was dead.

Lee remembered the gossiping company that sat up all night with the corpse, while hammers tapped away in the shed behind, fashioning the pine coffin. And then the man who came with the sheriff, to claim the rest of the farm for taxes.

Mrs. Cole came again, and wanted Lee to go home with her.

"I know you're a good boy, Lee," she said. "Jim and me want you to come and live with us. We'll be good to you. You won't have to work so hard; you'll have time to go to school, and everything. Jim and me always wanted a boy of our own."

Lee stood with tears in his eyes, and she came to him and pressed his trembling body against her soft bosom. Fiercely he broke away from her arms, chin up, fists clenched.

"I can look after myself," he choked. "Tige and me, we ain't beggars."

"But honey, Jim and me want you. And you ain't got a soul in the world to go to."

"Yes, I got folks," stammered Lee. "I got my Uncle Jethro."

"Your uncle? Where does he live, child?"

"Pa always said he was in Denver. He went there the year I was born. He's a paper hanger."

"But hon, does he know you're coming?"

"No, mam, we never heard from him after he started out. Pa was always lookin' for a letter. But he tol' me he knowed Uncle Jethro was goin' to Denver."

Her strong soft arms went around his body. He knew that she was crying, too, and felt a strange comfort.

"You must come stay with Jim and me, child, till we find him."

Lee had heard tramp cotton pickers talk about riding the freights. That night he started.

Dawn came. A white gleam that slowly drowned the thin moon and the hard clear stars. The train hammered on and the gray light brought no warmth.

Lee was sleepy.

He could not relax. He dared not loosen his grasp upon the ladder or withdraw the guarding arm that held Tige against him . . . The pounding, ringing wheels were very near . . . He tried not to close his eyes, but the lids slipped down. Again and again he yawned.

Little gaps came in his consciousness, when he had been on the edge of sleep. They made it seem that he had been forever on the car, that the crashing ring of steel on steel would never end.

White sun struck him, feebly warm. The chill receded gradually from his limbs. But still they were cramped and stiff.

Yet he fought the desire to sleep, jerking himself back again and again from just beyond the brink, but alarmed into wakefulness only for moments by the threat of screaming steel.

The train lurched on.

The sun was high and Lee at last warm again when it slowed. He saw they were entering a hollow among bare hills. Desire to sleep had almost left; he was hungrier. He looked eagerly toward the town ahead.

Men were climbing from the train. He waited until it was rolling slowly, then threw himself off. He had meant to land on his feet, but he stumbled and fell in the weeds. It was strange how weak and tired he felt, when he was not so hungry as he had been yesterday. Giddy, and feeling almost that he was swimming instead of walking.

Tige yelped and leapt off the plank and came running back to him. He yawned and whined and licked the boy's hand.

"Wisht I had somethin' for you, ol'—ol' man," Lee choked. "But I can't beg. I jes' can't!"

On a weed-grown open space near the track he approached three shabby men about a fire. One was cutting up cabbage and potatoes in a grimy tin bucket; and the scent of steaming coffee made the boy's head swim.

"Please, sir," Lee addressed the one who looked up at him. "Is this Denver? I'm lookin' for my Uncle Jethro." And he added hastily. "His name is Jethro Wade."

The unshaven man scanned him, and grinned.

"Hell no, kid. This burg's Trinidad. You can make Denver by night, though. Just hop the Rio Grande around the other end of the yards. She pulls out in about an hour."

He jerked his thumb.

Lee swayed, and bit his lip.

"You—you ain't jokin', Mister. I rode on the side of an oil car, so long! You don't really mean this ain't Denver?"

The man started to grin, and then looked quickly away.

"Honest, kid. But you can make it today, easy. Better sit down and have a fill of slum with us."

"Much oblige, sir," Lee said wearily. "But we'll be gittin' on."

He turned stiffly away. Tige went whining up to the man by the fire.

"Hungry, pup?"

"Here, Tige! Come here!" the boy called sternly. "We ain't —"

His voice broke; he walked away hastily, the dog reluctantly at heel.

"How you making it, kid?" came a hail.

It was the man of the vest—the garment by day was a dingy green.

"I'm lookin' for the place to git on the cars again."

"Had anything to eat?"

"No. I'm goin' to Denver, to my Uncle Jethro."

The man came toward Lee.

"Hell, kid, you look all washed up. Come on with me. Let's mooch something, and eat."

"I ain't goin' to beg," said Lee. "Not when I got folks to go to."

"Listen, kid, you're starving. You gotta eat."

The boy looked stubbornly away.

"Well, anyhow, let's move on. The train leaves out up this way."

They passed in front of a cafe. Lee saw men sitting at a counter inside, heard the rattle of thick dishes. He turned his face away, and hurried on. The man in the green vest lingered. Crisp fragrance of new bread smote Lee with intolerable yearning; he stopped and looked back.

A bakery truck had stopped in front of the cafe; the driver was getting out. The lingering man spoke to him.

"Sure, buddy," said the driver. "I've got plenty of stale bread. Rolls too."

He reached into the truck, produced a loaf of bread and a package of brown cinnamon rolls. The unshaven man stood eyeing his prizes with visible satisfaction.

"Hit him when he comes out, kid," he advised. "He's got plenty more. Hell, kid, you're starving. You'll never get to Denver unless you eat. You'll fall off the train."

The delicious odor of fresh bread floated around the boy. He swallowed, and took an unsteady step toward the

door of the cafe. Then he clenched his thin black hands, and thrust them hard into the pockets of his overalls.

"I ain't a beggar," he muttered. "Not so long as I got folks."

He went back to the tracks and stumbled along them until he came to the caboose of the motionless train. Walking along beside it, toward the engine blowing off steam far away at the head, he looked for an empty car in which he could lie down. He didn't feel like holding on to the outside again. But all the cars were sealed.

A rough man strode down upon him.

"Get the hell out of the yards, you! You damn sure ain't going to ride the train out!"

Lee hurried on, the bull followed him. They came to more men waiting; the bull herded them all down the track, left them at last to sit down wearily.

The engine whistled two blasts, began laborious puffing.

The man in the green vest was suddenly beside Lee, holding out a tempting, fragrant cinnamon roll.

"Here, kid. Take this. Hell, you ain't able to hop it, without something in your gut."

His hand moved toward it involuntarily; he felt the quick saliva flowing in his mouth.

Then he changed the movement to a weak slap, and buried his face between his knees.

"I won't—" he sobbed. "I won't be a beggar!"

The haggard, untidy men waiting got to their feet, slung their packs and bundles to their bodies, dully cursing the bull.

The train came roaring down. They trooped forward, running one by one with the cars, swinging upon the ladders.

Lee felt dizzy when he first stood up; he waited until his head had cleared a little. The others were all gone when he

lifted Tige in his arms and staggered toward the rushing cars.

A tank car came rumbling by, and he set the dog on the running board. The end of the car jerked past. He tried to run with it, seized the ladder. It was moving too fast. They had told him not to catch the rear end of a moving car, but he didn't want to leave Tige.

The world went abruptly gray, and spun; and a strangely delightful lassitude descended upon him. He was unconscious that his foot had missed the step; he hardly felt the iron rung jerk itself savagely from his hands. For an instant, very near, he saw cruel bright steel, and the great wheels thundering . . .

Tige leapt yelping off the car. He fell rolling in the weeds and ran back, to stand whining by the track until the roaring train had gone.