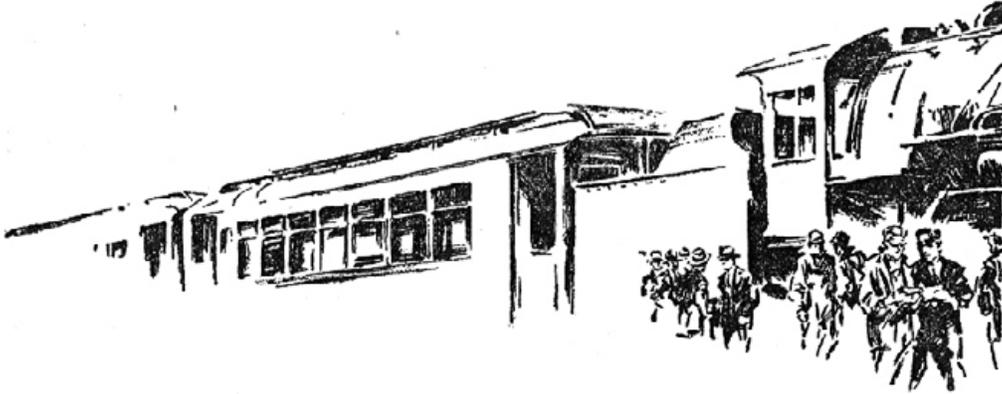


*Of all Trains for a Hobo to Pick to Ride the  
Rods on—the Presidential Special!*



## PRESIDENTIAL SPECIAL

By DUANE HOPKINS

**A**T BEST, little “Stubby” McDougal was a boomer nut-splitter. At worst, he was just a hobo. Stubby’s big weakness was quitting shop jobs and yielding to the call of the open road. He loved his carefree wandering. There were few times in his life when he really yearned for the locomotive pits. Today was one of those rare times.

It was a bitter raw day of early November, with a threat of the first snow of winter in the cutting wind that lashed down from the Great Lakes on the north. Stubby was riding a long westbound freight, riding the roofs of the loaded manifest. “The chill wind whistled over the cars and ripped through his ragged clothing. His nose felt like an icicle. He was so cold that he forgot about being hungry. He began to wonder if he would freeze to death before the train stopped. A greasy drop pit in a steam-heated back shop would have looked like paradise itself to him at that moment:

When finally the train halted to take a siding switch, Stubby McDougal dropped

shivering to the ground. He had planned to ride straight through to the big city. There would be soup kitchens and bread lines there. There would be a charity flop for the night, and possibly a warm roundhouse job tomorrow. But he was frozen out. He could stand it no longer on those windswept jouncing roofs. Stubby was ready to abandon his travels for the time being at this lonely siding among the yellow corn fields, and to build a thawing fire beside the track.

As the train drew slowly into the siding, he caught a grabiron ladder and rode a lumbering box up to the switch. A brakeman was standing beside the target there, waiting to throw the points when the caboose cleared the main line.

“Pretty cool out on the tops, ain’t it, ‘bo?” grinned the shack as Stubby swung off beside him.

“Cool? Say, skipper, it’s plumb chilly!” Stubby whipped his arms about him to start his blood circulating. “I sure can’t hold you down for another three hours into the city. It looks damn hungry around here, too. But I’d rather starve than

freeze.”

**A**BOVE the slow click of wheels rolling over the switch there suddenly sounded an angry blast of a chimer whistle from the rear. The brakeman stepped clear of the cars and glanced back along the track. Beyond the caboose a dazzling headlight loomed gleaming in the gathering dusk.

At once the man at the switch whirled around and flung his lantern up over his head.

“Tear sand, hogger!” he yelled at the freight engine moving sluggishly up the siding a half mile ahead. “Get your tail clear, you lazy teakettle loungers! We’re holding up the big parade!”

Finally the caboose rolled indolently over the switch and clear of the high steel. The freight brakeman shot the switch closed behind it, then swung a wide white highball to the following engine.

“If you’re cold and hungry, ‘bo, ride that one,” he called to Stubby beside the track, and laughed as if at some good joke as he swung aboard the caboose. “Go ahead and pick up the blinds. *She* won’t take no three hours to make town.”

Stubby pondered. He was famished as well as frozen. Here was a passenger, drifting slow, that he could blind into the city. The tank would be warmer than a box roof, with smoke and engine gases whipping back over the cab. The trip would be fast and short. He remembered the soup kitchens, the warm free flop. He came to a quick decision. No use starving out here in the country just for the sake of a wayside fire.

**T**HE big Pacific whistled and lunged ahead at the clear block. Sparks spit in a red whirlwind from her short stack. Her tall drivers spun and clattered over the switch frog. Stubby took three running

steps and swung up on the foot rail at the rear end of the tender tank.

“This must be the Midwestern Limited,” he said to himself as he climbed up on the flat tank. “I’m in luck. Sure glad that freeze-out drag slowed ‘er down for me.”

The explosive engine exhaust quickened tic into a deafening staccato. The tank began to lurch and roll. A long string of varnished wagons streaked along behind. Sere corn fields fled past in the November twilight. Stubby sat down on the tank with his back to the cab, using the rear flange of the coal bunker for a back rest and windbreak. He rolled and lit a cigarette, there with only the coal pile between him and the men in the cab, and started to puff away on the pill contentedly.

Suddenly a deep voice bellowed directly in back of his neck.

“Put up your hands, there!”

Stubby flipped away his cigarette and obeyed.

“Now get down in the cab before I drill you!”

He rose and climbed over into the coal. A grim man in a blue serge suit stood on the coal pile, an ugly automatic in his hand. Stubby stepped past him in silence and slid down to the cab apron in a miniature landslide of slacked lignite. The man followed him, gun in hand.

“Now, feller, what the devil are you doing on this train?”

Grim eyes surveyed Stubby in the bright cab light, searching his honest if grimy and bewhiskered face. Stubby had thought that the fireman had discovered him, but he noticed now the blue serge suit, and the engine crew in their accustomed places.

“Just riding, chief,” he replied nonchalantly; and thought to himself, “A railroad bull! But how come a detective in

a passenger cab?"

"Do you know what train you're on?" roared the special agent.

"Sure. Midwestern Limited. Extra fine, extra fast, extra fare—and extra tough on 'boes,"

The bull cursed. "You idiot! You're on the Presidential Special!"

The information had little immediate effect on Stubby. He frowned slightly, and remarked, "Didn't know the road had a train by that name."

"It's not a name, dumbness. This is the President's special train!"

"Oh. Then the brass hats are out traveling over their lines?"

The detective threw up his hands in disgust.



"Listen, tramp," he explained in detail. "Not the head of the railroad—the President of the United States! Ever hear of him? Ever hear that there's a national election coming off next week, and that the President is making important speeches around the country?"

As the full significance of his situation dawned on Stubby, he had to reach out to steady himself against the side of the swaying cab. His knees had somehow become very weak and threatened to buckle under him. At last he managed to grin and say feebly:

"My mistake, chief. Guess I picked me a hot spot this time."

"You'll know it, before you're done," declared the detective. Then he softened a bit. "Sorry, buddy, but I'll have to turn you over to Secret Service agents when we reach the city. I know a harmless hobo

when I see one, but you'll have a steep grade to pull with the Government men. They'll suspect you of having designs of the President's life, sure, after this."

"And there's no chance for a quick lam out the gangway?"

"Not a chance, buddy. This is serious business."

The railroad officer holstered his gun and directed Stubby to sit down behind the fireman, himself dropping on the seatbox beside the engineer. Thus passed the first of two exciting incidents in the cab of the Presidential Special as it sped westward across the midwestern corn fields that raw November evening.

**F**OR Stubby McDougal, however, the excitement was just beginning. The more he dwelt on his plight, the more excited and worried he became. He had no desire to get mixed up with the United States Secret Service. For all he knew, he was at that moment headed straight toward a Federal penitentiary for sabotage, for anarchism, for attempted assassination of the President. Riding in the rocking cab, Stubby began to envision the gray walls of Leavenworth opening to receive him. His imagination outraced the racing locomotive.

Presently the fireman got up from his stoker controls to peek in at his fire. At once a deep scowl crossed his face in the flamelight. Quickly he stepped across to speak to the engineer. The grizzled old hoghead snapped back a terse order and glowered at the steam gauge. After another glance at the fire, the tallowpot returned to his seatbox to fiddle nervously with the stoker.

Thereafter at short intervals the fireman rose and peered into the firebox. With each peering his scowl deepened. The engineer became tense on his seat, eyeing the needle more than the line

ahead. Even the detective became interested, fidgety. At last Stubby asked the fireman what the trouble was, raising his voice above the steady thunder of the exhaust.

“Leaking flue,” was the shouted reply. “She’s spraying water from the flue sheet onto the fire. Getting worse right along, too. Put the fire out before long, maybe. Damn all boilermakers!”

**S**UDDENLY steam began to issue from the cracks around the firebox door. The fireman leaped down on the air-trip. The engineer jumped across the cab deck to gaze into the steam-filled combustion chamber. There was a hurried conference in front of the boiler head, joined in by the detective. Stubby heard snatches of excited conversation.

“We’ll never get through. She’ll let loose in a minute and drown the fire. Engine failure—the President scheduled for a speech in the city—twenty thousand people waiting in the auditorium—on the air over a national network—ten minutes after we’re due in!”

Stubby McDougal had railroaded in the locomotive pits long enough to know what an engine failure on the road meant. Even with an ordinary train, a mechanical breakdown was the worst calamity in railroading, except for an actual wreck. Should the Presidential Special, the crack train of all trains, stall at a time like this, with countless people in every corner of the land waiting to hear the Chief Executive speak, it would rock the transportation world to its foundations. The unfortunate railroad would be years living down the disgrace. Throughout the entire country the division would be the laughingstock of railroader and traveler alike. And many a neck would feel the ax for this night’s folly.

**T**HE little tramp shopman climbed down off the fireman’s seatbox and joined the others on the cab deck. Like them, he stooped to look in at the fire. Through the flamelit steam in the firebox he saw a stream of water jetting back from the flue sheet at the forward end of the chamber, relentlessly extinguishing the glowing coals. The squirting water moved in a slow arc as the leaking flue beading opened steadily under the tremendous hydraulic pressure behind it. A wet, black splotch was swiftly expanding across the white fire bed. A quarter of the fire was out already, and the steam pressure dropping.

“Say,” said Stubby to the fireman. “Why don’t you calk that flue before it blows out and washes your fire through the grates? It won’t take but a minute.”

“Just a minute to calk,” agreed the tallowpot. “But we’d have to stop and dump the fire, and then let the box cool off before we could climb into it. Then we’d have to build another fire and work up a head of steam. That’d take hours!”

“I don’t mean that,” corrected Stubby. “I mean, why don’t you bead that tube now, while you’re running?”

The fireman gazed at him in amazement.

“Are you nuts?” he demanded. “How are you going to reach a flue sheet on the far side of fourteen feet of roaring firebox?”

**S**TUBBY rubbed his bewhiskered chin thoughtfully. He peered in through the firebox door again. Then slowly a broad smile spread across his grimy face in the fierce flamelight. The firebox was a blazing white inferno, but—but sixty seconds inside it might not be so dreadful as long years in Leavenworth!

“I’ll plug that leaker for you,” he announced to the men in the cab. “Right

now, on the fly!"

"You're nuts," repeated the fireman.

"Absolutely impossible!" asserted the engineer.

"Pipe down, buddy"—this from the detective. "I thought you were crazy for trying to ride this train, but you must be a raving lunatic to want to climb into that firebox."

"Just the same, I mean it," persisted the little boomer shopman. "I ain't a boilermaker by trade, but I'm a master nut-splitter with ten years on roundhouse running repair. I know what hot work is, and I can dry up that flue head in sixty seconds with a machinist hammer."



The others remained skeptical, incredulous, scoffing. Stubby turned directly to the engineer.

"Give me a chance, dad," he pleaded. "I've got a good reason for wanting to do this. And you've got a good reason for letting me try. You must be the finest hogger on the division to've been honored with this run. Think what it'll mean to your record to leave the Big Chief from the White House stranded in a corn field!"

The speech hit home. With bowed head the grizzled engineman admitted that the impending engine failure would break his old heart and mean the end of his railroading days. His suddenly blurred eyes wandered up to the steadily falling gauge, and back down into the chilling firebox once more. Then he said huskily:

"It's our only chance to get through, bo. Go to it! And God help you—in

there!"

AT ONCE Stubby McDougal assumed complete charge of the engine cab. He flew about giving orders. Crew and officer leaped to obey. The engineer procured a machinist hammer from the cab tool box. The fireman unearthed an armful of burlap rags from his locker cupboard. The detective ripped the canvas drop curtain from the cab roof above the gangway. Stubby himself stacked planks, in front of the firebox door, stop boarding from the coal bunker.

When these tasks were done Stubby, watching the fire closely, had the engineer close his throttle to a point where it was barely cracked open. Then he gathered the three men around him to issue final instructions.

"Dad," he said to the engineer, "your throttle is set at just the right place now to carry the smoke and gas out the flues. Whatever you do, don't move it while I'm in there! If you close it, I'll suffocate. If you open it farther, the stack draft will burn me to a cinder. Understand?"

The hoghead nodded, and Stubby turned to the fireman.

"Big boy," he said, "you ride your stoker and keep the screw turning. Keep it piling in green coal behind me. Bury your fire. I can stand black smoke better than white heat. Okay?"

"Right," answered the tallowpot, and then Stubby told the detective:

"Chief, you keep your hoof on the door trip. Hold the door open behind me so the fire will get as much cooling top draft as possible, and so I can dive out in a hurry. And now let's get going, gents. Wrap me up and duck me, and I'll be all set to do a job of running repair that really is running repair."

They wrapped him as he instructed in the rags and tarpaulin. Balls of burlap

encased his feet and head, with only a narrow slit left open for his eyes to peer from. Strips of canvas drop curtain were swathed heavily about his legs and arms and body. Each of the three men contributed a right-hand glove, so that he might have triple thickness of leather about his hammer hand. Then fireman and detective picked him up bodily and carried him back over the coal pile to the tender tank.

Kicking back the plate from over the intake opening, they lowered the bundled Stubby into the tank. They submerged him completely in the sloshing tank water. Then they jerked him up again, icy water streaming from his thick rag padding, and rushed him back into the cab.

"B-r-rr," Stubby chattered from beneath his dripping burlap as they set him on the cab deck. "Leave me at that fire before I freeze plumb to death!"

The fireman tossed the short coal-stop planks into the firebox, roughly making a wooden pathway across the fourteen feet of fire bed from the door to flue sheet. The detective pressed the machinist hammer into Stubby's heavily gloved right hand. The animated bundle of soaked rags advanced to the firebox door.

"Give me a push in," came a muffled voice. "And maybe I'll need a pull out, too!"

With that, Stubby McDougal stooped over and dove head first through the flame-scarred oval opening of the firebox entrance. Half way in he came to a rest. Ready hands grasped his feet and legs, and with a quick shove pushed him on through. Then the fireman leaped for his stoker controls. The detective stepped on the air-trip and crossed himself. The engineer, his old lips moving silently, sat and watched a green block float by above the drifting engine.

STUBBY scrambled quickly to his feet on the flaming plank path in the firebox. Stooping low beneath the heat-blasted crown sheet, he sprang forward through the white blaze of fire about him. He dodged the spurting column of water that would have scalded him through his rag padding, and in another bound reached the honeycombed flue heading at the forward end of the fire bed.

For a moment he felt no heat through his thick armor of water-soaked burlap and canvas. He was aware of only the acrid smoke and combustion gases that sucked past him into the flues, burning his eyes and tying his throat in a tight knot. Tears blurred his sight and he gasped for breath as he swung his calking hammer at the leaking flue. He swung desperately, with all his strength. With each blow the soft metal of the splayed tube end flattened back in place against the flue sheet and the water jet diminished.

Then suddenly the intense heat began to make itself felt. Yet Stubby had no normal feeling of heat, no sensation of being burned. There was only a sense of pressure, tremendous pressure that beat at his temples and crushed his body, terrific pressure that increased with every pulse beat and sapped away his strength. The force of his sledging weakened. He missed a blow and cursed the wasted second and strength as the hammer glanced off the sheet plate. The flue was nearly calked now under his desperate pounding. Another battering blow reduced the spouting leak to a mere dribble steaming down the flue sheet.

Stubby drew the hammer far back over his shoulder for a finishing lick. But the pressure upon him was too great at last. His ear drums crackled and his bones ached under it. His rag padding was a mass of flame. The hammer toppled from his hand down into the coals. He whirled

dizzily around to plunge back across the fire bed. Midway of the long chamber he stumbled and fell to his knees on the flaming planking. Frantically he crawled and scrambled forward, dazed and fainting.

EVERYTHING became a dream, a frightful nightmare. He began to wonder where he was. Why was he so cold? He was shivering. Was he still out on the roofs of that windswept speeding freight? No, damn it, he wasn't cold; he was hot. He was burning alive. Had he frozen to death atop that freight and passed to the beyond? Was he roasting in hell now? Was this the reward meted out in the hereafter to worthless wandering shopmen? He tried to figure it out, but failed. He seemed to hear voices calling to him, directing him. But he couldn't understand them, and he felt very tired and weary.

Suddenly his groping hands came in contact with a pile of—like a flash then he remembered. Green coal! Fresh lignite piled up in front of a firebox door by a churning stoker screw. He lunged weakly across the pile with outstretched arms.

“Grab me, somebody!” he gasped, and then everything went black.

THE detective plunged his head and shoulders through the firebox door, grasped Stubby's extended hands and pulled him across the piled coal. The fireman reached in and collared him around the neck. Together they pulled him through the oval opening, a mass of flame.

They dropped him flat on the cab deck. Buckets of water were at hand to slosh, over him. The cold drenching extinguished the flames and brought him to. His singed eyelids fluttered open as eager hands ripped the smouldering rags from him.

“Are you all right?” anxious voices asked.

Stubby drew a blackened hand across his eyes. Feebly he rose to a sitting position on the wet steel of the deck plate.

“Where'm I at?” he muttered, shaking his head to clear his muddled senses; then, “Oh, yes. Yeah, I'm all right—I guess!”

Very gingerly he began to feel over his anatomy, from head to foot. When the examination was done a smile spread over his streaked and blackened features, and he announced cheerfully:

“Not a burn. Not even a blister. Only a few holes burned in my pants. But it was plenty warm in there, gents, no mistake! I thought at the last that I was about to go out the stack in smoke.”

“You did a fine job, an amazing job, and we're all thankful you came out safe,” was the unanimous verdict of the others.

No more words were wasted then. There was work to be done. The Presidential Special was drifting four minutes behind schedule. The engineer latched back his throttle to the last notch on its quadrant and hooked up the reverse bar. The fireman raked down his dogged fire and spun open the stack blower valve. Belching black smoke, the engine leaped forward through the night after those precious lost minutes. Soon the thick smoke clouds thinned, and the low steam gauge began a steady rise.

AFTER a time the night sky ahead began to glow whitely with the reflection of lights from a great city. Stubby, who had been hugging the boiler head to dry his soggy clothing, stepped across to speak to the railroad detective.

“As I was saying, chief,” he grinned, “how about a quick lam out the gangway and keeping all this a secret from the Secret Service?”

“I certainly can’t refuse you now, buddy,” was the hearty reply. “Make your arrangements with the old man.”

The officer jerked a thumb toward the engineer, who beckoned to Stubby.

“A few blocks off to the right,” said the hoghead, pointing out through the cab window, “is a suburban electric line. You can catch a street car right into town. Here, take this. You’ll need some new clothes, too.”

The engineer drew three bills from a pocket and thrust them into Stubby’s hand. The detective offered another, and the fireman stepped over to donate still another. Stubby beamed as he pocketed the currency, and declared:

“I’m glad I stepped aboard this shot, after all.”

“We all are,” said the grizzled engine man sincerely, and reached forward for throttle and air brass.

Abruptly the screaming engine exhaust dwindled to a whispery purr. The shrill hiss of an air reduction sounded in the cab. The rocketing train began to slow.

“I can unload at thirty, dad,” Stubby told the engineer, and then slipped out through the gangway.

A minute later the ragged form of a little tramp shopman swung off the cab steps and went somersaulting down a cinder embankment in the darkness. The engine coughed heavily again and plunged on over the rails. Lighted cars streaked past. Then the rear marker lights of the Presidential Special were disappearing toward the white glow of the city, where waited a thronged auditorium, and microphones to carry a speech to every corner of the continent.