



December 2000
Number 26

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THE CIVIL WAR BUFF

by William C. Anderson

"You and your backroads!" said the missus, moping up a dollop of coffee that had just divorced its cup. "You got something against nice, smooth freeways?"

"As you well know, my dove, all freeways look the same. It's the backroad country that tickles one's risibilities."

"Your risibilities may be tickling, but mine are vibrating. North Carolina has a lot of assets, but its backroads are not one of them."

"The Tar Heel State is, indeed, a thing of beauty." I suddenly realized more attention should have been paid to my driving and less to the redhead's moping. Coming to a railroad track that crossed the road, I learned too late I was going too fast. An old, dilapidated camper we had been following hit the raised rails and literally flew across the tracks to land with an axle-bruising crunch on the other side.

By the time the sight had triggered poky reflexes, Rocinante was astraddle the tracks. Her front limbs went into a wild attack of the Saint Vitus Dance, and all hell broke loose. "Gadzooks!" I yelled. "We've blown a tire. Maybe two!"

Limping stoically like a racehorse with a broken leg, Rocinante slowed down as I applied the brakes. Spotting a service station just ahead, I brought the wounded steed chattering into the station. I shut off the ignition and looked over at my white-faced sidekick as I dismounted. "Just pray that we don't have to shoot her."

"Oh, you poor baby!" said the wife, stroking the dashboard.

Down on all fours, I was pleasantly surprised to see there were no flat tires. Furthermore, the front-end shocks and stabilizers appeared normal. Completing my inspection, I was startled by a face that suddenly materialized beside the left wheel. "Bitch, ain't it!" said the face. I crawled out from under the motorhome to see a lean, elderly body was attached to the face. "Name's Jackson. That's my camper over there with the flat tire."

"I'm Anderson." I shook the proffered hand,

while my eyes followed the finger pointing to the old camper that had hit the raised railroad tracks just ahead of us. "That railroad track!" I fumed. "I've traveled 6,000 miles in the boondocks on this trip without a problem. I hit this booby trap in North Carolina, and my front end starts shimmying like a go-go dancer."

"Know what you mean. I'm an ex-trucker, and I know a little bit about front ends. I'll take a look-see."

Before I could protest, he was on his back under Rocinante's forequarters. Ten minutes later he emerged, dusting himself off. "Looks OK to me. Nothing wrong with your front-end suspension far as I can tell. Could be your stabilizers. Sometimes if a wheel gets a bad jolt, it'll set up a chatter. The two shocks get to fighting each other. Makes a hellish shimmy."

"What do you do in a case like that?"

"Do what you did. Slow down. Let the equalizers get back in sync. You may need a new wheel alignment, but I don't see any structural damage."

"I'll try it out, but first let's check your camper."

"Already have. Didn't hurt my front end. Shocks and stabilizers are all shot anyway, so I just blew a tire. No sweat."

"I'll help you change it."

"No thanks. I'll tackle it after lunch." He looked around at the area. "So this is the state that lung cancer built."

"Just because North Carolina exports a lot of tobacco, I'm not sure the chamber of commerce would endorse your description."

"They ought to be ashamed of themselves," said Jackson, shaking a cigarette out of a pack. "Anything that burns holes in your shirts can't be very good for your lungs."

"Good point." I watched the old-timer light his cigarette. "You retired, Mr. Jackson?"

"Yep. You know the ol' story. I spent 30 years driving trucks and cussing out RVers, so I could

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