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CHAPTER I.

JOHN HENRY GETS A PARTNER.

"Seven weeks and then the wedding bells will get busy for you, eh, Bunch?" I chuckled.

"Surest thing you know," my old pal Jefferson replied, somewhat dolefully.

"I must dig up a few old shoes and have a plate of cold rice pudding on the doorstep," I went on. "It's going to afford me a bunch of keen delight to soak you in the midriff with a rusty patent leather and then push a few rice fritters in under your coat collar, believe me!"

Bunch tried to pull a smile, but his face didn't feel like working, and the finish was a mournful sigh.

"John," he said, after the waiter had crowded the sizz-water into the wood alcohol, "I'm a plain case of shrimp!"

"Oh, sush!" I said; "you'll get over that, Bunch. Isn't it a hit how we young fellows begin to warm wise to ourselves the moment we get a flash of the orange blossoms. We think of the beautiful little lady we are leading to the altar and then we think of the many beautiful souses we have led by the hand, and we begin to ask ourselves if we are worthy. Before we can get the right answer the preacher has dropped the flag, the ceremonies are over, and after that the struggle to supply three squares a day puts the boots to every other worry; am I right, Gonsalvo?"

"I s'pose so, John," Bunch replied, "but it isn't a case of rattles with me. I'm shy with the mazume, and it looks now as if that little trip to the minister's will have to be postponed indefinitely."

"Skidoo, skidoo, and quit me, Mr. Josheimer!" I suggested.

"I mean it, John," Bunch came back. "I can't lead a girl like Alice Grey into the roped arena of matrimony when I haven't the price of an omelette for the wedding breakfast, now can I?"

"Great Scott, Bunch, have you been Chadwicked for your roll?" I asked. "Are you the man from Ohio that was so polite he gave his bank to the lady? If you are, it serves you right."

"No, John," Bunch answered mournfully, "but I had to go to Washington on a business trip, and while there——"

“Wait, Bunch,” I chipped in; “I’ve got you sized. While in Washington you met a couple of wise voices who talked nothing but sure-things, so you for the Bennings race track to spill your coin, eh, Beau?”

“Well, John, I’ll tell you how it was,” Bunch tried to square himself. “My roll was just five thousand strong, and I began to wish for about two thousand more, so that I could take the little wife over the wild waves and point out Paris and the Riviera to her. In Washington I met a quick talker named Ike Gibson and he played me for a good, steady listener. Ike showered me with cinches and in short order I was down with Bennings fever. And then——”

“I know the answer, Bunch,” I sighed, “You followed Ike’s clues and finished fainting. I’m wise. But, say! Bunch, didn’t you pipe me with the neck bruises often enough in the old days to profit by my experience? Didn’t I go up against that horse game so hard that I shook the whole community, and aren’t you on to the fact that the only sure thing about a race track is a seat on a trolley car going in the opposite direction?”

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"I know, John," Bunch replied, "but this looked awfully good to me, and I went after it."

"Did they sting you for the whole bundle?" I asked.

"Not quite," Bunch answered sadly; "but they certainly put a crimp in my wallet. I'm only \$1,500 strong now, and that's not enough to tip the porter on the honeymoon journey. You know, John, I'm only drawing \$100 a week from the brokerage business, and I'll get nervous if I can't make up a purse quicker than that. I'll simply have to go to Alice and Uncle William Grey and get a set-back, and—say, John! I'm a polish, for fair! Alice is making all her preparations, and has her mind fastened to the date, and all that sort of thing, and like a chump I go up against that——"

"Oh, get back from the funeral, get back, Bunch!" I advised. "How often have I told you not to cut a beef about the has-happened? You went to Bennings, got dizzy, did a couple of Arabs and lose the price of a wedding trip—that's all. Now we must get that money back before the minister steps up to start the fight."

"How can I win out \$3,500 in seven weeks, I'd like to know!" Bunch moaned.

"A cincherine," I came back. "I've got a scheme cooking that will put you and me all to the splendid in short order."

"Yes, but these schemes of yours sometimes get nervous prostration," Bunch began to fret.

"Sush, now!" I said; "this is the real goods. It can't go wrong. It's just like getting money from Carnegie. I've discovered a genius."

"A genius!" Bunch repeated; "what kind of a genius?"

"His name is Signor Beppo Petroskinski, an Illusionist," I answered. "And he's aces."

"What does he do?" asked Bunch; "spar eight rounds with the piano or sell Persian rugs?"

"Nix on the hurry talk, Bunch," I said. "Petroskinski is a discovery of mine, and he's all to the mustard. He's an Illusionist, and he can pull off some of the best tricks I ever blinked at. Say, he has Hermann and Keller and all those guys backed up in a corner yelling for help. Skinski is our mint, and we're going to take him out over the one-night stands and drag a fortune away from Mr. and Mrs. Reub."

"You mean you're going to finance a tour for this unknown magician and expect to win out? Say, John, don't let my troubles affect your brain; I'll be good and stop crying!"

“I mean, Bunch, that Skinski is the wonder of the age, and all we have to do is to show him to the public and they’ll be handing us their jewelry. You know, Bunch, I’m a few chips shy myself on account of a side play which my wife knows nothing about. I promised her to make a first payment of \$5,000 on that new home we’re going to buy on the first of the year, and I fell down and broke my promise. I thought I could drag the homestead money away from the Street, so I took a few slices of Amalgamated Copper and burned my thumb. Old Colonel Frenzied Finance didn’t do a thing to me. When I yelled for help my pocketbook looked like a last season’s autumn leaf in the family Bible. Peaches isn’t wise that I’ve lost my roll, so it’s up to me to make good before she screams for a receiver.”

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"But this Skinski proposition," Bunch groaned; "isn't that taking a long chance? Clara J. was always bitterly opposed to you having anything to do with a theatrical venture—what will she say?"

"Peaches needn't be in on this at all," I said. "We'll simply put up a thousand each for the expense money, start Petroskinski, and after the opening night began to gather in the mazooboes. When we get all the money we need, we'll sell our interest and bow out. It's a pipe, Bunch. I tell you, this Skinski has them all faded to a whisper. He has a bunch of new illusions that will simply make the jay audiences sit up and throw money at us. And as for sleight-of-hand and card tricks, well, say! Skinski can throw a new pack of cards up in the air and bite his initials on the queen of diamonds before it hits the floor. He's a marvel."

"Where did you find him?" Bunch inquired.

"At a club smoker," I answered. "He was the hit of the evening. He pulled a few snake tricks down there and in five minutes he had all the members of the Highball Association climbing the water wagon. That was the same evening I took Clara J. to the St. Regis to dinner. Did I ever tell you about it, Bunch? Well, say, it may help you to forget your troubles. It's a swell joint, all right, O.K., is the St. Regis, but hereafter me for the beanery thing with the high stool and the low prices.

"In the St. Regis the faces of the clerks and the clocks gave token that much money changed hands while it was building.

"In the lobby the furniture was covered with men about town, who sat around with a checkbook in each hand and made faces at the cash registers.

"There are more bellboys than bedrooms in the hotel. They use them for change. Every time you give the cashier \$15 he hands you back \$1.50 and six bellboys.

"We took a peep at the diamond-backed dining-room and when I saw the waiters refusing everything but certified checks in the way of a tip, I said to Peaches, 'This is no place for us!' But she wouldn't let go, and we filed in to the appetite killery.

"A very polite lieutenant-waiter, with a sergeant-waiter and two corporal-waiters, greeted us and we gave the countersign, 'Abandon wealth, all ye who enter here.'

"Then the lieutenant-waiter and his army corps deployed by columns of four and escorted us to the most expensive looking trough I ever saw in a dining-room.

"'Peaches,' I said to my wife, 'I'm doing this to please you, but after I pay the check, it's me to file a petition in bankruptcy.'

“But she only grinned, picked up the point-lace napkin and began to admire the onyx furniture.

“*Que souhaitez vous?*’ said the waiter, bowing so low that I could feel a chill running through my little bank account.

“I guess he means you,’ I whispered to Peaches, but she looked very solemnly at the menu card and began to bite her lips.

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“*Je suis tout a votre service,*’ the waiter cross-counteracted before I could recover, and he had me gasping. It never struck me that I had to take a course in French before entering the St. Regis hunger foundry, and there I sat making funny faces at the tablecloth, while my wife blushed crimson and the waiter kept on bowing like an animated jack-knife.

“‘Say, Mike!’ I ventured after a bit; ‘tip us off to a quiet bunch of eating that will fit a couple of appetites just out seeing the sights. Nothing that will put a kink in a year’s income, you know, Beau; just suggest some little thing that looks better than it tastes, but is not too expensive to keep down.’

“‘*Oui, oui!*’ His Marseillaise came back at me, ‘*un diner confortable doit se composer de potage, de volaille bouillie ou rotie, chaude ou froide, de gibier, de plats rares et distingues, de poissons, de sucreries, de patisseries et de fruits!*’

“I looked at my wife, she looked at me, then we both looked out the window and wished we had never been born.

“‘Say, Garson,’ I said, after we came to, ‘my wife is a daughter of the American Revolution and she’s so patriotic she eats only in United States, so cut out the Moulin Rouge lyrics and let’s get down to cases. How much will it set me back if I order a plain steak—just enough to flirt with two very polite appetites?’

“‘Nine dollars and seventy cents,’ said Joan of Arc’s brother Bill; ‘the seventy cents is for the steak and the nine dollars will help some to pay for the Looey the Fifteenth furniture in the bridal chamber.’

“‘Save the money, John,’ whispered Peaches; ‘and we’ll buy a cow with it.’

“‘How about a sliver of roast beef with some slapped potatoes,’ I said to the waiter. ‘Is it a bull market for an order like that?’

“‘Three dollars and forty-two cents,’ answered Henri of Navarre; ‘forty-two cents for the order and three dollars to help pay for the French velvet curtains in the golden suite on the second floor.’

“‘Keep on guessing, John; you’ll wear him out,’ Peaches whispered.

“‘Possibly a little cold lamb with a suggestion of potato salad on the side might satisfy us,’ I said; ‘make me an estimate.’

“‘Four dollars and eighteen cents,’ replied Patsey Boulanger; ‘eighteen cents for the lamb and salad and the four dollars for the Looey the Fifteenth graperies in the drawing-room.’

“Ask him if there's a bargain counter anywhere in the dining-room,” whispered Peaches.

“My dear,” I said to Clara J., ‘we have already displaced about sixty dollars’ worth of space in this dyspepsia emporium, and we must, therefore, behave like gentlemen and order something, no matter what the cost. What are the savings of a life-time compared with our honor!’

“The waiter bowed so low that his shoulder blades cracked like a whip.

“Bring us,” I said, ‘a plain omelet and one dish of prunes.’

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[Illustration: "Bring us a plain omelet and one dish of prunes."]

"I waited till Peter Girofla translated this into French and then I added, 'And on the side, please, two glasses of water and three toothpicks. Have the prunes fricasseed, wash the water on both corners, and bring the toothpicks rare.'

"The waiter rushed away and all around us we could hear money talking to itself.

"Fair women sat at the tables picking dishes out of the bill of fare which brought the blush of sorrow to the faces of their escorts. It was a wonderful sight, especially for those who have a nervous chill every time the gas bill comes in.

"When we ate our modest little dinner the waiter presented a check which called for three dollars and thirty-three cents.

"The thirty-three cents is for what you ordered,' Alexander J. Dumas explained, 'and the three dollars is for the French hangings in the parlor.'

"Holy Smoke!' I cried; 'that fellow Looey the Fifteenth has been doing a lot of work around here hasn't he?' but the waiter was so busy watching the finish of the change he handed me that he didn't crack a smile.

"Then I got reckless and handed him a fifty-cent tip.

"The waiter looked at the fifty cents and turned pale.

"Then he looked at me and turned paler.

"Then he tried to thank me, but he caught another flash of that plebeian fifty and it choked him.

"Then he took a long look at the half-dollar and with a low moan he passed away.

"In the excitement I grabbed Peaches and we flew for home.

"Say! Bunch! the only time I'll ever go in the St. Regis again will be just after a hearty dinner."

"I guess you're right, John, but what about this scheme to win out my wedding money?" Bunch queried. "I'm dreadfully nervous about it."

"I know. Bunch, I know just how you feel. I'm quite a bit to the St. Vitus myself, because if Clara J. ever gets wise that I've been speculating again after faithfully promising her to cut out all the guessing contests, she's liable to say something unkind. I simply must get that money back, Bunch, before she knows I lost it, and Signor

Petroskinski is the name of our paying teller. I tell you, Bunch, we can't lose if we handle this cinch right, and I've got it all framed up. It's good for a thousand plunks apiece every week, so cut out the yesterday gag and think of a fat to-morrow."

"I'd like to see this Petroskinski," said Bunch.

"I'll have him take luncheon with us to-morrow at the Hotel Astor—twelve thirty. Are you for me to the finish, Bunch?"

"If you think it's all right I'll trail," said Bunch, and we shook hands.

"But not a word to the home folks," I cautioned him.

CHAPTER II.

JOHN HENRY GETS A SUFFICIENCY.

Since Uncle Peter Grant was elected Mayor of Ruraldene one book ago, our family group considers it extremely disloyal to stay in the big town for more than four hours at a time. So with us it is a case of catching those imitation railroad trains at all sorts of hours and commute to beat the band.

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Since I became a confirmed commuter I have sprained three watches and two of my legs trying to catch trains that are wild enough to dodge a dog-catcher.

The commuters are divided into two classes: going and coming.

One of the first rules for a commuter to follow after he locates the railroad station, and hikes there a couple of times to get in training, is to get a red and pink and blue hammock.

A hammock is a necessary evil in the country, because only by this means can the insects become acquainted with the new commuter.

The day after we first put up our new hammock Uncle Peter came rubbering around to look it over. He was all swelled up over being elected Mayor, and he dropped in the hammock with a splash. Ten seconds later the rope exploded and Uncle Peter made a deep impression on the stone porch.

Every mosquito in the neighborhood rushed to his assistance and tried to lift him up with their teeth.

Then Uncle Peter ran home and told Aunt Martha that Cinders, our bulldog, had tried to bite him.

The national emblem of the commuter is the lawn-mower.

The lawn-mower was invented originally for the purpose of giving the lawn a quick shave, and because it can't talk like a barber it makes a noise like the fall of Port Arthur.

I remember the first day I decided I would trim the vandyke beard on our lawn. Of course I got all mine, and I got it good. The result will always live in history side by side with the battle of Gettysburg.

The lawn-mower was sleeping peacefully in the barn when I rushed in and dragged it shriekingly from its slumbers.

Perhaps it was because I forgot to lather the lawn, but any way it was the hardest shave I ever had anything to do with.

That lawn-mower began to complain so loudly that the neighbors for miles around rushed to the rock pile and armed themselves for the fray.

The committee of citizens attracted by the screams of the lawn-mower came over to see if I was killing a member of the family or only a distant relative.

When they saw me boxing the ears of a stubborn lawn-mower they said my punishment was heavy enough, so they threw away the lynching rope and left me at the post.

Clara J. came out on the porch and said, "John, perhaps that lawn-mower would stop screaming if you used a little axle grease!"

"All right," I came back at her, "but it will take me an hour and a half to find out which part of the lawnmower will fit the axle grease."

Then I lifted the machinery up to examine its constitution and by-laws, and about two and a half pounds of wrought iron fell off and landed on my instep.

The wrought iron made good.

Then I tried to stand on the other foot, but I lost my balance and fell on the lawn-mower's third rail.

I never was so mortified in my life as when that lawn-mower began to saw its initials on my shin bones.

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Every time I tried to get up I lost my balance, and every time I lost my balance the lawn-mower would leap up in the air and fall on my wish-bone.

When loving hands finally pulled us apart I was two doors and a half below unconsciousness, while the lawnmower had recovered its second wind and was wagging its tail with excitement.

After waiting for about ten minutes for me to come back in the ring, the lawn-mower got impatient and began to bark at me in Yiddish, so I decided that our lawn could grow whiskers like a Populist farmer and be hanged to it.

Another splendid bit of local color in the life of some commuters is the tunnel which runs from Forty-second Street up as far as One Hundred and Fifty in the shade.

A ride through this tunnel on a hot day will put you over on Woosey Avenue quicker than a No. 9 pill in Hop Lee's smoke factory.

In order to get out to Ruraldene I have to use the tunnel, and every time I use it it leaves something which looks like the mark of Cain across my brow.

The first day I went through that tunnel will always remain one of my hottest memories.

I lost nine pounds of solid flesh somewhere between my shoulder blade and Seventy-ninth Street.

The sensation is the same as a Bad Man's hereafter, including the sulphur.

First I choked up a little, then I coughed, then I stirred uneasily, and then I looked out the window and prayed for the daylight, and then I looked at my newspaper, but I couldn't read it, because the railroad company had found the gas bill pretty heavy last month and they were cutting down expenses.

Then I lost my breath, and when I got it back I found it wasn't mine.

Then I began to fan myself with my hat, but I stopped when the man behind me began to kick because I was handing him more than his just share of the tunnel gas.

Then I began, to choke up again, and then I coughed, and then I could feel something fat and mysterious playing hide and go seek around my brain, but outside all was black as ink, and only from the noise could I tell that the road was still paying dividends.

The air began to get close and thick like a porterhouse steak in a St. Louis hotel.

I began to breathe like my wife crochets an open-faced stocking—one, two, three, drop one; one, two, three, four, drop one.

Then my blood began to curdle and cold chills ran up my back and liked it so well they ran down again.

My respiration was 8 to 1, my inspiration was 9 to 6 for a place, and my perspiration was like a cloudburst.

I had made my will with a few mental and Indian reservations, and was choking up for the last time when, with one mighty jump forward, the train shook itself free from the tunnel and once more we were out in the sunlight.

After picking enough sulphur off my clothes to make a box of matches, I reached gently over and tried to put the window up, but it was closed tighter than a sacred saloon on Sunday.

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I gave the window-sash a couple of upper-cuts and a few short-arm punches, but it sat there and laughed in my face.

The brakeman came through, and I spoke to him about the window. He said, "The first time I see the president of the road I'll tell him about it!" and left me flat.

Once more I tried to open that window, but I only succeeded in opening my collar; so then I opened my mouth and made a short but spicy announcement, whereupon the old lady in the seat ahead of me got up and left the car.

Just then the train pulled into a station which I hadn't paid for, but I went out and took it, because it contained a little fresh air.

Some day I will mention the name of this railroad company and make them blush.

Well, after I left Bunch that afternoon, I ducked for the depot, and reached Ruraldene just in time to witness the beginning of a most painful episode.

The house was lighted up from cellar to attic. As soon as I opened the door I found our respected Mayor, Uncle Peter, and he was also lit up.

"It's a surprise, Johnny," he whispered hoarsely. "Clara J. is giving an entertainment for the benefit of the Christian Soldiers' League, and it's going to cost you two dollars to come into your own house."

It made an awful hit with Uncle Peter to see me cough up those two bones, but I said nothing and made good.

My wife called it a musicale, but to me it looked more like a fight.

With the help of Aunt Martha and Alice Grey, my wife arranged the programme and kept it dark to surprise the rest of the family.

It was such a surprise to me that I felt like doing a glide to the woodlands.

It was my second experience with a musicale, and this one cured me all right.

You know I don't care much for society—especially when it breaks into our bungalow and begins to scratch my furniture with its high-heeled shoes. But just to please Peaches I promised to go in the parlor and not be an insult to those present.

For awhile everybody sat around and sized up what everybody else was wearing.

Then they gave each other the silent double-cross.

Presently my wife whispered to Miss Cleopatra Hungerschnitz, whereupon that young lady giggled her way over to the piano and began to knock its teeth out.

The way Cleopatra went after one of Beethoven's sonatas and slapped its ears was pitiful.

Cleopatra learned to injure a piano at a conservatory of music, and she could take a fugo by Victor Hugo and leave it for dead in about thirty-two bars.

At the finish of the sonata we all applauded Cleopatra just as loudly as we could, in the hope that she would faint with surprise and stop playing, but no such luck.

She tied a couple of chords together and swung that piano like a pair of Indian clubs.

First she did "My Old Kentucky Home," with variations, until everybody who had a home began to weep for fear it might get to be like her Kentucky home.

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The variations were where she made a mistake and struck the right note.

Then Cleopatra moved up to the squeaky end of the piano and gave an imitation of a Swiss music box.

It sounded to me like a Swiss cheese.

Presently Cleopatra ran out of raw material and subsided, while we all applauded her with our fingers crossed, and two very thoughtful ladies began to talk fast to Cleopatra so as to take her mind off the piano.

Then the Bingle dingle brothers, known as Oscar and Victor, opened fire on us with a couple of mandolins.

Oscar and Victor play entirely by hand. They don't know one note from another, and they can prove it when they begin to play.

Their mother believes them to be prodigies of genius. She is alone in her belief.

After Oscar and Victor had chased one of Sousa's marches all over the parlor and finally left it unconscious under the sofa, they bowed and ceased firing, and then they went out in the dining-room and filled their storage batteries with ice cream and cake.

This excitement was followed by another catastrophe named Minnehaha Jones, who picked up a couple of soprano songs and screeched them at us.

Minnehaha is one of those fearless singers who vocalize without a safety valve. She always keeps her eyes closed, so she can't tell just when her audience gets up and leaves the room.

The next treat was a mixed duet on the flute and trombone between Clarence Smith and Lancelot Diffenberger, with a violin obligate on the side by Hector Tompkins.

Never before have I seen music so roughly handled.

It looked like a walk-over for Clarence, but in the fifth round he blew a couple of green notes and Lancelot got the decision.

Then, for a consolation prize, Hector was led out in the middle of the room, where he assassinated Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* so thoroughly that it will never be able to enter a fifty-cent table d'hote restaurant again.

Then Cornucopia Coogan arose and gave us a few select recitations. She weighs 295 pounds and she was immense.

Just as she started to tell us that curfew would not ring to-night Uncle Peter winked at me, and we sneaked out and began to drown our sorrow.

Those musicales would be all to the good if the music didn't suffocate them.

After the crowd had left that night Peaches said to me, "John, Uncle Peter and Aunt Martha and I have been talking matters over to-day, and we've arranged a most delightful surprise for you!"

"What is it, another one of those parlor riots?" I asked, "If so, I want to tell you right now that you couldn't surprise me if Uncle Peter and Aunt Martha stepped out and did a song and dance in black face."

Peaches laughed.

"Oh! that isn't it," she chuckled. "It has something to do with the \$5,000 you've saved."

"Oh! it has," I muttered faintly.

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"Yes, Uncle Peter thinks we better not invest it in that house just now," she went on. "He has a better plan. You are to give him the money and he will invest it for you."

"Ah!" I said.

"But that isn't the real surprise," she cooed.

"It will do," I answered.

"Uncle Peter is so delighted that you have kept your promise to me not to speculate any more that he has planned—oh! I nearly told, and it's *such* a secret!"

Then I went over into a corner and got busy with my thoughts.

Bunch and I would have to get Petroskinski to work in a hurry.

We both needed the money.

CHAPTER III.

JOHN HENRY GETS BUSY.

We were a half-hour early for my appointment with Signor Petroskinski when Bunch and I strolled into the cafe of the Hotel Astor the next day.

"Bunch," I said, when the waiter had forced a confession from us, "there's doings out home. Clara J. tipped me off last night that I must hand over my five thousand plunks to be properly invested by the Mayor of Ruraldene."

"Uncle Peter!" chuckled Bunch.

"Now I can't tip my hand to the old gentleman and have him lecture me all over the place, can I, Bunch?"

"Not unless you want your wife to know that you sprained your promise."

"Then it's up to me to press the button and start my get-rich-quick concern," I said. "I simply can't go home and hand them a sad drool about being coaxed into the Street and being trimmed for my coin—nix! The only thing to do is to go out and get it back, and get it quick, eh, Bunch?"

"You bet, John," Bunch agreed. "I spent last evening with Alice and I felt like phony money all the time. She's going right ahead with the wedding preparations and I simply hadn't the nerve to tell her that I lost nearly every penny I had. Uncle William Grey

tiptoed into the parlor for a few moments and began to congratulate me on the good reports he had had from Alice with regard to my ability to save a bit of money. I could feel myself shrivelling up as he talked and the parlor began to turn around and start for the Bennings track.”

“I know the feeling,” I said earnestly. “There was a time, Bunch, that whenever my wife mentioned the word money to me I could see a horse come into the room and shake his mane at me.”

“And then,” Bunch continued, “Uncle William said to me, ‘Jefferson, my boy, Alice tells me you’ve already saved up five thousand, and I’m proud of you. I didn’t like you at first, because I thought you were a harum scarum like your friend, John Henry; but now that you’ve developed such manly traits of character I’m going to take four thousand of your money, put the same amount in for Alice, and start you in business.’ Say, John, I wanted to go through the parlor floor and on through the earth and then out through the busiest fort at Port Arthur, and let a Jap shell knock my silly head off.”

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"We're both up against it for fair," I said; "and we'll have to get in the ice-cutting business right away. As I told you, this Signor Petroskinski is the marvel of the age, and we can simply coin money with him. Two thousand dollars will start the driving wheels—gi' me your thousand and I'll put it with mine."

Bunch dug out his last bundle of big bills and I gave him the partnership articles I had framed up.

"We'll open up in New Rochelle," I said, "next Thursday night. Charlie Osgood is a friend of mine and he's laid out a gilt-edged route for me. Mamaroneck Friday night, and then into Cos Cob for Saturday matinee and night."

"That doesn't sound like a glad hosannah to me!" Bunch grumbled.

"What, Cos Cob!" I answered. "It's aces. Charlie Osgood says Cos Cob is a great Saturday night town because it's pay-day at the gas works. From there we jump to Green's Farms for the Monday night show."

"Is that place really on the map?" Bunch asked.

"Sure it is," I said. "Charlie says it's a good Monday night town because two through freights lay over there till daylight. Tuesday night we have to double back to Greenwich, and that's where Charlie gave us the bum deal. This gag of chasing us back over the same route is rotten, because somebody may be sitting up for us with a rock. But Charlie says Greenwich has developed into a great show town since five new families' moved there last summer. Wednesday we get into Stamford for a run—two performances. Friday we are booked at South Norwalk and Saturday we play matinee and night at Saugatuck Junction. Charlie says Saugatuck is a cinch money-maker because it's a Junction. When I asked him what there is about a Junction that makes it a safe play Charlie excused himself and went to lunch. After Saugatuck we are not booked, because Charlie says something may fall down in New York and he may want to yank us right in. And, say, if Signor Petroskinski, the Illusionist and Worker of Mystical Magic, ever gets a crack at a Broadway audience it'll be a case of us matching John D. Rockefeller to see who has the most money."

"No, we better not bring Skinski into New York," Bunch advised. "I'm afraid of the critics."

"What critics?" I inquired. "There are only four people in New York city who can write criticisms—the rest of the bunch are slush-dealers, and a knock from any one of them is a boost."

"I mean Mr. Stale," Bunch put in. "If he were to roast our Skinski it might hurt our business."

“It would—among the Swedes and Hungarians,” I cross-counteracted. “I’m wise to Mr. Stale, *nee* Cohenheimer, the Human Harpoon! Say, Bunch! he’s a joke. I caught him the day he first left the blacksmith shop, some ten years ago, with a boathook in each hand and a toasting fork between his teeth. That duck isn’t a critic, he’s only a Foofoo.”

“What the devil is a Foofoo?” Bunch asked.

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"A Foofoo is something that tried to happen and then lost the address," I explained. "Did you ever pipe Stale's cheery bits of humor as exemplified in one of his burning criticisms? Well, I'll put you wise, Bunch:

"I went to the Kookoo theatre last night, I and myself. *Voila! tout bien!* I have seen lots of shows before, I have, but I have never, I solemnly declare, seen any show so utterly banal as this. The libretto was written by some obscure person who never reads my criticisms for if he did he would know that I abhor Dutch dialect. One reason I hate it so much is that some people can write it so well that they make more money than I do writing English undefiled—oh! the shame of it! *Voila! tout suite!* But to return to our muttons, as we say in Paris whenever I go there. Tottie Coughdrop played the principal part but a merciful Providence gave me a cold in the head so I couldn't hear what she said! *Voila! tout fromage de Brie!* To my mind Tottie looked like one of yesterday's ham sandwiches, and a 'gent' sitting near me said she was all to the mustard, so you see great minds run in the same channel—oh! la, la, la! But to return to our muttons. The show is said to have cost \$25,000, but what care I? *Voila! tout coalscuttle!* I'd roast it if it cost \$50,000, otherwise how could I make good? *Voila! tout blatherskite!* But to return to our muttons. I went out after the first act and never did go back—great joke on the show, wasn't it? Oh! la, la, la! Still I insist that Tottie Coughdrop looked like a ham sandwich. *Voila! tout fudge!*"

"So that's the kind of piffle that managers and actors have to go up against," laughed Bunch.

"They don't go up against it any more, Bunch," I said. "They are shifty young guys in the theatrical business nowadays, and they sidestep the hammer-throwers. Mr. Stale is a back number, and his harpoon can't stop a dollar bill from fluttering into any man's box office."

"He thinks he can, all right," Bunch muttered.

"Well, there are two thinks and a half still due him," I said. "Who ever gave that guy a license to splash ink all over a production and hold actors, authors and managers up to ridicule? Did you ever hear of an actor or an author or a manager getting out a three-sheet which held a newspaper up to ridicule?"

"Not on your endowment policy," Bunch chimed in.

"Well, isn't a newspaper just as much of a public institution as a theatre? Suppose a manager were to call in a rubberneck, hand him a tool box and send him to a newspaper office to look for a splashy production on a busy night. Suppose, further, that after the paper went to press Mr. Rubberneck opened up his tool box and began to pound on the leading man in the print shop for having a bunch of bad grammar in his editorial column, and after that, suppose our friend with the glistening eyes jumped on

one of the sub-editors because the woman's page was out of alignment, or made a rave because the jokes in the funny column were all to the ancient, what would happen to Mr. Rubberneck, eh, what? Sixteen editors, fourteen reporters and twenty-three linotype men would take a running kick at old Buttinski, and there wouldn't be enough of him left to give the coroner an excuse to look solemn."

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"I thought Stale used to write books," Bunch put in.

"He thought so, too, but the public passed him the ice pitcher," I said. "He started in to be a successful author and then he bit his tongue."

"He'll get after you good and hard if he hears you talking this way," Bunch admonished.

"Say! Bunch! he's been after me for five years and he hasn't caught up with me yet. Every time he's had a chance he's tossed a few sneers in my direction, so I made up my mind the other day I'd coax him down to the foundry and throw the anvil at him. If ever I do cut loose on that Birmingham gent he'll think he has swallowed one of his own harpoons. He's a case of Perpetual Grouch because it gets the dough for him on pay-day.

"If somebody ever steals his hammer he'll be doing hotfoots for the handout thing and he'll eat about once a week.

"It's a brave and glorious spectacle, isn't it, Bunch, to watch this mouldy writer, with a big newspaper behind him and columns of space at his command, throwing his hooks into actors and actresses who haven't a chance on earth to get back."

"I'd hate to have to make my living by trying to drag the bread and butter away from other people," Bunch butted in.

"Yes, and the nickel-plated nerve that goes with it," I went on. "Every time this Stale guy goes to a theatre he makes it appear that he was forced into a den of thieves and everybody he can point out with his fountain pen is either a criminal or a dirty deuce. What has he ever done that finished one, two, nine?"

"He's been fourflushing around for years about the pitiful condition of the 'drammer,' but did he ever write a play that saw the light of day? Nix.

"I'll bet eight dollars if he ever does get a play produced there'll be nobody left in the theatre but the ushers and the spot light after the first act."

"Lots of people think he is very clever," Bunch suggested,

"So is a trained goat," I came back. "If you stood a crowd of handcuffed actors and authors and managers up in a corner and made faces at them and called them names and blew spitballs in their eyes you could get a laugh from the low foreheads, couldn't you, Bunch?"

"Surest thing you know, John."

“Well, that’s Grouchy Stale’s line of endeavor. Say, Bunch, if it were not for the knocks contained therein one of that guy’s essays would read like the maiden effort of a lovesick jellyfish.

“Did you ever pipe the pure and lofty and highly ennobling sentiments, the spiritually beautiful inspiration which characterizes that book of his—that deft little dip into degeneracy—something about a frozen wedding! Oh, slush! Percy, pass the cigarettes!”

“There must be a certain class of people who read that kind of criticism,” Bunch said.

“That windy stuff Stale hands out is supposed to be criticism, Bunch, but it isn’t—it’s typewritten egotism.”

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“Yes, but it’s useless for you to go after him, John; he’ll only hand you another javelin.”

“Well, the next time that dub throws the gaff into me I’ll know he has a reason for it. Hereafter, every time he bats an eye in my direction it’s me for a swift get-back, I’ll tell you those!”

“You should bear the ills of the flesh with Christian fortitude,” grinned Bunch.

“Nix,” I said. “I’m tired holding up something fat for a mutt like that to paddle with a slapstick!”

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN HENRY GETS A SHOCK.

A few minutes later we went into the general restaurant and found Signor Petroskinski waiting for us.

His right name was Jeff Mulligan, but Petroskinski sounded more foreign, and he fell for it.

I introduced Skinski to Bunch, and in five minutes all the business details were settled.

Skinski needed about \$900 to pay for a couple of new illusions which were being built for him, and Bunch was appointed a committee to go down to Sixth Avenue and disburse the funds.

“I think we’ve got the real graft, don’t you, Skinski?” I said, after the luncheon had been ordered.

“It’s a pipe!” Skinski replied in pure United States, much to Bunch’s surprise. From the name and the make-up I suppose Bunch expected Skinski to yelp in Bulgarian or throw out signals in Graeco-Roman.

Skinski was a warm member with the gab thing.

He got his start in life travelling with a medicine wagon in the West, and what he didn’t know about the show business wasn’t necessary.

“Say, people!” our star went on, “I’ve a couple of new card tricks up my sleeve that will leave the Reubens gasping for air. And when I pull my new illusion, entitled, ‘Keno, or the Curious Cage,’ on the public it will be a case of counting easy coin. Say! did I ever tell you about that gold mine I won in the West many moons ago?”

“Nix on the dream work, Skinski,” I cut in. “We’ve put up our good money to start you, so let’s get down to the programme.”

“Oh! very well,” said Skinski; “but I was down to see my brokers to-day in Wall Street and there are doings. I’ve got a plantation full of gold out near the Blue Hills, and——”

“Please don’t smoke, there are ladies present!” admonished Bunch.

“Oh, very well!” said Skinski, and forthwith he launched into a description of his various tricks.

The waiter had just brought our luncheon when a large blondined shadow fell across the festive board, and Skinski jumped to his feet, followed by Bunch and yours surprisedly.

“Permit me!” Skinski said; “our new backers, Mr. Jefferson and Mr. John Henry! this is Mademoiselle Dodo, the Human Guessworks. She’s my assistant in the mind-reading tests, and she’s all to the elegant. Will you feed the face, Dodey?”

“You betcher sweet!” Dodo replied, as she splashed into the chair provided by the waiter, while I glanced at Bunch sideways and found him on the verge of a fainting fit.

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[Illustration: "You betcher sweet!"]

"I've told Dodey all about you two glad boys," Skinski went on, "and she's for you, ain't you, Dodey?"

"You betcher sweet!" Dodo chimed in, with a hungry glance at the cooked stuff.

"I told her we had a business meet on here, but if she wanted to squeeze in she wouldn't be in nobody's way," Skinski continued. "Dodey's an awful clever girl, and she wouldn't be in this biz eight hours if that gold mine——"

"Sure, I know!" I interrupted; "possibly Mademoiselle is thirsty—a little wine, eh?"

"You betcher sweet!" the stout person replied, with a celerity that made Bunch sit up and look about the room to see if anyone suspected him.

"Dodey is always for the suds thing," Skinski chipped in. "But never to excess, never to excess. I never see Dodey lit up but once, and that was in Dayton, Ohio, the night we played to the janitor of the hall and his four children. When we came to the place where Dodey is blindfolded and does the decimal fractions stunt on the blackboard the janitor's oldest child fooled Dodey into doing all next week's lessons in arithmetic and Dodey fretted over it, didn't you, Dodey?"

"You betcher sweet!" the leading lady replied, with both eyes following the efforts of the waiter, who was opening a bottle of Pommery.

Bunch was beginning to get uneasy and I had a bad attack of fidgets.

"Say, Dodey!" our bright and shining light went on, "I want you to make a fuss over these two young gents, because they are the only nearly silk on the counter. They've put up their good cush to send me on tour without ever dragging me before a Police Justice to swear that I'm on the level, and if ever that gold mine——"

"Tush!" I interrupted. "I saw you work, Skinski, and you're a wonder; that's good enough for my money."

"Yes, but you never once put a sleuth over the back trail to throw the spot light on my past life," Skinski babbled on. "You're the first white man that ever took a chance with me without lashing me to the medicine ball, and I'll make good for you, all right, won't I, Dodey?"

"You betcher sweet!" she mumbled, with a mouth full of Pommery.

"Say!" said Skinski to me, after we had ordered some breadstuff for the leading lady, "you're not such a late train with the sleight-of-hand gag yourself, Mr. Manager!"



"Oh! I'm only a piker at it," I replied, modestly. "I can do a few moth-eaten tricks with the cards and I've studied out a few of the illusions, enough to know how to do them without breaking an ankle, but I'm not cute enough to be on the stage."

Skinski laughed, and Dodo looked over another glass of Pommery long enough to say, "You betcher sweet!"

"Well," said Skinski, leading a bevy of French-fried potatoes up to his moustache, "you'll know enough about it after I rehearse you to go on and do the show when we hit a fried-egg burg, where there's only a Mr. and Mrs. Audience to greet our earnest endeavors. Say, boys, you'll get a lot of fricasseed experience trailing with this troupe, believe me!"

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"I'm only going to be with you for a few days," I answered. "Mr. Jefferson will be your permanent manager."

"The hell I will!" spluttered Bunch. Then he got red in the face, glared at Dodo, and grouched out a "beg pardon!"

"You betcher sweet!" she replied, patting the Pommery.

"Say, John! you know well enough I can't leave New York for more than two or three days just at this time without having a good excuse to give Alice," Bunch growled, while Skinski and the Circassian lady put the knives to the chicken livers *en brochette*.

"How about me!" I snapped back. "I can't go out of town at all, except in the day-time. I'll have to duck back to Ruraldene after the show every evening or lose my card in the Happy Husbands' Union. It's different with you, Bunch; you're not married yet."

"It isn't different at all," Bunch whipsawed me. "And you haven't any business to expect me to hike over the country with this outfit while you stay at home and read Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress."

"I won't read that at all," I countered; "I'll read nothing but the ship news to see if you are stranded."

"Well, I won't do it!" snorted Bunch.

"You'll have to do it if you want to win out that wedding money," I retorted. "Is this the way you thank me for what I've done for you?"

"Done for me, nothing!" Bunch bit back. "I put up as much coin as you did, and now you want me to do all the work!"

"Work!" I echoed; "what work is it to count money, eh, Skinski?"

"Counting money is a hot pastime, isn't it, Dodey?" he answered.

"You betcher sweet!" responded the fair lady, gazing dreamily at the empty flagon of Pommery.

"Well, take my word for it," snarled Bunch, "I don't hanker for that sort of amusement. If there's any train-hopping to be done, it's up to you, John. It's your game, not mine."

"Say, are you going to welsh on me now that we've passed over our contract to Skinski?" I asked hotly.

“No, I’m not going to welsh,” Bunch came right back, “but I’m only a silent partner in this concern, so you for the Bad Lands to do the barking for the show.”

“Why didn’t you flash this stingy talk on me before we got started?” I wanted to know. “It’s a shine play to wait till you get me all tied up with these artists here!”

Skinski and Dodo both took a bow.

“I didn’t,” Bunch cackled, “You framed up the whole thing, and now you’re sore because I won’t leave home and friends to plug your game.”

“It’s as much your game as mine!”

“It isn’t!”

“It is!”

“Rats!”

“Make it twice on the Rats!”

In two seconds more I suppose we would have come to blows, but just then a well-known voice behind us gurgled, “Hayo, John! why, I hadn’t any idea you were here! And Bunch, too! I’m so glad to see you!”

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It was Peaches, and behind her, smiling sweet approval, stood Aunt Martha.

Heart failure for mine as I stumbled to my feet and caught the interested expressions on the faces of Skinski and Dodo.

"Aunt Martha and I have been shopping, and we dropped in here for luncheon," my wife rattled on, while I was slowly recovering.

"Of course we don't wish to be *de trop*," she added, glancing curiously at the famous Skinski and his assistant in the mind-reading tests.

"No, no, Peaches; certainly not!" I spluttered; "hadn't the faintest idea you were coming in town to-day. Let me present Bunch's Uncle Cornelius McGowan and his Aunt Flora from Springfield—my wife and my mother-in-law!"

Skinski and Dodo were wise in a minute, and they never batted an eye, but Bunch took the full count.

Of course he couldn't deny the relationship without giving himself away, so he simply stood there and looked foolish.

"Have you been in the city very long?" my wife said most pleasantly to Signor Petroskinski,

"No, Madam," he answered, with a most courtier-like bow; "we only broke away from the cars this morning, and we bumped into nephew quite by chance, didn't we, nephew?"

Bunch growled something that wouldn't sound well on the graphophone.

"Do you like New York?" Aunt Martha asked the other half of the sketch in an effort to be pleasant.

"You betcher sweet!" said Dodo, whereupon Aunt Martha fell back two paces to the rear and looked pityingly at Bunch.

"If you'll excuse us, Uncle Cornelius and Aunt Flora, I'll take my wife and her mother to the train," I said nervously.

"Not at all, not at all," piped Skinski. "Dodey—I mean Flo—and I don't mind a bit, do we, Flo?"

"You betcher sweet!" she answered, and I saw Peaches glance questioningly at Bunch, who was giving a brilliant imitation of the last rose of summer.



“But, John, I’m so hungry,” Peaches pleaded.

“I know, my dear, but you see Bunch has an awful lot of family happenings to discuss with his relatives,” I said; “and we must give him a chance to get acquainted with Uncle Cornelius and Aunt Flora.”

Whereupon I grabbed my hat and ducked for another eat shop without ever glancing at Bunch.

CHAPTER V.

JOHN HENRY GETS EXCITED.

The next day being Sunday, I determined to forget all my troubles and take Peaches out buggy riding.

I felt sure that Bunch was rid of his grouch by this time, and that he wouldn't have a rock in his hat for me for pulling that “Uncle Cornelius” gag.

I rather expected he'd show up at Ruraldene some time Sunday evening. At any rate, I was sure Skinski and the Dodo bird had conned him back to real life, and that by Monday morning he'd be ripe for work again.

Peaches and Aunt Martha said very little about Bunch's new relatives. They decided that “Uncle Cornelius” was eccentric and rather interesting, but when they thought of “Aunt Flora” they both got nervous and changed the subject.

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When I suggested the buggy ride to Peaches she was delighted, and I moseyed for the Ruraldene livery stable to get staked to a horse.

Anybody who has ever lived in a suburban town will doubtless recall what handsome specimens of equine perfection may be found in the local livery stable—not.

The livery man at Ruraldene is named Henlopen Diffenbingle, and he looks the part,

I judged from the excited manner in which he grabbed my deposit money that morning that he had a note falling due next day.

Then Henlopen shut his eyes, counted six, turned around twice, multiplied the day of the week by 19, subtracted 17, and the answer was a cream-colored horse with four pink feet and a frightened face, which looked at me sadly, sighed deeply and then backed up into the shafts of a buggy with red wheels and white sulphur springs.

[Illustration: The answer was a cream-colored horse which looked at me sadly.]

The livery man said that the name of the horse was Parsifal, because it seemed to go better in German.

I drove Parsifal up to our modest home, and all the way there we ran neck and neck with a coal cart.

Parsifal used to be a fast horse, but quite some time ago he stopped eating his wild oats and now leads a slower life.

When I reached the gate I whistled for Peaches, because I was afraid to get out and leave Parsifal alone. He might go to sleep and fall down.

My wife came out, looked at the rig, and then went back in the house and bade everybody an affecting farewell.

There were tears in her eyes when she came out and climbed into the buggy. She said she was crying because Aunt Martha wasn't there to see us driving away and have the laugh of her life.

We started off and we were rushing along the road, passing a fence and overtaking a telegraph pole every once in a while, when suddenly we heard behind us a very insistent choof-choof-choof-choof!

"It's one of those Careless Wagons," I whispered to Peaches, and then we both looked at Parsifal to see if there was a mental struggle going on in his forehead, but he was rushing onward with his head down, watching his feet to make sure they didn't step on each other.

Choof-choof-choof! came the Torpedo Destroyer behind us, and I wrapped the reins around my wrist, in case Parsifal should get uneasy and want to print horseshoes all over that automobile.

The next minute the machine passed us, going at the rate of 14 constables an hour, and as it did so Parsifal stopped still and seemed to be biting his lips with suppressed emotion.

I coaxed him to proceed in English, in Spanish and Italian, and then in a pale blue language of my own, but he just stood there and bit his lips.

I believe if he had possessed fingernails he would have bitten them too.

I gave the reins to my wife with instructions how to act if the horse started, and I jumped out to argue with him.

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Just when I had picked out a good-sized rock, which was to be my argument, Parsifal came out of his trance and started off, but Peaches forgot her instructions and spoke above a whisper and he stopped again.

Then I took the reins, cracked the whip, shouted a couple of banzais from the Japanese national anthem, and away we rushed like the wind—when it isn't blowing hard.

The hours flew by and we must have gone at least half a mile, when another Kerosene Wagon came bouncing towards us from the opposite direction.

In it was a happy party of ladies and gentlemen, who were laughing and chatting about some people they had just run over.

Parsifal saw them coming and stopped still in the middle of the road. Then he hung his head as low as he could, and I believe if that horse had been supplied with hands he would have put them over his ears.

The people in the Bubble began to shout at us, and I began to shout at the horse, and my wife began to shout at me, while Parsifal stood there and scratched his left ankle with his right heel.

Then the big machine made a sudden jump to the right and hiked by us at the rate of about a \$100 fine, while the lady passengers on the hurricane deck stood up and began to hand out medals to each other because they didn't run us down.

Ten minutes later Parsifal came to and looked over his shoulder at us with a smile as serene as the morning and once more resumed his mad career onward, ever onward.

We were now about two miles from home, and suddenly we came across a big red Bubble which stood in front of a road-house, sneezing inwardly and sobbing with all its corrugated heart.

Parsifal saw the machine before we did.

We knew there must be an automobile somewhere near, because he stopped still and quietly passed away.

I jumped out and tried to lead him by the Coroner's Delight, but he planted his four feet in the middle of the road and refused to be coaxed.

I took that horse by the ear and whispered therein just what I thought about him, but he wouldn't talk back.

I told him my wife's honor was at stake, but he looked my wife over and his lips curled with an expression which seemed to say, "Impossible."

It was all off with us.

Parsifal simply wouldn't move until that sobbing Choo Choo Wagon had left the neighborhood, so I went inside the road-house to find the owner.

I found him. He consisted of a German chauffeur and eight bottles of beer.

When I explained the pitiful situation to him the chauffeur swallowed two bottles of beer and began to cry.

Then he told the waiter to call him at 7:30, and he put his head down on the table and went to sleep with his face in a cute little nest of hard-boiled cigarettes.

I rushed to the telephone and called up the liveryman, but before I could think of a word strong enough to fit the occasion he whispered over the wire, "I know your voice, Mr. Henry. I suppose Parsifal is waiting for you outside!"

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Forthwith I tried to tell that liveryman just what I thought about him and Parsifal, but the telephone girl short-circuited my remarks and they came back and set fire to the woodwork.

"My, my!" I could hear the liveryman saying. "Parsifal's hesitation must be the result of the epidemic of automobiles which is now raging over our country roads. The automobile has a strange effect on Parsifal. It seems to cover him with a pause and gives him inflammation of the speed."

I thought of poor Peaches sitting out there in that blushing buggy staring at a dreaming horse, while in front of her a Red Devil Wagon complained internally and shook its tonneau at her, and once more I jolted that liveryman with a few verbal twisters.

"Don't get excited," he whispered back over the phone. "Parsifal is a new idea in horses. Whenever he meets an automobile he goes to sleep and tries to forget it. Isn't that better than running away and dragging you to a hospital? There must be something about an automobile that affects Parsifal's heart. I think it is the gasoline. The odor from the gasoline seems to penetrate his mind to the region of his memory and he forgets to move. Parsifal is a fine horse, with a most lovable disposition, but when the air becomes charged with gasoline he forgets his duty and falls asleep at the switch."

I went out and explained to my wife that Parsifal was a victim of the gasoline habit, and that he would never leave that spot until the Bubble went away, and that the Bubble couldn't go away until the *chauffeur* could wake up, and that the chauffeur couldn't wake up until his mind had digested a lot of wood alcohol, so she jumped out of the buggy and we walked home.

Parsifal may be a new idea in horses, but the next time I go buggy riding it will be in a street car.

When we reached home that afternoon I found a note from Bunch which cheered me up wonderfully.

The note read as follows:

CITY, Sunday Morning.

DEAR JOHN—Sorry we had the run in but it was all my fault. Am sending you two rosebuds this evening as a peace offering.

Yours,
BUNCH.

“Two rosebuds!” I snickered. “That boy Bunch is a honey-cooler all right. But I’m sorry he didn’t make it two cigars.”

“Oh! John!” Peaches said to me a little while later, when we went over to Uncle Peter’s villa to take dinner with them and spend the evening. “I *do* wish I could tell you about the surprise, but Uncle Peter made me promise not to say a single word.”

“Well, if you feel tempted to give the old gentleman the double cross and tell me, why I’ll lock myself up in the doghouse till he gives you the starting pistol,” I chimed in. “Who is that dragging the works out of the clock in the sitting room?”

“It isn’t any such thing!” Peaches exclaimed indignantly. “It’s Uncle Peter, and he has a dreadful cold, but Aunt Martha has it nearly cured now, she says.”

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I went in and jollied the old chap along a bit, and little by little I heard his awful story.

He caught the cold about three days previously, but, after taking the prescription of every loving friend within a radius of four miles, the cold had almost disappeared. In place of the cold, however, Uncle Peter now had acute indigestion, nervous procrastination, delirium tremens and a spavin on his off fetlock.

All this was caused by a rush of home-made medicine to his brain.

Aunt Martha is a great believer in the simple life, so when Uncle Peter acquired a simple cold she got a simple move on and poured enough simple medicines into him to float a simple tug.

Every friend she had in the world suggested a different remedy, and she tried them all on Uncle Peter.

The cold got frightened and left on the second day, but a woman has to be loyal to her friends, so Aunt Martha kept on spraying Uncle Peter's system with dandelion tea and fried peppermint until every microbe heard about him and dropped in to pay him a long visit.

The first thing Aunt Martha wanted to do was to rub Uncle Peter's chest with goose grease.

"Goose grease is such a noisy companion," Uncle Peter remonstrated.

"Goose grease may be loud, but it is never vulgar," said Aunt Martha, and she went after it.

In about ten minutes she came back with the painful news that the only thing in the neighborhood which looked like a goose was a quill toothpick, and that was ungreasable.

"But, my dear," Aunt Martha whispered, "I have something Just as good. I found this box of axle grease in the barn."

Uncle Peter shuddered and said nothing.

"My idea is to rub it on your chest and call it goose grease, because the moral effect will be the same," Aunt Martha told him.

Then that loving wife rubbed so much axle grease into Uncle Peter that for hours afterwards he thought he had a pair of shafts on him, and every time he saw a horse he felt like making fifty revolutions a minute.

I suppose the axle grease gave him wheels in the noddle and made him buggyhouse.

Then Aunt Martha said to him, "Now, Peter, we could cure that cold in five minutes if we can get a woolen stocking to tie around your throat."

After a little while she found out that the only woolen stocking in our village was owned by the night watchman.

The night watchman said he liked Uncle Peter well enough, but he'd be switched if he was going to walk around all night with one bare foot even to let the Mayor use his stocking for a necktie.

Selfish watchman.

The next morning Uncle Peter's cold was much worse, but the axle grease had cured his appetite.

About nine o'clock his friend Dave Torrence came in, and after Uncle Peter had barked for him a couple of times Dave decided that the trouble was information of the lungs and he suggested that Uncle Peter should tie a rubber band around his chest and rub his shoulder blades with gasolene.

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Uncle Peter told his friend that he had no desire to become a human automobile, so Dave got mad, kicked the piano on the shins and went home.

An hour later Deacon Ed. Sprong, the Mayor's next-door neighbor, came in and in ten minutes he had Uncle Peter making signs to an undertaker.

Deacon Sprong decided that Uncle Peter had the galloping asthma with compressed tonsilitis, and a touch of chillblainous croup on the side, aggravated by asparagus on the chest.

Deacon Sprong told Uncle Peter to drink a pint of catnip tea, take eight grains of quinine, rub the back of his neck with benzine, soak his ankles in kerosene, take two grains of phenacetine, and drink a hot whiskey toddy every half-hour before meals.

Deacon Sprong volunteered to run over every half-hour and help Uncle Peter drink the toddy if it tasted bitter.

Then Deacon Sprong went home, and Uncle Peter's temperature came down about ten degrees, while his respiration began to sit up and notice things.

During the rest of the day every friend and relative Uncle Peter had in the world rushed in, suggested a couple of prescriptions, and then rushed out again.

Aunt Martha tried them all on Uncle Peter.

Before the shades of evening fell that day Uncle Peter was turned into a human medicine chest.

And to make matters worse, he took some dogberry cordial and it chased the catnip tea all over his interior from Alpha to Omaha.

Then Aunt Martha gave him some hoarhound candy to bite the dogberry, so it would leave the catnip alone, but blood will tell, and the hoarhound joined with the dogberry and chased the catnip up Uncle Peter's family tree.

But it cured the cold. Now all Uncle Peter had to do was to cure the medicine.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHN HENRY GETS A SETBACK.

Dinner was nearly over that evening at Uncle Peter's villa in Ruraldene when suddenly the doorbell rang violently and two minutes later the servant announced that Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius McGowan were in the parlor.

First I decided to faint; then I changed my mind and tried to figure out which would be the most cruelly effective way of killing Bunch Jefferson.

Uncle Peter resented the unexpected arrival of these strangers, because he wanted to sit around and have the home folks tell him how sick he was.

"I'd like to know what Bunch Jefferson means by sending his relatives over to us on a Sunday evening," my wife's uncle snapped. "Why doesn't he worry old Bill Grey with them, eh? It's bad enough for me to have to sneeze my head off before my own people, but I'll be dod bimed if I'm going to sit around the parlor and play solos on my bronchial tubes for the edification of strangers—no, sir!"

Uncle Peter sniffled off to his apartments, and Peaches said she'd try to entertain the visitors.

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I concluded to help her some.

Skinski arose from the sofa and greeted us with his most elaborate bow.

Ma'moselle Dodo didn't Society very much.

She sat in the middle of the room and sang soft lullabys to a hold-over.

"Mr. Jefferson, my nephew," Skinski was saying, "insisted that we should hit the suburban trail and locate your shack. Here's a note from nephew Bunch for you."

Skinski handed me the note with a face as solemn as a monkey-wrench, and I read it:

CITY, Sunday P.M.

DEAR JOHN—I send herewith the two rosebuds. As a favor to your old pal please treat my beloved relatives with every consideration and make a fuss over them. You know you told them in the restaurant to come and see you. They want to make good and will stay a week if you insist.

With kindest regards,
BUNCH.

P. S. Don't drag Aunt Flora into any literary discussions—she might hand you something. Her favorite author is Pommery Sec., the chap who writes all those frothy books.

B.

"I wish you could have seen our place in the day-time," Peaches was saying to Skinski when I finished reading Bunch's get-back. "We think it's delightful out here. Did you, have much trouble in finding the place?"

"Nay, lady fair," Skinski replied; "no trouble at all. Nephew Bunch came as far as the front door with us."

"What!" exclaimed the astonished Peaches.

"Yes," Skinski concluded; "he even saved us the hardship of ringing the bell. Oh! he's a thoughtful relative, Bunch is."

Clara J. looked at me, I looked at Skinski, he looked at Dodo, and she looked at the piano and said thoughtfully, "You betcher sweet!"



"The idea of Bunch coming to our front door and then rushing off again without seeing anybody," gasped Peaches, "what does it mean?"

"Alice lives only half a mile away and possibly Bunch was running behind his schedule," I suggested.

Just then Aunt Martha and Uncle Peter came in the parlor, and presently I grabbed a chance to say a few words to Skinski on the side:

"If my family circle ever gets wise that you and the Queen of Laughter over there are excess baggage it'll be to the cabbage patch for mine," I whispered.

"I'm on," Skinski whispered back. "Never a break from yours mysteriously, believe me. We wouldn't have come out at all if your partner hadn't insisted. He was so hot to have us butt in here and hand your heart a flutter that I just couldn't resist his pleading voice. It's a catchy jest, all right, and it's making me laugh. The way you two ducks josh each other is pitiful, but your secret is safe with me, Manager. I won't make no bad breaks, and Dodo won't ever open her talk-trap. She never talks off the stage. On the stage, say! she has the most elegant line of language that ever left the pipes. Leave it all to me, Manager, and I'll see that the McGowan family makes an awful hit with your fireside companions."

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And Skinski kept his word.

He skilfully led Uncle Peter around to a discussion of sleight-of-hand, and two minutes later the Wonder Worker was dragging the coal shovel and the vinegar cruet out of the Mayor's inside pockets, to the intense mystification and delight of the old gentleman.

Uncle Peter was wearing a small diamond pin in his cravat and quite by accident the setting became loose and the stone dropped to the floor.

The old gentleman became very much concerned about it and we all started to look for it.

"Wait a minute!" said Skinski; "the spark fell in your left-hand vest pocket."

Uncle Peter looked at him blankly. "Impossible, why, there's nothing there but this box of quinine pills for my cold."

"Open it," said Skinski, and Uncle Peter did so.

"How many of those do you usually take in a day?" asked Skinski.

"Four," replied the puzzled old gentleman.

"Drop four of them in your left hand," ordered Skinski.

Uncle Peter's right hand trembled a bit, with the result that five of the quinines fell into his left hand.

"If you counted money the way you count pills you'd quit loser," chuckled Skinski. "Put four of those dizzy-wizzys back in the box."

The old gentleman did so.

"Now take your penknife and open the pill you didn't put back," commanded Skinski.

Uncle Peter obeyed instructions, and he nearly choked with astonishment when his diamond came to view.

It was a neat bit of work and Skinski became a solid success with Uncle Peter.

"Did I understand you to say, Mr. McGowan, that you are a commission merchant in Springfield, Ohio?" the Mayor asked Skinski when the applause had subsided.

"I'm a used to was," Skinski corrected. "There was a time when I commished for fair, but the bogie man caught me and I lose all I had. Since then I've been trying to sell a gold mine I own out in the Blue Hills."

I tried to sidetrack Skinski and lead him away from the smoking room, but Uncle Peter insisted upon hearing more about those dreamland gold mines.

“I’ve got the documents and everything to prove that my claim is all the goods,” Skinski rattled on. “All it needs is the capital to work it and it’s a bonanza, sure— isn’t it, Dodey—I mean Flo!”

“You betcher sweet!” she answered, whereupon Peaches and Aunt Martha had a fit of coughing which lasted three minutes.

Then Uncle Peter coaxed Skinski off in a corner and there they hobnobbed for fifteen minutes while my wife and her aunt and I tried to get cheerful and chatty with “Aunt Flo,” but we only succeeded in dragging from her four reluctant “You betcher sweets!”

Presently Uncle Peter and Skinski shook hands about something, and five minutes later Bunch’s “relatives” took their departure to the accompaniment of much internal applause on my part.

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"Mr. McGowan is a very accomplished gentleman," Uncle Peter decided; "but handicapped by a most depressing wife, most depressing. The Blue Hills, eh! the Blue Hills! Now, I wonder——"

Then he began to whistle softly and went into the dining-room.

Monday morning, bright and early, I met Bunch, and we buried the hatchet.

"I hope my beloved relatives didn't disgrace me while sojourning in your midst," he chuckled.

"Not at all," I answered airily. "Why, Uncle Cornelius was the hit of the season with Uncle Peter, though, of course, Aunt Flora didn't make good with that 'You betcher sweet!' monologue of hers. How could she? Even at that, she stands better with me than some conversational queens I know who get so busy with the gab they make me dizzy."

About noon Bunch and I ducked for New Rochelle to do a bit of advance work for our show.

Nobody knew us in the town, so we posed as Cameron & Connolly, owners of the Great Hall of Illusions, and Managers of the World Wonder and Magic King, Signor Beppo Petroskinski, and Ma'moselle Dodo, the Oriental Queen of Mystery.

Pretty hot line of goods, eh?

We handed out the salve thing to all the paper lads and they were for us good and plenty.

After our publicity department had been in operation for about four hours we began to see the neighbors sit up and notice us, and we figured on about a \$1,000 opening.

"The show will cost us about \$80 a day," Bunch financed, with a strangle hold on a big green lead pencil. "Let's see! expenses say \$500 a week at the outside. Now, let's strike a low average and say we play to \$800 a night; that's \$4,800 a week, and two matinees at, say \$200, that's \$5,000 on the week, eh, John! That gives us a clean profit of \$1,500 apiece for the three of us—oh, aces!"

"It looks good to me. Bunch," I agreed, and then we went out and ordered some more three-sheets and a flock of snipe.

We spent the whole day in New Rochelle, and I reached home tired, but enthusiastic.

“John,” said Clara J. when we were alone after dinner, “Uncle Peter says if you will let him have that \$5,000 by Thursday or Friday he will invest it where the returns will be enormous!”

“Sure,” I answered, and I could feel my ears getting pale; “I’ll hand it over to him Thursday or Friday—if you think it’s best not to invest it in that new house.”

“Oh! I really do!” she hurried back. “You know Uncle Peter is so careful and so clever with his investments. He told me in strictest confidence only this morning that he would more than double your money in six months. Isn’t that perfectly splendid!”

“Is that the wonderful secret you threatened me with?” I asked mournfully.

“Oh no!” she replied; “I can’t tell you that till Wednesday evening—I promised not to.”

I guess I didn’t sleep very well that night, for I had dreams of Uncle Peter chasing me with a club all over a theatre and making me hop every seat in the orchestra, while Ma’moiselle Dodo sat perched on the balcony rail and screamed, “You betcher sweet!”

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CHAPTER VII.

JOHN HENRY GETS A SURPRISE.

The following day Bunch and I attended to the shipping of all the scenery and props and trick stuff, and we were two busy lads, believe me.

On Wednesday we tried all day to locate Skinski, but he avoided punishment until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when we finally flagged him and began to ask him questions.

"I've been busy since Monday," he explained; "brokers and bankers and lawyers, and there are doings. Say! you're two of the dead gamest sports I ever bumped into, and no matter what happens I'm for you for keeps!"

"What's the reason for the crab talk?" I asked sharply. "Are you going to give us the sorry hand and bow yourself out after we have put up every mazooboe we possess? What kind of a sour face are you pulling on us?"

"Oh! pinkies!" he came back. "Did I say anything about quitting you? Why, I wouldn't give you guys a cold deal not for Morgan's bank roll. I only wanted to prepare you for certain big happenings in case there are real doings with that gold mine out in the Blue Hills."

"Sush!" I laughed; "then it's only the hasheesh. But, Skinski, on the level, I do wish you'd quit smoking those No. 4's; they'll ruin your imagination."

"Wait and see," smirked Skinski. "And, by the way, nephew Bunch, I met a certain old party this morning who thinks you are very hot fried parsnips!"

"You did," Bunch came back, with a yawn.

"Yes," replied Skinski; "and a nice old man, too, is Mr. William Grey."

"Where the devil did you meet Mr. Grey?" Bunch inquired excitedly.

"Back, back up!" said Skinski quietly; "I didn't disgrace my family. Mr. Peter Grant introduced me to him as your Uncle and I made good."

"You met Uncle Peter, too!" I asked in alarm.

"Surest thing you know," said Skinski; "but, don't worry. The Jefferson family tree will never be blown down by any hot air from me, so rest easy. Now, let's get down to cases about our opening Thursday night."

Bunch and I were both puzzled by Skinski's peculiar line of talk, but we forgot it and completed all the details for the opening the next night.

It was after eight o'clock when I reached home, and Peaches met me at the door with the face lights on full.

"Now for the secret!" she chirped, as she dragged me into the diningroom.

"Make mine a small one," I admonished; "I've had a busy day."

"This is a cure for all your business worries," she gurgled. "Guess what, John! We sail for Europe next Wednesday!"

"Poor Peaches!" I said sympathetically; "that's what you get for drinking too much tea."

"I mean it seriously, John!" she cried eagerly. "Uncle Peter has booked passages on the Oceanic for the whole family, and he is going to pay all the expenses for a three months' trip."

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"Water! water!" I gasped faintly, and I meant it, but Peaches thought I was only cutting up.

"I knew you'd be delighted," she capered on; "and it was all I could do to keep from telling you long ago. Uncle Peter says that this is the dull season in your brokerage business and the trip will do you a world of good. You need only take a few hundred dollars for pocket money, and he's going to invest your \$5,000 where it will be immensely productive."

I could only sit and listen and pass away.

What would become of Skinski and Bunch and our good money!

How could I ever account for the missing funds without leading Peaches down to Wall Street and showing her the tall buildings they had built with my dough.

And while these dismal thoughts ran through my mind Peaches grabbed that European trip between her pearly teeth and shook the delights out of it.

That night I had an attack of insomnia, neurasthenia, nervous prostration and the nightmare, with cinematograph pictures on the side.

All night long Skinski had me on the stage in a wicker basket, while Uncle Peter jabbed a sword through me and Dodo sat in the front row on the aisle yelling "You betcher sweet!"

Thursday broke clear and cloudless. Just before I left home for the fatal scene Peaches said, "I'm so sorry business will keep you in the city this evening, John; but of course I realize you have much to do before we sail on Wednesday. Alice Grey just phoned over that she has a box at a theatre somewhere, I didn't ask her where, but if you're sure you won't be home I'll go with Alice and Aunt Martha."

"By all means," I answered, and kissing her good-bue I trolleyed to New Rochelle.

Bunch was there ahead of me and so were Skinski and Ma'moiselle Dodo, all working like beavers.

"I'm going to take the 11:40 to town," Skinski informed us after all was in readiness for the performance. "I have a very important date, haven't I, Dodey?"

"You betcher sweet!" she puffingly replied.

"But I'll be back before six o'clock and I'll give 'em the show of my life," Skinski continued. "How's the sale?"

“There’s a three hundred dollar advance sale,” Bunch replied; “and Pietro in the box office says we’re good for a five or six hundred dollar window sale if it’s a fine night. You can gamble we’ve let ’em know we’re in town, all right!”

“Right!” chirped Skinski. “You’re the best bunch of managers I ever roomed with and nothing’s too good for you. I’m for the 11:40 thing now, so you better rent a stall in the local hotel and rest up till show time. How about you, Dodey? Are you for hunting a thirst-killing palace and getting busy with a dipper of suds?”

“You betcher sweet!” the large lady replied, and with that she grabbed Skinski’s arm and they left us flat.

Bunch and I loafed around till about an hour before show time, when we put a young chap we had sworn to secrecy on the door, and then we went back on the stage and began to chatter nervously.

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At seven o'clock Dodo came in with one of those sunburst souses, and as she went sailing by to her dressing room she gave us the haughty head and murmured, "You betcher sweet!"

Seven thirty and no Skinski.

I was nervous, but I wasn't a marker to Bunch. He had long since graduated from biting his finger nails, and was now engaged in eating the brim of his opera hat.

Seven forty-five and no Skinski.

I was afraid to tell Bunch what I was thinking, and Bunch was afraid to think for fear he'd spill something.

Eight o'clock came and still no Skinski.

It was pitiful.

I began to see visions of an insulted audience reaching for my collar over the prostrate form of my partner in crime.

An usher came back at 8:10 and told us the house was full.

I grinned at him foolishly and Bunch fell over a stage brace and disgraced himself.

At 8:15 the orchestra leader came up to see why we didn't ring in and Bunch told him to ring off.

I told Beethoven, or whatever his name was, to tune up and play everything in sight till I gave him the warning.

At 8:20 Ma'moiselle Dodo waltzed out of her dressing room made up to look like a cream puff.

"Where's Skinski?" I shrieked. "It's nearly 8:30 and he's keeping that mob waiting. Isn't he going to show up!"

"You betcher sweet!" she gurgled, and passed on.

At 8:25 I rushed into Skinski's dressing room, put on a swift makeup, dove into Skinski's fright wig, hid my face behind a false moustache and goatee, and prepared to sell my life dearly.

"What are you going to do?" asked Bunch in wild alarm.

"I'm going out and pull a few mouldy tricks till Skinski gets here," I answered heroically.



Then I gave the warning to the leader and rang up the curtain.

I was greeted by a harsh round of applause as I stepped out and I could feel both knees get up and leave my legs.

I pulled myself together, picked up a pack of cards and began to do things with the deck that no mortal man ever saw before, while Bunch stood in the wings with his teeth chattering so loud they sounded like a pedestal clog accompaniment.

Then I picked up an egg where Skinski had placed it on the tabaret and started in to do something mysterious with it.

Just as I raised the egg to show it to the audience I got a flash of the stage box on my right, and there, gazing curiously at me, sat Peaches and Alice Grey and Aunt Martha.

I was so surprised I dropped the egg, and it lay at my feet in the form of an omelet, while the house roared with joy.

[Illustration: I was so surprised I dropped the egg.]

At this moment Skinski bounded on the stage, bowed right and left, and in five words he made it appear that I was only a comedy curtain raiser.

Say! I never was so glad to see anybody in all my life.

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I backed off the stage, and he pulled something on my exit that got an awful laugh.

I didn't care. I was so delighted that Skinski was there that I nearly hugged Dodo.

And he gave them their money's worth, all right. He flashed a line of hot illusions that had them groggy in short order.

When the curtain finally fell Skinski was given an ovation, and when it was all over we backed into his dressing-room and sat looking at each other.

"That's the last," our star said, after a pause; "and it was a hot finish all right."

"What do you mean?" I gasped.

"The syndicate has bought my gold mine in the Blue Hills," he answered calmly.

"And you're going to throw us after making a start like this?" Bunch almost sobbed.

"Throw nothing!" Skinski came back. "Didn't I tell you once before that I am for you two guys all the old while—didn't I, Dodey?"

"You betcher sweet!" she answered solemnly.

"Well, that still goes," Skinski went on. "I've sold out a half interest in my Blue Hill gold mine, and I've got the corn to show for it."

So saying, he dug up a wad that a hound couldn't leap over.

"Now, I'm going to pay you each \$6,000 to cancel my contract," Skinski added, after our eyes had feasted on his roll.

I looked at Bunch, and Bunch was stepping on his left foot to see if he was awake.

"No, by Hick! I'll make it seven thousand each," Skinski chortled. "You two guys put up your last dollar on me, and you didn't know whether I was an ace or a polish. I like you both, for you brought me good luck. Tear up the contract and take \$7,000 apiece, is it a go?"

"Just as you say, Skinski," I answered nervously. "Of course, if you want the tour to continue, why——"

"Yes, of course," Bunch chimed in; "if you want the tour to continue, why——"

"Oh! pinkies!" said Skinski; "what do I want to go hugging one-night stands for when I have a hundred thousand boobos in the kick. It's the Parisian boulevards for us, and a canter on the Boy Bologna, eh, Dodey?"

“You betcher sweet!” she gurgled thirstily.

And so it came about that we destroyed the contract, pocketed our seven thousand each, and bade Skinski and Dodo an affecting farewell.

Bunch and I couldn’t talk for hours afterwards.

We were afraid we’d wake ourselves up.

When I reached home Clara J. started in to tell me what a delightful time she had had at the New Rochelle theatre, and how clever the magician was, and what a funny clown came out first and smashed a real egg on the stage, but I begged off and went to bed.

I never slept so soundly in all my life.

Next day I handed the five thousand dollars to Uncle Peter, and he complimented me so highly on my ability to save money that I nearly swallowed my palate.

“I’m going to invest this carefully for you, John,” he informed me. “When we return from Europe you’ll be surprised.”

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I don't know what powers of persuasion Bunch brought to bear on Alice and Uncle William, but I do know that there was a hurried wedding ceremony, and that a certain blushing bride and bashful groom and a delighted old Uncle who answered roll call when you yelled Bill Grey took passage that next Wednesday with us on the Oceanic.

I was promenading the deck with Peaches and Uncle Peter after we had been out two days when the old gentleman said, "John, aren't you curious to know how I invested your money?"

"Not particularly," I answered with a laugh,

"John knows it is perfectly safe in your hands," Peaches beamed.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Uncle Peter. "Bill Grey and myself celebrated the finish of our long quarrel by going into a little business deal together."

"Fine!" I said approvingly.

"We buried the hatchet," Uncle Peter went on, "by investing together in a gold mine."

"Where?" I asked nervously.

"We formed a little syndicate and bought a half-interest in a mine owned by Bunch's Uncle McGowan, out in the Blue Hills!"

"And is that where you invested my few plunks?" I asked, forcing myself to be calm.

"That's it," chuckled Uncle Peter, "and that's where Bill Grey has invested \$5,000 for Bunch."

I excused myself and said I didn't feel like promenading—the undertow made me dizzy.

I went off by my lonesome and looked across the troubled sea.

It seemed to me that I could hear a voice coming from far away behind that biggest wave, and the voice said, "You betcher sweet!"