

Why Shorty Wore the Grin



BY SEWELL FORD

Drawings by F. Vaux Wilson

Ah! why shouldn't I grin? Ain't it my day to wear the happy stretch? And foolish! Say, if I was down with the Meadowbrook Willies, wearin a wrist watch and a pink coat, and pourin' tea at a hunt luncheon, I couldn't feel any more mushy! Honest, my head might's well be a cantaloup full of vanilla ice cream!

Not that it troubles me a bit. I'm glad because I'm glad, and I don't care who knows it. Every man I meet looks as good to me as a long lost brother, and the kiddies on the street are little cherubs with their wings buttoned inside. Comin' over on a cross town car this morning, I gives up my seat to four different fat women, and I does the Peace Congress act between a scrappy conductor and a grouchy old gent that's dropped his nickel under the floor gratings.

But forty-eight hours ago it was different. My, my! Life was full of dark corners an' casualty lists, and cross grained folks with clogged livers and agateware hearts, and the program of future events was as cheerin' as a mud colored thunder cloud rollin' up over the Palisades. I ain't goin' into details; but it was a case of your friend Shorty with his head on the block wonderin' if the ax was goin' to fall.

As a general rule, I'm a consistent nonfretter. When things are lookin' worst I puts in what licks I can to right 'em, and banks on my luck. But this was once where I'm no use whatever.

"Come on down to the studio and take it out on Swifty Joe," says Pinckney.

You see, he's tackled the job of dry nursin' me through this spell, and in his own peculiar soap bubble way he's doin' his best to make me forget. But it's no use. The studio's too far away from the scene of trouble. Maybe I hadn't told you about my investin' in a place next to his, up on the Sound? Yes, we moved out there from the Perzazzner a few weeks ago because—well, just because.

It's one of these near-swell joints, with a strip of water frontage in the back yard, a fifteen-room house that'll be fine and nifty after it's been rebuilt, and a pair of fancy castiron gateposts that Sadie made me promise to unload on the first junk man that comes around. The trouble with the place is, it's been on the toboggan for about a dozen years while a lot of grandchildren have been squabblin' over the estate. The party I got it from was

the lawyer representin' the contestants, and I hear they got their share in witness fees.

Anyway, they let the rain pipes rust out, and the paint wear off, and the lawn grow up to weeds. Course I got busy right away, and now my steady mornin' job is callin' up plumbers and painters and carpenter gents, and askin' 'em why in the name of all that's good they don't get a move on. Would 'be breakin' any union rules, I wonder, if some of them contractor's bosses was to keep their word once in awhile?

Not that them little trifles was what I had on my mind. Say, I'd been satisfied to see the blamed house all apart like a New York tenement, if I could just know what— Well, what's the odds now? It was a relief then to stew about them little things, and as we was sittin' there on the veranda waitin' for some word I separates myself from a few acetic acid remarks about the buildin' trades in general.

"Look at that stack of copper leader!" says I. "Dumped there three days ago, and not a hand put to 'em since! And what do you guess has happened to that bunch of paint slingers that was workin' so merry up to Thursday night? Have I got to live all the fall in a house that looks like it was breakin' out with the hives? Am I an easy one, or what?"

"Go on," says Pinckney. "It's a pleasure to hear criticism expressed with such restrained eloquence. I would almost get the impression that you were annoyed."

"You would, eh?" says I. "Pinckney, if I was you I wouldn't work that mighty intellect overtime. You're liable to strip a gear."

Pinckney, he just taps the end of a fresh cigarette and grins, thinkin' he's got my mind runnin' on the side issues. Partly to keep up the game, but mostly to fool myself, I lets on that he has.

"I'll bet," says I, "that out of the dozen men that ought to be doin' things around this place, the only two on the job is that pair of macaronis I hired to cur-rycomb the front drive. Let's take a look at 'em."

With that we strolls around the house and down towards the gates. But there's no busy 'Talianos anywhere in sight. If I was faking the

peevish business before, it was the real thing now; for old Dominick, after puttin' me off every day for a week, had sworn by seven saints that to-day him and his son Pasquale would tackle them burdocks and tickweeds that was makin' my bluestone driveway

look like a road through a cow pasture. And here they hadn't done a stroke! Pinckney only chuckles.

"Well, well!" says I. "How humorous! Real entertainin' of 'em, ain't it? Well, you trot along with me until I locate that couple of smoked Ananiases, and you'll hear some strained eloquence that'll make somebody's hair curl! Maybe I can't get any work done; but I can call for the reason why!"

So we starts off for the particular section of little It'y that our neighborhood is blessed with,—you know all them Sound side towns has their Italian settlements,—and inside of half an hour we was hot on the trail.

EVER skirmish around through one of them spaghetti sections? It's worth while, just to study the architecture. I've heard said them old Romans was crackerjacks at puttin' up theaters and city halls, and if you can believe the pictures, that Coliseum of theirs must have laid over anything Hammerstein's done yet. But I guess the blood has been mixed considerable since then. The Romans that come over here now has simpler tastes.

A family will land at Ellis Island with a yellow tin trunk, eight children, and a handful of silver lire done up in a red cotton handkerchief. Papa borrows a pick and lets himself out to a padrone for one-twenty-five per, and for the first few weeks he hires a five by eight room in a tenement, stowin' the kids away on shelves. Then he squats on a little piece of swamp land, gets together a few railroad ties, yanks a board or two off an advertising sign, finds an old piece of tin roofing, and proceeds to build himself a villa.

He ain't partic'lar about his materials. He uses sod, old bottles, soap boxes, anything that's handy. Two lengths of drain pipe makes him a fancy chimney, and until he can pinch a door off somebody's chicken house he hangs up a burlap bag. But he don't support a landlord any longer'n he can help, and in a year or so he's saved up enough to spend the winter abroad, or to build a two family frame house that he'll paint