

sulting to say to the other, a tall man at the left turned until he faced us, and when, with extraordinary gravity, he had accomplished this difficult feat, he winked deliberately once at Jack and once at me.

"Ahem!" said he and, winking again, stepped round the corner. I nudged Jack or he nudged me, and we followed. As we came up with him he said, "S-sh!" mysteriously and proceeded to strip his face of a set of ecclesiastical whiskers—the variety of hirsute appendage still to be found in the section of the country that Mark Twain called the Whisker Belt.

"Maurauding Cats!" Jack hissed. "If it isn't Old Sleuth!"

Which remark proved he didn't know the man. "Hello, Bimble!" said I. "What's the idea of the makeup? Thought you agreed never to follow our show again?"

"Aw, I say, Mr. Coleman, I don't deserve that! Didn't I promise Mr. Harkins not to work around his tops? Didn't I make good by blowin' after McGee's gang o' dips frisked the human mattress—w'at's her name?—Fat—Fat—thanks—that's the moniker—Fat Florence?"

He looked so hurt that I apologized to Mr. Ezra Bimble, the most expert candy "butch" and balloon man who ever worked a street. Then I waited.

"You see, I was jest a standin' there on the corner, watchin' the rubes an' thinkin', when I sees you two gents come along. 'Hullo!' says I to myself. 'W'at are a couple of guys with 1914-model clothes doin' here?' Then I lamps your mug—pardon me, Mr. Coleman—I pipes you closer, and I knowed it was you. Just as I was about to open my trap and say 'Welcome to Okra!' you stop, an' I can't help overhearin' the conversation. That's how I come to answer the question."

"But what are you doing here?" I asked.

"Answered what question?" said Jack.

"Sh! Do you gents mind walkin' along a space? There's the dick of the 'Frisco comin' down the street. That's right, you got me: 'dick' spells detective. It's a warm day; but I suppose I got to put this muff back on."

We walked with Bimble up another side street while he readjusted his disguise.

"Queer about cops," said he. "Seem to have it in for everybody w'at's tryin' to make a honest livin'. Pardon me, Mr. Coleman, but ain't this the young gent with the sister?"

"Mr. John Henry McCann, Jr., has a sister," said I. "She's in San Antonio now. We're all going back to New York together from New Orleans. But you're to answer questions, not to ask them."

RIGHT-O! as the English comic says, or he ain't English. But first I want to put myself right. Your friend here's probably got me sized up for a short-change artist w'at's 'ere to frisk the circus crowd. Well, I ain't. I'm a business man, first an' all the time. I'm a gent with a grudge once in awhile. Just now I'm both. That's why I mentioned the nuts.

"The what?"

"The nuts. Don't you remember you was askin' if Mr.—the lady's brother here—you was askin' him how you could put the Rock Me to Sleep Mother sign on these 'ere grave diggers an' buttermilk enthusiasts an' pull a crowd to the circus? Of course you do. An' I says quiet like, 'Hoang Ho!' You remember that too. I thought so. Well, Hoang Ho is the answer to your question. Hoang Ho is w'at's goin' to pin the crape on both conventions. Hoang Ho is goin' to make the conveners take an afternoon off at Mr. Harkins' show. An' Hoang Ho is a nut. Get me?"

"Mr. Bimble," said McCann, "you are as clear as—"

"I know! I'm as clear as Missouri River water, a rainy night, the air in a tunnel, or mud! If you gents'll lean up against this fence and try to concentrate, the fog'll lift an' you'll understand that Old Mr. Fixit an' Yours Truly are one an' the same. Your eyes will open, your minds will thaw out, an' you'll appreciate the value of a knowledge of folks like mine, a knowledge of folks married to a knowledge of nuts."

"Go on, Professor," said Jack.

We both leaned. Bimble carefully worked the end of a cigar through his false beard, lighted up, and proceeded. Once when a small boy I had a teacher who was almost as careful in communicating to me a system of fundamental facts; but not quite. Ezra Bimble was the limit.

"Folks is a serious study," said he, "an' a curious one. They're like measles. You've got to know 'em to understand 'em. The simple fact that you're hep to their existence an' the regions in which they thrive hearty ain't nothin'. The gag is to find out the various sorts an' varieties of food they like the best, an' feed it to 'em. W'en a guy knows that, he's got somethin'. I'm the guy."

"These 'ere folks is like women; also sheep. W'en one chips in the others follow suit. An' they're never right. Their parts of the country is the nachral dumpin' grounds for things other folks don't want. Last year's hats, skirts, shirtwaists, overcoats, parasols, an' shoes, instead o' bein' sent to the cannibals in the Fiji Islands, where they ought to go, is sent out here an' sold at

double the original price. W'en city folks was coughin' up for autos they was still mortgagin' land for Cortland buggies. An' now that the females of the species in big towns wear slit skirts the ladies hereabouts are organizin' an' arrangin' to doll up in garments made of tin with a fringe of barbed wire."

"Which leads up to—" I interjected while he relighted his smoke.

"This," said Bimble. "The peculiar specimen of humanity at w'ich you gents are now gazin' knows all about the animal w'ich makes this portion of the globe its habitat,—I guess that 'habitat' is bad!—an' usin' this knowledge your Uncle Ezra intends to crab the temperance conference tomorrow."

McCann still wanted to know how he was going to do it. So did I; but neither of us had to ask. Bimble was wound up, and kept on going.

GENTS," said he, "if you will glance across this thoroughfare, w'ich, I might add, is the Fifth-ave. of Okra, your lamps will be attracted to a poster. It adorns the window of the Mayor's front parlor,—the room where under lock, key, an' glass are kept the family heirlooms, consistin' of four horsehair chairs, a horsehair sofa w'ich can't be set on without the use of glue, some wax flowers an' sea shells on the mantelpiece, two crayon enlargements of the Mayor an' his first wife (worth four cents apiece, but w'ich his Honor, bein' a rube, paid twenty-five bones for), three chromos,—Washington Crossin' the Delaware, Custer's Last Stand, an' the Signin' of the Declaration of Independence,—a kaleidoscope, the family Bible, two photograph albums, a book of Thomson's poems, Volume II. of Young's 'Night Thoughts,' a couple of Aunt Hetty's hand-painted plates,—one entitled 'Bananas' the other 'Gladiolas,'—an' in the corner a melodeon. Nobody in the Mayor's family ever played on it; but it's there."

"You see the poster, don't you? Well, in the middle of it appears the awful mug of the Hon. Jeremiah H. Regan. He's to be the big smoke, the loud noise, the star, the prima donna, the John B. Gough, the Francis Murphy, the Bryan, the General Coxey, the Teddy Roosevelt, the Kaiser Wilhelm, an' the Sousa's band of the temperance gathering tomorrow. That is, he thinks he is! But he ain't—not while Hoang Ho an' Yours Truly retain their health an' vigor! Don't you gents ever eat?"

"We've been known to," said McCann; "but from where I am leaning I should say this is a fast day. The butterfly, Mr. Bimble, flits from flower to flower, remaining in one blossom no longer than is necessary to sip the fragrant syrup secreted in its center. The bumblebee, symbol of business, loiters not, but buzzes from bloom to bloom intent only on extracting Nature's sweets from the store the butterfly has overlooked. The graceful swallow, the lilting lark, the wandering gypsy, all spend the major hours of their brief existence on the move. But it has been proved that once in awhile each of these itinerant creatures does alight. For the love of—for the love of anything you love best, will you emulate their example and come to earth long enough to tell Mr. Coleman and me what Hoang Ho and the Hon. Jeremiah Regan have to do with the undertakers' convention, how the casket makers connect with the temperance conference, and in what way the Mayor's parlor furniture has a bearing on the possible or impossible receipts in the red wagon of the Mighty Harkins Show?"

"Spoken like a gent! I'd a knowed you was the little lady's sister," said Ezra Bimble, a light of honest admiration in his dishonest eye. "You think I'm drifin'. I ain't. I'm just gettin' down to cases. In fact, I've got there. Listen!

HOANG HO will bring about the temporary fall-down of the Hon. Jeremiah. With Jerry out of the way, the meeting of the teetotalers busts. This temperance affair is to be the big event tomorrow: not so much the fact that we've killed it, as the way the deadly pill has been dealt will halt the grave diggers and coffin nailers. The minute they halt they're lost. Result, The town of Okra will be filled with a mob of strangers with nothin' to do but go to your show. An' the town folks will have the alternative of spendin' the holiday sittin' on the parlor furniture or trailin' along with the visitors. Take it from me, they'll trail! An' there you are! The circus is packed, an' I'm on my way successful. Now do we eat?"

Jack grabbed one of his arms, and I grabbed the other. Like the Three Musketeers, or Taffy, the Laird, and Little Billy, we pranced back to the business center and into the first luncheon. McCann did the ordering while Bimble started unraveling to me the conversational maze into which he had wandered. The State election was about due, and for the first time in its history the Prohibition Party loomed up as a factor. Anyhow, it held the balance of power. Ezra Bimble was in Okra as the special representative of E. Bimble, Esq., and his job was to discredit the Hon. Jeremiah Regan, who had been imported from the East as the champion temperance windjammer of the age.

"Jeremiah," said the candy butch as soon as McCann

could listen, "is ridin' for a fall. He thinks he's pretty slick; but there's slicker. Everybody's got a principal trouble. Ezra Bimble is his. In real life Jerry's a salesman for a Lake Erie claret and grapejuice factory. Sort of works both ends against the middle. In dry territory he sports a black suit an' string tie an' spoons about the curse of drink. In wet regions he wears checks and plays the claret right across the boards. An' drink! Say, Gents—yes, I'll have some ham. Looks like leather, don't it? An' pipe the phony Worcester-shire! I was just about to remark that when it comes to two-handed drinkin' Jeremiah Regan has all other competitors lost in a cloud of empty glasses. For the last twenty years he's spent all his vacations in Keeley cures. Fact. Since 1900 he's got his mail there. Calls it home."

"Jerry likes to talk—in public, I mean. That's where he lets his vanity get away with him. Right now he ought to be in Sioux Falls sellin' the red paint his firm calls claret; but along comes this temperance meetin' with delegates from everywhere, an' he falls for the grapejuice job of chief speaker."

BIMBLE sailed into his lunch. McCann and I exchanged glances. McCann was amused. Personally I had no intention of taking part in an unknown kind of rough work, even though it did turn the tide of people and money toward Sam Harkins' circus. I had no right to meddle in local politics, and was sure Jack shared my distrust of having anything to do with a candy butch's activities, despite the fact that this notorious street merchant had never been guilty of any great evil so far as we were aware. Our thoughts may have made a telepathic connection with Bimble's; for suddenly he pushed back a half-eaten slab of pie, carefully wiped his whiskers, and continued:

"I don't blame you gents for not throwin' up your hats an' yellin' 'Hoorah!' at the thought of mixin' up with me in this ornery business. Fact is I don't want you to mix. I'll turn this trick single-handed an' alone. You can take advantage if you want to, or you can leave it alone. Here's all I suggest, Gents: Have twenty thousand dodgers printed sayin' that the temperance an' undertakin' confabs for tomorrow 're off an' that the Mighty Harkins Show'll give the usual two performances. Then, when I proves to you that your Uncle Ezra's captured the Hon. Jerry's goat an' busted the opposition shows, you c'n smear the town with handbills an' take it easy till you gets to the next town. Him an' me has been fightin' f'r fifteen years. We hate each other somethin' 'orrible. Last time he got me. Now I gets even f'r all time. Take it from me this is Bimble's innings."

THAT was the last speech he delivered to us that day.

In the afternoon we saw him several times at a distance, once in intimate conversation with the hotel clerk. Whenever we spied him he wore his third-act whiskers, and seemed tremendously busy. All the press-work for the Mighty Harkins Show had been finished, and there seemed to be nothing for us to do but wait. I say "us" not because McCann was connected with the circus in any official capacity; for he wasn't. He was simply stringing along with the outfit because he had nothing else to occupy his attention, and because he liked to pal around with Sam and me. Still, he was ever ready to pitch in and help whenever there was any helping needed, and he felt as keenly as did I the ridiculous situation we were in.

Jack and I dropped into the office of the local evening paper, and during a story-swapping contest with the editor-publisher discovered that he was a prime mover of the Wets, that he wished the Hon. Jeremiah Regan and all his followers strangled, and that he longed, hankered, and ached, to perform some stunt that would bring about a return to the Good Old Times when each man was his own master and could enjoy a mug of October ale without facing a term in the penitentiary.

It was then that I ordered the dodgers. It wasn't necessary to divulge Bimble's scheme—especially as we didn't know it. The Okra editor was willing to commit anything up to murder. He agreed to run his presses all night if necessary. He would furnish the boys to scatter the handbills throughout the town. He would guarantee that every man, woman, and child in Okra got one within half an hour after I said the word. Promise not to let any get out beforehand? Why, he would break the type and sit on the stack with a loaded .45 in each hand! So I gave him the copy, a wad of admission tickets for the delivery boys, and told him he could expect to hear from me about eleven o'clock the next morning.

By this time it was getting along toward night. On the way back to the hotel we passed the man whose job it was to light the village street lamps. He was on the job.

Okra is one of those towns where every evening the village cutups smoke five-cent cigars and pick their teeth in armchairs tilted against the front of the hotel. While they smoke and pick the inhabitants of the town parade past, affording a more or less constant panorama and an easy, inexpensive, and diverse cause for gossip. The occupant of one of these hotel chairs needn't exer-