The Washington Herald Magazine of Features and Fiction

CAVE CANEM! BEWARE THE DOG : : :

By Stuart MacLean

IT WAS ten minutes past eight when Tubbs dodged into the office. He made a brilliant, if abortive, effort to get to his desk unobserved. As well might he have hoped to pluck the central sun of the universe from its radiant sphere without attracting attention.

"Mr. Tubbs?" cackled the city editor.

"Yes, sir." Tubbs made his way between rows of desks and faced the arbiter of human destiny.

"You are late again, Mr. Tubbs. The men on this newspaper report at 8 o'clock."

"Y—yes sir, but——"

"I don't care to hear anything about it, Mr. Tubbs. If it happens again we shall dispense with your services."

No one would have suspected, to hear the city editor, that he had a certain faint and far-off partiality for Tubbs' work. It was not, probably, that he cared two whoops for Tubbs himself. As a matter of fact the city editor was believed never to have really cared for anybody. He was not that kind of a city editor.

Sometimes a daring member of the staff would try to imagine the city editor in the bosom of a family, but it was always given up as a hopeless job. There are limits even to a newspaperman's imagination.

He had a reputation of having "fired" more men than all the other city editors in New York combined, which, taking it by and large, is an appalling thought.

In the mere matter of results he was revered as the greatest city editor on earth; at the same time it was as devoutly believed in the office that if he should walk down the street and meet the Milk of Human Kindness coming up he would look at it just once and put it out of business.

It was this general regard for the city editor that prompted Brundage's exquisite bon mot, still revered through the length and breadth of Park Row as a classic. One morning the city editor did not appear. Later it developed that he was sick.

"Dear me," said Brundage, "I do hope it's nothing trivial!"

At that if the city editor had not esteemed Tubbs' work beyond all measure for this particular city editor, Tubbs would long ago have been gathered to his reportorial fathers.

HE WAS known among his fellow serfs as the late Mr. Tubbs. He was the latest man on the staff. Nobody else was ever as late—nobody else dared to be. But then nobody else had Tubbs' godlike fancy, that could conjure any number of perfectly all right excuses out of the vasty limbo of nothing whatever. Only there was a vague feeling that Tubbs was too good at it.

Which he was.

"Did you try to lie to him?" asked Froelich, the financial man, as Tubbs skipped blithely back to his desk and prepared to forget all that the city editor had said.

Tubbs looked aggrieved.

"Didn't hear what he handed Tommy Smith last week, did you?" queried Froelich. "Tommy came over from Staten Island half an hour late and scared to death. To save time he called up from the Battery. 'This is Smith,' he said. 'Anything for me?'

" 'Oh, it's Mr. Smith, is it?' coos the Old Man. 'Nothing going on in the courts this morning, Mr. Smith?'

" 'Not a thing, sir,' says Tommy.

" 'That's strange,' says the Old Man.

" 'Strange, sir?' says Tommy. "How do you mean, sir?'

" 'Well,' says the Old Man, 'I thought you might have a story about the flood. I hear the tugs up there in the courtroom.' "

"Well, Smithy lasted, didn't he?" demanded Tubbs.

Froelich borrowed a cigarette.

"Oh, yes, he lasted, but how long is he going to last? Tubbs, my son, Dame Fortune doth not always wear a smiling face. One of these mornings you are going to tell the Old Man just the lie he's looking for. Cave canem! Beware the dog!"

"Thanks awf'ly," nodded the cherubic Tubbs. "I guess his bark's worse than his bite. Anyway, he's singing. Listen!"

"It has been just six months," mused Froelich, "since I heard the Old Man sing. Jacky Horner was the goat that day. 'Tum, tum, tum,' hums the Old Man, just like he's doing now. 'Oh, Mr. Horner?—tee tiddle-up—I don't believe—toodle too-too—we'll need you—tra la-la-la—any more.' Forget it, Tubbs. Forget it!"

And that was just what Tubbs did.

Whether it was that the clock didn't go off next morning, or breakfast was late, or he had to find somebody to borrow money from, the fact remains that at 8:15 a. m. Tubbs was in the subway and still a respectable distance from the bridge.

"Holy Mike!" he murmured, as his watch and the station clocks confirmed his worst [illegible] again! Now, what'll I do? If I don't get busy I'm as good as fired. As my old friend Koko puts it practically, I am fired; and if I am fired why not say so?"

He looked desperately at the advertising signs. They brought no inspiration. It would not answer even to shed his hat and coat in the hall and stroll into the office, pretending to have been there all the time. Something told him that at the fateful hour of 8 the city editor had taken notice.

He reopened his morning newspaper and his glance fell upon the obituary notices.

"Appropriate reading," he shuddered. "Wonder if I'll be in there tomorrow? 'Died, at his recent place of business, Thomas Tubbs. Kindly omit flowers.' "

He read on.

"Hm! Here's a lucky man right next door to my house—Bernard Weevyl Stokes, Esq. Buried this morning! Stokes, I could weep for you. Morituri, Stokesy, te salutamus. All around the mulberry bush! Happy, happy Stokes! Nobody can ever fire you any—"

He stopped short. A colossal thought began to take shape.

"Oh, my aunt's cat! Steady, Tubbs, steady! Anyway, it's new! Ab-so-lute-ly virginal! I'll bet it never was done before: It's an idea. A perfect, exquisite, apparently flawless idea. Tubbs, my boy, now if we can only get away with it!"

He revolved it in his mind. He began to smile. Several times he smote his knee. Finally he laughed aloud.

The express drew alongside of the bridge station platform. Tubbs did not get out. On the contrary he leaned back in his seat, rode on past South Ferry and over to the Broooklyn terminus. There he leisurely took another train back. It appeared that Thomas Tubbs actually was trying to see how late he could be.

Instead of 8:10 it was 8:47 when Tubbs entered the office, and, disregarding the clammy atmosphere of sympathy that hung about each desk at his appearance, walked to the rostrum of the city editor. There was a sadness in his step, as in that of one whom unkind Fate had not passed lightly by. Under his arm he carried a morning newspaper that was folded open at the obituary notices.

The city editor looked at Tubbs. Ordinarily when the city editor did that Tubbs, even when most virtuous, felt a little uneasy at the pit of his stomach. This morning, however, he only passed his hand wearily across his eyes.

He did not waste any time.

"There was a man who lived next door to me," he said; "he died. His name was Stokes—Bernard Weevyl Stokes. Here is the notice of his funeral this morning."

The old man didn't say anything.

"A strange thing happened," said Tubbs. "As I was lingering [illegible] breakfast table I got a message asking me to be one of the pallbearers—not that I knew Stokes, either—that is, not very well. In fact, I think he must have had very few friends."

An added touch of sadness came into his voice.

"There was nothing else to do, sir. I felt, in common decency, that I could not refuse. I am sorry. That, sir, is why I am late."

He paused. The city editor reached out his hand, looking at Tubbs. Tubbs gave him the paper, reverently indicating, by the merest movement of a grief-stricken finger, the exact spot where the news of the Grim Reaper's friendless victim might be found.

The old man read the notice. The silence in the office was prodigious. Copy desk, rewrite men and reporters all sat still and awaited the verdict. Privately, they said that Tubbs was a wonder. Tubbs could feel the atmosphere of sympathy behind him begin to warm with those radiations that are inspired by admiration and respect.

"Well, well!" The cit. editor was strangely sympathetic. "A singular case, Mr. Tubbs—a ve-ry singular case. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, very, sir!"

"Y-e-s. In all this g-r-e-a-t city of New York, with its mil-lions and mil-lions of people, a poor devil dies, and with so few friends that a neighbor, almost a stranger, I believe you said, has to be called into ser-vice as a pallbearer! Write me a column about it."

Starry worlds disintegrated into innumerable fragments; cosmic forces were let loose for disaster; the universe reeled like a god drunk with wine. "S-sir?"

"Won - der - ful story, Mr. Tubbs! G-r-e-a-t human-interest story! I'll run it on the first page. Take all the space you need—if you can't keep it in a column, take a column and a half."

History tells of agonizing moments that try the hearts of brave men as they stand face to face with doom. Tubbs had never cared for any of these people before. Suddenly he became twin soul to every one of them.

If the silence in the office had been profound, now it was unspeakable. The unhappy Tubbs turned toward his desk. His throat was dry. His fingers were cold. What was he to do? To write the story was suicide. To fail to write it—! No; he was going to be obliged to write it. He saw that. He also saw the procession of indignant friends and relatives of the deceased Stokes. Who was Stokes, anyway? Could the Stokes of his wretched story be confused, possibly, with some other Stokes? With a name like Weevyl? Oh, curse Weevyl! Curse all the Weevyls!

He sat down. He put a sheet of paper in his typewriter. He looked at the paper. It was fair and white, unsullied by the words that he, Thomas Tubbs, was going to write thereupon. O innocent paper! O mendacious words! O this! O that! O everything!

"Get in all the details, Mr. Tubbs."

The city editor was beaming across the vista of desk-tops. His expression was positively benignant. He spoke to Able, the head office boy, and presently a platter of scrambled eggs made its appearance, surrounded by other matutinal viands.

Never had Tubbs seen the city editor eat scrambled eggs so amiably. He began to pray that the city editor would choke—but then one does not choke on scrambled eggs except with high resolve.

The city editor bit into a piece of toast—the toast didn't choke him, either. Then he said:

"Mr. Tubbs, give me that story a paragraph at a time."

Miserable Tubbs! It was the one thing needed to engulf him in the brimstone lake of his own making. It was a peremptory order.

There was no more time for procrastination. It called for a swift hammering out of phrases, the writing of every one of which filled him with speechless helplessness. With a frightful effort he tried to make himself believe that it was all true, that Stokes had lived and died and been buried according to his late so joyous, now so horrid, fancy. Anyway, perhaps the city editor would drop dead before the story got into the paper.

He began figuring on a note to McArthur, up in the composing room.

He looked around. A copy boy was standing by the desk. Happily would Tubbs have slain him where he stood. He tore the first take out of the typewriter. A moment he looked at it, then threw himself upon the knees of the gods.

"Here!" he hissed.

The story grew. Paragraph by paragraph it went from Tubbs' delirious machine to the city editor, thence to the copy desk, where awe-stricken, shirt-sleeved slaves jabbed in a comma or two, made a phrase here and there doubly mendacious, and then went rocketing up the pneumatic tubes to the composing room.

Between perfervid paragraphs he managed to write a hasty note to MacArthur and sped it upstairs by a grinning boy:

If there is a spark of feeling in your disgusting soul, head off Stokes pallbearer story. I am dying by inches. Heaven will reward you, and may we meet in a happier land where there are no city editors. TUBBS.

THE last of the thing got into his blood. It was the orginal agony story. He became drunken with the magnificence of the lie. He wept with Weevyl Stokes' family. He bestowed upon him a mother, a wife, an aged uncle, a cousin in the last stages of tuberculosis and five children. He named the children. He called for a directory, opened it at random, took the first firm name he saw and gave Stokes a job. Over all he threw a cunning touch of mystery as to the unfortunate Weevyl's antecedents. It takes a lot of words to make a column.

What did he care for retribution?

He pictured the stranger, suddenly sought among the city's multitudes to pay honor where the city itself, also, ignored a human soul—the city, insensate, greedy, abject before its fetish of gold, caring for no one, dead to sympathy and love and even feeling, hurrying, pursuing, making merry, with no time for those who died.

"Wow!" he whispered. "That's good!"

He dispatched a second note to MacArthur:

How about blowing us all up with dynamite? No time to attend to it myself, but would welcome change. Oh, doctor, can't you do anything? TUBBS.

At last the story was finished. The final take had wailed its way up the tube. Tubbs was limp. Kindly heaven, what next?

It was a message from the composing room:

Cheer up. The worst is yet to come. Send up cyanide for operators. MacARTHUR.

Presently the city editions arrived. The Old Man got his first. He always did. Perhaps it wasn't in? Perhaps the Old Man had forgotten it? Things had been happening—a society murder over in Brooklyn, a couple of good automobile smash-ups, a police exposure.

No; it was not there!

There was a roar from the desk as the city editor grabbed his telephone from the hook and demanded to be given the composing room.

"MacArthur, where's that story? No!—that g-r-e-a-t human-interest story—Mr. Tubbs' story? I want that on the first page. What? I don't care what happened! I—want—that—story!"

BENEFICENT Providence! It was a respite until a quarter of one, the hour of the next edition—but what a respite! Tubbs became a living, breathing, anguished Damocles. He decided to sneak upstairs and offer to bribe MacArthur with a week's salary—provided he got any week's salary—but the city editor caught him, called him back, entered into a heart-rending discussion of the name Weevyl and told him to look it up in Burke's Peerage and the Almanach di Gotha.

He anathematized the city editor, and did as he was told, dripping perspiration on every royal house of Europe.

After that the city editor put the silence on him—let him sit there and do nothing. Other men rushed to the telephones, ran out of the office, clipped rival columns feverishly, abandoned their souls to the mad quest of news, news—not Tubbs. The boiling tide passed him by; split, and left him stranded on a lonely rock where he had only the satisfaction of contemplating the wretchedness of his own lot.

By this time the office had begun to think that it was funny. Brundage handed him the first typewritten page of a special story headed "Pails I Have Borne," and Cartwright, out in the art room, sent in a deliciously humorous cartoon. A group of chortlers moved near his desk and chanted in a stage whisper:

"Please, can you tell us if the joke's On Tommy Tubbs or Weevyl Stokes?"

Tubbs invited them to go to a far country, but they wouldn't.

It was half-past twelve when there came another call for Tubbs. The Old Man looked at him benignantly.

"You're not looking well, Mr. Tubbs," he chirped. "I'm afraid the day has been rather trying for you."

Tubbs gulped.

"And, by the way, Mr. Tubbs, if you are thinking of changing your address——"

The telephone rang. The Old Man put the receiver to his ear and listened. Then he put it down again.

"A calamity has overtaken our great human-interest story, Mr. Tubbs," he said regretfully. "Somebody dropped the metal on the floor. It's pied."

He looked at Tubbs; Tubbs looked at him. Tubbs understood. He knew well enough how quickly the lines of type could be rearranged.

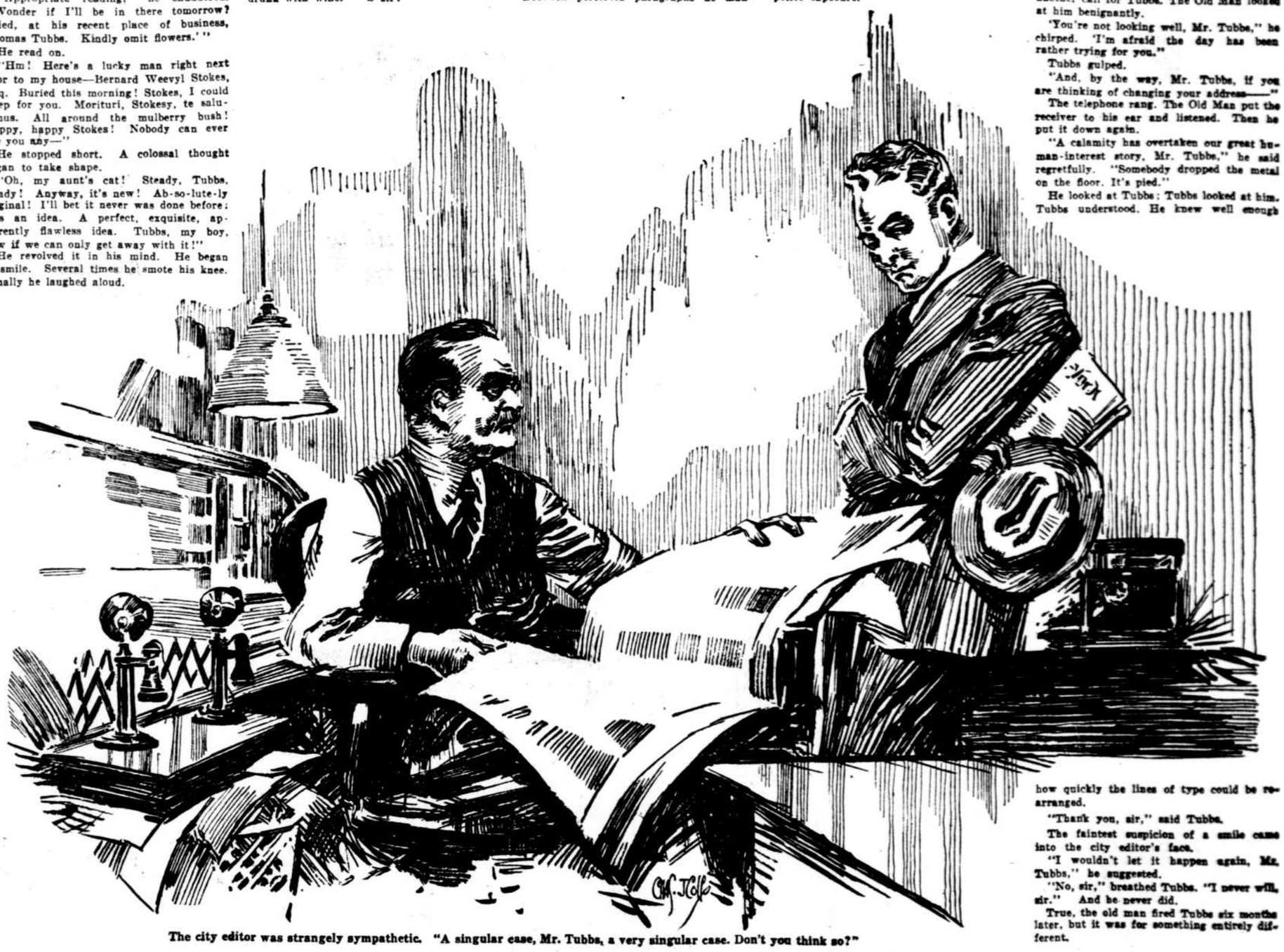
"Thank you, sir," said Tubbs.

The faintest suspicion of a smile came into the city editor's face.

"I wouldn't let it happen again, Mr. Tubbs," he suggested.

"No, sir," breathed Tubbs. "I never will, sir." And he never did.

True, the old man fired Tubbs six months later, but it was for something entirely different.



The city editor was strangely sympathetic. "A singular case, Mr. Tubbs, a very singular case. Don't you think so?"

Opening the Chestnut Bur: Hunting for Laughs

Fair Exchange No Robbery

AN EXTREMELY shrewd young man recently tendered his resignation as an employe in the packing department of a large establishment in Kansas City, announcing at the same time that he proposed to go into business for himself with another youth.

"I am sure, sir," he said to his old boss, "that this young fellow and I will make a success of it. I will furnish the experience and he will provide the capital."

"How long do you expect that plan to succeed?" asked the boss.

"Oh, about a couple of years," answered the young man. "I figure that by that time I should have the capital and the other fellow the experience."

Primitive Finance

IN GEORGIA they tell of an old farmer, who, in the wildcat banking days, came to Milledgeville to see Robert Toombs, who, at the time, was a state bank director.

"Bob," said the old farmer, "the folks down our way wants more money."

"I don't blame them," said Mr. Toombs, "but how are they going to get it?"

"Stomp it," said the farmer.

"Well," said Toombs, "if we stamp it, how are we going to redeem it?"

"Well," Bob," the farmer explained, "the folks down our way is agin redemption."

Applied Science

MISS PERKINS, the Sunday-school teacher, besides having little Willie Donn among her pupils, is also a friend of his mother. One day, while calling on the mother, Miss Perkins asked why William had not attended Sunday school for several weeks.

Much to her astonishment, the mother replied coldly: "I have kept him away from your class, Miss Perkins, because he learns wicked things there."

"Wicked!" gasped Miss Perkins, "Why whatever do you mean?"

"Well," explained Mrs. Donn. "The last time Willie went to Sunday school you taught him that we are made of dust. When he came home he nearly frightened the life out of his father and myself by trying to draw his baby sister into the vacuum cleaner!"

A Hopeless Case

A VANCOUVER man tells of a sea captain who, ashore, makes his home in that city, and who had loaned a sum of money to a neighbor. The latter, after the loan was a year or two old, made no effort to pay it.

Now the captain began to look upon the debt as a bad one indeed. On one occasion, however, upon his return from a voyage, he heard of a debt collector noted for his ability to extract money from such delinquents. Accordingly, the captain called upon this collector and advised him of the circumstances.

"If," said the skipper, "you can collect that debt, I'll give you half of it."

The collector promised that the thing would be done. The captain sailed away on another voyage, and, on his return, sought out the collector again. "Any success with that bill?" he asked.

"Well," said the collector, "I haven't collected the whole of it; but I did collect my half. He hasn't paid me a cent since. I keep after him, but it's just as you said when you gave me the bill—he hasn't any conscience about it."