

Torchy Follows a Hunch

By
SEWELL FORD

IT was a case of local thunder-storms on the seventeenth floor of the Corrugated Trust Building. To state it simpler, Old Hickory was runnin' a neck temperature of 210 or so, and there was no tellin' what minute he might fuse a collar button or blow out a cylinder head.

The trouble seemed to be that one of his pet schemes was in danger of being ditched. Some kind of an electric power distributin' stunt it is, one that he'd doped out durin' a Western trip last summer; just a little by-play with a few hundred square miles of real estate, includin' the buildin' of twenty or thirty miles of trolley and plantin' a few factories here and there.

But now here's Ballinger, our Western manager, in on the carpet, tryin' to explain why it can't be done. He's been at it for two hours, helped out by a big consultin' engineer and the chief attorney of our Chicago branch. They've waved blue-print maps, submitted reports of experts, and put in all kinds of evidence to show that the scheme has either got to be revised radical or else chucked.

"Very sorry, Mr. Ellins," says Ballinger, "but we have done our best."
"Bah!" snaps Old Hickory. "It's all waste land, isn't it? Of course he'll sell. Who is he, anyway?"

"His name," says Ballinger, pawin' over some letters, "is T. Waldo Pettigrew. Lives in New York, I believe; at least, his attorneys are here. And this is all we have been able to get out of them—a flat no." And he slides an envelop across the mahogany table.

"But what's his reason?" demands Old Hickory. "Why? That's what I want to know."

BALLINGER shrugs his shoulders. "I don't pretend," says he, "to understand the average New Yorker."

"Hah!" snorts Mr. Ellins. "Once more that old alibi of the limber-spined; that hoary fiction of the ten-cent magazine and the two-dollar drama. Average New Yorker! Listen, Ballinger. There's no such thing. We're just as different, and just as much alike, as anybody else. In other words, we're human. And this Pettigrew person you seem to think such a mysterious and peculiar individual—well, what about him? Who and what is he?"

"According to the deeds," says Ballinger, "he is the son of Thomas J. and Mary Ann Pettigrew, both deceased. His attorneys are Mott, Drew & Mott. They write that their client absolutely refuses to sell any land anywhere. They have written that three times. They have declined to discuss any proposition. And there you are."

"You mean," sneers Old Hickory, "that there you are."

"If you can suggest anything further," begins Ballinger, "we shall be glad to—"

"I know," breaks in Old Hickory, "you'd be glad to fritter away another six months and let those International Power people jump in ahead of us. No, thanks. I mean to see if I can't get a little action now. Robert, who have we out there in the office who's not especially busy? Oh,



"'Tidman, could you manage to make this young man understand that I don't care to be bothered with such rot?'"

yes, Torchy. I say, young man! You—Torchy!"

"Calling me, sir?" says I, slidin' out of my chair and into the next room promptly. Old Hickory nods.

"Find that man Pettigrew," says he, tossin' over the letter. "He owns some land we need. There's a map of it, also a memorandum of what we're willing to pay. Report to-morrow."

"Yes, sir," says I. "Want me to close the deal by noon?"

Maybe they didn't catch the flicker under them bushy eyebrows. But I did, and I knew he was goin' to back my bluff.

"Any time before five will do," says he. "Wait! You'd better take a check with you."

If we was lookin' to get any gasps out of that bunch, we had another guess comin'. They knew Old Hickory's fondness for tradin' on his reputation, and that he didn't always pull it off. The engineer humps his eyebrows sarcastic, while Ballinger and the lawyer swaps a quiet smile.

"Then perhaps we had best stay over and take the deeds back with us," says Ballinger.

"Do," snaps Old Hickory. "You can improve the time hunting for your average New Yorker. Here you are, Torchy."

SAY, he's a game old sport, Mr. Ellins. He plays a hundred-to-one shot like he was puttin' money on a favorite. And he waves me on my way with never a wink of them keen eyes.

"Geel!" thinks I. "Billed for a masked marvel act, ain't I? Well, that bein' the case, this is where I get next to Pettigrew or tear something loose."

Didn't need any seventh-son work to locate him. The 'phone book shows he lives on Madison Avenue. Seemed simple enough. But this was no time to risk bein' barred out by a cold-eyed butler. You can't breeze into them old brownstone fronts on your nerve. What I needed was credentials. The last place I'd be likely to get 'em would be Mott, Drew & Mott's, so I goes there first. No, I didn't hypnotize anybody. I simply wrote out an application for a job on the firm's stationery, and as they was generous with it I dashes off another note which I tucks in my pocket. Nothing sleuthy required. Why, say, I could have walked out with the letter file and

the safe combination if I'd wanted to.

So when I rings the bell up at Mr. Pettigrew's I has something besides hot air to shove at Perkins. He qualifies in the old fam'ly servant class right off, for as soon as he lamps the name printed on the envelop corner he swings the door wide open, and inside of two minutes I'm bein' announced impressive in the library at the back: "From your attorneys, sir." Which, as far as it goes, is showin' some speed, eh?

Yea-uh! That's the way I felt about it. All I asked was to be put next to this Pettigrew party. Not that I had any special spell to work off on him; but, as Old Hickory said, he must be human, and if he was, why— Well, about then I begun to get the full effect of this weird, double-barreled stare.

NOW, I don't mind takin' the once-over from a single pair of shell-rimmed goggles; but to find yourself bein' inspected through two sets of barn windows—honest, it seemed like the room was full of spectacles. I glanced hasty from one to the other of these solemn-lookin' parties ranged behind the book barricade, and then takes a chance that the one with the sharp nose and the dust-colored hair is T. Waldo.

"Mr. Pettigrew?" says I, smilin' friendly and winnin'.

"Not at all," says he, a bit pettish.

"Oh, yes," says I, turnin' to the broken-nosed one with the wavy black pompadour effect. "Of course."

He's some younger than the other, in the late twenties, I should judge, and has sort of a stern, haughty stare.

"Why of course?" he demands.

"Eh?" says I. "Why—er—well, you've got my note, ain't you, there in your hand?"

"Ah!" says he. "Rather a clever deduction; eh, Tidman?"

"I shouldn't say so," croaks the other. "Quite obvious, in fact. If it wasn't me it must be you."

"Oh, but you're such a deucedly keen chap," protests Waldo. Then he swings back to me. "From my attorneys?"

"Just came from there," says I.

"Odd," says he. "I don't remember having seen you before."

"That's right," says I. "You see, Mr. Pettigrew, I'm really representin' the Corrugated Trust and—"

"Don't know it at all," breaks in Waldo.

"That's why I'm here," says I. "Now, here's our proposition."

And say, before he can get his breath or duck under the table, I've spread out the blue-prints and am shootin' the prospectus stuff into him at the rate of two hundred words to the minute.

Yes, I must admit I was feedin' him a classy spiel, and I was just throwin' the gears into high-high for a straightaway spurt when all of a sudden I gets the hunch I ain't makin' half the hit I hoped I was. It's no false alarm, either. T. Waldo's gaze is gettin' sterner every minute, and he seems to be stiffenin' from the neck down.

"I say," he breaks in, "are—are you trying to sell me something?"

"Me?" says I. "Gosh, no! I hadn't quite got to that part, but my idea is to give you a chance to unload something on us. This Apache Creek land of yours."

"Really," says Waldo, "I don't follow you at all. My land?"

"Sure!" says I. "All this shaded pink. That's yours, you know. And as it lays now it's about as useful as an observation-car in the subway. But if you'll swap it for preferred stock in our power company—"

"No," says he, crisp and snappy. "I owned some mining stock once, and it was a fearful nuisance. Every few months they wanted me to pay something on it, until I finally had to burn the stuff up."

"That's one way of gettin' rid of bum shares," says I. "But look; this is no flim-flam gold mine. This is sure-fire skookum—a sound business proposition backed by one of the—"

"PARDON me," says T. Waldo, glarin' annoyed through the big panes, "but I don't care to have shares in anything."

"Oh, very well," says I. "We'll sett. on a cash basis, then. Now, you've got no use for that tract. We have. Course we can get other land just as good, but yours is the handiest. If you've ever tried to wish it onto any one, you know you couldn't get a dollar an acre. We'll give you five."

"Please go away," says he.

"Make it six," says I. "Now, that tract measures up about—"

"Tidman," cuts in Mr. Pettigrew, "could you manage to make this young man understand that I don't care to be bothered with such rot?"

Tidman didn't have a chance.

"Excuse me," says I, flashin' Old Hick