

THE WOUNDING OF PROHIBITION PETE

By Elbridge H. Sabin

"WHICH the reasons why I refuses to drink any beverages of an intoxicatin' nature are many an' multitudinous," remarked Prohibition Pete, deputy sheriff of Starr county, Texas, as with a wave of the hand he refused my invitation to adjourn to Bob's canteen. Rumor was that a cake of ice had come in on the stage, and that the beer would be cold. "Likers, they ruins my complexion; they tortures my digestion; they squanders my wealth; an' they scandalizes my morals. Put nevertheless an' notwithstanding the force an' power of them causes which I just enumerates, the first an' foremost reason for my total abstinence, is snakes. Ever hear about the time I mixes up with them reptiles?"

"No," I replied, but not too eagerly. Like many a famous story teller, Pete can best be led indirectly to the spinning of a yarn. "And you must not feel compelled to talk about it now, if it pains you to dwell on your former degradation."

"What's that?" snapped Pete, stiffening in his chair, and glancing at me keenly from beneath the brim of his big hat. "Degradation? Maybe you thinks them snakes I refers to is pink an' yaller an' green, a floatin' round on the walls on' ceilin', or a roostin' on the end of the bed? Well, you sure has your rope on the wrong critter, son, as I now proceeds to explain.

"It's back a dozen years ago that I has a row with a greaser I'm tryin' to arrest, an' afore I gets through with him, he's some dead and disfigured. Which the greaser's friends don't appreciate that I saves him a languishin' in jail a whole lot, sendin' him over the range. They plants him up on the hillside an' decorates his grave with white-washed stones, beer bottles an' a little wooden cross, neat and tasty. Then they sends word to me to say 'adios' to my wife an' children, which I haven't any, for they're goin' to get me next time I sticks my head out the door. Ain't they the locoedest cusses? An' me givin' the priest a 'dobe dollar to say a prayer over him, too."

After I had expressed my disgust at the unwarranted action of the friends of the deceased, Pete continued: "Them greasers weren't bluffin', neither. They gets me into trouble, deep an' desperate. Bob, he won't let me drink over the bar no more 'cause a stray bullet smashes one of his fancy bottles. The boys won't let me sleep inside, 'cause too many knives comes sailin' through the windows. I'm plumb lonesome an' disconsolate 'twixt friends an' enemies, so one mornin' I hops the stage an' rides off, thinkin' after me bein' away for a few months the old place is bound to appreciate me more.

"Where does I go? It don't make no difference. Liars always puts true names into their yarns to make 'em sound true; but men like me, statin' actual facts in an eventful career, exact an' careful, don't have to give no locations. We keeps our trails covered. But when I'm sittin' an' slidin' 'round the county, I comes to a little town out on the plains. It's after dark, an' with the lights an' music, she's sure sweet an' purty. Just one long street, beginnin' nowhere in particular, an' endin' nowhere in particular. One side's all saloons, dance halls an' gamblin' joints. T'other side's the same, teetotally. As I mills along with the crowd, I sees I'm in for a good time; an' I sure has it. When I wakes up in the mornin', I'm stretched out on a pool table, clean busted an' some thirsty. The bar-keep, he stakes me to a drink, but when I asks him for the loan of six bits, he ain't none too cordial. So I roams out on the street, a lookin' for the price of a feed.

"There I finds a little Jew man, with a humped nose an' a bald head, a standin' by a big freight wagon, loaded high as a mountain. Hitched up to it is six mules, but they ain't startin' nowhere yet, owin' to the driver havin' run off with one of the dance girls. So Mr. Jew an' I strikes a bargain. He pays me

twenty dollars an' gives me a sack of grub. I'm to drive them mules across the country to a similar city an' unload my stuff accordin' as directed. When I comes back, he's to give me some more dollars, in amount dependin' on just how I does the agreed job.

"There ain't nothin' to keep me, so me an' the mules, we pulls out immediate an' sudden. When I'm three or four mile from town, I overtakes a little sawed-off cuss a limp' along all by his lonesome. He climbs up on the seat, an' we soon becomes pards, intimate an' confidential. Which his name, it is Hitchcock Hitchcock, an' he's some bad man, bein' filled with lead on sundry an' diverse occasions. 'Pears like them bullets ain't shot in even, but there's more on one side than t'other, which side aforesaid naturally sags down, whereby his limp. He makes me promise, say he cashes in while we herds together, that I'll sell his body to the smelter down in El Paso, which pays big for lead bearin' ores, an' deliver the proceeds thereof to a little girl back east, who used to give him posies when he's a colt runnin' loose in the home pasture.

"An hour or so afore sundown, we reaches a little Mexican rancho which is all rigged out for a baile. The plaza is swept clean for dancin', little tables for coffee an' chocolate is set aroun' promiscuous, the big lanterns is fixed ready to light up the festal scene, an' the senors an' senioritas is all dressed up fit to kill. Hitchcock, he's for beddin' down right there an' seein' the fun, but I blocks his game. After my cruel an' inhuman treatment back borderway, I ain't hankerin' for no more greasers; not yet nohow. What with the sight of them saddle-colored varmint, I'm that mad that we don't halt to camp till way after sunset.

"Well, sir, I'm a picketin' out the mules an' a rustlin' 'em some feed, while Hitchcock, he's a rummagin' 'round the wagon for grub for us humans. All of a sudden I hears his gun go off—ker-bang.

"What's up? I yells, runnin' over, a thinkin' perhaps he's sighted some greaser a trailin' me.

"Oh, nothing much," says he, shamefaced like. "I was leanin' over when my gun falls out an' goes off accidental; an' blame me if the bullet didn't bore a hole in the head of that whisky barrel, stickin' out from the bottom of your load.

"Strikes me some strange an' peculiar that he has a plug already whittled to stick into that same hole, but I ain't sayin' nothin'." Hitchcock ain't a nice man to argue with. So we gets a tin cup apiece an' stretches out on the ground aside of the plug, contented an' peaceful. There's times when supper's plumb superfluous.

"After a while, the old moon comes up, right over the toes of my boots. I'm afraid to wiggle 'em, fearin' I'll kick the old girl in the face. While I'm deliberatin' what she means by risin' out of the goun', an' a fillin' an' a emptyin' my cup, frequent an' regular, I sees a big snake a crawlin' towards us, head up an' tail flirtin'. Hitchcock, he draws his gun, but I don't let him shoot none.

"Hold on!" says I "Keep him covered, but see what he's up to." The way he's a lickin' his chops makes me think he's somethin' on



"An every Senor swings his snake cane, an' every Seniorita rattles her snake bracelet."

his mind.

"An' he has. We hain't put the plug back tight, an' the liker has dribbled down till 'tween me an' Hitchcock's a puddle of some size an' extent. Mr. Snake, he sticks his nose into the stuff an' sucks like a thirsty ho's. When he can't hold no more, he don't move off. No sir; he lies there like a black stick. I touches him with my hand an' finds him stiff as a poker.

"Fine stuff that," says I, some scornful. "That snake's plumb petrified already."

"Petrified nothin'," says Hitchcock. "You hain't got no brains. Liker makes a human all limp and wobbly. Ain't a snake just contrary an' opposite to a human? Wherefore an' consequently, liker makes him stiff an' inflexible. That snake's drunk—that's what ails him."

"I'm debatin' this propositic' in my mind, some dubious, when I notices a line of reptiles a crawlin' towards us. Must have been a mile of 'em, comin' one after the other, a keepin' step like a file of doughboys. Hitchcock tips me the wink, an' pulls out the plug a little, so's there'd be 'nough on the goun' to go 'round.

"When the first one, a big feller, has filled himself up, an' just afore he starts to stiffen out, Hitchcock reaches over an' bends the cuss's head right angles to his body.

"Hoop-la!" he yells. "Ever since I limps, I has wanted a cane, an' now I reckons I has one."

"Then he goes plumb crazy. These here snakes was of all lengths an' sizes, an' the way he manipulates 'em afore they stiffens out is some amazin'. The big ones he makes into canes. The little ones he sticks their tails into their mouths, an' rolls 'em into bracelets an' necklaces. He nshes a pair of pinchers out of his pocket, an' pulls their teeth; then he tosses 'em into a pile bac' of him, a workin' fast an' furious. By an' by, he has the biggest assortment of trinkets you ever seen in all your born days. An' that ain't all, neither. When he's got 'em all fixed, he strings the rings on the canes, an' begins to pile his arms full of 'em.

"Easy, easy, now," says I, coaxin' like. "Them'll keep till mornin'. You lie down on your blanket, while I dopes you t' hot coffee."

"Coffee! Blanket!" shouts Hitchcock. "Don't you catch on? We packs these here trifles over to the fiesta an' sells 'em to them greasers for petrified ornaments. It's a gold mine," says he, "an' here's where we makes our stake."

"The idea strikes me fair an' favorable. So I loads up till I can't see over my chin, an' we hot-foots it back to town, where them Mexicans assembles. They're there, all right, happy an' hilarious. Dancin' on the plaza; drinkin' at the tables, an' strollin' along the streets—senoritas a smillin' an' senors a scowlin' 'cause they can't find no way to spend their money fast enough.

"We helps them senors out; we sure does. We rents a one-room 'dobe, we hires a lantern, an' we peddles them snakes quicker'n you can skin a rab-



"So Mr. Jew an' I strikes a bargain."