

IN THE STRINGTOWN FIELD

By WILLIAM L. GEPPERT

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THAT reminds me," said Henry Devere, a grisly, rather stout man, "of the time I was working in the Stringtown oil field. Ever been there, Jake?"

Jacob Hyde, the eldest of the group, admitted with something like a tone of pride that he never had.

"Well, there were some rowdy times in the old palmy days of the Stringtown oil excitement. Roly-boly, keno, chuck-a-luck, poker all around. Fighin' day and night. Everything wide open. Most of the fellers down there were pretty decent chaps, but rough, of course, jus' like oil drillers and pumpers and tool dressers. But, there weren't any downright thugs there because we fellows would run 'em out faster'n they'd come in."

There were four in the group and all were sitting around a camp fire one summer evening telling tales of personal adventure and experience. At one side stood a camping kettle upon a rickety tripod. Beyond were two small tents, while around about lay a confusion of articles in marked contrast to the dark greens and purples of the surrounding forest and the velvety green of the grass below. Here was a pile of jagged, empty tin cans; there the remnants of a box that had been dismantled for various needs; here were whittlings, torn labels, fruit peelings and pieces of newspaper; yonder by the tents stood a crude but substantial table piled with tin dishes, canned goods and bulging sacks; while a bit farther away an assortment of fishing poles, nets and guns lay against a croch of a sapling.

It was a typical camping scene, in a glade at the foot of a mountain ridge in central West Virginia, where the quartet of middle-aged business men were taking a camping vacation. For such it was an ideal spot, miles from the nearest railroad and in the heart of a thickly wooded section not yet reached by the lumberman's axe and saw.



"An' then some of them natives over there was a caution," continued Devere. "Not as much morality among some of 'em as animals. Everything was free and easy and nobody cared much what happened."

"Did you ever see any real exciting gambling games over there?" asked Glen Bradford after a pause.

"Oh, yes, there was a few lively roly-boly and poker games. I suppose in the poker games there'd be possibly a thousand collars on the table at a time. There was one time when Brownie Sullivan, a tool dresser on the Shirley side of the Stringtown field—ha! ha! This Brownie Sullivan would get on sprees and gamble in a joint over Tom Finnegan's speakeasy. Brownie wasn't playing in good luck one night. He was a losin' his money an' there was a pretty good pot on the table an' ol' Brownie jus' up and swooped her off and starts to run downstairs. He no more 'n gets to the bottom when some one picks up a shotgun and lets go with both barrels, hittin' Brownie in both legs. We all thought they was cut off. But, he got well all right."

"In the same dump one night a little fellow—I forgot his name now—licked the all-fired stuffin' out of Big Bill Crothers. A poker game was on, there was some words and first thing anybody knowed Big Bill had knocked the little feller down. But, the little feller got hold of a knife, somethow and jus' cut ol' Bill all to pieces. The fellows couldn't get him off o' him and he jus' cut all his clothes off. Any of the oil men as has been over in that section can tell you about that."

Devere paused for a moment while he searched his pockets for something.

"Gimme a chew of that scrap, Arnie will you?" he asked of Arnold Beecher, the youngest member of the party. Beecher drew a small paper sack from a coat pocket and tossed it over. Devere stuffed part of the contents into his face, returned the sack and continued.

"What I was a goin' to tell you about, though, is what I think is the saddest thing I ever heard tell of or even read of. Also, it was the biggest piece of retribution I ever seen. That was about a young fellow named Roy Hilton—him and me was pretty good friends, too. Roy come into the Stringtown field about two years after I began working there. I had been working for the company for about six years and most of the time had charge of the connection gang a' connecting up boilers."



"Roy come into the place a tryin' to get some money ahead to get married on. He never let on anything about it at first, but I knowed it all along. You know it don't take a blue print to show you when a feller's got a girl in his head. Roy would get a letter with long up and down writin' on it every time he went down to the store. If you ever wanted Roy for anything then and didn't know where to find him all you had to do was to stick around for the mail carrier and you'd find him. Later on he showed me her picture. A mighty

fine lookin' girl she was too. Martin, I believe her name was, Edith Martin."

"She wasn't any kin to the Berkeley Martins, was she?" asked Bradford. "I know the most of them and there was one of them who went to Philadelphia and got rich."

"I don't believe they was that family," replied Devere. "I never heard Roy say anything about anybody over there in the panhandle and if they'd been related he'd likely said something to me about it."

"It wasn't very long after that that Roy and Smilligen started their feud. Ha! ha! This Smilligen was the meanest man that God ever let live, the orneryest, cussedist brute in that whole section. As I said, I had charge of the connection gang—no, that was just before. You see, when new wells are drilled in and after they are tubed and put to pumping, the ten or fifteen handiest to each other are connected together. They locate a boiler house and connect all the wells to the one boiler house. Say where they'd have ten or fifteen wells, it'd take a battery of three boilers. They would build three boilers side by side, twenty-five horse power horizontal—long and round and come down at one end—and when the locations for the holes was made it was the connection gang's work to go down there and set those boilers up and connect them with the different wells. Also a water tank holding about 250 barrels to supply the water."

"Gimme a chew of that scrap," demanded Bradford of Beecher, interrupting the narrative for a moment. Beecher complied with the request and Devere resumed, after stowing away some more of the tobacco himself.

"That time I had just come into the Stringtown field from Dogtown, and I was a stranger and so was Roy as he'd just come there from somewhere over about Philadelphia. I had connected up a lot of wells at Dogtown, but the first day I was sent out with a routabout gang under this Smilligen. Roy was in the gang, too, a routabout. The men on a lease usually consist of a farm boss, one man in the gang called a pusher and eight or twelve routabouts. Then the pumpers in the same field are under the same foreman."



"This time we went out with Smilligen as the pusher and five or six fellows to connect a battery of three boilers. This fellow Smilligen had been pushing just a short time and he was stuck on himself generally. He wasn't much of an expert at the business, but he took this gang up to the boiler house. There's where him and Roy really started on the outs."

"He had it all laid out for us, this Smilligen. You see, we connect the top of the boiler with a four-inch steam pipe with a four-inch gate to each boiler. When you get to a pipe above two-inch you use a gate, below that a throttle or globe valve. Smilligen put one gang to connect this four-inch pipe on the boiler and also we'd run a two-inch pipe from a niggerhead, on top of each boiler to the back part and connect all in one pipe and run down to a corner of the boiler house and run down a drop pipe to the inspirator. We'd always put in three inspirators but instead of puttin' them in separately we'd put all three in a cluster."

"This Smilligen had the lay-out all drawn out on a paper for us and he was mighty snippy about it, too."

"Hey, there, you, he'd bark, makin' the 'you' strong and nasty like, 'what d' you think this is, a government job?' An' he'd keep tellin' the fellers, 'Git a move on! when everybody was working right along anyway. Aw, he had the swelled bean bad, this here Smilligen."

"I know just how that is," remarked Hyde, who was poking the camp fire with a stick. "Once I had to read a fellow his history for handing me the same sort of guff, and believe me, he never picked on me any more after that."

"We'd cut up that pipe," continued Devere, "and put a two-inch suction line from the inspirators to the water tank, also a two-inch discharge line from the inspirators to feed the boilers. But, he got it all backwards, this Smilligen. He made the suction line to the boilers and the discharge line to the water tank instead of the other way."

"Well, sir, we worked two or three days on that thing. Roy and me and one or two others in the gang knowed he was wrong, but we wasn't hired to furnish the knowledge. Smilligen was supposed to have, so we let him go ahead. He acted like he was plentifully supplied anyhow. One feller started to tell him but Smilligen cuts him off quick and tells him when he wants him to do the pushin' he'd send him a notice about it. So that settled it."

"We got the boilers filled and started firin' but Smilligen couldn't get the thing to work. Ha! ha! Then he started to cussin' Roy about some thing an' I tipped in and told him to close his trap or I'd plaster it shut for him so he couldn't open it for a month. I give it to him kind a rough and he shut up somewhat. If he hadn't been so damned mean I'd a felt sorry for him."

"Just about that time the farm boss comes along and Roy bein' hot in the collar told him the fool Smilligen didn't know how to manage men an' didn't have any better sense than to put the suction line in the boilers instead of in the tanks. That makes the farm boss hot as hell. He picks up Smilligen's drawin's, sees how they are marked and fires Smilligen off the job."



"As I was sayin', that's how Roy and Smilligen started their feud. Smilligen laid it all on Hilton, like the big bluffer he was. He laid around waitin' for Roy in front of the White House half the night and then he would get soused. He kept sayin' as how had get Roy and get him good and proper, and just to show what might happen he picked on Honeyard Mike and thrashed him."

"Smilligen had been the bully of the whole camp since he had come into it and he was always talkin' how he could clean up anybody. Sometime before that he went over to Dogtown and fought the bully of that place until both of them got tired."

"That must have been Greasy Mitchell," interposed Beecher. "I've seen him over at Mannington and he came from back there on Fishing creek somewhere."

"I don't just remember who it was now," said Devere, "but I don't think it was Greasy. I knowed him and he was a tough one, too."

"I told Roy Smilligen was a bad one and make him take a gun along with him for awhile. We fellows always had guns but we never lugged 'em around unless we thought we had use for them. Twasn't more 'n a day or two until Smilligen busts out of Beely Merkins' speakeasy and runs across Roy."

"You dirty, chicken-livered brat, you," Smilligen yells, "you'll bawl me outen a job, will you?" and with that he starts to pull out a cannon."

"There was a creek there—it cut right across the street—an' Smilligen started across on a foot log."

"Don't you come any nearer," yells Roy, "or if you do I'll puncture you."

"Just then Smilligen shoots and picks Roy in the leg. That didn't stop him, though, and he goes right on after Smilligen and he whaled away and shot him in the head. The bullet hit Smilligen right in the middle of the forehead and then he ducked. Both of them clinched."

"Aw, come away," exclaimed Beecher. "You don't mean to tell us that fellow got shot right between the eyes and kept on fightin'?"

"That might not sound reasonable," returned Devere, "but it's a God's fact. I was right clost and saw it myself. By that time they was out in the roadway and they sprawled around in the mud there fightin' and clawin' like a couple of dogs for maybe ten or fifteen minutes before we could pull 'em away. Of course we all thought Smilligen ort to be killed, but, you know, that bullet glanced right over his head under the skin to the back part of his head. The doctor just cut a little slit in his head and took the bullet out, sewed ten or twelve stitches and had him all right in an hour. That was right over there where Jenk Whipple got killed."

"Got killed by a train, didn't he?" asked Hyde.

"Naw; Ed Page shot him. That was Windy Pudger that was killed by the train."

"After that," resumed Devere, "Smilligen didn't tackle Roy. He had enough of fightin' him and he was a coward anyway, but he was layin' for him an' I lowed he'd do some dirty work of some kind. An' he did her, too."



"As I was sayin', Roy kept gettin' them letters from his sweetheart, just as regular as the day rolled around. Smilligen knowed that—in fact, everybody in the field knowed it. It got to be a sort of joke about Roy's gettin' them letters."

"One night two or three weeks later, Roy, 'n' me, 'n' Hoppy Lucas 'n' Walt Daniels all went over to see some of the native girls. Fellers had to have some women company now and then. We all just went sort o' skylarkin' over on Frank's run and met up with some of the calicoes. Hoppy he pairs off with one they calls Dirty Foot Mag. I draws a little black-haired thing—she wasn't such a bad looker, neither—Walt he gets a 'nanky girl' called Slinky Sal—sometimes they just called her plain Slat—and Roy he picks off Rose Garden."

"It just happens that Roy takes her, though none of us knowed then that Smilligen had been sort o' goin' with Rosie. There wasn't any strict rules about that in them days over there as far as that was concerned and you couldn't tell who was runnin' with who. There wasn't much steadiness about any of them girls, neither."

"Of course, we went over on the run several times, jus' to keep from goin' plum crazy, you know, while working like hell in the blisterin' sun

all day long an' havin' nothin' particular to do at night but gamble an' fight, an' you get pretty tired of that."

"I know just how that is," remarked Hyde. "A number of years ago, I ranched in Colorado."

"Purty soon," Devere went on, "Roy's letters stopped comin'. That boy was just about frantic. He writ sometimes two letters a day gettin' up early in the morning and writin' at night, stayin' in his shack all night humped over a table there and writin' away for dear life."

"I'm goin' back to Philadelphia," says he one night, lookin' pale behind the gills like a feller's had an arm cut off or somethin'. He packs up and goes, and in a week he comes back again, lookin' like he'd come out of a hospital."

"She an' her father's gone out west, an' they'll be gone several weeks," he confided to me. But, there wasn't any life left in that boy after that. He jus' moped and drooped around, takin' no interest in nothin' and near losin' his job."

"That blank, blanked, blankety-blank of a skunk of a Smilligen you might have knowed, had stole all them letters that girl had writ to Roy. Stole 'em from the store there where the postoffice is, sayin' at first as how he'd been sent for 'em an' then mixin' them up in them little lopsided pigeon holes there. When Roy'd come he'd jus' look in the company hole an' see'n nothin' there for him would say nothin' see'n' as how everybody kidded him about the letters so. The system they had, half the people paved over half the mail themselves, company men gettin' mail all in one pigeon hole."



"It's a wonder they didn't catch Smilligen at it," observed Bradford, who got up and replenished the camp fire."

"After Smilligen stole letters for awhile," explained Devere, "he got Dirty Foot Mag and Rosie to steal 'em when they'd claw around in the mail. But, stealin' them letters wasn't all that yellow hound done. He knowed one of the section men over on the Excelsior lease who knowed a man in Philadelphia who worked for a company Roy's sweetheart's father was at the head of. An' he puts a lot of damned lies into his ear about Roy's marryin' one of them Frank's run females an' livin' with her an' raisin' a lot of kids by her. God knows what other lies he passed on."

"It must have been seven or eight weeks later, when one day, Roy he comes back with a newspaper, lookin' like a tombstone. He never says nothin'. Jes' complains about feelin' sick and says as how he'd lay down awhile. We'd all been over at Finnegan's and 'long about midnight we starts to turn in. I goes to Roy's bunk and sees he's gone out. Right on top of the bunk was that newspaper Roy'd got in the mail an', curious, I picked it up to see where it was from. Yes, sir, it was the announcement of that Martin girl's weddin', marked around with a blue pencil. That makes us all uneasy as Roy never staid out that late without sayin' something to me, an' we starts to hunt for him."

"You've seen an oil tank, ain't you?"

"Yes," responded Beecher and Hyde.

"You mean one of those great, big steel things?" asked Bradford.

"Naw, not them you see in the magazines," replied Devere, "after they start pumpin' and are on a pipe line, they don't have great big tanks, specially when they are ordinary pumpers. They house 'em over. Some of 'em look something like small barns or big chicken houses. They gage them and let them run out every day or so."

"There is fumes from that gas comin' from that oil that are intoxicatin'. A certain amount you inhale, and it affects some people same as a shot of whiskey. Some of them contract the habit of it and some its nauseatin' to."

"There was a young feller pumpin' up there on this job on McElroy's creek—they was runnin' a regular night shift, the usual tower bein' from noon to midnight and midnight to noon. He come from the Jake's run country back of Mannington. He'd gone after relievin' the pumper, an' didn't come back that way, an' that's how they missed Roy."

"The fellows on the job down below had seen Roy coming up that way and we knowed he was around there somewhere. I was afraid about him, rememberin' how queazy he looked that evening. So, we give an alarm and we lease men made a search for him."

"There was one well 'way up on the top of the hill, maybe 800 feet away. There was sixteen wells connected up in that outfit. About a dozen of us went all over that lease and we got to that well on the top of the hill. The tank set out below the derrick an' it had been decked over with lumber—the tank house had never been built over it. Some parts of clothing was there and the tank was nearly filled with oil."

"It was a dark night—I remember just as well—an' we didn't have no lights on account of the gas, you know. Somebody got a gage pole—that you measure the oil with—and

found the body down there in that oil. We got hooks and fished him out. He'd been dead several hours. I never was so hot damned kicked in the face as when I seen that poor boy—by God, I liked him, too; he was straight and square."

Devere's voice became a bit hoarse and he cleared his throat noisily.

"We took him down to the undertakers—Happy Sam, they called him. The coroner came first; we called him in the first thing. There was more'n a hundred people around there. We wound up at daylight; we jus' made a night of it."

"You don't think he committed suicide, do you, Divvy?" queried Beecher. "Maybe he got intoxicated and fell in there."

"No; that boy just killed himself," declared Devere. "I knowed as well as I knowed anything that them times always nauseated him. I'd seen him get as sick as a baby smellin' 'em."



"But, that ain't the end of my story. We fellers never knowed any thing about the crooked work of Smilligen until one day, somebody from the Excelsior lease drops in and gets to talkin' about the tank drownin' and let slip how Smilligen put the joke on Roy's sweetheart's folks. There wasn't nothin' to it but a quick shootin' or lynchin'. An' I believe me if there'd been any chances, there'd a been one."

"Good land, did they let that skunk get away?" asked Hyde.

"Not on your life," returned Devere with vehemence, "not on your life. We just talked it over that night and set out early the next morning. We had our guns in our pockets, an' some of them took knives an' blame me ol' Daddy Bill didn't pick up a rope. We just got over the hill beyond the lease when 'Ka-bim!' bim! bim! come a roar game as shot of nitroglycerine above the ground."

"We could see the steam of it away over there on the right, down in a little hollow in the run. It didn't take us long to get there. They was—I forgot their names now—a man named Fuller, a cleanin' out man; the dirty skunk Smilligen an' a helper an' a pumper; four of 'em."

"After these wells get to production and start to run down, they clean 'em out an' shoot 'em. Fuller was runnin' a cleanin' out tool. You know you pull the sucker rod, pull out the tubin' and then string up the tools and clean out the hole. Some times you are cleanin' out months."

"They had been cleanin' out wells. The weather was cold an' the snow lay on the ground. They had a battery of three boilers connected up. On top of the dome, you know, there is a niggerhead. These fellers came up that morning and there was a bench in front of the middle boiler and they sat down there playin' a game of cards waitin' to get steam up. The pumper forgot to open the stop cock into the lines an' I suppose the safety valve was shut off an' they forgot that. The steam pressure got too high and the crown sheet of that middle boiler just blew down on all four of 'em an' the steam and water from the fire box came down on 'em."

"That's about like that boiler explosion over at that Salem planin' mill," observed Bradford, who had just thrown a coat over his shoulders which he brought from one of the tents."

"It got Smilligen deader 'n hell. The others run over to one end of the room—they couldn't see to get out on account of the steam—and all went through a little window. When they dropped on the snow outside, their shoes fell off and their fingers nails and their toe nails dropped off 'em on the snow there under the window."

"Well, for the love of Mike, how did that happen?" asked Beecher.

"Cooked," said Hyde succinctly.

"Yes, cooked," continued Devere.

"They were just the same as in a fiery furnace. One feller run about 200 yards before he fell. The others got clean down to the bottom of the hill, possibly five or six hundred yards away, an' collapsed just as they got to a house. Fuller died there on the ground. The other two got well. Fuller left a wife and four or five children, the oldest boy about 14 years old. Talk about the vengeance of the Lord; turned if I don't believe there's more 'n lots of people think about that."



The camp fire had burned low and a chill in the air reminded the men that time had slipped away unawares. "Good land," exclaimed Hyde, "let's turn in or we'll never catch any fish in the morning."

Whereat they all retired to their tents and went to sleep, each with conviction that, after all, the great, supreme, inscrutable Power which regulates the universe also rules the destinies of men, taking vengeance on its own hands and working out a law of compensation more infinitely just and righteous than any individual or collective attempt here below.