The BOUNDS of BADINAGE

By Kennett Harris

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CUTAWAY WICKES had been taunting Bill Parmlee, from the Skinning Knife, with an imputed inability to throw a barrel hoop over a tent peg at the distance of two feet, and Parmlee had retorted with a reference to Cutaway's supposed need of coopering to prevent his self-conceit swelling him to the "busting" point. This, apropos of the roping contest at Hermosa. The stock tender listened to the interchange of personalities with a lively interest that did not subside until Cutaway had passed the "makin's" to the Skinning Knife boy and the two were sitting, grinning through wreaths of smoke in retrospective enjoyment of the late pleasantness. Then he said: "You two fellers remind me of Paul Gustafsen and Jim Dickerman over in Macalaster county an' some time you'll get to joshin' one another a little too free an' plenteous an' split up the way they did."

"Neither o' them gents has got the privilege an' pleasure o' my acquaintance," said Parmlee.

"They was both o' them unforchnit enough to leave this favored region afore either o' you was drove to it," explained the stock tender. "They'd sure be unhappy if they knowed what they missed by not waitin'. This was in the palmy days afore they got a town marshal in Scoop, an' when a stage driver who couldn't decorate his harness with nothing better than poker chip material would have been run plum' out o' society. It ain't like that now. I've got two sets o' genu-ine ivory rings in my warsack an' I couldn't sell one o' them to save my neck."

"Do you reckon the feller you stole 'em from would reckernise 'em now?" asked Cutaway.

"There you go," said the stock tender. "That was the way Jim an' Paul uster talk. I remember the first time I ever seen 'em. I was in Dad's pagoda in Scoop one evenin' an' there was several games a-runnin'. Gustafsen was a-settin' in one, playin' poker. He was a middlin' sized wiry person with a little hay tinted mustache about the size of a eyebrow an' a face that had the color an' expression of a saddle flap. There was two strangers settin' in with him, an' Al Powell—him they uster call the Bar T dude. After a while in santers a lad in a check suit with sad, angel count'nance an' he stands regardin' the game for a minute in a disapprovin' way. Then he turns to the two strangers.

"'Gentlemen,' he says, 'you will excuse me, I hope, if I have any appearance o' pushin' my fork into your chuck, but I presume that you are unacquainted with the reputation of the tin horn disgrace to humanity who seems to be taking your good money away from you. He's been kicked out of every cow town and mining camp in the southwest for practices to which a dog's hind leg is rectilinear. This is his jumping off place, an' he's about due to jump. Play with him, if you must, but watch him keerful'. Sayin' which he looks stern an' threat'nin' at Gustafsen an' walks off.

"Gustafsen looks after him an' lays down the deck he was shufflin, an' calls Dad. 'Didn't I tell you that the next time you let that rum-soaked, hop-permeated degenerate in here I was goin' to slop gore on your oilcloth?' he says.

"'Why, yes, Paul,' says Dad, soothin' an' apologetic, 'you did. But I wasn't watchin' the door when he came in, an' you must excuse me. He don't get in again, but there's no need of startin' trouble now. Overlook it, to oblige me, won't you?'

"Gustafsen mumbles suthin' an' begins to deal, but I seen that the strangers was uneasy an' suspicious. I was sure took aback, myself. I didn't stay though. When I see Old Man Trouble comin', I most generally yoke up an' wet my whip popper. In about three minutes it come. A chair scraped an' tumbled over an' there was Gustafsen wigglin' his peace-pipe back an' forth from one to the other of them two unknown sports whose hands was held as if they was on the point o' doin' a trapeze act.

"'Take their guns, Al,' says Gustafsen, an' Al took 'em an' laid 'em in the pot.

"'Now you may lower your hands,' says Gustafsen, rakin' in the pile o' chips an' hardware an' jammin' his own gun back. 'You two bought chips for 25 apiece when you come in. Well, here's your money back. Now I'm going to learn you to act like gentlemen when you play with gentlemen.' An' with that he got up, knocked their two heads together an' kicked them out o' the saloon. After a while I seen the mournful duck with the check suit settin' opposit' him in a new game an' the both o' them cussin' one another in the fightin'est kind o' language an' Al Powell told me that the other fellow was Jim Dickerman, an' that they was always talkin' like that to each other jest for devilment.

"Another time there was a convention called an' held for the purpose of electin' a sheriff an' other officers for the newly organized county of Macalaster. Jim Dickerman was in the hands of his friends for the office an' so was Blue Nose Westerman. Jim seemed to have the most hands though, an' when Uncle Jimmie Orr reared up on his hind legs an' give in his name the storm of applause like to have ripped the clapboards off the shack. Right there was Gustafsen's chance.

"'Mr. Chairman an' gentlemen all,' he says. 'It is with feelin's of deep regret not unmixed with disappointment, contemp', horror an' loathin' that I have just heard a respected citizen with white hairs in his chin decorations propose for an office demandin' in the highest degree horse sense, sand and common honesty, the name of a low-flung, dog-robbing, rabbit-hearted, chicken-brained coyote like Jim Dickerman.

"CRUSE MADE A JUMP FOR HIM, GOT HIM BY THE ARMS AN' GENTLY STEERED HIM OUTSIDE—"

"'Gentlemen,' he says, 'haven't we greasers in this man's town? Haven't we Chinymen, haven't we niggers? If you want poor material, ain't some of the trash that there is a-loafin' round the red light dancehall poor enough without sinkin' to this? Gentlemen, afore you make any sech breaks as that, remember that there's sech a thing as the finger o' shame an' that it will be p'inted at Scooptown from now till the third and fourth generation of them that envies her if you c'mit yourselves to an outrage like this. You may not think that Jim Dickerman is what I described him to be, but I know him; I blush to say, I know him.'

"Then he set down. Everybody whooped an' yelled, especially the Westerman crowd. Then somebody nominated Blue Nose, an' the chairman, which was a strong Dickerman man, put the first nomination to a vote, aye or no. Gustafsen hollered 'no' louder than anybody, and there was some good lungs in that Westerman crowd. It seemed about an even break to me.

"'Well,' says the chairman, 'I reckon we'll have to take a standin' vote on this. Jim has had his whirl, so now we'll give Mr. Westerman action for his money. Them as favor the nomination of Mr. Henery, otherwise Blue Nose Westerman, will rise, an' them as prefers Mr. Jim Dickerman can keep their seats.'

"There was a line of the Westerman men settin' right in front of Gustafsen, an' in Gustafsen's row was a bunch o' the Flying Dutch Oven outfit that he uster train with when he rode the range. No sooner was them words out of the chairman's mouth than each one o' them Dutch Oven boys puts his hands on the shoulders o' the Westerman man in front o' him an' held him down in his seat. 'Twa'n't no use squirmin'. They was held down like they'd been hog tied an' snubbed to a post. Blue Nose himself was held in the lovin' embrace of a pair of arms, an' the man who owned the arms was Paul Gustafsen. It was a cinch. Quick as a flash the chairman took in the situation. 'Gentlemen,' he yells above the tumult of the storm, 'I hereby declare that accordin' to the rules of the game Jim Dickerman is the choice of this convention for sheriff!'

"That's the way Jim Dickerman got his nomination for sheriff, an' he stayed in for two terms and made a good one.

"While that was a-goin' on, Gustafsen got to buyin' feeders an' shippin' 'em an' incident'ly acquirin' real estate an' a reputation. He quit gamblin' an' he quit drinkin' an' come within one o' gettin' religion. I don't say that there's harm in any one o' them things, mind you, on'y there's no doubt but what they tend to unfit a man for any kind o' social life in Scoop. By an' by Gustafsen an' some more chipped in an' built the Brennan op'ry house out o' stone from Calico canyon, an' the next thing the Drovers' State bank was started up with Paul Gustafsen for president, an' Paul got to wearin' white shirts an' orderin' his clothes from Omaha and Sioux City.

"'If it wasn't an insult to the womanhood of the Hills, I'd say you'd be gettin' married the next thing,' Dickerman says to him. 'But outside of an asylum for deaf and blind females there ain't much show for you, which is a partickler forchnit thing for posterity.'

"'It would have been a partickler forchnit thing for posterity an' society an' the protection of citizens an' safety o' property if them horse thieves you made a bluff at chasin' had waited for you and pumped a belt full o' cartridges into your hide,' says Gustafsen. 'I wonder what in blazes they lit out for! They might have knowed you'd never have the sand to tackle 'em, sheriff. Oh, sacred Moses! Jim, the only place you're good for is the legislature.'

"'You're a liar on gen'ral principles an' an idiot by nature an' lack of education,' says Dickerman. 'All the same, that was one time you called the turn. The legislature is more befittin' a man o' my caliber. I'm in the hands of my friends, Gusty.'

"'I didn't know that you had any,' said Gustafsen. 'It's news to me. I've put up with you more or less because I feel sorry for you, but I had an idee that you bein' a crawlin' moral leeper an' a two spot an' blemish on the community, your friends was all in Boston, where they never heard of you—or in Blazes, where they're watchin' your career with intrust an' approbation.'

"But next convention Dick had the granger delegates solid, an' most o' the liquid there was in Scoop, an' the result was the nec'ry papers for the c'mittee on credentials at Bismarck in the breast pocket of a long tailed Prince Albert for him. I reckon he done tol'able well the first season. 'Anyway, they had the band boys out to meet the stage when he come back, an' there was a whole of a hurrah. Gustafsen was picked out to make the address o' welcome. It was a jim dandy. I wisht I could call to mind the half of it.

"He says: 'It ain't no holler, mean-in'less phrase o' mere empty politeness to say that we've missed you. We sure have. But, on the other hand, we hain't missed one-half o' the things we uster when you was around. There's been a skurceness o' style an' a gen'ral decay of Sam Fluey's laundry business sence you took your shirt away with you, an' gloom has enveloped Hank's honkatonk; but the supply o' whisky ain't never once run short. Never once have we lined up, expectant, before Dad, to have him hang up the dry sign, in consequence of you having just left.

"'We appreshate your labors in our behalf,' he says, 'the long hours you've spent wras'lin' with Roberts' Rules of Order to find out the difference between a subsidy and a subsidiary motion, an' whether the previous question had precedence of a resolution of condolence; we reelize that you puttin' in ten out of a possible hundred days was a sacrifice, considerin' the heavy demands made on your time by stud an' faro, an' we was pleasantly surprised to find how little damage you reely done in them ten days. It's too bad that you couldn't have stayed longer, but bein' as you're here, I reckon we'll have to bear it the best we kin.'

"O' course Dickerman come back. I forget what he said, too, but it was somethin' about the emotions o' joy he experienced at bein' with his friends again was some dimmed by the fact that they hadn't extirpated that Swede sheep tick—meanin' Gustafsen—which was still parasitin' around on the community an' producin' seasickness with his fathead foolishness. I can't keep what all he did say in mind, but I recollect wanderin' out o' the Pagoda at about 2 g. m., an' while I was embracin' a telegraft pole an' tryin' to get the bearin's for the boardin' house, Dickerman an' Gustafsen went wabblin' by me with four of their eight arms around each other's duplicate necks.

"But the windup of it come at last. You remember the bill the cattlemen got up in the winter of '80, makin' it imprisonment for life, hangin' an' b'illin' in oil, for any person or persons to fence, pen, confine, surround or otherwise inclose with wire, rail, cactus, hedge, picket, pole, slab or any other material whatsoever any spring, crick, water gulch, puddle, pool, brooklet, lake or other body of water within the bounds an' confines o' said territory? No, you don't, o' course. But they done it, an' somebody got wind of it, an' the grangers was stirred up a considerable. They'd been fencin' in the range wherever there was water to beat brimstun, an' naturally they had the range stock spittin' cotton an' the cow men pawin' the air. There was some few justifiable homicides on that account, an' some that wasn't justifiable, accordin' to which side owned the coroner that picked the jury.

"Well, this come up just a little while afore Dick was due back in Bismarck. The grangers in Macalister wasn't in no ways uneasy about Dick. They didn't even trouble to ask him how he stood. They knowed. It wasn't only that they'd elected him, but Scoop, not bein' a cow town, was as strong ag'in' the bill as they was.

"The mornin' afore Dick started out to take up the cares of office again, he blowed into the bank. There was quite a few in there—Cruse, the hardware man, an' Dock Flick an' Jimmy Woods an' a mess o' grangers. Dick spoke up loud an' cheerful as usual.

"'Don't he look sort o' natural an' fittin' behind the bars?' he says, indicatin' Gustafsen, who was thumbin' greenbacks back o' the brasswork. 'Boys,' he says, turnin' to the crowd, 'it beats me how any o' you trust him with your money. You mark my words: some o' these fine days you'll wake up an' wonder where he is, an' after a while you'll hear that somebody seen him in Montreal an' he said he wasn't expectin' to come back. Gusty'd be all right in charge of the raw material in a stove foundry, but it's like bettin' on a brace game in a strange town to hand him your cash to take care of. You want to picket him with a log chain to somethin' heavy an' inexpensive if you want him to stay when the bank roll's thick enough!'

"He looked at Gustafsen. Gustafsen's little mustache was bristlin' like a bobcat's, an' his light blue eyes was about ten shades darker, with a frosty sort o' sparkle in 'em. He sure didn't look amiable.

"'You ain't mad, are you, Gusty?' says Dick.

"Gustafsen twisted up his face in a poor imitation of a smile that showed too much of his teeth.

"'If I was a venal vampire an' a bribed an' corrupted tool of the cattle interests an' a traitor to the honest men that elected me, I'd keep my mouth shut,' he said. 'Get back to Bismarck where you're wanted. They're waitin' for you to vote aye on the fence bill for good an' sufficient reasons.'

"Dick took a step back as if he'd been slapped an' then a step forward an' stopped. He'd turned pale in patches, like alkali stickin' out o' the mud, an' his jaws was clamped together even while he spoke.

"'That's the kind o' talk I don't take from nobody, Paul Gustafsen,' he says. 'I can take a joke as well as anybody. You know that, but when a man talks about me goin' back on my friends an' sellin' out, that's where I draw the line. See?'

"'I serve notice on you right now that I don't approve funny talk about the bank,' says Gustafsen, kind of gurglin' it out from his throat. 'That's a subjec' on which a josh don't go an' nobody but a—'

"He stopped an' glared at Dickerman through the grating as if he was calculatin' what part he'd bite out of him first. Dick glared back an' they stood that way the best part of a minute. Then:

"'Say it,' says Dick.

"Cruse made a jump for him, got him by the arms an' gently steered him outside an' over to the store, where he proceeded to reason with him. Cruse weighs two hundred an' thirty-five stripped, an' he's as hard as his own nails an' as sudden as a bear trap. If he can't make anybody listen to reason, it's a hopeless case.

"So there wasn't no immediate trouble. But there was a heap o' surmisin' an' bets, an' one-half of Scoop was hangin' 'round Dick's law office an' the other 'round the bank all day in pleasin' anticipation of witness fees next district court. Next mornin' though, Dick took the stage without anything happenin' an' Scoop settled down with a sigh of resignation.

"About two weeks later I was dreamin' the happy midday hours away in my bunk, bein' on night shift at the time, when Ben Garling comes in an' scares me out of seven years' growth with a series of whoops an' shook my shoulders till I began to reach under the piller for one o' my boots.

"'Heard about Paul Gustafsen an' Jimmy Dickerman?' he says.

"I dropped the boot on the floor an' sat up blinkin' my eyes while that filtered through.

"'Which of 'em got killed?' I asked.

"'Neither one o' them yet,' he says, 'but Dickerman will be if he ever comes back to Scoop, which he won't, seein' he's got shet o' most of what he owned here. He voted for the fence bill an' worked for it like the devil beatin' tan bark. Ten thousand he got, but it was cheap at the price. They'd never have passed it if it hadn't been for him.'

"I gulped an' got that down.

"'What did Gusty have to do with it?' I asked.

"'I guess Gusty could prove an' alibi,' says Ben. 'He was in Canada at the time an' he's there yet with all of the Drovers' assets that wasn't nailed down. He left the vault behind when he started Monday on that business trip to Omaha.'

"I fell back in the bunk an' closed my eyes to think it over before I done anything rash, for I had a good ranch with a spring on it an' a balance of $15.75 in the busted bank."

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