

WITHOUT STRAW

By Jack Lait

Illustrated by J. C. Shepherd



HE WAS a venerable old bird, my friend the stranger. He had long white whiskers from his ears to his midships. My nifty comrade, the Canada Kid, when he beheld him, said: "He ain' sold his brick yet."

I looked puzzled—it was new slang to me, and I had thought myself neck and neck with the argot of "the line."

"What do you mean, 'He ain' sold his brick yet?'" I followed up.

"Well," said the Kid, "in the ol' days when we useta work the county fairs an' carnivals, me an' Gran' Central Pete, the buncle steersers useta come in wit' whiskers on their map somethin' like that ol' geezer, only not so successful, maybe."

"Wearin' spec's an' wit' them hair dickeys to make 'em look rural, innocent an' trustworthy, they'd slip a plated article o' Irish confetti to one o' the natives an' then shave off the underbrush so's they could get out o' town unrecognized, becuz them bricks didn' stay shiny long. An' this ol' minister-lookin' gazoo, he looks to me like he ain' sold his brick yet."

I laughed. The genesis of the phrase was laughable. More so was any talk of confidence games in allusion to the patriarchal and quiet citizen who wafted in every day to the secluded little buffet where the Kid and I exchanged views daily. He always called for brandy, drank it, wiped his whiskers with a snowy handkerchief, paid and departed. He looked a G. A. R. veteran not dependent on his pension.

I took the Kid's verdict as a brash flash. Being a crook, he took almost every one else for one. Sleeping over with the wisdom of the "inside," he affected to discern in the most harmless acts and mien of strangers criminal technique, deeply hidden clues.

This man's manner of looking about him was sure proof that he thought he was being shadowed; did I notice that that man never would sit or stand with his back to the door? The grayish shade on the cheeks of yon well dressed fellow certainly was a prison-made complexion, no matter if he did look prosperous—the penitentiaries were full of prosperous men—that's how they got into the penitentiaries, getting prosperous.

I could have passed the old white-whiskered galoot a million times and thought of anything but felony, and I am not the most unsuspecting onlooker either. But now that the Kid had dropped the witticism regarding the unsold brick, I found myself searching the aged wayfarer's every gesture, expression, act and wink with the keen expectation of finding the evidence of his law-breaking profession.

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SOMETIMES I smiled at myself to myself; it appeared so silly. Any man might have trusted him his diamond pin or his pocketbook, he was so certified-check in deportment and exterior, he was so gracefully grown old, he had such a kindly eye, his hands were so cushiony and unscarred, his beard was so of the prophet or the grandfather, his clothes were so respectably tailored and so uniformly correct—just that, no more than correct; not fashionable, not obsolete, not formal, not negligent.

The Kid was wise to all the tricks of the profession, and when he spotted the venerable one with the whiskers he called the turn.

The owner of the little resort was a sporting person. He never missed a rattling fight, were it in Nevada or in New Jersey. He drove a harness horse each morning in this day of automobiles. The old sports of classic antecedents always dropped in on him when they passed through town. He knew Nat Goodwin and he had been at McGraw's professional debut.

Politics also buzzed merrily where he

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leaned his silk-sleeved arm upon his mahogany bar. The owner had never held office, but he had entertained and hobnobbed with all important officialdom.

In certain administrations he had been very close to the mayor's ear, and once had had the disposal of privileges in a most interesting section of the city, where favors came high because they went lowdown.

A presidential election was in the offing, and the innkeeper was voluntarily acting as stakeholder for all who could back up with currency their opinions and their passions in the light of the national argument.

There was nothing "in it." He acted as betting referee and banker without commission. Both sides trusted him, knowing that he would "pay off" to the nickel and that he would do it right, being a "square sport." I know many that would trust a square sport without even a penciled memorandum who wouldn't lend a dime to the United States treasury without the Statue of Liberty for security.

The bets were running high, as they always do for a presidential wrestling match, a world's series or a heavy-weight championship scrap. I was reliably informed that my good crony, the landlord, had \$100,000 and up in his custody, and that he was keeping it all in the big steel safe within the little impaneled office in the corner, because when men trusted him with their money to hold he intended to hold it, not bank it; to guard it, not to farm it out.

One afternoon I stood at the little bar, sipping my mineral water and watching

the Kid take his creme de menthe through a couple of short straws, when I noted that the Kid, who was forever keeping an eye on the door, was suddenly agitated. I glanced around and I saw why.

Entering, arm in arm with my host, was the famous private de-

tective whose name is standard—the Bismarck, the Matthewson, the Booth, the Dewey of detectives, known the world around, feared around the world.

The Kid knew him and, of course, he knew the Kid. I knew both and the diamond studded boss of the joint besides.

The great detective and the genial proprietor sat to a table. The Kid quickly caught the eye of the floor boy and sent over a half bottle of wine with his regards; the detective returned a tender of four-bits cigars and fresh drinks to us in reciprocal courtesy, as is the etiquette of such places and such circumstances.

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PRESENTLY John, the landlord, was called out to his office. The detective winked to the Kid, calling him over, and they talked in whispers for some minutes. When my companion returned he nodded to me, indicating that all was well—that the "grand dick" had only quizzed him generally, I presumed.

"What's he doin' in here, d'ye figger?" asked the Kid of me in a suppressed tone. "He don' hang aroun' in no joints, not even in this one."

For once my guess wasn't so amateurish.

"There's a hundred thou, they tell me, in yonder box," said I, indicating with my head.

"I'm a rum," said the Kid. "Sure."

As we stood there the door slid and in came my whiskered old gentleman. He negotiated his brandy, took his change, turned to go, stopped dead.

"Come here," said the detective.

There wasn't anyone within hearing except just those of us I have mentioned and the deaf-and-dumb bartender—every good bartender should be so denatured. And the detective probably didn't realize that his voice was carrying, for I guess

he was in a bit of a passion as I heard him say to the old man:

"I thought I told you to stay out of Chicago, didn't I. Well, then, what's the idea of blowing back in again and never as much as giving me a high sign?"

"I—I got a sister here," said the other.

"I know you have," agreed the watchdog of wealth. "I get a report on her every second day. She has been behaving for quite a while now. As long as I represent the jewelers I keep my eyes on her. That's how I came to know you were in town. You didn't think you could roam about Chicago for three weeks and get away with it just because you let your whiskers grow, did you?"

"I didn't want to be bothered—picked up," said the sage.

"Or tripped up either, eh? Been doing anything since you got here—had your eye on anything?"

"Not a thing, so help me—"

"What were you doing around that safe this morning, after closing?"

"Who, me? Wha—"

"Look at that," said the sleuth as he drew a card from his pocket and laid it on the table. "See those finger-prints? Those are yours, Ned, taken in my office fourteen years ago. See those? Photographed off the combination of that safe this morning after I'd thrown them up with Spanish lamp-black. They're yours, too. How'd you get in this place? Keys?"

"I—impression—here," and he reached down and laid a flat key where it could be handily reached. "I guess I won't have any further use for it."

"I guess not," said the master guardian. "What time are you leaving town?"

"Five, today, I guess."

"New York?"

"Buff'lo."

"Anything in sight there?"

"Going to Canada."

"Thanks."

The venerable one arose sheepishly and shuffled out. Some of the poise of his manner had wilted, but he still looked eminently decent.

At 5 the Kid and I chanced to be at the depot—I was expecting a great-aunt from the East and the Kid just came along because he liked me and had nowhere else to go; also one can never tell what a good "dip" can find in a depot, and here he had me as an alibi in case of trouble or inconvenience: I was his reason why.

Trudging behind a red-capped luggage-carrier came a figure of familiar lines.

"Look, Kid," said I. "He's shaved 'em off."

The Kid whirled about.

"Well, what do you think of that! It's Ned Gilligan, the greatest tumbler-tamperer in these here United States. I'd a never knew him wit' them curt'ins; but now I got him. He an' Pete used to pal up when I was a ambitious newsboy jus' learnin' how to make a dishonest livin'."

"He sold his brick, it seems," I suggested ironically.

"It fell on him," he answered feelingly.

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"Is that airship finished yet?" queried an advocate on preparedness.

"No-o, not exactly."

"How far along are you?"

"We have the air."