

A Counterweight to Justice

By EDWARD and GUSTAVE A. PEPLE.

HALF the town was laughing at the sheriff, and the other half—well, the other half was laughing at him, too. It pleased him vastly. In the Weekly Clarion, beneath a highly unflattering wood-cut, had appeared a brief notice, as follows:

The existence for seventeen years of a Moonshiners' Trust, known as Pine Top Still, has ceased to be a novelty, and casts a reflection upon the character of our impotent and law-abiding community. It, therefore, the gentleman whose excellent portrait we present above expects another term of office, it behooveth him to play tag in the mountains, and make somebody "it."

This article was not in itself calculated to arouse the town to merriment, but a flaunting advertisement in the same issue of the Clarion proved more fruitful:

Drink Pine Top Rye
SHERIFF BRAND
Best and Cheapest

Best because it is the best. Cheapest because we pay no revenue.

The editor of the Clarion was a new editor, and received the advertisement for two reasons: first, because some unknown person had paid good money for its insertion; second, because he knew neither the history of the illicit still nor the sensitive disposition of the sheriff. When informed by a friend, however, that said sheriff was coming over to explain both, the editor made a hasty visit to relatives in the north, and stayed there—which was wise.

The sheriff, disappointed at the absence of his prey, unbuckled his six-shooters and sat moodily on his own front porch. He was a tall gaunt man of forty-five years, all muscle and seriousness; a hard grey eye and an aggressive little tuft of wiry whiskers on the point of his chin emphasized each the other's ferocity. Twice in his life he had been known to laugh, but both eruptions were caused by precocious remarks of his own infants—which is no proof of humour in any man.

For twenty years he had served his township faithfully. He had a clean record, and sears to prove it, with the one exception of his failure to locate and land in jail the proprietor of Pine Top Still. Many revenue officers had also tried their hands; but, in spite of a standing reward of five thousand dollars, Pine Top illicit rye continued to trickle through the veins of North Carolina.

The sheriff, too, spent most of his spare time in the mountains; but, to employ his own inelegant phraseology, he "raked them hills with a fine tooth-comb an' never found a nit." He was thinking of all these things, as he now sat idly on his front porch, when a stranger came up and accosted him: "Mornin', sheriff! Collins is my name—Sam Collins. I'm fo'man up to the Pine Top Still. Naw—wait a minute—stack yer gun. I'm talkin' business."

It was a little scrap of a man with shifty little cat eyes and the general make-up of a crafty, conscienceless little sneak. The sheriff eyed him suspiciously, and slid his weapon into its holster.

"What's your game?" he asked.

"Why, simply this," said the stranger, taking a seat on the porch step and fanning himself with his hat; "the gang has all gone over to the Country Fair fer to see the races, an' of you want to jump in the still, to-night's a mighty healthy time to do it. I'm probably the only man what can show you the way, but the question is: What's it wuth to me?"

"How much d'ye want?" asked the sheriff cautiously.

"Oh, not much," said Collins, selecting a juicy grass blade and nibbling on it. "I wants the right of State's evidence, of co'se, an' fer the res', I'll take in that five thousand reward."

"Half," said the sheriff, with a snap of his iron jaw.

The stranger arose, replaced his hat, smiled an adieu and crossed the dusty road; then he sat down under a tree and began to read the last issue of the Weekly Clarion, with evident enjoyment. The sheriff cursed softly and went over to him.

"Look a-her," he began, "what's yer object in turnin' traitor?"

"That there's my business," cooed the informant. "Ef you wants to break up the still, that's your business. You got my offer. Take it or leave it. The revenue fellers'll have the same privilege."

Whereupon Collins seemed to forget the presence of an officer of the law, for he tilted his head on one side and regarded the woodcut in the Clarion critically.

"Drop it!" commanded the sheriff. "I've got my limits. Now, what talk?"

The stranger pocketed his newspaper, selected another grass blade and opened negotiations.

"You see, it's this a-way. There won't be nobody up to the still to-night; 'cept a ol' darky an' the boss. You can take yer posse with you, break up the outfit an' ketch the res' of the gang when they comes back from the fair to-morrow. It's easier a lyin' an' I'll show you where to trap 'em."

The sheriff looked from Collins to the blue line of mountain tops twenty miles distant.

"It sounds all right," he agreed; "but how'm I to know that you ain't steerin' me into a hornets' nest?"

"Well," returned Collins, with a careless shrug of his little flat shoulders, "you'll have me as gilt-edge collateral. I'll go with you—totin' no weepins—an' ef you ain't satisfied, you can blow a hole in me. A man don't flirt with them blue babies o' your'n jes' fer the fun of it. Well, what you say?"

For five long minutes the sheriff gazed thoughtfully toward the distant mountain range which for seventeen years had hidden the Pine Top Still, then he stretched out his hard, lean hand. That night at one o'clock, accompanied by twelve sworn deputies, he picked up the informant at the cross-roads and rode toward the foot-hills. For ten miles the going was easy, then they struck the steeper ascents, and the horses were tethered in a grove while the posse went forward on foot. After several miles of stiff climbing, a halt was called; not only for a hasty breakfast, but to wait for the light, since the trail had now become too dangerous to follow in the darkness.

"Look a-her," snapped the sheriff, turning to Collins suddenly. "D'ye mean to tell me that you haul yer moonshine whisky down a hell-t-unt goat-path like this here?"

"Naw," returned Collins carelessly, as he swallowed half a biscuit and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "The juice gets to the valley by a pipe line, an' we dump the grain down a chute 'cross the saddle of the mountain."

"You gottler prove that later," growled the sheriff. "or somethin' else hevdins grain'll get dumped down that there saddle-back. Come 'long, boys, it's git-tin' light."

And now the real labour of the undertaking began. The posse and their guide clambered over boulders, dipped into tangled ravines, and worked upward again by the aid of projecting roots and stunted pines. Sometimes the trail led directly along the face of the cliff, where the men were forced to cling like flies, with scarce a foothold between them and the mist-wreathed chasms far below; and thus they scrambled on, slowly, laboriously, till the sun began to peep across the mountain range.

They struck a tumbling creek which bore a telltale taint of rye-mash, and following it for half a mile, came upon a wide and beautiful waterfall. Without warning, Collins dived through it and disappeared. The sheriff loosened one blue baby and dived after him, and in a way, was disappointed to find him waiting complacently on the farther side. Here the rest of the posse joined them immediately; wet, suspicious, and profanely critical; and the journey was taken up again, leading through the mouth of a narrow cave, where the men were forced to stoop, and ice-cold water ran ankle-deep.

"Sherf," said Collins, his voice sounding strangely hollow and sepulchral in the gloomy cavern, "this here's a mighty good place fer to ketch the gang when they come 'long home from the fair."

"Bully," agreed the sheriff grimly; "an' a mighty durn good place fer the gang to ketch we all—now!"

He laid the muzzle of one of the previously mentioned blue infants in the hollow of Mr. Collins' neck, and proceeded cautiously. Soon light was seen ahead, and the posse emerged into a wide valley with rocky, precipitous sides. This, the guide informed them, was the last stage of the journey; then he led them into a bisecting cleft which seemed to run toward the very heart of the mountains. The path lay along a dried-up watercourse, so narrow at its bottom that the men were forced to walk single file, but widening as the rocky walls sheared away above their heads. For thirty paces they traversed this cleft, silent, alert; then, founding a boulder, came into full view of the moonshiners' snug retreat.

A broad, fertile valley it was, set in a pocket among the towering peaks—as safe a nest as though it lay hidden in the bowels of the earth. In the centre of cultivated fields, surrounded by a grove of pines, sat half a dozen rough log cabins, all seemingly unoccupied save the largest of the lot, from the chimney of which blue smoke was curling.

The sheriff whispered to his men, ordered a wide detour, and approached this cabin stealthily, in the hope of taking its occupants unawares. All went well until they came within twenty feet of their destination, then some born fool sneezed. Around the edge of the cabin doorway appeared the frightened face of

an aged negro. It vanished instantly, and in its place slid the muzzle of a rusty musket.

There was a roar, a curse, the whine of a huge bullet frolicking away among the rocks—and the sheriff sat up, babbling foolishly. In a moment he caught his grip again, brushed the blood from a little furrow in his scalp, and charged into the cabin, bent on professional trouble. Inside the door he came upon his would-be murderer, nursing a bruised shoulder and muttering half-chanted prayers, but beyond, in the dining-room, he got the surprise of his life.

Seated at a table, calmly engaged in buttering butter-cakes, was the largest lady in the United States outside of a circus side-show. Had she consented to the test, she would have tipped the scales at over four hundred; as the sheriff afterward described her, under oath:

"She was jes' whoppin', all over. She had four chins, the lady had, an' a beam that put me in min' of the blank end of a barn." This description, though a trifle unpolished, was spread upon the court records, attested by twelve eyewitnesses.

"Lady," said the sheriff, entering the dining-room suddenly, and waving a pair of buns, in the manner of a prizefighter sparring for an opening; "wher's the boss?"

"I'm her," replied the lady, in question, smiling affably. "Set down an' hev some breakfus'."

"You!" gasped the sheriff, his mouth going open slowly, till his chin concealed the absence of a necktie. "You!"

"Sure," nodded the lady, watching the leisurely flow of syrup on her batter-cakes. "I've run this still ever sence my husban' was took off, seven years ago, with yaller jandies. Set down an' hev some cakes while they's hot, won't you? Mrs. Gooney's my name—Maria Gooney—an' from the way you come prancin' in jes' now I suspicion that you're the sheriff."

"Yes'm," said that officer meekly, when the widow paused for breath. She caught it immediately, and resumed:

"I've ben expectin' of you for quite a spell. Right smart of a climb up here ain't it? You know—have a seat, sheriff, do—I haven't left this place sence I firs' come to it, seventeen years ago, when Gooney an' me got married. I want nothin' but jes' a slip of a girl then. Ninety-four poun's I weighed—in my nightgown. You wouldn't hardly believe that, now, would you?"

The sheriff looked his doubts, to the point of impoliteness. "You've growed some," he murmured, non-committally, and lapsed into sheepish silence.

Mrs. Gooney continued eating batter-cakes. Presently she looked up, with a pathetic little smile which completely hid her eyes in two deep creases.

"Yes," she sighed. "I've look on right smart flesh. Why, not one of the boys can hop me across a ditch, though

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