

The Sweetening of Ezra Sankie's Pot

One Can't Divide Humanity Into Bad Breeds and Good

By ARTHUR STRINGER

CHEYENNE, MACCALLUM, the "bad man" of Jackpine Creek, had invaded Teet Brule's smoke-hung bar-room in quest of an old cigar box. He carried with him, in the crook of his great arm, a young pup that shivered and whimpered against his moose-hide jacket. When its whimpering, every now and then, would rise and break into an open and mournful cry of pain, Cheyenne would blaspheme solemnly and movingly, and reiterate still again just what he would give to get his hands on the unsanctified son of misery who would break a young dog's leg that a-way.

As Cheyenne was known to be the freest-handed blackleg west of the Dirt Hills his challenge was accepted in silence, and the quiet care and solicitude with which he improvised a pair of splints, and bound up the wounded fore-leg, was watched with something that might be said to approach awe.

"Who'd ever think," said Black Sauriol, as the door closed once more on the giant in moose-hide and his whimpering charge, "o' Cheyenne MacCallum a-goin' round wet-nursin' a six-week-old-she-mongrel that a-way!"

Timber-Line Ike, drying his beaded mocassins in the box-stove glow, looked at Black Sauriol with heavy disdain.

"What I allus told you short-horns," he said, slowly, leaning back and linking his stubby red fingers over his gorilla-like chest. "There's one fact I allus laid out, and I allow I allus will. And that fact is, there's no good wastin' time tryin' to divide this here corral o' humanity into the breed that's good and the breed that's bad. For somewhere you'll allus find enough good in the meanest speerited cuss that ever stole a blanket from a sick squaw, or mebbe enough bad in the neatest-prayin' sky-pilot that ever thought he was a-ropin' down the flesh and the devil and Jackpine Creek altogether, to show you that you're calculatin' on something that's about as uncertain as a Chinook wind."

"Which all is, mebbe, goin' to give the Almighty an uncommon shock, when it comes to a show-down for the good points concealin' themselves in a few citizens along this here crick-bed," commented Black Sauriol with placid disgust.

Timber-Line Ike twiddled his short red thumbs, ruminatively.

"Mebbe so; mebbe so!" he acquiesced, in his slow and deliberate wisdom. "But such bein' the Almighty's line o' snufflin', mebbe He'll git as much good out o' the black cards as the others, a-fore the end of the game. I've seen good men go bad, and now and agin I've seen bad men bein' good. Which same reminds me some forcible of a lesson what come home to me, 'bout the time I was cuttin' my eye-teeth, same as you, Sauriol!"

And this it was that prompted Timber-Line Ike to tell what he knew of Ezra Sankie and his pot.

"These here proceedin's took place some time after our old friend, Montana Bill, institooted them sun-parlors and mud-baths o' his up on Cone Peak—Bill called it a sannytarium. And I allow, after hittin' on them medicinal springs, and gittin' that sunny little shelf o' rock six thousand feet up, for lungers, and ropin' in a mild and trustin' tenderfoot for the cost o' puttin' up that palatial health-joint, I allow that Bill ought to have lived a fat and easy goin' life. But this sannytarium business is a heap more complicated than steer-herdin'. Leastaways, Bill saw that, when he got that health-joint goin' full swing and let his eye dwell on the specimens o' maverick that kept wandering up to take the cure. Bill tumbled to that fact, all right.

"The first patient what wanders up into Bill's secluded little sun-parlors was a foot-hill card-sharp who'd got a bullet through his lung for playin' a five-ace deck, across the Line. He was a quiet and feeble enough cuss, payin' handsome for all extras, and puttin' in his first three weeks alone playin' 'Frisko solitaire with hisself.

"Then along ambles the second patient, a yellow-faced granger with only one ear, who said he was lookin' for solitood and rest. Which, I allow, was some true, seein' he was wanted for shooting a Arizona sheriff, and had been chased up across the frontier twenty-two hundred miles, by his unforgettin' Uncle Sam. This second patient o' Bill's went by the name o' Tune Up Tidmarsh, and it weren't so long before him and Creepin' Kolker, the first-comer, were puttin' in twelve hours a day playin' cut-throat poker.

"That third patient o' Montana Bill's came along kind o' unexpected and sudden. He was a Eastern tenderfoot answerin' to the name o' Judge Wimble, and I allow he was the fattest thing our friend Bill ever squaw-cinched on to Cone Peak. He carried about three hundred o' beef *aparejoed* inside his saddle-girths, and Bill's side partner headed him off from Banff with a mitful of Saskatoon talk about those Cone Peak mud baths. This here Judge Wimble, havin' soaked in about forty years o' extra high livin', was carryin' round with him a genteel combination o' king's-evil and gout. And on off days, when his leg was bad, he could hand out about as high-spiced and well-browned a line o' profanity as you ever tried to strike a match on! Not that this here old judge's cussin' was mean and vindictive—not for a minit. There was something round and mealy and ripe about that old man's swearin'. Cusses just seemed to fall out o' him, like big ripe apples out of a old apple tree. And seein' he was weighted down with ready dust, payin' his four bits twice a day for these here mud-baths o' Bill's, he was given all the rope he wanted, keepin' Creepin' Kolker and Tune-Up Tidmarsh some busy squarin' up their three-handed cut-throat account every night, with Bill sittin' up meek and patient to put out the lights.

"But that Cone Peak poker outfit never got into fair and open sailin' until Bill's next patient ambles along, in the shape of a Southern sport by the name o' Captain Jade. This here Captain Jade had seen about as much high-livin' as old Judge Wimble, I allow, but it took the captain different. With him it was a high-grade lode o' rheumatism, with out-croppin's o' treemers. He'd been shootin' mountain sheep back in the hills, and landed on Bill's health-joint with an extra equipment o' lumbago, through sleepin' in jackpine wind-breaks without lickerin' up sufficient. He was lean and wiry and fine-wrinkled about the corners o' the eyes and mouth, and as bald as a hard-head. When he told a yarn he allus laid back and cackled like a hen who'd just dropped a egg. But when it came to a show-down in the line o' cussin' he ran this here Judge Wimble a uncommon close second. Only the captain's cussin' was different: sour and sharp and cuttin' as alkali topped off with a flavorin' o' blue-stone.

"But Montana Bill wasn't doin' any kickin' those days. He just laid low and watched his wad gettin' fatter and fatter, givin' the best corner o' his sun-parlor over to these here unregenerate old growlers, a-watchin' the four of 'em make for that poker table first thing every mornin', and waitin' for the last hand to be dealt round at night, before puttin' out the lights. When they cussed over the grub, Bill swallowed it meek. When they smoked in bed and burnt holes in the sheets, Bill let it pass. When the old judge, bein' uncommon heavy, broke another chair, Bill just chalked it down agin his account and said nothin'. Bill was mighty glad these here four patients o' his were provin' so congenial, and gittin' so much fun out o' their poker, seein' there was nothin' to do at Cone Peak but sit and look at seven miles o' rock and jackpine, or walk round and bet on the weather.

"THEN Bill's side-pardner sent in word he was forwardin' another patient, a genooinelunger, payin' spot cash for five weeks' treatment. But if Bill 'd been told they were sendin' a woman up to Cone Peak for five weeks he wouldn't have worried more'n he did about the comin' o' that fifth patient o' his.

"For this here newcomer, Bill finds, was nothin' more nor less than first remove to a parson, bein' a young professor o' homiletics out of a down-East gospel joint. And Bill saw, first throw o' the rope, that his broken-down sky-pilot was a-goin' to be some uncongenial to that gang o' sulphur-eatin' poker-players. But seein' it was too late to renigg, Bill goes over to the card table, some solemn, and tips off his four patients as to what's comin'. He likewise lays out, some tearful and appealin', how he's hopin' old friends aint a-goin' to desert him in the hour o' trial.

"Judge Wimble, bein' asked by Tune-Up just what line o' graft a doctor o' homiletics dealt in, explained, some learned, that this partic'lar science dealt with the fundamental principles o' public discourse and vocal rope-throwin' in general.

"Which means," says Creepin' Kolker wearily, 'we're goin' to be discoursed to continual'

"And which also means," says Tune-Up Tidmarsh, 'that I ventilates with thirty-eight caliber orifices the cuss who opens fire on me about this here soul o' mine!'

"But when this here broken-down sky-pilot turns up at Cone Peak Bill lays off sittin' up nights apprehendin' that talk menace. For Bill and his four growlers sees first cut o' the cards, that for a man whose trade had been the scientific teachin' of the art o' public discourse this here Professor Ezra Sankie was about as quiet and silent and all-round retirin' a cuss as ever wore shoe leather. There was six foot two o' him, but he was rolled out so uncommon thin that you could a-knotted him up into a hoss-hair cinch. He was kind o' pale and sallow and hungry-appearin' in the face, mighty solemn and sad-lookin', I allow. He had a queerish pale and plaintive eye, too, and a protoodin' Adam's-apple that worked up and down, some visible, when he was devourin' his grub. Which same always gave the four growlers the jim-jams, every meal time. But he was about as all-round' unoffendin' a sky-pilot as ever put on a collar backwards, and as that poker gang sized him up, in his long and shiny black coat, faded out into a kind o' gentle green, with the cloth gone off the buttons and the metal worn bright round the edges, why, I allow they were unanimous in decidin' they'd allow no special dust bein' kicked up about their sportin' proclivities.

"FACT is, from the first day this here sky-pilot appears in Bill's sun-parlor they starts bullyin' him round, stickin' out for their rights.

"This here crow-bait angel-buster," says Tune-Up, the first mornin', as he shuffles the deck and deals round some ostentatious, 'reminds me of a snake-fence decked with moss!'

"Kind o' reminds me of a lost hound, wanderin' round that-a-way!" says Captain Jade.

"Reminds me of a codfish!" says Judge Wimble, cussin' round good and audible, just so 's to establish a workin' precedent.

Then they goes on with their game, 'special noisy and pr'fane, slingin' out their chips and rakin' in their dough, with the sky-pilot a-settin' in one corner o' the sun-parlor as quiet and unoffendin' as a lost cat, havin' his spells o' bad coughin' now and then, and takin' his temper'ture about every half hour.

"Twasn't until well on in the afternoon that the old judge did any verbal quirtin' about this. But bein' peevish through losin' his pile to Tune-Up, on a jack-pot that was runnin' greenbacks over the table-edges, he lets out some sudden.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke that darned thermom'ter round here all day in my face!" he yells out, with a bang on the table.

"Which same makes the sky-pilot jump a good six inches up in the air. Then he flushes up, kind o' red and hot, and apologizes meek and gentle, layin' out that he'd try not to offend 'em in the future.

"Fact is, this here sky-pilot's offendin' took an altogether different and unlooked for trail. Which same was due to his prayin' aloud, when he turns in. And seein' as Montana Bill hadn't expended any unnecessary labour and wealth in puttin' up that health-joint o' his, just kind o' blockin' off the bedrooms with quarter-inch green pine, allowin' plenty for ventilation, these here four old gamblers are some electrified that night by hearin' a long and eloquent prayer goin' up to the Almighty for their unregenerate souls. And mebbe it didn't leave those sulphur-eatin' side-winders kind o' weak and gaspin', lyin' there hearin' theirselves described to the Almighty so plain and explicit and unvarnished. Which same brings 'em down to the next day's game kind o' quiet and constrained, not sayin' anything about this here prayin' they'd been overhearin', quite accidental.

"But they'd taken their stand, and they stuck to it. They allowed no interferin' with their gamin' and they kept on tyin' their all-round cussedness with a lariat o' well-braided swearin'. Which same the sky-pilot, sittin' meek and quiet in his corner, says nothin' about. But that night he prays ag'in, long and earnest and eloquent, for them four poor mortals whose souls is blackened with sin. And them four mortals overhears the same, breathin' hard, and writhin' down under the blankets and feelin' like a bunch o' greasers with a neck-girth on.

"And while sufferin' that a-way, all the rest o' the week, these here four old Piutes is studyin' out, silent and secretive, just how to side-flume that cataract o' chillin' solitood'. But they spot no trail a-leadin' out o' this blind canon until about the fifth day. Then I allow the sky-pilot can't stand the all-fired quiet and lonesomeness o' that corner o' his no longer. So he takes a look at the game

(Continued on page 28.)