

The Jinx

A Short Story by Frank Giolina

OIL there surely was; the same sort of oil in the identical kind of place that has made get-rich-quick Rockefellers in imagination thousands of times. And the whence-ness and the whereabouts of this oil makes the point of this highly diverting Canadian-made story.

Illustrations

by

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CAPTAIN MCPHEE stepped out from the Hotel Central and spat on to the mud-grimed thawing snow piled high on the outer edge of the wooden sidewalk.

As he took a cigar from an inner pocket, Sid Carmagan followed from the hotel and came and stood beside him; Carmagan also lit a cigar.

Neither spoke for a few seconds, both staring disconsolately across the five or six hundred feet of half-thawed, slush-covered vacant land that lay between the Hotel Central and the railroad depot. On the map of Harvest City this land was shown as first and second streets and was averred by realty agents to be of gilt-edged speculative value. On the farther side of the track and as far as the eye could see on either hand lay open prairie, last year's stubble showing here and there through the decaying snow.

"Say, Cap," Carmagan remarked, slowly, as he took his cigar from between his lips the better to capture a bit of hash that was evading his tongue by hiding in a hollow tooth, "the good old summertime will be with us again mighty soon."

Captain McPhee rolled his cigar to the left corner of his mouth. "To hell with the summer," he answered, "what's the good of it to me?"

Carmagan chuckled. "Well, I don't know," he replied, "but I guess if there weren't the summer there wouldn't be any wheat, and without the wheat how'd you and me reap our harvests from the Rubes?"

Carmagan waited a minute for an answer and then, not getting one, continued, "No, Cap, who'd buy horses and plows and farms from you and pianos from me if the Rubes didn't get twenty to the acre Number One Hard?" He shook his head meditatively. "That's truth all right. Say, Cap, you've got a 'then some' grouch this afternoon."

Captain McPhee again spat on to the snow. "Say," he answered, "you're the best piano salesman in these parts, all right, but as soon as you begin to let off hot air out of business your talk don't have sense. Starve, me starve? See here, Sid, if there was only one loaf left in Canada I'd be the first out of her seven million population to get my teeth into it. If

you don't believe me I'll ask you, is there another man that's been able to make a go of things in this burg let alone put a few dollars in the bank?"

Carmagan nodded assent. "You speak truth there, Cap. What's come over this Harvest City, anyway? What's the population?"

"If you're buying city lots, two thousand, more or less, otherwise three hundred and forty-four, counting Bill Smith's double-headed twin, born last Monday as two," Captain McPhee answered, without a flicker of an eye-lash.

"Three hundred and forty-four," Carmagan repeated, as if weighing the words, "that's about what I reckoned. Now, I can sell six pianos down in Wheatlands or Yorkville, all within thirty miles of this burg and not one with more'n a hundred and fifty cits, quicker than I can sell one second hand organ at reduced rates here in Harvest City. What's the reason, Cap?"

"There's a jinx on this burg, Sid," the captain replied, "and you and me's the only live men here."

"Don't count me in," Carmagan answered, hurriedly, "I only dropped off this morning and got on again at four-thirty," looking at his watch, "a little more'n an hour, but like ten years in this burg."

The captain continued without noticing Carmagan's interruption. "Yes, there's sure a jinx on Harvest City. I reckon all the has been's and never was's and dead beats and dope fiends and remittance men and all God's failures come straight to Harvest City from all the States in the Union and across thousands of miles of ocean from the other side of the world. It's no josh, I tell you, Sid. It's always been like that and I bet it always will be."

"What's on the burg?" Carmagan asked again.

Captain McPhee shook his head dolefully. "Ask me something easy," he answered. "It's a dead town and you might just as well expect people to go live in a graveyard as settle here. Something's always happening everywhere else except right here. Oil and silver and copper and gold and I don't know what else lying all around every other town right from here to the Pacific Coast, but never a hand-out for poor old Harvest City. Even that cyclone six weeks back that pretty near swept Wheatlands and Yorkville clean off the map made a detour round us. Pshaw, it's a dead spot."

Captain McPhee stopped speaking. Carmagan did not break the silence, just nodding agreement with the captain's remarks. Not a human being crossed their line of vision. The depot slept quietly in the sun and beyond it a restful, dreamy shimmer floated lazily over the open prairie.

GRADUALLY they became aware of an ever increasing clatter coming down the street that led from the depot through the town and was called Main. The sound resembled the raspings of a worn-out, jagged file, being rubbed continuously over a bit of grit-covered

stone. Sid Carmagan awoke from his reverie. "For the love of Mike," he exclaimed, "what's that?"

Captain McPhee took a couple of steps along the sidewalk to the corner of the hotel and craning his neck looked round up Main Street. He stepped back to Carmagan's side.

"Wait a minute, Sid," he said, "and you'll see as pretty a sight as you could imagine even after a nine days' drunk. Let the picture of one of Harvest City's leading farmers strike on your vision suddenly. Here he comes."

Sid Carmagan stared at the edge of the corner and waited. Suddenly appeared a long pair of ears followed by a very old, ill-kempt donkey's head and neck and body. There was no bridle, just a halter round its neck. Below the halter was a dutch collar made from four or five ply of sacking. Leading from this were a couple of rope tugs. Carmagan's bulging eyes followed these to their other end. There they were attached to a couple of wooden runners made from two poplar stringers. Across these rested four or five pieces of shiplap all different lengths. On this extraordinary sledge were piled four or five sacks of potatoes, one of flour, four cans of coal-oil and some half a dozen boxes filled with paper parcels. Seated on the top of the load was a human being clothed entirely, so far as Carmagan could see, in sacking. Trousers of sacking incased its legs, four or five sacks had been tied together with binder twine to form some kind of coat, and one enormous sack fastened into a peak like a monk's cowl sheltered its head and practically hid its face. Whether it was man or woman one could not possibly tell until seeing the ends of a dirty, matted white beard wagging below the edges of the cowl, Carmagan guessed the former. The strange outfit passed them slowly, the donkey slipping and stumbling, the wood runners scraping and shrieking as they were torn to pieces on the rough snow, the sack-clothed figure sitting aloft silent as the sphinx. On it went bumping over the rails and out into the shimmering haze beyond.

ONLY then did Carmagan find his voice.

"For the love of Mike," he whispered, "what is it, Cap? Or ain't there nothing there at all? Sure they've doped my liquor."

"Huh," Captain McPhee answered, "that's one of our leading farmers, as I told you, Sid. But now I put it to you straight, ain't that enough to put this whole burg on the hog?"

"I've been all over this western country," Carmagan answered, speaking slowly and gazing with staring eyes after the receding sleigh. "And I'll take any odds you like that there isn't another burg out here that could show you a sight like that."

"Sure I believe you, they'd poison it or bury it alive, it depreciates the value of real estate, it gives the whole district a black eye."

"What is it?" Carmagan asked again.

"It's a man, Carmagan, called William Henry Thorne, and he lives with his moke on a quarter section of alkali and swamp about eight miles to the northwest," nodding towards the prairie. "More'n that, no one knows. Thorne don't ever speak to a soul and so never a soul speaks to him. I reckon he must be alive or else he wouldn't want groceries and truck like he has on that sleigh. He comes into this burg about every two months and goes back again with a load like that. He pays cash for the goods and at the same time gets his mail. Always just one registered letter, never a paper or even a bill. I reckon that's his remittance, but where it comes from I don't know."

"Ab. Fleming, our oldest inhabitant, says Thorne was here when he came and looked just the same then as he does to-day and had the same old moke. But then Ab.'s getting a bit shaky in the thinks himself. Personally, I hold that some old time he won't come in and after