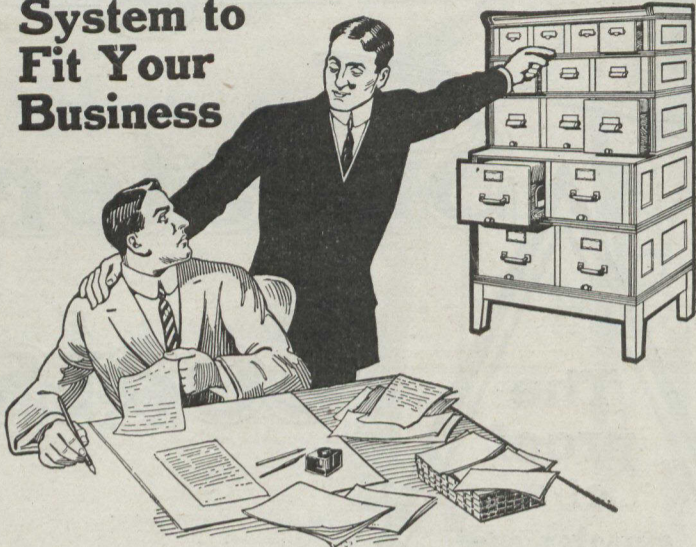


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quite unprofessional-like, and whispers into the sky-pilot's ear off-hand, that he can draw on him as high as two hundred.

"The old judge leans back and laughs and raises him ten, which leaves the sky-pilot lookin' kind o' worried for a minit or two. Then Captain Jade raises 'em another ten, and Creepin' Kolker goes 'em ten better, and Tune-up has to whisper for the sky-pilot to raise 'em all ag'in. Which same he does, while the old judge shoves his pile to the centre, free and confident, sayin' he ain't a quitter, with a hand like his. And Captain Jade does the same, chucklin' down in his lean old throat and makin' believe he'd a hand to sweep the board. Then Creepin' Kolker does the same, firm and belligerent.

"And the sky-pilot raises 'em agin. And they keep a-sweetenin' that pot until the sky-pilot's eyes begin to bulge and his hands is tremblin' and Tune-Up remarks some casual that mebbe it'd better be a show-down.

"What y' got?" demands the old judge as he plumps down his pair o' two spots on the board.

"Why, I beat you!" hollers Captain Jade. "I beat you, with two threes!"

"Then Creepin' Kolker he laughs kind o' free and easy, and says, 'I does you easy, with two sevens!'

"Then all turns to the sky-pilot, who was a-grinnin' from ear to ear, as innocent and unknowin' and unobservin' as a yearlin' lamb.

"Well, they hollers, hot and impatient, 'what y' got?'

"The sky-pilot puts down his hand, one by one. Then he sits back and rubs his Adam's-apple, kind o' nervous, and beams round at 'em kind o' silly, and rubs his Adam's-apple ag'in.

"Why, you've got four aces!" says Creepin' Kolker, lookin' up surprised, so bland and inncerent that the sky-pilot chuckles out loud.

"What!" gasps the old judge, blinkin' down at 'em. "Well, I'll be demed," says he, "if he ain't!"

"Why, he takes the pile, then!" says Captain Jade, kind o' weak and disgusted lookin'.

"And I felt so sure o' this here pot!" says Creepin' Kolker, uncommon sad and dejected, watchin' Tune-up countin' and sortin' up the money for the sky-pilot.

"But as they tucks it down in the pockets o' his faded old green vest with the shiny buttons, the sky-pilot stands back and makes 'em a little speech, kind o' falterin' and half-hearted, about not bein' able to take that money. And he lays that pile out on the table ag'in, slow and sorrowful, and the four old growlers is plum sloughed down, until Bill steps up and says he'll appropriate the wad, if all's willin' for three months o' good Cone Peak board and keep.

"Only," says Bill, as he picks out a fifty what he finds is left over and hands it back to the sky-pilot, 'you've got to gi' me your solemn word that you keeps out o' the game as long as you stays in this health-joint o' mine!"

"And the sky-pilot promises, some fervent, and begins thankin' 'em for nothin' at all, and is a-go'in' to cry, apparent, when the old judge shuts him off, some sharp.

"Look a-here, my young friend," he says, a-poundin' the table, "it ain't you that's winnin' this money; it ain't you or all your studyin' what roned in that pile! It was just the cards! It were these here four aces a-comin' into your hand won the trick. And if you're repudiatin' the Lord for sendin' you a full house that a-way, why, I ain't got much respect for you or your gratitood!"

"And he pounds the table ag'in, and the sky-pilot allows, kind o' dazed that mebbe he may be right.

"Of course it were the cards!" says Creepin' Kolker, without a blink.

"Which same is sure bad poker, and ain't mebbe good morality. But as I laid out to you short-horns at the first there's nothin' gained tryin' to divide this here corral of mixed humanity into the breed that's all good, on the one side, and the breed that's all bad, on t'other!"

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