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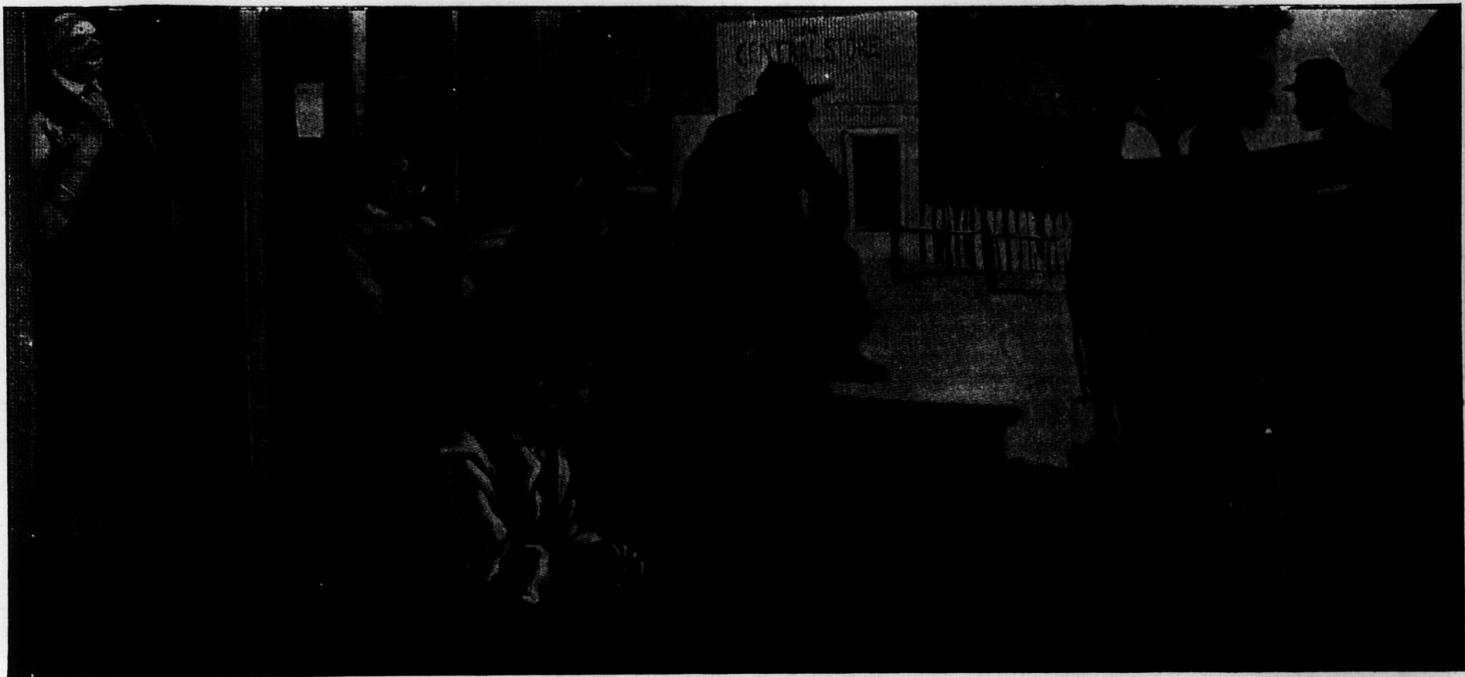
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THE PATENT CHURN

By William H. Hamby

A Humorous Story of a City Man's Experience with the "Trustin'est Man in the World" and There's a Genuine Surprise at the End!



"Good evening gents," said Carter, with an easy nod, as he drew rein in front of Buckeye Bridge's general store."



"GOOD evening, gents," said Carter, with an easy nod, as he drew rein in front of Buckeye Bridge's general store. "Howdy," responded two or three of the loungers on the platform, without so much as batting an eye.

"Will you tell me where your hotel is?" asked Carter in an affable tone.

"Fust house to the left, straight ahead," said one.

"Organ," commented the serious-faced individual on a nail keg, sizing up the covered object in the back of the spring wagon as Carter drove on. "Sewing machine, said the lank one in the door. Too small for organ."

"Humph!" snorted the serious one. "Stiff hat, hangin' black mustach, spotted tie, biled shirt, paste stud—organ, I tell you."

Carter, J. A. Carter, as it stood on the register of the Commercial Hotel, was the only guest at supper.

"Fine farming country around here," he remarked to the landlady as she passed him a plate of fried eggs and bacon.

"Yes, sir, it's purty fair country," she replied.

"Some pretty rich farmers around here, I suppose?" he asked, casually.

"Yes, sir, there's some that's tolerable well off."

"Who do you consider the most wealthy farmer in the community?" he asked carelessly.

"Well, I guess Billy Houck is about the best-to-do man in this neighborhood. You wantin' to buy a farm?"

"No, I hardly think so. Just looking around, what sort of fellow is this Billy Houck?"

"He's the cleverest man on top side of earth. There ain't anything he won't do for a body in trouble. I don't know how this country'd get along without Billy Houck. There's mighty few people around here he ain't helped one way or another."

"He's liberal, is he?" commented Carter, apparently interested.

"He's the freest-hearted man you ever seen. I've knowed him to keep a stranger a week and I never knowed him to charge a cent."

"I suppose he's kind of careful, though, who he takes in," suggested Carter.

"Not one bit. He's the trustin'est man in the world. He takes 'em all in. Says if they are saints they're havin' hard enough time of it, and he'll

give 'em a lift. Says if they are sinners they'll have a hard time hereafter, and he'll comfort 'em what he can while they're here. He's powerful droll," she added, laughing.

"Pardon me, gents," said Carter, as he drew up to the store after supper. "Can one of you tell me the way to Billy Houck's?"

The farmer on a nail keg took the tobacco out of his mouth, pitched it over the end of the board platform, took out a plug, and bit off a fresh chew, then pointed to the bridge.

"Take the road across the bridge there and go south to the first turn, then take the left hand and the first place on the right is Billy Houck's."

The farmer was in the yard as Carter drove up.

"Good evening, Mr. Houck," he said, pleasantly.

"Howdy," said Billy, getting up leisurley from his chair. "Get out."

"My name is Carter, Mr. J. A. Carter, of Chicago," he said, holding out his hand as Billy approached.

"Glad to meet you," said Billy, taking the proffered hand.

"Could I get a night's lodging with you, Mr. Houck?" asked Carter. "I have a little business matter to talk over."

"Guess we can keep you," said Billy. "Go in and make yourself at home.

and I will put up your team."

"Had supper?" asked Billy, when he returned from the barn.

"Yes, thanks. Had supper over to the Bridge."

Carter studied the farmer closely as he ambled slowly to the porch and brought another chair out onto the grass.

He was a little under height, but rather heavy set. Had grayish hair, well tousled, and the mildest of blue eyes, with a slight squint in the left one.

"Never like to set on wood when there's grass growin'," remarked Billy.

"I see where you are right," said Carter. "Fine place you have here,"

he said, looking over the stretches of meadow and corn that sloped away toward the creek.

"Middling fair," said Billy, modestly.

"We manage to make a livin' on it."

That night before going to bed, as Carter stood before the "dresser" glass in the spare room, twirling the ends of his mustach, he winked at his image and smiled admiringly as he tapped his forehead.

"Mighty nice young fellow," said Billy to his wife as they went to bed: "smart as a tack and powerful friendly."

"Now, Billy, don't you go and do nothin' foolish," was the only reply.