

The Free Press Short Story

GOSPEL FISTS

BY RUEL McDANIEL

JAMES LANGHAM, mill superintendent, stroked his receding chin meditatively after the fashion of a man who is sometimes afraid of his own decisions.

Suddenly Langham's demeanor and tone froze into stilted formality. "I might advise you, Reverend Prazier, that Dihal Front is getting along very nicely without churches and prescholars.

It would have been easy for the new missionary to have thanked the superintendent for his advice, driven away, and left this lawless sawmill town to be destroyed eventually by its own sin.

The story went that Gooden had arrived in the new town from parts unknown and had guardedly refused to talk of the past.

At first the few reputable citizens, among them James Langham, had protested against the rank violations being perpetrated openly by Gooden and his followers.

Reverend Paul Prazier said good-by to the superintendent and walked over to crank the antiquated car that had brought him bumping over the rough country road to the little town.

Young Prazier, a husky man himself, stepped back and eyed the man Gooden coldly; then he clambered carelessly into the ancient little automobile.

A sudden blow from the sledge-hammer flat of Gooden knocked the joker sprawling. The rest of the crowd laughed loudly as they felt their ears expected them to do.

"He won't be here!" sneered Gooden. "He knows enough about safety rules to stay out of Dihal Front to-morrow night. He's a great bluffer, that's all. I wish he would come. We ain't had no fun around here in weeks, boys. He could furnish us with some first-rate entertainment, but he won't be here."

"Now, he won't be here. We kin forget him. That guy'll be as far from Dihal Front as that wheezin' fiver will take him by to-morrow night!" agreed one of the gang.

In the minds of many of the men, however, including Superintendent James Langham and the mighty Phate Gooden himself, there lurked the distracting thought that this impudent young missionary likely as not would be on hand the following night.

Reverend Paul Prazier alighted from his automobile, carefully brushed the dust from his clothes, took his Bible and several songbooks from the rear seat, and walked nonchalantly into the building.

Presently he saw a workman and his family come into the thoroughfare from a side street and head toward the schoolhouse; then he heard the ringing voice of Phate Gooden.

That explained the situation. Phate Gooden was watching the school building and was halting those few citizens who ventured to cross his will.

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meot the raging stare of the bully. Not for a second did his gaze waver from the burning eyes of Gooden.

As his earnest eyes bored into the evil face of Phate Gooden, Paul fought out a harrowing battle in his mind.

Should he retreat to leave Gooden and his gang in supreme command of the situation and thereby give them an even more stifling grip about the moral throat of the struggling town?

Just the same, nearly every one harbored the thought that something was going to happen the following evening to break the monotony of flat fights and ordinary free-for-all brawls that no longer excited the sin-hardened town of Dihal Front.

These preparations completed he walked across the sketched street to a small restaurant to eat his supper. It was nearly eight o'clock when he returned to the schoolhouse.

Phate Gooden swung furiously at the young missionary's nose. Paul ducked with the agility of one who had been an active athlete from early boyhood.

When Paul dodged the blow, it was so fast that it threw Gooden off balance for a fraction of a second.

Consternation gripped his followers. Could it be possible that any man could drive the mighty Phate to the floor? Amazing, yet there he was, flopping around like a wild duck with his wings injured.

"Hold on there, Brother Gooden," commanded Paul. "Services are about to commence." The missionary seized the arm of the former czar and gently but firmly led him to a seat directly in front of the little platform that was to serve as a rostrum.

A spontaneous roar went up from the timid men and women who had watched the events from a safe distance; and Gooden's former followers joined in. All gathered around the little rostrum, and Paul Prazier resumed his interrupted prayer.

VEGETARIANISM

A theory carried to an extreme throws its light on queer sides of human nature. Many people believe that it is not only foolish, but wrong to eat meat, and their conclusions, pushed to their furthest bounds, have an odd sound in the ears of carnivorous mankind.

Another gentleman, who is not only a vegetarian but a conscientious eater of those fruits and grains which meet his approval, would not discard the rind of a fruit merely because it may be tough.

"I believe there must be something medicinal or nutritious in the pulp of an orange," he writes a friend, "and so I always eat it with the rest of the fruit. I must confess, however, that it never seems to agree with me."

Its bill of fare is long and elaborate. If one desires French names, they are here to be found.

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ON BROOKLYN BRIDGE

The bridge policeman grasped him roughly as he was about to leap over the rail.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "How do you get that way?" "What's the use," replied the would-be suicide. "I have lost my money on the stock market; I have lost my home; my wife has divorced me. There is nothing left but to end it all."

"That may be true, buddy," said the policeman. "But what's the hurry? Get on back in line and take your turn."

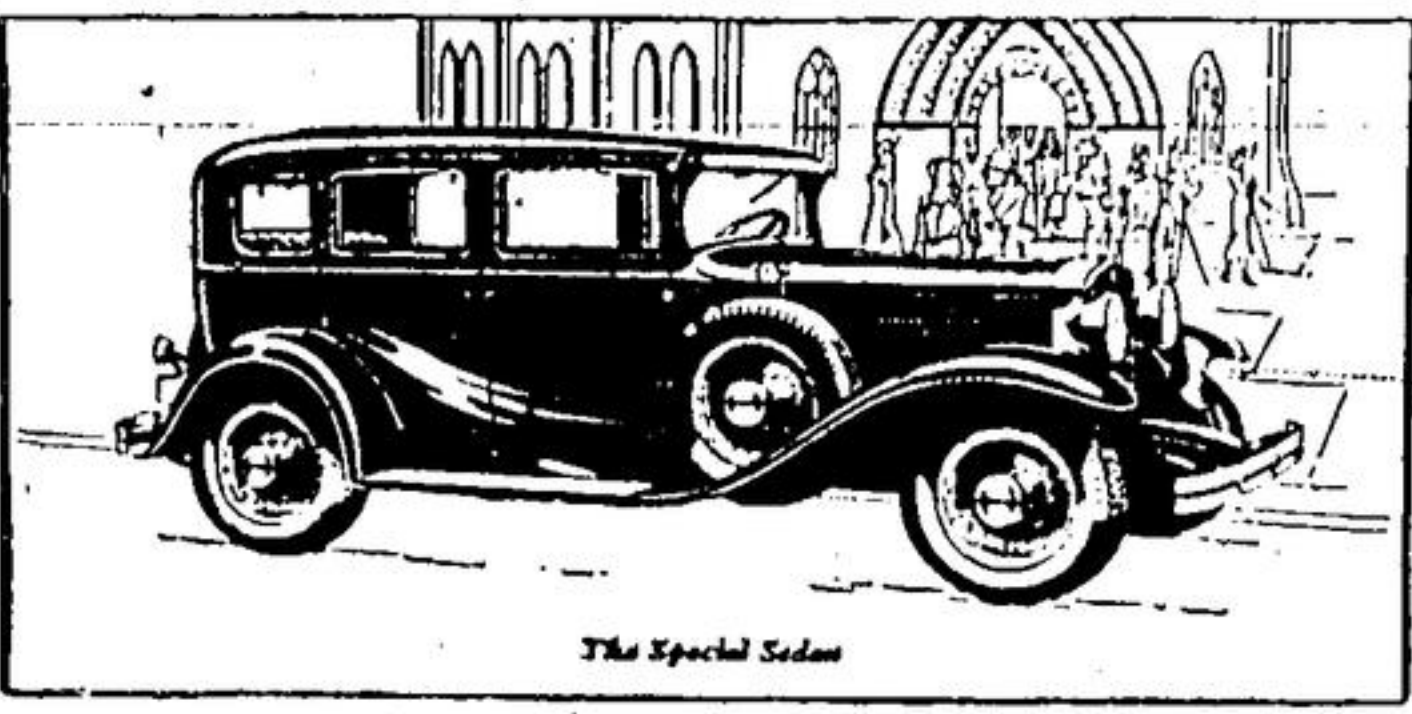
SOMETHING HAPPENED

Two Swedes were walking on a railroad track, when a train came along behind them. One of them was lucky enough to jump off the track in time, the other not being so fortunate.

"After I jump," he said, "I run a little way, and then I go back to see 'bout Ole. Pully soon I come cross an arm on the track, and soon I see one of Ole's legs. Now I'ing see Ole's head. Den I say, 'My goodness, someth'ing must 'a' happened to Ole!'"

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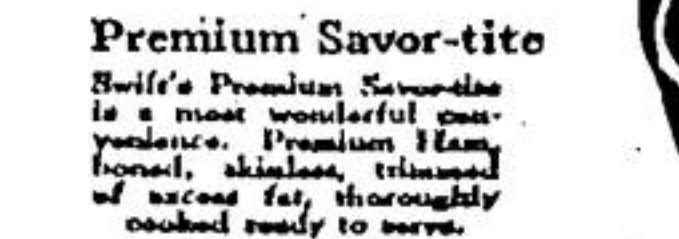
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