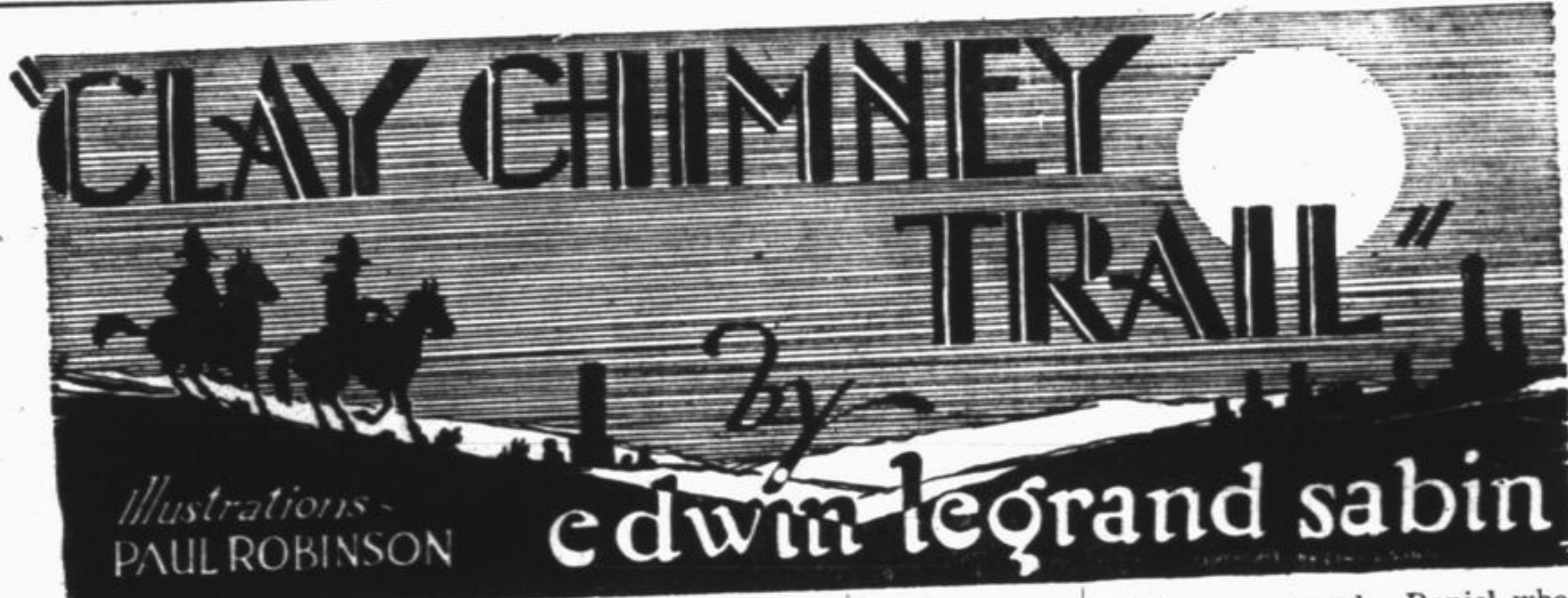
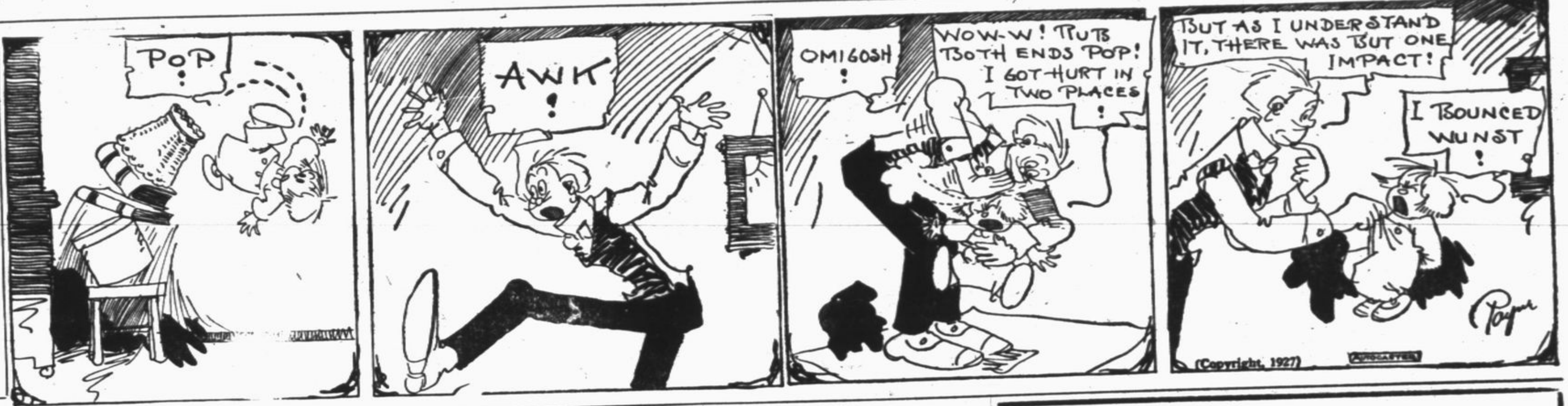


The Family Next Door



S'matter Pop?

By C. M. Payne



Frank Beeson, from Albany, N.Y., reaches Benton, Wyoming, then—1868—western terminus of the Pacific railroad. He had been ordered by physicians to seek a climate "high and dry." He is robbed of most of his money in his hotel and loses his last twenty dollars at monte in "The Big Tent," a dance hall and gambling resort, in the "roaring" town of Benton.

Edna Montoyo, a companion of a gambler, is believed by Frank to have cajoled him purposely into the game. Broke, disconsolate over his discovery that "the lady of the blue eyes" as he calls her, is what she is, and finally humiliated over his glaring "greenness," Frank repulses Edna when she begs him to go away with her, sobbingly telling him that she had made a big mistake in letting him lose his money. He goes to take a job with

George Jenks, a teamster in a wagon train about to leave for Salt Lake City.

Captain Adams, a Mormon, is in charge of the wagon train.

Rachael Adams, an attractive young woman, one of his wives, is in the train, as is

Daniel Adams, his loutish son. When Edna, who has shot, but not killed the gambler, Montoyo, comes a fugitive in "britches" to join the train, Daniel tells his father that she is seeking Jenks and Beeson. Captain Adams shouts, "No hussy in men's garments shall go with the train."

Daniel, by a spectacular gun play, foils Montoyo's attempt to take Edna back with him.

CHAPTER IX.

"I Don't Want to Kill Him."

One night after we had gone on some time, the sound of revolver shots burst flatly from a mess beyond us, but the shots were accompanied by laughter.

"They're only tryin' to spile can," Jenks reassured. "By golly, we'll go over and l'arn 'em a lesson." He glanced at me. "Time you loosened up that weapon o' yourn, anyhow. Purty soon it'll stick fast."

I went with him, glad of diversion. The men were banging, by turn, at a sardine can set up on the sand about twenty paces out. The heavy balls sent the loose soil flying but amidst the furrows the tin can sat untouched.

"What you thinkin' to do," Jenks smiled. "Hit that can or plant a lead mine?"

"Give him room! He's made his brag," they cried. "And if he don't plug it that pilgrim will sure."

Mr. Jenks drew and took his stand; hang with small preparation and missed by six inches—fact that brot him up wide awake.

"Gimme another try, boys," he growled, but they shoved him aside.

"No, no; Pilgrim's turn!"

Willy-nilly I had to demonstrate my greenness, so I drew, and stood, and

cocked, and aimed. The Colt exploded with prodigious blast and wrench—jerk, in fact, almost above my head; and where the bullet went I did not see, nor, I judged, did anybody else.

"He missed the 'arth!" they clamored.

"No! I reckon he hit Montoy 'bout the middle. That's whar he scored center!"

"Hold down on it! down, lad!" Jenks urged. "To hit him in the heart aim at his feet! Here! Like this— and taking my revolver he threw it forward, fired. The can plinked and somersaulted, lashed into action.

"By George," he proclaimed, "when I move like it had a gun in its fist I can snap it! But when I think on it as a can, I lack guts!"

Now somebody else shot, and somebody else, and another, and the can gyrated, spurring us to haste as it constantly changed range. Presently it was merely a twist of ragged tin.

Then in the little silence, as we paused, a voice spoke irritatingly:

"I loaw you fellers ain't no great shucks at throwin' lead!"

Waniel stood by, with arms akimbo, and beside stood My Lady. He towered over her in a maddening atmosphere of proprietorship.

She smiled at me—at all of us; at me, swiftly; at the rest, frankly. And I knew that she was afraid!

Daniel laughed boisterously, his mouth widely open.

"Set me-up a can! That thar one wouldn't jump to a bullet!"

A can was produced.

"How fur?"

"Fur as yu like."

It was tossed contemptuously out; and watching it I heard Daniel gleefully yelp, "Out o' my way, yu-all!"—half saw his hand dart down and up again, felt the jar of the shot, witnessed the can jump like a live thing; and away it went, with spasm after spasm, to explosion after explosion, tortured by him into fruitless capes until with the final ball peace came to it, and it lay dead, afar across the twilight sand.

Verily, by his cries and utter savagery and malevolence of his bombardment, one would have thought he took actual lust in fancied cruelty.

"I loaw thar's not another man hyar kin do that," he vaunted.

There was not, judging by the silence again ensuing. Only—

"A can's different from a man," Jenks coolly remarked. "A can don't shoot back!"

"I don't loaw any man's boin' to, neither," Daniel faced me in turning away. "That's somethin' fur yu to l'arn, young feller," he vouchsafed. His gaze shifted.

"Come along, Edna," he bade. "We will be agoin' now."

A devil—or was it himself?—twittered me, incited me, and in a moment, with a gush of assertion, there I was, saying to her, my hat doffed:

"I'll walk over with you."

"Do," she responded readily. "We're to have singing."

The men stared. Daniel wheeled.

"I loaw you ain't been invited, mister!"

"If Mrs. Montoyo consents, that's enough," I informed him. "I'm not walking with you, sir; I am walking with her. The only ground you control is just in front of your own wagon."

"Thar ain't no 'Mrs. Montoyo,'" he snarled. "And whilst yu're l'arnin' to shoot yu'd better be l'arnin' manners. Yu comin' with me, Edna!"

"As fast as I can, and with Mr. Beeson, also, if he chooses," said she. "I have my manners in mind, too."

"By gosh, I don't walk with ye," he jawed. And he flounced about, vengefully striding on as though punishing her for a misdemeanor.

She dropped the men a little curtsy.

"The entertainment is concluded, gentlemen. I wish you goodnight!"

Yet underneath her railleury there lay an appeal, the stronger because subtle and unvoiced. It seemed to me every man must appreciate that, as a woman, she invoked protection by him against an impending something, of which she had given him a glimpse.

So we left them somewhat subdued, gazing after us, their rugged faces sobered reflectively.

Daniel was angrily shouldering for the Mormon wagons, his indignant figure black against the western glow. She laughed lightly.

"You're not afraid, after all, I see."

"Not of him," madam.

"And of me?"

"I think I'm more afraid for you," I confessed. "That clown is getting unsufferable. He sets out to bully you."

"I'm afraid, too," she breathed. "I never have been afraid before. I didn't fear Montoyo. I've always been able to take care of myself."

"You have your revolver?" I suggested.

"No, I haven't. It's disappeared. Mormon women don't carry revolvers."

"But you're not a Mormon woman."

"Not yet," she caught quick breath. "Do you know," she queried with sudden glance, "that Daniel means to marry me?"

"But you're not free; you have a husband!"

"Oh!" she cried, "why don't you learn to shoot? Won't you? Let me have your pistol, please!"

"You must grasp the handle firmly, cover it with your whole palm, but don't squeeze it to death; just grip it evenly—tuck it away. And keep your elbow down; and crook your trigger knuckle is pointing very low—at a man's feet if you're aiming for his heart!"

"At his feet for his heart?" I stammered. The words had an ugly sound.

"Certainly. We are speaking of shooting now, and not at a tin can! You have to allow for the jump of the muzzle. Unless you hold it down with your wrist, you over shoot; and it's the first shot that counts. Of course, there's a feel, a knack. But

don't aim with your eyes. You won't have time. My file off the front sight—it sometimes catches, in the draw. And it's useless, anyway. They fire as they point with the finger, by the feel. You see, they know. Some men are born to shoot straight; some have to practice a long, long while. I wonder which you are?"

"If there is pressing need in my case," said I, "I shall have to rely upon my friends."

"Those gentlemen of yours, are Gentiles with goods for Salt Lake Mormons," she retorted. "Are they going to throw all business to the winds?"

"You yourself may appeal to his father, and to the women, for protection if that lout annoys you," I ventured.

"To them!" she scoffed. "To Hyrum Adams' outfit? Why, they're good Mormons, and why should I not be made over? I'm under their teaching; it's time Daniel had a wife—or two, for replenishing Utah."

She paused. Then resumed.

"But now if I may lend you a little something to keep you from being shot like a dog, I'll feel as though I had wiped out your score against me. Take your gun." I took it. "There he is, cover him!"

"Where?" I asked. "Who?"

"There, before you! Oh, anybody! Think of his heart and cover him!"

"See that little rock? Hit it!"

I fired. The sand obscured the rock. She clapped her hands, delighted.

"You would have killed him. No—he would have killed you. Quick! Give it to me!"

And snatching the revolver she cocked, leveled and fired instantly. The rock split into fragments.

"I would have killed him," she murmured, gazing tense, seeing I knew not what. Wrenching from the vision she handed back the revolver to me. "I think you are going to do, sir. Only, you must learn to draw. I mustn't stay longer. Shall we go to the fire, now? I'm cold."

We walked almost without speaking, to the Hyrum Adams' fire. Daniel lifted his upper lip at me as we entered; his eyes never wandered from my face. I was distinctly unwelcome. Accordingly, I said a civil "Good evening" to Hyrum and raising my hat to My Lady, left for my own bailiwick.

Friend Jenks joined me.

"We were keepin' cases on you, and so was he. He saw that practice—damn, how he did crane! She was givin' you pointers, eh?"

"Yes, she wanted amusement!"

Jenks rocked to and fro, as we sat by the fire. "Hell! Wall, if you got to kill him, you got to kill him and do it proper. For if you don't kill him he'll kill you; snuff you out like a wall, you saw that can travel."

"I don't want to kill him," I pleaded. "Why should I?"

Jenks, sat silent, and sitting silent I foresaw that kill Daniel I must. I was being sucked into it, irrevocably willed by him, by her, by them all. If I did not kill him in defense of myself I should kill him in defense of her.

Could this really be I? Frank Beeson, not a fortnight ago still living at a jog-trot in dear Albany, New York State? It was puzzling how detached and how strong I felt.

(Continued next week)

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