

The Sorry Tale of Hennery K. Lunk

by Ellis Parker Butler

In naming this quiet tall tale to his annual Honor Roll, The Best Short Stories of 1918 compiler Edward J. O'Brien wrote that it "would have delighted Mark Twain." Certainly the American public embraced it when it appeared. The story (and illustrations) appeared in Harper's Monthly Magazine, May 1918. After more than a year of dreary World War I front-line dispatches, its gentle, old-fashioned humor must have come as a happy reminder of times past. —Katherine Harper

When I made my visit to my old home town, after twenty years' absence, I was interested in every one and everything. It is fascinating work to take a shred of memory and watch it grow as forgotten memories add themselves to it. It is as if you discovered an inch of yarn sticking out of a chest. The little tag-end of yarn is nothing of itself, but you take hold of it and pull it and out it comes—yards and yards of it—until you have a great mass of yarn in your hands, and you feel the itchy feel of it, and get the camphor-ballish smell of it, and all at once you exclaim:

"By George! By George! It's that old woolen undershirt I hated so when I was a boy!"

You are as tickled as if you had discovered a five-dollar gold-piece in an old vest. In a little while you walk the streets in a fog of long-forgotten memories. I say "fog" because it is all dim and dreamy and unreal. You are neither yourself nor the person you were twenty years before. You are like a Mohammed suspended between the floor of today and the ceiling of your youth, but as you hang suspended there the tracings on the ceiling grow clearer and clearer.

I remember I walked down to the river and sat on the waterlogged dock of the old ferry-boat *Silas William*. The boat is gone now, and the dock is rotting, but the same old river ran by. I remembered the first time I rode across the river on the *Silas William* and what an adventure that had been. Then I remembered Hennery K. Lunk, who used to own the ferry and was captain and half the crew. I remembered, as if it had happened yesterday, how he warned me



HE WARNED ME NOT TO GO TOO NEAR THE EDGE

not to go too near the edge because the Mississippi River was full of saw-back whales that would glide under a boy if he fell in the river, and saw the boy in two, and then swish around and swallow the boy in two gulps. He told me that if a man fell overboard the saw-back whales would go "swish! swish!" twice—once to cut the man in two lengthwise and once to cut the man-strips crosswise, because saw-back whales could not swallow a man unless he was cut into four pieces. Then the captain—Captain Hennery K. Lunk—dug into his pocket and gave me two peppermint lozenges and told me to eat them immediately. He told me to eat one of them bottom side up and the other one top side down. That would go a long way toward saving my life if I did happen to fall overboard, because saw-back whales could not bear peppermint. If I kept breathing my breath in and out when I fell overboard the saw-back whale would come up and sniff my breath and turn around and swim away again without sawing me or anything.

I remembered how he came around to where I was standing, after he had gone up to the pilot-house to get a chew of tobacco from the pilot, and asked me if I was sure I had eaten one of the peppermints top side down and the other bottom side up, and he did not seem sure that I had, so he gave me another. He kept giving me others all the way across the river and back, because he did not want me to take any chances. My heart warmed to Hennery K. Lunk as the memories returned. There was a sun-roughened old codger sitting on a pile of lath on the dock, netting a seine with slow, exact swings of his arm, and I went over and seated myself beside him.

"Morning, pardner!" I said.

"Mornin'!" he said, without looking up.

"You don't remember me," I said, "and I don't remember you, but I used to live here twenty years ago or so, and I knew a man by the name of Hennery K. Lunk—"

My stranger shook his head without stopping his netting arm. "Poor old Hennery!" he said. "So you used to know poor old Hennery K. Lunk! I thought everybody in the world had forgotten poor old Hennery by this time, he's been dead so long—"

"Dead!" I exclaimed.

"Yep! He's dead," said my netter. "Saddest thing! Saddest durn thing that ever happened in this town. When I think how lively and chipper and always joking Hennery K. Lunk used to be when I first knew him— He was a fine feller, Hennery was."

"I never heard a bad word spoken of him," I agreed.

"He was kind and he was cheerful—"

"Used to run a ferry-boat right from this very livin' dock!" said my friend. "Old *Silas William*, she was. Many's the ride I've had on her. I don't know as I ever heard anything as sad as what come over old Hennery K. Lunk."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well," said the old fellow, "I don't mean the way he lost his money and all. That was sad, but it only sort of led up to the real sad part. You knowed he sold his boat?"

"The ferry-boat? No, I did not know that."

"Yes, he sold her. Durndest unlucky sale! Sold her one night to two fellers in town here for four thousand dollars—"

"Four thousand dollars!" I exclaimed. "Four thousand dollars for that rotten old hulk?"

"And the next day two fellers come down from Deebuque, and offered him five thousand two hundred and fifty for her! Yes, sir; and it broke Hennery K. Lunk all up! It sort of sickened him, like it would anybody. He wasn't never the same afterward. It made him sort of moodish and glum all the rest of his life. He sort of dwelt on it, he did. He'd intended to retire and live on his money, but he kept mooding about that one thousand two hundred and fifty he'd lost, and he got so durned glum about it he set out to make it up, Hennery K. Lunk did. So he started a saloon—a liquor saloon."

"Bad business, but profitable," I ventured.

"And two days after he got her opened up," said the



A SUN-ROUGHENED OLD CODGER SITTING ON A PILE OF LATH

sunburned old fellow, "they passed the prohibition law and he had to take all his liquor out in the street and smash it in the gutter. It saddened Hennery K. Lunk, that did. Yes, sir! It did so. I guess he lost a good thousand dollars by that deal, and I don't know what he would have done if he hadn't had a chance to buy Thomas Doherty's crockery-store. You remember Thomas Doherty?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"Done a right good business, I guess. Hennery K. Lunk, he thought so. He thought he could make back that two thousand, two hundred and fifty he was short, so he went and bought Thomas Doherty out of his crockery business. That was three days before we had that earthquake here."

"I remember reading about the earthquake," I said.

"Busted every crock and dish in Hennery K. Lunk's store," said the old fellow. "It made a big change in Hennery, too. Made him sort of melancholy like. I guess he might have sort of caved in if it hadn't been he had a chance to buy Droman's livery-stable. He figured that Droman wasn't never any business man and that a good hand at business ought to clean up three thousand two hundred and fifty dollars in no time at all. So when the foot and mouth disease come the next week—"

"You don't tell me—"

"Shot 'em!" said my historian. "State come around and shot every horse in Hennery K. Lunk's barn. And no redress, mind you. I tell you it 'most discouraged Hennery K. Lunk. He got so blue that if he hadn't had the notion to speculate in potatoes I hate to think what he might have done right then. But it looked like a hard winter, and he went and bought all the potatoes he could scare up. He showed me on a piece of paper, with a pencil, how he ought to make up the four thousand two hundred and fifty dollars he was behind if potatoes went up to a dollar a bushel—"

"But they went down!" I said.

"Nope! Froze! Froze as solid as rocks, in the old Bergen Mill where he had 'em stored. So he says to me, he says, 'I ain't hardly got ambition to try no more,' he says. 'Seems like,' he says, 'life and every durned thing was against me. For two cents,' he says, 'I'd jump in the river and let one of them saw-back whales cut me in four—'"

"Did he say that?" I asked, eagerly. "I remember—"

"He had a lot of sayin's like that," said the old codger. "Hennery K. Lunk was always sayin' things of one sort or another. So he says to me, 'I only got a dollar an' forty cents left, an' it ain't much to go on,' he says, 'but I can knock together a sort of hand cart with some wheels I can pick up, and I can buy a kerosene lamp for thutty cents, and I can buy a corn-popper for a dollar, and a dime's wuth of pop'-corn, and I can start in at the hotel corner, poppin' corn an' sellin' it for five cents a bag.'"

"'You'll need some salt and butter,' I says, 'and some paper bags, and some kerosene oil, if you want to do business like that.'"

"'Well,' he says, 'I guess if I invest a dollar an' forty cents into a business I can get trusted for a quarter pound of butter, and an ounce or two of salt and a couple o' pints of kerosene oil up to Fackelmeyer's grocery-store, and it's

my only chance to make back the five thousand two hundred and fifty dollars I'm behind."

"So he went ahead and done it, and the first popperful of corn he popped over the kerosene lamp caught fire and burned up the whole durned shootin'-match! Yes, sir; he was an unsuccessful man, Hennery K. Lunk was. He couldn't succeed at nothin' he undertook. Why—"

"What were you going to say?" I asked, when he hesitated.

My friend drew his hand across his forehead and looked out at the river and shook his head.

"Unfortunate! Unlucky!" he said, sadly. "Even when it come right down to suicide—"

"You don't mean to say that he—"

"He tried, but he didn't have no luck at it," said the old fellow. "He shot at himself and missed. He jumped in the river and they pulled him out. He done everything he could, and tried every way he knew, poor feller! but he didn't have no more luck at suicide than he had at business! He was a durned failure at suicide like he was at everything else. He'd be alive yet but for one thing. It was mighty sad!"

"What was it?" I asked.

"He fretted so much over not bein' able to die that it killed him," said the sunburned old man.

I looked at him and at the lines of regret and sorrow that his face had taken on, and then I put out my hand and took his and shook it violently.

"Now I know you!" I exclaimed. "I couldn't quite place you before, but I know you now! How are you, you exaggerating old rascal? How are you, Hennery K. Lunk?"

"Well, I reckon I'll pull through awhile yet," he said, with a cheery smile, "if no saw-back whale don't swaller me in four swallows." ❖



THE FIRST POPPERFUL OF CORN CAUGHT FIRE

Traditions

March 1 was traditionally moving day for farmers in Iowa. Sales of farm land, rent and interest payments, and lease arrangements with new tenants were often dated March 1. As historian Frank Yoder observes, the late winter was a naturally slow time in the agricultural cycle. Moving on March 1 allowed the new owner or tenant to be established before spring field work began. By March, much of the feed, hay, and straw for the livestock—as well as canned goods, firewood, and coal for the farm family—would have been consumed and therefore wouldn't need to be moved. Roads were likely to be clear of snow but not yet thawed into the quagmires of mud that once made spring travel on country roads so difficult.

Iowan Hortense Butler Heywood compared this moving-day tradition to the migration of birds and other natural signs of spring. "One day the whole neighborhood is as permanent, as settled, as stable as if it were to exist thus for years to come," she wrote. "The next the roads are filled with a unique procession—farm wagons piled high with household goods and trailing behind them corn plows, seeders and other pieces of machinery, loads of grain wherein the clever housewife has packed her precious fruit jars, loads of squealing hogs, [and] small herds of restless, frightened cattle."

Hazel Phillips Stimson, of Independence, Iowa, remembered moving day when she was a child in 1917, and in 1976 she wrote down those memories for an essay contest by the Iowa Commission on Aging. To this basic tradition in rural Iowa, Stimson adds the color of detail and emotion. Her essay (like Heywood's) is archived in the Special Collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).

—The Editor



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