Sssssssssshhhh!

Richard Connell

It was at Billup, Ohio, that Larry Carraway saw the mysterious stranger with the large freckled ears.

Peering from the train window, Larry was wondering why trains stopped, or even hesitated, at Billup. Then he spied the mysterious stranger. To view those extraordinary ears—that must be the reason for the train's halt, Larry decided. Not that Larry cared where or why the train stopped, or how or when; it was taking him away from New York—that was the important thing. He had a ticket, but offhand he could not have told the destination printed on it; perhaps it read to Butte, Montana, or Boise, Idaho, or Bisbee, Arizona. It mattered not to Larry.

The night before he had pulled the rubber tent over his typewriter in the city room of the New York Lance and had walked forth into the cool evening, no longer a star reporter, but a nomad. Six years of thrilling, gruelling work Larry had done in New York.

"Must have a change," he said—"a sabbatical year."

So, being an impulsive young man, he took it.

"Now to see the world without joining the Navy," he remarked as he strolled down Park Row. To a taxi man he said, "Please take me to a railroad station."

"Which one, buddy?" asked the driver, who at heart was a democrat.

"Use your own judgment, sir," replied Larry, sinking back on the seat and feeling the luxurious abandon of a man on the brink of new adventures. At the railroad station Larry opened a wallet in which were one one-hundred-dollar bill and one fifty-dollar bill—his last week's salary on the Lance. He poked the yellow hundred through the ticket wicket.

"Give me a ticket, please," he said.

"Where to, Jack?" asked the ticket seller, another democrat.

"I'm not fussy, sir," answered Larry. "Just a hundred dollars' worth of ticket on the next train out."

And the ticket seller, being a typical blasé New Yorker, born and raised in Escanaba, Michigan, sold him a ticket and put him down as a lunatic or an embezzler, which are too common in New York to merit comment.

So now the train had halted at Billup, and there on the platform was the man with the freckled ears, staring fixedly at Larry, while Larry stared no less fixedly back at him. Then the man on the platform did a peculiar thing. He suddenly gripped the lobes of his ears with two large, knuckly and not overclean hands, making earrings of his fists. Fastening an intent, expectant gaze on Larry, the man began to flap his elbows up and down—once, twice, thrice.

"This," said Larry to himself, "seems to prove the theory that there are more cuckoos than clocks."

He of the freckled ears stopped his cryptic gestures. Another native was approaching along the platform, a puffy, pinguid man with a neck like a plate of waffles. The puffy one, with great gravity, saluted the freckled one. Larry saw the waffle-necked man grasp his ears and flap his elbows—once, twice, thrice.

"More than one city editor has told me I'm a bit mad," mused Larry Carraway. "Perhaps I am or I wouldn't have turned itinerant reporter. Well, if I am loose upstairs, I'll certainly feel at home in Billup. Perhaps there's a newspaper here—the Daily Padded Cell. Might as well start my career here as anywhere."

So Larry Carraway, demonstrating once again that he was a young man whose guiding principle in life was Obey That Impulse stepped off the train and into the town of Billup.

The waffle-necked man was gone, but the freckled-eared one was still there, draped over a packing case. He unfolded his lean length as Larry approached. Once again he made that strange sign—fists gripping ears, elbows flapping, once, twice, thrice.

"When among nuts," said Larry to himself, "be a pecan."

So he grasped his own ears and flapped his elbows, once, twice, thrice. The freckled one glanced hastily, furtively about the deserted platform. Then in a low impressive voice he addressed Larry:

"The sun riseth in the east."

Larry nodded.

"Yes, and it sitteth in the west," affirmed Larry.

“East is east,” declared the man, in a whisper.

“West is west,” said Larry.

“North is north,” whispered the stranger.

“South is south,”” whispered back Larry.

The stranger held out his hand, his little finger crooked. Larry seized the hand and shook it firmly. The stranger pulled away as if he had been stung by a bee. A dark disturbed look rushed over his face.

“Where is thy grip?” demanded the stranger.

“Right there,” said Larry. “That old pigskin bag. You can take it up to the best hotel—if there is one.”

Alarm and suspicion were written large on the face of the owner of the ears. He recoiled from Larry. Then he turned and fled up the main street of Billup. Larry watched his long-legged figure till it vanished. Then he picked up his bag.

“Yes,” decided Larry, “I’m going to like Billup.”

Main Street, Billup, did not exactly stand out. To Larry it looked very much like the main streets of Eagle Grove, Iowa, Dowagiac, Michigan, Bamberg, South Carolina, and other small towns where journalistic missions had taken him. There was a drug store full of cardboard maidens inviting the passer-by to drink Pep-U-Up, a bulky bank building, a department store with bolts of calico in the window, the Happy Hour Movie—Today—Her First Sin— Today —and then, down the street, a careworn frame structure with a sign on it that made Larry turn his steps in that direction. The sign read:

THE BILLUP PALLADIUM-INTELLIGENCER

Roscoe Legg, Ed. and Prop.

As Larry moved along Main Street he became aware that it was different from other small-town Main Streets, after all. The difference was to be felt rather than seen. It wasn’t that the natives glanced curiously at Larry’s city clothes and blue collar; that was to be expected. But they also glanced with strange sidelong glances at one another.

He saw two men, obviously old inhabitants, pass each other. Larry could have sworn that

they were brothers twins, even—but they did not speak. Instead they fixed on each other baleful glares and contempt twisted down their mouth corners. Larry sensed a feud, Certainly there was none of that loud neighborly familiarity one noticed in Eagle Grove, Dowagiac or Bamberg. In Billup there were no hearty salutations ——

“Hello, Jake! How are your beans getting along?”

“Hey there, Elmer! I hear you was to Buckeye Lake Sunday.”

“Hello, Luke, you old son of a gun!”

“Morning, Matt. How’s the boy?”

It seemed to Larry that some cloud, some self-conscious sullen cloud, hung over the town. It weighed down on Main Street, and was even perceptible in the rather pretty side streets.

In the office of the Billup Palladium-Intelligencer, Larry discovered a man who clearly was Roscoe Legg, Ed. and Prop. Mr. Legg was plump and unkempt, a smallish man with ink on his ears, thumbs and shirt. His askew hair was white and he had bright genial eyes. He was engaged, when Larry entered the office— which looked as if a tornado had just left it—in answering the telephone, taking a want ad about a stray cow, bawling directions to an invisible printer, chewing gum and trying to keep the wind from blowing some galley proofs out of the window. Larry heard him saying:

“Yes, I got it. Spotted heifer—answers to name Geraldine—hang this wind—Bill, set that shoe ad in upper and lower, do you hear?—reward if returned to Amos Pratt yes, yes—spotted heifer—shut that door, please-— Bill, come a-running with the proof of that editorial about rats—have a chair, sir—yes, I got it—answers to name Geraldine ——

He turned to Larry Carraway.

“Yes,” said the inky Mr. Legg, “I will not join.” Larry stared at him. “Join what?” “Anything,” said Mr. Legg firmly.

“And that goes.” He raised his voice and roared, “Bill, Bill, for the love of heaven, don’t spell ‘pneumonia’ with an ‘n.’” Mr. Legg grabbed up a proof and began to read it with one eye, while he fixed the other on Larry and addressed him.

“Yes, sir,” said Mr. Legg. “ You give me a pain under the vest. You come into this nice quiet little town that used to ooze brotherly love, and what do you do? . Bill, Bill, for pity’s sake, that head ANOTHER DASTARDLY CRIME goes on the pig-stealing story, not the HingleyHatch wedding. . . . Yes, sir, you fellows have turned Billup into a hotbed of hate. Of

course I understand your point of view— you get five dollars for every new member you sign up. What a pity! You look like a nice young fellow too. But you and your crowd have certainly corrupted Billup."

"Me?" queried Larry.

"I'm not speaking to the King of Sweden, am I? said Mr. Legg, scribbling a headline on apiece of copy paper. "Yes, you. Do you happen to know, young man, that Damon Tuttle ; doesn't speak to his twin brother Pythias any more since Damon joined the Princes and Pythias joined the Hawks? And their devotion to each other used to be beautiful to see. You've split the town into two armed camps—that's what you've done, young man. Please put your foot on that proof there before it blows to hellan-gone."

"Mr. Legg," said Larry, "just what do you think I am?"

"A Prince or a Hawk," responded the editor.

"Nothing so exciting," said Larry. "I'm a newspaperman—looking for work."

Mr. Legg laid down his pencil and thrust out an inky hand.

"Well, well! In that case, glad to see you." He scanned Larry's professional card. "I've heard of you," he said.

"Will you give me a job?"

"You? On the Palladium-Intelligencer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Young man," said Mr. Legg, "you've been out in the sun. A cabbage leaf concealed in the panama would have prevented your sad condition."

"I'm sane," laughed Larry, "and sober too. The fact is I need a job."

He told Mr. Legg how wanderlust had turned him into a journalistic gypsy.

"I know the feeling, Mr Legg assured Larry. Then he shouted, "Bill, Bill, if you value your life, never spell 'accident' with an 'x' again. Now, Mr. Carraway, tell me why you picked out Billup."

Larry told the editor about the freckled-eared stranger and his signs.

“That,” said Mr. Legg, “would be Hod Frick. He’s high up in the Hawks.”

When Larry had finished, Mr. Legg said:

“I need a man. There’s a real problem here that maybe you can help me solve. I can pay you only twenty a week, but you can get board and room at Mrs. Olsen’s for twelve. If you aren’t really Carraway of the Lance I’ll soon find it out. I know a newspaperman when I see one. I used to work on the St. Louis Messenger myself till my arches fell and they wanted to stick me on the copy desk. Then I came here and bought the Palladium-Intelligencer. I was born in Billup, you see; and it used to be one of the pleasantest little towns in the country, but now ——

“Say, what is wrong with Billup?” Larry inquired.

“It’s got the sssssssshhhh habit,” said the editor, and not pausing in his work, he went on rapidly, “sir, Billup used to be a good place to live in. Any civic project and the whole community was behind it to a man. Main Street just dripped with good will. Fact. And now—well, you noticed something, didn’t you?”

I didn’t see any doves and olive branches,” Larry said.

“No, and I’ll tell you why. The folks here are going round like a lot of bulldogs with sore noses these days. Half of them are Princes and the other half are Hawks.”

“That’s Czecho-Slovakian to me,” said Larry

“It was to—until six months ago. Well, sir, six months ago into town came two slick fellows from Chicago. Glib—that’s what they were. One of ’em was Grand and Greatly Esteemed Organizer of the High and Mysterious Princes of the Enigmatic Realm of Secrecy. The other was Royal and Solemn Standard Bearer of the Cryptic Order of Honorable Hawks. Oddly enough, they both got here on the same day. One worked the south side of Main Street, the other the north side. They had smooth lines, both of them. I know. They tried them on me. The Princes—to hear them tell it—are the strongest and most secret order in the world, with secrets that would make a porcupine’s quills curl. For ten dollars anyone could be a Prince, wear a purple robe with skeletons embroidered on it and learn those terrific secrets. Likewise for ten dollars—don’t forget the ten—any worthy butcher’s assistant or soda jerker could become an Honorable Hawk, wear a red bib with birds on it and lock in his bosom, so the Hawk fellow said, secrets that made the secrets of all the other orders, especially the Princes, look like a page from a first-grade spelling book. Indeed, the Hawk fellow whispered in my ear that if I joined the Hawks I could certainly look with pity and scorn on the Princes and their puny little secrets, and the Prince assured me that any bona-fide

member of his crowd could properly regard a Hawk the same way a bottle of Grade A cream might regard a pan of sour skim milk. Well, I regret to say, Billup ate that stuff up. I could see why. Perhaps you noticed that our Main Street is no Broadway."

"I did see a difference," said Larry.

"The most ardent Billupian," said Editor Legg, "was bound to notice, now and then, that our Main Street lacked thrills. Its virtues are the simple, homely ones. those organizers found plenty of material to work on. Wallie, the butcher's assistant, might be able to withstand a purple apron with skeletons on it, but he could not resist the secrets. It sort of made him drunk with power to think he knew secrets that his friend Cliff, in the shoe store, didn't know. So Wallie joined the Princes, and pretty soon Cliff joined the Hawks, to have some secrets, too, and soon the whole town was full of folks making wigwags at one another and exchanging passwords and trick grips. They got to hating one another—the Princes and the Hawks. Every man in town except me belongs to one bunch or the other. I have to stay neutral. It's a shame, that's what it is. It's ruined Billup.

"A sad case," said Larry. "Why don't you kid the bibs off them in your paper?"

The editor sighed.

"I wish I could," he said. "But you know how it is in a place as small as Billup. A man isn't free to do as he pleases. Everything I own is tied up in this paper, and if I kidded the Hawks and the Princes the might all stop reading it. Besides, how could you possibly kid a Hawk or a Prince? A sense of humor and the sssshhh stuff don't dwell under the same hat."

"But there must be some way—began Larry.

"I wish you could find it," said Editor Legg. " Now please take these proofs out to Bill—he's the dirtier one—and tell him if he puts the police-court news in the social notes again I'll tear his tonsils out. I've got to write two editorials, an obituary and a baseball story in six minutes."

Larry Carraway had finished his first day as reportorial staff of the Palladium-Intelligencer. He was sitting in his room in Mrs. Olsen's boarding house, recuperating from it. He had written half a column about a dog fight, a laudatory column about a concert of the Billup Silver Cornet Band, a long obituary of a prominent switchman, an editorial of a satiric nature asking the city fathers why Main Street had been paved with taffy instead of concrete, and full stories about the new pump at the waterworks and the bull calf that had come to brighten the home of the Caleb Prouts.

Outside his window lay Billup and the peace of the moonlight was on it. The vagueness of

the night had softened the outlines of the houses, Only the slim white spire of the church, rising above the maple trees, was distinct. The windows of the houses were orange-yellow patches of light.

“There’s a family behind every one of those lights,” mused Larry, and laughed at himself, for newspapermen, being the most sentimental of mortals, affect to despise sentiment. “They’re simple, decent folks too.”” He was recalling how cordial and helpful they had been to him, a stranger.

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