Terrible Epps

Richard Connell

The blue prints and specifications in the case of Tidbury Epps follow:

Age: the early thirties.

Status: bachelor.

Habitat: Mrs. Kelty's Refined Boarding House, Brooklyn.

Occupation: a lesser clerk in the wholesale selling department of Spingle & Blatter, Nifty Straw Hattings. See Advts.

Appearance: that of a lesser clerk. Weight: feather. Nose: stub. Eyes: apologetic. Teeth: obvious. Figure: brief. Manner: diffident. Nature: kind. Disposition: amiable but subdued.

Conspicuous vices: none.

Conspicuous virtues: none.

Distinguishing marks: none.

Tidbury was no Napoleon. He was aware of this, and so was everybody in the hat company, including, unfortunately, Titus Spingle, the president, who felt that he knew a thing or two about Bonapartes because he had once been referred to in a straw-hat trade paper as the Napoleon of Hatdom.

Mildly, as he did everything else in life, Tidbury admired, indeed almost envied Mr. Spingle's silk shirts, which customarily suggested an explosion in a paint factory. But such sartorial grandeur, Tidbury felt, was not for him. He stuck to plain white shirts, dark blue ties and pepper-and-salt suits. The pepper-and-salt suit was invented for Tidbury Epps.

Tidbury worked diligently and even cheerfully on a high stool and a low salary, copying neat little black figures into big black books. The salary and the stool were the same Tidbury had been given when he first came to New York from Calais, Maine, ten years before.

It probably never entered his head, as he bent over his columns of digits that crisp fall morning, that in their sanctum of real mahogany and Spanish leather his employers were discussing him.

“Whitaker has quit,” announced Mr. Blatter, who acted as sales manager.

Mr. Spingle’s acre of face, pink and dimpled from much good living, showed concern.

“How come you can’t keep an assistant, Otto?” he inquired.

“After they’ve been with me for six months,” explained Mr. Blatter modestly, “they get so good that they simply have to get better jobs.”

“Well, got any candidates for the place?” queried the president.

“Burdette?” suggested Mr. Blatter.

Mr. Spingle eliminated Burdette with a flick of his finger.

“Too young,” he said.

“Wetsel?”

“Too old.”

“Fitch?”

“Too careless.”

“Hydeman?”

“Too inexperienced.”

“Well,” ventured Mr. Blatter, “what about Tidbury Epps?”

Mr. Spingle’s shrug included his shoulders, face and entire body.

“He’s neither too old, too young, too careless nor too inexperienced,” advanced Mr. Blatter.

“You’re not serious, Otto?”

“Sure I am. Epps has been with us ten years and he’s worked hard. I believe in giving our old employees a chance.”

“So do I,” rejoined the Napoleon of Hatdom; “but you know perfectly well, Otto, that Tidbury Epps is a dud.”

“He’s as conscientious as a Pilgrim father,” remarked Mr. Blatter.

“That’s the trouble with him,” snorted Mr. Spingle.

“He spends so much time being conscientious that he hasn’t time to be anything else. Not that I object to a man having a conscience, y’understand. But Epps hasn’t anything else. You know how it is in the hat trade, Otto; you’ve got to be a good fellow.”

Mr. Spingle paused to pat his silken bosom, in hue reminiscent of sunset in the Grand Cañon. That he was a good fellow, a *bon vivant*, even, was generally admitted in the hat trade.

“You see,” went on the Napoleon of Hatdom, “your assistant has to be nice to the trade. That’s almost his chief job. Remember the motto of our house is, ‘Our business friends are our personal friends.’ That’s meant a lot to us, Otto. Now and then you’ve simply got to take a big buyer out and show him a good time—buy him a meal and take him to the Winter Garden. You and I are mostly too busy to do it, but your assistant isn’t. Whitaker made us a lot of good friends, and good customers, too, because he was a regular fella and knew the ropes. But can you imagine old Epps giving a party?”

Mr. Blatter was forced to admit that he couldn’t.

“But he’s so willing,” he argued.

“Oh, sure,” agreed Mr. Spingle; “and sober and industrious and stands without hitching and all that. But he’s too much of a hermit. No more personality than a parsnip. No spirit. No nerve. No fire. No zip. Sorry I can’t jump him up; he may be a good man, but he’s not a good fellow.”

“I suppose it will have to be Hydeman, then,” remarked Mr. Blatter, rising. “He’s a little too slick and flip to suit me, and we don’t know much about him, but I suppose he’d know how to show a buyer Broadway.”

“I’ll bet he would,” said Mr. Spingle. “Try him out. But watch his expense account, Otto.”

So Tidbury Epps continued to enjoy his high stool and his low salary and to copy endless little figures into big black books. His shoulders drooped a little when he heard of Hydeman’s quick promotion, but he said nothing.

Messrs. Spingle and Blatter, being interested solely in what went on outside men's heads, did not attempt to find out what was wrong with Tidbury Epps. But had a psychoanalyst peered darkly into the interior of Tidbury's small round cranium he would have instantly noted that Mr. Epps was suffering from a bad case of inferiority complex, complicated by an acute attack of Puritanical complex.

If anybody was to blame for this it was not Tidbury himself but his Aunt Elvira, who, with the aid of a patented cat-o'-nine-tails she had sent all the way to Chicago for, willow switches from her own back yard, and an edged tongue that cut worse than either, had confined his juvenile steps to a very straight and exceedingly narrow path by the simple process of lambasting him roundly whenever he so much as glanced to the right or to the left.

Aunt Elvira was a lean woman with no digestion to speak of, and the chief tenet of her philosophy was that whatever is enjoyable is sinful. She impressed this creed on young Tidbury with her thin but sinewy arm, until one day while castigating him violently for laughing at a comic supplement that the groceries had come in she succumbed to an excess of virtue and a broken blood vessel.

Tidbury promptly came to New York with two suits of flannel underwear and many suppressed desires, and went soberly to work in the hat company. His subsequent life was as empty of adventure, variety, sin or success as the life of a Hubbard squash. His job wholly absorbed him. The little figures in the big books became his only world. He had never learned to play.

Yet people liked Tidbury, even while they thought him kin to the snail. He had a quiet twinkle in his eye and he took over mean jobs and night work without a peep of protest. It was his willingness to take on overtime work, and his quiet competence that first attracted the approving eye of Mr. Blatter. But Mr. Blatter had to admit that Mr. Spingle had diagnosed the case of Tidbury Epps all too accurately; Tidbury was indubitably, incurably a dud; and that is worse than being a dub. If any latent fire lurked beneath that pepper-and-salt bosom no one had ever glimpsed so much as a spark of it. Tidbury never lived up to that twinkle in his eye.

One would have said that Tidbury was as inconspicuous as an oyster in a fifteen-cent stew, and yet love, mysterious, ubiquitous love, found him out and laid him violently by the heels.

It was the round black eyes of Martha Ritter, the new girl at the information desk, and the way she cocked her head on one side when she smiled, that first brought to Tidbury the alarming realization that his heart was something more than a pump.

She was an alert little thing who would have been teaching school in her native Ohio village of Granville had not the glittering metropolitan magnet drawn her to it as every year it draws ten thousand Martha Ritters from ten thousand Granvilles.

She smiled at Tidbury one day as he registered his punctual arrival on the time clock, and a sudden strange warmth was kindled under his pepper-and-salt coat. Tidbury knew that it was wicked to feel so good, but he couldn't help it. Love laughs at complexes.

He saw her home; he called on her; he brought her salted peanuts; he took her to a concert in Central Park; he kept her picture on his washstand. But, characteristically, Tidbury as a lover was no volcano of imperious emotion. He was no aggressive bark, battling fiercely against wind and wave; he was a chip, floating with the tide. Matrimony, with Martha, was a desirable but distant shore; he would drift there in time. But Martha Ritter, who had more than a dash of romance in her, did not think much of this sort of courting.

The last time he had been with her—they had gone to the Aquarium to view the fishes—pent-up protest had burst from her, and she had exclaimed, "Oh, Tidbury, you are so—so quiet!"

The words had jolted him; he had said them over to himself uncounted times, and had pondered over them; indeed he was trying to keep from thinking of them as he bent over his task the day they made Hydeman assistant to the sales manager. Tidbury had noticed lately that Martha talked about Mr. Hydeman a great deal; she had mentioned his polished finger-nails; she had suggested that Tidbury would do well to get one of those high-lapeled, snug-waisted suits that Mr. Hydeman affected; she had quoted some of Mr. Hydeman's witticisms, and had retailed some incidents from his highly colored life. In short, she appeared to have taken a sudden acute interest in Mr. Hydeman.

Tidbury Epps could not drive from his mind the disquieting thought that Mr. Hydeman as a rival would be dangerous. In the washroom Mr. Hydeman made no secret of his finesse as a Don Juan. He was everything that Tidbury was not—dashing, worldly, confident. There was something about his smooth black hair, held in place by a shiny gummy substance, something about the angle at which he tilted his short-brimmed hat, something about the way his tight little knot of brilliant tie fitted into his modishly low collar, something about the way he filliped the ash from his cigarette so that one could see the diamond twinkle on his finger—that carried a subtle suggestion of sophistication and an adventurous nature.

That morning they had entered together—Tidbury and Mr. Hydeman—and Tidbury, with icy fingers gripping his heart, had noted that Martha bestowed on Mr. Hydeman a smile with a lingering personal note in it, while her greeting to Tidbury was a curt formal nod. His bitter cup was full, and for the first time in his life he gave way to the pangs of jealousy when, at noontime, he saw Mr. Hydeman take her to lunch. Tidbury came upon them,

talking and laughing together, and Martha made not the slightest attempt to conceal her interest in the suave new assistant to the sales manager; she was open, even brazen about it.

Tidbury was moodily copying figures and trying not to heed the fact that the green-eyed monster was clutching him with torturing talons when Mr. Hydeman came up to his desk and prodded him playfully in the ribs.

“Well, old Tid,” remarked Mr. Hydeman, “I’ll bet you wish you were going to be in my shoes to-night.”

Tidbury looked up from his work.

“Why?” he asked.

For answer Mr. Hydeman thrust two tickets beneath Tidbury’s stub of nose. With only a vague comprehension Tidbury glanced at what was printed on them.

ADMIT ONE

THE PAGAN ROUT

All Greenwich Village Will Be There

Webber Hall

Only Persons in Costume Admitted. Don’t Miss

the Daring Garden of Eden Ballet and

Masque at Four a.m.

“Are you a Greenwich Villager?” asked Tidbury.

Mr. Hydeman smiled at the note of horror in Tidbury’s voice.

“Oh, I hang out down there,” he admitted airily.

“And you’re going to the Pagan Rout?”

Even into the seclusion of Calais, Maine, and Mrs. Kelty’s, rumors of that revel had filtered.

“I never miss one,” replied Mr. Hydeman grandly. “And say, I’ve a costume this year that’s a knockout.”

“You have?”

“Yes. I’ve got a preacher’s outfit. Can you imagine me a parson?”

Weakly Tidbury said he couldn’t.

“And say,” went on Mr. Hydeman, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, “I’ll have a flask of hip oil on me.”

“Hip oil?”

“Sure. Diamond juice.”

“Diamond juice?”

“Aw, hooch. For me and the gal.”

“The girl?” quavered Tidbury.

“Say,” demanded Mr. Hydeman, “did you think I was going to take a hippopotamus with me?”

Tidbury’s small face was pathetic.

“You don’t know what you’re missing, Tid,” Mr. Hydeman rattled on. “It’s a real naughty party. Those costumes! Oh, bebe.” Mr. Hydeman rolled his eyes toward the roof and blew thither a kiss. “Last year there was a Cleopatra there and she didn’t have a thing on her but a pair of——”

“The cashier’s waiting for these figures,” mumbled Mr. Epps. “I’ve got to go to him.”

He heard Hydeman’s sniggle of laughter behind him.

That evening the desperate Tidbury met Martha Ritter as she was leaving the hat company’s building.

“May I come to see you to-night?” he asked, trying not to stammer, and hoping his ears were not as red as they felt. “There’s a nice band concert in Prospect Park and I thought——”

Martha Ritter cocked her head to one side and smiled mysteriously.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Epps,” she said coolly, “but I have an engagement.”

“You—have—an—engagement?” He repeated the words as if they were a prison sentence.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Oh, it’s a masquerade.” She smiled, her head on one side.

“Whom are you going with?” he blurted; he was trembling.

“That would be telling,” she laughed. “Well, good night, Mr. Epps. I must hurry home and get my costume on. I’m going as a gypsy.”

And she disappeared into the maw of the Subway.

A masquerade! In gypsy costume! Tidbury was struck by the lightning of complete realization; he understood Hydeman’s leer now. Feebly he leaned against a lamp-post until his numbed brain could recover from the impact. Then he committed a sin. Deliberately he kicked the lamp-post a vicious kick.

“Darn it all,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “Yes, gosh darn it all!”

Then he went wearily to his boarding house. Morosely he ate of Mrs. Kelty’s boiled beef and bread pudding; morosely he sat in his lonely stall of a bedroom and glowered at a hole in the red carpet.

“I’m too quiet. Too darn quiet,” he kept saying to himself in a sort of litany. “Yes, too gosh darn quiet.”

And when he thought of Martha, sweet simple Martha, and so short a time ago his Martha, at the Pagan Rout with Hydeman, surrounded by indecorous and no doubt inebriate denizens of Greenwich Village, his head all but burst. That she was lost, and, most poignant thought of all, lost to him, kept beating in upon his brain. He moaned.

Suddenly his spine straightened with a terrible resolve. His small guileless face was set in lines of stern decision. He leaped from his chair, dived under his brass bed, rummaged in his trunk and fished up twenty-five hard-saved dollars in a sock.

Clapping his hat on his head in emulation of the tilt of Mr. Hydeman's hat Tidbury issued forth. In the hall he passed Mrs. Kelty, who regarded him with some surprise.

"You're not going out, Mr. Epps?" she asked. "Why, it's after nine!"

"I am going out, Mrs. Kelty," announced Tidbury Epps.

"Back soon?"

"I may never come back," he answered hollowly.

"Sakes alive! Where are you going?"

"I am going," said Tidbury Epps firmly, "to the devil."

And he strode into the night.

§2

Never having gone to the devil before, Mr. Epps was somewhat perplexed in mind as to the direction he should take. But a moment's reflection convinced him that Greenwich Village was the most promising place for such a pilgrimage. He had never been there before; he had been afraid to go there. Startling stories of the gay profligacy rampant in that angle of old New York had reached his ears. He believed firmly that if the devil has any headquarters in New York they are somewhere below Fourteenth Street and west of Washington Square.

Mr. Epps debouched from a bus in Washington Square and started westward along West Fourth Street with the cautious but determined tread of an explorer penetrating a trackless and cannibal-infested jungle. He glanced apprehensively to right and left, his eyes wide for the sight of painted sirens, his ears agape for gusts of ribald merriment. At each corner he paused expectantly, anticipating that he might come upon a delirious party of art students gamboling about a model. He traversed two blocks without seeing so much as a smock; what he did see was an ancient man of Italian derivation carrying a bag of charcoal on his head, and a stout woman wheeling twins stuffed uncomfortably into a single-seater gocart, and a number of nondescript humans who from their sedate air might well have been Brooklyn funeral directors. He owned, after a bit, to a certain sense of disappointment. Going to the devil was more of a chore than he had fancied.

As he trekked ever westward a sound at length smote his dilated ears and made him catch his breath. It was issuing from a dim-lit basement, and was filtering through batik curtains stenciled with strange, smeary beasts. He had heard the wild, dissipated notes of a

mechanical piano. A lurid but somewhat inexpertly lettered sign above the basement door read,

YE AMIABLE OYSTER

Refreshmints at All Hrs.

With a newborn boldness Tidbury Epps thrust open the door and entered. No shower of confetti, no popping of corks, no rousing stein song greeted him. Save for the industrious piano the place seemed empty. However, by the feeble beams that came from the lights, bandaged in batik like so many sore thumbs, he discerned a mountainous matron behind a cash register, engaged in tatting.

“Where’s everybody?” he asked of her.

“Oh, things will liven up after a bit,” she yawned.

Tidbury sat at a small bright blue table and scanned a card affixed to the wall.

Angel’s Ambrosia $0.50

Horse’s Neck ..... .60

Devil’s Delight ..... .70

Dry Martini ..... .50

Very dry Martini ..... .60

Very, very dry Martini .. .90

Champagne Sizzle ..... .75

A sleepy waiter with a soup-stained vest came from the inner room presently.

“Gimme a Devil’s Delight,” ordered Tidbury Epps recklessly.

He had heard that Greenwich Village, the untrammeled, laughs openly in the teeth of the Eighteenth Amendment. He had never in his life tasted an alcoholic drink, but to-night he was stopping at nothing. The Devil’s Delight came, and Tidbury as he sipped its pink saccharinity found himself feeling that the devil is rather easily delighted. He had expected the potion to make his head buzz; but it did not. Instead it distinctly suggested rather weak

and not very superior strawberry sirup and carbonated water. He crooked a summoning finger at the waiter.

“Horse’s Neck,” he commanded.

The Horse’s Neck made its appearance, an insipid-looking amber fluid with a wan piece of lemon peel floating shamefacedly on its surface.

“Tastes just like ginger ale to me,” remarked Mr. Epps. “Wadjuh expeck in a Horse’s Neck?” queried the waiter bellicosely. “Chloride of lime?”

“I can’t feel it at all,” complained Mr. Epps.

“Feel it?” The waiter raised his brows. “Say, what do you think this joint is? A dump? We ain’t bootleggers, mister.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mr. Epps.

He was about to go elsewhere, when a babel of excited voices outside the door made him sink back into his chair; evidently the promise of the tatting matron was to be made good, and Ye Amiable Oyster was about to liven up.

The first thing that entered the door was an animal—a full-size, shaggy anthropoid ape, big as a man. Mr. Epps was too alarmed to bolt. But as the creature careened into the light Mr. Epps observed that his face was human and slightly Hibernian. Behind him came a girl, rather sketchily dressed for autumn in a pair of bead portieres, a girdle or two, and a gilt plaster bird, which was bound firmly to her head. Mr. Epps had seen things like her on cigarette boxes. A second couple followed, hilarious. The man wore a tight velvet suit, a sombrero several yards around, black mustaches of prodigious length and bristle that did not match the red of his hair, and earrings the size of cantaloupes; it was not clear whether he was intended to be a pirate or an organ grinder or a compromise between the two; but it was clear that he was in a state where it did not matter, to him, in the least. His companion wore a precarious garment of dry grass, and her arms were stained brown; at intervals she conveyed the information to the general atmosphere that she was a bimbo from a bamboo isle.

The four, after an impromptu ring-around-a-rosie, collapsed into chairs near the wide-eyed Epps. Fascinated he stared at them—the first authentic natives of Greenwich Village on whom his cloistered eye had ever rested.

“Ginger ale,” bawled the ape.

It was brought. The ape dipping into a fold in his anatomy brought to light a capacious flask, kissed it solemnly, and poured its contents into the glasses of the others.

“Jake, that sure is the real old stuff,” said the girl in the grass dress.

“Made it m’sef,” said the ape proudly. “Y’see, I took dozen apricots, and ten pounds sugar, and some yeast and some raisins, and mixed ’em in a jug, and added water and——”

“That’s nine times we heard all about that,” interrupted the pirate or organ grinder. “Better be careful, anyhow. Mebbe that guy is a revnoo officer.”

They all turned to stare at Mr. Epps.

“Of course he ain’t ‘nofficer, Ed,” protested the ape, surveying Tidbury with care. “He’s got too kind a face. You ain’t ‘nofficer, are you?”

“No,” said Tidbury.

“What did I tell yuh?” cried the ape, triumphantly, to his companions. “Shove up your chair, old sport, and have a drink with us. You look like a live one. I like your face.”

Thus bidden, Tidbury, with an air of abandon, joined the group. The ape named Jake tilted his flask over Tidbury’s spiritless Horse’s Neck with such vehement good-fellowship that a gush of pungent brown fluid spurted from the container. Tidbury downed the mixture at a gulp; it made tears start to his eyes and a conflagration flame up in his brain.

“Howzit?” demanded Jake the ape.

“ ‘Sgoo’,” answered Tidbury warmly.

“Have ‘nuther. Got plenty,” said Jake, producing a second flask from another recess in his shaggy skin. “I like your face.”

“Don’t care if I do,” said Tidbury nonchalantly.

The lights in the near-café were very bright, the voices very high, the conversation exquisitely witty, the mechanical piano a symphonic rhapsody, and the heart of Tidbury Epps was pumping with wild, unwonted pumps; he smiled to himself. He was going to the devil at a great rate. He waxed loquacious. He told them anecdotes; he even sang a little.

He beamed upon Jake, and playfully plucked a tuft of hair from his costume.

“Nice li’l’ monkey,” he said affably.

“Not a monkey!” denied Jake indignantly.

“Wad are you? S-s-schimpaz-z-ze-e-e?”

“Nope. Not a S-s-schimpaz-z-ze-e-e.”

“Ran-tan?”

“Nope. Not a ran-tan.”

“Bamboo?”

“Nope. Not a bamboo.”

“Well, wad are you?”

Jake thumped his hairy chest proudly.

“I’m a griller,” he explained.

“Oh,” said Mr. Epps, satisfied. “A griller. Of course! Is it hard work?”

“Work?” cried Jake. “Say, this ain’t my real skin. It’s a ’sguise.”

“Oh,” said Mr. Epps. “So you’re ’sguised? Wad did you do?”

“Careful, Jake,” the organ grinder or pirate warned. “He may be a revnoo officer.”

The gorilla turned on him angrily.

“Lookahere, Ed Peterson, how dare you pass remarks like that about my ole friend, Mr. —— What is your name, anyhow? Of course he ain’t no revnofficer? Are you?”

“I’ll fight anybody who says I am,” declared Tidbury Epps, glaring fiercely around at the empty chairs and tables.

“You a fighter?” inquired the gorilla, in a voice in which awe, admiration and alcohol mingled.

Mr. Epps contracted his brow and narrowed his eyes.

“Yep,” he said impressively. “I’m Terrible Battling Epps. I’d rather fight than eat.” He turned sternly to the gorilla. “Why are you ‘sguised? Wad did you do?”

“Why, you poor nut,” put in the girl in the beads, “we’re going to the Pagan Rout.”

“Sure, that’s it,” chimed in Jake. “Goin’ to the Pagan Row. Come on along, Terrible.”

“Aw, I’m tired of Pagan Routs,” said Mr. Epps loftily. But the suggestion speeded up the pumpings of his heart.

“Oh, do come!” urged the girl in the beads.

“Ain’t got no ’sguise,” said Mr. Epps. He was wavering.

“Aw, come on!” cried the gorilla, clapping him on the shoulder till his teeth rattled. “Proud to have you with us, Terrible. I know a live one when I see one. Come on along. You’ll see a lot of your friends there.”

His friends? Tidbury thought of Martha.

“If I only had a ’sguise——” he began.

“You can get one round at Steinbock’s, on Seventh Avenue,” promptly informed the organ grinder-pirate. “That is,” he added with sudden suspicion, “if you ain’t one of these here revnofficers.”

“S-s-s-s-sh, Ed,” cautioned Jake, the gorilla. “Do you want Terrible Battling Epps to take a poke at you?”

Tidbury had made up his mind.

“I’ll go,” he announced.

“Good!” exclaimed the gorilla delightedly. “Atta boy! Glad to have a real N’Yawk sport with us. Meet you at Webber Hall, Terrible.”

“Webber Hall? Wherezat?” inquired Tidbury as he sought to negotiate the door.

“Well,” confessed the gorilla, “I dunno ‘zactly m’sef. Y’see, I’m from Kansas City m’sef. In the lid game, I am. Biggest firm west of the Mizzizippi. Last year we sold——”

“Aw, stop selling and tell Terrible how to get to Webber Hall,” put in the girl in the beads; she appeared to be the gorilla’s wife.

“Well,” said Jake, thoughtfully rubbing his fuzzy head, “far as I remember, you go out to the square and you go straight along till you get to the L and you turn to the right——”

“Left!” interjected the organ grinder-pirate.

“Right,” repeated the gorilla firmly. “And then you turn down another street—no, you don’t —you go straight on till you see a dentist’s sign, a big gold tooth, with ‘Gee, it didn’t hurt a bit at Dr. B. Schmuck’s Parlors,’ painted on it, and you turn to your right——”

“Left,” corrected the pirate-organ grinder sternly.

“Waz difference?” went on the gorilla blandly. “Well, as I was saying, you turn to the right or left and then you go along three or four blocks, and then you turn to your left——”

“Right, I tell you!” roared the man in velvet.

“Oh, well, you go along until you come to a corner and you turn it and go down a little bit, and there you are!”

“Where am I?” Mr. Epps, posing against the door, asked.

“Webber Hall,” said Jake. “Pagan Row.”

“Oh,” said Mr. Epps.

“Didn’t you follow me?”

“Of course I followed you.”

“Good. See you at the party, Terrible. You’re hot stuff.”

“I’ll be there. G’night.”

“G’night, Terrible, old scout.”

§3

Mr. Epps emerged from Ye Amiable Oyster, walking with elaborate but difficult dignity. He had only a remote idea where he was, but he knew where he wanted to go—Steinbock’s on

Seventh Avenue. So with a temerity quite foreign to him he stepped up briskly to the first passing pedestrian and asked, “Say, frien’, where’s Sebble Abloo?”

The man accosted puckered a puzzled brow.

“I don’t get you, frien’,” he said.

“Sebble Abloo!” repeated Mr. Epps loudly, thinking the stranger’s hearing might be defective.

“What?”

“Sebble Abloo!” roared Mr. Epps.

The man shook his head as one giving up a conundrum.

“Sebble Abloo,” repeated Mr. Epps at the top of his voice “Look.” He held up his fingers and counted them off. “One, two, sree, four, fi’, sizz, sebble. Sebble Abloo!”

“Oh, Seventh Avenue. Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

“I did.”

“I’m going that way. I’ll show you.”

The stranger steered Tidbury through a rabbit warren of streets—the Greenwich Village streets never have made up their minds where they are going—and started him, with a gentle push, up Seventh Avenue.

Presently by some miracle Tidbury stumbled upon Steinbock’s, and pushed his way into a jumble of masks, wigs, helmets and assorted junk, till he approached a patriarch in a skullcap, hidden behind a Niagara of white beard.

“ ‘Lo, ole fel’,” said Mr. Epps affably. “What are you ’sguised as? Sandy Claws or a cough drop?”

“Did you wish something?” inquired the patriarch coldly.

“Sure,” said Tidbury. “Gimme ’sguise for Pagon Row.”

“Cash in advance,” said the patriarch. “What sort of costume?”

Tidbury considered.

“Wadjuh got?”

The venerable Steinbock enumerated rapidly, “Bear, bandit, policeman, Turk, golliwog, ballet girl, kewpie, pantaloon, Uncle Sam, tramp, diver, Lord Fauntleroy, devil——”

The ears of Mr. Epps twitched at the last word.

“Devil?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Steinbock; “a swell rig; nice red suit; hasn’t been worn a dozen times.” He leaned forward toward Tidbury and whispered, “And I’ll throw in a brand-new pair of horns and a tail!”

“I’ll take it!” cried Tidbury. “Where can I hang my pants?”

After an interval there emerged from the depths of the Steinbock establishment a small uncertain figure muffled in an old raincoat. The coat was short and from beneath it protruded bright red legs and a generous length of red tail, with a spike on the end of it that gave forth sharp metallic sounds as it bumped along the pavement. A derby hat concealed one horn, but the other was visible; the face was Mephistophelian in its general character, but softened and rounded—the countenance of a rather amiable minor devil.

Tidbury Epps paused on a street corner to get his bearings. He had read somewhere that woodsmen, lost in the forest, can find the points of the compass because moss always grows on the north side of trees. He was carefully investigating a lamp-post for a trace of moss when a beady-eyed urchin approached him with outthrust hand.

“Give us one, mister?”

“One what?”

“A sample.”

“Sample of what?”

“Ain’t you advertising something?”

Tidbury drew himself up.

“No,” he said with dignity. “How do I get to Wazzington Square?”

“Aw, chee,” the urchin said in disgust, “you’re one of them artist guys! Washington Square is two blocks south and three blocks west.”

With every corpuscle in his small frame aglow with an excitement he had never before experienced Tidbury Epps started in determined search of the Pagan Rout. A grim purpose had been forming in his brain. So Martha Ritter thought he was quiet, eh? Hydeman had sniggered at him, had he? Just wait till Terrible Battling Epps reached the ball and discovered the well-fed person of Mr. Hydeman in clerical garb. There would be fireworks, he promised himself. No one was going to steal the girl of Terrible Epps and get away with it.

These, and thoughts of a similar trend, reeled through the brain of Tidbury as he hurried with a series of skips and now and then a short sprint along the curbstone.

So busy did he become planning a dramatic descent on Hydeman that he forgot the directions of the urchin, and soon found himself hopelessly astray in an eel tangle of streets, as he repeated, “Two blocks wes’ and three blocks souse. Or was it three blocks souse and two blocks wes’?”

Gripping his tail firmly in his hand he tried both plans. Passers-by eyed him with the blasé curiosity of New Yorkers, as he passed at a dog trot.

Sometimes they nudged each other and remarked, “Artist. Goin’ to this here Pagan Rout. Pretty snootful, too. Lucky stiff.”

No one ventured to impede his slightly erratic progress; after half an hour of wandering he stopped, mopped his brow and observed, “Ought to be there by now.”

As he said this he saw two figures across the street, two ladies of mature mold, picking their way along. It was their garb which made him give a shout of triumph and follow them. For one, who was fat, was dressed as a colonial dame with powdered hair, and the other, who was fatter, was a forty-year-old edition of Little Red Riding Hood; her hair was in pigtails, but she was discreetly skirted to the ankle bones. He followed these masqueraders with the wary steps of an Indian stalking a moose, until they turned into the basement of a towering building of brick, from which issued the melodic scraping of fiddles and the pleasing bleating of horns. His heart skipped a beat. The Pagan Rout! The devil’s doorway.

Tidbury Epps shucked off his raincoat and derby hat, tossed them at a fire hydrant, put on his mask, dropped his tail, squared his red shoulders, knotted up his small fists, drew in a deep breath and plunged into the hall. So engrossed was he in these preparations that he failed to note a home-made poster nailed outside the door. It read:

Come One, Come All

The Ladies' Aid Society Will Give a

COSTUME PARTY

in the

CHURCH BASEMENT TO-NIGHT

With a rolling gait Tidbury Epps entered the hall. Figures eddied about him in a dance, and, somewhat surprised, Tidbury noted that it was very like the old-fashioned waltzes he had seen in Calais, Maine. The waltzers evidently regarded dancing as a business of the utmost seriousness; their lips, beneath their dominoes, were rigid and severe, save when they counted softly but audibly, "One, two, three, turn. One, two, three, turn." In vain Tidbury searched the room for Jake the gorilla, the beaded lady, the organ-grinding pirate and the bimbo from the bamboo isle. He concluded that Jake's flasks had been too much for them. And he saw no gypsy or Hydeman. Indeed, as he watched the restrained and sober waltzers he could not escape the conviction that the Pagan Rout, for an institution so widely known for impropriety, was singularly decent in the matter of costume. There were Priscillas in ample skirts, farmerettes in baggy overalls, milkmaids in Mother Hubbards, Pilgrim fathers, sailors, and Chinese in voluminous kimonos. Tidbury, a little dazed in a corner, began to think that he had overestimated the glamour of sin.

He perceived that the obese Red Riding Hood was standing at his elbow, gazing at him with some curiosity.

He lurched toward her, and administered a slap of good-fellowship on her plump shoulder.

" 'Lo, cutie," he remarked in accents slightly blurred. "Where's Cleopotter?"

The lady gave vent to a squeal of surprise.

"Sir," she said, "I do not know Miss Potter."

She sniffed the atmosphere in the vicinity of Mr. Epps, gave a little cluck of horror, and scurried away like a duck from a hawk.

The eyes of Mr. Epps followed her flight and he saw that she headed straight for a man who sat in a distant corner of the hall; the man was masked, but Tidbury felt every muscle in his

five feet three inches of body stiffen as he saw that the man in the corner wore the garb of the clergy. Hydeman!

Red Riding Hood whispered in his ear and pointed an accusing finger toward Tidbury; the man in the corner gazed earnestly at the diminutive red devil teetering on red hoofs. By now Tidbury had spied another figure, sitting next to the masked preacher. She was a gypsy. And as she gazed at her companion she cocked her head to one side.

With tail bouncing along the floor after him Tidbury started briskly in their direction at a lope. Within a yard of them he reined himself down, and stood, with a hand on either hip, glaring at the cleric and the gypsy.

Hydeman stood up. He seemed larger, rounder than the assistant to the sales manager known to Tidbury in business hours, but the fierce fire of jealousy burned within Mr. Epps—and he was not to be daunted by size.

“So it’s you, is it?” he remarked with biting emphasis.

“Naturally,” said the man. “Whom did you expect it to be?”

His voice had a soft sweet note in it, not at all like the sharp staccato of Hydeman’s crisp business New Yorkese.

“He’s making fun of me,” said Tidbury, and the spirit of Terrible Battling Epps wholly possessed him.

“You thought I was a dead one, eh?” remarked Mr. Epps. “Well, I’m going to show you that sometimes the quiet ones come to life and——”

The other eyed him sternly.

“Young man,” he said, “I fear that you are er—a bit—er—under the weather. I fear you are not one of us.”

“Not one of you?” roared Tidbury with passion mounting. “You’re darn right I’m not one of you—you low, immoral Greenwich Villagers, leading innocent girls astray.” He waved a thin red arm toward the gypsy.

The music had stopped in the midst of a bar; the masqueraders were crowding about. The accused ecclesiastic glared down at the small devil before him.

“How dare you say such a thing of me?” he demanded. “Who are you?”

“You know well enough who I am, Milt Hydeman,” cried Tidbury, breathing jerkily. “I’m Terrible Battling Epps, and——”

“Leave our hall at once!” the other returned. “You are plainly under the influence of——”

He stretched out a hand to grasp Tidbury Epps by the shoulder, and as he did so Tidbury brought a small but angry fist into swift contact with the clerical waist-line.

“Oof!” grunted the man.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear!” screamed the Red Riding Hood. “The devil has struck the Reverend Doctor Bewley. Help! Help!”

But Tidbury, deaf to all things but battle, had buried his other fist so violently in his opponent’s soft center that the mask popped from the man’s face. It was the round, pink, frightened face of a total stranger.

With a yelp of dismay Tidbury turned to flee, but the outraged parishioners had pounced on him, torn off his mask, and were proving, at his expense, that there is still such a thing as militant, muscular Christianity in the world. As they bore him, kicking and struggling, to the door, he saw in all the blur of excited faces one face with staring, unbelieving eyes. The gypsy had removed her mask, and she was Martha Ritter. In all the babble of voices hers was the only one he heard.

“Oh, Mr. Epps! Oh, Mr. Epps!” she was sobbing. “I didn’t think it of you! I didn’t think it of you!”

From the gutter in front of the church Tidbury after a while picked himself, felt tenderly of his red-clad limbs, found them whole but painful, applied a bit of cold paving brick to his swelling eye, and started slowly and thoughtfully down the street, his tail, broken in the fracas, hanging limply between his legs. Despite all, the potent stimulus of Jake’s concoction lingered with him, and there was a comforting buzzing in his head which all but offset the feeling of dank despair that was crowding in upon him. He had lost Martha. That was sure. He—he was a failure. He couldn’t even go to the devil.

How he got back to his own room in Mrs. Kelty’s boarding house he never knew, but that was where the brazen voice of the alarm clock summoned him sharply from deep slumber. His head felt like a bass drum full of bumblebees. But it was his heart, as he buttoned his pepper-and-salt vest over it, that hurt him most. He tried to drive from him the aching thoughts of the lost Martha, but the only thought he could substitute was the scarcely more cheerful one that he’d probably be cast incontinently from the hat company when news of

his brawl reached the alert ears of Messrs. Spingle and Blatter.

Spurning breakfast he hurried to his office, and before Martha or the rest arrived he had climbed wearily to the pinnacle of his high stool, and had hunched himself over his figures. He was struggling to distinguish between the dancing nines and sixes when he heard a voice —an oddly familiar voice—booming out from the doorway that led to the presidential sanctum.

“Well,” said the voice, “it looks to me just now, Spingle, as if we could use about ten thousand dozen of your Number 1A hats out in Kansas City this year. Of course I’ll have to shop around a bit to see what the others can offer——”

“Of course, Jake, of course,” replied Mr. Spingle, in the satin voice Tidbury knew he reserved for the very largest buyers. “But say, Jake, wouldn’t you and your wife like to be our guests at a little party to-night? Dinner and then the Winter Garden? Our Mr. Hydeman will be delighted to take you out.”

The person addressed as Jake lowered his voice, but not so low that the avid ears of Tidbury Epps missed a syllable.

“Between you and me, Spingle,” said Jake, “I wouldn’t care to at all.”

“Why, Jake,” expostulated Mr. Spingle, “I thought you and the wife always liked to whoop it up a bit when you came to the big town.”

“So we do,” admitted Jake, “but not with him.”

“What’s wrong with Hydeman?” demanded the Napoleon of Hatdom, and Tidbury read anxiety in his tone.

“Everything,” replied Jake succinctly.

“You know him, then?”

“Yep, ran into him last night at the Pagan Rout,” said Jake. “He didn’t make much of a hit with me or the missus. Too fresh. Treated us as if we were rubes. Out in Kansas City we know a good fellow when we see one—— Why, what the devil——”

Jake had chopped his sentence off short, and with a whoop of joy had bounded across the room.

“Well, if it isn’t Terrible Epps!” he bellowed heartily. “How’s the head, old sport? Say,

Terrible, why didn't you join us at the Pagan Rout?"

"I—I couldn't find you there," said Tidbury, trembling.

"Oh, yes," remarked Jake thoughtfully. "You must have got there after they put us out."

"They put me out too," said Tidbury.

Jake's roar of laughter made the straw hats quiver on the heads of the dummies in the show cases. He turned a beaming face to Mr. Spingle.

"Say, Spingle," he cried, "what do you mean by trying to palm off a tin-horn like Hydeman on me when you've got the best little fellow, the warmest little entertainer east of the Mississippi, right here?"

To this Mr. Spingle was totally unable to make any reply. But after a minute his brain functioned sufficiently for him to say, "About that order of yours, Jake——"

"Oh," said Jake reassuringly. "I'll talk to Terrible Epps about it at dinner to-night."

"And to think," repeated Mr. Spingle for the third or fourth time to Mr. Blatter, "that Tidbury is a man-about-town who goes to Pagan Routs and everything! You'll give him Hydeman's job, won't you, Otto?"

"I already have," said Mr. Blatter.

"Good!" exclaimed the Napoleon of Hatdom. "Didn't I always say that Tidbury Epps was a live one, underneath?"

The round cheek of Martha Ritter was in immediate contact with the pepper-and-salt shoulder of Tidbury Epps.

"And you tried to make me think," he repeated in a tone of wonder, "that you liked Hydeman and were going to the Pagan Rout with him? Oh, Martha dear, why did you do it?"

She hid her eyes from his.

“I did it,” she murmured, “because I wanted to make you jealous.”

The clock ticked many ticks.

“But, Tidbury, if I marry you,” she said anxiously, “you’ll reform, won’t you? You’ll promise me you’ll give up Greenwich Village and drinking, won’t you, Tidbury?”

“If you’ll help me, dearest,” promised Tidbury Epps, “I’ll try.”