

A Prevaricated Parade

by W. C. Tuttle

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“And for the support of this A declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.”

Hank Padden shifted his seat on the top pole of the corral, and marks the place with his finger.

“Now,” says he, “shall I orate the names of the men who signed it?”

“Never mind,” replies old man Whittaker. “We don’t know none of them, personally, so we’ll let what you’ve already read be sufficient and plenty. After listening to all you’ve read out of that book, Hank, I’m of the impression that she’s a fitting day to be celebrated. What do you think, Hen?”

“She’s worth a passing memorial,” says I, and “Scenery” Sims, the fourth member of our committee, nods his head:

“She sure is, gents. I never cared for kings, except in jack-pots, and our glorious forefathers sure did proclaim their feelings. I’m with yuh from the hondo to the saddle-horn.”

That makes it unanimous. The night before there’s a meeting in Paradise, and they appoints me and Scenery, Hank Padden and old man Whittaker as a committee to investigate the reasons and so forth of the Fourth of July, and whether, in our own minds, she’s of sufficient import to consider a celebration.

We finds that she is. Hank Padden reads us the reasons out of a dictionary, while we sets there on the corral top, at the Cross J.

Old man Whittaker owns the Cross J, Hank Padden the Seven A, and Scenery Sims is the possessor of the Circle S outfit and the squeakiest voice ever anchored in the throat of a human being. Every time I hears Scenery start to talk I pray for cylinder oil or chloroform. Me? I'm Henry Clay Peck. I work for old man Whittaker. I ain't got nothing but a conscience, a heap of respect for the truth and the feeling that I lowers myself when I punches cows.

We has just arrived at our conclusion when "Muley" Bowles saunters down to the corral, climbs up beside us and bends our seat all to pieces. We four moves to the next section for safety. Muley weighs so much that he has to bandage his bronc's legs with splints to keep it from being bowlegged. The world lost a cracking good poet when Muley essayed to punch cows. He don't look the part, not having soulful eyes nor emaciated ribs, but when it comes to making up poetry he's got 'em all lashed to the snubbing-post.

"Has the committee arrived at a satisfactory conclusion?" he asks, puffing hard on his cigaret, and shaking out a new rope.

"When the facts is made public we'll let yuh know with the rest," squeaks Scenery, who dislikes Muley a heap.

"Who's talking to you?" demands Muley. "Scenery, you takes too much upon yourself. I been thinking of a sweet little rhyme what sounds like this, and I gives yuh three guesses who I mean:

“He had a squeaky little voice,
A skinny little frame.
He lived in God’s own country,
But the country wa’n’t to blame.
Comparing him with growed-up men,
Who rode the Sawtooth Hills,
He looked like a pewter nickel
In a bunch of green-back bills.”

“Yah-h-h-h!” shrills Scenery. “You’re sore ’cause you wasn’t elected to the committee. Lard!”

Scenery puts all the venom in his system into that last word, and at the finish his voice would have split a cigaret paper. As he makes his greasy statement his right boot snaps up to horizontal, and Muley’s loop gets him around the ankle.

It sure was one beautiful and speedy piece of rope work, and the next minute Scenery is on his shoulders in the corral, with his right foot snubbed high and handsome to the top of a corral post.

Muley lights his cigaret and climbs down the other side.

“The committee will have to turn him loose,” he states. “I won’t pollute my hands by touching him. I reckon the acid in his measly little carcass will ruin that metal hondo before he gets loose, but it’s worth it.”

Muley peers through the poles of the corral and grins at Scenery.

“Next time yuh opines to speak of a byproduct of your family, Scenery, don’t look at me,” he states.

Our nerves are rasped considerable before we gets Scenery calmed down, but we finally pacifies him, and all sets in judgment on the Fourth of July again.

“Now that we’ve decided to celebrate—how’ll we do it?” asks Hank. “She ought to be did befitting the solemnity of the occasion, hadn’t it, Whittaker?”

“She deserves it,” agrees the old man. “We’ll have a salute at sunrise, won’t we? Then what’ll we do?”

“We got to have a pe-rade,” squeaks Scenery. “Them is necessary adjunct to celebrations. I was down to Cottonwood last Fourth, and they sure had a humdinger of a pe-rade. Had a feller all dressed up in a fancy hat and a sash, riding in front, and then comes a lot of dress-up wagons, what they designates as floats. They has a beautiful gal all dressed up to imitate Miss Columbus, and———”

“Who’s she?” asks Hank.

“Don’t you know who Columbus was?” asked Scenery, and Hank nods.

“Well, don’t ask fool questions then,” squeaks Scenery. “They has hoss-races, foot-races and———”

“They didn’t have nothing that we can’t have,” pronounces Hank.

“We can have all that. I’ll ride at the head of the pe-rade and—
—”

“That ain’t unanimous,” interrupts Scenery. “Why you any more than me, Hank? Next thing we know you’ll want to be Miss Columbus.”

“Hang on to yourselves,” advises Whittaker. “You fellers elects yourselves to everything—seems to me. A leading man in a pe-rade ought to dress the part, I reckon. When I lives in Great Falls I’m elected as a ornery member of a organization. It had something to do about woodcraft, and we dresses up like a plush hoss, when we meets. I still got my war-bonnet and pants left. Some son of a gun stole the coat. I still got my ax, too.”

“You still got the ax?” squeaks Scenery. “Wonderful! Go home and cut some wood. I think your fire’s out.”

“While you old spavs are fighting for honors, what’s the matter with considering me?” I asks. “You’re all so danged old and stove-up that you’d have to lead it in a lumber-wagon. Look at me, and step back in the ranks. I’m young, handsome——”

“Pause!” yelps Scenery. “Pause, Hen. It takes brains to lead a pe-rade.”

“Then let’s not quarrel,” says I. “We ain’t eligible. Let’s settle these little details later and in a place what ain’t so dry. It won’t be the Fourth of July until day after tomorrow, so let’s adjourn.”

They agrees. Scenery and Hank goes home, and I goes up to the bunk-house, where "Telescope" Tolliver and Muley are playing pitch.

"Hen, what has the committee decided to do?" asks Telescope.

I tells him what our plans are, so far, and while I'm telling in comes "Chuck" Warner, the prize liar of Yaller Rock County. Chuck punches cows with us for a living, and carries the greatest assortment of prevarications on earth as a side-line. I been with him so long that at times I shades the truth a little, too.

"They can't all lead the pe-rade, that's a cinch," states Chuck. "I seen a pe-rade down to New York one time that——"

"You never was in New York," states Telescope.

"I was born there," declares Chuck, wiggling his ears.

"In Pima County, Arizona," says Telescope. "I know when, too, Chuck."

"Dates don't count, Telescope. I said I was born in New York, and it's my business if I wants to stick to my statement. Now, Telescope, if you said you was born in a teepee on a Digger reservation I wouldn't argue with you for a minute. I'd take it as Gospel. A feller has a right to a birthplace, and I takes New York."

That argument shows Chuck Warner in his native state. He's got a face like a bronc, shortest legs on earth, and can wiggle his ears like a burro. The only time he can't look yuh square in the eye is when he's telling the truth.

“Yuh ought to get somebody with a little style to lead that pe-rade, Hen,” opines Muley.

“Might get ‘Pole Cat’ Perkins or ‘Harelip’ Hansen,” laughs Telescope. “Have Harelip ride one of his goats, and have Pole Cat walk slow behind him, leading a skunk. Have the goat wear the old man’s striped pants, and put Scenery’s hat on the skunk.”

“You fellers ought to be on the committee,” says I, sarcastic-like. “Yuh might get up your own pe-rade.”

“That’s a good scheme,” agrees Chuck. “We’ll form a offensive and defensive alliance.”

“Offensive is right,” says I, and then I goes up to see the old man.

The next morning me and the old man goes to Paradise, and goes into executive session, with Scenery and Hank, in the rear of Dug Chaffin’s saloon. Hank pounds on the table with his boot heel, and calls the roll. We’re all present.

“Gents,” asks Hank, “who is going to lead the pe-rade?”

We looks at each other, and then the old man clears his throat.

“I looked up them lodge raiment, and they’re dazzlers.”

“I still got that hard hat that I wore to a Dimmicrat rally down to Silver Bend ten year ago,” orates Scenery. “She looks a heap dignified, and it’s too small for any of you fellers. I got a sword, too—in a holster.”

“To lead a pe-rade a man ought to look dignified—not his clothes,” proclaims Hank.

“This here glory thing is going to cause hard feelings,” says I. “I moves that we does like this: we’ll all be here before the pe-rade is ready to start, and we’ll let some uninterested party pick out the suitable person for to lead it. Dress for the part, and if yuh don’t get picked, be a good sport and pe-rade anyway.”

“That’ll keep the mortality down to a certain extent,” agrees Hank, and the other two nods.

“Now,” says Hank, “how about this person to be Miss Columbus?”

“I got her picked,” states Scenery. “I nominates Miss Eulalie McFee.”

“Sheriff’s daughter, eh?” laughs Hank. “She’s so danged thin that if she stood edge-ways yuh couldn’t see her, Scenery. I nominates Miss Maggie Smith, niece of ‘Doughgod’ Smith. Who seconds the motion?”

“Miss Columbus ought to be a danged sight better-looking than Maggie Smith,” states the old man. “Who ever heard of Miss Columbus with crossed eyes and freckles? I marks X at the top of my ticket for Miss Clarice Chaffin, daughter of Dug. Do I hear an agreeable voice?”

“Haw! Haw!” roars Hank. “Clarice Chaffin! This contest ain’t for no animated flag-pole, Whittaker. How’s your sentiments, Hen?”

"I leans toward Mrs. Genevieve Saunders, widder of the late 'Slim' Saunders. She'd fill the part."

"It would be danged small if she didn't," Scenery. "She weighs at least two hundred and——"

"Scenery," says I, "some day I'm going to hang a pebble on your neck, throw yuh into a tin cup of water and drown yuh."

"Let's vote on it," suggests Hank.

"It don't require no vote," replies Whittaker. "If Hen wants to drown Scenery I'm——"

"I mean vote on the lady!" snaps Hank. We did. We each cast a vote for our choice, and it starts a argument that's a humdinger, and before we leaves the council-chamber we're mentally wallering in each other's gore.

Paradise is busy fixing up floats and decorations, and we're asked a lot of questions that we don't dare to answer.

"Who is going to lead the pe-rade?" whispers Doughgod to me, and I whispers back—

"I am."

He toilers me for a distance, and whispers once more—

"Hen, who is going to be Miss Columbus?" I answers—

"The widder Saunders."

"Hank told me that my niece, Maggie was going to be her."

"Hank's a liar," says I, and Doughgod nods, and walks away.

I'm over at the rack, cinching up my saddle, when here comes Dug Chaffin.

"Henry, I'm looking for information that I can't seem to get from any of your cohorts. Who is due to be Miss Columbus tomorrow?"

"The widder Saunders. That's settled, Dug."

"Do you know that old man Whittaker is a liar?" he asks, and I nods. "Yes, he's a liar," declares Dug. "He said he'd stick for Clarice 'till hell froze over."

"He got cold feet," says I, and Dug goes back to his palace of sin, in a unhappy mood.

I gets on my bronc and points toward the Cross J. I'm sick of being on a committee, and having to hurt people's feelings.

Paradise ain't no safe place to cause discord in. There's a sentiment in that place that leans towards shooting first and asking questions afterwards. There's only one thing the whole place will agree on, and that is this: yuh can't have a royal flush if your opponent has four kings.

"Stuttering" Stevens thought he'd establish a precedent by holding one against kings and sevens in one hand and kings and eights in another. The coroner said that either shot would have been fatal. Stuttering must a been guilty, 'cause no man would steal kings to make up two pair.

I hammers my bronc along down to where the Cross J road forks with the one from Silver Bend, when I hears a peculiar noise. Sounds to me like a threshing machine with St. Vitus

dance. My bronc shows signs of nervousness, so I gets off. Pretty soon it comes in sight, and I recognizes it as being an autymobile, the same of which ain't been in this country since the one belonging to Scenery Sims runs over some dynamite at Piperock and evaporates.

My bronc drags me off into the mesquite for a ways, until I can get my rope around a bush and stop him, and then I pilgrims back to the road. At first I don't recognize the inhabitant of that carriage. I looks him over, careful-like, and then he grins and betrays himself. It's old "Calamity" Carson. I ain't seen him for five years, and I shakes his hand industrious-like. After we gets through pumping elbows I leans back and surveys his equipage.

"Some vehicle, eh, Henry?" he says, with a dusty grin. "Surprised to see me?"

"Well, not exactly, Calamity. We been expecting yuh."

"Expecting me?" he wonders aloud. "I suppose 'Tellurium' had to go and tell everybody."

"Uh-huh," I agrees. "Tellurium Woods never could keep still."

So far as I know Tellurium ain't been in Paradise for six months, but he's as good as anybody to blame it on. Him and Calamity used to be pardners.

"Well, well!" says Calamity, brushing the dust off his mustache, and giving his cigaret a chance to burn hair freely. "Here I been figuring on surprising the old-timers, and I been told upon by a friend. Henry Peck, I done sold out my property over in the Little Rockies, and now I'm rich.

"I got more money than a dog has fleas, but I ain't enjoyed it none. I opines to throw a surprise into Paradise, so I buys this gasoline buckboard, has her shipped to Silver Bend, and here I am. She's worse than any outlaw bronc that ever flinched under a saddle, Henry, and I'm older by years and years than I was a week ago when a man teached me how to drive it. I don't know what makes her run. All I got to do is put gasoline in her, twist her tail a few times, pull the designated levers, and point her away from the stumps. She sure makes enough noise."

"You figured the tune right, Calamity," says I. "Paradise sure is doing itself proud in your honor."

"'In my honor?' What's the idea, Henry?"

"Well, yuh see it ain't often that a town can have a former inhabitant come home rich and distinguished like you are. The public sure admires a man with a chunk off the root of all evil, Calamity. We've decorated in your honor, and tomorrow we parades before yuh to show our admiration and respect. Sabe?"

"My gosh, Henry!" he snorts. "This is too much."

"It's considerable, Calamity, but look who you are."

"That's a fact, Henry—it sure is. Well, well!"

He sets there, with a far-away look in his eyes, and that cigaret sizzling on his mustache, and sudden-like he reaches under the seat and hauls out a jug.

"Henry Peck, I been saving this for my old friends—Tellurium, Doughgod, 'Half Mike' Smith, et cetry, but you qualifies, Henry.

Your oration sure puts joy into my old heart. Go as deep as yuh like.”

I sets there in his gas go-devil, and we swears allegiance to each other. We celebrates our new-found friendship, and regales each other with anecdotes. I tells him all the neighborhood gossip, and we toast each and every one. He tells me about his property in the Little Rockies, and we drinks a toast to all the little rocks.

My bronc gets the rope loose, and passes us on his way home. We toasts the Cross J and my pinto.

“Who did yuh say was going to lead the pe-rade in my honor?” asks Calamity.

“I am. Being your best friend, Calamity, I’m eligible. I’ll ride that pinto bronc at the head end of that great conglomeration. How’d yuh like that, old-timer?”

“I got a better idea,” says he, solemn-like. “I’ll teach yuh how to run this here contraption, and you lead her in this. How’d yuh like to do that, Henry?”

“Sounds to me like the voice of angels. What yuh packing in them two cans in the rear?”

“Gasoline. Twenty gallons I shipped with the car. All yuh got to do is to twist that front crank until she starts humming. Sabe? Then yuh get in and let this here brake loose. You get out and give her a twist, Henry. That’s the first lesson.”

I falls out and ambles around to the front. I grasps the crank in both hands, gives it a man-sized yank, slips with both feet, and

that juggernaut runs right across my floating ribs. She sure squashes me a plenty, and I don't more than start to get up when here she comes right back to run over me again. Calamity stops her just in time.

"You forgot the e-mergency," observes Calamity, scared-like, over the back of the seat.

"Maybe," says I. "I forgot my name and address, too, if that's anything to snort over. What are yuh supposed to do—put her against a rock to start her?"

"It's a simple thing, Hen."

"Yes, so is a stick uh dynamite," says I, rubbing the kinks out of my hide. "Let's not call school right now, Calamity. We'll go up to the Cross J, where prying eyes can see us not, and there yuh can show me all things. Anyway yuh don't want to show up in Paradise today. Everybody is busy getting things ready, and if you was to go down there now they'd drop everything. Sabe?"

"Popularity warmeth my cold heart," says he. "Being of the committee, Henry Peck, I bows to superior wisdom. We'll proceed to the old Cross J, and take a lesson."

We stops at the Seeping Springs and has a nice drink—out of the jug. We starts out merrily along the road, when all to once Calamity starts to tell me a story. Calamity must have French blood in his carcass, 'cause he talks with his hands.

At least he might a picked out a flat place to do his gestures in, but as it was we hops off the road, down a hill, and pokes the

front end of that machine into a mesquite bush. What part of it didn't plow through the bush jumped over.

I untangles myself from the brush and wanders over to the wagon. She don't seem hurt much, but her heart has quit beating.

"*Hyas cultus chuck, chick,*" states a voice, and I turns to see old Running Wolf, a Piegan, squatting on his haunches, looking at that machine.

He's got a look on his face that Columbus might a had when he first saw the shores of our fair country.

"What did he say?" asks a weak voice, and Calamity appears from the other side of the car.

"He said, 'It's a mighty bad wagon,'" I interprets, and Calamity nods his head:

"That Injun ain't no danged idiot, Henry. Wonder if he'd like to take a ride?"

"*Mesika klatawa kopa chick, chick?*" I asks, but the old redskin puts his thumb up to his nose and wiggles his fingers at us.

"Nah-h-h-h-h!" he gargles, and points at his moccasins.

We manages to get that wagon back on the road. We drinks a toast to our good luck and to honest and cautious Injuns, and plods on up to the Cross J. I reckon our toasts covers too much territory, 'cause when Calamity opines to have me read his book of rules, all I can do is sing.

It's almost dark when I wakes up. Beside me on the bunk is Calamity, snoring like a shepherd, so I sticks my boot into his ribs.

"Thanks," says he, after a look around. "Thanks, Henry. I was having a autymobilemare."

Just then in comes old man Whittaker. He looks around, sort of mad-like, and glares at me and Calamity.

"They don't seem to be here—gol dingle dangle it!" he yelps.

Me and Calamity looks around and shakes our heads.

"No," says I. "They must a left."

"They never went alone!" he howls. "That fancy, lodge war-bonnet and them striped pants never went away alone. I reckon I got to kill somebody!"

He slams the door, as he goes out, and Calamity looks at me.

"What's the matter with him?" he asks. "He never recognized me, and I've knowed Whittaker for years and years."

"Crazy," says I. "He went crazy over fancy clothes. He don't know anybody any more, Calamity."

"Pshaw! I knowed he wasn't——"

We hears a voice at the door, and I yells, "Come in!" and in ambles Pole Cat Perkins. He's got a bundle under his arm, and he sets down on the bunk and grins at me and Calamity.

"Huh-Hen, I'm after your permission," says he.

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