



UPSIDE DOWN OR BACKWARDS
by W C Tuttle

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“Well, she ain’t changed an awful lot since I left,” remarks Magpie Simpkins, as he cuddles his long legs up under his chin and tilts his chair against the side of the cabin.

“You can’t expect no big changes in uh wilderness like this in thirty days,” says I, and he nods emphatic like and spits at uh lizard.

“The East looks good, Ike,” he proclaims.

“Did the East look good to you or did you look good to the East?” I asks. “Seems to me that you gets uh heap civilized in thirty days. What’s the idea uh that hard hat?”

“Last word in head-gear, Ike,” he states, picking the yaller, pot-shaped thing off the ground, and patting it affectionate like. “They calls ’em Darby hats. Did yuh notice that green and red shirt in my valise? I annexes that in Chicago, Ill., U. S. A., and she sure is uh humdinger. Got uh necktie pin in that valise, too, that only assessed me ten dollars and eighty-five cents, and nobody what never seen uh real diamond could tell the difference.”

“Being as ignorance is bliss around here yuh may make uh hit, Magpie,” I replies. “The fact that yuh hangs your person full uh Christmas tree ornaments don’t lessen my hankering to hear yuh tell about how much capital yuh got interested in the Silver Threads.”

Magpie Simpkins is Ike Harper’s pardner, and I’m Ike Harper. We owns the Silver Threads mine, four burros, uh little grub and uh desire to find somebody with money to promote us.

Magpie's physique is impressing, unless yuh views him edgeways, when yuh can't get more'n uh glimpse. He's six feet several inches tall, wears uh kind look and uh long mustache, and has the ability to let me into more trouble than man is heir to.

When we gets nine hundred dollars' worth uh gold out of our placer mine on Plenty Stone Crick, Magpie gets the promoting itch. He orates that in the East is uh tribe uh philanthropists who spend their time hunting for uh shaft to sink their money in.

Also he opines that as uh hunter and finder uh this certain person he can't be beat or even tied. I protests audibly and often that we ought to let gold enough alone, but when Magpie gets an idea like that it's all off until he's proved that my objections were well founded.

Therefore and immediate he packs his valise—or rather one he borrows from Buck Masterson, the saloon-keeper at Piperock, and pilgrims East.

I holds down uh chair on the shady side of our cabin for thirty days, and tries to figure out how long it will take 'em to get Magpie's nine hundred away from him. He indicates in his departing words that his stay is indefinite and his destination problematical, but he comes back on the thirtieth day.

He pilgrims up from Piperock, with the taste uh ashes in his mouth, uh yaller, hard hat on his head and kid gloves on his hands. I hands him uh welcome and uh cigaret, and he humps up in my chair.

“She's uh hard drag, Ike,” he states. “The tribe I mentioned is either getting scarce or somebody has declared uh closed season on 'em. I invades Pittsburg and Chicago and other places too

numerous to mention, but all I could find was folks who were kind enough to listen while they took uh drink on me. When the drink was gone they all lost their hearing, Ike.”

“Did yuh expect to find capitalists in grog shops?” I asked, chiding like. “Moneyed men don’t get drunk—they gets intoxicated. Didn’t yuh do uh thing to be thankful for, Magpie?”

He shakes his head, sad-like, and fumbles in his pocket. After searching through all his clothes he comes back to the first pocket he looks in, where it was all the time and he knowed it, and pulls out uh letter.

“Ike, this is uh mystery,” he proclaims. “Honest to grandma, I don’t know what it means, but this letter says it was paid for and is on its way here. I didn’t think I got so drunk that I bought anything except more drinks, but—well, take uh look at this.”

He hands me the letter. At the top it proclaims to be from the Fur and Feathers Pet Shop, of Chicago. They orates that they handles each and everything what wears fur and feathers, and will supply same with cheer and great speed. The letter reads like this:

Dear Sir:—

As per your request and purchase we are shipping you today one cassowary. This is a male, and, in case you desires uh female, we can secure you one inside of thirty days. Thanking you for past and future favors, we begs to remain—and so forth.

I hands the letter back to Magpie, and rolls uh smoke.

“The letter was waiting for me when I got here,” he explains.

“You don’t need to apologize, Magpie. How much did yuh pay for this male bird, beast or reptile?”

“That’s what I don’t know, Ike. I’m sorry.”

“You always are, Magpie,” says I. “You can be sorry more times, hand running, than any man I ever seen. You were born to sorrow. Some folks are born to sorrow, but some are like me—they has sorrow forced upon ’em. What’ll we do with the danged thing?”

“How do I know?” he snaps at me. “Cassowary! What in —— is uh cassowary, Ike?”

“I ought to know!” I snaps right back at him. “You must uh been pretty blamed drunk, Magpie Simpkins.”

He nods, solemn-like, and spits at uh lizard again.

“Maybe. That Eastern hooch is awful stuff, Ike. I don’t remember no pet store. I must uh bought it the night I left Chicago for St. Louis. I wakes up in the morning and went to uh ticket office.”

“Give me uh ticket to St. Louis,” says I to the clerk.

“He looks queer like at me, and calls in uh policeman, and Ike, I had uh —— of uh time convincing that officer that I wasn’t crazy. He explained to me that I’m already in St. Louis.”

“Them policemen must be uh nearsighted bunch,” says I. “You’d have uh nice time trying to prove that to an officer west uh Dakota.”

“Don’t chide me, Ike,” says he. “I was uh stranger in uh strange land, and they took me in. Anyway I got uh green and red shirt, uh civilized hat and uh necktie pin to show for my trip.”

“Don’t forget Cassie,” says I. “Didn’t you talk mines uh-tall?”

“Uh-huh. There was uh fat bartender in Chicago who sympathized with me uh heap. Said he wished I’d uh showed up sooner with my proposition, cause he’d sunk all his money in uh new diving apparatus. He sure was uh good old scout, Ike. Doggone, that feller could fix up uh drink uh hooch until she tastes almost temperance, but she sure was uh sheep in wolf’s clothes. I rode all the way from Chicago to St. Louis on three of ’em and didn’t know it.”

“The big question before the house is this, Magpie: is this here purchase uh yours uh singer, uh beast, uh burden or uh nuisance?”

“Must be uh useful utensil, Ike, or I’d never bought it. I may get red-eyed from wobble water but I never loses my sense uh useful and ornamental things. I’m what you’d call uh discerning person—drunk or sober.”

All uh which shows that there ain’t no use arguing with Magpie Simpkins. He can do no wrong. Uh course he might do things that he’d be sorry for, but he never figures that he’s wrong—just uh little mistaken for the time being.

“Come back broke?” I asks.

“Uh-huh. My gosh, Ike, I must uh spent money like uh timber Willie. If I knowed what that animile cost me I could figure how much the trip cost me.”

“You don’t have to let X equal the missing quantity, Magpie,” says I. “You had nine hundred when yuh left, and you’re broke now; therefore the trip cost me four hundred and fifty. Sabe?”

Magpie don't sleep well that night. First he has an argument with that Chicago bartender. Uh course, me being an innocent bystander or bylayer, I gets hit in the nose. I cautions him to fight the other way. He apologizes uh heap, but inside uh five minutes he starts another fight with some colored person over the way his bed is made and I gets pitched out of the bunk and hits my head on the stove.

I've been mistook for an Injun, and one time "Red River" Radkey absorbs too much of the fermented foam, and mistakes me for uh pink pollywog, but that's the first time that anybody ever mistook me for uh colored porter, and it makes me mad.

I climbs right back on that bunk, gets Magpie by the feet, and drags him around the yard in the moonlight. He's plumb awake and docile enough to apologize again when I finishes the third lap around the woodpile, so he climbs back on the bunk and I takes uh blanket and sleeps on the floor.

The next morning we saddles our burros and starts for town. We're out uh spuds, and we needs some drill steel. Magpie leads the procession, setting on the rump of uh fuzzy-looking jackass. He's wearing that hard hat, green and red shirt—he sheds his vest—and on his hands he wears them gray gloves. He sure is uh thing to see. Even the burros acts bashful around him.

"I reckon I'll make the inhabitants uh Piperock set up and take notice," he states, admiring himself.

He sets the pot-shaped hat on the peak of his head, and brushes off that loco shirt with his gloves.

“Yes,” says I. “All I hope is that they don’t set up with uh gun in their hands. You sure look like uh cross between uh lodge-pole Christmas tree and uh zebra.”

We pilgrims down to the main road, and ambles through the dust in the direction of Piperock. We comes to uh turn in the road, where we sees uh man setting alongside on uh rock. He’s all humped up, with his head between his hands, and don’t look up until I hails him. Then we recognizes him as being Chuck Warner, puncher for the Cross-J. I never did know just how to take that feller. He never growed none to speak of from his waist on down, and I figures that he’s the honestest-looking liar I ever met. He sets there on that rock, sad-like, but when he sizes up our outfit his eyes gets bigger and he sort uh gasps:

“My ——! It must be true!”

“Too true,” I replies, glancing at Magpie. “Too true.”

He gets off the rock and wobbles over to us. His eyes are blood-shot, like he’d been dallying unduly with the cheerful fluid, and he squints at Magpie.

“It’s Magpie Simpkins in disguise, Chuck,” says I.

“Huh,” says he, sort uh relieved like. “Maybe I ain’t so bad as I thought. You fellers got time to help out uh pilgrim in doubt?”

“Your obedient servants,” says I. “Lead us to the doubt.”

He turns and ambles off across the country, and me and Magpie is right behind him. About two hundred yards from the road he stops and points across an open spot.

“That’s my bronc,” he states. “Yessir, that’s my little hawse, but, but—say, what in —— is on that rope uh mine, eh?”

“Fluttering fool-hens!” explodes Magpie, fanning himself with his civilized hat.

I looks and swallers uh chaw uh natural leaf.

“Do—do you see it, too?” asks Chuck.

“Just exactly,” states Magpie. “What is it?”

“If it ain’t the granddaddy uh all blue grouse I’ll eat my hat,” orates Chuck. “Yuh see I been down to Piperock for three days, trying to bust Buck’s wheel, and drink all the hooch in town. I comes along the road this morning, singing merrily, when I happens to see that busted crate in the road. I pulls up to see what it is, and my bronc danged near dumps me off. He’s scared at something in the brush, and when I spurs him over to see what it is, we scares out that blasted thing!

“Not being responsible for my actions I takes down my rope and proceeds to annex the thing. Between that thing and my bronc, they makes life miserable for me, so I gets off and leaves ’em to their fate. The rope is wound around the bush between ’em so they can’t do nothing but stand there and contemplate each other.”

“I don’t reckon there’s any doubt about it being uh grown bird,” states Magpie, fussing with uh cigaret.

“Your perceptions are wide open, Magpie,” nods Chuck. “Wonder where it flew from. It ain’t no grouse nor yet it don’t partake of any of the requirements of the fool-hen. It might uh been uh hummingbird about the time this here world was started.”

“She’s sure uh hummer,” I agrees. “If I’d been born with uh neck like that I’d uh died from delirium tremens years ago.”

“I’d opine that somebody done lost that crate off uh wagon, and maybe there’s something around to tell what and whose it is,” says Magpie.

We all pilgrims back to the road, and Chuck leads us to the busted bunch uh slats. On one side it says—

DO NOT TEASE.

On the other side, in letters uh foot high, it says—

MAGPIE SIMPKINS
PIPEROCK
MONTANA

We reads it over several times, and then Magpie steps back, cocks his yaller hat over one eye, sticks his thumbs in his belt and snorts—

“That is Cassie!”

“Make it Caspar,” says I. “It’s uh male cassowary, Magpie.”

“Huh!” snorts Chuck. “You wise guys knowed all the time what it was, didn’t yuh? What yuh going to do with the thing? What in — is it anyway?”

“That thing, Chuck,” says I, “is what uh man buys in the East when he’s drunk up seven hundred dollars’ worth uh mixed hooch. Cassowary is uh French word what means, ‘something yuh bought when you’re too drunk to consider the expense and necessity.’”

“I always did like the French language,” states Chuck. “It sure is expressive that-away, ’cause yuh don’t have to say much to mean uh whole lot. My mother was French. Name was Jones. Yuh pronounces it ‘Hones,’ the J being silent like the Q in cassowary.”

“Well,” says I, “we got to do something, and, being as it belongs to you, Magpie, I reckon yuh better suggest.”

But Magpie sucks away on that cigaret, and shakes his head.

“I’d admire to hear all about it,” states Chuck. “There must be uh deep and dark mystery about that bird, Magpie. If I knowed the details about that bird’s past, maybe I could help yuh out.”

Magpie is willing to receive help—as usual—so he sets down there and tells Chuck all about it—what he can remember.

“How much do yuh think yuh paid for it?” asks Chuck. “You sure ought to remember that part of it.”

“Dang me if I know,” replies Magpie. “Couple uh hundred, most likely. What yuh got on your mind, Chuck?”

“Say, what good is uh cassowary? If she was worth something to humanity we might peddle the blasted thing. If folks had an idea it was—cripes!”

“What’s the exciting thought, Chuck?” I asks, but Chuck begins to roll uh fresh cigaret and grin to himself. Pretty soon he busts out laughing and slaps his quirt across his chaps.

“By cripes,” he chuckles. “It won’t cost nothing to try.”

“Try what?” asks Magpie.

“Say, if you gets your two hundred back will yuh give me all I can make over that?”

“You answered your own question, Chuck,” declares Magpie. “You get us two hundred for that overgrown fool-hen and you can have the rest. What yuh going to do?”

“That’s my business, Magpie. You and Ike go along about your business, and don’t peep—no matter what happens. Sabe? Here comes the stage.”

Art Miller swings his four broncs around in front of us, and looks us over, sort uh grouchy like.

“Howdy, Art,” says Magpie. “What yuh doing these days—distributing poultry?”

Art spits over his off-wheeler, and considers the busted crate.

“Did yuh see what comes in that there box?” he asks, and we nods. “Did ye ever hear it crow?”

We all shakes our heads, and Art puts his hat on the brake lever and fumbles for his tobacco.

“Sounds like ——!” he snorts. “We was going along, sleepy like, when it crows. Runaway. Lost the crate out the wagon.”

“Uh-huh,” agrees Magpie. “Crate busted and canary flew.”

“Canary!” Art spits out the word like he’d pulled uh slug from his old pipe. “Magpie Simpkins, you can get the dangdest things sent to you. What yuh going to use that thing for?”

“Art,” says Chuck, chiding like, “you neglected your duty as uh stage-driver when yuh let that piece uh valuable freight get away.”

“Well, go ahead and say it,” replies Art, resigned like.

“Can you forget that you ever had that bird in your care?” asks Chuck.

“Audibly or mentally, Chuck?” asks Art.

“Audibly.”

“I hope to some day.”

“Be worth uh five spot, and no questions asked, Art.”

“I never seen it,” states Art. “What’s the idea?”

“You fellers are as inquisitive as an old maid,” replies Chuck. “All I asks is silence, and plenty of that. I’ll pay the bills.”

“We’re as silent as the tomb, eh, Magpie?” says Art. “You ain’t got nothing against me.”

“Nothing but admiration, Art. Chuck, do what you please with that hooch-hen, and we’ll go on to town. I don’t sabe your play, young feller, but I’m for it all the way from the ace to the deuce.”

We got our stuff at Piperock, and pilgrims right back home. The crate and bird are gone when we returns.

“I wish I knowed what Chuck aims to do?” says Magpie, as we goes past the spot.

“And bust up our chances to get back that two hundred,” says I. “If you didn’t hunger and thirst for information so hard, Magpie, I’d

be living uh life uh ease right now. You always wants to monkey with the wheels uh progress.”

About five days later “Scenery” Sims and “Dirty Shirt” Jones pilgrims up our way and stops to eat. They asks the usual questions and gets answered.

“Magpie, did yuh ever see uh railami?” asks Dirty Shirt.

“Uh-uh which?”

“Uh railami. Didn’t yuh ever hear of one?”

“Oh, yes. I used to raise ’em.”

“You did not!” squeaks Scenery “There’s only one specimen left on earth today. Sabe?”

“Meaning you, I reckon, Scenery,” says I. “You’re the only specimen I ever seen that might fit that cognomen.”

“No, not me!” snaps Scenery. “If yuh don’t know and recognize one when yuh see it, maybe you’ll wish yuh did.”

There ain’t much left to say, except unpleasant things, so they says “Klahowya” and departs.

“Railami,” says Magpie, after they’re gone. “Never heard the name before. The way Scenery pronounces it makes it sound like uh hare-lipped Piegan with hay fever trying to make uh noise like uh blowsnake.”

“It can’t be uh serious condition,” I replies. “It sure can’t amount to much if Scenery and Dirty Shirt knows what it is, so I ain’t worrying about it none, Magpie.”

The next day bringeth forth “Half Mile” Smith and “Tellurium” Woods. They rides in and partakes of bacon and beans.

“What you fellers doing up this way?” asks Magpie. “Seems like me and Ike is being honored lately. Scenery and Dirty Shirt was up to see us yesterday.”

“Crazy as bedbugs, too,” says I. “They was looking for—say, Magpie, what was that word?”

“Railami.”

Half Mile and Tellurium looks foolish like at each other and then back at us.

“You know what it is?” asks Tellurium, but me and Magpie has to plead total ignorance.

“You looking for it, too, Tellurium?” I asks.

He rubs the bald spot on top of his head, and grins.

“Uh-huh. She’s worth looking for.”

“We hate to have to ask questions,” I states.

“Worth uh thousand dollars,” says Tellurium. “Uh cold thousand.”

“So is sixty ounces uh gold, too, but that don’t tell nothing but the value,” orates Magpie. “Speak up, you’re among friends.”

“I wouldn’t,” states Half Mile. “No use letting everybody in on it, Tellurium. If they don’t know about it we hadn’t ought to lessen our chances by telling.”

We thanks 'em heartily for the information, and they rides away. Magpie gets out his dictionary and ponders deep like over it, but shakes his head.

“It ain't in the book, Ike. Must be uh foreign substance.”

The next day comes old Judge Steele and Ricky Henderson. They salutes us, and gets off to rest their saddles.

“How's law and justice, Judge?” asks Magpie. “You fellers hunting for uh railami?”

“Huh!” snorts the judge, like he didn't hear, and glances at Ricky.

“Railami,” repeats Magpie.

“Why—uh—you seen any?” asks the judge.

“I've quit drinking, Judge,” says Magpie. “I'm sure I'd uh seen one next, and I tapers off just in time.”

“Well, well!” exclaims the judge. “Ricky, I reckon me and you had better be going on. We're looking for uh couple uh strays. Two red cows. Seen anything of 'em up here, Magpie?”

We disclaims all credit for seeing two red cows, and they departs.

“Somebody's uh heap crazy around here, Ike,” states Magpie. “Either they're crazy to look for uh thing with uh name like that, or we're crazy for not looking. Let's me and you go over on Roaring Crick tomorrow and do uh little gophering on that quartz seam. Maybe we'll meet uh railami on the trail, eh?”

Me and Magpie gets enthusiastic over the way that quartz seam shows up, and when we leaves there we're out uh grub. Magpie

suggests that we pilgrims to Piperock and get uh banquet uh ham and aigs, and I'm right with him, so we points our burros toward town.

Magpie is still wearing that yaller hard hat. The burro he's riding turns its head once in uh while and looks back. It sizes him up, shakes its ears, sad-like, and pilgrims on. Magpie sure is dressed up like uh plush horse, and all he needs is uh cane to be uh cripple for life.

There seems to be uh certain degree of excitement in Piperock, when we arrives. Chuck Warner is setting on his bronc out there in the middle of the street, and he's surrounded with uh crowd. Lying down in the dusty road is that blasted bird that Magpie bought, and uh rope runs from Chuck's saddle to its long neck. The bird seems to be the coolest thing in town.

"What do yuh reckon to do with it, Chuck?" asks Dirty Shirt, and everybody seems interested.

"Danged if I know," replies Chuck. "I ain't never seen nothing like it before. It just comes busting along down the road, and I hangs my rope on it. Wish I knowed what she is."

"How much do yuh want for it, Mister Warner?" asks Judge Steele, looking the critter over, and fumbling in his pocket.

"You don't want it, do yuh, Judge?" laughs Masterson. "You couldn't eat it."

"I don't know what she's worth, Judge," states Chuck. "Ain't she some whopper of uh piece uh poultry? What do yuh reckon she's worth?"

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