

# Old Fib

M. R. HUNTZINGER

That's a mighty fine lookin' mare you're drivin' there, mister. You say she throwed a shoe about a mile from here? Well, I guess we can fix that soon as I run down some tools.

Didn't think I'd ever seen you round here before. You say you're passin' through to Upland? Well, you only got about an hour's drive ahead of you.

Whoa!—There now—steady gal, lift your foot—easy, that-a-babe. She's a peppy lookin' little rascal. Looks a mite too fat for much trottin'. You oughta keep 'er 'way from grass for a day or two before you driv'er much.

Guess I talk too much, but there ain't much else to do. I used to have another blacksmith here to help me, but he got shot. He was really a yarn teller. Most folks called him a liar but I never could see him that way. Course he did lie most of the time I guess, but he did it with such taste that it's hard to think of 'im as a liar.

Men folks 'round here could set and listen to old "Fib" tell tales from mornin' till night. He always went by the name "Fib," cause that's what his buddies all called him while he served under General Grant durin' the Civil War. Never knowed 'nother man that could drink and talk all the time and still get fifteen stallions shod in one afternoon. Course he'd knock off some days to go on a bender and never show up for a couple days, but when he did work he could do the work of two men.

The steady boozers down at the tavern usta get 'im tanked and start 'im to tellin' tales. They called 'em lies, but I called 'em tales.

Old "Fib" could really keep you laughin'. Most every night after the tavern

closed he'd go somewheres and play poker till morning. He was a shark too. Won losta money cause no one could tell when he was bluffin'. Luckiest man on drawin' face cards and aces I ever seen. I seen 'em stick in a three-hundred dollar pot one night on a little pair of duces. He took three cards from the dealer and damned if he didn't draw three aces. Come time fer bets and "Fib" set still as a mouse. Finally he drawled out, "Reckon I ain't got no business stayin' this hand with three little aces, but I'll be game and raise the limit." He flipped a wrinkled fifty-dollar-bill to the center of the table and never took his eye off his hand. The other fellers looked at each other sorta sore like and they raised old "Fib." He foller'd suit and raised the limit once more, and his hand was called. When he flashed his hand, his full-house was good as gold. He seemed plenty surprised at winnin' the pot and was real pleased with hisself.

"Fib" wasn't no real hansom man but he was awful careful how he dressed. I guess he spent most of his money on fancy duds and liquor. When he stepped out in his Sunday suit, he could make you stop and look twice. After a days work here in the shop you get purty dirty. I guess that's what makes a smithy look purty neat when he dolls up.

One day durin' spring rainin' season there wasn't much doin' here so I told "Fib" to take off for a couple days. Well, he got dolled up and walked down town. Fer a change he walked right past the tavern without stoppin' in for a snort. Well, some of the heavy drinkers noticed 'im not stoppin' in so they walked out to see what was the matter. They asked 'im to come in and

tell 'em a lie, but he said he didn't have time. Course they asked 'im why and he told 'em he was goin' down to see old Teddy Cranes' corpse. The all lifted their hats and said they was sorry to hear that he had died. Teddy was the old feller I bought this here shop from. Well, the fellers all went straight to home and washed their faces and then met at the tavern to go callin' on the corpse. But what do ya know, when they got there, old Teddy was settin' on the porch smokin' his pipe and arguin' over a checker match with his missus. Yes sir, old "Fib" could really tell tales.

I don't recollect if it was the glare of the forge or the liquor that caused Fib's eyes to start goin' bad, but any how he sure picked up a case of bad eyes. Got so he couldn't do much work by the time he was fifty. I kept 'im round here to do little things and that kept 'im in clothes and liquor money. I felt sorry fer 'im. He'd git mad 'nough to stomp holes in the ground whenever anyone mentioned his bad eyes. He picked up some dime-store cheaters, but they didn't help 'im any cause his eyes were just past fixin'. This cramped his shootin' eye somethin' awful too. Nevertheless he'd go huntin', but it sorta got under his hide when he got razzed about not gittin' any game.

The last time old Fib went huntin' he went into Conner's woods, which is just packed with fat fox squirrels, and he stayed all day. He seen a dozen or so, but didn't git a dern one. On the way back to town he runned into old man Conner's youngun' with his pockets bulgin' with squirrels. Fib managed to trade his knife and a box of shells fer six of the fattest ones the kid had. He told the kid never to tell anyone about this little swap and the kid kept the promise.

Fib displayed his kill to the tavern flock an' then hung the tails over his anvil here in the shop. They served to sorta stop the

fellers from teasin' Fib about his eyes fer a while; nobody believed he killed 'em.

Well sir, it was just about this time two year ago durin' spring plowin' that old Fib got shot. It was just before quittin' time and me an Fib was gittin' ready to go to supper. I was puttin' way some tools and Fib was out in back of the shop gittin' some coal for the forge. Here come a stranger in lookin' for Fib.

"Does a guy named Filbert Browning work here?" he asked. I told 'im Fib was out in back gittin' coal. He was tall, dark and sorta puny lookin' and he had a clean look. He was young, 'bout twenty-five I'd say, and talked a little like a Rebel. I was tryin' to place 'im when I heard a shot out back. I reckon it was five minutes after that when old Fib died with a hole in his chest.

The stranger come back in the shop and asked if I'd go with 'em to see the Marshall. Damned if I wasn't dumbfounded. I stood lookin' at Fib bleedin' in a heap. I didn't even notice that the stranger had taken off. Course I run over to the Marshall's place, but the stranger was already there. The Marshall locked 'im up and the young Rebel never said nothin'.

It wasn't until the day of the trial at Bilby's grocery that I learn'd about Fib's passed years.

It seems that Fib had been a prisoner of the Confederates in Georgia and escaped. He got as far north as the Kintuck-Tennessee line and couldn't git any further. The confeds were checkin' every thing that was tryin' to get north. Well, he was lucky, as usual, and some Tennessee'en took 'im in as a hired hand. He worked fer nothin' till the war was over fer this feller. Durin' this time he got attracted to a little Rebel gal and they got married on the sly. Bout three months 'efore the babe was due his little woman got struck with a bolt of that Tennessee lightnin'. Well it hurt her purty awful and she went blind right away. Well,

Fib took off from them hills right then, and left that little gal blind and carrin' an un-born chile'.

Since my misses hails from Tennessee I felt like I outa talk with the Young Rebel. I felt sorta sorry fer 'im, I guess, but he wouldn't talk to me or anyone fer that matter before the trail. Course he talked to Squire Davis and the Marshall.

The day of the hearin' the whole town crowded in the grocery and the puny Rebel told his story. Then he fished a marriage license from his pocket and the jury looked it over. It was passed around the crowd

and sure enough it had old Fib's signature scribbled on it.

There wasn't much else to do but release the stranger and nobody wanted any action against 'im. I guess everyone felt kinda' sorry for the young stranger's ma'. A hat was passed and enough money was collected to see the feller home. He never did tell anyone except the Squire and the Marshall how he happened to know that Fib was livin' here in Matthews, Indiana.

Whoa! Back up girl—there now, you're good as new again. That'll be two-bits mister.

## Variations On A Theme By Candide

FRANK SLUPESKY

"The United States, best of all possible countries," is the conviction of most non-thinking, yet sincere Americans. Was our government not formed by people who rebelled against the despotism of Europe? Was our Constitution not formed to give equality and self-government to the citizens of America? Did we not fight a civil war to insure equality? Have we not always been a humane nation? Were we not too generous in donating millions to the Japanese earthquake relief, just to turn around and have them "stab us in the back" at Pearl Harbor? Have we not more radios, telephones, automobiles, washing machines, lawn mowers and phonographs than all the rest of the world? Is our standard of living not higher than that of any other country?

But, upon reflection, is the United States the best of all possible countries? Is it not possible that, like Dr. Pangloss, we are merely suffering from many illusions? Patriotism, the cause of our illu-

sions, is an admirable quality only when it does not blind reason.

I first suspected the fallibility of the United States because of a high school history teacher. Of course in grammar school the history texts are more devoted to the eloquent speeches of Nathan Hale and Patrick Henry than to an objective delineation of history, and the high school texts as a rule are equally biased. But, fortunately, this teacher thought we had been exposed to enough illusions. For the first time I learned how the United States rudely and unjustly acquired California from Mexico, how we shamelessly failed to fulfill our agreements with France after the Revolution and how we inspired the Panamanians to revolt from Columbia just so we could build the Canal. And now we apply some very choice adjectives to the Panamanians for not renewing the lease on the islands which we have been using as air bases to protect the Panama Canal. Is there no