

IV. WINTER EVENING

BY ALBERT HALPER

IN THE Winter of the big snow, when Dave was ten years old, he began reading a lot of Indian stories and sometimes had terrifying dreams at night. He walked home from his father's grocery in the cold blue frost of early evening after reading library books behind the counter and imagined that blood-thirsty braves were trailing him from behind the telephone poles in the alley.

The alley running between Kedzie avenue and Sawyer street was paved with cobbles and after the snow had been packed hard by the traffic of coal-trucks and peddlers the cracks were filled up and it was like walking on a boulevard. A solitary arc lamp burned at the curb in Sawyer street, but the length of the alley was dark and gloomy.

Dave always walked in the middle, hurrying a little.

But as soon as he reached the flat he would take off his cotton mittens, hang up his hat and coat, and then walk through the rooms rubbing his hands together and saying, "Ah-h-h," like his father. He said this four or five times. Then he would sit down to the table and ask his mother what there was to eat. His mother made good thick soup every evening and he knew it, but he asked her just the same.

He ate in silence, lifting the spoon to his mouth and dipping it into the bowl, thinking about the running forms of lithe Indians who padded silently across the frozen wastes. If his younger brother poked his

foot under the table, he would frown. He liked to be silent, and he liked the questioning way his mother sometimes looked at him.

Right after the meal he would wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, get up from the table, and reach for his hat and coat. He wasn't needed back at the store, because an older brother of fourteen who went to high-school was there in the evening, but he put his hat and coat on just the same, and went.

He walked into the dark, gloomy alley, though he could have gone around Franklin street, where there were lights and people and traffic. As he went along, passing the bulking shadows in the silence, he started whistling quietly to himself. His hands were shoved deep into his coat pockets and he kept in the middle all the way.

Then, at the end of the alley, the street lights of Kedzie avenue would burst upon him and immediately he would walk with a slightly rolling gait, as if he were a stocky man of forty; and when he reached the grocery he'd place his fist upon the knob and open the door with a hard, firm hand.

If there were customers in the store, he'd go back behind the candy show-case, because on that side of the store were also the cigars and the slow-moving brands of catsup and baked beans; and if any item were wanted from there, his father would call out, and he would bring it over.

It was a small store, about twenty feet long and fifteen feet wide, but had many "departments." Some of them, however, were very small and almost invisible to the unsearching eye; for instance, the notion department, which consisted of two small cardboard boxes of assorted spools of thread, the five-cent variety. In a bitter mood the grocer sometimes addressed his various sons: "You, Milt, take care of the cold meat department; you, Ben, can supervise the tobaccos; you, Charley, take over the confectionery; Irving, the canned goods, and Dave, the notions."

"What about Louis?" they would question with their eyes. Louis was the youngest, about seven years old.

"Louis can have complete charge!" said the father shortly, and reached into a hopper for a coffee bean which he cracked between his teeth. His complete stock was worth perhaps \$500. Business was slow, and he moved his store from time to time, hoping for a "lucky strike."

After Dave came into the store Charley went home to eat. He went home and stayed there, now that Dave was here. If any orders were to be delivered Dave could take them on the sled. During the Winter the sled had carried a total of four orders—one of them was a peck of potatoes. Eight cents profit was made on a peck of potatoes that Winter.

Around seven-thirty the gas-lamp began to sing. The light would flutter a bit, then would burn steadily, then would flutter again. Dave's father would walk up to it and stand under it a while, peering at the round glass globe. A thin wire mesh encircled the globe, like a hair-net, in case the glass cracked from too much heat. But the grocer, who was not a very scientific man, never tampered with the workings of the lamp. After he stared at it a while it stopped singing.

Behind the candy show-case, in charge of the book department, Dave sat reading. The public library had installed free rental branches in hundreds of small candy and grocery stores throughout the city, and for each book taken out Dave's father received a cent from the city. The books were ordered from the heavy catalogue on the box near the stove and three days later the central library downtown delivered them. "It's the quantity that counts," the grocer once told Dave grimly.

Sometimes a customer did not call for a book for a week and Dave could half-finish it behind the counter. His head was full of half-read novels, mostly Westerns.

Then, at eight o'clock sharp, Old Man Sanderson would come in for a packet of Tip-Top smoking tobacco and Dave would do no more reading for the evening. With the entrance of Old Man Sanderson, his evenings really began.

II

Old Man Sanderson, who came from North Dakota, limped badly in his left leg and had long furrows running down the sides of his rugged, leathery face. He was a little, wiry fellow, about sixty, and wore a fur cap with a rabbit's tail hanging over the side like a tassel. On the streets of Chicago he looked like a vaudeville performer impersonating a North-western trapper. He was a janitor for the Cribbon Stove Company, whose warehouse stood flush against the Northwestern tracks. Two fingers of his right hand were clipped away at the second joints, but he often bragged that he could handle a broom as well as any man. He was a talkative gaffer and gave quaint grunts when he spoke, to reinforce his words. He said that he had accidentally sprung a steel trap up in Canada, somewhere near

Medicine Hat, back in '82, the jaws of said trap fastening upon his fingers. It had been a cold day and he had had his hunting knife with him. He gave no further details.

Dave's father, who was sick and tired of listening to the old fellow's stories, stood behind the stove in the rear of the store and cracked his short fingers. He stood looking at the frozen windows up in front, a stocky gloomy man, and once or twice he went forward to feel the oranges in the crate to see if any had hardened from the frost. He would roll three or four firmly in his hands; then he would come back to the warm little stove again, his hands clasped behind, his back facing the stove. Rolling the cold oranges chilled his hands and he was glad to feel the warmth of the fire once more.

"Now, take that time back in '77," Sanderson would say, but the grocer stood staring thoughtfully toward the windows without a muscle of his heavy face moving.

So in the end, Old Man Sanderson addressed himself to Dave.

"You're a small boy, but you know what's what," he said and, cramming his smelly pipe full of tobacco, he'd lean across the tobacco show-case. As he talked, he'd move his head waggishly and the rabbit's foot would wiggle up and back.

He told Dave of the time back in '83 when he had come upon two Indians stealing beavers from his trap. That was up near Big Smoky Forks, he said.

"I was tramping over a hill on my snowshoes when I see 'em huddled over my game. There was some berry bushes nearby, so I scuttled among 'em, out of sight, making a lot of noise, and every fifteen yards I fired my rifle. I shot up in the air; they didn't see me. They musta thought there was a lot of us. You shoulda seen 'em run away."

His cheeks sucked in and out as he puffed on his pipe. "That was nothin'," he said, and then spat on the floor. At the stove the grocer shifted weight to his other leg.

The old man came in every evening and though the grocer was tired of his stories he said nothing about it, because his arrival meant a ten-cent sale in the tobacco department and also indicated that it was now eight o'clock and only one more hour before closing time.

Toward the end of January the weather became colder than ever, though no more snow had fallen. Shop-keepers along Kedzie avenue scattered rock-salt on the sidewalks and chipped the ice away, but along the curbs the frozen snow, a month old now, ran parallel to the street like a sturdy little wall. Kids stormed the fortresses, shouting and commanding, and many "wounded" were carried from the field. It was a hard Winter. But Old Man Sanderson said the weather in Chicago was a joke—why, he had seen it forty below up in North Dakota; but the raw dampness of the lake city got at his bones and he coughed once in a while. He sneezed too and his nose was always running.

"It's the lake fog that gets you," he admitted after a while. "Up north it's colder, but it's drier." And once or twice he said he wished he was down in Florida, but he caught himself quickly and changed the subject.

On a Friday evening in the first week of February he came into the store in a semi-intoxicated condition and was even more talkative than usual. He smoked furiously, spitting often, and finally began spouting how he had once captured a fat, handsome squaw-woman and forced her to live with him. He grew vehement about it, his face became flushed, and he

was about to tell Dave all the details when the grocer came forward from the stove and told him to go home and sleep it off.

Old Man Sanderson, his eyes a trifle blood-shot, didn't like to be talked to in such a fashion. Biting the stem of his pipe so hard that he almost broke his front teeth off, he was just about to answer when the door opened and a big man came in for a packet of fine-cut plug tobacco. Dave reached into the show-case, handed the customer the package, said thank-you, then put the dime in the little cash-drawer under the counter.

After the man left, Old Man Sanderson, cooling off, began to apologize. The grocer, back at the stove again, started cracking his fingers and wasn't listening. He was thinking about a bill he owed his wholesalers and was wondering if he could meet it by the fifteenth of the month.

In a little while the wind began to whistle outside and Old Man Sanderson, his old self again, cocked his ears and said it sounded like the moan a roast-beef sandwich makes when there is a scarcity of gravy. For the first time in many days Dave's father's face broke into a smile. Shifting his weight from one leg to the other, he tried to crack his fingers all over again.

All of them listened to the rising storm. The wind was tearing south along Kedzie avenue and had the big sign of the tailor shop across the street swinging and creaking like a rusty gate. Then the grocer's heavy wooden upright laundry sign standing outside near the curb went over with a bang and Dave went out to set it up again. He kicked away some of the frozen snow, packed the supports with it, then came inside.

He came inside stamping and slapping his little sides with his hands, as if he had been tramping out in the frost for days. He

walked behind the counter with a slightly rolling gait and started blowing on his fists. He was frowning all his might and once or twice looked sharply all around. Old Man Sanderson, eyeing him, took out a big pocket-knife, scowled fiercely, and opened the longest blade, but as he had no enemy to stab, he started paring his finger-nails industriously. His finger-nails were thick, yellow and ugly, and the parings dropt to the floor like plane shavings, curling up slightly.

Behind the counter near the stove, still thinking about how he could meet the bill due on the fifteenth, Dave's father began to doze. His relaxed cheeks, hanging slack, lay like empty goat-skin bags against his face.

Then the door banged loudly. The big man who had come in a while ago for a packet of fine cut-plug came in again, but this time his hat was pulled low, shading his eyes.

III

At the bang of the door the dozing grocer started. His eyes flew wide open. All three of them were looking into the small black muzzle of an automatic. Waving the weapon, the big man stood them up against the ice-box in the rear. When he had them lined up there he went behind the canned goods counter, rang the cash register open, and scooped out the money. About twelve dollars were in the till.

Then he went behind the tobacco counter and felt around for the small drawer. Finally he found it. Eighty cents in small change reposed there, mostly nickels and dimes. He growled something and ripped the whole drawer out savagely, then kicked it as it lay upon the floor. The grocer, his cheeks trembling, lowered his hands to place them upon his son's

shoulders, as a sign of reassurance. "I am your father, don't be afraid," the pressure of his hands seemed to say. But Dave was not nervous a bit. He stood there round-eyed, his mouth opened a little bit, and felt a trifle excited, but that was all.

"Keep your hands up in the air," the man barked, and the grocer, taking his hands from his son's shoulders, complied.

Then the fellow came around to the other counter and started rummaging. He found a letter-file and went through it hastily, dumping the contents on the floor. His eyes scanned bills and statements, nothing more.

He went out, walking backward, one hand behind his back fumbling around for the door knob. Then he was gone.

As soon as he had disappeared, Old Man Sanderson, who had been standing all this time as quiet as a mouse, gave a queer gurgle and scrambled from behind the ice-box. He tore out of the store, yelling like an Indian. He ran yeowling and howling up the street, calling for his horse and rifle. Finally he threw his long jack-knife fiercely at a lamp post with deadly aim; there was a burst of sparks as the blade struck the cold black iron, then the knife was useless. He stared hard up Kedzie avenue. Freights were going by on the Northwestern tracks, and the wind was driving smoke and soot up the dark, cold street. Old Man Sanderson ran into the alley, made water, then came into the store again. He was still yelling and screaming and it was evident that the excitement had deranged him somewhat. And he was still a trifle drunk.

The grocer was standing in the middle of the store. He had been held up three years ago when he had had a store in Lake street, and he grew calm as he saw the half-crazed old fellow dancing around. He told Dave to walk a few blocks north to

see if he could find a policeman. If he couldn't find an officer there, he was to walk west.

Dave went out. Ahead, the street stretched dead and empty. When he had covered half a block the first few flakes of the storm began to fall. They were large flakes and at first fell quietly, but in five minutes they were whirling up the street in a dizzy fury and stuck to his eyelashes. He walked as far north as Ohio street and then turned west as far as Homan avenue. No one was in sight, not even a stray dog. All he could see was the long dark shadows of the freight trains as he came back in a big circle and neared Carrol avenue.

When he returned to the store he found his father squatting on the floor, picking up the bills and statements scattered about. Old Man Sanderson, sitting on a wooden box of Norwegian sardines marked King Oscar Brand, was crying bitterly.

Dave closed the door. His father's face was as red as blood because he was stooping, and his eyes, as he turned toward his son, bulged like globules of jellied fruits.

"Did you find a policeman?"

Dave started to answer that he had walked all over for one, when the laundry sign outside went over again, this time with a loud, hollow boom.

Shaking the snow from his coat, he squatted with his father. "I looked all around, but the cops must all be in the station. You ought to see how bad it's snowing now." Then he helped pick up the papers from the floor.

His father said nothing. After they had picked all the bills and statements from the floor, Dave went around to the other side and picked up the ripped-out drawer. The wooden bottom was split, the whole drawer was askew. With a few blows of the hammer, his father fixed it up a bit.

The grocer, setting things to rights, did not look excited or annoyed. There was a telephone in a drug store two blocks north, but he did not go there to notify the police. Three years ago, when he had been robbed of thirty dollars, he had notified the authorities excitedly, but did not get his money back, or any satisfaction, either. A big, fat, dumb-looking cop had come over to look things over, then had walked heavily up the street after listening to the facts.

Old Man Sanderson, under control again, wiped his eyes and went outside, where he stood peering up and down the whitening street. When he came inside again, his fur cap, covered with the freshly fallen snow, made him look more like a Northwest trapper than ever.

"I saw him. I got a good look at him," he said savagely. "He had an automatic and he was about six-foot-four. He was a big fellow, all right!"

A few minutes later, at nine o'clock, the grocer closed the store. He lit the small gas jet in the rear, then reached up and pulled the chain which extinguished the gas lamp. Old Man Sanderson hung around, muttering to himself; he opened and closed his broken blade nervously while saliva dribbled from a corner of his mouth. "If only I was young again," he said over and over. "If only I was a young buck once more."

"You sleep it off," the grocer told him as all three went toward the front of the store, then out into the cold.

The old fellow grunted good-night as Dave's father placed the lock on the door, then went limping up the street toward his rooming house. He lived near Carrol avenue, which was on the other side of the viaduct, and as he walked toward the roaring rumble of the passing freights, Dave stood looking at his rapidly moving, jerking figure going up the street. The

grocer, at the door, was giving the heavy lock quick jerks, trying it.

Then Dave and his father started walking home.

IV

They took the short cut through the gloomy alley, a thing the grocer had never done before. As they walked, the snow drove furiously through the narrow canyon, which was banked on both sides by the walls of houses. They passed the low line of one-car brick garages and neared Sawyer street, where the lone arc lamp, one side of it heavy with white clinging snow, was shining in the storm. In the distance the lights of other buildings began to show.

Dave walked fast, keeping up to his father. He shoved his hands in his pockets, mittens and all, and felt his lips going wet from the huge falling flakes of snow.

When they reached the house they stamped their feet in the lower hallway, then started up the stairs. It was cold in the vestibule, but warm in the hallway.

Dave rushed up the last few steps, his throat choked, his head bursting with the news, but the steady plodding tread of his father behind him shut off his excitement. They came inside the flat.

Around the table sat four of his older brothers, most of them reading parts of the evening paper. His sister, Rose, was sitting in a corner silently practicing her elocution lessons; her lips were carefully forming words, but she made no sound because her brothers did not want to hear her exercises. She was almost fifteen, had heavy yellow hair, and her wide eyes were a fine pale blue.

The grocer closed the door, hung up his hat and coat and came into the parlor. His wife, a large, tired-looking woman who

suffered from heart attacks, rose wearily from her chair and asked him if she should make a kettle of hot tea. He shook his head. Around the big table the yellow lamp light fell upon the dry, shiny hair of his sons. In a corner, watching his father's face like a hawk, Dave stood waiting for the news to break.

But his father didn't say a word about it. He took off his tie and collar, sat down in the rocker, and put his tired feet into old house-slippers. Dave, although his body was tingling, was afraid to open his mouth; he walked from room to room nervously, until one of his older brothers, looking up from the paper, told him to keep still.

A half hour went by. The grocer was still rocking slowly, thoughtfully, in the chair. Then he got up and began to wind the old wooden clock they had acquired by saving hundreds of soap premium coupons. One by one his sons went to bed, and Dave soon followed them. The last one rustled the sheets of the newspaper together and folded up the parts, then placed it near the parlor stove where it would be used to start the fire in the morning. Rose started unfolding the day-bed and later raised her slender arms to fix up her hair for the night.

After the boys turned in, the grocer stood looking at his dozing wife. Her

hands were folded in her lap and her head was nodding as she sat. He saw her rough, worn hands and her tired-looking eyelids. On her thick middle finger her heavy gold marriage ring shone like copper in the light.

Going over, he opened the stove quietly and poked inside with the iron rod. A few live coals, glowing, turned their rosy bellies up to him. Outside the snow had stopped falling. The street was very white, with a single pair of tracks cutting it where an auto had just gone along. With his palm, the grocer rubbed the window pane, then came back heavily, silently, in his old felt house-slippers. He stood over his wife for a while, then shook her gently.

"It's late, almost ten o'clock. The boys will want their breakfast in the morning."

With a wide, slow look she opened her eyes, then ran her hands across her tired face. While her husband tried the back door, she tried the front door, and when they met in the kitchen both of them were yawning and the grocer was already pulling his shirt off. One of the buttons on his suit of Winter underwear was missing. He put the light out.

When they were in bed, and the flat was dark, the coals started popping in the stove. Two or three of them glowed hotly for a whole hour, but all the rest lay cold and gray and heavy in a layer of ashes.

AMERICANA

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS on the progress of science at Washington:

Phrenology, described as the science of judging people by looking at the shape of their heads, is counted upon by former Gov. Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi to aid him in his new duties with the Farm Adjustment Administration. He told newspaper men today that he had acquired exceptional gifts in phrenology and that they had contributed greatly in carrying him forward from a farm boy to Governor of his State. Now that he has been appointed "advisory counselor" to the administrators of the Farm Act, he continued, he expects to make continued use of this ability.

KANSAS

THE higher learning in Wichita, as revealed by the *Sunday Eagle* thereof:

CAN YOU WHISTLE?

Join our Whistling Chorus—Learn the beautiful Double Yodel, Two Tone, Teeth and Tongue and Finger Whistling. Commercial booking already being arranged for this Fall.

Classes every Tue., Wed., Fri.,
from 1 P. M. to 8

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FRIENDS UNIVERSITY

School of Music

TED FREEMAN

212 N. Market

Dial 3-7161

POLITICAL manifesto circulated among 100% Anglo-Saxons in Floyd County:

To the Good Mothers of Floyd County:

I have taken good care of your boys while in jail. If you want a good-hearted, sober jailer for the next four years, nominate and elect

W. A. (BILL BUCK) DINGUS FOR JAILER

KENTUCKY

POLITICAL manifesto in the *Carter County Herald* of Olive Hill:

S. F. POWELL FOR CONSTABLE

I wish to announce my candidacy for constable on the Republican ticket, comprising the Hitchins and Grayson Magisterial District. I have drunk out of the same well at Hitchins all my life. I am now fifty-six years old.

I believe my friends would know me better as Tottle Powell.

I will not make it my duty to sneak around and try to seize some one for being drunk, but I shall be at all public meetings and then if anyone is intoxicated too much, I will take him home and put him in a fat feather-bed until he becomes sober. I don't believe in degrading a reputable man's reputation with a buggy jail for such small offenses.

I shall serve all papers that are placed in my hands. I, of course all my friends know, have drunk, I guess, fifty barrels of booze, so the bootlegger now, when I become constable, had better sell good liquor, for I certainly can't stand bad stuff.

I shall have no little two-by-four deputies under me.

I shall not have any at all. So if you want protection, come out and vote for your old friend,

TOTTLE POWELL.

MICHIGAN

THE progress of Christian thought in Grand Rapids, as reported by the *Press* thereof:

A pie-eating contest for adults and a cracker-eating contest for trustees and deacons will be featured at the annual Sunday-school picnic to be held by the East Congregational Church at Fallasburg Park Saturday afternoon.