

# Nothing to Laugh About

By EDWIN H. HOOVER

**T**HIS burly Western job with red hair and a strange habit of smiling when, so far as I am able to see, there was nothing to cause amusement, could do me a large favor if I knew where to find him.

The fact that he bears a flaming torch, such as I carried before my troubles faded it to a mottled pink, does not give me a claim on him. But I never cease to wish that he will come forward and tell what happened in that Loop hotel after Slim Pascoe had delivered a very depressing funeral oration for my benefit. The mouth-piece I hire to explain what I should have done to keep myself out of trouble tells me that—But never mind.

If you have never been invited to your own funeral, you will not know the feeling, which is to walk slow, out of respect for the near departed, and wish for a break. I did, but nothing came of it until

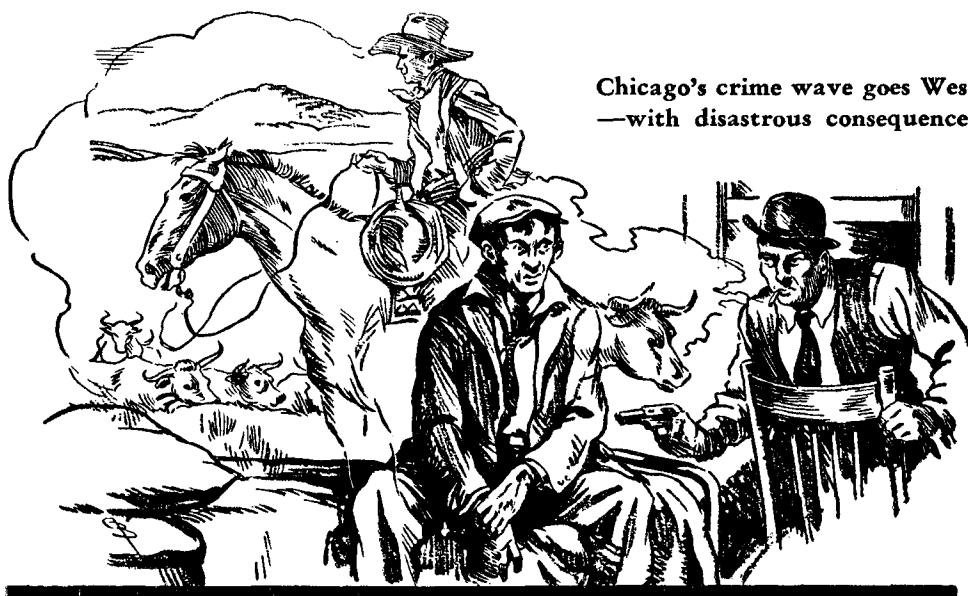
this oversize gent with the crimson skull-thatch chiseled in. His arrival was most welcome, on account he moved me off a very hot spot indeed. Now that I have had a chance to cool, I regret that he did not leave his name and address in the confusion of a hasty departure.

Without going too much into details, the events leading up to my meeting with this person from the wild, open spaces happened in some such manner as this:

I was about my business in the Loop district, with a load of malarky from Protective Association clients when someone in the crowd hailed me from a point south-east of my left shoulder:

"Hi, Mug!"

What I jokingly call my brain did a back spin. Such a feat is difficult in the confusion of Randolph street at the noon hour on a Saturday. Elevated and surface cars are a din in the ears. The jostling of citizens, some of them peeling oranges and bananas, or cracking peanuts, is a pain in the neck. Nevertheless, my brain came out of its acrobatic feat with a name to



Chicago's crime wave goes West  
—with disastrous consequences

go with the voice which I had not heard for a year. *Slim Pascoe!*

The last time I had seen him was one night in the railroad yards when he was dodging a sub-machine spray sent with my personal compliments.

Slim always prided himself on being the world's hardest human—unless you except the petrified man in a circus. His presence at that particular moment made me feel softer than a tomato which has ripened too long on a vendor's cart.

"Hi, Slim!" I greeted him cordially, without turning my head, in the manner of one old friend to another. To say that I was not nervous would be like denying you have a fever when a thermometer in your mouth registers 105 degrees above zero.

He was slightly behind me and I could not see him. But I could feel his presence. A hard object, which I was convinced would turn out to be a roscoe in his coat pocket, pressed against my ribs.

Although I am much inclined to be ticklish, I did not feel an impulse to laugh when he nudged my flank with this hard object; nor when he said: "Let's go!" in a tone of voice which was by no means playful.

Slim prodded me through the noonday mob toward Lake Michigan. He pointed me to the right when we came to an alley between State and Dearborn. Here we found less foot traffic, but great turmoil among truck drivers; and it looked like a break to dodge behind something that would stop bullets. However, Slim pushed lovingly against my left side so that my right shoulder always grazed the brick walls of buildings. There were doorways—most of them closed—but it did not seem good judgment to duck into one of them because a slug of lead will travel much faster than I am able to run.

Where he was taking me I did not know. Still, I knew where to turn when the pressure against a floating rib grew painful. We went through the rear entrance to Patsy Dugan's rooming house and up three flights of stairs which were brightened by

small electric-light globes at each landing. On the fourth floor, about halfway down a corridor, Slim said: "Stop!"

Being in no position to argue the matter I obeyed. Slim reached past me and turned the knob on an unlocked door. He did not, for so much as a split second, take the finger off me. He merely shifted his rod from my flank to a spot halfway between my belt and my back collar button when he opened and closed the door.

**S**LIM was much astonished when he did not find a rod in any of the usual places while patting me for concealed weapons. I explained this by telling him that I am now an upright citizen and have no need for smoke wagons. To hide his disappointment he took a roll of batwings—the day's collections—off my hip.

"Sit on the bed," Pascoe purred, like a cat with prospects of fish for supper. "I have come a long way to tell you something, Ace."

I am called "Ace" on account of the hole card I am apt to flash at odd times.

He sat across the room from me in his shirt sleeves. His vest was unbuttoned, and he toyed with a gat that followed me whenever I moved a muscle.

I gave him the double gander. Slim Pascoe used to be pale as skimmed milk and thin as a two-timer's alibi. Now he was brown, like some of the Big Shots after a season in Florida. There was flesh on his bones. But the cold, blue light in his glimmers would still freeze live steam at fifty yards, and he had the same sour grin such as would clabber dairy products on sight.

"You might as well take off your coat," he urged. "The heat is on."

"No, thanks," I told him. "I got a chill." Which was no lie, in spite of the season being October. Besides, I had something up my sleeve.

"Ace," he began, with those North Pole glimmers drilling into me like a pair of sharp icicles, "you sent me out of Chi on the lam—a rod man riding the rods. That's a laugh. I promised myself I'd

come back and give you the works, no matter how many of your mob I had to blast—”

“They’re all gone,” I told him. “I’m the only Moldavi mobster left.” A very generous impulse stirred in me. “Look, I am the Protective Association Syndicate which is a racket to insure merchants against pineapples exploding in their stores or homes. I will let you muscle in and become my partner in this benevolent project.”

“—and I’ve never had a chance to forget that promise,” he went on as though he had not heard me, which was discouraging in view of my generosity. “I bailed myself out of a box car down in New Mexico, a week or more after leaving you in Chicago, and started hoofing it across country. Wide open spaces—bahl!” he snarled, showing a set of teeth such as a large, angry wolf would choose for business purposes. “I walked thirty miles up a dry canyon where the sun was so hot it would melt asbestos hinges off the gates of hell, itself. No water. No shade. I thought of you every step of the way, Ace.”

He grinned at me in so brutal a manner that I felt sore all over—as if someone had worked on me with a club. I knew what he meant: My mob and me had run him into the open where he became a mark for the John Laws who wanted him for murder. Being chased from cover, he had to hole up so far away that even the readers, which the bulls send out with pictures of their favorite characters, could not find him.

“Do you know the kind of jaspers that live out there?” he inquired. “You do not, so I will tell you: Dull, dumb yokels that ride steeds and shoot single-action *revolvers*, if you can remember that far back. One of these mugs picked me off the road after I had fell down to die. He was driving a half-ton pick-up, loaded with groceries which he called *chuck*. With me alongside of him in the cab, he kicked and prodded this steaming tea-kettle through dust and sand and heat. I was

slug-nutty from the punishment when we stopped at a small house on top of a mountain which is flat as the slab in a corner’s place of business. Near the house, which is built of rough, native bricks called ‘dobe, is a corral— You would understand about the corral, Ace, if I explained it as a sort of jail for cows and their families. The bars are parallel to the ground, instead of up-and-down, and, instead of being metal, these bars are trees with the skin peeled off. There is no roof to the cow clink but the inmates do not escape, for reasons I do not understand. Some distance from the corral is a tank, where the female bulls, their husbands and children drink—though nothing but water.”

He stopped talking and reached a cigarette from his shirt pocket, and put it in his mouth. From the same pocket he got a match and snicked it on a thumbnail. All this he did with his left hand, not taking his eyes off me or moving the roscoe in his lap by so much as a gnat’s eyelash. It had been his trick in the old days to make a ceremony of smoking: First, he would reach a flat, gold cigarette-case from his hip pocket; snap it open; select a cigarette, as if there was some difference between them; snap the case shut; drag out a gold do-hickey that lighted when he pressed a button, and inhale two or three times before putting away the lighter. If he could not smoke with gestures he did not smoke.

So it was evident that the sort of life he had led in a foreign country must have left a deep imprint on his character. Another thing I noticed was that he had fallen into careless habits. Never before had I seen him sit in front of a window, even when the curtain was down and the room dark. But I do not doubt that his sad experience may have affected his head to such an extent that he failed to notice the sun was directly over the court and shining through the glass pane. I have known Slim when he would regard sunlight with the same favor as a Micky Finn in his own highball.

He continued his tale where he left off:

"This mark, who snatched me from drowning in the sun, greased me with tallow—which is the fat from animals—on the places where I had been fried.

"After a while, he put me out on a lonesome spot which he told me was a line camp. There was nothing for scenery but grass, sagebrush, rocks, a galvanized iron shack and a tank to which beefsteak on the hoof came when they were thirsty. I near went nuts. All I had to do was sit, think and ride a steed—Ever ride a steed, Ace? It is a shakedown. My duty was to see that the portable porterhouses did not venture off the mesa into canyons roundabout; and to keep an eye peeled for strangers whose good intentions I had reason to doubt. For this I got forty dollars a month, food and flop. That's where I have been until ten days ago, Ace.

"One day I was jouncing along the edge of a canyon and met a party whose pan was hid behind a large crop of alfalfa. From him I learned about a racket that has all the profits of city business and none of the risks. The beaver-faced egg explained that if I will encourage prime ribs of beef to loiter near the canyon's rim, he will do the rest. For this small chore I will get a share of heavy scratch when the meat is sold.

"The system is simple: You change the label on an animal to make it appear that he belongs to someone other than the original owner. This can not be done by pasting on phony revenue stamps, because the trademark is *burned* into the hairy outer covering of beefsteak while it is still alive; as a consequence, there must be some more burning to change the design so that it will appear to be the trademark of another person—one who has a right to sell the meat under copyright laws.

"When I made the discovery that overhead is absent—with no investment for protection, materials, transportation, I drove a smart deal to muscle in."

Slim went into a sort of trance, remembering, but came out of it when I wiggled an ear to disturb a fly.

"How long this sort of thing has been going on I do not know," he confessed. "but it was a perfect set-up for me. It gave me a chance to bite the yokel who put me on that God-forsaken spot. You'll understand, Ace, why I hate him: He had red hair, just like you, which kept reminding me of this and that. Also, I hate him on account of his doll who gave me the ritz when I made passes at her."

He tapered off again to pinch out his cigarette, and sat there looking at something which seemed to be directly above my head. I moved a foot to find out whether he still had an eye on me. He had. His trigger finger tightened slightly, then eased. So did I.

"This frill," he informed me, twisting up one corner of his mouth, "has what it takes to put high blood pressure in a cooling system—black hair, brown eyes, and curves that any man will follow even if he is cross-eyed and in a hurry. She is goofy about the redhead, but he won't marry her until he has paid off his debts at the bank; something he can not do unless he sells the beefsteak on the hoof which I have already fed to the cow-boomer and his mob—I ask you, is the percentage in my favor?"

Slim grinned and licked his lips. He was pleased with himself for having crossed up the redhead who was so great a sap as to make him a trusty. This did not surprise me. Slim would turn dentist on a crippled applewoman if he saw a profit in her china clippers.

I gandered over his left shoulder at the court, outside. "You would not believe me if I said the percentage, right now, is against you?"

"No," said he. "I wouldn't. Listen. There is one more thing I wish to say. Then you get the works. When I met this bush-faced cow-booster and his pals for the payoff, I collected it all. I told you they were slow, dumb yokels, didn't I? Well, I put the heat on them with my little old sewing machine"—he fondled the equalizer in his lap—"at a hideout called *Sardido Canyon*. It will be a month be-

fore the bodies are found. Maybe the hick sheriff will figure I did it; but he will be stopped there. He don't know where I came from or where I went. And *you* won't tell, Ace—"

The rod in his mitt rose a trifle. Almost, I could feel a stream of boiling lead between my eyes, but it turned out to be only cold sweat that trickled down my nose.

"Look, Slim!" I was desperate, wishing for the break that did not come. "Likely you would not believe me if I said that a redheaded job has just pushed his head and shoulders above the fire escape landing at your back?"

"You're telling me?" Slim's tone was quite sarcastic. "That stall was old before beaver went out of style on Mich Boul."

"You still wouldn't believe me," I screeched, losing my dignity, "if I said this jasper has a kind of sandy complexion, curly hair that sticks out under a black, wide-angle skypiece—and that he's drawing a bead on you with a single-action gat in his left hand?"

**S**LIM PASCOE knew that I was telling the truth when I mentioned a south-paw trigger-man. He had described this redhead in general terms, but nothing was said about him being a portsider; so Slim realized that I was not drawing on my imagination. Besides, the man outside the window straightened up and cast a shadow, as though to prove there was no hooley in my speech.

Quicker than I can tell it, Slim tipped his chair sideways and slid to the floor, next to the wall, where he would be out of range from the window. As he fell, he started blasting at me. What sounded like a flock of angry hornets zoomed past my ears. But I was on my feet and let him have it—six slugs, under the silencer, that sewed a seam down his left side and up the right.

I said I had something up my sleeve. It was a life-saver that dropped snug into my right lunch hook when I pressed a

metal spring at my elbow against my side—something I could not do while sitting down. Slim had overlooked this useful gadget which holds a flat shorty against the forearm by means of thin, steel bands until released by the trigger mechanism. Simple as shooting a cuff and a great deal more refined.

A kind of hissing noise, such as you will hear from a leaky gas pipe, was the only sound out of Slim. He was—as the mouthpieces say in court—null and void. I took a gander at the window where this torch-topped yokel stood on the fire-escape landing. He was making motions with his cannon which indicated that he wished to come inside, or else.

I dropped my roscoe to show peaceable intent, and unlocked the window, letting him in. I was afraid that he might break some glass and cause a disturbance that would bring in the neighbors.

"Ditch the rod," said I, in my best social manner.

He gave me the up-and-down and shoved the gun inside his belt.

"I reckon we will get along," he drawled solemn, "though I wasn't so sure when you and Mr. Pascoe met so chummy on the street a while back. It looked like you walked off together after meeting by appointment." He picked up my roscoe from the floor, examining it with great interest, but leaving Slim's where it lay.

I was busy frisking Slim. In a pants pocket was a leather full of sugar from the meat payoff. It was lousy with C notes, double sawbucks and other kinds of green and yellow frogheads—ten grand at least. I pouched it, along with the one Slim had boosted off me. All this time the redhead was talking:

"It's likely he did not tell you about Myrtle. She told me how he acted toward her, one day at the ranch. If I had known, right away, that he was getting fresh, I would have paid him off and knocked his ears down. As it was, I went out to Slim's camp and found that he was gone. So I cut sign and trailed him to a cabin in Perdidito Canyon—a rustlers' hideout. There I



found four corpses with automatic bullets in them. I knew, then, that he had 'reverted to type', as the crime experts say—

"Shucks, I knowed who he was. The sheriff of our county has his picture on a police poster; but I never said a word, believing Slim had reformed and would make a good citizen after what I'd done—saving his life and giving him a hideaway at Brushwood Tank—I tracked him to Santa Fe where I found he'd bought a railroad ticket to Chicago. I took an airplane and got there this morning.

"I would have had a hard time finding Slim," he said, "if a cop had not told me Slim would be sure to look up Ace Moldavi who is said to be in circulation around the Loop district. You wouldn't be this Ace Moldavi, would you?"

"I would," I told him in great haste. "But the name will be only a number unless I keep a very pressing engagement at a distant point."

I showed him the way out, which was *not* the stairway where Slim and me came in. Patsy Dugan's hotel specializes in personal service for guests who playfully wish a game of hide-and-seek at odd times. Being a friend of the management, I knew my way about.

**I**N a very few minutes, the redhead and me found ourselves on Clark street, which is more than a block from the hotel entrance. Citizens were hastening to and fro, paying no attention to us, other than raising their eyebrows and grinning at the redhead's high-heeled boots, which meant that they had spotted him as a stockyards cowboy.

We crossed Monroe Street, escaping a taxicab by the seat of our pants, and I, being anxious to miss a sudden appointment with the John Laws, drew up in front of a tall building, pretending that I had business to transact there.

"Will I be seeing you again?" I inquired, hinting coyly that a pleasant visit had come to an end.

"It is not probable," he sighed. "Well"—he held out his right hand, which is

half as big as a cold-storage ham—"I guess we have come to the fork in the road."

Now, I am superstitious about mitt-wrining. It is a silly custom that has brought bad luck to prominent persons who did not look their best in undertaking parlors. Still, I suppose that sort of thing is done among gents in the wild, open spaces where this redhead came from; and I am not one to display ignorance of foreign social habits.

So I slipped him my set of fives, and he clamped down firm, strong and friendly.

"Goodbye." The overgrown, crimson-topped mug, in his ignorant way, held onto me like I was a rich uncle in bad health. "And, by the way," he remarked as though thinking of something unimportant that had slipped his mind. "I reckon Slim did not mention that he took a lot of money from the four cow-thieves he downed. It is cash from the beef they stole off me and other cattlemen in the mesa country. Likely you did not notice—being excited that you put it in your right-hand coat pocket."

He was smiling, though nobody had cracked any jokes and nothing funny had happened, so far as I know. And he was so dumb that he did not notice that I tried to pull loose from him. He just kept on grinning while he reached into my poke and lifted the leather which I had taken from Slim for safekeeping purposes.

Doubtless it is a Western way to boost a friend if he owns something you crave; though why he did not take the Protective Association malarky also, while boosting me for the beef batwings, is something I can not figure out.

Being in a heavy sweat lest flatfeet and harness bulls come bouncing around the corner asking questions I was not inclined to answer, I wrinkled up the old hard pan into creases to show that I was in a jovial mood.

"I am absent-minded that way," I explained, as any honest man will do under the circumstances. My back was to a brick wall, and he was giving me the pump-handle action such as I have seen small-

town yokels hand to one another in motion pictures.

The redhead ungripped me, still wearing that peculiar grin, as though he was enjoying something or other.

"Come out and see me sometime," was his parting remark.

That is, doubtless, a Western way to invite a guest to your home and fireside; but I have done nothing about it yet. If Slim Pascoe could not stand the heat out there, I am practically certain the climate would do me no good whatever. Besides, I am not traveling great distances now, on account of a matter that happened a few minutes after the redhead left me.

**W**HILE I was hastening to the secret hideyhole where I am not annoyed by persons wishing to pry into my private affairs, a bevy of John Laws, all of them in harness, pounced on me.

"What is this?" I demanded, with indignation such as any citizen will feel when accused of deeds which he does not believe can be proved on him.

The big lard wearing a sergeant's badge, who was in charge of this roughhouse squad, told me:

"It is a pinch, in case you do not guess the answer in three tries."

"I am clean," I protested, feeling that I have avoided all appearance of evil by parking the gadget from my forearm in a storm sewer. There being nothing for this gadget to hold, after the redhead pouched my sleeve rod, I saw no reason to carry it any longer.

"That may be true," the sergeant agreed, having found my Protective Association collections in a hip poke of my pants. "I will look further and give you a report. You are also hot," he informed me, as though he had just thought of it.

Two of those Johns were holding me by the arms while the big lard cleaned me of kale. A fourth fanned me for hardware.

What was my chagrin when this gendarme who was fanning me turned up the rod which had been used to soften Slim Pascoe. He found it in my right-hand

coat pocket—the same one from which the redhead had lifted the leather full of meat malarky!

Now, I had not stashed that roscoe on my person. The last I had seen of it was when the redhead picked it off the floor in Slim Pascoe's room. So what happened took place in some such manner as this:

When the redhead placed his flipper in my coat pocket to boost the beef batwings, he must have planted that lady gun, which weighs no more than a fan-dancer's costume, believing I would enjoy a pleasant surprise, at some future date, to find so valuable an article which was supposed to be lost or stolen. It could not have occurred otherwise. Besides, this explanation is reasonable: I hear that a Western animal, named the Trade Rat, always leaves something to pay for whatever it carries away; and I have no doubt that the natives do likewise. This is an honest custom and I find no fault with it. However, it should be practiced only on those who understand the habit. Complications may arise from an unsuspecting person being in possession of property which is very hot. It happened to me.

No matter how loud I beefed that I will dumfound them with my innocence, those strong-arm bulls rushed me to the rowdy-gow while they added up the score.

This score showed nothing but base hits for the coppers: Eight empty shells ejected from a special .25 automatic, found around and about the corpse of Slim Pascoe, were a perfect fit for the special .25 automatic roscoe which had been turned up on my person. Moreover, those eight shells accounted for the number missing from the clip, which contained two unexploded cartridges; and they tallied with a census of punctures in Slim's hide.

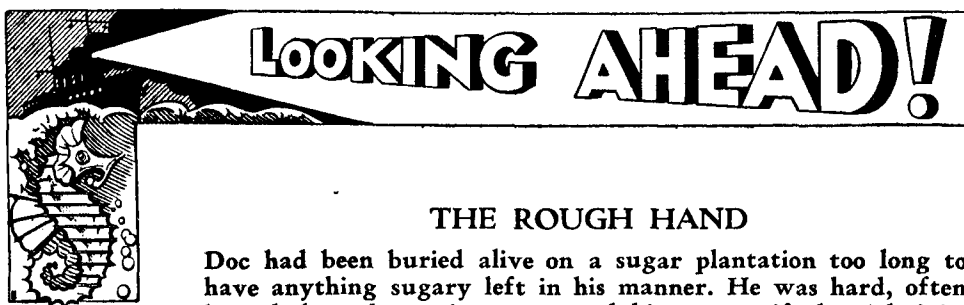
**I** HAVE explained to the precinct captain, and all other crimechasers who listen, that the party whose fingerprints appear with mine on that peewee roscoe is an important citizen in New Mexico who will prove self-defense for me; but the only reply I get for dishing this useful

information is a vulgar sound such as low characters utter when they do not believe, or heartily disapprove, something. So if this redhead does not show up to prove that I speak the truth, my mouthpiece tells me, I must retire from business for so long a time that all my Protective Association Syndicate customers will forget me.

While it is true that I am in a jam because of a quaint Western custom which requires that an object shall be deposited to take the place of some article you have lifted, I do not hold a grudge against the burly redhead. What burns me is that the

Big Lard and his roughhouse squad did not know Slim Pascoe had been cooked until after they had checked me in at the klink. Those flatties picked me up on complaint of a certain fish merchant who wished to dog the premiums he was paying to my Protective Association Syndicate—such a squawk as can be squared with a fix and a few potatoes placed in the right places.

There should be a law to protect a citizen against being held for murder when he is arrested for committing only a slight misdemeanor.



### THE ROUGH HAND

Doc had been buried alive on a sugar plantation too long to have anything sugary left in his manner. He was hard, often brutal, but the natives respected him—even if the Administrators didn't. Then the big boss sent down a couple of kids from up North to run things. And Doc discovered that misunderstanding sometimes leads to mutiny. A complete novelet by

RICHARD WORMSER

### THE WONDERFUL LIPS OF THIBONG LINH

A War-time Legionnaire turned spy is lured from the martial affairs of France by the lovely châtelaine of an ancient goddess—a diminutive idol, a mummified little lady who can speak only the truth. To a Legionnaire with lost treasure on his mind she, and her beautiful keeper, are an influence that sways the tide of war. A complete Thibaut Corday novelet by

THEODORE ROSCOE

### THE CLAN OF KIRK

The blood of a champion flowed in the two Kirk boys, and they played football like champions. They played as one man until one Kirk grew too big for his helmet. And from then on they played as enemies. It took a Kirk to help the Kirks. A distinguished short story by

WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—DECEMBER 4th