

Take Your Punishment

By PAUL O'NEIL

Remember, George Branson: It takes half a lifetime to find out what the old man meant

GEORGE BRANSON had entered the police station, casually, many times during his life; but now, with fear giving him perception, he realized that he had hardly seen it. He had never really noticed the harsh smell of disinfectant, the rickety, dusty old chandeliers, the drafty cold of the place.

He shivered, some part of him which had grown soft during the easy years quailing as he crossed the desolate marble floor. The jail, upstairs, would be worse.

The desk sergeant had his cap on the back of his head. His uniform coat, unbuttoned, hung open just enough to disclose the shiny leather of a shoulder holster. He needed a shave and his beefy hands were dirty. He stared at George Branson for a moment and then asked, "What's your name?" as if he had been affronted.

George Branson was overcome with a helpless wish to please this gross man, to make him smile the way you wanted to make the school bully smile when you were a kid.

He gave his name politely. The policeman scribbled briefly, looked up again, and then turned, with infinite boredom, to stare out the window. There was a billboard across the street and the desk sergeant appeared to be looking at it. George Branson looked at it, too. He read it twice, carefully.

The desk sergeant turned his head slowly, in irritation, and said, "You can sit down on that bench."

He sat down. It was early in the morning, and there was little noise. A door banged somewhere along an echoing corridor, and in the basement a motorcycle

exhaust roared for a few seconds, accenting the silence. The desk sergeant found a match and sucked on it.

The awful loneliness which George Branson had been fighting swept over him. He had an expensive automobile, and his overcoat was new and from a good tailor, and his wife's name was sometimes in the society sections. But none of these things could protect him now.

George Branson had not thought of his father save in a vague, momentary way, for twenty years. Both he and the town his father had known were changed. Their beginnings were almost forgotten, now, in the years which had brought the city theaters and traffic and plate-glass show windows, and had made him successful and conservative and heavy.

But in this moment of need George Branson, closing his eyes, remembered how his old man had died. He'd almost forgotten that boyhood phrase—his old man. Travail sharpens the memory. He'd been sixteen, awkward and gangling. Scenes and sounds and smells from that day came back to him, sharp and nostalgic.

THE town had sprawled on the frontier. He remembered the mills on Front Street, the smell of newly cut fir and of tidewater, the scream of the saws. There had been dirt streets, ankle deep in muck when it rained, wooden sidewalks, saloon doors, horses drooping in buggy harness, and squat Coast Indians beaching their canoes. It had been a tough town.

His old man had died of a gunshot wound, a forty-five slug through the back. He'd died stretched out on the green plush sofa which Mrs. Rose Madsen, a mill man's wife, had shipped around the Horn. His old man had been the town marshal. He remembered how Ad Schram, the saloonkeeper, had come running into the

house that night to say, breathlessly, "They want you down at Madsen's, sonny. Your pa's hurt bad."

He had felt one great, dizzying surge of faintness when he walked into the lamp-lit room and heard the old man's breathing. But his father said, sharply, "Kid. Ain't you ever around when you're wanted?" just like he had a hundred times.

He wasn't scared, then. He was bewildered. The old man lay there, breathing hard, looking at him. Then the old man said, talking with sudden difficulty:

"Kid—you just take—your punishment like a man."

He hadn't quite understood that, hadn't seen the broad meaning his father might have intended for the words. But the old man didn't say anything more and in a few minutes he was dead.

No, he hadn't understood, then, but now he was reaching back through the forgotten years to borrow strength.

His father's words had sharp, hard meaning now; and because they had, George Branson found himself remembering his father with a startling clarity.

The things he knew about his old man's early life he had pieced together from casual talk. His father had grown up in Montana. He'd been a roustabout in a saloon, and then he'd punched cattle. But by the time he was twenty he had been a peace officer.

Men on the dodge drifted back and forth over the northern border in those days. A gunman who wore a star was either dead or possessed of a reputation in a hurry. His old man had stayed alive longer than most. There weren't many towns left that needed men like him when they'd come out to the Coast.

George Branson remembered how his old man could go for a gun. His father had kept the inside of his holster coated with talcum powder, to cut down friction; and he practiced that draw every day of his life, the revolver blurring into his hand like magic. He hadn't been a big man. But his eyes were bright and cold and blue,

with a hint of fanaticism, and you sensed, in every move he made, a quick, deadly efficiency.

They made storybook heroes out of men like his father these days; but George Branson, living in the same house as a kid, had never seen anything unusual about him.

He'd never liked the old man. Right and wrong had been as sharply divided, in his father's mind, as black and white. The old man had never lost his temper, but he had meted out punishment to his son as inflexibly as he had enforced the law. There had been no appeal, no reasoning, no middle ground.

George Branson had always envied the other kids for the way their families treated them. He thought about that, realizing how the habits of his boyhood, harshly learned, had endured.

They had become a part of him, as real as his flesh.

HE HAD never conquered his resentment to realize how his old man's code had been forged by the hard years. George Branson remembered, with a little start, that he was fifty-five, now, three years older than his old man had been on the night of his death. The knowledge of his old man's courage kindled a hard pride in him.

The Brady gang had killed his old man. There had been twelve or fifteen of them, a tough, sullen, desperate lot, who wanted to take the town over. His father's reputation had stopped them for a long time.

But one night—the night his father died—they cleaned out a saloon and left two men dead in the sawdust by the bar. The old man, cutting across lots, got there too late, but he knew where to find the Brady gang.

He knew, and so he went there alone, with the direct, unhurried efficiency that had always governed him. And he found the Brady gang.

They were in a tumbledown barn on the edge of town. There was a candle guttering on the floor, and they were standing

behind it, waiting. The old man walked in with his thumbs hooked in his belt, and smiled and said, softly,

"Any of you monkeys packin' a wagon?"

There were minutes of silence. Then one of the gang walked around behind the old man. His father had stood like a rock with that man behind him. After a while another of the crowd came forward, with sweat on his face, and laid a revolver down by the candle. So did three more. But one of the four, with another gun in his pocket, moved into the shadows and shot the old man in the back.

He died for his brashness. The old man, kicked halfway around by the awful impact of that slug, shot his attacker through the lungs before he hit the floor. The Brady gang carried both of them into town.

"Take your punishment like a man," the old man had said.

The desk sergeant called, "Branson!"

George Branson stood up slowly. A jailer led him through a swinging door and into an elevator. After the elevator had stopped he stood looking around a barred enclosure. It was not a nice place, the jail. He thought, shaken, how it would be to pace behind bars enduring the endless passage of hours. Somewhere, down a barred alley, a drunk was yelling incoherently. George Branson squared his shoulders.

He was standing like that when they brought his son out of a cell.

George Branson found the will to look at the boy, his hope, the vessel into which his pride had poured, with detachment; to say, harshly "I could bail you out. Perhaps I could smooth this over. But I'm not—not this time. You'll have to take your punishment." Then he said softly, like a man saying a prayer, "Remember this in forty years."

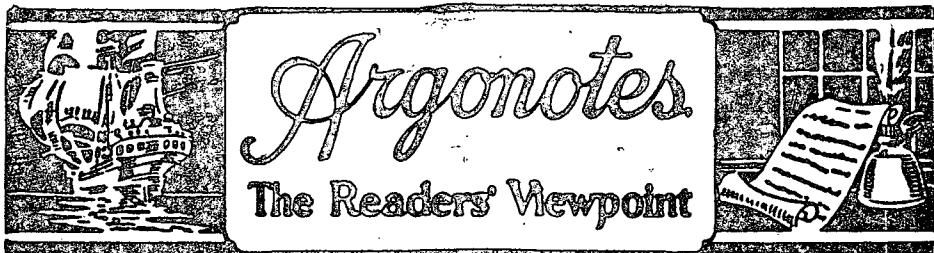
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ONE correspondent arrives this week with a song on his lips and in his mind a vast scheme for improving ARGOSY. It is a scheme calculated to plunge the editors and a large number of authors into feverish activity; and its originator has outlined it at such length that we're going to step aside at once and let you get into the letter. Afterward we may attempt a brief rebuttal.

A. L.

I wonder what's become of your Peter the Brazen, Singapore Sammy, Gillian Hazeltine, Rusty Sabin (remember "The White Indian"), John Solomon, Madame Storey, Tizzo (remember "The Firebrand"), Ivor Kildare ("The Naked Blade"), Jimmie Cordie et al, Smooth Kyle (the guy who drove the "Midnight Taxi"—remember?), Bill Peepe (Fred MacIsaac's cockeyed press agent), and many other old-time ARGOSY characters (Semi Dual and Zorro, to name a couple of more) who seemingly have passed into a limbo of mixed type and recalcitrant authors.

Has it never occurred to you, Messieurs the editors, that you might have erred in so blithely consigning these hoary favorites to the scrap heap? In the current ARGOSY, an Argonotes writer plaintively asks for stories about China referring specifically to Peter the B. and Cordie; and you reply—in quite as plaintive a tone—that those writers are now in with the slicks.

Well, all right. Suppose they are. So what?

So the logical thing to do would be to get two other writers to write Chinese stories a la Brent and a la Wirt. The author supplanting Brent would have to invent a new character similar to Peter the Brazen—say, Barry the Brassy—and be able to write frolicsome stories of modern China in the light and airy vein that characterized the writing of George F. Worts (or Loring Brent, if you will). It would be a hard job to find such a writer, I'll admit, but not an impossible one. Alfred Batson, with the proper training, would have been able to fill the shoes of Brent-Worts.

The important thing is that the new character—Barry the Brassy—be as much of a handsome, devil-may-care Hairbreadth Harry as was Peter the B. And, of course, Barry would need a girl friend to be to him what madcap Susan O'Gilvie was to Pete. Similarly, the writer replacing Wirt would hang flesh on the skeletons of Jimmie Cordie, Red Dolan, the Fighting Yid, and company and so create new roysterers who would cut throats in Northern China a la Cordie.

Suppose that H. Bedford-Jones has run out of ideas for John Solomon (as he certainly must have, after all these years). Well, okay; get some new writer to either continue the John Solomon yarns or create a new character to replace John S.

I realize as well as anybody that the ARGOSY of the early 1930's was in danger of being almost completely stereotyped because of the vast amount of "character" literature that was published; and I appreciate what the present editors have done in cutting down this plethora of character stories. But it was a mistake to cut down so thoroughly. Being editors, you must realize the tremendous force that character stories exert in holding readers—circulation. He who follows the adventures of an ARGOSY character does so as avidly as a ten-year-old follows the adventures of Flash Gordon in the Sunday comic strips. I write from experience.

But enough of this twaddle about character stories. I say print more of them, but always bear in mind that there is a delicate equilibrium between character and non-character stories. Let us on to speak of other things.

For example, let us consider the new editors (or is it editor? I am always confounded by the editorial "we" used in Argonotes). Fear not, editor(s); all that I have to say is of a highly laudatory nature (Ah! Are those sighs of relief which I seem to hear?).

The present staff has shown a very fine flair for discovering new writers which has been unheard of on the ARGOSY since the days of Bob Davis. Charles Rice MacDowell, William Gray Beyer, Howard Rigsby, Eric North, and other newcomers have been real finds.

I can't think of anything else. Your inside illustrations are swell, your covers are bad and