

# The Sooper Speaking

By  
EDGAR  
WALLACE



Illustrated  
by  
T. D.  
SKIDMORE

Miss Pinder, a very  
pretty girl, called at  
my lodgings one  
night

WHEN people get short on topics of conversation they say to me, "Sooper, you ought to write a book." And I always say, "I got no time." Anyway, superintendents of police don't write books. They know too much. And, besides, I can't spell. Never could. There was a woman down at Wembley who used to throw my uneducation in my face every time I pinched her husband. He *was* educated. Wrote five hands, all different. And there was a lady down in Kent who used to report me regular to the chief commissioner because I didn't say "my lady" to her—wife of a city sheriff or something. Anyway, she never asked me why I didn't write a book. She knew I was low.

In my young days police constables didn't have to do much more than read and write. The only etiquette they were supposed to know was never to give backchat to their superiors or argue with a man who threatened to punch 'em on the nose. But nowadays, when everybody's gone scientific and lots of policemen speak French, a chap like me would have no chance of promotion.

I got where I got on merit, as I was explaining to Mr. Frank Dewsbury one night. I often tell people this, otherwise they wouldn't know, but would be thinking I got my promotion because the chief was sorry for me.

Mr. Dewsbury is a man I respect very highly. Once upon a time I didn't respect him, because he was a stockbroker and wasn't rich. I used to think he drank or abused other good habits, but apparently there was nothing wrong with him. He had a house in Elsmere Gardens, and some nights when I had nothing better to do I used to go in and have a chat with him. That's how I discovered he didn't drink—I'd take four whiskies to his two. So you might say he was almost a teetotaler. He was a tall young man, nearly as tall as me, a good looker, a bit of a boxer, and he was an officer in the Territorials. He had a high respect for me—in fact, he was as intelligent a young man as you could wish to meet.

BUT he wasn't rich. So far as I could discover, there are quite a lot of people on the Stock Exchange who haven't got a million. He was one of them. His uncle was Mr. Elijah Larmer. I was sorry to hear this, because Larmer and I have never been boy friends. He is a man as old as me, but he hasn't worn as well.

Larmer owns most of West Kensington—land and estates to him are what back gardens are to me and you. He lives on the outskirts of my division in a big, dirty-looking house that is so surrounded by shrubs and trees that you can hardly see it from the roadway. Rich? That man could buy the Bank of England and still have enough money left to buy a lunch.

The first time I met him professionally was twelve years ago. He was the kind of man who liked to have a lot of ready money at his hand. I don't say that he distrusted banks, but in the estate agent's business, especially in his early days, most of the deals were done with ready money. He had a big strongroom built in his basement, and he often had as much currency as a hundred thousand pounds in that safe room of his. And naturally, being the mean old fellow, when he had that strongroom made he got the cheapest builder and the cheapest safe maker and used cut-price material.

Mean? He was so mean he used to count the pits in an orange. When they put the new heating into St. Asaph's Church he went twice a day to save his own gas.

As I say, I came into touch with him over this new strongroom of his. It was only a strongroom to a child with a wooden spade. When Harry Pinford went after it with a kit of tools it was the weakest strongroom you could imagine. They cut a hole through the strongest part of it one night and got away with eight thousand pounds.

"What are the police for?" he says to me (I was acting inspector at the

time) when I went to see the job. "Are they ornaments? I pay rates and taxes to be protected. Look at that strongroom! Burgled under the nose of the police!"

I pointed out that it was under his own nose too. I showed him the rotten lock on the kitchen door and the cheap fastenings on the pantry window and the burglar alarm that didn't go off because he'd been too mean to keep the batteries in order. He reported me for impertinence and threatened to have me broken. He got so that he used to think I was responsible. I took Harry about three weeks afterward, but he'd planted the money. Larmer was like a lunatic when he didn't get his eight thousand back. He had a new steel door fitted and new burglar alarms.

"My uncle," said Mr. Dewsbury, "is difficult."

He was being very difficult with young Dewsbury, who was his uncle's broker. Larmer did quite a lot of specu-

lating on the Stock Exchange and made money. And he had quite a number of friends who also did their business through Frank Dewsbury.

Frank was doing well when he met a girl, Miss Margaret Pinder, the daugh-

*The moral is,  
never count your  
wedding presents  
till after the wed-  
ding!*

ter of a man who had once caught old Larmer over a law deal. Larmer didn't know anything about the engagement for a long time. When he did he sent for Frank.

"What's this dam' nonsense about the Pinder girl?" he said. "I'd sooner see you dead than married to the daughter of that old crook Joe Pinder."

"I'm very fond of her," said Frank. "In fact, I'd sooner be dead than not marry her. Be reasonable, Uncle Elijah—Betty is not responsible for her father's actions. Besides, he's dead."

"Naturally he's dead," snarled old Larmer, who had a working arrangement with Providence, "but his daughter's alive! Didn't Joe Pinder play the dirtiest trick on me? Wasn't he a crooked-minded twister? . . ." And so forth and so on.

I HAPPENED to drop in to dinner the night after. There was Frank pretending not to care, and there was Betty, a very pretty, straight-backed girl who wasn't crying over the business but was looking rather serious. There was a sort of aunt there too. She spoke at intervals, saying the things she'd like to do to Mr. Larmer. Most of 'em were strictly illegal.

"He's taking his business away from me, and I suppose his friends will do the same," said Frank. "He's also cutting me out of his will—"

"That doesn't mean a lot," said Betty. "He told you he was only leaving you a thousand pounds—all his money is going to mental hospitals."

"If I had my way with him," said the aunt, who was a God-fearing woman who wore a gold cross around her neck and a copper cross on her waist, "I'd boil him in oil. A man like that doesn't deserve to live."

She was Betty's aunt.

I've naturally got a very soft place for young people. They want all the sympathy that we old chaps can give 'em. They're so darned foolish. I never see a young man that I don't think of him as an oyster who's mislaid his shell. At the same time, I never thought I should lower myself to be sorry for a stockbroker. He was a good soldier—he was in the war at sixteen—and a good amateur theatrical player, and they tell me the way he handled a tennis racket would make Lenglen look like Cousin Jane from the country. But I doubt if he was a good stockbroker. I don't know what kind of brain you've got to have to be a good stockbroker, but he







Illustrated by  
OTHO  
CUSHING

# The Decoration

A Short Short Story

By EDMUND  
LEAMY



The mail arrived and Toddles grabbed excitedly at a letter addressed to himself

TODDLES wanted a decoration, a military decoration. He dreamed of the Victoria Cross—the highest honor England confers on her fighting sons—or the Military Cross, a lesser glory. Of course it was ridiculous, for Toddles was corpulent and sweaty under the African sun.

He had a plantation in Uganda, but six months after the World War broke out he abandoned his place and sailed for England. A few of his friends saw him off and laughed. Fancy "Fat Sow" going to London to enlist!

But we who laughed didn't know his dreams.

You see, there was a girl—there usually is—and Toddles wanted to be a hero in her eyes. Which is the way of young men, fat or lean, or in between.

He arrived in England and joined the colors, a tear in his eyes as he took the oath. And then short leave. And a girl proud and smiling.

Old Fat Sow a soldier—laughable! She kissed Toddles. "When you win your spurs you'll find me waiting," she said a little hysterically, the last night they were together before he went to camp, and kissed him again.

And Toddles took that—rightly—to mean a decoration.

He was too late for the much prized Mons Star—but no man is ever too late for the V. C. or the M. C.

He got a commission, suddenly found himself singled out for detail to an officers' training school and there got his star as a second lieutenant.

Then the British War Office—which sometimes did rational things—ordered him back to Uganda.

"You know the language and the ways of the black men out there," said the pompous individual who gave him his marching orders, "and you're a good parade-ground officer. We are transferring you to the depot at Bombo, pro-

moting you to first lieutenant, and there you will be occupied drilling and training recruits."

"But I don't want to—to drill or train recruits," stammered Toddles. "I came all the way from there to fight."

He might as well have saved his breath. The next issue of the Official Gazette contained the news of Toddles' transfer and his promotion.

The night before he sailed he got slightly blotto. His vain girl had been unnecessarily cruel: "I should think if you had argued your case well enough they would have let you go to France."

That stung. Toddles took it as a reflection on his personal courage. But with the able assistance of "Johnny Walker" he later cheered up. He had plenty of friends in Africa. There was fighting out there too. He'd do a little wangling and in no time he'd find himself attached to a combatant unit. He tumbled into bed later to dream of capturing, single-handed, German positions.

and awoke with a bad head the next morning, just as the M. C. was being pinned on his now not quite so fat chest. It must be said that the regimental headquarters at Bombo, Uganda, is a nice post. There is comfort there and good food and better wines. Also it is not too far from the club in Kampala and the flesh pots. Many a lad would have been glad to be assigned to the post, war or no war. But Toddles had no sooner arrived than he began pulling wires. Among those whom he approached was myself. "Help me," said Toddles, "to get in the war."

"M'lud," said I, "what's the matter with Bombo?"

"Don't be an ass!" said Toddles.

So I did what I could, and in due course Toddles was sent down into the field resplendent in new khaki and flushed with high hopes.

To everyone's amazement he proved to

be a good soldier, always ready for dirty jobs, and they couldn't keep him from volunteering for every bit of extra-dangerous work which cropped up.

"In fact," said his colonel one night at the club, "I think the chap's a bit batty."

Batty or not, Toddles was a brave man. Once he led a charge, with only a walking stick as a weapon, and came through miraculously. Another time, alone and single-handed, he captured a machine-gun nest and took five prisoners. Still another time, when the battalion was cornered, he slipped through the enemy lines, disguised as a Shenzi native, and brought reinforcements. For this last he won his captaincy and a spell of leave.

He came up to my place to spend his furlough, and one night he waxed bitter.

"Damn it all," said Toddles, in his cups, "does a blighter have to get himself blotted to get a ribbon on his chest?" (And so I learned what was bothering Fat Sow.)

In the morning he did not remember that he had shown his hand. . . .

THE following night a young captain named Weekes dropped in for dinner. He was the man who had succeeded Toddles at Bombo.

I didn't care particularly for Weekes, but in Africa one ran an open house, especially during the days of the war. Toddles and he didn't hit it off.

"Fawney," said Weekes, adjusting his monocle and peering at Toddles—"fawney your jumping out of Bombo—to muck it in the gubba."

"Yes," said Toddles, unconsciously imitating him—"just fawney." . . .

I was glad that Weekes went home early. . . .

Two days later Toddles returned to his regiment. But before he left he told me something I had not known about

Weekes up to that time. Weekes was also a friend of Toddles' girl.

"I know she likes me," said Fat Sow, "and I know she likes him. But I'm afraid she may like him more."

I answered him with his own favorite expression. "Don't be an ass," I said. He grinned.

"Why," I said, "what girl would prefer him to you?" (I meant it.)

Toddles cased along. I went with him to the boat which was to take him across Victoria Nyanza to Kisumu. "If you don't watch out, when you get back into things down there, they'll be pinning the M. C. on you," I said.

He didn't answer. He thought I was being facetious. He didn't like it.

"Well, so long," I said.

"Kwa heri," said Fat Sow. . . .

The next news I had of him he was dreadfully wounded.

He had been on a reconnaissance patrol. And, as was usual with him, he had left his men behind in safety. He had walked blindly into a trap. Carrying a couple of Mills bombs and a rifle, he had taken cover and had returned the fire of forty men.

Somehow he had driven them off. They had never guessed there was no one with him. And a black corporal of his own battalion had found him later.

Toddles had been shot through the shoulder, several times through the left arm, once in the right leg, and a bullet had plowed its way along his chest.

He was not expected to live. But live Toddles did, and survived to be sent back to Bombo with only one arm and a waistline considerably shrunken. There he found himself subordinate to Weekes, who was now acting adjutant.

The situation, of course, was intolerable, and I went out one night to dinner with him at the mess to talk things over. He wanted more than anything else to be returned to the field, where lay that decoration.

"Hang it all," he said, "the left arm's nothing. I don't have to hold a rifle. It'd be different if I were an askari on special duty."

The mail arrived while we were at dinner. Toddles grabbed excitedly at an envelope addressed to himself, tore it across, skimmed through it hurriedly, then handed it to me and sort of slumped in his chair.

Dully I read it. Toddles was being retired from the service. On his breast would never shine the decoration he had craved! As I sat silently biting into my cigar, wondering what to say, a shrill, excited voice made us all look up—Weekes speaking:

"I say, chaps, what do you know!" Quoting from a letter: "For meritorious service in drilling and equipping native recruits for the field, I've been awarded the Military Cross!"