

# A Tale of Hoffmann

By H.C. Witwer

**Reel twelve of "Bigger and Better"—featuring Jack King in a comedy of calamity and sudden wealth**

**I**N ORDER to pile up a education without the wear and tear of going to college, my dear, I been infesting the public library of late getting a load of the classicals. The other night I inhaled Kenilworth; viz., a pungent scenario throwed by a lad named Sir Walter Scott and he says: "Ambition lures men to ruin!" That's out.

Ambition's what runs the splinters into the lumber yards. It's what put them airplanes over your head, them sweetly purring horseless vehicles at the entrance to them sixty-story skyscrapers, that telephone at your elbow, that radio at your ear, a million other gadgets at your beck and call for your ease, comfort and enjoyment, and finally put the talking picture on the screen. It set Columbus aboard ship, Lincoln in the White House, Peary at the Pole, Lindbergh in Paris, sent Byrd to the Antarctic and the Graf Zeppelin across the ocean. It makes a street digger a construction foreman and a living unidentified body suddenly the talk of the world. Without ambition we'd still be swinging from tree to tree and throwing coconuts at each other. Fool around with *that* for a while!

Let's take the effect of ambition on Jack King for today's text. A little soft music, Professor.

**J**ACK KING'S now president of Royal Sight & Sound Productions, which controls Voxatone, the voice reproduction sensation which knocked the other talking gags for a loop and made him and his smart original backers well-to-do millionaires. All voices is kosher on Voxatone, mind you, from the piping

tremolos of some of our uptown male stars to the hoarse croakings of some of our dainty lady peasant-killers. All they got to do is speak their piece, Voxatone does the rest—and how!

But before Jackie stumbled into this gold mine as the result of a good deed—bread cast on the waters which returned as angel cake—he was a flashy box fighter and I was his pilot. A hair-raising bout with the welterweight champ, which Jack knocked cold only to have the bell rob him of a knockout, win him a movie portfolio as co-star in a big sporting talkie with Fay Daniels, his promised spouse and the ace trouper of Colossal Productions. To the amazement of all concerned, this hokum opera broke box-office records from the wind-bound coast of Florida to the gin-bound coast of California, so my battler immediately swelled up like a boil, read himself out of the jab-and-grab racket and went movie.

When Jack heard what his picture had grossed for Colossal he bit all his nails off, gnashed the finest set of teeth that money could buy and yelled that hereafter he'd produce his own epics. Hey, hey! So thusly was born Royal Sight & Sound Productions; headquarters in Hollywood, assets in Jack's mind. Though sane in other respects, the boy producer intended playing all the leading parts himself. What a boy!

At the time of Jackie's seizure, lads and lassies, I was looking after the business affairs of the comely Queenie Davis; namely, the latest discovery of me and Colossal. She was their pride and my bride. Another member of the same stable was Kempton Calhoun, born Peter Dugan, and I'll state I'm glad he changed it, for this chiseler was a disgrace to that good old Irish name. He was a hero in reel life and a villain in *real* life, in love with Fay Daniels and loathing Jack for beating his time with that charmer. So far, the noisies seemed to have Calhoun licked, for though he was built like a heavyweight contender and played two-fisted heman in front of the camera his voice belonged in a young ladies' finishing school and no place else!

**W**HILE Jackie's casting about for a lot to put under his studio, he got another one of the lucky breaks which begin when he fell out of the cradle and landed on all fours instead of on his head—though they's times when he acts different. His ad in the papers for parking space brung him a visit from a snappy realtor representing the three-thousandth subdivision on the outskirts of Los Angeles. This go-getter's card read:

George Q. Escrow, Real Estate  
"A Lot for a Little"

"Our plot is actually within the city limits," says the dirt salesman.

"Me-Yah!" sniffs Jack. "That's mean—less out here. They's signs a thousand miles in all directions from this slab which reads, 'Los Angeles City Limits.' I hear they's one on the main street of Portland."

"Ha, ha, ha!" the peddler of soil yesses him. "You boys *will* have your little joke. Now, the advantages I have to offer—"

"Listen, brother—my magnificent studio's got to go up in Hollywood and not in none of them funny suburbs which basks in that magic name," Jack cuts him off.

"But, my dear man," says Mr. Escrow, which had a great line, "surely you know that Hollywood is no longer the capital of the film industry. For

obvious reasons, the legend is kept alive. But where are the majority of the big studios actually located? Burbank, Culver City, Lankershim, Santa Monica and Fox Hills, with others moving away from here all the time. Before long, Hollywood, the goal of the panting screen-struck and the gaping tourist, will be just another town."

Facts always made Jack thoughtful, children, and while he's silent before this barrage of cold turkey the agent plays his ace.

"Now, Mr. King, we are anxious to make our development the finest and most popular within forty-five minutes of downtown Los Angeles," he says. "To have a moving picture studio there will naturally boom the sale of all adjoining tracts. Realizing this, we are ready to make you an offer that you cannot well refuse. Put up your plant in our subdivision, let us advertise that and launch a super-selling campaign, and the ground is yours for nothing!"

"Sold!" yells Jack, leaping from his chair. "By a odd coincidence that price fits right in with my budget."

"When do you begin to build?" asks Santa Claus.

"The minute I can tune in on a contractor with a streak of gamblin' blood in him," says Jack.

**B**UT as he had more than a hundred grand in the bank, good people, picks and shovels was flying in less than two weeks. So much for that.

Well, to save the expense of buying one, me, Fay, Queenie and Jack all went to work on the first story Jackie was to make into a talkie which would goal the exhibitors. The continuity was a fearful thing when finished, as even Jack's warmest admirer—i. e., himself—admitted, but never the less he was determined to photograph it. He was the dashing hero and they was everything in it but the Battle of the Marne and the Johnstown Flood, what I mean. The next thing was to arrange for a voice reproducer and that's where my boy friend hit the first of the grief in the path of the independent manufacturer of speakies.

Jackie swiftly discovered that all the sound gimmicks then on the market was far too costly for his bankroll or else they rasped on the ear like the early talking-machine records used to do. He finally went in a huddle with Melbourne Maxim; to wit, the world-famous director and our right-hand man. Maxim give him a Bronx cheer.

"I'm afraid, my boy, you've bitten off more than you can masticate," he says. "To begin with, where will you find a theater equipped for sound pictures that doesn't belong to one of the big mergers? And you know the average independent small-town exhibitor is in no financial position to wire his house—he's hanging on by his teeth as it is. In your case, Jack, speech is silver, silence is golden! Your only hope is to make a good, old-fashioned *silent* movie that will stand on its merits alone as a first-class picture, or if you *do* make a speakie, you must get a release through one of the best known organizations."

"That's easy," remarks Jack airily. "So is walking a tight rope," answers Maxim, with a curl of his lip.

Well, Jack King's next move was to personally elect officers for Royal Sight & Sound Productions, and after a two-day conference with himself he proudly showed me the following list:

President, Jack King  
Treasurer, J. Joseph King



Illustrated by  
R. Van Buren

"If you think I shall make an ass of myself by strutting before that idiotic contraption, you're crazy!" Calhoun throws at Jack



Secretary, J. King  
General Manager, John J. King  
Vice-President, Mr. King

"Who's chairman of the board of directors?" I asks, with a sarcastical grin.

"That's a job I saved for myself, Funny Face," says Mr. King calmly, "along with the billet of studio manager."

**WELL**, gentle reader, good luck's got Lon Chaney cheated when it comes to disguises and many's the guy has passed up lifetime opportunities simply because they wasn't labeled as such. In the case of Monsieur King, fortune descended on him in the garb of a peniless, poor old man, the good angel which looks after fools arranging the contact for Jack. It's a small world after all, as the worm in the bean remarked to his chum.

The old gent which was to become world famous under the name of Aaron Hoffmann—his own, by a strange freak of chance—had worked with Jack in that thing my playmate starred in with Fay Daniels and was one of the scores of odd characters which makes Hollywood different. In the movie he'd played a aged storekeeper of the decrepit nationality and he behaved like said store was really his own and matters was real and not scenario. He tended the joint with loving care, disregarding completely the false back frame and seeing only the genuine front, sweeping it out, arranging his prop stock and beamingly waiting on customers which existed only in his mind. This, mark you, when no cameras was clicking whatsoever.

Odd times he potted around in the work shops, inventing little gimmicks to save time in set-building and the like. For this he got no cash at all and for credit he was christened a nut by the eggs which pronounces it "fillum." I bet today old Aaron Hoffmann and Edison could have many's the laugh together! A nut, hey? Well, listen my children and you shall hear:

Jack run into the old bird on the boulevard one day and he was as broke as a preliminary boy's nose. He looked like the Ancient Mariner with his sailor's license took away from him. He was certainly what the Lambs Club actors calls "at leisure," so my buddy broke out with a attack of generosity and made him a present of a job as gate tender at his brand-new studio. With tears in his eyes Aaron says he'll repay this boy scout some day—and I wish to Kansas City it had been *me* which had given him a job!

Well, as the driller remarked, old Aaron took to his portfolio at Jackie's studio like the bootleggers took to prohibition. The first one in sight at sunrise, he was the last to sign off at night. With the run of the carpenter shop, the drum where the mechanical effects was cooked up, and every other place where he could "invent" in his spare time, he was happier than the word itself.

However, to speed up this case: Jack was finally talked out of playing the handsome hero in his own movie, which he swore would be so hot it would burn down a theater here and there. So with the main hindrance to his success—to wit, himself—out of the way, he begin

to shop for a leading man. You can stroll down Hollywood Boulevard up to your ears in leading men, customers, but what Jack needed was a box-office card—a "name." This was a horse from a different merry-go-round, so him and his forthcoming spouse, Fay Daniels, convened on this snag.

"Kempton Calhoun's contract with Colossal runs out next week and it's not to be renewed," Fay says suddenly.

"Three rousin' cheers!" returns Jackie, which naturally enough was far from infatuated with the baby which tried to make Fay just something out of his reach. "But what's that prancin' banana's troubles to *me*?"

"Well," murmurs Fay, idly toying with Jack's coat lapel, which, of course, always means "Gimme," "it's—it's too bad you're enemies, for he is a good actor, Jack, and still a big name and I mean you should have no personal feeling against him—*now*. Really, he has a lot of good points."

"So has a porcupine," snarls Jackie. "What are you doin' in his corner?"

"If you could sign him for the lead in your picture, it would practically assure its success," says Fay, putting on the chill. "That's my only interest. It's a matter of business, pure and simple."

**WELL**, growls Jack, "I ain't simple enough to hire a guy which craves to see me layin' down in a dress suit, with my hands across my chest!"

"Just think!" Fay goes on excitedly. "You could heap coals of fire on Calhoun's head by giving him an engagement now, when he's been practically

thrown out by Colossal. And besides, he'd be so anxious to get even with them he'd give you a grand show. I'm no Miss Fix-It, but don't let an old enmity interfere with your success, dear."

"I guess you know best, Gorgeous," sighs Jack. "I know I'm crazy to do this, but send for that ape and I'll hire him."

So that's how Kempton Calhoun, Jack's old-time menace, become the star of the kid's super-gigantic. At first Calhoun hee-hawed at the idea, which seemed to strike him as a yell, but all at once he appeared to get plenty interested and bounded over to sign the articles with a grin. I'll have you know his weekly take was important, not counting tips. Queenie, Melbourne Maxim and them, which, of course, knew Jack and Calhoun got along like Puss and Rover, nearly swooned when they got a order of this, but Fay told 'em not to worry as bygones had all of a sudden become bygones. That's what *she* thought!

From the very first day, kiddies, Calhoun acted like the studio was a cannibal island and he was king, what I mean.

Old Aaron Hoffmann seemed to be more of a eyesore to Calhoun than anybody else and he rode the poor old man and laughed at his inventions till teeth was heard gnashing all over the lot. The big stiff knew nobody would spoil that pan of his while the movie was being shot, and being a hound he acted like one. Between him and Jack they was simply a cold, dangerous politeness. They met seldom and spoke less.

The first rushes we viewed was noth-

ing to go mad about and even the projection-room yes-man was hard put to it to see something which would rock the industry in the mess. The rest of the cast sold their stuff like the seasoned, union troupers they was, but Kempton Calhoun, the salesladies' delight, was a fearful bust, I wouldn't kid you. Why, boys and girls, in places he seemed like a correspondence-school actor whose last two lessons had become lost in the mails! The jury filed out in a dead silence.

Melbourne Maxim was one of the eye-witnesses to this terrible crime and no more than we backed outside when he called me and the grim-faced Jack aside.

**THAT** Calhoun rat has crossed you like Napoleon crossed the Alps!" explodes the famous director. "I never saw anything as raw since I've been in this peculiar pastime and I hope to tell you I've seen plenty!"

"I kind of thought he was a better actor than what (Continued on page 40)



"Listen, Poison!" growls Jackie, "I've took all the punishment I can stand! Get your form over here and take this test or I'll knock you cold!"

P. VAN BUREN



# The Loan of a Gun

By Alan LeMay

*Kerrigan was only a youngster, and Greaves was a desperate man. But there's no age limit for heroes*

"ET?"  
"Yup."  
"It wouldn't surprise me none," said old Creaky Magruder, with that air of open amiability with which he had never deceived anyone yet, "if Kerrigan wouldn't appreciate the loan of a weepin'."

The eyes of the two men by the fire flickered upward to Kerrigan's face, found he was not looking at them, and fastened there. It was a good poker face for a youngster of twenty, lean and smooth, with nothing readable in it except a pronounced obstinacy about the mouth. Kerrigan was gazing into the distances of the plain, where the shadow of the ranges had turned the quivering heat-blaze to a misty welter of purples and mauve grays. Only the flat table tops of a far tall mesa caught the last of the sunlight in a crowning stripe of gold.

Black dots out there at the foot of the mesa were cattle, but Kerrigan did not appear to be looking at these. For all those two men could tell, he was thinking about the far adobe walls of Santa Fe, and the laughter of dark-eyed girls behind latticed windows.

"Ain't he wearin' no weepin'?" said Lute Gilmore. His voice affected innocence but poorly, for he was a man with a thick face and a thick head.

"Am I sittin' on a horse?" asked Kerrigan. He plucked a blade of grass, and chewed it meditatively.

"Looks like you'd be actin' sheriff now that Pop Waterman's dead," Magruder suggested cautiously.

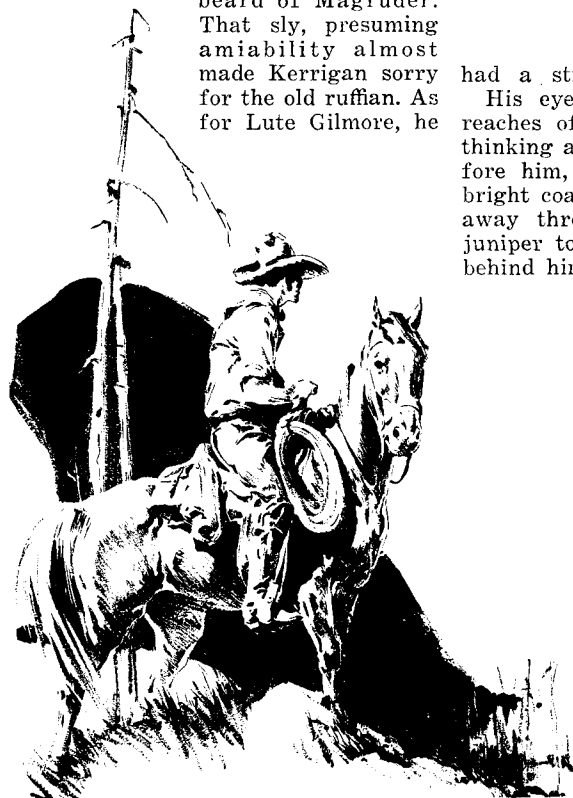
"Looks like it," Kerrigan agreed.

HIS eyes, still speculative, turned from the distance to the two men by the fire, and casually, as if by coincidence, first the eyes of Creaky Magruder and then those of Lute Gilmore dropped to the orange coals. With neither liking nor dislike Kerrigan studied the greasy clothes and thin beard of Magruder. That sly, presuming amiability almost made Kerrigan sorry for the old ruffian. As for Lute Gilmore, he

Illustrated by  
J. Clinton  
Shepherd



"Maybe I'll take a pop at you anyway," Greaves told him over the rim of the coffee pan. "I ain't decided yet"



had a strong back. So did horses.

His eyes returned to the dimming reaches of the plain, but he was not thinking about girls or Santa Fe. Before him, beyond the little huddle of bright coals at his feet, the slopes fell away through piñon pine and scrub juniper to the New Mexican flats, but behind him the steep-shouldering Cimarron Range piled skyward, black with pine and spruce, gray-green with aspen. Kerrigan was seeking a man whom he believed to be hidden somewhere in the raw rugged gashes of those slopes.

"Have they caught Joey Greaves?" Magruder asked.

"Not that I know of."

"Le' see—last Monday was it?—he shot Pop Waterman in the back. Monday? The Saturday before, by damn!"

If Kerrigan understood Magruder's implied criticism of the dead sheriff's

deputies, he took no offense. "Seems a long time," he agreed; "five days."

"Yes, I reckon," said Magruder. Lute Gilmore said nothing. He hardly ever did.

"I kind o' thought," Magruder went on, "you'd go south with one o' them posesses that was chasin' Greaves. I suppose he made Old Mexico, all right. But I kind o' thought you'd o' gone."

"Did you?" said Kerrigan.

"Uh-huh." Magruder lit a pipe, and sucked away, slowly and noisily. "But then," he suggested, "maybe you didn't think Greaves went south."

"Maybe I didn't," Kerrigan agreed.

"Maybe," said Magruder, thin, incredibly impudent slyness creeping into his voice, "you come lookin' for him over here."

"Maybe," said Kerrigan again. "Don't doubt yourself so much, Magruder."

OLD CREAKY shot him a glance. "Pity you didn't find him," he commented. "I suppose you'll be headin' back Wolf Springs way, now?" Kerrigan said nothing; and presently Magruder went on: "You're about the first feller I ever seen sheriffin' without a gun, Kerry."

... No—I seen one other once. Big Bob MacPherson. Whopper. Bald head with a dent in it. Feller put the dent in with a flatiron from behind while Bob was playin' poker. Bob up and hit him with a chair. It run along with him sheriff quite a piece. But finally some fellers couldn't stand it no more. So they shot him."

Kerrigan was familiar with that yarn; in those days everyone in that country had heard of Bob MacPherson, the sheriff who owned no gun.

Magruder waited for Kerrigan to say something, but was disappointed.

"I suppose, though," he said at last, "you anyways got a gun in your saddle-bag."

"No," said Kerrigan. "Worries you, doesn't it? Well, my horse stumbled, crossing a white-water crick, and I lost it." The truth, only the truth; the last thing Magruder would expect. "Now you know. Feel better?"

"Didn't mean to seem pryin', Kerry." "No, I suppose not. Still, glad to know, aren't you? I wouldn't lie to you, Magruder."

"Never said you would, Kerry," the old reprobate blared heartily.