

# The O'Grady Obit

HERE IS A GLIMPSE INTO THE SOUL OF THAT COMPLEX  
CREATURE, THE DAILY NEWSPAPER, AND A  
PICTURE OF ITS WILLING SLAVES

By Robert P. Lowry

FOR many months there had been a rapid succession of night office boys in the city room of the *News*, and each had been almost a total liability to the paper.

There were bright boys, who took such an intelligent interest in the linotype machines on the floor above, or the presses in the basement, that they had no leisure to carry up copy or bring down proofs.

There were lazy boys, who slumbered serenely through stentorian hails of: "Copy boy, boy, boy!" And there were worthy youths who brought in their high school work with them, and flatly refused to have their avid pursuit of learning interrupted by any newspaper man.

There was also a mild-mannered lout, with fists a little smaller than steam shovels, who had fought in one or two preliminaries at the National Sporting Club. One night he took exception to certain barbed reprimands from Farlow, the city editor, and invited that worthy to step out into the alley back of the *News* and settle the affair in true Gray's Ferry Road style.

Two watchmen and the policeman from the corner collaborated in removing the valiant Schuylkill ranger from the premises, after Farlow had prudently declined the invitation to combat.

But, with the coming of Harper, there was a great and blessed change. He was different from the others, not only in that he gave perfect satisfaction from the start, but in every other respect as well.

To begin with, Harper, by no elasticity of the imagination, could be called a boy. His age was a matter for conjecture, with guesses centering around sixty. He was short and slender, with hair almost white,

deep-set dark eyes, and a melancholy walrus mustache.

He sat on the extreme edge of a chair in the front of the local room, and the instant any one on the city desk called "Copy," he was afoot with a tremulously eager: "Yes, sir!" and running toward the inner office. A hundred times a night he ran up the stairs to the composing room with copy, and scurried down with bunches of galley proofs fluttering behind him.

"Poor old fellow! He's so darned afraid we'll think he's too old for the job!" Sam Carson, the assistant city editor, explained to Farlow. "He doesn't realize he's five hundred per cent better than anybody we've ever had."

"Now, Sam, don't butt in and spoil the only decent office boy since Forney was a cub," Farlow admonished. "It's easy enough to get new assistant city editors, but as long as I live, I'll never get another boy who goes up and gets the proofs without being told. By the way, we mustn't call him boy. Call him Harper."

"Why not Mr. Harper?"

"Suppose you put a good, bright head on this fire story, in place of this nice lady-like label," Farlow suggested, handing him a proof.

## II

DESPITE Farlow's warning, Sam Carson, for a time, constituted himself the protector of the elderly copy boy. He gave Harper an old overcoat several sizes too large for him, and sternly rebuked the cubs for galvanizing Harper into unlawful activity by stepping inside the partition of the inner office and calling "Copy!" more or less after the manner of Farlow, at times when the city editor was elsewhere.

Sam, in his benevolently despotic way, began pulling wires to get a job for Harper in the classified advertising department. And to further this scheme, he tried to cross-examine Harper in regard to his past.

He was amazed when the little man insisted that he did not remember where he had been born, or where he had spent his early years. Before coming to Philadelphia, he said, he had worked as porter in a saloon near the Chelsea docks in New York for a long time. He was not certain how long. After the place had been sold, he and another man had started beating their way to Philadelphia on a freight, and had been arrested in Trenton, and given sixty days each in prison.

Carson, who was becoming more and more impatient, fairly snorted when Harper gravely averred that, after he had reached Philadelphia, "my feet just seemed to bring me to the *News* office."

"See here, Harper," Carson said condescendingly, "I'm asking this for your own good. If there are things you don't want me to know about, just say so; but don't be ridiculous. I want to find out what experience you've had, so as to get you this job downstairs."

"But, Mr. Carson, I don't want a job downstairs. I might not be able to do the work there," Harper objected.

"Do you mean to say you'd rather run yourself ragged carrying copy than sit at a desk working on books, or taking ads over the phone?" Carson asked in amazement.

"I'd rather be here," Harper replied, apologetically.

"All right. Have it your own way, then. I'm through."

Early one morning in November, a month or so after Harper had appeared at the *News*, Sam Carson was seated at a desk in the big room, reading a magazine. All the staff had left except Hall, the reporter on late duty.

After a time, Hall, who was aimlessly wandering about the room, drifted over to the assistant city editor.

"He surely is a weird old party, isn't he?" Hall began, crooking his thumb toward Harper, who, with his chair tilted against the wall at the back of the room, was absorbed in the first edition of the *News*.

"Just a poor old lag," Carson commented. "I had everything fixed to get him a

job downstairs, with more money and less leg work, and what does he do but spin me a lot of fake stuff about not remembering anything about himself. I'll bet he can remember the insides of a lot of jails. And you won't get any tears out of me if you pull the old one about his having come down in the world. That guy was never up in his life."

"I'm not so sure. He looks as if he had been somebody with bells on, once, and he doesn't talk like a bum, either. But what started me saying he was weird was this: a few nights ago, around six o'clock, I was finishing a story at my desk back there, when Harper comes ambling along, dreamy like, with his hat and coat on. And do you know, he walked right across the room toward the wall opposite the door, taking off his coat as he went along. Then he suddenly stopped and looked at the wall, sort of puzzled, as if he expected to find something there. After a little while he went out to the lockers."

"Just a plain, everyday nut!"

"Perhaps; but kindly tell me what used to be along that wall?"

"The old coat cupboard, of course," and Carson looked at the other man a little startled. "But it's been at least ten years since it was torn out. Gee whiz, Harry, what are you getting at?"

"Fairly obvious, even to a person of your intelligence."

"By Jinks, you may be right at that! He told me his feet brought him to the office. We'll have to look into this. Maybe Hanning can throw some light on it. He's been here since they put Billy Penn on top of City Hall. Meanwhile, how about a round of casino?"

But, before Hall could fetch the cards, the telephone on the city editor's desk started ringing, petulantly, insistently.

Carson lifted the receiver.

"Just left, doctor," he said, after a brief pause. "This is Carson, his assistant; remember me when I used to cover the coroner's office? What's that? Do you mean the O'Grady, the old political boss? Holy smoke, where did he die? That's down near Winslow Junction, isn't it? What was the trouble? Yes, he was getting on, and that stretch in the pen helped matters. Who was with him? I see; old friends gave him the gate. What time did he die? And, doctor, you're not going to call any of the other papers, are you? That's fine. We

surely appreciate it. All right, I'll mail you a copy myself. Good-by, sir."

### III

"WIDE-AWAKE, Harry!" Carson called in true fire house style. "John O'Grady died a short time ago, and we have a clean beat on it. The name may not mean anything to you, and so long as he was alive, he wasn't worth a line. But dead, he owns the front page—for a day at least. He was the last big boss of this town, and got ten years for reaching into the city treasury and helping himself. He served about eight, and, for the last ten or a dozen years, he has lived down in Jersey, at Clementon, very much out of things. Dr. Benson called up just now and tipped us off. You take notes on what he gave me and write it. But first put in a call for the O'Grady house, and verify the fact that he is dead. I'd trust the doctor to Java and back, but we must be absolutely certain. Now, be sure you get this straight," and Carson proceeded to give Hall the information he had just acquired from Dr. Benson.

Both Hall and Carson were too much occupied to notice Harper. The elderly office boy did not hear Carson talking over the telephone to Dr. Benson, but with the very mention of O'Grady's name in Carson's instructions to Hall, which were given in the outer office, Harper was all attention. He put aside the paper he was reading, brought the front legs of his chair down to the floor, and leaned forward eagerly, so as not to miss a syllable Carson uttered. After that he sat bolt upright for a long time, staring straight ahead of him, totally oblivious to his surroundings.

In the meantime the assistant city editor hurried down the hall to notify the make-up editor of O'Grady's passing. Returning, he took a small key from the end of his watch chain and unlocked the sliding wooden flap of an old-fashioned cabinet that stood by Farlow's desk.

Carson ran his hand along the envelopes in the second drawer until he came to one with O'Brien on the outside. He flipped two more aside and pounced on one bearing the name of O'Grady; but as he started to take it out of the drawer, he noticed that it bore the name of George O'Grady, a judge of the orphan's court. The next envelope contained the life history of a gentleman named O'Toole.

Carson's heart missed a beat as he ran

over the whole collection again without finding the envelope he was after. He knew that it had been there a few months ago, because he had happened to take it out and glance over the obituary inside.

Carson took out the drawer and dumped the contents on the desk. There were about thirty envelopes, all told. He picked them up, one by one, and when he came to the last, he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. For the carefully written biography of the last of the political overlords, which had taken weeks to prepare, and which had been waiting twenty years or more for this very night, was not among those present.

There were two other keys to the cabinet. Andrews, the day assistant, had one, and Farlow himself carried the other. In a very few moments Carson had Farlow on the telephone at his house. The city editor knew nothing whatever about the O'Grady obituary, and profanely promised to fire Andrews the first thing after he reached the office at noon. All efforts to get Andrews's apartment met with the maddening: "They do not answer."

Carson next tried to get Barker, the veteran political reporter of the *News*, and the one man on the staff who could supply the missing information offhand, at the Pen and Pencil Club and at his house, and drew blanks in both places. Then he routed two antique politicians out of bed. They were vastly interested to hear the news, but were hopelessly vague as to the family name of O'Grady's wife, the county in Ireland where he had been born, and the number and sex of his children.

In the files there was an envelope marked John O'Grady. Inside was a slip of paper on which was typed: "See city department for obit." All the envelopes of clippings dealing with the old boss had vanished. An efficiency expert who had driven the employees of the *News* to distraction for months had seen to that.

A fire, fifteen years before, had destroyed all the bound copies of the *News* preceding that time, and a swift search of what was known as the library revealed a totally inadequate sketch of O'Grady in a twenty-five-year-old sycophantic history of the city.

Carson ripped out the page and carried it back to his desk. He noticed, in passing, that Harper had come to the front of the room, and was walking to and fro, as if the

nervous tension of the situation had been communicated to him.

Time, arch foe of all newspaper men, was tramping rudely on Carson's heels. He must make the best of what he already had in hand, and the *News* would have to be satisfied with a big beat in being the only paper to announce the death of O'Grady. But Carson ground his teeth when he thought how vastly more effective the announcement would be with the original comprehensive obituary to back it up.

#### IV

CARSON edited Hall's introduction, and wrote the two-column headline to go above it, accompanying the eight-column banner line which would inform the world that "Honest John" O'Grady had departed from works to rewards, if any. Then, as he thrust the paper in his typewriter, and set about the hopeless task of manufacturing an adequate biography of O'Grady from what he already knew, plus the idiotic sketch in the old history, Carson became aware that Harper was standing by his side.

"Run and play," Carson said, waving him away.

"I don't believe I know you," Harper retorted. "You must have come on the paper while I was away. I'm not quite certain how I come to be here myself, but I gather you have lost your O'Grady obit. The point is, if you wish me to write another, I probably know more about 'Honest John' than any one now alive in the city of Philadelphia."

It did not need this extraordinary speech to inform Carson that an entirely new Harper was speaking. The timidity had departed from his manner as a garment discarded, and in its place there was an air of easy confidence which caused Carson to look at him as if he could not believe his eyes.

Had the office boy suddenly gone mad? On the other hand, had he suddenly recovered his sanity? In any case, could this elderly failure, this snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, really be of any help?

"Go to it, and write everything you know. We might as well have a regular madhouse here, while we're at it," Carson said, partly to get rid of Harper and partly from blind instinct never to pass up a lead, however unpromising.

Harper took a wad of copy paper, sat

down at a near-by desk, borrowed a pencil from Hall, and started writing.

Carson, once launched on his own story, forgot all about the new Harper, and when he had finished a page, from force of habit, he called on the office slave to rush it to the composing room.

But the little man at the desk did not so much as raise his head when his name was called, and Hall came forward and took the sheet and all the succeeding ones to the composing room.

Harper was still writing when Carson had finished his story, and there was a rapidly increasing pile of sheets in front of him. More from curiosity than anything else, Carson reached over and gathered up what Harper had written.

"Here goes my faith in Santa Claus," he said to himself as he arranged the pages in order.

At the left-hand upper corner was written: "O'Grady Obit—Nevins." But Carson had no time to puzzle out this new enigma. He glanced through half a dozen pages of Harper's story—and ran down the hall to the make-up editor.

"Sorry, Mr. Blaine, but we'll have to make another lift on O'Grady!" he burst out.

"Jumping Judas Priest! I thought you'd cleaned up on that story, Sam. You know it's getting late, and we won't get it in enough papers to count," Blaine returned peevishly.

"I can't help it. We lost the original obit, and I just fixed up what I could get my hands on while another one was being written. This is real. We've got to have it or bust."

"You might have said something about it before. How much will you have of it?"

"There's a column already written, and a column and a half to come."

"Got any of it in type?"

"It's just going up."

"Something mighty fishy about this whole business somewhere, Sam. You slipped a cog, and you know it. Well, for the love of Great Goliath, make it snappy!"

#### V

As he read page after page of perfect copy, Carson swore gently to himself at the sheer wonder of the thing. It was not that it was so carefully written that he did not have to place a pencil on it, except to write in a subhead here and there; it was,

rather, that he realized that he was reading one of those rare masterpieces of newspaper work, which, despite the fact that they are turned off at white heat, and aim to serve only the purpose of an hour, are just as much literature as "King Lear" or "The Book of Job."

For this was no cut and dried chronicle of a dead politician. It gave dates, and other vital facts, to be sure, but cunningly interspersed were apt anecdotes, scraps of conversation, bits of color, marvelously garnered from the past, so that little by little, by sheer magic, the writer forced his picture of O'Grady up from the flatness of the page until it became a thing of three dimensions, breathed, and bled.

Almost at the beginning Harper told how Dan Casey and his wife took O'Grady in when he was fairly starving. Many years later, when the boss heard that the Caseys had fallen on evil days, he promptly bought a little farm for them out in Chester County. But the old couple obstinately refused to leave their hovel down in Martin's Village, until one day O'Grady coaxed them out for a ride in his carriage, and during their absence had one of his men soak the house with coal oil and touched a match to it.

O'Grady's story, in part, has been enacted in every large city of the United States. Landing with nothing, starting in with pick and shovel, gradually establishing himself as a small contractor, and at the same time, with the astounding gift for practical politics, which is the heritage of the Irish, rising from ward worker to committeeman, district leader, councilman, ward leader, State Senator, he finally took his place as the undisputed boss of the city. He made Congressmen his messenger boys, and caused one United States Senator to jump every time he snapped his fingers.

His devastating wit, how he scandalized the neighborhood of Twenty-Second and Pine Streets by leading his little horse in through the front door of his new and ornate house, his struggle with a refractory shirt bosom when he appeared for the first time in a dress suit at a banquet of the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick, his ignorance and pig-headedness, and the amazing lengths he would go to satisfy a grudge or do a friend a favor—all these things made Harper's story a joy forever.

There was also the description of the trial, where day after day, and week after

week, O'Grady sat grim, defiant and taciturn, and finally listening to the judge, whose election he himself had ordered, pronounce sentence without a change of expression. Then, when the court refused him permission to visit his grandchild in a hospital half a dozen blocks away, he had broken down, bowing his head and sobbing without restraint.

By half past three Harper had stopped writing, and Carson took the last page upstairs himself. Blaine, his hands full of proofs, was watching the men lock up the forms of the front page.

"All up, Sam?" he asked.

Carson nodded.

"Fine! Now, between ourselves, where in the name of the whale that swallowed Jonah did you get this stuff?"

"A real old-time newspaper man happened in. I never saw anything to touch him. Just sat down and wrote, without stopping to look up a date or anything. Pretty good yarn, don't you think?"

"Pretty good, your grandmother's tabby cat. Why, it's great! Who wrote it?"

"That reminds me, I've got to catch him before he leaves," Carson evaded, and made for the steps.

## VI

CARSON found Harper fast asleep, with his head resting on the desk where he had been writing.

Carson touched the little man lightly on the shoulder. Harper jumped up, rubbing his eyes.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Carson. I must have fallen asleep," he said. "Is there anything you want?"

"Only to congratulate you on your story. You saved all our lives this night."

"My story? What do you mean, sir?"

"All right, Harper. Don't bother your head about it. It's time to go home. By the way, do you know any one named Nevins?"

"Nevins? Nevins? Sounds sort of familiar, but I can't remember, now. I can't remember," he repeated in a dazed sort of way as he walked down the hall.

Carson stared after him in wonder.

"Talk about split personalities. His is split seven ways!" he declared aloud.

In response to an urgent summons, Carson hurried down to the office shortly after noon. Farlow told him that Andrews had confessed to loaning the O'Grady obituary



to a friend overnight, and having picked the one night in a generation when he would be certain to be caught at it. He was duly fired. "Hanning wants to see you right away," Farlow concluded.

William Hanning, the managing editor of the *News*, whirled around from his big roll-top desk as Carson entered the door of his room.

"Great stuff, Sam. We cleaned up the town on O'Grady, and it won't hurt you a bit when there's a chance of stepping up higher," chortled Hanning, holding out his hand in congratulation.

"But that wasn't the real reason I asked to have you called in here so early. Tell me how we came to get that obit—I mean the one in the last lift—and tell me everything you know about the man that wrote it. Everything, mind."

Carson carried out orders, not forgetting what Hall had told him about Harper hunting for the old clothes closet a decade after it had disappeared, the name Nevins on the slug line of the obit itself, and Harper's failure to account for its presence.

"Whether he remembers it or not, his name is Nevins," Hanning announced. "There's no question about it. I knew Jim Nevins had written that story before I read two paragraphs of it. To make certain, I got the copy. There it is, with his name at the top, and in his writing. And to think that he should come back from the grave just when we most needed him! Queer how things happen, isn't it? I suppose the death of O'Grady was the one thing of all others that would have brought him back."

"Yes, but who is Nevins?" Carson asked, eagerly.

Hanning gazed dreamy-eyed at the buildings on the other side of the street, as if he had not heard the question. It was half a minute before he turned to Carson.

"Nevins! Is it possible you never heard of Nevins? He was the best damned reporter we ever had on this paper. Also the best friend I ever had in the world." And Hanning went back to his contemplation of the office structures over the way.

"What became of him, sir?" Carson asked at last.

"God knows. Evidently Nevins himself hasn't an idea. Knocked himself out putting O'Grady in jail. He turned up the original story that started the grand jury investigation. He was at it day and night

for months. Then, after the trial, he started off for Chile on a sailing vessel. At Valparaiso he went ashore, and never came back to the ship. We even sent a detective all the way down there, but it was no use. Nevins had simply dropped out, and until this morning I thought he was dead."

"Some spiggoty must have walloped him over the head," Carson suggested.

"Possibly. Now, Sam, I want you to get hold of him. Where does he live?"

"Some flop house, I guess. Never would give us any address. But it's pay day, and he usually comes in about three. Suppose I nail him for you?"

"Yes, and bring him up here. Invent any reason for doing so you think of, only don't get him frightened. If he's still Harper, he naturally won't know me from Adam, so you'd better stick around. I want to see if I can bring back Nevins again. If I can, I'll take him out to my place and get old Dr. Dangerfield to look after him. Dangerfield's the best man in the country in such cases. Later on, perhaps, Nevins can come back here, if he feels up to it, and do a special column for us. It ought to be a winner. I guess I'm getting ahead of the game, though. It may be Jim never will be himself again. But I've an idea he will. Anyway, we'll see what we can do. And, Sam, remember one thing: if he starts to wander around the room, looking at photographs and things, don't try to stop him."

## VII

SHORTLY after three o'clock, Carson led a palpably nervous, shabby little man with a big walrus mustache into Hanning's room. Although Hanning had carefully schooled himself for this encounter, he half arose to his feet, his hand extended in welcome; but, as the little man stared at him blankly, the managing editor hastily resumed his seat.

"It is very good of you to come up here," Hanning said, a little unsteadily. "I understand you've been living in New York for some time, and I wished to ask you if you had seen anything of a man named Nevins over there—Jim Nevins?"

A troubled expression came over the little man's face.

"Mr. Carson asked me the same thing last night, and all day long I've been thinking about that name," he replied. "I've heard it before, somewhere, but for the life of me I can't think where. If I should re-

member any time, I'll come and tell you about it, sir," and he edged toward the door.

"Suppose you just sit down quietly over there and see if it comes to you," Hanning suggested kindly, indicating a chair across the big room, near a window. The little man obediently took it. Hanning turned again to his desk, and Carson picked up a novel from a small bookcase on top of the desk.

For a time the man known as Harper sat looking out the window. Then he slowly rose to his feet and began examining the pictures. The cartoons he passed over quickly. But before an old flash light of a staff banquet he lingered for five minutes, peering at each face grouped about the big table.

Finally, in the course of his peregrinations, the little man came to a large table at the other side of the room from Hanning and Carson. On it were spread out the last editions of the city's five morning newspapers. Harper ran his eyes over the front page of each one until he came to the *News*.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a sharp intake of breath.

Carson, stealing a glance in his direction, was suddenly reminded that this was almost certainly the first time Harper had seen the O'Grady story in print, as he had left the office before the papers were off the press. He wondered whether Hanning realized this fact, and looked sharply at the managing editor. Hanning merely raised his hand, after the manner of an official on a golf course when the champion is about to attempt a crucial putt.

After awhile the little man known as Harper started thinking aloud. Neither Carson nor Hanning could see his face, but they sensed a subtle difference in the tone

of his voice. There was now an assurance about it which Carson had remarked the night before, when Harper had, for a brief time, become Nevins with such startling results. To Hanning it was an authentic echo from the past.

"Poor old 'Honest John!'" the voice ran on. "Wasn't such a bad sort. Dumb as they make them in some ways—smart in others, until he got the idea he was Lord God Almighty, and—

"What's this?" he challenged sharply, and the others realized that he had come to the obituary proper under its divisional head.

"Why, this is *my* story! I remember, now. I wrote it last night, and it's a pip-pin. Almost good enough to pass O'Grady into heaven," he added whimsically, as he turned toward Carson and Hanning, who were tensely watching him.

His eyes passed over Carson as if the latter had been a piece of furniture, and he stood staring at Hanning.

Slowly there dawned on the face of the little man known as Harper, a wistful, startled look of recognition. His upper lip trembled. His eyes filled with tears.

Carson, with an understanding nod to Hanning, slid from the room.

"Bill! Oh, Bill!"

It was not so much a greeting as a half hysterical call for help that came from the lips of the little man.

Hanning swiftly crossed the room. His right hand grasped the right hand of the forlorn little wanderer, and with his left hand he patted the shoulder of Nevins's threadbare coat.

"Everything's all right, Jim," Hanning crooned, leading Nevins to a chair by the desk. "You've been away a long time, old man, but you've come back, and everything is absolutely all right, now."

## L'ENVOI

I WONDER, shall I die  
With my sweetest songs unsung?  
Pass through the silent portal  
With my best deeds undone?  
Or will the just, unerring ones  
Let music through to me?  
And with a patient little smile  
Grant me one gesture free?

Glenn Visscher