

The Devil's Checkroom

by Frank Gruber

IT was what they called in Iowa, an "unimproved" road. Which meant it was native dirt, scraped once or twice a month, but unadulterated with gravel or other road improvement material. It was narrow, and the auto trailer, even though compact, seemed to take up three fourths of it.

The man reclining lazily against a shock of wheat in the field beside the road wondered whether the swaying trailer would crowd the touring car, coming from the other direction, off the road.

It didn't—for the touring car did not try to pass the trailer. When some fifty yards from it, it suddenly had slewed sidewise across the road and come to a stop. The driver of the car to which the trailer was hitched honked his horn vigorously, then brought the car and trailer to a halt in a cloud of dust.

He climbed out of his machine and approached the touring car. Two men climbed out of the latter. The man in the wheat field heard angry words, then suddenly came to attention as the trailer man smacked one of the other men in the face. The man staggered back against the car, rebounded and came back to attack the trailer man. His partner joined him.

Two against one. The man in the wheat field came to his feet and started toward the road at a trot. As he ran he was a queer figure—undoubtedly the queerest that had ever been seen in this back-country section.

He was tall and thin. Beginning at the top, he wore a black velvet beret, pulled rakishly over his right ear. A bright-red handkerchief was tied around the collar of a khaki shirt, and still further below, he wore khaki shorts—shorts and bare knees. Thick woolen stockings came to just below the knees, and on his feet were stout tan brogans.

As he ran he brandished a thick,

gnarled blackthorn walking-stick.

One of the men who was fighting the trailer man saw the strangely dressed figure running toward them, and stopped fighting.

His partner ducked a vicious uppercut from the trailer man and shot a look toward the wheat field. He started to whistle, but the trailer man hit him squarely in the mouth.

The other man tore his eyes from the strange figure and clinched with the trailer man. His partner recovered, circled to the rear and began belaboring the trailer man about the kidneys.

The man in the shorts reached the road and waved his thick stick. "Here—here!" he cried. "You can't do that, you know!"

"Then gimme a hand!" yelled the trailer man, sorely pressed.

"Of course, old chap!"

The man in the shorts took careful aim with his stick and rapped one of the touring-car fighters smartly across the back of the head.

The man let out a yelp and leaped back. "What the hell!" he cried, more in anger than pain.

"Climb into your motor and clear out," warned the man with the blackthorn.

The second touring-car man backed away from the trailer man and faced the man in the shorts. "Why, you damned freak!" he cried. "I'll take that stick away from you and shove it down your throat."

The man in the shorts stepped forward, fainted with the gnarled stick and then made a sudden, swift lunge and cracked the man sharply across the side of the jaw.

That finished the fight. The wounded man howled to high heaven but he ran to his car, bumping against his partner who was also running away.

The trailer man started after them, but his rescuer stepped before him. "Better let them go," he suggested.

"Let 'em go!" yelled the trailer man, infuriated. "Hell, they're a couple of crooks. They were trying to hold me up."

The rescuer's mouth dropped. "Uh—why, I didn't know that. I was out there in the field resting up a bit and Well, let's stop them."

But it was too late. Both men were already in the touring car, which was just in the act of turning around. It dipped low into the ditch at the side of the road, swayed perilously, then leaped forward in a sudden burst of speed and was off in a cloud of dust.

THE trailer man turned to his rescuer. He surveyed him critically for a moment, then his mouth broke into a grin.

"Who're you?" he asked.

"Todd is the name," replied the man in the shorts. "Chester Todd. I was reposing in yonder field when those ruffians accosted you. It didn't seem, ah, sporting for two men to attack one, so I joined in to even the odds."

"And you did right well, me lad," exclaimed the trailer man, thrusting out his hand. "If it hadn't been for you, those hoodlums would now have my money, my trailer—and my vanilla extracts."

Chester Todd's eyebrows went up. "Vanilla extracts?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm James G. Nevins, God's gift to the poor, benighted farmer. I travel the highways and byways in my home on wheels. I bring to the farmer all the luxuries of his city brethren. Look!" He stepped over to his automobile, reached in and brought out a large bottle of a colored liquid and a cooking utensil. "This," he said tapping the utensil with a finger, "is the finest rolled-steel chicken frier ever produced by American ingenuity. I give it absolutely free with every purchase of a sixteen-ounce bottle of Superlative Vanilla Flavoring Extract, at the

ridiculously low price of ninety-eight cents."

"Hmm," said Todd, "sounds like a bargain. I'd imagine though that the chicken frier would be worth most of the money."

The vanilla extract man chuckled. "My friend, the vanilla and the chicken frier cost me wholesale, forty-nine cents. I buy them from the Superlative Extract Company. And they, my friend, make something like one hundred and fifty per cent profit on the deal. This chicken frier costs them exactly seventeen cents wholesale."

"Eh? Then how much does the vanilla cost?"

"Ha! There you come to the crux of the situation. This bottle and vanilla is worth, wholesale, at least two cents—and the bottle costs a cent and a half. Figure for yourself the value of the contents."

Chester Todd's mouth was agape. "My word," he said slowly, and with deep feeling.

The extract man tossed the bottle and the chicken frier back into the car. "Well, me lad, I must now be on my way."

"Are you going through Passamaqua?" asked Todd.

Nevins pursed his lips, "Passamaqua? That's about twenty miles from here, isn't it? Hmm. Yes, I'll be passing through there."

"I wonder then if I'd be imposing on you by asking for a lift that far?"

"Not at all. Climb right in. After the favor you did for me, it's little indeed I can do for you."

"If you'll just wait a moment until I get my haversack" He ran quickly to the side of the road, and from a grassy spot, picked up an item that was in keeping with his general appearance. The haversack was of a type almost extinct, but popular in other years. It was made of canvas duck and had two large loops for sliding through either arm.

Nevins cocked his head to one side when he saw the haversack, opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind and climbed in behind the wheel of his car.

Todd climbed in on the other side. Nevins started the car, and in a moment, it was jouncing along the rutted road.

Todd felt called upon to explain himself. "I'm on a hiking trip," he said. "Health, you know. I've been cooped up inside so long, it's a relief to be out in the country."

"Yeah," said Nevins. "Bookkeeper in the city, ain't you?"

Todd turned sideways and looked at Nevins. "Why no, what made you ask that?"

Nevins shook his head slightly. "Just guessed it. What do you do then, if you've not a bookkeeper?"

"Why, I'm a floorwalker at Lacey's Department Store."

Nevins couldn't quite control a chuckle. "Well, for a floorwalker, pal, you swing a mean stick. I appreciate what you've done for me, and maybe—maybe I can help you out."

"Help me. How?"

Nevins cleared his throat. "Why, I figured maybe you're not so well fixed and I might be able to throw a few dollars your way."

"I'd be delighted to earn some money," declared Todd, emphasizing the word "earn."

Nevins was silent for a moment, then said: "Those men back there—they weren't ordinary holdups. They're members of Dude Downing's gang."

"Dude Downing!" exclaimed Todd. "Why—why, isn't that the notorious bank robber who escaped from the penitentiary yesterday?"

"Yeah, that's him," replied Nevins. "It's like this—by the merest accident I had my bus parked across the street from the Bedford State Bank two months ago when Downing and his gang held it up. Downing, you know, was captured the next day, and I was one of the witnesses who identified him. His gang have been on my trail ever since.

Revenge, you know."

Chester Todd looked askance at the extract man. "My word!" he breathed. "Why, those—those gangsters—might have killed you!"

"They sure would," exclaimed Nevins. "I'm afraid I'm not rid of them yet, especially now that Downing has escaped from prison. He'll be joining his gang, and they'll be worse after me than ever."

"Do you think so?" asked Todd. "Didn't the newspapers say that Downing fell out with his gang? Something about the, ah, swag?"

"Naw, that was just newspaper talk. Downing cached the fifty-five thousand he got from the Bedford bank, but where it is no one knows. I'll bet his gang helped him break jail so he could get the swag and divvy it up."

"Umm," said Todd. "Well, you said I could help you. How?"

"I'll tell you when we get to Passamaqua."

NEVINS didn't drive to Passamaqua however. Two miles from it he turned to the right on a mere wagon trail, and after a few minutes of bouncing around on it, pulled the car and trailer into a tiny clearing almost hidden from the road by trees.

He cut off the motor, then turned to Todd. "Back a ways you said you were going to Passamaqua, Ever been there before?"

Todd shook his head. "No. I'll be frank with you, Mr. Nevins. You see, when a motorist gives me a lift and asks where I'm going, I always tell them a town about twenty or thirty miles ahead. Really—I'm heading for Kansas City."

Nevins chuckled. "I figured you were just traveling. Okay, I'll tell you what I want you to do for me A month or so ago, before I bought this trailer I was in Passamaqua and checked a package at the railroad station. I'd like to pick up the package today, but because of Downing's gang being in this

neighborhood, I'm leary about going into town myself. So I wonder if you'd go in and pick up this package for me?"

"Why not? They really haven't anything against me. I could explain that little misunderstanding back there if they stopped me."

"Yeah, but don't let them know my whereabouts."

"Of course not."

"Fine. I'll get the claim check."

Todd expected Nevins to reach into his pocket for the ticket, but the extract man leaped out of the car. Todd followed more leisurely. By the time he had walked around to the rear of the trailer, Nevins had already unlocked the door and was inside.

Todd stood in the doorway and looked in. His eyes lit up. "Say, this is pretty cozy!" he exclaimed.

"I like it," Nevins replied.

The trailer was a home on wheels. There was a studio couch, an upholstered chair, bookshelves, a gas cook-stove, refrigerator, closets, a curtained shower and toilet, a washstand with medicine cabinet above; even a dining alcove.

Nevins reached up to a can suspended from the ceiling. He fished around in the water awhile, then brought out a rubber pouch. Todd looked on with wide-open eyes.

Nevins climbed down from his perch, grinning crookedly. He took a towel from the rack above the wash stand, wiped the pouch dry, then opened it. He reached in with two fingers and brought out a bit of yellow pasteboard.

"Here it is," he said. "Stuff in the package is rather valuable, and I didn't want to lose it."

Todd took the pasteboard. It was, as Nevins had said, an ordinary, numbered claim check, such as is usually given out in railroad checkrooms.

Nevins pulled out a roll of bills. He peeled off a ten-dollar bill, then added a five.

"There's probably a dollar or two due on the package," he said. "Pay it, and keep the rest for your trouble."

Todd started out briskly toward the small city of Passamaqua. It was less than a mile to the city limits, but from there it was another mile to the railroad depot.

He presented the ticket to the checkroom attendant, and the man put in a search for the package. He came back in a few minutes with a dusty, paper-wrapped package the size of a small laundry bundle.

"That thing's been kicking around here for two months," he said. "We were just about ready to throw it out."

"Yes, I know," said Todd. "I'm sorry. I was called out of town and just got back. What are the charges on it?"

The attendant shrugged. "Well, you know, we usually charge ten cents a day, but gosh—that package's been here two months!"

"Yes, but all it contains is some old laundry, not worth over a dollar. But here—I'll give you two."

"Okay, pardner," said the attendant. "I'm glad to get rid of the thing."

Todd stepped out of the door of the station and realized suddenly that some one in an automobile at the curb was interested in his movements. He looked sharply at the car. It wasn't the same one that had driven off the two men with whom he and Nevins had fought. In fact, there were three men in this car—all of them hard-looking.

Todd frowned. He had two miles to walk, half of it outside the city limits. If these men should follow him, he'd have a difficult time of it.

He started across the street, changed his mind and went back into the railroad depot. He passed through and darted out on the other side. He entered a drug-store, created considerable stir by his attire, but walked calmly through the store and left by the alley door.

He came out on the next street, a

couple of minutes later, and began to breathe easier. Fifteen minutes more of maneuvering, and he was sure he had shaken the pursuers.

He walked down side streets, made his way gradually to the edge of the little city. Out in the country he walked along the side of the road, ready to dart into the woods at sign of an approaching person or car. He had traveled more than half the distance to Nevin's trailer when a high-powered car roared up the road. He took to the woods, but the car went by without even slackening speed.

ALMOST two hours had elapsed since he had left the trailer, Nevins had apparently been watching for him. For he opened the rear door of the trailer almost as soon as Todd came into sight.

"You got it!" he exclaimed in relief at sight of the package under Todd's arm.

Todd nodded. "Yes, but I had to do considerable dodging to shake off some men who seemed determined to follow me."

An expression of alarm crossed Nevin's face. "What sort of men—how many?"

"I don't know what sort of men they were, but there seemed to be three of them."

"Three? There were only two in that car that stopped me today?"

Todd shook his head. "This wasn't the same car."

Nevins' jaw became slack. "What—not the same?"

"No. Sounds like there's two gangs after you."

Todd climbed into the trailer. Nevins had evidently taken a shower during Todd's absence, for the little room was moist with steam. Todd's eyes dropped to the wash stand, and suddenly he drew in his breath.

Nevins heard it and turned. He looked inquiringly at Todd.

At that instant the noise of an approaching automobile hit the trailer.

Nevins sprang to the door and cried

hoarsely: "It's them!"

Brakes screeched outside, and a man's voice yelled: "Come out of there—with your hands up!"

For answer, Nevins slammed the door shut and bolted it. "I've got to fight for it!" he croaked.

Todd's eyes went wide. "You mean—shoot it out?" he gasped.

"What the hell you s'pose?" snarled Nevins. "Get under the bed if you're afraid."

Todd wasn't given the opportunity to state whether he was afraid or not, for a bullet suddenly tore through the thin steel-and-wooden side of the trailer, ricocheted from the ceiling, and fell on top of the stove with a clank.

Nevins was tearing at the door of a cupboard. Todd unslung his haversack and dropped it to the floor.

Nevins came away from the cupboard with a sub-machine gun in his hands. "I'll fix 'em!" he gritted.

He leaped to the rear door of the trailer and stabbed at it with the muzzle of the gun. A three inch loophole fell outwards. Nevins poked the muzzle of the gun through, and the interior of the trailer suddenly vibrated to a terrific clatter.

Nevins fired two swift bursts, then pulled in the gun and peered out through the porthole. As he looked, a gun outside began chattering.

"There's another car come up—and they're giving hell to this gang!"

He turned around, gasped again. For Chester Todd was standing in the center of the trailer, a very efficient looking automatic in his fist as he barked: "Drop the tommy gun!"

For an instant, it seemed as if Nevins would bring the gun up and try to shoot it out with Todd. Then his face broke, and the machine gun slipped from his hands to the floor.

"You—Todd!" he said, hoarsely. "What's the idea?"

“The idea is that your game is up, Harry Downing!”

“Downing?” cried Nevins. “What—”

“I’ve known right along that you were Dude’s brother,” Todd said, grimly. “I know, too, that the package I got for you is the loot of the Bedford State Bank holdup—the loot that Dude Downing stashed before he was caught two months ago and sent to prison.”

“Dude!” said Nevins, loudly. “You know where Dude is?”

“Yes,” said Todd, firmly. “And if he doesn’t come down, I’m going to send a bullet through the roof. Dude—do you hear that?”

For a moment there was a tense silence in the trailer, then a panel in the ceiling clicked and fell open. A pale face showed in the aperture.

A fist pounded on the back door of the trailer. “Todd!” cried a voice. “You all right?”

“Yes,” replied Todd, then motioning at Nevins with his automatic. “Open the door!”

HARRY DOWNING backed to the door and unlatched it. A familiar face appeared in the opening—the face of the bigger of the two men whom Todd had rapped on the head with his gnarled walking-stick earlier that afternoon.

“Hello, Canby!” Todd grinned.

“You—know—him?” cried Harry

Downing.

“Of course. We both work for the same man—Uncle Sam. That holdup this afternoon; it was a fake of course, to give me a chance to throw in with you—and to get Dude and the bank loot.”

“But Dude?” cried Harry Downing, “How’d you know he was up there?”

Todd shrugged. “I just figured you knew all about his break from jail, and I knew you would meet him somewhere. This patch of woods was a swell spot for you to pick up a dupe like me to run into town and pick up Dude’s swag. It was a swell idea—except for one little oversight.”

Dude Downing in his shallow compartment in the false roof of the trailer, spoke for the first time. “What was that, G-man?”

“Your weakness of being a ‘dude’. You had to clean up the first chance you got.” He pointed to the wash stand. “Take a look. Two men might use the same towel, but they’d never use the same toothbrush—not even brothers. There was only one toothbrush on that stand when I left for town two hours ago. Now there’s two. And one’s brand new. The one Harry brought for you, Dude. You can take it back to the pen with you.”