



Nearly Over

By
Thomas Thursday

A SETBACK only had the effect of making Sweeney try harder than ever to smash into print with one of his marvelous stories. In fact, after his distasteful work was finished for the day at the Crookometer factory, he would dash back to the room and proceed to hatch out new plots by the score—no trouble at all. He became also an expert typewriter player, and, after only six months' practice, managed to reel off a full sheet of paper without making more than ten or fifteen mistakes. Not bad, eh?

Of course you must bear in mind that Jeff used only two fingers—one on each hand—while other stenogs had to use all. He assured me that he had the new “noiseless” touch system down pat. But unfortunately the goop that camped in the next room didn't appreciate the noiseless part of the system because one night he shouted through the keyhole:

“Why don't you guys bring up a hand organ? I'm tired of hearing that pile-driving machine of yours. Play on something else for a change!”

Jeff paid no attention to the poor chap's raving, and kept right on banging away until he had finished his new story. And it was some story! Personally I thought—well, here's what Jeff thinks

about it:

“I'll admit, Jim, that in writing ‘The Mender of Broken Hearts’ I'm catering to the taste and appetite of girls under twenty and those over forty; but we can use a little coin, can't we? I figured it all out, and I'm dead sure that I've written one of the greatest mush stories ever attempted. It's on the style of that guy Harold Dingdong Left, and there's enough tears in it to promote a miniature ocean, believe me. You know that I don't care to lower myself to scribble stuff like that, but since ninety per cent of the girls are not happy unless they have something to cry over far be it from me to stop them enjoying themselves. What magazine do you think will pay the highest price for it, Jim?”

“I'd advise you to shoot it to the *Eversob Monthly*. That's just about their speed, I think.”

“How much do they slip you?”

“I don't know, Jeff. They ought to pay at least two cents a word for a story like that. It's a novelette, isn't it?”

“Yeah, I guess you could call it that and get away with it. It's about one hundred typewritten pages, and there's a little over twenty-five thousand words mixed up in it.”

“What's the difference between a novelette and a novel, Jeff?”

“Well, in my opinion, Jim, novelettes are always started with the idea of writing a novel, but the goop that’s writing it runs dry in the middle. The only thing he can do then is to throw in some kind of a reasonable finish and label it ‘novelette.’”

“And what would you call a novel?”

“As a rule, a novel is a thin short story that’s fattened with about sixty thousand words used in the descriptions of trees, moonlight, and the hair of the leading dame.”

“Then what’s a short story?”

“That’s a cinch to answer. A short story is nothing but the scenario of a novel.”

Jeff yawned a little, and made arrangement to place his feet in a more comfortable position upon the bureau.

“By the way, Jeff, Mrs. Snickers told me this morning that the typewriter man was around looking for some dough,” I said, changing the subject.

“Well, he’ll get paid just as soon as some of those dyspeptic editors slip me some coin. It won’t be the first bill he’s muffed in his lifetime, believe me!” he replied in a bored manner.

You see, we had purchased a typewriter on the hide-and-seek plan, and Mrs. Snickers, our landlady, told me very politely that she didn’t care to have the good name of her boarding house embarrassed by having a choice assortment of installment collectors wear out the doorbell.

“Say, Jim, where’s the *Eversob Monthly* published?”

“Out in Minnecago, Idaconsin,” I informed him.

“Good night! That’s extra postage, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s only a few cents more, but think of the coin you’re going to get for it!” I shot back enthusiastically.

“All right, then. I’ll give that bird the first crack at it.” And he did.

II.

TWO weeks later the editor of the *Eversob Monthly* gave Jeff an opportunity to test his lungs in the approved manner. Listen to Jeff:

“Believe me, Jim, the only thing that separates that editor from a crape-colored eye is about fifteen dollars’ worth of railroad fare. Take it from me, if that goop had his office here in Cleveledo I’d be in jail long ago. He thinks he’s funny, don’t he? Well,

believe me, the day will come when he’ll wear out the knees of his pants begging for some of my stuff. Just wait!”

Now, if you don’t think Jeff was justified in howling like that, read this:

MY DEAR SWEENEY: Your inclosed one hundred sheets of paper would have been very acceptable to this magazine—had you left them blank. Yours, et cetera.

HILAIRE FELIX, Editor.

On the level, wouldn’t that take the heart out of the Sphinx?

How the editor ever muffed “The Mender of Broken Hearts” is to Jeff the eighth, ninth, and tenth wonder of the world.

“I say, Jeff, maybe if you read a little more you’d get what they call style. You know that you don’t read much besides the Cleveledo *Evening Guesser*,” I told Jeff, trying to help him.

“Forget it, Jim; forget it! You don’t have to know anything to write stories. Why, there isn’t one story out of a hundred that’s printed the way the guy wrote it. That’s what an editor’s for. And talk about reading! Believe me, Jim, nothing gets by me—absolutely nothing. Why, I’ve read all the classics such as ‘Slick Starter,’ ‘Old Queen Grady,’ ‘The Statue Boys of ‘76,’ and a bunch of them ‘Work and Lose’ tales. Of course, when I was a young chap and didn’t know any better, I used to read lowbrow stuff like ‘Less Misery,’ by that Frenchy fellow, Victory Yougo. I also skimmed over a lot of stuff by those old Greek hack writers like Arisplato, Sincero, and Periodicals. Of course all that stuff died long ago. Take ‘Twenty Thousand Dollars Under the Ocean,’ by Julius Verne, for example. Why, in order to keep that alive they had to put it out as a moving picture. And, say! Talk about poetry! Remember that small-time poem by old Jack Milton, called ‘Paradise Missing’? And that ‘Infernal’ affair by Dante Ontheerie? Well, I read all that dope before I ever met you, Jim.”

Now, doesn’t that prove to you that there’s something wrong with a country that allows a genius like Jeff to wear out his young life in a suit of overalls? Although I knew he was pretty well educated and all that, I didn’t know that he had waded through all that stuff.

“By the way, Jeff, when did you leave school?” I asked.

“I didn’t leave, Jim. You see, it was this way:

I had been going to school for about two years when one day the goop that sat next me dropped his bean shooter on the floor. Well, I swiped the blame thing, and decided to practice on the kid sitting directly in front of the teacher. Now, I never was a good shot with a thing like that, so I muffed the kid, and the paper bullet hit the teacher plum on the nose. I haven't been to school since," Jeff concluded with a far-away look in his eyes.

"Too bad," I remarked. And it sure was. Poor Jeff was one of those fellows who never have any luck, anyway.

Three days later he bought seven of the latest magazines, and promptly voiced his disapproval of the bunch.

However, when I looked them over I discovered something that might interest him.

"Say, Jeff, did you notice that that chap Chauncey Crackers has one of his stories in all these magazines except the *Tenderfoot Weekly*?"

"What did you say the goop's name was?" asked he, interested.

"Crackers," I repeated.

"Crackers! No wonder the girls eat up his brand of stuff. If I had a name like Crackers I'd write advertisements for the Leatherine Biscuit Company. Listen, Jim, I've got an idea! Suppose I frame up a story and sign Chauncey Crackers' name to it and shoot it to the editor of the *Tenderfoot*? I figure that the poor dub will faint from joy when he discovers that Chauncey has lowered himself to send him some of his work. How about it?"

"Great, Jeff; great!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. Leave it to Sweeney to frame up the big idea! On the level, isn't he some genius? So far as nerve is concerned, Jeff was still about ten laps ahead of the kaiser.

During the next few days he wrote the greatest yarn of his career.

III.

SAY, Jim, I think we better blow from this Scamp; that Flossie Hemp dame gets me nervous. Did you hear her chatter at the table tonight? She sounded like one of those new Squeak-alot talking machines. And there I was trying to scheme up a new plot with that chick tittering like a canary bird. Why, she knocked twenty pounds of good thoughts plum out of my noodle. She was all

right until she got that job with the Flooker department store, but since then I guess she hollers 'cash' in her sleep. It's fierce!

"Anyway," he went on, "I'm getting sick of the grub old lady Snickers is passing out lately. Did you taste that hash? Some mystery, take it from me! I'll bet ten to one that the cat passed it up. I don't mind Hooverizing to help win the war, but old Snickers is just a little too patriotic to suit me. What does she take us for—birds? And, say, don't that pickle supply of hers ever run out? I bet if you walked into the dining room at three o'clock in the morning you'd find a gang of pickles on the table. She must be Heinz's fifty-seventh cousin. If she thinks I'm going to slip her six bones a week for stuff like that she's plum nutty. Remember the breakfast? Why, there was enough water in the oatmeal to make a good-sized fish feel at home. And, listen, did you taste that egg that she passed out? I don't want to knock or anything like that, but I bet the hen that manufactured that egg of mine died two years ago. Take it from me, Jim, I'm through!"

When it came to criticizing Mrs. Snickers' war-portioned meals, Jeff hit the nail right on the bean. The only time the dear old dame paid any attention to her victims was when they failed to hand her the weekly bank roll. In that event she would rap gently on the door and converse about the weather until you slipped her the coin. Jeff claims that she makes at least ninety per cent on her original investment.

After growling a while longer, Jeff settled on the bed in disgust and placed his feet upon the pillow.

"Cheer up, Jeff," I said, trying to make him feel better; "just finish your new Crackers story and you'll feel great when the coin rolls in."

"Cheer up beans!" he raved. "How can a guy write in a joint like this?"

Jeff was surely developing a temperament, just like those regular writers.

"What's the name of the new story?" I inquired, trying to get him separated from his grouch.

He brightened up at once, and replied: "I named it 'The End of Tillie Finish,' and it's got a laugh in every line. I'll wind it up just as soon as I can forget about that hash."

However, Jeff didn't forget about that hash, because the following day, at the Crookometer factory, he had a grand smash-up with the superintendent and was promptly fired. But maybe

Jeff didn't tell that fellow something on his way out! Oh, boy! When Jeff had finished, the boss looked like nothing ever seen before. Jeff told me about it the same evening.

"Take it from me, Jim, I'm glad I'm out of it. How can a man like me get along with a bunch of roughnecks that don't know anything about literature? Why, they're so far out of my class they can't even see me when I breeze by. They never heard of guys like Shakesbeer and Rudyard Doyle, or any of those fellows. Well, I don't care; I've got enough coin to hold out a month, and I'm going to sit down and write my head off."

"That's the spirit, Jeff! Even if your coin does run out, I'm still working, you know."

"I won't forget that, Jim, and when I do get there you'll be the only guy I'll recognize, believe me."

I couldn't help liking Jeff Sweeney. Personally I wouldn't care if he failed to work for a year. I felt quite sure that it would be only a short time when he would have all the editors winded from chasing after him.

Somehow, though, he didn't make a hit with the girls. In fact, Flossie Hemp thought he had some kind of dyspepsia. But I guess she was sore because Jeff didn't fall for her line of beauty. He wasn't a woman hater or anything like that, but he liked to surround himself with intellectual people. Of course poor Flossie wasn't guilty of being anything like that. Her vocabulary, consisting of "Cash," "Anything else?" and "Thank you," was about all that her brain could handle at the time. But she knew more about chewing gum than the chap that invented it.

IV.

DURING the next week Jeff kept himself cooped in the room like a regular hermit. Although he knew all there was to know about the art of story writing, he bought a book entitled "How to Write a Short Story; or, Scientific Ways of Ducking an Editor's Wastebasket," just to see if the author of the book knew as much about it as he did. According to Sweeney, the author knew fifty per cent less.

"How's the book, Jeff?" I inquired.

"Fierce!" was his terse reply. "The guy that wrote it, Pendennis Hoop, must have got his dope from an iron foundry. It gets me sore when I read

stuff like that. The funny part of it is that he never succeeded in having one of his own stories published. Yet he has the nerve to tell other guys just how to do it. Can you imagine that? For example, take chapter ten on 'What Editors Want, But Don't Get.' Why, if a writer followed those instructions he'd be placed in the madhouse for the safety of the general public. I bet Pendennis is laughing yet over the two bones I slipped him. It's a ten-to-one shot that he's got a picture of Barnum hanging on the wall."

It's a wise old bird that can put one over on Jeff Sweeney, I'll tell you.

"Say, Jeff, how's the new Crackers story getting along?"

"I finished it this morning, Jim, and mailed it to the *Tenderfoot* editor. Before I sent it I tried it out on Flossie, and what do you suppose happened? Why, the poor female started to cry before she hurdled the third chapter! And I thought I wrote the greatest humorous story on earth! I bet every time she goes to see one of those Charlie Feet comic pictures she takes along five or six handkerchiefs to mop up the tears. She's a mystery to me."

V.

NOW it so happened that the seventh day following the mailing of the Crackers story fell on Friday the thirteenth; but it didn't fall half as hard as Sweeney.

As I entered the house Mrs. Snickers met me in the hall and nervously informed me that she thought there was something the matter with Jeff, because she heard strange mutterings leaking via the keyhole. Flossie Hemp was quite sure that Mr. Sweeney must have broken the statue of Julius Caesar, as she was very positive that she heard an awful crash that sounded just like pieces of plaster kissing the floor. That was enough to convince me that all was not as it should be up the vicinity of Jefferson Sweeney.

I dashed up to the camp, and found Jeff pacing up and down the room with his hands behind his back and his hair twisted all over his head.

"What's the trouble, Jeff, old boy?" I asked anxiously.

"Nothing; absolutely nothing! I feel just as lively as Chris Columbus. Get out your guitar, Jim,

and play me the ‘Dead March’ in Saul! Turn the whole world upside down and find out what’s on the bottom of it. Go the limit!”

“But, Jeff! What’s the matter?” I pleaded, greatly agitated.

“Smatter? Take a slant at the glad news on the table!”

I walked over to the table and beheld the rejected Crackers story; also a letter from the editor of the *Tenderfoot Weekly*. When I had finished reading that funereal epistle I felt worse about it, I think, than Jeff did. Here it is, word for word and gloom for gloom:

DEAR WHO EVER YOU ARE: I have reported your case to Doctor Slicer, of Morgueview Hospital, and he promises to look you up some day this week. In the meantime I would suggest that you do the best to alleviate your malady by placing ice-cold towels on your head at intervals of five minutes. That’s what you get for quitting the plumbing business, anyway. Did a pipe or something fall on your head lately? Sincerely yours,

RUFUS HECTOR, Editor.
Otherwise known as “Chauncey Crackers.”

If, reader, during your travels you chance to find yourself in the little town of Whynott, Delahampshire, step into the city hall and you will find the following record: Jefferson Sweeney. Born January 13 (Friday), 1896. Son of Martha and Jerry Sweeney.