



To Skid or Not to Skid—^{By} C.S. Montanye

ALL men are created equal but some grow up to become inventors. My friend Archibald Catfitz is one. If you won't take my word for it, ask him and for proof he will show you his card, which reads: A. Catfitz, Inventor. America. To those unacquainted with Archie's brain children I will say briefly that his inventions began with the automatic fishing rod and have continued without interruption. If every invention of Archie's represented a dollar bill, he would be independently wealthy.

But such is far from being the case!

Money with my friend is as scarce as strawberries at Christmas. In fact if I see him with more than five dollars at a time, I consult the paper and read of all the pocket-picking cases recorded, and wonder!

Apart from the habit he has of continually drawing on me for small loans, I am very fond of Archie. He has a way with him. Even after his inventions misinvent, it takes only a few days for my resentment to wear away. And although I know I will regret it, sooner or later I forgive him and we smoke the cigarette of peace, and all continues to be calm until the bug of misfortune bites him again.

One morning lately Archie said to me: "Lend me two dollars for a week, old

man."

I gave him a cold look. "Who," I inquired, "is the weak old man?"

But sarcasm doesn't work, and Archie got his two bills. Yes, he certainly has a way with him.

Immediately after I had given him the money I regretted it. Some people borrow money to purchase the necessities of life, others blow it in on hilarious amusement, but Archie does neither. When he makes a touch it means that a newly hatched invention is galloping around, like a frisky colt, in the back of his brain.

As it turned out I was right!

II.

THE next evening, when I quit work and returned to Proone Villa—the boarding house in which we share a top-floor room—I found friend Archie reclining in the Morris chair before the window.

But what an Archie it was!

The disreputable old suit he had on bore quaint designs of mud and red clay, and his face, too, had not escaped the conflict. Several streaks of the same material trickled coquettishly down his cheeks and had splashed with whimsical abandon over what was once a clean,

white collar!

Archie, if nothing else, is usually extremely neat and takes pride in his immaculate appearance, so I can be pardoned for standing still and looking about suspiciously.

“Hello, Bill!” he chirped. “I just got back from Jersey.”

I took off my hat and coat and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Jersey?” I inquired. “Are you sure it wasn’t Siberia? What were you doing in Jersey—riding on the Erie?”

He grinned and helped himself to one of my cigarettes. “I was making a tour of the various sand pits,” he replied.

I didn’t know if he was kidding or not.

“Sounds like a song,” I said, “‘In the Sand Pits of New Jersey I Will Wait for You!’ “

When Archie goes anywhere, he usually returns with some little article of junk to add to his collection. Archie, to excuse the accumulation of trash in our room, calls the bedchamber his laboratory. Here you will find everything from a rusty nail to the parts of a sewing machine. It’s a good thing he has a high-sounding name for the room, for Mrs. Proones, our landlady, has threatened to clean the place out, many times. But Archie has impressed upon her the importance of his work, and threatens to sue her for libel or something, if she so much as moves a pin.

As I said before, I looked about suspiciously, but saw nothing visible that looked as if it might be something which, with a little help, would turn into an invention. I felt a little relieved.

Archie stood up and consulted the watch I gave him last Christmas. “I think I’ll wash up before dinner,” he remarked.

I laughed. “If you’ll come down in the back yard with me, I’ll hose you off. With the possible exception of a union suit, nothing sticks so closely as Jersey mud.”

He caught up a bath towel and found a cake of soap under the remains of an invention that was to be a typewriterless typewriter and sauntered out.

I took advantage of his absence to make a thorough investigation in the hope of finding a package that might give me a clew as to what was about to happen, but again discovered nothing.

III.

AT dinner, that evening, Archie directed most of his conversation at Mrs. Proones, and I saw that, for some reason, he was trying to win her favor. Even the blond Miss Iona Carr, on his right, was temporarily shelved as Archie beamed on our bewildered landlady.

I have seen lady vampires in the movies, but I never suspected before that my friend could pull the same kind of stuff on a poor, defenseless woman and get away with it.

After our so-called dinner was over, Archie, stayed to linger about Mrs. Proones, but I made a quick dash for the hall to escape being led into the parlor by Miss Carr and sung to. The blond Iona is an awfully nice girl, but she imagines Farrar has nothing on her, and is ready to prove it at any moment. She has a nice voice I admit—for selling Liberty Bonds or something—but when it comes to singing, I prefer to hear her at a distance—the farther away the better. I returned to my room in safety, and a half hour later Archie appeared carrying under his arm the following things: ten yards of tin railroad track in sections; one toy locomotive; one toy coal tender; two toy baggage cars; four imitation Pullman cars.

When I saw the playthings I began to understand his sudden affability at the table. The toys were the property of little Willy Proones, the nephew of the

boarding-house keeper, and a child who, with another disposition, might be called civilized. Archie had evidently enticed Mrs. Proones into lending the playthings to him, and with a few qualms of impending disaster I watched him as he silently put the tracks together and laid it over every available inch of floor space.

Then he wound up the miniature locomotive and looked up at me. "It's a lovely night for a walk, Bill," he said suggestively, "or the open-air movies. Why don't you take Iona over to the Palace Gardens? They are showing 'The Curse of Drink' in five reels and 'The Broken Doll' in two parts."

I could see I wasn't wanted, so I picked up my hat. "Some people," I said as cuttingly as possible, "reach their second childhood earlier than others." Archie, monkeying with the engine, grinned. "And some," he replied pleasantly, "never graduate from their first."

IV.

A WEEK went by, during the course of which Archie spent most of his time lying on the floor, watching the little engine spin around on the tin tracks. Some amusement for a man who votes! I honestly believe if anyone else had seen him then, he would have been given a free ride to some nice, quiet, laughing academy in the country.

I noticed other things, too; among them, the presence on the floor of some gritty substance that felt like sandpaper when I walked on it in my bare feet.

I refrained, however, from questioning Archie. I would just as soon enter the cage of a hungry lion, armed with a feather, as I would disturb my friend when his mind is all gummed up with a forthcoming invention.

By Sunday the incubation period of what was about to happen was over, and Archie lost some of the silence that had hung over him for the past week.

"Bill," he said seriously, when he saw I was awake, "what is the present danger in automobiling?"

I hunted up the various articles of my apparel before answering, wincing as a bit of the tin track on the floor leaped up and bit me on the ankle. "What's the answer?" I growled. "Liquor?"

Archie shook his head moodily. "The great danger," he said, "and a danger that never has been entirely overcome, is the skidding of the machine on wet and slippery pavements. I admit tire chains have to a certain degree eliminated some of the peril, but the cure is nearly as bad as the disease. Chains require time for adjustment, and likely as not they are forgotten when most needed. Then again, the man who drives his own car dislikes to get out in the wet and mud to jack up the car and put them on. It's a nuisance."

He sighed profoundly. "I might add that chains will become as old-fashioned as your grandmother's hat when the Catfitz Skidless Safety Skidder makes its appearance on the market."

I paused in the act of knotting my cravat and looked at him with open mouth. "The—which?" I inquired weakly.

Archie made a gesture. "You heard me," he replied, "the Catfitz Skidless Safety Skidder, a little invention of mine, for the manufacturing rights of which, Mr. Hiram Holley, of the Unique Six Motor Company, is at present negotiating. I will not go into particulars regarding the principle of my Safety Skidder now, but shall wait and let you judge its merit when you see it in actual operation."

I recovered a little and asked: "And when is this going to happen!"

Archie looked out at the lowering skies

overhead. "The moment it rains. Mr. Holley has granted me the use of one of his cars, and I have equipped it with a Safety Skidder. All I am waiting for now is a little moisture so that I can demonstrate to him the marvelous efficiency of the device. Say, I hope it rains!"

V.

ABOUT noon Archie's luck got in its fine work, and it did rain! A cold, steady drizzle fell, and the wind swung around to the east. It gave every indication of being an all-day affair.

When Archie saw this, he borrowed a nickel from me and rushed out to telephone. He returned all smiles and announced that Mr. Holley would be ready at three o'clock for a demonstration. Then he loosened up and informed me in a matter-of-fact way that I was to be included.

No excuse I could think up made any impression on him. Gently but firmly he eased me into my coat, clapped my hat on, and, holding me by the arm, so that I could not escape, led me off to the subway.

Our destination proved to be the combined garage and repair shop of the Unique Six. When we arrived we found the place full of chauffeurs putting chains on the tires of their cars, prior to taking them out.

Archie grinned as he saw them and nudged me. We hurried to the rear of the place and to the automobile that Mr. Holley had lent my friend to conduct his experiments with.

At first glance it looked the same as any other car. Closer inspection, however, revealed the fact that there were two oblong, wooden boxes under the rear fenders, from which protruded copper

pipes, opening directly in front of the tire on each rear wheel.

The boxes were painted black, and Archie had labeled each neatly in yellow paint: Safety First! The Catfitz Skidless Safety Skidder.

"Now," my friend said as I stared at the contrivance, "I shall acquaint you with the basic principle of the invention. As you see, I have built a special box—two of them in fact—and with a few feet of copper pipe or tubing have rigged up a device which will make the life of the motorist a long, sweet song. For example—you are out in this car and it suddenly begins to rain. Do you get out, flounder about in the mud, and get soaking wet, while you haul out your tire chains and bruise your fingers putting them on? You do not! What do you do? Simply this."

He went to the driver's seat and pulled a little lever on the wheel. As he did so, from each copper pipe a stream of sand poured out, falling over the tire and heaping up on the floor. I began to understand what it was that I had been walking over on the floor of our room at the Villa.

"Sand!" Archie cried. "The same idea as used by the street-car railways, but never before adapted to the automobile!" He turned off the current and continued: "The box containing the sand is arranged inside like an hourglass. That is, it is divided into two sections, separated by a diaphragm. The upper section contains the sand—and I might mention this is the roughest sand I could find in New Jersey—the lower part of the box contains the shutter and the mouth of the pipe, controlled by the lever on the steering wheel."

"When this lever is pulled," he went on, "it automatically releases the shutter and the sand runs out, and, falling on the

wet pavement or road, covers the slippery surface and gives the tires a sufficient hold. Under the floor of the tonneau is kept a reserve supply of sand, and by my experiments I have figured out just how much is required per mile. What do you think of it?"

I had to admit that it sounded all right. At this moment a respectful hush fell over the place, and a stout, puffy little man, with a red face and white hair, came briskly in. It was easy to see that he was somebody of importance, and I was not surprised when he came over to us and Archie introduced him as Mr. Holley, the president of the Unique Six Motor Company.

They had a long conversation together concerning the working of the invention. At the conclusion of this we entered the car and Archie took the wheel.

VI.

OUTSIDE it was still raining, but as we rolled out Archie gave the sand-control lever a twist and we turned a corner without slipping an inch.

"Nice work!" Mr. Holley beamed. "Don't be afraid to give her the gas!"

Despite myself I shivered a little. He wouldn't have said that had he known Archie as well as I do.

For almost an hour everything was lovely. We skipped merrily over every kind of road and pavement, laughing back at the poor unfortunates who were hopping around and getting all dirty with the chains they were trying to put on.

Archie put the Unique Six through every stunt on the calendar. We wheeled, turned, ran from side to side, doing the tricks the aviators perform in the sky, without a mishap. Everything was running so smoothly that I began to get nervous. It was too good to last. Sure enough I was

right!

We reached a broad stretch of asphalt, as highly polished as a mirror, and the first thing I knew we were cutting figure eights all over it. Archie looked puzzled, but that didn't help matters any, nor did it do anything save to make him lose his self-possession and yank desperately on the sand-control lever.

We executed some curious curves and twists and threw in a couple of scenic-railway dips and side slips for good measure. It must have looked funny to an observer to see us whirling around like a fancy dancing master, but the humor of it wasn't apparent to me—or Mr. Holley either.

While we went around like a merry-go-round minus the music, the president of the Unique Six Motor Company, losing some of his florid complexion, began to howl instructions to Archie, who, becoming more rattled, put on the brakes.

"I can't understand it!" Archie panted. "It's beyond me—"

Mr. Holley began to loosen up on some torrid language and bawled if he didn't stop the car and let him out he was going to call an officer.

He had hardly uttered the words when we skidded over to the curb, upset a peanut stand, toppled over a lamppost, and then rushed back to the center of the street, where we did all our former tricks all over again.

I was wondering how long it was going to last, and what the proprietor of the fallen peanut stand—a swarthy Italian—was going to do to us, whenever we did stop, when my meditations were brought to an abrupt termination.

We backed up to the curb again; there came a dull, heavy thud, the tinkle of breaking glass; something hit me on the head and the lights went out.

VII.

WHEN I came to, I found myself sitting on a chair in a grocery store, and Archie was picking small pieces of broken glass from various parts of my anatomy. There was no sign of Mr. Holley or the Unique Six, but there was an aperture in what had once been the show window of the store large enough to admit an adult elephant.

“The top of the car,” Archie said soothingly, “was jolted loose when we hit the store and fell on you.” Then he added: “Did you ever see such an unreasonable person as Mr. Holley? Just because I happened to run out of sand, he came to the conclusion that the Safety Skidder is no good! And the things he called me!”

He exhaled a breath and followed it up with a sigh. Then suddenly he brightened up and plunging a hand into his pocket, produced a five-dollar bill.

“I believe I owe you a couple of bucks, Bill,” he said. “Here take the five-spot and put it out of circulation!”

Weakly I accepted it and then asked a question.

“How did I get it?” Archie repeated. “Well, you see Mr. Holley thought that you were out for good, and he said he felt sorry for you being my friend, or something like that, and gave me ten bucks to get some liniment for your head. As you don’t need it, we’ll go fifty-fifty on the gift. Anyway, if it hadn’t been for me, you wouldn’t have got any of it.”