

LEAD IN THE HEAD

By

Ferdie Deering

"Job er no job, union er no union, if you don't get me some rent money today, out you go!"

The landlady clamped her lips until they looked like just another wrinkle in her toothless face. She picked up a pile of dishes and started for the kitchen.

"And that's final," she added, turning to push the double-hinged door open with her bony hip.

Arthur Terrel sipped his muddy black coffee.

"Foul stuff," he muttered. "A good deal like life. You hope for a lot but you can't tell what you're getting. After you've got it, there's nothing to it but a bad taste and a case of indigestion."

He pushed the cup back across the gravy-spotted cloth and

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got up from the table. He had once hoped for a lot from life, years ago when he was a young and carefree college student. Much of that hope had vanished when he got a taste of life in a world that, like boarding house coffee, had been boiled a little too long.

The university had graduated Terrel with high honors but it didn't tell him he couldn't use a diploma for a meal ticket. Nevertheless, it didn't take him long to find out that high honors and lofty ambitions have little cash value when the country is wallowing in the depths of depression and despair.

The two years following his graduation had been just one long nightmare of unemployment, distasteful odd jobs, stark hunger and disappointments for Terrel. Then he landed his first real job. It paid \$120 a month and was steady work.

That is, it was steady work until the New Deal took charge of prosperity, Hitler saved Germany from the Jews, Mussolini began civilizing Ethiopia and the C.I.O. set out to protect the poor working man.

It was unionism and Terrel's idealistic notion that in the United States a man may join or not join that had knocked over

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his time clock.

"You'll have to join the union or you can't work here," the superintendent told him.

"You can't make me join," Terrel exploded. "I'm not going to send my wages to some guy in a swivel chair so he can tell me who to work for and to go on strike whenever the mood hits him."

He was right. They didn't make him join. But they did stop him from working there. The superintendent kept his word.

"You'll just have to get in line," his friends advised.

Anyhow, here he was without a job again. And practically broke. His rent was due. And no job in sight.

"Prosperity is back," he sneered. "Back where? I'm just as much out of a job as I ever was and almost as flat broke."

He jerked on his snap brim hat and slammed the boarding house door behind him.

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That was three weeks ago. Now, the landlady, too, had kept her word. Today Terrel was still walking the streets hunting a job. A cold rain drizzled from gray skies. And if there's any-

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thing more lonely than being broke and out of a job in a big city, it's being broke and out of a job in a big city when it's raining.

As he sloshed along, Terrel thought his tired feet resembled the water-logged end of a piece of driftwood trying to keep afloat though doomed to sink.

Lead in his feet. Lead in the sky. Lead in his heart. Why not a little lead in the head and be done with it all? He had asked himself that question a hundred times in the past week.

Probably one good reason that he hadn't answered it in the affirmative already was that he didn't have a gun. He'd never owned one. And if he had, it likely would have gone for food days ago.

Food. How good a nice juicy steak with fried potatoes and hot coffee would taste right now! Terrel clutched a coin in his pocket. It was a silver dollar. He had picked it up somewhere months ago and had kept it---just for luck. If it had brought him any luck, he mused, it was mostly bad.

Still, he'd held onto the dollar while the remainder of his lean purse had dwindled to 75 cents, 50 cents, 40 cents, 15 cents and finally nothing. He had held onto it while he stayed the

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gripping of hunger with insipid lunch counter coffee, stale "sinkers" and cigarettes.

"Keep it a little longer," he had reasoned, "and maybe the damthing will change my luck."

It was not late but already neon signs were glowing through the foggy mist and lights in shop windows tried feebly to send a cheerful invitation through the gloom to prospective customers. Terrel drifted down the street, pausing before each lighted window, looking in but hardly seeing the displayed merchandise.

He tried to think of pleasant things, a warm fire, good companions and a steaming dinner. But his mind wouldn't let him enjoy his dream. It kept turning back, morbidly, to the question, that haunted him:

"Why not a little lead in the head and be done with it all?"

He halted a moment before a pawnshop. His eyes swept rapidly over the heaps of odds and ends, some new articles, others which obviously had been used and nearly all of them shoddy.

He started on again when his attention suddenly was focused on a smeary, handpainted placard:

SPECIAL SALE THIS WEEK ONLY

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BLANK CARTRIDGE REVOLVERS

ONLY 95 CENTS

A miscellaneous assortment of guns was displayed in the window. Several of them had the barrels stuck down over large nails driven into the shelf, so that their battered stocks resembled gnarled trees blown over by a wind too long from the same direction.

Terrel's face darkened as he pondered the question: ~~Why not~~ a little lead in the head? Why not? He hadn't even a place to sleep tonight. He hadn't had the night before, nor the night before that. What was the use? Why not a little lead---?

He whirled and went inside the musty pawnshop. A bell tinkled as the door opened. A short squat Hebrew, wearing thick glasses and a black skull cap, appeared from somewhere and hustled to the front of the store.

"Goot efening, vat can I do for you this efening?" he inquired in an accent as thick as the dust on the shelves.

Arthur hesitated. He grasped his "good luck" silver dollar in one of his sweaty palms.

"I-I-I---why, er, I came to buy a gun," he stammered.

"Vat kind, pliz? Ve haf all kinds of guns. Something to
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hunt with? About twenty-five dollars?"

"No, I want a cheap gun, something to shoot a rat with. Will that blank cartridge pistol you have in the window for ninety-five cents shoot real cartridges?"

"Yess, probably perhapss it will," The Jew shrugged his shoulders. "But if it don't, remember, ve aint responsible for accidents."

He knocked over a small vase as he squeezed his stout shoulders through a small opening to retrieve the gun from the show window.

"Do you haf many rats at your blace?" he asked as he handed the weapon to Terrel for examination.

"No---not many," was the curt answer. "No, I only know of one, a big one." He clicked the empty gun. "If you'll throw in a couple of cartridges, I'll take it."

The Jew mumbled something about "losing money" but dug a couple of dusty cartridges from someplace beneath the counter and picked up the silver dollar from the glass top. He looked at the coin suspiciously, then handed Terrel his five cents change.

Terrel hesitated in the lobby, as if undecided. Then, pulling his hat brim down and his coat collar up, he walked briskly away.

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It wasn't far to the river. He completed his lethal plans as he hurried along. He would stand on the bridge and pull the trigger. If the bullet didn't do a good job, well, he'd be hard to find in that river during such a fog as this.

The pleasant odor of food attracted his attention. Coffee. The smell of good, steaming hot coffee. Inside a tiny restaurant he saw three or four workmen hunched over the counter, eating.

He watched them through the window a moment.

"Where's that nickel? Might as well spend it, too," Terrel jerked the gun from his coat pocket and then pulled out the two greasy cartridges and the lone five cent piece.

He looked at the nickel. Then holding it closer in the light, he stared at it, as though he'd never seen one before. He turned it over and stared again.

Then quickly he turned and began walking, sometimes half running, back towards the pawnshop. The Jew was just turning out the lights when he dashed breathlessly inside. Terrel leaned against the counter to regain his wind.

"Hey, . . . you," he panted. "This . . . nickel . . . you gave . . . me . . . is . . . made out of lead . . . and . . . it has a buffalo . . . on both sides!"

THE END