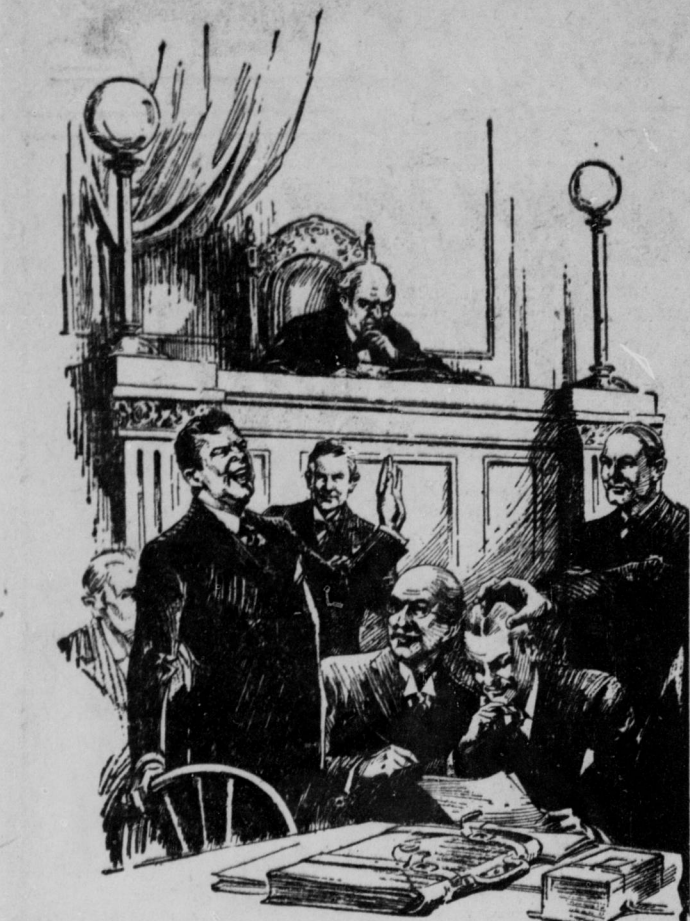


Today's Short Story

IT HAS TO HIT HOME

By Caroline Appleton & Bob Bohan



THE day he put on his uniform for the first time, Patrolman Rine also squeezed out the arrogant, case-hardened professionalism of the quack. It was tolerated for a while as a rookie breach of departmental good manners. But at length it began to appear that Rine was that kind of guy.

"COP KILLED BY BANDITS—" "COP KILLED BY HIT AND RUN DRIVER—" These headlines, crying to a docile and preoccupied public to realize a situation, cause the average cop to take a hitch in his pants, grip his stick hard and at least feel moderately abused. But not Patrolman Rine.

As one after another of his fellows went up on the posthumous honor roll, Patrolman Rine would comment tersely: "So what?" This summarization of the martyrdom of the dead did not endear Patrolman Rine to the living.

Rine didn't know any of the men on the posthumous honor roll. He worked in a quiet, residential precinct in which nearly nothing ever happened. He had 25 years to do on the job.

He seemed to thrive on unpopularity. His rejoinder to all raves, peevish, taunts and eulogies was a maddening "So what?"

The men of his precinct felt toward Rine much as a man feels toward the one clean shirt in the drawer on Saturday night—that one which is inevitably a misfit but which nevertheless must go on.

BUT in spite of himself Patrolman Rine had a friend. Name of Ninety.

Ninety was a mongrel pup who lived in a garage and should have had sense enough to have apprehended his fate. But Ninety was not a garage dog by choice. The garage was to him but the vulgar means of subsistence—food and shelter.

By temperament, Ninety was a cop lover. Uniforms bewitched him. He awaited with trembling excitement the change of tours and he played no favorites among the cops who shared Post Ninety for which he had been named.

Those who fed him hamburgers took no precedence over Patrolman Rine, who did not feed him anything—not even the kind word which is popularly supposed to be a canine's due.

Patrolman Rine, for his own part, ignored Ninety as thoroughly as possible without stepping on him. Patrolman Rine was not to be won over by ardent eyes of gold-flecked brown, which were Ninety's one claim to pulchritude.

Patrolman Rine saw only a mangy, flea-bitten pup whose appearance reflected on the good taste of his owners and on that of Patrolman Rine's own side partners, who claimed for the dog almost legendary qualities of loyalty and intelligence.

NEVERTHELESS, Ninety would not be discouraged from showering Patrolman Rine with adoring awe.

It happened a few moments after Rine had relieved his side partner and had commenced his own tour of duty.

Ninety was already whirling about him in frenzied circles of greeting; circles whose outer rim ran up on doorsteps and around ash cans and which skimmed wide loops a third across the street. Once, briefly, Ninety sat down on a doorstep and panted happily.

Then presently he decided, like a well-trained dog, to sit down in the gutter and pout there abstractedly, his pink tongue flapping. Ninety was momentarily absorbed in dog problems of his own.

He did not see or hear, apparently, the big car that swooped around the corner on two wheels, skidded riotously leftward across the street to the forbidden zone, clipped Ninety neatly and heaved him high in the air.

The shrill, almost human shriek of agony that tipped from Ninety's throat was followed instantly by a wild, unholly peal of laughter from the flying car. The little dog in the air turned a grotesque somersault and dropped almost at Patrolman Rine's feet.

Rine stood shocked into petrification for the fraction of a minute it took for the car to scud around the next corner and disappear.

He had not had time to register more than three things in that crowded space of seconds. No time for license numbers, color, make or type of car—certainly none for driver or passengers. But he had seen the vicious swipe that seemed to have been aimed at Ninety and had tossed the dog into the air; he had noted the curb jumping swerve of the wheels and—above all—that laugh. That laugh—harsh, braggart, void of decency—a strident yowl with a queer flip at the end.

PATROLMAN RINE, frozen, stood staring down at the crumpled little body at his feet, dead looking

as only a dog can look dead. Rine knew then, without knowing how, that some day he would connect with the man who had done this—the man who had laughed like that. That which made it difficult for him to reply. But his reputation was so unpleasant that his partner gave him no benefit of doubt, saying scathingly: "I bet you saw it, huh? The guy that'd hit a dawg like that'd hit a blind man wheelin' a baby carriage!" To which Patrolman Rine, recovering his voice, replied succinctly: "So what?"

He walked off without further conversational exchange. He went back to the station house and took down all the alarms carefully. Everything. Holdups, stolen cars, hit and runs, etc., noting all descriptions meticulously. He preserved the records of that night, and the records of many nights to come.

In the ensuing months and years he compared and cross-referenced them, but nowhere could he find any allusion to a laugh like that which he had heard from the car that ran down little Ninety—a laugh that was to ring in his ears for the rest of his life.

PATROLMAN Rine ceased to concentrate on his arches. He was on duty 24 hours of every day, and he frequently strange places in his quest. Cabarets and burlesques, farces, amateur nights and penny arcades—all of which was exceeding young and ingenious of him, as he realized later.

By and by Patrolman Rine found himself turning into a policeman. He met people, he saw people and by and by he got to be interested in people, as behooves a policeman. To watch their faces and their actions and to get used to the idea that putting two and two together does not necessarily make four, but is likely, in criminal calculation, to come out three, or five.

And in due course he made an overwhelming number of excellent and meritorious arrests which had nothing whatever to do with the demise of Ninety, the dog. But Patrolman Rine prospered according to his just desserts. He was promoted, and again, and yet again. Before he had been seven years on the job he had been made a first-grade detective.

Now, by this time, of course, you have surmised that Patrolman Rine's awakening to a full and proper sense of his duty as a public servant brought about the most notorious criminal ever recorded in the annals of the New York's Finest, and you are correct. Patrolman Rine—or rather, Detective Rine, apprehended and brought to justice the notorious Poker Pan Donlon, slayer of five and co-slaver of numerous others whose unsolved murders had linked the department for years.

It was for that arrest, and rightly, that Detective Rine was promoted to first grade. But it left something in him deeply unsatisfied. For he hadn't been looking for Poker Pan Donlon all these years.

The man for whom Detective Rine had been looking for years was the man who, in hitting the dog, Ninety, had hit home—the man with the hyena laugh who had run over a little dog on Post Ninety on the night of Jan 17, seven years ago.

No, Detective Rine was not wholly satisfied with the greatest and most meritorious arrest of his career, that of Poker Pan Donlon.

Rine had, to be sure, entered a house in which Poker Pan Donlon and four of his henchmen were finally entrenched with three machine guns and an arsenal of minor lethal weapons, and Detective Rine had performed this feat practically without benefit of gas bombs and very nearly alone and singlehanded. That was pretty good. Rine had to admit, himself. But the following morning at the lineup found him vain and depressed because he was no nearer his goal than he had been seven years before.

HIS dejection was acute by the time the trial of Poker Pan Donlon had exhausted the resources of all concerned, and Poker Pan Donlon and his cohorts were headed for more deaths, this time their own, in the electric chair.

But Detective Rine was downcast. When the prisoner, Poker Pan Donlon, rose to receive the verdict of the jury, Detective Rine wasn't even thinking about the case any more. Dimly he heard the words: "Guilty of murder in the first degree."

There was an instant of acute silence. Then a wild, unholly laughter tore through the crowded courtroom—a harsh, braggart laugh, void of decency, a strident yowl with a queer flip at the end.

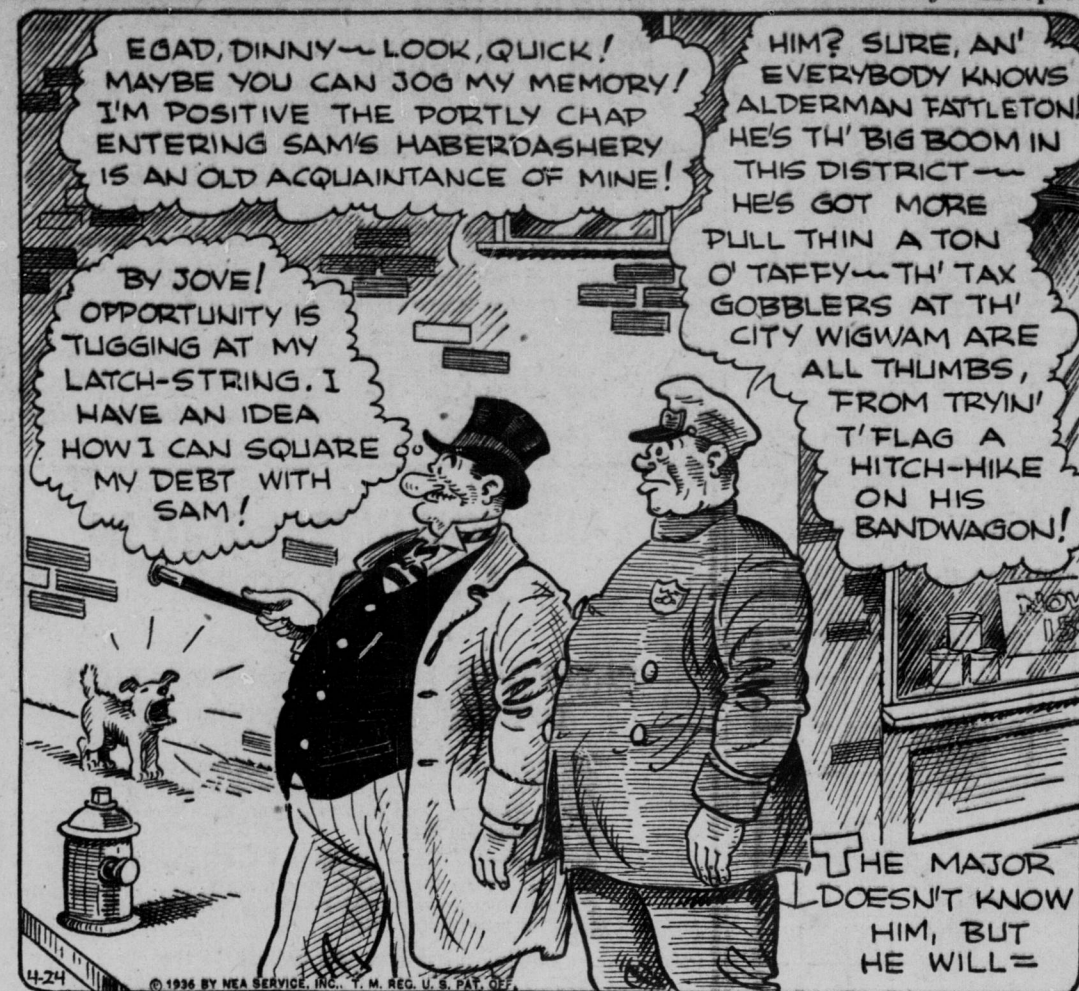
Detective Rine swung about convulsively to confront the source of that laughter for which he had been seeking these many years. It came from Poker Pan Donlon shouting defiance at his doom.

THE END

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OUR BOARDING HOUSE

With Major Hoople



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS



WASHINGTON TUBBS II



ALLEY OOP



BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES



TARZAN AND THE LEOPARD MEN



OUT OUR WAY

By Williams



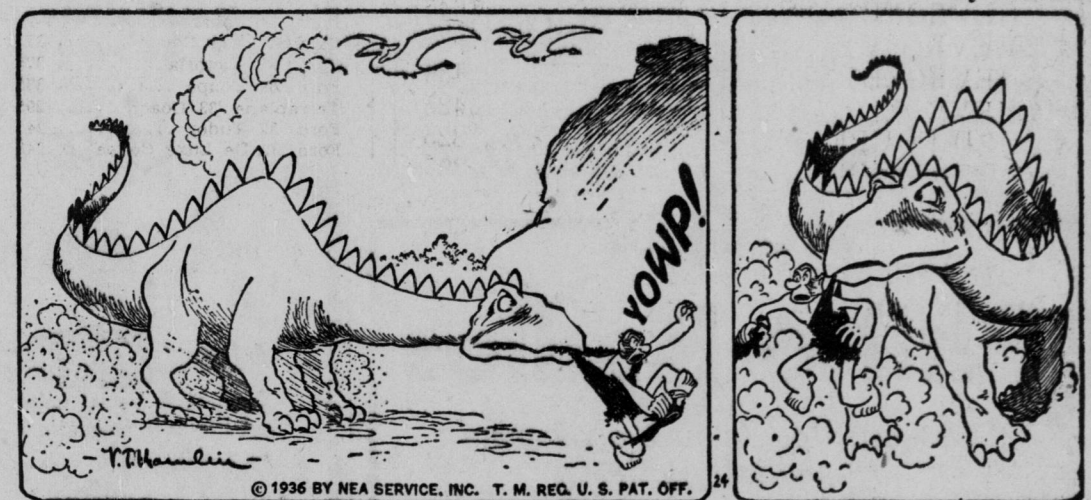
HAPPY HUNTING GROUND



By Crane



By Hamlin



By Martin



By Edgar Rice Burroughs



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