

Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing



The old man was a Bill Mauldin classic.

He stood before Judge Scoppettone in a worn overcoat, his hands folded behind him holding a sweat darkened Stetson.

His eyes were as juicy as wine grape and a gray stubble covered his face — sunken from the absence of an upper plate.

The arrest sheet named him George —, 59—address, U.S.A.—charge drunk in public.

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"Your honor, ever once in a while my mind wonders back to the time when I had a family and children and that old engine down by the depot got me started this time. (the old engine is awaiting movement to Harvey West stadium for the youngsters play area).

"My little daughter once sat in that cab, and she—" George turned his back to the court room spectators as if to hide his tears.

Judge Scoppettone rolled his eyes.

"Come on George, if your wife had died recently, or if I hadn't heard your stories before I might be impressed. The only way you could soften me up would be to bring along a violin.

"How many times have you been arrested, George?"

George didn't remember exactly.

"Twelve, said Scoppettone, refreshing his memory.

"You just finished 60 days for drunkenness yesterday and eight hours later you're back in jail. Is there any hope?"

"Hope springs eternal," quoted George, without really believing it.

He pleaded guilty and drew 10 days.

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Later on that day I went up to the county jail for a talk with him about that old engine.

He'd spruced up a bit and looked younger and straighter in his blue prison coveralls. He had added his upper plate which had fallen in the dirt during his drunkenness. It took off a few more years.

George's story followed the sad theme of so many alcoholics.

A handsome man, even now, he made a fair nitch for himself in vaudeville through the 20's and early 30's on the Ackerman and Harris circuit.

Maybe some of you might have caught one of his song and dance acts: "Freddy and His Dream Girls."

Well, drink loused that up as it did his bid for the movies. He had bit part's in Wally Berry's "Wings," and Patsy Ruth Miller's "Girl On The Stairs."

He was luckier than most and was handed another career chance.

George married and took over his father's well established company in Berkeley. He built a home in the Berkeley hills which looked straight down toward the Golden Gate bridge. He even had maids.

From his marriage came two "wonderful" daughters.

A switch track passed the factory and a six wheeled engine chuffed by daily with engineer Rags Murphy at the throttle.

"That was old 1282. Old 1282. Rags would pass every day and we became acquainted and he's go 'poop, poop, poop' in greeting with the whistle.

"Murphy was a bachelor and he just loved my youngest daughter ever since she was knee high to a beer bottle cap, you might say.

"I used to bring her to the plant and they'd wave to each other, and one time he stopped and held out his arms to her, like this, from the cab, and I lifted her up and he let her work the air. I took movies of it."

George wept with his eyes as he talked.

"But I drank my way out of all that," he said.

His marriage broke. He lost his daughters and sold his home and eventually the company. For eight years he worked as a machinist with the Southern Pacific, but drinking got him fired. Next he tried real estate, but that went too.

Wine has been his comforter and now he passes time, living on money which his father sends to him monthly.

He rarely sees his daughters, both of which he says are well established in marriage and security.

"Like I told the judge, and I'm not complaining, he's the fairest judge you could ask for — ever once in a while I get to thinking about my past and I go into a period of self pity and then I start drinking wine.

"After I got out of jail the other morning, I bought a half gallon of wine and started drinking, and wandered down near the depot, and there I saw old 1282.

"I went over and sat beside her and finished the bottle, and when it was gone I bought another bottle.

"My little girl once sat in that cab."

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After the interview I went back to the office and phoned the Southern Pacific ticket agent at the depot and asked him if the old engine standing in the weeds near his office was the 1282.

He said to hold the phone and he'd go have a look.

He returned and picked up the phone and said: "It's the same type, but the numbers on this one here are 1298."