

HOUDINI PIE

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PROLOGUE

OXNARD, CALIFORNIA IN 1910 had a population of nearly four thousand souls. Charlie Gates figured that if only ten percent were suckers, he would be out of debt before summer. One buck per sucker would net him four hundred dollars. Subtract the costs of production, packaging and advertising and he'd soon be sitting on something in the vicinity of three hundred and thirty dollars, split three ways.

Charlie was twenty years old. He had no job, no prospects. His wife Vera was pregnant again, still two months to go and already as big as a zeppelin. A hundred dollars would come in mighty handy. It was worth a shot.

“Stardust Pills,” he called them, “A Patented Mixture of Rare Herbs and Essential Substances, to Counter the Deleterious Effects of the Terrible Halley’s Comet.” The Comet’s tail, as everyone knew, contained the mysterious poison cyanogen, which the papers had been saying for months was nasty stuff. People were buying asbestos masks, building underground rooms and taking mail-order potions to keep them safe from Halley’s astral spew. Charlie figured the Pills were a sure thing.

He had two partners. Abe Beasley was as tall as a transom and as skinny as a sapling. He wore a punched-in top hat and clunky boots with wooden soles. His father was an apothecary. His mother had run away when Abe was three. He was in charge of making the Pills in the back room of his old man’s shop on C Street. The ingredients were random: a pinch of this, a cup of that. Whatever was handy and cheap. He rolled the boiled-down goop into little brown balls the size of lemon drops. Charlie called them squirrel turds.

Charlie’s pal Warren was short and bespectacled, and so smart it was scary. He was nuts about this Comet business, and had read all about it in the newspapers at the Carnegie Library downtown. It would be at its closest point to earth, he said, near the end of May.

The Pills went on sale the first of April. Sales were brisk from the start. People bought pills for themselves, sent them to relatives and mixed them into their kids’ oatmeal. Abe’s share of the money went mostly to the local pool hall. Warren bought books. Vera browsed a Sears and Roebuck catalog. Charlie worried. Things were going a bit too smoothly.

The City of Oxnard planned a celebration for the night of May 21, a Saturday, to commemorate the ground-breaking for a new Chinese pagoda at Plaza Park. There would be speeches, a parade, a baseball game, a tug-of-war. Charlie and the boys produced a batch of slightly larger pills, flat and round like overcoat buttons, that he dubbed his "Last-Minute Emergency" line. They came three to a package, at a dollar-fifty each.

The big day dawned bright and clear. Charlie set up under a palm tree at the corner of the park.

"Last chance!" he hollered at the milling crowd. "We are now fully within the tail of the Comet. It may be lovely to look at, but ..."

"Charlie," said Warren. "Look."

A dozen men were walking purposefully toward them in the twilight. Charlie's huckstering faltered on his lips. A crowd gathered slowly around them.

"What do you suppose they want?" Charlie whispered.

"I don't know, but they're not looking at the Comet."

Forty degrees above the eastern horizon Halley streaked uncannily across the firmament. Not a head was craned to watch it. All eyes were on Charlie.

Leading the group was big John Stokes, manager of the Oxnard Livery. His expression was a combination of boiling fury and crippling discomfort. He was bent forward oddly at the waist. Many of the others were similarly hunched over.

"So you're Mr. Stardust," Stokes said.

Charlie extended his hand and spoke with exaggerated civility.

"Charles Gates," he said. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure ..."

"Can the cute stuff. My wife made me take one of your goddamned Pills last night. I been shittin' my guts out since."

An ugly murmur of assent rose from the men behind him.

"I don't understand. There have been no reports of ..."

"All we want to know is what did you put in these goddamned pills?"

Charlie swallowed hard. He didn't know. He hadn't even been in the room when Abe cooked them up.

“Well?” said Stokes.

A hoarse shout came from the back of the crowd. It was Thomas Rice, one of the Oxnard City Councilmen, and a well-known shark with a pool stick. He was dragging a sorry figure wearing a punched-in top hat.

“Here’s the man,” he roared.

Rice deposited Abe at Charlie’s feet. The crowd moved closer. Abe’s face was green, his eyes bloodshot, his collar torn and his nose recently bloodied.

“They made me tell them,” he said.

“Not exactly,” countered Mr. Rice. “Seems that Mr. Beasley has been bragging all day about the killing he and his friends have been making. What did you say was the magic ingredient this last round, Mr. Beasley?”

“Castor oil,” Abe muttered.

“Speak up,” said Rice. “I’m not sure that everyone heard you.”

Abe cleared his throat, but didn’t lift his head.

“Castor oil,” he said, a little more loudly. “Mixed with some sawdust.”

“Sawdust?” said Charlie.

“Helped hold them together,” Abe sniffed. “You wanted them so damned big.”

Warren was making small squeaking sounds in his throat.

“What was your part in this, young fellow?” Rice asked Warren.

“I ... I ... mostly kept the books, sir. The money, I mean.”

“I suggest that you go get it.”

Warren was off in a flash. Charlie took a step as if to follow.

“Not so fast,” came John Stokes’ growl. “We ain’t done with you.”

The big man held out his fist and opened it. On his palm lay three big Pills.

“Taste of your own medicine,” said Stokes. “Eat ‘em up, now.”

“But I ...” Charlie began.

“One at a time,” Stokes said. “There’s gonna be some poisonous vapors in your house tonight, but they ain’t gonna have anything to do with the Comet.”

The men howled. Charlie smiled weakly and reached for a Pill. The feel of it in his hand—slimy, slightly sticky—was repulsive. People had *eaten* these?

“Down the hatch,” said Stokes.

Charlie got home shortly after midnight. When he staggered up Downing Street he was alarmed to find Doctor Broughton’s brand new Model T in front of his little cottage. As he came up the steps he heard the jagged cry of a newborn.

Broughton was sitting at the kitchen table; his tie undone, his sleeves rolled up and a tumbler of whiskey at his elbow.

“Put up a fight, he did,” he said, “but we got the little giant out safe and sound.”

There were two nurses in the front room. One cradled a bundle of towels. Charlie peeked inside it at what could not possibly be a newborn. It had a head the size of a melon and arms as thick as his wrists. Its eyes were an impossible, unearthly blue. Charlie whistled softly, then headed for the stairs.

“She’s fine,” said one of the women. “The doctor is a wizard with the stitching.”

Vera lay propped against the pillows, her face as pale as the sheets.

“We got us a boy,” she said with a weak smile.

“One at least,” said Charlie. “What are we going to name it?”

Through a gap in the curtains they could just make out the smudge of the Comet against the sky.

“Why,” she said, “I think we should call him Halley.”

Charlie didn’t answer. He raced down the stairs, through the back door, and to the outhouse, where he sat with the door flung open. He cursed the Comet silently while all his schemes and fortitude gushed out of him like a stinking waterfall.

So close, he thought. So goddamned close. Damn Abe. Damn that John Stokes. Damn Warren. Damn it all. What are we going to do now?