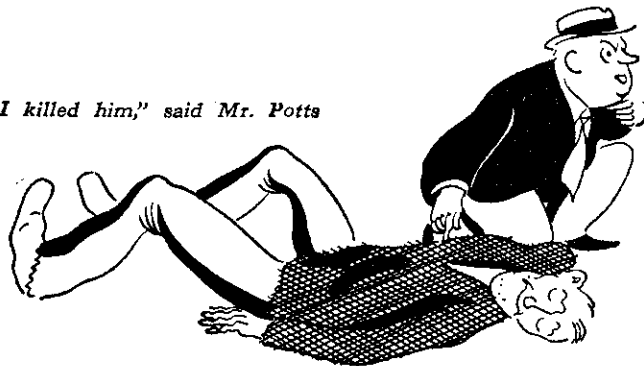


The end of M^r Potts

"I killed him," said Mr. Potts



RESULT OF UNFINISHED STORY COMPETITION

Judge's Comment And Decision

More than 100 entries were received from 97 entrants in "The Listener" short-story competition. The conditions, as set out in the issue of August 16 (p. 10), required competitors to supply an ending to the short story "Mr. Potts Takes a Walk." Mr. Potts, more or less a worm, had been driving in his car. He left it for a moment and returned to find a man stealing his tool-kit. He chased the man, unable to make up his mind to attack, and the story ended when darkness fell over the Canterbury Plains. What was Mr. Potts to do? Or what was to be done with Mr. Potts? Here is the originator's report on the competition:

WITH so many entries, it was only to be expected that many would use the same or similar ideas. The solutions of the problem divided themselves into three classes: Some despatched Mr. Potts in an evident attempt to maintain the theory of his complete futility. Others made him victorious and ended on the note that the worm had turned. The rest compromised in some way, avoiding the actual issue of conflict, and justifying or reducing Mr. Potts as circumstances demanded.

Six entries were selected for final consideration. E. E. Malden (Cust, North Canterbury) made Mr. Potts hesitate, and while he hesitated a car passed him—his own, driven by the thief. Roger Eastgate (Wellington) made the man frightened at the risk of outside intervention and gave Mr. Potts his tools back. When Mr. Potts returned for his car it was stolen. R. A. McIntosh (Auckland) had Mr. Potts help the man out of a deep ditch into which he had fallen, and when the man was rescued, made him steal Mr. Potts's dry clothes. Mrs. Gee (Auckland) carried the man off to escape on the back of a motor lorry which Mr. Potts had allowed to pass, unable to make up his mind about stopping it and asking for help. Elizabeth Parsons (Auckland) killed the man by accident and had Mr. Potts reach for the justification of high tragedy by claiming that he killed him. E. Miles Samuel (Wellington) created a romantic hero out of Mr. Potts.

Murder and the Police

The only one of these unique in the whole field was the entry from R. A. McIntosh. Elizabeth Parsons was almost the only one to make Mr. Potts seek fame as a murderer. She was the only

one to let him get away with his claim. Others had the same idea but were too practical-minded to prevent the police from seeing through the falsity of his claim.

A substantial number allowed the chase to lapse in some way and then made the loss of his car the climax for poor Mr. Potts.

An even larger number allowed Mr. Potts to win in a bodily conflict with the thief, by virtue of extreme vigour, rage, cunning, or chance. A favourite ruse was to take Mr. Potts over a short cut, and place him in position for a coup de grace.

About as many called in the police, who rescued Mr. Potts and discovered the thief as an escaped criminal or an escaped lunatic. Some of these left Mr. Potts with no wind in his sails at all, some allowed him the hollow satisfaction of claiming credit for the capture.

Flights of Imagination

Others went to varying extremes of original imagination. One turned the thief into an All Black footballer and made Mr. Potts drive him home, admiring. Another had Mr. Potts pick up a roll thinking it contained his tools. It turned out to be a roll of bacon, from which a tramp cooked some rashers by the way side. Potts was taken as an escaped lunatic but released when the real one was found (the thief). He returned to his car and had trouble with a lady whose children were using it for a picnic. Many made their climax, in so many words: "And when he woke up it was all a dream!"

There were, of course, many variations within these themes. There is not enough space to detail them.

Numerous as the variations in idea certainly were, there was little variation

in standard. It would be impossible to separate ninety per cent. of the entries. The six selected for final consideration were only a shade above this standard. Not many more were definitely below par.

The Editor made the task of judging even harder by saying that entries need not necessarily be literary efforts; he would accept plain statements of what happened. In these circumstances, the first point to look for was the best idea of the lot. It had to be original, and it had to fit with the facts already set out in the story, and the original conception of Mr. Potts.

Fantasy and Possibility

Here most entrants met their fate. The original story was not quite outside the bounds of possibility; but very nearly. It evidently excited competitors into one of two traps. The first made them increase the fantasy quite outside the bounds of possibility. (The case of the All Black was an example.) The second made them accept the fantasy implied in the original story, treat it as a perfectly matter-of-fact succession of events, and bring Mr. Potts out of trouble in the most ordinary way possible.

The trick of success lay in maintaining the interest of fantasy without killing it with the over-emphasis of impossibility. The trap was all the more dangerous because Potts was the sort of woolly-head who might do anything in such strange circumstances; but the Canterbury roads were not the sort of place in which anything might happen. The case of the roll of bacon was an example of fantasy falsely brought in from outside the orbit of Mr. Potts. The cases of the fall in the ditch and the confession of murder were cases of fantasy maintained within the almost unrestricted bounds permitted by the character of Potts himself.

Fortunately, for this would have made selection very difficult, few entrants confined themselves to a simple statement of what happened. Nearly all attempted to finish the story in story form. Those who did not were not excessively original or apt in their idea, so the final judgment could be made on the question of standard, considered with the value of the idea expressed.

Facts into Narrative

This was a test of competitors' understanding of the trick of converting a succession of facts into narrative. The New Zealand scene does not seem to encourage the development of this art.

New Zealanders have done interesting literary work in the examination of fact. They can recount incident or experience precisely, and in good English. They can examine theories logically. They are efficiently practical. The doings of people are clear in their minds, but not the people themselves. In a good story there must be more than beginning, middle, and end. There must be life and atmosphere.

To overcome these limitations within the bounds set by this competition would be more than usually difficult. The story itself was almost pure narrative. The character of Mr. Potts was sketched in the most obvious way. The success of the story depended entirely on its ending. This had to illuminate the whole scene, put the final polish on the theme and the last coat of enamel (or tar) on Mr. Potts. As a competition in literary arithmetic it was easy. One hundred people found it so. As a competition in literary callisthenics it was difficult.

Of the six finalists, the two who took his car away from Mr. Potts, to provide climax after anti-climax, came nearer to the requirements than others who had the same idea. Their technique, however, did not quite justify a perfect comedy situation. The same applied to the entrant who gave the thief a ride on a lorry. R. A. McIntosh had the advantage of an even better comedy situation, Mr. Potts without his suit was more hilarious than Mr. Potts without his car, more pitiable, more despicable. The author did not quite make the best possible use of his idea. He spoiled it, I thought, by his use of such words as "purloined," "unsavoury gentleman," and "miscreant." He made it impossible to accept his entry by several slips: if the ditch were deep enough to hinder the man's escape, it would be too wide for Mr. Potts's stick. Mr. Potts, a small man, would not be wearing clothes that would fit the thief, a large man.

The Best Effort

Of all the entrants who chose to end tragically, Elizabeth Parsons supplied the best effort. Many killed Mr. Potts, most of them as unexcitingly as they might despatch a fowl on December 24. But the best tragic situation, and the best tragedy continuing the vein of fantasy in the original, was the conception of Elizabeth Parsons. "I killed him," he said. A splendid ending, though she rather spoiled it with her approach. It

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