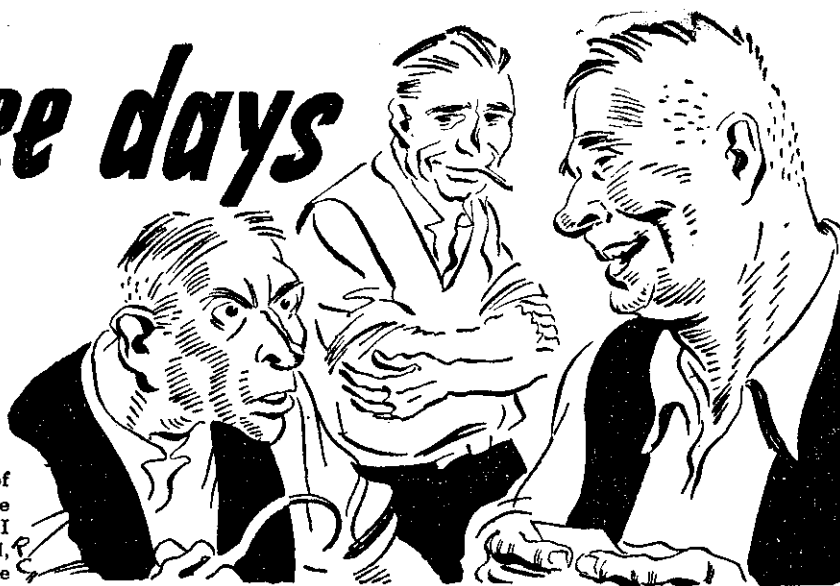


You can't go three days

A Short Story

Written for "The Listener"

By A. P. GASKELL



I DON'T like this Joe in the wool-store.

Mind you, at first he's decent to me, and he doesn't mean to be hard. He just wears you down, slow and heavy. He's so big and strong and thick-skinned you can't make no impression, and he just wears you down. He keeps saying, "Never mind, Henry," he says, "we'll soon shave Hitler's mo off. Them Royal Air Force boys, they'll shave his mo off." Then he laughs. Three—four times a day he does that. Every day he keeps on the same. He keeps on saying the same things and laughing at the same jokes in the same slow dull way so you get to hate the sight of him. He's not mean. It's just that he don't think my way.

At first I'm glad he's around. Me, I'm long and skinny. But wiry, mind you. The stringy sort that don't make good eating. Now with Joe it's different. You could feed your family for a week off one arm. They're as big as that. And his shoulders are big lumps of meat that keep busting his shirts. I was going to say his head is a big lump of meat, too, but he means well, Joe does. It's just that he's so strong he wears you down. Of course he's past his best now. They say to him, "Look at Joe, he's getting a pot."

"Me?" he says, pulling it in, then looking down. "I got no pot." And for a while he's got no pot. Then he forgets. But the next time it's just the same.

WELL, at first he's decent to me. He helps me pick up the bales when they fall off the trolley. And they fall off plenty times till I learn how to balance them. He shows me how to stand them up with a quick jerk when I'm struggling with a slow pull. He shows me how to ease them on to the scales. I dig the hook in and give a quick tug to pull them over on to the trolley. So one day the hook slips and rips my hand and Joe shows me how to do it with a slow pull.

He's good to me, Joe is. But even then I'm a bit sore at him.

"What's your name?" he says the first day.

"Henry," I says on account of that's my name.

"Henry the eighth," he says and laughs, and all the boys laugh. So I'm Henry the eighth, and Joe keeps asking me how's my wives.

WELL, pretty soon I get the knack of it and fit in with the team and we weigh the bales and stack them and I enjoy the life. I pull those bales around, and the trolley wheels roll over the smooth floor, and we talk and yarn and smoke and she's a good life. Joe don't worry me much because his jokes are still fresh and I don't mind when he keeps cadging smokes.

"Give us one of your smokes, Henry," he says. Then he rolls it with his thick fingers. "Never mind Henry," he says, "we'll soon shave Hitler's mo off. Them Royal Air Force boys, they're the ones." Joe's untidy with his smokes. He always has some wet straggling bits of tobacco hanging out the end and sticking on his mouth. I wish he'd nip the ends off.

"Thanks Henry," he says, giving me the tin. "How's all the wives? What a time you have, I bet —"

WELL, I get hardened to it and I like the life. The boys are a good crowd and we pull the bales out and roll them over to get weighed and stack them. I soon get the knack of it.

Well, pretty soon it's near time for the first wool sale and we've worked hard. Overtime nearly every night. I'm glad at the week-ends on account of the rest I get.

So now I begin to see Joe's pretty shrewd. He's lazy for all his strength. It's easy for him to handle those bales but he's shrewd as well.

"Pull those two out of the way Henry," he says, "and I'll take that BXE back there." So I get in the middle of the jam and struggle and push, then Joe wheels his trolley in easy and rolls out his bale. But I soon see when it's my turn to get one at the back. Joe lets me clear my own way. He's not mean, but he's sure lazy.

He puts one across me this time, too. I'm just going to pull a bale on to my trolley when Joe says, "I'll take that one Henry." So I don't mind. I take the next one and they weigh it.

"Bellies and pieces," they say. "Take it out to Sam." So off I go to the other end of the store, through the door, down the ramp, and the bale falls off when I turn too fast at the bottom. So I heave it up and pull it back on the trolley and push it away along to Sam.

WELL, I'm wild at letting Joe put it across me. When I get back Joe says, "Give us one of your smokes Henry."

"You smoke a hell of a lot Joe," I says.

"Not very much. I guarantee I don't smoke no more than you do."

"Yes you do, you're always smoking. You ought to cut it down a bit. Ever tried to stop?"

"Oh, I could stop easy," Joe says, putting my smoke in his mouth. "Thanks, Henry. I tell you what. You couldn't stop. You're one of them nervy ones. On the go all the time. You couldn't stop." A wet bit of tobacco sticks on his lip.

"All right," I says, "I'll give you a competition. See who can go the longest. I'll have a smoke now, then we'll see." I'm getting mad at Joe because I know I could beat him.

"There you go getting excited. I said you was jumpy. You can't do without your smokes. Why, you'd jump down our throats before a day was up."

Well, Joe narks me. He's so slow and pig-headed.

"Go to hell," I says, "You won't take me on."

"I tell you what," he says after a puff. "I bet you ten bob you can't go three days."

"Three days? I can go three weeks. It's a bet."

SO there you are. Old Joe he's pretty shrewd, and I'm so sore I don't see how he slipped out of it.

Well, the rest of that day I kept forgetting and put my hand to my pocket for my tin when the rest of the boys light up. But Joe remembers.

"Now, Henry," he calls. "Cut it out Henry. Three weeks you said. And no smokes at home to-night. I'll tell your wives to watch you." Then he laughs like hell and has the boys laughing too. I don't mind much but I sure do want a smoke. A smoke settles your nerves.

Well, that night I can't get settled on account of how I want a smoke. I just sorta roam round the house and pretty soon I go to bed.

THE next day I'm down at work again and I'm not feeling too good. My head feels kinda high and light and dizzy and I keep sucking in big breaths just like they was a good lung full of smoke, but they're just air and it don't do no good. I feel pretty restless so I work like hell to pass the time.

Well, Joe's there and he starts in early. "Good morning, Henry," Joe says. "You're lookin' a bit peaked this morn-

ing. How many smokes you have last night?"

"I didn't have no smokes, Joe," I says, "on account of a joker's going to pay me ten bob to-morrow for stopping."

"Aw come on," says Joe, "you aren't doin' yourself no good. Look at you now. You can't last out the day. You're all nervy."

"Go to hell," I says, because Joe's beginning to nark me and I'm getting a bit excited. So I get up to walk away.

"Have a good old smoke, Henry." Joe holds out his tin. "Here you are. I'll roll it for you."

So he starts rolling a smoke and I stand watching him and I can feel like it's my fingers rolling the smoke. But I walk away and have a drink of water.

WELL, Joe keeps riding me all day, and I keep working flat out, and pretty soon we're stacking. Now I don't mind stacking bales two high or three high, but when it's four high she's tough, because you got to push them up to arms' length above your head. So the gang is there with me and Joe, and Bill is up top hauling them up and putting in the stringers. We bend down and dig our hooks in and Joe says, "Hup," and we throw them up.

It's easy for Joe. He just lifts them big shoulders and pushes up them big arms and there she is. But with me it's different. I push on the floor with my feet and strain with my legs and guts and put my last ounce in the heave with my arms. Well, Joe's strong and he makes the pace hot, and I think "Why the hell doesn't he give us a spell, the big baboon," and I think how I'd like to crown him.

Well, pretty soon I'm done. The bales keep tilting over my way when we lift and Joe sees it's no use.

"Smoko, boys," he says. "Young Henry can't take it. I dunno how he got them six wives."

So I sit on a bale and slump down and I can't get my wind. My arms are too tired to lift up and wipe the sweat off my face. So Joe lumbers over and stands in front of me and grins and rolls a smoke. I watch his thick fingers twirl the paper. He leaves bits hanging out the ends. He lights it and sucks down a lung full. I take a deep breath too. I know

(Continued on next page)