

**Nathanael West**



*A Cool Million:  
The Dismantling  
of Lemuel Pitkin*

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Shagpoke Whipple lived on the main street of Ottsville in a two-story frame house with a narrow lawn in front and a garage that once had been a chicken house in the rear. Both buildings had a solid, sober look, and, indeed, no one was ever allowed to create disorder within their precincts.

The house served as a place of business as well as a residence; the first floor being devoted to the offices of the bank and the second functioning as the home of the ex-President. On the porch, next to the front door, was a large bronze plate that read:

RAT RIVER NATIONAL BANK  
*Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple*  
PRES.

Some people might object to turning a part of their dwelling into a bank, especially if, like Mr. Whipple, they had hobnobbed with crowned heads. But Shagpoke was not proud, and he was of the saving kind. He had always saved: from the first time he received a penny at the age of five, when he had triumphed over the delusive pleasures of an investment in candy, right down to the time he was elected President of the United States. One of his favorite adages was "Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs." By this he meant that the pleasures of the body are like grandmothers, once they begin to suck eggs they never stop until all the eggs (purse) are dry.

As Lem turned up the path to Mr. Whipple's house, the sun rapidly sank under the horizon. Every evening at this

time, the ex-President lowered the flag that flew over his garage and made a speech to as many of the town's citizenry as had stopped to watch the ceremony. During the first year after the great man's return from Washington, there used to collect quite a crowd, but this had dwindled until now, as our hero approached the house, there was but a lone Boy Scout watching the ceremony. This lad was not present of his own free will, alas, but had been sent by his father, who was desirous of obtaining a loan from the bank.

Lem removed his hat and waited in reverence for Mr. Whipple to finish his speech.

"All hail Old Glory! May you be the joy and pride of the American heart, alike when your gorgeous folds shall wanton in the summer air and your tattered fragments be dimly seen through clouds of war! May you ever wave in honor, hope and profit, in unsullied glory and patriotic fervor, on the dome of the Capitol, on the tented plain, on the wave-rocked topmast and on the roof of this garage!"

With these words, Shagpoke lowered the flag for which so many of our finest have bled and died, and tenderly gathered it up in his arms. The Boy Scout ran off hurriedly. Lem moved forward to greet the orator.

"I would like to have a few words with you, sir," said our hero.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Whipple with native kindness. "I am never too busy to discuss the problems of youth, for the youth of a nation is its only hope. Come into my den," he added.

The room into which Lem followed Mr. Whipple was situated in the back of the garage. It was furnished with

extreme simplicity; some boxes, a cracker barrel, two brass spittoons, a hot stove and a picture of Lincoln were all it held.

When our hero had seated himself on one of the boxes, Shagpoke perched on the cracker barrel and put his congress gaiters near the hot stove. He lined up the distance to the nearest spittoon with a measuring gob of spittle and told the lad to begin.

As it will only delay my narrative and serve no good purpose to report how Lem told about his predicament, I will skip to his last sentence.

“And so,” concluded our hero, “the only thing that can save my mother’s home is for your bank to take over Squire Bird’s mortgage.”

“I would not help you by lending you money, even if it were possible for me to do so,” was the surprising answer Mr. Whipple gave the boy.

“Why not, sir?” asked Lem, unable to hide his great disappointment.

“Because I believe it would be a mistake. You are too young to borrow.”

“But what shall I do?” asked Lem in desperation.

“There are still three months left to you before they can sell your house,” said Mr. Whipple. “Don’t be discouraged. This is the land of opportunity and the world is an oyster.”

“But how am I to earn fifteen hundred dollars (for that was the face value of the mortgage) here in such a short time?” asked Lem, who was puzzled by the ex-President’s rather cryptic utterances.

“That is for you to discover, but I never said that you should remain in Ottsville. Do as I did, when I was your age. Go out into the world and win your way.”

Lem considered this advice for a while. When he spoke again, it was with courage and determination.

“You are right, sir. I’ll go off to seek my fortune.” Our hero’s eyes shone with a light that bespoke a high heart.

“Good,” said Mr. Whipple, and he was genuinely glad. “As I said before, the world is an oyster that but waits for hands to open it. Bare hands are best, but have you any money?”

“Something less than a dollar,” said Lem sadly.

“It is very little, my young friend, but it might suffice, for you have an honest face and that is more than gold. But I had thirty-five dollars when I left home to make my way, and it would be nice if you had at least as much.”

“Yes, it would be nice,” agreed Lem.

“Have you any collateral?” asked Mr. Whipple.

“Collateral?” repeated Lem, whose business education was so limited that he did not even know what the word meant.

“Security for a loan,” said Mr. Whipple.

“No, sir, I’m afraid not.”

“Your mother has a cow, I think?”

“Yes, Old Sue.” The boy’s face fell as he thought of parting with that faithful servitor.

“I believe that I could lend you twenty-five dollars on her, maybe thirty,” said Mr. Whipple.

“But she cost more than a hundred, and besides she supplies us with milk, butter and cheese, the main part of our simple victuals.”



“You do not understand,” said Mr. Whipple patiently. “Your mother can keep the cow until the note that she will sign comes due in sixty days from now. This new obligation will be an added incentive to spur you on to success.”

“But what if I fail?” asked Lem. Not that he was losing heart, be it said, but he was young and wanted encouragement.

Mr. Whipple understood how the lad felt and made an effort to reassure him.

“America,” he said with great seriousness, “is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost.

“Let me warn you that you will find in the world a certain few scoffers who will laugh at you and attempt to do you injury. They will tell you that John D. Rockefeller was a thief and that Henry Ford and other great men are also thieves. Do not believe them. The story of Rockefeller and of Ford is the story of every great American, and you should strive to make it your story. Like them, you were born poor and on a farm. Like them, by honesty and industry, you cannot fail to succeed.”

It is needless to say that the words of the ex-President encouraged our young hero just as similar ones have heartened the youth of this country ever since it was freed from the irksome British yoke. He vowed then and there to go and do as Rockefeller and Ford had done.

Mr. Whipple drew up some papers for the lad’s mother to sign and ushered him out of the den. When he had gone,

the great man turned to the picture of Lincoln that hung on the wall and silently communed with it.

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Our hero's way home led through a path that ran along the Rat River. As he passed a wooded stretch he cut a stout stick with a thick gnarled top. He was twirling this club, as a bandmaster does his baton, when he was startled by a young girl's shriek. Turning his head, he saw a terrified figure pursued by a fierce dog. A moment's glance showed him that it was Betty Prail, a girl with whom he was in love in a boyish way.

Betty recognized him at the same moment.

"Oh, save me, Mr. Pitkin!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands.

"I will," said Lem resolutely.

Armed with the stick he had most fortunately cut, he rushed between the girl and her pursuer and brought the knob down with full force on the dog's back. The attention of the furious animal—a large bulldog—was diverted to his assailant, and with a fierce howl he rushed upon Lem. But our hero was wary and expected the attack. He jumped to one side and brought the stick down with great force on the dog's head. The animal fell, partly stunned, his quivering tongue protruding from his mouth.

"It won't do to leave him so," thought Lem; "when he revives he'll be as dangerous as ever."

He dealt the prostrate brute two more blows which settled its fate. The furious animal would do no more harm.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Pitkin!” exclaimed Betty, a trace of color returning to her cheeks. “I was terribly frightened.”

“I don’t wonder,” said Lem. “The brute was certainly ugly.”

“How brave you are!” the young lady said in admiration.

“It doesn’t take much courage to hit a dog on the head with a stick,” said Lem modestly.

“Many boys would have run,” she said.

“What, and left you unprotected?” Lem was indignant. “None but a coward would have done that.”

“Tom Baxter was walking with me, and he ran away.”

“Did he see the dog chasing you?”

“Yes.”

“And what did he do?”

“He jumped over a stone wall.”

“All I can say is that that isn’t my style,” said Lem. “Do you see how the dog froths at the mouth? I believe he’s mad.”

“How fearful!” exclaimed Betty with a shudder. “Did you suspect that before?”

“Yes, when I first saw him.”

“And yet you dared to meet him?”

“It was safer than to run,” said Lem, making little of the incident. “I wonder whose dog it was?”

“I’ll tell you,” said a brutal voice.

Turning his head, Lem beheld a stout fellow about three years older than himself, with a face in which the animal seemed to predominate. It was none other than Tom Baxter, the town bully.

“What have you been doing to my dog?” demanded Baxter with a snarl.

Addressed in this tone, Lem thought it unnecessary to throw away politeness on such a brutal customer.

“Killing him,” he answered shortly.

“What business have you killing my dog?” demanded the bully with much anger.

“It was your business to keep the brute locked up, where he wouldn’t do any harm,” said Lem. “Besides, you saw him attack Miss Prail. Why didn’t you interfere?”

“I’ll flog you within an inch of your life,” said Baxter with an oath.

“You’d better not try it,” said Lem coolly. “I suppose you think I ought to have let the dog bite Miss Prail.”

“He wouldn’t have bitten her.”

“He would too. He was chasing her with that intention.”

“It was only in sport.”

“I suppose he was frothing at the mouth only in sport,” said Lem. “The dog was mad. You ought to thank me for killing him because he might have bitten you.”

“That don’t go down,” said Baxter coarsely. “It’s much too thin.”

“It’s true,” said Betty Prail, speaking for the first time.

“Of course you’ll stand up for him,” said the butcher boy (for that was Baxter’s business), “but that’s neither here nor there. I paid five dollars for that dog, and if he don’t pay me what I gave, I’ll mash him.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” said Lem quietly. “A dog like that ought to be killed, and no one has any right to let

him run loose, risking the lives of innocent people. The next time you get five dollars you ought to invest it better.”

“Then you won’t pay me the money?” cried the bully in a passion. “I’ll break your head.”

“Come on,” said Lem, “I’ve got something to say about that,” and he squared off scientifically.

“Oh, don’t fight him, Mr. Pitkin,” said Betty, very much distressed. “He is much stronger than you.”

“He’ll find that out soon enough, I’m thinking,” growled Lem’s opponent.

That Tom Baxter was not only larger but stronger than our hero was no doubt true. On the other hand he did not know how to use his strength. It was merely undisciplined brute force. If he could have got Lem around the waist the latter would have been at his mercy, but our hero knew that well enough and didn’t choose to allow it. He was a pretty fair boxer, and stood on his defense, calm and wary.

When Baxter rushed in, thinking to seize his smaller opponent, he was greeted by two rapid blows in the face, one of which struck him on the nose, the other in the eye, the effect of both being to make his head spin.

“I’ll mash you for that,” he yelled in a frenzy of rage, but as he rushed in again he never thought to guard his face. The result was a couple of more blows, the other eye and his mouth being assailed this time.

Baxter was astonished. He had expected to “chaw up” Lem at the first onset. Instead of that, there stood Lem cool and unhurt, while he could feel that his nose and mouth were bleeding and both his eyes were rapidly closing.