

Road Closed: Detour *By William Hamilton Osborne*

Twenty-Five Thousand Dollars, a Hero and Four Sweeping Hawks.

AT 3 o'clock on a certain Saturday afternoon—a balmy day in early spring—a young man of the name of Elmer Quale stood bareheaded on the topmost step of the city hall in River City. His general appearance was that of a man who had been thoroughly through the mill. One arm was bound across his breast. He had no eyebrows. His hair had been cropped very close, revealing to the public gaze a white, well-shaped poll. He was about 35 years old, of medium height and weight. Save for his broad shoulders, he was slender. He weighed, stripped, not more, perhaps, than a hundred and fifty pounds. It was a necessary part of his profession, for he had one, that he be of athletic tendency and build. Weeks before he had been a passably good looking chap. Weeks later he would once more come into his own.

He stood erect and straight, but painfully embarrassed, upon the topmost step. In front of him there stretched a knock-down speakers' platform—a small affair, with a floor surface ten by ten. Elmer Quale was not the whole show here by any means. There was something else that made this particular occasion remarkably unique and curious. There was a mysterious, misshapen object resting in the middle of this platform—an object hidden and concealed. Over this object an American flag had been thrown. Small boys in the secret knew well what was there, perhaps. But they couldn't see what was there. And most of the people didn't know.

The Honorable Sam Oliver, River County's genial, popular and eloquent prosecutor of the pleas, delivered the presentation speech. He was never tiresome. In this case he was brief and to the point. With a final toss of his lanky hair Sam Oliver reached his peroration—he thundered out his climax. Dramatically he motioned to a dozen little boys and girls. Scrambling eagerly across the platform, they drew away the flag. The crowd surged forward to catch the better glimpse of what lay there revealed.

The Honorable Sam Oliver turned to the bandaged youth beside him. "To you, young Elmer Quale," he cried, "this hard-earned heap of coin." It was a heap of coin—a heap of bills and coin. Pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, halves, silver dollars, dollar bills, two, five, ten, and so on up to fifties. Clean money, solid money, thrown into a heap. Much money—twenty-five thousand dollars by actual count. Twenty-five thousand dollars in good American currency. And all for Elmer Quale.

The silence was intense. Then, as in a flash, three diminutive cheer leaders sprang to the platform, raised their voices in sharp, metallic treble, and swung and waved, and flung their bodies to the four corners of the wind. Shrill voices responded—young voices. Young voices were in the majority, young eyes glistened, young bodies—thousands of them—pulsated and pulsed in that crowd. For the gift was the gift of the school children of River City to Elmer Quale, the forlorn young hero standing there on the top step of the city hall.

It was the idea of the school children, this gift—an idea born and nurtured in their schools. In secret they had made their preparations for the tribute to their hero—for more than a month they had busied themselves about the great drive of their young lives. It was their personal drive for their own personal idol. They had posted the life out of River City business men—but with grave cautions to their contributors not to tell Elmer Quale, nor any of his family, nor any of his friends about it. Elmer Quale was not to know.

They had, indeed, intended great things. At the start they had thought of buying Elmer Quale a twenty-five thousand dollar automobile to live in. They had thought of having built for him a twenty-five thousand dollar automobile. They had considered fitting up for him a twenty-five thousand dollar sporting goods store, where they could all rush in and spend much money all the time. Many of them had thought of many meritorious things. The inevitable was clamor, internecine strife. And then from the very midst of these warring elements there rose a great genius, a spendthrift, a very human spendthrift. He opined that if he were Elmer Quale he'd rather have the money. His chance remark was recognized as a flash of inspiration. Every youthful donor, every collector and dispenser of small cash, searched for a gift of science and found there the naked truth. He would rather have the money, too. And then a young High School idealist—her soul attune with poetry—undertook to ennoble this idea. She capped the climax.



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her fine shoulders against the stone pillar, she leaned openly, gratefully, against this man. The woman watched her, too. Sam Oliver, a grim smile upon his lips, watched the people that were watching her—the reflex influence of a woman of this type was to him more interesting than the woman was herself. Then, as he looked about him, for the first time that afternoon Prosecutor Sam Oliver caught sight of Rosier F. Jones. Rosier F. Jones was one of the handsomest, and, in the estimation of Sam Oliver, one of the most dangerous gentlemen in town. Just why he was dangerous will soon appear. He, too, was a big man—bigger and far finer than the woman's escort. He was well dressed, well groomed, was Rosier F. Jones. One of the remarkable characteristics of this man was that he looked like a million dollars at all times. He, too, was standing near a column, but at the moment he was not looking at the woman. Sam Oliver, however, saw her twice cast a woman's glance at Rosier F. Jones. But for the moment Sam Oliver lost interest in the woman and her by-play. He concentrated, willingly and eagerly, upon this Rosier F. Jones. And he perceived, as in a flash, that of all the people in that crowd Rosier F. Jones was eyeing that luscious pile of currency with more genuine affection and regard, giving it more intensive thought and considerate meditation, than was anybody else.

Prosecutor Sam Oliver began to sniff the air. Silence was finally restored. The crowd gazed with expectation at their young hero, Elmer Quale. He spoke, "From now on," stammered Elmer Quale, as though talking to himself, or perhaps, as though taking into his confidence the souls of those youngsters round about, "from now on—to do the right thing—at any cost. The right thing—and nothing else." His chin quivered. His eyes filled. Then, suddenly he broke down and cried; cried like a little child; perhaps more like a woman. "Gee," broke out a boyish voice, "that's just the way he blubbered when he brought 'em down." The crowd, relieved, took up the cry. That was the way that Elmer Quale had blubbered when he brought 'em down. Those who hadn't seen and heard him blubber when he brought 'em down, had read about it in the newspapers. For Elmer Quale had earned this heap of money lying on the platform; by his singed hair and eyebrows, by his dislocated shoulder, by his broken ribs he had earned it. In the sight of hundreds of River City school children he had earned it. He had earned it in a fire.

There were many witnesses to Elmer Quale's heroic act. Elmer Quale was physical training instructor in the River City schools. On the day in question, Elmer Quale was drilling classes on the top floor of the high school. This school backed up against the Ironquils apartments on the street behind. The Ironquils apartments formed a rectangular U whose base fronted on the other street, whose uprights thrust themselves out toward the high school in the rear. The fire broke out on lower floors, seemingly in many places all at once. Smoke enveloped the apartment house. Elmer Quale was a regular human being. His suspended drill-his pupils massed themselves against the rear windows of the big room. They watched in interested silence. The shriek of a girl pupil broke this silence. Above the heavy pall of smoke, across the intervening space, she had caught sight of women at an upper window, signaling frantically for assistance. Elmer Quale followed this girl's glance—he, too, saw the women. They were clustered in a fourth floor window in a desperate port-

"I do not need much evidence," she said. "I have this ring." She took it off—that ring—and handed it to Grindstone. The lawyer lifted from his desk drawer a magnifying glass, glanced at the inscription first, then at the diamond. "Four hundred and twenty-five dollars as it stands," said Grindstone. Saying it, he slipped the ring into his waistcoat pocket. "But why?" protested the lady. "I shall retain it," smiled Grindstone, "as evidence, to be used upon the trial." "Oh, but you are sick," cried Zaida Lindquist. "That's why you are here," said Grindstone. "Now, tell me this—what does this ring prove, save that you bought it and had an inscription cut on the inside rim—what else?" Zaida Lindquist was ready for that question. She produced a packet of letters, tied with a highly scented pink ribbon. "These else," she returned. She passed them over. Grindstone read them over. "Well," he grinned, "looks like he loves you and wants to marry you. Why don't you marry him?"

"Because of—this!" exclaimed the girl defiantly. She produced another letter. Grindstone read it once, twice, thrice. "Well," he said at length, "these couldn't have been better if you had 'em all forged for the purpose of your breach of promise suit. I'm obliged to tell you that your case is clear. You win. The gentleman has \$25,000 in the bank—good American money. It'll split up quite conveniently, it seems to me." So much for Grindstone and his new client, Zaida Lindquist. A week after their presumably satisfactory interview two people entered the office of Sam Oliver, prosecutor of the pleas. Sam Oliver had quit for the day. He was sitting back in his swivel chair, one foot cocked up, his hat drawn rakishly over his left eyebrow. He was ready to go home, but he lolled there, dreaming, gazing from his vantage point on Court House Hill over the first-class city that was his especial pride and joy. That city was co-extensive with the county limits. As a county officer Sam Oliver had done his best to solve that city's problems—he had done his best to keep the city clean.

The two people that came in roused him from a reverie. They did more than that; they aroused his immediate attention. He saw, as in a flash, their significance, their place in the scheme of things. To him they were great people, these two. Great people because they were great lovers. One of them was the still damaged Elmer Quale—the other was the little school teacher of the city hall steps. Lovers, clearly, but not at peace. Trouble brooded over them, rested its burden upon their youthful shoulders—one of them a dislocated shoulder in the bargain. It helped, though, that they were hearing it together. Elmer Quale opened negotiations forthwith. "Prosecutor Oliver," he said, "I've come to you because you seemed, somehow, to really feel the fine things you said about me just the other day. Because of that and because I don't know where else to go. This is the first time I've ever been at law."

"You are at law now?" queried Elmer Quale. "Much," returned Elmer Quale with a grimace. "I have been sued for breach of promise by a woman." "Breach of promise!" echoed Sam Oliver, bending his glance upon the little school teacher. "And—you have been served with papers in the suit?" Elmer Quale produced them, a summons and complaint. He passed them to Sam Oliver. Sam Oliver read them through in silence. Then he shook his head. "This complaint," he mused, "carries its sharpest sting in its tail. He placed his forefinger upon a typed name at the bottom of the paper. "Mr. Eleazer Grindstone brings this suit."

"How does that signify?" asked Elmer Quale. "It signifies," nodded Sam Oliver, "because Mr. Eleazer Grindstone doesn't bring a suit unless he is sure of a satisfactory settlement or sure to get a verdict. He wins. He gets results."

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