ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

THE JACK-KNIFE MAN

Ellis Parker Butler

The Jack-Knife Man

EAN 8596547220541

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

I. THE JACK-KNIFE MAN

Table of Contents

PETER LANE GEORGE RAPP, the red-faced livery-man from town, stood with his hands in the pockets of his huge bear-skin coat, his round face glowing, looking down at Peter Lane, with amusement wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Tell you what I'll do, Peter,” he said, “I'll give you thirty-five dollars for the boat.”

“I guess I won't sell, George,” said Peter. “I don't seem to care to.”

He was sitting on the edge of his bunk, in the shanty-boat he had spent the summer in building. He was a thin, wiry little man, with yellowish hair that fell naturally into ringlets: but which was rather thin on top of his head. His face was brown and weather-seamed. It was difficult to guess just how old Peter Lane might be. When his eyes were closed he looked rather old-quite like a thin, tired old man-but when his eyes were open he looked quite young, for his eyes were large and innocent, like the eyes of a baby, and their light blue suggested hopefulness and imagination of the boyish, aircastle-building sort.

The shanty-boat was small, only some twenty feet in length, with a short deck at either end. The shanty part was no more than fifteen feet long and eight feet wide, built of thin boards and roofed with tar paper. Inside were the bunk —of clean white pine—a home-made pine table, a small sheet-iron cook-stove, two wooden pegs for Peter's shotgun, a shelf for his alarm-clock, a breadbox, some driftwood for

the stove, and a wall lamp with a silvered glass reflector. In one corner was a tangle of nets and trot-lines. It was not much of a boat, but the flat-bottomed hull was built of good two-inch planks, well caulked and tarred. Tar was the prevailing odor. Peter bent over his table, on which the wheels and springs of an alarm-clock were laid in careful rows.

“Did you ever stop to think, George, what a mighty fine companion a clock like this is for a man like I am?” he asked. “Yes, sir, a tin clock like this is a grand thing for a man like me. I can take this clock to pieces, George, and mend her, and put her together again, and when she's mended all up she needs mending more than she ever did. A clock like this is always something to look forward to.”

“I might give as much as forty dollars for the boat,” said George Rapp temptingly.

“No, thank you, George,” said Peter. “And it ain't only when you 're mending her that a clock like this is interesting. She's interesting all the time, like a baby. She don't do a thing you'd expect, all day long. I can mend her right up, and wind her and set her right in the morning, and set the alarm to go off at four o'clock in the afternoon, and at four o'clock what do you think she'll be doing? Like as not she'll be pointing at half-past eleven. Yes, sir! And the alarm won't go off until half-past two at night, maybe. Why I mended this clock once and left two wheels out of her—”

“Tell you what I'll do, Peter,” said Rapp, “I'll give *fifty* dollars for the boat, and five dollars for floating her down to my new place down the river.”

“I'm much obliged, but I guess I won't sell,” said Peter nervously. “You better take off your coat, George, unless you want to hurry away. That stove is heating up. She's a wonderful stove, that stove is. You wouldn't think, to look at her right now, that she could go out in a minute, would you? But she can. Why, when she wants to, that stove can start in and get red hot all over, stove-pipe and legs and all, until it's so hot in here the tar melts off them nets yonder—drips off 'em like rain off the bob-wires. You'd think she'd suffocate me out of here, but she don't. No, sir. The very next minute she'll be as cold as ice. For a man alone as much as I am that's a great stove, George.”

“Will you sell me the boat, or won't you?” asked Rapp.

“Now, I wish you wouldn't ask me to sell her, George,” said Peter regretfully, for it hurt him to refuse his friend. “To tell you the honest truth, George, I can't sell her because it would upset my plans. I've got my plans all laid out to float down river next spring, soon as the ice goes out, and when I get to New Orleans I'm going to load this boat on to a ship, and I'm going to take her to the Amazon River, and trap chinchillas. I read how there's a big market for chinchilla skins right now. I'm goin' up the Amazon River and then I'm goin' to haul the boat across to the Orinoco River and float down the Orinoco, and then—”

“You told me last week you were going down to Florida next spring and shoot alligators from this boat,” said Rapp.

Peter looked up blankly, but in a moment his cheerfulness returned.

“If I didn't forget all about that!” he began. “Well, sir, I'm glad I did! That would have been a sad mistake. It looks to

me like alligator skin was going out of fashion. I'd be foolish to take this boat all the way to Florida and then find out there was no market for alligator skins, wouldn't I?”

“You would,” said Rapp. “And you might get down there in South America and find there was no market for chinchillas. It looks to me as if the style was veering off from chinchillas already. You'd better sell me the boat, Peter.”

“You know I'd sell to you if I would to anybody, George,” said Peter, pushing aside the works of the clock, “but this boat is a sort of home to me, George. It's the only home I 've got, since Jane don't want me 'round no more. You're the best friend I've got, and you've done a lot for me—you let me sleep in your stable whenever I want to, and you give me odd jobs, and clothes—and I appreciate it, George, but a man don't like to get rid of his home, if he can help it. I haven't had a home I could call my own since I was fourteen years old, as you might say, and I'm going on fifty years old now. Ever since Jane got tired havin' me 'round I've been livin' in your barn, and in old shacks, and anywheres, and now, when I've got a boat that's a home for me, and I can go traveling in her whenever I want to go, you want me to sell her. No, I don't want to sell her, George. I think maybe I'll start her down river to-morrow, so as to be able to start up the Missouri when the ice goes out—”

“I thought you said Amazon a minute ago,” said Rapp.

“Well, now, I don't know,” said Peter soberly. “The fevers they catch down there wouldn't do my health a bit of good. Rocky Mountain air is just what I need. It is grand air. If I can get seventy or eighty dollars together, and a good rifle or

two, I may start next spring. I always wanted to have a try at bear shootin'. I've got sev'ral plans."

"And somehow," said Rapp, who knew Peter could no more raise seventy dollars than freeze the sun, "somehow you always land right back in Widow Potter's cove for the winter, don't you? She'll get you yet, Peter. And then you won't need this boat. All you got to do is to ask her."

Peter pushed the table away and stood up, a look of trouble in his blue eyes.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, George," he said seriously. "It ain't fair to the widow to connect up my name and hers that way. She wouldn't like it if she got to hear it. You know right well she don't think no more of me than she does of any other river-rat or shanty-boatman that hangs around this cove all summer, and yet you keep saying, 'Widow, widow, widow!' to me all the time. I wish you wouldn't, George." He opened the door of his shanty-boat and looked out. The cove in which the boat was tied was on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, and during the summer it had been crowded with a small colony of worthless shanty-boatmen and their ill-kempt wives and children, direly poor and afflicted with all the ills that dirt is heir to. Here, each summer, they gathered, coming from up-river in their shanty-boats and floating on downriver just ahead of the cold weather in the fall. All summer their shanty-boats, left high and dry by the receding high water of the June flood, stood on the parched mud, and Peter looked askance on all of them, dirty and lazy as they were, but somehow—he could not have told you why—he made friends with them each summer, lending them dimes that were never repaid,

helping them set their trot-lines that the women might have food, and even aiding in the caulking of their boats when his own was crying to be built.

All summer and autumn Peter had been building his shanty-boat, rowing loads of lumber in his heavy skiff from the town to the spot he had chosen on the Illinois shore, five miles above the town. He had worked on the boat, as he did everything for himself, irregularly and at odd moments, and the boat had been completed but a few days before George Rapp drove up from town, hoping to buy it. Peter believed he loved solitude and usually chose a summer dwelling-place far above town, but if he had gone to the uttermost solitudes of Alaska he would have found some way of mingling with his fellow-men and of doing a good turn to some one.

He never dreamed he was associating with the worthless shanty-boatmen, yet, somehow, he spent a good part of his time with them. They were there, they were willing to accept aid of any and all kinds, and on his occasional trips to town Peter passed them. This was enough to draw him into the entanglement of their woes, and to waste thankless days on them. Yet he never thought of making one of their colony. He would row the two miles to reach them, but he rowed back again each evening. It was because he was better at heart, and not because he thought he was better, that he remained aloof to this extent. In his own estimation he ranked himself even lower than the shanty-boatmen, for they at least had the social merit of having families, while he had none. His sister Jane had told him many times just

how worthless he was, and he believed it. He was nothing to anybody—he felt—and that is what a tramp is.

Once each week or so Peter rowed to town to sell the product of his jack-knife and such fish as he caught. He was not an enthusiastic fisherman, but his jack-knife, always keen and sharp, was a magic tool in his hand. When he was not making shapely boats for the shanty-boat kids, or whittling for the mere pleasure of whittling, his jack-knife shaped wooden kitchen spoons and other small household articles, or net-makers' shuttles, out of clean maplewood, and these, when he went to town, he peddled from door to door. What he could not sell he traded for coffee or bacon at the grocery stores.

With the coming of cool weather and the “fall rise” of the river the shanty-boat colony left the cove, to float down-river ahead of the frost, and Peter hurried the completion of his boat that he might float it across to the cove. Rheumatism often gave him a twinge in winter and when the river was “closed” the walk to town across the ice was cold and long. The Iowa side was more thickly populated, too, for the Iowa “bottom” was narrow, the hills coming quite to the river in places, while on the Illinois side five or six miles of untillable “bottom” stretched between the river and the prosperous hill farms. The Iowa side offered opportunities for corn-husking and wood-sawing and other odd jobs such as necessity sometimes drove Peter to seek. These opportunities were the reasons Peter gave himself, but the truth was that Peter loved people. If he was a tramp he was a sedentary tramp, and if he was a hermit he was a socialistic hermit. He liked his solitudes well peopled.

This early November day Peter had brought his shanty-boat across the river to the cove. A fair up-river breeze and his rag of a sail had helped him fight the stiff current, but it had been a hard, all-day pull at the oars of his skiff, and when he had towed the boat into the cove and had made her fast by looping his line under the railway track that skirted the bank, he was wet and weary. His tin breadbox was empty and he had but a handful of coffee left, but he was too tired to go to town, and he had nothing to trade if he went, and he knew by experience that an appeal to a farmer—even to Widow Potter—meant wood-sawing, and he was too tired to saw wood. But he was accustomed to going without a meal now and then, and there being nothing else to do, he tightened his belt, made a good fire, took off his shoes, and dissected his alarm-clock. He was reassembling it when George Rapp arrived.

George Rapp was a bluff, hearty, loud-voiced, duck-hunting liveryman. He ran his livery-stable for a living and, like many other men in the Mississippi valley, he lived for duck-hunting. He owned the four best duck dogs in the county. He had traded a good horse for one of them. Although George Rapp would not have believed it, it was a blessing that he could not hunt ducks the year around. The summer and winter months gave him time to make money, and he was making all he needed. Some of his surplus he had just paid for a tract of low, wooded bottom-land, in the section where ducks were most plentiful in their seasons. The land was swamp, for the most part, and all so low that the river spread over it at every spring “rise” and often in the autumn. It was cut by a slough (or bayou, as they are

called farther south) and held a rice lake which was no more than a widening of the slough. This piece of property, far below the town, Rapp had bought because it was a wild-duck haunt, and for no other reason, and after looking it over he wisely decided that a shanty-boat moored in the slough would be a better hunting cabin than one built on the shore, where it would be flooded once, or perhaps twice a year, the river leaving a deposit of rich yellow mud and general dampness each time. But Peter would not sell his boat, and Peter's boat, new, clean and sturdy of hull, was the boat Rapp wanted.

“I wish you wouldn't talk that way about the widow, George,” said Peter, looking out of the open door. The liveryman's team was tied to a fence at the foot of the hills, and between the road and the railway tracks that edged the river a wide corn-field extended. A cold drizzle half hid the hillside where Widow Potter's low, white farmhouse, with its green shutters, stood in the midst of a decaying apple orchard. “I wisht the widow lived farther off. There ain't no place like this cove to winter a boat, and when I'm here I've got to saw wood for her, and shuck corn, and do odd jobs for her, and then she lights into me. I don't say I'm any better than a tramp, George, but the way the widow jaws at me, and the things she calls me, ain't right. She thinks I'm scum—just common, low-down, worthless scum! So that's all there is to that.”

“Oh, shucks!” said George Rapp.

But Peter believed it. For five years the Widow Potter had kept a jealous eye on Peter Lane. Tall and thin, penny-saving and hard-working, she had been led a hard life by the late

Mr. Potter, who had been something rather worse than a brute, and since death had removed Mr. Potter the widow had given Peter Lane the full benefit of her experienced tongue whenever opportunity offered. It was her way of showing Peter unusual attention, but Peter never suspected that when she glared at him and told him he was a worthless, good-for-nothing loafer and a lazy, paltering, river-rat, and a no-account, idling vagabond she was showing him a flattering partiality. He knew she could make him squirm. It was Love-in-Chapped-Hands, but Mrs. Potter herself did not know she scolded Peter because she liked him. She counted him as a poor stick, of little account to himself or to any one else, but what her mind could not, her heart did recognize—that Peter was Romance. He was a whiff of something that had never come into her life before; he was a gentleman, a chivalrous gentleman, a gentleman down at the heel, but a true gentleman for all that.

“The way me and her hates each other, George, is like cats and dogs,” said Peter. “I don't go near her unless I have to, and when I do she claws me all up.”

“All right,” said Rapp, laughing, “but you could do a lot worse than tie up to a good house and cook-stove. If you make up your mind to go housekeeping and to sell the boat, let me know. I'll get along home. It is going to be a dog of a night.”

“I won't change my mind about the boat, George,” said Peter. “Good night.”

He closed the door and bolted it.

“George means all right,” he said, settling himself to his task of reassembling his clock, “but he's sort of coarse.”

The storm, increasing with the coming of night, darkened the interior of the cabin, and Peter lighted his lamp. As he worked over the clock the drizzle turned into a heavy rain through which damp snowflakes fluttered, and the wind strengthened and turned colder, slapping the rain and snow against the small, four-paned window and freezing it there. It was blowing up colder every minute and Peter put his handful of coffee in his coffee-pot and set it on the stove to boil while he completed his clock job. He tested the clock and found that if he set the alarm for six o'clock it burst into song at seventeen minutes after three. A thin smile twisted the corners of his mouth humorously.

“You skeesicks! You old skeesicks!” he said affectionately. “Ain't you a caution!” He set the clock on its shelf where it ticked loudly while he drew his table closer to the bunk, his only seat, and put his coffeepot and tin cup on the table.

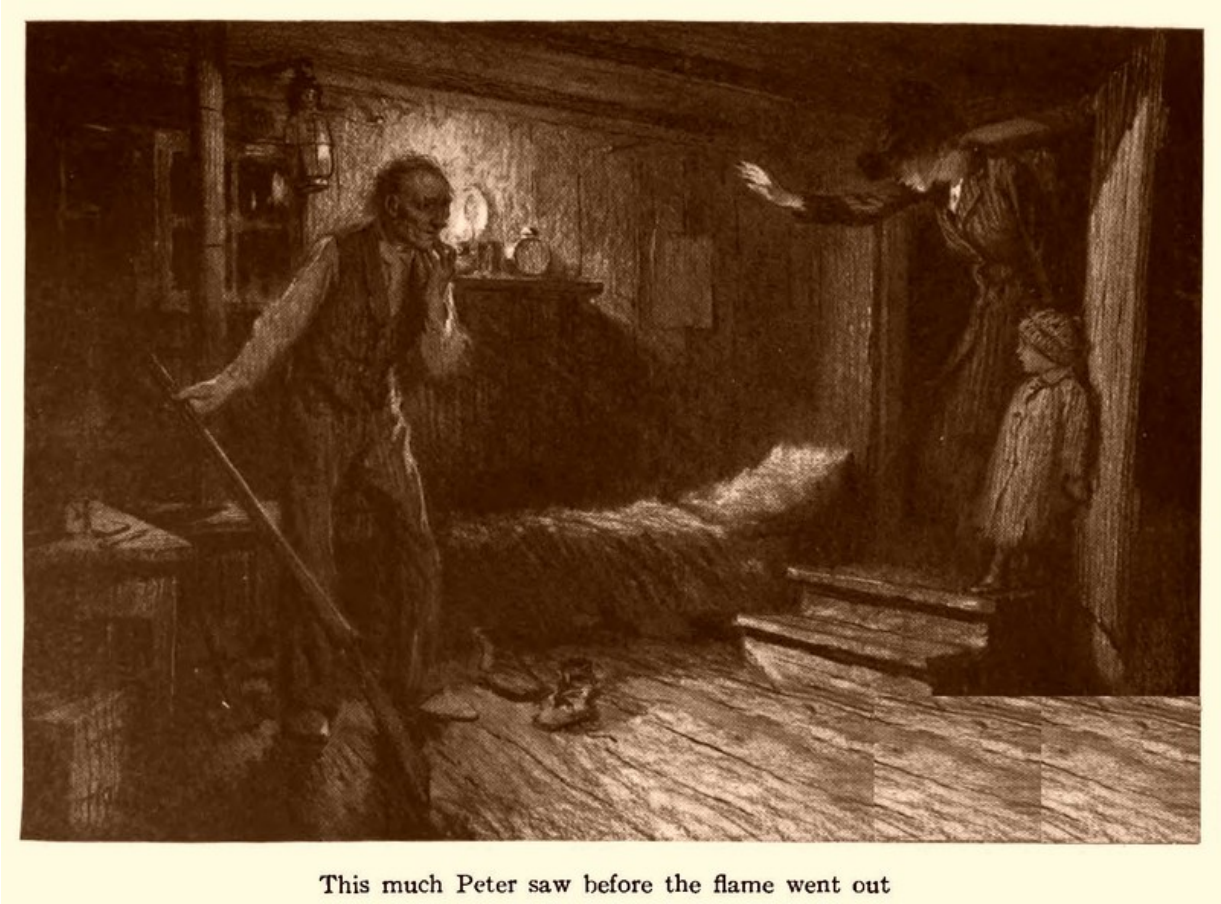
“Well, now,” he said cheerfully, “as long as there ain't anything to eat I might as well whet up my jack-knife.”

He whetted the large blade of his knife while he sipped the coffee. From time to time he put down the tin cup and tried the blade of the knife on his thumb, and when he was satisfied it was so sharp any further whetting meant a wire edge, he took a crumpled newspaper from under the pillow of his bunk and read again the article on the increased demand for chinchilla fur, but it had lost interest. The wind was slapping against the side of the boat in gusts and the frost was gathering on his windows, but Peter replenished his fire and lighted the cheap cigar George Rapp had left on the clock shelf.

What does a hermit do when he is shut in for a long night with a winter storm raging outside? Peter put his newspaper back under the pillow and hunted through his driftwood for a piece that would do to whittle, but had to give that up as a bad job. Then his eyes alighted on the wooden pegs on which his shot-gun lay, and he took down the gun and pulled one of the pegs from its hole. He looked out of the door, to see that his line was holding securely, and slammed the door quickly, for the night was worse, the rain freezing as it fell and the wind howling through the telegraph wires. With a sigh of satisfaction that he was alone, and that he had a snug shanty-boat in which to spend the winter, Peter propped himself up in his bunk and began carving the head of an owl on the end of the gun peg, screwing his face to one side to keep the cigar smoke out of his eyes. He was holding the half-completed carving at a distance, to judge of its effect, when he heard a blow on his door. He hesitated, like a timid animal, and then slipped from the bunk and let his hand glide to the shot-gun lying on his table. Quietly he swung the gun around until the muzzle pointed full at the door, and with the other hand he grasped his heavy stove poker, for he knew that tramps, on such a night, are not dainty in seeking shelter, and he had no wish to be thrown out of his boat and have the boat floated away from him.

“Who's out there?” he shouted, but before he could step forward and bolt the door, the latch lifted and the door, forced violently inward by a gust of wind, clattered against the cabin wall. A woman, one hand extended, stood in the doorway. Her face was deathly white, and her left hand held the hand of a three-year-old boy. This much Peter saw

before the flame of his lamp flared high in a smoky red and went out, leaving utter darkness.



This much Peter saw before the flame went out

II. PETER'S GUESTS

Table of Contents

OME right in, ma'am," said Peter.

C “Step inside and close the door. Nobody here's going to hurt you. I'll put my shoes on in a minute —”

He was feeling for the matches on his clock shelf, but he hardly knew what he was doing or saying. The ghastly white face of the woman was still blazed on his mind.

“Excuse me for being bare foot; I wasn't looking for callers,” he continued nervously, but he was interrupted by the sound of a falling body and a cry. He pushed one of the stove lids aside, letting a glare of red light into the room. The woman had fallen across his doorsill and lay, half in and half out of the boat, with the boy crying as he clung to her relaxed fingers.

“Don't, Mama! don't!” the small boy wailed, not understanding.

Peter stood, irresolute. He was a coward before women; they drove his wits away, and his first wild thought was of flight—of leaping over the fallen body—but, as he stood, the alarm-clock, after a preliminary warning cluck, burst into a loud jangling clatter and the boy, sore frightened, howled with all his strength. That decided for Peter.

“There, now, don't you cry, son!” he begged, on his knees beside the boy in an instant. “Don't you mind the racket. It ain't nothing but my old funny alarm-clock. She goes off that way sometimes, but she don't mean any harm to anybody. No, sir! Don't you cry.”

The boy wailed, more wildly than ever, calling on his mother to get up.

“Don't cry, your ma will be all right!” urged Peter. “That clock will stop right soon, and she won't begin again—not

unless she takes a notion.”

The clock stopped ringing abruptly, the boy stared at it open-mouthed.

“That's a big boy!” said Peter approvingly. “And don't you worry about your ma. I guess she'll be all right in a minute. You go over by that stove and warm yourself, and I'll help your ma in, so this rain won't blow on her.”

Peter led the boy to the stove, and lighted his lamp. He put the peg back in the wall, and placed the gun behind the boy's reach before he turned to the woman.

She was neither young nor old, but as she lay on the floor she was ghastly white, even in the glare from the smoking oil lamp, and her lips were blue. Her cheap hat was wet and weighted down with sleet, and the green dye from the trimmings had run down and streaked her face. She was fairly well clad, but not against the winter rain, and her shoes were too light and too high of heel for tramping a railway track. Peter saw she was wet to the skin. He bent down and with his knee against her shoulder moved her inside the door and closed it.

“That's hot in there,” said the boy, who had been staring into the glowing coals of the opened stove. “I better not put my hand in there. I'll burn my hand if I put it in there, won't I?”

“Yes, indeedy,” said Peter, “but now I got to fix your ma so's she will be more comfortable.”

“I wish I had some liquor or something,” he said, looking at the woman helplessly. “Brandy or whisky would be right handy, and I ain't got a drop. This ain't no case for cold