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PILE OF TROUBLE

By
HENRY KUTTNER

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*The miraculous Hogbens have to move when their flying makes too much commotion,
but the trouble they flee is nothing compared to what their atom pile soon stirs up!*

We called Lemuel, “Gimpy,” on account of he had three legs. After he got his growth, about the time they fit the War Between the States, he was willing to keep his extra leg sort of tucked up behind him inside his britches, where it would be out of sight and people wouldn’t talk. Course it made him look a little like one of them camel critters, but then Lemuel never was vain. It was lucky he was double-jointed, though, or he might of got cramps from keeping his leg tucked up thataway.

We hadn’t seen Lemuel for some sixty years. He was living in the southern part of the mountains, and the rest of us was up in northern Kaintuck. And I guess we wouldn’t of got in that trouble if Lemuel hadn’t been so blame shiftless. It looked like big trouble for a while. We Hogbens had had plenty of that before we moved to Piperville, what with people peeping and prying and trying to find out why the dogs barked so much for miles around. It got so we couldn’t do no flying at all. Finally grandpaw said we’d just better pull up stakes and move down south where Lemuel was staying.

I hate moving. That trip to Plymouth Rock made me sick to my stummick. I’d ruther of flew. But grandpaw’s the boss.

He made us hire a truck and load everything in it. We had trouble getting the baby in; he don’t weigh more’n three hundred pound, but that tank we got to keep him in is purty bulky. No trouble about grandpaw, though; we just tied him up in an old gunnysack and shoved him under the seat. I had to do all the work. Paw had got at the corn likker and was plomb silly. He kept hopping around on the top of his haid and singing something called, “The World Turned Upside-Down.”

Uncle wouldn’t come. He’d dug himself in under the corn-crib and said he was gonna hibernate fer ten years or so. We just left him there. “Allus traveling around,” he kept complaining. “Cain’t stay put. Every five hundred years or so, bang! Traipsin’ off summers. Go on, git!”

So we got.

Lemuel, the one we used to call Gimpy, was one of the family. Seems there was a dust-up when we first came to Kaintuck—the way I heard it. Everybody was supposed to pitch in and help build a house, but not Lemuel—he wouldn’t. Plomb shiftless. He flew off to the south. Every year or two he’d wake up a little and we’d hear him thinking, but mostly he just sot.

We figgered we’d live with him fer a while.

That’s what we did.

Seems like Lemuel lived in an old watermill in the mountains up over a town called Piperville. It was kind of ramshackle. Lemuel was on the porch. He’d been sitting in a chair, but it had fallen down some while before, and he hadn’t bothered to wake up to fix it. So he

sat there in the middle of his whiskers, breathing a trifle. He was having a nice dream. We didn't wake him up. We toted the baby in the house, and grandpaw and Paw started carrying in the bottles of corn.

That was how we settled in. It warn't exactly convenient at first. Lemuel was too remarkable shiftless to keep vittles in the house. He'd wake up enough to hypnotize a coon, back somewheres in the woods, and purty soon the coon would come wandering along looking dazed, ready to be et. Lemuel had to eat coons mostly because they're clever with their paws, which are sort of like hands. You can call me a weasel if that shiftless Lem didn't hypnotize the coons into building a fire and cooking themselves. I never figgered out how he got the critters skun. Maybe he spit out the fur. Some people are just too lazy for anything.

When he got thirsty, he made it rain a little over his haid and opened his mouth. It was shameful.

Nobody paid no attention to Lemuel, though. Maw got busy. Paw, natcherally, snuck off with a jug of corn, and I had to do all the work. 'Twarn't much. Main trouble was we needed some sort of power. Keeping the baby alive in his tank uses up a lot of current, and grandpaw drinks electricity like a hawg sucks up swill. Ef'n Lemuel had kept the water running in the stream, we'd of had no trouble, but that was Lemuel! He just let it dry up. There was a trickle, no more.

Maw helped me build a gadget in the henhouse, and after that we got all the power we needed.

The trouble all started when a skinny little runt come up the trail one day and seemed surprised to see maw take the washing out in the yard. I trailed along, interested like.

"Right nice day," Maw said. "Want a drink, stranger?"

He said he didn't mind if'n he did, so I got him a dipper full, and after he had drunk the corn he took a few gasping breaths and said, thanks, no, he didn't want any more just then or ever. He said he could cut his throat cheaper, and get the same effect.

"Just moved in here?" he asked.

Maw said yes, we had, and Lemuel was a relative. The feller looked at Lemuel, sitting on the porch with his eyes shut, and said, "You mean he's alive?"

"Shore is," Maw said. "Alive and kicking, so to speak."

"We thought he'd been dead for years," the man said. "That's why we never bothered about collecting the poll tax for him. I guess you'd better pay yours, too, now that you've moved in. How many of you are there?"

"'Bout six," Maw said.

"All of age?"

"There's Paw and Saunk and the baby—"

"How old?"

"The baby's about four hundred now, ain't he, Maw?" I asked, but she clouted me 'longside the haid and said I should shet up. The man pointed at me and said he'd meant how old was I. Heck, I couldn't tell him. I lost track round about Cromwell's time. Finally he said we'd all have to pay a poll tax except the baby.

"Not that it matters," he said, writing in a little book. "You have to vote the right way in this town. The Machine's in to stay. There's only one boss in Piperville, and his name's Eli Gandy. Twenty dollars that'll be."

Maw told me to git some money, so I went searchin'. Grandpaw didn't have anything except something he said was a denarius, and that was his lucky piece anyhow; he said he'd swiped it from a feller named Julius up in Gaul. Paw was daid drunk. The baby had three dollars. I went and looked through Lemuel's pockets but didn't find nothing but an old oriole's nest with two eggs in it.

When I told Maw, she scratched her haid, so I said, "We can make some by tomorrow, Maw. You'll take gold, won't you, Mister?"

Maw clouted me. The man looked kind of funny and said sure, he'd take gold. Then he went away through the woods carrying a bundle of twigs fer firewood, and I figgered Lemuel was getting hungry. The man started to walk faster.

I started looking fer some old iron I could change into gold.

The next day we got carted off to jail.

We knew about it in advance, of course, but there wasn't much we could do. It's allus been our idea to keep our haids down and not attract no special attention. That's what Grandpaw told us to do now. We all went up to the attic—all but the baby and Lemuel, who never stirred—and I kept looking at a spider-web up in one corner, so I wouldn't have to look at Grandpaw. He hurts my eyes.

"Out upon them for stinkard knaves," Grandpaw said. "'Tis best that we go to their gaol; the days of the Inquisition are over. 'Twill be safe enough."

"Cain't we hide that thar gadget we made?" I asked him.

Maw clouted me fer speaking before my elders. "That won't do no good," she said. "Them spies from Piperville was up here this morning and seen it."

Grandpaw said, "Have you hollowed a cavern under this house? Good. Hide me and the baby there. The rest of you—" He relapsed into old-fashioned language. "'Tis pity if we were to live thus long and be found out by these black-avised dullards. 'Twere better their weasands were slit. Nay, Saunk—I spoke in jest. We would not call attention to ourselves. We will find a way."

That was the way it was. We all got toted off, all but Grandpaw and the baby, who were down in the cave by that time. We got carried off to Piperville and put in the hoosegow. Lemuel never woke up. They drug him off by the heels.

As fer Paw, he stayed drunk. He's got a trick he knows. He can drink corn, and then, as I understand it, the alcohol goes in his blood and gets changed into sugar or something. Magic, I guess. He tried to explain it to me, but it made oncommon bad sense. Likker goes into your stummick; how kin it go up inside your skull and turn into sugar? Plumb silly. Or conjure, anyhow. But what I was going to say, Paw says he's trained some friends of his named enzymes—furriners, by the name—so they change the sugar right back to alcohol, and he kin stay drunk as long as he wants. Still, he likes fresh corn if he can get it. Me, I don't like them conjure tricks; they make me skittery.

I was took into a room with people in it and told to sit down in a chair. They asked me questions. I played dumb. I said I didn't know nothing.

"It's impossible!" somebody said. "They couldn't have built it themselves—illiterate hill-billies! But, unmistakably, there's a uranium pile in their hen house!"

Shucks.

I kept on playing dumb. After a while they took me back to my cell. There was bedbugs. I made a sort of ray come out of my eyes and killed 'em off, much to the surprise of a seedy

little feller with pink whiskers who was asleep in the upper bunk, and who I didn't notice was awake till it was too late.

"I have been in some strange prisons in my time," said the seedy little feller, blinking rapid, "and I have had some unusual cellmates, but never yet have I encountered one whom I suspected to be the devil. My name is Armbruster, Stinky Armbruster, and I'm up for vagrancy. What's the charge against you, my friend? Buying souls over the ceiling price?"

I said I was pleased to meet him. I had to admire his language. He had eddication something fearful.

"Mr. Armbruster," I said, "I got no idea why I'm here. They just carted me off—Paw and Maw and Lemuel. Lemuel's asleep, though, and Paw's drunk."

"I would like to be drunk." Mr. Armbruster told me. "Then I wouldn't be so surprised to see you floating two feet off the floor."

That kind of embarrassed me. Nobody likes to be caught doing things like that. It was just that I was absentminded, but I felt foolish. I said I was sorry.

"It doesn't matter," Mr. Armbruster said, rolling over and scratching his whiskers. "I've been expecting this for years. I've had a pleasant life, all in all. And this is a delightful way to go crazy. Why did you say they arrested you?"

"They said we had a uranium pile," I told him. "I bet we ain't. We got a wood pile, I know, 'cause I chopped the wood. But I know I never chopped no uranium."

"You'd remember it if you had," he said. "It's probably some political gambit. Election's a week off. There's a reform party starting, and old Gandy's smashing it before it can start."

"Well, we ought to be getting home," I said.

"Where do you live?"

I told him, and he thought that over. "I wonder. You're on the river, aren't you—the creek, I mean? Big Bear?"

"It ain't even a creek," I said.

Mr. Armbruster laughed. "Gandy called it the Big Bear River. That was before he got the Gandy Dam built, down below your place. There hasn't been any water in that creek for fifty years, but old Gandy put through an appropriation for I don't know how much money, about ten years ago. He got the dam built by calling the creek a river."

"What did he want to do that for?" I asked.

"Do you know how much crooked money you can make out of building a dam?" Mr. Armbruster asked me. "But Gandy's in to stay, I guess. When a man owns the newspapers, he can write his own ticket. Oh-oh. Here comes somebody."

A man come with keys and took Mr. Armbruster away. After quite awhile somebody else come and let me out. I was took into another room full of lights. Mr. Armbruster was there, and Maw and Paw and Lemuel, and some big fellers with guns. There was a little skinny wizened man with a bald head and snaky eyes, and everybody done what he told 'em. They called him Mr. Gandy.

"This boy's an ordinary hill-billy," Mr. Armbruster said, when I come in. "If he's got into trouble, it must be by accident."

They told him to keep quiet and banged him one. So he kept quiet. That Mr. Gandy sat off in a corner and sort of nodded, looking mean. He had a bad eye. "Listen, boy," he said to me. "Who are you shielding? Who built that uranium pile in your woodshed? You'd better tell me the truth or you'll get hurt."

I just looked at him, so somebody hit me on top of the haid. Shucks. You can't hurt a Hogben by hitting him on the haid. I recollect the time the feuding Adamses cotched me and banged me on the haid till they was plumb wore out and couldn't even squeal when I dumped 'em down a cistern.

Mr. Armbruster made noises.

"Listen, Mr. Gandy," he said. "I know it'll make a big story if you find out who built that uranium pile, but you'll get re-elected without it. Maybe it isn't a uranium pile anyway."

"I know who built it," Mr. Gandy said. "Renegade scientists. Or escaped Nazi war criminals. And I intend to find them!"

"Oh-oh," said Mr. Armbruster. "Now I get the idea. A story like that would be nationwide, wouldn't it? You could run for Governor or the Senate or—or write your own ticket."

"What did that boy tell you?" Mr. Gandy asked. But Mr. Armbruster said I hadn't told him nothing.

Then they started to whup Lemuel.

It was tiresome. Nobody can't wake up Lemuel when he's sot on a nap, and I never seen nobody so sot just then. They give him up fer daid after a time. He might as well of been. Lemuel is so bone lazy that when he's sleeping hard he don't even trouble to breathe.

Paw was working magic with them enzyme friends of his'n, and he was remarkable drunk. It sort of tickled him to get whupped. Every time they whammed him with a length of hose he giggled kind of foolish. I was ashamed.

Nobody tried to whup Maw. When anybody got close enough to hit her, he'd go all over white as a goose wing and start busting out with sweat and shaking. Once we knowed a perfesser feller who said Maw could emit a tight-beam sub-sonic. He was a liar. She just made a noise nobody could hear and aimed it wherever she wanted. All them high-falutin words! Simple as firing a squirrel-rifle. I can do it myself.

Mr. Gandy said to take us back to where we was, and he'd see us later. So they drug out Lemuel, and we all went back to our cells. Mr. Armbruster had a lump on his haid the size of a duck egg. He lay down on his bunk moaning, and I sot in a corner looking at his haid, and sort of shooting a light out of my eyes, only nobody couldn't see the light. What it did was—shucks, I ain't eddicated. It worked like a poultice, anyhow. After a while the bump on Mr. Armbruster's haid went away, and he stopped groaning.

"You're in trouble, Saunk," he said—I had told him my name by then. "Gandy's got big ideas now. And he's got the people of Piperville hypnotized. What he wants is to hypnotize the state, or even the nation. He wants to be a national figure. The right sort of news story could do that for him. Besides, it would ensure his reelection next week—not that he needs insurance. He's got the city in his pocket. *Was* that a uranium pile?"

I just looked at him.

"Gandy seems certain," he went on. "He sent up some physicists, and they said it was apparently Two-Thirty-Five with the graphite dampers. Saunk, I heard them talking. For your own good, you'd better not shield anyone. They're going to use a truth-drug on you—sodium pentathol or scopolamine."

"You better go to sleep," I said, because I heard Grandpaw calling me, inside my haid. I shet my eyes and listened. 'Twarn't simple, because Paw kept tuning in. Oh, my, he was drunk!

"Have a drink," Paw said cheerful, only without talking, if you understand.

“Beshrew thee for a warrantable louse,” Grandpaw said, much less cheerful. “Get thy dullard mind away from here. Saunk!”

“Yes, Grandpaw,” I said, silent like.

“We must make a plan—”

Paw said, “Have a drink, Saunk.”

“Now, Paw, do shet up,” I told him. “Have some respect fer your elders. I mean Grandpaw. Besides, how can I have a drink? You’re ’way off in some other cell.”

“I got me a pipeline,” Paw said. “I can give you a what-you-call-it, a transfusion. Teleportation, that’s what it is. I just short-circuit space between your blood-stream and mine and I can pump alcohol from my veins into your’n. Look, this is how I do it.” He showed me how, in a sort of picture inside my haid. It looked easy enough. For a Hogben, I mean.

I got mad. “Paw,” I said, “don’t make your loving son disrespect you more than natcheral, you runty old woodshoat, you. I know you ain’t got no book-larmin’. You’re just picking them four-bit words out of somebody’s skull.”

“Have a drink,” Paw said, and then yelled. I heard Grandpaw chuckle.

“Stealing the wisdom from men’s minds, eh?” he said. “I, too, can do that. I have just rapidly cultured a migraine virus in my bloodstream and teleported it to your brain—you gorbellied knave! A plague upon the varlet! Harken to me, Saunk. Thy rascally sire will not trouble us bewhiles.”

“Yes, Grandpaw,” I said. “Are you fit?”

“Aye.”

“And the baby?”

“Aye. But you must act. ’Tis your task, Saunk. The trouble lies in that—what is the word? That uranium pile.”

“So that’s what it is,” I said.

“Who would have thought anyone in the world could recognize it? My own grandsire told me how to make it; they existed in his time. Indeed, ’twas through such things that we Hogbens became mutants. Faith, I must pick a brain myself to make this clear. There are men in the town where you are, Saunk, who know the words I need—let me see.”

He sort of shuffled through a few brains. Then he went on.

“When my grandsire lived, men had begun to split the atom. There were—um—secondary radiations. They affected the genes and chromosomes of some men and women—a dominant mutation, with us Hogbens. So we are mutants.”

“That’s what Roger Bacon said, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Aye. But he was friendly and kept silence. Had men known our powers in those days, we’d have been burned. Even today, it would not be safe for us to reveal ourselves. Eventually—you know what we plan eventually, Saunk.”

“Yes, Grandpaw,” I said, for I did know.

“Well, here’s the rub. It seems that men have split the atom again. Thus they were able to recognize this uranium pile. We must destroy it; we do not want men’s eyes upon us. Yet we need power. Not much, but some. The uranium pile was the easiest way to get it, but we cannot use it now. Saunk, here is what you must do—so that enough energy will be supplied for the baby and for me.”

He told me what to do.

Then I went and done it.

When I sort of shift my eyes, I can see real purty things. Like them bars on the window, I mean. They get busted up into teeny-weeny little bits, all rushing around like they was crazy. I hear tell them is atoms. My, they look cheerful—all bustling like they was hurrying to git to meeting on a Sunday. 'Course it's easy to juggle 'em like blocks. You look real hard and make something come out of your eyes, and more teeny little fellers come busting out of your eyes and they all get together and it's mighty amusing. I made a mistake the first time and changed them iron bars into gold. Missed an atom, I expect. But after that I got it right and turned the bars into nothing much. I clomb out and turned 'em back into iron. First I'd made sure Mr. Armbruster was asleep. That was easy.

We was seven stories up above the street, in a big building that was part the city hall and part jail. It was nighttime, so nobody noticed me. I flew away. Once an owl came past, figgering I couldn't see in the dark, and I spit on him. Hit him, too.

I fixed that there uranium pile. There was guards around it with lights, but I hung up in the sky where they couldn't see me and got busy. First I hotted the thing up so the stuff Mr. Armbruster had called graphite turned into nothing and blew away. Then it was safe to handle the rest of the junk—Two-Thirty-Five, is it?—so I did, and I turned that into lead. The real crumbly kind. I made it so fearful crumbly it started to blow away. Soon there wasn't nothing left.

Then I flew away up the crick. There was only a dollop of water in it, and Grandpaw said he needed more than that. I got way up in the mountains, but didn't have no luck. Grandpaw started to talk to me. He said the baby was crying. I guess I shouldn't have tore up the uranium pile till I'd made plumb certain of getting more power.

Only thing to do was to make it rain.

There are several ways to do that, but I friz a cloud, sort of. Had to land and build a gadget fast and then fly way up where there was clouds; it took time, but pretty soon there was a thunderstorm coming up, and then it rained. But the water didn't go down the crick. I searched for a while, till I found a place where the whole crick bottom had fell out. Seems like there was caves underneath. I did some rapid plugging. No wonder there hadn't been no water to speak of in the crick for so long. I fixed that.

Grandpaw wanted a steady supply, though, and I smelled around till I located some big springs. I opened them up. By that time it was raining oncommon rapid. I went back to see Grandpaw.

Them men who was on guard had gone home, I guess. Grandpaw said the baby had plumb upset them when he started crying. They all stuck their fingers in their ears and screamed and run off. I looked over the water-wheel, like Grandpaw told me, and done a few repairs. There warn't much needed. They built purty good a hundred years ago—and the wood had got seasoned, too. I admired that wheel, turning and turning as the water piled up in the crick—crick, nothing! It was a river now.

But Grandpaw said I oughta of seen the Appian Way when it was being set up.

I fixed him and the baby up nice and comfortable, and then I flew back to Piperville. It was coming on dawn, and I didn't want nobody to see me flying. This time I spit on a pigeon.

There was a rumpus going on in the city hall. Seems like Maw and Paw and Lemuel had plumb vanished. There was people running around remarkable upset, and there was great confusion. I knowed what had happened, though. Maw spoke to me, in my haid, and told me to come up to the cell at the end of the block, which was spacious. They was all there. Invisible, though.

I forgot to say I'd made myself invisible too, after I'd snuck in, seen Mr. Armbruster was still asleep, and noticed the excitement.

"Grandpaw told me what was happening," Maw said. "I figgered we'd better stay out'n the way for awhile. Raining hard, ain't it?"

"Shore is," I said. "What's everybody so excited about?"

"They cain't figger out what become of us," Maw told me. "Soon as the ruckus quiets down, we'll all go home. You fixed it, I guess."

"I done what Grandpaw said," I explained, and then there was sudden yells from down the corridor. A little old fat coon came trundling in, carrying a bundle of sticks. He come right along till he got to the bars in front of where we was. Then he sot himself down and begun arranging the sticks to make a fire. He had that dazed look in his eyes, so I knew Lemuel must of hypnotized him.

People came crowding around outside. They couldn't see us, natcherally, but they were watching that there little old coon. I watched too, on account of I never was able to figger out how Lemuel could get the critter skun. I seen them build fires before—Lemuel could make 'em do that—but I just never happened to be around when one of his coons stripped down and skun hisself. That I wanted to see.

Just before the coon got started, though, a policeman put him in a bag and took him away, so I never did know. It was light by then. I kept hearing bellers from somewheres, and once I heard a voice I knew sing out.

"Maw," I said, "that sounds like Mr. Armbruster. I better go see what they're doing to the pore little guy."

"Time we was going home," she said. "We got to dig up Grandpaw and the baby. You say the water-wheel's turning?"

"Yes, Maw," I said. "There's plenty electric power now."

She reached around till she found Paw and whammed him. "Wake up," she said.

"Have a drink," Paw said.

But she roused him up and said we was going home. Ain't nobody can wake up Lemuel, though. Finally Maw and Paw took Lemuel between them and flew out through the window, after I fixed the bars so they could get through. They stayed invisible, on account of there was a crowd down below. It was still raining, but Maw said they warn't made of sugar nor salt, and I'd better come along or I'd get my britches tanned.

"Yes, Maw," I said, but I wasn't going to. I stayed behind. I was going to find out what they was doing to Mr. Armbruster.

They had him in that big room with the lights on. Mr. Gandy was standing by the window, looking real mean, and they had Mr. Armbruster's sleeve rolled up and was going to stick a sort of glass needle into his hide. Well! Right away I made myself get visible again.

"You better not do that," I said.

"It's the Hogben kid!" somebody yelled. "Grab him!"

They grabbed me. I let 'em. Pretty soon I was sitting in a chair with my sleeve rolled up, and Mr. Gandy was grinning at me like a wolf.

"Use the truth-serum on him," he said. "No need to ask that tramp questions now."

Kind of dazed, Mr. Armbruster kept saying, "I don't know what happened to Saunk! I wouldn't tell you if I knew—"

They whammed him.

Mr. Gandy stuck his face right into mine.

“We’ll get the truth about that uranium pile now,” he told me. “One shot of this and you’ll answer our questions. Understand?”

So they stuck the needle in my arm and squirted the stuff into me. It tickled.

Then they asked me questions. I said I didn’t know nothing. Mr. Gandy said to give me another shot. They done it.

It tickled worse than ever.

Right then somebody ran into the room and started yelling.

“The dam’s busted!” he bellered. “The Gandy Dam! It’s flooded out half the farms in the south valley!”

Mr. Gandy rared back and squalled. “You’re crazy!” he told everybody. “It’s impossible! There’s been no water in Big Bear River for a hundred years!”

Then they all got together and started whispering. Something about samples. And a big mob downstairs.

“You’ve got to calm ’em down,” somebody told Mr. Gandy. “They’re boiling mad. All the crops ruined—”

“I’ll calm ’em down,” Mr. Gandy said. “There’s no proof. And only a week before election!”

He rushed out of the room and everybody ran out after him. I got up out of my chair and scratched. That stuff they pumped into me itched fearful inside my skin. I was kind of mad at Mr. Gandy.

“Quick!” Mr. Armbruster said. “Let’s sneak out. Now’s our chance.”

We snuck out the back way. It was easy. We circled around to the front, and there was a big mob standing there in the rain. Up on the court-house steps was Mr. Gandy, mean as ever, facing a big, husky feller who was waving a chunk of rock.

“Every dam has its breaking point,” Mr. Gandy said, but the big feller roared and shook the rock over his haid.

“I know good concrete from bad!” he bellered. “This stuff’s all sand. That dam wouldn’t hold a gallon of water backed up behind it!”

Mr. Gandy shook his haid.

“Outrageous!” he said. “I’m just as shocked as you are. Of course we gave out the contracts in all good faith. If the Ajax Construction Company used shoddy material, we’ll certainly sue them.”

At that point I got so tired of itching that I decided to do something about. So I did.

The husky feller stepped back a pace and pointed his finger at Mr. Gandy. “Listen,” he said. “There’s a rumor around that you own the Ajax Construction Company. Do you?”

Mr. Gandy opened his mouth and closed it. He shivered a little.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I own it.”

You should of heard the roar that went up from that mob.

The big feller sort of gasped.

“You admit it? Maybe you’ll admit that you knew the dam was no good, too, huh? How much did you make out of the deal?”

“Eleven thousand dollars,” Mr. Gandy said. “That was net after I’d paid off the sheriff, the aldermen, and—”

But at that point the crowd sort of moved up the steps, and there wasn't no more heard from Mr. Gandy.

"Well, well," said Mr. Armbruster. "Now I've seen everything. Know what this means, Saunk? Gandy's gone crazy. He must have. But the reform administration will go in, they'll throw out all the crooks, and I will have a pleasant life in Piperville once more. Until I move south, that is. Come winter, I always move south. By a strange happenstance, I find I have a few coins in my pocket. Will you join me in a drink, Saunk?"

"No, thanks," I said. "Maw'll be wondering where I got to. Won't there be no more trouble, Mr. Armbruster?"

"Eventually," he said. "But not for quite a while. They're carrying old Gandy into the jail, see? For his own protection, probably. I must celebrate this, Saunk. Sure you won't—Saunk! Where are you?"

But I had went invisible.

Well, that was all there was to it. I didn't itch no more, so I flew back home and helped rig up the electric current from the water-wheel. After a time the flood died down, but we got a steady flow down the crick thereafter, because of the way I'd arranged things upstream. We settled down to the sort of quiet life we Hogbens like. It's safest, for us.

Grandpaw said it was quite a flood. It reminded him of something his Grandpaw had told him. Seems like when Grandpaw's Grandpaw was alive, they had uranium piles and a lot more, and pretty soon the things got out of hand and they had a real flood. Grandpaw's Grandpaw had to move out of the country right fast. Ain't nothing been heard of the place from that day to this. I gather everybody in Atlantis got drowned daid. But they was only furriners.

Mr. Gandy went to jail. Nobody ever knew what made him confess the way he did; maybe he got an attack of conscience. I don't suppose it could of been because of me. 'Tain't likely. Still—

Remember that trick Paw showed me about making a short-circuit in space and pumping the corn likker from his blood into mine? Well, I got tired of itching where I couldn't scratch it, so I used that trick myself. That stuff they'd squirted into me was making me itch, whatever it was. I just twisted space around a mite and pumped it right into Mr. Gandy's blood, up where he was standing on them court-house steps. After that I stopped itching, but Mr. Gandy must have been itching real bad. Served him right, though.

Wonder if it could have plumb itched him into telling the truth?

[The end of *Pile of Trouble* by Henry Kuttner]