

Excerpt – Six Bits

by Michael Ringering

The ruckus of plastic flipping and flopping off cobblestone impeded Jack's auditory senses just enough that he did not absorb the chime of the home's doorbell. With cups coming to rest near his feet, the second chime caught his attention. As if poked with a stick, he jerked from inside the cabinet and shot a look toward the front entryway. Slamming the cabinet shut, he stepped at an exaggerated pace, reciting in his head the barb-laced greeting he was planning for the unwanted guest.

Stepping into the large foyer modeled after a sixteenth-century rotunda, he patted along the wall in search of the light switch as the visitor depressed the button a third time.

"All right, wait a second ... Jesus."

A flip of a switch brought both foyer and porch into full illumination. Jack unlocked the deadbolt and opened the heavy, sprawling door to an avalanche of frigid air. Its advance tore at him like an unsuspecting punch in the face, stinging the tips of his ears and nose. The landscape remained covered in the dark of pre-dawn, apart from a slight hint of purple hue nudging just above the eastern horizon. All was quiet.

Fighting through the wall of winter air, Jack diverted his attention to the intruder, a most peculiar looking fellow, standing erect atop the last step leading to the stone porch as if awaiting inspection. Preparing to fire an opening salvo, Jack eyed the man from head to foot then lost his train of thought. His strategic, explosive response expelled from his mouth as a harmless cloud of white condensation.

The squatty, egg-shaped old man struggled to focus through a thick patch of un-groomed eyebrows and wire-rimmed spectacles, looking as if they'd been mangled and bent back to shape. Ink-black pupils peered through half-fogged lenses cut from glass a quarter-inch thick. A wide, clownish smile revealed a mouth jam-packed with horse-sized yellowed teeth, framed by an un-kept beard falling low below the chin. Wind-burned cheeks, expanded by the stretch of his grin, revealed deep canyons of wrinkles; a

crimson-colored bulbous nose suggested this was a man who knew his way around a bar and a bottle. An imprint of an animal's hoof appeared as a dent on the left side of his face.

If he wasn't a hundred years old, then he was a scientific anomaly. Jack scanned him from head to toe. A black fedora cap two sizes too small perched tilted atop a pumpkin-sized head. He'd wrapped some sort of homemade earmuff contraption around the side of his head, covering less than half of two giant ears, one of which hung lower than the other. A plaid scarf wrapped so tight and so many times around his neck prohibited any natural movement from left to right. A heavy, unbuttoned wool coat covered a gray fisherman's sweater and bright red-and-white-striped suspenders clipped to a pair of baggy, plaid knickers. Heavy wool socks merged with black leather shoes complete with Pilgrim-like brass buckles, finalized the uncoordinated ensemble resembling what one could order from a turn-of-the-century Sears and Roebuck catalog. The old man was either unmarried or widowed, because no woman would let him walk out of the house looking like that.

Jack concluded the old man had escaped from a mental ward or Santa's workshop. Regardless, he was not amused. Thinking it possible he was the butt end of someone's joke, he scanned his property in search of a van housing a hidden camera. He found nothing out of the ordinary.

"Is there something I can do for you, Mister?" Jack asked, his expression dripping with disbelief.

The intruder held a small postcard an inch from his face. Squinting, he asked in a slow, country drawl, "Is this the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Clarke?"

"Yeah, what can I do for you?"

"What'd ya say?" the old man asked, extending his head forward, placing a gloved hand to his ear.

"Yes, this is the Clarke residence," Jack insisted, increasing the amplification. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," the old man began, "am I addressing Mr. or Mrs. Clarke?"

The words just passed his lips before the man cut loose a gut-busting laugh that bent him over at the waist and onto the backs of his heels. Jack crossed his arms and remained in an idle position as the old man teetered on the steps enjoying what he perceived as the funniest one-liner ever delivered.

Responding through the belly laughter, Jack identified himself as Mr. Clarke. Unsure if the man heard his response, he took advantage to survey the neighborhood a second time. Waiting in the frigid morning air, he endured the sporadic laughter before the man removed his cap and slapped it against his thigh.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Clarke. It's just a little joke I like to play with my customers. It gets me every time."

"Yeah, that's funny – well done."

"Wha'd ya say?" the man asked, squinting as if Jack had disappeared.

"I'm right here," Jack said. "I said it's funny ...your joke was real funny. Why are you ringing my doorbell at six in the morning?"

The man steadied his body by grabbing at an iron baluster framing the steps. He replaced his cap and pulled himself up onto the porch.

"Well, Mr. Clarke, my name is Jubel Bigsby, of the Cartersville Bigsby's, and I work for the McClellan Delivery Service. I have a delivery for - "

"Cartersville Bigsby's?" Jack interrupted.

"What?" the old man asked, looking well to Jack's right.

"The Cartersville Bigsby's?" Jack repeated at a pitch sure to bring his neighbor across the street scurrying to their window. "Is that what you said?"

"Yes, sir, Cartersville," Bigsby replied, drawling out the "y" as if not wanting to let it go. The old man paused and cocked his head.

"Wha'd ya say?"

"What?" Jack questioned, looking as confused as the old man.

The man shrugged. "As I was saying, Mr. Clarke, I am--"

Jack tapped him on the shoulder. Bending close, fighting through an overwhelming odor of gorgonzola and horse manure, he caught the man's attention and asked in a loud and clear tone, "Could you take off the thing you have wrapped around your ears?"

Bigsby flashed a blank stare, gave a nod and pulled the homemade contraption over his head, knocking his hat to the ground. Jack recoiled as the man retrieved his cap. Returning upright with hat in hand, Bigsby reached for one of the columns supporting the porch roof and flashed an elfish grin after forgetting where he'd left off.

"Where was I?" he said to himself. "Oh ...Well, Mr. Clarke," he said, pausing to mumble how much better he could hear, "my name is Jubel Bigsby, of the Cartersville Bigsby's, and I'm an employee of the McClellan Delivery Service. I have a delivery for you and the missus."

"I've never heard of the McClellan Delivery Service," Jack said.

"Well, we're a small outfit operating north and northwest of here, but I can vouch for the company. Been with 'em plenty of years now. We started out on horseback but have upgraded somewhat since. I enjoy delivering packages and letters, especially around the holiday season because --"

Jack interrupted what was sure to be a fascinating narrative, "Who sent the delivery? Where did it come from?"

Bigsby paused to allow his mind to recuperate from the several words he'd strung together and to catch up with his customer's latest request.

"Well, I'm sure I don't know that. It was sent anominally."

"What?" Jack asked.

"What?" Bigsby replied.

"Do you mean anonymously?"

"Well, if that means the sender wanted to keep it a secret, then yes."

“Was there any identification inside the envelope?”

“Well, ya see, if we open a letter or a package on the way to a delivery, we can get in a might bit of trouble. That sorta thing is frowned upon by my employer, the McClellan Delivery Service. I did it once and swore I’d never do it again; almost got relieved of my duties. I was just startin’ out, ya see, and this feller, who was a good bit older, dared me to open this letter. Now my mother,” Bigsby explained without taking a breath, “who was as saintly a woman as the good Lord ever put on this earth, taught me to mind my own business and abstain from inafearin’ in the affairs of others. Well, that letter was sprayed with the sweetest smellin’ sauce you ever did put a nose to, and we assumed it came from this feller’s girlfriend, or something like that, because we happened to know he was married. And, oh, I guess I’d had too much to drink and was feelin’ a bit sprite so I ...”

“Mr. Bigsby?” Jack interrupted, extending an index finger near the man’s face. Bigsby rambled on several moments before allowing his words to fade. “Can you please just hand over whatever it is you were sent to deliver? I’m in a pretty big hurry.”

“Of course, Mr. Clarke,” he said, annoyed his customer did not appreciate a good story.

Smiling in a way suggesting annoyance, he removed the glove from his hand, one finger at a time, all the while maintaining direct eye contact. Unsnapping the flap of a large and beat-to-hell leather satchel, he buried his entire arm, to the shoulder, into its depths where he fumbled for something near the bottom. His hand reappeared holding two envelopes, one much larger than the other.

“As I was sayin’, Mr. Clarke, I was sent by my employer, the McClellan Delivery Service, to deliver these,” he said, raising his stubby arms above his head, waving as if in possession of a winning lottery ticket.

“The small one’s for you and the larger one is intended for the missus. That’ll be six bits please.” He dropped his arm, extended the envelopes toward his customer, and just as Jack reached in receipt, yanked them from his fingertips.

“Well, I don’t know how y’all do things ‘round these parts, but I’m obligated by my employer, the McClellan Delivery Service, to receive all monies in advance before handing over any products or parcels – that’s the rule. Six bits please.”

“Six what? What do I owe you?”

“That’ll be six bits, please.”

“What the hell is six bits?”

“That’s what you owe the McClellan Delivery Service. We’re not a free service. My employer would not be around long if that were the case. Ya see, if I don’t collect, it could cause ...”

Jack sighed. “I know you’re not a free service. How much money is six bits?”

“Well, that’s mighty peculiar,” the old man said scratching the side of his head. “Where I come from, it’s no more than seventy-five cents.”

“What?” Jack asked, shaking his head.

“What?” Bigsby returned.

“Did you say seventy-five cents ...for a home delivery?”

“No more than seventy-five cents,” Bigsby corrected.

“Who charges seventy-five cents for a home delivery for Christ’s sake?”

“Now, now there young fella,” he said, waving a finger. “Don’t be using the Lord’s name. You’re in enough trouble already.”

“How can you charge just seventy-five cents?”

“Well, I don’t charge that money myself. My employer, the McClellan Delivery Service, charges that money and I get paid out of the total profits at the end of the week. We’ve raised our rates a might but that’s because things are so much more expensive these days. Ya see, how it works is, I deliver the packages and collect what my employer instructs me. Then, I take that money back to the station. It’s all based on a system our forefathers -”

“I get it, okay? I get it,” Jack said. “I don’t understand how a home delivery could cost just seventy-five cents in this day and age. You people could put FedEx out of business.”

“Who?” the old man asked.

“F-E-D-E-X. FedEx,” Jack said.

“Well, I’m not familiar with them. Are they a local bunch? Did they start on horseback, too?”

“You’ve never heard of FedEx? How’s that possible if you’re in the delivery business? They deliver by trucks and planes?”

Bigsby offered a blank look as he scratched at the side of his head.

“Well, no sir, can’t say I’ve heard of ‘em, although I’m not used to these parts. You remember my employer, the McClellan Delivery Service, operates north and northwest of here. I heard some recent talk of a plane though, now where was that?” he said, looking down, tickling at his beard. “Somebody told me something about a plane; now who could have -”

“Mr. Bigsby, can you please just -”

“I know,” Bigsby yelled, raising a finger, surprising Jack onto the backs of his heels. “This feller was putting on some sort of show near a corn field on the outskirts of this small town back home – Cumberland - and, well, something went wrong because that poor feller flew that dern thing right into this farmer’s barn. Well, I don’t have to tell you the hullabaloo it caused. Horses and cows, all of ‘em, scattered all over the county, and well, the wife of the fella flying the plane was said to be having a little side deal with -”

“Mr. Bigsby,” Jack said, snapping an arm toward the old man, “FedEx happens to deliver packages worldwide. They’re everywhere.”

“I see. Worldwide ...hmmm,” the old man mumbled, readjusting his lopsided spectacles and not buying for one second this FedEx outfit was bigger than his McClellan company.

Bigsby stood before him, smiling and rocking back and forth on his heels. Shaking his head, Jack reached into his pocket, plucked a crisp dollar bill from a gold money clip and passed the currency on to his agitator, receiving the envelopes in the exchange.

“Keep the change,” Jack mumbled.

Bigsby accepted the currency, drawing it close to his face for inspection. He dispensed an exaggerated “Hmmm.”

Jack peered over his shoulder. “Is there a problem?”

“Well, it’s just about the strangest dollar I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean,” Bigsby said, looking over the top of his spectacles as if scolding, “it sure doesn’t look like any dollar bill I’ve ever seen.” The old man reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of very old looking currency. He fumbled through the bills, dropping several to the stone pavers below, before pulling out a dollar from the mess. “You see?” he said waving the currency in Jack’s face, “there’s an awful big difference.”

Jack snatched the bill from the old man’s hands. There was no question the bills were different. The design was unlike anything he’d seen before. The words “silver certificate” appeared in thick black print at the very top, as opposed to the “federal reserve” note script he was accustomed to seeing. It was puzzling, no question.

“Where did you get this?” Jack asked.

“Well, I’m not sure ...must’ve picked it up yesterday in Clear Lake,” he said.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean Clear Lake? Where the hell’s Clear Lake?”

“Clear Lake’s a pretty fair distance from here,” he continued, “north of course because, as you know, I am employed by the McClellan Delivery Service and we operate north and northwest of here. But I was in Clear Lake yesterday morning before heading this way and I’m pretty sure it’s still there. It’s

a nice little town, sittin' real close to one of the best fishin' holes you ever dropped a bobber in. Do you like to fish, Mr. Clarke? Well, I just can't get enough of it. My mother told me I should a been a -"

Jack rolled his eyes as the old man rambled on. He wondered why the man had this money. None of it was adding up. Jack passed the ancient currency back into Bigsby's hand as the old man finished the conversation with himself.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bigsby," Jack interrupted, "that's the only dollar I have."

"Well, okay, Mr. Clarke. If my employer, the McClellan Delivery Service, has a problem with this sort of money, I know where you live. By the way, here's your change," he said holding a coin Jack didn't recognize, and at the moment, didn't care to accept.

"Keep it," he said, turning for the front door.

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Clarke. I'll be able to buy myself a sliver of cheese for dinner – maybe."

Jack shook his head and snarled his lip at the man's insinuation. Bigsby was sucking mental energy at an alarming rate and Jack could ill-afford a battle of wits. The old man offered a tip of his fedora, reattached the homemade earmuffs and stuffed the currency into the pocket of his knickers.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Clarke," Bigsby said, stepping off the porch.

Jack watched over his shoulder the man's fedora disappear below the top step of stairs leading to the road. Re-entering the home with envelopes in hand, Jack felt the entire, bizarre exchange a bad episode of a soon-to-be-cancelled reality show. If this was a prank, someone had gone to great lengths to make it an elaborate one. Jack retraced his steps to the kitchen, so immersed in contemplation he forgot to shut the front door behind him.

A sharp, analytical thinker, he possessed an uncanny ability to make sound, accurate decisions with little or no warning or supporting background information. His ability to assess and decipher with

precision – whether it be data, a perplexity, or a fellow human being - was deadlier than a special ops sniper from two feet away. It was this ability he rode to the very top of his industry.

Although many questioned his methodologies and ethics, Jack's tactics were hailed as cutting edge. He operated with an arrogance that, to the naked and unsuspecting eye, implied extreme confidence, passion and a competitive drive. The attitude was a well thought-out strategy he spawned at a young age to compensate for a childhood marred with scars from being bullied and compromised by those he trusted most. His arrogance also was his weapon of choice for controlling situations, circumstances and those around him – including his wife. Coupled with his intimidating physical presence and handsome attributes, few held the necessary tools or mental capacity to challenge him head-on.

His most reliable attribute was failing him now. He struggled to connect the dots produced by the encounter. Nearing the kitchen table, an unlikely cry coming from the front of the house interrupted his assessment. It sounded first like a dog in distress. Still, he froze in his tracks and readjusted his head to assist in the identification process. Seconds later, the sound erupted again. It was no dog.

“That sounds like a damn horse,” he whispered. Scurrying toward a large bay window framing the front of the property, Jack surveyed to the street, now more visible in the budding sunlight. Scanning east toward the horizon, where the road cut into a soft curve fronting a steep embankment draped with one hundred-year-old oak trees, he could not believe the sight near the turn.

“What the hell?”

There sat Bigsby, with reigns in hand and a quilt blanket draped over his legs, perched atop a large wooden-wheeled carriage being towed down the street by two mammoth, white draft horses. The vehicle appeared a cross between an old “B” movie western stage and a royal carriage from jolly ole’ England, with rear spoke wheels twice the size of the set in front, and a curved belly dragging close to the ground. Three open windows stretched along each side.

Jack let slip the envelopes to the cobblestone floor below. He tracked the giant team with mouth open as they pulled Bigsby around the bend and out of sight.

“What the hell is going on here? Who the hell is this guy?”