

L. RON HUBBARD



The Tramp

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Chapter One

DOUGHFACE JACK unwedged himself from the rods with a startled grunt. He hadn't looked for the fast freight to stop in a Podunk like this and the thought of bulls had no more than flashed through his mind when he saw some legs coming and stopping at intervals along the cars. From the stick he knew it was an irate brakie, already twice dodged en route.

Anxiously Doughface sought to scramble out from under and so make the other side of the train. But the engineer backed a few feet with a jolt and, not knowing if it would happen again, Doughface took his chance.

He rocketed like a rabbit to the cinders and got one awe-inspiring glimpse of the six-foot brakie. He started to run, but in the other direction came somebody with a sheriff's paunch.

There was only one thing for it. The hounds had sighted the hare and Doughface couldn't trust his short legs on the level. He grabbed the handholds and started up the car.

"Come back here!" bellowed the brakie.

"Stop!" roared the sheriff.

Doughface scrambled for altitude as heavy boots ground cinders just under him. He was panting as he made the top of the car. He glanced back to see that the brakie was coming

up the same way and the sheriff had taken the other ladder. The sheriff had a gun in his hand.

Doughface took a sweeping look at the town he had uncovered. An old gent waited at the crossing in a Model T Ford. A sign said “Centerville, Population 2,000.” It was better than nothing. Doughface leaped for the other side and started down.

He would have been safe enough if his loose shoe sole had not jammed in the first rung. But jam it did and on that fact was to hang a national event.

He was still in sight on top and he yanked at the caught shoe. He heard a grunt and looked wildly about to see that the sheriff had made it.

“Stop!” bawled the sheriff.

Doughface almost had his shoe free. He gave one last yank and to the sheriff it appeared that the quarry was about to flee. He fired an intimidating shot—but the effect was more brutal. The bullet took Doughface in the shoulder. It slammed him out into space. His shoe held for an instant, long enough to turn him upside down.

He went through space like a bomb. He saw the switch he would hit and tried to fend for his head.

And then the lights went out.

Simultaneously sheriff and brakie appeared at the top to stare down.

The sight below was not pleasant and the sheriff gulped, “I . . . I didn’t mean to hit him.”

“Hell, he had it coming,” said the brakie. “I got my orders. He was probably one of that gang of sneak thieves.”

“Yes,” said the sheriff doubtfully, “but . . . but maybe he wasn’t, too.”

The old man in the car had stopped his shaking machine. He reached hastily into the back seat and brought out a black bag and then, white hair streaming out from under his black slouch hat, he ran swiftly to the tramp. He gave one glance at the two on top of the car and the sheriff became red of face and nervously started to climb down.

The old man pulled Doughface away from the train and lifted his head for an inspection of the skull. The mass was as soft as a swamp.

The sheriff got down in confusion. “Hell, Doctor Pellman, I didn’t mean to hit him. I was just . . .”

“First time you ever hit anything in your life,” said Pellman. “Take his feet and put him in my car, Joe.”

The sheriff was like a schoolboy caught with an ink bottle and a girl’s braid. He gingerly picked up the tramp’s feet and together he and Doctor Pellman succeeded in placing the man in the Model T.

“Get in and hold him from bumping,” ordered Pellman.

Joe Bankhead cared more about the doctor’s goodwill than he did about the bloody mess. He obeyed.

Pellman started the Model T and swung it around. He pulled the hand throttle all the way down and the rickety old car went galloping through Centerville to pull to a shivering halt before the doctor’s office. The store loafers got up and peered interestedly.

“Been an accident?” they asked.

Joe turned red when he caught the doctor’s eye and then

got very busy unloading the tramp. Together they packed him in and laid him on the doctor's chipped enamel operating table.

Miss Finch, the nurse, looked wonderingly at Pellman. "But he hasn't got any skull left, Doctor."

Pellman was already shedding his coat and rolling up his sleeves. He jerked his shaggy white head toward the door. "Get out, Joe. I won't have any time to hold your hand."

Joe shuffled out and closed the door behind him. Inside he heard Pellman saying, "Get that silver ice container Doris gave me for Christmas. I knew I could find some use for it."

Puzzled and downtrodden, Joe went back to the crowd on the walk.

"What happened?" they demanded.

Joe looked more uncomfortable than ever. "Aw, I couldn't help it. I got a wire to watch out for a gang that escaped from Cincinnati on a freight and I thought maybe this guy was one of 'em. But he was all alone and I guess he wasn't. I didn't mean to hit him." He was almost angry now. "He's just a damned tramp, anyhow!"

"Aw, you know the doc," said Durance, the storekeeper, wiping his hands on his apron. "Tramp or sick dog, he takes them all in. I tell him it don't pay. I've carried his accounts—"

"You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the doc!" challenged Joe, pulling harshly at his gray mustache.

"Tha's so," said Blinks, the town drunk. "Ol' Doc Pellman'd own this town if savin' lives meant somethin'."

"All I said," defended the storekeeper, "was that he was too softhearted about his bills. I don't say he ain't a good doctor. . . ."

“An’ you better not say it!” growled Joe, anxious to turn attention away from himself. “There’s them that claim he’s had fifty-leven offers to go to New York and be a brain surgeon. But he thinks too much of us, that’s what. If he owed two hundred dollars to every store in town, it’s still not enough to pay him back for what he’s done.”

“Think he can do anything for that tramp?” queried another loafer. “Fellah was pretty nigh dead from what I seen. Head all bashed in.”

“Doc Pellman can do anything he sets his mind to,” stated Joe.

They tuned their ears to the inside of the office and stood around almost in silence. They were awed by the thought that Doc Pellman might yank this tramp back from death, even though they had witnessed other things they thought miracles. Two or three times Pellman himself had gotten ill and that was the closest to panic that Centerville had ever gotten. They could not conceive a time when Doc Pellman wouldn’t be walking down the street in his black coat and slouch hat handing out cheery hellos and free medical advice in every block.

Almost an hour later, Pellman came out. He was rolling down his sleeves as he looked at Joe.

“Will he live?” said Joe.

Pellman’s big face relaxed into a smile. “If I could tell things like that, Joe, you could stop calling me ‘Doc’ and start calling me ‘God.’ How do I know if he’ll live? That’s up to Him.”

“What’d y’do?” said Joe interestedly.

The doc's blue eyes twinkled. "Took off the top of his skull. There wasn't much left of it."

"Huh?" said Joe. "But . . . but what's he goin' to do for the top of his head?"

"I made a silver cap for him," said Pellman. "Out of that ice dish Doris gave me for Christmas. Knew it'd come in handy some time."

"Aw," said Joe, "you're foolin'. How could a man wear an ice dish for a skull?"

"Same shape and size," said Pellman. "If he's alive day after tomorrow he'll be as good as ever. Had to sew the two halves of his brain together but that hadn't ought to upset him. C'mon, Joe. I think you owe me a drink."