

# STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 23, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

March, 1951



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STARTLING STORIES. Published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 29 Washington St., Lowellfield 3, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 19 East 49th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter June 13, 1948, at the post office at Northfield, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1979. Copyright, 1951, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscriptions: 12 issues, \$2.00; single copies, 35¢; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In correspondence with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



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dle became a pirate  
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# Short Order

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

*Enoch Jones, the wanderer, had been about everywhere there was to go—but he had traveled always in the same spot!*

**I**T was time to close up the dog-wagon for the night. The hands of the dirty-faced clock on the wall yawned widely at five minutes of four. A cockroach moved slowly, tiredly, toward its nocturnal crack at the base of the wall. Molly, the stubby thick-bodied waitress, had already hung up her apron and departed for home—or wherever she

elected to unveil her sawed-off-shotgun charms.

Enoch Jones, the leathery bald-headed short-order cook, cleaned with professional care the long thin-bladed knife that was the chief instrument of his sandwich-cutting trade. He placed it carefully in its rack-slot above the back-bar, then turned to regard with mel-

ancholy disinterest the two burly blue-chinned Diesel truckmen who were the sole remaining customers.

"Closing up," he told them, his hands unfastening with the expertness of long practise the strings of his own white apron.

"Okay, pop," said one of them. His voice too bore the fuzx of bone-deep fatigue. "Just as soon as I get this java down."

Enoch Jones nodded and made a few half-hearted swipes at the top of the service-bar with a towel that had seen better days. Occasionally, at this time of the morning, it seemed to him that he had been going through this same routine with this same pair of truck drivers for at least a thousand years.

He thought wryly that sixty-two years could seem a lot longer than a thousand if you were the guy that lived them—always accepting the fact that you could call this a life. He felt his jaws crack in a yawn, made no effort to conceal it.

Outside a truck roared past without stopping. Enoch Jones had already turned off the bright red-and-yellow-and-green sign that proclaimed the presence of *Enoch's Diner—Tables, Pizza, Dancing*. He thought of putting a slug in the juke-box, decided against it. It might cause the Diesel drivers to linger.

Yes, sixty-two years could seem like a thousand-plus, Enoch Jones decided. Usually he didn't allow himself to think about it. He didn't think about much of anything any more—beyond the scant mental requirements of facing everyday existence.

He had long since learned that thought was the door-key to recollection—and recollection was the stairway to the attic of dusty and discarded and broken and outworn dreams. Dreams were things—if you could call them *things*—that Enoch Jones had long since decided were responsible for most of life's miseries.

**E**NOCH JONES had had his share of them—perhaps more than his share. His life, he thought when he al-

lowed himself to think along such lines, had been dominated by dreams ever since, at the age of five and a half, he had first imagined the backyard puddle that appeared with each February thaw to be a pirate sea, peopled by d'Olineux, Blackbeard, Captain Kidd—and paved with pirate bullion.

That particular dream, which invariably found him striding a rocking quarter-deck, cutlass in hand, defying mutineers and Spanish sea captains simultaneously, had not endured very long despite its vividness and satisfaction. For other dreams, each as vivid, each as satisfying, had followed one another with the years.

For awhile, after the backyard pirate sea dried up in the heat of early summer, Enoch Jones had been a cowboy with cattle-rustling variations, riding the wide loop and beating to the draw lank lace-ruffled gamblers amid the false-front dens of the Great Southwest.

He had been, in turn, big league baseball hurler, fireman, soldier, Hollywood star, football hero and—after a painful pre-adolescent brush with the facts of life—Wall Street financier. Each of these dreams, while it endured, had filled him utterly.

Ultimately, of course, one king-sized dream had come to erase the vigor of all others, to dominate his life. It had been born one Saturday afternoon in the local movie house when his age had barely reached double figures.

The space-ship, resting upright in its desert cradle, had been sleek, beautiful, dangerous, suggestive of the ultimate in unknown adventure. In blast-off it had been incredibly beautiful and if, in its journey through space to the Moon, the stars looked like pinpricks in a black velvet curtain, the ship itself had remained as sleek and suggestive as ever—especially in Technicolor.

It had been only a Hollywood fantasy—but with it Enoch Jones had soared free of the increasing encroachments of the dull commonplaces of living. From then on he was a spaceman—even though no scientist nor adventurer had yet even to approach the long talked-of

conquest of space.

Enoch Jones, a space man—Enoch Jones, explorer of alien worlds—Enoch Jones, perhaps, ruler of some strange planet where no other human foot had trod, no other human voice been heard. This was the dream which, after the fashion of dreams, had come to be Enoch Jones—although perhaps it was the other way around.

This was the dream that refused to fade or be superseded in his imagination. In fact, the older he grew the more it came to occupy his thoughts asleep as well as awake. Gradually it began more and more to shape—or as his parents had implied—to infect his life.

Enoch Jones was not blessed in any wordly degree. His father was not rich—quite otherwise. Since there were half a dozen children and he was the second oldest he had to go to work early. He drifted from job to job, never able to rise in such careers as offered because his dream of space prevented sustained effort.

So he became a short-order cook. He knew he would never get rich behind a counter-bar—but he could do the work satisfactorily by rote once he had mastered its intricacies. More important, if man reached the planets in his lifetime, someone would have to cook for them there as well as on Earth.

Perhaps his logic was odd but it satisfied him. He even began to pile up a sizable amount of money in the bank out of his modest earnings. For if his dream prevented his rise in the world it also prevented his forming any of the usual ties, assuming any of the usual responsibilities that eat up a man's savings.

Marriage was not for him and the girls seemed to sense it. He did not starve for women since his desires were channeled otherwise and always some female around would find his self-pre-occupation a challenge. He did all right that way. No Miss Americas, perhaps, but then how many men did win beauty prizewinners?

"What's more," he used to say occasionally over a glass of whiskey with a beer chaser, "how many of them that

gets them like it after they're stuck with them?"

There was no answer to that one.

Enoch Jones got around a lot too. When he got tired of a job or the season turned sour he'd have his savings converted to Traveler's Checks and take off for a balmy clime. He knew his business and could get a job almost anywhere at any time. This, of course, was a planned factor in fulfillment of his dream.

He didn't care much for the cities. He liked to work the places between towns, the little demi-communities that have a way of springing up along the great highways alongside the filling and service stations, the places where the long-distance commercial drivers stop for refuelling of gas tanks as well as the inner man.

Yes, Enoch Jones got around. It was only after he had lost most of his hair and had his upper teeth replaced by a dental plate that the extent of his betrayal began to dawn on him. And by that time it was too late to do much about it.

ONE night, much like this one, when he stepped outside after closing up and looked up and down the highway, he had an odd impression that he was just a kid on his first job, working a few miles from the small dark-white home-stand—the place with the spring puddle in the backyard from which his first dream had sprung.

"What's eatin' you, lover?" Birdie, the dark-roots blonde who had shared quarters with him in a shack behind the garage down the highway asked. "You look like you swallowed a herring bone."

"I'm okay," Enoch Jones replied. "I'm okay. Just thought of something. Come on, I got a quart of rye stashed at the house."

He had figured the whiskey would kill the thought that had troubled him. But it hadn't—and a few days later he had moved on to try somewhere else. He hadn't wanted to face it. But ultimately he had had to.

All the places he had been—and each one of them looked and sounded and smelt and tasted just like the rest. He had worked Miami, winter playground of the continent—and all he had seen of it were neon signs and gas stations and the inside of the dogwagon.

All he had heard was the rumble of truck drivers' slow chatter and the roar of their trucks as they rolled by on the concrete outside. All he had smelt was fuel and food odors—all he had tasted was dogwagon food and not-too-mellow whiskey and too-sweet lipstick.

It had been the same outside Seattle, on Route 66, near Greenwich, Connecticut, on the Montreal-Quebec Highway and on the main drag beyond Phoenix, Arizona. He had been places, yes—about as many as a man had a right to get—but he might as well have seen, have been in only one.

Enoch Jones had begun to show his age once this thought attained the reaches of his conscious mind. He knew he had lost it, lost whatever it was that kept him going so long. There were no more Birdies for him—the Mollys, being women, knew he had lost it with no questions asked. Yet he hadn't been able to stop. The habits acquired in a lifetime held him chained to knife and apron.

He looked at the dirty-faced clock on the wall, saw that it was now one minute of four. "Come on, fellows," he said to the two truck drivers. "I need some shut-eye."

"Okay, pop." The one who had first spoken yawned widely, nudged the shin of his companion with his heavy boot. "We got to be goin' ourselves. See you next trip, old timer."

"So long, pop—give that Molly a smooch for me." The other driver, grinning, was on his feet. They brought their cups over to the bar-counter to save him an extra trip. They were good boys, Enoch Jones thought. They clumped on out into the night, buttoning their heavy felt coveralls and pulling on their thick boots. A blast of nostril-stinging air accompanied their exit.

Enoch Jones turned off all but the night light and got into his own heavy

outer garments. It was cold enough outside to freeze the tail off a brass elephant and he was too old to enjoy it, especially when he was bone tired. The hundred and fifty yards to the two rooms he had in back of the filling station seemed like miles.

He set the lock on the door and slammed it behind him and paused outside, nerving himself for the walk to his waiting bed. The roar of a Diesel motor, catching with difficulty in the cold of the night, made him jump. He lifted an arm in salute as his two recent customers rolled past, sodium headlights slicing the darkness in eerie death-yellow trim streamers.

He looked around him before beginning his walk to shelter. Most of the bright neon signs were darkened for the remainder of the night. But Hogan, who ran the roadhouse—by courtesy only—this side of the filling station, still had his signs glowing. And the big billboards lined the highway spottily, advertising their various products, from digestion aids to cold cures to tires to hotels.

It was cold but there was no snow—there never was in this crazy climate. Enoch Jones was grateful for that. Snow would have made his walk that much the harder. He began to slog off, past Hogan's to the filling station and bed, reflecting on the foolishness to which a man's dreams could drive him.

He kept his head down—for even here on Mars he was sick of the fading ribbons that were highways in the night, sick of neon signs and dogwagons and roadhouses and filling stations and two-room shacks in which he no longer could live alone from choice.

"I never got anywhere after all," he muttered as the cold made his nostrils stiff and a gust of wind all but stopped him in his tracks. "Not anywhere at all in spite of all my travels."

He didn't even look up at the twin moons above him—for at best Deimos and Phobos were dull and tiny satellites and in the bright glare of electricity, neon tubing and sodium lamps they were scarcely visible at all.