

NOPO GETS HIS MEN

Harold A. Davis

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THE MUSIC on the radio stopped, and an excited announcer began to talk swiftly. Nopo Beavers hardly noticed.

His faded blue eyes intent, lined face serious, Nopo carefully wielded the pair of pliers in his hand. He pulled another porcupine quill from the paw of the hound that sat crouched between his legs. The hound whimpered softly.

"I've got no sympathy for y'u, Chesty," Nopo Beavers said grave]y, but I his voice was kindly, and the hound's tail beat on the floor. "Even a hound of your quarrelsome disposition oughta know better'n try to tangle with a porcupine."

Chesty looked sad, as only a hound can look sad, and Nopo Beavers grunted and went on with his job, sticking the extracted quills into the lapel of his leather jacket. Chesty was a disappointment as a hunting dog. He couldn't seem to learn anything, not even to leave porcupines alone. But the quills had to be pulled out. If not, they'd keep on working into the body, might even kill the dog.

The radio shrilled on, and Nopo Beavers' head came up suddenly, his faded blue eyes sharpening.

"—these men are killers!" the announcer was saying rapidly. "They will stop at nothing. Peace officers have been warned to take no chances, to shoot on sight—" The voice broke, then rushed on excitedly.

"Wait a minute, folks! A new bulletin has just come in. Two more men have been killed, evidently by the escaped convicts. Their bodies, clad only in underwear, have just been found in a ditch, thirty miles north of the city. So far they have not been identified."

Nopo Beavers' breath came in sharply, his gray head came up. Thoughts seethed through his brain, while Chesty whimpered, almost forgotten.

Why, he wondered, hadn't he been notified? Why hadn't he been asked to help hunt for these killers?

Then his shoulders slumped, he looked for a moment even older than his eighty years. The answer was simple, of course. He was a man who had outlived his time, whose usefulness as a man hunter was past.

Once Nopo had been sheriff. He had been called Jack Beavers then—the nickname had come later. But that had been long ago, when the country was wild. Yet he had set a record that hadn't been bettered to this day. With gun and brains, he had brought order and law when a stern hand had been needed.

And he'd done it single-handed. That was where the nickname had come from. Beavers had never been one to rush wildly on the trail of some gunman or killer. He'd always taken his time, had figured out what he would do in the killer's place, where he would go and hide. Then he had gone out and got him.

"No posse," had been his stock answer in those days. "I've always been able to bring them in alone!" He said it so often that finally he'd been nicknamed No Posse Beavers. Then the name had been shortened to just Nopo.

But that was long ago, he thought wearily. His time was past. There were fast cars, two-way radios, lots of modern equipment for getting criminals these days.

True, he was still a deputy sheriff, but that was just an honorary job. No one ever expected him to take it seriously. It was just a tribute paid to a man who once had been good.

GRIMLY, he brought his mind back to the words gushing from the radio.

"—two men, Perley Jenkins and Hyde Slivers, serving life terms for murder, escaped from the State prison last night after cowing the warden and a guard with guns that somehow had been smuggled in to them.

"They fled in a prison car, and killed a motorist an hour later, when he balked at exchanging autos with them. Before leaving the prison, they took several other guns from the warden's office.

"Finding of the two bodies near the city indicates they probably are coming this way. Officers believe they

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have traded cars again, probably taking the machine driven by the last two they killed—"

Absently, Nopo Beavers resumed his task of pulling porcupine quills from Chesty's paw. His mind no longer was following the radio announcer's story. Unconsciously, he was reverting to a habit of a lifetime—he was trying to figure out what he would do if he was an escaped convict and a killer.

That was something he still could do, even if he was no longer sheriff, but only an inactive deputy and proprietor of a mountain filling station.

As far as that was concerned, he really couldn't call himself much of a filling station owner. That had been only a blind; so that he could have a logical excuse for deserting the city, for living where he could spend most of his time hunting. He'd purposely picked a site for his filling station on a mountain road that saw little travel even in the summer. Now that it was fall, days might pass without a car going by.

He had a radio to give him outside news. That was all he needed any more. But it was tough to realize that he had been forgotten entirely. Now, when every officer for miles around had been notified to keep on the lookout for two killers, no one had remembered to telephone him—to ask him to be on the watch, also.

Of course, as the radio announcer had said, the two probably were making for the city. But were they?

Wind whistled through the tall pines outside. Nopo Beavers pulled the last porcupine quill from Chesty's paw and added it to the others in his leather jacket. His eyes had narrowed slightly, his mouth hardened.

Hyde Stivers was a city man, a gangster. It was logical to suppose that he might want to go where there were crowds, to believe a city was the best place to hide. But Perley Jenkins wasn't from the city, he was a mountain man, had been given life for killing a Ranger who had caught him poaching.

Nopo Beavers considered that fact long and carefully, then his gray head nodded silently.

"Perley is bull-headed he's got more will-power than Stivers," he told Chesty quietly. The hound wagged his tail in approval. "Perley will leave a trail toward the city, then double back," the old man added.

Another thought struck him, and he grinned slightly. There was a trail right back of his filling station, not much of a trail, one that wound and twisted through the mountains but one that led far back into a wilderness that could hide a dozen killers. Perley might remember that trail, might come this way—

His thoughts broke off suddenly. Dimly, very faint at first, then more loudly, came the sound of a racing motor. A car was coming toward him, and coming fast.

Nopo Beavers started. Was his theory going to be confirmed as fast as that? It didn't seem possible. But still—

He pushed himself to his feet, moved toward a window where he could see far down the highway. For a moment he thought of climbing up to his sleeping quarters in the attic, of getting the ancient six-gun and rifle that were there. Then he shrugged. He would have plenty of time for that after he saw who was coming.

In spite of himself his pulse beat more swiftly. Excitement showed in his faded blue eyes. To have just one more brush with killers, to prove just once again that he was still a man hunter, that he wasn't too old—if he could do that then he would ask no more. He'd feel his life had been well lived.

THE ROAR of the approaching motor grew louder. The car whipped around a curve half a mile away, and Nopo Beavers' shoulders slumped.

The approaching car bore the familiar blue-and-white colors of the State police. He hadn't been the only one to remember that Perley Jenkins was a mountain man, that he might head for the old trail that led far back into the hills.

Slowly Nopo walked to the front of the small log building that was both his filling station and his home. Brakes bowled on the speeding car, it skidded into the driveway, came to halt. Nopo didn't want to look up. These men, these young officers, were going to spoil whatever chance he might have had of again seeing action, of again taking the trail after a pair of killers.

Then he did look up—and almost wished he hadn't. The men in the car were garbed in the smart blue uniforms of State troopers. But they weren't troopers!

A big gun was in Perley Jenkins' hand, a hard grin on his shifty features. Beside him, behind the wheel of the car, was Hyde Stivers.

Nopo Beavers felt he was dead then. He could see it in Perley Jenkins' too-small eyes, could see it in Hyde Stivers' merciless grin.

That didn't bother him. He was old enough, so that the thought of death no longer was frightening. But it would be an inglorious way of going out—would be a disgrace getting shot without even having a chance to put

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up a fight.

Then he noticed something else, and he forgot the shock he had experienced while a slow deadly anger surged through his ancient veins.

The number on the patrol car was 22. No. 22 was the one usually occupied by Burt Stevens and Clark Smith. And Burt and Clark were his friends, they quite often made a trip far out of their way just to bring him papers and magazines.

"—two men clad only in underwear, have just been found in a ditch," the radio announcer had said.

Burt and Clark! That had to be it. They had been surprised and slain, their car and uniforms taken.

"Get it, Nopo?" Perley Jenkins sneered.

"Yellow!" Nopo Beavers spat calmly.

Crimson flared to Perley Jenkins' face, he yanked open the car door, swang his big frame to the ground.

"No one can call me yellow," he shrilled. The gun in his hand made a sweeping motion, smashed against the side of Nopo's head. The old man went down.

Crimson mingled with Nopo Beavers' white hair. He was dazed; it took him some moments to get up. But his face remained calm, his faded blue eyes showed contempt.

Perley Jenkins was pointing to Nopo's ancient flivver that stood by the filling station.

"That's what I told you about," he snapped at Stivers. "Only a flivver can take us where we're going. New cars are hung too low, we'd tear out the bottom of the engine."

Perley did not seem to be watching. Nopo Beavers started toward the door of the filling station. If he could only get inside and lock the door, could get to his six-gun in the attic above—

Perley Jenkins spun with the speed of a cat. Once more he clipped viciously with the butt of his gun. This time Nopo was unconscious before he ever hit the ground.

WATER poured in Nopo's face. Hard boots kicked him in the ribs.

Painfully, head reeling, his body one gigantic ache, the old man pulled himself up, spat the water from his mouth. He was still outside the filling station, but now the troopers' car was gone. Perley and Hyde Stivers were both beside him, one pouring the water, the other kicking.

Perley Jenkins laughed harshly. "You're hard to kill, Nopo," he jeered. "Get up! Get us something to eat. You'll get to live that long, anyway—"

With difficulty, Nopo Beavers got to his feet. He could hardly stand. Hyde Stivers pushed him roughly.

"Snap into it, old-timer," he grated. "Eat and die! That is we eat, and you die." He laughed harshly.

Chesty pressed against Nopo, wagging his tail, his sad eyes mournful as usual. Nopo looked at him in disgust. Chesty was running true to form, he wasn't a bit of help. He'd probably make friends with the two killers before he was through.

For a moment, Nopo felt angry, then the anger passed. It was just as well. If Chesty had come to his aid, he would only have been killed. As it was, they might let the dog live, and Nopo did feel genuine affection for the hound, worthless as he was.

Stivers' words had merely confirmed what he had already known. He was to die. Naturally the convict killers wanted as big a start as possible. They would leave no one behind who might put the authorities on their trail.

Perley Jenkins and Hyde Stivers took turns guarding Nopo Beavers, as the old man mixed pancakes, prepared breakfast. And while one stood on guard, the other carried out supplies to the ancient flivver.

Nopo asked no questions. He didn't need to ask. The others' purpose was clear.

Perley knew the mountains. Using the ancient flivver as long as they could, the two would make their way far back to some remote hide-out. Soon the snows would come. They could elude pursuit until then. After that, they would hole up for the winter. When spring came, they would make their way down the other side of the divide, probably would make good their escape.

They would be free to kill others, as they had killed before, Nopo Beavers thought bitterly. They were being hunted in the city. After a while, of course, someone would come this way. But if they found his filling station deserted, they would think nothing of that. They would believe he had merely gone on one of his usual hunting trips.

The filling station would be closed his body hidden.

He set, pancakes, maple sirup and bacon before the killers and watched them wolf the food.

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These men had killed two friends of his, they had killed others as well. He would willingly die himself if he could only get them also. The fierce, impelling drive of the man hunter filled him. He had to get these killers. Some way, somehow they must be trapped. But how ?

Desperately he tried to think, his brain still whirling. Chesty limped into the room and whimpered slightly. His foot still sore from the porcupine quills. Perley reached for more maple sirup.

Subconsciously, Nopo Beavers noticed Chesty, saw Perley reach for the sirup. A thought seemed to be trying to push its way to the front of his brain—something important. He shook his head, tried to clear it, tried to think what it was he should remember.

If only it would come to him, if only there were one chance in a million of trapping these killers, of making them pay for their crime. If only he could get his hands on his rifle, could fight it out on even terms. But he was alone, was helpless.

Chesty was licking his sore paw, Stivers was pouring sirup on his pancakes. Nopo Beavers' mind clicked!

There was one chance, a long shot, but if it worked—

THE killers pushed back their chairs. The big gun came back to Perley Jenkins' side.

"Want to take it here, or outside, Nopo?" he leered.

Beavers' face did not change expression. "That flivver of mine has been drained for the winter," he said mildly. "Better let me fill it with oil and water for you before y'u go."

Perley chuckled maliciously. "And get another minute or so of life," he jeered. "Once a brave guy and a sheriff—now just a filling-station punk."

Nopo Beavers said nothing. He picked up a can, went to an oil pump. Then he poured the oil in the car. He even put air in the old-type, high-pressure tires.

Perley Jenkins put a rope around Chesty's neck, tied the hound in the rear seat of the flivver. "I'll take the mutt along and even do your hunting for you, Nopo," he said sarcastically.

The old man remained silent. The end was near. He had done all he could. Possibly he looked a little pathetic, his white hair matted with dried blood, his faded eyes unafraid.

But if he did so, it didn't affect Perley Jenkins. The killer forced him ahead of him, gun in the old man's back. Nopo was pushed to the edge of a small, but deep ravine.

Not by the slightest change of expression did Nopo Beavers show that this was what he had expected. But it was. At the bottom of the ravine was the troopers' car. He had known that must have been where it was concealed. It might escape search there for months. His body might also.

Perley Jenkins' breath came in sharply. Nopo Beavers knew he was going to shoot. The old man did the only thing he could do. He dived headfirst down the steep side of the ravine.

Blam! Blam!

The heavy gun in the killer's hand spoke twice.

Nopo Beavers screamed once, a thin, pain-racked scream. His body went over and over down the side of the canyon to lie in a crumpled heap beside the wreck of the troopers' car.

Nopo Beavers had known he was taking a chance. But he had known, also, that a startled man, shooting at a rolling target on a downhill grade, is not apt to be exceptionally accurate, even if he is a good shot.

He had been correct. Perley's first shot had merely grazed his ribs. The second had missed entirely.

He had believed, also, that the killer would not take the trouble to climb down the steep side of the ravine to make sure his victim was entirely dead. Perley would just as soon let him lie there and die in agony. The scream would convince the other that Nopo was wounded.

He had been right about that, also. What he had forgotten was that he was old, that his ancient body no longer could stand up under as terrific a fall, as he had taken, without paying for it.

It was an hour before he recovered consciousness. Then he discovered that one arm was broken, that he was a mass of pain from head to foot.

But the stubborn, relentless drive of the man hunter was there as well. He had succeeded in saving his own life, at least for the moment, but he didn't even think of that. He thought only of getting into action, of getting the two killers who cared so little about murder.

Carefully, steadily, he pulled himself up out of the ravine, a foot at a time.

Yet, once he was again on level ground, he did not appear in a great rush. He acted as if he knew the men he

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sought would be waiting for him, that he could find them when he wished.

Without haste, he went to the filling station, pulled himself up into the attic and got his six-gun and rifle.

NO LONGER did he look pathetic as he started through the mountains. Years seemed to have dropped from his once broad shoulders. Once again he looked grim and purposeful, his faded eyes were like chilled slate.

The trail the killers had taken, twisted back and forth, covering ten miles as it climbed for two across country. And Nopo Beavers was taking the short-cut.

Long minutes went by before he heard the mournful howls of Chesty. Nopo did not seem surprised when he heard those howls; he acted as if he had expected to hear them.

Chesty liked to ride in a car, it was another of his failings. And he liked to howl, also, when the ride was over or the car stopped.

Nopo Beavers knew the ride wasn't over—that is the killers didn't think it was.

The car was motionless when he finally spotted it. Two perspiring and tired figures were taking turns tugging futilely at the crank. The hood of the old flivver was up.

Nopo Beavers slipped forward cautiously, moving slowly from tree to tree.

While one of the killers was trying to crank the car, the other always stood alert, a sub-machine gun in his hand. That machine gun had been taken from the troopers' car, and Nopo's eyes grew even harder as he saw it. It reminded him again that Burt Stevens and Clark Smith were dead.

Nopo Beavers stopped a hundred yards away. Painfully he got his broken arm up so that he could rest the barrel of his rifle against it and against the trunk of a tree.

"Get 'em up!" he barked, and his voice was not that of an old-timer, but that of a man hunter.

Hyde Stivers was holding the machine gun. He didn't put up his hands. He whirled the muzzle of the gun, sent a volley of lead toward the sound of Nopo Beavers' voice.

The old man hunter sighed. He didn't like to kill, he never had liked to do so. But this was one time he had no regrets.

A sub-machine gun is hardly an accurate weapon at a hundred yards. A rifle in the hands of an experienced hunter is.

Nopo Beavers squeezed the trigger.

Blam!

The sub-machine gun stopped it chatter. Hyde Stivers looked almost surprised as he crumpled slowly. A third eye had appeared in the center of his forehead.

Perley Jenkins had dived for his rifle, on the running board of the flivver. He got it, whirled.

Again Nopo Beavers squeezed the trigger. The high-powered bullet pushed Perley's nose practically through the back of his head.

REPORTERS certainly can ask a lot of questions, Nopo reflected wearily some hours later.

His broken arm was in splints. His numerous cuts and bruises had been dressed.

The first trooper's car had reached his filling station almost by the time he had walked back there with Chesty. After that, after the car had sent its radio message, auto after auto had appeared.

"But I still don't understand how you were so sure you would find the killers in your car where you did?" one young reporter pressed relentlessly.

Nopo Beavers sighed resignedly. "Porcupine quills, son, porcupine quills. You put them in a tire, they work in, just like they work into your skin. They cause a slow leak, your tire'll go down in about ten or fifteen miles of driving. Nothing complicated about that."

"But why couldn't they start up again after they had stopped? How did you know they would still be there when it took you so long to follow them?"

For the first time a glint of humor came into Nopo Beavers' faded eyes.

"Maple sirup," he said briefly.

"Maple—what?" The reporter's jaw dropped. He looked as if he thought he was being kidded.

A tall trooper, nearby, laughed shortly. "Nopo is right, guy," he gibed. "Just maple sirup. Try it in place of oil sometime. I had that trick played on me once. The sirup mixes with the oil, the engine gets hot and the sirup crystallizes into sugar. You're all right as long as you keep the engine running, but once you stop—you're done for.

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"The sugar sticks the pistons, glues them as tightly as if they were soldered. You have to take the entire engine apart and clean it before you can use your car again. And Nopo here, put sirup instead of oil into that flivver of his."

The reporter's eyes glistened. "What a yarn! What a yarn! Two of the toughest killers in the country trapped with porcupine quill and maple syrup!"

"Yeah! But Nopo here still should have called for help before he went after them." the trooper said grimly. "Something might have gone wrong even then."

Nopo Beavers leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed. One hand patted Chesty's head. His features did not change expression, but he was happy—happier than he had been for years. Perhaps he was old, but he had shown he still could act when necessity called. The years faded. His answer was purely habit.

"No posse," he said softly. "No posse, son, I've always been able to bring them in alone."

THE END.