


Funny Business



by Thomas McMorrow

The illustration shows two men in a dark, possibly underground setting. One man, wearing a hat and a light-colored suit, is leaning over a large, dark trunk or chest. The other man, wearing a dark vest and a light shirt, is standing behind the trunk, looking on. The trunk has the number '2432' written on it. The artist's signature 'McM' is visible in the bottom right corner of the illustration.

LENOX AVENUE is a boulevard standing on its head. It emerges from the stagnant Harlem mere, begins with a Turkish bath, reviews the hectic life whose crescendo is One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street, and then hurries north to a rustic dance-hall, where Youth and Pleasure are clinking their first red lemonades.

Sapevitz runs a cigar-store on lower Lenox Avenue. He does a good business with sidelines; it is a lively neighborhood. The sidewalk before his windows is populated with young men at all hours of the day and night, the pungent breath of life fills the glowing delicatessens round about, and the coffee-and-cake dispensaries do a clattering trade. Prize-fighters stroll by in elegant attire, and pale gunmen, bearded Russians, trig pickpockets, night and second-story workers, gamblers, singers and dancers, waiters, rubbers, sportive manicurists, sporting barbers, chauffeurs—people who turn night into day and read the morning papers before going to bed.

Sapevitz runs a poker game in his back room, and stuss and dice are played there when the morning star shines above the Gibraltar Warehouse. It is a friendly game, with a touch of neighborliness: nobody is cheated but

strangers, Sapevitz provides the cards and cigars, and the regulars bring their own dice and brass-knuckles. If you go broke you can sell your watch to Sapevitz, or any watch you have; he buys them.

Sapevitz is up in the world; he wears diamonds. He wears a high hat at trade board dinners, and is introduced to the imported speakers. Success is success! He votes right, and is appointed receiver when local merchants go busted. If he makes his little pickings what do you expect?

He has his foible like other men of mark. Gladstone read dime novels. Grant preferred corned beef and—, Devery sat on a pump, Bryan ran for President, and Sapevitz?

He does *not* sell Gracia cigars. Don't ask for them: you will give him a pain. In the house of the hanged one does not mention rope—isn't it so?

He was not that way yet one summer afternoon when Smoke Engel entered his store. Two o'clock had just struck, Sapevitz had assumed his linen coat, dismissed his day clerk, and lit his after-breakfast cigar.

"Listen, Sapevitz," said Smoke Engel earnestly. "I need the money. Can you let me have that ten you owe me? I just been over to

the Gibraltar Warehouse, and they're going to sell out some goods belonging to me if I don't come through with the storage. Let me have that ten, will you?"

"I see the red flag as I came by just now," nodded Sapevitz. "Sorry I can't help you out, but already I give you more than them punks was worth. You know I was stung bad when that sucker, Louie Cohen, went busted over on Madison Avenue."

"That was almost a year ago, Sapevitz," grumbled the dusky-faced, hawk-eyed salesman. "And you were the receiver for Cohen, so I guess you didn't lose much. Come on, come across with my ten."

"Nothing doing," said Sapevitz, showing the pale palms of his pudgy hands. "And don't be so bright telling me what I losted on that bankruptcy, young man. That fellow Cohen was into me for thousands of cigars, understand? He skipped off with a lot of stock, believe me!"

"Say, Sapevitz," said Smoke Engel, with a flicker of anger in his eye, "you better cough up that ten. I'll get it."

Sapevitz puffed on his cigar. "Go to it! It's a free country," he observed comfortably.

Shortly thereafter Hyman Finkler, proprietor of a small cigar-store several blocks away, saw Smoke Engel darken his threshold.

"Finkler," pleaded Smoke Engel, "I need the money! Can you let me have that little bill of ten dollars you owe me?"

"I should say not!" replied Finkler. "You should pay me money, young man, I shouldn't sue you in the court. Them was the awfulest stinkers I ever bought in my life. Forget it!"

"You won't give me the ten dollars?"

"Ten doughnuts I wouldn't give you! Forget it!"

"Very well," sighed the cigar salesman. "If those smokes weren't all right you don't need to pay me another cent. I won't break friends with you for a little thing like that."

"That's the way to talk, like a man,"

asserted the pleased proprietor. "Have a cigar?"

Smoke Engel accepted the gift, lit it, and drew on it thoughtfully.

"I was offered two thousand of these at my own price this morning," he said chattily. "I wished I could have bought them, too."

"How much?" queried Finkler. "That's a Gracia you're smoking."

"I didn't make a bid as the deal wasn't honest."

"*Bitte?*" said Finkler, turning his good ear.

"I said honest," repeated Smoke Engel aggrievedly. "You never caught me in anything else, did you?"

"No-o," drawled Finkler carefully, "I never caughted you. I give you that."

"You remember Louie Cohen?" asked Smoke Engel, passing the innuendo. "The fellow who went busted last year over on Madison Avenue? You remember him. I met him this morning, and he told me he had a fine lot of cigars to sell. He said he had them in the Gibraltar Warehouse, and that they were going to be sold to-day for storage. He wanted me to go over and bid them in. Gracias they are—two thousand."

"The crook!" cried Finkler indignantly. "He held them out on the creditors!"

"In a trunk in the Gibraltar they are, marked—2432—and in perfect condition, Cohen said, or he wouldn't want a cent. He can't protect them—he's down and out—tried to lobbygow me for coffee-money."

"So Cohen's around again," muttered Finkler. "I heard he'd gone off out West. Them cigars are worth a hundred and forty dollars, they are."

"More," said Smoke Engel. "Tobacco's going out of sight these days. What's the use, though? There's nothing in that kind of funny business, is there?"

"I should say not!" agreed Finkler heartily. "I wouldn't touch them cigars with a pole, I wouldn't. They belong to Cohen's creditors,

them cigars do.”

“That’s the talk. Well, so-long, Finkler!”

“So-long, so-long,” replied Finkler abstractedly.

After the salesman had left him the cigar dealer moved about restlessly, like a man who had been slightly poisoned. Then he took some money from his till, put on his hat, and started toward that imposing structure, the Gibraltar Warehouse.

Smoke Engel returned directly to Sapevitz.

“Sapevitz,” he said accusingly, “you told me you were short, didn’t you? Hyman Finkler just told me that he bought two thousand cigars from you to-day!”

“He’s a liar!” said Sapevitz.

“He said he bought two thousand Gracia cigars, part of Louie Cohen’s stock, who went busted. He must have bought them off you, as you’re the receiver and Louie Cohen is out West. He asked me to go out and sell them on the quiet.”

“Finkler said that?”

“Yes. And he said he’d have the goods in his place in an hour, and I could look them over. He’s a liar; eh? All right, I’ll save my time; but don’t tell him I mentioned it, as he don’t want it known he’s handling bankrupt goods.”

“That’s a lot of hot air,” said Sapevitz. “Nobody could sell him those cigars but me, and I didn’t. That Finkler wants you should work for him, and so he tells you this ghost story about the cigars being Cohen’s.”

The clock before the corner jeweler’s marked three when Finkler returned to his place of business. He descended from an express wagon, and assisted the driver to carry a trunk into the store. This trunk was without marks except for the numerals —2432—scrawled on its side with white chalk.

He was bending over the trunk in his back room when he heard approaching footsteps. Smoke Engel stood in the doorway watching him.

Finkler sat down quickly on the trunk.

“Hello, Finkler!” cried Smoke Engel cordially. “I come back to ask if you wouldn’t change your mind about that ten dollars you owe me. Honest, I need it.”

Finkler rose and passed into the store, pushing Smoke Engel before him. With set face he marched upon his till. “I wouldn’t see you go broke for ten dollars,” he asserted. “What is it a ten-spot between friends?”

Smoke Engel folded away the bill and lounged to the show-case. “Thanks,” he said. “Have a cigar on me.”

He went to the window and glanced up the street. Sapevitz, the receiver, was coming toward the store. Smoke Engel lit his cigar on his way into the back room. He did not wish to meet Mr. Sapevitz.

“Hello, Sapevitz!” said Finkler to his fellow merchant.

Sapevitz returned the greeting sweetly and leaned over the counter. “How goes it by you, Finkler?” he inquired. “That’s good news. How is the mamma—and the papa? *Ganz gut*? And your boy, Pincus, he is working?”

He teetered benevolently while Finkler acknowledged these felicitations.

Then he reached forward and shook his heavy fist under Finkler’s astonished nose. “Hey! What is this funny business about cigars you bought them which they belonged to Louie Cohen?”

“A trunk I bought at the Gibraltar auction,” stammered the dismayed Finkler. “Unopened it was. Should I know what was in it?”

“Ah, so!” The receiver’s rage passed and he smiled knowingly. He drew out a nail-file and carefully he manicured his fingers. Finkler moved his stock about behind his counter, keeping his back turned to Sapevitz and watching his reflection in the glass doors of a cupboard.

“I guess it’s better you give me that trunk, and no more said, Finkler,” said the receiver at

last. "It's my duty as receiver to seize them cigars which I got information is in that trunk."

To Smoke Engel in the rear room entered Finkler, very pale of face.

"It's Sapevitz, the receiver," he whispered. "He wants I should give up the trunk!"

"Well?"

"Mine money!" hissed Finkler angrily.

"Finkler," said Smoke Engel, "I thought you were a real, wise guy. Don't you know what a receiver is? He's a officer of the court—like a revenue. And what does a revenue mean when he comes into your store and says it's his duty to seize your goods?"

"He means he wants a piece of change," translated Finkler readily.

"Well?" repeated Smoke Engel.

Finkler compressed his lips, groaned, and returned into the outer store. Through a cracked panel Smoke Engel beheld the rapid transit of a twenty-dollar bill from the cash-register to the palm of Sapevitz the receiver.

"Good day, Sapevitz!" cried Finkler radiantly. "Don't be such a stranger no more! My wife asked me I should bring you up to the house for dinner some night. You'll come, isn't it so? Good-by!"

"Poison I'll give him, the loafer!" he rasped and took a hammer and chisel from a drawer.

"What are you up to now?" asked Smoke Engel, halting him.

"I'm going to have a look at them cigars!"

"What a bonehead," sighed Smoke Engel. "Do you want to get pinched for handling stolen goods? Sell the trunk just like you got it, unopened, and as is!"

"Who'd buy it?" objected Finkler disconsolately. "Everybody ain't such a *verdumnte* fool like me. Believe me, I wished I never seen that trunk! What did you have to come around here talking about it for?"

"Did I tell you to buy it?" protested Smoke Engel. "Finkler, you give me an awful pain. It's my fault, is it? All right, do you want to sell it?"

"Forty dollars and it's yours," said the disheartened cigar merchant. "That's what it costed me so far."

"Thirty," corrected Smoke Engel. "Ten at the sale and twenty to Sapevitz. The other ten you owed me, you know."

"Give me the thirty," snarled Finkler.

"You're on," agreed Smoke Engel. "You hold it here till I telephone for the buyer. I know a fellow wants that trunk in the worst way."

"There's a telephone."

"For a fellow who tries to work flimflam games, Finkler, you're a marvel," said Smoke Engel. "You want me to call up from your store in a matter like this?"

He shrugged his shoulders and walked out. Finkler saw him pass into a neighboring drug-store.

He came back in a few minutes. "I got a buyer already," he announced cheerfully. "Give me a hand with the trunk into the store so's the buyer can carry it out!"

Together they raised the trunk and deposited it before the counter. Smoke Engel returned into the rear room, relit his eternal cigar, and disposed himself to play solitaire with the greasy pack of cards on a table.

"Who's your buyer?" asked Finkler from the doorway.

"Sapevitz his name is," mumbled Smoke Engel, shuffling the limp paste-boards. "He'll be here in a minute. Just collect his money for me, like a good fellow, and give him the trunk. The price is eighty dollars."

"Sapevitz!" exclaimed Finkler with astonishment. "Young man, if you can sting that loafer for eighty dollars you got my best wishes."

But the next visitor to the emporium of Hyman Finkler was none other than the same Sapevitz, receiver in bankruptcy.

"About that trunk, now," said Sapevitz, avoiding Finkler's eye. "I think it's better I take them cigars, after all. I thought it over, Finkler."

It's my duty, Finkler. So here's your twenty dollars, and that makes it all square between us. I'll just send around and get it, if you don't mind."

"You will—if I don't mind," said Finkler distinctly. "But under the present circumstances you won't. Maybe you think nobody didn't see you taking that money off me, hey?"

"Huh?" ejaculated Sapevitz.

"Young man," called Finkler, "could you did me the favor to step in here?"

With a sigh of *ennui* Smoke Engel abandoned his absorbing game and came out into the store. He leaned against the door-jamb and stared reprovingly at the abased receiver.

"Good afternoon, receiver," said Smoke Engel. "Could you let me have that ten you owe me now?"

Sapevitz coughed, stuttered, and then handed Smoke Engel ten dollars.

He looked at the trunk and licked his dry lips.

"How much?"

"Eighty dollars!" and Finkler closed his eyes in sensuous delight.

"Eighty dollars!" wailed the receiver. "Are you crazy in the head yet? Sooner I would go to jail!"

"That's the spirit, Sapevitz," declared Smoke Engel, and he frowned at Finkler. "What do you mean talking to a public officer like that? He'd sooner go to jail for taking a bribe than give you a red cent. Wait a minute and I'll go get a policeman."

"No, no—I was joking," protested Sapevitz hurriedly. "We're all good friends together, ain't it? I'll pay the eighty dollars and take the trunk."

He drew out a roll of bills, counted off eighty dollars, and extended the money toward Finkler. To his astonishment he saw Smoke Engel take the roll, pass a bill to Finkler, and pocket the remainder.

"Our arrangement," explained Smoke Engel.

"Don't worry, Sapevitz—there's your trunk."

"Young man," said the receiver fiercely, "this looks like funny business! You just sit down there till I look into it."

Smoke Engel seated himself compliantly and watched the proceedings with tranquil interest. Sapevitz took the hammer and chisel and broke the lock of the trunk. He threw back the lid.

He saw a neat array of cigar-boxes bearing the Gracia trade-mark. He pried a box open and inspected the neatly banded cigars within. The box had been closed with a film of paraffin, and the weeds were in excellent condition.

Sapevitz scratched his head. He had expected to discover some proof of perfidy within the trunk. "Finkler," he grumbled, "how comes it you bought this trunk?"

Finkler opened his mouth, swallowed, made a second attempt at speech, but finally shook his head.

"I could tell you," said Sapevitz acutely. "Comes to you this Smoke Engel; hey? And he tells you about these cigars Louie Cohen put into the warehouse! Am I right? Don't answer me!"

"He told me he met Louie Cohen this morning, and Cohen told him about the cigars," confessed Finkler.

"And to me he tells he met Who's-this, who told him Cohen was in Minneapolis," supplemented Sapevitz keenly. "And do you know who told me you had the trunk with the cigars? You guessed right the first time—that's who, that loafer sitting right there!"

"What a crook!" exclaimed Finkler, aghast.

"And last but not least," shouted Sapevitz, darkening to an apoplectic mauve, "I got called up just now by the referee in bankruptcy, and he tells me you got two thousand of Cohen's cigars, and I should go around and seize them at once! Now, who was it give that information to the referee?"

Their four eyes fixed on the imperturbable

Smoke Engel.

That young man shrugged his shoulders and yawned; the topic fatigued him. "What are you men kicking about, anyway?" he inquired. "Because you haven't robbed somebody? Forget it!"

"*Bandit!*" thundered Sapevitz. "Give it to me mine money!"

"You holler at me like that again, Sapevitz," said Smoke Engel resentfully, "and I'll just call in a policeman and tell him the whole story. Cut out those harsh words. There's a policeman passing now! Do you want him?"

"No, no, we can settle this matter without any policeman," urged Finkler. Smoke Engel burst into a laugh. "Look here. Sapevitz," he said genially, "I don't want your money. I want to do business with you again. Send those cigars around to my rooms and I'll pay you sixty dollars, and that will let you out clean."

"How can I—now that the referee is wise?"

"Forget it," chuckled Smoke Engel. "It

wasn't the referee called you up—it was me!"

"More funny business," growled Sapevitz with relief. "Them cigars, though, are worth more than sixty dollars."

"They're not worth thirty to anybody but me," Smoke Engel assured him. "Those are not real Gracia cigars. They're my own private imitation, and they cost me just a cent and a half apiece. Those are the goods I told you were going to be sold at the Gibraltar to-day for storage! You got them out for me like good fellows, and you also paid me up the money you owed me, so we're quits!"

He rose and stretched luxuriously. "Just one more word, men. When next we meet stay on the level with me, and don't try any funny business! That's how I make my living."

"Have a smoke on me!" cried Sapevitz happily.

He reached for the box, and then his hand recoiled. "Gracias? Never again! I'm off of that brand for life!"