

# Joe

RUSSELL MILLER

No one knows his last name, but that does not matter. He is one of those cosmopolitans, the type found all over the world, that are of no particular nationality. His most striking feature is his sparkling brown eyes, set in a face that has been tanned and hardened through years of sea-faring. Although he must be at least sixty-five, his jet black hair and vigorous energy give him the appearance of a man of fifty. He is invariably clad in blue denim pants, a black jacket, and an old tweed cap. He is a carpenter, plumber, painter, electrician, a gardener, and jack-of-all-trades.

For fifteen years Joe has earned his living by doing all sorts of odd jobs for the tenants of the homes in the Castor Highland vicinity of Philadelphia. He is a sort of glorified circuit rider, whose mission is to repair gadgets, paint furniture, repair leaky plumbing, and perform other incidental jobs. Ample warning of Joe's approach is usually given by the shouts of the neighborhood kids and the yelping of the dogs, as they congregate around him. He always has some pennies stowed away in his venerable tool-box, which he distributes to the smaller children.

The tool-box he carries contains a list of objects that defy the most vivid imagination. Houdini could not have stuffed more things into the confines of the small chest. The process of unpacking, preparatory to a repair job, resembles the prestidigitation of a magician. The box is always so full of odds and ends that to get what he is after, Joe has to remove everything. This, in itself, is no small undertaking. Items to be found

in the conglomeration are nails, screws, all kinds of tools, electric wire, light bulbs, paint, paint brushes, cord, putty, door knobs — but the list is endless. Joe always manages to have some shoe strings with him, too, just in case.

A trace of the sea is still evident in Joe's speech. Elaborate tatoos upon his hands and arms, and an amusing seaman's roll in his walk, are evidences of his days as a youth aboard sailing vessels. As a boy of fourteen he ran away from his father's upstate farm, to sail from Philadelphia to Hong Kong on the frigate "American Eagle." Until he was twenty-six years of age, he roamed the sea lanes of the world on vessels of all nationalities and home ports. Of these voyages he has many yarns to tell. It is not unusual to have him spend a whole day in a house, perhaps installing new washers on the faucets, at the same time telling some of his stories. While narrating one of his adventures, he has the habit of winking his eye at certain places, to emphasize a point. The yarns are always humorous, and told with such vivid gesticulations and seasoned with so many colloquial phrases and philosophies, that even the most reserved listener has to laugh.

One of his most amusing stories deals with an adventure he and four sailor comrades had in the hinterlands of Peru. His ship, the "Merlin," had come to Peru to take a cargo of lead aboard. The loading facilities of the dock were very poor, and as a result it took a week to load the cargo. The captain gave five of the sailors, including Joe, a shore leave of six days. It was decided that a trip into the mountains by burro would pro-

vide an excellent change from the vessel. Five burros were rented and the services of an old Peruvian, who understood a smattering of English, were acquired. After two days of constant traveling, they arrived in the interior sections of the mountains. It was decided that the next village would be the stopping-over point of the journey, before they turned back towards the sea. The entrance of five men from the outside world, all wearing white uniforms, was a matter of great interest to the natives. Since the natives of the region used any and every excuse to stage a feast, it was only natural that the chiefs declared a village holiday in honor of the guests.

The five sailors sat at the great central bonfire, with the chief and the other important dignitaries. Great piles of fruit, vegetables, and nuts were heaped in front of them. After eating what they wanted of this assortment, the guests were given to understand that the main course was to come. Amid great ceremony, huge chunks of sizzling meat were brought forward on wooden platters. The procedure in eating the meat was simple: two men would both take hold of one of the chunks and tug until it was

reduced to smaller pieces, which were eaten with the fingers, with much smacking of the lips. Fresh meat was a delicacy to the sailors, who had been living on salt port and fish for almost a month; they stuffed themselves until it was an effort to breathe. The seamen asked what kind of animal the flesh came from. Not understanding the natives, they asked to see it. The chief stood up and beckoned the guests to follow him. They were led to a pit, covered by a grating of branches, and were motioned to look down. Because of the stygian darkness nothing could be seen, until one of the natives ignited a flaming branch and threw it into the pit. The light revealed three huge gila monsters, slithering around the bottom of the hole. When the sailors realized the import of this, they became five of the sickest men any Peruvian in that village had ever seen, and only because they had eaten of the local delicacy "El Negro Cabazo" (the black head).

With the completion of the tale and the accomplishment of his job, Joe would give a final wink and leave, to return again some day to tell another "bit of a tale."