

Everything Old Is New Again

Alfred Hitchcock and a Well-Traveled Book

Part 2

Kenneth Roberts and Alfred Hitchcock Team Up To Complete the Saga of a Rather Possessed Bottle Collector

By Bob Strickhart

You will remember that Kenneth Roberts, in his story “The Bottle Mine,” was in the midst of relating the travels of Whitney Leet, a premier bottle specialist, always in the pursuit of rare and unusual bottle specimens. Taking a break from the chase, Leet finds himself traveling in the Southwest and ultimately we find him in a saloon with one lone morose individual who may have a story to tell.

The suspense now over, we can once again cue-in Alfred Hitchcock. We hear again the music fade followed by Hitchcock saying, “Good Evening. Tonight brings us the thrilling conclusion of Whitney Leet’s tale pursuing the ever elusive antique bottle. Let us see how his efforts progress.”

In the course of time, Leet struck up a conversation with the morose individual by asking his opinion of the Mexican whiskey that he was absorbing. It was, the overalled man said, neither good nor bad; merely drinkable. Leet, though slightly repelled by his gloominess, invited him to dine with him, and the two of them wrestled with a beef steak that for thickness and toughness — like most of the beef steaks in the Great Southwestern cow country — rivaled a sheet of crepe rubber.

It developed, during the dinner, that the gloomy person’s name was Bill Swiggert and that he was a prospector. He had, he revealed, combed through the Huachuca Mountains and the Continental Divide in search of metals of a more or less precious nature until his interior had taken on the character of the country. He came out of the mountains after a prospecting trip, he said, like the Copper Queen of Bisbee — like a big blue hole in the ground; a copper lined hole. That was why, he explained, he always purchased a bottle of Mexican rye whiskey when he entered a Mexican bar for drinking purposes. Anything less would be as devoid of chemical action as spraying a cupful of beef tea into a copper boiler with a perfumery atomizer.

Leet ventured the statement that his road to California let him through the ancient mining section of Arizona; through, in particular, Tombstone. Tombstone, Leet opined, must be a strange and wonderful sight, deserted and redolent of vanished glories.

Bill Swiggert remarked that Leet would be surprised. Tombstone, he said, was just like any other place except that the old front of the Birdcage Theater was still standing. Outside of that,

there were just as many people hanging around doing nothing as there were anywhere else in Southern California or the Southwest. Everybody had a Chevrolet or a Buick or Ford, and the high school girls wore silk stockings and skirts just as short as anywhere else, and bobbed their hair, and gave passing tourists the eye without meaning anything, the way they do in Ohio and Iowa, and so on.

For real spooky sights, Swiggert said, you had to go back into the mountains and look at some of the real deserted camps through which he had traveled and in which he had frequently resided, alone except for his pack mule, for weeks at a time — such camps, for example, as Canned Tomato, Full of Hell, Soak Hollow, Sinful and Parboil. In some of these camps, declared Swiggert, they must have devoted themselves almost exclusively to drinking, if such remaining signs of human habitation as whiskey bottles could be trusted.

At this point Leet excused himself and went to his automobile. From one of the side pockets he took his amethyst Corn For The World flask, wrapped carefully in sheets of cotton batting, and returned with it to Swiggert.

Had Swiggert, asked Leet, unwrapping the bottle as though it were a star sapphire, ever seen anything like that in his wandering among the deserted mining camps?

Swiggert examined the flask with some care, helped himself to another drink of Mexican rye whiskey, and asked Leet what sort of bottle it was. Leet explained that it was one of the early type of American bottles which had been made in great numbers around the time of the Mexican War and the Civil War, as well as earlier in the century. Through breakage, however, they had become scarcer and scarcer, he said, so that good flasks had become somewhat valuable.

Swiggert essayed the opinion that if they were valuable, he supposed a bottle like Leets would be worth as much as two or three dollars. Leet, somewhat distressed at having one of his finest flasks undervalued in this way, laughed unpleasantly and said that if Swiggert could buy one for \$100, he might consider himself lucky.

The flask seemed to hold a strong fascination for Swiggert. He studied it from every side. He wished to know whether a bottle had to have that color in order to be valuable. He asked, "A blue bottle or a green bottle, for example, would these colours be valuable?" Leet told him that a blue bottle was nearly as valuable as an amethyst bottle, but that a green bottle or a brown bottle was not 1/5 as valuable as the other colours. A golden yellow colour, however, was moderately valuable; and an aquamarine; or colourless, bottle was worth more than a green or a brown one.

Swiggert then wanted to know about the design on the bottle. Leet's, for example, had a likeness of an ear of corn in the glass, and the words "Corn For The World." For a bottle to be valuable, he wanted to know, did it have to have this design.

It was around this time that Leet awakened to the possibilities in the situation. He knew from long experience that to the

average human being a bottle is only a bottle, just as furniture is merely furniture to the person who has never been educated in antiques. The person who knows nothing about antiques can enter a room furnished with the finest Chippendale Hepplewhite and Sheraton and see no distinguishing marks about any of the pieces.

In the same way, the person whose attention has never before been directed to bottles is unable to distinguish any design that may be blown in the glass, or the colour of the bottle. Frequently he is even blind to its shape, unbelievable as this may seem to the average bottle collector. Consequently, Leet realized that Swiggert had somewhere encountered other whiskey flasks, and that he wished to keep his discovery to himself until he knew all about the bottles.

Leet therefore dissembled busily. He dropped his Corn For The World flask into his pocket and said indifferently that for a bottle to be valuable it should have an ear of corn blown in its side. There were, he added with a seeming lack of interest, one or two other designs that gave a bottle a certain value, provided its color was right. At the moment, he added, he had forgotten what these other designs were.

Swiggert then confirmed Leet's suspicions by asking whether a bottle was any good if it had a train of cars on one side. Leet asked with no visible emotion whether the bottle to which he referred was a green bottle or a brown bottle. Swiggert replied that it was a blue bottle. Leet at once displayed the cruelty and relentlessness that had been developed in him by bottle collecting by replying that if this blue bottle merely had a train of cars on it, it was worth two dollars, but that if it had the words "Success To The Railroads" on it, as well, it was only worth \$.75 for one bottle or five dollars for a dozen.

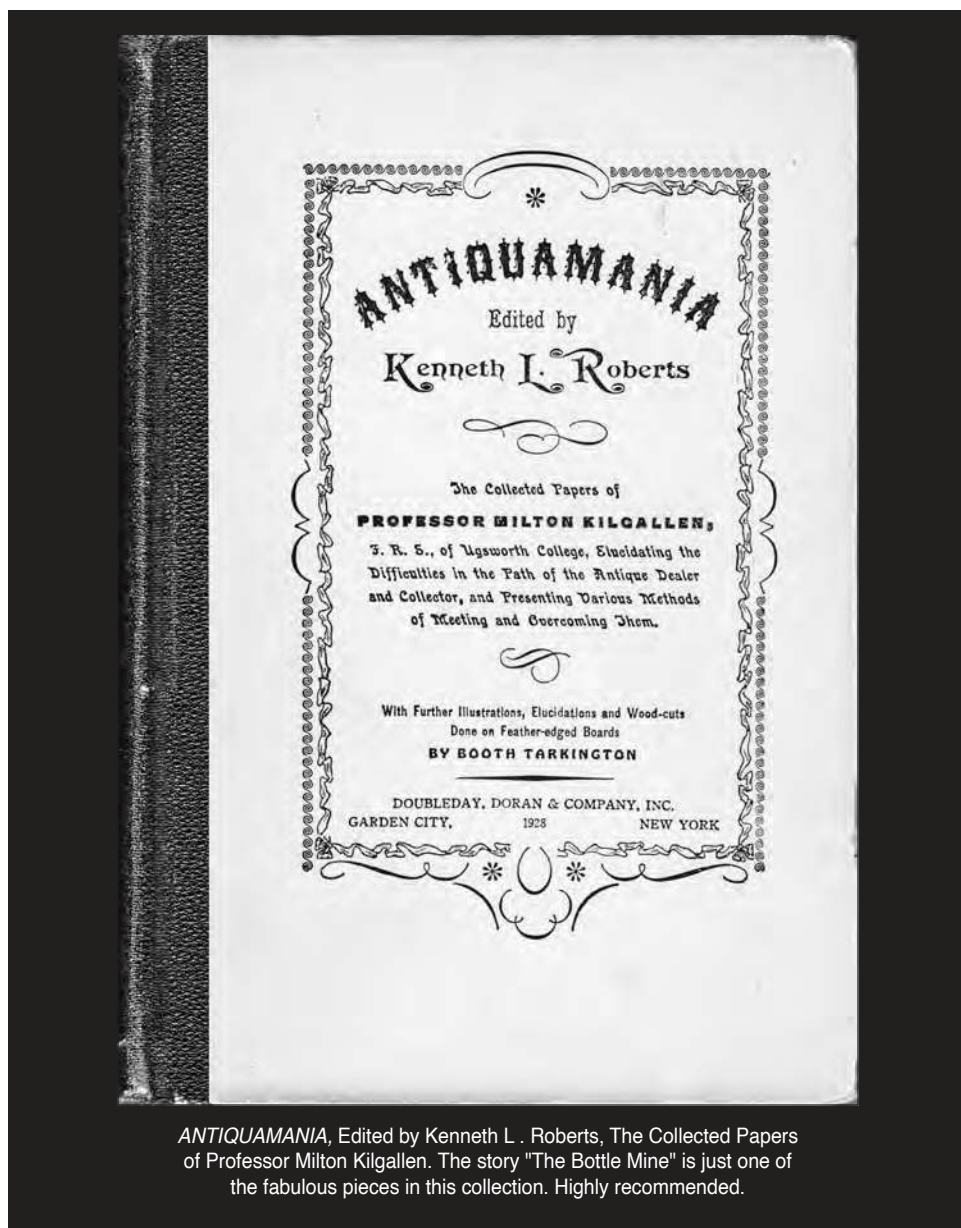
After some meditation, Swiggert wished to know whether a large, potbellied bottle

with a picture of Jenny Lind on it was any good. Leet, who had bought at least forty Jenny Lind bottles at high prices, shook his head regretfully and said that the shape of these bottles prevented them from having any value. For such a bottle in good shape, with a picture of the glassworks and a single star opposite the likeness of Jenny Lind, he admitted that he was willing to pay \$.50, provided the color of the bottles was either blue or lavender. For any other colour, he wouldn't pay anything at all, though as a special favour he would be willing to carry away these bottles without charge, provided blue or lavender Corn For The World bottles could be found for him.

Having thus prepared the ground, he told Swiggert that he could see that somewhere, in the surrounding country, there existed bottles that Swiggert had seen. Unless these bottles could be viewed by a bottle expert like himself, they could not be valued, either singly or in the mass. Descriptions by mail or word of mouth, for hearsay evidence, where flasks were concerned, were valueless. If, therefore, Swiggert wished to lead him to the bottles, he would be glad to estimate their value and even to purchase the rights to them at a fair price. If Swiggert did not wish to do this, the bottles would be valueless to him as they were at the present moment.

At these words Swiggert drained the dregs from his bottle of Mexican rye and hurled it to the floor with a morose curse. He would, he said, be at the front door of the hotel at six o'clock on the following morning, and would lead Leet to the biggest damned mess of bottles that he had ever seen.

Promptly at six o'clock on the following morning Leet was sitting at the wheel of his roadster in front of the hotel in Douglas. Five minutes later, with Swiggert sitting gloomily beside him, they were speeding over the long straight road toward the Continental Divide. They twisted through the tortuous mountain



roads leading up to Bisbee, past the mountains that man had removed from the beds of copper and hurled into valleys, and through the rugged and barren canyons of the Divide.

Beyond the Divide they turned toward the jagged peaks of the Huachucas Mountains, and in the course of time, high up among the hills, they came to the gray frame cabins and the deserted false-fronted saloons and gambling halls of the forgotten mining camp of Soak Hollow. Gophers, erect on their tails, watched their progress through the dead town with inquisitive noses held high, and

angry marmots hurled themselves beneath the decaying cabins with shrill and outraged whistles.

Swiggert gloomily directed Leet to a small cabin at the far end of Soak Hollow's single street, beyond the warped board front of the Grand Opera House, beyond the Freedom Dance Hall, beyond even the Feed Bag Café, The Hot Breath Saloon and the Full Up Drink Parlour.

The small cabin straddled a depression in the hillside. When Leet, preceded by Swiggert, poked his head between the doorposts from which the door hung

crazily askew, he saw that there was barely room within for a single wooden bunk, a chair made from a nail keg, and a few bricks on which a small stove had once rested.

Beneath the bunk was a small square hole. Swiggert pointed solemnly to the hole and observed without emotion that the cabin must have once belonged to the town drunkard.

Leet advanced to the hole and peered into it. The owner of the cabin, apparently, had reclined dreamily in his bunk and finished bottle after bottle of early American liquor, and as he had done so he had dropped early American bottle after early American bottle into the small square hole immediately beneath his numb and careless hand.

Leet could see an aquamarine Pikes Peak bottle reposing on the top of the heap. Several glints of amethyst caught his eye. Deep in the center of the heap he caught a flash of blue on an unidentified flask.

Swiggert left the cabin and climbed into the depression which the cabin straddled. He reached into the pile of bottles, drew an amber sunburst flask, and held it up to Leet. "What," asked Swiggert, "is this bottle worth?"

"That bottle is worthless," replied Leet, who had paid through the nose for an amber sunburst flask only three weeks before.

With a low curse, Swiggert flipped the bottle away from him, using an underhand toss which carried it far down the gulch and against a large, protuberant rock where it disintegrated with a musical tinkle.

Swiggert pawed over the pile of bottles once more and drew out an amethyst eagle and Washington flask with the motto "Remember The Cherry Tree."

"My God!" said Leet, who had heard of the existence of this flask but had consid-

ered it a rumor on a par with other old wives tales.

"How's that?" asked Swiggert avariciously.

"My God," replied Leet, "because I thought you were going to take me to some really valuable bottles. Instead of that you show me flasks like that one!"

"Ain't it a valuable one?" asked Swiggert ferociously. "It's the same colour as yourn!"

"True," admittedly Leet, "but the eagle on it spoils it. 'If it weren't for the eagle, I would be willing to pay \$10 for it."

Again emitting a foul oath, Swiggert dashed the flask into the gulch before Leet could stop him. and a shower of amethyst glass splintered from the rock against which it landed. Leet, turning the colour of oak ashes, beckoned Swiggert to re-enter the cabin.

"Look here, Swiggert," said Leet, when this gloomy guide again stood beside him. "I don't believe I could do much with these bottles, but I'm willing to gamble on them. If you'll give me all the rights to them, and promise to keep your mouth shut about them, I'll give you two hundred dollars for the lot."

"Two hundred dollars ain't enough!" declared Swigger malevolently. "I've been around in my time, and I know a thing or two. Oh, I seen your face turn pale when I busted that last bottle. Them bottles are with a thousand dollars if they're with a cent!"

"All right, Swiggert," said Leet desperately, "I'll give you a thousand dollars for them."

"You bet you will," said Swiggert offensively, "and you'll take me East with you while you sell 'em, and you'll give me twenty-five percent of all the money over a thousand dollars that you make when you sell 'em."

"My heavens, Swiggert! I can't do that!" protested Leet. "If I sold those bottles all at one time, I'd break the bottle market all

to pieces. Why, if I sold those all at once, you'd be able to buy amethyst flasks for ten dollars!"

"Oh, is that so!" said Swiggert with a malevolent laugh. "I guess those bottles ain't so wuthless after all. That being the case, I ain't a-going to sell 'em. No, sir! I'm a-going to take 'em East myself and sell 'em!"

At these words Leet became very cold and calm. "Are those your final words, Swiggert?" he asked deliberately.

"I'll say so!" ejaculated Swiggert coarsely.

In the twinkling of an eye, said Leet, all of the long, happy antiquing expeditions swept across his brain. Should he, he asked himself, permit all the past pleasures to be set at naught by this ignorant man? Should he permit the pride of bottle collectors all over America to be dashed into the dust through the headstrong act of an unschooled and reckless prospector? He thought of his eighteen Pitkin flasks. He thought of his amethyst Dr. Dyott and cross-eyed bartender amethyst flask. He thought of Joe Hergesheimer's twenty four best bottles in America. All the bottle lore of a lifetime flashed thorough his mind.

Without another word, Leet reached into the side pocket of his well-worn tweed jacket, drew out an automatic pistol and shot Swiggert through the heart. With a deft movement he caught the body as it fell and guided it so that it fell through the hole in the floor and slipped, with a musical tinkle of breaking glass, to the bottom of the pile of bottles.

A moment later he was kneeling beside the body. Having assured himself that life was extinct, he hastily selected a few of the finer flasks from the pile — five amethysts, six blues, two golds, and a jade green. Then, with artful hands, he concealed the body beneath the bottles, and fifteen minutes later he was on his way to California with his newly acquired bottles safely tucked

into the trunk of his automobile, and with a song of thanksgiving in his heart.

Lett felt, he said, that he must tell somebody about the whole affair and so he told me. What, he asked should he do about it?

I thought of my dark blue Pike's Peak or Bust bottle. I thought of my amethyst A Little More Grape Captain Bragg. I thought of my twelve dollar jade green Pitkin flask. I thought of my aquamarine Jenny Lind with star and glassworks. How, in view of all these, could I give him an unbiassed opinion?

Finally, with a deep sigh, I advised him to forget the whole affair. And, so far as I know, he has done so.

Fade in Alfred Hitchcock one last time for this evening's episode. I can imagine him saying something like, "It is a fortunate thing that the need to collect things isn't something you can bottle. Until next time, good night."

