

# *Sketch*

---

*Volume 15, Number 3*

1949

*Article 9*

---

## A Good American

Martin Hoffman\*

\*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1949 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).  
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

# A Good American

Martin Hoffman

## **Abstract**

The neon sign fizzled in the rain, sounding like an overdose of Bromo-seltzer when you are drunk...

# A Good American

THE NEON sign fizzled in the rain, sounding like an overdose of Bromo-seltzer when you are drunk. "Hamburgers," said the sign, and underneath it, just to make sure people knew that we serve hamburgers, Bud put up a sign, "Hamburgers, 15 cents."

The February rain gave no hint of letting up, a bus swished past the deep puddles on the avenue. . . I felt like having a cup of hot coffee. I poured two cups and took the other one back to Bud in the kitchen.

"Front's empty," I said.

"Yeh, it's the rain, relax." Bud was cutting up buns and squeezing meat into tiny little hamburger patties.

"Going to lose money." I felt like heckling the rebel. But he was a good Joe, came from Alabama, had a picturesque drawl and promised me a nickel wage-hike if I made good. He scowled, and I looked out at the rain and drank my coffee.

The door to my right opened with a jerk. A big figure in a blue overcoat came in. He looked up, and then a smile covered his chocolate-colored face.

"Hi there, Geof. You a working man?"

"Yep, Don, got to eat." I had known Don for quite a while. His desk was next to mine in engineering drawing. Don took off his coat and sat by the counter.

"What'll you have?" I took out a green guest-check.

"Coffee and a hamburger."

"O. K." I walked over to the little kitchen window and shouted, "One."

"One to go," came the answer.

"No, just 'ONE'," I shouted, thinking that Bud had not heard well.

Bud came closer to the window, looked hard at me and said, "We don't feed niggers in here. He's taking it out."

I said nothing. There was no suitable reply. If he wrapped it up, I'd unwrap it and put it on the counter for Don. Damn Bud. I found a cup without left-over lip-stick on it and poured coffee.

"Cream?"

"Please."

Don took a drink. I wondered whether he had heard Bud. I hoped not. Then Don looked up and asked, "Do you have a rest-room here, Geof?"

"Why, sure. Through the kitchen and then turn to your left." I washed a couple of plates. If I were a bacterium I'd like to bathe in lukewarm water. Bacteria have it good, I thought, better than lots of folks. . . especially people like Don. . . Better put a bit more soap into the sink.

I heard Bud's voice from the kitchen. It was loud and irritated. "Employees only. . ." Wasn't he going to let Don use the rest-room? Why, the damned rebel. "Health department rules. . ."

I realized suddenly. "In Alabama," Bud had said one day, "the niggers are all right; they know their place. But these Northern sons-of-bitches don't know where they belong."

Don came through the doorway. He looked at me. The creases in his face, when he smiled, were replaced with deep wrinkles. "Apparently," he frowned, "you don't have a rest-room for. . ." and then he stopped short and shook his head. . . "customers."

I looked down at the floor. The floor looked very dirty. I felt like being sick into the soilax-green rinse water in the sink. "Yeh." That's all I said.

"About that hamburger. . ." Don's voice wasn't cross or irritated. . . "better put it into a paper bag when it's ready. I . . . I . . . want to take it out."

I nodded. I looked everywhere but at Don. I looked through the little window to the kitchen. Bud said, "Come 'ere!"

"You no-good God-damned Englishman." His eyes said more than his words. He need not have spoken at all. Then, as if he had not made his position quite clear, he asked, "You a nigger-lover?"

I didn't say a word. I looked him straight in the face and went back to cut pie. I had to do some thing to keep me from thinking. . . to keep me busy. The pie was near Don. I miscut three pieces, then I stopped.

"I . . . I . . . He's from the South." I was going to say that I was sorry, but it was easier to talk about Bud, to project the blame.

"That's O.K., Geof. It happens every day." Don smiled again, and his smile was disarming, sincere.

"One to GO!" Bud slammed a bag on the window-ledge. I took it over to the cash register, where Don was waiting and said, "twenty-one."

Don handed me a quarter. "How long are you going to work here?"

"If he doesn't fire me, I'll work till after Easter. Got to help pay spring quarter's tuition."

Don looked at me hard. He would have liked to see me quit. I would have liked to quit.

"Need the money, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah." I handed him four pennies. "Don't get too wet."

"The door slammed. Then Bud was standing beside me, his hands deep in his pockets. He scowled and shook his head. I saw a little bead of sweat on his forehead. I clenched my fists. I should have insisted that Don eat his hamburger in here. It was easy saying that now, now that Don had gone.

If Bud was going to say something I wish he'd get it said. He just looked at me. Then he started speaking slowly. Thank God he had his temper under control.

"Geof," he drawled, "have you ever tried to get half a jar of mustard off of a hamburger? That nigger-bastard won't ever come back in here." He laughed and slapped his knees. Then he got serious. "In Birmingham, they lynch people like you—nigger lovers. But you're O.K., Limey, you'll learn. You'll be a good American yet."

Martin Hoffman Fo., Jr.

