

# THE GODS OF SERVICE

By JOHN BARTON OXFORD

THE routine work for the day was over. The big ladder truck, its gleaming brass and nickel without spot or blemish, had been passed upon favorably by Lieutenant Ganley, who had just shuffled upstairs to his quarters, with an eye to a cigar and a quiet hour or two with certain paper covered novels in the drawer of his desk.

Whalen, whose trick it was at the desk beneath the jigger, sat idly drawing complicated geometrical designs on the blotter before him and listening to the munching and stamping of the three big grays in their stalls at the rear of the truck.

Upstairs in the lounging room, the click of the balls on the pool table announced that Hall and Bogan were at their eternal game of one-ball; and the monotonous chant of "fifteen-two, fifteen-four," with its varied call of the rest of the count in runs or flushes, told that Dan Slattery was whiling away the time at cribbage with the probationer, who had been recently assigned to 73's quota.

Presently, the game palling upon them, Slattery and the probationer pushed back their chairs from the little card table, and lighted their pipes. Slattery's eyes abstractedly followed the course of the yellow ball, spinning from cushion to cushion on the pool table, as Bogan missed a difficult shot for the side pocket by a hair's breadth.

"Yep," said Slattery, continuing one of his not infrequent dissertations, which were always forthcoming whenever there happened to be a green probationer on the crew who would listen to him, "it's you fellers with the learnin' that gets the show now. Learnin'—that's what counts, here as well as anywhere else. You can have all the experience in the world, but it don't go for nothin' when you go up for a commission, if you ain't got the learnin' to back it up.

"Us old rooster" that never had much schoolin', is clean bummed, when he goes up against their examinations. Look at me. I might 'a' been a battalion chief by this time or a captain at the very least, if I could 'a' got by them exams; but schoolin' wa'n't my long suit. I never got but precious little of it in my time, and this talk about pickin' up an education by yourself is all right for some, no doubt, but it don't work with others. Me, for instance. I don't know how to go about it, and I'm thick-headed, too, more'n likely. And so when my chances come, and I've had 'em, lots of 'em, I got turned down because my examination papers showed altogether too plain what was in my head, or rather what wasn't there.

"It's different gettin' on now than it was in my day, you see. You fellers have to show you've got some learnin' and are capable of more before you get on in the first place. That starts you right. Then, when you gets your chance, you can take your examinations and cop your commission. There won't many of you begin as a ladderman, stick to it for twenty-eight years and end a ladderman, as I have. You'll have a commission long before that. Them examinations won't buffalo you, like they done me. Learnin's a great thing; yep, the whole thing. The rest of it is easy enough. Most any man can obey orders and do what's expected of him. It don't take no brains to do that. But learnin's different."

He tamped the tobacco in his pipe with a thoughtful forefinger. Hall missed an easy cross-side shot, tapped the floor irritably with the butt of his cue, and swore under his breath.

"Now I've got a boy," Slattery droned on. "Fine, straight, well-built, nerry young devil. Been a ladderman on 68 for over a year now, he has. Some day his chance is comin', like my chances come 'o me; he'll get recommended in general orders and go up for a commission. And he ain't goin' to get turned down and stay jest a ladderman, like his old man done. No, siree, he ain't. He's been to high school, and them examinations won't buffalo him, not a mite they won't.

"He'll get his commission in time. He's bound to, jest like you are, if you stick it out and take your chances when they're offered. He can follow orders jest as well as I can, and unlimber ladders and swing a maul and go up on the scalers. But besides all that, you see, he's got the larnin'."

Slattery indulged in a prophetic chuckle, wholly without malice.

"Some day, no doubt, he'll be givin' me orders; yep, givin' his old man orders; and I'll have to jump to 'em, too. He'll go up the line, and I'll be jest a plain dub of a ladderman, jest where I was when I begun. That's what learnin' does for you, sonny. Better stick to it. You can't have too much of it.

"Yep, I want to see Marty get his commission. Ought to be one in the family, seems to me, and it's up to him to get it. I had my chances, but them examinations had me buffalooed for fair. But it's



"Quick! Up with ye!" he ordered. "If ye welch, I'll throw ye down into the street"

goin' to be different with him. He's got the things the old man ain't. See?"

He picked up the deck of cards before him and began to riffle them musingly. The probationer was looking at him keenly, noting the fine, grizzled head, the broad shoulders, the big muscles of the fore-arms. Somehow the probationer was aware of a disquieting sense of pity for the older man, but being utterly unable to voice it diplomatically, he was very wisely silent.

Bogan ended the game at the pool table with a lucky shot that brought forth a torrent of sardonic comment from Hall. They put their cues in the rack and left the room, Hall still complaining stridently about his opponent's luck. The probationer, too, arose and slipped out. Slattery sat there alone, riffling the cards, and absorbed in his own introspections.

SLATTERY was still sitting alone in the deserted lounging room when the jigger below stairs began its staccato tapping. Mechanically he counted the number. He heard Whalen's feet come down from the desk top as he reached for the pen to register the box number on the tally sheet. Slattery was knocking the dead ashes from his pipe when the second alarm came in. He heard the stall doors swing open and the thunder of hoofs on the floor as the three big grays jumped to their places at the truck, for, in event of a third alarm, 73 would answer. There was a click of metal as Whalen snapped the collars about the horses' necks.

"Yes, sir, two-fifty-nine," Whalen was verifying Lieutenant Ganley's inquiry from the head of the stairs. And then the third alarm came in.

Instantly the truck house was all life and bustle.

Men went down the stairs, three at a time; men shot down the sliding-pole; Murphy, the driver, pulled open the trap-door, set in the floor of the lounging room just above

the driver's seat on the truck, slipped nimbly through the opening, fastened the safety-belt about him and gathered up the reins. He did it all with a speed and a precision of movement that wasted not a second. One glance over his shoulder to assure himself that Ganley was at the tiller, and the horses sprang forward, the ungainly truck rolled out into the afternoon sunshine, swung onto the car tracks and went plunging down town, with galloping horses and clanging bell.

On the side-step the crew were already nonchalantly donning rubber coats and helmets as the truck swayed and rolled with its gathering speed.

Whalen, standing next to Slattery, volunteered the information: "Greenwood apartments on Rindge avenue again. Guess they're going some this time."

Slattery merely nodded. He drew from his hip pocket a thick plug of tobacco, bit off a generous mouthful and silently offered it to Whalen, who followed suit in every respect, even to the size of the mouthful.

Murphy swung the plunging team into a side street, and so deftly did Lieutenant Ganley handle the tiller that the truck rounded the corner as easily as if it had been going at half its speed. They swung into Rindge avenue beyond, and Slattery, looking ahead, saw the great column of smoke drifting upward from the blazing apartment house.

With a critical eye he looked it over, and slowly shook his head.

"They've got all that's comin' to 'em this time," he observed to Whalen.

"No. 73" came to a stop at the curb just across the avenue from the blazing building, and even before it halted, Captain Shea had leaped from the side-step and was numbering across the pavements to report his arrival to a battalion chief, whose white helmet was now and then visible through the choking clouds of smoke.

THE crew seized this opportunity to kick off their shoes and don high-hipped fire boots, packed in the rack on top of the nest of ladders.

In another moment Shea was puffing up. "Over there at the nor-west corner, just outside the water tower," he instructed Murphy. "Ganley, take six men and axes and help 'em bust down a partition by the elevator well just through the main entrance. You, Bogan and Hall and Whalen, jerk out the sixty-foot ladder and come with me. Slattery, clear the automatic hoist and stand by with Murphy to run up the big feller, so'st they can take up a line of hose to that next roof, when the chief gives the word!"

The big truck crossed to the opposite curb. Ganley and his quota of six men disappeared through the smoky entrance doorway. Out came the sixty-foot ladder, the three men bearing it trotting along in the wake of Shea, who led the way at a shambling run.

In a trice Slattery had the automatic hoist of the big ladder cleared. Then he looked up. From the seventh floor up, the building was a blazing furnace. Windows came outward with a sharp crack and the glass came tinkling to the pavement in showers. A score of engines buzzed like giant bees; hoarse orders were passed to and fro through megaphones. Just below him, 68's big ladder was already up, and 68's crew were battering in a tier of windows on the sixth floor.

Slattery's face softened as he saw his son's big shoulders heaving to the swing of a heavy maul.

Then all at once there sounded even above the din of the pumping engines a long drawn scream, and after it a deeper yell of terror. From the crowd, watching the fight from outside the fire ropes, came a hoarse shout of horror.

There, in a window on the tenth floor, just above 68's ladder, stood a woman, her arms waving wildly, while her screams rang out again and again; and in the window beside her, a window already lurid with the light of the flames beyond, appeared the blanched face of a man.

Someone bellowed an order. Up the ladder ran three men with scaling ladders. At the top they stopped. Slattery saw his son drop his maul, grasp the first scaling ladder, plant its hook firmly on the edge of the window above him, and scramble nimbly up its length.

With never a moment's hesitation, once he had gained that ledge, Martin Slattery unhooked the ladder at his feet, swung it upward as if its weight had been nothing at all, braced himself firmly on the ledge, and sent the long hook crashing through the next window above. Another man was following in his wake, and a third was merely waiting for the second to be out of his way before he, too, started,