

BIG FROGS IN THE POND

WORKING MEN

A Little Excursion
Among the Men
Who Do Big Things
With Their HANDS
Directed by Their
BRAINS



JAMES COLEMAN

By Will Scarlet

HERE is always a glamour about the story of the man at the top. It makes no difference whether he be a railroad president or a sea dog, a writer of amorous poetry or an ascetic, a builder of airships or a rider of brakebeams; if he is only the best in his class, the biggest frog in his pond, he wins interest and admiration. This article is going to deal with certain big frogs—with men strong of arm and deep of chest, brown of face and clear of eye; men who do not go to lben matinees, and who could not for the life of them tell you the date of the battle of Issus. Gladiators, those of the iron age—men who compel our admiration and win our interest because they are the men at the top.

It was to get a near view of those big frogs, those men at the top, that I boarded a car one afternoon last week and set out through the south of Market street dust for the Union iron works. The Potrero is a land of big frogs. The loungers at the street corners are headliners and even the guardfish of the law who parades up and down Kentucky street is manifestly the man at the top of his profession. He must tip the scales at 250 or thereabouts. When one gets into the Potrero—a veritable city in itself—he is prepared to meet nothing but big frogs.

My card, humbly presented at the door of the Union office, brought out a mild mannered and slightly flustered young man, who listened patiently while I told my mission, and then ushered me into the office of Vice President Tynan. "He'll fix you up, all right," was the young man's parting assurance.

Vice President Tynan is the sort of man who looks as though he could fix anybody up and in almost any way he would choose to do it. He, too, is a big frog in his particular pond. A massive, clear eyed, clean shaven man is Mr. Tynan, who, so far as I could judge, is always busy and always affable.

"Glad to see you," he assured me; "very glad, indeed. Working up a story, eh? Well, you can get splendid material right here. We can give you the facts that show the superiority of a private shipyard. We've got the Logan hand now—a big piece of work. I assure you. Then there is the Manchuria. We finished her in 68 days—with a six weeks' strike going on. How's that?"

I told him how it was, and took occasion to add that I was not particularly interested in the work of the yards, but, rather, in the workers. "I want to see some of your star performers," I concluded.

"Star performers, eh? Well, here's Mr. Foster, our secretary." He indicated a trim, clever looking gentleman, "side his rollopp. He is a star performer in his line."

"Nothing," he replied significantly. "There are a few changes and promotions, that's all."

"It has to be—here and elsewhere, if men want to get results."

In the pattern shop I met my first big frog. The big frog was totally oblivious to my presence. He was busily engaged in planing a bit of wood, and did not so much as look up until Mr. Frear had tapped him on the shoulder. Then the big frog said he was pleased to meet me, but he looked as though he had much rather be left alone with his work.

The big pattern maker Victor Erickson is the big frog name. His pond is the pattern shop and he has been the big frog there for years and years. He began working for the Union iron works 20 years ago and worked himself up notch by notch until he reached the top of his particular ladder.

Mr. Erickson has the modesty of a real hero. He blushed when he learned of my mission, and when I casually mentioned the photographer he pulled at his taxen forelock and blushed again. It was very hard to get him to talk about himself. He seemed to be convinced that he was only wasting my time in trying to make him assume the role of one.

But he spoke enthusiastically of his work. On that afternoon he was engaged in putting the finishing touches on the pattern of a hawse pipe, and was only too happy to enlighten me concerning the details. Mr. Erickson explained and Mr. Frear explained, and from the dual elucidation I speedily understood how it is that Mr. Erickson is a star performer.

The hawse pipe, he it known to the uninitiated, is the hole near the bow of the ship through which the anchor cable runs. The making of it is not an easy job. On the pattern machine depends in very large measure its ultimate success or failure. He gets, of course, certain dimensions and specifications from the draftsman, but he has to depend almost entirely on his own judgment.

"Here, you see," said Mr. Erickson, indicating a blueprint thickly scarred with baffling lines, "are the plans for this hawse pipe. But the plans don't tell us all, or anything near all. We have to do most of the work on our own hook. They can't give us any directions, you see, for this slope, and this curve here can't be planned out, either."

"So, in the long run it depends almost entirely on you?" I commented.

"Well," replied Mr. Erickson, as he took up his interrupted work, "that's what I'm here for."

And my last impression of the pattern shop was the picture of Victor Erickson, his big shoulders stooped and his intelligent blue eyes gleaming as he caressed the wooden pattern of a hawse pipe.

The molding department was for all the world like a hippodrome production of "Faust." The only sounds were the subdued roaring of the furnace flames and the occasional clang of metal on metal. Scores of men dived back and forth, their rugged forms silhouetted against the fiery background.

"Our star performers in this department," Mr. Frear explained, "are a lot of grimy, perhaps, but stars none the less."

A little to our left stood a wiry, athletic man wearing middle age. He was perched on a bed of black sand and was busy, tamper in hand, covering a wooden pattern recently brought over from the domain of Mr. Erickson. He seemed likely material.

"My name is Oscar Taylor," he said in response to my query. "and I'm a native son. How long have I been working with the Union? Why, it's so long since I started that I almost forget about it. I was a pretty small shaver, though, I know that much. Let me see, I began when the shop was at First and Mission streets."

"That's over 20 years ago," put in Mr. Frear.

"Yes," assented Mr. Taylor, pulling at his black mustache reminiscently, "it is certainly all of that."

"Does it seem that long to you?" I inquired, noting with admiration the well-developed sinews of his forearms and the clearness of his skin, visible even beneath the thin coating of black dust.

"Oh, it doesn't seem long at all," the molder assured me, adjusting his little black cap and peering across the shop beneath his overhanging eyebrows. "All I know is that I began at the bottom and worked up and up, and here I am."

There was a glow of pardonable pride in his eyes at this recital of his autobiography.

"This work, I'm doing now," continued Mr. Taylor, "is a condenser. The



JAMES STEWART

pattern comes from the pattern shop, and our business is to make a mold from it. We tamp in this sand all around it and then bake the sand. We do a lot more things, of course, but that's the process in a nutshell. Sometimes the mold comes out all right, and sometimes it comes out all wrong."

The molder came a step nearer and shook his finger impressively and correctly, but with those delicate foreign inflections of which foreigners they have to. On the other hand, if a man hasn't any brains, or if he doesn't use the brains he has, then there is bound to be a failure. No; I can't see that luck has anything to do with it."

As we left the machine shop I readily understood why James Coleman is the biggest frog in his pond. He has brains and he uses them. He had said nothing about brains, but his strength spoke for itself.

"Next," said Mr. Frear, after we had passed through the dim of the boiler shop, "I want you to meet our veteran ship carpenter. If you are looking for workmen who are experts in their trades, you can't afford to miss Captain Johnson. He's been with us for years and years."

"I notice that all your star performers I have met thus far have been with you for years and years. And they're not old men either."

"Well, there's where Captain Johnson has the advantage of the others. He is an old man. In fact, some people would say, if they didn't know the fellow as well I do, that his period of usefulness has expired. But that is not so. He keeps tinkering around, and if he weren't here every one would miss him."

"I used to be a Dane," said Captain Johnson. His somewhat heavy face set off by gray side whiskers recalls the countenance of Henrik Ibsen, but a second glance assures the visitor that there is nothing of the when-we-dread-awake spirit in this kindly old artisan. The swash of the waves and the sounds of the hammer have conspired with his ripe old age somewhat to dull his hearing; but his mind is acute, his humor agile and his eye sparkling.

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"I can't see where the luck comes in," he said deliberately, "and my opinion is that the work I do is very far from being a lottery. Everything

depends on ability. In the first place, a man has to have brains. In the second place, a man has to use his brains. Then things come out right; they have to. On the other hand, if a man hasn't any brains, or if he doesn't use the brains he has, then there is bound to be a failure. No; I can't see that luck has anything to do with it."

that Captain Johnson "used to be" a Dane. He speaks English fluently and correctly, but with those delicate foreign inflections of which foreigners they have to. On the other hand, if a man hasn't any brains, or if he doesn't use the brains he has, then there is bound to be a failure. No; I can't see that luck has anything to do with it."

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A VETERAN OF THE SHOPS.
"LEAVE OFF THE NAME,"
HE BEGGED.



SUPERINTENDENT OF CONSTRUCTION
FREAR



VICTOR ERIKSON

lantly. "I'd be as well as ever today if it weren't for the doctors. I know what was the matter, but they didn't. They say they would have to perform an operation. Well, they performed it, and here I am."

"Yes," I said, "here you are—and working."

"Working, yes; but not working like I used to work. Why, when I was a young man I used to laugh at a fellow that couldn't lift 250; and now—but, never mind. A man can't be young all the time, can he?"

"Oh, don't let that bother you," said the captain as we shook hands, and expressed the conventional regret that I had taken up so much of his time. "I'm much obliged to you, sir, that you have given the old captain such a nice, long rest."

And he lowered and raised his right eyelid in a most impressive wink.

From the delightfully garrulous old Captain Johnson it was quite a transition to the next expert—this time a ship fitter who, Mr. Frear assured me, is a wonder in his own particular line. My obliging guide stopped a clean-cut, athletic young fellow, who was crossing the yard with a piece of iron plating on his shoulder. Mr. Frear's explanation, which by this time had developed into a showman's spiel, but not to the extent of making him remove the piece of metal from his shoulder. He was manifestly busy and apparently couldn't see how a mere newspaperman could take up much of his time.

Terse Mister Stewart

"This," said the superintendent of construction, "is Stewart."

"How do you spell it?"

"S-t-u-a-r-t," declared the expert ship fitter.

"Yep," he answered, slightly impressed by my lucky guess.

"You've been working here at the Union a long time?"

"Sixteen years."

"Exactly?"

"About."

"Native son, I suppose?"

"Yep."

"Now, Mr. Stewart, I've been talking to several men in the shop. Some fine specimens for my shoe maker. I could cry eureka once again. And when I look out at you from shrewd but kindly eyes and shows by his every movement that it is a good thing to be alive—then you must take off your hat for you are in the possession of royalty,

every inch a king. He is well knit and sturdy and if not exactly handsome is honest looking, which as the world goes counts for ever so much more. He was just quitting for the day when I found him and had the pleasure of riding home with his majesty.

"Who the dickens told you about me?" demanded royalty, grimly puffing at his piece of a pipe.

"Everybody," I responded, promptly.

"Well, then," said the king of the hod carriers, "everybody has mighty little to do."

"You spell your name—"

"Yes, I do, but you don't. If you want to talk with me—all right; but no newspaper publicity for mine. If you don't promise to leave out my name and where I work, I won't say another word to you."

"Picture! You're not going to get my picture, if you go sending a guy around to take a snapshot of me I'll smash his head and his shooting gallery into smithereens."

And the king looked as though he could do it. The royal gentleman is not a native son, and talks with an accent that I dare not attempt to reproduce. On longer acquaintance he became more affable and his native humor got the better of his brusqueness, which, it was very evident, was largely assumed.

The king of the hod carriers has lived a happy, well filled life. He came to California 14 years ago and has worked almost uninterruptedly ever since. And he loves his work.

"But your picture—"

declared in a burst of confidence. "Climbing up and down all day, a man gets a fine view of the scenery. And then there's always plenty of change. Once—about seven years ago—I thought there was a little too much change, when I fell from the third story of a building on Folsom street and didn't know where I was going to land."

"Pretty badly hurt?"

"In a way, yes," he answered. "I lost my pipe."

"Was that all?"

"And wasn't that enough? But if it's hurt of body and bones you mean, I came off entirely. I landed on the end of a pile of lumber on the sidewalk below, and I bounced up again and down again till I was shook almost to pieces. But I went to work the next day as usual."

"You are perfectly willing to remain a hod carrier to the end of your days?"

"That I am," he declared emphatically, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "But the trouble is, the job, I'm afraid, won't wait for me. These new angled elevators spoil most of the fun. I like carrying the hod;—don't like showing a wheelbarrow and riding to the top story in a place car."

Such is the king of the hod carriers, whose name and place of business I have promised not to reveal, and whose photograph, for some smashing good reason, does not appear on this page. But if, on your wanderings in the district north of Market, I dare not be more specific—you chance upon a brawny, honest faced gentleman with a hod on his shoulder and a pipe—a snapshot, between his teeth, a man who looks out at you from shrewd but kindly eyes and shows by his every movement that it is a good thing to be alive—then you must take off your hat for you are in the possession of royalty,