

ADVENTURES AMONG UNION MEN

BY G. FREDERIC PELHAM, JR.

DURING the winter of 1923 a builder in New York was erecting several houses. The houses were being lathed on the inside. On December 15 the lathers informed the owners that they would be unable to proceed with their work because the windows were not yet glazed and the house could not, therefore, be considered enclosed. December of that year was as mild as the average September. The men admitted that they were not uncomfortable. But they said that they would lose their union cards if they went on working, for their union rules forbade the application of lath in unenclosed buildings after December 15. It was impossible at that time to procure glaziers, and the job stood idle for weeks until the owner at last obtained them. When he did so, zero weather had set in and the lathers worked under far harder conditions than they would have faced had they proceeded without interruption. The delay resulted in the freezing and ruining of a good portion of the interior plaster, because by the time it was put on, the exterior stucco, due to the cold weather, could not be applied. This work, being delayed until more moderate weather, made it impossible to complete the houses by Spring. The Fall market, due to the elections, proved dead.

2

A few years ago, when steel casement sashes were new in this country, they were not included in the scope of any particular union. On one of the first jobs the carpenters refused to set them on the ground that they were not made of wood. But the steel-

workers did not consider them in their line either, and the masons refused to handle them at all. The entire operation thus came to a standstill. The masons finally consented to do the work, but were at once stopped by the other trades. Each refused to let any other trade do it. Thousands of dollars were lost by the delay before the matter was finally decided.

3

Two gangs of about forty bricklayers each were employed last Spring upon a large and beautiful new apartment-house. The architecture was old English and a special brick had been imported to give the desired effect. The owner, during the course of construction, called upon the architect to inspect the work, to make sure that it was being done in the desired manner. Finding that it was not, the architect explained to the foreman the method he wished him to adopt. The foreman, addressing the group made up of the owner, the architect and several superintendents, informed them that in the event that they did not like the way in which it was being done they could all go to hell. The owner informed the man that, in the event he would not do as he was ordered, a foreman would be hired who would. "To hell with you and yer job," was his answer. "I got too much sugar in the bank to give a damn fer you, and what's more, if I quit, every man on the job quits with me. What'll yer do then? Huh? Where will yer git others?"

The expressions upon the faces of the men clearly showed that the foreman's threat was no idle one, and the owner, not

wishing the job held up, sought by soft words to woo the foreman. "You and yer damned superintendents and architect, git the hell offer this scaffold or I'll quit the job right now," was the reply. The men nodded appreciatively. "That's the stuff to give em," the nearest one commented. So the owner and his party departed. They reported the matter to the contractor, but he claimed that if he were to discharge the foreman he would lose every man on the job. He further said that even transferring him to another operation would result in the same thing. Nothing could be done.

4

A gang of bricklayers was working on a front wall near the roof of a building. The superintendent pointed out to the foreman that projecting brackets, which had not yet arrived on the ground, were to fit into the brickwork, and niches would have to be left for them. "The hell yer say," was the foreman's answer. "Is it my fault if they ain't here?" The superintendent suggested that, if the foreman did not wish to leave the niches, he could work on an adjoining interior wall until the brackets arrived. "Say, feller," he replied, "I'm running this gang, and if I take 'em off this wall, they won't come back. Either that or we do this one the way we please. Take yer choice." He finished the wall as he pleased. Next day the brackets arrived and the niches had to be cut into the brickwork at the cost of much time and money.

5

A cement-worker was ordered to do a small amount of cement work on a side wall. Although the job would not have taken him more than twenty minutes, he refused to do it on the ground that his union allowed him to do only work that was either on, or within six inches, of the floor. Hearing this, the owner sent up a plasterer but the cement-workers refused to let him do the job for the reason that the

material was cement. Many hours were wasted before the two unions finally settled the matter. The outcome was that the plaster contractor had to hire a cement man with special permission to do the work. It took the builder over a week to get a twenty-minute job done.

6

A contractor, due to the blow-out of a tire, arrived fifteen minutes late with his payroll. His men refused to accept their money. They claimed that he owed them double time for the fifteen minutes that he had kept them waiting. (As a matter of fact, they were still changing their clothes when he arrived.) He refused to pay it. They finally took the money under protest, after arguing for an hour and a half.

7

There are still in New York City many steel erecting concerns that employ only non-union men. These companies, through their ability to underbid those that employ union men, have succeeded in obtaining most of the work. The union workers have appealed to their brothers in other trades to coöperate with them in forcing these "scab" concerns to the wall. This they have set about to accomplish by refusing to work upon any operation while the non-union steel-workers are still on the job. It is therefore necessary for these erectors to finish the entire steel structure before the other trades are called in. This is directly against the law, which quite properly demands that the concrete arches be poured as the steel progresses in order to strengthen it. Thus the owner encounters trouble no matter which path he pursues. The building inspectors place a stop order on the job if he attempts to proceed, and in the event that he breaks his contract and gives the work to union men it costs him thousands of dollars. Many of the biggest operations in the city are now held up on account of this state of affairs, some with the steel

work barely started, others with it almost completed. The cost of these delays is enormous. On other jobs, strikes have been settled only by the builders employing union men to tear down and then reërect the steel work.

8

On an alteration, done under a time contract, the architect was called upon to suggest means to facilitate the work. In going through the building he found two carpenters comfortably seated before an open fireplace, puffing cigars. They refused to go to work when he ordered them to do so, and he ordered them to leave the job. They stepped into the hall and, calling together the other men, informed them that they had been fired. "Come on, boys," said one, "we'll all quit. There's plenty of work up the block. Let's show this guy where to get off at."

The sub-contractors now came rushing up and by promising the men that no such assault upon their rights would ever be made again, succeeded in getting them back to their tasks. The next day the architect found the same two carpenters in the same place. The building was not finished on time.

9

On a large apartment, recently erected in the West Fifties, a gang of plumbers was employed. One day two of them returned after lunch intoxicated. They roamed about the building, cursing the bosses and owners in general, and so amusing did their antics appear to their fellow workers that all left their jobs to watch them. The owner went to the plumbing contractor and demanded the dismissal of the two men, but when the contractor sought to discharge them the entire gang threatened to quit. The owner

was insistent and some thirty plumbers walked off. It was three weeks before the owner succeeded in getting together another gang.

10

The painting unions forbid their members to work on Saturday. Even on the payment of double time, *i. e.*, twenty-one dollars a day, they will not work on Saturday. Tenants moving into a recently completed building on a Saturday afternoon were obliged to move into the halls the following Monday while a final coat of paint was applied to the ceilings.

11

On nearly every operation of any size in Manhattan graft has to be paid. The amounts run from two to twenty thousand dollars. The method is simple. Seeing that an owner is hurrying to complete his building in time for the renting season, the union officials discover some grievance, real or imaginary, and announce that on such and such a date a general strike will be called. They know that a delay will cost the owner half of his yearly rent roll and they figure that he will pay any amount up to that to complete the building on time. The owner is thus forced into a conference with the unions, and finds that, for a consideration, the strike can be avoided. This consideration must be great enough to take care of the officials all the way down the line. Needless to say, the builder usually pays. The workers are then informed that the time is not ripe for a strike and the row is smoothed over. Thus the cost of building in New York is increased tremendously. The builders now treat this expense as one of the items to be reckoned in with the building's cost. In the end the tenant pays it.

SERVANTS OF THE PEOPLE

BY JAMES M. CAIN

CHARACTERS

MR. WADE, *Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners*

MR. LERCH, *Superintendent of the County Almshouse*

MR. MUKENS, *Janitor at the County Almshouse*

MR. YOST, *a Resident at the County Almshouse*

The scene is the office of the County Commissioners, Room No. 1, Courthouse. It is morning. Messrs. Lerch, Mukens, and Yost have been sitting in silence around the table of the County Commissioners, and Mr. Wade, through a door marked "Private," has just come into the room.

MR. WADE—I reckon you gentlemen know what I called this little meeting for. You all seen them pieces in the papers where people are getting burned up down to the almshouse, and I got to lay the matter before the commissioners, account of them people down in the lower end of the county raising so much hell about it. So I thought the thing to do was for us to kinda get together, and listen to this man here that done all the talking; and see what he's got to say for hisself.

MR. LERCH—All I got to say, Mr. Wade, is this here stuff in the papers is a pack of lies from start to finish and that's all there is to it. What gets me is this here man here, and the county's been feeding him three year now, and he goes and tells them paper men a pack of lies like this here.

MR. MUKENS—Four year.

MR. LERCH—Four year, and that's all the gratitude he's got!

MR. YOST—I hope Christ may kill me if I knowed they was paper men. Then I never told them all that stuff they put in. They made up a whole lot theirself.

MR. WADE—I don't want you to think it's what you call a reflection on you, Mr. Lerch, because I know how fine you been running things out at the almshouse and all like of that. But it's them people down in the lower end of the county. You know how they are.

MR. LERCH—Don't tell me nothing about them people down in the lower end of the county, Mr. Wade. I know 'em.

MR. MUKENS—Half of 'em's already in the almshouse and half of 'em got relations that's in.

MR. WADE—Of course now, I believe in Christian burial.

MR. LERCH—Mr. Wade, every decent man believes in a Christian burial. I don't see how them paper men can look theirself in the face to print all that stuff, just on this man's say-so.

MR. YOST—I hope Christ may kill me if I told 'em all that stuff they put in. They done made a whole lot of it up.

MR. WADE—And the county feeding you four year! It's just like Mr. Lerch says, you had ought to be ashamed of yourself.

MR. LERCH—And there ain't nobody down there been treated no better than he is. Same as if he was in his own house, only better.

MR. YOST—I never knowed they was paper men. They come up to me and made out like they was just looking around.

MR. WADE—Well, what did you tell 'em?

MR. YOST—I didn't tell 'em nothing