

Some seedy-looking beachcomber would drop in, looking not at Pareda or Lamson, but at the bottle



By
GEORGE MASSELMAN

Author of "Windward Head,"
"Dutch Courage," etc.

The Bosun Is a Bandit

Wireless is as wireless does. An Argentine dungeon or a berth on the beach—all the same to ship's operator Lamson, when he discovers a small fortune in paint

MR. LAMSON in his cabin had noticed that the winches, one by one, had stopped whirring. Then there had come the noise of hatches being thrown into their grooves; and after that the confusion of steps passing his door, stevedores joining their lighters and sailors hurry-

ing to the fo'c'sle for a few hours of much needed rest.

Now there was silence, the complete inertia of an anchored ship at night.

Deliberately he took off his ear-phones and placed them on the desk. His mind was not on wireless at the moment, but rather on the town which

now was a mere few watches up the River Plate; streets with old remembered grogshops and the dives with bare tables which brought back the faces of friends he had made there.

He thought of little Pareda, "the shipsa news report" as he used to call himself, and he smiled.

Tomorrow he'd be there, in Buenos Aires, and he counted on it to give him a surcease from the boredom which so far had characterized this trip on the *Zaneleigh*.

She was an old ship, perhaps the oldest of the line; and as far as he had been able to make out, she had been tramping for the past few years.

But now they had put her on a quick run to the Argentine, giving her mail and even a shipment of gold, locked in the strongroom on the bridge. That strongroom was a relic from earlier days in the immigrant trade, when it had been used as a place of safekeeping for money and trinkets belonging to the passengers whose camplike existence between decks had offered no security for such things.

But it was not the ship as such that Mr. Lamson objected to, not her lines, nor the food or the quarters; it was the people who were on it. A ship was no better than the men you had to be with day after day. If that did not jell then everything else was lousy too.

The trouble was you could never tell what kind of a ship you were on until you were out at sea.

Of those with whom Mr. Lamson ate in the messroom, the second mate had proved the most communicative. It was not that he did a lot of talking, but at least he dropped in on him at times and spent a minute or two. One day Mr. Lamson had asked him point blank, "Why all this surliness, Martin?"

"Whose? Mine?" the second mate

had asked. Mr. Lamson had brushed his slender fingers through the air.

"No, not yours. I mean the ship, the whole bunch of 'em. Just watch them in the messroom. Everyone is afraid to say a kind word about anyone else."

"It's the ship," the mate had said with some show of disgust. "In the line it's known as the *Siberia*. It's the way the office has of putting a man on probation."

"On probation? For what?"

"Some sailor may be tough to handle, or he may be suspected of smuggling. If they can't pin it on him, off he goes to the *Zaneleigh*. Naturally, we always have the worst kind of crew; and because of it, something always seems to happen—like dope, or stowaways, or anything else that gives a ship a bad name. It puts us all on our guard because we, with the stripes, naturally get it in the neck all the time."

The mate felt sure that the office had it in for him, to put him on the *Zaneleigh*, and that it would be a long time if ever before he could count on being promoted to chief mate. That was the rank he needed, he said, before he'd dare to get married.

"Marriage is no game for a seafaring man," Mr. Lamson had offered. "Do you feel you have to go to sea for the rest of your life?"

"It's a good job, isn't it?"

"Yes, but there are other things a man can do." A faraway look grew in the old wireless man's eyes, "You are too young to ignore a home life for the sake of the sweep of the horizon, the racing clouds . . .

"Did you ever think of trying your luck down in South America? It gives a fellow a better break than most any other place I know of. There's ranching, sheep farming, and—"

"What?" The mate cut him short. "In that spig country? I should say not." The mate had left him on that note and had never referred to it again.

THE rest of the trip had continued in a drawn-out monotony which Mr. Lamson spent by looking forward to his conversations with other ships, clicking the words through the ether.

For the *Zaneleigh* there had been few messages. In reality there had been only one, rather cryptic at that. It had come in after they had left Pernambuco.

Ever so often Mr. Lamson had taken the copy out of his file and had looked at it, as if another reading might give him some clue: *Keep strict surveillance stop imperative keep crew on board.*

It had all the earmarks of being an answer to a question, but he had no record of having sent a wireless to the office. He had brought it to the captain, trying to watch his face while he read it. But the other had taken the message to the porthole, turning his back to Mr. Lamson.

"Any answer to that message?" Mr. Lamson said. The captain had pulled up a mouth corner; it was trying to be a smile or perhaps a smirk.

"No," he had snapped back, "there is no answer."

At first Mr. Lamson thought that the surveillance had to do with the gold. But that would have been a silly order because it was logical that a shipment of gold would get the necessary supervision. It was too heavy to be carried off without someone's noticing it, being in little cases, each containing ten thousand five-dollar gold pieces.

He was completely at a loss to understand the rest of the message. The implication was that the office did not want any desertions; but that was also too obvious.

In the end he had given up trying to decipher the message; and it was not until after Rio, where again the captain had been the only one to go ashore, that it dawned on him that the old man must have sent a cable to New York from the telegraph office in Pernambuco instead of using the ship's wireless. This alone could account for receiving a reply to a message he had never handled.

So they did not trust him! It had made him mad. Aside from his being under oath, captains had never yet doubted his integrity.

IT WAS cozy in his cabin with the hissing steam from the radiators and the red curtains screening the portholes. After all, he should not complain, he reasoned; he had the ether and his books, and between the two there was little time to worry about the ship. Whatever it was, it wasn't his affair.

Curling up in his bunk he heard a blast of a whistle and he knew that a tug boat was coming for the lighters. He figured the ship'd be leaving around midnight so as to get to Buenos Aires by daybreak.

He was almost asleep when he had the sudden suspicion that in Buenos Aires they might also stay on the roads. Whatever reason there was for keeping the crew on board, the captain would hardly dare take the chance of putting them within an arm's length of the dock. There a jump and a short sprint would bring a man to that maze of little alleys which offered a safe hiding place to anyone who had a reason for wishing to get away.

Was he, too, included in that order? It made no sense, but the thought was pressing enough to make him jump up and look for that message again in order to dispel his misgivings.

The cabin he slept in connected with the wireless shack by a door. In his pajamas he dashed through and opened the drawer which contained the file. He took out the whole sheaf, several hundred.

When he found it, he ruefully decided that the instructions referring to the "crew" might easily include him too.

Drumming his fingers on his desk, he chanced to see something on the carpet, just inside the door. Slowly and with a strange foreboding he picked it up. It was an envelope with his name on it and in a corner the simple request, *Please do not open until after leaving Montevideo.*

Several times he turned it over. There was no way of telling whom the letter was from.

He looked at the clock. In an hour they'd leave. He could wait that long. He put the letter into a drawer and sat down, listening intently for any sign of life which would indicate the impending up-anchor.

He felt the need for a cup of coffee; and slipping on an overcoat over his pajamas, he stepped into the alley and across it into the pantry. Wilke, the steward, was there pouring several cups.

"Good morning, sir," he greeted the wireless operator in his almost too polite manner.

"A bit early for morning, isn't it?"

"I know, sir, but it is after midnight. Cup of coffee, sir?"

"That's what I came for," Mr. Lamson said, taking the cup the other handed him. He wondered what a steward was doing up at this hour; they usually weren't that ambitious. The other noticed his questioning glance.

"I'm all excited about getting ashore, sir," he said. "Three weeks is a long time to be cooped up on a ship. I couldn't sleep a wink, so I said to my-

self, 'You better get up, Wilke, and see if you can't make yourself useful.'"

"A smart idea," Mr. Lamson said, slowly sipping the steaming brew. It was very hot and he decided to take it to his cabin. Also, he had heard the sound of the telegraph from the bridge, signaling the engineroom to stand by. "So long," he said balancing the cup in his hand.

"Yes, sir," the steward said, placing his cups on a tray and leaving for the bridge.

AT THE first sign of vibration in the deck, Mr. Lamson quickly slipped a finger under the flap of the envelope and tore it open. News was what he wanted, no matter how it reached him.

He was aware of the same feeling of anticipation as when he picked up his call letters from a faraway ship.

Aside from a single piece of paper which began, *Dear Sparks*, there was another envelope carefully sealed and addressed.

Dear Sparks: I took your hint. You were right. I am not cut out for being a sailor. I want more out of life than spending my time away from home, bickering with a lot of fools who are either envious or contemptuous of your rank.

I am forcing the issue and am jumping the ship; doing it right now, here in South America, just like you said.

You are the only person on board I can trust and I am asking you to deliver the enclosed letter in person when you get back to New York. Assure her that we won't be separated for long.

Thanks, old pal.

J. Martin

Thoughtfully Mr. Lamson folded the letter and returned it to the envelope together with the one for the mate's girl, slipping it into the pocket of his overcoat.

He was smiling quietly, but at the

same time his face had become a little sad. The smile was for what Martin had done; the man had guts. Jumping ship was not exactly a nice thing to do, but it was better than waiting.

It was for his own sake that the old wireless operator felt sad. Once he had thought of doing the same thing. He no longer remembered why he hadn't; it had been a long time ago.

There was a loud banging on his door and the chief mate stuck his head inside. He was surlier than ever.

"The old man wants to see you, Sparks," he said.

"What? Me? At this time of night?"

"What has the time of night got to do with it?" the other snapped back. "He wants to see you. Martin has jumped the ship."

He did not wait for an answer but slammed the door and the wireless operator heard his footsteps hurry down the deck. Quickly Lamson put on his uniform, wondering how they knew Martin had jumped.

"You wanted to see me?" The captain stood wide-legged in his cabin.

"What do you know about the second mate?" he exploded.

"Nothing," Mr. Lamson said, raising his eyebrows, "except that the mate tells me he's jumped the ship." He felt he had no right to tell about the letter.

"You bet he has. He stole a case of gold."

"What?" Mr. Lamson doubted his ears.

"You heard me." The captain was fairly screaming now, scaring the steward out of his wits as he entered with some more coffee. "Fifty thousand dollars in gold! . . . Get out of here!" he shouted at the unsuspecting Wilke, wanting to vent his wrath on someone.

"How do you know he did?" Mr. Lamson asked incredulously.

The captain sneered at him.

"How? He was in charge of the strongroom, wasn't he? Suppose we didn't look there after he had disappeared? A whole case is gone."

"Holy Moses!" It was all Mr. Lamson could say. He still couldn't believe this.

"Well, I just wanted to find out if you'd seen him leave," the captain said. "That's all."

. . . On deck, he joined the first mate and some of the engineers at the railing.

"That guy sure had a nerve," one of the engineers said, spitting over the side, "jumping with fifty grand."

"Isn't that a lot for one man to carry?" Mr. Lamson remarked. "It's a hundred pounds."

"What of it? All he had to do was to throw it on the lighter."

Mr. Lamson had to admit that it all dovetailed beautifully. The mate might well be guilty, and he certainly was not there to defend himself.

From astern a cluster of lights was rapidly overtaking them.

"The *Mihanovitch* packet," the mate volunteered, while they looked at her. "She leaves Monte at two and beats us into B.A."

No one voiced the opinion that Martin might be on her; and Mr. Lamson, who had this sudden thought, said nothing about it. If the second mate was as shrewd as he was accused of being, it would be no more than natural that he should be making for Buenos Aires, where a man could buy himself all the freedom he wanted with very little effort.

As the packet pulled abreast, he was asking himself why he did not suggest that Martin might be on board. It would be a simple matter to wireless ahead to Buenos Aires and have the police meet her at the dock.

But suppose the second mate was not guilty? Mr. Lamson quickly took his leave, afraid that the others might be reading his thoughts and so tie a noose around Martin's neck.

BY NEXT morning, he found that they were at anchor outside the Boca, the yellow water lapping against the sides of the *Zaneleigh* like a cat sniffing at a new arrival.

The news soon spread that the ship was going to stay on the roads. Lamson bit his lips when he realized that this might mean that he would not so much as get a whiff of the city he had been longing to revisit.

In the messroom, as everywhere else on board, there was a little talk of anything but the second mate's getting away with the gold. The captain gave strict orders that no one was to leave the vessel without his consent, news which caused a deep gloom to settle over the ship.

Shortly after breakfast, the agent came alongside and there was a confab in the old man's cabin. Then a tug arrived to take off the gold and the mail.

By then everything was in readiness to get rid of the cargo; lighters, high out of water like balloons, were towed out of the harbor and made fast to the *Zaneleigh*, while stevedores scrambled on board and booms swung into position. Almost at once the winches rattled all over the ship, tearing the cargo out of all four holds at once.

Aimlessly Lamson stood around, and at last returned to his cabin wondering what he might do in order to get through the day.

A smear of rust down the bulkhead and the recollection of a sailor walking down the deck with a can of paint made him decide to paint his cabin. Even if

he did not care much how it looked, it would at least give him something to do other than staring at the skyline of Buenos Aires.

He hunted up the chief mate and asked him for some paint.

"Go and see the boatswain," the mate said. "He's in charge of the paint."

"Do you need much?" the boatswain asked, seemingly not anxious to part with any. Lamson explained what he wanted it for. "Go aft, in the poop," the boatswain finally said. "You'll find some old paint-buckets there, stuff we're ready to throw out."

Lamson said, "That'll be all dried out."

"It's all I can spare," the boatswain said gruffly. "Take the hard stuff off and you'll find plenty that can still be used."

Lamson was aware that a boatswain was entitled to his little graft by selling such odds and ends as paint and things to the junkboat which sooner or later would come rowing alongside, preferably after nightfall when a better deal could be made because then a good can of paint might inadvertently be included in the lot.

Going aft he entered the poop deck-house where a dozen or so buckets of old paint stood around on the iron deck. The light came through a number of large portholes. A heap of rope, short lengths of chain, and similar discarded items cluttered up the deckhouse, waiting to be shoveled into a junkboat below the poop, as soon as a deal had been made.

Stepping over the debris, he made his way toward the paint cans, most of them five-gallon buckets. He picked up a stick of wood and poked in the cans.

In most cases he had trouble getting through the hardened layer of dried-out paint; and it was something of a

surprise when he came to a can where his stick, instead of piercing the coating, pulled it away from the edges, showing a fair quantity of white paint.

Lamson at once suspected the boat-swain of covering good paint with a layer he had cut out of some other can to make it appear dried-out like the rest.

The pail was too large to take to his cabin and he decided to pour some of the paint into a smaller one. But try as he might, he could barely lift the large pail off the deck, let alone tip it.

Puzzled by the extraordinary weight, he prodded into the paint and found that toward the bottom it was not as liquid as he had thought. In fact, he could not even stir it.

Pulling out the stick he saw that it had a thick blob of rubbery paint at the end of it and he swore to himself at having been fooled. Scraping the stick against the edge of the pail he noticed to his surprise how a small, flat disc worked itself loose. At once he reached for it.

Underneath the paint the disc was yellow.

QUICKLY he looked around. His fingers were holding a five-dollar gold piece. He was all alone. From a distance, he heard the muffled noise from the decks.

His mind, accustomed to instantaneous dots and dashes, reconstructed the theory of the theft. Martin could not have done it. If he had stolen the gold, he would have taken it along with him on the lighter.

Lamson wasted no time in trying to fathom the how and when, but he was sure of one thing: the man who had stolen the gold would waste no time in getting his loot ashore.

The thought of telling the captain was

discarded almost as soon as it came. It would not clear Martin; neither would it help to discover who had done the job.

It struck Lamson that there were two things he had to do: put the gold beyond the reach of the thief; and get in touch with Martin, tell him what was hanging over his head.

But the gold had to be hidden first, and at once. Beyond getting a little paint for himself, he had no business in the deckhouse; and it was obvious that keen eyes were keeping close watch over the hiding place.

He closed the inner door of the deckhouse. All he needed was five minutes; and he prayed that those swinging hoists of cargo would act as a barrier for that length of time, delaying any prowling member of the crew.

Quickly he opened a porthole, one that was directly aft. He measured its opening with the size of the can and saw that it would fit.

Picking up a long board he laid one end of it in the porthole, slanting upward from the deck. He found a long rope and pulled one end of it through the handle of the pail. It took all his strength to lift the pail on the board; and he pushed it as high up as he could manage.

Deftly he took hold of the lower end of the board, using it as a lever while at the same time holding on to the double strands of rope that went through the handle.

As soon as the board was a little more than horizontal, the heavy pail slid slowly toward the porthole. With the board he kept it under control.

Suddenly he realized that the pail would not go through while straight up; he had measured only the diameter. Sweat grew on his forehead and his hands began to shake from the nervous

strain. There was only one way out and that was to tip the pail while at the same time lifting the board high so that it would act as a skid.

He accomplished all this in one and the same instant by putting his shoulder under the board, straightening himself, and tipping the can toward him by pulling with all his might at the rope.

The moment it went he let the board look after itself and brought his hands down so that the friction of the rope against the edge of the porthole would keep the pail from plunging too rapidly.

The board glanced off his shoulder and the tension on the rope was suddenly increased. Quickly he paid it out. Down and down it went. He felt it enter the water without hearing it and kept paying out until the weight was taken off the rope.

As soon as the pail reached bottom he let go one end of the rope and pulled it up. He closed the porthole and quickly tucked the rope underneath the other junk. Some paint and water he wiped off with a rag.

He finished up the job by weighting down another pail with some odd bits of chain, so that outwardly and by the feel of it, at least, things were as they had been.

SHAKING in all his limbs he took stock of himself. His hands were grimy and the board had made a streak on his shoulder. He dusted himself off and wiped his face with a handkerchief before venturing out on deck.

He ran into the boatswain amidships, just when he was about to enter his cabin.

"Look at me," he said with some heat, "and not a thing to show for it."

The boatswain laughed and offered to see what he could do about it.

"Forget it," Mr. Lamson said. "I've

lost all interest. If I can't go ashore I'd just as soon sleep."

But the thought of sleeping could hardly have been further from his mind. Going into his cabin he sprawled into his chair. He had locked the door against any intrusion upon his thoughts, and also because it made him feel safer—for the moment at least.

Whoever had had the nerve to steal fifty thousand dollars would hardly stop at anything else if it came to dealing with the person who was out to queer his game.

There could be little doubt that the thief knew what he was doing; those old cans of paint were not only the best hiding place but they also provided an ideal way of getting the loot off the ship.

Obviously the boatswain was beyond suspicion or he would not have allowed him to rummage through that paint at will. Lamson smiled a bit wryly when he realized that this still left some forty other members of the crew to be considered.

He aimlessly played with the dials and gave his key a few deft flips, just from habit. He realized that what he was doing was for Martin; the second mate would have to be cleared of this crime or he'd spend the next ten years in jail.

He could think of no worse job than going to that girl with Martin's letter and telling her that her man was in the hoosegow.

The junkboat was the logical starting point. If he could watch it come alongside and see who did the talking, then that might give him an inkling who the thief was. But—

He flicked his fingers. A man who had such a message to convey would not talk where he could be observed. And why should he talk at all? He

would sneak off on that junkboat in the darkness.

The only way was to be on the shore when the junkboat pulled in. At that particular moment the thief was bound to be near his haul.

All of this meant that he, too, had to be ashore; soon at that. The captain was the only one who could give him permission to leave the ship and Lamson figured that it would have to be a good reason before he'd do so.

The key under his fingers gave him the idea. In quick succession he burned out some of the delicate coils. It could have happened by accident.

THE captain came into the messroom while most of the men were still at lunch. He seemed in good spirits and hopeful, he said, of apprehending the second mate in due course; he volunteered the information that the insurance company was offering ten percent salvage for the stolen gold.

Lamson had a queer feeling in his stomach and was in a fair way of choking on his coffee when he realized that he had it within his means to cash in on some five thousand dollars . . . or go to jail for it if they refused to believe his story.

And besides, what should he do with so much money? Give some of it to the second mate.

It was just like him to get a notion like that. But after all, why not? He, himself, had no need of the money; and Martin could buy himself a nice farm somewhere and settle down on it with his bride. He had a nice, warm feeling while he visualized the girl's face when Martin would tell her about it. . . .

"Another cup of coffee, Mr. Lamson?" Wilke stood by his elbow, waking him out of his speculations.

"Yes, yes, I wouldn't mind."

The steward walked off, slowly and with measured steps which belonged more to a carpeted dining salon than a ship's messroom. That one, too, the wireless operator thought, could do more with the reward than a man named Lamson ever could. He'd be starting a swell restaurant in the forties; he was the right fellow for it and it might make him very happy.

Lamson got up and approached the captain at the head of the table. "I need some replacements," he said calmly. The captain gave him a quick look.

"What's the trouble?"

"A short," Mr. Lamson said. "Been burning out coil after coil. I'll have to have some new ones."

"Could I get them for you?" the captain asked. "I'll be going ashore again tomorrow."

"You wouldn't know how to test them," Lamson said. "They come all different and it is necessary to test them. You'd have to pick out at least a dozen before we'd find two or three that'll work."

"I didn't think it was so complicated," the captain said. "You really need 'em that badly?"

"What do you think? Could you run a ship without a rudder? This is the same thing. Moreover, tomorrow might be too late, unless we're going to stay here a week or more; because the whole thing will have to be overhauled and I may be needing some other things as well if it turns out the coils aren't the only trouble."

"You mean you should get them today?"

"Yes, that's what it amounts to. I bet you someone has been monkeying with this outfit. Maybe that second mate, before he took French leave. Ever since Montevideo I have been having this trouble."

"Since it is an emergency I suppose I could let you go."

"It's up to you," Mr. Lamson said, as calmly as he could. "If we don't fix this quickly we'll be leaving without a radio and that may get you into plenty of hot water if—"

"All right." The old man cut him short. "You can go ashore with the agent. He is still here. Go with him in his launch."

Inwardly gloating, Lamson left the messroom to get into his going-ashore clothes, the too-wide raglan overcoat and the felt hat with the turned-down brim.

While he stood waiting at the companion, the steward spotted him.

"Are you going ashore, Mr. Lamson? You sure are lucky." There was a good deal of envy in his voice. "Would you mind doing me a favor?"

Lamson felt a cold tremor run down his spine. Was Wilke the one?

"Would you bring me some of those *Quarante Trez* cigarettes? I always smoke 'em when I get down here, but there seems no way of getting 'em now, unless . . ."

"Sure I'll bring you some. Be glad to," Lamson said, feeling relieved. He saw the agent emerge from the Old Man's cabin and they got into the launch. Things had gone more smoothly than he could have hoped for.

ON THE dock the agent asked him how long he'd be about his errands, and Lamson lied about it. He had no intention of being back soon. The agent told the launchman to be on hand and took his leave.

Lamson first did his errand at the radio depot, then went to look up his friend Pareda at the *Ciudad*.

The girl at the switchboard looked incredulous when he asked for Señor

Pareda, the ship's news reporter.

"The only Señor Pareda we have is the editor."

"*Hombre chico?*" he asked, holding his hand up shoulder high and hunching his own slim frame.

"*Sí, señor.*" The girl smiled. "Leetle, like yourself."

"That must be the one I want. Tell him Lamson—*el Americano*—wants to see him. It is important."

The girl sent a boy out. Almost at once a door flew open at the far side of the busy room and the boy was pushed aside by an excited Argentine who came dashing between the desks shouting "*Amigo! Amigo!*"

Lamson found himself being taken by the arm and dragged to Señor Pareda's office. There were the hurried queries of friends who had not seen each other in years; then the questioning look when the editor remembered that the boy had said "important."

Lamson explained as quickly as he could—the more easily because news of the theft had already come out. The *Ciudad* had noted the posting of the reward, and the fact that the second mate was under suspicion and supposed to be in hiding in Montevideo.

"Montevideo had place to hide," Señor Pareda said. "Streets too straight. Anyway, too small a place. You think he is here?"

"Yes," Lamson said, "I think he came on to Buenos Aires on the *Mihanovitch*. I want to find him. He should know what he is up against."

"Cristoforo Colombo!" the editor exploded. "You mean to tell me a man steals fifty thousand *dolares* and not know the consequences?"

"He did not do it," Mr. Lamson said. "He left because he did not like it at sea. He wants to get married."

"How do you know he did not steal

it?" Pareda asked coolly. "It is in the paper. Everyone thinks he did."

"The gold is still on board. I saw it."

The editor pursed his lips. "This is *very* interesting now," he said. "Maybe good story there, no?"

Lamson agreed that there was a story if they could get to the bottom of it. In his turn, Señor Pareda agreed that undoubtedly the paint cans would be brought ashore by the junkboat. Somehow they'd have to find out when and where, and, if possible, be on hand when it got ashore.

"Then, when we catch the thief we grill him. Third degree, no? He'll tell all and your frien' goes free. And then we find the second mate and give him the good news."

Mr. Lamson nodded gratefully. It was just how he had figured it out himself.

"What you going to do with the reward?" Señor Pareda asked. "Spend in one big blow?"

"I want to give some to Martin," Lamson said. "I figure a man who is willing to start out in a foreign country because he wants his woman with him all the time is entitled to a little boost. I know what it means to live alone and get old that way."

Señor Pareda got up and patted his friend on the back.

"I know, *amigo*. You should have married that girl you told me about."

There was a knock at the door and a young fellow entered, at once bombarding Señor Pareda with a stream of Spanish. The editor gave his friend a look and went to the window, scrutinizing the busy street below. After a while he slowly turned around and waved the young man out of the office.

"*Amigo*," he said, "Did you tell me all?"

"Practically," Lamson said, wondering what Pareda was driving at. "Why?"

"You were being followed when you came here. There is one man out in the hall and another on the sidewalk below. . . . Listen, *amigo*. You have certain information that others want to have. That is not healthy. Maybe you know where gold is now?"

"That's it. That's what I didn't tell you. I hid it somewhere else. But I did not think the crooks would find that out until they got the paint cans ashore."

"Not crooks watching you, *amigo*. Detectives. Just as bad for third degree if they want information. You're in a tough spot unless we find the real thief. Oh, la, la! What a story!"

"Are you going to let them take me?"

"Let them take you? *Amigo*, are you crazy? I could not let them take you; we got to get the story first. You are not to worry for a little while; later maybe, yes. I get you away from here. Don't worry."

He laughed gayly and rang a bell. The same young reporter entered the office. After a salvo of instructions Lamson found himself being led away, across the floor into a damp cellar stacked high with huge rolls of paper. There was a clammy silence in the vaultlike chamber, accentuated by a vibration from above.

"We're underneath the press rooms," his guide explained. "Here we wait."

FOR some time they sat there in silence while Lamson fumed inwardly at the mess he had plunged himself into. Even the very room he was in now already seemed like a dungeon. A solitary, dust-coated bulb hung from the ceiling.

"Are you a reporter?" he asked, unable to bear the silence any longer.

"Yes," the other said. "I have been on the *Ciudad* for about four years." He spoke good English.

"You like it?"

"Yes, I guess so," the reporter said, thinking a moment; "only your time isn't your own when you cover the ship."

Lamson fell again into a moody silence.

After what had seemed a lifetime he heard steps. It was Pareda, bringing Lamson's hat and coat which he had left in the office. Again he spoke to the reporter, calling him Salvador, finally telling him to go on his way.

"You don't like it here?" Señor Pareda asked with a pleasant smile.

"You bet I don't," Lamson burst out. "It is a mess. I wanted to walk the streets, sit in a nice café and enjoy myself. And what do I get?"

"Much better than being in a real dungeon," Pareda said, following Lamson's glances around the damp walls.

"Did you find out anything?"

Señor Pareda threw up his hands.

"Not so soon. Must lay groundwork first. Salvador—this young man—is a good reporter, only impatient at times. He wants to get married," Señor Pareda explained with a grin.

"But he knows his way about the waterfront. He is rounding up all the beachcombers, the beggars that hang around the swill cans on the docks. They know what is going on. Anyway, they'll be able to tell us who is running the junkboat in the Boca—now that the owner met with accident."

"An accident?"

"Call it what you like," Señor Pareda went on calmly. "They wasted no time. He got in a fight and broke his arm. It happened this afternoon. I just found

out. It means another man is going to take off the paint. It was a good idea."

"What was?"

"Your idea that the junkboat would take off the gold. Now if we can keep an eye on it we know where the gold will land. That is, if it is still in the paint cans." He gave Lamson a quizzical look.

"It isn't."

"But the thief will think it is. And we'll find out who he is when he tries to land it. We'll know this evening, I guess."

Apparently the editor had confidence in his men.

"Do I have to stay here all that time?" Lamson asked, a bit forlornly. Señor Pareda reassured him. The detectives had left after some one had fooled them by wearing Mr. Lamson's hat and coat. He had shaken them without much trouble.

"Detectives *very* clever," Señor Pareda said, "but not too clever."

THEY slipped out of a door into the street and were whisked to a back room in a dive near the waterfront. Occasionally, some seedy-looking beachcomber would drop in, stay near the door and cast a furtive look, not at Señor Pareda, but at a bottle which stood invitingly on the table.

The editor would gravely pour a glass and raising his own as well would hand it over with a becoming: "*Salud, amigo.*"

"*Salud, señor, y muchas gracias.*" After which they got down to business. For the most part it was a report on the movements of other junkboats, a measure which tended to make sure that there would be no last minute switch of boats.

After some time Salvador dropped in

again. His Spanish was too staccato now for Lamson to follow it and he watched the editor's face for signs of good news or bad. Pareda became more and more excited. Finally he turned around.

"What does your friend look like?" he asked sharply.

"Friend? What friend?"

"Your second mate."

"Tall," Mr. Lamson said, quite at a loss, "broad shoulders. Walks with a bit of a limp because he once broke his knee in a—"

The editor cut him short when he saw Salvador vigorously nod his head. "He says he's here, on the waterfront."

Lamson's eyes popped open. "You think he's waiting for the junkboat too? You think he had something to do with it? I can't believe it."

Salvador disregarded his English again and engaged his boss in another rapid-fire conversation.

"He says he's with the captain and he thinks he also recognized one of the men that followed you to my office but it is dark outside and he is not positive."

Mr. Lamson felt his head swim. He could not make head or tail out of it.

"Listen, *amigo*," the other went on, "when the disappearance of that second mate got known, after Montevideo, were you told to communicate with the police?"

"No I wasn't."

"Doesn't that strike you as being very funny? How did you hear about it?"

"The captain called me to his cabin and told me himself."

"And he told you that he thought the second mate had done the job, but he did not tell you to get in touch with the police when there was still a good chance of catching him.

"Listen, *amigo*, it looks very much like you have been taken for a, what you call it . . . sleighride? Maybe the captain had a reason for wanting the ship to know that the second mate had disappeared and stolen the money."

"What about that letter he left me?"

"What letter?"

Lamson felt in his overcoat and produced Martin's letter. He handed it over and watched Pareda read it slowly, spelling each word.

And then, to his consternation, he saw how the other deliberately tore open the letter he was to hand to the mate's girl. Pareda pulled out two pages, neatly folded.

They were completely blank. There was no trace of writing on them.

HE SAYS here he took your hint," Pareda said, re-reading the mate's letter. "Does that mean you had a talk with him?"

"Yes, earlier on the trip. I suggested he might start anew in South America if he did not like to remain a sailor all his life. He said he'd not jump ship. Anyway, he said, he did not like it down here."

"So if he would not have written you this letter it would have been hard for you to believe that he had jumped his ship?"

"Yes, naturally."

"And someone else, the real thief for instance, might have become mighty suspicious about the mate's disappearance if you had gone around telling people that he had no thought of doing such a thing?" Señor Pareda went on.

The wireless operator nodded; he saw now what the other was driving at. They had used him to set the stage for putting the real thief off his guard; those two blank pages proved it all too plainly.

"But I still don't see the whole picture," he said tonelessly.

"Neither do I," Señor Pareda agreed, "at least not yet. But it is obvious your second mate does not deserve your consideration. We wait, things will happen soon enough."

Salvador came rushing in later; and after a few remarks Señor Pareda jumped up, grabbing the wireless operator by the arm and pulling him along through a long corridor and up a staircase to the street. They turned a few corners and then the cold wind from the river blew into Lamson's face.

"Look, quick," the editor cautioned, as he took him by the arm and yanked him back into the shadows. He pointed.

Lamson looked closely and saw outlines that changed their contours.

"Those are your friends from the ship," the editor went on softly. They also seem *very* much interested in the junkboat. You're sure now the gold is not in the paint cans? They got there a little ahead of us, but it won't help them, will it?"

"No," Mr. Lamson said, "it won't help them." Stealthily they moved along, taking up their position within a stone's throw of the waiting group.

"You recognize any of 'em?" Pareda asked in Mr. Lamson's ear.

"That tall one is Martin. The other the captain."

They heard the creaking of oarlocks and waited breathlessly while other forms moved into position. The boat scraped against the dock. A searchlight suddenly played on it and Lamson saw the rowboat now.

A good dozen old paint buckets were in the bottom and two men were standing up, their hands in the air. One of them was Wilke, the steward.

"Get out of that boat," the captain ordered. The two men stepped out.

At this moment the *Ciudad* went into action, photographers and all.

"What's the idea!" the captain shouted. Pareda approached with a press card stuck in his hatband.

"What are you doing here?" the ship's agent asked querulously. "You don't think you are cutting in on this reward?"

"Oh, no," Pareda said lightly. "I only came for the story."

Lamson had stepped back between two railroad cars. He saw the captain and the second mate stand together watching others put handcuffs on Wilke and the junkman. He saw how the captain gleefully patted Martin on the shoulder, before they bent over the paint cans.

"*Amigo, amigo,*" someone called in a whisper. A form was slinking past the box cars. "Come on," Pareda said. "Let's get out of here before they find out it isn't where they think it is."

IN THE morning, the *Ciudad* had the whole story and pictures; front-page stuff. At the police station where they had taken Wilke, the captain and the second mate admitted they had decided to go after the thief themselves, when Martin, just before Pernambuco, had discovered that someone had gotten into the strongroom.

The captain had cabled to New York for instructions from Pernambuco—just as Mr. Lamson had thought—and had been told to keep everyone on board.

The captain and Martin had hit upon the idea of catching the thief on their own account and so cash in on the reward. Everything had run like clockwork—except that the gold had not been found.

Wilke at first had not wanted to talk, taking advantage of the fact that the

gold had not been found in the boat. He said he had simply used the junk-boat as a means of getting ashore. But the *carabineros* had taken him to a little backroom in the barracks and there he had talked more freely.

Wilke had found the place where the second mate kept the key of the strong-room. It had been little trouble to make off with one of the little cases.

. . . The *Ciudad* promised further developments.

During the morning Señor Pareda appeared, waving an agreement from the insurance company calling for the award to be paid to whoever located the missing gold. At his advice, Mr. Lamson gave out the information and a tug set out almost at once with a driver on board. It took him not more than twenty minutes to find the bucket.

"You want to go back on that ship?"

Señor Pareda asked him when he returned with the check.

"No," Mr. Lamson said after a moment's thought. "I don't think it would be a pleasant trip. I guess I'll stay a while. . . . You sure did a neat job, Pareda," he went on.

"I? You're crazy. You gave me the—what you call 'scoop.'"

"By the way"—Mr. Lamson smiled in his quiet, self-conscious manner—"this fellow Salvador, does he really want to get married?"

"Yes, why?"

"And he doesn't have enough money?"

"What are you driving at, *amigo*?"

"I want to give him some of this money. He is a nice fellow."

"Why, you old, soft-hearted fool," Señor Pareda exploded. But then he added, "How much?"

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