

# Writer's Cramp

By George S. Brooks

*Believe it or not, the life of Riley was just one dull riot after another*

CHIEF ENGINEER MART RILEY sat in his cabin on the freighter Maxwellton. Sitting was the only thing he could do when the folding writing desk was let down from the cabin bulkhead. Riley himself said his cabin measured "two by nothing," and every night he faced the difficulty of stowing away inside it exactly 183 pounds of fighting Irishman, 6 feet 3 inches long.

The smallness of chief engineers' cabins was a sore subject with Riley. He had discussed it in every port of the known world.

"So you want to know what's wrong with th' merchant marine, do you? I c'n tell you what's wrong. It's short bunks. Why, it's gettin' so that nobody but sawed-offs, woppies, spiggoties an' such can sleep in th' bunks they give us. Make Congress pass a law givin' us seven-foot bunks an' mattresses an' sheets an' blankets, and us Americans'll take to th' sea again."

There was a Spartan simplicity about Riley's cabin to which the engineer officer did not object. His complaint was only on the subject of size. The room contained the writing desk, which could be folded into the wall; one chair; two lockers, one for "short clothes" and the other for dungarees; the short bunk on which Riley had to fold himself, jack-knifewise, and the wash stand.

In front of the desk Riley now sat. In his right fist he clutched a pencil stub, except now and then when he stuck it into his mouth. On the desk lay a blank sheet of note paper and a stamped, unaddressed envelope. Riley was perspiring and unhappy.

The companionway door was un-

screened and open. So were the four portholes. Now and then Riley would lay the pencil stub down and slap viciously at his neck and bare arms. The freighter was anchored in the North River, off Hoboken. It was a sultry July morning. Countless Jersey mosquitoes had discovered that the Maxwellton was within easy commuting distance.

Riley was not exactly a tidbit for any skeeter. His leathery skin, tanned alike by boiler-room fires and tropical suns, stretched over his spare frame like a hide. Muscles bulged and rippled beneath this mahogany-colored coating. His hair, once brick-red, but now bleached by fire and weather, remained unruly, except when plastered down with salt water and comb.

"HEY, Mart. What'ch doin'?" Joe Ciazzo, chief steward of the Maxwellton, whose cabin adjoined Riley's, stood in the doorway. Unlike the engineer, Ciazzo was adapted to short berths and darkened only the lower portion of the door.

"Writin'," returned Riley morosely, without looking up.

Joe advanced one step, which placed him in the middle of the cabin. He glanced over the writer's shoulder. "You ain't writ nothin' down on the paper yet, that I can see."

Riley did not resent this surveillance. "I'm just beginnin' to write."

"Who to?"

"Me old lady. Me mudder."

"Hmmm." Joe leaned his fat body against the back of the engineer's chair. He considered the problem. "Where's she live?" he asked.



Illustrated by  
Marshall Frantz

"In California. Wid Pat, me brudder that's th' traffic cop. They got a bungalow. Th' old lady raises chickens and hell with the neighbors. Their dogs chase her chickens."

"Hmmm. Well, go ahead. You oughta write home. You oughta write to your mother, regular."

"I do, don't I?"

Joe, having delivered his dictum on filial duty, breathed heavily, and mentally phrased another thought appropriate for the occasion. "Your mother is your best friend," Joe added. "You know she ain't goin' to live forever. You oughta write to her while you got th' chanct."

"I know it," Riley agreed. "Nobody lives forever."

There was a long silence as both men thought deeply. The effort at concentration made Joe breathe heavily and in snorts, like a sea lion. Riley put down his pencil, wriggled in his chair and slapped two mosquitoes.

"Whereabouts in California does your old lady live?"

"Berkeley. Well, it's outside of Berkeley. You have to go through Berkeley to get there, unless you go the other way."

"Berkeley's across from Frisco, ain't it?"

Riley nodded.

"Say. You don't have t' write. We'll put into Frisco, on our way back from Adelaide and Melbourne. You c'n talk it all to her. Save a stamp."

"That'll be March," objected Riley. "It ain't only July now."

"Well, that's so too."

"And," Riley continued virtuously, "I always write her regular. Always have. Always write her every Fourth of July an' Christmas. Never missed yet, except when we was takin' in cargo, fuelin' or at sea, or somethin' like that."

Another silence ensued.

"Why don't you write it, then?"

"I dunno how to begin. That's th' trouble with writin'."

"Date it, why don't you?"

"Yeah," Riley was grateful for the suggestion. "I'll date it."

So, at the top of his paper, in a childishly cramped and uneven hand, he wrote—"Steamship Maxwellton, Duff

Bros., Liverpool, Owners. Port of New York, in Ballast for Liverpool. 3 July."

"It's Duff Bros., Ltd." Joe pointed a fat forefinger at the error.

"She wouldn't know the diff."

With this as a running start, Riley was able to continue. "My dear ma," he set down and paused.

"What else would you write, Joe?"

"Write her th' news."

"News? She can read th' papers for herself, can't she?"

"Aw. I mean what you been doin'."

Riley digested this idea and, beneath the "My dear ma" line added, "I found a seepage in the shaft alley, under No. 3 hold. I think it's the plate rivets that's the trouble, but it might be that the bulkhead post is sprung. We had heavy weather our last trip through the Canal."

"THAT'S th' God's own truth," Joe affirmed, reading the paragraph aloud, word by word, as Riley wrote it. "That night our wireless went outa commission, when we was standin' by the wreck off Hatteras, I thought we was done. So help me."

"Well, I told her about the seepage. What else can I write?"

"Nothin' much has happened, has there?" Joe scratched his head. "You might tell her that th' ice machine has leaked ammonia gas ever since that explosion. We can't seem to get it fixed."

"She wouldn't care nothin' about ice machines," Riley returned scornfully.

There was a patter of feet on the steel deck plates outside. A gangling mess boy appeared.

"Mr. Riley."

"Huh?"

"Th' skipper wants you. He's up in th' wheelhouse, sortin' charts."

Riley rose, grumbling, but not ill-pleased with the interruption. "Th' old man don't give you a minute to yourself. Not even to write to your old lady."

"Maybe you'll think of somethin' more to write by th' time you get back," suggested the steward, backing out of the cabin so Riley would have room to stand.

Riley made his way forward over the sizzling deck and climbed to the wheelhouse. He climbed like a sailor or, more



Hirshfield, with the  
agility of a snail, put  
down ten dollars



He was not aware that their privacy had been invaded until a rough voice said, "Look at 'em." Celeste screamed, "My gosh! My husband!"

remotely, like an ape, half-raising himself on each rung with his arms instead of lifting his whole weight with his long, boomlike legs.

"Aye, aye," was his guttural salute to Captain Jensen.

"Thankee, Mr. Riley," returned the captain. "I been thinkin' ye might take a walk on the beach for me."

"Now?" demanded Riley.

"At your convenience, Mr. Riley."

The captain's consideration slightly upset the chief engineer, who had intended giving fifty reasons why he could not quit the ship before noon.

"I'd rather go now," said Riley, true to his inborn principle of contrariness.

"As you prefer, Mr. Riley. I'd of gone myself, but th' underwriters' man is coming aboard to renew our papers. I want you should go to the bank for me. I'm payin' off t'morrow, before th' hands go ashore. You'll take this draft, and your license papers for identification and bring me back th' currency it calls for."

The captain handed Riley a bank draft for \$3,000. It was drawn to "Bearer."

"You'll want me to come right back, I suppose."

"Don't hurry. Cruise about a bit, if you're so inclined. But get to th' bank before it closes. Tomorrow's a holiday."

"Aye, aye. I know th' day it is."

Riley left the wheelhouse. The captain, mildly amused, smiled after him. Riley was, he knew, as dependable as a Swiss chronometer and as cranky as a ship's cook.

SO IT followed that, shortly after noon, Riley stood in the line before the A to D paying teller's window. In his right paw was a slip of blue paper, the second vice president's endorsement and signature still moist on the back of it.

Riley looked much less ferocious, even presentable, in his shore-going clothes. His blue serge suit had a proper nautical cut to it. His cap was merchant officer's gear and his cheek was shaved down to the second layer of tanned skin.

He gazed about the bank with the air of perpetual wonder with which he always regarded landmen and their ways, overlooking in his preoccupation a rat-faced man of forty, with cold steel-blue eyes who stepped into the line behind him. This man wore a gray summer suit, fancifully tailored, and a loud-banded, soft-straw hat. Riley's disregard for him was scarcely mutual. The rat-faced one had watched Riley narrowly ever since the sailor had been directed to the vice president's desk.

The line was a long one. Messengers were waiting for pay rolls to be made

up. The delay seemed interminable.

The rat-faced man, too obviously immersed in the financial section of a newspaper, managed to steal a glance at the draft Riley held. As he saw the four figures on the face of it he covertly nodded to a second man standing at the stock ticker. The second man went out.

The line moved slowly forward to the paying teller's cage.

"Pardon me."

"Yeah?" Riley turned as the other touched his elbow and for the first time noticed the individual behind him.

The man in the gray suit was looking at his watch.

"I'm tied up here. . . . I'm late, Mr. ah . . . ah—"

"Riley. Mart Riley."

"Mr. Riley. I'm Max Hirshfield, in business just around the corner. Everybody knows where my store is. I got to get back to my store before my partner leaves. I wonder if you'd do me a favor."

"Sure."

Hirshfield dug down into his pocket and produced two \$100 bills, which he handed to Riley. "Mind askin' the teller to change these into fives and tens? I think I can get back before you get to the window. If not, I'll be in my store, almost next door here. On Broadway."

"All right," Riley accepted the bills. Hirshfield left, hurrying toward the Broadway entrance.

It did not then occur to Riley to wonder why Hirshfield was standing in the long A to D line when there was no line at all at the H to L window, and certainly the name Hirshfield began with an H. Riley, traveling under the alias of "Bearer," was in the right place. Hirshfield was not.

RILEY was considering, as he finally neared the window, if he would have trouble finding Hirshfield's store. But, to his great relief, the man returned in time to watch him receive the change for the two century bills. Then, having delivered this money to its rightful owner, Riley put in the draft for \$3,000 and received for it a sizable package of fives, tens and twenties, which he put in the inside pocket of his double-breasted coat.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Riley. Just caught my partner in time. Going out this way?"

Riley had no prejudice against using the Broadway entrance, and permitted Hirshfield to pilot him to that door.

"There's my place," announced Hirshfield proudly, pointing to a "gents' furnishings" store beneath a gaudy "Hirshfield and Ziegler, Inc.," sign. "Well, much obliged to you again. Oh, by the way, ever touch anything?"

"What you talkin' about?"

"Ever take a drink?"

"Sure. Always." Riley thought it a silly question.

"Come along with me, Mr. Riley. I'll buy one. I know a good place. I don't never drink in my store. It sets a bad habit for my clerks."

"What's yours?" asked Hirshfield, a moment later.

"A little liquor."

"Make mine beer," Hirshfield added quickly. "Well, here's luck."

"Luck," echoed Riley.

"Good whisky, isn't it?" Hirshfield insinuated as he sipped his beer.

"Well, I tasted worse . . . once."

Hirshfield slapped another dollar bill on the table. "What'll it be?"

"Same."

"Same here." Riley tossed off the second glass, waving away the chaser of water.

"Let's go again." Hirshfield pushed a third bill toward the bartender. "Another beer and whisky."

At three o'clock Riley suggested he was hungry. He beckoned to the chef and ordered a modest lunch of lamb chops, fried potatoes, summer squash, a side dish of baked beans, finishing it off with two pieces of pie, cheese and coffee. He put whisky in his coffee. Hirshfield, none too secure on his feet after drinking uncounted glasses of needed beer, had little appetite for food.

"Do you always drink like this?"

Hirshfield inquired solicitously.

"Naw. Just when I come ashore,"

Riley returned. "Let's have another."

Hirshfield emitted a mental groan. Each round of drinks cost him a dollar; seventy-five cents for the ounce glass of cut whisky and a quarter for the beer which he drank himself. Hirshfield was stingy, even when playing for a \$3,000 stake. In his rôle of affluent merchant he had insisted that the party was "his." Now, to his disgust, he was learning that there are thirty-two drinks in a quart of watered whisky, which meant an investment of \$32. And a quart of whisky, spread over an afternoon's drinking, was a minor matter in Riley's life.

As for the chief engineer of the Maxwellton, he had never before encountered so agreeable a philanthropist who insisted upon playing tunes upon the cash register. Riley (Continued on page 51)



The inimitable Mitzi in the specially fitted automobile dressing-room she uses on tours

## Road Star By Hugh Leamy

**"Broadway isn't everything," Mitzi's manager said. She never forgot it. Her friends and admirers remote from New York have always had her loyalty. Perhaps that's why she's a Broadway headliner too**

**H**ER name is really Mizzi Hajos. It was the late Henry W. Savage who reasoned that as long as it was pronounced Mitzi it might as well be billed that way, and as long as only one half of one per cent of the American adult population could pronounce the Hajos properly, that part of it might as well be dropped entirely. Perhaps too—for he was a foresighted gentleman—he had in mind the future saving in electric-light bills when he plucked Mitzi from vaudeville almost 15 years ago.

Mitzi is just four feet ten inches in what I suppose you would call height. Though you wouldn't believe that if you saw her almost lost in the great double-high living-room of her duplex apartment home. She has the bluest eyes you ever saw in your life and an accent just as pronounced as ever you've heard it when she was before the footlights. An accent, by the way, no traces of which you're going to find beyond this point in this interview—and that's a promise.

She came here from Budapest when she was about 14. She came here to make Broadway, after a rigorous apprenticeship, first in special dramatic schools and later in the theaters of her native land. Well, she made Broadway,

all right. But in doing so she discovered a vaster, no less important region west of the Mazda Meadows.

"Broadway isn't everything, remember," Mr. Savage told her when first he took her under his managerial wing.

"And Broadway isn't everything, I remembered," she told me the other afternoon as we chatted in her apartment. She remembered it more keenly perhaps than any other player who has achieved stardom, for surely no one has been more loyal to the audiences of the fast-disappearing "road" houses. For the reason that she has toured from coast to coast herself with every production in which she has ever appeared on Broadway and with the original production as intact as possible; for the reason that in 5,000 performances she has missed only one, she has a stout and friendly following all over the land and is as well known—perhaps a little more so—outside New York as she is on Broadway.

### An Eye for Business

I have never talked with an artiste—and any sophisticate who wants to go around cracking that Mitzi isn't an artiste gets a poke in the eye and his driver's license suspended for one year—I have never, I say, talked with an artiste who had a keener or more impersonal sense of loyalty to her public. Hers is more the attitude of a manufacturer of some article that is in measured demand.

"The customers want my stuff. It's my business and to my interest to give it to them and to give them the best I can." Thus the manufacturer. And thus Mitzi.

The lads whose rapid world is limited by the somewhat elastic boundaries of New York's white-light district will

raise their eyebrows and tell you, "Ah, but Mitzi's just for the family trade."

Well, they're not so darn' original, at that. That's just what Mr. Savage decided she was going to be 15 years ago. That's why he schooled her in the ways of the road—not that Broadway hasn't its share of the family trade, though they'd never admit it: neither Broadway nor the trade!

"Don't get the New York idea that only New York counts," Mr. Savage said. "More people have ruined their pocketbooks even while they made their Broadway reputations than ever lost money on coast-to-coast trips. Besides, if I'm going to put \$50,000 or more into a show, you're going to play it and play it till there isn't anything left to play."

So she started out in Sari and played it till there wasn't anything left to play. She was a peasant girl in that. People say there is a formula for all Mitzi plays. Mitzi says there isn't; her rôles have always been different.

"For instance," she says, "after Sari came Pom Pom, in which I played an actress. Then I was an immigrant acrobat in Head Over Heels, then a street urchin in The Magic Ring, and then more recently in The Madcap I was a movie extra."

Yes, but there is a formula, and people know it and that's what makes them stick. Migosh, look at the Alger books!

"I won't play any rôle in which I don't like the character I'm playing," said Mitzi. Which must be pretty tough nowadays when most of the important characters in the dramas seem to be peculiarly undesirable persons.

"So long as the character isn't not nice, I like to play anything they want me to play. Oh, I likes dat." (My goodness, there we go!)

It must be a relief to theatrical managers to handle a star as businesslike and unspoiled by temperament as Mitzi. During her long association with Mr. Savage they had only one quarrel—well, one serious quarrel. They were like father and daughter, this beloved producer and the youngster he had nursed along to stardom. He taught her showmanship and loyalty; much of which was trying but all of which was good for her, she admits. And when her father was killed during the war, Mr. Savage telegraphed her:

"Don't cry, Baby. You have me for a father."

The only serious argument that marked eleven seasons of association, until Mr. Savage virtually stopped producing and Mitzi went with the Shuberts, came about during the early days of Pom Pom.

They'd opened in Hartford, swung to Springfield, and were due for Boston the following Monday. That was to be the big opening night. When they hit Boston for Sunday rehearsals they found a most disappointing set for the third act. It was one that had been used in a previous Savage production.

### Little Things that Count

"Mr. Savage was not stingy," Mitzi told me, "but he was—well, just a little bit careful. So he'd had what was once a library set made over into the set for an act that was supposed to be played in a boudoir. But it still looked like a library set: it never could look like anything but a library set. My, I was angry and disappointed, for, let me tell you, scenery is a very, very important part of any production, talent and music and everything else considered."

"Well, we rehearsed all day and were called back again for rehearsals in the evening. At the close of the afternoon I was so worked up that I walked off the stage and ran to my dressing-room and toppled over against the table and cried and cried and cried. They must have heard me on the stage."

"Anyway, Mr. Savage came down, and he took a great big bandanna handkerchief like he often wore around his neck during rehearsals, and he wiped away my tears, threatened to spank me and then promised me that everything would be all right. By that night, he assured me, the matter of the offending set would be straightened out. It was."

"When we got to the theater that evening he met me triumphantly. 'Your Uncle Dudley's fixed everything fine,' he told me. 'You needn't worry any more about that set for the third act. We're not going to have any third act.' I protested that it couldn't be done, but Mr. Savage was firm. He was always firm."

"So we opened Pom Pom with only two acts and played it for two years and a half. But" (and there was a gleam of satisfaction in those remarkable eyes) "after it closed Mr. Savage came to me and said: 'You were right, after all. If we'd kept the third act, we could have played it five years.'"

Mitzi was the first of her family to go on the stage. Her father held a government post in Budapest. She always showed a talent for theatricals and was dancing and reciting at charity affairs before she was ten. Then, as the talent persisted, she was enrolled in a national school of the theater.

"Going on the stage in Europe was not the casual affair that it is here," she said, "I got my foundation in two years that were devoted entirely to attending the training. We over there don't start in the chorus and work up as so many have done in America. At least at that time, we didn't. Of course, since the war it's changed a lot."

It was William Morris, the vaudeville booking (Continued on page 50)