

‘ ‘ G O S H ’ ’ By ARTHUR E. MCFARLANE

Illustrations by Howard Heath

IN the rolls of that metropolitan fire department he was George Wellman. In the engine house he was "Gosh." For "Gosh!" was his exclamation. And, to the ceaseless delight of the sophisticated and the really profane, he used it a hundred and fifty times a day. He was farm bred. For years he had worked as a hired man. And, in his large, confiding, and altogether likable simplicity, a hired man he had remained.

But what he did not talk about, what, with a queer outcropping of social pride, he had confided only to the captain, was the fact that for the year before he had come to the Greater City and satisfied a life's ambition by putting on the uniform as a fourth grader, he had been a member, in a Lower Lake port, of a longshore gang—a gang which specialized on coal jobs. "Specializing on coal jobs" meant that, working on a tonnage basis, with three buckets and a block and tackle, a gang such as "Gosh" had belonged to could take the coal out of any freighter under sail or steam rather faster than it had been put in by chute or automatic conveying belt. It meant working in an atmosphere so thick that an arc light could have been of use only to mark its own location. Nor, when the job was done, was there any stoker's "plunge" or "shower" awaiting.

Unsuspected by Gosh, one characteristic of the old life had stayed with him. To say it frankly, he had an exasperating inability to know when he had got all the "smoke" off. Sometimes, after a particularly thick fire, his wrists would carry waterlines for days. I say exasperating, because that company was a white-collar company in a central downtown district. And while affection for Gosh was warm and universal, "Lord, you know," explained his fellows, "he wants to get it through his nut that Number 19 is a squad that's on parade!"

What started the trouble for him was the simple, Simon-pure quality of his democracy. His attitude toward the company was that of threshing-day under the straw-carriers. To him they were all alike—"you fellers." And though Ryan and Carrol, grizzled first-graders and medal men, did not wholly like it, nobody said anything. When, however, the lieutenant, Hannan, found himself included in Gosh's freemasonry, an atmosphere was created of which Gosh himself was conscious. And it puzzled him greatly. But, seeing that every other man in "Number 19" was now hourly and ruthlessly awaiting the moment when Gosh would get his bumps, no light was vouchsafed to him.

He received both two days later, when the battalion chief made his visit. The chief was closeted with the captain in the captain's upper room, when from one of his native interests Gosh had a thought. He climbed the stairs, opened the captain's door without knocking, and said, "You fellers had ought to take a look at that there Billy horse." The battalion chief, a broad, Falstaffian man, exploded. The captain exploded, too, but not in the same way. One does not like to be made a fool of in one's own house. . . . Gosh got himself downstairs breathless with astonishment. And twelve hours later he could be heard still "Goshing!" in his sleep.

IN the meantime, those twelve hours had, for the captain, been hours calculated to carry a man with an uncertain temper and little sense of humour—and such the captain was—a long distance toward dementia. Five minutes after that battalion chief had reached the next fire station, the captain was called to the telephone. "Say, Cap," came an ecstatic inquiry, "have you fellers took a look yet at that there—?" . . . The next man got only to the "you fellers." But there were few calls that he succeeded in cutting off before they got to that. And, before the day was over he had cut off the Chief, who, needless to say, was not asking about Billy horses. Meanwhile he had been called away from every meal. He had been called up three times during the night. And by the next day the

whole engine house was in a kind of aching hysteria. Gosh himself had joined it. "Gosh," he said, "unless there was some way of keepin' from seein' the old feller, you can't do nothin' else but laugh!"

And when, for the fifth time since noon, some one had insisted that his message was for the captain alone, and the captain had once more answered—to smash the receiver back upon the hook in a fury that now seemed to gasp for breath—even as he passed Gosh on his return, Syme reached under the table and jabbed Gosh in his floating ribs. He went off at once—like a cow with a mangel in her throat.

The captain did what is supposed to be done only in comic pictures: he virtually danced about Gosh. "You great big coal-heavin' fool!" he cried, "what are you on a company like this for, anyway, I don't know!—Lord," he whimpered, "if you want to give the bunch somethin' to laugh at, supposin' you look at that for a while!"—and he showed one of Gosh's wrists. "An' that, too!"—he showed the other.



"And the next moment he had made out the captain's hand and arm."

The laughing stopped like a bunch of firecrackers quenched in ice water. The captain had not got upstairs before he would have given his silver trumpet to take it back again. But there are certain things which are, of their nature, unretractable. Gosh sat where he was, opening and closing his mouth. The colour seemed to keep working in deeper and deeper like the mark of a blow. "Aw, say now," the lieutenant broke in on the silence, "aw, that's all right now, son. H—, now, the old man was just blowin' off a little. That smoke over on Eleventh's left us all smutty as flues. I was just thinkin' I'm needin' to get to the suds myself." "Well, I guess—I guess," said Gosh, thickly, "I'll be gettin' to them first. An' I was on a coal-heavin' job before I come down here. I had folks was needin' the money. . . . But if you fellers had give me notice that I wasn't your kind—"

"Aw, h—, now! Aw, take a throw, take a throw!" They all pawed awkwardly at him together. "Aw, go an' fight yourself!"

If, in general, the mills of the gods grind slowly, sometimes they grind at a speed to make fiction itself look foolish. The call—it was the same day—

came in on one of the auxiliary service alarms which are thick along the water front. And, as the truck swung out of the narrow cross-town street into the crowded breadth of asphalt that gave upon the pier line, driver and crew began to look for their smoke. Save for that from their own engine, there was none. But the sidewalk population had all begun to tail in one direction. And, jarring across the B. & L. tracks, truck and steamer followed. With the same leadership, they turned off down the double siding that led to the Metropolitan Fuel Company's trestle and coal pockets.

Coal pockets, or hoppers, are of various sorts; but they are all of the same general plan, that of a huge, hollow elephant's head. The loaded coal cars are backed laboriously up the slope of the trestle to where it widens and enters the shed above the succession of great steel or timbered bins below. The bin is the pocket proper, the elephant's skull. And it is covered in save for the space between the tracks, through which the cars are dumped. The only mouth or outlet is the big spout, at the end of the elephant's trunk, from which the delivery trucks are filled.

At the top of that Metropolitan trestle and just outside the first pocket, two policemen and a dozen of the company's yard men were running crazily about. At the foot of the trestle another policeman and some of the office staff were trying to keep the crowd back.

The lieutenant, with Ryan and Carrol after him, broke through and ran on up. For a moment Gosh stood uncertainly; then he, too, followed heavily after.

Evidently it was not a fire job; there was neither smoke nor flame to be seen even now. Those Metropolitan yard men—a foreign lot—were all shouting together. But the lieutenant and his truckmen could make out the central fact: some one had "gone down"—fallen into the pocket. And for those who work with hopped slack, to "go down" has its own significance.

"Why didn't you open her up below and let her out?" shouted Carrol.

"Tague an hour! Two hun'ert ton she's got!"

THE lieutenant ran to the side of the trestle and megaphoned with his hands. "Fetch a roof line!" But with the noise of the crowd and the ear-numbing pulse of the steamers, he could not make himself heard. He spat an oath and started down for it himself.

And as yet no sound whatever had come up with the dust that belched from the pocket mouth. Ryan gave up trying to make out anything in the clucking babel of Hun and Polack about him, and, flattening himself beside one of the policemen, he looked over. "Cripes! he's in all right," he said, with the queer brutality of those whose business is danger. "Did yuh see who it was?"

"Why, ain't I told you forty times?" shouted about the only American among the shovel men. "It's your boss, the captain!"

"What?"

"What you say?"

"Sure it is! It's the first thing I told you. He was over here on inspection duty. You knowed he was, yourself!"

"God!"

But both Ryan and Carrol were old men. They still waited the half minute for the lieutenant and orders.

Had they been looking at Gosh, they would have seen that he was already bare-headed and coat free. "I don't know as we better wait for that rope, fellers," he said. "I reckon I know this work well enough to git to him without."

He had twitched out a green-and-yellow handkerchief. He crowded the middle of it into his mouth to get it wet, caught the damp place between his teeth, knotted the ends about his head, and went over. If he hurt himself as he came down, he did not know it. "Cap'n," he called, lifting the handkerchief for a moment—"Boss!" . . . And then to those above in the squared-off murk of light, "I can't get nothin' but his dust—even if it is his dust. 'I'll be goin' on."

Slack can best be described as soft coal dust mixed with screenings. It is so fine, it sets so

(Continued on page 32.)