



“COWBOYS of the air,” Jack Haynes and Jimmy Halton were; structural steel workers: that most dangerous calling, where men, working in daily association with peril, become so calloused to it they forget it exists—forget it, until one day they look down from the slender span of a steel girder swung dizzily over space. Then they know the face of danger, and *then they are through*.

But Big Jack and Little Jimmy were not through; not yet. Big Jack was shouldering his six foot two of splendidly muscled, steel sinewed body up the rungs of the ladder of success, swinging little Jimmy along with him as matter of course. Big Jack had been doing that ever since he had grabbed Jimmy, ten years old, but the undersized “butt” of the schoolyard, out of a ruck of youngsters who were giving him the “licking” of his young life.

It was Big Jack’s strength that was the bond between them, but it was also a bar; he never thought of it, it wasn’t his way to dig below the surface and mull over grievances, but little Jimmy never lost sight of the

disparity between them. It was only that he was always hoping his chance would come to prove that, man to man, his mettle was as good as his partner’s, that held them together when they were man-grown. But it is none so easy for a five foot four runt of a man to show the stuff he’s made of in a world where men measure men mainly by the heft of their fists through sheer force of occupation; and Jim Halton was still odd-man-out when Bill Carney—William Carney, steel construction contractor in a growing Western business town—handed out the jobs.

“I’d not take another job on those terms, on’y that I’m going to lay for Big Jack till I get my chance to even up things between us,” Little Jimmy told himself bitterly. He had brooded so long over his grievance that, like most ingrowing things, it threatened to sour and turn him into a rank trouble maker. “Why don’t he drop *me*, ’stead of everlastingly making me the condition o’ being took on himself?”

That was Big Jack’s way everywhere they went. “My pal an’ me sign on together: Little Jimmy here fits in anywhere, I do the work

you want,” was his slogan.

Bill Carney, who had worked up from steel riveter himself, ran an experienced eye over Jack Haynes’s lithe, powerful frame, and took the pair on. Made to straddle the monster girders, the big fellow was, pounding and drilling and clanking, and playing pitch-and-toss with red hot rivets; Little Jimmy would do for general utility man for the hundred odd jobs that crop up constantly in steel construction work to which no regular worker is assigned.

That was a year before; now Carney had landed the big Gigantic contract, the first of a series of sky-scrapers the city was planning to build. If he made good it would land him in the big contractor class, against the opposition of the big Acme Steel Construction Company. The rival concern had till then the monopoly of the city’s big construction work, and they were taking the loss of the Gigantic badly.

“The Acmes got those Gigantic people to ring in a stiff time forfeiture clause on Carney. Course it’s a big job to swing to a small man for the first time, an’ they want to protect themselves,” Big Jack told his partner over a last pipe, the night Carney signed the contract. “If he don’t come to scratch the Acme Company steps in an’ finishes the job, an’ collars all he’s sunk in the venture in the bargain.”

“He’s got his work cut out then,” Little Jimmy said, sucking on his pipe. “That gang won’t stop short o’ nothing to bust him up, if he gives ’em half a chance.”

Big Jack grinned like a mischievous monkey: he had news to tell, and he was elated over it.

“Carney ain’t trusting to his own eyes this trip,” he said. “Take off your cap to your new boss, Jimmy lad. I’m temp’rary foreman under him on the Gigantic. If we make good this trip we get the job permanent with the chance to handle the small contracts by ourselves while

Carney looks after the big ones. He figures he’ll get those other ’scrapers if he don’t fall down now. We got to hustle, Jim; we got to hustle on the job.”

Jim Halton eyed him sourly. Big Jack had all the luck because he was so strong; his own undersized body unfitted him for the heavy drill and riveting work where a man got the chance to make good, but he needn’t rub it in that way!

“Carney’s hard as nails,” he said viciously. “He’ll drive the men like mules to win out, an’ toss ’em on the scrap heap if they drop on him.”

Little Jimmy was no mean prophet. It was hustle for all hands on the Gigantic building from the moment of breaking ground for its forty steel-framed stories, eighteen of them thrusting up from the middle of the main structure in a slender spire of a tower, capped by a monster smoke-stack, and the first man to fall went to the scrap heap.

That was Horrocks, a rigger who missed his footing when the men were working on the big stack. He went to the hospital with a fractured skull, and when he came out ten days later, he looked to Carney to tide him over till he could go back to his regular work. But the boss contractor’s nerves were raw with the strain of all he was staking, and his resources were overtaxed already to meet the exigencies of the big undertaking.

“With us havin’ the devil’s time to get hands enough to get done on time,” he roared, “The man’s daffy yet from that crack on the skull—an’ his own fault he got it—or he’d not expect me to pay riggers to stay idle, let alone I’ve not got the money.”

“He’s gone off swearing he’ll do you up, Carney. It’s bad business if the man is a bit off his head, which may be,” Little Jimmy advised. “Don’t forget those Acme people are gunning for you, even if they ain’t showed their hand yet.”

Carney was more worried over that than anything else; he had expected a fight with the Acme Company; would rather have enjoyed it, but so far they had played a waiting game. It was unnatural!

“With the steel shack full o’ potentialities like it is, we’ll take no more chances on what they may do,” he snapped back at Halton. “This day you’re elected spotter. Do you spot the mishaps before they hap.”

“Tis a mean job an’ worse business than what you done to Horrocks, Carney—I’ll not take it,” Little Jimmy exploded. “Where’s Big Jack working till I tell him I’ve quit?”

“Riveting the rim of the smoke stack where that fool rigger should be an’ ain’t. Seein’ we’re short-handed, Haynes ain’t takin’ chances on more men fallin’ down on us.”

Halton left him chuckling grimly over his grim joke, and made his way up to the temporary ladder that had been run up to the stack, topping the steel tower like a spindling sentinel on guard over the skeleton structure below. Crawling out on to the crow’s nest gallery that ran around its base, he craned his neck up at the bosun’s-chair, a short plank with a triangle of rope rove through either end, swung from the rim of the stack for the riveting, with a sense of defiant envy. It was man’s work that, that Big Jack was at; not like being picked for a spotter!

The fall ends of the rope, trailing over the sheet iron nest, and the plank itself swayed gustily in the high wind that was always blowing up there, and Big Jack was steadying himself with one hand on the edge of the stack as he worked. He bent over to look down when Halton called to him, and in that second’s inattention the wind had the plank whipped from under him, whirling it round to the far side of the stack.

With a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, Halton watched him swaying tenuously in space, then lunge forward with

the other hand, grip the stack rim and, hand over hand, slowly, surely make his way round to the insecure foothold of the planking. When he reached it, Little Jimmy was already crawling back through the aperture to the steel ladder. He wasn’t going to quit after all! In that moment of suspense his mind, working oddly, unreasoningly, but none the less surely, had leaped to a conviction: the huge network of girders, like some sentient evil thing, was laying to trap Big Jack; he had only to wait and the huge steel spider web would give him the chance he wanted to even the score between them.

“I don’t like the job,” he was telling Carney five minutes later, “but a man takes what comes to him as it comes.”

Halton was right; the men took it badly that Carney was hunting for crookedness where it was obvious none had existed. They had their pride in rushing the work on the mammoth building before; now mishaps multiplied, culminating finally when twice in one morning they just missed dropping a five-ton girder on the town. Big Jack, coming down from the tower where he was bossing his own crew of riveters, found the boss contractor with his jaw clamped like a wolf trap over it.

“Twas no accident but the work of an expert done that,” he said. “I found a whole row of king-pin rivet-heads sheared off clean as cheese on the under side of each beam. What’s that partner of yours, you’re always boosting, doing that he don’t stop such things happening under my nose? Let him know if it happens again *I’ll* know where I get off with him. See to it I don’t get the same idea of you, Jack Haynes.”

It was only the rough edge of an overstrained man’s tongue Big Jack knew, but he made the mistake of telling Halton when the bolts were found smashed on the big steel ladder temporarily set up to the smoke stack gallery, and the ladder itself swinging loose

from its holdings so the men had to hoist themselves with the bosun's-chair to their riveting on the stack.

"Carney's got it doped out you must be taking Acme money, Jim, or you'd run down the sneaking devil that's tampering with the steel work nights," he said unwisely. "He'll have the whole top toppling down on us, at that if ever he gets at one o' the tower girders like he's done below."

Halton eyed him malevolently. "If it's night-watching you have in mind," he said, "you can take the job on yourself. I'll not lose beauty sleep for a man that's giving me a bad name a'ready."

Big Jack took the malicious suggestion literally. Halton knew he would; had made it with the thought in mind that here at last was his chance to show the big fellow that brawn was not everything; in a real issue brains counted. Of course, Haynes would botch the job of trapping the malefactor; that would be his own opportunity, watching the run of events from the background, to step in and turn the trick his partner had fallen down on.

He found Big Jack already on watch beside a fire he had built on the main floor of the giant building when, late that same night, he dodged past in the shadows of the skeleton girders cast everywhere.

"Course he wouldn't think to come up here where he'd have that Acme chap against the fire glow," Halton said half-contemptuously as he hauled himself up in the bosun's chair to the crow's nest gallery that ran around the big grim black smoke funnel.

Every nerve tensed, all his senses alert, he leaned over the iron sheathed coping, watching for his quarry. Far below the leaping flames flickered in the dark bowels of the Gigantic, like ruddy pin-points vaguely lighting the gloom. Up top the wind was blowing in a gale that sent the sheep's-back clouds scudding across the mackerel sky; it

lashed his face like icicles, and set the many storied spire swaying and groaning in all its joints like a tortured giant. He was chilled to the bone and growing drowsy with it, when—

*Click-click-click.* Down in the tower right under him the chipping of steel on steel sounded, an eery faint note, but distinct in the night stillness.

*Click-click-click.*

Some one was shearing away the rivet heads on one of the tower girders. He listened appalled, thinking of what Big Jack said would happen to the tower if one of its beams ever got loose in such a wind as had set it snapping like whiplash to-night. For a moment he could see nothing in the pitchy darkness; no specter form outlined itself against the fire glow. Then a sudden mad swoop of the gale ripped a section of the clouds apart like a torn ceiling cloth, and by the light of the scared stars, Halton saw *It*—saw an upturned, staring face, the face of the grim crawling planning Thing, clicking its way, like bare bones on steel, across the king-bolt girder that locked the whole tower against the wind. The face of Horrocks it was, the rigger who had fallen from this very smoke-stack where Little Jimmy himself was trapped now by the big steel spider web, instead of Big Jack as he had planned and counted on!

"Horrocks!" he shouted. "Horrocks! The man's mad like Carney said," he thought. "He must be, to risk his life out there the way he's doing, whether he's taking Acme money for it or not."

Mad Horrocks might be, but not so mad but that he knew enough to unlock the one girder of all in the tower that would most swiftly send it crashing to destruction. At the thought Halton's hand shot out for the bosun's chair; but the hoist rope was not flapping against the stack as he had left it. With insane cunning, and so quietly Halton had not detected him, Horrocks had shifted the sheave-

block below on the tower top platform; the double line of rope it held in place slanted now straight out from the rim of the stack, taut as an iron rod, swinging the plank beyond his reach.

A giggling, ghostly laugh floated up to him at that. "I'm dead, Little Jimmy," the rigger croaked without stopping his shearing. "You'll be dead too soon. I swore 'fore I died I'd bring the tower down on Carney like it brought me down. My head's been muddled, that's why I got at the wrong girders before; but I remembered to-night. I'm shearing off the rivet-heads on the king-bolt girder now; that will unlock the whole bloomin' shebang; the wind will do the rest. I'll learn Carney to crack my head an' then leave me to perish in poverty."

Halton's hair pulled as he listened to the madman; the next instant he had out the big revolver he had stowed in his pocket after Big Jack rejected it earlier in the evening in favor of his own big fists.

"Horrocks!" he shouted down again to the pale squirming blur on the narrow girder below him. "Horrocks, maybe you can't see it, but I've got a six-gun trained on you. I'll shoot when I've counted twenty-five, unless you swing in that bosun's-chair before."

Another giggling laugh as the ominous *Click-click-click* went on, was his sole answer. Even then Halton hesitated.

"I can't shoot that poor crazed devil," he said, "not though it's my life and the tower against a madman. I wonder now would Big Jack hear half a dozen quick shots and come a running to see why?"

The challenge of the shots carried, as he planned. Before the revolver spat out its last staccato *crack-crack-crack*, he saw the dim glow of the lantern swaying in Big Jack's hand as he raced up the long ascent to the tower.

Horrocks was almost two-thirds of the way across the king-bolt girder with his shearing

when Halton yelled down his warning to Big Jack.

"Look out, Jack! The beam's almost loose," he shouted. "Come up and swing me in the bosun's chair. I'm lightweight enough to get out to him maybe; you'll buckle the whole thing under us with your weight on that crippled girder."

He was too late. Already Big Jack was straddling the girder, working out to stay the mischief maker before the mischief had gone beyond repair. It swayed and sagged drunkenly as he worked forward, but he made the rigger and shot a powerful arm around his middle, just as the other, startled, started erect, lost his balance, and lunged into space.

The drag of his dead weight flung Haynes almost face down on the narrow girder, but his grip held long enough for his right foot to shoot forward, catching the struggling Horrocks square between the eyes. Halton saw him drag the limp body across the girder, head and heels down, and then he saw that which made him go sick and cold.

Big Jack had come to his moment of realization with the sudden sense of the peril Horrocks had so narrowly escaped—the moment every "cowboy of the air," comes to know in his time. Halton saw him fling his hands high above his head and crumple over his unconscious burden, just as he started to work back to the tower stairs, and knew that, unaided, Jack would never make his way over that clear drop of three hundred feet to where safety lay twenty feet away. Next moment Little Jimmy was shouting down at him from the gallery coping.

"Hold tight Jack!" he cried, "I'm coming down to get you. Lie like you are till I get there, an'—DON'T LOOK DOWN!"

He balanced for an instant on the precarious foothold, measuring the distance to the hoist ropes slanting just beyond reach from the rim of the stack above him. There was no

time to release the bosun's chair Horrocks had blocked; he must jump for the ropes and go down them hand over hand if Big Jack was to have his scant chance of life.

This was Jimmy's moment of realization. He knew now that was what he had been wanting all along: to stand shoulder to shoulder, man to man with him in the game of life, and give back all Big Jack had given him.

Halton leaped for a hold on the hoist ropes, made them by a bare margin, and went down so fast his hands were badly burned when he reached bottom.

He did not feel them sting; he was too busy slashing the hoist ropes free from the pulley block. Coiling the line as he ran, he darted down the spiral stairs to the king-bolt girder and his helpless mate. Carney and his helpers came panting up as he finished reeving one end of it to the stairs and two stout uprights, and the cross section supporting the crippled beam, and had the other end lashed securely around his own body close under the armpits. The boss contractor was quick to grasp his plan.

"It's soo'cide for three!" Carney said. "The beam's barely holding them two; it's bound to buckle the minute you go out. You'll just dash out your brains swinging in against a girder for nothing: they'll drop anyway."

Halton worked out on the beam that bucked like a bronco with every move he made, for what seemed an endless space to him and the men paying out the rope to match his progress. Haynes took no risk of looking down into the terrifying nothingness below; he even made shift to help when Little Jimmy slipped the loose rope end dangling from his own body, under the other's bulk.

But it was the last flick on raw nerves. Big Jack snarled out his refusal to budge without the man he had risked his own life to fetch in from his nefarious work, when he found Halton had not rope enough to trice the three

together.

"An' darn him too!" Halton snapped back exasperated; he was saving life himself, and he felt the same about it as Big Jack, but what could he do? He hadn't figured on enough rope; that was all there was to it. "Let him take his chance till I come back for him—he wanted it. You're coming *with* me, Jack Haynes. if I yank you in at the rope's end"

"No, you won't an' he won't," Big Jack began stubbornly.

The wind settled it. With a savage blast it swooped upon them; the crippled king-bolt girder, already strained beyond endurance lurched and groaned under the fierce onslaught, then, like an embattled imp cheated of its prey, it wrenched loose from the holding cross section where Horrocks had sheared away its guarding rivet-heads, and, buckling into space, ruthlessly flung off its triple human burden.

"Gawd!" Carney's voice screamed above the scream of the wind. "Don't let 'em swing in against the girders. Haul in the slack men; haul in for Gawd's sake!"

"It's like fishing 'em up from the devil," one of the men said. "Look at 'em; like tops, ain't they?"

Like tops they were, Haynes and Halton spinning in the red lit void at the end of the long rope, with Horrocks clutched in the vise-like grip of Big Jack's arms, to that devil's whip of a wind. The men above them were muscled to steel by toil on steel, but Carney's breath and his helpers' was coming in gasps, and the hempen strands of the rope snarled angry protest, before they finally managed to drag the dead weight of those three to the comparative safety of the spiral stairway.

"I'm through, Carney," Big Jack told the boss contractor when he had them untriced; he shoved aside Halton who had grabbed for him at that. "Let be, Jimmy, I'm all here but my nerve. It's just that; we got to hunt a different

job.”

“Sufferin’ cats!” Carney yelled at him. “Ain’t I always said a foreman ain’t called on to do the high work himself; he’s there to boss the men that are. An’ d’ye think I lugged that clumsy carcass of yours out o’ the hole where you tried to throw away the nerviest man ever worked under me, to lose Little Jimmy here, right when I’m short-handed, an’ you’ve busted up my tower on me?”

Big Jack looked at Halton. “What say, partner?” he asked. “Do we keep the job?”

Little Jimmy liked that, that was putting him in on a man’s work, where he’d always

wanted to be; it marked their new footing, the first time Haynes had ever turned to him for advice.

“Uh-huh!” he said, grinning, “I guess, man to man, Jack, we can manage to fix up that king-bolt girder for Carney, ’fore it brings the top down on him. What say, we get the men out right now, an’ hustle the job, so nothing can happen.”

“Uh-huh!” Big Jack agreed, thrusting out his big fist, and the two struck hands on it, understanding each other at last.

Man to man each was as good as the other, and each man knew it now.