

CHAPTER II

Bob The Hob Turns Gentleman

"I know, George," Jack Gardner was saying, "it's your assignment, but it can also be your funeral."

"Come, Jack, in about a year I shall be out of here...."

"A year may prove a long time."

"Wipe off the gloom, prophet of doom," George laughed. "You know the 'Light' was quite right. I am the callow youth with the fanatic exuberance. But what I believe, I believe. I am no crusader, but neither am I a pussyfooter."

"I brought up a Frankenstein to my own destruction!" There was a twinkle of good humor in Jack's eye. "Let's say the Eventide will survive the storm, and we with it."

"There'll be no wake of wreckage left behind me, Jack. The haters will hate us more. But that's to the good. It'll bring them into the open where we can see them. I promise not to offend the dignity of the Eventide in my next installments."

"Shut up for once," Jack said as he arose. There was gaiety in his voice as he turned and laid his hand on George's shoulder, "and go to h--!"

"Hello, there!"

Both turned to look at a tall figure in the doorway of the City Room leading to a back stairway. It was a startling appearance of a stranger at this late Saturday afternoon hour reserved for relaxation after the long hours of travail to put the Sunday edition to bed. An infringement on the holy hour of the Fourth Estate.

"Really, I am not a ghost," the voice agin, "you two look as if you have seen one." He winked at Jack as he came across the room. "You remember the old hobo who brought you savory tid-bits from the hobo-world when I was in town!" As he caught Jack's quizzical glance, "Of course it's this unaccustomed non-hobo outfit I am wearing!" And he roared hilariously with laughter, in which was a trace of lugubrious solemnity. "But I am the same guy. On rare occasions I do come up from the 'nether world' where it's cozy and people are warm and true, to the surface of this alien world, where the souls remain uncovered to the chill of brittle light...."

"God," Jack broke in turning to George, his eyes crinkling with a wan smile, "if truly he be my hobo friend we must stop his flow of words before he inundates us all."

The hobo grimaced to George in his most gracious manner, "He doesn't mean a word of it. He swallowed my drivel avidly in his column under the borrowed and ignominious title, 'Hobo Gossip'. Perhaps you have seen me at Dr. Capen's, our mutual friend, George. It's a strange world this." And he laughed uproariously in the upper scales of his baritone. "I know, this monkey-suit looks strange on me, but I'll get used to it. Herein, and for a long while, I am Robert Black, brother of Jerome Black, and interested in my brother's venture in the Emporium. You see, what society cast out it'll take back in - me."

"Well, what's all this," Jack exclaimed, "what's all this secrecy, George?"

"Come, come, Jack, wipe off that tragic smile, it hardly becomes your face," George said. "Mr. Jerome Black proposed the Emporium project to Dreen and me only two days ago - in secret. At least for the time being -"

"While my brother was honemooning," Bob said, "Mr. Forrest got an option on the Emporium, that took ^y it out from Mr. Dreen's hand very nicely. I telegraphed my brother and here it is back - that is the Emporium - where it should. George is right. It was all under cover. But how my brother broke the option is another matter. He'll probably have a good-

sized suit on his hands."

"If I may venture a speculation," Jack said, "Mr. Black is a very apt manipulator in such matters. If a suit develops he'll drag it into eternity. Or at least until the Emporium is well established."

"And then what?" George said dubiously.

"Then even Mr. Forrest wouldn't dare come out against the public will," Bob said.

George remained silent and unconvinced.

"I think our friend, the hobo, has got something there," Jack said.

"Now Mr. Bob Black, will you tell us what brought you here at this hour?"

"It's George," Bob said.

"Me?" George stared at Bob.

"Go on, Bob," Jack said evenly.

"Now, hold on," George cried, "if it's the Dreen report forget it." As he looked at Jack, "I have had enough advice already. At anyrate," he said stubbornly, "I shall write it as I see it."

"Perhaps not after you have heard what I have to say," Bob insisted.

"Is it one of the Ten Plagues?" George was laconic.

"It may well prove a plague and calamity to your uncle, Samuel Dervin," Black said in the even voice of overhanging doom.

George unconvinced and still jovial: "You do well with riddles, Mr. Black."

"Not so formal, my dear George. We are friends and conspirators together."

"Bob the Hob, then, how's that?"

"Excellent," Jack exclaimed slapping his knee.

"Quite the rhymster," Bob guffawed. "Bob the Hob it shall be."

Perhaps out of a prankish mood, or maybe to gain time to parry with the last thrust by Bob about the threat to his uncle, George turned to Jack. "I know now why your items under 'Hobo Gossip' had a cabalistic flavor," he said. "The origin and authority sits here with us. And well it suits him, though in its source it's more puckish than cabalistic, for it lacks much in mysticism." He grinned. "You see, though Bob might appear a man of

mystery, changing his mood and mode of life as quickly as he may change his garment, actually he is simpler to read than you and me. He is the soul of integrity and simplicity. He keeps nothing back. He is a man of two worlds, the nether and the upper. And what he doesn't know about either we would be hard put to find out. He hasn't learned anything in his travels between the two worlds, if he hadn't learned not to give a damn, or to take things with the proverbial grain of salt - or with the good old sense of humor. Now, Jack, I often wondered sitting at my desk and watching you, where the sudden hot jets of steam came from in ^{the} inherent style of the calm nimble flow in which only occasionally a burble occurred. Well, I said to myself, that guy has more ^{facts} sides to him than I gave him credit for - that other side, that something that seemed so strange, and yes, so extravagant, as not coming from within but from without." He took a turn about the room, and paused before Bob, stretched in his chair full length, his legs crossed. Jack silent, enjoying his Sweet Caporal. "Now Mr. Hobo, what makes you think what happens to my uncle would change....?"

"Frankly, I didn't think it would."

"Now, boys, that we have things straightened out," Jack said ironically, "let's have the rest of it." Looking at the clock on the opposite wall, "the hour is late and would like to help the Little Woman with her Saturday shopping."

"Well, it's this, George," Bob was somber, "Forrest has threatened not to renew your ⁿuncle's lease on his store come October..."

George sat down heavily, a cloud of uncertainty blanketing his face. He was thinking of Blanca - a Blanca without the munificence of a going business, a Blanca without the genius, the mood, the nuance of the business world; a Blanca lost on an island of loneliness, without the give and take of a busy day in her father's store. A destitute Blanca, a Blanca unimaginable! Was it really so inconsistent, off balance? He thought of Cynthia - as if to balance things. Petite, lovely Cynthia, who knows

little and cares less about wordly goods and their physical values, who had always lived in a castle of her dreams. Would it be a justification, a balancing off between Blanca and Cynthia? There is a flaw somewhere in a conjured up image such as this. There is balance right now, for each is happy in her own world. The irony of it all struck him suddenly, and he smiled to himself. Why does he bring up the two for comparison? When he thinks of Blanca, Cynthia always comes up on the horizon as if he were seeing her from the corner of his eye. The reverse wasn't true, he reflected. Was it because Cynthia preempts his mind completely, when he thinks of her - and no room left for Blanca? Even though -- and here his mind went blank. Was ^{it} even though he has never held Cynthia in a tight embrace? Or was it despite "even though", for one doesn't take Cynthia in one's arms on an ordinary day; or on any day, for that matter, on some slight pretext.

George waved his hand lightly as if to drive away the panick of his thoughts.

"No, it alters nothing," he said briefly.