

The Check

IT WAS early in the day and a pallor of black clouds thickened the air and gave a lush green tinge to the early-sprouting trees around the construction site. Men were dropping four-by-eight plywood panels into ditches and drawing them tight in two parallel rows with form ties, cripples and braces to provide concrete forms for the foundation walls. The laborers struggled up to their ankles in the slime to set wooden panels as carpenters toenailed and braced with double-headed nails and two-by-fours, accenting the picture with sure, swift strokes of the hammer.

The lean, white-haired laborer with the deep dark eyes watched as the winch and boom backed to the side of the flat-bed truck, cradling reinforcing rods between the big diesel cab and the stakes placed intermittently along the sides. The strange men from out of nowhere stood on the stake bed and hooked the chains halfway through a group of rods, then back the other way when the winch raised them from the bed.

He muttered a long Sicilian curse and cut across the mud toward the construction shack and the phone. At the door the big bulky form of the steel-hatted superintendent blocked his move to squeeze by, and he stepped back to look angrily into the fleshy face.

"You-a got t'ree men you-a lay off yest'day. You-a given them the check and tell 'em no work, an' t'day you-a hire t'ree men froma no place an you don't tell me. Why you no-a tell me? If you want t'ree more men, I get 'em from-a da hall. You trust me, I get you-a good man, hunh?"

"Vesculio, go peddle your papers and don't let me catch you hanging on that rope yakkin' at your damn business agent. You don't tell me how to run my job — ya hear? Get out!"

"They got to hav' card. No hava card, we shut down the job."

"They're outta Wichita. They got cards. They jus' ain't gonna stand for your damn Dago talk. Now get doin' or I can ya. You got to pull your own freight even if you are a steward."

"I'ma work. I'ma work as good as anyone. They got card from Wichita, they got to have-a da permit. They got to be clear tru' jus like ever'one. Anyway, only two on a permit and only gota ten ona this job. You got to get-a rida one and hire from ada hall jus like ever'onea else."

"Vesculio, get out of here! I got just enough of that fat mouth a' yours."

"I'ma go. We see 'bout these-a men. You wait!"

The heavyset man in the steel helmet dived from the edge of the wooden step and took a hard kick at the old white-haired laborer and connected somewhere around the hip as the old man turned sideways and shifted away. He responded with a bitter gesture, cutting short a swift motion of the thumb from the glistening white teeth.

Vesculio returned to lifting the panels into the excavation around the perimeter of the building. For a while his motions were jerky from anger, and the wasted emotion drove him to grasp his end of the panel harder and carry an almost superhuman portion of the load from the young black-haired boy he was teamed with. The carpenter, setting the form cripples on the central assembly jig, looked up and winked at the boy.

"Vesculio gon' build da whole building by hissself, eh? One more fight with ol' tub-gut and we go home today, ha?"

He waited for the usual fiery retort, but since none came he winked at the boy again and returned to his work.

Towards lunch time the men began to stop to fish watches from fob pockets and glance occasionally towards

the dull glare coming from somewhere behind the clouds. Old Vesculio broke away from the group and started towards the three strangers sorting reinforcing rods by the flat-bed. There was a brief exchange, and one of the men stepped forward to speak. Old Vesculio began to shake his head and point to the groups of men working about the building, and the stranger stopped speaking and turned his back on the old man. There were a few more words, but the three strangers ignored him, so Vesculio once more returned to his work. From the doorway of the shack, the steel-helmeted man watched the proceedings impassively.

At lunch the big fleshy man walked over to the three strangers seated in a battered blue Ford eating from open papers spread upon their laps. He paused before the one who had talked to Vesculio and looked sharply into his face.

"Well?"

"I dunno."

"Don't know what?"

"That old man sounds like he's got an organization behind him."

"Sure he does. But it's weak. They bought off the local up in Huntsville. He just takes his job serious, that's all. When he goes to count 'em, they won't be there. He'll be by hisself."

"Yeah. Huntsville ain't here, though, and these damn Dagos stick like glue. There must be close to a thousand of 'em around here."

"O.K. So don't worry. That ain't what you're getting paid for."

"I ain't worrying. I'm just telling you it ain't going to be no pushover."

"So it ain't a pushover."

"No, it ain't. That old man's tough."

That evening Vesculio stopped a shiny old Chevrolet before a glass-fronted room on the main street of Huntsville. Through a Venetian blind, half pulled, could be seen a stocky, balding man working in white shirt sleeves over an open ledger. Black letters and numbers on the window

informed the patrons of that end of town that this was Headquarters for the Huntsville Local No. 308. There was more but old Vesculio never read beyond the numerals. To him "308" was significant. It held for him the burden of responsibility that rested on his shoulders, that gave him pride and a position in the community of his fellow workers.

He rapped twice on the glass door with a large golden ring wrapped around one of his gnarled fingers, and the man at the ledger pushed back his chair and came to the door. The latch clicked and snapped, and the man in the shirt sleeves pulled the door in as Vesculio came through.

"What's on your mind, Ves?"

"Hello, Bob. I got to aska you someting. We got to a-scare some-a scab."

"Down at Scavenge? What's wrong down there? That super told me he was gonna work with us."

"He's a-not tell you true. He's a-got t'ree scab working. Tonight he giva t'ree more men pay, an' tomor' he work t'ree more scab."

"We'll see about that. You meet me tomorrow at the site when I get there. 'Bout ten. We'll see about that."

"I knew you'da help, Bob. You fight when we need. You-a talk smart when we need."

"Yeah, Ves. Go home an' get some shut-eye. We'll tackle this thing tomorrow and fix this smart guy."

Vesculio had been gone for some time before the stocky man took his hands from his balding head and his elbows from the ledger. He turned sideways in the swivel armchair and slipped a drawer open at the side of the desk. The drawer was empty except for a single slip of narrow, blue-green paper. Typewritten in the proper blank spaces was his name and the sum. It probably wasn't a great sum to some people. To others it represented a lifetime of labor. Bob didn't know what it meant to him. It was an oddity. Maybe in a way a badge of honor. Like the big time finally. He wasn't sure why he did the things he did, but burly shoulders, a hard sense of bargaining, a hard head, and a knowing and caring way with men whose hard hands and bent bodies earned them bread and keep and other things, kept him where he was. That and a sense of being someone.

Here he was king, undisputed, and though there were times when small sums were overlooked or mishandled, no one really cared. These were the ethics of being someone. In a way it was your right as long as you didn't go after it. Sure it came your way, but you weren't suckering anyone for it and nobody was hurt, and you had to make up the difference somehow. The men knew it, but he was still getting this for doing something, such as sticking up and standing for men who didn't quite say things right even when they knew the language, and getting them ready to fight when it could do some good. And then there was the money in the drawer. No two ways about it, a lot of money.

He slipped the drawer shut and reached for the switch on the green-glass-shaded lamp on his desk, and turned the room into blackness.

The following day was just as the one before. Gray and leaden and lush from the night's rainfall. There was a bitter cut to the wind and the damp chill kept the men moving and working at a quick clip. It was shortly before ten when Vesculio saw Bob's shiny big car stop on the road about a hundred yards down from the storage shacks. He pulled one hip-booted foot suckingly after the other to the end of the excavation and motioned to the carpenter foreman that he'd be gone for a while. The foreman nodded his head and motioned to another man to pick up the scoop and bucket and bail the water from the excavation where Vesculio had been working.

By the time Vesculio reached the construction shack, Bob and the superintendent were already talking.

"Bob, you know I'm a union man. Sure, but for some things it just ain't practical now. But never mind that. I been in unions ever since I was old enough to work. You know that."

"I don't care 'bout that. You tell me you got men from Wichita, but I don't see no cards. You tell me you're a union man, and you got nine men that don't clear through my hall."

"I can't keep track o' where these damn laborers come from, can I? That's your job.' "

"You told me you'd work with us, didn't you? Didn't

you ask these guys if they was union? Didn't you tell 'em this was a union job?"

"Sure I done all that. I can't ask 'em for no union card. If you find they ain't got cards, then keep 'em off the damn job. But don't make me do yer dirty work."

"You paid off nine good men an' now you got nine scabs. Yer asking for trouble."

"I pay off who I want. They don't work, I don't pay. They was no damn good."

"That ain't what Vesculio sez."

"That's what I say. You can't trust that damn little Wop. He's lying when he sez they was working. I know who's working and who ain't."

Vesculio watched the conversation from slightly to one side and shifted his dark eyes from one face to the other as the two men talked. Bob was a deep red through the face and neck.

"Yer asking fer it, mister. You ain't goin' ter move fer a month. I'll shut you down all the way."

"Now, I don't think so. I think you'll pay ball like a nice boy. I think you got things to think about. I think you'd better think real hard about these things. You got to think about —"

"You keep your damned mouth shut, mister! You're in my territory. I tell you what to think about."

Old Vesculio's eyes were on Bob.

"I'm telling you, Bob, you play ball. You think I can't stop your gravy train, yer crazy."

"Shut up, I tell you! This is my territory. You can't run scabs in here. Yer asking for it."

"Sure, Bob. Sure."

The superintendent turned away and walked part way toward a cement mixer where a group of laborers were leveling aggregate. He had his hands in his pockets and was looking down at his feet.

Old Vesculio turned and walked away from the shack after a hard look at Bob. He wouldn't raise his eyes to meet

his, and Vesculio felt a strange crawling along his spine that crept up and pulled his scalp tight along his forehead.

Bob pulled a notebook from his pocket and drew a three and a circle around it on the page set aside for the Scavenge job. He thought a minute and then put a question mark after the circle. Three men today. On a job that ought to be doing twelve. What tomorrow?

Sometime close to five, Bob pulled back into the space behind the building he had set aside for the local's office. It wasn't much, but here the locals records were kept and the men came to meet and ask the age-old question of when and where. They came to him and he was judge and jury. He knew who was hungriest, longest. He knew who worked hardest, best. And he added up the totals and fought and bargained for extra men, and then when elections came he laid it on the line, and they listened and believed because his words had the ring of truth. As the mines shut down and the factories closed, the members on the role grew longer and the cries hungrier, and the fights came more often, and Bob grew older, and tired — tired of the cheap ways of men and the accusing look on his wife's face as the years passed by and the living only came harder and the kids grew up.

He unlocked the back door and walked the length of the long meeting room and stepped through the open door into the front room. His office. He sat down and pulled out a report form which he kept for his own records and began to write figures in blocked columns after typewritten project names on the form, checking with his black notebook as he went.

He placed the form in a folder and tossed it on his desk and leaned back in his chair. He thought about the check in the drawer, but he didn't need to open it anymore. It was there. He thought about old Vesculio and thought about his wife and the kids and thought about himself, and then got up and left and walked down the street to a bar he seldom frequented for a glass and a bottle of good Corona whiskey.

He was still there when old Vesculio stopped the shiny old Chevrolet in front of the office and peered into the darkness behind the blinds. He was still there when Vesculio turned his back against the brick column beside the glass and looked at his gnarled old hand and opened it. There in his palm lay a crumpled piece of narrow blue-green paper. It was the same kind that lay in Bob's drawer, only the sum on it was different. Vesculio's wages up to that day. And the name on it was Vesculio's. It was the same kind given to the last three men on the job for Local 308 that day.

Bob never knew the time when he left the bar. It was some time towards morning and the whiskey was still in his head but so was the tiredness. There were no answers for good or bad when you got mixed up. Just the wild confusion and the longing. The gut-hungry longing to get up and walk away and never come back.

He walked down the street in empty damp silence to the office and unlocked the front door and sat before his desk again. He sat for a while and then walked into the back room and sprawled on a cot he had put in for lonely nights of work.

It was early that morning, before work, that Vesculio's shiny old Chevrolet pulled up by the construction shack at Scavage. He and six other men gathered in a knot by the front fender, and Vesculio began to talk.

"There's-a small signs in-a back seat. You, Louis and John carry 'em up to da shack. And walk slow in front. Us four we-a wait by tool shed and keep 'em from a da shov's and things."

The men started off self-consciously from the car but turned quickly as a pick-up truck jolted across the ditch and sloughed its way in front of them. From out of the rear tumbled eight men equipped with steel pipes, pry bars, and ax handles. From the front came three more variously armed. The close-knit group from Local 308 paused a moment, but an angry cry of "Scab!" from old Vesculio set them in motion after the old laborer, who charged forward with a fanatical lunge. The fervor of the on-coming group

impressed the men from the truck, and for a moment they were undecided. A surly voice growled, "Get the old bastard first," and a group of four moved somewhat forward and intercepted the flailing Vesculio, who leaped at the first man. The man went down with old Vesculio on top but another close by swung a pry bar and caught him high on the cheek bone. The old laborer sprawled sideways and presented a target for another man who swung high and came down solid on the old laborer's skull with a lead pipe.

Three of the younger men from Local 308 dived in to rescue old Vesculio and left themselves open for punishing blows from the steel pipes. One grappled briefly with one of the men from the truck and wrestled a pipe from him which he began to swing in a wicked arc as he made toward Vesculio. Someone clipped him from behind, and he went down to his knees. From there it was moments before he was prone and bloody in the mud like Vesculio. The other two went down seconds after reaching the circle, which was battering the old laborer, and the remaining who came forward with the signs stopped short as the strangers closed in a line around the downed group. There were some shouted imprecations, and the group piled back into the truck and slipped and slid back to the road. The two men with the signs dropped them in the mud and came forward to help their co-workers who were beginning to sit up. Two held their arms in awkward positions while one sat with his head down on his chest, his mouth open and blood streaming down his muddy front. Old Vesculio simply lay quiet without moving.

Vesculio never regained consciousness, and it must have been some time after ten when Bob got the call from the hospital. He hung up the phone and sat for some time looking nowhere, seeing nothing, struck sick to the pit of his stomach.

He finally reached for the phone and placed a call to Wichita and dispatched two wires: one to another party in Kansas City; another to national headquarters in Washington, D. C. In Kansas City a large contractor received a call

from a district representative of a large labor union and promptly placed a call to a superintendent in Scavage, Kansas.

Some time later Bob placed a list of twelve names on the board labeled "Employment Notices" by the door to the meeting rooms and returned to his desk. He slipped open the drawer and drew out the blue-green slip of paper and tore it carefully into many pieces and dropped them into the waste can. Better late than never. It was never for old Vesculio. He dropped his job book into his shirt pocket and reached for his coat. He supposed he had best first stop by and see Mrs. Vesculio.

It was nice to be someone again.

Sam Sample, Arch. 5



Epistemology

As fog steals shyly in from the still sea
Under the chill night's maternal care and clings
In drops to window-panes, a dark song sings
Itself softly in the damp heart of me.

Then out and down, down toward the wooden pier,
Down through the soft confusion of the dripping Gray,
A dark song singing through the streets of clay
To where the waves lap on a weary ear.

Decay-smells hanging in the clouded air,
A shallop bruising echoes from the dock,
A lantern hangs unlit; a swinging block-
And-tackle creaks a sleepy prayer.

A question singing in the heart of me;
I listen for the answer from the sea.

Art Johnson, Sc. & H. Sr.