

# THE ACE HIGH

By F. WALWORTH BROWN

I was a thick, foggy morning, and the little schooner-yacht was all our world as we beat our way up the Sound. The naval attache and I stood aft, trying to talk. At regular periods the electric fog-horn broke in with a bellowing reverberation which would have rendered ample protection to the ten thousand blundering tons of an ocean liner. The yacht was registered at forty net.

"At the wheel stood Danny Scidmore, in his oilskins. Danny is the particular glistening ornament of the yacht. He is still under forty, but his years have not been lean ones, and when Danny Scidmore opens his mouth, he initiated keen silence before him. Danny and I are friends."

"Do you know what this reminds me of?" said the naval attache in his excellent English. "It takes me back to the Okhotsk Sea and a summer I spent up there chasing seal-poachers."

"Now, I chanced to be facing Danny. Not a muscle moved, but his eyes turned quickly, fastened for an instant on the back of the Russian's head, and returned to their work."

"It was an awful place to send a man," went on the attache. "Wet and fog and cold, and cold and fog and wet. Nothing else night and day for weeks. We had just one experience that relieved the monotony. We caught a poacher one evening in the very act—had him right under our guns, you know, when he ran up the American flag and blew his vessel up rather than be caught. I never quite understood why. We picked up the only survivor, and he swore the captain was crazy, and in some ways, just before the explosion, his actions were a bit strange."

"Then and there I saw a holy, chastened smile amble over the countenance of Danny."

"What's the joke, Danny?" I asked.

"Joke?" says Danny solemnly. "I don't see no joke, sir."

"The fog-horn burst upon us like a hurricane, and when it ceased the attache broke in:

"You seem on excellent terms with the—er—hands, Mr. Brown," he said rather nastily.

"Certainly," I returned. "Why not?"

"Well," he drawled, "it's bad for discipline, for one thing. Can't keep the men in their place, you know, if you mix with them on equal terms. Rudimentary maxim in all navies, I assure you."

"So?" I said, and let it go at that.

I glanced at Danny, not without trepidation, for I valued his friendship. To my surprise, I noted a most peaceful, stuffed-animal, wooden-Indian look on his face, and at the moment failed utterly to interpret it.

Later in the morning the fog broke, the sun came out, and what little breeze there was died down till we had bare steeringway on the vessel. Later still I came upon Danny on the forward deck, smoking one pipe and carving a skull and cross-bones with his jack-knife on the bowl of another. The Russian was standing some ten feet away in the bows, studying the Long Island shore with a glass.

"Set down, sir," said Danny hospitably, as I approached. "Who is my lord, the duke with the spike mustache?"

"This last under his breath."

"Friend o' yours?" he asked when I had told him.

"Not particularly," I answered.

"Well," said Danny, "I'm glad o' that."

You just wait a shake or two now, and I'll let you in on the joke you missed a piece back."

"Why not now?" I asked.

"I ain't quite ready yet," returned Danny.

Five minutes passed, Danny whittling silently. The attache lowered the glass and turned down the deck behind us, and Danny burst into full narration.

"Say," he began, "if you've ever been up to Vladivostok, maybe you've heard them Rooshians tell about a Yankee skipper of a seal-poacher that blowed his vessel to small firewood, rather'n be ketch'd by a Rooshian cruiser. Well, I don't reckon there ever was a policeman that let his thief get away from him and didn't have a mighty plausible excuse to account for it, so I suppose them Rooshians are entitled to their yarn."

I heard the attache stop short behind us, and my heart went out to Danny, for I perceived a joyful climax.

"It's a nice little yarn, too, the way they tell it," went on Danny; "reflex, a lot o' credit on the vigilance o' the gunboat's officers; depicts the horror o' evil-doers in the face o' the Rooshian law; and is all o' half-way true, and that's wonderful."

"There was the sound of some one sitting down behind us, but Danny went calmly on, as though speaking for me alone:

"Among other things, they claim they picked up the sole survivor and brought him home, which the same it's kind o' queer when you come to think about it, 'cause I was aboard that scunner that was blowed up, and I'm dumfied if I came back in any Rooshian gunboat."

"Way it happened was like this: I was sittin' on the water-front at Hakodate, smokin' a pipeful o' dust, with thirty-eight cents Mexican in my breeches and my insides all clogged up with rice, which the same it ain't white man's victuals. "Frisco looked a long ways off across the sea, and I was agurin' sort o' feverishlike and frantic about stowing away in some steamer and runnin' the chances o' starvation and coal-dust. Out in the stream a ways laid a little white scunner, with a crew o' Japs hustlin' over her decks, gettin' ready to pull out. I watched her casually, not bein' p'tic'lar interested."

"Out of a job?" says somebody behind me; and I switched around quick, because English ain't so awful frequent in Hakodate, and American English is like diamonds in Greenland."

"He was a square little man, with a long upper lip and whitish-gray eyes that sort o' et right into you and yet was kindly."

"I'm Cap'n Israel Bedrock, o' the scunner Ace-High," says he. "That's her out there abast the steamer; and he pointed at the craft I'd noticed. 'I'm short one man."

"I'm not shippin' with Japs," I says, kind o' scornful, still havin' thirty-eight cents Mexican."

"You don't git the lay of it, son," he says, sittin' down alongside. "This ain't what you might go for to call an ordinary cruise. You see that there scunner? Well, there's more good Rooshian seal-skins come out o' that vessel the last two seasons than out o' airy other craft in them waters."

"Lord!" thinks I, "am I sunk this low?"

"What'll it pay me?" I asks him.

"Ten dollars gold for every prime skin you put aboard her. One o' my hunters is took sick, or you wou'dn't get the chance. You don't look like a feller easy-scared," he says, jollyin' me.

"I ain't a bit superstitious, but that sure looked like a call. Here was me, stranded, broke, and full o' rice, offered a job that meant a pile o' money if we won out with white man's grub thrown in. I ain't sayin' as how I haggled very long with my conscience. If we got ketch'd, it meant usin' a pie; and shovel for the Rooshians over Siberia way; but, somehow, I didn't reckon Cap'n Israel Bedrock was goin' to get ketch'd—not to any extent. Anyway, shovelin' for the Rooshians looked about as good as starvin' to death on rice or hidin' in a coal-bunker, so I went aboard the Ace-High peaceful."

"Come dark that evenin' we screened our lights and slid out o' Hakodate harbour without raisin' what you might call a riot over our departure. By mornin' we were off Cape Krino, and stood north-east up the east coast o' Yezo Island, makin' out we were a Jap fishin'-boat. A white men kept pretty much below-decks or down behind the rail, where we were hid by the bulwarks."

"There were two hunters besides me—Turk McGraw, a wiry little, red-headed man, with a snub nose and shiny-blue eyes that looked so meek, he said they were forever gettin' him in trouble; and Charlie Bennett, a big man with a husky voice and a way o' lookin' sideways, like he suspected the sheriff was a-trackin' him. I liked Turk McGraw right well, and neither of us had much use for Charlie. Turk said he was the meanest man in Asia, but could shoot a seal through the head with a Winchester at two hundred yards."

"Well, the Ace-High turned out to be a mighty decent little craft Yankee-built, speedy if she had all the wind she could carry, and easily handled. Bedrock owned her, and was sort o' crazy in his head over her. He'd stand at the wheel if the weather was bad and converse to that scunner like she was human. Said she waked away better if she was humoured that way."

"Everything went off beautiful. We ran pretty well to the eastward before breakin' into the Rooshian sea, 'count o' them havin' gunboats stationed to watch all the likely passes. But it come thick with fog just after we raised the Black Brothers Island; and we slipped through into Okhotsk Sea when we couldn't a' make out a gunboat a length away; and, once through, we set her north a point east and drove into the another end over end."

"Lord, but it was thick! It gives you sort of a creepy feeling to butt head-fore into fog like that, never knowin' what you may smash your bowsprit on next. I've sailed in plenty boats, wind and steam both, and the thing to do when it comes on a bit thick is to get the horn goin', and keep it up tremendous, till the fog lifts."

"Well, we weren't blowin' any horns. We was thankful for fog, and prayin' for more. But all the same, it gives you a queer feelin'. We were halfway up Sakhalin Island before we saw daylight again, and then only long enough to get our bearings and dive into it once more. We made out one other objek, though, before it closed down on us, which the name it was the funnel and masts of a gunboat, hull down to the

eastward. We got our bearings in a hurry, the fog closed in again, and away we drove, hopeful the gunboat had mistook us for a friendly battle-ship or something."

"I was standin' by the house that night, smokin' a pipe before turnin' in, when Charlie Bennett wanders up."

"That gunboat's goin' to get us, Dan," says he, sort o' mournful. "I wisht I hadn't come this trip. She'll foller us right up to the island and get us, sure."

"Well, jumpin' Peter!" I says. "You don't expect to ship for a cruise like this 'un and not run no chances, do ye? If it wasn't for the gunboats, we wou'dn't be gettin' ten dollars a pelt," I says."

"All right," he says. "You'll see. She's goin' to get us, I tell you."

"Shucks!" I says. "We ain't ketch'd yet," and Charlie went forward shakin' his head. I knocked out my pipe and went below and slept peaceful."

"That was the last sign of another craft we had till we'd made the island. It was June, and as we ran up our northin' the night kept gettin' shorter, till fine we were north o' Sakhalin, we were gettin' about two hours o' twilight between sunset and sunrise. But it didn't make a bit o' difference; we couldn't see anything day or night most o' the time for the fog."

"Old Bedrock, though, was a navigator out of a book. He sort o' smelt his way along, till one mornin' we heard the slappin' o' seals at play around us, and directly the bark of an old mame. The fog lifted a minute toward noon, and the skipper got a squint around. It all looked alike to the rest of us, but he said we'd be up with our island by six bells, and come six bells there we were, which the same it was all-fired good navigatin'."

"We could hear the surf breakin' on the rocks, and the noise of the seals barkin'; and all around the vessel the water was alive with 'em. Lord, that was a rookery! Why them Rooshians didn't have a gunboat layin' to anchor off that chunk o' rock I'll never know. It sure was puttin' sinful temptation in a man's way not to have."

"Bedrock got us hunters overside quick as might be in the boats, each with a Jap to row us. We were fitted out with a ten-bore shotgun and a boat-hook. A seal sinks like a stone once it's dead, and you got to be mighty sudden with the hook after shootin' 'em, or you miss your ten dollars."

"Well, we hung to that island for three full days, shootin' till we had a boat-load, and then pullin' to the scunner, outwidin' and off again. It was bloody work; and it didn't make it any better to know there was a pup on the rocks goin' to starve to death for every seal we killed. I didn't enjoy it, not a bit, but it was ten dollars a skin, and I needed the money."

"The Japs were kept busy skinnin' and saltin' down what we brought 'em; and in three days we had our load and pulled out. We had three hundred prime skins below decks, and felt pretty good. Me being new to the work, McGraw and Bennett beat me the first day, but my share of the cargo came to the right side o' seven hundred dollars all the same."

"Well, as I was sayin', we pulled out and pointed her south into a light head wind, and right away came trouble. Us four white men were standin' aft talkin' things over. A Jap had the wheel, and the rest o' 'em were swabbin' down