

Finally, we have the real story behind why a certain tower in Babylon was never finished and why all great builders, from Nebuchadnezzar to Moses (Robert), have such a rough time.

Project Hi-Rise by **ROBERT F. YOUNG**

As soon as we got word that the strike was on, we walked off the job. It was 10:40 A.M. Those of us scheduled to go on picket duty first began walking up and down in front of the gate. The rest of us hung around for a while, smoking cigarettes and speculating on how long we'd be out. Then we meandered on home.

The minute she saw me, Debbie's face fell. When we voted the Union in last month, she had a fit, and ever since then she's been dreading a walkout. How were we going to manage now, she asked me when I came in the door, with prices the way they were and with no money coming in? I told her not to worry, that with the Project so close to completion and the King on their backs morning, noon and night, the Company would have to come across pronto. She said she hoped so, what with another mouth to feed any day now and our savings account down to two figures, and what would I like for dinner —baked fish or fried figs? I said baked fish.

Women don't understand about strikes, about how important it is for workers to show who they're working for that they mean business when they say they want more money. Sure, I know the Project's an important undertaking, but construction workers have to live the same as anybody else, no matter how important what they're constructing is. Like the Organizer says, it's dog-eat-dog these days, and workingmen have to look out for themselves, nobody else is going to.

This afternoon, Ike dropped by with a sixpac, and we sat around most of the rest of the day, drinking beer and talking. He's up for picket duty tonight; I'm not scheduled till tomorrow morning. I'm glad, because that'll give me a chance to attend the Union meeting tonight. Ike told me to listen real good so I could tell him all about it, and I said I would.

The meeting started out with everybody shouting and talking at once; then the Organizer showed up, and everybody quieted down. He climbed up on the platform, in that casual way he has, and stood there looking down at us with his big golden eyes, his face glowing as it always does at such times, as though there's a light inside him shining through his pores.

"Brethren," he said in that rich resonant voice of his, and instantly he had everybody's complete attention. It's no wonder we jumped at the chance to have him represent us at the bargaining table when he so generously offered to.

"Brethren," he repeated. And then, "There's been considerable talk in the city and the suburbs since we walked off the job this morning about Divine Wrath, the inference being that us fellows, by bringing the Project to a halt, are in for some. Well, don't you believe it, fellow members of Local 209 —don't you believe it for one minute! Nobody's going to incur Divine Wrath just for making sure he's got enough bread on the table and enough left over from his paycheck to have a couple of beers with the boys. If anybody's going to incur it, the Company is. Because I happen to have it from a pretty good source — and you can quote me on this if you like — that somebody up there doesn't *want* the Project completed."

All of us applauded. It was just what we'd wanted to hear. After the applause died away, the Organizer outlined what we were striking for, and I paid strict attention so I could tell Ike. It adds up to a pretty nice package: a fifteen-percent across-the-board hourly rate increase; full-paid hospitalization; retirement after twenty-five years service; nine paid holidays; three weeks vacation after four years on the job; and a podiatric clinic, financed and maintained by the Company, where brickmakers can receive immediate treatment for chilblains, arthritis and fallen arches.

After the meeting a bunch of us stopped in The Fig Leaf for a few beers. I was still there when Ike got off picket duty and dropped by. I told him about the package and he agreed it was a nice one. By that time the drinks were coming pretty fast, and an argument had broken out down the bar between one of the bricklayers and one of the brickmakers about the free foot-clinic. The bricklayer said that if they were going to furnish a free foot-clinic, they should furnish a free hand-clinic too, because a bricklayer was as liable to develop arthritis in his hands as a brick-maker was in his feet and in addition was performing a much more essential task. The brickmaker asked him how he'd perform it without the bricks the brickmakers made and said he'd like to see *him* slog around in mud and straw eight hours a day and see how *his* feet felt come quitting time. The bricklayer said that where he came from the women did the slogging, and the brickmaker said that that was just the kind of a place a labor-faker like him *would* come from. Somebody broke it up just in time.

Not long afterward I left. I didn't want to be hung-over on my first spell of picket duty. It was a cool night, and the stars were thick in the sky. I caught glimpses of the Project as I made my way home through the narrow streets. It dominates the whole city. The whole Plain, for that matter. It had sort of a pale, blurred look in the starlight, the six completed stages blending together, the uncompleted seventh one softly serrated against the night sky. Working on it every day, I've kind of forgot how high it is, how much higher it's going to be when we get back on the job. The highest thing ever, they say. I won't dispute that. It makes a palm tree look like a blade of grass and a man look like an ant. Looking at it tonight, I felt proud to be one of the builders. It was as though I'd built the whole thing myself. That's the way a bricklayer feels sometimes. It's really great. I feel sorry for brick-makers. You'd never catch me slogging all day in a mud hole.

Picket duty wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. There's been some talk about the Company hiring scabs, but I guess that's all it is — talk. Anyway, nobody tried to get in. Not that they'd have succeeded if they had. The setup is ideal for picketing. You'd almost think the Company had built the wall around the Project to make it easy for strikers to picket the place, come strike time, instead of to keep people from stealing bricks. The gate's pretty wide, of course, but four pickets can guard it easily, and the wall's high enough to discourage anybody from trying to scale it.

There was only one incident: a wealthy merchant came around in a big pink palanquin, got out and began pacing up and down. He didn't say anything — just kept looking up at that half-finished seventh stage and shaking his head. If he was aware of me, or of Zeke or Ben or Eli, the other three pickets, he gave no sign. Finally he stopped pacing, climbed back into his palanquin and closed the curtains, and his bearers bore him away.

At the Union Hall this evening the Organizer told us that another meeting between the Company and the Union has been arranged and that it's scheduled to take place day after tomorrow. This time, there's going to be a Mediator present — one that the King himself appointed. Maybe now we'll get somewhere. I hope so. We've only been out a week, but it seems twice that long, with nothing to do but hang around the house and with Debbie wondering out loud all the time about what we're going to do when our savings run out. To tell the truth, I'm kind of worried myself. Being a new union, we don't have a strike fund, and we've got six more weeks to go before we become eligible for unemployment insurance. Meanwhile, the bills keep coming in.

The second meeting is to take place this afternoon. All of us have our fingers crossed.

I drew picket duty again this morning. Ike picketed with me, having arranged it with the Organizer to change places with Ben. With my old buddy to talk to, time went by fast.

Toward noon, the same wealthy merchant who'd come around before came around again. After climbing out of his palanquin, he started pacing up and down the way he'd done on his first visit; only this time instead of looking up at the half-finished seventh stage and shaking his head, he kept glancing sideways at Ike and Eli and Zeke and me. Finally he singled me out and came over to where I was standing, shooting the breeze with Ike. He had pink cheeks, with jowls to match, and a big blunt nose.

You only had to take one look at his hands to know he'd never done a lick of work in his life.

"You impress me as being a sensible young man," he said. "What's your name?"

"Jake," I said.

"Jake. Well, Jake, I happen to be a wealthy merchant, as you may have guessed. In Frankincense and Myrrh. But I'm here just as an ordinary citizen — a citizen who is doing his level best to try to understand why certain other citizens have put their personal interests above the common interests of the community-as-a-whole and aborted a community project."

"I thought it was a Company project," Ike said, butting in.

"The Company is in the King's employ. The King, *ex officio*, is the very essence of the community. Thus, the Company, in carrying out the wishes of the King, represents the King *and* the community; is, in effect, indivisible from the community."

"Not in my book," I said. "But I can see why it would be in yours. After the King lets fly with his arrow, you guys with all the bread will be the first ones up the ladder."

The wealthy merchant stiffened. "Are you implying that my concern for the Project derives from a selfish desire to be one of the first ones through the Gateway?"

"He's not implying it, he's saying it," Ike said. "You guys just can't wait to grease old Yahweh's palm, can you? You can't wait to tell him you think the King is a kook."

The wealthy merchant's pink cheeks were now a shade darker than his jowls. A purplish cloud had begun to gather on his forehead. "Young man," he said, "you sound positively paganistic. Don't you want to get into Heaven?"

"Not if you fat cats get there first," Ike said.

The purplish cloud broke. "Well, you may rest assured you aren't going to!" the wealthy merchant shouted. "Not if I have anything to say about it!" He pointed successively at Eli and Zeke and me. "And neither are you or you or you!" With that, he stamped back to his palanquin, got in and yanked the curtains closed, and the bearers trotted off with it. We stood there laughing.

Tonight at the Hall, the Organizer told us to tighten our belts, that at the bargaining table this afternoon the Company had refused to budge from its original offer of a flat five-percent raise and that he, as our representative, had informed them they could shove it and that despite the Mediator's pleas both sides had walked out.

Afterward, Ike and I stopped in The Fig Leaf for a couple of beers. Ike seemed worried. "Do you think he really has our best interests at heart, Jake?" he asked.

"Of course he does!"

"I suppose you're right. But sometimes I get the feeling that he's using us guys for some purpose of his own."

"What purpose?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling — that's all."

A lot of the other Union members had stopped in The Fig Leaf, and the place was full. Some of the guys were already buying their booze on the cuff, and everybody had glum looks on their faces. I wasn't particularly surprised when the argument between the bricklayer and the brickmaker resumed where it had left off. This time, nobody broke it up.

It was late when I finally got home. All evening I'd dreaded having to face Debbie with the bad news. But when I looked in the bedroom, she was sound asleep.

At long last the Mediator has got both sides to agree to another meeting. It's to take place tomorrow morning. I think the Organizer should back down a little — settle, say, for a ten-percent raise and forget the fringe benefits. True, it's only been two weeks since we walked off the job, but Debbie and I have already run up a sizable food bill at the Mom & Pop store around the corner, what's left of our savings will just about cover the rent, and I'm smoking Bugler instead of Winstons. And any day now, as Debbie keeps reminding me, we're going to have another mouth to feed. Feeding it doesn't worry me half so much as paying the hospital and doctor bills.

Ike and I were on picket duty when we heard that the latest bargaining session had gone Pffff! Eli was on too, and a bricklayer named Dan. It was clear by this time that the Organizer had no intention of settling for a smaller package, and it was equally as clear that the Company had no intention of coming through with a bigger one.

Eli didn't see it that way. "Hell, Jake, they'll have to come through," he said. "We've got them right by the balls!"

I told him I hoped he was right. "Look," Dan said. "We've got a visitor."

Four black bearers had appeared, bearing a long black palanquin. They proceeded to set it down directly before the gate. I knew from its length that here was no ordinary wealthy merchant, but I was unprepared for the personage who presently stepped out and stood gazing at the Project with black blazing eyes. Those eyes burned right through Ike and Eli and Dan and me, as though we weren't even there, then swept upward, absorbing the entire Project with a single glance. It dawned on me finally, as I took in the small gold crown nestled in the black ringleted hair, the flared eyebrows, the fierce nostrils and the defiant jaw, that I was looking at the King.

As the four of us stood there staring at him, he raised his eyes still higher, and their blackness seemed to intensify, to throw forth fire. It was the briefest of illusions, for a moment later he turned, climbed back into his palanquin and clapped his hands. We stared after it as the four black bearers bore it away.

"Whew!" Ike said.

I rolled and lit a cigarette to see how bad my hands were shaking. Pretty bad, I saw. I blew out a lungful of smoke. "I wonder what he wanted," I said.

"I don't know. But I'd hate to be in the Organizer's sandals."

"The Organizer can take care of himself."

"I hope so."

We let it go at that.

* * *

You've got to give the Mediator credit. Somehow he managed to get the two sides together again.

The Organizer had the minutes of the meeting Xeroxed and distributed them among the members. I have mine before me:

THE MEDIATOR: The Company Representative has informed me that considerable confusion exists among the populace as to the true nature of the Project's purpose, and he would like to clear this little matter up before proceeding further with the negotiations.

THE ORGANIZER: The purpose of the Project has no bearing whatsoever upon the reasonable demands made upon the Company by Local 209.

THE MEDIATOR: Nevertheless, I feel that in fairness both to the Company and to the King that the confusion should be cleared up.

THE ORGANIZER: Very well. But keep in mind that the typical member of Local 209 is concerned solely with how much his efforts will net him, not with the use to which their end result will be put.

THE COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: I will be brief. Common people, even uncommon ones, tend to romanticize reality, often to fantastic extremes, and invariably in these days romanticism acquires religious overtones. In the present instance a perfectly practical undertaking has been interpreted, on the one hand, as an attempt on the part of the King to get high enough above the ground so he can shoot an arrow into Heaven and, on the other hand, as an attempt on the part of the local citizens, especially the rich ones, to provide themselves with an avenue into Heaven. The two interpretations have somehow intermingled and become one. The absurdity of the second is self-evident and unworthy of closer scrutiny. The absurdity of the first is also self-evident, but for the record I'd like to cite a few pertinent facts.

According to the best estimates of our astronomers, Heaven is located 1,432 cubits above the world.

The Project, if it is completed, will reach a height of 205 cubits. This means that the King's arrow would have to travel 1,227 cubits —straight up. Now, it is a well-known fact that the King is a great hunter — a mighty hunter. No one can bend a bow the way he can. But 1,227 *cubits? Straight up?*

Thus, the facts alone make it clear that the King has no such intent. His real purpose in building the Project is to provide a haven. A haven to which the people can flee should a second phenomenal rainfall again cause the Twin Rivers to overflow their banks to such an extent that the entire Plain becomes inundated. Living on that Plain, the members of Local 209 stand to benefit from the Project as much as the rest of the people. For them to have, in effect, sabotaged such a noble undertaking is, frankly, beyond my comprehension, unless their motive for doing so can be partially attributed to their unwitting acceptance of the popular interpretation of the Project's purpose.

THE ORGANIZER: If the Project's real purpose is to provide a haven, why weren't they and the rest of the people so informed in the first place?

THE COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: I cannot, of course, speak for the King. But I should imagine that he considered it so glaringly obvious that there was no need for the dissemination of such information.

THE ORGANIZER: To me, it was never obvious. It still isn't. In the first place, only minimal flooding has occurred since the Inundation; in the second, it's highly unlikely that Yahweh will again choose that particular form of chastisement should future foul-ups on the part of the human race necessitate additional punishment; and in the third, if he does decide on a second Inundation, you can rest assured that it will be of such dimensions that the only thing the Project will be a haven for will be fish. But I'll play the game fair: I'll see to it that the members of Local 209 have access to these minutes; and if, after reading them, they wish to take another strike vote, I won't stand in their way. Meanwhile, the package stays as is.

There was a special meeting tonight at the Union Hall. At it, the Organizer asked if everybody had read the minutes he'd distributed, and when everybody raised their hands. He asked did we want to take another strike vote. There was a big chorus of nays and not a single yea. That shows how union brothers stick together when the chips are down.

I've got to admit, though, that before I yelled my nay I had a bad moment. I'm still not sure I did right. Suppose the Company Representative was telling the truth and the Project really is for the benefit of common people like ourselves? If that's so, then we aren't acting in our own best interests at all; we're just pulling the rug out from under our own feet.

The Company has pulled out!

Zeke brought us the news while we were on picket duty this morning. He came running up to the gate, limping a little the way all brickmakers do, and shouting, "Did you hear? Did you hear? The Company's gone! They've struck their tents and left!"

I stood there stunned. So did Ike. So did Eli and Dan. Ike got his breath back first. "Where's the Organizer?" he asked Zeke in a sort of whisper.

"He's gone too. We can't find him anywhere."

There was a silence. Then Zeke said, "I've got to go tell the rest of the guys." He looked at us kind of helplessly. "I guess there's not much sense picketing any more."

"No, I guess not," I said.

After he left, none of us said a word for a long time. Then Ike whispered, "It was like I said all along. The Organizer was using us."

"But why?" Dan asked.

Ike shook his head. "I don't know."

"We've got company," Eli announced.

We looked. It was that long black palanquin again. Out of it stepped the King.

This time, he had brought his bow with him. It was slung diagonally across his back. His right hand held an arrow.

Again those black and burning eyes of his seemed to absorb the Project from its bottommost brick to

its topmost one. There was a purposefulness about his mien that had been lacking on his previous visit; a fierce, almost an awesome determination that made him seem larger than life. His black eyebrows were like the wings of a hawk; his lips were set like bitumen. He was wearing a maroon turtleneck with a big N on the front, blue Levis and thick-soled chukka boots.

He strode toward the gate. The four of us were standing right in his path, and we stepped aside when he neared us. If we hadn't, he'd have bowled us over.

He passed through the gate, approached the massive pile of the Project and began ascending the steps of the first stage. Ike and I, coming out of our daze, followed him. Not to try and stop him but to catch him in case he slipped and fell.

When he reached the apron of the second stage, he strode across it and began ascending the second series of steps. We kept right on his heels. It was at this point that I noticed he was mumbling something under his breath. I listened hard, but I couldn't make out what it was.

He surmounted the second stage. The third. Ike and I stayed right behind him. The fourth. The fifth. We were high now. Looking down over my left shoulder. I could see the diminutive dwellings of the city and the minuscule mud huts of the suburbs. Looking down over my right, I could see the Plain, with its myriad fields of millet and barley and its sparkling irrigation ditches. In the distance the easternmost of the Twin Rivers gleamed like gold in the morning sun.

Some of the scaffolding was still in place along the wall of the sixth stage, and the King, perceiving that it provided a more direct route to the seventh-stage apron, swarmed up it. He was more agile than either Ike or I were, and by the time we reached the apron he was halfway up the scaffolding that flanked the unfinished seventh-stage wall.

I became aware of the wind. It was blowing steadily up from the south. I could smell the sea in it. The Project swayed, ever so slightly. But that was all right. The engineers had allowed for the wind. I'd felt it sway lots of times, and I was no stranger to the wind.

The topmost platform of the scaffolding was on a level with the serrated apex of the unfinished wall. Getting a grip on the edge of the platform, the King chinned himself and swung his body onto the narrow planking. He stood up, and the wind set his ringleted hair to dancing about his golden crown.

Ike and I remained on the apron below.

The King shook his fist at the blue and cloudless sky. "I knew all along that fucking Organizer was working for you!" he shouted. "He never fooled me for a second! But he wasted his time, because I'm still gonna do what I said I was gonna do, right from here!" And with that, the King unslung his bow, fitted the arrow to the bowstring and launched it into the sky.

Straight up, it sped, impervious to the wind, seeming to gather momentum with every cubit it traveled. Ike and I no longer breathed. Everything in all creation except that arrow had ceased to exist for us. In our eyes it had become a thunderbolt — a thunderbolt cast heavenward by a madman in a magnificent, if senseless, gesture of defiance.

It neither faltered nor slowed. Any moment now, it seemed, it would pass through the invisible Gateway and disappear. It was high enough: it *had* to. But it didn't. For, all of a sudden, a great hand emerged from the firmament, reached down and seized the tiny shaft. A mighty thumb pressed it between two mighty fingers. There was a distant *snap!*, barely audible above the wind. Then the hand withdrew, and the broken arrow fell back to earth and landed at the King's feet.

He stood there staring down at it.

An aeon went by. There was no sound except the whistling of the wind in the scaffolding. Then a loud sob reached our ears. Another. We turned away and slowly descended the successive stages to the ground. We didn't look back — not once. You might think you'd enjoy seeing a king cry, but you wouldn't. It's like watching a mountain dwindle into an ant hill, a city crumble into dust, a kingdom turn into trash.

Well, Local 209 pulled out, just like the Company did. We knew there'd be no more jobs on the Plain for the likes of us. We spread out all over. North and south and east and west. I went south. Right now, I've got a flunky's job in a granary. It doesn't pay very much, but it'll keep Debbie and Little Jake

and myself going till I learn the language. Once I learn the language, I'll get back in Construction. There's a big project about to begin just east of here. From what I gather, it's a tomb of some kind, and it's supposed to set a new trend. Building it may take as long as a year, and they're going to need all kinds of skilled labor. I figure that as a bricklayer I can get on easy.