

# NEAL of the NAVY

By WILLIAM HAMILTON OSBORNE

Author of "Red Mouse," "Running Fight," "Catspa," "Blue Buckle," etc.

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Then, unknown to himself, and unseen of anyone about him, he accidentally dropped something else upon the floor—a long, folded printed paper. He didn't miss it; and when Congressman James J. Prime moved off in the direction of his home, a human being slouched over to that corner, placed a concealing foot upon the folded paper, struck a match and lit a cigarette, stooped suddenly and with nicotine-stained fingers, picked up the document.

The concealing foot and the nicotine-stained fingers belonged to a young and sporty gentleman of the name of Joey Welcher.

He thrust the document into his pocket and then, he too, moved off to some less public place. When he reached a place less public, he examined his find. He was disappointed at first. He was prepared for anything of interest. But he was disgusted when he opened the document and read its headlines:

Questions and Correct Answers to be used in Preliminary Competitive Examination for Congressional Appointment—District of New Jersey, for Navy Academy, Annapolis. Duplicate.

It didn't interest him, but he glanced over its contents; then thrust it into his hip pocket and went his way—smoking a cigarette.

## CHAPTER XII.

### The Spider and the Fly.

Back in the Hardin cottage by the sea, Miss Irene Courtier—known in other and less reputable circles by the name of Inez Castro—limped (not ungracefully) downstairs from the room she had been occupying for some time, and entered the living room.

"Under your kind care," she said to Mrs. Hardin, her hostess—and in her tone was the slightest foreign accent—"I am so well again, that I must leave you."

She paused. Joe Welcher pushed open the door and slouched into the room. Inez Castro glanced at him seductively from under her long lashes and went on.

"With the aid of Mr. Joey Welcher," she proceeded, "I have consulted time-tables, and I find very good connections on the next train."

She opened her handbag, and took out bills. "And," she added, "I insist on paying board."

Mrs. Hardin held up her hand. "Miss Courtier," she returned, "I can't think of it. You have taken what we call pot-luck with us. You have been friendly with us, and I hope we have been friendly with you."

Inez smiled and shrugged her pretty shoulders. She glanced casually at Joe Welcher. She slightly raised her eyebrows—she watched Joey as a cat watches a mouse. And Joe—he was watching something, too—the cash that Inez was holding in her hand. Inez groaned suddenly and put out her hand.

"Stupid," she said, "I have forgot. My outer bandage. I must return." She returned the money to her handbag and laid it down upon the table. Then she left the room and went upstairs. Mrs. Hardin, Welcher's foster mother, sniffed the air.

"There's something burning in the kitchen, Joey," she exclaimed, "if Miss Courtier comes down I'll be right back." She, too, disappeared. And Joey—easy-money Joey Welcher, was left alone with the handbag and the bills. Joey listened for an instant, the tiptoed forward, seized the handbag and drew forth the roll of bills. He needed money badly—he had to pay a debt of honor, which means a gambling debt. He opened the roll of bills and peeled off a few where their absence would least be noted, and then restored the balance of the bills to the handbag—thrusting his share into his pocket.

Inez Castro, seated halfway up the stairs, watching through an inch of open doorway, smiled to herself. Then she—tripped a bit noisily, and irregularly—to show her limp—down the stairs and glided gracefully into the room. Joe lit a cigarette and watched her. He was nervous, but game. He watched her closely. She took up her bag and once again took out the bills. "My charming hostess," she exclaimed, "where should she be?" "She should be here," said Joey, evading her glance, "wait a bit, I'll get her."

He got her, and Inez resumed her former conversation—once more insisting upon payment for her board. Her offer was quite as insistently declined. She sighed prettily and clicked shut her bag. Welcher also sighed—with unmistakable relief. She turned to him.

"The one-horse vehicle?" she asked. "Outside," said Welcher, offering his arm, "boy's ready—time that you were off."

Once at the station Inez bought a ticket for New York. But when the train—a local—stopped at Lonesome

Cove, three miles north of Seaport, Inez dropped off the rear platform of the last car, and waited on the far side of the track until the train was out of sight. There was no station at Lonesome Cove—merely a shed. Swiftly Inez crossed the track and passed this station and then sped on down toward the shore. She reached a narrow strip of beach, stepped down to the water's edge, and looked about her. Suddenly she saw what she was looking for—a bandanna handkerchief thrust above a clump of bushes. On the sea side of this clump of bushes was a rock. Inez raised her parasol and sauntered gracefully toward this rock, and composed herself—also gracefully—in the shadow of the rock. Before doing so she peered into the bushes, noted the presence there of three shadowy figures, and nodded slightly, in recognition. A man with a foreign accent spoke.

"What progress?" he queried anxiously.

"Best in the world," she answered, "we have a new recruit."

She changed her position. A man thrust his head and face for a moment out of the bushes—a face across which was a saber cut; a livid scar. For a moment, with their heads together, the two whispered. The man with a scowl of satisfaction, finally withdrew his head. Inez rose to her feet and looked about her.

"Where is this Lonesome Cave Inn, then?" she queried.

"Half a mile farther up the beach—follow the shore line—turn in at the cove. Follow the water line—it takes you there. Good luck."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### The Honor Slip.

A crowd of thirty—more or less—congregated about the steps of the school building in Seaport, N. J. Neal was there. Some of the thirty he knew and some he didn't.

Neal started suddenly. A hand was laid upon his shoulder. He turned. Joey Welcher, his foster brother, faced him. Joey smiled.

"Neal," he said, "I think I'll take a hack at this Annapolis exam myself." For a moment Neal was taken back. Then he recovered. "Gorry," he returned, "I'm glad of that. When did you decide?"

"Before you did," replied Welcher. "I've had this up my sleeve for a year or so. I've been boning on the quiet—boning hard."

It was quite true that he had been boning hard—and also on the quiet. He had been studying the examination paper dropped accidentally by the congressman in the local post office, and he had mastered every answer by heart. "You bet your life I'm going in," he said.

Ten minutes later Neal and Welcher were seated side by side at desks in the old-fashioned little schoolroom.

The examination questions had been written on the ample blackboards that completely circled the room. The examiner had copied them from his printed list of questions.

There was a knock on the door and the congressman came in. The examiner left his desk and met the congressman half way. He whispered to him.

"How goes it?" asked the congressman.

"I've only had the chance to look over young Hardin's papers as they came in—he's been the first to finish. They look good to me. They're well-nigh perfect. There he is now. He's all through."

"May the best man win," said the congressman, "he looks the part at any rate." He glanced about the room; he seemed to be trying to remember; then he remembered. "Say, look a here," he said, "Beecher's letter says he mailed me a duplicate of those questions and answers; and I'll swear I saw a duplicate when I read his note—did I hand you two or one?"

"One," returned the examiner. He stepped back to his desk. Neal handed in his final paper. The examiner thrust in front of Neal a slip of paper and a pen. "Sign this, please," he said. This is what it said—and Neal signed it as requested: I do solemnly declare on my honor as a gentleman that I have neither obtained nor given aid of any kind during the course of this examination.

Neal Hardin, Candidate.

He had no sooner finished signing than Joe Welcher approached the desk.

"Through, Joey?" queried Neal, "I'll wait for you."

Welcher signed his own honor slip. Neal waited—and while he waited, he thrust his hand into his coat pocket. There was something unfamiliar there. Involuntarily he drew it out—it was a crumpled printed paper. The examiner's eagle eye was upon it in an instant.

"Haven't been cribbing, boy?" he exclaimed.

(To Be Continued.)

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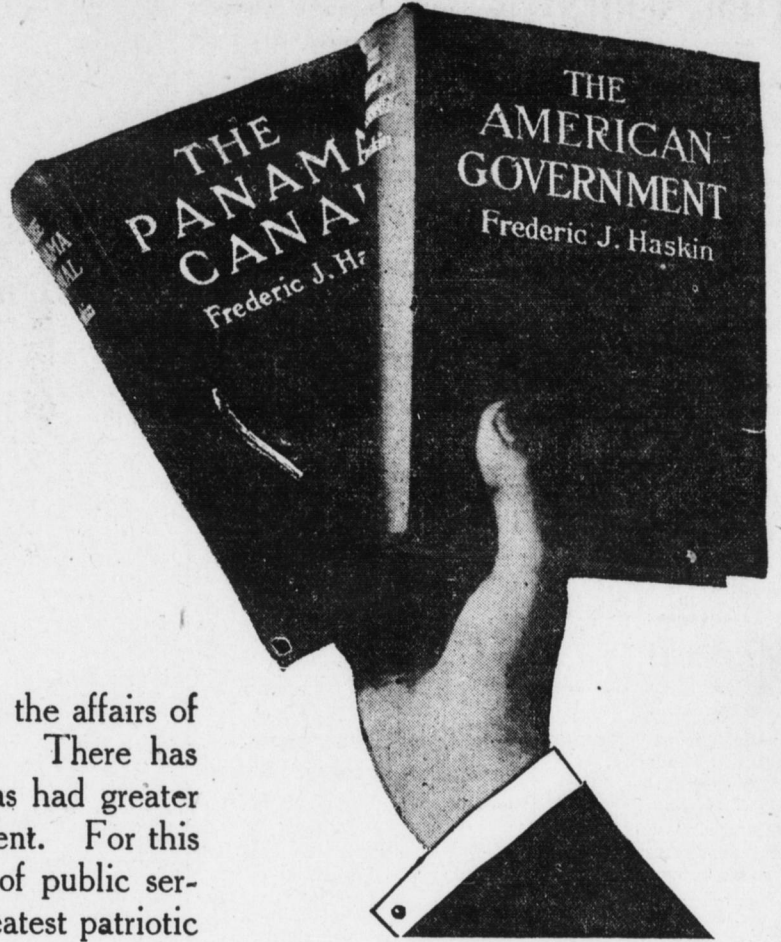
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