

# THE IRON PIRATE

A Plain Tale of Strange Happenings on the Sea

By MAX PEMBERTON

## CHAPTER XX.

It was later that Captain Black, Doctor Osbart and myself entered the 7:30 train from Ramsgate; leaving the screw tender, now disguised, with the man John and eight of the most turbulent among the crew of the nameless ship aboard her. We had come without hindrance through the crowded waters of the Channel; and, styling ourselves a Norwegian whaler in ballast, had gained the difficult harbor with out arousing suspicion. At the first, Black had thought to leave me on the steamer; but I gave him solemn word that I would not seek to quit him, that I would not in any way betray him while the truce lasted, and that I would return, wherever I was, to the tender in the harbor at the end of a week.

I will not pause to tell you my own thoughts when I set foot on shore again. I could not help but carry my memory to the last occasion when, with Roderick and Mary, I had come to London in the very hope of getting tidings of this man who now sat with me in a Kent Coast express. Where were the others then—the girl who had been as a sister to me, and the man as a brother; how far had the fear of my death made sad that childish face which had known such little sadness in its sixteen years of life? It was odd to think that Mary might be then returned to London, and that I, whom perchance she thought dead, was near to her, and yet, in a sense, more cut off from her than in the grave itself.

It was after 10 o'clock that the ride terminated, and, following Black and Osbart into a closed carriage, I was driven from the station. We drove for fifteen minutes, staying at last before a house in a narrow street, where we went upstairs to a suite of rooms reserved for us. After an excellent supper Osbart left us, but Black took me to a double-bedded room, saying that he could not let me out of his sight.

"Boy, if you make one attempt to play me false," said he, "I'll blow your brains out."

On the next morning Black quitted the house at an early hour after breakfast, but he locked the door of the room upon Osbart and myself. "Not," as he said, "because I can't take your word, but because I don't want anyone fooling in here." He returned in the evening at 7 o'clock, and found me as he had left me, reading a book.

The following day was Thursday. I shall always remember it, for I regard it as one of the most memorable days in my life. Black went out as usual early in the morning; his object being, as on the preceding day, to find out, if he could, what the Admiralty were doing in view of the robbery of the *Bellonca*. We had been left thus about the space of an hour when there came a telegram for the doctor, who read it with a fierce exclamation.

"The captain wants me urgently," said he, "and there's nothing to do but to leave you here. You must put up with the indignity of being locked in. The man who owns this house is one of us."

When he was gone I sat in the great armchair, pulling it to the window, and taking up my book. I could hear the hum of town, the rumbling of buses, and the subdued roar of London awake. I could even see people in the houses at the other side of the leads, and it occurred to me, "What if I open that casement and call for help? I had given a pledge, it is true; but should a pledge bind under such conditions?"

I was in the very throes of a mental struggle when the strange event of the day happened. I chanced to look up from the book I had been trying to read, and I saw a remarkable object upon the leads outside my window. It was the figure of a man, looking into my room; and presently, when he had given me innumerable nods and winks, he took a knife from his pocket, and opened the catch, stepping into the chamber with the nimble foot of a goat upon a crag path. Then he drew a chair up to mine, slapped me upon the knee and said:

"In the name of the law! I take you by surprise; but business, Mr. Mark Strong. In the first place I have wired to your friend, Mr. Roderick Stewart, and I expect him from Portsmouth in a couple of hours; in the second, your other friend, the doctor, is under lock and key, on the trifling charge of murder in the Midlands, to begin with. When we have Captain Black, the little party will be complete."

I looked at him, voiceless from the surprise of it, and he went on:

"I needn't tell you who I am; but there's my card. We have six men in the street outside, and another half dozen watching the leads here. You will be sensible enough to follow my instructions absolutely. Black, we know, leaves the country to-night in his steamer. The probability is that he will come to fetch you at 7 o'clock—I have frightened it all out of the people downstairs—if he does, you will go with him. Otherwise, he's pretty sure to send someone for you, and, as you at the moment are our sole link between that unmitigated scoundrel and his arrest, I ask you to risk one step more, and return at any rate as far as the coast, that we may follow him for the last time."

I looked at his card, whereon was the inscription, "Detective Inspector King, Scotland Yard," and I said at once:

"I shall not only go to the coast, but to his tender, for I've given my word. What you may do in the meantime is not my affair. I suppose he's made a sensation?"

"Sensation! There isn't another subject talked in any house in Europe—but read that; and it's ten thousand in my pocket, any way!"

Detective-Inspector King went as he had come, passing noiselessly over the leads; but he left me a newspaper, where in there was column after column concerning the robbery of the *Bellonca*. At last, the police were on the trail of Cap-

tain Black; yet I saw at once that, lacking my help, he would elude them.

It was half past six when at last a man unlocked the door of my room and entered. He was one of Black's negroes.

"Sart will come quick," said he, "and leave his luggage. The master waits." He gave me no time for any explanations, but took me by the arm, and, passing through a door, he went down a narrow street. There a cab waited for us, and we drove away, but not before one who stood on the pavement, had made a slight signal to me, and called another cab. In him I recognised Detective Inspector King, and I knew that we were followed.

## CHAPTER XXI.

We drove rapidly and took a train for Tilbury. The journey was accomplished in something under an hour; and when we alighted and got upon the bank of the river, I saw a steam launch with the man John in the bows of her. I entered the launch and we started immediately, going at a great pace towards Sheerness; and reached there after some buffet with the seas in the open. At this point we sighted the tender, and went aboard her, when we made full speed towards the North Foreland.

Black had made a colossal mistake, from his point of view, in setting foot in England; but the crowning blunder of his life was that fatal act of folly by which he had sought to shield me from the men. Now the object of letting Black reach his vessel again was as clear as daylight; it was not so much the man as his ship which they wished to take.

But were we followed? I had seen nothing to lead me to that conclusion as I came down the Thames; and now, favored by an intensely dark night, we promised, if nothing should intervene, to gain the Atlantic in two days, and to be aboard that strange citadel which was our stronghold against the nations. There was no sign of any warship pursuing; no indication whatever that the tender, then steaming at thirteen knots towards Dover, was watched or observed by any living being.

I was dead worn out and slept twelve hours at the least, for it was afternoon when I awoke. Black was not in the cabin, and I went above to him on the bridge. There was no land then to be seen; but the clear play of sparkling waves shone away to the horizon over a tumbling sea, upon which were a few ships. Upon one of these he constantly turned his glass.

By and by all the crew began to observe Black's anxiety and to crowd to the starboard side; but he told them nothing, although he never left the bridge. It was somewhat perplexing to me to observe that, while the great ship was undoubtedly following us, she did not gain a yard upon us.

This strange pursuit lasted three days and into the third night; when I was awakened from a snatch of sleep by the firing of a gun above my head. I got on deck, where my eyes were almost blinded by a great volume of light which spread over the sea from a point some two miles away on our starboard bow. We had been in the Atlantic then for twenty-four hours, and I did not doubt for a moment that we had reached the nameless ship. Had there been any uncertainty, the wild joy of the men would have banished it.

I heard the voice of Black singing, "Hands, stand by to lower boats!" At that moment the cruiser showed her teeth. Suddenly there was a rush of flame from her bows, and a shell hissed above us the first sign of her attempt to stop us joining our own ship.

We were no more than a quarter of a mile from safety, but the run was full of peril, and, as the launch stood out, the nameless ship of a sudden shut off her light, if possible to shield us in the dark. But the pursuer instantly flooded us with her own arc, and, following it with quick shots, she hit the jolly-boat at the third. Of the eight men there, only two rose when the boat had disappeared.

"Fire away!" cried Black, shaking his fist, and mad with passion; "and get your hands in; you'll want all the bark you've got just now."

But we had hauled the men aboard as he spoke, and, though two shells flamed in the sea and wetted us to the skin in the passage, we were at the ladder of the nameless ship without other harm, and with fierce shouts the men gained the decks.

For them it was a glorious moment. They had weathered the perils of a city, and stood where they could best face the crisis of the pursuit. It was a spectacle to move the most stolid apathy; the sight of a couple of hundred demoniacal figures lit by the great white wave of light from the enemy's ship, their faces upturned as they waited Black's orders, their hands flourishing knives and cutlasses, their hunger for the contest betrayed in every gesture.

"Boys," cried Black, "yonder's a government ship. You know me, that I don't run after war steamers every day, for that's not my business. But we're short of oil, and the cylinders are heating. Boys, it's swing or take that ship and the oil aboard her."

"Look out aft—the torpedo!"

A tiny line of foam was just visible for a second in the way of the light; but the moment the cruiser had shot it from her tube, she extinguished her arc, leaving us to light the waters with our own. There was no difficulty whatever in following the line of the deadly message.

"Full speed astern!" roared Black, and the nameless ship moved backwards, faster and yet faster. But the black death-bearing followed her, as a shark follows a death ship; we seemed even to have backed into its course—it came on as though to strike us full amidships, but the great ship swung round with a majestic sweep, and as we waited breathlessly, the torpedo

passed right under our bow, missing the ram by a hair's breadth.

We fired at the cruiser, hitting her right under the funnel, and a second time near her fore gun. Nor did she answer our firing, but rolled to the swell apparently out of action.

"Skipper, are you going aboard her now?" asked the man "Roaring John." "She's done by her looks, and you'll get no oil if ye delay. Karl, there, he isn't as comfortable as if he were in his bed."

The little German engineer was very far from it. He was almost desperate when minute by minute his stock of oil grew less; and he ran from one to the other as though we had grease in our pockets, and could give it to him. Black took due notice, but did not lose his calm.

"You're quite sure she's done, John?" he asked, turning to the big man. "She's done, I guess, or why don't she spit?"

The words had scarce left his lips when the cruiser's aft guns thundered out almost together, and one shell passed through the very center of our group. It cut the man John in half as he might have been cut by a sword, and his blood and flesh splashed us, while the other half of him stood up like a bust upon the deck, and during one horrible moment his arms moved wildly, and there was a horrid quivering of the muscles of his face. The second shot struck the roof of the turret obliquely, and glanced from it into the sea. The destruction seemed to move Black as no more than a rain shower. He simply cried: "All hands to cover; I'm going to give 'em a taste of the machine guns;" and we re-entered the conning tower. Then, as we began to move again, I swept the horizon with our light; but this time, far away over the black waste of water, the signal was answered.

"Number two!" said Black, quite calmly, when I told him, "and this time a battleship. Well, boy, if we don't take that oil yonder in ten minutes you may say your prayers."

## CHAPTER XXII.

The nameless ship bounded forward into the night, and soon was not fifty yards away from her opponent. Never have I known anything akin to the episode when bullets rang upon our decks in hundreds, and the dead and the living in the other ship lay huddled together, in a seething, struggling, moaning mass. We had opened fire on her before such of her men as could be spared had got below.

"Let 'em dig that!" cried Black, as he watched the havoc.

I, who had not ceased to watch that distant light which marked another warship on the horizon, knew that a second light had shone out as a star away over the sea; and now, when I looked again, I saw a third light. We were being surrounded. The searchlights of the distant ships were clearer to my view every moment. Black saw them, and took a slight moment from the glass.

"Boy," he said, "you should have told me of this. I see three lights, and that means a fleet."

"Are you going to run for it?" I asked. "Run for it, with two engines, yes; but it's a poor business. And we'll have to fight!"

I saw the foremost ironclad but two miles away from us, and the others were sweeping round to cut us off if we attempted flight. We lay with but two engines working, and a speed of sixteen knots at the best. Nor did we know from minute to minute when another engine would break down. At that moment there came a horrible sound of grating and tearing from the engine room, and it was succeeded by a moment of dead chilling silence.

"The second engine's gone!" said a man above, quite calmly.

We found the crew sullen and muttering, but Friedrich, the engineer's eldest son, sat at the top of the engine room ladder, and tears rolled down his face. The great ship still trembled under the shock of the breakdown and was not showing ten knots. The foremost ironclad crept up minute by minute; and before we had realized the whole extent of the mishap, she was within gunshot of us; but her colleagues were some miles away, she outpacing them all through it.

"She signals to us to let her come aboard," said "Four-Eyes." "Answer that we'll see in chips first," said Black, and he called for Karl and made signs to him.

Those on the battlement made quite sure of us now, for they steamed on and came within three hundred yards of us. Black watched them as a beast watches the unsuspecting prey. He stood, his face knit in savage lines, his hand upon the bell. I looked from the glass, and saw that no man was visible upon our decks, that our engines had ceased to move. We were motionless. Then in a second the bells rang out. There was again that frightful grating and tearing in the engine room.

The nameless ship came round to her helm with a mighty sweep; she foamed and plunged in the sea; she turned her ram straight at the other; and, groaning as a great stricken wounded beast, she roared onward to the voyage of death. I knew then the fearful truth; Black meant to sink the cruiser with his ram. I shall never forget that moment of terror, that grinding of heated steel, that plunge into the sea. I waited for the crash, and in the suspense hours seemed to pass. As last there was under the sea a mighty clap of submarine thunder. Dashed headlong from my post, I lay bruised and wounded upon the floor of steel. The roof above me rocked; the walls shook and were bent; my ears rang with the deafening roar in them; seas of foam mounted; shrieks and the sound of awful rending and tearing drowned other shouts of men going to their death. And through all was the hysterical yelling of Black, his defiance, his elation.

(To be continued.)

Couldn't Fool Her.

Miss DePlyne (proudly)—A dozen men offered me their hands at the seashore this summer.

Miss Wisely—Indeed! How long have you been a student of palmistry?

Wanted Particulars.

"Have pity on me, darling," pleaded the poor but otherwise honest young man; "I cannot live without you."

"What's the matter," queried the homely heiress; "have you lost your job?"

London cab drivers earn an aggregate of over \$40,000 per day.



### Bookshelf of Boyhood.

Some ere I'd like to plant myself By boyhood's long-neglected shelf, Once more to ope those volumes worn Which modern pages make forlorn.

Once more to let the moments speed With Optic, Castlemon, Mayne Reid! And "Boat Club" set, "The White Chief" there— Ah, these were books, I do declare!

"Jack Hazard!" Joy! Again we meet By grace of Trowbridge lines replete! And, 'pon my word, here's "Cudjo's Cave" (Was Cudjo not a "dandy" slave?)

The "Scottish Chiefs" is this, I guess, With "Thaddeus of Warsaw"—yes! And this (I loaned it o'er and o'er) Is Stephens' "Left on Labrador!"

Pass by that dog-eared treasure? No! "The Scott's" entrancing "Ivanhoe!" (How often of its glamour taught, Have Tom and I in tourney fought!)

And here, imporing boyhood's eyes, The "Last of the Mohicans" lies! Hail! Hawkeye, Uncas, Chingachgook! ("Deerslayer" is that next old book.)

Come, "Crusoe," pretty ragged, you— A hundred times read through and through! Your woodcuts blurred. While this one— The far-marooned "Swiss Family!"

And look! Their loneliness confessed, "Aladdin," "Sinbad" and the rest Peer forth from covers stained and dim, Awaiting—cheek by jowl with Grimm!

Upon this faded back discern The tempting wizard name of Verne! The title? Must be "Field of Ice"— Or, no; some "trip" of strange device.

Munchausen, here; that, Gulliver; This, Coffin—truthful chronicler. (The other three, of course, are bricks, But can't beat "Boys of '76!")

And you, O gift of gentler pen, Louis Alcott's "Little Men" And you, whom kindred soul creates, "Hans Brinker; or, The Silver Skates!"

But duty warns—like mother's dread: "Stop, my son; time to go to bed." In vain I'd beg: "One chapter more!" Farewell, dear shelf of boyhood's lore. —St. Nicholas.

### A Surprise.

It was pouring rain, but the twins did not mind it one bit, because they always liked ever so many rainy days when they were making a visit at grandma's.

Grandma had a big attic, filled full of the most wonderful things that you ever saw.

There were large trunks full of queer ruffled coats and velvet knee-breeches. And there were bouncing handboxes that held funny green calashes and the biggest poke bonnets imaginable. And then there was the Noah's ark!

It was not like your pretty painted one, which is full to the very top with a wonderful menagerie.

It was only a little old black box without any cover. And the animals! Uncle Jacob cut them all out of some pieces of wood with his jack-knife, ever so many years ago, when he was not much older than the twins.

And these animals were just as funny-looking as all the rest of the things up in that queer old garret. There were blue cows and pink lions and red-and-black leopards, and when Uncle Jacob had finished them he discovered that all the animals looked very much alike, so he wrote the name on the back of each one in great black painted letters.

Polly and Patty lied this Noah's ark better than anything else in that whole attic, and they thought it was every bit as wonderful as Uncle Jacob did when he had finished it so many years ago.

So this rainy morning, after they had finished their breakfast, these two little girls hurried up to the attic and ran straight to the corner under the eaves to get their precious treasure.

Patty got here first, but when she looked into the box she said, "Oh! oh! oh!" very loud indeed.

"Why, what's the matter?" exclaimed Polly, breathlessly.

"There's a live animal in it!" whispered Patty. "There's a heap of baby mice! A whole nest of them! And they're pink, 'stead of gray and furry. Peep in and see them, quick, Polly!"

Polly shivered. "I don't dare to," she said. And then something happened that made both children scamper down those stairs in a terrible rush. The mother mouse came home!

"I guess we can't go up in the attic ever again," said Patty, woefully, "cause I'm not 'specially fond of mice, 'less they're in traps."

But when Uncle Jacob went up into the attic with her after dinner, there stood the Noah's ark just where Polly had left it. The mice were gone. Every one of them! And the twins are still wondering if the big yellow pussy-cat could tell them a secret, for she was washing her face, and she looked so knowing and wise.—Youth's Companion.

### The Mother Bird.

It has been said by observers of birds that some of them will feed their young if they are caged, and if they fall, after a time, to release them, they will bring them a poison weed to eat so that death may end their captivity. This is hard to believe, but an apparently well au-

thenticated incident is cited to prove it. Three young orioles were captured and were immediately caged and the cage was hung in a tree. The mother soon came, calling to the little ones, and in a little while she brought them some worms. She continued for several days to feed them, without paying much attention to the persons who were about, but one day she brought them a sprig of green in the morning, and disappeared. In less than an hour the young birds were dead. An examination of the sprig showed that it was the deadly larkspur, which, it is said, will kill full-grown cattle. There is, of course, a possibility that the mother brought them the sprig by mistake, but to believe that would be to doubt the protective instinct that naturalists attribute to birds and animals.



### Topsy-Turvy.

Eddie drew a hen sitting in a box. When he came to look at it he accidentally turned the slate on its end, and lo! the hen disappeared and a calf was in her place.

### How to Walk Upstairs.

Perhaps it has never occurred to the boys and girls that there is a good way and a bad way to walk upstairs. Hear what a well-known physician says about it. "There are few persons who know how to walk upstairs properly. Usually a person will tread on the ball of his foot in taking each step, springing himself up to the next step. This is not only tiresome, but is wearing on the muscles, as it throws the entire suspended weight of the body on the legs and the feet. In walking upstairs the feet should be placed squarely down on the step, heel and all, and then the ascent should be made without hurry. In this way there will be no strain on any particular muscle, but each will do its work in a natural manner."

### GERMAN HEART TOO LARGE.

### Doctor of That Country Tells of Observations at Olympian Games.

A German medical man publishes some interesting comparisons made at the Olympian games respecting the size and stamina of the heart of the English, American and German competitors respectively. Dr. Smith says that as soon as he examined before the games the hearts of German sportsmen he could prophesy that they would prove no formidable rivals. The size of the heart was so abnormally great that in contests requiring strength, energy and endurance it was physically impossible that they should succeed. Results proved the truth of this forecast, and, it is notable that the few German athletes who did win places were in possession of the minimum sized hearts.

In the American sportsmen the heart conditions were in striking contrast to those of the Germans. Many of the American athletes were found to possess hearts smaller in dimensions than the smallest heart ever measured in a German hospital. An invincible sprinter possessed the smallest heart among the American competitors. A German-American athlete, rather significantly, was found to have the largest.

Among the Englishmen examined the heart was found to be slightly larger than that of the Americans, though smaller than that shown by any other nation. A parallel case which occurred at the games strikingly illustrated the difference in form between the English and the German athletes. In spite of an indisposition a German athlete took part in a certain contest. Subsequent examination proved that his heart had increased at the end of the struggle to double its previous size. An Englishman, suffering from the same indisposition, returned from the contest as winner and his heart had become smaller. The writer points out that by a wrong system of training and injudicious living German athletes are doing much to cultivate heart and nerve complaints on a serious scale.

### Joke on the Professor.

The scholarly William E. Byerly, professor of mathematics at Harvard, was once asked by a student how to develop a retentive memory. The professor answered that ordinary mental exercise was sufficient to secure a good memory, whereas the student asked if he might test the mental capacity of his instructor. Professor Byerly agreed and the student asked him to listen to and remember several varied items for a test. He began:

"One quart of whisky."  
"Um!" said the professor.  
"Six pounds of sugar, a pint of sour milk, three onions, half a gallon of molasses and two raw eggs."  
"Um!" said the professor.  
"Two green apples, twenty-six peanuts, one and a half cucumbers and four mince pies."  
"Um!" said the professor.  
"A package of starch, sixty-seven cakes of yeast and the skins of seven bananas. Got that down?"  
"Yes," answered Dr. Byerly.  
"How does it taste?" asked the student.

And when you hear a man boast of his ancestors it's a safe bet that his descendants will have no occasion to boast of theirs.



### A great deal of harm is done by self-drugging for the relief of various real or imaginary ills.

There is nothing easier. The only objection to the plan is that what is good for the cough may be bad for the cougher.

So it is with a headache. Almost any pain in the head not due to actual brain disease may be moderated, if not relieved temporarily, by some form of "headache powder"; but a frequent recourse to this means of cure may fatally weaken the heart. When this stops beating the headaches cease to trouble, but the patient is not in condition to know or care.

Every man, of course, believes himself a doctor, and often thinks he is better able to attack a cough or a case of rheumatism or a headache, whether it be his own or another's, than those who make the cure of disease a special study. All he has to do is to make up his mind what the trouble is—and any one can tell a cough when he has it—and then to take something that is "good for a cough."

Less serious, but not much so, is the abuse of tonics. A true tonic is anything that promotes the nutrition of the body. This may be done by increasing the appetite and improving digestion, which is the function of the bitter tonics; or by improving the condition of the blood by adding to it the iron it has lost; or by supplying the system with some needed substance, such as fat in cod liver oil; or finally by stimulating the tissues to increased absorption, an action which is ascribed to arsenic, mercury and others of the mineral tonics.

But these are not the "tonics" to which people are apt to resort when they run down. They take to stimulants, alcohol usually, and think they are getting strong because they feel better after each dose. The alcohol in the "tonic" is often disguised, and the user, perhaps a conscientious teetotaler, would be shocked to learn that what he was taking to give him strength had more alcohol in it than has the strongest whisky. If the system is seriously run down, a physician should be consulted, who will be able to give what is needed, whether iron, or bark, or gentian, or cod liver oil, to correct the underlying condition that causes the debility.—Youth's Companion.

### The Bird in Hand.

Instead of getting angry, Clarkson was rather amused at the actions of his pet waiter. For two years he had dined at the same restaurant almost daily and August knew his every wish and had always been liberally tipped. That day, however, Clarkson was shamefully neglected. He had to ask for butter, his napkin was damp and soggy, the particular sauce he liked so well was not on the table, and, in fact, August was the antithesis of a devoted servant. All his attentions seemed concentrated upon a man at an adjoining table. August hovered around him like a bee around a flower, anticipating every wish and bringing him sundry little extras.

The customers were evidently a stranger. Clarkson could not recall having seen him before, and from his long patronage of the place he had come to know all the regular customers by their faces at least. His curiosity got the better of him and as he was leaving, after bestowing the customary tip, he asked:

"Why is it, August, that you have been so attentive to that man and so neglectful of me? Is he in the habit of giving extra large tips?"

"Oh, no, m'sieu," said August. "He is a stranger. He has never been here before." Then he added, apologetically, "And I am sure of you, m'sieu."

### The Other Side.

"Don't you get homesick for those beautiful old Colonial mansions in the South?" they asked the Kentuckian on the night that the thermometer froze. "Not this weather," she answered. "I haven't forgotten yet how the wind used to blow through the cracks of the windows and doors of those beautiful old Colonial mansions, and how we used to sit in rooms about the size of ballrooms, huddled around a two-by-four grate, our faces scorching and the bitter blasts blowing through our back hair."

"Oh, no; in such weather as this the steam heated luxury of the Chicago flat for me," she decided.—Chicago Inter Ocean.

### Proof Positive.

Bertha—But, papa, what have you against Charles? Wouldn't he make a good husband?

Father—He's a fool, and besides he's only after your money.

Bertha—Oh, papa, I know he would marry me without a penny.

Father—You see? He's even more of a fool than I thought!—Le Pele-Mele.

We do not like to have any child coaxed to speak a piece for us or to give us a kiss.

Trying to avoid work is often the hardest kind.