Faith
Dashiell Hammett

Not only is Dashiell Hammett regarded as one of the greatest of all pulp writers, he is often recognized as one of the most important and influential, as well as popular, American writers of the twentieth century. His work has never been out of print, being reprinted again and again in many parts of the world. His stories have been anthologized more frequently than such Nobel laureates as Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Mann, Pearl S. Buck, and John Galsworthy.

How rare it is, then, to be able to offer a story that you cannot have read before. “Faith” appears in print here for the very first time anywhere.

The copy of the typescript from which the story was set has Hammett’s address, 1309 Hyde Street, San Francisco, on it. It provides an unusual opportunity to see a story in the form in which it was originally mailed out—before e-mail and before agents worked as middlemen. It is clean, with a few minor corrections made in his hand, a few words crossed out.

Candidly, it is not his greatest story, a bit thin when compared with “The House on Turk Street” or “Dead Yellow Women.” Still, it’s more than just a literary scrap, providing a searing look at hobo life in the Great Depression. These men lived on the roughest fringes of society, stealing when they had to, drinking when there was money, brawling with each other and with railroad security guards and other elements of the law enforcement community.

Were they criminal? Was the protagonist of “Faith”? You decide.

Faith

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SPRAWLED IN A LOOSE evening group on the river bank, the fifty-odd occupants of the slapboard barrack that was the American bunkhouse listened to Morphy damn the canning-factory, its superintendent, its equipment, and its pay. They were migratory workingmen, these listeners, simple men, and they listened with that especial gravity which the simple man—North American Indian, Zulu, or hobo— affects.

But when Morphy had finished one of them chuckled.

Without conventions any sort of group life is impossible, and no division of society is without its canons. The laws of the jungles are not the laws of the drawing-room, but they are as certainly existent, and as important to their subjects. If you are a migratory workingman you may pick your teeth wherever and with whatever tool you like, but you may not either by word or act publicly express satisfaction with your present employment; nor may you disagree with any who denounce the conditions of that employment. Like most conventions, this is not altogether without foundation in reason.

So now the fifty-odd men on the bank looked at him who had chuckled, turned upon him the stare that is the social lawbreaker's lot everywhere: their faces held antagonism suspended in expectancy of worse to come; physically a matter of raised brows over blank eyes, and teeth a little apart behind closed lips.

"What's eatin' you?" Morphy—a big bodied dark man who said "the proletariat" as one would say "the seraphim"—demanded. "You think this is a good dump?"

The chuckler wriggled, scratching his back voluptuously against a prong of uptorn stump that was his bolster, and withheld his answer until it seemed he had none. He was a newcomer to the Bush River cannery, one of the men hurried up from Baltimore that day: the tomatoes, after an unaccountable delay in ripening, had threatened to overwhelm the normal packing force.

"I've saw worse," the newcomer said at last, with the true barbarian's lack of discomfiture in the face of social disapproval. "And I expect to see worse."

"Meanin' what?"

"Oh, I ain't saying!" The words were light-flung, airy. "But I know a few things. Stick around and you'll see."

No one could make anything of that. Simple men are not ready questioners. Someone spoke of something else.

The man who had chuckled went to work in the process-room, where half a dozen Americans and as many Polacks cooked the fresh-canned tomatoes in big iron kettles. He was a small man, compactly plump, with round maroon eyes above round cheeks whose original ruddiness had been tinted by sunburn to a definite orange. His nose was small and merrily pointed, and a snuff-user's pouch in his lower lip, exaggerating the lift of his mouth at the

corners, gave him a perpetual grin. He held himself erect, his chest arched out, and bobbed when he walked, rising on the ball of the propelling foot midway each step. A man of forty-five or so, who answered to the name Feach and hummed through his nose while he guided the steel-slatted baskets from truck, to kettle, to truck.

After he had gone, the men remembered that from the first there had been a queerness about Feach, but not even Morphy tried to define that queerness. "A nut," Morphy said, but that was indefinite.

What Feach had was a secret. Evidence of it was not in his words only: they were neither many nor especially noteworthy, and his silence held as much ambiguity as his speech. There was in his whole air—in the cock of his round, boy's head, in the sparkle of his red-brown eyes, in the nasal timbre of his voice, in his trick of puffing out his cheeks when he smiled—a sardonic knowingness that seemed to mock whatever business was at hand. He had for his work and for the men's interests the absent-minded, bantering sort of false-seriousness that a busy parent has for its child's affairs. His every word, gesture, attention, seemed thinly to mask preoccupation with some altogether different thing that would presently appear: a man waiting for a practical joke to blossom.

He and Morphy worked side by side. Between them the first night had put a hostility which neither tried to remove. Three days later they increased it.

It was early evening. The men, as usual, were idling between their quarters and the river, waiting for bed-time. Feach had gone indoors to get a can of snuff from his bedding. When he came out Morphy was speaking.

"Of course not," he was saying. "You don't think a God big enough to make all this would be crazy enough to do it, do you? What for? What would it get Him?"

A freckled ex-sailor, known to his fellows as Sandwich, was frowning with vast ponderance over the cigarette he was making, and when he spoke the deliberation in his voice was vast.

"Well, you can't always say for certain. Sometimes a thing looks one way, and when you come to find out, is another. It don't *look* like there's no God. I'll say *that*. But—"

Feach, tamping snuff into the considerable space between his lower teeth and lip, grinned around his fingers, and managed to get derision into the snapping of the round tin lid down on the snuff-can.

"So you're one of *them* guys?" he challenged Morphy.

"Uh-huh." The big man's voice was that of one who, confident of his position's impregnability, uses temperateness to provoke an assault. "If somebody'd *show* me there was a God, it'd be different. But I never been showed."

"I've saw wise guys like you before!" The jovial ambiguity was suddenly gone from Feach; he was earnest, and indignant. "You want what you call proof before you'll believe anything. Well, you wait—you'll get your proof *this* time, and plenty of it."

"That's what I'd like to have. You ain't got none of this proof *on* you, have you?"

Feach sputtered.

Morphy rolled over on his back and began to roar out a song to the Maryland sky, a mocking song that Wobblies sing to the tune of "When the bugle calls up yonder I'll be there."

"*You will eat, by and by,*

In that glorious land they call the sky—
'*Way up high*!
Work and pray,
Live on hay.
You'll get pie in the sky when you die. "

Feach snorted and turned away, walking down the river bank. The singer's booming notes followed him until he had reached the pines beyond the two rows of frame huts that were the Polacks' quarters.

By morning the little man had recovered his poise. For two weeks he held it—going jauntily around with his cargo of doubleness and his bobbing walk, smiling with puffed cheeks when Morphy called him "Parson"—and then it began to slip away from him. For a while he still smiled, and still said one thing while patently thinking of another; but his eyes were no longer jovially occupied with those other things: they were worried.

He took on the look of one who is kept waiting at a rendezvous, and tries to convince himself that he will not be disappointed. His nights became restless; the least creaking of the clapboard barrack or the stirring of a sleeping man would bring him erect in bed.

One afternoon the boiler of a small hoisting engine exploded. A hole was blown in the storehouse wall, but no one was hurt. Feach raced the others to the spot and stood grinning across the wreckage at Morphy. Carey, the superintendent, came up.

"Every season it's got to be something!" he complained. "But thank God this ain't as bad as the rest—like last year when the roof fell in and smashed everything to hell and gone."

Feach stopped grinning and went back to work.

Two nights later a thunderstorm blew down over the canning-factory. The first distant rumble awakened Feach. He pulled on trousers, shoes, and shirt, and left the bunk-house. In the north, approaching clouds were darker than the other things of night. He walked toward them, breathing with increasing depth, until, when the clouds were a black smear overhead, his chest was rising and falling to the beat of some strong rhythm.

When the storm broke he stood still, on a little hummock that was screened all around by bush and tree. He stood very straight, with upstretched arms and upturned face. Rain—fat thunder-drops that tapped rather than pattered—drove into his round face. Jagged streaks of metal fire struck down at ground and tree, house and man. Thunder that could have been born of nothing less than the impact of an enormous something upon the earth itself, crashed, crashed, crashed, reverberations lost in succeeding crashes as they strove to keep pace with the jagged metal streaks.

Feach stood up on his hummock, a short man compactly plump, hidden from every view by tree and undergrowth; a little man with a pointed nose tilted at the center of the storm, and eyes that held fright when they were not blinking and squinting under fat rain-drops. He talked aloud, though the thunder made nothing of his words. He talked into the storm, cursing God for half an hour without pause, with words that were vilely blasphemous, in a voice that was suppliant.

The storm passed down the river. Feach went back to his bunk, to lie awake all night, shivering in his wet underwear and waiting. Nothing happened.

He began to mumble to himself as he worked. Carey, reprimanding him for over-cooking a basket of tomatoes, had to speak three times before the little man heard him. He slept little. In his bunk, he either tossed from side to side or lay tense, straining his eyes through the darkness for minute after minute.

Frequently he would leave the sleeping-house to prowl among the buildings, peering expectantly into each shadow that house or shed spread in his path.

Another thunderstorm came. He went out into it and cursed God again. Nothing happened. He slept none after that, and stopped eating. While the others were at table he would pace up and down beside the river, muttering to himself. All night he wandered around in distorted circles, through the pines, between the buildings, down to the river, chewing the ends of his fingers and talking to himself. His jauntiness was gone: a shrunken man who slouched when he walked, and shivered, doing his daily work only because it required neither especial skill nor energy. His eyes were more red than brown, and dull except when they burned with sudden fevers. His fingernails ended in red arcs where the quick was exposed.

On his last night at the cannery, Feach came abruptly into the center of the group that awaited the completion of night between house and river. He shook his finger violently at Morphy.

"That's crazy!" he screeched. "Of course there's a God! There's got to be! That's crazy!"

His red-edged eyes peered through the twilight at the men's faces: consciously stolid faces once they had mastered their first surprise at this picking up of fortnight-old threads: the faces of men to whom exhibitions of astonishment were childish. Feach's eyes held fear and a plea.

"Got your proof with you tonight?" Morphy turned on his side, his head propped on one arm, to face his opponent. "Maybe you can *show* me why there's *got* to be a God?"

"Ever' reason!" Moisture polished the little man's face, and muscles writhed in it. "There's the moon, and the sun, and the stars, and flowers, and rain, and—"

"Pull in your neck!" The big man spit for emphasis. "What do you know about them things? Edison could've made 'em for all you know. Talk sense. Why has there got to be a God?"

"Why? I'll tell you why!" Feach's voice was a thin scream; he stood tiptoe, and his arms jerked in wild gestures. "I'll tell you why! I've stood up to Him, and had His hand against me. I've been cursed by Him, and cursed back. That's how I know! Listen: I had a wife and kid once, back in Ohio on a farm she got from her old man. I come home from town one night and the lightning had came down and burnt the house flat—with them in it. I got a job in a mine near Harrisburg, and the third day I'm there a cave-in gets fourteen men. I'm down with 'em, and get out without a scratch. I work in a box-factory in Pittsburgh that burns down in less'n a week. I'm sleeping in a house in Galveston when a hurricane wrecks it, killing ever'body but me and a fella that's only crippled. I shipped out of Charleston in the *Sophie*, that went down off Cape Flattery, and I'm the only one that gets ashore. That's when I began to know for sure that it was God after me. I had sort of suspected it once or twice before— just from queer things I'd noticed—but I hadn't been certain. But now I knew what was what, and I wasn't wrong either! For five years I ain't been anywhere that something didn't happen. Why was I hunting a job before I came up here? Because a boiler busts in the Deal's Island packing-house where I worked before and wiped out the place. That's why!"

Doubt was gone from the little man; in the quarter-light he seemed to have grown larger, taller, and his voice rang.

Morphy, perhaps alone of the audience not for the moment caught in the little man's eloquence, laughed briefly.

"An' what started all this hullabaloo?" he asked.

"I done a thing," Feach said, and stopped. He cleared his throat sharply and tried again. "I done a thi—" The muscles of throat and mouth went on speaking, but no sound came out. "What difference does that make?" He no longer bulked large in the dimness, and his voice was a whine. "Ain't it enough that I've had Him hounding me year after year? Ain't it enough that everywhere I go He—"

Morphy laughed again.

"A hell of a Jonah you are!"

"All right!" Feach gave back. "You wait and see before you get off any of your cheap jokes. You can laugh, but it ain't ever' man that's stood up to God and wouldn't give in. It ain't ever' man that's had Him for a enemy."

Morphy turned to the others and laughed, and they laughed with him. The laughter lacked honesty at first, but soon became natural; and though there were some who did not laugh, they were too few to rob the laughter of apparent unanimity.

Feach shut both eyes and hurled himself down on Morphy. The big man shook him off, tried to push him away, could not, and struck him with an open hand. Sandwich picked Feach up and led him in to his bed. Feach was sobbing—dry, old-man sobs.

"They won't listen to me, Sandwich, but I know what I'm talking about. Something's coming here—you wait and see. God wouldn't forget me after all these years He's been riding me."

"Course not," the freckled ex-sailor soothed him. "Everything'll come out all right. You're right."

After Sandwich had left him Feach lay still on his bunk, chewing his fingers and staring at the rough board ceiling with eyes that were perplexed in a blank, hurt way. As he bit his fingers he muttered to himself. "It's something to have stood up to Him and not give in… He wouldn't forget… chances are it's something new… He wouldn't!"

Presently fear pushed the perplexity out of his eyes, and then fear was displaced by a look of unutterable anguish. He stopped muttering and sat up, fingers twisting his mouth into a clown's grimace, breath hissing through his nostrils. Through the open door came the noise of stirring men: they were coming in to bed.

Feach got to his feet, darted through the door, past the men who were converging upon it, and ran up along the river—a shambling, jerky running. He ran until one foot slipped into a hole and threw him headlong. He scrambled up immediately and went on. But he walked now, frequently stumbling.

To his right the river lay dark and oily under the few stars. Three times he stopped to yell at the river.

"No! No! They're wrong! There's got to be a God! There's got to!"

Half an hour was between the first time he yelled and the second, and a longer interval between the second and third; but each time there was a ritualistic sameness to word and tone. After the third time the anguish began to leave his eyes.

He stopped walking and sat on the butt of a fallen pine. The air was heavy with the night-odor of damp earth and mold, and still where he sat, though a breeze shuffled the tops of the trees. Something that might have been a

rabbit padded across the pine-needle matting behind him; a suggestion of frogs' croaking was too far away to be a definite sound. Lightning-bugs moved sluggishly among the trees: yellow lights shining through moth-holes in an irregularly swaying curtain.

Feach sat on the fallen pine for a long while, only moving to slap at an occasional pinging mosquito. When he stood up and turned back toward the canning-factory he moved swiftly and without stumbling.

He passed the dark American bunk-house, went through the unused husking-shed, and came to the hole that the hoisting engine had made in the store-house wall. The boards that had been nailed over the gap were loosely nailed. He pulled two of them off, went through the opening, and came out carrying a large gasoline can.

Walking downstream, he kept within a step of the water's edge until to his right a row of small structures showed against the sky like evenly spaced black teeth in a dark mouth. He carried his can up the slope toward them, panting a little, wood-debris crackling under his feet, the gasoline sloshing softly in its can.

He set the can down at the edge of the pines that ringed the Polacks' huts, and stuffed his lower lip with snuff. No light came from the double row of buildings, and there was no sound except the rustling of tree and bush in the growing breeze from southward.

Feach left the pines for the rear of the southernmost hut. He tilted the can against the wall, and moved to the next hut. Wherever he paused the can gurgled and grew lighter. At the sixth building he emptied the can. He put it down, scratched his head, shrugged, and went back to the first hut.

He took a long match from his vest pocket and scraped it down the back of his leg. There was no flame. He felt his trousers; they were damp with dew. He threw the match away, took out another, and ignited it on the inside of his vest. Squatting, he held the match against the frayed end of a wall-board that was black with gasoline. The splintered wood took fire. He stepped back and looked at it with approval. The match in his hand was consumed to half its length; he used the rest of it starting a tiny flame on a corner of the tar-paper roofing just above his head.

He ran to the next hut, struck another match, and dropped it on a little pile of sticks and paper that leaned against the rear wall. The pile became a flame that bent in to the wall.

The first hut had become a blazing thing, flames twisting above as if it were spinning under them. The seething of the fire was silenced by a scream that became the whole audible world. When that scream died there were others. The street between the two rows of buildings filled with red-lighted figures: naked figures, underclothed figures— men, women and children—who achieved clamor. A throaty male voice sounded above the others. It was inarticulate, but there was purpose in it.

Feach turned and ran toward the pines. Pursuing bare feet made no sound. Feach turned his head to see if he were being hunted, and stumbled. A dark athlete in red flannel drawers pulled the little man to his feet and accused him in words that had no meaning to Feach. He snarled at his captor, and was knocked down by a fist used club-wise against the top of his head.

Men from the American bunk-house appeared as Feach was being jerked to his feet again. Morphy was one of them.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he asked the athlete in red drawers.

“These one, ‘e sit fire to ‘ouses. I see ‘im!”

Morphy gaped at Feach.

“You did that?”

The little man looked past Morphy to where two rows of huts were a monster candelabra among the pines, and as he looked his chest arched out and the old sparkling ambiguity came back to his eyes.

“Maybe I done it,” he said complacently, “and maybe Something used me to do it. Anyways, if it hadn’t been that it’d maybe been something worse.”