

# DEEP SEA GAME

By ARTHUR J. MESSIER

**W**HEN a fishing launch is sighted putting into the Crescent Bay of Avalon at Catalina Island, the vacationists look seaward with interest. If the approaching launch displays a tuna flag—symbolic of having caught at least one of that game fish—the interest is manifested in expressions of “Let’s go see if it’s big enough to get a button from the Tuna Club.”

But when the mast of the little craft carries both tuna and swordfish flags, the interest is displayed in action. The boardwalk is vacated. Purchases in the little stores along Wriglet Way are curtailed. Small boys take up the cry of “Fishin’ boat’s comin’ in! Fishin’ boat’s comin’ in!” and long before the fishing launch has reached the float at the end of the pier, the concerted movement from all sides has abruptly taken on the semblance of an exodus. Each man, woman and child striving to be the first to reach the end of the pier and gain the first glimpse of fisherman and catch.

It was on one of such occasions that two men, plainly from the desert country, were caught by the turmoil from a point about the middle of the pier and carried unwillingly by curious, onrushing hordes, until the two bewildered men were pressed flat against the rail at the extreme end of the pier and it seemed that they must necessarily jump into the ocean and swim ashore if they valued their lives.

One of them, a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed, placid man with a tinge of color under tanned cheeks, was Dick Brownell of the revenue service. The man with him was Jack Crowley, the tall, slim, red-headed Texan who had accompanied Brownell on so many expeditions against smugglers along the Mexican border.

“Wh—what do you make of it?” he breathlessly asked, plainly angered by his treatment from the mob.

“Guess they’re more anxious than you and me, Jack,” coolly returned Brownell. “They want to see li’l tuna and li’l swordfish,” he added, easing his body from the railing with his broad hairy hand.

Just then, the fishing launch that had been responsible for the commotion touched at the float. The bushy-browed captain threw a hawser to a waiting attendant and the launch came to, rising

and falling gently with the ground swells.

A sun-burned, stocky man in careful fishing togs slowly rose from one of the swivel chairs at the stern, stepped on the rail and jumped to the float.

Brownell’s hand suddenly gripped Crowley’s arms. His face was tense as he kept his eyes on the fisherman, then it relaxed into a peculiar combination of smiling lips and steady, obstinate eyes. It was Brownell’s characteristic smile of action. The smile that always came to him with the grim determination to fight—and win out.

“What’s the big idea?” gruffly demanded Crowley.

“Trail him, Jack,” Brownell quietly leaned over and whispered. “Find out all you can about what he’s doing here.”

“Suppose you do that little thing yourself,” obstinately retorted Crowley. “I’m here on a vacation, and this is my first day.”

“It’s Bowser, Chic Bowser,” said Brownell, keeping his eyes on the man. “He’ll know me the moment he sets eyes on me. Big game going on, Jack. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be here.”

Crowley looked at the fisherman appraisingly, scowled as he glanced back at Brownell, then shrugged hopelessly and wormed his way along the rail to the plank that ran up from the float and waited.

Bowser was helping unload the fish to the float. This task finished, he spoke in undertones to the captain, then came up the plank.

Brownell kept looking down at the float. Seemingly, he was engrossed in the novel sight afforded by the big yellow fin tuna and the three hundred pound marlin, but his mind was far off. He was thinking of that night three years ago when Chic Bowser had wounded him in a running fight—and gotten away. Thinking how the boys had jeered and called him an infant when he had been forced to report failure in capturing the smuggler. “I’ll get him, somewhere, some time,” he had boasted in hurt pride. And now Bowser had bobbed up when he was least expected.

Brownell risked a glance over his shoulder. He could see Bowser in the thinning mob fifty feet away, protesting

against the efforts of an “official” photographer. No wonder he refused to be photographed with his catch. Too many people were apt to see the picture of the “sportsman” when posted in the glass case with other record breakers.

Vaguely, he heard the captain remark that it had taken thirty minutes to land the swordfish and that it had jumped nineteen times. He watched the enormous yellow fin tuna being carried across the float, up the plank to the pier itself; but it held no particular interest for him. He was thinking of Bowser, trying to formulate some plan that would land the smuggler. Still, no plan could be complete without Crowley’s report. But what was Bowser’s game? Why was he in Catalina? Smuggling of course, but why choose a base so remote from the Mexican border?

He heard a yell back of him. It was the captain importuning a helper for so carelessly handling the fish. “Didn’t you hear me say the big ones are to be mounted!” the man bellowed. “Pick ’em up and carry ’em to the scales!”

In a flash, it came to him. That was part of the scheme—mounting that fish. Why else would a man like Bowser have them mounted? That was it. Bowser was smuggling opium to the mainland in the stuffed fish! But where did he get it? Mexico, no doubt. Perhaps he brought it up in that fishing launch.

He fell in with the group that was surrounding the Tuna Club’s official scales. Saw the scale register two hundred and forty pounds. Heard the comment of admiration and the captain’s statement that it was the biggest yellow fin in years, but it was not the breaking of records that brought a smile to his lips—it was the thought of the number of cans of brown sticky stuff that could be concealed in the fish when mounted.

He must get to that launch, somehow. Maybe it would reveal something important. He touched the captain’s arm.

“You run the *Gray Goose*?” he inquired.

“Yep,” said the captain, struggling to maintain his hold on one end of the tuna as it was being lifted from the scales.

“I’ve been wondering if I could rent it for a few days.”

The captain shook his head. "Chartered for the season. But if it's to go fishing, my son's got a launch—the *Lollito*. He knows the fishing grounds as well as I do." He produced a card and handed it over. "You'll find him on the pier after supper; locker number fourteen," he added.

Brownell pocketed the card. This did not please him. He had his mind set on getting on the *Gray Goose* before Crowley returned. Now it appeared that the visit must be indefinitely delayed.

He returned to the end of the pier, produced his pipe, filled it and, almost deliberately, he applied a match. "Chartered for the season," he mused. "We'll have to shorten that season."

The *Gray Goose* was shoved off. The captain threw in the clutch and the launch veered to the right and headed directly for a small row boat two hundred yards from the float. In a moment, the *Gray Goose* lay at anchor and the captain was rowing back to the pier.

**B**ROWNELL chuckled. It would soon be dark. Simple, then, to get to the *Gray Goose* and take plenty of time in looking it over. In the meantime, there was nothing to prevent visiting the little taxidermist shop along the waterfront. He had seen it that afternoon. No doubt that was where Bowser was having his fish mounted.

The taxidermist was a little weazened old man with protruding rheumic eyes and a bald head. He came shuffling behind a glass case, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

"Anything in my line?" he asked, in a dry, colorless voice.

Brownell glanced around the little shop. The walls were covered with mounted flying fish, sea bass and albacores; a few blow fish, suspended on wires. "I'm wondering if you have any such thing as swordfish, or good sized tuna," said Brownell easily.

The taxidermist shook his head. It was evident that he was disappointed. "This is all I have," he said, pointing to the wall.

"All too small. I want either a big marlin or a good sized tuna." Brownell's glance shifted to the little workroom at the back. Through the partly opened door he saw a big swordfish on the work table. He took a step toward it. "Ah! That's what I want," he said, stepping into the workroom.

As if filled with resentment, the taxidermist had followed. He was visibly nervous. His long, emaciated fingers tapped the edge of the work table. "That

—that isn't for sale." The old man was flushed now; his forehead dotted with perspiration. "That isn't for sale," he repeated, "and this is my workroom. It's—it's private."

The man's agitation amused Brownell. It could only mean one thing. It could only mean that he had something to conceal. He ran his hand over the swordfish, his strong fingers pressed hard. There was something bulky under his touch. Something hard and sharp—like the edge of a can. His expression of amusement suddenly changed to the combination of smiling lips and steady, obstinate eyes.

"So, you're mixed up in the game with Bowser," he said evenly.

The taxidermist went white. His lips trembled. His eyes grew wild and he leaned on the edge of the table for support. "What game? There must be some mistake. I—I don't understand," he quavered.

Brownell turned the swordfish over and quickly ripped open the under side. He pulled out some wads of excelsior, then a small tin can. "I don't suppose you understand what this is," he said holding the can before the old man's face, "nor why you put it in that fish."

The taxidermist sank into a chair. His lips moved, but no words came.

"I'm not going to ask you to explain to me," continued Brownell. "You will be given the chance to explain to the judge."

"You mean! You mean you're going to arrest me?" came the old man's voice shakily.

"Exactly."

There was a sudden wail. The old man had fallen to his knees and grasped Brownell's hand. "Please! Please let me tell you what I know. It's not much, but, please, please believe me."

Brownell looked down at the withering old man. There was something in those eyes, that voice, that rang true. He pointed to the chair and bade the old man to arise.

"I didn't know these cans were in the fish until today," began the taxidermist. "And I didn't put them there. They must have been put in last night after I had closed up. I don't know who put them there."

"Do you suspect anyone?" Brownell's voice was quiet, comforting.

"I do and I don't. It's all a puzzle to me and I can't quite make it out."

"Go on and tell me what made you suspicious," prompted Brownell.

"It's the way he wanted those fish mounted."

"Who?"

"Mr. Bowser. He came to me two or three weeks ago and asked me if I would undertake to mount all the fish he caught or managed to buy for that purpose. He said he had a friend who could sell all the mounted fish he could collect on the island and that he wanted to make sure of uniform mounting.

"Well, I undertook to do his mounting, but when I did the first one for him and put it on a board, he insisted that I leave them off the boards until he was ready to have me.

"I told him it would do a better job if I did the whole thing at once, but he was insistent that I merely prepare the fish and put it ready for the board and hold it for further instructions.

"I did that, afterwards. And this morning when I came into the shop I found a note under the door telling me to have all the fish ready today because he expected to crate them tonight to ship. I left off everything else and began following his instructions when I noticed that the fish seemed heavy. Then I noticed that one of them was not tacked the way I usually do. I ripped off the tacks and began doing the job over when I discovered the cans. It was that fish that's on the table now.

"I was worried about it and wondered what it was. When I went home for breakfast, I told the wife about it and showed her one of the cans. She said it must be opium. I've been worried sick all day. Haven't been able to do a thing and I've been scared everytime anyone's been in the store for fear they knew those cans were here and they thought that I was mixed up in something crooked."

"What were you going to do with the fish?" slowly asked Brownell, sure that the taxidermist had spoken the truth.

"Tell Bowser to take it away and do his own mounting," flared the old man.

"Haven't you thought about notifying the authorities?"

"Yes," the taxidermist admitted sheepishly, "but I didn't want to do that until the fish was away from here. I figured that if I told the police after Bowser got the stuff away, there was less chance of making me trouble."

"Haven't you any idea who put the cans in the fish after you had closed the shop last night?"

The old man smiled for the first time. "I don't think it's anybody but Bowser himself, but I swear, I don't know how he got in." He lowered his voice. Someone entered the front door. The newcomer was Bowser.

Brownell tried to step away from the smuggler's range of vision, but he was too late. One quick glance had shown him that Bowser's facial muscles had contracted. It left no doubt in Brownell's mind that he had been seen and recognized, so he boldly followed the taxidermist into the store, took out his pipe and, slowly, deliberately, he filled it.

Bowser's glance swept past Brownell's shoulders, to the little workroom where the swordfish and the opium cans lay in full view. His face clouded and he slammed the street door shut and turned the lock.

"I'll fix you for meddling," he said belligerently to the old man. "Pull down those shades!"

The taxidermist glanced appealingly at Brownell and proceeded to obey.

"So, Mr. Dick Brownell is still in the service, eh? It's a pity I didn't finish you when I had a chance."

BOWSER'S right hand had slipped into his coat pocket and something sharp was pointing toward Brownell. The revenue service man knew it was a gun, and although he was unarmed himself, he smiled back at Bowser, deliberately struck a match and applied it to his pipe.

"Danged sure of yourself, eh?" came Bowser's voice. "You won't be when I get through with you." His hand whipped out of his pocket; a gun flashed in the light.

The taxidermist turned off the switch and threw himself on the floor back of the showcase. Brownell launched himself at Bowser, tripped and fell headlong. Bowser fired. Then came a crash in the street door, splintered glass over the floor and Bowser sprinted through the workroom, slammed the door shut.

Brownell darted after him, but the rear door was locked from the outside. He could hear Bowser running up the alley.

"Don't be a fool," boomed Crowley's voice. It was he who had flung himself through the street door unmindful of the plate glass.

"Guess you're right, Jack. I haven't got a gun. How did you manage to be here at the right time?"

"Been right back of him since he left the pier. Saw you inside and everything that went on before the shades were drawn. When I saw the lights go out, that was my cue. I knew if I smashed the door it would scare him off."

By this time Brownell had reached the electric switch near the door. He

turned it on and the light revealed the taxidermist standing where Brownell had been, holding a gun in his hand.

"I was taking it to you when the crash came," he said. "I wasn't sure you had one." He came forward and gave the gun to Brownell.

Brownell quickly examined the gun, saw it contained six shells, motioned to Crowley and stepped into the workroom.

"It would be foolish to show ourselves in that alley," said Crowley. "He'll shoot the moment he sees us. Don't you think it would be better to block his escape off the island and lay low?"

Brownell saw the logic in Crowley's question and turned for the store. He stopped as he reached the threshold. The captain of the *Gray Goose* was coming in from the street.

There was some significance in this, Brownell thought. First, Bowser had come to the store—undoubtedly to get his stuffed fish—and this boatman was coming in to help carry it to the *Gray Goose*. The taxidermist was innocent, but this bushy-browed boatman? How much did he figure in Bowser's schemes?

"Put up your hands!" commanded Brownell, watching for tell-tale expressions. "Step right this way, and keep them above your head."

It was evident that the boatman was frightened. His eyes grew wide and it seemed as if he would collapse.

"This is Bowser's accomplice," Brownell said to Crowley. "Put the cuffs on him."

"Bowser's accomplice," repeated the captain. "What do you mean?"

"Simply that we're on to your smuggling scheme, captain. We've got you with the goods."

"I don't get you." The man was pale, unsteady.

Brownell smiled. "You'll find that it isn't always easy to smuggle opium to the mainland, old man. That stuffed fish stunt was good, but it stopped working."

"You got me wrong," said the boatman, as if coming to a sudden realization. "I'm not mixed up in it and I'll tell you all I know. I came in to compare notes with Mr. Linder. Will you let me talk?"

"You can do that in court," coolly said Brownell.

"I'll talk now. As I said before, I came in to compare notes with Mr. Linder, the taxidermist. I got kind of suspicious today, over something that happened yesterday and last night.

"We were coming back from the fishing grounds, Mr. Bowser and I, and when we passed Sheepshead, I saw a boat anchored there and—"

"Where's Sheepshead?" interrupted Brownell.

"That's a big cliff on the other side of the island, not far from Seal Rocks."

"All right. You saw a boat anchored there, and what?"

"I saw a boat anchored there that don't belong in these waters. Bowser asked me to go close to it. I did. He spoke to the fellows on that boat for a few minutes. They talked Spanish and I couldn't understand. Afterwards, he said they were friends from San Francisco. Well, last night, I filled the gas tank on the *Gray Goose* so's we could start early this morning. Bowser had told me he wanted to get an early start today.

"This morning, I noticed that half the gas was gone and the cushions on the seats were wet. I didn't say anything. I thought maybe my boy had gone out for a ride with his girl on the *Goose*, so I filled the tank again.

"Today, Bowser asked me to come past Sheepshead again. He didn't ask me to stop this time, but we went close to that boat and when he thought I didn't see him, he made signals to that boat with his fingers."

"What kind of signals?"

"He held up both hands and spread his fingers apart. I figured what he was doing had something to do with ten. I thought that was funny, those queer signals when he thought I wasn't looking, so I paid strict attention to the name of that boat. It's called the *Ionic*, but that name was painted over another one that looked like *Spindrift*.

"Well, when I got home tonight, I asked the boy if he used the *Gray Goose* last night. He said he had not, and when I told him about that launch I saw yesterday and today, he said he was sure that was the boat that had been stolen out of San Pedro three weeks ago. He said he read in the paper about the *Spindrift* being stolen and the description he gave me tallies to a 'T'.

"That's all I know, and I was coming in to ask Mr. Linder if he had noticed anything queer about Bowser, and what we'd better do about it."

"Bowser must have gone after that opium last night himself and sneaked in here after everybody was gone to bed," supplied Linder.

"That's just my conclusion," said Brownell. Then turning again to the captain of the *Gray Goose*. "Can you take us to Sheepshead?"

"Sure could. When do you want to go?"

"Right now."

"Be ready as soon as I tell the wife and get some gas in the tank."

"Let's send word to your wife and get started right away. We want to get there before Bowser does."

The three men went to the pier. But it was too late. The *Gray Goose* was gone. At the point where it should have been anchored was the small row boat that was used to go to and from the pier.

Brownell did not waste time in asking questions of the men on the pier. Instead, he asked the captain the name of the fastest boat on the island.

"The *Catalina Flyer* is the fastest boat here, but we couldn't get her. She's used for searchlight trips at night."

"Humph! Searchlight! Couldn't want anything better," supplied Crowley.

A FEW minutes later arrangements had been concluded for the use of the *Catalina Flyer* and the three men were on their way to Sheepshead. Brownell gave instructions to leave the searchlight on and make it appear that the boat was on one of its regular excursions. These instructions were followed and while the *Catalina Flyer* sped toward Seal Rocks, the immense searchlight played on the water and the shore line. Thousands of flying fish, attracted by the light, sprang out of the water and planed above it for long distances, their long slender bodies shimmering like silver things above the blue water.

They finally reached Seal Rocks, the point farthest south on the island, and while the giant searchlight kept its beam on the rocks and the *Flyer* rounded the point, dozens of seals, blinded and frightened by the glare, barked and crawled into the water.

Finally, the *Flyer* had rounded the point. They were in rougher water now, on the unprotected side of the island, and while the speed of the excursion boat was retarded, the craft lived up to its reputation. Soon, the *Gray Goose* was picked up in the distance. Gradually, the *Flyer* crept on it. Then the *Ionic* was sighted.

The *Gray Goose* was seen to run alongside, then veer off to the right and turn in circles. It was evident that she had been abandoned.

"The *Goose*'ll be smashed to pieces," came the cry from the captain. "She's all I've got."

"We'll pick her up in time, and tow her in," reassured Brownell.

The *Ionic* got under way and headed for the ocean, then turned sharply to the left, a ruse to make time while the *Catalina Flyer* changed its course.

Brownell ordered the engine reversed. The *Flyer* slowed down and the *Gray Goose* was taken in tow. This operation only took a few minutes, but the *Ionic* had taken advantage of those minutes. When the *Flyer's* searchlight scanned the water, the craft was nowhere in sight.

At a word from Brownell, the *Flyer's* engine was shut off. Then came the distant "put-put" of the other craft. They got its direction from the noise of the exhaust. Immediately, the *Flyer* resumed full speed, the chase was begun, and, soon, the *Ionic* was once again within the powerful beam of searchlight.

As the distance between the two boats was reduced, Bowser was seen gun in hand, teeth bared and gleaming. He was ready for a finish fight.

Then came his first shot. It splattered against the upper deck and Brownell realized that Bowser intended to shoot out the light. Then came a volley of shots that went wild. Two men joined Bowser in the stern of the *Ionic* and from the way she traveled from side to side, it was evident that there was no one at the wheel.

The boats were within a hundred yards of each other now, and Brownell saw that the two men with Bowser were Mexicans. He called to them to surrender.

For answer, a shot knocked off his hat.

"If you don't throw your guns in the water and hold up your hands," yelled Brownell, "we'll ram you."

There were no signs of surrender from the *Ionic*. While the two Mexicans fired less frequently and used Bowser for a shield, the wild shooting continued without seeming effect.

They were opposite the garbage dump now, just north of Seal Rocks. Crowley, who had been manning the searchlight gave a yell and the beam of light pierced the water, directly down. Schools of sharks were traveling with the *Flyer*.

For a moment, Brownell thought his friend had been wounded, but he heard the yell again and he knew that if he had been wounded, there was nothing serious.

"Look at 'em, Dick! Sharks! Hundreds of 'em!"

Brownell glanced into the water, then at the faces of the Mexicans. It was the psychological moment. "Put up your hands or you'll feed the sharks!" he commanded.

The Mexicans were looking fixedly at the sharks, fear gripping their hearts. Their hands went up.

Brownell heard something cutting the air above his head. He looked up. It was Crowley swinging a rope. It suddenly darted and the next moment the two Mexicans had been roped. Their agonized cries rent the air.

The *Flyer* struck the *Ionic*. The impact sent the Mexicans from their feet, tumbling over the rail into the water. Bowser had sprung at the *Flyer* and caught the railing. In a moment, he had clambered over it and was backing toward the stern—away from Brownell.

The captain switched on the deck lights, shut off the engine and came hurrying toward Brownell.

"Help Jack," he commanded. "Up above. Help him pull up the Mexicans."

Brownell had done little firing. He wanted to get Bowser without hurting him if he could, but Bowser had drawn blood now. Brownell felt a stinging pain in the left shoulder. That characteristic smile of his came to his lips, his eyes, cold, steady.

Bowser had found refuge back of a pile of life preservers. Occasionally his head bobbed up, then his hand, holding the automatic, appeared above the life preservers. Brownell fired.

Bowser's hand flew up, the gun went overboard, and when Brownell saw that hand again, it lay on the deck, at the end of that stack of life preservers, bleeding.

He slowly tucked the gun in his belt, took out his pipe, deliberately filled it and applied a match. "I guess your smuggling days are over, Bowser," he said coolly. "When we get through with you—Texas will still be wanting you. Last I heard, they were anxious to spend thirty thousand to get you back. Nifty little reward, Bowser. Nifty little reward."

Bowser sprang to his feet. In a second he was climbing the rail. The searchlight was pointed into the water, dozens of sharks, long, clammy, sinister-looking, threading water, as if waiting. Bowser hesitated. He reeled back and fell to the deck. The smuggler had fainted.

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