

*River Joe—Clever Sleuth of Inland Streams—Battles For
His Life on the Trail of a Strange Murder Case!*



They rolled down the incline

FINGERPRINTS on WATER

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RIVER JOE was worried. "Straw Hat" Aufort hadn't been fishing at his usual place by the chemical company's plant. His boat hadn't been there either. His absence was just as astounding as if the Third Street Bridge or River Joe's own floating second-hand store—his barge up at Riverton, had suddenly vanished into thin air.

Because old Jim Aufort fished every afternoon, rain or shine, by the chemical plant. With his big straw hat covering his

white hair and shading his twinkling blue eyes, always wearing a khaki jacket, he was so much a landmark that captains of river steamers claimed they took bearings on him in bad weather.

River Joe was guiding his launch through the winding channels of the marsh country down river from Riverton. He was going to Aufort's little houseboat to see if he was all right, and to present the cake that set on the seat beside him. Louise Archer, the dark-haired lovely girl River

Joe hoped some day to marry, had baked that cake for the lonely old man's birthday.

River Joe's face softened as he thought of her, then he tensed suddenly. From close ahead, around a bend in the channel, there came a sudden exclamation of alarm, then a splash and the sounds of floundering in the water.

"Help!" a voice shrilled. "Help! We've tipped—"

JOE shoved the throttle full on, and the powerful launch leaped ahead. Holding the wheel with one hand, he had slipped off his shoes and jacket by the time he swung around the curve.

An overturned rowboat came into sight, an oar and some pneumatic seat cushions floating around it. The boat was still rocking, and Joe saw a man's hand gripping the bow.

"Help!" the fellow spluttered.

Joe cut the switch and stood up. He hardly looked at the excited man clinging to the boat; his eyes were sweeping the water close by.

"Anybody with you?" he snapped. "Didn't you say 'we tipped?'"

"Yes." Joe recognized him now—Mace Kussel, hanger-on to the fringes of organized crime in Riverton. "Straw Hat Aufort was with me. He—he went down like a lead sinker. I tried to grab him but—"

River Joe didn't wait to hear more. With a curiously stiff movement he picked up a small anchor and holding it, dived headfirst into the water. The weight of the anchor and his dive carried him down rapidly.

Joe reached under his shirt into one pocket of a special waterproof belt he always wore, and brought out a small flashlight. Its joints were sealed; it worked just as well in water as in the air.

He played the beam of light around as

it got darker with increasing depth. He was looking for an ascending string of bubbles, that would lead him down to Aufort. Air from a drowning person's lungs together with air imprisoned in their clothing, keeps coming up for several minutes.

But there was no bubble trail to follow. The pressure here, far below the surface, was hurting Joe's ears and eyes, but he let the anchor take him down. Then he saw the muddy, silt-covered bottom of the channel.

River Joe let go the anchor, began swimming around in widening circles, playing his flashlight on the bottom, but he didn't come close enough to it to stir up an obliterating cloud of the fine silt. He made every move count to prolong his stay, far beyond ordinary endurance, down there without air and under that crushing pressure.

For River Joe, who walked a little stiffly and with a slight limp on land, had the grace and agility of an otter or seal in the water. This wasn't a miracle, there was a very simple reason for this startling difference.

Joe's lower spine had been injured in a fall. On land, the weight of his upper body pressed down on the injured vertebrae, making him a little stiff. But the water bore his weight up evenly, the pressure was relieved from his back, and he had his full strength and suppleness.

He needed it all now as he continued searching without results. His flashlight cut only a tiny cone of light through this deep blackness, and he had to move slowly. The light touched a rock, half buried in the silt. A piece of new, shining copper wire was tied around the rock, the loose ends of the wire sticking out like tendrils.

River Joe had no time for this interesting discovery. He had reached the end of his endurance, when, a few feet

further on, he found the limp figure of Aufort huddled on the bottom.

Joe caught his shoulder in one hand and shot up—up, with his lungs burning and aching for fresh air. He broke the surface near his own launch. The shifty-eyed Kussel had deserted the rowboat and had climbed into the launch. He gasped as he saw Joe's burden.

"I thought—you stayed under so long—I thought you was a goner, too!"

"Help pull him up!" Joe panted. "We'll rush him to the hospital."

Between them they lifted Aufort's body to the turtle deck. Kussel took the wheel, under Joe's sharp orders and they sped back toward Riverton. Joe kneeled over Aufort's form, applying artificial respiration.

DOUBTS and suspicions were in Joe's mind as he worked. There were a lot of questions he wanted to ask the sneaky Mace Kussel, questions about that accident back there in the channel. Joe realized he would have to wait, though. He couldn't make Kussel hear above the roar of the engine, and he had to keep working over Aufort in the desperate attempt to get regular breathing started again.

Joe didn't get a chance to ask those questions. In the excitement of landing at a pier and calling an ambulance, Mace Kussel slipped away. Joe kept on with the regular count of the respiration—*one, two, three, four*—until the white-coated internes lifted a pulmotor from the ambulance.

Even with that aid they were fighting a losing battle. Finally, when dark clouds in the west were throwing a premature dusk over the waterfront, they realized there was no chance that Straw Hat Aufort would ever breathe again. One of the internes got up and gave River Joe a long, searching look.

"You say you got to this man just a minute or two after he went down? And that you began to use artificial respiration at once?"

Joe nodded. He felt sick, dazed. Old Aufort had been such a kindly, cheerful sort of man. Why had this had to happen to him—on his birthday?

"Because," the interne was going on, "if you did what you said, this man should have recovered!"

Joe had already realized that. "Are there any marks on him; anything to indicate he might have been knocked out and then thrown in the water?" he asked.

A young, sandy-haired police officer standing at the side of the ambulance tensed at that and stared at River Joe.

"No," the interne answered. "He died of drowning, all right. But you can bet there will be an autopsy, and you'll have to answer a lot of questions."

River Joe feared, as he went back to his launch, that the autopsy would not reveal any additional evidence, would not *prove* that Aufort had been murdered. But he felt sure of that now. The missing Mace Kussel could explain a lot of things. Joe went thoughtfully back to the scene of the accident to read the signs in the water.

Three times River Joe dived. The first time he brought up the rock with its new wire around it and put it in his launch. The next two times he swam close above the silty bottom, studying it closely, noting the impressions that Aufort's body, the rock, and his own anchor had made in its otherwise smooth and undisturbed surface.

The sun hadn't quite set, but the blackening clouds made it so dark he had to use his flashlight all the time. As he broke surface the third time and gulped in a long, sweet breath of air, he found himself looking into the muzzle of a .38 police positive.

It was the young, sandy-haired policeman who had been at the pier when they were working over Aufort. He was leaning over the side of his small launch and his face was grim as he gritted:

“So there *is* something wrong .about this! Trying to cover up evidence, huh?”

JOE trod water and studied him. He looked clean-cut, alert, intelligent.

“Why did you follow me here?” he asked.

“I know this is out of the city limits, but I was going off duty—and in a whole year on the force I haven’t had a chance at a single job that might mean promotion. We—I want—” began the young fellow.

“Meaning that you’ve got a girl friend and that you need the promotion to get married,” River Joe guessed shrewdly. “All right, I’ll tell you: I know Aufort was murdered, but it’s the kind of proof a clever defense attorney could beat in court.”

“What proof?” The officer still held his gun on Joe.

“Aufort was drowned before the boat tipped over here,” Joe said. “Kussel probably did it back at old Aufort’s houseboat, holding him under water. He was going to play it as an accidental drowning; then he got cold feet and decided to sink the body here in the channel. He heard me coming, realized he’d have to work fast or get caught, and went back to his original idea. Kussel just tipped the boat over and yelled that Aufort had gone down. He thought he was even getting a witness to Aufort’s drowning.”

“Yeah?” answered the young policeman suspiciously. “Where’s the proof for all that story?”

“There weren’t enough bubbles coming up when Aufort went down, showing he had been in the water before. Then a man going down into thirty-five

feet of water would still be moving a little when he hit bottom. He should have stirred up the mud around where he lit. He didn’t. Down there on the bottom is the impression of the place where he landed, and didn’t move at all!”

“Go on!” the bluecoat growled.

Joe swam to his own launch, ignoring the zealous officer’s gun, reached in and lifted the rock off the thwart.

“See, this wire is new, shiny. Not tarnished or covered with slime the way it would have been from staying in that stale water at the bottom for any length of time. In other words, this is the weight Kussel was going to use on Aufort’s body. When he changed his mind and tipped the boat over, the rock fell out.”

The young policeman took a long breath and shoved his gun back in its holster. “Say, you do know things they never taught us in police school,” he admitted. “I’d like to work with you on this. My name’s Elvin Dunster.”

He paddled his boat closer to Joe’s and his forehead wrinkled in thought. “But where’s the motive? Why should this Kussel, or anybody else, kill him? Not robbery?”

“That’s what we’ve got to find out,” Joe admitted. “Aufort wasn’t the type to be in with any gang. He didn’t have any enemies. He barely made a living by fishing, so it couldn’t have been rob—”

The vicious chatter of a submachine gun cut off his words, shattering the evening stillness over the channel with a thundering roar of sound.

Joe, just pulling himself into his boat, saw the rushes at the bank of the bend below them whipping and dancing with the blast of bullets from behind their concealment. A boat had been rowed up to that turn.

“Overboard!” he yelled, throwing himself back into the water.

Dunster wasn't quite quick enough. A bullet caught him in the shoulder, spinning him around. He cried out with the shock and pain, and then fell over the side of the boat, splashing weakly in the water. Bullets tore into his rocking launch, showering the two in the water with splinters.

"Don't try to swim—just hold onto my shoulders!" Joe directed.

He sank quickly, the young officer clutching his shoulder, as the stream of bullets dipped lower and furrowed the surface where they had been an instant before. Ten feet under water, Joe turned for the shore, swimming with all his strength. He realized his weakened companion could not hold his breath long.

They came up behind a log at the edge of the channel. Dunster held to the log and tried to still his painful breathing while River Joe listened with his ears close to the water. He made out the faint hum of a boat engine with an underwater exhaust going away from behind the next turn down the channel.

"Can you hold on till I get my launch? Then we'll get you to a doctor," he said to the bluecoat.

THE latter gritted his teeth and nodded. Joe swam out and got his launch. The other boat was riddled and sinking. He came back, quickly pulled his companion into the boat, and turned the craft down the channel.

The spunky young policeman was recovering from the first shock of his wound. He took a bandage from a locker Joe opened and stuffed it inside his shirt to check the bleeding.

"No doctor!" he gritted. "If I go in now I'll likely get suspended for getting myself shot up. I've got to have something to show for this puncture. Let's see if we can catch them!"

It was almost a hopeless task, Joe knew, in these winding and tortuous channels, with twilight coming on fast. But he combed them for a quarter of an hour, with Elvin Dunster gritting his teeth as he rested his revolver on the gunwale and peered ahead. Then they met a small fishing launch.

"See any other boats around here?" Joe hailed its single occupant.

"No. Who are you looking for?"

"The man who killed Straw Hat Aufort!"

"What? What's that you say?" The other boat yawed as the pilot took both hands from the wheel. "Straw Hat dead? Are you crazy? It wasn't more than ten minutes ago when I seen him with my own eyes. Fishing, right off the chemical plant, where he always is!"

The astounded fisherman found himself gawking at a wake of white water where River Joe's launch had been.

"There's your motive!" Joe cried, as he sent the launch speeding out toward the river under full throttle. "They killed Aufort just to get his boat and his clothes."

"What?" Dunster gulped.

"People never look twice at anything they're accustomed to seeing," Joe said. "They just take it for granted. Like that fisherman back there. He saw Aufort's boat in its usual place by the chemical plant, with a man wearing a khaki jacket and straw hat in it. It never entered his mind that it might not be Aufort."

Dunster shook his head. "But why murder for a stunt like that?"

"There's a big payroll at that chemical plant," Joe answered as he swung the launch around the last curve before reaching the main channel of the river. "Those trained men get high wages. And today's payday!"

"I get it!" Dunster cried. "There's a high fence around the grounds and

watchmen at the gate, but no protection on the river side.”

“They’ll pay no attention to Aufort’s boat,” Joe went on breathlessly. “They’re so used to seeing it that it’s just part of the scenery. They won’t even notice until it’s too late, that his boat is drifting in to shore.”

They shot past the marking buoys at the channel’s end and headed across the river toward the chemical plant. The early dusk had brought the floodlights on; in their glow Aufort’s boat was plainly visible.

It had already come to shore and there seemed to be nobody in it.

“You’re right!” Dunster cried. “Look—it is a holdup! See them backing out of that door!”

FOUR men, their figures dwarfed by distance, were coming out of the office building. One, carrying a heavy sack, ran for the boat. The other three backed up more slowly, covering their retreat. The largest one held a submachine gun in his thick arms; his two companions had an automatic in each hand.

Dunster, too excited to realize they were far out of effective pistol range, raised his revolver. Joe took one hand off the wheel to pull his gun down.

But someone ahead there at the chemical plant had the idea of shooting, too. Flame leaped from a window of the office and the robber with the sack doubled up and fell just before he reached the boat.

Then the submachine gun exploded into action and the windows of the office shattered out. The three remaining robbers raced back to Aufort’s launch, firing back as they ran. They threw the sack in, swung downstream, and were lost in the darkness down the river before Joe and Dunster could get within range.

River Joe swung his launch into shore, where dozens of the white-uniformed chemical company men were running around in wild confusion. The dead robber lay on the bank. Two men and one girl were wounded in the bullet-riddled office.

Joe bent over the dead holdup man. He had stopped here on the chance that he might know this man, thus getting a line on his companions. He was a thin, angular fellow with a scarred face the investigator had never seen before. Joe started back to his boat, when he noticed something that brought him up short.

In falling, one of the dead man’s trouser cuffs had caught on a rock and pulled down. A light grey, granular substance showed there in the crease. River Joe picked up a few grains of it, and swung back into his boat.

“Downstream; the way they went!” he ordered, and Dunster took the wheel with his good hand. “We’ll run dark, as they are,” Joe added as they swerved away from the floodlights into the darkness over the river.

Dunster watched with growing curiosity while River Joe spread a few grains of some damp, pulpy material on a piece of paper, fished a magnifying glass from a locker, and studied the grains in the shaded light from the instrument panel.

“What’s that?” he demanded at length.

“About our only chance to catch them before they make a clean getaway,” Joe answered softly. “The address of the gang’s hideout. Taken from the dead one’s trouser cuff. Just a few grains of sawdust.”

“Sawdust!” Dunster exploded. “Why there’s sawdust lots of places around here. Lumber mills, box factories, furniture—”

“Not pure, unmixed spruce sawdust,” Joe corrected. “Old sawdust, too. Only one place in this country where that could have come from. The old deserted Telling mill, about a couple of miles on down the

river.”

THE Telling mill had been built during the World War, to supply the crying demand for spruce for airplane construction. After the war it had operated intermittently, then closed down completely. River Joe knew its history, had a complete mental picture of the buildings and their layout. As they floated closer to it in the darkness, he recalled the ground plans.

On his trips along the river, buying and selling things for the second-hand store that covered every inch of space on his barge, Joe noted such things and filed them away in his mind for possible future use.

He had shut the motor off upstream, letting the current and his paddle bring them soundlessly closer. He skirted the rotting logs that formed the boom around the mill pond, and made straight for the opening in the side of the old mill building across the pond. There was the incline, where the logs had been hauled up from the water to the waiting saws. It made an ideal entryway into the old structure.

A half mile back on a hill, the lights of a small town showed. But here, along this section of the river bank, there was no sign of life except the croaking of frogs.

Joe brought the launch up noiselessly to the float at the bottom of the incline which rose blackly into the interior of the rotting old building. Joe stepped out onto the float.

“Paddle over to shore,” he directed Dunster in a whisper. “Wait in the old lumber yard there. If I don’t show up in ten minutes, make for the nearest house and send in a call for help.”

Dunster started to protest, but Joe silenced him by pushing the boat away from the float. He waited until the boat had merged into the darkness shoreward;

then he turned and started up the incline into the mill. He moved silently, his gun out and ready, hoping that no watcher was lurking in the darkness inside, ready to blast him when his figure showed against the starlight in the opening.

Joe wasn’t taking chances in any foolhardy effort to hog the glory. In fact, he played an unknown part whenever possible. But now time was essential if the crooks were to be located before they had time to hide the loot, or to scatter. Once that was done, he planned to let the wounded Dunster call in reinforcements, and take credit for the pinch.

He reached the top of the incline, where the logs had begun their journey through the saws, without anything happening. He stepped out on the main floor of the mill. And then, from the left, he saw light seeping through the cracks in a partition.

Joe crept toward it, feeling his way over the old plank floor, cursing the limp that always became worse in times of tension like this. The rumble of voices grew louder as he came close. He reached the partition and looked through a crack into a small room.

Two men were on hands and knees on the floor, counting packages of bills and rolls of coins they were taking from a heavy canvas sack. A lantern, on the floor between them, threw a yellowish glow on the money and on their intent, greedy faces.

One of the men was huge, with coarse, brutish features. His thick lips moved as he counted the bills. Joe recognized him as Barney Weiss, a notorious holdup man. His companion, small and swarthy, was Pete Luigi. He was addicted to the pleasant habit of carving up his victims with the stiletto he always carried.

“A sweet job,” Weiss was gloating. “Nearly fifty grand and—”

Luigi's dark face twisted. "I'm still worried about that River Joe. Maybe we didn't finish him and that cop. He's like a fish in the water."

"Huh!" snorted Weiss. "He's nothing but a peddler, running a floating junk shop on that barge of his. That was a fool stunt of Kussel's, trying to make it look like old Aufort had drowned out of the boat. This River Joe guy would get wise to that, but what did it get him? We went right ahead and pulled our play, and the turtles is eating off him now!"

River Joe was stepping away from the partition when a gun, rammed hard into his back, halted him.

"Hello, playmate!" gritted the voice of Mace Kussel. "This makes the third time today you've butted in and tried to gum things up. The third time's going to be the charm!"

He shoved Joe through a door in the partition. Weiss and Luigi had heard the commotion; they were on their feet with guns in their hands.

"Good thing I was watching outside," Kussel said with a satisfied leer. "This will help even up for all the trouble he's caused us."

He swung his gun in a raking, bruising blow to the side of River Joe's head. Joe staggered.

Luigi's eyes were flashing. He put away his gun and slowly drew out his long stiletto. "He won't cause us no more trouble after I work on him with this and we sink him in the mill pond." River Joe's head was whirling dizzily, weakly. Luigi's long knife blade was a blurred streak of light before his eyes as it came closer.

Then big Barney Weiss growled suddenly, "Hold it! Maybe that cop or somebody else is with him. Which way did he come in, Kussel?"

"I was watching on the land side—"

"Then he slipped in from the pond

side. Up the incline, most likely. Let's go down there to his boat and see if there are any of his friends who'd like to join our party!"

He came up behind Joe, clapped a big dirty hand over the prisoner's mouth, and almost lifted Joe from his feet. Luigi walked beside them as Weiss half carried, half pushed Joe through the door. The point of Luigi's keen blade was sticking through the river man's shirt.

Kussel hurried ahead silently down the incline. When the others had come down to the opening in the side of the building, just above the water, he reported in a strained whisper:

"No sign of a boat here, boss!"

BIG BARNEY WEISS, still holding Joe tightly, cursed in a savage whisper.

"That means somebody was with him, went off in the boat. Hiding around here somewhere, ready to go for help if there's a racket. But we can work it another way."

The pressure of his heavy hand released a trifle on Joe's mouth.

"In just a second I'm going to take my hand off your mouth," he gritted. "And then you're going to call to your friend, and be sure you talk natural! You're going to tell him you didn't find nothing here, there's nobody in this mill, and for him to come back in the boat and pick you up! Luigi likes to play with that shiv of his; he'll fix it so you won't say the wrong thing!"

The edge of Luigi's knife came up and rested against the front of River Joe's throat. Slowly, Barney Weiss' hand came away. "Call him!" Weiss gloated. "And call pretty!"

The sudden movement sent streaks of fiery pain flashing through Joe's injured back as he threw his head backwards with all his strength. It caught Barney Weiss

full in the face—and the maneuver jerked Joe's throat clear of that keen knife edge.

Weiss roared in rage and pain as Joe's head pulped his nose. The automatic in his other hand roared with the reflex tightening of his muscles.

Joe caught Luigi's wrist as he tried to drive his knife in; then used all his strength to tangle their legs with his. They tripped, fell, and in a squirming bundle, the three of them rolled down the last few feet of the incline and splashed into the dark water. It closed over them.

Mace Kussel had been caught flatfooted by this sudden flurry of action. Standing a little to one side he had rushed in as the others rolled down the last of the incline, and had swung his clubbed gun at Joe's head.

He had hit something, he was not quite sure what, in the twisting, rolling mass before they went off. Now he crouched, peering down at the bubbling, swirling dark water, that gave these signs of the life-or-death struggle that was going on under its surface. Mace Kussel raised his gun, to be ready.

River Joe, with his superhuman cunning in the water, might emerge the victor. But when he did come up—

Orange flame lanced at Kussel from behind a lumber pile on shore. Bullets splashed the water around Kussel, tore pieces from the rotten siding of the mill building above his head. The reports were still echoing out over the river when another burst of fire came from another place on shore. Kussel fired back twice, then yelped with pain as a bullet creased his hip, and dodged back up the incline into the mill. Even there streams of bullets searched for him, sieving the rotten siding of the building.

But far down below the surface of the dark mill pond, the real fight was going on. River Joe, with his clothes nearly

completely torn off by clawing, desperate hands, was holding Weiss and Luigi down below the surface, twisting free of Weiss' hooked fingers at his throat and eyes; fighting to keep Luigi from driving his stiletto home.

MEN are given strength far beyond their ordinary capacities, when faced with a primordial terror, such as drowning. It was this desperate strength that River Joe had to fight. One of Barney Weiss' massive arms hooked about Joe's neck, twisted.

Joe felt like his neck was being pulled loose from his shoulders—and his grip on Luigi's knife wrist slipped.

Luigi drove the knife in viciously. Joe used all his strength to twist his body to one side. The knife cut a hot streak of fire along his ribs, flashed past, and big Barney Weiss jerked.

Weiss' mouth opened in a soundless cry of mortal agony. The dark water choked this cry and hid Barney Weiss as he tore free with one last convulsive movement and sank slowly toward the bottom.

It was the end for Luigi, too. He had used his last bit of strength in that knife thrust. Joe twisted the weapon away from him. Then painfully, agonizingly, he pulled Luigi's limp body up to the surface.

Headlights of cars racing down the hill were the first things River Joe saw. The high whine of their sirens was welcome music.

By the time three carloads of sheriff's deputies, led by Elvin Dunster, had swarmed into the mill Joe had pulled the weakly stirring Luigi up on the float by the incline. Mace Kussel, with one of Dunster's bullets in his leg, was found cowering in the old boiler room. He threw away his gun when they closed in on him.

Dunster's face was white as he told

Joe:

“As soon as I heard that shot and the splash, I knew you must be in the water. So I began shooting. I had to shoot left-handed with this bum shoulder. I thought I’d make up in noise what I lacked in marksmanship. So I shot from different places so they’d think they were—”

THE young officer reeled and started to fall. Two deputies caught him and eased him down. Sheriff Mercer, a lean, knobby-faced man, bent over him and inspected the wounded shoulder.

“Not serious, but it’s started bleeding again.” He called for some of his men to bring a stretcher and then turned to River Joe.

“Of course,” he said, with a suppressed

twinkle in his eyes, “you don’t know a thing about all this?”

“Not much,” River Joe answered. “Elvin Dunster can give you the story. I just ferried him around in my boat. And don’t you think, Sheriff, that he rates a better job for tonight’s work?”

The sheriff was nobody’s fool, and he knew River Joe. “If they don’t give him a better job in Riverton, *I* will!” he said.

Then he bent down over the wounded young policeman as his lips began to move.

“Hurry up with the stretcher!” the sheriff called. “He’s mumbling about a little bungalow out on Oak Street that he can rent for twenty-five bucks a month for reading signs on water! He must be out of his head!”