



RIVER LAUGHTER *A complete Novelette* by Raymond S Spears

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THE Turtles were a select crew of Mississippi River pirates. They knew the river so well that it was an instinct—so well that they could go straight across it in a fog, rowing a skiff. They waited in Tupelo Bend, above Mendova, for a favorable night to ply their occupation of loot, and, when at last a gray mist rose thickly from the surface of the water and drifted out over the sand-bars and eddied through the longshore trees, they dropped down.

They landed on the sand-bar at the upper end of Mendova wharf and tied their shanty-boat to stakes already there. They walked fifty yards across the sand to the cobbled wharf, which had been masked by the bar, and climbed to the level of Front Street. They walked across the brick paving, and there a gloomy figure emerged from the wall and whispered:

"All hunky! Get busy!"

Four men entered the little recess in the wall of the building, which was between two plate-glass windows; they

did something to the double door, and it opened before them. They entered the famous "Duck and Deer" store, and one sweep of the flash disclosed the fact that it contained goods to please their fancy. They wasted no time on imagination, however; they set to work.

They dumped boxes of ammunition into bags; they caught up and tied rifles and shotguns into rolls; they filled a big tub with jack-knives and other cutlery—with flashlights, compasses, fishing-tackle and other sporting-goods-store material—and scurried across the street, down the wharf and over the sand-bar to the shanty-boat moored in the gray gloom.

They returned to the store, gathered another load and hurried to the boat with it; and, as they worked separately, they were coming or going—all four of them, for half a dozen trips. No mere minute of business satisfied them. They dealt in no diamonds, pearls or cash affair; they were low-grade workers, but they made up in quantity what they

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failed to get in quality or price. Many and many a dip, post-office yegg, jewelry-case trader and the like might well envy their average winnings in the precarious game they played. They specialized in method, but not in loot. This happened to be a sporting-goods-store proposition; once they had handled, or turned over, the contents of a grocery store; another time they had taken a dry-goods store; they recalled with evil glee a pawnbroker's establishment and a fur-buyer whom they had easily raided.

The Ohio River knew their work by evidence only; in St. Louis they had a reputation not attached to names; they had even worked in New Orleans, and Kansas City and St. Paul; they were thorough, competent and of great discretion. All they wanted was a dull, foggy night, a beat seldom patrolled by police, a store of some kind and a line of disappearance. They were pirates, but they did not disdain the assistance of motor truck or flat car or even a purloined team of mules and truck.

So now they operated with the skill of experience, the daring of many escapes and the carelessness of those whom the Mississippi has long favored or played with. To their minds, Old Mississipp' was sure their good old granddaddy, and they knew him, and he knew them, and the understanding was mutual. At the same time, it is possible that one should not be too sure that he knows the silent, swinging torrent

whose moods are full of many seemings.

Little remained in the sporting-goods store when they returned at last, all together, to get the safe. It wasn't a very large safe; one of the four had given it a tentative lift with his hand and was surprised to discover that he could raise a corner. Accordingly, they all returned, caught their fists under the steel box and walked away with it.

They stopped to close and lock the door, too, and, when they went down the levee, they were conscious of the fact that, when the policeman came along on his beat, he would see nothing wrong in the store, except that the electric light had burned out.

The sand was loose on the bar, and that made lugging the safe a hard proposition. They grunted as they stumbled and staggered along—the involuntary grunts of men heavily burdened. A little noise did not alarm them, nor would it alarm any one. The banks of the Mississippi are strangely silent at times and curiously noisy at other times. No one pays much attention to minor sounds.

They had a plain path to follow across the bar. Their four pairs of feet had trampled a trail which they could follow with their toes had their black-night instincts failed them. They arrived at the edge of the bar and lowered the safe to the place where the boat's bow had been.

“Where t'—— 's that shanty-boat?”

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one choked. "I cayn't feel hit!"

"Ner I!" another gasped for breath.

Their feet were in the water, where they had bumped into the nine-foot-wide bow of their shanty-boat on every previous trip. They lowered the safe and scurried up or down the water's edge. They returned and, hearing one another's footsteps, stopped together.

"Hit's gone!" one whispered fiercely. "Who d'——"

"Some sucker's ——"

"Who's done us?"

There was no answer from the four pirates. From out in the fog, however, apparently close at hand—but it was fog—returned a laugh. It was a low, vibrating, merry, chuckling laugh.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" in short, light expirations.

It seemed low, but the faces of the buildings along River Street, Mendova, returned the laugh in an echo as loud but breaking.

A minute later they heard another burst of laughter, further away, but carried with the uncanny distinctness which is the property of some kinds of fog. They stood there paralyzed by their disaster and heard the laugh again away down the bend.

"The dad-blasted, no-'count, son of a sneakin' thief!" one of the four on the sand-bar cursed deeply.

Another wailed at the bottom of his breath:

"He hadn't no right to take that bo't! What'd he rob us fer? Why didn't he go

up the bank an' steal——"

"An' we doned all the work!" a third whined.

"An' then he laughed at us!" the fourth one gritted his teeth.

They stood there, cursing and growling. Then, suddenly, away down River Street they heard a footfall, followed by another one and another, as some heavy-heeler came pounding along. He kept coming up and up the street, hitting concrete, slab-stone and brick, according to the walks in front of the buildings. They heard him thump upon a plank, and it squeaked a little, not having as yet become damped by the fog. They heard him stop at the corner and drop a locust stick on the curb.

Away up town, three blocks up the hill, they heard the echo answer; then the cop continued his peregrination along the next block and into the one which they had entered to loot. They listened as the cop walked along. Then they heard him stop. The silence was pathetic. It was full of loneliness. Long arms reached out through it; horrors crawled along under the dark. And several sets of teeth chattered and clicked out there on the sand-bar.

The long, rising, screaming shrill of a policeman's whistle shot through the fog like a bullet—or explosion—with the sting of a freezing gale.

"Fo' Gawsake!" one whispered. "For Gawsake!"

He repeated it over and over again in

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a trembling whisper, unconscious of the fact that he was saying anything and not merely thinking or feeling it. They heard, away up yonder, the pound of heavy feet; they heard the running roll of a big cop coming down the grade, dragging his bounding locust on the pavement to let his partner know he was coming. Then there were two revolver shots. The four men down on the bar saw the faint flashes in the cloud like reflected lightning, and they knew that the bull on the beat had discovered the raid.

“You —— fool!” a voice hissed. “Yo’ was smokin’ a cig’, an’ I seen yo’ drap hit—an’ hit ain’ went out yet—an’ they knows—they knows we ain’ be’n gone long! What’ll we do? They’ll throw circles—thisaway fustest!”

Away up yonder they heard a sharp musical ringing, and they needed no information as to what that meant. It was the bull cart, big, red and gold bus with the headquarters reserves in it—word had been sent from some corner that there was shooting down on River Street and whistling.

The pirates whispered together. One was for going down the bar. Another preferred up the bar, and a third was for running up into the town, scattering and hiding wherever they could find a hole.

“Stand still, boys,” one warned them. “The bull up the slough beat’s on, and the one down to the bridge is on—probably been asleep down theh—an’—they’d nab us! They ain’ never seen us

—but we ain’ no angels to look at, boys; we’s riveh-rats, an’ we look hit! We ain’ no friends to count on—we’ll jes’ do like we done befo’; come on, boys!”

They felt, rather than saw or heard, him turn from the anxious staring toward that blank gray wall of ominous sounds. They did hear his light step into the water. They knew that he was wading in, and they followed him. It was Autumn water, out of the cold and bitter North. Nevertheless, swimming was better than languishing through a third degree.

Silently they took to the water, and, with strokes like muskrats or frogs, they entered the river. As they floated up into the eddy, they heard some one crossing the bar and heard him call:

“This is the way they went!” And, as they felt the current eddy, they heard, “Hey—here’s the safe!”

With that, they took the main current and, like ducks, swam away out of danger.

CHAPTER II COLUMBIANA IS MILDLY ANNOYED

COLUMBIANA MUSCATINE
O’BINE dropped down the Ohio in a little white cabin-boat with a red hull; she had a twenty-foot gasoline-launch beside her boat, covered with a half-cabin on the bow and a canvas over the engine-pit to prevent rains from sinking

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it. A pair of long, light sweeps on the twenty-four-foot flatboat saved gasoline in making landings and showed river-wisdom as well as river-thrift.

As she floated down the edge of Putney Bend eddy, where several boats were tied in, her gaze discovered a number of children and a man of perhaps thirty years playing down on the sand-bar. He was an agile, square-shouldered man, tanned by sun and wind, smooth-shaven and with the smooth action of what is called a "city man" down the river. His glance was quick and keen, and he amused the youngsters and enjoyed himself on the firm, floor-like sand.

With the snag roots and limbs for safeties, the children and man were playing Puss in the Corner; men and women in the other shanty-boats regarded the adult among the children with amusement a little tinged with contempt.

The man was oblivious, however, till the voice of Columbiana crossed the eddy in a sharp hail—

"Don't teach them Puss in the Corner!"

"Why not?" the man demanded resentfully, gazing at her through horn-bow spectacles with wide eyes.

"Because Puss in the Corner is just getting there first and grabbing safety from the others. Teach them Prisoner's Base. Prisoner's Base teaches sacrifice, heroism and rescuing at personal risk! Can't you see?"

The man gazed at the young woman with scowling expression and puzzled eyes. A number of the adult spectators chuckled. The children looked from one to the other, wondering. The game stopped while the shanty-boat went drifting on down, and the woman pulled clear of the shoal and began to make the crossing below.

"That's right, kids!" the man said at last. "I hadn't thought of that; we'll play Prisoner's Base!"

"I never played hit!" one of the children wailed. "I wanta——"

"I'll show you how," the man declared. "First, we must find two long lines—there! That pole-sycamore snag's good for one base, and I'll draw a line between that ship timber and the broken barrel for the other base. Now we'll line up; I choose Timmy. Who do you choose, Myra?"

So they began to play Prisoner's Base, with its racing, romping and daring rescues of caught companions. But there was an odd number, and so the man was referee and told them how. When they were engrossed in playing and had caught the idea, he turned and looked away down the crossing—where a glimmer and a reflection of the sunshine on a cabin-boat window cast darts of light over the river surface and showed whither the young woman was traveling.

When it was time for supper, the children were called to the boat, and they were happy, laughing and full of

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the delight they had had, playing with the big man, whose name was Caroost. Mrs. Cramell called the big man in to supper with her and her little girl and her own man, for she was grateful to have him so friendly to the little ones, teaching them games that were good to play.

At the table the big man was silent and even diffident. His smooth-shaven face, his bright, blue eyes and his quick smile were attractive, especially to children, whom he seemed to understand better than grown folks. They got nothing from him at the table, not even whether he was out of the Ohio or the Upper Mississippi. Clean, mannerly and a listener; Mrs. Cramell liked him better than ever, for he made talking so easy for her—and she had so much to say!

After supper he took down Cramell's banjo and began to pick it to the immense delight of the little girl, not to mention Cramell and Mrs. Cramell, who loved music. He played fast music and slow, loud music and soft, good dance-tunes and sweet things to think by. When he went out on the gangplank, he tiptoed so as not to wake the little girl up, and he did not light the lamp on his own cabin-boat. He made it easy for the Cramells to sleep that night.

CAROOST put together all the gossip he had heard down the Ohio and Mississippi, but there was nothing in it for him so far as he could tell.

Apparently, Mr. Barklow Waldin had been swallowed up by the Mississippi; at the same time, duty is duty!

He looked from the deck of his red shanty-boat out across the river and recognized it as one of the interesting moments of his life. Adventure had come to him in satisfactory frequency. This was another adventure, hunting for a lost human straw in ten thousand miles of navigable waters and fifty thousand miles of canoe waters—*Kismet—Selah*—so be it! In the years since Prof. Barklow Waldin had dropped out of sight, he might have disintegrated and flowed into the Gulf, or he might have moved up the bank somewhere and become respectable, or he might, on a one-hundred-to-one bet, still be on the Mississippi. But shanty-boaters, knowing everybody in a way, had never heard of him that they knew.

James M. Caroost just loved the idea of having been adventurous, although in the critical moment of superlative incident he might endure rather more than he enjoyed. At the same time nervous anticipation never prevented him from having jubilant retrospection. He had what he fondly called a dual personality.

He sat for an hour on the stern-deck of his boat, looking down the Mississippi in the dark night. Away down the bend a Government light wavered and flickered, looking him in the eyes with a challenge. He accepted it. He went ashore and cast off his bow-

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line. He pulled in his stern-line rapidly and thus backed his boat out into the eddy current. He floated noiselessly up the eddy, around into the main current and down the crossing, pulling a pair of sweeps that carried his boat into the channel.

He sat in the comfortable wicker chair, but not at his ease. At intervals he groaned; then he cursed under his breath; once he said:

“I can’t learn from my own heart! Somebody else always has to tell me!”

He made his calculations; in two hours he rowed into the west side and threw over his anchor in the dead water at Typer’s Plantation. He turned in to sleep and was up at first dawn. As soon as he could see, he was searching the river with his binoculars. Every few minutes he was out to look, but in the intervals he cooked his breakfast of ham, fried eggs, fried potato, coffee and milk kept sweet with boracic acid—he was reckless.

Soon after eight o’clock he saw a little white shanty-boat moving down out of the sand-bar almost opposite him. He grinned to himself. He took a book labeled “Mississippi River Maps,” and turned to Sheet No. I.

“She’s traveling by these same charts or how’d she know that little bay behind those willows?” he asked himself.

The shanty-boat made the water flicker for a time and then fell into the quivering reflection of the morning

sunshine. When it was about a third of a mile below him, he hoisted his anchor and, with two pulls of his sweeps, entered the river current. The two boats moved down into Columbus Bend, and, as they came into the Iron Bank, they were hardly a hundred yards apart. He sat in his cabin, however, out of sight, reading one of a shelf of books with the word “Essays” over it. Under that shelf were several other shelves, each with a label.

The two boats were carried past Columbus within two hundred yards, and the house-boat floated toward the Chalk Bluff, after swirling in the Hickman Bluff current toward Wolf Island Chute. The man’s boat went down the long chute and out of sight behind the sand-bar. When it was out of sight, the man turned up the outboard motor and steered at seven miles an hour around the long loop and floated down behind Wolf Island Towhead into Beckwith Bend current just as the little white shanty-boat swung to Lower Lees Landing.

Columbiana came out on the bow deck and stared at the motor-boat with a calculating gaze. She looked up the long dead water of Wolf Island Chute and then looked up the short, swift current of the main river down which she had floated. There was no sign of life on the house-boat; but how could a boat float five miles in a six-mile current and a boat float eight miles in a three-mile current and both arrive at the same point

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at the same time? Columbiana's expression was one of anxious, or at least grave, suspicion.

All day long the two boats floated down, almost within a toss. The river was falling, and they held to the trough near the mid-current. It was a navigable river, public and free. Any one in a craft had a right anywhere by living up to the rules. Columbiana, however, was doubtful. Nearly an hour before dusk she pulled into the dead water above Donaldson's Point about three miles. When she looked across the river, she saw the red cabin-boat floating around in the eddy at the foot of the filled-in Island No. 9. The boat made a complete circle around and then bumped into the bank for the night.

Columbiana shot a wild goose from a flock that came down within a hundred yards, killing it with a light rifle and retrieving it with a skiff. She hoped that scoundrel on yon side was watching her shoot, for that would be fair warning. In the morning she dropped out again about eight o'clock and then discovered that the swift peninsula current carried her right down to the motor-boat, which had started forty minutes before in a dragging current. So, as they passed the Slough Landing whisky-boat, they weren't two hundred yards apart, and at Gates Landing, two miles down, they were only a hundred yards apart.

Columbiana was vexed. She gazed steadfastly at the red boat without

seeing any one. She had the feeling that in the cabin was a man watching her. She had that feeling for three hours, and then with her binoculars, as the stern of the boat swung around, she saw a man sitting inside the cabin, leaning back in a comfortable rocker with his feet on a bench, reading calmly and obliviously.

Then she was vexed to think that she had paid any attention to the horrid old thing. She landed in at New Madrid and went up-town to buy supplies. When she dropped passed Tiptonville, fifteen miles below, she saw a man coming down the bank at the ferry with an arm full of bundles and packages, and half an hour later she was perturbed to observe a cabined motor-boat floating down in the caving bend less than half a mile behind her. And, when she pulled into the foot of Merriwether Bend sand-bar, the motor-boat anchored about a mile below at the head of Little Cypress Bend sand-bar.

But the following morning, when she floated out, the motor-boat was gone from its anchorage, and in vain she looked for it up and down the river. She studied the caving bend below Island No. 13, and, when she passed Reelfoot, she pulled over close to see if the scoundrel had stopped along there in the shanty-boat town.

All day long she looked for him up and down, and, when she landed in, she shrugged her shoulders. In the morning, when she dropped out and turned the bend of Needham's Cut-off, a light song

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was choked in her throat by the discovery of a motor-boat a hundred yards from her port bow. Where it came from, and by what force, she could not tell. She would think of something else for a minute and then return with a start to the fact of the exasperating presence. She did not see the boat stir under any power. It drifted with the current—yet there it was!

That night she floated down the chute of Island No. 35, and anchored at the foot. Ten minutes later she saw the red boat anchored just over the sand-bar, practically just around the corner—and it had anchored there first! She couldn't even think a word.

Fishermen for the Mendova market were down this stretch of the river. The sporting resort of Gumbo Bend was at hand. Islands and sand-bars seemed to promise a thousand picnics for all. A long, narrow shanty-boat floated by just at dusk, and four men looked across at the pretty girl on the boat. One of them hailed:

“Hello, gal! Lonesome?”

Without a word she reached behind the door, and, before the ribald crew could more than duck, she fired five .25-20s through their cabin. One bullet hit the dish-cupboard, and the still night resounded with the fall of caving crockery and the crash of glassware.

On the night air was borne a whine:

“Aw, Red. What'd yo' want 'sult a riveh-lady fo'—yo' danged fool! Yo' mout of knowed yo'd git the wust of

hit!”

A little later Columbiana saw the motor-boat drifting down by her anchorage and turning into the main current.

“Now where's he going?” she muttered.

The next instant there was a whiff of chill, and immediately there boiled up in the night a heaving, writhing, climbing gray mist, which rapidly assumed the proportions of a fog.

Columbiana shivered and entered the cabin, where, with the curtains pulled down, she tried to read a magazine essay. But she gave it up and turned to fiction, and so she read herself to sleep where she sat.

She was awakened by a loud, long laugh—

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

She blew the light and ran to look. She was adrift in the night with her anchor on the deck where she hadn't left it; on all sides was a fog as gray as sin.

CHAPTER III

A HA-HA-HA IN THE RIVER NIGHT

FOUR river-rats, treading water and cursing their luck, floated down Mendova Bend with their heads in the fog that hung black upon the night. They kept near enough to one another to talk in low voices, awed by their misfortune and wishing that they could

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find the scoundrel who had stolen their shanty-boat after they had filled it up with tons of loot from a water-front sporting-goods store.

Out there in mid-Mississippi it was like floating in a lake, except that once in a while they felt the water boiling around them and currents pulling them about. Water-rats that they were, they didn't mind floating down the current, even though it had been cold to plunge into the water; now it felt almost warm.

They kept their lungs full of air, breathing in short gasps, to float better, and they swore with angry, ignorant fluency. Some mean scoundrel had been too lazy to pull a trick and had robbed them after they had done all the hard work. They had carried guns and hardware and all that kind of stuff till they sweat and were dead-tired. They had taken all the chance of being caught by a bull or somebody or other, and, just when they had the safe and everything right, they find their boat stolen, their loot gone and themselves under the stern necessity of taking instant flight!

"Danged ole Mississipp' all oveh ag'in!" one grumbled. "'Membeh the time we was killin' beef in the Overflow an' we was left high an' dry into that Ohio sport's launch an' neveh did get to git out, Tid?"

"Yeh!" Tid's voice grumbled. "An' that time we took them logs out'n Wolf Riveh, nicest line of Black Walnut an' sech, an' the dang thing sunk on to us, afteh we'd got hit mos' to N'Orleans—

Yo' 'membeh that, Rooter?"

"Sho! I wouldn't mind hit none if I could git to go up the bank, but hit don't agree with a feller. I'm always gittin' sick er took bad er arrested er sunthin' up the bank. Hit don' agree with me!"

"Me nuther!" a plaintive voice responded. "Sh-h-h!"

They all heard a sound and felt an echo through the water. They knew it as beavers know the slap of a beaver's tail. Sharply and eagerly they listened. It was the dip of a pair of oars—big oars—or long, shanty-boat sweeps.

"All right, boys!" a whisper went around the drifting pirate crew, and Tid added, "I'll rattle the water so's we won't git los' in this yeah danged thickenin'!"

They followed the touching splash he made as he reached toward the sound they heard. To the dipping of the oars was added the sound of a soliloquizing voice:

"Where in the world am I? Seems as if I'd ought to be getting somewhere! This must be the Mississippi! It can't be any lake! I never heard of any lake down here. Lake Pepin's up on the upper river. But this water isn't moving. I wonder——"

He began to pull his oars tentatively again. The swimmers, not without imagination, could think of the lost soft-paw standing there in the black gloom, looking in all directions and seeing nothing. The depths of his folly they did not know until they were baffled and

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disturbed by the apparition of a great, yellow glow in the night.

Tid stopped swimming, and the four stood erect in the water, treading, their faces faintly visible as they rode with their heads like pumpkins staring ahead at the source of that light. It was light enough for a steamboat, but they heard no paddle-wheels.

"Hit's that danged fool!" Tid managed to convey to the crew.

"Yeh!" they all breathed.

Tid moved toward the center of radiance, and they heard the tripper musing:

"I wonder which way is which? My! But this fog's thick! It's an awful eery feeling, out here all alone, not knowing which way is which! Why, I can't tell anything about it! It's just as if ghosts might be walking around. Ghosts would be lost in this like the river-man said wild geese are lost in canebreaks and river-bottoms sometimes. I can't tell anything by the maps—they're—Wha—what's that?"

The pirates, too, stopped to listen. Somewhere around in the fog was something. It was a sound, and the sound grew from a rattling death-cough to a loud, long laughing—

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-a!"

"Fo' lawse—a gosh!" one of the pirates breathed, and through the fog of yellow-golden haze returned a quick reply:

"What—what's that? Did somebody speak?"

"Nope!" Tid replied without thinking, and the drifting soft-paw started to laugh but stopped suddenly.

"Hello!" he called doubtfully.

There was no answer. He called louder, and there was still no reply. Then he shouted, and a minute later his bellow returned doubled in volume from some bank of trees or bluffs alongshore.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-a!" a laugh followed out of the fog, and for the first time the pirates all felt very, very cold.

"Gosh!" they heard the soft-paw muttering. "That man's crazy! This river's crazy! How'd I get to floating off down the Mississippi! Why, I had two anchors out, and I—and I know I tied the ropes fast. I wonder—somebody must have turned me loose!"

Tid turned and looked at his mates. They could see one another plainly now, and their expressions were puzzled and baffled. They, too, had seen a shanty-boat where it wasn't—or where it ought to have been. Some darned scoundrel

However, they had something personal to attend to just then. If the old river was tricking them same as usual, they couldn't float around all night and perhaps two or three days in a falling river, waiting for the fog to lift so that they would know where they were. Right there ahead of them was a shanty-boat, and it was a soft-paw. Soft-paws notoriously never thought anything about people. At the same time Tid

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decided he had better be polite.

“Excuse me, mister!” he hailed. “Give us a ride? Our maw is sick down the river to Memphis, and we’s in a hurry, and we thought likely you’d let us ride down with you.”

“Certainly! Row right over this way!” the soft-paw replied.

“I’m Re—I’m Thomas Cumstark, an’ I got my three brothers with me,” Tid explained and began to swim.

The other pirates, too, began to swim.

It was a thick fog, and they were close to the shanty-boat. Their splashing to a soft-paw’s inexperienced ears sounded something like dipping oars, and they were swimming fast.

“Look out!” Caroost cried. “You may ram me!”

Tid looked up into a great hanging lamp suspended from the bow of a shanty-boat porch; as he looked up, the shanty-boater looked down. The soft-paw for the moment was dazzled. He evidently saw the four heads coming in line *en échelon*, for he gave a slight squawk of astonished excitement. And then with a yell of determination he turned and fled. He choked as he dashed through the cabin to the deck at the other end of the flatboat.

Tid caught the bow-bumper and scrambled out like a mink, drawing his automatic pistol as he did so and shaking the water out of it. But the soft-paw had not gone after a gun. Caroost cast off the line of the skiff floating at

the opposite end of the boat and with a pull and a jerk set the boat from the flat and shoved clear into the fog.

“Gosh!” the pirates heard him exclaim. “What a river! What were they?”

Awkwardly but quickly the soft-paw set the oars in the locks and began to row full-speed away into the black night. As he took his departure, they heard an answering consolation:

“All right! I’m a-coming! Ha-ha-ha-haha-a!”

“Oh!” the pirates heard the soft-paw ejaculate. “He’s a madman!”

THE pirates knew what to do. They unswung the lamps in the bow and stern of the boat, blew them out but left the little table-lamp inside burning. They closed the doors and pulled down the window-shades. One stood outside at the sweeps while the others looked around.

It was a nice twenty-four-foot shanty-boat with deep hull, six-foot-six high cabin and two rooms, kitchen and living-room. A lot of ammunition for a sixteen-gage shotgun and a .25-20 rifle were on the tops of the gunwales, and the siding of the boat had been laid on good waterproof roofing. It was a tight, warm boat. There were three stoves: a wood or coa heater, a cooker and a three-burner oil-stove.

On the stove was a funny jigger of a coffee-pot that was spouting up inside itself. But the coffee smelled all right,

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and, after they had all sampled it, they thought it tasted all right—except that there wasn't so much flavoring in it as when one boils coffee in a regular coffee-pot and has the grounds to chew on.

The bed was wide enough for two, and there was enough stuff to make another bed on the floor, especially as there were two thin mattresses on the bedstead, besides the chain-springs.

"Hit's a purty good boat," Tid admitted. "Hit ain't nothing like so big's the one we got off that store-boater up the Ohio when he was drunk, but hit's a good un to operate from. What you 'low he done with all them books—sell 'em? Who'd buy 'em, anyhow?"

At intervals, while they inspected their new property, they stepped outside to listen. All was quiet again. The soft-paw wasn't inviting any wild loon crazy man to find him, and the laughter was silent, too. In low voices the river-men tried to straighten out the wonder of their adventure. Of course, it was easy enough to explain a fool soft-paw floating down in the night, when he had tied up at dark. Soft-paws don't know much about making boats fast to stakes or anything. But their own big boat had gone adrift.

Also, that laugh—that made chills in their souls. It never did anybody any good to hear hard laughing like that in a fog. No wonder the soft-paw had suddenly choked into silence. They could hear him rowing away, slowly,

stopping at intervals—to look around no doubt.

They threw some water on the oar-pins of the shanty-boat, so they wouldn't squeak and, after listening a while, determined that they were dropping down a long bend, and, if they pulled away from the noise of rustling waters and the splash and crash of sawyers and the lumping in of the bank, they would get to the sand-bar opposite or run into the dead water or eddy where they could anchor. Figuring as they could, they estimated they had been in the water long enough to float about fifteen miles, which would take them into the horse-shoe bend below Mendova where they could land—but on second thought they guessed they wouldn't land.

"Probably they'll be lookin' around fer suspicious characters," Tid muttered resentfully. "An' they'd likely suspect us if they'd see us. Course, we could dress up real fancy in this here feller's clothes, but four different-sized fellers all in the same size pants 'd probably make them sheriffs think sunthin'——"

"Hit shore would!" Rooter grumbled. "Course, we ain't rightly guilty of stealin' nothin'! We didn't get to getaway with them things——"

"An' they got our boat, so's I bet they's stoled hit! That'd give us kind of a holt on 'em," one suggested.

"If we wanted to exercise hit," Tid squinted one eye. "Co'rse——"

"Co'rse!" the others echoed.

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Accordingly, they let their boat drift with the current. As they drifted in silence, having drunk some coffee and eaten some canned fish and cased ginger-snaps, they blew their lights and went out on the bow deck to kind of keep track of things. Lots of times they had cut loose in the night or in a fog and gone to sleep, but not this night. Somehow, they didn't feel like sleeping.

As they sat there on the wall-benches of the bow, they heard a sort of cross between a yelp and a squall, followed by:

"Tom—you old fool—Tom! Wake up—Tom—hi-i! Tom!"

"Hit's a lady," Tid explained in a low, cautious voice. "Some lady——"

They heard a "sn-lop" sound carried across the water surface as a sound sleeper awakened with difficulty.

"Heh?" the sleeper asked querulously.

"Yo' ole fool!" the woman fairly screamed. "I tole yo' now for six weeks yo' needed a new mornin'-line, an' now where be we? Now where be we?"

"Hey—what!" the man demanded.

"Hey what! Hey what! Yo' ole fool, hyar we be gonad adrift, an' laws knows where we be—driftin' up on to a towheader sucking inter a cavin' bank. Where be we? I tole yo'——"

"Well, dad drat hit!" the voice retorted. "Spos'n ye did tell me! Spos'n—a new line'd cost fourteen cents a poun'——"

"Yeh—yeh! An' hyar we be, gittin'

drowned er sucked in under a tow—yo' didn't half tie them ropes, an' neveh did! Jes' 'cause I didn't go out'n tie them lines oveh ag'in, hyar we be. An' we're 'n—my line! I got mos'n to swearin', an'—oh, go put on yer pants! Yo'll ketch yer death o' cold. I got 'er! Hit's foggy as the ole scratch—shut up! Now, George Ebenezer! Stop your crying! It ain't nothin' 'at all! Many's the time we tripped at night——"

The wail of a small boy, scared of tripping in the fog, had taken the river-lady's attention.

"Yo' ole fool!" she began all over again. "What'd yo' tie them lines to last night? That two-inch Gove'ment line never bruck!"

"I tied the starboard one to a big cypress snag," the man replied, "two half-hitches an' a bight, same's——"

"Tell me same 's yo' always did! Didn't yo' make a half-noose jes' up by Putney Bend? An' didn't yo' slip yo' stakes off, into Tiptonville? An' then down by Little Prairie Bend, yo' old fool, yo' used willer stakes into a cavin' bank, an', if hit hadn't been fer that big gum root I tied to, yo'd——"

"I bet that's Mrs. Mahna!" Tid turned to his mates. "She's allus givin' old Mahna down the banks thataway! She kin remember on to him ten yea ——"

"Hark! Shut yo' ole fool mouth—listen? I hearn——"

"Lawse!" Tid whispered. "Likely I drawed her fiah now!"

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"I ain' said no——"

"Oh, shut up, yo' ole fool! Keep still —ain' I tryin' to listen? Mebby hit's— U-whooh!"

Not one of the pirates made answer.

"U-whooh!" the voice exclaimed more determinedly, and then she turned on her man again. "If yo' hadn't made so much noise, yo' ole fool, likely hit's somebody trippin' nights. I neveh 'lowed to trip nights, 'thout hit's necessary. Listen! Hear that echo come back? Hit's the bank er off'n the side of anotheh shanty-boat. U-Whooh!"

She stopped, listened, heard something and began again:

"Theh — hear hit! Right in theh! Likely—I bet hit's some of them darn riveh-rats. They kin hear well's we kin. Bring that big rifle, yo' ole fool—I kin feel somebody right aroun' yeah, an' I'm goin' to plug around. Nobody'd not answer but riveh-pirates, an' I——"

"Hit's us!" Tid raised his voice. "Hit's us, Mrs. Mahna. We jes' woked up an'——"

"Time yo' woked up. Neveh mind, George Ebenezer—don' shoot! Who yo' all, anyhow?"

"Why, hit's Tid an'——"

"Oh, I know who 'tis, now—what yo' doin'? What yo' trippin' nights fo', anyhow? I bet yo' be'n doin' meanness er sunthin'!"

"No'm! No'm! We jes was into a hurry, an'——"

"Yeh—an' p'lice wa'nt quick 'nough to git yo'! I know! Lawse! Ain' this fog

thicker'n all git aout?"

She was pulling her sweeps, following the sound and coming through the black night. Suddenly she banged into the other boat.

"Yo' ole fools, yo'!" she screamed. "Where's yo' lights?"

Just then through the fog returned a long, breaking laughter.

"Fo' lan's sake!" she gasped. "What's that?"

CHAPTER IV

COLUMBIANA LISTENS, FIRST, AMUSED; SECOND, SORRY

COLUMBIANA MUSCATINE O'BINE stood staring out into the gray fog. In the abstraction of her reading and the depths of her subsequent sleep, she had drifted clear. She found her anchor on the bow deck and the rope hanging down. It had been hauled up, handed over, and she had floated out.

Now she didn't know how long she had been floating, except that she had gone to sleep around nine o'clock. She didn't think she had been cut loose before that. It was now midnight, or past. Uneasily she stood at her sweeps, trying to penetrate the gloom with her gaze. Even when her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she could see nothing. It was as if she were blind and in mid-river, going whither she could not tell—whether around and around in an eddy, or whether swiftly down the

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semicircle of a long bend.

She felt the boat heaving ever so little, up and down, as if in long rollers, and she knew it was a crossing. It might be above Mendova in the reach or at the foot of Mendova Bend or away down below Mendova.

She remembered the pirates, and her hand stole to the butt of her automatic. She went through her two rooms and looked around from her stern deck with an electric-flash to see by—but all she could see was the fog, dragging into lines. The fog eddied around in coils, spirals, puffs and lumps. At first she thought perhaps she could tell in which direction she was floating by watching the fog dragging by, but it drew first one way and then another. It was full of light airs, zephyrs, and never twice alike in its shape or drift.

The fog was soon full of sounds. She heard far-away voices, rustling and washing of water and then the tinkling or ringing of a bell, curiously distorted by the fog. She heard shouts and calls. A dull glow in the fog puzzled her for a little, and then she realized that it must be Mendova lights reflected on the fog. But she couldn't tell in which direction it was. It seemed to be all around the boat and even reflected enough on the water to enable her to see the surface.

In a little while it was gone again—and then just fog! It was fog across the river, which was alive now with voices and splashes and other sounds. She heard babbling by humans, as it

seemed, all around her. She heard a dog whining somewhere; she heard a baby's wail; she heard the bumping of oars on their pins.

"Sounds as if everybody was afloat tonight!" she told herself.

The thought gave her an ominous twinge. The Mississippi River is a stranger to its own people. It occurred to her that perhaps there had been some great change in the Bottoms; perhaps the lands had sunk again, and perhaps there had been earthquakes, eruptions, caves and upheavals? Things are never twice alike down that river. The anchor on her deck—that was kind of human and mischievous, but the voices and whisperings in the dark—the passing of strange sounds among human voices.

The wonder, more than the ominousness, appealed to her. She heard some one say something plain at last. Some one hailed:

"Say, Jack! There's an awful fog on the river!"

"Tha' so?" some one asked sleepily.

"Yeh! Say, Jack—Jack—Jack—*Jack!* Say—we're adrift, Jack! Say —"

Columbiana heard some one tumbling out of a squeaky bunk or bed and heard a pattering of feet.

"That's right. What the—say! What—where—what 'd you tie to?"

"Me—me—I didn't—"

"What—why—yes, you did—you —"

"Me—you tied yourself—to that

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sand-bar snag——”

“That was when we stopped to hunt rabbits. We anchored——”

“That’s so—we did anchor. I’ll go look——”

A minute later a voice cried:

“Say, Tim! The rope’s gone!”

“Slipped off the cleat! That’s what it done. Slipped——”

“Slip yer gran’mother! It was tied to the tow-bitts, and through the hawser hole—why! Here’s the anchor——”

“Hold on, Jack!” a voice said a minute later. “Better start the motor—kind of slow so you got headway to steer——”

“You fools!” Columbiana exclaimed. “You’ll ram somebody or run aground—the river’s falling——”

“Hark!” the two men exclaimed and listened, one continuing, “I thought I heard somebody. Somebody say we’d ram something——”

“So’d I. What do you suppose——” the voices trailed.

The voices were silenced. Columbiana could fairly hear them trying to listen. She started to laugh, but on second thought she didn’t. She had heard something laughing before that night. She didn’t feel like being that kind of something. Besides, something was crazy on the old Mississip’, and no one cares to be caught up with an absent mind or too frivolous when things none can understand are abroad on the river.

At the same time a glint of anger shot through Columbiana’s mind. For

days she had been just about the same as bumping into that motor-boat with the nice-looking and impudent-acting man, whom she had seen playing with the children up on Putney Bend bar, on board.

She heard a rowboat coming. The oars were dipping with energy, and they were continuing with speed. Somebody was rowing fast—and in that fog! She had only time to think of that, and then almost at her feet the skiff passed by; she heard its cutwater slicing the surface and felt it going through the fog. In a minute it was somewhere toward her left hand. Then, suddenly, out there in the black she heard a crash.

The skiff had run into something. She heard it scraping along on the side of something. She heard a voice calling excitedly:

“Excuse me! Excuse me! Excuse me!”

A minute later she heard a hail:

“Hello—hello, on board!”

There was no reply. By and by she heard some one scraping up over the side of a boat. She could even hear the lopping as a rope was thrown around a timber-head or over a large cleat. She heard footsteps and another hail; she heard somebody rapping on a door or the side of a cabin, and that made her laugh.

“If there are just women on board that boat, the next thing will be gunshots!” Columbiana said to herself. “I don’t know why any woman would

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be tripping down in this fog at night any more than I know why I am, but if they are and Mister Man comes knocking on the door instead of hailing from five or ten yards, like a gentleman——”

But there were no shots. Instead, she heard the skiffman fall over something in a cabin, something that sounded like the cross between a crowbar and a stick of cordwood. Then she heard an exclamation:

“My land! I wonder what this is! My land—it’s awful extraordinary, this is—down the river—my land!”

Columbiana listened, thinking judiciously.

“That,” she said, “sounds like a soft-paw—only a soft-paw would go rowing at full speed in a fog like this—unless he was being chased. Perhaps he was being chased. But I know that voice. Where—um! Putney Bend!”

Confusion was abroad that night on the Mississippi. Columbiana had considerable knowledge of the river’s whims and whimsies, and she was in an expectant mood in consequence. From all directions she heard the passing of shanty-boat and motor-boat sounds. Away off yonder, some motor-boat man was running his engine with the cut-out open, and the throbbing of the exhaust whaled through the fog, hammering the ears—though it was miles away. Suddenly the motor choked up and then exploded with a hoarser note—in reverse.

“The fool—driving like that in a

fog!” Columbiana muttered. “Looks as if all the fools were tripping down—what do they want to float in the fog for, anyhow?”

She paused for answer. Then she choked—

“What’m I out for, anyhow—like the rest of them?”

Indignant rebellion against her predicament, not knowing which way to row to get anywhere, succumbed to awe—awe of the strange experience. She didn’t understand, and she couldn’t just remember how deep she had cast her anchor, being bothered by that fool who had been following her along down. Then, as if to lighten her wonders, there fell upon her ears the music of an accordion. Somebody out yonder was taking to music for solace or for revenge or just for the music.

It was wonderful, that gay, rippling tune, full of Italian grace and tripping inspiration. In that gray gloom of night, it was like a ship going down with the band playing—but it did quicken the spirits of the young woman. It wasn’t ghostly, that music, but human and companionable like a fleet of shanty-boaters going by on a starlight night with all hands romping to the calls of a square-set.

At the end of the tune there was silence, deeper than ever. People seemed to be all around. A voice rose in a long-drawn call—

“Keep’r up, old hoss!”

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THE accordion began again in assent. It was half a mile from Columbiana, and a quarter of a mile in another direction she heard somebody "Patting Juba" sharply with his hands. Then a banjo began to pick in, somewhere near the accordion, and a violin began to play second. The violin hadn't played a minute when a big gimp string snapped and a voice rose in melancholic wailing.

"I ain't got no mo' gimp strings!" he announced. "Yo' cayn't play right in no fog!"

"Nobody asted yo' to play!" a jeering voice called from another quarter.

Columbiana listened in increasing amazement. No less than ten boats were somewhere around her; she could hear the people talking; she heard the music; she felt their presence—and then somebody yelled:

"Who set my boat loose? Where the —— am I at?"

"Oh, you're tripping down!" Columbiana called with feminine sweetness.

"Who are you?" the rasping masculine voice demanded.

"Me? Oh, Old Mississip's second wife," she replied.

Instantly from away off yonder a voice swore profanely—

"Well, by the Lord Harry, if I'd married any such dad-blasted old son of a no-'count son-of-a-gun 's him, I bet I'd shift him an' 'vorce him!"

"Why?" Columbiana asked.

"Why? Why?" the man yelled, "Why, dang blast hit! I went to sleep up in Mendova Bend on to Gas House Slough an' I had a good job at three-fifty a day, an' now where the —— am I, an' how the —— 'd I get here in this dangblasted fog—hey?"

"That's no way to talk to a lady!" Columbiana called imperturbably.

"Lady! Lady! No lady ever married this danged Old Mississip'!" he retorted, discourteously.

"My husband will sink you for talking that way," Columbiana suggested.

"Hit wouldn't be the fustest time!" the man yelled. "I ain't done nothin' but sink er fight, drift er hunt for my dangblasted boat, since I come down here to live cheap into a shanty-boat."

"Oh, I thought you talked like an Up-the-Banker!" Columbiana said.

"Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-a-a!" a laughing clatter came through the fog, and all other sounds ceased while the chilling echoes returned from both sides of the river and from the sides of none could tell how many shanty-boats, after the baffling manner of fogged-in sounds.

Repartee ceased. There was no competition with that dank and thrilling sound, demoniac laughter neither distant nor yet near at hand. Old river-people knew the symptoms of that night. Old Mississip' was up to some deviltry, and no one was escaping. Columbiana had thrown a chill about when she said she was old Mississip's

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second wife. She knew they were probably calculating on the chances of whether or not she had told the truth. Lord help the man who insulted her if she had!

She counted the boats which she could identify by their sounds, old-timers—men and women—declaring to gracious they never had heard the beat, were mingled with Up-the-Bankers, who called in futile endeavor to discover where they were at.

“Wu-hoo!” Columbiana called suddenly. “Is that you, Mrs. Mahna?”

“Yes, indeedy, Columbiana!” Mrs. Mahna replied. “I ’lowed hit were yo’, ’count of yo’ laughing at them through-trippers! What yo’ reckon ails us?”

“Old Mississip’!” Columbiana suggested. “Where’d yo’ tie in at?”

“Yeh! Up above Mendova into the head of the Islands. Now we’s down away below Mendova—I could smell them cottonseed-oil mills theh, ’sides hear the p’lice auty-mobill comin’ by when we was drappin’ along. Wheh’d yo’ start at?”

“Into the foot of the Chute of Thirty-Five.”

“Well, I hope to goodness I ain’t neveh seen no beat of this! Up above yeah, I was pullin’ my daylights out, an’ they was a whole passel of them riveh-rat scoundrels, an’ theh was Tid an’ Rooter an’ them pirates right acrost the way I was goin’, neveh sayin’ nothin’ tell I bunked and bammed ’em. Shucks! They’d lost theh boat, they said, an’

theh they was into a soft-paw’s, out’n the Forks, some’rs—a red boat, an’ I bet they killed ’im——”

“Aw—we ain’t nuther! Mrs. Mahna, hit ain’ so!” a voice returned out of the fog, and Mrs. Mahna exclaimed:

“Gracious! I ’lowed I was shet of yo’ scoundrels—I bet yo’ done somethin’ this night——”

“We ain’t!” the voice retorted, and then the two women heard somebody begin to pull on a pair of sweeps.

The sound moved away in the fog, and Mrs. Mahna chuckled as she cupped her hands to talk across to Columbiana.

“I bet them fellers is scairt of sunthin’!”

Every little while there would be a yell of excitement, or at least agitation, as some sleeper awakened and hailed the fog. The old-timers would answer back with a roar of laughter, but the laughter quickly perished. Word had gone around: several boats from Gas-House Slough at Mendova, boats from the shanty-town at Mutton Island and through Sentinel Cut-off and trippers who had just landed in—they didn’t know where—were within a mile or so. And word passed up and down that indicated four or five miles in the shanty-boat fleet. A few laughed, but mostly it was indignation, tempered by mystery and superstition.

While they wondered, listening to the music, or cursed the occasion, there was a sudden flare through the gray

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gloom. Instead of black night, it was gray day. Columbiana clambered to the roof of her cabin and found her head above the level of the mist. She could see the trees on both banks and here and there a flagpole or the riding-light of a motor-boat flagstaff—pale in the dawn.

As she looked, other heads appeared above the fog here and there as far as she could see: heads of men and women, some with whiskers and some with disheveled hair, some with circles of agitated fog around them as they waved their arms.

Through the fog echoed the laugh of the night, and half an hour later the fog was gone, except for little shreds. Forty or fifty shanty-boats and motor-boats pulled shoreward, and eddies where there hadn't been three boats at once in twenty years suddenly had whole shanty-boat towns with an indignant, puzzled and revengeful population.

Columbiana floated down close to the west bank eddies till she saw a tall, slim man with thin, brown face standing on a great shanty-boat deck with an expression of bewilderment on his features.

"Excuse me!" he hailed her. "I am greatly disturbed, perturbed, and I am a stranger down the river——"

"A soft-paw?" she asked, sweetly.

"Yes, indeed! Just so; if you——"

"All right," she smiled. "I'll come over and see what's the matter."

She pulled in and made fast to the stern of the big boat. She climbed

aboard and went into the cabin. It was stacked with rifles, shotguns, great heaps of ammunition, cutlery, fishing-tackle, nets, bales of net-twine and bushels of unassorted material.

She looked at the rough heaps and stacks and bundles. Then she looked at the man who stood there, equally bewildered, but helpless instead of experienced and efficient as she was.

Columbiana looked the outfit over, walking around it and sniffed through the cluttered up kitchen-gallery, and disheveled bunk-rooms. There were tons of the stuff, and it was inexplicable to her mind. It was a sporting-goods store run riot. She sat down on a bale of rope and considered. She was sitting there when the shiver of a gentle bump ran through the craft. The next instant, there was the trampling of feet, and the doorway flashed with figures rapidly entering, one by one.

"Hyar they be, boys!" the leader shouted, exultantly. "Hands up! Yo' riveh-pirates don't git by Sheriff Dabonne, neveh indeed!"

The astonished soft-paw stared wide-eyed through his big, round glasses at the muzzles of several black and blue automatics. The pretty girl glanced calmly from raider to raider, and she was sorry for Caroost, sorry for herself. She had been too long on the river not to know the terror of circumstantial evidence applied to shanty-boaters.

"Yo' two alone on this yeah boat?"

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Sheriff Dabonne demanded. "Ho law! Yo' two's swell-lookin' pirates. All dressed up, eh? Sho!"

"Shucks!" Columbiana looked him in the eye to say. "Are honest folks so scarce where you're from that you don't know them when you see them. Not that kind!"

"Hue-e!" members of the posse yelled, and the sheriff reddened.

"Yo' all cayn't play no innocent game on me!" he declared. "We gets five hundred dollars for this year outfit up to Mendova, yo' two! Yes, indeed! All this stolen goods on yo'. Sho! We shore got a haul this time, boys!"

"Stolen! Stolen goods!" the man exclaimed. "My land!"

CHAPTER V CHIEF CLUMB LOSES HIS PATROL

A SOFT-PAW remains just "that soft-paw" or "the soft-paw" until something happens to him to give interest to his name and make somebody of him. James M. Caroost had preserved his nonentity for a thousand miles while he floated down the Mississippi. The Indian youth seeks an opportunity to distinguish himself, become somebody and earn a name. James M. Caroost, having a long and inherited name, had never dreamed that he would ever become subject to the immutable laws of humanity and under the necessity of being somebody all by himself and

without regard to the fortune which his ancestors had acquired. He had presumed to be a highbrow adventurer with a purpose.

The commercial agencies who list men according to their finances had the name of James M. Caroost indexed with a credit of one hundred thousand dollars; it had more than a dozen of the Caroost relatives listed, too, and the aggregate rating was satisfactory to any one from the maker of a player-piano to a promoter of speculative securities seeking some one willing to take a chance.

The name Caroost was utterly unknown down the Mississippi. No shanty-boat man had ever borne it; no fugitive from justice had ever assumed it; no lady had ever run away from home on its account; no man had ever come down the river to hide its shame; and at first James M. Caroost had no distinguishing qualities, except rather more complete ignorance of river ways than common in soft-paws, to mark him among a sore-handed crowd of anxious and worried trippers. His inquiries about one Mr. Barklow Waldin seemed a fad in him.

But no sooner had he been arrested with Columbiana Muscatine O'Bine than all the shanty-boaters from Pittsburgh to the Passes heard of him. Nobody could figure it out. Nobody believed the wildly improbable ideas that were suggested and became discards immediately. It was some time

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before a whispering grew to a certainty.

James M. Caroost was sure a lucky lad, if ever there was one. That O'Bine girl had just naturally been too proud to escape Old Mississipp', even if she had sassed and escaped about every one and everything else from above the Forks down to New Orleans. Just imagine the glory of being arrested with the prettiest and least approachable girl on the Mississippi. Some folks are just naturally fools for luck! Or at least are born lucky.

Sheriff Dabonne took the two down the crossing in the big shanty-boat, loaded with loot, and tied in at Brisco County court landing. Thence he marched them, handcuffed together, up to the jail and locked them safely in separate cells while he notified Chief Clumb of Mendova over the telephone of the capture. The facts were printed in the afternoon newspapers as far away as St. Louis and New Orleans, and overnight about everybody on the river had heard of the matter.

Nobody believed on the river that Columbiana Muscatine O'Bine and James M. Caroost had actually robbed the famous Duck and Deer sporting-goods store, where everybody on the way down stopped to purchase ammunition or fish-hooks, or something just for the sake of getting acquainted with the noted Dart Coldby of Mendova, who knew all the gunmen east of the Mississippi and all the long riders and robbers west of that

thoroughfare and dividing-line, not to mention a great assortment of river-pirates, sportsmen and Gipsies.

But at the same time no one in Mendova official circles or in any of the various sheriff outfits along the river bar believed that Columbiana Muscatine O'Bine was a river queen of pirates and that Caroost was a desperado from Broadway, New York, or Michigan Avenue, Chicago.

Chief Clumb drove down to Brisco court landing in the department's fast motor-boat, the *Dareall*. He landed and walked up to the jail and had dinner with Sheriff Dabonne and had a glass of soda water, for Brisco County was dry, and a good cigar for a smoke. Dabonne told how he had tried to understand the things that Miss O'Bine had said to Caroost in a low, earnest voice. He had heard her say something about a "foolish soft-paw," "five years on the State farm" and similar incriminating things, Caroost being red-faced and helpless to deny.

"They're a bad pair," Sheriff Dabonne warned. "You'n your engineer wants to keep your eyes on 'em, for they are slick riveh artists, if eveh there was one down thisaway!"

Dabonne had the jailer bring out the two prisoners, and Clumb slipped one pair of handcuffs on them, chaining Caroost's right hand to Columbiana's left wrist. She looked at the two representatives of Government with narrowing eyes, and Caroost bit his

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lower lip in confusion. The period in the jail had not overcome his embarrassment nor her alert indignation.

They were just going to walk down Main Street and over the levee when the telephone bell rang and Sheriff Dabonne listened with disgust to the fact that he must go with two deputies back into the brakes to hunt for a negro who had been ructioning around with a club.

That left Clumb and the two prisoners to walk along the street together. The chief was not averse to the parade. They went over the levee and down to the landing. Several shanty-boats were tied along the bank, and a stern-wheel tow-boat, the *Bridle*, had just hooked on to the fifty-foot cabin-boat, loaded with the Duck and Deer loot, which had been under a deputy's guard till it was turned over to the Mendova chief.

The *Dareall* scout-boat was all ready to take on the prisoners and start up the river, but at the last moment Chief Clumb discovered that he didn't have a cigar, except the one between his teeth. Neither did Croty, the motor-boat engineer cop.

"I'll run up an' get some, Chief!" Croty said, and Clumb handed him a five-spot. Croty ran up the bank, and Columbiana and Caroost clambered rather awkwardly into the bow of the launch.

At that moment a man emerged from

a red cabin-boat down the eddy and began to toss chunks of wood on to the bow deck. The wood made a hollow, booming sound, and Caroost glanced that way. He started up from his seat and began to exclaim—

"Why, that's——"

Columbiana pulled him down beside her with a low hiss—

"Yo' fool!"

Happily, Clumb was casting an eagle-glance at the energetic shanty-boater. He even moved in the shanty-boater's direction, keeping a sharp eye on the man. Being Chief of the Mendova Police, Clumb always looked strange river outfits over, and he didn't exactly recognize the shanty-boater. But he had the feeling that he ought to.

"I beg pardon," Caroost turned to her softly. "Did I hurt your wrist?"

"No—that shanty-boater's a friend of ours," she replied in a voice scarcely audible.

"I'm sure sorry—this thing's up to me. My ancestors helped to settle Ohio and Indiana, and they were very successful people. They were famous Indian-fighters and had many hair-breadth escapes and ——"

"Don't strain your imagination," she glared at him. "Did they wear black-rimmed specs?"

"I don't need them," he flushed, taking the black bows from his eyes. "You see—I thought they gave me a kind of intellectual appearance. Apparently, looking intellectual isn't

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any help to me!"

With his dark-rimmed spectacles off he wasn't anywhere near the same looking man. Clumb was thirty yards down the bank by this time, and he glanced back and saw the two sitting numbly in the launch. As he looked, the shanty-boater gave them an eloquent look, a gesture that Columbiana understood but which Caroost, looking at her, did not even see.

A talking-machine on the little red shanty-boat started a brass band record, and the shanty-boater threw armfuls of wood on to the shanty-boat bow. The tow-boat, having straightened up the big boat of loot, was splashing and sighing out at the eddy edge. A sawmill down the levee was roaring, and the band-saw began to scream through a knot.

Columbiana reached and slipped the mooring-line from the cleat on the bow of the launch and moved into the steerman's seat. Inspired, Caroost kicked the battery-starter switch and threw in the reverse. The motor-boat backed swiftly and, as a good police-boat should, noiselessly out into the eddy. Then the girl swung the bow sharply down the eddy, and he threw over the reverse. The boat shook with the change of the power from astern to ahead.

The next instant the *Dareall* was lifting her bow out of water and beginning to skim over the surface. And then Chief Clumb turned. He saw the two prisoners crouching and swinging

out into the current fifty yards away. He snatched out his automatic pistol and began to empty it, but in vain. His heavy bullets slapped into the water, first on one side, then the other, and skipped off across the river surface for half a mile in shortening jumps.

Chief Clumb yelled profanity, threats, orders, but the patrol-boat merely swung wide, straightened out, squatted more and more at the stern and began to boil away down-stream.

It was the swiftest boat for miles along the river. It had a double engine with automatic couplings, and, when both sets of cylinders were applied to the screw, the bow rose from the surface, and, standing on her tail, the *Dareall* scooted like a wild goose stepping in the water for fun.

IN THREE minutes the boat was, to Chief Clumb's gaze, a mere agitation a long way down the river. And in seven minutes there was nothing in sight to lend possibility to the hope that there would be a break-down. What Chief Clumb remarked to his subordinate with a handful of cigars is utterly unthinkable, unless one has heard a river-town policeman swing his tongue on such an occasion.

When the escapers had gone from sight, Clumb turned wrathfully on the shanty-boater.

"Theh—theh, yo' scoundrel. See what you done, distracting my attention!"

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Clumb choked in his anger and effort to find a scapegoat.

"What all did they do?" the riverman asked with all the innocence Tid could muster.

"Do—do! They stole the Duck and Deer stock——"

"They did! Sho! That lil' gal an' that feller—the paper said there was a big safe—them two tote a safe across Mendova mud an' sand-bar!"

Clumb's jaw dropped. How had those not overly-strong river man and girl carried a weight like that—carried the tons of merchandise in the short time they had had to work, between the passings of the patrolman on the beat? Clumb saw and was dazed by the point.

"Riveh-pirates could do anything!" Clumb declared angrily. "Co'rse, they could——"

Tid laughed as if he had been paid a compliment, but he said seriously:

"Them two ain' no scoundrels, Chief! They's jes a soft-paw an' one of them independent riveh-gals—so they say. I hearn tell some real riveh-rats done hit an' was snucked off 'n the night. Somebody cut 'em loose—an' when they got down theh, the boat was gone, an' they hadn't time to bust open the safe——"

"Who said that?" Clumb demanded sharply.

"Feller drappin' by ouh bo't las' night, suh—up on the County bar, suh."

"Shucks!" Clumb snorted indignantly. "Yo' shanty-boaters is all

crooks and all riveh-rats, an', when we catch one bunch of yo', hit's neveh the right bunch, accordin' to yo' tell. Them two——"

"Yas, suh," admitted Tid humbly. "Theh's a heap of iggerance up the bank about what's down the eddy, yas, indeedy!"

"They had the boat and they had the loot!" Clumb declared, justifying his conclusion.

"Columbiana's bo't was theh with hit—an' Caroost's skift, too; 'cordin' to the paper, they said they found hit deserted into the fog, and they salvaged hit, 'count of nobody bein' on to hit. Hadn't be'n fo' them, that boat'd be'n by Memphis an' clost to Vicksburg er Helena, anyhow, by now. What they said stood to reason, Chief!"

"They had them goods on, an' they was receivers on hit!" Clumb retorted.

"I hate to see innocent fellers took up," Tid suggested.

"Likely yo' know all about hit?" Clumb turned suspiciously.

"No, suh; I'm jes' a drifter. That big boat was comin' down, mostly nights; feller name of Tid an' one name of Rooter had hit—four fellers."

"Tid? Ain't that Red——"

"Yassuh, a mean little scoundrel—'bout my size, suh, leetle heavier," Tid said without batting an eyelash and as innocent as the river in appearance.

"How come hit that feller 'n his gal was on to that bo't?"

"Yas, suh—hit's seo. Theh they was!

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But hyar I be, too; likely yo' ain't hearn about hit, but about a hundred shanty-boats jes' cut loose by theirselves, an' fust anybody knowed he wa'n't theh no mo', but five, ten, twenty-five mile down-stream an' in the dang-blastedest fog——”

“Why—Mendova wharf-boat cut loose, too!”

“Yas, suh—hit's what I'm tellin' yo'. Nobody reg'lar wa'n't accountable fo' nothin' that night. Them pirates had awful hard luck, Chief. Jes' when theh'd got that boat loaded down, an' when they'd brung down that safe, the boat was cut loose, an' theh they was with yo'n' all them bulls coming down. An' they had to git to swim fo' hit down the bend that night er git took up. Them pirates got Caroost's bo't—that's what they say. ‘Whisky Sam’ was tellin'——”

“I'd like to git my hands on Whisky Sam!” Clumb grumbled. “I bet he lands a thousand pints into Mendova every week, an' Mendova's dry!”

“Yas, suh, Chief—but not so overly dry, at that!”

“I'd bust his haid!”

“Yas, suh—but hit's tolerable thick, suh. Yo' hadn't no call to 'rest Columbiana an' that feller. He waren't nothin' but a soft-paw. Co'se, he ain't no soft-paw, not now. He's 'sperienced, now. If he hain't a reg'lar ole riveh-man already, Columbiana 'll shore make one of him. Yas, indeed!”

“Yo' tell folks around that I offer

five hundred dollars reward for them two scoundrels!” Clumb cried out angrily, his judgment unshaken by the cunning and tricky shanty-boater.

“Yas, suh!” the river-man grinned.

As Clumb and his discomfited motor-boat man went aboard the ferry, the shanty-boater returned into his own craft.

“Theh!” he said to his pals. “Old Clumb's plumb sure Columbiana an' that feller Caroost done that job. Good thing we towed up with ‘Sour Pop.’ Hit's jes' the way he said. I bet we can pull that pearl-buyer tonight. We ain't never bothered them pearl-buyers none. This here boat ain't big enough fer any real freight. Hit don't take much joolry o' that kind to make a load, though.”

“Lawse!” Tid grinned. “Them two made that getaway slick! She held the wheel, an' he kicked over the starter.”

“How'd they managed the rope?”

“Columbiana kicked hit off the cleat.”

“Yo' 'low hit's safe to pull a job tonight—so soon?”

“On to that pearl-buyer——”

“But they'll all be nervous 'count of them pirates.”

“We got to bait 'im,” Tid explained. “They never was a buyer turned down a pearl 'count of nervousness yet. Lucky I got them pearls yet. They ain't much account, but I kin play off I expect they're worth about a thousand.”

“Hit's seo!”

A little after dark they put the

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outboard motor on the skiff and drove up the river to land in Gas House Slough of Mendova and walked up to Tivoli Street, turned south and then turned again toward the river. Two stopped at the first corner, and Tid and Rooter went on down the block to a little brick and concrete building with a delivery alley along one side. They entered the building, and ten minutes later the other two strolled down and also entered.

In the back room a man with greatly distended jaws sat firmly bound in a chair. His eyes were eloquent gray-blue. Tid and Rooter were making a businesslike collection from the large, open safe in the room. Within five minutes the four turned out the lights, closed the doors and carefully locked them. They strolled past a policeman on Front Street and walked up to Gas House Slough, entered their skiff, dropped back to the County court landing and cut loose their shanty-boat.

Down the bend they counted their money, seven thousand six hundred and forty dollars. They examined their pearls of price and decided that they had about fifteen thousand dollars' worth, Old Britler having collected enough for several strings and matched six pairs of beautiful ear-drops.

They had played a bold game and won handily. They floated all night, playing poker with a five-cent ante and a twenty-five-cent limit—a rate that gave them excitement but did not leave

them stranded as a big game would have done. They knew what a big game would do to them—that it would break them up and that probably they would fight before they were through.

"I tell you, boys," Red boasted, "we'll drap down to Vicksburg and go into N'Orleans, and there we'll have some fun, eh? We'll get shut of them pearls and slugs, an' we'll have fifteen thou', all right, and we'll get some new hats and pants and so on, an' what we won't do won't be do-able. No! Nobody can tell us how to do things!"

"Yeh!" Sunflower cried with delight. "I know what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' to salt some of my money away, an' I'm goin' to live around an' maybe kind of git married er somethin'. An' I'll have a little place to live on so, 'f I got to git to scoutin', I'll have a place I kin go to an' settle down an' never say nothin' but what I'm one of them swell sports who lives out'n the country——"

"Believe me," Rooter grinned, "I'm goin' to circulate around. I'm going around to 'Frisco. I ain't be'n there sincet the earthquake, when they made me work—work like a darky—an' me with two thou' into my pockets I'd picked up around before they got to shootin' so promiscuous just if yo' was walkin' around and bendin' over ——"

"Let's stop into Thirty-Seven an' get some of Tavell Love's Arkansaw Overflow, eh?" the fourth man suggested. "We kin git somethin' so's when we go drappin' down, scoutin'

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down the bends, we'll have somethin' to do. I don't know nothin' harder to do 'n jes float down an' watchin' the banks. If yo' got some good liquor along, hit kind of passes the time; see?"

"Sure—that's right! We'll jes' have a drink aroun', an' we'll sort of float down nights an' tie up back in some'rs days!"

Thus they contrived to fall into the hands of Nemesis.

CHAPTER VI THE RIVER ALWAYS DOES CUT UP

WITH their thirty-foot police patrol-launch speeding down the river at nearly twenty-five miles an hour, the soft-paw, James M. Caroost, and the river-girl, Columbiana Muscatine O'Bine, were fully occupied in steering it. Going at that rate, the boat slipped and slewed around, and only by quick, hard pulls on the wheel could Columbiana steer it properly. Caroost stood patiently beside her with his right wrist fastened to her left wrist by the handcuffs. When they had rounded the long bend below Mendova, on her order, he pulled the lever to cut out the extra motor, and they dropped back to the less exacting gait of ten or eleven miles an hour.

The soft-paw could not speak, and Columbiana's mind was too full of thoughts to make any remarks. Becoming fugitives from justice was the

last idea that would have occurred to either of them, and now they had stolen the Mendova police-launch from under the very foot of Chief Clumb.

"Did you know who that shanty-boater was, talking to Chief Clumb?" she turned and demanded suddenly.

"No!" he shook his head. "Did you?"

"Of course, I knew him! One of those river-pirates, and the first time I eveh knew him to get to do anything—anything—kindly for anybody!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, didn't you notice? Clumb was watching that shanty-boat, and that gave us a chance—that shanty-boater did it on purpose! Helped us get away!"

"Helped us escape!" Caroost turned to look at her.

"Well, didn't he?"

"Why—yes—of course. But—bu —"

"Possibly you had moral scruples about his helping us get away?" she demanded.

"Why—you see—it's so—so unconventional—helping—ah—prisoners escape. I thought——"

"Who-all mout you be, stranger?" she drawled, her expression one of bewilderment and her eyes wondering and yet twinkling.

"James M. Caroost," he replied absently.

"I thought so—but I wasn't at all sure!" she said, turning to see whither she was steering, and then a minute later she continued, "One of my friends

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was arrested by Chief Clumb, once, up above here. He said as they came down to Mendova, chief opened some things he called emergency rations, and they had a regular feed. I'm hungry!"

"I am, too—awfully!" Caroost exclaimed. "I will get——"

He started, and the unaccustomed handcuffs brought him up short. He stared at the steel links, while Columbiana steered industriously. He looked from side to side helplessly. Sheepishly he returned and sat down. It occurred to him—it dawned on him at last—that their predicament had a number of wide-spread ramifications.

"For a man," she murmured at last, "I think you are a person of exceedingly trifling and no-account ingenuity."

"I—I have to have time to—ah—think!" he explained contritely. "Our family were, really, plodders——"

"You must have been astonished when you found yourself escaped from the—ah—authorities," she half-mocked him.

"Well—ye—yes; I recall that our dear ancestor, Jevone Caroost, did escape from Indians by the exercise of superior intelligence and—and ability to run."

"You're running true to form then, aren't you?"

"Eh—true to form?"

"Yes; you know when horse-races are run, horses are said to make about a certain speed under certain condition of training—according to their form, you

know."

"Eh—of course. You—ah—are familiar with race-tracks?" he asked in obvious effort to restrain himself.

"They amuse me," she admitted. "I just love the Louisville races—and in N'Orleans, too!"

He looked at her.

"Aren't you afraid—possibly you think I may contaminate you?" she smiled at him suddenly. "A sporting girl—you think?"

"I beg your pardon!" he hastened. "I didn't happen to have met any like you before."

"Never was attached to one like me before, then?"

"N-n-n—" he started, and then he threw his head back to laugh in an outburst, which he followed by a contrite, "I beg your pardon! It sounded—er—so humorous. Of course, I came down the river because——"

She gazed at him with hopeless admiration.

"Because of some untoward incident?" she suggested.

"Yes—you see," he burst forth, "there was a lady sang in our church, and she—and she——"

"I see—refrained from marrying you?" gently.

"Yes," he blinked, "a very lovely lady; her voice was beautiful, thrilling. Her mother promised she would marry me, and, of course, it seemed all settled. It was all settled, but she married a—married a garage-owner instead."

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“And you didn’t even own an automobile?”

“Oh, several——”

“And you could drive an automobile?”

“Oh my, yes!”

“I thought you started that motor as if you knew it—I was astonished at your facility. So you came down the river?”

“So I came down the river. I—I felt very badly, of course. They said—her mother, you know, and the rest—that down the river I would forget.”

“And you forgot?” she asked, softly.

“Why—ye—largely. I’ve had to. Dear me! Life is so unexpected down here—events are so varied. My excuse was to find my dear old college professor——”

“Exactly!” she smiled. “Suppose you look in that tool-chest, there in the locker, and see if there isn’t a file?”

“That’s so!” he cried. “That’s so—if we had a file——”

“You’re so anxious to be separated from me?” she demanded.

“No!” he exclaimed after gazing at her for a full half-minute.

He sat back against the gunwale and made no motion toward the tool-chest. He sat stubbornly when she attempted to go to it. She was helpless. She discovered that, despite his light appearance, he was immovable.

“Please!” she exclaimed, at last.

Without a word he threw up the locker top, and there were trays of tools

and, in cover slots, a score of assorted files. He drew a thin, fine blade with a saw-edge and had taken two or three cuts with it when he turned to her and said:

“This is a police-boat. Don’t you suppose in those lockers? In that cabinet inside?”

“That’s so!” she exclaimed. “Really, you are learning!”

Sure enough, hanging over a bar in a gun-cabinet were a score of pairs of handcuffs, ready for any police emergency. They found one pair that was exactly like their own, and its key clicked the lock. Their manacles fell from their wrists.

“Thank you!” she smiled.

“I shall never forget——” he hesitated—“our attachment!”

She tried not to smile, but she could not help it. One of her own birds had come flying home.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. “We’ll change the boat’s name!”

“They certainly would recognize—identify this boat!” he admitted. “I don’t know—I am—I am not familiar with the river—not very——”

“But a callous gathers on your hand?” she queried.

“Eh? You mean—oh!” he laughed gaily. “I realize—I begin to understand. You know—people said so much about ‘soft-paws’—and I—and I——”

He turned up his palms, and gazed at the four lumps along the bases of each of his sets of four fingers.

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"I am delighted!" he cried. "Isn't the Mississippi wonderful? And the *patois*—the dialect—the colloquialisms—are so amusing and so appropriate! I begin to like—I begin to love it!"

"It treated you mean at first?" she asked.

"I wouldn't say exactly that," he shook his head. "Not meanly but with—with a kind of discourtesy!"

She laughed.

"My hunger is not yet appeased," she added. "Won't you look for an emergency ration? We can not go down much farther. By this time they've telephoned and telegraphed our descriptions to N'Orleans. We don't dare pass Memphis in the daytime. We can run down Barnay Chute, though, and I reckon there's enough water to come across the bar at the head of Thirty-Seven; anyhow, there's a new cut across Centennial Island, and we'll lie in there till after dark and drop on down, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you'd rather not travel with a lady?"

SHE looked him in the eye with level gaze. In all his life he had never met quite that cold, gray stare. Columbiana Muscatine O'Bine had thought of things which he had not yet surmised. She had lived alone on the Mississippi for a number of years, and she was far from ignorant; she knew things which never were included in the sheltered life and

circumscribed education of an ignorant up-the-bank man. She was a girl of the world, competent and adaptable; he was just a narrow, hapless townsman.

"I am sorry!" he exclaimed. "Of course—as you say! If you'll just land me up the bank here—anywhere!"

"You're—you're going to leave me—to get away as best I can?" she asked, and she had to turn her face away lest he see the twinkle in her eyes as she thought of being protected by the like of him.

He started. Bewildered and blanked by her sudden shift of view-point, he could only open his mouth and gaze helplessly at the sand-bar, the trees of a long bend, the willows and the narrow chute toward which they were heading.

"I don't know!" he whispered, wiping his arm across his forehead, where had gathered beads of sweat at the crisis of his predicament. "You—you are so much more familiar with—with affairs down here. I—I was never a fugitive before with a lady!"

She burst into a laugh, and he grinned ruefully. As she laughed, she steered the police-boat down the chute. She cut down the gas and as the boat slowed she ran it around a point and up into an old bayou. There, hidden behind young willows growing on a bar and in a pocket in a wilderness, clear of the mainland and surrounded by many islands, they threw over an anchor and came to rest.

It was nearly sunset, and

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Columbiana made haste to examine the emergency rations and found that the big, sheet-metal, porcelain-lined cupboard contained bread in waxed paper, smoked meats, canned goods, a bushel of potatoes, cans of flour and cornmeal and other ample supplies. Rapidly she spread out what she wanted. While she prepared to bake hot-bread, he acted to her orders and peeled potatoes and sliced smoked beef. She tried to find a coffee-pot but found, instead, a percolator.

He made the coffee. When it came on dark, they turned on the cabin light, pulled down the curtains and closed the door. They sat up to the table to dine. Out of the stores they had succeeded in making a delicious meal, including smoked-beef, sauce, hot bread, corn pone, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes and many other things.

"The police live in plumb comfort when they go shanty-boating, don't they?" Columbiana suggested.

It was, however, an intolerable position. They were both embarrassed. They had but touched the brim of their affair together. She had minded her own business, refrained from asking him any least question—but she just had to know now. Yet she hesitated to ask the questions.

"You seemed plumb surprized when Sheriff Dabonne told you those things were stolen?" she hinted.

"I was!" he admitted. "If I'd known—I couldn't imagine—you see, it was

this way. I'd tied in up at the head of Island 35—and, first thing I knew, I was down in a big fog—I didn't know where."

"You'd anchored?"

"Yes. And then—then, while I was looking around, I saw four horrible monsters coming right up to my boat, swimming, and—and—well, I was greatly alarmed, and I went away in my skiff, and I bumped into that big house-boat, all full of sporting-goods."

"And I arrived just in time to be caught with you by Sheriff Dabonne?"

"Exactly, and I'm so sorry——"

"I'm not!"

He started and then gazed at her. She did not meet his gaze. This was something different again. He could not guess what was in her mind. He realized, however, that for some reason she was not blaming him nor greatly disturbed by their predicament.

"I should not forgive myself if by my stupidity I had gotten you into this difficulty," he said slowly, "and if there is anything I can do—anything possible—I'll go back and explain to the chief—I'll take all the blame—anything!"

"Just to save me annoyance?" she asked.

"Exactly!"

"You weren't to blame," she told him. "It's just what Old Mississip' did. The river's cutting up all the time. It's got us into this scrape, and perhaps it'll get us out, but we can't depend on it. Of course, we can't keep this boat. There's

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something you could do——”

“I’ll do it!” he declared.

“It’s down below, on Island 37. There’s a blind-tiger there—a Black-and-Tan dive, if you know what that is?”

“No,” he shook his head.

“They sell whisky there and beer; all the disreputable men and women off the river, and around, go there. It’s a regular shack settlement on the island and a lot of shanty-boats. Nobody decent ever goes there, except—except fugitives from justice. I’d die before I’d go there—but——”

“I might—I might find somebody there who——”

“We’ve got to have another boat—two boats. Skiffs. One for you—one for me—of course! And——”

“Of course—I’ll go. You are the captain!”

“Thank you!” she replied, not without feeling.

His eyes turned to a clothing-cabinet or locker part way up the cabin at the foot of the sleeping-car bunks. He walked over and looked at the contents. He smiled as he found uniforms of several of the waterfront policemen.

“I’ll go down to those shacks in style!” he told her, drawing the curtains.

In a few minutes he emerged. He was a policeman, from the jaunty lieutenant cap down to the oil-polished shoes on his feet. She stared at him.

“You—you wouldn’t go there in that—that uniform!” she gasped. “Why,

they’ll shoot you—dead!”

“I deserve to be shot,” he replied. “This is the police-boat, and it’s been seen—a boat came down this chute ahead of us. They’d be sure I was a detective if I went in there in plain clothes. If I go there in this—and tell my business, why perhaps——”

An exclamation of astonishment broke from her lips.

“Really—you are bright!” she cried. “That is the thing to do!”

With side-lights burning and the searchlight picking their way, they ran down to the rear of Island 37 and rounded up to the stern of a big boat there. The side of the board carried the weather-beaten inscription—

SACRED CONCERTS, THE LOTUS!

Dancing and music ceased within a half-minute after the police-boat appeared, and there was a scampering of feet over the bow and up the bank. With line in hand, Carost jumped to the big cabin-boat stern and threw a hitch on a timber-head. He stood there, fully revealed in the stern light of the concert-boat. He walked into the cabin and out on to the dancing-floor.

Columbiana watched him with catching breath. She saw that his shoulders squared, that he stepped upon the balls of his feet, his heels raised like an anxious bear. He was going into a den, the like of which he had never seen, but she noticed what she had not

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seen before—that both of his outside coat pockets sagged heavily, though his hands were not in them but on the protruding butts of two police automatics.

SHE could see the men and women crowding back against the walls of the cabin. There were three or four whom she knew, “Big Sue,” for example, and “Pete the Gunman” and two or three trappers and market-hunters whom she did not know by name. There was a blue-eyed yellow girl and a little, smart-Alec white man with a face like a cat, who walked from the far side and, smirking, greeted the newcomer in a policeman’s dress uniform.

“Who yo’-all ’low to git, Lieutenant?” the little man demanded. “My name’s Tavell Love, and I’m superintendent here.”

“I don’t happen to want to get any man,” Caroost replied. “I want two good skiffs, clinker-built and sixteen or eighteen feet long. I want them right, too, and good oars. If you’ve got an outboard motor, so much the better.”

“Then—then yo’ ain’t afteh nobody?”

“If I was, I’d come down like a river-rat, and I’d work like a snake, and I’d be a plain-clothes man!” Caroost retorted.

“Sho! Yas, suh! We don’t aim to interfere with nobody that don’t bother us, er ouh friends!” the little wretch grimaced, and, turning to a gingerbread

darkey leaning against the bow door jamb, he ordered, “theh’s them two skiffs down by Palura’s yacht. One’s clinker-built, but one’s laid smooth—a narrow-strip boat, Lieutenant?”

“Tight?”

“Yassuh, theh’s both varnished boats, suh. One’s twenty-foot long, an’ hits got a two-hoss motor, suh——”

“Good! I’ll go down and look at them.”

The three walked down the bank to the “yacht,” which was a whisky-running motor-boat. There, in an eddy beside a square timber float, were several skiffs. With a flash Caroost looked them over. The boats the little man pointed out were the best ones there.

“How much, old man?” Caroost asked.

“Nothing, suh!”

“What! Why, I’m willing to pay ——”

“Yas, suh—course! I know that; I know every —— bull in Mendova, too—an’ yo’ ain’t one of them. Yo’ shore come hit dandy on to ‘Pig Foot’ Clumb—yo’n that gal, Columbiana. Hit’d be a favor to me, though—if—if——”

“If what?”

“If yo’ ’n her’d leave that police-launch down by Old River Mouth landing—she knows where hit is. I’d shore like to telephone Pig Foot I got hisn’s boat to return hit as a special ’commodation to him!”

“Oh!” Caroost exclaimed astonished.

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“Yo’ throwed a good bluff, old sport!” the man cackled. “But hit wa’n’t necessary; any time yo’ git to scoutin’, drap in hyar, an’ we’ll take cyar of yo’, yassuh—an’ if that gal—if she wants to hide out hyar—why——”

“We’ll go up and talk to her!” Caroost hastened to say.

“You kin!” the man grimaced. “I done hit onct; I was six weeks into Memphis Hospital, an’ my side’s tender, yet, where the bullet went. Lawse! She ain’t—she’s friendly with yo’-all, suh?”

“She’s captain!” Caroost answered.

“She sent yo’ in in that uniform?”

“It was my idea—coming down in the police-boat—I didn’t want anybody to think I was a plain-clothes man——”

“Sho! Didn’t yo’-all wear big round specs?”

“For a time—yes!”

“An’ they said yo’ was a soft-paw—say! Go get some extra gasoline an’ that outboard, Tinkle!”

The gingerbread turned and hurried away.

“Say, sport!” the man lowered his voice. “I could use you—down b’low! Yo’-all want to tie up for a job?”

“Not with a lady on my hands.”

“That’s so—any other lady, course—but—um-m; Columbiana’s awful particular—yas, suh!”

Five minutes later with two skiffs alongside the police-patrol dropped down the Old River behind Island 37, and Columbiana laughed when she heard the plan of the little man.

“He’s bad, that scoundrel!” she said. “I met him onct.”

“He said he knew you.”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked down the search-light beam.

“Yes; he helped establish my reputation down this way,” she admitted. “Most anywhere else in the world a lady with a reputation lots of times deserves it but don’t like it. But down this way a reputation’s useful and necessary—and I have one.”

They anchored in the Old River Mouth landing eddy. She picked supplies and outfit for the skiffs from the lavish stock on the police-boat, including waterproof blankets, swing cots and the balloon canvas tents and flies—used when the chief went turkey-hunting or hounding a fugitive. She took her pick, too, of the boat’s firearms, and Caroost took his—and his discrimination pleased her fancy. He took, too, a bunch of handcuffs.

“What for?” she asked.

“There are some scoundrels who scared me,” he answered simply. “And I have a grudge!”

Then they abandoned the police-patrol.

CHAPTER VII

CAROOST SEIZES EVIDENCE OF HIS INNOCENCE

THE shanty-boat load of sporting-goods which had been carried from the Duck

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and Deer was brought to Mendova by the gasoline-packet *Bridle*, and a gang of negro roustabouts were employed to carry the stuff back up to the Front Street store. Two clerks and the proprietor spent some time filling up the shelves and cases which had been so thoroughly evacuated.

The shanty-boat, which was fifty feet long, was claimed within three days by a man from up on the Ohio River, who had missed it from its landing between two days. Having identified it, proved ownership and engaged a tow-up in a barge fleet, he returned it to his own berth.

Adjustments were made with regard to other shanty-boats which had gone down the river on that night of fog. River-people, among themselves, looked out upon the placid current, wishing that they could swear, but not daring to, for fear the Mississippi would hear them. No less than three shanty-boat towns had gone afloat that night, besides half a hundred boats that had been moored along banks, bars, towheads and islands, from fifteen or twenty miles above Mendova to below town.

It could happen, of course, because it had happened. The memory of that weird, prolonged, chilling laughter could not be eradicated; that was as tangible and important as the mere going adrift had been. It really meant more in the minds of those who had heard it.

Word that Columbiana and a sport, or a soft-paw, had been arrested in a fifty-foot Point Pleasant-built shanty-boat with all the Duck and Deer stock on board was another fine bit of live gossip. Among some of the women, the fact that Columbiana had always held herself aloof and refused to marry any man and had shot no less than three persistent admirers—all easy, and no one fatally—they resented as a criticism on their own conduct and ideas.

Columbiana had always held her head high, daytimes, anyhow, and now—she was just getting what was coming to her for being that kind of a girl, river-pirating along, and caught at last. Of course, river-ladies like Mrs. Mahna, Mrs. Young, Mrs. Haney and old-timers of discretion and experience understood Columbiana's viewpoint and stood up for her.

"Jes' 'cause she don't have no man a-hangin' around ain't no sign she ain't no regard for 'pearances!" Mrs. Mahna declared. "Likely she's got reasons. Perhaps some feller she likes is gone off some'rs scouting er is into jail er something like that, an' she's jes' waitin' on him. She ain't obliged to tell her business, is she? Course, she ain't. Them O'Bines never was no hand to talk their own business——"

"Well, how does she live?" Mrs. Dapnell demanded. "What she got to live on if she ain't what she says she ain't and if she ain't a river-rat pirate like some others, I'd like to know!"

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"She's educated, Columbiana is!" Mrs. Mahna retorted. "Take a man er lady that's eddicated, an' they don't have to work. All they got to do is think, and they make money same's the rest of us does lifting our daylights out lugging nets er drift logs er—er anything!"

The capture of Columbiana and the soft-paw, who was now believed to be a regular old sport hiding behind a pair of big round specs, was an almost unanswerable indictment of Columbiana, at least.

"If she ain't one of them pirates, what is she?" Mrs. Dapnell demanded.

"How comes hit yo' drapped down forty mile into that fog, an' you 'lowed to lie there above Thirty-Four Towhead till it come cold?" Mrs. Haney demanded.

"That's ole Mississip'—the dad _____"

"Couldn't Ole Mississip' git Columbiana into that boat, somehow?" Mrs. Mahna asked tartly.

"Course——"

"That's hit! Course! Sho!"

"Gittin' caught with the goods neveh made no one a pirate, 'thout they was circumstantial evidence," Mrs. Drost explained elaborately. "Why, one time me 'n' my husband that used to was—le's see; hit were Mr. Jacklin' or Mr. Reel, I fergits which—found fo' thousand dollars up by Buf'lo Island. Hue-e! Wa'n't we rich! Well, we took to spendin' hit along same's anybody would, an' next we knowed we was

right into U. S. court an' 'cused of counterfeitin'.

"Was we counterfeiters? Nope! We never got no good out 'n that money, to speak of. They took—I 'member, now, hit were Mr. Cumstark I was married to then—all we had left, exceptin' some into a tin can they didn't find. We bought chickens an' such stuff and pigs an' hides off'n darkeys, after that; so, really, we didn't git to lose so much as we mout of. But theh they had us 'cused of counterfeitin'—shucks!

"S'posen Columbiana did have them things? Likely she'd jes' stopped in theh to say howdy to that black-bow-specked feller what laid off to be a soft-paw an' fooled everybody! Sho! I ain't no faith in nobody that acts iggerant; mebbly they is iggerant, an' mebbly they's jes' reg'lar pirates. But yo' take a smart Alec, an' yo' know he's iggerant, because he plays smarty."

Thus they discussed, professed and recorded during the interim of the capture and escape of Columbiana and that sporting soft-paw, Caroost. When the river-people learned of or witnessed the escape of the two while handcuffed together in the Mendova police patrol-boat, leaving Chief Clumb standing up the bank swearing through the cadences of a complete repertoire of profanity, there was great joy. Pig-Foot Clumb always was acting so superior to shanty-boaters; and then, right on top of the escape, the burglary and the excitement arrived the gagging and binding of Old

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Britler in his little pearl, baroque and shell headquarters there in Mendova!

That was rubbing it into Clumb! At the same time river-people couldn't be sure whether the theft was by their own pirates or some of those long-riding or automobile fellows who had lately begun to appear far and wide as claimants for attention of those on the mid-line between Up-the-Bankers and regular river-pirates. However honest a river-man or lady might be, he could not refrain from a genuine interest in the doings of the people who might drop in any day, all unbeknownst, and have dinner at their own very tables, or perhaps merely tie in at the same eddy or sand-bar.

In any event, they enjoyed the embarrassment manifested by Chief Clumb and the Mendova Chamber of Commerce and all that kind of people when they chipped in and offered five thousand dollars reward for the capture and conviction of the raiders who dared tie up and rob, first a famous sporting-goods store and then a leading merchant, a dealer in pearls and baroques and buttonshells.

It was bad enough to have a ratio of one hundred and thirteen killings to the one hundred thousand population, but, when it came to having four tons of stock and twenty-five thousand dollars in pearls stolen one night right after the other—that was too serious to go unresolved and without resolution.

Tavell Love and Tinkle, proprietor of

the Island 37 resort, took the police patrol-boat, *Dareall*, up to Mendova and reported it by the wharf-boat telephone to police headquarters. Clumb came down in the sky-blue, gold-trimmed police automobile and looked the boat over with rueful dissatisfaction. It wasn't because some of the contents were gone—taxation would pay for that—but because the two culprits were not in it.

"Where'd you get it?" Clumb grumbled.

"Down in the big cut-off, Chief——"

"Anybody into it?"

"No—it just floated down, swinging into the eddies. I was out duck-shooting, and I saw it swing by, and I 'lowed perhaps yo'd like hit——"

"Course, Tavell! But——" Clumb stared at him.

"Yo' ain't nothin' on me now, Chief!" Tavell declared. "Not sincet that feller come down with——"

"Didn't see them two prisoners?"

"Didn't see anybody, Chief. Who was they?"

"Why—a white girl name of Columbiana O'Bine, and a fellow name of Caroost. They robbed the Duck and Deer——"

"I heard somebody talking about that!" Tavell exclaimed. "Somebody said——"

"Aw, come off! Yo' know all about hit! What ails me is it took 'leven rousters two-three hours to pack that

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stuff back up to the store, an' them two—feller and a girl—packed hit all down to the shanty-boat in about an hour.”

“When pirates has a job, they works fast,” Tavell declared.

“What you heard about that Britler business, Love?”

“Not a word!” the islander shook his head.

“You’re lying!”

“Nope, hope to die, not! That wa’n’t no river job; hit were up the bank. I don’t know anybody that ’d have the nerve to do hit. How much did they get?”

“Pearls and slugs Britler paid eighteen thousand seven hundred and sixty dollars for and more’n seven thousand dollars cash.”

“Hit were a nice tidy little haul, Chief.”

“The —— of it is, I got to get ’em back er lose my job!” Clumb choked.

“Wh-a-at?”

“That’s right!”

Tavell Love stared out across the Mississippi.

“Reckon yo’-all could he’p a feller? I ain’t been mean—you know that!” Clumb reminded him.

“Who’d get your job?” Love demanded practically.

“Dolend!”

“What! Why——”

“That’s right; I wouldn’t mind gettin’ dumped so much if it wa’n’t for havin’ a dadblasted reformer come in. He’d sure raise——”

“I ain’t heard nothin’, Chief—but if I should——”

TAVELL went on down the river in a little runabout he had towed up behind the patrol-boat. He was perturbed by the prospect. If they put in Dolend, Mendova would be dead; the State would be dead; the Mississippi River would be dead; there wouldn’t be anything doing anywhere. The next he knew, they’d enforce the law against blind-tigers on river islands; the Mississippi would go dry. He couldn’t think of any calamity to equal the thought of the Mississippi River going dry.

When he arrived at Thirty-Seven, he asked around about that job on Old Britler. Gossip said that it was a river job, but no one knew who had done it. The money hadn’t showed up yet. Tid, Rooter and two others of the Turtles had just dropped in, and they told him they didn’t know anything about it.

“You see how it is, boys,” Tavell Love declared, “if they dump Clumb out, that’ll bust up Mendova. You know how it is down in Memphis now—all dried up so they’ve begun to tell how extravagant people is about drinking so much coffee, and it’s bad for the nerves. Well, now ’f Mendova——”

“I don’t cyar if old Clumb gits his and they’s forty of them reform cops put in,” Red Tid sniffed. “I don’t have to ast any man fer a drink. I come from the mountangs, an’ I can make mine, an’ I’ll

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do it but what I have my liquor. It don't do no man any good, goin' without his liquor. Why, what fun is there in this world if a man don't have liquor? Why, that's all the real fun they is!"

"But look't, Tid! Ev'rybody ain't sit'yated the way you be! Take them that cyan't make their own liquor— what'll they do?"

"They's iggerant, an' I never worry none about iggerants," Tid jerked his head. "Les' have some more liquor, boys, before we gits dried up!"

Tavell Love, afraid of Mendova's going dry and being reformed and everybody's pleasure dried at the fountain-head, was poor company for them. They spent a drink around for everybody and then announced their intention to drop on down the Old River and out into the Mississippi.

"You boys got lots of money!" Love declared suspiciously.

"We's got business to 'tend to," Tid declared. "We needed a little money to kind of prepare for it."

"I bet you got a sawmill pay-job on hand?" Tavell hinted.

"If we have, likely yo'll see the envelopes' insides," Tid grinned, and they parted, the pirates in their pretty little red shanty-boat.

However, they took six jugs full of Arkansaw Bottom Overflow with them, and, when they reached the Mississippi, they didn't care much which way the boat floated.

They had gone down for thirty-six

hours when in the dusk a skiff drew near them. The cabin-boat was going around in an eddy and had been for an hour or more. The skiff drew out of a little chute-bay and ran alongside. Its occupant stealthily climbed aboard and turned a flashlight into the interior, where he saw the pirates sprawled on the floor. The light confirmed a suspicion.

"Why, this is my boat!" the skiffman muttered softly. "I think I'll take possession!"

It was Caroost, fugitive from justice, ex-soft-paw, and learning still. He climbed aboard and gently slipped handcuffs upon all the wrists of the band of pirates. Then he dragged them out on the bow deck.

Then Caroost proceeded to sweep out the boat and pick it up. He threw overboard several empty jugs, but inherited sense of economy prevented him from throwing overboard the full jugs. He searched through the boat and found many of his own things intact, except the food supply. That had been depleted, and sundry unfamiliar meat lumps and the like substituted.

As he swept by lamplight, he saw something roll along the floor, and, picking it up, he saw by lamplight that it was a pearl. It was a beautiful pink pearl. Its size made him wonder if it wasn't artificial. A closer search revealed a pail full of little envelopes, each marked with figures, and he recognized the contents of the

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envelopes as baroques.

He went out and searched the clothes of the pirates and discovered that he had been idiotic. Each pirate had one or two automatic pistols and ammunition. Moreover, they all had money-belts and in the neighborhood of one thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars in each belt. Gazing at one of the faces, its familiarity struck Caroost as remarkable; that, and the fact of the boat being his, and the certainty that four horrid water-monsters had come through the fog to alarm and dismay him—surely, these were the monsters!

The money and additional pearls from their garments stirred Caroost's mind to diverse ideas. He brought out the bottle of forty per cent. ammonia which he had for cleansing purposes and, dragging one of the pirates into the cabin, proceeded to revive him.

The pirate was Sunflower, the least of the four. Sunflower came out of his stupor slowly as from a bad dream.

"We got ernough, boys!" he whimpered. "I'm all wore out, totin' this stuff! Lawse! We couldn't sell no more rifles er shotguns! Look't—we got fo' hundred automatics already—aw, come on, boys! Les' quit while the quittin's good. I'm tired! Yeh—aw—what's the ust of the safe? They ain' no money into hit! They don't leave no money into a safe. Come on!"

Caroost listened with quickened mind. So these were the men who had loaded up that big house-boat with

firearms. He plied the half-conscious wretch with ammonia and with questions. Sunflower gave up, told all about the raid on the Mendova Duck and Deer sporting-goods store, and Caroost listened with gratitude and attentiveness. He wrote down the confession, and Sunflower signed it, "Jerry Miskole, alias Druley Frane."

Next Caroost partly revived Rooter, and Rooter boasted of his prowess and swore that, when he stole, he stole clean. Under Caroost's questioning, he told the story of robbing Old Britler, and he signed the paper. Red came partly to with a desire to fight, but Caroost managed him psychologically, and Red confirmed the stories of his unfortunate piratical mates—and signed the confession. The fourth man, when Caroost went out to find him, was gone, handcuffs and all. Caroost was sorry he hadn't chained him to the cleat, but at the same time it was a lesson.

He chained the three who remained, elbow in elbow and from cleat to cleat on the stern. Then he knew what he had to do.

"This clears Columbiana's reputation," he exclaimed gratefully. "It was my life's work and necessity to clear her reputation! My land! It wouldn't do to let an innocent girl like her suffer under that strain! I wish she were here to help me think what to do about this. My gracious! These men must be awful bad men, robbing and burglarizing the way they tell about!"

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Caroost, innocent and with the proof and evidence of his innocence, with substitutes for court action, too, knew of but one way of settling the affair. He studied the maps and found that he was still somewhere above Memphis. Memphis, naturally, would be the place to go to with the prisoners, as he had no power with which to buck the current up to Mendova.

Accordingly, he pulled out into the current and floated down. Memphis was just below the second bend where he could see the yellow haze of the sky-reflections. He landed at the Mud Bar and, sitting guard, waited for day.

CHAPTER VIII

“GOOD OLD KEKO—HA-HA-HA-HA-A! POOR OLD PONY BOY!”

COLUMBIANA parted from James Caroost for appearances' sake, with regret. It was bad enough to be caught with him and taken to Mendova on the charge of burglary, and, no doubt, her escape with him—and even handcuffed to him—would make an awful lot of talk down the Mississippi River, where everybody does talk so much—often not having anything else to do for days and weeks at a time but talk.

But she knew people wouldn't think so much of it if she quit him at the first opportunity. At the same time, when she had sent him away he had gone under protest until she told him frankly that it

wasn't proper for her to go wandering down the Mississippi all alone with a man, even with him. Then he had suggested—

“But—but we could—why, Columbiana, we could get married!”

The idea was such a shock and had come so suddenly that she had flared up angrily at him and told him what was what.

“What gave you the idea you had a right, or even permission, to propose to me—any such thing as that?” she had demanded, and she had said to him more than that with indignant, thoughtless tongue, asking, “Where could we go to get married? You know, if we went anywhere, they'd arrest us. You expected me to say yes—and then—and then you'd thought of that—and—and——”

Caroost had been abashed, humbled and rendered speechless. She knew he hadn't thought anything of the kind, but she had said it the way she was always saying things to men who had pretended they liked her—but she knew there was no pretense about Caroost. He wasn't much, yet, but she knew that she could have made quite a man of him; he had developed so fast in so short a time and had been so respectful and all that.

Sifting in her skiff with her chin on her hand and her elbow on her knee, she knew that she had really been angry not at him but at the condition of affairs which prohibited her going with the man she really wanted to marry,

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because he was wanted and she was wanted for burglary. And justices of peace or mayors or anybody doing marrying, not to mention clerks making out licenses, would have grabbed them and yelled for the police. Any Up-the-Banker would sell his soul for one hundred dollars, let alone the five thousand dollars reward for their arrest, which they had heard about at Thirty-Seven.

Columbiana Muscatine O'Bine was more indignant, less resourceful and sorrier than she had ever been since she left her father's store-boat up on the Ohio to live on her inheritance from her grandmother on her mother's side. She knew now that she had been waiting nine years, since she was sixteen, for this young man—and now she couldn't be his wife, because they'd both be arrested and sent to jail for years and years. She looked with asperity around her at the Mississippi; she hated it, but it was the life for her, especially now when she had to go in the night and do her shopping where she wasn't known.

She dropped down to Memphis, two days later, and landed in Ash Slough, where she had some friends who would treat her right, Mrs. Haney, for example, if she were there—and she was. Mrs. Haney said it was lucky Columbiana never had had any use for Memphis, and, if she would put on some other clothes, longer skirts and so on, no policeman up-town would ever recognize her. The newspapers said that

Columbiana's boat was up at Mendova, waiting to be claimed, and if it wasn't claimed soon somebody would buy it and the money would be put in the hospital and police-pension funds.

Columbiana and Mrs. Haney went up-town, and the girl bought some clothes, which she needed. Then they went to the moving-picture second show and had a real good time together. They had such a good time, that Columbiana determined to spend several evenings up-town, trying to forget in the turmoil and excitement of town the disappointment of her life and the necessity that had occasioned it.

She even went up-town the next morning about nine o'clock, wearing a veil, a dark blue skirt, a white shirtwaist and a blue jacket so that she wouldn't attract attention and look like the brown-suited, tailor-made girl advertised by the Mendova chief.

She strolled along North Main Street, down-town, to the business section, and she saw ahead of her a crowd of people which was increasing. In the lead of the crowd she saw and soon recognized several old river-acquaintances of hers. There were Red Tid and Rooter and Sunflower. They were linked arm in arm, and their wrists were handcuffed each to each. On their faces was a look of intense and disgusted disappointment and surprize. Behind them stalked, of all men, James M. Caroost.

Caroost had a tall, broad policeman

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beside him, a man of the name of Haddam, who gained the applause of hosts because he just naturally killed up "Wild River Bill," who had grown proud as he grew wild. Haddam kept his eye on Caroost, who was the only one loose of the river-men in the group.

Columbiana choked down a sob. They had caught Caroost. She followed around to police headquarters, saw the fated four enter the Gates of Hades, and then she faded. She hurried to Ash Slough and wept in the pillows of Mrs. Haney's fourteen-dollar-and-ninety-cent brass bedstead, which she bought in St. Louis the time she fitted out the little blue poplar-boat with the asphalt cementing.

"I'll go up-town and find out if there's anything anybody can do," Mrs. Haney said, and right after dinner she went up-town.

She was gone three hours, and she returned with the first and second editions of the *Battle-Ax*.

"Well, I declare!" she cried to Columbiana, showing her the seven-column headings. "Look't!"

Columbiana, drying her tears, read:

Sportsman Wins the Mendova \$5,000 Reward, and Clears His Own Good Name of False Charges due to Suspicious Circumstances; Anxious Only To Find Columbiana Muscatine O'Bine, Fellow Victim of Circumstantial Evidence and Heroine of Sensational Escape in Chief

Clumb's Motor-Boat Patrol.

Columbiana read, rising to her feet as the news startled her to surprise and excited delight.

"Now look't!" Mrs. Haney cried triumphantly.

Columbiana turned to the second edition of the *Battle-Ax* and saw the special, extra important news, enclosed in a "box."

TAKES OUT A MARRIAGE LICENSE!

She read with bewildered doubt. Just then the cabin-boat door opened, and Mrs. Haney stepped to one side to avoid the rush.

"Oh, it's all right, Columbiana!" a deep voice exclaimed. "I fixed it. We're all clear, and anybody'll marry us and never say a word——"

Columbiana's lips parted and fire appeared in her eyes, but just then she remembered how a few hasty words and a tart remark had disturbed the Ohio River soft-paw—as regards some things—and sent him away into the dark river-night when she didn't mean anything at all. Accordingly, she curbed her tongue and turned her lips to the stalwart who had come to claim her—now that they were no longer fugitives from justice.

THE early Autumn night was at hand. The cabin of the shanty-boat had been

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too small and close for the exuberant feelings of the two. They went out into the open, where the dark river was rolling by and the city lights were flaring on to make a yellow glow in the gloom.

They were speechless—and at that moment the silence was broken by a long-drawn laugh. Caroost started and Columbiana uttered a low exclamation. Just down below the mouth of Wolf River some one was going by. He was crying out clearly audible phrases:

“Good old Keko—ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-a! Poor Old Pony Boy!”

“Why—that’s—that’s our yell! I went to Keko College!” Caroost cried. “Poor Old Pony Boy—that’s the man I’ve come down the river to find—my

old professor in mathematics—I had about given him up! Excuse me a little while!”

He scurried away. He was gone but an hour. In the interval he raced to the river-police wharf-boat, and with a lieutenant and the engineer he overtook the mad skiffman whose laughter had thrilled the river-people and established a tradition.

“Poor Old Pony Boy!” Caroost explained to Columbiana on his return, when he found her inclined to resent his hasty departure. “Overwork and underpay got him going. Now he’ll be taken care of back home, and you and I’ll finish this trip to N’Orleans together, eh girl?”

“Well, probably!” she admitted.