

Argosy, August, 1909

A Motor-Boat Mystery

by Tom Worth

WITH two or three spasmodic coughs, the cursed little motor at the stern stopped altogether; and there I was, drifting idly in midstream, when everything I valued in the world was dependent upon my getting to my destination.

I bent over the infernal flywheel and cranked it in profane vexation. No go! I was not "up" on such machinery. I had simply learned, from the fellow from whom I had rented the launch, the few essentials in its control; but, now that it had balked, I was completely at a loss to locate the trouble. I am not much of a mechanic, anyway.

So I just fished out a paddle that, by good chance, was numbered in the boat's equipment, and managed by this slowest progression to bring the now unwieldy motorboat to the riverbank. There I purposed abandoning the craft and striving to reach my objective point afoot.

But, while scanning ahead in the falling twilight for a spot to beach the thing, I noticed a little old man crouched up into a huddle among the roots of a fallen tree. Then I saw that he was beckoning to me violently.

I decided that he probably knew the shore better than I, and so headed for him. He seemed delighted at my confidence thus shown and stood up to catch the bow as it ranged up to him.

In a cackling voice he inquired

heartily:

"And so you can't locate the trouble, eh?"

"No," I answered in my vexation, "and it's just at a time when I want to keep going most. That's always the way, isn't it?"

I don't know why it was I felt like thus taking him into my confidence; but he appeared to warrant it, for he chuckled delightedly:

"Well, young feller, you couldn't have struck a better spot to bleak down at; fer, if there's anything I *do* know, it's machinery. I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts I can get that thing going in five minutes."

He thumbed over toward the balky motor.

"If you can do that," said I, consulting my watch with a match, which was necessary by now, "I will still be able to get to Manning's Mill in time."

"Manning's Mill!" cried the old man. "Why, what do you want of Manning's Mill, young feller?"

There seemed to be an excitement about him that I couldn't understand. But as he had already fished out a wrench from the tool locker, and was, with remarkable skill, working at the motor in a manner that showed him a master of its intricacies, I decided that it was no more than right to take him somewhat into my confidence.

“Why, I’ve got to meet Mr. Manning by eight o’clock, anyway. He told me he would wait that long, and no longer.”

“Just like him,” he muttered as he bent down and loosed a nut.

“You know him, then?” I inquired.

“Oh, yes.” he replied with a peculiar emphasis, “I know Jim Manning!”

“I should argue from your tone that you don’t like him overwell.”

“No more *do* I?” he cried, straightening his wiry, gnarled old body to its full height. “nor does anybody who knows him. He grinds his mill hands to the last copper, dilutes his product to the last notch, even cheats himself in his selfishness.”

Now, this was but confirmation of a conclusion I myself had arrived at in my own dealings with the wily mill owner. But I argued that, once I had bought the mill, I could institute my own regulations; he would then have absolutely nothing more to do with it; and if I could manage to complete the sale of the plant by him to me. I would be entirely shed of him.

“Well,” said I, “I don’t know but what I am inclined to agree with you in regard to what kind of a man Manning is; but I don’t expect I’ll be obliged to have much more dealing with him after tonight.”

He looked up with a sudden start.

“*Why* not a after tonight?” he exclaimed.

“Because,” I said quietly. “I am going to buy the mill from him at eight o’clock, if I can get there in time; and I think, with your aid. I can.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed in what I took to be a tone of relief. This was at first; then, immediately thereafter, he went on:

“You are going to buy the mill? Do

you think you can make a success of it? I’m old enough to tell you you are pretty young to tackle it.”

“Well, anyway,” said I, “I have confidence enough in my ability to stake everything I have on it.”

Then I did something which went far to prove how young I really was.

“Fact is,” I went on. “as old Manning doesn’t believe in banks and won’t take a check in payment, I’ve got the absolute ready cash to pay him with. That looks like I have confidence in my own ability to run the mill, doesn’t it?”

And, as I spoke, I was actually fool enough to slap my inner pocket where the money was.

He glanced at me only a second, but appeared to take no great interest in what I had said. But then he exclaimed suddenly:

“You’ve got to be there by eight o’clock?”

“Why, yes, so Manning said. And he’s just that big a crank to refuse the entire proposition if I’m late.”

“You have got him pretty well sized up, I see,” replied the other calmly; “that is, for a stranger in these parts. Where do you come from?”

“Chicago.”

“Uh-hm!” he grunted, as he now forsook the part of the boat where the engine was and stepped forward toward the tank.

Here he broke out with:

“Suffering Sarah, no wonder the darn thing won’t run!”

“Why?” I exclaimed.

“Can’t you *smell* why? . Every darn drop of your gasoline has leaked out.”

Then, sure enough, the unmistakable odor reached me from where it had dropped into the bilge. But what

struck me as peculiar was that I hadn't noticed it before; indeed, why hadn't we been blown up when I lighted the match to consult my watch?

But I wasn't bothering with conjectures at that moment; time was too precious.

"What's to be done?" I cried.

"Why, simple enough," said he. "D'you see that path beginning there?"

"Yes."

"Well, a quarter of a mile up that path there's a country store where you can buy gasoline. You can easily make it and bring a gallon back with you; and, at that, in half the time you could ever hope to reach the mill afoot."

"There's nothing else the matter with the engine?"

"Not a thing," he assured me.

And, without a second's delay, I took up the path at a trot. The old fellow hadn't overestimated the distance, for I soon came in sight of the lights of the store. I bought a can of gasoline, paying for the can and all, and returned down the path even faster than I had come.

As there were no branchings to the trail, I came upon the boat easily. But, look where I would in the darkness around, among the shrubbery and fallen trees. I couldn't discover a hair of the little old man.

But he had certainly left the boat in good shape. He had tied the painter nicely to a limb: had even thrown the canvas cover over the engine to keep the dew off it until I had heated it up.

I called once or twice: but as time was precious, I gave it up and filled the tank again, this time assuring myself that the drain-cock was shut.

Somehow I felt little doubt that the engine would run now. I had confidence in the masterful way the old fellow tackled

the machinery. I felt he knew his business.

So, the tank being filled, I unfastened the painter and, planting my shoulder against the bow, shoved the craft well out into the current of the river, climbing over the gunwale as she shot out from the bank.

Then I clambered aft to crank up the engine. I reached under the edge of the canvas cover.

Immediately on my coming into contact with the cloth. I felt my arm seized in a grip like a vise; the canvas cover was hurled aside, and I realized, even in my thunderstruck bewilderment, that the engine had been taken bodily from the boat, and that in its stead I had shipped with me the fiercest antagonist I ever remembered having encountered.

For, just as the boat caught the full force of the current, we both went to the floor in a deadly grip.

II.

IMMEDIATELY it flashed over me what a young fool I had been thus to let an entire stranger into my confidence. I had even told him that I had funds upon my very person, funds which I had actually assured him amounted to all I possessed in the world, and enough, at that, to tempt old Manning to part with his mill.

And even as I struggled, I felt that I really deserved what I was getting. I certainly had been an ass.

But my next thought was that, fool though I had been thus far, I would make the fight of my life for it. And a fight for life it certainly proved, for I never would have believed that such strength could come out of such a body as this little, old, shriveled hulk of a man possessed.

Once he had me by the throat, but I wrenched back and cleared. Fastening

upon him full, as well as I could, I tried to lift him bodily over the side, for, I argued, he was lighter than I.

But the instant I attempted to put the plan into execution, he dropped a gnarled grip upon my calf and tripped me to a hard fall beside him in the bottom of the boat.

Then I thought of an expedient, though I had only the sense of feeling to trust to do it. And so I wriggled in his grip over toward the plug that was used to drain the boat when she was pulled up on land.

At first it proved stubborn to my kicks; but finally it gave enough to start the water into the boat, which soon completed my scheme by gurgling around us good fashion.

And so the boat sank, leaving us two still in deadly grip; on the surface.

From the first instant I realized that the man couldn't swim. Then it was I began my mental struggle.

Should I abandon him to drowning? Surely he deserved no consideration from me. His grip had changed from one of antagonism to one of clinging to a rescuer.

Finally I could not find it in my heart to let him die thus, so I said the first word that had been interchanged between us since I had discovered his treachery:

"If you'll do exactly as I tell you, I'll swim with you to safety, though, Heaven knows, you don't deserve it!"

"All right," said he humbly enough, but, moreover, in a relieved tone that had something in it I couldn't fathom. "Go ahead."

"Here, then," I commanded. "Put your hands on my shoulders—so."

And I actually put this man I had been trying the last minute to kill full upon my back and struck out for the bank.

Not trying to stem the current, but going with it at an angle, I found the thing easy enough. The swim was a short one, though, of course, slow.

Now, even in the water thus, the old fellow asked me a question that certainly did astonish me, and he asked it in a tone of anxiety:

"What time do you think it is *now*, young man?"

"It must be eight o'clock!" I snapped out between my puffings. "I am too late already!"

And just at this very second a most extraordinary thing occurred:

From downstream there came a mighty roar, a detonation of volcanic magnitude, a belch of flames toward the heavens; and the explosion was followed by the steady glare of a fire of terrific ferocity.

The clouds above us took on the red glow we all know, and even the concussion of the blast could be felt in the water where I was swimming.

Immediately, and as if tuned to that very second, the man on my back began to twist and wrench, to screech and squirm. He sank his nails into my neck, chuckling away in a sort of fiendish glee.

So I need not say how grateful I was to perceive the glare of two torches directly alongside on the bank I was headed for.

The two men who held them ran right out into the water to free me of the veritable fury that had me thus by the back.

And so we four finally gained the shore.

Here one of the newcomers slipped shackles over the raving, gnarled, little old man with whom I had had such a strange adventure. And passive enough now he was as they led him off.

Dripping from the river, and absolutely thunderstruck in amazement and endeavor to understand it all, I turned to the man who remained beside me.

“You see,” he explained, “old Hanby has lucid intervals of exactly two hours each.”

“He’s crazy, then?” I cried.

“Why, yes, for the most part; but, I will say, he can plan to beat the best sane man I ever saw when he is right. You see, he used to be old Manning’s chief mechanic; then old Manning stole every patent he invented, and finally gave him the bounce. It was a hard winter, and his poor old woman died. That was the final straw.”

“But what was that explosion just now?”

“Why, I’m as dead sure as if I’d seen it all, for we found two sticks of dynamite under the cot in his cell when we missed him first.”

“Then, he set a mine under the Manning mill?” I cried, the thing beginning to dawn upon me.

“That’s the way I figure it; with a time fuse, at that!” answered the asylum

keeper. “And, what’s more, that blame old head o’ his didn’t fail to take in the fact that Manning never believed in fire insurance any more than he did in banks and checks and such like. Fact is, I don’t see any other revenge he could ’a’ took as would’ve hurt old Manning as much.”

And as the light came to me I explained how I was just about to buy that mill myself promptly at eight o’clock that evening.

“Which must make you mighty happy old Hanby had his lucid interval just when he did. If he’d ’a’ had it an hour later, *you* would ’a’ lost the mill, instead of Manning.”

“You mean?”

“I mean, you’d ’a’ been the *owner* when the explosion went off. And it seems to me, young feller, that I’d be mighty glad, if I was you, that you didn’t spoil old Hanby’s revenge on Manning, as that was the reason he was trying to delay you a getting to the mill.”

“By Jove, I believe you are right,” said I as I felt into my inner breast pocket and took a reassuring pat at my wallet.