



As his hand shot out, his knees pistoned into my stomach

MURDER ON THE MISSISSIPPI

By H. WOLFF SALZ

Death, voodoo, and mystery stalk the decks of a River boat searching for priceless mussel pearls!

YOU don't talk about what's inside of you. You smile, of course, and talk as if nobody knows the truth, but no one is fooled by the wisecracks.

Sometimes you skirt so dangerously close to the answer that you laugh to cover up. But the laughter sounds hollow.

For instance, when I said to Marge, "He's got the temper of a bull, and he'll beat you three times a day. Worse than that, he's nuts about apple pie, and you'll have to have it for dessert every day. Can you

imagine going through life with Lance and apple pie as a steady diet?"

"What's wrong with that?" Lance had demanded.

Marge laughed. "It's sweet of you to worry about my diet, George, but I'll just have to make the best of it—and Lance."

"You can still change your mind," I offered. "It's not official till the minister pronounces sentence."

"Uh-uh," Marge replied firmly. "Tomorrow when the boat docks we're

going straight to the license bureau, and you're going to be best man, George."

"Adding insult to injury!" I snorted. "But don't say I didn't give you your chance, Marge."

"I won't."

We were standing at the rail on the lower hurricane deck. I wasn't due to take my turn at the wheel of the *River Belle* until eleven o'clock and I still had an hour. From the dining hall—turned into a ballroom at night—came the strains of the orchestra playing "You Were Never Lovelier." That could mean Marge.

Even in the subdued deck light, I could see the happy glow of Marge's brown eyes, and the fleck of gold in her hair. She'd never looked prettier.

I HAD known Marge for almost two years now, since the first time she had accompanied her father on one of his regular trips on the *River Belle*. Donald Lee made two or three trips a year with us and Marge always came along with her father to act as secretary. Though why a mussel pearl buyer would need a secretary, I could never figure out.

I didn't mind. Marge's presence always made the monotonous routine run of the *River Belle* a holiday trip for me. I think she guessed how I felt about her from the very beginning and for a while I hoped she might grow to feel the same way about me.

But deep inside I guess I always realized that I was running a poor second to Lance. Tonight I got it all straight. It hadn't been because I was a pilot on the *River Belle* that Marge accompanied her father on those buying trips. It had been because Lance, my red-headed, younger brother was mate of the excursion packet.

Well, if I couldn't have Marge, I didn't know of a man who'd make her a better husband than Lance. Sure, he was hot-headed, maybe stubborn. But I was pretty

sure Lance could always leash his temper.

That was what I thought then, as we stood at the rail watching the fog-blanketed Illinois shore drift by. The trouble, you see, didn't come until later that night.

I decided I was making their twosome a crowd.

"I know you hate to see me go," I said, "but it's time to take my turn at the wheel."

"Must you?" Lance grunted, giving me a gentle shove toward the companionway. I tried not thinking of Marge as I made my way up the steel steps to the middle hurricane deck I had to put her out of my mind and out of my heart. It wasn't as easily done as said. That's why I almost didn't see the stocky, powerfully built man who was standing before a closed cabin door in the passageway. His back was toward me, and his ear was pressed against the door.

He whirled suddenly, as he heard my footsteps. For a moment fear etched his red, weathered face. Then he grinned and moved away from the door.

"Lose something, Morrell?" I asked.

"Thought Don Lee was in his cabin," he answered. "I've been knocking, but there's no answer."

It was certainly peculiar knocking, what with his ear glued to the door, and that frightened look on his face.

He went down the companionway and I continued on up to the Texas deck. I had never had much use for Spencer Morrell. Like Donald Lee, he was a mussel pearl buyer. But unlike Marge's father, Morrell had the reputation of being one of the foxiest buyers on the river.

Up in the pilot-house, Slim Delphi was glad to turn the wheel over to me.

"She's a dirty night," he muttered as he moved away. "Watch out for Old Al."

"Old Al," in the legend of rivermen, is the dragon-tailed king of the Mississippi, ceaselessly waging war on the boats that

invade his domain. When a boat sinks or strikes a reef, it's Old Al who is always blamed.

I nodded and pushed a black cigar into my mouth. When you're alone high up in the pilot-house, a cigar makes a good companion. It gives you something to concentrate on during the long hours of the night.

Faint strains of music reached me from below. Overhead sounded the steady, rhythmic coughing of the *River Belle's* twin smokestacks. On all sides I was hemmed in by the solid blackness of the river night.

I don't know how long I'd been in the pilot-house when it happened. There was the scrape of shoe-leather at the door behind me. I turned to see if it was "Black Crow" Jefferson, come to break the monotony for me with a mug of black coffee.

THERE was no one at the door, no sounds from the darkness of the Texas deck. Puzzled, I turned back to the wheel. An instant later, the shot blasted out behind me. Instinctively, I lurched to one side. A second shot! I dropped, twisted swiftly toward the door.

I could see no one there. Whoever had fired those shots had melted into the darkness.

Then there was the sound of running feet on the deck. I leaped up, lunged toward the door, and ran straight into a powerful-shouldered figure. My arms shot out.

"Let go, you blasted fool!"

The man shoved me back into the lighted pilot-house and I recognized Captain Sandy Gallagher, white-headed master of the *River Belle*.

"That was a shot!" he bellowed.

"You're darned right," I retorted, moving quickly back to the wheel.

"What happened?" he demanded.

I glanced at his perspiring face. Captain Sandy was one of those old-time, rock-fisted rivermen. He ran his boat with an iron hand and never let a man forget who was boss. But underneath his bluster, I suspected Gallagher was a sentimental old man whose one great love was the swirling Mississippi.

"Did you see anyone out on the Texas?" I asked.

"Can't see your nose in that dark," he retorted, "much less anyone prowling about."

I told him what had happened.

"Any idea who took those shots at you?" he grunted.

I didn't have the faintest notion, but one thing I was sure of. Whoever had fired those shots was playing for keeps. The slugs had shattered a front window of the pilot-house, in direct line with my position at the wheel.

"Where were you when you heard those shots?" I asked.

"At the foot of the companionway on the middle hurricane."

"And you came straight up here," I mused. "That means the would-be killer was hiding out there in the dark—likely behind the yawl—when you reached the pilot-house. He's slipped below by now. There's not a chance in a million of finding who it was."

"We'll see about that!" Captain Sandy snorted belligerently as he stamped out of the pilot-house. I heard his angry footsteps descending the steel stairway.

Alone again, I tried to shake off the chilling snakes that crept up and down my spine. I knew it wasn't logical to fear that whoever had fired those shots at me would return for another try. He would be afraid I'd be on the lookout for him. Still, as far as I knew, killers weren't logical. In the first place, where in the world was the logic in anyone wanting to kill me?

A half-hour passed. Nothing happened up at the pilot-house. But something had happened below. What it was I couldn't tell. The strains of orchestra music had stopped suddenly. By leaning far out a portside window, I could hear shouts and the tones of excited voices from below.

I leaped back to the wheel suddenly, spun it swiftly to bring the *River Belle* back into the middle of the channel. A decent river pilot doesn't need the red and green government lights that mark the channel to tell him when he's straying off his course on a foggy night. When you've piloted a Mississippi packet for five or six years, as I had, you can just about take your boat down the river blindfolded.

I reached over my head to the boat's radio intercommunications transmitter, pressed Captain Sandy's button. There was no response. I tried the engine-room.

There was a low hum, then Jim Brewster's tobacco-muffled voice:

"Yeah, George?"

"What's the trouble below, Jim?"

"Plenty, near as I can learn."

"Loosen up!"

"I'm tellin' you, ain't I!" Brewster grunted. "There's been a killin'."

"A murder!"

"That's what the law books call it."

"Who was it?"

"Say, I ain't got a box seat to this thing," Brewster retorted. "I'm down here nursin' these 1,200-horsepowers."

A FEW minutes later, Slim Delphi came up to relieve me. He said Captain Sandy wanted to see me in Stateroom C. There was a peculiar look on Delphi's face.

I went below, pushed through the scared-looking passengers blocking the dim passageway and went into Stateroom C. It was the same cabin at which I'd seen Spencer Morrell prowling earlier that night.

Four people were in the cabin, beside the sheet-covered form on the bunk. Marge Lee stood just inside the door and one glance at her grief-stricken face told me that the man under the sheet was Donald Lee.

Lance's powerful right arm was around Marge's shoulder and she was clinging to him as if for protection. It wasn't until a few minutes later that I learned it was for Lance's protection, not her own.

As he looked at me, Lance's steely blue eyes clouded and his jaw muscles ridged his face in an expression that I knew spelled trouble for somebody. The knuckles of his left hand, clutching his visored mate's cap, were white.

Captain Sandy, who'd been talking to Spencer Morrell as I entered, turned to face me.

"George," he said, "I wanted you to get it straight from me so's there won't be any more trouble on my boat."

"What's there to get straight?"

"Donald Lee was stabbed to death in his sleep," Captain Sandy murmured in a low voice. He hesitated, as if there were more to it.

Before he could continue, Marge cried out in a grief-choked voice, "He thinks your brother killed Dad, George!"

I stared at Lance unbelievably and then looked at Gallagher. "How do you figure it, Skipper?"

Captain Sandy answered slowly. "George, you Moores are a hot-headed lot, but I'd never believe one of you was capable of a cold-blooded murder if every card didn't stack up that way."

"What cards?"

Captain Sandy's big right hand gestured toward the little bedside table beside the bunk. "There's some of them right there."

My eyes followed his gesture. I didn't understand right off what Gallagher was

driving at. On the table lay a blue handkerchief displaying a little cluster of pearls and a packet of bills, held together by a thick rubber band.

"I know Lee was a pearl buyer," I said. "Every mussel pearler on the river knows it. What's the connection with Lance?"

Lance spoke up for the first time since I'd come into the cabin. "I had those pearls and money," he said.

I stared at him in amazement. "You had it!"

"Mr. Lee gave them to me to keep for him. He came to my cabin early this evening, said he was afraid somebody was going to steal the pearls and the money. He wanted me to hold them till we got to St. Louis tomorrow."

"Did he tell you who he was afraid of?"

Lance shook his head. "He didn't say anything, just that since I was going to be his son-in-law soon, I was the only one he could trust."

"How does that stack up against Lance?" I asked Gallagher.

Gallagher shook his head. "Now, don't misunderstand me, George. I'm not accusing Lance. I'm just showing you how it will look to the police tomorrow. Suppose Lance had killed Mr. Lee and stole the pearls and money? Then suppose after the body was discovered, he got cold feet or thought of a smart way to push attention away from himself? He comes to me with some of the pearls and tells me that story about Lee giving 'em to him. But suppose he keeps most of the pearls and money hidden away? Nobody knows just what Lee had with him."

I lurched forward suddenly and caught Lance's arm as he leaped at Gallagher.

Marge seized his other arm. "Don't, Lance," she pleaded. "You'll only make it look worse."

Her soft words were more effective than my muscles, for Lance stopped

struggling to get at Gallagher. One glance at Marge's shiny eyes as she looked at Lance was enough to tell me that she could never believe him guilty.

"How does that tie in with those shots that somebody took at me up in the pilot-house?" I asked Gallagher.

He shrugged. "I'm no detective. You tell me."

What could I tell him? It just didn't make sense.

"Who discovered the body?" I asked Gallagher.

"Miss Lee," he said. "She says Lee hadn't been feeling well earlier in the evening, so she stopped to see how he was. The door was open."

"What time was that?"

"About twenty minutes ago."

"Only a few minutes after the attack on me in the pilot-house," I murmured.

"Any idea who attacked you?" Lance asked.

"No." I told him what had happened.

"But why would anybody try to kill you?" He frowned.

I shrugged. "Why would anybody kill Donald Lee, if you had the pearls and that wasn't the motive?"

"Unless it was somebody who didn't know Lance had the pearls," Marge murmured.

I nodded. That was true. But I could see that it would still look bad for Lance when the cops in St. Louis took over the case, especially after Gallagher added:

"And another thing, George. Even if Lance brought back all the pearls he stole—assuming he's the one—he'd still have a powerful reason for doing the murder."

"Explain that, Gallagher."

"Lance and Miss Lee are to be married soon. Everybody knew that Lee had a heap of money. Well, with Lee dead—"

He didn't have to finish. I knew how a

motive like that would look to a jury.

"But you're wrong!" Marge cried. "People thought Dad had a lot of money, but it isn't true. He's lost almost everything in a couple of bad business deals!"

"He wasn't buying pearls with peanuts!" Captain Gallagher retorted.

"Buying pearls didn't take a lot of money," Marge answered. "Why, he didn't buy more than three or four thousand dollars' worth at a time!"

Gallagher looked skeptical. I could hardly, believe it myself.

"There's four or five thousand in cash and pearls right on that table, I'll wager," Gallagher exclaimed.

"That was Dad's entire fortune!" Marge retorted. "Why, he wanted to buy the Choctaw Bend pearl and couldn't because he didn't have the money! "

UP AND down the river people had talked about the Choctaw Bend pearl. Mussel pearling isn't a big business on the river. Altogether, mussel pearlers take maybe a hundred thousand dollars' worth of pearls out of the Mississippi in a whole year's time. The real profits in mussel fishing are in the shells, which are used for manufacturing buttons.

But once in a blue moon, a mussel pearler will run into a big, perfect pearl that draws buyers from all over the country. Fine freshwater pearls have even brought buyers from as far off as India and China.

The Choctaw Bend pearl was one of those unusual finds. The owner, a shanty fisherman who knew the value of his find, had asked forty thousand dollars for it, but there hadn't been any takers. Then, two weeks ago, there had been a lot of excitement along the river when the pearl was reported stolen.

"That's not what Lee told me," said Spencer Morrell who had been quiet all this while.

I turned to stare at him. Morrell and Lee had been rival pearl buyers but had always maintained a cordial friendship.

"What do you know about it, Morrell?"

"I know what Lee told me before the Choctaw pearl was stolen. We both wanted to buy it, but I couldn't get forty thousand. But Lee told me he was going to St. Louis to raise the money on securities he had. He was going to have that pearl if it cost him his last nickel. You know how he was—crazy about beautiful pearls."

"Dad didn't have forty thousand dollars!" Marge denied.

Morrell shrugged. "Most likely, he didn't tell you everything, Miss Lee."

I turned away from them. Talking about it wasn't getting us anywhere. I crossed the space to the bunk. I had to steel my nerves before I pulled the sheet back a few inches. It was worse than I had expected.

Donald Lee had been tortured before his death! Each bloody slash on his face told its own story of torment. The gashes down Lee's cheeks weren't very deep, but deep enough to have drawn blood. His throat, where the fatal knife blow had been struck, was covered by dark, congealed blood.

Out in the passageway there was a sudden commotion. The voices of passengers grew loud and a woman's frightened shriek split the air. The cabin door was thrown open. A terrified Negro roustabout was pushed headlong into the room. Behind him came two other roustabouts.

"Cap'n!" one of them whom I recognized as Willy Crowfoot, shouted, "here's de killer! We cotched 'im! Natchez Jim is the man who done that killing!"

The roustabout in the center rolled frightened eyes at Gallagher. "Naw, suh! I ain't done it! Please, Cap'n, suh! I ain't killed nobody!"

"What's this all about?" Gallagher

demanded.

Willy Crowfoot stepped forward. "We seed him, Cap'n. We seed Natchez Jim burning de Three Orphans!"

Gallagher confronted Natchez Jim. "Is that true?"

Natchez Jim's eyes rolled toward the body on the bunk. "I warn't burning 'em for dat man! I war burnin' 'em for Willy Crowfoot! He done win all mah money away from me wid his crooked bones!"

Passengers were crowding into the cabin. All attention was on the three roustabouts. It was a simple matter to slip out into the passageway unnoticed by the others.

I KNEW that Natchez Jim had had nothing to do with Donald Lee's murder. Lighting the Three Orphans was a form of roustabout voodoo magic, in which three charmed candles were supposed to have the power of bringing death to a victim, the poor spelled victim falling instantly dead when the last of the candles burned to the end.

The roustabouts had evidently seen Natchez Jim burning the candles, and in their complete faith in the voodoo power had presumed that he was the cause of Donald Lee's death.

Whoever had tortured and murdered Donald Lee was still on the loose. But of one thing I was certain: My brother Lance was not the murderer.

I wasn't quite sure what I intended doing, but I did know that I wanted a chance to look over Spencer Morrell's cabin.

Marge had said that she had found her father's cabin door unlocked. When I had come upon Spencer Morrell in the passageway, he'd been leaning against the door. He had said he'd knocked and gotten no answer from Lee. At that time, Lee must already have been dead, judging by the

already congealed blood at his throat.

His door, then, would probably have been unlocked at the time Morrell was leaning against it. In that case, it seemed to me that the weight of his body would have pushed the door open and he would have discovered Lee's body. Unless Morrell had not been trying to get in to see Lee, but had been coming out of the cabin!

I made my way to the portside hurricane deck and found the window to Morrell's cabin. Shrouded by the deep curtain of night fog, I knew that my movements couldn't be seen by anyone who might unexpectedly venture out on the deck. Morrell's window was locked. I slipped the blade of my pocket-knife between the upper and lower panels of the window. Careful maneuvering managed to unhook the catch.

A few moments later I edged into the dark cabin, pulled the window shut again, lowered the green shade, then groped across the cabin to the door and found the light.

I stared around the small cabin uncertainly. At one side was a door leading to a small private bathroom. At the other side was Morrell's bunk, and opposite the door was a maple bureau.

I decided to start with the bureau drawers. The top drawer revealed nothing but carefully folded garments. The same was true of the middle drawer. But as I lifted the small heap of shirts in the bottom drawer, I drew a sharp breath. In an inside corner lay a .32 Colt revolver.

I sniffed at the muzzle. The odor of cordite still clung to it. The gun had been used recently. A quick glance at the chambers showed that two bullets had been fired. The man who had tried to kill me up in the pilot-house had fired two shots.

Suddenly my back stiffened. I heard the sound of voices approaching in the passageway outside. One of the voices was

Morrell's. I pushed the drawer shut, dropped the revolver into my hip pocket.

Swift strides carried me to the door. I flicked off the light, turned and groped to the bathroom. Behind the partially shut door I waited.

It seemed plausible that Morrell was the man who had tried to kill me. Yet it made no sense. Why should Morrell want to murder me? Unless it had something to do with my having come upon him unexpectedly outside Donald Lee's door?

I heard the scrape of a key, the opening and closing of Morrell's door, and then the click of the light switch. Morrell was moving about, but I couldn't see him. I held my breath as I pulled the door back another inch or two, bringing Morrell into my line of vision. His back was toward me and he was stooped on one knee in front of his bunk. Curiously, I watched him draw out a yellow life preserver from underneath and sit down on the edge of his bunk.

Now he faced me and I could see his strained excitement.

Trembling with nervousness, Morrell was groping into a slit in one of the preserver's canvas pockets. Then he drew in his breath, and his tenseness gave way to eager relief.

A MOMENT later, his fingers withdrew from the slit and he dropped something into the palm of his left hand. I couldn't see what it was at first. Then as he leaned forward to hold it closer to the light, my eyes widened. I had to choke back a gasp of amazement.

Clearly visible now was a large, beautiful, perfectly circular pearl. I had seen many pearls in the years that I had worked on the river, pearls uncovered by poor shanty mussel pearlers who had grown suddenly wealthy from the sale of their finds. But I had never seen as extraordinarily beautiful a pearl as the one

that now reposed in Spencer Morrell's palm.

There could be only one such jewel on the river—the missing Choctaw Bend pearl!

Suddenly a great many things became clear to me. Everything that had happened fell into a simple pattern.

I pulled the door wide then and stepped into the cabin. In my right hand I held Morrell's small revolver.

The pearl buyer's head jerked up as he heard my movements. For a moment he sat as if paralyzed. Surprise, then fear, then fury raced across his face in an obvious turmoil of emotion.

"Marge," I said, "must have been right when she said Lee didn't have the money to buy the Choctaw pearl. But Donald Lee had a passion for beautiful pearls. He must have gone momentarily insane when he realized he could never buy the Choctaw pearl."

"You must be crazy, too!" snapped Morrell. "What are you doing in my cabin?"

"That ought to be obvious to you now," I retorted. "You must either have seen Lee steal the pearl or somehow, guessed that he was the one who had stolen it."

Slowly, Morrell came to his feet. As if he thought I wasn't aware of his movement, he inched toward me.

"Don't make any more mistakes, Morrell," I warned. "You've made enough of them already. The first was when you tortured Lee to make him reveal where he'd hidden the pearl and then murdered him. Your second mistake was when you killed him by stabbing him with a knife. I knew then, when I saw the blood on Lee's body that my brother Lance couldn't be the killer.

"You see," I added, "Lance may be hot-tempered and tough as a bayou 'gator, but he could never stab a man to death.

Because he has a phobia that isn't at all uncommon. Some of the biggest and toughest men have it. Hematophobia, it's called. He can't stand the sight of blood. It's an abnormal terror of it. Even a speck of blood would make him faint. That's why he could never kill a man by stabbing him or any other way that would cause the flow of blood. And that, my filthy friend, left you as the likeliest suspect."

"That's what you think," Morrell retorted. His self-assurance seemed to be surging back. "A fat chance you'll have of proving it."

"I don't intend to prove anything," I answered. "I'll leave that to the cops. Once they begin to add everything together, you'll have as much chance of squirming out of the noose as Mussolini has of sitting in the White House."

I advanced slowly toward him, extended my left hand. "I'll take charge of that pearl."

THAT'S when Morrell made another of his mistakes. At least, in the end it turned out to be a mistake. Maybe it was because he thought I had relaxed my alertness. Maybe it was the thought of losing the pearl for which he had already killed once and was ready to kill a second time.

He lunged forward suddenly, with a maddened swiftness that surprised me. His right hand shot out, grasped my gun-wrist. He twisted downward. At the same time his knee pistoned upward into my stomach. For an instant the room went black. I gasped in pain, dropping the revolver to the floor. Morrell swooped downward like an

enraged eagle, swept up the gun and leaped back.

"That's a convincing story you tell," he murmured as he pointed the revolver at my head. "But you'll never get out of this cabin alive to repeat it."

I saw his finger tighten around the trigger. I lunged sidewise, but too slowly. There was a sharp blast. Something hot lanced across my scalp. Then darkness enveloped me.

When I opened my eyes, Marge was bent over me. She had just finished binding a bandage around my head.

"It's just a surface wound, George," she assured me quickly.

Behind her, I recognized Captain Sandy's anxious face. In a few words he told me what had happened. The sound of the revolver shot had brought some of the deck-hands out of their cabins. Morrell was caught running toward the rail of the fore-castle, evidently planning to leap into the water. But they had swiftly overpowered him, relieved him of the revolver and the Choctaw Bend pearl.

"Where's Lance?" I asked.

"Right here," Lance answered from the doorway.

He came toward me, then suddenly as he caught sight of the blood on the floor, his face turned pasty white. His jaw hinged open and his eyes went blank. Captain Sandy and Marge caught him as he started to sink to the floor.

Marge led him to the door. I called after her, "Well, what do you think of that big baby of yours now?"

"I think he's swell!" Marge called back, and added as an afterthought, "and you're swell, too, George!"