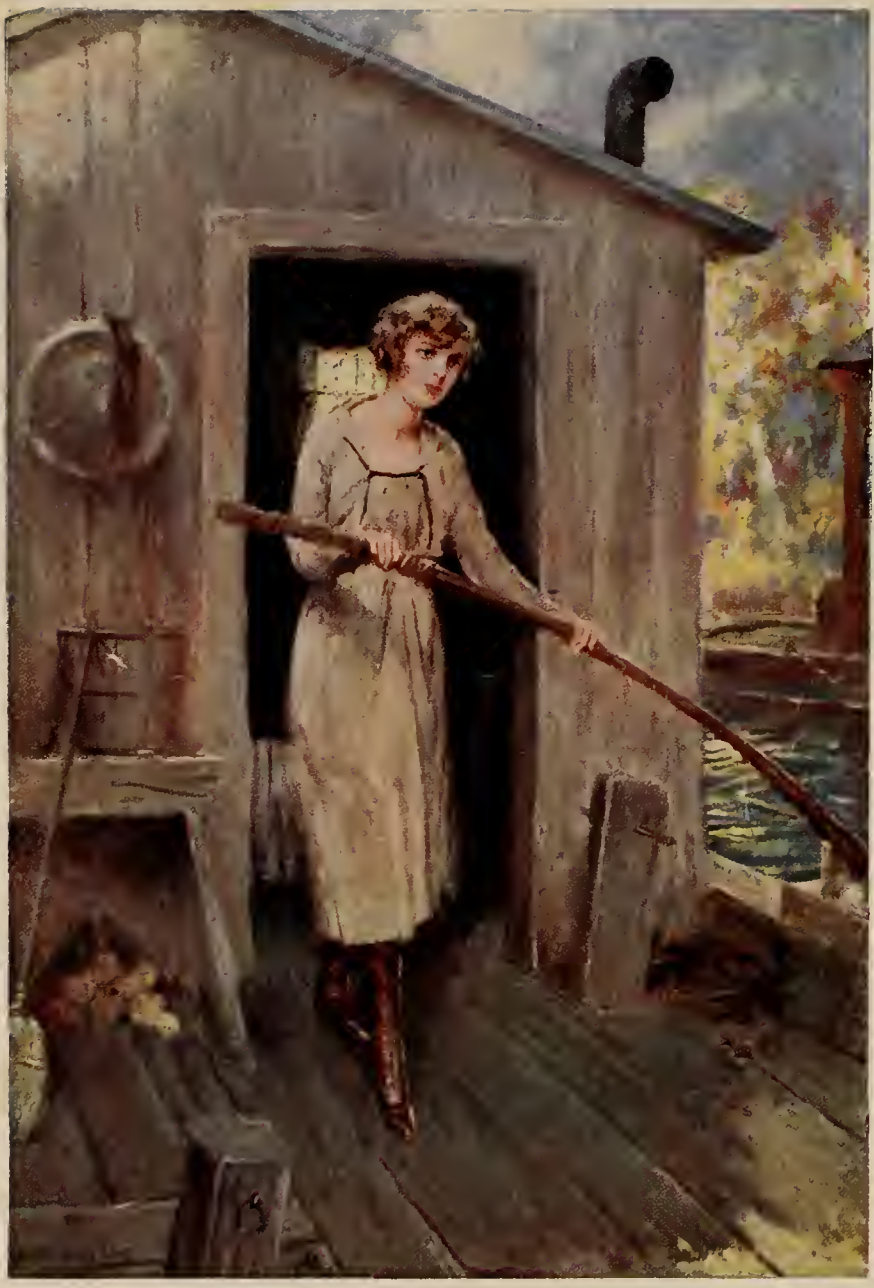
DIAMOND TOLLS

RAYMOND S. SPEARS



"Standing at the sweeps was a slender, blue-eyed girl . . . the light and wind caused her to squint ever so little."

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BY

RAYMOND S. SPEARS

FRONTISPIECE
BY
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CHAPTER I

OBERT GOLES left Maiden Lane, in New York City, with an assortment of several hundred diamonds and several rubies to visit the Ofsten & Groner customers who were nearly all jewellery stores down the Ohio River. The total value of the gems was $106,450, wholesale. The jewels were in a small leather-bound case, weighing with its contents less than a pound.

Ofsten & Groner knew all there was to know about Obert Goles, from his grandparents to his own record in Ottawa, Ill., and thence eastward when he brought four beautiful pearls which he traded for two thousand dollars and a job as office boy in the Ofsten & Groner establishment. The pearls were finds from Fox River, and helped make that river famous in jewellery circles as pearl-bearing. He offered with that money to pay for the bond which the firm required of every employee, but the lad's willingness and his eagerness caused the company to see means of remitting the cost at Christmas time.

Goles soon proved his instinct by bringing in a definite pearl trade from western rivers, and within fifteen years he had established himself as salesman for Ofsten & Groner. He was, perhaps, the most inconspicuous man imaginable. It was said of him that people could look at him and not know that he was present! His voice was a monotone, his face a blank, his gait a glide, and his habit complete silence.

Yet his very self-abnegation served but to impress upon customers the gems and jewels he desired to sell. He never distracted a customer from the beauty of a bit of work in platinum or gold; he gave a buyer the feeling of being entirely alone with a tray of diamonds, to make his selection; there was in him not the least trace or hint of the strong-arm method of salesmanship —so he sold especially beautiful gems with extraordinary success to collectors and to the trade.

It was a year of belated prosperity down the Ohio Valley. All summer the jewellers had been waiting for some sign which would help them decide how much Christmas goods to take on. Also, they had waited before buying jewels which are in demand when crops are bountiful, when, especially, the patrons of the local bucket shops and stock-exchange brokers have been making money, and when tradesmen see big trade in hand.

Now they knew that money was plentiful down

the valley, and as the political situation was satisfactory, by the signs that the gem trade read, it was time for Obert Goles to go selling gems from Pittsburgh to Cairo.

His going was not announced in any of the trade papers, and the fact was not heralded on Maiden Lane. The New York gem trade has long since learned that a salesman carrying from $50,000 to $250,000 worth of gems needs to slip away from his home store in the night, like a thief, and to scout from centre to centre like a spy in the land of the enemy, telling no man his business, suspecting even little children and hating especially beautiful women and good fellowmen.

So Obert Goles vanished from Maiden Lane, and apparently no one missed the shadow that never stood in the way of the least sparkle in a diamond or clouded the lustre of a pearl. He glided uptown and caught a train over to Pittsburgh, where he appeared unannounced in a little store around a corner, under a stairway, in which a little Rabbi of a man welcomed him and shortly paid him for certain stones the sum of $4,360.

Goles mailed his sales slip to the home office that night in a plain and not overly clean envelope. He deposited the cash in a bank to the credit of Ofsten & Groner, and dropped down the Ohio by train. He stopped in three towns, and made two sales—two or

three small stones in each. Then he struck Marietta, whence he wrote a note detailing his future course—as usual—but adding one significant sentence:

"I am obliged to use extreme care, for I find that I am followed."

Now this statement gave Ofsten & Groner considerable satisfaction. Goles was such a perfect salesman for the business that he worried the firm. They knew that he was unmarried, had no social life, spent his spare hours reading in the libraries, where he amassed volumes of notes about gems and the lore of gems. His suite of three rooms on the West Side, near the Museum of Natural History, contained a beautiful collection of books, documents, and ancient writings. Nothing had ever happened to Goles since he found the four pearls in the Fox River except that he invested in conservative stocks, with one exception. He bought a very cheap stock at 21, and later sold it at 478, thereby clearing a matter of forty-seven thousand dollars.

The fact of this little flier, known to the firm, worried its members. It was the sign of weakness, to their minds, and accordingly they had the National Agency shadow Goles on this trip down the Ohio Valley. He was carrying less than half as valuable an assortment as when he struck what the Maiden Lane gossips call "the wheat pit, cattle land, and

copper-mine route," from Chicago to Kansas and Butte.

Goles had observed the shadow; he had noted it; he had called the firm's attention to it, which was equivalent to a warning to them to put the National Agency on the trail to protect him! It was an excellent corroboration of the visible trust reposed in Goles. They were glad to know that he was not only competent, honest, and thorough; he was also watchful. One of the most successful shadows in the detective branch of the jewellery business had been detected almost instantly.

Accordingly, Ofsten & Groner notified the National manager of their satisfaction and the detective, Volcon, was called off at Cincinnati at noon. Volcon trailed his man till noon, sharp, and saw him enter a restaurant at that moment. Then the case closed, Volcon reported to the local branch of the National Agency, and was assigned to a hold up over on the Wabash River, in which a pearl buyer had lost a thousand dollars in cash, and pearls of the value of $6,000.

From that moment, noon sharp, Obert Goles vanished. He failed to make his customary report that evening, and when Ofsten & Groner telegraphed to the hotel in Warsaw, where he was to have put up the following night, they learned from the proprietor that Goles had not appeared there. Agency Manager

Grost at Cincinnati, informed of the matter, immediately called up all the customers down the river on Goles' itinerary, and the one whom the salesman had last visited was at 10:45 o'clock, in Cincinnati, from whose shop the detective had followed him to the restaurant.

They did not even recall him in the restaurant. Obert Goles was so inconspicuous that even the waiter who brought him his commonplace lunch would not remember him, no matter how faithfully he was described in feet, inches, pounds, and complexion.

Unfortunately, Goles had no other customer to visit in Cincinnati when he entered the restaurant. He presumably was bound down to Warsaw, and it was noted that he had failed to tell whether he was going by railroad, taking the stage across from Glencoe, or by the river on the Packet, which would have been the obvious way.

Warsaw contained only one customer, Judge C. Wrest, of the Ofsten & Groner Company. He was a peculiar old man, with a large income from an unknown source. His strict orders to Ofsten & Groner were that no one should know that he purchased diamonds. He lived in a brick house on a knoll the fence of which was falling down, the yard grown to weeds, and some of the windows broken and patched with boards. Nevertheless, he purchased about five thousand dollars' worth of diamonds twice a year, for cash.

He refused to answer telegrams and he had no telephone. When the manager of the National Agency went down to see him personally, he would only say:

"I know nothing about Goles; another agent of Ofsten & Groner was here on Thursday morning, at 10 o'clock, and I purchased my usual supply from him."

"Then you admit having in your possession some of the diamonds which came from the firm of Ofsten & Groner?" Manager Grost asked, softly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you have any of those stones, you are a receiver of stolen goods," the detective said, sharply.

"Stolen goods?" the man repeated. "I think not—I have here the receipt——"

He handed the manager a sales slip, and there was the list of stones, weight, grade, value—$5,190. It was signed, "B. L. Folded, Agt."

"What kind of a looking man was this Folded?"

"Black moustache, dark eyes, dark complexion—perhaps thirty years of age," the old man replied, for a shade of worry had begun to trouble him.

That was all the detective manager could learn from Wrest. He went to the stage driver, but he nor any one else in town recalled a man as described by the customer. No boat had arrived at the hour described to bring the pseudo diamond salesman. No automobile had come in over the roads; no one recalled any

boat on the river—skiff, launch, houseboat, or other craft—which might have brought in or taken away the man who sold diamonds.

Instantly suspicion was directed against the customer. He was known by the detective to hoard diamonds, and it was not beyond the realms of chance that he had in some way killed the salesman and stolen the diamonds. Manager Grost summoned Operative Volcon and they ransacked Warsaw from the water-front river rats to the hill billies back on the river ridges.

Then they learned from a shanty-boater two miles above town in the mouth of the creek that he had seen a dude in a white collar and derby hat coming down the Ohio on Thursday morning. The man was as described by the customer. He had run his skiff into the bank in a little eddy, where the fisherman, when he passed down with some fish, about 11 o'clock, saw it moored to a stake. The skiff was gone when he returned about noon.

With a good description of the skiff, word was sent up and down the river, and the skiff was found in a boat livery at Misquaw.

"I'll be back Tuesday after it," the man had said, taking his suitcase and going to the train. He had bought a ticket to Cincinnati, but in Cincinnati no trace of him could be found.

"He's an old timer," the detectives decided. "He knew about that customer, and he took in the cash—more than five thou'! Now how did he know about the customer? Easy enough! He rapped Goles over the head, carried away his stock and itinerary, and he knew it was safe to go to Warsaw——"

The case was pigeonholed until they could trace out some of the men who were abroad who might pull such a job as that. But the matter remained pigeonholed only a week.

From Warsaw arrived Judge C. Wrest, the purchaser of diamonds, limping and whimpering:

"They stole my diamonds!" he wailed to Manager Grost. "A fellow came in and pulled a gun on me; he tied me to a chair, and he moved me up to the fireplace, and—and he put my feet against the coals. I couldn't stand it! I like to died—and I was muzzled so's I couldn't holler. I had to give 'em to 'im—most a hundred thousand I paid for 'em. But—but he didn't get 'em all!"

"You told the officers?" Wrest was asked, for he had seen no mention of the theft in the newspapers.

"Not a word!" the old man shook his head. "I don't know what to make of it!"

"What kind of looking men held you up?"

"Only one, suh—just an ornery looking fellow, kinda middling, you might say, and just a purring kind of

voice. Not much of a man! Some no 'count whit trash, I bet, but mean and trifling. I paid a hundre thousand for them. Here's the slips, how much the weighed and what I paid, but they's a sight more val uable now'n when I bought 'em."

"What'd you keep that much around you for anyhow?" Grost asked, exasperated to think that an one would have so much wealth in so exposed a place

"I—I 'lowed that nobody knowed about it, suh." Wrest shook his head. "I—I never 'lowed it'd leak out. Theh's been profit in diamonds! I aimed t sell, directly, and I'd be good interest ahead—I sav it a-coming! Now look 't me!"

He grimaced, but added, cunningly:

"But I got some left!"

"You want us to look after those stones?"

"Yes, sir, I'll spend some money to get them back —I brought this up, to kind of guarantee it—there' two thousand here. You boys look around, and se what you can find. It's kind of funny, that Gole feller turning up missing, and then they got me, righ along! You look into it!"

And with that, the quaint old customer of diamon merchant and detective agency hobbled out of th office, leaving the detective to the contemplation o the case, as stated accurately by the old man.

CHAPTER II

MANAGER GROST called in a trusty newspaper reporter who favoured the Agency on occasion, and who was in turn favoured when a good story broke that was safe to print. This reporter was Charles Urleigh, a slim, tall, blue-eyed bundle of nerve and nerves. He was a free lance, with a string of papers that reached from Nashville and Knoxville to Chicago and St. Louis and New York —trade journals and occasional articles in noted weekly semi-newspapers supplying him with his pocket money, and helped him meet the demands of his brokers when wheat broke or certain favourite industrials had a "temporary relapse."

To Urleigh, Grost made a clean breast of the whole affair. The Agency was stumped. It did not know which way to turn. There was a certain tone to the double diamond robbery which had no ear marks familiar to the Agency's archives. They could not recall a single gem salesman specialist who would go to a salesman's private customer and sell him a line of the stolen diamonds and thus—perhaps—obtain information as to where the old fellow hid his hoard of gems.

"That's just what happened, though," Grost told Urleigh. "They pulled a double play that time, and look what they got! Two hundred thousand—and they've made a clean getaway with it! Poor Goles—he's a deader now. Yet there's just one chance about him: If he survived the rap they gave him on the head, he may be somewhere around, though he's not in any hospital here or down in Warsaw. I believe he's in the Ohio, but if he is, I've an uncommonly strong hankering to see the corpse."

"That's a real story!" Urleigh smiled. "It's all mine?"

"Yes, sir. Don't spring it here, though. Make the headline Warsaw, or Louisville, or Columbus, so that you don't mix us up in it. The police are working, you know; it'll be plumb amusing to me to hear their voices over the telephone asking me how long they've been working, when our local reporters have brought them the news from Chicago and Pittsburgh that Obert Goles disappeared between Cincinnati and Warsaw with a hundred thousand in diamonds, and that Warsaw's mysterious Mr. Wrest was held up and tortured and forced to give over another hundred thousand. Oh, I'm waiting for that!"

The two laughed. Sheriffs, chiefs of police, and U. S. Secret Service workers often read the newspapers to find out what they were doing, now that Urleigh

was working with Manager Grost of the National Agency.

"I think I'll just marshal several stories," Urleigh smiled. "I'll mention despatches from Pittsburgh, Louisville, Columbus, Marietta—I always like to run Marietta into a live story, because they run to literature in that town, with more book stores than any other town down the Ohio—and I'll run my big story from Warsaw. I've been down there a few times, and I know the lay of the land. What's the town marshal's name, now? I'm going to have him very close mouthed on the subject and also the Sheriff of Gallatin County——"

Grost laughed aloud.

"That's just what I want you to do—have everyone busy! That'll worry the thieves, and they'll be watching the local authorities and the hooks in sheriffs' offices and police headquarters which carry the rewards offered for bad men. We're not to figure in it at all. Not a word about the National Agency. We're asleep, and our snores are deep. Possibly I may find it necessary to deny that we know anything whatever about the matter. Just to give it all to you—not for publication—we had a man after Goles; our man trailed him right up to the Fresco Restaurant door, and then dropped out of the case on orders. From that moment, noon, Goles has not been seen

by any one who knew him. Volcon, who trailed him, says he was the most difficult man he ever saw to keep in sight—he would have made a perfect shadow, he made so little impression on any one. Why, jewellers here who knew him well could not give us the colour of his eyes, his height, weight, kind of clothes he wore, or a single detail of his appearance. We tried that, just to satisfy ourselves that Volcon was right."

"No picture of him?"

"Not a picture. They ransacked his apartment in New York, and found a lot of queer junk about gems and jewellery but not so much as a silhouette of him."

"Well, much obliged, Grost! See you later—I want to get this written in six different ways, fifteen hundred words per each way, between now and 10 o'clock to-night. So long!"

Thus the mighty engine of publicity—general publicity—was set in motion in the case of the Goles mystery and the Wrest robbery. Urleigh did his work well, at from five to nine dollars a column, and from the Mississippi to the Atlantic. Having the story well distributed as a news sensation, he followed it up with second-day stories, and the theories of rather surprised and wondering sheriffs and police and detective chiefs, who obtained their first information from Urleigh's own tales.

Then Urleigh wrote Sunday specials, which retold

the first-day stories and mentioned previous jewel thefts, giving numerous details of what may have happened to the two lots of gems, speculation as to what may have become of the missing Obert Goles, with details of the debate among county and city authorities as to whether or not Goles's disappearance was connected with the Wrest robbery.

Now Charles Urleigh, being a free lance, had very many questionable acquaintances among his friends in public, financial, political, up-the-bank and down-the-river acquaintances. He knew the boss pig sticker in town, for example, and a hundred moored and tripping shanty-boaters on the river. He was a frequent visitor in the little back office of a certain liquor emporium where the upper met the lower world on terms something like equal. Now he sought his most questionable friends, one after another, and listened with acute ears to their suggestions.

Speaking of diamond robberies, Urleigh's friends were reminded of many other strange things which had happened and which had never been fully explained. Suppose Goles had disappeared—was that so unusual? It was astonishing how many people knew of men, women, and girls who had suddenly vanished from sight without leaving a trace behind them—not even a reason for their going. Lost diamonds, it was suggested, were more interesting than

lost people merely because there were so few diamonds lost compared to the number of lost people.

Urleigh picked up a list of more than thirty people who had dropped out of sight within a year in that locality. A little inquiry revealed the fact that the list was far from complete—there were people right in his own circle, for example, who had packed up their duds and vanished from their boarding houses and left no trace behind them. Whole families changed their address from Known to Unknown. Even the post office delivery department received a steady stream of mail which they were obliged to turn back to the senders, or to the Dead Letter Office undelivered.

Thus the diamond robbery led to forty or fifty columns of stories suggested by the missing Goles and the double raid on precious gems. It was, from Urleigh's standpoint, a very satisfactory news story to begin with, and he recalled none that had given him a better income. It led to his reassorting the one hundred thousand clippings which were a chief part of his capital and indexing the six hundred box-drawers in which he stored them for ready reference. This same collection was very embarrassing to sundry people, for Urleigh was enabled to recall episodes in their lives which few remembered.

Literally hundreds of stories led down to the bank

of the Ohio and there trails vanished—girls, women, children, and men were last seen going down Main, or John, or Cutter, or Woodburn, or State, or some other street or avenue "toward the river." It was this little phrase recurring so often that led Urleigh to write the news special headed "Toward the River" which attracted so much attention in newspaper circles a few weeks after Goles vanished.

Manager Grost told Urleigh that he had found no trace of Goles anywhere; neither had the diamonds nor rubies been recognized in any of the legitimate marts—but that meant nothing. The Diamond Trade had its Under World, through which wandered gems as precious and perhaps a thousand times more interesting than anything one could learn about the legitimate traffic of the surface trade, which by comparison is prosy and uneventful. The $200,000 worth of diamonds had sunk into this Under World, leaving hardly a trace.

"If you see a hundred thousand worth of diamonds above aboard and in the open," Grost explained, "there's a lost million somewhere!"

That exaggerated a condition, but sometimes it does seem as though gems drop from sight faster than any other form of wealth—and it is a fact that the Treasures of Solomon, of Inde, of the Spanish Main, of Rome, Carthage, Constantine—of countless kings

and even nations, have vanished, leaving no trace, plowed under by Time.

"Then the chances are you'll never find those gems?" Urleigh asked.

"Looks like!" Grost admitted. "I tell you, there's something pretty bad in that double robbery. You just don't know whom to suspect, or which way to turn!"

Other stories, other things gradually crowded the Goles diamond case into the background. It seemed as though no new phase could enter into the matter now; but an astonishing word reached Manager Grost in the routine mail one morning. From the New York office arrived a letter relating to Case J-1416—the Goles case.

In matter of Obert Goles, missing with diamonds and rubies belonging to firm of Ofsten & Groner (see files) Goles arrived at office of the firm to-day bringing a black fishing tackle box containing a large number of diamonds. Putting the box on the counter, he said:

"There're those diamonds!"

Immediately he turned and left the store, every one too astonished to stop him. He was very seedy, clothes badly worn, hat a dirty gray. Face very haggard and unshaven.

When the diamonds were examined, they were found to exceed in value those with which he disappeared, but only a few of them were the same as those in the selection which he carried away. No rubies in this lot.

Please reopen the case energetically; these stones seem to be the ones stolen from Judge C. Wrest, your local case, J-1416a. Ofsten & Groner are examining records to make certain that they are gems from Wrest collection.

"Now that just beats Hades!" Grost exclaimed to himself. "What's the reason?"

A messenger arrived from the telegraph office, and this confirmed the suggestion in the order regarding cases J-1416 and J-1416a.

"Records show that gems are identical with sales to Wrest," the code resolved the message.

Grost brought out the records in the two cases. With these records were hundreds of clippings from newspapers, including the Urleigh articles which were authoritative and accurate; the records were the reports of the detectives who had been assigned to the cases, and tips which had been received by anonymous letters and reward seekers.

He went over them all. He saw, of course, new angles of the subject now—many things might have happened which no one had dreamed happened. What could that seedy man, Goles, bringing in those Wrest diamonds and then taking his departure, tell? What was it that troubled his conscience or stirred his mind?

Grost was an able student of psychology, and he had

made his success in detective work, doping out the minds of criminals and of subjects of his inquiry. Here was a subject worthy of his best practical study. He could see a dozen different things that might have happened, perhaps the most obvious one being the supposition that Goles had stolen away with his case of gems, and then become troubled by his conscience.

"But why didn't he bring back those gems he absconded with?" Grost asked himself. "Why and how did he fall upon the Wrest diamonds?"

Then again:

"Where are the Ofsten & Groner diamonds and rubies?" Grost asked again, without any reasonable reply.

As this report had been sent, in substance, to all the branches of the National Agency, Grost had no compunctions about calling in Urleigh and telling him the latest development in cases J-1416 and J-1416a.

"Only don't head it from this town," he grinned. "You might date-line it at Pittsburgh. That'd suit me very well. They've been laying talks up there onto me from time to time!"

"Pittsburgh it is, then!" Urleigh grinned.

CHAPTER III

A LITTLE white cabin-boat floated down the Ohio and swung around in the eddies where the green waters rubbed with the yellow of the Mississippi. On the bow, standing at the sweeps, was a slender, blue-eyed girl with wavy brown hair; she was tanned, and the light and wind caused her to squint ever so little. Apparently she was at her ease, as though she knew the river, but when she pulled the sweeps, she looked around uncertainly, as though wondering which way the boat would go.

When she was swinging down Putney Bend, she found herself approaching a number of other shanty-boats moored along the river bank. She attempted to row straight to them, but Mrs. Mahna, an old river woman, called to her. What kind of a fool soft-paw was she, anyhow, trying to row against a reverse eddy current?

"Drop down to the foot of the eddy, an' float in!" Mrs. Mahna ordered. "Then float along up the bank an' land in, the way you'd orter!"

The young woman flushed under the river woman's

scorn, but she did as she was told, and landed beside Mrs. Mahna's boat, and Mrs. Mahna took the girl's mooring lines and made them fast handily to the stakes which other shantyboaters had driven into the bank and left when they pulled out.

"If it's no offence, who all mout you be?" Mrs. Mahna asked in her politest river language.

"Delia," the girl answered.

"Delia?" Mrs. Mahna repeated, adding, "that's a lady's first name!"

"I'm a lady," Delia smiled, "and that's my first, last, and middle name."

"Sho!" Mrs. Mahna exclaimed, perplexed. Then the elder woman burst into a low chuckle, saying: "It's a good name, Delia is. It'll be plumb popular down Old Mississip', d'rectly Miss Delia, Mrs. Delia, and Delia! Yas, suh! I expect hit'll be a regular old tangle-tongue name!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're a pretty girl, and you're alone, and you're a soft-paw on the river," Mrs. Mahna observed, shrewdly. "But I expect you-all can take care of yourself, you look real handy, thataway. There's lots of girls come down Old Mississippi that can't take care of themselves, so they gets took care of, but you—sho! you make me think of Big Sue."

Delia's lips pursed doubtfully, and then they smiled

without showing her pretty teeth. She asked, a minute later:

"Who was Big Sue?"

"She was one of those big brunettes, with brown eyes and long lashes," Mrs. Mahna explained, "and she made a real good living, into a skiff, selling whisky along in Plum Point and Fort Pillow and down thataway. Seems like she might of lived real nice, and owned a whisky boat and made a good bit of money, but she took to marrying and 'vorcing. You know what that does to a lady!"

Delia laughed aloud, showing her teeth. Mrs. Mahna looked at her in surprise. There wasn't anything at all funny in what she had said, and so she wondered what ailed Delia?

"Anybody'd know you was from up-the-banks!" Mrs. Mahna exclaimed, petulantly, "no feelings at all, laughing about Big Sue and her plumb foolishness!"

"Oh, I meant no harm, Mrs.—Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Mahna. See that old feller up the bank, staring at you? Well, he's my husband. Don't forget that!"

Delia's eyes opened, and her mouth closed, tentatively.

"Well, why don't you laugh this time?" Mrs. Mahna demanded, with asperity. "When a lady warns you about taking her husband you want to smile!"

Delia laughed aloud at that.

"Really, Mrs. Mahna!" she cried, "I want to laugh right. But I've not been long on the river——"

"I knowed it!"

"So I don't know what to—what to think!"

"It isn't the thinking that hurts down here," Mrs. Mahna shook her head. "It's the sayings that makes troubles. Going to trip clear down?"

"Oh, I think so. How far can you go down?"

"Clear to the jumping-off place!"

"Where's that?"

"For some, it's the forks of the Ohio," Mrs. Mahna declared, meaningly, continuing, "for some hit's Memphis, some hit's mouth of Old Arkansaw, and there's some goes to Vicksburg, and into Chaffelli! Down Chaffelli is the jumping-off place for most anybody!"

"How far is it to down Chaffelli?" Delia asked, breathlessly.

"Why, about seven hundred miles."

"And down Chaffelli—nobody comes back? Never?"

"Well, when a lady's dropped down Chaffelli, she ain't generally the same any more," Mrs. Mahna admitted.

"Seven hundred miles! It's an awful long ways!"

"You got all the time in the world to get there!" Mrs. Mahna observed.

"You can't hurry, on the river!" Delia shook her head.

"You've learned that already?" Mrs. Mahna asked, shrewdly. "You can cut loose and float night and day, tied to drift when the wind blows, and seems like then you just poke along and poke along! It ain't best, on Old Mississip' to hurry, specially toward the jumping-off places!"

"No, perhaps not!" Delia shook her head, absently, looking up stream. The Mississippi was on the fall, and the green Ohio River water was pouring down the east side, along the great bend. On the near side, the Mississippi water looked dull yellow, for the sun was wrong to give it the colour of flowing gold.

"You better take you time, dropping down!" Mrs. Mahna warned. "If you 'low to stay on the riveh, you had. The further down you gets, the meaner it is! I tell you that!"

"It's nothing to what I've left behind." The young woman shook her head, and Mrs. Mahna nodded with satisfaction.

"Some don't know what meanness is till they—till after they's drapped over the jumping-off place!" Mrs. Mahna suggested.

"You think I don't know?" Delia asked, level eyed and with a certain little hardness in her tone, recognized by any woman of experience.

"I 'low you know," Mrs. Mahna shook her head, sympathetically. "You can call the forks of the Ohio the jumping off-place—lots does. After passing the forks nothing matters—much."

In this way Delia became one of the river people. Who she was, where she was from, where she had lived, were problems for the old ladies to gossip about. But these matters of the past were not all there was to talk about Delia. She had her own present place on the river.

She remained in Putney Bend only over night. In mid-morning she dropped out of the eddy and floating up with the current pulled out into the Old Mississip' which carried her down stream in an autumn sunshine on a breathless day.

Mrs. Mahna watched her till the boat was out of sight down the crossing and over the sandbar. She voiced the river thought:

"I sure hate to see a girl like that dropping down; seems like there's something mean, when you think of what she's going to meet up with down there—folks that won't care, and men that are bad, careless, and no 'count!"

The girl's boat was hardly out of sight when a gasolene cruiser which had moored above Putney Bend landing along the switch-willow bars backed out into the river and straightened away down stream. That

cruiser passed within fifty or sixty yards of the shanty-boats at the landing, and Mrs. Mahna took a sharp look at it.

The man in the cockpit at the steering wheel was a tall, dark-featured fellow, whose shoulders were slightly stooped and who glanced sideways at the shantyboats, passing Mrs. Mahna with a contemptuous look. His boat swung down the crossing under hardly more than steerage way, the man looking ahead with a pair of binoculars.

"I don't like his looks," Mrs. Mahna declared. "He's one of those slick sports; he knows what he is about. He steered with one hand, and he rolled his eyes sideways—like a mean dog. He's no good on this river! But he knows the water. What's he dropping down after Delia for? Oh, I know the looks of those scoundrels! I've seen 'em dropping down, trailing some widow's daughter, or looking for another man's wife! I've seen that feller before—some'rs—I can't place 'im!"

Her husband, discreet and trained by long experience, ventured no suggestion. Her son, a grinning youth, rolled his eyes down the river, already dreaming of rescuing fair damsels from sleek pirates. Mrs. Haney, who lived in a little blue boat twenty yards up the eddy, hearing the remark, answered Mrs. Mahna:

"That Delia lady you're worrying about—I seen her cleaning a nice blue-barrelled pistol last night, and trying the hang of it."

"She was!" Mrs. Mahna cried in amazement. "Oh, goody! I was afraid! I've seen so many girls dropping down that didn't know what they needed to have, first of all!"

"Oh, well! You dropped down, and I dropped down, and there's lots of others dropped down——"

"And more died than lived, after they passed the jumping-off place!" Mrs. Mahna declared with asperity.

"I guess so," Mrs. Haney admitted. "It takes some roughing to get to be an old river lady, eh, Mrs. Mahna?"

"You bet," Mrs. Mahna chuckled. "When you-all going to drop down, Mrs. Haney?"

"I ain't got to think yet, but in a day or two, I expect. I just got to tar my roof again; that canvas is worn bad, and then I want to get to stop in Memphis where Jess's goin' into the Government boats."

"Then you ain't going to Arkansaw Old Mouth?"

"Not directly. No. I don't like that lower river——"

"Shucks! If you just take care of yourself, that lower river's just as good as up around here, and I don't know but what it's better!" Mrs. Mahna de-

clared. "Take it up here, and you ain't thinking nothing, and first you know, something does happen. Down b'low, you're watching all the while, and you're all ready when anything does happen. That's why I say folks is better off down b'low than up here. Up here, you gets careless!"

"Yes, that's so," Mrs. Haney admitted. "But I don't know, I never cared much down b'low. You see, I'm out the Ohio, myself, and I kind of like the Upper Bottoms. Hit's purty lonesome down b'low. I bet that Delia girl'll think so 'fore she sees the last of this little old world of ourn! She's no river girl; notice her hands? They was slim and smallish——"

"Some girls pulls a good stroke with little hands——"

"But she didn't! She kind of crabbed them sweeps, and she swung into the head of the eddy 'stid of the foot. That dark feller—she'll keep a droppin' down, and droppin' down. She found us here, and she'll likely land into New Madrid shantyboat town, and then down to Carruthersville, and so on. Some day the wind'll take her into a lonesome bend, and then she'll have a visitor. Feller into a gasolene launch, with dark eyes and dark moustache—I bet she remembers her happy little home then."

"She's got that gun."

"She'd better use it first and ask no questions after-

ward," Mrs. Haney sniffed. "A man can talk to her—that's the worst of it! There's mighty few young girls a man can't talk to. Take us old timers——"

"We does the talking ourselves," Mrs. Mahna laughed.

CHAPTER IV

DELIA floated down the crossing and sat on the bow of her little shantyboat, with her elbows on her knees and her knuckles under her chin. Her face, so far as the passing birds could have seen, was expressionless. Her eyes looked frankly at the swirling eddies and watched ahead to see that the boat kept in midcurrent.

"So this is Old Mississippi," she told herself. "This is where people come when they really want to forget and be forgotten? This is where you make your own law, and where you don't just give a—give a damn for anything! Well, it looks it."

She smiled whimsically. She sat up straight, and filled a good pair of lungs with sweet air. She raised her chin with a pert, saucy toss of her head. She looked at her palms, and saw there the little roughening, inevitable accompaniment of pulling fourteen-foot shantyboat oars. She looked at the backs of her hands.

"My hands are bare!" she smiled to herself with satisfaction. "And I'm free! I've nothing to bother about, now—just my own thinking!"

So she floated along, and eyed the river banks curiously. There were dark banks, covered with tall trees along which the current pulled, cutting with the suggestion of a saw's teeth. There were miles-wide sandbars opposite these long, curving, dark banks—beautiful golden sandbars on which the sunshine reflected as the moon reflects upon water. Between woods were openings and clearings, and back on some of these west side clearings she saw long, level dirt embankments, which she knew were levees. On the east side were hills and ridges, but no levees.

Here and there she saw little houseboats moored in eddies, and at intervals she saw gasolene ferryboats crossing the river. She saw occasional buildings on the banks, and passed a little settlement or two. But all these signs of humanity were far away, and they but added to the immensity of the Mississippi River upon whose flood she was floating down. It was of an overwhelming size, that old river! It spread out till it was a mile wide, and when she looked up or down stream, she looked into miles distance where the river turned around a bend under a dancing haze of sheen; down stream, the grade was visibly down, and the plane of the surface sloped and gave the voyager the feeling that she was sliding into oblivion, a mere fleck on a vast, living torrent.

"It's that I am here to feel and enjoy," she told herself.

Up stream, the plane sloped up and miles back she could see the waters coming down toward her, a wave that rose surely to a crest a thousand miles away and a thousand feet in the air—such a wave as the sea never dreams of throwing, but which the imagination pictures as one floats in a low shantyboat somewhere down the face of that whelming swell. Suppose that wave should heave up and break? Fancy swinging under the crest of a wave breaking a thousand feet higher than one's head!

Delia, feeling that wave, shuddered a little. That wave, in fact, for her was swelling up and swinging over and breaking down upon her—not the Mississippi tide wave, but another wave, a spiritual wave which she believed and hoped would engulf her. It pleased her fancy to recall the river woman's quaint statement that the forks of the Ohio was the jumping-off place for some.

But while she enjoyed the sensation of the oblivion, and while she gazed with pleasure at the miles up stream and the miles down stream, and the great breadth of protecting torrent between her and the far shantyboats and the occasional ferries, she became conscious of a menace. A cold chill swept along her back. She looked up and down and around,

trying to discover the source of that menace, but it was a long time before she saw anything that suggested a reason for the sudden change from friendly solitude to dreaded company.

Something seemed to warn her that she was under observation—that something was watching her. She looked around impatiently, and she stepped into her boat to get her binoculars to scrutinize the surroundings. As she started back on to the bow deck she paused within the doorway.

"Don't go outside to look!" something said to her, and accordingly, she obeyed the voice and began her scrutiny from under the shadow of her own cabin.

She looked ahead to port and to starboard, and astern. She looked up and down and then away astern. Miles and miles up the river, across the low edge of a wide sandbar, she picked up a spot upon the water, and when she had found the exact focus for her glasses, that spot resolved itself into a boat, into a gasolene cruiser.

Delia felt a little thrill at discovering that craft. It was not a pleasurable thrill, nor yet a distinctly unpleasant one. It seemed to answer the feeling of menace which had driven her from comfort.

"There!" her mind seemed to say.

Instead of going out to sit on the deck, she prepared a meal on the three-burner oil stove in her

cabin. It was a dainty meal—a luncheon that included salad, tea, and bread ample for a fair appetite. The boat, swinging and swaying in the mid-channel swirls, hung broadside to the current. As she ate, she could distinguish the gasolene boat far astern, floating in her wake, but not approaching nearer that she could see.

She resumed her vigil on the bow of the boat, sitting there as she had been sitting when she drifted out of the Ohio. She at last observed that the boat astern was coming nearer, for she could see it plainly with her unassisted eyes. As night drew near, the boat drew up within a mile, and Delia, watching both shores ahead, sought for a little shantyboat town where she could land in among people.

She had passed Hickman, and the river had turned wild below there. Woods grew to the very bank of the river, so that midstream was open, but her course down stream crowded into a bend that grew ever gloomier and darker, and the shantyboats which she discovered under the high, caving banks were in singles. She knew better than to run in beside a lone shantyboat!

A dread, which is a part of the Mississippi's training of the soul, filled her thoughts. With sunset near, a strange little chill swept over the river. Real danger menaced! The gasolene boat drawing down nearer

and nearer, after holding aloof all day long—Delia realized that her hour of trial was at hand.

"I knew it!" she whispered to herself, "I expected this. Now I mustn't flinch!"

A long, straight reach ran for miles down ahead of her. With her glasses she searched both shores, and saw only a scattered shantyboat or two. It was a wide, wild river, and wherever she ran in, she would be dependent upon her own resources. She could expect no help in that lonesome reach of woods and sandbars.

She dared not float in the night. There were terrors in midstream which she dreaded more than the questionable and gloomy bank. So she landed at the foot of a long, narrow sandbar, in a wide, almost currentless eddy. She made fast with her bow lines to the limbs of a snag that lay half in and half out of the water where her bow bumped against them.

She prepared supper, though she felt that she never would be able to eat another meal in the coming of night. As she cooked, the gasolene cruiser swung by under power, cut across into the eddy below her, and then floated up toward her boat in the slow eddy current.

In the pit sat a man whom she could see plainly now. He was busied getting his own supper in the galley on a gasolene stove. She watched him from

behind her windows; nothing in his appearance or motions or manœuvres added to her confidence.

The boat landed against the bank only fifty yards distant. The man threw an anchor over the stern and then ran a bow line up the bank to a stake which he drove. Watching him nervously, she saw that this was an excellent thing, and resolved herself to remember it, and moor her own craft in that way. It would serve better than to have a spar plank against the bank to keep the boat from pounding.

An old river man, the gasolene boat navigator was quickly in shape for the night. The dark had come. The reach was as lonesome as any from Cairo to Mendova. The last Delia saw of him in the fading twilight that followed sunset was his side-long glances in the direction of her boat.

She lighted her lamp and after a little thinking she left the doors unlocked. She felt that the attack would come either from the bow or stern, and she thought that she would be able to escape if the opposite door was not fastened.

She waited, growing calm the while. The actual presence of the great danger for a river woman, especially for such a pretty girl as she was, seemed to calm her. She sat in the low rocking chair which she had brought for comfort, where she could read, mend, and just sit.

Sure enough, she heard footsteps along the sloping bank and felt the sagging of the boat as the man walked up the gangplank and stepped upon the bow of her little houseboat.

"Hello, girlee!" he hailed, pushing open the door, and stepping into the room.

She crouched in the low chair, her hands against her bosom. She glared up into his eyes with an expression which bade him pause, but he did not heed it.

"Hello, girlee!" he repeated, turning to close the door. He walked across the room toward another chair, adding, "I thought I'd come visiting, knowing you wouldn't mind!"

As he reached to the back of the other chair she drew her automatic pistol and fired.

"Agrrah!" he grunted, and then with a cry he backed away, saying: "You've shot me! Damn you, you've shot me!"

He turned, and seeing the stern door swinging partly open, he dashed toward it, flung it wide, and leaped from the deck. After the splash she heard him floundering away from the boat.

She stood surprised by what she had done. It was unbelievable, incredible. She had been attacked by a man, and she had driven him from her! She had not been obliged to flee from him!

"Why, it was easy," she said to herself. "All I did was just—shoot!"

She patted the automatic pistol as though it had been a glove or a scarf. She let the cocked hammer down, and put another cartridge into the case, to take the place of the one she had fired.

"Is that all there is to it?" she asked herself, and then she laughed lightly and aloud.

The secret of Old Mississipp' was hers! She had discovered it, and she laughed with delight at the discovery she had made. There was nothing to it but keep her mouth closed and shoot—shoot quick and straight!

She locked the doors now and sat down to think it all over. She tried to read, but reading was less exciting, less exacting, less true than just thinking. All the romances of the world, all the news items, all the learned essays were as nothing compared to the unmatched adventure through which she had gone that night.

She had saved herself from that visitor who waited to call in the dark. She gave no thought to the question of what had become of him. That was immaterial. Nothing had happened to her; that was the idea uppermost in her mind.

She sat there, with the automatic pistol in her lap, stroking it with a rare tenderness and affection.

"My dear sweet!" she called it, and then as she found new ideas, she gave it the appellation so familiar down Old Mississip': "This is law! This is law and I administer it!"

Delia looked into the mirror which hung against the cabin wall. She saw her cheeks were a little flattened, and her colour was dulled, but the fire in her eyes was of a different kind than any she had ever seen in them before. It was a cold, grim fire. It seemed to her as though all the lightness and gaiety had departed from her heart for ever more. Yet she was not dissatisfied. Far from it!

Never was she so perfectly certain that she was right, and that she had done well as at this moment when she stood any man's equal in any man's game.

She could not think of resting, of trying to go to sleep. She had too much on her mind to let go in stupid repose and somnolence. She had made the greatest discovery in the world. A man had declared:

"Damn you! You've shot me!" and then had turned and fled from her.

Sweeter words no man had ever addressed to a woman, she thought, repeating them over and over again. How silly, how uninteresting, how utterly inconsequential were the countless things other men had addressed to her, compared to that choking compliment by that strange and desperate river man,

who had damned her and then fled staggering from her—hard hit and preferring the open door to the river rather than approach her, even to get to the river bank.

She looked at herself in the mirror, and remembered the look on the faces of the river women whom she had seen up the river the previous night, women whom she had envied, even to their colourless skins and grim, knowing eyes. Something about those women stirred her deeply. They possessed so many things that a young and pretty girl, tripping down Old Mississip' for the first time, could not possess. There was a poise, an independence, a certain erectness which Delia wondered if she would ever possess.

She was startled with delight when she saw in her own countenance that same expression now. It had never been in her eyes and face before. She had always felt hunted, and she had always been hunted—but now she was neither hunted nor afraid. She had met a man on his own grounds and driven him reeling backward, cursing, whipped, and glad to escape into the coiling river if only thereby he could find his way from her presence!

A curious, satisfied calm followed the panic which had affected her during the hours when she was looking for some safe place from his pursuit. It seemed to her as though the river had ceased to menace, and it

was once more a free and open highway for her pleasure! The weakness of which she had always been aware as a girl and a young woman suddenly vanished. She was now able to cope on equal terms with the river!

The cabin-boat was twenty-two feet long, eight feet wide, and seven feet six inches from the bottom of the hull to the eaves of the cabin roof. The cabin was twelve feet long, which left five feet for the length of each deck, ample room for pulling the sweeps or to sit and watch the banks move by.

The cabin, divided into two parts, had a little kitchenette of a galley, leaving the living room eight feet square. The partition jutted out from each wall only a foot, so that there was practically only one room. A curtain served in the doorway, but Delia left the curtain open so that she could see both doors from where she sat.

Her bed was a low, thirty-inch wide folding cot covered with a woven Indian blanket, which made it look like a lounge. There were four chairs, one for the kitchen, a comfortable wicker rocker, an armchair, and a dining-room chair.

The ceiling was the roof of the boat, with the stanchions and sheeting all painted a light blue. The walls were painted white. The curtains on the four side windows were dark green and very heavy.

Several pictures hung on the walls, a writing desk, a stack of sectional bookcases, and a clothes press completed the furnishings of the interior of the boat. The floor was plain and bare except for two small rugs.

The workmanship on the boat itself showed the craft of a river carpenter. The frame was braced fore and aft and athwartship, against strains and gales. In each corner of the cabin was a little trap, which might be raised to reveal whether the boat was wet or dry, and supply a place in which things could be hidden or stored. In one corner stood a large tin bilge pump, and holes above the gunwale with shutters over them enabled the skipper to pump out any water that might seep through in a storm.

The boat was equipped with three hundred feet of new half-inch handy line coiled dry under the cot; the inch bow and stern mooring lines had hooks under the wide eaves of the bow and stern, on the walls; an anchor, with one hundred and fifty feet of inch line, rested in a locker on the stern, to swing in an eddy or hold the boat off the banks against the strain of the bow lines—as the gasolene marauder had hauled off his boat.

The more accustomed Delia became to river living, the more she was satisfied with her boat. If she paid a good price for it, she had been well and fairly

treated, and the old river ship carpenter had built and well found her boat for her.

She retired on this night with a new feeling of satisfaction, and with no qualms of fear. Her thirty-eight calibre automatic guaranteed her against intrusion. Her experience had proved that she could take care of herself without question.

She yielded to an impulse to say a prayer which was of thanks, blew out her light, and retired. For a time she listened to the spattering and pattering of the waves along the hull, and then drifted into sleep from which she did not awaken till after sunrise in the morning.

When she stepped out to look at the gay river from the stern deck, she was surprised to see the gasolene crusier still moored to the bank. She had expected it to be gone.

"Why—why, he must have—perhaps he's drowned!" she whispered, her imagination bringing up the possibility that she had shot too well.

Then she wondered if he might not have crawled back on board the motorboat and be lying there injured. This thought worried her, and she hurried down the bank, not neglecting to take her automatic with her.

She hailed the cruiser from the bank several times, and hearing no reply she climbed on board. It was

a clean boat, and except for the odour of cigarettes and a medicine of fragrant smell, it offered no offence to her mind.

The motor was housed in neatly, and the boat was well and handsomely built. It had no name. There was a gun cabinet and a desk built in at the cabin ends of the two narrow staterooms. On the locker seats were stacks of newspapers. A smoking jacket was thrown upon the table with masculine untidiness. The galley contained a few dishes, scraped clean, which needed washing.

She stood in the cabin a long time, wondering what to do. She knew now that the raider, the river pirate, had not returned to his boat. Whether he was dead or alive she could only guess. With difficulty she confronted the situation from the viewpoint of the people to whose customs she had determined to adapt herself.

"I've captured it!" she thought, her cheeks growing warm. "I'd better keep it till I find out whose it really is."

Accordingly, she freed the bow line and hauled in the anchor which was over the stern. Then the boat, which was about thirty-three feet long, floated up the eddy and she pulled it in alongside her houseboat and made it fast, bow and stern, with fenders between the hulls.

She cleaned house in her capture; scrubbed and aired and shook out everything. She ransacked her prize, seeking to discover whose it was. In one locker she found a black sheetiron box, which was locked. She picked the lock with a wire hairpin and cried out with astonishment at what she saw within:

There was a thick brick of yellow-back currency the top bill of which was for one hundred dollars. Besides this brick was a square, black leather case, and when she opened it there were long, narrow envelopes by the score. She unfolded one, and uttered a cry:

"Why—it's a diamond. They've all got diamonds in them!"

CHAPTER V

DELIA looked at the diamond case. On it was stamped the name of "Ofsten & Groner," in gilt letters. The envelopes were of stiff linen paper, lined with tissue, and each one contained a diamond, with a few rubies held apart from the others by a rubber band.

"What does it mean?" Delia breathed. "I don't understand!"

She repacked the diamonds in their case and hid them on her own boat, under the floor in one of the traps. Then she worked all day with her housecleaning. As she cleaned, she wondered what thing had befallen her? The money—tens of hundreds of dollars—was more than she had ever dreamed of having.

She carried the newspapers to her own cabin and began to read them. Everyone of them was turned to a page that contained an article or item about the mysterious disappearance of Obert Goles, a jewellery salesman, with his stock in trade.

She realized, then, that she had come upon the gems which Obert Goles had carried. She wondered if she

had shot Goles? She wondered if she had shot the man who made away with Goles?

More than these things, she wondered where her own position would be, for as she looked the papers over she discovered another item of news that had run through several days of interest and wonder for the reporters and editors—a pretty, prepossessing telephone girl had dropped out of sight in Cincinnati on the very day that Obert Goles had disappeared.

Something like a thrill of fear, of terror, swept over the mind of Delia. The coincidence would be hard to explain.

"Suppose they should think something. Suppose I went back with these diamonds. What'd they say to me?" she whispered to herself.

She pondered on many things.

That other river tripper, whom she had shot overboard, and whose possessions she had fallen heir to, was a better river traveller than herself. She had been satisfied with the pretty and well-built shanty-boat. Yet a great deal was lacking when she was most comfortable—paradoxical as that seemed. Her lack of knowledge vexed her very much. She had believed that she would not care where she was, and that she would not want to know where she was.

Nevertheless, she knew that this was the reach below Hickman and the most interesting and valuable

of the finds on the cruiser from her viewpoint were not the diamonds, but a complete set of maps which were bound in a single volume, each sheet showing a section of the river from Lake Itasca to The Passes—every sheet numbered and all the sections indexed on several small-scale maps.

There on No. 1 was Cairo, Ill., at the forks of the Ohio.

"The jumping-off place!" she mused, smiling with approval.

She found her own location on one of the inch-to-the-mile sheets and, though she felt as if she had travelled for ages on the river, her distance from the Ohio was less than seventy miles. Only seventy miles! In that short stretch she had definitely passed out of an old life into a novel one.

Not for an instant did she regret what she had done. Much that she liked had been of course given over for something that she loved and could not do without. She was doing even better than she had ever dreamed of doing—expenses were ridiculously small. The money and treasure in precious stones were a safeguard against any future worry from the question of income, should she determine to her own satisfaction that she must retain them.

She debated the matter of the gems frankly enough in her own mind. They were not hers. They were

owned by a firm as she knew very well. The firm was wealthy, and could afford to lose a diamond once in a while. As an advertisement, the mystery and robbery had already paid excellent returns without question. No doubt the loss already had been charged off on the books—of course it had! All diamond salesmen are under bonds! An impersonal insurance company long since must have computed the cost and paid it.

But there are things easier to toss aside than the habit of perfect honesty in financial matters. It would be easier to toss social conventions aside than to neglect the scruples of respect for property.

Delia again brought out the diamonds and rubies, to stare at them. She stood before her fine mirror and looked first at the diamonds and then, meditatively, at the reflection of her own face and figure. Already she detected something in her expression as elusive as a nice question of honour. If she gazed steadfastly at her reflection, she did not see what puzzled her. But when she had been looking through the window at the eddying waters and her glance returned to her image, as her glance lighted upon her countenance, she saw fading that underlook of baffling but ominous meaning.

"It's a hard look!" she decided. "It's not plain, but it's there—a tough, a savage expression!"

She frowned at that thought, only to laugh lightly.

"That's what I need," she whispered.

She returned the gems to their hiding place, and cleared away the little confusion that was the result of her luncheon. Her work done, she sat on the stern deck reading some of the newspapers of varying age which she found on the cruiser.

She was reading, unconscious of the flight of time, when a loud hail startled her.

"Hue-e-e!" someone cried, and looking, she saw a shantyboat swinging into her eddy. On the bow, each pulling an oar, were Mrs. Mahna and her son.

"Hello!" she called, smiling. The arrival of people whom she had known awakened something in her heart.

"Looks like you are going into the boat business!" Mrs. Mahna declared with a laugh.

Delia looked at the stern of the cruiser, surprised by the statement. Her possession of that boat might make people think. How could she explain it? She had not thought of that phase of the situation.

"Your friend on board?" Mrs. Mahna asked her as though her curiosity were overcoming her tact.

"My friend on board?" Delia repeated, wonderingly, looking around her in a kind of bewilderment. "I have no friend here."

"Sho!" Mrs. Mahna exclaimed. "You got that

man's gasolene boat tied up—I 'lowed—I sure 'lowed he was a friend of yourn!"

"Oh," Delia smiled, enlightened. "Oh, no! He was no friend of mine——"

"But he left his boat with you?"

"Yes, he kept right on going," Delia admitted, "but he left his boat."

"Lawse!" Mrs. Mahna exclaimed, staring at the self-possessed girl. "We 'lowed—we got to thinking like's not that scoundrel might harm you—we knowed him! Course, hit were none of our business, but we just dropped down. When I seen you sitting on the stern there, reading comfy, I knowed you was all right. Then the cruiser there—we 'lowed perhaps you-all'd taken a boarder or—or he was some friend or husband or something like that——"

"No, nothing like that," Delia replied, keeping a composed countenance with difficulty. "Won't you come over? I would like to talk to you, Mrs. Mahna."

"All right," the river woman replied. "I'll sure come."

They had dropped their anchor a few yards distant, and Mrs. Mahna immediately crossed the open water in a little skiff that rocked at the end of a short line from the stern of their boat.

"I sure am glad I found you all right and well took care of," Mrs. Mahna declared. "You wa'n't no

reg'lar river girl, I could see that, and I told the folks up in Putney's Bend I bet you'd know more about Old Mississip' at the end the week than at the beginning. How came hit?"

"You're friendly?" Delia asked, absently, "I mean I can talk to you?"

"You sure can!" Mrs. Mahna declared, emphatically. "I don't know what happened, but that man who was in that cruiser was a mean scoundrel, I could see it by his face. Now, wa'n't he?"

"Yes—as mean as possible," the girl shook her head.

"Looks like you took care of yourself."

"The law did——"

"The law?" Mrs. Mahna repeated, wonderingly. "Did any sheriff or such like take care of a river girl? I never heard the beat of that——"

"Oh—this is the law!" Delia exclaimed, drawing her automatic.

"Ah-h!" Mrs. Mahna caught her breath. "That's the law! Sure! I might have knowed! There's no law to beat it on the river. So you killed him?"

"I don't know; he came aboard right there, up the gangplank and opened the door. I'd left them both unlocked, so I could run either way. He began to talk to me—I forget what he said, and I—and I——"

"Served the law on him—then what?"

"He coughed, and went on through the boat, and into the river," she said. "I didn't see nor hear him again. I just—well, I didn't care! I took his boat, and here it is——"

"You'd better not stay here with it." Mrs. Mahna shook her head. "We'll all drop down the river to Tiptonville Chute, or somewhere. When you've shot a man, you always want to just move up or down a bit. Course, in this lonely reach, it don't matter, really. But you kind of want to get used to going on a bit. Roy!"

The youth, who had returned to the other shanty-boat, called an answer.

"We're going to drop on down again—night trip a bit. Get up that anchor and pull over here, and cut us loose. Hitch them boats together, ourn outside the cruiser, so's they'll tow. Put on the lights d'rectly."

Mrs. Mahna returned to Delia's cabin, and sat down in a motherly way.

"I just knowed you all was a soft-paw doing this away," the river woman asserted. "You didn't pull a clean stroke with the oars, kind of crabbing them. But shucks! That's nothing; lots of girls comes down here as soft and sissy as a lady-daisy, but when they tie in to N'Orleans, I tell you, they mostly

knows a thing or two! They sure do! River rats don't mostly kill a lady down here, 'thout they thinks they got a lot of money, or something like that, but they maul 'em awful, sometimes. You see, on Old Mississip' ladies got to take care of themselves. 'Tain't many that brings the law with them, right off at first, the way you did. Some'd get along lots better if they did. So you plugged him—shoot many times?"

"Just once——"

"Just once! Well, I declare! Hit him the first whack! That's the best way. After you've done that a few times, I tell you they'll treat you mighty respectful down thisaway. They ain't nothing makes a man step around like a lady that knows the law, and ain't afraid to use it. Late years, and since I was married, I ain't lawed it none to speak of. Little birdshot into fellows trying to steal a skiff or lift a hoop net, but that's all. Sho! Where'd you hit him?"

"I don't know——"

"Didn't see no blood?"

"No."

"Well, likely he had on coat and vest and shirt and undershirt and so on. They don't bleed to amount to anything if they move away quick, like he did. Say who he was, or anything?"

"No—just that he had come visiting and that he knew I wouldn't mind. Then I shot."

"Good! He's learned his lesson if he isn't dead. Gracious."

There was a shock as the other shantyboat bumped into the cruiser and shook all three boats.

Mrs. Mahna went to the stern deck and scolded about the way the two men were roughing around. Then she returned into the cabin again.

"It's calming down awful," she remarked. "This is cyclone weather—warm and no wind and graying up. We'll drop into the eddy down by Point Pleasant, or under the Two State point across from New Madrid. I wouldn't pull out to-night, only you oughtn't to stay in the eddy where you've shot up a man. This is Kentucky—United States marine laws along here—but down there it's Tennessee. It'll help a lot if some fee-hunting sheriff should take a notion to investigate. Nobody said anything about your shooting?"

"I told no one but you."

"And I'll tell no one at all." Mrs. Mahna shook her head. "You see, the best way when you've killed a man is not to say anything if you're away off by your lonesome. Course, if there's witnesses, you kind of want to fix them right off. I ain't even a witness now. You see, I know ladies that's been

tried for shooting folks. I never did get to be. But I never talked none. Don't say a word to those boys outside! They're the darndest gossips from Cairo to The Passes. Course, it'd be better, if men kinda knowed you'd shot a fresh fellow. But after you've looked at them, they'll know you'll shoot fast enough. Course, you're pretty—prettiest girl I've seen dropping down alone in five or six years. Course, there's pretty girls drop down, but they're married ladies mostly, and they have folks with them. But you're alone! That's what got me. No man with you! Honest, you'd ought to have some kind of a man along, if it wa'n't more than a ten-year-old boy. They're a heap of company, on the average, s'pecially the right ones. Still, take a good dog now——"

"I don't want a dog," Delia sniffed, "much less a man!"

"Oh, that's the tune you play, is it? Well, everybody to his own biting, as the man said when he bit his tongue. I was just telling you. No 'fence, of course. I've lived alone, and I've had husbands and sons and boarders, and I come to the conclusion a man's of some consequence even if he is kind of sickening. Well, they got that anchor up."

The two women went out to the bow deck and saw the boats drifting out into the main current, hitched three abreast, with the cruiser in the centre. Roy

Mahna, the son, was pulling the starboard sweep of the girl's cabin-boat and Mahna, the father, was pulling the port sweep of the Mahna boat. Thus they navigated the boats out into the river, and as dusk fell, they were in mid-channel, floating down at the rate of nearly six miles an hour.

"That motor run all right?" Mahna called across.

"All right," Delia answered, "I'll start it any time you want the power. If I'd thought, I would have towed us out instead of using the sweeps."

"There wa'n't much pulling," Mahna answered. "The current handled us, and all we needed was to keep them going across the sucks."

"We're all going to eat on our boat to-night," Mrs. Mahna declared. "Come on over, and I'll set up a snack."

Delia crossed the cruiser's cabin and entered the Mahna boat, which was larger and as clean as her own. Except for the lack of desk and books there was little difference in their furnishings. In the large, sweet kitchen, Mrs. Mahna proceeded to set out hot bread, cans of fruit, beefsteak, and other river foodstuffs.

"We'll trip down aways to-night, and run into Don't-Know-Where, and then after a day or two tripping down, they'd never find you in God's world!" Mrs. Mahna whispered. "I didn't want to tell you, but that man you plugged run up the sandbar and

they found him this morning, out of his head and crazy as a loon. Whisky Williams is taking him up to Hickman, to the hospital. He's White Collar Dan—a mean feller. Course, Williams won't never say a word, but they might think something, up around Hickman, if some of them knowed he was shot and then seen you with his boat. Men folks is awful particular about ladies that shoots and robs men. You know how that is."

"I know all about it!" Delia exclaimed, with so much emphasis that Mrs. Mahna nodded sympathetically.

CHAPTER VI

THE Mississippi River drains several empires. The Trans-Missouri Prairie, the Corn, the Middle West, the Breast-Bone of the Continent, the Cotton, the Oil, are some of these empires. The river is itself an empire with treasures of pearls and a people of its own—the shantyboaters.

More than fifty thousand people live in floating river homes—houseboats varying in size from tiny tent-cabined skiffs to great show boats carrying half a hundred men, women, and children. These shantyboaters have their own floating stores, boarding houses, mission boats, sacred concerts, recluses, grafters, doctors, drifters, whisky boats and countless other up-the-bank phenomena as well as their own particular occupations. They are River Gypsies.

Some of them hardly ever come in contact with people on the river shores. They hide down lonesome bends, and lurk in old river lakes. Perhaps away back yonder, somewhere, some time, they did some meanness and a sheriff would be glad to trouble them for a reward. Others live in city eddies, or up a tributary moored permanently to the bank at some city,

town, or sawmill, working for some company, but living on the river because it is cheap. Every fall a fleet of sports drift down the river in shantyboats or gasolene boats, hunting, fishing, roistering down for the fun of it, and some are always sports, but some few cease to be soft-paws with no river sense—incapable of learning anything—and falling into river ways, attaining to river society of up or down class.

The river people heard that a pretty girl going by the name of "Delia" had drifted out of the Ohio. The whisky gasolenes carried the gossip about Delia up and down. Within a month, old timers in Little Oklahoma above Eads Bridge were talking about her, and "Junker" Frest, with three tons of heavy copper, which he had salvaged from an old still house on the Lower Ohio, ceased his hurry to the Mendova market to make the acquaintance of Delia.

That copper was worth twenty cents anyhow, and maybe twenty-one at the Mendova Landing, and Frest estimated that when any river girl saw that copper, and learned that it hadn't cost a cent, she would sure be interested in so successful a grafter.

"I'll get twelve hundred dollars for it!" Frest figured to himself. "I got money in the Mendova Bank, and if that Delia girl's got any sense, she'll see I'm just the man she's lookin' for, even if she ain't going to stay on the river but a little while. I'll show

a thousand dollars in cold cash. Hue-e! But she's shore a handsome gal! Why, 'f I'd a-knowed she was alone, that day she dropped down by my boat above Cairo, I'd cut right out an' interduced myself. Dad blest hit! Seems like a man's thicker-headed 'an a blue cat!"

Accordingly, hurrying down the river with his forty-foot shantyboat, towed by a four-horsepower open launch, Junker Frest pulled out of Putney Bend and tripping night and day, except to land in at New Madrid, Carruthersville, and other towns, to find out where Delia was when last heard of, he overtook the Delia-Mahna fleet tied in at the foot of Yankee Bar, where they were hunting.

He was surprised to see the gasolene cruiser hooked between the two shantyboats. It was a nice cruiser, but when he saw it last, a fellow of the name of Gost, but known, too, as White Collar Dan, said it wasn't for sale at any price. Gost was an old river man, himself, having tripped Upper, Lower, Missouri, Red, and Yazoo rivers, at one time and another, besides being an up-the-bank grafter.

"Hullo, Mrs. Mahna!" Frest greeted the noted river lady. "How do you hook?"

"Oh, fair to middlin', and not consequential, you might say. Hearn you wrecked a big stillery up the Ohio?"

"Yes, and it was a nice job, too——"

"Much copper?"

"Oh, so-so, 'bout six thousand pounds."

"Sho! Ho-law! Six thousand pounds, an' copper ranging around twenty-three cents now—at the bank!"

"Twenty-three cents?" Frest exclaimed; "why, last I knew, it was only twenty-one, or dropping down to twenty. Why, that's—that's, let's see."

He drew out a pencil and began to figure.

"That's thirteen hundred and eighty dollars."

"Yes, sir—it ain't likely to hold there, though." Mrs. Mahna shook her head. "Them big mines'll begin to ship, and she'll drop again."

"I—I expect that's so." Frest shook his head. "See you're dropping down with Delia."

"Oh, yes. She's out with Roy, hunting squirrels——"

"Roy's nothing but a kid—fourteen, is all," Frest declared.

"Well, cayn't a gal travel with a kid if she wants to?" Mrs. Mahna asked with asperity. "Some little kids is lots safer for a young lady than any old buck—I expect they is!"

Frest flushed and blinked unhappily. Mrs. Mahna had an uncomfortable way of saying things to a river man.

"Oh, I don't know," Frest managed to retort. "Some river ladies teach soft-paws things they don't need to know!"

"Well, yes," Mrs. Mahna admitted. "Comes natural to an old hen to kind of look after the pullets. All that copper heavy? Lawse! I bet you paid twelve cents for it."

"No, I didn't." Frest grinned, cunningly. "All I done was pack it on board——"

"Sho! Hit must of been in a dark bend?"

"That's just what it was—six thousand pounds, and all I done was lug it."

"All I got to say is, if I'd found six thousand pounds of copper, and the market was near twenty-three cents, I couldn't get to that market quick enough."

"I expect that's right," Frest admitted. "You going to drop right down—or be you hunting and traping along? You'n Delia?"

"We're just hunting table meat. We'll be to Mendova, if we have to trip nights and Sundays."

"Then I'll meet you folks there. I'll have a lot of money to give somebody a good time," he hinted, winking craftily.

"You sure will." Mrs. Mahna shook her head, with admiration and an expression of cunning on her own countenance.

"Then I guess I won't stop here." Frest shook his

head, meditatively. "You see the market might drop!"

"That's right," she approved. "Three cents a pound ain't to be sneezed at. Feller sold some copper down there for twenty-three cents; probably you know him, José Macrado?"

"Sure I know him. He a junker now?"

"No—just picked some copper up some'rs."

"Well, s'long." Frest backed out of the eddy, adding: "'Member me to Delia—I seen 'er above Cairo, droppin' down!"

"Yes, she was saying she seen some awful tough-lookin' fellers up there." Mrs. Mahna laughed, and Frest felt that he had been paid a fine compliment.

He went on down to Mendova, never tying line night or day. He ran into Shanty Boat Ridge, at the foot of Ferry Street, and sought the local wholesale junk buyers.

"Vat!" Mr. Isaacsten exclaimed. "Six thousand pounds! Mine Gott—vat you think I am? Vell, I pay you six dollars to haul all dat up to mine yard. It is too much! I can pay you but eighteen cents."

"Oh, come now, Isaacsten; when the market is twenty-four cents a pound! You think I don't know the quotations, don't you?"

"Twenty-four cents?" Isaacsten repeated. "I

think you river people all go crazy wit' yourselfs. I don't pay no such price! Look! Here is the market price, as by the papers reported. Twenty cents. I make but two cents a pound, if I buy your load, and the six dollars for dray—you see, I make but one cent a pound, gross, and not that, maybe, when the market go down!"

Frest read the price list.

"But you gave José Macrado twenty-four cents——"

"I did not so! I paid him twenty-one cents, and I lose money by it. It was block copper, from the smelters, two hundred pounds in fifty-pound blocks. Your stuff—it must be melted, and cast, and then perhaps it is dross! I give you nineteen cents, and I make not a cent——"

"Like H—l you will!" Frest retorted, turning away.

"Oh, say, Mr. Frest! I vant your business, I make it twenty—I lose money! But I make it twenty. But that is all."

Frest hesitated, and finally he accepted twenty cents. Instead of three tons, however, he had only 5,120 pounds, which brought him $1,024 instead of more than thirteen hundred as he had dreamed. It made him feel poor indeed. Two days later, while he lingered at Mendova, waiting for Delia and her

chaperon to drop in, junk copper went to twenty-two cents, and he cursed Mrs. Mahna.

"That damned woman lied to me!" he declared. "What'd she do that for?"

He was stunned by a thought. He stared at the water off the stern of his houseboat.

"Why, she—she done it just to get me to trip on down," he whispered. "Ain't that one of that danged old girl's tricks? She knowed—course she knowed, I 'lowed to make that girl Delia a good man. Oh, those blasted old river women! If 'twa'n't for them, Old Mississip'd be some comfort to live on—but they keep butting in and butting in, interfering with men's business. Shucks! Knowing her like I do, I bet—well, I bet when Delia gets to see me, and gets to know the liberal kind of a feller I'll be, buying her clothes and looking purty well dressed up myself! Old Mrs. Mahna be sunk in mid-channel. Delia 'n me'll make a great team if that old woman don't get her head full of notions. That makes twice she's spoiled me getting a nice wife, good lookin' an' so on—um-m. How'd she get that gasolene boat of Gost's? Something funny about that. If she bought it, she's rich. She ain't no common shantyboat lady lookin' for a man! I bet she's—sho! That's how come hit! I ain't heard of Gost being found daid or anything, but I bet that's how come hit! I ain't

paid much 'tention to what's been talking around. I'll jes' get over into the whisky boat and listen where the listenin's easy and good."

Thus Junker Frest made up his mind to get out and move around in society. Take it where a man is thrifty and attends to business and don't trouble other people in their business, he loses track of things. Frest had lost track of things, except that he happened to hear that Delia was dropping down, and he recognized her as the girl on the Ohio, who was just the kind of a girl he wanted to marry, but whom he never dreamed at that time was alone on her shantyboat, supposing of course her man was inside sleeping while she watched ahead.

"If I'd only knowed she was alone," Frest grimaced. "You bet she'd never passed out the Forks 'thout a good man. No, you bet!"

The *Klondike* happened to be the whisky boat lying in at Shanty Boat Ridge, opposite Ferry Street. Frest, having put most of his money into the Mendova Bank—a wise precaution—went down the Ridge to the *Klondike* that evening and having treated the white men once around, sat at one of the tables, where two other river men were at their ease, smoking and contemplating filled little gill glasses.

"Hello, Macrado," Frest grinned. "See you sold some block copper."

"Oh, yes—out the Upper River—fell off a train, those blocks did."

Macrado grinned, thoughtfully. "See you salved a still house!"

"Yes—nice lot of heavy copper," Frest admitted. "I come down not tying a line. Anything new along?"

"Why, yes. There's something funny about one of those old river grafters, fellow name of White Collar Dan. Know him?"

"I don't remember. Who is he?"

"He rubs the banks. Any kind of graft, but he sells phony a lot, and he's off the river, too—Chi, an' N'York an' Boston. Down East, and helling all around. He come out of the Ohio in a nice gasolene cruiser, dull painted like an old shantyboater would have it, so's you couldn't see it to 'ell an' gone. Well, next anybody knowed, he turned up on the long, narrow sandbar above Slough Neck. You know, in the Reach there. He was shot through and through the right side, broke the fourth rib, coming and going both. He was crazy, and Whisky Williams found him. He took him to Hickman Hospital, and there he is. Getting well. Course, somebody got him for his boat. Who do you think it was?"

"Why, I—I couldn't know," Frest replied, his face hot with wonder.

"Well, I don't know who shot him, but the Mahnas and that soft-paw girl, Delia, has got White Collar Dan's boat, and him an old river man! I tell you, shantyboaters is talking now! All but Mrs. Mahna. She ain't saying a word. I stopped in with them one night last week, above Plum Point in the Chute of Canadian Reach Island. Number twenty-six, is it?'

"Twenty-six and twenty-seven," Frest identified the island. "Get to talk to them any?"

"Why—sorta. Delia and the men folks didn't talk none much. Mrs. Mahna talked, course she talked! You know how she is. I'd kinda liked to talk to that gal a bit. She's a looker all right. Mrs. Mahna talked fish, hunt, trap, trippin', and the devil knows what all. Not a word about Delia or that cruiser. Made me kind of mad, and I pulled out. They'll bust up in a row. Then somebody'll get to talk to that girl. She ain't no common soft-paw, you can bet on that!"

Thus there were mysteries and mysteries in this matter of Delia.

"Mostly, girls take a name with a handle to it," Frest mused. "She ain't nothing but Delia!"

"That's one thing makes me think she's no common girl," Macrado suggested. "Take Kid Russel, now, or Eyes Brolah, or Big Sue Cairn, or any of those girls. You know their last names, anyhow—or some

name. They got handles to their names, but Delia—she's different!"

"Didn't Gost—that's his name, White Collar Dan Gost—tell how he was shot?" the hitherto silent shantyboater at the table asked.

"He's come to, they say, but he can't remember," Macrado said. "He was dropping down, he said, and next he knew, he was hog wallowing in the water. Well, he crawled out somewhere and next he knew, Sawbones was working on him, and the hospital nurse a-smoothing his pillow."

"Was he robbed?"

"That's a funny thing, too. He had more'n nine hundred in his pocket, but it wa'n't touched. Whisky Williams found it. You'd think if anybody went to the trouble of shooting him in a lonely bend, they'd took his money, anyhow, 'fore they threw him overboard."

"Well, that's the way on Old Mississip'!" Frest shook his head. "You is, you ain't, and to Hell you go!"

"You bet. Let's liquor!" Macrado approved the sentiment.

CHAPTER VII

G. ALEXANDER MURDONG retired from the Chicago *Fredonia* with his feelings badly mangled by the sarcasm of a fine-grained city editor, one Lawser. The trouble was, Murdong did not care to waste poetic temperament on the prosaic affairs of Market Street, the Drainage Canal, and weepy, villainous individuals who were haled to the various city police stations on various charges affecting their past and present lack of behaviour.

In other words, City Editor Lawser saw in Murdong's casual contributions to the Sunday edition the instinct and the power of a sob writer, and Murdong hated the idea of turning his sweet soul to the task of singing the sorrows of the wicked and the vile. Accordingly, he departed from the Chicago newspaper world.

Murdong would not admit it, but he was a failure as a Chicago reporter. He thought to himself that Chicago grated on his nerves and he had in mind seeking a different environment in which to permit the poetic muse with which he was endowed—which the city editor had tried to divert to bringing tears to

the *Fredonia's* readers—to expand and bloom according to its nature and without let or hindrance.

The young man was rebellious against cutting his genius to fit any of the cut-and-dried literary courses open to him. He wanted the privilege of writing a short-story idea into 24,000 words, and to cram the form and action of a hundred-thousand-word novel into 5,000 words. He felt himself superior to many things regarded with satisfaction by most people afflicted, as he was, with a wayward soul.

He was very indignant about the way the world was permitted to run, and he set forth, hotfoot.

Murdong cared not whither he went, so be it that there could be no return. He went by train, on foot, and at Davenport, Iowa, he took to the Mississippi in a skiff to row down stream to the very end of things. He had read there was a jumping-off place somewhere down the Mississippi.

He, too, was bound for the jumping-off place; he, too, had his reasons for leaving the closed, hide-bound world for the wide open and the undistraught; and he, too, in record skiff time, passed the Forks of the Ohio floating with the current and resting on his oars.

Now the upper Mississippi River is not like the lower river. The change is at Cape Girardeau, or below the Tower at any rate. Murdong rowed with savage energy for days and days, minding neither the

wind, nor rain, nor sunshine, nor midnight. Down the upper river he felt the same as when he strolled along Michigan Avenue, along the Park. He was penned in and bound and a prisoner, physically. Mentally, publishers of all kinds surrounded him by an impenetrable wall of two words, "Not Available." He could let his genius blush unrecognized in the *Fredonia* newspaper—but that small consolation was wrenched from him for what the publishers declared he possessed:

"You're too prosaic," said the city editor.

"You're too poetic," wrote an editor who saw possibilities in him.

"Reporters must have temperament, and authors must not!" Murdong stated his discovery. "Oh——"

The upper Mississippi was like his writing experiences. The great stone bluffs, the rollicking shoals, the numerous cities and towns, the railroad trains pounding up and down and over countless bridges, the very liveliness and sauciness of Nature kept him stirred up and uncalm.

Then, having passed the Grand Tower, and swept down the widening surface and down the lengthening reaches and bends, something gripped him tenderly, and something soothed and softened his frame of mind. He ceased to bend his oars when he pulled

them; he ceased to fetch his leather oar collars against the locks with snappy stroke.

His stroke was longer, slower, and growing silent. When he recovered, his blades feathered without the savage hiss of hard and angry swing. His eyes were conscious of a different atmosphere; he felt his chest expanding, his breath coming deep, his mind enjoying a strange and novel contentment.

"What the hell!" he said in so many contemptuous words. A poetic temperament dislikes being sunned out of its tantrums.

Just that was happening. The sunshine was softened by diffusing sky; great stone cliffs receded from the river edge far back and at last out of sight across the Bottoms; a bewilderment of woods, waters, and low, far-away banks replaced the uncompromising stones of much of the banks; there were no jagged lines of spiles sunk across sandbars to hold them against the wear and tear of the waters. The river seemed to be meandering as it wished, unhampered!

The banks no longer dominated the scene. Instead, the river, the Mississippi flood was supreme. The transition may have been gradual or it may have been at some certain point, as at Cape Girardeau, or the Grand Tower, or even at the mouth of the Missouri—but the fact now was, Old Mississip' had come into his own, and the low shore line hardly

amounted to anything, except to give swiftness and breadth and mass to that tremendous flood tide pouring so swiftly out of empires into—into its own!

Looking about him in wonderment Murdong rested at his oars. Finally he housed them, and sat back to let Old Mississip' do the work! Heretofore he had rowed and the river had pulled him sixty to ninety miles a day. Now he let the ponderous torrent carry him at its own will, and he enjoyed the sensation.

He was conscious that his thoughts filled him with satisfaction, and he looked around him, wishing that he had a pencil and paper, or typewriter and ribbons—something with which to record those precious if fleeting ideas, which he mistook for his own, but which were, in fact, mere reflections of the river which has fooled so many a wise man into fancying he was responsible.

Thus suddenly had the river ironed out the wrinkles in G. Alexander Murdong's mind and soul, and made him a very much finer person to meet and know. He was humbled now; he saw certain things in better perspective; his most important affairs couldn't amount to as much as a whoop in Hades, when he saw himself afloat in a mile-wide tide, bound down a bend in which the great Ohio River was but a streak of green skirting along under the eastern bank.

Artists, photographers, rich men, poor men, beggars,

thieves, yeggmen, absconders, little children, old maids, tormented wives, scandalized husbands, circus performers, actors, preachers, lawyers, and doctors have brought their troubles down from the empires and tossed them overboard at the forks of the Ohio.

Before he reached Putney Bend G. Alexander Murdong decided that he didn't care a damn, and he meant it. Pride of soul, perhaps the most uncomfortable pride in all humanity, had its fall.

"Guess I'll run in and see who those people are in the houseboats," Murdong decided. "Gee! I haven't shaved in two weeks. I bet I look like the devil, but what's the odds?"

What he saw was the little cluster of shantyboats along the bank at the head of the Putney Bend sandbar, in the eddy. This bend is, according to the map, only ten miles below the mouth of the Ohio. There and thereabouts people who float in shantyboats run inshore to land and catch their breath after passing the forks. It takes just about that ten miles to have it dawn on the tripper that he has at last entered the lower river, and is in the realm of the river, and out of the empires up the banks.

Behind the boat is what one flees from; ahead of the boat is one does not know what. It takes a little while, a day or two, to readjust one's mind to the fact that the jumping-off place has been passed, whether

for good or evil. Right there, where thousands and tens of thousands of river trippers had landed in, Murdong answered to the spirit of the river, which makes one look askant down stream, and with calm questioning up stream.

Murdong thought that he had left the dead past in Chicago, but now he discovered that he had had a living past, and that he was at the brim of two futures: he could return into the old life—and it was life—or he could swing down into the new opportunities of an entirely—apparently—different feature.

Many a man and many a woman has taken one look at the lower Mississippi, and then caught the steamer bound for home. Sometimes a shantyboat is for sale mighty cheap there in Putney Bend—but mostly shantyboats are not for sale there at any price. There are husbands and fathers who quit the river to return home from Putney Bend; there are wives and sweethearts who scurried back up stream to their old lives from that same place. On the other hand, many a life dates its beginning under cover of a new name from that same changing place.

There, not knowing these things, Murdong met an old lady who declared her name was Mrs. Haney, who invited him in to supper, and whose son Jesse offered him the use of his razor and a leather belt to strop it on.

"I never cared about whiskers myself," Jesse remarked. "Take it in the summer and they itch, and in winter they hangs wet in the drizzle and rain. That's why I takes the trouble to shave."

Murdong accepted the proffer of the razor, and not for days did he think of that incident again. When he did, however, it struck him at first as funny, then as interesting, and finally as a milestone in a new career.

Right there Murdong ceased to be a soft-paw in spirit and became a river man in fact.

"Going clear down?" Jesse asked.

"Yes, I guess so," Murdong answered. "I started up at Davenport in October. I pulled right along——"

"You must have! But it's getting kind of late up there. Frosts, and those fall storms! They're bad," Jesse put in words what Murdong knew he ought to say himself.

"But I'm taking it easy now——"

"You got six weeks of nice weather to Mendova; then you'll have Arkansaw Old Mouth, and Down Below," Jesse nodded. "It's nice to trip down slow. Sleep in that skiff or'd you go up the bank in a tent?"

"In the bottom of the skiff. That canvas is just a hoop up over the skiff. I got blankets and an air mattress."

"That's a nice way to trip down; but down below,

you'll find a little shantyboat best—if you ain't in no hurry."

'I expect to live on the river quite a while."

"If you do that summers, you'll want about a pound of quinine 'long next summer sometime!" Mrs. Haney remarked.

"Oh, I don't care. Malaria. What's the odds?"

"Better take care of yourself." Mrs. Haney shook her head. "You're young. Don't do anything you'll be sorry for. When you're as old as I am, you'll see nothing much now mattered for you!"

Murdong was startled from his moment of pessimism. Mrs. Haney had read his thought.

"Yes, if you've done something, in six or seven years the Statue of Limitations'll save ye; if it's a girl, why, there's girls down thisaway'll make you forget you was ever up-the-bank."

"There's Delia," Jesse suggested, grinning.

"Now look't that!" Mrs. Haney retorted. "Since she was here Jesse's done nothing but think about her; well, so's everybody else, for that matter."

"Who is Delia?" Murdong asked.

"Why, that is what nobody seems to know." Mrs. Haney shook her head, continuing as she straightened up from putting biscuits into the oven to bake: "She's as pretty a bolt of silks and fine linen as I've seen dropping down Old Mississip' in many a day——"

"Delia, you say?"

"That's it and all of it; she didn't say who she was or where she was from; but down below here a fellow that was following her down sure got his! Whisky Williams found him on that long sandbar above Slough Neck, on the east side. He had a bullet through him, and he was crazy. Delia's got his motorboat and her own boat, too, but that's all anybody knows."

"Sort of a pirate lady, eh?"

"Well, if I was young, and a feller, and good looking, I might think so, and again I might not. She's down toward Plum Point, with Mrs. Mahna now. If what ails you is a girl, and you wanted to forget her, I'd sure get to see Delia, yes, I would! Course, what she thinks of your looks would count, too. A lady don't have to be nice to a man down thisaway if she don't want to. That's one advantage. If he don't mind his own business and she shoots him—all right."

"I hadn't noticed any river girls." Murdong shook his head. "They sound interesting from your description."

"They're as int'resting as they sound, too," Mrs. Haney declared.

"There's only one thing that makes more murders down the Mississippi than whisky," Jesse observed, judicially, "that's women!"

"Humph!" Mrs. Haney sniffed, "hear him talk! If men'd mind their own business, same as women tries to do, hit'd be plumb peaceable in every reach and bend from here to N'Orleans, and you know it, Jesse Haney!"

"Oh, shucks, Maw! What's the use of arguing about men and women! I get plumb sick and tired hearing which ain't responsible."

"Yes, sir! And you men folks'll get a darned sight sicker and tireder 'fore you get done with it, too," Mrs. Haney declared, vehemently, whereupon the men both laughed.

It was thus that Murdong was transformed from recusance to toleration. His nonconformity drifted easily and without shock into river ways of talking and thinking.

He smoked a silent pipe with Jesse and Mrs. Haney, and then, while Jesse held the lantern, he spread the canvas cover over the hoops and pumped up his pneumatic couch. Then having bid Jesse good-night, he turned in to sleep, his boat swinging and swaying on the end of a twenty-foot line made fast to the starboard stern timberhead of the Haney shantyboat.

He did not go to sleep immediately. Lying there, he gave his imagination free play with the pictures conjured up by his talk with the river people. He wondered, more than anything else, what kind of a

girl Delia could be, pretty—according to river standdards, which he questioned—dropping down alone, pursued by strange men, and then shooting one and pirating his cruiser.

Anywhere else, his poetic temperament would have rebelled against that strong-arm kind of a girl, but down here on Old Mississip', with its rebellious women, it sounded almost natural and according to caving banks, lonesome bends, Mrs. Haney, and the jumping-off place.

CHAPTER VIII

MURDONG slept steadily and deeply under his flat arch canvas canopy. He had slept for a long time, he felt, when something awakened him suddenly from his slumbers. His eyes opened as consciousness returned—with his senses appeared a feeling of startled and subdued excitement. Something was different, something was wrong.

For a man of poetic temperament he was a well-found river tripper. His hand crept down his side and seized a pistol butt. There he let it rest, having made certain that nothing had hooked over the receiver and that the muzzle was free.

Outside of his skiff he heard a steady if subdued paddling. He knew the sound well, for he had jacked for deer in northern Michigan ponds, for the excitement of violating the game law, as much as anything else. A paddle was cutting the water, and through the skiff were occasional bumps, as craft struck craft—slight shocks, but perfectly apparent to the skiff man, though his pneumatic mattress was a shock absorber.

Soon Murdong divined what had happened. One

of the river sneak thieves had slipped into the stern of Mrs. Haney's boat and cut loose the dangling skiff, thinking it was unoccupied. The pirate had no idea any one was in the skiff. The situation struck Murdong as humorous. Yet it had its serious side, too. A river pirate, no less than one of the bounding main, dislikes being cheated of his loot, and kills on slight provocation.

Murdong, with infinite caution, divested himself of his blankets, and buckled his belt. He listened for sounds to help him discover the exact location of the craft alongside. Little by little, the pirate lengthened his stroke and put noisier vigour into it.

This helped Murdong in his own scheme, now rapidly forming in his mind. He imitated a worm as nearly as possible, crawling toward the stern, glad of the counterbalance of his luggage in the bow of the skiff. The canoe was on the starboard side, and occasional jerks on the canvas indicated that the canoe was lashed bow and stern to the skiff by twine or hooks.

Murdong cautiously raised the overhang of the canvas, covered the back of the pirate with his automatic, and then pulled the slip nooses to throw the canvas forward, leaving him sitting in the stern seat, in the open air. When Murdong was all ready, he carefully pushed the canvas covering clear, and turning on his electric flash, remarked:

"Good evening, sir!"

"Ah-ah-ah!" the pirate choked, freezing where he sat, his paddle pattering in and out of the water, his hands shaken by the cold that turned his spine to ice.

The flash made a circle of radiance in a fog that accumulated over the river, and in this circle the shrunken little figure of a river rat made a gigantic silhouette of a preposterous, insect-like figure.

"Where would you rather I'd shoot you?" Murdong asked, pleasantly. "In the head, or through your heart?"

"Oh, Gawd! Don't kill me!" the man found voice to wail, and a bank answered by echo.

"No? A gentleman hates to have his sleep disturbed by being stolen!" Murdong exclaimed. "You murdered my sleep, and the punishment is death, you know that!"

"I nevah meant no harm! This cunnar—I was sairt of hit! I got a lil' gal—my wife's dead—down to Vicksburg. I'm dropping down to see her. Old Mississip's so big I was scared of the canoe. I hadn't no money to buy a skiff—an' so—an' so——"

"So you paddled me down here to cut my throat and steal my skiff!"

"'Fore Gawd, I didn't know a man was into hit!

I 'lowed hit were a gasolene skiff. Don't kill me, Mister!"

"Shucks!" Murdong exclaimed, impatiently. "You wouldn't feel it a bit. Just a big bump, and you'd be dead——"

"My Gawd! Don't kill me!" the man begged. "Don't kill me!"

"But it won't hurt. Hold still——"

"Ah—ah—ah," gasped the little wretch, like a man sinking slowly in cold water.

"Don't you want to be put out of your misery?" Murdong asked, in polite surprise. "Why, I thought people like you were so unhappy they would rather die than live."

"Oh, Gawd!" choked the captured pirate. "Ain't you got no mercy?"

Murdong considered. He smiled grimly. He knew what the wretch was thinking. The pirate believed that Murdong was one of those heartless feline types of men who delight in torturing before they kill. Murdong had been slashed and wretched mentally by that kind of persons who despised poetic temperaments. Gurley, of the *Fredonia*, a star reporter and a savage toward office boys and cub reporters, was that kind.

"Well, you lied about your wife in Vicksburg," Murdong declared. "I don't think a man ought to

die with a lie on his conscience. You'd better tell the truth, you know. You're just a cheap pirate and sneak thief, aren't you? What's your name?"

"Yas, suh. Storit, suh. You'll hear. I was rich, but a feller belted me——"

"You have a boat of your own somewhere along here?"

"Yas, suh."

"Where's your partner?"

"I—they ketched him to Cairo."

"Oh, chain gang, eh?"

"Yes, suh. He'll be down in three months."

"From when?"

"October 10."

"Where'll you meet him?"

"Mendova."

"What kind of a boat do you live in?"

"Tar house, suh."

"Slide that revolver, holster, and your belt under my canvas there. Careful you don't get the revolver out of the holster, and don't drop it!"

The man did as bidden.

"Well, I guess I won't kill you till morning, now," Murdong remarked, meditatively, and then with decision, "I think I'll kill you down below, somewhere, if I should happen to meet you anywhere. Let me see that face of yours!"

The fellow turned and displayed a face with little, frightened, stone-coloured eyes; bristling, unshaven countenance; long, shaggy gray hair; narrow, crooked shoulders, and long bony hands.

"Yes, I'll know you when I meet you; I'll know your voice at night and your face by day," Murdong decided. "Cut loose!"

The man gave two twitches at two pieces of trot line, and the canoe—a hollowed log canoe—drifted free from the skiff.

"Now paddle for your life!" Murdong ordered.

The river man slapped his paddle into the current, like a scared and diving muskrat, gave a quick thrust, then another thrust, and where he had been the fog swirled in and the thief was gone. Murdong heard him paddling swiftly away with receding sounds when the appalling silence of a Mississippi river fog in the midnight settled upon him.

Not a sound, not a motion, except wreathing wisps and rags of fog, and coiling surface waters, broke the dark and gloom. When he doused the flash Murdong felt as though the skies might fall down upon him. A more awesome gloom he had never felt before in his life. It fairly seemed to smother—it even gave him a sensation of being crushed.

There did not seem to be anything he could do to escape. He could not tell which was up, down, or

toward the banks. Now that he had disposed of his pirate he felt a chill gathering upon him, prickling his skin with goose pimples. He missed the warmth of his blankets. He dared not return to them, however, for it was unthinkable to leave his boat floating in mid-river while he turned in to sleep.

So he floated down for what seemed an age, a blanket drawn tightly around his shoulders. He listened for sounds that would help him know where he was in relation to the bank. He heard nothing for a long time. Then a voice suddenly burst out of the fog, a few yards distant:

"Ain't I a dangblasted old fool! I cayn't find the bank! Where in dangnation's the bank? I neveh ought to have touched that danged skiff. That soft-paw'd killed me, sure as I'm borned, if he hadn't been a danged fool! I'd ought to be killed, danged old numb-skull! Now I got to paddle up this old river forty-fifty mile, back to my shantyboat. Damblast this Old Mississip'! Well, I'll try goin' thataway. I don't want float all night! I'll be clear to New Madrid 'fore mornin'!"

The lost river rat began to paddle angrily. When he had taken a dozen strokes Murdong cupped his hands over his mouth, turned his face toward the interior of his canvas-topped boat, and laughed slowly, deeply, and with rollicking cadence:

"Haw—haw. Haw-w-w!"

The paddling ceased.

"Jee-Gawd!" a voice gasped, and then the paddle slapped into the water and Murdong could hear the water hissing under the bow of the canoe.

"Ha-a-a!" Murdong laughed.

Counting the paddle strokes, Murdong found that the man was making about fifty-four a minute—a rate that rapidly took the canoe out of hearing.

"The gentleman seemed to be alarmed," Murdong remarked, with surprise. "I wonder why?"

Murdong accepted his predicament with philosophical alertness. The sensation of being carried into the jaws of doom was novel, entertaining, but of questionable pleasure. Murdong could not be certain that he was really being rushed along by the mid-river current, except for the wifts of fog dragging past his countenance. The pressure of the fog was the only physical fact of motion apparent, and it was a slight one, which he could see with his eyes when he shot the light of his electric flash into the night.

"So this is the lower river," Murdong mused. "Pirates and silences, gloom of fogs, and the rush to doom—ugh!"

Murdong was afraid the boat might be sucked into a caving bank somewhere, or strike a snag in a crossing shoals, or be run down by a steamer. He did not

know that a steamer could not run in the fog on the river. He was not yet familiar enough with river life to know that shantyboaters often cut loose when the wind goes down at sunset and sleep most of the night, fog or no fog, with a running light on the cabin to warn steamers to keep clear. He must needs sit awake when he might have been sleeping.

Morning began at last to diffuse light through the fog. The surface of the water became visible, and the dawn swept by, followed almost instantly by sunshine skipping across the top of the bank, light raining down through mist in white sheets.

Murdong, now hungry after his adventure and his vigil, rolled back the canvas covering his boat, took down the hickory hoops, and brought out his two little pump-jet blue-flame oil stoves. Putting them on the footboard, he lighted one and put on his coffee percolator. Then he sliced a round leaf from a smoked ham and put it into a frying pan over the other stove. Shortly the sizzle filled the air with fragrance. Around the slice of ham he placed coins of cold boiled potato to fry them. When they were browned on the bottom he turned them over. Having cooked a plenty, he broke two fresh eggs into the pan beside the meat, turned them quickly, and then his breakfast was ready.

A board eighteen inches wide with a cleat on the

bottom, and just long enough to reach the width of the boat, and rest on the gunwales, served as a table. On this he served his breakfast, eating on paper plates, which reduced nauseating dishwashing to the minimum. He dined at his leisure, and while he dined the warm sunshine dissipated the fog, which broke into gray floating islands upon the surface of the river, finally lifting and bursting into thin air.

G. Alexander Murdong sighed in a comforting frame of mind. He had fled from the turmoil and hurry and excitement of crowded, unresting humanity —beaten and hating himself more than he hated the people whose standards he could not satisfy.

"Well, I'm all right down here!" he nodded with genuine satisfaction. "This is where I belong; I can be a river rat if I can't be anything else—a superior kind of a rat, at that. Say, a muskrat."

So he continued on his way down the mid-current which carried him in near one caving bank on the right, and then down a crossing close to the bank on the left, each swing being a matter of five or ten miles and an hour or so of floating for it takes time for a mile-wide flood to swagger even a little bit.

Murdong felt that the ambitions and hopes, the aspirations and the desires of his life of old were rather dwarfed and ridiculous in the presence of so real a power and consequence as the river. What did it

matter if a little insect like himself did splash around and flutter and become prey for large emotions?

"Nothing seems to be of much consequence down here," he mused. "I'm real funny with all my puny temper and pride!"

He laughed, not without a sigh, however. The magnificence which he had discovered in his mad flight—beautiful, wonderful, satisfying as it was—quite in course rendered his own thoughts conspicuously trivial. If he could bring his soul to humbleness, contented with inconsequence, here was contentment for him.

Other river people were tripping down that day. Ahead of him, two or three miles distant, barely visible on the vast, glowing surface, was one shantyboat; astern a mile or two was another one, hardly more conspicuous. No one touched an oar, and the eddyings swung the boats around and around, and carried them first toward one shore, then toward the other.

Not a breath of wind was stirring, and the sun shone down with caressing warmth. Hardly ever did a sound fret the silence, but at noon far and wide shrieked the whistles of cotton gins back on the bottoms, and somewhere in the distance—miles and miles away—rumbled the hoarse voice of some great sawmill with a battery of boilers feeding the growling horn.

The whistling quickened the appetite of the skiff

traveller, and he prepared another meal with deliberation, and ate with calm gusto, leaning in his cane-bottom stern seat against the back, resting his elbows upon the arms. Following his cup of tea he smoked a cigarette, recklessly. It was the third smoke he had taken from a box which he had purchased in Chicago, vainly endeavouring to soothe his nerves with them. Three smokes in five or six weeks!

That night he drifted into a west side eddy, and dropped a light anchor into six feet of water. He let out a long line and put up his canvas, which gave him just headroom under the hoops when he sat in the seat at the oar locks. He spread down his bed, put a gas-light lantern on the oar seat, and lay down to read one of the magazines which he had included in his outfit at Davenport.

It had been days—weeks—since he had even thought of reading Now he read with interest, having no subcurrent of ambition to keep pace with the story; he was reading for amusement, not for study, for the first time in years. He went to sleep, reading, and then, awakening, he turned out the light and settled down for the night.

The next morning but one he pulled out into the current on a dull gray day, warm but gloomy. All day long he floated down, and he wondered off and on whether he was going south too fast, whether he

would arrive in New Orleans too soon? He felt as though he had travelled so far down the lower river that he must be halfway to New Orleans, but when toward night his skiff swirled around a short, sharp bend, with a caving bank on the west and miles and miles of sandbars on the east, he saw ahead of him a bluff that loomed against the sky like a mountain. It rose, apparently, for hundreds of feet—a long ridge extended for miles back from the sheer, caving bluff.

Down the left turn of the bend was all caving bank, but opposite were sandbars and still waters. Looking that way, Murdong fell upon his oars and rowed across the current, and in the last light of day he anchored in the eddy. He put up his canvas, started his oil stoves, and cooked his dinner, the stoves giving the low shelter a comfortable and pleasing warmth for there had fallen a chill with the dark.

He read some more this night, but nothing he read compared with the fullness of the days. He was dazzled by the wonders of the lower river—the massy current, the ethereal sandbars and low, flimsy banks, the grim sky, and the absence of all the things to which he was used! He had seen but few people, had spoken to only eight or ten in weeks. He had dodged people on the upper river, and now there seemed to be hardly any people to dodge!

So he read till he could not hold his eyes open—

which was for only half an hour or so—and then he went to sleep with such a feeling of rest and comfort as he had never known before. For years and years he had been struggling and fighting and grappling with questions and seeking for opportunities and wrestling with unseen difficulties, till his mind was in a whirl and his soul was sick and his heart was faint. In a madness of anger and despair he had quit, let go his old life, and fled—and a whimsy of chance had fixed in his mind the idea of tripping down the Mississippi on some indefinite point of which was a line known as the jumping-off place.

"I really found it," he told himself in wondering surprise. "I really found it—the jumping-off place! I thought it was absurd, but it's at the mouth of the Ohio River!"

The incredible had become a literal fact.

The following morning he slept late, making up for years and years of lost repose of mind. It was nearly nine o'clock when he prepared his breakfast, nearly noon when he took down the canvas and made ready for a short day of floating.

There was a light breeze blowing, and when he hoisted the anchor the breeze blew him against the eddy current, and he found himself obliged to resort to the oars. He rowed out into the edge of the river current, and floated down along the brim of the eddy.

Looking down stream, the great ridge filled his vision, and he did not know what it was, or where he was, but his curiosity was aroused. He began to want to know about the reaches, bends, crossings—he wanted to know, especially, if that ridge was not a place.

So his gaze turned along the shore, and a mile down, against the bank across the great eddy below the sand-bar island there, he discovered shantyboats.

"I'll go ask them," he told himself.

By just that arousing of his curiosity Old Mississip' added another diversion to the countless episodes of river life.

CHAPTER IX

PEOPLE who go down the Mississippi for fun generally fall overboard when they have been drinking too many rickeys or cocktails, a very few of which are too many on board an ordinary Mississippi River cruiser or shantyboat. The lower Mississippi is no place for fun. That is why serious people, men and women with temperaments and a livid scar of a past, get on so well with the flood and wind up with such joys as mere light and frivolous people never know in the world.

Delia was sitting in the Mahna shantyboat when Murdong rowed into hail. Mrs. Mahna, her husband, and Roy had gone back into the Peninsula to line a bee tree which Roy had suspected, and Mrs. Mahna wouldn't trust any male she ever knew to line a bee tree, in late October, when the honey is sure to be at the best.

They left Delia looking after the three boats. It is never good policy to leave a boat unguarded down the Mississippi. Something might happen to it.

"Hello," Delia heard a call, and she stepped out on the stern to look and answer.

The slight breeze carried her skirt against her figure, and when she looked at the stranger, her face wore an expression that did not injure the appearance of her countenance.

"I'm a stranger on the river," Murdong said to her. "I passed the mouth of the Ohio two or three days ago, and I don't know where I am now. I wondered if you couldn't tell me?"

"Don't know where you are?" Delia asked, smiling. "That's Yankee Bar up there, I believe, and that's Plum Point above it. There's a town over across there, opposite the point—Osceola."

"Thank you," Murdong said. "I never heard of any of those places before; I suppose they're somewhere! I was wondering, particularly, if that big ridge down there had a name?"

"Indeed it has," she smiled. "That's Fort Pillow —what's left of it. Mrs. Mahna said last night that the old fort is all gone; the river undercut it, and it caved in. It's two hundred feet high, and wave washed over Craighead Point and away back for miles. It stranded tons and tons of fish."

"So that's Fort Pillow." Murdong turned and rested his eyes on Chicksaw Bluffs No. 2.

"Mrs. Mahna you said?" he turned and asked. "I wonder if that's who Mrs. Haney and Jesse Haney

were talking about the other night? I stopped there, in Putney's Bend."

"Why, yes! It must be—Mrs. Mahna dropped out of there the other day."

"They said I'd likely find the Mahnas down here somewhere," he remarked. "Are you—Miss Mahna?"

"No," Delia shook her head, and looked across at Craighead Point. "I'm just with them."

"My name is Murdong," he told her. "Out of the upper Mississippi—from Chicago. When will they be back—the Mahna?"

"They went out to line a bee tree—whatever that is! They take some molasses and corn starch and when a bee gets on the molasses they sprinkle the starch on it. When it flies away, they follow it—that's what Mrs. Mahna said."

"Well, there's nothing special for me to see her about," Murdong said, as though he were indifferent. "Perhaps I'd better drop on down."

"I've some maps here of the river," Delia suggested. "They'll show you right where you are. Won't you come aboard? I'll bring out the maps."

Murdong pulled the skiff to the stern, climbed on to the deck, and by the time his boat was fast, the young woman had returned with a book and a chair. She brought out another chair, immediately, and they sat down to look at the river maps together.

"Here we are," she said, "on Sheet No. 6——"

"It's one hundred and seventy miles below Cairo!" he exclaimed. "Is that all! Why, I thought——"

"You thought you'd been down here for ages, and had travelled halfway around the world," she laughed.

"Yes—these are dandy maps. I want a set of them. I wonder where I could find some?"

"Some river town, I should say—Mendova? I don't know. It's my first trip down. These were on the boat."

Murdong looked at the Plum Point section, and then turned down stream, sheet after sheet.

"All that's ahead of me yet!" he mused. "I never knew what a river it was!"

"I had crossed it at Memphis and New Orleans," she said. "When I—when I could, I floated down it. There are index maps in the front."

He turned to the small-scale index sheets showing the lower river in three sections, and the large-scale sheets plotted out on the river course, according to their numbers, No 1 at Cairo, No. 28 at New Orleans, No. 32 at the Passes, showing thirty miles or so to the sheet.

He studied the index sheets a few minutes, and tried to turn to the title page, but saw the inside of the cover. There was written a name, boldly:

"Rubert Gost"

"Why, that's——" he began, but stopped short.

"Who is it?" she asked. "Really, I would like to know."

"If he's the man I think he is, I know him well," Murdong said. "I—perhaps he is a friend of yours?"

"Not in the least," she shook her head.

"He's White Collar Dan, one of the slickest thieves in the country," Murdong said. "I saw him at police headquarters in Chicago where they had him last winter for penny-weighting a jeweller——"

"What is penny-weighting?"

"Why, generally speaking, it's substituting a paste for a diamond, or phony for a real goods ring, something like that. I remember, because I wrote an article about him. They couldn't prove it on him, though, and they had to let him go. He isn't here, is he? Perhaps I've talked too much."

"No, not at all. What did he look like?"

"Why, five feet ten, 160 pounds, black moustache, dark complexion, and brown eyes—nice-looking fellow, but slick. They say he's a strong-arm, too——"

"Strong-arm?"

"Yes—hold up, or blackjacker."

"I wouldn't be surprised," the young woman admitted. "He looked it. You say you wrote about him? Are you a—a writer?"

"Eh?" Murdong ejaculated, and then glared at

the deck a minute. "No, I'm not a writer. I used to think I was, but I know now I'm not. I'm a river rat now. Judging from what I've seen, being a river rat's enough for any man to be."

"Oh!" she observed, as though with feeling.

"Well?" he demanded, defiantly.

"I thought men were stronger—than that!"

"Than what?" he asked, wonderingly.

"From your remark, I presumed you were a quitter, and had run away—from something."

Murdong flushed, and then he laughed as his surprise yielded to the fact.

"Sure I did," he admitted, cheerfully. "That's what I'm down here for—to escape."

"And did you?" she asked, sweetly.

"N-n-no, not at first," he shook his head. "But when I passed the jumping-off place—I was all right then!"

"Isn't it strange—the Forks of the Ohio?" she shook her head, adding quickly: "That's the place you meant?"

"Yes," adding, "I couldn't help it—I would have gone crazy if I'd stuck to the job—I just had to let go!"

"I'm glad you said that," she startled him. "That's what I wanted to know. You see, I'm a stranger on the river, too. You live in that little skiff?"

"I cover it over with canvas at night—house it in.

Those hoops stretch and hold the canvas up. I cook with those oil stoves. I've a pneumatic mattress—it's very comfortable! Sometimes a pirate tries to steal me, or something like that."

"Tries to steal you!" she interrupted. "You mean that?"

He told her about the river canoeman who cut the skiff loose.

"He thought no one was on board—but I fooled him!" he laughed. "Still, they'll steal almost anything down here, they say. It's a mean old river in some ways. You have to know how to take care of yourself! I took his gun away from him. Have you got one? You can have that——"

"I—yes, I have one, thank you. They call guns 'The Law' down here."

"That's good!" he laughed. "The Law! Well, a revolver is the law. You travel down here for days, and hardly see a soul."

"And when you see people, you aren't sure they have souls," she smiled, uncertainly. "Here comes someone."

Mrs. Mahna bounded out of the woods, and her menfolks toiled after her.

"Hue-e!" she called. "We found that old bee tree, sure's your borned, and I bet there's—— Sho! Got a caller, eh?"

"Yes. Mr. Murdong," the young woman answered. "He stopped at the Haney boat in Putney Bend the other night. They were talking about you, and he dropped in to say 'Howdy'."

"You're welcome," Mrs. Mahna declared after she had scrutinized her visitor. "Out the Ohio?"

"No—upper Mississippi. I'm from Chicago. Probably I'll go clear down to New Orleans."

"In that skift? Why don't you get a shanty-boat?"

"I had thought of it," he admitted. "In bad weather I'm cramped under that canvas."

"Why don't you sell him yours, Delia?" Mrs. Mahna turned to the girl. "You got the gasolene—that'd do well for you. Better'n a shantyboat, because you can run or anchor or go anywheres."

"I hadn't thought——" she turned questioningly to Murdong.

"It's that other boat," Mrs. Mahna declared. "Come on over and look at it! Won't do no hurt to look, for lookin' is cheap down here, long looks an' short looks all the same."

She sprang as agile as a goat aboard the gasolene, and Murdong and Delia followed, the girl accepting his hand to get across.

"Course she'll want some of the things," Mrs. Mahna declared. "But not the bed, or furniture,

except maybe a chair, say. You can see it's a right tight boat, dry's a bone."

"How much?" Murdong asked.

Mrs. Mahna dodged behind, making frantic gestures with two fingers to the girl, who thought a moment before answering.

"It cost me in the water one hundred and thirty-five dollars. You can have it for that; I want to save my books and things——"

"That's dirt cheap," Mrs. Mahna declared. "You'd never get that boat from me for less'n two hundred!"

"It's too cheap!" Murdong assented. "I'll pay $150."

"As you wish," Delia said, looking at him curiously. "Is that the way you do business—giving more than is asked?"

"I couldn't take advantage of any one," he explained. "I wish I could—I'd get farther, probably. But my conscience——"

"Perhaps that spirit has its compensations," she suggested.

Mrs. Mahna looked as though the two were talking in an alien tongue. She wondered what they were driving at, but when Murdong counted down seven twenties and one ten-dollar bill, she saw that the deal had been properly consummated whatever the tongue they bargained in.

"I'll pack up," Delia said, and Murdong retreated to the Mahna boat, leaving the two women to do the moving.

Murdong was elated with his bargain. Travelling in the open skiff was not exactly tiresome, but the boat was too small for comfort when it rained and he lacked room to turn around in. He could hardly stand up, to say nothing of taking a step.

Mrs. Mahna returned after a time, and began to flax around getting supper. She had squirrels and ducks to roast, but everything was all ready to put into the oven, and shortly the odour of a game dinner filled the boat. Mahna and the youth were up the bank chopping up an ash sapling which they had discovered in a drift pile, and which was the best kind of firewood when one didn't want a coal fire's staying qualities.

Delia returned to the Mahna boat, and picked up the thread of conversation of Mrs. Mahna, who was telling Murdong about the river down below.

"Yes, suh!" she declared, "you trip down onct an' you hate the riveh, like's not. You get to go away, but bye and bye you feel hit a-drawin' you ag'in. You keep a-droppin' down, an' a-droppin' down—as you dream. Old Mississip' don't take hold cruel, but hit hangs on soft and strong. You'll quit Old Mississip' against your heart, yassuh."

"I don't want to quit it." Murdong shook his head. "I want to live on it. That's one reason I wanted a houseboat, so I would have a kind of a home——"

"Hit's a real home," Mrs. Mahna declared. "I've lived up the bank some, but I never seen no mansion on the Bottoms that'd equal a little white shantyboat. Theh's work enough, takin' care of a shantyboat with two rooms. But I 'low I wouldn't take cyar of any house with forty-fifty, or ten-twelve rooms, not if 'twas give to me! If I have room to set, a bed that'll let me stretch, an' room to turn around in for a kitchen, I'm satisfied."

"But don't you get lonesome?" Murdong asked. "Never seeing people for weeks sometimes?"

"Shucks!" the river woman snorted. "Me lonesome? Sometimes I boot Roy an' the Old Man up the bank, I get so sick 'n tired of so much people around. And then I get to know trippers that's going down. Hyar's you, out of Chicago, and hyar's Delia, out'n the Ohio! Here to-day, gone to-morrow, maybe. Like's not when I see you down to Arkansaw Old Mouth come Christmas I'll have seen twenty-forty—a hundred strangehs. Never two alike, never the same thing happening twict. I just friendly along, and don't care. Blow high, blow low. You see what I mean? I couldn't stand hit, living up the bank, where you always see the same lady next door,

the same old storekeepers, same old street. Take it down here, and a man ain't the same twict, even. Feller come down two years ago, name of Det Bettin; next time he was Fur Walkin, an' next I knowed he was feller name of Gost. Never twict alike! That keeps it int'restin'!"

"I should think it was. Gost, you said Gost?"

"Yeh! Rubert Gost, most impudent whelp I eveh seen in all my borned days, wearin' diamonds fit to kill! Graftin' all the way down. A mean scoundrel clear through. He's up to Hickman into a hospital now. So darn mean somebody plugged him—an' he'd ought to have been killed!"

"Shot!" Murdong exclaimed. "How did that happen?"

"No one knows; Whisky Williams found him circlin' around on the long sandbar above Slough Neck some'rs—shot through, an' out'n his head."

Murdong was surprised by the recurrence of this story at this place. He recalled, now, what Mrs. Haney and Jesse had told him about Delia, and he realized only now that he was really in the midst of the stories that were in the making down the river.

The five sat down to supper—a most excellent, smoking meal, fragrant with roasted game, a big heap of brown bread, onion-gravy dressing, and hot bread. Little was said during the meal, but after-

ward, while the two women washed and wiped the dishes, the talk turned to river gossip, and Mrs. Mahna talked about river trippers, all kinds of whom drop down the current past the Forks of the Ohio.

"You never know!" she declared. "Some'r scouting, feared of detectives, and some are 'lopers whose folks wouldn't let 'em marry, and some are wives hating their husbands, and som'r husbands whose wives are well shut of them. Men, women, children. Why, there was one boy dropped out of the Ohio, long in 1903-1904, who played poker like a genuine crook. He was just a boy, fourteen-fifteen years old. He pulled into my boat, one night, long of dusk. He laughed and talked, and when he 'lowed to pay me for a night's lodging, he pulled out a roll of bills; he had a thousand dollars then. I told him he was a fool and to drop back home with it! He laughed, 'I'll have five thou' 'gin I get to N'Orleans!' That's what he said. He had eighteen hundred out of Helena, and he never come by below—no, sir! Not without it was under water. Nobody that'd admit it had seen him. He showed his roll once too often. I'd sooner have an ounce of cocaine into me than let it be known I had a thousand dollars in my pocket down this old river."

"They'd hurt a woman?" Murdong asked.

"Yes! They'd kill their own mothers, some of

them. Lawse! But not every one's mean thataway. There's some down here like you—paying more'n they's asked to pay. But everybody wants to keep his eyes open, take a sharp look at a stranger every time, and not take chances with those that's crooks in the eye of them. You get to know a crook down Old Mississip'! You can tell 'em by their eyes."

Thus they talked, Mrs. Mahna being speechmaster, as she declared, adding:

"Somebody's got to talk. If I didn't you'd jes' set and think."

At nine o'clock, or a little later, Murdong rose to depart.

"You don't mind if I leave my boat where it is to-night?" he asked.

"Not at all," Mrs. Mahna answered.

Murdong started to leave, and the little visit broke up for the night. He found that Delia had taken only a few of the furnishings. She had left chairs, cooking utensils, oil stove, curtains, and even dishes, and several books. He thought the books must have been overlooked, but left the subject for the morning.

He pulled his skiff up to the stern of the cabin-boat, and brought all his own outfit on board. He locked it by the chain which had been clamped to the bow ring.

Lighting his gas-flame light, he sat down to read.

A little later he was surprised to hear a knock on the cabin door, and when he opened it, Delia stood there.

"I would like to talk to you for a little while," she said. "You were speaking of Gost——"

"Certainly!" he exclaimed. "Come in—or——"

"No, I'm a river girl. It doesn't matter—I'll come in."

CHAPTER X

CHARLES URLEIGH, the free-lance reporter in Cincinnati, grew more and more interested in the Double Diamond Case, as he called it on his clipping file. He could not get over the feeling that he ought to find the inside story of the matter. Perhaps the nerve of the man who carried Goles's selection of diamonds to Judge C. Wrest and sold him upward of five thousand dollars' worth of the stolen stones struck Urleigh as the most interesting phase of the matter.

The reappearance of Goles, furtive and fleeting, with the diamonds stolen from Wrest, simply added to the impossibility of the story as he saw it from the news and detective standpoint. If Goles had not brought the stones to his own firm, and left them there, two alternatives were possible:

Goles had been killed; his list of customers found with the diamonds and Wrest worked for ready money. Or Goles himself had joined a conspiracy, and made a double raid on the gems within his reach.

Working on these theories, the case presented only normal aspects to the detectives and to the reporter

who had full possession of the known facts. All the speculations were knocked in the head when Goles appeared with the stolen gems.

Naturally, it was possible that the salesman's conscience had troubled him, and he had returned the Wrest gems to his firm as a kind of atonement. But why had he returned the Wrest gems instead of the firm's own?

Speculation along these various and blind alley lanes more and more worked upon Urleigh's imagination. For years he had been hoping that some time he would stumble upon a ready-made plot for a story so that he could sell his string of newspapers and settle down to a comfortable living writing stories and living on his royalties. He, too, had his delusions.

He had a good deal to work on, and he was so good a newspaperman that he felt that if he could but pick up some certain clue or thread or fact—he could not guess what fact—he would be able to gather all the scattered vagaries of the case into a perfectly understandable story. It would be a good Sunday story, and he knew several newspapers which would pay him a hundred dollars for a broadside, perhaps a good deal more, for the Goles Diamond Case was now a standard mystery in Sunday edition archives.

In mid-November, one day when he had found but little news to send away, he was tired with writing

a five-thousand-word special about the standard subject of Civic Reforms. He walked down Broadway into Ludlow Street and strolled out on the Central Bridge.

The bridges were a favourite resort of Urleigh. Standing against the rail of any of these bridges, the Ohio River, up or down, brought him many fleeting notions to store or forget. He had seen the river in great floods and in low water. The perpendicular difference between the two stages was five or six stories —and he could just remember that day in February, 1884, when the Ohio went to seventy-one feet above low-water mark.

Year after year, school boy, office boy, reporter, and free lance, he had gone down to the bridges to enjoy the strange sensations he had while on them. Looking down stream his mind's eye conjured up visions that would have done credit to any magician's crystal, but he felt that his most vivid efforts were as nothing compared to the realities.

"Some day," he had said for years and years, "I'll just go down clear to N'Orleans."

"N'Orleans." A strange port to the thought when one considers that it is at the trunk of a dozen empires.

He had in his pocket the latest editions of the evening newspapers, and as he walked with his quick, nervous stride down the streets, he seemed to glance

through their columns hastily. As a matter of fact, he was reading every item with ample care, seizing the names and essential facts with that finest of sieves, the mind of a free-lance reporter.

And suddenly, as he walked out upon the bridges, and was about to fold his paper, there struck his eyes a single line of "full face lower case" type:

SHANTYBOATER SHOT

HICKMAN, Nov. 14.—White Collar Dan, a river man well known to shantyboaters, was found wandering on a sandbar a few miles below this place, with a bullet hole through him. Williams, a medicine man, brought him to the local hospital, where he now lies with an even chance of recovery. He was insane when discovered, but he recovered consciousness later. He would tell nothing about his predicament, but the authorities think he was shot in a row over the division of some jewellery, for he mumbled and groaned as he talked about diamonds and rubies.

"Mumbled and groaned as he talked about diamonds," Urleigh shivered. "Where's that danged fool local correspondent's eyes, ears, wits—Lord! What did he say about diamonds and rubies?"

Urleigh turned and started up town again on the run, but he realized as he glanced at his watch that Manager Grost would not be in his office. He ceased his race and returned to the bridge. He strolled out

on the great structure and looked down stream past the C. & O. bridge to the glimmering sunset in the bend.

The autumnal chill was in the air, and when he stopped walking he felt the drift of the cold in the gathering night. His lips felt dry, his backbone quivered, his mind raced and romped as he realized what strange thing he had fallen upon in the little paragraph from Hickman about White Collar Dan—of all men!

Urleigh needed no stimulant now to bring out of his memory a flood tide of consequential details. White Collar Dan—the scoundrel. Shot, eh? Deserved it, if ever a man did.

"The authorities think do they?"

Urleigh laughed.

He walked up town and stopped at the *Winnower* office, where he was lucky, finding Dill Wester just coming down to go out to have something to eat. Urleigh joined him, and they went around to the restaurant—the very one in which Obert Goles had vanished as though he had put on a cap of invisibility.

"Will you cover my string for me for a week or two?" Urleigh asked. "I'll post you——"

"Be glad to," Webster assented.

Then Urleigh gave him a scratch list of the newspapers who wanted telegraph and those that wanted mail items, and gave him a rapid description of the

eccentricities of the auditors and which ones have to have strings of clippings before they would admit their papers had printed the items, and which ones kept track and mailed checks regularly.

"I'll be away a week or two," Urleigh declared, as they left the restaurant. "So long!"

With that another man was missing from his many haunts. Not a soul in the city knew where the free-lance reporter had gone and no one knew for certain whether he would ever return or not.

Urleigh, with his suitcase packed, stepped aboard a train down the Ohio. He changed cars at Paducah, and arrived in Hickman. Checking his suitcase in the baggage room, he went immediately to the hospital, and the superintendent admitted him to the cot-side of the wounded river man, Daniel Gost.

"Hello, Dan!" Urleigh greeted him. "Heard you were here—thought I'd drop in and say how-de-do!"

The wounded man looked up at Urleigh sharply, making no reply.

"I'm on my vacation," Urleigh explained. "I've always wanted to drop down the Ohio, so I took a train down, stopping off at the towns——"

"Dropped down on a train," Gost repeated. "That the way you trip the river?"

"Why not?" Urleigh asked.

"Why didn't you get a shantyboat and drop down thataway? Then you'd get to know the river."

"Never thought of it—really; I don't know anything about the river, and I didn't want to try it. Besides, I didn't have time; I'm going to N'Orleans. How are you coming on?"

"All right." Gost shook his head. "I get my G. B. to-morrow—broke!"

"So! Then what?"

Dan shrugged his shoulders, and turned pale with pain.

"Some shantyboat'll take me on a while—lot's of friends on the river."

"Can't I help you?"

"You might," the wounded man studied, "you done me a good turn that time they had me, two-three years ago. If we had a boat——"

"How much would it cost?"

"We could get a good one for fifty, a hundred or along there—little shantyboat. There's some in West Hickman; I saw 'em when I went by. Could you do it? There's—there's more in it than you know, old sport!"

"Sure I can—I've a month if I want it."

"You saved my life," the patient sighed. "Just when I didn't give a damn, too; but I'll tell you about

that. I'm going out this afternoon a little. We'll see about a boat, eh? You can stand it?"

"A hundred, yes—perhaps one-fifty."

"All right, old boy! You saved me, yes, sir."

That afternoon Urleigh and Gost rode down to the ferry in a jitney, and crossed on the ferry to the sand-bar opposite. Luck was with them. Two youths who had started down the river in a new little shanty-boat, to make their fortune trapping and feather hunting, had been caught killing game against the now resident law, and they were flat broke, discouraged, and anxious to go home to God's country. For sixty dollars Urleigh obtained a two-hundred-dollar boat and a hundred dollars' worth of furnishings and supplies.

"I never had a better bargain." Gost shook his head, when they had seen the river adventurers depart on the ferry. "I'm not going back to that danged hospital. I'll stay here. You got any baggage?"

"A suitcase is all."

"Get it. See if they'll let you have some of that dressing and dope at the hospital? We'll pull right down. I'm in a hurry to drop down."

Urleigh had no trouble obtaining medicine, and he paid twenty dollars to the hospital, just to cover expenses. He returned within three hours, and before three o'clock, under Gost's direction, Urleigh cast off

the lines, pulled the sweeps, and they moved out into the Mississippi current.

Gost, weakened by his sufferings, went to sleep on one of the two folding cots. Urleigh, looking down the bend ahead, wondered what mess he had gone into now. The least he suspected was that Gost had done something, and that he was now a fugitive from justice, and this made Urleigh *particeps criminis*. At first the thought was disagreeable, but as he left the town behind a bend and the old river loomed larger than anything he had ever dreamed or suspected, Urleigh's mind changed.

"I've needed a rest," Urleigh admitted to himself as he sat down in a chair, and drew on a sweater because there was a tang of chill in the air.

Gost slept nearly two hours, and then, taking a look at the river, had Urleigh row them into the east bank of the river, at the foot of a long sandbar. Urleigh made the two bow lines fast to a snag and a stake. It lacked then but a few minutes of sunset.

The wounded man looked up and down the eddy and at the bank. When he had finished his inspection he looked at Urleigh, grinning:

"Right here's where she got me!" he shook his head. "If I hadn't been dipping, I'd known better, but you know what snow does to a man. It was that made me crazy. I'd been all right if it hadn't hurt

so, and if I hadn't taken more. I'd whiffed, though, and I whiffed again, when I crawled out on the bar. Wonder I didn't take enough to lay me cold. I didn't have only a little in my jag, I remember. So I didn't have only enough to set me off my head."

"This is where she shot you?" Urleigh repeated. "I was wondering about that."

"Yes, and she was a mighty pretty girl, too. If it hadn't been for the snow, I'd known better. You know what coke does to a man! I never hit it regular, you understand. Down here, after I've been working, I take on a little. I let it alone, though, for months, not touching a smell! Well, she done a good job, and made her getaway—but you wait, lad! You've done me a good turn, and I know a friend. We got to find that girl next. She's a slick one. You know what I think? I've been studying, and I understand now. I was a fool! She showed herself to me up the Ohio. I was afraid, then; something about her warned me. Then she showed herself again. She pretended she didn't notice me at all. But I see now she was tolling me along. She hasn't left the river—I heard that. She's slick, but we'll be slicker."

"You think she just wanted a chance to roll you?" Urleigh asked, understandingly.

"Exactly that, old boy. I've been trying to think out what she must have known. You see, you take a

pink like her, and she had me muttoned before I knew it. Well, you wait. I don't know what your game is, but——"

"I'm on the level with you," Urleigh declared. "I'm a newspaperman. I'm just down the river, that's all."

"Yes? Oh, I know—say, there's things I'd like to know, too."

"What, for instance?"

"Was that straight, in the papers: did a man name of Goles go into his shop on Maiden Lane, in New York, with old Wrest's sparklers?"

"You mean that diamond salesman who turned up missing?"

"That's the one—travelled for Ofsten & Groner. Papers had a lot about it. I happened to notice—I was wondering. That was a big haul if he got away with a hundred thousand. I was wondering if he carried them back, the way they said. I mean Wrest's——"

"Yes, he went away with a hundred thousand in diamonds and some rubies. He carried back the diamonds Judge C. Wrest of Warsaw was robbed of. They couldn't dope it out."

"How the devil could anybody dope it out?" Gost exclaimed. "You know that made me feel d—d funny myself!"

"It made everyone feel queer," Urleigh said. "He carried back five thousand in diamonds he got away with himself—they were sold to Wrest by a man who said he was B. L. Folded."

"Say, you know Grost, head of the National Agency, in Cincinnati?"

"Very well. He's tipped me off to a lot of stories," Urleigh admitted without hesitation.

"You one of his men?"

"No."

"Just a reporter, same as always?"

"The same as always—I'm resting now, though. I'm taking a vacation."

"It beats h—l!" the wounded man commented. "Let's have supper. I got some meat to fry. That's yours. I just want a little soup! Say, now, I don't want to ask anything you can't tell. I mean about your friends——"

"Go on."

"Was there a skirt anywhere in that Goles diamond job?"

"Never heard a hint of any woman in it."

"Well, we'll have supper, then." Gost shook his head, adding: "A woman always butts into a job sooner or later—same's one done into this. Don't it beat h—l?"

CHAPTER XI

WHEN they had eaten supper Urleigh sat down beside the bed where the wounded river man's weakness compelled him to lie.

"It looks funny to me." Gost shook his head. "Wouldn't it to you? You see, I went on board that girl's shantyboat, and just said 'good evening' same as a man will. Course, I hadn't any right to be there, but she had her doors unlocked, and swinging. She didn't look mad, or anything. She was just a pretty girl, and alone. What do you expect, a pretty girl alone down Old Mississip'?"

A note of personal injury entered the man's tone.

"Now what'd you think, yourself? I ask you, man to man. I didn't go anywhere near her—just started to set down. I wasn't rough. I just visited. She drawed an automatic and plugged away, just as off hand and careless as that! Never give me a chance to explain or anything. Never said a word. What'd she shoot me for? I'd been through the snow, course! I'd ought to hailed from the bank—but that don't make any difference. She was damned quick with

her gun! What'd you think if a lady kinda hauled off, careless like, and plugged you through?"

"I'd be astonished," Urleigh admitted.

"I was hurt, I knowed how bad, too! I stumbled out over the stern and the water wa'n't deep, hard sand bottom. I got ashore, and ran up the sandbar, and I took some more snow, like I said. It made me crazy. That's all there was to it, from what I can see, or you can see, or any man can see, ain't it?"

"That's all—perhaps she was frightened."

"Frightened? Hell! That's what got me to thinking. She just drawed her gun, kinda smiled, and let go! If she'd acted scairt—you see yourself! If a lady's scairt, and shoots you, you understand. Likely you apologize. Anyhow, you ain't sore. You understand, even if you didn't mean no harm, but she meant it! She smiled, I tell you, when she plugged me. She was satisfied. I tell you, she's bad, that woman. A woman like that ain't no right to be bad, I tell you. Why, damn it, she's pretty! She's beautiful. A man don't expect that kind to be mean, and smiling about it. I've been all around. Paris and London, and N'Orleans, and New York, and Chicago; why, I didn't find no woman anywhere, not like her! I tell you, that's what she was waiting for—a chance to plug me. What for? You got any idea what for?"

"Why, it was night—she was alone—she was afraid——"

"Not by a d——d sight! She wa'n't no more worried'n a fly. She just let go, calm and smiling like! The reason why? I'll tell you. She knowed what she wanted, and she'd got it, and she took it. That's what is. I don't know her; I never knowed her. But I got my suspicions; when I was scouting around, getting ready, and getting pointers. I run into something then that was funny. You know Goles, the salesman? Well, it was about him. Diamond salesmen don't have no friends, do they? They don't talk; they're suspicious as h——l; and they're bonded. Why, the comp'ny had him trailed, he was so smooth they suspected something. The papers said so, didn't they? They took him into that restaurant, didn't they, there in Cincinnati?"

"Yes—that's so. That's as far as they ever traced him."

"Well, he was going down to Old Wrest's, wasn't he?"

"That's so, too."

"Well, what do you s'pose he went away down the north bank for, and to Vernon and then to Madison? What'd he do that for? What'd he drop in there to Madison for? Away down below Warsaw, and he was going to Warsaw? If he was going to Warsaw!"

"If he was going to Warsaw?"

"Sure! That's what's aching me, and I never thought! Not before, I didn't. I tell you when that girl let go at me, so darned handy and already, and me the sure-enough simp, never understanding a little bit, why, she showed herself to me! Look't! There she sat, reading magazines and books on the bow deck. Pretty! Lord! Why, if I hadn't been watching up the river, I'd tumbled then, right away! But I held off. There she was, and there she kept. Course, I didn't drive like h—l down the river. I knew better'n that. What I didn't know was that she tripped along, making up what she'd lost, floating nights, down the Ohio, and I tied in nights. There, day after day, just ahead of me, maybe, or just astern. And me worried about up the river."

"You think she baited you on?"

"Ain't I be'n telling you? Then I went aboard, and she smiled. Plumb satisfied she was! She smiled, and let go her little billie doo, and I fall off the deck, and hog-wallow up the sandbar. Ain't she got my gasolene boat then? Sure she has! And she's got it yet, I know that. Believe me, if that girl gets the drop on me again, she's got to spend her time doing something 'sides smile. I ain't never killed no woman, but she's bad, that woman is. Delia, h—l! Ain't I the come-on, though? But if I'm a come-on, there'll be a comeback, too! Believe me there will!"

Urleigh could not explain. He was hard put to it, trying to catch the drift of the river man's plaint. He could see that the man had a grievance of some kind, but he dared not try to delve into it by direct question. The thing he wanted to know was hinted at. The diamond salesman had not gone to Warsaw but had circled around and struck the Ohio far below Warsaw. What happened then was not plain. The river man seemed to know, but he would not tell.

Who was Delia, the girl who had shot Gost? That was a question which seemed to have little bearing on the diamond question. In some way, however, she was accused of having lured to attack the more or less innocent Gost, whose record was known far and wide because he worked jewellers in various ways. Because Gost—White Collar Dan—had been shot, and because Urleigh knew that he was the kind of a man to know about the lost diamonds and the evanescent Obert Goles.

Thus far Urleigh was fortunate. He had carried Goles several hundred miles from Cincinnati—taken him to Madison. Why had he gone down there instead of to Warsaw? What had he done in Madison? This was a point which his friend Grost, of the agency, could inquire into.

The river man was tired, weak because of his wound and wearied by the excitement of his mind, baffled

by the mishap that had come upon him so unexpected, and from such unwonted hands. He fell into a fitful sleep almost immediately, and Urleigh went out to look at the dark flood, which so little resembled the Ohio River with which he was familiar along the water-front of the city.

A man may know a river where the steamboats land against the bank, within a stone-throw of the warehouses and junk yards of a great city; may know it from the flow of cubic feet per second to the passing of tows, shantyboats, driftwood, government boats, and the fatalities that cause coroners' juries to bring in "Unknown cause" verdicts. But at the same time he may not know what is down around the second bend, much less what a lonesome bend or long reach has to offer.

Urleigh had imagined the Mississippi River to be like the Ohio, with towns every little way along the banks and steamers and bridges and a thousand civilized things to fret any tendency toward rurality. Now he was in a section of river where only one light was visible, and that a dim, quivering spark that seemed to be miles distant. He knew the feeling of a black street in a desolation of waterfront dives; he had not the least acquaintance with a desert sandbar or a wooded wilderness river bend.

Just that few minutes that he stood alone looking

into the clouded murk of a bottom land night would stand by him whenever he should attempt to add a paragraph of description to his specials about river people. If he should ever write a fiction story, he would never need to fake a description of river dark.

"She was just a pretty girl, and alone!" he repeated from Gost's shrewdly veiling narrative. "She had her doors unlocked and swinging."

Urleigh, unprejudiced, a thorough newspaper reporter, and skilled in deduction, repeated that last sentence:

"She had her doors unlocked and swinging!"

He studied that fact, for he saw that it fixed one phase of the girl's character; her smile, as she shot, fixed another phase.

"She was ready for him," Urleigh decided. "Instead of locking the doors to keep him out, she knew a better way: she left them swinging, so that if she had to, she could run out on the bow, or over the stern. She's a brave, level-headed girl!"

It was a nice bit of deductive reasoning and Urleigh was well satisfied by his conclusion. Gost accused her of leading him on, and teasing him to overstep the bounds of all propriety, whether up the bank or down the lower river. Urleigh studied that phase a long time.

"That may be the story!" he told himself. "I sure

want to get to interview that girl—Delia, did he call her? That's it—Delia."

He locked the door of the cabin and having stripped and donned his pajamas, he, too, turned in to sleep. The motion of the boat in the low river swells disturbed him for a time so that he could not immediately go to sleep. During this midway interval he smiled in the dark at the curious adventure. A dream of going down the river in a houseboat was coming true—and under ideal conditions, for he was on the track of a story as strange as any he had ever hoped to cover.

"I'll never get my expense money out of it," he told himself with practical recognition of the conditions. "But I'll have the fun of getting the story straightened out if it costs me a thousand dollars."

A thousand dollars was not too much to pay for the satisfaction of solving such a mystery as he now saw; the prestige he would have for covering such a yarn would add to his value as a free lance. The girl was a find. Not a whisper of a woman in the case had reached any one's ears. His hope was that Delia would prove intimately associated with the case; his fear was that she was just a blind-alley lead or trail. If he could only connect her up with the story in two or three places.

"Then I will have a story!" he told himself.

Gost awakened him at dawn.

"Cut us loose!" Gost said. "We want to trip down! We got to find that girl. We'll stop in down below, somewheres, and ask along. They know she went past Carruthersville, they said there at Hickman sandbar. They're all talking about her, and they've given me the ha-ha, getting shot up! They don't know the right of it, though. They wonder how she got my gasolene boat, and all that. They think we were pals, and that she was huffy about something, and just rowed it and shot me up. Let 'em think what they please. I don't care!"

They floated down, early and late. Gost knew every bar and bend. He pointed to a hundred features, and told Urleigh what they meant. He indicated the point at Slough Landing where a man was killed; showed the soft-paw where Island Ten Bar lay golden yellow under the sunshine; he pointed out where Dancing Laura was run over the stern of a big houseboat when Clarence Pauley chased her with a butcher knife, and where Picking Joe picked her up and tripped away down the river with her.

Urleigh had never known there was a river people till he heard White Collar Dan relate the traditions of the shantyboat towns.

"Right along here," Dan said, "in that Point Pleasant Eddy, there was a man and his wife lived

for a few weeks. One night people heard shooting out in the shantyboat, and next day the boat was gone. Guess what happened?"

"What?"

"She was changing her man; if a man's got a wife down here, she has two good bets to lose him: one is to shoot him and throw him overboard; t'other is to just get him 'vorced to Mendova. Both ways has their advantage for a lady."

"Do many women trip the river alone?"

"Not many. That's what beats me about that Delia. Lawse! She's a high-steppin' good looker. You'd ought to seen her. She stood up straight, and good looking and solid! You know, some women stand up all right, but they look soft and squashy. She stood up different—like a statue on a pedestal, but alive! First along, I didn't notice her much, but down below Paducah, I couldn't help but notice. I know how a wild cat feels, now, after it's been and stepped into a bait trap. First along, I didn't notice much, thinking of other things. Then I walked right slam into it. Bang!"

"What would she bait you on for?" Urleigh asked, casually.

"What would she bait me on for? Didn't she know what'd happened? How do I know how she found out? But she knows! You bet she knowed!

I remember now. You see, things keep coming back to me. I've been trying to think where it was I seen her first. Where do you expect? It was on the Central Bridge there in Cincinnati. She was leaning on the down side rail, looking away down the river—you know how people do!"

"I've done it myself," Urleigh admitted.

"There she was. Then, down below Louisville, when I'd done my job and made my getaway—there she is! How'd she know about that gasolene boat? And then—and then——"

"You think she aimed to get you after you'd made your getaway?" Urleigh repeated the substance of other questions.

"Well, that's just what she did!" Gost growled. "I fell for it like a fly to the swat! But she's on the river yet. If we can beat the good word down, for she knows I'm out the hospital, we'll visit her, all right. That's what we'll do. I got some questions I want to ask that lady!"

CHAPTER XII

THOUGH one travels like the wind, word of his coming will precede him down the Mississippi River if he is of interest. The fact that White Collar Dan had left the Hickman Hospital was printed in several newspapers up and down the river, with the result that Junker Frest and José Macrado learned the fact on the evening of the same day—this to make plain what might seem to be a mysterious shantyboat grape-vine telegraph.

"He was accompanied by his friend," the news item declared, "one Charles Urleigh, believed to be from Cincinnati. Urleigh purchased a shanty-boat at Hickman bar, and the two floated away down the river together, leaving the mystery of White Collar Dan's shooting as much involved as ever."

"Now what do you make of that?" Macrado demanded, reading the item with pains and determination, in Palura's wine room in Mendova.

"Looks like Dan'd found somebody to fish and cut bait for him," Frest declared. "Dan had nine hundred left in his pockets. I know that, because

Whisky Williams told me so. That girl's got his motorboat, though—I don't make nothing of it."

"Who's Urleigh?"

"Oh, probably some grafter—Dan's always picking up that kind."

"Well, maybe he ain't, now—maybe he's a soft-paw, and Dan may be givin' him his lessons."

"You can bet Dan'll look out for hisself. Course, he may be just boardin' with Urleigh."

"Like's not we'll know more about it. They'll be dropping in down here in Mendova d'rectly. I been kinda suspicioning about that Dan. He ain't been on the river in a long time now—'ceptin' just to say howdy. Now he drops down, out'n the Ohio, and when he's shot, he comes back on the river. Course, likely as not he's afteh that gasolene of his'n, if that gal did pirate it off'n him. Gawd help her if he is! Dan's mean when he aims to be. Course, I never knowed of his mussin' up women, but you know, ten-twelve years ago, he was a young feller then mebby twenty, mebby eighteen, but a wise one.

"Well, as I was sayin', they was a little old feller name of Storit run a whisky boat down b'low, round Arkansaw Old Mouth. He always had a lot of money, and he was keerless, besides wearing more diamonds 'an any shantyboater I ever got to hear about be-

fore or since. Dan come down into a little blue skift, out'n St. Louis, an' he stopped into that whisky boat. Storit was in Mozart Bend all alone. I know, because I'd just left him that same evenin'. Next day Dan come by in that whisky boat, tellin' me he'd bought it.

"What come of Storit? Well, he never showed up not in two-three months. He was always proud of his looks, wearing diamonds, as I told you. He showed up into a hog pen on a raft, shiftless, dirty, no 'count. I hardly knowed him. He had a long scar from his right ear, which was split, down to his collar. He'd been hit—hard!

"Now ain't it funny how men gets their start? Dan wa'n't nothin' particular up till that time. He took some diamonds down East, after selling the whisky boat som'rs around Vicksburg. Them diamonds brought him good money, all right. But let me tell you: when he sold them diamonds, he learnt somethin'. He got to know about diamonds and that kind. They say he's the slickest sparkler trader anywhere now, just by accident, you might say—happenin' to catch Storit just right to get what he had. Storit was a mighty cyarful man, too, never turnin' his back on no damned customer that come in."

"Yes, sir!" Macrado agreed. "A lot depends on

the way a feller gits his start. I 'member Dan. He always wore a wool shirt till he went East. He come back White Collar Dan! Some fellers is jes' lucky. Some says they ain't no luck, but I know! Somebody was jes' bound to git Storit, with all them sparklers—and it were Dan. He knowed 'nough to take 'vantage of what he got to know, tradin' with them down-East fences. Dan's a big gun now. He ain't neveh been caught right out. He was two years in Joliet, an' two-three months on Blackwells, is all. I seen 'im down on the coast three-four years ago. Had a long talk with him.

"'What I'm afteh,' he said, 'is a big stake. Then me for investments. Hit's only a notion, fellers wantin' a lot of money. S'pose a man could git three-four thousand a year? Why, he could live into his gasolene an' eat 'nough, an' live!' That's the way Dan put hit. He 'lowed 'f 'e could get fifty thou', he'd live right, an' square."

"Yas, suh," Frest admitted, thoughtfully, "on'y a damned fool couldn't get to live off'n three-four thousand comfortable. He'd have to have an awful 'stravagant wife to spend more'n that. Course, if a man gambles er she dresses like the devil hit'd take a heap more'n that!"

"Oh, if you goin' to count a woman in." Macrado tossed his head.

"Well, you wouldn't want a man to be washin' dishes an' sweepin' around, an' so on, would you? He'd navigate the boat!"

"I bet you got to stop to see Delia," grinned Macrado, slyly, and Frest grimaced with embarrassment.

"Well, she's a swell looker!" Frest defended himself.

"And Mrs. Mahna's a swell talker! She said three cents extry on a pound of copper would coax some fellers away from the prettiest gal on Old Mississip'——"

"That old—that old woman," Frest choked, "she tricked me thataway."

Both laughed lightly.

"If luck'd only break right for a man," Macrado mused; "some men is lucky. They was a feller over on White River who found one of those pearlers down a green stillwater, and all he done was he'p himself. Just like that! No trouble—nothing. Six thousand dollars' worth of pearls."

"And somewheres around—the papers is be'n full of it. There's a hundred, two hundred thousand worth of sparklers."

"That's right. Up to Cincinnaty; I come by Warsaw, three-four times. I know right where that old Wrest lives jes' as well as I know I'm settin' here. Sho! He had a hundred thou' into his house, all

sparklers. Lawse! Somebody jes' got onto hit, an' they was jes' pickin's, yas, suh!"

"White Collar Dan come out the Ohio," Frest suggested, thoughtfully.

"Sho'!" Macrado turned and stared at the junker.

"He was always lookin' around for di'monds."

"I see somebody took back half what was missin'—Goles, was hit?"

"Theh's on'y a hundred thousand worth aroun' now." Frest shook his head as though the outstanding gems were a meagre lot.

"Think what even a hundred thou'd do for a feller—two fellers!" Macrado protested. "Nobody knows how Dan got shot. That gal's got his boat! You s'pect he was working with someone?"

"I always hearn say—he told me so hisse'f, that he worked alone." Frest recalled: "'I make a fair livin',' he said, right down in Arkansaw Old Mouth, 'I'm layin' off to make a big haul, an' then jes' live. That's what he said."

"Who's that looking for a big haul to live on?" a low voice demanded, and the two river men started from their chairs. In their absorbed interest they had not watched closely. Palura himself had sauntered near on his rubber soles.

"We was jes' talkin' about White Collar Dan. He's out the hospital!" Macrado showed Palura the item.

"I seen that," Palura said, sitting down. "About those diamond drummer sparklers—heard anything about 'em on the river?"

"No," Macrado shook his head. "We seen about 'em in the papers."

"What'd Dan get shot for?"

"He neveh told!"

"And he's comin' on down hisse'f? Know that feller Urleigh?"

"No."

"Probably that ain't his right name. Dan always worked alone?"

"Seems like he said so," Frest declared.

"And some skirt's got his gasolene boat?"

"Yas, suh," Frest nodded. "I seen hit in b'low Yankee Bar. Mrs. Mahna 'n her fambly boat's on one side an' the boat of a girl out'n the Ohio was on t'other side. Delia's her name. I seen her, up above, on her bow deck, reading. I 'lowed there was a man inside, an' I was jes' drappin' down. Awful nice looker! She beat me down, some way. I 'lowed to be friendly, but that old Mrs. Mahna's broodin' her, an' she sent me down to git my copper sold on a bull market. There wasn't no bull market. That old woman jes' lied to me. Looks like she jes' done hit to keep me way from Delia, that's her name."

"They's talkin' about Delia!" Palura nodded. "If she's what they say, she's some girl. How you expect she got that gasolene?"

"Well, Dan was shot an' up the long bar above Slough Neck, an' she dropped down with the gasolene 'side of her boat."

"Looks damn funny, don't hit?" Palura shook his head. "They say she made an eddy at the head, an' crabbed her strokes, too, like she was a soft-paw."

"She could shoot straight, though!" Macrado added.

"If she done the shootin'," Palura shook his head. "I don't always bet women does the shootin' they gets the credit for. Course, there's some women that does shoot, and shoot like h—l, but generally they ain't had the practice or the nature to do hit. You got to want to shoot to hit anything, and women don't run to that deviltry, much."

Palura strolled on, cat-footed. The two river men sat in silence. The dance-hall keeper had said nothing direct, but they knew what was on his mind. He was watching for any drift loot that might float down the river. If they could think of something, he would stand in with them, to their mutual advantage. He kept in touch with river people, and he knew the river gossip.

"As long's she's with Mrs. Mahna, they ain' no

use trying to get acquainted with her!" Frest mused, half to himself.

"And when Mrs. Mahna gets through with her, she'll be plumb careless how she treats anybody," Macrado added; "I don't understand how she got the best of Dan."

They left Palura's and returned to their shantyboats on Poplar Slough. They went into the cleaner, neater boat belonging to Macrado, there to sit, thinking.

"Luck neveh breaks the same way twict," Frest suggested. "You reckon them di'monds are on Old Mississip'?"

It was a blunt question to put there in the river night which had lately fallen. Macrado, though the question had been in his own mind unspoken, was startled by it. He looked over his shoulder and then at his fellow river man.

"I be'n wonderin'!" he admitted, "if they be! Lawse! Lawse! Theh's a hundred thousan' of them! Hit'd keep a man—three-four fellers all their borned days. No work. Neveh hongry. Livin' comfy! I worked hard for all I got to eat. I got to go to work now. I ain' shif'less—I work in log camps an' sawmills and steamboats. Seems like I work all the time, an' all I got's this shantyboat."

"Same with me," Frest shook his head, glancing at Macrado sidelong, for Frest had sold three tons of

copper this trip, and he had made many profitable trips down the river.

"If a man could make a stake—five-ten thousand, he'd get along!"

"Hit ain' enough," Frest protested, angrily, "hit ain' enough!"

Macrado glanced up quickly, but let his gaze go on past the junker to the blank wall.

"I be'n thinkin' we mout—we mout get to look that gasolene boat over," Macrado suggested, with a cunning leer. "I'd like to git to hit 'fore Dan comes clear down. He had money to carry him around—but I been figuring some, and hit don't look right to me."

"Mrs. Mahna," Frest brought up.

"What's her? What's Mahna an' that boy an' the whole damned bunch of them if theh's a hundred thousand into diamonds theh?" Macrado demanded with sudden vehemence. "I'm desp'rit!"

"So'm I!" mumbled Frest. "Money'd do me as much good as any man."

"I'll sell this yeah shanty; a feller 'lowed he'd give me one hundred and twenty-five for hit, an' get his answer in the mornin'. You could sell your boat to Carl—hit's a big boat——"

"Then?"

"I got my eye onto a gasolene half-deck boat up the Slough—all hit needs is paint to make hit good's

any boat. Make ten mile an hour, an' she was new, last year, but ain't be'n took care of right. Three hundred."

"Sho! You expect we—we could do hit?"

"Ain' you a man? Ain' I a man?" Macrado demanded. "Cayn't you shoot, an cayn't I shoot? No questions asted on Old Mississip'——"

Frest's eyes gleamed with hopeful avarice. This thing that Macrado suggested stirred him to his soul. It reminded him of his own thought that luck breaks right to a man sometimes. Wasn't it likely to break right this time?

"Diamonds is hard to get away with," Macrado admitted, "but we can go around; if White Collar Dan could get to learn, we could. We'll get a little money for the gasolene boat—get our money back, so's we could go East. Maybe the detectives would chase afteh us if they heard we had them. We could just slide around from place to place. Nobody'd know."

"Yassuh, hit's so!" Frest approved. "I could git a little ready money an' we could keep a goin' circlin' around, kinda livin' nowheres in particular."

Macrado looked keenly at the junker, but dropped his eyes. They whispered their scheme over; they would purchase a gasolene boat and go hunting the girl, Delia. Watching White Collar Dan, and taking in any strangers who might appear, and who might

have something to do with the diamonds, which they now had convinced themselves were on the river. Some instinct, developed by years in the shantyboat world, dealing with and watching fugitives, now assured Frest that he was at last venturing forth upon a great stroke of business.

Macrado's suggestions were opportune. Macrado sold his shantyboat in the morning; Frest went uptown, and Macrado shadowed him till he saw the junker go into the bank.

That night the two started up stream in the weather-beaten but well-found gasolene semi-cruiser. They carried two rifles, a shot gun, two heavy revolvers, and two heavy automatic pistols.

Frest the junker thought that he had turned pirate, but José Macrado knew better—or worse. His keen eyes had seen a ridge around Frest's body outlined against the shirt. Macrado knew that this was a money-belt, and the height of the ridge indicated the thickness of the contents of the belt.

"A man neveh knows when his chanct is comin'!" Macrado thought to himself.

CHAPTER XIII

OF THE coming and going of river people there is no end. Macrado knew that when they sold out their shantyboats at Mendova and left in the gasolene boat no one would know whether or not they went up or down river. He knew that when they had rounded the first bend their future would be lost to the minds of people, except in idle gossip, perhaps wondering around as to what they were up to. Shantyboaters would not take word up the bank that anything had happened, even if they knew that something had taken place.

The avarice of Junker Frest was well known from far up the Ohio down to New Orleans. He drove hard bargains for bottles, iron, rubber, bones, copper, brass, and a thousand other things that come to a junker, including old ropes, and new ropes declared to be old.

Frest saw ahead of him the chance of his life time: he saw that he had a chance to junk in diamonds. It was not a big chance, but by being bold for once in his life he might establish himself for all time as a man of ample wealth. He had cast his all on the throw of this chance—but he did not know that. Neither

did he know that the dice were loaded against him. He thought he couldn't lose.

Macrado drove the boat and steered it while Frest took care of the cabin and prepared the meals. They stopped that evening in Veal Island Chute, and after supper they played cards over a folding table in the little cabin, which was not quite high enough for either one of them to stand erect, though Macrado was the taller, bulkier man of the two. They played late, Macrado grimly, Frest nervously.

Frest had never gone upon such an enterprise before. It was out of his line. Only the amount of the possible booty had lured him from his lowly system of depredations. The story of the stolen diamonds had taken firm hold on countless river minds, and countless pairs of eyes were on the lookout, as river rats and big fellows alike were gasping at the thought of such luck as getting them breaking their way.

Somehow, it would not be possible to tell just how, the impression had gone down the river that those diamonds of the Cincinnati mystery were somewhere on the river. Perhaps only two knew the fact for certain, but filtering minds had gathered from the river gossip, from the news of the papers, from strangers who had tripped out of the Ohio, and especially from that strange shooting episode in which had figured White Collar Dan—whose luck with diamonds was a

river tradition, and whose specializing every one with ears had heard about—the tiny germs of truth, and fixed them.

Two of these minds were Frest's and Macrado's. They were acting on their suspicions. But Macrado had two minds in the matter. He was not lacking in imagination and the daring that takes a long chance; perhaps of all the river observers, he had determined upon taking the longest chance of all.

When the card game ended, and Frest was folding up the table to put it away, Macrado took the second step in his own private plan. With a leather slung-shot, wielded with a short, savage swing, he tapped Frest behind the right ear, felling him as a sledge fells an ox.

Then Macrado pulled out the horsehide money-belt which Frest wore, and in which he had gathered his savings from junking for years. Having searched the man's pockets, so that nothing of value could escape, Macrado dragged the unfortunate junker out into the cockpit, and having hoisted the anchor, steered out of the Chute up stream into the main channel of the river. Landing at a sandbar, Macrado scooped up two pails full of sand and backed out and steered across into the deep water opposite a caving bend.

There he made certain that Junker Frest would never return to disturb him as a corpse, by doing what

river tradition says will keep a corpse on the bottom of the river. He filled the body with sand and buttoned an old overcoat tightly around it, and then cast it into the river tied in the tarpaulin on which he had performed his loathsome task. He threw overboard the knife that he used, and when he was done, there was not a speck or a fleck of any kind to betray his ghastly, perfectly premeditated horror.

He went on up the river then to meet Mrs. Mahna, Delia, White Collar Dan, or any one who might perchance inform him with regard to the mystery of the diamonds. White Collar Dan had the reputation of trailing a man for days, weeks, months, seeking opportunity to rob him. José Macrado entered upon his diamond-hunting career with a reputation as a mere careless, shiftless shantyboater, kind of a watermelon stealer and corn husker, who would work a few days in a sawmill to earn money to lounge down the river doing nothing for a few weeks.

No one, anywhere, had ever suspected José Macrado of harbouring the spirit of a cat waiting for a mouse—for Fortune to show him his prey; much less no one ever had suspected him of being desperate or vicious enough to do murder for his first step in a long, carefully laid development of plans.

No sooner was he rid of Frest than he reckoned the spoils of his venture. The motorboat was worth $300

anywhere, and Macrado had paid half of the cost. The boat was as nothing, however, to the money-belt. Frest had declared five or ten thousand dollars was not enough for any man, and Macrado had skillfully persuaded him to draw his money out of the bank. He now counted the money by light of a pocket flash while he steered the launch up midstream.

There were hundred, fifty, twenty, and ten-dollar bills in the hoard. He counted them slowly, with considerable difficulty, for Macrado was not educated or used to handling large sums of money. When he had counted the money, so many hundred-dollar bills, so many fifties, so many twenties and tens, he added up the amount with a pencil on a stick of wood —the pencil had been Frest's for similar service in arithmetic. He read the figures with satisfaction, $8,640.

"It'd cost a man two dollars a week to live," he reckoned, and he worked a sum in life right there. The money would last, at that rate, more than four thousand weeks, or about eighty years.

The discovery dazzled Macrado for a time. He could not believe that he had more money than he would need for his own life, even should he live to be a hundred years of age. He had lived long on meagre supplies—far more meagre than one would believe. He had known hunger and privation. He had found

old clothes in a river drift pile better than any he had to wear. He had had slim pickings so long that two dollars a week was ample to his mind—for a little while.

Then he saw himself cutting a good figure—wearing suits of clothes costing fifteen or sixteen dollars; he imagined himself wearing a three-dollar hat just as though he were used to it; he looked at his unmated shoes, and swore that he would get a good pair of shoes if he had to pay five dollars for them.

"That money'd never done that old scoundrel any good, anyhow," he said, his mind reverting to Junker Frest, who had worked through painful years gathering bones and old rubber and bottles on the sandbars in order that Macrado might have a fortune!

"Sho! He said five-ten thousand wa'n't 'nough for a man," Macrado sniffed, and his glance turned to search the other end of the boat.

The river night was star-flecked. The shadows looked ominous along the caving bank side. There were shapes out over the sandbar opposite which Macrado had seen before, but their significance he had never known till this hour. Frest had gone to join the procession that marches up and down the current of the Mississippi, and the shapes often leave the procession to dance on the wide sandbars, and any one might see them.

Macrado, when he had counted the money, replaced it in the money-belt and started to strap it around him, but the belt was cold and clammy. At the touch of the damp leather against his skin, he shuddered. He almost forgot to steer, and the first he knew the motorboat was cutting across the current. He straightened it up for the government channel light up the bend, and turned to glance into the night over his shoulder. No matter which way he turned, the face of Junker Frest was just withdrawing from view, and yet so slowly that he had a side-long vision of that shrunken, eagle-billed countenance with shrewd little eyes—eyes that accused him while they seemed to be amused.

Macrado did not mind the accusation, but the amusement was ominous, and grew more and more hateful as the night proceeded. He ran his boat into an open eddy and anchored it. He ventured at last to light a lantern in the cabin. He sat down there, thinking. He took note and stock of himself, and of his possessions.

"Now I needn't be afraid of bein' hongry," he told himself, over and over again. His conscience was not entirely accusing with regard to what he had done.

"If I hadn't killed him, like's not I'd be'n killed up myself by that old scoundrel," he thought, with

truth. "I'd never knowed he had that money if he hadn't said ten thousand wasn't enough."

He dared not turn out his light to go to sleep. He found but fitful slumber in the cabin. When the sunshine of morning followed the dawn, he was able to go to sleep, and toward noon he awakened moderately refreshed. After breakfast and a pot of strong black coffee he wondered at his nervousness and strapped the money-belt around him without a qualm.

He went on up the river, still undetermined what he would do. He needed time to think; luck had broken his way, with some assistance, and he could not make up his mind what he ought to do. His mind was about equally divided between relief from worry about his future meals and the threat which hung over him—not quite banished from the background of his thoughts.

"When you've killed a man," he admitted to himself, "you ain't safe. You never know when something'll break wrong. But nobody knowed what we 'lowed to do. Not a whisper to anybody. Not without he said sunthin'. He mout of said sunthin' to the bank; I hadn't thought of that."

He had sunk the evidence of his crime in the depths of a river bend, where a crime is little apt to return in court evidence, but he had not counted on the fact that he himself would know all about it. Knowing

about it, he could see places and ways where the crime might perhaps be revealed. Of course, he recalled murders which had been carefully hidden, but which had risen up to terrify the perpetrators and convict them even before men.

He steered up the river, but looked back down the reaches and bends frequently. It seemed to him as though someone might be pursuing. He was not sure that a swift sheriff's boat would not suddenly swing up in chase of him. The idea of that dead man returning to the surface, his reason told him, was preposterous; but his fears told him that it was possible. A man had been killed up Arkansas River once, and sunk with a chilled steel plow; the body and plow were recovered three hundred miles down the Mississippi. Macrado had seen the plow. A man recalls such things when he is himself menaced by an untoward revelation.

"I'm satisfied," he told himself. "I got enough money now. I don't need any more money. I'll jes' live on this. Sho! I plumb forgot those diamonds he was going afteh! He 'lowed to get them."

There was something reasonable in the chance of finding those diamonds. Macrado could see nothing to interfere with his continuing on the adventure alone. In fact, he had schemed to continue the venture alone.

"It'll give me sunthin' to think about 'sides that——" he decided.

"That" loomed large in his mind. It meant the means by which he was relieved of hunger and poverty and worry, about where next he would find a place to sleep. His idea of bliss had been escape from the petty subject of pennies and dimes and nickels—two bits wasn't much to him now.

"I'll know how to spend my money," he told himself; "I'll spend it cyarful. I won't take no chances about hit. Mebby I'll buy a little farm som'rs an' settle down. That'd be plumb comfort. Hit'd s'prise some, hearin' José Macrado had bought a farm. No-'count José a planter. Sho! Course, they might think sunthin' if they knowed me'n the Junker's gone off together. They'd sure think sunthin'. Nobody must know I got money—not for a long time. No, suh!"

He spent another terrible night alone in his cabin in a little eddy under the gloom of a wilderness. He had lived up and down the river, night like day to him. Now night was full of horror. He dared not put out his light; he did not know what attack might be made upon him if he let the light burn. He covered the ports, and stuffed the cracks around the door—but he was sure some splinter of a light beam shone through to betray him. He knew it in his heart, just as he

dreaded in his heart a discovery of what he had done. Nevertheless, in his worst fears he declared to himself:

"I'd do hit all oveh ag'in. Hit ain't no worse'n what I be'n through, hongry and sleepin' out in sleet an' snow, like a dog."

And yet he wished that he could have thought of some easier way of getting the money.

"If I'd on'y jes robbed 'im, an' left him to squawk what I'd done—I mout of gone some'rs. I could of gone down into Chaffelli. They say you cayn't find a steamboat that gets lost down in theh."

He longed for companionship now; he thought that if he could find someone to keep him company, he would forget his spectre; at least, he would not be afraid of it, and he could sleep in the dark.

"Old Frest 'lowed he could get that gal," he remembered. "Sho! I'm rich—I got lots of money. Likely she'd friendly with me. She's a great looker, they say. I'd be kind an' gentle—an' if she's got them diamonds —Lawse! What a time we'd get to have, sportin' around!"

He cut loose his boat and started up stream in the midnight, hurrying to find Delia, whom he understood was at Yankee Bar, or around there somewhere, with

Mrs. Mahna and her family. He knew Mrs. Mahna, who had befriended him in his poverty days.

"I'll shine up to Mrs. Mahna, and let on I'm somebody, an' can take cyar of myself," he decided. "I won't act like I care a whoop about that gal. Likely Delia'll be kinda skittish and offish till she gits to know what kind of a feller I am. I'm all right; all I eveh needed was some clothes an' a bit of slickin' up. I'll stop in to one of them plantation commissaries and buy some clothes and fixings. A feller's kinda got to dress up, tell he gets hitched up to one of them proud an' high-steppin' ladies."

As good as his thoughts, he lavished eighteen dollars on hat, shoes, clothes, and shirts. Every cent he spent seemed to wrench his soul, which was not yet tuned to his affluence. As he had known, he was not so bad looking when he was dressed up. All he ever had needed were a few good clothes.

Thus he was prepared for what a shantyboater told him was the mooring place of the Mahnas and some other boats, up in the bend above Fort Pillow Bluffs, about a mile or so below Yankee Bar.

Sure enough, there were other boats along the eddy—nearly a dozen of them. A shantyboat town had formed there—one of those ephemeral little floating settlements where is made so much of the river traditions. Macrado was disappointed. He

had hoped to find the object of his hopes alone with the Mahnas. If she was there, probably a dozen men'd be willing to marry her.

"Anyhow," Macrado reflected, "I've got money; that's what'll count."

CHAPTER XIV

DELIA entered the cabin that had been her own, and closing the door behind her, drew a chair up to the table on which she rested her elbow, letting her sun-browned hand and forearm hang over the edge.

She stared into nothingness for a time, and then she began in a low voice:

"You're not a river man. You only just arrived on the river. Seems like I've been on it for ages—centuries!"

Her face looked as though she was suffering from a hurt.

"Can't I help you? You said——" Murdong began, eagerly.

"Yes—you see, I'm desperate. I thought down here I'd escape from everything—everyone! But here you are."

"Me—what!" Murdong gasped, amazed.

"Yes—you! What are you following me down for? What do you mean by it? You have no business dropping in here, taking up with me!"

"Why—I had no idea—I—you seemed—I thought——"

"If men only could understand women!" she sighed, hopelessly, and real tears started in her eyes.

"If my presence is objectionable"—Murdong stood up and bowed—"I'll take my skiff and my departure——"

"Take your shantyboat—and go! It's your boat," she said, and though she said it vehemently, Murdong discovered an undertone in her voice that was pleading.

"Certainly I'll go!" he said. "I'm sorry to have my presence so disagreeable to—to so fair a river personage."

He bowed, and she flushed.

"Oh! You don't understand," she choked, "it isn't—it's——"

"Whatever it is, we'll not discuss it," he told her. "It is sufficient to me to know that my departure will bring relief to you."

She rose from her chair and turned to the door. He followed with instinctive politeness. On the bow deck she hesitated as she confronted the high-raised cabin of her gasolene. He sprang to place a chair for her. As she stepped to the seat, she stopped, having accepted his proffered hand.

"You don't know how good you are to me," she

whispered, and before he knew it she had kissed him squarely and wonderfully upon his lips.

Then she sprang aboard her own boat, and remarked:

"I'll cast your lines off."

As good as her word, she let the lines go, one by one. He coiled them, under her low-voiced directions, and in a minute the pretty cabin-boat was clear. Before it floated clear, however, she dropped on her hands and knees, leaning over the four-inch high pipe railing around the motorboat's cabin and caught his hands in hers.

"Take care of yourself, will you? Don't trust anybody. And hide—hide all the way down the river. Be ready to shoot—and if Gost comes, don't wait; kill him! Promise me you'll kill him if he follows you?"

"Anything to please you, lady mine!" he whispered, gallantly. "Anything for another one of those—of those delicious——"

"Sure!" she laughed under her breath, and this kiss was not all one sided, by any means. Then she whispered: "In January I'll meet you at Salem Landing, or down Spanish Moss Bend."

Then Delia released him, and the shantyboat floated out in the eddy, and past the sterns of the motorboat and of the Mahna shantyboat.

"Hello, you!" Mrs. Mahna's voice demanded. "You pullin' out?"

"Yes, Mrs. Mahna," Murdong replied; "I'm no good, and when I make a mistake, I take my departure p. d. q. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

"And forgive me my sins, fair Delia," he called out, contritely.

"You're a beast!" she retorted. "I can forgive your prompt departure, however!"

Delia stood on the motorboat cabin for a few minutes, and then entered the cabin, which she had made sweet and clean, and which now had the perfume and sanctity of a lady's bower. She turned on the cabin lights supplied by storage batteries, and sat down with a book in her lap, as though to read.

"He's a good boy!" she said to herself. "I wonder what he would think if he knew why I drove him down the river with that cabinboat?"

She smiled, and her face became serious, then smiling again, as she saw the humorous and the deadly phases of the affair.

"Oh, I wish he would take my warning seriously!" she whispered over and over to herself. "If only men would understand. He's such a dear boy. I could almost love him—doing just what I begged him to do, and not asking one question. I'm glad I thought to

kiss him. He seemed so surprised. Some men might think it was perfectly natural, because they are beasts. But he was really surprised—and he meant that last one. I know he did. Not a word; he just floated away because I asked him to. His name is Murdong. I mustn't forget that."

She tried to read a story of romance and adventure, but it seemed dull to read when she had such memories and thoughts and was living such an adventure herself. A hail from Mrs. Mahna interrupted her reverie:

"I kinda suspected that feller," Mrs. Mahna declared. "One of those smoothy-woothy sort of fellers. If you hadn't sent 'im pikin', I 'lowed I'd go visitin' with a shot gun, an' then he'd git, you bet!"

"Oh, he's all right, Mrs. Mahna," Delia exclaimed, impatiently. "Probably I'll catch him again down the river. He's real nice."

"Wha-a-at!" Mrs. Mahna cried.

"Yes, real nice; you see, he's young and—good. I was afraid if I didn't send him away, you might think something."

"Well, I de-clare!"

"I hated to do it, so I sent him packing."

"Gracious!" Mrs. Mahna commented. "You are a queer one. You looking out for the looks down Old Mississip'? Sho!"

"Oh, a lady cannot be too careful," Delia answered.

"My lan'! What'd you come down the river for, if it wasn't to get to a place where you wouldn't have to be careful, an' could do as you please?"

"Why, that's so! Of course—I didn't think—you'd never say anything, or any one."

"You bet! And even if we did talk, what dif'rence would it make—down here? It ain't like it is up the bank. That's a real nice-lookin' young feller, too—if you cared about him."

"I do care a great deal about him, Mrs. Mahna—but I just couldn't help it. I had to send him away."

"Well, cook your goose to suit yourself—that's all I got to say."

Mrs. Mahna subsided, and Delia retired to the little stateroom, and in the dark of her bunk she sighed and smiled and chuckled.

"Dear old woman!" she thought. "Looking after me like that. And wasn't he sweet, behaving the way he did—not knowing, but going just to please me, just not to hurt my feelings. I wonder what the poor boy is thinking about, floating down that dark Fort Pillow Bend. If he'll only be careful. Oh, if anything should happen to him, I'd feel as though I'd killed him. But I was afraid—so afraid!"

The following day other boats began to drop into the Yankee Bar eddy, and tied into the bank. Some were old river people, who enjoyed the company,

and they knew that Mrs. Mahna would keep things going in any shantyboat town of which she was president. Other boats drew in for purposes of their own —a gambler boat, whisky boat, a little showboat, and three or four parties of sports hunting and rowdying down the river bent upon fun and devilment.

Among the rest, José Macrado blew up the river all dressed up fit to kill, in a nice little gasolene launch and spending money, though none had ever known him to spend money before. Mrs. Mahna had seen the day when he was so hungry that he begged like a dog—but people are up and people are down in the river. If she saw anything, or thought anything, she did not say a word to any one—not about Macrado. She had enough to talk about without prying into the affairs of other people.

Nothing would do, Mrs. Mahna declared, but they must have a barbecue, with wild turkey, roast goose, pig, beef, game pies, and all kinds of things. Accordingly, the hunters chose sides and went forth to slay what they could, up and down the river in the gasolenes. Some hunted at night, and they brought their prey in dressed and skinned, ready to cook, but no questions were asked about that. It would not be minding one's own business, asking where the "boys" caught their pork or killed their beef.

Through the turmoil and effort of the river women

preparing for the feast and merry-making Delia moved doing her own share. She set her face as firmly against the sly looks as against the pointed hints of the men and women who would have been glad to see her showing what she could do in the way of "matching men" as the game was called. She would not smile on the ardent attentions of Macrado, and she faced down the gayest of the sports, who was gallant till Delia's scorn drove him in confusion from the scene, surprised that a river girl could resist him.

All these affairs were but introductory to the day of the barbecue, which fell upon a Thursday. In the morning another cabin-boat drifted into the foot of the eddy and floated up the line, looking for a place to tie in. A stranger sport was at the sweeps, handling them, but not so the man who sat on a chair against the cabin telling the soft-paw what to do and where to land in.

"Sho!" Mrs. Mahna exclaimed, "I know that feller; where'd I see him?"

"Of course you know him," Delia whispered in a low voice. "That's White Collar Dan—Rubert Gost—the man you've been talking and thinking about—the man you dropped down to save me from."

"I'll shoo 'im out," Mrs. Mahna declared, emphatically. "I'll have the boys—they'll——"

"No! Don't!" Delia shook her head. "You

keep him here. He's fooled and he's mean, and—let it go!"

Sure enough, Urleigh and the man Delia had shot had arrived in the shantyboat town. They drifted past the Mahna shantyboat with the gasolene cruiser occupied by Delia alongside. The diamond specialist gazed at the cruiser steadily and with lowering brows.

"Hello, Mr. Man!" Mrs. Mahna burst out upon him, from the stern of her boat. "You can land up above that yeller boat if you want!"

"Thank you!" Urleigh raised his hat. "I'll try it."

A space above the yellow boat was forty or fifty feet wide, and Urleigh easily landed against the bank, bow on. He ran out the starboard bow and stern lines and made them fast to a snag limb. Then he hauled the port lines taut on stakes which he drove with an ax. Last he drove a stake at the bow, and pushed the gang-plank against it, and, lashing the plank rope to a cleat on the bow, bumped. Thus the boat was held on the bank, but sparred off, too.

"You're getting right handy with the lines," Gost approved. "It's a good part of a man's business to know how to moor a shantyboat down thisaway."

Gost started up the bank, weakly, and Urleigh had to lend him a hand as he climbed the steep dirt bluff. As they emerged upon the level of the bottoms Delia strolled that way, her arms swinging, and her face

impressive, looking every way but toward the new arrivals.

On all sides the observers, men, women, and children, stopped their work or play. In a breath they heard or felt the tenseness of the incident which was now breaking—Delia, the beautiful stranger, about to meet the river man whom she had so casually shot, or was at least believed to have shot, none knowing exactly what had happened.

Urleigh, uninformed as yet, turned and discovered the strikingly impressive young woman. As he turned, she looked him in the eye, and with a glance appraised him. Gost, wetting his lips, turned and faced her. He glanced to right and left, to see what was the attitude of the other spectators, and under the sharp glances which he met, he quailed a little—weak as he was from his wound.

Delia walked up till she was within ten feet of the man and then she stopped suddenly, speaking sharply:

"Has your visit here anything to do with me?" she demanded.

Gost, whose mind worked in anything but direct lines, stopped where he stood and looked at the ground searching for something to answer, as it seemed. She waited a minute, while he gathered his breath, but she grew impatient.

"If you have anything to say to me, say it," she ordered. "I shot you, you scoundrel, and you know it. I'll shoot you again, too—and you'd better know that. What do you want?"

"You—you got my—my——"

"Say it," she exclaimed, as he hesitated, "say what you have on your mind, *if you dare!* Don't talk about any trifling, no-account thing. Say what you are really thinking. If you *dare*, say it."

Gost wet his lips. He had suffered much as a result of his previous encounter with this young woman. He knew, as the other spectators surmised, that she would shoot him where he stood, like a dog—and they would approve of it, because she was a tall, angry, and good-looking girl. He had not counted on this reception. He had expected the girl to be afraid, and keep out of his way, and give him a chance to get his bearings and renew old alliances—but nothing of the kind. He could not meet her on the grounds that she had chosen.

"Just for your satisfaction," she smiled, relaxing her indignant poise, "just to let you know what's what, the business that brought you here is ended. I haven't possession of what you are after. Not at all. I knew you would never rest till you learned about them. I threw them overboard—every one!"

"You—you——" he began.

"Don't you call me any names," she ordered. "I won't stand for it from you or from any man."

Gost swallowed and blinked. He turned and staggered toward the top of the bank. He would have fallen down into the river if Urleigh had not caught and helped him on board the boat and into the cabin.

Macrado, standing a few yards distant, let his jaw drop as the girl spoke, and staring at her, his tongue worked wonderingly for a moment. She turned and saw him.

"Lawse, gal!" he gasped. "Did yo' all throw them di'monds ovehboard?"

Two score of river people within hearing started up tense and eager, for their minds had long dwelt upon that treasure.

"Did I?" she repeated, scowling at him. "May I ask what diamonds, and if I did, is it any business of yours what I did with them?"

Macrado flushed and retreated.

"You fellers better get to mind your own business," Mrs. Mahna called after him, "you darned fools!"

CHAPTER XV

A RIVER barbecue is where the shantyboaters laugh, dance, and sing, but more than anything else, they exchange ideas, duel for the sweethearts, and sometimes succeed in trading for other men's wives. The trades are not all ill-natured, at that, for it is a matter of authentic tradition that such a swap was made mutually satisfactory all around by the addition of a side of bacon as "boot," when one river lady was regarded as slightly fairer than the other. It was said, too, that both men paid for the necessary divorces, a cost of seventeen dollars and fifty cents, at certain river towns being the prevailing rate, and weddings to suit.

This Yankee Bar eddy barbecue was not lacking in its sub-rosa interest and excitement. It was a sort of coming-out party for Delia, the girl whom Mrs. Mahna had chosen to chaperone, but who had proved sufficient to herself in the now admitted encounter with White Collar Dan—than whom none seemed so crestfallen as when he stumbled out and took his place at the driftboard tables to dine with the others.

Delia, like the other women, did her share in serving the good things to eat and drink, which ranged from roast meats to pies and from filtered river water to raging strong drink supplied in a burst of generosity and good fellowship by the whisky boat—Hule's, as it happened.

Music for the dancing followed from two fiddles, banjo, several guitars, accordeon, and a talking machine or two. The dance was on the Sacred Concert Boat, as the theatre boat was called. It lasted far into the night, but Delia, after watching the river men and women dance a while in their rough and careless way, declared that she could not possibly dance, not even if she tried—not like that.

Nevertheless, she did a notable thing, for she permitted Urleigh, the companion of White Collar Dan, to take her to the supper tables where the cold remnants of the evening feast were stacked up. She allowed him to place a chair for her, and to pour her a cup of coffee from the big pot simmering over the live coals in the mudroast hole.

Urleigh, long enraptured with the newspaper business of gathering news, had found a good deal more than traces and facts in the story of the diamonds which he was following down. He had White Collar Dan's story in part—so far as Delia was concerned and fortune, or rather Delia, favoured him when he sought

her out and endeavoured to worm another fragment from her.

It was just as plain to him, now, that White Collar Dan was hunting down the river for the lost Goles diamonds, and he knew from the girl's veiled statement to Dan that she had captured the diamonds when she seized the motorboat. Macrado's ejaculation had seemed to clear up that phrase. Now he wanted to know if those diamonds had really been thrown overboard. Already he had gathered material for the greatest two-page gem story he had ever seen or heard of, and he lacked but some few hints about this mysterious young woman who taunted her pursuer with the information that she had tossed his loot—a hundred thousand dollars' worth of gems—into the Mississippi.

So Urleigh set about getting an interview, willy-nilly, from the young woman. He prided himself with his fine manner and his irresistible craft. He had the stage all ready and he was sipping coffee with her, but he hesitated as to how he should frame his opening questions.

At that point, as he hesitated, she rolled her eyes up and asked:

"When did you leave Cincinnati, Mr. Urleigh?"

"Eh—about three-four weeks ago."

"I was surprised when you pulled into the eddy

here with that—that man Gost; I heard he had a man of the name of Urleigh with him, but I had no idea it was the Cincinnati newspaperman of whom I had heard so much—and whose perfectly ridiculous writings had so often amused me in the newspapers. Dear me—the world is small, isn't it?"

"Eh?" Urleigh choked, reaching around to stare into her countenance on the lighted side.

"Oh—and now you don't remember me?" she sighed with mock resignation.

"Who—who are you?" he demanded.

"You don't know?" she asked, banteringly and yet with an undernote of eagerness.

"When did I see you?" he parried.

"You know," she smiled, as she rose to stroll along the bank. "I wondered, at first, whether you were after me, or after the diamonds. I'm glad it's only the diamonds. Good-night!"

She shook his hand briefly, and ran down the bank and out on the Mahna boat gang-plank, and thence into her gasolene boat cabin. Urleigh stood there staring after her.

"Evidently," he considered, half aloud, "very evidently, there are news stories of which I never even dreamed—who is she that she would think I might be following her down—and where the devil did I see her?"

He searched his mind for memories of women, fair and great and interesting. He was surprised at the multitude whom he knew by sight and sound. This Delia girl—he puzzled with a half-awakening sense of memory. He recalled her voice, and it suggested other voices. Yet he could not place a name or a fact with that voice, to recall it.

He went on down to the concert boat, to see the dancing again. He was already up to his neck in the novelty of the shantyboat life. He could see columns and columns of articles about these floating people. He dared not miss so good a scene as the men and women dancing—men with the mark of Cain in their eyes; women who looked as though they had experienced a thousand adventures; and music which possessed a strange and melancholy undertone, themes that were more pathetic than the people themselves.

Urleigh ventured to dance a set or two, and to waltz, trot, and eddy-step under the tutelage of one of the women, who was not old but who was very, very wise. She led him up and down the two-set hall, and as he was agile on his feet, he made an impression on the crowd. Her man, who was playing fiddle, kept shouting:

"Shake yer legs, boy! Shake 'em! That gal theh can outdance any gal I know of in them fancy step-pin's. Shake up, boy! Get to it. You all's the

fustest dangdest man as I eveh seed could keep up with 'er. Get to it, now—whoe-e-e!"

Urleigh, who had no desire to risk trouble, was glad the husband felt that way about it. Other husbands that night were not so complaisant. Already there was a subdued and ominous anxiety, bad tempers having been stirred by the generosity of the whisky boater and the recklessness of lone men. Trouble was not far away, and Mrs. Mahna, peacemaker at large, was going about, shaking her fists in the faces of some men, and pleading with others, and shaking her fingers in the countenances of rash young women.

Having obtained what experience he desired in that way, Urleigh returned to the bank and started up to his own boat, where Gost was lying, dead tired and weak, unable to stand much roistering around. As he went along, he was surprised to see the dark shape of a boat out in the eddy. As he looked, the boat gathered headway and pushed across the eddy toward the current of midstream and the black gloom of the far shore.

He did not know the boat, not recognizing the shape. He decided that it was one of the gasolenes that had dropped in for the play, and was now taking its departure. As there were eight or ten motorboats in, he did not give the subject thought.

On board his boat he found Gost dreaming and

tossing in his sleep. Gost was mumbling, as he had mumbled a good deal the past two or three nights. He had left the hospital too soon, and the river was not thoroughly agreeing with him.

"She's got 'em!" Gost muttered, "nobody'd throw 'em oveh! She's got 'em! I bet I get 'em back, if I burn her feet off!"

Urleigh gave the sick man some medicine which quieted him. Then he filled in his notebook with the work of the day which he had found intensely strange and interesting. All day long he had seemed to be on the brim of a volcano about to become active—yet the river people had somehow evaded conflict and trouble.

He, too, went to sleep at last, and it was late when he awakened. Gost was just getting up. When they looked out on the shantyboat town only two or three people were abroad. Everyone was sleepy, and looked it.

Urleigh walked along the bank and at Mahna's boat he stopped. The girl Delia's motorboat was no longer moored alongside it. He looked up and down the bank, wondering why she had changed her berth. As he stood there, Mrs. Mahna stepped out on the deck

"Well, looks like she'd give you the slip, don't it?"

"Give me the slip?" he repeated.

"I could see you two fellers worrited her," Mrs. Mahna grinned, "and I wa'n't s'prised to find she'd cast off and beat away. What you going to do about it, hey?"

"It is none of my business what she does," Urleigh declared, nettled by the river woman's hints and questions.

"Well, all I got to say is, she's a darned bright girl, and it's 'button, button, who's got the button!' I bet you you don't ketch her er ketch Murdong, either. Hue-e! I tell you, I bet them two's the slickest pair ever twisted slickers at their own game. She'll give you cards an' spades an' beat you, she'n that feller."

"Oh, Murdong isn't so much."

"Ain't he? Ain't he? That shows you don't know 'im. They tried to fool me, but them two's slick—slicker'n all the rest put together. You fellers ain't slick. You'll never get them, not into a shanty-boat."

"No? Perhaps we don't want them."

"Shucks! You cayn't fool me. Jes' as Macrado said, you're s'prised she throwed them diamonds overboard."

"Oh, no! Not a bit surprised—that's a regular lady's trick, throwing diamonds overboard. Just like Miss Desbrow, especially."

"That her name? Desbrow? Sho! I bet I'd get to find out. Where's she from, mister?"

"Up the Ohio."

"I know that—which place?"

"Oh, it isn't my secret to tell you. Didn't she say?"

"Well, I done the best I knowed how for her. I expect she can take cyar of herse'f all right. She seemed right innocent an' quiet, but, gee whiz! that gal's got spirit."

Urleigh knew that Delia had pulled out about 2:30 A. M., and he knew that she had headed down stream. He was nonplussed by the turn of events. When he returned to the cabin-boat he told Gost that Delia had slipped away in the night.

"Course she did!" Gost exclaimed. "Didn't I know she'd make her getaway? That fool Macrado talking thataway—I'd ought to kill him, the fool! Now there'll be a chase after her down Old Mississip', pirates and beaus and sports and crooks and all kinds of danged fools. Lawse! Wa'n't that Macrado a fool? Well, we got to cut out, too. We got to get down the riveh. I want a motorboat. This slow poking down in the current ain't no way. Shucks! I mout of knowed. Help me up. Lawse! We got to get a motorboat so's we can hurry. We got to hurry, I tell you."

Gost was querulous and weak, but he did not forget and raise his voice so that other river men would hear him. His voice was hardly more than a whisper, but it was distinct, and his meaning seemed plain. He stumbled up the gang-plank and along the bank crest, leaving Urleigh who turned to getting a meal—breakfast, luncheon—he did not know what to call it. He had forgotten to wind his watch, and he did not know the time.

Already some of the shantyboats were working out into the eddy, preparing to trip on down the river. It was clear that the shantyboat town was breaking up. The merrymakers of the previous days were now going forth to make up for their play, each after his own mind. Only the lazy sports and those who need not wonder where their next meals would be found lazied there for the day after.

A motorboat steered up the eddy about an hour after Gost's departure with Gost and Macrado in it. The boat was the one in which Macrado had run into the eddy, and when the two men entered the shantyboat, Gost exclaimed in short, breathless sentences:

"Mac' here'll swap boats. He's sick of a motorboat. He don't like it. He says he'll trade cheap. I told 'im you owned this boat, and he 'lowed it'd suit him. Gasolene costs money, it does. What d'ye say? Trade? Just a hundred to boot's, all."

"I can't do it," Urleigh shook his head. "I'm about broke. This boat took a lot of my money."

"Hell! I didn't know that!" Gost exclaimed, and Macrado seemed disappointed, a fact that Gost observed, as he continued: "Can you raise twenty-five? Eh? Look'n see—it's important——"

Urleigh thought a minute, and then he drew out a billfold. In the fold were three bills, a ten, two fives, and a one.

"I kin make it up!" Gost declared, going into the galley, and rattling the cooking ware. He returned with eighty dollars in bills.

"We'll trade!" he cried, eagerly, and Urleigh found himself in another river deal which he did not quite understand.

Gost would not wait. In a few minutes the few things on board that they wanted on the motorboat were transferred, including Urleigh's suitcase and clothes. The two partners jumped into the motorboat, shoved off, and with the motor running, started by Gost, they steered down the eddy into the current and headed toward Fort Pillow. When they were out of hearing Gost turned to Urleigh and grinned.

"This boat'll sell anywhere for four hundred if it's painted. We'll make money on it. Macrado 'lowed two-fifty for that shantyboat. That's trading, that is. But we could sink this old boat and never

know it, 'fore we get through with this job we're on. You know, now, what it is, don't you?"

"The diamonds?" Urleigh asked.

"You bet! I wasn't asleep last night when you was gallivantin' with the girls. I seen you sweetenin' Delia. Good! You got a game to work, now. See? I want a chanct at that boat of her'n, see? She said she throwed the diamonds overboard, but she's crazy if she thinks I'd fall for that. Why them diamonds'd make a girl crazy. Look't—what you got to do is take her up town in Mendova, see? Then I'll get to look—see, in her boat—I know it, every nook and joint."

"That'd be a very nice game for a reputable newspaperman to play," Urleigh suggested, thoughtfully.

"You bet! It's fifty-fifty, you'n me, on them diamonds, now. I don't forget you took care of me, sick's I was, and the way you done."

Urleigh did not demur. The Mississippi soon suggests to the wayfarer that its ways are not the ways of other empires. He wondered that his conscience did not trouble him at the mere thought of playing such a trick on Delia. Somehow he felt as though she had laughed at him the previous night. He wanted a chance to laugh at her now. For that reason he did not immediately deny the surface feasibility of Gost's scheme.

Gost had divined the girl's destination accurately. When they ran into Poplar Slough, her motorboat was moored at the foot of Ferry Street, and she was sitting in the cockpit reading a newspaper—and a pretty figure she made of it, too.

CHAPTER XVI

MURDONG drifted out, pulling his oars, little understanding the adventure of the night. He was glad that he did not know why Delia had visited him, kissed him, and sent him packing, because the uncertainty and womanliness of it fed his imagination, which took fire and filled him with conflagration. Surely Old Mississip' loves a romance.

With the kisses warm upon his lips, the tart statement Delia had made, for the benefit of Mrs. Mahna, left no wound in his heart. Far from it. It showed that G. Alexander Murdong was possessed of a secret in common with Delia, and Delia was one with whom it was joy and delight and extravagance to have a confidence.

"She'll meet me down at Salem Landing, or in Spanish Moss Bend, in middle January," he whispered to himself. "That'll be some meeting. Gee! If only I could write sonnets and do good poetry. Little weak stuff like mine'd sound silly down here on Old Mississip'."

Thus he mused, and leaning on the sweeps of his boat, he looked unafraid into the dark bend. His

eyes turned up to the heights of Fort Pillow, and he wondered if the souls of the dead do not walk upon the waters in the murk of night? If he knew no fear, at least he thrilled to the strange music which the river plays, which one cannot hear but of which one sometimes feels as though he is a part.

Murdong could see only the dark masses of the bluffs, the equally dark wooded point opposite, and the paleness of the river surface, catching and reflecting glows out of the sky. He saw a sandbar down stream, which had a strange gleam that marked the silhouettes of the wind-heaped, water-moulded hills and valleys of the little desert, where the myriads of grains of sand turned their polished facets and reflected the sky lights like precious stones.

Here was inspiration for his muse, which he now realized had been starved for these strange lower river things. He had come below the jumping-off place, murderous in his feelings and desperate—only to find that his star had guided him aright, and brought him into the very heart of the land of his dreams.

He knew how his mind had strived and struggled with the things it had to eat; he looked back wonderingly. What had saved his mind? Why hadn't it starved to death? Why hadn't his very soul died within him for lack of proper nourishment?

Here he was satisfying an appetite long ahungered.

Any sleep was too much—any rest of the eyes was too much—anything that for a moment interrupted his gaily intoxicated senses was a murderer of opportunity! The river swept him down bend and reach, and he knew that it was taking him far and away and beyond any of those poor devils who were struggling and plugging and stumbling through the prosiness of back yonder.

One touch had awakened his soul, one kiss had elevated him to heights of which he had dreamed, toward which he had struggled in vain through jungle fastnesses—now he breathed deep with satisfaction. His mind dwelt upon the sheer beauty of mighty torrent, and a skyline that did not imprison the soul struggling against the bars of limitation and crowds and haste and efficiency.

Just so Murdong found himself a part of the atmosphere of Old Mississip'. He felt as much a river man as any old-timer ever felt. He had been away; he had wandered in far places; but now he had returned to his true home.

He was still leaning on the sweeps when dawn darted like a flash of lightning out of the east. He saw the magnificent sunrise up-pouring of light. He caught the chirrups of migrant birds, and he saw wild geese planing down out of the high sky, having travelled a thousand miles since sunset the night before. By that

spectacle he knew that away to the northward there were grim, cold storms—his instinct told him so.

He went about his day's work calmly enough. He prepared a very good breakfast, and ate it in the comfort of a chair at a table. He looked about him with awe and reverence. Here had dwelt a fairy lady of the river. This had been her home; this had been her chamber of secrets; this had been the housing of a rare and beautiful soul; he dared not let his imagination run free in this place.

He walked up and down in that little boat, looking to right and left, and everywhere he saw the touch of her hand, everywhere he felt her presence, and the aroma of that fair place smote his nostrils like incense —a faint, delicious perfume sweeter than any he had ever known before.

He floated on down till noon, and then he swung into an eddy, where he anchored in order that he might sleep and make up for his lost rest. He went into Nodland, dreaming fair dreams as a poet will when in the proper mood, untrammeled by noxious environment. His soul had expanded, his vision had welled up in proportion, and his heart rejoiced as never before.

This is what Old Mississip' does to an appreciative poet.

But Old Mississip' was not yet through with G.

Alexander Murdong. Instead, the river had only just begun. That afternoon, about 6 o'clock, when darkness of autumn was very near at hand, Murdong awakened and arose greatly refreshed by his sleep. He looked forth into the evening, and decided that he would not float down that night. Instead, he would give free rein to his imagination and curiosity.

His curiosity got the upper hand, and he began to take an inventory of the things which were in and of the houseboat which he had purchased. He turned to the bookcase and inspected the books, papers, magazines, and writing material there. He wondered if she had meant to leave so many things, or had they been overlooked? He comforted himself by the thought that she would meet him down in Spanish Moss Bend—he would rather meet her there than at some prosaically named landing.

There were a number of old newspapers—Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and so on. He read their headlines impatiently. One newspaper featured a president's note, a Wall Street flurry, a fevered magnate, and a diamond mystery. Another paper featured an actress's divorce, a murder, a captive smuggler, and lost rubies and diamonds. A third paper featured a meeting of a common council, a sermon on municipal lack of reform, a street car strike, and one question persisted, "Where is this gem salesman?"

Murdong found that every one of the papers featured many things, but every one agreed in featuring that diamond story. It exasperated him, that diamond mystery refrain. He threw the newspapers down impatiently. He resumed his inspection of his craft, and the more he examined it, the better he liked it.

He liked, particularly, one evidence of shantyboat efficiency. In each of the four corners of the cabin were little manholes, and in one of these stood a hand pump. If the boat should spring a leak anywhere, the hull could be pumped out from the cabin without going outside.

However, when he looked into each of these holes in the floor he saw that the bottom was perfectly dry —not a drop of water leaked in anywhere. In fact, the bottom was so dry that Delia had used the little openings as storage places. In one were several cans of corn, tomatoes, and the like—this was the port side in the galley or kitchen. On the other side she had stowed sealed gallon cans of kerosene. In the bow she had stowed other things.

In one of them Murdong discovered a leather case with the name of "Ofsten & Groner" printed on it in gold letters. He hesitated, trying to remember where he had seen that name. Then he opened the case, and found in it a large number of folded sheets

of linen paper with tissue paper inside. And when he looked in most of all he discovered a little cut stone.

"Gee Christmas!" he gasped. "What's this? Those diamonds!"

He shook out the folded papers, and examined the brilliant pebbles which Delia had taken out of their papers and neglected to fold in again. There were hundreds of the brilliants, including a number of rubies. There was no denying their genuineness. The papers were all marked, with the weights, with their price, and with symbols to indicate their quality.

Murdong stared at them in dismay. There was something uncanny in their flashing there in the bright lamplight. First he had learned about them from the headlines in the newspapers, and now he saw vividly that those newspapers were there because they told about the diamonds.

His imagination had been a blessing, as he viewed the river in its broad, beautiful moods. Now the lonesomeness taunted him, and he seemed to feel, if he did not hear, the demoniacal laughter of the river spirits, rejoicing in his predicament.

"She said she'd meet me down in Spanish Moss Bend," he sobbed. "And these are stolen—she didn't do it. Who did it, if she didn't do it? That's why she ordered me to go away, and that's why she kissed

me, and wants to meet me again. She was afraid—and I'm scared."

He pulled the window curtains down closer, and locked the bow and stern doors. He brought out and examined his automatic pistol, with which he had played upon the feelings and nerves of the river rat, Storit. He recalled the ghastly scar on Storit's head revealed by the flash's white light.

In a moment the free, open, beautiful river had become a place of menace and tragedy and horror. He recalled White Collar Dan, alias Rubert Gost, something of whose career he had written on one of his police station story assignments—and he had come across that crook's name here on the river. Worst of all, now that he thought of it in connection with the diamonds, Gost and the girl were in some way connected. The girl had some of Gost's books—cheap detective fiction. He was a penny-weighter who substituted phony or paste for gold or gems. In some way they had come into possession of all these precious stones.

He packed the gems in the case, hastily, and hid them behind the cans of corn in the kitchen manhole. Then he returned to the writing desk and seized upon the newspapers. He read the accounts of the famous diamond mystery wherein a diamond salesman had sallied forth with more than one hundred thousand

dollars' worth of gems, and disappeared from under the eyes of detectives and the world that knew him.

Murdong shivered when he thought what happened to men who pack around a fortune in gems. His poetic instinct prevented him from knowing which way to turn. These might be the gems—they might not be. On the other hand, what was she doing with them? Or did she know about them? And there was Gost. Could it be possible that the beautiful girl was his victim? Was she trusting to the chivalry of G. Alexander Murdong?

Where lies the duty of a poet, who had been mauled sore by civilization and who has fled past the jumping-off place, down Old Mississip'?

Murdong decided that his duty was first to discover the honesty and prove the innocence of the fair Delia. Fair Delia was too lovely not to be helped by a poetic river roamer who cared not for the wealth and baubles of a world that despised his genius.

In a short time the romantic spirit took the place of the panic that the discovery of the gems had given Murdong. He had no thought of the ethical questions which he might or even should have asked himself. Questions of ethics do not trouble beyond the jumping-off place.

He rejoiced in the sweetness of the trust reposed in him by the river lady fair, whose spiritual presence

overwhelmed his muse and prevented him from putting even into prose the galloping wonder of the adventure which was now his, although he did not label the varying incidents adventure, and would not know till long afterward that the Mississippi commonplaces were wonderful. The river was like a fairy kingdom where one in enchantment regards the most extraordinary events as the most commonplace and merely interesting.

He did not know where Spanish Moss Bend was. He had never heard of it before she had whispered in his ear the magic name. He had sealed his agreement to meet her there with a kiss so precious that he felt that he would breast the ramparts of countless hordes of foes to reach her side.

And the river smiled and turned the bends, piling up against the long curve, and sloping down like the rim of a vast, shallow half-saucer. He floated down and down till he was carried into the bank at Mendova one bright day. He landed and in a ship chandler's on the waterfront he found a book of river maps and a list of the post lights on Western rivers, which he carried on board his boat and examined with eager haste.

Sure enough! There was Spanish Moss Bend, a twenty-five-mile semicircle, where the first Spanish moss is seen growing on the trees. He had four hun-

dred miles to go from Mendova—lots of time before mid-January. He would dream down those great curves shown by the map. He would recover his poise, and he would by that time be an old river man, careless and free in that vast plenty of atmosphere which was the charm and the life of the huge torrent.

Murdong purchased a carbine rifle and four hundred 30-30 calibre cartridges, hard and soft nose both. He bought another automatic pistol and picked up two sheets of boiler iron, half rounded. His idea was that in case of an attack anywhere down the river he could stand one of these sheets in front of him and use it as a breastwork. He had never heard of shantyboaters who line their cabin along their bunk with boiler metal to protect them against being shot up at a landing. Thus was the instinct of self-preservation vindicated. Murdong knew what to do.

He floated out of the Mendova landing and down the river. Something of the sweetness seemed to have vanished from the atmosphere of the Mississippi, but it had gained in romantic interest.

"Where else in the world would a man find five hundred diamonds in a shantyboat?" Murdong asked himself.

From now on, like a diamond salesman, he lurked along, keeping at a distance from other shantyboaters, and having nothing to do with other river people.

He kept away from towns; he landed in lonesome bends where no other shantyboat was in sight. He swung heavy curtains over the ordinary shades of his windows so that at night not a glimmer of light could go through. He lingered in his eddies till late in the morning, and when he landed it was after dark, so that no one could see him.

He had the feeling of a fugitive, or a guardian of great treasure; of a poet in the throes of inspiration —and night or day he packed his two automatics in their holsters out of sight but always in mind. Perhaps the river spirit laughed, perhaps it merely smiled—when a man runs away down the Mississippi to dodge responsibility and to go to the dogs, he is very apt to find himself loaded up with unheard-of burdens of soul and body.

Then he made a discovery which startled and exasperated him, while it gave him cause for worry and dread. He began to think that he was being watched, being followed, being scrutinized.

This was with reason, too, for sometimes he would see a flicker of a boat far up the river astern; sometimes he would see it ahead of him down a long reach; once or twice in the night he spied it floating down the current a few rods out from where he had found a little port against a steep bank under the shelter of a wooded bend.

The craft was a little scow, covered at the stern with an A-tent of canvas—a hog-pen on a raft. Not once did he get a fair look at it—if he ran into the bank in mid-afternoon, the pursuer would run in and wait. When he pulled out it, too, would soon appear, a mile astern.

Murdong redoubled his vigilance, growing angrier and angrier, the chase wearing on his nerves more and more.

"I've got to stop that," he whispered to himself. "I can't stand it. I'll try to sneak away in the night. Then—then if he keeps after me, I'll find out."

CHAPTER XVII

DELIA had fled from the staring of the shanty-boat town. Half the men were trying to flirt with her, and others who did not make open advances and who lurked in the background, sullen, watchful, and menacing, were worse than the clowns who sought by gyrations to attract her favourable notice. Accordingly, seizing a favourable moment, she slipped aboard her boat, told Roy Mahna that she was going to drop down, and that she would see his mother later, cast off the lines, backed out into the eddy, and left for other scenes.

She was conscious of a serious qualm of regret that she had burdened the unsuspecting Murdong with that parcel of stolen gems. She wondered if she ought not to have warned him in some way—ought not to have given him some hint, so that he would be prepared for what might follow him down the river? She knew, now, that the diamonds were known to be down the Mississippi—forty covert hints had fallen upon her ears, as watchful men and women sounded her for a look or a gesture that would again betray her own knowledge.

"Sho!" one evil-faced little creature had sniffed, "nobody'll eveh throw sparklers ovehboard. No, indeedy! What she'd do, she'd have a pal, and her pal'd get to go with 'em!"

The shot had struck home. Despite her held-taut composure Delia felt that a little start she gave had betrayed her secret—or enough of it to let the truth be known. Her heart ached when she thought of the young man who had unquestioningly done her bidding, not knowing what Pandora's Box she had left in his charge.

"I must warn him!" she whispered to herself. "I mustn't let him go down this dreadful river unwarned! I ought to have told him he'd be in danger —someone would watch him."

Accordingly, she scurried down the river, trying to find the man whom she had sent down to hide out. She had told him that. If he should find the gems, then he would understand.

"Don't trust any one," she had warned him. "Hide—hide out!"

She kept her motor at half speed, and steered by the steamer lights down bends and over crossings. Carrying no light on her own boat, she was invisible. She travelled till dawn, and then sought the mouth of a bayou which was deep enough for her to enter. Around the first turn in the bayou

she let the boat drift up to a snag, to which she made fast.

Very tired, she turned in to make up for her lost sleep. At her hand, ready for instant service, rested her automatic pistol. Personally, she was content. Nothing mattered much—but her conscience had rebuked her for sending the friendly young man down the river unwarned of his jeopardy. She dreamed, in her sleep, as she remembered, while awake, that he was in trouble, perhaps without knowing it.

"I must find him!" she murmured in her dreams. "I must find him!"

So she ran on down the river, and stopped at Mendova because she was not sure that she had not passed him without seeing the boat in some of the huge horseshoe bends through which she followed the mid-channel. All things seemed small in those terrific windings of the unimaginable torrent. Again and again she discovered boats in little bays and eddies, just by accident. She was sure she must have passed dozens of boats which she had not seen.

In Mendova she endeavoured to learn from other shantyboaters if they had seen such a craft as Murdong travelled in. Although Murdong had gone on by, she did not learn it for a day. Thus she was sitting reading newspapers which she had purchased when there swung into the eddy a motorboat which

she recognized even out of the corner of her eyes. It was Macrado's boat, and Gost was at the wheel. Urleigh was sitting back in the cockpit watching her from under the brim of his gray felt hat.

She knew their purpose instantly. They were on the trail of the diamonds. They would not rest until they knew the truth about them. What else they had in mind she did not know or care. It was enough for her to know that her instinct had truly spoken when she trembled for the safety of the man whom she had sent, all unawares, with such a treasure in his possession as a prince might carry.

Immediately she threw down her paper, and beckoned to the two, who could not have been more surprised. Gost hesitated, but Urleigh, more interested in the story he was following down, suggested the turn of the wheel that brought the boat alongside her own.

She threw a rope, and in half a minute the two craft were moored side by side in a most amicable way.

"Won't you boys tell me frankly what your game is?" she asked, with an expression of grave anxiety. "There's something I want to know—and there's something you want to know. Won't you talk right out?"

Gost flinched under that demand. He could have slid from under almost any other attack, but his mind did not work in direct lines. Urleigh took the voice:

"This is it; I am a reporter——"

"Oh, I know that," she exclaimed, impatiently.

"And I am after the story of those diamonds, which disappeared with Goles, the salesman, in Cincinnati. You said you threw them overboard, and we simply wanted to verify that."

"Search this boat if you wish!" she exclaimed. "I don't want men chasing me down this river. I didn't come down here to have men chase me——"

"There aren't more than a dozen after you now," Urleigh smiled. "I may be mistaken, though. Let's see, there's Macrado, and Frest, and——"

"Don't!" she cried. "Do you want to search this boat? I had the diamonds—I'll show you that."

She darted into the cabin, and brought out a handful of papers, little sheets of linen paper, creased to make envelopes of card size. With these white papers were grayish tissue sheets folded the same way—some with one another. On the linen paper were prices, carat weights, and symbols as to quality.

"There are the envelopes," she cried. "I knew you'd chase me——"

"You threw them into the river!" Gost asked, hoarsely.

"I said so. Of course I did."

"Who's your pal?" Gost demanded, sneering. "You played me for a sucker, all right. You're the slickest pair ever dropped down Old Mississip'—

I mean the lad who went on down in your shanty-boat, when you moved into my gasolene there."

"Mr. Man!" she turned on him with cold ferocity, "I shot you once for your insolence, and I'll shoot you again. You're a scoundrel. You stole those diamonds and rubies—what murder you did to do it I don't know, but you mind your business, now, and I'll mind mine. I don't know who you mean——"

"What—Murdong!" Gost retorted. "Oh, I know. Roy Mahna was a-listenin', and his eyes are good at night, believe me."

Delia flushed. Her bluff, which was half truth, had failed. These two men knew, at least Gost knew. Urleigh was not Gost's kind. She knew that. She knew the reason Urleigh was there—he was daring much to find the truth of the story of the gems.

"You'n Murdong meet down in Spanish Moss Bend," Gost declared, with venom in his tones. "You got those sparklers, or he has. I'm tellin' you."

Urleigh was surprised at Gost's statements. He turned and looked at his partner, and showed his surprise. Gost felt the rebuke, and he turned to say:

"I wanted to break it to her, sudden! See? I'd 'a 'told you, but I kinda overlooked hit——"

"After all I've done for you!" Urleigh exclaimed.

"You're holding out on me. Is that the way you treat a pal?"

Delia listened with impassive countenance. Gost shrivelled under the scorn of Urleigh, whose quality he had underestimated. He now tried to bluff through himself.

"Well, if you don't like my company, you can give er take! I'll pay you two hundred for your int'rest in the boat——"

"Done!" Urleigh exclaimed.

Gost drew out his billfold and began to count down the bills. Urleigh entered the cabin and packed up his suitcase and returned into the cockpit. He accepted the money with relief Gost had been an ill-at-ease companion, and leaving him seemed the best luck in many a day.

"Thank you." Urleigh nodded, and as he stepped out of the boat on to the splash-deck of Delia's, she said to him:

"I'll cast off his bow line. Will you throw off the stern one?"

In a moment Gost was adrift, sulking at his wheel. He watched the two as Delia whispered something in Urleigh's ear. Urleigh stared, but she ran over the bow and cast off the line mooring her boat to the bank. Before Urleigh fully realized her purpose she had thrown over the engine and started it. A moment

later she pulled over the reverse, and they backed into the eddy, following which, she steered around, and then headed down the river.

"Good-bye, goosie," she called across to Gost. "Mind your eyes, now!"

"What! What!" Gost shrieked. "You two *pals!* You—you——"

She laughed merrily, and with a nod she said to Urleigh:

"Throw your suitcase into the cabin, and make yourself to home."

A little dazed, Urleigh did as bid. It was a fine, large cabin and it was prettily decorated, bright and cheerful. Books were in racks on both the stateroom ends, and a desk had been fitted up under one of the stacks of shelves.

He returned to the open and sat down opposite the young woman, who was steering into the main channel. The engine purred at full speed, and the boat swayed and rocked to the low river swells. She did not once speak to him during the eight or nine miles down the bend and around out of sight of Mendova on the bluffs.

At last she looked back and saw that they were clear of the town and were swinging between a sandbar and a caving bend. She looked then at Urleigh, and laughed at the expression on his face.

"You were almost shanghaied that time, for a fact," she laughed. "I just had to do it, though. You understand why—he fell for it beautifully. If he thinks you and I and Murdong, down the river, are all in a gang together, he'll think twice before he bothers any of us any more. He told you about it, didn't he?"

"The diamonds, you mean?" he asked, "and the——"

"And the shooting? Oh, I did shoot him, if that's what he said."

"Yes," Urleigh admitted.

"What did he say about the shooting?"

"He said he had been taking coke—snow—and he was dippy. He said he just went aboard your boat, to make a social call, so to speak, and you shot him, careless-like, smiling. He said if only you had acted frightened, he wouldn't have thought anything about it. He made up his mind that you had played him, somehow, and coaxed him to follow you and brought him aboard, just so you could have an excuse to shoot him."

"He thought I had flirted with him!" she exclaimed. "Aren't men fools, anyhow—I mean about women!"

"Well, you know, really—I'm—I'm in no position to judge," Urleigh answered, really somewhat bewildered.

"Oh!" she laughed, and then seriously: "It's this old river. Here I am in that man's boat. I've kept it—just as though——"

"Oh, it's yours, according to river practice," Urleigh declared. "Even Gost said that when a lady has shot a man she has a right to the loot."

"Of course, it's the diamonds that worry him."

"And me, and everyone else," Urleigh shook his head. "At least, that's what did worry me. Now——"

"Now it's something else," she took his words. "Never mind that. I'm perfectly competent. It's my boat. I'm a river pirate, I suppose. And you're a shanghaied victim, held for ransom, so to speak. Really, I don't know, yet, how much you are worth."

"Eh?" he demanded.

"Just accept conditions as they are," she told him, coldly. "I'm perturbed about the man down the river. You were following us both. I haven't the diamonds—and that man Gost would kill him just to search his boat. The worst of it is, if we don't find Murdong first, Murdong will be murdered, and Gost'll get the diamonds."

"Then—then you gave Murdong the diamonds?" Urleigh exclaimed. "Gost was right then?"

"Do you suppose I'd have done what I did, that I'd have you here on this boat for any other reason except to save a life—the life of a dear boy who doesn't

suspect what danger he is in? I almost died, worrying about him. It was to save him that I hurried away from Yankee Bar. I thought—I hoped I would find him right away! I don't know where he is. No one could tell me there at Mendova. No one remembered him. We just must find him. I thought perhaps you knew——"

"No—but I'm obliged to you for taking me away from that man. I was getting worried about him. He was growing uglier every day," Urleigh shook his head. "Anything I can do to help your friend, I'll be glad to!"

"Oh—he's not my friend, exactly," she exclaimed. "He's—he's just one of my—one of my dupes. That's what they call it, isn't it?"

"One of your dupes?" Urleigh saw only a smile on her face, and she made no reply. He took off his hat and gazed at the river.

"Some river, isn't it?" she suggested, a minute later.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOST, thus suddenly deprived of his partner, Urleigh, saw the departure of Delia and Urleigh in the motorboat with a burst of anger to which he had seldom permitted himself to yield. It wasn't the loss of Urleigh that dismayed him. The thing that caught him hardest was what he believed to be the fact that Urleigh and the woman were pals.

"They tricked me," he growled. "They worked Urleigh off on me, to get me. I'm lucky I didn't get killed!"

Convinced that he was a victim of an organized gang of crooks who had tripped down the Mississippi on his trail, he could see many things to prove the theory. First, the woman had appeared and caught him with her wiles, made a first-class case against him, in favour of self-defense, and then shot him down. Instantly she had captured his cabin cruiser with its precious hoard of diamonds.

"I'd be'n rich for life!" Gost mourned. "On'y they jobbed me."

He now gripped himself to see what he should do.

He was still weak from his wound, but recovering as fast as might be expected. He could, at least, manage for himself, and he had a competent little motorboat which would enable him to make such a journey as he determined upon. He ran in to the bank, against the Ridge, where shantyboats tied in, and soon he met a man he knew—one Dolman, who was familiar with river gossip.

In five minutes he had learned that a man of the name of Murdong had purchased a 30-30 carbine rifle and four hundred shells, both hard and soft nose.

"They was talking funny about hit up to the gun store," Dolman declared. "'Nuther funny thing, he carried away two sheets of boiler iron, off'n the Melgrit junk yard."

"What'd he take them for?" Gost asked.

"Lawse! I don't know, if 'twan't so's he couldn't git shot up. That's what whisky boaters does—line their cabins an' pilot houses with steel plates. But he didn't get to buy no whisky or liquor, not as I seen."

Gost made no comment. He went uptown to the gun store, and he soon learned the truth of the rumour. Murdong had bought a big supply of ammunition—enough to stock a soldier in the trenches.

Gost, himself, then bought a high-power rifle and three boxes of cartridges.

"I 'low I'll lay off an' kill some wild geese down

b'low," he explained. "Theh's deer down on some of them bars, too, and back in the bayous."

That was reasonable. No one there who would not have liked to stalk wild geese themselves, and shantyboaters used long, slim bullets on that kind of game.

Then Gost headed away down the river in the late evening of the day. Sunset found him around the first bend, and night found him still under way, settling down for the long chase that he thought was ahead of him.

"They'll meet down b'low, and they'll quit the river," he told himself. "I'm jes' goin' to shoot their heads off. I've quit monkey-shining with them; now that I know 'em. You can't trust nobody; they get you goin' an' they get you comin'. I want them diamonds. I got 'em an' they're mine."

He was willing, but his flesh was weak. He was dead tired within three hours following sunset, and accordingly he turned into an eddy and cast over his anchor.

"I work alone afteh this," he declared. "I was a fool to fall for that Urleigh's song 'n dance. He neveh in gawd's world was anything but a crook, an' Delia's another one."

The following day, at dawn, he set forth again, and keeping in mid-channel, he drove for Spanish Moss

Bend. There, he believed, he would find the shanty-boat carrying Murdong and the diamonds. Young Mahna had overheard, with river ears, and for a price he had yielded up the precious information.

All day long he drove, eating a cold snack at noon rather than stop the motor for a minute. Thus he travelled until late on the second day he spied a cabin-boat away down a crossing which instantly struck him as familiar. At first he could not place it, but when he was passing it, two or three hundred yards distant, he cursed himself for a fool.

"It's Delia's boat," he whispered. "I'd know hit into a thousand. The fool'll see me. He'll know me."

Gost kept right on down stream until he was miles ahead, and out of sight. Then he ducked into an eddy, swung up behind the tops of several trees that had recently caved in, and waited there. He had gained about two hours on the shantyboat, and he watched till an hour after dark—three hours in all.

The cabin-boat did not pass by, and toward midnight a wind sprung up out of the north which promised to hold a long time. He heard with pleasure the roar in the trees overhead. It meant the cabin-boat could not float down. He had a good hope—that the girl and his late partner would miss the shantyboat, which was not conspicuous, and pass it by.

As if to answer his wish, the following morning Urleigh and Delia did pass down in their motorboat, not three hundred yards out. They were searching both banks with a pair of binoculars—his own glasses, as he surmised with an oath. They swept both shores, and soon went down and out of sight around the next bend.

No cabin-boat could float in that kind of a wind, and Gost figured that now he was below Murdong, and the woman and Urleigh were far down the river, having passed their partner without knowing it. That was easy to figure out.

Gost turned up stream that morning. Hugging the shore, he watched the banks, landing at intervals and going out on points to look for the shanty-boat.

Sure enough! There was Murdong's boat in a bayou, which had once been a part of the river channel, or at least an island chute. Woods overhung the bayou on both sides, and it was not less than five miles through that timber into the clearings behind the levee.

"Now we'll see," Gost whispered to himself. "He's hid so clost his own pals can't find 'im, but little old me did it. I've trailed too many men down Old Mississip', and I've played the game from little old N'York to Chi' an' the coast. Hue-e! That

boy's something to learn, an' he'd better learn quick!"

With the wind roaring through the trees overhead, and rolling up the waves on the river so that it was not possible for a boat without power to float out even as far as the current, Murdong was indeed trapped in a lonesome bend.

Gost was in a hurry, but he knew better than to make haste. He must make sure that he was safe—that he could make his own getaway undiscovered and without danger of being captured. No matter how lonesome a bend may seem, one must take a look at it first.

Also, the cabin-boat was moored on the up-stream side of the bayou, which was fifty or sixty yards wide, and probably it was a mile or two around the end of it if not more.

"I'll run my little boat up above," Gost grinned. "Then I'll make an evening call."

Lurking in the switch cane, he soon saw Murdong step out on the deck, rifle in hand. That perturbed him till he saw that the cabin-boater was about to fire a few practice shots. The marksman slipped five shells into the magazine—Gost counted them—and then fired four times up the bayou away from the river. The bullets slapped into a log end one hundred yards distant.

"I got a hunch I mustn't take no chances with that little boy," Gost grimaced. "He's shot a gun before. He'd cave my face in now if he saw me."

Gost aimed his own rifle at Murdong, with his finger on the trigger, but he thought he knew better than to shoot in broad day. He thought that he ought to wait for night to do the thing he was to do. It was not in him to commit a daylight crime when a little patience would make it possible to have friendly night for the same job.

He retreated to his boat down the bend and after dark he drove out into the river and up stream. Apparently, there was nothing to prevent him from performing his task. He steered wide of the entrance of the bayou, thinking that perhaps Murdong would be watching for his friends to drop down.

Swinging wide, he felt his motor jerk, missing a stroke. A minute later it missed again, and with a curse he tried to look at it in the dark. A few more explosions, followed by alternate misses, and the engine died where he was, in midstream, with one hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds almost in sight in a dark and lonely bend—just the place for what he had to do.

"What in h—l!" he choked, giving the wheel a savage whirl over.

The motor started up hopefully, and turned over

for a full minute. He began to breath easier; and then it died down once more.

"Ain't that h—l?" he asked, fervently. "Ain't it? I lose a hundred thou' because I ain't a cup full of gasolene. I forgot to fill my tank."

He couldn't even pull ashore, for the boat had no oars—a curious omission for a river man to make. And he had to sit and wait while the wind and current swept him down the bend and at last drove him in at least ten miles below the entrance of the bayou.

"Now I got to wait for the wind to lay, too," he grunted in disgust, adding, "but the son of a gun ain't got away yet."

He rigged him a pair of oars out of two poles and a section of board which he found in the drift along a sandbar just below him. With two loops of rope fastened in holes bored in the splash board he could swing his oars. Getting clear of the eddy, he worked out into the current, despite the wind, and floated down watching for a ferry, a gasolene boat, or a landing. Fifteen miles down stream he ran into a landing and two hours later he had a drayman hauling fifty gallons of gasolene in a barrel to the river bank, and the two of them emptied it into the boat's tank, filling it. Then they filled two five-gallon cans with the remainder.

"Now we'll see," Gost exclaimed, when he was clear

of the landing and was bucking the current and the cross swells from the gale. He entered the bayou bend late in the day, and in the dark he hugged the opposite shore till he was well up toward the head of the bend. He crossed over and drifted down, his motor turning slowly and almost noiselessly.

It was pitch dark, cloudy, and the air full of the murk of a dry gale, threatening rain. He passed the government light hardly fifty feet from it, and then ran into a short eddy which he felt close to the bank, not a hundred yards up stream from the entrance to the bayou.

"I lost a little time, 's all," Gost grinned to himself. "We'll see how you'll answer to a hail, eh? And if you got a light—— Um-m. I don't give a damn, now —I got ye."

He made certain that his motorboat was well fastened, but with knots that would be easy to find and cast off in the dark. He studied the skyline to make certain that he would recognize the mooring place of his boat when he returned.

Rifle in hand, his pistol in his pocket holster, he slipped along the top of the river bank to the bayou and followed that till he could see the dim outline of the boat against the paleness of the bayou waters. No streak or trace of light showed from the boat anywhere.

Gost stepped along, foot by foot, keeping himself near a tree trunk or back from the bank. He could not have been more careful. He believed that he was on the edge of perfect success. He had but to put in practice an old river trick of hailing a shanty-boater saying he was a lost man, and asking the way to the levees.

He paused, taking his time and calming his breath. His excitement, his exertions, his wound had greatly wearied and weakened him. He must be careful now. He smiled, as he thought, perhaps, of fooling Urleigh and the girl and all the rest of the gang, whoever they might be.

Luck was better than he had hoped for. He did not have to hail. He heard footsteps on the floor of the cabin-boat crossing toward the near end, or bow. The bolt was turned back in the lock and the door flung open. In the doorway appeared the shanty-boater.

"Now! Now!" whispered Gost, bringing his rifle up.

As he did so, he heard something. He turned his face to look over his shoulder. Then on his head fell the crash of ages. The rifle went off. He fell to his knees and upon his face. On his head rained a hundred frantic blows, while a shrill cry went up in the timberland.

CHAPTER XIX

STORIT, the little river rat, who had at one time run a whisky boat on the lower river, lived in a "hog pen on a raft," to call it according to the vernacular. His home was, in fact, a scow twenty feet long, four feet wide, and twenty inches deep. The stern of the boat to within five feet of the bow was covered by a tent canvas nearly five feet higher than the gunwales to the peak. The canvas was old, but it had been painted with white lead and tar and fish-net waterproofing, so that it did not leak a drop.

In this rag cabin were a number of things which accorded well with Storit's position in society. The bunk was a shallow box nearly seven feet long, thirty inches wide, and filled with corn leaves. On the bunk were some old blankets.

A soap box filled with cooking utensils rested next to the flap that opened out into the bow. Hanging along the ridge pole were little bags and chunks of smoked meat, thus carefully placed out of the way of the mice which would enter into the boat and build their nests and rear their families in spite of Storit's

constant efforts to trap them and drive them out with maledictions.

There were two oil stoves and parts of a third one in the corner opposite the kitchen box. Besides these oil stoves were old and rusty oilcans, two containing glass bottles—household oil cans. A third contained kerosene. Over the oil stoves were sections of several patches, for every once in a while, during the painful cooking operations, there would be a flare up. Storit would lose some of his whiskers, some of his hair, and some of his eyebrows. Nevertheless, he always had managed to save his canvas from burning, probably because some of the waterproofing which he spread on the canvas was partly waterproof—an asphalt composition, say.

Thus Storit lived in tatters and rags, a glittering-eyed human reptile at one time and a whipped cur at another. He was a little man of shrunken figure and shrunken mind, but in the late years he also had been a feeble-minded man in addition to his paucity of ideas and narrowness of vision—feeble in the sense that at times he had no control over himself, clouded by visions and streaks of perversity, during which periods he acted but without knowing what he did, nor could he remember what took place during those spells.

His spells exasperated him a good deal. There

was one hiatus which he could not account for, though he recalled it very well. He was at his ease down the Mississippi in a comfortable little cabin-boat. He remembered that he was in Ozark Bend, just below Arkansaw Old Mouth, and some of the boys had been joshing him about the widow Jellson who lived at Bolivar Landing, and who would have made him an admirable wife, as he considered. That was along in November.

Then, right at that very moment, a spell seized him, and the next he knew, he was sitting in a leaky old skiff just below Davenport, Iowa, floating down a very trifling kind of Mississippi River, with a raw, cold spring wind blowing and snow banks unthawed in the shade of the woods along the banks. This was early in May.

He had lost at least six months, and when he managed to beat his way down to the lower Mississippi he had been gone two years! He had lost not less than eighteen months of his life, where he did not know. Worse yet, he had lost his cabin-boat, and he was reduced to a hog pen on a raft, which he had managed to find and steal and construct little by little.

But in spite of these aberrations, he never forgot one thing. That was the thing which started him on these strange peregrinations, and which always prevented him from struggling up out of his lowly estate.

Time had been when he was quite a smart kind of a fellow, with as slick clothes as the next man's, when he lived in a big cabin-boat and kept a hired man to cook, tend bar, and other things, for his trade was selling whisky from Evansville to below Red River. He had been slick at that business, too, and none knew the safe landings and the dangerous landings any better than he.

Never had a planter's party shot him up, because he knew enough to run in, make his sales, and slip on down the river before the field hands could attract the attention of the Overseer or, worse yet, the Planter.

There remained fixed in Storit's mind a picture of the ease and glory of his condition. He remembered vividly a thousand incidents which showed him how important he had been in those old days. Among the other things were his diamonds. He had worn three rings on one hand and two on the other hand, all diamond rings, and the cheapest one worth four hundred dollars. He had had a diamond stud in his shirt bosom which was his glory, for it represented the savings of a whole year of profitable whisky business.

A sting in the memories of those days were the warnings which he had received from men and women to the effect that he ought to look out, or those diamonds would surely draw trouble down some dark and lonesome bend, or at some black landing.

"I took cyar of myse'f," he whimpered. "I carried a gun—I was plumb watchful. If it'd be'n done fair—hit couldn't of be'n done."

He had never turned his back on any man. He had kept his customers the other side of the bar. He hired a man for bartender only after the most careful and persistent inquiry. He never trusted his help beyond a certain point.

Then he hired a mere youth who seemed a treasure and who was the fastest man to fill the glasses, the surest man with the change, the swiftest man at making a landing, and the quickest one to make his getaway. This man was true and faithful, apparently, and he went forth into the cotton fields, and brought down whole crews of pickers to patronize his bar. The very excellence of the man made his bitterness the greater, now that he recalled what had happened.

One day, as they were dropping down a bend going from landing to landing, Storit's light went out. He was felled by a blow from behind. But as he went down, his fires glimmering, he received the impression that his bartender had struck him on the head a foul blow from which he could not possibly save himself, and for which he was utterly unprepared.

He came to in a hospital. What his ventures had been between the minute of the blow and his awakening he had no idea. He had been brought into Vicks-

burg by kindly shantyboaters, who left word that they had found him sitting on a sandbar, with buzzards sitting in a circle around him, listening to his talk.

Now Storit had one set purpose in mind. That was to find the scoundrel who had betrayed his confidence and stolen his diamonds—equal crimes. Every once in a while someone would tell him the man was on the river, and he would go seeking him, only to lose track of him—or lose track of himself. It was difficult to move up and down the river, chasing rumours. He had his living to make, anyhow.

Making a living was a tremendous business. He would go hunting for birds' eggs, to eat. He would creep up to the hole of a rabbit, and watch in the moonlight, to seize the little animal with his hands. He gathered hickory nuts at Columbus and other famous hickory groves. Sometimes he lived for days at a time on pecans. He fished some, too, and he foraged in drift piles for clothes to wear. Cornfields supplied him with some sustenance. When he was feeling well, he picked cotton, or even hoed cotton, but a good deal of the time his head hurt and he could not work. He had lucky hauls, sometimes, taking ropes from fleets or boats or government works. He sometimes ventured to steal a skiff or something of that kind.

One night, when he had tried to steal a skiff, a scoundrel frightened him terribly, having taken an unfair

advantage of him. The scoundrel had slept in his skiff, under a canvas tarpaulin, and when Storit had the skiff actually in his possession, what did that lurking scoundrel do but hold him up in the fog, and try to shoot him.

Storit had told the man a good story, or something, he could not recall just what. The man had been thrown off his guard, Storit remembered, and Storit escaped into the fog and paddled away out of sight. It was that night he had heard the river spirits laughing, and when he had time to think it over, that laugh heartened Storit up considerably.

Accordingly, paddling up the river to where he had hidden his rag-house shantyboat, he started down the river in pursuit of the man who had played on him the scurvy trick of sleeping in a skiff. He followed that man down, waiting his chance and biding his time. Fortune favoured him with a bag of cob corn which had fallen off a river steamer, and a lot of canned goods which had rolled up on a sandbar from a wreck. He even had been able to catch a wounded goose and find two or three ducks which had been lost by hunters.

The man he was following tried to fool him by getting into a shantyboat in the eddy at Yankee Bar. Storit almost got him there, but just when he was ready to nab him at the next venture ashore the fellow slipped out into the eddy and went on down the

river in the shantyboat, so Storit took up the chase again.

Thus Storit followed his man down, keeping his boat in sight, and ducking in and out sometimes ahead, sometimes behind. He would teach that kind of folks not to trifle with him. He certainly would—and taking his time, watching his chance, Storit held to the chase. And then one day the shantyboat was blown into a bayou.

This served Storit's purpose, of course. But someone else was chasing down about that time. The other pursuit bothered Storit, who did not know its intent. He hung back ready to turn back, or run in, or play the rôle of innocent spectator, according to the time and opportunity.

His eyes, river-keen and perhaps of preternatural sight, picked up the motorboat that started up the river and then stopped and drifted down. That incident, meaning much or little, compelled him to wait, and his waiting was rewarded. The boat returned in a day or two, and this night it landed below his own boat, and the man climbed up the bank and started sneaking down toward the bayou.

Storit, animal and human, too, followed him. Something in the man's figure, something in his gait, something in the silhouette he made against the black night, awakened vague memories in Storit's mind.

He crept closer, and when the skulker stood in the gloom above the shantyboat, Storit was trying with all his senses to discover what there was about this stranger to make him seem so interesting—perhaps familiar.

The door of the cabin-boat opened, and the light flooded out into the dark. Storit saw the man's body clearly outlined against the light, rifle, head, body, and all. Then he recognized him.

"He hit me. He stoled my diamonds!" Storit thought, hotly. "Hit's that slick White Collar Dan —I'll git 'im!"

He sprang at the bush-whacker, who turned his face to look over his shoulder. Storit landed upon his head with the piece of railroad iron which he carried in his hand. He followed the blow with other blows, and having broken the victim down, Storit caught the fellow by the collar, picked up his rifle, and dragged him back through the dark woods down the river bank to the gasolene launch which Gost had moored there.

Storit dragged the body on board, cast off the lines, and pulled out into the current. He fumbled around with the motor, till he had started it—he had stolen motorboats in his time—and drove up the river to his own poverty-struck craft, which he towed out and down the river, at full speed, seeking a hiding place.

When he had made a few miles he rifled the dead

man, and found money, a watch, and other treasures. He stripped the corpse and threw it overboard.

"Theh!" he said. "I knowed I'd git that man sometime. Lawse. They don't any man want to treat Mr. Storit mean, no, suh! If they does, they gits what's comin' to them. Hi-i! This yeahs a dandy little motorboat. Ha! Ha!"

He began to pace up and down the narrow cockpit. He looked over his shoulder. He no longer steered the craft, though the motor was still going. Something had gone wrong with his head again.

With a loud cry, a rattling laugh, he ran aft, leaped up on the stern lightly, and curving into the air, he plunged deep into the river. He rose like an alligator gar and began to swim with long, fine strokes. He struck out of the current into an eddy, and climbed the bank to enter the woods.

He went through the woods till he arrived at the levee. There he tramped toward the south, singing. At the first town he went down into the streets and stopping a man, asked for two bits to buy something to eat. He was wandering around town when the sheriff, in a ferry launch, towed a gasolene boat and a hog pen on a raft down to the landing.

A crowd looked at the two boats curiously, for the gasolene boat's cockpit was stained with blood. As the sheriff declared:

"If I know the signs, boys, sunthin' shore happened, yes, sir."

Among the spectators was Storit.

"Yes, sir!" Storit echoed. "Sunthin' must of happened."

CHAPTER XX

DELIA was captain, Urleigh was the crew. They were bound down Old Mississip' trying to find Murdong, who was carrying a treasure perhaps without knowing it, and who was being pursued by one of the deadliest of river menaces—a strong-arm diamond specialist of a thief.

There was nothing else they could do—humanity demanded it. They swung down reaches and bends, their glasses turned incessantly toward the banks. Many little white shantyboats fooled them, and they ran in to inquire, only to be disappointed.

They happened upon no one who recalled seeing such a boat as they described, nor such a man as they had in mind. When night fell, Delia steered into an eddy at the foot of a sandbar, and Urleigh threw over the anchor on a long line, giving the boat plenty of swing room.

Then they cooked supper over the gasolene stove in the galley—a supper of quail, toast, fruit, and other light food things. Following supper, they sat in the cabin, which was lighted by storage batteries, Delia

quite composed, Urleigh telling about himself and his adventures.

"You took a chance on solving the diamond mystery by running down to Hickman, and dropping down the river with that beast!" she commented.

"I had to trust him." Urleigh shook his head. "He told me a good deal; but waking or sleeping, he never said a word about the double robbery. He boasted all the while that he got his ready money slick, though. I wondered if that wasn't selling the diamonds to Judge Wrest?"

"It sounds that way," she admitted. "Now, he'll follow Murdong down and perhaps kill him. He'd do murder, that man Gost."

She told him what she had done—how she had discovered the diamonds in their case, and how she had wondered what to do with them, until Murdong drifted into Yankee Bar eddy and Mrs. Mahna sold her cabin-boat for her, because she didn't need both boats.

"I'd hid the diamonds in one of the pump-wells," she said, "and when I carried my things on to the gasolene boat, I just left them where they were—hundreds and hundreds of them. I didn't know what else to do with them. I might have sent them to Ofsten & Groner, but I didn't know how to do it. They would have traced back, you see, and when

they learned—when the express agent told them that I —a woman—had shipped them, they might have kept on following. The National Agency never lets up——"

"That's so," Urleigh nodded. "Manager Grost of the Cincinnati branch has told me a good many stories about his agency's work. He was the one who got me interested in this case. I ought to tell him what I've learned, but now—now it seems to be your say. Whatever you say——"

"Thank you!" she exclaimed. "Of course, I knew you were that kind. I know you quite well, you know——"

"Well, thank you for your compliment to my knowledge," he grimaced.

"Oh, that's all right," she laughed at him. "And you a newspaperman."

"No," he shook his head. "I'm a river rat; the things I don't know about my job that used to be—I heard a river lady mention her husband-that-used-to-be—those things would equip a wonder in the profession."

"You have the spirit—the ambition," she praised him. "Any one who would go hundreds of miles, and who would travel with that horrible Gost, just to try and solve a mystery, risking his—everything! Oh, I think it's wonderful."

"Thank you," he bowed. "I wish I knew as much about you."

"Don't you?" she asked, rolling her eyes up and gazing at him, reproachfully.

"Well—you see—of course, I know what a fine——"

"That'll do!" she shook her head. "You needn't say it; when you know that much about a woman, you know all there is worth knowing—I mean under existing social conditions. But why shouldn't I be like you? Why shouldn't a woman be known by her business, her affairs, her profession, as well as a man? When you know a woman's good looking—that's all there is to her!"

"You're a new woman?" he asked.

"Now you're asking questions," she turned his query.

Nevertheless, her statements had awakened a new line of inquiry in his mind. He looked at the books in the two sets of shelves.

"I never had a chance to think," she shook her head. "I never had a chance to be alone—so I started down the river. I wanted to be where I could find a perspective—where it would be quiet."

"So you dropped down the Mississippi?"

"Yes," she admitted, with a laugh.

At the laugh, Urleigh started; the laugh reminded him of something, and it suggested the voice, too, so

that when she spoke again he listened attentively, wondering. Somewhere—sometime—he could not just remember.

Thus they talked, good friends, now, and with perfect understanding.

"We'll want to start out at dawn," he suggested, and she admitted that, with the remark:

"Yes—and it's late now—I think you'll find your room ready."

"Which one?" he asked.

"The port side. You find the light at the head of the bunk."

In the morning, as soon as they could see clearly, they went on down the river.

"He couldn't go more than forty or fifty miles a day," she declared. "But that might mean two hundred miles—or if he floated nights, four hundred miles —I told him—why! I told him I'd meet him down in Spanish Moss Bend. Or at Salem Landing—I just happened to remember."

"Is that the way you remember your dates?" Urleigh ventured, and she laughed but made no answer.

Murdong had hidden his trail from their inexperienced eyes. They asked shantyboaters blunt questions, and the river people, suspecting that Murdong was a fugitive, and needed a good lie in his favour, sent them up and down, so that they ran down to

Spanish Moss Bend, and stopped over night at Salem Landing, and then beat their way back up stream again, not once finding trace of the man.

More and more they grew worried as to his fate. They set forth in a dry gale, and passed within a thousand yards of him perhaps three or four times, not once catching a glimpse of the boat.

"We must find him. We must save him," Delia whispered, her voice tense with anxiety.

It seemed as though they must find such a big boat—but they saw other boats almost lost to view on the miles' wide surface; they saw other boats which were almost invisible against caving bank and among the tops of trees that had fallen into the river.

By chance they ran into the eddy at Poole, and found there a boat which they recognized. A number of people were sitting up the bank when they ran in, and at sight of the gasolene boat Urleigh and the girl masked their faces after a glance at each other.

Sure enough, the gasolene boat and the rag shack on a scow had figured in a river mystery. Something had happened on it. The sheriff, learning that Urleigh was a newspaperman, told him all that he knew, and told the guesses that he had made.

"You see, somebody got killed up on that gasolene boat, and we got a suspicion hit were a feller that rolled out on the bar ten miles below here—stripped

an' daid, an' his head busted in so's you wouldn't know him, not in a thousand years. Only thing we could find on that body was three little red diamonds tattooed on his arm. Now if somebody only knowed who that was——"

"I think it would be a good idea to telegraph that description to Manager Grost of the National Agency at Cincinnati," Urleigh suggested, blandly.

"Sho!" the sheriff grinned. "You know I jes' 'lowed you all's story about bein' a newspaperman was a stall! I spotted you, right off, for one of those agency fellers. Yes, suh! I'll telegraph to Cincinnati. You expect theh's a reward on that feller?"

"No, I don't know—Grost is a friend of mine; I'm a reporter—he'll tell you the same if you ask him. Here's my card——"

"Of course he'll tell me the same," the sheriff chuckled. "Oh, you boys are a sharp lot. Who do you expect that three-diamond man was?"

"White Collar Dan—Rubert Gost; he has a dozen names, I think."

"Sho! Now you speak of it—course hit is. And say, Mr. Man, I'm sure a blunderhead. That same day we found these boats nosing into the bank, the engine going and never stopped. That same day there was a river rat here that could have told me all about it. I let him slip right through my fingers—

I 'lowed he was harmless. His name was Storit, and White Collar Dan got his start stealing Storit's diamonds. Ain't it funny the way things comes around—you was after Dan?"

"No, but I feel safer about a friend of mine, now that Dan's dead and buried. Did you notice a bullet wound, an old one——"

"Why, that's so! Right side, plumb through. Well, I declare!" The countenance of the sheriff showed his self-disgust. "Theh, I knowed Dan was shot by a lady up around Hickman, and I knowed he'd got out the hospital, and I never placed him. Ain't a man stupid sometimes?"

Urleigh joined Delia at the levee, she having been uptown to purchase some supplies. He told her what the sheriff had declared. They examined the two boats with interest. They looked as though murder might have been done on them—the stains were plainly to be seen.

"It sounds like the Old River," Urleigh commented, as they turned down the river once more.

The dry gale had passed; there had been a hard rain, and once more fair, warm, beautiful sunshine was at hand. The shantyboats were tripping down in midstream; a boat or two in every bend as the river people continued their migration down—ever down!

Urleigh and Delia were good friends now. They had set forth to save a man's life, and now that they knew White Collar Dan was dead, they felt a measure of relief—only they hoped that the murder had been done before the diamond specialist found Murdong, of whose fate they could not be certain.

"That poor boy! Never dreaming what he was up against," Delia shook her head.

Thus they swung down the river, scrutinizing the banks and steering to pass near by the trippers who were taking advantage of the fair weather.

"He'd float a day like this," Delia surmised, "but he'll take his time, dropping down, if he really meant to wait for me at Salem or in Spanish Moss Bend."

They made twelve or fifteen miles an hour down stream. Sixty miles below they rounded a sandbar into a long reach, and ahead of them something fretted the glassy surface in midstream. It was miles distant, but they knew it was a shantyboat, for they had passed a dozen that day.

They ran down straight toward it, scrutinizing both shores, and once turning in to look at a craft moored against the west bank. They turned out, and as the boat ahead swung in a swirl, Urleigh remarked:

"That's a white boat. Another one."

"We'll look at it close by," she said. "I'm growing discouraged."

"Never say die," he laughed, "that man's taking it plumb comfortable. See him? He's sitting on his chair, leaning back against his cabin, and letting the river do the work."

"And do the worrying, too." She shook her head. "You have to do that down here—if you want to find the full benefit of Old Mississip'."

"That's so," he admitted, "but when you do that——"

"Nothing matters—you don't care!" she exclaimed with sudden emphasis and feeling. "You know—I used to wonder if people could get so they didn't care for appearances? If there was a place in all the world where you could live and be decent and do what you want to do, and not care, and not feel—not feel hounded."

"You can on Old Mississip'," Urleigh said. "It's wonderful."

"Look at that boat!" she started up.

He took the binoculars and looked.

"Well?"

"I—I almost know that boat," she whispered. "You—you don't suppose——"

"We'll soon know!"

They soon did know. The man sitting on the bow deck of the houseboat was reading, but most of the time he was just viewing the wonderful scene presented

to him by the river and its banks. As they approached, they observed that there was a rifle leaning against the cabin at his right elbow.

When he saw them approaching, he turned on his chair and set all four of its legs on the deck. His hand fell to the breech of the rifle.

"Well, he's all ready, anyhow!" Urleigh commented.

"The good, brave boy!" she whispered aloud.

She ran the boat down within hail and threw over the reverse, steering by under losing headway.

"Hello!" she hailed.

"Why—why—that you, Delia!" he cried.

"None else," she laughed, choking. "You are all right?"

"Sure thing. Say, what in——"

"Throw him the line," she ordered Urleigh, and in two minutes the boats were lashed side by side as of old.

"I've worried so about you," she cried. "I thought about it afterward—what you might meet—what might happen to you."

"Well, it didn't happen!" he shook his head. "I found——"

"You found the diamonds?"

"Yes," glancing at Urleigh.

"You have them?" Urleigh exclaimed.

"About a cup full." Murdong laughed. "I was some surprised——"

"And nothing happened?"

"Well—one night I was tied in a bayou up the river. I opened the door, and I heard a 'whack' up the bank. A gun went off, and then there was a lot of 'whacking.' I jumped back in and shut the door. Next day, I looked around. I couldn't tell what had happened. I'd seen the rifle flash up the bank. Something had been dragged on the ground over to the river bank; I don't know what it was. There was a rifle right there by a tree. I have it inside. This is mine."

"I see now," Urleigh exclaimed. "Look! Storit bushwhacked White Collar Dan just as he was going to——"

"Don't!" Delia gasped. "Oh, it's—it's awful."

"Come in, won't you?" Murdong asked. "Here are the diamonds."

He brought out the case with its sparkling contents.

"There they are!" Urleigh shook his head, hardly able to believe his eyes.

"You'll take them to Ofsten & Groner, won't you?" Delia asked him.

"You want me to take them?" Urleigh asked, surprised.

"Yes," she declared, adding: "then there's a pack of bills—I—I found them with the diamonds."

"A pack of bills?" Urleigh asked, eagerly.

"Yes—about five thousand dollars!"

"Ah-h-h!" Urleigh gasped with delight. "That shows—that shows that part of it! Dan went down and sold them to old Judge Wrest! Lord, but he was a nervy crook!"

"And Old Mississip' got him at last!" Delia suggested.

"That's right!" Urleigh replied. "It gets us all."

"We'll wrap them all up in envelopes; I'm afraid they'll be all scratched, carrying them loose that way!" Delia suggested.

The three sat down at the table and began to fold the gems into little envelopes. A stranger occupation was never seen on Old Mississip'—but a thousand groups as strange have been down that way!

"You'll take them, won't you?" Delia asked again, "you'll take them to—the firm?"

"On one condition," Urleigh said.

"And that?" she let her eyes fall under his meaning look.

"Who are you?"

"No one—in particular," she shook her head.

"But I know you," he protested. "I've seen—heard you somewhere?"

"No doubt," she smiled. "I was Central, there in Cincinnati, for a while—three or four years. I used to connect you with—Pittsburgh, Chicago——"

"Why—then you're Delia!" he gasped.

"Delia!" she laughed. "I resigned—I wanted to—to think, as I told you. Oh, if you'd ever been at the beck and call of a little click! Well, down here—I can think. I'm——"

"Delia!" he filled in, "I'll land in at——"

"Vicksburg," she suggested, "I'm just going to trip on down."

"That's what I'm going to do," Murdong declared, "Old Mississip's great!"

"Lots of dandy stories to it!" Urleigh declared. "You won't mind if I—if I tell about——"

"About Delia?" she smiled. "Oh, if it's any satisfaction to you—go ahead! Down here nobody cares, you know, what anybody says."

"I'm glad to be rid of those things," Murdong shook his head. "Rocks like that are some burden and responsibility—I thought—I didn't know what to make of them——"

"You saw to whom they belonged?" she asked. "I see you've been reading the newspaper."

"Oh, yes—I knew—only——"

"Only what?"

"Well, you turned them over to me—I wondered

if you'd forgotten them in that pump-well. I didn't care," Murdong declared, with a touch of defiance in his tone, "I thought I'd keep them for you."

"You're a dear," Delia laughed. "I thought—I knew you would. When I remembered it all—I knew."

They drifted on down the river to Vicksburg, where they landed in. By that time some other matters had been decided.

"It's no place for a lady to be alone—I mean in one way it isn't," Murdong had declared, and Delia had admitted it.

"But if she's married," Murdong said—"now if you'd marry me?"

Urleigh saw them married, and they saw him off on the train. Then they returned to their boats, and drifted down the Yazoo into the big river again, and around the bend toward Palmyra cut-off.

When Urleigh arrived in Cincinnati he called on Manager Grost.

"Hello, boy!" Grost cried. "Say, we've solved that diamond mystery!"

"So?" Urleigh exclaimed. "Am I in time to write it?"

"Just in time. You know Goles, the agent? Well, we found him. It was just luck. He wanders into a hospital here, and says his head hurts. Well, I

should say it ought to have. Had a slung-shot hole in it an inch deep. They operated on him—lifted out the skull. He's come to and he's all right. Sent for me, and he remembers a lot he did. He's the lad who held old Wrest up and got his diamonds. Said so! He was daffy, you see, 'count of that diamond thief rapping him on his head and getting his case. Now we got to get the diamond thief—I suspect——"

"Oh, don't bother about him," Urleigh laughed, putting down the diamond case. "He's dead—White Collar Dan, you know. I thought I'd bring you the diamonds. You've given me a lot of good stories, you know."

THE END

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