

The Strumpet Sea

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

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CHAPTER XX

Peter was in danger, and the men hunting for them would be in danger. As much to protect these others as to save himself, Richard decided to dig his way out.

He had for tools the stout club, about four feet long, two inches thick, one end shod with iron; and he had his pocket knife. He whittled the end of the club into a flat, chisel-shaped blade, not too sharp, not sharp enough to break easily.

Then he began to dig steps up the side of the pit. For the first few feet, the sides sloped outward. That was easy; but above that, they became perpendicular. He began to excavate a sort of spiral gallery around the sides of the pit; a shelf wide enough for him to lie on, on his stomach, while he reached up ahead of him and loosened the soft stuff with the end of his club, and then scraped it out with his right hand, flinging it over the side of the shelf to fall to the bottom of the pit.

The dust of his digging through the charred, half-burned peat choked him. He descended and drank water from the pool, and wetted his handkerchief and tied it across his mouth and nose. While there was still some light, he had been able to climb ten feet above the floor of the pit; but then the light failed and he worked in darkness. Some time later, the shelf on which he lay broke off under his weight, and he fell, rolling down into the water again. He guessed that he had reached a point where the walls of the pit began to slope inward; so that there was nothing to support the gallery he excavated so laboriously.

He would have to tunnel upward through the solid peat and reach the surface somewhere to one side of the hole.

He began to do so. Almost at once the texture of the peat became tougher. Till now he had worked in stuff half-burned, the life baked out of it by the heat of those old fires; but now it began to have substance and cohesion, held together by grass roots dead centuries ago. His task became increasingly laborious. Using the chisel-shaped end of his club like a narrow spade, he drove it upward, cut around blocks of peat, and then with his right hand clawed these blocks free.

He burrowed like a mole. The tunnel he dug was no larger than necessary. If he could wedge his body through it, and have room to use his club, he was content. There was now some moisture in the peat through which he tunneled, and not much dust; nevertheless thirst harassed him.

Once when he went down to drink, he saw that there was light in the hole at the top of the pit. The short southern night was ending. Dawn was near.

A long while after that, he realized by the tougher fibre of the chunks he tore away that he had reached live grass roots. The realization, even though it proved he was near the surface of the ground and promised an early end to his labors, did not speed them. He worked slow and slower, tired without knowing it, sluggish with weariness. He thrust the pointed club upward with a heave of shoulders and back, his feet braced hard.

Presently one of these thrusts sent the club through into open air. There was still the mat of grass roots to rip apart; but five minutes later Richard dragged himself like a crippled mole through the opening he had made, and lay prone.

It was Corkran, following the broken trail through the tall grass, who hours later found him there.

Aboard the Ventura, George and Mary kept their vigil; George by the desk with the revolver and the bomb gun ready, Mary at the cabin window through which she could see the boats on shore. After a long time, George heard a voice on deck, a sudden cry; so he knew the truth before Mary spoke.

She turned with glowing eyes; she whispered: "They've found him! He's walking. Two of them are helping him. George, Richard is alive!"

George nodded. "Then they'll be at us," he reminded her. He knew what to expect. Since the men had found Richard, Peter must hold the Ventura and escape in her, or be damned. To hold her against the men in the boats, he must have the guns.

George did not stop to consider what means Peter had in hand. He meant to hold the cabin against any odds. If he could. But he might fail. In the sudden imminence of crisis now, like a revelation, he realized that even if he failed, he could still leave Peter weaponless.

He spoke to Mary, sharply. "Take all those cartridge boxes, the powder, everything. Break the window. Throw it all overboard."

She began to throw out the boxes of cartridges. Someone on deck heard them splash in the water and looked over the rail and saw what she was doing, and shouted a warning.

"Stop that down there, you!" George shouted back: "I'll shoot the first man who shows himself!" Looking up through the companion he could see nothing except the sky, and a segment of the rail.

Mary kept at her task, working fast and without pause, till it was done.

The sounds over his head kept George's attention fixed on the companion. No movement in the main cabin warned him; but it was from that quarter that the attack came.

Rannels, Gee, Hurd, and Peter were united by the greedy hope of reward. Peter had won them by promises, playing on each according to his appetite. For weapons, they had the edged tools of the whale fishery; harpoons, lances, spades. It was only necessary to find a chance to use them. With this in mind, Peter planned to draw George's eye in one direction, to attack from another. He set Rannels by the cabin companion with a cutting-in spade, the keen chisel blade six inches across, the handle long enough so that Rannels from the deck could reach the cabin floor. He posted Hurd on top of the after house where from high overhead he could see down through the glass of the skylight and dart a harpoon at any mark that offered. He directed Gee to take an axe down into the main cabin and strike the door into the common room a smashing blow that would make George turn that way. When he thus turned, Rannels, at the companion, or Hurd, darting the great harpoon, would kill him from above.

When the others were in position the Negro went below. Peter himself would take no active part in the affray. Gee was barefooted, and he moved silently. He was accustomed to use an axe left-handed. The door he had to attack swung into the after cabin, the hinges on the port side. Gee stood on that side when he swung the axe.

He delivered that blow with a nervous violence which proved his own destruction. The axe hit the panels just beside the bolt, and the flimsy screws flew out and the door flew open so easily that Gee by his own weight was pulled forward, the axe and his swinging arms dragging him off balance, into the doorway.

George, when the Negro struck, was standing at the foot of the companionway, looking up, the bomb gun in his hands, the door into the main cabin ten feet away and behind him. At the crash of the axe blow, he whirled and saw the Negro in the doorway. Gee bawled in dismay, trying to leap clear, as George lifted the bomb gun and fired.

At the sound of the axe, Rannels stepped to the top of the companionway above George. At the foot of the companionway he saw George swing to face Gee, and as George lifted the bomb gun, Rannels stabbed downward with the long spade. He aimed at the nape of George's neck.

If the blow had struck fairly, it would have decapitated the man below; but the recoil of the gun knocked George off balance backward. He was already falling when Rannels struck, so the harpooner missed his aim. The spade that would have caught George in the neck, instead slid over his shoulder and down his left arm. It bit into his forearm just below the elbow. It sliced the flesh like a razor, grated on the bone.

George, thrown backward by the recoil, fell on his left side. The smoke of powder from the gun's thunderous discharge had instantly filled the cabin; but through this smoke as he lay on his side he saw Rannels at the head of the companionway recovering the spade to strike again. He rolled on his back, dodging that blow; and he dragged the revolver, already cocked, out of his belt and fired it upward blindly. The heavy slug struck Rannels in the breast bone. He slid feet first down the companionway and lay in a huddle on the cabin floor.

The thinning smoke made George cough. He heard a faint sound that seemed to be far away, and realized it was a voice, and saw Mary on her knees here beside him.

Mary was trying to hold him. He pushed her away. He had not meant to do this violently; but under his thrust she staggered backward till she collided with the corner of the desk. He shook his head regretfully. Too bad to hurt her; but he had business in hand.

He looked for Gee, and saw him with a calm surprise. George had not heard the bomb explode; but it had exploded. There was no doubt of that. Gee was in the main cabin, on the floor by the table. Something had flung him backward; but what lay there had been Gee. It must have been. The skin was black.

Mary was here again, ripping at his coat, trying to tear away the sleeve, trying to tend the terrible wound in his arm. Weakness swept over George in a slow, sick wave; yet his mind was clear enough. Rannels was dead, and Gee too; but in a minute now he, George McAusland, would collapse from loss of blood, and lie helpless here, and then Peter could come down and get the guns.

That had to be stopped. He must kill Peter while he could.

George decided to go through the main cabin into the steerage and thus reach the deck. Mary was trying to hold him, but he put her aside. Whatever she was saying did not matter. It could not matter. He must reach the deck somehow, and manage Peter Corr. Mary hindered him. He said to her in an elaborate whisper, loudly, so that she would be sure to understand: "Stay here. Talk. Make them think I'm here."

He pushed her aside, and she was thrown three or four steps backward against the wall and fell. He thought: Why, I must be strong, really strong, to do that! Too bad! Poor Mary!

He went through the after 'tween decks. He moved briskly, the revolver in his right hand, his left arm hanging. He remembered to cock the revolver before he started to climb to the deck. He could not help himself with his left hand, because it would not do what he wanted it to do; and he had to hold the revolver ready in his other hand; so he went up the companionway very slowly, pushing himself with his feet, his body leaning forward against the treads.

The housing looked aft. When his head rose above the deck level, he faced the mizzenmast. He crawled out of the companion on his hands and knees; and the revolver in his right hand thumped on the deck.

Peter heard that sound and turned and saw him.

Peter was on the starboard side of the cabin companion, by the door of the potato room where Tommy Hanline slept. He had a boat spade poised ready to slice at anyone whose head appeared in the companion. George saw him. George did not see Hurd. Hurd was on the port side, beyond the door of the galley, where old Willie Leeper, as though blind to all that went on aboard here, persistently banged and clattered at his work. Hurd had a boat spade too.

But George did not see him. He saw Peter, and Peter saw George and leaped toward him. George fell on his face and rolled on his side and lifted the revolver and shot.

Peter ducked and dodged; and suddenly he screamed like a woman. Panic fear broke him down. He turned to run aft toward the companion, squalling as he ran.

George thumbed back the hammer of the revolver and shot again. Peter seemed to trip and fall, and he no longer screamed. George, lying on his side, his cheek against the deck, the revolver flat on the deck at his arm's length, pulled the hammer and shot again and again, slowly, laboriously aiming through eyes half closed.

After a space, the hammer clicked on an empty cylinder. He could do nothing more. He rolled on his back and looked up; and then his eyes opened wide in clear recognition of what was about to happen to him. Hurd, the little Cockney, stood over him in silhouette against the sky and the web of rigging. Hurd was lifting his boat spade to strike. He seemed to stand there motionless; and time had stopped, and instants were eternal.

CHAPTER XXI

Behind Hurd—George could see him under Hurd's upraised arms—Willie Leeper was holding upraised a heavy cleaver. Before Hurd's spade stopped going up for the downward blow at George, the cleaver, already lifted, began to descend. It came slowly against Hurd's neck, on the side under the ear, at an angle inward. The broad keen blade went far in and in.

The spade in Hurd's hands dropped to the deck. The blade of it brushed against George's side, and stuck in the planking; and the spade stood erect for a moment, and then fell over sideways as the blade, for lack of any deep hold, broke out of the planking. The handle fell across George's body.

Hurd fell the other way, making choking sounds. Willie Leeper looked down at him. Willie said in a piping, thin voice to Hurd dying on the deck:

"There, drat ye!" George laughed. That was funny. He had never heard Willie speak before. Willie had a thin, squeaking voice that was completely absurd. George was much amused.

Then he forgot Willie, for here was Mary. George rolled his head sideways to look at Peter lying on the deck aft; but Peter had not moved, so everything was all right.

He told her so. He said carefully: "Everything's all right, Mary." He tried to nod, to reassure her. "It's all right, Mary," he repeated.

She said fiercely: "Hush! Oh, my brave dear!" "It's all right," he insisted, and smiled. Something was running out of him. His life. It was running out through his arm, fast; but he must be sure Mary understood, so that she would be happy, afterward.

He tried to tell her that he knew she loved Richard, that he knew she and Richard were fine, that it was all right, that she was not to feel badly about him, or about anything. But so much of him had already run out that there was not enough of him left to say what he wished to say; and while he lay happy in Mary's arms, the rest ran out in a dwindling little stream.

On a day almost four months later, under all sail, the Ventura moved serenely upon a white-capped sea. Richard had for the moment gone below. Mat Forbes was aft, Tommy Hanline proudly taking a turn at the wheel. Corkran and Mary stood together by the starboard rail amidships; and the parrot nibbled at Corkran's ear, and whispered wheedlingly. Two or three miles away, a whaler, bark-rigged, was outward bound.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Beginner Didn't Want Possibility to Be Wasted

The driving instructor was teaching the awkward fellow to drive a car.

"Put out your left hand to signal that you are about to move off. Then with your left foot step in the clutch. With your right hand put the gearshift into first. Gradually ease up on the clutch, the while stepping gently on the accelerator with your right foot.

"When the car has gathered speed, again step in the clutch, shifting with the right hand to second. Then with the left foot slowly let out the clutch, accelerating with the right foot. Then repeat to shift to high speed. Keep your eyes on the road ahead all of the time."

There was a long pause; the pupil appeared to be thinking.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" asked the instructor finally. "There's nothing useful I could do with my nose, is there?" inquired the beginner.

ASK ME ANOTHER ?

A Quiz With Answers Offering Information on Various Subjects

The Questions

1. What is the only state in the Union which is bounded by one state alone?
2. Which of the following is a natural magnet—Capstone, thunderstone or lodestone?
3. What are known as cardinal winds?
4. When was the boundary between the United States and Canada finally determined?
5. What are the odors of the principal gases that are used in war?
6. How many shillings are there in a British pound?
7. How small can diamonds be cut?
8. Who said: "I know of no method to secure the repeal of bad or obnoxious laws so effective as their stringent execution"?

The Answers

1. Maine.
2. Lodestone.
3. Winds blowing from due north, east, south or west.
4. The boundary between the United States and Canada was not completely determined until 1925, or 142 years after our country signed the treaty with England.
5. As nearly as can be described, mustard gas smells like garlic; lewisite like geraniums; phosgene

like musty hay; and tear gas like apple blossoms.

6. Twenty.

7. Some diamond cutters have become so expert in cutting very small diamonds for mass settings that they produce regular 58-facet stones so small that as many as 800 weigh only one carat.

8. Ulysses S. Grant (inaugural address March 4, 1869).

NAGGING BACKACHE

May Warn of Disordered Kidney Action. Don't Neglect It!

Modern life with its ceaseless hurry and worry, irregular habits, improper eating and drinking, exposure, contagion, whatnot, keeps doctors busy, hospitals crowded. The after effects are disturbing to the kidneys and oftentimes people suffer without knowing that disordered kidney action may cause the trouble.

After colds, fever and similar ills there is an increase of body impurities the kidneys must filter from the blood. If the kidneys are overtaxed and fail to remove excess acid and other harmful waste, there is poisoning of the whole system.

DOAN'S PILLS

Two Tragedies There are two tragedies in life—one is not to get your heart's

desire, the other is to get it. And the latter is the greater tragedy.—Oscar Wilde.

Desire, the other is to get it. And the latter is the greater tragedy.—Oscar Wilde.

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