

The Reconciliation

By Norman Springer

O'KEEFE mopped his face with his grimy sweat rag and anathematized Creation. It was hot—heavens, but it was hot! Not in the memory of many voyages could he recall a spell so hot. Nor—as he had profanely asserted at least once a day since joining the ship—never had he seen, or heard of, or believed to exist above water, such a jumble of junk as masqueraded for boilers on board the Galway. Leaky tubes and burnt out furnaces! It would be a miracle if they made home without a smash.

The faint tinkle of the ship's bell came to the fireman's ears through the ventilator. Seven bells! Another half hour and the watch would be over. At eight bells the relief would come. At eight bells, his relief—the rage that had smoldered within O'Keefe since that day ashore at Singapore, a week before, blazed again. At eight bells, Jim Malone would relieve him.

Malone—the false mate! Seven years they had been mates, closer to each other than brothers. And then—all because of a woman—Malone had betrayed the friendship. It had been Malone's treachery in stealing O'Keefe's sweetheart—and then boasting about it. And then, the crowning ignominy! They had fought, and Malone had knocked him cold before the eyes of all Malay street. But, it was the drink that had bested him, the rotgut samshu of Madras Bob's—not Malone. He knew that, and soon he would square accounts with Jim Malone.

The engineer's gruff bellow came from the passageway between the stokehold and the engine room.

"D'ye think you're home on the farm? Watch your steam, O'Keefe!"

The furnace doors swung open, and the stokehold was white in the glare of the fires. O'Keefe bent over his shovel, working with speed and sureness; casting far back into the firebox; feathering each scoop with a deft flick of the wrist, and spreading the coal evenly over the flames. The bulging muscles of his great body rippled and coiled. He kept his head half turned from the blistering heat that surged out upon him; yet, in the brief moments of his labor, the veins in his forehead swelled into knots, and his face seemed to draw up and wither.

The furnace doors clanging shut announced the completion of the task; and the coal-passers darted from their dark caverns, their barrows piled high with coal, to replenish the heaps on the floor-plates.

O'Keefe turned to the water-butt, his whole parched being craving moisture. He raised a cup of cold water to his lips. For a long delicious moment he held a mouthful, then spat it out. Though he lusted to drink, experience forbade.

Eight bells! The watch was changing, and the heart-breaking work of cleaning fires had begun. Through narrowed eyes and grasping tight the heavy shovel, O'Keefe saw the huge form of Malone come toward him. The two eyed each other warily, their bodies half crouched, their whole attitude eloquent of hatred and distrust.

"How's she steamin'?" demanded Malone.

"Hard!" was the terse reply. "She's fair eatin' the steam. Keep an eye on number four—tube leakin'."

"All right," returned Malone. And then, with studied, mock concern, he added: "You look bad, O'Keefe. You're not the man ye once were—mind ye don't burn out!"

O'Keefe gritted his teeth. His physical powers is the stoker's pride; and a greater insult could hardly be offered him than a reflection cast upon his ability to withstand the killing pace of the hold. O'Keefe tightened his grasp on the shovel and took a half step forward; and Malone crouched expectantly. But with a mumbled curse O'Keefe handed the tool to the other and turned away.

"Not now," he muttered, as he wearily climbed the ladder to the deck

above. "He's fresh, and I'm tired. I'll wait my time."

Four hours later the soft voice of the call boy awakened O'Keefe. The fore-castle was filled with the protesting growls of suddenly aroused men. With a grunt O'Keefe composed himself again to sleep. The mid-watch was being called; it was midnight, and he had still four hours before his turn below.

And then the idea came to him. Now was his chance! He was refreshed and strong. Unnoticed, he could go below with the mid-watch. He would wait at the foot of the fiddly ladder, and when Malone sought to ascend, he would confront him. And then, before the eyes of all the watch—Malone's own watch—he would prove himself the better man.

O'Keefe reached for his shoes and rolled from his bunk. The mid-watch looked at him in surprise, but forbore to question. The doings of Bull O'Keefe were not lightly to be discussed in his hearing; in all the Black Gang, only Malone might essay it. O'Keefe opened his ditty-bag and drew therefrom a pair of brass knuckles. The eyes of the watch widened with comprehension.

"Es goin' down after Malone!" excitedly whispered a little Cockney coal-passer to the man next to him. "Blimme—wot a row!"

O'Keefe turned a black face to the speaker.

"Ye'll do well to mind your own damned business!" he growled.

The little cockney subsided with an apologetic whimper. The rest of the watch maintained an interested silence; it was no affair of theirs—and O'Keefe was a hasty man.

The watch filed quietly out of the fore-castle and along the deck; and behind them stalked O'Keefe, battle in his heart and the deadly knuckles on his fist. When he had finished with Malone, he exulted, Malone's own mother wouldn't know her son. He would break him.

And then it happened.

A sharp, penetrating, swelling hiss rose from the stokehold; startled shout, and the shrill scream of a man in agony. The group at the fiddly door stiffened and blanched, each man instinctively knowing what was wrong. "A tube!" cried one. "A tube has busted!"

Then came a roar that shook the ship and drowned all other sounds. Clouds of vapor swirled upward from the hold and billowed through the door. A figure stumbled out on deck—then other figures.

O'Keefe counted eight men—two were missing. One was dead. He had heard that scream before, and knew its meaning. But the other? Without looking, he knew it to be Malone. Malone was head stoker of his watch; he would have tried to reach the cut-off valve.

O'Keefe wheeled on a man who danced and gibbered with the pain of his scalds.

"What boiler?" he roared.

The man mouthed the answer:

"Four!"

"And Malone?"

The poor wretch replied with a dumb gesture toward the hold.

O'Keefe dove through the fiddly door—to be driven back, choking. He snatched a towel that draped one man's shoulders, dipped it into a fire-bucket that hung on the bulkhead, and then wrapped it about his face. Hands reached to restrain him. He shook them off and disappeared into the swirling mist of steam.

He felt his way down the ladder, the wet cloth covering his mouth and nostrils, his eyes shut. His brain worked surely and swiftly.

A tube had gone on number four. Malone would have tried to reach the cut-off. The cut-off was on the side of the boiler near the foot of the ladder. There was a chance, if he could get to the bottom.

He reached the platform on a level with the boiler tops. A thousand needles were plunged into his flesh—the live steam had attacked him. He threw himself ahead, and slid and fell the rest of the way to the bottom.

He landed on his knees, the precious towel still wrapped about his face, his eyes still shut. On all fours, he scuttled across the floor-plates, feeling his way and aided by his knowledge of the place. The steam seared his flesh—he could feel his body cook.

His hand struck something that was soft and that quivered to the touch. He reached for the side of the boiler and found the mark he sought. And then O'Keefe stood up, and found and closed the valve which controlled the flow of steam, the baked flesh of his hands sticking to the metal of the wheel as he spun it shut. The roar died away to a hiss, and stopped.

And O'Keefe sank down, unconscious, across the body of Malone. O'Keefe awoke to pain. His whole

being was alive and racked with pain. The smell of drugs was in the air, and he knew that he was in the ship's sick-bay.

Slowly and painfully O'Keefe took stock of his surroundings. At his side was a table, and on it were bottles and ointment, his belt and sweat rag—and the brass knuckles. His gaze roamed past the table, and he met the eyes of another bandaged, swaddled figure in the bunk opposite.

For a long moment the two men regarded each other. Slowly and painfully two bandaged hands reached across the narrow space and met.

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