the dark ships

BY HULBERT FOOTNER

SYNOPSIS: Neill, a young federal agent, comes to Baltimore to spend a week with Janet. She won't break a dinner date with Prescott Fanning. So they quarrel and part. Neill, distrusting Fanning, decides to check on him. He gets acquainted with him at the hotel bar. Fanning gives him knock-out drops, searches his papers and keeps a snapshot of Janet. Next day Neill awakens to find Janet, Fanning and Fanning's yacht gone. A mysterious phone call tells him Janet is aboard the yacht in Absalom's Harbor and in trouble. Neill hurries to Absalom's by bus.

Chapter Eight

Murder On The Nadji

RETURNING to the porch of the sprawling store, Neill sat down at the end of the line of men taking their ease and enjoying their after-supper pipes. Sunburned fishermen mostly, in gumboots and faded drill shirts. Neill learned that fishing was good and that pound nets were being set out in the bay. The trout had come earlier than was customary.

None of this was to his purpose, and he studied the yacht. Very smart and modern with her high sides and stubby funnel. Something under a hundred feet over all. She carried two boats on davits amidships, and he noted that one of them was gone. As darkness gathered it seemed odd to him that no lights showed in the cabins. The riding lights were up.

The man next to Neill was a tall fisherman with white hair and a complexion the color of beet juice. "That's a tidy little yacht yonder," Neill remarked to him.

"So you might say. She's the latest caper all right. But ugly as hell, if you're asking me."

"Is she owned hereabouts?"

"Nah! We got no toys like that down here. We're working people. New York man." He told Neill of the accident to the yacht's engine.

"Is the owner aboard?"

"Sure, he's aboard."

"I see their dinghy is ashore."

"The crew just come in to go to the movies."

Neill grinned in hard satisfaction. Owner aboard; crew ashore. The situation was working out to his advantage.

Another man hearing them talking about the yacht, took up the tale. "The owner was in the store telephoning awhile ago. Fine-looking, big slicker; fresh-complected. But surly. Didn't have a word to throw to a dog."

Neill took heart from this. If things were going badly with Fanning, so much the better.

"You're right he's a surly brute," said another. This was a lanky fellow with an innocent blue eye. Neill noticed that the others were inclined to make a butt of him. "I rowed out there with a mess of trout, thinking they'd be glad to buy some fresh fish," he said. "But when I come alongside the owner, he ordered me off. 'Get the hell away from here,' he says. 'I don't want any damned fish!'"

"That was manners," said another. "What did you say, Jake?"

"I says, 'Go to hell yourself you long-legged so-and-so! I'm as good a man as you, if you do own a yacht. And if you'll come ashore, I'll prove it!'"

There was a general laugh.

"All right," the speaker went on. "I told you before and I tell you again there is some funny business aboard that yacht, and we ought to investigate it!"

More laughter.

'As If She Wanted Help'

"WHAT do you mean, funny business?" asked Neill.

"I'll tell you, stranger. When I come alongside the yacht I was standing up in my skiff and I could look right into one of the portholes. All closed they was, warm as it is. And on the other side of the glass I seen a beautiful young girl with bare arms and neck. Only seen her a second, but she nodded her head, and beckoned pitiful as if she wanted help real bad."

Neill's breast was suddenly lightened. Janet *was* aboard the yacht, then; he had come to the right place. And she was not a willing passenger, either. That relieved his worst fear. He felt a gush of friendliness towards the speaker.

But he, it seemed, enjoyed no reputation for veracity among his mates. They laughed him down. "You're seeing things, Jake. You're wasted fishing. You ought to be one of these here, now, storywriters in the papers."

"All right! All right!" said Jake. "Some day you men will learn that I'm not as big a fool as you like to make out!"

When it became really dark and the vessels in the harbor were no longer sharply silhouetted against the water, Neill got up and strolled away. Each house along the harbor front had its little pier sticking out from the shore with one or more small boats moored to it, and he had it in mind to borrow one of these without asking.

He turned to the right because in that direction the shore road rose somewhat. Here the little piers were under the bank, and screened from observation. Climbing down the bank, he walked out on a pier and found a skiff with oars in her. He got in and, untying the rope, rowed quietly toward the yacht.

The water was as smooth as a mirror, and voices came from the shore with startling distinctness. On the porch of Longcope's they were still talking about fish. Every star in heaven was shining. No moon. This moon was near its end, Neill remembered. Wouldn't rise until near dawn.

When he drew alongside the yacht, he hailed her, not loud. There was no answer. Tying his skiff to the ladder, he climbed on deck and spoke again. No answer. There was something about the stillness of the little craft that chilled his blood. Where was Janet? He walked forward along the deck and aft again, sticking his head in the different doors and speaking. There was no movement, no sound in reply. Everything aboard was neat and shipshape. The silence was not absolute, for somewhere below he could hear the hum of a generator.

There were two deckhouses on the yacht. The forward house contained a luxurious little dining saloon, while the after house was merely the entrance to a companionway leading to the quarters below. Having satisfied himself that there was nobody forward, Neill switched on lights in the after house and went down the stairs with his heart rising in his throat. His instinct told him there was something very wrong aboard.

He found himself in a miniature saloon with doors forward and aft. The forward door admitted him to a comfortable sleeping cabin, empty. A man's belongings were scattered about. Fanning's? The after door was locked. It was a light door and, putting his shoulder against it, he burst it in.

A Dark Wet Stain

SWITCHING on lights, he saw Prescott Fanning lying on the floor at his feet, dead. There was a bullet hole in his forehead and a dark wet stain was slowly spreading through the rug under his head. Janet in her pretty evening dress was lying limply in an easy chair nearby. There was a crude smear of blood across her cheek. A gun lay on the floor beneath her hand, and a stale smell of gunpowder hung on the air.

Neill's heart stood still. He ran to the girl and flung his arms around her. Her body was warm; she breathed; there was no wound on her. Upon wiping her face, he saw that the blood was not hers. He crushed her to his breast, trembling in the reaction from his first terrible fear.

Leaving her for a moment, he dropped to his knees beside the body on the floor. Fanning was dead all right, but to Neill's astonishment there was still warmth in his body. If only he had come a few minutes sooner! He saw that the hole in his forehead was a wound of egress. He had been shot in the back of his head and the gun had been held so close that his hair was singed.

Neill glanced towards the door that he had burst in. Its key was on the inside. All the portholes were closed and fastened. To his mind there was only one possible explanation. Fanning had attacked Janet and she had shot him. Neill had no thought of blame for her; he approved her courage. Lucky that she had the gun. Where had she got it?

He carried her out into the saloon and laid her on a couch. There was a vacuum jug on a stand. He sprinkled water in her face and bathed her temples.

Meanwhile he had to make the greatest decision of his life. The trained sleuth in him said: She shot this man and we'll have to face it out together. She'll be acquitted of course. But the man in him thought of how she would be dragged through the mud—Janet whom he had always laughed at and loved for her delicate ways! And how after acquittal, fingers would forever point her out as a murderess. I don't care what the evidence is, the man in him said, *she couldn't have done it.* And I'm going to keep her under cover until I can prove it!

She opened her eyes and looked around so wildly and senselessly that Neill feared for her reason.

"Janet!" he murmured. "This is Neill. Don't you know me, dear?"

Recognition came into her eyes, and like a frightened child she flung her arms around his neck. "Neill! Neill!"

"It's me, all right."

"You've come!" she murmured in a passion of relief. "I knew you'd come!"

He soothed her silently.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Let's not talk about it now, dear. I have you safe!"

"Oh, take me away from this horrible place!" she moaned. "Take me away! Take me away!"

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Neill and Janet row away into the darkness, tomorrow.

STRANGE AS IT SEEMS—By JOHN HIX

For further proof address the author, inclosing a stamped envelope for reply. Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

Hotter on Cold Days.

On cold, clear days the intensity of the heat radiation received from the sun by the earth is far greater than on hot days. The reason behind this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon is the fact that on warm or hot days the air is filled with water vapor and dust. Vapor traps much of the sun's rays while dust scatters them. Little vapor or dust is in the air on cold days.

Perhaps one of the most evident examples of "hot sunshine" on a cold day was recorded in Washington, D. C., on February 9, 1934. On that day, according to W. R. Gregg, chief of the U. S. weather bureau, the city experienced its coldest weather in 20 years. Yet, strange as it seems, on the same day the intensity of radiation received from the sun was the greatest ever recorded there.

"Sweetest Story Ever Told."

In writing his famous song, "The Sweetest Story Ever Told," Robert Morrison Stults received his inspiration from a chance remark made by his wife. Having just completed reading a book one day in the 1880's Mrs. Stults expressed her opinion of it to her husband with the words, "Well, that's the sweetest story ever!" Mr. Stults snapped up the remark as a theme for a song. He started writing it immediately and finished the entire song in less than two hours.

Land of No Knots.

Of the many taboos observed among the peoples of Africa, the ban against knots in the Bakongo country of the Lower Congo, Africa, is perhaps the oddest. Nothing tied with a knot is allowed in a village. All bundles must be untied before being carried in. The taboo even goes so far as to ban the wearing of knotted belts or girdles in a village. The natives' explanation in support of their prohibition of knots contends that any form of knot will prevent certain magical powers from functioning.

Tomorrow: What Snake Can Strike Fatally Before It Is Hatched?

Scottsboro Boy Appeal

WASHINGTON, Sept. 13.—(AP)—Haywood Patterson, one of the nine Negroes involved in the celebrated Scottsboro case, appealed to the supreme court today in an effort to escape a 75-year prison sentence imposed by Alabama courts for an alleged attack on a white woman.

Use Mail Tribune want ads.

Federal Board Hurries

WASHINGTON, Sept. 13.—(AP)—The national labor relations board, moving swiftly to avert a threatened maritime strike at Atlantic and gulf ports, refused today to delay until October collective bargaining elections among employes of 58 steamship lines.

An ensign is a flag flown on ships.

Light Blister Rust

THE DALLES, Sept. 13.—(AP)—D. W. Hagenstein, in charge of control of pine rust in the Ochoco national forest east of Prineville, said today only 16 trees to the section were infested this year. Last year a check-up showed as high as 1000 trees to the section diseased.

Use Mail Tribune want ads.

SUBURBAN HEIGHTS By GLUYAS WILLIAMS

S'MATTER POP By C. M. PAYNE

TAILSPIN TOMMY—Unexpected Help! By HAL FORREST

BEN WEBSTER'S CAREER—Encouragement! By EDWIN ALGER

THE NEBBS—What Now? By SOL HERS

MA CAT KNOWS RAIL SCHEDULES

ROCK ISLAND, Ill.—(AP)—She is a railroad cat and knows her schedules.

She gave birth to four kittens on top of a box car axle housing where no one could reach them.

Then she heard trainmen say they would have to move the car in two days. When the field was clear, she began moving her youngsters, one by one, down the side of the car and into a secluded corner of the repair shop.

Cat, kittens and car moved on schedule.

Use Mail Tribune want ads.

INDIANS LIKE PLANES FROM THE GROUND

VALENTINE, Neb.—(AP) — Chief Kills-a-Horse and other Sioux braves on the Pine Ridge reservation are having their homes "air-mapped" by the soil conservation bureau of the department of agriculture.

The Indians are interested in the equipment which allows the pilots to take pictures from altitudes of 24,000 feet, but none of them has expressed a desire to go aloft.

"See plenty from ground," one chief commented.

WINDOW GLASS—We sell window glass and will replace your broken windows reasonably. Trowbridge Cabinet Works.