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It was long after midnight when young Fisk made his way somewhat unsteadily to his cabin on the Louisville boat. His wife, a bride of three months, was still awake and reproached him gently.

"I think it is hardly safe for you to play cards with strangers, Frank," she said rather timidly.

"It's all right, my dear, I assure you," he answered, with unwonted precision of speech. "Excellent fellows. Didn't resent it a bit when I cleaned them out. A man must have a flutter once in a while, you know."

"Did you win?"

"Should say I did. At least five hundred. They taught me the game, but I was just a trifle too much for them."

In her inexperience and faith she yielded her objection, reflecting that, after all, he was a man among men and that it was not hers to interfere with amusements that pertained so distinctively to the masculine sphere. And then he had won. She did not wonder at that. Frank was clever at everything.

By the time the steamboat reached Louisville Fisk had reason to believe that he possessed natural and hitherto unsuspected gifts in the matter of twenty card poker. He marvelled that he had never discovered this important fact before. The three prosperous New York brokers with whom he played had noticed it at an early stage, and while he had modestly sought to evade their compliments on his skill it was really impossible to overlook the tangible results.

Fisk had left Natchez on his wedding trip and was now returning thither. He had done well as a planter and had been doubly fortunate in an opportunity to act as agent for many of his planter acquaintances during his visit to New York and Boston. It was the custom to collect the proceeds of the year's shipments of cotton and sugar each fall and a dozen wealthy residents of the Mississippi city had been glad to intrust Fisk with their business instead of making the journey themselves. He was bringing back a large sum in cash, the commission from which would suffice to cover his expenses since the wedding.

He had no means of knowing that the three "brokers" with whom he had spent so many pleasant and profitable hours on the Louisville boat were members of a clever band of card sharps who operated between east and south over the rivers. They kept watch upon the offices of the shipping firms along the coast, waiting for men like Fisk, planters flush of money after making their collections. Fisk had been marked and they had learned his homeward route. The three had preceded him to Pittsburg and had fallen in with him there.

The young man looked forward to parting from his amiable companions with regret, and it was a matter for warm rejoicing when he learned that they had decided to continue their trip to Baton Rouge. At his earnest solicitation they agreed to take the steamer from Louisville on which he had engaged passage, leaving that city three days later. On boarding the Orleans for her southern trip he was greeted with effusion by the "brokers."

"I'm afraid you'll have to lend me return fare by the time we reach Natchez as a matter of common charity," said one of them ruefully. "Can't you go a little easy on the unfortunate father of a large family?" continued the speaker, who was known as Smith.

"Oh, come, now," laughed Fisk; "it's not as bad as that. My luck can't last forever, you know."

The Hint Dropped.

"Now, that's just what I thought at first," chimed in Sprague, the tallest and handsomest of the three. "You remember, boys," he said, appealing to the others, "I predicted that Fisk's winning streak would turn at the second sitting. But it didn't. I'm a nigger if I wouldn't like to know his system. I've played some before, but I never saw a man who took to the game so like a duck to water as our friend. It's more than luck, you can stake on it."

"Whatever the trick, it works," said Fuller, the third "broker." "I can see that plantation I was going to buy gone a-glimmering if he keeps his pace."

Fisk waved their remarks aside with a smile and started the glasses around, after which conversation drifted into business channels. The men were well informed concerning crop conditions, and until dinner time discussed topics familiar to Fisk without a word concerning gambling. During the evening, however, the group gravitated toward the men's cabin on the main deck, and Mrs. Fisk found herself alone once more. She knew where her husband had gone and felt some return of her former uneasiness, but suppressed it, taking herself to task for her selfishness and lack of confidence.

Dawn was breaking before the game broke up, and at its close Fisk crept up to his cabin on the deck above with stealthy step. He did not care to be questioned this time, and it was with infinite relief that he found his wife asleep. He slipped into his berth without waking her and counted over the situation. He had lost not only his winnings, but the share of the money he carried which he might properly consider as his own. However, he comforted himself with the thought that he would win it back on the morrow. It was unthinkable that one who had mastered the game so completely as himself could be checked seriously by a streak of ill luck.

When the boat reached Vicksburg Fisk found himself with about \$5,000 left out of a total of \$70,000. His depression, abstracted manner and brusque responses had not failed to reawaken his young wife's alarm. She had divined something of the cause, though not its extent, and had even ventured to take him to task. The result had been the first sharp word she had ever had from him, and the delicate

little woman, nursing the only unhappiness that had entered her sheltered life, had retired, hurt, tearful and confused.

Fisk, left to himself, figured the chances with fatalistic precision. He was ruined. His resources had been wiped out in the vanished sum and he now owed more to his friends at home than he could ever hope to repay. He pictured to himself his return, disgraced, penniless, a felon, to the city he had left with such bright expectations. It was too late to draw back. He ran over the course of his losses, which had occurred with a rapidity that blinded him to the quicksand. Even now he had no suspicion of his companions, whose attitude toward him had been more than solicitously friendly since the golden stream had flowed from his purse. As he saw it there remained but one slender possibility. With his last \$5,000 he might regain his ground.

He drank heavily at the card table that night, playing in an erratic manner that served for a time to win an advantage. During a brief pause at one of the steamer's stops he found himself several thousand dollars toward recovery. Stepping out on the deck he

fascinated, eyes fixed upon the cooling rush of water. His hat fell from his hand, spun a moment in the whirling eddies and danced swiftly away.

The only light on the deck was that at the foot of the companionway. On the stairs beneath the faint rays crouched a woman, her face drawn and aged beyond semblance of the girl wife who had been the talk and admiration of the boat when she boarded it at Louisville. She was staring with terrible intentness at the man by the rail. Her hands grasped the balustrade convulsively. Slowly, with almost sinister deliberation and stealth of movement, she came down a step at a time.

Suddenly Fisk, who had not removed his gaze from the persistent white wave, flung a leg over the railing. The woman cried out and flung herself toward him. He turned a haggard face upon her and released his hold an instant before she reached him. But in that tense space his wrist was seized in an iron grasp and he was drawn bodily, rudely, back to the deck.

The All Night Game.

He came to some realization of things to find himself struggling in the arms of a tall, stern faced

which turned the stranger's luck sharply. He lost on each and allowed an expression of irritation to escape him. In that instant the three others exchanged signals.

The Fatal Deal.

Fuller, who sat opposite the stranger, was dealing. Sprague was at his left and Smith at his right. While the cards were being dealt Sprague went \$10 blind, the ante being \$5. After looking at his hand the stranger put in \$20 and Smith did the same. Fuller raised them both \$20. When it came to Sprague's turn he shoved \$130 forward, raising \$100. The stranger met the raise and Smith raised \$100 more. Fuller then threw down his hand. For ten minutes the bets were swiftly made, Sprague and Smith forcing the play and raising whenever it came their turn. The stranger, sitting between them, quietly met every advance, showing no hesitancy. The pile of money

The name of the most famous and fearless adventurer of the Southwest, synonymous with high and proved courage, attached to many a desperate enterprise and the knife which he had invented, a terror to the wildest of reckless men, fell like a whiff of spray upon the simulated resentment of outraged honor. There remained, however, the anger of the freebooter bereft of his spoils. Fuller and Smith, who had advanced to support Sprague, fell back. The latter was more mettlesome, though his tone had changed.

"Bowie or Nimble Nick—this is where you have a charge of lead for breakfast. I repeat my challenge, sir."

"That is decidedly better. I accept it, with thanks," said Bowie. "Sir, he said, turning to Fuller with ready resolution of the immediate situation, 'as I am without friends I trust that you can see your way to act for me in this delicate affair.'"

The man addressed, a distinctly lower type than Sprague, was loath. But terror induced by the identity of the one they had sought as a second victim left him no choice. Assuming a dignity that he was far from possessing, he bowed and drew aside with his principal. It was agreed that the duel should take place at once with Derringers as weapons.

While Fuller met with Smith in final negotiations, Bowie, carrying his handful of money, ascended to the cabin of the Fisks, rapped at the door and unlocked it. It was opened by the young wife, who had kept unhappy watch upon the restless slumbers of her husband. Her face, white and pitiful, lighted with gratitude as she saw the man who had stepped between Fisk and death the night before.

"Has he slept?" asked Bowie.

"She nodded, trying bravely to smile.

"Oh, yes, I think he will be all right when he wakes.

But what shall I tell him? I have been trying to plan all night, but there seems to be no way."

She looked at him appealingly, hopelessly, such a look as James Bowie had seen seldom in his life, with great gray eyes and lips that trembled. He passed a moment, vain to fix that image in his brain, then thrust the hat hastily into her hand.

"Here is the money," he said briefly, almost roughly. "If I don't come back two-thirds of it is your husband's, what he lost to those rogues. The rest is my own. If I am missing at noon you will find out who owns it. I am giving it over to the proper person. Goodbye."

Without waiting to answer her incoherent and bewildered questions he turned on his heel and returned to the bar. Sprague and his second were waiting and the party climbed to the hurricane deck.

The paddle boxes of the Orleans were of an antiquated design, not curved but square and high, with flat tops that reached within two feet of the hurricane deck. The Derringers were Bowie's own, flintlocks of beautiful make and finish. They were loaded by Smith and Fuller, Bowie looking well to the operation and examining each weapon. He then courteously accorded Sprague the choice. The stranger made no choice, took their positions on the paddle boxes. This placed them about twelve yards apart, exposed to each other above the knees. Fuller and Smith stood off out of range.

According to the agreement Smith was to say "One, two, three, fire, stop," with the interval of a second between each word. The duellists were free to shoot at any time between the first syllable and the last.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" asked Smith.

Both signified that they were.

The Duel.

"One!" said Smith. The pistols came up to position. It was clear early morning, the red rim of the rising sun just showing above the eastern shore. Sprague stood with the light full upon him, a graceful and striking figure, his smooth face set and firm, the breeze from the progress of the vessel blowing his long hair back from his forehead. He showed no trace of nervousness. Bowie was gaunt and angular, with erect body and arm as steady as a rib of steel.

"Two!" Still there was no change in the picture.

"Three!" His voice was lost in the sharp report of Sprague's weapon, shattering the quiet. Bowie did not move.

"Fire," continued Smith. Bowie's pistol spoke at the word. The elder man retained his unbroken pose, his opponent stood with mouth compressed. The seconds looked anxiously from one to the other of the principals, when Sprague, without a sound, crumpled

rather than fell to the top of the paddle box. Smith and Fuller started forward but the young wife's muscles relaxed and he slipped over the edge in front of the revolving wheel before they could reach him.

The three men on the hurricane deck held their places a moment, with thoughts intent upon the fall. A body, now beneath the powerful blades. Then Bowie, with a casual glance, saw the man's place, the still trailing smoke from his pistol barrel, and descended to the main deck.

Just before noon, when the steamboat was to stop at a small landing, he knocked again at the Fisk cabin. It opened almost at his touch and an eager little hand drew him inside. For some minutes the man placed every action spelled self-command, stood helpless, vainly trying to stem the warm gratitude of a woman who had lived through a lifetime in one day and who knew that she owed whatever happiness might still be hers to him. Fisk slept on while she talked, and Bowie could not check her until she said it all, that had gathered in her breast during the hours of horror, the moment of reprieve and the later period when vague fears for the fate of her deliverer had assailed her. He had recourse to counting the money in the hat to escape her.

There was a few dollars more than \$100,000, and of this he turned over to Mrs. Fisk \$70,000, the sum which, as he had learned, had been taken from the young planter. The rest was his own and he pocketed it. This business completed in businesslike manner, he held out his hand.

"I am leaving at the next landing," he said in a matter of fact voice.

"But you cannot go until Frank has thanked you," she said in surprise. "Surely you will not leave us so after such obligation."

"Much obliged. I hardly think he'd appreciate it much," he answered dryly. "He would have gone, but his eyes rested upon hers, and what he saw there drew him from his mood. He came close to her."

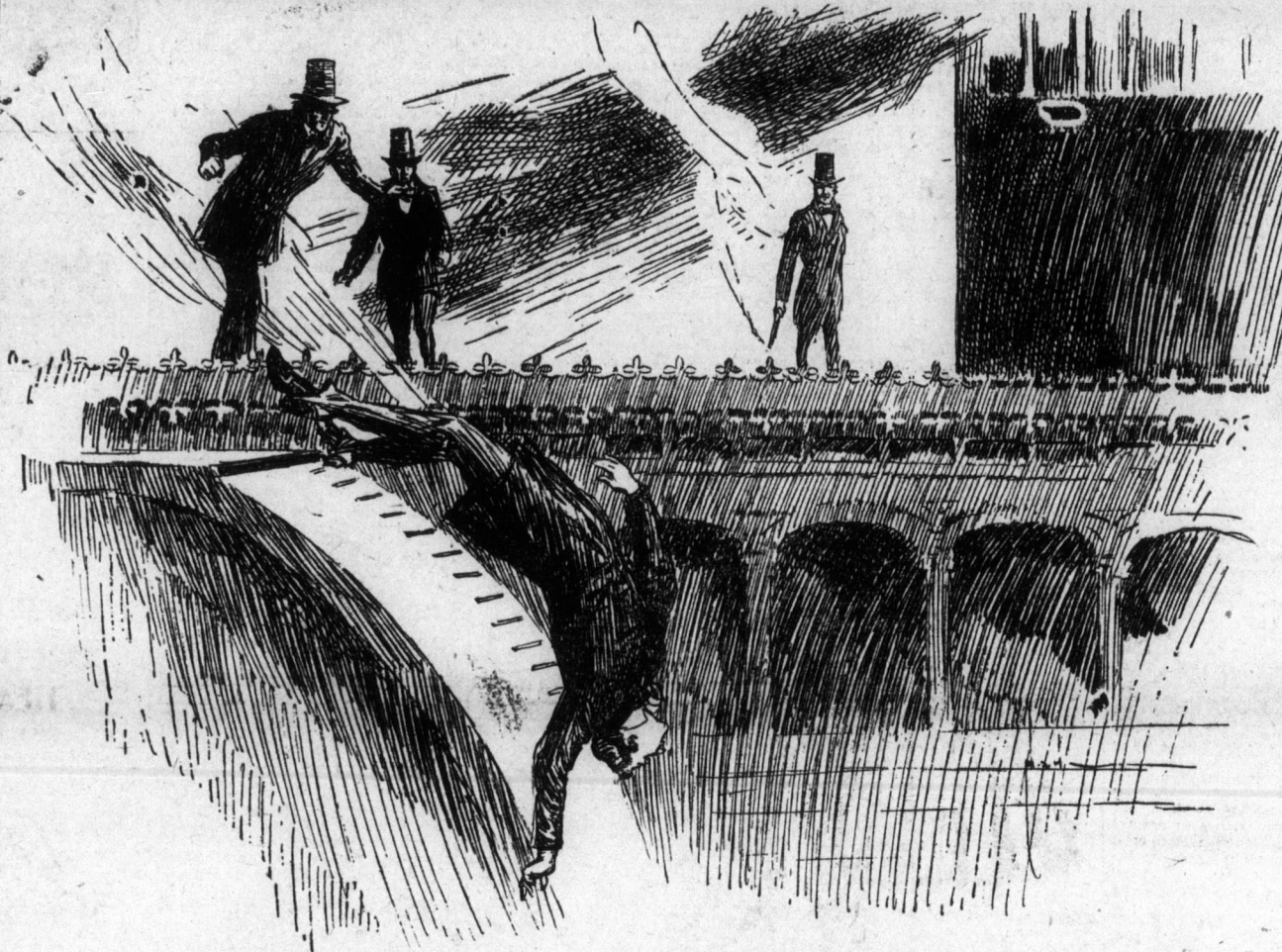
"It is better this way," he said. "When your husband has recovered and has had time to scan the lesson that this incident has taught him you can tell him who it was that helped you. And perhaps when you hear men speak of Jim Bowie as of a fiend incarnate you yourself may have a kindly thought for me."

Both hands nestled on his arm. She did not remove them when he spoke his name, her glance did not falter. He took her hands in his grasp for a moment, and gazed again at the fair, flushed face so near to his.

"Goodbye," he said suddenly, and bowed formally as he passed the door.

"Goodbye," was her answer, softly. She did not seek to detain him anew.

As the door closed she turned and sank by the berth on which lay the sprawled, unconscious form of her sleeping husband.



HE SLIPPED OVER THE EDGE IN FRONT OF THE REVOLVING WHEEL BEFORE THEY COULD REACH HIM.

was surprised to find his wife there. He began to remonstrate, but she took him by the arm with a pleading gesture.

"Frank, you must stop this," she said in a decisive manner that was new to him. "One of the pilots told me what has happened. I don't care for the money, Frank. We can make it up in some way. But these brokers of yours are professional gamblers. I am sure of it. Leave them now while you can save what you have left."

He hung her off.

"It's too late," he said shortly.

Plea of the Wife.

"Then it is as bad as that," she answered gravely, but with the words all her tenderness swept back and she clung to him. "No, it's not too late, dear. Think. It means much more than we should keep our trust and love for each other than that any conceivable sum of money should be ours. I ask you to leave these men. It is madness to suppose that they will ever let you win back what they have taken from you. Save the little you have and come with me. Have I no longer a claim upon you?"

All the power she could summon, all the intensity of newly given affection, all the charm and beauty of her nature and personality, thronged into vehement words. But the flicker of returning confidence combined with what he had drunk to make him hard and reckless. He told her to go to her berth, and left her, consoling himself in his twinge of conscience that she would yet thank him for having shown his strength of purpose in an emergency.

As she turned slowly toward the companionway, despair clutching at her heart, she brushed unheeding by the tall figure of a man who had been an unwitting spectator of the little scene. The light at the foot of the stairs fell softly upon her, and as he stood aside he caught a glimpse of her face, blinded by tears. He watched her for a moment as she ascended, then turned and followed Fisk into the men's cabin.

The stranger was middle aged, powerfully built and carried himself with the ease and poise that bespoke an active life among men. He quietly took seat with the four players and casually observed the situation. Fisk, after the resumption of the game, began to lose again steadily. He plunged desperately on a hand of moderate strength and more than half of his remaining sum disappeared. The cards were shuffled, dealt and passed rapidly, the "brokers" no longer heeding their skill or keeping up the fiction of a friendly pastime. It was the familiar operation known on the river as "three pluck one," shorn of all pretence now that the victim was nearing the end.

In the final crash Fisk bore himself with a boisterous, carefree manner which was patently the product of nerve strain and whiskey. He tossed his last gold coin to the centre with a jarring laugh and saw it swept into the winnings of one of the others. He remained to accept a last drink, then flung out upon the deck. The stranger, who had not been noticed, sauntered after him.

The night was overcast. The river bank was visible only as a broad, vague line between the lighter stretches of sky and river. Below, from the paddle wheel, ran an endless white path of foam stop the wave that slid monotonously out and back into the darkness. The swelling crest rose smoothly, lashed by the thudding blades. Fisk hung upon the rail,

stranger, while his wife hung, sobbing convulsively, about his neck. The liquor swept over his faculties in the momentary relief he experienced at finding himself still beyond the embrace of that cruel, white wave, and passively he allowed himself to be led away.

There were a few words of explanation between the stranger and Mrs. Fisk after her husband had been placed in a berth, and when the former passed the main deck once more the key to the Fisk cabin was in his pocket. He turned into the bar.

The three "brokers" were standing before half finished glasses, engaged in discourse of apparently agreeable nature. The stranger took a one hundred dollar bill from a well filled wallet and passed it over the counter, ordering a drink. The bartender shook his head.

"Sorry, sir," he said, "but I can't change that. Perhaps this gentleman," indicating Fuller, "can help you."

The wallet had not passed from sight unnoticed. "Certainly," responded Fuller in cordial tone, "I can change it if you like. But why break it? Won't you join us?"

The stranger bowed pleasantly, accepted the courtesy and conversation became general. The party moved to one of the tables in companionable mood and anecdotes were exchanged. After a time Smith turned to one of the others.

"Do you know this river air always makes me wakeful instead of sleepy? Let's make a night of it. Poker hath charms to soothe my savage breast now that would be wholly lacking in a restless doze and a stuffy cabin. Can't we keep on?"

"Yes, I suppose we can," said Sprague doubtfully. "It's not much good with three. But I don't feel like turning in yet myself. Suppose we have another sitting, people. I owe you revenge for that last drubbing you gave me, Fuller."

With offhand jests the three moved their chairs to the table and the cards were brought out. Sprague turned, with the proper degree of hesitation to the stranger.

"Perhaps you'd like to join us, sir?" he suggested.

"We'd be glad to have you if you care for a friendly game."

The man shook his head.

"I'm afraid you'd find me poor sport," he said. "I'm not well at cards, and that's a fact."

"Well, let's test it," said Sprague, with brisk good fellowship and a smile that sat well upon his youthful face. "I'm only a novice myself, learned the game a few days ago, but these fellows have left me my scalp."

Evidently reassured by Sprague's ingenuous frankness, the stranger, with further protestations of his lack of skill, allowed himself to be persuaded and took the fourth seat. The game was played with tens, jacks, queens, kings and aces of the pack and was the one in favor upon all river craft. During the early deals the stranger won steadily, a circumstance that seemed at once to surprise and to embarrass him. He handled his cards awkwardly and bet with caution. His success, measured in small sums, continued throughout two hours. Gradually he gained in confidence and allowed his good fortune to draw him into heavier play. He relaxed his attitude of cold reserve. Just as the river began to lighten under the first reflection of coming dawn there were two hands

on the table grew, each of the three having recourse to his wallet.

"I'll raise it," was Sprague's monotonous formula.

"Raise," was Smith's rejoinder. The stranger made no response except to push forward his stake each time.

While the tension grew with the sum involved the keen eyes of the unknown player were never off the cards held by his opponents. Sprague, sitting restlessly in his seat, suddenly raised \$500, bringing the total amount on the table up to a little more than \$100,000. Fuller had been watching the game intently and fumbling with his abandoned cards. Under cover of Sprague's unusual raise he slipped one with the speed and ease of light to Sprague, but quick as was the move the stranger caught it.

He rose slowly from his chair, leaning over the table. His left hand, holding his cards, he placed upon the pile of money. With the other he drew a long, curved knife from his belt. His tall form dominated the three, who sat breathless in suspense.

"My dear sir," said the stranger softly to Sprague, "I am going to count your hand. I am going to find six cards in it. And when I do I am going to kill you."

His voice, like the tinkling of chilled steel, and the glittering of the knife as he lifted it, left no doubt in the mind of any of the party that he was sure of his move. Then Sprague, with a spasmodic gesture, shoved his cards, as if in an access of offended rage, among Fuller's disarray and bounded from his seat, cursing blackly. The stranger smiled for the first time that night, a tribute to the cleverness of his handsome young antagonist. Keeping his eye upon them all, he spread his own cards face up on the table. They showed four kings and a ten spot.

"If either of you two gentlemen can put down a legitimate hand to beat that he is welcome to the money," he said. Smith did not even expose his cards. Sprague had fouled his own. None of the three offered an objection and the stranger calmly swept the pile of money into his soft hat, holding it like a bez. The wrath of Sprague, held momentarily by the man's personality and grim demeanor, broke fiercely into a stream of words. With flushed face and threatening gesture he thrust back chairs and table like one who prepares a battle ground.

"Satisfaction. I demand satisfaction. You're a thief, a liar and a blackleg. Do you think we'll submit to any such robbery, you damned scoundrel?"

He carried it off well. The stranger nodded approvingly.

"Quite at your service, sir," he said. "I would scarcely have hoped so much from one of your profession. Setting aside your language, which is unworthy of a gentleman, I find you quite entitled to what you ask."

His unflinching calm and the touch of patronizing loftiness achieved Sprague's exasperation. He made as if to hurl himself upon the other, who held him back with a sharper word.

"I am James Bowie."

"Try not to be a ruffian, sir. I don't propose to fight you in roustabout style."

"Who are you, then, you blackguard?" shouted Sprague.

"I am James Bowie," was the answer. "and I must urge you again to be more temperate in your expressions."