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SPINDRIFT

An Adventure of the Great Lakes

By HAROLD TITUS

For a long interval John Goodheart, bound hand and foot, lay listening to the moan of wind through the cracks in the building and the slap of ruffles against its sides, letting the strength that the unfair fight had taken from his body come back, trying to think and plan.

He knew where he was by then. This building was an unused boat-house, built at the end of a narrow dock years before by a summer reporter who had kept his gasoline launch there.

John had been in the place once, and after his eyes became accustomed to the darkness and a flood of tears caused by the irritation had washed the sand from the one, he twisted his head as far as he could and made certain of his location.

He had been left on the half floor of the shelter, close to the covered top in which the small pleasure craft had once been moored. The door at the dock end was locked and built of heavy planking. Getting that way would mean a deal of noise and would require time.

At the other end was a sliding door, its bottom beneath the water level he could not remember.

For a man privileged to use his arms and legs and who could swim at all, escape would be easy in that direction. He could open the door or he could dive beneath it, round the corner of the building, and in a few strokes be within his depth.

But John could not use his arms or his legs. He could scarcely use his jaws, and a tremendous rage at the nearness of escape combined with his inability to help himself swept through him.

He bit savagely on the gag in his mouth. He felt a sharp pain of twine give as his teeth ground on it and that offset a measure of his rage.

He commenced to chew briskly and to move one foot. He could barely do this last, and so tightly were his ankle bones pressed together that the movement gave him considerable pain even through his heavy shoes.

But he kept on with those small movements. For a long time he made no progress, and then the frayed strands of twine in his mouth commenced to give, one by one. He concentrated on that process until he could close his jaws tightly and with that much accomplished found he could move his head with less restriction. He shook it savagely and the last of the twine slid from his mouth.

He threshed about, jerking his head from side to side in an attempt to loosen the hold of his bonds on neck and shoulders; but he could not bring pressure enough to bear to gain much advantage so he commenced working his foot again.

He had been feverishly hot from his hand-to-hand combat; he had been chilled by apprehension and the dampness of his prison, but now he commenced to sweat with the effort.

Beads of moisture stood out on his face and trickled into his eyes. He tried to lift his legs and scrub them along the wall in the hope of finding a nail that would catch in the twine and tear it, but this availed him nothing—nothing directly; it did accomplish something, however. The strain of that posture became too great and he let his heels thud back to the planking he found that he could move both feet.

He worked as desperately at that small movement as a man could work with a shovel. His breath grew short with it and his pulse ebbed up, but every passing moment gave him more liberty of action.

He stretched his toes upward as far as possible in vain attempts to catch them in the mesh and tear it. He drew his knees up and put all the strain his leg muscles could bring to bear on the net. He groaned with the effort and threshed about on the damp floor.

And then, suddenly, one foot was free!

He drew it up and kicked out savagely, as savagely as he had kicked at his unidentified assailants. The stout twine gave with the force. Both legs were free from the knees down, but his thighs were still locked together.

He paused a moment to regain breath and the thought came to him that his lonely struggle had taken time, much time. Until he could free his arms he would be helpless should those men return, and the men must not even be there when they came back.

He concentrated on the task of freeing his arms, and although they were crossed on his breast and he could bring great strength to bear by straining to extend his elbows, the net held him fast.

He sat up then, swinging his feet into the water, and listened. Perhaps it was the slap of the ruffles his feet made that created the sound. But whatever it was he thought he heard a stealthy, muffled step outside. He listened. It did not come again, but he took no chances and rolling into the water, swam on his back for the seaward door.

Goodheart let his body float against it and groped with one foot for the bottom. It was, he judged, eight inches below the surface.

He hooked his toe beneath and pulled, expelling air from his lungs as he would sink more easily. A difficult feat, that. Slowly his body submerged, the meshes of the twine catching at irregularities in the bottom of the door. He worked his legs outside and raised it, pressing the heel against the outer side of the door. His belly scrubbed through his shoulders and he rolled over, down, forcing himself again to his back and up to the surface by a series of sharp, short kicks.

"Now!" he said, as he let the first welcome breath of air into his lungs. "Now, come and find me!"

He swam on his back, forced to nudge and rapid movement of his legs to make headway, and as soon as he had cleared the boathouse, swung himself toward shore.

The distance was not far; it would have been but a few moments' swim for a man under ordinary circumstances, but it took John Goodheart so long that he was all but exhausted when he heels struck bottom.

He rolled over, let his feet down and tried to rise to his knees but without the use of his hands he could not gain the required balance, so he turned on his back again and kicked himself along. When his shoulders touched he swung himself about, parallel with the beach line, and

rolled over and over until he was out on the cold, wet sand, and lay there panting, listening.

He could liberate himself now, he knew. He could simply rise, hobble to any one of the nearby net houses, find a protruding nail or end of a board and rip his bonds free. And yet at any moment those men who had tied him and laid him away in the old boat shelter might be back. He wanted them to come back; he wanted a fair chance with them, wanted to identify them, but he wanted to be free to take them on, singly or collectively. He wanted to fight under no more impossible handicaps.

So he lay still, estraining his ears to listen.

And before the pulses which sent blood roaring through his head to interfere with his sense of hearing had had time to slow appreciably, he distinguished the thing which he had expected; the thing which, free, he would have welcomed, but which, tied as he was, sent rage through him.

That thing was the sound of foot-steps. With his one ear pressed against the sand he heard them distinctly, coming toward him along the beach. They were the steps of a slowly moving person, approaching as a cautious stalker would come, and tried to plan. He could not rise and run to some place where he could liberate himself without being seen. He could not roll back into the water without creating a disturbance. He did the only thing he could do: lay still and wait.

The steps came on, nearer and nearer, and for each footfall his heart tapped the beach a dozen times. At least, though, he might know who it was this time!

He was to know.

The oncomer stopped, hesitated, then came on, circling away from him; stopped again and a light, breathless voice said:

"Who's that?"

A curious thrill, made up of relief, surprise, and profound regret ran through Goodheart, because the one who had spoken that sharp query was Janet Needham.

"Who's there?" she asked again, breathlessly, before he could answer.

"Janet! I'm glad—"

"John!" She was on her knees beside him. "What happened? What are you doing? Why, you're—"

"Tied up!" he said, chokingly. "Bound hand and foot! See if you can untie those knots. They're between my shoulder blades and under my knees!"

He rolled to his face so that she might have a chance to work, and ground his teeth, for even in the stress of the situation he found the tremendous problem into which the girl had plunged him surmounting everything else.

Her light hands touched his drenched clothing. He heard her muttering in fright to herself.

"I can't get that wet twine—here!" she cried, straightening, and from the pocket of her sweater drew a light silver penknife.

Then it was the work of a moment to sever the twine where it was tied, and Goodheart was standing, erect, moving his stiff and cramped arms wildly as he tore the net from him.

"John! What in the world happened? Who did that?"

"I don't know, just. I've a good idea. They'll be back. Here—you've got to get out of here."

He grasped her by the elbow and hastened her along the beach, back the way she had come, to the shelter of a clump of bushes.

"It's a good thing you came along," he said. "I was wondering just how I was going to get out of that confounded net and—"

"But who did it?" she burst out, insistently, her face close to his, a pale oval in the gloom. "What had you been doing? You're soaked."

"I don't know much about it," he said quickly, or his caution was rising now, his reason functioning. He knew that he must explain in some manner and that he must send her away. The beach, this night, might prove to be no place for a girl like Janet, and besides—her presence, the touch of her hands, had set that small, wheedling voice within him talking.

He drove that entreating whisper to silence, though, and said: "Somebody's wanting to play a little joke on me, or else make a little trouble—a little more trouble for me. Three—"

He jumped me in the United's reel yard. I didn't have a chance because they came from all directions. They got that net around me so I couldn't move an eyelid. Then they packed me down to that old boat house and put me away to cool, I guess. I got my legs loose and made it to shore.

"Lord knows when they'll come back. They must be coming back after they'd gone that far. I was figuring my chances to get loose so I could make a try at a fair fight, and made up my mind they weren't so good. Then you came along, and here I am."

"Oh, I'm so glad! But you mustn't stay here."

"Think I'd run away?"

"I know you wouldn't want to, but it's an unfair fight."

"That's easy." He was looking hard into her face now. "A thing like that would be easy compared to other things."

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"Oh, John, that's why I came out! I can't sleep; I can't stay still! Father brought your message to me: that I mustn't try to see you again, that I mustn't ask questions. I hoped I might meet you and I did."

He laughed bitterly. "You helped me out and now I have to ask you to go on, to do as I've asked you to do."

Her hand fell on his wrist then. "What is it, John? Tell me what it is! I can't stand this my lover. I can't stand knowing that you and my father share some secret that you won't tell me, that affects me that has come to spoil this happiness that was ours—yours and mine. Tell me what it is, John Goodheart!"

He slowly withdrew his hand from her grasp and shook his head. "I can't," he said, flatly. "I can't explain. You mustn't ask me to. Janet, remember this: that I love you as I never thought a man could love a woman. I've loved you from the first. I always shall. I will remember you as the most wonderful thing under the stars, but beyond

that I can't go—not yet!"

"I'm caught in a trap that makes the strength of that net seem like shreds of cobweb! It's nothing I can take hold of with my hands, it's nothing I can fight as I can fight these skulkers who are after me! It's something that perhaps even you wouldn't understand."

"You couldn't help me, dear, or I'd tell you. Your hands, your knife, your faith and belief in me even wouldn't help. Why, even your love only makes the thing harder to see through!"

"I've had to ask you to go to it blind, this way, but it's easier than bringing a lot more misery down about your blessed ears. Just please believe that I won't change, that I shall love you always, and that I'm going to fight the hardest fight a man was ever asked to fight. If I was alone in it, it wouldn't be so hard, though that used to seem hard enough. Thinking of you, knowing that I mustn't be near you, that I can't even tell you, would be conditions hard enough to drive me wild if I didn't love you like I do!"

"But I want to know! I must know!"

Swiftly he debated with himself. Tell her that he was not John Goodheart, that he was Carl Garrison, a convicted murderer, an escaped convict? What would she say to that? Would not the shock of realizing that she had given her love to such a man be revolting? Risk of just such a reaction was present and he could not stand that. He could not bear to see her draw away from him even for an instant of horror, even though the gesture of distrust should be a gesture only!

"If you love me, just believe in me," he said. "Believe that it is best for us to stay apart, for us to leave things between us where they are now. And believe that I am fighting for you, for us, fighting as I never thought I could fight!"

"I won't go. I will hear—"

"Janet, you are going. You'll leave me now. I need to be away from you. I mean that; please believe me."

He had spoken quietly but for the moment he was master of himself and of the situation and he was as positive, as assured as he ever had been

when on the bridge of a ship with the safety of those on board in his keeping.

She stood silently before him a moment. Then she said simply: "I'll go, John, and I will believe in you."

She turned with no other word, not so much as a gesture of farewell, and walked slowly away.

Goodheart watched her go, and when she had been swallowed in the gloom, when no sound came to him but the sob of the wind in the trees, he lifted a trembling hand to his eyes.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW.)

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