

## **The Yellow Cat**

BY WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

From *Harper's Magazine*

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At least once in my life I have had the good fortune to board a deserted vessel at sea. I say "good fortune" because it has left me the memory of a singular impression. I have felt a ghost of the same thing two or three times since then, when peeping through the doorway of an abandoned house.

Now that vessel was not dead. She was a good vessel, a sound vessel, even a handsome vessel, in her blunt-bowed, coastwise way. She sailed under four lowers across as blue and glittering a sea as I have ever known, and there was not a point in her sailing that one could lay a finger upon as wrong. And yet, passing that schooner at two miles, one knew, somehow, that no hand was on her wheel. Sometimes I can imagine a vessel, stricken like that, moving over the empty spaces of the sea, carrying it off quite well were it not for that indefinable suggestion of a stagger; and I can think of all those ocean gods, in whom no landsman will ever believe, looking at one another and tapping their foreheads with just the shadow of a smile.

I wonder if they all scream--these ships that have lost their souls? Mine screamed. We heard her voice, like nothing I have ever heard before, when we rowed under her counter to read her name--the *Marionnette* it was, of Halifax. I remember how it made me shiver, there in the full blaze of the sun, to hear her going on so, railing and screaming in that stark fashion. And I remember, too, how our footsteps, pattering through the vacant internals in search of that

haggard utterance, made me think of the footsteps of hurrying warders roused in the night.

And we found a parrot in a cage; that was all. It wanted water. We gave it water and went away to look things over, keeping pretty close together, all of us. In the quarters the table was set for four. Two men had begun to eat, by the evidence of the plates. Nowhere in the vessel was there any sign of disorder, except one sea-chest broken out, evidently in haste. Her papers were gone and the stern davits were empty. That is how the case stood that day, and that is how it has stood to this. I saw this same *Marionnette* a week later, tied up to a Hoboken dock, where she awaited news from her owners; but even there, in the midst of all the water-front bustle, I could not get rid of the feeling that she was still very far away--in a sort of shippish other-world.

The thing happens now and then. Sometimes half a dozen years will go by without a solitary wanderer of this sort crossing the ocean paths, and then in a single season perhaps several of them will turn up: vacant waifs, impassive and mysterious--a quarter-column of tidings tucked away on the second page of the evening paper.

That is where I read the story about the *Abbie Rose*. I recollect how painfully awkward and out-of-place it looked there, cramped between ruled black edges and smelling of landsman's ink--this thing that had to do essentially with air and vast colored spaces. I forget the exact words of the heading--something like "Abandoned Craft Picked Up At Sea"--but I still have the clipping itself, couched in the formal patter of the marine-news writer:

"The first hint of another mystery of the sea came in to-day when the schooner *Abbie Rose* dropped anchor in the upper river, manned only by a crew of one. It appears that the out-bound freighter *Mercury* sighted the *Abbie Rose* off Block Island on Thursday last, acting in a suspicious manner. A boat-party sent aboard found the schooner in

perfect order and condition, sailing under four lower sails, the topsails being pursed up to the mastheads but not stowed. With the exception of a yellow cat, the vessel was found to be utterly deserted, though her small boat still hung in the davits. No evidences of disorder were visible in any part of the craft. The dishes were washed up, the stove in the galley was still slightly warm to the touch, everything in its proper place with the exception of the vessel's papers, which were not to be found.

"All indications being for fair weather, Captain Rohmer of the *Mercury* detailed two of his company to bring the find back to this port, a distance of one hundred and fifteen miles. The only man available with a knowledge of the fore-and-aft rig was Stewart McCord, the second engineer. A seaman by the name of Bjoernsen was sent with him. McCord arrived this noon, after a very heavy voyage of five days, reporting that Bjoernsen had fallen overboard while shaking out the foretopsail. McCord himself showed evidences of the hardships he has passed through, being almost a nervous wreck."

Stewart McCord! Yes, Stewart McCord would have a knowledge of the fore-and-aft rig, or of almost anything else connected with the affairs of the sea. It happened that I used to know this fellow. I had even been quite chummy with him in the old days--that is, to the extent of drinking too many beers with him in certain hot-country ports. I remembered him as a stolid and deliberate sort of a person, with an amazing hodge-podge of learning, a stamp collection, and a theory about the effects of tropical sunshine on the Caucasian race, to which I have listened half of more than one night, stretched out naked on a freighter's deck. He had not impressed me as a fellow who would be bothered by his nerves.

And there was another thing about the story which struck me as rather queer. Perhaps it is a relic of my seafaring days, but I have always been a conscientious reader of the weather reports; and I could

remember no weather in the past week sufficient to shake a man out of a top, especially a man by the name of Bjoernsen--a thorough-going seafaring name.

I was destined to hear more of this in the evening from the ancient boatman who rowed me out on the upper river. He had been to sea in his day. He knew enough to wonder about this thing, even to indulge in a little superstitious awe about it.

"No sir-ee. Something *happened* to them four chaps. And another thing--"

I fancied I heard a sea-bird whining in the darkness overhead. A shape moved out of the gloom ahead, passed to the left, lofty and silent, and merged once more with the gloom behind--a barge at anchor, with the sea-grass clinging around her water-line.

"Funny about that other chap," the old fellow speculated. "Bjoernsen-- I b'lieve he called 'im. Now that story sounds to me kind of--" He feathered his oars with a suspicious jerk and peered at me. "This McCord a friend of yourn?" he inquired.

"In a way," I said.

"Hm-m--well--" He turned on his thwart to squint ahead. "There she is," he announced, with something of relief, I thought.

It was hard at that time of night to make anything but a black blotch out of the *Abbie Rose*. Of course I could see that she was pot-bellied, like the rest of the coastwise sisterhood. And that McCord had not stowed his topsails. I could make them out, pursed at the mastheads and hanging down as far as the cross-trees, like huge, over-ripe pears. Then I recollected that he had found them so--probably had not touched them since; a queer way to leave tops, it seemed to me. I

could see also the glowing tip of a cigar floating restlessly along the farther rail. I called: "McCord! Oh, McCord!"

The spark came swimming across the deck. "Hello! Hello there--ah--" There was a note of querulous uneasiness there that somehow jarred with my remembrance of this man.

"Ridgeway," I explained.

He echoed the name uncertainly, still with that suggestion of peevishness, hanging over the rail and peering down at us. "Oh! By gracious!" he exclaimed, abruptly. "I'm glad to see you, Ridgeway. I had a boatman coming out before this, but I guess--well, I guess he'll be along. By gracious! I'm glad--"

"I'll not keep you," I told the gnome, putting the money in his palm and reaching for the rail. McCord lent me a hand on my wrist. Then when I stood squarely on the deck beside him he appeared to forget my presence, leaned forward heavily on the rail, and squinted after my waning boatman.

"Ahoy--boat!" he called out, sharply, shielding his lips with his hands. His violence seemed to bring him out of the blank, for he fell immediately to puffing strongly at his cigar and explaining in rather a shame-voiced way that he was beginning to think his own boatman had "passed him up."

"Come in and have a nip," he urged with an abrupt heartiness, clapping me on the shoulder.

"So you've--" I did not say what I had intended. I was thinking that in the old days McCord had made rather a fetish of touching nothing stronger than beer. Neither had he been of the shoulder-clapping sort. "So you've got something aboard?" I shifted.

"Dead men's liquor," he chuckled. It gave me a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach to hear him. I began to wish I had not come, but there was nothing for it now but to follow him into the afterhouse. The cabin itself might have been nine feet square, with three bunks occupying the port side. To the right opened the master's stateroom, and a door in the forward bulkhead led to the galley.

I took in these features at a casual glance. Then, hardly knowing why I did it, I began to examine them with greater care.

"Have you a match?" I asked. My voice sounded very small, as though something unheard of had happened to all the air.

"Smoke?" he asked. "I'll get you a cigar."

"No." I took the proffered match, scratched it on the side of the galley door, and passed out. There seemed to be a thousand pans there, throwing my match back at me from every wall of the box-like compartment. Even McCord's eyes, in the doorway, were large and round and shining. He probably thought me crazy. Perhaps I was, a little. I ran the match along close to the ceiling and came upon a rusty hook a little apart of the center.

"There," I said. "Was there anything hanging from this--er--say a parrot--or something, McCord?" The match burned my fingers and went out.

"What do you mean?" McCord demanded from the doorway. I got myself back into the comfortable yellow glow of the cabin before I answered, and then it was a question.

"Do you happen to know anything about this craft's personal history?"

"No. What are you talking about! Why?"

"Well, I do," I offered. "For one thing, she's changed her name. And it happens this isn't the first time she's--well, damn it all, fourteen years ago I helped pick up this whatever-she-is off the Virginia Capes--in the same sort of condition. There you are!" I was yapping like a nerve-strung puppy.

McCord leaned forward with his hands on the table, bringing his face beneath the fan of the hanging-lamp. For the first time I could mark how shockingly it had changed. It was almost colorless. The jaw had somehow lost its old-time security and the eyes seemed to be loose in their sockets. I had expected him to start at my announcement; he only blinked at the light.

"I am not surprised," he remarked at length. "After what I've seen and heard--". He lifted his fist and brought it down with a sudden crash on the table. "Man--let's have a nip!"

He was off before I could say a word, fumbling out of sight in the narrow state-room. Presently he reappeared, holding a glass in either hand and a dark bottle hugged between his elbows. Putting the glasses down, he held up the bottle between his eyes and the lamp, and its shadow, falling across his face, green and luminous at the core, gave him a ghastly look--like a mutilation or an unspeakable birth-mark. He shook the bottle gently and chuckled his "Dead men's liquor" again. Then he poured two half-glasses of the clear gin, swallowed his portion, and sat down.

"A parrot," he mused, a little of the liquor's color creeping into his cheeks. "No, this time it was a cat, Ridgeway. A yellow cat. She was--"

"Was?" I caught him up. "What's happened--what's become of her?"

"Vanished. Evaporated. I haven't seen her since night before last, when I caught her trying to lower the boat--"

"*Stop it!*" It was I who banged the table now, without any of the reserve of decency. "McCord, you're drunk--*drunk*, I tell you. A *cat*! Let a *cat* throw you off your head like this! She's probably hiding out below this minute, on affairs of her own."

"Hiding?" He regarded me for a moment with the queer superiority of the damned. "I guess you don't realize how many times I've been over this hulk, from decks to keelson, with a mallet and a foot-rule."

"Or fallen overboard," I shifted, with less assurance. "Like this fellow Bjoernsen. By the way, McCord--". I stopped there on account of the look in his eyes.

He reached out, poured himself a shot, swallowed it, and got up to shuffle about the confined quarters. I watched their restless circuit--my friend and his jumping shadow. He stopped and bent forward to examine a Sunday-supplement chromo tacked on the wall, and the two heads drew together, as though there were something to whisper. Of a sudden I seemed to hear the old gnome croaking, "Now that story sounds to me kind of--"

McCord straightened up and turned to face me.

"What do you know about Bjoernsen?" he demanded.

"Well--only what they had you saying in the papers," I told him.

"Pshaw!" He snapped his fingers, tossing the affair aside. "I found her log," he announced in quite another voice.

"You did, eh? I judged, from what I read in the paper, that there wasn't a sign."

"No, no; I happened on this the other night, under the mattress in there." He jerked his head toward the state-room. "Wait!" I heard him knocking things over in the dark and mumbling at them. After a moment he came out and threw on the table a long, cloth-covered ledger, of the common commercial sort. It lay open at about the middle, showing close script running indiscriminately across the column ruling.

"When I said 'log,'" he went on, "I guess I was going it a little strong. At least, I wouldn't want that sort of log found around *my* vessel. Let's call it a personal record. Here's his picture, somewhere--". He shook the book by its back and a common kodak blueprint fluttered to the table. It was the likeness of a solid man with a paunch, a huge square beard, small squinting eyes, and a bald head. "What do you make of him--a writing chap?"

"From the nose down, yes," I estimated. "From the nose up, he will 'tend to his own business if you will 'tend to yours, strictly."

McCord slapped his thigh. "By gracious! that's the fellow! He hates the Chinaman. He knows as well as anything he ought not to put down in black and white how intolerably he hates the Chinaman, and yet he must sneak off to his cubby-hole and suck his pencil, and--and how is it Stevenson has it?--the 'agony of composition,' you remember. Can you imagine the fellow, Ridgeway, bundling down here with the fever on him--"

"About the Chinaman," I broke in. "I think you said something about a Chinaman?"

"Yes. The cook, he must have been. I gather he wasn't the master's pick, by the reading-matter here. Probably clapped on to him by the owners--shifted from one of their others at the last moment; a queer trick. Listen." He picked up the book and, running over the pages with a selective thumb, read:

"*August second*. First part, moderate southwesterly breeze--' and so forth--er--but here he comes to it:

"Anything can happen to a man at sea, even a funeral. In special to a Chinyman, who is of no account to social welfare, being a barbarian as I look at it.'

"Something of a philosopher, you see. And did you get the reserve in that 'even a funeral?' An artist, I tell you. But wait; let me catch him a bit wilder. Here:

"I'll get that mustard-colored ---- [This is back a couple of days.] Never can hear the ---- coming, in them carpet slippers. Turned round and found him standing right to my back this morning. Could have stuck a knife into me easy. "Look here!" says I, and fetched him a tap on the ear that will make him walk louder next time, I warrant. He could have stuck a knife into me easy.'

"A clear case of moral funk, I should say. Can you imagine the fellow, Ridgeway--"

"Yes; oh, yes." I was ready with a phrase of my own. "A man handicapped with an imagination. You see he can't quite understand this 'barbarian,' who has him beaten by about thirty centuries of civilization--and his imagination has to have something to chew on, something to hit--a 'tap on the ear,' you know."

"By gracious! that's the ticket!" McCord pounded his knee. "And now we've got another chap going to pieces--Peters, he calls him. Refuses to eat dinner on August the third, claiming he caught the Chink making passes over the chowder-pot with his thumb. Can you believe it, Ridgeway--in this very cabin here?" Then he went on with a suggestion of haste, as though he had somehow made a slip. "Well, at

any rate, the disease seems to be catching. Next day it's Bach, the second seaman, who begins to feel the gaff. Listen:

"Back he comes to me to-night, complaining he's being watched. He claims the ---- has got the evil eye. Says he can see you through a two-inch bulkhead, and the like. The Chink's laying in his bunk, turned the other way. "Why don't you go aboard of him," says I. The Dutcher says nothing, but goes over to his own bunk and feels under the straw. When he comes back he's looking queer. "By God!" says he, "the devil has swiped my gun!"... Now if that's true there is going to be hell to pay in this vessel very quick I figure I'm still master of this vessel."

"The evil eye," I grunted. "Consciencs gone wrong there somewhere."

"Not altogether, Ridgeway. I can see that yellow man peeking. Now just figure yourself, say, eight thousand miles from home, out on the water alone with a crowd of heathen fanatics crazy from fright, looking around for guns and so on. Don't you believe you'd keep an eye around the corners, kind of--eh? I'll bet a hat he was taking it all in, lying there in his bunk, 'turned the other way.' Eh? I pity the poor cuss--Well, there's only one more entry after that. He's good and mad. Here:

"Now, by God! this is the end. My gun's gone, too right out from under lock and key, by God! I been talking with Bach this morning. Not to let on, I had him in to clean my lamp. There's more ways than one, he says, and so do I."

McCord closed the book and dropped it on the table.

"Finis," he said. "The rest is blank paper."

"Well!" I will confess I felt much better than I had for some time past. "There's *one* 'mystery of the sea' gone to pot, at any rate. And now, if you don't mind, I think I'll have another of your nips, McCord."

He pushed my glass across the table and got up, and behind his back his shoulder rose to scour the corners of the room, like an incorruptible sentinel. I forgot to take up my gin, watching him. After an uneasy minute or so he came back to the table and pressed the tip of a forefinger on the book.

"Ridgeway," he said, "you don't seem to understand. This particular 'mystery of the sea' hasn't been scratched yet--not even *scratched*, Ridgeway." He sat down and leaned forward, fixing me with a didactic finger. "What happened?"

"Well, I have an idea the 'barbarian' got them, when it came to the pinch."

"And let the--remains over the side?"

"I should say."

"And then they came back and got the 'barbarian' and let *him* over the side, eh? There were none left, you remember."

"Oh, good Lord, I don't know!" I flared with a childish resentment at this catechising of his. But his finger remained there, challenging.

"I do," he announced. "The Chinaman put them over the side, as we have said. And then, after that, he died--of wounds about the head."

"So?" I had still sarcasm.

"You will remember," he went on, "that the skipper did not happen to mention a cat, a *yellow* cat, in his confessions."

"McCord," I begged him, "please drop it. Why in thunder *should* he mention a cat?"

"True. Why *should* he mention a cat? I think one of the reasons why he should *not* mention a cat is because there did not happen to be a cat aboard at that time."

"Oh, all right!" I reached out and pulled the bottle to my side of the table. Then I took out my watch. "If you don't mind," I suggested, "I think we'd better be going ashore. I've got to get to my office rather early in the morning. What do you say?"

He said nothing for the moment, but his finger had dropped. He leaned back and stared straight into the core of the light above, his eyes squinting.

"He would have been from the south of China, probably." He seemed to be talking to himself. "There's a considerable sprinkling of the belief down there, I've heard. It's an uncanny business--this transmigration of souls--"

Personally, I had had enough of it. McCord's fingers came groping across the table for the bottle. I picked it up hastily and let it go through the open companionway, where it died with a faint gurgle, out somewhere on the river.

"Now," I said to him, shaking the vagrant wrist, "either you come ashore with me or you go in there and get under the blankets. You're drunk, McCord--*drunk*. Do you hear me?"

"Ridgeway," he pronounced, bringing his eyes down to me and speaking very slowly. "You're a fool, if you can't see better than that. I'm not drunk. I'm sick. I haven't slept for three nights--and now I can't. And you say--you--" He went to pieces very suddenly, jumped

up, pounded the legs of his chair on the decking, and shouted at me: "And you say that, you--you landlubber, you office coddler! You're so comfortably sure that everything in the world is cut and dried. Come back to the water again and learn how to wonder--and stop talking like a damn fool. Do you know where--. Is there anything in your municipal budget to tell me where Bjoernsen went? Listen!" He sat down, waving me to do the same, and went on with a sort of desperate repression.

"It happened on the first night after we took this hellion. I'd stood the wheel most of the afternoon--off and on, that is, because she sails herself uncommonly well. Just put her on a reach, you know, and she carries it off pretty well--"

"I know," I nodded.

"Well, we mugged up about seven o'clock. There was a good deal of canned stuff in the galley, and Bjoernsen wasn't a bad hand with a kettle--a thoroughgoing Square-head he was--tall and lean and yellow-haired, with little fat, round cheeks and a white mustache. Not a bad chap at all. He took the wheel to stand till midnight, and I turned in, but I didn't drop off for quite a spell. I could hear his boots wandering around over my head, padding off forward, coming back again. I heard him whistling now and then--an outlandish air. Occasionally I could see the shadow of his head waving in a block of moonlight that lay on the decking right down there in front of the state-room door. It came from the companion; the cabin was dark because we were going easy on the oil. They hadn't left a great deal, for some reason or other."

McCord leaned back and described with his finger where the illumination had cut the decking.

"There! I could see it from my bunk, as I lay, you understand. I must have almost dropped off once when I heard him fiddling around out

here in the cabin, and then he said something in a whisper, just to find out if I was still awake, I suppose. I asked him what the matter was. He came and poked his head in the door."

"'The breeze is going out,' says he. 'I was wondering if we couldn't get a little more sail on her.' Only I can't give you his fierce Square-head tang. 'How about the tops?' he suggested.

"I was so sleepy I didn't care, and I told him so. 'All right,' he says, 'but I thought I might shake out one of them tops.' Then I heard him blow at something outside. 'Scat, you--!' Then: 'This cat's going to set me crazy, Mr. McCord,' he says, 'following me around everywhere.' He gave a kick, and I saw something yellow floating across the moonlight. It never made a sound--just floated. You wouldn't have known it ever lit anywhere, just like--"

McCord stopped and drummed a few beats on the table with his fist, as though to bring himself back to the straight narrative.

"I went to sleep," he began again. "I dreamed about a lot of things. I woke up sweating. You know how glad you are to wake up after a dream like that and find none of it is so? Well, I turned over and settled to go off again, and then I got a little more awake and thought to myself it must be pretty near time for me to go on deck. I scratched a match and looked at my watch. 'That fellow must be either a good chap or asleep,' I said to myself. And I rolled out quick and went above-decks. He wasn't at the wheel. I called him: 'Bjoernsen! Bjoernsen!' No answer."

McCord was really telling a story now. He paused for a long moment, one hand shielding an ear and his eyeballs turned far up.

"That was the first time I really went over the hulk," he ran on. "I got out a lantern and started at the forward end of the hold, and I worked aft, and there was nothing there. Not a sign, or a stain, or a scrap of

clothing, or anything. You may believe that I began to feel funny inside. I went over the decks and the rails and the house itself--inch by inch. Not a trace. I went out aft again. The cat sat on the wheel-box, washing her face. I hadn't noticed the scar on her head before, running down between her ears--rather a new scar--three or four days old, I should say. It looked ghastly and blue-white in the flat moonlight. I ran over and grabbed her up to heave her over the side--you understand how upset I was. Now you know a cat will squirm around and grab something when you hold it like that, generally speaking. This one didn't. She just drooped and began to purr and looked up at me out of her moonlit eyes under that scar. I dropped her on the deck and backed off. You remember Bjoernsen had *kicked* her--and I didn't want anything like that happening to--"

The narrator turned upon me with a sudden heat, leaned over and shook his finger before my face.

"There you go!" he cried. "You, with your stout stone buildings and your policemen and your neighborhood church--you're so damn sure. But I'd just like to see you out there, alone, with the moon setting, and all the lights gone tall and queer, and a shipmate--" He lifted his hand overhead, the finger-tips pressed together and then suddenly separated as though he had released an impalpable something into the air.

"Go on," I told him.

"I felt more like you do, when it got light again, and warm and sunshiny. I said 'Bah!' to the whole business. I even fed the cat, and I slept awhile on the roof of the house--I was so sure. We lay dead most of the day, without a streak of air. But that night--! Well, that night I hadn't got over being sure yet. It takes quite a jolt, you know, to shake loose several dozen generations. A fair, steady breeze had come along, the glass was high, she was staying herself like a doll, and so I figured I could get a little rest lying below in the bunk, even if I didn't sleep.

"I tried not to sleep, in case something should come up--a squall or the like. But I think I must have dropped off once or twice. I remember I heard something fiddling around in the galley, and I hollered 'Scat!' and everything was quiet again. I rolled over and lay on my left side, staring at that square of moonlight outside my door for a long time. You'll think it was a dream--what I saw there."

"Go on," I said.

"Call this table-top the spot of light, roughly," he said. He placed a finger-tip at about the middle of the forward edge and drew it slowly toward the center. "Here, what would correspond with the upper side of the companion-way, there came down very gradually the shadow of a tail. I watched it streaking out there across the deck, wiggling the slightest bit now and then. When it had come down about half-way across the light, the solid part of the animal--its shadow, you understand--began to appear, quite big and round. But how could she hang there, done up in a ball, from the hatch?"

He shifted his finger back to the edge of the table and puddled it around to signify the shadowed body.

"I fished my gun out from behind my back. You see I was feeling funny again. Then I started to slide one foot over the edge of the bunk, always with my eyes on that shadow. Now I swear I didn't make the sound of a pin dropping, but I had no more than moved a muscle when that shadowed thing twisted itself around in a flash--and there on the floor before me was the profile of a man's head, upside down, listening--a man's head with a tail of hair."

McCord got up hastily and stepped in front of the state-room door, where he bent down and scratched a match.

"See," he said, holding the tiny flame above a splintered scar on the boards. "You wouldn't think a man would be fool enough to shoot at a shadow?"

He came back and sat down.

"It seemed to me all hell had shaken loose. You've no idea, Ridgeway, the rumpus a gun raises in a box like this. I found out afterward the slug ricocheted into the galley, bringing down a couple of pans--and that helped. Oh yes, I got out of here quick enough. I stood there, half out of the companion, with my hands on the hatch and the gun between them, and my shadow running off across the top of the house shivering before my eyes like a dry leaf. There wasn't a whisper of sound in the world--just the pale water floating past and the sails towering up like a pair of twittering ghosts. And everything that crazy color--

"Well, in a minute I saw it, just abreast of the mainmast, crouched down in the shadow of the weather rail, sneaking off forward very slowly. This time I took a good long sight before I let go. Did you ever happen to see black-powder smoke in the moonlight? It puffed out perfectly round, like a big, pale balloon, this did, and for a second something was bounding through it--without a sound, you understand--something a shade solidier than the smoke and big as a cow, it looked to me. It passed from the weather side to the lee and ducked behind the sweep of the mainsail like *that*--" McCord snapped his thumb and forefinger under the light.

"Go on," I said. "What did you do then?"

McCord regarded me for an instant from beneath his lids, uncertain. His fist hung above the table. "You're--" He hesitated, his lips working vacantly. A forefinger came out of the fist and gesticulated before my face. "If you're laughing, why, damn me, I'll--"

"Go on," I repeated. "What did you do then?"

"I followed the thing." He was still watching me sullenly. "I got up and went forward along the roof of the house, so as to have an eye on either rail. You understand, this business had to be done with. I kept straight along. Every shadow I wasn't absolutely sure of I *made* sure of--point-blank. And I rounded the thing up at the very stem--sitting on the butt of the bowsprit, Ridgeway, washing her yellow face under the moon. I didn't make any bones about it this time. I put the bad end of that gun against the scar on her head and squeezed the trigger. It snicked on an empty shell. I tell you a fact; I was almost deafened by the report that didn't come.

"She followed me aft. I couldn't get away from her. I went and sat on the wheel-box and she came and sat on the edge of the house, facing me. And there we stayed for upwards of an hour, without moving. Finally she went over and stuck her paw in the water-pan I'd set out for her; then she raised her head and looked at me and yawled. At sun-down there'd been two quarts of water in that pan. You wouldn't think a cat could get away with two quarts of water in--"

He broke off again and considered me with a sort of weary defiance.

"What's the use?" He spread out his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "I knew you wouldn't believe it when I started. You *couldn't*. It would be a kind of blasphemy against the sacred institution of pavements. You're too damn smug, Ridgeway. I can't shake you. You haven't sat two days and two nights, keeping your eyes open by sheer teeth-gritting, until they got used to it and wouldn't shut any more. When I tell you I found that yellow thing snooping around the davits, and three bights of the boat-fall loosened out, plain on deck--you grin behind your collar. When I tell you she padded off forward and evaporated--flickered back to hell and hasn't been seen since, then--why, you explain to yourself that I'm drunk. I tell you--" He jerked his head back abruptly and turned to face the

companionway, his lips still apart. He listened so for a moment, then he shook himself out of it and went on:

"I tell you, Ridgeway, I've been over this hulk with a foot-rule. There's not a cubic inch I haven't accounted for, not a plank I--"

This time he got up and moved a step toward the companion, where he stood with his head bent forward and slightly to the side. After what might have been twenty seconds of this he whispered, "Do you hear?"

Far and far away down the reach a ferry-boat lifted its infinitesimal wail, and then the silence of the night river came down once more, profound and inscrutable. A corner of the wick above my head sputtered a little--that was all.

"Hear what?" I whispered back. He lifted a cautious finger toward the opening.

"Somebody. Listen."

The man's faculties must have been keyed up to the pitch of his nerves, for to me the night remained as voiceless as a subterranean cavern. I became intensely irritated with him; within my mind I cried out against this infatuated pantomime of his. And then, of a sudden, there *was* a sound--the dying rumor of a ripple, somewhere in the outside darkness, as though an object had been let into the water with extreme care.

"You heard?"

I nodded. The ticking of the watch in my vest pocket came to my ears, shucking off the leisurely seconds, while McCord's fingernails gnawed at the palms of his hands. The man was really sick. He

wheeled on me and cried out, "My God! Ridgeway--why don't we go out?"

I, for one, refused to be a fool. I passed him and climbed out of the opening; he followed far enough to lean his elbows on the hatch, his feet and legs still within the secure glow of the cabin.

"You see, there's nothing." My wave of assurance was possibly a little over-done.

"Over there," he muttered, jerking his head toward the shore lights. "Something swimming."

I moved to the corner of the house and listened.

"River thieves," I argued. "The place is full of--"

*"Ridgeway. Look behind you!"*

Perhaps it *is* the pavements--but no matter; I am not ordinarily a jumping sort. And yet there was something in the quality of that voice beyond my shoulder that brought the sweat stinging through the pores of my scalp even while I was in the act of turning.

A cat sat there on the hatch, expressionless and immobile in the gloom.

I did not say anything. I turned and went below. McCord was there already, standing on the farther side of the table. After a moment or so the cat followed and sat on her haunches at the foot of the ladder and stared at us without winking.

"I think she wants something to eat," I said to McCord.

He lit a lantern and went into the galley. Returning with a chunk of salt beef, he threw it into the farther corner. The cat went over and began to tear at it, her muscles playing with convulsive shadow-lines under the sagging yellow hide.

And now it was she who listened, to something beyond the reach of even McCord's faculties, her neck stiff and her ears flattened. I looked at McCord and found him brooding at the animal with a sort of listless malevolence. "*Quick!* She has kittens somewhere about." I shook his elbow sharply. "When she starts, now--"

"You don't seem to understand," he mumbled. "It wouldn't be any use."

She had turned now and was making for the ladder with the soundless agility of her race. I grasped McCord's wrist and dragged him after me, the lantern banging against his knees. When we came up the cat was already amidships, a scarcely discernible shadow at the margin of our lantern's ring. She stopped and looked back at us with her luminous eyes, appeared to hesitate, uneasy at our pursuit of her, shifted here and there with quick, soft bounds, and stopped to fawn with her back arched at the foot of the mast. Then she was off with an amazing suddenness into the shadows forward.

"Lively now!" I yelled at McCord. He came pounding along behind me, still protesting that it was of no use. Abreast of the foremast I took the lantern from him to hold above my head.

"You see," he complained, peering here and there over the illuminated deck. "I tell you, Ridgeway, this thing--" But my eyes were in another quarter, and I slapped him on the shoulder.

"An engineer--an engineer to the core," I cried at him. "Look aloft, man."

Our quarry was almost to the cross-trees, clambering the shrouds with a smartness no sailor has ever come to, her yellow body, cut by the moving shadows of the ratlines, a queer sight against the mat of the night. McCord closed his mouth and opened it again for two words: "By gracious!" The following instant he had the lantern and was after her. I watched him go up above my head--a ponderous, swaying climber into the sky--come to the cross-trees, and squat there with his knees clamped around the mast. The clear star of the lantern shot this way and that for a moment, then it disappeared and in its place there sprang out a bag of yellow light, like a fire-balloon at anchor in the heavens. I could see the shadows of his head and hands moving monstrously over the inner surface of the sail, and muffled exclamations without meaning came down to me. After a moment he drew out his head and called: "All right--they're here. Heads! there below!"

I ducked at his warning, and something spanked on the planking a yard from my feet. I stepped over to the vague blur on the deck and picked up a slipper--a slipper covered with some woven straw stuff and soled with a matted felt, perhaps a half-inch thick. Another struck somewhere abaft the mast, and then McCord reappeared above and began to stagger down the shrouds. Under his left arm he hugged a curious assortment of litter, a sheaf of papers, a brace of revolvers, a gray kimono, and a soiled apron.

"Well," he said when he had come to deck, "I feel like a man who has gone to hell and come back again. You know I'd come to the place where I really believed that about the cat. When you think of it--By gracious! we haven't come so far from the jungle, after all."

We went aft and below and sat down at the table as we had been. McCord broke a prolonged silence.

"I'm sort of glad he got away--poor cuss! He's probably climbing up a wharf this minute, shivering and scared to death. Over toward the gas-

tanks, by the way he was swimming. By gracious! now that the world's turned over straight again, I feel I could sleep a solid week. Poor cuss! can you imagine him, Ridgeway--"

"Yes," I broke in. "I think I can. He must have lost his nerve when he made out your smoke and shinnied up there to stow away, taking the ship's papers with him He would have attached some profound importance to them--remember, the 'barbarian,' eight thousand miles from home. Probably couldn't read a word. I suppose the cat followed him--the traditional source of food He must have wanted water badly."

"I should say! He wouldn't have taken the chances he did."

"Well," I announced, "at any rate, I can say it now--there's another 'mystery of the sea' gone to pot."

McCord lifted his heavy lids.

"No," he mumbled. "The mystery is that a man who has been to sea all his life could sail around for three days with a man bundled up in his top and not know it. When I think of him peeking down at me--and playing off that damn cat--probably without realizing it--scared to death--by gracious! Ridgeway, there was a pair of funks aboard this craft, eh? Wow--yow--I could sleep--"

"I should think you could."

McCord did not answer.

"By the way," I speculated. "I guess you were right about Bjoernsen, McCord--that is, his fooling with the foretop. He must have been caught all of a bunch, eh?"

Again McCord failed to answer. I looked up, mildly surprised, and found his head hanging back over his chair and his mouth opened wide. He was asleep.