

The Red-Headed Man

By Leslie McFarlane



Synopsis:

Romance and adventure come but seldom to a country boy on a lonely farm, but when I found the body of the red-headed man lying on the shore one sunny morning, not far from our home on the shores of Lake Huron, it was the first episode in a series of strange and dangerous events. For some time past there had been rumors that rum-runners had been centering their activities in our neighborhood, bringing cargoes of liquor from the Ontario side, and there had been tales of violence. The red-headed man, who was young and had died smiling, lay on the shore with a bullet in his forehead. I told my mother, who was vastly upset by the news and then set out for town in order to inform the police. On the way I passed the Kent farm, where my sweetheart, Hazel, was sitting on the fence, talking to my hated rival, Slim, a newcomer to the neighborhood, Mr. Kent's hired man. I told them of the discovery and was puzzled by the fact that evidently they knew the red-headed man and did not seem greatly surprised by his death. The police came to our farm and investigated the murder. One of Slim's footprints was found in the sand near the body. Afterward, I told Hazel that I would come over to see her that evening, but she asked me to stay away and gave no explanation for her request. When I mentioned her odd behavior when I told her of the death of the red-headed man she still refused to explain. In spite of myself, I was convinced that she and Slim know something about the murdered man.

I was glad when night came and I was able to escape the reproachful glances of my mother and make my way down to the shore, down to a favorite nook among the rocks, where I crouched, sheltered from the wind and looked out over the dark lake. The beating waves and the scurrying clouds harmonized with my tumultuous mood and for a long time I sat there until the very monotony of thrashing wind and waters brought me peace.

From where I sat I could see a blob of yellow light from one of the windows of the Kent farm, a little way back from the shore, and as I gazed at it and speculated vainly on the mystery of Hazel's refusal to let me visit the place that night I saw another and smaller blob of radiance move slowly away from the dark shadow of the house.

The light swayed to and fro, as with the movements of a person walking, and it drew nearer and nearer the shore, then passed out over the water and came to rest. Someone, carrying a lantern, had gone out to the end of the small dock. Whether or not that person returned to the house, I could not tell, but the light remained motionless. It glowed steadily in the darkness.

Perhaps five minutes later the gusty wind carried to my ears the distant throbbing of a launch, far out in the black waste, and in a little while a light flashed sharply and vanished, as though swallowed by the waves. As sharply then the light on the dock blinked and shone again. That was all.

Gradually the throbbing noise grew louder as the launch approached the shore, and at last I could distinguish its dark mass faintly even in the gloom. A vivid beam of light slashed the pall as the roar of the engine died away, and in the clear white radiance I saw the figure of a man standing on the dock. A rope dropped like an uncoiling serpent, and he caught it deftly. The light was blotted out.

A vagrant gust of wind bore down the voices of men, which sounded faintly above the steady crash of the waves on the shore. The lantern light blinked fitfully when obscured by passing figures.

I scrambled up from the rocks with a sudden determination in my mind. I meant to find out things for myself.

**CHAPTER III
Under the Tarpaulin**

Forgotten was Hazel's request, her command, that I stay away from the Kent farm that night. There was a mystery here, and somehow I could not shake the conviction that it had something to do with the murder of the red-headed man. The yellow light attracted me with an irresistible fascination.

I made my way down to the pebbly shore, the waves breaking almost at my feet with luminous splashes. The wind from the lake was cold, but I scarcely felt

it. A warming excitement grew with every step. The dark mass of the Kent farmhouse and outbuildings became more distinct and gradually resolved itself into its separate parts. Now I could hear voices, and even in the gloom I could vaguely see human figures moving about.

A clump of trees afforded refuge not fifty yards away from the house. The branches were bare now, but the trees grew so closely together that their friendly obscurity shielded me from observation. Against the gray sweep of open beach there was danger of being seen. Here I stood, watching the moving shapes, eyeing the dark bulk of the launch as it rose and fell with the waves.

There were, I judged, three men, and as I watched I saw them leave the dock and go slowly up the path toward the house. A single light gleamed from the kitchen window.

In a few moments a rectangle of light sprang out against the gloom and silhouetted against it were the three men. One of them—distinguishable even at that distance by his gangling form—was Slim Bogart. They went into the house. The door closed sharply.

The wind rustled the naked branches. The launch bumped and thudded against the pier. The dark lake murmured an undertone to the constant crashing of the waves.

I left my hiding place and sped across the shingle until I reached the dock. The launch was evidently deserted. I looked back at the house in time to see Hazel's form against the light from the window as she drew down the blind. For a moment my suspicions flamed into wrath. If I had ever had any thought of turning back, it vanished then. I was possessed by a cold curiosity.

I went out upon the dock until I came abreast of the launch. It was a large boat, with a cabin from which emanated a tiny gleam—a minute crack of light at the side of one of the windows. I listened. There was not a sound but the splash of the waves. I leaped down upon the deck, found the cabin door, and opened it.

The dim radiance of a solitary electric globe in the centre of the ceiling revealed the fact that the cabin was designed for cargo rather than for passengers. Scores of wooden cases and gallon cans were stacked in orderly array, those at the back of the cabin being covered by a tarpaulin. Most of the available space had been utilized, so that for the greater part of the cabin's length the windows were quite obscured.

There was no need of closer scrutiny. My eye caught the words 'Fine Old Scotch Whiskey' on one of the cases. The cans evidently contained alcohol. The mission of the strange launch was explained. It was a smuggling craft, manned by lawless men, and Slim Bogart was allied with them. The Kents too were ac-

cessories in allowing their farm to be used as a rendezvous.

"It's Slim's fault," I muttered. The hired man had arranged it all, cunningly winning his way into the confidence of the Kents, discovering their financial difficulties, suggesting the ease with which money could be made. Yes, there was no doubt that Slim was to blame.

However, there was nothing I could do. I had found what I had sought to find; my curiosity was appeased. My course now was to go home and keep my mouth shut.

My hand was on the knob of the cabin door. I heard a sudden heavy footstep at the end of the dock, and then a voice.

I was trapped. Swiftly I withdrew to the back of the cabin. There was no use trying to escape by the door, for I would most certainly be confronted by the enemy and might earn a bullet for my temerity. I began to realize the extent of my folly and heartily wished I had been sensible enough to stay away from the launch.

Footsteps along the creaking timber's. A man's voice.

I looked about in the hope of finding a hiding-place. The tarpaulin over the whiskey cases caught my eye and I pulled it aside. The cases had been piled one on top of another in irregular fashion, and at the bottom several jutted beyond the rest, leaving an open space. If the worst came to the worst, I could crouch down in this depression, but for the meantime I simply pressed closely against the boxes and drew the tarpaulin over me.

But no one came onto the launch just then. The footsteps halted at the end of the dock.

"... so I'll go on down to Moberly with them in the boat. There won't be any danger."

It was Slim Bogart. And the voice that answered was the voice of Hazel.

"I'm afraid, Slim," she was saying, "something might go wrong." Her tones were tremulous with concern.

"Naw, there'll be nothin' go wrong," he drawled. "Don't worry, kid."

"But after what happened to Red—"

"It won't happen to me."

Red! That must be the red-headed man! It was true, then. Slim and Hazel did know something about his death. They knew who he was, after all. I crouched there behind the tarpaulin, with a great bitterness rising in my heart. It was in no way allayed by the evident anxiety in Hazel's voice as she talked to Slim. She cared for him. I was convinced of that. In spite of all her assurances to me, she cared for him. A rum-runner!

Other voices intervened then, and heavy footsteps on the dock heralded the approach of the other men. A dead, husky voice said: "Ready, Slim?"

"All set."

There was a thud as one of the men leaped down upon the deck. "Well, good-by, kid."

"Good-by, Slim."

"Good-by, girlie," called out the man on the dock. "See you later."

Two successive thumps and a shuffling of feet indicated that Slim and the other man had boarded the launch. There was no chance of escape now. I crouched down into the cavity, realizing that if I remained upright my body might be defined against the tarpaulin and that there was always a danger of someone's brushing against me as I stood there.

I crouched on hands and knees, wedging my body into the aperture. The space was small and I was cramped, but I was better concealed. I had acted on sheer instinct in hiding myself. What would be the outcome when we reached Moberly and the gang began unloading their cargo, I

did not dare anticipate. Sufficient unto the hour was the evil thereof.

Hardly had I wedged myself into this hiding-place when the cabin door opened and heavy boots clumped noisily on the floor. I heard Slim speak:

"Might as well start."

"Nothing to stop us," replied the husky voice.

"You have a bigger cargo this time. Bigger than the other night."

"We thought we'd be able to send it in by truck from the farm again, so we loaded up. I don't like bringin' in too much by boat. If we have to run for it before we unload, we haven't much chance."

There was the clatter of a rope on the deck, and then the launch quivered to the staccato bark of an engine.

"All right out there, Tony?"

"All right," called back the other man. I sensed that the launch was backing slowly away from the dock. Water swirled about the stern. The engine throbbed.

(To be continued)

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