

The Red-Headed Man

By Leslie McFarlane



A wild thought shot through my mind that I might pretend knowledge of an ambush, and thus persuade the smugglers to turn back. In that case, however they would be convinced I had come aboard the boat as a spy, and I should be turned over to the tender mercies of Joe. I would have to take a chance on the success of the expedition.

"So far as I know, nothing is going to go wrong." "Right," said Tony, grimly. And you know what'll happen to you if anything does go wrong. Lay off him, Joe. Keep an eye on him. Better tie him up. One squeak out of you, boy, when we are unloadin' this hooch, and it's curtains for you. Get me?"

I nodded. Tony wheeled about and left the cabin. A moment later the engine throbbed again. The launch, which had been wallowing about in the waves, shot forward into the night. Slim leaned indolently against the cases and watched as Joe picked up a length of rope from the floor and bound my wrists behind me. When he had finished the stir bug gave me a push that sent me tumbling into a corner. He sat down on a box.

"Just the same I think he should 'a' been bumped off." His hairy hand still grasped the automatic, and he eyed me malevolently.

Slim lit a cigaret and flicked the match into the air. His face was expressionless.

The launch rocked and plunged on its way. In a little while we would reach the breakwater at Moberly Creek, and on the events of the next half-hour my life depended.

"Turn off that light," called out Tony.

Slim snapped the switch. Darkness enveloped us. The head and shoulders of the man at the wheel could be seen faintly in blurred silhouette beyond the door. The end of Slim's cigaret was a scarlet period in the gloom. But the evil presence of the stir bug, invisible near-by, dominated the little cabin.

CHAPTER IV Trouble at Moberly

The speed of the launch slackened. The engine roared no longer, but purred. Waves slashed and slapped. From where I lay I could see through the open door, and away beyond the bow I caught a glimpse of lights strung briefly across the night, like a necklace of yellow gems. Tony crouched at the wheel, a sullen and gloomy statue.

"Quiet, now," he ordered. The noise of the engine had diminished so that his voice came to us very clearly.

Slim's cigaret described a ruby arc as he removed it from his mouth.

"Are we far away?" "About half a mile."

Our sinister progress continued. Joe stirred restlessly.

"I gotta hunch," he muttered. "I got a hunch ther's somethin' queer about this."

"What's eatin' you? Everythin's all right."

"Mebbe. But I gotta hunch, just the same."

"Quiet, back there," cautioned Tony.

They were silent.

After a while Tony leaned forward, and the bow of the craft was illuminated for a moment in a brilliant white light. It was blotted out as suddenly as it appeared. He waited, then sank back with a murmur of satisfaction. He had switched on the search-light and off.

"He's there, all right. I got the flash from the breakwater."

Outside the entrance to Moberly Creek was a gray cement wall, at the end of which burned a red light by night as guidance to incoming craft. I judged that another member of the gang was waiting there to signal if the coast was clear.

"Everything O.K.?" asked the stir bug huskily.

"Right."

The launch slipped smoothly through the night. Slim and Joe left the cabin and crouched in the bow. I managed to get to my feet and made my way silently to the door.

I could see the town lights strung across the black mainland, and the ruby glow of the breakwater lantern. A sharp break in the yellow tiara immediately beyond indicated the location of the creek. The main part of the town was to the left, but there was a scattering of houses on the right bank, dwindling away to shacks and finally to isolated farms.

The craft bore steadily forward, and I could distinguish the gray wall of the breakwater. A dark figure was standing there, immobile and sinister, by the red light. We passed the wall with a few yards to spare; then the figure turned and moved slowly away into the night, picking his steps carefully along the narrow ridge.

The mouth of the sluggish creek was before us. The street lights no longer formed a tiara flatly superimposed on velvet, but resolved themselves spasmodically to left and to right beyond the banks of the waterway.

It was very quiet. Far up the creek a dog barked, and somewhere out back of the lights a lonely klaxon sounded raucously and was still. The men in the bow were tense and motionless, craning forward, peering into the gloom.

The speed of the boat had decreased until it scarcely seemed to be moving at all. If it had not been for the illusion of the shore lights slowly creeping past, one might have thought the launch had come to rest.

Then, to the left, something gray and misty emerged from the darkness, and I saw that the course of the launch had been altered and that we were moving in toward the south bank, approaching a frame structure that appeared suspended high above the water. As I watched this apparition, a light flashed once, swiftly, vividly, from the very surface of the creek, beneath the frame building.

The launch crept on. As my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw that we were drawing near a house that jutted out over the water. Its rear was built directly on the bank, but the front was supported by piles rising from the creek bed. It was a sad, gray, weather-beaten little place, not much bigger than a boat-house. We slid quietly beneath it and became engulfed in its shadow. There was the peculiar smell of rotting wood, the odor of timbers long lashed by the waves.

A thud, a slight shock, and the launch came to rest beside the landing-stage. I could see a flight of steps rising to an abrupt termination in the floor of the building.

Out of the shadows a quiet figure emerged and caught a rope flung to him by Joe. There were low voices. Tony shut off the engine and stepped over the side onto the landing-stage, where he stood stretching his arms. A light shone abruptly from above and illuminated the stairs. A white face peered down at us through the trap-door.

The light vanished and some one descended the steps.

"All right," muttered a voice gruffly. "Get this stuff upstairs. We haven't much time."

There were two men on the landing-stage with Tony. He spoke to them. I heard an exclamation. "What?"

The Italian said: "We've got him tied up inside."

"How did he get on board?"

"He sneaked into the boat back at the farm. Joe wanted to knock him off."

"Good job he didn't. One is enough."

"What'll we do with him?" asked Slim quietly.

"Make him give us a hand with this cargo. I'll deal with him later."

Slim turned and came into the cabin. He swung me about roughly and undid the knots of the rope about my wrists.

"Step lively," he ordered. "Keep your mouth shut and get a move on."

Some one went back up the stairs. Joe got out upon the landing-stage and moved off into the shadows. There were whisperings, muffled voices, a constant rustling of feet. I heard Slim wrestling with the cases, and in a moment he shoved one of them into my arms. "Over the side, kid," he drawled.

The passage of the cargo began. I handed my case up to Tony, he moved away with it a few steps, passed it on to the next man, and returned. Slim thrust another heavy box towards me. Soon there was a steady stream of cases moving over the side, along the landing-stage and up the stairs into the house. We worked in darkness and to the sound of labored breathing, footsteps on the stairs, and a constant scraping and thudding overhead.

For about ten minutes this went on. The cases were heavy. The cargo seemed inexhaustible. My arms ached, although I am as strong as the average farm boy of my age.

Finally Slim came over to the door, an unlighted cigaret dangling from his lips.

"Won't be long now," he said, and scratched a match. It flared up brightly, and he lit his cigaret.

Joe turned and growled at him: "What 't'hell's the big idea?"

"Can't a man have a smoke?" retorted Slim, and moved back into the cabin again.

He thrust another case toward me. I felt a drop of rain on my cheek and heard a distant murmur of thunder.

The work proceeded. Then into these nocturnal activities, into this atmosphere of secrecy, came an interruption.

On the road back of the house we heard an automobile slither through the gravel; brakes screeched; a door slammed. There was a rapid pounding. Voices. The banging of the house door was followed by a sharp, excited conversation.

We stood waiting, gazing up at the trap-door. Slim came out.

"What's the matter, hey?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

"Don't know," I answered, and together we stared up at the gloomy steps.

There was a sudden glare of light as a lantern was held above the opening of the trap, and in this glare we could see a figure descending the stairs. He was completely enveloped in a long, gray coat that reached almost to his heels, and the collar was turned high about his neck, meeting a black felt hat pulled so low on his forehead that his face was obscured. He came rapidly, decisively down the steps, strode across the landing, and, as the men there backed away, got into the launch and said in a thick, calm voice:

"They're onto us. Let's get out of here."

At the same time, from farther up the creek, we heard the noise of an approaching launch. The distant hum of a speeding automobile became audible from the shore road.

"Beat it—the rest of you!" snapped the newcomer, authoritatively. "Save your hides. Tony take the wheel! Hurry up, Joe!" Tony leaped into the launch at a bound and Joe came scrambling over the side, muttering. A terrific clatter rose from the engine. The launch backed out into the creek. There was no attempt at silence now. Footsteps thudded on the stairs. A few hundred

yards away I caught sight of a ghostly shape moving swiftly toward us through the water. Some one shouted. A scarlet tongue licked at the darkness and vanished simultaneously with the bark of a revolver. Something splashed in the water by the stern.

Joe flung himself down, sighted over the side, and his automatic rapped out explosively. Out in the creek the launch stopped, quivered, and then shot ahead toward the gray wall of the breakwater, with its solemn red light marking the channel to the open lake beyond. At the same time, from the road back of the house on the bank, a long, narrow triangle of brilliance cut the gloom, sweeping back and forth. The house itself stood out sharply in this glare. The light came to rest as the automobile stopped. Running figures flitted across the road.

"Just in time," remarked the stranger calmly. "I got the tip-off from Dulmage a few minutes ago. Somebody squealed. Step on it, Tony."

(To be continued)

ADMINISTRATRIX' NOTICE TO CREDITORS

In the Matter of the Estate of Fred McGregor, Deceased.

NOTICE is hereby given that all creditors and others having claims or demands against the Estate of Fred McGregor, late of the Town of Haileybury, and who died at the said Town of Haileybury, on or about the 23rd day of April, 1930, are required to send by post prepaid or deliver to Lena McGregor, Administratrix to the said Estate, or to the undersigned solicitor, on or before the 24th day of July, 1930, their Christian names and surnames, addresses and descriptions, with full particulars of their claim and a statement of their account, and the nature of the security, if any, held by them.

AND TAKE NOTICE that after such above mentioned date, the Administratrix will proceed to distribute the assets of the said Estate amongst the parties entitled thereto, having regard only to the claims of which she shall then have notice.

And the said Administratrix shall not be liable for the said assets or any part thereof, to any person or persons whose claim notice shall not have been received by her, at the time of said distribution.

DATED this 20th day of June, 1930.
LENA MCGREGOR, Administratrix
Per: JOSEPH A. LEGRIS,
12-3-c Haileybury, Ont., Her Solicitor

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