

LANTERNS ON THE WATER A FERRYBOAT MYSTERY



As I went by I see it was a lantern hanging on the of a double-hull ferryboat. I skimmed around for the watchman, a-wondering whereabouts he slept; and by and by I found him roosting on the bitts forward, with his head down between his knees. I gave his shoulder little shoves, and begun to cry. He stirred up in a kind of a startlish way; but when he see it was only me he took a good gap and stretch, and then he says: "Hello, what's up? Don't cry, bub. What's the trouble?"

I says: ", and mam, and sis, and—" Then I broke down. He says: "Oh, dang it now, don't take on so; we all has to have our troubles, and this 'n 'll come out all right. What's the matter with 'em?" "They're—they're—are you the watchman of the boat?" "Yes," he says, kind of pretty-well-satisfied like. "I'm the captain and the owner and the mate and the pilot and watchman and head deck-hand; and sometimes I'm the freight and passengers. I ain't as rich as old , and I can't be so blame' generous and good to Tom, Dick, and as what he is, and slam around money the way he does; but I've told him a many a time 't I wouldn't trade places with him; for, says I, a sailor's life's the life for me, and I'm derved if I'd live mile out o' town, where there ain't nothing ever goin' on, not for all his spondulicks and as much more on top of it. Says I—" I broke in and says: "They're in an awful peck of trouble, and—" "Who is?"

"Why, pap and mam and sis and ; and if you'd take your ferryboat and go up there—" "Up where? Where are they?" "On the wreck." "What wreck?" "Why, there ain't but one." "What, you don't mean the Walter Scott?" "Yes." "Good land! what are they doin' there, for gracious sakes?" "Well, they didn't go there a-purpose." "I bet they didn't! Why, great goodness, there ain't no chance for 'em if they don't git off mighty quick! Why, how in the nation did they ever git into such a scrape?" "Easy enough. Miss Hooker was a-visiting up there to the town—" "Yes, Booth's Landing—go on."

"She was a-visiting there at Booth's Landing, and just in the edge of the evening she started over with her nigger woman in the horse-ferry to stay all night at her friend's house, What-you-may-call-her I disremember her name—and they lost their steering-oar, and swung around and went a-floating down, stern , about mile, and saddle-baggsed on the wreck, and the ferryman and the nigger woman and the horses was all lost, but she made a grab and got aboard the wreck.

Well, about an hour after dark we come along down in our trading-scow, and it was so dark we didn't notice the wreck till we was right on it; and so we saddle-baggsed; but all of us was saved but Bill Whipple—and oh, he was the best cretur!—I most wish 't it had been me, I do." "My George! It's the beatenest thing I ever struck. And then what did you all do?" "Well, we hollered and took on, but it's so wide there we couldn't make nobody hear.

So pap said somebody got to get ashore and get help somehow. I was the only one that could swim, so I made a dash for it, and she said if I didn't strike help sooner, come here and hunt up her uncle, and he'd fix the thing. I made the land about a mile below, and been fooling along ever since, trying to get people to do something, but they said, 'What, in such a night and such a current? There ain't no sense in it; go for the steam ferry.' Now if you'll go and—" "By , I'd like to, and, blame it, I don't know but I will; but who in the dingnation's a-going' to pay for it? Do you reckon your pap—" "Why that's all right she tole me, particular, that her uncle Hornback—" "Great guns! is he her uncle? Looky here, you break for that light over yonder-way, and turn out west when you git there, and about a quarter of a mile out you'll come to the tavern; tell 'em to dart you out to , and he'll foot the bill.

And don't you fool around any, because he'll want to know the news. Tell him I'll have his niece all safe before he can get to town. Hump yourself, now; I'm a-going up around the corner here to roust out my engineer." many would a done it.

I wished the widow knowed about it. I judged she would be proud of me for helping these rascallions, because rascallions and dead beats is the kind the widow and good people takes the most interest in. Well, before long here comes the wreck, sliding along down! A kind of cold shiver went through me, and then I struck out for her. She was very deep, and I see in a minute there warn't much chance for anybody being alive in her.

I pulled all around her and hollered a little, but there wasn't any answer; all dead still. I felt a little bit heavy-hearted about the gang, but not much, for I reckoned if they could stand it I could. Then here comes the ferryboat; so I shoved for the middle of the river on a long down-stream slant; and when I judged I was out of eye-reach I laid on my oars, and looked back and see her go and smell around the wreck for remainders, because the captain would know her uncle Hornback would want them; and then pretty soon the ferryboat give it up and went for the shore, and I laid into my work and went a-booming down the river. It did seem a powerful long time before light showed up; and when it did show it looked like it was a mile off. By the time I got there the sky was beginning to get a little gray in the east; so we struck for an island, and hid the raft, and sunk the skiff, and turned in and slept like dead people.

BY and by, when we got up, we turned over the truck the gang had stole off of the wreck, and found boots, and blankets, and clothes, and all sorts of other things, and a lot of books, and a spyglass, and three boxes of seegars. We hadn't ever been this rich before in neither of our lives. The seegars was prime. We laid off all the afternoon in the woods talking, and me reading the books, and having a general good time. I told all about what happened inside the wreck and at the ferryboat, and I said these kinds of things was adventures; but he said he didn't want no more adventures.

He said that when I went in the texas and he crawled back to get on the raft and found her gone he nearly died, because he judged it was all up with him anyway it could be fixed; for if he didn't get saved he would get drowned; and if he did get saved, whoever saved him would send him back home so as to get the reward, and then would sell him South, sure. Well, he was right; he was most always right; he had an uncommon level head for a nigger.

I read considerable to Jim about kings and dukes and earls and such, and how gaudy they dressed, and how much style they put on, and called each other your majesty, and your grace, and your lordship, and so on, 'stead of mister; and eyes bugged out, and he was interested. He says: "I didn' know dey was so many un um. I hain't hearn 'bout none un um, skasely, but ole King Sollermun, onless you counts in a pack er k'yards. How much do a king git?" "Get?" I says; "why, they get a dollars a month if they want it; they can have just as much as they want; everything belongs to them."

"Ain" dat gay? En what dey got to do, Huck?" "They don't do nothing! Why, how you talk! They just set around." "No; is dat so?" "Of course it is. They just set around—except, maybe, when there's a war; then they go to the war. But other times they just lazy around; or go hawking— just hawking and sp— Sh!—d' you hear a noise?" We skipped out and looked; but it warn't nothing but the flutter of a steamboat's wheel away down, coming around the point; so we come back.

"Yes," says I, "and other times, when things is dull, they fuss with the parlyment; and if everybody don't go just so he whacks their heads off. But mostly they hang round the harem." "Roun' de which?" "Harem." "What's de harem?" "The place where he keeps his wives. Don't you know about the harem? Solomon had one; he had about a ." "Why, yes, dat's so; I—I'd done forgot it. A harem's a bo'd'n-house, I reck'n. Mos' likely dey has rackety times in de nussery. En I reck'n de wives quarrels considable; en dat 'crease de racket. Yit dey say Sollermun de wises' man dat ever live'. I doan' take no stock in dat.

Bekase why: would a wise man want to live in de mids' er sich a blim-blammin' all de time? No—'deed he wouldn't. A wise man 'ud take en buil' a biler-factory; en den he could shet down de bilerfactory when he want to res'." "Well, but he was the wisest man, anyway; because the widow she told me so, her own self." "I doan k'yer what de widder say, he warn't no wise man nuther. He had some er de dad-fetchedes' ways I ever see. Does you know 'bout dat chile dat he 'uz gwyne to chop in two?" "Yes, the widow told me all about it."

"Well, den! Warn' dat de beatenes' notion in de worl'? You jes' take en look at it a minute. Dah's de stump, dah—dat's one er de women; heah's you—dat's de yuther one; I's Sollermun; en dish yer dollar bill's de chile. Bofe un you claims it. What does I do? Does I shin aroun' mongs' de neighbors en fine out which un you de bill do b'long to, en han' it over to de right one, all safe en soun', de way dat anybody dat had any gumption would? No; I take en whack de bill in , en give half un it to you, en de yuther half to de yuther woman. Dat's de way Sollermun was gwyne to do wid de chile. Now I want to ast you: what's de use er dat half a bill?—can't buy noth'n wid it. En what use is a half a chile? I wouldn' give a dern for a un um."

"But hang it, you've clean missed the point—blame it, you've missed it a thousand mile." "Who? Me? Go ' long. Doan' talk to me 'bout yo' pints. I reck'n I knows sense when I sees it; en dey ain' no sense in sich doin's as dat. De 'spute warn't 'bout a half a chile, de 'spute was 'bout a whole chile; en de man dat think he kin settle a 'spute 'bout a whole chile wid a half a chile doan' know enough to come in out'n de rain. Doan' talk to me ' I knows him by de back." "But I tell you you don't get the point." "Blame de point! I reck'n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de real pint is down funder—it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised.

You take a man dat's got on'y one or two chillen; is dat man gwyne to be waseful o' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. He know how to value 'em. But you take a man dat's got 'bout million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. He as soon chop a chile in as a cat. Dey's plenty mo'. A chile er, mo' er less, warn't no consekens to Sollermun, dad fatch him!" I never see such a nigger. If he got a notion in his head once, there warn't no getting it out again. He was the most down on Solomon of any nigger I ever see. So I went to talking about other kings, and let Solomon slide.

I told about Louis Sixteenth that got his head cut off in France long time ago; and about his little boy the dolphin, that would a been a king, but they took and shut him up in jail, and some say he died there. "Po' little chap." "But some says he got out and got away, and come to America." "Dat's good! But he'll be pooty lonesome—dey ain' no kings here, is dey, Huck?" "No." "Den he cain't git no situation. What he gwyne to do?" "Well, I don't know. Some of them gets on the police, and some of them learns people how to talk French." "Why, Huck, doan' de French people talk de same way we does?" "No, ; you couldn't understand a word they said—not a single word."

"Well, now, I be ding-busted! How do dat come?" "I don't know; but it's so. I got some of their jabber out of a book. S'pose a man was to come to you and say Polly-voo-franzy—what would you think?" "I wouldn' think nuff'n; I'd take en bust him over de head—dat is, if he warn't white. I wouldn't 'low no nigger to call me dat." "Shucks, it ain't calling you anything. It's only saying, do you know how to talk French?" "Well, den, why couldn't he say it?" "Why, he is a-saying it. That's a Frenchman's way of saying it." "Well, it's a blame ridicklous way, en I doan' want to hear no mo' 'bout it. Dey ain' no sense in it." "Looky here; does a cat talk like we do?" "No, a cat don't."

“Well, does a cow?” “No, a cow don’t, nuther.” “Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?” “No, dey don’t.” “It’s natural and right for ’em to talk different from each other, ain’t it?” “Course.” “And ain’t it natural and right for a cat and a cow to talk different from us?” “Why, mos’sholy it is.” “Well, then, why ain’t it natural and right for a Frenchman to talk different from us? You answer me that.” “Is a cat a man, Huck?” “No.” “Well, den, dey ain’t no sense in a cat talkin’ like a man. Is a cow a man?—er” “No, she ain’t either of them.” “Well, den, she ain’t got no business to talk like either er the yuther of ’em. Is a Frenchman a man?” “Yes.”

“Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan’ he talk like a man? You answer me dat!” I see it warn’t no use wasting words—you can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I quit. WE judged that three nights more would fetch us to Cairo, at the bottom of Illinois, where the Ohio River comes in, and that was what we was after. We would sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free States, and then be out of trouble.

Well, the second night a fog begun to come on, and we made for a towhead to tie to, for it wouldn’t do to try to run in a fog; but when I paddled ahead in the canoe, with the line to make fast, there warn’t anything but little saplings to tie to. I passed the line around one of them right on the edge of the cut bank, but there was a stiff current, and the raft come booming down so lively she tore it out by the roots and away she went.

I see the fog closing down, and it made me so sick and scared I couldn’t budge for most a half a minute it seemed to me— and then there warn’t no raft in sight; you couldn’t see yards. I jumped into the canoe and run back to the stern, and grabbed the paddle and set her back a stroke. But she didn’t come. I was in such a hurry I hadn’t untied her. I got up and tried to untie her, but I was so excited my hands shook so I couldn’t hardly do anything with them.

As soon as I got started I took out after the raft, hot and heavy, right down the towhead. That was all right as far as it went, but the towhead warn't yards long, and the minute I flew by the foot of it I shot out into the solid white fog, and hadn't no more idea which way I was going than a dead man. Thinks I, it won't do to paddle; first I know I'll run into the bank or a towhead or something; I got to set still and float, and yet it's mighty fidgety business to have to hold your hands still at such a time.

I whooped and listened. Away down there somewheres I hears a small whoop, and up comes my spirits. I went tearing after it, listening sharp to hear it again. The next time it come I see I warn't heading for it, but heading away to the right of it. And the next time I was heading away to the left of it—and not gaining on it much either, for I was flying around, this way and that and t'other, but it was going straight ahead all the time. I did wish the fool would think to beat a tin pan, and beat it all the time, but he never did, and it was the still places between the whoops that was making the trouble for me. Well, I fought along, and directly I hears the whoop behind me. I was tangled good now. That was somebody else's whoop, or else I was turned around. I throwed the paddle down.

I heard the whoop again; it was behind me yet, but in a different place; it kept coming, and kept changing its place, and I kept answering, till by and by it was in front of me again, and I knowed the current had swung the canoe's head down-stream, and I was all right if that was and not some other raftsmen hollering. I couldn't tell nothing about voices in a fog, for nothing don't look natural nor sound natural in a fog.

The whooping went on, and in about a minute I come a-booming down on a cut bank with smoky ghosts of big trees on it, and the current throwed me off to the left and shot by, amongst a lot of snags that fairly roared, the current was tearing by them so swift. In another second or two it was solid white and still again.

. I set perfectly still then, listening to my heart thump, and I reckon I didn't draw a breath while it thumped a hundred. I just give up then. I knowed what the matter was. That cut bank was an island, and had gone down t'other side of it. It warn't no towhead that you could float by in ten minutes. It had the big timber of a regular island; it might be five or miles long and more than half a mile wide. I kept quiet, with my ears cocked, about fifteen minutes, I reckon.

I was floating along, of course, miles an hour; but you don't ever think of that. No, you feel like you are laying dead still on the water; and if a little glimpse of a snag slips by you don't think to yourself how fast you're going, but you catch your breath and think, my! how that snag's tearing along. If you think it ain't dismal and lonesome out in a fog that way by yourself in the night, you try it once—you'll see.

Next, for about a half an hour, I whoops now and then; at last I hears the answer a long ways off, and tries to follow it, but I couldn't do it, and directly I judged I'd got into a nest of towheads, for I had little dim glimpses of them on both sides of me—sometimes just a narrow channel between, and some that I couldn't see I knowed was there because I'd hear the wash of the current against the old dead brush and trash that hung over the banks.

Well, I warn't long loosing the whoops down amongst the towheads; and I only tried to chase them a little while, anyway, because it was worse than chasing a Jack-o'-lantern. You never knowed a sound dodge around so, and swap places so quick and so much. I had to claw away from the bank pretty lively times, to keep from knocking the islands out of the river; and so I judged the raft must be butting into the bank every now and then, or else it would get further ahead and clear out of hearing—it was floating a little faster than what I was.

Well, I seemed to be in the open river again by and by, but I couldn't hear no sign of a whoop nowheres. I reckoned I had fetched up on a snag, maybe, and it was all up with him. I was good and tired, so I laid down in the canoe and said I wouldn't bother no more. I didn't want to go to sleep, of course; but I was so sleepy I couldn't help it; so I thought I would take jest one little cat-nap.

But I reckon it was more than a cat-nap, for when I waked up the stars was shining bright, the fog was all gone, and I was spinning down a big bend stern first. First I didn't know where I was; I thought I was dreaming; and when things began to come back to me they seemed to come up dim out of last week. It was a monstrous big river here, with the tallest and the thickest kind of timber on both banks; just a solid wall, as well as I could see by the stars.

I looked away down-stream, and seen a black speck on the water. I took after it; but when I got to it it warn't nothing but a couple of sawlogs made fast together. Then I see another speck, and chased that; then another, and this time I was right. It was the raft. When I got to it was setting there with his head down between his knees, asleep, with his right arm hanging over the steering-oar. The other oar was smashed off, and the raft was littered up with leaves and branches and dirt.

So she'd had a rough time. I made fast and laid down under nose on the raft, and began to gap, and stretch my fists out against , and says: "Hello, have I been asleep? Why didn't you stir me up?" "Goodness gracious, is dat you, Huck? En you ain' dead—you ain' drowned —you's back agin? It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true. Lemme look at you chile, lemme feel o' you. No, you ain' dead! you's back agin, 'live en soun', jis de same ole Huck—de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness!" "What's the matter with you, You been a-drinking?"