



The Reef

By JOHN EARL DAVIS

THERE can be no doubt whatever about what happened. You can see the shabby brick tenement, just off First Avenue, where Carl Tempest lived. You can still go out on the crumbling old dock at the end of Forty-eighth Street—if the city hasn't demolished it—and look up the East River to Welfare Island and that bare pile of rocks where the terror left him.

* * *

From seven in the morning until six in the evening, Carl Tempest picked up new padlocks, looked at them, and

threw them down. If they passed specifications, he threw them into one box; if not—into the other. For these services he received fifteen dollars a week, which he brought home to the dirty tenement just off First Avenue and gave to Bella. Bella had been pretty once; but she had washed herself out in the same tub with the everlasting laundry. Spirit had been diluted to slavery; love to acceptance. The color of her face, the softness of her hands had gone down the drain. Her hair fell into strings, which got into her eyes when she scrubbed. Carl saw that, but was too weary to care much. Bella has always been a good wife. She cooked for him, and they lived.

The only thing that really came up in that last month was that Carl got a little more restless. Maybe it was the

damp heat that came about then, making their back room intolerable. You sat on the one cane chair, and it stuck to you. The bed was a tumbled mess of hot rags. Through the court window came the smell of what the neighbors were having to eat; and it turned your stomach. When you ever did get to sleep, you dreamed of padlocks with faces, spitting at you while you inspected them.

When Carl couldn't sleep at all, he got up and dressed and went for a walk. It seemed natural, then, to go down toward the river. After midnight the traffic thinned out on First Avenue, and the roar was stilled a little. If you went west, you got into the dreary caverns under the elevated; north took you past delicatessen shops, south past the slaughter houses, now dull with sleep. But the river, even if it stank a little, was alive and cool. You could sit on the end of a rotten old pier, and nobody would bother you. It would be a little world all your own; and maybe after a while you'd feel like going back home to bed.

Carl found the dock at the end of Forty-eighth Street—decaying, barred to all traffic, and carrying warning signs to keep off. Heedless—at first—of those warnings, he would slip through the bars and go to the very end, where black water gently slapped the piles. Sometimes a tug or an oil boat would go by, plodding on some errand that couldn't wait for another day. Once or twice an excursion steamer dawdled past, spangled with electric bulbs, crawling with forms which must have been people dancing. You knew that for sure when you heard the music floating at you from that direction, swelling louder when the wind happened to be right; dying out entirely when it didn't.

CARL loved to watch boats; loved to think about them sometimes when he was working—because his work was automatic anyway, and independent of thought. But often at such times would come a dull, foolish little ache, and the strangely insistent memory of a boat he had made, years ago.

He had labored over it with clumsy but eager hands, because it was a kind of symbol. The other boys who swam off the pier with him brought tiny fleets down to the river, where they showed them proudly for a day or two: cigar boxes, pointed blocks of wood, even fancy toy yachts and steamers, fished out of junk heaps. Some floated, some capsized; but in time each of them drifted away and was forgotten.

Carl said, "My boat is going to be different. It's going to be real—not just a piece of wood that floats." So he gathered scraps wherever he could find them—whatever could be turned to use; he studied pictures of ocean liners, and slowly built his model. It took a long time. When he was finished, he knew that he had done a good job; nothing had ever looked to him so beautiful. Proudly he gave it his own name, *Tempest*; proudly he carried it to the pier for launching. "Watch this," he told the others. Gallantly the *Tempest* moved away from the pier, pausing an instant like any fine lady waiting to be admired. Then an undercurrent took her and she raced; and Carl, watching her, knew for a moment the ecstasy of creation fulfilled.

Only for a moment. Then he saw her prow headed straight for a reef—a pile of rock close inshore. The current was mad. Before Carl could get to her she had crashed, faltered, capsized. A sudden eddy took her under. Seconds later her keel showed, a little speck heading

down-river toward the bay; then a launch went by to starboard, and blotted her out.

It wasn't so much that the boys had laughed at him then. The thing went deeper, because it crystallized every boyhood failure he had ever known. It left, somewhere inside him, a dark core of hopelessness and fear; a kind of tacit assurance that whatever he planned or hoped was doomed from the beginning. That distrust had grown up with him; came back to him now, as he remembered the *Tempest*. Nothing, he reflected, had ever gone right with him, either before or since.

There was another result. Though boats still fascinated him, he feared them—or rather feared for them. It almost seemed that the thing which had dragged him down had dragged his boat down also; and he dreaded that thing. Once, when he was courting Bella, they had taken an excursion to Coney Island; and he had been frightened and unhappy all the way. Anything, he thought, might happen. After that he did not go on the water any more.

Yet now, these hot summer nights, he was down at the river again, watching boats, thinking of things that lay beyond his grasp. He sprawled on the dock, forgetting, for a little while, the sticky room, the rinse-water eyes and rough red hands of Bella. Up to his left he could see the southern tip of Welfare Island, and below that the tiny islet of rock masses where the gulls liked to rest. Something about those rocks made him shudder. Nothing he could see or understand; just a nameless dread. They were too stark, too heavy, those rocks. They could crush a man; or a man could be crushed on them—as the little *Tempest* was crushed. Sometimes he had to turn and

look the other way; then he felt a menace at his back. This grew. This was part of the restlessness that came upon him in that last month.

ONE night he asked Bella to take a walk with him. Vaguely, he may have wanted to have her share this new experience of his—the silence, the river smell, the boats slipping by in the night. Or again, there was the possibility that her presence there, her unimaginative comments on what she saw, could help to dispel the growing feeling about those rocks. For thought of them was mingling now with thought of boats—in his work, in his dreams. Those cold stones took on a kind of collective personality. Sooner or later, in some way, they would get him.

Of this he did not speak to Bella at all. He simply asked her to go for a little walk. At first she refused, because the request seemed incredible, irrelevant, and silly; he had not suggested such a thing in years. And she was tired, and hadn't any decent clothes. Where would they go? But at last she gave in, and Carl took her down to the river. Nervously he tried to draw her attention from the signs that said, "Warning. Keep Off"; for they were beginning to have a significance which he did not wish to examine.

He felt a kind of elation at having her there on the dock—his dock. For a moment it brought a little surge of forgotten feeling; and surprisingly, he reached for her hand. It was rough. She drew it away, shivering a little. "This is a terrible place," she said. "I'd rather be home. Anything could happen to you down here."

A flanking warehouse draped them with a sullen blanket of shadow. Out in mid-channel, a tug hastened north with the incoming tide. Its thick-bearded

prow seemed headed straight for the clump of rocks below Welfare Island. It must strike; nothing could stop it now. Carl took a deep breath, yelled, "Hey!" But by then the tug had passed safely by, yards this side of the rocks. Things get out of perspective when you're looking over the water. Carl felt a little foolish; but he was strangely afraid, too. He had tried to cheat the rocks. They would not forget that.

Bella turned back, whining. "Carl Tempest, what's got into you, yelling like that? Are you going crazy? This is a terrible place you brought me to." He never took her down there again after that.

But now he faced a new struggle every night. The river was still beautiful, peaceful, cool; it was better than being at work, or at home. But the river held a threat: Bella had crystallized it, in a way, when she had said, "Anything could happen to you down here." She had meant, probably, that you could be slugged, or robbed, or arrested; or that you might fall through a rotten plank and drown—something tangible like that. But Carl knew better. There was something waiting down there for him, that had nothing to do with any of these possibilities. A penalty that he would have to pay, sooner or later, for the little hours of escape that the river afforded him.

Of course he didn't put it in those words. He only knew that when he went down among the coal lighters at night he was getting away from the things that made him tired and unhappy. The roar from the bridge at Fifty-Ninth Street was faint and soothing when it reached him. Even the tall red Socony sign, over in Queens, had a kind of impersonal beauty which the dark river liked and

reflected. . . . But against these things he had to weigh the insubstantial shadows which crept closer to him, nightly, from the rocks. His place, like Bella's, was at home. Anything could happen to him here. That phrase grew into suspicion, and the suspicion into a secret terror. And the colder that terror sat in his heart, the tighter those bonds became which drew him to the lonely dock. The peace disappeared from there; more and more he returned out of an unwilling defiance, as when a man continues to shout at a brute antagonist though he knows it would be wiser to turn and run.

THE last night was not in its beginnings any different from the rest. Oh, it was his birthday—his twenty-fifth. At twenty-five a man is young, full of hope and courage; the whole world is in his pocket. So Carl addressed himself, and then laughed with a deep, abiding bitterness. No, nothing happened that day, any more than what happened every day: feeding, drudgery, feeding. After supper he read the paper for a little while, said, "Be seeing you," to Bella and then walked down to the river.

He leaned against a splintered pile at the end of the dock, steadfastly shutting out all thought. But something whispered outside the portals of his brain. Slowly, slowly, tight strong wires pulled at his eyes. Look up—up-river. Look. You have to look. . . . Well, there was nothing to see. Only a pile of rocks, sticking out of the river where they didn't belong. They were eloquently silent. Look here. You cannot look anywhere else. Your wife is at home. That is the place to be. Maybe it is not too late to go there.

Happy birthday, Carl Tempest. Something went wrong twenty-five

years ago. Look, Carl; look here, and try to think what it was.

There was a chill wind off the East River, making not a ripple on the water's surface. Carl pressed his palms flat against the weathered timbers beneath him, clamped his teeth, and turned his face toward Queens. Then he relaxed, and drew in a long, deep breath at what he saw.

It had not been there a moment before; he could have sworn to that. A giant liner, glowing and proud—the most beautiful thing, surely, that he had ever seen. Pure white she was, from sharp bow to graceful stern; even her funnels were white against the shadowy background of Queens. And high up above the funnels was a soft glowing whiteness which seemed like a reflection of the boat herself—warmer and more delicate than any cloud.

She lay quite still on the still river. She was mammoth and high—so high that a man standing in her bow might grow dizzy on looking down. The sheer line of the prow—Carl shook his head, dug his fingers into the rotting planks. The ship was reeling; no, the ship was quiet, and he was reeling. But he knew what he had seen. The prow was pointing straight at—was even touching—that stark little island of rock. The ship was a finger, directed to those dark threats that worked with him, ate with him, slept with him. He wanted to leave; struggled, even, to turn; but he was fixed there, cold and helpless and rigid.

And now the thing came which no one could have foreseen. Surely Bella, pale, stringy-haired Cassandra, conjured up no such fantastic nightmare when she said, "Anything could happen to you down here." But she spoke dreadful truth.

AS Carl Tempest fought against the inflexible bonds twisted about him by the shadows, he looked and saw a thick, flat shaft of light extending to him from the liner's promenade deck. He closed his eyes and opened them again. It was still there. His gaze was fixed on it without thought of volition. He forgot his bonds; and in forgetting them, lost them. Suddenly, without reason, he put out his hand and touched the light. It was substantial. At the first quick touch he jerked his hand away, recoiling from the material cold softness of what had no right to solidity at all. The thing glowed with a luminosity that had in it nothing of heat. It was susceptible of measure. Carl found himself estimating its breadth as about four feet, its thickness as perhaps six inches. Like a sturdy plank. And it was just long enough to extend from the gleaming vessel to the dock on which he sat. It rested firmly there, waiting. . . .

The thought came over Carl that it was waiting for him. For the moment he did not try to explain otherwise this gangplank of light, or to understand how it came there. So with the ship: it did not seem to him at all strange that she should appear thus resplendent in the East River; though surely there was here no place for such a craft to dock. She was simply there, a token of luxury, romance, elegance—everything to which he would never have access. Yet she stood there now in mid-river, incredibly beautiful, provocative, inviting; and he had but to walk aboard.

Stiffly he rose, placed a tentative foot on the beam. It held. The ugly dead end of a street, the blank frowning warehouses had disappeared. Only there was one brief flash of thought for Bella. She should be here. She

would like to see this too. Twenty-fifth birthday party, together. Then he shrugged, set his face toward the goal, and began deliberately to cross the beam.

He must have realized, later, the awful significance of that moment when he thought of Bella. If he had turned back for her then, with one foot yet on the honest commonplace grime of the dock, he might still be inspecting padlocks; might still be coming home for meals, reading the paper, giving his socks to Bella to wash and darn. There might be blood that nourished and a brain that thought, where now is only the everlasting vacuum of terror.

As he walked his step was springy and his feet sank a little, as in thick moss. Already he felt the luxury that waited for him aboard the huge glowing liner. But, with what was pleasurable, he felt also a vague uneasiness. He tried to define it as worry over the fact that he was an interloper—in short, that he would be kicked off as having no right on the ship. But that wouldn't do. He was not timid by nature, nor did he mind a rebuff. He had had too many of them. Now, as his steps slowed, he came to understand that something was definitely wrong. His throat felt tight and dry. He licked his lips; found them dry, too.

He had avoided looking down at the river; but the soft springiness of the light beneath his feet began flashing chill misgivings to his brain. It was not like moss after all; rather, he thought, like tender human flesh—yielding, recoiling. And, like flesh, this substance was alive; it moved, not in any direction but with a fierce bumping swirl that he could feel through his shoes. The sensation made his own skin crawl.

And yet it seemed that he had known the sensation before.

HE KNEW that he was terribly afraid. Somewhere out of the past came an absurd memory, an admonition to conquer fear by examining its object. He shuddered. There was something beneath him too awful to look at; yet he had to see it if he was to go on. Not to know would turn him into a gibbering maniac. He believed that; and believing, he knelt, the sweat starting from his forehead—knelt, and steadied himself on the beam, and looked.

At first he could not be sure. To credit his eyes would be madness; but to admit hallucination—that would be madness, too. In this seething mass on which he knelt he saw, animate and corporeal, the secret terrible fears of his own soul.

In terror he rose, turned back toward shore, began a step—and suddenly shrank, retreated. It was all but too late. His foot would have gone down into a black void where the river waited. Between him and the shore there was nothing—not even a glimmer on the unrippled water. The gangplank ended at precisely the spot where he stood. He was trapped.

Surely, he thought, he must be dreaming. He had heard of such dreams. He would yawn—so—and turn easily, and will to cast off sleep. He would reach out, and touch Bella, and so return to the cluttered little apartment where a pack of cigarettes lay always by the bed. He would smoke, and try to forget this hideous nonsense.

And so he turned slowly, and saw the ship. It was very real—more real, because he was nearer to it. The gangplank stretched ahead—from here to there. His feet sank a little in the turmoil of despair that swirled beneath them. He screamed and ran, bounding sickeningly over the glowing path,

trying to run out of the dream; and at the last step fell, not far but hard, face down on the deck. In this there was no physical pain, no sensation, even. As if the body were already—

He shuddered, and pulled himself upright against the rail. The gangplank was gone. With his last running step they had dropped away, those scurrying, desperately searching, utterly hopeless lives. The millions of hideous, tortured reflections of himself. His road back to the safe, heavy commonplaces of life—gone!

Yet for a moment, looking out over the water, he had one last access of dull calm. It was strange, he thought, that everything should be as before: the river; a tug with a string of barges; the dirty warehouses, and the lights of Manhattan beyond. Not far past those docks would be First Avenue, and the shabby brick tenement where Bella waited. Alone—and on his birthday.

He started suddenly.

An ominous shiver ran the length of the vessel. Carl held himself very still, grasping the rail, waiting. There was no sound anywhere behind him. Waves of silence engulfed him, weighed him down with sinister, creeping apprehension. Little by little it came to him, the significant penultimate knowledge—there was no life on that boat. No one. Nothing. Only himself, trembling, desperately grasping the rail. And the last knowledge, the final stark domain of endless terror, was at his back.

Slowly—very slowly—he turned. The deck held beneath his feet, but the air had suddenly gone unspeakably cold. Fighting against the thing he must see, he remembered the rocks; rejected that thought, and could find no other. At last he faced the boat itself; at last,

in a flash of searing, intolerable understanding, he knew. The boat was—

The *Tempest*.

The air had turned to liquid ice.

* * *

Tony Bellano was always better at everything than that little Casey mick. He got up very early in the morning to prove it; and this time he had something that would hit the ball. The sun wasn't quite up when he rousted out Casey and challenged him to a backstroke race as far as Gull Island—which is what the kids called that little bunch of rocks below Welfare. Casey gave him a good run for his money at that; and it was the mick who kept his head when they found the body lying there.

"Drowned like a rat," he announced calmly. "Must've fell off a boat or a dock or something, and got carried up here by the tide."

"Gosh," Tony muttered, looking the other way. "Gosh! We better swim back and get the cops."

It was as simple as that. While they were making tracks for the precinct station, Casey's mind was already on other matters. "Say, Bellano, did you see the pitcher in the tabloids yesterday of that swell liner that got sunk on its first trip out?"

"Yeah, sure." Tony was good at current events, too, and a little scornful of the mick's knowledge. "Sure, you dope. I suppose you think that just happened. Well, that ship sank just twenty-five years ago last night. Hit a reef, and went down with everybody on board, because the captain didn't take his wife's advice or something. The thing in the paper was about his wife just died."

"Aw, I knew that," Casey protested. "Twenty-fifth anniversary of big disaster. Sure. But I forgot the ship's name."

He scratched his head.

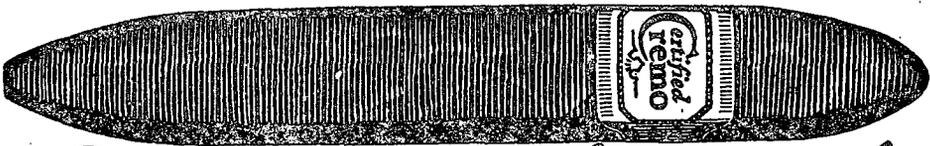
Tony saw a cop and hailed him; then answered the mick out of the corner of his mouth: "Screwy name for a boat. The *Tempest*. Kind of a jinx, huh?"

Mouse and Man

ALMOST as legendary as the friendship between Man and Dog, is the strife between Man and Mouse. For centuries this wily little rodent of the genus *mus musculus* has sabotaged the pantries and frightened the females of *homo sapiens*. It is no wonder that the sage Thoreau said that the world would beat a path to the door of the man who invented a better mousetrap.

Now Science has entered the fray and the conflict is resolved: Science vs. Mouse. Science plans to wipe all mice from the face of the earth with a perpetual motion trap. This is a diabolical device that is set by the first victimized mouse for the second—and so on. The first mouse sees a streamlined mouse-hole sprayed with an aroma of the finest cheese. Lured, Mr. Mouse enters a hall, hangs his hat and regards himself in a lighted mirror; and—being a mouse—thinks his reflection is another mouse. Believing it to be his host, and losing all caution, Mr. Mouse moves into a small room of mirrors, and, once he is inside, a grating drops behind him. The cheese, Mr. Mouse discovers, is in a glassed-in compartment and while the rodent is thinking this over another mouse drops in and another grating drops, and— Well—it's going to do away with mice, Science says.

—George Preston



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