

People's Story
Story
March 1908

THE FISH PIRATES.

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A TALE OF THE GREAT LAKES.



HE managing editor was studying a map when Bilkins came in. He looked up and nodded.

"Have you seen this, Bilkins?"

He picked up an afternoon edition and pointed to big head-lines running across the first three columns. The preceding night an American fishing-tug had been fired upon by a Canadian revenue cutter, and the story had been "played up" in graphic detail.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

Bilkins shrugged his shoulders. He had learned that this was a golden way of expressing himself until he had fathomed the managing editor's mind.

"Interesting," he said. "Mighty interesting!"

"I'll wager a hat that it will end in something more than a little excitement, Bilkins!" exclaimed the managing editor. "Our lake correspondents say that the fishermen along the Erie shore are desperate. They're not catching fish on our side, and a good many of the tug captains have turned pirates and are running their nets over the international boundary. Our Dunkirk man says the town is hot with threats against the Canadians; in Erie, they're ready to fight, and I've got a tip that a number of captains are fitted

out with guns—and there's a strong sentiment that if they're fired upon they'll use 'em. The Canadian revenue cutters are confiscating nets by the wholesale; they've captured three tugs and have taken them as prizes into Canadian ports, and two boats have been fired upon when they refused to haul to. That's the situation in a nutshell, Bilkins. If the Dunkirk and Erie men don't back down there's going to be a fish-pirate war; anyway, there's stacks of fun brewing, and I want you to hustle over there and take the thing in hand. Everything is up to you. Get the best special stuff you can. Our regular correspondents will attend to the routine. Here—wait a minute—I'll give you an order for transportation and funds."

Bilkins was on his feet, ready to go.

"I can make the three-twenty train," he said, glancing at his watch. "That will get me into Erie to-night."

It was already three o'clock, and the managing editor nodded in appreciation of Bilkins' readiness.

"Then we won't waste time in getting transportation. Here's an order on the cashier. If you want more money wire for it. Get in with the pirates, if you can, and take a trip with one of them. That's what we want. Good luck to you!"

Fifteen minutes later Bilkins was

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aboard his train. He had purchased a magazine at the depot news-stand, but did not read. Lounging back comfortably in his seat, he closed his eyes and began formulating a plan of action. At the outset he realized that he would have difficulty in successfully filling his assignment. This was not the first time that the dark clouds of a fishermen's war had gathered over Erie. And it was not the first time that a newspaper man had gone down among the pirates.

He remembered that MacIvrie had almost succeeded. MacIvrie's story was a bit of cherished history in the *Herald* office. He had smuggled himself aboard a Dunkirk fish-pirate's boat, and had reached the poaching-grounds before he was discovered. After that he was marooned upon a sand-bar which was not much larger than the tug which put him there. He had almost starved. Bilkins chuckled as he recalled the Scotchman's adventure. Then there was Briggs, the best marine man that every struck the *Herald* beat. Briggs came back with one arm in a sling, and so badly used up that he was unrecognizable for a month. Bilkins had loaned him money with which to pay his hospital bill.

Bilkins himself had been among the pirates before, in a desultory, friendly sort of way, while writing up the fish industry. He knew them for men of strong courage, toughened by storm and inured to wreck and hardship, and with a thousand fancied wrongs to right—men who talked with foxlike caution in the companionship of strangers, and who thought it no sin to seek their livelihood across a line they could neither feel nor see, and would not understand.

Bilkins admired their courage. He liked the men. He wanted to join them, and be friends, and write them up as heroes instead of outlaws. He knew that this would please the managing editor. Everybody liked the fish pirates, except the Canadians. MacIvrie and Briggs had liked them—

A mental picture of MacIvrie upon his sand-bar, and Briggs in his hospital cot, flashed upon Bilkins, and the humor of it tickled him.

"If that's the reward of friendship in Erie, what the deuce will they do with me?" he thought.

Unconsciously he spoke the words quite audibly. The next instant he was looking into a pair of dark, tear-filled eyes turned upon him from the seat ahead. He saw a troubled face and a mouth trembling as if upon the point of speech. Then the face was turned away.

Bilkins straightened himself. He had noticed the girl when he came in, and had looked at her hair because it had struck him as being exquisitely pretty. After that he had not thought of her again. But now he watched her closely, hoping that she would give him an opportunity to speak to her. But the opportunity did not come, and gradually his thoughts slipped back into their old channel.

By the time his train reached Toledo he had devised a scheme by which he hoped to make good among the pirates. He would get employment in one of the fish-houses, make the acquaintance of poachers, and watch for a chance to join one of their crews. It would take time, but he believed the managing editor would stand for it.

As the train pulled into the Toledo yards, the girl ahead of him rose from her seat, and Bilkins was enabled to get another view of her face. Something in it—a look of tense anxiety, almost fear—urged him to speak.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I change here—may I help you with your grip?"

A bit of color mounted into the girl's pale cheeks.

"I—I—hardly know," she faltered. Bilkins saw unutterable wretchedness in her eyes. "You are—going to Erie?" she asked. "I overheard you—"

"Yes, I'm going to Erie," Bilkins inter-

rupted. He wanted the girl to understand that he knew she was in trouble, and there was gentle friendliness in his voice.

"Won't you please tell me how I can help you?"

"You can carry my grip."

She looked up into his face, and there came a little tremble round her mouth, and her eyes were soft in the lamp-glow, as though she wanted to cry. It was a pretty face, and Bilkins felt his heart pounding with sympathy.

"I want to do more than that!" he said. Suddenly he reached out and caught one of her hands. "See here, little girl, something's troubling you! Won't you tell me what it is?"

The girl was crying in earnest now. The passengers had filed out of the car, and Bilkins continued to hold the hand he had taken.

"Tell me!" he pleaded.

"I—I—want you to take me to a pawnshop," sobbed the girl from behind her handkerchief.

"A pawn-shop!" cried Bilkins. "What the devil— Oh, I beg your pardon."

"Yes, a *pawn-shop!*" repeated the girl, withdrawing her hand and meeting his eyes squarely. "I want to go to a pawnshop right away. I've lost my purse, and I haven't got a ticket to Erie, and I'm—"

"Hungry, I'll bet a dollar!" cried Bilkins. "We're bound this instant for a place where they set up square meals, and do it in a hurry. We've got just thirty-five minutes. Come on!"

He caught up their grips and hurried down the aisle. There was not much beauty about Bilkins, but there was something unusually attractive in the boyish frankness of his face, and, as he looked back over his shoulder, his strong, white teeth shining at her, the girl laughed.

"I'm a beggar!" she cried.

"The prettiest I ever met!" he flung back.

Their eyes met laughingly as he reached up to help her down the car-steps.

"A pawn-shop—you!" He laughed aloud.

Relief from her anxiety and the excitement of her rescue had flushed the girl's cheeks with color. Suddenly, Bilkins halted her under a depot light.

"My name is Bilkins," he announced, fishing a card from his pocket. "J. Augustus Bilkins, of Detroit. It's a rummy name, but I've got to keep it. I don't put on that 'J' for style, but to make the thing passable. Altogether it's Jeremiah Augustus Bilkins!"

"And mine is Burton," replied the girl, smiling up into his boyish, jolly face. "Josephine Burton, of Erie."

"Jo—for short?" said Bilkins.

"Ye-e-e-s, if you want to. You're a newspaper man?"

"Bound for Erie, to get up a few special stories about the fish pirates," he answered. He led her into the depot café and gave their orders.

"Do you know any fish pirates?" he asked, after it was done.

He noticed that she was looking at him with unusual interest.

"What are you going to say about them?" she questioned. "You're not going to—say anything—bad?"

She spoke with intense seriousness, and Bilkins detected a note of alarm in her voice.

"I want to make friends with them," he assured her. "I want to turn pirate myself. And I will—if they'll let me."

Then he told her about MacIvrie and Briggs. Afterward, when they were seated in their train, he described to her his plan for getting among the poachers.

"And you think that will succeed?" she asked, with a suggestive curving of her lips. "Well, it *won't!*"

Bilkins stared at her in astonishment. "How do you know?" he retorted.

"I'd be ashamed of them if it did," continued the girl, her eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Those men whom you call pirates are all old hands. They've known one another for years, and would no more

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think of stringing a gang over the line with a new hand aboard—"

She caught herself in confusion.

"You're a pirate!" whispered Bilkins. His eyes burned with admiration. "You're a pirate, Miss Jo—and so am I!"

It was late when they reached Erie. A single cab was waiting at the depot, and Bilkins led Miss Burton to it.

"I am coming to see you soon," he said. "To-morrow, or the day after—may I?"

"The day after," she invited. "I shall sleep to-morrow."

Bilkins opened the cab door for her. After she had entered she stretched out a hand to him and said:

"I will get you acquainted with a pirate, Mr. Bilkins. To-morrow afternoon call at 520 Water Street, and ask for Captain Town. He will help you. Good night—and a million thanks!"

It was midnight by the time Bilkins had registered for a room at a hotel. But for some time after that he did not go to bed. He lighted his pipe, and went over the afternoon's adventure. Who was this Captain Town? For some reason which he did not attempt to analyze the question bothered him, and he imagined half a dozen things which might account for Miss Burton's apparent influence with him. He was quite positive that he must be a pirate, however, and a picturesque one at that, if his name stood for anything at all. Altogether, he counted himself immensely fortunate in having met the girl and been thus placed in line, as he was convinced, with a Lake Erie poacher.

The following morning, when Bilkins went down to breakfast, he stopped to chat for a few moments with the clerk, and asked him if he knew Captain Town. The clerk had never heard of him.

Until noon Bilkins hung about the fish-houses. There he discovered that Captain Town was master and owner of the only "compounder" in the port.

"What's a 'compounder'?" asked Bilkins.

"A 'compounder' said his informant,

who was a dock loafer, "is a big wot you can only ear the tiffles of—if y' listen 'ard!"

At a little before two o'clock Bilkins walked slowly along Water Street. Before No. 520 he stopped in astonishment. It was a big stone front.

"Great Scott!" he gasped.

He walked up to it and rang the door-bell.

"Rooms here, I suppose," he mentally concluded.

A moment later the door was opened by a little white-haired old lady, who stared at him with ardent curiosity.

"Does Captain Town live here?" asked Bilkins.

"You bet he does, my boy!" came a jovial voice from back in the hall. "Step in, will you? I suppose you're the fellow Burton's girl sent over?"

One of the oddest individuals he had ever seen confronted Bilkins. He was unusually tall, and unusually thin, and his long, lean face shone like red tanned leather. But there was something immediately likable about him. His smile was friendly, and his grip so convincing that his visitor's hand ached for some time after he had shaken it.

"Been expecting you for some time, Bilkins," he said familiarly. "Come this way, will you?"

He led him into a little room shut off from the hall, in which two men were busily engaged in smoking pipes. They were broad-built, weather-toughened men wearing heavy seamen's jackets, and as Captain Town came in they shuffled to their feet and stood with their pipes in their hands. Bilkins had yet to learn that this was a custom of old lake men when they wished to show unusual respect for a stranger.

"This is the fellow Burton's girl sent over," announced the captain. "My Bilkins, shake hands with the boys, will you? This is Teddy—Teddy Roosevelt, we call him, though his name is Jones; and this is Sandy—Sandy MacGunn. Both of 'em

old-timers and rattling good men, as Burton's girl may have told you."

Bilkins shook hands.

"We're going out to-night," continued Captain Town, relighting his pipe. "We've got our gang stretched two miles over the line, and there's a straight tip come that the *Vigilant* is going to drag there to-morrow. If she does we lose our nets—unless we get 'em out before morning. Burton's girl says you want to go, so—" He puffed hard on his pipe. "So—I guess we'll have to take you!"

For an hour Bilkins talked and smoked with the men. It did not take him long to see that for some reason the two fishermen, MacGunn and Jones, treated him with especial deference. Even Captain Town was puzzlingly attentive. At the door, as he was leaving, the master of the compounder gave him a letter.

"Burton's girl asked me to give this to you," he explained. "It's the money, I guess."

Suddenly he placed his two great hands upon Bilkins' shoulders and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"See here, mate," he spoke in a low voice, "you did the square thing by Burton's girl. She thinks you're a brick. But if you lied to her—if you came down here to—" He stopped. Bilkins thought of Briggs and the Scotchman, and understood.

"I swear that I won't betray her confidence," he replied. His voice vibrated with truth. "I'd turn back now if I thought there was a chance of it!" he finished.

"You'd be willing to die first if you knew Burton's girl as well as I do!" declared the captain. "You would, s'elp me God, you would, Bilkins!" He took his hands from his visitor's shoulders and opened the door. "I don't suppose Burton's girl told you anything about herself?" he asked.

"Not a word!" cried Bilkins. His eyes shone with eager questioning.

"Well, mebbe I'll tell you something to-night," laughed the fish pirate. "Remember, we leave at ten—sharp. You're sure you can find us?"

"Perfectly!" said Bilkins.

He walked away as if in a dream. Twice he looked back at the handsome stone house, and more than once during the next half-hour he asked himself if it were possible that a fish pirate lived there; an outlaw, a man who staked a fortune and imperiled himself in the strength of his own cunning; and who was willing to accept the risks of the poorest fisherman for the chance of a successful haul from over the line.

He had expected to meet pirates, but not of this kind. He had not associated stone fronts and pretty girls with his pictures of the poachers. He realized that, perhaps unwittingly, he was now turning traitor to his assignment.

He knew that he had already gathered material which would have created a sensation in the *Herald* office; but he had given his word not to divulge its secrets; he had deliberately pledged himself not to use those details which his managing editor would demand, and all this—he acknowledged it with a peculiar thrill of satisfaction—because he had become strangely interested in a girl.

Bilkins whistled as he thought, and walked without seeking any particular direction. If he had made a fool of himself he was not in a mood to confess it. He still might follow out his original scheme, ingratiate himself into the confidence of some other pirate not associated with the girl, and write his sensation in the manner he had planned.

He wondered how far Captain Town's friendship for the girl went. Perhaps they were relatives. He tried to make himself believe it.

Not until he had reached his hotel did he think to open the letter which had been given to him by the fish pirate. He was elated to find that it contained a note from Miss Burton, as well as the money

which he had expended for her ticket the previous evening.

"Dear Mr. Bilkins," he read. "In this I am returning what you kindly loaned me last night. I hope you liked Captain Town. Please do not forget your promise to come and see me to-morrow afternoon. JOSEPHINE BURTON."

It was not much, but it filled Bilkins with pleasure. Since his interview with Captain Town he had feared that, perhaps Miss Burton did not care to continue their acquaintance, and that the captain himself might not regard further attentions on his part in a friendly light.

He read the note again, and, instead of destroying it afterward, as was his custom with unimportant epistles, he placed it in his pocket. Miss Burton had become a young woman of mystery to him. He realized that she possessed unusual influence with the fish pirates, or, at least, with Captain Town; and each hour added to the eagerness with which he anticipated that night's adventure, in which he was confident he would learn more about her.

An hour before the appointed time he was at the slip in which the fish-pirate tug was secured. With the approach of evening a high wind had sprung up out of the northeast—although the night was clear—and from the disturbance in the bay he knew that heavy seas were running outside. The compounder lay black and silent. Not a spark of light could he discern aboard her, and he began to fear that the gale had driven Captain Town and his men from their determination to leave port. He was confident that they would at least send him word, however, so he seated himself in the shelter of a fish-box and waited.

A few minutes before ten two men hurried down from the blackness of the fish-houses and jumped aboard the tug. Bilkins called to them, and found that one of them was MacGunn. The other was the tug's engineer, whom he had not met before.

"Going out, MacGunn?" he asked, as he followed them aboard.

"Sure!" replied the poacher. "Didn't the cap'n say so—at ten?"

He flung open the engine-room door and a rush of hot air poured out into Bilkins' face. He lighted a couple of lanterns, and saw the puzzled look in his companion's face.

"Had steam up for half an hour," he grinned. Then he added, with a suggestive shrug and another grin: "Hard coal!"

He flung an oil-coat over one of the lanterns and carried it into the pilot-house, where Bilkins and he sat down in silence. A few minutes later they were joined by Captain Town and Teddy.

When the captain spoke it was in a voice little louder than a whisper, and Bilkins accepted the hint by maintaining silence while the compounder was got under way. Only by the gentle throbbing of her engine and the pitching of the boat in the seas could he tell when she had left her mooring.

A quarter of an hour had passed when MacGunn uncovered the lantern. He handed it to the captain.

"We're off the point," he said. "You remember—"

Captain Town pressed his face close up to one of the port windows. After a moment he turned and motioned Bilkins to him.

"That's Presque Isle," he said. "Can you make out a light?"

Bilkins stared hard. A long distance away, it seemed to him, he could see what he thought to be the glow of a lamp in a window.

"That's where Burton's girl lives," said the captain softly. "I told her that if we took you to-night we'd show a light. She must see us soon. There—look!"

Bilkins' heart gave a sudden throb of pleasure. For an instant the distant light vanished, then reappeared; and in a dozen flashes of light, followed by intervals of gloom, came the signs of recog-

dition from the watching girl. There was almost a break in Bilkins' voice when he spoke to Captain Town.

"She's—a trump!" he breathed.

He looked again, but now the light remained steadily in the window. He watched it until the tops of the heaving seas shut it out from his vision. Never in his life had he felt the blood pulsing through his veins as it did now, and when he seated himself, facing Sandy and the master of the compounder, he found the men eying him with keen interest.

"She is a trump!" replied MacGunn. "She's a—"

A sweeping run of the sea caught the compounder with the booming force of a ten-ton sledge-hammer, and at this first signal that she had come into the open lake, Teddy swung the tug's nose squarely out from the point, three-quarters in the teeth of the wind and on a line for the international boundary. Bilkins shivered. "She's a *angel!*" finished MacGunn, when the compounder had straightened herself.

Bilkins passed around a box of cigars. The fish pirates seemed indifferent to the roughness of the night, and the fact gave him courage. But Captain Town had discovered his nervousness.

"We've gone out in worse seas than this," he said, lighting his cigar. "It was twice as bad that night Burton went out; wasn't it, Teddy?" he asked, turning to the wheelman. "It ain't customary to go out nights—unless you've got a couple o' thousand dollars' worth of nets at stake, as we've got right now. That's what took Burton out, in November three years ago. He had a fifteen-hundred-dollar gang—which is a string o' gill-nets—dropped three miles over the line in a heavy herring-run, which ground was scheduled to be dragged the next day by the Canadian gunboat *Petrel*. It was that damned boat that settled for Burton!" he growled.

MacGunn had pulled a piece of paper from one of his pockets.

"Look here!" he cried, bringing a

doubled fist forcefully upon his knee. "Look here what this reads. I cut it from a fish paper. 'Cap'n Chayter,' it says, 'of the United States revenue cutter *Morrill*, on Lake Erie, states that all the fish this year are on the Canadian side.' And that's right! Nine out of ten of 'em are over there. Now, look here, Mr. Bilkins," he continued, in a voice that shook the little cabin, "fish is fish, ain't they? And they ain't got no nationality, 'ave they? And everybody ought to be allowed to ketch 'em, 'adn't they? But the law says not. The law says fish is *citizens!* The fish this side of that damned line out there it says is Americans. The fish t'other side is Canadians. If an American pike 'appens to cross that line he immediately turns Canuck—accordin' to law—and we can't ketch 'im, no matter if 'e was born 'n bred 'n' brung up right in Erie harbor! Think of that, would y'! An Eric man can't go over there and bring back a runaway Erie fish! That ain't a decent law—it's a damned outrage. And that's the law which killed Burton."

"You see, Burton went out in a bad night to save his nets and was washed overboard," elucidated Captain Town. "The lights of the cutter hove in sight and it was in the hurry of trying to save a part of the gang that he was lost. The tug got away—but that was all—and it left Burton's girl and her mother in pretty bad shape."

The wheelman spoke.

"Then she went to work as a—"

"Shut up!" commanded Captain Town. "I won't have it said, Teddy—damned if I will!"

Bilkins reached over and gripped the fish pirate's hand.

"I believe I understand," he said, his eyes glowing. "She was a brick, old man!"

"But it wasn't long," interrupted the other. "We rented Burton's boat to a Dunkirk man, and got her a position in

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one of the fish-house offices. That was just before the strike."

"Remember the big strike a couple years ago?" asked Teddy, looking over his shoulder. "Lord—"

"Them as owned boats was all right," spoke MacGunn. "But for them that didn't it was—hell! Half of us was re-joiced to soup bones, sir—*soup bones*, by thunder!"

"And atop of that came an epidemic of diphtheria," said the captain. "It was a desperate rub for some of the poorer fellows. That was when Burton's girl showed her colors."

A deep breath came from Teddy.

"I lost my little Nell then," he said hoarsely. "I'd lost the others—three of them—and the wife, too, if it hadn't been for her. She nursed 'em through it, and fed 'em, God bless her—s'elp me, she did; she fed 'em!"

"There are others, Teddy," said MacGunn, a peculiar softness in his rough voice. "There was the Stimsons, the Rogers, 'Pig' Walcott's family, and a dozen others. We didn't know what she had done for 'em until—"

He stopped, and for a time there was silence. Bilkins listened to the wash of the seas, and waited. Teddy, the wheelman, was staring straight ahead into the gloom of the night. MacGunn was enveloping himself in clouds of smoke. After a little Captain Town finished what the other had begun.

"We didn't know until we found she had sold Burton's boat," he said. "The Dunkirk man had bought it at a half what it was worth; and by the time we discovered what she had done the girl had spent it all on poor devils of the fishing fleet. That's her, Bilkins—that's Burton's girl!"

"We paid her back—afterward," came Terry's muffled voice. "But she wouldn't take a cent more than she had spent, not a cent."

"And at Walcott's she took diphthery herself," rejoined MacGunn. "God, how

we prayed! And in the critical days some of us didn't work, but just hung around waitin' fr her to live."

"That was two years ago," said Bilkins, after a silence. "What does she do now?"

"Nurses sick folks!" jerked MacGunn. Teddy drew the tug a step into the wind and glanced at Captain Town. The master of the compounder thrust his head and shoulders out of the pilot-house, and, after peering for a few minutes into the darkness of the sea ahead, went forward. Bilkins followed. The wind had shifted into the north, and was colder, but less violent. A mile over the starboard bow two or three steady, starlike lights were slipping swiftly up the lake.

After a little MacGunn's voice came from behind.

"What is it, cap'n?" he cried.

"It isn't her," shouted Town, over his shoulder. "Lights are too high for the *Vigilant*. We'll cut a quarter of a mile astern. Better douse the glims."

He made room for Bilkins beside him in the bow.

"The Canucks are in port to-night," he said to him. "They're pretty sure they wouldn't catch anything in a sea like this. I'd be tied up myself if I didn't have a couple thousand dollars' worth of nets layin' out there!"

Captain Town kept a ceaseless vigil to the north. Once or twice Bilkins spoke to him, but received only monosyllabic replies. A little later he rejoined Teddy and MacGunn in the pilot-house.

"D'ye remember the *Laughing Lass!*?" greeted Teddy.

The incident of the *Laughing Lass* had caused talk of war, and Bilkins nodded.

"Well, right here is where the *Petrel* tried to shoot hell out of her, back in 1903. She was poaching on the other side and wouldn't stop—"

Captain Town interrupted him from the pilot-house door.

"Tell the engineer to ease her down, Teddy," he called. "We're sighting the

point buoy. Sandy, give us a lift with the drag."

Bilkins followed the two aft. A few days before he knew that he would have taken a keen interest in what was about to happen, but now his enthusiasm was lamentably lacking. He saw the international buoy come and go in the gloom. He heard the creaking of the net-lifter, watched Captain Town as he slowly paid out the drag-line, and was conscious of the suspense which followed.

He knew that the compounder was now in forbidden waters—that they were pirates, with certain prices upon their heads, and that at any moment a gunboat might bear down upon them. But these things did not thrill him as he had imagined they would. More than anything else they produced in his mind the picture of another night, when the father of the girl back at Presque Isle had gone to his death, perhaps very near to where he stood at this moment.

After a little he noticed that the tug was moving at a snaillike speed. She seemed to be feeling her way through the seas foot by foot.

Then came a shout from the captain, a triumphant cry from MacGunn—and the throbbing of the compounder's engine ceased. He knew that the drag had caught. For a few moments he watched the line as the creaking windlass drew it in. He saw the first of a mile of net slip over the stern, and then, unobserved by the fish pirates, went back into the still darkness of the pilot-house.

Half an hour later Captain Town came in to get his pipe. As he lighted a match he caught sight of Bilkins doubled up in one of the cushioned seats.

"Hello, mate—seasick?" he cried.

"A little uneasy," replied Bilkins.

As the fish pirate turned to go, Bilkins jumped to his feet and caught him by the arm.

"Captain, can you tell me on what date Burton was lost?" he asked.

"On the day before the season closed—November fourteenth."

"And to-morrow is the thirteenth," mused Bilkins, as the other left the pilot-house. "Lord deliver us, Jerry; there's no time to lose!"

He whistled softly and happily, in the way of a man who is far from seasick.

In the early dawn the compounder came back into Erie. There were two tons of herring in her boxes. Her nets were wet and tangled. But Captain Town did not remain to see to the unloading of his catch or to the reeling of his gang. With Bilkins he hurried ashore, the two almost running in their haste.

A few moments later, divested of his oil-coat and sou'wester, Teddy disappeared upon a run behind the fish-houses.

When they reached Water Street Bilkins and the captain halted.

"You are sure you've got time?" asked Bilkins.

"I'll have twenty boats and a hundred men by noon!" declared the fish pirate. "We'll raise hell—if you can work your end of it, Bilkins!"

The *Herald* man thrust out a hand.

"I'll never look Burton's girl in the face again if I don't!" he exclaimed. "Remember—I promise, upon my word of honor!"

He hurried toward a block away he glanced over his shoulder and saw Captain Town going up Water Street at a trot. It was six o'clock when he reached the Western Union telegraph-office.

"I don't suppose the manager is in," he inquired of the clerk.

"He won't be in until eight."

Bilkins reached for a pad and began writing. Five minutes later he handed his message through the window.

"This is a matter of great importance," he explained to the clerk, "and I don't want to spare expense in getting it to the right party. I want it sent to Port Stanley, Port Burwell and Port Rowan, Ont-

tario. If Captain Fitzgerald is not in any one of these three places, have a tug sent out in search of him from each port, and I will stand the expense. He must get that message before noon at all costs."

As the clerk read he gave a low whistle of astonishment. This was the message which Bilkins had written:

"CAPTAIN FITZGERALD, Commander Revenue Cutter *Vigilant*, ———, Ontario.

"This afternoon a powerful fleet of tugs will leave Erie for Port Dover, where it is their intention to recapture the three American fishing-boats recently caught in Canadian waters and now held in that port. It is probable that the boats will approach from the direction of Stromness. For assurance of responsibility of writer, wire managing editor, the *Herald*, Detroit, or W. P. Samson, M. P., Windsor.

"J. A. BILKINS."

Half an hour later the most sensational story of the year was being received over the *Herald* wire. It described in minute detail the daring plot of a hundred men to consummate one of the most thrilling exploits in lake history. After a column of it had gone Bilkins sat down and waited. Exhausted by forty-eight hours of sleepless exertion he soon fell into a slumber, from which he was aroused by the clerk an hour and a half later. The *Vigilant* had been found by a Port Rowan tug near Long Point, and the message had been delivered to Captain Fitzgerald.

After breakfast at his hotel, Bilkins went to his room, but not to sleep. He had made up his mind to call upon Miss Burton as soon as possible, although he knew that she did not expect him until afternoon. He changed his clothes, shaved himself, and a little before ten o'clock appeared on Presque Isle. A small boy directed him to the Burton home. It was a comfortable-looking cottage, set well back in a group of maples. A gravel-path, with flower-beds on either side, led to the big porch, and as he walked up this Bilkins caught a magnificent view of the lake beyond. As he approached he heard whistling, unusually clear and musical.

"A man, by Jove!" he thought. "I hope not——"

Suddenly he caught the whisk of a skirt around the edge of the cottage. He followed the path, and a moment later stopped dead still, while a flush of pleasure and embarrassment gathered in his face.

Perched half-way up a ladder, a dozen feet away, was a young woman in a man's coat, a man's hat, and with a big, brown, shining braid of hair falling down her back. She was wielding a paint-brush upon the side of the cottage, and whistling while she worked.

As she partly turned to dip her brush into a can suspended to the ladder she saw Bilkins. The whistle died on her rounded mouth. For an instant she stared in astonished confusion—and then she laughed, the merriest, sweetest laugh Bilkins thought he had ever heard.

"There! I was afraid you'd go and do it!" she cried. "I told mama that just as surely as I came out to paint this morning you would show up—and you have! How do you do?"

She reached down a hand, laughing, and Bilkins climbed up the ladder to reach it.

"I wouldn't have missed this for anything," he said, looking up into her face. "You—you're beautiful up there! Besides, I'm here just in time to help you. I can mix paint——"

"I buy mine ready mixed," cried the girl. "See, it comes in cans."

She turned to show him, and in doing so dislodged the paint receptacle, which dashed its contents down the ladder, discoloring the tip of one of Bilkins' shoes. She looked at him with mock dismay.

"I'm glad of it," he said, descending. "Now you must stop work!"

"I've got half a dozen more cans in the kitchen," she flung down at him. "And another brush—and a ladder! If you will help me paint this side I'll let you stay to dinner."

Bilkins' heart fairly jumped with joy. The girl came down and surveyed her

work with critical eyes. Her hat had fallen off, and Bilkins stood a few steps behind and looked at her unobserved. To him she had become inexpressively beautiful.

"Isn't it fine?" she asked, turning upon him. "I'm painting it copper-brown—because—well——" Her eyes danced with fun. "That's the prevailing style in ladies' dress-goods this year, you know," she added. "I painted the fence to begin with. Mr. Tubbs, our neighbor, gave me some home-made paint for that, and it was—it was like *paste*. Please don't look at the fence!"

Bilkins turned and looked.

"I'll do it all over for you, and paint your whole cottage, too—if you'll have an early dinner," he replied.

"Why an early dinner?" The girl pouted her red lips. "Are you hungry, or are you in a hurry to get away?"

"I came over this morning, Miss Jo, because I couldn't come this afternoon," said Bilkins. "I've got a very important engagement, which begins at one o'clock, and——"

"Then we won't paint," she interrupted.

"But I'll come over and help you every day for a week after to-day, if you'll let me. I'll paint it copper-brown, or red, or—no, it *must* be copper-brown, for that's the color of your hair—and your hair is beautiful. Will you let me come, Miss Jo?" he pleaded. "Please!"

"I'll have to ask mama about that," said the girl, laughing softly at him with her eyes. "I think—perhaps—— Well, let's go in and see her. Do you mind going through the kitchen?"

Bilkins followed her, throbbing with a sensation which was new to him.

When he rejoined Captain Town at one o'clock in the Water Street stone front he spoke his feelings.

"I've been over to see Miss Burton," he said. "I never met a girl like her before."

"And you never will," declared the fish pirate. "Next to Laura—that's Mrs. Town—she's the finest girl that lives!"

He led the way to the little room into which Bilkins had been admitted the day before.

"Well, I've got twenty-seven boats and a hundred and sixteen men. The tugs you want have steam up and are ready to leave at any time. You didn't let Burton's girl know?"

"Only told her part of the scheme," said Bilkins. "She fairly begged me to let her go with us—said she *knew* Mrs. Town would go if you'd let her."

"Lord, Bilkins, how Miss Jo will fight us when she discovers just *why* we're doing this!" laughed the captain. "If it wasn't for the mother——" He shrugged his shoulders and blew a huge cloud of smoke from his pipe.

"Have you mapped out the course, captain?"

"This is it." The master of the compounder thumbed a much-worn map hanging on the wall. "We strike due north to the international line; follow that on the American side until we're opposite Dunkirk, then cut a point midway between Stromness and Port Dover. The Canadian boats can't help from sighting us somewhere along that course."

"And we start?"

"It's sixty-five miles. We should leave within an hour."

"That will give me just about time to run up-town and wire a few paragraphs to my paper," said Bilkins. "I'll meet you at the boats."

He hurried to the telegraph-office again, and found a message awaiting him. It was from W. P. Samson, member of Parliament, Windsor, and read:

"What the devil! Captain Fitzgerald, the *Vigilant*, asks who you are, and if responsible. Told him yes. Are you in trouble?"

"Hurrah!" cried Bilkins.

The clerk turned a surprised face upon him from the window.

"Good news?" he asked. "Money from father, perhaps?"

"Bully!" exclaimed Bilkins.

He scribbled a note of thanks to Samson, M. P., and then hurried half a column additional matter off to the *Herald*. When he came down to the docks he saw Captain Town advancing to meet him.

"The *Vigilant* is taking the bait," he greeted, as the fish pirate came up. "Read this!"

He gave him Samson's telegram, and when they reached the foot of the slip Captain Town read it aloud to the little group of men assembled there. Broad grins overspread their strong faces, and each gave Bilkins a hearty grip of the hand.

A quarter of an hour later six of the largest and fleetest tugs in Eric trailed out of the harbor. As they passed Presque Isle, Bilkins stood high up on the engine-house of the compounder, and with his heart throbbing anxiously within him gazed toward the Burton home. Soon he saw a figure run down to the edge of the beach, and with a joyful shout he waved his hat above his head. Then something rose in the air above the distant girl. For an instant it fluttered, only partly visible; then a gust of wind caught it, and every eye in the little fleet recognized the American flag.

From the pilot-house Captain Town shouted to his engineer, and a screeching blast from the compounder answered the salute of Burton's girl. In an instant it had been taken up by the other tugs, until a mist of steam floated out and hid the distant shore from Bilkins' eyes. When he rejoined the fish pirate captain in the pilot-house there was a tense whiteness in his face which he did not know was there.

It was a strange fleet that passed along the international boundary that afternoon. According to Bilkins' plans, the six tugs followed one after another, in battle-ship line, and the blackest smoke that bituminous coal could be forced to make trailed over the sea behind them. Late in the afternoon a slim, low craft, which was made out to be the auxiliary Canadian

cruiser, was sighted in the offing. For an hour she remained parallel with them, running eastward; when darkness fell her lights showed that she was gathering great speed, and was making in the direction of Port Dover.

Opposite Dunkirk the compounder swung her course to a point between Stromness and Port Dover. At nine o'clock, with the sky faultlessly clear above them, they were in the edge of Outer Long Point Bay. In the distance the lights of Port Dover shone dimly.

Half an hour later the compounder, under low pressure, left the line and steamed silently in the direction of the Inner Bay. Another of the tugs struck a course in the direction of Stromness. Both vessels edged shoreward. It was nearly midnight when they returned to the fleet.

The compounder reported that the auxiliary cruiser was lying with steam up between Port Rowan and Normandale; the *Vigilant* had been found two miles beyond Port Dover. Both cruisers were on the watch, and ready to sweep down upon the little fleet the moment it entered the harbor.

For two hours more the tugs lay silently in the Outer Bay. Then the reconnaissance was made again. The cruisers had not changed their positions. A little after three o'clock the compounder led a course straight for Port Dover, and simultaneously with their movement the auxiliary cruiser slipped down from Port Rowan. Mile after mile, steaming slowly, the fleet of tugs approached the port in which the captured American boats were held. At dawn they had come to within half a mile of the town. Then the compounder darted eastward. In their battle-ship line they steamed boldly past the *Vigilant*, gave a simultaneous blast of their whistles, and with their crews shouting themselves hoarse with joy struck a course for the town of Dunkirk.

And, meanwhile, in the unguarded Canadian fishing-grounds, forty miles away, twenty-one Eric fish-tugs were making the

biggest catch of the season. When they came into port they brought fifty-two tons of Canadian herring, and that afternoon a check for six thousand dollars was handed to Captain Town by the manager of one of the big fish companies.

That evening a deputation of fish pirates, headed by Captain Town, called upon Mrs. William Burton. Bilkins accompanied them until he could see the lights of Josephine's home. Then he stopped. For a few moments he and the fish pirate captain stood alone, and their hands met in a firm grip.

"Bilkins," said the master of the compounder, "this was your scheme. I want to tell them so. I want to let Miss Jo know that the biggest thing that ever happened in Erie came from an idea of yours. I want——"

"She would never forgive me, captain," interrupted the young man. "I don't believe she would ever let me see her again. She will regard the whole thing as a piece of charity, and she will fight it—hard! Remember, it's for the mother. It's a six-thousand-dollar ransom taken of the Canadians for Burton's death—and it comes from the fishermen of Erie. Please leave me out!"

Captain Town returned to the waiting men and Bilkins watched them until they disappeared into the cottage. It was Burton's girl who came to the door. And after that Bilkins stood close in the deep shadow of a tree and waited. This was the anniversary night of Captain Burton's death. He knew that it was a night of

sorrow in the little cottage, and there came upon him an almost overmastering desire to enter there, and to ask permission of the girl to always share that sorrow with her.

An hour passed, and then the cottage door was reopened, and the men filed out. As they came out at the gate, Bilkins joined them.

"It was a hard rub, Bilkins," said Captain Town, "but we made the little widow take it!"

Two weeks later Bilkins came into the office of the managing editor of the *Herald*. He had just arrived from Erie. The chief held out his hand with a welcoming smile.

"Glad to see you, Bilkins," he said. "Best stuff we ever got. I've raised you to thirty a week."

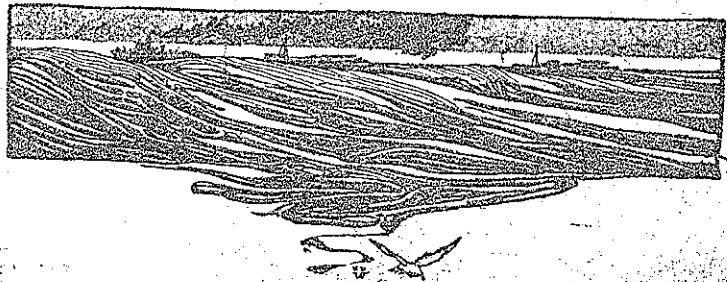
"Thanks!" said Bilkins. "It's mighty good of you, Mr. Beck, but I'm afraid I can't stay to earn it. Fact is, I got a chance to buy a half-interest in a little paper down in Erie, and I took it. Besides——"

"Well, besides——" urged the managing editor.

Bilkins blushed.

"Well—I'm going to be married Christmas week," he confided. "She's an Erie girl, and of course——"

"Oh, of course!" cried the managing editor, holding out his hand again. "Congratulations, Bilkins! Only if I'd known what was going to happen I'll be damned if I would have sent you!"



MISS DOCTOR.

By JEANNETTE I. HELM,

Author of "A Pair of Fools and Their Folly," "The Blue Dog," etc.



ROTHY DEANE, M. D., sat in her office reading a yellow-backed book which could hardly be said to have a medical aspect.

Presently she dropped the book, and, leaning her chin on her hands, gave herself up to a meditation, not wholly pleasant, to judge from the forlorn droop of her mouth. Outside the wind howled dismally, and every now and again a party of drunken sailors went by, yelling out snatches of song in voices even more discordant than that of the wind; but for once she did not notice them, so engrossed was she in her bitter thoughts.

When, three months ago, on the day she had received her diploma, Dorothy Deane had announced that she intended to hang up her shingle in one of the poorest quarters of the city close to the great docks and wharves, her classmates had first jeered and then entreated. She would certainly fail, they said; it was hard enough to get patients in the better parts of the city, as everyone knew, but to go down deliberately into the slums and expect to procure a living and do charity work besides was pure madness! If she had been rich or even less pretty it might not have mattered, but it would mean certain failure, they had all agreed.

Dorothy, who had refused all their friendly offers and advice so self-confidently then, was beginning to wonder if

after all, they might not be right. The cause of medicine and humanity, also, incidentally, the maintenance of Dorothy Deane, M. D., did not seem to have been furthered materially by sitting alone day after day in a small, stuffy office waiting for patients who never came, and who, worse than that, apparently had no desire to come.

Her only visitors during the past two weeks had been a small boy with a bruised finger, and a slatternly girl, who had come in to ask if she could get some belladonna to make her eyes brighter.

This last had made Dorothy smile rather grimly as she remembered her words so proudly said a few months ago: "If the men on the docks don't need me, their wives and children will, and you know there are no decent doctors there for them to go to."

If the smile had changed to a sob there was no one that saw it except the plaster skull on the desk, and that was hardly sympathetic. It saw, indeed, many days of dark discouragement for poor Dorothy when the sense of her unfitness pressed heavily upon her. Who, in fact, could be expected to place much confidence in a slight girl with a fair, childish face and big, appealing eyes, to realize if they did not know it that the magic letters M. D. stood for years of hard work!

"If I were only big and determined-looking," Dorothy would mourn to her-