

No one knew what had turned Mary Butler's stroke-oar sweetheart into...

# The Blind Blade

*Crew Racing Story*

*By Maitland Scott*

WHEN I saw the frown on the brow of Toby Marquand, the best stroke oar a coach ever had, I was worried. But I drew a deep breath and barked my last, oft-repeated orders:

"Remember what I said, lads. You're to keep the long-sweeping, deep-driving stroke all the way through, after the start. There isn't another crew in the country can do it as well as you do. It's the only way you can win. No spurting! That's the way we'll outrow 'em all. Coxswain, you see to it! Marquand, you're stroke—it's up to you to take it straight from coxy.

But the scowl on Toby Marquand's face only deepened. I was worried still more. Instinctively I knew it was about Mary, my daughter. I had warned him to stay away from her, because training on midnight spooning wasn't good for an oarsman. I also didn't want Mary to fall too hard for the handsome stroke oar. I wanted her to find security in marrying Preston Oglethorpe, who was pretty well off. Preston, who had graduated from another school, hung around our campus a lot since meeting my bonnie lass, Mary, at a prom. And although Toby was a good lad, he hadn't a cent to his name—was working his way through school. The Green Lake Regatta means everything to me as Hudson University's coach. If that nasty looking scowl meant....

I wasn't going to take any chances, so I stepped closer for a sure-enough word with Marquand. I wanted to be sure he'd come through as he always had.

"Pay attention to me, Marquand," I barked as I looked up belligerently into his face beneath the long shell he was helping to support. Then in a lower voice, I said: "Just because you and I have

differences about my daughter isn't any reason why you won't give your best. You know what this race means to Hudson and to me."

He didn't say anything right away. For a few seconds I stood there looking deep into his steely gray eyes. I was bracing myself to judge by his answer if he'd be okay. Then he said:

"I'm going to stroke this race, Mr. Butler. But don't think I'll not attend to that personal matter soon enough!"

There was an angry tone to his voice, but the gray eyes were honest enough. I turned away, but I was wondering....

Came Coxswain Jordan's sharp, piping order. The boat wheeled neatly around, dipped down perfectly into the lake. Still troubled, I started toward my launch. I knew unsuccessful affairs of the heart often stopped athletes from giving their best. I had won out with Mary, made her see a lot of young Oglethorpe. I knew that Marquand must be upset because he probably hadn't seen Mary for several days.

When I neared the starting line, those six long shells were already set to go, sweeps bent down, coxies leaning forward, their megaphones shouted outward from their faces. As I got closer, Marquand's words began to take on a new significance in my mind—an ominous one.

*"Don't think I'll not attend to that personal matter soon enough!"*

Had the lad meant that he'd—No, I couldn't think of him not giving his best. Then I realized that the lad had plenty to be bitter about—the way I was steering Mary toward Oglethorpe. I was getting more and more troubled. I hadn't anything against Toby Marquand. I even liked him a mite better than the other boy. But I had seen enough,

in my time, of near-poverty and the hardships it caused women. I wanted Mary to be safe from all that. Even if—

The tail of my shoreward eye caught a glimpse of a figure, white skirt aflutter, racing along the landing I had just left. I turned and saw that it was Mary. She was waving wildly at me, screaming:

“Stop! Stop! Toby, stop—stop!”

I threw a hasty glance toward the Hudson boat. Her voice either had not reached Marquand’s ears, or he was too sullen to look around. I was glad that he didn’t. I believed that whatever was afoot wouldn’t help him keep his mind on rowing this race for a hard-fought win.

Then as I neared the line of racing shells, the warning whistle sounded. I yelled across the few feet of water to my Hudson crew:

“Remember my orders! If anybody disobeys, he’ll never live it down!”

Those eight lean, muscle-corded bodies of my crew hunched down, their sweeps slanted, steadying the shell. Their hardy chests sank inward for that big, vital breath at the start. Came the crack of the starter’s gun—and the simultaneous, yelping shouts of the coxswains: “Row!”

**H**UDSON’S crew got away to a good twenty-eight beat, about as good as could be expected for a getaway, their oars arching beautifully in a high, light-dipping stroke. But that was not for long. They obeyed orders, settling down to a long-sweeping, powerful, deep-driving stroke.

That perfected, long-sweeping, deep stroke was what I counted on for a win. My lads, husky but leaner than the other oarsmen, had been carefully trained to keep that stroke more evenly and powerfully, for a longer, consistent time, than any other crew. Because of their perfection in this, I prohibited spurting. Their consistency made up for the let-down that followed other crews’ gaining spurts. That was the way we won our crew races.

By the time Coxswain Jordan had stepped his men up to an even thirty-two beat, Hudson was cutting through the water in second place. The husky California crew from Olympia College was in the lead by a good length. From my place in the launch, I could clearly catch Coxy Jordan’s

yelping, peppy voice.

“All right, you guys! Step it up a bit! Here we go! Hep—hep—hep!”

Catch, drive, release, recovery—my boys were doing fine. Rhythmically as a symphony orchestra, their splendid torsos bent lithely forward, swung forcefully back—the eight slender blades slashing into water as eight strong, wiry legs drove backward.

“Hep—hep—hep”

The Olympia shell had gained to a two-length lead at the mile-and-a-half spot along that grueling four-mile water course, which would be rowed in somewhere between eighteen or twenty minutes. But I was still satisfied, although the other four crews were dogging close to the two in the lead, almost bow-and-bow.

I forgot my apprehension over Marquand, in watching his inspiring performance. Catch, drive, release, recovery. His shoulders heaved powerfully, his legs straightened steadily with each strong drive. His arm motion lashed evenly at each finish, as he fought the coxy’s beat up to thirty-nine.

The race flashed farther on toward that tantalizing finish line, and I began to take in something I had but vaguely noticed before the race. It was the amazing weight and solid beef of that Olympia crew. And my breath caught in my throat when I saw that they were using our same deep-driving stroke.

It is a point of honor, at Green Lake Regattas—as it is at Poughkeepsie regattas—that no coach, or scout, sees a rival team practice. Now, I saw that the Olympia’s long-sweeping consistency was almost as good as ours. If those unusually beefy oarsmen kept that up until near the finish, and then spurted, their heftiness would preclude the let-down on which I counted to get my boys through first.

I was cussing helplessly under my breath, as my eyes confirmed what I feared from those Olympia huskies. And they were the only crew to fear. For the other shells were now straggled out hopelessly behind. Then hell broke loose—yes, hell for me—on the Hudson boat.

Coxswain Jordan was gesturing frantically at Marquand, who was straining faster and faster. The little coxy was screaming at the stroke—threatening, begging, imploring his stroke oar to hold down the beat. Toby Marquand was

deliberately stepping it up to a spurt—and at about a fatal mile and a quarter from the finish.

Before I could hardly draw in more breath for more cussing, Hudson was alongside Olympia. The coxswain of those husky crewmen saw what was happening. He grinned, kept his crew going at the steady, long-sweeping, deep stroke. And at that damnable distance from the finish, Marquand was forcing my boys into a high, light-dipping spurt stroke. I think I could have shot that stroke oar had I then had a gun. What an insane time for a spurt!

Coxswain Jordan raved with pathetic wildness, and he glanced queerly upward and toward the shore. I was sure that the chunky little fellow's sanity was leaving him. The seven lads behind Marquand had to keep to the new stroke and beat set by that madman of a stroke oar. They simply had to! They had to take the beat all the way along the line—or there would have been more than one crab caught.

I was nearly out of my mind, myself, as my gaze riveted on that Hudson stroke oar. Every time Marquand came forward, I could see his face past the coxy's shoulder. That face of his startled me. It was contorted in a clear expression of hate and agony. Then his catch, drive, release and recovery began to slump off a bit. My heart took a sickening drop as my reeling brain told me what he intended to do. He had deliberately planned this. He was wearing himself out—on purpose—to lose. His bitterness about Mary had warped his mind, banished loyalty to his college from his soul—resolved itself into one stupid intention: to have a petty blackguard's vengeance on me.

The Olympia shell was now almost three lengths behind my boys. Its coxy grinned again, held his same beat and stroke. Then my eyesight telegraphed another shock of surprise to my whirling brain. Something else had happened to Marquand. In the bright sunlight of that day, I saw that the expression of hate and agony had vanished from his face. Although his mouth was gaping, as he labored for breath, its lips now wore a grim and somehow brave smile. He actually shouted at Jordan for more tempo—I knew what that cost his panting lungs—and proceeded to fight the beat up higher.

**C**OXY JORDAN stopped looking wildly around, settled down to driving that crew of

mine into a killing pace. They were hitting forty, forty-one—and forty-two! The eight, twelve-foot blades bent like rubber in the water, as eight sturdy legs drove to a strong finish at the end of each stroke.

The forty-two was a killing pace that gave my game lads scarcely time to feather their blades on the recovery. My heart was now way up—seeming to choke in my throat as I feared, any minute, to see a miserable crab caught. Coxy Jordan was giving of his best, though there was a slight, fearful quaver in his yelping voice, as he yipped that murderous, forty-two beat, “Hep—hep—hep—”

My eyes shifted quickly to the Olympia coxy. As I feared, his shrill voice was preparing his husky oarsmen to step it up into a swift, high and light-dipping spurt. I knew that my leaner, smaller-chested lads couldn't—couldn't ever hold their beat for the last quarter mile that remained between them and the finish line.

Dimly I wondered what had banished that bitter expression of hate and agony from my stroke's face. But I didn't think on that for long—just then. I was in too much agony myself, as the tragic, hopeless, “Hep—hep—hep,” of my game little coxy beat like devil's hammers against my brain.

Marquand, least of all my crew, could stand that heart-tearing forty-two for so long a time. And when he weakened, his crewmates would have to let down with him. Marquand's splendid, thick-muscled shoulders and arms made him incomparable at the deep-driving strokes, but at this—well, his chest was not quite full enough in girth. He'd be winded.

The Olympia shell sliced through water, gaining, gaining—*gaining*. It was now but a length-and-a-half behind. Its coxy's confident, barking voice lashed those husky, barrel-chested oarsmen in a beautiful, unbelievably steady spurt. But I couldn't help marveling at Marquand's courage—his plain downright guts. I saw the hideous contortions of his writhing face and breath-gasping, gaping mouth.

My heart felt for him as I read the deep, agonized knowledge written in his eyes. For I saw by those eyes of his that he knew that it was up to him to do the impossible—keep the beat for those panting mates who labored, like heroes behind him. Any time, now, I expected to see a blade fail

to feather in time on a recovery—and a fatal crab result.

Gaining, gaining, that Olympia prow sliced through water. I was leaning forward so far in my launch that I thought I'd reach the finish line before either of those shells. A plethora of surging, deep sound went up from shore and hundreds of spectators' craft. In my wild excitement, I could hardly drive my spinning brain to tell my mind what had happened. But I kicked it into giving me a kaleidoscopic picture of it all.

Both shells were over the line, their oarsmen's heads drooped down kneeward—sixteen men slumped in utter exhaustion. But the Olympia coxswain was actually tearing at his hair, sobbing to himself. And I knew what had happened. He had not gauged, quite right, the time at which to whip his crew into a winning spurt. And I guessed what had thrown him off.

I knew that he had not started them quite soon enough, that their more ponderous bodies had needed more time to get into the full drive of their spurt. Otherwise it would have been more sustaining at its peak than the spurt of my boys—and Olympia would have won. I wondered if it was but in a nightmare that my overtaxed mind had told me that I saw my Hudson shell cross the finish line a scant three-foot length ahead of the huskier oarsmen's boat.

**I**T was in my private office, in a wing just off the Hudson crew-house, that the mystery was cleared, after I had searched fruitlessly about for Toby Marquand. In my office I saw them. Toby's bathrobe-and-towel-swathed figure was there, arms holding my Mary tightly. She took her lips away from his, at sound of my entrance. She turned to me defiantly, and blurted:

"Dad, we're going to be married. I don't care what you say! I know now that Preston's a low, despicable man. Why, he—"

I gruffed out: "Later about that—later! There're things I gotta know about. What—"

"Very simple, Dad," she interrupted, as if that race—which had almost made a wreck of me—didn't matter a fig. "I broke my promise to you about marrying Preston. I told him last night that I wouldn't. Just before the race, I saw Preston

sitting in his car. I went to it to give him back some presents I had brought from home, as I had expected to see him at the race for that purpose. He didn't notice me because he was busy talking to a tough-looking fellow. Preston was haggling about money he was to pay him to 'put the glass on Toby from Red Oak Knoll on the river bank.' Then I ran down to the landing to try and stop—"

I broke in with: "You mean that just for cheap, low spite, he was going to make us lose because you turned him down?"

"Yes," she said. "When I told him I was going to marry Toby, he flew into a vile rage against Toby. Preston intended that big mirror to make Toby look as though he were throwing the race. It would have been awful—everybody knew how Toby felt about losing me. And I might have believed he'd really thrown the race!"

Toby Marquand took a step toward me, a pleading, boyish look in his eyes. "Gee, coach, I didn't want to disobey your orders. But that glass sent hot light into my eyes so badly that I had to step it up—before I had to shut them. You know it would have been just too bad if I couldn't have seen at all."

Rapidly I remembered Coxy Jordan looking wildly around, trying to see from where that spot of intense heat from the strong mirror had come. In the bright sunlight of the day, no shaft had shown. Nobody had seen.

"I couldn't have kept it up anyway, coach, except that the damned thing suddenly stopped torturing my eyes. And—and, coach, Mary won that race for you. She couldn't get help fast enough—was afraid it'd be too late. She got to Oak Knoll, herself, just in time to save me. She had a fight with the guy—broke the glass just in time."

I just stood there and looked at him. I never had realized what a fine guy that stroke oar was—and what a grand young pair those two kids made. Finally I said:

"Toby, *you* won that race, too, all right. I saw plenty enough. You've won my Mary, all right. You're the kind of a man I'm proud to have her marry."

But I made him get out of there, take care of himself, get a shower and rubdown, before he could kiss my Mary again.