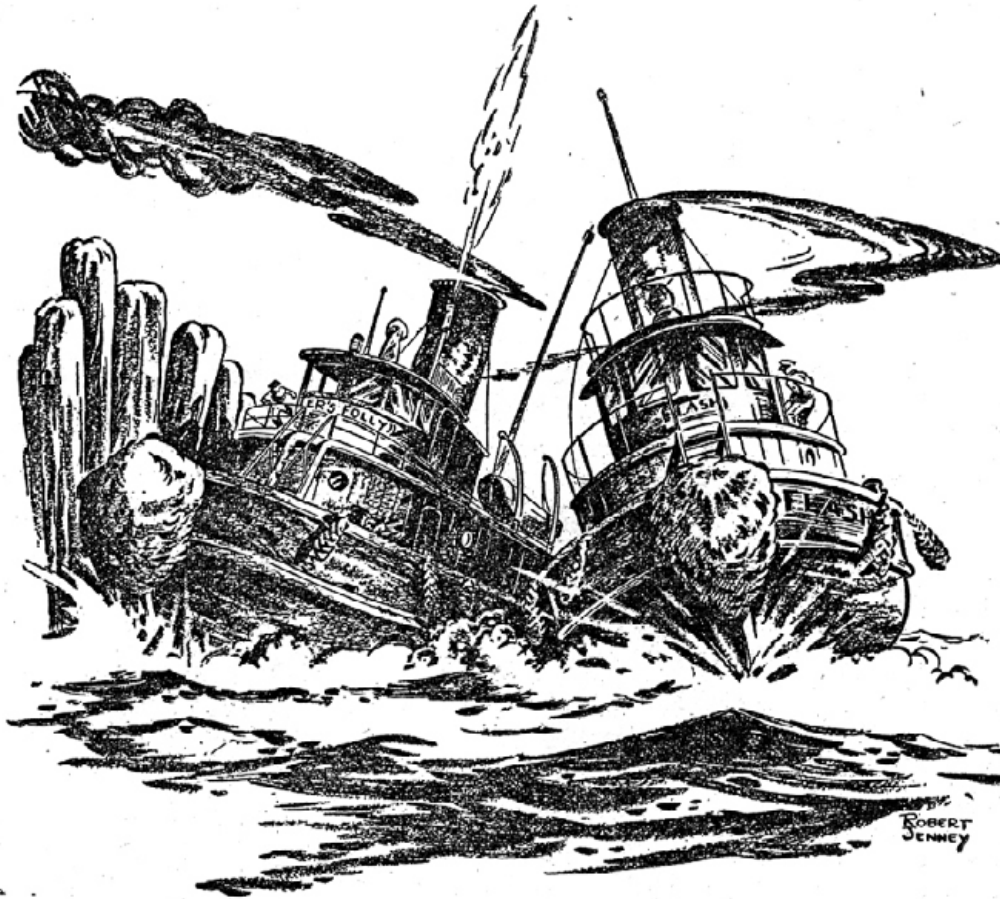


*A Boat So Old She'd Forgotten How to Blush!*



## FIDDLER'S FOLLY

By FRANCIS GOTT

*Author of "The Briefing of Sammy Peel," etc.*

**Y**ES, we loved the frowsy hag even if she was so old that she'd long since forgotten how to blush. She had good stuff in her, too, which could be seen that May morning when Thomas W. Flash had rammed her, leaving a section of her rail tilted up, cracked and freed of yearly layers of paint and grime. The inside of that rail gleamed golden and exuded a spicy smell. Teak? Sure. Her hull was oak, copper bolted; and she'd been prettied inside with brass and mahogany, and her

big wheel was of gnarled cherry. She'd served through two world wars and the long years in between, and looked it.

So, of course, young Fiddler could not be expected to see through the layers of countless paint jobs that had, in the interests of expediency, come to cover every inch of her through the years. Young Fiddler couldn't see her as we old hands saw her, as she'd been that July morning in 1916 when we'd boarded her on the ways and had glided into the river with her in her launching to the sounds of ringing

cheers and upraised toasts. What a beauty! Young and lovely. Maine built. Our pride, and the envy of every tugboat man who'd competed against us.

So, loving her as we did, 'twas quite a blow to us as well as Cap Fiddler when Cap's big son came back from the war and took no interest in her at all. We was moored to a Manhattan pier in the North River that May morning when he come aboard right from Grand Central station. A quiet-eyed sort of chap, he pumped hands with old Cap and the rest of us old geezers and sat down to the mess table with us over breakfast.

'Twas all the home the boy had to come back to; for Cap lived aboard, and worked and dreamed for tug and boy, them two being all he had.

I tell you, there come a lump in my throat when I watched the disappointment, the awful, tearing disappointment, build up in Cap's blue eyes.

"But she's all your'n, Niles," Cap quavered, seamed face working with anxiety. "I been countin' on ye, son."

"This old tub!" Cap's boy muttered, fingering the service bars on his shirt pocket.

"She's sound," Cap defended.

We all leaned across the table, staring at Cap's boy, each old man of us nodding that the *Esther* was sound, and knowing in our hearts that she was. There was fat Ham Bidder, our cook; big boned Lars Thorbjornsen and little Oscar Ray, the two hawser men; and me, Coot Somes, the engineer.

"Damn it, pa," Niles said, soft like, not wanting to hurt Cap and hurting him all the more because of it. "I'm goin' to scare up a job ashore—along the same lines as I worked at while in the army."

Cap crumbled the doughnut in his hawser-splayed fingers, not seeing it, seeing only his boy and the boat that was

so much a part of him. Like the *Esther*, Cap was frayed and shrunk and battered, but only us who knew him and loved him knew how tough and sound and capable he was inside. I tell you, alongside of the old man, the boy wasn't shaping up too well even if he had fit the Japs and the Germans and God knows what else. Yes, Cap's boy was big and hard and had a devil's quirk to his leathery lips, but something had gone since he'd marched to war six years ago. And that something was the brine and tar that old Cap had passed on to him for blood and which the army must have drained out of him.

A JOB ashore, Niles had said! We couldn't believe our ears.

Niles finished his coffee. "Well, I'd better go ashore and rustle a job."

Cap sort of swallowed. "Ye'll leave yore gear here, son? Two bunks in my cabin, same as usual. I just bought a new mattress for your'n."

Young Fiddler looked dubious. "You're apt to be out on a tow time's I get back."

Cap's eyes clouded. "No, I guess not. We ain't been doin' so well lately."

"All right, then. I'll leave my things here until I land something." Niles lifted the strap of a leather case from his shoulder. "Camera. Keep an eye on it, pa. Well, it's good to have seen all you old-timers."

Niles turned to step out of the lee door, and bumped square into Ruby O'Brien.

"Oh!" she gasped, blue eyes wide. "It's a wonder you service men ever won a war, you're all so clumsy. I think you've broken my toe."

A flush passed over Niles' tanned face. He looked at us inquiringly, wondering, no doubt, what a pretty girl like Ruby was doing aboard the *Esther* among us old geezers.

Ruby's wealth of red gold hair sort of lighted up Cap's faded eyes as he looked at her fondly. "Son, meet Ruby O'Brien. She's one o' the hands."

"What!" young Fiddler exploded.

I chuckled. "Things have changed in this country since you been overseas, Niles. Durin' the war we couldn't get an extra deckhand. So Cap'n O'Brien of the tug *Wanderer* loaned us Ruby. She's the best man we got aboard, eh, Cap?"

Cap nodded, cuddling Ruby against his threadbare sweater. "When better tugboat men are made, Ruby'll make 'em."

Ruby blushed. I heard rumbling anger in young Fiddler's voice.

"No wonder you're so anxious to have me aboard this box, Pa, seein' as how all you've got for a crew are several old-timers like yourself, and this red-haired swishtail."

Ruby's eyes flashed. "Don't you talk like that to your old dad, soldier. All he's done for months is cross off the days on the calendar, he's been looking forward so to having you home."

Niles reddened. "Looks like I come back to the wrong country."

"Looks like the wrong boy came back to the right country," Ruby flared.

Just then I heard a heavy step outside and a brassy voice demanded, "What's goin' on here?"

Jim Hannigan shoved his beef around the door frame. If I'd been Cap I'd never have let the mouthy lout aboard the *Esther*. He gritted everybody the wrong way. Cap, too, but Cap 'lowed as how he liked to have him aboard where he was out of circulation for the time being and couldn't be pulling a fast one on the *Esther*. Young Hannigan pushed everybody around like a bulldozer, or tried to. We all knew he was the running light by which his pa steered his tugboat.

A crooked pair they was, too, the kind

who'd make believe a new hawser is froze to the towing bitt so's they'd have to cut it adrift and sell the eye for junk, and with the price rope is—

Young Hannigan pushed his surly jaw past Ruby's blue sweater and scowled at Niles. "This soldier botherin' you, Ruby? I'll dunk 'im."

A surprised look passed over Niles' thin face. "This brass bound razorwit one o' your hands, too, Pa?"

Hannigan brayed, "Lissen, mug! Don't ever get it down on the record that I'd ever take orders from an old hasbeen like Pop here."

WELL, if Cap's boy hadn't been there, Cap would've kicked Hannigan down to the pier, or tried to, but now he just sort of edged back, expectant like. The rest of us old geezers made room for Niles, too. Even Ruby, disgusted at Hannigan for that remark, stepped over the weather combing and back up the narrow deck to make room for swinging fists.

Gorry! All Niles did with that extra space was step through it, past Hannigan and over the bulwarks to the pier. Yes, we was stunned. Through a port I watched him walk up the pier towards the street.

"Gotta make allowances," Oscar Ray mumbled, sucking at his snag tooth. "The boy's been to war."

Cap gave Oscar a grateful glance. "I cal'ate that's it."

"Ha!" Hannigan grunted. He took a chew of tobacco, sucked the wad into his cheek and spat into the Hudson. "So that's the Purple Heart I been hearin' about! Well, takes all kinds to make a world. Better come aboard the *Flash* for a cup o' scoff, Ruby. Cook's made a honey cake for you."

As she passed the door I glimpsed sort of a puzzled and uncertain light glowing deep down in them pretty eyes of hers. I

watched Hannigan take her by the hips and lift her to the pier, and then I sat down at the mess table, sort of sick in the stomach and weak in the knees. Hannigan wasn't no man for Ruby, but we couldn't tell her that, and Cap was getting kind of old to run the *Esther*, and we couldn't tell him that either. We'd all sort of counted on Niles, taking it for granted that the boy'd take over natural like and handle both Ruby and the *Esther*. Well, we was just old fools, that's all.

'Twas a bitter pill, though. Here Ruby was just about half engaged to that lamprey eel of a Hannigan, and him a-taking all our old customers away from us and keeping us from getting new ones. Yes, we'd counted on Niles as the cure all.

Well, 'twas a pitiful sight to look on Cap that morning; he sort of crawled around like a worm, all hope drained from his eyes. From time to time he'd look down the pier and sigh. I went below and took my spite and disappointment out on the engine. After that, I felt better and decided not to take this disgrace lying down. So I had a mugup at noon, topped off with a half dozen of them lead sinkers Ham called doughnuts and four cups of that scalding varnish remover he calls coffee. Then I strolled down the pier to chew the news over with the watchman and wait for Niles.

'Twas a great day, one of them dreamy kind when it seems as if Gotham is being bathed by the winds of heaven. The warm air kissed one cheek and the warm sun the other. Out on the river there was a slight haze through which the ships moved and spoke to each other like echoes in a reverie. Every way I turned I smelled coffee, roasting coffee, steamed coffee, perked coffee; 'twas New York's special smell, telling everybody that she had her troubles but that her heart was in the right place.

LONG about two bells, one o'clock, I seen Niles pass a gang of stevedores on the corner and cross the street. He showed his pass, come through the gate and spied me.

"Lo, Coot," he grinned. "Why in thunder you wearin' a derby this time of year?"

I took my battered derby off, looked in the crown and then up at him. "Habit, I cal'ate. When a man's wore one for fifty year and is as bald as a dolphin post—"

"Say," he broke in, "don't know but what I'll take a stab at helpin' Pa run the *Esther*."

"Seems like you change yore mind mighty sudden, boy."

He shoved a finger under the collar of his brown shirt, kind of ashamed like, eager, too. "Yeah."

I perked up quick. "Depends on how much guts a young feller has."

"Whadda ya mean?"

"Well, ye seem to have forgot that towboatin' ain't pickin' daisies."

"It's the business angle I'm interested in."

"Business means fight, too."

"Yeah, I suppose so." He ruffled his yellow hair in a puzzled way. "I been shuttlin' back and forth and up and down Manhattan. I made a contact or two, but I figured maybe, knowin' towboatin' like I do, that I'd better give it a try."

"Sounds sensible," I agreed, feeling pretty good at them words. "There's always a future in towboatin' for a good man, provided he can stick out the hungry months when he's first bucking the organized fleets."

"Bein' monkey-wrench sailor 'board an independent tug don't seem to have wore you down none, Coot."

I chuckled. "Well, like any fat animal I can live off'n my lardbelly for a long time, son."

He cast me a sideways look. "Say, where does that mouthy guy fit in?"

"Ye mean young Hannigan?"

"The one who barged aboard this mornin'."

Hannigan, His pa owns and skippers the *Flash*, that green tug down there at the end of the pier. They've just about cut us out of business."

"Have, eh."

I give Niles a quick look, and was disappointed to see that his lean jaw hadn't even knotted. This new Niles sure was a puzzler.

He studied both tugs, eyes squinted. "Yeah, by the way the *Flash* is shined up and new painted, I'd say they was more than usually successful. Look at poor pa's boat now! Ain't been painted in so long that her red superstructure looks almost black."

"Good stuff underneath, boy."

"Say, that red-haired spitfire—" he hesitated.

"Ye mean Ruby?"

"She don't strike me as bein' Hannigan's kind."

"No accountin' for taste, son."

"Well, I'm goin' aboard for a snack," he said. "Prices in the restaurants was so high they scared me. What's happened to this country anyway since I been gone?"

"We're just beginnin' to pay for the war, son," I said, puffing along behind him, eager to see Cap's face when he heard Niles had decided to help handle the *Esther*.

Niles turned to me, blue eyes troubled. "Strikes and more strikes. Vets and war workers livin' off'n the dole. Jobs open. Nobody takin' 'em. Looks bad, Coot. Looks like we all gotta snap outta it and buckle down."

**A**BOARD, I was surprised and real upset to find a confab going on in the

messroom. Young Hannigan, looking real satisfied, had a fat cigar uptilted between his greasy lips and one big fist on a sheaf of ship's papers. Beside him sat Cap, fingers trembling over a fountain pen.

"What you doin', Pa?" Niles asked.

Cap looked up glumly. "Sellin' the *Esther*."

"You signed yet?"

"Nope."

"Don't sign."

A flicker of hope shone in Cap's faded eyes. "You ain't—?"

"Yeah. I've decided to give you a hand with the old hooker, Pa."

Hannigan burst out in an uproarious gale of laughter. "Tugboat in' ain't soldierin', fella."

Niles ignored him.

"Sign," Hannigan growled.

Cap's pinched face set in stubborn lines. "Ye heard my boy."

Hannigan shook his hairy fist in Cap's face, roaring. "Old fool! The *Esther's* losin' money every day. Tomorrow my offer'll be five hundred dollars less."

"Don't sign, Pa," Niles bade quietly.

Hannigan turned on Niles, black eyes ugly. "Shuddup, you!"

Cap's face was shining now. "She ain't for sale, Hannigan. Now get off'n my boat! I've got to talk to my boy."

Well, Niles' taking over like that was like a stiff shot of high-priced cognac to us old duffers. We all knew we was so old and set in our ways that we couldn't get a job elsewhere; the *Esther* was our lifeblood, our home. Even the whiff of a promise was good news to us, for it meant that we wasn't on the shelf, quite yet.

However, our high spirits didn't last long. Niles just couldn't seem to understand how 'twas the *Flash* always got the jobs away from us. Instead of puttin' up a fight, Niles would just let the *Esther* muddle along behind the *Flash*,

letting them walk away with all the tow jobs, while all he done was shake his head and take pretty pictures with that fancy camera of his.

The *Flash* was the faster boat, true, but young Hannigan's crooked streak was what got 'em the business. I knew he greased many a palm with a wad of dough, but I couldn't prove it. 'Course, everybody don't connive like that, but to them as didn't—and they was plenty—young Hannigan would talk as smooth as a parson. Young Hannigan dug up the business and that bull-shouldered pa of his rammed the *Flash* through all the harbor traffic to get it. Almost looked to me as if 'twas an unbeatable a combination.

One rainy day, after we got in from a light tow, us old duffers was hunkered in the warmth of the engine room when Ruby swished in. Peeling her lithe limbs out of her oilskin jacket and pants, she flung 'em on a covered steampipe and looked at us, blue eyes snapping, two red spots of color in her smooth cheeks.

"Ye look mad, daughter," I chuckled.

"Mad!" She nigh snipped my head off. "I'm burning up."

The look she gave me was enough to crack a head of steam. Being a fool bachelor, however, I ain't never learned to keep my mouth shut around women.

"You'n that young Hannigan been at it?" I grinned hopefully.

She flipped off her sea boots, and stood there on the warm grating of the catwalk in her stocking feet, her dungarees and pull over sweater fitting her like as if she'd been poured into 'em.

"No!" she snapped.

"Must be young Fiddler, then?"

"That fool!" she flared, whipping off her dripping sou'wester and letting her red gold curls tumble down over her shoulders. "While poor Cap is up there in the wheelhouse figuring his old head off

trying to make ends meet, that half-baked soldier son of his is in the galley developing pictures!"

"You sure?"

"Sure?" She rubbed her rump. "I went in there to see what he was up to, him having it all dark in there with blankets coveting the ports. He grabbed me, twisted me around—he's strong as a bull—and bounced me out of there on his knee."

"Arr'r!" Lars chuckled, wagging, his craggy head.

'Twan't no laughing matter, though. We'd set our course by that boy, and here he was fooling half his time away with a camera. 'Twas discouraging, I tell you, and it sure did shame old Cap.

**B**Y THE middle of June we was all pretty discouraged. None of us said much to Niles and cap, we all felt so sorry for 'em. 'Cept Ruby, who took to twittin' Niles right to his face. I couldn't figure out why she did it—'twan't in her nature—but then, they ain't no figurin' a woman out, let alone a nineteen-year-old girl.

I remember one hot day around the last of June, I climbed out on deck for a breath of fresh air. I was astonished to see Niles up on the monkey bridge with a can o' paint and a brush, working in a new name above the starboard running light. I craned my neck to see better. Gorry! He'd gone and painted out *Esther* and over it had painted *Fiddler's Folly*.

I tell you, a cold hand touched my heart strings and I nigh took sick right there. So Niles had give up, eh, and had Cap put the *Esther* up for sale! 'Twas a terrible thought.

Then I heard a girl's cool voice, crisp with scorn. "So you can't take it, soldier!"

'Twas low tide. I looked up on the pier, and there, nigh on a level with Niles, and silhouetted against a couple of skyscrapers, stood Ruby. Her hands were

on her hips, thumbs hooked into the belt of her dungarees. Her hair was caught under a blue scarf and she looked as fresh and dewy as a new budded violet.

I caught an edge of anger in Niles' slow drawl. "Where you been all the morning, Ruby?"

She tossed her head. "What's it to you?"

"You been aboard the *Flash*?"

"Yes. So what?"

"I just been wondering," Niles mused, watching her closely, "how come 'tis the *Flash* always bids us under so close on most of these tow jobs that come up."

"Why, you—you—" Ruby choked.

She jumped across to the monkey bridge railing, hung on and started to pound Niles with her fist.

He laughed, drew her to him and kissed her. "Another thing, how come you work your pretty self all pink cheeked aboard the *Esther* when we don't even make subway fare? You gettin' a cut from that future husband of yours for keeping him tipped off to our plans?"

Boy! She slapped him so hard, smack against the cheek, that I swear I heard the echo bounce back from the Jersey Palisades across the river. Then she wrenched herself free, slid down the ladder and ran past me to her tiny cabin in the after part of the deck housing.

I mosied up the deck. "Do ye believe she's been talkin' out o' turn, boy?"

He grinned. "Hell, no!"

"Why'd ye say so, then?"

"Oh, maybe just to have something take her mind up for a while and keep her quiet. Women and ships ain't much different, come right down to it, Coot."

"Can't see as how you're a success with either one of 'em, boy."

His shoulders sort of slumped. I could have bit my tongue off, then, I felt so bad for myself and him both.

Then he shoved the tired look back in his eyes and pointed at the new name. Damned if he didn't grin.

"How come, boy?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"I figure Lady Luck will see this sign and take pity on us."

"That the real reason, boy?"

He pursed his lips, thoughtfully watched a along tow creeping up the river. "Well, no. I'm doin' it for the benefit o' the Hannigans more'n anything else."

"Gosh, boy!" I exploded. "Them fresh-painted names shine like black eyes. If you let 'em stay, we'll be the laughing stock o' New York harbor and all three rivers 'round Manhattan. *Fiddler's Folly*! Them Hannigans will know for sure we're licked now."

He set his jaw. "That name sticks. I had it changed legal."

"Niles," I advised soberly. "I think ye ought'er go to a hospital and get a check-up on yore head."

"I ain't begun to fight yet, Coot."

"How're ye goin' ter fight, boy," I cried bitterly, "when ye spend so much time takin' pictures and stayin' locked in a darkroom fussin' around with 'em?"

"There's different ways o' fightin', Coot."

Well, I didn't say any more. I felt too sorry for the boy; I figured hardships and fightin' and all in the war must have hurt his head. I just went below to moon at my engine.

NEXT morning we got a telephone call to tow a barge of condensed milk from Jersey City, up the North River and through the Harlem to a freight depot. 'Count of a scattered strike, stevedores, truckmen and tugboats wouldn't touch it.

"It means buckin' every union in two states," Cap objected.

"There's a bunch of hospitals need that

milk, Pa,” Niles said. “We can handle that tow legally because we don’t belong to any union.”

Ruby surprised me by sidin’ in with Niles. “Lots of babies in those hospitals, Pop. They need milk.”

Cap gave in gruffly. “All right. You better skip ashore, Ruby, and take in a movie. Everybody’s keyed up so, we ain’t likely to get the lines of that barge aboard without a fight.”

“I’m a towboat man’s daughter,” Ruby declared. “I’m staying.”

So we whipped out lines aboard in a hurry, glad for a bit of business. As we was backing water at the end of the pier, waiting for an oil tanker to pass, both Hannigans came out of the *Flash*’s pilot house.

By looking up through the port door of the engine room I could see their beefy faces plain.

“*Fiddler’s Folly!*” Cap Hannigan roared and slapped his great thigh, while tears of mirth seeped from his fat, creased eyes. “Truer words was never spoke.”

“Where you goin’?” grunted young Hannigan suspiciously.

“None o’ yore blame business!” I heard Cap Fiddler yell.

“I bet ten bucks you’re after that Blue Line barge,” young Hannigan accused. “We got a telephone call, too. Well, you better lay off’n her or you’ll get your fool heads bashed in. She’s picketed.”

Cap Fiddler rung a bell then and I hooked her up. A couple of minutes later I took a quick look astern. I seen the *Flash* bearing down on us, fast, a good bone in her teeth. I jumped back to my controls quick because I suspected what them Hannigans was up to. Sure enough! They was a crash that sent me on my beam ends. Lucky for me I got plenty of padding.

Gorry! With the tide behind ‘em, they’d come abeam, put their wheel hard

over, giving us a nasty sideswipe that careened us into a pier. Time as we dragged out of that trap, against a five-knot tide, the *Flash* was hooking it up across the river on a slant toward Jersey City.

When we got there, they had a line to that barge, the union pickets on the pier lending them a hand, although I got to give ‘em credit that they didn’t suspect what the *Flash* was up to any more’n we did. Them pickets just took it for granted that the *Flash* was sort of on picket duty, too. Well, it puzzled me, the *Flash* being a union tug. Then Ruby stepped into the engine room beside me.

“Coot,” she said, cool-lipped, “they’re going to let that barge catch under the pier with the tide behind it. See how they’ve made that line fast! The barge will take a bad list, fill and sink.”

Ruby was a tugboat skipper’s daughter through and through. I got what she was driving at almost before she spoke. Young Hannigan, I saw, was standing by that towing hawser with a fire ax!

Ruby clenched her small fists and turned to me. Gorry! All to once she was growed up, a real woman.

“You were right, Coot,” she said, biting her lip. “Those Hannigans are lice.”

Then I heard a crash. The *Flash* had backed water, letting their towing hawser go slack. The heavily loaded barge swung against the corner of the pier, broadside. The *Flash* had run her hawser through a fairlead on the port quarter of the barge. Now the *Flash* nosed into the tide, putting a slow strain on that hawser. Slowly, ever so slowly, aided by the tide and the river current, the barge listed. Then she gulped in the tide, gave a choking sigh and sank.

Then Cap Hannigan let the *Flash* ease down a few fathoms while his deck hands whipped in their hawser, or as much of it as they could save. When they couldn’t get



any more, young Hannigan cut the stout manila with his ax.

Ruby started out of the engine room. "That's as dirty a trick as I've ever seen!" she cried.

Cap Hannigan's wide mouth split in a grin. " 'Twas an accident."

Young Hannigan scowled at Ruby. "Shuddup, Puss! Nobody can prove nothin'."

"Maybe not," Ruby agreed coldly. "But I'll tell you one thing, Jim Hannigan, from now on you keep away from me. We're through."

THAT afternoon we was tied up in our berth inshore of the *Flash*, as usual, when I spied a couple of men coming through the gate. Carrying briefcases, they reached the tugboat and jumped down to the hairy fender on our bow and from there to the deck.

"Fiddler aboard?"

"Which one?"

"Niles Fiddler."

Me'n Ruby, enjoying a glass of cold gingerale in the shade of the port side, looked at each other. We flashed the same question, feeling might uneasy because of it. What had young Niles gone and done now?

"Niles!" I shouted.

Niles stepped out of the darkened galley where he'd been messing around with his fool pictures. Cap poked his white thatch out of the pilot house where he'd been taking a snooze on the settee.

"Mind stepping down into the messroom, Pa," Niles called. "These gentlemen here are on some important business. Mr. Bridlow's the commissioner and Mr. Lewinsohn's an insurance investigator. Step into the messroom, gentlemen. Now, Ruby, will you skip down to the *Flash*, please, and invite Cap'n Hannigan and son aboard."

"I'm not on speaking terms with the Hannigans," Ruby said.

"Well, you can have the message relayed, Ruby," young Niles suggested mildly.

Well, she went, meek as could be, which surprised me considerable. Maybe the Hannigans thought the *Esther* was up for sale again, for they come right over, chewing on their fat cigars. We all gathered in the messroom.

The heavy-set commissioner cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I had you called aboard to secure your version on the ah—er—sinking of that Blue Line barge this morning."

Cap Hannigan plucked his cigar out of his mouth and looked at it good naturedly. "Accident."

"That so?"

"Yeah. Tide caught her. Case for the insurance people. Glad to testify."

THE insurance investigator's gray eyes gleamed coldly through his glasses. "Yes, you'll testify, Captain. We're clapping an injunction on your towboat."

"What!" the elder Hannigan roared. "I'll have the law on you people. I'll sue—"

"The law is already working on the matter," Lewinsohn stated. "When we found that you were tied in with several borderline claims, we began to get suspicious. Our suspicions solidified when young Mr. Fiddler here, one of our recently hired investigators, came to us a couple of weeks ago with pictures of a so-called accident for which you were responsible, Captain Hannigan. However, we had to wait for more proof."

Niles tossed a sheaf of photographs on the table. Them pictures slid open like a newsreel, showing a minute by minute account of the sinking of the Blue Line barge.

"It's a lousy frameup," young Hannigan croaked. He reached for the pictures, scooped them up in his big hands and sailed them through an open port from which they fluttered into the river.

"We have the negatives," Lewinsohn reminded him mildly. Then, to Niles, "can you recommend a tug for a year-round contract. A client of ours has asked for one that is capably and honestly handled."

Niles winked at Cap. "I'll take that contract; Mr. Lewinsohn."

Cap's jaw sagged, and I nudged him. He licked his lips, hardly able to believe his ears. "Whatever Niles says."

Lewinsohn gave Niles a penetrating look, and reminded him, "But you're working for us, Mr. Fiddler."

NILES rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. "This first job you put me on has convinced me that I'm cut out to be a tugboat man, sir. I'm handing in my resignation."

"Don't know but what you're wise, at that," the insurance investigator said enviously. "This business of nailing down claims gets to be something of a headache, especially when we have to prosecute."

I glanced at Cap Hannigan and then at young Hannigan. They looked pretty sick, I tell you.

After the commissioner, the insurance investigator and the Hannigans had gone ashore, Niles sat down. His lean face was drawn and haggard.

"When I got out of the army," he said, "I thought I'd like to make a living with

my camera. Well, I've had enough." He turned to Ruby. "Let's you'n me take in a movie, Kitten, and stop by for that license."

"What license?" Cap asked, puzzled.

Ruby blushed. "Marriage license. This dumb soldier trapped me, too. He bet me he'd have the *Esther* on a paying basis before the summer was over. I told him I'd marry him if he did, believing I was safe enough. Well, I guess I'm just plain unlucky."

Cap Fiddler, being the good skipper that he was, damn nigh cried, he was that happy, and he took to stuffing his pipe to control his feelings, but he couldn't stop the trembling of his gnarled fingers.

"Say, by the way, Pa," Niles broke in. "Better call up the ship chandler and put in an order for paint, varnish, scrapers, and new stores in general, and a blow torch. We're goin' to burn about twenty years off this old girl."

"*Fiddler's Folly!*" I mused.

Niles grinned. "That name sticks. I had to paint it on so's to give them Hannigans plenty of water to drown themselves in."

Ruby skipped aft to change her skirt and nylons. When she came back, Niles grabbed her and swung her to the pier.

"Hey, boy!" I called, as an after thought struck me. "What was your job in the army anyway?"

"I was a reconnaissance photographer, Coot."

Dumb as I am, I finally come to the conclusion that the army hadn't hurt that boy a mite.