

EXCURSIONS INTO THE NIGHT

With Captain Morain

VI. THE ESCAPE FROM THE FERRY-BOAT

By E. Spence de Pue

It was night-time and raining; a dull, spiritless rain that made no sound, but soaked and penetrated as no honest rain could do. The planking of the wharves along the whole of San Francisco's water-front was soggy as a sponge. The great clock on the tower of the Ferry Building showed twenty-four minutes after twelve; the long, lower, outside nave of the building was deserted, for the last passengers of the night were crowding through the gate.

Suddenly a man darted out of the building, pursued by a plain-clothes policeman, a heavy-shod, thick-necked policeman, whose body was girthed with many layers of areolar tissue. The man in the lead was heavily built, muscular, fine-looking, well-dressed; he ran lightly; the policeman following him lumberingly, panting. For a little way they ran, pursuer and pursued, under the cover of the open part of the ferry building. Then the fugitive darted out upon the asphaltum of the street, from that to the slushy, uneven cobbles, across the full width of the street, and to the sickly glare of the many lights of the waterfront saloons. The man wore a tall hat, and he tightened it as he ran.

The policeman took the slippery asphaltum, struck hard running of the cobbles, caught his toe in a rail, and floundered profanely to the ground. That the end of the chase, as far as that particular policeman was concerned.

As soon as satisfied that the pursuer had lost the fugitive doubled, turning back to the water.

He had a light overcoat on his arm, and he slipped it on, then made for the first opening between the buildings that would give him a view of water. The lap-lap of the waves at the piles, the sound of heavy oil in agitation; down below it unfathomably black; a scant hundred yards away a myriad blaze of lights showed the steamer on her way to the other shore.

It was little time the man spent in useless staring after the boat that he had missed. He ran from this opening to the next one below, looking down into the water as best he could; then he ran to the opening in the next block, darting around carts and sheds and donkey-engines, his feet making a peculiar slushy noise as they squeezed the water out of the spongy planking.

The twinkle of an arc lamp, making a black mirror of the wharf, showed the end of the street. As before, the man ran to the edge of the wharf and looked over. Something a little lighter than the water caught his eyes—the outline of a launch. The man turned quickly, without pausing to calculate, went over to the squat red cabin at the back of the wharf, and hammered at the door, persistently, insistently, noisily, till there came an answer from within; even then he did not cease his pounding on the door, and kept it up till the door was flung angrily open.

"Your launch!" he said. "At once, at once, mind you! Don't wait to dress. Grab your clothes. Money don't count." He struck his coat pocket, which gave forth the unmistakable jingle and ringing of gold.

Now, Captain Morain was a shrewd old man, cunning and deep and hard; and many the strange trips his boats had made, once they slipped from their landing float; and few were the questions he asked. So, while the musical tinkle was yet in the air, the old man turned a sweep on a long, oiled coat, and gathered his clothes in his arm. The spring-lock clicked, and the waterman was leading the way.

Down the incline, to the float. "Tumble in," said Captain Morain. He gave his clothes a toss, and had the lines free from the boat and was in by the side of the man and had the screw going around while another would have been parleying.

"You're the man!" said the stranger. "You're the man for me." While the boat gathered way, her course her purpose as yet undefined, the fugitive stranger took a handful of gold, then another, and pressed them upon the waterman, who tossed the stuff on the top of a locker.

"Now, where to, and how much time?" asked the Captain, his thick, clumsy fingers playing skilfully with a half-dozen oil-cups at once.

"That ferry making across the bay. I've got to catch it! Can you do it?" asked the man, a wild eagerness in his voice.

The Captain shaded his eyes with his hand, leaning half out of the window, estimating the distance nicely. "I don't know," said he. "She's a long ways ahead."

"You must do it. By Heaven, you must!" said the

man. "My wife is aboard!" he added vehemently.

Captain Morain looked the other man square in the eyes, his old, weather-seamed face inscrutable. For a full half-minute the two men looked at each other, the stranger fearlessly, his blue eyes hard, his firm jaw set. "Do the best I can," said the Captain at length, then drew the lever over far as it would go. The engine whirred and coughed sharply. Then the Captain began hastily pulling on his clothes, one hand on the steering wheel all the while.

It was remarkable with what facility and self-composure the awkward-looking waterman donned his garments, his right hand never leaving the wheel,

lips, carefully modulated his voice. "We must do better than that," he said, with gentlemanly anxiety.

"We will," Captain Morain answered with low confidence. "We're in the worst run of the tide just here; we'll do better beyond the island."

There were no further words—the passenger straining to lessen the distance by the force of his will; the old waterman simply alert, now giving his wheel a turn this way or that, taking advantage of every vagary of the current.

Away off from the left somewhere came the deadened sounding whistle of a coaster working her way into the harbor; in the nearer distance boomed the bell of the island; and everywhere and all around was the silent, black water, smothered into sullen restlessness by the rain that was less than a rain, more than a mist.

"We're half-way!" The passenger let the words out from between his set lips as if he could hold them back no longer.

"Yes, and gaining now. We're out of the worst of the current," said the Captain.

The man shot him a questioning glance, then estimated the distance again.

They came opposite the bell on the island, and it clanged out its warning brazenly, thunderously, and the light above the bell streamed out a scintillating beam, that fought with the mixed elements and partly overcame them.

"We are nearer," said the man. "We're coming up. But, blazes, how slow! They'll be in before we get there. They'll be in before we catch them, I say!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

But Captain Morain answered never a word, but kept his eye only on the great bulk of the ferry steamer in front.

They were nearer, without doubt; but there was yet nearly a third of the way to go. Though the Captain said nothing, appeared to feel nothing, the wrinkles drew out from the leathery skin about his eyes a bit, and the muscles bunched on his jaws. They drew up, oh, how slowly! But drew up without a doubt, for they could hear the splash of the big side-wheels now. Then, in a little more, they felt the effects of the great swell from the steamer. The little launch rose on the crest of waves, when the men could make out the lowermost lights in the steamer's hold; then they sank into the trough till only a glimpse of a single light would show.

Abruptly the passenger turned to the waterman, putting a hand on his shoulder, digging his fingers into the rock-like flesh. "You'll do it!" he said. "You're my sort of man!"

"Do you want to board her?" asked the Captain.

The passenger hesitated. "Run her close," he finally said. "Be guided by circumstances. Leave the rest to me."

They were passing the end of the long wharf now. A few minutes more and the steamer would be gliding into her slip; but the launch was only a little way behind, catching up.

"Close, mind you," admonished the man. Then he slipped out on the deck and ran to the extreme of the bow, where he stood, a misty figure blending in with the rain and the night.

They were closer to the ferry now, coming up with it rapidly, for the larger boat had diminished its speed, preparatory to making the slip. Captain Morain kept the Flyer at her best. Only twenty feet between the two boats, the smaller one gaining; in two minutes more the launch would shove her nose under the ferry's overhanging deck. The commotion of the water tossed the launch around viciously.

The old waterman kept his eye on the man in the bow. He could see that the passengers who happened to be on the lower deck had hurried to the chain and were leaning over, gesticulating, waving the small craft off.

The man in the bow could have climbed aboard now, for the big steamer had slowed. Instead, he searched the deck below, then the one above; then he put his fingers to his lips and whistled. There was a stir on the upper deck; a woman came running to the rail.

"Helen!" The man in the bow shouted the name commandingly. The woman called something in answer, unintelligible to the Captain; then she vanished, only to reappear on the lower deck. She came forward to the chain, struck viciously at one of the passengers who endeavored to restrain her, swooped under the chain and ran to the end of the boat. Again she called something, outspread her arms



"Hump, Helen!" Shouted the Man

his eyes never departing for more than a second at a time from their grip of the misty blaze of lights in the distance. The passenger, though a cool, shrewd, iron man to look at, continually thrust his head out into the night, staring at the ferry. When he drew his head into the cabin again it was all sparkling with diamond moisture. Each time after a look at the boat ahead he took in the waterman again, then ran his eyes over the throbbing engine hopefully.

"We're not gaining the least!" said he at length, bringing the flat of his hand down fiercely on his thigh.

"No?" said Captain Morain. He waited a long while before venturing to say more, trying the other man's patience to the utmost. "No, we're just holding our own," he said calmly. Then he took up a piece of waste and wiped a stray drop of oil from the burnished cylinder.

"Holding our own? Holding our own?" The stranger checked the violent words that were at his