

# The Mate's Affair

By T. JENKINS HAINS

WE had left the land, or rather sea, of sunshine far behind us—the beautiful days of tropic softness, the blue sky, and

the gentle breath of the trade wind—all the warmth and color of the South Sea. The memories of the smooth-heaving swells sparkling in the bright sunlight faded, and in their place came the leaden glass and icy breaths from the north. The coral reefs were visions of the past, and in their place loomed the iron-hard coast of Alaska.

We were picking our way along shore, making rough sketches of the beach, and hunting whatever trade goods would pick up. The charts we can now buy for three cents apiece were not in existence, and we went slowly. Navigation, always difficult in this region of fog and ledge, made careful running necessary. The skipper had no compass, but himself could rely upon for courses along that desolate coast, and we were often forced to tow the vessel out of dangerous sloughs and channels by means of the whale-boat. Among the ledge-studded islands the wind would sometimes fail us, and the tide was strong. Then down would go the anchor, and we would go forth to make our bearings in the small boat, or hunt along the shore. When the fog would come in, and the drifting firs would stand forth like shrouded sentinels, we would pass the time working upon ship's gear, or go back in the forest hunting.

The Captain always allowed at least two rifles to a party; but ammunition was to be paid for on the spot—chest account at a high premium. Carttridges were as high as ten cents apiece; but they were often worth many times that if there happened to be any game around. When we were able to buy a few we were allowed to go in, with orders to make the beach at the first sign of an easterly shift. As second mate of the trader, it was my special privilege to pull stroke oar in the whale-boat, which was much larger than the regular whaler; and because I had done so for thirty days from morning until night I was allowed to go in near the settlement of Dryer with a rifle and ammunition. Slade, the mate, also got permission to hunt, and with a rifle full of metal joined me with two of the crew.

Slade had been to the settlement for a pilot named O'Brien, and had seen something feminine which had taken his fancy. She was good looking and only eighteen, and was much sought after, as might be expected in a country where women are few, and those few usually hard as iron.

O'Brien had come aboard and piloted us in to an anchorage; but it was easy to see that he resented the mate's interest in the affair ashore. It looked as though he had not been wise in this interest, and I could not help telling him that he was making a fool of himself.

"It's all right," said he. "I've as much right to admire the girl as any of these long-haired hunters. Look at me! Ain't I as good to look at as one of these skin-covered fellows whose only recommendation is a head of hair, a shaggy beard and a smell like a wolf? You attend to your own affairs and hunt seals, if you want to. I'm going back in the woods with this O'Brien."

"He's the very one you want to keep your eye lifting for," said I. "He is to marry the girl, I understand."

"Well, maybe you understand wrong." And so that day we hunted the ledges, shooting five seals and taking their pelts. Late in the afternoon the fog came in so thick that we ran down near the settlement and sent the boat's head upon the shore. We were lying in a little slough or bay which ran two fathoms deep at high water and then ran dry for nearly half a mile from shore at low. Slade was overhauling the gear, and the rest of us were busy.

We failed to notice the figure of O'Brien until his footsteps sounded upon the seaweed. He approached silently, a giant figure, standing nearly six feet three inches and weighing nearly three hundred pounds. He was hard and muscular, and looked almost slender. Tremendous was his frame. His eyes were a pale, cold blue and narrow, set wide apart in his freckled face, and his hard-drawn mouth was partly covered by a mustache a bit



She Was Good Looking and Only Eighteen.

redder than his hair. Thick curly hair covered his heavy jowls. Altogether he was not a handsome fellow; but he was a good pilot. As he strode silently up to the beached boat, he seemed to look hard at the mate, and there was anything but a pleased expression in his eyes as Slade nodded to him. He came close to the craft, and then sat upon her gunwale, resting his rifle carelessly across his knee. I noticed that the weapon was of a foreign make, but high-powered and small of bore. His ammunition showing in his belt told of a hunter who trusted to long-range firing and to the tremendous impact of a soft-nosed bullet.

"Been up to old man Masters' lately?" asked Slade, grinning.

"Yes, I go up every day," said O'Brien, "and they say there is sickness and sometimes sudden death lurking about the swamp up that way." He said this with some meaning, and I saw Slade smile.

"No fear, my son; there is no sickness like that caused by a woman; but it never causes death. Oh, no. And besides, I don't like the insinuation. Masters has a pretty daughter; but that is no reason for trouble."

"Well, his daughter is not for every man who happens along this way, and I might as well tell you now that she don't care especially for sailor-men to be hanging about there. I don't object to Masters' land is exempt from them while I'm around."

"Not so; no fear. I'm in the running. What, do you mean to tell me you are jealous of a sailorman like me?" said the mate, grinning.

O'Brien gave a snort of disgust. "I'm telling you for your own good, friend. You keep away from Masters' place while you are here. I've got nothing against you; but I don't want any foolishness going on around there."

"So, you're the boss, hey? And I'm to mind you? Look here, my friend, if your sweetheart is so fickle you have to keep her under cover of your rifle, I should think you would rather be rid of her." A woman who can't know her own mind isn't worth to shoot the fellow who got on the weather side of you."

"Well, I'm here to tell you all the news, and if you are not willing to listen to it you don't have to listen; but you take my advice and keep away from where she is, or some trouble is certain to come out of it."

"Well, I'll not accept your advice. I'll not keep away from any woman who is willing to talk to me. When the young lady in question tells me to my face she has no use for me I'm out. But I won't have it from any man. Now, you take that and sift it down carefully. I'm as good a man as you or any other fellow hanging around here, and don't you go making the mistake thinking that I'm afraid of your rifle. I'm not hunting any trouble with anyone; but you take it from me that I'm ready at all times to see who's who. This shooting game may go all very well in story books, but it don't go here. I don't want to shoot you, and I don't intend that you'll shoot me, unless you do it behind my back, and then there'll be some one to see you swing for it."

"I haven't threatened to shoot anyone, mate," said O'Brien in a conciliatory tone; "but I'm telling you the news, and I stand to it."

"Well, you forget it," said Slade. "Why, man, I may marry the young lady as well as anyone! And has the man she cares for to be shot? Not by a long sight! Oh, no!"

"Now come aboard, friend O'Brien," he said. "Come and eat some whack with us. I'll overlook your foolishness. But don't think you're talking to children again," he said.

He came aboard surly enough, and after eating was silent for sometime. "I saw a b'ar along back of that cedar swamp," he suddenly said after the long pause, "an' if you'll take your rifle along with you we'll likely get a shot at him before dark."

He was addressing Slade plain enough; but I answered. "It's too late," I said. "We've got to get aboard again to-night."

"No fear," said Slade; "it'll be a strong easterly wind for hours yet, and the air thicker than burgeo. I'll go you, O'Brien, an' maybe stay all night in the brush. What I want is game."

O'Brien set the butt of his Winchester on his toe. Then he looked hard at the mate with those slits of eyes for a fraction of a second. It was an ugly look, and I didn't like it.

Slade took no notice whatever, but grabbed his rifle and sprang ashore. "Don't wait for me," he said.

They started off, and ten minutes later we heard the crack of a rifle. Following their trail, we came upon bear tracks and saw splashes of blood; but they had evidently not made a kill and had kept rapidly on in pursuit. We waited until dark; but Slade failed to put in appearance. Then we went aboard and reported to the old man, and after that turned in.

The next day we watched the shore for the mate; but he did not appear. The skipper was furious and wanted to get under way, for the wind had made enough easting to clear away the fog. We had to lay there and waste valuable time or go on without him. The old man decided to wait one more day; and it was well for the mate he did.

Shock-headed Jones was watching the shore late the second morning, when he noticed a figure crawling painfully down to the water. It did not resemble a man at all, much less our tall good-looking mate. But it was Slade. We knew it the moment he waved something to us, lying prone upon the beach with his head toward us. Ten minutes later we had him aboard.

Late that afternoon he told his story. "When we started for the bear, O'Brien must have intended to put me through after his own fashion, for he went plunging ahead on the trail and I following him. I had just seen a black object on the edge of the clearing and, firing on it, had wounded the beast, which went tearing off making a racket through the brush. For hours we followed the trail, and it grew dark. O'Brien seemed to find his way, and I close behind him, until we struck into a forest so thick that it was black dark in there. Here we lost all trace of the bear."



"So, You're the Boss, Hey? And I'm to Mind You?"

Well, the pilot said he could not find his way back again that night, and suggested that we camp in a clearing about a mile back from where we stopped.

It was drizzling now, and the woods were as black as ink. We stumbled along for a time and came to an opening, a sort of swale with a stream running through it, and the first I knew of it was when I pitched head first into the water. I thought I heard the fellow laugh; but when I scrambled out he was waiting there on the bank for me.

"Close by we came to a little log cabin. He said it was a hunter's cabin and deserted. It was about ten feet square and built of solid logs. There was an opening at one end boarded up with rough boards; but these gave way to the powerful hands of O'Brien. It was so black inside the place you