

THE THOUSANDTH SHELL

By ALFRED HENRY GIEBLER

ON an afternoon in October two men were tramping along a country road in Arkansas. They wore new clothing of cheap, shoddy material; their faces were white with the pallor that comes from long confinement, and as they walked they raised and lowered each foot in a peculiar manner. In fact, the brand of ex-convict was upon them as plainly as though it had been placarded on their backs.

It lacked about an hour of sunset when they came to a small river. There was no way to cross it except to wade, for the road ran straight into the water. William Cairns, the older of the men, scowled at the stream, muttered an oath, and then turned to his companion, who was busy taking off his shoes.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"Wade it," said the other man; "it ain't deep; I can see the bottom all the way over."

"Well, not for me," growled Cairns. "I'm dead tired. What do you say if we camp right here? In the morning some farmer will come along and we can get a lift over without wetting our feet."

"All right, whatever you say. I'm tired myself."

They set about making a fire and soon Cairns, who proved to be an expert at that sort of work, had a can of steaming coffee ready, which with the bread and cheese made a meal that gratified their hunger.

The two men had been released from the penitentiary at Little Rock that day. They had not known one another before their incarceration, having been sent up from different parts of the state, but they had formed a sort of friendship in the prison, and Cairns, who was an habitual criminal and meant to return to his life of crime as soon as possible, had cultivated the friendship; he needed a partner in one of his intended operations and had found in Jim Sneed a tool acceptable to his needs.

He began talking of his scheme again, but his companion was such an unenthusiastic listener that he soon filled his pipe and smoked in silence.

Sneed walked down to the ford, and stood watching the river as it rippled past. The water was so clear and cool that he felt a boyish desire to wade in it. His feet were tired and swollen from the unusual exercise of walking. He sat on the ground, removed his shoes, and let his feet swing in the water.

He was glad to be alone; he was tired of Cairns' everlasting talk of the crime they were going to commit. He had practically decided that he would be a partner in the robbery. His share of the spoils would enable him to take his family to a place where they were not known, and then he would start life over, and never do a crooked thing again as long as he lived—he swore this to himself. And also, some day he would pay it back. He had never had an equal chance, he argued; life had always been an uphill climb. The world owed him something, and he would take it. He tried to justify himself, tried to work himself into a satisfied state of mind by these specious reasonings, but in spite of it all, he sat on the river bank a miserable, dejected heap.

Across from where he sat the river flowed over a long bar, and spotting the yellow sand and gravel at the bottom of the shallow water were a number of dark, oval objects. Sneed saw them, and jumped to his feet, interested. He knew they were mussels, the mollusc that contains the most beautiful fresh water pearl in the world. He rolled his trousers to his knees and waded across to the bar.

He was an old "pearler"; he had spent two or three seasons hunting for the elusive gem, all of them unprofitable. But pearl fishers, like all other soldiers of fortune, are always expecting to find an El Dorado just around the corner, always looking for the thousandth shell that may contain the priceless pearl, and the sight of the few shells affected Sneed just as traces of pay-dirt would have affected a gold miner.

He gathered as many of the dripping mollusks as he could carry in his arms and went back to the bank, where he began to open them in feverish haste. One by one he pressed his knife between the shells and ripped them open, till he came to the very last, a great, grayish brown shell, old as the everlasting hills, and worn white around the hinges from its years of scruffling on the gravel bars of the river.

As soon as Sneed opened the shell he saw the gleam of the pearl half hidden by the creature's pulpy flesh.

He lifted it out with reverent fingers. It was a deep salmon pink, with not a flaw, and not a single irregularity to mar its perfection.

It lay in the man's trembling hand, a drop of frozen dew that had borrowed its color from a rose leaf—a moonbeam sifted through pink carnations and rolled into a ball—a thing to gladden the soul, a thing to warm the heart.

SNEED gazed at the shining gem entranced. He could scarce believe the evidence of his own senses; his eyes filled with tears, fortune had smiled on him at last. He had found the pearl fisher's hope—the thousandth shell, containing the perfect pearl.

And then it flashed over him what the finding of the pearl meant; it meant home and wife and child—it meant an honest start in life. His resolve was quickly taken. He knotted the pearl in a handkerchief, and secreted it in his bosom, then slipping on his shoes, he went back to where Cairns sat smoking by the fire.

"Better come close and be comfortable," he said; "it's getting chilly." Sneed shook his head.

"No. I want to tell you something. I ain't going to help you on that job of yours. I'm going straight home. I'm going to cross the river; I think there's a town up the road a piece where I can catch a freight going north tonight."

Cairns rose to his feet. He gave Sneed a searching look.

"What's come over you? Got white-livered all at once? Nice sort o' gun you'd make, to get scared to death at just nothing more than talking of turning a trick."

"No, that ain't it," said Sneed. "I've just changed my mind, that's all. And now I think I'll be pushing on."

"Hold on, not so fast. I don't understand what made you get cold feet so quick."

"I just changed my mind, that's all," said Sneed, doggedly. "I'm going home." He started to go. Cairns stepped in his path.

"Seems like you're in a hell of a hurry all at once. How do I know but what you are going to squeal on me about the job. How do I know but what you'll sell me out?"

"I won't do that," Sneed assured him. "I don't care what you do, I'm just going home as soon as I can, that's all."

"You'd better not snitch," said Cairns, an evil light in his shifty eyes. "If you do, I'll get you for it." He made a threatening gesture. Sneed stepped

back, and his hand went instinctively to his breast, where he had put the pearl. Cairns saw the motion.

"What have you got there?"

"Nothing," replied Sneed.

"You're a liar," Cairns said, advancing. "Haul it out. Let's see what it is that's caused you to go back on a pardner."

Sneed stepped back and put out a hand to ward him off, but Cairns came on, crowding him backward step by step till he was almost in the fire. Then Sneed turned and tried to run, but he stumbled, and before he could recover himself Cairns grabbed a tree limb that had been part of the fire and dealt him a crashing blow that felled him to the ground. Then he ran to the road, gave an anxious look in all directions to satisfy himself that his cowardly deed had been unwitnessed, came back, and began to search the fallen man's pockets. He found the pearl; a glance told him it was valuable.

He dragged Sneed's unconscious body out of sight of passing vehicles, destroyed traces of the fire, waded the river, and set off down the road at a rapid pace.

He reached a small town about midnight, found a train waiting in the railroad yards, crept into an empty box car, and rode fifty miles to the north.

The following night he robbed the railroad station at a town named Wollets. Another long ride on the blind baggage of an express train took him a safe distance from the scene of his crime. He spent a day in the woods near a village called Perry's Junction, and that night entered the town and broke into a store. There was no money to be had, but he discarded the suit he had worn away from the prison and helped himself to an entire new outfit of clothes.

He was now fully launched on his career of crime, and intended working north, then east, across the river into Tennessee, where he hoped to be able to dispose of the pearl at Memphis. During the next two weeks he did one or two other small jobs, as he called them, and flattered at the success he was having, and being anxious for bigger game, he tried to put into execution the plan he had wanted Sneed to help him with, a thing experienced thieves seldom attempt alone—he tried to rob a bank, and was caught red-handed.

IT so happened that in the county where Cairns was taken the jail had burned a short time before, and the authorities were forced to send him to another town to await trial.

The deputy that had him in charge started with him late in the afternoon of the day following his arrest. The deputy was a good natured man, always inclined to be lenient with prisoners in his charge, and soon he and Cairns struck up a friendly conversation, and were talking away like old acquaintances.

After the train was in motion the deputy removed the handcuffs and proposed a game of "pitch" to while away the tedium of the journey. Cairns played with as much skill and evident enjoyment as though he were on a pleasure trip.

Such a good impression did he make, and so reassuring were his actions that the deputy contented himself with merely watching him, and did not replace the handcuffs, as he should have done when the train stopped at a station.

When it grew too dark to play cards, the deputy bought some cigars from the train boy. He gave Cairns one of them, and the two men sat and smoked in silence, the deputy placidly thinking how easily he was earning his money. Cairns, on the other hand, was full of plans for escape. Their journey was two-thirds over; it was growing dark. He had won the deputy's confidence, and only waited to catch him sufficient off his guard to make a dash for freedom.

A few minutes after, the chance came. They passed a large town, and the train ran very slow after leaving the station.

"What's the matter?" he said; "we don't seem to be making very good time."

"There's a tank a piece on the line," replied the deputy. "I reckon they're going to take water." He looked at Cairns with a smile. "What's the matter with you, anxious to get to your lodgings?"

Cairns grinned sheepishly, but there was a wicked light in his eyes. If the deputy could have seen the hand that was creeping toward his pocket that held the unused handcuffs, he would not have found so much humor



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