



That Sharp Yankee

by
Raymond S. Spears

LARRY POLRAY'S shanty-boat was tied in an eddy where a northwest wind sweeping diagonally up the Ohio River above Cairo could not hit it. The wind was raw and cold, so that when Polray went out to look at his bow lines, he shivered from head to foot.

"It's an awful day to be out!" he shook his head. "A man that's got a good little shanty-boat sure is plumb comfortable! Time was when I was out in the bleak, turning round and round, so's there'd be one side that wa'n't quite so cold as the otheh!"

Years of saving, years of picking and grubbing down the river had given him his good little boat, with a good ax for wood and a good stove to burn either wood or coal—coal from wrecked tow-barges. He paused in the gale to look with satisfaction at the blue film of smoke curling out of his heater-stove pipe.

"I'm plumb comfy," he shook his head, gratefully. "Seems like a man who's faithful don't get no worst off, but jes' better 'n' better all the time. I slept up the bank and skiffed hit, many a year. Now I got a shanty-boat, an' money to see me clear to N'Orleans—sho!"

He ran down the bank, along his gangplank onto the bow deck. His hand had reached to open the door by the latch, when he heard a hail from the top of the bank. He turned to look.

A little grizzly man, with long arms—so long that a foot of wrist and forearm showed between hands and sleeves—was standing on the brink, looking down. The stranger had his face covered with a short, shaggy beard; his eyes were pale, misty blue; he wore only a thin shirt, a pair of old blue overalls, and unmatched shoes.

"Could you let a feller wahn by yo' fiah?" the little wretch whined. "I'm froze up—an' I yain't no place to go!"

Polray hesitated. He scrutinized the man keenly. He did not like the looks of the muddy complexion, the long hands, the flat countenance, the dull, animal stare—but as he looked he saw the human frame swept by a shiver that it was hard to witness. The shiver was real, and the face pinched up grayishly in the cold.

"Come aboard!" Polray invited. "I'd hate to leave a dog out in this wind!"

The man dashed down the bank,

leaped nimbly to the deck and entered the cabin. There he extended his hands, his arms, his very body over the hot stove, and there he reveled in the luxury of the warmth.

“Lawse! Lawse!” he chattered. “I been tramlin’ down these yere bottoms, an’ like to froze to death. I ’low yo’-all’s trippin’?”

“Yes—tripping down.”

“Cl’ar down to N’Orleans?”

“Likely so.”

“A Yankee, I bet!”

“Yes, from New York. I was born there—a long time ago.”

“Some of my mother’s fambly was Yankees. Down East, suh—Utiky. Her name were Polray.”

“Sho, that’s my name!”

“Yo’ mean that, suh? Yo’ name Polray?” the wretch asked, widening his eyes, as if greatly surprised.

“Yes, Polray. I never knew there was another one in the country. Just my father come from France—”

“Likely hit weren’t the same fambly,” the other shook his head. “My name’s Curdle, Hess Curdle. I los’ my daddy an’ mammy when the Mosden blowed up in Chickasaw Reach. A shanty-boater picked me up. I been on the riveh eveh sinst.”

“A good place to be,” Polray suggested.

“If yo’ got a shanty-boat an’ ’nough to eat,” the other added. “I been hongry. I ain’t now, not much. I had a fine big supper last night. Yassuh! Potatoes an’ salt, an’ a piece of bacon. Yassuh! A fine supper!”

He smacked his lips, adding afterward:

“Why, I et ’nough to last two, three days!”

“You haven’t had anything to eat since last night?” Polray asked, staring, and for the minute forgetting some of his own experiences.

“Hit’s seo!”

“We’ll have something, d’rectly,” Polray said, turning to his kitchen.

He brought out of the grub box a catfish, all cleaned and skinned. He sliced off several steaks. He mixed a batch of biscuit dough. He set the table and put on it real butter, sorghum molasses, knives, forks, and spoons. He put out a pot of coffee, which soon was simmering, while the blue fish smoke made the little man by the stove sniff and grin. Rapidly, with no waste motions, Polray prepared the meal.

They sat down, at last, to an ample dinner, with condensed milk and sugar for the coffee. Curdle ate his full share, but he did not wolf the things to eat. It seemed to Polray as though he showed remarkable restraint. When he urged the little man to eat more, the guest replied:

“I don’ want to rob yo’, suh!”

Polray declared his indignation. After dinner, Polray brought out two pipes and a big box full of tobacco, and they sat down by the fire to smoke. They talked along, and toward dark, Curdle looked out the window. The river was running yellow, and waves with dirty white caps were breaking up-stream. Curdle shivered.

“I ’low I betteh be movin’ on,” he said. “I don’t rightly know where’bouts I will lie in to-night, suh. A nice holler tree’s good, er under the floor of an old house.”

Polray looked out the window. He saw a little motor-boat launch driving down in the edge of the current. Over the bow was a canvas hood, and a sullen man crouched at the wheel in the cockpit. Curdle rose to his feet.

“I betteh be goin’,” he said. “Who yo’ reckon that feller is, theh?”

“I don’ know,” Polray shook his head, leaning to look more keenly, “I never ’ve se—”

The little man had moved around a bit, leaning to look. He glared at Polray’s head,

and then deftly lifted out of his hip pocket a yellow slungshot. Just behind the ear, he landed on the skull of the man who had taken him in, fed him, and would shortly have invited him to sleep in a hammock swung across the cabin.

Polray's light went out. His word was cut in two by the foul blow. He dropped to his hands and knees, crying and choking. He fell with a sigh on his side. But ere he lost that last glimmer of consciousness, he realized what had happened, struggled against it and then gave over.

The little man stepped lightly to the bow deck, and waved his hand to the gasoline boat which was driving by. Instantly, the launch turned into the eddy. On it shone a bar of sunlight, the last straight rays of the hour before dark.

The launch swung in beside the cabin boat, and the steersman made fast to it with ropes, while Curdle ran up the bank and cast off the mooring lines. In the twilight, they towed the boat out into the stream and pounded into the wind, bound downriver. The wind was falling at the end of the day, as commonly happens. By dark the gale had blown itself out.

Polray lay where he had fallen. The two men, river pirates, sat by the stove, holding their hands over the fire, to warm them.

"Nice little boat," Gurdle nodded. "Don't no wind come through the sides—Gawd! I like to froze, waitin' to be took on board! The scoundrel wa'n't in no hurry to take me."

"He got his, all right," the other growled. "River man?"

"Yeh—Yankee," the other cackled. "I don't see what they call them Yankees sharp for, d'you?"

"No—they fall fer anything. 'Member that feller in mouth of White River?"

"Had two hundred onto him—sho!

Betteh drap him ovehbo'd now, Jim?"

"No hurry. Mus' of rapped him tol'able hard!"

"I neveh take no chances," Gurdle grinned.

"Ner I," the other shook his head. "Reckon I'll jes' sip some coffee."

They each took a cup of coffee. As they sipped it, they looked with fishy eyes at their victim. Colder blooded men there never were than river pirates, and these two were the coldest of their crew.

They went out on the bow deck to look at the bank and stream. The clouds were rolling overhead, and stars were shining frostily out of the sky in the straits between the clouds. Their boats were in midstream, gliding with the current. They spoke in voices so low that a hissing whisper would seem like a shout.

"Where 'll we drap him oveh?" Gurdle asked, anxiously.

"No hurry," Jim replied, impatiently.

"He mout come to."

"Agin, he moutn't. Hit'd take 'im a week jes' to sit up!" Jim jeered. "What ails yo'?"

"Nuthin'," Gurdle replied, "I don' cyar no more'n yo' do."

They pulled the curtains down and lighted one of the big, broad-based lamps. By its light they searched the prostrate man, methodically, from pocket to pocket. They found his money belt, and extracted, with satisfaction, one hundred and fifty dollars. His pocketbook contained a five-dollar bill and some change. On his finger was a plain gold ring, which they took off.

The loot was satisfactory. Having so much, they began to talk of hurrying to Memphis, or Helena, or Arkansas City. They told one another what that much money would purchase. Best of all, to their minds, was the whisky they would take on board.

Casually, while arguing the subject of

what would be the most fun, Jim dragged the prostrate figure out the front door onto the deck. He glanced around, and whispered:

“Too near the bank yere!”

He threw a piece of canvas over the body, remarking that if a steamboat happened along and threw the search-light on them, he didn't want any one to see anything. There was a freezing tang in the air. He entered and closed the door.

Then they debated their good fortune, and what was ahead of them. Fortune had favored them; good luck was coming their way; they could see good times ahead; the cup of pleasure was full; of course, some people might not think as they did, but the world owed them a living.

Suddenly, a shiver and a tremor went through the boat. The two froze where they sat, askant. They heard a click and felt a throb.

“He's wrigglin'!” Gurdle exclaimed. “He's comin' to!”

Like a shadow, Gurdle leaped toward the door, but before he could reach it, the bow of the boat lifted, and they heard a sharp splash. Jim blew out the light, and they rushed onto the platform. The bank was right at hand, as they flanked a bend. Within a yard was the edge of the eddy and the eddy was only a few yards wide.

“I don't see 'im!” Gurdle exclaimed.

“He's drawed down in the sucks,” Jim declared. “Save us botherin' to drap him oveh!”

“That's right,” Gurdle grinned.

With the shanty-boat oars, they rowed the boats out into the stream in the channel. Little by little they drifted into mid-current and went on their way.

Polray, dazed and blinded, his head aflame, rejoiced in the sting of the cold water. It dashed his eyes open, and it cleared his mind. He struggled with the river, gaining strength. He washed into the eddy, and crawled up the

bank. He climbed to the river bottom, and surged across the level, hunting for a hole to crawl into, out of the cold. He found a straw stack, and bored into it. There he warmed his own den. There he cleared his mind.

He felt for his money belt; it was gone. He had expected that. He felt for his waistcoat, and found it. He had hoped for that. He ran his fingers over the back and over the wet lining. He could feel lines of sewed places and lumps between them.

“They got some of it,” he muttered. “They didn't get it all! A man learns not to carry all he's got into one place! Them danged scoundrels! Likely I won't neveh see them agin—but if I do! They's down b'low, and if I do!”

A painful day arrived. He stumbled on down the river bank. He found a little shanty-boat town. He knew some of the river people there. They took him in, and a woman shaved and dressed the lump-wound on his head.

“Who done hit?” she asked.

He told her all that had happened.

“An' when yo'd took 'em in, they robbed yo'! I bet that feller in the launch was Gurdie's pal, yassuh.”

“Like 's not. He looked sharp. I seen 'm—to'd my boat.”

“If yo' had a launch, likely yo' could get them fellers!” she suggested.

“Likely!” he admitted. “But they'll hide in their holes.”

“Er trip, night an' day, for a week!” she said. “Yo' cayn't get out with that head, not in days!”

“I'll thank you kindly, and pay my board,” he said. “I'm peaceable—but—”

“I wouldn't blame yo', not if yo' shot them fellers down in cold blood!” she exclaimed, angrily. “They should be, like dogs!”

A week later, Polray ran out of the eddy in a twenty-two foot gasoline launch,

with a cabin clear back to the stern. It was a wide boat, and not high in the wind. He steered down-stream, the little motor running freely.

“He’s got a good rifle,” the shanty-boaters repeated among themselves, “and a good six-shooter. Them fellers wants to keep clear an’ shet of him!”

Up to this time Polray had made no threats; in his own mind he had failed to register any vows or harbor thoughts of vengeance. He regarded the matter of the piracy as “trifling,” compared to his own peace of mind. If he worried, his comfort was gone, and he lived on the river for comfort. Yet he was ready for trouble, now. Deep in his soul was an indignation against the abuse of his good nature, kindness, hospitality.

“They need killing!” he said to himself. “I never killed anybody, and I never wanted to kill anybody. But they need killing!”

The ache and pain in his head were constant reminders of the foul blow. Yet the suffering from the pain was less than the other suffering, the feeling that he had been imposed upon. He watched ahead, now, and he searched the river banks as he went down, looking for his cabin-boat.

In New Madrid shanty-boat eddy, he learned that his boat had dropped by there several days before. He knew better than to let it be known that he was after the boat. He recognized it from the description of one of the men, and from the canvas hood launch-cover. At Reelfoot, he was only a day behind them. When he passed under the shadow of Fort Pillow he saw the boats in the morning sunshine a mile ahead, floating down.

He stopped his motor, and drifted with the current, while he thought and planned. The pirates had figured that he was dead, and were taking no precautions. They knew that he had fallen overboard, but they had not counted on the strength which accompanies clean living,

the endurance which is the reward of taking care of, oneself. He knew that they believed he was dead. The knowledge made him smile.

All day long he floated, sometimes two miles astern; sometimes hardy a mile; he saw other cabin-boats drifting down. He would attract little attention in the migration flight of shanty-boaters, before the winter which was at hand.

Toward night, he came to within a few hundred feet of the shanty-boat. Gurdle was on the bow, handling the sweeps. He was smoking a pipe—Polray’s own pipe, the pursuer thought. In the sunset, Gurdle was silhouetted against the western sky, a thin, shrunken little figure, huddling over the oars.

The other man stepped out on the bow deck. Apparently for no reason, he stumbled as he stood there, lurching against Gurdle, who turned on him savagely. There was feeling between them, that was plain. The fellow whom Polray had seen on the launch was drinking, but Gurdle was sober.

The two began to quarrel; their voices were lifted in vituperation; they faced each other, like spitting cats. Polray, seeing them thus oblivious to their surroundings, glided down close to the stern.

“If they hang me they’ll burn you alive!” Polray heard one say. “Who was it always done the hittin’ on the haid?”

“Hit were you that were so ’fraid yo’ dassen’t to hit!” Gurdle swore. “Yo’s a coward!”

“An’ all I got to do is tell what I know—” the other hinted.

There was a moment’s silence. Polray drew up at the stern of his cabin-boat, stepped aboard the deck, revolver in hand. He tiptoed silently through the kitchen into the cabin. As he did so, he heard Gurdle say:

“I kin kill yo’ same’s I killed othehs!”

“Yo’—”

The two clashed, and with the smacking of fist blows, Polray heard a sharp,

double cracking stroke. He saw Gurdle standing over his victim, striking mad blows with a yellow slungshot.

"Stop! Stop it!" Polray gasped, horror-stricken, stepping into the doorway.

Gurdle looked up and staggered back.

"Gawd! Gawd!" he choked. "Don' touch me, Mr. Ha'nt! Don'—don' touch me, Mr. Ghostes—I—"

The pirate turned, but Polray raised his hand to point at the other man.

"Take him with you!" Polray ordered.

"Yassuh!" the fellow whimpered, "Yas-suh!"

Without another word he seized his pal by the collar and threw him over the rail, and then sprang after. The two struck the cold water together. Gurdle let go, then, and started to swim ashore.

"Come back!" Polray shouted, and with his face twisting and frightened almost to death, the river rat returned to tow his pal toward shore, struggling with the rolling, boiling current.

"Take him all the way!" Polray demanded.

The river rat landed on the bar at Squab Island. Polray saw him shoulder the limp burden and stagger up into the willows.

"Well, I suppose that taught the wretch a lesson!" the shanty-boater mused. "And I've had one, too. What a mess to clean up!"

Polray found nothing on the dirty boat which he regarded as fit to eat, so he ran on down to Mendova eddy, where he landed on the following morning and went up Eddy Street on his way to add to his meager supplies.

As he turned into Main Street, he saw a crowd of people coming. In the lead by twenty yards was Gurdle, still packing the grisly burden on his shoulder like a bag. He was staggering and crying along, his clothes torn to rags, his face scratched where he had

crawled through barbed wire fences, and his eyes bulging out of a gray, shrunken face.

His gait was a jog-trot as he hitched along, hardly three inches to a tired step. Polray could hear him breathing, and he remembered that the victim of the Old Man of the Sea must have breathed just like that. While not forgetting his own part in the affair, Polray still pitied the poor devil of a pirate. But Gurdle, stumbling along hitch by hitch, turned his gaze to where Polray stood, silent, bright-eyed, and with an unconscious smile of recognition on his lips—as though he would greet the fellow and reassure him by good nature.

For a moment Gurdle stopped and started. To his countenance mortal fear of the ghost of the man who had been his victim up the Ohio added a bluer gray.

"I'm takin' 'im in!" Gurdle screamed, like a lost soul. "I'm mos' theh! Oh, le' me go! Le' me go!"

And gathering what strength he had left after that night of terror, toil, and despair, he started with a slow-gathering speed, like a tired horse lumbering under the lash in a muddy road. Faster and faster he ran, while the burden slumped upon his shoulders.

He bounded along, swiftly, like a deer wounded through the heart, seeming to gather strength. Behind him whooped the little mob, trying to keep pace with the sensation.

Two blocks further on, Gurdle crossed Main Street diagonally and turned down Ferry Street. Polray walked that way. As he did so, two men spread behind him and came abreast.

"Howdy?" one greeted. "Off the riveh?"

"Yes."

"Yankee, I expect?"

"Yes—down-easter."

"Know that riveh rat?"

"Up the riveh—I'd seen them."

"That feller knowed you, all right."

What's your name?"

"Polray."

"How come hit he knows you?"

"What business is that of yours?"

Polray demanded.

"Don't you git excited, Polray. We're bulls, understand?"

"Well, what do you want of me?"

"Witness—that 'll do to hold you!"

Polray glanced down Skiff Street toward the river as they crossed on their way to Ferry Street, where the mob was hesitating at the head of the lane.

"I reckon I'll make a good witness, for a fact," Polray admitted.

"Yeh? How come hit?"

"Gurdle batted me over the head—see that lump?—and I fell overboard. He thought I was dead. He took my shanty-boat, but I followed him and his pal down. I happened along, just when Gurdle killed that other fellow with his slungshot. Gurdle 'lowed I was dead, and I told him to take the—the body with him. I see he's done it!"

"When was that?"

"Yesterday evening, toward sunset—up by Squab Island."

"He's toted that thing down here—twenty-five miles down the levee!" one of the detectives exclaimed. "Gawd—what a pack to carry all night!"

"He's headed for the morgue," the other plain-clothes man observed.

"He neveh got there!" the other replied as they turned at the head of the street, where the mob had halted.

Half way down the block, in front of the dirty, dingy, little building for the unclaimed dead was a kind of bundle on the sidewalk, motionless. The morgue keeper walked down the steps, packing a smoke in his goose-neck pipe. He stooped over the figures, to draw a match across his hip, as he studied the situation, which was unique even in his long experience.

The two detectives and Polray walked down the grade, followed doubtfully by the mob.

"Well, skipper?" a detective greeted the man.

"I seen 'em comin'," the morgue keeper shook his head. "I thought the live man was the deadest, 'cordin' to his'n's face. Lawse! I bet Wagon '11 be mad!"

"Why?"

"He gets two dollars fer bringing in anybody that's daid. Hyar's two—that's fo'r dollars. An' they don' need Wagon!"

"Po'r Wagon!" one of the detectives murmured, sympathetically.

"I'll bring the blanket out, an' coveh 'em," skipper said. "Hit ain't legal to touch 'em tell the coroner's had his little look. Friend of the deceased, suh?"

Polray started.

"Not so's yo'd notice hit, skipper," one of the detectives chuckled. "He's got a lump big's a coconut behind his ear where them pirates swatted 'im. He's kind of a witness into the case."

"Sho!" the skipper of the morgue remarked regretfully, "I 'lowed, likely, they'd get to be buried honorable, 'stid of goin' on the table!"

Polray looked along the street and across the Mississippi River. He no longer had any bitterness in his heart; he had entirely forgotten his hurt, and he remembered only that he had survived a needed lesson.

"I couldn't let a good teacher—" he murmured half aloud.

"One of them a school teacher?" a detective asked, quickly. "Lawse! Old Mississipp' takes 'em a long ways down, sometimes! One used to be yo' teacher, Polray?"

"I was just thinking," Polray replied, "perhaps I owe them something!"

Within an hour the coroner had disposed of the case, lumping autopsy,

inquest, and decision all in one. Polray's story was all there was to it. He was frank about it, and no one accused him for his involuntary play of ghost.

Still, they couldn't make it seem out of

the way for him to pay the burial expenses of his fellow river men, wretches though they were, and he paid without protest, remarking:

“A man sure owes his teachers something!”