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The Tornado

by Raymond S. Spears

A YEAR on the Mississippi River in a cabin-boat had given Jesse Meldew a good many new ideas. He had quit his job, up in Pittsburgh, dead tired of roaring furnaces, clanging steel, and metals that ran white hot, more blinding than the sunshine. Now he could look back and see that he had done well to float down into the serene flood-quiet of the lower river. It had been the luckiest day of his life when he started.

Now he would leave the river, take up a man's job again, and settle down for the long pull, which a man hopes will not end till it is time to step down into the grave. There was, however, a little detail to settle.

Carlotta Dales, the daughter of Bett Dales, had not yet quite made up her mind that she would go with him and share his life, for better or for best of all. The Dales store-boat, famous from Evansville to Vicksburg, had brought in a lot of money in its time. They all liked Meldew, for he was a faithful, hard-working, steady-living man. It had been a good deal to Meldew's credit to have Old Dales keep good-natured while they tripped down the river, meeting at landings and visiting back and forth.

It was obvious that Meldew liked Carlotta. She was a dark, bright-eyed girl, brunette, and gay. It was as easy to make love to her, as easy to love her, as it was to let the river current carry one's boat down midstream on a windless day.

She liked to have the right kind of a man admire her, too, and this stalwart young man who had had the good sense to drop out of the Pittsburgh mills for a year, to get a new perspective and adjust himself to new ideas, appealed to her good sense.

"You're no river-man!" she had laughed at him. "You could live on the river forty years, and you'd give your boat a kick at last and walk up over the bank, and never come back again—never want to come back. I know your kind! There's lots like you. You trip down once or twice, and then you get to go away. Shucks! I'm jes' a little riveh-gal, yas-suh!"

That's the way Carlotta talked to him, and he protested with all his heart and soul that he would be a river-man for her sake, if she would tell him that she loved him and agree to marry him—and then, really marry him!

"What!" she exclaimed, tipping her head and listening keenly to the undertone of his protestations. "If I'd really marry you afteh I'd

promised? I bet you-all had experience with gals up the bank, eh? Some gal let you trip down the riveh, by not marryin', eh?"

He laughed uneasily. He had not expected quite such shrewdness in deduction. He wondered what she was thinking.

"Poor fellow!" she soothed him, sorry, for him. "Was it a gal made you think you could come down old Mississip' an' forget? Did you forget?"

"The girl?" he chuckled. "Oh, yes; I was just mistook—"

"About the gal? Sure—you'd neveh talked to me, looked at me thataway, if you remembered that other gal," she decided sagely enough. "I seen lots of fellers drappin' down thisaway, 'count of gals. Theh's some stayed down yeah, neveh did forget. But you—were it the gal you could forget, er the city 'way back yonder? I seen Pittsburgh once, with the smoke a rollin' up, an' the lights a blazin' at night, an' the rumblin', rollin' down the river— sho! Hit were noisy up theh! Hit's in yo' blood, honey, yes, indeed! You-all cayn't fo'get Pittsburgh!"

"Couldn't I, with you?" he demanded. "Why—look at the money I've made down thisaway—as much, more than as much, as I'd made if I'd stayed back up theh! Look! One raft I swung in four hundred and fifty-six dollars—an' in the winter rises I made a clean thousand. Come this spring, green that I am, I took in eight hundred fishing, running fence nets—"

"Yes, I know, I know!" she laughed at him. "Every day you've worked. I've watched yo' working; yes, indeedy. I've seen yo' settin' theh, stiddy all day long—what doin'? You mended shoes, an' you sold net twine, and you've rived net hoops. Lawse! How you've worked! Daddy lows you ain't lost a day in the three hundred an' ninety you've been on the river; never lost a Sunday nor a holiday. Lawse! I've seen yo' floatin' down, an' you was fixin' that motor you picked up, to sell hit to that fisherman into Centennial Cut-off. Yo' made a hundred thataway?"

"Yes, a hundred an' ten dollar. Besides I allowed day wages, too."

"How much wages?" she asked.

"Five dollars a day."

"In four hundred days you made two thousand dollars?" she asked almost casually.

"That's my day wages—I've earned it all!" he told her. "Oh, I could take care of you! I could have lived a year, when I came on old Mississip', never raising a hand. But I've made my day wages, besides—"

"And profits?" she smiled.

"Yes, and profits," he admitted, hesitating. "I can show you a bank-book, and I own a lot back there in Pittsburgh; a lot that 'ii bring me two thousand dollars when I get to sell hit!"

"Sho! Yo's rich!" she accused him.

"Not yet," he shook his head.

"You come by the forks of the Ohio?" she asked suddenly.

"Why—yes, of course!"

"What 'd yo' think of the Kentucky side?"

"Why, they was trees and brush there. Why?"

"An' Putney Bend?"

"I don't remember."

"Just below the forks, where everybody always stops to look at the Mississippi, if they hain't seen hit before?"

"I didn't notice."

"Where'd you see yo' fustest sandbar?"

"Eh? Why, I don't remember."

"Not remembeh yo' fustest sand-bar!" she exclaimed, shocked. "All yellow as gold, the sun a shinin' onto hit, an' mebby wild geese a walkin'—"

"Oh, yes; I remember seeing wild geese! I killed nine on one bar, below Columbus. Sold 'em all for—"

"Sh!" she stopped him. "I don't want to know how much yo' got fo' them geese. I bet yo' don't rec'lect nothin' about las' spring, a year, do yo'?"

"What! Not remember last spring? And I caught a thousand dollars in drift logs, all profits? Took in four gasoline launches and a nice cruiser, salvaging two of them and selling the others? Well, I guess I remember?"

"But the birds singing? An' the orioles? Lawse! I bet yo' neveh heard an oriole yellin' acrost to a yellowhammer on yon side?"

"Why, prob'bly I did!" he exclaimed doubtfully. "Course—"

"Course, hit's made yo' hard of hearin', rumblin' round in them Pittsburgh shops!"

"My ears are all right," he protested.

"Some ways," she reassured him.

Carlotta was grave, after that precious day when Jesse asked her in dead earnestness to marry him, declaring that he would live where she willed and do as she desired.

"I can make my living anywhere," he declared, and she knew that he spoke the truth.

He went on to a crippled steamboat one day and linked up the engine with a piece of wire rope—a regular Yankee trick that enabled the delighted captain to get into Helena to get a permanent repair—

"Twenty-five dollars' worth of know how," Jesse chuckled. "Besides five dollars a day wages."

The two boats dropped down the river, often moored together. But sometimes Jesse would dart away in his launch, be gone two or three days, and return with his wages plus his profits. He spent a week up White River, and found a pearl that brought five hundred and sixty dollars on the spot: and returned, with another laugh, to the Dales's boat.

The Dales were such practical river-people, and made so much money with their store-boat, their swapping, their occasional drifting in the tides, and their watching the markets for old brass, rubber, pecan nuts, and what not, that Jesse Meldew never doubted for a minute that he would be most welcome in the family. Old Dales took to talking over proposed ventures with Jesse, and Mrs. Dales had him over to dinner about five times a week. The Dales knew, after Jesse became the avowed suitor of Carlotta, that he had money—lots of money! He had, with his Yankee shrewdness, made five or six thousand dollars working, trading, drifting, and what not.

"Yo' take cyar of that money," Old Dales remarked shrewdly. "In ten years yo' can have a lot of mortgages back up the bank, an' a fleet of boats down thisaway, too—honest tradin'!"

"Ten years on old Mississip'!" In spite of himself. Meldew shivered a little, and he added hastily as he saw a quiet falling: "A man who could make ten thousand on old Mississip' in five years could make a million back in Pittsburgh, in ten."

"A million dollars? Hit 'd bother a man lookin' after all that." Old Dales shook his head.

"No more trouble looking after a million than after a hundred thousand," Meldew laughed shortly, his eyes glistening.

When Meldew started up the bank to walk to his boat, Carlotta went with him to the end of the gangplank. There they talked. Into her voice came a little catch, when he urged upon her the certainty that in a few years he would be wealthy, that he would be right with the best of them.

"I've the right idee now," he told her. "I didn't have when I was staggering along back there. I was working myself dead tired. But I knew enough to knock off, and get back on my balance again. That's what I came down here for."

"Yes, I know," she admitted sorrowfully. "That's what you came down heah for. Sho! And old Mississip' opened yo' eyes, honey?"

"You bet!" he laughed. "I didn't know there was so much water in the world. That means transportation some day. Too slow and too uncertain for me, but I can see some ways, down here, of doing business. Look at the cotton gins. Then down below, the sugar mills.

And there's the timber—"

Before his mind's eye there swept a vast vision of industry and business and power and manufacturing. Cotton by the million bales, timber by the hundred million feet, sugar by the ship-load. Hardly had he begun to express the vision that he saw than he heard a sob in the crook of his arm and felt the shiver of the girl weeping against his shoulder.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing! No, honey, I was just thinking. If yo'd only heard a little bird I heard just then—up yonder."

"A bird?"

"Listen!" she exclaimed.

Away out yonder in the brake there was a trembling voice in the night wind, throbbing and pulsing, quivering over the river eddy.

"Tu-ree-ree-ree-e-e-!"

"Yes, yes." he nodded impatiently. "You can see how I feel about it. There's more than a hundred thousand square miles down here that's practically undeveloped absolutely untouched, and—"

"Yes, dear." she stopped him. "Good night!"

She let him kiss her, and she ran back on board the ninety-five-foot boat which Old Dales had built for his trade. Meldew looked after her dim figure in the dark. He could not quite think what was the matter. He decided that she was tired, very tired, probably, he felt, it made her heart-sick, there was really so little on the river for any one to think of or work about.

"She'd sure be some queen in an automobile and dressed up the way she'd ought to be," he thought to himself. "Nice, unspoiled girl—and bright! She's traded a thousand dollars in her own right since I've known her. Give her half a chance!"

Meldew returned on board his own boat. That night he laid plans for a life partnership with Carlotta Dales. She would advise him, for she knew the value of saw-logs and the cost of boats and the price of furs and the kinds of cotton. She could tell him what was the matter with an ax; that it was no good for cutting, though it would do all right for splitting. She was a good judge of copper, and could grade brass, light and heavy, with any one.

"In six months there'd be nothing she wouldn't know about that little machine-shop I've got my eyes on!" Meldew told himself.

The weather had been hot for a week. Little by little the sun had hazed under. For two days it had been gray, calm, and warm. The air had grown thick. That night Old Dales had put out double mooring lines, and thru run a mudhook off the stern, so as to hold the store-boat off the bank.

Meldew, who had been through some winds, followed suit, and the boats were as secure as could be; but they were on the east side of the river, where there was a good landing, also where Old Dales sold a good line of store stuff and frequently took on a ton or two of valuable junk.

Meldew, having glanced around, turned in. He was soon asleep. How long he slept he could not guess, but suddenly he found himself sitting upright in the bed, straining his ears to listen. He heard, at first, nothing. Then he heard the low squeak of a bird, or birds, He heard the lapping of water along the sides of his boat. A silence, thicker than the night, was in the air. He rose to his feet, slipped into his clothes, and crept aft to look at the river. He did not know but what some river-pirate might be working at his launch. Me saw no one there. Then he crept to the bow, but saw no one there.

He listened more intently, but he ridiculed himself for having dressed. He sat on the edge of his bed, wondering. Never before had he done a thing like that. In the mid-blackness he had started upright, subject to some nerve rack. He laced up his shoes; he tightened up his clothes; he drew his money from its hiding-place and put it, with his bank-books, into his waistcoat pocket.

And then, but not till then, he heard a low rumbling in the distance. It was like Pittsburgh—a grumbling, uneasy thunder, He noticed a flare, like the breaking out of the tap in a great furnace, to let melted steel flow into the caldrons. The noise grew louder and wider spread. The lightning grew brighter and brighter.

Meldew stepped to the stern and looked toward the west, across the wide Mississippi. There was not a breath of air stirring that he could feel. But beyond the river, behind the low line of trees on the far shore, he saw flaring lights spreading across the horizon. He saw clouds that hung down in black streaks against a pale-white glow. He saw long streamers rock out under those hanging banners, dark and flapping like gigantic arms. Right in the midst of the pale glow there was a compact, hard-looking lump of black, which seemed to be staggering along, bumping up and down. Out of this mass shot occasional streaks of lightning.

The man had never seen anything like that before. He had seen gray storms, wind-storms, thunder-storms, and even an earthquake-breeder up at New Madrid, but not a storm like this. He remembered having seen or heard something somewhere about such a thing, but he could not on the instant place it. He stood, leaning back against his cabin, while the thing boomed and rumbled. He could see the tops of the trees opposite, every limb silhouetted plainly against the brightening sky of the horizon. He could see the trees against the black cloud behind. Then, to his surprise, he saw the trees begin to bend and whip back and forth.

Suddenly the trees doubled over and then churned out of sight in the tumult and the roar. The whole river-bank seemed to vanish in a tearing fog. At that moment Meldew felt his boat sag away from the bank, and he saw the eddy of the river in the light drawing toward midstream. At that instant there was not a breath of air that he could feel.

The next instant out of the sky whipped down a terrible crashing blow like a charge of shot, like bullets, and Meldew found himself beaten to the deck, stunned by a slashing drive of hail. Then there was an interval of quiet again, during which he crept into the cabin and shut the door behind him.

Vain precaution! A moment later there roared down on his cabin-roof such a slashing as he had never heard. Then followed another quiet, and in another instant something hit the stern of the cabin, and, amid the wrenching and splintering of timber and boards, the structure was wrung and crumpled, and then whirled away through the air, which seemed alive with snakes of fire.

Blindly, almost thoughtlessly, Jesse Meldew had clutched at the floor as he felt himself being sucked up. He caught his arm under the floor, through the well-hole in the corner. The other arm he locked through the hole under the bow deck, where he stored old metals and some tools. There he hung on grimly, while his feet were jerked up and he felt the very shoes torn off of his feet and his socks ripped from them.

In a minute the ravaging monster had gone by. Dragging behind it were torrents of rain, and the hull of the wrecked boat jumped up and down in the waves that sucked after the tornado. Meldew, dazed, stunned, pounded by the downpour, turned and crawled toward the bow. The hull was filling, and he knew that he must get ashore. He reached the bank and crawled up to the top.

Then he turned to find the Dales's boat. He stumbled along the bank, looking at the low-lying hulk which was spread down in the eddy. The cabin, the very gunwales, seemed to have been torn away. In place of the store-boat there was but a wreck.

Crying out with fear and anguish, Meldew slid down the bank, found the gang-plank, and made his way out into the hull. The deck had been ripped up, as though sticks of dynamite

had been exploded under it. In spite of the torture to his feet, he went on to the level of "the store floor. That floor was covered with all kinds of things from the stock; canned goods, broken crockery, bales and bolts and rags of wearing apparel.

He hurried over the debris to the stem of the boat, where the living-cabins had been. The roar of the rain and thunder filled his ears, but there were lightning flashes that revealed the scene in pictures. Up out of the floor through a hatch crawled a whiskered figure; then followed two bedraggled women.

"Ain't hit a mess!" shouted Old Dales. "We hearn hit comin', an' we went down in, like woodchucks! Yes, indeedy! Hue-e-e! We's all tore up, ain't we? Lawse, Lottie, theh's a lantern down theh in the hold—"

Meldew leaped into the hatch, and with a match from his water-proof safe, struck a light. When he came out on the deck, he found that the three had found something to put on in the stuff on the floor. Carlotta brought him a pair of mismated boots.

"Yo'll tear yo' feet all up," she warned him.

By the light of the lantern they began to work. It was the best thing to do, they said. The floor was, happily, water-tight, and the scuppers along both sides let the water run off, without too much flowing into the hold, which sounding at the well proved to be dry.

Dawn and daylight followed before long. The Dales laughed at each other, and Meldew heard Carlotta singing snatches of song:

" 'Just feed up the fiah, let the old smoke roll,
Burn up yo' cargo if yo' run out-a coal;
If we don't beat the record,' Billy told the mate,
'Send my mail in care o' Peter at the Golden Gate.' "

Meldew's boat-hull was just awash, and his motor-launch was stem first up the steep, caving bank. Everything seemed to have been carried away, even to the stove, cot and coal-scuttle. He paused in his work on the big hull to consider the devastation which the storm bad wrought.

"I saw a power-house, after a boiler blew up," he thought to himself, "and it wasn't tore up worse than what this is!"

Up the bank, in the woods, there was a lane a hundred yards wide, in which the trees were tossed about like driftwood. On some of the broken and twisted branches were draped rags and streamers. Sitting on a log, with its chimney still in place, unbroken, was a glass lamp which had been carried from the table in the Dales's boat.

They gathered bushels of canned goods which were scattered along in the storm's pathway on the river bottoms. Old Dales brought a tent up out of the hold of his boat, and they pitched it on the cabin floor, and a boxful of sand served as a fireplace, over which to cook their midday meal.

Not a cross word was said, and the three Dales laughed as they worked. Meldew worked faster and harder than all of them put together, and got more done. He was everywhere, and doing everything that needed doing. But he worked grimly, and as he worked Carlotta watched him covertly. It is in disaster that men loom up for what they are.

"You've said nothing about what's happened to yo?" she suggested, smiling.

"My launch is all right," he replied. "Soon as we get this straightened out, and what's left around carried on board, we'll tow down to Helena. It won't take long to put another good cabin on your boat. I thought last night the hull was all tore up, but the top strakes are all that's splintered, and they're not bad."

"But your boat?" she asked breathlessly.

"The hull's twisted. Here's where I beat it for Pittsburgh, soon's I get your daddy fixed up."

"You—you're going to leave the river how?" she asked, her voice choking.

"You bet!" he exclaimed. "When that wind was sucking me up last night I wasn't ready to go—not that way, but I'm going now, peaceable, while I may."

"Your—you don't like the river?" she persisted.

"Don't like the river?" he exclaimed. "After what it done to us? Well, not to any extent!"

She did not pursue the subject any further. The following morning, towing the big hull, Meldew drove his launch down the river, and they ran into the big Helena eddy. There he sold the launch to Dales for its cost, less use.

Over and over again Carlotta refused to go with him.

"No," she replied, though her heart was breaking, "I couldn't go, not now. Oh, Jesse, cayn't you see, I couldn't go now? The river—don't you see what old Mississip' is?"

"You bet!" he declared almost angrily. "I see what it is—tear you all up and twist you into a wuddle of paper and throw you away. Oh, I know all right! It took my cabin like it was a pasteboard box—"

"Ah—you seen hit, then?"

He hesitated. He puzzled over what she could mean. He recalled that struggle on the floor of his boat, while lightning played around and the whole earth seemed suddenly to be feathery and unsubstantial. He remembered the warning voices of the birds in the timber, and his own sudden starting up in that stillness of the early morning before the storm struck.

"I got to go back to Pittsburgh." He shook his head. "Look't what I can do now, having my second wind, and money to start with—"

"Oh, Honey!" She wept on his shoulder, but she would not go with him.

He caught a train up at the bottoms; he crossed at Memphis and took the fastest route to Pittsburgh. The smell of the soft coal was perfume in his nostrils, the roar of the metals was music in his ears, and he went up and down, finding old friends, looking into old shops, feeling the glare of melted steel on his cheeks again.

For days and weeks he searched up and down for just what he wanted. He had in his mind a machine-shop which would offer him a chance to grow, to expand and become one of those great steel workers of the modern age. He had the idea that this would be the worth-while of his life, and that he could return to the zest of his task as of old.

He found shops and small mills, into whose work he could have entered. The one he did go into, as an employee, was one, which he knew was for sale. He was seeking to learn the shafts, as he would say-to find out the little things of the shop life, so that he could know it from both sides, as employee and as employer.

As he stood over his lathe, however, his enthusiasm waned, and when he heard the tools "rauching," steel against steel in the slow turning machine, the noise grated on his nerves. Before going down the Mississippi he had loved that sound, and it had been a voice to stimulate his ambition promising him the ownerships of roaring shops and flaring furnaces.

Now he found his mind divided against itself. He had fled once before from the systematic conversion of ores into wonderfully intricate machinery, according to formulas and blue-prints. He had supposed that he was merely going away to rest, to get his bearings, to study out the second step of his own conversion from a mere machine into a maker of plans and a worker of formulas and blue-prints for his own devices.

He was conscious of a vague disappointment; the roar and the clangor, the whiff of burning coal, and the odor of special kinds of grease and oil, reminded him of sweeter, more attractive odors. His mind turned back, and he remembered the whiff of peach-blooms coming over the levees in scented

clouds across the gleaming river.

Fighting with himself, he strode forth from his day's work and paced through city streets, up and down, bent upon annihilating the weakness that was breaking through the very fiber of his character. He felt all his fine hopes, all the glories of his ambition, breaking up like crystal steel before the corrosion of perfumes and the decay of Sirenic flowers. While he struggled he strode along, unconscious of whither he was bound, and suddenly he emerged from the city and stood upon the bank of the Monongahela in the sunshine of a late spring afternoon. He saw a great fleet of barges like a row of beautiful, airy, white tenements, deep laden with four million bushels of coal, going down on the springtide, with the Boaz looming up at the stem.

"She's going clear down, the Boaz is," he muttered to himself, "clear down to N'Orleans. I never did get to go clear down there. There's four or five hundred miles of river thataway that I never did get to see. The coast, below Red River, and Natchez Bluffs, and then there's Chaffeli!"

Down to the river's edge the earth seemed to tremble with the pound, and the air seemed to roll with the thunder of machinery earthquakes and troubled mechanical demons, but out there in midstream it looked quiet and restful, and as he watched the great towboat going on in its business down past the forks into the Ohio, growing dimmer and dimmer in the gathering of smoke and vanishing day, his heart seemed to beat to a new tune and out of his soul was wafted the dust of breaking idols.

The river bottoms seemed fairly to beckon him to the quiet that was living; full of promise and peace, shot through on the instant by the song of a bird's pure, quavering, thrilling voice.

"Don't you hear it?" he seemed to hear a question.

"Carlotta!" he gasped, looking around him, startled, and almost expecting to see the girl who would not return with him to this terrible industry.

His old world had shed its glamour and attraction. He knew, now, that all his dreams of conquest had been machine-made and were not real nor according to his own soul's mandate. That year when he went away to get his perspective, to plan his future, had opened his mind to its real needs, its real desires.

"I see," he whispered. "I know now, girl!"

He turned on his heel, his old swiftness of decision and certainty of action returned; in full force. Within the hour he had found a cabin-cruiser which was exactly what he needed. He stormed to the chandler's and purchased the outfit. He packed his ice-box with ice and things to eat. He filled the tanks at the sign of "Gas," and when his boat was equipped he went aboard and headed in the night down the river, with its ten thousand shore lights in the first five miles.

He could hear the rumble of steel and steam; he could see the many colored flares from foundries: he sniffed through the odors of grease and gas and smoke, eagerly sensitive to the touch of spring blooms. He overtook the Boaz with her great fleet, and whistled to let the pilot know some one was coming. To the motor-boat's shrill toot the Boaz replied with low, vibrating grumbling throb.

"I'm a comin', gal, yes I am!" Meldew hummed an old song. "You bet I am a comin', gal. Railroad, plank-road, Tennessee Canal. On my way to draw my pay for standin' by my pal—"

All night long, and all the next day, and half the next night, he drove his boat at ten miles an hour, and six miles more by catching the current right. Then he anchored in an eddy, slept a few hours, and drove down the river again. So he made the forks at Cairo, and at Putney Bend he stopped in to ask where Old Dales's store-boat was.

"Last I knowed," Jim Pool, the medicine-man said, "she was down by Rosedale or

Arkansaw City."

At Memphis, Meldew took on more supplies, and as he neared Ozark Bend his heart was thrumming and his eyes were straining to catch sight of Bolivar Landing. Old Dales had landed in there, and his big store-boat's new cabin was white. Yes! There it was—ten miles away, a white, flickering streak of a mirage, but unmistakable over that down-grade of quicker-swinging spring-tide which was rising.

With his glasses Meldew stared at the store-boat. He could see the bright-red paint of the hull, and the bright-white paint of the cabin. The flag was flying from its pole—a new flag. On the top deck he could make out some one.

As the minutes passed, that some one resolved into a woman, and in the last half mile he knew it was Carlotta standing there leaning against the rail of the store-boat. She was watching the strange motor-boat through glasses of her own. He remained hidden in the pilot-house of the trunk cabin, so that she would not be able to see him.

He drove the boat down in the current along the eddy of Bolivar Landing, and as he went by he saw Carlotta relax and turn her glasses up the river again. Then he pulled the wheel hard over and turned his cruiser into the eddy and ran up alongside the big store-boat, with the propeller churning in reverse.

Stopping the motor, Meldew caught up a stern-line and, jumping to the deck of the store-boat, threw two half-hitches and took a bight on the line; then ran up to the top deck, where Carlotta turned to stare at him, not believing her own eyes.

"You came tripping down again?" she asked breathlessly. "You came back again—oh, Jesse!"

"I did! I sure did!" he exulted.

"I knew you would," she half sobbed.

A minute later—perhaps two minutes later—he raised his head suddenly to listen.

"Hark!" he exclaimed, as though they had been making a world of noise. "What's that?"

"The—the sawmill?" she faltered.

"No; no!" impatiently. "That bird a singing! I've been hungry to hear it. Hear it?"

"Oh!" she cried. "The oriole, the Baltimore oriole calling?"

"That's it," he laughed. "Did you ever hear it like that before?"

"Never, never!" she gasped. "Oh, and you can hear the birds singing, Jesse! I'm so glad!"

"Finest music in the world," he cried, "except one—"

"And that?" she asked, her voice chilled.

"You telling me you'll marry me now," he chuckled.

"But I—I—you didn't ask!" She turned away.

"I do now," he whispered. "We'll be plumb comfy on the rivers!"

"Anywhere—together!" she whispered. "Anywhere!"