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LOBSTER BLONDE

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

The Collision of Jenny Johnson's Fishing Boat with a Strange Raft in Fog-Obscured Waters Plunges Her into Sudden Peril

JENNY JOHNSON was a very weary young lady as she cautiously brought the *Toby II* toward the fog-blanketed pier. Dusk had fallen swiftly under the thick mantle of dull gray murk, and what she wanted most in the world was a warm tub, some dry clothing and rest.

The last thing she wanted was trouble.

She'd already had more than her share. The day had been one of those in which nothing had gone as ordered. In the first place, handling the lobster pots was a tough job for a girl.

But she'd been brought up on the shore, and with her brother Toby in the Merchant Marine and all the able men gone to war, she'd taken over with a

determination and stamina that were belied by her almost fragile golden good looks.

At the moment, however, she was ready to burst into tears. Some of the pots had been stuck, and the ropes had been more than usually covered with those live little stinging red strings passing jellyfish leave as a reminder of their greater deadliness.

To make matters worse, the sun had been terribly hot, and then had come the fog, making it difficult to find her markers and preventing needed relaxation on the run back to the dock.

The collision was the last straw. As the *Toby II* smacked squarely into the odd little raft that loomed up before it without warning, Jenny visioned damage suits and repair bills that would eat up the slim profits she'd been able to wring from the lobster run by the sweat of her tanned brow.

"Ach!" came the cry from an excited male voice, and a dimly-seen figure was tumbled out of the low boat he was paddling to splash into the water.

"This way!" she called, forgetting her worries in the greater responsibility of effecting a human rescue.

There was no answer to her cry—only the splash of swimming arms heading away from her.

THE boat she had rammed floated past her then, and her blue eyes widened. It appeared to have no shape she recognized, and was losing what vague form it had with a gentle hiss.

She gaffed it as something fell out of it and brought it aboard, surprised at its lightness till she saw it was the remains of a torn rubber raft.

Puzzled, she looked ahead barely in time to see the dock directly in front of her. Swiftly she cut the one-cylinder motor

of the *Toby II*. From somewhere nearby she heard wet footsteps running.

Then, in quick succession, came the shots – one, two, three. A man screamed and gurgled, and something heavy fell as the footsteps ceased.

"Holy smoke!" said Jenny.

"Who's there?" snapped a tall male figure, looming even taller as he moved toward the end of the dock.

"Jenny Johnson," said the girl.

She was scared and looked it. The man peered at her, revealing the polished hardness of his own not unhandsome features. Then he put the pistol he'd been carrying into a belt holster.

"Okay, Miss Johnson," he said, and his voice was menacing. "What in blazes are you doing out in this?"

"Bringing in my catch," she snapped, suddenly angry. She uttered a cry of protest as he jumped into the *Toby II*. "What about that man? You shot him?"

"What man?" queried the stranger icily.

"The man I rammed in that." She pointed toward the torn rubber raft. "The man you just—"

"Blast it all!" interrupted the grim stranger. "Why did you have to ram him? I'll take this if you don't mind."

"I do mind," she said, her blue eyes flaming dangerously. "You—you killed him."

"No such luck," said the man. "Now get out of this. It's no place for a girl."

He seemed to appreciate her slim lines for the first time.

"It's my dock," retorted Jenny. "I'll thank you to get out of here before I call Constable Craig. You have one heck of a nerve."

"Maybe I have to have," said the man with what might have been a touch of regret. "Don't hang around though."

He folded the torn raft, slung it over his shoulder, vaulted gracefully back to the dock and vanished in the fog.

Even more frightened to be alone, but determined not to let it throw her, Jenny slowly swung her catch up onto the dock.

Then, feet lagging for fear of what might lie ahead of her, she walked down the dock to the market along a cobbled street of the tiny town. But she found no trace of the man who had fled or of the grim stranger.

A GROUP of villagers appeared through the fog as she reached the market. They were clustered around its door, staring up the street. One of them, tow-headed, tanned and clad in dungarees, spotted Jenny and moved over to her.

“My catch is on the pier,” she said. “It’ll run about a hundred pounds. And what’s going on around here?”

“I’ll take care of the catch,” promised the young man. “You ought to let me unload it for you.”

“I’m a regular here, and I’m asking no favors, Jimmie. But what’s happening? I rammed a man in a raft. There was some shooting and then a man with a gun held me up and took the raft away.”

“Good Lord, Jenny!” exclaimed the young man, walking her back to the dock where her day’s catch was piled. “Nobody seems to know. I was behind the counter with an armful of mackerel when the shooting started. When I got outside, all I saw was a couple of men putting something in a car. Then your friend showed up.”

Jimmie paused, then asked a blunt question.

“You’re sure that this man didn’t take anything else from you?” he demanded, his eyes bright and alert.

“What do you mean, Jimmie?”

“Well,” he said, peering at her catch as

he stood there, “this is war time, you know.”

“A fat chance we have of forgetting it,” she said, “with three tankers going down just outside of the lobster runs yesterday.”

“Blast them!” he declared bitterly. “I’d like a chance at them.”

“I know, Jimmie,” she said, her voice gentle.

He had been rejected for both services because of the fact that a salvage job two years before had left him deaf in one ear. Jenny, who was moderately fond of him, felt a bit sorry about it.

“But a mysterious man coming ashore in a fog in a rubber raft in war time looks funny. And when there’s shooting and strangers with guns—well, perhaps he brought something with him. No one would be running the risk this man must have taken for nothing.”

“You must be psychic, Jimmie,” she murmured suddenly.

“How do you mean?”

There was excitement in his eyes.

Quickly Jenny told him of the barely-seen object that had slipped overside into the water as she gaffed the rubber boat.

“Jenny,” he said, his fingers digging into her arm, “could you find the place?”

“I guess so,” she answered doubtfully. “It was only a few yards from this dock.”

“You’re wonderful,” he declared and planted a quick kiss on her cheek.

“I don’t get it,” she said, pulling clear of him.

Jimmie was all right, but, outside of an occasional movie, their acquaintance was strictly business.

“Don’t you see?” he said excitedly. “If I can find this something—whatever it is—and turn it in, I might get some consideration from the powers that be, bum ear or no.”

NODDING doubtfully, the girl gazed at his strangely intense features. The idea sounded scatterbrained, possibly dangerous. But he'd been paying her top rates for her catches, and she didn't see how she could let him down.

"I see," she whispered. "But before you start anything, I'm going home, take a bath and get something to eat."

"Go to it," he said, and his excitement was infectious. "I wouldn't want to try it before dark. If it is something important, we don't want to tell the world. And there was shooting, remember."

"I remember," she replied grimly, wondering why she had decided to enter into anything so risky and probably profitless.

Walking to the trim little fisherman's house her parents had left her and Toby, she debated the wisdom of reporting her adventure to Constable Craig, then decided a hot bath was more important.

It was close to ten o'clock, and Jenny was drowsy when Jimmie rapped on her door. He had his jalopy with him, and the back seat was piled with paraphernalia.

"What's that?" she asked curiously.

"Diving equipment," he told her. "How am I going to look around under water at night without it? I borrowed it from one of my pals on the salvage boat."

"But your ear, Jimmie!" she protested. "Aren't you afraid that—"

"Heck no," he grunted. "The harbor isn't deep enough. Now here's all you'll have to do."

He gave her precise instructions as to how to help him while they drove the old car out onto the dock and parked it above the *Toby II*.

Getting the equipment into the *Toby II* was a cumbersome job, but Jimmie was strong and managed it. Before donning his diving suit, he adjusted the portable telephone over her chest, showed her how

to use it to communicate with him. Then he handed her an automatic pistol.

She looked at it wonderingly. The fog had faded, but the night was moonless, and from the distance sounded the drone of patrol planes and launches on the prowl for U-Boats.

"What's this gun for?" she asked.

"Just in case we have visitors," he told her. "Remember, there's sub activity out there, and things have been happening on shore. With those earphones on, you won't be able to hear much. So keep your eyes peeled."

"I will," she said. "Good luck, Jimmie."

He grinned, put on his heavy equipment, had her tighten the clamps that fastened the metal helmet to the rubber suit. Then, with a powerful flashlight clutched in his left hand, he slipped over the side.

When he reached bottom, he held the light towards the surface so that she could spot his whereabouts. After a brief interval he asked for directions in muffled tones.

"About fifteen feet half right," she murmured tensely.

It was a poor guess. She'd been fooled by the fog. The operation became absorbing, and she picked up some of Jimmy's high excitement as she directed him to possible spots where the object of his search might lie.

It took twenty-five minutes to find it, considerably beyond and to the right of where Jenny thought she'd spilled it. At last, however, she heard his muffled shout of success in the earphones.

Five minutes later, he was coming up slowly at the stern of the *Toby II*, thrusting a waterproof tan steel case, a case weighted with and lashed to a rock, over the stern sheets. His flashlight lit up the scene weirdly.

"I'll take that please," said a cool, hard voice.

With a gasp Jenny whirled and swung her gun toward the handsome hold-up man of the afternoon, who was halfway down the dock ladder.

He had an automatic pistol, and it was pointed directly at Jimmie's rubber-covered chest.

"I'll shoot!" warned the girl.

"If you do, he drowns," stated the stranger. "And you'll be in for a nice fat life sentence."

"They don't imprison women for shooting crooks," said Jenny.

"Granted," agreed the stranger, his voice thin and remote. "But they do for shooting F.B.I. men in pursuit of their duty—especially when it's war time espionage."

"Okay down there?" called a deep voice from the dock above.

"Okay," responded the hard-eyed stranger.

He took the gun from Jenny's nerveless fingers, put it in his pocket.

Jimmie, hopelessly awkward in his diving suit, made a move as if to slip back under water, but stopped when the other aimed menacingly at the air line.

Utterly bewildered, Jenny climbed back onto the dock ahead of the two men. There stood another stranger and, to her relief, Constable Craig.

"How come you're mixed up in a thing like this?" asked Craig, a husky, alert young specimen for all his rural title.

"I didn't know. I mean I—" she stammered.

"The heck she didn't!" scoffed Jimmie, emerging above the level of the dock. "She hired me to get this thing for her. I'm clean."

THE F.B.I. agent clambered hastily up after Jimmie and made him measure

his length on the dock with a savage smash to the chin. Blowing on his fist, he turned to the girl.

"It's my fault," he said. "I should have questioned you earlier, Jenny, but we had to get Bauer to talk before he was operated on. He'd just come ashore from a U-Boat. Two of my shots nailed him. He was unconscious until a short while ago when we forced him to tell us about himself. The minute he mentioned that chest falling in the water we rushed down here."

"Is he—?" the girl asked tremulously.

"He'll live, worse luck," said the F.B.I. agent. "And, Jenny Johnson, thanks to you we've got a complete outline of the Axis plan of campaign for espionage agents here with the names and locations of agents, plus a big wad of big bills they were going to use to finance their scheme."

"With the information contained in this chest we can crack down on key Nazi agents all over the country. We've already contacted the Navy and they've ordered out extra planes and patrol boats to hunt down that sub. Even Jimmie helped us without meaning to do so."

Jimmie snarled as Craig and the other F.B.I. man led him away. "But why would the Nazis bring such plans in by submarine?" the girl asked.

"Because, Jenny," said the F.B.I. man, lighting her a welcome cigarette, "these plans were so important they didn't dare trust them to any code transmission. They had to be delivered in person."

"The bay here is a perfect place for such delivery. It's isolated, not a shipping center, not a Navy or Coast Guard yard and not far from the coastal U-Boat lanes. Your friend Jimmie was planted here for the purpose years ago."

"His salvage work was a cover-up as well as a preparation in case he had to make sudden trips. His market job was to keep his ear to the ground, spread local

rumors and communicate with other spies inland if needed.”

“It’s hard to believe,” murmured the girl.

“Your brother believed it,” said the F.B.I. man. “He sends his love by the way, though I can’t tell you where his ship is. But he’d been suspicious of those ‘salvage’ jobs for some time.

“He’d caught some odd signaling going on. So he reported to us. We checked, caught Bauer, thanks to you. He told us all we needed to know about the whole affair.”

“I’d like to see Toby,” said the girl. “Will he be home soon?”

“Maybe,” said the F.B.I. man, smiling. “I can’t tell you definitely, but I think you’ll see him soon. Meanwhile, do you mind very much if I take you home now, Jenny?”

The girl looked at him there in the darkness. And even without a moon, she saw that his eyes weren’t hard any more.

“I’d love it,” she said. “What’s your name?”