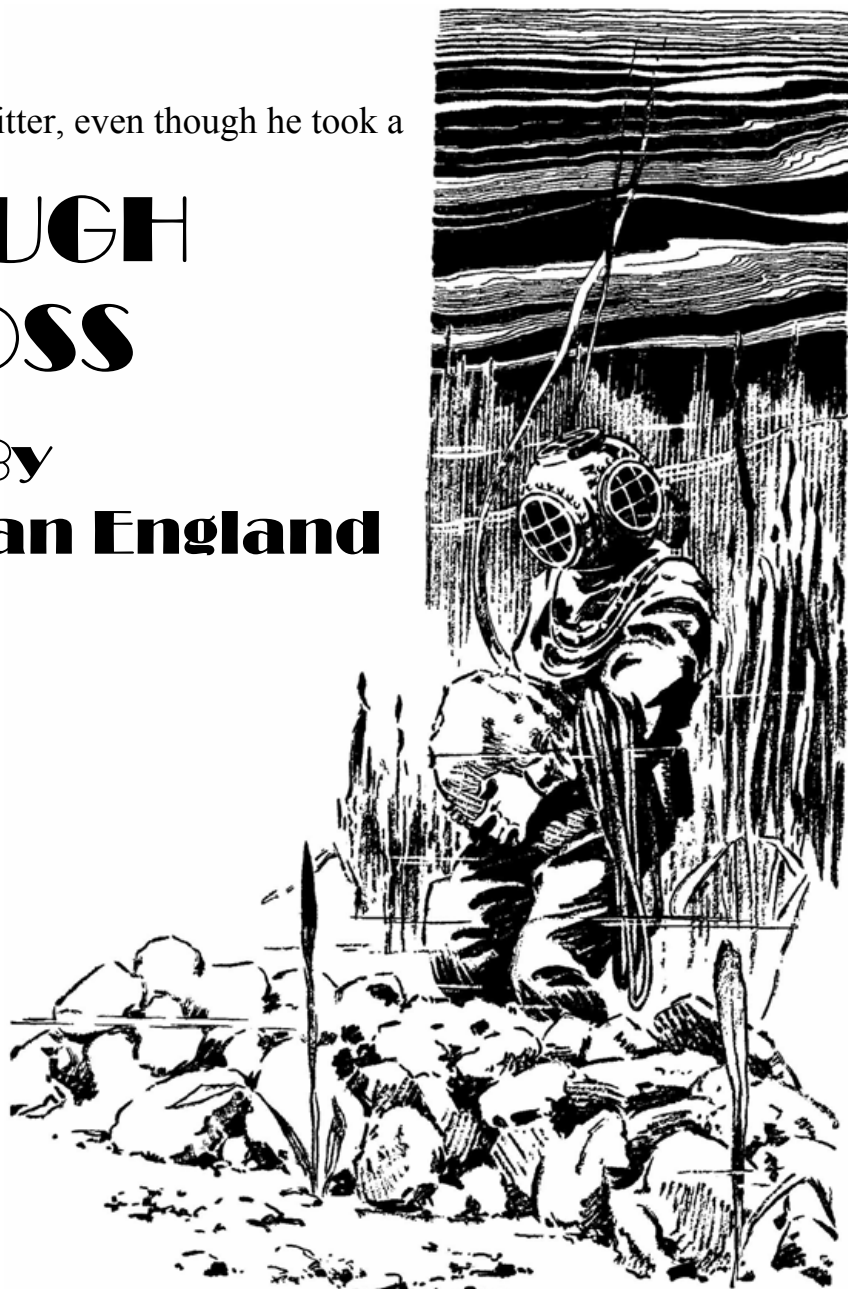


Tim Spurling wasn't a quitter, even though he took a

ROUGH TOSS

By
George Allan England



THE telegram arrived just as Tim Spurling, diver, was at breakfast with his wife in the kitchen. A leisurely, skimpy breakfast. When a fellow's out of work, been out of work for more than six months, why hurry? The wire said:

CAN YOU COME IMMEDIATELY CRYSTAL
LAKE RECOVER BODY STOP WIRE DECISION
COLLECT URGENT

DR S W OLIVIER

Spurling's lip tightened as he shoved the message over to his wife.

"Well, job at last!" he grunted. "And we need it, somethin' fierce!"

"Yes, but going down after a body ain't—"

"Tain't what I like, Blanche, that's a bet. Allus gives me the crawls, handlin' a stiff. But beggars can't be choosers. And then, too, case like this—"

"Well?"

"So much a day. Tain't like a contract job, or salvagin' stuff that the position of it's known. Carcasses drift round on the bottom. Ain't nobody can tell how long it'll take to locate one, and so—"

Blanche Spurling shot him a quick glance. She asked:

“You mean, even if you found a body, you could let on you hadn’t and get more pay?”

“Well, why not?”

“Wouldn’t that be cheating, or stealing, or getting money under false pretenses? Couldn’t they jail you for that, if it was found out?”

“Who’s to find out anythin’, underwater?” he retorted defiantly. “And besides, the way times is—Then, too, what we just found out about Bill—”

The diver’s wife sat brooding a moment. Not even the shaft of July sunlight slanting in through the window could make the table and kitchen other than drear and ugly. With an abstracted air the woman smoothed the hair back and away from her forehead, revealing deeper wrinkles than her thirty-six years should have graven there. Her brown eyes, studying the telegram, appeared to see through and beyond it; perhaps even away to the Arizona desert which alone, so their family doctor told them, could yet save the life of Bill, their only son.

“Yes, it’s T.B.,” the doctor had bluntly affirmed. “But it’s only beginning. Send the boy out West, and you can still save him. But if he stays here—”

“Us, send the kid West?” Spurling had queried. “Where would we get the jack to do that? Us, with our rent three months overdue, and a grocery bill with whiskers on it! Where would we get the dough?”

“Sorry. That part of it is beyond me, Spurling. All I can do is tell you what’s wrong with the boy, and recommend the treatment. He’s positively got to have a change of climate, or—well—”

And the case had stood right there. T.B. No cash to be had, no job, nothing to borrow on. And Bill, hardly sixteen, and their only child.

“Judas!” Spurling had ejaculated. “What a hell of a rough toss!”

His fist, hard clenched, had seemed knotted against whatever gods there be.

AND now, this job! Incredible, yet true. Things, after all, sometimes happened like that. Tim Spurling and his wife, silent a moment in the untidy dreariness of their little kitchen, eyed each other and felt hope reborn. This new job; did it not mean a chance for Bill?

“There, there, Blanche old kid! Don’t cry!”

Spurling went round the table and clumsily patted her shoulder.

“What’s there to cry for now, baby? Things is beginnin’ to come right for us, now, ain’t they? We’re beginnin’ to get the breaks at last, ain’t we?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “But say, Timmy, how’d you happen to get this here job, anyhow, I wonder?”

The diver scratched his unshaven chin; a square chin and a hard one.

“Search me! Reckon maybe it’s ‘cause I’m the nearest diver to Crystal Lake they could get hold of.”

“Yes, that’s prob’ly the reason.”

“Here, what you cryin’ for, now?”

“I’m not crying, Tim! That’s just something that got in my eye.”

Blanche dried her eyes on her apron, then reached for Tim’s hand a moment, and held it clasped in both her own hands, roughened by dishwater and the washtub. Her caress was awkward. Lack of practice, in the matter of caresses, had made it so.

Silence fell. Through that silence a muffled cough echoed from the next room—an ominous, deadly sound.

“But we’ll soon fix all that now, kid,” Spurling growled. “Job like this will bring a hell of a lot o’ dough.”

“How much, Timmy?”

“Hundred a day, at the very least. Maybe more. Depends on how much the stiff’s family’s got. Even though I got to pay my helper ten or twelve bucks per, there’ll be a swell clean-up.”

“Who you going to take along for a helper?”

“Jim McTaggart. He’s ‘bout the only guy I’ll trust to handle the pump and hose for me. When you’re down on the bottom and your life depends on another guy bein’ steady and reliable, the best ain’t none too good!”

“That’s right, too,” Blanche agreed. “Oh, if anything was to happen to you— But tell me, how many days’ll you need, to find—it?”

“How do I know? Depends on a lot o’ things. Size o’ the lake, how deep, and the like o’ that. This here job—if I have any kind o’ luck—might run into thick kale.”

Silence again. Blanche broke in.

“That there telegraph boy, out at the front door. He’s waiting.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Gotta send an answer, ain’t

I?”

Tim fished out a pencil from his pocket. Bending over the disordered table, he scrawled on the yellow blank:

Leaving at once. T.H. Spurling.

THREE hours later Tim Spurling and Jim McTaggart stepped onto the platform of the little station at Crystal Lake. He and Jim helped unload the diving gear from the baggage car, also the air pump. Two huge boxes contained this equipment, at which a duly impressed little knot of people gazed with silent wonder.

“Take you out to the lake, four miles,” said a loose-lipped man with a small truck. “Mr. Eccles—him that had his son drowned—told me to git you out there.”

“Oh, all right,” Spurling agreed. “Gimme a hand and we’ll load the stuff.”

When he and McTaggart and the truckman had loaded the equipment they got aboard, McTaggart sitting on the boxes in the truck body. Out of the village they jolted and away into the hills.

“Terrible thing to happen, ain’t it?” asked Spurling.

“Sure is,” the truckman agreed. “Havin’ millions, like old man Eccles, don’t pervert trouble. Only kid he’s got, too.”

“Yeah, I heard about it on the train. Only sixteen years old, they was tellin’ me. Yest’day p.m. They say he was a good swimmer. Quite a champ. He dove off a raft and never come up. Must of got a cramp or somethin’.”

“I reckon so,” assented the truckman. “Say, buddy.” His voice lowered. “I got a few words fer you before we git out to the lake. Can I talk to you confidential-like?”

“Why, sure. What’s on your chest?” Spurling’s blue eye showed surprise. “What’s the idea?”

“This here is just fer you, see? Not him!” The driver’s tone was below the hearing of McTaggart, on those boxes in the rear of the jolting, rattling truck. “How’d you like to clean up a nice little bundle o’ jack?”

“Jack? What you mean, jack?”

“A real bundle, that’s what I mean.”

“Sure I’d like it,” Spurling asserted. “That’s what I’m here for—big wages.”

“Ah, I don’t mean wages!” scornfully said the truckman, as they struck into a pine-arched road through forested hills. “How much they goin’ to

slip you fer this here job?”

“Well, four, five hundred bucks, maybe, dependin’ on how long it takes me to bring up the stiff. They ain’t easy to locate.”

“Hell, that ain’t a bundle! That’s jest chicken feed. S’posin’ you seen a way to grab off ten times that—five G’s. How ‘bout that?”

“Five G’s! Holy cripes, man! What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Pipe down!” the truckman warned. “If he gets wise,” and the truckman nodded backward, “it’s all off. This has got to be a man-to-man deal, ‘tween me and you. Say, buddy, can I talk cold turkey and be sure you won’t blow it?”

“Sure you can—though I ain’t agreein’ to nothin’ till I know what’s what.”

“And not to blame, neither. Well, anyhow, it’s like this. If you go down and make all the motions of tryin’ to find the body, but don’t find it, don’t let it never be found at—”

“You mean,” cut in Spurling, his heart beginning to pound, “you mean you’ll slide me five grand?”

“Yeah. That is, not me, exactly. But somebody’ll hand it to me to hand you. It’ll be worth that, to ‘em, and a good bit more. Git me?”

“No, damn ‘f I do!” the diver asserted, careful to keep McTaggart from overhearing. “Why the hell would it be worth thick money to anybody to keep a kid’s carcass from bein’ brung up?”

WELL, I ain’t exactly sayin’, buddy. But if I was to tell a fairy story, kind of, I might say as how once upon a time there was a lady, and she had a weak heart and her health was awful poorly. And she had a whale of a lot o’ coin. Well, she made a will, leavin’ a big wad to a certain relation. But then her son got drowned and she said she was goin’ to change that will and leave the money for a memorial library to remember him by. And the fact that she couldn’t git the boy’s body was drivin’ her crazy, or mebbe killin’ her. If she got it—”

“If she got it she’d prob’ly pull through and not die or go nuts. And she’d change the will and the relative would lose the dough?”

“Say, you got a headpiece on you, mister, as is a headpiece!” The truckman nodded warm approval. “You don’t hafta be told to come in outta the rain. And if you make a good job of it, why, mebbe that five grand might be stretched a bit, too. Savvy?”

Well, what say, buddy?"

"Hunh! Gee, I dunno!" And Spurling scratched his unshaven chin. His hand trembled slightly. In his throat, rapid pulses were beating "Five grand or even a bit more, eh?"

"That's right. Think it over, bo, but think fast. We'll be to the lake now, almost right off. Well?"

Spurling's head swam. His senses blurred. Money! Thick money! It all jumbled up with Blanche, Arizona, Bill and a dry cough, unpaid rent, debts, misery, and despair. And then, out of it all, he heard the voice of Blanche:

"You mean, even if you found a body, you could let on you hadn't and get more pay?"

"Well, why not?" echoed his own answer.

"Wouldn't that be cheating, or stealing, or getting money under false pretenses?"

"Who's to find out anythin', underwater? And besides, the way times is— And then, too, our Bill with the T.B."

Suddenly he straightened up. His brain cleared. The whirling stopped.

"Nix!" he exclaimed.

"Nix what?" asked the driver.

"Nix on that stunt. I couldn't do it. Thanks, a heck of a lot, but nothin' doin'."

"The hell you say! Why not?"

"Well—" And Tim seemed studying his fingernails. "It ain't the way us divers does business, that's all. What we're hired to risk our lives to do, we allus does the best we can. Ourn ain't a gyp game, for any diver as is a diver. So thanks, mister, but forget it!"

"Aw, hell, don't be a simp!"

"Never mind about that simp part of it!" And Tim's jaw grew taut. "I said 'No,' didn't I? Well, that means no! N-i-x, no! So—great weather we're havin', ain't it? Reckon it'll rain, to-morrer?"

MANY cars stood parked near the steamboat landing at Crystal Lake. Reporters and photographers had gathered. On the wharf a knot of curiosity-seekers thrilled with pleasurable anticipation as the truck backed up and as two husky men and a very grumpy-looking driver unloaded two huge boxes. The audience tautened, as the stage began to be set for a stirring real-life drama.

Now, with a businesslike air, a gray and thin little wisp of a man came forward.

"You're Spurling, the diver, of course?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"I'm Doctor Olivier. Coroner, as well as physician to the family of the victim. Glad you're here, Spurling. This is a terrible thing to happen."

"Sure, I know. I heard all about it, on the train and comin' out from the depot. Young feller named Gordon Eccles, just 'bout sixteen years old."

"Yes, that's right. He was diving from that float out there." The doctor pointed a lean finger at a raft with a springboard, some two hundred yards from shore. "I hardly see how it could have happened. He was a first-rate swimmer. Must have had a cramp."

"Sure, he must." And Spurling nodded his tousled head. "Happened yest'day p.m.?"

"Yes, about five o'clock. He never came up, at all. And—"

"Been any draggin' for him?" asked Spurling, while morbid folk crowded around.

"Dragging? Yes. Work has been carried on for hours, but no results. And the boy's parents—especially his mother—nearly insane. Their only child. What does all their money mean to them, now?"

"Not much, I reckon."

"And what," the doctor asked, "is your charge for this kind of work?"

"Me and my helper," replied Spurling, his blue eyes narrowing appraisingly, "two hundred a day."

"Two— Well, I suppose that's quite all right. How long is the work likely to require?"

"That depends. What's the depth, out there?"

"Sixty feet or so. Maybe more."

"Any currents?"

"So I understand. The lake is fed by springs. The outlet is a mile below here." Doctor Olivier pointed. "But you can find the body, surely?"

"With any kind o' luck, and if I have what I need to work with."

"What else do you need besides what you've brought?" the doctor queried, while the spectators absorbed it all with keenest interest. Among them stood the truckman, his face drawn into lines of disappointment and harsh malice.

"What else do I need? Well, I got to have plenty o' rope, and a sixteen-foot ladder weighted at one end, and somethin' to dive off of and hold my equipment—somethin' mighty solid."

"That's all arranged. We've had a float built." The doctor pointed where a massive float lay moored at the end of the wharf. "There's a

motorboat lashed to it, too. Take you anywhere you want to go, with your equipment and helper.”

“Fine!”

Spurling walked to the wharf end, stood and peered down, inspecting the float. He noted the quality of its huge beams. No cost had been spared.

“Hell!” thought he. “Maybe I’d oughta of asked two hundred and fifty!”

A LONG gray car swung to a stop at the steamer landing. Out of this car, as a chauffeur opened the door, a man came stumbling. This man was fifty-odd, and he looked seventy. His legs shook. Sunken, dead-seeming eyes blinked in the July sun, out of a lined and waxen face.

“Him?” grunted the diver, with a jerk of the head.

The doctor nodded.

The drowned boy’s father advanced uncertainly. Eager cameras clicked. Pencils danced across notebooks. Not every day could Harrison T. Eccles, financial colossus, be caught in agony for the world’s delectation.

“Are you the diver?” he asked, in a perfectly flat voice that seemed to be the voice of some queer mechanism.

“Yes, sir.”

“How soon can you get to work? It’s very important.”

“Right off.”

“And how long—”

“Well, as I was just tellin’ the doctor, it all depends. It’s all accordin’ to depths and currents, and the like o’ that.”

“Of course. But you’ll do your best—your quickest! I’m not appealing to you for my own sake. It’s his mother. She—she’s—”

“Sure, I know, mister! Reckon I know what a mother thinks of her son. I’d oughta!”

“You have a son, too?”

“Yeah. Just one. And he’s—but never mind. I’ll do what I can. Can’t promise nothin’, o’ course. It’s that uncertain, divin’ is. But whatever I can do I will!”

The millionaire’s thin hand went out. The diver’s massive one enfolded it.

“Reckon I oughta know what an only son means!” repeated Spurling. “And you can count on me, mister, for all I’m worth!”

Under the watchful eyes of the crowd now constantly growing, and the bitter, hostile gaze of

the truckman, Spurling and McTaggart unloaded their equipment from the wharf onto the waiting raft. Doctor Olivier meantime sent for a rope and a ladder, weighted as the diver had specified.

Presently Spurling, McTaggart, and the doctor got aboard the raft. With them they took three reliable workmen to help with the air pump and to do other work. The pump and diving gear, when laboriously lowered by ropes to the raft, fascinated the spectators now lining the string-piece. The atmosphere fairly vibrated with electric tensions of excitement. Never had Crystal Lake known so thrilling a day as this.

Presently the motorboat towed the float out to the raft whence young Eccles had taken his fatal plunge. Spurling had the float anchored there with long ropes lashed to heavy grate bars.

The drowned boy’s father drove away. Silent and hollow-eyed, he went back to his stricken wife. It lay not in human nature for him to stay there on that wharf, waiting for those deep and cold waters to give up the dead.

But it lay very much in human nature for townfolk and gentlemen of the press to snatch all the boats available, and hover around the scene. A couple of newsreel scouts set up a movie camera in a boat and began grinding out footage.

“Now then,” Spurling directed McTaggart, “let’s get busy and unpack. We got to test the pump. Sixty, seventy foot; that’s quite a dive!”

“Think you’ll locate the body close by here?” queried the doctor.

“Search me! Might be ‘most anywhere, by now. Might even o’ drifted out the lake, down the outlet—no tellin’. We got to keep tryin’, movin’ round till we locate it.”

“When is it likely to rise?” cut in a reporter, from a boat that had edged near.

“Can’t say,” the diver answered. “In this here cold water tain’t likely to rise, at all. And, by the way, you get out o’ there! Think I want to get all balled up with a bunch o’ butters-in? Scram!”

He turned to help McTaggart bolt the heavy iron flywheels and handles to the pump shaft, to test the compression on the air gauges, then to unpack the diving suit.

The workmen were meantime lashing the weighted ladder to the edge of the float. A quarter of it rose in air; the rest hung down into the pale-green waters, so cold, so deadly.

UNPACKED, the diving suit sprawled on the float, with oddly turned-in feet, with loose arms tipped by rubber wrists. The suit looked like a fantastic burlesque of a body, a bizarre mockery of humanity.

Then, Spurling laid out the massive metal breastplate and the goggly-eyed helmet, its windows crisscrossed by thick bars. His brain seemed humming, as he worked. Five grand! Five thousand smackers! And Bill with the T.B.! And far below, a dead boy's body—the body of an only son—and somewhere, a mother going mad and dying.

"Hell, I got to buck up!"

Spurling bucked up. He forced himself to unroll and to examine the black rubber hose whereon his very life was to depend. Painstakingly he inspected the lifeline, and connected hose to pump, making sure all joints were tight and absolutely perfect.

His mind seemed blurred and queerly confused, but his hands were deft as he oiled the helmet valves. Sitting down on the float he took off his worn shoes, tucked his trousers into his socks, soaped his hands, then struggled into the heavy suit.

Around Tim's neck McTaggart now laced the apron. Tim Spurling had already lost much of his human semblance, had assumed the guise of some extraordinary monster. He lubricated his soaped hands with water, then drew on the rubber bands that were to keep his arms dry.

"All right, the breastplate!" he directed, while reporting went on apace, and townsfolk thrilled. Even Doctor Olivier forgot to feel professional sympathy for the bereaved millionaire and his wife, in the interest of watching this singular procedure of a diver preparing for his work.

Rare sensation, this; a diver descending into fashionable Crystal Lake, for the body of a magnate's only son!

"Gimme a drag, Mac," ordered Spurling. "I gotta have a drag before I go down!"

Mac lighted a cigarette for him. Puffing deep lungfuls of smoke, Spurling stood up and let his helper fit the breastplate studs into the rubber collar of the dress. McTaggart made the plate fast. Faint *tinks* of metal sounded, blending with a quiet *lap-lap-lap* of water round the float. At a little distance, conversation buzzed, speculation passed from boat to boat. Now or then more cars arrived at the wharf. More, ever more curiosity-seekers gathered there.

Bright sun, cheerful sky, and dazzling clouds all made it gay, all of them mocked the mystery of human grief.

"Now, them shoes!" Spurling commanded.

His helper drew on the heavy rubber shoes, buckled them over the clumsy feet of the diving suit.

"Weights, Mac."

"Goin' to use the foot weights, too?"

"Nope. I'll chance it without 'em. Can get round better with just the belt."

MCTAGGART fitted on the leather belt, sagging with more than eighty pounds of leaden pigs. He fastened the buckles that, in case of accident, Spurling could unsnap in a jiffy for quick ascent. Then he tied the lifeline under his chief's arms and secured it to the breastplate stud. After screwing the air hose firmly to the plate, he led it under Spurling's left arm and fastened it in front.

"Ready for the helmet, now?"

"Yep!" And Spurling, with a final eruption of smoke, threw the cigarette away. "Get ready to start the poison, there. Take it easy, boys, but keep goin'. Start twistin', now!"

As the huge round helmet closed over his head, and with a quarter-turn was screwed home and fastened, he became wholly unreal. His eyes peered dimly from those cross-barred windows, as though from another world.

Two men at the handles of the ponderous wheels, began slowly and steadily turning. Mac tapped his "O.K." on the helmet. Spurling dragged himself to the ladder. Clumsily he wallowed down it.

Now his suit began puffing with air. As the water took him, he moved more easily. Down, down he sagged; then with a crab-like, sidewise motion, slid off the ladder. McTaggart, at the edge of the float, held the lifeline and air hose in careful, experienced hands.

As Spurling sank, the line still partly supported him. Cameras did their best. Pencils leaped. Boats crowded in, despite Mac's snarled warnings to stand clear. With a swirling twist, Spurling wavered down into the lake. His vast eyes of glass and metal blurred away into the cold green deeps. They faded, vanished. A line of bubbles rose and broke, flinging fine spray into the summer air.

Water eddied round the float. Steadily the line and hose, paid out by the watchful Mac, ran away.

Already far below, the diver was sinking down and down, into regions of unreality and dream.

SPURLING felt not the slightest uneasiness, so far as just the diving itself was concerned. Hundreds of times he had been down, often in swift rivers or in the sea itself, far deeper than this. Many a time he had risked his life exploring perilous wrecks where rotten timbers might have fallen and jammed, where octopuses and sharks might have lurked. This job, now, in a sheltered lake was different.

“Cinch!” thought he. “If it wasn’t for bein’ a stiff that I’m after, it’d be a cinch!”

How he hated diving and groping for stiff!

Oh, yes, he’d recovered not a few, in his time, from wrecks. But they made bad salvage. They were liable to do such singular and gruesome things. Under the compelling urge of water, they sometimes moved so convincingly, in ghastly imitation of life.

Once, he remembered, he had been fairly terrified away from a job by a body that had refused to be salvaged; a body that, three separate times, had jerked itself free from his grasp. Spurling had had to come up, take off his suit, and gulp nearly a pint of raw liquor before he’d been able to go down again and discover that the body—an old sea captain—had been caught in a loose bight of rope.

And Spurling had never forgotten that nerve-tingling experience. It had made him corpse shy. But as for the mere diving, itself—why, nothing to it!

“It’s only the damn stiff I don’t like,” thought he, as he slid down, ever down into the darkening waters. “That’s all, just the stiff. How I hate to handle ‘em! But two hundred smackers a day—”

Looking out through the thick glass, he perceived a vague greenish light, still faintly shot through by slanting sun rays. A certain uneasiness had begun to develop in the hinges of his jaw. He opened his mouth, shut it, to loosen the pressure on his eardrums; and constantly he swallowed.

“Oughta have a wad o’ gum to chew,” he reflected. That always helped. Too bad he’d forgotten the gum. But never mind; he’d get by without it. Only the lack of it somehow disconcerted him.

His ears commenced to feel as if he had a cold. But that was nothing. Many a time, diving, he’d

suffered real pain, especially on top of his head. When that grew too severe it meant coming up. But as yet, nothing bothered Tim Spurling; nothing but his grim errand.

All sensations of weight were vanishing now; strangely fading away. Gravitation claimed hardly more than thirty pounds, from his hundred and eighty of bone and muscle, from his ponderous gear, lead weights and all. Never did a human being move, atop the earth, as lightly as now Spurling when he set foot on the hard, rock-tossed floor of Crystal Lake.

“Gee! Well, I’m down, anyhow!” he said to himself, as he gave Mac the “on bottom” and the “O.K.” signal. Dimly an unreal, isolated, mysterious world surrounded him. Everything had grown eerie and unnatural.

A sense of utter isolation, of supreme unreality possessed the diver. He was only about seventy feet away from other men, but he might have been a million miles. Far from imaginative though he was, still he sensed this extraordinary unreality which always took place in every dive.

Startled fishes flicked away; or, growing bolder, circled, backed, and nosed waveringly about him. One bumped the glass of his helmet. It sounded like a small volcanic explosion. Regularly, *tunk-tunk-tunk*, something pulsated in his crackling ears. That slight noise of the pump was comforting. Yes, after all there must be another world; a world of reality, where men dwelt. A world in which McTaggart was keenly watching; in which the diver’s wife was waiting; in which Bill, their son—

Thoughts of the boy stabbed Spurling. For a time he had forgotten the boy, the doctor, the verdict of T.B. Now all this surged back sickeningly. Spurling remembered why he was here, what he had come for.

“Hell of a job!” he growled, inside his goggle-eyed helmet. “But I gotta do it. We need the money, and I gotta go through!”

He stood on the bottom of the lake, peering about him in that unreal and ghostly dimness. Off at his right he could just make out the grate bars that anchored his diving float, and beyond them two immense cubes of concrete with ring bolts, that held the swimming raft. Vague ropes led upward. Muted though all illumination now was, his vision was growing used to it. He perceived this watery world in hues of green gloom. Sinuous plants waved mysteriously beckoning arms. Off at one

side lay a jet-black patch—the shadow of his diving float, far above.

“Where the devil an’ all, now, is that stiff?”

Vainly he looked. Nothing at all in guise of a drowned body was visible. He felt his air pressure rising a bit too high. To lower it, he slightly cracked his pet cock valve. Crowding upward, bubbles chased one another toward the surface.

The job he had to do, Spurling realized, might be long. Had currents drifted the body, the raft would have to be moved. No telling how much time it might take.

“But it’s a hundred and eighty-five bucks a day, clear, for me,” he thought. “And we gotta have at least five hundred, to save Bill. Three days’ll give us the five, and a little over. I only wisht it would take three days!”

THEN, almost before this desire had registered, he saw the object of his search.

Yes, there it lay, hardly twenty feet from one of the big concrete cubes. Dim though the down-filtering light was, none the less that light revealed the son of Eccles, the millionaire, sunk in a hollow amid plant-grown boulders.

The boy lay on his right side, clad in a blue bathing suit. The face was averted; one arm outstretched as if in final, agonized protest against death.

Spurling’s first reaction was an exultant:

“Found him, by gosh!”

But on the instant a devastating thought surged through his brain:

“One day’s work—only a hundred and eighty-five bucks. And—and how about my kid?”

A little dazed, groping more perhaps in mind than in body, he started toward the other man’s son. Against smothering resistance at that great depth, he walked with circumspect caution, lest he lose his footing. Once that should happen, quick as a flash he might turn topsy-turvy, hang upside down, helpless and imperiled. His own life—no, he mustn’t lose that, now!

Almost weightless, he moved. His heart was pounding thickly as an overtaxed pump.

“Our Bill! What about our Bill, I’d like to know?”

Yes, furiously, Tim Spurling, diver, was thinking about his only son. A sick and quivering sensation gripped and shook him. Only one day’s work.

“What the blazes good is one day’s work to us, now?”

After all that Blanche and he had hoped and planned on, from this job, just one day’s work. What the blazes, indeed?

He thought of Blanche, mother of the boy now doomed to death. Then his mind nickered round to this drowned boy’s mother and father.

“They’ll suffer, if this kid don’t come up. Sure they’ll suffer like the flames o’ hell, if I don’t bring him up. Yeah, but what about us?”

Over him surged the words of the loose-lipped truckman:

“If you make a good job of it, why, mebbe that five grand might be stretched a bit, too.”

Five grand, and then some! Five thousand dollars and more, plus his wages for a few days’ work—all of six thousand or better! And for what? Why, for just doing nothing at all. For just seeing nothing, down there where nobody could check up on him. For just finding nothing, bringing up nothing.

Had ever a man in all this world been left so starkly alone with his own conscience? In all of life, could any possibility exist, for Tim Spurling, of so much money being won by so little effort? Money, money that now meant life itself to his boy, life to little family!

TIM felt strangely dizzy and sick. Heart pounding and air pump throbbing hammered his brain with maddening tempo, as he stood there in that green gloom and peered down at the corpse, and tried to think.

Just a dead body, the body of a very rich man’s son. That was all—cold flesh and bones. And what on earth good, in bringing that up? Oh, yes, of course, it would give back to a father and a mother the thing they longed for; a lifeless thing, but still passionately desired. Without it, of course they’d agonize.

“But how ‘bout us, if our kid dies? How ‘bout us, watchin’ our Bill die? How many dead boys is one live boy worth?”

Tim Spurling seemed to hear words, echoes of his own speech hardly an hour ago:

“Nix on that stunt. I couldn’t do it. Thanks, a heck of a lot, but nothin’ doin’!”

And then the truckman:

“The hell you say! Why not?”

“Well, it ain’t the way us divers does business,

that's all. What we're hired to risk our lives for, we allus does the best we can. It ain't a gyp game, for any diver as is a diver. So thanks, mister, but forget it!"

Already he was stooping to pick up the body. It would weigh almost nothing. A signal on the cord, and with the millionaire's son in his arms, Tim Spurling could in less than no time be back up there at the diving float. Already he was reaching for the body.

But there before him, suddenly he beheld—plain as if reality—the pinched, hollow, and suffering face of his own boy. The terror-stricken and hopeless eyes of his wife. Eyes now all too often red with secret weeping.

"What a fool I am!" growled the diver, his brain clearing. "This here kid don't go up, now nor never! I don't locate him, and no other diver don't, neither. And that is that!"

Still stooping, what he picked up was not the body, but a weed-grown rock. Then another, and still another, and many more. Presently the body had vanished under layers of stones which so perfectly masked it that never could any diver locate it, no matter what his skill might be.

"Six thousand bucks!" thought Tim Spurling, as he straightened up from this macabre task. "I'll put in at least three days, and collect both ways. Make a good job of it, while I'm at it. And any man as wouldn't do the same, to save his own boy's life, he'd be a quitter an' a coward, on top o' bein' a poor damn fool!"

All of a sudden very weak and trembling, he wanted to regain the upper air. Then after a while he could go down again, could continue the fictitious search. But for now, he must quit a spell.

TIM twitched the signal rope, felt an upward pull, saw the lake bottom slide down and away. Down, away, with that pile of stones under which lay a secret that only he knew. Only he, in all this world! Light strengthened, pressure steadily diminished. And then quite suddenly he saw the weighted bottom of the ladder. He grappled it, climbed up, emerged monstrous and dripping, his helmet goggling over the edge of the float.

McTaggart and a couple of others gripped and hoisted him. Up and out he came, while cameras were busy and eager eyes watched from boats and from the float. Sitting down on the edge of the float, he motioned for McTaggart to unscrew his

helmet and take it off.

"Whew!" he breathed, deep-lunged and glad of air not pumped through a rubber hose. "Gimme a drag!"

"Find anythin'?" Mac eagerly queried.

"Not yet."

Another voice cut in—a trembling voice, a woman's:

"But you will? You *will*?"

Astonished, Spurling turned his head. He blinked in the sunshine that cut his eyes after the vague obscurity of the depths. Beside the float he saw a motor launch, all brass and varnish, with a uniformed mechanic at its gleaming engine. In wicker chairs, aft, a man and a woman were sitting—Eccles and his wife.

"Look a here, mister!" Spurling reproved the millionaire. He felt aggrieved, to have these two hanging round while he was at work. "See here, now. You hadn't oughta be here. This here ain't no place for you two!" His clumsy, rubber-gloved hand sketched a crude gesture. "No place, 'tall!"

"I know it," the magnate assented, while listeners stretched their ears. Eccles, for all the heat of that July day, was shivering. His body shook as with a palsy. "I know it, but—"

"I had to come. I had to!" put in his wife. "I couldn't stay away and wait—"

Spurling's lip tightened with acid disapproval. An extraordinary and grotesque figure—with his head, seemingly far too small, projecting up out of that vast suit—he looked at the dead boy's mother. And what he saw was human agony, raw and bleeding.

The diver understood. The woman's sunken eyes and pale lips, her deep-lined face, told the whole story. This story was underscored by her quivering fingers that tightly clutched the arms of the wicker chair.

"If you only knew," the mother half-whispered. "If you could only understand what it means to lose an only son!"

"Reckon I do ma'am," answered the diver. "Or reckon I will, pretty soon."

"Why—how—"

"Well, I got a kid o' my own, see? 'Bout the same age as yours was, and he's dyin'. Arizona's all that'll save him. But Arizona ain't for us. Huh! Fat chance we got o' that!"

"Oh!" breathed Mrs. Eccles comprehendingly, while the reporters pounced on a wonderful human-

interest story. "You mean you've got a—"

TELL me," the millionaire brusquely cut in. "You haven't found anything, yet? No sign, no indication?"

"Nothin', so fur. Not yet."

"But you will? You're going down again, right away?"

"Yeah, pretty soon. Quick as I rest up, a little, and get this cold out o' my bones."

"And you'll find my son?" asked the mother. "You will, won't you?"

"Well, gee, I'll try."

"No, no! Promise you'll find him. Oh, don't you see, you've got to?"

Tim Spurling began to feel very queer and sick again. Something seemed to have hold of his guts and to be twisting them. He blinked as he looked that woman fair in the eyes. Between the float and the motor launch extended a distance of not more than four feet. Between Tim Spurling, workman, and those two millionaires, stretched infinity. But something strove to bridge that infinity.

Under the compulsion of this something, under the fever of that stricken woman's look—that appealing, agonized, crucified look—Spurling felt his plans all riven, cast awry and wrecked.

"Hell!" he tried to rally himself. "Don't be a quitter and a fool!"

But it was no good. For the woman was speaking again.

"Your own boy—you say he's very ill?"

"Yes. T.B."

"What's his name?"

"William. But o' course we call him just Bill."

"And how old?"

"Sixteen, ma'am. Your boy—same age?"

She nodded. He saw tears gleaming in her faded eyes.

"Please get away from here," he begged. "I'm goin' down again right away, and when I come up mebbe you better not be here." He appealed to the millionaire. "See here, Mr. Eccles. Get her out o' here. Won't you take her away, please?"

"He's right, Valerie," the magnate assented. "We really ought to go." He gave a word of command to the mechanic at the engine. Then, to Spurling: "You're going down again, right now?"

"Yeah. Just as quick's I have a smoke and a bit of a rest. And you can count on me. I'll do the best I can!"

As the powerful engine started, and the motorboat purred away with those two lonely, sorrowful, rich, death-stricken figures, Tim Spurling gazed after them with tragic eyes.

"The best I can, for you," he thought. "That means the worst for us!" Aloud: "You there, Mac—light me a tack, can't you? Gee, that water's awful cold, down there. I sure need a smoke. I sure need it worse'n I ever needed one in all my life!"

TIM SPURLING, that same evening, stood on the platform of the Crystal Lake station with McTaggart, his helper. Their diving gear, all boxed up again, was waiting to be lifted aboard the baggage car of the 7:17, that had already whistled far up Swiftwater Valley.

"Damn short job, Tim," Mac was complaining. "Seems like we ain't got no luck at all."

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no. What's good for one, is bad for another. Everybody can't have all they want."

"Sure, I know. But—"

Down the road swept a long gray car. It slowed, stopped at the station. A chauffeur opened its door. Out stepped Eccles.

The last fading of sunset over the mountains showed his face, which though still grief-ravaged was more at peace. He even managed a wan bit of a smile as he came toward the diver.

"I wanted to thank you again, before you left," he said, quite simply. "We'll never forget it, my wife and I. Never forget what you've done for us."

"Oh, that? Well, it's just my job, I reckon."

"Perhaps. But at any rate, we want to send your boy something. You'll take it to him, won't you?"

"Send my boy somethin'?" And Spurling's eyes widened. McTaggart was all curiosity. "Why—what could—"

"It's a memorial. Something in memory of our own lad."

The envelope from Eccles's pocket passed to Tim Spurling's hand. Amazed, the diver stared at it.

"This here; it's—"

"Call it life, if you will," smiled Eccles. "It's a check made out to William Spurling. I've signed it. Your boy can fill in the amount. Be sure he makes it enough to get him well and strong. To keep his hold on life—life that, once gone, can never be brought back by all the millions in this world!"

More loudly echoed the train whistle. A

glimmering headlight sparkled into view.

“Why, my gosh, I—I been paid, already,” stammered the diver. “I can’t take this and—”

“You’re not taking it. It’s your boy’s. Goodbye, Spurling, good luck to you and yours!”

A handclasp. A silent look that passed, not now between workman and millionaire, but from man to man, father to father. Then Eccles, turning, was gone.

The headlight glare strengthened. Brakes began

to grind. The train slowed at the station.

“Gee whiz, Tim!” ejaculated McTaggart, as his chief’s face was for a moment brilliantly illuminated. “What the devil? Why, you’re cryin’!”

“The hell I am!” Spurling indignantly retorted. “It’s just a cinder in my eye. This damn soft coal, and all! If you don’t know when a feller’s got a cinder in his eye— Say, gimme a drag, can’t you? I sure need it!”