

# THE SOLE SURVIVOR

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**A**BBOTT, CURLED UP on a pile of straw in an empty freight car, awoke with a start. He sat up in the pitchy dark and rubbed his eyes. With the regularity of clockwork, the car trembled, swooped downward, then rose again.

"Pshaw! I must've ben more'n middlin' drunk this mornin' when I climbed into this car! Never woke up when they switched 'er, nor when they put 'er on the ferry. S'pose I'm halfway acrost Lake Michigan by now!" he said mildly.

His tone implied that he would have appeared shame-faced if there had been any light. An icy blast of wind from some unseen crack sent him burrowing into the straw.

"Wind's hauled 'round into the Northeast. She's sure pitchin' some, too. Must 'a' come on to blow hard, right quick."

He drew his knees up against his chest, and lay listening to the crash and hiss of the pounding waves.

There was no fear in Abbott's heart. Instead, it was warmed by a nameless exhilaration. It had been a long time since he had been out on "Michigan" in a blow; but he had weathered a good many, boy and youth, in and out of Bagley on the "East shore."

The car ferry's long slide from wave-crest to wave-crest took his mind back; and he lay in the dark and communed with his memories, as every

own worst enemy. His muscles were hard, his fingers tangle; but the wires that connected them with his brain were badly strung. The path of least resistance invariably bore the imprint of Abbott's feet. The monotony that he found in toil was one of his curses, and red liquor was its twin. The former had kept him "hiking" from Florida to Puget Sound, by the way of the Philippines. The latter was responsible for his being at the moment aboard a car ferry in the middle of Lake Michigan, when he had intended to go to Buffalo and land a nice, warm, winter job as a porter.

"I'd like to know if Jimmy Burke's still in Bagley," ruminated Abbott. "I'll bet Jimmy's worth a piece o' money by now. He was the kind that 'd get on."

Jimmy Burke had been the foremost youth in Bagley. To him had belonged the prestige of having for a father old Jake Burke, who owned the biggest fruit farm in the county. Jimmy had not been popular with many of the town boys. His bullying manner had drawn him more than one licking. However, that very manner had won for him the doglike devotion of Abbott. He recalled how he had been Ruth Hawley's "steady company" till Jimmy began to come up to call. Some how, he had felt in the way after that; so he had sort of dropped out, and given his idol a clear field.

"I s'pose Ruth's married to him by now. She had too much class for anybody but Jimmy," he said softly. "I expect he'll be mayor o' Bagley some day."

In Abbott's eyes, that was the least the town could offer Burke. As he lay still and dreamed his dreams, the battering of the waves became a singing monotone that made him drowsy. He snuggled deeper into his nest of hay, and dozed off.

A dull, thudding jar, from up forward, set him broad awake again. A shivering of the hull followed it. He leaped to his feet, his heart pausing between beats. Dimly, he wondered how long he had slept.

"She's goin' ashore!" he gasped.

Another grinding crash directly beneath him sent him sprawling to his knees. With his heart pounding as if it would shake his ribs loose, he sprang across the car to the door and leaned against it, listening. He heard a scurry of running feet pass his shelter. Through a crack in the door, he glimpsed the flash of a swaying lantern. From above, there came to his ears a volley of hoarse shouting. He could not distinguish the words; but that second, sodden blow had told

Abbott that the ferry was not ashore.

"She rode over somethin'—a hulk most like," he explained to himself.

Suddenly, a voice at the very end of his car shrieked:

"She's fillin'! That second wallop stove us!"

Abbott sprang into life. He set his weight against the door of the car; but it held firm against his frantic tugging. For the first time that night, he was afraid. There flashed across the screen of

his brain, a picture of a freight car wallowing down under a flood of icy water, and the figure of a man crowding and battering breathlessly against the roof, like a rat in a cage.

"Hey! Le'me out!" he yelled.

"Where are ye?" came an answering voice.

"Here! In the freight car!"

He heard the crunch of boots. Fingers fumbled at the sealed door. It rolled back, and he leaped out before a lurch of the vessel should slam it shut again.



"Ain't you scared?" asked the sailor who had let him out

man will do once in a while. He had not seen or heard of Bagley in ten years. Since he had last picked the sand burrs of the old town off his trousers, he had been around a bit; picking oranges in California, working on the levee at New Orleans, even soldiering a spell in the "P. I's."

Abbott was not a hobo, save in the sense that he did most of his traveling in the "side door pullmans." He always went to work as soon as he struck a new town. His was the type that is its



"Aash—craaash— aash— aash!" hummed the call of the wireless

Through the open stern of the ferry, Abbott caught a glimpse of ridge upon ridge of white-crested waves. They looked like writhing lines of cotton upon a background of dead black. He heard the thousand creaks, groans, rattles, scrapes of a vessel in heavy weather. A car ferry is not particularly buoyant.

"Right smart of a blow," he remarked.

"Ain't you scared?" asked the sailor who had let him out.

"Me? I been brought up, boy and man, on this lake. I ain't afraid o' her."

"Thought you might be a lubber."

Abbott shook his head. Neither made any further reference to his presence in the freight car.

"What'd we hit?" questioned Abbott. "Felt like a lumber barge."

"Guess it was. Whatever 't was, 't wan't even awash. Nobody seen it. The old girl's stove up some, aft."

The sailor turned and led the way through an aisle of straining freight cars. As he started up the companionway that led to the main deck, he looked back at Abbott with a shame-faced grin.

"I'm always afraid them cars'll get loose. Them shackles don't look so darn strong. I ain't been ferrin' long."

Clinging to the rail, the two men staggered forward. The hoarse voice that Abbott had heard before he got out of the car, rose in a bellow again from the bridge.