

PLAYING SAFE By HENRY C. ROWLAND

The Story of a Man, a Girl and An Amazing Adventure That Came on the Wings of the Storm.

HAVING nothing else to do, Claire MacNorton went down to the station early...

It is always grievous to find one's self out of an expected large inheritance...

Claire had traveled two days and nights by rail to reach the bedside of her dying godfather...

Later the lawyers had explained the reason for her omission as a legatee.

"When our late client learned of your engagement to marry Mr. Van Schaik he was furious..."

"But I had just written to him to say that I had broken the engagement..."

"Alas! my dear young lady," said the lawyer, "your letter must be among those which arrived after the stroke..."

So here was Claire, a penniless girl, dependent on the bounty of a relative, her engagement to marry a wealthy profligate broken...

Claire had taken the blow squarely on her two feet; she had shed some tears, these of sorrow, quite free from all recrimination...

Since death of her parents her home had been made with a rather tyrannical widowed aunt, whom she suspected of being by no means averse to a second marriage...

Facing the present one, her gray eyes grew thoughtful, her firm little nose appeared to raise itself a trifle, as if in self-comfort for the mess that she had made of things...

But underneath was a burning rage, this directed not against her kindly godfather, but against the man who had profited by the death of her father...

"Lan! sakes!" said he, and tried again, this time with success, though at the cost of some considerable effort...

"Never mind that, George," said the young man, crisply. "Just a little white mule. We have to ride close herd on it nowadays..."

Claire had missed no part of this. She could easily guess that "white mule" was a term for the country's forbidden fruit...



"We'd better save our lifeboat. Might want to abandon ship if we should happen to run aground."

The train presently pulled out of the station; Claire's vis-à-vis picked up a technical magazine of engineering...

It was evident to Claire that his clothes were not American, although their wear was distinctly so, as evidenced by his speech...

Then as the train rumbled on she made another discovery. It was a suffocatingly hot, with a low barometer and a lurid, heavy sky...

"Perhaps you'd rather have the lower berth," said he. "It's rather awkward for a lady to scramble up and down the ladder..."

"Thank you," said Claire, "if you're sure you don't mind." "Not at all. The upper is really better on a sultry night like this, more free air and I'm used to that, too..."

He looked surprised. "I don't think I quite get you." Claire glanced significantly at his wrist to which the light chain was attached...

"So was I," said Claire bitterly; "but that is a matter which I prefer not to discuss." She turned to look out of the window with the manner of one who desires a conversation discontinued...

She was angry with herself for having accepted the offer of this complacent young stranger whom she felt had profited at her cost. "Playing safe," said Claire to herself...

Blacker and blacker grew Claire's mood, until she found herself in a state of desperation. She could see no light ahead. The discovery of the character of her flame, which led to the breaking of her engagement, had been catastrophic enough...

"I'll be a sudden mass by morning if I live through this fearful night," said Claire to herself. It was difficult to understand the reason for such extra discomfort. The porter had assured her that the train was safe...

open but the air which filtered through it was hot and oppressive. As she lay there unable to sleep and reflecting on this final torture by the high gods or low devils as the result of her journey to the south-west in midsummer, she heard Stephen's voice asking the porter to bring the steps and a moment later the curtain rustled as he crept into his upper berth...

"Now," thought Claire, "we shall quickly suffocate and that will be an end to it." She almost regretted when the porter requested permission to close her own and instead of the cooling spray there was the sodden smell of wet bedding.

"Some cyclone, ma'am," said the negro. "I reckon we done pitched into a cloudburst." Claire presently dropped off again, but this time her sleep was fraught with troubled dreams. She thought that she was aboard a ship which had broken down and was drifting toward a maelstrom...

"All is over," thought Claire with a sort of resigned relief, and at that moment there came a most terrific sense of falling accompanied by a rending, spitting sound and culminating in an appalling crash. She woke suddenly and flung up her hands. The train struck a hard, smooth surface which slanted down across her and completely blocked her exit from the berth...

"It's jammed against the partition," he panted. "Don't be frightened, I'll get you out." She suddenly found herself alone. There were no more sounds of human presence, no crashing fabrics, but a torrent of water seemed cascading over the roof of the car as a river flows over a dam, with swirling, sucking gurgle. Then, to her horror, Claire felt a warm trickle about her, and thrusting her arm through the aperture felt the flood up to the very edge of her berth.

to realize what had happened. There had been a cloudburst, a terrible crossing some torrential river-bed, normally dry at that season, had been washed out and given way. And here she was imprisoned, probably the only one in the car to be thus helpless, as otherwise there must have been cries for help.

No doubt the torrent was continuing to rise, in which case she must die like a rat in a trap unless speedily released. "At any rate this solves my problem," she thought, and at that moment there came the sloshing of water in the aisle and a voice said cheerfully, "Now I'll soon have you out of this. Keep over against the window side."

"All right," said the voice, and a hand fumbling about gripped her by the shoulder and helped her to her feet. The car was at an angle of 45 degrees and, like people aboard a sailing vessel in a gale, they managed to crawl, and scramble to the platform. Crossing this they entered the car ahead which was slanted at a steep angle...

"Good Lord!—the rest of the train is gone." "Into the river?" Claire said tremulously. "I don't think so." It seemed out into the murk. "It's not deep and we could see if it had. We were moving very slowly when the side of the trestle gave way. This car is on the track. The passengers from ours must have gone through to the car ahead of this when they uncoupled the train and went on."

"These are the triangular partitions from between the upper berths," he said breathlessly. "They'll float up until we ground somewhere. It's not as if we were a thousand miles at sea. I'll get a couple more." He accomplished this and taking five of the partitions he laid them in the water one on top of the other beside the downstream edge of the platform, and as he did so there came another ominous shudder and the car careened slightly. Stephen went down the steps and set his valise on the improvised raft.

"Come on," said he to Claire. "Lie half-way across this thing and we'll cast off. Hurry. The car's apt to topple over at any minute." Claire followed his instructions and a moment later they were swirling away through the inky murk, partially submerged but floated by the wood partitions. The water was warm as new milk and about as thick, though this was not immediately discoverable. As the bed of the stream was smooth there were no waves, but occasionally they were caught in a whirlpool and twisted from side to side.

"What do you think now of playing safe?" she asked. "There's no such thing. I've hung on to it so far, though, and he rapped the panel beneath him with his knuckles. "Well, I don't begrudge it to you, now. You saved me from a very cozy death. What if you hadn't been able to get me out?"

"Then I'd have kept you company. There's no good in halting one's self for all one's life." His hand was clasped to hers. Claire laid hers on the back of it for a moment with a sudden impulsive pressure. "Thank you," said she. The pressure was returned and for several moments they drifted on in silence, then Stephen said: "This is the first time I've been comfortably cool since my morning tub, and that was fairly lukewarm. Not getting chilled, are you?"

"Not a bit. It's very refreshing." "The daylight can't be far off," said Stephen; "then we can make a landfall and lay a course for somewhere." The rain stopped suddenly as though somebody had turned off the faucet of the shower and the silence struck them with a sort of shock. There was no noise beyond the low murmuring voice of the flood, a sort of deep, musical diapason. Then presently the heavy clouds seemed to roll at the edges and the brilliant summer stars shone down upon them from a widening zone of fathomless sky. Dark high banks loomed up on either side at a distance of several hundred yards. But looking down at them was like looking straight out to open sea. "Just as I thought," said Stephen. "This is a big shallow torrential tributary of the Arkansas, and it can't be very far away." His eyes pierced the gloom, now rapidly lightening, and suddenly he gave a gasp of dismay. "Good Lord! look at that. We're out in the river!"

with a flat roof. This on a slant which brought one side of it awash, possibly from the weight of a stove inside, as its pipe projected. "We had better trans-ship," said Stephen. "We've drifted out into the Arkansas not far from where it empties into the Mississippi, and if we have to go on to Vicksburg we will be more comfortable aboard a larger vessel. Let's kick this boat overboard!"

"One ought to play safe with a big dog shipment," answered Claire. "Especially when you happen to be chained to it. Lucky for me we swapped berths. I was half awake when we got let down, so I grabbed the curtain rod and swung there till I got a foothold. Provisionally my berth jammed or it might have crushed you."

"Thanks to you, I'm still alive and kicking," Claire answered. Above the kicking, they were soon able to exchange a precarious float for a more stable one. The floating house, which looked like a big square box, had revolved in an eddy so that its front was now presented obliquely to them, about 10 feet of it being above the water, while the rear was awash. Two upper story windows were clear of the stream, and above these was painted an inscription in crude vermilion letters, the n's and the s's reversed: "Cotton Pickers Bank," and beneath, "Storage."

"Good thing for the cotton pickers they haven't started to pick," Stephen observed. "Let's kick this thing around to the back." They accomplished this and found the rim of the roof about a foot under water. Stephen passed his valise aboard, scrambled up after it, then turned and held out his hand to Claire, who now for the first time realized with a shock that she was scarcely clad at all. But there was no help for it, and being a sensible girl, she took the outstretched hand and a moment later was standing, as Stephen expressed it, "on the quarter deck," a superb, unshrinking figure in her thin, wet pajamas. Stephen without glancing at Claire began to drag the pieces of Pullman partition up onto the roof. Their weight had caused the flimsy structure to creak at an even greater angle.

"We'd better save our lifeboat," said he. "Might want to abandon ship if we should happen to run aground. Besides, since the sun gets up this tar paper is going to get awful hot." He fitted the triangular pieces together near the front of the roof, when Claire sank down upon them with a sigh of fatigue, less from exhaustion than the tremendous strain of the last three hours. The day was coming apace and presently the sun rose and sent its crimson horizontal beams across what much resembled a sea of fluid mud. Sitting side by side with their hands crossed in front of their knees, they looked out across the desolate waste. Here and there were farms along the banks of the river and far ahead a jetty ran out into the stream. Some motor boats were also visible moored to the shore, but no immediate succor was in sight. There was also about a great mass of floating debris, trees, and logs, and fragments of shacks, and not very far distant a waterlogged skiff which Stephen eyed covetously. But Claire observed that never once his eyes rested upon himself, and this fact gave her new esteem for him.

"She reflected that she really was about as much in his debt as it is possible for one person to be in another's; that, resistant to the pain of the other passengers who had fled forward while there was still time, he had remained terribly incumbered by the heavy valise, not only an inconvenience but a grave danger, to fight for and accompany her release. She believed absolutely that he would have gone to the bottom of the creek with the car sooner than have abandoned her, had been in danger of doing so at any moment with the coach at a perilous pitch which needed but the slightest setting of its support to roll over into the stream. This knowledge sent a warm glow through her and made her feel that she had done him great injustice.

"It's going to be scorching hot in about an hour," he said, "but we are sure to be taken off before we begin to crisp up. Besides we can always keep wet. We could do with a bite to eat, though." He rose, crossed the roof, and returned with two flat stones from those cemented around the base of the stove pipe, then reentered himself at her side. "What now?" asked Claire. "Watch and learn," he answered.

Stretching the chain across the corner of one stone, he began to strike it with the other, about a foot from his wrist. "You think of everything, don't you?" asked Claire. "Ah! but you see I'm an inventor!" "But is that playing safe?" she asked, amused. "It would prove so if I should happen to fall overboard. But my present object is to swim over and get that skiff. Then we can split paddles off our raft and row ashore."

He continued his hammering softly, so as not to break the stone, which was wearing considerably from the process. "I suppose you think," Stephen observed as he tapped away, "that the contents of this valise should be rights belong to you." "Not now," Claire answered. "Any such claim is more than satisfied." He shot her a sidelong glance, then glanced quickly away, reddening slightly. "Then you consider that there is no existing claim between us?" "I didn't say that. I said that what possible claim that I might have on you was settled." "Tap! tap! tap!" His hand was bowed over his task, and Claire, glancing at him in turn, discovered that his shipwrecked condition added to rather than diminished his attractiveness. The water had curled his chestnut hair in pleasing fashion and his skin was very clear and fine, his eyes doubly fringed with long, black, curving lashes, and his profile of pure classic Grecian type, but without the softness lent by the chisel of Praxiteles. He had strong jaw and his chin was square rather than rounded, while the lips instead of being full, were straight and firm. Then, watching his task, its method puzzled her, for instead of tapping continuously on one point of the chain he now spread it the length of the stone and proceeded to hammer his segment flat. "Why are you doing that?" she asked. "Watch and learn," he answered. Satisfied presently with the result, he picked up the chain, of which the links were now hammered so closely together that there was no play between them, but remained stiff like a piece of wire. Taking this between his hands, he began to bend it back and forth at the point which he had first eroded. The result was almost immediate, as the chain, no longer able to articulate, broke at the eroded part. "Easy enough when you happen to be an inventor," and glanced at Claire with a flashing smile which brought the color to her face. But this was not because of her deshabille. She was beginning to forget about that, or at least to dis-