

# THE FORGOTTEN FLEET MYSTERY

by Van Wyck Mason

**CHAPTER I**

**W**HAT had been one of those crisp, crystal clear fall mornings which make a multi-colored paradise of tidewater Maryland, had degenerated into a raw evening with forbidding banks of fog blowing up the Chesapeake. The first gray strata were wandering like heralds of misfortune among the narrow streets and scattered houses of Patuxtown when Geneva Benet's scuffed brown brogues reached the end of the sidewalk.

In a minute now she was telling herself, the depressing and mournful wail of the Solomon's island fog warning would begin. How she dreaded its monotonous plaint. Her soft, square-shaped mouth pressed itself when a Ford clattered by with a heavy load of oysters for Baltimore. How she hated this sprawling village with its pettiness, its ugly unshaven faces, its eternal reek of mud flats, of stale fish and oysters.

On passing over the causeway joining Patuxtown to the island she approached the first of a line of stores. Dozens of tin and cloth signs met her eyes.

She was with dull curiosity noting that more than the usual number of men and boys were collected at the end of a pier which thrust an uncertain length out into the Patuxtown's glassy waters when a zealous voice belted:

"You back again, Geneva? Well, this time you ain't agoin' to get no more Patuxtown boys down to them cussed old ships of yours."

A curious silence fell upon the crowd and spread with a widening effect as Geneva Benet halted and contemptuously surveyed a powerful individual whose unshaven face was brown as an old saddle. His gait, as he came shuffling forward, was uncertain, but oddly enough his eyes were yet steady and alert as he belted:

"Killed anybody this week down there?"

Ghastly pale save for two blotches of carmine in either cheek, Geneva Benet drew up her skirt. She glared at the man, the grimacing, self-conscious crowd.

"I hope you will pay no attention to Tod Ferguson," she cried. "He's spy because Captain Benet discharged him."

The big man swayed over her and his upper lip twitched up, revealing yellow horse-like teeth.

"Yeah, and 'Y for 'Cause to please that guy you say is yer Paw I wouldn't go down below in the Amerika and get the same dose as the others."

"Good fer you, Fergie!" "At's tellin' her!"

A hostile murmur circled the crowd whereupon Geneva Benet felt a tiny trickle of glacier water run the length of her spine.

"Please listen," she pleaded desperately, "won't any of you listen to me."

"Shut up!" roared Ferguson. "You wouldn't never have got no-body down there 'cept by your come-on ways and your promises."

The girl on the plank sidewalk turned a throbbing, furious scarlet, and said in choked tones, "Unfortunately, I can't make you take that back and nobody else here will, but I can and will with my cowardly liar." She held out both hands and turned to the ever increasing crowd.

"Please listen. This man is lying to you. The job is—"

"Shut up!" shouted the bully Ferguson. "I'm goin' to make it my job to see there ain't nobody from Solomon's nor Calvert County goes down to Point Patience."

The crowd emitted a peculiar undertone, the kind of sound one hears when violence is brewing.

"Run her out!" somebody called excitedly and the gathering gave an ominous surge forward. "Yeh! Duck her!"

Features a-giver, the girl searched the circle for a friendly face—in vain.

"She's always let on she's too good for us oystermen," yelled the frowny individual called Ferguson, "but she's only another tramp just the same. I know, I seen her with that Mears guy."

"Oh-h-h—" White with fury, the girl in the shabby tweed suit rushed forward and would have struck at her tormentor's bruised looking features had not a singular figure intercepted her—quickly and efficiently.

"Just a minute, boys," came the stranger's incisive tones, "this is supposed, at least, to be a free country, so the lady has a right to talk if she wants to."

"Stay outta this." "Who do you think you are anyway?" "Shut up!"

"Where'd he come from—off'n the old oil tanker what came in this mornin'?"

As for Geneva Benet, she found herself looking at a leanly adequate back garbed in a curious coat. It was gray and had red piped shoulder straps, and on the stranger's head was set a jaunty military cap of unfamiliar design. She caught at his arm.

"No, don't interfere," she panted in a fierce undertone, "don't mix in on this. They'll kill you."

"Will they?" Deep set blue eyes that were both hard and bitter, briefly glanced down at her. "You started this," the stranger snapped. "Haven't you got nerve enough to

when the hard bitten young man adroitly dodged a pile driver blow. "Yah! Fight! Quit stallin'!" An oysterman suddenly pushed the stranger off balance thus enabling Ferguson, snarling and red faced, to land a short forearm jab to the side of his enemy's jaw. At the resounding smack, Geneva Benet flinched and expected to see the slighter figure go over backwards. She had, you see, witnessed all too many fights since coming to Patuxtown.

"Now y'u got him, Fergie. Kick his ugly face in!" shouted the on-lookers. "Go fer his eyes!" No one cried "shame!" since anything from scraps to mayhem goes in oysterman fighting.



At once the oysterman latched back with a ludicrous expression of surprise.

out; or are they right about you?"

"No! Ferguson lies!" she blazed. "But I—"

"Then get out of the way—" Impatiently, he shook her off and again faced the girl's persecutor.

"Are you going to let this young lady talk, or aren't you?"

Ferguson's answer was a vicious swing at the stranger's jaw.

Fanned in by the fog, the crowd seemed suddenly enormous, with waterproof hats, baseball caps, seaman's caps bordering the entire visible world.

"Hey, fellars, let's give 'em room."

Gangling loafers in rusty blue jerseys and tobacco stained dungarees promptly fell back.

"Soak that buttin' in tin soldier," someone yelled. "Whereja' get 'at trick coat?"

Beneath her tight gray jersey sweater, Geneva Benet's hair beat even more furiously. Mears had been right. She shouldn't have come to Patuxtown on Saturday when bugyas, punies and shallops were in—along with oysters, booze and the devil.

How would this brawl end? Merely in battered faces and skinned knuckles or in staccato shots, followed by sudden significant silence? Ferguson, as she well knew, was a terrible rough-and-tumble fighter.

She was almost by when an eddy of the crowd halted her, at the same time exposing the battleground. In the center of the cleared space Ferguson, powerful and thick bodied, was wrenching off his coat. Boys and men, rank with fish odors and stale sweat, crowded in.

The big oysterman drove a vicious right at this wiry stranger who was of about equal height. The second combatant ducked under the blow and at the same time quickly cast loose the buttons of his uniform coat. His face, she saw, was so high cheek-boned as to be almost Indian-like in cast, and though it was young there were lines in it that ought not to have been there and a dull red scar traversed his jaw from mouth to chin.

Geneva Benet suddenly found herself inexplicably curious to know why he had wandered to Patuxtown. "Stand and fight, yah yallah monkey!" roared the oysterman

At the deadly glare now playing in the stranger's semi-dazed blue eyes, Geneva Benet felt sick—she felt, nay, she knew that something decisive was about to happen.

With a scarlet thread of blood trickling from a corner of his mouth, the man in the uniform coat swayed backwards, weakly but efficiently parrying his enemy's furious blows until, so quickly that the girl could not follow its motion, the ex-soldier's right hand shot out. At once the oysterman lurched back with a ludicrous expression of surprise stamped on his sweaty features; inexplicably his left arm was dangling limp by his side.

Like a comb which retreats only to fling itself forward again, Ferguson gasped and gave ground but all the while fought behind him with his good hand.

"God Almighty!" came someone's breathless yelp, "look out—he's got a knife!"

The crowd surged back; fists were one thing, but cold steel was another. Borne with it Geneva Benet felt an icy hand squeezing the warmth from her heart.

"Cut him open," clamored one faction.

"Kick 'im, soldier! He'll knife yer else!" warned the other.

The crowd milled and swayed across a pale road made of crushed oyster shells and a half about went up when the seamed ex-soldier leaped desperately back to avoid a furious slash which missed his jugular by a scant inch. Quick as a recoiling spring the blue eyed man darted in to again deliver a curious chopping blow with the side of his hand. Instantly the big man uttered a strangled grunt and pitched forward on his face as suddenly as a marionette whose strings have been cut.

Fickle as always, the crowd now roared in approbation.

Though panting slightly, the victor looked about calmly enough, pushed a lock of dark red hair from his eyes, and then gulped a long drink from the handiest bottle.

"Have another, Mizter? Then show a guy how y'a did it."

"No thanks, boys, I'm a bit warm," said the ex-soldier curtly.

(To Be Continued)

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Mrs. Yetta Weisbrod celebrates her 107th birthday by blowing out candles on her birthday cake at the Home of the Daughters of Jacob in the Bronx, New York. The party was attended by her 6 children, 14 grandchildren, and 20 great-grandchildren. (Central Press)

## Dirty Kitchen Grease Helps War On Japs

To the taxpayer who is paying for this war it is welcome news that the thrifty army can salvage from \$6,000 to \$9,000 worth of grease every day from thousands of grease interceptors installed in army camps and cantonments, says the Plumbing and Heating Industries bureau.

Grease is used in the manufacture of glycerine which in turn is used for making explosives. Because imports of fats from the western Pacific have been cut down, the army's grease helps to fill a vital war need. The only losers are the Japs who eventually will find themselves on the receiving end of the grease from the army's dirty dishes.

Interceptors of the type now being installed in army camps have a rating of 90 per cent of better in the recovery of grease. In fact, the bureau points out that the army will buy only those interceptors which are certified to have an efficiency of at least 90 per cent.

In the extensive use of grease interceptors in connection with kitchens, the army is setting an example of tidy and thrifty housekeeping which the entire nation might well emulate now that every ounce of grease is needed for the manufacture of explosives.

As the number of men in training increases the amount of grease salvaged will increase correspondingly. Grease now being salvaged averages about one-tenth of a pound per man per day. Clean grease is worth from 3 to 5 cents a pound.

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**Local Salvage Group Will Join Rubber Campaign**

Gulfport salvage committee will join the nation-wide intensive drive for collection of old scrap rubber, which was announced by President Roosevelt. P. T. Hines, chairman of

the local salvage committee, has stated.

He said that definite setup for the drive here has not yet been completed.

Participation of the county salvage committee in a tin can salvage program was also announced by Mr. Hines. The campaign to reclaim large

quantities of tin, steel scrap and copper will be sponsored by the bureau of industrial conservation of the war production board.

The British ministry of works and buildings has created a directorate of post-war building to prepare for the tasks of reconstruction.