

ON HOGS BACK REEF

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MOORED to the rotting pier a fisherman's dory, old and worn, swung on the smooth surges that ran under the dilapidated structure. The sun was setting. Seaward a wall of mistiness caught the waning light, and to the experienced eye of the single individual lounging on the string-piece it spoke loudly of coming fog.

The man was young, roughly dressed in oilskins, old rubber boots, and a "sou'-easter," and bore the unmistakable stamp of a fisherman. Almost a giant in figure, his clean-shaven face was singularly gentle in its expression, though about it was something of an air of sorrow or depression as his vacant gaze was fixed on the cold distance. Presently, behind him the loose planks rattled under a heavy tread.

"May there, you! What'll you take me over to Sisquinet for?"

The sitting man gave a slow and sidelong glance at the well-dressed stranger, spat pensively into the water, and returned his attention to the distance before he gave voice to the spiritless reply:

"Bout a dollar, I guess—when I go."

"All right," said the other, vigorously and in a tone of relief. "And when will that be?"

"Maybe five minnits; maybe an hour. Waitin' for a bucket o' clams."

"But, man, it will be black dark in an hour!"

"Well, what of it?"

"Oh, nothing! Only I ought to be in Sisquinet right now. I got on the branch road by mistake, and there won't be another train out to-night."

The stranger kicked aside a pair of old oars and, seating himself on the stringpiece, took a cigar-case from his pocket. It was well filled, but without tendering it to the fisherman, he selected a cigar and proceeded to light up. "Say," he continued, rolling the Havana in his thick lips, and dressing his slightly grayed mustache with a pudgy hand on which glistened a diamond—

"say, do you happen to know a chap named Maxwell over to Sisquinet? His father's just dead."

"Sure," was the terse reply.

"Know him well?"

"Since I was a sucker. Decent kind o' feller, too." The voice drawled as if words were an effort.

"Yes? Well, he's the man I want to see. You can show me where he lives?"

The other turned and looked squarely at his questioner. "Lives close to me, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Mr. Selover."

"Yaas, Mr. Selover. They call me Roger, I live to Sisquinet."

"Do, hey? Well, is Maxwell a hard man to deal with? Spunky, you know, or is he easy-going, like his father was? I knew his father, but I don't know him, yob see."

"Lord!" exclaimed the fisherman, with his first show of either animation or interest. "Hard? I should say not! Easy as an old gum boot! Between me an' you he's plumb simple at times. I'm an old friend o' his. If you'll excuse me, what he ye goin' over to see him about? He don't have many o' your figger callin' at his shack."

The stranger hesitated a moment. "Well, I don't mind telling you as his friend," he finally said. "It is a disagreeable piece of business for both of us. I—I am Mr. Jacob Lamson's lawyer. Perhaps you've heard of him. He used to live in Sisquinet, years ago, and—"

"Lamson!" interrupted the other. "Him what holds one share more'n half in Maxwell's schooner?" The fisherman seemed fully alive now.

"Precisely. Mr. Lamson still owns the controlling interest in several vessels in Sisquinet."

"That's right! Have I heard of him? I should smile! An' so you're his lawyer, hey? Well, I want to say right here to your client's a skunk—a low-down dogfish. Why don't he put up his share o' money to make repairs? The boys can't do it all an' give him half profits, too, an' so there's a bunch o' vessels drawed up on the beach jest goin' to rot—no good to nobody. He won't repair nor sell—an' he don't care, 'cause he's rich. Max's schooner is the only one that's fit at all! Yes, sir; your man's to be used mean, if ye don't mind my sayin' it."

"That may be your opinion, my friend, and one for which my client cares nothing," replied the stranger, with a touch of asperity. "But this is purely a matter of business. Mr. Lamson is going to sell Maxwell's schooner."

The face of the fisherman lighted. "No!" he exclaimed. "To Max?"

"Hardly," was the calm reply. "To parties in Boston, I believe. The point is this. The contract came to your friend from his father, who has recently died, and my client holds the controlling interest. Now, the money Mr. Lamson has already paid for repairs and improvements just about cats up himing Maxwell's equity in the vessel. I regret to say he will get nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. I have tried to get Mr. Lamson to sell his interest to young Maxwell, but he is obdurate—and perhaps vengeful. He had no lover for old Maxwell. Do you follow me?"

"I'm in yer wash," returned the other, his face suddenly clouding. "And what if the devil do you want to see Max now for?"

"To give him legal notice and settle any small differences that may arise. That's why I asked if he was mild or hot-headed."

"Yaas—yaas, I see," said the other, nodding slowly as he got to his feet. "But this'll be an awful crack for his wife! He ought to get red-headed over it, but he's jest fool enough not to. Well, there's nothin' I can say."

I suppose, I'm goin' up to the store for a minnit. That seegar o' yours makes me hanker for a smoke. No thanks—I wouldn't think o' robbin' ye." And with that the speaker turned and walked slowly up the pier, his bronzed face indicative of extreme disgust.

The little building toward which he directed his steps seemed to hang on the end of the steep street, and an old sign across its front gave notice that one Thomas Pemberton dealt in general merchandise. The fisherman entered the gloomy and odoriferous interior, lounged up to the knife-scored counter, and greeted the proprietor.

"Hello, Tom!"

"Hello, Roger! What can I do for you?"

"Just want to buy a seegar an' borrow a lantern. Going to take a landshark across the bay, an' I reckon he's afraid o' the dark."

"Don't say! Who is he?"

"Feller named Selover; says he's lawyer to miser Lamson. Says he come up to sell the *Luella*. What do ye think o' that? Nice news, hey?"

"You don't tell me! Feller with a gray mustache an' a flash ring?"

"Yaas."

The proprietor opened wide his eyes. "Him a lawyer to Lamson!" he exclaimed, a mixture of astonishment and derision in his voice as he looked questioningly at his customer; then he glanced at the two men sitting by the empty stove and jerked his head toward the rear of the store. At the unspoken hint the man called Roger followed with something like wonder on his calm countenance. When, some ten minutes later, the two returned to the front the fisherman's face was flushed and he was whistling softly. Abstractedly swinging the borrowed lantern, he walked slowly from the store like one in deep thought. The proprietor followed him to the door and glanced over the bay.

"Say, Roger, looks mighty like a fog a-comin', don't it?"

The other looked up and answered, absently, "Sure."

"If I was you," continued Mr. Pemberton, "I'd tow him astern for a spell, or, better yet, I'd set the sucker on Hogback rocks an' let the tide fix him fer fair. Sech people hain't no right to live in this world. Well, my duty to Kitty. Good night."

As the fisherman walked slowly back toward the little pier his erstwhile mild expression gave place to hard lines around the mouth, and his clean jaw worked nervously. Presently he halted, lost in deep thought, but finally brought his great hand down on his oilskinned thigh with a resounding slap and went his way with accelerated steps. He found the stranger smoking in the gathering dusk, and the bucket of clams had arrived. Across the bay, on a distant headland, the mellow glow of the Sisquinet Light shone out like a star.

Within the next ten minutes the dory was running quietly over the long waves, its little sail hardly bulging under the weakening wind. To the lawyer it appeared as if they were floating out into space, for almost immediately after the start the threatening mist had crept in from the sea, which, with the falling light, cut off even the loom of the land ahead. For a time neither of the boat's occupants spoke, but at length Roger gave voice to his thoughts.

"Say, won't Lamson give Max no show at all?" he asked appealingly, as he leaned toward his passenger.

"I believe we have gone thoroughly over the ground," was the terse reply.

"Well, then," was the earnest return, "Lamson is just goin' to ruin Max. It'll take the bread-out o' his mouth to sell the schooner now, an' him only lately married to the nicest little gal in Sisquinet. Say, that interest in the *Luella* is all he's got in the world. He never despised o' such a thing happenin'. He never had no trouble with Lamson, if his dad did. An' he's put a beap o' work on that craft. This here traverse will knock him flatter'n a white squall, an' nigh kill his wife. I think a pile o' Max. Won't Lamson sell to him? Max hain't got the money, but you can bet he'll raise it. Say, won't ye help him out?"

The fine face was pathetic, and the low voice held an unmistakable note of pleading, but the listener was unresponsive. He waved an impatient gesture with his fat hand. "No, I told you. Mr. Lamson is a good hater; he don't forget what the people of Sisquinet, and especially Maxwell and his father, have said about him. And what's the use of talkin'? I can't do anything."

The fisherman settled back. "Yaas, I see. Ye needn't say no more, I reckon ye feel some bad yourself, an' I'm glad I haven't got your job. After all, there's more'n one way to catch fish!"

With this enigmatical remark the boatman relapsed into silence. He puffed vigorously on the pipe he had filled and lighted, but the lines of his face, which had relaxed as he begged for his friend, grew hard again.

Time passed, and as darkness fell space the wind fell with it, until at length there was hardly enough force to keep the dory under way. All signs of land, both before and behind, had long since vanished; even the friendly light from Sisquinet was lost in the thickening fog. Vision became contracted, and to the city man the condition made the rate of the boat's progress and its direction at once a matter of mere guesswork. The swells had grown heavier, indicating open water, and once in a while a wave gathered head and broke with a hissing sob that was startling to the passenger.

And by this time he was more than anxious that the trip should end. The motion of the boat had become mighty unpleasant to him and from his reckoning they should have arrived at Sisquinet long since; they had been out for upward of two hours, but as yet there were no signs of their destination. Mr. Selover had become uneasy, and he replied:

"And if finally downed upon him that his morose pilot was in a quandary; for, as the fog thickened, the fisher-

man's face, now barely discernible, bore a troubled look which he made no effort to conceal. Roger finally knocked the ashes from his long-extinguished pipe, shifted himself in his seat, tried to pierce the gloom on all sides, listened intently, and otherwise showed anxious watchfulness. At length he broke the protracted silence.

"I declar' for it! I wish I had brought a compass! Damn a fog, anyhow!"

"Don't you know where we are?" asked the other, mightily disturbed by the tone of his guide.

"Listen!" came the irrelevant exclamation. "Do ye hear that?"

"Breakers, by the Lord! Sure as thunder the tide is settin' us on the Hogback!"

As the man ceased speaking, through the silence there came the muffled boom of a distant surf. The stranger caught the sound and perspiration started from his forehead. "The Hogback!" he feebly exclaimed, turning as weak as the water about him, while the fog-heads hanging thickly on his heavy brows and mustache did not soften his expression of sudden fear.

its color and his features grown haggard. The "shut-in" feeling caused by the blanket of moisture, demoralizing to any nerves, made his a wreck, and it was all he could do to keep from exposing his abject terror as he sat on the thwart, loose-mouthed and clutching the gunwale of the boat.

By this time the dory had hardly way enough to keep across the trough of the enlarging swells, but to the landsman, listening to the growing thunder of the breakers, it seemed as if the frail craft was flying to its destruction. Presently a wave broke in phosphorescent foam close to the boat, and the gaunt outlines of a great, swaying spar-buoy slid by. It was a startling sight. As the fisherman caught a glimpse of the mighty stick he gave a shout and sprang to his feet. "Stand by!" he yelled, dropping his hold on the tiller and catching up the borrowed lantern. "By heaven! it's comin'! Ye set still. I'll do the best I can for ye."

It was a strenuous moment to both parties. For the boat, reliever of all direction from the tiller, at once fell into the hollow of the rollers, and a toppling sea caught her and bore her sidewise toward the shore. Soon each wave became a white-capped menace, and for a time the dory wallowed drunkenly; finally it seemed lifted up by an unseen force and hurled forward. "Starn all!" shouted the sailor, as the boat came down and struck hard bottom with a shock. The next second it slid upward a few feet and then fairly rolled over.

But before the last happened the burly fisherman had leaped from the dory, and grasping his terrified and half-paralyzed passenger by the collar, dragged him unceremoniously through the receding breaker, and landed him above the rush of the waves, himself wet only to the hips.

"Forgit we struck a pocket o' sand!" he said, looking at the bedraggled man who was coughing up the brine he had taken in. "There's rock to both sides of us, but the minnit I seeed the spar I sensed where we was. Nice kettle o' fish, ain't it?"

"Thank God we are out of it!" gasped Selover, regaining his powers of speech. "This will be an eternal

The fisherman's face changed. "Will ye give Max the schooner? I'm mighty sorry to be makin' terms with a dyin' man, but it's Max ye will have to depend on, an' I'm working for him."

"I'll do that, or anything. I'll see that he gets the schooner; I'll give you a hundred dollars if you send him—or anyone. I can't be left here to die like a rat! Good God, man, how can you have the heart to think of such a thing? Can't you—"

"Say, you'd better shut up about havin' heart," interrupted Roger, snapping his strong jaw. "Ye didn't care a cuss when I showed ye what a hole ye would put Max in; an' now ye cries for him to save ye. Say, I wouldn't take yer word for anything—if you'll excuse me for sayin' so."

"Why not? I will—"

"Why not?" came the explosive interruption. "Because you're a coward an' a liar, that's why not. Soon as ye get ashore ye'd go back on it all. Now I'll help ye on jest one condition; an' that is ye put yer change o' heart in black an' white right now. If I don't show writin' to Max he won't come—an' ye couldn't blame him."

"I'd do it gladly; and I'd give you a check this moment," was the eager return; "but you know it can't be done here. Don't be absurd at such a time. I'll take my oath—"

"Damn yer oath!" was the vociferous return. "You write it. I got a pencil—a pencil is good in law—an' I can fish out some paper, too, an' there's the gim!"

The fisherman drew a box of water-proof matches from his pocket and lighted the unburned lantern, after which he produced the stump of a pencil and an old letter. Tearing off the blank page, he handed it to the lawyer.

"Ye got to be sudden," he continued, harshly. "Jest make a plain bill o' sale o' the schooner *Luella* to Mr. Thomas R. Maxwell, puttin' in the proper consideration, an' don't ye forget to sign yer own name to it, Mr. Jacob Lamson, or I'll let ye lie here an' rot before I'll lift a finger for ye."

The lawyer blinked. "Huh?" he ejaculated. "Oh, I'm on to ye, sir; ye an' yer playin' ol' lawyer. Ye be a foxy villain. It was Tom Pemberton what put me wise, but if ye hadn't been so cantankerous mean about yer seegars I'd never gone up to the store for one an' knowed about ye. An' by gosh! I dare forget the smoker, after all. Git a move on. It might be pleasant news to Max to hear ye are out on Hogback in a rain'tide. Hurry up; time's goin'."

There was no gentleness in the voice of the big man. If he was not honestly ugly he was honestly indignant, and Mr. Lamson, *alias* Selover, feeling himself completely trapped, bent his head under the lash of the other's words and wrote in silence. He made out a rough but legal document, the fisherman holding the lantern over him and eyeing the cringing figure with an expression of extreme disgust while the fog billowed thick about them. Just as the writer finished signing his name a roll of spume washed to his feet.

"Be quick! For God's sake be quick!" he said, thrusting the paper into the hand of his hoped-for savior.

But the other seemed to be in no haste. "That'll make Max's little gal the happiest woman in the hull o' Sisquinet," he said, folding it carefully and putting it in his pocket. "That is settled! Come along; we'd better get to the shore alid. I'm some chilled. Ain't ye?" The voice was now as smooth as oil.

Mr. Lamson was chilled, body and soul; but he had other things to think of; his precious life was not yet out of danger. "How long before Maxwell can get to me?" he asked, humbly.

"Won't be two hours; not long enough to drown ye, I reckon. You follow an' don't tumble."

They went over the rocks, the lantern-bearer going easily and rapidly, the other scrambling along in his desire to keep within sight of the illuminated haze made by the light. It was a terrible journey to the city man. Hogback Reef he knew to be a quarter of a mile in length, with about the same distance of open water between it and the mainland, but he seemed to have gone twice that space before he protested. "How much further?" he finally gasped.

"Only a piece more, I guess," came back the cheerful answer. Presently they struck a strip of hard sand, and almost immediately the fog above them turned golden. The guide whirled his lantern aloft and wheeled around on his panting follower.

"Well, by my great-grandmother's aunt's black cat!" he exclaimed. "If that ain't Sisquinet Light, an' this ain't Sisquinet beach! I must ha' mistook Spindle Point for the Hogback!" He halted, facing the breathless man, his benevolent countenance bearing a broad grin.

Between tremendous relief and acute astonishment Mr. Lamson was momentarily brought to a mental and physical standstill; but as he caught a full view of his guide's smiling face a light rivalling that from the towering beacon above him broke on his brain. For a moment he gazed at his companion, his face gathering anger.

"You infernal scoundrel!" he broke out. "You knew it all the time!"

The fisherman threw back his head and laughed outright. "Course I did. Was ye thick enough to think I'd sailed these waters for twenty year to get lost in Sisquinet Bay 'cause it fogged? I never said we was on the Hogback. Ye jumped at it."

"You lie! You said the rocks were covered at high water."

"On Hogback. So they be."

"And that you'd have to swim ashore."

"Not once I didn't. I said I *could* swim ashore. Come now."

"You intended to deceive me all along. You—"

"An' who was ye tryin' to deceive? Ye was afraid to come into town under yer right name. It's been dog eat dog, hain't it? What be ye kickin' about? Ain't ye safe?"

"You rascal! You obtained that paper under the pretence that it was Maxwell whom I would have to depend. He can't make it hold."

"Can't, hey? See here; I happen to be him—Thomas Roger Maxwell, an' at yer service, Mr. Selover. Guess it was Max what brought ye here. 'at like I said he would. The man's face was shining with quiet good humor. "Don't bile over, now," he continued in a conciliatory voice. "I'm goin' to let ye off that check for a hundred. Ye never was in no danger. Did ye think an old doryman would be such an ass as to leave his own ashore an' put off in a fog unless he had his bearin's to almost a hair? I was layin' for that spunk-buoy, an' when I saw it I knowed jest where we was."

"You damnable—"

"Now—now, I wouldn't, if I was you. Look here; ye don't think I'd take your share o' the *Luella* as a gift, do ye? Not much! I'm goin' to rip that paper to bits jest as soon as we agree about the sale. I know 'tain't witnessed, but knowin' what I know about your change o' heart, I don't think you'll deny signin' it. See, I'm goin' to do the fair thing by ye. Come now. Ye go with me an' I'll fix ye up dry, an' we'll have a hot supper, an' ye'll see Kitty an' feel lots better. Ye don't hate me, really. An' ye know what ye said about tryin' to get Lamson to sell to Maxwell. Ye can't go back on that, can ye? Come now."

Mr. Lamson was something of a philosopher, and, when embarrassed, a quick thinker. His brain now worked rapidly. What a court in that region would do for him in case he contested the paper was hardly problematical. He knew when he was beaten, and he was aware that half a loaf is better than no bread. But the story that galled him. He capitulated, though still sparring feebly.

"And you told me that Maxwell was soft," he blustered, losing his aggressive attitude, "but he was willing to frighten me to death, and now you will end by making me ridiculous."

The fisherman caught the charge and laid his finger on the sore spot.

"Scared, hey? Well, I gness ye were—some. But ye wasn't half so scared as I was when I knowed what ye had come for. An' soft! Ye can bet I'm soft when I'm treated white; for unless ye go round tellin' about it, nobody won't know how ye was saved from dym'nin' on the Hogback. Ain't that comin' down easy?"



Dragged him, unceremoniously through the receding breaker.

"What do ye know about Hogback rocks?" demanded the fisherman.

"Nothing but what Mr. Lamson has told me. I don't see how you got out so far."

"Me?" came the unexpectedly forcible return. "I didn't make the tide run an' the wind stop blowin' nor I didn't make no fog. What's more, I never asked ye to come aboard. Can't a man get lost?"

"I—I beg your pardon. What can we do?"

"By thunder! I don't know what to do; ain't anything to do, as I see. If I had oars I'd try to row, but like a dum fool I forgot 'em. Ye noticed 'em lyin' on the pier, didn't ye?"

The lawyer nodded despairingly; the other fell into what appeared to be a perplexed silence. Presently the latter spoke again: "We're sartain gettin' nearer them rocks! I can hear them breakers plainer—can't ye? The tide is settin' us on strong, but we may fetch past 'em. By the Lord, I hope so!"

"Are we in great danger?" asked the lawyer, his heavy voice weakened by apprehension.

"Well, ye ought to know what it means to go on the rocks in a surf; it was the uncomf'ortin' rejoinder. "I'm fair to say that I can't like this traverse a damn bit better than ye do. I can ye swim?"

The perturbed passenger fairly groaned. "Not a stroke."

"That's bad! Sorry I ever got ye into this muss; but it wa'n't my fault. How could I ha' known? Be ye a married man?"

"Yes—and two children."

"Well, we've got to trust in the Lord an' do the best we can. I'd we hit sand we'll have a show, but if it's to be rock—well—I don't know that swimmin' would help any. Listen to that! Sure as thunder we're goin' on!"

And to the lawyer's strained senses it was only too evident that the man was right. The fog was now thick and the desperation of the situation intensified by the impossibility of seeing more than ten feet away. Mr. Selover, being a coward, was on the verge of panic. Within the space of five minutes his ruddy face had lost

lesson to me! I was a fool to trust myself to a boat!"

"I don't quite see what ye got to thank God about," said the other. "We happen to be safe for a minnit or so, but ye evidently don't know that the Hogback is three foot under water at high tide. No livin' soul could keep a hold on the rocks in the run o' the sea. An' the dory's a wreck."

The lawyer's jaw dropped as he sat staring at the speaker. For a moment he was overcome—too overcome to move. And if he hoped for something to mitigate the force of the blow of this piece of information he was disappointed; there was no comfort forthcoming; instead, the fisherman sat down, emptied the water from his boots, and then divested himself of his heavy oilskin. The two men remained silent for a space while the froth of the breakers shot up closer and closer. At length Selover, shivering from cold and fright, got to his feet and his agony of mind was plain in the tone of his voice.

"What are you going to do?" he faltered.

"What am I goin' to do?" was the calm return. "What do ye s'pose?"

"Good God, man! You are not going to leave me here on the reef to die alone!" was the sudden and frenzied exclamation.

"Does see hard," was the unfeeling reply, "but I don't see how it would better ye by my dyin' with ye. Sides, I got a wife, same as ye, if I hain't got children."

"And you can swim ashore?"

"Easy. The sea'll be 'a'm on the land side."

"Almighty God! How long before the tide covers the reef?" demanded the lawyer, the fear of death in his voice.

"Near as I can guess it'll be slack water on the flood in about two hours."

"Two hours? You could bring help in that time?"

"I might try—supposin' all went right," said the big man. Then he cleared his throat, and his voice grew harsh. "See here, my friend, I'd have to ask Max to get ye ashore, he bein' my nearest neighbor. Do ye think he'd thank me for bringin' ye down on him?"

"But this is a case of life or death."

"Yaas; it is to him, too."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense now! I'll give you anything to save me."

"An' what'll ye give Max?"

"Anything he demands. Almighty Heaven! We can't haggle here!"