

THE LAW OF THE BEACH

Drawings by George Wright

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A Dim, Shadowy Oblong Showed Beneath.

WHAT I say, we ain't called on to blacklist a man for showin' the white feather, not so long as he does his duty. Leastways, not when his job's up in the air, an' his wife's sick, and him not used to the ways of the beach. Of course, if that flyin' machine skipper o' yours falls down on his job, Welshy, that's dangerous to folks that trusts him. Duty's duty; a man's life don't count against folks, nor his feelings neither."

It was the law of the beach reduced to its bare bones. Ford flinched as the booming voice reached him from the runway of the lifeboat house. It was Casco, big Jem Casco, keeper of Ships Bottom Life Saving Station, and the coastguard Captain was discussing him with little Welsh, the breeches buoy gunner.

When the Navy Department assigned Ford the week before to Ships Bottom, the Inspector of the Barnegat Bay District detailed Welsh as "sky pilot" to assist the Government aviator because of the gunner's intimate knowledge of the treacherous Barnegat shore, the worst ship-killing stretch on the whole Jersey coast from Sandy Hook to the Delaware capes. Ford's experimental appointment had come on the heels of a storm cycle that accounted for no less than ninety sail along ninety miles of coast,—a sail a mile!—a wholesale disaster which taxed the derelict destroyers of the navy, enriched the beachcombers, and brought fear to the hearts of coastwise skippers. In the face of the havoc the Washington authorities inaugurated the daring innovation,—an aeroplane service for charting down derelicts, that drifting menace to coastwise craft, which could be more readily and quickly discerned from a moderate altitude than from sea level; a fact that the Ships Bottom life savers admitted as sailormen who had plumbed sea depth from a ship's masthead, though they resented the "flyin' machine service" as the coastguards resent all innovations, on general principles.

THE alarm of the telephone bell in the intervening station put a period to the colloquy on the runway. Evidently there was trouble on foot; but Ford turned away, unseen and unheeding.

"So Welsh has me sized up? He knows why I cut the flights short," he said drearily as he crossed the sand dunes to the squat shed overlooking the station, where the aeroplane was housed.

He was not surprised that they had found out, and he knew that the final break was bound to come soon. And then—the debacle! Ford realized the impossibility of explaining psychological facts to these grim men of the beach, who took no count of self interest or the first law of nature. The thought of what it meant for his young wife, sick in the little village across the bay, if he lost his scanty Government pay, was additional torture to the tortured nerves that had gone to pieces after that terrible mile-high tumble from the clouds at Frisco.

"You're only shook up a bit: you'll come back, old chap." That's what the other birdmen, who envied his daring, had said; but Ford knew better. That miraculous escape had left him with an abiding horror of high places, a fear of flying. Only the girl's immediate necessity had forced him into temporary employment with the Government.

For relief Ford turned mechanically to the aeroplane, preparing it for the daily search of the sea. As he busied himself with the familiar bolts and screws, an envelop dropped on the ground. It was a letter he had received that morning in Barnegat village and thrust unread into his pocket. He opened it and glanced at the heading:

THE DEEP SEA WRECKING COMPANY,
WILLIAM C. HANDY, PRES.

Billy Handy! He hadn't heard from Billy in years: not since the days of his hard luck, anyway. The note was suggestively abrupt.

DEAR JIM.—No doubt you know the latest Philippines disaster. The company is prepared to whack up for first publication and exploitation of specific Eastern material that may reach you by sea. To prevent official piracy we should be advised at once on receipt of news, that we may have our correspondent on the ground. Let me know how this strikes you.

Yours for wealth, health, and happiness.
BILLY.

So Billy was president of a wrecking company now. Well, he was always a good hand at business,—a little unscrupulous perhaps; but—A sudden suspicion brought a flush to Ford's haggard face. Why had Handy troubled to hunt him up now, just when he had taken a Government job hunting down derelicts?

"Billy's driving at some crooked work. What's the latest Philippines disaster, and what's Handy's company got to do with it?"

Baffled by the cryptic letter, he gave it up at last, and stood staring moodily seaward. There the elements were in concert with his thoughts. The wind, boring inshore, piled up long lines of spume and spindrift on the half submerged Gridiron reefs, which stretched out fanwise a rifleshot away, like giant fingers, hungry to claw down coastwise craft. Farther to the south a single gray gull balanced inquiringly over the splintered spar of the Carbonate, an ancient sea wagon disintegrating in the maw of the Barnegat quicksands. A ghostly skeleton draped that spar, the upflung planes of a smuggling aeroplane that, through some miscalculation of the driver, had swooped down to destruction in the dark.

Grimly suggestive, the fluttering rags chilled Ford's heart. Was it a premonition of his own ultimate fate? He knew there was menace for his frail air craft—a short-winged scouting machine—in the gray gulls and other marauding sea fowl that swarmed in flocks each day at her launching, and followed the droning wreck hunter, or swooped in her path regardless of consequences in case of collision at sea. His own wrecked nerves saw death lurking everywhere.

"Maybe that would be the best way out," he said bitterly. The whole beach would soon be on to him, through Welsh. "A coward, a quitter, afraid of his precious neck!" That's what he was! A derelict hounding down derelicts!

A DEEP throated roar capped his moody reflections, as Little Welsh, the gunner, came plodding into the hangar, his weatherbeaten face eager with the news he brought.

"Orders from Headquarters," he said. "Ships Bottom's just got word by wire to watch out for the Manila Transport, she is, bound with bullion for the Philippines. Reported seen swamped, stacks down arter the big blow. Gee! She'd be a find!"

"I don't see what good she'd do us: we're Government employees," Ford said, his face paling with sudden premonition as he stared at the peajacketed little man in sou'wester and sea boots—Welsh's idea of proper "sky pilot" costume. "We couldn't claim salvage—"

"I wasn't meaning that—hang the loot!" Welsh broke in. "It's on'y she ain't ashore an' she ain't sunk; her bulkheads 'ud hold her up. She's a floatin' menace, der'lic', an' driftin' in the lane o' commerce an' coastwise skipping," he said, quoting from the Service Rules. "Two double-barreled funnels with red rims she is, layin' for murder. We got to git her, if we bust that sky ship an' go squash doin' it!"

There it was again, the law of the beach that ruled the unlettered little gunner as it ruled his mates! But for that sublimated self sacrifice, the Barnegat coastguard (proverbially poor like all life savers) might be as rich as the best—or worst—of the beachcombers: they had the same opportunities. And they risked death willingly for pitiful pay, and without hope of pension. The Government was unfair,—unjust and grasping.

As the thought shaped itself, Ford had a dawning sense of what Billy Handy meant by his mysterious letter. "The Manila with bullion for the Philippines." Somehow Handy had found out the nature of his present employment. Knowing he was down and out, and realizing the tremendous advantage the derelict-hunting aeroplane gave him over sea-level searchers, Handy had brutally offered to bribe him, when he learned of this richest of the many pickings along the bleak Barnegat beach—to "whack up" for advance information of the transport's whereabouts, before the Government should locate the wreck. There would be big money in it—

Dazed, as a man in a trance, Ford mounted the ready machine, with Welsh beside him. As the aeroplane sped out over the slaty ocean, the roar of the surf on the Gridiron welled up like giant minute guns flailing the reefs. He shuddered, raging to think that he too, like the simple-minded surfmen, was daily risking death for a pittance—worse than death! And there was Aline! A mere fraction of the Manila's wealth would solve the problem, give him the chance of escape from his precarious calling, put him on his feet, a man, and make the girl a well woman. He had only to accept Handy's offer. It meant riches, safety—if he found the missing ship. Already he was weighing the chances.

I NEVER see so many gulls as the' is today," Welsh jerked out suddenly, backing a brave front. "Must be a big blow comin': they know."

The aviator glanced curiously at the little gunner. Welsh was not used to the "high flyin' business" yet, and was having his own trouble hanging with a death grip to the wire spreaders. It would not be difficult to divert his attention at the crucial moment if they should sight the Manila's two murder stacks he spoke of!

Ford chuckled—an ugly sound. A pair of yellow funnels, sticking up from the water—that was what Welsh, a boatman, accustomed to sea-level sighting, hoped to see. Ford, an aviator, knew that from the altitude of the aeroplane those two yellow funnels would appear only as black specks on the sullen surface. He had nothing to fear from Welsh's forestalling him with the swamped Manila. And the imminent storm would keep off other searchers; more particularly the U. S. S. Katahdin, the big navy ram, which was down shore somewhere hunting derelicts just as the aeroplane was doing.

"This gale'll scare off the Katy; she's a poor sea boat," Welsh said, as though divining his thought. "Likely it'll hang some hookers on the Gridiron, comin' from the east'ard," he added grimly.

"It will drive in drifters too?" Ford said in sudden panic. "There'd be no chance of finding 'em again—say twelve hours after?" It would take about that for Billy Handy's wrecking tug to come from New York.

"Mostly them kind hang round for days; if coastway craft don't find 'em?" Welsh said grimly. "On'y a big wash 'ud pile the Manila on the Gridiron, a swamped ship like her, on'y her two funnels showin'—if it was her the Morgan packet thinks she saw."

Ford's eyes glinted evilly, scanning the sea ahead,—a sea that seemed laboring to spawn forth some horror buried in its bosom. What was that? Something flickered far down below. Fish gulls, a shimmering porpoise? The twin spots were too steady for that, too evenly aligned. He looked closely, gripping the controller of the speeding aeroplane with whitened knuckles. A dim shape showed beneath the two spots, a shadowy oblong, growing plainer as the machine droned seaward. What was it Welsh said? "Her airtight bulkhead 'ud keep her afloat under sea level."

"By Jim! There she is now—seaward!" Welsh's sudden cry throttled the gurgling triumph in