

Smuggle, Please

by Kalman Phillips

WAVELETS lapped against the sides of the lazily drifting canoe, rocking it gently. Within it, Sheila stretched lazily and wriggled her toes as the sun sent purrs of warmth along her smoothly tanned legs and arms. Jonathan Blair was coming tonight -- coming up to the hotel on the lake for his weekend fishing. Utter relaxation was the beauty treatment Aunt Emma had prescribed for that afternoon. Sheila had to look her best.

She gazed dreamily up into the china-blue bowl of sky and thought of the lawyer's office Aunt Emma had rescued her from to give her what Aunt Emma called "a shot at some big game." You didn't meet men like Jonathan banging away at a typewriter. Aunt Emma was a very practical woman.

Something splashed

nearby. Sheila didn't bother to investigate. The world was completely shut out by the curving sides. That was the beauty of the bottom of a canoe. Perfect serenity, no matter what went on about you. You could relax and...

Her eyelids bounced. A hand had suddenly appeared on one gunwale. She started up. The canoe lurched, shivered, then went over with a splash, and Sheila slid smoothly into the deep cool waters of the lake.

She came up a short distance from the canoe, coughing and spluttering, shocked to the core. She was so mad she was a little surprised that the water in her immediate vicinity didn't start boiling. Her hair was plastered over her eyes, and she pushed it away. She had to see to know in what direction to explode.

Her overturned canoe floated easily on the placid

surface of the lake. Nearby, there was another canoe, red also, right side up. It was empty. She looked around. No one.

Sheila swam to the other canoe. She peered inside. A paddle lay on the bottom. Nothing else. She held on to its side and frowned. This was silly. Canoes didn't float around by themselves. And lakes didn't have sudden storms to turn over other canoes. Besides, she had seen the hand. Something wasn't making sense.

She blinked. Her canoe was moving. Underside up, small ripples were curling away from its bow. And there wasn't any wind. Sheila's chin set. Ghosts. She was in no mood for ghosts. She swam over to it. She clenched one fist and hammered on it, hard.

It stopped. There was a swirl of water. A head popped out from under the gunwale.

The hair on it was short, the skin tanned, the features irregular. It was smiling reprovingly. "You shouldn't do that," it said. "Makes an awful racket." Then it disappeared again.

Her lips tightened. Her knuckles stung, but she pounded again.

The head reappeared. One hand came up and rubbed an ear. The gray eyes were puzzled. "Hey. Cut it out, please. There are echoes in there."

"Good. You...you fiend!" HIS eyelids flickered. He looked over his shoulder, but there were no other possible qualifiers for the title. "You mean one of those fellows in the newspapers that go amok and slay people?"

"I shouldn't wonder. Supposing I couldn't swim?"

"Riddles, eh?" He brightened. "That's more friendly. I like games. Supposing you couldn't. What then?"

"I might have drowned just now."

He shook his head at the obvious flaw in her reasoning.

"If you couldn't swim, you wouldn't be in swimming."

Sheila clenched her teeth. She had no patience with people who didn't make sense. "Do you always turn canoes over when you come out on a lake?"

"Generally. You see, there's an air-pocket underneath. You lay the paddle under the crossbars. Then you can dive under, come up inside and breathe perfectly well. I get a kick out of it. Hangover from childhood, I guess."

"And what do you do with the bodies?"

"What bodies?"

"The ones that come floating to the surface after -- what is it -- about a week or so? Of the people in the canoes you turn over."

The gray eyes went blank. Then they switched to the red canoe which was floating right-side up. "Oh-oh. That looks like mine."

"It is."

"And this one?"

"Mine. I was in it."

His gaze was shocked. The eyebrows raised, the eyes looked up at the sky, and the head sank out of sight again. Sheila pounded on the canoe. The head reappeared. He was rubbing both ears this time.

"I dove in and swam under water," he explained. "I had an idea the canoe had drifted a little when I came up, but I just grabbed hold and heaved. Good thing you can swim. No harm done, eh?"

Sheila softened. Little lines had a pleasant way of sprinkling from the edges of his eyes when he smiled, and he seemed honestly sorry. "Well, as a matter of fact..." She stopped as a damp lock fell forward across her forehead. Her eyelids startled wide open.

"My hair! It'll be a mess! Oh, I could scream! Oh, you -- you..."

But the head, ostrich-wise, had disappeared again. Sheila pounded a frustrated fist once on the canoe, then turned and swam to the other one. The afternoon was waning. If she were going to rescue anything from the wreck of what had once been a sleekly tailored coiffure, it behooved her to start rescuing.

AUNT Emma was in the room when she got there. The buxom older woman with the early white hair paid no attention as the door closed. She had a large pair of field glasses up to her eyes and was gazing out at the lake. Sheila observed her. "Whatever are you doing?"

"Watching Luke. That boy is practically a fish. He's got it righted already."

"Who's Luke?"

"Luke Pendleton. Your new young man."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"I was watching you swimming with him from the window. Tres gai."

"We weren't swimming. He dumped me in."

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"You can consider me merely a scientific prop to aid in the working out of a theory," Luke said.