AL-42

Henry Kelly,
2 m. from Talladega Springs, Ala.

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"DEAD MAN" OF
COOSA RIVER

We had been at this spot before -- a shaded slough opening into a wide, tawny expanse of backwater. It was twilight now, and the sun was a crimson crescent that sent crimson shafts across the wind-tossed river. Henry Kelly rested the paddle of his boat across long, thin legs. He looked far off down the river toward the bend, where the willows are like a huge green scarf thrown upon the banks. He said in his quiet way, "It's damned pretty."

There was a time when a little encouragement might have rehabilitated Henry Kelly. Sometimes a dulled touch of the refinement that he knew once in life manages to flash above the sordidness of his present environment; sometimes he sees beauty, as he was seeing it now. But most of the time his brain is filled only with bitterness, and the ugly tragedy of dead hope.

He cannot be rehabilitated now, because he is getting old, and he is afraid of society. He lives in a shack made of rough pine boards, sprawling not twenty feet from the mud-caked banks of the Coosa River. In summer, the shack is baked by a relentless sun. Winds whip through its wide cracks in winter. Henry Kelly is always sick, but he has learned how to suffer. He sleeps on an old bed held together by stout cord, with a mattress made of pine straw. He cooks on a broken-down wood stove, when he has anything to cook.

There have been days when the fish were not biting; when there was nothing in the house to eat. But Henry Kelly will not talk much about that. He will not ask for credit at the small, country store in Talladega Springs, two miles away. He will bear his hunger in silence until his trotlines yield a supply of blue and yellow catfish; then he will go into town and trade for all they are worth.

Sitting in the boat as it rested in the slough, I asked, "Henry, do you ever think of leaving the river?"

He smiled a little and dipped his paddle into the water, heading out into the open river. "I used to think of it," he said, "but I don't anymore. I've been here too long for that. I can survive out here, and that is better than I could do out in the towns and cities. I'd have to ask for charity there, and I don't want any charity. I don't want anything much except to be let alone. I don't want to have anything to do with anybody except my friends."

I remonstrated, "You're getting too bitter, Henry; you have lived alone too much."

"I like living alone," he said shortly. "The trouble with me is that I have lived with too many people in the past!"

Fifteen years ago Henry Kelly had a good job in Akron, Ohio. He lived in a comfortable house with his wife, and a daughter who was just beginning to bud into young womanhood. He thought then that he had everything that a man could ask; that life had dealt with him more than fairly. But then came the blow that started him on the long path back to Alabama

and the river. He quarreled with his wife; the rift between them widened, and at last they were divorced. The daughter chose to remain with her mother.

"That almost drove me crazy," he said. "I went about for days in a fog; I still can't remember some of the things that happened. I lost my job at the rubber plant -- I didn't care anything about keeping it. I came back to Sylacauga, Alabama, where I was born; and then I drifted on down here. I've been here ever since."

"Do you ever hear from your wife and daughter?"

"Never from my wife," he answered, "but sometimes from my girl. Her name is Lola. She sent me a picture of herself about a year ago, and she is beautiful. I've got the picture over there at my house by the bed, where I can look at it the first thing every morning. She's going to be married pretty soon, but of course she wouldn't want me at the wedding. I guess she has told her fiancee that I am dead, and that is what I want her to tell him. I <u>am</u> dead, you know."

He waved my protest aside and laughed harshly. "Why don't you write a book about river rats?," he asked. "I know a damned good title. It would be, 'River, Give Up Your Dead.' There are hundreds of --- ------ on this river who have been dead for years, only they don't know it. They've never been away from here to know any better. They can't read a newspaper, or even write their names. And God knows, I sometimes envy them. I went through high school, and look what it's got me!"

I told him, "Yes, but you can't blame high school for this."

"I don't know that I can't," he answered quietly. "If I had never been off this river, I'd be happy to stay here. If I had never learned anything, I would have me a woman who wouldn't know enough to argue with me. Maybe I'd have some brats running about like those other people. But a man who has lived with a pretty woman couldn't live with one of these snuff-smeared wenches. You couldn't give me one of them."

We were at the bank now, and he climbed out of the boat to chain it securely to a stout willow. Standing there in mud that was ankle deep, he made the sorry and pathetic picture of a man who was once courageous, but who was now beaten. He wore no shirt, and his ribs were outlined through browned flesh that was like dried leather. His face was tanned, but it was gaunt, and it had the pallor that is brought by malaria. It had been days since he had bothered to shave away his scraggly gray beard.

"I almost died with pneumonia last winter," he told me, "and it may take me out this next one. I'm sixty years old, and that's too damned old to fight it. Living by myself this way, I don't have anyone to help me when I get down, so don't be surprised if I cash in before you see me again."

I remonstrated again, "Henry, you are losing your grip on yourself."

He laughed, baring toothless gums.

"Hell," he cursed, "I lost my grip fifteen years ago. When you get word that I've gone out, you can just tell yourself that I didn't mind going. I've been wanting to go a good long time now.

"Why, I get to thinking about how fine it will be to get

away from all this. I imagine it will be a lasting sleeping drunk. Many times, I get myself a quart of this river whisky and put it by my bed. I keep drinking out of it as long as I can reach for the bottle, and when I can't reach any longer, I drop off to sleep. I stay dead as hell for about seven hours, and when a man is dead, nothing can bother him. Maybe sometime I won't wake up."

I stepped into my own boat and turned the motor. I wanted to get on down the river, around the bend to the cool spot where Cedar Creek meets the tawny backwater -- where "Uncle Bud" Ryland dispenses the quaint philosophy that drives a man's worries away. I pushed the boat away from the bank.

"Take care of yourself this winter, Henry," I admonished.

He did not answer. He only stood there with his hands upon his hips, smiling crookedly.

Yes, I needed "Uncle Bud" and his philosophy; and I was glad that he could not read his name!

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S.B.J.