

## *On the River*

**F**arrell was beginning to think that he had the River all to himself when he saw the girl. He had been traveling downstream for nearly two days now—River days, that is. He had no way of knowing for certain, but he was convinced that River time had very little to do with real time. There were days and nights here, yes, and twenty-four hours elapsed between each dawn. But there was a subtle difference between time as he had known it once and time as he knew it now.

The girl was standing at the water's edge, waving a diminutive handkerchief. It was obvious that she wanted him to pole over to the bank. He did so, forcing the raft out of the sluggish current and into the shallows. Several yards from shore it nudged bottom, and he leaned on the pole, holding the raft in position and looking questioningly at the girl. It surprised him to discover that she was young and attractive, although it shouldn't have, he supposed. Assuming that he had created her, it was only logical that he would have made her pleasing to the eye; and assuming that he had not, it was illogical to conclude that merely because he had reached the age of thirty, it was necessary for someone else to reach the age of thirty in order not to want to go on living. Her hair was only a shade less bright than the splash of afternoon sunlight in which she stood, and she wore it very short. A scattering of freckles lightly dappled the bridge of her delicate nose and the immediate areas on either side. She was willowy, and rather tall, and she had blue eyes.

"I'd like to share your raft," she said across the several yards of water that separated her from him. "My own broke loose during the night and drifted downstream, and I've been walking ever since dawn."

Her yellow dress was torn in a dozen places, Farrell noticed, and the slender slippers that encased her feet had already reached the point of no return. "Sure," he said. "You'll have to wade to get on board, though. This is as far in as I can get."

"I don't mind."

The water came to her knees. He helped her up beside him; then, with a strong thrust of the pole, he sent the raft back into the current. The girl shook her head as though her hair had once been long and she had forgotten that it had been cut, and wanted the wind to blow it. "I'm Jill Nichols," she said. "Not that it matters very much."

"Clifford," Farrell said. "Clifford Farrell."

She sat down on the raft and removed her shoes and stockings. After laying the pole aside, he sat down a few feet from her. "I was beginning to think I was the only one making the journey," he said.

The wind was moderate but brisk and was blowing upstream, and she faced into it as though expecting it to send her hair streaming behind her. The wind did its best, but succeeded only in ruffling the almost-curls that fringed her pale forehead. "I thought I was all alone, too."

"The way I had it figured," Farrell said, "the River was the product of my imagination. Now I see that it can't be—unless you're a product of my imagination also."

She smiled at him sideways. "Don't say that. I thought you were a product of mine."

He smiled back at her. It was the first time he had smiled in ages. "Maybe the River's an allegorical product of both our imaginations. Maybe this is the way you thought it would be, too. Drifting down a dark-brown stream, I mean, with trees on either hand and the blue sky above. Did you?"

"Yes," she said. "I've always thought that when the time came, it would be like this."

A thought struck him. "I took it for granted that because I'm here voluntarily, you are too. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Maybe," he went on, "two people visualizing an abstract idea by means of the same allegory can make that allegory come to life. Maybe, down through the years and without our being aware of it, we brought the River into existence."

"And then, when the time came, cast ourselves adrift on it? But where is the River? Surely, we can't still be on earth."

He shrugged. "Who knows? Reality probably has a thousand phases mankind knows nothing about."

Maybe we're in one of them ... How long have you been on the River?"

"A little over two days. I lost time today because I had to go on foot."

"I've been on it almost two days," Farrell said.

"I must have been the first to com—the first to cast myself adrift then." She wrung out her stockings and spread them on the raft to dry. She placed her bedraggled slippers beside them. She stared at the articles for some time. "Funny the way we do such things at a time like this," she said. "Why should it make any difference to me now whether my shoes and stockings are wet or dry?"

"I guess we're creatures of habit," he said. "Right up to the very end. Last evening, at the inn where I stayed the night, I shaved. True, there was an electric razor available; but why did I go to the trouble?"

She smiled wryly. "Last evening, at the inn where I stayed the night, I took a bath. I was going to put up my hair, but I caught myself just in time. It looks it, doesn't it?"

It did, but he didn't say so. Nor did he gallantly deny the fact. Somehow, small talk seemed out of place. The raft was drifting past a small island now. There were many such islands in the River—bleak little expanses of sand and gravel for the most part, although all of them had at least one tree. He glanced at the girl. Was she seeing the island, too? Her eyes told him that she was.

Still he was not convinced. It was hard to believe that two people—two people who did not even know each other, in fact—could have transformed the process of dying into an allegorical illusion so strong that it was indistinguishable from ordinary reality. And it was harder yet to believe that those same two people could have entered into that illusion and have met each other for the first time.

It was all so strange. He felt real. He breathed, he saw; he experienced pleasure and pain. And yet all the while he breathed and saw and experienced, he knew that he wasn't actually on the River. He *couldn't* be on the River, for the simple reason that in another phase of reality—the *real* phase—he was sitting in his car, in his garage, with the motor running and the garage doors closed.

And yet somehow, in a way that he could not fathom, he *was* on the River; drifting down the River on a strange raft that he had never built or bought and had never even known existed until he had found himself sitting on it nearly two days ago. Or was it two hours ago? Or two minutes? Or two seconds?

He did not know. All he knew was that, subjectively at least, almost forty-eight hours had passed since he had first found himself on the River. Half of those hours he had spent on the River itself, and the other half he had spent in two deserted inns, one of which he had found on the River bank at the close of the first afternoon and the other of which he had found on the River bank at the close of the second.

That was another strange thing about the River. It was impossible to travel on it at night. Not because of the darkness (although the darkness did impose a hazard), but because of an insurmountable reluctance on his own part—a reluctance compounded of dread and of an irresistible desire to interrupt his ineluctable journey long enough to rest. Long enough to find peace. But why peace? he wondered. Wasn't it peace toward which the River was bearing him? Wasn't the only real peace the peace of oblivion? Surely by this time he should have accepted a truism as basic as that.

"It's beginning to get dark," Jill said. "There should be an inn soon." Her shoes and stockings had dried, and she put them back on.

"We'll watch for it. You keep an eye on the right bank, and I'll keep an eye on the left."

The inn was on the right bank, built almost flush with the water's edge. A low pier protruded a dozen feet into the stream, and after securing the raft to it with the mooring line, Farrell stepped onto the heavy planking and helped Jill up beside him. So far as he could see, the inn—on the outside, at least—was not particularly different from the two he had already stayed overnight in. It was three-storied and square, and its tiers of windows made warm golden rectangles in the gathering dusk. The interior proved to be virtually identical too, give or take a few modifications—Jill's work, no doubt, since she must have collaborated on the creation. There was a small lobby, a bar, and a large dining room; a gleaming maple staircase curved upward to the second and third floors, and electric lights burned everywhere in the guise of counterfeit candles and imitation hurricane-lamps.

Farrell glanced around the dining room. "It looks as though you and I are slaves to American Colonial tradition," he said.

Jill laughed. "We do seem to have a lot in common, don't we?"

He pointed to a glittering juke box in the far corner of the room. "One of us, though, was a little mixed up. A juke box doesn't belong in an American Colonial setting."

"I'm afraid I'm the guilty party. There was a juke box just like that one in the inn where I stayed last night and in the inn where I stayed the night before."

"Apparently our inns vanish the minute we're out of sight. At any rate, I saw no sign of yours ... I still can't help wondering whether we're the only force that holds this whole thing together. Maybe, the moment we're de—the moment we're gone—the whole business will disappear. Assuming of course that it has objective existence and *can* disappear."

She pointed to one of the dining-room tables. It was covered with an immaculate linen tablecloth and was set for two. Beside each place, a real candle—real, that is, to whatever extent it was possible for objects to be real in this strange land—burned in a silver candlestick. "I can't help wondering what we're going to have for dinner."

"The particular dish we happen to be hungry for most, I imagine. Last night I had a yen for southern-fried chicken, and southern-fried chicken was what I found waiting for me when I sat down."

"Funny, how we can take such miracles in our stride," she said. And then, "I think I'll freshen up a bit."

"I think I will too."

They chose rooms across the hall from each other. Farrell got back downstairs first and waited for Jill in the dining room. During their absence, two large covered trays and a silver coffee set appeared on the linen tablecloth. How this had been brought about, he could not fathom; nor did he try very hard. A hot shower had relaxed him, and he was permeated with a dream-like feeling of well-being. He even had an appetite, although he suspected that it was no more real than the food with which he would presently satisfy it would be. No matter. Stepping into the adjoining bar, he drew himself a short beer and drank it appreciatively. It was cold and tangy, and hit the spot. Returning to the dining room, he saw that Jill had come back downstairs and was waiting for him in the lobby doorway. She had repaired her torn dress as best she could and had cleaned her shoes, and there was a trace of lipstick on her lips and a touch of rouge on her cheeks. It dawned on him all of a sudden that she was positively stunning.

When they sat down at the table, the lights dimmed, and the juke box began to play. In addition to the two covered trays and the silver coffee set, the magic tablecloth had also materialized a mouth-watering antipasto. They nibbled radishes by candlelight, ate carrots Julienne. Jill poured steaming coffee into delicate blue cups, added sugar and cream. She had "ordered" sweet potatoes and baked Virginia ham, he had "ordered" steak and French fries. As they dined, the juke box pulsed softly in the ghostly room and the candle flames flickered in drafts that came through invisible crevices in the walls. When they finished eating, Farrell went into the bar and brought back a bottle of champagne and two glasses. After filling both glasses, he touched his to hers. "To the first day we met," he said, and they drank.

Afterward, they danced on the empty dance floor. Jill was a summer wind in his arms. "Are you a professional dancer?" he asked.

"I was."

He was silent. The music was dream-like, unreal. The big room was a place of soft lights and pale shadows. "I was an artist," he went on presently. "One of the kind whose paintings no one buys and who keep themselves going on scraps of hopes and crusts of dreams. When I first began to paint, I thought that what I was doing was somehow noble and worthwhile; but a schoolboy conviction can't last forever, and finally I recognized and accepted the fact that nothing I would ever paint would justify my having gone without even so much as a single helping of mashed potatoes. But that's not why I'm on the River."

"I danced in night clubs," Jill said. "Not nice dances, but I was not a stripper."

"Were you married?"

"No. Were you?"

"Only to my work, and my work and I have been divorced for some time now. Ever since I took a job designing greeting cards."

"It's funny," she said, "I never thought it would be like this. Dying, I mean. Whenever I pictured

myself on the River, I pictured myself on it alone."

"So did I," Farrell said. And then, "Where did you live, Jill?"

"In Rapids City."

"Why, that's where I lived too. Maybe that has something to do with our meeting each other in this strange land. I—I wish I had known you before."

"You know me now. And I know you."

"Yes. It's better than never having gotten to know each other at all."

They danced in silence for a while. The inn dreamed around them. Outside, beneath stars that had no right to be, the River flowed, dark-brown and brooding in the night. At length, when the waltz to which they were dancing came to an end, Jill said, "I think we should call it a day, don't you?"

"Yes," Farrell said, looking down into her eyes, "I suppose we should." And then, "I'll wake at dawn—I know I will. Will you?"

She nodded. "That's part of it, too—waking at dawn. That, and listening for the falls."

He kissed her. She stood immobile for a moment, then drew away. "Good night," she said, and hurried from the room.

"Good night," he called after her.

He stood in the suddenly empty room for some time. Now that she had gone, the juke box played no more and the lights had brightened and taken on a cold cast. He could hear the River, hear it whispering a thousand and one sad thoughts. Some of the thoughts were his, and some of them were Jill's.

At last he left the room and climbed the stairs. He paused in front of Jill's door. He raised his hand, knuckles turned toward the panel. He could hear her in the room beyond, hear her bare feet padding on the floor and the rustle of her dress as she slipped out of it for the night. Presently he heard the faint whisper of sheets and the muffled creak of springs. And all the while he heard these sounds, he heard the soft, sad susurrus of the River.

At length his hand fell to his side, and he turned and stepped across the hall and let himself into his own room. He closed the door firmly. Love and death might go together, but love-making and dying did not.

The sound of the River grew louder while he slept, and in the morning it was a steady murmur in his ears. Breakfast was eggs and bacon and toast and coffee served by ghosts, and gray words spoken in the gray light of dawn. With the rising of the sun he and Jill cast off, and soon the inn was far behind them.

A little mist midday, they heard the roar of the falls.

It was a gentle roar at first, but it grew louder, decibel by decibel, and the river narrowed and began flowing between bleak gray cliffs. Jill moved closer to Farrell, and Farrell took her hand. Rapids danced around them, drenching them at sporadic intervals with ice-cold spray. The raft lurched beneath them, turned first this way and that at the whim of the River. But it did not capsize, nor would it, for it was the falls that stood for death—not the rapids.

Farrell kept glancing at the girl. She was staring straight ahead of her as though the rapids did not exist, as though nothing existed except herself, Farrell, and the raft. He had not expected death to come so soon. He had thought that life, now that he had met Jill, would linger on. But apparently this strange country which they had somehow brought into being had no function save to destroy them.

Well, destruction was what he wanted, wasn't it? A strange encounter in a strange land could not have changed that, any more than it could have changed it for Jill. A thought struck him, and, raising his voice above the gurgling of the rapids and the roar of the falls, he asked, "What did you use, Jill?" "Gas," she answered. "And you?"

"Carbon monoxide."

They said no more.

Late in the afternoon, the River widened again, and the cliffs gradually gave way to gently sloping banks. Beyond the banks vague hills showed, and the sky seemed to have taken on a bluer cast. The roar of the falls was deafening now, but apparently the falls themselves were still a considerable distance downstream. Maybe this wasn't the last day after all.

It wasn't. Farrell knew it the minute he saw the inn. It was on the left bank, and it appeared a little while before the sun was about to set. The current was swift now, and very strong, and it required the combined efforts of both him and the girl to pole the raft in to the small pier. Breathing hard, and soaked to the skin, they clung to each other till they caught their breaths. Then they went inside.

Warmth rose up to meet them, and they rejoiced in it. They chose rooms on the second floor, dried their clothes, made themselves presentable, and joined each other in the dining room for the evening meal. Jill had a roast-beef dinner and Farrell had scalloped potatoes and pork chops. He had never tasted anything so delicious in all his life, and he savored every mouthful. Lord, but it was good to be alive!

Astonished at the thought, he stared at his empty plate. *Good* to be alive? Then why was he sitting in his car with the motor running and the garage doors closed, waiting to die? What was he doing on the River? He raised his eyes to Jill's, saw from the bewilderment in them that the face of all the world had changed for her, too, and knew that as surely as she was responsible for his new outlook, he was responsible for hers.

"Why did you do it, Jill?" he asked. "Why?"

She looked away. "As I told you, I used to dance in night clubs. Not nice dances, but I wasn't a stripper either—not in the strict sense of the word. But even though my act could have been far worse, it was still bad enough to awaken something in me that I didn't know existed. Anyway, one night I ran away, and not long after that I joined a convent."

She was silent for a while, and so was he. Then she said, looking at him now, "It's funny about a person's hair—what it can come to stand for, I mean. I wore my hair very long, and it was the most essential part of my act. The only decent part, because it covered my nakedness. Without my knowing what was happening, it came to symbolize for me the only really decent quality I possessed. But I didn't tumble to the truth until it was too late. With my hair, I had been able to live with myself. Without it, I felt unfit to live. I—I ran away again—to Rapids City this time—and I got a job in a department store and rented a small apartment. But a decent job wasn't enough—I needed something more. Winter arrived, and I came down with the flu. You know how it weakens you sometimes, how depressed you can feel afterwards. I—I—"

She looked down at her hands. They lay on the table before her, and they were slender and very white. The sad susurrus of the River filled the room, muting the throb of the juke box. Backgrounding both sounds was the roar of the falls.

Farrell looked down at his own hands. "I guess I was sick, too," he said. "I must have been. I felt empty. Bored. Do you know what true boredom is? It's a vast, gnawing nothingness that settles around you and accompanies you wherever you go. It comes over you in great gray waves and inundates you. It suffocates you. I said that my giving up the kind of work I wanted to do wasn't responsible for my being on the River, and it wasn't—not directly. But my boredom was a reaction, just the same. Everything lost meaning for me. It was like waiting all your life for Christmas to come, and then getting up Christmas morning and finding an empty stocking. If I could have found something in the stocking—anything at all—I might have been all right. But I found nothing in it, absolutely nothing. I know now that it was my fault. That the only way anyone can expect to find something in his Christmas stocking is by placing something in it the night before, and that the nothingness I saw around me was merely a reflection of myself. But I didn't know these things then." He raised his head and met her eyes across the table. "Why did we have to die in order to meet each other and want to live? Why couldn't we have met like other people—in a summer park or on a quiet street? Why did we have to meet on the River, Jill? Why?"

She stood up, crying. "Let's dance," she said. "Let's dance all night."

They drifted onto the empty dance floor and the music rose around them and took them in its arms—the sad and the gay and the poignant songs that first one of them and then the other remembered from the lifetimes they had cast aside. "That one's from the Senior Prom," she said once. "The one we're dancing to now," he said a short while afterward, "dates from the days when I was still a kid and thought I was in love." "And were you in love?" she asked, eyes gentle upon his face. "No," he answered, "not then. Not ever—until now." "I love you, too," she said, and the tune took on a softer note and for a long

while time ceased to be.

Toward dawn, she said, "I hear the River calling. Do you hear it, too?"

"Yes," he said, "I hear it."

He tried to fight the call, and so did she. But it wasn't any use. They left the ghosts of themselves dancing in the dawn-light and went down to the pier and boarded the raft and cast off. The current seized them greedily and the roar of the falls took on a triumphant tone. Ahead, in the wan rays of the rising sun, mist was rising high above the gorge.

They sat close together on the raft, in each other's arms. The roar was a part of the air they breathed now, and the mist was all around them. Through the mist, a vague shape showed. Another raft? Farrell wondered. He peered into the ghostly vapor, saw the little trees, the sandy shore. An island ...

Suddenly he understood what the islands in the River represented. Neither he nor Jill had truly wanted to die, and as a result the allegory which they had jointly brought to life and entered into contained loopholes. There might be a way back after all.

Springing to his feet, he seized the pole and began poling. "Help me, Jill!" he cried. "It's our last chance."

She, too, had seen the island and divined its significance. She joined him, and they poled together. The current was omnipotent now, the rapids furious. The raft lurched, heaved, wallowed. The island loomed larger through the mist. "Harder, Jill, harder!" he gasped. "We've got to get back—we've *got* to!"

He saw then that they weren't going to make it, that despite their combined efforts the current was going to carry them past their last link with life. There was one chance, and only one. He kicked off his shoes. "Keep poling, Jill!" he shouted, and, after placing the end of the mooring line between his teeth and biting into it, he leaped into the rapids and struck out for the island for all he was worth.

Behind him, the raft lurched wildly, tearing the pole from Jill's grasp and sending her sprawling on the deck. He did not know this, however, till he reached the island and looked over his shoulder. By then, there was just enough slack remaining in the line for him to belay it around a small tree and secure it in place. The tree shuddered when the line went taut, and the raft came to an abrupt stop several feet from the brink of the falls. Jill was on her hands and knees now, trying desperately to keep herself from being thrown from the deck. Gripping the line with both hands, he tried to pull the raft in to the island, but so strong was the current that he would have been equally as successful if he had tried to pull the island in to the raft.

The little tree was being gradually uprooted. Sooner or later it would be torn out of the ground and the raft would plunge over the falls. There was only one thing to do. "Your apartment, Jill!" he shouted across the whiteness of the rapids. "Where is it?"

Her voice was barely audible. "229 Locust Avenue. Number 301."

He was stunned. 229 Locust Avenue was the apartment building next to the one where he lived. Probably they had almost run into each other a dozen times. Maybe they *had* run into each other, and forgotten. In the city, things like that happened every day.

But not on the River.

"Hold on, Jill!" he called. "I'm going the long way around!"

To travel from the island to the garage required but the merest flick of a thought. He came to in his car, head throbbing with misted pain. Turning off the ignition, he got out, threw open the garage doors, and staggered out into the shockingly cold winter's night. He remembered belatedly that his hat and coat were in the back of the car.

No matter. He crammed his lungs with fresh air and rubbed snow on his face. Then he ran down the street to the apartment building next door. Would he be in time? he wondered. He could not have been in the garage more than ten minutes at the most, which meant that time on the River moved at an even faster pace than he had thought. Hours, then, had already passed since he had left the island, and the raft could very well have gone over the falls.

Or had there really been a raft? A River? A girl with sun-bright hair? Maybe the whole thing had been a dream—a dream that his unconscious had manufactured in order to snap him back to life.

The thought was unendurable, and he banished it from his mind. Reaching the apartment building, he ran inside. The lobby was deserted, and the elevator was in use. He pounded up three flights of stairs and paused before her door. It was locked. "Jill!" he called, and broke it down.

She was lying on the living room sofa, her face waxen in the radiance of a nearby floor lamp. She was wearing the yellow dress that he remembered so well, only now it was no longer torn. Nor were her slender slippers bedraggled. Her hair, though, was just the way he remembered it—short, and trying to curl. Her eyes were closed.

He turned off the gas in the fireless circulating heater that stood against the wall, and he threw open all of the windows. He picked her up and carried her over to the largest one and let the sweet-life-giving air embrace her. "Jill!" he whispered. "Jill!"

Her eyelids quivered, opened. Blue eyes filled with terror gazed up into his face. Slowly, the terror faded away, and recognition took its place. He knew then that there would be no more Rivers for either of them.