

MONSTER

PARADE

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FROZEN

H. B. Levin



As long as the harbor remained icebound Olav was safe . . . but when the ice would melt and the fogs begin to break up, the secret beneath the sea would return to haunt him

STIFF

By HAL ELLSON

THE MORNING was like a dream. Most of the harbor and all its ships were frozen in. Fifteen years had passed since this had last happened, and in the early light everything appeared strange and unnaturally quiet. Nothing moved, nothing at all, no tug, no barge, no ship. No hint of the tide, either, but somewhere deep under the ice, Olav knew it was there, stirring, yet he didn't feel it, and gave no sign of itself. No water slapped around piles, no channel bells tolled, no gongs rang, no tugs hooted. The slips were solidly frozen, barges trapped and held motionless in the ice, lighters with their booms angled—and most odd—barges caught in the bay itself, left stranded where the tugs had given up in the struggle to bring them in. Nothing seemed real that morning to Olav.

He lay on his bunk with his hands clasped behind his head. Nothing would be doing. It would be like yesterday, too quiet, and he'd have time to think. He didn't want that. Thinking meant Anna, and he'd finished with her.

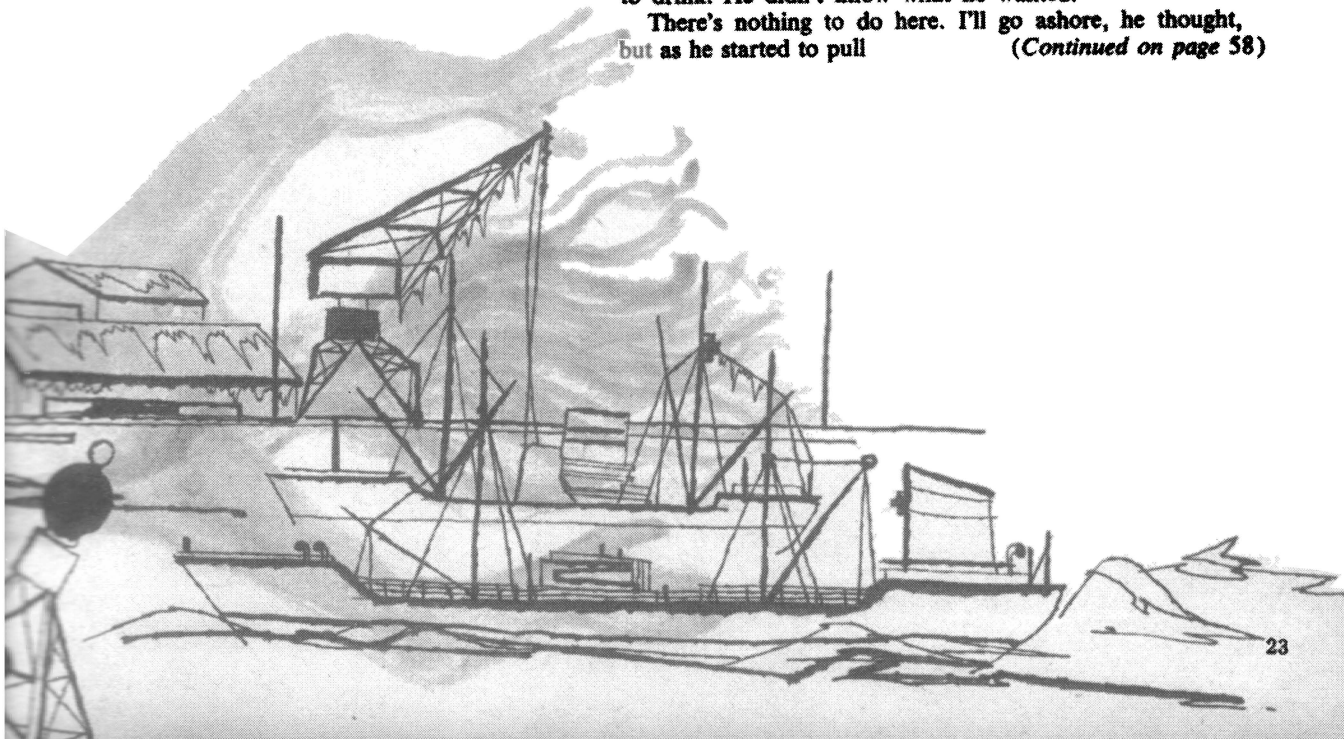
How did I let it go on so long? he wondered and caught himself, shook his head to clear his mind, got up from the bunk, went to a window and was struck by the scene. Ordinarily, everything was fluid, changing minute by minute, but now the frozen harbor appeared strange and the ice looked even whiter than yesterday. Watching, he saw two men far up the slip crossing the ice, and gulls flying low, not gliding serenely but hungrily searching for food, their flight erratic, their cries too sharp and filled with melancholy.

Those same cries sent him from the window. He sat down near the fire, rolled a cigarette, but the gulls stayed in his mind. He was aware of their cries, the beat of their wings as they passed overhead. As for the cigarette, it wasn't enough and had no taste.

Getting up again, he found an old magazine and thumbed through it, but that couldn't hold him, either. The bottle came next. He took it out from under his bunk, had a drink and found no satisfaction in that, for he didn't want to drink. He didn't know what he wanted.

There's nothing to do here. I'll go ashore, he thought, but as he started to pull

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FROZEN STIFF

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his heavy coat on, he realized he didn't know where to go. He put his coat away and felt a hollowness inside himself like a wound—and the quietness outside—in spite of the gulls. For their cries were part of something else and didn't come out of the quietness.

Going back to his bunk, he lay down, his face crushing the pillow, to blind himself, for he wanted to blot out everything with darkness, as if that would help. For a while it did, but soon the dark began to fill with light, and nothing could stop his thoughts.

Later, he heard footsteps without believing in them. They were no more real than anything else that morning. Even after he heard the knock on the door, he lay there with his face in the pillow, then, slowly, turned his head, hearing a second knock. He pulled himself up and said, "Come in."

Another barge captain entered the cabin, his name, Gunnar, a tall, bony, red-faced man. He pulled off his gloves, sat down near the fire and said, "It's something outside today, no, Olav? It's good I find you, too. I couldn't get on my boat. Ya, I don't remember it like this before."

"The first time in fifteen years," Olav said flatly.

Gunnar leaned back in his chair. Both men fell silent. Wood in the stove crackled and popped cheerfully, and Gunnar's eyes went round the cabin. Finally they came to rest on Olav who was staring at the wall before him. Gunnar waited, then said, "And where is she?"

"Where is who?"

"Who? You know who I mean."

"Oh." Olav's face didn't change expression. "She's not here any more."

"Not aboard?" Gunnar laughed.

"Something happened?"

"Nothing happened. I just got rid of her."

"So what did you do? Throw her overboard?"

Olav's eyes flashed. "Take it easy with that talk," he said, and Gunnar stopped smiling.

"What's wrong with you?" he answered. "Hell, I know you don't push nobody overboard."

BOTH MEN were quiet then. Red ash dropped through the grate of the stove and turned quickly to grey. Outside, the gulls still keened and Olav listened to their mournful cries. For Gunnar, though, they didn't exist. He took out his pipe, filled and lit it, then looked at Olav again.

"But it's been done in the harbor before, that, pushing somebody overboard," he remarked.

"Sure, and it will be done again," Olav said without lifting his eyes.

"Well, that's where most of them belong. But, you know, she wasn't so bad-looking, I mean the one you had.

Where did you pick her up?"

Olav didn't answer. He stared toward the window, and Gunnar studied him. After a while he said, "What did you do, have a fight with her, or did she try to roll you?"

"I just got tired of her, that's all. You always get tired of that kind. They don't care anyhow, as long as they've had a cabin to stay in for a while."

"I know."

Gunnar nodded, and both were quiet again, aware of the warmth in the cabin and the cold outside. As for the silence, it came only in moments, for, over and over again, it was broken by the gulls whose cries voiced all the loneliness and hunger of the world. There were more of them now, haunting the slip, their swift shadows sweeping across the ice.

Finally Gunnar lifted his eyes. "You were with that one a long time, Olav . . . How long was it?"

Olav shrugged. "I don't remember." "But she must have had something while she had it. No, Olav?"

"No more than the next one. They're all the same, everyone of them. Give them a place to eat, something to drink, and what the hell."

"Ha, you got a nice scratch on your hand. Is that how she kissed you goodbye?"

Olav looked at his right hand and covered it with his left. "I got that when I fell a couple of nights ago," he said and, looking up again, saw Gunnar smiling.

"You got it on the face, too, some nice long scratches. Well, that's the way they claw you, them women. They're like cats, no, Olav?"

Olav flushed and looked away.

"Ah, I know," Gunnar chuckled. "How many times the same thing happened to me. Some of them are tigers when they're drunk. You can't tell me about them, Olav."

"There was no fight. I got tired of her and told her to go."

Gunnar smiled. There'd been a fight. He was certain of that. Olav stood up now, went to the stove and looked at the scratches on his hand, his back turned to Gunnar. When he didn't speak or turn round again, Gunnar understood. He wasn't wanted, and he stood up.

"I think I'll go ashore," he said. "Nothing'll be doing today, and I can't get aboard my boat."

Olav didn't bother to answer. He went back to his bunk, sat down and began to roll a cigarette. Gunnar watched him, then went to the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Olav," he said from there.

Olav nodded without looking up. The door opened and closed. Footsteps sounded on deck and died away. Olav finished rolling the cigarette, put it in his mouth, then raised his eyes and stared at the door. Finally he lit the cigarette, then

stared at the scratches on his hand. Overhead, a gull screamed, but its cry seemed remote and when Olav got up and looked out the window at the ice-bound harbor, nothing was moving, no ship, no tug, no barge.

FOUR DAYS later Olav's barge was still in the same slip, but now the sun shone and the sky was blue and cloudless. With a soft warm wind blowing from the east, it was almost like a spring day, and water dripped from the pier-sheds; everywhere ice was melting, the tides and the warmth of the sun having broken the solid mass in the harbor.

Olav lay in his bunk. He'd slept through the morning and now was staring across the cabin, listening. From out of nowhere, he'd caught the sound, as if someone were whispering. He tried to make it out, couldn't, and lay still, listening.

Then he knew. The ice was breaking up, the harbor coming to life. He could feel it, hear the old familiar sounds. But most of all he sensed the change. It was in the air and everywhere about him.

Getting up, he went to the doorway and saw a grey ice-breaker enter the slip. Moving slowly, the ice parted at its bow and huge slabs heaved and broke. The ice-breaker went deep into the slip, turned, started out again, moving faster now, ripping through the ice and leaving open water in its wake.

Olav stepped out on deck and felt the living warmth of the sun touch him immediately. In the harbor, a ship moved down the "stream" tugs were working. One was just entering the slip. Everything had changed. It was the same harbor once more, but he heard the whispering sound again and looked down at the ice. Great slabs were on the move, for the tide was coming in. The whispering came from the moving floes.

Disturbed, Olav went into the cabin and stretched out on his bunk. With the harbor clearing, he new he'd be towing soon, and that was what he wanted—to get as far away from this place as possible and never come back again.

It's a hard luck place, he thought and closed his eyes, but he couldn't sleep.

Sleep was impossible, for the ice in the slip was still moving and he heard that terrible whispering sound it made. It was almost human.

He didn't hear the visitor at all. The man walked too quietly. Still, he sensed someone near, opened his eyes and saw a man standing in the open doorway. For a moment, he didn't recognize him, then he sat up and said, "Hello, Magnus."

Magnus nodded and came into the cabin. A stout, middle-aged man with a blond moustache and serious face, he sat down stiffly, looked around the cabin and then at Olav.

"It's almost like spring out. No?" said Olav.

"Yes, the wind's from the East, and the ice is breaking up. I guess we'll have rain."

"Yes, it will rain."

"The floes are moving, too. When the tide turns, the ice will float out to sea. A few more days and you won't see a piece in the harbor.

Olav nodded and stared through the open doorway at the golden light outside. Everything seemed warm and alive, but it wasn't like that in the cabin.

Too dark in here, Olav thought, and Magnus coughed, cleared his throat.

"The harbor's dirty now, but when the tide takes the ice out it'll carry everything with it and be clean again."

Olav nodded, stood up and went to the doorway. "I'm light," he said, starting across the harbor. "I'll be towing out of this place and I'm not sorry."

Magnus shrugged. "So isn't the harbor the same wherever you go?"

"Sure, but I don't like this place. I never did."

"There are worse places," said Magnus, blinking and watching Olav.

Olav didn't reply. He was still staring at the harbor where the ice drifted in great floes.

Magnus picked at the callous on his thumb and laughed. Then said slowly, as if speaking to himself, "Yes, in this weather the harbor cleans itself. Everything'll go out with the ice, all the dirt . . . even the dead. . . ."

Olav turned round suddenly, but Magnus was still picking his callous and didn't look up. "Early this morning over in the other slip," he went on, "I saw them take a man out of the water, a cop. He'd been in the ice a long time, I think. . . ."

Olav stared at Magnus, took a deep breath and walked across the cabin. "A cop?" he said from the other side of the cabin.

"Yes, a cop, and he didn't fall in accidentally. A longshoreman's hook was still in his head when they pulled him up. Not that that's anything new around the waterfront, but just after breakfast it was something to see."

Olav sat down and put his hands on his knees. "No, that's nothing new," he said slowly.

And Magnus left off picking his callous. He looked up at Olav. "I had my trouble with something like that one time. With a woman," he said and paused, still watching Olav.

Olav stared at him, waited for him to go on.

"When something like that happens and you're mixed up in it," Magnus continued, "you're in real trouble. The police ask questions, you know. They ask a lot of questions and it's better to have the right answers."

Still looking at Olav, Magnus smiled. Olav said nothing. He didn't want to hear any more. Magnus was deliberately taunting him, trying to get at something.

"Well, they figured they had me that time," Magnus continued, "but I had the right answers. Suppose, though, that I didn't? They'd have fried me. Yes, that was a bad thing, so from that time on I bring no more women on my boat. I keep it like that too. No women. A woman is always trouble, always. But that was a long time ago and I was younger than I am now. Maybe, if I was still young, I'd think different. Say if I was young like you, Olav."

Olav tried to smile, and said, "You never told me anything about this before."

"Oh, yes, I was a young fellow, too, and not for nothing. Always in trouble because I drink too much then. Now?" Magnus shrugged. "Well, I drink too much but it doesn't matter because nothing happens. Still, I'm careful since that time."

Olav nodded, watching Magnus as he tapped his knee and continued: "That time they could have fried me. I was right in the pan for a bit."

"And how did you get out?"

"Oh, I got out all right, but it was too tight. Once you're in, it's not so easy to get out, even if it's so easy to get in." Magnus shrugged. "I had a woman on my boat. Just a woman, you know. Today I don't even remember her name. You know how you pick them up all the time and bring them on board? Well, she was just another one. Pretty, too, and young. Then she beat it, and I towed out."

Magnus shrugged again. "I figured she picked up somebody else she liked better. Well, a couple of days later the police picked me up and started asking questions. I knew right away what happened then. They'd pulled her out of the harbor. Maybe she took a fall. Or maybe she threw herself in. That's what I always figured, because she was an odd one."

"Anyway, they started asking me questions fast. They wanted to know where I picked her out, how long she'd been with me, when I saw her last and all that. I had to have the right answers or they'd fry me. I don't know how they picked me up. Who knows? Maybe some other captain opened his big mouth. Anyway, I guess I had the right answers because they let me be and I never heard anything more about it." Magnus smiled and looked at Olav. "Since that time I'm smart and bring no more crazy women on my boat."

Olav nodded. Magnus watched him, the smile faint but still on his face. Finally he said, "But I don't see Anna here today."

"She's gone."

"I know."

"You know?" Who told you?"

"Gunnar. I saw him yesterday."

"That's all Gunnar has to talk about?"

"Well . . ."

"It's none of his business."

"I know, but did she fall overboard?"

Magnus said jokingly.

"No, I got tired of her and told her to go," Olav answered, staring out the doorway.

"Then you didn't push her over?"

Olav felt his skin prickle at the question and looked up angrily. Magnus was smiling at him. "Well, maybe I did," he said. "Who knows?"

"If you put plenty of weights on the body, nobody'll ever know."

"That's right. Plenty of weights," Olav said, suddenly laughing.

MAGNUS stood up now, went to the door and looked outside. "Sometimes a body comes up anyhow," he said seriously. "It's a funny thing, no?"

Olav didn't reply. An odd sound, like a scratching against the side of his barge, drew his attention and stopped his laughter. Magnus heard it, too, and

turned around.

"What's that?" Olav asked him.

"The ice. The tide's turned. The floes are moving out."

Relieved, Olav got up, went to the doorway and looked out at the ice. "Yes, it's moving out to sea," he said as if to himself.

"There'll be no more real winter," Magnus predicted. "And it'll probably rain before dark."

Olav nodded. Magnus stepped from the cabin. "I'll drop in again," he said and walked across the deck.

Olav watched him climb to the pier, then went back to his bunk and sat down. As soon as he did, the scratching sound started up again, for the ice, which was slowly moving out of the slip, was scraping against the side of the barge. Olav tensed, waited, and finally the scratching ceased.

He relaxed, then suddenly felt tired and stretched on his back and closed his eyes. But his mind wasn't at rest. He began to think of Anna, and of Magnus' story.

Yes, they'll come here, he told himself. They'll find me and pick me up and start pumping me. They'll ask questions, lots of them. They'll want to know everything, where I picked her up, if we had any arguments, when I saw her last, everything. . . .

But they can't ask anything unless they find her. And how will they know unless they find her? She just walked out of the picture, that's all I have to tell them. What can they do to me? They've got to find her first, and no one'll miss her. That's one thing I know. She hasn't anybody, so nobody'll be asking questions. Even if they do, it won't make any difference because they'll never find her.

A gull screamed as it flew overhead. Then the stillness of the afternoon came back, and the sun shone, but its brightness was gone. An almost indiscernible shadow was present in the air. Olav was aware of it and of the ice making that odd scratching sound against his barge again.

He lay still and tense, then suddenly sat up, frightened, for it seemed as if something alive and with claws was tearing at the bottom of his barge. Recalling the fight with Anna, how she had torn at him with her nails, he looked at his hand where the marks were, then stood up.

The ice was still moving, clawing at his boat. The terrible scratching sound seemed to glow louder, and the idea formed, persisted; the scratching evoked images, all the frightening details he'd tried to forget. Anna was there in the water. Her nails were making that sound. She hadn't drowned, wasn't dead. There was still time to save her.

"Anna!" he shouted and he ran for the door, burst out on deck and slipped, stumbled, then plunged forward and downward. His head struck a huge slab of ice and the cry he uttered went unheard. The weight of his body caused the slab to turn. He rolled into the frigid water and disappeared. The slab righted itself again, continued to move seaward with the rest and the scratching sound went on as before.