

Title

J. Allan Dunn

A Man to His Mate

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To ...

J. E. DE RUYTER, Esquire

this yarn is affectionately and
appreciatively dedicated

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A Man to His Mate

I. BLIND SAMSON

It was perfect weather along the San Francisco water-front, and Rainey reacted to the brisk touch of the trade-wind upon his cheek, the breeze tempering the sun, bringing with it a tang of the open sea and a hint of Oriental spices from the wharves. He whistled as he went, watching a lumber coaster outward bound. The dull thump of a heavy cane upon the timbered walk and the shuffle of uncertain feet warned him from blundering into a man tapping his way along the Embarcadero, a giant who halted abruptly and faced him, leaning on the heavy stick.

"Matey," asked the giant, "could you put a blind man in the way of finding the sealin' schooner Karluk?"

The voice fitted its owner, Rainey thought - a basso voice tempered to the occasion, a deep-sea voice that could bellow above the roar of a gale if needed. For all his shoregoing clothes and shuffle, the man was certainly a sailor, or had been. All the skin uncovered by cloth or hair was weathered to leather, the great hands curled in as if they clutched an invisible rope. He wore dark glasses with side lenses, over which heavy brows projected in shaggy wisps of red hair.

Blind as the man proclaimed himself with voice and action, Rainey sensed something back of those colored glasses that seemed to be appraising him, almost as if the will of the man was peering, or listening, focused through those listless sockets. A kind of magnetism, not at all attractive, Rainey decided, even as he offered help and information.

"You're not fifty yards from the Karluk," Rainey replied. "But you're bound in the wrong direction. Let me put you right. I'm going that way myself."

"That's kind of ye, matey," said the other. "But I picked ye for that sort, hearin' you whistlin' as you came swingin' along. Light-hearted, I thinks, an' young, most likely; he'll help a stranded man. Give me the touch of yore arm, matey, an' I'll stow this spar of mine."

He swung about, slinging the curving handle of the stick over his right elbow as the fingers of his left hand placed themselves on Rainey's proffered arm. Strong fingers, almost vibrant with a force manifest through serge and linen. Fingers that could grip like steel upon occasion.

Rainey wonderingly sized up his consort. The stranger's bulk was enormous. Rainey was well over the average himself, but he was only a stripling beside this hulk, this stranded hulk, of manhood. And, for all the spectacled eyes and shuffling feet, there was a stamp of coordinated strength about the giant that bespoke the blind Samson. Given eyes, Rainey could imagine him agile as a panther, strong as a bear.

His weight was made up of thews and sinews, spare and solid flesh without an ounce of waste, upon a mighty skeleton. His face was heavy-bearded in hair of flaming, curling red, from high cheek-bones down out of sight below the soft loose collar of his shirt. The bridge of

his glasses rested on the outcurve of a nose like the beak of an osprey, the ends of the wires looped about ears that lay close to the head, hairy about the inner-curves, lobeless, the tips suggesting the ear-tips of a satyr.

Mouth and jaw were hidden, but the beard could not deny the bold projection of the latter. About thirty, Rainey judged him. Buffeted by time and weather, but in the prime of his strength.

"Snow-blinded, matey," said the man. "North o' Point Barrow, a year an' more ago. Brought me up all standin'. What are you? Steamer man? Purser, maybe?"

"Newspaperman," answered Rainey. "Water-front detail. For the Times."

"You don't say so, matey? A writer, eh?"

Again Rainey felt the tug of that something back of the dark lenses, some speculation going on in the man's mind concerning him. And he felt the firm fingers contract ever so slightly, sinking into the muscles of his forearm for a second with a hint of how they could bruise and paralyze at will. Once more a faint sense of revulsion fought with his natural inclination to aid the handicapped mariner, and he shook it off.

"The Karluk sails to-morrow," he said.

"Aye, so - so they told me, matey. You've bin aboard?"

"I had a short talk with Captain Simms when she docked. Not much of a yarn. She didn't have a good trip, you know."

"Why, I didn't know. But - hold hard a minnit, will ye? You see, Simms is an old shipmate of mine. He don't dream I'm within a hundred miles o' here. Aye, or a thousand." He gave a deep-chested chuckle. "Now, then, matey, look here."

Rainey was anchored by the compelling grip. They stood next to the slip in which the sealer lay. The Karluk's decks were deserted, though there was smoke coming from the galley stovepipe.

"Simms is likely to be aboard," went on the other. "Ye see, I know his ways. An' I've come a long trip to see him. Nigh missed him. Only got in from Seattle this mornin'. He ain't expectin' me, an' it's in my mind to surprise him. By way of a joke. I don't want to be announced, ye see. Just drop in on him. How's the deck? Clear?"

"No one in sight," said Rainey.

"Fine! Mates an' crew down the Barb'ry Coast, I reckon. Sealers have liberties last shore-day. Like whalers. I've buried a few irons myself, matey, but I'll never sight the vapor of a right whale ag'in. Stranded, I am. So you'll do me a favor, matey, an' pilot me down into the cabin, if so be the skipper's there. If he ain't, I'll wait for him. I've got the right an' run o' the Karluk's cabin. I know ev'ry inch of her. You'll see when we go aboard. Let's go."

Rainey led him down the gangway to the deck of the sealer, still cluttered a bit with unstowed gear. Once on board, the blind man seemed to walk with assurance, guiding himself with touches here and there that showed his familiarity with the vessel's rig. And he no longer shuffled, but walked lightly, grinning at Rainey through his beard, with one blunt forefinger set to his mouth as he approached the cabin skylight, lifted on the port side. Through it came the murmur of voices. The blind man nodded in satisfaction and widened his grin with a warning "hush-h" to his guide.

"We'll fool 'em proper," he lipped rather than uttered.

The companion doors were closed, but they opened noiselessly. The stairs were carpeted with corrugated rubber that muffled all sound. Two men sat at the cabin table, leaning forward, hands and forearms outstretched, fingering something. One Rainey recognized as the captain, Simms - a heavy, square-built man, gray-haired, clean-shaven, his flesh tanned, yet somehow unhealthy, as if the bronze was close to tarnishing. There were deep puffs under the gray tired eyes.

The other was younger, tall, nervously active, with dark eyes and a dark mustache and beard, the latter trimmed to a Vandyke. Between them was a long slim sack of leather, a miner's poke. It was half full of something that stuffed its lower extremity solid, without doubt the same substance that glistened in the mouth of the sack and the palms of the two men - gold - coarse dust of gold!

Rainey felt himself thrust to one side as the blind man straddled across the bottom of the companionway, towering in the cabin while he thrust his stick with a thump on the floor and thundered, in a bellow that seemed to fill the place and come tumbling back in deafening echo:

"Karluk ahoy!"

The face of Captain Simms paled, the tan turned to a sickly gray, and his jaw dropped. Rainey saw fear come into his eyes. His companion did not stir a muscle except for the quick shift of his glance, but went on sitting at the table, the gold in one palm, the fingers of his other hand resting on the grains.

"Jim Lund!" gasped the captain hoarsely.

"That's me, you skulking sculpin? Thought I was bear meat by this, didn't you, blast yore rotten soul to hell! But I'm back, Bill Simms. Back, an' this time you don't slip me!"

Jim Lund's face was purple-red with rage, great veins standing out upon it so swollen that it seemed they must surely burst and discharge their congested contents. Out of the purpling flesh his scarlet hair curled in diabolical effect. His teeth gleamed through his beard, strong, yellow, far apart. He looked, Rainey thought, like a blind Berserker, restrained only by his affliction.

"You left me blind on the floe, Bill Simms!" he roared. "Blind, in a drivin' blizzard with the ice breakin' up! If I didn't have use for yore carcass I'd twist yore head from yore scaly body like I'd pull up a carrot."