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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRUCIAL MOMENT ***

THE CRUCIAL MOMENT

By Charles Egbert Craddock

1911

A mere moment seems an inconsiderable factor in life—only its multiplication attaining importance and signifying time. It could never have occurred to Walter Hoxer that all his years of labor, the aggregation of the material values of industry, experience, skill, integrity, could be nullified by this minimum unit of space—as sudden, as potent, as destructive, as a stroke of lightning. But after the fact it did not remind' him of any agency of the angry skies; to him it was like one of the obstructions of the river engineers to divert the course of the great Mississippi, a mattress-spur, a thing insignificant in itself, a mere trifle of woven willow wands, set up at a crafty angle, against the tumultuous current. Yet he had seen the swirling waves, in their oncoming like innumerable herds of wild horses, hesitate at the impact, turn aside, and go racing by, scouring out a new channel, leaving the old bank bereft, thrown inland, no longer the margin of the stream.

The river was much in his mind that afternoon as he trudged along the county road at the base of the levee, on his way, all un-prescient, to meet this signal, potential moment. Outside, he knew that the water was standing higher than his head, rippling against the thick turf of Bermuda grass with which the great earthwork was covered. For the river was bank-full and still rising—indeed, it was feared that an overflow impended. However, there was as yet no break; advices from up the river and down the river told only of extra precautions and constant work to keep the barriers intact against the increasing volume of the stream. The favorable chances were reinforced by the fact of a singularly dry winter, that had so far eliminated the danger from back-water, which, if aggregated from rainfall in low-lying swamps, would move up slowly to inundate the arable lands. These were already ploughed to bed up for cotton, and an overflow now would mean the loss of many thousands of dollars to the submerged communities. The February rains had begun in the upper country, with a persistency and volume that bade fair to compensate for the long-continued drought, and thus the river was already booming; the bayous that drew off a vast surplusage of its waters were overcharged, and gradually would spread out in murky shallows, heavily laden with river detritus, over the low grounds bordering their course.

"This Jeffrey levee will hold," Hoxer said to himself, as once he paused, his hands in his pockets, his cap on the back of his red head, his freckled, commonplace, square face lifted into a sort of dignity by the light of expert capacity and intelligence in his bluff blue eyes. He had been muttering to himself the details of its construction: so many feet across the base in proportion to its height, the width of the summit, the angle of the incline of its interior slope—the exterior being invisible, having the Mississippi River standing against it. "A fairly good levee, though an old one," he muttered. "I'll bet, though, Major Jeffrey feels mightily like Noah

when he looks at all that water out there tearing through the country."

His face clouded at the mention of the name, and as he took the short pipe from his mouth and stuck it into the pocket of his loose sack-coat his tread lost a certain free elasticity that had characterized it hitherto, and he trudged on doggedly. He had passed many acres of ploughed lands, the road running between the fields and the levee. The scene was all solitary; the sun had set, and night would presently be coming on. As he turned in at the big white gate that opened on a long avenue of oaks leading to the mansion house, he began to fear that his visit might be ill-timed, and that a man of his station could not hope for an audience so near the major's dinner-hour.

It was with definite relief that he heard the gentle impact of ivory balls in the absolute quiet, and he remembered that a certain little octagonal structure with a conical red roof, in the grounds, was a billiard-room, for the sound betokened that he might find the owner of the place here.

He expected to see a group of the Major's "quality friends" in the building but as he ascended the steps leading directly to the door, he perceived that the man he sought was alone. Major Jeffrey was engaged in idly knocking the balls about in some skilful fancy shots, his cigar in his mouth, and a black velvet smoking-jacket setting off to special advantage his dense, snowy hair, prematurely white, his long mustache, and his pointed imperial. His heavy white eyebrows drew frowningly together over arrogant dark eyes as he noted the man at the entrance.

Despite Hoxer's oft-reiterated sentiment that he was "as good as anybody and would take nothing off nobody, and cared for no old duck just because he was rich," he could not speak for a moment as he felt Major Jeffrey's inimical eyes upon him. He lost the advantage in losing the salutation.

"Did you get my check?" Major Jeffrey asked curtly.

"Yes," Hoxer admitted; "but——"

"The amount was according to contract."

Hoxer felt indignant with himself that he should have allowed this interpretation to be placed on his presence here; then he still more resented the conjecture.

"I have not come for extra money," he said. "That point of the transaction is closed."

"All the points of the transaction are closed," said Major Jeffrey, ungraciously. There was more than the flush of the waning western sky on his face. He had already dined, and he was one of those wine-bibbers whom drink does not render genial, "I want to hear no more about it."

He turned to the table, and with a skilful cue sent one ball caroming against two others.

"But you must hear what I have got to say, Major Jeffrey," protested Hoxer. "I built that cross-levee for you to join your main levee, and done it well."

"And have been well paid."

"But you go and say at the store that I deviated from the line of survey and saved one furlong, seven poles, and five feet of levee."

"And so you did."

"But you know, Major, that Burbeck Lake had shrunk in the drought at the time of the survey, and if I'd followed the calls for the south of the lake, I'd had to build in four feet of water, so I drew back a mite—you bein' in Orleans, where I couldn't consult you, an' no time to be lost nohow, the river bein' then on the rise, an'——"

"Look here, fellow," exclaimed Major Jeffrey, bringing the cue down on the table with a force that must have cut the cloth, "do you suppose that I have nothing better to do than to stand here to listen to your fool harangue?"

The anger and the drink and perhaps the consciousness of being in the wrong were all ablaze in the Major's eyes.

The two were alone; only the darkling shadows stood at tiptoe at the open windows, and still the flushed sky sent down a pervasive glow from above.

Hoxer swallowed hard, gulping down his own wrath and sense of injury. "Major," he said blandly, trying a new deal, "I don't think you quite understand me."

"Such a complicated proposition you are, to be sure!"

Hoxer disregarded the sarcasm, the contempt in the tone.

"I am not trying to rip up an old score, but you said at Winfield's store—at the store—that I did not build the cross levee on the surveyor's line; that I shortened it——"

"So you did."

"But as if I had shortened the levee for my own profit, when, as you know, it was paid for by the pole——"

"You tax me with making a false impression?"

An extreme revulsion of expectation harassed Hoxer. He had always known that Jeffrey was an exception to the general rule of the few large land-owners in the community, who were wont to conserve and, in fact, to deserve the pose of kindly patron as well as wealthy magnate. But even Jeffrey, he thought, would not grudge a word to set a matter straight that could cost him nothing and would mean much to the levee-contractor. Though of large experience in levee-building, Hoxer was new to the position of contractor, having been graduated into it, so to speak, from the station of foreman of a construction-gang of Irishmen. He had hoped for further employ in this neighborhood, in building private levees that, in addition to the main levees along the banks of the Mississippi, would aid riparian protection by turning off overflow from surcharged bayous and encroaching lakes in the interior. But, unluckily, the employer of the first enterprise he had essayed on his own responsibility had declared that he had deviated from the line of survey, usually essential to the validity of the construction, thereby much shortening the work; and had made this statement at Winfield's store—at the store!

Whatever was said at the store was as if proclaimed through the resounding trump of fame. The store in a

Mississippi neighborhood, frequented by the surrounding planters, great and small, was the focus of civilization, the dispenser of all the wares of the world, from a spool of thread to a two-horse wagon, the post-office, in a manner the club. Here, sooner or later, everybody came, and hence was the news of the Bend noised abroad. Hoxer's business could scarcely recover from this disparagement, and he had not doubted that Jeffrey would declare that he had said nothing to justify this impression, and that he would forthwith take occasion to clear it up. For were not Mr. Tompkins and Judge Claris, both with a severe case of "high-water scare," ready to contract for a joint cross levee for mutual protection from an unruly bayou!

Therefore, with a sedulous effort, Hoxer maintained his composure when the Major thundered again, "You tax me with making a false impression?"

"Not intentionally, Major, but——"

"And who are you to judge of my motives? Told a lie by accident, did I? Begone, sir, or I'll break your head with this billiard cue!"

He had reached the limit as he brandished the cue. He was still agile, vigorous, and it was scarcely possible that Hoxer could escape the blow. He dreaded the indignity indeed more than the hurt.

"If you strike me," he declared in a single breath, between his set teeth, "before God, I'll shoot you with your own pistol!"

It seemed a fatality that a pair in their open case should have been lying on the sill of the window, where their owner had just been cleaning and oiling them. Hoxer, of course, had no certainty that they were loaded, but the change in Jeffrey's expression proclaimed it. He was sober enough now—the shock was all sufficient—as he sprang to the case. The younger man was the quicker. He had one of the pistols in his hand before Jeffrey could level the other that he had snatched. Quicker to fire, too, for the weapon in Jeffrey's hand was discharged in his latest impulse of action after he fell to the floor, the blood gushing from a wound that crimsoned all the delicate whiteness of his shirt-front and bedabbled his snowy hair and beard.

This was the moment, the signal, fatal, final moment, that the levee contractor had come to meet, that placed the period to his own existence. He lived no longer, Hoxer felt. He did not recognize as his own a single action hereafter, a single mental impulse. It was something else, standing here in the red gloaming—some foreign entity, cogently reasoning, swiftly acting. Self-defense—was it? And who would believe that? Had he found justice so alert to redress his wrongs, even in a little matter, that he must needs risk his neck upon it? This Thing that was not himself—no, never more!—had the theory of alibi in his mind as he stripped off his low-cut shoes and socks, thrusting them into his pockets, leaping from the door, and flying among the dusky shadows down the glooming grove, and through the gate.

Dusk here, too, on the lonely county road, the vague open expanse of the ploughed fields glimmering to the instarred sky of a still, chill night of early February. He did not even wonder that there should be no hue and cry on his tracks—the Thing was logical! Jeffrey had doubtless had his pistols carried down from the mansion to him in his den in the billiard-room, for the avowed purpose of putting the weapons in order. If the shots were heard at all at the dwelling, the sound was reasonably ascribed to the supposed testing of the weapons. Hoxer was conscious that a sentiment of gratulation, of sly triumph, pervaded his mental processes as he sped along barefoot, like some tramp or outcast, or other creature of a low station. He had laid his plans well in this curious, involuntary cerebration. Those big, bare footprints were ample disguise for a well-clad, well-groomed, well-shod middle-class man of a skilful and lucrative employ. The next moment his heart sank like lead. He was followed! He heard the pursuit in the dark! Swift, unerring, leaping along the dusty road, leaving its own footprints as a testimony against him. For he had recognized its nature at last! It was his own dog—a little, worthless cur, that had a hide like a doormat and a heart as big as the United States—a waif, a stray, that had attached himself to the contractor at the shanties of the construction gang, and slept by his bed, and followed at his heel, and lived on the glance of his eye.

He was off again, the dog fairly winging his way to match his master's speed. Hoxer could not kill him here, for the carcass would tell the story. But was it not told already in those tracks in the dusty road? What vengeance was there not written in the eccentric script of those queer little padded imprints of the creature's paws. Fie, fool! Was this the only cur-dog in the Bend? he asked himself, impatient of his fears. Was not the whole neighborhood swarming with canine dependents?

Despite his reasoning, this endowment that was once himself had been affrighted by the shock. The presence of the little cur-dog had destroyed the complacency of his boasted ratiocination. He had only the instincts of flight as he struck off through the woods when the great expanse of cultivated lands had given way to lower ground and the wide liberties of the "open swamp," as it was called. This dense wilderness stretched out on every side; the gigantic growth of gum trees was leafless at this season, and without a suggestion of underbrush.

The ground was as level as a floor. Generally during the winter the open swamp is covered with shallow water, but in this singularly droughty season it had remained "with dry feet," according to the phrase of that country. The southern moon, rising far along its levels, began to cast burnished golden shafts of light adown its unobstructed vistas. It might seem some magnificent park, with its innumerable splendid trees, its great expanse, and ever and anon in the distance the silver sheen of the waters of a lake, shining responsive to the lunar lustre as with an inherent lustre of its own. On and on he went, his noiseless tread falling as regularly as machinery, leaving miles behind him, the distance only to be conjectured by the lapse of time, and, after so long, his flagging strength. He began to notice that the open swamp was giving way in the vicinity of one of the lakes to the characteristics of the swamp proper, although the ground was still dry and the going good. He had traversed now and then a higher ridge on which switch-cane grew somewhat sparsely, but near the lake on a bluff bank a dense brake of the heavier cane filled the umbrageous shadows, so tall and rank and impenetrable a growth that once the fugitive paused to contemplate it with the theory that a secret intrusted to its sombre seclusions might be held intact forever.

As he stood thus motionless in the absolute stillness, a sudden thought came to his mind—a sudden and terrible thought. He could not be sure whether he had heard aught, or whether the sight of the water suggested the idea. He knew that he could little longer sustain his flight, despite his vigor and strength.

Quivering in every fibre from his long exertions, he set his course straight for that glimmering sheen of water. Encircling it were heavy shadows. Tall trees pressed close to the verge, where lay here a fallen branch, and there a rotten log, half sunken in mud and ooze, and again a great tangle of vines that had grown smiling to the summer sun, but now, with the slow expansion of the lake which was fed by a surcharged bayou, quite submerged in a fretwork of miry strands. The margin was fringed with saw-grass, thick and prickly, and his practised eye could discern where the original banks lay by the spears thrust up above the surface a score of feet away. Thus he was sure of his depth as he waded out staunchly, despite the cruel pricks to his sensitive naked feet. The little dog had scant philosophy; he squeaked and wheezed and wailed with the pain until the man, who had no time to kill him now—for had he heard aught or naught?—picked him up and carried him in his arms, the creature licking Hoxer's hands in an ecstasy of gratitude, and even standing on his hind-legs on his master's arm to snatch a lick upon his cheek.

In the darksome shadows, further and further from the spot where he had entered the lake, Hoxer toiled along the margin, sometimes pausing to listen—for had he heard aught or naught?—as long as his strength would suffice. Then amidst the miry débris of last summer's growths beneath the recent inundation he sank down in the darkness, the dog exhausted in his arms.

This was one of those frequent crescent-shaped lakes peculiar to the region; sometimes, miles in extent, the lacustrine contour is not discernible to the glance; here the broad expanse seemed as if the body of water were circular and perhaps three miles in diameter.

Suddenly Hoxer heard the sound that had baffled him hitherto—heard it again and—oh, horrible!—recognized it at last! The baying of bloodhounds it was, the triumphant cry that showed that the brutes had caught the trail and were keeping it. On and on came the iteration, ever louder, ever nearer, waking the echoes till wood and brake and midnight waters seemed to rock and sway with the sound, and the stars in the sky to quake in unison with the vibrations. Never at fault, never a moment's cessation, and presently the shouts of men and the tramp of horses blended with that deep, tumultuous note of blood crying to heaven for vengeance. Far, far, down the lake it was. Hoxer could see nothing of the frantic rout when the hounds paused baffled at the water-side. He was quick to note the changed tone of the brutes' pursuit, plaintive, anxious, consciously thwarted. They ran hither and thither, patrolling the banks, and with all their boasted instinct they could only protest that the fugitive took to water at this spot. But how? They could not say, and the men argued in vain. The lake was too broad to swim—there was no island, no point of vantage. A boat might have taken him off, and, if so, the craft would now be lying on the opposite bank. A party set off to skirt the edge of the lake and explore the further shores by order of the sheriff, for this officer, summoned by telephone, had come swiftly from the county town in an automobile, to the verge of the swamp, there accommodated with a horse by a neighboring planter. And then, Hoxer, lying on the elastic submerged brush, with only a portion of his face above the surface of the water, watched in a speechless ecstasy of terror the hue and cry progress on the hither side, his dog, half dead from exhaustion, unconscious in his arms.

The moon, unmoved as ever, looked calmly down on the turmoil in the midst of the dense woods. The soft brilliance illumined the long, open vistas and gave to the sylvan intricacies an effect as of silver arabesques, a glittering tracery amidst the shadows. But the lunar light did not suffice. Great torches of pine knots, with a red and yellow flare and streaming pennants of smoke, darted hither and thither as the officer's posse searched the bosky recesses without avail.

Presently a new sound!—a crashing iteration—assailed the air. A frantic crowd was beating the bushes about the margin of the lake and the verges of the almost impenetrable cane-brake. Here, however, there could be no hope of discovery, and suddenly a cry arose, unanimously iterated the next instant, "Fire the cane-brake! Fire the cane-brake!"

For so late had come the rise of the river, so persistent had been the winter's drought, so delayed the usual inundation of the swamp, that the vegetation, dry as tinder, caught the sparks instantly, and the fierce expedient to force the fugitive to leave his supposed shelter in the brake, a vast woodland conflagration, was added to the terror of the scene. The flames flared frantically upward from the cane, itself twenty feet in height, and along its dense columns issued forth jets like the volleyings of musketry from serried ranks of troops, the illusion enhanced by continuous sharp, rifle-like reports, the joints of the growth exploding as the air within was liberated by the heat of the fire. All around this blazing Gehenna were swiftly running figures of men applying with demoniac suggestion torches here and there, that a new area might be involved. Others were mounted, carrying flaming torches aloft, the restive horses plunging in frantic terror of the fiery furnace in the depths of the brake, the leaping sheets of flame, the tumultuous clouds of smoke. Oh, a terrible fate, had the forlorn fugitive sought refuge here! Let us hope that no poor denizen of the brake, bear or panther or fox, dazed by the tumult and the terror, forgot which way to flee!

But human energies must needs fail as time wears on. Nerves of steel collapse at last. The relinquishment of the quest came gradually; the crowd thinned; now and again the sound of rapid hoof-beats told of homeward-bound horsemen; languid groups stood and talked dully here and there, dispersing to follow a new suggestion for a space, then ultimately disappearing; even the fire began to die out, and the site of the cane-break had become a dense, charred mass, as far as eye could reach, with here and there a vague blue flicker where some bed of coals could yet send up a jet, when at length the pale day, slow and aghast, came peering along the levels to view the relics of the strange events that had betided in the watches of the night.

Hoxer had not waited for the light. Deriving a certain strength, a certain triumph, from the obvious fact that the end was not yet, he contrived in that darkest hour before the dawn to pull himself into a sitting posture, then to creep out to the shore. The little dog had seemed to be dying, but he too experienced a sort of resuscitation, and while he followed at first but feebly, it was not long before he was at heel again, although Hoxer was swift of foot, making all the speed he might toward his temporary home, the shacks that had been occupied by the construction gang. As he came within view of the poor little tenements, so recently vacated by the Irish ditchers, all awry and askew, stretching in a wavering row along the river-bank near the junction of the levee that he had built with the main line, his eyes filled. Oh, why had he not gone with the rest of the camp! he demanded of an untoward fate; why must he have stayed a day longer to bespeak the correction of an injurious error from that proud, hard man, who, however, had wrought his last injury on

earth! Hoxer was sorry, but chiefly for his own plight. He felt that his deed was in self-defense, and but that he had no proof he would not fear to offer the plea at the bar of justice. As it was, however, he was sanguine of escaping without this jeopardy. No one had cause to suspect him. No one had seen him enter the Jeffrey grounds that fatal evening. There had been noised abroad no intimation of his grievance against the man. He had all the calm assurance of invisibility as he came to his abode, for a fog lay thick on the surface of the river and hung over all the land. He did not issue forth again freshly dressed till the sun was out once more, dispelling the vapors and conjuring the world back to sight and life. Nevertheless, he made no secret of having been abroad when an acquaintance came up the road and paused for an exchange of the news of the day.

"But what makes ye look so durned peaked?" he broke off, gazing at Hoxer in surprise.

Hoxer was astonished at his own composure as he replied: "Out all night. I was in the swamp with the posse."

"See the fire! They tell me 't wuz more'n dangerous to fire the brake when the woods is so uncommon dry. I dunno what we would do here in the bottom with a forest fire."

"Pretty big blaze now, sure's ye're born," Hoxer replied casually, and so the matter passed.

Later in the day another gossip, whose acquaintance he had made during his levee-building venture, loitered up to talk over the absorbing sensation, and, sitting down on the door-step of the shack, grew suddenly attentive to the little dog.

"What makes him limp?" he demanded abruptly.

But Hoxer had not observed that he did limp.

The acquaintance had taken the little animal up on his knee and was examining into his condition. "Gee! how did he get so footsore?"

"Following me around, I reckon," Hoxer hazarded. But he saw, or thought he saw, a change on the stolid face of the visitor, who was unpleasantly impressed with the fact that the officers investigating the case had made inquiries concerning a small dog that, to judge by the prints in the road, had evidently followed the big, barefooted man who had fled from the Jeffrey precincts after the shooting. A rumor, too, was going the rounds that a detective, reputed preternaturally sharp, who had accompanied the sheriff to the scene of action, had examined these tracks in the road, and declared that the foot-print was neither that of a negro nor a tramp, but of a white man used to wearing shoes something too tightly fitting.

The visitor glanced down at the substantial foot-gear of the contractor, fitting somewhat snugly, and thereafter he became more out of countenance than before and manifested some haste to get away. Hoxer said to himself that his anxiety whetted his apprehension. He had given his visitor no cause for suspicion, and doubtless the man had evolved none. Hoxer was glad that he was due and overdue to be gone from the locality. He felt that he could scarcely breathe freely again till he had joined the gang of Irish ditchers now establishing themselves in a new camp in the adjoining county, where the high stage of the river gave him employment in fighting water. He made up his mind, however, that he would not take the train thither. He dreaded to be among men, to encounter question and speculation, till he had time to regain control of his nerves, his facial expression, the tones of his voice. He resolved that he would quietly drift down the river in a row-boat that had been at his disposal during his employment here, and join his force already settled at their destination, without running the gauntlet of inspection by the neighborhood in a more formal departure. He had already bidden farewell to those few denizens of the Bend with whom his associations had been most genial. "And I'll clear out now, as I would have done if nothing had happened."

He said no more of his intention of departure, but when night had come he fastened the door of the little shanty, in which were still some of the rude belongings of his camping outfit, with the grim determination that it should not soon be opened again. How long the padlock should beat the summons of the wind on the resounding battens he did not dream!

It was close on midnight when he climbed the steep interior slope of the levee and stood for a moment gazing cautiously about him. The rowboat lay close by, for one might embark from the summit of the levee. It was a cloudy night, without a star. A mist clung to the face of the waters on the Arkansas side, but on the hither shore the atmosphere was clear, for he could see at a considerable distance up the river the fire of a "levee-watch," the stage of the water being so menacing that a guard must needs be on duty throughout the night. The leaping flames of the fire cast long lines of red and yellow and a sort of luminous brown far into the river, where the reflection seemed to palpitate in the pulsations of the current. No other sign of life was in the night scene, save in the opposite direction, amidst the white vapors, the gem-like gleam of a steamer's chimney-lights, all ruby and emerald, as a packet was slowly rounding the neighboring point. Hoxer could hear the impact of her paddles on the water, the night being so still. He had seated himself in the middle of the rowboat and laid hold on the oars when his foot struck against something soft on the bottom of the craft, partly under the seat in the stern. It was his bundle, he thought, containing the spoiled clothing that he had worn in the swamp, and which he intended to sink in mid-stream. His nerve was shaken, however; he could not restrain a sudden exclamation—this must have seemed discovery rather than agitation. It was as a signal for premature action. He was suddenly seized from behind, his arms held down against his sides, his hands close together. The bundle in the stern rose all at once to the stature of a man.

The touch of cold metal, a sharp, quick click,—and he was captured and handcuffed within the space of ten seconds.

A terrible struggle ensued, which his great strength but sufficed to prolong. His wild, hoarse cries of rage and desperation seemed to beat against the sky; back and forth the dark riparian forests repeated them with the effect of varying distance in the echoes, till all the sombre woods seemed full of mad, frantic creatures, shrieking out their helpless frenzy. More than once his superior muscle sufficed to throw off both the officers for a moment, but to what avail? Thus manacled, he could not escape.

Suddenly a wild, new clamor resounded from the shore. In the dusky uncertainty, a group of men were running down the bank, shouting out to the barely descried boatmen imperative warnings that they would

break the levee in their commotion, coupled with violent threats if they did not desist. For the force with which the rowboat dashed against the summit of the levee, rebounding again and again, laden with the weight of three ponderous men, and endowed with all the impetus of their struggle, so eroded the earth that the waves had gained an entrance, the initial step to a crevasse that would flood the country with a disastrous overflow. As there was no abatement of the blows of the boat against the embankment, no reply nor explanation, a shot from the gun of one of the levee-watch came skipping lightsomely over the water as Hoxer was borne exhausted to the bottom of the skiff. Then, indeed, the sheriff of the county bethought himself to shout out his name and official station to the astonished group on shore, and thus, bullet-proof under the aegis of the law, the boat pulled out toward the steamer, lying in mid-stream, silently awaiting the coming of the officer and his prisoner, a great, towering, castellated object, half seen in the night, her broadside of cabin lights, and their reflection in the ripples, sparkling through the darkness like a chain of golden stars.

They left no stress of curiosity behind them; naught in the delta can compete in interest with the threatened collapse of a levee in times of high water. Before the rowboat had reached the steamer's side, its occupants could hear the great plantation-bell ringing like mad to summon forth into the midnight all available hands to save the levee, and, looking back presently, a hundred lanterns were seen flickering hither and thither, far down in the dusk—no illusion this, for all deltaic rivers are higher in the centre than their banks—where the busy laborers, with thousands of gunny-sacks filled with sand, were fighting the Mississippi, building a barricade to fence it from the rich spoils it coveted.

The packet, which, as it happened, was already overdue, had been telephoned by the officers at her last landing, and a number of men stood on the guards expectant. Hoxer had ceased to struggle. He looked up at the steamer, his pallid face and wide, distended eyes showing in the cabin lights, as the rowboat pulled alongside. Then as the sheriff directed him to rise, he stood up at his full height, stretched his manacled hands high above his head, and suddenly dived into deep water, leaving the boat rocking violently, and in danger of capsizing with the officers.

A desperate effort was made to recover the prisoner, alive or dead—all in vain. A roustabout on the deck declared that in the glare of the steamer's search-light, thrown over the murky waters, he was seen to come to the surface once, but if he rose a second time it must have been beneath the great bulk of the packet, to go down again to the death awaiting him in the deeps.

On the bank a little dog sat through sunshine and shadow in front of the door of the shack of the contractor of the levee-construction gang, and awaited his return with the patient devotion of his kind. Sometimes, as the padlock wavered in the wind, he would cock his head briskly askew, forecasting from the sound a step within. Sometimes the grief of absence and hope deferred would wring his humble heart, and he would whimper in an access of misery and limp about a bit. But presently he would be seated again, alertly upright, his eyes on the door, for the earliest glimpse of the face that he loved. When the overflow came at last the shacks of the construction gang were swept away, and the little dog was seen no more.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRUCIAL MOMENT ***

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