

BY THE FALLS

Harry Harrison

It was the rich damp grass, slippery as soap, covering the path, that caused .Carter to keep slipping and falling, not the steepness of the hill. The front of his raincoat was wet 'and his knees were muddy long before he reached the summit. And with each step forward and upward the continuous roar of sound grew louder. He was hot and tired by the time he reached the top of the ridge--yet he instantly forgot his discomfort as he looked out across the wide bay.

Like everyone else he had heard about The Falls since childhood 'and had seen countless photographs and films of them 'on television. AU this preparation had not readied him for the impact of reality.

He saw a falling ocean, a vertical river--how many millions of gallons a second did people say came down?

The Falls stretched out across the bay, their farthest reaches obscured by the clouds of floating spray. The 'bay seethed and boiled with the impact of that falling weight,

raising foam-capped waves that crashed against the rocks below. Carter could feel the impact of the water on the solid stone as a vibration in the ground but all sound was swallowed up in the greater roar of The Falls. This was a reverberation so outrageous and overpowering that his ears could not become accustomed to it. They soon felt numbed from the ceaseless impact but the very bones of the skull carried the sound to his brain, shivering and battering it. When he put his bands over his ears he was horrified to discover that The Falls were still as loud as ever. As he stood swaying and wide-eyed one of the constantly changing air currents that formed about the base of The Falls shifted suddenly and swept a wall of spray down upon him. The inundation lasted scant seconds but was heavier than any rainfall he had ever experienced, had ever believed possible. When it passed he was gasping for air, so dense had been the falling water.

Quivering with sensations he had never before experienced, Carter turned and looked along the ridge toward the gray and water-blackened granite of the cliff and the house that huddled at its base like a stony blister. It was built of the same granite as the cliff and appeared no less solid. Running and slipping, his hands still over his ears, Carter hurried toward the house.

For a short time the spray was blown across the bay and out to sea, so that golden afternoon sunlight poured

down 'on the house, starting streamers of vapor from its sharply sloping roof. It was a no-nonsense building, as solid as the rock against which it pressed. Only two windows penetrated the blankness of 'the front that faced The Falls--tiny and deep, they were like little suspicious eyes. No door existed here but Carter saw that a path of stone flags led around the corner.

He followed it and found set into the wall 'on the far side, away from The Falls--a small and deep-set entry. It had no arch but was shielded by a great stone lintel a good two feet in diameter. Carter stepped into the opening that framed the door and looked in vain for a knocker on the heavy, iron-bolted timbers. The unceasing, world-filling, thunder of The Falls made thinking almost impossible and it was only after he had pressed uselessly against the sealed portal that he realized that no knocker, even one 'as loud as cannon, could be heard within 'these walls above that sound. He lowered his hands and tried to force his mind to coherence.

There had to be some way of announcing his presence.

When he stepped back out of 'the alcove he noticed that a rusty iron knob was set into the wall a few feet away.

He seized and twisted it but it would not turn. However, when he pulled on it, although it resisted, 'he was able to draw it slowly away from the wall to disclose a length

of chain. The chain was heavily greased and in good conditional fair omen. He continued to pull until a yard of chain emerged from the opening and then, no matter how hard he pulled, no more would come. He released the handle and it bounced against the rough stone of the wall. For some instants it hung there. Then with a jerky mechanical motion, the chain was drawn back into the wall until the knob once more rested in place.

5r

Whatever device this odd mechanism activated seemed to perform its desired function. In less than a minute the heavy door swung open and a man appeared in the opening. He examined his visitor wordlessly.

The man was much like the building and the cliffs behind it solid, no-nonsense, worn, lined and graying. But he had resisted the years even as he showed 'their marks upon him. His back was as straight as any young man's and his knob-knuckled hands had a look of determined strength. Blue were his eyes and very much the color of the water falling endlessly, thunderously, on the far side of the building. He wore knee-high fisherman's boots, plain corduroy pants and a soiled gray sweater. His face did not change expression as he waved Carter into the building.

When the thick door had 'been swung shut and the many sealing bars shoved back into place the silence in

the house took on a quality of its own. Carter had known absence of sound elsewhere here was a positive statement of no-sound, a bubble of peace pushed right up against the very base of the all-sound of The Falls. He was momentarily deafened and he knew it. But he was not so deaf that he did not know that the hammering thunder of The Falls had 'been shut 'outside. The other man must have sensed how 'his visitor felt. He nodded in a reassuring manner as he took Carter's coat, then pointed to a comfortable chair set by the deal table near the fire. Carter sank gratefully into the cushions. His host turned away and vanished, to return a moment later with a tray bearing a decanter and two glasses. He poured a measure of wine into each glass and set one down before Carter, who nodded and seized it 'in both hands to steady their shaking. After a first large gulp he sipped at it while the tremors died and his hearing slowly returned. His host moved about the room on various tasks and presently Carter found himself much recovered. He looked up. "I must thank you for your hospitality. When I came in I was shaken."

"How are you now? Has the wine helped?" the man said loudly, almost shouting, and Carter realized that his own words had not 'been heard. Of course, the man must be hard of hearing. It was a wonder he was not stone deaf.

"Very good, thank you," Carter shouted back. "Very kind of you indeed. My name is Carter, I'm a reporter, which is why I have come to see you."

The man nodded, smiling slightly.

"My name is Bodum. You must know that 'if you have come here to talk to me. You write for the newspaper?"

"I was sent here." Carter coughed the shouting was irritating his throat. "And I of course know you, Mr. Bodum--that is I know you by reputation. You're the Man by The Falls."

"Forty-three years now," Bodum said with solid pride, "I've lived here and have never been away for a single night. Not that it has been easy. When 'the wind is wrong the spray is blown over the house for days and it is hard to breathe--even the fire goes out. I built the chimney myself--there is a bend part way up with baffles and doors. The smoke goes up but if water comes down the baffles stop it and its weight opens the doors and it drains away through a pipe to the outside. I can show you Where it drains--black with soot the wall is there."

While Bodum talked Carter looked 'around the room at the dim furniture shapes barely seen in the wavering light from the fire and at the two windows set into the wall.

"Those windows," he said. "You put them in yourself? May I look out?"

"Took a year apiece, each one. Stand 'on that bench.

It will bring you to the right level. They're armored glass, specially made, 'solid as the wall around 'them now that I have them anchored well. Don't be afraid. Go right up to it. The window's safe. Look how 'the glass is anchored."

Carter was not looking at the glass but at The Falls outside. He had not realized how close the building was to 'the falling water. It was perched on the very edge of the cliff and nothing was to be seen from this vantage point except the wall of blackened wet granite to his right and the foaming maelstrom of the bay far below. And before him, above him, filling space, The Falls. All the thickness of wall and glass could not cut out their sound completely and when he touched the heavy pane with his fingertips he could feel The vibration of the water's impact. The window did not lessen the effect The Falls had upon him but it enabled him to stand and watch 'and think, as he had been unable to do on the outside. It was very much like 'a peephole into a holocaust of water a window into a cold hell. He could watch without being destroyed--but the fear of what was on the other side did not lessen. Something black flickered in the falling water and was gone.

"There--did you see that," he called out. "Something came down The Falls. What could it possibly 'be?"

Bodum nodded wisely. "Over forty years I have been

here and I can show you what comes down The Falls."

He thrust a splint into the fire and lit a lamp from it.

Then, picking up the lamp, he waved Carter after him.

They crossed tube room and he held the light to a large glass "bell jar.

"Must be twenty years ago it washed up 'on the .shore.

Every bone in its body 'broke too. Stuffed and mounted it myself."

Carter pressed close, looking at the staring shoe-button eyes and the gaping jaws 'and pointed teeth. The .limbs were 'stiff and unnatural, the body under 'the fur 'bulging in the wrong places. Bodum was by no means a skillful taxidermist. Yet, perhaps 'by accident, he had captured a look of terror in the animal's expression and stance.

"It's a dog," Carter said. "Very much like other dogs."

Bodum was offended, his voice as cold as steel can be. "Like them, perhaps, but not of them. 'Every 'bone broken I told you. How else could a dog have appeared here in this bay?"

"I'm sorry, I did not mean to suggest for an instant Down The Falls, of course. I just meant it is so much like the dogs we have that perhaps there is a whole new world up there. Dogs and everything, just like ours."

"I never speculate," Bodum said, mollified. "I'll make some coffee."

He took the lamp to the stove and Carter, left 'alone in

the partial darkness went back to 'the window. It drew him. "I must ask you some questions for my article," he said but did not speak loudly enough for Bodum to hear. Everything he had meant to do here seemed irrelevant as he looked out at The Falls. The wind shifted. The spray was briefly blown clear and The Falls were once more a mighty river coming down from the sky. When he canted his head he saw exactly as if he were looking across a river.

And there, upstream, a ship appeared, a large liner with rows of portholes. It sailed the surface of the river faster than ship had ever sailed before and he had to jerk his head to follow its motion. When it passed, no more than a few hundred yards away, for one instant he could see it clearly. The people aboard it were banging to the rails, some with their mouths open as though shouting in fear. Then it was gone and there was only the water, rushing endlessly by.

"Did you see it?" Carter shouted, spinning about.

"The coffee will be ready soon."

"There, out there," Carter cried, taking Bodum by the arm. "In The Falls. It was a ship, I swear it was, falling from up above. With people on it. There must be a whole world up there that we know nothing about."

Bodum reached up to the shelf for a cup, breaking

Carter's grip with the powerful movement of his arm.

"My dog came down The Falls. I found it and stuffed it myself."

"Your dog, of course, I'll not deny that. But there were people on that ship and I'll swear--I'm not mad--that their skins were a different color from ours."

"Skin is skin, just skin color."

"I know. That is what we have. But it must be possible for skins to be other colors, even if we don't know about it."

"Sugar?"

"Yes, please. Two."

Carter sipped at the coffee-it was strong and warm. In spite of himself he was drawn back to the window. He looked out and sipped at the coffee--and started when something black and formless came down. And other things. He could not tell what they were because the spray was blowing toward the house again. He tasted grounds at the bottom of 'his cup 'and left the last sips. He put 'the cup carefully aside.

Again the eddying wind currents shifted the screen of spray to one side just in time for him to see another of the objects go by.

"That was a house! I saw it as clearly as I see this one.

But wood perhaps, not stone, and smaller. And black as though it had been partially burned. Come look, there

may be more."

Bodum banged the pot as he rinsed it out in the sink.

"What do your newspapers want to know about me?

Over forty years here--there are a lot of things I can tell you about."

"What is up there above The Falls--on top of the cliff?

Do people live up 'there? Can there be a whole world up there of which we live 'in total ignorance?"

Bodum hesitated, frowned in thought before he answered.

"I believe they have do~ up there."

"Yes," Carter answered, hammering Ms fist on 'the window ledge, not knowing whether to smile or cry. The water fell by; the floor and walls shook with the power of it.

"There--more and more things going by." He spoke quietly, to himself. "I can't tell what they are. That--that could have 'been a tree 'and that a bit of fence. The smaller ones may be bodies--animals, logs, anything. There is a different world above The Falls and in that world something terrible is happening. And we don't even know about it. We don't even know that world is there."

He struck again and again on the stone until his fist hurt.

The sun 'shone on the water 'and he saw the change,

just here and there at first, an altering and shifting.

"Why--the water seems to be changing color. Pink it is--no, red. More and more of it. There, for an instant, it was all red. The color of blood."

He spun about to face the dim room and tried to smile but his lips were drawn back hard from his teeth when he did.

"Blood? Impossible. There can't be that much blood in the whole world. What is happening up there? What is happening?"

His scream did not disturb Bodum, who only nodded his head in agreement.

"I'll show you something," he said. "But only if you promise not to write about it. People might laugh at me. I've been here over forty years and that is nothing to laugh about."

"My word of honor, not a word. Just show me. Perhaps it has something to do with what is happening."

Bodum took down a heavy bible and opened it on the table next to the lamp. It was set in very black type, serious and impressive. He turned pages until he came to a piece of very ordinary paper.

"I found this on the shore. During the winter. No one had been here for months. It may have come over The Falls. Now I'm not saying it did--but it is possible. You will agree it is possible?"

"Oh, yes--quite possible. How else could it have come here?" Carter reached out and touched it. "I agree, ordinary paper. Torn on one edge, wrinkled where it was wet and then dried." He turned it over. "There is lettering on the other 'aide."

"Yes. But it is meaningless. It is no word I know."

"Nor I, and I speak four languages. Could it have a meaning?"

"Impossible. A word like that."

"No human language." He shaped his lips 'and spoke the letters aloud. "Aich--Eee--Ell--Pea."

"What could HELP mean," Bodum shouted, louder than ever. "A child scribbled it. Meaningless." He seized the paper and crumpled it and threw it into the fire.

"You'll want to write a story about me," he said proudly. "I have 'been here over forty years, and if there is one man in the entire world who is an authority on The Falls it is me.

"I know everything that there is to know about them."