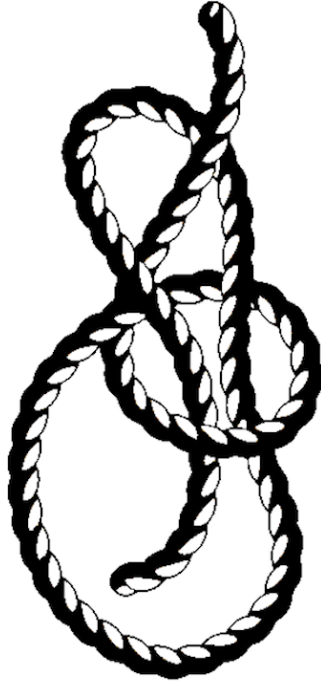


The
**LUCKIEST
FOOL**
ON
EARTH

THE TWISTED YARN OF AMERICA'S GREATEST FLAGPOLE
SITTER, ALVIN "SHIPWRECK" KELLY

PHILLIP S. ROBERTS

Chapter 1 –
The Luckiest Fool on Earth



*“The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man
knows himself to be a fool.”*

— William Shakespeare, As You Like It

The “Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus” marches their parade through the Dewey Arch in Madison Square with all the pomp and circumstance befitting a major occurrence on April 22, 1898. Those ticketed for the matinee follow a plethora of attractions; colossal elephants, grease-painted clowns, ornately costumed bareback riders, lithe acrobats, and more proceed toward the Big Top erected in the park and then to the mini-compound built to accommodate them during their run in New York City.

Once the attendees are in place, the brass band whips into a frenzy with an unrestrained crescendo until the director’s baton signals an abrupt stop. Throughout the troupe’s performance, there is barely an instant without an ooh or aah from the enjoyment starved audience. Each presentation had been stupefying, arranged in such a whirlwind pace that the viewers hardly have a chance to gasp. The floor lights are extinguished before the closing act.

“Ladieeeeees and Genteel-men! I direct your attention to the center ring.”

A single spotlight appears. It illuminates the ringmaster in the vibrant felt regalia of his craft. He holds court like a barrister in a powdered peruke with a cardboard cone that he points at a microphone.

“Quiet, please. The breathtaking spectacle you are going to observe requires undiluted concentration. It is the most dangerous undertaking tonight and thus a perfect culmination of the evening.”

The figure in the shining beam is the focus of 8,000 transfixed ticket holders; not even one dares munch popcorn from the bag resting on their laps lest the crunching disturb the artist.

“Absolute silence, please. Diavolo’s life depends on noiselessness. Centrifugal force is so hazardous, an ambulance is near by just in case. He risks his essence for his family and also for YOUR entertainment.”

The conductor motions for the drum roll on the snare. A second beam of light now hits the middle ring; the totality of brightness focused 80 feet in the air on a platform. On it, John Carter Baker poses in a blood-red devil costume with a flowing cape. A horned hood covers a helmet, his cardinal-colored gloves heroically on his hips.

Mirrored goggles reflect the sliver of luminescence and to the gallery he looks like a personification of Lucifer posing next to a glistering silver-plated bicycle. A looping of metal and highly polished wooden slats is revealed as he motions to the onlookers below. Inspecting the track, he knows approximately 20 feet exist until the drop into a steep incline. Everything looks satisfactory. He grabs the handlebars and runs furiously, gaining momentum. With a practiced, deliberate motion, he swings a leg and mounts before hitting the slope.

Zooming at a breakneck tempo, he pedals on the groaning slats and then reaching a sufficient velocity, launches. He has completed countless revolutions but it still raises the goosebumps when he loops-the-loop, completing a full spin and defying gravity.

This application of scientific method never feels run-of-the-mill, he thinks. He has been exhibiting daily, Wednesday to Sunday, for two years. Risking the upside-down circle maneuver, nets him a princely sum—\$1,000 a week. Today tragically, a weld buttressing the front wheel gives causing Diavolo to careen chaotically.

He flies and despite the heavily-padded scarlet suit feels the brunt of the impetus as he hits unforgiving ground. Knocked out, the crack of a vial containing ammonia wakes him. Helped to his feet, he acknowledges the anxious onlookers while clasping his injured side. A tiny amount of blood stains the corner of his mouth.

The gathering is informed he will continue his death-defying. The truth is somewhat divergent. His understudy continues to ride while Baker heals from three broken ribs, and a concussion. The earliest individual to be popularized as a “daredevil” retires quietly and without announcement. Others take his mantle and continue secretly in his stead as the original.

daredevil 1 of 2

dare-dev-il adjective

: recklessly and often ostentatiously daring

dare-dev-il noun

: a recklessly bold person

“Woman survives Niagara!” Paper-sellers in midtown Manhattan all bellow a variant spiel to draw customers to their stack. “Widow braves rapids.”

In the late afternoon of October 24, 1901, Annie Edson Taylor cascades into Niagara Falls. The sexagenarian schoolteacher (and her cat,) is unstoppable as she is towed in a customized, padded Kentucky oak whiskey barrel near Port Day. The rope is cleaved, and she thunders pulled by the rushing currents. Like Mercury bearing Psyche up Mount Olympus, she becomes immortal as the first to survive the pitch. She bobs in the water near the Canadian shore after 17 minutes and the rescue boat corrals the wooden cask after the 188 foot plunge at the bottom of Whirlpool Rapids. With a crowbar, her saviors pry open the lid. They ascertain she is alive, and discern the woman has suffered a minor scrape on her forehead plus a few bruises.

The “Queen of the Mist” has a confab with several newsmen on the riverbank an hour after her harrowing slump. She poses for photos, with her tabby, who has also lived through the exploit. Reporter Joseph Emmerling poses a question.

“Mrs. Taylor? Would you risk the excursion again? I mean, now that you know what you know?”

“If it was with my dying breath, I would caution anyone to not attempt the feat, young sir,” replies Taylor. “I would sooner walk up to the mouth of a cannon, knowing it was going to blow me to pieces than take another trip down Horseshoe Falls.”

After that well publicized proceeding, two other incidents transpire to make the world smaller. In May of 1903, Horatio Nelson Jackson and his mechanic Sewell Crocker begin peripatetically moving on America’s unmaintained roads. Their goal is to be the first to complete a transcontinental automobile journey. Cranking the motor of the two cylinder, 20-horsepower, Winton touring car he names ‘The Vermont,’ the drivers traverse the bumpy paths visiting rural settlements and big cities alike. Negotiating dried riverbeds and railroad tracks, the duo drives far off their planned route eastward.

Filing stories about their travel experiences to the *Oakland Tribune*, they enthrall untold devotees as other newspapers reprint their daily wanderings. Mud, mechanical complications, and rickety bridges

hinder their route, but the motorists persevere along their path. In Boise, a bulldog is purchased from a farmer for \$15. They fit their new mascot with goggles, and name him “Bud.” The triad are treated as celebrities while refilling petrol, waiting for parts to be delivered by train, or taking a rest-break. After 63 days, 12 hours, and 30 minutes, as July 1903 comes to an end, Jackson wins a \$50 wager as the vehicle trundles across New York state lines. Greeting the men at City Hall Park, Mayor Seth Low reads a proclamation comparing the trailblazers favorably to Lewis and Clark. Jackson’s achievement nurtures America’s romance with the roadster.

The second occasion that changes the world happens on December 17, 1903, south of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The Wright brothers, soar 852 feet at the Kill Devil Hills. Advances in aviation’s pioneer era come swiftly in response to Orville and Wilbur’s fulfillment of man’s dream to fly like an osprey.

*Chapter 2 -
Twine Twists Like the Destiny of Men*



*“Not all things end up tied with a perfect bow.
Sometimes the ribbon frays. Sometimes you get a knot. A
very messy one.”*

— Anonymous

In 1904, 11-year-old Alvin Kelly is beckoned to the stateroom of his Captain, Thomas Arnold Jacobi. The sailing master is fifty, born on Christmas Day of 1853. His tar-tinged mop is streaked with grey, wrinkles stream from the corners of his eyes like spray shooting aft a rapidly-fleeing duck, and he flourishes a well-trimmed beard.

Jacobi's maritime logbook includes his commission as a cabin boy with David Glasgow Farragut of the Union Navy. From that day on, he has hoisted sail almost 30,000 leagues in his circumnavigations. His current position of authority is commander of a 95-foot freighter, re-christened in the name of his beloved matriarch, Helene.

The lock on the heavy portal is bolted and a cloth obstructs the porthole to prevent prying. The inner sanctum is decorated with an oil likeness of his mother during her youth, unclad and in a scandalous pose. Captain Jacobi has a tattoo of the risqué painting inked on his inner left forearm. He sits at a desk with charts strewn across it. A compass and a sextant are on a shelf with a finically curated library of calf-hide-bound classics. The four-striper signals Alvin to sit on the low pouffe. Jacobi opens his giant palm to display a golden coin to his charge.

"From the first day I liberated you from that dingy 'Home for Destitute Children,' you have learned well and become my trusted mate. I see myself in you. Pledge to undertake a chore, and this token will be yours."

The British coin is an asymmetrical shaving of resplendent metal—a six-shilling florin bearing the profile of the Duke of Aquitaine, Edward III gleams as a side catches a reflection from a hanging lamp swinging in rhythm like a pendulum with the welter of the waves. Jacobi begins a homily on the antiquity of the object so the boy will appreciate its uniqueness.

"Struck in 1343, by the order of Richard II, the bulk of this specific coinage was melted to make into other currency. This collector's item comes from Blackbeard's own hoard on the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. In 1718, the gold was bestowed upon a midshipman who had taken a lead musket ball propelled at the privateer. Relayed from senior to apprentice since, the bit has a reputation for conferring

providence on the bearer. It shall without exception prise its owner to his port of origin.”

He hands the boy the coin. The metal feels marvelously warm.

“Thus, you clench upon the rarest memento. Many would murder to have it. I was handed this relic by Rear Admiral Farragut himself before the Battle of Mobile Bay.”

Alvin craves this item. His inner dialog races. *I’ve had a rough start and thankfully my Captain had the foresight to snatch me off of Hell’s Kitchen’s crowded, dirty streets. Of all the waifs he could have chosen, it’s a miracle he picked me. The open sea is a much better place to live in than that malodorous city. Jacobi is like the father I never had. I trust his counsel, and I’ll do anything he asks of me without question. I could happily sail on the ocean blue until the end of my days. It is a wonderful feeling—being free. I am lucky indeed.*

“Flash the coin not to mates, who will likely betray you. If moneyless, know wealth can always be obtained. Sell it if you must, only in the most dire emergency. Pawn it not, as brokers will not honor its true value. Play not with it when idle, for if lost, it is doubtful to come back to you. Despite temptation by the fairer gender, even if she be Amphitrite herself, refuse to cede it. Should you approach my age and have gracious means, find a virtuous cadet to guide into manhood. If you retire or are truly without orientation, you can rely on its security as your prime season moves into Winter.”

Jacobi pours apricot brandy and takes a gulp. He hands over the mug. Alvin slurps a mouthful, and feels warm inside.

“Should I die on the bombora, impart my final demise to my dear mumsy in Queens. If she is alive, tell her my final words were that ‘I loved her as no son ever has.’ If she has gone to the Great Beyond, place a white rose on her gravesite and you will be released from your sincere oath.”

Jacobi hands Alvin a small pouch to keep the coin in.

“I swear to complete the errand you have tasked. Let Poseidon’s angry wrath send violent storms to scuttle any ship I bunk on to Davy Jones’s Locker should I fail.”

Other episodes that mold the American landscape occur while Alvin sails on the *Helene* past the Tropic of Cancer and the Equator to

Porto de Santos. While on shore leave, he has a small crucifix tattooed on his left shoulder as a reminder of his faith.

In Pittsburgh, 5,000 miles absolute bearing, north from Brazil, 250 bodies pack the inaugural Nickelodeon's opening on June 19, 1905. Among the flickers are *The Great Train Robbery*. As a bandit on-screen turns to draw his gun, a viewer unholsters his firearm. He unloads a volley and holes appear in the white sheet being used as a screen. Patrons stampede out and the resulting tumult puts the enterprise on the front page of *The Pennsylvania Gazette-Times*. The mention helps the concessionaires, Harry Davis and John P. Harris quadruple their traffic on the second day, bewitching the 1,500 queuing to see the 15 minute repeating cycle of films. Soon a slew of cinemas modeled upon their success are opening in almost every constituency.

Among those at a heavily promoted event in Morningside Heights on July 3, 1905, is Joseph Emmerling. He is currently stringing for *The Brooklyn Eagle*. Harry H. Gardiner causes a crowd-puller by scaling the 159-foot dome of Grant's Tomb, using by handholds and nothing else. Approximately 500 observers applaud as he conquers the mausoleum. After the 35-year-old trods on terra-firma, Joseph asks a few questions for his write-up of the curiosity.

"I have never seen a perilous endeavor like that Mr. Gardiner. Did you know that President Cleveland stopped by? When asked to comment, he joked that you must be 'a human fly.' Harry, would you care to provide a statement for *Press Internationalé* readers?"

"Say, that's pretty catchy nickname. I like that. Tell kids not to try this. They'll hurt themselves. I am a virtuoso. I will keep surveying taller buildings to gain the thrills I seek."

"Thrill-seeker. That is snappy. I can use that. Thanks for the scoop."

thrill-seeker 1 of 1

thrill-seek-er noun.

: a person who enjoys taking part in extreme sports and other activities involving physical risk.

In 1906, Alvin is 5 feet 6 inches, and the 13-year-old's sunburnt skin represents the internship he has spent on the seas. He has become a respectable middy under Jacobi's tutelage. The verdant thicket glistens in the distance as the *Helene* hugs the Panamanian coast. The vessel is tied by a cleat hitch to the pier at a modest fishing village. The crew jettisons supplies as Jacobi and Alvin wander ashore.

The pair stride deliberately toward a little café. The server brings carimañolas and cerveza. The town Alcalde, informed Captain Jacobi is in town, comes by to propose a rich conveyance. Repatriating Vivian Frances Steele to San Francisco will reap a lucrative meed.

The Steele family had headed by ship and rail to meet her grandparents in Manhattan 20 months ago. The lone daughter of a well-off clan, the nine-year-old has had all the pampered benefits of her fortunate upbringing. Private tutors, equestrian lessons, and fine silk dresses do not prepare her for the rigors that she sees during a visit to a poor village in Panama. Three months later, on the way back across the Central America isthmus by train, she is abducted by bandits. Before the lawbreakers responsible can be brought a ransom, Federales riddle them with bullets. The preteen is not found among the dead. Her rich relatives spend 17 months and a trove on sherlocks searching for her, but efforts are unfruitful—eventually departing to California to grieve their lost child.

Now, almost 11, Vivian slinks into the settlement caked in dried blood. She hops onto a crate to rip a reward poster bearing her image from a wall. The girl produces a knife and lets no male approach her. The sheriff is summoned. He fetches his wife to clean her up while he rides half a day by horseback to a more sizable town to transmit a cablegram.

A terse, skeptical acknowledgement comes from the Steele compound—"If the lost enfant trouvé is her, they will gladly pay the reward upon receipt but nothing in advance."

Alvin runs a Bill of Lading to the first mate that the ship will be taking on supplies bound for San Francisco. That means gambling on the unpredictable Cape Horn. Jacobi is apprehensive about rounding Chile, yet the incentive for the carriage is worth undertaking the five week voyage. The windjammers aboard the *Helene* mutter

with apprehension as she boards. The crew considers her as if she is a mouse out to nick their last morsel of cheese. Escorted to the skipper's quarters, she is locked in. The key is placed in Alvin's hand, and he is given the duty of attending to her needs. He has some questions to ask of his Captain.

"Why are the men afraid?"

"The hands fear her because of superstition. Despite living in an enlightened era, fallacy is problematic to squelch. The ship's camaraderie has not had much schooling, and thus unsubstantiated rumors trade amongst each other. The uninformed do not easily shake their belief." Jacobi packs a pipe with tobacco while he considers how to explain the quandary. "An 'old-wives tale,' postulates that conveying bananas or preachers is risky and prone to bring jeopardy to a ship. I will not fill my hold with either. I don't consider the myth to be true, but that other subordinates in my command might and I need their devotion. Sprinkling salt on a net is imagined to attract more fish. Is the billow not brackish enough already?"

"I'm not sure. I"

"During the Middle Ages, seafarers interpreted Friday as ill-fated. Many refuse to launch a voyage on the Sabbath, as by legend that is the eve of the week that our lord Jesus was betrayed. A baker's dozen join the Last Supper, so when that number is commingled with Friday, the convergence is regarded as blighted. On Friday, October 13, 1307, historians wrote that the French King Phillip 'The Fair,' imprisoned the Templar, tortured their leaders, and seized their riches. That was a woeful day but are all Friday the thirteenth's ill-starred? I think not."

"The nuns told me when I was born on a Friday the thirteenth, my mother died. Am I doomed?"

"No," Jacobi realizes he's spoken too allegorically. "Good or bad, we live what we choose for ourselves. Luck is happenstance interpreted incorrectly. Real miracles are rare. I've never seen one."

Alvin is still puzzled what unfounded beliefs are associated with the maiden.

"So, the ship's company believes having an 11-year-old girl aboard will bring us misfortune?"

“Possibly. Many mariners will not transport an unescorted female; as trouble can arise amongst the lonely men. We must safeguard her until the journey’s end. She has suffered some trauma that we can never comprehend.”

Vivian glares at Alvin when he brings her meal. A week into the sail, she hasn’t uttered a syllable. Her thoughts are confused and jumbled like the pitch of the ocean. *I am not sure of what is going on. Who are these men? Are they like those in the jungle? What is this ship? Is it taking me toward safety or more troubles? How did my situation change for the worse so quickly? Why does this uncertainty excite me? I know I hate the feeling of not being in control.* Abruptly, like a branch splitting from the weight of snow, she gushes words while brandishing a blade.

“I slit their throats for what they did. Are you also bad? I don’t like bad men.” Vivian rages loudly, her voice echoing in the cramped quarters. “Where are you taking me?”

Alvin backtracks in haste, closes the door, and whispers to her.

“To San Francisco . . . Home, to your family.”

“They will bleed too. For leaving me behind . . .”

Alvin can hear glassware smashing against the wooden barrier. He recollects when he was an orphan who had to scramble to survive, so he sympathizes with her callousness. Emerging from the bowels of the ship, he discloses the dramatic event to Jacobi who is scanning the seascape from the foredeck.

“Maybe she’s healing, but she now begins another tumultuous period,” came Jacobi’s assessment. “Only the strongest mind can survive such an ordeal and it alters a soul. She may never be normal.”

In a month, Jacobi allows the girl to stretch her legs on deck in full sight of the sailors who avert their direct gaze. She and Alvin have become attached as he is the sole contact she has had on the ship. Enwrapped in an infatuation, he accompanies her as she stares at the cerise sunset from the bow. The breeze whistles a bubbly tune through the rigging and in the encroaching shadows, she kisses him on the cheek. He is exhilarating in the moment as her lips brush him like the gauzy touch of a butterfly’s wing. She grasps his hand. He approaches

his Captain at the steering wheel as the west coast looms in the yonder. The boy dares to voice an intimate request.

“Will you marry us?” asks Alvin. “That is part of your rank’s most joyful oceangoing duties, correct?”

“You are too naive to realize the gravity of your petition. I could, but a ceremony would not be legal due to your ages. Her parents would be incredibly displeased, assuming that I brought her home with a husband. I will not compromise our bounty.”

The following few days are unperturbed and that no mishap has befallen the *Helene* soothes the ship’s complement. Dropping anchor at The Embarcadero in March of 1906, Jacobi, Alvin, and Vivian ride a streetcar to the Palace Hotel near Nob Hill. Mrs. Steele weeps uncontrollably engulfing her daughter with a tight embrace as her husband hands a valise of freshly minted bills to Jacobi. The girl begs her mother and father to force Alvin to remain. When he declines, she pleads for rescue. Her elders drag her away, screaming. The Captain apologizes for the disturbance to the hotel manager.

In the span of a few minutes, Jacobi sends a cablegram to his grand old lady, deposits the funds in the hotel’s repository, and orders port wine be sent to the room. After the tense exchange, he feels the need to decompress. Later, after the bellhop uncorks the fermented grape, he relaxes in an armchair as Alvin sits on the rug near the crackling fireplace.

“I would like to see her again,” ventures Alvin. “I hope that might be possible one day. Do you think that I can be so lucky?”

“Miracles can happen. They are not just verses in the bible,” smiles his captain. “She has a path to find away from the ocean as you are in possession of a life upon the swells. As we chart our own course between jagged shoals, she will have to navigate different waters. I have found a multifarious number of women and a profusion of routes that can be taken to happiness. You can even choose to reinvent yourself wholly. Once, I knew a scamp. ‘His eminence, Joshua A. Norton, Emperor of America.’ His legend is a rigmarole that you cannot purchase from any bookstore. I once had the distinct pleasure of shaking his monarchical mitt.”

The 13-year-old is wide awake and attentive. He truly enjoys the sporadic conversations when his Captain discloses wisdom to him. Jacobi can really spin a yarn like tying a “Monkey’s Fist” knot out of hemp. He pours Alvin a soupçon of port from his jug. The boy sips the sweet tasting fortified berry and likes the woozy feeling it brings.

“Arriving in San Francisco from South Africa, the rumor mill implies that Norton is Napoleon’s illegitimate son who fled La République to avoid the guillotine. He invests in real estate ultimately owning much of North Beach. Overhearing the canard speculate on how a famine in China will result in a temporary cessation of rice exports, the gluttonous landlord mortgages his properties to purchase a cargo hold of Argentinian grown grain. The staple that feeds the coolies completing the Transcontinental Railroad skyrockets in price from 4¢ to 36¢ a pound. He counts on multiplying his grubstake into a mint, but Chinese junks stuffed to the gunwales with rice, cast anchor in the harbor before his ship and the value subsides. The speculator begs a court to void his transaction but is denied. He goes on his knees, lamenting that he is bankrupt, but his creditors refuse to take pity on him. Norton’s prime lots are auctioned off to the highest bidders for pennies on the dollar.”

Kelly wonders *what it must feel like to be rich and then lose all. He hopes he never finds out.* Captain Jacobi continues weaving the intricate details; embellishing the legend of the scallawag.

“He sprints in celerity from the Barbary Coast. A decade slips by and he rematerializes in the city as a daft unusualness. Norton is grand and altruistic in all respects. He dons a battered beaver-skin hat, embellished with an ostrich plume. Adorned in proud regimentals with epaulettes, his chest is sparkling with a swath of tarnished medals. A vermillion sash fastens a cavalry saber to his ponderous waist. On a soap box in Golden Gate Park, he proclaims himself imperator as well as the protector of Mexico. He orders Congress to disband. Gladdened by his outrageous manner, a majority of San Franciscans decide he is utterly nutty.”

The Captain takes a draw from his briar pipe and adds a modicum of liquid to Alvin’s glass. He smiles broadly, enjoying the retelling the saga as it was told to him and adding his own trivialities.

“Mark Twain based a character on him in Huckleberry Finn. Regular readers of San Francisco’s dailies the *Chronicle* and the *Examiner* become devoted to his capers. Their outlandish articles are reprinted statewide in *The Pacific Appeal* and *The Sacramento Daily Union*. The dynast issues wholly farcical proclamations that are ahead of their time.”

“What kind of ideas?” Alvin asked. He is curious and invested in the narrative.

“Dissolving the Congress. Annexing Mexico. Zany notions such as a bridge should be built to connect San Francisco to Oakland, or that anyone who refers to the ‘City by the Bay’ as ‘Frisco,’ shall be fined \$25. He never works and rarely is in possession of funds to finance his lifestyle. Occasionally he prints and sells ‘imperial bonds,’ promising 5% interest. The rascal has carte blanche at the finest restaurants whose chefs create memorable cuisine. Restaurateurs even install bronze plaques in their vestibules to boast of Norton’s patronage. Theatrical producers keep a reserved box vacant in case the blue-blood should demand an evening of distraction.”

Jacobi rises to stretch his legs. From the window of the upper floor suite, he can see the soupy fog steeping into the city like tea from a fresh bag does into hot water. Another dram of liquid passes the dry lips, and Jacobi turns toward his captive audience. He retakes his seat to continue his recounting of the facts as he knows them.

“After Norton halts a race riot in Chinatown, the mayor confers him a shiny medal with a ribbon. When his garb begins to look ratty, the board of supervisors authorize funds so the finest tailor in town can fit him for a fine uniform. Witnesses report that the “Emperor” whimpers as he is presented his effervescent livery, au courant with the knowledge that his citizens truly love him. Their mock ruler continued his benevolent reign unabated, delighting in the rank and file’s adoration.

As all must, Emperor Norton I dies in 1880, and more than 300,000 line the procession route to watch his “wooden overcoat” be wheeled by on the way to the cemetery. Barroom gossip conjectured that he was immensely affluent but played the pauper because he was so stingy that he could not bear to part with a farthing. At his low-cost

room, every floorboard is ripped up by looters hunting for his objet de vertu. All the treasure hunters locate is \$8, a quartz-topped, gnarled blackthorn wood cane, and a battered ceremonial saber.”

As Jacobi had drained his flagon, he finishes the tale.

“Residents hallowed his inane buffoonery; his actions eased them into a carefree frame of mind and relieved the pressures of every day problems. The way of the world has innumerable swerves—that are not foreseeable or avoidable like earthquakes, fire, and drought. Norton provided the disadvantaged a chance to giggle, during their distress and nonsensical predicaments. We must all wallow in whimsy to give us relief from our complex realities. You would be wise to bear in mind that no future is set in stone.”

The *Helene* steers southwest to Tahiti with the soft trades. The ship moors in Papeete harbor. Before shoving off, Jacobi poses a classic philosophical question to the seamen for contemplation during the succeeding leg of the voyage.

“If a vessel was replaced by one timber daily, would it be the same boat upon completion of the restoration? Our valued mate has jumped the rail and thus will be left behind. You will assume his duties and his share divided. Meditate on that until we moor at Easter Island.”

Subsequently, the navel of the universe is a such unc customary anchorage that Jacobi and Alvin saunter around Hangaroa, marveling at the hulking fallen monoliths while provisions for the sheep ranch are unpacked. In the morning, the vessel heads east across the Pacific to Chile and then around South America to the Atlantic.

In 1909, Jacobi accepts a consignment of explosives bound for the Panama Canal construction camp up the Rio Chagres. The delicate payload is fraught with danger and thus incredibly profitable for such an alacritous cruise. Approaching the mouth of the watercourse, waves and weather batter the deck. The Captain shouts commands as lightning brightens the horizon. A strike hits the mast. It splinters and pelts Jacobi dead. The *Helene* writhes. A coal boiler explosion detonates the nitroglycerin. The boat tears asunder with a stomach-churning crackle that sounds like a walnut crushing under a size 14 shoe. Fiery fragments of the boat set the jungle ablaze on both sides of

the river. The 16-year-old is spared from the disarray as he is cast from the bulkhead into the drink, while the others suffer the abyss.

Alvin clings to a rectangular section of wood. The current draws the exhausted teen out to open sea. He prays for divine intervention from Manannán mac Lir, the Gaelic god of the sea, Tangaroa the Cook Islands atua of fishermen, Jesus (who walked on water,) and any other deities he can think of. He feels for the pouch around his neck that holds his lucky charm. He wants to execute his guarantee to his Captain. Two days elapse before a boat chances upon his feverish, dehydrated shell. He reeks worse than the smelt the fishermen keep as bait. The mariners warily drag the torpid boy aboard and knock their catch out with a belaying pin.

Everything goes dark.

Alvin strives during the next four years of conscription to circumvent his servitude, return to “The Modern Gomorrah,” and satisfy his covenant. Yet as an Arab proverb of yore states, “The wind does not blow as the ship desires.” During that interval of his compulsory enlistment, scads of “attention-getters” capture infamy by the implementation of offbeat feats. In 1911, Englishman Bobby Leach becomes the second swashbuckler to survive Niagara in a barrel. The eight-foot, metal enclosure in which he rides demands a heavy physical toll. Pulled from the inlet, he heals for six months from two broken knee caps and a fractured jaw.

Meanwhile, an intrepid gentleman is touring the midwest with a crackpot talent. Acrobat Bud Launtz “walks” inverted, his feet catching nooses strung on a ladder suspended 25 feet above the sawdust. He does not employ a net, defying gravity. Billed as “The Bat,” his legerdemain has looker-ons holding their gulp of air until they must exhale. They cannot avert their collective gaze, lest the upended gait misses a coil. One day he does, breaking his neck.

Even the era’s most distinguished prestidigitator, Harry Houdini, is not above pandering to the bizarre. The Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts dares the escapist to “emulate Jonah” and tempt eternal damnation inside a “monster” stomach. A rotting dollop

that resembles a whale crossed with a squid washed onto a beach near Boston and was preserved in an ice warehouse.

On September 11, 1911, the manacled mage forces himself through a slit in the preserved specimen's blubber while his accomplices sew the gash and wrap the lump in chains. It takes 15 minutes for him to emerge from the putrid flesh. Joseph Emmerling, watching the initiative for the *New York Evening Journal*, is on hand to question Houdini. He takes photographs to accompany his article. This is not the first meeting the newspaperman and performer have had.

"Harry, how uncomfortable did you feel? Contained in the flesh of the gullet? I cannot imagine being surrounded by those revolting, slimy innards. Disgusting."

"I concede it was the most abstruse test I ever attempted, Joseph. I nearly succumbed from the smell of the arsenic fluid used to preserve the blob, but I am devoid of its paunch."

"Will you ever participate in another trial like that?"

"No comment."

It takes a while to accomplish but in early 1912, Alvin Kelly secures a hammock that will take him across the Atlantic. He will finally be able to bring to fruition his troth. While he traverses the salty remoteness as an engineer's helper, the American population is demanding unrestrained diversion to inject some excitement into their mundane lives.

Parachutist F. Rodman Law springs from the Statue of Liberty's torch on February 3, 1912. Frederick free-falls 40 feet before yanking his ripcord. In 305 feet, he rolls on Bedloe's Island's turf. The *Pathé Movie Company*, for filming his historic vault, remunerates him with \$1,500. Joseph Emmerling is situated at the colossuses base.

"Rodman, that was quite a hurdle. Would you care to say a few words for *The Lexington Dispatch* and the other associated compendiums of *Press Internationalé's* syndicate?"

"I have planned many mad tricks for the cameras. I took a leap of faith, and it was a rush. I would like to thank the good lord. That was an amazing stunt, man."

"Stunt-man. Thanks, Mr. Law. I will spread that word."

The reporter originates the phrase, and Law becomes the earliest to be recognized as a “movie stuntman”—a storied tradition.

Movie stuntman 1 of 1

Mo-vie stunt-man noun.

: a man who performs stunts

especially : one who doubles for an actor during the filming of stunts and dangerous scenes

As Emmerling is filing his report, 3,625 miles away in Paris, Austrian tailor Franz Reichelt gambols from the Eiffel Tower in a parachute of his own design. His alteration fails to unfold, and he zips 187 feet from the observation deck, perishing on French soil.

Alvin returns to Queens on April 10, 1912, and goes to Widow Jacobi’s address in the Forest Hills neighborhood. The residence has been replaced, and no one he asks knows where her final resting place is. He lays a rose on the steps of the building constructed on that lot as a single thought goes through his membrane. *I hope I am not damned in perpetuity for failing the mission given to me by my captain.* The sea dog boards his ship as it is heading back to Fiume. Days later, in the Atlantic, the all-hands-on-deck siren whines. His divine decree is going to be recast.

*Chapter 3 –
The Enigma that is Joseph*



*“To produce a mighty book, you must choose a
mighty theme.”*

— Herman Melville

Joseph T. Emmerling's personal telegraph clacks out an urgent communiqué on April 15, 1912. His heart flutters like a Yellowhammer woodpecker tapping out a bright beat as he deciphers the dots and dashes by ear.

TITANIC HITS ICEBERG. SHIP LOST.

He rushes to gather information on the worst cataclysm of his times. Perhaps in the horrific details, he will dows a worthy theme to capitalize on. He requires a stirring narrative.

Early reports about the *Titanic* puts in motion a hierarchy within news bullpens worldwide. Editors order a “reset” to put out an “extra” edition. Casualty lists dominate the desks of the division chiefs who mobilize their minions to scrutinize any iota of information. Pencil pushers browbeat sources for details of the unfortunate who have embarked upon the traversal. Art departments hastily assemble illustrations. Reams twist between the ear-splitting printing presses—copies with scarcely dry ink are rushed out to the stalls and paperboys on street corners. The herd lays out their coins to ingest details like a hatched chick hungry for a worm.

As the proprietor of the *Press Internationalé* wire service, this sad affair portends a stack of greenbacks. Emmerling's syndicate provides for a need . . . one that fills space and his wallet. His epigrams remit a quarter-penny per inch. Quantity is his livelihood, not quality. He churns out the fodder that supplements regional periodicals for whom the resources to hire staff is unavailable. His discounted vacillating write-ups run far below the fold and deeper in the pages than the farm futures. His peers consider him a “hack.” He has a file cabinet with oodles of scrawl; cross referenced by category. The tittle-tattle creations are formulated with pawky, temerity, and unsubstantiated innuendo.

This calamitous mishanter of the *Titanic* will sell bazillions of 2¢ sheets . . . as many as can run through their clamorous printing machines. Readers will gravitate to the largest font available. The broadsheet that squawks calamity the loudest will stain a sizable amount of hands in “The Five Points” and beyond.

The gravity of the plight demands he send out a “bulldog edition” for far-flung presses like the Honolulu’s *Hawaiian Gazette*, Fargo’s *Bottineau Courier*, and 67 others. Emmerling fills his billfold with his trade’s favored tools—crisp ten dollar bills.

He is an imposing figure with a cleft jawbone. The Falstaffian consults his pocket watch from the waistcoat that contains his girth wrapped in a double-breasted suit. He does not want to strike someone as rushed and full of hubris. His blond curls are tucked under a straw boater as he saunters closer to the moorage. A few try to engage him in polite conversation. He expeditiously chats but is fixated on rushing to the waterfront. At 32, the muckraker is storied enough to be nostalgic—he thinks back to when equine miasma permeated the thoroughfare. He almost prefers that whiff to the exhaust from the gas-powered vehicles that rumble on the hectic streets.

Born in 1880, the Joseph’s widowed mother re-marries after the mourning period. Her second husband, Abe Emmerling is a Jewish immigrant from Austria. His stepfather operates the Postal Telegraph in the hamlet of Berwyn, Illinois, nine and a half miles from Chicago. The toddler is raised with his name and is inundated with Morse Code. The clicks and clacks develop into a covert communication between the child and parent. After the days lessons at Mt. Airy School, the brainy little nipper earns tips by distributing messages for his dad. He does not neglect fishing and other puerile pursuits. When he is seven, he breaks his leg jumping from a tree. During his convalescence, P. T. Barnum’s autobiography becomes his favorite thing to read. He admires the compère’s hucksterism and self-aggrandizement.

In June of 1888, the Barnum & Bailey Circus plays a week in the “Windy City.” Joseph implores his family to take him. Among the 19,000 watching, he signals his approval by clapping so briskly that his hands hurt. He is keenly entertained by the trained dog act and the sword waving Bedouin Arab caravan astride camels. The tot observes exotic animals—zebras, leopards, and giraffes—for the first time. There are wagon loads of grease-painted pantaloons, a human cannonball act, and the Lawrence Sisters performing their double-trapeze “Winged Mercurys” routine.

Meandering the midway booths, Abe wins him a teddybear despite the fact that the carnival operator has bent the sights on the popgun. Entering the “Ten-in-One Freak” tent, the youngster shakes the paw of “Major Atom,” the two-foot, two-inch dwarf and his polar opposite, the seven-foot, seven-inch Austrian giant, “Captain Urick.”

After taking in the articulated skeleton of the gargantuan African elephant “Jumbo,” Joseph recalls when the train crashed into the mountainous mammal, crunching its bones, and killing it. He takes a trip down memory lane back to when *he fell from that branch and how much he hurt when he broke his own femur*. The boy winces as he feeds a peanut to the fallen attraction’s widow, “Alice.”

A photographer captures a shimmering tear on his cheek as Barnum himself appears to pat the adolescent on the head as if to comfort him. The picture runs in *The Chicago Times*. The child tacks the clipping on his bedroom wall. He is blessed to have met his idol.

Joseph consumes the topic of what living is like under the main tent. He saves 60¢ to mail away for the showman’s treatise on “How to Create Wealth.” The maxim he feels most inspirational about is “The noblest art is that of making others happy.” He copies the phrase out in flowing cursive and pins the writing next to his grey-tone portrait with the showman.

For his 10th birthday in 1890, he is given a “Fulton Printing Outfit #1” with a grapheme alphabet. He duplicates a page of kiddie gossip and peddles his *Berwyn Snitch* to his classmates with the slogan, “Cuz You Wanna Know.” Rising early on Saturdays, he bikes the neighborhood, distributing *Barton’s Free Press*, to his 36 house route.

Barnum departs this mortal coil after four score on April 7, 1891, and the 11-year-old authors and prints a page celebrating the impresario. He slips it into his next Saturday’s route. The gazette’s owner, Zachariah Barton gets wind of the unauthorized addition and has his editor pull the budding wordsmith in for a stern lecture.

“It was wrong to insert your opinion without permission. Your writing skills lack the grammar and excellence that we strive for.”

The boy tells Barton he plans to “run a newspaper like him,” and pledges to study his lessons intently. He becomes a star pupil

during the next two years. After school, he helps out at the paper's bullpen, soaking in knowledge from the older employees. Thanks to a growth spurt at 13, he towers above his schoolmates. His teachers encourage him to play basketball, but he rebuffs them explaining that he wants to "join a metropolitan paper" and needs to focus on study. He has a schoolboy dose of puppy love, but the girl spurns the lanky bookworm's charms. Joseph finishes 8th grade at the head of his class both figuratively and literally.

In 1893, his editor elevates the teenager to "cub reporter" and assigns Emmerling to pay a visit to the "Columbian Exposition." Celebrating 400 years after the navigator claimed territories for Spain, the gathering is the most grandiose spectacular ever put on in the United States. The high schooler lusts to encounter as much as he can in 72 hours. Joseph is bug-eyed at the cornucopia of astounding exhibitions he beholds.

Even though officially not part of the festivities, "Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders" camps near the Expo entrance and sells tickets for daily re-enactments of General Custer's final battle at Little Bighorn. Joseph walks the deck of the replica of Columbus's carrack *The Santa Maria*. He also boards a copy of the 9th century *Gokstad* viking longship from Norway. From the deck, he sights contemporary Navy cruisers moored in Lake Michigan.

The parkland becomes incredibly ornate after nightfall encroaches. Fountains are lit in tinctures of blue, green, and red. The glow beguiles those who come like a bloat of hippopotamuses to bask in the sunshine of progress. The World's Fair flairs like a nearby sun as alternating current powers a million incandescent bulbs. Emmerling finds himself seated at a table, face-to-face with inventor Nikola Tesla at a press luncheon. He cannot believe his luck.

"Can you comment about the power system that electrifies this fair? What fantastic strides can humanity enjoy soon?"

"This is what lies ahead. I look forward to free air transmission of sound and energy to be feasible. America will be a utopia," the Croatian-born engineer states straightforwardly as Emmerling uses shorthand to scribble his words. "It is coming like Chronos the Titan's rule . . . he is . . . that is . . . what is . . . on the way."

The inventor's eyes shine as he thinks of the future.

"A true Golden Age where men mingle with gods . . . the World of Tomorrow."

"Thomas Edison says"

"Let me ask you a question, sprout. How many Edisons does it take to screw in a lightbulb? No clue? Edison does not screw a bulb. He screws you, sir. He stole that idea and does not deserve his own joke."

Joseph moseys away with quotable words for his article. He is dumbfounded as he sightsees in the stretch of temporary plaster establishments dubbed the "White City." Every few steps, pitchmen spout hurly-burly. The divertissement in the Midway Plaisance ranges from games of chance to technical demonstrations. Spending a few pennies, he takes in "Camera Obscura," views of the fair and peeks at the whirring animation of a horse galloping at the "Anschuetz Electric-Photographic Tachyscope" booth. A few feet further, he tarries to watch a demonstration. Two divers, immersed in bulky suits, perform activities like sawing wood planks underwater and recouping objects for the audience from a large glass tank.

Emmerling tries many products being introduced—Wrigley's Juicy Fruit, Cream of Wheat, and Pabst Blue Ribbon. He is saddened that the 264-foot Ferris Wheel is not operational, but he finds many other things that intrigue him. His "informational packet" contains a souvenir—an "elongated" copper penny from the sundry "squasher" machines that create exnumia throughout the park.

Touring the international bazaar for three days is an enlightening experience. The fledgling has a nip of scotch as he climbs a half-size reproduction of Ireland's Donegal Castle to kiss a facsimile of the Blarney Stone. Merchants from Chicago's Italian neighborhood dish up spaghetti bolognese while stereopticon images project Pompei's destruction.

A souk is imported from Cairo—fully stocked with camels and snake-charmers, it enraptures the turnout. Anthony Comstock, chairman of the "New York Society for the Suppression of Vice" lodges a formal complaint concerning "indecent undulations and swiveling hips of 'Little Egypt' and her belly dancing attraction."

He demands the revue be shuttered. Chicago mayor, Carter Harrison replies with a one word telegram—"No."

France's contribution to the fair includes a "Folies-Bergère" show. Joseph is propositioned by a brunette burlesque dancer. For \$1, she guarantees to teach him the practicality of Parisian intimacy. Behind a curtain, the hand job lasts a few seconds. He does not enjoy the experience and comes to doubt she was even French.

Emmerling channels Jules Verne for his critique "Around the Fair in 80 Hours." It is so well received that Barton arranges to have his article reprinted in journals with a greater influence. The opinion is that the "wet behind the ears" reporter will have a bright progression in the fourth estate. He frames the critique and adds a copy to his bulging sample folder. The 13-year-old is proud of his initial byline.

In 1898, 17-year-old Joseph embeds with U.S.S. *Charleston* as a "Spanish-American War Correspondent" for the Hearst newspapers group. When the destroyer arrives on the scene in Agaña Bay Guam, Spain's ranking envoy surrenders the garrison without a shot due to the fact that the armory holds no gunpowder.

Joseph interviews the Spanish Commandant of the fort who drunkenly tells him, "La guerra es un infierno. War is Hell. We were ready to die, but it is God's miracle."

Emmerling files his lackluster report from the radio cabin. His boss demands a more potent narrative, cabling him for a "re-write full of blood, guts, and glory." He misrepresents the truth and the item runs without a credit. The budding writer learns a valuable lesson—*I prefer it that way . . . anonymous. Without a by-line, news is but a fiction based on fact.*

Back in Illinois, Joseph finds his parents have passed away in a train derailment. The son has conflicted feelings. *They were good. Why would a just god allow something like that to happen? Why does he not smite evil-doers instead? On the other hand, if the allotted span is so haphazard, then it must be better to live life to its fullest. Everything could be concluded in a snap.* He decides not to worry about the "Grim Reaper" nor be constrained by any religion.

He liquidates the family assets and uses the funds to purchase a building in the upper west side of Manhattan near Central Park. He

settles in the four story, five-unit at 13 West 89th Street near Central Park. A telegraph wire is installed as well as a telephone line and a safe. He leases out the bottom units.

Emmerling registers the *Press Internationalé* name and commences to establish his place in the industry. He holds the optimism is that his nascent enterprise will one day be able to fund his high-brow inclinations. He is accepted to Princeton's ivy-walled surroundings and its hallowed halls of learning.

Majoring in English, Joseph's sesquipedalian vocabulary is noticed by his teachers. With his journalism experience, his professors recruit him for *The Daily Princetonian*. He is never without his state-of-the-art favorite tool—a Kodak Brownie camera. He soon becomes bored churning out banal dribble relevant to the 1889 "Tigers" football squad. At the team's ten year reunion, the freshman profiles the former halfback, second cousin (twice removed) of Edgar Allan Poe. He has an epigrammatic, discreet dalliance with Samuel Poe and comes to the decision that he prefers his own gender.

In 1902, the senior is seething when the college will not allow an expansive expose to be printed and he resigns from the school paper. Dean Samuel Ross Winans tells him, "The racy subject you broach regarding Princeton fraternities contesting (amongst themselves,) to see which house can take advantage of the most sorority sisters at nearby Evelyn College" is not acceptable as it violates the code of conduct, and he expels him from the institution. Emmerling is infuriated at not graduating after investing almost four years in pursuit of a degree. He rails against the patriarchy and privilege. He vows to get his story in print as revenge.

The budding freelancer hawks the investigative piece to *The Newark Evening News*. The publisher wants to get the article in front of their large readership. Joseph does the unexpected by assigning the rights to the article for free. He asks for a byline for only the second time in his career. The editors counter that he join their ranks as a reporter. He declines, explaining his plans for a wire service and that he would rather enlist the news organization to distribute his content. They become his earliest patron on a purely speculative basis, paying a (low) flat fee annually.

The 21-year-old parlays his disquisition into a meeting with higher-ups at the *New York Herald* offices at West 35th Street and 6th Avenue. He rejects their suggestion of him occupying a desk at the bureau and pitches the newspaper into joining his growing fold of subscribers. They hand him a freelance assignment to cover a harum-scarum daredevil stunt at Niagara Falls.

Disposable articles become his stock in trade. He excels at succinct compositions of prompt, dross writing interspersed with 14¢ words. His droll style is exquisite for the scandal sheets. He finds he can conjure a hundred lines of fluff easier than researching facts.

As the idle rich's scandalous conduct boosts circulation, hearsay informs Emmerling's preoccupation as he stays in the "Seat of the Empire," utilizing his skills with morse code to file his salacious stories far and wide by telegraph. Joseph conscripts a network of snitches to beat the bushes for the elite's excesses. Coat-check girls, mixologists, pharmacists, as well as the parking valets feed him details of the bad behavior of society cads and daffy dames. He is so tied-in to goings-on that even city detectives request his help in reducing crime.

Publishing firms, searching for the next literary prodigy have no approbation for those who work in the newspaper industry. He will prove the "big-money-men" wrong by having an opus of the highest quality reside beside the classics of the literati. Working on themes for a fictional piece obsesses him and takes the rare spare time he has. He wishes to validate his command of language with an attestation that he is a brilliant writer by creating a best-selling page-turner. When famous, he speculates *they will pay through the nose for his next effort*.

His inceptive manuscript is sent for review to the major printing companies in 1902. "The Three Rings," sets forth "the suspenseful machinations of an ignoble Hungarian carnival hornswoggler who uses legerdemain and fakery to usurp the throne." He considers his suspenseful tale tensely written like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's finest Sherlock Holmes whodunit, but the work is cast aside as "lukewarm horror."

He buys a Ford Model-A and moseys along the eastern coast in search of odd stories. He uses the eight-horsepower vehicle to chase any carnival he can find. Composing Homeric prose on these

unrestrained characters, he spends most nights clacking away on his portable typewriter. He mails his articles to his typist, who parcels them out.

In 1904, a second spine-chilling manuscript is sent out. “Anger Under the Canvas Tent,” is a chronology of incidents that happen during the hunt for a murderer hiding in plain sight with the aberrations in a sideshow. The narrative is not released. Next, the 25-year-old writer finishes a pastiche featuring a Navajo gumshoe named Hawke-shaw in 1906. “The Elegant Savage of the Heart Mountain Range” does not garner any interest, nor are his other ideas considered. His work is rebuffed as trite, despite that he is undeterred, believing his labors will be noticed by a publisher of fine literature.

Outlets that rely on *Press Internationalé* material number 62 by 1911. After years traversing the seaboard states, Joseph decides to focus on writing about “The Melting Pot” that is New York City.

Emmerling grinds away, bringing in legal tender from a number of revenue streams. Besides writing, he dabbles in stocks and is a co-owner in a horse racing tip-sheet. He writes press releases and skits for Broadway revues. A Tin Pan Alley pianist has him penning lyrics, hoping for a hit. By escorting ravishing actresses and singers around town, the rumormongers do not envisage him as a loner.

At the 5th Avenue Public Library, he skims the latest releases for a spark of creativity. A work of fiction he bases on his wanderings is panned as “nostalgic tripe” by reviewers. The continued lack of recognition and rejection stings him like a hornet from a disturbed nest, but he keeps adding to his stack of unpublished projects.

Joseph is 31 in 1912. His contractees have been bolting to rival wire services *The Associated Press* and a newly emergent syndicate, *The United Press*. Subscribing to their content is far less expensive than his. He is forced to take forays further from his base to gather his information. Emmerling realizes having exclusives will keep him relevant.

Park Row outlets headquartered in New York City; *The Times*, *The World*, *the Tribune*, *The American*, (along with a plenitude of other nearby papers like *The Syracuse Herald*,) are rushing resources and staff to investigate the *Titanic* disaster. Worldwide agencies are doing

the same. A provocative coup would be a feather in his cap . . . perhaps providing another gem of writing to frame and affix to his office wall of fame.

Optimistic and joyful, Joseph Emmerling is convinced that divine providence will gift him the spade to dig up an angle no one else has found. He needs an eyewitness report to be pertinent in his chosen industry.

Thank You for reading this excerpt.

*The Luckiest Fool on Earth:
The Twisted Yarn of America's
Greatest Flagpole Sitter, Alvin
"Shipwreck" Kelly*

The book will be released in Hardcover, Paperback, and e-book formats on October 1, 2025 on-line and select bookstores worldwide.

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