

**THE
ISLAND
OF
FEAR**

**HULBERT
FOOTNER**

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BOOKS BY
HULBERT FOOTNER

THE ISLAND OF FEAR

THE MURDER OF A BAD MAN

SCARRED JUNGLE

THE MYSTERY OF THE FOLDED PAPER

EASY TO KILL

DEAD MAN'S HAT

THE RING OF EYES

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY

DANGEROUS CARGO

THE WHIP-POOR-WILL MYSTERY

THE ISLAND OF FEAR

By

HULBERT FOOTNER

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IT WAS the last call on his depressing round for the day and Dirk Elvaston wondered if he had heard aright. “*What?*” he said.

The clerk in the shipping agency repeated his statement. “The skipper of the steam-yacht *Alethea*, clearing from Philadelphia, walked ashore this morning. She’s lying at the B. & O. piers at Fort Henry.”

Walked ashore! After weeks, months, of searching for a berth it was hard to believe that any vessel in the world lacked a skipper. In Baltimore alone there were a dozen men with master’s papers walking the streets. “What was the matter with him?” asked Dirk.

“I don’t know. Didn’t like the set-up. His wife runs a boarding-house in Philly, and he can afford to be independent.”

“Well, I’ll go right down,” said Dirk.

“Understand, they haven’t applied to us for a captain,” said the clerk. “I’m just passing you the tip. Got your papers on you?”

“Sure!”

Dirk boarded a trolley-car for Fort Henry. He saw the *Alethea* from the hill above the piers, and paused to look her over. A small white vessel of old-fashioned design; clipper hows, raking masts and funnel, overhanging stern. Old-fashioned, but having a grace that the stubby modern yachts lack. A sweet little ship, Dirk thought to himself, and took her to his heart.

A closer view from the pier itself was less favorable. His seaman’s eye told him at once she was neither well found nor well manned. There was a litter about the decks that made him frown, and up forward a frowsy deckhand leaned on the rail and idly spat overboard.

As Dirk mounted the rough plank they had run ashore, a man came forward on the deck to meet him. Forty-five years old, had been handsome, but the clean-cut features were now somewhat run together; thus Dirk sized him up. He was wearing soiled white duck trousers and a faded shirt; there was a certain air about him that led Dirk to term him “decayed gentleman.”

“What can I do for you?” he asked, with hard eyes and a pleasant smile.

“Are you the owner?” asked Dirk.

“I represent the owner.”

“I was told you wanted a captain.”

“I believe one has been engaged. Wait here and I’ll find out.”

Dirk thought: Damn his smile! He doesn’t like me any better than I like him. I’d better see to this myself. He followed the man aft.

On the after deck they came to a fat man in undershirt, drill pants, and bedroom slippers sitting squashed in a basket chair with his belly untidily overhanging his waistband. He was sweating profusely and wielding a palm-leaf fan. In short, a man who, however well fixed he might be, had clearly gone to pot. Opposite him sat a hard-looking customer in a neat blue suit. A seaman and a crook! Dirk judged the latter.

“Who’s this?” asked the fat man.

“I told him to wait until you were free,” said the other man, coldly.

Notwithstanding this discouraging introduction, a certain look of friendliness appeared in the fat man’s eye. He liked the cut of Dirk’s jib. “Looking for a job?” he asked.

Dirk admitted it.

The owner turned to the other seaman. “Go forward and wait until I talk to this man,” he said.

The man scowled like a pirate. “You said I’d fill the bill,” he growled.

“Well, I hadn’t seen this fellow then.”

The seafarer favored Dirk with a murderous glance and slouched forward.

“Sit down! Sit down!” said the fat man, with boozy good nature. “My name is Harry Prosser and my friend here is Claggett Ashcomb. Two fine old Southern families end in him. Have a drink!”

He howled for the steward and highballs were presently set before them. The steward was another slatternly creature with brawny shoulders almost splitting the seams of his soiled white jacket, and arms sticking grotesquely out of the sleeves. His manner was offensively familiar. Dirk thought: My

God! what kind of a galley have I got into! However, he had to have the job. He was at the end of his string.

“You turned up just in the nick of time,” said Prosser. “I was about to engage that other fellow, though I didn’t cotton to him. I got to have somebody quick.”

With merely a glance over Dirk’s papers and half a dozen questions, he engaged him on the spot. (Too easy! thought Dirk.) Prosser had the yacht on a three months’ charter and offered good wages. He wanted to cast off from the pier then and there. Ashcomb was sent forward to tell the other man his services wouldn’t be required. The pleasant smile had become somewhat strained. He returned, smiling still.

“May I ask a few questions about my job?” said Dirk to Prosser.

“Shoot!” answered the fat man.

“What’s the crew?”

“Well, we’re short-handed I admit, but it scarcely matters, as we’re not going outside Chesapeake Bay. Just cruising around the Bay all summer, that’s the idea. I’m doing this to oblige my friend Professor Harford, the anthropologist. Seems there are islands up and down the Bay with little isolated communities of people who are cut off from their fellows. Their habits and customs are said to be peculiar, and the professor wants to investigate them.”

“What does the crew consist of?” asked Dirk.

“There’s yourself, engineer, fireman, deckhand and the fellow who acts as cook and steward.”

“No mate?”

“What’s the need of a mate? We’re only going to make short runs, harbor to harbor. No steaming at night.”

This sounded reasonable enough. “I see you have wireless,” said Dirk. “Aren’t you signing on an operator?”

Prosser looked at Ashcomb, and the latter said, “What’s the need of an operator when we’ll never be out of sight of land?”

Dirk felt a healthy distrust of this slipshod outfit. Something queer about it! His instinct urged him to get one man aboard that he could depend on. He said: “The responsibility would be pretty great without either a mate or a wireless operator.”

Prosser hesitated. “I don’t want a wireless man,” he muttered, like a sulky child.

Dirk risked everything on it. "Then you'll have to find another captain," he said, firmly.

Prosser hesitated, biting his fingers. "Could you get a wireless man quick?"

"Surely. I know a man. He lives in my boarding-house. I could fetch him aboard when I bring my kit."

"Oh, hell! Fetch him aboard, then."

Dirk breathed more freely. Ashcomb's smile had become a grimace. "What's our first destination?" Dirk asked.

"Diseree Island. That's the most southerly of the islands. It's over the Virginia line. From there we'll work back northward from island to island."

After some further talk the crew were called out on deck, and Dirk presented to them as their captain. They were an unprepossessing lot. The blond engineer, McElderry by name, looked honest enough, but he had a wild expression; not a steady man. He had a cut-throat fireman serving under him, and the deckhand was another swab.

The captain's keys were handed to Dirk and he proceeded to inspect the ship. She was pretty foul below, but sound. Needed paint and disinfectant. He was thankful that his own little cabin was up on the bridge deck. There was a ventilating system not working, which it seemed might easily be put in repair. She had an old reciprocating engine which McElderry assured him was in good order. She carried two wooden lifeboats on davits amidships, one having a motor.

Among other old-fashioned toys, he took note of a little brass cannon forward of the main-mast, for firing salutes. In a locker in the wheelhouse he was a little surprised to find six automatics of a late pattern, and a good store of ammunition.

Her accommodations comprised two double staterooms, a single stateroom, a bathroom, and a miniature saloon below. There was a small house at the top of the after companionway, and a larger house forward containing dining-saloon and pantry. Above it was the wheelhouse and two small cabins, the second one housing the wireless apparatus.

Having looked everything over, Dirk made his way aft to report. He had rubber heels on his shoes and his steps made but little sound. Passing the after deckhouse he heard voices around the corner. Claggett Ashcomb's well-bred voice, not so smooth now, saying:

"The fellow's too knowing. He'll make trouble for us."

And Prosser's querulous answer: "Well, we had to have somebody."

Dirk showed himself, and Prosser said, hastily, with false heartiness: “How did you find everything, Captain? all hunky-dory?”

“Sufficiently,” Dirk said. “I’ll go up to town and fetch my grip, Mr. Prosser. We can get away by dawn.”

“Oh, call me Harry,” said the fat man. “Everybody calls me Harry.”

A T MISS BUHANNON'S boarding-house on Calvert Street quite a bit of excitement was caused by Dirk's departure. Miss Buhannon, a tiny woman who allowed that she was a martyr to pernicious anæmia, but who was nevertheless extremely active, scampered from room to room conveying the news that Captain Elvaston had a ship, and had got Mr. Garth a job aboard her, too.

Tony Garth was Sparks-out-of-a-job and Dirk went direct to his room. He found Tony gloomily reading a magazine that he had already digested from cover to cover, a symbol of the great unemployed. "Pack your grip, Sparks," he said. "We're going to sea at dawn."

Tony was an ugly little fellow whom men took to—also a good many women. Like all wireless men, he was absurdly young. He had an irresistible grin and he unfurled it now. "To sea?" he said.

"Well, anyhow, down the Bay," said Dirk. "A three months' job for you at a hundred a month, if that's good enough."

"Under you?" asked Tony.

"Sure!"

Tony sprang up and pitched his magazine out of the window. "Oh boy!" he cried. "I live again!"

Dirk pointed out the shortcomings of the *Alethea*. Life aboard her was not going to be a bed of roses. But it failed to dampen Tony's enthusiasm.

"Right now I'd take a job on a garbage-scow," he said.

Dirk went to his own room to pack. Miss Buhannon presently came along, and draping herself in the doorway like landladies the world over, started to tell him about all the other guests she had had who had lost their

luck and found it. Dirk had heard it all before and had trained himself to make pleasant noises at intervals without paying any attention.

After a while she was called downstairs by a ring at the door. She returned, priming up her lips. "There's a girl asking to see you," she said, severely.

"A girl?" echoed Dirk, opening his eyes wide. "I don't know any girls. . . . What sort of girl?"

Miss Buhannon tossed her head. "That's not for me to say. I'm sure it's impossible to tell nowadays."

This was the manner Miss Buhannon always adopted towards the youth of her own sex. In her opinion all women under thirty were no better than they should be.

"Are you sure it's for me?"

"Captain Elvaston, the girl said. That's plain enough, isn't it?"

"What does she want?"

"I didn't ask her."

"Well, I suppose I better go down and find out," said Dirk.

"Naturally," said Miss Buhannon.

Dirk found his visitor in the threadbare parlor. She was standing at the window, looking anxiously up and down the street as if to assure herself that she had not been followed to the house. When Dirk coughed to attract her attention, she whirled around and he got a shock. It was her eyes, great dark eyes luminous with emotion, searching his very soul. This was no ordinary girl and no ordinary situation. She was very young, eighteen perhaps, but wise beyond her years. Her emotion, her agitation, had raised her beyond the commonplaces of talk.

"Oh, you're so young," she blurted out.

"I'm not as young as I look," said Dirk, and immediately felt like a fool, the remark sounded so flat.

But she was more confused than he. "What must you think of me?" she murmured, blushing deeply. "I just meant that one expects a captain to be, well, elderly."

"Some aren't," said Dirk. He was all mixed up. The only clear thought in his head was: What a grand wife she'd make for a seaman!

"I am Mona Prosser," said the girl. "I understand that you've been engaged as captain of my father's yacht."

"That's right," said Dirk.

“The first captain was a friend of mine. He telegraphed me today that he couldn’t stick it, so I came down. I got your address from the shipping agency.”

“Why couldn’t he stick it?” asked Dirk.

“Well, you’ve seen the yacht. Can you blame him?”

“No!” said Dirk. . . . “What can I do for you?”

She did not answer immediately, but searched him through and through. Finally she said, simply:

“I believe you are a square man. . . . Anyhow I’ve got to trust you . . . because if you won’t help me nobody will.”

Dirk’s feelings strangled utterance. All he could get out was, “Well . . . try me!”

She looked around her anxiously, and lowered her voice. “Are we alone here? . . . Where has that woman gone? She was very inquisitive. . . . What’s behind those portières yonder?”

Miss Buhannon was a notorious eavesdropper, and Dirk had not the least doubt but that she was behind the portières at that moment. Her bedroom was back of the parlor. He said:

“We could go and sit in the café across the street, or, if you would not consider me fresh in suggesting it, we could go up to my room and shut the door.”

There was a glint of laughter in the girl’s eyes, gone immediately. (Dirk thought, What’s so funny about me?) “Let’s go upstairs,” she said.

Dirk led the way. She entered his room as a matter of course and sat down. To see her there in his own place among his things raised a fresh turmoil inside Dirk. What’s the matter with me? he asked himself. Up to this moment he had taken himself pretty much for granted; that is to say he had never disappointed himself in the ordinary crises of a man’s life. But now—he suddenly felt as though he were only half a human being, and this was the other half of him sitting so sedately in his Morris chair with her feet crossed. And he yearned terrifically to be made whole.

“I will try to be brief,” she said.

“You don’t have to be,” said Dirk, quickly. “I’m not a business man.”

In the midst of her distress she suddenly showed her white teeth. “You’re nice,” she said. “So unexpected!”

“I’m a seaman,” Dirk mumbled, in confusion. “I don’t understand shore ways very well.”

“So much the better!” she said, with a decisive nod of her head.

After a silence during which she seemed to be searching for the right words, she began very low: "It's hard to talk about family affairs to a stranger. It's about my father . . . and this yacht. He ought not to be allowed to go away in her. He has been very sick. He has only been out of the hospital a few weeks."

"What was the matter with him?" asked Dirk.

She blushed painfully. "Well . . . if I must tell you, he got to drinking too hard."

"Gosh! that's hard on you," murmured Dirk.

"And alone with a lot of men on that yacht he is almost certain to start drinking again . . ." (Already well on the way, thought Dirk.) "I ought to be along to look after him. And he won't take me, though I know there's plenty of room aboard. We quarreled about it."

Dirk continued to assure her of his sympathy. He felt pretty helpless in the situation.

"My father inherited money," she went on. "We weren't rich, but we had enough to get along on. He never had any regular occupation. My mother died ten years ago. I'm his only child, and we have always been everything to each other. We never had any trouble until this came up. I don't like this yacht business. It seems such a foolish thing to do!"

Dirk thought, Worse than foolish, maybe. But he kept his mouth shut.

"It isn't the money he's spending I mind," Mona continued. "I could always earn enough to keep us both. It's his health that I'm worrying about and . . . and the company he keeps. I don't like this man Claggett Ashcomb."

"Neither do I," said Dirk, promptly. "What do you know about him?"

"I know next to nothing about him. My father met him first, I think, in a barroom. They were drinking companions. Later he began coming to our house. He was very friendly . . . too friendly. He began to pay special attention to me. My father intimated to me that I might do worse than marry him. He was impressed by his family connections. But as far as I can see Ashcomb's fine relations have cast him off. Of course I would never marry him. I have just been stalling in the hope that my father would finally see him as he is."

"It certainly is tough!" said Dirk, painfully aware of the feebleness of speech. "I would do anything to help you! . . . But what *can* I do? Your father is his own master. If I tried to interfere with him I would only get fired off the yacht. There are plenty of other captains looking for a ship."

“You mustn’t leave the yacht!” she said, swiftly. “I can see you are an honest man. I can trust you. You mustn’t leave him. He might get some terrible person in your place. I want you to stay and watch over him and keep him from drinking too much.”

Dirk grinned inwardly at the prospect of acting as moral nursemaid to Harry Prosser. She didn’t foresee the difficulties of course; she was young. “I will do what I can,” he said, earnestly. “I swear it!”

“Thank you for that,” she said, and hesitated.

She was looking down at her hands in her lap. Throughout all this it was evident that she was not speaking all that was in her mind. There was a slight cloud over her frank eyes. She was not a good dissembler. She talked fast in order to conceal her real thoughts:

“She seems like a pretty little yacht. I’ve never been allowed aboard her. Perhaps you think I’m just a child, sore because I was left behind. But there’s more in it than that. I’ve been through a lot. I grew up before my time. But I’m not going to make a heart-breaking song about it to anybody. . . .”

Her gameness moved Dirk more deeply than any amount of tears. “Tell me the truth,” he said, simply. “You didn’t come down from Philadelphia just to ask me to keep your father from drinking. What’s in your mind?”

She glanced up at him, startled. “Oh!” she gasped. “You’re sharper than you look! . . . It’s true. That’s not what I came to ask you.”

“Well, what is it?” he said. “God knows I’m for you. I can’t help you unless you’re open with me.”

“I want . . . I want . . .” she stammered. Finally it came with a rush: “I want you to get me aboard the yacht, and hide me until after they have sailed.”

“Oh no!” cried Dirk, instinctively.

“It would be easy,” she said, eagerly. “I have got a suit of boy’s clothes. Tonight when it’s dark . . .”

“No!”

“It would be all right. My father’s an easy-going man. Once I was aboard he’d let me stay. You could make out you thought I was a boy. I suppose the captain has the right to hire a boy if he needs one.”

“It’s not that,” said Dirk. “Ashcomb is aboard the yacht. You are just running into trouble.”

“I care nothing for him. My father needs me. I must watch over him.”

“I won’t do it!” said Dirk.

Her face fell like a child's. "Oh! . . . Why?" she said.

"That yacht is no fit place for you."

She thrust up her chin. "I'm not afraid. I can take care of myself. I always have."

"I don't doubt it. But you don't know what you'd be up against in this case. Put it that I'm afraid for you. . . . Besides, you couldn't do any good. I want to help you, but we've got to begin by facing the facts. When a man is besotted as they say, nobody can save him. If he's determined to go to the devil he would only drag you down with him."

"I'll risk it. I . . ."

"No!" said Dirk, with a gesture of finality. "I wouldn't stand for it under any circumstances."

She spread out her hands and let them fall. "Well, that's that!" she said, bitterly. "There's no more to be said, is there?" She got up and started for the door.

Dirk felt as if he were being torn apart. "Don't go . . . yet!" he said, swiftly.

She paused at the door. She did not look at him. "What's the use?"

He sought around for some excuse to detain her. "Your address . . . I must have that . . . so I can let you know."

With an indifferent air she told him where she lived in Philadelphia, and he wrote it down. She put her hand on the door-knob. It was bitter to him to feel that she looked on him as having failed her.

"Wait a minute!" he urged. "Try to put yourself in my place. I couldn't act any differently."

"Perhaps not," she said, with a shrug. "I don't pretend to understand men."

"I'm easy to understand."

"Oh, I dare say." She looked at him scornfully. "You're a good fellow, I'm sure . . . but rather limited in your ideas."

Dirk felt himself flushing red all over. If a man had said that! "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Like most of the men I know, you won't allow that women are human!" She had the door open now and was gone.

Dirk cursed his luck softly and with feeling. Here was his ideal girl; the woman who seemed to fulfill every desire of a man's heart; and through no fault of his own he had got in wrong with her at the first go! Now he would probably never see her again. It was damnable!

Tony strolled in, grinning and full of curiosity. Miss Buhannon had put him wise to Dirk's mysterious caller. Seeing his friend's glum face, he said:

"What's the matter, Captain? Do you hate the sea?"

Dirk told him briefly what had happened. "You could see," he concluded, "that she had more on her mind than she was willing to tell me. This cruise has a fishy look to me."

Tony's face fell. "Are you going to chuck it?"

"No. I'm committed to it. I promised her. But you're not. Any sensible man would be justified in chucking it."

Tony grinned once more. "What the hell, Captain! You and I will be in the key positions aboard. They can't rope us into anything against our wills."

"You'd better pass it up, Kid!"

"You're wasting your breath. In the words of the old song, 'Where you go, I go, e'en to the county of Sligo!'"

"All right," said Dirk, gruffly. Secretly his heart warmed to the kid. There was nobody he would sooner have at his side in a tough spot than the grinning Tony.

DIRK and Tony dined for the last time at Miss Buhannon's frugal table. The depressed boarders were aroused to a state almost of animation by the events of the afternoon. Captain Elvaston and Mr. Garth going for a voyage on a steam-yacht! Miss Buhannon angled continuously to find out the business of the mysterious female visitor, but Dirk kept his own counsel.

"A friend of the family's, ma'am," he said.

"A second cousin on the mother's side twice removed, wasn't it, Captain?" asked Tony, with a straight face.

"Something like that."

Later, after they had finished packing, the entire household crowded out on the steps to see them off.

"Send a postcard wherever you touch port, Captain!"

"If you go into Norfolk look up my aunt. She runs a stationery store."

"And always remember," Miss Buhannon added, sentimentally, "that you must look on this house as your very own home!"

"Gee!" Tony murmured to Dirk. "All we need to complete the send-off is a bag of rice and a bunch of old shoes."

It was eight-thirty when they boarded the car for Fort Henry, and darkness fell as they were traversing the streets of South Baltimore. A sultry night with low-hanging clouds obscuring the stars. Dirk carried his old Gladstone bag with the leather flaking off, and Tony a suitcase covered with shiny black oilcloth. Once they were started, Dirk's spirits began to rise. Any job was better than none.

They dropped off the car a few hundred yards short of its terminus at the gates of Fort Henry. Fort Avenue, where the cars ran, followed the crest of a

ridge between the main harbor and an inlet. It was a well-lighted street lined with small houses and shops. The piers, too, and the road which served them down at the left, were sufficiently lighted; but the irregular slope between was a kind of no-man's land given up to ash-dumps, a factory shut down since the war, and a yard for the storage of junked automobiles, all as black as your hat.

The street lights below showed up the *Alethea* lying alongside the pier. "What do you think of her?" asked Dirk.

"All right," said Tony. "Now if she were owned by a millionaire with two beautiful daughters and they fell overboard and you rescued one and me the other!"

Dirk laughed. "You could have 'em both!"

As they started down over the broken pavement towards the lower street, Tony called Dirk's attention to a rough-looking figure at the door of a saloon on the opposite corner of Fort Avenue. His hat was pulled low over his face.

"Seems to be taking an interest in us," said Tony.

"Why shouldn't he?" said Dirk, carelessly. "There's nothing else in sight for him to look at."

"I don't know," muttered Tony; "it's a swell setting for a stick-up."

"Well, there are two of us."

When they had descended a hundred yards or so down into the impenetrable shadows of the dumps and the ramshackle buildings that lined the way, Tony looked back.

"Still watching us," he said. "Look at him."

At the top of the hill the man had walked out into the street, where he stood clearly silhouetted against the light behind. He raised his hat high in a mocking gesture and put it on again.

"What's he doing that for?" said Tony.

"He's just razzing us."

"He can't see us down here."

"What the heck! We look like just what we are, a couple of seamen on the way to join a ship. We're not worth picking."

Dirk had scarcely spoken when figures seemed to rise out of the earth on both sides of them. Before they could put themselves in a position for defense they were slugged. Dirk heard the sickening blow that descended on his own skull. His senses reeled, but he did not pass out altogether. Dropping his bag, he seized the throat of the man who had struck him.

His first thought was of Tony. A figure lay prone at his feet with a man kneeling beside it with nimble fingers running over his body. They had got the kid! A blinding rage seized Dirk. He heard running feet coming down the hill behind him. The scout was making haste to join his pals. Well, anyhow, I'll get this one! Dirk thought, grimly squeezing the throat between his fingers. He got a second crack on his skull from behind, and that was all he knew.

He came to to find himself tied hand and foot, a handkerchief bound over his eyes, and strips of tape pasted across his lips. He was on his back, lying partly upon a warm body that he guessed must be Tony's. He was thankful that they were still together. They had been jammed into the rear compartment of a sedan, which was jogging over a smooth pavement at moderate speed. Upon Dirk's body two pairs of big feet rested heavily.

Tony cautiously pressed up against him. He was conscious; so much the better. Dirk with his bound hands softly returned his signal. With that gentle pressure he tried to tell his friend that he was all right, but not to let anything on for the moment. Dirk had a healthy fear of the brutal quartet of feet bearing down on him.

By the sounds that reached his ears he knew that they were passing through the center of the city—the clang of trolley-car bells; the soft passing of many cars; the shuffle of feet on the pavements. Occasionally they stopped for a traffic light. All keyed up as he was, it gave him a queer start to hear snatches of light talk and laughter. Life was going on as usual.

The two men who had their feet on him conversed in whispers now and then, but, strain as he would, he could hear nothing of it. There were two more men on the front seat; he heard them whispering. Tony had been laid one way in the bottom of the car and he the other. Dirk very slowly shifted his feet out of Tony's face.

By and by he heard a well-known set of bells just ahead of the car striking the quarter hour. Ten-fifteen. It was Corpus Christi Church just around the corner from Miss Buhannon's. They were running north on Mount Royal Avenue. Sure enough, they presently crossed the bustle of North Avenue and struck into the silent park. He recognized Cedar Avenue Bridge by the sound of the railway in the valley, and Falls Road from the screech of the trolley-car wheels on the curve in Hampden. After that they bowled north at high speed for many miles without making a turn.

Finally the driver said, "Ain't this far enough?"

One of the men on the back seat answered: "All right. Take a side road to the left. Any road."

Turning out of the highway, they proceeded at a slower rate. From the remarks passed back and forth it was evident that they took in turn a dirt road and afterward a track through woods. After bumping heavily over ruts and fallen branches for a while, the car stopped and the driver said:

“Tree down. Can’t go no further this way.”

“All right, this’ll do,” answered the gruff voice.

The doors were opened and the men climbed over Dirk’s body. He was seized by the feet and roughly pulled out, striking his head against the running-board and ground. A second man lifted him by the shoulders, and the two started off with him, grunting, cursing his weight, stumbling over obstructions. Tony, he supposed, was hauled out of the car also, but his two bearers were making so much noise, he could hear no other sounds. Is this the end? Dirk wondered, clenching his teeth.

They bumped him against tree trunks; thorns scratched his flesh; leaves threshed against him. Evidently they were passing through a dense wood. Finally his bearers dropped him incontinently on the ground and made off without a word. A delicious feeling of relief ran through him. Life was safe for the moment, anyhow.

Presently he heard the car endlessly backing and filling. No easy job to turn her around in the woods. They did it at last, and the sound of the engine died away. He then did his best to cry out, but only a hollow groan issued through his sealed lips. To his joy a similar sound answered him from not very far away. Tony was still within call.

Grunting to his friend, and listening for his answering grunts, Dirk sought for him in the woods. The only way he could move was to lie on his back, draw his feet up and push himself forward a few inches. When his head collided with a tree, he went around it. At last he ran into Tony’s body, and they pressed against each other, exchanging congratulatory grunts. The irrepressible Tony shook with laughter.

Tony also was lying on his back. Dirk butted him in the ribs with his head as a hint. Tony got it and rolled over on his face. Dirk pressed his face against Tony’s bound hands, and Tony pulled the tapes off his lips. Dirk then attacked the knots at Tony’s wrists with his teeth. The rest was easy.

They sat up and rubbed their sore joints. They had lost everything they possessed. The intense darkness of the woods surrounded them, and there was no sound but the rustling of the leaves. The sky was so heavily overcast that it showed merely as paler patches between the tree tops. There was not a star to guide them; no breeze between the thickly springing trunks to give them a direction. Dirk said:

“Impossible to tell now which way the road is. We’ve got to watch that we don’t go round in circles. You sit tight and I’ll explore for the road first in one direction then another. When I find it I’ll holler.”

“Okay, Captain,” said Tony.

An hour or so later they struck a main highway, and a road sign told them that it was the same Falls Road by which they had been carried out of town. They turned towards the luminous glow in the clouds that denoted the distant city. Whenever a car approached they tried to flag it, but the two hatless figures in the lonely road at one o’clock in the morning inspired no confidence in motorists. They only speeded up.

As they plodded along in the dark Tony said: “What do you think about this chivaree, Captain?”

Dirk answered: “It may be robbery pure and simple, or it may be a hint to us that it would be healthier not to take a voyage on the *Alethea*.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“If I can get to the pier before she sails I’m going to report for duty,” said Dirk. “But that doesn’t apply to you. You’d better stay ashore.”

“Nothing doing,” said Tony. “I never could take a dare. It’s a weakness of my character.”

After walking for a couple of hours more they had the luck to come on a pair of motorists changing a tire by the roadside. These men were obliged to listen to their story. Convinced finally that Dirk and Tony were good fellows, they offered them a lift to Baltimore, and at the end of the trip even advanced them a dime apiece for the trolley-car to Fort Henry.

They had to wait a long time for a trolley. When it finally came there was no one aboard but a couple of sleepy night workers and a drunk propped in the front corner. As it slowed down a few blocks farther along to pick up another passenger, Dirk, idly glancing out of the window, saw a man wearing a seaman’s neat blue suit who had a familiar scoundrelly face. The man saw Dirk at the same instant, and loosing his hold of the car rail, turned and was swallowed in the darkness. The conductor grumbled and rang his bell to go ahead.

“Well I’m damned!” said Dirk.

“What is it?” asked Tony.

“That was the guy that I nosed out of a job this afternoon.”

“The heck you say! What gave him a hunch that there might be a vacancy now?”

“You can search me!”

Dawn was breaking as they walked out on the pier. In the gray light the *Alethea* lay alongside with her empty decks unguarded. The doors of both deckhouses were standing open. Those on board had not even taken the trouble to run in the plank.

“Damned lubberly carelessness!” grumbled Dirk. “Thieves could strip the vessel while they sleep!”

During the night a big motor-boat had tied up astern of the *Alethea*, laden with boxes of soft crabs for the Western trade. Her captain, a burly Eastern Shore man, came strolling along the pier and stood chewing a cigar and giving the yacht the once over. Moved by an impulse to seek information, Dirk waited for him.

“You the skipper of this here tea-kettle?” the Eastern Shore man asked.

“Just joined,” said Dirk.

“She’s a pretty play-toy,” said the other, grudgingly, “but useless, of course.”

Dirk glanced at the bluff-bowed tub astern and grinned. “Well, every man favors his own,” he said.

“Where you bound?” was the next question.

“Just cruising,” said Dirk. “Diseree Island is the first call.”

The Eastern Shore man took his cigar out of his mouth and stared. “My God!” he murmured.

“What’s the matter with Diseree Island?”

The man did not answer directly. “Reckon you’re a stranger to these parts,” he said.

“Well, I’m a deep-sea sailor, if that’s what you mean,” said Dirk. “Don’t know much about the local points. . . . How did the island get that funny name?”

“I can’t tell you, Captain. Some say it means Wrath of God, but I don’t know.”

Dirk was careful not to betray too much curiosity. He knew the type he had to deal with. The Eastern Shore man spat overboard, took a fresh pinch on his ragged cigar, and continued:

“The island bears a bad name up and down the Bay. I never been there myself, and I don’t calc’late to go. Years ago they used to call it Poison Island along of a certain weed that grew there and nowheres else. They say when the first white settlers come to this country, the Indians made it up to gather this weed and poison all their wells with it. But the plot was discovered. The descendants of those self-same Indians are living on the

island to this day, but all mixed up now with white blood and negro blood and God knows what all. Ain't no new people gone there since time out of mind, and the stock is near run out.

"I've heard tell it was a big island once, with hundreds of people living on it. Even then they was known as quare people, and the mainlanders let them alone. Since then the northwest gales have washed three-quarters of it away, and in twenty-thirty years more there'll be no more than shoal water to tell where it once was. The village is gone long ago; there's only maybe twelve or fifteen ramshackle shanties and about fifty-sixty people. They stays to themselves and we leave them lay. They're a quare people, Captain!"

"How do you mean queer?"

"Well, just quare!" He shook his head impressively as if to intimate that he could say plenty more if he would, but that was all Dirk could get out of him.

Harry Prosser came out on the deck of the yacht in his pajamas and hailed Dirk with undisguised pleasure. "Come aboard, Captain! Come aboard! By Gad! we stayed up near all night waiting for you. Thought you'd run out on us!"

Dirk went over the gangplank and, introducing Tony to the owner, told him succinctly what had happened to them. Prosser's eyes became as round as saucers.

"My God! a hold-up!" he exclaimed. "And in sight of the ship, as you might say. This is terrible! terrible!"

"We've been stripped of everything," said Dirk, grimly; "valises, cash, watches, keys, everything!"

"That's a small matter so you weren't hurt," said Prosser. "I don't want to linger here until the stores open, but I'll levy on every man aboard, and amongst us we'll outfit you somehow until we can buy you new things. I have duplicate keys to everything. Take them."

It was clear that he had no suspicion this was otherwise than simple robbery, and Dirk kept his own thoughts about it to himself for the moment. He believed that there was more to be learned by concealing his hand. Meanwhile he wanted to see the faces of the other men aboard when they discovered that he had returned to the yacht safe and sound.

Claggett Ashcomb, half dressed, was next to appear. His smooth and slightly puffy face gave nothing away. He advanced to Dirk with outstretched hand, delighted to see him back. When he was told of the abduction his face was a study in astonishment.

“Good God! We must notify the police!” he cried.

Prosser was in a dither immediately. “No! No! That would only keep us here! What can the police do in such cases? I’ll make up the losses of these men. Let’s forget it and get under way!”

Then Professor Harford. This was Dirk’s first glimpse of him. A meager man, with an unexpectedly big stomach; deeply-seamed face, penthouse eyebrows, an innocent, fatuous expression. He was an old-fashioned type of professor with long thin, gray whiskers of the sort that used to be called Dundrearys, and a stubbly chin showing between. An absentminded man who gave little thought to his personal appearance. He shuddered at the story of the night’s happenings, and lent his shrill voice to support Prosser.

“Yes! The police are worse than useless after the trouble is over. These rough characters hang around the waterfront of every town. Let’s get away. We’ll be safer at sea.”

McElderry, the young engineer, joined the group, but he had nothing to say one way or the other. A strange, quiet fellow with oddly burning eyes, he seemed to live inwardly and to have little concern with what passed outside himself.

Meanwhile the excited voices on deck had brought three heads popping up through the fo’c’s’le hatch. Dirk studied them without appearing to. First Kirkall, the deckhand, a tall fellow with a sweep of soiled blond hair across his forehead and a sharp, secretive face—Dirk put him down as a sea lawyer, a type detested by captains. Second, Mike the fireman, a gorilla of a man with hanging arms, and a heavy, dull face; third, Wesley, the cook-steward, who looked like nothing but a clumsy, broken-spirited lout.

None of the faces on board expressed either guilt, uneasiness, or self-consciousness, and Dirk was almost convinced that the attack on him and Tony was, after all, a simple robbery.

Prosser kept saying: “Let’s get under way. Let’s get under way. We’re all on board now.”

“Have you got steam?” Dirk asked the engineer.

“All ready, Captain.”

“All right. Let’s go!”

After they were clear of harbor traffic, Dirk handed over the wheel to Kirkall and he and Tony went into their little cabins on the bridge deck to tidy up as far as they were able. After a bit the fat Prosser came laboring up the ladder, bearing an armful of miscellaneous underclothes. He threw them on Dirk’s bunk.

“Every man on board contributed something or other,” he said. “Divvy up with Sparks next door.”

Prosser went away, and Dirk turned over the things he had brought. A pretty scratch lot. There was a pair of striped socks that somehow had a familiar look, and Dirk idly examined them. Sewed inside the top of each sock was a little white label with a number upon it in red. When he caught sight of the number an exclamation of astonishment was forced from him. Tony glanced in at the door to see what had caused it.

“Look! Look!” said Dirk, pointing to the laundry mark.

“Well, what of it?”

“That’s my number. From the Elite Laundry. It’s sewed on all my things.”

They stared at each other.

“Do you want to go ashore?” asked Dirk grimly. “I wouldn’t blame you.”

Tony shook his head. “What the heck! The owner is backing us. How about you?”

“I’m seeing it through,” said Dirk, shortly.

His first thought was of the automatics in the wheelhouse. The seat-locker where he had seen them was fastened with a hasp and padlock. Sending Kirkall down to the main deck, he opened the locker with one of the keys on Prosser’s ring. The guns had not been disturbed.

“We’ll change this lock,” he said to Tony. “I saw locks yesterday among other junk in the engineer’s stores. Go down and fetch me a lock with two keys.”

★ IV ★

THREE hours later the *Alethea* was off the mouth of the Magothy River heading south down the Bay. It was a fair day with a steady breeze in their faces just sufficient to darken the wide surface of the water without making it break. Slow-going cargoships and barges crept up and down the channel; the distant shores were bathed in summer haze.

Having left Tony at the wheel, Dirk was going about the slovenly deck, trying to bring about a semblance of order. He had Kirkall working hard. The tall deckhand's face wrinkled in disgust at such unnecessary tasks on a hot morning, but he obeyed orders willingly enough—too willingly, perhaps. His kind always butters up to an officer at the start of a voyage, Dirk thought. Kirkall's lips ran into little cushions of flesh at the corners that gave him a sly, false, secretly-amused expression.

Professor Harford followed Dirk around, asking the usual fool questions about a ship. He promised to be a first-class pest aboard, but at that Dirk disliked him less than the owner's other guest.

“You must explain the use of every little thing to me, Captain. I am always after information. That's the scientific mind, you know. Well, that's what we're here on earth for, I take it—to learn and learn and learn!”

He wore glasses that made his eyes look round and solemn like a child's, and oddly at variance with his seamy whiskered cheeks. Dirk noticed that when he took the glasses off to wipe them, his whole expression changed. He really had small eyes. Dirk in his turn fished for a little information from him.

“What about this Diseree Island where we're going, Professor?”

The Professor cleared his throat as if he were about to start a lecture to his class. “Diseree Island. . . . Ha! . . . Yes! It is the most isolated and the

most southerly of the large islands in Chesapeake Bay. In 1901 when it was last surveyed it comprised an area of forty-eight square miles, but it is now much smaller as a result of erosion. It offers the anthropologist a unique opportunity to study the deleterious effects of too close interbreeding. I expect to find many morons, cretins, and other forms of low mentality among the inhabitants.”

“Swell!” said Dirk. “How did you get on to it, Professor?”

“Mr. Prosser offered to take me there to study the people.”

“Are you and he old friends?”

“Not at all. He knew me by reputation, that’s all. A mutual friend introduced us. He said he had this yacht and was cruising around Chesapeake Bay, and would be glad to combine a little useful work with pleasure if I cared to come.”

That was as far as the conversation got. Proceeding aft along the deck, Dirk noticed that the canvas cover of the port lifeboat was flapping, and stepped forward to fasten it. A sudden hunch caused him to lift the cover and look under. He found himself staring into the pale, tense face of Mona Prosser.

“Well, I’m damned!” he muttered. His first feeling was one of overwhelming delight, but he kept his face wooden. He had to play the Captain’s part.

“What’s this? What’s this? What’s this?” squeaked the Professor.

Mona rose up out of the lifeboat.

“A stowaway!” shrilled the Professor. “Bless my stars!”

She was wearing her boy’s suit. She had no bag or bundle, but her pockets were all stuffed out with the articles she considered necessary for the voyage. Her face was set and stormy; she expected trouble and was braced to meet it. Dirk’s heart melted completely at the sight—the darling! But he frowned.

“Come out of that,” he said, sternly, and held up his hand to her. She stepped on the gunwale of the lifeboat and jumped down to the deck. “How did you get aboard?” said Dirk.

She squared her shoulders like a boy. “I was hanging around the pier last night. There was nobody near. I just came aboard and hid in the lifeboat.”

Dirk looked at her, struggling to keep up his stern front.

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked, nervously.

He was about to say, “Take you to your father,” when he recollected the Professor. Nobody on board must know that he had seen this girl before. He

said, "The owner must decide that."

She got the implication and played up to it. "Aren't you the captain?" she said. "Can't you put me to work? I'm willing to work. I only did this because I was out of work and near starving. I thought you would feed me, anyhow, on the yacht."

Dirk rubbed his lip to conceal the spreading grin.

But however absentminded the Professor appeared, he was sharp enough to see through this. "Why, that's all a made-up story!" he shrilled. "This is not a boy at all; it's a girl! And it's Mr. Prosser's daughter!"

Dirk made out to be struck dumb with astonishment.

The Professor bustled aft to convey the news, leaving Dirk and Mona alone for ten seconds. Her face broke up and her eyes searched his apprehensively. "I suppose you're angry with me!" she murmured. Her lip trembled.

Dirk was not a man of stone to resist that. "Oh, no! no!" he whispered. "But I must make out to be. You shouldn't have done it!"

"I *had* to do it," she whispered. "Stand by me, Captain!"

"Bring her here! Bring her here!" the Professor was squealing, and they had to go.

Though it was no more than eight o'clock, Prosser was already squashed into his basket chair with a highball before him. Ashcomb was drinking with him. At the sight of the girl the latter leaped up. His puffy face reddened with gratification and his eyes swam lickerishly.

"Miss Prosser! . . . Mona! . . . My dear, dear girl! Where on earth did you drop from!"

Dirk felt the skin of his face drawing tight with rage. *His* dear girl! that decayed rounder! What a gall! He noticed that Ashcomb's outburst angered the Professor also. The girl paid no attention to it. Her eyes were all for her father.

Prosser was more confused than angry. He was ashamed to have her see his state of undress, his unshaven chin, his highball. He tried to bluff it out. Like all drinkers, he seized on the unessential thing.

"What do you mean," he cried, "by dressing yourself up like that and coming out before a lot of men. Oh, my Lord! I suppose you went through the streets of Baltimore like that! A daughter of mine! I'll never get over it! never! never!"

She cut through all this with an appealing cry: "Daddy! Aren't you glad to see me?"

His face worked as if he were about to weep, but he would not answer her directly. "Now we'll have to go in and put you ashore somewhere, and lose more time!" he grumbled, peevishly.

She dropped down beside his chair and put her hands on his shoulders. "Let me stay with you, Daddy," she pleaded. "This is where I belong. I won't be any trouble to you. I can make myself useful in many ways."

Ashcomb pressed forward to support her, and Dirk could gladly have strangled him. The man seemed almost to slaver in his eagerness. "Sure! Sure! Now that she's here, she must stay with us, Harry. There's plenty of room aboard. And Mona's a sensible girl. She won't mind roughing it. And think how delightful it will be to have her with us. It will make all the difference!"

The girl gave him a grateful glance. Dirk silently cursed him for a hypocrite and a scoundrel. Prosser, in a miserable state of indecision, patted his daughter's back and glanced from one to another.

"What do you think, Professor?"

The Professor shook his head. "I would be sorry to disappoint the young lady," he said in his squeaky voice, "but this is no place for her. The yacht is not outfitted for a young lady. And the islanders may be a rude sort of people; you wouldn't want to expose her to insult."

"I'll stay aboard the yacht," said Mona, quickly. "I don't want to go ashore. Let me cook for you and make you comfortable, Daddy!"

"What do you think, Captain?"

Dirk trembled for the girl. There was something unexplained about this voyage—unexplained and sinister. It was all right for him and Tony to embark on it; men had to take their chance of danger. But not a gently reared girl! So straight, so plucky—and so inexperienced. She mustn't be exposed to it. He said:

"The Professor is right, Mr. Prosser. We're not fitted to carry a lady. And this is no voyage for a lady to take."

Prosser glanced at him, startled. Had he touched an exposed nerve? However, the fat man didn't say anything, but turned back to his daughter.

"You see, my pet! I'll have to put you ashore."

Mona flashed a furious look at Dirk. "It's none of his business!" she cried. "He is just a man whom you hired yesterday. He's got nothing to do with our family matters. It's for you to decide, and you alone!"

"I was asked for my opinion or I shouldn't have given it," said Dirk, sorely.

She ignored him. "Daddy, let me stay with you! Let me stay!" she whispered.

He wavered in his mind. "I couldn't have you associating with a lot of men in a rig like that!" he said, weakening.

"I have a dress," she said eagerly.

He looked around for her bag or bundle. "Where?"

"In my pocket."

"Well, for Heaven's sake go below and put it on, then! I'll decide later what to do with you."

"We are off Annapolis now," said Dirk, grimly. "That would be the most convenient place to land her. There's an electric railway back to Baltimore."

"Daddy!" she cried, imploringly.

He couldn't stand out against her. "All right! All right!" he said, waving his hands. "You can stay!"

Dirk turned away. He had done his best. He couldn't be altogether sorry that she was going to stay aboard. If there was trouble, he could fight for her. On her way to the deckhouse she passed him with stony eyes.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"You pretended to be my friend!" she whispered, angrily.

"Maybe you'll see yet that I *was* your friend!"

"Ah, that's just talk!" She disappeared.

He was glad to see her go below. The sight of her had brought something ugly into Ashcomb's dissipated face. Dirk had even seen a hint of it behind the Professor's polished glasses. Old as he was. While Kirkall and Wesley had been leering around the corner of the deckhouse and Mike's apelike countenance had appeared grinning in the engine-room hatch. What was there in the sight of a woman in boy's clothes that aroused something base and dirty in men? Any fool could see that this girl was as straight as a string.

Dirk could hear Prosser discussing the sleeping arrangements with his two guests.

"Claggett's got a double room. You two won't mind bunking together, will you?"

Both men said that that would be all right, but there was no enthusiasm in their voices.

"Then Mona can have the Professor's room just outside my door," said Prosser.

Presently Ashcomb came to Dirk. The man wore his usual ingratiating smile, but he was clearly disturbed. He said, lowering his voice:

“Captain, isn’t there some other place you can stick the Professor? I don’t like that little geezer. I’d sooner give up my comfortable room than share it with him.”

“I thought he was your friend,” said Dirk.

“No friend of mine! I wasn’t responsible for bringing him aboard the yacht.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

Ashcomb returned to Prosser, and shortly afterwards the Professor came around the other side of the deckhouse. His glasses were polished to a dazzling brightness. He said:

“I don’t want to go in with Mr. Ashcomb, Captain. Mr. Prosser promised me a cabin to myself. Ashcomb gets drunk every night and snores in his sleep. You see, I do a lot of studying at night and it’s very necessary for me to be alone.”

“There’s a little cabin forward of the galley on the port side,” said Dirk. “It’s supposed to be the mate’s quarters, and as we carry no mate, it’s unoccupied. Why don’t you carry your traps in there?”

“Much obliged,” said the Professor. “I don’t care how small it is, so I can have it to myself.”

He went below.

Mona appeared on deck transformed and feminized by a much-wrinkled yellow silk dress. Dirk’s heart softened at the sight of her, and he grinned inwardly at the wrinkles. However she passed him in silence, eyes front. To make matters worse, she smiled at Ashcomb on the after deck. They picked up folding-chairs and carried them forward where there was more breeze. Dirk was full of bitterness.

He went to Prosser, who was now sitting alone. “Mr. Prosser,” he said, “I want to explain to you why I am against having your daughter stay aboard the yacht.”

The fat man moved his shoulders impatiently. “Must you bring that up again?”

“Hasn’t it occurred to you that there was something more than robbery behind the attack on me and Sparks last night?”

Prosser’s face expressed pure surprise. “What do you mean, Captain?”

“It seems strange, if they were only robbers, that they should go to the expense and trouble of carrying us all that way out of town. I have reason to

believe that it was all engineered aboard the yacht.”

“But why? Why?”

“I’m asking you that. A pair of socks you brought me had my laundry mark on them.”

“There are a hundred laundries in Baltimore, each with its own way of marking. Whom do you suspect?”

“How about Mr. Ashcomb?”

Prosser laughed loudly. “Captain, you’re suffering from delusions. Why, Claggett’s my most intimate friend. He’s not only my friend, but he’s dependent on me. He’s lost all his money, you see, and he has a taste for good liquor. As long as I supply that he will stick to me!”

“How about the Professor, then?”

The fat man grinned at Dirk slyly. “Captain, that’s funny, but you don’t know it! That blinking little owl! Why, the Professor is just . . . just . . . how can I put it? just a bit of camouflage. I picked him out for that. The Professor furnishes a front for this voyage.”

“Would you mind explaining what you mean by that?” asked Dirk, grimly.

“All in good time,” said Prosser, with a wave of the hand. “You’re a good fellow, Dirk, but, after all, I’ve only known you for twenty-four hours. You and me are going to be friends. You stick to me and I’ll take care of you, Dirk. I’ll take care of you.”

Dirk was forced to be content with that.

“As you go forward tell Wesley to fetch me a highball,” said Prosser. “All this discussion makes a man thirsty.”

DURING the day nothing more was said about putting Mona ashore. As she began to feel secure on board, she modified her haughty attitude towards Dirk, and evinced a desire to make friends. Dirk was too sore to respond immediately.

While Dirk took a trick at the wheel, Tony tested out his wireless. It was a satisfaction to learn that it was working okay. If trouble developed, they would at least have a way of summoning help.

Prosser, for reasons of his own, was anxious to avoid all towns and frequented harbors. As evening drew on he ordered Dirk to anchor in a place where there were no houses in sight.

There are many lonely coves up and down the Chesapeake, and Dirk with the aid of his chart found one such, with good holding ground, plenty of water, and an unbroken wall of forest back of the curving yellow beach. The *Alethea* lay there in the twilight like a model yacht fixed in glass.

All hands turned in early. Dirk watched during the first hours, secretly hoping that Mona might appear on deck to share his vigil under the stars, but she did not come. At midnight he called Tony and turned in.

Up again at dawn, his first act was to go forward to rouse Wesley to cook breakfast. Prosser had ordered an early start. The cook's bunk was empty, and he was not to be found either in galley or pantry. Considerably mystified, Dirk went up to consult Tony.

Tony said: "Wesley came up to the bridge last night, asking for you. It was just after you had turned in. He wouldn't tell me what he wanted. When I said he'd have to wait until morning he went below, and I didn't see him again."

In the forward deckhouse the table was set neatly for breakfast. Dirk was struck by the clean napkins set out at each place, all folded in the shape of the lilies that ships' stewards affect the world over. It was the loutish Wesley's one poor accomplishment. Moved by an obscure impulse, Dirk shook out the lily at his place. A little rumpled piece of paper fell to the floor. It bore a pencil scrawl in a painfully cramped hand:

"CAPTAIN, SIR:

"I swim ashore. I don't like this voyage. Watch yourself
Captain.

"From your friend,
WESLEY."

This communication did not make Dirk feel any easier in his mind. Tony whistled when he saw it.

"Captain, can you see any light through the surrounding fog?" he asked.

Dirk considered. "Have you noticed," he asked, "what the first thing is that everybody says about Prosser?"

Tony shook his head.

"Prosser 'has money,' they say. In other words, Prosser lives without working. He is an object of envy to every other waster who would like to live without working. Moreover, he is obviously an easy mark. Something is being put over on Prosser. There is a plot afoot to separate him from his money. But what the nature of it is or who's in it I can't tell you yet. It may be Ashcomb; it may be Kirkall and Mike, or they may all be working together. Perhaps there's more than one plot. Maybe the Professor is playing a little game, too."

"What have they got against you and me?" said Tony.

"Nothing personal, I should say, but the mere presence of two honest men aboard the yacht threatens the success of the plot."

"I see," said Tony. "Well, anyhow, we won't be bored on this voyage."

"I wish the girl was out of it!" muttered Dirk.

Dirk said nothing about the letter to anybody else on board. When the news of Wesley's desertion became known, Mona said:

"I will be the cook."

"We'll fare better then," said Prosser, with a fond smile.

They hoisted anchor at six o'clock, and soon after Diseree Island was rising like a low stratum of mist on the water ahead. It lay out in the widest part of the Bay; the eastern shore was faintly visible off to port; to the west

there was no land whatever in sight. Dirk's chart gave him the soundings around Diseree, but a note informed him that the shoals and sand banks were continually shifting, and that it was not considered safe for a vessel drawing more than four feet of water to approach within a mile of the shore, except at the southernmost tip of the island.

He coasted along the western shore, keeping the distance recommended. This side presented an irregular low bluff of clay or gravel, topped by pine trees. It was about six miles long. This was the side that washed so badly, and it was still washing, as one could see through the glass by the trees that had lately toppled over. The raw bank, the fallen trees, presented a depressing scene of ruin.

Beyond this main part of the island stretched a curving spit of sand for another two miles, ending in a curious hook of sand. This formation is characteristic of the Chesapeake, and there is always deep water to be found within these sandy hooks. That was the spot where Dirk designed to anchor.

The glass revealed no sign of human occupation until they had passed the long washed bank. On the edge of the shore facing the little bay inclosed by the sandspit, Dirk picked up a dozen or so of crouching shanties, weatherbeaten to such a degree that they looked more like natural objects than the buildings of men. A flimsy pier stretched into the water, and a dozen small boats lay at anchor.

Everybody was lined up along the rail of the main deck, staring ashore. Prosser, full of excitement, hoisted himself up the ladder, and joined Dirk outside the wheelhouse. He said:

"You can round the southerly point, Captain, and make your way up the eastern side until you are opposite a brick house that you will see over there. You can then steam in to within a couple of hundred yards of the shore."

"It would be safer to anchor inside the point," said Dirk.

"But that's two miles from the island proper. We would waste all our time going back and forth."

"My chart says that it is not safe for a vessel of this draft to come nearer than a mile of shore."

"Oh, there has never been any serious attempt to chart these waters. I got information in Philadelphia from a former islander. When the water is calm you can see your way in."

"But once we're in," said Dirk, "is there room enough for me to turn around and steam out again?"

"Plenty of room at high water."

“Sounds risky to me, Mr. Prosser. If you force me to depart from the chart, I can’t take any responsibility for what may happen.”

“Sure, that’s understood,” said Prosser, impatiently. “I take full responsibility.”

They rounded the hook-shaped point and headed north, passing closer to the huddle of shanties that seemed to be growing out of the sand. The easterly side of the island was low and swampy, with some natural meadows on which the islanders kept goats. On this side there was a larger house standing by itself, which Prosser pointed out as their mark.

It was done as he ordered. Dirk was able to pick out his course by the changing color of the water. They moved in slowly, keeping only enough way on her to steer. It was nine o’clock; the tide had lately turned and was running out.

From this point the shanties facing the Bay were hidden by intervening sand dunes. The yacht had been seen, of course, and the people began straggling over the dunes, looking like insects. As the *Alethea* drew in, those on board could see that men, women, and children were dressed in nondescript garments all faded to a general earth color. The people resembled their houses. They came part way and halted.

Dirk did not care much for the anchorage. It was sufficiently sheltered by the surrounding shoals and sand banks, but it was too restricted. Considerable maneuvering would be required to turn around without grounding. However, he dropped his hook about two hundred yards off the beach, and went to lower the motor-boat.

Prosser had become more and more excited. “First of all I’m going to talk to these people by myself,” he announced.

Ashcomb’s face fell. “You should take me with you, Harry,” he protested. “I can help you.”

“Take me! Take me!” said the Professor.

“No,” said Prosser, stubbornly. “I’m going alone. I’ve got to smooth these people down. They’re queer people.”

He went below and presently returned with two heavy suitcases to be loaded into the motor-boat.

“What’s that, Mr. Prosser?” asked Dirk, grimly.

The fat man grinned slyly. “These people have Indian blood. These are trade goods,” he said.

Dirk steered the boat and McElderry went along to run the motor. Dirk had noticed that as soon as the boat was lowered, the islanders started to

retreat slowly. Only one man detached himself from the group and came to meet them. The others paused on the top of the dunes to watch, but when the motor-launch grounded on the beach they disappeared. It had an uncanny look.

Dirk took note of the house that faced them from above the beach. It was a brick house and very old, probably a relic of the first settlement on the island. A fence of hand-split palings surrounded it, with ragged bushes growing inside, and half a dozen gravestones sticking up in one corner. On the gate leaned an old man with a great mane of white hair that made him look like an aged lion. A little old woman peeped timidly around the door frame. Offshore rode a graceful Chesapeake Bay canoe, and there was a flat-bottomed skiff tied to a trolley running between the beach and a post driven into the water.

The man who was on his way to meet them passed in front of the yard and came down to the beach. It struck Dirk as odd that he exchanged no greeting with the old man at the gate. He was a roughly-dressed islander of great physical strength, but uncouthly made. He thrust his heavy head forward and shambled in his walk. Coarse black hair, heavy features, and a furtive glance. He smiled in what he intended to be an ingratiating way, but it only made him look uglier than before.

“H’are yeh, strangers? There’s not many strangers lands on this island.”

Prosser introduced himself. “That’s my yacht out yonder. This is my Captain, Dirk Elvaston, and my engineer, Andrew McElderry.”

“H’are yeh? H’are yeh?” said the islander, shaking hands all round. “Happen my name is Lipp Bewley, at your service. What brought you ashore here, Mr. Prosser?”

“Well, I’m just cruising,” said Prosser. “I’ve got a scientist aboard who would like to meet you people. He’s what they call an anthropologist. One who studies the facts about people, you know, and writes books about them.”

“So!” said Lipp, rubbing his bristly chin with a doubtful look. “There’s queer people lives on this island, Mr. Prosser. They like to be let alone. Me, I been to the mainland and I know their ways. But these people, they don’t hold much by strangers nohow.”

“Well,” said Prosser, indicating the suitcases, “I brought some little presents to prove to them that we mean well, and to put them in a good humor.”

“Let’s see what you got,” said Lipp.

Lipp picked up one suitcase, Prosser the other, and they walked off twenty paces or so. "You stay with the boat," Prosser said over his shoulder to Dirk.

Towards this Lipp Bewley Dirk felt an instinctive antipathy. The suitcases were opened, but Lipp scarcely glanced at the contents. He and Prosser fell to whispering together. Strange that two men who had just met for the first time should discover so much to say to each other. Meanwhile, fifty paces away, the old man continued to lean on his gate, smoking and looking on with a kind of sardonic humor.

Dirk glanced at McElderry. He was anxious to make friends with the engineer in order to make sure of having another man on his side in case of trouble. McElderry was a strange fellow, but he appeared to be square. He had been without work for more than a year, Dirk had learned, and misfortune appeared to have crushed his spirit.

"What do you think of this voyage, Chief?" asked Dirk.

McElderry's eyes rolled like those of a frightened horse. "I don't like it," he muttered. "I wish I'd let it alone."

"Why?"

"These islanders are a dangerous lot."

"Dangerous? In what way?"

McElderry scowled and looked away. "They got a bad reputation up and down the Bay," he muttered. "They say that every man, woman and child born on Diseree is gifted with the evil eye. They say that if a Diseree man curses you, you will surely die, though you go to the other end of the earth."

Dirk's mouth opened in astonishment. You never knew what was inside a man until you got him talking. "But, good God, Chief, you don't believe this mumbo-jumbo, do you?"

McElderry refused to meet his eye. "Sure, I don't believe it," he mumbled, evasively; "but I don't like it, neither."

"How could they reach you on the other side of the earth? These poor ignorant oystermen!"

"I'm not explaining it to you, Captain. I'm telling you what they say. There's many things that's beyond a man's knowing. They say that these people can appear before you wherever you are. And neither locks nor walls can keep them out. Many years ago there was a fellow lived in Princess Anne, called Willy Heaslip. He bet his mates he would go to Diseree Island and stay there a week. Well, he went and he never come back again.

“After a while a party of six men made up to go look for him. But they didn’t find him. And those men was green in the face when they come back to Princess Anne. None of them would ever tell what they seen on Diseree. And within the year every last one of those six was laid in his grave. There wasn’t nothing the matter with them. They up and die. . . . There’s worse stories than that about this island. Ships passing out in the Bay hear their ungodly singing at night. It’s a cursed spot.”

Dirk shrugged. It was useless to argue with a man who had that wild light in his eye. He said: “If you feel that way about it, why did you come?”

“I didn’t know it then.”

“Who told you?” Dirk asked, quickly.

“Oh, it’s common talk. Kirkall, mainly.”

“It doesn’t seem to bother him any.”

“I don’t know whether it does or not.”

Their talk went no farther because at that moment Prosser and Lipp Bewley shook hands, and the latter picked up the two suitcases. Once more he passed the old man at the gate without looking at him. Prosser rejoined his two men.

“A fine honest fellow!” he said, with a wag of his head. “Ignorant, of course, but intelligent. He has seen a bit of the world; he knows what’s what. He has promised to square us with the people here.”

Dirk was put to it not to laugh in Prosser’s face.

They returned to the yacht. It was now dead-low tide and Dirk was able to show Prosser that if the wind blew strong from the east and their anchor dragged, the yacht would go aground. He obtained permission to move out into deeper water at high tide next day.

After lunch Lipp Bewley reappeared, rowing from the settlement in a weatherbeaten skiff. Aboard the yacht he adopted a cringing, insinuating air like a professional beggar’s. He was closeted with Prosser in his cabin for half an hour. Ashcomb waited for the result of this consultation, biting his lips in suspense.

After Prosser had seen Lipp off in his skiff, he turned to his friends, grinning and rubbing his hands together. “It’s all fixed! The islanders are giving a big sing-song and dance for the Professor tonight. We’re all invited.”

Dirk noted that Ashcomb was sharply studying Prosser’s face as if in an effort to read what lay behind this announcement.

“Good! Good!” cried the Professor, with his glasses gleaming.

The more he watched them the more puzzled Dirk became. Apparently everybody aboard the yacht was pulling in a different direction.

HARRY PROSSER was one of the steady tipplers who rarely show the effects of liquor. On this occasion, however, he appeared to become decidedly tipsy at the dinner table. He realized his own condition, and as they rose from the table he said with a giggle:

“I can’t go ashore in a small boat. I’d fall overboard.”

Ashcomb instantly offered to stay with him, but he would not hear of it. “Damn it! I’m not a baby. I don’t want you.”

Ashcomb could say no more.

“Let me stay with you, Daddy,” murmured Mona. “I’m not interested in these people.”

“No! No! No!” he said, waving his hands. “I want you to see all you can. It’s educational. Claggett will look after you.”

She whispered to him. What she said was evident by his reply. “Not another drop! I swear it! You can lock the liquor in the cupboard and take the keys, if you want.”

Mona was obliged to submit.

When he saw that Mona was going ashore, Dirk was determined to go also. Her father might be willing to intrust her to Ashcomb, but he decidedly was not. However, he felt it his duty to suggest to Prosser that Tony could stay with him. The fat man fairly lost his temper then.

“The hell with it! I don’t want him. I don’t want anybody. I’m going to bed! Kirkall and Mike can watch the ship, and that’s enough. They’re not concerned with the higher education.”

So it was arranged. At half-past seven Dirk, Mona, Tony, Ashcomb, Professor Harford and McElderry set off in the yacht’s motor-launch, with

Mike to run the engine. They headed for the nearest point on the beach, as Dirk had no wish to navigate shoal waters coming home after dark. As soon as he landed them Mike returned to the yacht. He was to come back for them when they hailed him.

Mona had a quiet and saddened air that made Dirk's heart sore on her account. Though she had been handed over to Ashcomb, she displayed an inclination to stick close to Dirk, which secretly gladdened him. After all, I'm the one she trusts, he thought.

As they started out the old man and his wife were sitting out on the doorstep, taking the air. There was something about this old fellow's strong and scornful gaze that appealed to Dirk, and caused him to say to himself: "There's a man!" As they passed his gate Dirk called out in a friendly fashion:

"Aren't you coming to the dance, Captain?"

His answer was limited to three words: "All foolishness, Captain!"

Dirk laughed; it was so exactly what you might have expected.

Along the edge of the firm ground bordering the beach ran an ancient well-beaten path, bordered with gnarled locust trees. From the meadows the goats watched them with the hard-boiled expression that is characteristic of goats. The islanders were not waiting for them, it appeared, because already they could hear a weird chanting from the direction of the settlement. The Professor walked behind Dirk, entertaining him with a dissertation on anthropology.

"In order to get a clear understanding of the many difficult questions connected with the natural history of the human family, two cardinal points have to be steadily borne in mind—the specific unity of all existing varieties, and the dispersal of their generalized precursors over the whole world in pleistocene times. . . ."

"Is that so?" said Dirk dryly.

It was half a mile or so to the sand dunes. By some freak of the winds these dunes had been heaped up all the way across the island at this point. Coarse sea grass grew upon them in clumps. The path wound between the dunes, and on the other side lay the shanties, facing the harbor. They were built of driftwood, logs, and bits of sawn lumber saved from the wreck of better houses; roofed with gasoline-tins hammered flat, and suchlike odds and ends. From the largest house came the singing, which was like no other singing that Dirk had ever heard; more like the howling of wolves.

Passing around the house, they entered. Lipp Bewley received them affably at the door. Everything had been cleared out of the house except the

cook-stove, and a rough double tier of seats built around three sides out of barrels and kegs with planks laid across. Children sitting on the floor in front made a third tier of spectators, all facing the cook-stove.

A swarthy people with coarse black hair, and shallow, black, brilliant eyes. The women were decorated with the cheap necklaces, the men with the bright handkerchiefs Prosser had brought. Every place was taken, and nobody made a move. This sing-song might have been gotten up for the visitors, but when they came, the islanders made believe to ignore them. The party from the yacht had to remain standing just within the door. Nobody so much as looked at them except the children, who, like children everywhere, stared with big eyes.

Night was falling now, and presently a kerosene-lamp was lighted and placed on the cold cook-stove. Looking around, in face after face Dirk marked the downcast eyes and the ugly glitter half-concealed. This he supposed was the famous evil eye. He himself would have called it just ignorant cussedness. Dangerous enough at that. McElderry, he saw, was getting a big kick out of it. Scared though he was, the engineer had wanted to come. The children were like anybody's children. Tough on them to have to grow up like their parents, Dirk thought.

They sang on. There were no words to it. Or if there were it was mere gibberish. Dirk could make no sense; only howling. The men started on a high falsetto note, gradually working down the scale; halfway down the women came in on their highest note; when they got to the bottom they started at the top again. It never varied. To Dirk a senseless performance, yet the singers were filled with a strange fervor; their bodies swayed to the chant.

After a few minutes, Mona pulled Dirk's sleeve. "I want air," she whispered.

They went outside. It had become quite dark.

"How good the stars look, after that," murmured Mona, slipping her hand under Dirk's arm.

He pressed it against his side.

"Let's go back to the yacht," she said.

Half an hour later they arrived on the beach at the spot where they had landed. Dirk shouted to the yacht. No answer.

He and Mona looked at each other. "Queer!" said Dirk. "That ought to have waked them." He continued to shout without effect.

Presently the old man, carrying a pair of oars, joined them. "I'll put you aboard in my skiff if you want," he said.

“That’s kind of you,” said Dirk.

“Well, a body can’t sleep with you hollering on the beach,” he said, crossly.

He pulled the skiff in and they embarked in it. It was only a couple of minutes’ row to the yacht. Dirk introduced himself and Mona, and asked the old man’s name.

“Cap’n Jim-of-Jim Bewley.”

Dirk glanced at Mona, wondering if he’d heard right. “Any relation to Lipp?” he asked.

“None,” said the old man, promptly. “Or so far back it’s been lost. Most of us on the island are Bewleys.”

“How did you get your queer handle?”

“Queer?” said the old man astonished. “Nothing queer about it. There are two Jim Bewleys. I’m called Jim-of-Jim because my father was Jim Bewley, and the other Jim is Jim-of-Ed Bewley.”

At the ladder Dirk said: “Will you come aboard, Cap’n?”

“I will not!” said the old man. “I’ll say good-evening to you.”

They thanked him, and he rowed away. The deck of the yacht had the look of a deserted thing; no light anywhere, no sound, falls swinging idly. The motor-boat was missing. “Ha! Gone for a joy-ride,” said Dirk.

Mona ran down the companionway to look for her father while Dirk went forward and shouted down the hatch. No answer. Mona, reappearing, said, blankly: “He’s gone, too. His room is empty.”

“So he was not so drunk as he appeared,” said Dirk. “I thought he was overtaken pretty quick for an old toper.”

There was nothing to do but await the outcome. Dirk was addicted to cocoa, and Mona made him some in the pantry. Afterwards they sat on the cushioned seat that encircled the stern rail. A wasted moon began to climb up from behind the black line that denoted the distant eastern shore. There was just breeze enough to keep up a continuous lapping of the ripples against the yacht’s sides. Mona’s hand stole inside Dirk’s and he pressed it warmly. Just like a child! he thought. She hasn’t any idea what it means to me.

Upwards of an hour passed before they heard the exhaust of the returning motor-launch. She was coming straight in from the Bay, but Dirk had an impression that when he first heard her she was making a wide swing around from the north. As she drew close they saw Kirkall steering, Mike standing by the engine, and Harry Prosser hunched up amidships.

When he came aboard, Prosser looked at them sourly. There was no trace of drunkenness in his demeanor. He was not surprised to see them. Wherever he had been, he must have heard Dirk's hails from the beach. "How did you get aboard?" he demanded in a surly voice.

"The old man brought us off in his skiff," said Dirk.

"What made you come back so soon?"

"Well, we didn't care for the show."

"Where are the others?"

"Still there."

"Where have you been, Daddy?" asked Mona.

A natural question, surely, but it caused Prosser to fly off the handle altogether. "Suppose I want a bit of air, can't I take it?" he snarled. "Must I sit here alone and twiddle my thumbs? Can't I go for a little breather in my own motor-boat?"

"Why . . . why surely!" she faltered.

Prosser, suddenly aware that he was giving himself away, walked forward, struggling with his ill-temper. He turned into the forward deckhouse to get a drink.

Mona looked at Dirk in dismay, but he could only press her hand in silence. He had no explanation to suggest.

A moment later Ashcomb's voice was heard hailing from the beach, and the two hands set off in the launch to fetch the rest of the yacht's company aboard. Mona, wishing to avoid them, went below.

As Ashcomb and the others came up the ladder, Prosser appeared from the bow, still glowering. "I want to talk to you," he said to Ashcomb, shortly, and led the way down to his own cabin.

The Professor was full of the night's experiences. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he babbled in his innocent style. "You shouldn't have missed it, Captain. Nothing like this has ever been reported. It will make me famous. . . . Their speech is polysynthetic, a type unknown elsewhere. It is not a primitive condition, but a highly specialized form of agglutination in which all the terms coalesce in a single polysyllabic word. Their dance clearly had a religious significance; it is a crude form of Shamanism; the monotheistic concept is not clearly evolved."

He finally went to bed; the launch was hauled up on the davits; Dirk and Tony were left alone on deck. The former said:

"Turn in and get some sleep. I'll stand watch until four bells, and then call you. I can't puzzle out what they're letting Prosser in for. I don't like the

situation at all.”

Tony left him.

As Dirk paced the after deck he could hear Prosser and Ashcomb whispering below. Though their voices were never raised, it was evident that they were quarreling. For Mona’s sake Dirk played eavesdropper at the open skylight over Prosser’s cabin, but he could distinguish nothing of what they said. Finally Ashcomb went forward to his own cabin. Dirk heard Prosser turn the key in his door. Shortly afterwards he put out his light.

Dirk turned in at two o’clock, but his anxieties would not let him sleep long, and he was on deck again at six. In the early sunlight an unearthly beauty had fallen on the green island. Another garden of Eden, he thought, but a long way from the Book of Genesis. From behind the sand dunes to the south he could see the thin smoke of the islanders’ breakfast fires rising, but no figures showed.

As it drew on towards eight o’clock, he decided that he had tide enough to move out to a safer anchorage. McElderry had steam up. The water was as clear as window glass, the shoals well defined. Dirk sent Tony and Kirkall forward to man the anchor hoist. So far nobody had appeared on deck but the crew.

It was a ticklish job to swing the *Alethea* around in the pool of deep water without grounding her. Full speed ahead, then astern; backing and filling endlessly as her head swung slowly to the eastward. Finally he was able to move slowly into the narrow channel.

Meanwhile he wanted the owner on deck to share the responsibility, and he had sent Kirkall below to rouse him. The deckhand returned to the wheelhouse saying:

“I knocked and hollered, but I couldn’t get no answer, Captain. Miss Prosser she come out of her room and called him, but he didn’t answer her, neither.”

A creeping fear entered Dirk’s veins. He was unable to leave the wheel. He signaled stop to the engine-room, and sent Kirkall forward to release the anchor. To Tony he said:

“Drop through the skylight of Mr. Prosser’s cabin, and open his door from the inside.”

Tony made haste to obey. As soon as the anchor caught and the vessel lost way, Dirk started down. At the top of the companion stairs he heard a cry from below that made his heart squeeze together. In the corridor he met Tony with a paper-white face coming to report. Tony whispered:

“He’s dead, Captain! Dead and cold!”

From the doorway Dirk surveyed Prosser's spacious and comfortable cabin. Mona was kneeling on the floor with her arms across the bed and her head hidden between them, softly crying: "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" Prosser sprawled on the bed in a natural enough position except that his mouth was hanging open strangely. There was no visible wound on him, no blood; nothing in the room had been disturbed.

"Died in his sleep?" suggested Dirk.

Tony, with horrified eyes, slowly shook his head. "When I dropped through the skylight," he whispered, "the door of the cabin was locked, but the key was lying on the floor. How did it get there?"

★ VII ★

DIRK'S first move was to get Mona out of the cabin. Bending over her, he whispered: "Mona, dear, you can't help him now. Leave us for a little while and we will try to find out how it happened."

She got to her feet, but swayed upon trying to make a step. Dirk picked her up in his arms and, carrying her into her own cabin near by, laid her on the bunk. She lay there inert, with her eyes closed. If we only had a woman aboard to help her through this! thought Dirk.

The news was instantly all over the ship, and guests and crew alike all crowded into the little passage with horrified faces, craning their necks to see into Prosser's cabin. For the present Dirk kept them all out while he and Tony made an examination.

They stood gazing down at the gross figure on the bed, which had become pitiful in death. "This has turned out differently from what I expected," said Dirk, grimly. "Somebody appears to have killed the goose with the golden eggs."

The room was about fourteen feet square. It occupied the whole width of the vessel astern. Behind it there was only a little hatch to permit examination of the steering apparatus from the deck. In the cabin the skylight overhead and two portholes on either side provided ample light and air. All the portholes were standing open. The *Alethea* had been designed for southern cruising, and her portholes were larger than is customary.

In the center of the cabin was the double bed with its head against the after bulkhead. A small safe, locked, stood against the wall alongside. Cushioned seat-lockers ran along under the portholes on either side. On one side of the entrance door stood a man's chiffonier and a built-in wardrobe;

on the other side a woman's dressing-table, and a corresponding wardrobe. Two easy chairs completed the furnishings. There was but the one door.

In the little passage running forward there were two doors; that on the starboard, serving the single cabin occupied by Mona; that to port leading to a bathroom. Then came the little main saloon with companion stairs rising from the forward end, and a door to starboard opening into Ashcomb's room. This was a double cabin, but not so large as the owner's, because a piece had been taken off to provide for a passage leading to the forward quarters of the yacht.

Harry Prosser lay on the bed just as he might have thrown himself down to sleep. His eyes were closed. The bed was not tumbled. A minute examination of his body revealed no wound. His clothes lay where he had dropped them; his pockets had not been rifled; nothing in the room suggested that he had had a nocturnal visitor.

"He *must* have died from natural causes," muttered Tony. "Perhaps the key fell out of the door."

"Keys don't fall out-of-doors," said Dirk, grimly. "When you lock a door you leave the key turned crosswise in the lock unless you're taking it with you. It requires two separate motions to turn the key all the way around."

In passing his hand over the head of the dead man, Dirk felt a sizable lump on the crown. "He received a blow over the head before death," he said.

"Did it crush his skull?"

"No. The blow was not sufficient to have caused death. He was killed afterwards."

"But how? . . . how?"

Dirk shook his head. "Only an autopsy can reveal that."

After taking everything in the room into account, Dirk said: "There are several possibilities. . . . Prosser and Ashcomb quarreled last night. I don't know what about. I heard Ashcomb leave him, and I heard Prosser lock his door. Perhaps Ashcomb came back later."

"But if the key had been left turned in the lock, how could he get in?" objected Tony. "He's too big to creep through the skylight. I could scarcely make it."

"Prosser may have let him in."

"How could he have got out after, leaving the door locked?"

"Duplicate key. That would account for Prosser's key being on the floor."

“Sure! But if Prosser were awake, how could Ashcomb have attacked him without his making an outcry or putting up some resistance?”

“You’re right,” said Dirk. “We must look farther. . . . Could the Professor have entered by the skylight?”

Tony shook his head. “His stomach’s too big. There is nobody aboard the yacht who could have entered that way except me—and the girl.”

“Well, she didn’t do it,” said Dirk. “Suppose somebody boarded the vessel during the night.”

“You and I were on watch every moment.”

“Sure. No boat could have approached the yacht, but a swimmer might.”

“How could a swimmer get aboard? The ladder was drawn up. There is nothing hanging overboard for him to pull himself up by.”

Dirk considered for a moment. “A clever man might have thrown a hook over the rim of the porthole and pulled himself up and entered that way.”

“But if he came out of the water he must have left wet spots on the locker cushions.”

Dirk lowered his head, studying. “The yacht was left alone for an hour or more last night,” he said, slowly. “Somebody might have boarded her then, and concealed himself in Prosser’s cabin until he was asleep.”

“That’s more likely,” said Tony. “But how could anybody from the shore have got hold of a duplicate key to the cabin?”

“He could have escaped through a porthole.”

“In that case why should he have taken the key out of the door?”

“I don’t know,” said Dirk. “We’ve got to dig a lot deeper into this.”

“If we could only establish a motive!” said Tony.

“The commonest motive is murder for profit,” said Dirk. “It may be that somebody induced Prosser to bring a large sum of money aboard the yacht. We must look into that.”

A painstaking search of the cabin advanced them not a step farther. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed. There were no visible fingerprints on the brass rim of the portholes. Prosser, it seemed, had brought nothing aboard with him but a few clothes, an outfit of fishing-tackle, and a quantity of liquor for his private use.

The liquor was locked in one of the wardrobes. They found the key in the pocket of the pants he had taken off the night before. Along with the bottles was a new trunk standing on end. It was empty. The other wardrobe, which was unlocked, contained only his clothes. The locked safe kept its own secrets.

There was not a scrap of writing to throw any light on Prosser's life or on his affairs except a pocket checkbook. The stubs revealed that he had drawn large sums of late, apparently for the purpose of chartering and outfitting the yacht. There was still a balance of several hundreds shown on the stubs.

"He may have had other accounts," Dirk pointed out, "or he may have drawn out sums without entering them."

Dirk called the Professor into the cabin. The little man, gray-faced and tremulous, blinked at the sprawling figure on the bed in fascinated horror. He appeared to be unable to drag his eyes away from the sight. Dirk dealt with him guardedly.

"Professor, we have reason to believe that Mr. Prosser has met with foul play."

"Oh my God! no!" he cried, starting. "How could that be? There is no wound on him. Whom do you suspect?"

"Nobody as yet. He was struck over the head. The blow is not sufficient to have caused death. I was hoping that with your scientific knowledge you might be able to help us establish what killed him."

The Professor shrank back. "Not my line at all!" he gasped. "I know nothing of physiology or medicine!"

"Well, do you know anything about Mr. Prosser that might throw light on this situation?"

"Nothing at all, Captain. I cannot believe that anybody would want to kill Mr. Prosser. Such a kindly, easy-going man! I've only known him a few weeks."

"What were the circumstances of your meeting?"

"It was in a hotel in Philadelphia, the Auvergne, to be exact, in the bar."

"Who introduced you to each other?"

"Nobody. I was there with my friends, he with his. We got into talk as men do in front of a bar. He told me about chartering this yacht to cruise in Chesapeake Bay, and I spoke of the islands that I was interested in. One thing led to another and he finally asked me if I'd like to come along. I jumped at the chance."

"What did he tell you about his own object in making this cruise?"

"He said his object was to fish and to get back his health."

"Have you observed anything suspicious since we left Baltimore yesterday morning?"

“Absolutely not, Captain. Everybody on board was devoted to Mr. Prosser.”

“Please describe your movements after you came aboard last night.”

“Well, as you know, I stopped to chat with you on deck. I then went to my cabin, and I never left it until I heard all the running about awhile ago.”

“You heard nothing during the night?”

“Not a sound, Captain. I am at the other end of the ship.”

“Have you any suggestions to make, Professor?”

He shook his head helplessly. “I’m not much good in a case of this sort, Captain. Engaged in my studies as I am, the criminal side of life passes me by. I never suspect evil in anybody.”

“I shall have to search you,” said Dirk, sternly.

His mouth dropped open. “Good God! Captain, you don’t think that I . . . ! Oh, this is terrible! Why, in a way of speaking, Mr. Prosser was my benefactor. Why should I . . . ?”

“I’m not charging you with anything,” said Dirk. “Under the circumstances you must see that I can’t leave any stone unturned.”

The Professor got a grip on himself. “Surely, surely,” he agreed, nodding and blinking. “I was just startled. Of course you must search me. I have nothing to hide.” He held up his hands.

They found nothing upon him but the usual contents of a man’s pockets, including a little red notebook with some entries in a crabbed hand relating to anthropology. They went forward to his cabin, where he laid everything open to inspection with entire willingness. A couple of changes of clothing, some scientific books and papers, that was all. When Dirk had finished the Professor wailed, squeezing his hands together in distress:

“What are we going to do, Captain? What are we to do?”

“Well, like yourself,” said Dirk, grimly, “I feel this situation is out of my line. The best thing to do is to steam to the nearest port and call the police in.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said the Professor, “but shouldn’t we investigate a little farther first? If we sail away the murderer may escape.”

“Then you think it was somebody on this island?” asked Dirk, sharply.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” he answered, quickly. “I know nothing!”

Dirk then took Claggett Ashcomb into Prosser’s cabin. Ashcomb was in much worse shape than the Professor. He kept glancing over his shoulder as if he dreaded an attack from behind. His puffy face was mottled, his hands

shook, he could scarcely articulate. As Dirk started questioning him, he said, shakily:

“Come out into the saloon, Captain, or into my cabin. I . . . I scarcely know what I’m saying, with him lying there.”

Dirk curtly declined to adjourn the inquiry. At the same time he had to admit to himself that Ashcomb’s agitation was natural enough under the circumstances. He kept murmuring in an agonized voice: “I never foresaw this! I never foresaw this!” and it had somehow an honest ring.

Dirk led him over the same ground that he had taken the Professor without bringing out anything to the point. Ashcomb had known Prosser for a much longer time—for several years, in fact. He described the course of their relations; it was evident that Ashcomb had been the hanger-on, the sponge throughout.

“When did Mr. Prosser first begin to talk about taking this cruise?” asked Dirk.

“When he was in the hospital he read an ad in the paper offering this yacht for charter at a very low figure. She’s old, you see, and not in first-rate condition.”

“Did you ever suspect that he had another reason for taking this voyage beside the one he gave?”

“What reason could he have had?” asked Ashcomb, staring.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

“It was the ad in the paper that put it into his head. He never thought of taking a voyage until he saw that.”

“At first he intended to take his daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Why did he change his mind?”

“I couldn’t tell you, Captain. I was for it. I ascribed it to the caprice of a sick man.”

“Did the Professor have anything to do with changing his mind?”

“No. Harry had decided not to take the girl before he met the Professor.”

“What do you know about the Professor?”

“Nothing. Harry met him somewhere and invited him to come along, without consulting me.”

“Now, let’s come down to last night,” said Dirk. “When you came aboard, Prosser said he wanted to talk to you. What was it about?”

Ashcomb hesitated. "I hardly like to answer that. It was a personal matter."

"You'll have to answer it sooner or later," said Dirk. "You must know that a reluctance to answer only arouses suspicion."

"Oh, it isn't that," said Ashcomb. "I wanted to spare your feelings."

"My feelings?" said Dirk, astonished.

"Harry was angry because I had allowed Mona to return to the yacht alone with you. 'I won't have her getting mixed up with a mere yacht skipper,' he said. 'What future is there for such a fellow?'"

"Hm!" said Dirk, dryly. "And you took my part?"

"No, I didn't," said Ashcomb, sourly. "Why should I?"

"Then what were you quarreling about?"

"That was something else. I told him he was drinking too much. It always put him in a rage. In the end he ordered me out of his cabin."

Dirk had a hunch that Ashcomb was lying now. "And then what?" he asked, quietly.

"And then what?" retorted Ashcomb, defiantly. "Then nothing! I went to bed and stayed there until I heard Mona cry out this morning."

"You're sure you didn't see him again?"

"Are you trying to make out that *I* killed him?" cried Ashcomb.

"You were the last to see him alive!"

"The best friend that I had in the world! In Heaven's name what would I have to gain by his death?"

"Keep cool," said Dirk. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. If you didn't do it you have nothing to fear."

"It's bad enough to lose your friend without being accused of his murder!"

"Nobody has accused you."

"How have you figured out that I did it?"

"I don't know. The autopsy will reveal that."

"Autopsy?" said Ashcomb startled.

"We'll have to carry him to Criston."

Ashcomb became quiet and lowered his eyes. "I suppose you're right," he said, in a crafty voice. "But the solution of the mystery may lie here. We ought to investigate a little farther before we leave. I'll help you all I can."

Dirk was struck by the similarity of this answer to the Professor's. The two men had never agreed on anything before. Strange that Ashcomb, terrified as he was, didn't want to leave the island. "Much obliged for the offer," said Dirk, dryly.

Ashcomb put up a strenuous protest when they offered to search him. "You have no right!" he cried.

"What do you mean, no right," said Dirk, sternly. "I'm the Captain of this vessel, and my word is law on board her."

After all, there was nothing incriminating on him. Proceeding to his cabin, Dirk found an automatic under the pillow, which he took possession of, though Ashcomb pleaded hard for it.

"After a thing like this we all ought to go armed," he said.

"Until this murder is solved I will keep all weapons under my control," said Dirk.

Ashcomb was almost ready to fight to prevent them from searching the desk in his cabin. Tony coolly held him aside while Dirk went through the drawers. The paper that Ashcomb was most anxious to conceal turned out to be his will, a brief document leaving all he possessed to "my dear friend, Harry Prosser."

"What's the matter with my seeing this?" said Dirk.

"It's a private matter," muttered Ashcomb. "One doesn't want it gossiped about."

"Rather an empty gesture, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Prosser told me that you had lost all your money."

"An exaggeration," said Ashcomb, stiffly. "I haven't lost all."

Dirk made an effort to win the man's good will. "Ashcomb," he said, in friendly fashion, "let's be open with one another. I can't help but feel that you haven't told me everything you know. Good God! man, we're in a serious situation. You and I must pull together."

"That's what I want, too, Captain," said Ashcomb, eagerly. "The only reason you suspect me is because I'm so upset I don't know what I'm saying. Oh God! this is frightful! The best friend I had in the world! You'll soon find out that I'm on the square, Captain. You'll see it!"

The words were fair enough, but somehow they had a false ring. Far from satisfied, Dirk let him go for the moment, and took the deckhand, Kirkall, into Prosser's room.

Kirkall was not at all put about by the presence of death. There was something indecent in the way he gaped at the body on the bed. The lines around his ugly mouth deepened as if he enjoyed the excitement. This man had no nerves.

Dirk put a number of the same questions to him without eliciting anything new. Finally he asked:

“How did you get your job on this vessel?”

“Through a shipping agency in Philly. Barnett and Miles is the name.”

“Who hired you?”

“Him there,” said Kirkall with a callous jerk of his head towards the bed.

“Were you acquainted with anybody now on the yacht before you came aboard?”

“Only Mike. Him and me has shipped together before.”

“Mr. Ashcomb?”

“Never seen him before.”

“The Professor?”

“Don’t know nothing about him.”

“McElderry?”

A shake of the head.

Dirk tried a shot in the dark. “Why did you want to get rid of Wesley?” he asked, carelessly.

“I don’t get you, Captain,” said Kirkall, staring.

“You frightened him off with your stories about the Diseree Islanders having the evil eye and so on.”

Kirkall grinned wickedly. “Jeese! I never thought he’d believe that stuff, Captain.”

“Do you believe it?”

“Nah, Captain! But it makes a good story to tell.”

“Who told it to you?”

“I couldn’t tell you where I first heard it. It’s common talk among the Bay men. . . . Do you think maybe there’s something in it, Captain?” he asked, slyly.

“I do not. And I recommend that you find other stories to tell your mates.”

“Yes, sir,” said Kirkall, humbly.

Dirk took a new line. "What happened on board the yacht after we went ashore last night?"

"Mr. Prosser he was taken with a sudden notion to try night fishing," said Kirkall.

"Fishing? What did he do for bait?"

"He got a bit of salt pork out of the galley. With that he could catch a small fish he said, and cut him up for bait."

"Where did you go?"

"We dropped anchor in eighteen foot of water about a mile offshore."

"A mile?" said Dirk. "It was a still night. Didn't you hear me hailing from the beach?"

"No, sir. We didn't hear nothing at all."

Dirk was sure this was a lie, but he let it pass for the time being. "That's all now," he said to Kirkall.

The deckhand lingered. "Captain, it was a foolish thing to leave the yacht alone last night," he volunteered. "I told Mr. Prosser that, but he only shut me up. It comes to me that somebody may have sneaked aboard her and hid away. It ought to be looked into before we steam away from here."

"I have it in mind," said Dirk, dryly. "You can go forward."

Later Dirk made it his business to look into the motor-launch where it hung from its davits on deck. There were, for a fact, three hand lines complete with hooks and sinkers lying on the bow thwart; but they had never been unwound, and the hooks were clean.

Mike's story closely followed that of Kirkall's—too closely, if anything. Mike was as slow of tongue as Kirkall was glib. He might have been coached during the night.

From McElderry Dirk learned nothing. The engineer was sparing of words, but it was clear from his expression that he had been driven half out of his wits by superstitious terror. He was convinced that Prosser had come to his death as a result of the evil eye, and nothing could shake him.

Dirk locked the door on the dead man, and consulted with Tony in the saloon. Dirk said:

"I believe that Ashcomb and Kirkall were lying in certain respects. Maybe the Professor lied, too. So far there is nothing to prove that they are working together. It was curious though, that each one of them hinted that an islander may have done it. Maybe this is a trick to detain us here for a while longer."

“But that was one of your theories,” Tony pointed out. “There may be something in it.”

“Sure. There may be. It struck me yesterday, while Prosser and Lipp Bewley were introducing themselves to each other, that it sounded like something rehearsed beforehand. I believe they had met before. It is possible that Prosser was decoyed to the island by Lipp Bewley.”

Dirk paced the little room, studying. “Lipp Bewley greeted us when we got to the settlement last night,” he said, presently, “but I didn’t see him when I left. Did you have any talk with him afterwards?”

“Why, no, since you ask me,” said Tony, staring. “He wasn’t there any more. He must have sneaked away somewhere.”

“Good!” said Dirk, setting his jaw. “Then I’ll take the time to ask him a few questions before we hoist anchor again.”

Going above, they found the rest of the men gathered on the after deck, talking over the situation in whispers. Dirk said to them:

“Men, I’m going ashore to question this fellow, Lipp Bewley. Who will come with me?”

Only one voice answered him—Tony’s. “I’ll go, Captain.”

“Good man.” Dirk looked around from one to another. “How about you, Mr. Ashcomb?”

“No, Captain, no!” Ashcomb burst out, nervously. There was no doubt but that his fears were real. A fine sweat broke out on his face. “There are from twenty to thirty men there. To go among them with three or four would be suicidal!”

“So far they have shown no ill-will against us,” said Dirk. “You, Kirkall? . . . Mike?”

He got the same sort of answer from each, and it made him sore. “What’s the matter with you men? You tell me I ought to investigate the island situation before we leave here, and then you refuse to back me up. Do you expect just to sit here and do nothing?”

“Send a message to Lipp Bewley to come aboard by the old man on the shore,” suggested Ashcomb. “Don’t tell him what you want him for.”

“That’s foolish,” said Dirk. “If Lipp had a hand in it, he’s not going to stick his head into a noose by coming aboard!”

The Professor spoke up in shrill indignation. “You men ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Big fellows like you! I’ll go with you, Captain.”

“The offer does you credit, Professor,” said Dirk. “But you’re not exactly a fighting-man.”

“I’ll stand by you, Captain. I’m not afraid.”

Dirk shook his head. “If there should be trouble, I couldn’t guarantee your safety, Professor. I’ll leave you in charge of the yacht.”

★ VIII ★

DIRK and Tony set off in the motor-launch with Mike to run the engine. The latter had reluctantly volunteered upon being assured that he would not be required to go ashore. Dirk had not seen Mona again. It made his heart ache to think of her lying in her cabin alone, but he was afraid she'd cling to him and weaken his resolution.

They headed straight for the shore, since Dirk desired first to try to win Cap'n Jim-of-Jim over to his side. The *Alethea* was now lying about three furlongs off the beach. Tony and Mike waited in the launch while Dirk went up to the house.

Passing around outside the yard, he found Cap'n Jim-of-Jim Bewley hoeing his garden behind. At sight of him the old man said:

"What for you steam out there and anchor again? There's more water near shore. Her stern will be high and dry at low tide."

"We'll be away before that," said Dirk.

"Going to leave us so soon?"

Dirk leaned his elbows on the pickets. "Captain," he said, quietly, "there was murder done aboard the yacht last night."

The old man had an admirable command of his features. Not a muscle changed. "So?" he said, resting on his hoe. "Who got it?"

"The owner."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know. I want to ask Lipp Bewley a question or two."

Cap'n Jim-of-Jim made no comment. Impossible to tell what was going through his head.

“We have come ashore to talk to him,” Dirk went on. “Will you come with us?”

Cap’n Jim-of-Jim betrayed a mild surprise. “What for you want me to come?”

“You have influence over these people.”

He grinned sardonically. “They ain’t over-fond of me, Captain.”

“Why?”

“Because I tell them the truth when they don’t want to hear it.”

“They respect you,” said Dirk. “Men always respect a truth-teller. And you are one of them. They will listen to you quicker than to a stranger. I want you to tell them the law holds that anyone who obstructs justice is guilty also. . . . These people want to be let alone; you want to be let alone. It wouldn’t be so good for you if the state sent over their police and detectives from the mainland to ferret into this murder.”

The old man leaned on his hoe, smoking and looking across the island.

“Well, will you come?” said Dirk.

He took so long to answer that Dirk’s patience snapped. “Damn it, can’t you say something, man?”

“No, I won’t come,” said the old man.

“Why not?”

“I don’t aim to sail in strange waters without e’er a chart. I want to know where the shoals are. . . . You say Lipp Bewley killed this man. Did anybody *see* him do it?”

“I didn’t say he did it. There are certain suspicious circumstances, that’s all. If he can answer my questions satisfactorily, all right. If not, wouldn’t it be better to carry him over to the mainland to have it investigated, than to bring the officers swarming over here? He’ll get a fair trial.”

“Maybe,” said Cap’n Jim-of-Jim. He resumed his chopping of the weeds around his potato plants.

“Listen,” said Dirk. “You’re the most intelligent man on the island. It’s up to you to see that justice is done.”

The old man paused to press the tobacco into his pipe. “My intelligence,” he said, dryly, “such as it is, bids me to keep out of trouble.”

“What do they think of Lipp Bewley here on the island?” Dirk asked, craftily.

“Not much,” said Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, sardonically chopping. “A no-account man. Piddles around in his old skiff catching crabs and oysters. Or

works for the men who have motor-boats. If he gets any money he cadges a ride over to the mainland and we don't see him again until the seat of his pants is out."

Leaves the island occasionally! Dirk put away the fact for future reference.

"He's picked up a little learning," added the old man. "Can read and write some. But does him no good."

"When did he last leave the island?" asked Dirk.

Cap'n Jim-of-Jim turned wary. "Ain't going to say no more," he said, "until I find out what's what."

There he stuck. Dirk had to return to the boat unsatisfied. Still, he couldn't help liking the downright old fellow.

The motor-launch headed south along the shore. The panorama that unfolded on their left was very pretty, and Dirk wondered as so many have done before him, why men had to mess up the good earth. Beyond the line of old locust trees lay the meadows. The middle of the island was swampy, and off to the north behind them showed the open water of a landlocked pool. Higher ground, covered with pine trees, closed in the background to the west.

The settlement came suddenly into view when they rounded the dunes. There was not a living soul to be seen, though it was clear the men were not away fishing or crabbing, because the usual number of boats lay anchored in the harbor.

"We are expected," said Dirk, grimly.

"Reckon they had a lookout posted on the dunes," added Tony.

Tony was pale and tight-lipped—steady as steel. Mike, on the other hand, big as he was, was clearly in a state of funk. His lips worked upon one another: his little eyes shifted from side to side.

In order to get into the harbor it was necessary to make a considerable détour around a shallow point. As they turned in, the houses faced them in a rough crescent. Sunken, leaning, patched with all manner of odds and ends, it was remarkable that they hung together at all. None of the crooked windows had its full complement of glass. When a pane went out the hole was stopped with cardboard or stuffed with rags. Rusty ends of stove pipes stuck out of the roofs. Several of the houses leaned together for mutual support. All the doors were closed.

Yet the site was well chosen for a community of fishermen. The dunes sheltered them from the violent northwest squalls of the summer and the

northeast gales of the winter. Their boats were always under their eyes. Nothing grew around the houses but clumps of coarse salt grass; the corn and potato patches were beyond the dunes.

Dirk issued brief instructions to Tony before they landed. "Keep your gun out of sight. Do your damndest to avoid trouble, but don't yield an inch. And let me do the talking."

They landed on the rickety little pier. Mike was ordered to draw out for fifty yards or so and drop anchor.

Dirk went up to the door of the first house and knocked. There was no answer, yet he had the feeling that there were people inside. After knocking several times he tried the door, and it opened. The room was full of silent people.

"Sorry to intrude," said Dirk, dryly, "but nobody answered my knock."

"We never knocks," said a voice. "When we wants in, we goes in."

As Dirk's eyes became adjusted to the gloom, he saw a man sitting in a home-made chair beside the stove with his back to the door. A shotgun rested against the wall suggestively within reach of his hand. Beyond him sat a hard-bitten woman with a baby on her knees. In the back of the room there was an old man and a scowling young one, besides a whole raft of children herded on a bed against the wall. None of the men looked at Dirk, but the woman was glaring at him. She seemed to be ready to burst with venom, and he thought uneasily, What could I do with a woman who began to screech and claw?

He addressed himself to the back of the man by the stove. "Where's Lipp Bewley?"

"Don't know," he answered, without looking around.

"When did you see him last?"

"Yester even.

"Where did he go this morning?"

"Ain't seen him."

The man would not turn around. Dirk choked down his rising anger. Their object, of course, was to make him lose his temper. Then they'd have him dead to rights. He tried another line.

"What's your name?"

"Joe Siever."

"Who's your leader in this village?"

"We got no leader. We're all equal here."

“Can’t you face a man when you talk to him?” asked Dirk sternly.

Blank silence.

Dirk could stand no more of this. He strode out. Tony had remained standing outside the door, and Dirk relieved his mind to him. “Damned savages! What can you do with the like of them? There’s nothing you can get hold of.” He lit a cigarette and drew deeply at it until he was able to grin again.

“Well, what can you expect of folks who have never had a parson, a school-teacher, a doctor, or a post-office?” he said.

Throwing away the cigarette, he knocked at the door of the next house and went in. Coming out of the sunshine, another dark interior. Like all the houses, it comprised only one room. Here there was a whole line of youngish men squatting on their heels along the wall and looking down their noses like wooden images; a group of frightened women and children on the beds.

“I’m looking for Lipp Bewley,” said Dirk. “Where is he?”

Absolute silence.

Dirk began to get hot again, but carefully controlled his voice. “Is this the way to receive a man who comes to you fairly and openly?”

Silence.

He addressed the first man in the row. “I have nothing against you people. I only came to this island in the line of my job. I ask you as one man of another, What have you got against me?”

The man never lifted his eyes or changed a muscle.

Dirk strode out with a shrug. At any rate, Lipp was not in that room—unless he was hidden under a bed.

So it went from house to house. In each the people were waiting for him in silence. They answered his questions in monosyllables, or not at all. There was something so inhuman in their immobility that Dirk could not help but be shaken by it, though he kept telling himself it was all staged. They were only playing with him. Most of the houses had back doors, and he had it in mind that as he passed along the front, Lipp Bewley might be spirited from house to house in the rear.

Occasionally he was asked what he wanted of Lipp Bewley. The first time the question was put he hesitated. Should he tell them what had happened? Deciding against it, he said: “The owner of the yacht has a complaint against him. If he can answer it there’ll be no trouble.”

He came out of the last house cursing. "By God! it's too much to expect a man to keep his temper with such brutes! If we were only twelve instead of two I would knock out some sign of feeling from their stony faces!"

He tried changing his tactics. These were mindless people. As with backward children, it was a mistake to court them; it only set them up in their stubbornness. Very well, he would ignore them and see if he could bring them to him.

He borrowed Tony's fountain pen, and tore off the blank page of an old letter. The two of them sat down on an up-turned skiff in front of the houses, and Dirk started to write, while Tony, leaning forward, made believe to be watching every stroke of his pen. They took care never to look towards the houses.

A long time seemed to pass. They heard doors open here and there. Dirk, glancing through his lashes, saw men crowding in the doorways and faces pressed against the window panes. Finally the men began to edge forward, still putting on a great air of unconcern. Dirk grinned inwardly. It was working!

The women and children did not venture out-of-doors. The men lined up in a semicircle a little way off. Dirk never looked up. While his hand guided the pen his eyes were watching their feet. Finally one growled—it was the surly brute who had turned his back in the first house:

"What you writing?"

Dirk raised his eyes in seeming surprise. It was an ugly circle of faces which fronted him, furtive, sullen, savage. Their extraordinary immobility suggested the red Indian. Their eyes were fixed on his writing, not on him.

"I'm writing to the sheriff on the mainland," said Dirk, coolly.

"What for?"

"Well, you won't let me see Lipp Bewley, and I'm telling the sheriff he'll have to come over here with a posse to question him."

None spoke, but a certain look of uneasiness appeared in their faces. Dirk made haste to follow up his advantage.

"If you let me talk to Lipp nobody will trouble you. But God help you if the sheriff comes over here with his detectives. It won't stop with Lipp then; they'll put you under all their laws. Your children will be taken away to school and you'll all be examined by doctors."

The dark-skinned men exchanged looks and, retiring a little way, put their heads together. Dirk made believe to go on with his writing.

Finally the man who had first spoken turned his wooden face, saying: "Lipp Bewley is nothing to us. If you want him, find him. We will neither help nor hinder you."

"Fair enough," said Dirk, letting them see him put the written paper in his breast pocket. "I will search your houses. Your women may be hiding him."

The islanders returned indoors. Dirk and Tony started with the first house on the right-hand side. Dirk said:

"Tony, you watch the back door, as I go in the front. We'll move on from house to house together."

Searching the houses was not a lengthy business, since privacy was unknown to these people. They had neither garrets nor cellars. Every corner of the single room was open to the eye when you entered, except for an occasional chest and the space under the beds. The men submitted to the search without so much as a glance at Dirk; the women were less amenable. They scowled at the floor and muttered, and occasionally one would break out angrily to her husband. He was no man to allow a stranger to poke around his house like this.

An unlucky accident started the trouble. In a shanty about halfway down the line, Dirk was stooping to look under the bed, when a baby on the bed, half paralyzed with fear of the stranger, rolled off and fell to the floor at Dirk's feet. He instinctively picked it up and put it back in its place, and the child, mad with terror, let out a scream of anguish.

Instantly its mother, screaming in unison, seized the object nearest to her hand and flung it at Dirk's head. A stream of missiles followed; skillets, pots, sticks of firewood. Dirk sidestepped, and she ran forward, snatched up her child, and made out of the front door, screaming continuously. Other screams answered her; doors slammed; running feet approached. Dirk's heart sank. How could a man deal with a parcel of furious women? He ran for the back door, shouting a warning to Tony. The man of the house sat in his chair, unmoved.

Tony flung the door open and Dirk seized him. "Quick! to the boat!" he cried. They ran across the room and out the front door. Women were converging on the shanty from every direction, armed with whatever they could snatch up. Dirk thrust them aside, yelling to Tony to stick close. The blows fell thick and fast. Out in the harbor Mike was staring at them stupidly, too frightened even to pull up anchor.

The women concentrated their attack on the smaller man, and Dirk, hearing his footsteps falter, looked back and saw they had beaten the kid to

his knees. Dirk ran to his assistance. One could not punch women. He shouldered them out of the way, grimly taking their blows. "Back inside the house!" he yelled to Tony.

He held them off until Tony got inside the door. Giving ground a foot at a time, Dirk backed over the sill, and contrived to slam the door in their faces, and to hold it while Tony dropped the wooden bar in place. They leaned against it, panting. The man had left the house. They heard the women pouring around the house, and running across the room, slammed the back door and barred it. The women returned to the front.

"Well, here we are," said Dirk, with a hard grin.

They went to the grimy little window in front. The women were running around in the sand, looking for something with which to smash in the door. In the background stood the men, shoulders hunched, hands in pockets, looking on with faces as walled and expressionless as animals. Out in the harbor Mike was now frantically pulling up his anchor.

"He's going to leave us to our fate," growled Dirk.

The women snatched up a mast that lay across two trestles ready for scraping, and carrying it in the manner of a battering-ram came charging towards the door of the shanty. Dirk and Tony with a common impulse went out the back door. As they slammed it behind them, the front door went in with a crash.

There was no one back of the houses at the moment. They turned to the left. The back of the next house was lower than the others, something less than eight feet. Dirk and Tony, exchanging a glance, sprang for the edge of the roof and drew themselves up. There was only a slight pitch to the roof and when they had snaked their bodies across the crackling tin, they were completely hidden from below. The whole crazy structure quaked under their weight. They heard the women running around below, yelling to each other as they searched for them.

Suddenly fresh outcries were heard from the beach; yells, imprecations, cries of encouragement. Judging from the sounds everybody was running in that direction now. Dirk and Tony edged forward on the roof until they could peer over the edge.

It was the starting of Mike's engine that had attracted the attention of the crowd below. The sight of the terrified man attempting to escape was too much for the impassiveness of the male islanders. Their hunting instinct was aroused. Two of them rushing into the water had climbed into a canoe, cranked the engine, and started after him. Mike rounded the shallow point to

the east of the harbor, with the graceful canoe a couple of hundred yards behind. Dirk saw at a glance that the canoe had better speed.

“They’ll get our boat now,” he muttered bitterly.

From the look of it, every man, woman, and child in the settlement was lined up on the beach to watch the race. Perhaps they thought that Dirk and Tony were hidden in the bottom of the yacht’s boat. At any rate, the way was clear at the rear.

“Here’s our chance to beat it,” muttered Dirk. “Jump down at the back, and head for the dunes.”

They rose to their feet to make a dash for it. The strain was too great on the rickety roof. It sank under them, parted with a splintering of wood and a rending of tin, and dropped them through in a cloud of gritty dust.

As he attempted to regain his feet, half-dazed, Dirk was aware that there were two men in the room. One leaped on his back and bore him down again. Hands passed rapidly over his body. His gun was taken from him, and the man on his back arose. Dirk scrambled to his feet and, turning, found himself looking into the grinning face of Lipp Bewley.

Dirk glanced around him. The gaping hole in the roof let plenty of light into the shanty. Near by lay Tony, white and spent, his cheek pressed against the dirty floor. A sharp anxiety seized on Dirk; but before he could reach the lad’s side, Tony sat up, blinking. His first glance was to make sure that Dirk was safe.

The man with Lipp Bewley had relieved Tony of his gun. This was another ragged, unkempt waterman, younger than Lipp, but even uglier. He had the dull eye and the lifted lip of the mentally deficient. Apparently he had had no acquaintance with scissors, razor, or comb for months past. His faded pants were rolled to the knee; his feet bare.

“This my brother, Wye Bewley,” said Lipp, revealing broken and blackened teeth in his grin. “You must excuse us for treating you so rough. We was afraid you might shoot before you found out we was your friends, so we took your guns. You can have ’em back when you’re satisfied that we mean you well.”

Dirk was nonplused for the moment. This was hardly what he had expected to hear from Lipp Bewley.

“After what’s happened it would be only natural for you to suspicion us,” Lipp went on. “But it wasn’t us set the women after you. They broke loose of theirselves.”

“If you’re a square man,” demanded Dirk, with some heat, “why all this effort to keep out of my way? Why didn’t you come forward right away

when I asked for you?”

“I only wanted to find out what you was after,” said Lipp. “I heard you was going to sick the sheriff on me. Any man would want to find out where he stood before giving himself up.”

“And now you think you have us dead to rights,” said Dirk, with a bitter glance at the guns.

“No! No!” protested Lipp, grinning. “Me and Wye don’t mean you no harm. We are your friends.”

“Then give us back our guns.”

“Not while you’re mad at us,” said Lipp, slyly.

★ IX ★

LIPP went to the front window of the shack and peered out. “There’s no telling when they may bust in on us,” he said. “We got to get you out of here.”

“Where are you aiming to take us?” demanded Dirk.

“Back to the yacht,” said Lipp, instantly. “That will prove we’re on the square, won’t it? And I’ll come aboard if you want me. I’ll put myself right in your hands, Captain.”

Dirk said nothing. This sort of thing was difficult to deal with when they were in the man’s power. There was a false, oily quality in his voice that would have put a young child on its guard.

Lipp said: “My skiff is tied up to the little wharf yonder and the oars are in her. Are you willing to make a run for it, Captain? Maybe you’ll get beat up a little, but not serious injured. Me and Wye will keep them off as best we can.”

Dirk hesitated before answering. He suspected a trick, but on the other hand their position in the shanty was quite untenable.

“You don’t trust me,” said Lipp, reproachfully.

“Why should I?” Dirk coolly retorted. “Look, if you are on the square, unload our guns and hand them back to us. If you keep the shells neither side has any advantage.”

“That’s all right with me,” said Lipp, grinning. “You got a good head on you, Captain.”

The guns were duly unloaded and passed over.

“Now,” said Dirk, “let your brother go first and get in the skiff. Let him untie it and run out the oars. Then we can make a dash for it.”

“Right, Captain!”

The hairy one, though his wits were limited, was apt in obeying commands. He kept his dull gaze fixed on Lipp’s face like a dog. At a word he set off out of the door, and ran down across the beach. The yelling crowd at the water’s edge paid little attention to him.

But when Dirk and Tony issued out of the shanty pandemonium broke loose. The motor-boat chase was instantly forgotten. The women came running, picking up all sorts of missiles. They had the faces of she-devils. Lipp attempted to fend them off and was pretty roughly used. Dirk and Tony put their heads down and ran at full speed. They were struck repeatedly, but their momentum carried them through the crowd and out on the rickety pier. They jumped in the skiff. Lipp was close behind.

A shower of hard objects fell all around them. Some of the women ran into the water and seized the skiff. Wye Bewley whacked their fingers with an oar and they let go with screams of pain. Lipp pushed away from the pier and, standing in the skiff, attempted to make himself heard above the yelling.

“You fools! These men haven’t done nothing to you! If you hurt them the police will come after you from the mainland. Let them go aboard their ship and steam to hell away from here!”

He was howled down from the shore. However, Wye Bewley had got his oars in play now, and pulled them out of range of the stones. The women could be seen urging their husbands to get their boats, but the men resisted. Bruised, bloody, with their caps gone and their jackets half torn off their backs, Dirk and Tony could grin at each other again.

“You’re a sight!” said Dirk.

“You’re another, Captain!”

From the bow of the skiff Lipp cried, exultingly: “Well, I stood by you, didn’t I? I got you off! Now will you believe that I’m on the square?”

“Sure!” said Dirk, good-humoredly. But he trusted the man no farther than before. It happened to suit Lipp’s purpose to help us this time, he thought, but if ever there was a liar and a sneak in the world, this is he!

The women had started running around the beach, hoping to cut them off at the point. But the skiff gave it a wide berth, and the stones fell short. The furies were hoarse and breathless with yelling now. There was no attempt to pursue the skiff up the shore. As soon as it passed around the dunes the noise astern died down.

“Damned dish-washers!” said Lipp. “A parcel of spitting she-cats, at the sight of a dog, that’s what they are! They got no sense. It’ll all be forgotten

in half an hour.”

“They’re your people, aren’t they?” said Dirk, dryly.

“I was born there, if that’s what you mean, but I left early. I’m used to mainland ways and educated people.”

Now they could see what had happened to the motor-launch. Finding himself hard-pressed, Mike had run her on a shoal near the beach and had taken to the water. They could see him running up the shore. Letting him go, the two islanders had jumped out of their boat into shallow water and were smashing in the sides of the launch with axes. Lipp cursed them disgustedly.

“I never see such a pack of senseless fools!”

Less than half a mile ahead the yacht lay at anchor with a white feather floating from her exhaust pipe. McElderry was keeping steam up. It was good to see it. The sooner we get away from here the better, Dirk told himself. Presently he was able to make out five tiny figures on the deck, one of them skirted. Realizing that they would be terrified by what had happened to the motor-launch, he stood up in the skiff and waved his arms reassuringly.

On the middle thwart of the skiff, the hairy one applied his arms assiduously. Nature had attempted to recompense him for his lack of sense by giving him tireless strength. Dirk had not yet heard him open his mouth. Dirk and Tony sat side by side in the stern, Lipp in the bow. An inch or so of water sloshed around in the bottom of the old boat with floating crab claws, fish scales, and bits of seaweed.

When they were within a few hundred yards of the yacht, Lipp told his brother to rest on his oars for a while. “Me and the Captain ought to have a little talk before we go aboard,” he said.

While they drifted Dirk and Tony washed their faces and made themselves as presentable as possible.

“What was you wanting of me, Captain?”

“Just to ask you a few questions,” said Dirk.

“Well, here I am ready to give answers.”

“Where were you last night?”

“Why you saw me, Captain.”

“I saw you when we came to the settlement, but then you went away. Nobody saw you after that. Where did you go?”

“Is that all?” said Lipp, laughing heartily. “I went to bed, that’s where I went. That kind of sing-song and dance is no treat to me, Captain. Senseless

old Injun stuff, I call it. Soon as I seen your party was all right, I went home.”

“How long did you stay home?”

“Right through till morning,” said Lipp, truculently, “and I can prove it. I lodge in my cousin Nick Bewley’s house. I was lying there in my bed when Nick and his folks came in from the dance. And when Nick got up at three o’clock to fish his net I was still there and when he come back I was there.”

“So!” said Dirk.

“Ten people can swear to it!” said Lipp, heatedly.

Dirk thought, He’s presenting his alibi before he’s been asked for it.

“What for you ask me these questions, Captain?” said Lipp. “What you getting at?”

Dirk did not answer him. “What brought Harry Prosser to this island?” he asked, sharply.

Lipp was not to be caught napping. “I don’t get you,” he said, staring. “How the hell should I know?”

“You saw him in Philadelphia.”

“Philadelphia? Me? I never was in Philadelphia, Captain.”

“You left the island recently.”

“Sure. But I never got no further than Criston. It would cost a man nigh ten dollars to go to Philadelphia and back on the cars. Where would I get ten dollars?”

“Prosser had information about this island before he came here. He said that an islander had told him in Philadelphia where to anchor.”

“Well, there’s other men left this island beside me.”

“Name them.”

“There was John Peters and Sam Lewis and others a long time back.”

Dirk said, keenly watching Lipp’s face, “Harry Prosser was killed in his bed last night.”

Nothing could have appeared more natural than Lipp’s start. “Killed! No! My God! Captain, how?”

Dirk gazed at him steadily without answering.

“And you think maybe it was me done it?” cried Lipp. “The man was nothing to me, Captain. A kindly man, he brought presents to the islanders. He promised to give me a ten-dollar note when he went away if I would square him with the people and keep them quiet. In God’s name, why would I want to kill him?”

Dirk said nothing. It seemed to him that there was something theatrical in all this parade of innocence.

“What time did it happen?” demanded Lipp.

“Sometime after eleven thirty when they all came aboard.”

Lipp wiped his face with his sleeve as if in relief. “Well, that lets me out,” he said. “When Nick Bewley come home from the dance there was I asleep in my bed. Him and all his family can swear to it. Nick locked the door. I couldn’t have got out or come in again without waking him.”

Dirk kept silent.

Lipp became uneasy under it. “What you going to do, Captain?” he asked.

“Take the body to Criston and put the matter in the hands of the police.”

“Sure, that’s the only thing to do,” Lipp agreed. “If you still suspicion me I’ll go with you, Captain. The police or anybody else can question me. I got nothing to hide.”

Dirk was shaken then. It seemed unlikely that a guilty man would make such an offer. “Well, let’s get aboard,” he said.

Wye Bewley applied himself to the oars again.

The breeze, hauling around to the southwest since they had left, had swung the yacht thwartwise in the narrow channel. As they drew closer, Dirk with a sinking heart perceived that the green streak which marked her waterline was a little elevated at her stern. Had she gone aground? If Lipp Bewley had already marked it, he was safe in making his offer.

Dirk and Lipp boarded the yacht while Wye was sent into the beach to fetch off Mike. In the midst of his anxieties Dirk saw the deep look of concern that Mona bent on him as his head rose above the deck, and it warmed his heart.

“You are hurt,” she cried, sharply.

“Only minor bumps and bruises,” he said, reassuringly.

The others crowded around and questions were fired at him from every side. “What happened? Where’s Mike? Why were you gone so long?”

“All in good time!” he said, waving his hands. “We’re lying in a bad position here, and I’ve got to see to that first.”

McElderry was sent below to his engine; Kirkall ordered to stand by the anchor hoist. Ashcomb volunteered to help the latter if needed. Dirk with a whispered word to Tony not to allow Lipp out of his sight, ascended to the bridge.

Half an hour later he was forced to give up his attempts to move the yacht. The sand held her stern hard and fast, and the tide was falling. Already her stern was appreciably higher. Since he could not navigate among the shoals after dark, this meant that they must lie where they were until near noon next day. Full of bitterness, Dirk ordered McElderry through the speaking-tube to bank his fires.

As he turned to leave the wheelhouse, he discovered that Mona had stolen to the door. She was breathing fast, and there was an extraordinary expression on her face. The pitiful hollows in her pale cheeks, the big eyes luminous with unshed tears, made Dirk's heart ache. Afraid of his own feelings, he said in a matter-of-fact voice:

"I'm glad you came up."

"I just wanted to tell you that I had a cold lunch waiting," she murmured. "None of us have eaten."

"Well . . . we've got to eat," he muttered, scarcely knowing what he was saying.

Silence fell between them and it was unbearable. Dirk, frightened by the strength of the emotions that surged up inside him, said, hurriedly:

"Anything happen while I was ashore?"

She shook her head.

He studied her face. "Anything unpleasant to you, I mean."

She shrugged. "Ashcomb . . ."

"What?" cried Dirk, instantly in a rage.

"He has constituted himself my protector."

"Damn him!"

"It is nothing. I can manage him."

"Did you see anything that suggested plotting aboard?"

"Ashcomb and the Professor avoid each other," she answered. "McElderry speaks to nobody. Ashcomb and Kirkall were whispering together."

Dirk nodded.

There was another painful silence. Mona was standing in the doorway with downcast eyes, plucking at her dress. She raised her eyes. They held a look that he had never seen in a woman's face, and the tumult inside him was suddenly stilled. In that moment of stress something was exchanged between them that could never be taken back. No explanations were required. He only held out his arms and murmured her name:

“Mona!”

She flew to him. “Oh, Dirk! Oh, Dirk, how I suffered while you were gone! I imagined all the things that might have happened to you. It was like dying a thousand deaths. What would I do if they got you, too? Oh, how good it is to get you back! How good!” Sobs strangled her utterance.

Amazed, enraptured, and humbled, he silently soothed her and pressed his cheek against her hair. She presently raised her wet face, saying, with a catch in her breath:

“I’m going to be all right now. I shan’t break down again and act like a foolish woman. I can bear anything as long as we are together.”

“As far as it is possible,” he promised, “I shall never leave you again.”

Before they rejoined the others, Dirk asked her, “Have you ever fired a gun?”

“No,” she said, resolutely, “but I could if it was necessary.”

“Where could you carry it?”

She pointed to the bosom of her dress.

Throwing back the cover of the locker, he took out one of the automatics. “Always keep this on you,” he said.

WYE BEWLEY had brought Mike off from the shore. Glancing over-
side, Dirk saw the half-witted Islander slumping in his skiff and
hanging on the yacht's ladder. His face presented a blank of stupidity. It was
impossible to tell how far he understood the situation or what he thought of
it.

On the main deck Lipp somewhat ostentatiously returned the two guns
saying: "I'm in your hands, Captain. I'll stay aboard or go ashore, just as
you say."

"Stay aboard for a while, anyhow," said Dirk, dryly. "You may be able to
help me."

Lipp went to the rail to speak down to his brother. Dirk looked at Tony,
and the latter murmured:

"He's been talking to everybody on board. I heard it all. Nothing
suspicious. But he knew I was listening."

"Right," said Dirk. He went on in a low voice: "We're stuck here. I want
you to wireless the Chief of Police at Criston. Wait till I get everybody off
the deck. Say that the yacht *Alethea* under charter to Harry Prosser of
Philadelphia is aground off the easterly side of Diseree Island, and that Mr.
Prosser was found dead under suspicious circumstances. Ask him to send
help immediately. Got that?"

"Right, Captain."

Dirk shepherded everybody aboard the yacht into the dining-saloon to
eat. He wanted to see them confronted with each other; he wanted to watch
their changing expressions and to listen to their voices in the hope that the
truth might appear. He even suggested that Wye Bewley be brought aboard,
but Lipp objected.

“Wye, poor fellow, he ain’t hard good,” he explained. “Ain’t got no more table manners than a young baby. Just give me some bread and meat and I’ll tote it to him.”

So Wye was left wolfing his food in the skiff alongside while the others gathered in the little dining-saloon forward. Everybody aboard the yacht was present except Tony. It was a curiously mixed company which included on one side of the table the unkempt islander, the two waterfront toughs from Philadelphia; on the other Ashcomb with his air of decayed elegance and the Professor. Over them all rested the shadow of what lay in the cabin below. Eyes bolted nervously from side to side, and hands trembled.

Mona, when she had put the food on the table, quietly sat down with them. She had got her courage back and kept her chin up. Her face was a pale mask.

Dirk said: “I thought we all ought to get together to talk this over. Whatever his position on the ship may be, everybody here has an equal right to speak. We’ve got to lie here for another twenty-four hours, and we ought to be able to solve the mystery in that time. Any one of you may make the suggestion that will lead to the truth, so speak up.”

For a while they ate in silence and no voice was raised. Lipp Bewley, far from being abashed at sitting down in such company, was the most self-possessed man present. His sharp eyes darted from face to face, his lips were fixed in a grin. He laid himself out to please by passing the dishes and fawning on everybody. It was overdone. The other men looked at him with a kind of fear. As for Dirk, he greatly desired to kick him.

“Professor,” said Dirk, “you’re a logical man; you’ve had several hours to think this thing over. What do you say?”

The Professor cleared his throat importantly. “I still say that he died from natural causes,” he said in his high-pitched voice. “If Miss Mona will forgive me, the doctors had told him that it would kill him if he didn’t stop drinking.”

“How about the blow on his head?”

“He may have received that any time yesterday or last night.”

“Not such a crack as that or we would have heard about it. It raised a swelling on his head over a half an inch high.”

“Is it your idea that that blow killed him?”

“No. I suggest that he was poisoned afterwards.”

“If he had been knocked unconscious, how could you get poison down his throat?”

“There are other ways of poisoning a man. Some poisons can be breathed in.”

The Professor shook his head in vigorous disagreement.

Looking around the table, Dirk caught Ashcomb surreptitiously wiping his face, though it was not over-warm in the saloon. “Ashcomb, what do you say?” he asked.

The man started nervously. “I . . . I’ve got nothing to say,” he stammered. “I agree with the Professor. I don’t see how anybody could have done it—or why anybody should want to.”

“Robbery?” suggested Dirk.

“Nothing in his cabin was taken.”

“How do we know that? If there was something worth taking the murderer would leave the small stuff just to put us off.”

“Did your father have valuable jewelry, Miss?” Lipp Bewley asked Mona. Dirk gritted his teeth at the way he looked at her.

“No,” she said.

The talk went on around the table without bringing out anything new. Dirk listened and watched. Suddenly he became aware that Tony was standing out on deck, trying to catch his eye. He disappeared when he saw that Dirk had seen him. Dirk waited a moment or two and went out through the pantry. Tony was waiting for him by the ladder.

“Captain,” he said, grimly, “somebody has been playing hell with the wireless. He cut out the wires and threw them overboard. My spare wire followed it.”

Dirk cursed savagely under his breath. “The murderer is aboard this ship!” he muttered. “Was it all right when we went ashore this morning?”

“I couldn’t say for sure. He didn’t cut anything that showed. I haven’t had any occasion to test it since day before yesterday.”

“Can you get it going again?”

“Yes, but it will take time.”

“Where will you get wire?”

“I’ll rob the wiring elsewhere on the vessel.”

“All right. Go to it.”

Tony ran up the ladder.

Dirk, glancing over the side, saw that Wye Bewley was gone in his skiff. He thought nothing of it. If the poor half-wit had become tired of waiting

and had rowed home, it made no particular difference. He was not in sight, but time enough had passed for him to get back to the harbor.

Smoothing out his face, Dirk returned through the pantry. The deck of the *Alethea* now had a distinct slant towards the bow. In the saloon Dirk probed each pair of eyes for the guilty secret. Which man had cut the wireless? This, anyhow, could not have been the act of Lipp Bewley. The eyes refused to give up their secrets.

There was an acrimonious discussion going on. The Professor, heated and shrill, was saying: "If it *was* a murder, I say the murderer came from the island."

Lipp opposed him respectfully. "You hadn't ought to say that, Professor, without you got proof."

"I don't say he intended murder; he was probably only after robbery. The islanders knew that we were all coming ashore to the dance, and one of them rowed out to see what he could pick up. As a matter of fact, the yacht was deserted. He had only to go aboard."

"If he rowed out, what become of his boat?" put in Lipp.

"Well, there must have been two of them. One went aboard; the other stayed in the boat. He was scared off by the Captain's unexpected return, and the other one had to hide himself aboard. Later I suppose he struck down poor Mr. Prosser in a panic."

Dirk shook his head. "It won't hold water, Professor. There was no rowboat alongside the yacht when I came down to the beach. Last night she was lying near enough to the shore for me to see."

"Well then, he was alone, and he swam off to the yacht," said the Professor. "The ladder was down. He had only to walk up it."

"It ain't possible," said Lipp. "These are simple people. There ain't one among them with nerve enough to swim out alone and board the yacht."

Dirk thought: Except perhaps you!

"That's what you say!" retorted the Professor, waspishly. "Naturally you want to stick up for your own. If it happened at all, that's the way it must have happened. And then he heard the Captain coming and had to hide."

"That won't work, either," said Dirk. "I stood on the beach for a good ten minutes, trying to hail the yacht. He had all the time in the world to slip into the water and swim away. . . . If he hid himself aboard it was for the purpose of murder."

McElderry suddenly spoke in a hollow voice. "They used to call this Poison Island. Years ago the people here were known as poisoners."

It was the first time that McElderry had spoken, and everybody at the table stared at him as if a wooden image had given voice. Sunk in his own thoughts, McElderry seemed not to be aware of their presence.

“You see,” said the Professor, triumphantly, “he agrees with me!”

“Aah, he ain’t got no proof, neither,” retorted Lipp, grinning.

Everybody had his say, but when the circle finally broke up Dirk was forced to admit to himself that he had learned next to nothing. For some reason every man on the yacht evinced fear and hatred of the cringing Lipp Bewley. Lipp perceived it and plumed himself on it. Nothing had transpired to suggest that he was in collusion with any of them.

When Dirk came out on deck he glanced over the side. There sat Wye Bewley in his skiff, clinging to the ladder and staring stupidly ahead of him as if he had never moved. So after all he could not have gone far.

Dirk took Lipp below into Prosser’s cabin, watching him keenly without appearing to. Upon entering, Lipp took off his cap respectfully, glanced at the body unmoved, and said:

“Looks like he died natural. Maybe the Professor was right.”

“Maybe,” said Dirk. But he was doubly assured now that this was not so.

There was already a disagreeable sweetish smell on the air. Lipp, sniffing it, said: “He won’t keep until tomorrow. Not in this weather.”

Dirk shrugged. It was a bitter thought to him that within the next twenty-four hours changes might take place in the body that would render an autopsy unavailing.

Lipp’s sharp little eyes darted around the cabin, taking everything in. “Fixed up pretty, ain’t it?” he remarked. He noted the closed safe beside the bed. “Have you looked inside that, Captain?”

“It’s locked,” said Dirk. “I could open it with an acetylene torch, but I prefer to leave it to the police.”

Lipp asked a number of shrewd questions that might have been natural—or designed to show Dirk that he could have known nothing of what had happened. He was a new type to Dirk; as sharp as a lynx—and almost as mindless. You couldn’t get hold of him; he continually slipped away. Something essential to a man seemed to be lacking. Was it a moral sense? Dirk asked himself.

When they left the cabin, Lipp said: “Do you mind if I look through the rest of your ship, Captain? Reckon I’ll never get another chance. You don’t have to come if you’re wanted on deck.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Dirk, dryly.

“This is Miss Prosser’s cabin,” he said without opening the door, “and this is a bathroom.”

“A sure-enough bathroom!” exclaimed Lipp. “I seen one of them over in Criston.”

Dirk exhibited the saloon, and opened the door of Ashcomb’s cabin so he could look in. They went forward through the passage that had a door midway leading to the engine-room, and Lipp was permitted to go down and examine the machinery. He took time to see everything. The galley followed. McElderry was sitting there, peeling potatoes, to help Mona out. He cast a look of fear at Lipp, but said nothing. They went on to the two little forward cabins, one occupied by the Professor, the other McElderry’s. Finally, after glancing into the fo’c’s’le, they ascended to the deck through the forward hatch.

On the forward deck they met the Professor. “Guest of honor, eh?” he sneered at Lipp. “Getting shown over the ship.”

“Hope it’s no offense to you, Professor,” said Lipp, grinning and cringing.

Dirk had never seen the Professor so upset.

Passing through the dining-saloon, they found Mona clearing away. By something urgent in her eyes, Dirk saw that she wanted to speak to him privately. Leading Lipp into the pantry, he returned.

“Look what I found,” she whispered, breathlessly.

It was one of the crumpled paper napkins that had been used at the table. On it was printed in pencil:

“Fix up a signal to be sent after dark when the coast is clear.”

Dirk hardened. This suggested that the plot was not complete with the death of Harry Prosser. Further moves were preparing. It was impossible to tell from the contents whether it was a message from the yacht to the shore or vice versa. The letters were painstakingly formed as if by a hand not well accustomed to such a task.

“Can you tell from whose place this came?” he asked.

Mona shook her head. “When you all left the saloon the paper napkins blew off the table. I found this one on the floor by the door. I don’t know who used it.”

Dirk put it in his pocket. “Well, at any rate we’re warned,” he said, smiling to reassure her. “They won’t catch us off our guard.”

Returning to the pantry, he found that Lipp was gone. Outside, under the lee of the deckhouse, he saw him whispering with Ashcomb. The latter’s

eyes bolted in terror at the sight of Dirk but Lipp's grin was unaltered.

"Mr. Ashcomb was telling me how you was robbed in Baltimore, Captain. Certainly is an unlucky trip for all."

Dirk said nothing. This was something to work on; Ashcomb and Lipp conspiring together. But he dared not risk a showdown until he learned better where he stood. Excepting Tony, there was not a man aboard the yacht whom he could trust. He judged from Ashcomb's agitated face that he would stand a better chance of getting something out of him after Lipp had gone.

Lipp, after some further inconsequential talk—was it to show how thoroughly at his ease he was?—said: "Well, Captain, if there's nothing more you want of me, reckon I'll be going ashore."

"All right," said Dirk.

"If you want me, blow your whistle or run up a flag and I'll come off at any time."

"I'll do that," said Dirk.

Lipp went down the ladder. As his brother pulled away from the yacht he stood in the stern, grinning and waving his cap. Dirk saluted him with grim humor.

He turned to see Ashcomb stealing away aft. "One moment," said Dirk. "Sit down." They sat on the engine-room skylight. "What the hell are you afraid of?"

"Afraid?" stammered Ashcomb. "You ask me that? After what has happened? God! nobody knows who may be next! And you won't let me have a gun to protect myself! I have good reason to be afraid!"

"Sure!" said Dirk. "But what's your *special* fear?"

Ashcomb did not answer.

"Is it Lipp Bewley?"

Ashcomb wiped his face. "Yes . . . no . . . I have no proof against the man. But I don't like him. I believe he's dangerous!"

"So do I," said Dirk. "What were you and he whispering about when I came out of the pantry?"

"We weren't whispering," protested Ashcomb. "He told you what we were talking about. It was no more than that. I have nothing in common with the man."

"Ashcomb," said Dirk, "I believe you are a decent fellow at heart. . . ."

"I hope so."

“But you’re not dealing fairly with me.”

“You have no reason to say that, Captain,” he broke out, agitatedly; “you have no reason!”

“If you are on the square, certainly you ought to be able to trust me. You must see that I have no interest in this matter except to get you all away from here safely.”

“I do see that, Captain.”

“Ashcomb, what is behind all this?”

“Captain, I swear I know no more than you do! You’re the master of this ship. We all depend on you. What reason could I have for not telling you all I know?”

“I don’t know,” said Dirk, “but it must be a strong one.” He fixed the man with his hard gaze. “Who is it,” he asked, quietly, “who has got to fix up a signal to be sent when the coast is clear?”

Ashcomb’s jaw dropped in astonishment, real or feigned. “I swear before God I don’t know what you’re driving at!” he gasped. “Where did you get hold of this?”

Dirk stood up. “Ah, you’re in bad shape,” he said, disgustedly. “You’d better go away and think things out, and make up your mind whether you’re going to stand by Lipp Bewley or me!”

Ashcomb slunk away aft.

Dirk looked into the pantry. Mona was there alone. It was sweet to be able to stand close to her and press her hand. He took fresh courage from it.

“What do you make of it?” she whispered, raising her candid eyes to his.

“There is certainly an understanding between Ashcomb and Lipp Bewley,” he answered. “I believe there are others in it too. Probably Kirkall and Mike. But none of them can trust Lipp. He’s got them scared. That’s as far as I can see into it now.”

She sighed and leaned against him. For a moment or so they stood, lost in their feelings. Mona whispered:

“How strange to find love at a time like this!”

“Glimpse of heaven,” he murmured.

She finally drew away. “Tony hasn’t had anything to eat all day,” she said in a matter-of-fact voice.

“I’ll go up and see how he’s getting along with his job,” said Dirk.

He ran up the ladder. From long habit his gaze swept the horizon. No vessel in sight. Calm sea, and sky like an inverted turquoise bowl. The

beauty of the earth had a new meaning to him since he had found Mona.

It struck him as odd that the door of Tony's little cabin should be shut. He opened it saying, "How is she going, Kid?"

Tony, his back partly turned towards the door, was seated at his table, leaning forward with his head down. His hands were still. Suddenly afraid, Dirk strode in and, seizing his shoulder, jerked him upright. His curly black head lolled horribly, his mouth hung open. Dirk put a hand under his chin and raised his face. He was dead.

Dropping the boy, Dirk staggered back, choking for breath, half mad with rage and grief—and terror. It was well that he was alone at that moment. He stood, arms outstretched against the door frame, staring at the dead youth, fighting for his own sanity. Another blow out of the dark! Out of the dark! His wits deserted him. He felt as if he were up against something beyond human power to deal with.

DIRK softly closed the door of the wireless cabin and went into the wheelhouse. He could not face anybody. Must get his grip first. He was the captain and it was up to him to show a composed front to all on board. Dropping on the seat-locker, he pressed his head between his hands and tried to think the thing through. But the pitiful limp body of young Tony came between him and his thoughts. He groaned.

Little by little he got his shaking nerves under control. After all, Tony had not been struck down by the powers of hell. This was murder, and the murderer was no more than a man. Moreover, in Tony's case the motive was clear. Sparks had been killed to prevent him from summoning help from the mainland.

Dirk canvassed the possibilities. Certainly Lipp Bewley had not done this, because Lipp had not been out of Dirk's sight for a moment since he had last seen Tony alive. The half-witted brother, then? Was he really half-witted? or was it a pretense? It was possible that while they were all in the dining-saloon he had slipped on board the yacht and crept up the ladder. Tony's door would be open then. The half-wit could have stolen up behind him and hit him over the head. These mental defectives were sometimes gifted with superhuman cunning.

Possible, but not likely. It was more probable that the murderer belonged to the yacht. Ashcomb, Kirkall, Mike, or the Professor—for the moment he put aside the thought of McElderry. He, Dirk, had been below with Lipp Bewley for a good while. During this time all these men had the run of the yacht; any one of them could have gone up on the bridge deck without attracting attention. Perhaps there were more than one in it.

Dirk was forced up against the same question that had confronted him from the first. As terrified as these men plainly were, what motive could there be powerful enough to induce them to destroy the means of bringing help? No answer presented itself.

Dirk returned to Tony's cabin, and standing in the doorway scanned the interior foot by foot in search of a possible clue to the murderer. The door was in the starboard side. On Dirk's right as he looked in, Tony's bunk stretched along the wall with drawers for his clothes beneath it, and a wash-basin at the foot. The other side was almost entirely taken up by his work table with the switchboard rising at the back. The window of the cabin was opposite the door.

Floor, walls, table, bed, revealed no telltale marks or clues. Dirk had to confess to himself that he was no detective. Perhaps a trained sleuth would have been baffled just as completely. The murderer had taken two steps into the cabin and cracked Tony over the head. What then? How had he finished him? Must have been something quick. No time for a handkerchief soaked in a lethal drug. He had been in momentary danger of interruption.

Gathering up Tony in his arms, Dirk laid him on the bed. The lad had a bump on his head just like Prosser's. Apart from that there was no wound anywhere on his body; not so much as a pinprick. As far as the cause of death went, Dirk had to give it up. Tony's gun had not been taken from him. Dirk transferred it to his own pocket.

As he straightened the comely young body and covered it with a sheet, grief overcame him. So young, so quick with life, and with such a power of laughter in him! So warm-hearted, plucky, and loyal! Never was a grin so ready and infectious as Tony's. How bitterly Dirk regretted having brought the lad on this voyage. If it hadn't been for me he would be grinning now!

He finally pulled the shutter across the window, locked the door on his friend, and went down the ladder. Mona looked out of the pantry. Dirk endeavored to show her a smooth face, but she loved him too well to be deceived.

"Dirk! what is it?" she gasped. "Come in here!"

Seizing his jacket in her agitation, she shook him a little. "What has happened now? Oh, what has happened?"

He could not say the words.

"Is it Tony?"

He nodded.

"Oh, Dirk!" Letting go of him, she leaned against the wall, sick with horror.

“You must be strong!” he said, harshly. “I am depending on you!”

She straightened up. She was white to the lips, but her eyes were steady. “I’m not going to faint,” she said. “Was it . . . was it in the same way as my father?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Dirk! . . . Who? Who? Who?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Somebody aboard the yacht.”

“Not McElderry. He asked me for a job. He was working in the galley until after Lipp Bewley went ashore.”

“Well, there are four others. . . . Did you hear anybody overhead while you were working here?”

She shook her head. “He could steal up to the ladder without my seeing him. There’s no window looking aft. He would be very quiet, of course.”

As he turned to leave her, Mona clenched her hands in a kind of agony. “Oh, Dirk . . .” He read the rest in her eyes: They may try to get you next!

“I’m armed,” he said, with a hard grin. “And on the watch.”

Kirkall and Mike were lying on the forward deck with their backs against the hatch. They awaited him, showing no change in their expressions, Kirkall with his quick glance, Mike slow as an ox.

“Men,” said Dirk, “I want you to describe all your movements since you left the dining-saloon.”

“What’s up, Captain?” asked Kirkall.

“Answer my question.”

The two looked at each other. Kirkall began slowly. “Well . . . we offered to help the girl . . .”

“Miss Prosser,” Dirk sharply corrected.

“Sure, Miss Prosser. . . . We offered to help her clear away and wash up, but she didn’t want it. Said she could do it herself. So we come out on deck. . . . You can easy check up on that, Captain.”

“All right. Go ahead.”

“What did we do then, Mike? . . . Nothing in particular.”

“I went down in the hold to look at the fires,” said Mike.

“Where did you go?” Dirk asked Kirkall.

He scratched his head. “Sure, I remember now. I went down to my bunk to get a pack of cigarettes.” He showed the package. “I lit up down there.”

“And then?”

“Mike come looking for me and I give him one. We smoked in the fo’c’s’le.”

“We was looking for cigarettes,” put in Mike.

“Sure, this is the last pack we got between us,” added Kirkall, “and we looked through everything to see if any had been overlooked, but no good.”

“You weren’t in the fo’c’s’le when I came through the ship,” said Dirk.

“No. We come up on deck and sat down right where you find us now. Mike he slept for a piece. A couple of times while we was sitting here Miss Prosser she come out on deck to throw stuff overboard. She can tell you we was here.”

“While you were sitting here did you see anybody up on the bridge deck?”

“We can’t see back on the bridge deck sitting down. The rail of the bridge hides it.”

“Since we got up from the table Sparks has been killed in his cabin,” said Dirk.

Kirkall sprang up all of a piece. “O God, no!” he cried with a face of horror. “Sparks killed? No! No! O God! this vessel has a curse on it!”

Mike was on his feet also. “This is awful! This is awful!” he was muttering in his slow way.

To Dirk this had the look of a natural spontaneous reaction. In a moment Kirkall had recovered himself, and then you couldn’t tell whether he was lying or not.

“It couldn’t be Mike nor me, Captain. What do you think we are? Here we sat for an hour past and Miss Prosser can prove it. We ain’t got nothing against Sparks. We ain’t no killers!”

“Be quiet,” said Dirk. “I don’t want any alarm raised. . . . Stick up your hands, both of you!”

They obeyed. Neither man had anything on him that could have been used as a blackjack. Neither had a gun.

“Now are you satisfied? Are you satisfied?” Kirkall asked. “We’re honest fellows.”

“Sit down as you were,” said Dirk, curtly.

Leaving them, he went in search of Ashcomb. He found him in a deck chair astern, looking straight ahead of him, the picture of wretchedness. He was unable to give a clear account of what he had been doing between the time of leaving the dining-saloon and his meeting Dirk on deck.

“I can’t remember,” he muttered.

When Dirk grimly told him what had happened, he sat up, staring wildly and gasping: "I knew it! I knew it!"

"Knew what?" Dirk sharply demanded.

"That somebody else would get it! O God! they mean to pick us off one by one!"

"Who are they?"

"I don't know," he cried. "That's the awful part of it. They seem to strike out of the air! Whenever they're ready! Whenever they're ready! And you won't give me the means to defend myself!"

"Do you believe that this comes from the island?" asked Dirk.

"Why, sure!" cried Ashcomb. "Where else?" A fresh spasm of fear passed over his face. "But don't tell anybody I said so, or my life won't be worth a dime's purchase! . . . You were a fool to let Lipp Bewley get away from the yacht! If you had shot him dead on the deck our troubles would be over. Give me a gun and I'll shoot him!"

"What has Lipp Bewley got against us?" asked Dirk.

"I don't know, I tell you! The man is a fiend in human form. You can see that in his eye. . . . This yacht would be a rich prize to the starving islanders. After they have killed us all off they will dismantle her and break her up. It would never be known! Nobody knows that we ever came here!"

This was a new possibility. Dirk thought it over. "In any case," he said, finally, "it wasn't Lipp who got Tony. He was never out of my sight for one moment while he was aboard us."

"The idiot was in the skiff alongside. Lipp can make him do anything he wants."

"I have thought of that," said Dirk. "It is scarcely possible."

Ashcomb began a new desperate plea to be given a gun and Dirk left him.

He found the Professor in his little cabin, reading one of his big scientific books. "Thank God! I have my work!" he exclaimed, fervently. "If I could not lose myself in my work I would go out of my mind!"

In answer to Dirk's questions, he said that Lipp Bewley had aroused a feeling of loathing in him that made his flesh crawl. Consequently, as soon as lunch was over he had come down to his cabin to get away from him. He had remained there, he said, until he heard Dirk and Lipp approaching through the galley. He had then gone on deck, where Dirk had met him a moment later, and had afterwards returned to his room.

When Dirk told him about Tony his eyes widened in terror. “Oh, this is frightful!” he cried out, shrilly. “What next? What next? O God! get us away from here, Captain! Get us away!”

“As soon as I can,” said Dirk, grimly.

“Give me a gun in the meantime, Captain, and I’ll stand watch!” he went on. “I’m no fighting-man but at least I have a pair of eyes. And you must have help!”

“No guns will be given out at present,” said Dirk. “I’ll call on you if I need you.”

Hearing a sound behind him, he turned. McElderry was standing in the doorway of his cabin, staring out with mad, terrified eyes. “Another! Another!” he whispered, hoarsely, and slammed and locked his door.

Dirk let him alone for the moment. Returning on deck, he went to the pantry. Mona looked at him with anxious, questioning eyes.

“It appears that we have first-rate actors aboard,” Dirk said, bitterly. “Each of the four men that I went to burst out with a cry of surprise and fear that you would swear came from his heart.”

“Ashcomb’s been up on the bridge deck,” said Mona.

“What!”

“I didn’t try to follow him.”

“That was right.”

“He came down again after a couple of minutes and went below aft.”

“The guns!” muttered Dirk.

He ran up the ladder. Neither door nor window of Tony’s room had been disturbed. In the wheelhouse the locker looked as usual, but when Dirk took hold of it, the lid came up in his hand. It had been pried open, pulling the hasp clean out of the under side of the lid. Of the four guns that Dirk had left in the locker, two were missing.

Dirk pocketed the remaining two and ran down the ladder. To Mona he said:

“We must act quickly. I’ll have to ask you to be my decoy. He wouldn’t open his door for me.”

She nodded, and they ran softly aft to the companionway and down into the saloon. At a sign from Dirk, Mona knocked on the door of Ashcomb’s cabin, saying agitatedly:

“Claggett! Claggett! It’s me, Mona. I must speak to you quickly.”

Ashcomb immediately threw open his door. Dirk wasted no time in argument, but hauled off and struck him on the chin. He measured his length across the floor of his cabin. Dirk dropped on him and recovered the two guns before he knew what had hit him. Dirk got up, and Ashcomb raised himself in dazed fashion.

“Let this teach you that I’m master of this ship,” said Dirk, sternly. “I will keep all guns in my possession. If we are attacked they will be given out.”

ALL afternoon the wind had been rising, and by five o'clock it was blowing half a gale from the southwest. Since it was coming offshore the *Alethea* was in smooth water, but out in the Bay the whitecaps were tossing. It was a sultry wind, and in the northwest quarter of the sky threatening thunderclouds began to heap up.

Dirk, with the object of keeping them in plain view, ordered everybody on deck. It was only after considerable difficulty that he persuaded McElderry to open his door and come out. The engineer appeared to be completely unhinged by the second tragedy. When he got the men together Dirk addressed them, keeping out of his face all signs of distrust and suspicion.

"Men," he said, "we're in a bad spot here, and to make it worse we've got to take it sitting down. There is nothing that we can do to help ourselves. The yacht will be afloat between ten and eleven tonight, but in the dark and with the wind blowing as it is, I can't maneuver her into a better position. She'll ground again when the tide falls. We can't expect to get away from her until high tide at noon tomorrow.

"In the meantime I'm going to put everybody to work. When a man's hands are occupied it makes the time pass quickly and keeps him from brooding. Mike and Kirkall will scrub down the deck; Mr. Ashcomb and the Professor will wash down the woodwork on the main deck while the chief and myself do the same on the bridge. Miss Prosser has her work in the galley."

The order seemed to be received with a kind of relief, and the *Alethea's* decks began to present a scene of activity. Under the circumstances there was an awful irony in it. Dirk had the after awnings rolled up so that every

part of the deck was open to him. He marked that Ashcomb and the Professor were no better friends than before. They never addressed each other.

Dirk worked along side by side with McElderry. The engineer continually fell into a trance over his job. He appeared to have aged ten years in an hour. Perhaps the seeds of madness had been in him before they set sail. Dirk considered the theory that McElderry might have committed the murders in a state of frenzy. But it wouldn't stand up. Tony had certainly been killed with a purpose.

Dirk felt his way along with his companion. "Chief, I suppose you've been trying to think this thing out like the rest of us. On the level, who do you think got Tony?"

The engineer's glance at him was bereft of all sense. "Watch yourself, Captain," he said in a husky whisper. "There are eyes all over this ship!"

"Whose eyes?" asked Dirk, startled in spite of himself.

"Nobody's eyes. That's just it. Eyes in space. Always watching. You only have to look around you."

Dirk thought, Poor devil!

Suddenly the engineer dropped to his knees, and clasping his hands together began to pray in a hushed voice: "O God, have mercy upon us, miserable sinners! God have mercy on us! God save us!"

Dirk looked at him helplessly. He was past reasoning with. Dropping beside him on the deck, he patted his pockets. No weapon. McElderry continued to pray.

"Do you believe in the redemption of sinners, Captain?" he whispered, urgently.

"Sure!" said Dirk, soothingly. "We're all sinners. Let's get on with our job."

McElderry obediently picked up his rag and started wiping down the wall of the wheelhouse. Dirk working alongside, looked at him out of the corners of his eyes, and wondered what the hell he could do with him.

Presently McElderry began to talk again—if you could call it talking. He ran on in a kind of stumbling secretive whisper that was like a voice from another existence. "Poison, Captain! This vessel is poisoned. So they die one after another. Nothing can live aboard her. You are poisoned and I am poisoned. It is eating our vitals. We will die!"

Dirk was struck with awe. Could there be any approximation to the truth in the madman's rambling? "What makes you think so?" he asked, coolly.

It was impossible to make McElderry stick to any one point. He started praying again. "O God, though we be tied and bound with the chain of our sins, let the pitifulness of thy great mercy loose us!"

By and by he returned to the subject of poison. "It's the woman," he whispered. "She is in league with the serpent. It is she who puts poison in our food. Since she began to prepare the meals two men have died!"

Dirk could afford to smile at this; at the same time he was attacked by a sharp new anxiety. With a delusion like this, McElderry might be led to harm Mona. Dirk said, coolly, "There's nothing in that, Chief."

"How do you know?" whispered McElderry.

"She sits down to eat with us. She takes something of everything."

McElderry smiled cunningly. "Beware, Captain! She's too clever for you! She will fool you yet!"

"I'll watch her," said Dirk.

McElderry, satisfied for the moment, started to rub down the wall again.

After a while Mona came out of the pantry below, and spoke up to Dirk. "Supper is ready, Captain."

At the sound of her voice McElderry snarled and crouched against the deckhouse. "There she is!" he whispered. "What did I tell you? She has mixed another dose!"

What will I do with him? Dirk asked himself in a kind of desperation. I can't watch him all the time. Who can I trust?

Leaving McElderry for the moment, he went down the ladder and filled a plate with food for him. "He's completely loony," he said to Mona. "We'd better let him stay by himself."

She took it quietly; they were becoming hardened to misfortune. "Is he violent?"

"Not at present."

"Will you have to lock him up?"

"Sure!"

When McElderry saw the food he strained away against the wall, clapping a hand over his mouth like a willful child.

"Come on," said Dirk, persuasively.

"You can't make me! You can't make me!" he snarled. "You're trying to poison me, too!"

"That's foolish," said Dirk. "Watch me!" He squatted in front of McElderry and proceeded to eat.

In the end hunger overcame the engineer's delusion. He took the plate and ate.

Afterwards Dirk opened the door of his own cabin. "You'd better sleep up here," he suggested. "It will be safer," he added with a nod and a wink.

McElderry fell for it. "Will you keep her down below?"

"Sure, we wouldn't let her on the bridge," said Dirk.

McElderry went in. "Look, I'm going to lock you in," said Dirk, showing the key. "Then nobody can get at you."

McElderry nodded eagerly. "Right! I can sleep now. . . . But mind you don't let the key out of your possession, Captain. I don't trust anybody else."

"You can depend on it," said Dirk. "You stay quiet in here until I come to let you out."

Dirk drew the shutter across and locked it. Unfortunately there was no way of fastening window or shutter from the outside. He locked the door with a woof! of relief. How long can I keep this up? he asked himself.

In the dining-saloon below Dirk found them halfway through their meal. "McElderry's gone completely off his nut," he announced, briefly. "He'll have to be watched continually."

"What next?" muttered Ashcomb.

"I've locked him in my cabin," said Dirk. "He's quiet, but God knows how long he'll remain so. Professor, as soon as you've finished will you go up and watch? He can't break out of the door because it opens inward, but he might climb out of the window. Watch the window. If he opens it, holler for me."

The Professor seemed pleased to be of service. "Right, Captain," he said, getting up immediately.

While they were still at the table the southwest wind suddenly died down and a few minutes of unearthly silence followed. Then the thunder squall broke. The black clouds turned sulphurous and shot sinister yellow fingers across the zenith. Far away the eastern sky was still fair and bright. From the northwest a new wind came howling obliquely across the island and across the water, turning it black. It struck the *Alethea* abeam like a blow, making her shiver from end to end.

"It will blow us off the shoal!" cried Mona, clasping her hands.

"Not a chance!" said Dirk, grimly. "Our stern is two feet out of water."

The wind came in gusts stronger and stronger, whipping the black water white and shrieking through the yacht's rigging. On shore the branches of the old locust trees blew out straight like hair. One of the trees lay quietly

down across the path. The dishes in the pantry rattled. One wondered how much harder it was going to blow.

A deluge of rain came hissing over the water in the wake of the wind; lightning laced the sickly clouds overhead, and thunder crashed near by. They watched the storm through the windows of the saloon. Sheets of water spread over the yacht's deck; overside all was hidden behind an impenetrable gray curtain of rain.

Suddenly they heard running feet overhead, and an instant later the Professor's shrill voice yelling: "Captain! Captain!"

Everybody ran out oblivious to the rain. The Professor, yelling still, was already down the ladder. Dirk saw with a sinking heart that the dinghy had disappeared; the falls were hanging loose. Running to port, he saw her adrift in the water alongside; the great wind sweeping across the yacht had already caught her; the lunatic was in the act of clambering into her from the water. He picked up the oars.

"Bring her back! Bring her back!" shouted Dirk.

McElderry grinned at him, and pointing crazily out in the Bay shouted something that was carried away on the wind. God knows what maggot was eating his brain then. Sick at heart, Dirk drew his gun. There was no help for it. The dinghy was their last boat.

Seeing Dirk's move, the lunatic threw himself down in the bottom of the dinghy, where he was hidden. Dirk fired a couple of shots at him in vain. Meanwhile the little boat was rapidly being carried away on the wind. Dirk kicked off his shoes, and handing his jacket to Mona—the precious guns were in the pockets of it, dived overboard and swam after the dinghy with powerful strokes. However, the lunatic, no longer threatened by the gun, snatched up the oars and rowed away at a great rate, helped by the wind. There was nothing for Dirk to do but turn and swim back.

Kirkall threw him a rope end and he pulled himself up on deck. The dinghy had been swallowed up in the rain. The Professor was standing there like a child, expecting punishment, scared and watchful, ready to run.

"O God! how I am cursed with fools!" Dirk cried in his rage. "I told you to call me if he opened his window!"

"I never saw him," whimpered the Professor. "When it started to rain I went inside the wheelhouse. I never thought he'd try to get out then. I never saw him! The first thing I heard was the slap of the boat when it hit the water. He cut the ropes. I ran then, but it was too late. He jumped in the water after the boat."

Dirk looked around. "Where did he get a knife?"

A silver-handled carving-knife lying on the deck supplied the answer. Dirk picked it up. "Where did this come from?"

Mona answered. "It belongs in the drawer of the sideboard. It wasn't used for supper."

"I searched his pockets for weapons," muttered Dirk.

"You couldn't carry a knife like that in your pocket," suggested Kirkall. "You would slip it inside your sock and catch the point in the sole of your shoe."

Dirk turned his back on them, struggling with his rage.

The storm lasted only a few minutes longer. When it cleared they searched the surface of the Bay in vain. No sign of the dinghy or its occupant.

"Swamped," said Kirkall.

Dirk returned to the bridge white and stony with anger. The other men kept out of his way.

★ XIII ★

AFTER the storm had passed the southwest wind sprang up again, but blew less hard than before. The sun went down in tumbled splendor, and darkness began to creep up the eastern sky.

Dirk and Mona prepared to stand vigil on the bridge deck. From this point of vantage they could survey the whole yacht; there was no way of reaching them except by the ladder at the after end, and, with all the guns on board in his possession, Dirk had no doubt of his ability to stand off the rest of the men should it come to that. But not to know where he stood; to suspect them all without any proof; to be forced to watch them every moment, not knowing from what quarter to expect attack—it was enough to try the strongest nerves.

Professor Harford followed them, and hung around with an abject, propitiatory air. A dozen times over he undertook to explain how poor McElderry had eluded him. “I can never forgive myself!” he wailed. “I can never forgive myself!”

Dirk’s temper was wearing thin. “Ah, forget it!” he said. “What’s done can’t be undone.”

When the Professor, sitting on the edge of the locker in the wheelhouse, undertook to explain the islanders in the light of anthropology, it was worse.

“Such people, despite their generally quiet, taciturn demeanor, are just as liable as the orang-malayus to those sudden bursts of demoniacal frenzy and homicidal mania that we call ‘running amuck.’ A. R. Wallace tells us that such wild outbreaks frequently occur among the civilized Mangkassaras and Bugis. It is the national, and therefore the honorable, method of committing suicide. A Roman fell upon his sword; a Japanese rips up his stomach; and an American blows out his brains with a pistol. . . .”

To Dirk in a situation like the present, it sounded like gibberish. He felt he could stand no more. "Better go below and get some sleep, Professor," he said, harshly. "I'll call you if I need you."

"I hate to leave you," the Professor said, nervously. "Couldn't I lie down in the wheelhouse or in your cabin, Captain? My own room is so far away from you."

"No," said Dirk. "Go below. You'll be perfectly safe if you lock your door."

"Very well, Captain."

He went down the ladder. The other three men were smoking and whispering together aft. The Professor cast a glance of terror in their direction, and scuttled through the pantry door like a rabbit. Through pantry and galley was the quickest way to his cabin.

"Thank God, we're rid of him!" said Dirk.

He was pacing the little deck fore and aft while Mona sat on a stool in the wheelhouse door with her hands lying in her lap. It made Dirk feel savage with pity to see her quiet air of endurance. Never a word of complaint out of her. Good God! what a situation for a woman to be in, and he powerless to save her from it.

It appeared that Mona was thinking of him. "Couldn't you relax for a little while it's still early?" she suggested. "I can keep watch perfectly well. Lie down in the wheelhouse and I'll call you if there's any move."

"Don't feel like sleeping," muttered Dirk.

"You were up practically the whole of last night."

"One more night won't hurt me. Tomorrow night, please God! we'll sleep easy!"

"How will the yacht move without an engineer?" she asked.

"Mike is smart enough to keep the generator and the ventilating systems going. He can run the engine, too."

"If he wants to," she murmured. "Or he could wreck us if he wanted."

"Well, don't let's dwell on the worst that might happen!" said Dirk, sharply. Instantly he regretted it. "Mona, I'm sorry!" he said, hastening to her. "I'm an evil-tempered brute!"

She smiled and caught up his hand. "You don't have to apologize to me," she said. "I know what you're going through on my account."

"It's the thought of you that drives me half out of my mind!" he groaned. "If you were not here I could put up with it easily enough."

“That seems a little silly to me,” she said, raising her chin. “After all, women are human beings, too. Forget I’m a woman and let me do my part.”

“You’re one in a thousand,” he said, humbly.

Mike, after a visit to the generator below, returned to the other two on deck. Dirk had forbidden any lights to be shown on the yacht. Lights on board tended to dazzle him. Since he had no means of knowing what the disposition of the half-savage islanders was, he had to keep watch on the water as well as on the yacht. The moon was due to rise after midnight.

Strictly speaking, Mike and Kirkall had no business to be taking their ease on the after deck, but Dirk was not disposed to take a stand on that now. If he broke up their whispering with Ashcomb, they would only go below and get together. He felt safer when he had them in sight.

Before it was yet dark, Kirkall and Mike left Ashcomb and went forward to their favorite lounging-place against the fo’c’s’le hatch. Ashcomb disappeared below and presently, to Dirk’s surprise, came up again, stripped to the waist. Running down the ladder, he dived into the water and started swimming in the direction of the shore. Dirk hailed Kirkall.

“Where’s Mr. Ashcomb going?”

“Captain, he had the idea of swimming ashore to borrow or hire a skiff, so we’d have something if we wanted to leave the yacht.”

Dirk made no comment, but merely grinned hardily at Mona. He took it for granted that Ashcomb had gone to consult with Lipp Bewley.

However, in little more than half an hour Ashcomb came rowing off in Cap’n Jim-of-Jim Bewley’s skiff. He had not had time to go to the settlement; possibly Lipp might have met him on the beach. Dirk, on the alert for signaling, had seen nothing that could be interpreted as such.

Ashcomb tied the skiff to the boarding-ladder and went below. After changing into dry clothes, he came up on the bridge deck with a hangdog air. Dirk met him near the ladder.

“What do you want?” he harshly demanded.

Ashcomb spread out his hands. “Am I an outcast?” he muttered, bitterly. “Can’t I approach you? What have I ever done against you that you treat me like this?”

“Never mind that,” said Dirk. “What are you after now?”

“Nothing for myself,” said Ashcomb. “I’m just thinking of you and her. I can’t go through the night this way. I can’t stand it! Good God! if we can’t pull together we’ll all go crazy!”

“Can’t stand what?” asked Dirk.

“Your suspiciousness. You’ve wronged me from the first. I don’t know what it was set you against me. I was Harry Prosser’s best friend, and I was always Mona’s friend, even to going against her father for her sake. Now you’ve poisoned her mind against me! I had hoped to be something more than a friend to Mona. I don’t mind saying before you all that that girl is dearer to me than life itself!”

It angered Dirk to hear him bandying Mona’s name about the deck. “Cut out the dramatics!” he said, sternly, “and tell me plainly what you are after.”

Ashcomb’s voice rose hysterically. “I tell you I want nothing from you! If you have no human feelings, other men have! I can’t stand it to see you walking the bridge deck armed as if you expected us to attack you!”

“Well, I’m damned!” muttered Dirk.

“I swam ashore,” Ashcomb continued passionately. “I hired a skiff for you from the old man. There it is! There it is! It’s yours. Could I do more? Take it and row Mona shore, where she can sleep in peace. The old man will put you up. He’s got a brick house with strong doors and shutters. No harm can come to you there!”

This was so different from what Dirk had expected that he could only stare in astonishment.

“Take your guns with you!” Ashcomb went on. “There’s nothing we can do until you come back again. We can’t get off the yacht. We can’t move her without you. In the morning you’ll find us here just as you left us!”

Dirk was tempted by the offer. If it had come from anybody but Ashcomb he might have accepted it without hesitation. But he distrusted Ashcomb through and through. He believed that all this passionate self-justification had been whipped up for some ulterior motive.

“You’ve set the Professor against us, too,” said Ashcomb. “He’s down in his cabin sweating with fear. For God’s sake take him with you and let him sleep ashore.”

Kirkall and Mike had come to the foot of the ladder. The former added his voice to Ashcomb’s. “We feels the same way about it, Captain. It hurts us because you think we had something to do with the killings on board. We’re bound to prove to you that we’re on the square!”

“And so say I,” growled Mike.

Coming from the sly Kirkall and the brutal Mike, who had given no signs of possessing either nerves or feelings, this had a slightly ridiculous sound, and it confirmed Dirk in his suspicion that the whole thing was a fake. He sparred for time.

“Give me five minutes,” he said, “to talk it over with Miss Prosser.”

Ashcomb went down the ladder, and the three of them retired towards the stern and put their heads together. Dirk turned to Mona.

“In the name of sanity,” he said, “what do you make of this?”

She shook her head. “Can’t make anything of it.”

“It’s the same line-up that has been suggested from the beginning—Ashcomb, Kirkall and Mike. The Professor is on the outs with them. It is certainly a fake.”

“What could be their object?” said Mona. “Without guns and without a small boat there isn’t anything they could do until we get back.”

“The only thing that I can dope out,” said Dirk, “is that there is something valuable aboard the yacht, something belonging to your father, that they haven’t succeeded in finding. They’re making this opportunity for a thorough search of the vessel. Perhaps they want to break into the safe.”

“What could my father have brought aboard?”

“A sum of money.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He had certainly been let in for something. . . .

“Couldn’t it be an honest offer?” said Mona.

“Don’t you believe it! Not that crew! Look! when I was talking to Ashcomb this afternoon he suggested that all our troubles were the result of a plot among the islanders to seize and dismantle the yacht. If there was such a plot, tonight would be the moment for the islanders to attack us. Here we are hard and fast aground. Tomorrow we’ll be afloat and away from here. Well, Ashcomb has forgotten what he said this afternoon. He must know darn well that the islanders are not going to attack us.”

“I can see that,” said Mona. “The message we found in the dining-room proves, whichever way you read it, that there’s an understanding between Lipp Bewley and Ashcomb.”

“Or between Lipp and somebody else aboard the yacht,” Dirk amended. “What’s your feeling about accepting this noble offer? It’s tempting.”

“Whatever you say, Captain.”

“I have a hunch that something these three crooks are so keen to have us do must be the wrong thing for us to do.”

“I agree.”

“Whatever may happen, I feel that I can defend you better on the yacht than any place else.”

"I'm satisfied, Captain."

Dirk went to the ladder. "I'm ready to give my answer," he said.

Ashcomb and Mike hurried to the foot of the ladder. Kirkall had left the deck.

"This is my place," said Dirk, "and here I stay."

"You don't trust me!" cried Ashcomb, sorely. "Nothing I do makes any difference to you."

"I can trust nobody," said Dirk, grimly, "until the truth about these murders is revealed. If I am doing you wrong I'll make it up to you then."

Kirkall came out of the pantry with the Professor in tow. "Captain! Captain!" said the latter, excitedly. "Is it true? This man says that Mr. Ashcomb brought a skiff to take us ashore!"

Dirk did not answer immediately.

The Professor, glancing over the side, saw the skiff tied to the ladder. "It *is* true!" he cried, joyfully. "Come on, Captain! Let us row ashore!"

"I am staying here," said Dirk, quietly.

"Don't say that, Captain! Don't say that! This vessel is like a charnel house! It is horrible!"

"You may take the skiff and row yourself ashore if you want," said Dirk. "The old man will give you a bed."

"No! No!" wailed the Professor. "I will not desert you. I beg you to come, Captain, and bring the young lady."

Ashcomb spoke up. "Captain, by your stubbornness you are forcing two innocent people to go through a night of terror."

Dirk smiled grimly. "Do you want to go ashore?" he asked Mona.

"No," she said, firmly.

"You hear her," said Dirk.

"But, Captain . . ."

"That's enough," said Dirk, curtly. "My mind is made up."

The Professor, whimpering in distress, ran through the pantry door. A moment or two later they heard his door slam in the depths of the yacht. The other three drifted aft. Soon the group broke up; Ashcomb went down the after companionway, while Kirkall and Mike disappeared through the fo'c's'le hatch. The deck was left empty.

"So much for that!" said Dirk. "I hope you don't regret it."

"You did right," said Mona.

Dirk recommenced his pacing on the deck. He was keyed up to a high pitch. So was Mona. This became evident to him when she said, in a strained voice:

“You can’t walk all night, Captain. You’ll exhaust yourself.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t realize that I was making you nervous.” He planted a folding-chair near the top of the ladder. “Pull your chair out on the bridge,” he said, “so that you can watch forward while I watch aft. Keep an eye on the sand dunes in case there’s any attempt to signal the yacht.”

It was a fair mild night, and a great stillness brooded over the yacht, relieved only by the sighing of the breeze through the rigging and the lapping of the water alongside. Far away across the island Dirk heard the mellow whistles of two steamships signaling to pass each other on the Bay. It made him homesick. Long before the moon rose its influence was felt in the sky. Only the biggest stars were shining.

Always in Dirk’s mind was the thought: What are they up to below? He guessed that Mona was thinking the same, and he would not speak of it. He wanted to cheat her with a feeling of security, to induce her to sleep. With that idea he told her a long story about a Captain he had served under who was addicted to patent medicines and bought a bottle of every sort that he could find.

When he had come to an end Mona laughed, dryly. “Thanks for the lullaby,” she said.

Dirk had to laugh himself; it came out so unexpectedly.

“When will you learn not to treat me like a baby?” she said. “I know perfectly well that your ears are stretched for every sound from below, and that your eyes have never left off searching the deck. Well, neither have mine. What’s the use of making pretenses with each other. Small talk is out of place.”

“I give up,” said Dirk. “I hereby appoint you mate of this vessel, with full powers.”

Time passed. The wind blew softly and the water lapped alongside; the sky began to lighten in the east. Less than twenty feet separated Dirk and Mona and they occasionally spoke to each other softly. There was no sound of movement within the yacht.

The strain did not lessen. Dirk’s limbs twitched and he gritted his teeth together. Anything was easier for a man to bear than a state of inaction. Mona was as still as the night. It came to him that as far as mere endurance went, women were perhaps stronger than men. In the end Mona said:

“Captain, would it be safe to go down in the pantry and make a cup of cocoa?”

Dirk grinned in relief. “Sure, Mate! The idea likes me right well!”

They went softly down the ladder. In the pantry a pocket flash gave them sufficient light to see what they were doing. Mona lighted the primus burner and mixed her condensed milk and water. The cocoa tin always stood handy on the dresser. Dirk closed two of the doors and stood in the third, gun in hand, looking up and down the deck. There was no sound from below.

When the cocoa was ready they put out the light and Dirk laid his gun handy on the dresser. He stirred and sipped the hot infusion with satisfaction. Luckily for them both Mona was not fond of cocoa, and in spite of his urging did not take any.

When it cooled sufficiently he drank it in swallows, praising its quality. “When that swab Wesley made cocoa it tasted like dish-water, but I swear yours is like Huyler’s. It warms the cockles of me heart—whatever they are. It makes my stomach purr!”

It made him feel good—too good. He didn’t realize what it was doing to him until Mona said, sharply:

“What’s the matter with you, Dirk?”

A blissful numbness was stealing through him; he involuntarily dropped in a chair. “Sleepy, I guess,” he murmured.

“O God!” whispered Mona, in terror. “There was something in that stuff! There was something in it!” She seized and shook him violently. “Dirk! Dirk! Can you understand me? You mustn’t give in to this feeling! Fight against it! Fight against it for my sake!”

She dragged him to his feet. “Walk! Walk!” she implored him. “Keep going until I can get some strong coffee into you!”

By that time Dirk was too numb to have any volition of his own, but he responded automatically to her words, and staggered dutifully back and forth across the pantry. “So sleepy!” he murmured with an immense yearning to be let alone.

Meanwhile Mona flew to get the primus relighted; put water on. This done, she caught hold of Dirk and guided him back and forth. When he sank to his knees she dragged him up again. Dirk felt as if the weight of the world was bearing him down.

“Dirk, listen to me!” she cried, desperately. “You must fight this thing! You must fight! Somebody has tried to dope you. What would I do if you failed me?”

Dimly her words reached him, and he made renewed efforts to move his legs.

She poured coffee into the boiling water and let it froth up. Cooling it with water from the tank, she held him against the wall to keep him from collapsing, and pressed the cup to his lips. "Drink! Drink!" she implored him.

When she had got the first cupful in him, she steered him out on deck. He fell flat, but somewhere she found the strength to lift him to his feet, and to support him under one arm. "Put your arm across my shoulders!" she gasped. "Lean on me! Keep moving! Keep moving!"

Back and forth along the deck she kept him going. "Just a minute," Dirk would mutter, hanging back. She shoved him on. Every time they came to the pantry door she forced another cupful of coffee down his throat. Each cupful was stronger than the last.

In the end the strong coffee began to have its way. Slowly his head cleared, and at last he was able to stand unaided. "What's the matter with me?" he asked, wonderingly.

Mona almost collapsed then, leaning against him and shaking pitifully. His arm went around her strongly. He was his own man again.

"Somebody tried to poison you!" she whispered. "It was in the cocoa."

"To put me to sleep, I guess, not to kill me," he said, grimly. "They need me to work the ship—for awhile anyhow. . . . Did anybody come on deck?"

"Nobody showed himself, but I had a feeling all the time that we were being watched from the dark. I kept my gun in one hand while I supported you with the other."

"They thought that you would drink the cocoa, too," he said. "If we had both passed out the coast would have been clear, see? And some sort of signal would have flashed ashore . . . Well, we fooled them, Mate, thanks to you! . . . Where's my gun?"

She pressed it into his hand. "I picked it up."

"We've nailed two of their plots," said Dirk, grasping it. "I'm not going to sit quiet and wait for them to spring something else. I'm going below to see what they are up to."

He heard her draw a deep breath to steady herself. "I'll go with you," she said.

★ XIV ★

AS THEY walked forward the deck trembled slightly underfoot, and Dirk, glancing at the stars, saw that the *Alethea* had altered her position a little. "We're afloat," he murmured, grimly. "A lot of good it does us!"

A wasted moon was rising behind the black line that denoted the silhouette of the distant eastern shore. Far down the Bay a pin point of light flashed at intervals, a reminder of the orderly world where folks went to bed in peace at night, while policemen patrolled the streets. The breeze off the island brought puffs of the scent of honeysuckle.

The fo'c's'le hatch was protected by a hood opening aft. As Dirk started softly down the ladder with Mona close behind, he heard the sound of heavy snoring from below. He paused to listen. The sound rose and fell with undisturbed regularity.

"Sounds like the real thing," he whispered.

At the foot of the ladder there was a door opening into the fo'c's'le. It stood open. Standing in the doorway, Dirk flashed his light around inside. An untidy and malodorous hole, littered with cast-off clothes, newspapers, and soiled bedding; two bunks on either side. In the lower bunk to starboard sprawled Kirkall on his back with his mouth open. When the light flashed in his face he started up, gasping:

"What is it? . . . Who are you?"

"The Captain," said Dirk.

Kirkall let out a breath and started laughing. "Jeese! you give me a fright, Captain. I thought the islanders had boarded us!"

"Where's Mike?"

"In the engine-room, I reckon."

“Go back to sleep,” said Dirk.

Kirkall dropped back to his pillow. “A little too good to be true,” Dirk whispered to Mona. As they passed out he ran his hand over the door. “There’s no key in it,” he whispered, “or I’d lock him in.”

Back of the ladder ran the little passage, with a door into the galley at the end of it. The cabin to starboard, McElderry’s, was empty, of course; Dirk tried the Professor’s door. Locked. He knocked smartly and a quavering, high-pitched voice answered:

“Who is it? What do you want?”

“The Captain.”

The Professor unlocked the door and showed his frightened whiskered face around it. “What is it, Captain? What has happened?”

“Nothing,” said Dirk. “I’m just looking things over.”

The Professor caught sight of Mona. “I’m not dressed,” he faltered.

“That’s all right,” said Dirk. “Lock your door and go to sleep.”

“Sleep!” said the Professor, tragically.

Dirk and Mona proceeded into the galley. This was a narrow room extending all the way across the yacht, with portholes on either side, and a trapdoor in the middle of the floor which gave entrance to the food stores. All looked as usual. Dirk lifted the trap and cast his light around below. Everything was in place. There was a ladder from the galley to the pantry above and also a dumb-waiter.

They went on aft through the passage alongside the engine space. Dirk opened the door midway which gave on the gratings above the engine. There was a single masked light in the bottom of the ship. The generator was purring softly, and they saw Mike seated on a tool-chest with his head fallen back against the bulkhead.

“Wake up!” said Dirk.

The fireman straightened up, dug his knuckles into his eyes, like a child, and looked around him stupidly.

“How are your fires?” asked Dirk.

“Banked for morning,” he growled.

“All right. Turn off the generator and go forward.”

Mike pulled a switch and the electric bulb turned red and went out. Dirk lighted him up the ladder with his flash. He turned and slouched forward without a word.

This door, which was not supposed to be used except when the decks were awash in bad weather, had a key in it. Dirk transferred it to his pocket saying: "The hatch on deck has a hasp and staple. It's a good thing to remember."

They entered the cosy little saloon with its cushioned seats and curtained portholes. All quiet here. Passing around the stairway, Dirk softly tried the door of Ashcomb's cabin. To his surprise it opened in his hand. Upon casting his light around he saw that the room was empty.

"Where the hell has this one gone?" he muttered.

They looked up on deck. Ashcomb was not there. They tiptoed aft through the little passage. On the one side Mona's cabin was unlocked and empty, likewise the bathroom on the other. Dirk laid his ear against the door of Prosser's cabin. He heard a faint stirring inside.

"He's in here," he whispered to Mona.

Dirk softly turned the handle of the door, and found it locked just as he had left it. He had the key in his pocket. With slow care he inserted it in the lock and contrived to turn it without making any sound. Handing the flashlight to Mona, he took his gun in hand and opened the door. A sickening whiff of decay met their nostrils. Mona cast the light inside.

Ashcomb was on his knees in front of the little safe. He had propped a flashlight on a book in such a manner that it cast its light on the knob and dial. When the other light flashed in, he sprang up with a sob of terror, and leaped on the seat-locker. His light rolled away against the wall.

"Come back!" ordered Dirk. "I have you covered."

Ashcomb, blind with terror, caught hold of the top rim of the port and, raising himself, thrust his legs through the hole. Dirk caught him by the collar and dragged him back. He fell in a heap on the floor. Mona kept the light steadily upon him.

"Stand up!" commanded Dirk. "Put up your hands!"

But Ashcomb in an extremity of terror only crouched and writhed on the floor, moaning.

"Stand up!" repeated Dirk, "or I'll shoot you like a dog!"

Ashcomb slowly got to his feet and faced the light. His trembling hands went up. His face was dehumanized with terror. "I meant no harm . . . no harm," he stammered.

Dirk passed the gun to Mona. "Keep him covered while I search him," he said.

He failed to find a key on Ashcomb. “How did you get in here?” he demanded.

Ashcomb either could not or would not answer.

“What are you doing in here?”

“What—what is the use of my saying anything?” stuttered Ashcomb. “You won’t believe me. . . . I tell you I meant no harm here. My dead friend . . . it seemed a shame to leave him here unwatched. I came in to be with him. . . .”

“Ah, you dirty liar!” cried Dirk, in disgust. “It was your friend’s safe that you were after!”

“No! No!” cried Ashcomb. “It’s true I was trying to open the safe. I thought there might be something in it that would throw some light on his murder. I only wanted to solve his murder!”

“You’re lying!” said Dirk. “If you knew the combination why didn’t you say so in the beginning?”

“I don’t know the combination,” whined Ashcomb. “I have heard that sometimes you can open a safe by turning the knob and listening to the lock.”

Dirk laughed shortly. “That’s a good one! Mona,” he went on, “throw the light on the floor around the safe. I’ll keep him covered.”

The light picked up a scrap of paper lying on the carpet. Ashcomb, with a groan, dropped to the floor and clutched the paper. Dirk, flinging himself upon him, clubbed his gun and struck him a blow over the knuckles that caused his hand to open quickly. Dirk knocked the crumpled piece of paper out of the way, and Mona picked it up.

Dirk rose. “Stand up!” he commanded. “You’re lucky that I didn’t shoot you. March to your own cabin with your hands above your head. Mona, you follow me with the light.”

Ashcomb stumbled out of the room with hanging head, whimpering abjectly. There was something awful in the sight of such degradation. He shamed the whole race of men. “I could explain everything if you would only listen,” he whined. “I could explain everything!”

“Sure!” said Dirk. “You’re good at explaining.”

They issued out into the saloon. Suddenly, with a quickness one would not have believed possible, Ashcomb ducked and, twisting around, seized Dirk by the legs and threw him heavily to the floor. The gun was knocked from his hand.

Dirk felt Ashcomb's fingers closing around his throat. Drawing up a knee, he thrust out with all his force and broke the man's hold. Ashcomb was thrown to one side. As Dirk reached for him he rolled nimbly out of the way. He collided with the center table, and Dirk dropped on his back. Ashcomb, drawing himself up like a cat and heaving up his body, threw Dirk off. He fell on Dirk's chest.

Locked together, they threshed wildly back and forth across the cabin. Ashcomb's flexed fingers were continually reaching for Dirk's throat, his eyes. Mona with gun and flashlight ran around them, saying: "Hold him still, Dirk! Hold him still and I'll shoot!" Whereupon Ashcomb redoubled his efforts.

He was already sobbing for breath, and Dirk guessed that the flabby mass of flesh could not keep this up long. "Don't shoot!" he cried. "I can hold him!"

By ill luck, as they rolled across the floor Ashcomb's hand struck against Dirk's gun, and instantly he had snatched it up. Dirk seized his wrist and a desperate new struggle commenced; Ashcomb straining to draw in his arm and turn his hand, Dirk clenching his teeth and holding it straight out. He had his other arm locked around Ashcomb's neck, his legs around the man's body.

"He's got your gun!" cried Mona. "I *will* shoot him!"

"Put a bullet through his hand," said Dirk.

Ashcomb squalled with terror and let go the gun. Dirk grinned at the success of his ruse. Mona snatched up the gun. Ashcomb renewed his frantic efforts to shake Dirk off. They rolled across the room.

Up forward a door banked open and running feet approached. "Stand them off!" cried Dirk.

Mona threw open the door, and cast her light down the passage. "Stand back or I'll shoot!" she cried in a steady voice.

Ashcomb, encouraged by the approaching reinforcements, got a fresh access of strength. Dirk held him grimly. It was fictitious strength and it suddenly failed, leaving him sobbing for breath. Dirk, getting him by the throat, banged his head savagely against the floor, and he went limp. Dirk arose, and dragging him into his own cabin, locked the door on him and ran to Mona's aid.

She was still aiming her light steadily into the passage forward. "Get behind me," whispered Dirk, "and keep them covered with the light." She dropped on one knee behind him, and trained her light under his elbow.

Kirkall and Mike were halted in the narrow passage, Kirkall in front with his sly and sinister grin. “What’s the matter, Captain? We were coming to help you. The young lady must be off her nut.”

Dirk raised his gun. “Is that so?” he said, dryly. “Well, you can best help me by opening that door beside you and going down into the engine-room.”

“Aw, Captain . . .”

“Quick!” said Dirk. “One more step and I’ll fire.”

Kirkall’s face was as hard and watchful as an animal’s; the grin was purely mechanical. “You wouldn’t shoot me, Captain,” he whined. “Ain’t I your man? Ain’t I coming to help you?”

Dirk saw his body slowly sinking preparatory to a spring. He fired over the man’s head. The report crashed through the narrow passage. Kirkall thought better of his intentions and straightened up. Mike in a panic already had the engine-room door open and slipped through it. Dirk took a stride forward.

“Through that door with you and down the ladder!” he commanded.

Kirkall obeyed.

Dirk took the flashlight from Mona, and following them through the door, cast the light down. The two men stood at the foot of the ladder and scowled up at him. Dirk spoke swiftly over his shoulder to Mona:

“Go back to the after cabin and get the other flashlight. Take it up to the wheelhouse. On the floor beside the seat-locker you’ll find the first padlock that I had on the locker. It has a key in it. Close the engine-room hatch on the main deck; catch the hasp over the staple and padlock it. Bring me the key.”

Mona ran out.

From below, Kirkall, between a snarl and a whine, was saying: “You can’t lock us up down here, Captain!”

“Can’t I?” said Dirk.

“We’ll suffocate in this hot hole! It’s inhuman.”

“You can stretch out on the gratings,” said Dirk.

In a moment or two Mona returned. “I have padlocked the hatch,” she said.

“Good!” Dirk locked the door on the two hands and took the key. It was a steel door.

From the darkness up forward came a piteous whimper. “Oh, what has happened now, Captain?”

Casting his light in that direction, Dirk had a glimpse of the Professor's agitated face. It jerked back out of sight. "It's all right," said Dirk. "You can have your sleep now. Kirkall and Mike are locked up in the engine-room, and Ashcomb in his own cabin."

"What did they do?" gasped the Professor. "What did you find out?"

"I just put them out of harm's way on general principles," said Dirk. "Go to bed."

"Let me stay with you, Captain."

"Stay in your own cabin until morning," ordered Dirk.

They heard him go in and shut his door.

Dirk and Mona went aft into the saloon. From behind Ashcomb's door they could hear him moaning. Mona said, anxiously:

"Shouldn't we see if he needs care?"

Dirk grinned hardily. "Let him grunt," he said. "It's a sign that he is recovering."

"Can he get out of there?"

"Not unless he smashes the door down. It opens inward."

"He can climb out of the porthole?"

"Well, if he wants to go ashore and join up with Lipp Bewley it's all right with me. . . . However, I don't think he will. He appears to be more afraid of Lipp than he is of me. . . . Have you got the paper you picked up off the floor?"

She handed it over. It contained figures and directions. "Turn clockwise to 60. Make three complete turns backward and stop at 45. Two turns forward and stop at 80."

"The combination of the safe," said Dirk. "Ashcomb must have had it from the beginning."

The sickly smell of mortality was stealing through the whole after part of the yacht, and Dirk hated to expose Mona to it. "Go up on deck and wait for me," he urged. "There's no danger now."

She shook her head. "I'll stay with you. I don't mind it. I can't feel that that's my father in there. He has gone."

They entered the after cabin. Dirk, trying to dope out how Ashcomb had got in, stuck his head out of the porthole for which the man had leaped, and saw the explanation. The skiff tied to the ladder, lay against the yacht in such a manner that Ashcomb had been able to drop into her from Mona's cabin, and to climb back from the stern thwart into Prosser's cabin.

Dirk dropped in front of the safe and manipulated the dial according to directions. In a moment or two he swung open the door. The first thing he saw was a packet of new bills; fifteen tens and thirty fives.

“Three hundred,” he murmured. “It scarcely seems the price of two murders.”

Among a number of papers that had no bearing on the situation he found a penciled map of the island and Harry Prosser’s will. The map was a hasty sketch, but easily recognizable. Cap’n Jim-of-Jim’s house was marked, and offshore a cross had been set down with the words, “Drop anchor here,” in a schoolboy hand.

“Lipp Bewley certainly made this,” said Dirk.

As for the will, judging from the phraseology, Prosser had drawn it up without legal assistance. It was dated a week before and witnessed by two names unknown to Mona.

“This is the last will and testament of Harry Prosser:

“I hereby devise and bequeath to my beloved daughter, Mona Prosser, the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, and this shall be the first charge against my estate. After this sum has been paid I direct that the balance of my property shall be divided into two equal portions, of which the first shall be paid to my said daughter and the other to my dear friend Claggett Ashcomb.”

After appointing Ashcomb and a trust company as his executors, the document concluded with the statement that it was the testator’s “dearest wish that my daughter will accept my friend Claggett Ashcomb for her husband.”

“This will may supply the motive for the murder,” said Dirk.

Mona shivered. “After killing the father, would he dare to marry the daughter?” she murmured.

“Who can tell what passes through a man’s mind?”

“I don’t see what there can be in it for him,” she said. “My father told me several times that the value of his property was about a hundred thousand.”

“He may have been concealing something from you.”

Dirk locked the money and the will in the safe, and locked the door of the cabin behind him. They returned on deck.

HOURS of darkness still lay before him. It was the longest night of Dirk's life. The moon stood still in the sky; the earth ceased turning. It seemed to him that there were leaden weights attached to the hands of the clock in the wheelhouse. Every time he flashed a light on it he exclaimed in surprise. It was incredible that time could pass so slowly.

Towards morning Mona persuaded him to lie down on the seat-locker, and he slept awhile.

Dawn was graying the windows when she woke him, and his heart bounded with joy. Day had actually arrived! The day of their departure from that island of horror! But instantly he was smitten with remorse upon marking the hollows of strain and fatigue in the pale face bending over him.

"I shouldn't have slept!"

"The skiff is gone," she said, bitterly. "You will think I have kept a bad watch."

"Not necessarily," he said, getting up.

"It was lying in the yacht's shadow," said Mona, "and I couldn't be sure whether it was there or not until it got light. Then I saw it was gone."

"Don't worry," said Dirk. "We would have had to return it to Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, anyhow. It's his meal ticket." Fetching a pair of binoculars, he trained it on the shore. The skiff was riding on her trolley as usual. "It's all right," he said, dryly. "It's been taken back."

"But who took it? I swear nobody came on deck. No boat approached the yacht."

"Let's go count our prisoners."

On the main deck Dirk threw open the door of the engine-room hatch. Instantly Kirkall and Mike below started for the ladder.

“Back up,” said Dirk, grimly.

“Ain’t you going to let us out?” demanded Kirkall, in dismay.

“When breakfast is ready,” said Dirk, closing the door. . . . “That pair of pigeons is still in the coop,” he said to Mona.

They descended into the after saloon. Upon opening the door of Ashcomb’s cabin, they found it empty.

“So he’s gone,” said Dirk. “Dropped out of the porthole, untied the skiff, and drifted astern on the wind until he was out of earshot. You are not to blame, Mate.”

“You only say that to make me feel better,” she murmured.

“No. Honestly, it’s just as well he’s gone. He was of no help in working the ship, and we’re too short-handed to watch and feed him.”

On deck Dirk cast his glance around the sky. The breeze had shifted to the northwest and it was much cooler. In the pure light before sunrise the green island stood out with crystalline distinctness.

“It’s going to blow hard today,” said Dirk. “Coming from this quarter, it ought to blow us off the shoal a little sooner.”

The Professor looked out of the pantry door like a gray ghost with polished glasses. “Is everything all right?” he stammered.

Dirk had to smile at his excessive timorousness. “All right so far,” he answered. “All we need to make men of us is food. . . . How about breakfast, Mate?”

“I’ll start it,” said Mona.

Later, after they had eaten, when the Professor saw Dirk preparing to let the two hands up on deck, he was seized with a fresh panic. “They’ll get the better of us, Captain!”

“We’ve got to have their help to work the ship,” said Dirk.

“Then for God’s sake give me a gun so I can help you to overawe them.”

Dirk shook his head. “No guns are to be given out until the murders are solved.”

“Do you think I committed them?” the Professor demanded, excitedly.

“I’m not saying you did. But I’m not going to break the rule I have laid down.”

“You have armed the girl!” he said, resentfully.

“Do you think she killed her father?”

He made no answer.

Kirkall and Mike appeared on deck with an humble and chastened air; quick to obey orders; respectful to all. Dirk was not too much deceived by this anxiety to please. He took care never to present his back to either one of them. Dirk had two guns on him and Mona one. The other four weapons he had locked in a drawer in his cabin.

After the two hands had eaten, Dirk ordered them below again, Kirkall to stoke the fires, Mike to lubricate and care for the engine. As Dirk prepared to follow them, Mona remonstrated:

“It’s not safe, Captain. You can’t watch them both at once.”

“Well, you come, too,” said Dirk. “You can sit on the gratings and help watch them.”

Dirk, as a result of long service on steamships, had a working knowledge of engines. He wanted to find out how much Mike knew. “Can you run it?” he asked.

“Ain’t never tried by myself,” growled Mike. “I got no confidence.”

“Well, you’d damned well better find confidence,” said Dirk. “You’ve got to run it today if I have to stand over you with a gun and let the girl steer.”

After watching Mike’s practiced hand with the oil-can, Dirk was satisfied that he knew more than he let on.

As the morning wore on a thick excitement took possession of Dirk. He walked his little ship, continually glancing overboard to gauge the depth of the water and watching her deck flatten out by infinitesimal stages as the rising tide lifted her bow. In three hours we’ll be free! in two hours! in an hour! Civilization and safety only thirty miles away. He kept an anxious eye on the point of the harbor. If only the islanders did not interfere! No boat showed itself.

The wind was blowing hard from the northwest, catching the yacht full abeam. Sky, sea, and shore were swept clean of cobwebs today. Shortly after eleven, almost an hour before Dirk expected it, the *Alethea* gave a preliminary tremor that rooted him to the deck. A moment later she heeled a little to port, slipped a few inches, came to an even keel, and began to swing into the wind.

“We’re afloat! We’re afloat!” yelled Dirk.

Mona and the Professor came running down with joyful faces. Dirk shouted down the engine-room hatch. “Kirkall, on deck! . . . Mike, stand by your engine!”

Sending Kirkall and the Professor forward to man the anchor hoist, Dirk ran up to the wheelhouse. When Kirkall shouted: "All clear!" he signaled full speed ahead to the engine-room. The propeller turned over, the water gurgled and boiled up astern. What a goodly sound it was in his ears! The *Alethea* moved slowly ahead.

The yacht was still pointing ashore and he had to steam in close to the beach in order to get water enough to turn her in. He could not quite straighten her out in the channel on his first signal, and gave Mike full speed astern. He answered promptly, she churned for a moment, then suddenly there was a jar and a hideous clanging of metal rose from below. The yacht was shaken from stem to stern. Dirk's heart stood still.

Mike quickly got steam turned off and the awful shaking was stopped. A moment later Dirk heard him yelling from the engine-room hatch: "We've lost our propeller, Captain. We've lost our propeller!"

Dirk knew it already. He hardened his face in order to hide the utter sickness that filled him. "Let go the anchor!" he shouted to Kirkall. The chain ran out. "Go below and watch your steam!" he ordered Mike. "You can let the fires out!"

On the main deck the Professor came running back, wringing his hands and squalling: "No propeller! What are we going to do, Captain? What are we going to do?"

Dirk, silently cursing him for a fool, made no answer. Unable to move the yacht, and without any means of leaving her, what *could* they do but remain aboard and await their fate?

Mona came running up the ladder. She was at the point of breaking down and wanted nobody but Dirk to see it. Stepping back into the wheelhouse, he caught her in his arms. "Oh, Dirk! Oh, Dirk!" she faltered.

From between stiff lips he murmured the conventional words of cheer that he was far from feeling at the moment. "Buck up, Mate! I'm depending on you. They haven't got us down yet. And they won't if we stand together."

"I'll be all right in a minute," she gasped. Withdrawing herself from his arms, she flung herself face down on the locker, struggling with her sobs.

The Professor was behind her, chattering excitedly. "We can't get away! We can't get away! What are we going to do, Captain? If the propeller has dropped off, can we recover it? Can we fix it on again?"

Dirk was in no mood to fool with him. "Go down on deck," he said shortly.

"We got to do something!" he wailed. "We can't just sit here and wait for them to pick us off!"

“Go down on deck!” shouted Dirk. “When I want your help I’ll ask for it!”

The Professor faded.

Kirkall slouched back from the bow with a look of dismay on his sly face; but Dirk could have sworn that the grinning lines around his mouth had deepened. Had Kirkall known what was going to happen?

Dirk was under no delusion that losing the propeller was accidental. His mind flew back to Wye Bewley the half-wit in his skiff the day before. Wye had left the yacht’s side and had returned later. At that time the propeller had been half out of water. Wye Bewley must have removed the nut that locked it on its shaft. But there was no tool of any sort in the skiff. Well, then, a tool had been handed him from the yacht.

Lipp Bewley, Wye Bewley, Ashcomb, Kirkall, Mike—Dirk felt as if a net was being slowly tightened around him. He looked toward the point of the harbor, half expecting to see the skiff come stealing around it with the brutish figure of Lipp Bewley standing in the stern. The skiff was not there, but Dirk was very sure that Lipp and Ashcomb were not far away, watching and waiting.

What was the motive behind it all? Keeping them prisoners aboard the yacht and killing them off one by one. Why? Why? Why? Dirk could find no answer.

AS SOON as it became clear that the yacht could not leave the island, Dirk had to get rid of the bodies on board. He could not carry them ashore, and if he cast them overboard, weighted, there was scarcely water enough at low tide to hide them decently. He decided to set them adrift and let wind and tide carry them out in the Bay.

After they had eaten their midday meal, he got out a bolt of canvas from the yacht's stores and cut from it sufficient to make two shrouds. Having put Mike to work in the engine-room and Kirkall on deck—they still obeyed his orders—he carried it below. Mona followed him around the yacht like his shadow, but he would not let her help with this gruesome task. She waited in the saloon while he made Prosser ready, and in the wheelhouse while he sewed Tony into his last suit. For each he made a little water-proof packet to contain the dead man's name, and a brief statement of the manner of his death.

When all was ready Kirkall and Mike carried the two bodies and laid them on a grating placed on the main deck between the davits where the motor-launch had hung. Around the grating gathered the five persons so strangely confined together and so strangely divided. The Professor took care to keep Dirk between him and the two hands that he distrusted.

Mona silently handed Dirk a Book of Common Prayer that she had found on the shelves of the saloon. Dirk offered it to the Professor, but the little man drew back, waving his hands.

“No! No! Not me!”

“You represent the learned professions,” said Dirk.

“You are the Captain. It is the Captain's place.”

“Very well.”

Bareheaded, Dirk took his place at the head of the grating. Kirkall put on a pious expression that went badly with his smirking lips; Mike merely looked stupid. Both men kept glancing out of the corners of their eyes at Mona. Mona had got her grip again, and her face was marble smooth. Dirk was proud of her. He read the burial service in a strong voice. When he came to the words:

“We therefore commit these bodies to the deep to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body when the sea shall have given up her dead. . . .”

He nodded to Mike and Kirkall, and they tipped up the grating allowing the sheeted bundles to slide feet first into the water. They dropped the grating and gaped over the side, waiting for the bodies to rise. “Amen! Amen!” intoned the Professor, wagging his head.

Dirk and Mona would not look. They went up the ladder. Dirk’s heart ached on the girl’s account.

“Don’t overdo it,” he said, glancing sideways at her white face.

“What do you mean?”

“Self-control. If you feel like busting out now, you can.”

She shook her head. “No! I’m relieved.”

In a few moments the bodies appeared floating awash past the stern, rolling and bobbing in the waves, now submerged, now reappearing; two companions setting out on their last voyage. Dirk bade his dead friend a silent farewell. Better, anyhow, than being stuck in the earth, he thought. Dirk and Mona watched them out of sight.

Dirk shook himself, and, taking out a packet of cigarettes, offered it to Mona. She accepted one. They lighted up, leaning their elbows on two window sills of the wheelhouse and looking forward.

“We’ve got to do some heavy thinking,” said Dirk.

Mona forced a smile. “Surely!”

The game smile moved Dirk more deeply than her tears. Some moments passed before he could go on. “Anyhow, we’ve got plenty of food and water,” he said. “And with our guns we could stand off almost any number from the bridge deck. So far as I could see, the islanders possess no weapons but a few antique shotguns.”

“But what is to be the end of it?” asked Mona, in a low voice. “Apparently no boat from the outside world ever calls at the island.”

“You’re right,” said Dirk. “We can’t just sit here waiting for rescue, or we’d go off our nuts. We got to do something about it.”

After thinking awhile he said: "Cap'n Jim-of-Jim Bewley is our best bet."

"How will we reach him?"

"Swim ashore. Are you good for it?"

"Surely."

"We'll escape in his canoe. There's that money in the safe. We can pay him well."

"She's got no engine."

"We'll sail her. With a wind like this we could make Criston in five or six hours."

"If the islanders saw us sailing away they'd come after us in their motor-boats."

"We'll go at night and before the moon rises."

"What will we do about the Professor?"

"Oh, damn the Professor!" muttered Dirk. "He can't swim. What *can* we do with him?"

"We couldn't leave him in the hands of these brutes."

Dirk scowled. "It's not outside the bounds of possibility that the Professor is a crook, too."

"But he's so much afraid of the others."

"He may be playing a little game of his own."

"You have no proof that he is crooked."

"He's such a fool! It will quadruple the difficulty of getting away!" groaned Dirk.

"We could put a life-preserver on him," suggested Mona. "At half-past eight or nine when it gets dark, the tide will be low. We will only have to help him into shoal water. Then he can walk ashore."

"I suppose there's no getting out of it," muttered Dirk. "Say nothing to him about our plans until it's time to start."

Upon first looking into Ashcomb's cabin that morning, Dirk had been struck by the fact that the man appeared to have abandoned the yacht without taking anything with him. He proposed to Mona that they make a further search through his things. "We can make out to be cleaning up the after part of the ship," he said.

They went below. Ashcomb's cabin contained two small twin beds, a seat-locker under the portholes, and a flat-topped desk against the opposite wall. A dressing-table and a chiffonier stood against the after bulkhead.

There was a wardrobe alongside the desk. Everything about the cabin was orderly; no indication that he had hurriedly gone through his things before dropping out of the porthole.

Though he had come down in the world, Ashcomb still possessed a good wardrobe. His neatly pressed suits were hanging up, and there was a store of shirts and other haberdashery in the drawers of the dresser. Also a small amount of personal jewelry—studs, cuff-links and the like.

“These things must have meant something to him,” said Dirk. “Strange that he should leave it all behind. He seems to have gone off in undershirt and pants.”

“How could he take anything with him if he had to swim for it?” asked Mona.

“He only had to swim thirty feet to the skiff. It would be simple to make a water-proof bundle and tow it. There’s an oilskin coat in the wardrobe.”

“Perhaps he expected to return to the yacht.”

“Something in that,” said Dirk.

He continued his search. Under the mattress of Ashcomb’s bed he found a wallet containing upwards of fifty dollars, and his face turned grim. “Even though he may have expected to return, I can’t see him leaving his money behind,” he said.

Mona’s eyes widened. “What do you suspect?” she murmured.

“I can’t help but remember his fear that he would be the next on the list. Whatever part he may have taken in this business, his fear was real. It brought the sweat out on his face.”

On the carpet of the cabin Dirk found three little brown spots that he did not remember having seen when he searched it the day before. Moistening a towel and rubbing one of the spots, it came off red.

“Blood?” he said. “Where did that come from? It’s true I beat him up some before I threw him in here last night, but he wasn’t bleeding then.”

On the brass sill of the door leading into the saloon there was a brownish smear. Somebody had attempted to wipe it clean, but had not succeeded completely.

“It’s beginning to look as if Ashcomb never left the yacht,” said Dirk, quietly.

A shiver went through Mona. “O God! more horrors!” she murmured.

Dirk transferred his search to the saloon, and to the passage leading forward. On the linoleum of the passage he found a drop of dried blood, and another on the iron stairs leading down to the engine-room.

“But how could he have got out of his cabin?” faltered Mona. “Or how could anybody have got to him?”

“There has already been evidence that somebody on board has duplicate keys to the doors. Perhaps Ashcomb let himself out and went and liberated Kirkall and Mike. Or the other way around. Looks as if they got Ashcomb in his own cabin.”

“But, Dirk, you searched Ashcomb; you searched his room; you searched the other men and all through the fo’c’s’le.”

“I’m not an experienced searcher,” said Dirk, bitterly. “I couldn’t guarantee that I poked into every hole. There are hundreds of hiding-places aboard a ship. . . . Look!” He pointed to the I beams supporting the deck overhead. The lower edges offered a perfect hiding-place for a small object such as a key. “Those beams are all over the yacht. And that’s only one place.”

Dirk and Mona descended into the engine and boiler space. Kirkall and Mike were on deck. Dirk carefully swept through the litter of coal and dust on the steel floor in front of the two fire-boxes. He found nothing.

The fires were out. Dirk dumped the ashes and cinders in the pit below, and started drawing it out a little at a time. He dropped to his knees to examine it particle by particle. It was a lengthy business. The skylight in the deck overhead gave him sufficient light. Mona sat on the tool-chest and turned her head away.

In the end Dirk’s eye was caught by an infinitesimal glitter. He picked up a tiny bit of partly calcined bone with a speck of gold clinging to it. In short, the remains of a human tooth.

“Poor wretch,” he said, gazing at it. “So his fears were justified.”

“Oh, Dirk!” murmured Mona. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure now.”

“How about the skiff?”

“The murderer rowed it ashore and afterwards swam off to the yacht. No doubt his partner helped him aboard through a porthole. . . . At any rate I have the goods on Mike,” he went on with satisfaction. “This could not have been done without Mike’s knowledge. . . . It’s narrowing down all the time. Wye Bewley could not have tampered with the propeller and killed Tony, too. Tony was killed by somebody attached to the yacht.”

Dirk carried his find to Mona. “I’ll have to ask you to look at it, Mate. You may have to identify it at some future time.”

Mona looked and shivered. “I don’t understand,” she faltered, “if Ashcomb was in the plot, why should they have turned against him?”

“It’s a common situation,” he said, grimly. “Suppose this was Ashcomb’s deal in the first place, and he called in the crooks to help him. Suppose they liked it so well that they decided to eliminate him and make it all their own!”

AS SOON as it became dark, Dirk and Mona invited the Professor down below for a consultation. They left Kirkall and Mike lying on the forward deck. The Professor entered the saloon blinking apprehensively. Dirk wasted no time in beating around the bush.

“Mona and I have decided to swim ashore,” he said. “Do you want to come?”

“I . . . I can’t swim,” stammered the Professor.

“You can put on a life-preserver and we’ll tow you into shallow water.”

“But why are you going? What will you do when you get there? Where will you go?”

“I’m going to hire or buy Cap’n Jim-of-Jim’s canoe and sail it over to the mainland to fetch help.”

The Professor’s jaw dropped. “No! No!” he said, agitatedly. “It’s too dangerous! . . . The islanders would come after us in one of their motor-boats. They would sink us! Kill us all and sink us out there in the middle of the Bay and there would be nothing to show what had happened!”

“We’ve figured all the chances,” said Dirk, “and we think it’s worth trying. . . . I’m not satisfied that the islanders are against us.”

“Maybe not,” said the Professor. “But they’re watching us. And if they saw us trying to get away they would know we were going to bring back the police. They’re terrified of that. They would never let us get away!”

“Well, I felt that it was only fair to tell you what we were going to do. You can decide for yourself, of course. If you’d rather remain aboard the yacht . . .”

“Remain aboard the yacht!” he cried, shrilly. “Alone with those two thugs! They would murder me before you had been gone ten minutes, Captain!”

“Then you’ll have to come with us,” said Dirk.

“Yes . . . yes . . . I’ll have to come with you,” he said, distractedly. “But it’s a hard choice! Suicidal either way!”

“Have you got a bathing-suit?” asked Dirk.

He shook his head.

“Then strip to your underclothes. I’ll wrap your clothes along with ours in a water-proof bundle.”

“But . . . but . . .” stammered the Professor, glancing at Mona in terror.

“Oh, for God’s sake! this is no time for modesty!” said Dirk, impatiently. “Mona will get ready in her own cabin and you and I will go in Ashcomb’s room.”

“I must get my wallet and my notebook. I couldn’t leave those.”

“All right. Don’t show yourself on deck.”

The Professor ran forward through the passage.

Dirk had already secured the money from the safe and all the guns. To these he added Mona’s clothes and his own. Mona had given him the boy’s suit to pack. The Professor returned and handed over his garments as he removed them. Dirk rolled up everything inside Ashcomb’s oilskin coat and tied it securely.

The Professor looked like a bleached frog in his union suit, and it did not lessen the comic effect when he tied a life-preserver around his middle. Dirk was forced to grin. Out in the saloon Mona was unconcernedly waiting for them clad in an abbreviated silken garment that made her look like a nymph out of antiquity. Dirk ached at the sight, and the thought flitted across his mind, Will I ever be able to love her in quiet?

All being ready, they went up the stairway, across the deck, and down the boarding-ladder. The wind had gone down with the sun and the water was as smooth as glass. The Professor stood cowering on the grating. “I’ll never do it, never!” he whimpered. Dirk coolly pushed him in. He rose to the surface gasping out: “I’m drowning! Save me!” Dirk and Mona dove in and, each seizing a hand, started towing him towards the shore.

Kirkall and Mike came running aft along the deck. “What’s the idea?” shouted the former.

“We’re going ashore,” answered Dirk.

“When will you be back?”

“As soon as we can get here,” Dirk called back, dryly.

“Don’t desert us, Captain! Don’t desert us!” Kirkall shouted pleadingly; but Dirk heard the break of laughter in his voice. Evidently he believed that this move played right into his hands. Was Kirkall the directing mind of the whole plot?

They swam on through the smooth water, warm as new milk. In the darkness each swimmer left a long trail of phosphorescence behind. Dirk looked across at Mona’s body and limbs outlined by the misty glow. She was like a creature of silver cleaving the water. Between them the Professor sputtered and splashed.

Coming to shoal water, they put their feet down. Mona’s shoulders arose decked with little globules of phosphorescence like stars.

“This stuff will show us up if anybody is watching,” remarked Dirk. “We must head for a point on the beach a little above Cap’n Jim-of-Jim’s house. There’s no knowing who may be hanging about.”

Alternately walking and swimming, they made their way in. Looking over his shoulder, Dirk caught a blink of light from the yacht’s deck. Signaling. To his surprise it was not directed towards the settlement, but towards the lonely stretch of beach to the north. Who or what could be up there? He said nothing about it to his companions.

Upon coming abreast of the Bay canoe at anchor, Dirk caught hold of the gunwale and looked in her. As he half expected, she had no tiller. It was Cap’n Jim-of-Jim’s habit to carry it ashore with him. So there could be no question of carrying off the boat without leave.

They walked out on the beach, dressed under the shelter of bushes, and stole back towards the house, crouching low as they approached so that their heads might not be silhouetted against the stars. Though it was only a little after nine, the windows were dark. A scent of old-fashioned herbs came out of the yard. In the faint light the little low-eaved house with its big chimneys like ears, squatted sedately behind its fence of palings. They paused at the gate. Nothing stirred. A crazy recklessness took possession of Dirk and he desired intolerably to seize Mona and cover her face with kisses. It might be his last chance. But the presence of the squeaking Professor spoiled all.

“I wish I didn’t have to rouse him out of sleep,” muttered Dirk. “It doesn’t put a man in the best of humors.”

“Don’t knock on the door,” said Mona. “Call to him from here.”

“Ho, Cap’n Jim-of-Jim!” sang Dirk.

He fell to shaking with helpless laughter at the sound of the absurd name. Mona joined in. The recklessness had her, too. Flinging an arm

around her, he drew her hard against his side in a sudden wild passion of regret because life and happiness were so precarious. She understood. A little to one side, the Professor was making little fretful noises.

“Ho! Cap’n Jim-of-Jim!” Dirk repeated, in a shaking voice.

A tousled white head appeared at one of the dormer windows. “What the hell do you want?” Cap’n Jim-of-Jim demanded, peevishly. “Why can’t you come in the daytime?”

That sent Dirk and Mona off into renewed silent laughter. “What’s the matter with you?” the Professor whispered fretfully.

Dirk released Mona. “Sorry, Cap’n,” he said, steadying his voice, “but it’s important.”

“Well, wait till I get my pants on.”

He presently appeared in the doorway with his pants pulled over his nightshirt, and his gnarled feet bare; an aged lion carrying an old-time lamp with a scalloped chimney.

“Come you in,” he said.

When the light fell on Mona he was embarrassed. “Please to excuse my language from the window, Miss. I couldn’t see from above that you was a lady.”

“Please treat me as a boy, Cap’n,” said Mona.

He led the way into his sitting-room. “Be seated,” he said, with old-fashioned courtesy. “I would rouse up my wife to receive the lady, but she is ailing.”

“Don’t think of it, Cap’n.”

There was something very grim in the bareness of the room. It contained nothing but a little chunk stove in front of the chimney and a home-made table with a set of plain chairs, the latter constructed without any concessions to the human form. The only ornament was a big faded chart of Chesapeake Bay pinned to the wall. But the place was very clean. Mona was touched by such a want of comfort in the old. Seeing her look around, the old man said, in his equable fashion:

“Once my folks had mainland furniture, but it done give out long ago. This I made myself. I don’t favor fal-lals.”

“It’s very nice,” said Mona.

“Would you mind blowing out the light, Cap’n?” asked Dirk. “There might be snoopers around. We can talk just as well in the dark.”

Cap’n Jim-of-Jim took the request as a natural one, and coolly obeyed.

Dirk said, simply: "Cap'n, there have been two more men killed aboard the yacht; the young wireless operator, and Mr. Ashcomb, a guest of the owner's."

The old man with his admirable self-possession forbore to show any excitement. "Who did it?" he asked.

"I reckon it was the same hand that struck down Mr. Prosser last night."

"Why didn't you steam away at midday when the tide was in? You had steam up."

"Somebody had been tampering with our propeller. When we started the engine it was thrown off the shaft."

"So!" said Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, scornfully. "You were simple to let them do it."

"So it seems," said Dirk, bitterly. "But it's gone. And apparently it is somebody's aim to kill us off one by one."

"What is it to me?" asked Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, calmly.

Dirk flushed. "I don't understand that point of view. Among our people it would be said that if you sat here and let us be murdered without lifting hand or foot, you would be partly responsible."

The old man was unimpressed. "A man must look after his own first," he said.

"Then you refuse to help us?" said Dirk, getting hot.

"I didn't say that. . . . How can I help you?"

"I want to hire your boat and sail over to the mainland for help."

Cap'n Jim-of-Jim was silent for a while. "No," he said, resolutely, "you can't have my boat."

"Damn it!" cried Dirk. "What do you value it at? I'll buy the boat!"

"Your money is nothing to me," said Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, undisturbed. "What need have I of money, living here?"

"What am I to think of this?" demanded Dirk, angrily. "Are you in this murderous conspiracy, too?"

The old man chuckled. "Keep your hair on, young Captain. My only aim is to live out the balance of my days in quiet. . . . Look you, if I let you have my boat, it would be held as an act of treachery by the people here. And I would be run off the island."

"I will bring back a boatload of armed men to protect you."

"Sure, and after they had nosed around awhile, they would go away again, and where would I and my old woman be? . . . I have no other place

to go. My folks have lived in this house for two hundred year. They are buried in the yard yonder, and I shall soon be there with them. I'm not going to yield my grave to a stranger."

"So, we've got to submit to being murdered in order to save your grave!" said Dirk, bitterly. "By God! I'll take the boat, anyhow."

"Sure you could do that," said the old man, calmly. "The tiller is lying in the hall. . . . But it wouldn't do you no good. There is no wind, and when morning broke you would still be in sight of the island. Naturally, the men would go out in their motor-boats to see what you was up to. There is nothing that frightens them like the coming of strangers. They would use you rough, Captain."

Dirk had no answer to this. After giving it time to sink in, Cap'n Jim-of-Jim said, significantly, "There is a better way of saving yourselves, Captain."

"What's that?" asked Dirk, eagerly.

"These are poor ignorant people on this island, but not bad-hearted. Leastwise no worse than the average of men. They're afraid of strangers, that's all, and they act rough towards strangers to scare them away. Go to the settlement and put your case before them, Captain. That's my advice."

"Ha! I like that idea," cried Dirk.

"No! No!" put in the Professor, in a panic. "They are savages! You can't reason with them. Look what happened to you the last time you went among them. You were nearly killed. You can't risk it a second time!"

"Ah, be quiet," said Dirk, impatiently. "And let me get to the bottom of this!"

"I will speak!" he cried, shrilly. "You've got to think of the girl. What would she do if . . ."

"If you're askeared of them you could stay here with my old woman," said Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, dryly.

"What good would that do me?" shrilled the Professor. "If the Captain was killed, what would I do on this horrible island?"

"Be quiet!" ordered Dirk. "Go on, Cap'n."

"Have you any reason to believe that the men of the island are working against you?" asked the old man.

"Only Lipp Bewley and Wye Bewley. They're in it. I suspect that Lipp brought the yacht here for some purpose of his own."

"So? Well, you can take it on my word, Captain, Lipp and Wye Bewley they ain't no favorites on the island, and never was. There's no reason why

the men should further their murderous designs. Lipp Bewley he's a loafer; he's riffraff, a hanger-on, and everybody knows it. And Wye, you can see what he is. He's not hard good. He'll do what anybody tells him. Maybe Lipp has circulated lies about you and the men are sore. If you face them, Captain, and tell your own story, they will remember what a liar he always was."

"Good!" said Dirk. "I'll do it!"

"Lipp and Wye Bewley come of bad stock," Cap'n Jim-of-Jim went on. "They had a brother called Nahum Bewley, killed a man here on the island twenty years ago. The men wouldn't stand for that murder. They run Nahum Bewley off and he never dast come back here. Awhile ago I hear he was put in state's prison on the mainland for some other crime. They are bad people. . . . If you could prove that Lipp Bewley brought the yacht here, the islanders would turn against him to a man."

Dirk showed him the rude map he had found in Prosser's safe.

"Lipp may well have drawn this," said Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, "but how can you prove it?"

"By this line of writing," said Dirk. "Drop anchor here."

"How can you prove handwriting to them as can't write?" he asked. "Howsoever, bring the map with you and show it to them."

"Can we go now?" asked Dirk, eagerly.

"Why not? . . . I'll go with you. Just let me get my boots on." He left the room.

"No good will come of this!" said the Professor, lugubriously shaking his head. However, when Cap'n Jim-of-Jim returned, he refused to be left behind.

WHEN they wound between the sand dunes and the crouching shanties loomed before them in the dark, Cap'n Jim-of-Jim called a halt. "You folks stay here a piece," he said. "I'll go rouse up the men and gather them in Joe Siever's house. I'll prepare the way for you. . . . We won't be able to keep Lipp Bewley out of it."

"That's all right," said Dirk. "I'll be glad to confront him."

"He's a smooth talker, Captain."

"All right. I can talk some myself, if need be."

"Speak to them slow, Captain," the old man urged. "And don't use no hard words. Because the mainland talk is strange in their ears."

He left them. Presently they heard him going from house to house, rousing the men. They came out, and voices spoke back and forth. A dim light showed in the rear window of Joe Siever's house off to the right, and the murmur of talk from that source became continuous.

Dirk waited for a quarter of an hour, and then led his two companions around the house. The front door stood open. The room was lighted by a single small oil-lamp. There were between twenty and thirty men present, presumably the entire adult male population. They made a circle of dark, masklike faces squatting on their heels around the walls. Neither Lipp nor Wye Bewley was present, and to Dirk's relief, the women and children had been sent out.

Cap'n Jim-of-Jim was haranguing them in his humorous and sardonic fashion. As Dirk entered, he said: "Here he is. Let him speak for himself."

It was a disconcerting audience to face. They looked down their noses instead of at the speaker. But Dirk took heart from what Cap'n Jim-of-Jim

had told him. They were more afraid of him than he was of them; under their great parade of indifference they were men like any others.

“Where’s Lipp Bewley tonight?” he asked. “I want him to hear what I’ve got to say.”

“Fishing,” a voice answered.

“Fishing at night?”

“Him and Wye Bewley’s been out in their skiff all day.”

“I’m a simple man like yourselves,” Dirk began. “Since I was a boy I have followed the water and I know little about shore ways. We ought to understand each other. I was hired in Baltimore to navigate this man’s yacht. He said he wanted to go to Diseree Island, and I brought her here. It was none of my business.”

The walled faces in front gave no sign of any response; however, upon glancing at Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, Dirk caught a certain twinkle in his eye which assured him that he had made a good beginning. He continued:

“On the morning after we got here Mr. Prosser, the owner, was found dead in his bed. I suspected foul play, and I suspected that Lipp Bewley was mixed up in it somehow. So I came here to question him. You all know what happened. Lipp Bewley denied knowing anything about the murder, but I believe that he was lying.

“I wanted to carry the dead man back to his home, but when I returned to the yacht I found her aground, and it was impossible for me to get away until today. Meanwhile, yesterday afternoon I found my wireless operator killed in the same manner, and last night a third man disappeared. I found evidence showing that he had been killed on board, and his body burned under the boiler.”

Dirk felt a certain stir among his hearers, but their faces showed no change.

“When I started up my engine at high water today, I lost my propeller. Somebody had been tinkering with it.”

This created a visible sensation. The dark-skinned men glanced at each other.

“So you see I’m in bad trouble,” said Dirk, simply. “I’ve got to take care of this young lady and this learned man and return them to their homes. I come to you for help.”

Their immobility was breaking up. They whispered among themselves, but none addressed Dirk. Cap’n Jim-of-Jim finally spoke up:

“Captain, these men want to know if you believe that it was the people of the island who made this trouble.”

“These men?” said Dirk, including the whole room in his gesture. “No. I have no reason to think it. But Lipp Bewley had something to do with it. I don’t say that he was alone in it. The chief killer was aboard the yacht. It was Lipp Bewley who brought the yacht here.”

This aroused them effectively. Dirk got all their eyes then. “What for did he bring you here?” a voice demanded.

“That I can’t tell you,” said Dirk. “Can you tell me?”

There was no answer.

“How you know Lipp brought the yacht here?” asked another voice.

“He went away from here this spring, didn’t he?” said Dirk. “He came back just a little while before the yacht came. The owner told me that somebody in Philadelphia had described the island to him, and had told him where to anchor. Could that have been anybody but Lipp Bewley?”

No answer.

“After the owner was killed,” Dirk went on, “I found this among his papers.”

The little map was passed around from hand to hand. It made a considerable impression. “How do you know Lipp Bewley drew this?” asked a voice. “His name ain’t on it.”

“Would he put his name on it?” asked Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, sarcastically.

“I hope to prove it to you when he comes back,” said Dirk.

“Lipp was out last night in his skiff and he brought back no fish,” growled Joe Siever. “And tonight he’s out again. Who fishes at night?”

“I would be willing to lay a bet,” said Dirk, grimly, “that he is on the yacht right now, and up to no good.”

“Who’ll come with me to see?” asked Joe Siever, looking around.

Before any further move could be made in this direction, there was a stir at the door and Lipp himself walked in, followed by the slouching Wye. Lipp looked around, grinning.

“Hello!” he said. “Having a meeting? What’s up?”

Nobody answered him.

“How are you, Captain?” cried Lipp, with assumed heartiness. He had the effrontery to go up to Dirk and offer his hand.

Dirk looked at him steadily. “Catch any fish tonight?” he asked.

A dry note of laughter went around the circle.

Lipp, frightened by the sound, fell back, snarling. “Aah, what’s the matter with you? What’s going on here? This man has been talking against me behind my back.”

“Well, now you’ve come, you can hear what he’s got to say,” put in Cap’n Jim-of-Jim.

“He’s crazy!” cried Lipp. “What have I ever done against him? Didn’t I save him from the women yesterday? Didn’t I put him back aboard his ship? Didn’t I offer to go with him to the mainland and let the police question me?”

“You ain’t answered his question,” said Cap’n Jim-of-Jim. “Catch any fish tonight?”

“What the hell business is it of his what fish I caught?” Lipp cried, passionately. “Or of yours, either? Fishing’s free!” He turned to the others. “Men, Jim-of-Jim Bewley’s has always had a down on me. Ain’t it so? And now him and this fellow has fixed it up together to pin this trouble on me! You know what Jim-of-Jim Bewley is! A mainland-lover! Didn’t he marry a mainland woman?”

“Forty years ago,” said the old man, grinning. “It’s a long time.”

“Mainland lover!” snarled Lipp. “And him and this other mainlander is working against us people!”

“I’m satisfied with this island,” said Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, coolly. “I ain’t been off it in fifteen year. How about yourself?”

“Lipp, here, sets up to be better than the rest of you,” put in Dirk. “He told me you were ignorant foolish people. He told me that he was accustomed to mainland ways and knew what was what.”

“It’s a lie!” yelled Lipp.

“Sounds natural,” said the old man, quietly, and a crackle of laughter went around.

Lipp appealed to the audience. “You can see they’re working against us. They are working to bring a whole crowd of the mainlanders to our island and overrun us!”

This was a touchy point with the men. Dirk saw them scowl and glance at each other uneasily. He said, quickly: “There is no man on the island under suspicion but Lipp Bewley. . . . As for bringing over the mainlanders, ask him why he brought the yacht here.”

“You’re a liar!” yelled Lipp.

“Don’t say that again,” said Dirk, quietly.

The word was already halfway out and Lipp could not stop it. “Liar!”

Dirk let him have it swift as the release of a spring. The hulk of a man went down like a bowled pin. He sat up, blinking and holding his jaw, and the men laughed briefly. Direct action was something they all understood.

“I’ve been wanting to do that,” muttered Dirk.

Cap’n Jim-of-Jim was delighted. “There’s a man!” he said. “Well, you all know Lipp Bewley. Which of the two are you going to credit?”

Lipp now took a considerably lower tone. “I ain’t saying nothing against the Captain,” he muttered, sullenly, “but it ain’t so that I brought the yacht here and I can prove it.”

“You was mighty anxious to go forward to meet them when they landed,” growled Joe Siever. “You told us all to stay back!”

“And why was that?” snarled Lipp. “Because you and the rest was going to club them. I only wanted to keep you out of trouble.”

“You said you’d send them away,” growled Joe.

“Well, he was a friendly man,” parried Lipp. “He brought presents. . . . You all took his presents, didn’t you?”

Joe was silenced. Dirk saw that Lipp was cleverer than any of them—except Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, and might very well talk them around if given the opportunity. He said, quickly:

“Never mind that. If your hands are clean there is a way by which you can prove to these men that you had no part in bringing the yacht here.”

“What’s that?” demanded Lipp, suspiciously.

Dirk produced an old envelope and the stub of a pencil. He said, sternly: “Write on the back the words, ‘Drop anchor here.’ ”

Lipp stared at the objects full of suspicion and fear. “This is a trick,” he muttered, moistening his lips.

“Well, show it up,” said Dirk.

Lipp’s eyes narrowed cunningly. He looked around from face to face, calculating his chances. “All right,” he said, finally.

Somebody handed him a stick of wood to put under the paper. Moistening the pencil and putting his head to one side, he commenced to form the letters with painful care. It was a lengthy job. When he had finished, he handed the envelope to Dirk with a defiant air.

The instant that he compared the two lines of writing Dirk saw that he had him. The two sets of crabbed letters showed a dozen peculiarities in common. Dirk went around from man to man, pointing out the similarities. In the background Lipp defended himself glibly.

“I told you men it was only a trick. He can make it out any way he wants. Let Joe Siever or anybody write the same words and they’ll look just alike.”

Cap’n Jim-of-Jim had been right. Dirk, as he went from man to man, saw that this piece of evidence had no weight with them. Only one or two among them could write at all, and none were sufficiently familiar with writing to be able to recognize individual peculiarities. However, for others it would be *prima facie* evidence, and he stowed away envelope and map in his pocket.

Lipp, perceiving that he had gained ground with the islanders, amplified his protestations of innocence. “I swear I never seen Prosser until he landed on this island. I swear I never was in the city of Philadelphia. When the right time comes I can bring forward twenty witnesses to swear I never went away from Criston while I was on the mainland.”

“Let that go for the present,” said Dirk. “The handwriting experts can decide whether you’re lying or not.”

“All I want,” cried Lipp, passionately, “is to get these mainlanders away from our island!”

“I’ll take you up on that,” said Dirk, quickly. “Yesterday you offered to come over to the mainland with me. You could see that the yacht was aground when you made that offer. And while you were aboard the yacht you sent your brother to remove the lock nut from the propeller, so we couldn’t get away at all.”

Lipp’s face became convulsed with passion. “It’s a . . .” he began, but thinking better of it, changed it to a surly: “’Tain’t so. If you lost your propeller, I never knew it until this minute.”

“Who else could have done it?” asked Dirk, mildly.

“I don’t know nothing about that . . .”

While Lipp was speaking, Wye Bewley began edging towards the door. “Stop that man!” said Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, sharply.

Several men seized hold of Wye. He struggled furiously and silently like an animal. In the middle of it there was a sharp rap on the floor, and everybody saw the big brass nut that had fallen out from some hiding-place in his rags. The men who had him were so surprised they let go their hold. Wye dived for the door. Somebody hauled him back and the door was closed.

“Well!” said Dirk, grinning broadly, “I didn’t expect to see my words proved so soon!”

Lipp's face was a study. "I didn't know he had it," he cried, desperately. "I never told him to do nothing to the yacht. You all know what Wye is! He ain't hard good. He's just mischeevous!"

"Mischeevous, all right!" said Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, laughing silently.

Lipp's voice rose shrilly. "I reckon he got tired of waiting for me in the skiff. He looked around and he seen the yacht's screw sticking out of the water, and he just naturally started fooling with it. 'Tain't my fault if a half-wit is mischeevous!"

"Who gave him the wrench to unscrew it?" demanded Dirk.

Lipp ignored the question. He addressed a stream of curses at the stolid Wye. "I'll learn you not to fool with things!" he cried, making for him. He slapped his brother violently on one cheek and the other, jerking his head from side to side. Wye took it, flinching like a child. As Lipp was about to follow up the blows with a brutal kick, Dirk shouldered him aside. "Cut it out!" he said, angrily. "This don't fool anybody here!"

"I swear I didn't know what he was up to!" Lipp protested.

"Who gave you a wrench?" Dirk demanded of Wye.

The half-wit only stared at him foolishly. What little sense he had had been scared clean out of him.

A tearful note came into Lipp's voice. "I swear it was not my doing, Captain! I'll do all I can to make it up to you. As soon as it is light me and Wye will grapple for the propeller, and haul it up and screw it on again. Could I do more? Maybe I will need a little help to put it on."

"Us men will furnish all the help that's wanted for that purpose," said Joe Siever.

"I'll show you that I'm on the square!" cried Lipp. "When the propeller is fixed and the yacht sails away from here, I'll go with her, and the Captain can hand me over to the police at Criston or any other place else where he lands. I got nothing to hide!"

Not for a moment did Dirk believe in the genuineness of this offer. It had been made too many times. However, for the moment he appeared to agree. "All right!"

The meeting broke up.

★ XIX ★

IT WAS after midnight when they got back to Cap'n Jim-of-Jim Bewley's house, and Dirk thankfully accepted the old man's invitation to spend the rest of the night with him. Both Dirk and Mona were dropping in their tracks for the lack of sleep, and there was not much prospect of rest on the yacht, with a couple of proved murderers aboard. The Professor seemed pleased also.

There was a spare bed in a room upstairs that was given to Mona; for the Professor a shakedown was made ready in another room; while Dirk prepared to lie down on the bare floor of the sitting-room. He needed no cushions to enable him to sleep this night. There was no lock on the door, but he wedged a piece of wood under it so that it could not be opened without arousing him; and when he fastened the shutters of the two windows he felt safe enough.

He slept like the dead until Cap'n Jim-of-Jim knocked him up in the morning. The sun was already high. While Dirk was washing at the back door the old man said:

"What you think about Lipp Bewley's offer to give himself up to the police?"

"I think there's a large-size trick in it," answered Dirk.

"Right!" said Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, grinning. "You better take him, anyhow. The islanders would be glad to get rid of him."

"I mean to take him."

"Tie him up," said the old man. "Chain him so he can't play no tricks. . . . If you want, I'll come along with you to watch him."

"That certainly is kind of you," said Dirk.

“Sho! Such a man is a plague on earth! . . . Have you got a piece of light chain aboard?”

“I don’t know. I’ll look.”

“I got just what we want in my tool-shed. I’ll bring it.”

In the kitchen Mrs. Bewley put a fine breakfast of fish and oysters and vegetables before them. It did Dirk’s heart good to see Mona eat. Mrs. Bewley was a tiny woman like a little girl who had grown old without growing up, and when she spoke, which was sparingly, it was in a childish treble. Nevertheless, her brisk, decisive movements suggested that she had plenty of character. The old man always addressed her as “my girl” and she called him “Cap’n.”

In the course of the meal he said: “My girl, I would be thankful for you to get out my Sunday suit. When the Captain steams away from here I’ll be going over to the mainland with him.”

She looked up, startled, but answered, quietly, “Very well, Cap’n.”

“There’s plenty to eat,” he went on. “The men will bring you fish while I am gone.”

She pursed up her lips dubiously.

He grinned on observing it. “Oh, we had a big pow-wow last night,” he said. “We’re all good friends now. . . . I’ll bring you a nice present from the mainland.”

“You should spare yourself that expense, Cap’n,” she said, quaintly.

He saw that she was really disturbed, and said, slyly, “We’ll be taking Lipp Bewley with us when we go.”

Her face cleared. “And a good riddance,” she said.

When Cap’n Jim-of-Jim had been dressed to go he looked like a figure out of an old print. Mrs. Bewley had shorn the flowing white locks and trimmed his beard. Dirk judged that the decent black suit must have been made for his wedding forty years ago, and preserved with loving care. The high-crowned derby hat was of the same vintage. Choosing a moment when they were unobserved, Dirk presented the old man with one of the spare automatics.

They set off for the yacht in the skiff. As they drew near her, Kirkall and Mike ran forward on the deck waving their caps and cheering. Their shouts of joy came over the water. “Jeese! we’re glad to see you back, Captain! . . . We thought you had deserted the ship! . . . We put in one awful night last night!” And so on. And so on.

“Don’t let them fool you,” Dirk murmured to Cap’n Jim-of-Jim. “They are certainly murderers.”

“I’m not easy fooled,” said the old man.

Going aboard, Dirk cut short the protestations of the two hands and set them to work in different parts of the yacht. One of the island motor-canoes appeared around the point of the harbor and bore down on the *Alethea*. It was Joe Siever’s boat, the *Josephina*. To Dirk’s joy, she was towing the lost dinghy. Joe brought the little boat up to the yacht’s ladder. It had been found by a fisherman at dawn, he said, floating upside down, a couple miles east of the island.

After the dinghy had been handed over, Dirk, through a megaphone, directed Joe to the spot where the *Alethea* had dropped her propeller, as near as he could fix it, and the islanders set to work grappling for it. Lipp Bewley and his brother were aboard Joe’s boat. Throughout all the operations of the day Lipp could be seen exerting himself to impress the watchers on the yacht.

They located the propeller, and it was hoisted into the canoe. It was now dead-low water, and as the wind had hauled around to the westward just enough to keep the yacht floating clear in the narrow channel, nothing more could be done until the tide rose and fell again. The canoe returned to the harbor.

While they waited, Dirk searched the yacht from stem to stern to see if he could find any evidence that Lipp Bewley had visited it the night before. But everything aboard appeared just as it had been.

At one o’clock, the tide being high, Joe returned, and passing a line aboard the *Alethea* astern, pulled her around over the shoal. Dirk put out an anchor astern to hold her in that position. All afternoon they waited for the tide to go down, the islanders playing cards and sleeping aboard the canoe, while the anxious little party aboard the yacht watched them—and watched each other.

As it drew on towards six, the stern of the yacht was sufficiently elevated to permit them to start operations. The canoe was warped up close under the yacht’s stern, and the islanders went overboard in the shallow water. Dirk joined them in order to direct the job.

The sun was setting when the propeller was finally screwed home and locked on its shaft. Dirk and Joe Siever shook hands on it. Joe looked around at the sky, saying,

“No wind now, but there’s no telling from what quarter she may spring up. I’ll come back at high water tonight and pull you around so you can

steam right out come daylight.”

“Good work,” said Dirk.

Lipp Bewley was standing in the water, near by, listening. Dirk said to him, “You can go aboard the yacht now.”

Lipp was not prepared for this move, and the usual grin became forced. “I got to go ashore and get my things, Captain. I can’t go traveling in my work clothes. Wye will row me off in the skiff before you’re ready to pull out.”

“Get in the skiff and row me to the ladder,” ordered Dirk. “Wye can fetch what you want from the shore.”

Lipp hesitated, scratched his head, glanced at the islanders standing about, and up at the heads looking over the yacht’s rail. With a shrug he said: “Well, it’s all right with me, Captain, if you say so.” He climbed into the skiff.

Dirk said to Joe: “Will you come aboard, Captain, and have a drink before you go home?”

“Don’t mind if I do, Captain,” said Joe, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand in anticipation.

They followed Lipp into the skiff. Dirk sent Lipp up the ladder in advance, while Joe tied the skiff. On deck Lipp, with his matchless effrontery, greeted everybody familiarly.

“Evening to you, Miss, and men, all. Evening, Professor . . . Cap’n Jim-of-Jim.”

Dirk and the old man exchanged a look of meaning. Dirk said to Lipp. “Turn and face me. Put your hands behind you.”

Lipp whirled around. “What’s the matter, Captain?” Glancing behind him, he saw Cap’n Jim-of-Jim pulling a thin strong line from his pocket. “No! No!” he cried, in sudden terror, and thrust his hands under his arms. “This is no way to treat a man! Didn’t I come aboard of my own free will?”

Dirk drew his gun. “Put your hands behind you!” he ordered.

Lipp looked around wildly. “Professor,” he cried, “are you going to stand for this? . . . Sailors, will you see a man mistreated like this?”

The Professor backed away in a panic, stammering, “I haven’t got anything to do with it.” An uncertain look passed over Kirkall’s and Mike’s faces. Perhaps they were inclined to interfere. But with Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, Joe Siever, and Dirk standing by, the odds were too great. They made no move.

Dirk raised his gun significantly, and Lipp's hands shot out behind him. Cap'n Jim-of-Jim quickly had his wrists bound together.

"Now march!" commanded Dirk. "Into the pantry, down the steps, and forward into the engineer's cabin."

The old man followed them down. In the little cabin Lipp flung himself on the bunk with his face to the wall. Dirk said, grimly:

"Watch him while I give Cap'n Joe a drink. If he gets ugly, shoot him. It will save us the trouble of guarding him through the night."

"I wouldn't be loath to shoot him," said Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, calmly.

Dirk and Joe toasted each other in the pantry. The latter's surly taciturnity had disappeared. He said, grinning:

"Us islanders ain't such bad fellows when you come to know us, Captain?"

"Well, neither is us mainlanders," said Dirk.

Joe clapped him on the back.

As Joe went down the ladder, Dirk said, quietly: "The half-wit may try to make trouble tonight."

"He ain't dangerous without he's got somebody to tell him what to do," said Joe. "Howsoever, I'll lock him in the cabin of one of the canoes until you leave. He can't get out of there."

Joe rowed away in the skiff. Since they had the dinghy back, they had no need of the skiff, and one of the islanders was to row it ashore. As the canoe barked away in the dusk, her crew lined up and gave the yacht a cheer.

"Some change in popular opinion!" remarked Dirk to Mona.

Back in the little cabin below, he found Lipp lying on the bunk in the same position, and Cap'n Jim-of-Jim unconcernedly loading his pipe. The latter said: "I been looking things over, Captain. It's a right good place to chain a skunk." He pointed to a cluster of pipes that ran across under the deck above; a big pipe to carry steam to the windlass forward, and smaller pipes for heating and ventilation. "If we lock one end of the chain around the big pipe, and the other end around his neck, it'll hold him fast."

The old man had his length of light chain and his two padlocks ready. Standing on the chair, he locked one end of the chain around the steampipe overhead. Lipp Bewley was then forced to sit up on the bed, and while Dirk stood alongside with his gun, Cap'n Jim-of-Jim locked the other end of the chain around his thick neck. There was play enough in it for the captive to lie down if he wished. Lipp offered no resistance, but his little eyes were as venomous as an adder's.

“That’s what I call a real nobby necktie,” said Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, grinning. “New style. Ties behind.”

“I want food,” growled Lipp.

“Sure!” said the old man. “When supper is ready I will feed you like a baby!”

Later, when they had all eaten, Cap’n Jim-of-Jim announced his intention of locking himself up with the captive all night.

“All night?” said Dirk.

“Sure. I had a good sleep this afternoon.”

“It would be all right if you watched him outside his cabin.”

“No, Captain. If I keep him under my eye every minute he can’t help himself, nor can he be helped from the inside or the outside. I will lock the door and the porthole also.”

“When you lock the door, turn the key crosswise so it can’t be pushed out,” said Dirk.

He was secretly relieved by the old man’s offer, which meant that he could forget Lipp during the night. He said: “As soon as we get steam enough to run the generator, we’ll turn on the ventilating system so you won’t suffocate in there.”

They went in and looked at Lipp together. He lay torpid on his bunk with his eyes closed. The cords that bound his wrists together were perfectly tight.

“Captain,” said the old man, grinning, “if you fetched me a bucket of fire from under the boiler and a soldering-iron I could soon find out the truth of what is behind this plot.”

Lipp rolled over and faced them with terrified eyes. “You see,” said Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, laughing, “the mere threat of it wakes him up.”

Dirk laughed harshly. “No torture,” he said. “Leave it to the police to make him talk.”

Dirk went out, and Cap’n Jim-of-Jim turned the key in the door.

Meanwhile Kirkall and Mike had been ordered below to start the fires and get up steam. Dirk took up his stand on the grating overhead, prepared to watch them throughout the night. He had locked the engine-room hatch on deck, and the key to the other door was in his pocket. Mona and the Professor were watching in the wheelhouse.

Something new had come into Kirkall and Mike tonight. They were in great spirits, breaking up wood and shoveling coal with a will, continually joshing each other and indulging in rough horseplay.

“Tomorrow night we’ll be back in town,” said Kirkall.

“And I know what to do when I get there,” rumbled Mike.

They whispered together slyly, and burst into a roar of laughter.

Good God! thought Dirk. And only last night they killed a man and burned his body under that boiler! Their cheerful confidence made Dirk secretly uneasy; but with Ashcomb gone, with Lipp Bewley chained up, and with these two men right under his eye, what could happen now?

So the hours passed. Finally steam began to murmur in the boiler, and the generator was turned on. Dirk went up on deck to start the ventilating fan. He spoke to Mona and the Professor; all right there; and on the way down he looked in on Cap’n Jim-of-Jim and was greeted with a cheerful grin. Lipp was asleep. The little cabin was brightly lighted now. Dirk returned to the engine-room.

In the middle of the night he heard the bark of the *Josephina’s* exhaust approaching, and again locking the door on the two hands, went out on deck. He and Joe Siever exchanged greetings by megaphone. The yacht was afloat again, and Joe, picking up her stern anchor, pulled her around into the channel and dropped it again. There was no wind.

Joe shouted through his megaphone: “I’m going to anchor here astern of you, Captain, so there can’t be no slip-up this time. If you want me you only have to come on deck and holler.”

“Good work, Cap’n Joe!”

Dirk ran up on the bridge deck. Mona, coming to meet him, whispered: “If you could only get the Professor to go below! He drives me crazy with his chatter!”

Dirk said: “Go to your cabin and get a couple hours’ sleep, Professor. Then you can come up and let Miss Prosser sleep for a while.”

“Well, since you suggest it, I will,” said the Professor.

Mona squeezed Dirk’s hand gratefully.

On his way below Dirk looked in on Cap’n Jim-of-Jim again. No change here. When he got back to the engine-room he found Mike cheerfully shoveling coal and whistling through his teeth. Kirkall sat on the tool-chest, with his head against the bulkhead, sleeping.

Four hours later Dirk with a thankful heart saw the glass in the engine-room skylight turning gray. He went out on deck and breathed in the sweet, cool air of dawn. A fair, still morning; would be hot later. The tide was down, still ebbing, but the *Alethea* floated clear in the channel with her nose pointing out in the Bay. All he had to do was pull up anchors and steam out

when it became light enough to see. The graceful *Josephina* was riding astern of him.

The Professor was on watch. Dirk saw him peering timidly out of the wheelhouse door. Dirk ran into the pantry, down the ladder, and through the galley to fetch Cap'n Jim-of-Jim. He wanted the old man to stand guard in the engine-room, while he took the bridge.

He knocked on the cabin door. "Hey, Cap'n Jim-of-Jim!" There was no answer. He knocked again; called; no answer came, and his heart squeezed up in a hard knot. He hesitated for a moment, calling on all his strength to face what was before him. He tried the door. Locked. Putting his shoulder against it, he burst it in.

The door was stopped by something on the floor. Looking around, Dirk saw Cap'n Jim-of-Jim lying there on his face. Lipp Bewley was gone. The chain with its padlock was dangling from the pipe overhead. One of the links had been cut through. The porthole was standing wide open.

For the moment Dirk was unable to take in what had happened. He stood in the doorway, staring into the little cabin, dazed like a man who has received a blow over the head. Cap'n Jim-of-Jim dead, and Lipp Bewley escaped! How could it have happened?

It was understandable that Lipp might have succeeded in freeing his hands. But where had he procured an instrument to cut the chain? He had been searched three or four times over. And what had the old man been doing while Lipp was freeing himself? Dirk could not believe that he had fallen asleep within three feet of his dangerous prisoner.

Dropping to his knees, Dirk automatically searched the body. Cap'n Jim-of-Jim's gun had been taken from him. As with the two first deaths aboard the yacht, there was no wound upon him anywhere. This death was even more mysterious because there was no indication that the old man had been struck over the head first. In this case the killer had varied his procedure a little.

Dirk's brain reeled when he tried to figure it out. He had proved to his own satisfaction that Lipp Bewley could not have killed Prosser and Tony, yet surely no one but Lipp could have killed Cap'n Jim-of-Jim.

Suddenly Dirk heard a choked cry behind him. The Professor had come through the galley without his hearing him. Dirk sprang to his feet. "Quiet!" he said, savagely.

The Professor, out of his wits with terror, was shaking and pointing at the body. "Another! Another!" he cried, shrilly. "God has forsaken us!"

"Be quiet, I tell you!" ordered Dirk.

The Professor clasped his hands imploringly. "Captain, for God's sake, get us away from this island! You have steam up, and the yacht is afloat. Oh, get us away from here!"

This insensate squalling was more than Dirk's shaken nerves could bear. Reaching behind the man, he opened the door of his cabin. "Get in there," he ordered, "and keep quiet."

"No! No! Captain! I implore you not to linger here. If they get you next what will we do?"

Dirk shouldered him roughly into his cabin, and taking the key out of the door, pulled it shut and locked it. The Professor beat on the door with his fists. "Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!" he cried, hysterically.

Dirk, ignoring him, went through the galley and up on deck like a man walking in his sleep. In a voice that sounded strange in his own ears, he hailed the craft astern.

"Hello, Cap'n Joe!"

Presently the sleepy answer came back. "Hello, Captain!"

"Come aboard, will you?"

Joe had no small boat with him. He had three men aboard the *Josephina*. They pulled up their anchor, started the engine, and presently laid alongside the *Alethea*. The boarding-ladder had been drawn up the night before, and Joe stepped directly from his cabin roof to the yacht's deck. Dirk waited for him in a daze.

When Joe saw his face, he cried out: "For God's sake, what has happened, Captain?"

"Quiet!" said Dirk. "Come with me."

When Joe Siever looked into the little cabin his dark face turned clay color. "O God! What's this? What's this?" he gasped.

Dirk didn't have to explain what had happened. There it was.

Hearing their voices, the Professor renewed his pounding on the door. They paid no attention.

"Could somebody have helped Lipp?" muttered Joe.

"They were locked in here together," said Dirk. "The door was still locked when I came to get him. There's the key lying on the floor."

The color rushed back into the islander's face, and he cursed Lipp Bewley savagely. "He's swum ashore," he said. "Ain't no place else he could go. By God! us men ain't going to let him get away with this, Captain! We'll catch him for you. Ain't but a small island. He'll make for the woods on the other side. I'll send a party around either way and we'll pinch him

between us. In three hours I'll guarantee to have him back on board, Captain."

"All right," said Dirk. "I'll wait three hours."

As Joe turned to go, Dirk laid a hand on his arm. "Take him with you, will you?" he said. "I think . . . if the girl has to face another murder she'll lose her mind."

"Sure," said Joe.

Two men were brought aboard from the canoe. Cap'n Jim-of-Jim was lifted and carried up the steep ladder from galley to pantry, across the deck, and down to the *Josephina*. Through the mercy of Providence, Mona slept through it all. They laid the old man on the cabin roof of the canoe. Joe placed the quaint high-crowned derby on his chest.

"God help the little old woman!" he muttered.

They cranked their engine and the *Josephina* moved off.

SOMEHOW Mona got to know what had happened, though Dirk had no clear recollection of telling her. Her face became ghastly, but she did not break down. Her first thought was for Dirk. She took his hand in both of hers and pressed it silently. Dirk was profoundly grateful to her for not adding to his trials at that moment.

They stood together on the bridge, looking ashore. Neither said anything. The situation was beyond words. It was only by slow degrees that Dirk's wits began to work again.

Meanwhile they saw Joe Siever ground the nose of the canoe on the beach. Two men lifted the body from the cabin roof and started up to the house with it, Joe walking alongside. The third man started running over the path towards the settlement to arouse the islanders.

After a while the three men came out of the house, and started northwards up the beach with bent heads as if searching for tracks in the sand. They disappeared around a point. The thought came into Dirk's head: The solution of the mystery lies somewhere up there.

Dirk and Mona drifted into the wheelhouse and sat down on the locker. By and by Mona faltered:

"Speak to me, Dirk. I can't bear your silence!"

"I'm trying to think," he muttered. "My thoughts are all confused."

"Think out loud," she begged.

"O God!" groaned Dirk, "the thing that chiefly torments me is, how did Lipp get the old man? There wasn't a mark on Cap'n Jim-of-Jim. He hadn't even been struck over the head like the others. How could he have submitted

to being drugged? And where did the drug come from? I took no chances. I searched Lipp to the skin last night.”

“Could Kirkall or Mike have helped Lipp?”

“I can swear that neither one of them left the engine-room. Twice I looked in on Cap’n Jim-of-Jim and he was all right. This didn’t happen until after Joe Siever had pulled us around and anchored astern of us.”

“Well,” said Mona, “the only person besides you and me who was free aboard the yacht was the Professor.”

“I have that in mind, too,” said Dirk. “But that gets me nowhere.”

“Suppose it’s the Professor who has the duplicate keys?” she suggested.

“I told Cap’n Jim-of-Jim to leave the key crosswise in the lock. . . . Even supposing that the Professor or somebody else got into the room by some hocus-pocus, how could he have drugged the old man? Cap’n Jim-of-Jim was on the alert. He had a gun. A man is almost forced to believe that there is magic in it!”

“Not that! Not that, Dirk!” she said in swift terror. “There *must* be a natural explanation!”

After a silence he went on, bitterly: “This morning . . . nothing seems to fit together. Until last night I was certain that Lipp Bewley was working with Kirkall and Mike. I still feel that they must be in it together, but now they seem to be at cross purposes.”

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“All night long Kirkall and Mike were laughing and singing and carrying on. Evidently they believe that the success of the plot—whatever it is—is assured. But this morning Lipp Bewley is on the run. He is certain to be caught. You couldn’t say that his plot has been a success.”

“Maybe Kirkall and Mike don’t yet know what has happened to Lipp,” suggested Mona.

“I almost wish I had let Cap’n Jim-of-Jim give him the third degree,” muttered Dirk.

“That was only his joke,” said Mona, quickly. “He would not have done it really. . . . When they bring Lipp in, the truth is certain to come out, Captain.”

“If the islanders don’t kill him in their rage,” muttered Dirk.

Kirkall and Mike began to pound on the door of the engine-room hatch and to shout to be let out. Dirk went down to them.

“What do you want?” he said, curtly.

“Captain, we got steam up,” answered Kirkall, “and the yacht is afloat. Why don’t we get going?”

Dirk had the notion of trying an announcement on them. “We’re waiting for Lipp Bewley,” he said, with a hard grin.

Their voices sounded completely surprised. “Lipp? Where is he at?”

“He escaped from the yacht last night. The islanders are after him.”

There was a silence on the other side of the door, then both men broke into laughter. “What the hell is that to any of us, Captain?” cried Kirkall. “Let Lipp go and let us get away from here!”

“I’ll tell you when I’m ready to get under way,” said Dirk, grimly. He returned to the bridge more mystified than before.

“At first Lipp Bewley seemed to be the head and front of the plot,” he said to Mona. “Now Kirkall looks to be taking the lead. Has Kirkall been the brains of the conspiracy from the beginning, and using his menial position on board as camouflage? It was Lipp Bewley brought Prosser here. Whose plot is it, anyhow?”

Mona shook her head helplessly. “When we leave here you must get some of the islanders to come with us,” she said.

“I will,” said Dirk, grimly. “Luckily I have the money to hire them. . . . I can lock Kirkall up, but Mike will have to run the engine. It isn’t likely that any of the islanders are familiar with steam-boilers or engines.”

Leaving Mona sitting in the wheelhouse, Dirk paced up and down the bridge, cudgeling his brains to produce some explanation of the seemingly meaningless tangle of circumstances that hemmed them in. At first the plotters were bent on keeping the yacht at the island; now they were keen to get away. Things must have happened in between to which he possessed no clue. How could Kirkall be looking forward so eagerly to his return when he must know that a trial for murder awaited him? How could he be so confident when he was locked up below, and all the guns on board were in Dirk’s hands.

Dirk finally came to a stand at the starboard end of the bridge, leaning on the rail and looking down at the water. He noted abstractedly that it was one of those rare days when the water of the Chesapeake takes on a crystalline clearness and you can see twelve or fifteen feet into its depths.

What had Lipp Bewley hoped to gain by escaping to the island? He was without food. He must know that he would be taken within a few hours. Every man on the island was aroused against him. . . .

Gradually Dirk realized he was staring at a dim shape in the green water. All his faculties suddenly leaped to attention. A *body!* A man's body swaying a little in the current, held down by some heavy object that was hidden beneath him. Dirk was knocked breathless by the discovery. He leaned far over the rail, with his eyes starting from his head.

Unmistakable that thick and clumsy frame, that big misshapen head. It was Lipp Bewley. Lipp Bewley with his hands still bound behind him. Dirk wondered if his reason had suddenly left him. He looked around to reassure himself; sky, Bay, green island, unaltered. He smacked the rail under his hand. That was certainly the solid rail of the bridge. He looked overboard again, half afraid to look. There he was! Lipp Bewley!

"Mona! Mona!" he cried, shakily.

She came running out of the wheelhouse.

"What is it?"

"Lipp Bewley," he gasped, "he's down there . . . overboard . . . drowned!"

"You're mad!" she whispered.

"Look for yourself!"

She looked and straightened up with fixed and staring eyes.

"Well, am I right? Am I right? Isn't it Lipp?"

She slowly nodded. "What does it mean?" she whispered.

He paused, staring sightlessly in her face while his brain struggled to adjust itself. Every conclusion that he had come to since the first murder had to be cast aside now. "It means . . . it means . . . I don't know what it means! . . . But, anyhow, Lipp Bewley has got his! That's one less against us!"

After a silence, while they stood staring at each other, Dirk went on slowly: "It means . . . that I've been after the wrong man from the start. . . . It wasn't Lipp Bewley that planned and carried out this series of murders. . . . I reckon Lipp was just a tool for a cleverer brain than his. . . ."

"Who? . . . Who?" she stammered.

"Somebody aboard the yacht. . . . Kirkall? . . . No! It isn't possible that Kirkall could have killed Lipp! It was somebody else!" . . . Dirk's voice hardened. "The Professor!"

Mona froze with astonishment. "But . . . but," she finally gasped, "he's a fool!"

"Maybe he's not a fool," said Dirk, somberly. "Maybe he's only playing the fool. . . ."

He fell silent while the possibilities of this explanation unfolded in his mind. "Come on!" he said. "Let's go inside and try and dope it out."

They sat on the locker in the wheelhouse. Dirk kept Mona's hand in his. "Look," he went on, "we know nothing about the Professor's antecedents. We don't even know what college he is supposed to be connected with. He appeared from nowhere. Very likely Lipp put him in your father's way. Or, if the Professor is the master mind of the affair, he brought Lipp and your father together, and then happened along, himself, a little later. . . ."

"As I think it over, I don't believe he is a Professor. If he were really a man of learning we would respect him though we didn't understand his talk. But all this anthropology stuff sounds like mere jabber. Like something he had got by heart out of a book. . . . Maybe his whiskers are false, too. Even Professors don't wear those comic sideburns nowadays. Professors are just as up-to-date as anybody else. . . . O God! what a fool I've been!"

"No! No!" protested Mona, pressing his hand. "It's easy enough to say that after you've worked out the truth for yourself!"

"Let's begin at the beginning and see how everything fits in," muttered Dirk. "Evidently your father was the first one marked for murder. He was brought here for that purpose. Well, the Professor could steal aft through the passage without being seen on deck. . . ."

"How could he get in if the key was turned in the lock?"

"Let's assume for the moment that he had an instrument to turn the key, so that he could push it out with another key."

"How did he kill him?"

"That remains to be proved. Poison of some sort."

"Oh, my father!" whispered Mona.

"Now, coming to Tony," Dirk went on. "The Professor had the run of the yacht. He could be up and down on the bridge deck and nobody would think anything of it. Suppose he came to the door of the wireless room. Tony would just look around at him and go on with his work. Then two silent steps into the room, a blow from behind. How easy! O God! Why didn't I see it before?"

"Anybody would have been deceived," Mona murmured.

"Likely it was the Professor, too, who worked on McElderry's fears until he slipped over the border altogether and destroyed himself. That would be another obstacle out of the way. It was the Professor, you remember, who was supposed to be guarding McElderry when he stole the dinghy. God! how could I have trusted him! Perhaps he handed McElderry the knife. . . ."

The Professor was always with us. He heard all the plans we made to protect ourselves. He had us dead to rights!”

“Where does Ashcomb come into it?” asked Mona. “He wasn’t any good, but I cannot believe that he was a party to my father’s murder.”

“Perhaps not,” said Dirk. “His part is still hidden. I suppose they used him in some way and then cast him aside.”

“He and the Professor hated each other.”

“That proves nothing. The Professor wouldn’t be showing his hand. He wasn’t alone in this. He had Lipp, and later he had Kirkall and Mike.”

“If Lipp was his man, why should he kill him?”

“Who can tell?” said Dirk, grimly. “Perhaps Lipp had come to know too much. He was about to be handed over to the police. Possibly the Professor was afraid that he would tell all he knew. . . . What’s the use of speculating as to the whys when we don’t know yet what is behind it all?”

“How did Lipp get . . . there?” said Mona, pointing.

“Lowered out of the porthole with a weight attached to his body. The engineer’s cabin is directly under that end of the bridge.”

“The Professor’s such a little man . . .” murmured Mona.

“But great in cunning,” said Dirk, bitterly.

“How could he go into that cabin and kill both men without their resisting him?”

“There you have me. I’m damned if I know.”

He got up and looked out of the door. “Unless,” he resumed, when he returned, “he had made sure that both men were dead before he went in.”

“How could he do that?”

“He may have poisoned their food last night.”

“That’s not possible. I cooked their suppers myself, and handed them direct to Cap’n Jim-of-Jim.”

Dirk was silenced again. Finally he said: “We must remember that we’re dealing with a man who has at least some smatterings of science. Enough, anyhow, to poison men in a highly efficient manner. . . . I have read of men being killed by a poisonous gas being fed into the room where they were.”

“There are no openings into the cabin.”

“The keyhole.”

“That doesn’t seem credible.”

“Wait a moment!” cried Dirk, suddenly. “There is another opening. The pipe that feeds them fresh air from the ventilating system. That pipe and

several others come into the cabin from the galley. . . . Come on! Let's see if it has been tampered with."

They ran down through the pantry and galley into the little passage forward. No sound came from behind the Professor's door. They looked into the engineer's cabin. Mona shivered at the sight of the hanging chain.

The air vent was in the middle of the ceiling. The pipe that fed it was of tin with soldered joints. It was a simple matter to follow it back through the bulkhead into the galley. In the galley it looked all right at first glance, but upon a closer examination they found where a small round hole had been cut into it, and afterwards filled with putty. Dirk and Mona looked at each other.

"Everything played right into his hand," Dirk said. "We had the fan going last night. He had only to lead his gas through this hole and the current of air blew it right into the cabin next door."

"And they died without knowing anything," murmured Mona.

"Sure. But it isn't likely the gas would kill them outright. It put them to sleep and he went in there and finished the job."

"Maybe he did the same to my father."

"Not likely. The portholes and the skylight of your father's cabin were open. He varied his technique to suit the circumstances."

DIRK stood in the galley, debating his next move. “It’s lucky I happened to lock him up,” he muttered. “It’s only by accident that I happened to do so. . . . I can’t leave him loose in his cabin. God knows what he is plotting right now. We can be sure that he isn’t idle.”

Mona turned pale with terror. “Dirk! you mustn’t! you mustn’t!” she murmured, agitatedly.

“But I’ve got to secure him, Mate.”

“No! No! I’m afraid for you! God knows what dreadful surprise he may spring on us when you open the door!”

Dirk took out his gun. “This is a pretty good argument, Mate.”

Her distress increased. “No! Not that, either!”

“I’m not going to shoot him if I can help it,” said Dirk. “I want to hand him over to the police. . . . But if he tries to pull anything I’ll let him have it. You would shoot a rattlesnake if you saw him coiled to spring!”

Seeing that it was useless to say anything more, she silently squeezed her hands together.

“Please go up on deck until it is over,” said Dirk.

“No!” she said, defiantly. “I’m coming with you. Two guns are better than one.”

“But two can’t operate in that narrow passage,” said Dirk. “You’d be in my way. I might shoot you.”

“Very well. I’ll stay here,” she murmured.

Dirk left her. In the passage he put his ear against the crack of the Professor’s door and listened. . . . No sound. He waited, listening. It seemed incredible that the man should be sleeping at a moment like this.

Perhaps he wasn't asleep. There were plenty of devilish occupations that made no sound. Such as measuring and mixing poisons. Dirk softly inserted the key in the lock and turned it with infinite caution, a fraction of an inch at a time. In spite of all his care it squeaked a little. No matter. The door had to be opened. He took his gun in his right hand. If the Professor had killed Cap'n Jim-of-Jim, naturally he would have the old man's gun.

Before throwing the door open, Dirk hesitated for a tick to recall the layout within. The high bunk with drawers under ran thwartwise of the little cabin. The porthole faced the door. Against the right-hand wall stood a little desk-bureau; with a short seat-locker beyond. If the man was working at anything he would be seated at the desk. The door opened against the bunk.

Dirk threw open the door, stepping back in case the occupant was watching, ready to shoot. There was no shot, no sound from within. He took a slant around the door frame, bringing up his gun ready to fire. . . . His arm dropped weakly. The Professor was lying on his back on the bunk, staring sightlessly at the ceiling. His mouth was open and his tongue protruded slightly. Dead eyes staring at the ceiling!

So terrible, so unexpected was the sight, that an involuntary cry was forced from Dirk. Slight as it was, it brought Mona to his side. He didn't hear her coming; he didn't know she was there until he heard her scream. Fearing for her reason, he instinctively gathered her up in his arms, and ran up on deck, carrying her.

She did not faint. When he put her down on her feet, she seized him and started dragging him towards the dinghy hanging from its davits. "Come away! Come away!" she gasped, quite beside herself with terror. "You were wrong, you see! This ship has a curse on it! Oh, come! come!"

Dirk's own veins were congealed with terror, but he instinctively resisted her. "Wait a minute!" he muttered. "We've got to think this thing through. . . . If we leave the yacht we've only got to come back again."

Mona was beyond hearing. "Come! Come! Come!" she urged, frantically.

Dirk was in despair. In Heaven's name what could he do with her? "Mona, listen!" he pleaded. "I'm here! We're both unhurt!"

They were standing by the rail aft of the dinghy. For the moment Dirk had forgotten everything but the girl. He felt himself grasped by the legs; a heave and over the rail he went, still grasping the gun, Mona's scream ringing in his ears as the water stopped them.

He came to the surface, still grasping the gun, useless now. He automatically thrust it inside his shirt. When he got the water out of his eyes,

he saw Mona on the deck of the yacht, struggling in the arms of the foul Mike in his greasy overalls. He ceased to be a thinking being then.

The ladder was hauled up and there was no way by which Dirk could climb aboard from the water, except by the aid of the rope to the stern anchor. He started swimming towards it. He saw Kirkall run out of the forward deckhouse with an automatic in his hand. Cap'n Jim-of-Jim's gun. As Kirkall raised it to fire, Dirk went under.

He came up for a breath and sank again. Under the water he heard the reverberation of Kirkall's shot. He swam a little way, came up and went under again. Kirkall fired too late. So it went back and forth. Dirk counted the shots. Soon the man would have to pause to reload. Kirkall had not the cool eye of a dead shot. His face was working with rage.

Suddenly Mona with the strength that is lent to women in an extremity, tore herself free from Mike's arms, and rolled over the rail. Mike caught hold of her jacket. She flung up her arms as she went down, leaving it in his hands. Joy flooded through Dirk. Let them both be shot in the water. They would die together.

He sank as Kirkall fired, and rose again. Kirkall was reloading now, and he could stay on top for a brief space. Mona's head appeared. "Make for the shore!" he yelled. "Swim under water!" She disappeared and he followed suit, swimming as hard as he could away from the yacht.

He rose, looked around and sank again. No Mona, and he turned sick with anxiety. But while he swam under the surface, he heard two shots, and his breast was lightened. Mona must have risen in order to draw the man's fire. He rose again and had a brief glimpse of her head. After one more dive, he judged himself out of range, and stayed on top. Kirkall emptied his gun without coming anywhere near him.

Mona's head appeared not far off and they drew close to each other. He led her into shoal water and they stood for a moment to rest, clinging together. Dirk laughed shakily. God! but she was precious to him at that moment.

"A narrow squeak, eh, Mate? . . . The worst is over. They can't reach us here."

"I'll be all right now," she whispered. "It was the yacht. Too much has happened on board. I couldn't stand it."

"So Kirkall had the keys!" he muttered. "Kirkall is the head and front of this business! . . . Good God! a murderer five times over."

There was no time for thinking things out then. On the yacht the two men made for the dinghy, and Dirk and Mona started swimming again with

all speed for the shore. But the dinghy was made fast on her chocks, and it was quite a business to free her. It presently became evident to the swimmers that she could not be launched in time to overtake them in the water. They relaxed their efforts. Kirkall and Mike saw the uselessness of chasing them, and left the dinghy.

Running to the stern they cast off the anchor rope. A moment later Dirk heard faintly the clank of the anchor winch from the bow. So they were going to abscond with the yacht. He cursed them from his heart. But he looked at Mona swimming alongside him, her grave face streaming with water, and softened. There was something worse than losing his vessel. Suppose he had lost *her*!

“I hope to God they wreck her!” he muttered.

They finally came out on the beach. “Come on! Come on!” he cried. “There’s no use going after Joe. We must get the others started after them in a boat.”

“I can’t show myself like this,” muttered Mona. All she had on was a silken slip tucked into the boy’s pants.

They ran up to the house. Among the graves in the corner of the yard they saw a piteous sight. The tiny old woman was wielding a spade almost as big as herself; planting it in the earth, stepping on it to drive it in; tossing the earth aside. It brought a sharp cry of compassion from Dirk.

“For God’s sake leave it, Mrs. Bewley! We’ll send men from the harbor to help you.”

She raised her seamed old face, looking at them as if from a great distance, and muttered: “I want no help. I can do for my own.”

“Can I have something to cover her with?” Dirk asked, indicating Mona.

“Take anything you see,” Mrs. Bewley answered, with an indifferent jerk of the head towards the house.

Mona went to try and persuade the old soul to drop the ghastly spade, but Mrs. Bewley pushed her aside. “Let be! Let be!”

There were no clothes in the kitchen, and Dirk ran upstairs to the old couple’s bedroom. Cap’n Jim-of-Jim’s ragged everyday coat lay on a chair. Snatching it up, he started down again. He recollected the chart that was tacked to the wall of the living-room. Come in useful if we have to chase them, he thought, and ran in to get it.

The body of old Cap’n Jim-of-Jim in his decent Sunday blacks had been laid out on the table. Dirk could only spare him a swift glance of regret. He was a man! Pulling down the chart, he ran out of the house, rolling it up.

Dirk and Mona started running for the harbor. By this time the *Alethea*, with smoke pouring from her funnel, was slowly feeling her way out through the channel. There was little doubt but they would make it. Even if they did ground her, at this stage of the tide she would presently be afloat again.

The islanders got a shock of surprise when Dirk and Mona ran around in front of their shanties. Besides the women and children there were only half a dozen men at home. The rest had gone around the west side of the island to beat the woods for Lipp Bewley.

“They chucked us overboard from the yacht,” cried Dirk. “They have gone without us!”

As always when the islanders were faced by a new situation, they turned dumb and wooden. Dirk groaned at the sight of their blank faces. “Don’t you understand me? They’ve gone! They’ve gone! For God’s sake get after them in the fastest boat you’ve got!”

Charlie Peters spoke up for the others. “We got to guard our boats from Lipp,” he growled. “He may come this way.”

“Lipp will trouble us no more,” said Dirk. “He is drowned. I saw his body in the water. It is Kirkall and Mike who are back of this!”

These were too many new ideas for the islanders to take in at once. They merely stared.

“Get after them! Get after them!” cried Dirk.

“They’ve got a cannon aboard. They’ll sink us,” growled Charlie.

“It’s only a saluting cannon. There is no powder or shot for it anyhow. . . . If you don’t believe me, you don’t have to go close to them. Just follow them and keep them in sight until I can bring Joe Siever in his boat.”

With alternate persuasion and abuse, Dirk finally got Charlie and three men started out of the harbor in Charlie’s canoe, towing a skiff astern. Seen from the top of the dunes, the *Alethea* had now won clear of the shoals, and was steaming north at full speed. She could make about ten knots an hour; the canoe scarcely more than eight. However, if the islanders could keep the yacht in sight it would be sufficient.

Dirk and Mona hastened back in search of Joe Siever. A short distance beyond Cap’n Jim-of-Jim’s house they met him and his two men running at top speed towards the harbor. These men required no urging to take part in the chase. They watched the escaping yacht as they ran, their faces black with rage. Joe was spitting curses.

“No need to look further for Lipp Bewley,” said Dirk. “He’s drowned.”

“Aah, to hell with him!” muttered Joe.

“Kirkall is the murderer,” said Dirk.

“He’s a robber!” cried Joe, almost crying in his rage. “We’ll get the dirty robber! We’ll string him up!”

Dirk wondered at his passion. Something new here. “What’s the matter?” he asked, sharply.

An evasive look came into Joe’s face. “Shake a leg, Captain,” he cried. “My boat is faster than Charlie Peters’. If we can keep the —— in sight we’ll overtake him before dark!”

Dirk let it go for the moment.

Reaching the harbor, the men wanted to pile into Joe’s boat instanter and set off.

“Wait a minute,” said Dirk. “How about gasoline?”

Joe had about half a tank full. There was no great store on the island. One man had five gallons, another ten, and so on.

“Drain all the tanks,” said Dirk, “and stow it aboard Joe’s canoe. We can bring a fresh supply when we come back.”

There was some argument about this, but it was finally done. Joe’s tank was filled, and twenty gallons in tins put aboard.

By this time the other men were coming in. Some mysterious word circulated among them, and all were mad to go with Joe.

“There are only two men aboard the yacht,” Dirk protested. “It isn’t a question of numbers. We’ll only get in each other’s way. Let Joe pick four men to go.”

Some wanted to force Dirk and Mona to stay ashore then. “This is our business!” they cried, and once more Dirk wondered. Joe took his part.

“The Captain’s got a head on him worth ten of yours,” he cried. “I’m taking him!”

“Let the girl stay with our women,” cried a voice.

“Where I go, she goes,” said Dirk, grimly.

He carried his point, and after the loss of a precious half hour, Joe picked his men, they stowed food and water and set off. The *Josephina* was likewise towing a skiff. From among the stay-at-homes a party had been told off to dig Cap’n Jim-of-Jim Bewley’s grave.

When they rounded the point and headed north, the yacht was visible merely as a smudge of smoke on the horizon. The chances of overtaking her

appeared very slim. Dirk, studying the water as it slipped past, doubted if the *Josephina* was good for ten knots. Every man aboard fixed his burning eyes on the smoke; their teeth gleamed in their dark faces.

“What’s all the excitement?” Dirk asked Joe, casually.

“Aah, any man is roused by a chase,” said Joe.

It was obviously an evasion. Dirk, warned by his previous experience with them, asked no more questions. Appear to forget about it, he thought, and it will come out of itself.

He found the canoe’s gentle progress through a calm sea hard to bear. He could not sit still, and there was no room to move about in. The islanders, on the other hand, settled down with characteristic impassivity. They sat as still as snakes. Some of them slept. Dirk envied them the animal-like quality that permitted them to lie quiescent until something started.

Mona was forced to sit shelterless in the blazing heat. A tragi-comic figure in the old coat that hung almost to her knees, ragged sleeves rolled back over her thin wrists. The men stared at her with expressionless eyes. There was a tiny cabin forward, just big enough to allow a crew of two to creep in at night and stretch out on the floor. Small as it was, it contained a tiny cook-stove with an end of stovepipe sticking through the roof. Now it was as hot as an oven; useless for shelter.

From time to time Dirk and Joe Siever talked over what the men on the yacht would be likely to do. Dirk was at a disadvantage in these discussions because Joe knew something which he did not. However, he patiently bided his time.

“There are two courses open to them,” said Dirk. “They could sail into one of the harbors and drop anchor in front of a town. Nobody would bother them for a while at least. They could go ashore and abandon the yacht.”

Joe growled curses in his throat. “Criston is the nearest town,” he said. “They ain’t heading thataway, because Criston lies to the nor’east.”

“They wouldn’t go into Criston. Too near Diseree Island. They won’t go in anywhere until they think they’ve shaken us off. They know they’re being followed.”

“What’s the other plan they could choose?”

“If they abandoned the yacht it would be identified within a day or two, and a general alarm sent out. And by God! when that man’s crimes are known, the earth will be too small to hide him! A better plan for him would be to find a deep hole somewhere out of the way and scuttle the yacht.”

“How could they scuttle a steel ship?”

“There’s a sea-cock under the engine-room floor. There’s an acetylene torch aboard. If they opened a lot of holes in her hull above the waterline, left the portholes open and opened the sea-cock she’d go down pretty quick.”

“Damn!” growled Joe. “If they was to sink her before we come up with them what chance would we have of finding them?”

“What we ought to do,” said Dirk, “is to go into one of the towns, tell our story and let it be spread over the country by telegraph. Kirkall would never escape us then!”

“No!” cried Joe, with unexpected violence. “We don’t want no mainlanders in on this! This is our business and we will settle it in our own way!”

Every man on board supported Joe in this, and Dirk was forced to submit.

Some hours passed. The islanders slept, woke, ate, and slept again. Mona sat alongside Dirk like a little figure of Patience. Dirk, rummaging in the cabin, finally found a piece of sailcloth with which he managed to construct an awning under which she could lie on the cabin roof. The smudge of smoke to the northward thinned out and disappeared altogether. They held to the same course because they knew of nothing better to do.

Joe steered with one hand on the little wheel affixed to the cabin alongside the door. Dirk sat facing him. Following a long period of silence, Joe drew a coin from his pocket and started tossing it in the air and catching it with a great air of unconcern. Dirk caught the bright glitter of gold and his pulse beat faster. He felt that he was on the brink of a discovery. He said nothing.

After a while Joe exhibited the gold piece on his outstretched palm. “What do you make of that, Captain?”

None of the other men looked that way, but Dirk was aware that all were listening with strained attention. “Old Spanish gold piece,” said Dirk, with an air of pleased interest. “Where did you get that, Joe?”

“Oh, it’s been handed down in my family since time out of mind,” said Joe, carelessly.

Dirk took the piece and studied it. “Over three hundred years old,” he said. “But as fresh as if it were stamped yesterday!”

“It’s just been kept as a curiosity,” said Joe.

“Do you suppose there’s buried treasure on the island?” said Dirk laughing.

“Oh, them tales!” said Joe, with a shrug. “They tell them stories about ’most every island up and down the Bay. Sure we got our story on Diseree Island. The old folks tell about a pirate called Rafe the Blood who buried his treasure there before our people came. We all know the story. Ain’t nothing in it. None but this one piece ever was found.”

He returned the coin to his pocket. Dirk supposed that was all, but presently Joe said, surveying the horizon: “What would you say the value of that there piece would be, Captain?”

“It’s about the size of our gold eagle,” said Dirk. “That’s worth nearly twenty dollars now.”

“What?” said Joe, puzzled. “Are you telling me that a gold eagle will buy twenty dollars’ worth of goods?”

“Yes,” said Dirk grinning, “but you can’t spend it.”

“You can’t spend it?”

“It’s against the law.”

Joe scowled. “Are you saying gold ain’t no good no more?”

“No. I told you it was worth twice as much as it used to be.” It was a difficult matter to explain to the simple islander.

“If you can’t spend it, what can you do with it?” demanded Joe.

“You take it to the bank and change it for paper money.”

“Oh!” After a silence he said: “Reckon it would make considerable talk if a man was to go into a bank to change an old piece like that.”

“It sure would,” said Dirk, dryly.

That was all Joe would say, but it gave Dirk plenty to think about. A feeling of amazement overwhelmed him. Here at last was a possible explanation of the lure which had drawn Harry Prosser to the island, of Ashcomb’s frantic actions after Prosser’s death, of the islanders’ present rage to recapture the yacht. It was like a jigsaw puzzle; as soon as two pieces fitted together, the others began to drop into place one by one. The possibilities took his breath away.

After a while he said, grimly: “It’s a pretty safe bet that they will scuttle the yacht. They have the dinghy to get away in.”

“O God! if I could only double her revolutions!” groaned Joe, glancing at his engine.

IN THE middle of the afternoon they met a crab-boat heading south and hailed her. Yes, they had passed a steam-yacht about an hour before, and half an hour later a Bay canoe on the same course. The canoe was called *Almira P.* (This was Charlie Peters' boat.) The yacht was heading north inside Carter's Island.

The crab-boat then began to question them in turn. What were they chasing the yacht and the other canoe for? Where did they hail from? What was the skipper's name? Joe Siever let in his clutch without answering and moved on. Curses on their incivility came down faintly on the breeze from the other boat.

Dirk unrolled his chart. "Well, we've learned something," he said. "We're still on the right course. She's not heading up the Bay, but means to try and shake us off among the maze of sounds and straits and passages behind the islands."

"She's still got near two hours' start of us," growled Joe.

"Charlie Peters is on the job, and the yacht's smoke shows her up a long way off."

At six o'clock the sun's rays were tending to the horizontal, and a blessed coolness began to steal through the air. Mona came out from beneath her awning. They were then in a wide body of water named on the chart as Carter's Sound. Far away on their left lay Carter's and Blodgett's islands, and on the right the mainland of the eastern shore; ahead, more islands.

At the head of the Sound there were two deep-water channels; Carter's Straits continuing to the north, and York Passage tending to the eastward. Here the chart proved invaluable. "York Passage is broken up by swampy

islands,” said Dirk. “All right for small boats, but it would be a trap for the yacht. Keep on through Carter’s.”

Quarter of an hour later, upon rounding an island, they saw another Bay canoe motionless in the channel ahead. She was not anchored, but appeared to be drifting aimlessly. An excited discussion arose. A sharp-eyed young fellow called Sam Bewley said that it was Charlie Peters’ canoe. He recognized her by some peculiarity known to himself.

And he was right. When they came within hailing distance, Joe shouted to the other craft, “What the hell you waiting for?”

The laconic answer came back: “Out of gas.”

“Oh, damn!” muttered Dirk. “That doubles the odds against us.”

The canoes were brought alongside each other, and a full tin of gasoline passed over. “Where’s the yacht?” asked Dirk.

“We lost her before we stopped,” said Charlie. “Last time we seen her smoke she was still heading north.”

The two canoes proceeded.

A mile or two farther along they came to a space of open water where two routes crossed. On the left Cooper’s Channel came in from the Bay and went on to the several towns that lay at the head of navigation. The question here was, had the *Alethea* gone back to the Bay; had she ascended the channel to one of the towns, or was she continuing north?

A motor-boat appeared, issuing out of the channel to the north, and they headed for her on the chance of getting information. She was towing something in the water that they could not see. On coming alongside they discovered that it was a long stout mast roughly chopped off at the butt, with cross-trees and the ends of the shrouds dangling. Dirk smiled grimly. He recognized the type of cross-trees.

“Where did you pick that up?” asked Joe Siever.

“Out of the water couple miles north,” came the answer.

“Why the hell should any vessel want to chop her mast out?” said Joe. “Ain’t been no bad storms lately.”

“You can search me, Mister. Reckon it’s been in the water a long time. Anyhow, what’s his loss is my gain.”

They passed out of hearing of each other. Any waterman could see that the mast had not been in the water long. It was perfectly clean and smooth; the ax marks as fresh as if it had been chopped within an hour.

“What do you make of it?” Joe asked Dirk.

“We have our course,” said Dirk; “and now we know they’re getting ready to sink her. They doubt if they can find a sufficient depth of water to cover her masts and all.”

The two canoes chugged on northward in company among a confusion of islands, all apparently uninhabited, all covered with woods. Joe Siever would steer the *Josephina* around one side of an island while the *Almira P.* took the other until they met again.

Finally Dirk called a halt. “No use traveling further north,” he said. “A little way ahead of us lies the country which is served by the railway. That would be all cleared off and well settled. No good to them if they’re planning to sink the yacht.”

He studied the chart closely. “A copy of this same chart is in the wheelhouse of the *Alethea*, and an hour or so ago, Kirkall would be studying it just like I am now. Everywhere the depth of the water is marked. He would be looking for an out-of-the-way spot that showed forty feet or more. There are not many such holes marked. We ought to be able to visit all of them before dark.”

He carefully drew a ring around each likely spot on his chart. The *Josephina* visited one, and the *Almira P.* was sent off to look at another. For an hour they searched back and forth without success. The men glanced scowling at the sinking sun and muttered curses.

Finally the *Josephina* started to push through a narrowish channel which seemed to lead nowhere in particular, but showed a depth of twelve feet at low water all the way through. It was a difficult passage for the *Alethea* to have negotiated, but Dirk persisted, because halfway through, behind a hook of land, was marked one of the deep coves that are characteristic of Chesapeake waters. Seven fathoms was set down there.

The sun had now disappeared behind a bank of clouds, but the sky overhead was full of light. There was no air stirring; trees and water seemed to hang in a breathless suspense that was only broken by the approach of the noisy *Josephina*. The wide-winged herons fled in affright before them. So wild and tangled were the shores they might almost have been the first humans to visit the place. Between points of firm ground the little bays were choked with rushes.

The cove they were in search of was separated from the channel by a low ridge of earth covered with pine trees. When they rounded the hooked point it opened up before them, an almost circular pool perhaps a hundred yards across, surrounded by an inextricable confusion of bushes and vines

with pine trees rising behind. The surface of the water was a mirror reflecting its rich green frame.

Joe Siever threw his clutch out, and they drifted in. Suddenly a cry broke from several men at once. They saw a patch of oil spreading widely over the water. So their search was rewarded. From the oil they glanced uneasily in Dirk's face. In all that maze of islands and waterways he had led them direct to the spot where the *Alethea* had sunk. He saw that they suspected him of powers of divination.

"Just a simple process of deduction," he said, grinning.

As they drifted across the oily patch other human mementoes were discovered—a couple of cigarette butts, a wooden block with a piece of rope disappearing into the depths, a boathook. On account of the oily scum it was impossible to see any distance into the water. Darkness was gathering now.

"We can do no more tonight," said Dirk. "Let's get hold of the *Almira* and make camp until dawn."

The men grumbled. "They'll get away from us during the night."

"I doubt it," said Dirk. "They haven't had any opportunity to make arrangements in advance. Suppose there's something on the yacht they want to save. They'll have to hide it until they can go and fix a place to receive it, and a way of getting it there."

The islanders glanced uneasily at Dirk. He made his face very bland.

Joe looked around the shores of the cove. "There's some light left," he growled. "Let's go ashore and search for them."

"They wouldn't camp here," said Dirk. "That would be too simple."

Joe's face fell. "How in hell can we find them, then? Where will we start looking?"

"We'll have to dope it out. . . . Look at the chart. This is an island that surrounds us. They wouldn't hide their stuff on an island, because then it would have to be transported across water again. Look! the mainland is only a half a mile or so to the east. My guess is that they will land somewhere on the mainland and bury their stuff; sink the dinghy so it can't give them away, and return later by land to fetch what they want."

The islanders now evinced a childlike faith in Dirk. His decisions were accepted without question.

The two canoes anchored in the cove. It rained hard during the night, but that was nothing in the life of the hardy islanders. By spreading pieces of sailcloth over the booms they contrived to sleep dry. Mona occupied the little cabin on the *Josephina*, and Dirk slept outside the door.

Morning broke fair, and everybody was immediately astir, eager to start the search. During the night the falling tide had carried the oil and the flotsam out of the cove and the water was now as pure and clear as on the first morning of earth. While breakfast was cooking Dirk untied the skiff and he and Mona rowed slowly across the cove, peering into its depths.

A short distance below the surface, like something in a dream, they saw the yellow funnel of the *Alethea*, and passed over it, and looked into its black hole. Below it they could see the roof of the wheelhouse, the bridge, the main deck gradually fading into the general greenness. The blocks hanging from the empty davits strained upwards almost to the water's surface, held down by the falls; a drowned ship; a ghost half seen through that strange green medium.

"I'm glad she's gone," said Mona, bitterly.

"It wasn't her fault," murmured Dirk, with regret. "A sweet little ship."

He rowed back to the canoe. "There seems to be no reason why anybody should ever visit this cove," he said. "In the ordinary course of things she might have lain here without being discovered until the Judgment Day."

After breakfast the two canoes pulled up their anchors and headed towards the east. They presently came out into open water bounded on the far side by salt marshes stretching away north and south as far as one could see. The solid ground with trees was upwards of a mile beyond.

"That's the mainland," said Dirk.

"Not much of a shore for landing on," remarked Joe. "Bet they was sick when they seen it."

"Well, there are always waterways through a salt marsh."

"Shall us head straight across, Captain, or veer north or south?"

"Straight across, Joe, until we get some lead."

Sam Bewley, the lynx-eyed youth, presently called their attention to a thread of smoke rising against the eastern sky, from a point far away across the marsh and a little to the left.

"Let's investigate that," said Dirk. "It is possible that darkness overtook them before they could get away, and that they're still on the ground."

The islanders' eyes glittered at the prospect of success.

The marsh proved to be laced with little creeks or canals meandering in every direction. After exploring several of these in the skiffs in the endeavor to find a way through to dry land, and only getting stuck in the mud, Dirk said:

“We won’t enter any more of these damn ditches until we come to one which shows a real flow of water.”

They found a stream deep enough to allow the canoes to enter and began slowly to ascend its winding course. The rushes grew so high on either bank that it was only by standing on the cabin roof they could see over them. The smoke no longer rose to the east, but they were satisfied that they were heading in the general direction of the spot where they had seen it.

The tide was running out, and upon rounding one of the incessant bends in the stream, they met a procession of bits of charcoal and half-burned pieces of wood floating down the middle. Dirk fished a curved piece of wood out of the water that was clearly part of a pulley block. Sam Bewley showed two overlapping bits of wood that suggested the lap-streak construction of the dinghy.

“They burned the dinghy,” said Dirk. “That was the fire we saw . . . and we’re close on their trail!”

The islanders’ teeth gleamed in their faces.

Very soon the water shoaled off so that they were obliged to anchor the canoes. Leaving four men to guard them, the remaining six, with Mona, went on in the two skiffs. Those who were assigned to the oars bent to them with a will.

When they finally reached the place where the sedge grass and rushes gave place to firm ground, they saw at once where the fugitives had landed. Above this point the tidal stream was only a little brook. A stretch of grass alongside the water made a natural landing. Back of it was a steep little bank where a road had once come down.

Dirk, taking stock of the surroundings, said:

“These streams silt up fast. Once, you can see, there was plenty of water here, and Bay boats used to come up to this point and transfer their loads to wagons. But it was abandoned as a landing long ago. It looks now as if nobody has visited the spot for years until last night.”

The fire had been built close to the water’s edge. Chips here and there indicated that they had broken up the dinghy with axes first. When it was consumed they had shoveled the embers into the water, and spread wet mud about to hide the burned grass. This could not have been done more than an hour before.

Dirk, studying the ground all around, perceived a good deal more than he let on. Kirkall and Mike had evidently brought a set of blocks and falls from the yacht. Hitching their tackle to a tree on the edge of the bank, they

had hauled up a heavy object on rollers—the marks in the earth were clearly visible, though the rain had fallen since.

From the top of the bank the course of the old road could still be followed, winding away among the trees; but no wheel obviously had passed over it for years. It was lined with deciduous trees and their dead leaves were thickly strewn all about. The rain had been a providential thing for Kirkall and Mike, because it had soaked and beaten down the fresh leaves they had spread, making the whole surface look alike. There were no more marks of the passage of the object on rollers.

But darkness must have overtaken them before they could carry away their heavy loot. It was certainly buried close by—and close alongside the road, too, since it would be impossible to work their tackle among the trees. One by one Dirk searched the trunks of the trees along either side for marks of chafing.

The islanders followed and watched with scowling faces. Clearly, their feelings were mixed. They didn't want Dirk to share their secret, but they couldn't proceed without him. At last Dirk ceased his search, grinning. He had found the tree.

“What have you got?” demanded the scowling Joe.

Dirk pointed to the chafed marks. “They shifted their tackle to this tree, and hauled the—well, whatever they had—in from the bank. You will find it buried somewhere between this point and the bank, close alongside the road on the left.”

Instantly the whole crowd of them dropped down and fell to scrabbling among the wet leaves. Soon a cry rose from Sam Bewley, and all ran to see what he had found.

For two men it had been a big task, no doubt, to bury the heavy object, and not more than three inches of mixed leaves and dirt covered it. When this was scraped away, Dirk saw the neat new trunk which had formerly stood in the wardrobe of Prosser's cabin. It was now bound with many turns of heavy rope to keep it from bursting with the weight of its contents.

The islanders went wild with joy. Several of them tugged at the ropes without being able to budge the trunk. The weight of it filled them with rapture.

“This is the stuff!” they cried. “We've got it back! By God! they couldn't get ahead of us, the damned mainlanders!”

“Easy!” Dirk warned them. “They may still be hanging around.”

“What the hell!” cried Sam Bewley. “Let them come if they want. We'll handle them!”

Dirk's heart was beating with the same thick excitement that filled them all. "So that is Rafe the Blood's treasure," he said, dryly.

Joe scratched his head somewhat sheepishly. "'Pears like it must be, Captain. Reckon you had to know it. I reckon Lipp Bewley dug it up and never told."

Other voices broke in angrily. "Brought in the mainlanders to get it! The dirty traitor! It's ours! It's ours! It's always been ours!"

"Where do I come in on this?" asked Dirk, coolly.

They fell silent, glancing uneasily at each other, scowling.

"I brought you here," said Dirk. "I pointed out the spot where it was buried."

"That's right, men," said Joe Siever, slowly. "The Captain is entitled to his share."

The others reluctantly agreed to this. Dirk saw that they were influenced more by their fear of his making trouble rather than by any good will towards him. Gratitude was not one of the Diseree men's strong points. However, he went farther and struck again.

"The young lady must have her share, too. The money that ought to have been hers was put into the yacht."

There was violent opposition to this. Dirk stood firm. The men finally retired a little way and went into a huddle on the question. After a while Joe Siever returned to Dirk with a sly grin.

"Captain, us men won't agree to give the young lady a share. We ain't going to give our women none. But we'll give you two shares, Captain, and you can do what you like with it, provided you agree to take the money to the bank and change it for us. Us ain't familiar with banking ways."

"All right," said Dirk. They shook hands on it.

The trunk was dragged out of its grave. Joe opened his knife.

"Wait a minute!" Dirk warned them. "That kind of trunk was never made to hold such a weight. If you cut the ropes she'll bust open, and how will you carry the stuff away?"

They groaned in disappointment. "Aw, let's have a look at it!"

"You men ought to think this through," said Dirk. "Are the men back home in on it?"

"Sure. All grown men share alike," said Joe. "That was agreed."

"Then you ought not to open it until all are present. Else, you'll have trouble, certain. More killings will follow."

It went hard with them to take this. The thought of what the trunk contained made them lick their lips. They scowled and grumbled. But Dirk's logic was incontrovertible.

"It goes hard not to run it through our fingers," said Joe. "But the Captain he's right. Gives us good advice, men. What say, shall we carry it back to the island and open it?"

The soberer voices prevailed and the young men submitted.

Half a dozen hands seized the ropes, and the trunk was dragged over the road and down the bank. With considerable difficulty they got it loaded aboard one of the skiffs. Dirk watched grimly from the bank, foreseeing more trouble.

"Well, come on, Captain!" said Joe.

"Wait a minute!" said Dirk. "These murderers will be coming back for their loot. Aren't you going to help me catch them?"

"Aah, to hell with it! We've got what we came for."

"I don't see it that way," said Dirk. "They killed my friend. I'm not going to let them get away with it."

"What do you want to do?" asked Joe, with a hard grin. "String them up?"

Dirk made no answer.

"If you take them and hand them over to the police, the whole story will come out. It will make trouble for us."

"I've already told you these crimes can't be hidden," said Dirk. "It's all got to come out, anyhow."

"All right," said Joe. "We've got our gold. The mainlanders can do what they like about it."

Dirk began to get a little hot. "But for me you wouldn't have got it," he reminded them. "And now you want to leave me to face those killers alone."

Joe had the grace to look a little shamefaced. He tried to bluff it out. "We ain't trying to get out of our agreement. Two full shares is yours when you take it to the bank."

"Never mind that," said Dirk. "Listen to me. I've never deceived you yet. There is no suspicion or blame attached to any of you in connection with these killings. You've got nothing to fear from a showdown—if you face it. But if you try to run away from it, suspicion will be aroused immediately. And it will be a long time before you cash in at the bank!"

This had its effect. One or two of the men hung back. Joe said, cajolingly:

“Well, come on, Captain, let’s get the trunk aboard my canoe before anybody sees it, and we can talk it out down there.”

“Nothing doing,” said Dirk. “I’m staying here.”

Joe didn’t believe that he meant it. “Well, that’s up to you,” he said, shrugging. He turned towards the skiffs. “Push off, men!”

Dirk had no notion of allowing himself to be outbluffed. He turned coolly towards Mona, saying, “I wish to God I had a cigarette.”

The older men grumbled against deserting Dirk, and Joe himself was not so confident as he was making out to be. Suddenly Dirk found an additional supporter in young Sam Bewley, who said:

“Men, since we started out with the Captain everything he told us has panned out like he said.”

They fell into a discussion among themselves. Dirk, making out to pay no attention, quietly awaited the outcome. He noticed that Joe Siever was one of the first to yield. His bluff had been called. They came to an agreement, and Joe said:

“Captain, you can’t expect us all to stay here with the trunk. The mainlanders are slick, and if they get their hands on that gold they’ll find a way to diddle us out of our rights. But if you will agree to Charlie Peters and four men taking the gold back to Diseree Island in the *Almira P.*, the other four of us will stay here and help you.”

This was a better deal than Dirk had expected to get. “Sure,” he said. “And it is further agreed that the trunk is not to be opened until we all are present.”

“Right,” said Joe. “Charlie will lock it in the cabin of his canoe and let it stay there until we get home.”

Thus harmony was restored. Joe said:

“Captain, all of us has got to go down to the canoes to help load the chest aboard, and to fetch some more grub. Will you come with us?”

Dirk hesitated. To go with them was the only way of making sure that they would come back again. However, he decided against it. “No,” he said. “There’s a chance that the men may come back by daylight. The Mate and I will stay here on watch.”

“Well, so long, Captain. We’ll be back this afternoon.”

As they watched them poling away—at the beginning the stream was too narrow to permit of rowing—Mona said: “Shall we ever see them again?”

“God knows!” said Dirk. “I have felt that there was something in young Sam Bewley. Maybe he will hold them to it.”

In order to pass the time, Dirk and Mona cautiously set off to explore the old road through the forest. Both were armed, and their guns had been well cleaned and greased since their immersion. Though the land was perfectly level, the road wound back and forth among the trees, as old roads always do; and they could never see far ahead. Depressions in the wet leaves and an occasional footprint or part of a print in a muddy spot, showed where somebody else had preceded them since the rain. These signs kept them keyed up to a sense of danger. Whoever had gone before would be coming back again.

It was an original forest tract, though the virgin timber had been cut out long ago, and in addition to the evergreens there were many varieties of trees; oaks, gums, sycamores and here and there the silvery skeleton of a long-dead chestnut. The interstices were filled with laurel, dogwood, and holly. Other rough tracks came into the forest road, but none showed the prints of wheels. Yet, except for an occasional mud-hole, the road was good enough.

“They can come back in a motor-car,” remarked Dirk.

When they had walked for about a mile they began to hear a well-known sound that had been absent from their ears these past days, the hum of a rapidly driven motor-car. All at once the forest came to an end alongside a modern concrete highway. Conscious of their ragged and disreputable appearance, they crept forward under cover until they were able to look out between the stems of a clump of laurel.

At one step they had returned to a civilized land. On the other side of the highway stretched well-tended fields of corn and grass, and in each direction they could see prosperous farmhouses with shade trees in front, barns and outhouses behind. Off to the left lay a village embowered in trees, with a church steeple or two sticking up. Every now and then an automobile buzzed past in front of them. The placid, dull expressions of the occupants suggested that they were totally unacquainted with the dangerous life.

Mona’s hand stole inside Dirk’s. “It makes one feel so strange,” she whispered. “As if one no longer belonged to the world.” He saw that there were actually tears in her eyes.

“Well, we’ve been through hell,” he said, “but we’re on the return trip.”

She forced a smile.

Dirk, wanting information, struck out into the road. Mona remained in hiding. When cars passed him he was acutely aware of his unshaven chin

and matted hair; the shirt that had dried upon his back and the soiled and torn trousers. However, nobody gave him more than a glance.

He went to the back door of the nearest farmhouse. The farmer's wife and her hired girl working in the kitchen, looked at him in no friendly manner. Without waiting for him to speak, the mistress said, crisply: "We've got nothing for you. . . . The men are right handy in the barn," she added significantly.

Dirk grinned. "I don't want anything but a little information," he said.

The woman stared.

"I don't exactly know where I am."

"Where did you come from?"

"I've been paddling around the creeks and inlets the past few days," he said, vaguely. "What's the name of this village up the road a piece?"

Realizing from his voice that he was not the usual panhandler, she unbent a little. "Carberry," she said.

"What's the nearest town?"

"Fenton. Seven miles north."

"It's on the railway, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"You haven't got an old road map lying about that would put me straight, have you?"

"I reckon so. . . . Annie, go look on the desk in the sitting-room."

The maid presently brought him a rumpled map. Meanwhile her mistress' curiosity was stirring. "Where did you leave your boat?" she asked.

"At the head of the creek about a mile from here."

"Did you come out of the woods just now?"

"Yes."

"Well, I declare!" said the woman, now thoroughly intrigued. "You're the second fellow that come out of those woods this morning."

Dirk pricked up his ears. "The second?" he echoed.

"Yes. After breakfast when I was doing the upstairs, I happen to look out of the window and I see a man come out of the woods yonder. In all the years I been here as wife I never see anybody come out of those woods on foot before."

"Only one man?" said Dirk, startled.

"Sure. He turned up the other way to the village."

“What sort of looking man?”

“I couldn’t tell you. Neither one thing nor t’other. It’s a right smart piece away and he turned his back on me. I didn’t see his face.”

“How dressed?”

“Neatly dressed with a good hat and all. Carried a satchel like a city fellow. That’s what looked so funny.”

Dirk reflected that Kirkall and Mike had had the run of the yacht all day. No doubt both had fitted themselves out before they sunk her. But only one of them!

“It beat me what he could have been doing in the woods,” said the woman.

It occurred to Dirk that if too much curiosity was aroused it might result in an investigation that would spoil their plans for the night. “That was my partner,” he said, carelessly. “He left me this morning to buy grub, and I got tired waiting for him to come back. . . . So he went to the village? The son-of-a-gun! Ought to have been back long ago.”

She accepted the explanation. “If you want grub,” she said, “take a couple of cantaloupe and any vegetables you can carry. You’re welcome, I’m sure.”

“Much obliged, ma’am.”

When Dirk returned to Mona she saw by his face that he had collected surprising information. “What’s the matter?” she asked.

“They told me at the farmhouse that a man came out of the woods before me this morning. Only one man. . . . Where’s the other?”

Mona’s eyes widened. “He must have been there guarding the spot, and we never knew it! I suppose the size of our party frightened him away. He saw at once that the game was up.” She caught her breath. “Or else he’s hiding somewhere about still!”

Another possible explanation occurred to Dirk, but he did not speak of it.

THE islanders kept their word. In the middle of the afternoon Joe Siever and Sam Bewley turned up in one of the skiffs, bringing two men whom Dirk knew merely as Streaker and Dick. They were stalwart young fellows belonging to Sam's particular lot, and, Dirk judged, dependable enough if their leader was present.

Joe reported that the trunk was safely on its way back to Diseree Island aboard the *Almira P.*

In the still woods the slightest sounds were exaggerated, and Dirk, aware of the impossibility of keeping the men quiet for so long a time, sent them back to lie in their skiff during the remaining hours of daylight. They allowed the skiff to drop back a few yards among the rushes, where they lay perfectly hidden, yet were within ten seconds of Dirk if called.

Dirk and Mona stretched out behind a screen of blackberry bushes some fifteen yards back of the spot where the trunk had been buried. Thick underbrush afforded them complete cover on both sides. Dirk picked off the blackberry leaves here and there to allow them to peep through. They had roughly filled up the hole in front with leaves so that whoever returned for the trunk might not take alarm too soon.

Throughout the hot still hours nothing stirred in the forest. Even the occasional birds they saw flitting from branch to branch were without voices. Having more highly organized nervous systems than the islanders, the forgetfulness of sleep was denied to Dirk and Mona. All those tedious minutes had to be measured off one by one.

Mona said: "If there was somebody watching here this morning and we scared him away, he may have warned his partner. In that case nobody will come back."

“We have to take that chance,” said Dirk. “However, the man who went first would scarcely be able to figure out in advance just where he would be during the day, and if the man who stayed didn’t know where he was, he couldn’t warn him.”

“Ah, I wish it was tomorrow morning and it was all over!” she breathed.

When at last the sun went down and darkness began to steal under the trees, Dirk brought the four men up from the skiff and posted them. They knew that he had four guns in all, and he was faced with mutiny when he refused to hand any of them out. But he held to it. He was determined that his man should not be killed until he had yielded his secrets.

“Look,” he said, “there’s only one man coming back, or at the most two. All you’ve got to do is to jump on their backs and hold them down. If you start shooting in the dark, you’ll shoot each other or shoot me as sure as eggs is eggs.”

“Suppose you’re wrong,” growled Joe. “Suppose he brings a gang with him?”

“If more than two come,” said Dirk, “lie just where you are and let them go away again.” He felt safe in saying it.

They yielded. Dirk kept the guns on his own person.

Joe and Streaker were posted under cover across the road from the hole in the ground, while Sam and Dick were put about fifty feet down the road, one on each side of it. This was in case the man should take alarm before reaching the hole, and make a break to get away. Dirk and Mona lay down behind a clump of wild rhododendrons, nearer to the hole than they had been before. They were not perfectly hidden here, but it would serve in the dark.

When these arrangements had been made, quiet settled down on the woods. Ever since darkness had begun to gather Mona had been perfectly silent, following Dirk around or remaining in whatever spot he placed her. Now, lying close beside her, he couldn’t even hear her breathe. Alarmed by her unnatural silence, he put a hand on her breast. Under it he felt her heart pounding wildly, and pity melted him.

“Matey, dearest, you don’t have to go through with this,” he whispered. “Go and stay in the skiff until it’s over. You’ll be perfectly safe there.”

“That would be worse,” she whispered, crossly. “You know I’m not going to leave you.”

He tried to draw her close to him so that he could smooth back her hair and comfort her, but she resisted him stubbornly.

“No!” she whispered from between stiff lips. “Not at a time like this. . . . It only weakens me when you sympathize!”

Dimly he comprehended that a great spirit inhabited the little woman’s body. “Matey, you’re a stout fellow!” he whispered. “I’m proud of you.”

She gave his hand a convulsive squeeze, and didn’t touch him again.

A long time passed—or so it seemed. Yet when Dirk looked straight overhead there was still light in the sky. A demon of restlessness entered into him, and he went rigid in the effort to control the twitching of his limbs. The silence seemed to press against his ear-drums now, to stop his breath, to bear him down with the weight of a nightmare.

And he, too, began to be afraid—not of anything that walked on two feet, but afraid of evil itself. The horrors of the past few days infected his imagination. Evil that strode ahead so confidently, striking down its victims where it would. Prosser, Tony, Ashcomb, Cap’n Jim-of-Jim, and Professor Harford murdered one by one in silence and mystery. Lipp Bewley dropped overboard and McElderry driven mad.

How completely this thing had baffled him! Made a fool of him at every turn! He could see It silently laughing. Locked doors, loaded guns, watching eyes had all been powerless to stop It. Even in the confined spaces of the yacht nobody had ever seen It at work. It struck down when It was ready. It used a man and then killed *him*. Surely no two-legged human creature could be gifted with such fiendish assurance! . . . If It approached in the dark, would he have the grit to face It?

Dirk struggled against these terrors. He reminded himself that there were four simple men near by who trusted in his ability to cope with any situation. And there was Mona! Certainly Mona would die of terror if she suspected that he was afraid, too. Mustn’t lie and think such thoughts. Must get busy!

He whispered to Mona: “There’s still a little light in the sky. He won’t be coming yet. I am going around to see if the men are on the job. You stay here.”

She answered with a ghost of a whisper: “All right, Captain.”

Avoiding the hole in front of him, Dirk crept across the road on all fours. “Joe!”

“Here, Captain!”

“Is it okay?”

“I’d feel better if I had a gun in my hand, Captain.”

“Nothing doing.”

“All I want is a smoke of tobacco,” grumbled Streaker.

Dirk crept on along the side of the road to where the others lay. As the road was open to the sky at the end, he kept out of it to avoid making a shadow against the light to anybody who might be coming from the other side.

“Sam!”

“Here, Captain!”

“Look, if anybody comes, let them get well past you before you run out. And if they have flashlights shut your eyes so they won’t give you away by reflecting the light.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Having repeated this to the man across the road, Dirk started back on that side. He had covered about half the distance when he suddenly put his hand on something soft, and jerked it back, quivering with repulsion. Because it was not mud that he had put his hand into, nor a pile of wet leaves, but something that yielded sickeningly.

Steeling himself, he hastily scraped aside leaves and dirt—and met the touch of cold damp flesh. He clamped his teeth to keep from crying out. Clammy, stiffening flesh; a human nose. Dirk struck a match in trembling fingers and looked. It was Mike. He had been thrust into his shallow grave just as he had fallen dead. Hair matted; eyes and mouth filled with dirt—a loathly sight.

Well, Dirk had prefigured something of this sort. After destroying half a dozen lives to secure the treasure, Kirkall had no intention of sharing it with the stupid Mike. Dirk passed his hand over the dead man’s head and felt a raised lump on the crown. Struck down unawares like the others and quickly finished.

After waiting a moment to steady himself, he started around the body. His shaken nerves had to withstand another shock. Alongside Mike’s body he sank again. Another one! Confusion was added to his horror. How could there be another one? How could there be?

He forced his unwilling hands to scoop away the leaves and dirt. He struck another match, and when he had sufficiently cleaned the features, he recognized the mean, sharp face of Kirkall, hideous in death. The two men had been shoved into the same shallow grave and barely covered. The match dropped from Dirk’s hand and went out.

For a moment or two he knelt there, holding himself rigid. Kirkall! Again all his carefully built-up structure of explanation went to pieces and a shrieking confusion filled his mind. He couldn’t bring his faculties to order.

He couldn't think. All he was aware of was a frantic animal desire to run from the horror.

By slow degrees his whirling senses registered the sound of a moving automobile, and he jerked his head up. This one was running slowly. The sound was coming nearer. A car was jolting through the rough forest road in second gear. Dirk instinctively hastened to Mona's side.

"What were you striking matches for?" she whispered.

With an effort he steadied his voice. "Quiet! There's a car coming!"

In a few moments they could see light off among the trees; widely diffused at first, gradually narrowing, jogging up and down as the car took the bumps. It drew closer, shifting this way and that, following the bends in the road. It was coming very slowly, and every second tightened the rack of suspense. Not until the car was almost upon them could they see the actual headlights. Their brightness blinded them to what was behind.

The car stopped beside the roughly filled hole. When the headlights passed by a certain amount of their radiance was reflected back, and for a second Dirk glimpsed an old model touring car with the top down. A solitary figure sat at the steering wheel. His hat was pulled down over his eyes, and Dirk could not see at all what manner of man he was. He turned off the headlights.

Immediately afterwards the round eye of a flashlight sprang into being. The man got out of the car and turned his light on the hole in the ground. Instantly he perceived that it had been disturbed. A crazy shrill cry broke from him. Falling to his knees and dropping the light, he plunged his arms deep into the mass of wet leaves. His cries were like those of a beast in pain.

Dirk having circled a little to get squarely behind him, leaped on his back bearing him forward into the leaves. Dirk's hands closed around his throat. How good it was to feel the human flesh; the larynx, the strained cords in his neck. "Man or devil," muttered Dirk. "I've got you! I've got you!"

He was not a powerful man, but for a moment or two terror lent him a superhuman strength. He scrambled away blindly through the undergrowth bearing Dirk on his back, then stopped by a tree, threshed wildly among the leaves and branches. Dirk was not seriously put about.

The man contrived to get a hand into the side pocket of his jacket, and to pull out a gun. Dirk wrenched it out of his hand, and clubbing it, brought it down on his skull. He collapsed. It was all over in a few seconds.

The islanders came crashing through the undergrowth. Joe Siever picked up the flashlight as he came, and cast its light on the motionless figure. They

turned him over on his back. It was a man in his forties, with a meager clean-shaven face, deeply-seamed, and curiously pale—more than pale. In body unexpectedly corpulent.

A yell broke from Dirk. “It’s the Professor! . . . the Professor! His whiskers and eyebrows were false! . . . Thank God! now I *know*! After all there was no hellish magic in it! It was the Professor all the time! . . . Oh, thank God!”

So violent was the reaction that Dirk was forced to sit on the ground. Mona crept close to him and passed an arm around his shoulders. He looked wonderingly at the gun in his hand. It was the same automatic he had given Cap’n Jim-of-Jim.

“But you said . . . you said you saw him dead,” stammered Joe Siever in a maze.

Dirk broke into wild laughter. “That was just a trick, it seems. His last and smartest trick! After he had killed five men he made out to be killed in the same manner himself. Oh, this Professor was a rare one . . . a rare one! He knew all the tricks! . . . But he’ll play no more!”

Joe was still holding the light on the unconscious man’s face. “I have seen this fellow somewhere,” he muttered. “Look, men, do you know him?”

The other three shook their heads.

“Ah, you’re too young,” said Joe. “It was a long time ago . . . a long time ago!” Suddenly he cried out: “By God! he’s a Bewley! You can see the likeness to Lipp Bewley, for all his color is different. Now I know him! This is Nahum Bewley, the oldest and the wickedest of the brothers! We drove him off the island twenty years ago.”

“This is the one who went to state prison?” asked Dirk.

“The same. It was the boss of the crab-house over to Criston told us he was in prison. He read it to us out of the newspaper.”

“What had he done? Do you remember?”

“Sure. It was all in the newspaper. Nahum worked in a hospital—not a doctor, a kind of waiter I take it . . .”

“Orderly?” suggested Dirk.

“Sure, that’s the name they put to him—orderly. . . . It seems there was a rich man died in the hospital, and Nahum got himself up like a lawyer and went to the dead man’s wife and told her the doctors had given her husband the wrong medicine and killed him. He got money out of the woman by telling her he could make the hospital pay damages. But they caught him.”

“Now you can see how it all worked out,” Joe went on. “Lipp found the gold and went to the mainland, seeking help, naturally it was his smart brother he would go to.”

“Had they kept in touch with each other?” asked Dirk. “Had they written?”

“No. No letters ever come to the island.”

“Then how could Lipp find him?”

“Well, he was in state prison,” said Joe, grinning. “He couldn’t move away. . . . It was two years ago he went to prison. He was put in for two years and he would get something off for good behavior, they said. That would bring him out this spring.”

“And all Lipp got out of it was a watery grave!” Dirk muttered.

“Sure,” said Joe, coolly. “Soon or late Nahum was bound to kill Lipp. Nahum wasn’t going to share the treasure. Lipp ought to have known that, because Lipp would have done the same. It was dog eat dog.”

Joe prodded the limp body with his foot. “Ah, this was a sure-enough bad one!” he went on. “He always had a twist in him. He was different from the rest of us. He went alone. Smarter than the rest, too. Father, mother, brother were nothing to him. He was bad!”

“He was smart, all right,” said Dirk, grimly. “He couldn’t have foreseen everything that was going to happen. He had to accommodate himself to it. He took advantage of everything that came up. . . . And in the end he almost got away with it, too.”

“He was smart!” said Joe.

“Let’s see what he’s got in the car,” suggested Dirk.

In the rear compartment of the touring car they found a dozen stout canvas bags for carrying away the contents of the trunk; and a suitcase—no doubt the same that the man had been seen carrying that morning. Upon being opened, the flashlight revealed among a heterogeneous collection of his belongings, these articles, which offered eloquent testimony:

(a) A tin make-up box containing grease paints, water-colors, several twists of gray hair, spirit gum, alcohol for removing it, several pairs of spectacles, and so on. The natural appearance of the “Professor’s” eyebrows and whiskers was due to the fact that the hair had been applied directly to his skin with invisible gum, and then trimmed with scissors.

(b) A four-ounce bottle of a thick, brownish liquid. Joe idly removed the cork and started to convey it to his nose. Dirk caught his hand. “Look out!”

he said. "There are poisons which kill with a sniff." Joe changed color and hastily corked the bottle.

(c) An odd-looking pair of tweezers with notched teeth, so thin that it could be inserted in a keyhole to grip a key.

(d) A cigar-box full of keys of every size and shape.

(e) The red notebook that they had often seen in the man's hands. Its pages were filled with the cramped, ill-formed characters of one who had not learned to write until reaching maturity. Without stopping to study it thoroughly, Dirk saw that it contained the extracts from some book on anthropology that the "Professor" had spouted in and out of season. Also, in the back of the book there were a number of prescriptions containing the names of drugs of which Dirk had never heard. One of these recipes ended with the significant words: "To generate the gas, put the powder in the kettle with a spout and fix a rubber tube over the spout. Then pour in water and close quickly."

Sam Bewley spoke up: "He's coming to, Captain." They shut up the suitcase and went back.

THEY found the prisoner breathing heavily and groaning. He was a hardy specimen. His senses returned suddenly and completely. He opened his eyes, and taking in the situation at a glance, thrust a hand into the pocket where his gun had been. Finding it gone, a barely perceptible shrug lifted his shoulder.

“For God’s sake give me a drink,” he said, huskily.

“There’s not a drop in the outfit,” said Dirk.

Nahum struggled to a sitting position.

“Tie his hands behind him,” ordered Dirk.

It was done. Dirk searched him. There was nothing of interest on him but a highly efficient blackjack.

“In God’s name, how did you make it?” Nahum demanded, harshly, of Dirk. This was the natural man speaking. The “Professor’s” affectations had vanished.

“Oh, we got the breaks,” said Dirk, grinning. “One thing led to another.”

Nahum’s face was twisted in bitterness. “You’re right,” he snarled. “You got the breaks. I outplayed you at every turn. I fooled you as I pleased. It wasn’t through any cleverness of yours that you came out on top, but just by luck. But for one little thing I’d be clear away now and a rich man.”

“What was that?” asked Dirk.

“You locked me in my own cabin. I had duplicate keys to every other door on the yacht. I never thought I’d need two keys to my own door.”

Dirk perceived that the man was governed by vanity and played up to that. “You’re a remarkable fellow,” he said.

“Think so?” said Nahum, pleased and sneering. “You don’t know the half of it. . . . Even after you locked me up I fooled you by playing dead. And you was fooled, too! If you had come a little closer to me I had the gun ready and I would have shot you down. But the girl screamed and you carried her up on deck.”

“A lucky scream of yours, Mate,” Dirk said to Mona, aside.

“I started from scratch!” boasted Nahum. “I hadn’t a dollar nor a friend in the world. I was just out of prison. But I made out to get me a private yacht and everything I wanted. I made you all serve my purpose!”

“Where did Lipp find the gold?” demanded Joe Siever.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” sneered Nahum. “I’m not talking.”

Not so different from the other islanders, thought Dirk; it will all come out if he’s handled right.

Joe and the other men were threatening the prisoner. “We’ve got you where we want you, Nahum! You’ve damned well got to tell!”

“Try and make me!” he snarled.

“Ah, let be,” said Dirk, indifferently. “We’ll throw him in the back of the car directly and carry him to the police. Our job is done.”

Young Sam Bewley got it. “Sure, throw him in the car,” he said, “and carry him to town.”

They made believe to forget about Nahum. “Joe,” said Dirk, “you and Sam had better come with us. The other two can wait aboard the canoe. We’ll see this man committed to jail, then we’ll all go to Disreee Island and come back for the trial.”

After a bit more of this, Dirk said, casually: “On the level, Nahum, who put you up to this stunt?”

He flew into a passion immediately. “Damn you! Didn’t I tell you it was my doing from the start? I’m no man’s man! I play a lone hand!”

“Expect me to believe that!” said Dirk.

By such tactics he soon got Nahum launched on his tale. While he talked, Sam Bewley gathered dry sticks together and started a little fire that lighted the scene.

“It was the big storm of February twenty-third last washed the old chest out of the bank on the west side the island,” said Nahum. “Next morning Lipp was poling alongshore in his skiff to see if there was anything washed ashore worth saving, and he seen the chest all twisted up amongst the roots of the down trees. That chest was buried years before them trees sprouted

from seed. The oak of it still held together, but the iron bands was about rusted through. It was near ready to bust open.

“When it come dark that night, Lipp and Wye Bewley went back in the skiff and loaded it aboard. They pulled around the north end of the island and buried it again on the beach on the westerly side, where the storms couldn’t reach it, and where they could dig it up again when ready.

“Lipp knew if he said anything every man on the island would lay claim to a share, and it wouldn’t be nothing divided amongst thirty, so he kept his mouth shut. He got one of them to carry him over to the mainland. . . .”

“Damn him! I took him over!” growled Joe.

“Sure it was you took him over,” said Nahum, grinning. “He bummed his way up to the state of Pennsylvania and he come to me at the state prison. Lipp knew I had a head on me. And he told me about the old treasure-chest. There was I sick and broke and locked up. My God! what a chance! It put new life in me!

“I still had a month to serve and Lipp had to wait around. God knows how he lived. I didn’t have no money, and neither did he. Then I come out and we went to Philly. Jeese! I was near crazy, with a fortune like that almost in my hands and no money to swing it and no friends. I could not go to the island myself, because of trouble I had years ago!”

“You’re damned right you couldn’t come back!” growled Joe.

“I went to the hospital where I used to work,” Nahum went on with his grin of pleased vanity. “I learned a lot in that hospital, but they showed me the door. I got next to the fellows I used to work with and tried to borrow money off of them, but they give me the razz. Damn bunch of crooks! They near got me down! Lipp nor me didn’t have a cent! However, I stuck around with these orderlies and from their talk I learned there was a patient in the hospital getting over the D.T.’s, and he was going to charter a steam-yacht to go cruising in Chesapeake Bay when he was discharged.

“That was the first break I got. I trailed this guy Prosser when he left the hospital, and found out where he lived, and who his friends was, and where he went to drink. He was the kind of guy anybody could talk to when he had a drink or two, so I put Lipp in his way in the bar of the Hotel Auvergne, and when Lipp had made himself solid with him, he swore Prosser to secrecy and told him about the chest of gold on Diseree Island.

“Prosser fell for it like a load of brick, and after that the rest was easy. Lipp borrowed money off him, and I fixed up my disguise as the Professor and hung out in the bar of the Auvergne until I got next to him. I fixed it so that Prosser thought he was making up to me, not me to him. Jeese! when I

let fall that I was interested in the islanders of the Chesapeake he near jumped down my throat asking me to come with him. He thought he was taking me to camouflage his treasure hunt, see? Jeese! it was rich comedy!" Nahum went off into a dry cackle of laughter.

"Unluckily, Prosser couldn't keep it to himself," he resumed. "He told his pal Ashcomb about the gold, and took him in on the deal. And Ashcomb undertook to run the show for him. Never took no notice of me, of course. Thought I was just a lousy Professor. Ashcomb was scared of Lipp, and he hired Kirkall and Mike for a pair of strong-arm men to use against Lipp if necessary.

"Ashcomb couldn't work the first Captain they got to his will, so he made trouble between him and Prosser, and the Captain walked ashore in Baltimore. Then Prosser hired you. Ashcomb didn't like you, neither; thought you was too sharp. He had a crook for a candidate. He didn't want no wireless man, neither. So him and Kirkall and Mike fixed it up to knock you and Sparks out and prevent you from sailing. I didn't say nothing. Ashcomb was a fool. I knew he would play into my hand in the end.

"So we left Baltimore and the girl turned up aboard. That was awkward for me, but I took it in my stride like everything else. I was prepared to meet any situation. I had everybody on board fooled. I was enjoying myself.

"Lipp, of course, had gone back to the island ahead of us. When we got there he told Prosser where the gold was buried, and Prosser was in such a sweat that he took Kirkall and Mike in on the deal that same night—Ashcomb hadn't told them two about the gold, and they tried to fetch it aboard while the rest of us was ashore. They had it all but dug up when you gummed their game by coming back, and they had to bury it again. Jeese! was Prosser sore!

"I had to make a new plan then. I seen that Prosser run his lip so much, he'd be telling you and the girl about the gold, and then I would be up against it. So I decided, I had to wipe him out that night. Of course I meant to do it, anyhow, but not so soon. When the yacht quieted down that night I just went aft and fixed him. I wanted it to look like he died from alcoholism. It didn't work out that way, but it was all right, anyhow.

"Jeese! what fun I had in the morning! You suspected Ashcomb, you suspected Lipp, you suspected Kirkall, everybody but me! And Ashcomb he was scared stiff. Of course he thought Lipp had had it done, and he expected to get his next. He hadn't a friend on board but Kirkall and Mike and he couldn't trust them, now that they knew about the gold. They wanted it for

themselves. And me, I fussed around and put my nose into everything and talked wise!” Nahum went off into cackling laughter.

“The next thing I had to do,” he resumed, “was to keep you from leaving the island until they got the gold aboard the yacht, and to keep you from fetching help from the mainland. I was up against it for a while because I couldn’t get in touch with Lipp right away. Not until he come aboard with you later. I was getting ready to disable the engine myself, but it wasn’t necessary, because when Lipp come, I passed a wrench to him to let the half-wit loosen the propeller while we was eating. The poor nut had just enough sense for a job of that kind. Me and Lipp, we always crabbed at each other when you was watching us. Good comedy!

“In the meantime while you and Sparks was ashore I had put the wireless apparatus on the blink. Later, when I see that Sparks was going to be able to fix it anyhow, I had to step on him quick. Of course I had him marked down, but not for that moment. It was an emergency call.”

Dirk could no longer contain himself in the face of the grinning, boastful Nahum. “Good God! does human life mean nothing to you?” he burst out.

Nahum suddenly turned snarling. “Why should it?” he demanded. “I tell you I started from scratch. Since I was a kid they was all against me! All my life I had to scheme for myself! And as an ex-convict every man felt free to give me the boot! Well, it was a pleasure to get back at some of them!”

Dirk mastered his rage. “Go on,” he said.

Nahum grinned once more. “Jeese! there was a fresh panic aboard the yacht after that. Ashcomb got so damned hysterical I seen that the moment had come to wipe him out, too. Else he would have broke down and blabbed everything to you. . . .”

“How about McElderry?” asked Dirk, grimly.

“Believe it or not,” said Nahum, “I neither helped nor hindered him. But at that I was glad to see the last of him. To have a loony aboard threatened to gum up any sensible plan I might make. You can’t calculate on what a loony will do.”

“Go on,” said Dirk.

“Ashcomb had his instructions from Lipp to get you and the girl and me ashore that night, so the gold could be loaded aboard. That didn’t work. The doped cocoa was the second string to my bow. I didn’t mind if Ashcomb got on to me through this, because I was ready to wipe him out, anyhow. But the cocoa didn’t work out, either. It didn’t matter. The next night was just as good.

“Prosser and Ashcomb had made wills in favor of each other, so in case one fluffed out the other would come in for all the gold. That night Ashcomb tried to get hold of Prosser’s will because he was afraid if it was found it would look like evidence that he had killed Prosser. I didn’t have nothing to do with that.

“But you played right into my hands when you locked Kirkall and Mike in the engine-room, and Ashcomb in his own cabin. I had keys to both doors. I went down to Kirkall and Mike and talked them over to my side. I pointed out to them what a damn fool Ashcomb was, and it was agreed that we should wipe out him and Lipp, and share the gold just among us three.

“So then I went to Ashcomb’s room and let myself in, and sympathized with him against you and made friends with him, and when he happened to turn his back I tapped him on the bean with my silencer. Mike and Kirkall carried him down and shoved him in the furnace. . . .”

“Oh, my God!” murmured Dirk, half sick with terror. “What about me?”

“Oh, you would have got yours in time,” said Nahum, grinning. “I only needed you to get the yacht out of shoal water.”

“And the girl?”

“Sure! . . . Before we returned to the mainland.”

Dirk saw red. His fist doubled involuntarily.

“Keep your hands off me!” snarled Nahum, shrinking away. “If you want to hear the rest.”

“Go ahead,” said Dirk.

“We lowered Kirkall out of a porthole. He took the skiff ashore and swum back and we hauled him in again. That was to persuade you that Ashcomb had escaped ashore. And it worked—for a while.

“Well, I had to laugh the next night when you offered to tow me ashore to rescue me from them wicked fellows, Kirkall and Mike. It was a laugh! Suited me all right. My plans was working fine. Soon as we left the yacht Kirkall signaled to Lipp, who was already waiting on the beach to the north. And the gold was put aboard.”

“Where?” demanded Dirk.

“That’s funny, too,” said Nahum. “Prosser acting on my advice as Lipp gave it to him, built a false partition across the back of his cabin, and painted the cabin so it wouldn’t show. Part of the wall unscrewed and come out, and the trunk was stowed behind it.”

“Pretty good,” said Dirk.

“Well, you know pretty near all that happened after that. All the eloquence that was spilled in Joe’s shanty while the gold was being put aboard. The old chest bust open and they had a time with it. On the yacht they put the gold in Prosser’s trunk and hid it away.”

“One piece was dropped on the beach,” said Joe Siever, showing it.

“The hell you say!” snarled Nahum. “That’s what brought you guys so hot on the trail, eh?” He shrugged. “Well, it don’t make no difference now. . . . Next day Lipp got the surprise of his life when you tied him up,” he went on. “He looked to me to save him. He thought now the gold was safe aboard, the time had come for a showdown. Well, so it had, but not just the way he expected. I never had no notion of letting him share it.”

“Your own brother!” put in Dirk.

“He was nothing to me,” said Nahum, coolly. “I’m a lone wolf. . . . That night I put Lipp and old man Jim-of-Jim to sleep in the cabin. . . .”

“I already doped that out for myself,” said Dirk.

“Then you know about all, Captain. I got a bar of lead out of the yacht’s ballast to sink him. . . . Did you find the yacht?”

“I did.”

“Kirkall and Mike are buried somewheres around here,” said Nahum, casually.

“I found them, too. . . . That makes seven.”

“I don’t regret nothing,” said Nahum. “It was a game worth playing.”

“Where did you keep all the stuff in your suitcase?” asked Dirk. “I searched you and I searched your cabin.”

“Say, you was easy to fool,” answered Nahum, grinning. “I had different hiding-places. Under the fo’c’s’le ladder there was a trap in the deck. I masked it with a couple of folded chair. Under that trap was a stowage place full of junk. I hide my suitcase down there.”

“How did you kill the men?” asked Dirk, grimly.

Nahum hesitated, grinning, looking around from face to face. “I got a mind not to tell you that,” he said. “Just to keep you guessing.”

“It’s all one with me,” said Dirk, with a shrug.

A strange possessed look came into Nahum’s face. “Reckon, I will tell you,” he said, slowly. “It’s too good to keep. . . . You’ll find the answer in my right hand, Captain.”

Dirk sprang towards him—but he was too late. A strong shudder passed through Nahum’s body. His eyes rolled up in his head. He fell over sideways, dead.

When Dirk forced open his hand, a hypodermic syringe fell out. He had palmed it while they bound his hands together, and he had only to clench his hand to drive the needle into his flesh. There was a tiny brownish stain on the point.

Low cries of amazement were forced from the watching men. They instinctively snatched off their caps.

“So that was it!” said Dirk grimly picking up the needle. “And that ends it! . . . Well, anyhow, he was game enough to take his own medicine.”

“But that needle leaves a little mark,” said Joe, examining Nahum’s palm. “And you said there was no mark on the dead men.”

“Their mouths were open,” said Dirk. “I reckon he forced it into their tongues.”

Dirk looked behind him. Mona was standing there with her face buried in her hands. A great surge of tenderness swept over him. Careless of the men standing around, he flung an arm around her and drew her away from the ugly sight on the ground.

“Matey dear,” he whispered, “our troubles are over. We have come through! Realize it! Realize it and let me see you smile. We can be human again; we can be like other people. We can forget and be happy.” He put his lips close to her ear. “And, Matey dear, we can be married if you’ll have me.”

She pressed close to him. “Yes, Captain.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Island of Fear* by Hulbert Footner]