

The
**PURPLE
BALL**

**FRANK L.
PACKARD**

A CRIME CLUB MYSTERY STORY



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THE PURPLE BALL

By FRANK L. PACKARD

There are no more exciting mysteries than Frank L. Packard's startling tales of the South Seas. Join, in these thrilling pages, young Captain Heath of the yacht *Nepenthe*, cruising idly in the dangerous waters of the Malay Archipelago. Watch for the little boat that will come floating out of empty darkness to the side of the yacht, bringing with it the wizened Malay and the mysterious purple ball, with its secret of violence and death. . . .

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FIRST EDITION

To
A. M. B.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I In Command	<u>1</u>
II Undercurrents	<u>10</u>
III Out of the Night	<u>22</u>
IV The Tale of Kaya Dâlam	<u>29</u>
V Evil Island	<u>52</u>
VI Where the Search Led	<u>66</u>
VII “Button, Button . . .”	<u>82</u>
VIII By Way of Impasse	<u>102</u>
IX Allies	<u>123</u>
X Off-Stage	<u>144</u>
XI Four Left	<u>156</u>
XII The Purple Ball	<u>171</u>
XIII ‘Ware the Wolf!	<u>180</u>
XIV The Wolf Bites	<u>189</u>
XV Faced Cards	<u>200</u>
XVI The <i>Nepenthe</i> ’s Secret	<u>219</u>
XVII Threads	<u>229</u>
XVIII Below Decks	<u>249</u>
XIX Strange News	<u>263</u>
XX Why Gaffney Laughed	<u>271</u>
XXI How the Pieces Fitted	<u>286</u>

THE PURPLE BALL

CHAPTER I

IN COMMAND

FROM forward the *Nepenthe's* bell struck twice. Nine o'clock in the evening.

Owen Heath, as he made his way along the deck, glanced in through the open door of the yacht's combination smoking room and bar. The four males of the party were playing bridge as usual. He shrugged his shoulders. They were always playing bridge—and drinking. They were forever drinking. It was none of his business, of course—he was not the owner; he was merely, through force of circumstance, in temporary command of the *Nepenthe*—but one would think they would want to suck a little fresh air into their lungs occasionally. And especially on such a night of stars and glory. A queer sort of voyage this, and a queer sort of crowd aboard—with the proverbial exception!

His eyes traveled along the deck. It was quite empty. Obviously the four men in the smoking room were not the only ones oblivious to the wonders of a perfect tropic night. He was conscious of a sense of disappointment. To be perfectly honest he had rather hoped, hadn't he, that one of those deck chairs would be occupied? And to be honestly precise he had hoped, hadn't he, that it would be occupied by Doris Carroll? Well, it wasn't. The sea was like a sheet of silver under the full moon—scarcely a ripple on the water. A pity to miss the witchery of it! He grinned a little mockingly at himself. Those chairs looked very inviting; or, in lieu thereof, say, a stroll around the deck. That was the idea, wasn't it?

From the boat deck above came the crackle of wireless. Roach was always sending vagrant messages off into the air—or were they vagrant? Just ahead of him was the door of the lounge. The door was closed, but he could hear the radio going. The last word in radios was cased in that bit of ornate furniture in there—long and short wave-lengths—get anything with it—anywhere. Perhaps she was in there—someone was, anyway.

He stepped across the deck, opened the door, and halted abruptly on the threshold, as a voice came sharply over the radio:

“. . . brutally murdered. Valued at between thirty and forty thousand pounds, the . . .”

There followed a meaningless jumble of sound—the snatch of a song, the blare of a band, the screech of some instrument on a high note, the fragment of a station announcement. Instinctively he put his hands to his ears. The only occupant of the lounge was, not Doris Carroll, but Mrs.

Stavert. Mrs. Stavert, in apparent exasperation, was manipulating the dial frantically. But now, as he crossed the lounge to her side, she snapped off the radio, and looked up.

“It’s perfectly awful, isn’t it?” she exclaimed.

“You mean the murder that was on the air as I came in?” he smiled.

“No, I don’t,” she answered. “I mean the reception tonight. It’s appalling—simply scandalous. But it’s just too bad about that murder too. It sounded as though it was actually going to be creepy.”

“What was it?” he asked. “All I heard was that someone had been brutally murdered, presumably for something that was worth thirty or forty thousand pounds.”

“That was all I heard, too,” she complained. “It just came out of nowhere and then faded away. As you saw, I was trying to capture it again, but it was hopeless. I hope you won’t report my confession to Mr. Morlan, Captain Heath, but it was the nearest approach to a thrill I’ve had since we left Singapore two weeks ago, and I’m quite peeved at losing it.”

“As bad as that?” Owen sympathized. “No, I won’t say a word. Suppose we try for it once more?”

“Try if you like,” she invited, waving her hand in an unfriendly fashion toward the dial as though thoroughly incensed with it. “But even if you got any reception it would be too late now, anyway. It was probably just a brief news item, and by now the parrot at the ‘mike’ would be talking about the latest developments in the international debt situation, or on what terms the League of Nations would be willing to admit the Eskimos to membership, or something equally exciting.”

Owen studied his companion for an instant, grinning in spite of himself. Myrna Stavert was not an ordinary woman, of that he was quite well aware; but just what to make of her he had not so far been able to decide. She was extremely attractive, still young, certainly not more than thirty, and her slim figure was always perfectly and expensively gowned; also, she was unquestionably clever and quick-witted—and also at times embarrassingly caustic. Not pretty; he would be more inclined to describe her as handsome—there was something curiously masculine in the firm set of her lips and the rather square jaw, and something of immutability lurking behind the fine dark eyes that somehow or other seemed to rob them in some degree at least of their femininity.

“Yes,” he admitted, “I fancy you’re right. Hard luck to have missed it though, if it would have provided the needed thrill. I hope, however, it’s no reflection on me that the voyage up to date has been so—er—uninteresting.”

“Uninteresting!” She was smoking a cigarette. She drew on it deeply, and exhaled slowly. “It’s the old story of familiarity breeding contempt, isn’t it? Of course it’s no reflection on you! You have nothing to do with it except obey orders. It’s the constant repetition of what at first is of interest because it is new that eventually makes that very thing tame and even nauseating. When I stepped aboard at Singapore even the name of the yacht thrilled me. *Nepenthe*, you know, was the name given to a magic potion or drug that was supposed by the ancient Greeks to cause persons to forget their sorrows and misfortunes. Not that I had any sorrows or misfortunes that were at all momentous; but I was quite excited about it, the name I mean, it was so delightfully poetic—and now I positively loathe it. It’s all very well to forget, but really there are times when one would like to have something else to do.”

“But look here, I say, Mrs. Stavert,” Owen protested, “you — —”

“Oh, yes, I know,” she interrupted, her voice suddenly brittle, “the Malay Archipelago with its glamorous isles and all that sort of thing should be a source of unending rapture—only it isn’t—for me. Today we’re at one island, tomorrow at another, or at another so-called port on some other part of the same island. They are all the same—the same so-called hotels, the same bars, the same white men, the same natives, the same flies, the same heat—and the same unspeakable hang-outs that are quite as bad, I imagine, even though they are on a smaller scale, as the worst in Singapore.”

“My word!” Owen ejaculated a little helplessly.

“Yes, quite a tirade, isn’t it?” she continued with a tight smile. “But, as I understand the Americans say, I’ve got to get this off my chest—and you’re the victim. You feel like a victim, don’t you? Don’t answer. I know you do. Well, then, I’m bored to extinction with the monotony of it—which is only one degree less deadly than the life aboard the yacht here when we are at sea. Here it’s just an unending series of meals, and those four men at their everlasting cards who grow more quarrelsome and drunker every time they play. And as for the other two—oh, well!” She leaned abruptly forward and laid her hand on Owen’s arm. He felt her fingers tighten in a quick, nervous way; her dark eyes were wide as they held upon him—and suddenly seemed strangely prescient. “Really, Captain”—her voice was low now, tense—“if you can’t manage to scare up something in the shape of excitement by way of a change in the very near future, I warn you we’ll all be scratching each other’s eyes out.”

Damn the woman! She meant it, too! What was the matter with her? Why didn’t she talk to her husband? What was he to say?

“Well, Mrs. Stavert,” he began inanely, “anything that I can do to — —”

But her mood had changed and she burst into laughter.

“Please forget everything I’ve said,” she cried gayly. “I don’t know what possessed me to talk like that, but I feel—oh, ever so much better for it. But remember”—she put a finger to her lips—“not a word to Mr. Morlan. I’ve been horribly unguestlike.”

Owen laughed in return. He was gathering his wits again.

“All right,” he agreed, “on one condition. Tell me this. Have you seen anything of Miss Carroll this evening, or do you know where she is?”

She was merry now—teasing.

“I knew that was coming. But I am afraid you are doomed to disappointment. She’s busy coding or decoding something or other. I think it’s a shame that Mr. Morlan keeps her cooped up”—she glanced provocatively out through a window at the moonlit sea—“on an unforgettable night like this.”

Damn the woman again! But what could he do?

“You can’t half see the beauty of it from in here,” he invited courteously. “What do you say to a turn on deck?”

She shook her head.

“A gallant comeback, Captain!” she applauded. “But I was only teasing. As a matter of fact, I promised Miss Morlan I’d go down and spend a little while with her. She’s not feeling very well tonight.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said mechanically.

She smiled at him cryptically as she rose from her chair and walked to the head of the main companionway that led to the deck below. Here she halted.

“Do you know,” she stated abruptly, as she turned and faced him, “I like you because you are so painfully transparent that I know you must be inherently honest.”

Owen flushed uncomfortably.

“Thanks!” he acknowledged stiffly.

“Oh, I didn’t mean you to take offense,” she said significantly and in a lowered voice. “I only wanted to add that because you are so obviously what you are, and though I know officers’ berths are hard to get at sea these days, I hope your next voyage won’t be—on the *Nepenthe*.”

He caught a flash of white shoulders disappearing at the foot of the companionway. She was gone.

CHAPTER II

UNDERCURRENTS

A FURROW gathering between his eyes, Owen made his way up to the boat deck and paused for a moment at the door of his room at the foot of the starboard bridge ladder. Subconsciously he was aware of the steady, reassuring throb of the *Nepenthe's* engines and, subconsciously, up there on the bridge he noted the head and shoulders of a white-uniformed figure showing above the weathercloth. That was Gaffney. It was Gaffney's watch. But his mind was far away at the moment from either Gaffney or the *Nepenthe's* engines. Mrs. Stavert had given him something else to think about.

He opened the door of his room, stepped inside, switched on the light, closed the door, and flung his six feet of stature down on the settee. His clean-shaven, weather-tanned face was serious. He tossed his cap deftly across the cabin to the locker-top, and sent a hand rumpling through his light-brown hair. What had she meant by that last remark?—her reference to honesty. Was it merely one of her caustic pleasantries, which no one enjoyed but herself? Or was it a friendly warning? A timely hint? Had she discovered something of an ugly nature that was going on under the surface here aboard the *Nepenthe*? He was inclined to the latter view. Undercurrents—inharmonious, disturbing. He had sensed them himself almost from the moment he had come aboard. Something queer about it all. Not normal. It would not surprise him at all if, figuratively speaking, Mrs. Stavert were right and Mr. Morlan's guests began scratching each other's eyes out at short notice—with Mr. Morlan and his daughter joining in and making it a free-for-all.

He clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Well, where did he come into the picture? What could he do about it? He certainly had no authority over the owner's guests, much less over the owner himself; he was, as he had already had reason to remind himself that night, merely for the time being in command of the yacht and subject to the owner's orders, except, of course, where matters of navigation and seamanship were concerned.

His eyes left the ceiling and circled the well furnished and comfortably appointed cabin. Queer about that, too—being stretched out here on the skipper's settee and in command!

Tough on old Captain Penny. A week out from Singapore and then dumped ashore at Swabi. A godforsaken place! Mrs. Stavert had at least described Swabi! But there had been nothing else to do. There was no doctor aboard the *Nepenthe*. The doctor ashore had said it was typhoid. They would call there for the skipper on the way back. When? The Lord only knew! A month, maybe. He hoped the old man would pull through. He owed the fact that he was aboard here at all to Captain Penny.

His mind harked back over the years. He had served his apprenticeship at sea under Captain Penny, and had eventually made a voyage or two, as third officer, with the other. Then they had drifted apart. Two years ago he, Owen, had obtained his master's certificate, but no actual berth higher than that of second officer had come his way. Then they had begun to tie up the ships everywhere, and he had been paid off. Mrs. Stavert, who seemed to be so phenomenally worldly-wise in so many things, had made no mistake when she had said that officers' berths were hard to obtain these days. He had seen the best of them, men with extra-master's tickets and long records without a smirch on them, serving as A. B.'s—and glad to get the job. He himself had shipped out to the East that way—in the forecabin.

He nodded to himself. The sea as a profession was making heavy weather of it these days. There was no jolly error about that! He had not been able to strike anything in England and so he had come back here to the East. He had been born in the islands and had hoped that, with his knowledge of the language and the help of his father's old friends, he would stand an excellent chance, if nothing better offered, of getting at least some coastal work to do. But things had changed a lot. He had gone to sea at fifteen when his father died—twelve years ago. Old friends and jobs had been equally scarce. Nothing had clicked. He had no one to support but himself, for his mother had died while he was still too young to remember her, and he had put aside a fair amount, but his savings would not last forever. What to do had become a facer. And then, a few weeks ago, fate had appeared suddenly on the scene one morning on a street corner in Singapore in the person of Captain Penny. It had been a bit miraculous, or so it had seemed at a time when jobs were so obviously no more. Before he had barely had time to ask if Captain Penny knew of a chance for a berth anywhere, he had found himself listening incredulously as Captain Penny offered him one.

"I do—with me," Captain Penny had said heartily. "And you're just the lad I'm looking for. I've got the *Nepenthe*, a fifteen-hundred-ton private yacht—an oil-burner. My first officer's just got married and taken on a shore job with his bride's old man. Can't say I blame him. Carlin, my second, is all

right, but I'm not stepping him up. Not enough experience. Only carry two bridge officers, and I don't want my hair to get any grayer. It'll be practically watch and watch like it used to be in sail, but I generally take the forenoon watch myself so that eases things off a bit. There's a fair screw in it and everything all found. What do you say, Owen?"

Owen smiled reminiscently to himself. The luck of it! First officer on a private seagoing yacht! He would have sailed on a mud scow! It had seemed too good to be true. He had not hesitated. He had not been able to get "yes" out fast enough.

Later, Captain Penny had explained that Mr. Morlan, Mr. Henry K. Morlan, the owner, had sailed with him on several voyages from England to the Orient; that Mr. Morlan had asked him on more than one occasion to take over the command of the *Nepenthe*, and had finally offered such inducements that, in justice to himself, Captain Penny could not refuse.

Queer that—too!

All that he knew about the *Nepenthe* and its owner he had learned from Captain Penny. Mr. Morlan was head of an amalgamation of rubber and copra plantations, and the *Nepenthe* spent much of her time amongst the islands and up the China coast, carrying supplies and making inspection visits to the various plantation managers. Sometimes the yacht went to Ceylon and from there to Indian ports. Mr. Morlan was apparently very fond of the sea—mingling business with pleasure—always with guests aboard. On the other hand, Mr. Morlan spent a good portion of the Northern summer in the United States and Europe. The *Nepenthe* seemed to cruise the Seven Seas!

Owen ran his hand through his hair again. There was something strange about it all—something that was somehow or other disquieting. And yet he could put his finger on nothing specific.

There had been no question of discontinuing the cruise on account of Captain Penny's illness. Mr. Morlan had expressed himself as most emphatically opposed to any such idea, and had been only too glad to accept Captain Penny's assurance that he, Owen, was fully capable of taking command. All that was then involved had been another bridge officer. But Swabi had produced applicants and to spare—though the majority of the said applicants, if the truth were told, had savored more strongly of the beachcomber fraternity than of anything else. One, however, had been selected. Carlin had been promoted; and Gaffney, up there on the bridge now, had been taken on as second officer. Gaffney's papers were all right; he'd been out of a sea job and living with his brother for a year; and he had been recommended by Mr. Morlan's local manager. So far, he had made a

good officer; but somehow or other he, Owen, could not help feeling that he wished he knew more about Gaffney. No reason for it—except for the fact, possibly, that the man could never be induced to talk about himself, and that he and Carlin did not seem to hit it off any too well together. But maybe that was also due in a large measure to Gaffney's habitual reticence. Ought to make some allowance, of course! Gaffney was getting on a bit in years—and perhaps there wasn't much sugar-coating on the pill of serving under much younger men.

The wireless was crackling again. That brought his mind back to Roach. Roach appeared to be a fixture—at least he had been on the *Nepenthe* for a year or more before Captain Penny had taken command. A funny little sort of a chap—about thirty—so thin one could almost see through him. Mostly nose—pronouncedly inquisitive. He appeared to have every code book that had ever been printed up there in the wireless room, and was forever tuning in on other people's business. Nor did private codes abash him. On the contrary, private codes, Roach shamelessly asserted, were his “meat.” He had a mania for them, and it would be an intricate one indeed that he did not finally decipher. Hunting for skeletons in the closets, Roach called it. Ethics and Roach were not on speaking terms in this particular. He even boasted quite openly of the number he had intercepted and decoded, but was mum—which was perhaps to his credit—so far as the precise nature of any of the skeletons he had discovered was concerned. It was fair game, Roach claimed, only you had to be a pretty good shot to bring down your quarry! Owen frowned. Also it was a pretty fair background for blackmail, or perhaps stock manipulation, or something of that kind, if Roach ever really fell on anything worth while.

Owen shook his head vigorously. Nonsense! He didn't like Roach overmuch, it was true, but that was no reason why he should do the other an injustice. The man was quite harmless. Suited Mr. Morlan, anyway. Mr. Morlan seemed to think a lot of Roach—and it was Mr. Morlan's yacht.

Quite!

But why this mental stocktaking of the *Nepenthe's* personnel? Was he to go on and dissect the rest of the crew—Blaine and Naylor in the engine-room, the Chinese chef, and a score of Lascars and Malays that, headed by Tanu, the serang,^[1] completed the *Nepenthe's* roster? It wasn't getting him anywhere, was it?

[1] Native boatswain.

Mrs. Stavert's outburst hadn't been directed at the yacht's officers and crew. Certainly, if anybody's eyes were going to be scratched out, that pleasant little job would be undertaken by Mr. Morlan and his guests, and would be confined to themselves. A singular lot! They made him think of an eerie play he had once seen called *Outward Bound*. All dead already, though they did not know it when they set out on their voyage—all being ferried across to the nether world to their last accounts. Good God! what was the matter with him? Just because he was uneasy was no excuse for being rabidly morbid! What did he expect them to do? Murder each other? But, just the same, leaving Doris Carroll, Mr. Morlan's secretary, out of it, they were a strangely assorted lot—Mr. Morlan, Mr. Paul Stavert, Count Gaspard Luvac and Mr. Lao-ti, the four men who played quarrelsome bridge constantly, and between whom I. O. U.'s for thousands of pounds changed hands daily—with Mr. Paul Stavert the sole winner; and Paul Stavert's wife who was an enigma; and Anne Morlan who kept to her room a great deal, and who, both from a hint Captain Penny had dropped and from her own abnormal actions at times, he knew was addicted to drugs. Certainly the makings of a nice little blow-up!

He didn't know much about them. How could he? Just the surface scratching. But the French Count intrigued him perhaps more than any of the others. Count Luvac did not play bridge for money—his partner always carried the double stake; he was more abstemious than the others and less quarrelsome; also his English and his accent for a Frenchman were amazingly good. But so, too, for that matter, was the English of Mr. Lao-ti, who had been educated in Europe, who lived in Shanghai, who was credited with having made several millions out of tin in the Peninsula, and who — —

Something had been lurking in the back of Owen's mind. It surged to the fore now. That radio announcement about the murder, and the thirty or forty thousand pounds that were involved! It seemed to him that just before he had reached the door of the lounge, and though he could distinguish nothing of what was then coming over the air, he had been subconsciously aware that the radio had been functioning smoothly and without static or interference of any kind; yet he had no sooner opened the door and caught the few words he had heard when everything was chaotic. Had Mrs. Stavert intentionally mishandled the dial? Had she heard the crux of the affair preceding his entry, and for some reason — — He swore savagely at himself. He was in a filthy state of nerves tonight—ready to suspect even his own mother of anything, it would seem, if she had been alive! Out here in the islands, what could it possibly have mattered to Mrs. Stavert what she might

have heard? And whatever it was, she could only have fallen on it by chance. She couldn't possibly have known in advance that anything about a murder somewhere was going to be broadcasted at that precise hour and had therefore arranged to be alone in the lounge prepared to tune in on it! Perfectly absurd! And yet he could not rid himself of the belief that there had been nothing wrong with the radio before he had entered the lounge. Damn!

He sat suddenly bolt upright on the settee as he heard footsteps hurriedly descending the bridge ladder, while almost coincidentally there came a knock upon his door.

"Come in!" he barked.

It was Gaffney—squint-eyed, stocky, but admittedly trim in his white uniform.

"The moonlight's a bit deceptive, sir," Gaffney reported; "but though we're sixty miles from the nearest island, we've sighted what looks like a small boat two points off the starboard bow and close aboard; and there appears to be something white, like a figure, as far as can be made out, standing up in it and waving its arms—in a sort of ghostly fashion, if I may say so, sir."

Owen's mind leaped back to Mrs. Stavert. He smiled whimsically to himself. Mrs. Stavert had been asking for some excitement to break the monotony of the voyage. Well, here at least was something in that line—though probably of such a mild variety that it was likely to prove more of a disappointment to her than anything else!

"Very good, Mr. Gaffney," he answered crisply. "We'll stand by."

CHAPTER III

OUT OF THE NIGHT

THE stopping of the *Nepenthe's* engines had brought Mr. Morlan, his daughter, and the full quota of his guests on deck. Even Doris Carroll, Owen noted over the weathercloth of the bridge, had deserted her work below; and they were all grouped now at the yacht's rail on the main deck at the head of the gangway ladder which had been lowered. Gaffney had been quite right. It was a small boat that had been sighted, and there had been someone in it—a Malay in a white coat and sarong. But the occupant, though picked up adrift sixty miles from the nearest land, was obviously not much the worse for wear, since he had rowed vigorously toward the *Nepenthe* from the instant a blast of the yacht's siren had assured him that he had been sighted.

Owen made his way down from the bridge to the main deck and joined the others. The boat was alongside now. Tanu and two of the crew were down the ladder there at the water's edge chattering like magpies with the native who had just stepped out of the boat.

And then Tanu's voice floated up from below:

"What shall be done with the boat, Tuan? It is a good boat. Also there is a name upon it. But nothing remains in it, except some food, and of water only a little in a small jar."

Owen glanced inquiringly at Mr. Morlan.

"What do you say, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Morlan shrugged his squat shoulders.

"Oh, damn the boat!" he exclaimed impatiently. "A good boat is a godsend on any beach, but do what you like with it. What I'm interested in is that scarecrow who was navigating it. Let's hear what it's all about. He can finish telling his life's story to Tanu and the crew later—we're in the middle of a rubber."

Owen nodded.

"See the boat aboard, Tanu," he ordered crisply; "and send that chap up here on deck."

"Yes, Tuan," Tanu answered.

In the rays of the flood-light playing down the gangway ladder, Owen studied the figure that Mr. Morlan had not altogether ineptly described as a scarecrow, and who now, in obedience to Tanu's instructions, was making his way, a little hesitantly, it seemed, up toward the deck. The man was a

Malay of small stature; his flowered sarong was excessively dirty; his white coat, equally dirty, was unbuttoned over the chest, and had rents in it that exposed the brown torso in many another place—but physically, except that he seemed to be somewhat unnerved and apprehensive, the man did not appear to have suffered any hardship.

The man reached the deck, and, addressing Owen, doubtless because of his uniform, began to talk volubly in the native tongue—and, from almost the first word, suddenly oblivious of those around him, Owen listened incredulously. It was fantastic. If the man was telling the truth, it—

Mrs. Stavert's voice broke in.

"Oh, I say!" she protested. "This isn't fair! It's perfectly poisonous! We're all on our tiptoes, and can't understand a word. Can't he speak English at all?"

Owen put the question to the Malay, and turned to the others.

"Yes," he announced. "He says he can speak English."

"Well, then, why the hell doesn't he?" growled Mr. Morlan. "What's it all about?"

"I don't know quite what to make of it," Owen replied in a puzzled way. "He seems to be trying to tell everything at once—and it's a bit sketchy at best. He says his name is Kaya Dâlam, and he's talking about a murder, or, rather, what seems to be a series of murders—and some priceless thing that was the cause of it all."

"Pardon," observed the clean-shaven and rather well-set-up Count Luvac politely, "but murder is always interesting—more especially a series of them. If it will not shock the ears of the ladies, and if Mr. Morlan will forgive me for suggesting it, I would very much like to hear about these murders before we resume the so-far disastrous rubber in which Mr. Lao-ti has the misfortune to be my partner."

"Awfully well put!" applauded the also clean-shaven Mr. Paul Stavert. "Let's adjourn to the lounge and hear the beggar out. What do you say, Lao-ti?"

The Chinaman, immaculate in his white evening clothes, smiled blandly.

"These fellows," he murmured, "have such a common habit of cutting each other's throats wholesale that I am afraid the story will not be very original; but curiosity is a great sauce. And as my friend Count Luvac has said, murder is always interesting. I agree—it may change the luck with the cards."

Anne Morlan stepped suddenly out from the group toward the Malay. Owen moved a little aside to make place for her. In the moonlight, or in any

other light, and despite the fact that her wide black eyes were almost habitually devoid of pupils, and the cosmetics failed to disguise an unnatural pallor in her face, Anne Morlan, with youth still triumphant, was an unusually beautiful girl. How long would it last? How far along the gray way had she gone? At times, as Owen saw her, there was something distractingly alluring about her, while at others her personality repelled him with equal force—like the poles of a magnet, as it were, that functioned alternately at intervals and without warning. Tonight, or at least for the moment, she was gay, carefree, and at her best.

“Come along, Kaya,” she cried merrily, as she caught the Malay by the arm and led him across the deck toward the door of the lounge. “We’re dying to hear about it all. And you’ll have to live up to a lot unless Captain Heath was spoofing us about what you said.”

The rest followed. Owen lingered for a moment to give necessary instructions. He hadn’t been “spoofing.” Unless the Malay was mad or a consummate liar, there was a tale forward that would satisfy even Mrs. Stavert’s appeal for excitement. He smiled in a tight way. Better not put it on the air yet, though! There was Roach up there at the foot of the bridge ladder. Roach had left the wireless room for a post of vantage. Well, that was quite a natural thing to do, wasn’t it? What was it Mr. Lao-ti had said? Curiosity was a great sauce. Particularly at sea. The native crew were lining the rail along the fore deck. Tanu, the serang, below there, was giving his orders, preparatory to getting the boat aboard. Tanu had been brought up, Owen understood, in a mission school. Tanu could read, and had said there was a name on the boat.

“You there, Tanu!” Owen called down the gangway ladder abruptly. “What’s the name on that boat?”

“Tuan,” Tanu answered, “the name is *Orsu*.”

“All right!” said Owen briskly; and then, hailing the bridge: “As soon as the boat’s aboard, you can get under way, Mr. Gaffney.”

“Yes, sir,” the second officer responded. “Very good, sir.”

Owen stepped quickly across the deck. He was as anxious to hear Kaya Dâlam’s story in full as any of them—perhaps more so, having already had an appetizer.

They were still crowding into the lounge. He had, after all, been only a moment or so behind them, and he now brought up the rear.

And now they all dispersed, appropriating couches and easy-chairs. The Malay in his disreputable attire held center stage. Anne Morlan had posed him beside the radio and had sunk into a chair alongside.

“Go on, Kaya,” she urged, clapping her hands. “First scene: Act one! Attention, everybody!”

But Kaya Dâlam was ill at ease and disconcerted, blinking his eyes in the bright light that flooded the room. He turned in a bewildered way to Owen’s uniform which was now enhanced by the fact, doubtless, that it was worn by one who understood his native tongue.

Owen drew up a chair close to the other.

“Begin at the beginning, Kaya,” he prompted encouragingly in Malay. “You are quite safe now. We are your friends. No further harm can come to you. Speak in English so that all may understand.”

CHAPTER IV

THE TALE OF KAYA DÂLAM

THE MALAY'S dark eyes roved around the half-circle of faces that confronted him, and came back to rest on Owen. He swallowed once or twice, shuffled his feet, but was still silent.

"Yes, I know," Owen reassured the other smilingly. "It is all strange. But I have already told you that we are your friends. Go ahead, Kaya. You have nothing to fear."

And then Kaya Dâlam, suddenly seeming to acquire composure, began to speak.

"Tuan," he said in a low voice, "the tale runs thus: The count of the days is gone, but it is in my mind that they are ten since the night in Singapore when four men came aboard the *Orsu* and bargained with Tuan Radford that he should make a voyage with them, for what purpose I knew not then, and — —"

"Heh! Wait a mo'!" interrupted Paul Stavert. "I want to get this straight. What's the *Orsu*, and who's Radford?"

"I think perhaps I can help Kaya out—from what he told me before," Owen offered. "The *Orsu* is a schooner—it was one of her boats that we have just picked up. The schooner was owned by a man named Radford, who traded in and out of Singapore. Perhaps you've heard of him, Mr. Morlan?"

"No; I can't say I ever did," declared Mr. Morlan indifferently.

"Oh, yes!" It was Doris Carroll who spoke. Owen glanced in her direction. She made a picture sitting there in a vast lounge chair four sizes too large for her trim little figure, her hair now bronze, now gold, as the light played upon it with each movement of her head. Her blue eyes were shining with excitement. "That was the name of the schooner that was chartered by the company last year for a cargo of copra. And Radford was the captain's name. You must have forgotten, Mr. Morlan."

Mr. Morlan scowled.

"Well, that's quite possible," he admitted. "We charter a good many schooners, off and on, in the course of a year. But let's get on with this."

"You told me you sailed that same night before daylight came," Owen prompted. "Go on, Kaya."

“Yes, Tuan. It was even so. But the next day a great storm came upon us that lasted for many days. We were eight in the beginning upon the *Orsu*, for there was Tuan Radford, and I, Kaya Dâlam, and two others who were my kinsmen and who helped to sail the schooner for Tuan Radford. And then great evil fell upon us, for the storm was greater than any that my eyes, which have seen many, for since a child I have lived always on the sea, had ever seen before. The falling of a topmast on the second day killed Bujong and Kulop my kinsmen; and that night, as he sought to make his way to where I, Kaya Dâlam, was lashed to the wheel, Tuan Radford was swept away by a wave that was many times the height of a man and from whose blow it was in my mind the ship must break in two.”

Kaya paused, pulled his hand in an agitated way across his eyes, and then, addressing Owen, broke suddenly into Malay. He spoke excitedly for a moment or two, and then paused again.

Owen translated rapidly.

“He says it is not easy to explain himself in English. That things went from bad to worse. The four men who had hired the schooner from Radford were not sailors, but they helped as best they could. Kaya himself had lost all sense of reckoning. They none of them knew where they were. Their water tank sprang a leak and, before this was discovered, their fresh-water supply was almost all gone. Then things began to mend as the weather cleared. But it was two days before they sighted land—an island—early one morning. But though they needed water, the four men would not let Kaya go any nearer to the island from the moment they discovered that there were white men’s houses on the shore. He says that once the weather had begun to moderate he was often alone on the deck, and that the four white men drank a great deal in the cabin, and that on several nights he saw them through the cabin skylight pass a purple ball from hand to hand which each one had seemed to take turns in keeping in his possession.”

“How do you mean?” demanded Mr. Morlan. “I don’t follow that.”

“The way I get it,” Owen replied, “is that whoever had the ball in his possession had to produce it on demand. They would then all examine it, and one of the others would pocket it until the next time it was asked for.”

“H’m!” grunted Mr. Morlan. “Our friend Kaya seems to have seen a good deal through that cabin skylight—on the quiet!”

It was Kaya Dâlam himself who answered.

“Tuan,” he said, “it was because of fear that I watched. I was now alone with them, and I knew not what they would do when they had no longer

need of me. Both from the manner of their coming to the *Orsu*, and the evil that was written in their faces, I was afraid.”

“Did you *hear* anything through the skylight?” inquired Mr. Lao-ti softly.

Kaya Dâlam shook his head.

“I heard no word,” he said simply, “for the skylight was fastened down.”

“Excellent deductions, then,” murmured Mr. Lao-ti.

“Yes,” said Paul Stavert a little impatiently; “but what about the ball? What was it for? What did it mean? Could it be opened, or taken apart, or anything like that?”

Again Kaya Dâlam shook his head.

“That I know not, Tuan,” he replied. “I know only that it was in looks like a rubber ball such as is bought for the children in the bazaars, and that in size it was no greater than a small orange. But it is true, as the Tuan will see, that they set great store by it.”

Count Luvac hitched his chair slightly forward.

“What were the names of these four men?” he questioned briskly.

“Their names, Tuan,”—Kaya Dâlam ticked them off on his finger-tips—“were Tuan Black, Tuan White, Tuan Green and Tuan Gray.”

Anne Morlan laughed outright.

“And a *purple* ball!” she exclaimed. “Colorful, anyway!”

Count Luvac did not laugh.

“What were their real names, Kaya?” he asked quietly.

“Those were the names, Tuan, that they gave to Tuan Radford. If there were other names, I do not know them. But Tuan Radford laughed when they gave him these names.”

“Stout fellow!” grimaced Stavert. “Obviously, they were phony, but that doesn’t matter for the moment, does it? Let’s get on with the yarn, and let’s have as much of it as you can in English. You were doing all right. You said they wouldn’t let you put in at the island, because there were white men’s houses there. What happened then?”

“Tuan,” said Kaya, “when I saw the island, I knew for the first time in all these days to what part of the sea we had been blown by the storm, for it was an island that was not new to me. And so I knew that there were other islands not far away, of which some were small and upon which no man lived, and where it might be that water could be found. And this I told to the four white men. So by the middle of the day, for it was but daylight when we saw the big island, we came to a small island upon which no man lived, and

put down the anchor outside the reef, and I rowed the four Tuans to the shore, and we went up on the beach. And here they sent me back to the boat that I had rowed, and that lay on the sand, for something that was not there. But it was in my mind that they had reason for this, and, looking back, I saw that they were gathered close together, and I saw the purple ball passed from one to another as if, for so the thought came to me, they might be sure that it was amongst them. And when I returned to say to them that what they had asked for was not there—it was a gun for shooting birds that Tuan Gray said he had put into the boat—they talked together and said that we would all go each his way and look for water, and gather together on the beach after two hours had passed; and that, if no water was found, we would search for it on another island, for, as I had said to them, there were still other islands not far away.”

Again Kaya Dâlam paused, and again broke into Malay; but Owen shook his head.

“You do not need any help, Kaya,” he said hearteningly. “Your English is a lot better than my Malay. Carry on with it.”

Kaya Dâlam made a sort of helpless gesture with his two outspread arms.

“As the Tuan wills,” he said. “The island had many hills and steep rocks, and many trees that were so thick and close together that they shut out the sun, and to walk amongst the trees was like the fading of the day. For a long time I searched for water and found none, and then when the trees were all around me I heard the steps of two men almost at my side—but I was hidden from sight by reason of the trees. And I was about to call out, and then my tongue grew thick within my mouth and I could make no sound, for I saw one of the two men raise his hand and with a knife stab the other man in the back, and the man that was stabbed fell upon the ground on his face, and the man with the knife even then stabbed again so that the other would be surely dead.”

A low, quick exclamation of horror came from Doris Carroll. Owen glanced swiftly at the others. Mrs. Stavert was leaning eagerly forward, a flush of excitement on her cheeks. Anne Morlan’s short, hysterical laugh was discordant. Mr. Morlan, Count Luvac, and Stavert, as though the movement were concerted, had hitched their chairs tensely forward. Mr. Lao-ti alone showed no emotion.

“Since you say there was no one else on the island,” observed the millionaire Chinaman impassively, “these were two of the four men you have been telling us about, of course. What did you do then?”

“Tuan”—Kaya shivered and touched his lips with his tongue—“I did nothing. Had I been seen by the man with the knife I, too, would have been killed, and— —”

“Which one of the four was it who did the killing?” interposed Count Luvac quickly.

“Wait, Tuan,” pleaded Kaya. “It is not easy to tell. I did not know then which of the four it was who had struck with the knife, for I could see only his back, and not once did I see his face; but as I watched I saw him thrust his hand into the pocket of the man that lay upon the ground, and take from the pocket the purple ball, and this he hid in the roots of a great tree that grew beside him that he had stabbed to death, and— —”

“‘The Purloined Letter’!” Mrs. Stavert’s voice shrilled out. “How clever!”

Kaya Dâlam stared blankly from one to another of the faces around him.

“And how clever of *you*, Myrna dear!” said Anne Morlan with sweet sarcasm. “It is nothing, Kaya. For heaven’s sake, don’t keep us waiting!”

“Sorry to interrupt,” said Stavert abruptly, addressing Kaya. “But I say, you know, if you could see the purple ball and all that, I’d have thought you’d have been able to spot the beggar with the knife by his clothes, or his height, or something of that sort, even if you couldn’t see his face.”

“Tuan,” Kaya Dâlam answered simply, “the clothes of the four were not many, and one was as the other’s, for they wore only white pants and shirts; and the hair of each was black; and his height I could not tell, for when he ran then from the place, he ran as a man runs amongst the trees with his body low; and when he struck with the knife I thought not of such things but only of the killing of a man.”

“Oh, all right!” Stavert shrugged. “My error. Fire ahead!”

“Yes, Tuan,” Kaya Dâlam nodded. “When he who had killed the other ran from the place, I came from where I had been hidden by the trees, and looked upon the man who lay upon the ground. He was dead, and it was Tuan Green. And then I, too, ran, but not with great speed for my legs were weak so that I— —”

“But the ball!” It was Anne Morlan who interrupted now. Her voice was feverish. “The purple ball! You took it with you, of course. What was in it? There must have been something in it!”

Kaya Dâlam’s tongue touched his lips again.

“I did not take the ball,” he said hoarsely. “I know not what was in it.”

"My God!" ejaculated Mr. Morlan heavily. "All this fuss and bloody murder about the ball, and he leaves it there! Is the man mad?"

A certain dignity came to Kaya Dâlam as he straightened his shoulders and drew himself erect.

"I am not mad now, Tuan," he said gravely; "but at that time it is true that I was mad. I was mad with fear. What I had seen was not good to see. I did not touch the ball because it was an evil thing; and it was in my mind that it had brought evil upon Tuan Radford and upon my kinsmen, Bujong and Kulop, and that because of it they had died, and likewise because of it with my own eyes I had seen the killing of Tuan Green. It was not a purple ball; it was a ball of death, and it was accursed. And it was from that I ran, even as I ran from the terror that my eyes had seen. Does the Tuan not understand?"

Mr. Morlan, heavy-jowled, his black eyes narrowed, shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other with a jerk of his lips, and waved a diamond-fingered hand indulgently.

"I pass," he grunted. "Your bid."

"I do not understand, Tuan."

"Well, you said you ran. Where did you run *to*?"

"To the beach, Tuan. And there I found the three Tuans, but I said nothing of what I had seen for I knew not which one of the three it was who had killed Tuan Green; and, if I told my tale, then he who had killed Tuan Green would surely kill me secretly because of the fear that I had seen more than I had told, and also because then the ball of purple would be taken from where he had hidden it and would no longer be his alone—and for that, too, he would also kill me."

"You send the shivers up and down my back," purred Mrs. Stavert. "But I like shivers. You were certainly in a bit of a jam, Kaya."

"Jam?" Kaya Dâlam pondered the word for a moment, and then his face cleared. "It was even so," he said. "It was not that which is good to eat, but the fear of death. Yes, it was even so. The three Tuans and I, Kaya Dâlam, had found no water. The two hours had gone, and Tuan Green did not come. The three Tuans began to raise their voices and shout for Tuan Green, but Tuan Green did not answer. Then the three Tuans, and I with them, began to make search for Tuan Green. Could I, Kaya Dâlam, say that Tuan Green was dead, and where he was to be found? But when an hour was past we came upon the body of Tuan Green. And when they had searched the body of Tuan Green and found that the purple ball was gone, they made a loud outcry one against the other, and he that was guilty, though I knew not then

which one of the three it was, made as great an outcry as the others. Then they carried the body of Tuan Green to the beach, and because no one would let another out of his sight to go to the schooner for that with which to dig, we dug with our hands in the sand the grave of Tuan Green. But by reason of the need of water, they could not stay upon the island. And Tuan Gray, cursing many times, spoke thus: 'It is certain that it is one of us three, for Kaya Dâlam, knowing nothing, would have no reason for the killing; but, though we must first go elsewhere for water, we will see to it that the ball does not go with him who took it.' And then there upon the beach the three Tuans took off all that which they wore, even to their shoes, and were as Allah made them—and I likewise. And they searched the clothes and the naked bodies of each other, and I, Kaya Dâlam, also they searched, but the purple ball was not found. Then they put on their clothes, and no one trusted the other, and we went down to the boat, and rowed to the schooner and set sail upon the *Orsu*, for I had said to them that by morning we would come to another island where they might look again for water."

Kaya Dâlam's voice had grown dry and cracked. He stopped and licked at his lips. The half-circle of eyes and chairs had drawn still closer to him. No one spoke.

"There was great evil on the *Orsu* that night"—Kaya Dâlam's hands clenched nervously as he went on—"and my blood became as water from that which I saw. The three Tuans were in the cabin, but they did not sleep. They feared each other, and each one watched the other two. And I, Kaya Dâlam, who stood alone on the deck at the wheel, and sailed the schooner, could hear them quarrel and curse with many oaths, for the skylight of the cabin had been opened. And one said—I know not which one—that he who had killed Tuan Green could gain nothing from the killing of Tuan Green until he had killed the other two, and that could not be brought about while the three remained together, for then the odds were as two against the one who had killed Tuan Green. Therefore they did not sleep, but watched each other, so — —"

"Quite!" interjected Paul Stavert with a raucous laugh. "We get the idea. Only one of them was sitting pretty—the other two had the wind up for fair. United we stand, divided we fall, so to speak."

"Oh, shut up, Paul!" Anne Morlan's voice was high-pitched. "Go on, Kaya."

"It was in the middle of the night"—Kaya Dâlam closed his eyes for an instant as though to shut out some abhorrent sight that was visualizing itself before him—"and there came a sudden wind and storm of great fury with much thunder and the flashing of the lightning that Tuan Radford had taught

me was called in the white man's tongue a stinker squall, and I, Kaya Dâlam, feared for the schooner unless care be given quickly to the sails. And I called with a great shout to the three Tuans in the cabin that I had need of them. And they came upon the deck, and to Tuan Black I gave the wheel and told him that which he must do; and with the other two I ran to the fore part of the schooner to the sails. And Tuan White and Tuan Gray did that which I bade them, and I, Kaya Dâlam, ran still farther to the jibs. And the *Orsu* came up out of the water in which her side had been sunk so far that I had thought she would go over. Then the lightning came, and I, Kaya Dâlam, looking back, saw Tuan Gray stab Tuan White in the back; and Tuan White fell upon the deck even as Tuan Green had fallen upon the ground on the island.

“But all this Tuan Black, who was at the wheel, could not see by reason of the sails. And then Tuan Gray ran back toward the wheel, and even as he ran he fired many shots at Tuan Black, and where Tuan Black had been there was no man now who stood at the wheel. And the schooner was yet in great peril. And I, Kaya Dâlam, ran with all my strength to reach the wheel. And it was in my mind that I would see Tuan Black lying dead upon the deck beside the wheel, but it was not so, for he was on his belly on one side of the deck, and a revolver was in his hand; and Tuan Gray lay likewise on the other side, and they were hidden from each other by reason of the cabin skylight that rose above the deck between them.

“And they gave no heed to the schooner or to me, Kaya Dâlam, who now stood at the wheel; but they shouted at each other, and Tuan Black cursed Tuan Gray with the fury that was upon him, and swore that he would kill Tuan Gray, even as Tuan Gray had killed the other two. And Tuan Gray laughed and mocked at Tuan Black as they lay hidden from each other, and said that whereas from the plunging of the ship he had missed with the shots that he had fired he would not miss again, else the killing of the other two would have availed him nothing. And Tuan Black answered and said that Tuan Gray should never have that which was hidden upon the island; and, since one must die, it would be Tuan Gray who would die, for even if he, Tuan Black, could never find that which Tuan Gray had hidden upon the island, it was in value less than the value of his, Tuan Black's, life, and he could make his life safe now only by killing of Tuan Gray. Therefore he would kill Tuan Gray even as Tuan Gray sought to kill him and had killed the others.”

Again Kaya Dâlam stopped. Sweat beads glistened on his forehead. Perhaps it was the heat of the room. He raised a hand jerkily and brushed them away. Owen glanced around the lounge. The engines were pulsing with

regular beat. No one seemed to have noticed that the *Nepenthe* was under way again. Perhaps it was his imagination, but the eyes that were all riveted on Kaya Dâlam seemed to stare out of curiously white and set faces. All except Lao-ti's. Lao-ti's eyes were half closed, his face expressionless—and his skin was a yellowish, pasty color, anyhow. Owen heard himself mechanically prompting Kaya Dâlam to carry on.

“Fear such as I had never known before was upon me.” Kaya Dâlam seemed literally to be living the scene again, as he swallowed hard several times and plucked nervously at his sarong. “And all the time I knew not even if the schooner would live, for I had no man now to help me, and the schooner was in great danger for suddenly it lay again almost upon its side. And as this came about, Tuan Black, who lay upon his belly, gave a cry as he slid across the deck and was thrown against the rail, for it was doubtless in his mind that he would be swept over into the sea. And Tuan Gray, hearing the cry, raised himself to his feet and looking over the cabin skylight saw Tuan Black where he lay against the rail and fired with his revolver at Tuan Black. And Tuan Black also fired his revolver at Tuan Gray. But whereas Tuan Gray fired many times, Tuan Black fired only twice before the revolver fell from his hand and he lay still. And Tuan Gray gave a great laugh and went across the deck and looked down upon Tuan Black, and laughed again, for Tuan Black was dead.

“Then Tuan Gray, giving no heed to me, Kaya Dâlam, turned and went down into the cabin; but, while I still stood at the wheel and sought to save the schooner from the storm, I could see Tuan Gray in the cabin by reason of the skylight. And the arm of Tuan Gray was red with blood from a bullet of Tuan Black, and this he bound up with cloth, and drank from the mouth of a bottle many times until it was empty, and when it was empty he placed still another bottle on the table before him.

“And then after a long time he came again to the deck, and to me, Kaya Dâlam, and he walked with many swayings of the body, but not because of the plunging of the schooner for the storm was at an end. And he came to me and gave orders with a thick tongue that I take the schooner again to the island from which we had come, and he said that of water there was now enough for the next day since there were but two who would drink of it; but, even if there be not enough of water, I should still sail the schooner back to the island. And I answered Tuan Gray that even as he had ordered so should it be done.

“But it was not in my mind to obey the order of Tuan Gray, for because of him there were two who lay dead upon the deck of the *Orsu*, and yet another on the island of which he spoke. And I feared even more for my life

than I had feared before; for Tuan Gray, when he had no more need for me, would kill me as he killed the others so that I might not tell that which I had seen.

“And Tuan Gray went down into the cabin, and drank many times more until he fell from his chair upon the floor and slept heavily. Then I, Kaya Dâlam, seeing this, and because of the fear that was upon me, put the small boat into the sea, and took food and half the store of the water, and rowed from the *Orsu* with all my strength. And for two days I saw no land, and remained in the boat until tonight even as you have seen. And where the schooner sailed I know not—for there was no man to guide it.” He flung out his arm in a sudden impassioned gesture. “Should I, Kaya Dâlam, have given thought to the safety of Tuan Gray and of that which should befall him so that in the end I also should die? The tale is told.”

It was Count Gaspard Luvac who broke the long ensuing silence. He spoke with seeming nonchalance:

“You say you saw where this fellow Gray hid the ball when he killed Green. Could you find the spot again?”

“Yes, Tuan, but it is not in my heart to see again the accursed thing.”

“Still,” persisted Count Luvac, “you would be willing to show us where it is, wouldn’t you?”

Owen smiled grimly to himself. Count Luvac had apparently voiced what was in the minds of all, for everyone in the room seemed to be hanging tensely now on Kaya Dâlam’s reply.

“Yes, Tuan, if the Tuan wills; but it is in my mind that only evil will come of it.”

“Well, I for one will take a chance on that,” announced Paul Stavert with a short laugh. “Anything that one man will kill three others for ought to be worth looking at! But what about the island itself? What’s its name, and where is it?”

Kaya Dâlam shook his head.

“Tuan,” he answered, “it has no name that is known to me, for even as I have said, it is a small island on which no man lives; but by reason of it being near to the big island of which I spoke, and which is well known and is written upon the maps, even a child could come upon it without losing his way, for the big island is called Laolu.”

“Laolu!” Mr. Morlan reared himself up in his chair. “Say, what the hell! Why, that’s our next port! We’re due there tomorrow.”

“Otherwise,” observed Mr. Lao-ti imperturbably, “we should not have picked up the interesting Kaya Dâlam tonight, for we should not have been

in this vicinity.”

“Of course!” murmured Count Luvac. “The point is well taken. I should like to ask our friend Kaya another question, though. If this man Gray ever gets to land again anywhere and could pick up a crew, would he, being no sailor, as I understand it, be able to find his way to that little island again?”

Kaya Dâlam inclined his head gravely.

“Yes, Tuan,” he replied, “for, as I have said, it is not far from the big island to the little island, though one cannot be seen from the other; but all knew the name of the big island, for I had told them that it was called Laolu, and all knew that the direction in which we sailed from Laolu was south, for that also I had made known to them when we stood upon the deck that morning.”

“Well, then, let’s go there ourselves!” Anne Morlan cried out imperatively. “We all want to.” She began to laugh a little unnaturally. “And since the island has no name, I’ll name it for you—after Kaya’s friendly warning. Evil Island. Isn’t that a perfectly lovely name? Father, tell Captain Heath to make at once for Evil Island.”

Mr. Morlan glanced at his daughter through narrowed eyes, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“No reason why we shouldn’t, I suppose,” he rumbled. “We’re not on any schedule. A mare’s-nest probably! However, I have no objections, and certainly no wish to disappoint any of you. And since, judging from your looks, Anne seems to have sized you all up correctly as wanting to go, I’ll ask Captain Heath to take us there before we touch Laolu.”

Owen rose from his chair. Queer again these faces around him! They were flushed and excited now—all except Lao-ti’s, of course, which was always as unemotional as that of a graven image. Even Doris Carroll seemed to be under the thrall of tense suspense, for her eyes as they met his for an instant were unusually bright. Evil Island! Why the devil had Anne Morlan been prompted to christen it that? Absurd, of course, but it struck a note he did not like.

“Very good, Mr. Morlan,” he said. “I’ll check our position at once, but from what Kaya Dâlam here has said, I imagine we ought to ‘rise’ the island quite a bit before noon. Meanwhile, if you have no further questions to ask him, I’ll send him forward and have him looked after.”

“All right,” agreed Mr. Morlan.

“And, if I may be permitted to suggest it,” added Count Gaspard Luvac quietly, “tell him to say nothing to the crew of what he has just told us.”

“That would be very wise,” stated Mr. Lao-ti solemnly, “very wise indeed.”

“Rather!” appended Paul Stavert almost boisterously. “Excitable lot, these native crews! We don’t want to get our throats cut, you know. They might take it into their ruddy heads to have first shy at that bally purple ball themselves!”

“Oh, make it unanimous!” grunted Mr. Morlan.

Owen nodded.

“I’ll see to it,” he said—and, beckoning to Kaya Dâlam, led the way to the door.

And then, as he stepped out on the deck, he heard Mrs. Stavert’s voice from the lounge behind him raised in a curiously delirious way:

“Isn’t it just too delightfully creepy for anything! Fancy! A real treasure hunt!”

CHAPTER V

EVIL ISLAND

WITH an emphatic injunction to Kaya Dâlam to repeat nothing of what he had said to any of the crew, Owen turned the Malay over to Tanu, instructing the latter to see that Kaya Dâlam was well taken care of, then made his way to the bridge and from there to the chartroom abaft the wheel house.

Kaya Dâlam's island, he found, was charted after all. At least, what looked more like a fly-speck than anything else was there on the chart—he picked up a pair of dividers—about forty-five miles due south of Laolu. Also, scattered to the eastward, were a number of other similar specks. This, of course, bore out Kaya Dâlam's story. Well, why shouldn't it? The man couldn't possibly have made up a yarn like that, and there would have been no reason for doing so anyway. Parallel rulers came into play. He began to work out the change in course. Evil Island! The damned name stuck in spite of— — He looked up suddenly as Mr. Morlan opened the door and stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

"What Mr. Stavert said about the crew is naturally all rot," said the owner abruptly; "but just the same, of course, there's no use stirring up any excitement. You understand that's what I meant in the lounge?"

"Quite, sir," Owen answered; "and I've already carried out your wishes. I've just warned Kaya Dâlam to keep a quiet tongue in his head, and I think he can be depended upon to do so."

Mr. Morlan pulled on his cigar, and emitted a cloud of smoke.

"What d'you think of his story?" he demanded gruffly. "You lived out here as a kid, and ought to know the natives."

Owen pondered the question an instant.

"I don't think he could have made it up, sir," he replied finally, "though it sounds mostly like a bad nightmare. Anyway, there's an island here on the chart, forty-five miles due south from Laolu—a distance that could easily be covered by a schooner from dawn to noon given any kind of a breeze."

Mr. Morlan made a grimace.

"Evil Island, eh?—according to my daughter. So you believe his story, then?"

"Yes, sir; frankly, I do."

"H'm!" ejaculated Mr. Morlan. "Well, then, though I reserve my own opinion, perhaps it would be just as well to apply the same rule to the

officers as to the crew. There's no use starting a lot of tongues clattering until there's something to clatter about."

"Just as you say, sir," Owen returned quietly; "but there's quite a difference between the officers and the crew. The officers, anyway, will obviously connect the change of course, and our putting in at another island tomorrow instead of Laolu, with our having picked up Kaya Dâlam tonight."

Mr. Henry K. Morlan had thin lips. He removed his cigar and his lips contracted into a hard, straight line.

"Supposing they do," he said sharply. "They don't need to know the ins and outs of it, do they? I don't have to give specific reasons for what I do or where I go with the *Nepenthe*, do I?"

The man seemed a bit petulant, a bit wrought up—unnecessarily so, Owen thought.

"Certainly not, sir," he responded promptly. "Owner's orders are quite sufficient."

"Let that be the answer, then, in the present instance," said Mr. Morlan tersely. "And about tomorrow, Captain Heath. No one is to go ashore except those who were in the lounge tonight. And any of the crew necessary to man the boat that takes us ashore will remain with the boat on the beach."

"Very good, sir."

Mr. Morlan became suddenly affable. He advanced and laid a hand familiarly on Owen's shoulder.

"I don't want any fuss raised until there's some reason for it, that's all," he smiled. "I leave the matter in your hands. Good-night, captain; and I hope you won't dream, as I am sure all the ladies will—of purple balls!"

Owen stared at the closed door for a moment in a puzzled way. There didn't seem to be any particular sense in making a mystery of the affair where the officers were concerned. It struck him as a bit far-fetched. But quite another matter with the native crew, of course. He rather agreed with that policy. What was at the back of the man's head, anyway?

He shrugged his shoulders, and returned to his work. Presently he left the chartroom, gave Gaffney his orders for the change in course without comment, and descended from the bridge to his room.

It was still fairly early—six bells had just gone. Eleven o'clock. He was restless, and uneasy, and in no mood for sleep. A grisly yarn, that of Kaya Dâlam. Murder rampant. A purple ball. He filled his pipe and picked up a book. Kaya Dâlam's story kept intruding itself across the pages. Seven bells. When they got that purple ball tomorrow, what would Mr. Morlan do with it? A silly question! It would depend on *what* it was, wouldn't it? Any fool

would know that. What had happened to Gray, loaded to the guards plus a wounded arm? Was the *Orsu* still sailing aimlessly around? Pleasant sort of a chap, Gray! Eight bells. Owen had left his door on the hook for air, and he heard Carlin's voice up there on the bridge now as he came on watch.

"What for?" Carlin asked.

"He didn't say," Gaffney's voice answered; "but I hopped into the chartroom for a look when he left the bridge. It'll take us a good bit south of Laolu. It's got something to do with the blighter we picked up, of course. The whole crowd of them had him in there with them in the lounge until near six bells."

Carlin laughed.

"Well, the ladies are there yet, and — —"

The voices drifted away.

Owen tossed his book aside, and turned in. After a while he slept.

He awoke to breakfast alone—no one aft ever appeared for breakfast on the *Nepenthe*—and, following Captain Penny's practice, took the forenoon watch. It was a perfect day, not a ripple on the water; but his mood was far from being in keeping with the weather. Where a calm lay upon the water, his mind on the contrary was uneasy and disturbed. What was it? Premonition? Piffle! He did not believe in premonition, but just the same he could not rid his thoughts of Kaya Dâlam's story and that infernal blood-drenched purple ball.

Toward nine o'clock he "rose" the island, and sent word along to Mr. Morlan that he would anchor about eleven. Later, as they drew nearer shore, the guests—the women frankly excited, the men with poorly simulated nonchalance, it struck Owen as he watched them from the bridge—began to assemble on deck. Something damned morbid about it all!

It was a small island, so small indeed that it would appear to have been quite adequately represented by that diminutive fly-speck on the chart. It was densely wooded, with here and there a stretch of white beach gleaming in the sunshine. They were getting close in now and he called Kaya Dâlam to the bridge. Where had the *Orsu* cast anchor? How far out was the reef? Was it navigable for the launch? But nearly a complete circuit of the island was made before Kaya Dâlam descried the spot where he had landed, and before the *Nepenthe* finally dropped anchor some four hundred yards from the shore.

Evil Island!

The name certainly would not down. Owen cursed it uncomfortably as he left the bridge—and fifteen minutes later, the launch, carrying all those

who had gathered in the lounge the night before, and manned by Tanu and two of the native crew, nosed the beach. Owen, the last to disembark, and remembering Mr. Morlan's instructions, spoke to Tanu as he stepped ashore.

"You three will remain here in the launch," he ordered. "You are not to leave it. Understand?"

"Yes, Tuan," Tanu answered.

From amongst the group gathered on the sand came a sudden burst of immoderate laughter.

"It isn't at all the kind of place I dreamed about all last night," announced Anne Morlan—and laughed again. "It's just like any other island."

It struck a jarring note. Owen's lips tightened slightly. He was a bit on edge himself, wasn't he? And somehow now, though he could not have told why, he very poignantly wished Kaya Dâlam's story and this island to the devil. Not a face among the lot of them, save only and always that of Lao-ti, but showed, as he had noted in the launch and as he scanned them now while crossing the few intervening yards of beach to join the group, some pent-up emotion in which it seemed either avarice or an unhealthy excitement or an avid curiosity that barely overshadowed apprehension and superstitious fear played its part. Well, he could understand that. It was natural enough, wasn't it? Their imaginations fired by a purple ball that was God knew what, they were to be taken to the spot where a man had been horribly murdered—for a purple ball! What about himself? Was he a superman—immune? Damn it—no! He had already admitted to himself, hadn't he, that he was a bit on edge? Doris Carroll looked pale, he noticed—the flush of last night had gone.

Mr. Morlan waved his cigar at Kaya Dâlam.

"Is it far from here?" he demanded.

"No, Tuan," Kaya Dâlam answered. "It is but a little way, and in not many minutes we can come to the place."

"Well, lead on, then," commanded Mr. Morlan laconically.

They trooped across the sand, and, following Kaya Dâlam, entered the stretch of wooded land that fringed the beach. It was a chattering little crowd, noisy. Everyone talked unnecessarily. The men made pointless jokes. Paul Stavert's voice rose above the others.

"We ought to go on tiptoes," he cackled facetiously. "We might surprise Green's ghost."

It was excruciatingly funny! Mr. Morlan was impolite.

“Go to hell!” he growled.

Doris Carroll had been the last in line, and Owen had waited for her. She spoke to him now in a hurried way.

“I’m terribly curious, of course,” she said; “but I must confess I’m also really quite frightened, and I would rather not have come.”

Owen looked at her for an instant—and was conscious that this had become a habit of his of late whenever he had had a warrantable excuse. That piquant little face of hers was well worth looking at! The blue eyes met his frankly.

“Well, then, why did you?” he asked bluntly.

“Mr. Morlan insisted.”

“Why?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know. He said he wanted everyone who had heard Kaya Dâlam’s story in the lounge last night to come ashore together. I don’t imagine he had any deep-dyed reason for it, but—though I suppose I shouldn’t say this, and you mustn’t report me unless you want me to lose my job—when he takes a notion he’s always very stubborn about it.”

“I’ve found that out myself since we put Captain Penny ashore,” Owen smiled, “so I’ll keep your secret. But, in any case, a bit Grand Guignol-y as Kaya Dâlam’s tale undoubtedly was, there is certainly absolutely nothing to be afraid of here on the island now.”

“No; of course not,” she admitted—and forced a laugh. “But, you see, I did not sleep a wink all night, which may perhaps account for it. After the men had gone back to their bridge, Miss Morlan, Mrs. Stavert, and I sat there in the lounge until all hours and talked about those awful murders and the purple ball.”

“So I understand,” said Owen dryly. “And I have no doubt got yourselves so worked up that if any of you had dropped a pin you would all have screamed. No wonder you couldn’t sleep.”

She glanced at him quickly.

“Oh,” she said, “then Mr. Morlan, or one of the other three men told you, or perhaps it was Miss Morlan or Mrs. Stavert?”

“No.”

“Then how did you know?”

Owen grinned at her.

“A captain is supposed to know everything that goes on aboard his ship, isn’t he?”

Her hand sought and closed impulsively on his arm.

"Then I was right," she said a little breathlessly, "and there *was* someone listening out there on the deck. Who was it? Who told you?"

Owen evaded a direct answer. He was suddenly serious.

"What do you mean about someone listening out there on the deck?" he questioned. "Tell me about it."

"Well," she said, "it doesn't sound so exciting in broad daylight, of course. But last night it was different. You know that creepy feeling you get sitting around listening to ghost stories—or perhaps you men are above anything like that. Anyway — —"

"What time was this?" he interrupted.

"About eleven o'clock, I think," she answered.

"All right. And then?"

"We were sitting near the radio at the side of the lounge, and all of the windows were open. It was a warm night, you remember, and there was no breeze. We were all facing the radio. I happened to turn in my chair, and over my shoulder I saw the blurred outline of a face, I don't know whose it was, at one of the windows. It startled me so that I gave a little scream. I told the others what I had seen and we all rushed out on deck. But there was no one there. When we went back to the lounge, Miss Morlan and Mrs. Stavert made fun of me and said I was imagining things and was a silly little 'fraid-cat. But I was satisfied then that there wasn't any imagination about it, and now, from what you said, I'm positive about it. Who was it that told you we were sitting up in there? And why did he run away?"

Owen shook his head.

"I don't doubt for an instant but that you saw someone," he said; "but I am afraid my evidence won't help any along the line of identification. No one told me you were there. I was in my cabin at midnight, reading, when Carlin took over the watch from Gaffney. My door was on the hook, and I heard Carlin up on the bridge tell Gaffney that the ladies were still in the lounge."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "So it was Mr. Carlin, then. How else would he know?"

Again Owen shook his head.

"Not at all likely," he said. "We've only two bridge officers, you know; and Carlin always snatches a few hours' sleep beforehand when it's his turn to take over at midnight. If he followed his usual procedure, he could not

help but see you in the lounge as he came along the deck a minute or so before eight bells.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged quickly. “I remember now. Someone did pass along the deck just about that time. Well, then, if it wasn’t Carlin, who was it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But aren’t we taking this a little too seriously? I would like to know who the fellow was, of course, so that I could teach him a lesson he wouldn’t forget in a hurry; but no matter who it was, all he could have heard would have been the gist of the story that Kaya Dâlam told us, and, after all, supposing he did hear that, and in spite of the fact that Mr. Morlan did not want the yarn spread all over the ship, what actual difference could it make?”

She laughed a little again—less nervously this time.

“None, of course,” she returned. “I said the daylight robbed it of importance; but last night it was spooky and unpleasant and— —”

She broke off abruptly. Those ahead had ceased talking, and had come to a halt—or, rather, were spreading out amongst the trees to form a partial circle around Kaya Dâlam.

“It is here in this place,” said Kaya Dâlam in a flat voice, “that Tuan Gray killed Tuan Green. And it was there”—he pointed to a thick growth of foliage near by—“that I, Kaya Dâlam, was hidden.”

“Perfect setting as the curtain goes up,” declaimed Paul Stavert in a hollow voice. “The audience is breathless. Turn on the spotlight! Stir the cauldrons! Where is this purple ball of death we seek?”

“Ass!” hissed his wife fiercely.

Kaya Dâlam pointed to the gnarled roots of a tree that were almost entirely hidden by an overgrowth of moss and creepers.

“It is there,” he said.

CHAPTER VI

WHERE THE SEARCH LED

MR. MORLAN stood nearest to the tree indicated. He stepped over to it and, stooping down, thrust his hand in under the roots and creepers. After a moment he dropped to his knees and thrust his hand still farther in. Everyone craned forward eagerly—jostling one another. A minute, two, passed, and then Mr. Morlan rose to his feet. He stared fixedly at Kaya Dâlam.

“There is nothing there!” he rasped.

“Let me try,” cried Anne Morlan—and, flinging herself impetuously on the ground, began to delve in turn beneath the roots.

She stood up finally with a blank look on her face.

“Permit me,” murmured Count Gaspard Luvac. He dropped to his knees, and searched for what seemed an interminable length of time. “It is true,” he declared finally as he stood up and brushed his knees with meticulous care, “there is nothing there.”

“Of course it’s true!” exploded Mr. Morlan. “That’s what I said, wasn’t it? Do you think I was trying to conceal the damned thing?”

“It is possible,” suggested Lao-ti suavely, “that Kaya Dâlam has made a mistake in the tree. There are many trees.”

But Kaya Dâlam shook his head. Open-mouthed, his lower jaw sagged down as though it were unhinged; his arms were limp at his sides. He stared wide-eyed from one to another.

“It was there that Tuan Gray hid the purple ball,” he said hoarsely. “Of that I am sure. Would I not know again the tree? See where a storm has struck it, and the branches on one side are dead.”

Mr. Morlan rounded on the Malay savagely.

“That’s all very well, but what’s the great idea?” he burst out violently. “I thought there was something fishy about your story from the start. Come on, tell us why you lied to us, and what you expected to get out of it by bringing us here, like a pack of credulous fools—which, by God, we certainly are!”

Kaya Dâlam drew himself erect.

“Tuan”—there was resentment in his voice—“what would it profit me to lie to you? I have not lied to you. I have told only what is true. I, Kaya Dâlam, with my own eyes saw Tuan Gray hide the purple ball, even as I

have said, beneath the roots of that tree. It is not I, Kaya Dâlam, who desired to return to this place where the killing was done, and I have come only because you willed it. If the purple ball is no longer there, then it is in my mind that Tuan Gray has come again to the island and has taken it or, that, though I thought no man lived here, it may even be that there are those who live upon the island and who have taken it.”

“And you can put that on your piano and play it,” observed Paul Stavert airily as he lighted a cigarette. “There’s a heap lot of sense in what the beggar says, and it lingers in my tortured beano, don’t you know, that it’s perfectly damned true he wasn’t at all keen about coming back here.”

Owen smiled grimly. The whole thing had ended in a complete fiasco, that was all. He heard Doris Carroll’s whisper at his side:

“Just the same, I’m glad they did not find it.”

He nodded mechanically. He was watching Count Luvac and Mr. Morlan now. Count Luvac had approached Mr. Morlan and was speaking in an undertone. Mr. Morlan chewed viciously on an unlighted cigar as he listened, then he spoke peremptorily.

“We’ll get back to the beach,” he announced.

Again Kaya Dâlam led the way, and as the little party, silent now, emerged once more into the open, Mr. Morlan spoke for the second time and as peremptorily as before.

“Anne,” he ordered, “you and Mrs. Stavert and Miss Carroll get aboard the launch and go back to the *Nepenthe*.”

“Why?” demanded his daughter truculently.

“Because I wish it,” said Mr. Morlan shortly.

Mrs. Stavert tossed her head, and, accompanied by Doris Carroll, walked across the beach toward the launch—and Anne Morlan, after an instant’s hesitation, followed them angrily.

“Now then”—Mr. Morlan swung again on Kaya Dâlam—“where’s the place you say this fellow Green was buried? Perhaps we can find *that*!”

“I will show you, Tuan. Come with me.” Kaya Dâlam walked a little way along the beach and halted at a spot that was just outside the fringe of trees. He pointed to the sand at his feet. “It is here, Tuan.”

A furrow gathered for an instant between Owen’s eyes. There was certainly no sign of any grave. The sand looked smooth and undisturbed. And then he remembered that, according to Kaya Dâlam’s story, there had been a violent storm with heavy rain during the night after the *Orsu* had left the island. That would lay the sand flat, of course.

"All right," said Mr. Morlan gruffly as he faced Kaya Dâlam. "You said you dug the grave with your hands. Show us."

"Oh, I say," chirped Paul Stavert, "that isn't done, you know! Ought to have a bally court order and all that sort of thing to exhume the jolly old corpse, what? What's the good of digging up the dear old josses? *Requiescat* and all that, if you know what I mean?"

"If there is no purple ball," said Lao-ti softly, "perhaps there is no corpse."

"Oh!" said Paul Stavert.

Mr. Morlan motioned to Kaya Dâlam.

"Well, carry on!" he snapped impatiently.

But Kaya Dâlam held back.

"No, Tuan," he protested. "It is unclean, and I— —"

Kaya Dâlam did not finish his sentence. Mr. Morlan was a man of big physique, and he stepped suddenly now, threateningly, toward the Malay.

"You do as you're told!" he flung out savagely. "And look sharp about it! I've had about enough of this." His hand fell heavily on Kaya Dâlam's shoulder, forcing the other to his knees. "If there's a grave here, as you say, and Green's buried in it, you're going to prove it. Quick, now!"

Kaya Dâlam began to scrape away the sand gingerly with his fingers. A few inches down, something white came into view—and Owen, leaning forward with the others, saw that it was a trouser-leg.

"Well, that's that!" exclaimed Paul Stavert hurriedly. "And it's enough! He's told the truth, all right."

"I think we should see the face," suggested Count Luvac gravely.

"The face!" groaned Paul Stavert. "My God! What for? I can't see any sense in staging a chamber of horrors."

"There is the possibility of identification," explained Count Luvac smoothly. "There is the chance that Mr. Morlan, who has lived for many years in this part of the world, or Mr. Lao-ti, or even Captain Heath, might perhaps recognize the man."

Paul Stavert took out his silver cigarette case, painstakingly selected a cigarette—and laughed.

"Most complimentary to the three aforesaid gentlemen! From Kaya Dâlam's account, our friend Green there was obviously an out-and-out crook." He laughed again. "Why don't you take his finger-prints?" he inquired ironically.

"That would be an excellent idea," returned Count Luvac calmly, "if we only had the facilities." And then suddenly a malicious little smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "But I see that we have, after all. Nothing could serve the purpose better than the so beautifully polished surface of that cigarette case of yours. It's made to order. Let me have it, will you?"

Paul Stavert snapped shut the case and thrust it hastily into his pocket.

"I'll see you in hell first!" he informed the other heartily.

Count Gaspard Luvac's smile became almost a chuckle as he shrugged his shoulders.

Mr. Morlan motioned again to Kaya Dâlam.

"Go on!" He bit off his words. "Count Luvac is right."

The face came into view. It was not a pleasant sight—and the unpleasantness was accentuated by the fact that the dead man's nose, whether deformed or by reason of accident, lay almost flat on the right cheek. Owen turned away. Like himself, both Mr. Morlan and Lao-ti denied ever having seen the man before.

Kaya Dâlam scraped the sand back into place.

Mr. Morlan's eyes scowled around on the ring of faces.

"And now—what?" he growled. "I'm bound to confess that Kaya Dâlam here has pretty well authenticated his story."

"He has already answered your question," observed Lao-ti placidly. "Either the murderer, Gray, has returned and possessed himself of this desirable purple ball, or there is someone living upon the island here who has taken it."

"Well, we'll take the Gray possibility first," said Mr. Morlan tersely. "What do you say, Captain Heath? Do you think the fellow could have got back here?"

"It's possible," Owen answered after a moment's thought, "but not at all probable. From what Kaya Dâlam told us, Gray was both blind drunk and wounded when Kaya Dâlam left the schooner. Gray could not handle the schooner alone, in any case, and, not being a sailor, could not have found his way back here unaided. Furthermore, it was a dead calm, as you know, all yesterday and last night, so Gray would have had to receive assistance almost immediately after Kaya Dâlam left the *Orsu*, I should say, in order to have enabled him, in the time that has elapsed, to reach this island and sail away again."

"In other words," jerked out Mr. Morlan, "you don't think he did?"

"No, sir; I don't," Owen answered emphatically.

"H'm!" muttered Mr. Morlan. "Well, that leaves us only then with the other alternative."

"Which would presuppose," mentioned Mr. Lao-ti casually, "that if there was someone living on the island, he also, like Kaya Dâlam, was hidden and saw where Gray concealed the purple ball."

Mr. Morlan pulled at his lower lip.

"Yes; it would seem so," he admitted. "And yet I don't know—there's a chance in a thousand that it might have been found. But what other answer is there? It's gone—that's certain." He turned abruptly to Kaya Dâlam. "What do you say, Kaya Dâlam?"

"I know not, Tuan," Kaya Dâlam answered heavily. "But it is yet only midday and the island is small, and, if the Tuan wills, I will make search to see if there be signs of anyone who might live here."

For a moment Mr. Morlan was silent, while he flung away his half-chewed cigar, and, pulling another from his pocket, bit off the end and spat it out on the beach. Then he spoke through tight lips.

"We'll all search," he decided curtly. "We've started this fool hunt, and we'll finish it now one way or another so far as this island is concerned."

"Lay the ghost, as it were," approved Paul Stavert languidly. "Awfully damned bad for one's bridge, you know, if the ripping old brain is distraught. What?"

Mr. Morlan glowered.

"I wish to God——" he burst out—and checked himself. He turned to Owen. "Captain Heath, that being a sailor's job on account of the reefs, you take the launch—I see it's back again from the ship—and make a circuit of the shore line. There may be some sign of a boat. Then come back here for us. Meanwhile, the rest of us will prowl around a bit. As Kaya Dâlam says, it's a small island, and it ought not to take very long to settle the question whether there's anyone on it or not except ourselves."

"Right, sir!" Owen answered—and, turning, crossed the beach to the water's edge. And then, as he stepped aboard the launch and gave Tanu his orders, he saw the others disappear amongst the trees.

It was a small island. Roughly, from the bridge of the *Nepenthe* that morning, he had estimated it at somewhere about two miles in length and a mile in width. The launch, out of a wholesome respect for a lurking reef that might be hidden just below the surface of the still water, chugged its way cautiously along, skirting the shore. Here and there, where there was a likely-looking inlet that might harbor a craft of any kind, Owen went ashore, and sometimes pushed his investigations some little way inland. But

nowhere did he see any indication of life or habitation, let alone a boat of any description. Therefore, improbable as it had appeared to be, he was finally forced to the conclusion that Gray, the killer, had come back to the island and gone again. What other answer was there? The grave of the murdered Green substantiated Kaya Dâlam's story, didn't it? Well, that would end the matter, it would seem, so far as he was concerned—and his interest in the affair, he was conscious, had waned. The whole thing, in so far as the *Nepenthe* was involved, had resulted in nothing more nor less, as he had already told himself, than a pronounced fiasco.

The tour of the island had taken a little less than two hours. It was not quite two o'clock, his watch informed him, when he returned to the beach where he had left the others.

A sole figure in the person of Paul Stavert, squatting there on the sand, rose and came toward the launch.

"I say, you know," Stavert complained, mopping at his face, "the heat's a bit ghastly, what?"

"Where are the others?" Owen asked.

"Haven't an earthly!" drawled Paul Stavert. "And frankly, old dear, I care less. We all got separated. I haven't got a dry stitch on me. This is no time of day in the Tropics, even amongst the sylvan glades, to hunt for purple balls and aborigines and all that sort of thing. Take me off to yonder vessel, old top, will you? I've a most frightfully urgent appointment with a gin and tonic—a long one with tinkling ice, if you grasp my meaning."

Owen grinned.

"It sounds alluring. I might even join you."

"Brother o' mine!" cooed Paul Stavert as he clambered aboard.

From the *Nepenthe*, Owen sent the launch back to the beach. The ladies were nowhere in evidence—an afternoon siesta probably—and, presently, leaving Paul Stavert in the bar, Owen went to his own room. It *was* hot. Damned hot! He took off his coat and flung himself down on the settee. During the next hour at intervals, separately, the launch functioning as a ferry, Mr. Lao-ti and Count Gaspard Luvac came aboard—and finally Mr. Henry K. Morlan.

Mr. Morlan was also hot, and far from being in a good humor as he stormed into Owen's cabin.

"Not a damned soul lives, or ever did live, on that godforsaken frying-pan!" he swore vehemently. "That's a certainty. Don't know what to make of the infernal business, though it's true there's a dead man buried there, but

anyway, I'm through. Better recall that Arabian Nights storyteller with a blast or two of the siren, and then we'll get under way."

"Very good, Mr. Morlan," Owen answered.

Mr. Morlan left the cabin. Owen issued his orders.

Intermittently then there sounded the hoarse, raucous bellow of the ship's siren—a thunderous note crashing through the silence of the still afternoon. But Kaya Dâlam in answer did not appear upon the beach. A quarter of an hour, a half hour, an hour went by. And there was still no sign of Kaya Dâlam. Owen, at first irritated by the Malay's tardiness, grew puzzled, and finally uneasy.

He went along to the smoking room. The four men were playing their interminable bridge; but they did not seem to be as deeply immersed as usual in their game, he thought. At least, they all looked up as he entered.

"Most awfully helpful, that dulcet tooting of yours, Captain," commented Paul Stavert brightly. "Fancy Mr. Lao-ti, of all men, making a revoke—and twice in the last hour."

"Fortunately, I was playing with Count Luvac," returned Mr. Lao-ti imperturbably, "so the loss was entirely mine."

Mr. Morlan laid his cards down on the table in front of him.

"Well, Captain," he demanded gruffly, "what is it?"

"Kaya Dâlam hasn't showed up," Owen stated tersely. "Our siren would be heard all over the island, and, no matter in what quarter he might have been, he would have had far more than enough time in which to have returned to the beach by now—but he hasn't done so. I know what you said about the crew, but under the circumstances I would like to have your permission now to send a search party ashore."

"Excellent idea," applauded Paul Stavert heartily, "provided I'm not included. I've had enough of yon charming Evil Island for today!"

Count Gaspard Luvac cleared his throat.

"You seem to fear that something is wrong," he said slowly. "What, Captain, would you imagine could have happened to him?"

Owen shook his head.

"I have no idea," he replied. "I only know that he should have been back long ago—and that, as I said, he hasn't showed up." He turned to Mr. Morlan. "What do you say, sir?"

Mr. Morlan scowled—and hesitated for a moment. Then he picked up his cards abruptly.

“Well, we don’t want to stay here all night,” he snarled; “and I don’t suppose we can go off and leave the beggar marooned. Do what you think best, Captain.” Mr. Morlan studied his cards. “Four spades,” he announced.

Dismissed, Owen returned to his cabin and sent for the first officer.

“Mr. Carlin,” he said crisply, as the other appeared, “there’s a good hour and a half to two hours’ daylight left. Take enough men with you to make a thorough search ashore, and see if you can find out what’s keeping that Kaya Dâlam chap we picked up last night.”

“Yes, sir,” Carlin responded promptly. “Very good, sir!”

Owen frowned as he watched the other depart. Carlin had said nothing, but he had caught a sudden tense expression, gone almost as quickly as it had come, in the first officer’s eyes. Who was that prowler of last night? Not Carlin, of course—but how much had been spread around the ship? How much of Kaya Dâlam’s story and the object of this visit to the island here did Carlin know?

There was some ship’s business in arrears, and Owen seated himself at his desk to tackle it. Through the open door of his cabin he could see the beach, and as the afternoon wore on with no word from shore, and he grew more and more uneasy, his eyes kept straying in that direction with ever-increasing frequency. But it was not until almost the short twilight of the Tropics was setting in that he saw the launch coming off again. He picked up his glasses then, and went out on deck. Kaya Dâlam was not in the launch with the others. His face was suddenly set and hard. Evil Island. Was that what was bothering him?

He returned the glasses to his cabin, descended to the lower deck as the launch came alongside, and met Carlin at the head of the gangway ladder.

“Well,” he flung out, “I see you haven’t got the man. Couldn’t you find him?”

Carlin’s face, despite his tan, was white and strained.

“Yes—” Carlin’s voice was throaty—“we found him lying on his face amongst the trees—dead. He’d been stabbed several times in the back.”

CHAPTER VII

“BUTTON, BUTTON . . .”

THE *Nepenthe* was still at anchor. Her portholes cast shimmering rays across the water; and, searching out even the hidden corners, her promenade deck was ablaze with unwonted light as though the presence of darkness were intolerable.

Dinner had been a macabre feast. The ladies had afterwards retired immediately to their rooms—or, at least, had announced that such were their intentions.

In the smoking room, Mr. Morlan, Paul Stavert, Mr. Lao-ti, and Count Gaspard Luvac sat around their usual table—but not at bridge. Owen sat with them. There were bottles and glasses on the table. The native steward had been dismissed. The door was closed.

Mr. Morlan glanced around the table.

“Well, what in hell are we going to do about it?” he flung out.

“Ice!” murmured Paul Stavert. “Would you mind, Captain? One of those jolly little cubes from that bowl in front of you—or make it two. Thanks no end! He was stabbed in the back—several times. Testimony of Mr. Carlin. Said testimony corroborated by the burial party’s post mortem. Sort of an encore in technique, so to speak, if you grasp my meaning, of the premature demise of one of the rainbow-hued Tuans, I forget exactly the losing colors, who died aforetime on the same island because of an intriguing purple ball that— —”

Mr. Morlan’s face was suddenly white.

“In the name of God!” he exploded, “will you hold your tongue? This is no time for—er—damn it, persiflage!”

“And yet,” observed Mr. Lao-ti placidly, “there is much food for thought in what Mr. Stavert says. Except for a slight difference in the number of those involved, the happenings of today bear a distinct analogy to the happenings of the day on which Kaya Dâlam first came to the island—the day that Green was killed.”

“I agree, except on one other point—a very vital point,” Count Luvac pointed out shortly. “No one was stripped naked and searched before leaving the island.”

Mr. Morlan was still scowling.

“I’m not sure I get the drift of that,” he said sourly.

Count Gaspard Luvac shrugged his shoulders.

"I will try to make myself clear," he said. "We are all agreed, I take it, that there was no one living on this island?"

"Oh, positively!" declared Paul Stavert with cheerful encouragement.

The others nodded.

"Very well, then," Count Luvac went on, "there remains only the one other possibility—that sometime during this afternoon after the ladies returned to the *Nepenthe*, at which time Kaya Dâlam was alive, and, say, five o'clock when his dead body was found by Mr. Carlin, Gray returned with his schooner, chanced fortuitously upon Kaya Dâlam in the woods, committed the murder, and sailed away again. That Gray might have been here and gone yesterday, the which even we have already been told is highly improbable, has no bearing on the murder of Kaya Dâlam. The point is, could Gray have come here with his schooner without any of us knowing it this afternoon when Kaya Dâlam *was* murdered? I think Captain Heath is qualified to give us a conclusive answer to that question."

"It would have been impossible," Owen stated quietly. "When we approached the island this morning we virtually circled it, as you know. At that time there was no sign of any vessel, sail or otherwise, anywhere on the horizon, and it remained a flat calm all afternoon."

"Exactly!" concurred Count Luvac—and stared significantly at the circle of faces.

Mr. Morlan stirred uneasily in his chair, reached for a drink, and gulped down a goodly portion of the contents of his glass.

"Well, go on!" he grated.

Count Luvac made a deprecatory gesture.

"It seems to me," he said, "that what is in my mind, is in the minds of all of us—that we can all appreciate now what only one of us had the, may I say, *unfortunate* foresight to appreciate before driving a knife into Kaya Dâlam's back. It was Kaya Dâlam, we all remember now, who suggested that we separate and search the island. Kaya Dâlam was a good actor. He was very reluctant to have anything more to do with the purple ball. He deceived all but one of us. Kaya Dâlam had the purple ball when he was murdered—or he would not have been murdered. He obviously lied in part of his story. Instead of leaving the purple ball where Gray hid it, Kaya Dâlam must have taken it and hidden it in turn, for he would not have dared to return to the beach with it that day on his person any more than Gray had dared to do so. Obviously, then, Kaya Dâlam intended to come back to the

island here for it at the first opportunity—and the *Nepenthe* provided that opportunity, so that— —”

“What you mean to say is,” broke in Paul Stavert still cheerily, “that the bright lad with the foresight tracked Kaya Dâlam to where the ball was really hidden, removed Kaya Dâlam from this vale of tears, and copped the ball for himself?”

“Yes,” asserted Count Luvac, with a hard smile. “And, knowing he would be subjected to no search on the beach such as Gray was, brought it off to the ship here where it is undoubtedly hidden now. Also, of course, since we have disposed of the possibility of anyone else but ourselves being on the island at the time Kaya Dâlam was murdered, one of us five is the murderer.”

Mr. Lao-ti had long, tenuous fingers; but, out of deference to Occidental conventions doubtless, he pared his nails. He drummed lightly, rhythmically now with his finger-tips on the edge of the table, as he looked blandly at Count Luvac.

“It seems to me,” he remarked casually, “that the analogy of Green’s murder to the murder of Kaya Dâlam becomes more and more pronounced. After Green’s murder one of the survivors, Gray, I believe, assumed the rôle of spokesman and pointed out with indisputable logic that it must have been one of themselves who had committed the crime.”

“Quite so,” returned Count Gaspard Luvac calmly. “I follow you—perhaps? And Gray was the murderer.”

“It was the coincidence that occurred to me,” said Mr. Lao-ti politely. “It appears to me, however, that while I unhesitatingly agree that one of us is the murderer, we might possibly begin by narrowing down the number of suspects to four instead of five. Kaya Dâlam was alive and amongst us at the time Captain Heath left the island in the launch. Could we not, therefore, in justice to Captain Heath and to our own advantage, bring in an unanimous verdict of ‘not guilty’ so far as his connection with the affair is concerned?”

Count Gaspard Luvac twirled his glass slowly in his hand, but did not drink.

“No,” he said deliberately; “we are all in it. And, as a matter of fact, though I am making no accusation, suspicion might easily be considered as pointing to Captain Heath more definitely than to anyone else. According to his own story, he landed at several inlets and went ashore alone. It was near one of those inlets and quite close to the shore that Kaya Dâlam’s body was found.”

Owen smiled grimly as his eyes traveled from face to face. One of these four men was unquestionably a murderer. But which one? Each in his way was specious. He knew but little of their private lives—and that little was not wholly of a saintly nature! There was nothing, he told himself, to warrant him in eliminating any one of them from his mind as being above suspicion.

“What Count Luvac has stated is true,” he said dispassionately. “I can only say unequivocally that I know nothing about the killing of Kaya Dâlam.”

“Nor I, by God!” swore Mr. Morlan.

Paul Stavert stifled a yawn.

“‘Button, button, who’s got the button?’” he drawled. “Will the murderer please hold up his hand?”

Mr. Lao-ti permitted a faint smile to cross his lips.

“I am afraid,” he said, “that, as Mr. Stavert has just expressed it in other words, we are not making much progress. I have a suggestion to make. We are involved in an unusually delicate and, if I am not mistaken, extremely sinister situation. Four of us are innocent. One of us is guilty. All of us are known to Mr. Morlan; but, previous to our shipboard contact here on the *Nepenthe*, the rest of us had never met each other. My suggestion, therefore, is that we introduce ourselves in a more intimate way than we have so far done. In any case, I will begin. Mr. Morlan, of course, needs no further introduction. He is a man of wealth; and his business standing in Singapore and, for that matter, throughout Malaysia over a period of many years leaves nothing more to be said concerning him—besides, we all know him. As for myself, if I may modestly say so, I am also well and, I trust, favorably known in Singapore as one of the so-called”—he smiled again—“Chinese tin magnates, and also in Shanghai where I control an export and commission business that deals with many of the most important houses in Europe and America. I might add that I have long been acquainted with Mr. Morlan, and that on several former occasions I have been his guest on the *Nepenthe*.”

No one said anything.

“H’m!” ejaculated Mr. Morlan unpleasantly. “Mr. Lao-ti’s suggestion doesn’t seem to be exactly popular.”

“Oh, yes—if it will be of any help!” Count Luvac projected himself into the breach suavely. “Unfortunately, I have not my credentials with me, as I left them with the French Consul in Singapore. Mr. Morlan, however, has seen them. I am deeply interested in the life and customs of the, if I may so

call them, uncivilized peoples who live in the out-of-the-way places of the world. I am connected with several scientific journals in Paris for which I write articles on these and kindred subjects. I arrived in Singapore only a day or so before the *Nepenthe* sailed, and it was due to the kind offices of the French Consul, to whom I had explained the object of my visit to Malaysia, that I was honored by Mr. Morlan with an invitation to accompany him on the present cruise, thus giving me an opportunity to visit many of the little-known islands. I think that is all. Perhaps Captain Heath, who sits next to me, will continue this interesting autobiographical exposé."

Mentally, Owen shook himself together. One thought, and one thought only, had been running through his mind. One of these four was a skulking rat. One of these four was a cold-blooded, cowardly killer. Which one?

"I haven't much to tell," he said bluntly. "I was born out here. My mother died while I was still too young to remember her. When I was fifteen my father died and I went to sea. I have been at sea ever since. Eventually I obtained my master's ticket. A lot of us lost our jobs in England. I don't need to tell you how hard the shipping business has been hit. I was out of a job and I came back here hoping that my chances would be better in these parts because I knew the language, and I counted a bit on some of father's old friends too. I ran into Captain Penny in Singapore. I'd made a number of voyages with him. He offered me the berth of first officer on board here. I took it gladly. You all know what happened to Captain Penny and why at present I am in temporary command of the *Nepenthe*. I know of nothing further I could say about myself that would have the remotest bearing on the present situation."

All eyes were focused on Paul Stavert.

Paul Stavert gazed back in return—indulgently.

"Oh, very well," he complied pensively. "But it's a sad story. I am one of those johnnies that was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Wretched old family lineage, and all that sort of rot that a chap can't live down and has to live *up* to, if you know what I mean. I wasn't keen on any of the Services so I took a shot at politics—but I didn't get into the Cabinet. When the dear old pater died a few years ago and I came into the money, I chucked up everything owing to a most awfully serious attack of the jolly old wanderlust, which afflicted my wife at the same time, and, if you follow me, we've been taking the cure religiously ever since. We met Mr. Morlan hither and yon on several occasions during the last two years—the Riviera, at Newport—those sort of places, you know. We saw quite a bit of each other. Mr. Morlan had asked us several times to join him in a cruise on his yacht, but the date was only finally arranged about three months ago. And"—he

smiled engagingly—" 'pon my honor, you know, like Captain Heath, I can't think of anything else to say, except that my wife and I came out to Singapore, and here we are."

Mr. Morlan had been drinking steadily. His face was flushed as he looked at Mr. Lao-ti.

"Well, I can't see that this has got us anywhere," he snarled.

"I am afraid not," admitted Mr. Lao-ti softly. "Unfortunately, all that has just been said had already been said in the course of general conversation before we had been twenty-four hours on board together. It is true that there have been no apparent discrepancies in the retelling, but no one has seen fit to add any further information about himself."

"Including yourself," submitted Count Luvac dryly.

"Yes," admitted Mr. Lao-ti graciously; "but I, of course —"

"Of course!" Count Luvac broke in a little icily. "But permit me to remark that 'of course' applies to all of us. Undoubtedly, one of us is a liar; but the point is that we are no farther on than before. It all comes back to the question that Mr. Morlan asked to begin with. What are we going to do about it?"

"Well, it hasn't been answered yet!" There was the hint of a hiccough in Mr. Morlan's voice.

"No," agreed Count Luvac; "but if you will allow me to say so, it seems to me that there are only two courses of action open to us. One is to return direct to Singapore and place ourselves in the hands of the authorities. The other is to remain at sea and endeavor to discover the guilty man ourselves. As both host and owner, I presume it is your prerogative, Mr. Morlan, to make the decision."

Mr. Morlan poured for himself.

"We'll go back to Singapore," he announced; "but as we're only forty-five miles away and I've got important business with Mallinson, my agent at Laolu, we'll call there first."

"Pardon me," protested Count Luvac gently; "but that would vitiate whichever programme was decided upon. There would be no proof then that the purple ball was still on the *Nepenthe*."

Mr. Morlan reared himself up in his chair.

"What do you mean by that?" he roared belligerently. "Do you mean to accuse me of being —"

"I am in no position to accuse anyone," Count Luvac interrupted almost brusquely, "for unfortunately I find myself in the same unenviable position

as everyone else around the table. I mean only this: If we return to Singapore and declare, as we must, that one of us five is the murderer, the consequences will naturally be unpleasant for us all; but if the purple ball is not then found by the authorities, and I do not imagine it would be found, for, if I were the guilty man, I am quite sure I should drop it overboard as a last resort, direct suspicion would at once rest on anyone who had gone ashore, or who had been visited *from* shore, while en route from this island to Singapore.”

Mr. Morlan subsided in his chair.

“Hell!” breathed Mr. Morlan thickly—and chewed on his cigar for a moment. “Well, then, blast it all, Singapore or sea, it’s all the same to me. Do what you damned please. Decide it yourselves.”

“Rather a ticklish decision to make, don’t you know,” murmured Paul Stavert. He sipped lazily at his glass. “If I have got Count Luvac’s meaning, here we all are aboard the *Nepenthe* with the *pièce de résistance*, otherwise known as the purple ball, still with us. Do we surrender ourselves to the tender mercies of the authorities and all of us who are innocent suffer ghastly and untold hardships for the guilty one; or do we don the time-honored gum-shoes, and, remaining *incommunicado* with the outer world, which might possibly keep the purple ball longer in our midst, run the gore-spattered villain to earth ourselves? I wonder which the jolly old murderer would prefer? In either case, in a tight corner, the purple ball would likely vanish through a convenient porthole. *Sic transit* and all that sort of thing, you know. I trust I’m not making a speech. Not at all in my line, I assure you. It’s a bit nervy of me, of course, but I hope you won’t mind if I too offer a suggestion. As Mr. Morlan has left the decision to us, a vote is indicated. But the good old *viva voce* method might prove embarrassing to one of our number and sway his vote from the straight and narrow, if you get my thought. I perceive before me a bridge scoring-tablet and a pencil; and, in order that our true and innermost thoughts shall be revealed, I propose that each of us marks, with the same pencil of course, an ‘X’ on the blank side of a scoring sheet as indicative of a vote for Singapore and the authorities, and a ‘zero’ if he desires to remain at sea for the time being without any outside contact. What?”

“An excellent idea,” approved Mr. Lao-ti unemotionally.

Owen, watching, saw Count Luvac’s eyes narrow for an instant before he agreed with a curt nod. Mr. Morlan merely grunted his assent.

Paul Stavert rose from his chair, picked up the pencil, possessed himself of a scoring sheet, crossed to the far side of the room, marked his ballot, and, returning, laid the paper, printed side up, on the table.

"We'll shuffle 'em around a bit, of course," he said, "when all of you chaps have voted."

Owen voted last. With the door closed, the room was hot, and he swept the clinging drops of perspiration from his forehead with a flirt of his hand. But it was not the heat alone that had got under his skin. He remembered Mrs. Stavert's cryptic remark expressing the hope that for his own sake his next berth would not be on the *Nepenthe*. And suddenly, at this moment, he shared that hope with her. There had been no threats, no show of force, no bluster around the table here, but underneath it all he had felt the presence of an ugly, lurking shadow. A man had died today—unpleasantly. A man had been stabbed in the back. One of these four was as callous as he was a consummate actor. Who would go next—if an unscrupulous expediency demanded it? He was not given to nerves, but he was conscious now of an impalpable menace that seemed to overhang, not only this room, but the ship itself. The sooner it was over and done with the better. This was a matter for the police—as undoubtedly three of the others besides himself would likewise so decide. He marked his paper with an "X" and returned with it to the table.

Without lifting the ballots, Paul Stavert mixed them thoroughly and then turned them face up.

Everyone, each a self-appointed "scrutineer," leaned tensely forward. There were four "zeros" and one "X."

Mr. Morlan was the first to speak.

"The swine's pretty cocksure of himself, I'd say!" he rasped. "Anyway, it's settled that we stay at sea. And that being settled, I'll go at once and wireless Mallinson at Laolu not to expect me. We should have been there today. I suppose I'll have to transact my business with him by wireless, too, the best way I can." He half rose from his seat. "He's got a receiving set of a sort, and— —"

"Oh, I say—really!" It was Paul Stavert who protested this time. "Frightfully sorry and all that, but the idea was, you know, according to the vote, that we weren't to communicate with anyone."

Mr. Morlan's hand on the edge of the table clenched.

"That's carrying things a bit too far!" he shouted angrily. "I said I'd agree with the majority; but, by God, my business with Mallinson is important—I've already told you that—and it's got to be transacted some way or other."

"Yes—quite!" Paul Stavert nodded genially. "But, you see, it's dashed unpleasant sitting here with a noose dangling over one's head. I hope you

won't mind my calling your attention to the fact that we're—er—but it's most amazingly apt, don't you know—all in the same boat. What? Nevertheless, I can't see any objection to the message, provided we know what it is, and that no change in the text is made when it is sent. A sort of censorship that will apply to all of us, if I make myself clear—codes, of course, being strictly taboo."

Mr. Morlan sat down again. He controlled himself with an obvious effort.

"All right!" he said savagely. "Will you be satisfied if I write out the message here, let you all read it, have Roach along, hand it to him in your presence, and we all sit here while he sends it?"

"Oh, rather!" exuberated Paul Stavert happily. "So glad to have got around the beastly old impasse."

Mr. Morlan turned to Owen.

"Send for Roach," he directed curtly.

Owen rose and went to a push-button. Presently a native steward opened the door.

"Ask Tuan Roach to come down here," he instructed.

The man withdrew, and Owen went back to his place at the table.

Mr. Morlan was utilizing the bridge scoring-tablet, writing on the blank sides of the sheets, but he seemed to be making heavy weather of it. He scowled and muttered under his breath continuously, and tore up attempt after attempt. No one else around the table spoke. All seemed immersed in their own thoughts. Mr. Lao-ti was wholly immobile. Count Gaspard Luvac's interest was centered on the ceiling. Paul Stavert mixed another drink for himself with meticulous care.

Perhaps ten minutes passed and Mr. Morlan had still not got his message to his liking, when the door opened again. But it was the native steward who appeared once more, not Roach.

"Well?" demanded Owen briefly.

"Tuan," the man answered, "in the cabin of Tuan Roach there is no light, and the door is locked, and from within there has come no answer; and because of these things I have run in search of Tuan Roach in all places on the ship, but no man has seen him for many hours."

"Ah," murmured Mr. Lao-ti, "it is perhaps possible that, after all, there were *six* upon the island with the unfortunate Kaya Dâlam instead of five."

Owen was on his feet. He spoke sharply to the steward in Malay and the man vanished instantly.

“I think I’d better look into this,” he jerked out over his shoulder—and stepped toward the door.

But the others were on his heels, and a minute or so later as he halted before the door of the wireless room on the boat deck, where Roach bunked as well as worked, they crowded close around him.

“Roach!” he called—and banged with his fist upon the panels of the door.

There was no answer. The door did not yield to pressure.

Count Gaspard Luvac, at Owen’s elbow, leaned still closer.

“What did you say to that steward?” he asked in an undertone.

“I told him to send the ship’s carpenter here,” Owen answered in a level tone. “I saw Roach on board around two o’clock when I came off with Mr. Stavert. Roach couldn’t have gone ashore unnoticed—at least until after dark, and only then by swimming. Would you mind stepping back a little, please? Here’s the man I sent for.” He turned to a sarong-garbed native who carried several tools in his hand. “Open this door!” he ordered tersely.

It took a few minutes, and then the door swung open. Owen stepped inside, switched on the light—and with his hand still lingering near the switch stood motionless.

The walls of the wireless room were decorated with native curios and weapons that Roach had collected in his travels. But one of the weapons was missing from its place on the wall now. A crudely shaped stone axe, blood-smeared, lay on the floor near the crumpled body of a man whose head, crushed in, was circled by a dark crimson stain.

It required no professional eye to discern the fact that Roach was dead.

Furthermore, it was perfectly apparent that the stone axe had been put to still another purpose. The wireless set was smashed to pieces.

CHAPTER VIII

BY WAY OF IMPASSE

MIDNIGHT.

A moon ray, creeping inquisitively across the water from the *Nepenthe's* side, invaded the stretch of white sandy beach, and then, as though making a stealthy attempt to penetrate the thick foliage beyond, was, instead, absorbed itself and fell a prey to the dark shadows of the island. The yacht had not shifted its moorings.

Owen stood beneath the bridge, just forward of his cabin door, and looked down on the moon-swept fore deck. His spirits were low enough as it was. What he saw did not revive them. In fair weather, on nights like this, the native crew, by choice, stretched themselves out and slept where they would on the deck below there. They were there now, but they were not asleep. Instead of slumbering, recumbent forms scattered singly here and there, they were gathered in little groups of threes and fours squatting for the most part on their haunches. No one of them, save only the anchor watch on the fo'c'sle head, was without fellowship. Owen knew the natives well. Their low murmurings reached him. A disturbing sound, under the circumstances, that he would much rather had been non-existent.

Some of them had been ashore again with Carlin—to bury Roach. Owner's orders. Perhaps it had been the course of wisdom. Native superstition and the presence of a murdered man aboard did not go well together, whereas it would have done Roach no good to have kept him on the yacht only to bury him at sea tomorrow or the day after. But those of the crew who had been detailed for this duty ashore had gone about their task reluctantly. So had Carlin.

Carlin on his return from shore an hour ago had come directly to his, Owen's, cabin. Carlin's face had been the color of chalk, the man himself unstrung. He had offered Carlin a drink of whisky—and had watched without protest while in the space of some ten minutes Carlin, who usually drank little, had gulped down a third of the bottle, pouring a stiff four-fingers for himself each time with a shaky hand.

"That's two I've buried in the last six hours," Carlin had laughed almost hysterically as he had left the cabin. "Both murdered. You can hear the leaves in the trees ashore there talking about it. You'd better send Gaffney with the next one."

The next one! Owen stared bleakly down on the squatting, murmuring group below him. They were restive, under the prod of superstitious fear—and night enhanced that fear. He did not like it; but the spark had not become a flame, and was not likely to become one, unless. . . . The next one! What had prompted Carlin to say that? Under his breath he cursed Carlin for it—but he was nevertheless conscious that, whether he attempted to gainsay it or not, it had struck a responsive chord in his own mind. The next one. Well, if there were—what then? An ugly question. He had no answer to make.

The thing to do, of course, as he saw it, was to put to sea and get away from this island here and its associations at once. He had gone to Mr. Morlan with that proposal as soon as Carlin had left his cabin. But—owner's orders again. Mr. Morlan had said no. He had found Mr. Morlan drinking alone in the sitting room of his suite; also he had found Mr. Morlan half drunk, aggressive and profane.

"T'hell with the crew!" Mr. Morlan's voice had been hoarse with liquor and ill temper. "T'hell with everybody! If we aren't going to make any port until that damned ball's found, we'll stay where we are. I'm not going to waste fuel cruising around in silly circles. We can all murder each other just as well at anchor here—and save expense."

Owen's hands clenched on the rail. Yes, and at the rate things were going that was probably what would happen. Why was it that, following the murder of Kaya Dâlam, Mr. Morlan, and Mr. Lao-ti, and Paul Stavert, and Count Gaspard Luvac had all voted to keep away from the authorities? Why was it that with yet another murder, and that one committed here on board, their decision was still unaltered in this regard? It was understandable that the guilty had no desire to run foul of the law, but they were not all murderers. Why were the innocent voting with the guilty? They were certainly not in collusion. Was it greed? A hope each harbored that he might find and appropriate this presumably priceless purple ball for himself? Incredible! Well, then—why? What had each one individually to gain by deliberately avoiding the law?

Mentally he mocked savagely at himself. He did not know. Of course he did not know. He only knew that at this moment the *Nepenthe* should be speeding back to Singapore and the police. Well, he was in command. Suppose he took matters into his own hands? The thought was not a new one. It had merely persisted. He dismissed it now as he had dismissed it before—with a hard smile. It would be a stupid, futile thing to do. He himself was under suspicion. His incentive to get to the bottom of this madness that, like a gibbering death's-head, now seemed to hang over the

yacht, was as great as that of anyone else—greater. He had the ship to think of, the women—there was Doris Carroll. He had put a revolver in his pocket. God, if those chaps down there ever got pushed over the brink into the abyss of utter, unreasoning terror! To attempt to move the ship, to take matters into his own hands could only have one result—that of placing himself in a position where he would be an hundredfold less able to help either himself or others than he was at present. The owner was aboard—and the owner was absolute. To disobey orders would only be to find himself instantly relieved of his command and relegated at the least to a position where the freedom of movement that was now his would, for all practical purposes, no longer exist. Cold, common sense, no other thing, had held him back from going to Mr. Morlan with the ultimatum: Singapore—or my resignation.

But in any case the *Nepenthe* would not have gone to Singapore!

Beneath the bridge the shadows hid him, hid the drawn, strained look upon his face. Since the discovery of Roach's murder the ship had been the scene of what he could only describe as one of chaotic and fear-struck activity.

They had all gathered in the lounge almost immediately after the finding of Roach's body on the floor of the wireless room. Everybody had been questioned—the guests, the officers, and the native crew through the medium of Tanu. He, Owen, appeared to be the last one who had seen Roach alive, and that had been in the neighborhood of two o'clock when he and Paul Stavert had come off from the shore. No one else had seen Roach since lunch-time—or so they said. It was very strange—a bit hard to believe. It was in the highest degree unlikely that Roach could have gone ashore unobserved, therefore he must have been on the ship all the afternoon until the time he was killed.

What time had that been? Owen shook his head. There was no medical man on board to give an opinion, but the body had been cold. Therefore Roach must have been dead, at a layman's guess, for at least an hour, and quite possibly several hours, before his body was found.

Only one fact had come out in evidence that amounted to anything. Gaffney had stated that after the launch went ashore in the forenoon, Roach had come along to his, Gaffney's, cabin, for a yarn. They had had a drink or two, and Roach had detailed the whole story of the purple ball—said he had been out on the deck last night listening to the women in the lounge, and seemed to think it no end of a joke that they had got the wind up. Owen nodded curtly to himself. Well, that cleared that up—answered Doris Carroll's question. It was quite in keeping with Roach's propensity for

delving shamelessly into private codes and other people's business. Roach had some unpleasant characteristics. But Roach was dead now, murdered. "*De mortuis . . .*"

Nothing else had come to light, nothing else had eventuated from the inquiry except to bring the purple ball more feverishly to the fore than ever. What connection was there between the murder of Kaya Dâlam and the murder of Roach? But that, however, though mooted of course, had not been the dominant question that had seemingly been uppermost in the minds of Mr. Morlan and his guests. The purple ball itself was the obsession. The purple ball was aboard here somewhere. Where was it? It had to be found.

They had left the lounge in a body, no one willing to let another out of his sight, and in a body had searched each other's cabins, including his, Owen's, and those of Mrs. Stavert, Anne Morlan, and Doris Carroll. Owen's lips tightened. It had seemed to him to be a rather senseless proceeding, doomed to failure from the outset. Of course, the ball hadn't been found. If it were aboard here, it would not be discovered so easily as all that! Count Luvac, in that meeting in the smoking room after dinner, had stated that if he were the guilty man and found himself in a tight corner he would drop it overboard as a last resort. He, Owen, was not at all sure in his own mind that the infernal thing had ever been brought aboard at all; but, if it had, he inclined very strongly to the belief that, without waiting for any tight corner to force the issue, it had long ago been thrown overboard. Kaya Dâlam had given them to believe that it was a rubber ball. A rubber ball in itself was of no intrinsic value; its only value could lie in what, if anything, it might contain. The natural thing to have done would have been to slit the rubber covering and remove the contents. Why preserve the known and damning evidence of the container? Why hunt for a purple ball?

He had not hesitated to say so bluntly to the others. They had agreed that this was a possibility, but, at the same time, had pointed out not illogically that, even if the ball itself had been disposed of, there always remained the possibility of finding what had been inside. And so the search had gone on.

A furrow gathered between Owen's brows. There was, of course, still another possibility. Kaya Dâlam had deliberately conveyed the impression that it was a rubber ball. But Kaya Dâlam had lied once. Kaya Dâlam might have lied again. There was no guarantee that it *was* a rubber ball. Did that help any? Why should it help any? Suppose it wasn't rubber? Suppose it was—oh, damn it, suppose it was—anything!

In sudden exasperation he swung around, planting his back against the rail, and stared aft along the boat deck, now checkered by the moonlight and the shadows that were cast in fanciful patterns by the lifeboats and the ship's

upper structure. Along there, amidships, was the wireless house. His eyes, arrested, held on it. It brought Roach to the forefront in his mind again.

Mr. Morlan and his guests, dismissing it in any case as of secondary importance, had apparently assumed that the murder of Kaya Dâlam was intimately linked with the murder of Roach. A more or less natural assumption, of course. But was it logical? He, Owen, was far from satisfied on that score. It had troubled him a lot. It troubled him now. Granting that Roach had not gone ashore, and it was a practical certainty that the wireless operator had not left the yacht that afternoon, what possible connection could there be between Roach, Kaya Dâlam, and the purple ball? But, above all, why had the wireless set been destroyed? That seemed to be the crux of the whole matter.

In a general way, a search of the wireless house had been made at the time of the finding of Roach's body; but, each watching the other, they had seemed more intent on the hope of finding the purple ball than of uncovering any clue that might lead to the discovery of the perpetrator of the crime itself. After that, they had all adjourned to the lounge, and Roach's body had been taken ashore and buried.

His eyes still held on the shadowy outline of the wireless house. It seemed to have suddenly endowed itself with a sort of uncanny fascination that grew upon him as he stared at it. The shadow of a stay, a spidery thing, lying across a moon-bathed patch of deck, and moving with the ship's gentle lift and fall, seemed to beckon him. Ridiculous!

But why not? A little while ago, after Carlin had departed somewhat unsteadily, he had made a tour of inspection throughout the ship. The main deck, blazing with light, as it still was and would be by Mr. Morlan's instructions until morning, had been deserted; Mr. Morlan and his guests, if not asleep, were at least all in their rooms, if the light showing through the fretwork over their doors was any evidence that their individual activities for the rest of the night were at an end. No one was about—save the crew that squatted and murmured on the fore deck there below, and the anchor watch on the fo'c'sle head, to all of whom the boat deck was out of range of vision.

Why not? There *might* be something worth while to be gained by an intensive search of Roach's quarters—certainly nothing could be lost by it. Any more of this sort of thing, another murder, and God alone knew what would happen!

Why not? He had only to walk along the deck there and push the door open. It was not locked. The lock had been broken in forcing the door. No attempt had been made to repair the lock for the very good reason that the only key to the wireless room that was known to have been on board had, of

course, been taken by the murderer when he had locked the door behind him after killing Roach.

Within a foot or so of where he stood, a narrow space of deck, designated as the lower bridge, joined the fore and aft sweep of the boat across the front of his cabin. He had left his door open, the lights on. And the round shafts of light from the forward portholes of his cabin, as his gaze for some unknown reason focused on them now, seemed like dull, yellow, bulbous eyes peering astigmatically out into the moonlight. Well, what about it? He pushed his hand across his forehead. What had that to do with the wireless room? Nothing? He was a bit off-color, wasn't he? Brain hubbub!

He swore angrily at himself; then, stepping abruptly forward, he entered his cabin, took a flashlight from a drawer of his locker, and came out on deck again. He glanced mechanically around him; then, walking quickly aft along the boat deck, he reached the door of the wireless house. Here he halted, and again looked about him—this time vigilantly and in all directions. Also he listened intently. He smiled a little indulgently at himself. It was exaggerated precaution perhaps, but where everyone was suspicious of everyone else, his actions would almost certainly be misunderstood if he were seen entering here alone and at this hour.

There was no sound. There was nothing to be seen but the shadows intermingling with the moonlight along the deck. He pushed the door open and stepped inside. It had creaked a little as he had opened it, it creaked a little now as he closed it behind him. Its rough handling had displaced the hinges slightly, of course. Strange, though, that the faint noises it made should sound like a series of thunderclaps!

The round, white ray of his flashlight circled the interior. It was a large room—the designers had been generous in respect of the yacht's wireless accommodations. That door aft there, wide open now, led into Roach's erstwhile sleeping quarters. Owen stepped over to the threshold of the open door, flung the beam of the flashlight cursorily inside the bedroom, then he returned to the center of the wireless room again, and stood frowning at the confusion that confronted him.

True, in their search, ostensibly for clues, but in reality, he had little doubt, in the hope of coming upon a certain purple ball, Mr. Morlan and his guests had added somewhat to the disarray that had existed when the door had been broken in; but substantially everything was as it had been at the moment the crime had been discovered. The same evidence of a frantic search—for *something*. The drawers of the wireless table or desk still gaped open, the floor was still strewn with a litter of papers and the code books that had presumably been swept from their rack with the smashing of the

wireless set, while the débris of the wrecked wireless set itself still lay where it had fallen. Even the stone axe still remained there on the floor, and Roach's swivel chair, still unrighted, lay there too.

It was not a pleasant task that he had set himself. There was something acutely horrid about the atmosphere of the room. He had seen Roach, an ugly sight, lying there upon the floor and, do what he would, he now found himself glancing again and again about him, as though anticipating an unearthly clutch upon his shoulder. Was he a child?

He nerved himself and tried to reconstruct the crime. It was pure theory of course; but from the upturned chair and the position in which Roach's body had been found, there was, in his mind, little doubt as to what had actually happened. Roach had been sitting at the wireless table and someone, of whom Roach had no suspicion—and that unhelpfully applied to everyone on board, for Roach was hardly likely to have expected anyone to enter the wireless house with murderous intent—had come in, and, under the pretext of examining Roach's native curios, had taken down the stone axe, stepped behind Roach and killed him. A nasty weapon. It would not have required much strength. A woman could have done it.

Undoubtedly. But theory, however informative, had its limitations. Who was that "someone"? He was here now. What did he expect to find, to upturn, or unearth? He did not know. He had admitted that to himself when the idea of visiting the wireless house had taken root and germinated in his mind. Perhaps luck, or fate, or whatever one might choose to call it, would take a hand.

He began by an examination of the desk. It revealed nothing. The drawers were practically empty. What they had once contained now lay scattered all over the floor. He turned then to the papers on the floor and dropped on his knees amongst them. There were many letters, Roach's private correspondence; but for the most part the litter consisted of the yellow wireless forms in vogue aboard the *Nepenthe*—copies of messages, some in code, received or sent by Mr. Morlan. Not all, by any means, connected with the present voyage—some of them, many of them, were dated a year or more back. They represented despoiled files.

He swung his hand suddenly, fretfully across his eyes. He had the feeling now that he was being watched. That he was not alone here. Absurd! He cursed himself audibly, furiously. He was worse than a child! He went on with his search doggedly.

The minutes passed; and then, as he pushed a clutter of wireless forms aside, a small object, snuggled against the wall, and though still half hidden amidst the broken pieces of the wireless set, glittered responsively as the ray

of his flashlight fell upon it. He reached forward, picked it up, stared at it for a full minute in puzzled bewilderment, then slipped it into his pocket.

A reward? Perhaps yes; perhaps no. His lips were firmed in a straight line. He continued his search. Another five minutes went by. He had read some of the wireless messages, and some of them were strange and apparently ambiguous, but to have read them all would have taken hours. An impossibility. He rose finally to his feet. He laid no claim to being a detective of high degree, possessing a miraculous storybook sagacity. If there was anything else here to aid him, obvious though it might be to the trained, observant eye, it had eluded him. Well, then—what? The damned place seemed to grow more creepy with every minute. His inclination was to get out of it now as quickly as he could, but he had come here for a purpose—and there were still Roach's personal effects.

He stepped then again toward Roach's bedroom, and this time entered it. At the far end, as he knew, having seen it many times, was a curtain-enclosed recess where Roach hung his clothes. He stepped hurriedly in that direction—and came to a sudden halt less than a yard away. His muscles tensed. He heard the swish of the curtain, while at the same instant the glare of his flashlight seemed to become dull and diffused—and there flashed through his mind the analogy of the opposing headlights of approaching automobiles meeting one another on a pitch-black highway.

And then a voice spoke, its intonation cool and unperturbed:

"Ah, it is unfortunate, is it not, that we should both have decided to come here at the same time, and particularly that you should have decided to investigate our poor friend Roach's wardrobe?"

He recognized the voice. It was that of Count Gaspard Luvac.

Owen, startled, upset, was for the moment thrown off his mental balance—but what seemed like flaunted insouciance in the other's tones angered him.

"You!" he rasped. "Count Gaspard Luvac! What the hell were you doing behind that curtain there?"

"Yes, of course," returned Count Luvac calmly; "but you, my dear captain, what were you doing so secretively out there in the wireless room? And why did this curtain here also attract you?"

There was only a filmy shadow there in front of him—the rays of the two flashlights were still blending.

"Damnation," Owen flung out, "I happen to be in command of this ship. There has been too much going on aboard here that I do not understand. I am not accountable to you for my actions. I have a right to be here."

"Damnation is a fine word," returned Count Gaspard Luvac suavely. "May I borrow it and say: Damnation, I, too, have a right to be here. I perceive"—the rays of the two flashlights seemed suddenly to separate—"that your right hand is in your jacket pocket; but I, too, have a revolver. Shall we proceed to blow each other into eternity, or shall we call it, say, an impasse? One of five men, of whom we are two, is undoubtedly guilty of the murder of Kaya Dâlam. You, who are innocent, are suspicious of me because you have found me here on the scene of still another murder. I, who am innocent, am suspicious of you for the same reason. It is what you say in English, fifty-fifty, is it not? You may be the captain of the ship, but you are also under suspicion, and may I repeat that I have as much right to be here as you have. Am I not justified in anything I may do in an effort to protect myself, even as you are? And if I have come to Roach's quarters, as I have, in the hope that I might discover something that would help to clear up the situation, I do not see that my presence here is any more open to question than yours is, and certainly would not be, I think I am safe in saying, in the opinion of the other three."

Owen smiled grimly. Innocent himself, Count Gaspard Luvac showed up in a most suspicious light. If Count Luvac was innocent, he, Owen, naturally appeared to the other in like case. In any event, in the eyes of Mr. Morlan, Paul Stavert and Mr. Lao-ti, as Count Luvac had just bluntly stated, there would be nothing to choose between the surreptitious presence of Count Gaspard Luvac and himself here in the wireless house. It was admittedly an impasse. Count Luvac had said it. Also there was another very good reason why he did not care to force the issue here and now. He had thrust something into his pocket, and so too, perhaps, had Count Luvac; but —

"Well?" inquired Count Luvac softly. "Shall we go below and tell our fellow-suspects that we found each other here, or shall we decide to keep our own counsel?"

"I'll make no promises," said Owen gruffly.

He sensed, rather than saw, the other shrug his shoulders.

"Quite so," returned Count Luvac pleasantly. "I perfectly understand you. Let us leave that, then, to each other's considered judgment. But I might say, and I trust you will believe me, that it never entered my mind you had anything to do with the, shall we say, *untimely* death of Kaya Dâlam on the island this afternoon."

"Thank you!" said Owen curtly.

"Not at all," murmured Count Luvac politely; "and since, apparently, we do not intend to murder each other here on the spot, and, in view of the fact

that the separate privacy of our investigations at the scene of Roach's murder is now obviously at an end, may I suggest, if the suggestion is not anticlimactic, that we go to bed?"

For a moment Owen did not answer. The man was plausible—too damned plausible. Smooth as hell, in fact. But what else was there to do?

"Right!" he said finally—and led the way out of the wireless house.

Out on the deck he closed the door behind him.

"Good-night, Captain," smiled Count Gaspard Luvac airily.

Owen's mind was still awry.

"Good-night," he answered unaffably.

He watched Count Luvac stride along the deck and disappear down one of the after companionways; then he started slowly in the direction of his own cabin. But after a pace or two he halted in a moonlight-flooded space, and took from his pocket the object he had found in the wireless room. His eyes, as he stared at it, were somber. The day before yesterday, while walking along the main deck, which was deserted at the time, he had noticed and recognized a lady's handbag lying open on one of the deck chairs, and on the deck itself, where it had fallen from the handbag, a small, silver-chased hypodermic syringe. He had picked up the syringe—and replaced it in the handbag. This was the same one, or its counterpart.

It belonged to Anne Morlan.

CHAPTER IX

ALLIES

OWEN went on again along the boat deck, but as he neared the door of his cabin, which was still open, he turned to glance down the companion ladder leading to the main deck—and came to an abrupt halt. With the lights all on, it was bright as day on the deck below there, and he could see a figure in white curled up in one of the deck chairs. Also he could see that it was Doris Carroll—and a moment later he was standing in front of her.

“Good heavens!” he expostulated, “what are you doing here at this hour?”

Her blue eyes, he noted with sudden misgiving, were frankly troubled as they met his for an instant, then she turned away her head.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said in a low voice.

He appropriated the chair beside her.

“Look here,” he said earnestly, “you mustn’t let this business put you off your stride, you know—you really mustn’t.”

She was looking down at her hands which were clasped now in her lap.

“And you?” she asked pointedly. “Why are you still up—at this hour?”

He laughed her question away.

“Just making last-minute rounds,” he said easily. “Skipper’s multifarious responsibilities, the crushing weight of the whole world on one’s shoulders, and all that sort of thing, you know.”

She still did not look up.

“Oh!” she breathed skeptically.

Perhaps it was the effect of the artificial light, but where there should have been color in her cheeks, there was only pallor. She looked tired and wan. Something tugged at Owen’s heart. He leaned forward impulsively and laid his hand over both of hers.

“I know,” he said gravely. “It’s a beastly business. But some of us have got to keep sane, or at least try to—and I’m banking on you.”

She had left her hands in his; she withdrew them gently now.

“That’s good of you,” she said with a little catch in her voice. “And—and I’m so glad you came. I—I wanted to talk to you. I intended to do so at the first opportunity that offered in the morning. It’s quite true, as you see—I *am* afraid. Terribly afraid. It’s not childish fear. I am sure I am not guilty of

that. Things I have heard—tonight—until it seems as though there was no one who was incapable of committing these horrid crimes. And—and I am sure they are not at an end. It is like some frightful nightmare, not real, not true, but from which I am unable to awake. And I can't think any more. I can't keep sane and keep everything to myself. And there is no one now to whom I dare say anything except you."

He did not like what she said; he did not like that tense, drawn expression in her face. Doris Carroll had been very much in his thoughts almost from the moment she had come aboard the *Nepenthe*; he was very definitely aware now that all his hopes, his ambitions, his incentive for the years to come were bound up and centered in—Doris Carroll. And she—her feelings toward him? He did not know. He only knew at the present moment that, while he would stake his life on her dependableness in a crisis, he must, if he could, allay the fears, for which, heaven knew, there was enough warrant, that were now possessing her. And so again he spoke lightly.

"Unworthy me!" he ejaculated playfully. "For, of course, before I assume the rôle of confessor, it is my bounden duty to inform you that I, too, am of the suspects. In fact, according to Count Luvac, I am the suspect *par excellence*. So beware what you say!"

"Don't!" she protested after a moment's silence. "It's good of you, and I know what you mean, but it doesn't help any. It's all far too serious. It seems so unnecessary for me to say that I know you have had no more to do with these intrigues and murders than I have. You—you are not like the others. And there is so much to say, and I—I do not know what to do."

He bit at his lip as he told himself he was no better than a blundering fool.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out contritely. "Tell me all you know. God knows, I need an ally, too!"

She was staring out, he could see, over the rail at the island that lay abeam like a black, elongated rampart defiant of the moonlight.

"Evil Island. Anne Morlan called it that." She was speaking as though almost to herself; then she turned abruptly in her chair and faced him. "If I am to be honest," she said steadily, "I must appear to be disloyal to my employer, Mr. Morlan. If I am not honest, it would be worse than useless for me to say anything. And there is so much at stake now. You will understand, won't you?"

Owen smiled queerly. He held no brief for Mr. Henry K. Morlan. He seemed to see Mr. Morlan sweating again in the smoking room over the "important" message to Mallinson at Laolu that was never sent. And he

could not help wondering if Mr. Morlan were still drinking alone down there in his suite!

"I will not only understand," he assured her bluntly; "but I am quite sure I shall not be shocked by anything you may say."

"Very well, then," she nodded; "but I'll have to go back a little into past history, for it all seems to have a very significant bearing now on what took place tonight after—after Mr. Roach's body was found and all our cabins were searched. In the year and a half that I have been Mr. Morlan's secretary there have been a number of things in the conduct of his business that have made me wonder a great deal—little things, like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle that would not fit together. He has fine offices in Singapore, and his Amalgamated Copra and Rubber Company undoubtedly does a big business, but little by little I began to feel that this only served to cover some private enterprise that was of far greater importance to him. Code messages come to him from all over the world, and apparently they have to do with nothing else but the buying and selling and shipment of copra and rubber, but when decoded they do not seem, in many cases, to warrant the secrecy that was employed. And then I began to notice the constant presence of unnecessary words in the messages, and— —"

"Just a minute," Owen interrupted. "I think I see what you mean. You were given the key to the code, but there were arbitrary words used—in other words, a code within a code?"

"Yes."

"And Roach? Did he have the same key you had?"

"Yes; we both had it."

"But the key to the key—the key to those arbitrary words. Did he have that, too?"

She shook her head.

"I am sure that Mr. Morlan never gave that to him any more than he did to me. But after tonight, I—I am afraid that— —" She stumbled with her words and did not go on.

"That he solved it for himself—and was found out," Owen supplied grimly.

Her face, white before, was whiter still in the moonlight now—and her knuckles were like little rows of bloodless knobs as her hands clenched on the arms of her chair.

"Oh, it's horrible!" she whispered. "The thought of it! And I have no proof. I—I can't bring myself to believe it. It can't be true, and yet—and yet there are other things. Let me go on. It's hateful of me, but I must say it, if I

am to make everything clear. Mr. Morlan has a very beautiful home in Singapore, and entertains in a lavish fashion, but the people one would like to have do not — —”

“I know,” Owen interrupted. “Captain Penny said as much. Mr. Henry K. Morlan has poured out his money all right, but was never quite able to crash the social gates. That’s it, isn’t it? His present status is that, always in the hope of establishing a certain entrée with the right people, he grabs at all newcomers and visitors to Singapore who have any claim at all to distinction —and then is promptly dropped by them when they find he is not received in what are called the best circles. And that’s the way he secures his guests for these cruises on the *Nepenthe*, too, I fancy. Am I right?”

“I think so,” she answered, “though I am afraid there is far more to it than that.”

“What?” he demanded tersely.

“I don’t know,” she replied nervously. “But I cannot help feeling there is something strange and mysterious even about this yacht itself. And yet, if that is so, why does Mr. Morlan always have guests aboard, both here and when he is in Europe and America; and why does he have men like Captain Penny and yourself always in command?”

Owen studied her for a moment. Her lips were quivering. The situation was becoming too tense again.

“Camouflage!” he proclaimed with mock seriousness—and then laughed teasingly. “The reflected glory of unassailable reputations—long live the good old British Mercantile Marine!”

She turned swiftly toward him and her hand gripped his arm.

“Again your good intentions”—she seemed to force her words. “I understand. But you must not think of me now. I believe you have hit exactly upon the truth.”

“Not really!” he protested. “I say, you know, we mustn’t do him an injustice. There’s Miss Morlan. We all know about her, I imagine. She’s—well, she’s not, with her unfortunate weakness, what one might quite call a social asset. Perhaps she has a lot to do with Mr. Morlan spending so much time at sea. After all, he’s her father, and perhaps out of love and consideration for her, and in the hope that he might—well, you know, effect a cure, he — —”

Doris Carroll’s wan little smile stopped him.

“I wish that were true,” she said in a flat tone; “but it isn’t. I know that impression is quite widespread in Singapore, and Mr. Morlan has apparently preferred that it should gain ground rather than deny it; but—oh, don’t you

see?—it's so natural an additional explanation of his constant wanderings—what you said a minute ago—camouflage. They hate each other—bitterly.”

“Oh!” he ejaculated blankly. “I didn't know that.”

“No; I suppose not.” She was staring out over the rail again. “I didn't fully realize it myself until tonight.”

Owen broke a short ensuing silence abruptly.

“I don't want to digress,” he said; “but there is a question I would like to ask. How did you happen to become Mr. Morlan's secretary?”

She looked at him in a puzzled way.

“That's a rather strange question, isn't it? Father, when he died five years ago, didn't leave us very well off financially. I went in for this sort of work. The position I held at the time wasn't any too lucrative, so, when I heard that the secretaryship to Mr. Morlan had become vacant, I applied for it. That was natural enough, wasn't it?”

“I don't think you quite understand what I mean,” he said quietly. “I fancy there were quite a lot of other applicants all duly qualified like yourself?”

“Why, yes, of course,” she said perplexedly; “but, I don't see — —”

“Wait,” he broke in gently. “Even when I was a boy out here your father's name was well known. When he died he was General Carroll, and held a high Government post, and — —”

She had straightened in her chair.

“I see what you mean.” A tinge of color was dyeing her cheeks. “Such a thing never occurred to me, or else I would never have — —”

“Please,” he begged earnestly, as he broke in again, “please don't misunderstand me. I know it didn't occur to you then. But now? It's all in line with what we have been saying. And I'm wondering now if the prestige of your father's name — —”

“Oh, that's hateful, too!” she burst out. “I don't want to think about it. It — it only seems to make matters worse. Don't let's talk about it.”

“All right, don't let's, then,” he agreed promptly. “It's perhaps just one of those stray pieces, anyway, that doesn't belong at all to that jig-saw puzzle you mentioned. Are you ready to tell me now about tonight?”

“Yes”—her smile was mirthless—“I've said enough else—things that I never thought I should ever have to say about anyone. I—I'll let Mr. Morlan blacken his own reputation from now on in his own words. Yes; I'll tell you now. It was some little time after all our cabins had been searched when it happened. You know, of course, that the guests' cabins are all one side of the

ship, and that Miss Morlan and Mr. Morlan's suites, my office, and my cabin are on the other—on this side."

"The starboard side," he nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Mr. Morlan's sitting room, as you also know, connects with the office by means of a communicating door, and the office in turn connects with my cabin in the same manner. I was in my cabin lying on the settee in the dark. Everything in the office from the filing cabinets to the drawers of my desk had been in a frightful state of confusion as a result of that maniacal search, and I had been straightening things out in there. I had just returned to my cabin a few minutes before, and I was tired, upset, frightened. My eyes ached. I thought I would lie down for half an hour before putting the things in my own cabin, which were still in disorder, to rights. I might have been lying there five minutes, or perhaps a little more, when suddenly I saw a faint, narrow streak of light creep across the floor of my cabin from the direction of the door connecting with the office.

"It startled me so that I remember putting my hand to my mouth to prevent myself from crying out; it—it just seemed to me at the moment as though it were another manifestation of the nameless horror that was pervading the whole ship. And then I realized that I must have inadvertently left the door just slightly ajar when I came back from the office; but I realized, too, at the same time, that there was something strange about that streak of light—it was so vague, and thin, so almost shadowy, that it was certain the office lights had not been switched on."

She paused and made a nervous, impotent little gesture with her hand.

"I—I hardly know how to explain myself," she went on in an agitated way. "I seemed all at once to become two persons; one of whom, frozen with terror, was rooted to the settee, while the other was possessed by an irresistible urge to go to the door. I listened. I could hear no sound. I told myself I was a coward, that there was no killer stalking around in there, and that there was some very simple explanation to account for that thread of light at which I would laugh when I had discovered what it was. I don't know how long I remained there on the settee, probably only a few seconds though it seemed much longer, but anyway I finally got up and tiptoed across the cabin to the office door. It was just as I had thought—the door was all but closed. But through the crack I could see that the light was flooding out from Mr. Morlan's sitting-room door that had been opened on the opposite side of the office. Then the door began to close noiselessly—but not before I could see Mr. Lao-ti moving cautiously back across the threshold into Mr. Morlan's sitting room. And then the door was shut without a sound and he was gone. I— —"

“Do you think he noticed that your door was not quite closed?” Owen interrupted crisply.

She shook her head.

“There was no light in my cabin. Besides, I’m sure he didn’t, as you will see in a minute. It had made me feel more creepy than ever, not only to see Mr. Lao-ti there where he had no business to be, but to see him sneaking away like that, and my heart was thumping as I opened my door and stepped as quietly as I could into the office. I—I am afraid I am making myself sound like a heroine in a storybook, but I had to act quickly or not at all, though what I really wanted to do was to go back to my cabin and lock myself in. You see, the office door opening on the alleyway is always kept locked except when I am at work in there, and it flashed through my mind that in order to reach the office Mr. Lao-ti might have entered Mr. Morlan’s sitting room just as stealthily as he had entered the office itself. On the other hand, Mr. Morlan might have been in his sitting room all the time, though I did not see how that could be. In any case, if Mr. Morlan were not there, Mr. Morlan must be found and told what had occurred. I meant to find out. I meant to knock and then enter at once. If Mr. Morlan was there, any one of a dozen excuses for coming to him would do; and if Mr. Lao-ti was alone I had only to say that I was looking for Mr. Morlan; while, if the room was empty, it meant of course that Mr. Lao-ti had already gone, and that I had been right in the first place. All this was running wildly through my head in the moment or two it took me to cross the office and reach Mr. Morlan’s door; but, before I could knock, my question was answered. Mr. Morlan *was* there. I heard his voice on the other side of the door.

“‘Well, are you satisfied?’ I heard him growl. ‘I told you Miss Carroll was through in there for the night. What is it you want? And why the hell all this secrecy, anyway?’”

“I had never heard Mr. Lao-ti snarl before, but he snarled then as he answered.

“‘It was safer to make sure,’ he said. ‘You’ve made enough dangerous mistakes already tonight, Morlan. That’s why I’m here, and that’s what I want—to straighten them out before it’s too late if we can.’”

“My word!” Owen muttered under his breath. “And then?”

“And then”—she tried to force a smile—“and then I did something that I hardly imagine a heroine is supposed to do; but I remembered Kaya Dâlam, and remembered Roach, and I deliberately became an eavesdropper. I stood there at the door with my ear against the panel and listened.

"I am not going to attempt to repeat verbatim all I overheard. It would take too long—and besides, of course, I couldn't catch every word. Mr. Lao-ti tongue-lashed Mr. Morlan for having taken too much to drink in the smoking room, and called him a fool in ugly words for the way he had acted when you were all in there together after dinner. They began to quarrel bitterly. It was about Mr. Morlan having agreed to keep at sea, but suggesting that a stop be first made at Laolu; and then, later, for having insisted on sending a message to Mallinson. Mr. Lao-ti said there were some places to which even a drunken man should have remembered it was courting disaster to draw attention—and Laolu in particular. I couldn't follow them. They talked fast and angrily. Mr. Morlan had apparently hoped to get a chance to land something at Laolu so that it wouldn't be found on the *Nepenthe* if a police search of the yacht were finally made at Singapore but, in any case, he had wanted to warn Mallinson about something too. And once he screamed at Mr. Lao-ti: 'What are we going to do with it? What if we're caught with it?' And Mr. Lao-ti said they would never be caught with it, for with half an hour's work it could all be dumped into the ocean. And Mr. Morlan screamed at him again: 'Damn you, do you know how many thousand pounds it's worth!' I didn't understand about Laolu, and I don't now; but I am quite sure that it wasn't the purple ball they were afraid might be found aboard here—that's why I said at the beginning that there was something strange and mysterious about the yacht itself. I am certain it wasn't the purple ball they were quarreling about."

Owen smiled mirthlessly. He remembered a certain remark Count Luvac had made in the smoking room.

"Evidently not," he said. "But I think I can say with equal certainty that the purple ball was nevertheless the cause of their quarrel."

She swung toward him tensely.

"What do you mean?" she breathed.

"Just this," he said—and explained to her briefly what had transpired in the smoking room. "You see, therefore," he went on, "it is all summed up in what Count Luvac said about anyone coming aboard or going ashore at Laolu. It is apparent there is something, not only aboard here, but also at Laolu itself, that Messrs. Morlan and Lao-ti want to keep from the light of day. So, if the purple ball were *not* eventually found on board here—and personally I think it has long since gone into the sea, its covering, I mean—and the yacht *had* touched at Laolu, it is obvious that the police, for the police will have to come into this sooner or later no matter what happens, would not under those circumstances overlook Laolu in their investigations. Mr. Morlan and Mr. Lao-ti don't want Laolu investigated, that's all. As I see

it, I don't blame Mr. Morlan from his standpoint for wanting to warn Mallinson to look out for squalls."

"I see," she said slowly. "Then what we were saying, what we—we were afraid of about Mr. Morlan having found out that Roach had—oh, you know what I mean! That couldn't be true, could it? Roach was already dead when Mr. Morlan wanted to send that message from the smoking room."

Owen was silent for a moment.

"It would have been an almost perfect alibi," he stated thoughtfully. "I hadn't forgotten about that message when we were trying to put two and two together, but I didn't realize its importance then to Mr. Morlan. I do now. Yes, I'd say that so far as Roach is concerned this lets Mr. Morlan out. But"—a sudden angry glint was in his eyes—"from the way things look now I can't say I'm glad. He deserves to be hanged for something, and—"

"Let me finish," she interposed—and drew her hand nervously across her eyes. "I haven't told you everything yet. Just as Mr. Morlan and Mr. Lao-ti were at the height of their quarrel, I heard the slam of Mr. Morlan's sitting-room door that opens on the alleyway, and then I heard Anne Morlan's voice as she, evidently, came into the room. I could tell from her voice, which was shrill, almost hysterical, that she was in one of her—her ——" She hesitated.

"Yes, I know," Owen said laconically. "Go on."

She nodded hurriedly.

"I'll tell you as nearly as I can just what I heard each of them say. I—I think I can remember almost every word of it this time. Miss Morlan seemed to begin talking the instant she entered the room.

"'What are you two fighting about—the purple ball?' she cried out in a high-pitched, jerky way. 'The purple ball! Ha ha! The purple ball! I wonder what you two know about it? I wouldn't put it past either of you to have stuck that knife into Kaya Dâlam—or both of you together! But it isn't with the other stuff—for I looked.'

"Her father swore at her furiously, but she paid no attention.

"'Anyway,' she went on, 'whether either of you knifed Kaya Dâlam or not, we're in a hell's mess now—and all you do is sit here and spit at each other. God, what'll happen to you two will be just too bad if the masks ever slip off!'

"'Go to bed!' her father roared. 'You're not fit to be anywhere else—except in a straitjacket!'

"And then she burst into a peal of insane laughter that made me shiver.

“‘Go to bed!’ she echoed. ‘You fools! I tell you again to look out for that fellow Gaffney. I caught him twice tonight sneaking in a corner, once talking in Malay to the deck steward, and again to another Malay who, when he saw me coming, disappeared before I could recognize him; and when I asked Gaffney for an explanation, he said the native crew were all scared by the two murders, and he was trying to put some sense into them. But he was a liar. He’s up to some game. He knows too much about you and the *Nepenthe*. I warned you about him at Swabi. I told you what I’d heard about him there.’

“‘Yes,’ her father snarled, ‘you told us what you’d picked up in those filthy dumps you frequent ashore, and where you’re doped to the eyes just like you are tonight. That’s all you ever pick up! I’ve better information than that. You’re a disgrace. You’re a millstone around my neck. You’re a menace. In a couple of years you’ll be a hag. Look at yourself tonight!’

“‘I’m what you’ve made me!’ she screeched at him. ‘You smooth-faced hypocrite! You’d like to see me dead, wouldn’t you? Well, you won’t! You can’t kill me the way you killed my mother by breaking her heart when she found you out!’

“‘You go to bed,’ Mr. Morlan roared at her again—and I could hear the thud of his feet on the floor as he evidently leaped from his chair, ‘or, damn you, I’ll choke— —’

“He didn’t get any farther. She was beside herself, of course.

“‘You lay a hand on me,’ she screamed, ‘and, father or no father, I’ll drop you where you stand—yes, and you too, if you interfere, you slick, yellow-skinned, crooked Chink!’”

Again Doris Carroll paused, and pushed her hand across her eyes.

“I’m almost through.” Her voice was thin, tired. “I don’t know what happened in Mr. Morlan’s sitting room after that, because I turned and ran. Someone was trying the alleyway door to the office, trying to work the key that was on the inside out of the lock. It was only a little rasping noise, but it sounded like a deafening clamor in my ears. I was afraid of whoever it might be, and I was afraid of being found in the office. I ran across the office to my room as silently as I could. It was pitch black. I told you I had not put things to rights in my room. And inside there I stumbled over something and crashed down on the floor. Then I heard footsteps running along the alleyway outside, and realized that the noise I had made had frightened away whoever had been trying to get into the office. I got to my feet, opened my cabin door a little way, and peered out. A man was just disappearing around the foot of the main staircase.”

“Who was it?” Owen clipped off his words. “Did you recognize him?”
“Yes,” she said. “It was Paul Stavert.”

CHAPTER X

OFF-STAGE

WITH an admonition in a quick-flung undertone to Doris Carroll to remain where she was, Owen rose abruptly from his chair. A figure in white had showed suddenly at the head of the forward companion ladder leading up from the fore deck. Owen moved briskly forward, and halted within a pace or two of the other as in the moonlight he recognized the man's features. It was Tanu, the serang. Tanu, like the others, should have been asleep.

"Oh, it's you, Tanu!" he exclaimed a little sharply. "What are you doing up here?"

Tanu pointed upward to the boat deck.

"For a long time there has been a light in the Tuan's cabin," he said, "and the door has been open even as it is now, for which reason I knew that the Tuan was not asleep; also, for a long time, those of my people who should have slept have not slept, but have talked together and I have talked with them, and it is my mind that those things which I have heard should be made known to the Tuan also. So, therefore, I am come."

Owen stared at the other for a moment. He liked Tanu. Tanu was not only an excellent seaman and an efficient serang, but he, Owen, had every reason to believe that the man was thoroughly honest and trustworthy. But Tanu was obviously ill at ease now, and his usual cheery smile was not in evidence.

Owen nodded.

"I know that the crew has not been asleep," he said then quietly. "What is it that you want to say, Tanu?"

"They do not sleep because of a great fear that is upon them," Tanu answered. "The Tuan knows my people because as a child he has spent much time in the campongs, and he knows the many tales of ghosts and of the unseen spirits that strike with death which fill the minds of my people. And now, Tuan, they gather close to each other because of the fear of that which is aboard the ship—and when next death strikes I know not what in their terror they will do."

Owen's lips tightened. "When next death strikes." Carlin had said practically the same thing—so had Doris Carroll. It seemed to have become an obsession with almost everybody—an ugly obsession. And honesty

compelled him to admit that what Doris Carroll had just told him had not tended to relieve his own mind of anxiety on that same count itself.

“Nonsense!” he laughed cheerily, and his laugh, as he meant it should, carried to the fore deck below. “There isn’t going to be any ‘next death,’ as you put it. Get that out of your head, and get it out of the heads of the crew. When daylight comes you’ll all feel differently about it.”

“Tuan,” said Tanu soberly, “the daylight is not yet come, and the fear that is upon them is very great. All know the tale of the purple ball that was told by Kaya Dâlam, and it is in their minds that, even as Kaya Dâlam said, it is a thing of evil magic and death, and it is also in their minds that it has been brought aboard the ship. If, as the Tuan says, there is no more killing on the ship, then with the coming of the daylight it may well be that fear too will flee with the darkness; but, if it be otherwise, then, Tuan, I know not what will come about, for there are those who say that unless the ball be seized and thrown into the sea then all aboard will die.”

A light offshore breeze had sprung up. Owen’s brows were knitted now as he watched the ripples dancing in the moon track. Children—yes. But potentially they would rank as anything but children if their fears got the upper hand. He knew that. He had put a revolver in his pocket.

“Are there many who say that the ball should be seized?” he demanded abruptly.

“No, Tuan, but the ears of the others are not closed.”

“Well, then,” said Owen tersely, “while their ears are open, I’ll go down and talk to them. There is no reason for their fears.”

“It would be well, Tuan,” Tanu agreed gravely.

Owen turned toward the figure in the deck chair.

“I’ll only be gone a very few minutes,” he said. “Please wait for me, Miss Carroll, will you?”

“Yes,” she answered.

Owen nodded to Tanu.

“All right,” he instructed, “get them together below there.”

He followed Tanu down the ladder; and then as, at Tanu’s bidding, the Malays gathered around him, he spoke to them briefly, cheerfully, reassuringly, in their own tongue—and at the end dismissed them pleasantly.

For the most part, if he judged their reception aright, his words had had the desired effect, for there was chatter now, and little bursts of laughter, and gayer spirits amongst the crew; but as he started back up the companion ladder his lips were set. Here and there amongst that score of natives a sulky,

sullen face had been lifted to his—and amongst these he had remarked that of the deck steward. And he remembered now that this steward, together with several others of the present crew, had joined the *Nepenthe* at Swabi. Also thrusting itself insidiously upon his mind he remembered Doris Carroll's account of Anne Morlan's accusations against Gaffney. According to Anne Morlan, Gaffney had been talking secretly to the deck steward—and Gaffney, too, had joined the ship at Swabi. Gaffney hadn't been fomenting trouble among the crew, had he? It was preposterous. A white man! Why should he? Anne Morlan had answered that question. She had said that Gaffney was up to some game—that he knew too much about Mr. Morlan and the *Nepenthe* itself. It was still preposterous. Any such act on Gaffney's part would be sheer piracy. There was nothing unusual about the fact that the steward in question had joined up at Swabi. Nearly every port saw changes in the personnel of the crew—the native temperament. It was one of Tanu's crosses. Anne Morlan had been frankly not herself, irresponsible, her brain drug-motivated. Her father had put no other construction on her outburst. Gaffney's explanation had been not only logical, but wholly credible. He had done what any man in his position would do; what he, Owen, had just attempted to do—sensing the uneasiness among the natives, Gaffney had naturally tried to quiet their fears. Anything else was unthinkable.

And yet strangely, though he was smiling now as he dropped again into the chair beside Doris Carroll, Owen's mind was not at rest.

"What was it?" she asked.

"Nothing to worry about," he said reassuringly. "Tanu came to tell me that the crew had the wind up a bit. They're a superstitious lot; but they're like a bunch of kids, too—scared out of their senses one minute, and frolicking on the moon-beams the next. I just went down"—he grinned—"fatherly fashion, you know, to tuck them back into bed, and tell them no bugaboos would get them. They're all right now."

"It was because of Kaya Dâlam, and Roach, and the purple ball, of course?"

"Yes, of course," he admitted.

"The owner, the guests, and now the crew," she said half under her breath.

"I wish I hadn't told you that," he said contritely. "I didn't mean it as an added worry. I am quite sure that, if nothing further of a dire nature happens, the crew need not be given a second thought."

“Yes, that’s just it—if nothing further happens!” Her hands were suddenly tight together in her lap. “But what is to prevent it? After what I have told you tonight you must feel just as surely as I do that there is more of this—this horror to come.”

Owen did not answer at once. His mind was racing. To indulge in sophistry would be little less than an insult to her. Doris Carroll was not that type of girl. She was frightened. But her fears were not allied with cowardice. She had abundantly made that clear tonight. She and he were not dealing with phantom fears induced by morbid imaginations. They were dealing with stark reality. God knew her fears were well founded, and he was conscious now that, to a greater extent than he had been willing perhaps to admit to himself until this moment, he shared them with her. He couldn’t laugh them away for her. He couldn’t smooth them over. She was too brave to be anything but contemptuous of any semblance of veneer, and to — —

“Well?” she prompted with a faint smile. “Are you trying to think up something comforting to say to me?”

His mind was made up.

“You dug up quite a lot of things tonight,” he said quietly.

She turned swiftly toward him.

“What do you mean?” she asked in a low, tense way.

“Just this,” he said still quietly. “That perhaps you can dig up more; that perhaps between us we can dig up the whole truth. I do not see any other way. They all, every one of them, for I couple Mrs. Stavert with her husband, seem to be mixed up in this in one way or another; and, taken in conjunction with what has already happened, I agree with you that, from what you saw and heard tonight, things certainly will not remain as they are. But, on the other hand, and I am not saying this merely as an effort to relieve your mind, I honestly do not think another murder or anything of that kind is at all imminent, for I cannot bring myself to believe that the killing of Roach was consequent upon the murder of Kaya Dâlam as there does not seem to be any connection between the two. Meanwhile, there is obviously only one thing that will definitely put an end to what you call this horror that is hanging over the ship, and that is the unearthing, whether it be of one, or more, of whoever is guilty. And who is there now but our two selves to attempt this? We may not succeed; but at least there is always the chance that we may have the luck to stumble upon the truth. There”—he was smiling again, though his voice was grave and earnest—“you see, I am hiding nothing of my own reactions from you. Shall we take on the job and pool our findings?”

"I'd do anything to stop this!" she burst out desperately. "*Anything!*"

"Good!" he applauded. "We've at worst a fighting chance, and as a starter I'll contribute something new in my turn to our common fund of knowledge. I had not meant to tell you this, but our alliance had not then been formed, of course. It's about the one man you didn't mention tonight, our friend Count Gaspard Luvac, who left his credentials behind with the French Consul in Singapore, and — —"

"Yes," she interrupted critically; "but I understood you to say that Count Luvac stated in Mr. Morlan's presence that he had shown his credentials to Mr. Morlan."

"Quite!" acknowledged Owen evenly. "But Mr. Morlan himself now appears in an entirely new light. We know tonight that he is neither more nor less than a crook of high degree. I don't know the relationship existing between Mr. Morlan and Count Luvac, but it is now at least open to question."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. "Yes, you are right. What were you going to tell me about Count Luvac?"

"I was fibbing," he confessed, "when you asked me a little while ago why I was up so late. I wasn't making late rounds. I was in the wireless house."

"In the wireless house!" she exclaimed. "What were you doing there?"

"I had been trying to think things out a bit on my own," he explained, "and it struck me the original search that had been made in there hadn't been very thorough or exhaustive. So I went there on the chance of finding something in the way of evidence that had possibly been overlooked and which might help to clear up the fog."

"And did you find anything?" she questioned eagerly.

"Yes," he said laconically; "I found something—and also found Count Luvac hiding behind the clothes-press curtain in Roach's cabin."

She drew in her breath sharply.

"Yes; go on!" she urged. "What happened? Why was he there? What did he say?"

"He said his reason for being there was the same as mine; that he was one of those under suspicion, just as I was, and that he was entitled to protect himself in any way he could, and therefore had just as much right to search there as I had."

"And then?"

“And then”—Owen shrugged his shoulders—“we left the wireless house together and said good-night on the deck outside.”

“But I don’t understand!” she protested. “He might have found something too—something that he was trying to conceal. You are the captain, you had the authority, why didn’t you arrest him and have him searched?”

Owen smiled queerly.

“As Count Luvac took pains to point out to me, and as I have already told you myself, I also am one of the five suspects. My presence there was no less open to suspicion in the eyes of the other three than his was. Whether he found anything or not, I do not know; but, if he were searched, it was inevitable that I, too, would be searched, and I *had* found something—amongst the wreckage of the wireless set—that I wasn’t then, and am not now, prepared to have publicly exposed.”

“Am I to know what it was?” Her voice was a little unsteady.

For answer he reached into his pocket, then extended his hand—on the open palm of which lay the silver-chased hypodermic syringe.

She looked at it for a moment, her eyes widening as she sat rigidly in her chair, then she pushed his hand hastily away.

“Now I *am* afraid!” she whispered. “That’s—that’s Anne Morlan’s. I’ve seen it, or one like it, before—in her cabin here—in her rooms at home in Singapore. What does it mean? Do you think—?” Her voice faltered and broke. “Oh, I’m glad you didn’t let the others know. They mustn’t know. At least not yet—not until—until there’s more to justify—”

“That’s why I didn’t want it known,” he said simply.

She gripped his arm.

“Yes,” she reiterated unevenly, “I am really afraid now. Afraid of everything and everyone. You realize, don’t you, that the only white people on the ship that we could count on at all in an emergency are Mr. Carlin and the two engineers, Blaine and Naylor; for after what Anne Morlan said, and whether it is true or not, I do not trust Mr. Gaffney.”

He did not tell her that Carlin at that moment was in a blue funk and probably blind drunk.

“I know,” he returned inspiritingly; “but why anticipate anything of that sort? We had rather decided, hadn’t we, that there was no immediate—”

His sentence was never finished. They were both on their feet, each staring direfully into the other’s eyes. A shot, coupled with a choking cry, had rung out from the boat deck above.

CHAPTER XI

FOUR LEFT

FOR the fraction of a second, perhaps, their eyes held each other's, then Owen whirled and sprang for the companion ladder leading to the boat deck. He took the treads three at a time, and, as he reached the deck above, was subconsciously aware that Doris Carroll was following close behind him, though for the moment now Doris Carroll, in a concrete way, was obliterated from his mind.

He was still running. Aft there, just abaft the funnel, was a shadowy figure that seemed to be crouching over a prostrate form that lay huddled on the moon-flecked deck.

Came then the tongue-flame of a revolver shot stabbing viciously through the moonlight, the roar of the report that seemed to shatter the night silence like a cannon blast—and Owen was conscious of the angry whine of a bullet winging past his ear. The crouched figure had leaped to its feet, fired, and, turning, was running at top speed now for the after companionway.

Owen wrenched his revolver from his pocket as he raced in pursuit, pulled trigger, fired, and fired again at the retreating figure. It was a man, clad in pajamas—that was all he could make out. His shots did not seem to take effect—one's aim was not improved by a mad rush along the deck! The other had a start of some twenty yards, he judged. Not a great distance in the open, but the man had nearly reached the after companionway now.

Owen swept past the figure that lay huddled on the deck—a man that lay face downward, motionless. He could not tell who it was, and to stop for even an instant now was to lose all chance of running his quarry down; but, as he raced by, a narrow strip of something white that stretched out from underneath the man's body and lay along the deck caught his eye. A pajama cord probably. Of no moment, anyhow! Queer that he should even notice it! That was the killer ahead there, wasn't it? The first time he had showed in the open! Nothing mattered now other than to get the man.

He flung a glance over his shoulder. Doris Carroll was running, following, along the deck.

"See if you can do anything for him," he shouted, pointing backward to the inert form on the deck.

Whether she answered or not, he did not know. That flying figure ahead there had reached the after companionway—and now it had disappeared.

In turn he reached the companionway and half jumped, half flung himself down on the promenade deck. But here it was as though he had come upon forked roads—the sweep of the brilliantly lighted promenade deck leading forward to port and starboard—the short lower after deck below. It took him but an instant, however, to assure himself that no one was in sight either on the lighted promenade deck or on the open space of the lower after deck where the moonlight would at once have disclosed any lurking figure.

His mind was working in quick, virile flashes even as he swung himself down now to the lower after deck. The man had certainly not gone forward, at least no farther than the lounge—he would have had no time to run the length of the promenade deck. There were two things the fugitive could have done. From the lounge he could have run down the main staircase which spread out fanwise at the bottom and gave on the port and starboard alleyways that were flanked by the guests' and owner's rooms; or, since these alleyways at their after ends opened directly on the lower deck here, he could have reached either one at will by coming this way. In either case it would land the man in the cabin quarters. But that was precisely where the man was making for, wasn't it? There had been no doubt in Owen's mind on that score, he now realized, from the start. It was a question only of *which* man. And it was a hundred-to-one shot that the fellow had dropped down on the deck here, as he would thus be able to gain his cabin, not only quicker, but with far less chance of being observed than by way of the lounge.

Both alleyway doors were open for air, and from each the light streamed out on deck, for, like the promenade deck above, the alleyways were being kept ablaze throughout the night. On the starboard side were Mr. Morlan's rooms; on the port side the cabins of the other three men. A glance through the doorway showed the starboard alleyway to be empty, deserted. Owen sprang then toward the doorway on the port side, but even as he crossed the deck a sense of futility assailed him. It seemed ages gone since, sitting there on the promenade deck with Doris Carroll, he had heard that first shot, though in reality he knew that it had been little more than a matter of seconds—so short a time, in fact, that it had probably given the man who had fired the shot the very chance he was no doubt counting upon to reach his own cabin unobserved before the occupants of the other cabins had been fully or effectively aroused from their sleep.

Yes; and so it seemed to be! Owen's lips were a straight line as he stepped in through the port doorway. No one was to be seen—like the starboard alleyway this one, too, was deserted. But there was commotion

now, the sound of hurried movements from within the cabins, lights going on and showing through the fretwork over the doors.

The door nearest Owen swung open. Count Gaspard Luvac, in pajamas and struggling into a dressing-gown, appeared on the threshold.

"Ah, Captain—you!" he exclaimed—and there seemed to be a hint of challenge in his voice. "I thought I heard a shot—several shots."

Owen stared at the other levelly. At least the man did not appear to be short of breath.

"You did," he said laconically.

The door beyond opened. Mrs. Stavert, clutching at some wrap she had evidently thrown hastily around her shoulders, thrust out her head. Behind her, in pajamas, and also, like Count Luvac, in the act of donning a dressing-gown, stood her husband.

"What is it?" she cried excitedly. "What has happened? Paul woke me up. He insists he heard some shots fired."

Before Owen could answer, both Anne Morlan's and her father's voices sounded from the direction of their rooms on the starboard side. Count Gaspard Luvac and the two Staverts came crowding out into the narrow alleyway; and then, as of one accord, all moved forward to the foot of the main staircase where there was more space. Here Mr. Morlan and his daughter now appeared, both running.

"What's all this about?" puffed Mr. Morlan belligerently. "I heard shots."

Owen's eyes swept over the other swiftly. Mr. Morlan, too, was in pajamas, but had evidently considered that a dressing-gown under the circumstances was superfluous. Mr. Morlan's voice was wheezy. The voice of a man who had been running hard would be wheezy—but so, too, would be the voice of a man who had been drinking hard. Mr. Morlan had been drinking hard since dinner-time. A speculation, suggestive, flashed through Owen's mind. He had forgotten, when he had looked in along the starboard alleyway, that Doris Carroll's cabin was the end cabin, the one adjoining the lower after deck, and that it connected *through the office* with Mr. Morlan's suite. Did this mean anything? Had Mr. Morlan known that Doris Carroll was not in her cabin?

"A man has been shot on the boat deck," he announced evenly.

Anne Morlan gave a little scream.

Count Gaspard Luvac was the only one who spoke.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

The thought came to Owen with sudden disquietude that Doris Carroll should not be left alone any longer with that still figure up there on the boat deck, even though he felt intuitively that the latter was past all aid from any source—but there was something here that counted vastly too.

“I did not wait to see,” he answered stonily; “but Miss Carroll is up there with him now, and — —”

“Doris Carroll—up there!” murmured Mrs. Stavert *sotto voce*. “At this hour!”

The muscles of Owen’s face tightened, but he went on as though she had not spoken:

“We were sitting on the promenade deck. Miss Carroll was unable to sleep, she said; and I”—he glanced covertly at Count Gaspard Luvac—“had been making late rounds. We heard a shot from the deck above. I ran up to the boat deck. Miss Carroll followed me. A man was lying on the deck, and another man was bending over him. When the latter saw me he jumped to his feet, fired at me, and then turned and ran aft along the deck. I started after him and fired several shots; but, though I was not more than twenty yards away, I do not think I hit him. I lost sight of him, of course, as he went down the companion ladder to the promenade deck, but I am quite certain he came down here.”

“Down here! Ridiculous!” blustered Mr. Morlan. “What would he come down here for?”

Paul Stavert had fished his silver cigarette case from his dressing-gown pocket and was lighting a cigarette. Count Gaspard Luvac was smiling—either grimly or ironically, Owen could not make out which.

“I fancy I gather the captain’s thought,” drawled Paul Stavert. “It must be one of us, of course—one of the suspects, you know. We all live down here except the captain himself. And speaking of suspects”—he flipped an almost imperceptible ash from his cigarette with his forefinger as he looked around him—“where is Mr. Lao-ti?”

Mr. Lao-ti’s room was directly across the alleyway from the foot of the staircase. All eyes turned instinctively in that direction. Mr. Lao-ti’s door still remained closed, and there was no light showing through the fretwork above it.

Count Luvac stepped abruptly to the door, opened it, switched on the light and disappeared inside—only to return the next instant.

He shook his head.

“He’s not there,” he stated darkly.

“The boat deck!” shrilled Anne Morlan.

There was a concerted rush up the stairway—and presently in a body they reached the boat deck. A moment more and they had clustered around Doris Carroll, plying her with questions as she stood looking down at the crumpled, motionless form that lay there at her feet.

“It’s Mr. Lao-ti,” she said tonelessly. “He—he was dead when I reached him.”

Owen’s eyes searched up and down the deck. The entire ship seemed to be thoroughly aroused now. Gaffney, Blaine, and Naylor were coming along from aft, and in their wake, obviously none too steadily on his feet, Carlin followed his fellow officers. Forward, but remaining at a discreet distance, Owen also noted the sarong-garbed figure of Tanu; and from still farther forward, from the fore deck below, no longer a murmur now, he heard the voices of the native crew—and their voices sounded in his ears like the buzzing of an excited swarm of bees.

His eyes reverted to the body of Lao-ti. Curious that white, ribbon-like thing, that he could now see was nearly two inches wide, and one end of which seemed to be attached to Lao-ti’s hand while the other straggled away for a good yard or more along the deck! Count Gaspard Luvac had dropped to his knees to examine it—so too had Paul Stavert.

And then Paul Stavert spoke.

“Oh, I say, you know!” he jerked out bewilderedly. “My word! It’s adhesive tape! The jolly old mystery thickens, what?”

Carlin, standing beside Gaffney and rocking slightly on his feet, laughed unnaturally.

“It’s your turn, Gaffney,” he announced thickly. “Your turn to go ashore and listen to the damned leaves whispering to each other.”

Gaffney’s answer was a snarled oath.

Mr. Morlan seemed suddenly to acquire a belated sense of the proprieties.

“You girls go below!” he ordered with his usual peremptoriness. “This is no place for you!”

Anne Morlan laughed mockingly as she started aft along the deck. Mrs. Stavert followed her silently. But Doris Carroll hesitated.

“That means you, too, Miss Carroll!” Mr. Morlan rasped—and herded her along the deck after the others. “We’ll hear anything more you’ve got to say in the morning.”

Mr. Morlan returned and stared moodily down at the body of Mr. Lao-ti.

“I suppose he’s dead, all right,” he mumbled.

“He’s quite dead,” said Count Gaspard Luvac shortly.

Paul Stavert toyed with the tassel of his dressing-gown as he looked in turn at Owen, Mr. Morlan, and Count Luvac.

“Four left,” he said—and shrugged his shoulders. “And, I give you my word, I had put him down, you know, as the guilty man.”

Owen’s eyes shifted from his immediate surroundings and rested for an instant on the figure of Tanu at the forward end of the deck. Tanu had not moved. That ominous buzz still rose from the lower fore deck. Owen’s lips drew together. One thing was certain—there would not be another burial party ashore tonight!

“You, Blaine, and you, Naylor,” he directed quietly, “carry Mr. Lao-ti into the wireless house, will you? It’s too late to do anything else tonight.”

“Yes,” rumbled Mr. Morlan; “and then the lot of you turn in. We’ll talk it out in the morning. I’ve had plenty for one night!”

The deck cleared—save only for Owen, Mr. Morlan, and the patient, waiting figure of the serang. Mr. Morlan appeared to notice the latter for the first time.

“Who’s that?” he demanded—and then, with a growl: “Oh, I see! It’s Tanu. Hey, you, Tanu, come here! What do you want?”

“Tuan,” said Tanu gravely as he came forward, “as I have already made known to Tuan Heath, a great fear has come upon my people because of the killing of Kaya Dâlam and the killing of Tuan Roach; and now, because of that which has just come to pass, a fear even greater than before is upon them, and they will no longer listen to my voice and I have no more any authority over them, and their mouths are full of threats.”

Mr. Morlan glanced at Owen inquiringly.

“What’s this he says about having talked to you?” he grumbled.

“It’s quite true,” Owen answered—and recounted briefly Tanu’s former warning and his own effort to dispel the fears of the crew. “And,” he ended soberly, “I am afraid there will be serious trouble if we don’t look out. You can hear them now. Listen!”

Mr. Morlan listened.

“Scared, eh?” he ejaculated. “Damn fools! Well, what about it, Tanu? What do they want?”

“Tuan,” Tanu replied anxiously, “they say there is only evil here; so, therefore, the ship should go to Laolu, even as it would have gone but for the coming of Kaya Dâlam. If the Tuan will say that the ship shall go to Laolu then they will fear no more.”

For a moment Mr. Morlan stared at Tanu through narrowed eyes, then he laughed—and because Mr. Morlan had drunk much that night his laugh was boisterous.

“Why, sure!” he agreed with sudden graciousness. “Sure—if that’s all that’s wanted! All right, Tanu. You can tell them we’ll sail for Laolu at the peep of day.” He turned to Owen. “You hear, Captain Heath?”

Owen looked at the man wonderingly. What was this—a complete *volte-face*?

“Yes; I hear,” he said mechanically.

Tanu’s genuine relief was obvious—his face was wreathed in smiles.

“I am glad, Tuan,” he said happily, as he turned away, “and because of the Tuan’s words my heart is no longer heavy.”

“I want a drink,” snapped Mr. Morlan abruptly. “You’ve got a bottle in your room, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” said Owen.

He led the way to his cabin, and placed a bottle of whisky on the locker.

Mr. Morlan poured a neat half tumblerful for himself—and held it up to the light.

“I’m a bit upset over poor old Lao-ti,” he grimaced. “It’s a pleasant voyage we’re having, Captain. What do you think will be the end of it?”

Owen’s hands were deep in his pockets—clenched.

“God knows!” he said in a monotone.

“And He won’t tell,” augmented Mr. Morlan with an unpleasant grin. “Well, then, I’ll tell you something. We’re not going to Laolu. And do you know why we’re not going to Laolu?”

Owen knew one very good reason why Mr. Morlan no longer wanted to take the *Nepenthe* to Laolu.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because those damned natives would desert to a man,” snarled Mr. Morlan. “They’d leave the ship right now if there was anything to eat or drink on this island here. They’d spread their cursed ghost tales about us all over Laolu. There wouldn’t be a native come within a mile of us, and we wouldn’t be able to get a crew for love nor money. Think I haven’t cut my eye-teeth? I’m on to them, all right. Promise ’em anything to keep them quiet—that’s the game. We’ll put to sea, I’ll grant that much, but we’ll stay at sea until I get good and ready to make other plans. They’ll get over it—because they’ll damned well have to! Eh?”

“I’ve been watching them for the last few hours, and Tanu wasn’t exaggerating,” Owen stated bluntly. “Your promise will probably see us through the night all right, but I tell you frankly I don’t care to think of what will happen if we don’t make Laolu as you agreed. I think you are playing with fire.”

“You do, eh?” Mr. Morlan tossed down his half tumblerful of whisky in two huge gulps, wiped his lips inelegantly with the sleeve of his pajamas, and, lurching slightly, stepped to the door. But at the threshold he paused for an instant. “Well, you may have been born out here, my boy,” he laughed arrogantly, “but you’ve a lot to learn about the natives yet. I know their monkey tricks! To hell with them!”

CHAPTER XII

THE PURPLE BALL

FOUR bells.

Owen, standing in his cabin, glanced out through one of the forward portholes toward the fo'c'sle head. Tanu had well said that the daylight had not yet come. Furthermore, it was yet a long way off. It was incredible, after all that had transpired, that it was still only two o'clock in the morning!

His face was hard. He had not undressed. Sleep, he knew, would have been impossible even though the rest of the night seemed to give promise now that it would pass without any further untoward happening.

But the forward portholes of his cabin had their limitations at night so far as vision was concerned. He opened the door and stepped around to the narrow stretch of deck in front of his cabin that the *Nepenthe* was pleased to call its lower bridge. He had done this at intervals since Mr. Morlan had taken himself off, presumably on his way to bed. How long ago was that? He was not at all sure. Was it important?

He stared down on the fore deck. The natives were reassuringly quiet now. There was no longer that ominous hum of voices, and though some of the Malays were still huddled together in little groups, others had stretched themselves out on the deck and were apparently asleep.

He cast a critical sailor's eye around him. The breeze that had sprung up after midnight had freshened. Here and there the water was white-crested, but overhead the moonlit sky was clear. The *Nepenthe* was riding easily at anchor, her bows pointed seaward into the breeze.

He returned to his cabin and, shutting the door behind him, began to pace restlessly up and down. There was nothing to worry about on account of the weather, and nothing to worry about for the time being, apparently, so far as the crew were concerned; but any intention of turning in, however inviting his bunk might look, was as far away as ever. His mind, if relieved to some extent, was still too active, too disturbed and anxious to permit of any thought of sleep.

He had warned Mr. Morlan against playing with fire. What about tomorrow morning when, a few hours after the *Nepenthe* had put to sea, the crew discovered that they were being bilked and that there was no intention of going to Laolu? There were women aboard. There was Doris.

His hands clenched. He could arm Carlin, Naylor, and Blaine; and, undoubtedly, with their own skins at stake, Count Luvac, Paul Stavert, and even Morlan would join in—like Doris Carroll, he was not sure of Gaffney. Including himself, therefore, that made seven against twenty-odd. It was certain to result in a bloody shambles whatever the outcome might be.

Damn Morlan for the crook he unquestionably was! The man was right, of course, when he had said that the crew, probably to a man, would flee the ship at the first opportunity, spread their terror-stricken and superstitious tidings among their fellows ashore, and so leave the *Nepenthe* stranded for lack of man power—but that was the lesser evil. And, anyway, that wasn't Morlan's basic reason for refusing now to touch at Laolu. But Morlan had not been himself tonight. He had been drinking steadily for hours. Tomorrow morning, before it was too late, he might be made to see reason—and rank the risk of losing his life as of more moment than the possibility of any penalty that might be meted out to him by a retributory justice as the result of a visit to Laolu.

And if not?

He did not know. There was always one alternative. Despite Morlan's orders, he, Owen, could take the ship to Laolu. That would be mutiny. He had thought of Gaffney as a mutineer. Yes, but this would be a bloodless mutiny. He would lose his job, of course. But no one else would suffer—except perhaps Morlan himself, who might conceivably thereby eventually receive his just deserts at the hands of the law.

Well, what was he to do? The answer appeared to be obvious: wait until morning, hear what Morlan finally had to say, gauge the temper of the crew—and then govern his course of action accordingly. But that was far from being all there was to it. It did not set his mind even temporarily at rest. His chief concern now was for Doris. Suppose, to avoid bloodshed, which of course would safeguard her on that score, he was forced to take matters into his own hands and sail the yacht to Laolu, there was no question whatever but that he would be incontinently discharged, or, to put it more bluntly, thrown off the yacht immediately on arrival there. He did not want to think of her being left on the *Nepenthe* without even the protection that he might be able to afford her. He wished most heartily for her sake that she was not here now. It was none of the crew who was guilty of any one of the three murders that had been committed—good God, everything connected with the passage of time seemed incredible!—in less than the last twelve hours; and to leave her at the mercy of a ruthless killer who would still be aboard

He flung himself into his desk chair—pushed his hand wretchedly across his eyes. It all went back to the purple ball. First Kaya Dâlam, then Roach—no, that wasn't right. Roach logically did not seem to fit in with the purple ball at all.

What about Lao-ti, then? Was the purple ball at the bottom of Lao-ti's murder, or was that killing due to a private feud? It might easily be either—or even a combination of both. *In vino veritas* perhaps applied to drugs as well, and Anne Morlan had not hesitated to say that her father and Lao-ti were quite capable of having killed Kaya Dâlam. Also Morlan and Lao-ti had quarreled violently not long before Lao-ti was shot. It was certain that either Morlan, Stavert, or Count Luvac had killed Lao-ti. But which one of the three? It looked more like Morlan than any one else. Morlan had quarreled with Lao-ti; Morlan was the only one of the three who had shown any sign of being out of breath when, following his, Owen's, pursuit of the unidentified murderer, they had all emerged from their rooms below.

Owen smiled drearily. Always in fiction, a threadbare trick of the writers' trade that a long-suffering but kindly public had years since come to smile at indulgently, the finger of suspicion invariably pointed to the one who was *not* guilty. The finger pointed now to Morlan. But this wasn't fiction—it was pure, unadulterated hell! And it by no means gave Morlan a clean sheet.

What had that piece of adhesive tape to do with it? What had Lao-ti been doing with a piece of adhesive tape that was two inches wide and a yard or more in length? Not a commonplace possession to find clutched in the hands of a murdered man! Perhaps it might be worth a closer examination than Paul Stavert and Count Luvac had given it. He remembered that no one had attempted to free it from Lao-ti's hand; that Naylor had simply laid the loose end across the dead man's chest, and that it had been carried with the body into the wireless house.

He had not attached the importance to it at the time that it possibly deserved. Perhaps he was belatedly attaching too much importance to it now. But certainly it was not without significance. He was no sleuth himself. He was not even sure that adhesive tape, for instance, was a productive hunting ground for finger-prints; but whatever the police might, or might not, be able to make out of it as Exhibit A or Exhibit B, and there had never been any doubt in his mind from the beginning that the police must eventually come into the forefront of the picture, that piece of tape would be in request by the authorities. The place for it was in the ship's safe here in his cabin. He had perhaps been remiss in not having taken charge of it at once, but at the time

he had to admit frankly he had not given it a second thought. Well, it was not too late even now, was it?

But there was still another viewpoint. Tomorrow morning the four remaining suspects, of which he was one, would undoubtedly hold “court” over the murder of Lao-ti, just as the original five had done last evening after dinner following the murder of Kaya Dâlam. What were Morlan, Paul Stavert, and Count Luvac, two of whom were unquestionably innocent of Lao-ti’s death, going to say when it was discovered that the piece of adhesive tape was missing, and he informed them, as he most certainly would, that he had taken it?

His mental jaws, so to speak, were becoming clamped. Did it matter particularly what they said—or thought? After three murders, anything that offered even a chance of bringing the guilty man to book was all that counted now. His statement would simply and bluntly be that the piece of adhesive tape was in the ship’s safe—and would remain there until it was handed over to the authorities.

But he had yet to secure it and lock it away in the safe. Not a particularly pleasant task! However, it would not take long.

He rose abruptly from his chair, procured his flashlight, stepped out of the cabin and, leaving the door open behind him, walked briskly along the boat deck to the wireless house. And a moment later, for the second time that night, he was standing in Roach’s living quarters. His flashlight came into play. Naylor and Blaine had laid Lao-ti on Roach’s bunk and had decorously covered the body with a sheet.

He turned down the sheet—and for a little space of time stood there motionless while a twisted smile gathered on his lips. Then he replaced the sheet and stepped out on deck again.

The piece of adhesive tape had vanished. Someone had been there ahead of him—and hadn’t lost much time over it, either! But who? The eternal question!

He was angry with himself. He felt in a sense responsible. But to upbraid himself now was a rather futile proceeding. He simply hadn’t thought of the damned thing at the time, and now — —

He frowned suddenly as he neared his cabin and noticed for the first time that no light streamed out on the deck from an open doorway. He was under the impression that, meaning to be gone only a few minutes, he had left the door open. Perhaps not. He had not been thinking intensively about his door at that moment. Perhaps the breeze had taken a hand. In any case, it was closed now.

He reached the door, opened it—and came to a sort of stunned halt on the threshold. Doris Carroll was standing there inside.

She smiled at him bleakly.

“I have thrown conventions to the winds, you see,” she said. “I found your door open, and closed it after me. Please—please close it now. I have even drawn the porthole curtains.”

He obeyed her mechanically. Like himself, she was fully dressed; like himself, she had obviously had no thought of retiring for the night. Her lips were almost bloodless. He stepped toward her anxiously. His eyes questioned hers.

“The purple ball,” she said. “It’s under the cushion of your settee.”

CHAPTER XIII

'WARE THE WOLF!

OWEN stared at Doris Carroll for an instant as though he had not heard aright—but that one instant sufficed to sweep away all sense of incredulity. There were no hysterics here, but her figure was taut, her hands tightly clenched.

He sprang across the cabin to the settee, and flung the cushion to one side. And again he stared. There it lay—the purple ball that he had almost from the first decided in his own mind, as he had then thought logically, but now realized fatuously, had been consigned to the sea or otherwise to oblivion.

“How did you know it was here?” he demanded hoarsely, as he picked up the ball and began to examine it.

“I put it there,” she answered in a monotone.

His eyes lifted from the purple ball to search her face.

“You—you put it there?” he stammered helplessly. “When? I don’t understand. Where did you get it?”

“Lao-ti had it. The loose end of that piece of adhesive tape was wrapped around it.”

“Good God!” he ejaculated under his breath. “But I still do not understand. Go on!”

“I wanted to tell you. I wanted to get a chance to speak to you when we were all up here on deck, but I did not get a chance. Mr. Morlan, as you know, sent Anne Morlan, Mrs. Stavert, and myself incontinently below. I—I’ve been sitting up in my room, waiting until everyone had gone to bed, and, not only that, but waiting until I hoped they were all asleep, and it would be safe to come up here and wake you—I did not know that you, too, were still up.”

“Yes?” He realized that he was speaking brusquely—he did not mean to be brusque. “But the ball—that tape—Lao-ti?”

“Listen! After that shot when we ran up to the boat deck”—she was speaking with almost frantic haste but obviously making an effort to keep her voice in control—“I ran to the man who was lying on the deck, as you called out to me to do. It was Lao-ti, as we all know now. I saw at once that he was dead. And then I saw the purple ball. It was lying on the deck and was attached to the loose end of the adhesive tape a yard away from Lao-ti,

whose hand still clasped the other end. The man who had shot Lao-ti had certainly not known that we, or anyone else, were on the promenade deck. I suppose it was no more than a matter of a few seconds after the shot, wasn't it, before you reached the boat deck?"

"Yes." Owen smiled without mirth. "I see what you mean. Sticky stuff, adhesive tape! He hadn't time to free the ball. But why the adhesive tape, anyway?"

Doris Carroll shook her head.

"I don't know," she said.

"No; of course, you don't," he agreed quickly. "Neither do I. I was only thinking aloud. Tell me the rest."

"The whole thing was horrible—Lao-ti lying there dead—the purple ball that was the cause of it all lying there too," she said with a little shudder. "I could not do anything for Lao-ti; but the thought rushed through my mind that the only way to prevent any more murders was to break the hideous spell that the purple ball seemed to be exerting over all these people by putting it somewhere beyond their reach, and so end their crazed efforts to annihilate each other in their attempts to obtain possession of it. My first impulse was to throw it overboard. And then I thought, not only that it must be of great value, but that it should be handed over to the police at the first opportunity."

She paused—leaned closer to look at the purple ball in Owen's hand for a moment, and then drew back again.

"It takes so much longer to tell it!" she exclaimed. "All this had passed through my mind before you had scarcely left the deck. You remember that the door of your cabin was open. The light streamed out across the deck. It was not very far away. I had no time to lose, and that light seemed to be there for the express purpose of deciding for me on the instant where to hide the ball. No one under the circumstances, and for the time being at least, would think of searching your cabin again for it. I detached the end of the adhesive tape that was wound several times around the ball, ran with the ball to your cabin, slipped it under the cushion there, and was back beside Lao-ti again before anyone had appeared on deck. It was imperative, of course, that you should know what I had done, that you should know where the ball was; but, as I said before, I had no chance to tell you until now. And now, of course"—apprehension and anxiety had crept into her voice, though she was smiling bravely—"we've got to decide just what is the best and safest thing to do with it. What do you think?"

Owen did not answer at once. Instead, he groaned inwardly. There was cause for apprehension—more even than she seemed to have realized. She had acted on the spur of the moment, done a very natural thing; but, in so doing, had placed herself in a position of utmost peril. The man who had shot Lao-ti had known, when he was forced to run from his victim, that the purple ball was still attached to the adhesive tape; had known that the ball was no longer there when everybody had raced on deck and gathered around Lao-ti—and that Doris had been alone for some little time with the dead man. She had not proclaimed the fact that she had even seen, much less that she had taken, the purple ball. Her silence itself had told the story only too eloquently to the murderer as he had stood there on the boat deck, himself certainly one of the group that surrounded the body of Lao-ti. The slayer had not hesitated to murder at least once; he would not hesitate to murder again—for the purple ball. She had not only taken it, she was hiding it. Far from good!

Owen's mind raced on. Her actions had been prompted by the best of motives, and with no thought or consideration for herself. But she was in danger now. The essential thing was to remove from the killer's mind in a very positive way the belief that the purple ball was now in her personal possession. But how? It was up to him, Owen! Well, there *was* a way, wasn't there? He could issue a general defy; state publicly that the purple ball had been placed in the ship's safe (where he had meant to store away that piece of adhesive tape—a mental digression that was somewhat acid!) and that anyone, except the authorities, who attempted to get at it here would do so at his own risk. A little complication, though: Mr. Morlan, and probably Anne Morlan, could open the safe. But the finger again! They would hardly dare to do so under the circumstances. Anyway, it would unquestionably safeguard Doris, which was the prime consideration now, and for the moment this seemed to be the one way out. Yes; that was what he would do! But there was no need to tell her why, to alarm her unnecessarily.

He was balancing the purple ball in his hand. And now he evaded a direct answer to her question.

"Let's have a real look at the thing," he suggested, "before we come to any decision as to what we will do with it."

She nodded agreement, leaning closer to inspect the ball as Owen turned it over and over in his hands.

As Kaya Dâlam had said, it was about the size of a small orange—perhaps a trifle larger. It was made of metal, and had once been exquisitely enameled—a deep, rich purple in color—but the enamel was hacked and chipped and scratched now in a score of places, exposing the metal beneath.

"It's not exactly a ball, you see," observed Owen; "for a sphere has neither top nor bottom, while this has a flat base—so that it will stand by itself, of course. And look at the top—what do you make of that?"

"It looks as though it might once have been a very tiny keyhole," she said.

"Yes," he agreed. "And it's been gouged a bit in an attempt to force it. Here"—he placed the ball in her hand—"it's quite heavy, isn't it? Now, shake it."

"There's something inside," she declared. "It doesn't rattle or make any noise, but you can feel it moving around."

Owen nodded.

"I'm beginning to see a little daylight," he announced tersely.

"You mean that you think you know what's in here?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Oh, no," he said; "not that! I haven't the faintest!" He took the ball from her hand and set it on his desk. "It stands quite securely on its base, you see—nothing wabby about it."

"Yes; but what did you mean by what you just said?" she persisted.

"Well," he answered, "I meant that I can see now why the kernel was never dug out and the ball itself destroyed; why Gray and that pleasant crowd of his had to carry it around with them; why Kaya Dâlam was in the same box, as was likewise the man who murdered Kaya Dâlam and had to bring the ball in its entirety aboard here. No one of them could open it, that's all. The thing is a veritable, if miniature, safe; and I'm prepared to say that it is made of the toughest kind of steel. You can see where it has been attacked by hammers and chisels and whatnot and the only result has been a lot of little dints and scratches, except, of course, that the enamel has suffered pretty badly. It's rather evident that, without the key, it's a machine-shop job to open it—and I'm not sure that the key would be any more good now, anyhow."

"Oh, I see!" she exclaimed quickly. "Then what matters most now is who is at the bottom of this so far as the *Nepenthe* is concerned, isn't it? Lao-ti had the ball when he was shot. Do you think that he—?" She hesitated, as though reluctant to voice all that was in her mind.

"Killed Kaya Dâlam?" Owen supplied evenly. "It looks like it. But if Lao-ti brought the ball aboard with him, it is certain that someone else knew he had it."

There was silence between them for a moment—and then she spoke in a whisper.

“Don’t pay any apparent attention to what I am saying,” she cautioned tensely. “There is someone outside there in front of the cabin. I saw one of the curtains move.”

Still pretending to study the purple ball that was resting on his desk, his back turned to the forward portholes, Owen did not move.

“You drew the curtains,” he said in an undertone; “but the portholes are open. It was the breeze.”

“It was not the breeze.” She spoke so low that he could scarcely hear her. “There is someone out there—listening—watching. I distinctly saw one edge of the curtains at the center porthole pushed aside.”

“Well, it’s beyond me,” said Owen casually in an ordinary voice. “A bit thick, I’d call it, this purple ball! I can’t see what all the row’s about.”

He shrugged his shoulders, and, with his hands thrust into his trousers’ pockets, paced the length of the cabin once—and then, reaching the door, he flung it open, sprang out on the deck and leaped around the forward end of the cabin.

The flare of a revolver shot greeted him, and behind the flare he saw a white, uniformed figure—and the moon shone on a sneering working face. It was Gaffney’s face.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WOLF BITES

FOR the second time that night a shot fired at Owen had missed its mark—this time, despite the close quarters, since he had taken Gaffney utterly by surprise.

His leap around the forward end of the cabin had hurled him into almost instant physical contact with the other—while at the same time he had driven his fist with all his strength to land on Gaffney's chin. And now he heard Gaffney grunt under the blow; he heard Gaffney's revolver clatter to the deck—then Gaffney's arms were wrapped around him, like a steel vise.

This way and that they swayed and staggered in each other's embrace. The man was powerfully built, a big man, wiry, strong.

A fury was upon Owen—not a blind fury—a cold, merciless urge to kill. His brain was quite cool, quite judicial. That shot—Gaffney had meant murder; but the man's callous attempt on his, Owen's, life was not what mattered most. What really mattered was that Anne Morlan, after all, had been right. Gaffney was aboard here for no good purpose . . . the native crew amuck with Gaffney at their head . . . that steward . . . the women . . . Doris. . . .

A torrent of obscene profanity gurgled from Gaffney's lips.

No word came from Owen—it was a waste of precious breath. He wrenched his right arm loose and drove again, twice in quick succession, at the other's face.

They rolled to the deck. Gaffney was slavering now—or was it blood as a result of the blows that had gone home?—in any case, Owen could feel that the other's cheek, pressed close against his own, was repulsively wet and slithery.

Queer sounds coming from that fore deck below there now!

They rolled over and over. Gaffney was fighting like a mad animal now, snarling between each hot, quick-drawn breath. One hand came free, and, clawing at Owen's throat, closed in a throat hold.

Owen fought desperately to break the hold. The man was choking him. It was like an iron hand closing tighter and tighter that could not be dislodged. Gaffney was uppermost now—but now, too, one of Owen's hands was free again, and he jabbed upward, smashing in under Gaffney's chin. He heard

Gaffney's teeth click together and the other yell out in pain as though from a bitten tongue—and the grip on his throat fell away.

And then once more their arms were hugged viciously around one another, and again they tumbled savagely about the deck. It was not a man, but a brute, Owen knew, that he was matched against. The other was using his teeth now. If he could trick Gaffney into breaking loose! A chance to use his fists! To batter the man into insensibility! This was Gaffney's mode of fighting—not his!

They rolled again, this time with Owen uppermost—and then suddenly Owen was conscious of a sense of falling as though through space. Came then almost the next instant the crash of their bodies meeting substance again, and, as a blaze of light flared in Owen's eyes, he realized that they were pitching, now sideways, now headlong, down the companion ladder toward the promenade deck.

They bumped from tread to tread, gaining momentum as they went, and Owen sensed, rather than saw, Gaffney's head strike one of the guardrail stanchions, which he himself evaded by no more than the fraction of an inch. They were torn apart. They struck the bottom.

Bruised and shaken, Owen rose to his feet. Gaffney lay there on the deck two yards away. From below on the fore deck there rose and fell now the voices of the native crew in ugly cadence; and, in the moonlight, Owen could see their forms milling ominously around the foot of the companion ladders. They needed only leadership and the fuse would be alight. They were waiting for Gaffney.

Owen's face was set, his lips slightly parted over his clenched teeth, as his eyes reverted to the prostrate form of the second officer. Gaffney had not only meant murder, Gaffney was responsible for what was going on below there now—well, Gaffney would be shown no mercy—Gaffney would be made to serve as a wholesome example for the benefit of the crew, even if the man had to be dragged to his feet and smashed into a broken thing. That blow on the head had momentarily stunned the other, but Gaffney was coming to, now, twisting about a little on the deck.

"Get up, you dog!" Owen flung out hoarsely.

Gaffney raised his head. He was not a goodly sight. His hair straggled into his eyes, and his face was covered with blood. His lips worked, framing muttered, almost soundless oaths.

"Get up!" Owen repeated.

He took a step toward the other—and jerked himself to a sudden, startled halt. From the boat deck overhead, from the direction of his cabin, rising

high above the chorused clatter of the Malays' voices, there came a woman's piercing scream.

Doris!

And in that moment Gaffney, the crew, and all else were forgotten; though, as he whirled now, and sprang for the companion ladder, and leaped upward, Owen was aware in a queer, extraneous sort of way that Gaffney had risen to his feet and was staggering toward the fore deck ladder and the crew.

Owen gained the boat deck. There was no glimmer from the forward curtained portholes. He raced along the short stretch of the lower bridge and around the corner of his cabin to the door. The door was wide open. It was black inside.

"Doris!" he called.

There was no answer.

He reached for the switch just inside the door and flooded the cabin with light. Doris Carroll lay there inertly on the floor. With a low, bitter cry Owen dropped on his knees beside her.

"Doris!" he called again.

There was a wound on the back of her head. It was bleeding freely. The washstand rack behind him was just within reach. He snatched a towel from it to stanch the flow of blood, and raised her a little in his arms.

She stirred—opened her eyes. Her lips moved. He bent to catch the words.

"The purple ball," she whispered feebly.

He glanced at the desk. He had left it lying there when he had rushed out of the cabin. It was gone now.

She was still struggling to speak.

"I—I saw a man's hand—reach in—through the door," she said faintly, "and the light went out, and—and I screamed, and someone—rushed in—and struck me on the head. I—I don't remember—any more. Did—did he get—the purple ball?"

"Yes," Owen answered mechanically.

That was Gaffney's voice shouting at the natives on the fore deck below there, inciting them to action! He looked desperately around him. No one aft seemed to have heard the shot that Gaffney had fired, or appeared to have been aroused by the commotion amongst the native crew. He could not hold the cabin alone. There was no safety here for her. He gathered her in his arms and stood up.

And then a form blocked the doorway.

It was Tanu. The man was panting—out of breath. His jacket was torn, his sarong disarranged.

“Tuan, they come!” he gasped. “If the Tuan wills, I will fight with him.”

It was like an answer to prayer. Here was a way out!

“Good man!” Owen cried out buoyantly—and thrust Doris abruptly into the other’s arms. “You’ll fight later, Tanu. Run aft with Miss Carroll. Get her below. Warn the Tuans so that you may make a stand together. Run!”

“But you, Tuan?”

“I can still hear them on the fore deck.” Owen was biting off his words. “They haven’t started to swarm up yet. I fancy I can hold them for the few minutes you’ll need. Run!”

“Tuan,” Tanu protested, “it is your death—for Tuan Gaffney leads them.”

“Nonsense!” Owen rasped out savagely. “In God’s name, Tanu, will you run! Else it will be too late!”

“Yes, Tuan. I go,” Tanu answered heavily—and, turning, disappeared through the doorway with Doris in his arms.

“Owen! Oh, Owen!”

He had followed Tanu out on deck. Her voice, low as it was, reached him in a poignant little cry. He had no time to answer. Tanu was speeding aft along the boat deck making for the after companion ladder, even as he, Owen, leaped now to the rail of the lower bridge. She had called him Owen spontaneously—as spontaneously as, he suddenly realized with quickened pulse, he had called her Doris for the first time. That wound in her head—pray God it wasn’t serious! Pray God she would come through what was brewing now unharmed!

He peered over the rail. The natives were all clustered around the foot of the starboard ladder leading up to the promenade deck. They had not divided forces. He was thankful for that. It made the diversion he was attempting to create more effective if they were all massed in one spot—would prolong the rush aft through the ship a bit.

As a second passed these thoughts whirled through his mind. He could not hold back the rush for long. He knew that. Just the few minutes that would give Tanu time to get below, the time necessary for Morlan and the others to arm themselves and protect the women. And then, if he could, he would fight his own way out of the ruck and join the others. Nothing heroic in what he was doing. It was the only chance there was.

He saw Gaffney's white uniform jacket down there amongst the natives; saw Gaffney's arms going like flails in gesticulation; heard Gaffney's voice bawling orders in the native tongue—and then he sprang for the ladder leading to the promenade deck. They were beginning to swarm up the starboard fore deck ladder now.

He thrust his hand into his pocket for his revolver as he ran—and dismay that was like an icy hand clutching at his heart fell upon him. The revolver was gone. An inner voice told him it had fallen out of his pocket in his fight with Gaffney.

He met the rush at the head of the fore deck ladder with naked fists. The Malays were yelling, screaming now. But they could only come up two abreast. They struck at him with knives. He saw, in a blurred way, faces—distorted faces. His arms swung in and out like steel pistons. He carried the fight forward. Two natives went down under his hammer blows, staggering back against those who packed the ladder behind them. No one of them yet had gained the deck and the minutes that he was fighting for were slipping away. How many? Perhaps two or three. Not enough. He was feeling groggy. That knife lunge just missed his side. His fist answered the challenge. The man went down.

And then from somewhere he heard a laugh—a raucous sound. That was Gaffney laughing, though he could not see where Gaffney was. Then out from amongst the heads of the Malays clustered on the ladder there came a shot. There was an instant of consciousness in which he felt himself whirling like a spent top—then a multitude of feet trod upon him—then blackness.

After what length of time he had no means of knowing, save that it was not yet daylight, he opened his eyes. He still lay on the deck near the head of the ladder. Above him he could just glimpse the open door of his lighted cabin. Forms seemed to be moving around inside—looting probably. The promenade deck was empty. Elsewhere than on the boat deck the ship seemed deserted. Strange!

Where was Doris? Where had Tanu taken her? Was she safe? Where were the others? What had happened?

He rose to his feet with difficulty. His clothes were in ribbons. There was intense pain across his left temple. It burned and throbbed—as if it had been seared with a red-hot iron. Yes, he knew. Gaffney's bullet had mercifully no more than grazed the skin, stunning him almost instantly.

Half dazed, he staggered aft along the promenade deck. There was no one in the lounge. He made his way unsteadily down the main staircase, and

turned to go along the starboard alleyway because Doris's room was there; but, as he turned, he came to a sudden stop.

He brushed his hand heavily across his eyes as though to clear his vision. The door of Morlan's sitting room was open, and Gaffney stood there in the doorway. There was a leer on Gaffney's battered face.

"By God," Gaffney snarled through closed teeth, "I thought you were dead!"

CHAPTER XV

FACED CARDS

GAFFNEY held a revolver in his hand. He toyed with it for a moment in a sort of ugly, speculative way.

"Yes," he said with a sudden oath, "I thought I'd nailed you for keeps up there on the deck, and the only reason I'm not finishing the job now is because that damned girl of yours, that you're so fond of, don't look as though she was ever going to do much talking again."

Owen rocked a little on his feet. He felt miserably weak. Perhaps it was because he was still too dazed to understand, but the man seemed to be talking in riddles.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"You don't, eh?" Gaffney sneered. "Well, then, I'll tell you. I saw you two with that purple ball in your cabin. When I shot you on the fore deck ladder I didn't know she had been put out of business. When I got up to your cabin she was gone and so was the ball. She can't talk now—but you can. It's a side issue with me, but I fancy that ball's worth having, and I want it. Get the idea?" Owen closed his eyes for an instant. He was dizzy. He did not know where the ball was. He did not know who had struck Doris down and taken it. What was torturing his mind now was the fact, from what Gaffney had said, that Doris was dangerously hurt.

"I don't know anything about it," he said. "Where's Miss Carroll?"

"Bad memory, eh?" Gaffney's bruised lips parted in a twisted smile. "Well, we'll freshen it up a bit presently. Never mind about your lady-love. It's the ball I'm talking about. You know a lot about it, and what you know you're going to tell before I'm through with you."

He stepped abruptly out into the alleyway and, prodding with his revolver muzzle, pushed Owen violently through the sitting-room doorway.

"I was going to hold a little séance in here, anyway," Gaffney went on with a coarse laugh. "One or two little things to clear up—and I'll make a clean sweep of it and attend to you at the same time. I've sent for that swine Morlan and his gentle offspring, the lovely Anne."

"Where's Miss Carroll?" Owen burst out frantically.

Gaffney shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say—yet," he replied offensively. "Perhaps that will help to loosen your tongue later on. But I don't mind telling you that what's left of

the rest of them are safely stowed away and neatly trussed up in the dining saloon.”

Owen’s mind was clearing rapidly.

“What do you mean—the rest of them?” he flung out anxiously.

Again Gaffney shrugged his shoulders.

“There’s a job or two for Carlin,” he grinned unpleasantly. “Maybe there’ll be more yet! Too bad you lost your revolver, wasn’t it? So did I. But I had some extra ones when I came aboard at Swabi. Don’t move or this one might go off. Here comes the owner. Look like you were feeling happy. He’ll need a lot of bucking up.”

Owen turned his head. Morlan and his daughter, their hands tied behind their backs, were being herded none too gently into the room by the native steward who had joined the *Nepenthe* at Swabi. Anne Morlan’s eyes were devoid of pupils, there was a set smile on her lips, and her cheeks were bright with an unnatural color. Morlan had obviously been badly mauled. His clothes were in disarray, there was blood upon his face—but there was a look of flaming fury there, too. His heavy jaws were savagely clenched. The drink, it was quite apparent, had gone out of him.

Gaffney for the moment paid no attention to them. A heavy portière, drawn to one side and held in place by a thick silken cord, hung before the door leading into Morlan’s bedroom. Gaffney pointed to the cord with his free hand while he still covered Owen with his revolver, and spoke abruptly in the native tongue to the steward; then, curtly, to Owen.

“Put your hands behind your back!” he ordered.

Owen obeyed. What choice had he but to submit? The Malay lashed his wrists securely together with the cord.

Gaffney grinned approval and dismissed the man. The door closed.

With a wave of his hand, Gaffney indicated near-by chairs.

“Please sit down,” he invited with mock graciousness. “You might as well be comfortable. There are a few little matters to discuss.”

“Yes,” Anne Morlan shrilled out suddenly; “I heard about them at Swabi in Hula’s dive. My father is thoroughly convinced of that now.”

“By God, Gaffney,” Morlan gritted as he slumped into a chair, “you’ll swing for this!”

“If I do,” retorted Gaffney with a sinister smile, “I promise you now that you won’t get any pleasure out of seeing the job done—for you won’t be there!”

Owen had taken a chair beside and slightly to the rear of Morlan; Anne Morlan sat on his other side—she seemed deliberately to have chosen a seat that would place him between her father and herself as though to evidence the fact that even here her bitter hate admitted of no truce.

Owen's eyes held now on Gaffney. The center of the room was occupied by a massive, flat-topped rosewood desk that matched the paneling of the walls. Gaffney swung himself to a seat on the edge of the desk facing his three prisoners, laid down his revolver—and helped himself to a choice cigar from a box that lay there at hand. He bit off the end, spat it out on the floor, and lighted the cigar.

“We'll get down to business,” he said evenly. “The natives have still got the wind up on account of their silly superstitions, but you'll notice I'm maintaining discipline. They're mostly Mohammedans, but they're not so damned religious that they turn their noses up at a spot of booze. See? That's what's keeping them quiet for a bit, but they want to get off this ship and they'll run amuck again if they're kept waiting too long. They're going to get off all right! I'll see to that! I don't want but a few of them any more. I'm going to get under way in half an hour—but first I've got to know what I'm going to do with *you*.”

“It was you who stirred them up,” Anne Morlan cried out furiously. “You who worked on their superstitions, you who— —”

Gaffney cut her short with a snarl—any air of complacency that he had so far assumed seemed suddenly to have vanished.

“That's enough of that!” he whipped out savagely. “You'll get plenty of chance to talk out of the other side of your mouth in a minute—if your father won't. That's what I brought you here for. One of you is going to come across. What I want to know from you two is where the stuff is hidden on board here; and *Captain* Heath is going to tell me a lot that he knows about a purple ball. But we'll start with what interests me most. Now, then, Morlan, where have you got your ‘snow’ tucked away?”

Owen's eyes switched to Morlan. What was it Doris had said about there being something strange and mysterious connected with even the *Nepenthe* itself? Mr. Morlan's face was blank; but Mr. Morlan's hands behind his back, hidden from Gaffney, had on the instant begun to twist and wrench at the cord that bound them together.

“Have you gone completely mad?” Morlan inquired caustically. “I haven't the least idea what you are talking about.”

Gaffney leaned forward menacingly from the edge of the desk.

"That's the kind of talk that's going to cost you your skins," he threatened. "Likewise your game's up, Morlan—unless you stand in with me. I'm giving you that chance."

Morlan's wrists were fretting together this way and that behind his back.

"I've told you once," he said stormily, "that I don't know what you are talking about."

Gaffney laughed—not pleasantly.

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" he rasped. "Think you're calling a bluff, eh? Well, it isn't any bluff. I'm willing to lay my cards on the table—if that will start your tongue swinging and save time."

"I'd like to see them," Morlan shot back with well-simulated contempt.

"All right"—Gaffney's voice held a jeering note—"did you ever hear of a man named Helmholtz who's got enough degrees after his name to use up half the alphabet?"

"Yes," replied Morlan coolly; "he's a retired chemist, I believe—lives at Swabi. I've met him there several times."

"You don't say!" mocked Gaffney. "Well, you're right on all counts. He's retired, all right; very much retired—so's to keep out of the police limelight. Also, he's a chemist, and a damned clever one, or else *you* wouldn't have picked him—besides which, or else you wouldn't have picked him either, he's almost as big a crook as you are."

"My father a crook! Oh, surely not!" Anne Morlan flung back her head and burst into a peal of neurotic laughter.

Gaffney stared at her through narrowed eyes.

"Damn you, you're steamed to the gills!" he snarled. "Keep quiet, will you?"

Morlan flung a baneful glance at his daughter as his jaws crunched together—then he eyed Gaffney steadily again.

"You were going to tell me something about a chemist named Helmholtz, I believe?" he suggested in a hard voice.

"Yes," said Gaffney, "and about another of your gang too—Wylie, your general agent at Swabi, who recommended me for the job aboard here."

"Wylie must have been sadly mistaken in you!" observed Morlan tartly.

"You said it!" Gaffney chuckled evilly. "He was. I played him up until I was the one and only fair-haired boy in town. He didn't let you down—not knowingly. Listen! I want to get on with this. One night just after I went to Swabi I was out on the wharf there. Being a stranger, I'd been roaming around kind of getting the lay of things. You understand? A boat with two

men in it came in. There was a full moon and I could see their faces. I didn't know who they were then, but it didn't take me long to find out afterwards. They were Wylie and Helmholtz. They didn't see me because I was hidden by the shadows of the copra shed. I didn't hear much of what they said, but I heard enough so's to get my ears pricked up—and they've been pricked up ever since. After that night I watched them for a year, Morlan. I trailed them; I listened in on a lot of their secret confabs; and all the time I was making myself a good fellow with Wylie so that he had no suspicion I had anything up my sleeve. A year, Morlan! Did you hear what I said—a whole year? Does that mean anything to you?"

Morlan's lips were tight. He said nothing.

Gaffney sneered.

"Don't want to open up, do you?" he giped. "Well, you don't have to. I'll do it for you. I'll tell you what I found out in that year. I found out that you and the late lamented Lao-ti were the big shots of an international dope ring, and I found out how you worked your game. I've got to hand it to you. It was slick, all right—and safe. You've got a 'cookery' hidden away somewhere down here on a supposedly uninhabited island. I don't know where, because I was never able to follow Helmholtz when he went away in that big seagoing launch of his and was gone sometimes for weeks at a stretch. But I know what he was doing. He was 'cooking' the opium that Lao-ti's junks brought him; making morphine out of it, and then making heroin out of part of the morphine, because you wanted to carry a full line of goods, and heroin is what the worst of the pimps and sluts and perverts prefer to feed on—like your sweet daughter here."

Anne Morlan's face was livid. She stamped insanely with both feet on the floor.

"I'd kill you for that, if I could—kill you—kill you—kill you!" she screamed out in fury.

Gaffney shook his head sorrowfully—while he grinned.

"Yes, that's heroin, all right," he pronounced judicially. "Too bad you didn't go in for morphine, my dear, and drift your life gently away amongst the dream clouds! That's the difference between morphine and heroin, so I overheard that distinguished scientist, Helmholtz, say one day. Morphine addicts are rarely violent; heroin drives you crazy—like the way you are now."

She swore at him in abandon.

"Shut up!" snapped Gaffney; and, as she subsided sullenly, turned again to her father. "Well, Morlan," he demanded sharply, "how do you think

things are sizing up?"

Again Morlan made no reply. His hands still worked craftily behind his back—and it seemed to Owen that the lashings had become somewhat looser. Owen had strained at his own wrists; he strained at them again now; but in his case at least the work had been only too thoroughly done. He could not budge them.

"All right!" Gaffney rapped out. "You'll get over your lockjaw by the time I'm through, I fancy! Here's the rest of your little game. Helmholtz took another trusty of yours—Mayhew—you know Mayhew, don't you?—along with him on those trips, so I figure it was a good long way from Swabi, too far to go alone. But that doesn't matter. Helmholtz would bring back some of the stuff every trip to Swabi, where Wylie stowed it away waiting for you to come along; and some was sent to Laolu where Mallinson—you know Mallinson, too, don't you?—did the same. Easier and safer for Wylie and Mallinson to hide it, and easier to smuggle it aboard the *Nepenthe*, if there wasn't too much in one place. I don't know what sort of a ferry you run between Laolu and the 'cookery'—but that doesn't matter either. The rest of the finished stuff—most of it, I'd say—was sent to somewhere over on the Chinese coast by one of Lao-ti's junks that had originally brought in the opium."

Gaffney paused and blew a cloud of cigar smoke insolently in Morlan's direction.

"Pretty tricky—what?" he went on. "Three or four days, or maybe more, at Swabi and Laolu, going ashore with ordinary handbags so's you'd have a change of clothes in the heat of the day up at the plantation! Who was to guess there was anything in the bags that there shouldn't have been every time you went back on board with them? To say nothing of what, for instance, Wylie and Helmholtz and Mayhew brought off with them at Swabi in their visits to the yacht! How many thousand pounds' worth of morphine or heroin would a single suitcase hold? And that ain't all. Who'd guess it went ashore again in much the same way at swell watering-places all over America and Europe? Who'd guess that the well-known millionaire, Mr. Henry K. Morlan, had 'snow' worth a couple of hundred thousand pounds or more hidden aboard his beautiful yacht, and that amongst those he entertained on board were the local dope barons who, figuratively speaking, went ashore with their pockets full of the stuff; or, from whom, if his own supply ran short before the overseas pleasure cruise was ended, he took orders that would be filled by Mr. Lao-ti and delivered by the usual underground route? And out here who'd guess that the profit-making plantations of the great Singapore company camouflaged anything?"

“What do you want? What do you want?” Anne Morlan shrieked suddenly in an unstrung way. “Why don’t you say what you want?”

Gaffney shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other with his tongue.

“Sweetheart,” he purred, “I’ve only been trying to show your beloved father that his millions vanish and the prison gates yawn before him unless he stands in with me—and, from that white look on his face, I’d say I’d shown him plenty. Yes, I’ll tell you what I want.” He turned to Morlan again. “I’d only got fully to the bottom of this a little while before you were due this voyage in Swabi. Understand? I thought I’d wait and make sure you were taking ‘cargo’ aboard this trip; and then, because I had a hunch it wouldn’t be safe for me to pull it at Swabi, I was going to Singapore so’s to be there when you got back from the cruise, and put a sort of little partnership proposal up to you— —”

“Blackmail, you mean!” Morlan, speaking for the first time, spat out his words.

“Ah!” exclaimed Gaffney blandly. “So you’ve found your tongue at last, have you? Well, call it anything you like. We won’t quarrel about that. But, anyway, I got a break when you put in at Swabi with the skipper sick and a berth open. Getting a chance to sail on the *Nepenthe*, and getting wise maybe to where the stuff was hidden, looked pretty good to me. It might help to make you a little more generous when we came to signing that partnership agreement! See?”

Owen’s eyes drifted to Morlan’s hands. Given time enough the man would certainly free himself. And then—what? Morlan at bay, and whatever else he might be, was potentially an ugly customer. Owen strained again at his own lashings—uselessly.

“Yes, I see”—Morlan was becoming suddenly loquacious—“but, I take it, you didn’t find the stuff.”

“No,” Gaffney admitted with a significant shrug. “I haven’t found it—yet. Wylie got me the berth and very kindly, at my suggestion, shipped the two or three natives there was room for, who’d been palling along with me for the last year. We’ve pretty well combed the *Nepenthe* since we left Swabi; but, as I say, we haven’t found the stuff yet. But now *you’re* going to tell me where it is. This little uprising of the crew on account of their going nuts, which I couldn’t stop though I tried my best, over the murders occasioned by a certain purple ball popping into the picture has changed my plans a lot.”

“You meant trouble from the start, you dirty skate!” Anne Morlan screeched out deliriously.

“Calm yourself, vampire!” cautioned Gaffney with a smirk. “Whether I did or not, I’m running the show now—and from now on. What I want is the stuff, and your father is going to tell me where it is. I know it’s on board. Come across, Morlan.”

“And if I don’t,” Morlan challenged, “what then?”

“I’d get it anyway,” Gaffney answered roughly, “if I had to tear the ship to pieces for it. But that would be a lot of trouble. It’s going to pay you to save me that trouble, that’s all.”

“That’s a threat”—Owen could see that Morlan now was deliberately stalling for time while he worked at his wrists—“I’d like to know exactly what it means.”

“Fair enough! I’ll tell you. I’m going to keep Naylor and Blaine to run the engines—because that’s what they’re going to do whether they like it or not. If they behave themselves nothing will happen to them in the long run. The rest of you, providing you come across, I’m going to land on some cosy little uninhabited island with plenty to eat and drink, but where your shouts won’t be heard until I’ve had a chance to get the ‘cargo’ out of the ship and fade away with it. After that, for of course I can’t go barging all over the lot visiting watering-resorts with the *Nepenthe*, the news will leak out as to where you are and where the yacht is to be found, and you’ll all be rescued and the *Nepenthe* will be restored to you.”

“And after that,” amplified Morlan levelly, “I’ll be blackmailed and bled white for the rest of my life.”

“Why talk about that?” complained Gaffney ironically. “The ‘snow’ that’s aboard here at this moment is worth at least fifty thousand pounds—and that’s good enough for a starter.”

“And what about the crew—who won’t stay on the yacht?” persisted Morlan. “You’ve got a little problem on your hands there, haven’t you?”

“Don’t let my problems worry you,” begged Gaffney with grim solicitude. “There’s a few of them that know which side their bread is buttered on and these, together with my own chaps, are enough to work the ship until I can pick up more natives somewhere if I need them. As for the rest, those that have the wind up for fair and want to go ashore will go ashore with you—when I’ve found that little haven I was speaking about. I can keep them happy with hooch plus the knives of my faithful followers for the day or so it will take me to do that. Any more questions, *Mister* Morlan, before you open up about that hiding place?”

“Yes,” Morlan flung back tersely. “One. You haven’t told me yet what will happen if I refuse.”

“Right you are!” acknowledged Gaffney with sardonic geniality. “I had almost forgotten that. Glad you mentioned it. Well, you’ll all go ashore just the same—only you’ll go without any food and where there isn’t any water. Right here, for instance. I can’t think of any more suitable place. I believe our charming Anne there has named it Evil Island, hasn’t she?”

Owen’s eyes kept traveling now from Morlan to Gaffney. His heart thumped premonitorily. Impotent himself, he could only sit here and watch. The last strand on Morlan’s wrists was almost slack.

“You mean”—Morlan’s voice was hoarse, uneven—“that it’s a question of all our lives? That if I come through, we live; that if I don’t, we die just as certainly as though you lined us all up and committed a wholesale massacre?”

“Or something like that,” agreed Gaffney with a leer.

“Mrs. Stavert is dead,” stated Morlan in a flat voice, and with what seemed almost irrelevancy. “Murdered.”

Owen drew in his breath. Mrs. Stavert dead! He had not known that. He knew nothing of what had happened since he had dropped to the deck unconscious at the head of the fore deck ladder. Morlan’s hands were still behind his back—but they were free now.

“Too bad!” mourned Gaffney callously. “But I can’t bring her back to life again. The point is, unless you decide to make a damned fool of yourself, that all you’re up against is a little camping inconvenience; after which you can all live happily until such time as the Almighty sees fit, in the natural course of events, to gather you finally into the fold as members of the great majority. Nicely put—what?”

Morlan’s face was suddenly black with fury.

“You lie, Gaffney!” he shouted fiercely. “You don’t mean to give any of us a chance for our lives—and you know it. You’ve gone too far for that. You’ve led a mutiny, and murder has been committed—Mrs. Stavert’s murder. You’re responsible for that whether you actually killed her yourself or not. You’ll hang for it if you’re ever caught. The police would search the world for you if word of what has happened here ever got out. A chance for our lives! We’d have no more chance for our lives than”—he leaped suddenly from his chair—“by God, you’ve got now for yours!”

It seemed to Owen that it was all happening in no more time than it would take a watch to tick. If Morlan had been swift in action Gaffney had been swifter still. Gaffney’s hand snatched at the revolver that lay beside

him on the desk—and the roar of the report was deafening in the confined space.

Morlan's leap appeared to end in mid-air with a sort of horribly grotesque flop to the floor. He lay there now face downward, his arms and legs sprawled out. His body twitched convulsively for an instant or two—and then was still.

CHAPTER XVI

THE “NEPENTHE’S” SECRET

OWEN was on his feet. So, too, was Anne Morlan. She stood there staring down at the body of her father. The erstwhile hectic flush on her cheeks was replaced by a grayish pallor; but her jet-black eyes, though still devoid of pupils, were strangely luminous—like glowing coals.

There was an acrid smell in the room. It was as though one could still see the smoke curling from the muzzle of Gaffney’s revolver. Gaffney still sat on the edge of the desk, still holding his revolver, still dangling his legs.

Owen, with his hands lashed behind him, could do little, but he dropped to his knees on the floor beside the stricken man. He rose again to his feet after a moment. Morlan was unquestionably dead.

Gaffney was the first to speak.

“Well, he asked for it—and he got it!” Gaffney’s voice was callous, contemptuous—but nevertheless a bead of sweat glistened on Gaffney’s forehead. “Thought I was out of an institute for the blind, eh? Thought I didn’t see him fiddling with his hands from the time he sat down, eh? Well, he’s paid for it! I had an idea he’d try to pull something like that. He always figured that he was a jump ahead of even God Almighty! Fancy Mr. Henry K. Morlan imagining that anyone could ever outguess him!”

Anne Morlan began to laugh—horribly. Her peals rose and fell, reverberated around the room—satanically. It made Owen shiver.

“Oh, God, it’s funny!” she screamed out between her hysterical gusts of laughter. “Look at him now—after all the precautions he took! He made so sure of everything—and so *very certain* that the *Nepenthe*, in particular, would never rise up in evidence against him. He was always afraid of that. You see, don’t you? You see? Suppose the gendarmes at Cannes got suspicious and set their trap—or Scotland Yard—or the narcotic gentlemen of the U. S. A., or—ha-ha-ha! And now look at him! He’s dead—dead right here in his sitting room on the *Nepenthe* where he was so sure of himself. I hated him”—her voice reached a high falsetto note—“I hate him now. I hate you! You’re worse than he was. I’d like to see you lying there where he is. I’d—”

Gaffney sprang from his seat on the desk and, seizing her arms, shook her violently.

“Stop it!” he bawled furiously. “Stop it, do you hear—or I’ll twist your windpipe for you for keeps! You’re nothing but a wild, dope-soaked— —” He used a string of opprobrious and unprintable epithets. “How long since you had your last shot of heroin? Need another one now—with the jim-jams coming on, eh? Well, maybe I’ll give you one in a few minutes—if you’re a good girl. Where’s the stuff from Swabi hidden? It’s your turn now.”

Something within Owen at one and the same time sickened him and filled him with insensate rage. The scene was impossibly horrible: Anne Morlan, drug-crazed, standing there with the body of her dead father at her feet—Gaffney with his sneering face.

“Take your filthy paws off me!” Anne Morlan shrilled out frenziedly.

Gaffney moved back to the desk and leaned against it. With his forefinger inserted in the trigger-guard, he spun the weapon around and around in nasty playfulness.

“All right, little one,” he cooed, “I see you’ve got to be humored. Well, what about it? It won’t cost you anything to tell me. You won’t go to prison for your father’s nose-thumbing at the law. And life is still sweet, isn’t it?”

Anne Morlan stared at Gaffney for a long time—and then suddenly she seemed to become more rational.

“Yes,” she said, “I know all about it. I know where it is. There’s even more than you think there is aboard here. But you’d be a long time in finding it. I’m not so sure you’d ever find it—alone. It’s all quite true, what you said about the watering-places of America and Europe. Once the customs’ inspection was over in any port, and where nothing, of course, was ever found, and the internationally known multimillionaire began to entertain on his palatial yacht, his guests were practically free to come and go without let or hindrance. And amongst these guests were—well, you found out a lot, Mr. Gaffney. And it’s all true, if that’s any satisfaction to you. Dope barons, you called them. Yes, and some of them were really titled. You’d be surprised at the list of Holier-than-Thous that— —”

“I’d be listening hard,” broke in Gaffney roughly, “if I hadn’t already got next to all that for myself. Where’s the stuff, damn you? I’m getting tired of asking you, and I haven’t got any more time to waste.”

Again she stared at Gaffney for a long time—and Owen, watching, wondered uneasily what was hatching in that obviously disordered and irresponsible brain.

“I hate you,” she reiterated in a curiously monotonous way. “I said I’d kill you if I could—and I would. Why should I play into your hand?”

"You know what I said to your father," he answered menacingly. "That goes for you, too. Once is enough. I don't have to repeat it."

"You mean that you're putting it up to me now to save all these people's lives? That's what you said, wasn't it?"

"Yes—and your own! And I mean it. Blast you, quit your stalling!"

"I don't trust you," she said slowly. "Father was right. You've gone so far now that you wouldn't dare to give us a chance."

"Your father was a fool!" snarled Gaffney. "Take a good look at him and learn your lesson! You haven't got any choice about trusting me. And you couldn't be any worse off anyway than he is now, could you?"

It was swift, fleeting—a tigress gleam in her black eyes that Owen caught as Gaffney, momentarily and in pretended indifference, occupying himself with his plaything, twiddled his revolver around his forefinger. And then her eyelids were lowered—half closed.

"I hate you!" The words broke from her lips in a quivering venomous whisper.

"That's getting monotonous," Gaffney snapped.

"I'd sacrifice them all, every one of them aboard here, to make you pay, not so much for him"—she jerked her head toward the dead man on the floor—"though he was my father, but for the vile insults and the foul names that you have called me. I'd sacrifice every one on the *Nepenthe*—to kill you!"

Gaffney barked out a short laugh.

"I don't doubt it!" he sneered contemptuously. "You're the world's champion she-fiend. You're capable of anything—provided it's been hatched straight out of the pit of hell! But letting the rest of them—and yourself—die the lingering death of thirst and starvation doesn't help any to make your fond dream of killing me come true. You'd better let that sink in, and sink in quick."

Once more she gave Gaffney a prolonged stare.

"Father swore that no matter what happened it would never be found on board here," she stated as though almost to herself—but her eyelids had dropped again.

Again Owen's eyes traveled swiftly from Anne Morlan to Gaffney. She was playing with the man for some purpose or other. Something that he could not even guess at, save that it promised an ugly sequence, was impending. He was sure of that—and he stood here in no better case than if he were a trussed fowl.

Gaffney's fist smashed down on the desk. His face reddened angrily.

"I'm not talking to your father!" he flared out. "I'm talking to you. It doesn't matter to me what he said."

"That's funny, too," she twitted. "I thought you'd like to know."

"I'll take your word for it being funny," Gaffney told her viciously. "And you can take my word for it that if you don't open up in the next minute it will be the end of the lot of you! Understand? You've admitted you know where the stuff is. It's the one chance you've got. I'm going to get under way. Talk and talk fast, or ashore every blasted one of you goes—without a crumb and not a damned drop of water!"

Anne Morlan seemed to be lost for a moment in intensive deliberation. Then she nodded her head in an obsessed way several times.

"A chance?" she repeated. "Yes; that's all it is. I don't trust you, but I suppose I've got to take it. Untie my hands."

"What for?" he rasped suspiciously.

She laughed at him suddenly.

"You've got a revolver," she taunted. "Are you afraid of an unarmed woman? I can't very well tell you where it is. I'll have to show you."

Gaffney glared at her for an instant contemplatively through squinted eyes—then from the ornate desk-set he picked up a long, gold-handled pair of scissors, and cut away the cords that bound her wrists.

"All right!" he growled. "Now show me!"

Anne Morlan frictioned her evidently numbed wrists for a moment, her lips compressed. Then she walked across the cabin, away from the door that opened on the alleyway, and halted at the starboard or water side of the sitting room.

Gaffney kept close at her heels.

Mechanically Owen followed Gaffney. What was she up to? What mad, fantastic idea had germinated in that unhinged brain of hers? Did it matter? Nothing could come of it—except her own destruction. Gaffney was no fool. Gaffney was watching her like a hawk—and Gaffney had the whip hand.

Owen stood now a yard behind Gaffney. He saw Anne Morlan pass her hand along the upper edge of a section of the paneling—and one of the rosewood panels slid smoothly and noiselessly out of sight.

Anne Morlan said nothing.

Owen stared. Inside there were rows and rows of what appeared to be small, hermetically sealed tins.

Gaffney reached forward, grabbed ravenously at one of the containers, and wrenched off the cover. From the container he took out one of the many

little packs that it harbored, tore it open, sniffed at it, touched the tip of his tongue to it.

“It’s the stuff all right!” he exulted. “But where’s the rest of it? I know how much came on board. This is just a joke.”

“Yes, just a joke,” agreed Anne Morlan softly. “There’s lots more of it. This had only been temporarily stowed away. The rest of it is here.” Her fingers felt along the upper edge of the paneling again—and a small opening was revealed. The light glistened on a metal push-button. “You see? It’s in here. Fifty thousand pounds’ worth of it, you said. There’s at least that. You said, too, that it didn’t matter to you what Father had said about it never being found on board here whatever might happen. Well, it does matter! It’s all here, but you’ll never get it! I’m only sorry that I cannot tear you limb from limb! You’ll never get it”—her voice rose without the slightest warning to a maniacal shriek—“never—never—never— —”

Gaffney’s revolver had flung instantly upward as premonition evidently seized suddenly upon him.

“You devil!” he shouted rabidly. “I’ll — —”

Owen launched himself forward, butting with his head at Gaffney’s arm—it was all that he could do—and Gaffney’s shot went wild. And at almost the same moment Owen saw Anne Morlan, while she still laughed diabolically, press the button within the little receptacle she had disclosed. Then the ship seemed to lift up under his feet, he was pitched to the floor, and the roar of what could be no other than a series of explosions that seemed to run fore and aft thundered in his ears.

And then the lights went out.

CHAPTER XVII

THREADS

FROM without, muffled by the closed doors of the room, came a prolonged chorus of what seemed like panic-stricken cries and screams that almost certainly emanated from the native crew. Within, Owen heard again Anne Morlan's peals of crazed laughter; he heard oaths purling from Gaffney's lips in a constant stream—but they were terror-inspired, for there was panic, too, in Gaffney's shaking voice.

Then a door slammed and with it Anne Morlan's laughter died away—that obviously was the door leading into Morlan's bedroom and connecting thereafter with Anne Morlan's own suite. Another door slammed—the one opening on the alleyway. It was utter blackness in here; Owen could see nothing, but he could orientate the sounds. That would be Gaffney racing for the open. The ship was sinking, of course.

Owen had regained his feet. His hands lashed behind his back had hampered him—they hampered him now. He made his way, as well as he could judge the direction, toward the alleyway door—and bumped against the wall. He turned then with his back against the wall and began to feel along it, searching with his fettered hands for the door.

Racing footsteps receded along the alleyway. There was a succession of pistol shots. He did not understand the meaning of that. His brain whirled. Fear gripped at him, held him in thrall. The *Nepenthe* was sinking, of course. That, at least, he could understand—and understand now the significance of every word Anne Morlan had spoken. She had probably blown the bottom out of the ship. Morlan would not have dealt in half measures. Discounting the possibility of being caught in a jam from which there was no other escape, Morlan had mined the yacht so that he might sink her as a last desperate resort to prevent her rising up in evidence against him.

Owen's hands behind him groped frantically for the door as he shuffled along the wall of the room. The *Nepenthe* was sinking . . . Doris! . . . Those others imprisoned in the dining saloon!

His fingers touched the door-knob. He wrenched the door open, and stumbled out into the alleyway. The alleyway ran the length of the ship, opening on the fore as well as on the lower after deck. The fore deck door was open now. He could see the first gray streaks of dawn. He ran in that direction—and gained the lower fore deck.

He swept a swift glance around him. Heads were bobbing in the water—Malay heads—the crew swimming frantically for shore. Anne Morlan stood at the rail pulling feverishly at the trigger of an automatic. The wind had increased. The whitecaps were higher crested—racing shoreward. The *Nepenthe* was adrift—the series of explosions, so far as the fore part of the vessel was concerned, had obviously had the effect at least of having torn the yacht away from her anchorage. There was probably a gaping hole in her bows. As for what had happened amidships and aft he did not of course know, but he was only too well convinced that the destruction had been absolute. But there was no sign of fire. Yes—he could explain that. The explosion had taken place below the water line.

A second had passed. He sprang to Anne's Morlan's side.

She turned a demented face toward him.

"Look at them!" Her voice was a shriek. "Like rats! Like rats leaving a sinking ship. Something more to add to their superstitious fears! Look at them! As though the devil himself were after them! And Gaffney's there, too! I tried to get him as he ran along the alleyway after I'd got into my room and picked up my pistol. He was ahead of me when I got my door open. He jumped overboard with the rest of them—the filthiest rat of them all. There he is! See him!" She swung around again—leaning far out over the rail. "I'll get him yet!"

The hammer of her automatic clicked on an empty shell.

"For God's sake, get a grip on yourself!" Owen shouted at her. "The others! Gaffney doesn't matter now! We're sinking! Get this lashing off my wrists."

She whirled and stared at him under puzzled brows while a precious minute passed—then she began to untie his hands.

"Where is Miss Carroll?" Owen asked anxiously.

"I don't know," she answered.

Owen's hands were free now.

"Come with me, then—quick!" he flung out. "You've got to help! Gaffney said the rest of them were in the dining saloon."

"All right! All right!" she cried out hysterically. "But I would like to have got him, the mongrel, sneaking—"

"You've probably got the lot of us through your insane act!" Owen cut in bitterly over his shoulder, as he raced back along the alleyway.

The stairway to the dining saloon below was just forward of the main staircase from the lounge. He plunged down the stairs, conscious that Anne

Morlan was following him closely, and burst into the dining saloon itself.

Gaffney had told the truth. Owen's eyes searched eagerly, rapidly around the room—and his heart sank. As Gaffney had said, they were all safely trussed up here, some on the floor, some tied to chairs—all except Doris and Mrs. Stavert. But Mrs. Stavert was dead—and Doris was not here.

He made at once for Tanu.

"Where did you take Miss Carroll?" He did not seem to be able to get the words out fast enough as he began to unloosen the serang's bonds.

"Tuan," the man answered, "I carried her to her room, and then I made known to the other Tuans that which had come to pass. Tuan, it is in my mind that great ill has come to her, for she could speak no word when I laid her upon her bed."

Owen bit at his lips, and swung sharply around.

"Miss Morlan," he called, "Tanu tells me Miss Carroll is in her room, and, from what he says, I am afraid her condition is serious. Please go to her at once. I'll give you a hand in a moment to get her on deck. Tanu and I will manage here now. As each one is released, he can release another. It won't take long."

Anne Morlan seemed to have become suddenly human.

"Yes! Oh, yes!" she cried—and ran for the stairs.

With Tanu helping him now, Owen worked frantically to free the others—and as he worked he began to issue his orders briskly:

"Carlin, see a couple of the boats swung out! Look lively, and— —" He broke off abruptly. The *Nepenthe* suddenly rose and fell. From her bottom arose a prolonged grating and grinding noise—she thumped and bumped. "Good God," he ejaculated tensely, "we weren't far out—she's drifted on the reef!"

Near eight bells. Near noon.

Owen stood in the doorway of his cabin, canted now, due to the ship's uneven position, and swept the shore, some four hundred yards away, with his glasses. Here and there was to be seen one or two of the native crew upon the beach. So far, there had been no sign of Gaffney.

There had been no need to abandon ship. A God's mercy! For, with the dawn, the moonlit nights, the days of calm and brilliant sunshine had come to an end, and a spell of dirty weather was rapidly setting in. It was blowing half a gale now. The launch, even if it had not been put out of commission when, as one of the results of the explosion, the lower after deck where it

was housed had been torn open, could not have lived through the mounting seas to Laolu, forty-five miles away, the nearest island where it could be hoped to obtain succor. The boats were out of the question. There could have been no escape—except to share, unfed and unwatered, Evil Island there with Gaffney and his equally murderous mutineers.

The *Nepenthe* was fast on the reef—and would remain there until she disintegrated, as all things, animate and inanimate, finally disintegrate in the course of time. A careful examination of the yacht made by Carlin, the two engineers and himself, both inside and out—the latter inspection accomplished by circling the yacht with one of the boats—had convinced him of that. Her hull in places was literally sheared apart. But she was hard and fast.

She had drifted on the reefs stern-first, and was down at the head by an uncomfortable but not dangerous angle of approximately ten degrees; otherwise, she rested on a practically even keel. And another providential mercy! The wind had veered. This was the lee side of the island now. Instead of pounding herself to pieces, she was as motionless as though tied to a dock in a sheltered harbor—and the stretch of water inside the reefs between her and the shore, except for the occasional ripples caused by diverted wind gusts due to the configuration of the island, was as smooth as the proverbial goldfish bowl.

Owen lowered his binoculars, but he still scanned the shore with his naked eyes. Gaffney would have to make a move sooner or later. What would it be? Gaffney, at least for the moment, no longer held the whip hand.

Owen's brain churned like a mill race. There were so many things! Doris was better—in no danger—able to sit up now—even to walk about a little in her cabin. Anne Morlan had been surprisingly magnificent in her attentions to Doris—tender, womanly. He would not forget that. But Anne Morlan, too, was shaky, unnerved, off balance, in the throes of one of the black hours of her besetting sin.

Each had fended pretty well for himself where food was concerned—invading the steward's pantry when the urge came.

It had been a drear forenoon. There were those who had died aboard—Lao-ti, Morlan, and Mrs. Stavert, who, delaying too long after Tanu's warning, had been shot and trampled underfoot when, issuing from her cabin, she had, with her husband, attempted to join the others in the stand they were making in the starboard alleyway. There was deep water off the outer edge of the reef. Canvas-shrouded and shotted, these three, with such reverence as the situation afforded, had been committed to their last resting places.

There had been others who had died—several of the Malays who had fallen under the revolver shots of Morlan, Blaine, Naylor, Carlin, Tanu, and Count Luvac, all of which later, from what he, Owen, could gather, had put up a desperate resistance. But the native dead had been quickly and unceremoniously disposed of by their own kind immediately after Gaffney had assumed temporary command.

Stavert had been wounded in an effort to protect his wife—stabbed in the side. Not seriously, he claimed. The wound had been dressed. He was able to be about. Apart from a severe mauling, the others had escaped without any major disabilities.

Owen's mind was suddenly arrested in its rehearsal of the details of the last few hours. Someone was coming up the companion ladder from the promenade deck—Anne Morlan. She was carrying, he saw, a small leather traveling bag.

She reached the boat deck and came directly toward him. Then, as he stepped aside to permit her to do so, she entered his cabin with no other acknowledgment of his presence than that of a curiously enigmatic smile which she directed at him.

She laid the bag on the top of the locker, and swung around to face him.

“Do you know what's in here?” she inquired—and laughed, not normally, but in a jerky, uncontrolled way.

Owen shook his head.

“How should I?” he questioned quietly in answer. “I haven't the faintest idea.”

“Oh!” she complained. “I'm disappointed! I was so sure you would say at once that it was the purple ball.”

“What!” he exclaimed sharply—and took a sudden step toward her.

And then she laughed again.

“But it isn't!” she cried out in what seemed almost like childish glee. “*Touché, mon capitaine!* You don't mind, eh?”

She was not herself, of course—or was she? A sudden pity for her tugged at Owen's heart. He knew now that she had gone much further along that gray road than he had imagined when he had first met her. It was not likely that she could ever be reclaimed.

“Not in the least,” he assured her genuinely. “Quite all right. I admit I rose to the bait—so tell me, then, what's in it?”

She opened the bag and dumped its contents on the locker.

Owen stared. There were four very serviceable-looking revolvers and at least a dozen boxes of cartridges.

“Where did you get these?” he demanded.

“A little reserve supply that Father always had tucked away,” she replied. “There’s one more—mine. I’m keeping that. I thought they’d come in useful—since Gaffney disarmed you all. You can divide them up as you like. We haven’t heard anything yet from Gaffney and his bloodsucker Malays—but we will. They can’t get out here to the *Nepenthe* except by swimming—but they can’t drink salt water, or live on meals of sand and grass, either! And there’s a lot of them!”

“Yes,” Owen agreed gravely. “Thanks, Miss Morlan. These revolvers may mean everything to us before we’re through. I’ll see to their distribution.”

“That’s all right,” she rejoined a little raggedly. “Use your own judgment. Even the purple-ball murderer, if he’s still aboard, has to make common cause with the rest of us now. It wasn’t Father, I’m certain of that; it might have been Lao-ti who is dead, or Paul Stavert, or Count Luvac—I’m sure it wasn’t you. Doris has just taken a bowl of broth that I managed to heat up for her. It’s made a new woman of her—acted like an elixir. I wish I could have had one, too!”

Owen looked at her in perplexity.

“Why not?” he queried. “There’s surely no shortage. What do you mean?”

“Not broth!” Her lips twitched. “An elixir! You heard what that beast Gaffney said about me and heroin. But you probably knew already. He was right about heroin. There’s plenty on board. I’ve got plenty. But taking it through the mouth isn’t the same thing. You won’t understand that—but it’s true. I’m in a”—she gave a catchy laugh—“hell of a state, and I have been all night. Someone stole my hypodermic syringe yesterday afternoon.”

Owen thrust his hand casually into the pocket of his jacket. The hypodermic syringe was still there. Quite understandable! Since he had fought only with his fists at the head of the fore deck ladder, he had obviously been unarmed at the time he had been left there for dead, and there was therefore no reason why he should have been searched. Even Gaffney had afterwards commented ironically on the loss of his, Owen’s, revolver.

“You mean,” he said conversationally, “that you were crazed at the time—which accounts for your having blown the bottom out of the *Nepenthe*?”

“No. I don’t know. Perhaps. I don’t know.” Her words came in a sort of inconsequential rush. “I hope I would have done it, anyway. Gaffney didn’t intend to let one of us live. It was better to die that way than go through with the miserable end that he had planned for us. If we were to die, at least he wouldn’t sail away and gloat—he would die too. I know! I know what you think—what you all think. A crazed woman who didn’t care a damn if she sent every one of you to destruction. But”—again she burst out into staccato laughter—“look at us now! It’s funny, isn’t it? We’re all alive. And look at Gaffney! Crazed? What does it matter? I was crazed then—I’m crazed now.”

Pity for her welled up again in Owen’s heart. Without a word he held out the hypodermic syringe to her.

She stared at it for a moment in wild incredulity—then she snatched it from his hand avidly.

“You!” she screamed out furiously. “You took this out of my room! You”—she caught her breath. “No; it wasn’t you. I don’t believe that. You’re not that sort. You’re not one of us rotters”—a bitter note was suddenly in her voice—“aboard here. Where did you get it?”

“I found it on the floor amongst the wrecked pieces of the wireless set,” he told her frankly. “I made a search in there last night.”

“Well, then,” she flung at him angrily, “why didn’t you say so before? Why didn’t you give it back to me at once? You must have known that it belonged to me. Why make a secret of it? Why—” She caught her breath again. “Oh, I see!” she exclaimed with a sudden break in her voice. “It was an ugly bit of evidence. A woman could have killed Roach with that stone axe. Is that it?”

“Generally speaking—yes,” Owen admitted.

“But not cricket—not enough to warrant my crucifixion,” she added quickly. “I understand. Does anyone else know about this?”

“Yes,” Owen answered. “Miss Carroll. She felt the same way about it that I did.”

Anne Morlan’s eyes became unbelievably misty. There was a strange dignity in her carriage as she walked now to the door.

“Thank you, Captain Heath,” she said simply. “You won’t regret this. A herring—is that the word?—dragged across the trail. I think I know who did it. Not nice, was it? That’s a debt I owe. I am almost sure you believe me when I say that I did not kill poor old Roach. But I think I know who did. And I think I know who killed Kaya Dâlam, and who killed Lao-ti.”

“Who?” Owen asked tensely.

She had paused in the doorway.

“When I have the proof—which I will get,” she promised through thinned lips as she turned away, “I will tell you.”

But Anne Morlan never told.

An hour had gone. The *Nepenthe's* bell was no longer struck, but the hands of the ship's chronometer pointed to one o'clock.

Owen, after a scratch lunch and still another critical but again a satisfying inspection of the ship, had returned to the boat deck, and once more from the doorway of his cabin was scanning the shore of the island through his binoculars. Something white was waving there now—a signal. A sarong—perhaps. Gaffney was standing there—the natives were clustered around him. It was not very far away—one could see almost as well without the aid of the glasses.

“Ahoy! Ahoy! *Nepenthe*—ahoy!” Gaffney's voice, through cupped hands, came faintly, but distinctly, borne along by the wind. “We've no food! We've no water! For God's sake, are you going to let us die like cattle?”

There was a tight smile on Owen's lips. It was a bit thick that—coming from Gaffney! The draught Gaffney had so far swallowed of the medicine he had prepared for others was proving to be anything but palatable! But, still, even cattle — !

He mounted to the bridge with deliberate leisure, and, picking up a megaphone, shouted through it.

“Let one of your natives swim out here, and I'll talk to him—unless,” he supplemented grimly, “you'd like to come yourself.”

Gaffney made no verbal answer, but that he had heard and understood was evidenced by the fact that a moment later a Malay entered the water and began to swim toward the yacht.

Owen descended to the lower fore deck. Tanu was already there.

Owen from under gathered brows watched the Malay expertly and swiftly cleaving through the water. This was a problem that he had known since dawn he would have to face. Gaffney and his followers would have to be supplied with food and water, and the food and water would have to be transported to the shore; but he did not propose to furnish Gaffney at the same time with the means of transportation that would further an attack on the *Nepenthe*—though there was always a risk, of course, which had to be taken. Gaffney was tricky, in no sense to be trusted. Humanitarian instincts

might even prove costly—but those men ashore there, however richly they might deserve such a fate, could not be left to die of starvation and thirst.

He turned to Tanu.

“Were there any amongst the crew,” he demanded crisply, “one or two, say, that you could trust above the others?”

“Yes, Tuan,” Tanu answered. “There are two. He who is named Sentul, and he who is named Umat. They have made many voyages upon the *Nepenthe*. Their fear was very great because of that which came to pass upon the ship, but their fear of Tuan Gaffney was great also, and so they became like sheep; but the killing of no Tuan was in their minds, for I, Tanu, have known them since they were naked children, for, Tuan, it was in the same village that we were born.”

“A stout pair!” observed Owen gruffly. “Do you think their fear of Gaffney and the evil magic aboard here would be outweighed by the assurance of food in plenty and comfortable quarters on the ship, instead of what they are now up against ashore?”

“Yes, Tuan,” Tanu answered readily; “for one fear is no more—they have seen that the ship does not sink.”

“All right!” Owen ejaculated shortly. “Go and tell all the Tuans that I would like to see them here.”

Tanu departed, running—and presently, as Carlin, the two engineers, Count Gaspard Luvac, and Paul Stavert gathered around him on the fore deck, Owen outlined to them briefly what he proposed to do.

The ship’s officers nodded assent. So, too, did Count Luvac.

Paul Stavert looked miserably white; the bandages bulged under his shirt—but he spoke airily.

“Can’t let the blighters go under,” he said. “Not done, you know! But we ought to be able to hold them off in any case, thanks to Miss Morlan having played Santa Claus, I understand, by rearming the troops. Stand fast, the Guards!—if you get my idea?”

The Malay swimmer was alongside. Tanu threw over a rope. The man made a frightened obeisance as he stood dripping on the deck.

“Listen to me,” said Owen sternly in the native tongue. “You will go back to Tuan Gaffney, and say that because we are not murderers like himself, and like you and all the devil’s spawn that grovel now on the island, we will grant food and water enough so that you will not perish, although you deserve to die of retching bellies and endure the torture of burning throats for many days. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Tuan,” the man answered tremblingly.

“It is well that you do!” said Owen coldly. “Listen further, then. We will send only enough food and water to last throughout a day so that Tuan Gaffney may not be tempted to seize the boat that carries it and in the darkness of the night steal out to make an attack upon us. Also, we will trust no one in the going and coming of the boat that will carry the food and water, save only the two who are named Sentul and Umat. These two will swim out to us, row the boat ashore, and, when it is unloaded, bring it back here to the ship. And thereafter they will live here. If this is not done there will be no food and no water for the next day. And if Tuan Gaffney thinks to play any tricks upon us he will not profit by it, for a watch will be kept, and”—he whipped a revolver suddenly from his pocket—“we are still well armed. See that this is made known to him!”

The Malay had jumped back in affright.

Owen smiled thinly.

“There is one thing more,” he stated evenly. “Knives sufficient for the cutting of wood, so that you may make fires, we will leave with you; but all other weapons, and especially the revolver of Tuan Gaffney, and all other revolvers that he has distributed amongst you, are to be sent back in the boat with Sentul and Umat. You have heard what I have said?”

The Malay’s face was a chalky brown.

“Yes, Tuan.” His teeth chattered. “The Tuan is merciful.”

“Glad you think so!” Owen rasped. “Go!”

The man went hastily over the side and started for the shore.

“And at that,” Count Gaspard Luvac broke out gruffly, “what is it you English say?—we’d better keep our eyes peeled!”

“Quite!” chirped Paul Stavert. “Charming lad, Gaffney! So ingenuous and trustworthy! We haven’t the foggiest notion how many popguns they’ve got amongst them. As a matter of cold fact, you know, I don’t see how we can expect him to do anything else but razzle us on that score.”

“Can’t!” acknowledged Owen tersely. “But we’ll at least have drawn some of his teeth—and that will help.”

CHAPTER XVIII

BELOW DECKS

CAME night again. But there was no moonlight overhead, and the *Nepenthe's* decks and portholes no longer blazed luminously. On account of the wrecked dynamo, there were candles for the staterooms; and, for the lounge and dining saloon, the few lanterns that had been found aboard.

The storm had increased in violence; and, though protected here in the lee of the island, the wind was still crafty enough to reach the *Nepenthe* and strum eerily and discordantly on the ship's stays. The water from the reef shoreward was no more than ruffled with tiny wavelets that, as they slapped with dogged persistence against the yacht's hull, seemed to be furiously incensed at their own impotence; but from across the island came the roar and thunder of booming surf.

The candle, stuck on a saucer and set on the locker in Owen's cabin, guttered. Owen stared at it introspectively. His face was lined—careworn.

There was more than one good reason for dire anxiety.

It was just the sort of night that would suit Gaffney's purpose. Gaffney with twenty-odd natives at his back! It was scarcely four hundred yards to the shore. The swim to that amphibious crowd was child's play. The thunder of the surf on the windward side of the island would drown all other sounds. And the night was so black that the sharpest eyes could see no more than a yard or two beyond the ship's sides.

Well, so far as he could, he had guarded against such an attack. Gaffney, desperate now, would certainly attempt it, if he thought there was a fair chance of success. It depended to a large extent on how well armed Gaffney and his followers still were. Following immediately upon the departure of Gaffney's terror-stricken ambassador, Sentul and Umat had swum out to the *Nepenthe*, rowed a provisioned boat ashore, and while he, Owen, had watched through his glasses, had unloaded it with the help of Gaffney and his followers on the beach, and had then returned to the ship. Gaffney had sent back a dozen native knives but only one revolver—with the statement that it was the single firearm he possessed; that it was the one which was in his pocket when he had swum ashore; and that he had distributed none to the Malays either before or during the mutiny. This might, or might not, be true. If it were true, Gaffney had definitely by his own statement convicted himself of being the actual murderer of Mrs. Stavert—Mrs. Stavert had been shot.

But Gaffney was still a long way beyond the reach of judge and jury!

The revolver that Gaffney had surrendered, added to the four that Anne Morlan had provided, made a total of five. Sentul and Umat, vouched for by Tanu, had secretly taken to the water after dark and had gone ashore to act as spies, leaving seven men still on the ship—Carlin, Blaine, Naylor, Tanu, Paul Stavert, Count Gaspard Luvac, and himself. He had kept one of the revolvers for himself; he had given one each to Tanu, Carlin, Blaine, and Naylor; he had eliminated Paul Stavert and Count Gaspard Luvac from the distribution, for, unless it had been Morlan who was now dead, one of these two was the murderer of Lao-ti, and at the present moment was in possession of what Kaya Dâlam had well called that accursed purple ball. One of them was innocent. But which one? He did not know. Therefore he trusted neither of them.

What more could he have done? He had divided the six men into watches. Carlin, Blaine, and Count Luvac in one; Naylor, Tanu, and Paul Stavert in the other. Count Luvac had protested that Paul Stavert, being wounded, was not fit for duty and should be excused. Paul Stavert, for the first time, had shown his teeth, and, cursing Count Luvac virulently for gratuitous interference, had insisted on carrying on.

Damn it, which one of the two was it? Or had it been Morlan himself?

He, Owen, himself was keeping all watches.

If Sentul and Umat proved to be dependable, or if they were not themselves caught, there could be no surprise attack—and failing a surprise attack, Gaffney's chances of success would be slim indeed.

But granting this—granting that Gaffney was not too greatly to be feared—there was still another cause for anxiety; and one that, at least in a personal sense, was far greater than the other. Doris, throughout the afternoon and evening, had not been so well. She was still able to do for herself to a certain extent, but she was suffering a great deal of pain. Feverish—content to lie still on the couch in her cabin with the porthole curtains drawn against the sun which hurt her eyes. She needed medical attention. He feared the consequences otherwise. But there was no medical attention to be obtained. There was no escape from the *Nepenthe* for the time being. No boat would live in the seas that were running out there beyond the sheltered side of the island. And the glass was still falling.

For the time being! A bitter smile crossed his lips. The “time being” might be too late. There promised to be days of storm.

His mind became chaotic—one thought rushing in pell-mell upon another. That purple ball . . . Satan's masterpiece . . . How many deaths had

it already caused? . . . Counting Gray's fellow crooks aboard the *Orsu*, and Kaya Dâlam on the island, and those on the *Nepenthe*—no, he wouldn't count them! . . . Stark horror . . . There couldn't be any more . . . Where was the damned ball now? . . . Blown from its hiding place and lost forever when Anne Morlan in her frenzy, but for the saving grace of the reef, would have sunk the ship? . . . He hoped so . . . It had almost brought death to Doris . . . Death? . . . She was far from being out of danger yet! . . . Who was it, to whom the extinction of a human life, even that of a defenceless woman, meant no more than the squashing of a fly on a windowpane? . . . Well, he too now could kill quite as mercilessly, if he but knew who it was that—

He pulled himself together. He looked at his watch. The night, thank God, was already more than half over! It was four minutes after one.

It was Naylor's, Tanu's, and Paul Stavert's watch. Better make a round.

He blew out the candle and left his cabin. Tanu was stationed forward and Naylor aft. He had allotted the amidships' section on the promenade deck to Paul Stavert because that was the least vulnerable point of attack and Stavert was unarmed. Besides, he was none too sure of Stavert being constantly on the *qui vive*—the man had grittily insisted on doing his part, but that wound was bothering him a lot. Paul Stavert was another that needed medical attention.

Owen went aft. He wanted to talk to Naylor again anyway about the possibility of engine repairs to the launch against the return of fair weather. He joined the engineer at the stern.

"All quiet," stated Naylor—and laughed shortly as he pointed shoreward to where two faint sparks of light showed from amongst the trees beyond the beach. "They're keeping the home fires burning. They'd better! I'd like the chance of potting a few of them if they tried anything—and Gaffney in particular!"

"Right!" Owen nodded. "But Gaffney's tricky. We can't take any chances. What did you and Blaine finally decide about the launch after looking it over again?"

"Nothing doing!" Naylor answered definitely. "We might repair the engine in time, but the hull's a mess. Never stand it. She'd sink like a sieve after the first revolution. But we're bound to hold out till a spell of decent weather sets in—and the boats are in good condition. Forty-five miles to Laolu is a long pull, but it's been done before. We can do it again."

"Yes," admitted Owen, "I know that. A long pull, and"—he smiled mirthlessly—"hardly the sort of ambulance I'd choose for Miss Carroll; to say nothing of Mr. Stavert who, in spite of what he says to the contrary, is

much more seriously wounded, I am afraid, than even he himself realizes. Besides, I do not want to go to Laolu if I can possibly avoid it. You know now the inside story of Morlan and the *Nepenthe*. Mallinson at Laolu undoubtedly runs the island. He's up to his eyes in this. If the truth comes out, he's a goner. I'm not so sure but that Laolu would only mean from the frying-pan into the fire for us; and, anyway, I understand from Carlin that there's no doctor at Laolu."

"No; that's right," said Naylor, "there isn't, and— —" His words were cut off as though a knife had severed them.

For a space of time that lasted but an instant, but which to Owen seemed to span the ages, each stared through the darkness into the other's face. Faintly there had reached their ears the sound of a shot—a scream.

"It's from somewhere below decks!" Owen flung out. "My God, is there no end to this? Come on!"

Owen leading, they raced across the lower after deck and into the starboard alleyway. There came another shot, a succession of screams—louder now, but still dull and muffled.

"The engine room!" panted Naylor. "It can't be anywhere else!"

Aft from the dining saloon and along the alleyways where the engineers and bridge officers were quartered, were the entrances to the engine room—port and starboard. They plunged down the stairway, and ran aft again. Owen's flashlight was in play. Another shot—more screams!

They had kept to the starboard side. Owen wrenched open the engine-room door, started down the iron ladders—and stopped. There was a sudden stillness. Below, a candle flickered, lighting up dimly the work bench. A woman's form hung in a strange, embracing attitude over it. His flashlight circled. Misty, white, unidentifiable through the maze of machinery, a figure was fleeing up the ladders on the port side of the engine room, making for the opposite exit.

Owen's revolver blazed—but apparently without effect.

"Get him!" Owen snapped out over his shoulder to Naylor. "I'll attend to what's below here!"

He heard Naylor turn and leap back up the ladder—and a moment later he himself had reached the floor of the engine room. It was quite dry owing to the forward pitch of the ship, though the fore holds were flooded. There was no more need of a flashlight—the candle, meager though its glow, was sufficient.

It was Anne Morlan—in a most curious attitude—her arms clasped tightly around the workbench vise. He laid her gently down. She was quite

dead. There were several knife wounds—still bleeding profusely. Clamped in the vise was the purple ball. A brace and bit for metal-drilling lay beside it—particles from the drilling, dust-like, showed on the bench—the keyhole of the ball was almost completely drilled through. A pistol—was it hers?—lay on the floor.

He stood for a moment motionless—his features drawn. Savagery overwhelmed him—then compassion came. But perhaps it was the way out for her. She had gone beyond the unrecoverable limit—drug-broken! Even her father’s millions were no more—only her father’s disgrace and ruin had been left as an inheritance. But that did not in any degree let out the guilty man!

In one sense, what had happened here was obvious. A back-to-the-wall attempt had been made to open the purple ball, obtain the contents, whatever the contents might be, and then jettison the ball itself. A crisis had been reached. Not nice to be found in possession of the purple ball! Not easy to hide on one’s person, or in the scanty amount of baggage to which everyone would necessarily have to be restricted when a resort to the boats was finally made in an effort to reach some sort of civilization—the which, it would be apparent to anyone, was the only feasible means of escape under the circumstances, and would, save for some unexpected intervention, ultimately have to be done. But whatever else might actually have happened here in the engine room, it was plain enough that his and Naylor’s arrival, coupled with Anne Morlan’s grim death clasp upon it, had prevented the removal of the purple ball.

Owen unscrewed the ball now from the vise, picked up the brace and bit and pistol as contributory evidence, and, carrying these with him, made his way up the engine-room ladders again.

Confusion and commotion reigned as he emerged on the alleyway. Lanterns glimmered. Everyone seemed to be rushing toward him as though intent on a descent below. Owen switched on his flashlight—and swept its ray over the faces that gathered around him. Those off watch were here; so were the others—all except Tanu. Tanu appeared to be the only one who had not deserted his post. Owen’s flashlight focused on Naylor.

“Well?” he gritted.

Naylor shook his head.

“I don’t know who it was,” he said savagely. “I never got another glimpse of him.”

“What has happened?” inquired Count Gaspard Luvac.

“Miss Morlan has been murdered.” Owen’s jaws were set.

"I see," observed Paul Stavert in an ordinary voice, "that you have got what appears to be the jolly old purple ball."

"Yes—someone was trying to open it with this brace and bit. And someone murdered Miss Morlan"—Owen was on edge, his flashlight held alternatively now on the faces of Count Luvac and Paul Stavert—"and that someone was one of you two!"

"I resent that!" snarled Count Gaspard Luvac with an ugly French oath. "I take that as a personal insult, and I will make you pay for it!"

"And yet," chimed in Paul Stavert smoothly, "I am afraid the captain is quite right. We are the only three left out of the original five who could have murdered that poor chap Kaya Dâlam, and as in the present instance Mr. Naylor, so I understand, was with Captain Heath, it couldn't have been our revered skipper who killed Miss Morlan because of the purple ball being so obviously in the offing. What? So it would really seem that by the process of elimination and all that sort of thing, you know, it must be either you or I. Shall we toss for it?"

A torrent of French oaths purred from Count Gaspard Luvac's lips.

"You are an ass!" he shouted. "An ass—what do you say?—that he-haws. That is what you do. You he-haw! If you were not already a sick man, I would make you one. I— —" He choked, seemed to control himself, and became calmer. "I would like to ask Captain Heath a question."

"Ask it!" said Owen brusquely.

"How do you know," demanded Count Luvac, "that it wasn't Morlan who had the purple ball? How do you know that Anne Morlan didn't find that out, and find out where the ball was? How do you know that it wasn't Anne Morlan who was attempting to open the ball tonight, which somebody, who might be any one of us, tried to take from her, and in so doing killed her, of course, since the dead tell no tales and he could not then be denounced? What right have you to say that it could only have been either Stavert or myself who murdered her?"

It was possible and plausible—but more likely specious! Owen made no answer.

Paul Stavert laughed—though he swayed a little on his feet.

"Very well put, my dear Count!" he applauded. "I begin to see the line of defense glimmering through the utter darkness. But now that we have the priceless old ball at last in captivity what are we going to do with it?"

Carlin and the two engineers had said nothing. Carlin and Blaine held lanterns; all three fingered their revolvers uneasily—uncertain what to do.

"I'll show you," replied Owen gruffly. "Come with me."

He led the way up to his cabin, entered, and, bidding Carlin hold the lantern so that he could see to work the combination, swung the door of the ship's safe wide.

"Oh, I say!" protested Paul Stavert from the doorway. "Before you do that, why not open the bally thing, set our minds at rest, and let's see what's inside?"

Owen thrust the purple ball, together with the brace and bit, inside the safe, shut the door, and spun the dial—the pistol he kept in his pocket.

"The bally thing, as you call it," he said evenly, "will be opened in the presence of an officer of the law—and not before!"

"Too bad!" complained Paul Stavert—and reeled against the jamb of the door. His face was ghastly in the lantern light. "Great disappointment! I—I'm afraid I won't be there."

Tanu's face showed suddenly through the little press that crowded the cabin doorway.

"Tuan," he cried excitedly, "Sentul and Umat, swimming from the shore, have just returned to the ship. Will the Tuan listen to them? They bring strange news."

CHAPTER XIX

STRANGE NEWS

PAUL STAVERT had collapsed and lay, white-faced, his eyes closed, half in and half out of the cabin, his body bent in almost a bow-shaped fashion over the high storm sill.

Count Gaspard Luvac was the first to stoop over the fallen man, and, as he lifted Stavert now into an easier position, his own face looked suddenly and strangely pinched in the light of the lanterns that Blaine and Carlin thrust forward. He spoke after an instant in a low tone.

“He’s bleeding pretty badly,” he said. “It looks as though that wound in his side had opened again. I am afraid the dressings Miss Morlan put on have worked loose.”

Owen nodded sharply. He had not liked Paul Stavert’s appearance all through the day; he liked it infinitely less now. A crimson blotch was showing through the left-hand side of the man’s white jacket—widening. But perhaps Stavert’s immediate condition was no more serious than that of a temporary fainting spell.

“Get him below to his room and put him to bed as quickly as you can,” he ordered. “You, Blaine, can show the way with your lantern—and see what you can do for him. I believe you’re the best one left at that sort of thing. Naylor, bear a hand—and perhaps Count Luvac will help. I’d like Carlin to stay with me and hear what Tanu has to say.”

No one made any answer. Naylor and Count Luvac picked Stavert up, and, led by Blaine, moved silently away.

Owen turned to Tanu.

“Well, Tanu,” he demanded, “what is this ‘strange news’ you say Sentul and Umat have brought?”

“Tuan,” Tanu replied, “they say that a ship has come to this side of the island but a little while ago.”

“A ship!” Owen exclaimed incredulously. “Here! It doesn’t make sense! What would a ship be doing here?”

“Put in for shelter, perhaps,” Carlin suggested.

Owen shook his head decisively.

“No,” he declared, “it couldn’t be that. The weather’s nowhere near that bad. Our boats couldn’t live in it, of course; but a ship is quite a different matter. It’s not blowing more than half a gale. But, if this is true, it’s queer

we caught no sight of her lights coming in. Heaven knows we had a watch set! You were one of them, Tanu. What have you to say to that?"

"As the Tuan knows," Tanu answered simply, "close to the east of us there is a point of land that runs far out into the sea and that is covered with many trees. Also the Tuan knows that beyond this there is a bay. It is in this bay that Sentul and Umat say the ship has made anchor. Therefore, by reason of this point, it is in my mind that the lights of the ship were hidden from the eyes of all those who watched here on the *Nepenthe*."

"Oh, I see!" assented Owen. "Well, that's quite possible anyway. What else did they say?"

"I asked no more, Tuan—but came at once to tell the Tuan so that he might question them himself."

"All right! Where are they?"

"On the fore deck, Tuan."

"Go ahead with the lantern then, Carlin," Owen directed. "We'll follow you."

The two Malays were standing at the rail. Their naked chests still dripped water; their sarongs were wet, clinging to their thighs.

"Tell me the tale of the ship that you say has come to the island," Owen said tersely in the native tongue. "What kind of a ship is it?"

The two men looked at one another as though each waited for the other to answer. Then Sentul spoke.

"We know not what kind it is, Tuan," he said, "for we did not see the ship."

"And yet you are sure there is one here?"

"Yes, Tuan, of that we are sure. Will the Tuan give ear to that which came to pass?"

"Yes. Tell it your own way."

"It was not long ago, Tuan"—Sentul's voice became suddenly eager and excited—"only a little time longer than Umat and I, Sentul, spent in swimming from the shore. Tuan, they had made two fires in the shelter of the trees, and one was for Tuan Gaffney, and the other was for those of my people who—" The man hesitated.

"Who were fools enough to let him make mutineers of you," Owen suggested evenly; and then, reassuringly: "But with you, Sentul, and with you, Umat, I will deal kindly since Tanu swears there was no evil in your hearts, and that now you are once more to be trusted. Go on."

"The Tuan's words are like the coming of daylight out of the darkness," Sentul said gratefully. "We will remember them. And even as the Tuan trusts us, so now too we trust the Tuan. Tuan, Umat and I, Sentul, watched from amongst the trees. A great rage had descended upon Tuan Gaffney, so that no man went near him, and he sat alone before the fire, and his face was ugly with twisting, and at times he shook his hands above his head like the waving of clubs in the air. But Umat and I, Sentul, were not near to Tuan Gaffney, for we were hidden in the trees behind where our people were gathered around their own fire, and our people were between us and Tuan Gaffney, yet we could see that which Tuan Gaffney did. Does the Tuan understand?"

"Yes," said Owen briefly. "And then?"

"And then, Tuan," Sentul continued, "there came two of our people, but not those of our people who had been on this ship, and — —"

"Strangers, you mean?" Owen interpolated.

"Yes, Tuan. And they came first to the fire of our people, for that lay first in their path in the way from which they came. And Umat and I, Sentul, remained hidden, but we heard that which passed between our people and these two. And these two said they had come from a ship, and made known where the ship had come to anchor, even as we have made it known to Tanu. And our people made outcries of excitement, and Tuan Gaffney, hearing the outcries, called out that the two men should come to him. Then they went to Tuan Gaffney, and Tuan Gaffney talked with them, but we could no longer hear that which was said for the distance was too great. And that which was then said amongst our people which we could yet hear was no more than I have told the Tuan, for no more had passed between the two who had come out of the night and our people before Tuan Gaffney had called out to them to come to him. But this we could see and this we could hear. We saw Tuan Gaffney leap to his feet, and we heard Tuan Gaffney burst out into great laughter. Then Umat and I, Sentul, took counsel together, and it was in our minds that before we ourselves should be seen, for our people were no longer quiet around their fire, we come with haste to the Tuan that he might know what our eyes had seen and what our ears had heard. And so, Tuan, we are come."

"You have done well!" commended Owen heartily. He turned to Carlin and translated the gist of what had been said rapidly. "What do you make of it?" he demanded crisply as he finished.

"There's no doubt but that a vessel of some sort has put in here, and there's no doubt in my mind either but what that devil ashore there will be up to mischief if it's at all possible," Carlin answered bluntly.

"I agree with you—and the unfortunate part of it is that such a possibility exists all right," Owen amplified savagely. "In fact, there's more than one opening staring him in the face that would give promise of better than a fair chance of success. Swimming out here to make an attack upon us when he knows we are on the watch for him is one thing—though I have never seriously believed he would dare attempt it unless driven to desperation, in spite of the fact that he outnumbers us three to one. But to make such an attack on an unsuspecting vessel and take her by surprise is quite another matter and would be almost certain to succeed. Then there's possibly a boat or craft of some kind in which those two natives came ashore—he could no doubt use that to advantage also. On the other hand"—Owen was thinking aloud now—"he might try another tack. He might go off in that boat, say, and cajole the master of the ship, or vessel, or whatever it is, into putting to sea at once before it is light enough for us to be seen here on the reef—saying nothing about us, of course, and giving some cock-and-bull story to account for his followers and himself having been marooned on the island."

He drew his shoulders suddenly back.

"Look here, Carlin," he said grimly. "Apart from getting a warning to that ship, we need help ourselves, and need it desperately on account of Miss Carroll and Mr. Stavert. It's *our* move. I don't think it's too late. Gaffney and his crowd at least hadn't left their camp-fires when Sentul and Umat here swam off to us, and that's not so many minutes ago." He swung to face Tanu. "Tanu," he ordered briskly, "you and these two chaps get a boat overside at once—and step lively!"

"Yes, Tuan."

The three men scurried away across the deck.

"It can't be much more than half a mile by water to the point," observed Owen reflectively.

"About that," Carlin agreed; "but there's no telling how much further beyond that again the ship is anchored."

"Right!" admitted Owen. "It's not a large bay, however."

"If it's a question of volunteers," Carlin offered readily, "I'll be glad to go."

"No," Owen stated quietly; "you'll remain here in command. I'll take Naylor with me, and Sentul and Umat can man the boat. There's scarcely a chance that Gaffney will now have any more interest in us out here tonight, but keep a sharp lookout just the same. Please get Naylor, will you? As quickly as possible."

Carlin departed, his lantern bobbing as he ran.

Owen walked to the rail and stared shoreward. The two camp-fires at no time showed very brightly through the trees, but they were as bright now as they had ever been—as though they were being constantly replenished. But that might be camouflage.

And then presently Tanu stood at his side.

“The boat is ready, Tuan,” Tanu said.

CHAPTER XX

WHY GAFFNEY LAUGHED

ALMOST utter blackness. No moon, no stars overhead—only the dark canopy of scudding clouds. The outline of the shore was scarcely visible. It was quiet water here on the lee side of the island, but it was not a quiet night—the wind sweeping across the island, moaning its way through the trees, and carrying with it, besides, the sound of the pounding surf on the windward shore, was noisy.

Sentul and Umat pulled at the oars.

Owen, with Naylor beside him, sat in the stern of the boat. He was physically tense. His muscles somehow would not seem to relax. His mind was restless, anxious.

It was a lot quicker, of course, to go afoot along the shore—Gaffney had the advantage there—until it came to getting out to the vessel itself, and there could be no doubt now but that there *was* a vessel, that lay at anchor in the bay. Gaffney would then, in one way or the other, either by swimming or by making use of the vessel's shore boat, be obliged to take to the water himself. Had Gaffney already started? If so, how long ago? What would Gaffney do? Gaffney had the choice of several alternatives.

"Faster!" Owen urged the two Malays.

The boat rounded the point.

Naylor grasped Owen's arm.

"There she is!" he exclaimed.

Ahead, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, though it was impossible to judge the distance accurately in the darkness, there showed a light.

"Yes," said Owen laconically. "But the question is, whether we are here first or not?"

"Well, it won't take long to find out," said Naylor coolly. "We could practically get right alongside of her without being heard—thanks to the strafe the wind is putting on."

"And Gaffney could have done the same," replied Owen pointedly.

"Right! Of course!" Naylor admitted. "But there's no sound of any row—we'd be bound to hear *that*. You don't think it's over, do you?"

"I don't know," Owen answered; "but, as you say, it doesn't sound like it. Anyway, we won't take any chances by advertising our presence if we can help it."

“As I’ve before remarked,” stated Naylor in a savage undertone, “I’d give a lot to get my hands on that blighter Gaffney! And here’s hoping for luck! What do you make her out to be?”

They were nearer now. The vessel’s hull began to loom up vaguely while masts began to take uncertain, wavering form in the blackness. Also, the light that she showed seemed to have broadened out and become diffused above the deck, though it remained as a single gleam lower down near the water line where it doubtless issued from a porthole.

Owen did not answer at once.

“It’s a schooner,” he pronounced finally. “I can make her out now plainly enough.” He leaned forward and spoke in Malay to the two natives in a lowered voice. “Quietly now!” he cautioned. “Be careful not to splash! No noise!” And then a minute later in a still lower voice: “That will do! Stop rowing! Let the boat slip alongside under her own way now—but don’t let it bump.”

The schooner’s hull was like a black wall now, blacker than the surrounding darkness, rising up above the boat. Owen’s eyes searched upward to the deck. There did not seem to be any sign of movement. But now, faintly, there came the sound of voices—not from the deck—the voices were not clear enough for that—from down in the cabin, then, of course.

The boat glided in closer. The voices became louder, though no words could be distinguished. And then, when almost directly beneath the lighted porthole, which Owen could now see was open, one of the voices, though the words themselves could still not be made out, became unmistakably recognizable.

For the second time, Naylor gripped Owen’s arm.

“By God,” he whispered fiercely in Owen’s ear, “that’s Gaffney! He’s here, all right!”

Owen’s hand, reaching out to help fend the boat from the schooner’s hull, had encountered a craft of some sort moored alongside. By the feel of it, as his fingers ran along the gunwale, it was almost certainly a native dugout. Undoubtedly the craft in which the two strange natives that Sentul and Umat had seen had gone ashore—and which Gaffney, it was quite apparent now, had borrowed for his own use.

“Yes; he’s here, all right,” he whispered back. “And he’s come out here without his crowd—obviously to try his persuasive powers on the skipper first. If that doesn’t work, he’s probably got the crew ashore there lined up and ready to enforce his demands by means of a little knife-sticking.”

“A downy bird—damn him!” gritted Naylor.

By the sense of touch they discovered that the dugout was made fast to the bottom rung of a rope ladder that hung down over the schooner's side.

Owen gave his orders in a scarcely audible voice.

"Make fast here, too," he told the two Malays. "And remain in the boat. Understand?"

"Yes, Tuan," they both answered.

Owen turned to Naylor.

"Come on," he said—and started up the rope ladder.

What sound was made was drowned out by the sougning of the wind.

Owen swung over the rail to the deck.

Naylor joined him.

Aft, the light seeped out on deck from what was now seen to be the cabin skylight. Elsewhere darkness. Owen's eyes strained forward and round him. Queer! There was, except for the cabin, no evidence of any life aboard. No sign of the crew.

He touched Naylor on the shoulder, cautioning silence, moved aft along the deck—and, with Naylor beside him, came to an abrupt stop a few feet away from the cabin skylight. From here he could see down into the cabin; and, from below, the skylight being open, even the gurgle now of liquor as it was being poured from bottle to glass could be plainly heard.

Two men were sitting at the table. One was Gaffney. The other, a rather youngish man, was naked to the waist, his only attire apparently being a pair of cotton trousers. His black hair, neglected and sadly in need of trimming, was matted, and this, with the many days' growth of beard on his chin and jowls, gave the fellow both a disreputable and sinister appearance. His left arm, bound around with a bloodstained bandage, was supported by a sling consisting of a dirty strip of cloth suspended from his neck.

Owen drew in his breath in a quick, startled way. His brain, numbed for an instant, was virile again, functioning swiftly. Kaya Dâlam's story . . . The hiding of the purple ball on the island . . . The night at sea on the *Orsu* when Black and White were murdered, and Gray, the murderer, was wounded in the arm . . . Tonight, when two strange natives had appeared in Gaffney's camp, and Gaffney, after talking to them, had suddenly, as Sentul had described it, burst out into great laughter.

Owen's eyes were narrowed, his lips drawn hard together. Yes, he knew now why Gaffney had laughed! Gaffney had had reason to laugh. Birds of a feather! It must have seemed like a miracle to Gaffney. This was the *Orsu*.

That man down there in the cabin was Gray—Gray, back here for the purple ball!

It was Gaffney who was pouring from the bottle. It was Gaffney who spoke now.

“If you weren’t so drunk,” said Gaffney easily, “you’d have got the hang of it from the start—Mister Gray.”

“*Gray!*” —it came in a tense undertone from Naylor.

Owen nodded shortly—but his eyes did not leave the scene in the cabin below.

“I’m not so drunk as maybe you think I am,” Gray snarled. “Not so drunk but that I’d like to know who told you my name was Gray; and, likewise, I’d like to know who the hell asked you to have a drink?”

Gaffney laughed—and drank.

“You wouldn’t refuse a chap a few fingers, would you?” he returned affably. “All I’m asking you to do is to listen to reason—and you’ll hear something good.”

Gray did not appear to be over-readily convinced.

“Is that so?” he retorted. “Who the devil are you, anyway? You come barging aboard here alone in my dugout. Where are those two fellows of mine that I sent ashore? And what the blazes are you doing on this island, anyway?”

Gaffney emptied his glass—and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“And there’s a bunch of interrogation marks for you!” he observed coolly. “But they’re fair enough. Gaffney’s my name. Why I’ve taken up temporary residence on this island here is part of *your* story—that, I fancy, we’ll come to in a minute or so. Your two Malays are all right—no harm’s come to them. From what they tell me, you spotted the camp-fires coming in—which was about the last sort of thing you expected or wanted to see—and sent those two birds ashore to get a line on things. Knowing what you came back here for, I can’t say I blame you for getting the wind up. I would myself.”

“What’s that?” rasped Gray. “What do you mean by saying you know what I came back here for?”

“A purple ball,” grinned Gaffney, “that you hid under the roots of a certain tree—only it’s not there any more.”

“By God!” Gray reared himself up on his feet as he whipped a revolver from his trousers’ pocket. “So you’ve got it, have you? Well, you’ll —”

“Oh, sit down!” drawled Gaffney. “There’s no earthly use going off the deep end! I haven’t got it—but I know where it is.”

“Where?”

“Somebody on the *Nepenthe*, I don’t know who, has got it.”

Gray slumped back into his chair.

“And what may that be? The—whatever you call it?” Gray’s teeth clamped together.

Gaffney told him—while Owen listened, too. Beginning with Kaya Dâlam’s story, and ending with the *Nepenthe* drifting on the reef, it was a fairly accurate recital.

“So you see,” Gaffney finished, “there’s juicy pickings aboard there—to say nothing of the purple ball. And by the way”—he helped himself, uninvited, to another drink—“what’s in that grisly purple ball, anyway?”

“None of your damned business!” Gray shot out sourly.

“Oh, all right, if you feel that way about it,” Gaffney smiled complacently. “If you want the purple ball all for your lonesome, stick to it, my bucko! I’ve told you how many thousand pounds’ worth of dope there is on the *Nepenthe*, and I’m satisfied with that. I was only thinking that if we got our hands on all that stuff, maybe you might like to sit in on a fifty-fifty divvy including the purple ball.”

Gray became suddenly interested—he leaned forward across the table.

“Maybe I would,” he grunted. “But you didn’t say anything about grabbing that dope before. How’s that going to be done? Tell me that first.”

“Sure, I’ll tell you!” Gaffney laughed shortly. “That’s what I’ve come for. But let’s get everything straight as a starter. I want to check up on how many men we’ve got. Those two natives you sent ashore spun me a yarn. They said they were paddling just as day broke from some island to another, and they ran into you becalmed. There didn’t seem to be anyone on the schooner, so they climbed on board—and found you, soused to the gills, down in the cabin. They said there wasn’t anyone else. Is that right?”

Gray scowled.

“Maybe I’d had a drink or two,” he growled; “but it was mostly this arm of mine that was raising hell with me. It was the morning after that thieving devil, Kaya Dâlam, made his getaway. The rest of it is right enough. One of them could speak a bit of English, and I know a few words of their lingo. I offered them a good screw to sail the schooner for me—they said they knew how to get to Laolu—and, as soon as a breeze sprang up, we — —”

“Did you land at Laolu?” Gaffney interrupted sharply.

“What for?” inquired Gray disgustedly. “D’you think I’m a bloody fool to go showing myself off? All I wanted was to pick up Laolu so’s to get my bearings. This island’s due south—and there’s a compass aboard, even if I’m no blooming shark of a sailor. Well, I picked up Laolu—and here I am.”

“So I see,” murmured Gaffney pleasantly. “And a bit shorthanded in that blow out there tonight, I’d say.”

“Oh, hell,” ejaculated Gray contemptuously, “we got along all right! Why wouldn’t we? Radford never had more than a crew of three natives with him. She’s no four-master.”

“All right. With your two chaps, then, who’ll have to take a hand whether they like it or not, yourself, and my crowd, leaving out the two swine that Heath weaned away from me,” Gaffney calculated, “we’ll be twenty-two all told. That’s enough.”

“Enough for what?” demanded Gray. “I’m no mind-reader.”

“Enough to grab the *Nepenthe*, of course!” Gaffney broke into a guffaw. “The only thing to stop us is the wind. We may have to wait a bit for that—but anyway, they don’t know you’re here, and they can’t see around the point. We’re sitting pretty and there’s no use taking chances even if we have to hold back for a day or two.”

“The wind?” Gray screwed up his eyebrows. “What do you mean—the wind? There’s plenty of wind.”

“Yes—on the other side of the island. But we’re in the lee. Nothing but flurries here—you came in with the way you already had on the hooker. I’m not sure we could work out around that point the way it is now.”

“You talk like a cross-word puzzle,” sniffed Gray. “I’m not wise yet; but if it’s a question of getting around that point, wind or no wind, that’s easy if you can run an engine—which I can’t, damn it, worse luck, or I’d have been here before.”

“An engine!” exclaimed Gaffney. “You mean the schooner’s got an auxiliary engine?”

“That’s what I said.”

“But Kaya Dâlam didn’t say anything about an engine— —”

“There’s more than one thing Kaya Dâlam didn’t say according to what you’ve told me,” Gray broke in with a snarl. “It’s a good thing for him he’s dead—or he wouldn’t have died as pleasantly as he did!”

“An engine!” Gaffney cried out hilariously. “I’ll say I can run any old sort of thing that you’d have aboard here—or I’d eat my shirt! We’re all set!”

“Spill it!” invited Gray.

“Listen!” chortled Gaffney. “It’s so easy I’m almost ashamed to do it. I’ll go ashore now, round up all my natives, likewise your two, and bring them back on board here. Then we up anchor and round that point. It’s like we were standing in from sea. They won’t suspect anything on the *Nepenthe*. Why should they? The natives will be lying doggo behind the rails until they get the high-sign. There’s deep water off the reef where the *Nepenthe* piled up. We lay ourselves alongside, and with a few slit throats it’s all over in a minute or two. Then we tranship that snug little fortune in dope, to say nothing of that precious purple ball of yours that somebody is damned well going to cough up, and — —”

Owen’s lips were suddenly pressed against Naylor’s ear.

“Time to sit in,” he breathed. “You cover Gray. I’ll take care of Gaffney. Slip off your shoes, and come along.”

Followed by Naylor, Owen moved back to the companionway leading down into the cabin. He made no sound in his stocking feet as he descended, or if he did, it was lost to the two occupants of the cabin in Gray’s sudden outburst of boisterous laughter.

“Some head you’ve got, my lad!” Gray was roaring out enthusiastically as Owen and the engineer reached the cabin threshold. “I’ll go fifty-fifty on that, all right! You bet your life! Here, have a drink on it, and then — —”

Gray’s jaw sagged—he was staring into the muzzle of Naylor’s revolver.

Gaffney had leaped to his feet, his hand streaking for his jacket pocket.

“Don’t do that, Gaffney!” Owen warned coldly as he held a bead on the erstwhile second officer. “There are so many lives at stake that yours doesn’t count—and I really do not need any added excuse.”

Gaffney’s face had gone a chalky white. His hand dropped to his side.

Gray’s revolver was lying on the table. Naylor picked it up and put it in his pocket.

“Take Gaffney’s too,” directed Owen tersely. “It’s one of those he forgot to send back to us!” And then, as Naylor complied, and stripped Gaffney’s pocket: “Give Sentul and Umat a shout. Tell them to dig up some lashings and bring them down here.”

Gray swore virulently. Gaffney’s tongue circled his lips as though they were parched.

Sentul and Umat appeared in the cabin each with a coil of small rope.

“A favorite pastime of yours, Gaffney,” said Owen icily; then he turned to the two Malays. “Tie these men up,” he ordered. “Look out for that

wounded arm, though. Lash his right hand behind his back. Naylor, since it's your profession, I fancy you can run that auxiliary engine we've heard about, if Gaffney can."

Gaffney's tongue was still circling his lips.

"What are you going to do with us?" he croaked out hoarsely.

"I'll give you one guess," replied Owen shortly.

It was breaking daylight when the *Orsu* made fast alongside the *Nepenthe*—but the native mutineers were not lying doggo behind the rails, and Gaffney was not in command.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW THE PIECES FITTED

THE *Orsu* had been two days out from Evil Island. Fairer weather had set in, but there was still a stiff breeze and a running sea.

It was mid-afternoon. Owen, on watch, stood near the taffrail. His eyes ranged forward, past Tanu at the wheel, to where Gaffney and Gray sat on the schooner's deck, their backs propped against the foremast. Gaffney was manacled with irons procured from the *Nepenthe*. Gray, by reason of his wounded arm, though kept under strict surveillance, was allowed to go about unfettered.

A sullen pair—trapped! Both murderers. What were their thoughts? Gray wouldn't talk—it was as though he had legal counsel at his elbow. Questioned again and again, his only answer was:

"It's all a bloody lie, and that crawling skunk, Kaya Dâlam, was a bloody liar. I don't know anything about any purple ball."

Owen shrugged his shoulders. Quite so! The man, from his viewpoint, would have been a fool to say anything else perhaps. Not that it would do him any good in the long run! Tomorrow, Gray and Gaffney too, would be in the meshes of the law—at Shanghai.

Owen's eyes, shifting, rested on two of the *Nepenthe's* boats that had been stowed amidships—the other boats, together with the dugout belonging to Gray's two natives, had been, under Carlin's supervision, deliberately destroyed beyond any possibility of repair.

Owen's mind became involuntarily retroactive—as it had many times before in the last two days. What was to be the end of all this?

The China coast—Shanghai—was the nearest landfall he could make where he could definitely depend on securing the medical assistance that was so desperately and urgently needed. He had calculated on three days from Evil Island—if the wind held. It had more than held. Yesterday the schooner's deck had been for the most part awash, as, close-reefed, she had plunged through the heavy seas.

Provisions and water from the *Nepenthe* had been put aboard the *Orsu*—all aboard here now had brought with them their personal belongings—Anne Morlan, as reverently as those preceding her, had been committed to the deep. No time had been lost in getting away from Evil Island. The native mutineers had been left there. What else could have been done with them?

There was no room for them on the *Orsu*, in any case, to say nothing of the fact that it would have been practically an impossibility to round them up. The authorities later on, via the medium of a gunboat probably, would dispose of them as the law might provide; meanwhile, with all the boats destroyed, except those two that had been transhipped to the *Orsu*, they could not escape from the island, let alone carry any loot away with them from the *Nepenthe*. But food and water were there for them in plenty. They had only to swim out to the yacht, knowing that it was deserted, and help themselves.

Thousands of pounds' worth of morphine and heroin! That, too, was a matter for the authorities to handle. No part of it had been brought aboard the *Orsu*.

But the purple ball had!

Owen's lips were suddenly compressed. At the present moment it was in his dunnage bag down there in the cabin. Not a particularly secure receptacle for it, perhaps; but, in view of the confined space, the close quarters, and the overcrowded cabin it would be practically impossible for anyone to get at it without being discovered. Everyone knew it was there. The dunnage bag was therefore, as it were, sacrosanct. There were not the same opportunities here as there had been on the *Nepenthe* to—

Tanu, at the wheel, met an on-rushing comber in masterly fashion. The *Orsu*, lifting to it, shook herself free of a cloud of spray and raced onward.

Owen's mind raced onward too. The purple ball—the genesis of all this welter of blood and the toll of lives that had been taken! What was the end to be? How many times had he asked himself that question? He could not answer it. He did not know. But out of that welter there had come something, the most priceless boon in life for which he thanked God with all his heart—Doris. Last night she had stood beside him when he had taken his trick at the wheel there. He inhaled again now the fragrance of her hair as the wind had blown it against his cheek. Her lips in shy, wonderful surrender! Doris! Yes, he might well thank God! Life's vista, with all its hopes and aspirations, and its happiness that was theirs for the claiming, stretched out before them. There was no wealth, in its crass meaning, to share between them; but there was a wealth untold that was theirs in a joint account, a wealth not measured in pounds, shillings, and pence—something that could not be bought with money—they had youth and love.

And for one other thing, too, his heart was full of gratitude. While still not wholly recovered, still lacking the full measure of her strength, Doris was now definitely out of danger.

Not so Paul Stavert! Stavert had never rallied. He had remained in a state of almost complete coma from the time he had collapsed in the doorway of his, Owen's, cabin on the *Nepenthe*.

The cramped quarters of the *Orsu* had not lent themselves any too well to being metamorphosed into a sick bay. There was one small stateroom, if what was scarcely more than a cubby-hole could be dignified by such a term, that opened aft off the main cabin. This, essentially for such privacy as it afforded, had been allotted to Doris. The settee on the port side of the main cabin had been transformed into as comfortable a bed as possible, apportioned to Stavert, and that side of the cabin had been partitioned off by means of an improvised curtain consisting of a piece of sailcloth. The others aboard had taken their rest when and where they could—mostly in the schooner's hold, which was at least dry and a protection from the wave-swept deck.

Stavert—Shanghai tomorrow—if nothing went amiss! But Stavert appeared to be sinking rapidly. It was not likely that they would reach Shanghai with Stavert alive, or that, if they did, medical assistance would then be any longer of avail. Suppose Stavert died. What then? What about Count Gaspard Luvac? What was to be done with him?

Either Paul Stavert or Count Gaspard Luvac had certainly killed Lao-ti and Anne Morlan, probably also Kaya Dâlam, and quite possibly Roach as well. He, Owen, had no shred of doubt in his mind but that one of the two was guilty. But belief, however deep-seated it might be, was not proof. He had no proof. Nor, so far as he could see now, was anything in the way of proof likely to be forthcoming.

Which one of the two was it?

Queer about Count Gaspard Luvac since they had come aboard the *Orsu*! What was the man's game? He had been assiduous in his attentions to Paul Stavert—more than assiduous—constant. He had constituted himself Stavert's nurse, and had barely left the other for a moment day or night. Yes; quite queer! There had never appeared to be any love lost between the two on the *Nepenthe*!

Owen swung around. Someone's head had appeared above the cabin hatch—Carlin's. And Carlin now was coming hurriedly across the deck. The man seemed agitated.

"What is it?" Owen questioned tersely.

Carlin shook his head.

"I'm not sure," he said, "except that Count Luvac says there's been a change in Mr. Stavert's condition, and that Count Luvac would like to see

you in the cabin below at once. I'll take over."

"All right," returned Owen briefly. "You know the course. Keep her as she goes."

A change in Paul Stavert's condition—not at all probable that it was one for the better! Owen ran across the deck, and down into the cabin. Count Luvac was standing at the foot of the companionway. No one else was there. Blaine and Naylor had turned in forward, Owen knew, and Doris was aft there in her own small room.

"Well?" he asked bluntly. "What's happened? Carlin said you wanted to see me about Stavert."

"Yes," Count Luvac answered with equal bluntness. "He's showing signs of returning consciousness—but I do not think there is any doubt that it is anything other than the beginning of the end. Stavert is dying. Will you be good enough to let me have the purple ball?"

Owen stared in blank amazement.

"Good enough to let you have the purple ball?" he repeated numbly. And then anger and suspicion came. "You've got a hell of a nerve!" he ejaculated fiercely. "What do you want with the purple ball?"

"I want to try an experiment."

There was something in the inflection of Count Luvac's voice that gave Owen's temper pause.

"An experiment?" he echoed mechanically.

"Yes," urged Count Luvac hurriedly; "and I'm afraid there's none too much time. Just an experiment—that you will witness. I couldn't very well steal the ball here, you know—and I'm not likely to rush on deck and throw myself overboard with it, which is the only possible thing I could do in order to retain it in my possession."

Count Luvac was unarmed, and in that sense was powerless. Also the man seemed to be rational enough—and in deadly earnest. What was back of the other's mind? Owen hesitated an instant, then he walked over to the corner of the cabin, opened his dunnage bag, and took out the purple ball.

He held it in his hand, looking at it for a moment. The keyhole had been nearly drilled through. What was it that Naylor, who had examined it, had said? Barely a film of metal left. Another turn of the brace, and the bit would have sunk down through the skin. Did it make any difference? That wouldn't have opened the ball, would it?

"I don't understand what you're driving at," he said gruffly as he handed the ball to Count Luvac; "but I warn you now, with no thought of being

melodramatic, that at the slightest indication of trickery you'll find yourself, without a second's hesitation on my part, in even worse case than Stavert is."

"There won't be any—trickery," Count Luvac replied through set lips. "Come with me to Stavert."

Owen followed across the cabin. Count Luvac lifted the sailcloth curtain aside. Stavert, emaciated, white of face where the skin showed through his unshaven cheeks, lay there with his eyes open.

Unless one had good sea-legs, it was difficult to stand here in the cabin with any degree of stability against the plunging of the *Orsu* as she took the seas close-hauled. Owen spread his feet wide apart—as did Count Gaspard Luvac.

Stavert's eyes traveled vacantly from Owen to Count Luvac—then narrowed suddenly as they rested on the purple ball. Count Luvac, with the ball nesting in his cupped hands, held it in plain view of the sick man.

Stavert's lips moved.

"Open it," he said. "Asked Captain Heath to—open it before—not too late yet."

"But you already know what's inside," Count Luvac stated quietly. "You'll admit that, won't you?"

"That's a leading question," replied Stavert weakly—and forced what was meant to be a debonair smile. "You're a—a jolly joker, Count! I've never seen what's inside."

"I am well aware of that," returned Count Luvac as quietly as before. "I said you *knew* what was inside."

No answer. The smile still lingered, but Stavert had closed his eyes.

Count Luvac leaned over the bed.

"Stavert," he asked, "do you remember the old white-haired gentleman with the side-burns and moustache who could scarcely read even through the thick lenses that his failing sight required, and who came out with you and Mrs. Stavert on the *Oratanga* to Singapore not so many weeks ago? He sat at the next table to you, you know, and sometimes used to watch you at your bridge games in the smoking room where he was tolerated as a harmless onlooker."

Stavert's eyes opened again and fixed themselves intently on Count Luvac's face—but it was a full minute before he spoke.

"I grasp the thought," he murmured at last—and the smile was back on his lips once more. "You're that same dear old johnny, all right. Both Myrna

and I kept thinking all the time we were on the *Nepenthe* that you looked like—like a distant relative, if you get my meaning, and our fingers were crossed, but we couldn't place you. Jolly well played, old top, I'd say! But would you mind telling me who the hell you are, anyway?"

"Think back a bit"—Count Luvac's voice was strangely gentle—"ten years ago—that night at Harrowgate—Kramonsky's safe—too bad you didn't confine your activities to leeches and moneylenders of his type—you did me brown that night, Stavert—only your name was Williams then."

"Yes"—Stavert raised himself with a desperate effort to his elbow—"and yours was Curle. I didn't see your face that night, it was too dark; but I read the newspaper account of my—awfully bad form to repeat it, of course, but I'm only quoting—daring and clever escapade, and the discomfiture of the official attached to the priceless old C.I.D. who was in charge of the case. So that's who you are, eh? I expect you've gone up in the world since then. Inspector now, I take it. Inspector Curle of Scotland Yard—what?"

"Yes," said Count Gaspard Luvac, "I am Inspector Curle of Scotland Yard."

Stavert, his strength ebbing, had dropped back on his pillow.

Mechanically Owen braced himself against a vicious lurch as the *Orsu* heeled to starboard. He stared at the man he had known as Count Gaspard Luvac. His mind seemed suddenly to have become chaotic. He saw the Scotland Yard man lean closer over Stavert.

"Listen, Stavert," Inspector Curle said gravely. "I'm sorry to say this, but you know it yourself as well as I do—you're going out. Come clean—it's the only compensation you can ever make. Bessner has confessed. You know that, too. That was the code message you got the afternoon that Roach was killed. I've got Roach's copy of that message. He had started to decode it—I was able to complete the decoding. It is quite obvious, isn't it, not only that you killed Roach, but why you did it?"

Owen had to lean over the bed now, too, to catch Stavert's feeble words.

"Can't outbid—grand slam in no-trumps." The debonair smile struggled again for existence. "Most frightfully awful affliction—being noseey. Sorry for Roach, though. But no other way. Had to do it. Anybody see—hypodermic syringe? Took it from Anne Morlan's room. Follow me? Nerves a bit wobbly before—committing—dire deed. Gave myself a shot—of dope. 'Fraid I lost syringe in Roach's quarters. No intenton of incriminating—tell her, will you? No—by God—she's dead!"

"Stavert"—Inspector Curle's voice was suddenly sharp and insistent, raised as though to pierce through to the other's dulling consciousness.

"There's one other thing. I know practically everything else. Was it you or Lao-ti who killed Kaya Dâlam?"

"I'll tell you," replied Stavert faintly. "Don't mind in the least, I assure you. It was Lao-ti. I was in the wireless house that afternoon, and — —"

"You mean just after you had killed Roach?" Inspector Curle's interjection was as swift as a rapier's thrust.

"Yes; but—but don't be crude," complained Stavert with an attempt at his old-time insouciance. "A wily old bird—Lao-ti. He came up on the boat deck—had the purple ball attached to a yard or more of adhesive tape—saw him stick it down one of the ventilators—he had to hide it temporarily, of course—I wasn't dead sure which ventilator—thought I'd retrieve it when it got dark and everybody was asleep—so did he—and — —"

"And so you got Lao-ti, but you didn't get the purple ball," supplied Inspector Curle as Stavert's voice trailed off.

There was silence for a minute, and then Stavert spoke again.

"Bright boy, Curle—you'll go far!" he whispered. "Glad now it was a rotten poor shot I took at you, Captain Heath. Knew then Doris Carroll must have the ball—no one else could—watched her—saw her go to Captain Heath's cabin later on—Captain Heath'll tell you — —"

Again Stavert's voice died away.

"And then Anne Morlan?" Inspector Curle probed. "Tell us, Stavert—while you can."

Stavert fought valiantly for his breath.

"Not bloodthirsty—really!" he gasped. "Self-preservation, and all that sort of thing, you know. Had to open it—get at the kernel. If we took to the boats—no chance of carrying the damned ball away—without getting nipped in the long run. She caught me at it, and so — —"

Stavert didn't speak any more. His head had sagged down on his pillow.

Inspector Curle after a moment stood upright—and significantly lifted aside the sailcloth curtain.

"He's dead," he said.

Owen, followed by Inspector Curle, stepped out into the cabin proper.

Doris was standing there. Her eyes were wet.

"I heard most of what Inspector Curle said," she told them catchily. "Enough to know—though I could hear scarcely anything of Mr. Stavert's replies. It's almost impossible to believe that it was Mr. Stavert. He—he did not seem to be that kind of a man at all. He—he was always so gay, and—and gallant."

Owen stared at her—and nodded.

“As Stavert would have put it, I grasp your meaning,” he said a little unsteadily. “He was the most likable murderer I ever knew.” The words sounded out of place, almost facetious, in his own ears. He did not mean them that way. The man had been an out-and-out killer, contemptuous of human life where his ends might be served thereby; but Owen was conscious that a lump, nevertheless, had gathered in his throat. He turned to Inspector Curle. “I apologize to you for my suspicions, and the several run-ins we’ve had. But, of course, I did not know.”

“Quite all right,” Inspector Curle answered heartily. “The one bit of humor for me in the whole ghastly business! I had to keep up appearances myself, you know.”

“Yes,” said Owen, “I see that now; but there’s still a lot I don’t understand. You spoke to Stavert, for instance, of someone named Bessner, who had confessed. Would you mind explaining that—or is it an official secret?”

“No; far from it!” replied Inspector Curle grimly. “It was a murder that furnished the newspapers with a lot of scare-heads. You may have read about the affair. In any case, about five months ago, Sir Hartney Harris was killed in his town house in London, and something in the neighborhood of eight thousand pounds in Treasury notes were stolen. Sir Hartney was getting on in years, and it was common knowledge that he had acquired, and nursed fanatically almost, a distrust of all banking institutions. And, for this reason, he had installed what he believed to be an impregnable safe in his own home. There’s no good going into details now. The safe was blown, the money taken, and Sir Hartney, who presumably had surprised the burglars at their work, was murdered. At the time this occurred there had been a number of guests in the house—and amongst these guests were Mr. and Mrs. Paul Stavert. We had been after Stavert for years—but had never been able to pin anything on him. He kept popping up here and there under one name or another—and was away before we could nail him. Mrs. Stavert, I am afraid, was almost as clever, plausible, and unscrupulous as Stavert himself. They were well educated; their manners were charming; they were constantly worming themselves into the best circles, making their hauls, making their getaways—and then reappearing again, perhaps on the Continent, perhaps in America, or perhaps even again favoring England with their presence. On this occasion, though we had identified them and were satisfied beyond question that they were the guilty ones, we had not, as usual, the slightest shred of evidence on which to hold them. But Scotland Yard was determined this time to get the ‘goods’ on them, as they say in America, even if they had

to be followed to the ends of the earth. I was detailed to follow them. That's why I'm here. But before the Staverts and myself had left England on the *Oratanga*, a safe-worker named Bessner had become implicated, and had been apprehended. A few days ago, the afternoon that Kaya Dâlam was murdered, to be exact, Bessner broke down and confessed that he and Stavert had killed Sir Hartney."

Owen's eyes held a puzzled look.

"But how did you know that?" he questioned incredulously. "We were out here in the uttermost parts of the Peninsula—anchored off Evil Island, if you want to give it that name, at the time."

"Roach," said Inspector Curle succinctly through straightened lips. "That's why Roach died."

"I still don't understand."

"I'll try to make it plain," Inspector Curle smiled without humor. "Let's follow the sequence of events. Shortly after we landed at Singapore from the *Oratanga*, I discovered that Stavert and his wife had accepted an invitation from Mr. Morlan for a cruise on the *Nepenthe*. I consulted the British Consul. The British Consul consulted the French Consul. I know French as well as I know English. My mother was French. Cables passed between Singapore, France, and England. I became a guest on the *Nepenthe*, vouched for by the French Consul. Is that clear?"

"Oh, yes," said Owen readily, "I can see that. But the rest? What followed?" He pointed to the purple ball that Inspector Curle was still holding in his hand. "You accused Stavert of knowing what was inside of that. How could that be? It has certainly not been opened."

The three were braced against the cabin table to meet the *Orsu's* pitch and roll. Inspector Curle looked from one to the other—and again, though he smiled, it was without mirth.

"The radio," he said. "The details were briefly broadcasted from Singapore as a police measure. I heard it one night when I was dummy, and had strolled out into the lounge. Mrs. Stavert heard it—on the night that you, Captain Heath, walked into the lounge and Mrs. Stavert twisted the radio dial this way and that, implying static. I don't just know why. Inherent in her, I take it—crime afoot. Anyway, she had got the gist of it. I had been watching the two as closely as I could. I overheard her telling Stavert about it."

"You mean," Doris put in, with a quick, indrawn breath, "that you, and Mr. and Mrs. Stavert, the three of you, knew all the time what was in that ball—even before Kaya Dâlam was picked up and had told us about it?"

“Yes—exactly that, Miss Carroll,” affirmed Inspector Curle. “But, as I said before, let us take all this in sequence and avoid confusion. I am sure you will both understand far better that way. When we went ashore at Evil Island—I agree that we should continue to call it that for I do not think it could be more appropriately named—I insisted, you will remember, Captain Heath, on having the face of the man who was buried in the sand uncovered. I thought he might be one of a band of international crooks that I might recognize—in which case I could put the Singapore police on the right track. But I did not recognize the man. When the news of Kaya Dâlam’s death was brought aboard, I immediately suspected Stavert—since I already knew Stavert to be a murderer, and— —”

“Five votes were taken as to whether we were to stay at sea or not,” Owen broke in impulsively. “I voted, as you no doubt surmised, to put ourselves in the hands of the authorities. The rest of you voted against it. I can understand Morlan’s vote. Failing to disembark the damning evidence of the dope aboard, and have Mallinson at Laolu take it over, he dared not risk any intensive and official search of the *Nepenthe* being made. I can now understand Lao-ti’s vote. He had killed Kaya Dâlam, and had the purple ball—which he could not open. But I cannot understand either yours or Stavert’s vote.”

“Quite!” agreed Inspector Curle. “I get your point perfectly. So far as I was concerned, I believed that, knowing Stavert’s record, I was well on the track of the murderer of Kaya Dâlam, and that, given a decent leeway, I would be able to lay my hands on the purple ball itself. I was afraid that, if the pinch came and the authorities were about to board us, the possessor of the ball—Stavert, as I then thought—would heave the thing overboard rather than be caught with it, and so the evidence would be lost. As for Stavert’s vote, you are running a bit ahead of the story, for at the time the vote was taken, Stavert had already killed Roach, and the last thing on earth he could afford to do then, quite apart from any connection with the purple ball, was to run into contact with the police. And this is the reason why. It was originally, of course, in code.”

Inspector Curle reached into his pocket and produced one of the yellow forms that were used for wireless messages on the *Nepenthe*.

Owen read it—as did Doris, leaning over Owen’s elbow:

Bessner has confessed. You’re for the rope if caught. They’re sure to wireless the yacht to arrest you. Make your getaway if you can. This is the best I can do for you.

Owen looked up from the message as he handed it back.

"Where did you get this?" he queried blankly.

"It was the reason for Stavert's vote—why he did not want the *Nepenthe* to go back to Singapore—and the police." Inspector Curle's face was set. "Where did I get it? Well, a part of it out of the pocket of Roach's dressing-gown when you and I had our little mutual hold-up that night in Roach's sleeping quarters off the wireless room. As I said before, Roach had got along far enough with his decoding to give me the key—so I was able to complete it. What happened then in view of Stavert's confession is now indisputable—though it was fairly obvious, anyhow. Sometime during that afternoon, probably before Stavert returned on board from our search for the purple ball on the island, Roach received that message. I don't know who sent it, or where it came from; for, on Roach's copy, it was unsigned, and there was nothing to indicate its point of origin. But the presumption is that it was from some pal of Stavert in Singapore acting on cable advice from London. Anyway, Roach with his mania for codes set to work on it. He hadn't, as the outcome showed, completed his deciphering of the message when Stavert returned from the island, or at least at the time when he delivered the message to Stavert. You can see what then occurred as well as I can. You heard what Stavert said about Roach being 'nosey.' He was afraid of Roach's proclivity for delving into all codes that came his way, and Roach's boast, which was known to everyone, that there was none he could not solve. He killed Roach so that Roach might not decipher the message, and he wrecked the wireless set at the same time so that, if anyone else were able to operate it, no order for his arrest would come aboard. After that, I have no doubt he searched frantically for any copy that Roach might have made of the message, or any scribblings that Roach might have made in an attempt to decipher it."

"That must be why, then," Doris exclaimed with a quick little cry, "he tried to get into the office that night! He thought perhaps Roach had handed in a copy of the message for the files."

Inspector Curle nodded gravely.

"I hadn't heard about that," he said; "but, if Stavert tried to get into the office that night, there is no doubt but that was what he was after."

Owen, swaying with the schooner's lift and fall, indicated the purple ball in Inspector Curle's hand with a jerk of his head.

"And the radio?" he asked. "What was it that came over the radio that you and Mrs. Stavert both heard?—and that I didn't! The contents of that ball there—that lured on both Lao-ti and Stavert to murder?"

“Yes,” said Inspector Curle, with a sudden gruffness in his voice; “I’m coming to that now. It’s the end. The radio announcement itself was very brief—a police announcement—broadcasted in the hope of laying by the heels four men who were wanted for theft and murder, and who we now know to have been Gray and his three companions. The sense of the radio announcement—I am not attempting to repeat it literally—was this. A Mrs. Haynes-Clifford, visiting in Singapore, the wife of a wealthy British diplomat resident in one of the East Indian States, had returned from a ball given in her honor by Sir Runga Saleh, an important Malayan rajah. She was sitting at her dressing table, disrobing, and attended by a native maid. She had been presented by some Indian potentate, through her husband, with a steel jewel case of Oriental design, beautifully enameled in purple—a ball in shape when closed; but which opened like the petals of a flower when its key was pressed down to release the spring. The jewel case was open before her. She had just taken off a diamond necklace and earrings to match, which combined, tritely speaking, were worth a king’s ransom, when Gray and his three fellow-crooks appeared on the scene. The maid screamed and was promptly knifed to death. Mrs. Haynes-Clifford snatched up her jewels, thrust them into the jewel case, in other words this purple ball, and snapped the ball shut. She was knifed in turn—but survived. The key to the purple ball was evidently not in evidence, and, in any case, Gray and his companion had no time to make any search for it. They grabbed up the purple ball and fled.”

Inspector Curle paused, as his eyes fixed dourly on the purple ball that he held loosely in his hand.

“So that’s what’s in here,” he continued in a flat tone. “A good many lives have gone out on account of it—far too many—and there are still more to go. Those two men forward there—Gray and Gaffney. I cannot see where any mercy is deserved or will be shown them when they come to trial. The native crew would certainly never have mutinied under Gaffney if it had not been for their superstitious fears that were aroused to the boiling pitch by the series of murders that were committed on the *Nepenthe* because of this beastly thing. So far as the native crew, who no doubt will be dealt with leniently, and the confiscation of the drugs aboard the *Nepenthe* are concerned, the British Consul at Shanghai will, of course, take over all that. But Gray’s and Gaffney’s cases are in quite another category. We’ll probably find that Gray, whose name, obviously, is not Gray, has half a dozen aliases, and— —”

The *Orsu* rose to a sea—and plunged violently.

The impact threw them all off balance. The purple ball flew from Inspector Curle's hand, crashed against a bulkhead—and opened—like the petals of a flower, as Inspector Curle had said. It was plush-lined. The contents were scattered about the cabin floor.

Owen stared at the strewn jewels. Quite understandable! The keyhole had been drilled through to within the barest fraction of an inch. The blow had broken the remaining film of metal and had released the spring. The glittering necklace seemed suddenly snakelike, treacherous, as it twisted and squirmed there at his feet. The scintillation of the earrings became revolting. His brain was whirling. These gems, in money, were priceless things—but not worth one single drop of all the human blood that had been shed for them!

No one made any effort to pick them up.

Doris reached out her hand and closed it tightly around Owen's arm.

"Oh, Owen, the pity of it!" she cried brokenly—and pointed with her free hand to the slithering ornaments that, with the motion of the *Orsu*, still rolled aimlessly hither and thither on the cabin floor. "All this—for *that*!"

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 Purple Ball*, by Frank L. Packard.]