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by

Stewart Edward White

and

Samuel Hopkins Adams

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"And you know a heap too much"

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THE MYSTERY

BY

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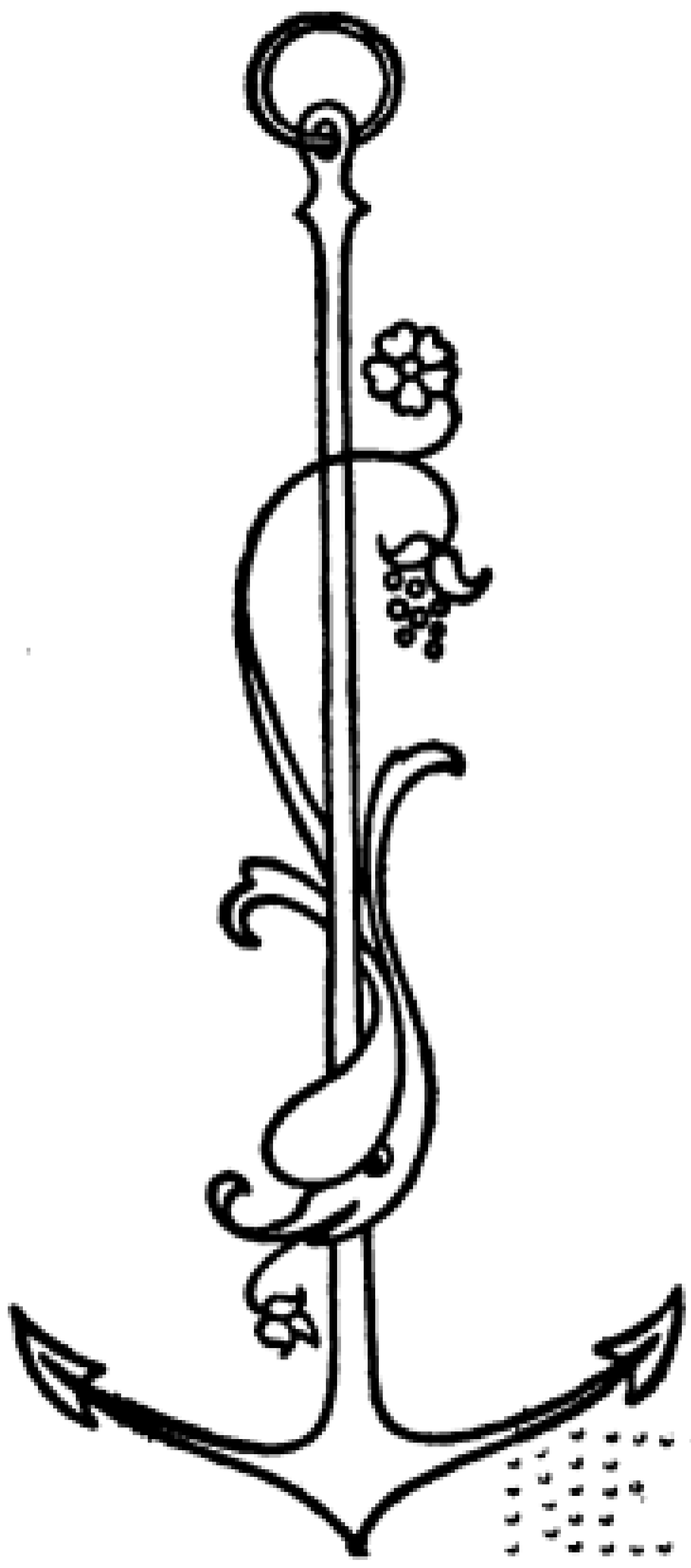
AND

SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS



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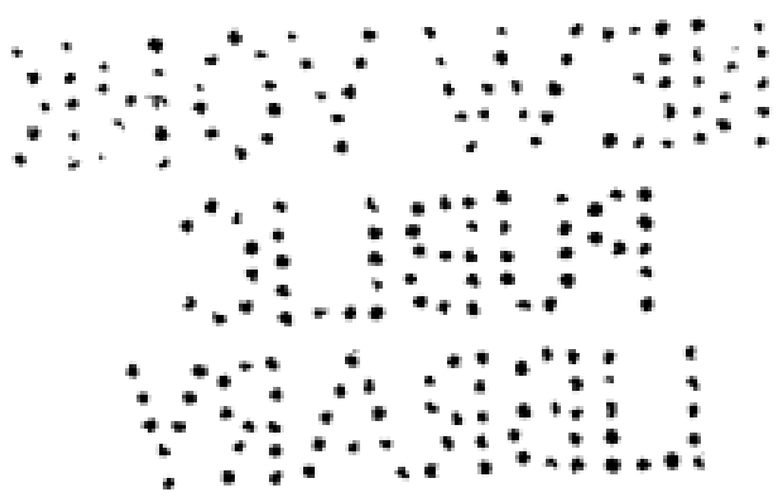

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PART ONE

THE SEA RIDDLE

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I

DESERT SEAS

THE late afternoon sky flaunted its splendour of blue and gold like a banner over the Pacific, across whose depths the trade wind droned in measured cadence. On the ocean's wide expanse a hulk wallowed sluggishly, the forgotten relict of a once brave and sightly ship, possibly the Sphinx of some untold ocean tragedy, she lay black and forbidding in the ordered procession of waves. Half a mile to the east of the derelict hovered a ship's cutter, the turn of her crew's heads speaking expectancy. As far again beyond, the United States cruiser *Wolverine* outlined her severe and trim silhouette against the horizon. In all the spread of wave and sky no other thing was visible. For this was one of the desert parts of the Pacific, three hundred miles north of the steamship route from Yokohama to Honolulu, five hundred miles from the nearest land, Gardner Island, and more than seven hundred northwest of the Hawaiian group.

On the cruiser's quarter-deck the officers lined the starboard rail. Their interest was focussed on the derelict.

"Looks like a heavy job," said Ives, one of the junior lieutenants. "These floaters that lie with deck almost awash will stand more hammering than a mud fort."

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"Wish they'd let us put some six-inch shells into her," said Billy Edwards, the ensign, a wistful expression on his big round cheerful face. "I'd like to see what they would do."

"Nothing but waste a few hundred dollars of your Uncle Sam's money," observed Carter, the officer of the deck. "It takes placed charges inside and out for that kind of work."

"Barnett's the man for her then," said Ives. "He's no economist when it comes to getting results. There she goes!"

Without any particular haste, as it seemed to the watchers, the hulk was shouldered out of the water, as by some hidden leviathan. Its outlines melted into a black, outshowering mist, and from that mist leaped a giant. Up, up, he towered, tossed whirling arms a hundred feet abranch, shivered, and dissolved into a widespread cataract. The water below was lashed into fury, in the midst of which a mighty death agony beat back the troubled waves of the trade wind. Only then did the muffled double boom of the explosion reach the ears of the spectators, presently to be followed by a whispering, swift-skimming wavelet that swept irresistibly across the bigger surges and lapped the ship's side, as for a message that the work was done.

Here and there in the sea a glint of silver, a patch of purple, or dull red, or a glistening apparition of black showed where the unintended victims of the explosion, the gay-hued open-sea fish of the warm waters, had succumbed to the force of the shock. Of the intended victim there was no sign, save a few fragments of wood bobbing in a swirl of water.

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When Barnett, the ordnance officer in charge of the destruction, returned to the ship, Carter complimented him.

"Good clean job, Barnett. She was a tough customer, too."

"What was she?" asked Ives.

"The *Caroline Lemp*, three-masted schooner. Anyone know about her?"

Ives turned to the ship's surgeon, Trendon, a grizzled and brief-spoken veteran, who had at his finger's tips all the lore of all the waters under the reign of the moon.

"What does the information bureau of the Seven Seas know about it?"

"Lost three years ago—spring of 1901—got into ice field off the tip of the Aleutians. Some of the crew froze. Others got ashore. Part of survivors accounted for. Others not. Say they've turned native. Don't know myself."

"The Aleutians!" exclaimed Billy Edwards. "Great Cats! What a drift! How many thousand miles would that be?"

"Not as far as many another derelict has wandered in her time, son," said Barnett.

The talk washed back and forth across the hulks of classic sea mysteries, new and old; of the *City of Boston,* which went down with all hands, leaving for record only a melancholy scrawl on a bit of board to meet the wondering eyes of a fisherman on the far Cornish coast; of the *Great Queensland,* which set out with five hundred and sixty-nine souls aboard, bound by a route unknown to a tragic end; of the *Naronic,*

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with her silent and empty lifeboats alone left, drifting about the open sea, to hint at the story of her fate; of the *Huronian,* which, ten years later, on the same day and date, and hailing from the same port as the *Naronic,* went out into the void, leaving no trace; of Newfoundland captains who sailed, roaring with drink, under the arches of cathedral bergs, only to be prisoned, buried, and embalmed in the one icy embrace; of craft assailed by the terrible one-stroke lightning clouds of the Indian Ocean, found days after, stone blind, with their crews madly hauling at useless sheets, while the officers clawed the compass and shrieked; of burnings and piracies; of pest ships and slave ships, and ships mad for want of water; of whelming earthquake waves, and mysterious suctions, drawing irresistibly against wind and steam power upon unknown currents; of stout hulks deserted in panic although sound and seaworthy; and of others so swiftly dragged down that there was no time for any to save himself; and of a hundred other strange, stirring and pitiful ventures such as make up the inevitable peril and incorrigible romance of the ocean. In a pause Billy Edwards said musingly:

"Well, there was the *Laughing Lass.*"

"How did you happen to hit on her?" asked Barnett quickly.

"Why not, sir? It naturally came into my head. She was last seen somewhere about this part of the world, wasn't she?" After a moment's hesitation he added: "From something I heard ashore I judge we've a commission to keep a watch out for her as well as to destroy derelicts."

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"What about the *Laughing Lass?*" asked McGuire, the paymaster, a New Englander, who had been in the service but a short time.

"Good Lord! don't you remember the *Laughing Lass* mystery and the disappearance of Doctor Schermerhorn?"

"Karl Augustus Schermerhorn, the man whose experiments to identify telepathy with the Marconi wireless waves made such a furore in the papers?"

"Oh, that was only a by-product of his mind. He was an original investigator in every line of physics and chemistry, besides most of the natural sciences," said Barnett. "The government is particularly interested in him because of his contributions to aërial photography."

"And he was lost with the *Laughing Lass?*"

"Nobody knows," said Edwards. "He left San Francisco two years ago on a hundred-foot schooner, with an assistant, a big brass-bound chest, and a ragamuffin crew. A newspaper man named Slade, who dropped out of the world about the same time, is supposed to have gone along, too. Their schooner was last sighted about 450 miles northeast of Oahu, in good shape, and bound westward. That's all the record of her that there is."

"Was that Ralph Slade?" asked Barnett.

"Yes. He was a free-lance writer and artist."

"I knew him well," said Barnett. "He was in our mess in the Philippine campaign, on the *North Dakota*. War correspondent then. It's strange that I never identified him before with the Slade of the *Laughing Lass*."

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"What was the object of the voyage?" asked Ives.

"They were supposed to be after buried treasure," said Barnett.

"I've always thought it more likely that Doctor Schermerhorn was on a scientific expedition," said Edwards. "I knew the old boy, and he wasn't the sort to care a hoot in Sheol for treasure, buried or unburied."

"Every time a ship sets out from San Francisco without publishing to all the world just what her business is, all the world thinks it's one of those wild-goose hunts," observed Ives.

"Yes," agreed Barnett. "Flora and fauna of some unknown island would be much more in the Schermerhorn line of traffic. Not unlikely that some of the festive natives collected the unfortunate professor."

Various theories were advanced, withdrawn, refuted, defended, and the discussion carried them through the swift twilight into the darkness which had been hastened by a high-spreading canopy of storm-clouds. Abruptly from the crow's-nest came startling news for those desolate seas: "Light—ho! Two points on the port bow."

The lookout had given extra voice to it. It was plainly heard throughout the ship.

The group of officers stared in the direction indicated, but could see nothing. Presently Ives and Edwards, who were the keenest-sighted, made out a faint, suffused radiance. At the same time came a second hail from the crow's-nest.

"On deck, sir."

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"Hello," responded Carter, the officer of the deck.

"There's a light here I can't make anything out of, sir."

"What's it like?"

"Sort of a queer general glow."

"General glow, indeed!" muttered Forsythe, among the group aft. "That fellow's got an imagination."

"Can't you describe it better than that?" called Carter.

"Don't make it out at all, sir. 'Tain't any regular and proper light. Looks like a lamp in a fog."

Among themselves the officers discussed it interestedly, as it grew plainer.

"Not unlike the electric glow above a city, seen from a distance," said Barnett, as it grew plainer.

"Yes: but the nearest electric-lighted city is some eight hundred miles away," objected Ives.

"Mirage, maybe," suggested Edwards.

"Pretty hard-working mirage, to cover that distance" said Ives. "Though I've seen 'em——"

"Great heavens! Look at that!" shouted Edwards.

A great shaft of pale brilliance shot up toward the zenith. Under it whirled a maelstrom of varied radiance, pale with distance, but marvellously beautiful. Forsythe passed them with a troubled face, on his way below to report, as his relief went up.

"The quartermaster reports the compass behaving queerly," he said.

Three minutes later the captain was on the bridge. The great ship had swung, and they were speeding

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direct for the phenomenon. But within a few minutes the light had died out.

"Another sea mystery to add to our list," said Billy Edwards. "Did anyone ever see a show like that before? What do you think, Doc?"

"Humph!" grunted the veteran. "New to me. Volcanic, maybe."

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II

THE *LAUGHING LASS*

THE falling of dusk on June the 3d found tired eyes aboard the *Wolverine*. Every officer in her complement had kept a private and personal lookout all day for some explanation of the previous night's phenomenon. All that rewarded them were a sky filmed with lofty clouds, and the holiday parade of the epauletted waves.

Nor did evening bring a repetition of that strange glow. Midnight found the late stayers still deep in the discussion.

"One thing is certain," said Ives. "It wasn't volcanic."

"Why so?" asked the paymaster.

"Because volcanoes are mostly stationary, and we headed due for that light."

"Yes; but did we keep headed?" said Barnett, who was navigating officer as well as ordnance officer, in a queer voice.

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Edwards eagerly.

"After the light disappeared the compass kept on varying. The stars were hidden. There is no telling just where we were headed for some time."

"Then we might be fifty miles from the spot we aimed at."

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"Hardly that," said the navigator. "We could guide her to some extent by the direction of wind and waves. If it was volcanic we ought certainly to have sighted it by now."

"Always some electricity in volcanic eruptions," said Trendon. "Makes compass cut didoes. Seen it before."

"Where?" queried Carter.

"Off Martinique. Pelée eruption. Needle chased its tail like a kitten."

"Are there many volcanoes hereabouts?" somebody asked.

"We're in 162 west, 31 north, about," said Barnett. "No telling whether there are or not. There weren't at last accounts, but that's no evidence that there aren't some since. They come up in the night, these volcanic islands."

"Just cast an eye on the charts," said Billy Edwards. "Full of E. D.'s and P. D.'s all over the shop. Every one of 'em volcanic."

"E. D.'s and P. D.'s?" queried the paymaster.

"Existence doubtful, and position doubtful," explained the ensign. "Every time the skipper of one of these wandering trade ships gets a speck in his eye, he reports an island. If he really does bump into a rock he cuts in an arithmetic book for his latitude and longitude and lets it go at that. That's how the chart makers make a living, getting out new editions every few months."

"But it's a fact that these seas are constantly changing," said Barnett. "They're so little travelled that no one happens to be around to see an island born.

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I don't suppose there's a part on the earth's surface more liable to seismic disturbances than this region."

"Seismic!" cried Billy Edwards, "I should say it was seismic! Why, when a native of one of these island groups sets his heart on a particular loaf of bread up his bread-fruit tree, he doesn't bother to climb after it. Just waits for some earthquake to happen along and shake it down to him."

"Good boy, Billy," said Dr. Trendon, approvingly. "Do another."

"It's a fact," said the ensign, heatedly. "Why, a couple of years back there was a trader here stocked up with a lot of belly-mixture in bottles. Thought he was going to make his pile because there'd been a colic epidemic in the islands the season before. Bottles were labelled 'Do not shake.' That settled his business. Might as well have marked 'em 'Keep frozen' in this part of the world. Fellow went broke."

"In any case," said Barnett, "such a glow as that we sighted last night I've never seen from any volcano."

"Nor I," said Trendon. "Don't prove it mightn't have been."

"I'll just bet the best dinner in San Francisco that it isn't," said Edwards.

"You're on," said Carter.

"Let me in," suggested Ives.

"And I'll take one of it," said McGuire.

"Come one, come all," said Edwards cheerily. "I'll live high on the collective bad judgment of this outfit."

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"To-night isn't likely to settle it, anyhow," said Ives. "I move we turn in."

Expectant minds do not lend themselves to sound slumber. All night the officers of the *Wolverine* slept on the verge of waking, but it was not until dawn that the cry of "Sail-ho!" sent them all hurrying to their clothes. Ordinarily officers of the U. S. Navy do not scuttle on deck like a crowd of curious schoolgirls, but all hands had been keyed to a high pitch over the elusive light, and the bet with Edwards now served as an excuse for the betrayal of unusual eagerness. Hence the quarter-deck was soon alive with men who were wont to be deep in dreams at that hour.

They found Carter, whose watch on deck it was, reprimanding the lookout.

"No, sir," the man was insisting, "she didn't show no light, sir. I'd 'a' sighted her an hour ago, sir, if she had."

"We shall see," said Carter grimly. "Who's your relief?"

"Sennett."

"Let him take your place. Go aloft, Sennett."

As the lookout, crestfallen and surly, went below, Barnett said in subdued tones:

"Upon my word, I shouldn't be surprised if the man were right. Certainly there's something queer about that hooker. Look how she handles herself."

The vessel was some three miles to windward. She was a schooner of the common two-masted Pacific type, but she was comporting herself in a manner uncommon on the Pacific, or any other ocean. Even as Barnett spoke, she heeled well over, and came rush-

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A schooner comporting herself in a manner uncommon on the Pacific

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ing up into the wind, where she stood with all sails shaking. Slowly she paid off again, bearing away from them. Now she gathered full headway, yet edged little by little to windward again.

"Mighty queer tactics," muttered Edwards. "I think she's steering herself."

"Good thing she carries a weather helm," commented Ives, who was an expert on sailing rigs. "Most of that type do. Otherwise she'd have jibed her masts out, running loose that way."

Captain Parkinson appeared on deck and turned his glasses for a full minute on the strange schooner.

"Aloft there," he hailed the crow's-nest. "Do you make out anyone aboard?"

"No, sir," came the answer.

"Mr. Carter, have the chief quartermaster report on deck with the signal flags."

"Yes, sir."

"Aren't we going to run up to her?" asked McGuire, turning in surprise to Edwards.

"And take the risk of getting a hole punched in our pretty paint, with her running amuck that way? Not much!"

Up came the signal quartermaster to get his orders, and there ensued a one-sided conversation in the pregnant language of the sea.

"What ship is that?"

No answer.

"Are you in trouble?" asked the cruiser, and waited. The schooner showed a bare and silent mainpeak.

"Heave to." Now Uncle Sam was giving orders.

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But the other paid no heed.

"We'll make that a little more emphatic," said Captain Parkinson. A moment later there was the sharp crash of a gun and a shot went across the bows of the sailing vessel. Hastened by a flaw of wind that veered from the normal direction of the breeze the stranger made sharply to windward, as if to obey.

"Ah, there she comes," ran the comment along the cruiser's quarter-deck.

But the schooner, after standing for a moment, all flapping, answered another flaw, and went wide about on the opposite tack.

"Derelict," remarked Captain Parkinson. "She seems to be in good shape, too, Dr. Trendon!"

"Yes, sir." The surgeon went to the captain, and the others could hear his deep, abrupt utterance in reply to some question too low for their ears.

"Might be, sir. Beri-beri, maybe. More likely smallpox if anything of that kind. But *some* of 'em would be on deck."

"Whew! A plague ship!" said Billy Edwards. "Just my luck to be ordered to board her." He shivered slightly.

"Scared, Billy?" said Ives. Edwards had a record for daring which made this joke obvious enough to be safe.

"I wouldn't want to have my peculiar style of beauty spoiled by smallpox marks," said the ensign, with a smile on his homely, winning face. "And I've a hunch that that ship is not a lucky find for this ship."

"Then I've a hunch that your hunch is a wrong

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one," said Ives. "How long would you guess that craft to be?"

They were now within a mile of the schooner. Edwards scrutinised her calculatingly.

"Eighty to ninety feet."

"Say 150 tons. And she's a two-masted schooner, isn't she?" continued Ives, insinuatingly.

"She certainly is."

"Well, I've a hunch that that ship is a lucky find for any ship, but particularly for this ship."

"Great Cæsar!" cried the ensign excitedly. "Do you think it's *her?*"

A buzz of electric interest went around the group. Every glass was raised; every eye strained toward her stern to read the name as she veered into the wind again. About she came. A sharp sigh of excited disappointment exhaled from the spectators. The name had been painted out.

"No go," breathed Edwards. "But I'll bet another dinner——"

"Mr. Edwards," called the captain. "You will take the second cutter, board that schooner, and make a full investigation."

"Yes, sir."

"Take your time. Don't come alongside until she is in the wind. Leave enough men aboard to handle her."

"Yes, sir."

The cruiser steamed to within half a mile of the aimless traveller, and the small boat put out. Not one of his fellows but envied the young ensign as he left the ship, steered by Timmins, a veteran bo's'n's mate,

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wise in all the ins and outs of sea ways. They saw him board, neatly running the small boat under the schooner's counter; they saw the foresheet eased off and the ship run up into the wind; then the foresail dropped and the wheel lashed so that she would stand so. They awaited the reappearance of Edwards and the bo's'n's mate when they had vanished below decks, and with an intensity of eagerness they followed the return of the small boat.

Billy Edwards's face as he came on deck was a study. It was alight with excitement; yet between the eyes two deep wrinkles of puzzlement quivered. Such a face the mathematician bends above his paper when some obstructive factor arises between him and his solution.

"Well, sir?" There was a hint of effort at restraint in the captain's voice.

"She's the *Laughing Lass,* sir. Everything shipshape, but not a soul aboard."

"Come below, Mr. Edwards," said the captain. And they went, leaving behind them a boiling cauldron of theory and conjecture.

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III

THE DEATH SHIP

BILLY EDWARDS came on deck with a line of irritation right-angling the furrows between his eyes.

"Go ahead," the quarter-deck bade him, seeing him aflush with information.

"The captain won't believe me," blurted out Edwards.

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Barnett, smiling.

"It certainly is," replied the younger man seriously. "I don't know that I blame him. I'd hardly believe it myself if I hadn't——"

"Oh, go on. Out with it. Give us the facts. Never mind your credibility."

"The facts are that there lies the *Laughing Lass,* a little weather-worn, but sound as a dollar, and not a living being aboard of her. Her boats are all there. Everything's in good condition, though none too orderly. Pitcher half full of fresh water in the rack. Sails all O. K. Ashes of the galley fire still warm. I tell you, gentlemen, that ship hasn't been deserted more than a couple of days at the outside."

"Are you sure all the boats are there?" asked Ives.

"Dory, dingy, and two surf boats. Isn't that enough?"

"Plenty."

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"Been over her, inside and out. No sign of collision. No leak. No anything, except that the starboard side is blistered a bit. No evidence of fire anywhere else. I tell you," said Billy Edwards pathetically, "it's given me a headache."

"Perhaps it's one of those cases of panic that Forsythe spoke of the other night," said Ives. "The crew got frightened at something and ran away, with the devil after them."

"But crews don't just step out and run around the corner and hide, when they're scared," objected Barnett.

"That's true, too," assented Ives. "Well, perhaps that volcanic eruption jarred them so that they jumped for it."

"Pretty wild theory, that," said Edwards.

"No wilder than the facts, as you give them," was the retort.

"That's so," admitted the ensign gloomily.

"But how about pestilence?" suggested Barnett.

"Maybe they died fast and the last survivor, after the bodies of the rest were overboard, got delirious and jumped after them."

"Not if the galley fire was hot," said Dr. Trendon, briefly. "No; pestilence doesn't work that way."

"Did you look at the wheel, Billy?" asked Ives.

"Did I! There's another thing. Wheel's all right, but compass is no good at all. It's regularly bewitched."

"What about the log, then?"

"Couldn't find it anywhere. Hunted high, low, jack, and the game; everywhere except in the big,

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brass-bound chest I found in the captain's cabin. Couldn't break into that."

"Dr. Schermerhorn's chest!" exclaimed Barnett. "Then he was aboard."

"Well, he isn't aboard now," said the ensign grimly. "Not in the flesh. And that's all," he added suddenly.

"No; it isn't all," said Barnett gently. "There's something else. Captain's orders?"

"Oh, no. Captain Parkinson doesn't take enough stock in my report to tell me to withhold anything," said Edwards, with a trace of bitterness in his voice. "It's nothing that I believe myself, anyhow."

"Give *us* a chance to believe it," said Ives.

"Well," said the ensign hesitantly, "there's a sort of atmosphere about that schooner that's almost uncanny."

"Oh, you had the shudders before you were ordered to board," bantered Ives.

"I know it. I'd have thought it was one of those fool presentiments if I were the only one to feel it. But the men were affected, too. They kept together like frightened sheep. And I heard one say to another: 'Hey, Boney, d'you feel like someone was a-buzzin' your nerves like a fiddle-string?' Now," demanded Edwards plaintively, "what right has a jackie to have nerves?"

"That's strange enough about the compass," said Barnett slowly. "Ours is all right again. The schooner must have been so near the electric disturbance that her instruments were permanently deranged."

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"That would lend weight to the volcanic theory," said Carter.

"So the captain didn't take kindly to your go-look-see?" questioned Ives of Edwards.

"As good as told me I'd missed the point of the thing," said the ensign, flushing. "Perhaps he can make more of it himself. At any rate, he's going to try. Here he is now."

"Dr. Trendon," said the captain, appearing. "You will please to go with me to the schooner."

"Yes, sir," said the surgeon, rising from his chair with such alacrity as to draw from Ives the sardonic comment:

"Why, I actually believe old Trendon is excited."

For two hours after the departure of the captain and Trendon there were dull times on the quarter-deck of the *Wolverine*. Then the surgeon came back to them.

"Billy was right," he said.

"But he didn't tell us anything," cried Ives. "He didn't clear up the mystery."

"That's what," said Trendon. "One thing Billy said," he added, waxing unusually prolix for him, "was truer than maybe he knew."

"Thanks," murmured the ensign. "What was that?"

"You said 'Not a living being aboard.' Exact words, hey?"

"Well, what of it?" exclaimed the ensign excitedly. "You don't mean you found dead——?"

"Keep your temperature down, my boy. No. You were exactly right. Not a living being aboard."

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"Thanks for nothing," retorted the ensign.

"Neither human nor other," pursued Trendon.

"What!"

"Food scattered around the galley. Crumbs on the mess table. Ever see a wooden ship without cockroaches?"

"Never particularly investigated the matter."

"Don't believe such a thing exists," said Ives.

"Not a cockroach on the *Laughing Lass*. Ever know of an old hooker that wasn't overrun with rats?"

"No; nor anyone else. Not above water."

"Found a dozen dead rats. No sound or sign of a live one on the *Laughing Lass*. No rats, no mice. No bugs. Gentlemen, the *Laughing Lass* is a charnel ship."

"No wonder Billy's tender nerves went wrong," said Ives, with irrepressible flippancy. "She's probably haunted by cockroach wraiths."

"He'll have a chance to see," said Trendon. "Captain's going to put him in charge."

"By way of apology, then," said Barnett. "That's pretty square."

"Captain Parkinson wishes to see you in his cabin, Mr. Edwards," said an orderly, coming in.

"A pleasant voyage, Captain Billy," said Ives. "Sing out if the goblins git yer."

Fifteen minutes later Ensign Edwards, with a quartermaster, Timmins, the bo's'n's mate, and a crew, was heading a straight course toward his first command, with instructions to "keep company and watch for signals"; and intention to break into the brass-

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bound chest and ferret out what clue lay there, if it took dynamite. As he boarded, Barnett and Trendon, with both of whom the lad was a favourite, came to a sinister conclusion.

"It's poison, I suppose," said the first officer.

"And a mighty subtle sort," agreed Trendon. "Don't like the looks of it." He shook a solemn head. "Don't like it for a damn."

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IV

THE SECOND PRIZE CREW

In semi-tropic Pacific weather the unexpected so seldom happens as to be a negligible quantity. The *Wolverine* met with it on June 5th. From some unaccountable source in that realm of the heaven-scouring trades came a heavy mist. Possibly volcanic action, deranging by its electric and gaseous outpourings the normal course of the winds, had given birth to it. Be that as it may, it swept down upon the cruiser, thickening as it approached, until presently it had spread a curtain between the warship and its charge. The wind died. Until after fall of night the *Wolverine* moved slowly, bellowing for the schooner, but got no reply. Once they thought they heard a distant shout of response, but there was no repetition.

"Probably doesn't carry any fog horn," said Carter bitterly, voicing a general uneasiness.

"No log; compass crazy; without fog signal; I don't like that craft. Barnett ought to have been ordered to blow the damned thing up, as a peril to the high seas."

"We'll pick her up in the morning, surely," said Forsythe. "This can't last for ever."

Nor did it last long. An hour before midnight a pounding shower fell, lashing the sea into phosphorescent whiteness. It ceased, and with the growl of a

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leaping animal a squall furiously beset the ship. Soon the great steel body was plunging and heaving in the billows. It was a gloomy company about the ward-room table. Upon each and all hung an oppression of spirit. Captain Parkinson came from his cabin and went on deck. Constitutionally he was a nervous and pessimistic man with a fixed belief in the conspiracy of events, banded for the undoing of him and his. Blind or dubious conditions racked his soul, but real danger found him not only prepared, but even eager. Now his face was a picture of foreboding.

"Parky looks as if Davy Jones was pulling on his string," observed the flippant Ives to his neighbour.

"Worrying about the schooner. Hope Billy Edwards saw or heard or felt that squall coming," replied Forsythe, giving expression to the anxiety that all felt.

"He's a good sailor man," said Ives, "and that's a staunch little schooner, by the way she handled herself."

"Oh, it will be all right," said Carter confidently. "The wind's moderating now."

"But there's no telling how far out of the course this may have blown him."

Barnett came down, dripping.

"Anything new?" asked Dr. Trendon.

The navigating officer shook his head.

"Nothing. But the captain's in a state of mind," he said.

"What's wrong with him?"

"The schooner. Seems possessed with the notion that there's something wrong with her."

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"Aren't you feeling a little that way yourself?" said Forsythe. "I am. I'll take a look around before I turn in."

He left behind him a silent crowd. His return was prompt and swift.

"Come on deck," he said.

Every man leaped as to an order. There was that in Forsythe's voice which stung. The weather had cleared somewhat, though scudding wrack still blew across them to the westward. The ship rolled heavily. Of the sea naught was visible except the arching waves, but in the sky they beheld again, with a sickening sense of disaster, that pale and lovely glow which had so bewildered them two nights before.

"The aurora!" cried McGuire, the paymaster.

"Oh, certainly," replied Ives, with sarcasm. "Dead in the west. Common spot for the aurora. Particularly on the edge of the South Seas, where they are thick!"

"Then what is it?"

Nobody had an answer. Carter hastened forward and returned to report.

"It's electrical anyway," said Carter. "The compass is queer again."

"Edwards ought to be close to the solution of it," ventured Ives. "This gale should have blown him just about to the centre of interest."

"If only he isn't involved in it," said Carter anxiously.

"What could there be to involve him?" asked McGuire.

"I don't know," said Carter slowly. "Somehow

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I feel as if the desertion of the schooner was in some formidable manner connected with that light."

For perhaps fifteen minutes the glow continued. It seemed to be nearer at hand than on the former sighting; but it took no comprehensible form. Then it died away and all was blackness again. But the officers of the *Wolverine* had long been in troubled slumber before the sensitive compass regained its exact balance, and with the shifting wind to mislead her, the cruiser had wandered, by morning, no man might know how far from her course.

All day long of June 6th the *Wolverine*, baffled by patches of mist and moving rain-squalls, patrolled the empty seas without sighting the lost schooner. The evening brought an envelope of fog again, and presently a light breeze came up from the north. An hour of it had failed to disperse the mist, when there was borne down to the warship a flapping sound as of great wings. The flapping grew louder—waned—ceased—and from the lookout came a hail.

"Ship's lights three points on the starboard quarter."

"What do you make it out to be?" came the query from below.

"Green light's all I can see, sir." There was a pause.

"There's her port light, now. Looks to be turning and bearing down on us, sir. Coming dead for us"—the man's voice rose—"close aboard; less'n two ship's lengths away!"

As for a prearranged scene, the fog-curtain parted. There loomed silently and swiftly the *Laughing Lass*.

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Down she bore upon the greater vessel until it seemed as if she must ram; but all the time she was veering to windward, and now she ran into the wind with a castanet rattle of sails. So close aboard was she that the eager eyes of Uncle Sam's men peered down upon her empty decks—for she was void of life.

Behind the cruiser's blanketing she paid off very slowly, but presently caught the breeze full and again whitened the water at her prow. Forgetting regulations, Ives hailed loudly:

"Ahoy, *Laughing Lass!* Ahoy, Billy Edwards!"

No sound, no animate motion came from aboard that apparition, as she fell astern. A shudder of horror ran across the *Wolverine's* quarter-deck. A wraith ship, peopled with skeletons, would have been less dreadful to their sight than the brisk and active desolation of the heeling schooner.

"Been deserted since early last night," said Trendon hoarsely.

"How can you tell that?" asked Barnett.

"Both sails reefed down. Ready for that squall. Been no weather since to call for reefs. Must have quit her during the squall."

"Then they jumped," cried Carter, "for I saw her boats. It isn't believable."

"Neither was the other," said Trendon grimly.

A hurried succession of orders stopped further discussion for the time. Ives was sent aboard the schooner to lower sail and report. He came back with a staggering dearth of information. The boats were all there; the ship was intact—as intact as when Billy Edwards had taken charge—but the cheery, lovable

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ensign and his men had vanished without trace or clue. As to the how or the wherefore they might rack their brains without guessing. There was the beginning of a log in the ensign's handwriting, which Ives had found with high excitement and read with bitter disappointment.

"*Had squall from northeast,*" it ran. "*Double reefed her and she took it nicely. Seems a seaworthy, quick ship. Further search for log. No result. Have ordered one of crew who is a bit of a mechanic to work at the brass-bound chest till he gets it open. He reports marks on the lock as if somebody had been trying to pick it before him.*"

There was no further entry.

"Dr. Trendon is right," said Barnett. "Whatever happened—and God only knows what it could have been—it happened just after the squall."

"Just about the time of the strange glow," cried Ives.

It was decided that two men and a petty officer should be sent aboard the *Laughing Lass* to make her fast with a cable, and remain on board over night. But when the order was given the men hung back. One of them protested brokenly that he was sick. Trendon, after examination, reported to the captain.

"Case of blue funk, sir. Might as well be sick. Good for nothing. Others aren't much better."

"Who was to be in charge?"

"Congdon," replied the doctor, naming one of the petty officers.

"He's my coxswain," said Captain Parkinson. "A

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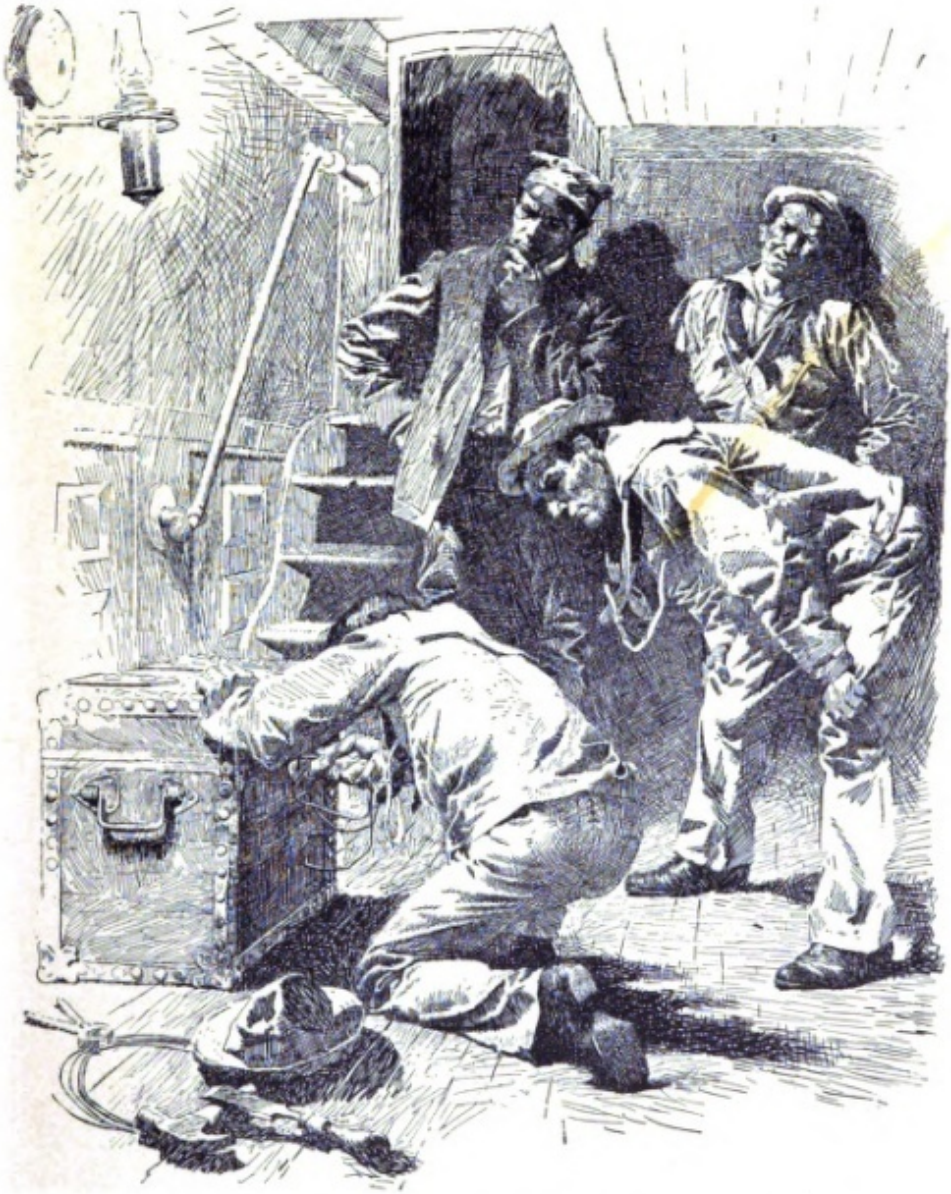

A man who was a bit of a mechanic was set to work
to open the chest

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first-class man. I can hardly believe that he is afraid. We'll see."

Congdon was sent for.

"You're ordered aboard the schooner for the night, Congdon," said the captain.

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any reason why you do not wish to go?"

The man hesitated, looking miserable. Finally he blurted out, not without a certain dignity:

"I obey orders, sir."

"Speak out, my man," urged the captain kindly.

"Well, sir: it's Mr. Edwards, then. You couldn't scare him off a ship, sir, unless it was something—something——"

He stopped, failing of the word.

"You know what Mr. Edwards was, sir, for pluck," he concluded.

"*Was!*" cried the captain sharply. "What do you mean?

"The schooner got him, sir. You don't make no doubt of that, do you, sir?" The man spoke in a hushed voice, with a shrinking glance back of him.

"Will you go aboard under Mr. Ives?"

"Anywhere my officer goes I'll go, and gladly, sir."

Ives was sent aboard in charge. For that night, in a light breeze, the two ships lay close together, the schooner riding jauntily astern. But not until morning illumined the world of waters did the *Wolverine's* people feel confident that the *Laughing Lass* would not vanish away from their ken like a shape of the mist.

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V

THE DISAPPEARANCE

WHEN Barnett come on deck very early in the morning of June 7th, he found Dr. Trendon already up and staring moodily out at the *Laughing Lass*. As the night was calm the tow had made fair time toward their port in the Hawaiian group. The surgeon was muttering something which seemed to Barnett to be in a foreign tongue.

"Thought out any clue, doctor?" asked the first officer.

"*Petit Chel*—Pshaw! *Jolie Celimene!* No," muttered Trendon. "*Marie—Marie*—I've got it! The *Marie Celeste.*"

"Got what? What about her?"

"Parallel case," said Trendon. "Sailed from New York back in the seventies. Seven weeks out was found derelict. Everything in perfect order. Captain's wife's hem on the machine. Boats all accounted for. No sign of struggle. Log written to within forty-eight hours."

"What became of the crew?"

"Wish I could tell you. Might help to unravel our tangle." He shook his head in sudden, unwonted passion.

"Evidently there's something criminal in her record," said Barnett, frowning at the fusty schooner astern. "Otherwise the name wouldn't be painted out."

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"Painted out long ago. See how rusty it is. Schermerhorn's work maybe," replied Trendon. "Secret expedition, remember."

"In the name of wonders, why should he do it?"

"Secret expedition, wasn't it?"

"Um-ah; that's true," said the other thoughtfully. "It's quite possible."

"Captain wishes to see both of you gentlemen in the ward room, if you please," came a message.

Below they found all the officers gathered. Captain Parkinson was pacing up and down in ill-controlled agitation.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we are facing a problem which, so far as I know, is without parallel. It is my intention to bring the schooner which we have in tow to port at Honolulu. In the present unsettled weather we cannot continue to tow her. I wish two officers to take charge. Under the circumstances I shall issue no orders. The duty must be voluntary."

Instantly every man, from the veteran Trendon to the youthful paymaster, volunteered.

"That is what I expected," said Captain Parkinson quietly. "But I have still a word to say. I make no doubt in my own mind that the schooner has twice been beset by the gravest of perils. Nothing less would have driven Mr. Edwards from his post. All of us who know him will appreciate that. Nor can I free myself from the darkest forebodings as to his fate and that of his companions. But as to the nature of the peril I am unable to make any conjecture worthy of consideration. Has anyone a theory to offer?"

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There was a dead silence.

"Mr. Barnett? Dr. Trendon? Mr. Ives?"

"Is there not possibly some connection between the unexplained light which we have twice seen, and the double desertion of the ship?" suggested the first officer, after a pause.

"I have asked myself that over and over. Whatever the source of the light and however near to it the schooner may have been, she is evidently unharmed."

"Yes, sir," said Barnett. "That seems to vitiate that explanation."

"I thank you, gentlemen, for the promptitude of your offers," continued the captain. "In this respect you make my duty the more difficult. I shall accept Mr. Ives because of his familiarity with sailing craft and with these seas." His eyes ranged the group.

"I beg your pardon, Captain Parkinson," eagerly put in the paymaster, "but I've handled a schooner yacht for several years and I'd appreciate the chance of——"

"Very well, Mr. McGuire, you shall be the second in command."

"Thank you, sir."

"You gentlemen will pick a volunteer crew and go aboard at once. Spare no effort to find records of the schooner's cruise. Keep in company and watch for signals. Report at once any discovery or unusual incident, however slight."

Not so easily was a crew obtained. Having in mind the excusable superstition of the men, Captain Parkinson was unwilling to compel any of them to the duty.

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Awed by the mystery of their mates' disappearance, the sailors hung back. Finally by temptation of extra prize money, a complement was made up.

At ten o'clock of a puffy, mist-laden morning a new and strong crew of nine men boarded the *Laughing Lass*. There were no farewells among the officers. Forebodings weighed too heavy for such open expression.

All the fates of weather seemed to combine to part the schooner from her convoy. As before, the fog fell, only to be succeeded by squally rain-showers that cut out the vista into a checkerboard pattern of visible sea and impenetrable greyness. Before evening the *Laughing Lass*, making slow way through the mists, had become separated by a league of waves from the cruiser. One glimpse of her between mist areas the *Wolverines* caught at sunset. Then wind and rain descended in furious volume from the southeast. The cruiser immediately headed about, following the probable course of her charge, which would be beaten far down to leeward. It was a gloomy mess on the warship. In his cabin, Captain Parkinson was frankly sea-sick: a condition which nothing but the extreme of nervous depression ever induced in him.

For several hours the rain fell and the gale howled. Then the sky swiftly cleared, and with the clearing there rose a great cry of amaze from stem to stern of the *Wolverine*. For far toward the western horizon appeared such a prodigy as the eye of no man aboard that ship had ever beheld. From a belt of marvellous, glowing gold, rich and splendid streamers of light spiralled up into the blackness of the heavens.

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In all the colours of the spectrum they rose and fell; blazing orange, silken, wonderful, translucent blues, and shimmering reds. Below, a broad band of paler hue, like sheet lightning fixed to rigidity, wavered and rippled. All the auroras of the northland blended in one could but have paled away before the splendour of that terrific celestial apparition.

On board the cruiser all hands stood petrified, bound in a stricture of speechless wonder. After the first cry, silence lay leaden over the ship. It was broken by a scream of terror from forward. The quartermaster who had been at the wheel came clambering down the ladder and ran along the deck, his fingers splayed and stiffened before him in the intensity of his panic.

"The needle! The compass!" he shrieked.

Barnett ran to the wheel house with Trendon at his heels. The others followed. The needle was swaying like a cobra's head. And as a cobra's head spits venom, it spat forth a thin, steel-blue stream of lucent fire. Then so swiftly it whirled that the sparks scattered from it in a tiny shower. It stopped, quivered, and curved itself upward until it rattled like a fairy drum upon the glass shield. Barnett looked at Trendon.

"Volcanic?" he said.

"'Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord,'" muttered the surgeon in his deep bass, as he looked forth upon the streaming, radiant heavens. "It's like nothing else."

In the west the splendour and the terror shot to the zenith. Barnett whirled the wheel. The ship responded perfectly.

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"I though she might be bewitched, too," he murmured.

"You may head her for the light, Mr. Barnett," said Captain Parkinson calmly. He had come from his cabin, all his nervous depression gone in the face of an imminent and visible danger.

Slowly the great mass of steel swung to the unknown. For an hour the unknown guided her. Then fell blackness, sudden, complete. After that radiance the dazzled eye could make out no stars, but the lookout's keen vision discerned something else.

"Ship afire," he shouted hoarsely.

"Where away?"

"Two points to leeward, near where the light was, sir."

They turned their eyes to the direction indicated, and beheld a majestic rolling volume of purple light. Suddenly a fiercer red shot it through.

"That's no ship afire," said Trendon. "Volcano in eruption."

"And the other?" asked the captain.

"No volcano, sir."

"Poor Billy Edwards wins his bet," said Forsythe, in a low voice.

"God grant he's on earth to collect it," replied Barnett solemnly.

No one turned in that night. When the sun of June 8th rose, it showed an ocean bare of prospect except that on the far horizon where the chart showed no land there rose a smudge of dirty rolling smoke. Of the schooner there was neither sign nor trace.

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VI

THE CASTAWAYS

"THIS ship," growled Carter, the second officer, to Dr. Trendon, as they stood watching the growing smoke-column, "is a worse hot-bed of rumours than a down-east village. That's the third sea-gull we've had officially reported since breakfast."

As he said, three distinct times the *Wolverine* had thrilled to an imminent discovery, which, upon nearer investigation, had dwindled to nothing more than a floating fowl. Upon the heels of Carter's complaint came another hail.

"Boat ahoy. Three points on the starboard bow."

"If that's another gull," muttered Carter, "I'll have something to say to you, my festive lookout."

The news ran electrically through the cruiser, and all eyes were strained for a glimpse of the boat. The ship swung away to starboard.

"Let me know as soon as you can make her out," ordered Carter.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"There's certainly something there," said Forsythe, presently. "I can make out a speck rising on the waves."

"Bit o' wreckage from Barnett's derelict," muttered Trendon, scowling through his glasses.

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"Rides too high for a spar or anything of that sort," said the junior lieutenant.

"She's a small boat," came in the clear tones of the lookout, "driftin' down."

"Anyone in her?" asked Carter.

"Can't make out yet, sir. No one's in charge though, sir."

Captain Parkinson appeared and Carter pointed out the speck to him.

"Yes. Give her full speed," said the captain, replying to a question from the officer of the deck.

Forward leapt the swift cruiser, all too slow for the anxious hearts of those aboard. For there was not one of the *Wolverines* who did not expect from this aimless traveller of desert seas at the least a leading clue to the riddle that oppressed them.

"Aloft there!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Can you make out her build?"

"Rides high, like a dory, sir."

"Wasn't there a dory on the *Laughing Lass?*" cried Forsythe.

"On her stern davits," answered Trendon.

"It is hardly probable that unattached small boats should be drifting about these seas," said Captain Parkinson, thoughtfully. "If she's a dory, she's the *Laughing Lass's* boat."

"That's what she is," said Barnett. "You can see her build plain enough now."

"Mr. Barnett, will you go aloft and keep me posted?" said the captain.

The executive officer climbed to join the lookout.

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As he ascended, those below saw the little craft rise high and slow on a broad swell.

"Same dory," said Trendon. "I'd swear to her in Constantinople."

"What else could she be?" muttered Forsythe.

"Somethin' that looks like a man in the bottom of her," sang out the crow's-nest. "Two of 'em, I think."

For five minutes there was stillness aboard, broken only by an occasional low-voiced conjecture. Then from aloft:

"Two men rolling in the bottom."

"Are they alive?"

"No, sir; not that I can see."

The wind, which had been extremely variable since dawn, now whipped around a couple of points, swinging the boat's stern to them. Barnet, putting aside his glass for a moment, called down:

"That's the one, sir. I can make out the name."

"Good," said the captain quietly. "We should have news, at least."

"Ives or McGuire," suggested Forsythe, in low tones.

"Or Billy Edwards," amended Carter.

"Not Edwards," said Trendon.

"How do you know?" demanded Forsythe.

"Dory was aboard when we found her the second time, after Edwards had left."

"Can you make out which of the men are in her?" hailed the captain.

"Don't think it's any of our people," came the astonishing reply from Barnett.

"Are you sure?"

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"I can see only one man's face, sir. It isn't Ives or McGuire. He's a stranger to me."

"It must be one of the crew, then."

"No, sir, beg your parding," called the lookout. "Nothin' like that in our crew, sir."

The boat came down upon them swiftly. Soon the quarter-deck was looking into her. She was of a type common enough on the high seas, except that a step for a mast showed that she had presumably been used for skimming about open shores. Of her passengers, one lay forward, prone and quiet. A length of sail cloth spread over him made it impossible to see his garb. At his breast an ugly protuberance, outlined vaguely, hinted a deformity.

The other sprawled aft, and at a nearer sight of him some of the men broke out into nervous titters. There was some excuse, for surely such a scarecrow had never before been the sport of wind and wave. A thing of shreds he was, elaborately ragged, a face overrun with a scrub of beard, and preternaturally drawn, surmounted by a stiff-dried, dirty, cloth semi-turban, with a wide, forbidding stain along the side, worked out the likeness to a make-up.

"My God!" cackled Forsythe with an hysterical explosion; and again, "My God!"

A long-drawn, irrepressible aspiration of expectancy rose from the warship's decks as the stranger raised his haggard face, turned eyes unseeingly upon them, and fell back. The forward occupant stirred not, save as the boat rolled.

From between decks someone called out, sharply, an order. In the grim silence it seemed strangely incon-

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gruous that the measured business of a ship's life should be going forward as usual. Something within the newcomer's consciousness stirred to that voice of authority. Mechanically, like some huge, hideous toy, he raised first one arm, then the other, and hitched himself halfway up on the stern seat. His mouth opened. His face wrinkled. He seemed groping for the meaning of a joke at which he knew he ought to laugh. Suddenly from his lips in surprising volume, raucous, rasping, yet with a certain rollicking deviltry fit to set the head a-tilt, burst a chanty:

"Oh, their coffin was their ship, and their grave it was
the sea:
Blow high, blow low, what care we!
And the quarter that we gave them was to sink them in
the sea:
Down on the coast of the high Barbaree-ee."

Long-drawn, like the mockery of a wail, the minor cadence wavered through the stillness, and died away.

"The High Barbaree!" cried Trendon.

"You know it?" asked the captain, expectant of a clue.

"One of those cursed tunes you can't forget," said the surgeon. "Heard a scoundrel of a beach-comber sing it years ago. Down in New Zealand, that was. When the fever rose on him he'd pipe up. Used to beat time with a steel hook he wore in place of a hand. The thing haunted me till I was sorry I hadn't let the rascal die. This creature might have learned it from him. Howls it out exactly like."

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"I don't see that that helps us any," said Forsythe, looking down on the preparations that were making to receive the unexpected guests.

With a deftness which had made the *Wolverine* famous in the navy for the niceties of seamanship, the great cruiser let down her tackle as she drew skilfully alongside, and made fast, preparatory to lifting the dory gently to her broad deck. But before the order came to hoist away, one of the jackies who had gone down drew the covering back from the still figure forward, and turned it over. With a half-stifled cry he shrank back. And at that the tension of soul and mind on the *Wolverine* snapped, breaking into outcries and sudden, sharp imprecations. The face revealed was that of Timmins, the bo's'n's mate, who had sailed with the first vanished crew. A life preserver was fastened under his arms. He was dead.

"I'm out," said the surgeon briefly, and stood with mouth agape. Never had the disciplined *Wolverines* performed a sea duty with so ragged a routine as the getting in of the boat containing the live man and the dead body. The dead seaman was reverently disposed and covered. As to the survivor there was some hesitancy on the part of the captain, who was inclined to send him forward until Dr. Trendon, after a swift scrutiny, suggested that for the present, at least, he be berthed aft. They took the stranger to Edwards's vacant room, where Trendon was closeted with him for half an hour. When he emerged he was beset with questions.

"Can't give any account of himself yet," said the surgeon. "Weak and not rightly conscious."

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"What ails him?"

"Enough. Gash in his scalp. Fever. Thirst and exhaustion. Nervous shock, too, I think."

"How came he aboard the *Laughing Lass?*" "Does he know anything of Billy?" "Was he a stow-away?" "Did you ask him about Ives and McGuire?" "How came he in the small boat?" "Where are the rest?"

"Now, now," said the veteran chidingly. "How can I tell? Would you have me kill the man with questions?"

He left them to look at the body of the bo's'n's mate. Not a word had he to say when he returned. Only the captain got anything out of him but growling and unintelligible expressions, which seemed to be objurgatory and to express bewildered cogitation.

"How long had poor Timmins been drowned?" the captain had asked him, and Trendon replied:

"Captain Parkinson, the man wasn't drowned. No water in his lungs."

"Not drowned! Then how came he by his death?"

"If I were to diagnose it under any other conditions I should say that he had inhaled flames."

Then the two men stared at each other in blank impotency. Meantime the scarecrow was showing signs of returning consciousness and a message was dispatched for the physician. On his way he met Barnett, who asked and received permission to accompany him. The stranger was tossing restlessly in his bunk, opening and shutting his parched mouth in silent, piteous appeal for the water that must still be doled to him parsimoniously.

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"I think I'll try him with a little brandy," said Trendon, and sent for the liquor.

Barnett raised the patient while the surgeon held the glass to his lips. The man's hand rose, wavered, and clasped the glass.

"All right, my friend. Take it yourself, if you like," said Trendon.

The fingers closed. Tremulously held, the little glass tilted and rattled against the teeth. There was one deep, eager spasm of swallowing. Then the fevered eyes opened upon the face of the *Wolverine's* first officer.

"Prosit, Barnett," said the man, in a voice like the rasp of rusty metal.

The navy man straightened up as from a blow under the jaw.

"Be careful what you are about," warned Trendon, addressing his superior officer sharply, for Barnett had all but let his charge drop. His face was a puckered mask of amaze and incredulity.

"Did you hear him speak my name—or am I dreaming?" he half whispered.

"Heard him plain enough. Who is he?"

The man's eyes closed, but he smiled a little—a singular, wry-mouthed, winning smile. With that there sprung from behind the brush of beard, filling out the deep lines of emaciation, a memory to the recognition of Barnett; a keen and gay countenance that whisked him back across seven years time to the days of Dewey and the Philippines.

"Ralph Slade, by the Lord!" he exclaimed.

"Of the *Laughing Lass?*" cried Trendon.

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"Of the *Laughing Lass.*"

Such a fury of eagerness burned in the face of Barnett that Trendon cautioned him. "See here, Mr. Barnett, you're not going to fire a broadside of disturbing questions at my patient yet a while. He's in no condition."

But it was from the other that the questions came. Opening his eyes he whispered, "The sailor? Where?"

"Dead," said Trendon bluntly. Then, breaking his own rule of repression, he asked:

"Did he come off the schooner with you?"

"Picked him up," was the straining answer. "Drifting."

The survivor looked around him, then into Barnett's face, and his mind too, traversed the years.

"*North Dakota?*" he queried.

"No; I've changed my ship," said Barnett. "This is the *Wolverine.*"

"Where's the *Laughing Lass?*"

Barnett shook his head.

"Tell me," begged Slade.

"Wait till you're stronger," admonished Trendon.

"Can't wait," said the weak voice. The eyes grew wild.

"Mr. Barnett, tell him the bare outline and make it short," said the surgeon.

"We sighted the *Laughing Lass* two days ago. She was in good shape, but deserted. That is, we thought she was deserted."

The man nodded eagerly.

"I suppose you were aboard," said Barnett, and

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Trendon made a quick gesture of impatience and rebuke.

"No," said Slade. "Left three—four—don't know how many nights ago."

The officers looked at each other. "Go on," said Trendon to his companion.

"We put a crew aboard in command of an ensign," continued Barnett, "and picked up the schooner the next night, deserted. You must know about it. Where is Billy Edwards?"

"Never heard of him," whispered the other.

"Ives and McGuire, then. They were there after—— Great God, man!" he cried, his agitation breaking out, "Pull yourself together! Give us something to go on."

"Mr. Barnett!" said the surgeon peremptorily.

But the suggestion was working in the sick man's brain. He turned to the officers a face of horror.

"Your man, Edwards—the crew—they left her? In the night?"

"What does he mean?" cried Barnett.

"The light! You saw it?"

"Yes; we saw a strange light," answered Trendon soothingly. Slade half rose. "Lost; all lost!" he cried, and fell back unconscious. Trendon exploded into curses. "See what you've done to my patient," he fumed. Barnett looked at him with contrite eyes.

"Better get out before he comes to," growled the surgeon. "Nice way to treat a man half dead of exhaustion."

It was nearly an hour before Slade came back to the world again. The doctor forbade him to attempt

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speech. But of one thing he would not be denied. There was a struggle for utterance, then:

"The volcano?" he rasped out.

"Dead ahead," was the reply.

"Stand by!" grasped Slade. He strove to rise, to say something further, but endurance had reached its limit. The man was utterly done.

Dr. Trendon went on deck, his head sunk between his shoulders. For a minute he was in earnest talk with the captain. Presently the *Wolverine's* engines slowed down, and she lay head to the waves, with just enough turn of the screw to hold her against the sea-way.

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VII

THE FREE LANCE

By the following afternoon Dr. Trendon reported his patient as quite recovered.

"Starved for water," proffered the surgeon. "Tissues fairly dried out. Soaked him up. Fed him broth. Put him to sleep. He's all right. Just wakes up to eat; then off again like a two-year old. Wonderful constitution."

"The gentleman wants to know if he can come on deck, sir," saluted an orderly.

"Waked up, eh. Come on, Barnett. Help me boost him on deck."

The two officers disappeared to return in a moment arm-in-arm with Ralph Slade.

Nearly twenty-four hours' rest and skilful treatment had done wonders. He was still a trifle weak and uncertain, was still a little glad to lean on the arms of his companions, but his eye was bright and alert, and his hollow cheeks mounted a slight colour. This, with the clothes lent him by Barnett, transformed his appearance, and led Captain Parkinson to congratulate himself that he had not obeyed his first impulse to send the castaway forward with the men.

The officers pressed forward.

"Mighty glad to see you out." "Hope you've got

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your pins under you again." "Old man, I'm mighty glad we came along."

The chorus of greeting was hearty enough, but the journalist barely paid the courtesy of acknowledgment. His eye swept the horizon eagerly until it rested on the cloud of volcanic smoke billowing up across the setting sun. A sigh of relief escaped him.

"Where are we?" he asked Barnett. "I mean since you picked me up. How long ago was that, anyway?"

"Yesterday," replied the navigating officer. "We've stood off and on, looking for some of our men."

"Then that's the same volcano——"

Barnett laughed softly. "Well, they aren't quite holding a caucus of volcanoes down in this country. One like that is enough."

But Slade brushed the remark aside.

"Head for it!" he cried excitedly. "We may be in time! There's a man on that island."

"A man!" "Another!" "Not Billy Edwards?" "Not some of our boys?"

Slade stared at them bewildered.

"Hold on," interposed Dr. Trendon authoritatively. "What's his name?" he inquired of the journalist.

"Darrow," replied the latter. "Percy Darrow. Do you know him?"

"Who in Kamschatka is Percy Darrow?" demanded Forsythe.

"Why, he's the assistant. "It's a long story——"

"Of course, it's a long story. There's a lot we want to know," interrupted Captain Parkinson. "Quartermaster, head for the volcano yonder. Mr. Slade, we

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want to know where you came from; and why you left the schooner, and who Percy Darrow is. And there's dinner, so we'll just adjourn to the messroom and hear what you can tell us. But there's one thing we're all anxious to know; how came you in the dory which we found and left on the *Laughing Lass* no later than two days ago?"

"I haven't set eyes on the *Laughing Lass* for—well, I don't know how long, but it's five days anyway, perhaps more," replied Slade.

They stared at him incredulously.

"Oh, I see!" he burst out suddenly; "there were twin dories on the schooner. The other one's still there, I suppose. Did you find her on the stern davits?"

"Yes."

"That's it, then. You see when I left——"

Captain Parkinson's raised hand checked him. "If you will be so good, Mr. Slade, let us have it all at once, after mess."

At table the young officers, at a sharp hint from Dr. Trendon, conversed on indifferent subjects until the journalist had partaken heartily of what the physician allowed him. Slade ate with keen appreciation.

"I tell you, that's good," he sighed, when he had finished. "Real, live, after-dinner coffee, too. Why, gentlemen, I haven't eaten a civilised meal, with all the trimmings, for over two years. Doctor, do you think a little of the real stuff would hurt me? It's a pretty dry yarning."

"One glass," growled the surgeon, "no more."

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"Scotch high-ball, then," voted Slade, "the higher the better."

The steward brought a tall glass with ice, in which the newcomer mixed his drink. Then for quite a minute he sat silent, staring at the table, his fingers aimlessly rubbing into spots of wetness the water beads as they gathered on the outside of his glass. Suddenly he looked up.

"I don't know how to begin," he confessed. "It's too confounded improbable. I hardly believe it myself, now that I'm sitting here in human clothes, surrounded by human beings. Old Scrubs, and the Nigger, and Handy Solomon, and the Professor, and the chest, and the—well, they were real enough when I was caught in the mess. But I warn you, you are not going to believe me, and hanged if I blame you a bit."

"We've seen marvels ourselves in the last few days," encouraged Captain Parkinson.

"Fire ahead, man," advised Barnett impatiently. "Just begin at the beginning and let it go at that."

Slade sipped at his glass reflectively.

"Well," said he at length, "the best way to begin is to show you how I happened to be mixed up in it at all."

The officers unconsciously relaxed into attitudes of greater ease. Overhead the lamps swayed gently to the swell. The dull throb of the screw pulsated. Stewards clad in white moved noiselessly, filling the glasses, deferentially striking lights for the smokers, clearing away the last dishes of the repast.

"I'm a reporter by choice, and a detective by in-

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stinct," began Slade, with startling abruptness. "Furthermore, I'm pretty well off. I'm what they call a free lance, for I have no regular desk on any of the journals. I generally turn my stuff in to the *Star* because they treat me well. In return it is pretty well understood between us that I'm to use my judgment in regard to 'stories' and that they'll stand back of me for expenses. You see, I've been with them quite a while."

He looked around the circle as though in appeal to the comprehension of his audience. Some of the men nodded. Others sipped from their glasses or drew at their cigars.

"I loaf around here and there in the world, having a good time travelling, visiting, fooling around. Every once in a while something interests me. The thing is a sort of instinct. I run it down. If it's a good story, I send it in. That's all there is to it." He laughed slightly. "You see, I'm a sort of magazine writer in method, but my stuff is newspaper stuff. Also the game suits me. That's why I play it. That's why I'm here. I have to tell you about myself this way so you will understand how I came to be mixed up in this *Laughing Lass* matter."

"I remember," commented Barnett, "that when you came aboard the *South Dakota,* you had a little trouble making Captain Arnold see it." He turned to the others with a laugh. "He had all kinds of papers of ancient date, but nothing modern—letter from the *Star* dated five years back, recommendations to everybody on earth, except Captain Arnold, certificate of bravery in Apache campaign, bank identifications, and all the

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rest. 'Maybe you're the *Star's* correspondent, and maybe you're not,' said the Captain, 'I don't see anything here to prove it.' Slade argued an hour; no go. Remember how you caught him?" he inquired of Slade.

The reporter grinned assent.

"After the old man had turned him down for good, Slade fished down in his warbag and hauled out an old tattered document from an oilskin case. 'Hold on a minute,' said he, 'you old shellback. I've proved to you that I can write; and I've proved to you that I have fought, and now here I'll prove to you that I can sail. If writing, fighting, and sailing don't fit me adequately to report any little disturbances your antiquated washboiler may blunder into, I'll go to raising cabbages.' With that he presented a master's certificate! Where did you get it, anyway? I never found out."

"Passed as 'fresh-water' on the Great Lakes," replied Slade briefly.

"Well, the spunk and the certificate finished the captain. He was an old square rigger himself in the Civil War."

"So much for myself," Slade continued. "As for the *Laughing Lass*——"

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PART TWO

THE BRASS BOUND CHEST

Being the story told by Ralph Slade, Free Lance, to the officers of the United States cruiser Wolverine.

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I

THE BARBARY COAST

A COINCIDENCE got me aboard her. I'll tell you how it was. One evening late I was just coming out of a dark alley on the Barbary Coast, San Francisco. You know—the water front, where you can hear more tongues than at Port Said, see stranger sights, and meet adventure with the joyous certainty of mediæval times. I'd been down there hunting up a man reported, by a wharf-rat of my acquaintance, to have just returned from a two years' whaling voyage. He'd been "shanghaied" aboard, and as a matter of fact, was worth nearly a million dollars. Landed in the city without a cent, could get nobody to believe him, nor trust him to the extent of a telegram East. Wharf-rat laughed at his yarn; but I believe it was true. Good copy anyway——

Just at the turn of the alley I nearly bumped into two men. On the Barbary Coast you don't pass men in narrow places until you have reconnoitered a little. I pulled up, thanking fortune that they had not seen me. The first words were uttered in a voice I knew well.

You've all heard of Dr. Karl Augustus Schermerhorn. He did some big things, and had in mind still bigger. I'd met him some time before in connection with his telepathy and wireless waves theory.

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It was picturesque stuff for my purpose, but wasn't in it with what the old fellow had really done. He showed me—well, that doesn't matter. The point is, that good, staid, self-centred, or rather science-centred, Dr. Schermerhorn was standing at midnight in a dark alley on the Barbary Coast in San Francisco talking to an individual whose facial outline at least was not ornamental.

My curiosity, or professional instinct, whichever you please, was all aroused. I flattened myself against the wall.

The first remark I lost. The reply came to me in a shrill falsetto. So grotesque was the effect of this treble from a bulk so squat and broad and hairy as the silhouette before me that I almost laughed aloud.

"I guess you've made no mistake on that. I'm her master, and her owner too."

"Well, I haf been told you might rent her," said the Doctor.

"Rent her!" mimicked the falsetto. "Well, that —hell, yes, I'll *rent* her!" he laughed again.

"Doch recht." The Doctor was plainly at the end of his practical resources.

After waiting a moment for something more definite, the falsetto inquired rather drily:

"How long? What to? What for? Who are you, anyway?"

"I am Dr. Schermerhorn," the latter answered.

"Seen pieces about you in the papers."

"How many men haf you in the crew?"

"Me and the mate and the cook and four hands."

"And you could go—soon?"

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"Soon as you want—*if* I go."

"I wish to leaf to-morrow."

"If I can get the crew together, I might make it. But say, let's not hang out here in this run of darkness. Come over to the grog shop yonder where we can sit down."

To my relief, for my curiosity was fully aroused—Dr. Schermerhorn's movements are usually productive—this proposal was vetoed.

"No, no!" cried the Doctor, with some haste, "this iss well! Somebody might oferhear."

The huge figure stirred into an attitude of close attention. After a pause the falsetto asked deliberately:

"Where we goin'?"

"I brefer not to say."

"H'm! How long a cruise?"

"I want to rent your schooner and your crew as-long-as I-please-to remain."

"H'm! How long's that likely to be?"

"Maybe a few months; maybe seferal years."

"H'm! Unknown port; unknown cruise. See here, anything crooked in this?"

"No, no! Not at all! It iss simply business of my own."

"Not that I care," commented the other easily, "only risks is worth paying for."

"There shall not be risk."

"Pearls likely?" hazarded the other, without much heed to the assurance. "Them Jap gunboats is getting pretty hard to dodge of late years. However, I've dodged 'em before."

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"Now as to pay—how mooch iss your boat worth?"

I could almost follow the man's thoughts as he pondered how much he dared ask.

"Well, you see, for a proposition like that—don't know where we're going, when we're going to get back,—and them gunboats—how would a hundred and twenty-five a month strike you?"

"Double it up. I want you to do ass I say, and I will also give your crew double wages. Bud I want goot men, who will stay, and who will keep the mouth shut."

"Gosh all fish-hooks! They'd go to hell with you for that!"

"Now you can get all you want of Adams & Marsh. Tell them it iss for me. Brovisions for three years, anyhow. Be ready to sail to-morrow."

"Tide turns at eight in the evening."

"I will send some effects in the morning."

The master hesitated.

"That's all right, Doctor, but how do I know it's all right? Maybe by morning you'll change your mind."

"That cannot be. My plans are all——"

"It's the usual thing to pay something——"

"Ach, but yes. I haf forgot. Darrow told me. I will make you a check. Let us go to the table of which you spoke."

They moved away, still talking. I did not dare follow them into the light, for I feared that the Doctor would recognise me. I'd have given my eye teeth, though, to have gathered the name of the

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"Where we goin' ?" "I brefer not to say"

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schooner, or that of her master. As it was, I hung around until the two had emerged from the corner saloon. They paused outside, still talking earnestly. I ventured a hasty interview with the bar-keeper.

"Did you notice the two men who were sitting at the middle table?" I asked him.

"Sure!" said he, shoving me my glass of beer.

"Know them?" I inquired.

"Never laid eyes on 'em before. Old chap looked like a sort of corn doctor or corner spell-binder. Other was probably one of these longshore abalone men."

"Thanks," I muttered, and dodged out again, leaving the beer untouched.

I cursed myself for a blunderer. When I got to the street the two men had disappeared. I should have shadowed the captain to his vessel.

The affair interested me greatly. Apparently Dr. Schermerhorn was about to go on a long voyage. I prided myself on being fairly up to date in regard to the plans of those who interested the public; and the public at that time was vastly interested in Dr. Schemerhorn. I, in common with the rest of the world, had imagined him anchored safely in Philadelphia, immersed in chemical research. Here he bobbed up at the other end of the continent, making shady bargains with obscure shipping captains, and paying a big premium for absolute secrecy. It looked good.

Accordingly I was out early the next morning. I had not much to go by; schooners are as plenty as tadpoles in San Francisco harbour. However, I was sure I could easily recognise that falsetto voice; and

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