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THE SCARLET X

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THE SCARLET X

BY

HARVEY WICKHAM
Author of "The Clue of the Primrose Petal"

NEW YORK
EDWARD J. CLODE

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THE SCARLET X

CHAPTER I

A CURIOUS INVITATION

FERRIS McCLUE sat in the private office of the McClue Detective Agency, a surgeon's bandage around his head, his handsome, almost boyish features half hidden by strips of adhesive tape.

It was an old-fashioned place, almost homelike in its appointments, though beyond the windows and only seven stories below rolled the incessant traffic of down-town Broadway. Had the windows been closed and the restless procession of trucks and motor cars shut out the office would almost have seemed to be in the country. McClue alone looked like a genuine product of Manhattan Island, and even he was thinking—not of Broadway, but of the revengeful nature of the heathen Chinee.

"It's preposterous!" he mused aloud.

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"Here I let Yen Hui go Scot free when I might have had him held for attempted murder. And for thanks, he tries to beat me up because he thinks I poisoned his dog."

"Tries? I rather think he succeeded," said a soft voice as a young woman entered the room. "And you *ought* to have had him held. It's dangerous to leave a man like that at large."

"Clara!"

McGlue encircled the young woman's waist with his available arm, and smiled as broadly as the adhesive would permit. "You're actually engaged to be married—to *me*, mind you—and still you've hardly the rudiments of a sense of humor. Would you like to read in the papers that the celebrated 'Ferret,' greatest of detectives, had been compelled to call on the police to protect him from a simple Mongolian—a man who ties his trousers to his ankles with baby-ribbon?"

Clara Hope responded with a tolerant smile, ran an anxious eye over the bandages, and sat down. Though she was becomingly dressed, it was easy to see to whom the room

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owed its quaint atmosphere, so out of keeping with the events which even then were making ready to draw its occupants into strange scenes. When she first entered it as The Ferret's assistant and confidential secretary, several years before, she wore one of the most sombre and durable creations which ever emanated from a ladies' tailor. The dawning of a nearer relationship had brought about a change in style. But the habits of earlier days, reaching back to a time when her only sleuthing was done in the school-room, still showed themselves in her excessively distinct enunciation and in her way of combing her hair.

Old friends now regarded her as a very gay butterfly. Newer friends thought her a regular Puritan. Crinoline would have suited her immensely, and even in a silk blouse cut low at the throat she suggested something copied from an old print.

"I am afraid of Mongolians," she said, suddenly returning to the subject. "You know what Bret Harte said about them."

"He said they were 'peculiar,' and if you'd seen Yen Hui at the hospital you'd have said the

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same thing. He certainly looked peculiar after I got through with him. But what have you there?"

"Telegrams. You'd better leave them to me. A return of the fever—"

"Fever," he interrupted, "comes from mental unrest due to inaction."

And possessing himself of one of the yellow envelopes, he broke the seal, his eyes dancing as he read:

"Ferris McClue, 94 a., Broadway, N.Y.—Would you accept employment from Government on interesting counterfeiting case? Wire at once.—J. L. Rorty, Ass't Chief of Service."

"Very complimentary," admitted McClue with a yawn. "But there is never any interest in these Secret Service cases, they put such an infernal lot of information right in your hands. What's the other one?"

"This is longer." Clara opened a second envelope and read aloud:

"Want you to come on a pleasure trip—yachting—long voyage—islands of Pacific.

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Aunt Evelyn, Carlos and Birds in party. You will be interested and I need an old friend along, but can't give reasons nor real destination till you arrive Palace Hotel, San Francisco.—Bernice Stover."

"A peculiar pleasure trip, it strikes me," observed The Ferret, half to himself. "And I wonder what she means by 'Birds.' Look! It's a capital letter—but that may be a mistake."

"Who is Bernice Stover, Mac?"

"Nice girl. Her father is in the U. S. Geodetic Survey. She and I and this Carlos—Gonzales, his name is—used to go to school together in California. He's a Spaniard, but I shouldn't be surprised if Bernice was engaged to him by the sound of things. Seem to remember his having inherited some money. Never heard of Aunt Evelyn. Just like a woman to suppose I had. But it's time you read me the daily report of the office. I've got to settle down to work."

Work, however, was destined to be delayed still further by the arrival of a third telegram.

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"Ferris McClue, 94 a., Broadway, N. Y.—Dear Mac: Will have to call off that counterfeiting business. Got another man. Besides hear you are laid up. Why not take a long vacation? Try the Pacific Islands. I'm sure they'll do you good.—Rorty."

"Unofficial, and quite a different tone," remarked Clara.

"Yes. Damn funny, too. Rorty has got something up his sleeve."

"It's odd that he should mention the Pacific Islands."

"More than odd, Clara. Rorty has heard in some way about this yachting party, and that I'm invited. "Don't believe in such coincidences. They don't happen. And this new affair is so peculiar, too, that he can't openly ask me to go. So he merely drops the other case and gives me a hint."

"Mac, you're thinking of accepting!"

"Nonsense!" McClue leaned forward and took her hand in both his own. "It isn't likely that I'd leave you for a long voyage—now, of all times."

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"But you'd like to."

"I wouldn't, Clara. Give me a telegraph blank. We'll settle this business right now."

She did as he requested, but as she watched him a cold little shiver went through her. He was so obviously struggling with an impulse to drop everything—his own happiness and hers—and start for the West at once. Had she been just emerging from the chrysalis of her schoolmarm days, she could never have resisted the temptation to hold this lover of hers with a chain made of her own clinging arms. But she had lived for some years now in the world of men; had felt for herself the call of great, impersonal quests.

"I think you'd better change your mind," she said suddenly.

He looked up, his flint-gray eyes and hard-set jaw too plainly showing the direction in which his thoughts had been moving.

"I really believe you're in earnest. But of course I won't stir. That is,"—and he jumped to his feet as a new idea entered his mind,"—that is, unless you'll marry me first and go

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along. I never *could* see the sense of this waiting.''

For an instant Clara wavered. But she wasn't ready for any such adventure—yet. So she went into another room and ordered the bag which The Ferret always kept packed for emergencies brought from his lodgings. When she returned a few minutes later, her face showed no trace of the struggle which she had just gone through.

"Take the first train, Mac. Sea air is what you need, and I can run the office quite well without you."

He protested. But she won the point, and five days later, his bandages already discarded, he was registering at the Palace Hotel, San Francisco, feeling in his heart that Clara was a brick—but a frozen one when it came right down to cases.

A note from Bernice which awaited him revealéd but two facts—her Aunt Evelyn was a Mrs. Millspaugh, with whom she was living in a very correct quarter of the town, and she wanted him to call immediately, no matter at what hour he arrived. As it was already after

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noon, he obeyed this injunction to the letter and was soon descending from his taxi at the address indicated. How did it happen that this young lady was in such a hurry to start on a voyage for far islands at the very moment when the Secret Service was anxious for him to take just such a trip? That was the problem. But it was not destined to be solved in any such comfortable surroundings as those to which he was now admitted.

He expected to find some changes in Bernice —something to justify the shadowy series of inferences which he had set up since first linking those three telegrams in his mind. When she appeared, looking almost exactly like the jolly co-ed he remembered, he was conscious of a shock. Life, to judge by appearances, had played her none of those darker tricks with which his profession had made him so familiar. She was a little older, a little spoiled, perhaps, by the self-indulgences of a pampered existence, but still essentially wholesome.

"What's in the wind?' he asked, returning the firm grip of her outstretched hand.

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"Opium smuggling, or just a plain murder or two?"

"Of course you always think of yourself as a *detective,*" she responded. "But I'm nothing as interesting as the heroine of one of your hair-raising adventures. I merely wanted a friend, and it was ever so good of you to come."

She spoke with the easy poise of one well-trained in social usages, and as he regarded her frank, open face he reproached himself for his feeling of disappointment. Sleuthing made a man unhuman. He ought to have been glad to find her so completely what a young lady should be. But his brain persisted in having its own way, and the conversation had not progressed beyond the commonplace stages before that refractory organ scored its initial triumph. At her ease Bernice undoubtedly was as she sat there, dressed already for the voyage in her white duck yachting costume. But she wasn't happy. Minute traces of powder revealed the fact that she had recently been called upon to hide the evidences of some acute and painful emotion;

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and the very brightness of her eyes, now that one came to study them closely, was suggestive less of good spirits than of worry and sleepless nights.

"You're engaged to Carlos Gonzales, aren't you?" asked The Ferret, probing cautiously into the puzzle.

"Yes—and nobody but Carlos knows why I'm undertaking this trip. It's to go and look for my father."

"Look for him? I thought he was stationed at Manila with the Geodetic."

"He was. But three months ago we received word of his death. And Mac, I don't believe he is dead."

"My dear young lady!"

"Wait! You knew my father—what a brave, upright man he was. If anyone told you that he had come to a shameful end, would you believe it?"

"But who told you any such thing?"

My aunt heard the stories. She hears of everything. At first there was only the official notice. Father was at the head of a little expedition, map-making in the Southern Philip-

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pines. They encountered a band of uncivilized Moros, there was a skirmish, and father was lost. That is exactly the word that was sent us, though his companions were described as *killed*. Then came the rumors. It is said that if he didn't actually lead the party into an ambush, he at least deserted to the enemy."

"I don't believe I quite understand," put in her listener. "You mean he is accused of permitting himself to be taken prisoner when he might have fought his way out?"

"Worse. It was on an island beyond the farthest government outposts—we've been given the latitude and the longitude—and they say he deliberately went over to the Moros and adopted their way of life."

"The idea is ridiculous," reflected the detective aloud. "But, in view of these stories —yes, I shouldn't wonder if he was alive."

"Anyway, I'm going to that island and find out." Bernice suddenly lifted her head, revealing a look—was it of reasoned determination or of mere willfulness and the defiance of some authority?—shining in her eyes. "Carlos was preparing for a cruise—he's al-

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ways taking cruises. So I coaxed Aunt Evelyn to let him take us along. They telephoned from the hotel that you had arrived. We can start at once."

But at that moment a servant entered with word that her aunt wished to speak with her; and fifteen minutes later Bernice returned to the room, her face pale with vexation.

"What do you think? My maid—the one who was to have gone with us—has left without warning. You might as well go on board. I've got to stay here and find another maid. Aunt simply will not stir without one."

McClue received the necessary directions, telephoned to his hotel in regard to his baggage, and set out for the water-front on foot. He wanted a long walk and a chance to think. Of course there was nothing necessarily significant in the eleventh-hour refusal of a servant to undertake a long sea voyage. Nevertheless, it couldn't be denied that this desertion had an air of being curiously well-timed—for somebody.

Bernice evidently knew little, and it wasn't at all likely that she had told him all of that.

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Was it possible that she saw nothing odd in the circumstance that Carlos Gonzales had been on the point of taking a voyage to the South Pacific, whether she accompanied him or not? A frequent custom, eh? But what was a rich man of leisure doing with a custom which would have taken him away from his sweetheart? That he, himself, was about to leave his sweetheart, and on the eve of marriage too, didn't occur to the detective as a parallel case.

And then, that ugly yarn about Stover—it was altogether too fragmentary. It assigned no adequate motive for the conduct alleged. A man with an honorable record and an important official position doesn't league himself with savages for the fun of it. Even rumor usually tries to be more convincing.

"I must find out what Stover is really accused of doing," said The Ferret to himself as he walked along. "Carlos ought to know. If he's alive, it is something worse—and at the same time more easily creditable—than turning squaw-man. If he is dead, there has been foul play, and he was only the pawn in some game."

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CHAPTER II

AN UNLISTED PASSENGER

AT the wharf, McClue found that a boy from the hotel had already preceded him with his bag. There, too, lay the yacht's tender—a keelless affair propelled by oars and apparently built for the special purpose of passing through shallow channels. It was manned by curiously rough-looking fellows, who won their way through the water by brute strength rather than skill. Even the coxwain was something of a Samson, who—in spite of his natty uniform—would have seemed less out of place in a waterfront brawl.

The yacht, however, was as dainty and spotless as a bride. She rode at anchor about a mile from shore, and was capriciously named *The Escapade*. It took no sailor to see that, notwithstanding the luxurious fore and after cabins projecting above her deck, she was built primarily for speed, though one looked twice

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before noticing the squat, slightly disfiguring funnel just forward of the mainmast.

"Hermaphrodite rig," observed The Ferret as they approached. "With her sails spread she would make a good racer. But she seems rather small for an ocean voyage."

"Sixty-six tons displacement, 130 feet over all," responded the coxwain gruffly. "Big enough—with all her boilers."

A man stood waiting at the head of the ladder—a man almost as slender as a girl and having something of a woman's grace in his movements. His skin was of a deep olive, his eyes, hair and mustache startlingly black. McClue had some difficulty in recognizing in this proud, white-clad being the impecunious, hang-dog Carlos of university days.

Carlos strove to be cordial, there was no doubt of that. But his manner appeared to be a little forced, and Bernice's non-arrival seemed to vex him beyond all reason.

"She should have come aboard this morning," he complained, glancing uneasily about the harbor.

"If it hadn't been for me, she would."

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"Nonsense, Mac. Only, with a maid to select from the huzzies the employment agencies will send her, she may not be here till tomorrow."

"That reminds me," broke forth McClue, with the sudden emphasis of one who discovers an alarming lapse in his faculties. "I've forgotten one of my bags—also my hotel bill. If you'll lend me the tender again—"

"The whole outfit is yours," interrupted the Spaniard. "Take what you want."

All at once his heartiness seemed spontaneous. He was pleased. Could it be with the idea that his friend was going ashore?

McClue returned to the landing and started citywards. But no sooner was he out of sight from the tender than he sought another point on the water-front, engaged a motor-boat, and directed the man in charge of it to slip unobtrusively back to the wharf and wait for him. Then he found a wretched restaurant, which had the single advantage of affording a view of the wharf in question, and ordered a hearty meal. Yet instead of falling to like a hungry man, he toyed with his food, his eyes fixed on

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the window. He did not look like one who was worrying about a hotel bill, and made no move to acquire any bag save the one he had already left on the yacht.

A long wait ensued. But just as the thin veil of fog which floated over the bay and city was beginning to thicken with approaching darkness, a taxi dashed past. The detective stepped out to where he could see its occupants as they descended. There were three. One he recognized as Bernice. The second, he thought, was her aunt. The third was wrapped up as if the chill of a San Francisco evening was something to which she was not accustomed. She must be the new maid.

The women boarded the tender, which immediately set off. McClue followed silently in his motor-boat, ordering the boatman to use only the oars. He wondered if the tender, once having reached the yacht, would start back for him. It did not. So he hung about, a wry smile on his lips, relying upon the deepening mist to hide him, and upon his own engine to put him alongside if the situation should suddenly call for haste. Finally, as he

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gradually crept up, he heard Gonzales remark to someone in a tone of ill-controlled impatience:

"Of course I'm sure he's aboard. Capt. Luffy saw him go below."

Then came silence, followed by the unmistakable clatter of an anchor-chain. McClue chuckled, sprang for the ladder, and stole to the deck with the soundless agility of a cat.

Few lights were as yet going, and as nearly everybody was absorbed in watching San Franciso become a cluster of jewels that grew ever dimmer and dimmer in the distance, he managed to reach the companion-way. Once below, his name on a door-plate showed him his cabin, and it was not until some time after the second gong had sounded for dinner that he emerged.

His appearance in the dining-salon was the signal for a chorus of greetings, but Gonzales started in spite of himself.

"The scoundrel *did* plan to leave me behind," was The Ferret's mental comment. "And he thought he had succeeded. What in thunder can it mean?"

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There were eight at the table—Bernice, her Aunt Evelyn, a Miss Dolly Breen, Carlos Gonzales, Capt. Luffy, Prof. Elliot Baird, Gilbert Oaksey, and McClue himself. Oaksey was a reticent Englishman, and from things that were said it was evident that he had some reputation as a hunter of big game. Baird could be set down at once as the "Birds" of the telegram, for not only was he introduced as an ornithologist, but he rather suggested one of his own specimens—somewhat untidily dried. Luffy, as commander of the ship, did the honors—entirely too stiffly for a man altogether at his ease. The real head of the table was at the foot, where sat Mrs. Millspaugh—a woman who appeared to be so thoroughly formal through and through that one almost wondered at her niece's temerity in calling her "aunty."

Of the others little could be said for little appeared, and dinner was decidedly a failure—as is often the case with first dinners at sea, where the voyagers, accustomed to the superficial intimacies of the land, hesitate upon the brink of the all-revealing companionship about

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to be enforced by the ocean. Even McClue felt little disposed to hurry the study of his surroundings. Things would begin to develop soon enough.

In fact, coffee had hardly been served before Gonzales, taking advantage of a general movement towards the after cabin, touched him significantly upon the arm.

"I want to apologize," he began as they reached the deserted deck. "Of course we wouldn't have gone far without you, but it gave me a scare when you were late tonight."

"Late?"

"At dinner, I mean. The captain had reported that you'd come aboard in a boat of your own, but when you didn't appear I got to thinking that maybe there'd been a mistake."

McClue accepted this explanation at its face value. He knew that the captain could not have seen his boat—that there had been an attempt to leave him ashore, and that someone was merely guessing why it failed. But there was nothing actually to prove that Carlos was responsible.

"I was in rather a hurry to get off," the

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Spaniard went on. "A little more, and the newspapers would have heard of our trip. Bernice has told you what we're after, I suppose?"

"Yes. But do you think there is any truth in those stories about her father that have been going the rounds?"

"Of course not. Stover pushed his expedition too far, and the natives wiped it out—that's my opinion. But Bernice naturally wants the matter settled. Are you coming in?"

The Ferret expressed a desire to finish his cigar outside, and when his host had withdrawn continued for several minutes thoughtfully pacing the deck. Finally, instead of moving towards the card-table, he climbed to the wheel-house, where he found Capt. Luffy lounging in a comfortable chair and snapping an occasional word in the direction of the man at the wheel.

The captain was preparing to mix something in a glass; the sight of a visitor apparently did not please him. But on seeing McClue's re-

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assuring smile, he broke into laughter and capped the glass with a metal cone.

"That damned Mrs. Millspaugh," he explained, "is a tetotaler, and all the liquor on board is supposed to be in the bird professor's medicine-chest. But you've found your way to the right spot."

"I judge you've sailed with this crowd before," said the detective, sniffing appreciatively at the proffered drink.

"Never saw one of them till a week ago—excepting Mr. Gonzales. It's a dull season when we don't go for a cruise."

Luffy, having mixed and disposed of a cocktail for himself, leered into the bottom of his glass, as if he saw strange pictures there. McClue slyly tossed the remains of his second round into a convenient cuspidor, and complained of continued thirst. After that the mixing became fast and furious, and included even the man at the wheel.

But with every glass, the captain drew the conversation persistently further and further away from the yacht, incipient drunkenness

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seeming to warn him of things not to be told. At last, questioned point blank in regard to previous routes, he closed the subject by growling:

"You'd better speak to the owner if you want to see her log. I never did like curiosity in passengers."

"Very well," said the detective, determined to try the effect of different tactics. "Let's drop ancient history and come down to the present. Perhaps you'll tell me, then, what you meant by trying to sail without me this evening."

Luffy got to his feet, upon which he swayed surprisingly little, and glared at his visitor in sudden fury.

"I weighed anchor when I got my owner's orders. What in thunder are you trying to get at?"

"But you told Gonzales that I'd come aboard, and I hadn't. You'd already started when I made the gang-plank—by the skin of my teeth."

"Seven thousand devils! I'll teach you to talk to me like that!"

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He seized a bottle, and leaned threateningly over the little table that stood before him.

"Who says I told Carlos you was aboard?"

"Maybe I was mistaken. But I thought I heard somebody say you did—or anyway that you'd seen someone going below and thought it was me."

"That's a very different thing." The captain subsided into his chair, then continued with a new eagerness:

"Come to think, I did see a party crossing the decks. It was pretty dark—a new hand blew out a fuse when we were starting the dynamos—and I caught sight of somebody all muffled up. And I says to myself—yes, and to Carlos afterwards. I remember it now. I says, 'There goes that friend of yours—McClue.' Got your name pat the first time. Devilish sorry about the whole thing. Let's have another drink."

Luffy's good humor was so completely restored that it was possible to leave him protesting against the termination of the interview. But the detective had already learned

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what he wanted to know. Carlos had lied, and his tool had tardily tried to back him up. But there had been no opportunity for the two worthies to get together and make their stories agree. They were old acquaintances, too, companions on many trips, into the nature of which it was best, perhaps, not to inquire.

Returning to the deck, McClue tried to accuse himself of making mountains out of molehills. But as the second dog-watch came to an end he had a rather comprehensive view of the crew. They were rough and uncouth, most of them, quite worthy of such a captain—but they didn't look like sailors.

Certainly this was a queer ship. And the little turmoil incident to changing the watch had hardly subsided before a cloaked figure stole up from the companion-way and approached the starboard rail. The watcher darted into a shadow. Could it be that Luffy had not made his yarn up out of whole cloth after all? That he had really seen that muffled up personage he had described? It began to look as if he might at least have caught a

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glimpse of something which suggested the tale.

The figure was looking out to sea, taking no apparent notice of its surroundings. McClue made stealthily towards it and suddenly gripped it by the arm. It wheeled to face him.

"Clara!"

"Yes; but don't talk so loud. I'm the new lady's maid, and it would be better for us not to be seen together."

"But how did you get here? What has happened?"

"Nothing has happened—yet. But Mac, when you left the office I looked out of the window, and somebody was shadowing you."

"Good heavens! I've been shadowed ever since I went into business."

"But this was a Chinaman," said Clara Hope.

"So I noticed no great novelty in that, either."

"Was that why you didn't want me to come to the station and see you off?"

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"Something of the sort."

"And you're angry because I followed you."

"Naturally I'm not particularly pleased. Heaven knows where this yacht is really bound for. But since you're here, come inside and let me tell them who you are."

"What would you tell them?"

"That you're my wife, of course."

"And that I followed you to sea rather than let you out of my sight?"

"Well, then, what am I to do?" cried The Ferret, losing the last shreds of his temper as the force of the objection went home.

"Leave me where I am, of course, and listen to my report. The office is in charge of Minnie Deyo, the girl who was so useful to us in the Primrose Petal case. She'll be perfectly capable—"

"I'm not worrying about the office. But how did you get across the continent ahead of me?"

"I obtained permission to go with the Air Mail to Washington. I wanted to talk with Rorty."

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"So, that was it. What did Rorty say?"

"I told him where you had gone, and he was so pleased that he couldn't hide the fact. yet he insisted that he knew nothing whatever about the trip, though he'd heard of Stover as a good Geodetic man."

"Of course he wouldn't tell you anything—if you let him know that I'd already gone before you questioned him. He saw that he'd accomplished his object, and had only to sit mum."

"Yes, I realized my mistake. There was nothing left for me to do but to telegraph our representative in San Francisco. He bought off Miss Stover's maid, and I arrived just in time to take her place."

"And have you discovered what everything is all about?" inquired McClue, fighting back an impulse to take this incredible young woman forcibly in his arms.

"I've discovered *something*. The cook is a Chinaman."

The Ferret swore softly under his breath. If he was expected to have the shivers every

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time he saw a Chinaman the future promised to be interesting. Then he reached out to take Clara's hand.

But she stepped back.

"On this voyage, Mac, you'll have to remember that I'm a lady's maid."

She was down the companion-way before he could protest. But once in her cabin—a wretched little cabin near the sailors' quarters—her dignity suddenly fell from her shoulders, and by the time she was ready to creep into her berth she looked very much like a girl who had been indulging in a fit of tears.

Meanwhile, McClue on the deck above was also having an unpleasant colloquy with his inner consciousness. Its conclusion ran thus:

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish!"

That night in his sleep he thought he heard the sputtering of the wireless, and it seemed to be sending that very sentence through space.

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CHAPTER III

A PISTOL SHOT

THE next morning was cool and clear. But as the days passed, with the vessel steaming on its long, southwestern slant, both sea and air underwent a subtile change. There was a langorous softness in the breeze. It became deliciously warm even in the dead of night.

At the same time discipline, never very good, grew more lax than ever. White paint became dingy and brass mountings and polished woodwork lost some of their original brightness. Why bother to holystone and scrub when a washdown of the decks with a piece of hose in the morning answered every purpose? The captain was often palpably drunk now. But the passengers made no complaints, not even when the servants—all natives of the island towards which the course was being laid—fell into a decidedly free and easy way of performing their

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duties. As long as meals were on time and Sam, the Chinese cook, maintained a high standard nobody seemed to think it worth while to grumble.

Bernice was almost always to be found sitting beneath a bit of awning by the taffrail with Carlos, whose love-making grew more and more ardent as the parallels of latitude slipped by. She made the detective think of a child playing with fire. Clara kept persistently aloof, a slave to the caprices of three women. She was one of the few upon whom the seductive airs produced a hardening effect, evidently by arousing an inner spirit of rebellion. Mrs. Millspaugh alone remained quite herself. She had been something of a trial at first, with her fussy toilets and New England parlor manners. But decidedly she was a person to be reckoned with. *Her* cup and saucer had always to shine, and even Luffy felt constrained to mutter an apology before he permitted himself to doze in her presence.

Honolulu was reached and left behind. Then came Manila, where one would have expected a long stop, since here was the station from which

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had come the news of Stover's disappearance. Two days, however, and *The Escapade* was once more en route, having barely escaped losing her naturalist, who had insisted on taking a little trip inland for the benefit of his collections.

The island for which they were bound was indicated by a dot of red ink on the chart which hung in the after cabin—a very tiny dot, unnamed and unnumbered, and marking a spot near the Saranganis, south of Mindanao. Above it was written in Bernice's own hand:

"Lat., 5-24 North. Long., 125-40 East."

McClue would have liked to pick up some unofficial information, say from the gossip of the Manila water-front. Could it be that this desire had been suspected and forestalled? Or had Bernice been so far swayed from her original purpose that she only wanted now to sail on and on with her lover over the tranquil waters, ever farther and farther into the region of *dolce far niente*? But that was Italian. It had nothing to do with this devil's land of the Moros which they were approaching. He felt himself at fault. There was something funda-

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mental in the situation which he had not grasped.

With impatient eyes he watched the growth of the broken red line with which the captain recorded the course on the chart. It became longer every day as the yacht fell southward. It reached Mindoro Straits, passed the little Calamianes, Panay and Negros, and began skirting the huge *terra incognita* of Mindanao, slipping north of Basilan and then south-easterly to the Sarangant Channel which cuts off the Sarangani group from their huge brother. Finally, avoiding the channel and making around Balut, the vessel turned her prow almost squarely towards the equator.

It was marvelous weather. A gentle head-wind drove the heat astern, and one could look through an atmosphere almost as transparent as glass across a sea as blue as turquoise. Capt. Lufty took an observation, steamed around for a few hours, and took another.

"Here we are, sir," he announced, approaching Gonzales and touching his cap.

"Here?"

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The word broke simultaneously from half the company at once.

"Yes," affirmed the captain, "this is five degrees and 24 minutes north, 125 degrees and 40 minutes east."

"But there isn't a speck of land in sight!" cried Carlos, with every appearance of amazement. "It ought to be an island."

"Ought to be according to the chart you gave me," admitted Luffy. "But here we are." He made a comprehensive sweep with his arm, indicating the four cardinal points, with nothing but water showing in any direction.

There was a consultation, and it was decided to circle about for a while, test the instruments, and take another observation the next day. The company dispersed with some little stir of excitement.

"Bernice," said The Ferret, intercepting that young lady on her way to her cabin; "did you get that latitude and longitude from the official notice sent you by the Geodetic?"

"Yes; here is the notice, itself. I got it out

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when I saw that we were approaching nothing.''

McClue carefully perused the letter which she took from the bosom of her dress. It was as she had said. And the look of hidden fear in her eyes was unquestionably genuine.

When she had gone, he managed to encounter Clara calmly gathering together some bits of fancy work which Mrs. Millspaugh had dropped on her way out of the dining-salon.

"Bernice has the official memorandum of the location," he began. "Either it's been tampered with, or else the authorities didn't want her to find the place. Or else again—but what do you think?"

"I think 'or else again' is right."

"The captain is simply lost?"

"Possibly—unless he is still more simply trying to lose *us*."

With which cryptic remark she went below, leaving The Ferret with a dawning consciousness that his assistant was imposing even more restraint upon their relations than the situation called for. He did not know that he had spoken with an almost savage abruptness—

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that people on board were wondering what had come over him of late.

The test of the instruments disclosed no errors, and after twenty-four hours of constant navigation the earlier observations were confirmed.

"Here we are again," said the captain, "and with sixty fathoms under the keel."

Gonzales suggested that they proceed for the Macassar Straits and Java, go on to Australia, and cable for new sailing-directions from there. No objections being offered, Luffy gave the order:

"South by west!"

There Three was something in the way he said it which made one fancy he had mentally added the words, "At last!" A wink of understanding appeared to pass between him and his owner—but that may have been an illusion created by the sunlight dancing from the empty waves.

Out of deference to an increasing humidity, dinner was served on the tiny hurricane deck which formed the roof of the after cabin. But

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in spite of this improvement in quarters, it was a silent and bewildered company, and Carlos, who alone seemed gay, had the air of being a professional entertainer preforming before an unappreciative audience. When dessert was finally served, he took from his pocket several manuscripts, yellow with age and seemingly of parchment.

"I hope you're not going to give us anything scientific," said Mrs. Millspaugh, smiling apprehensively across the table at her prospective relative. "Prof. Baird has been trying to explain how islands come and go almost of their own free will—by volcanic action, or something—and we poor women have the headache."

"No," laughed the Spaniard, "these are only some documents which have been handed down to me from one of my ancestors, a Navares Gonzales y Badajos, who was governor of the Philippines under the King of Spain just before the occupation of Manila by the English in the eighteenth century. I brought them out because they show that we're not the only ones

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who ever failed to find what they were looking for in this part of the world."

The speaker paused until a chorus of protests assured him that he had everybody's attention, then went on:

"Old Navares was a sort of antiquarian, and was always collecting native legends and superstitions. He even started to write a book about them. Most of it was destroyed in a fire before I was born. But I've a fragment here which used to interest me a good deal when I was a boy."

He selected the yellowest of the parchments and began to read it aloud, translating the old Spanish into English as he went along:

" 'Coming to the island whose summit is like a tooth, we found the tribe of the treasure. And the treasure, they told us, was guarded forever by a scarlet X, and no man might come to it except by the same, nor leave it at all. For the trail thereto was a one-way trail, and he who assayed it without the sign was lost.' "

"I don't understand a word of it!" exclaimed Mrs. Millspaugh. "Clara, go and get my

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fancy-work. Who ever heard of an island that was like a tooth? The idea isn't at all pleasant."

"What I've read seems to be a quotation from a yet older document," explained the Spaniard, "and Navares evidently didn't understand it either. But he made some investigations on his own account, and by piecing a lot of stories together managed to concoct quite a tale. It isn't at all complete, but this is what he says."

"'In these islands'—name of the islands torn off,—'we found the X. of red or scarlet to be an object indeed of veneration and dread. So superstitious were the natives in its regard that it was impossible for many days to win admissions of knowledge. But by pouring water through a section of bamboo inserted into the rebellious mouth, we awoke the sense of the necessity for truth, and learned that to the south and east of us lay a land whose inhabitants had the cunning of serpents and the ferocity of devils—that they killed strangely, ate from platters of gold, and decked themselves

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with gems the like of which have not been seen in our time.' "

"Your ancestor seems to have been a delightful old party," remarked Oaksey with a drawl. "Looks as if he invented the 'water cure.' "

"It's like all Spanish legends," complained Birds, "a lot of nonsense about gold and jewels. Travelers in those days were always looking for Eldorado, and never left a single intelligent note regarding the fauna and flora of the lands they visited."

"My ancestor had been taken prisoner by the English," explained Gonzales, "and was no doubt half insane when he wrote. Of course it's all ancient history now. But I've always thought that, where there was so much smoke, there might once have been a little fire."

At this point, a Tagal boy in dirty white trousers and flapping matting slippers, appeared and began to remove the remaining dishes. The captain aroused himself, as from the depths of a profound slumber, and went forward. There was the usual languid dispersal of the company toward its favorite nooks,

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Oaksey alone having remained faithful all these weeks to the card-table, where he and Mrs. Millspaugh now buried themselves in a game of bizique.

Gonzales' tale had been disappointing. It dealt neither with disappearing islands nor hair-breadth escapes. McClue was inclined to regard the whole incident as an attempt to draw a herring across the trail and distract attention from the fact that *The Escapade* was out of her reckoning. He had been impressed by the authentic appearance of the documents, and determined to give them a closer inspection before finally dismissing them from his mind, but for the moment he lost himself in renewed indignation over the managment of the yacht. He had but to look down to the main deck to see the crew lolling about as if the place belonged to them. Such slovenliness was intolerable at sea, where one's very life often depended upon everything, from mainmast to morals, being snug and shipshape.

He had gone thus far in his thoughts when he and everyone else was brought up standing by a cry from the look-out.

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"Land, ho!"

From the deck, with its brilliant lights throwing the sea into dark relief, nothing could be seen at all. From the mast-head the swift, tropical twilight had not quite vanished. But it was difficult to take the look-out seriously, and incredulity became general when it was learned that he was not a regular sailor, but a half-breed servant—a native of Ilo-Ilo, named Kulisan—who had been bribed by a chew of tobacco to stand the trick aloft. There was indeed a tiny shadow on the southern horizon, but the idea that it could be land was almost unanimously voted a delusion, and it was jestingly named "Kulisan," after its pretended discoverer.

Nevertheless, in the morning, there, off the port quarter, lay an island. And as the vessel made towards it, a mountain rising in its center took slowly the form of a tooth—a huge molar, half decayed and covered from base to summit with vegetation, which, from the distance, suggested a fungus rather than healthy trees.

By midday the yacht had steamed entirely around it without having found a harbor.

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Capt. Luffy pretended to be feeling his way, and finally—complaining of engine trouble—came to a stop in three fathoms of warm brine. But The Ferret was not convinced. The engine trouble was too opportune, and during the entire circuit the lead had not been heaved overboard more than three or four times. But one conclusion seemed tenable. *The Escapade* had let fall her anchor at the very spot which had been her goal from the start.

For what had she come? Who was in her secret? Where, exactly, was she, if her bearings could be read aright? And where was that other island, the last known camping-ground of Stover, which they had ostensibly set out to seek?

The only answer was the breeze, falling dead as the propeller ceased to turn, and the heat—now stifling—which rose like an invisible vapor and threatened to envelope the very source of thought in lethargy and indifference.

He slung a hammock to port, in the shade of the wheel-house, and took up the lonely burden of vigilance. Kulisan, visible just beyond the after cabin over the starboard rail, and bearing

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no name save the one given it in jest, was very quiet. From the first not a sound had come out of its fastnesses save the occasional scream of a monkey and the vibrant "chuck-a-oo, chuck-a-oo" of a poison lizard. It appeared to be utterly—one might almost have said ostentatiously—uninhabited. Not a vestige of so much as a nipa-thatched hut had at any time been visible, even through a glass.

And yet that grove of cocoanut palms on the slope beyond the green-shrouded beach—for even the beach was covered with vegetation—must have been planted by the hand of man. Those pole-like trunks with their feathery fronds, growing so seemingly at random, are always to be taken as a sign of cultivation. He knew enough about the tropics to know that. The place had once possessed a population. It had a history. In what unknown language was it written? What unguessed terror had brought it to an end?

Suddenly Clara appeared.

"There is something you ought to know," she announced, pausing for a moment by his side—and her voice, though pitched in an

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undertone, broke through the spell of its surroundings with a wholesome and healthy reminder of New York. "From where I sleep I can often hear the sailors talking, and they say that we are undoubtedly at 125 east, and all the rest of it."

The Ferret came quickly to a sitting position. "Clara, I believe you're right. This Kulisan is Stover's island, whatever else it may be. You don't find chunks of land sticking up out of the ocean and not down on the map—not these days. Luffy isn't as much at sea as he pretends."

"I know he isn't. And the crew have been here before—at least so I gather from some of their remarks."

"Then someone is willing to have us come here, but is anxious that we shan't know where we are. How do you explain that?"

"I don't, Mac. But good-bye. Somebody is watching us."

Clara walked unhurriedly away, and McClue cast a quick glance about him. By the taffrail sat Bernice and Carlos, talking earnestly, their faces towards the land. Along the starboard

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promenade, far out of earshot, Sam, the Chinese cook, was taking a constitutional. But nowhere could he see anything which savored of espionage until he happened to look upward. And there, stretched out on the canvas covering one of the life-boats, her head just visible over the edge, lay Dolly Breen attentively watching the unsuspecting couple by the rail.

She was the one person on board whom the detective ever since the voyage had commenced had systematically avoided. Though undeniably pretty, she had a habit of giggling and of rolling her eyes which greatly annoyed him; and chancing one day to hear the captain refer to her as the "Little Fool," he had felt that he and Luffy had at least one opinion in common.

But now there was something sinister in her attitude. Perhaps it was her shameless eavesdropping. Perhaps it was her eyes, which for once seemed more green than blue. Maybe—was not her very hair tawny rather than golden if one regarded it attentively? A trick of the slant, afternoon sunlight, no doubt. But

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it gave her, in her own almost feline pose on the edge of the boat, the look of a jungle creature getting ready to spring.

McClue tried to dismiss the notion as fanciful, and closed his eyes. But it was all he could do to keep from dragging the Little Fool down from her lair and demanding an explanation.

The afternoon wore away. The sun touched the horizon. Sam had long since gone below, and now Dranquilino, the Tagal boy, appeared on the hurricane deck and began laying the cloth for dinner. A feeling of loneliness crept over The Ferret. When he could endure it no longer, he left his place and went in search of Birds.

The naturalist was in his cabin—a disorderly, nest-like space, hot as the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar and smelling worse than the valley of Hinnom. Seen through the half open door as he bent over a table strewn with newly acquired skins, he resembled more than ever a ruffled specimen out of his own collection. No wonder they called him "Birds." With large, shell-rimmed glasses, claw-like hands, a prom-

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inent beak, and two tufts of gray hair standing erect on his head, the old fellow seemed partly hawk, partly owl, with perhaps a trace of wren in his nervous, jerky activity. And—with the possible exception of Oaksey—this eccentric enthusiast was the most dependable male ally to be looked for in case any one of the hidden brewing dangers about them should suddenly develop a crisis!

"It's incredible," Birds began in a hoarse croak, nodding to his visitor but without looking up from an iridescent thing of feathers which he held in his hand; "simply incredible, the way the idea has gained ground that none of the *Trochilidae* are to be found in the Philippine Islands. I trapped this specimen on Luzon, and could have had a dozen more if everyone hadn't been in such a hurry to continue the voyage. Of course it isn't one of the *Trochilidae* proper, but *Salasphorus rufus* is own cousin to *Trochilidus colubris*, and when I once get ashore here, if I don't catch a few *Loddigesia mirabilis*—"

"What are you talking about?" demanded the detective, sinking into a chair and lighting

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a pipe. "Those things look like humming-birds."

"They are humming-birds."

"Well, I wish you'd talk about people for once"

"They're worth a word or two at times," admitted the ornithologist, suddenly smiling. "Every form of life is worth study, though as a general thing I'm more interested in the order *aves* than in *mammalia*. As to the genius *homo*—"

"Good! Let's get down to *homo*. What do you think of *homo* as he is found on this ship?"

"That is your province," observed the other. "You are a detective, they tell me, in your proper habitat—which, permit me to say, is the north temperate zone."

"But you must have reached some conclusions—especially as your own habitat, as you call it, isn't so far away. I'd like to know your opinion of those manuscripts left by Navares Gonzales y Badajos."

"What chiefly interested me, Mac, was

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Carlos' probable reason for reading them aloud."

"You don't believe it was merely to entertain us?"

"I could answer that better if I knew what was really the object of this voyage."

"Now you're going too far. Bernice is certainly anxious to find her father."

"No doubt. But has it never occurred to you that finding her father was the excuse rather than the reason for this trip?"

McClue started to answer, but he was cut short by a chorus of screams from the deck above, the hoarse shouting of men, and a pistol shot.

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CHAPTER IV

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

WHEN McClue reached the deck he found the passengers huddled in a group forward. It was dusk, and as yet few electrics were on, but there was light enough to see that Bernice was clinging to Gonzales in frank terror, and that the Spaniard's hand, hanging nerveless by his side, grasped a revolver.

Further aft, withdrawn from the passengers as if in feud, were the captain, the crew and some of the native servants in a group of their own. The deck between was empty save for an outstretched object, very still and curiously white.

"What has happened?" the detective demanded, noting with relief that Clara seemed to be unscathed and that only Mrs. Millspaugh was unaccounted for.

Gonzales pointed to the object on the deck.

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"That thing swam out from the island and was over the rail before anybody saw it. I shot just in time. Turn on more lights, somebody, will you? Damn it, how long are we going to be kept in the dark?"

There was a stampede of the crew to the switch-board below. But whoever got there first pulled the wrong lever, and the yacht went as dark as a floating derelict.

"You say—a man swam out from an uninhabited island?" The Ferret heard his own voice inquiring.

"Yes—it's a juramentado," Carlos answered unsteadily.

Now a juramentado is a raging Malay fanatic, who shaves off his eyebrows, binds up his arteries, covers his otherwise almost naked body with pigment, and starts out armed with a bolo to win Mohammed's paradise by killing as many Christians as possible before being finally despatched. To be left with one in that ghostly twilight—even though he was supposedly dead—was enough to try the stoutest nerves. Dolly Breen began to laugh in the shrill, disconcerting voice which presages hys-

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teria. McClue was at once recalled from the thought of dangers past to a realization of what might be yet in store.

"Don't move!" he ordered, as he sensed rather than saw the panic-like stir among those on deck. "Get ready what weapons you have—pocket-knives if nothing better—and strike at anything that shows itself. That devil may be only shamming, or he may not have come alone."

He had hardly spoken before the proper switch was found and every light on board was set aglow. And there upon the planking, instead of the painted savage he had expected to see, lay the harmless, slippered Dranquilino, whose slovenly appearance as he went about setting the table had aroused his indignation not half an hour before. The little Tagal was quite alone, his dirty white sailcloth *pantalones* and his camisa-like shirt streaked with red. And he was dead—apparently not from a bullet but from a slashed throat!

"Get together—back to back—the women in the center," commanded the detective, as the passengers and the returning sailors stared

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into each other's faces in helpless astonishment. "I *thought* I saw something move. The juramentado must be around here somewhere, and still alive."

"But I'm sure I potted him," Gonzales spoke up. "He wasn't three feet away."

"Potted Dranquilino?"

"I potted the man who climbed over the rail."

"Then who cut Dranquilino's throat?"

Instead of an answer, the voice of Mrs. Millspaugh was heard from the companion-way.

"Didn't I hear a pistol go off?"

"We were trying a little target-practice," said McClue, hurrying to delay her approach and speaking so that all might hear. "Your niece happened to clip the ear of one of the servants. I'm afraid you'll find her a bit upset."

Exactly what I was afraid of!" exclaimed the aunt, planting a determined foot on the stair.

"She *would* take up shooting, though for a young lady even to touch firearms is some-

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thing that was never heard of when I was a girl."

There was no keeping the indignant chaperone from the deck, but by the time she arrived the sailors had already found a tarpaulin, and stood in a concealing circle about the thing it covered. Mrs. Millspaugh saw only her niece's terror-stricken face—at the sight of which she hurried forward with arms extended in forgiveness. An almost immediate adjournment was taken to the dinner table where a plate of soup spilled by a terrified Negrito soon absorbed the good lady's attention. McClue was able to turn to Clara, who of late had her meals served at a little table just behind him, and to catch her barely audible whisper:

"You shouldn't have spared her. Something worse will happen if we're not careful."

"Yes," he admitted with the same caution. "We'll soon have to drop this farce. But I was afraid of a panic if she saw—and maybe began to scream."

"You did quite right," put in Gonzales, leaning towards the detective. "And there's no

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further danger. Luffy and the crew are searching the whole yacht. If the fellow's aboard they'll find him."

McClue gave the Spaniard a quick, appraising glance. Carlos had quite recovered from his fright. The hand which held his soup spoon was perfectly steady. And now he was trying to minimize the danger. Why? What could possibly lie behind this ghastly murder of the inoffensive Tagal?

The shadows cast by the lights, and the dim, almost invisible ocean beyond became more threatening than ever. A juramentado was at least a tangible enemy. But a juramentado who produced this curious reaction in one of the party—above all, a juramentado who changed to a harmless servant even after he was dead—was a thing to appal. And catching Clara's eye, the detective read his own thought. Gonzales had been momentarily startled, but was nevertheless in possession of some knowledge which they did not share.

"You are all upset by that target-shooting," he heard Mrs. Millspaugh say to Birds. "I'm nervous myself. Tomorrow we must go

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ashore. A little real exercise will do us good.''

McClue caught a mental flash-light of what a trip to Kulisan might mean, and he was about to break out with the truth when Birds forestalled him by remarking in a cheerful squawk:

"That's a good idea—if you're not afraid of bats. The place must be full of them.''

"Bats only fly around at night,'' corrected Mrs. Millspaugh. "I read up the subject in the encyclopedia the other day, after you'd been telling us about those dreadful vampires in South America. We won't be on the island at night, so you needn't try to frighten me.''

"Bats or snakes,'' went on the naturalist.

"You mean—there are snakes on Kulisan?''

"The terrain certainly seems well adapted to *reptilia—ophidia* in particular. I should be much disappointed if we didn't meet with some splendid specimens of the python and boa. But there's nothing to frighten one in that.''

Mrs. Millspaugh fairly shrieked, declaring that she would never rest now until the cap-

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tain had fixed the machinery and weighed anchor. Certainly, when he *did* descend to human affairs, the old naturalist was clever.

McClue, relieved to find even one level-headed man on board, slipped away to make a personal examination of the ship. He poked into every nook and cranny, from chain-wells to fore-peak, even looking beneath the covers of the life-boats, into the sleeping-cabins and the sailors' quarters. When he emerged from a final inspection of the hold, convinced that no hiding-place had been overlooked, the yacht had settled down for the night and only Oaksey remained by the dining-table.

"Not enough excitement to keep the others awake, I suppose," he remarked, taking a seat opposite the hunter.

"No, but their nerves got edgy as it grew late. They wanted to feel themselves behind locked doors."

"Well, I hope they haven't forgotten to lock them. I can find nothing, but it's hard to believe it was Dranquilino who ran amuck."

"It wasn't Dranquilino, Mac. The man who climbed the rail was naked save for a strip of

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loin-cloth. I had a distinct glimpse of him before Carlos fired."

"It's funny that Carlos missed."

"He didn't miss. The fellow went down with a bullet in him, I'm certain of that. It was his body that lay on deck when you first came up. It wasn't as dark to me as it must have been to you, fresh from a brightly lighted cabin."

"Just what do you mean, Oaksey?"

"Dranquilino was about to ring the gong for dinner when it happened," the Englishman went on without replying directly. "He has a neat way of doing it, you know—or had, I should say—with a lot of flourishes and half taps. We were gathered around to see him perform. My idea is that this other man who jumped over the rail and was shot, slashed Dranquilino as he fell. It's incredible that Dranquilino could have slashed himself. He must have clung to the gong for a minute, slumped down while the lights were off, and crawled to where we found him. The other, being merely wounded, got away."

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