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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK EL DIABLO ***



"May I come aboard your vessel?"

EL DIABLO

By
BRAYTON NORTON

ILLUSTRATED BY
DAN SAYRE GROESBECK

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PRESS OF

To
MY WIFE
"STERLING"

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EL DIABLO

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I

FORBIDDEN WATERS

Richard Gregory stirred restlessly in his sleep vaguely aware of an unfamiliar sound, a faint tapping, insistent, disturbing. He wakened sharply and sat bolt upright, conscious of the fact that he was fully dressed. Then he remembered.

"All right, Bill," he called softly. "Coming."

It took but a minute to shove his automatic into his pocket and secure his rifle from the corner. Groping his way to the door he stood shivering on the threshold, staring into the thick gray fog which enveloped him.

A hand touched his shoulder. Strong fingers tightened on his arm.

"This way," a low voice directed. "Careful, don't scuff."

Gregory started to speak but a warning pressure of the big fingers restrained him. His companion led the way. He followed in silence. Through the winding streets of the little fishing village they went, the familiar landmarks about them looming grotesque and mystical in the low-hanging fog. At length the acrid air of the sea assailed their nostrils and the silence of the night was broken by the noisy splashing of a marsh-loon.

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Bill Lang stopped suddenly. Faintly through the gray void came the muffled gulping of an under-

water exhaust. Huddled together they stood listening. To Richard Gregory the sound indicated only the slow approach of a motor-boat. To the trained ear of the fisherman it meant that Mexican Joe was on time with the *Sea Gull*.

Lang led on down the loosely boarded wharf piled high with ill-smelling fish-boxes and paused at the head of a narrow gangway, looking back, listening. Close by the dock Gregory discerned the outline of a fishing-boat, magnified by the fog into whimsical proportions. Descending cautiously, he followed Lang aboard and groped his way into the protecting shelter of the engine-house. The cold mist clung to his flesh and he drew his coat closer about him. The soft breathing of the heavy-duty motor became more pronounced, more labored. The clutch was in. They were backing out into the stream. He glanced above him at the stay where the starboard side-lamp hung. But the grayness was unbroken by a single ray of green.

Lang was running dark.

It was taking a long chance on such a night as this, Gregory reflected. But then the whole business was a long chance. And Lang knew his business. [Pg 3]

Imbued with a fisherman's sixth sense of feeling his way along familiar channels rendered unfamiliar by fog, Bill Lang piloted his craft skilfully down the silent bay in the direction of the open sea.

Crouching in the bow, Mexican Joe sought with cat-like eyes to pierce the gray veil of blinding fog. Narrowly averting collision with unlighted harbor-boats, bumping at times over sandy shoals, plowing through grass-grown mud-flats and skirting dangerous reefs with only the smallest margin of safety, they came at last to the jettied outlet of Crescent Bay.

The roar of the breakers sounded ominously close through the gray canopy of fog. The little craft rocked briskly in the trough of the swell as Lang threw the wheel over and headed out to sea. Flashing a small light over the compass, which served as an improvised binnacle, he peered intently at the instrument. Then he spoke softly to the man forward.

"Take the wheel, Joe."

When the Mexican had relieved him Lang bent low over the compass and examined his watch. Then he joined Gregory.

"Twelve o'clock," he announced. "We've got to make Diablo before daybreak. Sixty-five miles in less than four hours. That means hurry in weather like this."

He turned to the man at the wheel.

"Crowd her, Joe," he called. "We're taking chances to-night. If we hit anybody we might as well hit hard." [Pg 4]

"Do you think we got out without being seen?"

Lang shook his head sagely in the darkness.

"Not much of a chance," he answered after a moment. "Couldn't have had a better night, though. But it's mighty hard to slip anything over on the dago. If the fog would lift up it would be even shootin' you'd see one of Mascola's outfit trailin' us astern. We've got him nervous, I tell you."

"It's high time they were getting nervous," Gregory rejoined. "When they try to browbeat American fishermen off the high seas and coastal waters it's time somebody was getting nervous."

He was silent for a moment and Lang as usual only grunted his assent. Then Gregory went on:

"But there's something else that's making them nervous, Lang. Something they are doing around that devil-island. What kinds of laws they're breaking out there nobody knows. They may be doing anything from shooting fish to catching chicken-halibut or baby barracuda. We don't know what. But we do know they're mighty touchy on who cruises round El Diablo. When our boats get around that infernal island something always happens. You know that."

Lang's grunt was emphatic and Gregory concluded:

"That's why it's up to us to find out what it is. It's hard enough to get the fish as it is without Mascola staking out the water like he owned it and telling us to keep out." [Pg 5]

For some time the two men leaned together against the engine-house, each keeping his own counsel, each busied with his own thoughts. Then Gregory spoke:

"If anything happens to me to-night, Lang, keep all this business to yourself until my son comes home. Tell him. No one else. We want to get to the bottom of this thing ourselves without any one else butting in to bungle the job. Do you understand?"

When Lang had gone to relieve the Mexican at the wheel Richard Gregory's thoughts turned to his son overseas. Should he have waited until his return? He wondered. It was a young man's work, such a job as this,—and yet,—no, it was better to get to the bottom of the thing to-night. His head sank lower on his breast. Perhaps he could snatch a few winks of sleep. He might need it.

The muffled rattle of the anchor-chain caused him to waken sharply, stiff with cold. The motor was silent. The launch rocked lazily. Through a rift in the fog he saw a rocky beach only a stone's throw away. They were anchored close by the shore.

"Hell-Hole," announced Lang in a whisper.

Gregory picked up his rifle.

For a moment the big fisherman by his side hesitated. Then he said: "Why not stay on the *Gull*, Mr. Gregory? Let Joe go ashore with me."

"No."

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The answer was decisive. There were no explanations. Lang knew it was final. Assisted by the Mexican, he swung the dory free and lowered it quietly into the water. Helping Gregory into the small boat he turned to the Mexican and spoke rapidly in Spanish. Gregory could catch only the substance of a few sentences. Lang was telling Joe to stand by for a quick get-away. To watch the beach and start the anchor when he saw them coming. And above all he was to keep quiet.

The bow of the dory grated on the beach. The two men stepped out and without a backward glance slowly disappeared into the fog.

Huddled in the bow, Mexican Joe waited by the anchor-chain, his eyes searching the little cove. For a long time he sat thus, not even daring to light a cigarette. Once his straining ears caught the muffled exhaust of a motor-launch. It came very close but the fog guarded him well and he heard it pass on. What the two men were doing upon the island concerned Mexican Joe not at all. The devil-isle was filled with secrets. Why should he try to fathom them? He was paid to obey and Señor Lang had twice saved his life.

A sound from the shore caused Joe to struggle to his feet and begin hauling on the chain. Then he looked again, stopped and straightened up.

There were three men coming along the beach, four,—five.

Joe dropped behind the rail and watched them climb over the rocks and halt by the empty dory. Then he heard the sound of low voices in a foreign tongue, and shivered. The voices of the men on the beach grew fainter. They were minutely examining the dory. One lifted his arm and pointed seaward in the direction of the *Sea Gull*.

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The Mexican crept to his sawed-off shotgun loaded with buck-shot. Securing the weapon he made his way again to the bow and waited. The rock-bound cove was silent. The dory was still on the beach. But the men were gone.

At length came the rattle of loose stones mingled with the sound of low-pitched voices. *Gracious a Dios*. It was Señor Lang and Señor Gregory. Joe's hand leaped to the anchor-chain. There would be need to hurry. He tugged hard at the heavy cable, then he stopped, straightened and screamed a warning.

Gregory and Lang whirled about only a few feet from the dory. From the shadowed crevices in the rocks, men leaped forward and hurled themselves to the beach. About the skiff bright jets of flame cut the fog. Came the sharp report of an automatic, twice,—three times.

Mexican Joe watched the unequal struggle, huddled against the rail. His eyes brightened with fear. Twice he raised his gun, but his hand shook. At the distance the shot would scatter. There would be no use. He saw the two men fight their way to the dory. Saw Lang reach it, shove it into the water. The Señor was safe. *Gracious a Dios*. But no, he was going back for Señor Gregory. *Sangre de Christo*, they would all be killed.

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The fog thickened. The struggling forms merged, grotesquely intermingled and became indistinct. From behind the gray curtain came the sound of heavy blows, muttered imprecations, groans.

Joe waited for the veil to lift, staring with straining eyes, cursing softly. *Los Señores* were being murdered before his eyes and he could do nothing. Through a rift in the fog he saw Gregory with his back to the cliff fighting back the savage horde which were pressing hard upon him. He was using his rifle as a club. The men were falling away from him. Lang had cleared the way to the skiff; was almost at his companion's side.

From the overhanging ledge above, two dark figures leaped suddenly upon the man beneath, wrenching his gun from his hand, crushing him to the sand. Lang fell upon the group of struggling figures, fighting like a madman. Then he staggered, dropped to his knees and went down before the onslaught.

Again the gray pall drifted down from the tall crags above and blotted out the scene.

Joe staggered to his feet, grasping the wire-stays for support. Then he stiffened and stood listening. The muffled purr of a high-powered motor disturbed the silence. From out the gloom to starboard he saw the bow of a big motor-boat cut the fog. The Mexican shrieked a warning and tightened his clutch on the stays.

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The strange craft veered, the sharp bow swung over. With wide-open engines, she struck the *Sea Gull* amidships, full on the beam. Hurling to the deck by the impact the Mexican heard the

snapping and grinding of timbers. He was conscious of falling and the cool rush of waters about his head. Then he remembered no more.

Wrapped in a clinging mantle of filmy fog, rock-bound, grim and mysterious, the Island of El Diablo frowned at the sea from behind the veil of silence. Brave men had sought to fathom her secret but she had guarded it well.

CHAPTER II

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JETSAM OF THE SEA

John Blair was worried. Every line of his face, every movement of his nervous body showed it. He turned quickly to the bare-footed fisherman who blocked the doorway.

"You combed the beach, you say? How far?"

"San Lucas to Port Angeles."

"No signs of wreckage; nothing?"

The fisherman shook his head.

Blair was silent for a moment. Then he asked: "How far out to sea did you go?"

"About three miles, 'Dog-face' Jones's workin' out San Anselmo way. Big Jack left last night for Diablo."

Blair started. "Diablo," he repeated. "They surely wouldn't have gone out there."

Before the fisherman could reply there came an interruption. The door opened quickly and a young man strode into the room.

"Mr. Gregory? Is he in?"

Blair looked up quickly at the sound of the voice and ran his eyes over the clean-cut figure in the serge uniform. The impression, hastily formed, of having met the man before, was strengthened by the roving black eyes which were expectantly traveling about the room.

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"This is the Legonia Fish Cannery, isn't it?"

Blair nodded. "Yes," he said. "But Mr. Gregory is not here at present."

"When will he be in?"

The words came eagerly with the brusque assurance of an immediate answer. The crisp insistence had a decidedly familiar sound. Blair regarded the clean-cut face of the young officer intently as he answered:

"I don't know. Will you call again or leave your name?"

"I am Mr. Gregory's son."

Blair came to meet him with outstretched hands.

"I might have known it," he said. "I am Mr. Blair, your father's manager. I'm glad to meet you. Your father did not expect you so soon, did he?"

The young man shook his head and smiled.

"No," he answered. "Dad thinks I'm still on the other side. I wanted to surprise him. I wrote a letter saying I would be home as soon as possible. I mailed the letter on the ship which brought me over." A boyish look crept into his eyes. "Don't let on when dad comes back that you've seen me, will you, Mr. Blair? I have to go back to camp to-night and arrange about my discharge. It may be a week before I can be back."

The black eyes grew suddenly wistful.

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"Say, Mr. Blair, don't you think there's a chance of my seeing dad before I leave? I have until five o'clock to get my train."

Blair was unable to meet the steady gaze of his employer's son. Should he tell the boy of his father's strange absence? Voice his own fears and suspicions for the safety of Gregory, Sr.? By the time the young man returned the mystery might be solved. At least they would know something.

"What is wrong, Mr. Blair?"

The question was volleyed with quiet insistence. It demanded an answer. The boy would not be put off. He was his father's son. Blair sought to put the matter in as favorable a light as possible under the circumstances. In a few words he told of the disappearance of Richard Gregory.

Kenneth Gregory listened quietly, at times interrupting with rapid-fire questions.

"When was he last seen?"

"Three days ago."

"You knew nothing of his plans?"

"Nothing definite," Blair evaded. "He might have gone out with the fishermen scouting for albacore. One of Lang's boats turned up missing the next morning. Lang himself is missing, too."

"Who is Lang?"

"Your father's fishing captain. He recently bought him a number of new boats. They might have gone to try one of them out."

"Nothing has been heard of them since?"

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"Not yet. You see it has been very foggy lately all along the coast. That has handicapped our search."

"Where can I get a boat?"

Blair shook his head. Then he came closer and put his hand on Kenneth Gregory's arm.

"All of the Lang boats are out now, Captain. Everything is being done, I can assure you. It would be no use."

"Are there no other boats here than Lang's?"

"Only the alien fleet."

The man in uniform whirled about decisively.

"Then I'll get one of them. Will you show me where they are?"

"It would be no use. They wouldn't go. You see——"

"Let's try."

With some reluctance Blair consented.

"We haven't been getting along any too well with Mascola's outfit lately," he explained as they walked along. "I'll stop at Lang's wharf first. Maybe some of the boats are back."

Turning on to a small wharf they walked in silence over the loose boards down the lane of ill-smelling fish-boxes. At the end of the dock a narrow gangway led downward to a small float which rocked lazily in the capping swells thrown up by a passing fishing-boat. Close by, another wharf jutted out into the bay. Upon it were a number of swarthy fishermen, piling nets. Blair stopped abruptly at the head of the gangway, his eyes searching the water. The fishing-boat was swinging up into the tide and edging closer.

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"Is that one of the Lang boats?" he heard Gregory ask.

A paroxysm of coughing prevented Blair's immediate reply. The young officer looked eagerly at the approaching craft, upon the bow of which a dark-skinned man leaned carelessly against the wire-stays. He noticed that the man was tall and straight. Upon his head a gaudy red cap rested with a rakish air. His eyes were upon the Lang dock as he stood with folded arms and waited for the boat to nose up to the near-by wharf.

Gregory admitted to himself that there was something masterful about the red-capped stranger, at the same time, repellent. The crowd of aliens moreover, he noticed, fell away respectfully. The newcomer was evidently a personage in the community.

Gregory, watching him as he stepped from the launch, instinctively disliked him.

"That's Mascola."

Blair bit the words savagely.

Gregory surveyed the newcomer with interest.

"He has a boat," he said. "Let's go over and get it."

Blair put out a restraining hand.

"There would be no use," he said. "Mascola wouldn't let us have that boat to save our lives."

Gregory was already on his way to the Italian dock. Blair started to overtake him. Then he glanced down the bay and his face brightened.

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"Wait," he called. "Here comes one of Lang's boats now. Perhaps they will know something."

With the approach of the second fishing-boat came a crowd of curious fishing folk of all nationalities. Men, women and children clustered about the dock, imbued with a lust for excitement and a morbid desire to learn the worst from the latest mystery of the sea. All eyes were held by the fishing-boat as it swung about and drew near the float.

Blair shoved his way through the crowd and led Gregory down the gangway. Upon the covered hatch of the launch Blair's eye caught sight of two rolls of canvas, fashioned bundle-like. Nets most likely. He looked eagerly at the fishermen aboard the incoming craft. Their faces caused him to look again at the canvas bundles. Then he turned quickly to the man by his side.

"Why not wait on the wharf until they come up?" he asked in a low voice in which he strove to conceal his agitation.

Kenneth Gregory shook his head. He too had noticed the bundles on the hatch.

In silence the launch tied up to the fleet. In silence two bare-footed fishermen lifted one of the bundles and carrying it carefully between them, stepped out upon the gently rocking float. The salt-stiffened canvas unrolled as the men laid their burden down, exposing the body of a huge fisherman. His face was battered and bruised and Gregory noticed that his hair was red.

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Blair's hand on Gregory's arm tightened.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "It's Lang."

Kenneth Gregory looked down into the face of the big fisherman. Then he remembered the other bundle. Blair sought to deter him. But he was too late to check the onward rush of the young man across the float. Already he was boarding the boat. Blair watched him raise the flap of canvas. Saw his eyes searching the folds beneath. At length came voices. A man was speaking.

"Found them off Diablo. Went on the rocks at Hell-Hole in the fog. Boat was smashed. Bu'sted clean in two."

Gregory scarcely heard them as he knelt on the hatch looking down into the face of the one he had traveled seven thousand miles to see.

Blair led him away. As the little procession moved silently down the dock the crowd parted respectfully. Eyes that were hard, softened. Fishermen took off their hats, holding them awkwardly in their red hands. Fisherwomen looked down at the rough boards and crossed themselves devoutly.

The cortège passed on. Turning from the dock they threaded their way down the narrow street leading to the town. As they neared the alien docks, the dusky fishermen uncovered and drew together, awed by the presence of the great shadow.

Gregory's arm brushed against a man leaning carelessly against the wharf-rail. Raising his eyes from the ground, he beheld the one man of all the villagers who had remained unmoved, unsoftened by the spectacle. With his red cap shoved back upon his shining black hair the insolent stranger stood looking on with folded arms. Gregory noticed that Mascola had not even taken the trouble to remove the cigarette which hung damply from his lips.

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For an instant the two men looked deep into each other's eyes. Then the procession passed on.

CHAPTER III

[Pg 18]

TANGLED THREADS

The death of his father hurled Kenneth Gregory into a new world—a world of unfamiliar faces, of strange standards of value, of vastly different problems—the world of business.

Kenneth Gregory had taken this world as he found it. There had been no time to moralize upon the situation into which the spinning of the wheel had plunged him. There was work to do.

Securing his discharge from the army he had turned to the task of settling up his father's estate. The fact that he was the sole heir and legal executor simplified matters. But there were complications. These he had unraveled with the aid of Farnsworth, the attorney for the estate. Then he had come to Legonia and found plenty to do.

Blair, the former manager of the Legonia Fish Cannery, had suffered an attack of pneumonia and was ill at a neighboring sanitarium. From him he could therefore learn nothing. The books of the company told him but little more. Now he was going over the private papers in his father's office.

"Are you the boss?"

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Kenneth Gregory turned from his perusal of a file of letters and faced a young man standing in the doorway. Gregory nodded.

"I'm the owner," he replied pleasantly, noting the well-worn, much-patched service uniform of the stranger. "And for the time being, boss. My manager is sick. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. You can give me a job."

Gregory smiled at the frankness of the answer.

"I might at that," he said. "Can you speak Russian or Italian?"

The ex-soldier shook his head as Gregory went on:

"What I need more than anything else just now is an interpreter. I have a lot of foreigners working outside cleaning up. I've been having to make signs to them all morning."

The soldier's brow wrinkled.

"That's what they told me of this place in Centerville," he said. "They said I was only wasting shoe-leather to come down here. That it was no place for an American."

"Maybe they're right," Gregory cut in. Then he added: "However, we may be able to change things. What can you do?"

The youth's face assumed a more cheerful expression. "I'm a mechanic by trade," he answered. "I'll do anything right now."

"Know anything about marine motors?"

"Two or four cycle?"

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Gregory pondered. "Twas best to be on the safe side. "Both," he answered.

The soldier shook his head. "You'll have to count me out on the two cycles," he said. "Those little peanut-roasters and coffee-grinders are new to me. Never had any experience with anything much but Unions and Standards. That's what most of the fishermen have in their boats."

Gregory's face cleared.

"I may be able to take you on. I have a lot of motors which will need looking after before long. In the meantime if you want to go to work cleaning up the house, you can start any time you're ready. What do you say?"

"I'll say you've hired a man. My name's Barnes."

Gregory extended his hand. "And mine is Gregory. When do you want to go to work?"

"Right away."

Together the two men went out into the fish-laden atmosphere of the cannery. Walking down the aisles, flanked on both sides by huge vats and silent conveyers, they came upon a number of dark-skinned laborers whiling away the time with a scant pretense of work. Stung into a semblance of action by the sudden appearance of the boss, the men abruptly postponed their conversation and tardily plied their scrubbing brooms, meanwhile eying the newcomer with frank disapproval.

Leaving Barnes with the injunction to keep an eye on the men and, if possible, induce them to speed up, Gregory returned to his work. Passing through the outer office where he had met Mr. Blair upon the day of his arrival from overseas, he entered the little room which Richard Gregory had used for a private office. Opening a small safe which stood in a corner, he resumed his examination of his father's papers.

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In a vague sort of way he regarded his legacy of the Legonia Fish Cannery as a trust. In the atmosphere of this room this feeling was always enhanced, the trust more sacred. Here Richard Gregory had worked, planned, worried. Every detail of the room spoke eloquently from father to son. Here was begun an unfinished work. Richard Gregory had believed in it; had given his life to it.

Farnsworth had said that the business had never paid. That his client had purchased it directly against his advice and had continued to throw good money after bad ever since. The lawyer advised selling at the first good opportunity.

Kenneth Gregory absolutely refused to believe that his father had failed. The business had not prospered. That was true. But doubtless there were good and sufficient reasons. He continued his examination of the contents of the safe, methodically going through the various compartments and making notes concerning the papers found therein. At length he came to a memorandum which held his attention. It was the agreement his father had made with Lang to purchase ten fully-equipped fishing-boats for the fisherman.

Gregory studied the penciled notes. His father had reposed untold confidence in Lang's integrity. So much was shown by the loose phraseology of the document and the extreme latitude given the fisherman in compliance with its terms. That this confidence had evidently not been misplaced, was evidenced by the promptness with which Lang met the payments as they fell due.

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Farnsworth, Gregory remembered, had regarded the chattel mortgage on Lang's boats and equipment as a most doubtful asset. If Lang had left a son the old lawyer had maintained, who would be competent to go on with his father's work, the situation would have appeared in a more favorable light.

But Lang had left no son. Only a daughter. And, to quote the reputable Farnsworth, what chance would any man stand of getting anything out of a woman on a loosely drawn contract like that? Figure it profit and loss, my boy, he had concluded brusksly.

Like Farnsworth, Gregory too wished that Lang had left a son. It would be easier dealing with a

man, competent or incompetent, than a woman. Well, he would say nothing to the girl for the time being at least. She had had enough to bear in the loss of her father. That much he could swear to. When she had defaulted the next payment he would make her a proposition to buy her boats. Fishing was no business for a girl anyway.

He glanced at the schedule of dates arranged by Lang and his father for making the payments and turned to the calendar. One of them was already past due. Five hundred dollars should have been paid the week before.

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So intent was Gregory upon his study of the contract that he failed to hear the opening of the outer office door. His first intimation of the presence of a visitor came with a sharp knock upon his half-open door.

"Come in," he called.

A wind-bronzed fisherman stood upon the threshold, dangling a red cap in his hand. He bowed gracefully and smiled.

"You are Mr. Gregory?"

Gregory nodded, trying to remember where he had seen the man before. Suddenly he remembered. It was on the day his father's body had been brought in. Near the alien wharf a man had jostled against him. A man with a bright red cap, smoking a cigarette.

"I am Mascola."

The visitor spoke the words slowly as if anxious that none of the importance of the introduction might be lost or passed over lightly.

Gregory looked Mascola over carefully. The man's carelessness and seeming irreverence on that never-to-be-forgotten day might not have been intentional. He must not allow his prejudice to interfere with his judgment. That was not business. He resolved to hear what the man had to say.

"What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

Mascola walked unbidden to a chair and seated himself before replying: "You will want fish before long, Mr. Gregory. I would like to contract for my men to get them for you."

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Gregory was nettled by Mascola's calm assurance. He had a mind to send him packing. Blair, he remembered, had evidently had but little use for the Italian. But Blair too might have been prejudiced. It was business perhaps to hear the man's proposal.

"What is your proposition?" he asked, hoping Mascola would be brief.

In this he was not disappointed. Mascola plunged his hand into the pocket of his vest and drew forth a paper which he placed in Gregory's hand.

Gregory ran his eye hastily over the typewritten sheet which contained the memorandum of four numbered clauses. They were briefly worded and to the point:

1. The fishermen to furnish albacore, tuna and sardines at the same price paid by the Golden Rule Cannery.
2. The cannery to assume complete liability for all boats and equipment used by the fishermen in providing fish for it.
3. The cannery to agree to pay all fines, state and federal, for any violation of fishing or navigation laws.
4. The cannery to agree, under bonds, to hire no men who are not members of the fishermen's union.

Gregory looked up to meet Mascola's dark eyes regarding him intently.

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"That is all," said the Italian boss.

"It's enough," commented Gregory tersely, striving to hold his temper in check at the impudence of Mascola's proposal. Any one of the four clauses he realized would be amply sufficient to throw him into bankruptcy. The first would place him in the hands of his local competitor, a Slavonian. The last would deliver all that was left to the fisherman's union, also foreigners. By the second clause his property would be placed in jeopardy to protect the carelessness or incompetence of others, aliens all. And the third, Gregory did not clearly understand. To satisfy his curiosity he asked:

"What do you mean by the cannery agreeing to pay the fines?"

Mascola smiled pityingly, exposing a fine set of even teeth.

"You are a stranger here. I forgot. So you do not know that it is necessary for fishermen to break the law sometimes to get fish. The canneries must have them. They ask no questions. If we can get them without breaking the laws it is so much the better. But sometimes when you have steam up you want fish very bad. Then you say, Mascola, I must have fish. Well, I get them for you. There are always fish to be caught in some way or other. They are worth a good deal to you at

such a time. Why should you not pay for the extra risk we run in getting them?"

It was Gregory's turn to smile.

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"Rather ingenious," he commented. "Do you find it necessary to go to such extremes often?"

Mascola sensed the sarcasm. A faint flush crept to his dark cheeks. He began to suspect that the young man was not taking either him or his proposition seriously. Perhaps he had said too much. He answered the question with one word.

"No."

Gregory studied Mascola's face and his smile faded. His irritation at the Italian's entrance had at first given place to amusement at the absurdity of the man's proposal. Now came again the feeling of dislike which had assailed him on the occasion of his first meeting with Mascola.

"Mascola," he said, "I'll keep your proposition in mind. That is just about all I ever will do with it, I guess, though I'll talk it over with Blair."

The Italian frowned at the mention of Blair. He had supposed Blair to be gone. Had not Rossi reported the departure of the former manager more than a month ago? Blair would be a stumbling-block to his scheme. Blair knew too much. Mascola realized that he had been too confident. He felt, moreover, that he had made a fool of himself. Had not the young man smiled? His anger mounted at the recollection. He rose quickly, fighting it down.

"All right, Mr. Gregory," he said smoothly. "I make my proposition. I come to you this time. You do not accept. It is all right. Next time you come to me."

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Bowing slightly and smiling to hide his anger, he went out.

Gregory turned again to his work, but found it hard to keep his mind from the Italian's veiled threat. It angered him. Mascola had appeared so sure of his ground. His irritation grew as his eye fell again on the Lang contract. If he only had some one with whom he could talk. Some one who knew something about fishing or running a cannery. Some one who would understand what he was up against. His father evidently had few if any confidants. If he had only left some written word.

From the cannery came the sound of excited voices, a jargon of unintelligible words. Gregory sprang to his feet and hurried out. He met Mascola coming to meet him. Behind him trooped the alien laborers.

The Italian stopped abruptly and threw out his arm with a dramatic gesture. Pointing in the direction of the solitary soldier who stood staring with open mouth, he said: "My men, they do not work with scabs, Mr. Gregory. You let that man go, or they quit."

"Let them quit."

Gregory spoke quickly and tried to smile. Losing his temper would not help matters. That wasn't business.

Mascola spoke rapidly to the men in their own tongue, waving his arms and rolling his eyes. Gregory noticed that every one seemed to be getting excited. With scowling faces, the alien laborers grouped themselves about their leader and glared at the offending soldier and his boss.

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Gregory checked a quick impulse forcibly to show Mascola the door. It was the right of every man to refuse to work if the job was not to his liking. There was, however, nothing to get excited over. He turned to Mascola.

"Tell your men to come into the office and get their money," he said.

His quiet manner disappointed the Italian boss. He had hoped for a scene. An argument at least. His men expected more of him than this. Gregory had calmly turned his back upon him and was walking away. Mascola could stand no more.

"All right, Gregory," he called. "You go ahead and hire a scab crew. Then you'll find out you're the same damn fool as your father."

Gregory whirled. Mascola's hand leaped to his side, burying itself in the folds of his shirt. Before he could bring it out, Kenneth Gregory was upon him.

His fist caught Mascola full on the chin. The Italian's head snapped backward. His feet shot forward. He clutched at the air for support and strove to regain his balance. Then he fell to the floor, rolled over like a cat, and rebounded to his feet, snarling.

Gregory heard a warning cry from Barnes: "Look out! He's got a knife."

Barnes looked vainly about for a weapon as he ran to his employer's assistance.

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The laborers pressed closer, their brown hands fingering their belts, their faces dark with passion. Hemmed in on every side by the scowling aliens, Gregory took a step forward and stood waiting.

Mascola advanced warily with peculiar sideling steps. His face was a mottled gray save in one place where his chin was flecked with blood. His left arm was extended guard-wise. His right was

crooked loosely to his side, fingers covered. He crouched low and gathered.

Gregory measured the distance which separated him from the advancing Italian. Faintly to his ears came the sound of creaking boards behind him. Perhaps Mascola's men were pressing in from the rear. He dared not look to see. His eyes were held by Mascola's crooked arm. That was what he must grab and break.

Mascola's dark eyes, shining with anger, flashed over Gregory's shoulder to the door beyond. Then they widened with surprise. He stopped suddenly. His extended arm drooped. For an instant he stood hesitating, wavering. He took a step backward. His crooked arm unbent, dropped slowly to his side.

His eyes were held by the open door.

CHAPTER IV

[Pg 30]

THE WORK OF THEIR FATHERS

"Drop it, Mascola."

The sharp command drew the eyes of the laborers to the door and they stopped fingering their knives. Shuffling closer together they looked to their leader for guidance.

Mascola's eyes darted about the floor, coming to rest upon a big vat only a few feet away. For an instant he hesitated. A faint metallic click from the doorway caused him to make up his mind. His body straightened as his hands traveled upward to the level of his shoulders. The palm of his right hand opened and a thin two-edged blade rattled to the floor.

Gregory took a step forward and shoved the knife away with his foot. Keeping one eye fixed warily upon Mascola, he shot a glance over his shoulder to determine the author of the interruption.

He turned to see a trim little figure in loosely-fitting outing clothes striding across the floor. Facing the light which streamed in from the open door, he could not distinguish the newcomer's face. He only noted the ease of the stranger's movements, the poise of the uptilted head and the nervous manner with which the Italians fell away before the advancing figure.

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"What's the trouble?"

Gregory stared. It was a girl. She had turned into the light and was facing him. As he formed an answer to her question he saw that her sun-bronzed cheeks were flushed with red and her clear brown eyes were looking into his inquiringly. In her hand she held an automatic revolver.

Gregory strove to make his explanation brief.

"These men refused to work. I told them to go. Mascola and I had some trouble. He drew his knife. Then you came."

The girl nodded, dislodging a lock of red-gold hair from under her knitted cap. Turning quickly to Mascola, she commanded: "Get out."

Mascola made no sign that he intended to comply with the order. With folded arms he looked insolently at the speaker.

"When my men are paid, I will go. But first, I must have my knife."

His eyes roved longingly in the direction of the dagger.

The girl took a quick step backward and covered Mascola's waist-line with the automatic.

"You'll go now," she said. Turning to Gregory she added: "Tell him you'll pay him down-town."

Gregory picked up the Italian's knife before replying:

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"I'll be at the bank at two," he said, making no move to comply with Mascola's request for his weapon.

Mascola clenched his hands. His face grew red with passion. For an instant he glared from Gregory to the girl. Then the color faded. Turning to his men he spoke rapidly to them in their own tongue. The workmen retired sullenly and picking up their coats followed their leader to the door. Mascola hesitated for a moment on the threshold. Then, checking the angry threat which rose to his lips, he went out.

Gregory watched him go in silence. Then he turned to the girl.

"My name is Gregory," he said. "You happened along just about right for me."

The tense lines about the girl's mouth disappeared slowly as she passed a small brown hand across her forehead and replaced a truant lock.

"I am Dickie Lang," she announced simply. Shoving the automatic into her coat pocket, she extended her hand. "I knew your father well. I am glad to meet you."

The frankness of the words was strengthened by the look of sincerity in the brown eyes as she stood calmly looking him over.

Gregory curbed his surprise with an effort which left him staring at the girl in awkward silence. When he had thought of Lang's daughter at all, it had been only in the most abstract way. He had regarded her only a possible and very probable source of trouble, scarcely as a flesh and blood woman at all. Never a girl like this.

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He wakened to the fact that he was a very stupid host. Barnes, after staring at Dickie Lang for a moment, had retired to his work, leaving Gregory alone with his guest in the middle of the receiving floor.

"Won't you come into the office?"

The words came hesitatingly. He nodded in the direction of the screen-door.

"Yes. I would like to talk with you."

Again the direct straightforward manner of speaking. Dickie Lang started at once for the office, walking across the floor with quick impatient steps. Gregory held the door open and as the girl brushed by him, he saw her flash a glance to the door of his father's office beyond. He led the way in silence to the room where he had been working and waited for his visitor to be seated.

Dickie Lang's eyes roved swiftly about the room, taking in the familiar details. Nothing had been changed. She could see her father leaning against the desk, his great shoulders hunched forward, his big hands nervously toying with the glass paper-weight, his blue eyes fixed upon the silent figure in the swivel-chair. Again she could hear the voice of Richard Gregory:

"All right, Bill. I'll see you through. Go ahead and get the boats."

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Dickie realized with a start that the square-jawed, black-eyed young man before her was Richard Gregory's son. The past faded away. With simple directness she plunged into the object of her visit.

"I've brought the money due on the boats. Got into a squabble with the markets and they tied me up for a few days. Otherwise I would have been here sooner."

Thrusting her hand into her pocket, she drew out a roll of bills and began to count them.

Gregory watched her as she thumbed the bank-notes. The dark brown corduroy was simply, if mannishly cut, and in a way it became her. Her small feet and rounded ankles would have appeared to better advantage in high-heeled shoes and silk stockings than those blunt-nosed boots and canvas leggings. And why in the name of common sense would any woman with hair like that want to keep it tucked away under a close-fitting cap? She would have been beautiful in — He roused himself from his examination of the girl's attire and strove to fix his mind on the object of her visit. He reached for the receipt-book as she finished counting the money.

"Tenth payment," she exclaimed. "Five hundred. Makes twelve thousand even. That right?"

Gregory ran over the money, consulting his notebook to verify the figures.

"Right," he answered.

While he wrote the receipt she studied him. So this was the man whom Richard Gregory had designated as a red-blooded American. The father's praise of his absent son, she was forced to admit, had slightly prejudiced her against the young man. No single individual could possess all the sterling traits of character attributed to him by the late cannery owner. That was impossible. He would fall down somewhere.

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Gregory handed the girl her receipt.

"And now," he began, somewhat uncertain as to just how to proceed, "what do you intend to do about the boats?"

Dickie Lang paused in the act of folding the paper and looked up quickly. For some reason she felt herself irritated by the question. Her irritation crept into her voice as she answered:

"I'm going to run them, of course."

Gregory straightened in his chair and faced about.

"You're going to run them?" he repeated. "You don't mean yourself?"

"Sure. What else would I do with them?" she asked coldly.

The man was caught for the moment unawares by the suddenness of the question.

"I thought perhaps you would want to sell them," he answered bluntly.

"Why?" Her voice had a belligerent ring and he noticed that her eyes were snapping. As he did not immediately reply, she flashed: "I know why. It's because I'm a woman. You think I can't make good. Isn't that it?"

Gregory felt his cheeks burn at the feeling she threw into her words. He hadn't meant to make it quite so plain but if she insisted on the truth, why not? Perhaps it was the best way. [Pg 36]

"You've guessed it," he answered slowly. "You may call it prejudice if you like, but that is just the way I feel."

Tapping the floor angrily with her foot, she interrupted:

"It's worse than prejudice. It's just plain damn-foolishness. Honestly, after all I've heard of you, I gave you credit for having more sense. Your father wouldn't have said that. He believed there wasn't a thing in the world a man or woman couldn't do, if they tried hard enough. And he gave them the chance to make good. But I'll tell you right now, you've got a lot to learn before you'll be able to wear his hat."

Gregory sank deeper into his chair as Dickie Lang proceeded with his arraignment. Nothing could be said until she was through. His silence gave the girl a free rein to express her feelings.

"You think I don't know my game because I'm a woman. Why, I've been on the sea since I was a kid. If my father hadn't made me go to school, I would have lived with him on the water. And don't you suppose in fishing with a man like Bill Lang, a person learns something? Doesn't that more than make up for the handicap of being a woman?"

The young man waited for a chance to put in a word but none came. Becoming angrier each minute, she hurried on: [Pg 37]

"There isn't a man in Legonia but you who would have said that. Not even Mascola. He hates me only because I do know my business. And you, a stranger, come down here and tell me——"

"I didn't say you didn't know your business," Gregory interjected as she drew a long breath.

"No, but you thought it just the same. And what right have you to think things like that? What do you know about things here? You never saw the place until just a few weeks ago. And you've been gone ever since. I'll bet you were never in a fish cannery before in your life. I'll bet right now you don't know what you're going to do next. You're waiting for Blair to get well and tell you. Suppose he doesn't. He's a mighty sick man and it's a cinch if he does come back it won't be for a long time. What are you going to do in the meantime besides tell me I don't——"

Gregory held up his hand to check a further outburst.

"Listen," he said. "There is no use going on like this. Our fathers were the best of friends. Why can't we be the same? I'm willing to admit there is a lot of truth in what you say about my not knowing just what I'm going to do right now. I didn't select the position I'm in, but I'm going to make the best of things as they are and finish up the work which was begun by my father. And I want to say right now that I'm going to finish it. [Pg 38]

"In a way," he went on slowly, "our positions are somewhat similar. We each have a job to finish. I didn't think yours meant as much to you as mine does to me, though of course I might have, if I hadn't been thinking so much of myself. Our fathers worked together and got along fine. It may be that we can do the same thing."

The fire died slowly from the girl's eyes. In its place there came an expression, more wistful perhaps than anything else. When she spoke again the irritation was gone from her voice.

"No," she answered. "There isn't any reason why we can't be friends. And there are a lot of reasons why we should be. I'm willing to do my part and I'll show you, Mr. Gregory, that I do know my business. It always makes me mad when any one thinks I don't know the sea. When dad wanted to tease me he always called me a 'land-lubber.' And even when a kid I would always fight at that."

She paused a moment. Then went on:

"I'd like to do what I can for you for two reasons. Your father did a lot for mine. He was one of my few friends. I'd like to give his son a hand if it would help. In the second place, it is to my interest in a business way to see your cannery succeed. It is a market for my fish. I won't sell to the Golden Rule and the dealers won't pay the express on canning fish. The sooner you start up the better it will be for me. I can tell you right now you have a lot to do." [Pg 39]

Again she paused and looked down at her feet. When she spoke again it was with some hesitation.

"If I were you I'd get hold of Jack McCoy. He can do more for you than any one else. I wouldn't count too much on Blair. I heard from him this morning and they didn't hold out much hope. He's completely run down and that's the kind pneumonia hits hard."

Gregory nodded.

"I know," he said. Then he asked: "McCoy was the foreman, wasn't he?"

"Yes. He's still in town. Blair gave him a letter of recommendation but Jack won't look for another job until he knows what Blair is going to do. He says Blair taught him all he knows and he's going to stick to him because he always treated him white."

Gregory wrote McCoy's address which the girl supplied and she continued:

"One of the first things to be done, of course, will be to go all over the machinery. That won't take long. Then the supplies and material will have to be checked over and the new stuff ordered. That will take a week for two men."

Gregory looked at the girl with more respect. Apparently she knew something of his business as well as her own. Doubtless her association with her father had brought her into close touch with the cannery. As she went on, Dickie Lang divulged the source of her information.

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"Jack and I have talked you over a lot," she said soberly. "We are both anxious to see you get going."

While she talked on concerning the re-opening of the cannery, Gregory wondered to what extent her opinion of McCoy's ability was based by personal prejudice. Of course it was nothing to him what Dickie Lang thought of McCoy or of himself either, for that matter. He decided to look McCoy up at once.

"Then you have to get your labor," she went on. "And that isn't as easy, I have found, as it seems. You see Mascola has the bulge on the labor situation around here. He has the riff-raff of the world on his pay-roll. They speak in a dozen different languages. Everything almost—but English. They are practically all aliens and there is nothing they won't do to keep a decent man out. Blair had hard work to get a crew, I know, and harder work to keep it. He was always hiring and firing. Things would go all right for a while. Then there would come a row with Mascola's outfit and a lot of the boys would get disgusted and leave."

Gregory interrupted:

"I understand from my father's attorney, that one of the biggest things he had to contend with was the matter of getting fish."

"I'm coming to that in a minute. Let's finish up the labor question while we're on it. You've got to get a certain number of skilled men who can handle the machines. With a few others who have worked in a fish cannery you can go ahead, for the biggest percentage of your labor is unskilled anyway and has to be broken in. Men like that are the hardest to get," she concluded, "they are mostly tramps. Here to-day and gone to-morrow. You can't depend on them. If you can get a bunch to stick, you're mighty lucky."

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She paused and moved her chair nearer. Then she broached the important subject.

"About the fish, you can do one of three things. Or rather two things," she corrected, "for I hardly think you'll tie up with Mascola. You can fix up your own boats, try to man them and get your own fish. You have twenty-five boats. That's not enough even if they were all in good shape, which they're not."

"What do you mean by trying to man my boats?"

The girl smiled.

"Just what I say," she answered. "Fishermen are scarce. My father was in business here for twenty years and most of the time he was running short-handed. You can get plenty of men to ride on your boats but they are not fishermen."

Noting the direction in which the conversation was drifting, Gregory resolved to hasten the climax.

"Do you think you could furnish me with enough fish?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't think anything about it. I know I could."

"How do you know it?"

She hesitated as she cast about in her active brain for a tangible argument to convince the obstinate, square-jawed man before her. Of course she could get him the fish. But how could she make him believe it?

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"My fishermen know the coast for one thing," she began. "That's a whole lot around here. It's a treacherous shore-line and a man who doesn't know it can lose a boat mighty easy. Then, I have ten new boats, just the kind you have to have for albacore and tuna. As a general rule you've got to go way out to sea to get them. Sometimes as far as Diablo. And that means trouble. If you've ever been out to that God-forsaken island you'll understand that it takes real men and boats. I have both."

Gregory said nothing, but waited for the girl to finish:

"I know my game," she concluded, with no spirit of bravado, but merely as if it was only a plain statement of fact. "My men are used to holding their own against Mascola. And I can tell you that is worth a lot."

Gregory nodded. Then he said quietly:

"Your father was never able to supply mine with enough fish to keep this cannery going. Isn't that right?"

Dickie Lang was forced to admit the truth of the statement. Then she qualified: "He hadn't had the big boats but a few months and they had a run of bad luck from the start."

Gregory considered her words carefully.

"Would you be willing to enter into a contract with me to keep the cannery supplied with fish?" he asked, watching her closely. For the first time he saw her show signs of receding from her original position.

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Dickie Lang hesitated. Her fear of legal entanglements was hereditary. Bill Lang had settled his differences out of court and had warned his daughter on more than one occasion of the dangers which lurked in a contract. She shook her head. What did she know of this man, save the fact that he bore his father's name?

"No," she answered, feeling, however, that she had weakened her previous statement by refusing to make it legally binding.

"Why not?"

The girl realized that their positions were becoming reversed. It was she now who was on the defensive.

"Because," she answered slowly, "I wouldn't." Ashamed that she had given the proverbial reason for feminine change of mind, she added quickly: "You see you may be all right. And then again you may not. I'd like a chance to size you up first."

Gregory smiled. "That was what I thought about you at the beginning of our talk," he said. His face became instantly serious. "We'll just have to size each other up before we can actually get down to cases. Isn't that the truth?"

She nodded. "Yes. You think I can't make good."

"And you just don't know about me," Gregory finished for her. Then he added: "How are we going to find out about each other?"

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Dickie regarded him gravely.

"The ocean is the best test for a man or a woman that I know. It doesn't play any favorites. When a girl goes out there all 'dolled-up' it washes off the paint and powder and shows her up for just what she is. And it shows a man up too. It's always waiting for him to make some mistake. When he does, he has to think and act at the same time. He can't hedge or make excuses. He's got to pay or play. A quitter has no chance with the sea."

Observing him closely, she concluded: "I could tell more about you on the sea in a minute than I could find out in here in a month."

"And I could find out whether or not I thought you knew your business."

They laughed together.

"I'll be ready any time."

Dickie was on her feet at his words.

"To-morrow morning then, at four o'clock. Meet me at our dock and I'll show you I know what I'm talking about."

Gregory promised and the girl hurried out.

For some time the young cannery owner scratched busily at the pad of paper before him, jotting down the substance of his interview with Dickie Lang. Passing through the cannery he came upon the solitary remnant of his floor force whom he had forgotten for the time being.

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"I'm going down-town for a few minutes, Barnes. If anybody asks for me, tell them I'll be back in half an hour."

The ex-soldier's eyes brightened at the sight of his employer.

"Say, Mr. Gregory, you took me on quick and stayed by me, and I don't want you to think I don't appreciate it, for I do. Now that you've canned the other gang, I wonder if there'd be any chance for a couple of my pals. We've been drifting around together and their shoes is worn out same as mine."

"What can they do?"

"One of them's a chauffeur. He ain't afraid of nothin'. And he can drive anything on wheels. The other one's a steam-fitter by trade, but he'll be glad to nurse a broom or anything else right now."

Gregory was on the point of telling Barnes to wait until he had conferred with McCoy when he noticed the peculiar manner with which his employee held his broom.

"What's the matter with your arm?" he asked quietly.

Barnes tapped the member in question and regarded him somewhat doubtfully.

"Nothin'," he said.

Gregory stepped nearer and examined the shoulder carefully.

"Why didn't you tell me your arm had been hurt?" he asked in a low voice.

Barnes met his eyes squarely.

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"Because I was afraid it would queer me for a job," he said. "You see, Gregory, when a man hires a fellow he figures he's all there. He kind of rents him all over and when he's shy on somethin', he kind of figures the fellow's holding back on him. I didn't want to slip anything over on you. Because you were white to me from the start. But I was afraid when you saw my pin was faked you might change your mind."

Gregory's eyes were fixed intently on the soldier as he went on:

"You see I got my insurance. But that ain't enough. My old man died while I was away. And my mother ain't any too well. So I just lets her have the money. But that ain't all there is to it. You see when a fellow's worked and hit the ball, he don't want to lay round and loaf."

Still Gregory said nothing, and Barnes, misconstruing his silence, continued:

"It's wonderful what a fellow can do with what the doctors leave him when they get through cuttin'. You ought to go up to Port Angeles and see what the Bureau's teaching the poor blind devils. It kind of seems like their eyes goes into their arms and legs, for they can do more with them now than they ever thought of doing before they lost their lamps."

He extended his good arm and flexed the muscles until they stood out like lumps of whip-cord. "Look at that," he exclaimed. "They's twice the pep in that one since they hacked up the other one. You don't need to be afraid of me not doing a day's work. I——"

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"Are there many of the boys out of work?" Gregory found his voice at last.

Barnes nodded.

"Scads of 'em. Some of them went back to their old jobs. Some of them found 'em gone and they was others that couldn't cut it like they used to. The government's tryin' to land 'em all jobs. But it's slow."

Gregory turned slowly about and retraced his steps in the direction of the office. Then he remembered Barnes's request.

"You can tell your friends to come along," he said.

Barnes ran after him.

"Say," he exclaimed, "I forgot to tell you. One of 'em's leg's a little stiff and the other one's shy an eye."

Gregory whirled about.

"They've got brains and hearts left, haven't they?" he challenged. "Tell them to come along."

Walking rapidly to the office he entered and closed the door. When Barnes came in at quitting time the room was thick with smoke. In the center of the smoke-screen Gregory sat at a small table, hammering away at a typewriter. On a near-by chair, the ex-soldier caught a glimpse of a colored poster, glaringly captioned:

JOBS FOR SOLDIERS

Shutting the door softly behind him he withdrew, smiling to himself.

CHAPTER V

[Pg 48]

THE WAY OF THE GULL

Br-r-r-r-r-r-r.

The alarm-clock announced the hour imperiously, triumphantly, the importance of the day being manifest in its resonant warning.

Kenneth Gregory leaped from his bed and hastily donned a brand-new suit of overalls. A young man's first business engagement was not lightly to be passed over. Particularly when it promised a chance for excitement and new adventure. He dressed quickly and hurried out into the street. With difficulty he stumbled through the dark streets and groped his way along the water-front to the Lang wharf. All about him was darkness, opaque and impenetrable.

"You're early."

Gregory found himself blinking into the white light of an electric torch. By his side stood Dickie Lang.

"Yes," he answered. "Wasn't sure whether my clock was right so I set it half an hour ahead."

Still holding him in the rays of the light, the girl examined him critically.

"All right but your shoes," she announced. "You'll break your neck in those leather soles. I'll see if I can rustle a pair of tennis-shoes."

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She vanished suddenly and a moment later he saw her light fall upon the burly figures of three bare-footed fishermen shuffling along the dock. She greeted the men familiarly.

"Got that coil for you, Tom. Cache it this time where those thieving devils won't beat you to it. Coils are hard to get right now. Bill, you'd better run down Lucas way and scout around for barracuda. They were beginning to hit in there strong this time last year. How's the baby? I phoned to town last night for that medicine I told you about. They said they'd shoot it out on the first mail."

As she spoke Gregory saw other shadows draw near and hover for a moment in the circle of light. From the hillside above the town lights gleamed from the windows of the fishing colony, the intervening spaces of darkness narrowing second by second until the village stood out like a great checker-board of lights and shadows. Against the background of lights he could see the slender figure of the girl passing among the huge fishermen who towered like giants above her. Radiating energy wherever she went, criticizing some, commending others and joking away the early-morning grouch, she directed the movements of the constantly increasing stream of men who thronged the dock and despatched the boats one by one into the darkness.

When she returned to Gregory's side for a moment she held in her hand a tattered pair of rubber-soled shoes. "They're better than nothing," she explained. "When you are a full-fledged fisherman you won't need shoes. You'll get so you can use your toes like fingers and——"

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The rays of her flash-light, which swept the wharf as she spoke, suddenly brought into view the figure of a man lunging unsteadily along the dock. Leaving her sentence unfinished, she was by his side in an instant.

"Nothing doing, Jack. Go home and go to bed. I know all about your wife's sick aunt. No time to listen now. If you're sober by afternoon you can go out with the boys drifting."

The fisherman started to expostulate but she had already left him. Mumbling that she didn't know what sickness was, he stumbled obediently away in the direction of the shore.

"He's been drunk since Tuesday," she announced as she rejoined Gregory. "Too bad, too. Best man I've got in shallow water. You ought to see him handle a dory in the surf."

Again the light picked out a newcomer who stood hesitating a few feet away. "What's the trouble, Pete? Why aren't you on the job?"

"I've got to have more money." The words were spoken boldly and in a tone which drew the attention of all about. A number of fishermen shuffled nearer the speaker and ranged themselves beyond the circle of light within easy hearing distance.

"You want more money," Dickie Lang repeated slowly. "Well about the only reason I could ever think of for paying you any more would be for your nerve in asking for it. Why, I've lost more through your carelessness since you've been on the job than I could make on you in six months. The first shot out of the box you let a piece of barracuda-webbing go adrift and Mascola's gang picked it up right before your eyes and you never cheeped. Then you put one of my motors on the blink because you were too lazy to watch the oil-feed. Where do you think I get off? How long could I run this outfit if all my men were like you? Take a brace and come alive, Pete. That's the way to get more money out of me or any one else. The harder you hit the ball the more you'll get. I don't want to hog it all. The boys will tell you I shoot square."

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The fisherman slunk sullenly away and joined his companions. Dickie Lang turned again to Gregory.

"That's one of the things I'm up against," she exclaimed in a low voice. "That fellow is a regular agitator. Talking is his long suit. Why, he didn't even know how to throw a bowline when he hit in here, flat broke and down on his uppers. I've taught him all he knows. And now he's trying to start something. If men weren't so scarce I'd can him in a minute."

Gregory watched the fleet embark, marveling at the manner in which the burly fishermen took orders from a mere slip of a girl. How it must go against their grain, he thought, to be bossed about by a woman. The last of the boats had cleared before the youthful commodore prepared to follow.

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"Let's go," she exclaimed impatiently. "We're late now. Mascola's outfit cleared two hours ago."

Leading the way she took Gregory aboard a small fishing vessel which waited at the float below. The motor started the instant their feet touched the deck and a gruff voice growled:

"We've got to go some to make the point by daybreak."

The girl nodded to the dark form at the wheel.

"You said it, Tom. Mascola's gang are mighty near down there by now."

She cast off the lines and jumped again to the boat as the little craft backed from the slip and headed down the bay. While the boat gained headway under the rapid pulse of the powerful motor, she explained:

"Got a string of nets off Long Point. Just put them out yesterday. But I've a pretty good idea we'll load up. That is unless Mascola tries to sew us up. One of his fishing captains was cruising round last night when I left the set."

"But if you had your nets out first," Gregory began.

A low laugh from the girl interrupted him. "You don't know how Mascola does business," she said. "Listen, I'll tell you. Did you ever notice them throw garbage overboard from the deck of a steamer and see one lone gull flying in her wake? The minute he squawks and swoops down to pick it up there's a hundred of them come from all points of the compass to fight it out with him for the spoils. Well, Mascola's men are just like that. We may spot the fish first. We generally do. But that doesn't make the slightest bit of difference to Mascola. It only saves him the trouble. When our nets are out and he sees we're getting a good haul, he lays around us and cuts us off. Do you get the idea?"

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Gregory nodded vaguely.

"But can't you do something?" he asked. "I should think——"

Again the girl laughed. "You bet I can do something," she snapped. "You just watch me. That's what I brought you out here for this morning. If those devils try to lay around me, I'll show them a thing or two. I wish we had an earlier start though," she concluded. "They've got the best of it by a couple of hours."

Through the darkness they raced to the open sea. The cool morning breeze blew briskly in their faces and Gregory noticed they were overhauling a few of the stragglers.

"It oughtn't to take you long to catch up with them at this clip," he said admiringly. "Are all of your boats as fast as this one?"

"If they were it would break me up," the girl answered. "The *Petrel's* my flag ship. She's a gas-hog, but she can travel. She has fifty horse, and built on the lines she is, there aren't many of them around here that can make her run in their wake. Only two in fact," she added. "Mascola's speed-boat and Rossi's fleet-tender."

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"Who is Rossi?"

"Mascola's fishing captain. Next to his boss and old Rock, one of the biggest crooks in town. He knows his business though," she supplemented half-admiringly, "and is a good man for Mascola."

"Who's Rock?" asked Gregory.

The girl faced about suddenly.

"Rock's the big man of a little town. He's in everything. The further you go without meeting with him the better off you'll be. He's president of the bank, the Rock Commercial Company and several other concerns. He owns the controlling interest in the Golden Rule Cannery besides. He has a finger in everything. He's a mighty busy man. But he's never too busy to meddle with other people's business. At least he tried to in mine."

Her teeth snapped in a vicious click.

A number of questions crowded to Gregory's mind, as they crossed the jettied inlet and headed down the coast. He asked them in rapid-fire order.

"How many boats have you?"

"Twenty-five. Using sixteen to-day."

"Why don't you run them all?"

"Can't get the men. That is, good ones. I'm hiring and firing all the time. Paying thirty-eight now and that leaves me short-handed even with the boats I'm working."

"How many boats has Mascola?"

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The girl was silent for a moment. Then she answered:

"Can't say. Somewhere about fifty, maybe more. It's hard to check him up. His boats cruise a long way out and some of them don't put in to Legonia at all."

"What kind of fish are you catching now?"

"Halibut mostly, some barracuda. Haven't tried for sardines or albacore since your cannery shut down."

The *Petrel* rolled lazily in the trough of the swell as she sped down the coast. Suddenly the darkness ahead was blurred by an indistinct shape and the man at the wheel put the vessel over sharply. As he did so he narrowly escaped a collision with an unlighted boat which loomed directly across their bow.

"Trawler fishing within the three-mile limit without lights," the girl explained to her passenger.

Gregory remembered Dickie Lang's words concerning alien interference. He knew that running without lights was illegal. Why was the law not enforced?

In answer to his question, the girl burst out: "You just wait. I couldn't take the time now to tell you of all the laws Mascola breaks and if I did you wouldn't believe me."

"How can he get by with it?" Gregory asked.

Dickie Lang walked to the rail and searched the dark water in the direction of the shore before she replied: "There are three different kinds of laws out here. The navigation laws are made by the government, the fishing laws by the state, and the law of the sea is made by the fishermen. If you break the pilot-rules they'll haul you up before the local inspector at Port Angeles and fine you, take away your license or put you in jail. But they've got to have the proof and that is hard to get. If you break the state's laws you run up against the fish commissioner. His deputies do their best to protect the fish and see that the fishermen use the right kind of gear. If they catch an outfit with the goods, they put them over. But it's hard to do."

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She stared away into the faintly graying darkness.

"Cut through the kelp, Tom. It will save us a little and we're going to need it."

"And the fisherman's law you spoke about. What is that?" Gregory queried.

She faced him suddenly. "I don't know how to explain it," she said. "Every one has to learn it for himself. It's the law of the biggest and fastest boat. The law of the longest and strongest arm. The law of sand and a quick trigger."

Gregory felt his pulse quicken as she went on:

"You see we have to depend on ourselves out here to settle our troubles. Whatever happens, happens quick. Generally there are not many witnesses. If you knew trouble was coming, you might get a deputy to come out, but the chances are ten to one they wouldn't. They would say it was only a fisherman's row and tell you to swear out a warrant. And if you go to law, Mascola will bring five witnesses for each of yours and they'll outswear you every time for they can lie faster than a man can write it down."

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Again she paused and searched the gray border of the receding curtain of night. Far away Gregory could hear the roar of the breakers. From out the gray dusk ahead appeared the shadowy outline of a rugged promontory jutting far out into the sea.

"Keep close in, Tom. Our last string's dead ahead, off Peeble Beach. When you get around the point swing on the outside of Coward Rocks and give her all she'll stand."

She walked slowly about the deck with her eyes fixed on the wave-washed shore-line.

"So you see each outfit makes its own laws and it's up to them to enforce them. Our law is to mind our own business and get the fish. The only law we break is Mascola's. He tries to tell us where to fish. He bullies the ones he can and fights the ones he can't in any way that is easiest and safest. He's a thief and a crook and he'd commit murder in a minute if he thought he could get by with it."

The idea lodged in her brain. She leaned closer and exclaimed in a low voice: "And how do we know he doesn't get by with murder the way he does with everything else? There's many a man picked up along the coast as a 'floater' that nobody knows how he drowned."

Daybreak was upon them as they hugged the shore-line and slipped into the protecting shadow of Long Point. Dickie Lang's words sank deep into Gregory's consciousness. A half-formed question found its way at last to his lips.

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"Do you think," he began, but was interrupted by the man at the wheel.

"Can't make the inside channel. Have to go round."

He altered the helm as he spoke. Dickie Lang jumped to his side.

"We've got to run the short-cut, Tom. No use going round. They'd spot us a mile away in this light. If they're laying round my nets I want to surprise them. I'll take the boat."

The fisherman surrendered the wheel and sidled out of the way.

"She's your boat," he said with blunt emphasis. "But don't forget it's my license. I wouldn't take the chance."

The girl nodded. "My license is hanging up in the engine-room," she retorted. "If anything happens, it's me that is responsible. I won't forget."

She spun the wheel over as she spoke and the *Petrel* swerved like a gull and headed straight for the rugged cliff which towered high above the foaming water, bold and defiant of the angry waves which dashed relentlessly at its base.

Off the port bow Gregory saw a narrow pathway of quiet water fringed on one side by white-toothed swells, on the other by the barnacled feet of the point itself. He leaned over the rail and

followed the course of the ribbon-like path which wound like a snake among the curling waves and jagged rocks. Could that be the channel the girl meant to take? [Pg 59]

Dickie Lang's eyes were fixed with his upon the devious waterway. The hand which held the wheel was steady and the *Petrel* plunged boldly on as if bent upon flinging its fragile shell upon the time-defying rocks of Long Point.

Gregory measured the distance to the overhanging ledge. What was the use of taking such a chance as this? It looked like one in a million. In another minute they would pile up. They were almost abreast of the thread-like channel when he saw the fingers on the wheel tighten. The steering gear whirred and the *Petrel* leaped forward to answer the master-hand at the helm.

Then came the miracle.

The slim bow of the little craft swung about. For a second she wallowed in the trough of the ground-swell, rose high on its foaming crest and nestled slowly down in the quiet water of the rock-bound channel. And the distance to safety had been gained by the scant margin of only a few inches. A sharper or blunter turn would have ripped the vessel from bow to stern. Was it luck? He shook his head slowly. Then he began to understand why the fishermen took orders from Dickie Lang. He was recalled to himself by a laughing voice and he saw that the girl's eyes were sparkling, as she said without turning her head:

"Did you think you were going to have to swim ashore?"

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Gregory laughed. "I could feel the water about my ears," he said. Then he added: "Do you do stunts like that often?"

She shook her head. "Sometimes it is necessary to take a chance," she answered. "You've got to catch Mascola's bunch red-handed. When we round the 'bull-nose' we'll be right on top of our nets."

Her lips were firmly compressed and the little lines which suddenly appeared about her mouth were hard. With her eyes still held by the barnacled rocks, she snapped: "Then you may see something."

They were nearing the end of Long Point. Throttling the throbbing motor until its soft breathing could be heard only a few boat-lengths, she nodded to the fisherman:

"All right, Tom. She's yours. Plenty of water from here on. When you round 'bull-nose' head for the cove with all you've got."

Relieved from the wheel she dodged into the engine-room and returned with two rifles. Flashing a glance shoreward to determine the *Petrel's* position she rejoined Gregory and handed him one of the guns. Gregory reached eagerly for the weapon. For the past hour he had been forced to sit by a spectator. Now was a chance to do something. To play a game he knew. His fingers caressed the stock of the Winchester as the girl exclaimed:

"Don't suppose there is any use telling you how to shoot. Only at sea things are a little different. You have to count on the roll. Sight full until you get on the range. Distances are deceiving on the water. Pull on the slow rise if you can. That's when she's steadiest."

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He noted her quiet manner of speaking and the businesslike way with which she handled her gun. What she meant for him to do he did not clearly understand. Whatever it was, she would find him ready. He slipped a shell into the barrel from the magazine, and waited. He noticed that the girl was watching him closely as they came to the end of the winding channel. Then she gave him brief instructions.

"When we pass that big rock ahead we'll head in. Then you will see a string of nets. You may see two strings, one laid around the other. If any of Mascola's gang are hanging around I'm going to try to persuade them to give me sea-way."

She set her lips grimly and tapped the rifle. Drawing a pair of binocular-glasses from her pocket she focused them carefully.

"Don't shoot until I do. If they are trying to lay around I'll open up on them and start them moving. Aim at the water-line and pump away as fast as you like. All right, Tom. Give her the gun."

The *Petrel* leaped under the advancing throttle and raced for the curiously fashioned nub at the cliff's end.

Gregory crowded forward, striving to catch a glimpse of the water beyond. As they flashed by the "bull-nose" she saw silhouetted against the brightening light which streamed across the water from the beach, the sharp outline of a fishing-boat. Then he heard a low exclamation from the girl.

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"He's laid around my string," she gritted, and again the glasses flashed to her eyes. She whirled on the fisherman. "Look at that, Tom! He's stripping my nets. I've got him with the goods this time and, so help me God, I'm going to make him pay. Don't shoot," she cautioned Gregory. "Wait till we get closer. I want to get him with the deadwood. Wide open, Tom, we'll run him off his legs. I'll—"

A puff of white smoke drifted upward from the deck of the launch ahead and floated lazily above the rigging. Some fifty feet beyond the port bow of the *Petrel* the water leaped upward in a tiny spout. Dickie's rifle sounded in Gregory's ear and the report of his own prolonged the echoes. As he pumped in another cartridge he noted that the girl's eyes were shining and her red lips were parted in a smile. Between shots he heard her mutter:

"Can you beat that? The dirty robbers are going to stay and fight?"

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 63]

THE LAW OF THE FISHERMEN

Her decks spouting flame, the *Petrel* raced on to meet the enemy. Gregory crowded close to the rail and dropped to his knee. The girl was right about the roll. He shoved the rifle through a cross-stay, sighted carefully and pulled the trigger.

"I have the system now," he called.

She nodded. "That's the stuff. Aim for the engine-house. They're shooting from the ports."



"Aim for the engine-house!"

The bullets from the alien craft were flying wide. The fusillade from the *Petrel* was evidently interfering with the enemy's marksmanship.

"No expert riflemen there," Gregory commented.

Dickie shook her head. "A knife's their long suit," she answered. "I never saw them shoot much before. Don't believe they—"

A jingle of breaking glass interrupted her and the starboard side-lamp toppled from the bracket and crashed to the deck.

"Get down," Gregory commanded. "They're getting the range."

The girl smiled and wiped away the blood which spurted from a small cut in her cheek. "Just fool luck," she answered, leaning coolly against the stays and reloading her rifle. "That was only an accident."

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Gregory was by her side in an instant. Grasping her roughly by the arm he said harshly: "Get down, I tell you."

She jerked away her arm and started to speak. Then she dropped to the deck.

"Maybe you're right at that," she admitted, a smile playing about her lips.

The firing became brisker as the distance lessened between the two boats, while the enemy bullets became wilder and more desultory. Dickie ceased firing and turned to the man at the wheel.

"It's Rossi with the *Roma*. He's getting under way."

She flung out an arm pointing in the direction of the stubby-nosed point which lay across the little bay. "Head for the arch, Tom. We'll cut him off." Pointing to the fleeing boat she explained to Gregory: "He's almost in shoal water right now. To get out he's got to follow the channel. It's dead low tide and he'll have to make a big bend to get out. We'll cut across and head him off. He

has the speed of us and a quarter of a mile lead. But he has farther to go. If he opens up he's liable to pile up on the rocks. It's about an even bet he'll make it for he's clever. But if he does we'll be right on top of him when he comes out. Then I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget in a hurry."

The *Petrel* altered her course while she was speaking and sped off at a tangent. The *Roma*, dashing shoreward, turned and angled sharply, running parallel to her pursuer. [Pg 65]

"He's sure pounding her," the girl observed as she noted the increasing distance which separated the two boats. "If he holds that clip when he comes to that figure S channel, he'll never make the turns." She shut her jaw tighter. "Cut in a little closer, Tom," she ordered. "We'll make him take all the chances there are."

Gregory climbed to the top of the engine-house and watched the *Roma* dodging among the rocks like a frightened rabbit. Dickie Lang was poised in the bow like a figurehead, one foot resting on the rail. Her hair, jerked from her cap by the fingers of the dawn-wind, streamed out behind her in a shower of dull red gold. Her eyes were shining with the joy of the chase.

"He's almost at the turn," she called back. "He'll never make it on an outgoing tide. He's got to slow up. If he does, we've got him. If he doesn't——"

She was interrupted by a muffled exclamation from the man at the wheel. The *Roma's* bow was rising from the water. For an instant she planed like a high-powered racing-boat. Then, as if exhausted by the chase, she settled slowly to rest in the white water, her masts angling sharply toward the beach.

"High and dry on mussel rocks," Dickie Lang announced. "It's a flood tide to-day and with the big ground swell she hasn't a chance." [Pg 66]

As they neared the wreck they saw the crew of the stranded vessel huddled together on the sloping deck.

"Don't go in any closer, Tom," cautioned the girl. "The tide's turning. They can wade ashore and watch her break up."

As they circled closer to make the turn, Gregory noticed a red-shirted giant leap from the wreck of the fishing-boat into the shallow water, waving his arms wildly about his head. But the noise of the *Petrel's* motor drowned the voice of the infuriated fishing captain and his threats and curses were heard only by his own crew.

"It isn't Rossi, after all," Dickie observed as she caught sight of the red-shirted figure. "It's Boris, the crazy Russian. I never knew Mascola to trust him with a boat like the *Roma* before."

The *Petrel* turned about and, burying her nose in the big swells, made haste to leave the dangerous water.

"Head for the nets," the girl ordered. "I'm not through with Mascola yet. He has my fish on the *Roma*. If I had a dory I'd go in there and get them. But it isn't good enough to risk the *Petrel*."

As they came nearer the two strings of nets, Dickie explained: "I'm going to work the same game on Mascola that the fish commissioner does when he catches them trawling within the three-mile limit. I'm going to salvage his nets and make him pay for his crooked work to get his property. Lay to, Tom, and we'll pull them aboard with mine." [Pg 67]

The fisherman drew alongside the row of bobbing corks with a grim smile playing about his lips.

"Have to rustle," he observed. "You know how Mascola's boats follow up."

The girl tossed her head.

"I don't care if his whole fleet comes along. And him with them. I'm going to make him pay me for those fish Boris stole from my nets. I can't take it into court but——"

She paused in the middle of her sentence as her eyes swept the sea. Focusing the binoculars on a small speck on the horizon, she announced: "Here comes Mascola now in his speed-boat. We'll haul them aboard, boys. Then I'll talk business with the dago. Get his nets first."

Falling to eagerly, Gregory received his first lesson in pulling the nets. With straining back and smarting fingers he worked by the fisherman's side hauling the heavy webbing to the deck. As they reached the middle of the string the weight of the sagging nets increased and a number of glistening barracuda floundered from the water, gilled by the strong mesh. The girl observed the fish with darkening brow.

"The dirty robbers," she exclaimed wrathfully. "Look what they have already. I'll bet I'd have had a good haul if they had let me alone."

Gregory noticed as he straightened up that the distant speck on the water was fast assuming the proportions of a motor-launch. He noticed too that the approaching craft was coming at a high rate of speed and was swerving shoreward. Tugging harder at the nets, he worked doggedly on, listening to the staccato bark of the speed-craft as Mascola drew close. They were hauling at the last string when he came within hailing distance. [Pg 68]

"What's the matter?" he called. "You're pulling my nets."

"Don't pay any attention to him," admonished Dickie Lang. "I'm not going to hollow my head off. Keep working and wait until he comes alongside."

With his motor purring like an angry cat, Mascola whirled his craft about in a wave-washed circle and drew abreast of the *Petrel*. At the same instant Gregory and the fisherman lifted the last piece of the Italian's nets to the deck. Gregory straightened his aching back and looked toward the early morning visitor, but his eyes did not get as far as Mascola. They remained riveted on the launch.

Never had he seen such a boat. She poised on the waves like a gull, quivering with potential energy, ready for instant flight. From her sharply V-ed bow to her delicately molded stern, every line of the trim craft spoke eloquently of the plan of a master-designer who fashioned her with a single purpose—speed.

"What's the matter I say? You're pulling my nets."

Gregory freed his eyes with an effort from the launch to survey its owner. Mascola turned angrily on the leather cushion and glared at the *Petrel's* deck.

Dickie Lang walked coolly to the rail. "Sure I'm pulling your nets," she said. "I've got them all aboard. And that's where they're going to stay until you pay me for the fish your outfit took from my nets."

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"I never take your fish. I don't know—"

"Oh, yes you do, Mascola. Boris laid around me and robbed my nets. There's my webbing lying right where I put it out. I caught that crazy Russian of yours with the goods and he lost his head and your boat. He's piled up over there on the beach."

Mascola rose hastily and followed the direction of her arm. In his anger at beholding Dickie taking his nets from the water he had not noticed the wreck of the *Roma*. A torrent of Italian words burst from his lips. His cheeks purpled and his eyes grew hot with passion. When he controlled himself to speak in English he cried:

"I'll have you arrested for stealing my nets. I'll get a warrant and search your wharf and your house."

"But you won't find your nets." Dickie Lang supplied the words and went on: "Listen, you crook, if you and I don't settle this thing up right now you won't find a piece of your nets big enough to swear what it is. I'm not trying to rob you like you robbed me. I just want what's coming to me. Not a cent more. If you give me that I'll throw your webbing over. If you don't I'll trail them every inch of the way to Legonia and cut them into ribbons with the propeller. It's up to you, Mascola."

The Italian flashed a glance to the cove where the *Roma's* angling mast appeared against the beach. Then he looked out to sea and his eyes brightened as the mast of a fishing-boat rounded the point and turned shoreward. It was Ankovitch with the *Lura*.

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His launch rode high on a capping swell and a puff of wind caused him to look anxiously at the beach. The tide was beginning to set in strong and the breeze was freshening. He snapped out his watch and scowled. Whatever was done for the *Roma* must be done at once.

"What do you want?" he flashed.

"Pay for the fish you stole from my nets. From what I saw in your nets I figure I had all of a ton." She glanced at the fish lying on the deck. "You've got about five hundred here. I'll allow you for that. You pay me the difference at three cents. That will be forty-five dollars."

Mascola glared. His hand crept slowly to his pocket.

"None of that."

The girl's words cut like a knife. The hand which lay in her pocket turned and the coat bulged outward.

"I was getting my money," Mascola growled.

"All right. Face about the other way when you get it."

As the Italian turned, Dickie Lang caught up a rifle and threw it loosely over her shoulder. Mascola turned to look straight into the muzzle and drew back sharply. Then he flourished a roll of bills.

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"Quick," he said. "You have me at a disadvantage this time. I will pay. Here is the money."

He tossed the bills to the deck.

"All right, Mascola. That squares us for to-day. I'll dump your nets over right where they are as soon as I check up the money. And the next time you try to lay around me I'm going to run through your nets and cut them to pieces."

Mascola dropped to the cushioned seat and whirled half about.

"I will not forget," he said. "To-day you win. Next time—"

His words were lost in the roar of his motor. The speed-boat shot forward like a horse at the touch of a spur. In a whirl of white water Mascola sped away for the beach.

CHAPTER VII

[Pg 72]

YOU'LL HAVE TO SHOW ME

The sky was reddening in the east when the last of the nets were pulled aboard. Rounding Long Point, the *Petrel* took up the homeward track as the sun peeped over the low brown hills and caressed the sea. Dickie Lang looked back at the wreck of the *Roma* and the light of victory died slowly from her eyes.

"I'm not sorry for Mascola," she exclaimed. "He got only what was coming to him. But I am sorry for the little boat. She was a good little scout and she was game to the end. You'll find that boats are a good deal like people," she went on, "when you know them as well as I do. Some of them are cranky and have to be coaxed along. Others are just plain lazy and must be pounded on the back. And there are some that are treacherous and the minute they get you in a tight place, they will lay down cold."

Her last words gave her the cue to continue: "And the ocean is full of tight places. Mascola found himself in one this morning. He had the sense to realize it and act before it was too late. It went against his grain to be beaten by a girl. But by cashing in when he did, he saved a boat perhaps. So he put his pride in his pocket. Sometimes you've got to do that," she concluded seriously. "It hurts. But it's business."

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Gregory's face showed his surprise at her annunciation of the business principle and, sensing that her admission might become embarrassing at some future time, the girl changed the subject abruptly.

"Did you see McCoy yesterday?" she asked.

"Yes. We had a long talk last night. He's coming to work for me as house-foreman."

"That's fine," Dickie commended. "You'll like him. He'll be just the man for you."

Gregory nodded. "Yes," he answered. "I think we'll get on fine when we understand each other better."

"What do you mean? You haven't had a row with Jack already, have you?"

"Not exactly. Just a difference of opinion. I had an idea I worked out yesterday. McCoy couldn't see it."

"What was the idea?"

"It was a plan I had for getting labor. I wanted to hire a certain class of men. McCoy didn't."

"How did it come out?"

"I'm going to hire them, of course. I told McCoy if he didn't like it, he could take the job or leave it. He decided to take it."

"It's the foreman's job to hire the help," the girl observed. "What was your plan?"

Gregory looked the girl full in the eyes for a moment. Then he began: "I'm going to organize my business on a cooperative basis, make my employees partners, pay them a graduated minimum wage and a share in the profits which will be held back as a bonus to make it worth their while to stick with me during the season."

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"And McCoy thought it wouldn't work?"

"Yes."

"Neither do I."

"Why not?"

Dickie knew the question was coming and was already prepared to give her reasons.

"When a man works for you," she explained, "he wants his money every Saturday night. He's earned it and he should have it. He may leave the minute it's in his fingers and hit the grit again. But he's worked a week at least and that's something. If he thinks you're holding out on him to get him to stick, he wouldn't even start."

"That is what McCoy said. But you are both wrong. The men I am figuring on hiring will stick. That is why I am hiring them."

"Don't think much of a bunch like that," Dickie commented. "A man that can't get a job to-day is a bum. And the fellow doesn't live that ever gets through knocking around. That is if he's a real man."

"You're wrong again," Gregory contradicted. "They are eighteen-carat men. I've tried them out already. I know."

"Where?"

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"In France."

"You mean soldiers?"

"Yes. I called up a friend of mine last night in Port Angeles. He used to be first lieutenant in my company. He's a reporter on *The Times* now. Hawkins told me a lot of the boys were out of work and he promised to look up a number of addresses of men in my old outfit. To-morrow I'm going to the city to round them up. They've stood by me before in many a tight place. It cost them a lot sometimes. But they stuck just the same. Now I've got a chance to stick by them. And I'm going to do it because I know they'll come up to the scratch."

The girl was impressed by the earnestness of his words. He meant well of course. It was a splendid idea but——

She voiced her objections. "You'll find business is a different game from war."

"Perhaps. But in both there is hard fighting. And when you are going into a scrap with all you've got, you want men behind you you can bank on."

"I wouldn't bank on them too strong. A lot of the ones I've seen think they're too good to work at an ordinary job. They have an idea the war has made them worth a lot more money than they really are. They like to tell what great things they've done. But when it comes to——"

"I've seen that kind, too. On both sides of the water. Over there no one depended on them. They were shunted from pillar to post until they hit a place where they couldn't even hear the guns. When the war was over they came back. They were whole. And they talked."

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He paused for a moment and looked down at the deck. Then he went on in a low voice: "The kind I'm figuring on are not whole. And they don't talk."

Dickie Lang said no more. When a man spoke with such depth of feeling, what was the use of trying to talk him out of it. Of course he was wrong. But he'd just have to find it out for himself. In silence they neared the entrance to the bay and threaded their way among the fishing-boats as they drew up to the Lang wharf. Gregory roused himself at the sight of the Lang dock and turned to the girl.

"You took me out this morning," he said, "to show me you knew your business. Now it's up to me to show you I know mine. I'm going right to work. I expect a hard fight, but I'll tell you right now this idea of mine is going to win out."

Dickie smiled as they drew alongside the dock.

"Go to it," she said. "I won't say you're wrong. But you'll certainly have to show me."

CHAPTER VIII

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A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

"What do you expect me to do with a bunch of cripples like that?"

Jack McCoy burst into the office of the Legonia Fish Cannery and hurled the question angrily at his young employer.

Gregory looked hard at McCoy's flushed face and snapping gray eyes. Then he said quietly: "I expect you to train them."

"My God!" McCoy came a step closer. Then he burst out: "Don't you know it's hard enough to run a cannery with real men without——"

Gregory was on his feet in an instant.

"Don't say it," he gritted. "Unless you want to hook up with me right now."

McCoy sought to explain.

"I'm not saying anything against them," he said. "But you don't understand. I wonder if you have any idea what it means to break in a bunch like that."

"Yes. That is why I hired you. I believed you could do it. If you can't, I'll find some one else who will."

Gregory leaned against the desk.

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"Listen, McCoy," he said. "You and I have to get down to cases right now. There's no use flying off the handle. If you have anything to say, I'll hear it. Anything except a word against those men

out there. They've had enough already. You told me the other day," he went on, "you could break in anybody who'd stick. You showed me just the kind of work there is to do. These men I'll guarantee will stick and I think you'll get quite a jolt when you see what they've been taught to do. They're not all cripples. I've got some huskies for the strong-arm stuff. And there is a lot the other fellows can do. I want you to show them how. You are not taking much of a chance that I can see. You'll get your money the same as you always have, more if you stick through. And every dollar we make, you'll have a few cents of it at least. Can you see anything wrong with that?"

"I don't see where you're going to get off. You seem to think there is a fortune in this business. I'll tell you there isn't. It's hard sledding to make both ends meet as it is."

"I know it. Last night I sat up half the night going over the books. I found my father lost more money on account of labor trouble than from any other cause."

"Except not being able to get fish," corrected McCoy.

"Exactly. That's labor just the same. Since this idea came to me it's getting bigger all the time. I'm going to extend it to the boats as well as the inside. I've got a plan to have Miss Lang take charge of the fishing end, train my men and run her boats for me on a flat rental and salary."

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McCoy began to show more interest. "Is she in on the deal?" he asked.

"I haven't had a chance to talk with her yet. I'm going to see her to-day."

McCoy smiled. "I'd like to see Dick's face when you spring the proposition of having her work for you," he said.

"Suppose she turns me down. Has that anything to do with your working for me?"

McCoy's face flushed. "Don't know that it has," he admitted, "but——"

The telephone interrupted further conversation and Gregory turned to the instrument.

"Yes—Mr. Gregory at the phone. All right."

McCoy watched the silent figure as he listened to the message; saw his jaws set tighter as he replaced the receiver and faced about.

"I'd kind of like to talk this thing over with Blair," McCoy began. "You see——"

"I just received a telegram from the sanitarium. Mr. Blair died this morning at nine o'clock."

McCoy crumpled in his chair and rested his head in his hands. "Poor old John," he muttered brokenly, "I ought to have gone up last night when they phoned me he was so much worse." He raised his head and there were tears shining in his eyes. "They didn't make them any whiter than John Blair," he said.

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Gregory agreed.

"I knew him only slightly," he said. "But I surely counted on him. His loss means a lot to me. I'll go up there right away and see if there is anything I can do. Would you like to go with me?"

McCoy could only nod and the two men left the building together.

The hearts of men are tested in various crucibles. In a smoothly-moving world human paths diverge and the grooves are often widened by indifference. In times of stress, the diverse threads of commonplace existence may merge into a single strand. Then it is that casual acquaintances become friends, when man rubs elbow with man and hearts beat together in mutual sympathy and understanding.

Jack McCoy returned to Legonia saddened by the loss of an old friend; gladdened by the belief that he had found a new one. It was not what Gregory had done that made the difference to McCoy; simply the way he had done it. Any man with money could have defrayed the expenses of Blair's sickness and funeral. But it took a real man to make the gratuity appear as a favor to the donor.

When he met Gregory at the cannery the morning after their return to Legonia, McCoy was not slow in admitting that he was strong for the boss.

"If we had time, Jack," Gregory was saying, "there is nothing I'd rather do right now than give you a week off on full pay. But you know what that would mean to us at this time. Before we start in I want to make you another proposition."

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As the foreman said nothing, he asked bluntly: "How would you like the job as house manager?"

"Fine," McCoy answered. "Do you think I could cut it?"

"Do you?"

"Yes," McCoy answered with no hesitation.

"All right then," Gregory answered in the same manner. "So do I. You've got a real job ahead of you. Minutes are going to count in the next few days. The next batch of my service men are due to-morrow."

McCoy jumped up. "That means a day's work for me," he exclaimed, and hurried out.

Gregory glanced at his watch. The next thing to be done was to see Dickie Lang. The matter of securing fish was of cardinal importance. The girl would be at the dock about this time. It would afford him a good chance to make his proposal while she was getting the fish ready for shipment.

Some time after Gregory had left the cannery, Barnes reported he was out of carborundum and McCoy set out at once for Legonia.

"They'd be all day sending it up," he said. "I've got to go down anyway and check over some stuff for us at the freight-house so it might as well be now."

On nearing the Lang dock he heard Dickie's voice issuing from a pile of fish-boxes at the shore end. McCoy checked his steps involuntarily at the girl's words, and without meaning to—listened.

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"So you want to pay me a flat rate for my boats and hire me to train your men with my fishermen?"

"Yes. With a share in the profits."

It was Gregory's voice. McCoy noted the quiet tone used by the girl. He felt ashamed to eavesdrop. But he was torn with curiosity to hear Dick's answer.

"Well, you've got your nerve, I'd say. And then some. Do you think you can run my business better than I can myself?"

"If I did, I'd try to buy you out. I'm asking you to run my boats as well as your own and——"

"Be your hired girl."

Dickie supplied the words and went on angrily: "Say, the Lang boats were here a long time before you came. And they'll be here as long after you go. They have gone on their own hook ever since they went into the water. And that's the way they are going to stay. My dad never took orders from anybody. He ran his boats the way he pleased. He was independent. I'm the same way. And I want to tell you right now, I wouldn't sell out my independence to you or any other man."

McCoy crept back into the shadow of the fishing-boxes and making a wide detour went on into town. He was sorry he had listened. It wasn't a white thing to do. He liked Gregory. He was his friend. Then why, he asked himself, was he kind of glad that Dick had turned down his proposition?

CHAPTER IX

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DIABLO LUCK

Busy days followed for Kenneth Gregory, and with the loyal support of Jack McCoy, much was accomplished.

The Legonia Fish Cannery wakened from its long sleep and took on new life. From the receiving floor to the warehouse everything had been carefully overhauled and put into first-class shape. Necessary repairs and alterations had been made. Supplies and material were on hand. A nucleus of skilled labor had been carefully selected by McCoy and brought to train the service men who came to Legonia on every incoming train.

The sleepy little fishing village viewed the vanguard of the ex-soldiers with sullen indifference. Silvanus Rock had told them not to worry their heads over the "efforts of an impractical dreamer to turn the town upside down." And who knew, if Rock didn't? As the days went by, however, and the invasion became more noticeable, the alien element of the fishing colony began to experience a feeling of sharp resentment against the new owner of the Legonia cannery and his wild scheme. But again the foremost citizen had come to the fore and quieted their fears, turning them into open contempt and ridicule by his words:

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"What can he do with a bunch of crippled rag-a-muffins? Look at them for yourselves. There's hardly a whole man among them. I give him a month to go to the wall. It's the old saying of a 'fool and his money.'"

The opening of the new cannery presented every appearance of proving the truth of Rock's prophecy and caused the aliens to laugh openly.

"How can they run without fish?" sneered Mascola as he checked the catch of the incoming boats. "They haven't had enough in a week to pay them to keep up steam."

Ten days after the opening Gregory was asking Jack McCoy the same question.

"I tell you, Mac, something has to be done. The Lang boats are falling down on the job. You'll admit we haven't had a paying run since we started and expenses are climbing."

McCoy nodded. "I know it," he agreed. "But Dick has had hard luck. None of the boats have brought in much lately. The fish have taken out to sea. Then Mascola's men have been causing a

lot of trouble."

"That's just it," Gregory interrupted. "The girl's tackled too big a job. I was afraid of it all the time. She's all right, Jack. I'm not saying a word against her. But she was foolish to get on her 'high-horse' and turn down my proposition. It's a man's job to get all the fish we're going to need. Not a woman's. Of course I know she's doing her best," he went on. "But we can't go on this way. If she can't make good on her contract we'll have to take it out of her hands. I'm only going to give her a few more days."

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"Then what?" McCoy questioned.

"Then we'll run things ourselves. I've been figuring on it for three or four days. That's why I'm having all our boats put in shape."

"How will you man them?" asked McCoy quickly.

"I've arranged for that too. The last time I was in the city I lined up a bunch of ex-navy men. They are fair sailors and have had some experience in handling launches and small boats. I'm going to bring them down here the same as I figured at first. If the girl wants to help me with her men, all right. If not, we'll go it alone. It's a ground-hog case. We've got to get the fish."

"I wish Dick wasn't so darned independent," observed McCoy. "If it was anybody else, they'd jump at your offer."

"That's the trouble," Gregory admitted. "She's a woman and she's mighty hard to talk out of an idea she sets her mind on. If I was dealing with a man I'd have come to a show-down long before this. As it is, I'm going to see her this afternoon and try to get down to brass tacks."

A screech of the steam whistle interrupted further speech and the two men jumped to their feet and hurried out on the floor of the cannery at the signal to resume work.

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"Only have enough to run about an hour," McCoy answered in response to Gregory's question concerning the supply of fish on hand. And as he noticed the frown on his employer's face, he supplemented: "We've had enough the last few days to break the crew in anyway."

"That's something, but it isn't good enough," Gregory answered. "You're fixed right now to handle three times what we're getting. And I'm paying for it. I'm not worrying about things in here, Mac. Everything is going fine."

He paused suddenly and his face glowed with enthusiasm as he walked nearer the cutting-bench.

"Look at the way those poor blind fellows are taking to their job, Mac," he whispered. "They can't tell black from white but watch them work. They'll be doing as much in a week as a man with two good eyes. How are you coming, Dorgan?"

He addressed a cutter working at the nearest bench. The blind man turned quickly.

"Fine, Capt. It's getting easier all the time. 'Twon't be long before I'll be making real wages at this job."

They passed from the blind cutters and came to the capping machine where a man with an artificial leg was being instructed in soldering the cans. Again Gregory's eyes expressed his satisfaction.

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"That's fine, Carlson," he commended. "You're getting on fine."

The man at the machine nodded. "Nothing much to it," he answered cheerfully. "Got kind of tired standing at first. But I don't notice it much now."

Kenneth Gregory strove to express his appreciation of McCoy's work as they came to one of the empty warehouses, but the manager refused to take the credit.

"It was your idea," he said, "you paid me to carry it out. At first I didn't think much of it. But now I believe it's going to work. The men are tickled to death. I never had a crew that tried so hard to learn or picked it up so quickly. I can handle an average run with them right now and they've only been working broken hours for a week."

Gregory turned quickly to McCoy and said earnestly: "It's a big idea, Mac. It will work. It's got to work. It's getting bigger all the time. And I'll be damned if I'm going to have a girl hang me up by falling down on her job."

He shut his lips tight as he drew a blue-print from his pocket and spread it out on an empty case.

"Now I want to go over these plans for making a bunk-house out of this building. The boys can't get a decent place to stay in the town. The contractor will be here in half an hour. After I've closed with him I'm going down to the Lang dock and see the girl."

Dickie Lang paced the docks in nervous expectancy while she checked in her returning fleet and conferred with one of her fishing captains.

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"I'll tell you, Tom, we've got to get them. I'm under contract to supply Mr. Gregory with fish and I can't fall down like this. Look here." Shoving a tally-sheet before his eyes, she pointed to the

totals. "Not enough there to last him half a day. He's beginning to eat them up. We've got to get more."

"But if they ain't runnin', what you going to do?"

"Go after them," she snapped. "Mascola's getting fish. He's going out to sea for them. He brought in a good haul yesterday from Diablo. That's why I sent the big boats over there with the *Petrel* scouting ahead."

The fisherman shook his head dubiously.

"You're takin' a tall chance," he said slowly. "Things happen out Diablo way. Your dad never could make it stick out there. He lost a heap around that devil-island. That's why he give up fishin' out there."

"He didn't give it up," the girl flashed, "any more than I'm going to give it up. Diablo's got your goats, and you know it. There's always fish around the island and I'll bet you two to one when the fleet comes back they'll have them to burn."

Turning with disgust, Dickie walked to the end of the dock and sought to pierce the shifting curtain of mist which hung about the inlet. It came to her suddenly that in her anger at Gregory's proposal, she had made a big promise. Moreover she had entered into a contract which she was finding more difficult to fulfill than she had imagined. Perhaps she was a fool not to have taken up the cannery-owner's proposition. At least it was worth considering. By accepting his terms all the worry would have been shifted to him and she would have been able to play safe. In a year she would have been out of debt. With her boats paid for, she could afford to be independent. Now, she was going further behind each day. Worse than that, she was falling down on her contract.

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Finishing his business with the contractor a half-hour before closing time, Gregory hurried down to the Lang wharf.

He found the girl busied with her tally-sheets and stepped behind a row of fish-boxes and waited. From his position he could see the neighboring dock where a number of alien fishermen were at work mending nets. Apart from the others was the huge figure of a red-shirted man standing motionless, scowling in the direction of the Lang wharf. As he looked closer, he became conscious of the fact that he had seen the red-shirted giant before.

Boisterous laughter floated across the intervening strip of water and a scarlet sleeve flashed as the big man shook his fist threateningly at the rival dock.

"They are kidding the Russian about losing the *Roma* and getting canned by the boss," explained a fisherman who was passing by. "Boris is sorer than a boiled owl at being run on the rocks by a girl."

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Gregory watched the excited foreigner in silence. A man like that could cause a lot of trouble. Suddenly he heard the sound of low voices on the other side of the lane of fish-boxes.

"What's that got to do with it? We've got to live as well as she has. We ain't gettin' enough I tell you, and you know it. What's the use of bein' a damn fool?"

The words died away in a low mumble as the men passed on. Gregory emerged from his cover and looked after the two fishermen. Then he noticed the girl had finished her calculations and hurried toward her.

"I suppose you want to know what I have," she anticipated. "Well, I haven't much yet. If you stay round a little while though I'll show you a real haul. I'm expecting my boats back at any minute from El Diablo."

Gregory scarcely knew how to begin the interview. The girl was clearly unreasonable and flared up at the slightest intimation that she was unable to manage her own business. And yet it was perfectly clear that she could not.

"Fish is what we're needing right now," he said with blunt emphasis. "We're ready to go. McCoy has a good crew and he can handle them fast. A whole lot faster than we've been getting them," he added.

She interrupted as he knew she would.

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"Well, I'm doing my level darnedest," she retorted. "If I wasn't I guess I wouldn't have risked my best boats at Diablo in a fog." As Gregory said nothing in the way of argument, she challenged: "Do you think you could do any better?"

"Yes," he answered without any hesitation, "I think I could. That is if you would help me. I think if we would pull together on this proposition we could do a whole lot. Right now you are threatened with labor trouble."

"You don't know what you're talking about. My men are loyal to me and always have been. They'll stick from start to finish."

Gregory related the conversation he had overheard a few minutes before. As he finished, he

noted that a worried expression crept to the girl's eyes, though she said:

"What's that amount to? There are always some who are dissatisfied and try to cause trouble. I'm well rid of a bunch like that anyway. There are not many of them."

It was on Gregory's tongue to broach his proposal when he saw the girl looking eagerly past him into the wall of fog. Through the veil he caught the dim outline of an approaching fishing-boat.

"Here comes the *Curllew* back from Diablo. Before you say anything more wait until you see what luck they've had. If I don't miss my guess we'll have fish enough for you now all right." [Pg 92]

Together they walked down the steep gangway to the swaying float.

"If I can't get them at Diablo, I can't get them anywhere," exclaimed Dickie Lang. Then she shouted to the captain of the *Curllew*: "What luck, Jones?"

From the gray void of fog a deep voice floated back:

"Diablo luck. Never got nothin' and the *Petrel* was smashed to hell."

CHAPTER X

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SALVAGE

Dickie Lang was nonplussed. Her best bet was thrown into the discard. Her pride and independence had been at stake. For her most valued possessions, she had risked her all, and "stood pat" on the turn-up at the devil-island. Her cards were all on the table. Now she had lost. Leaning against the sagging rail she watched the *Curllew* draw alongside the float. Her slender fingers gripped the hand-rail and the sharp splinters bit into her hands. But what was that to the pain which gnawed at her heart? She hadn't made good. The taste of failure was a new and strange sensation. She had made her fight, done her best. But it wasn't good enough. But why was it necessary to take the little *Petrel*? Was Diablo to beat her as it had beaten others? No, she must buck up. She was Bill Lang's daughter.

"It's all in the game," she exclaimed to Gregory. "As I told you, the sea plays no favorites."

Before the young man could answer, she had turned from him to meet the men who were climbing from the incoming vessel.

"Hello, boys. Tough luck. But we can't help it. Tell me what happened. Make it short. I've got a lot to do." [Pg 94]

The fishermen grouped themselves about her as the quivering figure of a little Mexican lunged through the circle and began to speak:

"*Dios, Señorita*, it was very bad," he quavered. "We were lying close to shore. The fog was everywhere. We could not see. And the anchor, it would not hold. I was at the chain as you say I must when I hear a boat coming. *Jesus de mi alma*, but she is coming fast. I can not leave as we are drifting and I say to Pedro that he make a noise with the whistle. But he does not get a chance. As he jumped for the engine-house a big boat she come right out of the fog and before we can move, she smash us all to hell. I fall into the water with Pedro and loose the dory. For a time we drift. Then we are picked up by *Señor* Jones."

"Did the *Petrel* sink right away?" Dickie interrupted.

Another man crowded forward and answered the question.

"She didn't sink at all, miss. She wasn't far from the shore and she drifted in with the tide that was settin' in strong. Then she piled up on the rocks. She's layin' there now, high and dry on the beach."

"Didn't the boat that smashed them, lay to?" volleyed the girl.

Again the Mexican began to speak excitedly: "*Sangre de Christo*, no," he chattered, "The boat, she was very big, *Señorita*, and she did not stop." [Pg 95]

"Nonsense, Manuel. You were crazy with fright. Don't talk like a fool. Go home and go to bed. When you've had a good sleep, I'll talk with you again."

Stung into action by Jones's statement that the hull of the *Petrel* was still on the beach, she turned suddenly to the wharf.

"Tom Howard," she called sharply. When a voice answered, she ordered: "Fill up the *Pelican* with oil and stock her with grub. You can get it from Swanson. Throw in a couple of deep-sea hooks and a lot of good hauser. Mind it's new. Be ready to pull out in an hour." She turned again to the men before her. "Jones, I want you to get the *Curllew* ready. We may need two boats to pull her off. You know where they went ashore. Take Johnson and Rasmussen with you. We've got to move lively. A boat won't hang together long out there."

"Rasmussen's sick. How about Pete Carlin? He was with me coming over."

"Don't want him, Jones. Got to have men who know the game round Diablo in a fog. Take Sorenson."

The fisherman nodded and lumbered up the gangway followed by others. Dickie Lang jammed her hands deep down into her pockets and shrugged her shoulders as she turned to Gregory.

"If it isn't one thing, it's another," she said quietly. "Can you beat it? Manuel saying he was run down? He was scared to death. I don't believe a thing touched him. He just went to sleep and drifted in on the rocks and made up that story to save his job. Well, we'll know when I see the hull."

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Gregory listened, scarcely hearing the girl's words. At her announcement of going to the island he began to make tentative plans to accompany her. There might be a lot he could do. And she sure needed help. He wondered if he could offer his assistance without again antagonizing her.

"I'd like to go with you," he said bluntly. "I don't know much about the sea yet, but maybe I can do some of the strong-arm stuff and learn something. Besides, I want to have a look at Diablo."

Dickie regarded him approvingly.

"How about the cannery?" she asked. "My boats will go on fishing just the same."

"McCoy can take care of things all right until I get back. I'll learn a lot more over there than sticking around here."

"You're the boss of that," she replied. Then she added as an afterthought. "I'd be glad to have you."

As they walked to the wharf Gregory encountered McCoy and explained the situation.

"So I'm going out there," he concluded. "While I'm away it's up to you."

McCoy, he noticed, did not enthuse over the idea.

"Diablo's a dangerous place to be fooling around at this time of the year," he said.

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"If she can take the risk, I surely can," Gregory answered promptly.

"You're needed here," objected McCoy. "Everything's new and there's liable to be something come up I don't know about."

"Then do the best you can. I'll back you up. You know a lot more about it anyway than I do."

McCoy lapsed into silence while Gregory hurried away to make ready for the trip. When they were ready to shove off, McCoy watched the two boats slide out into the fog with conflicting emotions. Dick knew how to take care of herself all right. She could handle a boat in bad weather with the best of them. But, was that good enough? He reflected suddenly that Bill Lang *had* been the best of them. And it was on just such a day as this that Bill Lang had met his death on Diablo with Gregory's father.

Leaning against the dripping rail, he cursed the circumstances which prevented his being at the girl's side if anything went wrong. He liked the boss or he would have told him to look for another man. And Gregory's banking on him, tied him up. His inability to join the expedition gave to another the chance which should have been his. Torn by anxiety for the girl's welfare and another emotion he was slower in analyzing, he listened to the faint gulping of the *Pelican's* exhaust until it was no longer audible.

The sun rose sullenly from a fog-spotted sea and glared wrathfully at the wreaths of low-lying mist which obscured his vision of the saw-toothed peaks of El Diablo. Under the warmth of his gaze, the white-fleeced clouds wavered, shifting about uncertainly. As if loath to leave the devil-island they had guarded throughout the long night, they contracted slowly, niggardly exposing a line of rugged cliffs which shone bleak and gray in the strengthening light of early morning.

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"It's breaking up at last. Look!"

Dickie Lang pointed to the dark blot on the horizon.

"Can't. If I take my eyes from this needle for a second the boat'll run all over the ocean."

Gregory continued to stare at the compass while the girl smiled at his earnestness.

"Tom will take her now," she said, nodding to Howard to relieve him at the wheel. Then she added: "You've done fine. We've been going all night on dead reckoning and we're not far off."

Gregory surrendered the wheel with a sigh of relief and followed the direction of the girl's extended arm.

"That's Diablo," she announced. "I'm mighty glad the fog is shifting. Wouldn't have needed to have started so early if we had known. But that's the fun of the sea. You never know. There is no use trying to make it in there in a fog," she added. "It is bad enough when you can see."

While she talked with Johnson concerning the location of the wreck, Gregory found time to note the towering cliffs which rose precipitously from the blue-green sea. Somewhere along that rock-crusted coast, he reflected bitterly, Diablo had claimed another of the Lang boats only a few months ago. Somewhere among the white-crested rocks his father and Bill Lang had met their death. He wondered where, but did not ask. Perhaps the girl would speak of it.

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For some time he watched the mist-clouds flee before the brightening rays of the rising sun. Then he noticed that Dickie was standing by his side. Her eyes too were held by the rugged coast.

"The devil dumped it there," he heard her say in a low voice. "And when he saw what a hellish coast it was, he named it for himself. That's what dad used to say." She flung out her arm in the direction of a towering peak. "At the base of that highest cliff was where the *Gull* went on the rocks. They call it 'Hell-Hole.'"

Staring in silence at the saddle-backed mountain, their minds traveled into the past. Then Gregory asked: "Does any one live on the island?"

"It's a sheep-ranch. A man by the name of Bandrist has it leased on long time from the government. He's Swiss, I think. He farms a little of the land that isn't too rocky and runs his sheep over the rest. The island is about twenty miles long and over ten in the widest place."

"Is fishing good out here?"

"Fine," the girl answered. "Only it's dangerous. Fogs in spring and summer, and storms the rest of the time. Lots of albacore and tuna. But it costs boats and sometimes men to get them. Dad used to fish out here, but something was always sure to happen about the time he got well started. Just like yesterday. Diablo's a place," she said slowly, "where a man just can't make a mistake. If he does, he never lives to tell what happened." She pointed to the frowning cliffs which guarded the shore and extended far out into the water in a series of white-capped reefs. "No anchorage," she explained. "And a strong inshore current. When you get weather out here, it's nasty, and it hits you all in a bunch."

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As they neared the island the *Pelican* slowed down to wait for the *Curlew* which had been lagging astern.

"Jones must be having engine-trouble," commented Dickie Lang. "Or else Diablo's got him buffaloed too."

"What do you mean?" Gregory asked.

Lowering her voice so that it would not reach the two fishermen on the *Pelican*, she said: "They all give Diablo a wide berth. The fishermen are scared to death of the island. If you want to hear a lot of wild tales, just talk to some of my men at Legonia. Look at Manuel. Went clean out of his head and the funny part of it is the others all believed him. What's the matter, Jones? Having trouble?"

She addressed the skipper of the *Curlew* as he brought his craft alongside.

"Been havin' it all the way over," the man replied. "Compression's gettin' worse all the time." He drew a grimy hand across his blackened forehead and squinted in the direction of the island. "No place to be foolin' round with a cripple either, I can tell you," he growled. "Reckon I'd better lay to until I can get patched up."

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The girl's brow wrinkled.

"All right, Jones. I'll go on. Follow when you can. We'll be around that next point. Can you beat that?" she exclaimed in a low voice to Gregory. "His feet are getting cold too, and he's one of the best men I have."

Keeping well off the headland they rounded the point and turned shoreward.

"In there."

Johnson jerked his head in the direction of a small cove which lay almost hidden beneath the brow of an overhanging cliff.

"She lays just beyond that arch."

Dickie ordered a halt.

"Can't chance it in there with the big boat. Throw out the hook and keep your motor warm, Johnson. We may have to get out of here in a hurry. Keep a good eye on the chain for if she starts to drift you'll be on the rocks before you can snub her up. Put the dory over, Tom, and we'll go ashore and take a look."

Under the powerful sweep of Tom Howard's oars, the small boat darted from the shadow of the launch and sped away toward the cove. Rounding the natural arch by which the point projected itself into the sea, they entered the little cove which nestled at the base of the overhanging cliff. Bisecting the cove, a rugged ledge of rock jutted out into the sea. Dickie shaded her eyes with her hand and half rose from her seat. Cradled between two jagged rocks at the extreme end of the ledge, her bow angling sharply, her stern washed by the lapping waves, bruised and broken, lay all that was left of her favorite vessel. Only the girl's eyes mirrored her emotion as she stared

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at the wreck.

"Looks as if they made a clean job of it," she observed quietly. "Land right in here, Tom. We'll climb up on the ledge and walk over."

Pulling the dory up on the rocks they stumbled over the slippery eel-grass and approached the ill-fated craft. Dickie Lang examined the hull.

"Looks like Manuel wasn't dreaming, at that," she ejaculated, pointing to the jagged hole in the *Petrel's* side.

"Somebody bumped him all right and it must have been almost in the cove or he would never have drifted in here."

The further examination of the wreck went on in silence. The engine was half-submerged, Gregory noticed, and the water poured from the splintered hull and splashed to the rocks in a series of tiny cataracts.

"Not much of a chance to save anything but the motor and the shaft," Dickie observed. "And we'll have to work lively to do that on this ebb. She'll break up on the flood if there's any sea."

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As Howard jerked his head in acquiescence with the girl's diagnosis, a shower of loose rocks rattled from the overhanging cliff. Dickie walked around the *Petrel's* bow and scrambled to the ledge.

"Looks as if we were going to have company," she announced, pointing in the direction of the bluff, where three men were descending the trail to the beach. Reaching the ledge the strangers walked steadily toward the wreck and halted within a few feet of the salvage party. As they jabbered in a French dialect, Gregory listened intently.

Dickie's hand stole to the pocket of her coat. The men seemed bent on making trouble. It was best to take no chances. Her fingers sought the handle of the Colt in vain. Cursing her negligence in leaving the automatic aboard the *Pelican*, she stepped forward for a parley with the strangers. Gregory and Howard placed themselves about her as the men moved closer.

"No sabe," exclaimed Dickie Lang. "What kind of lingo are they talking anyway."

Gregory was dividing his attention between the man with the red beard and the weasel-faced stranger who was gesticulating so wildly with his long arms.

"Red-beard says nobody's allowed here, or words to that effect," he interpreted. "Weasel-face backs him up in it and says for us to beat it."

"Tell them what we're here for. And that when we get the boat stripped we'll go, and not before."

The red-bearded man shook his heavy head with slow comprehension. Weasel-face shuffled closer, his small eyes blinking malevolently. The third member of the party, a thick-set man with a face pitted by scars, motioned threateningly in the direction of the dory.

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Dickie brushed forward.

"I'll try them in dago," she said.

Gregory watched the strangers move closer to their leader as the girl began to speak; heard his low-voiced words, uttered in a harsh guttural; saw his arm flash out and grasp the girl roughly by the shoulder.

Leaping forward, Gregory found his way blocked by Weasel-face. The islander's hand was fumbling at his belt. Gregory's fist snapped his head backward. The man's hands flew up, but not in time to block the vicious blow which caught him full on the chin.

Weasel-face's legs collapsed. Without a sound he fell in a heap upon the rocks. Holding Dickie Lang in his great arms, the red-bearded man saw his companion fall by his side. With a snarl he released the struggling girl and shoved her from him. Before he could draw his knife Kenneth Gregory was upon him.

CHAPTER XI

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REFUSING TO BE BLUFFED

Dickie Lang reeled backward as the red-bearded man shoved her from him. She felt the eel-grass slipping beneath her feet. Striving vainly to regain her balance, she turned cat-like in the air and broke the fall with her hands. As she rebounded to her feet she could see Gregory wrestling with the man who had precipitated the attack. Close by his side, Tom Howard grappled with the scar-faced islander. The third man lay huddled on the rocks where he had fallen.

Dickie decided at once upon her course of action. Gregory and Howard were holding their own against the two men. It was up to her to see that the third of the islanders did not come to the rescue of his companions. The man might regain consciousness at any moment. Then there would

be three against two. She remembered suddenly that there was rope on the *Petrel*. Better than that there was a rifle. It was but a few steps to the launch. She covered it quickly, caught the main-stay and pulled herself aboard.

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Kenneth Gregory realized at the outset that he was up against a hard fight. In his hurry to close with the red-bearded man, his foot had slipped on the slimy grass and he had been forced to clinch to save himself from falling. This placed him at a marked disadvantage. His opponent had the best of him in weight by at least twenty pounds and was heavily muscled. Moreover he possessed a certain agility on the grass-covered rocks which rendered any attempt on Gregory's part to force the battle, as extremely hazardous. The islander, at home on the slippery footing, from the start, became the aggressor.

For a time Gregory was content merely to hold his feet against Red-beard's rushes and retain his hold on the islander's knife-arm, should he be possessed of a weapon. Men of that type, he reasoned, were usually short-winded. In time the heavier man would exhaust himself. Then his turn would come. Ahead he noticed a clear space, free from grass. The solid rock would afford good footing. There he would have a better chance.

If the islander was determined to crowd, he might as well crowd in the right direction. Gregory changed front slowly, working his body around the heavier man, giving way before his bull-like rushes. When he reached the position he desired, he checked his circling movement and began to retreat steadily. Keeping his feet wide apart, his body carefully balanced, he backed slowly in the direction of the spot where the grass would no longer slip beneath his feet.

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On the other side of the ledge, Tom Howard battled with the scar-faced man. Of equal weight and strength, the struggle resolved itself into a question of endurance, as the two men rolled over each other on the barnacled rocks in an effort to break the other's grip and strengthen his own. Unconscious of their surroundings, their heads locked close to their straining bodies, they grappled blindly, working closer to a deep crevice which lay across their path. For a brief instant they ceased struggling. Their bodies stiffened. With each man seeking to pin the other beneath him they rolled to the crevice and dropped from view.

Dickie, aboard the boat, flashed a glance at the gun-rack. The rifle was gone. The patent-clasp which held the weapon in place had been wrenched free. Her eyes traveled to the empty provision-locker, which stood open. Close by it lay a small monkey-wrench with which some one had battered the padlock.

A wrench would be better than nothing. She caught it up and ran to the deck. Securing a small coil of rope, she jumped to the rocks and raced in the direction of the spot where the weasel-faced man had fallen.

As she ran she caught a glimpse of Gregory giving way before the red-bearded man toward the table-like surface of the ledge which jutted out over the cove. Of Howard she could see nothing. She stopped suddenly as she came in view of the spot where the weasel-faced islander had sprawled upon the rocks.

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The man was gone.

Solid rock beneath his feet at last—Red-beard had forced him to the exact spot he desired to reach—Gregory's muscles contracted with a jerk. He stopped retreating and began to slide around the islander. If he was successful in carrying out his plan it was best to have Red-beard on the outside of the ledge.

Divining his purpose, the big man stiffened as he caught a glimpse of the sea over his shoulder. Straining closer to each other's throbbing bodies, the two men redoubled their efforts to twist the other to the outside. Red-beard's breath began to come in gasps. He opened his mouth and sucked in the air feverishly. His corded muscles were beginning to relax. Gregory's feet shot under the islander's legs and the big man narrowly escaped falling. When he regained his balance he could not see the water. The cool air from the sea which had been blowing in his face now stirred the thick hair which covered his neck. He was on the outside of the ledge overlooking the cove.

Before he could recover from his surprise, Red-beard felt the fingers on his arm relax. His opponent wriggled in his arms, stiffened and crushed against him. As the big man fought to regain his balance, Gregory freed an arm and his fist flashed to the islander's ear. Red-beard grunted for breath. Again the rigidly flexed forearm cut under his guard and landed on his hairy chin. As he raised his big arms to protect his head, his antagonist twisted free.

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Ducking under the clumsy fist which beat the air above his head, Gregory swung again for the islander's chin. With a snarl of rage, the big man lowered his head. Then his angry growl changed quickly to a grunt of pain as he took the blow full in the forehead. Reeling dizzily, his hand sought his girdle. His fingers closed on the hilt of his knife and jerked it free.

Gregory hurled himself forward at the sight of the steel. Grasping the uplifted arm he wrenched it inward, twisting the man half around. Surprised at the suddenness of the move, the islander gave way in a series of staggering steps which carried him to the edge of the rock ledge

overlooking the water.

Retaining his hold on the red-bearded man's wrist, Gregory struck with all his force at the bulging chest. As the blow landed he felt the body crumple in his arms and the knife clattered to the rocks. The islander staggered backward with his assailant pressing close against him. In their struggle both men had for the moment forgotten the overhanging ledge.



Both men had forgotten the overhanging ledge

Gregory remembered it too late. Red-beard's arms were still about him. Suddenly he felt the dead weight of the islander's body. As he strove to break the man's hold he tottered on the brink of the ledge. He felt himself being dragged downward. Before his eyes flashed the rock-dappled waters of the cove. His only chance lay in clearing the rocks below. His knees straightened with a jerk. Shoving his body outward, he plunged over the ledge with the islander clinging to him.

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The warning scream died on Dickie Lang's lips as she ran toward them. Checking her steps on the edge of the rocks overlooking the water, she stared at the ever-widening circles which rippled the water and the jagged rocks which shone ominously dark beneath the surface. She followed the center of the ripples mechanically. Thank God, they had hit in a clear spot. But what chance would a man have throttled like that by another?

The cool rush of air on his throbbing face gave place to a cooler one as the waters closed over Kenneth Gregory's head. He felt his body sinking like a stone. The arms about his body tightened. The blood pounded to his brain. To his mind flashed stories of swimmers who had been drowned by women with the fatal strangle-hold. He realized sharply that he was held by no woman, but a red-bearded giant, insane through fear, incapable of reason. Whatever he did must be done at once.

With an effort which left his lungs pressing hard against his ribs he freed an arm and worked it upward until he felt the matted hair of the islander's beard. From there it was only a span to the throat. That was what he must reach. The throat. The words raced through his brain. The throat. He must shut down on that and hang. His groping fingers searched for the elusive organ. Perhaps Red-beard had no throat. The grotesqueness of the idea caused him to want to laugh. It didn't matter much after all. Not when.... There it was. He had found it at last. His fingers stiffened and slid on the slippery flesh. Then they fastened, tightened and hung.

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Good God, would they never come up? Dickie searched the faintly dimpled waters from her commanding elevation, but her closest scrutiny revealed no sign of the men beneath the surface. Kenneth Gregory was drowned as his father had been drowned at Diablo. So intent was the girl upon her examination of the water that she failed to see a limping figure emerge cautiously from behind a pile of rocks and drop into a near-by crevice.

Under the steady pressure of his fingers, Gregory felt the body of the islander relax. Then he became conscious in a vague sort of way, of movement. They were rising to the surface or sinking lower to the bottom. Why couldn't he tell which? He freed his legs from the inert form which twined itself about him, and kicked weakly. The red-bearded man slipped from him at the effort and he narrowly escaped losing his hold upon his throat. He kicked again. If he could only get one gulp of air he could make it. In spite of the ever-increasing pressure on his lungs he found himself getting sleepy. He was tired, worn out. If he could only fill his lungs with something to stop that dull pain, he could go to sleep and rest.

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Dickie Lang saw the dark blot of the two figures as they neared the surface. Then she thought of the rope in her hand. She could weigh it with the wrench and throw it from where she stood. Uncoiling it hastily, she measured the distance. Too far, she realized bitterly. She looked to the water's edge. The distance would be shorter from there. Shoving the wrench into her pocket and throwing the rope loosely about her neck, she crawled over the ledge and climbed downward.

The ledge dipped sharply under the overhanging surface and extended shoreward in a narrow shelf, carpeted by kelp and washed by the sea. Around that big boulder would be the best place. From there she could throw the rope to good advantage. She was about to shout encouragement when she heard the sharp splash of a stone falling into the water from the cliff. Shrinking closer to the rocks, she listened. Then crept silently on.

Air to breathe at last! Gregory lay passive on the surface, content to gulp it in in huge mouthfuls. Nothing else mattered now. His head throbbed painfully and his eyeballs burned in their sockets. But he had air. And that was enough. As the pressure of blood on his brain lessened, he became conscious of the fact that he was still gripping the islander's throat. He released his fingers and the big head tilted forward until it rested face down on the water. With a start Gregory realized that the air had come too late for Red-beard. He must get the man ashore at once.

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He turned his head slowly and saw the rock ledge only a few feet away. By that big overhanging boulder would be the place to land. There he could crawl up on the soft kelp and rest. Rolling the unconscious man to his back, he swam slowly for the ledge.

Dickie reached the base of the projecting rock and wedging her slender body into a small fissure, peered cautiously through the cleft. So close that she could almost touch him, alert and motionless, stood the weasel-faced man. His small eyes were fixed upon the water. The hand which was nearest her held a knife.

Wriggling from the crevice she hastily retraced her steps. No use trying to squeeze through there. She would be in full view before she would have a chance. Flashing a glance at the rugged surface of the boulder, she began to climb.

It was farther to the ledge than he thought. Something was the matter with his legs. His arms had no strength. They had almost ceased to function. A sharp pain gripped his side and tore downward through his body. Still Gregory swam on. In another moment he could reach out and grip the kelp with his hand. He closed his eyes and swam mechanically. At length his extended fingers touched the sea-grass which fringed the ledge. Twining them eagerly about it, he pulled his aching body closer and rested, clinging to the rocks.

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Hand over hand Dickie Lang crawled upward and outward until she could see the water lapping at the ledge beneath. From her vantage point she could see Gregory swimming on with closed eyes in the direction of the rocks. His limbs were moving slowly and his face was drawn with pain. Still he floundered on. Straight for the kelp-covered ledge—and Weasel-face.

A sharp turn in the rocky pathway put the man in full view, only a few feet below. Sheltered from sight of the struggling figure in the water, he waited in silence.

If she called out to warn Gregory to seek a new landing-place it was doubtful if he could make the beach in his exhausted condition. Such a course, too, would make her presence known to the hatchet-faced man who as yet had not observed her. No, it was better to take the man unawares. She thought of the rope. Perhaps she could loop it over his head. She gave up the idea at once. It could only fail. Jamming her hands into her pockets, her fingers closed on the wrench. She jerked it out and balanced it in her hand. A feeling of confidence surged over her. She couldn't miss him from where she stood. Her pastime of flinging stones at the gulls when a child would stand her in good stead now. If the man looked up, she would throw before he could recover from his surprise.

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Dragging his tired body wearily from the water, Gregory pulled his unconscious companion after him. As he stretched the islander at full length on the soft kelp and knelt over him, he caught sight of a man's foot protruding from behind a rock.

Gregory stumbled to his feet. At the same instant he heard the sound of a muffled blow. A small wrench clattered to the rocks and fell with a splash into a pool of water.

"I knew I could get him," a girlish voice called from above. Dickie Lang jumped down with shining eyes and made her way toward him. "Buck up," he heard her say. But the voice trailed away into silence.

When he regained consciousness, the girl was bending over him, rubbing his numbed limbs and slapping his cold flesh violently.

"You'll be all right in a minute," she said. "Don't try to talk now. Lie still and rest. Feel better?"

He nodded. As he moved his head he noticed the two figures lying close beside him. Noting the questioning look in his eyes, Dickie explained:

"They're all right or will be in a little while. I'm looking after them. When they come to, I'm going to tie them up." She flourished a small coil of rope.

As his strength returned Gregory began to pick up the loose threads. "Howard?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Don't know where he is. Couldn't see him. Don't worry. Chances are he's all right. He's hard as nails. When you can walk we'll go and look for him."

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They found the fisherman huddled against the rocks at the bottom of the small crevice. Close by his side lay the scar-faced islander. Both men were unconscious.

Gregory examined Howard carefully.

"His leg is broken," he announced. "And he's pretty well bruised up. He must have got an awful jolt when he fell on these rocks." Jumping up, he exclaimed: "I'll go and get something for splints," he said. "Make him as comfortable as you can."

When he returned Dickie noticed he carried a heavy oar which he had fashioned into a rude crutch, a number of small strips of wood and a piece of an old blanket.

"Found them on the *Petrel*," he said as he set to work.

Dickie assisted Gregory in caring for the wounded man. Her respect for the young man increased as she noted the skilful manner with which he worked. Soon Howard's leg was set and after a time he opened his eyes and slowly regained consciousness. The sun was high overhead when they were able to move the injured men. While Howard rested for a moment on the ledge, Gregory carried the unconscious form of the other man to the soft sea-grass and stretched him at full length. Then he thought of the two men they had left on the narrow shelf by the sea.

"I'd better have a look at Red-beard and the other fellow," he said suddenly. "The water might come in there and wash them off."

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Dickie nodded. "I'll stay here," she said, and Gregory hurried off.

When he came back he shook his head. "Gone," he announced.

"Washed off?"

"Don't think so. The water hadn't quite got to where we left them. I guess they sneaked."

Dickie's eyes searched the sea while he spoke.

"I can't understand what is keeping the boys from the *Curlew*," she said. "We'd better get Tom aboard the *Petrel* where we can make him more comfortable. Better bring the other fellow too. There's some whisky on the boat unless those devils have stolen it too. Hello, what's that?"

The quiet was broken by the sharp clatter of horses' hoofs. Looking in the direction of the sound, Gregory saw a number of horsemen riding over the crest of the bluff overlooking the cove.

The fisherman glanced toward the dory which lay on the rocks at the extreme end of the ledge.

"Better beat it," he suggested.

Dickie Lang shook her head stubbornly. "No," she said. "We'll leave that man here and the rest of us will get aboard. The *Petrel's* on tide land and I'll be damned if any one's going to bluff me out."

CHAPTER XII

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A WARNING

From the *Petrel's* sloping deck they saw the horsemen appear in bold silhouette against the skyline. Swinging from their saddles they walked to meet a white-shirted rider who galloped over the ridge and drew rein among them.

The newcomer remained astride his horse. Resting an arm on the horn of his saddle, he stared into the little cove through his binoculars. Satisfied apparently by what he saw, he dismounted and walked rapidly toward the trail leading to the beach, the men following after him. As they took their way down the cliff Gregory noticed that some of the men carried rifles. When they reached the beach the white-shirted man walked on alone, and without a backward glance, traversed the rocks in the direction of the wreck.

"He walks like a king," commented Dickie Lang. "I wonder if that is Bandrist."

Gregory noted the clean-cut figure of the stranger carefully. The man was about his own height though of slighter build, the spareness of his figure being emphasized by the close-fitting riding-trousers and the thin silk shirt which fluttered about him as he strode along. The fair-haired stranger stopped abruptly when he reached the *Petrel's* side. Flinging an arm upward with a careless gesture, and looking straight at the girl, he said quietly:

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"I am unarmed. May I come aboard your vessel?"

Only the slightest trace of the foreigner was discernible in his speech.

Dickie Lang nodded. "Come ahead," she said. "Whoever you are, you can speak English at least."

The visitor smiled as he caught the mast-stay and drew himself gracefully over the rail.

"I am Leo Bandrist," he introduced. "I fear my men have caused you some annoyance. I am sorry."

Dickie rehearsed the incidents leading up to the trouble with the natives and when she had concluded, Bandrist's forehead wrinkled in a frown.

"I am very sorry," he repeated. "My men, you see, are very stupid. Very ignorant. They understand but little English. Then, too, I have been annoyed by others. You see, I have many sheep and wild goats upon the island. Hunters come to shoot the goats, but they often mistake my sheep for them. Fishermen also have caused me great trouble. I have fenced my lands to keep them out; put up the signs the law tells me I must to protect myself. But no, they disregard my rights. So I give my men instructions to keep them out. When my rangers are opposed they grow ugly. One of them tells me that one of your number began the attack. That angered them, you see, and they fought back. It was but natural. However, I am sorry. I trust that none of your party has been seriously injured."

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"Small thanks to you," Dickie snapped. "Your men tried hard enough to commit murder." Nodding in the direction of the unconscious islander, she added: "There's one of your outfit stretched out over there. Another was half-drowned. The third tried to knife Mr. Gregory. I hit him in the head with a monkey-wrench. They both got away or were washed off the ledge."

Bandrist shot a quick glance at Gregory as the girl mentioned the cannery owner's name. At the girl's reference to her part in the affair his eyes lighted with interest. Then the frown came again to his face.

"That is the trouble," he said quickly. "My men do not understand. They know only one way to fight. That is to win. If you will permit me, I shall summon the others to care for their companion."

He waited for the girl's consent. Then he waved his hand to the men on the beach. When they were within ear-shot, Bandrist addressed them rapidly, nodding toward the spot indicated by Dickie Lang. As the men hurried away, he explained:

"They come to me from many countries. Some of them are bad and cause me much trouble. It is so lonesome out here that I can not keep good men. I tell my fence-riders only to keep people away so that they will not kill my sheep. Some of them I arm as you see, because those who hunt also carry guns and are sometimes ugly."

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He spread out his slender fingers apologetically.

"Again I am sorry," he said. "If you desire to work now I will see that you are undisturbed, if you will promise to leave the island when you are through. You see I do not want any more trouble," he concluded with frank emphasis. "My men will be very angry when they find their wounded comrade. Sometimes it is difficult for me to restrain them."

The excited jargon of the islanders as they came upon their disabled fellow confirmed the truth of his words. Jabbering to themselves, and casting sullen glances in the direction of the *Petrel*, they carried the man over the ledge to the beach.

"Mr. Bandrist," said Dickie clearly. "I've as much right to be here as you have. You can't legally keep me from taking the engine out of this boat. She's on tide and you haven't any more claim to that than I have. You know that as well as I do. I'm going to take my time. When I get through, I'll go. And not before. If you are on the square you'll stay here until I do. We don't want trouble any more than you do. But we're not going to be bluffed out on this deal or any other."

Bandrist's eyes shone with unconcealed admiration. He inclined his head in response to her suggestion and exclaimed: "I shall be only too glad to remain here until you are ready to leave."

Dickie Lang turned quickly to Howard. "You keep off your feet, Tom," she said. "I might as well start in. The boys from the *Curllew* ought to have been here long before this."

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Gregory pressed forward. "Tell me what to do," he said.

The girl regarded him approvingly. "You can loosen the stud-bolts on the motor first. Come on," she said. "I'll show you."

Bandrist followed after them. "May I help?" he asked.

She shook her head with decision. "Two's as many as can conveniently work around the engine," she answered.

The work of tearing down the motor began at once. Gregory wore the skin from his knuckles in loosening the stud-bolts while Howard instructed him from the doorway how to take off the carburetor and rip up the feed-line. As they worked the girl made a rapid survey of the parts she desired to salvage.

"Some more of your friends?"

Bandrist pointed seaward where a dory was rounding the point and heading shoreward.

The girl acknowledged his words with a curt nod.

"Here come the boys from the *Curlew*," she announced.

When the landing party reached the *Petrel's* side, Jones and Sorenson stared in silence at the white-shirted man leaning against the rail.

"Got things fixed up, Jones? You were a long time coming."

The skipper of the *Curlew* climbed aboard before replying. Drawing the girl to one side, he said quietly: "Thing's pretty well shot, miss. Took her down and found this." [Pg 123]

He extended a blackened handkerchief covered with fine dust. Dickie Lang examined it carefully, rubbing the particles of black grit between her fingers.

"Emery dust?"

Jones nodded. "She's full of it," he answered. "Don't dare and start her up. She'd cut herself to pieces."

Silently regarding the blackened particles, the girl asked: "Carlin was with you yesterday you said, didn't you?"

"Yes. Him and Jacobs."

"Carlin's enough. I knew he was a dub. But I didn't think he had brains enough to be a crook. I know now. Well, we've got enough trouble right here for a while without bothering about your boat. You rip up the motor and Sorenson and Mr. Gregory can strip the deck. We've got to hustle. It will begin to rough up soon. Then we'll have to run with what we have. She'll break up on the flood by the looks of things."

Pausing for a moment to partake of a meager lunch which Dickie discovered had been overlooked by the robber of the *Petrel*, all hands turned again to the work of salvaging the motor.

Through the long afternoon they worked in silence. As Gregory stripped the iron chaulks from the deck and removed the stays, he noticed that Bandrist leaned idly against the rail with his blue eyes following the movements of Dickie Lang with great interest. Once, before Gregory could surmise his purpose, he sprang to the girl's side and assisted her with a piece of shaft and the ease with which he handled the heavy brass caused the young man to marvel. [Pg 124]

A queer specimen of man was Bandrist, he reflected, to be marooned in such a spot as this. Gregory's work gave him a chance to study the islander without being observed. He was a figure who merited more than a passing glance. He would challenge attention in any environment. While he twisted the galvanized turn-buckles, rusted by the salt-air, Gregory appraised the man carefully.

Trained to the minute and hard as nails, he catalogued the slender figure. The long smooth-lying muscles were those of an athlete. He could see them rippling at the open-throat and on the islander's wrist when he raised his arm. The features too were worthy of notice. Line by line he studied them. From the high forehead which bulged over the clear blue eyes, to the delicately ovaled chin. The face was emotionless. Only the curve of the thin lips showed the man beneath the mask. The lips were cruel as death.

The tall crags cast their irregular shadows athwart the cove and a sudden puff of wind, which had freshened as the day wore on, ruffled the quiet waters and caused them to slap angrily at the base of the ledge. Dickie Lang cast a weather-eye to seaward and shook her head. [Pg 125]

"Time we were getting in the clear, boys," she said. "The tide's beginning to set in strong and the breeze is freshening. We've got about all we dare fool with. I want to get clear of the Diablo coast before the fog drifts any closer."

The fishermen issued from the engine-house at her words and began to gather up the parts of the dissembled motor and carry them to the waiting skiffs. Then they assisted Howard to the dory. In a few moments they were ready to shove off. Dickie stepped into the dory of the *Pelican* which Jones shoved into the water.

"I want to get Tom to the launch and have her ready to get under way," she explained to Gregory. "Will you stay and help Sorenson load the rest of the motor?"

Gregory nodded and set to work. Bandrist's eyes followed the departing skiff until it disappeared around the point. Then he motioned Gregory to one side and began to speak: "Do not let her come out here again," he said in a low voice. "Diablo is not a safe place for fishermen, much less a woman. My men will not forget you. I was able to control them to-day. The next time I might not be so fortunate."

However well meant the warning might have been, it rankled in Gregory's breast. He felt his instinctive dislike of Bandrist grow with the man's words. Meeting the islander's eyes squarely, he said in a voice which only Bandrist could hear: [Pg 126]

"If it is necessary for us to come to Diablo again, Mr. Bandrist, we will come. If you are unable to handle your men, that will be up to you."

For a moment the two men appraised each other in silence. Then Gregory turned and walked to the waiting dory.

In the purpling dusk they embarked from Diablo and sped across the rippling water to the launch which lay in the offing. Looking back from the stern-seat, Gregory saw the man on the ledge gazing after them with folded arms.

On the deck of the *Pelican* the girl was issuing hasty orders for the return to the mainland.

"Kick her over, Jones. Johnson, stand by the hook. Here comes the other skiff. Get your stuff aboard, Sorenson, as quick as you can," she called to the approaching dory, "and swing the boat on deck. We'll beat it out of here and take the *Curlew* in tow. Make it lively, boys. We've got to be under way."

Swinging wide of the headland the *Pelican* plunged into the trough of the swell and skirting the coast raced on to pick up the disabled *Curlew*. Dickie Lang looked back at the dim outline of the cliffs as they shadowed the sea.

"Poor little *Pete*," she exclaimed softly. "It's tough. But it can't be helped."

Gregory alone heard her words.

"It sure is," he said, feeling that the words were wholly inadequate. "And I'm mighty sorry," he added.

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The girl started. "I guess I was thinking aloud," she said. "I didn't know you heard." She set her lips together. "It's all in the game, I know," she went on, "but no one but me knows how I hate to lose the little *Petrel*."

When they picked up the *Curlew* the fitful wind died suddenly and the air grew heavy with moisture. The white clouds which scurried across the face of the heavens dropped lower and massing themselves together obscured the stars. Piloting the *Pelican* and her tow safely to the high seas, the girl relinquished the wheel to Johnson with a sigh of relief.

"I'll rustle something to eat, Bill," she said. "We'll stand two-hour watches. I'll take her next. I want to see if there is anything I can do for Tom. I'll be in the cabin. Call me if you sight anything or it gets thicker."

Turning to Gregory, she exclaimed: "The next thing is to eat. I'm starved myself, and I'll bet you're worse."

Repairing to the cabin where the big fisherman was already asleep on the bunk, they ate their first real meal of the day in silence. There was much that they could have talked about, but one does not follow the sea long without learning that opportunities to eat are sometimes golden, and not lightly to be passed over or interfered with by conversation. It was not until the last morsel of food had been consumed, therefore, that Gregory made an effort to voice his thoughts.

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"What do you think of Bandrist?" he asked suddenly.

The girl started, surprised that they should both be thinking of the same man. Her forehead wrinkled slowly as she answered:

"I think he's a crook. I don't know why exactly, but I just do. He's too smooth. Too well educated for a sheep-man. He's up to something at Diablo. Don't know what. Don't know that it is any of my business at that. But I don't like him."

"Neither do I," Gregory admitted. "I sized him up as a mighty clever man. He has a hard outfit out there and he pretends he can't control them. That's the bunk. Did you notice how they took orders from him without even talking back?"

"Yes. And he had most of them armed. With orders to keep people off of the island. Why?" she asked suddenly. "I don't believe it's on account of the sheep."

Gregory shook his head emphatically.

"That was bunk too," he said. "They knew we were not trying to hunt. I suppose they did get pretty sore when we roughed it with them, but that didn't give them any license to pull their knives and try to carve us up. That crazy fool would have had me in another minute if it hadn't been for you."

Dickie sought to minimize her part in the affair.

"I didn't do much," she said. "I was just lucky. You did all of the hard work. I thought you were never coming up."

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"You were dead game," Gregory cut in. "You saved me from that fellow's knife and you know it."

Dickie Lang made no reply but sat with her arms resting on the cabin-table, looking off into space. Again she saw herself huddled against the rocks, looking down into the sunlit water of the cove, waiting for the men to come to the surface. What a fight Gregory must have had to have freed himself from that strangle-hold and save the life of the other man as well as his own. How skilfully he had worked over Howard. He seemed to know just what to do. She raised her head sharply. Not given to living in the past, she wondered why her mind had gone wool-gathering.

Perhaps it was because she was beginning to realize that this man was a man among men. And real men were scarce. He was speaking again.

"There's something wrong at Diablo. I'd give a lot to find out what it is."

"It would cost a lot," she answered soberly. "And what business is it of ours? Dad used to say that monkeying with other people's affairs was a luxury he never could afford."

"But if they interfere with fishing, it is some of our business."

"Yes, but do they?"

"I don't know. That is, not yet," he was forced to admit.

"Neither do I. Until I do, I'm not looking for any more trouble than I can see ahead right now."

Silence for several moments. Then, from the girl:

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"Besides, you couldn't find out anything. The fishermen are scared stiff of Diablo as it is. When this gets around, they'll be even worse. They're not looking for more excitement. They have enough."

To Gregory's mind recurred his plan of manning the girl's boats. Here was an opportunity to justify it.

"The bunch I'm figuring on wouldn't be afraid of it," he said. "In fact I think they would kind of enjoy finding out."

Dickie smiled. "Aren't you speaking two words for yourself?" she asked.

He smiled too. "I'll admit I have some curiosity," he answered.

The girl laughed. "You've got into the habit of fighting," she retorted. "But the war is over now."

"Maybe you're right. But at Legonia I've an idea it has just begun."

It was just what she would have had him say. What she would have said herself if she had spoken her mind. She liked a man who wasn't afraid. They were the kind one could tie to. Gregory's proposal again assailed her. It had its advantages. She would think it over while she was at the wheel.

"Boat off starboard quarter," a gruff voice announced from the doorway.

Dickie Lang sprang to her feet and hurried on deck with Gregory following close behind. From the gray gloom came the sharp exhaust of a high-powered motor, running at top speed. As they looked in the direction of the sound, which was fast changing to an angry roar, the shifting wall of filmy fog was pierced by a flash of green.

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"Mascola!"

Gregory was barely able to catch the girl's words above the uproar of the gatlin-like exhaust. The next instant the green light flashed by and was swallowed up in the gloom.

"I wonder what he's doing out here running like that?" Dickie mused.

"How do you know who it was?"

She laughed. "There's only one boat anywhere around here with an exhaust like that," she answered. "That's the *Fuor d'Italia*. She's the fastest craft in southern waters of her kind. And no one ever runs her but Mascola."

Gregory continued to listen to the rapid-fire exhaust as it died away in the distance. Then he pictured himself driving the trim craft, plunging through the waves and hurling the spray into his face as he raced on. Recalled to himself by the slow-moving *Pelican* burdened by her tow, he reflected that speed sometimes was everything. If he was going to oppose Mascola he would have to get there first. Dickie was speaking again.

"Joe Barrows built her up at Port Angeles. Mascola hasn't had her very long and he won't have her much longer if he pounds her like that. I wonder what he's going out to Diablo for in such a hurry."

Gregory could not answer. But he made up his mind if he was ever going to find out, he would have to have a faster boat than the *Fuor d'Italia*. Perhaps Joe Barrows could help him out.

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Through the long night the *Pelican* crept into the thickening fog with the disabled *Curllew*. Daybreak found them at the entrance to Crescent Bay. When they reached the Lang docks the masts of the fishing-fleet could be dimly discerned through the shifting mist like a forest of bare-trunked trees.

Dickie frowned.

"The boys are late getting out," she observed. "I wonder what's the matter."

As they drew alongside the wharf it was evident that something unusual was in the air. The pier was thronged with fishermen, gathered together in little groups, leaning idly against the empty

fish-boxes. At the landing party's approach the low hum of conversation died away into a faint murmur. A solitary figure, standing apart from the others, hurried forward to meet the girl as she walked up the gangway.

"Hello, Jack. What's the trouble?"

McCoy nodded in the direction of the silent fishermen. "Trouble enough," he whispered. "I'm mighty glad you've come, Dick. There's a strike on. Carlin's got them all riled up and there's hell to pay."

CHAPTER XIII

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THE STRIKE

A strike at this of all times! And Pete Carlin at the bottom of it! With her nerves frayed raw by two nights of sleepless vigil and the memory of the *Curlew's* disabled motor rankling within her, Dickie Lang brushed by a group of men and confronted a bullet-headed man in a loose gray sweater.

"Carlin," she said clearly in a voice which all could hear, "you're fired. You're a crook. If you'd work the clock around I wouldn't have you on the job."

Turning to the fishermen she rapidly related the incident of the finding of the emery-dust in the *Curlew's* motor.

"It's a lie," Carlin interrupted, "I don't——"

"It's the truth, Pete Carlin, and you know it."

Dickie moved closer to Carlin and her eyes met his. "You can't look me in the eye and deny it," she challenged. As the man said nothing, she flashed: "Get off my dock while you're still able to walk. If I was a man I'd knock you down."

The man grinned but did not move.

"But you ain't," he retorted. "I reckon I ain't goin' to have no fool girl tell me where to head in at. I reckon I——"

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A heavy hand fell on his shoulder and his sentence remained unfinished. Gregory's eyes were snapping close to Carlin's.

"Beat it," he said, "while the trail's open."

Carlin flashed a glance over his shoulder at the fishermen who stood looking on in stoical silence. Then he decided to go. Mumbling to himself, he turned sullenly from the men about him and walked slowly down the dock.

Dickie Lang faced the silent fishermen.

"Now, boys, what is it? I'll hear what you've got to say. But I won't have any dealings with a crook."

The men about her shuffled their feet and drew closer. Then a man in a faded plaid jumper detached himself from the others and began to speak.

"We ain't got nothin' against you, Miss Lang," he began uncertainly. "But we've all got to look out for ourselves. We got families and folks dependin' on us. Livin' 's out of sight. So is clothes and everything. We——"

"What's your proposition, Blagg?"

The fisherman hesitated at the directness of the question. Then he recited: "Straight time. Eight-hour day for six dollars. Double money for overtime and Sundays."

Dickie started at the demand. Carlin had done his work well to set such a limit as that. She wondered how far the seeds of discontent had spread among the others. As her eye traveled over the silent groups, Blagg went on:

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"You see, miss, as I say we got families and the women-folks——"

"Don't blame the women, Joe," interrupted the girl. "If they got half of what the saloons leave they'd have no kick coming. I'll bet they're not back of this. You've been listening to a half-baked fool who couldn't make a living if dollars grew on trees. All Pete Carlin can do is talk. You boys know he isn't a fisherman."

She stepped closer and her voice dropped to a conversational tone. "It just isn't in the business, boys. If I promised to pay those wages I couldn't do it. I'd be broke with the first run of bad luck and you know it as well as I do, if you'd stop to think. The man doesn't live who can pay that around here and get out."

Blagg smiled knowingly at the fishermen.

"You're wrong, miss," he said. "We've already got the offer for a job at them terms."

"Not here?"

He nodded. "Right here in town. We won't have to move nor nothin'." Watching the effect of his words upon the girl, he went on, carried away by the importance of his announcement. "That's why we're puttin' it up to you. You've always shot pretty square with us. But money talks, and we all got to look out for Number One. I reckon none of the boys is honein' to go to work for a furrinor, but we all knows his money's good as yours and that's what counts."

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"You mean you're going to ditch me for Mascola?"

Blagg dropped his eyes to the planks of the wharf before the girl's steady gaze.

"We don't aim to ditch nobody," he said awkwardly. "But we got to live. The dago's offered us six day straight with double for overtime and Sundays. We ain't decided yet. We waited to give you a chance."

Dickie Lang listened quietly, her eyes roaming among the knots of silent fishermen. Some she noticed stood close and as their spokesman went on, shuffled closer. Others held aloof. When Blagg had concluded, she began to speak in a voice which carried to the detached groups of men standing in the back row.

"I'm not going to say much. But what I do say I want it to sink in. Come up closer all of you where we can see one another."

When the fishermen ranged themselves about her, she looked hard into their weather-beaten faces and went on earnestly: "Boys, you've known me since I was a kid. Most of you knew my dad. If you did, you knew a man. He had to fight hard for a living. But he shot square every foot of the way. Some of you were here when he came."

She singled out a few of the older men and spoke directly to them: "Do you think you'd be here now if it hadn't been for Bill Lang? What were the Russians and Austrians doing to you when he came? You were all down on your uppers and didn't know where your next meal was coming from. Who was it that took up your fight? Who backed you with boats and gear and taught you how to fish so you could hold your own against the outsiders? You know without my telling you."

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Some of the older fishermen dropped their eyes to the rough board planks at the girl's words. There was no doubt that Lang had been square. But as Blagg had pointed out, a man had to look out for himself.

"You think that hasn't anything to do with your quitting me to get more money? All right. I'll show you that it has. Let me ask you some questions. What is Mascola paying his own fishermen? Why should he pay you fellows twice that much? Does he think you'll rob more traps, lay round more nets and run more men off the beach with his seine? Why should he pay you six dollars when he can load up with a gang that'll do what he says for three? Is that business?"

She paused and her lips compressed in a straight line as she went on: "You can answer those questions just as well as I can. You know what Mascola's game is. He thinks he's going to put me out of business. He's trying to crowd me off the sea. What do you suppose will become of you if he makes good? How long will you get that six dollars a day with the Lang fleet out of commission? You've been fighting his men for a square deal ever since you came here. And now you're figuring on helping them run you out of your own town."

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Blagg noticed that several of the men were falling back and whispering among themselves. Scenting signs of a break among his ranks, he felt it was up to him to say something. Well, he had his trump card yet to play.

"We ain't such fools as you think," he said. "We ain't gone at this thing without considering pretty careful and gettin' good advice. Last night some of us had a meetin' and talked things over. Mr. Rock was there and he give us some mighty good advice. He says to the boys that it was every feller for himself and——"

"Rock's got a mortgage on your house, hasn't he, Joe?"

Blagg flushed beneath his tan.

"I reckon that ain't got nothing to do with it if he has," he challenged. "And you understand I ain't even sayin' he has. But he's a business man."

"And a hypocrite," supplemented Dickie Lang. "Nobody knows that any better than I. He lied to me and tried to flim-flam me out of my boats before my dad was buried a week. If I'd fallen for it he would have had me right where he's got you, Joe. But I didn't. And when he found out I was going to stick to you boys, he called me a fool and said no white man could compete against Mascola's men."

As she paused for breath, Gregory saw Tom Howard hobbling through the crowd, speaking in low tones with the fishermen.

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"One minute more and I'm through," the girl concluded. "We're up against a hard fight here at

Legonia. A fight for Americans to fish their own waters. Sounds foolish, but you know it's the truth. When my father and Mr. Gregory were drowned off Diablo, Mascola thought he had us beaten. Rock thought so, too. But I'm telling you we're going to fool them both. There's something wrong around here, boys, when we can't get a fifty-fifty break on our own coast. And we're going to find out what it is."

Seeing that she had the ear of the men at last, she walked closer.

"Listen, boys, I've got a big proposition to offer you. One that will beat Mascola's like an ace beats a deuce. Because this one is on the square."

The fishermen crowded closer while she went on:

"You know what we've been up against here for years to get good help. You boys have been working short-handed most of the time. Doing more work than it was up to you to do. I've got a plan now to get all the men you want. Good men too. Fellows who have been tried out, red-blooded men. Fighters! I want you men to train them. Show them how to fish. In a little while they'll be doing all the work and I'll pay you four dollars a day straight time with a dollar a day more if you stick through the season. But better than that I'll give you a share in the profits of not only my own business, but the Legonia Fish Cannery as well."

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Gregory gulped. It was Dickie's voice all right. But the words were his own. There was some mistake somewhere. He strove to regain control of his scattered senses as Blagg burst out:

"You're figurin' to start somethin' you can't finish, ain't you? You ain't bought the cannery already, have you?"

"Don't you worry about that, Blagg. I know what I'm talking about. Mr. Gregory and I are partners on this deal."

Blagg was taken back by the girl's announcement. Almost as much so as Gregory himself.

"Suppose there ain't no profits?" put in another fisherman.

"That's your lookout as well as mine." Again the girl took Gregory's words and went on: "But there will be. I'm going to get a bunch of ex-navy men down here that mean business. They won't let Mascola, Rock or anybody else bluff them off the sea. All they want is a chance to learn the game. You boys can teach it to them right."

Blagg stepped back and began to whisper to the men about him. The other fishermen looked at one another and listened for Bill Lang's girl to go on:

"You fellows all know the advantage it gives you to have enough boats and men. If you break down and get into any trouble, it's pretty good to have somebody standing by to give you a hand. And you know that Mascola knows how to make trouble."

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Turning to the older men, some of whom had already begun to feel their joints stiffening with rheumatism, she said: "Fishing's a hard game, boys, for the best of us. And it doesn't get any easier as we get older. There's a lot of you who will have to go into dry-dock before long and get patched up. And there's some that can't afford to lay up. You've been working with your hands too long. You've got to ease up and use your brains. That's what I want to hire now. These young fellows are eager to help you. It will be up to you to show them what to do."

Could this be the girl who had angrily announced that she intended to run her business in her own way? Gregory could only stare at Dickie Lang. So far, she had not even included him as being a partner to the idea, save by her pledge of the profits of his cannery. Surely she would explain her sudden change of heart. Listening intently, he heard her conclude:

"Think it over, boys. It's a chance that may never come again. If there are any questions you'd like to ask, shoot."

Blagg noted that her words were having a marked effect upon the silent fishermen. Seeking to stem the tide of the reaction which he felt was setting in against him, he began to make objections.

Dickie Lang met his arguments with painstaking explanations and the objections gradually became fewer, simmering down into more or less intelligent questions. Gregory noticed that the fishermen began to retire and clustered together in little groups while they talked earnestly among themselves. Still there came no explanation from the girl. She was championing his ideas as if they had been her own cherished plans.

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At length the various knots of men drew further apart and faced each other in two well-marked divisions. To the left stood Joe Blagg, about him clustering the younger and more radical element of the fishing colony. On the right the property-owners and heads of families for the most part, drew closer to Big Jack Stuss, their acknowledged leader.

Dickie Lang regarded the two factions carefully, striving to count their ranks. Each was about evenly divided, she figured, with Big Jack's constituency slightly in the lead.

Blagg stepped forward and began to speak: "It's six straight for me and mine," he said. "Them's our terms. The boys can't see your new-fangled proposition at all."

"It's up to you," the girl replied coolly. "If that's the way you feel, you can get your money. But before you do, I'd advise you to talk it over at home. Don't forget that I'm fighting for you—not against you. It might be pretty nice to remember some time that you tried to help yourselves. Think it over before you get your checks."

As she finished speaking, Big Jack got slowly under way. Elbowing a path through the crowd he shuffled closer, hitching at the straining suspender to which was entrusted the task of holding in place his two pairs of baggy canvas trousers. Shifting from one bowed knee to the other, he contemplated his great bare toes in silence while he drew in a deep breath which filled his huge lungs to the bursting point and caused the muscles of his neck to stand out in purpled knots.

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Dickie waited, knowing full well that it was Big Jack's invariable preface for speech. When the big fisherman had secured enough compression to proceed, he boomed forth in a fog-horn voice:

"Me and my fellers has decided to stick. Youse fellers can count on us if you shoot square. We's willin' to take a chanct."



"Me and my fellers has decided to stick"

His sentences were interpolated with great gusts of surplus breath. As he finished speaking he lumbered away to rejoin his companions.

"That's the stuff, boys. It's the way I like to hear men talk. It shows you've got the sand. Take it from me, you'll never be sorry you stuck."

She walked forward and passed familiarly among them while the Blagg faction melted slowly away and straggled down the dock in the direction of the town.

Gregory stood with McCoy while the excitement quieted down and Dickie despatched the fishing-boats on their accustomed morning cruise.

"Well, I'll say you've done wonders," McCoy was saying. "Who would ever have thought that Dick would have given in?"

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Gregory nodded weakly. "I was rather surprised myself," he admitted.

McCoy looked at his watch. "I must go," he said. "It's almost time to blow the whistle. Coming up soon?"

Gregory promised to be on hand as soon as he got his breakfast and McCoy hurried off. When the last of her remaining men had left the dock, Gregory noticed the girl coming toward him. Now he would learn the reason for her sudden change of mind. He listened eagerly for the explanation.

Dickie Lang passed a slim brown hand slowly over her forehead and replaced a tousled lock of red-brown hair.

"Now," she said calmly, "when can you get me my men?"

CHAPTER XIV

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THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

Everything was coming his way. Kenneth Gregory glanced again at his first balance-sheet. The cannery had been in operation but a single month and already the business was exceeding his fondest expectations. He glanced at the chart which hung by his side. Forty-two completely

equipped fishing-boats in the water and every one fully manned. He smiled as he thought of Dickie Lang's astonishment at the manner in which the ex-navy men had taken hold of the work.

His smile broadened too as he noted the receipts from the fresh fish and the canned product. Fishing had sure been good. And there had been little or no interference from Mascola. Since the day when Dickie had accepted his proposition all had gone smoothly. Gregory attributed his success to the carrying out of an idea. It had worked. It had to work. And it was *his* idea.

On the floor of the cannery, Dickie Lang was also analyzing the phenomenal success of the Legonia Fish Cannery while she waited for the owner to accompany her on their daily cruise to the fishing grounds.

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"I'll tell you, Jack, it gets my goat how things began to pick up the very minute I threw up my contract. He's had nothing but luck ever since."

"I wouldn't say that, Dick," McCoy objected. "The boss's idea was worth something. Of course I ___"

"Oh, rats! I'm sick of hearing everybody talking about an idea. All these fellows in here think that Kenneth Gregory can't make a mistake. They think that nobody else could have done what he did."

"That's what you want fellows to think who are working for you, isn't it?" ventured McCoy.

Dickie gasped. Had McCoy too fallen a victim to hero-worship? McCoy, who had been her loyal friend, and servant? She determined to find out to what extent he had transferred his allegiance.

"Do you think Mr. Gregory did any more than I could have done?" she flashed.

McCoy endeavored to temporize. "Well, in a way he didn't," he said, "and then again he did. You see—"

But Dickie refused to see. Whirling angrily, she walked rapidly toward the office. Anything to get away from hearing Gregory's praises chanted from every lip. Better be with the idol himself than his devout followers. She flung open the door and entered the office. Gregory faced her with a smile. A self-satisfied smile, the girl thought. In his hand was a paper.

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"Look at that," he exclaimed. "My idea has worked out a lot better than I anticipated."

Dickie glanced coldly at the sheet but made no effort to take it from his hand. Looking him full in the eye, she observed:

"I'm about caught up with that idea of yours. I don't see that there is anything in it to cause any one to get the swelled-head."

"Who's getting the swelled-head?" demanded Gregory, the smile passing from his face.

"Well, I'm not," retorted the girl, laying special stress on the pronoun. "I've seen too much of this game to have my head turned by a little luck."

Gregory overlooked the implication and admitted soberly:

"Yes, we sure have had luck. There's no denying that. I never had any idea the boys would take to the game the way they have."

"They wouldn't if it hadn't been for my fishermen taking all the trouble they did with them. Why, a lot of those fellows were seasick when they first came down here. They were 'rocking-chair sailors.' My men made them what they are. I don't see any luck in that."

Gregory smiled provokingly.

"No, I don't suppose there was," he said. "What I meant was I was lucky in getting hold of men who really wanted to learn. You've admitted several times that they got along faster than you had any idea they would."

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"Anybody could catch fish the way they've been running the last few weeks," evaded Dickie. "I never saw anything like it before. Nearly every boat comes in with a good haul. And when the local market was glutted at Port Angeles, you shot them up north and just tumbled on to a good market as Frisco was out of fish. That was nothing but luck," she challenged.

"And now we have orders for all canned stuff we can turn out," Gregory put in.

"Sure you have. From the Western outfit. I wouldn't trust them out of sight with a case of fish. They'll eat the stuff up as long as you can throw it to them in big lots. That gives them a chance to beat you down on the price. The first bad run of luck you have, they'll drop you cold. I know. They did the same thing with your father the very first time he began to fall down on his output."

"Yes, but—"

"You're not going to fall down." She took the words from his mouth and hurried on: "That is just what I was afraid of. Your luck has gone to your head. You have an idea things are always going to be like this. I know better. And you'll know before you get through. The fish are liable to head out to sea any day."

"You guessed wrong about what I was going to say," Gregory announced. "I was going to tell you I had an order from Winfield & Camby for a shipment of albacore if we can get them out right away. Suppose the fish do run to sea," he went on. "I'll back you to find them if any one can. And we're well equipped now to follow them up."

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Dickie was somewhat mollified but she took care not to show it.

"You're not figuring on Mascola either," she began.

"Mascola," Gregory repeated. "Why, he's been decent enough the last two or three weeks."

"I know it," she interrupted. "That's what has me guessing. It isn't like Mascola to be that way. He's been checking up on us right along, but he hasn't bothered any of our boats since he lost the *Roma*. It's about time he showed his hand."

"We have nearly as many boats as he has now," Gregory observed. "Maybe he thinks——"

Again the girl anticipated his words.

"Get that out of your head," she snapped. "If you think Mascola's quit, you're wrong. The more boats dad got, the harder Mascola fought him. It's only when an outfit gets big enough to make a showing that he begins to get busy."

"We'll have the rest of the cannery boats out the last of the week," Gregory announced. "I'll have the boys rush them. We won't start anything, but just get good and ready. It's Mascola's move. I've made it perfectly clear to all the men that we are not looking for trouble."

Dickie was silent for a moment. Then she said:

"I have an idea that Rock gave Mascola a 'bum steer' and that both of them are just beginning to find out their mistake."

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"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Rock guessed wrong. He told a lot of people around town when you opened up that you'd be broke in thirty days. He and Mascola are pretty thick and the chances are he told Mascola the same thing and the dago believed him. Now they're beginning to find out they slipped up in not trying to cripple you before you got your men broken in. I've just got a hunch it won't be long before we hear from Mascola. He's bringing more boats in here every day from down the coast and the islands."

Seeing they were getting nowhere by their talk, Gregory tossed the balance sheet to the desk and got to his feet.

"We'd better be on our way," he said.

With Dickie following, he lead the way out into the cannery where he stopped for a moment to speak to McCoy. "I'm going outside for a while, Mac. If the Western people call up, tell them we're shipping the last of those sardines to-day. Sound them out on albacore prices in job lots."

Dickie turned away at the mention of the jobbers. Gregory evidently thought very little of her advice. Biting her lips, she walked to the door to wait on the receiving platform. McCoy watched his employer follow after her. Dick was sore at him. He'd have to go up to the house this evening and try to square himself. She was evidently sore at Gregory, too. And in that thought, McCoy derived some consolation.

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With the crisp sea air fanning their faces as they headed out to sea, Dickie's irritability vanished. Desirous of starting conversation after a protracted silence, she began: "Who do you think I saw down-town the other day?"

Gregory could not guess. "I was in the bank," she began after a moment, hoping Gregory would not notice that at times she did frequent Rock's institution. "And that crazy fool, Boris, was in there trying to borrow some money. He's been hanging round town ever since Mascola fired him. When I've seen him he's been drunk on Japanese *sake*. He has it in for me because all the fishermen kid him about being run on the rocks by a girl. When I stepped back from the teller's window, Boris lunged against me and started to mumble something. But before he had hardly opened his mouth, a well-dressed man came from somewhere and threw him half across the room. And who do you think it was?"

Again Gregory shook his head.

"Bandrist."

As Gregory voiced his surprise, the girl went on:

"You wouldn't have known him. He was all dolled-up and looked like a different man. He knew me all right and he had the nerve to ask me if he could come to see me," she concluded.

Gregory's dislike of Bandrist increased.

"What did you tell him?" he asked.

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Dickie laughed.

"I told him I wasn't any more anxious to receive callers at my home than he was at his."

Gregory wondered if the caustic answer to Bandrist might have been retailed for his own benefit. He reflected suddenly that Dickie Lang had never so much as intimated that he would be a welcome guest at her home. Well, there was no use dwelling on it now. He had never bothered the girl, and never would.

"Bandrist is no ordinary sheep-man," she went on. "And I know it. He's working some kind of a game over there that he doesn't want people to butt in on." She paused abruptly and her eyes narrowed. "I wonder," she began, but left her sentence unfinished as she noticed that Gregory was regarding her curiously.

"What?" he prompted.

"Nothing," she said. "Maybe some day I'll tell you. But not now."

Gregory knew her well enough to know that nothing could be gained by urging. During the silence that fell upon them the minds of both were working in parallel grooves, groping for a way of light to lighten the darkness of an unsolved mystery. When they reached the albacore banks and sighted the vanguard of the fishing fleet, both came back sharply, back from the maze of doubt and intangible suspicions which clouded their brains as the fog had clouded the island that held their thoughts.

Making the rounds of the albacore fishermen the truth of the girl's pessimistic prophecy became strikingly apparent. The fish had undoubtedly taken to sea. Laying-to to check one of the last of the few remaining boats which rode at anchor, Dickie consulted her tally-sheet and shook her head.

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"Not much in this," she averred. "It's a losing game so far. And there's only Big Jack with the *Albatross* yet to hear from. We ought to find him cruising off the seal rocks. He's generally the first out and the last to come in. He never gives up while there's a chance left. I've seen him 'chumming' for albacore all day and then bring in a bunch hours after everybody else had given up."

As they drew near the *Albatross* she hailed the fisherman: "How are the fish, Jack?"

Big Jack continued throwing the live bait from the tanks into the water. Then he straightened up and hitched at his suspender.

"They're beginnin' to come in like hell," he bellowed.

The fisherman was right. Gregory looked over the rail and gasped with wonderment. The sea about them was literally alive with fish. The lines which flashed over the side of the *Albatross* scarcely touched the water before the fish struck.

Dickie's eyes snapped at the sight.

"Put her about," she cried to Gregory. "And beat it as fast as you can for home. We'll make a killing if we can just overhaul enough of the boys to get in on the run. Load up, Jack," she called as the vessel swung about. "Cruise up and down and keep 'chumming' so we won't lose them. We're going after the fleet. Pound her for all she'll stand," she instructed Gregory. "Every minute means money."

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They had been running only a few minutes when they sighted Mascola's speed-boat astern. The girl frowned as the *Fuor d'Italia* roared by in a swirl of white water.

"This is where speed counts," she exclaimed. "If Mascola tumbles on to Big Jack he'll have his gang around the *Albatross* before we can get within hailing distance of our nearest boat."

Gregory watched the rapidly disappearing speed-boat anxiously. It was on his tongue to tell the girl of the launch Joe Barrows was building for him at Port Angeles, a craft which the boat-builder guaranteed in the contract would beat the boat he had built for the Italian.

"Keeping in close touch is everything in this business," Dickie observed. "Fish come in bunches. The ocean's spotted like a checker-board. You may have one boat loading up and another right around the next point doing nothing. That's where Mascola wins out," she exclaimed. "He scouts round and tips his fleet off if you've anything good. Then they're down on you like a flock of gulls."

Before they caught up with the stragglers of the cannery fleet they sighted the alien fishing-boats coming in their direction. Dickie's brow was overcast.

"Just what I was afraid of," she cried. "He's tipped them off. We're going to lose a lot to-day on account of not being able to keep closer together and being shy on a fast boat. You might as well get the idea of filling that albacore order out of your head right now."

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As they overhauled the cannery boats and headed them back to the seal rocks, Gregory considered the girl's words about keeping in closer touch. If he was going to beat Mascola, he'd have to get there first. The speed-launch which Barrows was building for him would serve as a signal boat, but even that would not serve to keep the other boats in constant touch with one another. Before they reached the last of the available boats they met Mascola coming back. While the girl stormed at their helplessness to cope with the situation, Gregory spoke in monosyllables

and wrestled with his problem.

He considered the methods of communication employed by the army in connecting the various units. One by one he discarded them. The semaphore would serve only for short distances and then only when the boats were within sight of each other. The same argument would apply against the wig-wag. The heliograph would be useless in stormy weather or in fog. A fast launch would help out, but even that would not completely solve the difficulty. How did boats keep in touch with one another? The answer came at once. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

When they came in sight of the seal rocks they saw the masts of the two fleets clustered thickly about the *Albatross*.

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"Look at that," snapped the girl. "Now, maybe you'll believe I know what I'm talking about. We were asleep and Mascola's beat us to it. It won't take him long to fish them out with an outfit like that. He's got our boats on the outside now, taking what's left."

Gregory saw that she was right. Mascola's boats were crowded closely about the *Albatross* and his own fleet was completely fenced off.

"What did I tell you? He's got them already. Look! He's ready to move. While we've been crawling along in this old tub, he's cleaned up."

The alien fleet began to get under way as she spoke and headed about. Darting past his boats came Mascola. Noting the tardy arrival of the oncoming launch, he made straight for them. Slowing down, he drifted by with his white teeth flashing in an insolent smile. Then he opened the throttle and the *Fuor d'Italia* leaped forward and raced away with an angry roar.

When they reached the *Albatross*, Big Jack was apoplectic with rage. It was some minutes before he could master his speech sufficiently to explain the situation. Mascola had arrived when they were hardly out of sight, had watched them pulling in the fish and had gone at once to summon his boats. The aliens had come upon him from around the point in ever-increasing numbers. Had hedged him and taken his school. When the cannery boats arrived the albacore quit biting and took to other waters.

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Dickie Lang issued orders for the return of the fleet to Legonia. Then she vented her wrath on Kenneth Gregory.

"So you thought you had Mascola beaten, did you? What did I tell you? Didn't I say he'd come back at the first chance? Albacore fishing is where he's always been strong. And that's about all there is from now on. We've got to come alive and forget these ideas and get down to brass tacks. Mascola beat us hands down and we couldn't lift a finger to stop him. What are you going to do about it? That's what I want to know."

Gregory curbed his rising anger and answered quietly:

"Before I tell you what I'm going to do, I'd like to ask you a question. What could we have done legally to break through Mascola's fence?"

"Nothing. That's where he had us. He got there first. To get in to the fish we'd have had to ram his boats and he'd have you up before the local inspectors in no time if you had done that. If he had laid his nets around ours it would have been different. You could demand sea-way and run through them if he didn't move. But this way he had us over a barrel. And he knew it. It's a trick no white man would do. But I guess even you will admit now that there isn't a drop of white blood in that dago's body."

"Then about the only way we could have beaten him," pursued Gregory, "would have been to have got there first and covered our own boats. Is that right?"

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"Yes. But that is not so easy as it sounds."

"It is not so hard either," Gregory went on. "I have an idea that I think will work out all right."

Dickie's eyes flashed.

"Forget your ideas!" she snapped. "You've got to have a whole lot more than ideas when you start out to beat Mascola."

Gregory felt his patience oozing from him at her words. It was bad enough to lose an order from a firm he hoped to get in strong with, without the girl rubbing it in.

"You haven't done anything yet but find fault," he said. "You have been at this game a lot longer than I have. Maybe you have something to suggest."

Something in his voice caused Dickie to quiet down. She began to cast about in her mind for an answer.

"You've got to keep your boats in closer touch," she began. "So Mascola can't work this same deal on us again."

"That is exactly what I am going to do."

"You'll have to show me."

"I will. I'm going to show you and Mascola both. By wireless."

Before she could interrupt, he hurried on: "Listen. Half of these navy men know the International code. The others can learn easy enough with some one to teach them who has worked at a radio key. I have several who have done that and can rig the sets."

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"You must think you're a millionaire. You aren't running a line of steamships. Come down to——"

"The sets won't cost much," Gregory went on calmly. "If they did all these kids along the shore wouldn't have them. A fifty or one-hundred-mile radius would be enough for us. And it wouldn't take them long to pay for themselves. If we had had the boats equipped with radio outfits to-day we could have beaten Mascola at his own game. When Big Jack 'chummed' up the albacore the rest of our boats would have known it before Mascola got there. The fish he caught to-day would pay for quite a few sets."

"It would pay for itself in another way if it would work," supplemented Dickie, much to Gregory's surprise. "Lots of times a boat breaks down and drifts on to a reef. If she could get word to some one close by they could take her in tow or even pull her off before she was hurt much."

Discussing the pros and cons of the new idea, they took their way toward Legonia. When they arrived at the Lang wharf the girl grudgingly admitted that the plan might work. At least it might justify a trial. Leaving Dickie at her own dock Gregory was about to proceed up the bay to the cannery wharf when she came over to the rail and exclaimed in a low voice:

"Oh, yes. Another thing. I didn't have a chance to look at that statement you had this morning. If you're not too busy to-night, you might bring it up to the house."

CHAPTER XV

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BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

Alone in his little room in the fish cannery Kenneth Gregory found himself confronted by a new and unexpected problem. A hurried glance at his watch only served to aggravate the tense lines which creased his forehead. It was seven-thirty already. He was due at the Lang residence at eight. And what was he going to wear?

The seriousness of the situation became painfully apparent as he pawed over his wardrobe. His pre-war clothes had served nicely to wear about the cannery. But they were hopelessly out of style. Why hadn't he taken the time to have had something decent made in Port Angeles instead of taking the first thing in 'hand-me-downs' which the salesman had offered? He surveyed the suit ruefully. Then he reflected that his errand was purely one of business and hastily donned the garments.

A nasty fit, he admitted to himself, as he looked into the mirror. He'd like to get his hands on the man who talked him into it. He looked at his shoes. They too caused him a commensurate amount of worry. Built on lines of comfort they displayed a total disregard of fashion. The longer he examined his attire the more conscious he became of its defects. Turning from the glass he walked with disgust from the room.

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The moon was shining bright when Gregory reached the Lang cottage. Pausing on the graveled walk to reef in his vest, he walked up the steps and fumbled about for the bell.

Dickie welcomed him at the door.

"I hardly knew you in those clothes," she began. "They do make a difference, don't they?"

Gregory pulled his coat closer about him and agreed that they did. Then he noticed that the girl had discarded her man's attire and was clothed in a plain white dress. In the light of the little hallway her hair gleamed like dull gold.

She led the way into a small living-room upon the floor of which a number of vari-colored rag rugs were scattered about. By a big sewing table sat a little woman in black. A light shawl draped her shoulders and a white cap covered her gray-threaded hair. At their entrance she laid aside her knitting and smiled.

"This is Mr. Gregory, Aunt Mary," Dickie announced in a loud voice. To Gregory she added: "Miss Lang, my father's sister. She is very hard of hearing."

Gregory bowed as he took the hand Miss Lang extended.

"I'm glad to know you," she said. "Real glad. Your father was one of my few friends. We enjoyed many pleasant games of checkers together."

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Her keen gray eyes appraised him while she spoke and under the frankness of her stare, Gregory felt his coat collar slowly pulling away from his neck. Passing a hand nervously to the lapel he jerked the garment into place while he responded to her greeting.

"Richard all over again," announced Miss Lang when she had finished her inspection. "The same

eyes, the square chin. Even the same nervous manner of hitching at your clothes."

"Aunt Mary!" Dickie expostulated. "You're too personal. You—"

But Miss Lang went on with a smile which put her guest wholly at his ease: "You won't mind what an old lady like me says, I'm sure. I always told your father just what I thought. And I'm going to do the same with you."

Gregory listened attentively while she told him of her first meeting with his father. While she spoke his eyes traveled curiously to the high-backed organ and the what-not beyond. Richard Gregory had described the Lang home as a model of neatness and old-fashioned charm. His son went further. The room possessed a personality. It was not only livable but lovable as well. The very atmosphere breathed a benediction.

"Do you play checkers?"

Miss Lang's voice recalled Gregory to himself. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he began.

"No you're not," put in Dickie quietly. "You're lucky. Don't ever learn. Aunt Mary never gave your father a chance to say a word. She had her board out when she heard him in the hall." [Pg 163]

A knock on the front door interrupted Miss Lang's request for her checker-board and Dickie hurried out.

"I can teach you in no time," Aunt Mary was saying. But Gregory was listening to the sound of a man's voice in the hallway. Then came the girl's laugh.

"I wasn't angry at all, Jack. Just cranky. But I'm glad you came up just the same and thanks for the candy."

She reentered the room followed by McCoy. McCoy stopped with surprise as he caught sight of Gregory. Nodding casually, he went over to greet Miss Lang.

Aunt Mary welcomed McCoy warmly. Then she addressed her niece.

"Bring us the board, Josephine. Kenneth can watch and I'll explain the game as we go along."

McCoy sank into a chair and passed a hand wearily over his eyes.

"I have a headache," he shouted. "Don't think I'd better play to-night."

"You've been working too hard," Aunt Mary retorted. "Nothing like a good game of checkers for relaxation."

Dickie was already on her way for the board. As she passed Gregory he saw that her eyes were sparkling. [Pg 164]

"That's right, Jack," she called back. "Leave it to Aunt Mary to prescribe for your headache. She knows."

As McCoy drew up to the board Gregory noticed that he was attired in close-fitting clothes of ultra-fashionable cut. As he saw McCoy look him over he became ill at ease and moved his chair farther from the light. Dickie sensed his embarrassment and noting that neither man appeared to enjoy himself, strove to make her guests feel more at home. Both men she knew were vitally interested in the operation of the cannery. And Gregory, at her request, had brought up the balance-sheet. A discussion of business affairs would relieve the situation and at the same time rescue McCoy from Aunt Mary's checker-board. The rapid termination of the first game gave her a chance to interrupt.

"I asked Mr. Gregory to bring up a business statement to-night, Aunt Mary; you'd like to see it, wouldn't you? I know Jack would."

Miss Lang nodded and promptly laid aside the board.

"Very much," she answered. "I've always been interested in that business and I understand this young man is making it pay."

McCoy heaved a sigh of relief to learn it was merely business which had brought Gregory to see Dickie Lang.

At the girl's reference to the object of his errand, Gregory unbuttoned his coat and delved into his pocket for the paper. He must have put it in his vest. Again his fingers failed to find the missing document. He became conscious of a prickly sensation creeping slowly over his flesh. Where had he left that darned paper anyway? Suddenly he remembered. In his mortification over his attire he had left the statement lying on his dresser. He looked up to meet all eyes fixed expectantly upon him. Then he leaned back in his chair and tried to smile. [Pg 165]

"I guess the joke's on me," he said. "I came away in such a hurry I forgot it."

Dickie laughed at his discomfiture until the tears shone in her eyes, while McCoy regarded his employer with suspicion. Aunt Mary finished polishing her spectacles and settled back to listen.

"I'm all ready to hear it," she announced. "Perhaps you had better come nearer so you will not

have to speak so loud."

Dickie came to Gregory's rescue and explained the situation to her aunt. Then she added in a low voice:

"You must have been stung by another of those ideas of yours."

During the remainder of his visit Kenneth Gregory was content to remain in the background. McCoy made a few efforts at conversation as he noted Aunt Mary's eyes roving longingly in the direction of the checker-board. Then Miss Lang, much to every one's relief, began to monopolize the conversation. Beckoning Gregory closer, she said:

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"I want to give you just one bit of advice though I don't suppose you'll heed it coming from an old lady like me."

As Gregory encouraged her to go on, she exclaimed:

"Stay away from Diablo Island." Seeing that she had aroused his interest, she went on: "You're going to ask me why, and I'll have to answer that I don't know except that it is a dangerous place and has been the cause of a number of strange accidents during the past few years. I used to warn my brother to stay away from there. He only laughed at my fears—at first. When he lost the *Kingfisher* at El Diablo he called it bad luck. Any boat was liable to be run down, he said. Then came the wreck of the *Crane* off the south coast of the island and not a body ever recovered."

"Aunt Mary thinks there's ghosts and everything else at Diablo," Dickie whispered. "If you give her any encouragement, she's as bad as my fishermen."

Gregory noticed that although the girl's words were intended to ridicule the idea, the expression of her face showed that her aunt's words were not regarded by her in the light of idle gossip.

"For a time after that," Miss Lang continued, "my brother stayed away from Diablo. When fish were scarce he went back. He hadn't had his nets out a week before he lost them all. No one ever knew what became of them. Will was getting worried though he tried not to show it. He was about ready to give it up when your father bought the cannery and came to Legonia. For a while after that fishing was good everywhere. As long as they stayed away from that accursed island things went well. But they were not satisfied. So they sent the *Eagle* over there. The last they heard of her she was anchored in Northwest Harbor."

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The room grew very still as the old lady continued:

"That worried them. Because they could not find out what became of her. The fishermen began to refuse to go there and I thanked God it was all over. Then one night Will and your father went out to Diablo in the *Gull*. Why they went, heaven only will ever know."

She rose slowly and walked to the door.

"She won't sleep a wink to-night," exclaimed Dickie as the door closed on her aunt. "I must look after her."

When the girl returned a few minutes later she found Gregory and McCoy discussing business. Gregory remained on his feet at her entrance.

"I must be going," he said. "I have a lot of work to do."

Bidding McCoy good night, he followed Dickie to the hall.

"I'm glad you came up even if you did forget the balance-sheet. Come up again any time you're not too busy."

With the girl's words in his ears, Gregory walked into the moonlight. The evening had not been a complete failure after all. As he turned his steps in the direction of the town his mind was wholly engrossed with the events of the past two hours. How Aunt Mary did hate Diablo. Had the girl noticed how badly his clothes fit him in comparison with McCoy's? Why had Jack appeared so grouchy?

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He stopped short in his descent of the hill road as he saw a man walking unsteadily toward him. Moving to one side he watched the drunken fisherman stumble on, heard the low mumbling of his voice. Then the moonlight fell full upon the man's face.

It was Boris, the crazy Russian.

CHAPTER XVI

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THE BAITED PAWN

Of all the many saloons that made up Legonia's water-front the "Red Paint" was the favorite resort among the alien fishermen. The universal popularity of the establishment was due mainly to three causes. The boss owned the place and paid off there between moons. Credit was freely given to all fishermen in good standing, and thirdly, Mascola's emporium enjoyed full police

protection.

During the evening when Gregory made his first call at the Lang hill the tide of revelry at the "Red Paint" was at the flood. It was pay-day and the boss was in high good humor. Either occurrence was always good for a number of rounds of free drinks. But when Mascola was happy on pay-day, the liberality of the "Red Paint" was indeed prodigal.

And Mascola was happy. Within the frosted glass enclosure that marked off his saloon-office from the bar, the Italian sat at his desk in a genial glow of good humor. The glow was purely physical, superinduced by the rapidly disappearing contents of the slim-nosed bottle which stood at his elbow. The good humor was due to other causes.

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As he re-filled his glass, Mascola smiled. It hadn't been such a bad day at that. He'd showed somebody something about albacore fishing. And he'd show them a lot more before he got through. Things were coming his way too from other sources. He took out his leather wallet and ran over a number of bills of high denomination. Then he took another drink and smiled at the ceiling. It had been such easy money. Much easier than fishing.

A knock sounded at the street-door. Mascola shoved the wallet again into his pocket and hastily removed his bottle of Amontillado.

"Come in," he called.

Boris entered, clumsily filling the doorway with his great bulk and bringing with him a strong odor of garlic and Jap *sake*. For a moment he stood on the threshold, blinking stupidly. Then he pulled the door closed with a bang.

Mascola's eyes grew hard as he dropped his hand into a drawer of his desk which stood open.

"Stay where you are," he commanded. "What do you want?"

"Job," muttered the Russian thickly.

Mascola shook his head and an annoyed frown darkened his brow. "Go home," he said. "You're drunk. You're no good. I fired you. Don't want to talk."

Boris made no move to comply with his order. His small eyes roved restlessly about the room for a moment, then came to rest on the Italian.

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"Boys making fool with me all time," he said. "Say I can no lick woman. I get damn mad. You give me job. I show you."

Mascola shook his head. Leaning closer to the swaying figure, he said in a low voice: "Show me first."

Boris's face became purple with rage as the import of Mascola's answer filtered into his thick skull. He clenched his huge hands and raised them above his head, mumbling all the while in his own tongue. Then his arms fell to his sides and his pig-like eyes gleamed with belated comprehension. Licking his dry lips, he said: "Give me drink. I show you to-night."

The Italian slipped a hand into his pocket and tossed him a two-dollar bill. Stumbling to the door the Russian found Mascola close by his side.

"Wait," he commanded. "Sit down. There."

He pointed to a chair screened from the street entrance by a large steel safe. When Boris had deposited his great bulk therein, Mascola walked to the door and looked up and down the street. Then he returned and grasped the Russian by the arm.

"Go," he said. As Boris reached the door he shoved him out with the whisper:

"Don't forget. You've got to show me."

Joe Blagg was among the last of Mascola's men to come for his money. And though he said nothing when he signed the pay-roll, Blagg nursed a grouch against his employer. Mascola had cursed him out that morning and no livin' dago could do that. He'd get square, or his name wasn't Joe Blagg.

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The bartender shoved a black bottle toward him as he pocketed his money. "Boss's treat," he announced.

Blagg's animosity thawed sufficiently to permit him to accept the proffered drink, then flared again under the influence of the fiery liquor. He called for another and gulped it down. Then Mascola's whisky began to talk. He'd make the dago eat his words. That's what he'd do. Two more drinks and he decided to have it out with Mascola at once.

"Where's boss?" he inquired thickly.

The bartender jerked his shorn head in the direction of the frosted glass enclosure.

Blagg drew back, his ardor somewhat chilled to find his quarry so near. Perhaps it was better to figure out just what he was going to say before he tackled the boss. Deciding that he could plan better in the open air, he walked unsteadily to the swinging doors and staggered across the street. There he leaned against the bulkhead and looked back at the Red Paint.

A flash of light illumined the side-walk in front of the saloon office and Blagg saw Mascola's figure silhouetted in the open doorway. He was looking up and down the street. As the fisherman drew back into the shadow the Italian disappeared to return a moment later shoving a burly figure before him.

Blagg became even more discreet as he recognized Mascola's guest. Boris was a bigger man by far than himself. And yet Mascola was putting him out with no trouble at all. The observation had a sobering effect upon the fisherman. His militant air changed quickly to one of craft. He'd quit the boss and pull a lot of the boys along with him. He could hit the dago better that way. They were all pretty sore at being bossed around by a "furrinor" anyway. And work was plenty up around Frisco. He'd round up a bunch of the boys right away.

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With that idea in view he walked along the water-front and turned again to the row of saloons. Then he noticed that Boris was lurching along ahead of him. He saw the Russian push open the door of the "Buffalo" and heard the derisive roar from within which greeted his entrance. Scenting amusement at Boris's expense, Blagg followed. When he elbowed his way through the press of fishermen who thronged the "Buffalo" bar, he saw the Russian surrounded by a jeering crowd.

"Got a job yet, Boris?" some one called.

"He's workin' for the Lang girl now," put in another.

Boris snarled and, flinging his tormentors away from him, made his way to the bar, jabbering excitedly in Russian to Pete Ankovitch.

Blagg moved nearer.

"What's he sayin', Pete?" he asked.

Ankovitch laughed.

"He say everybody go to hell," he interpreted. "He say he show Mascola he ain't 'fraid of no woman."

Blagg strove to focus his mind on the Russian's words. Boris was sore as a boiled oil, crazy as a coot. And he had it in for the Lang girl for causing him to get the can. The Russian's reference to Mascola caused the furrows in Blagg's brow to deepen. Both of them were sore at the girl. Were they framing up? If they were he'd block the boss's game. He'd wise her. She'd always shot straight enough with him anyway, and he was a fool to have ever quit her. If Mascola was baiting the Russian to pull off some dirty work he'd—

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Blagg paused in his tentative plans for outwitting Mascola as his eye fell on Neilson. There was the man he wanted to see. Swan could swing the Swedes into quitting the dago. All thought of Boris vanished from Blagg's mind as he drew Neilson aside and conferred confidentially with the big Swede in a drunken whisper. When he looked about for the Russian some time later, Boris was gone.

Blagg drained the contents of his last glass with a wry face, and walked unsteadily to the door. Colliding with a man on the sidewalk, he regained his poise by leaning heavily against a sandwich sign-board.

"Hello, Blagg. Seen any of my men inside?"

Blagg shoved back his cap and eyed the speaker with drunken suspicion. When he recognized the cannery owner, a furtive light crept into his eyes and he beckoned Gregory closer. Gregory noted the mysterious mien and promptly credited it to the man's state of intoxication. He was on the point of hurrying on when Blagg's words stayed him.

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"Tell Lang girl t' look out for 'self."

"What do you mean?"

Gregory grasped him by the arm and whirled him about.

"Was in s'loon," Blagg muttered, striving to focus his bleary eyes upon his auditor. "Damn Russian there, too. Boys's kiddin' him an' Boris tol' 'em he was't 'fraid no woman. Said he'd show 'em."

"Does he live over there?" Gregory asked quickly, pointing toward the Lang hill.

Blagg shook his head and nodded in the opposite direction.

"Down there," he corrected. "Think he—"

But Gregory did not wait to hear what Blagg thought.

Blagg looked after him stupidly. He had had no time to speak of his hatred or suspicion of Mascola. But he'd show the dago yet.

A crowd of fishermen lumbered along the sidewalk toward him, talking excitedly. Leaning against the sign-board, Blagg was able to gather from their conversation that a fight had just occurred at the Red Paint. Some one had tried to get square with the boss and Mascola had knifed him.

Cold sweat broke out on Joe Blagg's forehead. To his whirling brain came other instances he had heard of how Mascola always got square with those who opposed him. Blagg's whiskyfied courage began to ooze. Perhaps he had gone too far. Suppose Neilson, with a desire to get in strong with the boss, should tell Mascola that he, Joe Blagg, was trying to start a strike among the alien fishermen? And a Swede liked to talk too. Why not get out of town for a while till the thing blew over? He wasn't afraid of the dago and his whole crowd. But what was the use of starting a row? Besides he was ready to move anyway. He reflected suddenly that the midnight train for Frisco stopped at Legonia on signal. That would give him time to throw his stuff together. He had already drawn his money. Why not hit the grit?

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As Jack McCoy took his way down the hillside he was acutely conscious of the fact that the evening had been a distinct disappointment. Why was Gregory there anyway? That talk about his forgetting his papers sounded mighty thin. How many times had the boss been there before? What was the matter with Dick to-night? She acted kind of funny, didn't seem to care whether he stayed any longer or not.

McCoy stopped by the roadside as he caught sight of a man running hastily along one of the streets leading from the town. Whoever the fellow was he was sure in a hurry the way he was cutting 'cross lots. As the runner came under the rays of the corner arc-light, McCoy started and peered intently after the departing figure.

It sure looked like Gregory. And he was angling in the direction of the Lang hill. The idea clung tenaciously. When he reached his rooming-house it became an obsession. He decided to find out if the runner could have been his employer. Calling up the cannery it was some time before a sleepy voice answered his summons.

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"Boss ain't here. Went out at eight and ain't been back since. Want to leave message?"

McCoy snapped up the receiver and walked slowly into his room. So it was Gregory. Where had he been going at this time of night? And on the run, too. The forgetting of the paper was only a frame-up. Dick had acted funny. Now he knew it was because she wanted to get rid of him.

He sat on the bed, making no effort to remove his clothes. You're a poor fish, something whispered. Why don't you go and find out if they're double-crossing you? McCoy tried not to listen. For a long time he stared moodily at the floor. Then he rose and threw off his coat. Hastily replaced it and hurried to the door. He was ashamed of his suspicions. But he simply had to find out.

There was a light still burning in the Lang cottage when Gregory turned into the walk. Perhaps he was foolish to have returned. Still it would do no harm to warn the girl.

As he went up the steps he saw Miss Lang walking up and down the little hall. Tapping loudly, he summoned her to the door.

"Could I speak to Miss Dickie a moment?" he shouted. "It is something important."

Aunt Mary came out on the porch.

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"If you wait a moment," she said, "my niece will be back. She left some time ago to take some medicine over to one of our neighbor's sick babies."

Gregory's fears multiplied.

"Where did she go?"

"To the Swanson place just over the hill. It's the first place you'll come to before you reach the Russian Valley."

"I'll go meet her."

He turned quickly and hurried down the path.

Reaching the brow of the hill, he saw the lights of the Swanson cottage and slowed down to a walk. His fears for the girl's safety were apparently groundless. The valley lay before him, steeped in moonlight. No sound disturbed the stillness save the far-off cry of the screaming gulls and the monotonous murmur of the distant sea. Walking slowly down the road, grown high on both sides with sage and cactus, he caught a glimpse of a bulky figure in the path ahead.

Looking again to the cottage only a few hundred yards down the road, Gregory saw the light flash out from an open door. For a moment it shone brightly, then disappeared.

As the man in the roadway heard the sound of footsteps behind him, he stepped quickly to the brush and faced about. Keeping well in the center of the path, Gregory went steadily on with his eyes fixed upon the clump of sage which sheltered the disappearing figure. It was Boris, without a doubt. No other man about Legonia possessed the giant proportions of the big Russian.

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Boris glared sullenly from the brush as he saw the advancing figure hesitate and turn toward him. Then he recognized the young cannery owner. What chance would he have to show Mascola now? The intruder threatened the defeat of his cherished plans. The girl he sought was coming up the hill. A few minutes more and—

"What do you want, Boris?"

The Russian's answer to Gregory's question came in a guttural snarl as he staggered from the sage and flung himself upon the speaker.

CHAPTER XVII

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THE FANGS OF MASCOLA

Gregory leaped nimbly beyond reach of the Russian's waving arms and placed his back to the moonlight. Meeting the fisherman's blind rush with a quick blow to his heavy jaw, he sidestepped and struck again. Boris blocked the fist with a sweep of his long arm and clinched. For an instant the bodies of the two men rocked in the gripping power of the embrace. Then they fell to the roadway.

Dickie Lang stopped suddenly as she saw the struggling figures in the path. A fight between two drunken fishermen was the commonest thing in Legonia. She'd better not get mixed up in it. They were not her men. She knew that. None of her fisherman lived up here but Swanson, and the Swede she knew was at home. Making a wide detour through the brush which carried her beyond sight of the scuffle, she hurried on.

"Where's Dick, Aunt Mary?"

There was a note in Jack McCoy's voice which made Miss Lang regard him sharply before replying:

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"She's gone down to Swanson's, John. One of the babies was sick."

"Has Mr. Gregory been back since I left? I'm looking for him."

McCoy was ashamed of the question. Still it was better to find out from Aunt Mary than to try to explain to her niece.

"Yes. He left only a few minutes ago. He inquired for Josephine and when I told him where she had gone, he said he would go to meet her."

Shaking his head weakly at Aunt Mary's question if anything was wrong, McCoy turned slowly and walked down the path. Everything was wrong. Dick had ditched him for Gregory. They'd framed it to get him out of the way. Well, it was a cinch he wouldn't butt in. His reflections were cut short by the sight of a white figure walking toward him.

"Hello, Jack. What's the matter?"

McCoy stared. Dickie Lang was alone.

"I'm looking for Mr. Gregory," he faltered.

"Haven't seen him since he left the house."

The girl was by his side, looking anxiously into his face.

"Anything wrong, Jack?" she asked quickly.

McCoy shook his head.

"No," he said. "I just wanted to talk to him about changing the pack in the morning. Your aunt told me he came back and went to meet you."

Dickie's surprise entered into her voice as she said:

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"That's funny. I walked all the way from Swanson's and I didn't meet him."

As she ceased speaking came a sharp remembrance of the two figures battling in the roadway. Could one of them have been Kenneth Gregory? She expressed her fears to McCoy.

McCoy started at once for the hill.

"Go back to the house, Dick," he called back. "I'll go down there and see what's the trouble."

Dickie followed after him.

"I'm going too," she said. "I should have gone back and told Swanson or——"

Her words were interrupted by the sharp report of a gun from over the hill.

McCoy broke into a run.

"Go back," he cried. "Hurry. Get your gun. I'm going on."

Boris looked stupidly into the white face of Kenneth Gregory as he knelt over him. Then he staggered to his feet and looked up and down the road. As the possible consequences of his act began to filter through his consciousness, he jumped to cover in the brush and ran down the ravine in the direction of Russian valley.

When Dickie Lang reached the spot where she had seen the men fighting in the roadway, she found Jack McCoy bending over the sprawling figure of Kenneth Gregory.

"Is he dead?"

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McCoy shook his head.

"The bullet went into his side," he said. "He's losing a lot of blood but he's still conscious. Run down to Swanson's and phone for the doctor. Then have Bill come and help me move him."

While McCoy worked to staunch the flow of blood, the girl ran to carry out his orders. Remorse gripped her heart as she raced down the hill. She should have gone to Gregory's aid. She might have done something. At least she could have discovered the identity of his assailant. If she had gone at once for Swanson, he might have arrived in time to prevent the shot.

When she reached the house she roused the Swede and rushed to the telephone, giving hasty instructions to the fisherman to take a couple of oars and a blanket and go at once to McCoy's assistance. After an interminable period of waiting she was able to get in communication with Doctor Kent. Instructing the physician to come at once to the Lang cottage, she hurried away. On her way up the hill she met McCoy and Swanson carrying Gregory on the improvised stretcher.

"Where are you going?" she cried.

The Swede started to explain. His house was closest and they were quite welcome to bring the injured man there.

The girl objected with decisive emphasis.

"I've already told the doctor to come to our house. Aunt Mary is the best nurse in the country. Besides, Bill, you have your hands full to-night with Hulda."

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Mascola paused on the threshold of his office at the Red Paint with his key grating in the lock. Then he placed his back to the brick wall and drew his knife as he saw a bulky figure coming toward him.

"Stop where you are," he exclaimed sharply. "What do you want?"

Boris lunged forward and Mascola caught him roughly by the arm.

"Get out, damn you," he cried. "I told you to beat it."

"Tried to get girl," Boris panted. "Gregory man there too. I kill him."

Mascola looked hastily about. When Boris had ceased mumbling, the Italian ordered after a moment's consideration: "Shut up. Go down to my dock the back way. Get on the *Lura*. Wait there for me."

As the Russian slouched down the street, Mascola reopened his door and went into his office. Then he got Ankovitch on the phone.

"Come down to the boat right away," he ordered. "I want you to get right out."

Day was breaking when McCoy stood with Dickie Lang on the steps of the Lang cottage. The bullet had been found and removed. Kenneth Gregory was resting as well as could be expected. There was danger only through blood-poisoning. The patient was young and strong and should recover. The doctor from Centerville had just left after agreeing with the local physician's diagnosis.

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"And now," McCoy was saying, "as there is nothing more I can do here I'll go back to town. It will sure be up to me from now on."

Dickie put a hand on his arm and looked earnestly into his eyes.

"It will be up to both of us, Jack. We've simply got to keep things going for him. I might have saved him. Now it's up to me to make good."

As McCoy walked homeward through the brightening light, he strove to consider the events of the night in their proper sequence, but his brain rioted in a jumble of confused impressions. He owed Kenneth Gregory an apology. Now that the boss was down and out it was up to every one to do their level-darndest. He'd see that they did, too. He was sorry it had all happened. Sorry that he had doubted. Sorry too for other things which he would not admit, even to himself. And down in the bottom of his heart, loyal though it was, Jack McCoy was sorry that Kenneth Gregory had not been taken to Swanson's.

THE COST OF DEFEAT

There are periods in every one's life when the standard measurements of time are hopelessly inadequate fittingly to express its passing. Minutes may creep, or they may fly. An hour stretches into a day or a day contracts into an hour directly at the will of circumstance.

Kenneth Gregory found this to be true during his period of convalescence at the Lang cottage. As the days went by he found himself devising a simpler method for keeping track of time. There were hours when Dickie Lang was with him, and hours when she was not.

His moments with the girl were always too short. And he was surprised to find that they never appeared to lengthen. His interest in Dickie, he told himself, was purely impersonal. She told him of just the things he desired to hear most about. Kept him in touch with his world. Brought him news each day from the cannery; the business for which he hungered and fretted during each minute of his idle hours.

It was Dickie Lang who had told him of the search which had been made for Boris, a search which had ended in failure. The Russian had fled, leaving no trace of his whereabouts. Blagg also was missing, so nothing further could be learned from that source. Gossip had been rife in the fishing village over the sudden disappearance of the two men. Then the matter was apparently forgotten, giving place to the excitement caused by the installation of the first radio-set on one of the cannery fishing fleet.

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Gregory, who had given orders for a trial equipment before the accident, was elated to learn from the girl that the innovation was proving a distinct success. Other sets were installed and the practicability of the new idea was demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt. To quote the girl, all she had to do was to "spot the fish, click out the signal and the cannery boats would be round her like a flock of gulls."

Mascola, she told Gregory, had regarded the new departure, at the outset, as something of a joke. Rock too had ridiculed the idea openly. But when the cannery fleet got fish while the Italian's boats came in but scantily-laden, Mascola's laugh changed to a scowl and Rock's flabby forehead was creased with worried lines.

With the aid of the radio the "patchy" schools along the coast had been fished to good advantage while Mascola's fleet were forced to cruise as far as Diablo and San Anselmo in order to obtain fish enough to supply the rival cannery.

From McCoy's occasional visits Gregory had learned that the plant was running to its full capacity. Upon the subject, however, of sales and orders, the house-manager was extremely reticent.

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So it was that Gregory passed the long days of his confinement, rejoicing with Dickie Lang over the growing success of the outside end and worrying over McCoy's evasion when he was questioned concerning the disposition of the finished product. And all the while longing for the time to come when he would be permitted to get back into the harness.

"There's no use letting you go with instructions to take it easy," Doctor Kent had said. "I know your kind. When I turn you out I want you to be going strong."

In that opinion, Aunt Mary concurred. But the time came at last when Gregory was permitted to leave the Lang cottage and return to the cannery. Fearing a reversal of the verdict rendered in his favor, he set out at once. At some distance from the cannery he stopped and inhaled the fish-laden atmosphere with a singing heart. Once, he remembered, the odor had sickened him. Now it came like a breath from Heaven. It stirred his soul, quickened his pulse. He sucked in the tintured air greedily. It was life itself. A life that was full and free, teeming with opportunity, filled with work and fight.

"Long on fish, but short on sales."

Gregory expressed the state of his business with blunt accuracy as he stood with McCoy in the crowded warehouse.

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McCoy admitted the truth of the owner's statement.

"We didn't want to worry you while you were sick," he explained, "but you can see just where we stand. Something has sure gone wrong with the selling end. Dick's getting the fish. I'm canning them. But we can't sell them."

"What's the matter with the Western people?" Gregory asked quickly. "I thought they were strong for us."

McCoy shrugged. "So did I," he answered. "But a few days after you got hurt they quit us cold with no explanation. When we fell down on that first big order of albacore, Winfield & Camby lost interest and I haven't been able to get a flutter out of them since. The other dealers seem to be afraid of us for some reason. They come down and look us over, but that is all."

McCoy scowled at the huge stacks of shining tins and shook his head. "It's got me," he admitted.

"We're putting out a first-class article but we can't unload it. I've got a hunch somebody's plugging against us." Noting the worried lines which were finding their way to Gregory's face at his words, he went on hastily:

"I'm sorry to have you come back into such a tangle as this. I did my best but you see I didn't have a minute to get out and take care of the sales."

"Don't say a word, Jack," Gregory interrupted. "You've done more than your part. Every man of you and every woman too," he added quickly. "I'll never forget it. This part of the game is up to me. I'm feeling fit now. Keen to get going. I want to look things over for a few minutes in the office. Then I'll talk with you again and let you know what I'm going to do first." [Pg 190]

A careful examination of his finances convinced Gregory of the seriousness of the situation. There was only one thing to be done. He must visit the jobbers at once.

He paused abruptly in his calculations at the staccato bark of a high-powered motor. Mascola, he thought, as he rose and walked to the window. What he saw through the glass caused him to stand staring. Speeding through the dancing waters of the sunlit bay came a speed-launch, heading in the direction of the cannery wharf. But it was not the *Fuor d'Italia*. His eyes followed the course of the oncoming stranger and a worried frown leaped to his brow. It couldn't be that Joe Barrows had completed the *Richard* already. He glanced at the calendar and his frown deepened. In all probability it was his boat. And if so, where was he going to get the money to pay for it?

He walked to the wharf and with narrowing eyes watched the stranger's approach. Something wrong somewhere, he reasoned. He had ordered a speed-boat. One that would beat Mascola's. A craft with real lines and bird-like grace like the *Fuor d'Italia*. The oncoming launch, he observed bitterly, was the direct antithesis of his expectations. Surely there could be no speed in that squat packet with her sagging bow and queer looking box-affair for a stern. [Pg 191]

The strange craft drew abreast of the wharf and whirled about in a wave-washed circle. The motor hummed with contentment and the hull sank sullenly into the water as the man at the wheel guided the boat in the direction of the float. Then Gregory caught sight of the letters painted on the side:

RICHARD

"Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Gregory?"

The man in the boat looked up questioningly.

Gregory walked slowly to the float.

"I'm Mr. Gregory," he answered lifelessly. "I was almost wishing I wasn't if that's the launch I ordered."

The driver of the craft rested his arms on the big steering wheel and laughed outright.

"Don't like her, eh?" he grinned.

"Can't say that I do," Gregory answered. "It looks to me like Mr. Barrows misunderstood my orders."

The stranger's face grew instantly serious.

"You wanted a sea-going craft which could stand rough water and beat the *Fuor d'Italia* we built for Mascola," he said slowly. "And you left the lines and everything else entirely up to us. Is that right?"

Gregory nodded. Then a gleam of hope lighted his eye. [Pg 192]

"You think this one will fill the bill?" he questioned.

"If she doesn't, it's up to us," the man answered. Noting the skeptical look in Gregory's face, he went on: "Don't make the mistake of trying to judge a boat from the dock, Mr. Gregory. 'You can't tell by the looks of a frog how far he can jump,' or how fast either. Barrows has been at the game long enough to quit guessing. When he tackles a proposition like yours, he wants your money, not your boat. I came down this morning to take you out for a trial. Then if there's anything you want changed we can fix it up before we turn her over to you to beat Mascola. If you can spare the time I'll take you back with me to Port Angeles. That will give you a good chance to see her perform in rough water as it's blowing up nasty off the breakwater."

Gregory's face cleared. The suggestion had two-fold value. By acting upon it at once he could combine business with pleasure. Visit the jobbers in the city and at the same time test out the launch.

"I'll be ready in half an hour," he answered.

The boatman nodded. "I'll run down-town," he said, "and get a bite to eat. Don't forget to bring a rain-coat with you. You're liable to get wet."

Gregory promised and hurried away. In the cannery he found McCoy and outlined his plans.

McCoy objected. "Better take it easy for a day or two," he counseled. "No use trying to hit the ball too hard at the start."

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Gregory smiled brightly. "I'm feeling like a king, Mac," he said. "I'll find out what the trouble is with the jobbers and be back sometime to-morrow."

Seeing that his advice was futile, McCoy left to put up a few samples while his employer hurried into the office. Gregory turned at once to his desk. As he prepared the quotations for submission to the jobbers, a cheery voice interrupted him in his work.

"Welcome home."

In the doorway stood Dickie Lang.

He jumped hastily to his feet and put out his hands.

"Oh, if you only knew how good it was to be back," he began. Then, as he noticed the girl's rapid change of expression at his words, he hastened to amend: "I don't mean I was glad to leave your house. I wasn't. It's the only home I've known for a long time. I was only trying to say how glad I am to be able to get back to work."

Dickie smiled at his enthusiasm.

"I know," she said. "It's wonderful you were able to get back so soon."

Soon the talk turned to business and Gregory explained his plans for visiting Port Angeles. Like McCoy, Dickie voiced her objections, but with more vehemence. Seeing at last, however, that the young man could not be talked out of it, she exclaimed:

"Never let on to Aunt Mary that I knew you were going or she never would forgive me. She's kind of adopted you and she told me to look out for you."

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Soon they were discussing the new speed-boat and its practicability at the present time should it be proved a success.

"Mascola ran across our trammels this morning with a dragnet," the girl explained. "If you had had that boat, you might have stopped them. He's getting pretty ugly lately and last night his men tried to crowd ours off the beach with their seine. If they try it again, there'll be trouble."

Remembering Gregory's object in going to the city, Dickie suggested:

"While you're in Port Angeles you might look in at the fresh fish markets and find out what's the matter with them, too. They are bad enough at best, but they've been getting worse for a long time. Now they are hardly yielding us enough to pay to ship."

Gregory promised and looking at his watch, saw he would have to leave at once.

"I wish you could go up there with me," he exclaimed. "Why couldn't you? I'll wait."

A smile flashed to the girl's lips, then disappeared on the instant. "It wouldn't be proper," she said gravely. "Port Angeles is a city and people look at things differently in cities. Aunt Mary would have nervous prostration if I even suggested it."

McCoy walked with Dickie Lang to the dock to bid Gregory *bon voyage* and wish him luck on his mission. Then they caught sight of the launch nearing the float and their disappointment registered in their faces. Gregory drew the girl aside.

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"You have the same idea about her that I had," he said. "But don't worry. Barrows' man, I guess, knows what he's talking about and if she doesn't make good I don't take her." Lowering his voice so that only Dickie could hear, he met her eyes. "You'll notice," he said, "that I named her Richard. But as boats are always called 'she,' you will understand that means 'Dickie.'"

Before the girl could recover from her surprise he hurried away and dropped into the seat beside the driver. As the boatman threw in the clutch and the launch shot out into the stream, Gregory looked back at the wharf and noted that Dickie Lang's cheeks were red beneath her tan. And Jack McCoy, though he said nothing as he walked with the girl along the dock, wondered what the boss could have said to make Dick blush like that.

CHAPTER XIX

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ROCK FOLLOWS UP

His first ride in a speed-boat.

Kenneth Gregory leaned back on the cushions and watched the *Richard* drag her heavy hull through the quiet water of Crescent Bay. A feeling of disgust assailed him. The craft was utterly worthless for his purposes. She had no pick-up at all and was barely able to maintain her lead as she lumbered along ahead of one of the fastest of Mascola's fishing-boats.

The driver, who called himself Bronson, appeared to be perfectly satisfied with the vessel's behavior and made no effort to crowd her by the fishing fleet. At length they reached the outlet and the *Richard* settled comfortably into the trough of the swell. Then Bronson turned to his passenger.

"Better put on your rain-coat," he suggested. "We'll be bucking the wind and it picks up the spray and throws it right back at us."

As he spoke he slipped into his slicker and waited for Gregory to don his mackintosh.

"I'm ready when you are," Gregory announced. "Let her go."

Bronson looked cautiously over his shoulder.

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"Want to keep an eye out for Mascola," he said. "Don't want him to see this one in action until we're good and ready. I won't open her up to-day. Motor's too stiff yet and we're liable to burn out something."

As he spoke he advanced the throttle and the *Richard* protested at his action in a series of spasmodic coughs. Then the hood began to incline slowly and Gregory felt the hull rising. Perhaps the craft was not dead after all, but only sleeping. Watching Bronson's fingers on the spark and throttle, he noticed that the man was advancing them cautiously.

"Watch out for your hat," Bronson admonished.

Gregory moved his hand carelessly to his head and caught his hat just in time. With an angry roar the *Richard* shot forward, raising her great hood higher and higher in air while the hull seemed scarcely to be in the water at all. The wind blew in their faces like a hurricane carrying with it great clouds of spray which drenched their skins and blinded Gregory's eyes. Gasping for breath, he noticed that the *Richard* was climbing higher. Then Bronson opened the cut-out and the craft sped away like an angry sea-bird.

The roar of the exhaust was deafening and Gregory was obliged to shout to the man beside him before he was able to make himself heard.

"Is she wide open?" he shrieked.

Bronson directed his gaze to the position of the throttle device and Gregory saw with a gasp of astonishment that the throttle was only half open.

On they sped, the hull rising from the water and hurling itself along the crest of the waves, tossing them to the sides in great clouds of whirling, blinding spray. Could it be possible that the propeller was still in the water?

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Suddenly he felt the *Richard* collapse and drop sullenly into the sea. The "machine-guns" had ceased firing and Bronson was regarding him with a smile. The boatman's face was crusted with salt and his eyes were twinkling.

"How about it?" he asked. "Do you think Barrows made any mistake?"

When Gregory recovered his breath, he observed: "Yes. I wanted a motor-boat. Not an aeroplane."

Bronson laughed.

"Easier to go through the air than the water," he said. "That's why we made your boat plane. It takes a lot of power to put her on her 'high horse.' But once she's there, she makes her speed on a minimum of horse-power. That's why we bank on the *Richard* to beat the *Fuor d'Italia*. Your boat is heavier than Mascola's, closer ribbed, but you have more power. We're backing this one against his in any weather and the rougher it is the better it will suit us."

Gregory glowed with satisfaction. The *Richard* was all boat. He noticed that she did not tremble like Mascola's boat, but did her work in a businesslike way with no ostentation. He admired people like that, and as Dickie Lang had said and he was beginning to find out, boats were very much like people.

For some time Bronson instructed him in the proper operation of the craft. Then he slowed down and threw up the hood, disclosing two complete multi-cylindrical motors.

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"Everything's double," he explained. "You can cut it all in or halve it as you please. And if anything goes wrong with one motor you're never hung up. You can always limp in at least."

As they settled down to a good running speed, the talk gradually drifted to Mascola.

"The way things are going now," Bronson observed, "it won't be long before we're building a new boat for Mascola."

"What do you mean by that? Has he seen this one?"

The boatman shook his head.

"You needn't be afraid of that," he answered. "What I meant was that Mascola is hammering the *Fuor d'Italia* to pieces with his trips to Diablo in that rough water."

"Does Mascola go often to Diablo?" Gregory questioned quickly.

Bronson shrugged his shoulders non-committally.

"Can't say," he answered. "Don't know how often he goes out there. But I do know that he brags that his boat can make it in two hours and a half. Diablo's a bad place for the *Fuor d'Italia*. She's built too light to stand the gaff."

The ride to Port Angeles proved all too short. Bronson was communicative in the extreme and regaled him of many evidences of Mascola's prosperity, chief among which was the Italian's recent order to a firm of Norwegian boat-builders at Port Angeles of twenty large fishing launches of the most improved pattern. These boats, according to Bronson, were of sufficient tonnage and fuel capacity to enable them to cruise far down into Mexican waters.

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As they rounded the light-house point and made for the breakwater, the wind increased, driving a choppy sea before it. Then it was that the *Richard* rose to the occasion and demonstrated her natural ability to cope with a head-on sea.

Arriving at the municipal docks, Gregory promised to call for the boat on the day following and hurried away to attend to his business. He had a real boat all right. Just what he wanted. Now all that remained to be done was to see the jobbers and get a few orders which he could convert into cash to pay for the *Richard*.

With elastic step he set out for the wholesale district imbued with a spirit of rosy optimism. The Western was first on his list. The chances were he would have to go no farther. A short talk with Mr. Eby, the resident manager, convinced him otherwise.

"Can't quite see your quotations, Gregory," that gentleman had crisply maintained. "We have been offered a similar line of goods at fully ten per cent. less."

Gregory was greatly surprised. McCoy, he knew, had figured a bed-rock, cash price and the extreme lowness of the quotation offered the Western was influenced solely by the possibility of a quick sale in straight car lots. And still the man claimed he could beat it.

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"Do you mind telling me who is offering you stuff at a lower figure?" he asked.

Mr. Eby hesitated. It was to his interest to stimulate price cutting. The fact that the figure quoted was below cost was nothing to him. A cutthroat war between two rival canneries might result in still lower quotations which would give him a greater profit.

"Certainly not," he answered. "The figure quoted me was from the Golden Rule Cannery."

Gregory felt his face growing hot under the influence of Mr. Eby's exasperating smile.

"That figure is below cost and you know it," he said bluntly.

The manager continued to smile. "Possibly," he affirmed. "From your view-point. Your cost and theirs may be two different things. Your wage scale is much higher than theirs for one thing, and your system, in my mind, does not make in any way for low costs."

Gregory's anger mounted at the man's tone.

"What do you know about my business?" he asked quickly.

Mr. Eby shrugged.

"It is our business to keep in close touch with our customers," he evaded. "I'm just giving you a friendly tip to do away with some of your more or less impractical ideas, and put your business on a plane with others. You can take it for what it's worth."

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Gregory curbed his anger and started for the door.

"My idea is working out all right, Mr. Eby," he said in parting. "And you are going to live to see you've overlooked a good bet."

Eby laughed. "Go to it, young man," he said. "You'll just have to live and learn like the rest of us. When you get down to earth again, come in and see us."

Somewhat taken back by his interview, Gregory sought the other jobbers. But at every place of business he was met by evasions and superficial excuses. Brown & Brown had heard he had gone out of business on account of ill-health. Possibly they would send a man down when they got straightened out. The Eureka people were overstocked and, on account of shortage of cars, were not buying any more for the present. Davis Incorporated were reorganizing and would do nothing until their plans were completed. Others intimated they would submit bids if he cared to sell at auction and some broached the question of taking his output on consignment. But from no firm did he receive even a conditional order.

The various interviews had a depressing effect upon Gregory's spirits. Weakened by his illness, he decided to call it a day and tackle the few remaining jobbers on the following morning.

As he sought the hotel he remembered his friend Hawkins, who was working on the *Daily Times*. Bill had been his lieutenant overseas. He was a fighting fool and had always been an optimistic chap. In his present frame of mind, optimism was what he needed. Accordingly he called Hawkins

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up and invited him to dinner.

Some hours later the two men were conversing in Gregory's room. The great war had been fought over again, mutual acquaintances checked up and the past thoroughly covered.

"And so now you are a full-fledged business man," Hawkins was saying, as the talk turned to the present, surveying Gregory through the haze of his cigarette.

"Yes. And from the way it looks now I'm about due to be plucked by these thieving jobbers."

Hawkins smiled brightly. "Nothing to it," he said. "You've overlooked two big things, that's all. When we get them straightened out, everything will be lovely."

Knowing that Hawkins expected no reply, Gregory waited for him to go on.

"Your idea is bully. I can't see any reason why it won't work out all right. But in order to make that possible you've got to stir up the animals. When you get an idea like that, the thing to be done is to capitalize it. Why withhold it from the public? They would be interested. Let them in on it."

"You mean advertise?" Gregory prompted.

A slight frown passed over Hawkins' face.

"Nothing so crude as that," he answered. "I mean publicity."

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The newspaperman's face glowed with the importance of his subject and he continued rapidly:

"This is an age of publicity. With proper handling you can do most anything. Even adverse publicity, so-called, has its value. Lots of shows around here for instance are crowded to the doors every night by a mere suggestion that they are not all that they should be. The quickest way to kill a man or an idea in this country is by a 'campaign of silence.'"

Seeing that Gregory did not quite get his drift, he went on:

"Your idea is O.K. It will write up well if it is handled right. Moreover it is a little out of the ordinary, and all-American. That is a popular theme at present."

He paused and puffed the air full of smoke-wreaths. In the smoke he could see a big story. Why couldn't hard-headed business men realize the value of the thing he was trying to get at? Why, Kenneth Gregory's idea would be a winner at the present time. He, Bill Hawkins, could make it so.

"Listen," he said quietly. "I have to be getting back to the office so I can't say much now. I put over a big story for the boss yesterday. Shot myself to pieces over it. So he's giving me a week off on full pay to take it easy. I want a vacation. I'm a fan for fishing and if you'll give me an invitation to go back with you and will let me muss around on your boats, I'll see if I can't drop on to something that will look good in print. I have an idea I can have a few of the jobbers around here yelping at your heels for fish before I get back. In the morning I'll be off. Then I'll go down to Winfield & Camby's with you. I know the boss there and think maybe I can get him to talk 'turkey.'"

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Gregory jumped eagerly at Hawkins' suggestion and immediately extended the desired invitation. The following morning saw the two men closeted at an early hour with Mr. Dupont, of Winfield & Camby. And under the warmth of Hawkins' introduction, the manager's manner thawed perceptibly toward the young cannery owner.

Noting the change, Gregory hastened to take advantage of it, and straightway put up his proposition. When he had concluded, Mr. Dupont took the floor.

"In our dealings with our patrons, Mr. Gregory," he began, "we are nothing, if not frank. Our firm is one of unimpeachable standing which follows as a natural result from years of square-dealing. We are, however, extremely conservative. We play, as the saying goes, no 'long-shots.' Once convinced of the dependability of our producers, we give them every chance and stick by them to the limit."

The manager removed his nose-glasses and polished them carefully before going on:

"I had the pleasure of meeting your father, Mr. Gregory. From my observation of him, he was everything that one could expect in a man. But he was constantly hampered with labor troubles of one sort or another. Consequently, he was unable to operate his plant in the way we like to see them operate. When we work up a trade for a particular brand, we like to be able to supply the demand which we create. If we were assured that you were able to make good in this respect, we would have no hesitation in sending a buyer down at once to inspect your pack."

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"But you do not?"

Gregory met the man's eyes squarely and the manager looked him over critically.

"Yes," he answered after a moment. "For some reason or other I believe I do. I think you are working along the right lines. That is," he amended with a smile, "if you do not carry your ideas of cooperation far enough to deal direct with the consumer and cut us out of it."

As Gregory shook his head, Mr. Dupont concluded:

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll send Mr. Dalton down at once to look over your pack. How does that suit you?"

Gregory's face clearly expressed his satisfaction and a few moments later he hurried out into the street, leaving Hawkins with the manager.

"I'll meet you here at any time," Hawkins called after him.

Promising to meet his friend at four o'clock, Gregory started again on his rounds. Passing a butcher-shop he stopped and surveyed the array of fish which were on display in the window. He noted the prices and hastily compared them with the figures he was getting from the markets in Port Angeles for his fresh fish. There was surely money going to waste somewhere. Remembering that he had promised Dickie to visit the wholesalers, he directed his steps to the water-front.

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The dealers he visited were scarcely civil and among them was none who spoke English without the accent of the foreigner. Their observations in response to his questions concerning the prices they were offering, were short and to the point. If he did not like it, he need not ship to them. They were dumping fish every day as it was. The market was glutted. What was he going to do about it?

Gregory wondered himself. Then a plan began to form in his brain, suggested no doubt by Mr. Dupont's jest about him carrying the cooperative idea far enough to include the consumer. Why not? Fish were being retailed at almost prohibitive figures. And the markets claimed they were dumping them. Somebody was profiteering. Who was it? Certainly not himself. He was barely able to get enough from the dealers to pay express.

The idea grew as he walked along the street. He decided to take up, with Dickie Lang, the matter of establishing a cooperative service-market and selling direct to the consumer.

In mid-afternoon he found himself again among the jobbers. But the few he had not called upon the day previous, appeared even less interested in his proposition. As he came out of the Pacific's establishment, he brushed against a heavy-set man with gray hair, who was just going in. Excusing himself for his awkwardness, he glanced at the stranger's face. It was Silvanus Rock, of Legonia.

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Gregory passed on. Rock apparently had not recognized him. Yet surely he was not mistaken in the man's identity. The flabby face with its sagging folds of pink skin, the snake-like eyes and the long Roman nose could not have been the inheritance of any other than the magnate of Legonia. And yet, what business could Rock have with the jobbers? Gregory wondered as he walked uptown to get a box of candy for Aunt Mary and Dickie Lang. While he made his purchase, his mind was filled with his meeting with Rock. In some vague way he began to associate Rock's presence in the jobbing district with the failure of the dealers to become interested in his solicitation. When he reached the office of Winfield & Camby at four o'clock, the matter still filled his mind.

"Mr. Hawkins just stepped out," Mr. Dupont informed him. Then the manager cleared his throat and beckoned Gregory to his private office. "It sometimes happens," he began, when the door closed, "that we are forced to change our plans, owing to an unexpected event. Since you were here this morning, I feel that what has happened in the interim, warrants us in our decision. In view of that, I wish to say that for the present at least, we will not send Mr. Dalton to visit your cannery."

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"Why not?"

Mr. Dupont shoved an evening *Times* across his desk and pointed to a marked item that appeared therein.

"That will explain for itself," he said.

Gregory read:

RIOT AMONG THE FISHERMEN AT LEGONIA

This afternoon when the foreign fishermen were peaceably engaged with their seine, they were brutally attacked by a number of ex-soldiers and sailors employed by the Legonia Fish Cannery, and driven from the beach.

Gregory read no further.

"It's a lie, Mr. Dupont," he said hotly. "My men do not pick fights. A few nights ago the alien fishermen endeavored to crowd them off the beach and they——"

Mr. Dupont interrupted with a peremptory wave of his hand.

"You may be right," he said. "But I'm not interested. Whatever the merits of the case are, the fact remains that you are mixed up in a labor brawl with foreigners. As I stated to you this morning, we are conservative and until you get matters adjusted amicably with your competitors, we do not care to go into your proposition further."

He rose at once, showing the interview was at an end. Gregory followed him to the door. In the

outside office he found his friend waiting. Hawkins, clad in outing clothes, was smiling broadly. The smile, however, quickly disappeared as he caught sight of his friend's face. [Pg 210]

"Anything the matter?" he asked.

Gregory walked with him to the street before replying. Then he bought a copy of *The Times* and the two men read the account of the fight with the aliens.

"What of that?" Hawkins queried. "Your men licked them, didn't they?"

"Yes. But it cost me my chance with Winfield & Camby. Mr. Dupont called the whole thing off."

"The devil he did!"

Hawkins' smile returned.

"Why, the old fool," he ejaculated. "Can't he see that this will only be publicity for your brands. Why, darn his crinkled old hide, I'll show him. And I'll bet I'll have him eating out of your hand in less than a week."

He glanced curiously at the paper.

"Regular correspondence," he muttered, as he noticed the date-line of the news-item. "That means it comes from the little paper down there. What did you ever do to Tommy Black?"

Gregory shook his head blankly.

"I don't even know who he is," he answered.

Hawkins laughed.

"He seems to know you all right," he answered. Then he explained: "Black is the editor of *The Legonia Star*. A man by the name of Rock owns it."

CHAPTER XX

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PLANS FOR A SHOW-DOWN

Shall the control of our fisheries pass into foreign hands?

Riot among Legonia fishermen raises interesting question. Ex-service men contest forcibly with aliens for freedom of the seas. Show-down expected in the near future.

"How does that strike you?" Hawkins grinned and shoved the copy of *The Times* forward as "Exhibit A" for publicity. "Notice the date line," he exclaimed. "From our own correspondent."

Kenneth Gregory read the news item carefully before replying. First came a true account of the fight with Mascola's men on the beach which had ended in the decisive victory for the service men. Followed, in chronological order, a review of past interferences suffered by the American fishermen at the hands of the foreigners. And lastly, glowingly outlined, came his plans for meeting the opposition by a cooperative organization of one hundred per cent. bona-fide Americans. The article concluded:

The public will watch with a great deal of interest the outcome of Mr. Gregory's fight to regain control of a lost industry in local waters. Should the young cannery owner succeed, it will mean much to the people of Port Angeles in reducing the high cost of living. For Mr. Gregory has already under way, comprehensive plans for supplying the public with fresh fish at a greatly reduced price, through his system of establishing cooperative markets and dealing direct with the consumer. [Pg 212]

Gregory's face was radiant with satisfaction.

"You're there on that kind of stuff, Bill," he exclaimed, gripping Hawkins by the hand. "You surely put it over in great shape."

Hawkins frowned.

"Fell down on one thing," he observed. "The city editor blue-penciled my direct reference to your brands of canned stuff. Claimed it was slapping the ad man right in the face. Say, I'll tell you what to do," he went on. "Let me write you up some good ads for your stuff and shoot them in right away to the advertising department. That will put you in strong with the paper and I can 'dead-head' a lot more dope through."

Gregory gave Hawkins *carte blanche*.

As Hawkins set to work, Dickie Lang entered.

"Light haul all around," she announced. "The albacore are heading out. Looks as if we were going to have a little weather."

Gregory's expression changed quickly at her news.

"That means we've got to follow them up," he said. "We've got to have the fish. We've been putting it over on Mascola for the past few weeks and we can't fall down now. The jobbers are watching us and we've got to show them we can deliver the goods. In addition to that I am going to enter into quite an extensive advertising campaign and when it begins to bear its fruit, we've got to have the stuff on hand to come across. There are a lot of people looking this way right now and we've got to make good."

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"That's the way to talk," encouraged Hawkins. Then he smiled at the girl and nodded toward his friend. "Notice how I'm bringing him alive," he exclaimed. "He's quit 'shooting nickels' now. He's raised his sights already."

They all smiled at Hawkins' enthusiasm. Then the girl's face became serious.

"You know what going out to sea means," she said quietly. "It just about means Diablo. That's where Mascola's boats went this morning and I shouldn't wonder if they struck it out there. When they get back we'll know."

"We've got to know before that," Gregory averred. "Why not send a bunch of the boys over right away?"

Dickie shook her head with great emphasis.

"Haven't the gear," she objected. "It's liable to be nasty around the island at this time of the year. We're shy on deep-sea hooks and heavy line."

"We'll get it." Gregory turned to the telephone. "I'll order it by express," he announced, as he put in his call for the ship-chandlers at Port Angeles. While he waited for the call, he addressed Dickie Lang. "We can send some over right away, can't we?"

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She considered. Then nodded acquiescence. "The *Pelican* and the *Curlew* are outfitted for that kind of work," she stated. "We could get them moving in half an hour. They could go over and do the scouting. They both have the wireless, you know."

Gregory made up his mind at once.

"Will you give me a list of the stuff you need?" he asked. "As soon as I get this call through I'll come out and we'll get them started. We ought to get the stuff we need to-night, or early to-morrow. Then the rest can clear." His face brightened. "I'll have the *Richard* to-morrow," he said. "Bronson's going to bring her back and stay two or three days to put me on to the ropes. We'll get him to take us to Diablo."

"Count me in on that too," exclaimed Hawkins. "I've got it coming. Haven't had a breath of salt air since I've been here."

The girl completed her list of the required gear as the telephone rang. Gregory turned to the instrument and gave the order.

"What's that?" he concluded. "You'll have to have the cash? Thirty days is customary on that kind of stuff, isn't it? Well, I've got to have it.—All right, go ahead and draw on me if that's the way you feel about it.—But send the stuff." He turned wrathfully to the girl. "The robbers," he said. "They have me in a hole and they know it. We have to have that gear right away though Heaven only knows where I'm going to raise the money to pay for it."

The problem of raising approximately three thousand in cash before ten o'clock the following morning presented its difficulties. Gregory decided to tackle the matter without delay.

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"I'll try the local bank," he declared. "And give old Rock a chance to make good on his promise."

Dickie strove to dissuade him.

"Keep in the clear of that old hypocrite," she cautioned. "If he lets you have it at all it will be only with strings which will tangle you up later on."

Gregory was on his way to the door.

"A man needing money like I do at present has to get it where he can," he answered. "Will you see to getting the *Pelican* and *Curlew* started as soon as possible?"

She promised and he hurried out.

Gregory found Rock in his private office at the bank and was welcomed warmly by the financier.

"Growing more like your father every day you live," was the president's greeting. "How happy we would all be if he could have been spared to this community."

Gregory lost no time in preliminaries.

"You told me if I ever got into a tight place, you'd see me through," he began.

Rock nodded and the corners of his thick lips turned downward.

"I sincerely trust you have met with no business reverses, my young friend," he purred. "However, if such is the case, feel perfectly free to make me your confidant."

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Briefly Gregory stated his case, to which the old man listened attentively. When he had concluded, Rock's eyes were on the ceiling, and his soft white hands caressed the desk noiselessly.

"If you will accept a word of advice from a man old enough to be your father, and one who is entirely disinterested in you, save in a personal way as the son of my old friend, you will——"

"What?"

Gregory cut short his rambling.

"Stay away from Diablo Island."

Rock's advice carried a mandatory note which was not lost upon his auditor.

"Why?" Gregory asked quickly.

Rock searched the far corners of the room for the answer to the question. At length he replied: "It is an extremely dangerous place, particularly at this season of the year. Storms are prevalent about Diablo and by making the venture at this time, you place not only your capital in jeopardy, but the lives of your men as well."

Gregory realized he had little time for argument.

"I've asked for a loan of three thousand for ten days, Mr. Rock. It's up to you. What will you do for me?"

A slight frown passed over the bank president's forehead at the young man's insistence. For a moment he gave his entire attention to the blotter on the desk. Then he said:

"I will let you have the money you desire on one condition. That you confine your operations to coastal waters. Your security will then be comparatively safe and——" [Pg 217]

"You forget, Mr. Rock, that I am not taking my cannery with me to El Diablo," Gregory broke in. "Don't you regard the plant and the canned product on the floor as sufficient security for a temporary loan of three thousand dollars?"

Rock nodded. After a moment's silence he said: "Then there is another thing. This is a time to speak plainly. Otherwise I would make no mention of it. But as you are seeking a favor at the hands of this bank, it is my duty to inform you that we do not wish to countenance or encourage, in any way, your policy of stirring up trouble with our alien population."

Gregory rose angrily.

"There is no use of my taking up your time or mine any further," he said. "My business is my own. And while we're on the subject I'll say that I intend to run it as I please. Neither myself nor my men are seeking trouble with Mascola's foreigners. But I'll tell you here and now that we are prepared to fight, if need be, for what the law says we can have. We want only a square deal, Mr. Rock, and you can take it from me we are going to get it."

Walking out of the bank president's office Gregory observed a familiar figure leaning idly against one of the grated wickets. And though the man was dressed in the extreme of fashion, he had no difficulty in recognizing him. It was Leo Bandrist, the lord of El Diablo. Gregory returned the islander's nod and hurried to the street. As he walked to the cannery he found it hard to concentrate his thoughts on the problem of raising the desired funds. Rock was a royal old hypocrite. Of that he was sure now. The financier had used his influence among the jobbers to some purpose. He had knocked him through his local paper. And now he was telling him, almost threatening him, to stay away from El Diablo. His mind flashed again to Bandrist. What brought the man to Rock's bank? Business, no doubt. But what kind? Was Rock backing Bandrist? Were the two men in cahoots with Mascola's gang? If so, for what purpose? [Pg 218]

The questions multiplied with astonishing rapidity. When Gregory arrived at the cannery he had decided upon a definite course of action. He would wire Farnsworth, the estate's attorney, to sell his bonds at a sacrifice if need be. They should bring enough, added to his own personal account, to pay for the equipment he desired. After that, he'd go to Diablo and call Rock's bluff, whatever it was.

It was late that evening before he received an answer from the lawyer. Farnsworth had regarded the instructions of his client as sheer idiocy and had taken no pains to conceal the fact. But he had sold the bonds and was forwarding the money. Close upon the message from the attorney came one from the ship-chandlers at Port Angeles. They were shipping the gear in the early morning. Gregory heaved two great sighs of relief which adequately expressed his feelings at the contents of the two respective messages. [Pg 219]

The day had ended better than he anticipated. The *Pelican* and the *Curlew* were at Diablo by now. He should hear from them any minute. While he was waiting there was much that he could do. He took up his personal bank-book and began to balance it. A low rap at the office-door interrupted him.

Dickie Lang entered with McCoy and Hawkins.

"We've been out for a walk," she announced. "Thought we'd stop in and see if you'd heard

anything from the boys yet."

"Not yet," Gregory answered. "I'm going to keep a man at the key all night. We should have heard before this. They got a fairly early start and with good weather should have hit the island in time to get a good line on things before dark. I just got a wire from the ship-chandlers and they are shipping the stuff the first thing in the morning."

As the talk turned to Diablo, Hawkins listened attentively though he said but little. At length the party rose to go.

As Gregory was bidding them good night one of the radio men entered with a message. Gregory glanced at the meaningless jumble of words and shook his head.

"Too much for me," he announced. "I haven't savvied the code out well enough yet to read this one."

The operator again took the message.

"Haven't been using it long," he answered. "But one of the boys dropped on to a little rig on one of the cliffs a little way from here, so we thought it was just as well to be careful." [Pg 220]

Gregory nodded and the company drew closer to the operator as he bent over his work. When the message was decoded it read:

Off Northwest Harbor El Diablo
From: Launch *Pelican*.

Albacore tuna running close shore this end. Slipped round Mascola's boats by running round south shore. His fleet off Hell-Hole Isthmus. Spotted them hour ago. Don't think he's wise we're here. Can load up fleet if they get here quick and can dodge by Mascola. What shall we do?

The message was signed by Tom Howard.

Dickie beamed at the news.

"I know right where he is," she said. "When you get them that close in at this time of the year it means they are running in bunches and there's pretty apt to be some weather."

She glanced at her watch.

"Not much sleep for me to-night," she announced. "I've got a lot to do before morning. Guess I'll be on my way. It will mean work to clear by to-morrow noon and every minute is going to count."

"It will mean a scrap with Mascola too, unless I miss my guess," put in McCoy. "When he finds we are hitting into his territory there's liable to be trouble." [Pg 221]

Hawkins' eye brightened at the possibility. "That will mean a story for me," he contributed.

"It will mean more than all that," Gregory said slowly. "It means the thing we need most—money. Fish in car-load lots. A chance to show the jobbers we know our business. It may mean a show-down with Mascola. And if it does, we've got to be ready when it comes."

CHAPTER XXI

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THE GRAY GHOST

Ready to clear for Diablo at last! Gregory's lieutenants had done their work well. The gear from the ship-chandlers had arrived on the morning train. Also the remittance from Farnsworth. Dickie Lang had outfitted the fishing-boats in record time. Crews of experienced men were selected and supplies taken aboard. One by one the launches were carefully examined by the girl and despatched singly on a course mapped out by herself, a course which would bring them to Northwest Harbor without skirting the shore of the island. The auxiliary supply boat, the last of the fleet to go, had cleared but an hour before. For the time being Dickie Lang was content to rest upon her oars.

Bronson was ready. In response to a night letter from Gregory he had arrived on time with the *Richard*, bringing with him a full equipment of heavy gear. Tuned to the minute, the speed-craft waited impatiently at the cannery float for the signal to be under way.

Jack McCoy was ready. Everything within the cannery was shipshape to handle a big run. Depleted supplies had been hastily ordered. Necessary additions to the floor force had been made and the house-manager was in possession of detailed instructions for the running of the plant during the owner's absence. [Pg 223]

Even Hawkins was ready. The advertisements had been written and checked over before being despatched to *The Times* to "farm out" among the other city dailies. In addition to that, the newspaperman had arranged to communicate with his paper *via* the cannery wireless should he be fortunate enough to secure a big story.

Gregory himself was ready. The details of the embarkation had been covered to the minutest detail. A plan had been formulated in the early morning hours for the outwitting of Mascola at El Diablo, a plan to which Dickie Lang had given her hearty approbation before it was sent to Howard over the radio.

Gregory turned for a last word with McCoy before giving the order which would send the *Richard* to sea.

"We'll keep in close touch, Jack," he said. "We'll expect you to do the same. This is Friday. If we send in a lot of fish to-morrow it will mean a straight run over Sunday. Keep a man at the key day and night. And don't forget that we are low on cash. If you get any orders that look at all good, grab them until we can get 'out of the woods.' We're going up against a mighty stiff proposition. It's make or break, and the sooner we get down to cases with Mascola the better it will be."

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He put out his hand and McCoy's fingers tightened over his. Then McCoy watched him go down the gangway and take his place beside Dickie Lang in the *Richard*.

"You don't mean to tell me that's Diablo?"

Hawkins wiped his dripping face and stared at the misty blot on the purpling horizon.

Gregory and Dickie Lang looked up from their scrutiny of the small clock on the *Richard's* dash and smiled:

"Two hours and ten minutes to here," Gregory announced. "We can make it easy in two hours and a half, and we've been bucking a head wind and sea all the way over. If the *Fuor d'Italia* can do this well, Mascola will certainly have to show me."

Bronson smiled but made no comment.

As the island loomed across their track, Dickie directed a change of course.

"Cut in close to that big cliff on the northeast corner and we'll work our way along close in to the shore."

Bronson complied. Then the girl turned to Gregory.

"Get my idea?" she asked.

"You want to see if Mascola has fallen for our scheme," Gregory replied.

"Exactly. We'll cruise by his fleet and lay to by the *Pelican*. Then we'll find out if he's spotted the *Curlew* yet. If he hasn't, the boys can get in in the dark and 'chum' the fish. By that time we won't care what Mascola does."

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The passing of a few minutes brought them in sight of the alien fleet grouped closely together off Black Point.

"They've shifted," announced the girl. "Tom's message said they were off the Hell-Hole."

Gregory said nothing but as they drew nearer he exclaimed: "Look! They've got the *Pelican* sewed up tighter than a drum. Looks like Mascola hasn't tumbled on to the other boat yet."

"Can't tell."

Dickie searched the darkening water intently. Then she observed: "I don't see Mascola's boat anywhere. Maybe he's cruising the island."

Throttling to the speed of an ordinary fishing craft they approached the fleet and dodged skilfully among the boats in the direction of the *Pelican*.

Tom Howard had but little news. He had put to sea from Northwest Harbor according to orders. Had circled the island and appeared off the east coast at daybreak as if en route from the mainland. Had stumbled on to a small school of albacore off Black Point and started fishing. Mascola's fleet had moved down from Hell-Hole in the early morning. Had "fenced" him. The Italian's men had been drinking freely all day and had refused to give him sea-way to get out. Of Mascola himself he had seen but little. The Italian boss had been down in the morning but had paid little attention to his men. After boarding but one of his boats he had returned with the *Fuor d'Italia* in the direction of the Hell-Hole Isthmus. He had not been back since.

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"Is the *Curlew* still off Northwest Harbor?" inquired Gregory.

"Don't know. Haven't tried to reach them. Didn't want to wise these fellows we had anybody else over here. 'Sparks' says they've got a rig round here somewhere and have been trying to hail somebody all day. We've been getting a few messages from the boys. Most of them are off the other side of the island now, waitin' for dark to pass the harbor."

Gregory and Dickie were elated to find the fleet so near. At the same time both looked worried at the mention of another wireless equipment in the immediate vicinity.

"I'll bet they're trying to reach that shore-set the boys spotted the other day," hazarded the girl. She looked at her watch and glanced toward the towering peaks which cast their shadows far out into the water. "Well, if they are, we can't stop them," she observed. "What do you say we start

along the north shore with an eye out for fish and Mascola? Maybe he's already nosing around Northwest Harbor."

Gregory agreed to the girl's suggestion.

"Running slowly will bring us up with the *Curlew* about dark," he said. "Let's go."

Climbing again into the *Richard*, Bronson threw in the clutch and the speed-craft zigzagged her way through the fishing fleet and headed away from Black Point. At the same time one of the faster of the alien boats detached itself from the others and trailed along in their wake.

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"Better slip that fellow," advised the girl. "We don't want him tagging. If we keep well in he won't be able to see us long."

Gregory gave Bronson the necessary orders, and the *Richard* bounded away from her pursuer and raced into the shadows of the cliff. When they arrived at the point near the Hell-Hole Isthmus, the speed-craft motor began to miss and Bronson guided the *Richard* in the lea of the promontory and threw out an anchor.

"Good place to fix that right now," he said. "You see everything's new and I've been feeding too much oil. The plugs are all gummed up. 'Twon't take but a minute to clean them."

While he worked over the motor Gregory's eyes roamed shoreward to the cliffs. It was quite dark now and only the sound of the lapping waves betokened the presence of the jagged rocks which projected above the surface of the water near the shore. It was almost here he remembered suddenly that the *Sea Gull* had been wrecked. As he looked out into the darkness, he felt Dickie's fingers tighten on his arm.

"Look!" she cried. "What's that behind us?"

Gregory turned about to see the black waters to the sternward were rippled with sparkling threads of silver-white. From out the darkness came a swiftly moving gray shadow. One glance astern caused Bronson to slash the anchor-rope which held the *Richard*. Then he started the auxiliary motor and threw the speed-craft forward with a jerk. The same instant a long gray hull brushed by them and disappeared into the gloom as silently as she had come. Bronson whirled the *Richard* about, gazing intently after the departing stranger.

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"A miss is as good as a mile," he observed. "If it hadn't been for the dual motor we'd have been out of luck."

"I wouldn't say so," Hawkins snapped. "A miss of a mile wouldn't give a man heart-failure. Lord, I'm weak as a cat."

Kenneth Gregory leaned closer and spoke in a voice which only the boatman could hear. Bronson put about at his words and muffling down, followed silently after the gray boat.

"Cut out your lights."

Bronson threw the switch at Gregory's command.

"It's against the law," he muttered, "but I reckon it's safer with a bird like that."

Soon the strange craft was again dimly visible, appearing like a gray blot in the darkness ahead. Off the Hell-Hole she turned shoreward and was lost to view.

"Tell him to stop the motor for a moment," whispered Dickie Lang.

When Bronson complied, the silence for the space of a few minutes was unbroken. Then from the little cove came the muffled cough of a high-speed motor.

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"All right. Head out."

The *Richard* sped on her way at Gregory's command. Then he asked: "What did that sound like to you, Bronson?"

The boatman answered promptly: "That was the bird you're looking for. I've heard the *Fuor d'Italia's* exhaust too many times to guess wrong."

Dickie Lang nodded sagely in the darkness, while Bronson volunteered:

"I think I know the one that nearly run us down too. Running dark's her long suit." For a moment he hesitated, then he added: "She looked a whole lot like the *Gray Ghost*."

"Interesting, if true," muttered Hawkins, sliding nearer to the operator. Then he asked aloud: "Who's the *Gray Ghost*?"

Bronson noted the suppressed eagerness of the man's tone. Then he remembered that Hawkins was a newspaperman. Reporters were a nosey class as a rule. Perhaps it would be as well to keep still. After all, what did he, Bronson, know about the *Gray Ghost*? What did anybody really know about her, for that matter?

"The *Gray Ghost* is a fishing-boat," he said quietly, "that was built by Al Stevenson. She's bigger and quieter than the average. She's supposed to be about as fast for her size as any of them. I heard the other day she was owned by a fellow by the name of——" He stopped abruptly. "I can't

remember the man's name," he concluded.

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Hawkins knew Bronson was lying. Straightway he decided to find out what he could about the ownership of the *Gray Ghost*. Of the vessel herself, he had some knowledge though he gave no intimation that he had ever heard the name before.

"Mascola must own the *Gray Ghost* himself, the way he's sticking around her," observed Dickie Lang. "He must have been waiting in there for her or he'd have been scouting around before this."

Gregory agreed.

"Tom said they were pretty well fished out down below," he contributed, "and Mascola hadn't given them a new location. He's evidently got something on his mind that's more important to him than fishing."

Bronson said nothing but smiled grimly in the darkness. Perhaps that wasn't such a wild guess, at that. But it was none of his business. His firm was building boats for the Italian, so why should he say anything?

The sky was dark overhead and a freshening breeze sprang up when they reached the tip of the island and headed shoreward. Rounding Devil's Point they came in full view of the glimmering lights of the fishing fleet.

"Looks like home," commented Dickie. "Wonder how long the boys have been there." She checked up the lights rapidly, then announced: "They're all there but one. Probably the supply-boat. She isn't due yet. That's pretty quick work I'd say."

Hailing the first of his fishing-boats, they learned that the voyage from the mainland had been without incident. The albacore were thick about the island. They were keeping the fish around with live bait. All of the fishermen predicted a record haul.

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Proceeding to the *Curlew*, Bronson tied the *Richard* alongside and the party from the speed-launch climbed aboard. Then the girl conferred with Gregory and plans for the night were formulated. The fleet would lay at anchor with every motor in instant readiness to get the respective vessels under way at a given signal. The men would alternate on an anchor watch and keep the fish "chummed" up during the night. Those who were off duty would get their needed rest and make no unnecessary noise. No vessel was to move from her anchorage without permission from the *Curlew*. Fishing would begin at daybreak.

With preparations completed for the night, Gregory's party made themselves comfortable aboard the *Curlew*. A message was despatched to the *Pelican* instructing Howard to join the fleet shortly after midnight. And the cannery was notified of the safe arrival of the boats at the island.

After supper Hawkins clung tenaciously to Bronson and the two men retired to the bow and conversed in low tones. Gregory sat with Dickie Lang in the stern and for some time puffed at his pipe in silence. The yellow rays which issued from the fresneled glass light on the mast-head fell full upon the girl's figure and Gregory saw that her eyes were fixed on the dark outlines of the coast.

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"What do you make of Mascola?"

Dickie shook her head. "I don't know," she answered. "He has me guessing right now. I can't understand why he's been hanging round Hell-Hole all day and hasn't tumbled on to the *Curlew*. He seems to have forgotten his boats entirely."

"I have an idea he has," Gregory answered. "Sometimes I think that perhaps fishing is only a small part of Mascola's business. We both know he hasn't made much with his boats in the last few months, yet Bronson says he's having twenty new launches built at Port Angeles. That will run into a big bunch of money at present prices."

"You're not the only one who has ideas to-night," Dickie said softly. "Being around Diablo always makes me think—and wonder."

"What?" Gregory encouraged.

The girl moved closer to his side.

"I'm wondering about the same things our fathers wondered about," she said. As Gregory said nothing, she went on hurriedly: "Did you ever stop to think that if Mascola and that gray boat lay in at Hell-Hole that they are doing it with Bandrist's permission? That means that whatever they are doing there, Bandrist is in on it." She paused abruptly and her eyes rested full on Gregory's face. "I have an idea that old Rock is in on it, too," she said. "He and Bandrist are pretty thick evidently, and Rock always did stick up for Mascola. And all three of them are doing all they can against us."

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"And you think it is something else than fishing?" Gregory prompted.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. I think our fathers had the same idea. I believe they came over here alone that night to find out."

"Do you think——" Gregory began.

But the girl answered his unfinished question.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I think they found out. That is why they never got out alive."

"But they were wrecked and drowned."

Dickie shook her head slowly. "I have never thought so," she answered in a half-whisper. "Listen," she went on, "boats like the *Sea Gull* don't wreck themselves and a better man with a launch than my dad never lived. Men like him don't drown easily. He was a regular fish in the water and had got out of many a smash-up before."

"But they were drowned. The coroner himself told me——"

"You're right," she interrupted. "Any man can be drowned. How long do you suppose you and Tom Howard would have lasted on the island if you had insisted on staying the night we were over here?"

Gregory considered her words carefully. In the light of past events, they held some truth. But if Bill Lang and his father had met with foul play, why were the bodies ever recovered? Why would it not have been simpler to have made way with them entirely? He put the question and Dickie answered promptly:

"That would have caused a search of the island. Just what they do not want, if they are up to anything crooked over here. With the bodies recovered and the boat smashed, it had all the appearance of a natural wreck."

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"Why have you never said anything like this before?"

Dickie hesitated. Then she answered simply. "Because I never felt as if I knew you well enough. I have no proof. It's only a girl's idea, and one I'm afraid you would have taken but little stock in."

"You're mistaken," Gregory replied. "I would have. And perhaps by now we could have had the proof."

"No. We've done just right. If we had pretended we suspected anything they would have gone to cover. There's only one way to get to the bottom of this thing and that is to beat Mascola at his own game. Make him think that fish are the only thing in the world we care for around Diablo. And while we're fishing over here, keep our eyes open and learn what we can."

Before Gregory could reply the silence of the night was broken by the sharp exhaust of a high-speed motor. Looking in the direction of the sound, he saw a flash of red pierce the darkness and heard the girl's voice close to his ear.

"I guess we're due to find out something now. Here comes Mascola."

Together they watched the red light brighten. Then came a flash of green as the oncoming launch swerved and sped toward them. In a few moments Mascola had located the flag-ship and the *Fuor d'Italia* lay snorting angrily by the *Richard's* side.

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"I want to see the boss," demanded the Italian.

Gregory leaned over the rail and focused his flash-light on Mascola.

"What do you want?" he called.

Mascola blinked under the bright rays. Seated beside him was another man who leaned closer into the shadow of the fishing-boat.

"I want you to move," Mascola said thickly. "My men were here first. Plenty of fish at San Anselmo. Many as here. If you go to the other island there will be no trouble."

"And if we stay?"

Mascola's passenger looked up quickly at Gregory's words, and the light fell full upon his face.

It was Bandrist.

"I hope you will not decide to stay," he said slowly. "As I have told you before, I'm not seeking trouble on this island. Mascola's men have been drinking too much and are ugly. A supply-boat arrived to-day from the mainland with too much liquor. I am having some difficulty with my own men. I hope you will help us avoid trouble."

Gregory answered them at once.

"If there is any trouble, it will be of your making. The ocean is free to all. We are interfering with no one's rights. We're here. The fish are here. And here we're going to stay."

"I'll show you, you——"

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Bandrist checked the Italian's angry outburst by placing a hand firmly upon his arm.

"I'm sorry," he began. But Mascola's open muffler drowned his words and the *Fuor d'Italia* leaped away into the darkness.

"Mascola's drunk," commented Dickie, looking after them. "Otherwise, he would never have

talked like that. It's a wonder Bandrist ever mixed up with him." She turned about and confronted Gregory. Behind him were Hawkins, Bronson and the crew of the *Curlew*. "This means we've got to move," she exclaimed. "We'd better round up the bunch, give them their positions and start fishing."

Gregory and the girl climbed into the *Richard*, calling to Bronson to follow.

"Tell 'Sparks' to send word to Howard to beat it out with the *Pelican* right away," Gregory instructed Hawkins. Then he exclaimed to Dickie as she took her seat beside him: "It looks like Mascola was spoiling for a fight. And if he is I'll say he's due for the surprise of his life."

CHAPTER XXII

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STRICTLY ON THE DEFENSIVE

The *Richard* was in motion before the echoes of the *Fuor d'Italia's* gatlin-like exhaust had died away. Directing Bronson to take them alongside each of the vessels which composed the fleet, Gregory and Dickie Lang boarded the fishing vessels and conferred with the respective captains. Gregory's instructions were phrased with military directness.

Every launch was assigned a definite position which it was to assume at once and hold at all cost. The fleet was divided into three divisions. The main unit, comprising the vessels equipped with the live-bait tanks, were to begin "chumming" at once within a given area. As soon as practicable, fishing was to commence. The second division, made up for the most part of the heavier, Diesel-motored vessels, was to lay to in V formation about the fishermen to protect them from interference in the direction from which the fish were running. The remainder of the fleet were to stand by as a rearguard, cover the extreme flanks and maintain a reserve.

Before taking leave of each craft as it left to go to its new position, Gregory briefly addressed the crew: "Get this, fellows. We're here to fish. Not to fight. If trouble comes, let Mascola start it. If he does, I expect you to hold your positions. Keep in the clear and use no firearms. Remember, what you do to-night, binds me. Play safe. Keep cool. But get the fish."

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To a man, the ex-sailors understood the seriousness of the situation, though there were some who argued against the poor fighting policy of letting the other fellow hit the first blow. The radical element, however, were soon quieted by the older and more conservative men, and all agreed to stay in the clear so "nobody could hang anything on the boss."

Tom Howard had arrived with the *Pelican* when Gregory and Dickie Lang returned to the *Curlew*. The fisherman brought the news that the men of the alien fleet were in a high state of intoxication. Moreover, they appeared to be completely out of live bait.

Dickie smiled grimly. "That means that if Mascola does send them down here, he'll just be looking for trouble. If they haven't the bait, all they can do will be to try to steal our school like they did before, and I guess this time they'll find they're out of luck."

"Met Mascola on my way down," Howard announced. "He was running wide-open, heading straight for Black Point."

Gregory frowned. "It's hard to tell what Mascola will do to-night," he said.

The *Pelican* was despatched at once to take her position as the leader of the front rank. As the *Curlew* made ready to get under way, Hawkins appeared at the rail.

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"Don't forget the press," he called. "If I'm going to do this affair justice I've got to be at the ringside."

Gregory moved nearer to Bronson and allowed the newspaperman to accompany the party on the speed-craft. Then the *Richard* sped away to see that all the boats were in their proper places. Arriving in the center of the fishing area, Dickie Lang watched the men "chumming" the fish and suggested they throw out their lines at once.

"I don't like the looks of the weather," she confided to Gregory. "It feels like a blow. I'm going to have a look at the glass on the *Snipe*." Gregory noticed that the girl appeared worried when she returned to the *Richard*. "Dropping fast," she announced. "It may be just a squall or it may be a real blow. This is no place for us in either case. We must rush the fishing all we can."

Gregory agreed and gave the necessary orders. From the sides of the *Snipe* the lines flashed over the rail. On the instant the albacore began to strike. As the *Richard* bounded away to notify the other boats of the order to hurry operations, the girl observed:

"The fish are heading close in all right. They're running from something. Now is the time to hit it hard. Oughtn't to take long the way they're starting. I must see that the boys have all the barbs off the hooks. We have to work fast. And when the blow comes, we'll have to get clear of the Diablo coast."

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The second tour of the fishing fleet was only partly completed when Dickie directed Gregory's

gaze in the direction of the point off Northwest Harbor.

"Here they come," she cried. "Mascola's looking for trouble just as I told you."

Gregory surveyed the bobbing lights in silence as they moved nearer; saw the red-lights blur and fade into green as the vessels changed direction and headed shoreward; noted one twinkling light running far in advance of its fellows; saw it swerve and double again into red and green. That meant that the *Fuor d'Italia* was bearing down upon them. Directing Bronson to intercept the Italian, Gregory explained:

"I want to give Mascola another chance. We're not looking for trouble. He can lay to the seaward but he's got to give us sea-way to get out if it roughens up."

The *Richard* swung wide and came abreast the *Fuor d'Italia*. Then it came to Mascola that the strange craft on his left had some speed. Above the roar of his own exhaust he heard his name called in a peremptory hail. The hot blood surged to his face and he stepped on the throttle. He had no time to talk. He must spot the position of the cannery boats and give his men instructions how to break through.

The *Fuor d'Italia* bounded away with a sullen roar. But before Mascola could circle in the direction of the lights of the fleet, the *Richard* was again on his rail. Cursing to himself, the Italian advanced his spark and pressed hard on the throttle. But though he gained a few feet on his pursuer, he knew that he dared not try to make the turn. His boat would "turn turtle" or be cut in two by the craft behind.

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On the two boats sped through the darkness. The lights of the fishing fleet flashed by them like the gleam of switch-lights, seen from an express train. Mascola's anger mounted. His men were waiting for orders and he had seen nothing of the enemy's formation. A plan formed quickly in his brain. It was dangerous of course. But the liquor gave him courage. Removing one hand from the wheel, he extended it toward the switch-board.

"He doesn't dare make the turn at this speed," Dickie shouted in Gregory's ear. "Tell Bronson to watch him close when he doubles to come back. He'll head into the swell, to the starboard."

Gregory was giving the boatman the message when he felt Dickie grasp his arm.

"He's switched off his lights," she cried. "He's going to try to dodge us, running dark."

Bronson had already slackened speed at sight of the disappearing lights ahead. Then he put the *Richard* hard over, and the speed-craft swerved with a jerk which left her passengers crowding close against one another.

"Give her the gun," shouted Gregory. "Head back. Don't let him slip us."

As the boatman complied and the *Richard* began to lift her hull from the sea, the dark waters ahead were brightened by a phosphorescent flash. Directly across their course lay the *Fuor d'Italia*. Twisting the steering wheel with only the slightest pressure of his fingers to avoid turning the *Richard* over, Bronson opened the cut-out and stepped hard on the throttle. The speed-craft dipped, then raised and bumped the *Fuor d'Italia* beam to beam as she raced by.

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The shock of the collision threw Mascola half from his seat and had a decidedly sobering effect upon his senses. He had noted his boat tremble at the impact and crowd away from the stranger; had felt the straining of her timbers. Now he noticed that his motor was missing badly. A loose wire probably. He made haste to repair the trouble and switched on his running lights. The *Fuor d'Italia* was too light to take chances of roughing it in the dark. As he worked, he heard a voice hail him.

"What do you want?" he demanded angrily. "Damn you, you hit my boat."

The lights of the returning motor-boat drew alongside before Gregory answered:

"Listen, Mascola. If you're looking for trouble, this is the place to find it. If you're not, you can move out to sea and get as many fish as we are. We'll not bother you. There's plenty of albacore over here to-night for everybody. If you try to break through us, it will be up to you."

Mascola's anger came in a torrent of Italian words. Then he composed himself sufficiently to speak in broken English: "This Mr. Bandrist's island. He tell me I fish here. He say you go. You stay, you like trouble. My men like fight any time."

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"Go to it, then," Gregory answered quietly. "And when you see your friend Bandrist, tell him for me that he hasn't bought Diablo. He's only leasing the land. If he has any more claim to the water than we have, he'll have to show us."

Mascola completed his repairs, started his motor and raced away in the direction of his fleet with the *Richard* running close at his side. But when he came abreast of the cannery fishing-boats, he made no effort to head in.

"He don't want to rough it any more with this one," Bronson commented. "I reckon when he looks over his boat it'll mean a job for the shop putting in a few ribs."

Mascola returned to his fleet, his cheeks burning with rage. In the first preliminary skirmish with the enemy, he realized he had been beaten. He had found out nothing of value. Had damaged his

boat too, no doubt. Well, he'd make somebody pay for it before morning. Circling his boats, he gave orders for an immediate advance in the direction of the cannery fleet.

Kenneth Gregory looked after the departing lights of the *Fuor d'Italia*.

"Score one for the invaders of Bandrist's island," he said grimly. "Mascola didn't learn much on his reconnoitering expedition, except that we had a better boat than his." Then he turned to Bronson. "Take us up to the other end," he instructed. "I want to tell the boys to keep as close in as they can so Mascola's boats will have to skirt the reef to get by."

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When they arrived at the indicated spot and the V broadened according to orders, the lights of the alien fleet could be discerned moving toward them.

"Here they come," announced Dickie Lang. "Looks as if they were going to try to crowd in from the north side."

Gregory smiled. "That's just what I want them to do," he answered. "One of the benefits of reconnoitering is to get an idea of just what you're going into. If Mascola had taken a good look, he wouldn't have come that way."

CHAPTER XXIII

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BATTLE OF NORTHWEST HARBOR

Convoyed by his fishing fleet, Mascola came steadily on. Cruising to the seaward of the cannery boats he circled, laid to and critically surveyed the bobbing lights in the narrow channel which was flanked on both sides by saw-toothed reefs. The fish were coming from the north and west. Doubtless the American fisherman already had them well "chummed up" with their live bait. He would force an entrance among the cannery boats if they did not give way and take their school. He had done it before. It was simple enough. Directing his boats to follow, he led them on.

Kenneth Gregory stood in the bow of the *Pelican* with a megaphone and directed the position of the boats which made up his first line of defense. His plan of keeping Mascola away from his fishing fleet was nothing more or less than just straight football formation, with an augmented line to withstand the opposing pressure. The *Pelican* formed the center of the wedge. To her right and left followed the heavy Diesel-motored vessels with the *Curlew* and *Snipe* guarding the extreme ends. Behind the first line came the reserve which closely covered the fishing-boats cruising the center area. Every boat was at its proper station, awaiting the signal from the *Pelican*.

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It came with Gregory's word to Howard: "All right, Tom. Let's go."

He stood at Howard's side as the fisherman whistled for sea-way and moved his vessel forward with the fleet flanking him astern in V formation. Mascola's boats gave no heed to the signal save to draw closer together and slacken speed as they entered the narrow channel.

Again the cannery boats shrieked a warning and the wedge narrowed with the waterway until only the bare width of a boat separated the beams of the defending vessels. Dead ahead, and only a few boat-lengths away, twinkled the lights of the alien fleet. Gregory grasped the rail of the engine-house and braced himself for the shock. The next instant the foremost of Mascola's boats struck the *Pelican* a glancing blow on the bow.

The heavy fishing-boat quivered from stem to stern from the impact. Then the powerful Diesel engine came into play. The drunken skipper of the *Lura* felt his craft being shunted to the side. Before he could gather his wits together, another American boat brushed his outside rail and crowded him forcibly against the craft he had endeavored to ram. Caught between the heavy hulls of the *Pelican* and *Albatross*, the *Lura* grated, beam to beam, her timbers creaking and twisting from the strain, her propeller churning the water in a vain effort to break through the tong-like grip of the two boats which disputed her passage.

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The drunken crew of the *Lura* surged to the rail with wild cries of rage. The air was filled with flying missiles. Came the sharp snap of breaking glass and the dull thud of heavy objects hurled from the alien craft to the deck of the *Pelican*.

"Stay under cover," Gregory commanded the crew. "Stand by if they try to board."

A flying bit of scrap-iron gashed his forehead and caused the blood to trickle over his eyes. He wiped it away with his hand and turned to observe the progress of the other vessels.

The engagement was now general. Mascola's boats were trying to smash their way through. But the V was as yet unbroken. That, he could tell by the solid formation of the boats in reserve. They had not found it necessary to separate.

The night was enlivened with the shrill cries of the aliens. Gregory noticed that there was congestion of lights on his left wing. He reflected suddenly that that was where the *Curlew* was stationed. And Dickie Lang was on the *Curlew*. Why had the girl persisted in her determination to take an active part in the conflict? Perhaps she might be already wounded. Hit by a piece of

flying iron or a wine-bottle.

"How about it?" Howard's voice recalled him to his plan of battle.

Gregory looked hastily along his front line. "All right," he exclaimed. "Go to it."

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The *Pelican's* whistle shrieked two shrill blasts in reply, the signal for every man at the wheel to go full ahead and put his respective craft hard over.

Mascola cursed volubly at the increasing jumble of his boats. They had already lost their way and were only tending to raise a further barrier to his entrance to the fleet. If he rammed, he must ram his own boats as well as those of the enemy. It flashed over his heated brain that the American had chosen a difficult position for him to break through. The narrowness of the sea-way prevented him from engaging them in mass formation. Then he became conscious of another fact as two sharp whistles sounded above the uproar. His lead boats were being crowded back against their fellows with a twisting movement which was carrying them in the direction of the reef. The channel had been too narrow to break through the solid wall of Diesels. A puff of wind from the southeast helped Mascola to make up his mind. Directing a summary withdrawal, he sped away toward the reef to pilot his boats again to safety from the dangerous shore.

Gregory directed the pivot movement of the cannery wedge until the last of the alien fleet had fled from the channel. In the first preliminary engagement, the enemy had been beaten back. At what cost he must find out at once. As he turned about to signal the *Richard*, a voice which he recognized as Hawkins', came to him from the darkness astern.

"Bronson's knocked out."

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Leaving Howard to supervise the return of the advance line to their original positions, Gregory instructed the sailors to launch a dory over the rail of the *Pelican* and was rowed away in the direction of the *Richard*.

Hawkins had but little to tell. The *Richard* had been plying about according to orders, to report any break in the wedge. As she skirted the right end close to the *Snipe*, some one had thrown a bottle from the nearest enemy craft. It had struck Bronson in the head. The *Richard* had drifted backward. Hawkins had thrown out an anchor. That was all. Gregory examined Bronson while Hawkins was speaking. The man was not badly injured. But his loss would be a serious one. Without the speed-boat, Gregory would be greatly handicapped. He set his jaw grimly in the darkness. He could not afford to tie up the *Richard*. He would run her himself. Directing Hawkins to pull the anchor, he slid into Bronson's seat and focused the rays of his flash-light on the speed-boat's starting mechanism.

"Are you going to try to run her?" Hawkins inquired as he tugged at the hook.

"I am going to run her. Bronson showed me how. It's taking some chance of course. But not so much as tying her up. We've got to have the *Richard*, Bill. That's all there is to it."

Gregory started the motor and, proceeding at quarter-speed, set off to take Bronson to the *Curllew*. By so doing, he realized, he could accomplish a dual purpose, find out about the safety of Dickie Lang and leave the boatman in her care. That, he reflected, would give her a safer though more inactive rôle.

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The girl greeted him from the rail of the *Curllew*. Not a man had been scratched aboard her vessel. Her craft had held the pivot and twisted two of the alien boats until they bumped the reef. A man had been reported injured on the *Falcon*.

Placing Bronson in the dory, Gregory directed the skiff to be pulled aboard the *Curllew*. Then he climbed over the rail with Hawkins.

"Bronson was hurt by a flying bottle," he explained. "Will you look after him? I've got to round up the boys and see what's doing."

"You're hurt yourself," Dickie observed as the rays of the cabin lamp fell upon Gregory's face.

"Just a scratch," he said quickly. "If you'll look out for Bronson I'll be off."

Dickie Lang whirled about. "Look out for this man, Jack. See you later, Jones. I'm going with Mr. Gregory."

Reluctantly Gregory consented to allow the girl to accompany him in the *Richard*. An instant later they were on their way to round up the fleet.

Injuries were few among the crews of the defending vessels. Bruises and cuts summed up the physical damage done by Mascola's men. One of the boats was leaking, but Sorenson was holding the water easily with the pumps. The *Falcon's* shaft was sprung but the propeller was still turning. To a man, the various captains reported that their men had obeyed instructions to the letter. No acts of violence had as yet been committed by any of the American crews. The ex-sailors, though chafing at their inaction, had assumed the defensive throughout.

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The next thing was to arrange to oppose Mascola's next move.

"Whatever he does, he's got to do mighty quick," observed Dickie as the *Richard* nosed her way among the albacore fishermen. "It's roughing up in the last five minutes and the glass is falling

all the time."

"There's only one thing he can do, as near as I can figure," Gregory answered. "And that's to come down the harbor channel and hit us from the stern. If he does that," he added quickly, "we'll have to be careful not to block the sea-way leading into the harbor. My idea is to move farther up. Then if the blow does come, we can go out with the wind and sea through the north channel."

"That's our best bet, unless it's a nor'wester," she agreed. "We've got to keep a way out clear or Mascola will crowd us on the rocks."

The captains of the fishing-boats reported their craft to be better than half laden when the *Richard* arrived alongside. The fish were still running strong. In another hour, without interference, they might be loaded. At Gregory's direction the albacore fishermen began cruising toward the north channel.

The next thing to do was to marshal the fleet to withstand Mascola's attack from the rear. Owing to the extreme wideness of the waterway, the Italian's boats would now have a better chance. The V must be broadened by the boats hitherto held in reserve. They must be brought up at once. The rising wind and the roughening sea, added to Gregory's inexperience in handling the speed-boat, rendered the mobilization of the cannery fleet not only slow, but extremely hazardous as well.

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Before his left end defense was complete, Mascola was bearing down upon his center.

CHAPTER XXIV

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A FIGHTING CHANCE

Mascola's boats advanced warily, spreading out and covering off the defending fleet as they came. It would be a boat to boat, man to man fight in the darkness.

Head-on, the opposing fleets collided with a crash which twisted their keels and racked their timbers. Lights merged together and became stationary as hull locked with hull in a grinding embrace. The alien crews swarmed to the decks and leaped across the rail upon the American sailors who surged forward to meet them. Fists flashed in the darkness. Men met hand to hand. The night was filled with wild cries, the trampling of heavy feet, the thud of contact of wood meeting wood and flesh meeting flesh. From the center of the struggling mass of men and boats came a sudden flare of light which dispelled the dark shadows cast athwart the vessels and brought into bold relief the struggling figures of the men who battled on the decks.

"Fire!"

The cry was taken up by every throat and echoed down the line. It came to Kenneth Gregory on the extreme end of the left wing where he had been directing the defense of his weakened quarter, by a counter-flanking movement. A boat afire! And right in the center of his fleet! When the tank exploded hundreds of gallons of burning distillate would flood the waters. But he dared not think that far. Whirling the *Richard* about, and circling behind his line of boats he dashed away to face the new peril.

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The crew of the *Florence* abandoned the attack at the first cry and surged to the hold to fight the conflagration. A gasoline stove, carelessly left burning by one of that vessel's drunken crew, had been overturned by the shock of collision, and had fired the bilge. Fanned by the rising winds, the flames were licking at the oil-soaked timbers and spreading rapidly toward the tanks in the bow.

The alien crew of the *Florence* fled in a panic of fear. Leaping to the rail they flung themselves to the deck of a neighboring craft which was already backing away from the ill-fated vessel. From all sides, friend and foe alike drew away from the blazing fishing craft. For the time being the sound of conflict gave place to the rasp of reverse levers, hoarse cries of warning and the labored chug of heavy-duty motors going full astern. In the ever-widening cleared space about the ill-fated derelict the lurid waters were churned into a roseate foam by the frenzied lashing of the heavy propellers of the fishing craft as their masters sought to clear the dangerous area.

As the *Richard* sped on in the direction of the ever-brightening glare, Gregory's mind kept pace with the rapid pulsing of the high-speed motor. He must tow the blazing vessel clear of the fleet before the tanks exploded.

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Dodging among the retreating fishermen he grazed the *Curlew's* hull and plunged into the open space. Warning cries sounded above the roar of the flames but he did not hear them. His plan, formed on the instant, must be put into execution at once. If it failed, the speed of the *Richard* would carry Dickie to a place of safety. It was a fighting chance. That was all.

Swinging the *Richard* about, he drove straight for the *Florence*.

"Take the wheel, and stand by," he cried to the girl. "If the tank goes, run."

He leaped from his seat as the *Richard* breasted the blazing hull and Dickie found herself

gripping the big steering wheel before she could utter a protest. Gregory was already in the stern of the *Richard*. Grasping the stern-anchor chain of the speed-launch, he caught the wire-stays of the *Florence* and pulled himself aboard, dragging the chain after him. For an instant he clung to the rail, shielding his face with his arms. Then he scrambled on deck.

Holding the *Richard's* stern close to the *Florence's* bow, Dickie Lang saw Gregory running across the deck. Saw his reeling figure silhouetted against the white glare of the blazing cabin-house. Heard the rattle of the heavy anchor chain of the alien fishing-boat. Keeping the *Richard* in place with an effort against the wind and chop, she waited. He expected her to stand by.

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His hair singed by the heat, with blistering face and burning lungs, Gregory dropped by the snubbing-post in the bow and tugged at the heavy chain and knotted it about the block. Then he made the free end fast to the chain of the *Richard*. Running to the rail he threw his body over and hung by his hands, searching the air with his feet. Then he felt the deck of the *Richard* beneath him.

Dickie Lang had stood by.

The next instant he was again at the wheel and the *Richard* lunged forward.

"Steady," cautioned the girl. "Don't take the slack so fast. Hard a port. Now kick your stern over. That's the stuff. Pay out. Now you've got her."

For an instant the *Richard* quivered with anger to find herself in leash by the fiery incubus at her stern. Then she settled doggedly to work and the two vessels began to gather way. To the right and left the fishing-boats scattered before them. The tanks of the blazing tow might explode at any minute. It was best to be in the clear. In the common fear of the new danger the contending factions drew apart, friend and foe uniting in the universal effort to gain a place of safety. The wind caught the blaze and fanned it upward in a solid sheet of flame which blistered the varnish of the *Richard's* stern-deck.

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"Get down," Gregory shouted above the roar of the speed-boat's exhaust.

Dickie started to protest when she felt herself jerked roughly from the seat.

"There's nothing you can do now. Lie still. Keep your head covered." The tone was gruff, the words commanding, spoken by a man. A man who thought of the safety of others and placed it before his own. A man who was not afraid to take chances. Dickie's heart glowed with pride as she huddled in the *Richard's* cockpit. It was worth while to know a man like that.

Mascola watched the progress of the burning *Florence* from the deck of the *Lura*. His blood-shot eyes gleamed red in the glow from the burning vessel and the lust of destruction surged into his heart. He was losing one of his best boats. Somebody must pay.

In the light of the fire he saw the vessels of the defense scattered. Now would be his chance to crowd through to the fishing fleet. With the wind and sea at his back he would pile them up on the rocks. Jumping to the *Fuor d'Italia* he sped away to direct the attack upon the heavily laden fishing-boats.

Clear the fishing fleet and shunt the *Florence* to the rocks with the wind and current. For the space of a few seconds it was Gregory's only thought. The rising wind at his back was hot with the fevered breath of the burning tow. What did it matter if the heat was scorching his neck? Only a few boats remained ahead. Then he would be in the clear. If the tanks of the *Florence* exploded he must crawl to the stern and cut the tow-line. The crested waves began to slap angrily at the speed-boat's hull. Then the *Richard's* motor began to miss.

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"She's all right. Keep down. I can——"

A muffled roar interrupted his words. The hull of the *Florence* bulged. A jet of flame mounted upward from the deck. The engine-house tottered and collapsed in a shower of glowing sparks which filled the air and rained down into the *Richard's* cockpit. A stream of burning oil surged up from the hull of the derelict and tumbled into the sea, blazing fiercely on the crest of the waves.

"Take the boat."

Before the girl could gain the wheel Gregory was fighting his way to the stern. As Dickie's fingers closed on the steering-wheel he was slashing at the rope spliced to the chain. With blistered hands and burning lungs he hacked at the tough strands of hemp with his pocket-knife. The threads of the line snapped and crinkled from the heat. The water about the speed-craft's stern was on fire. Tottering drunkenly, he bent low and held his breath. The rope was more than half severed. The threads were already parting from the strain. Then the knife slipped from his blistered fingers and fell into the water.

Mascola witnessed the explosion of the *Florence's* first oil tank with a grim smile. The vessel was already clear of the fleet. She could do no damage now save to the *Richard* and her crew. With his eyes fixed on the fire, Mascola prayed to his saints that the second and larger tank might explode before Gregory could sever the tow-line. Fascinated by the sight, he moved farther to windward and watched.

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Kenneth Gregory's bleeding fingers tore at the straining fiber of the quivering line which bound the *Richard* to destruction. One by one the threads snapped and curled in the heat radiated from

the burning vessel.

Dickie Lang huddled in the driver's seat and jerked the hull of the speed-craft frantically against the strain of the tow-line. For an instant death held them by a single strand. Then the line parted and the *Richard* leaped to safety. The cool rush of air revived Gregory's senses and he found himself leaning weakly against the coaming of the speed-boat. Then he heard the girl calling from the wheel.

"Mascola's broken through."

He gulped in the moist sea air and groped his way forward. Far astern the wreck burned fiercely, bringing into bold relief the frowning peaks which fringed the shore-line of El Diablo. As he caught at the rail for support he saw the flames leap skyward, blackened by smoke and bits of timber. The waves burned brightly about the settling hull. Then came the sound of the explosion of the *Florence's* second tank.

"Mascola's broken through. Can't you hear me? Are you hurt?"

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Gregory staggered to the seat and dropped beside the girl.

"I'll be all right in a minute," he said. "Keep going. I can't see very well yet. You say he got through?"

"Yes. He's trying to crowd the fishing fleet to the rocks. Look!"

In the light that the burning vessel astern cast upon the waters ahead, Gregory saw a confused jumble of boats crowded close against the saw-toothed reef.

"Damn him!" he grated. "We'll beat him yet. Slow down. Give me the wheel."

Dickie relinquished the steering-wheel with reluctance.

"We ought to be putting to sea," she observed as a sudden gust of wind and rain assailed them. "This is a bad place to be caught napping."

Gregory's eyes glowed with the lust of battle. "No," he gritted. "We're going to stay and fight. Mascola's not going to win on a fluke if it costs me every boat I have."

In a frenzy of activity he threw the *Richard* wide open and sped away to gather his scattered boats for a flank attack upon the alien fleet.

Mascola was in high good humor. His boats were crowding the fishermen backward in the direction of the reef. Forced to the rocks they would have no chance in the face of the approaching storm. What was the loss of the *Florence* in comparison to the destruction of a dozen or more fully equipped fishing vessels, laden to the water-line with their valuable cargoes?

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Repairing to the cabin of the *Lura*, the Italian refreshed himself with a drink. A shout from without brought him hurrying to the deck. Bearing down upon him at full speed came the cannery fleet. His vessels were broadside. They would strike him full on the beam. Cut his boats in two. Mascola shrieked out an order to put about and face the enemy. His captains sprang to their respective wheels and battled desperately among themselves for steerage way.

Then came the crash.

Skirting the mass of snapping grinding hulls, Gregory shot through with the *Richard* and came among the fishing-boats. Some were already grazing the reef. A line from the speed-craft pulled them again to safety and launched them around Mascola's rear. Fighting their way through the press of the alien craft they circled and renewed the attack from the opposite flank. Mascola's fleet was caught broadside between the Americans.

The din of the battle mingled with the roar of the wind. Again men met over the rail. Knives flashed in the sullen glare from the burning *Florence*. Pistol shots echoed above the tumult and the air was filled with flying splinters.

Slowly and inexorably Mascola's fleet was ground back. An alien craft, reaching the clear space to the rear of the battle line, turned hastily about and fled down the narrow channel leading to the sea. Another followed. Still another.

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Mascola strove vainly with shouts and curses to stem the tide of his retreating vessels, but the boats brushed by him and continued on their way. Soon the exodus became a rout with hull scraping hull in the effort of the alien boats to gain sea-way in the channel.

In a few minutes the last of Mascola's fleet, leaking badly and settling low in the water, lumbered by with rapidly pulsing motor in the direction of Northwest Harbor.

"We beat him at his own game." Kenneth Gregory repeated the words again and again. Blood flowed from a jagged cut in his cheek. His face and hands were raw and blistered, but his eyes were shining with the light of victory.

In the shadow of the *Pelican* his arms closed about Dickie Lang and he drew her to him. "We beat him," he cried. "You, and the boys, and I."

The girl struggled for a moment, then lay passive in his arms. He was delirious from the fire and

the battle. He did not know what he was doing. Freeing herself with an effort from his clinging arms she drew away.

"We must put to sea," she cried. "Before the storm breaks."

Gregory roused at her words and turned quickly away.

"Yes," he answered. "You're right. I forgot."

Within a few minutes the cannery fleet was heading down the main harbor channel in the direction of the open sea. [Pg 263]

Then the storm broke. Battling desperately into the teeth of the gale, the fishing-boats plunged head-on into the curling waves. Lashing the sea into white-caps, the wind picked up the water and hurled it to the decks in great clouds of choking, blinding spray.

In a last dying flare the flames leaped upward from the charred hull of the *Florence* as she lay pillowed on the rocks. And in the feeble glow, only Hawkins, who was looking astern, saw the shadowy outline of a long gray boat nosing her way about the island.

The *Gray Ghost* was running before the storm.

CHAPTER XXV

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THE BANKER AT THE HELM

Foot by foot down the storm-lashed, wind-swept channel the victorious cannery fleet doggedly fought its way from the Diablo coast and headed to sea.

"We've got to lay in at San Anselmo," Dickie Lang shouted to Gregory as she guided the *Richard* skilfully through the buffeting waves. "Some of the boats are pretty badly stove up. They're riding too low to try to make the mainland. We'd have to buck the storm all the way over. Best run before it as long as we can. Then we can gain the lea of the other island and head in at Cavalan and leave some of the boats there. May have to run a few of them on the beach. We ought to make the little harbor on the south shore of San Anselmo in a couple of hours."

Gregory agreed with some reluctance. When it came to seamanship he was perfectly willing to leave the management of his craft to Dickie Lang. The girl was familiar with the coast of the two islands and had fully demonstrated her ability to handle the *Richard* in a storm. Still the idea of running from Diablo rankled in his heart. It looked like quitting. [Pg 265]

The girl's next words, however, made him feel a little better.

"There would be no use lying in at Northwest Harbor at Diablo," she was saying. "The anchorage is too small and Mascola's boats will overcrowd it. If you tried to beach anything there, you'd wreck it. At Cavalan we can check things up, transfer the fish if we have to and get them right out. We've beaten Mascola, hands down, so why should we care?"

It was well toward morning before the last of the cannery fleet staggered into the little harbor of Cavalan. Then came the first opportunity to reckon the cost of Mascola's defeat at Diablo.

Gregory's first thought was for the personnel of his fleet. In the fight with the alien fishermen several of his men had been injured, but as near as could be ascertained, none fatally. A number of men had been slashed by knives, but the injuries for the most part were only flesh wounds. There were many aching heads and bruised bodies. Two sailors and a fisherman had been grazed by bullets. One man's arm had been broken.

To a man the various crews made light of their injuries and proudly maintained that they had left their mark on many a dark-skinned member of Mascola's aliens.

Bronson had partly recovered and was anxiously inquiring concerning the behavior of the speed-craft in the storm.

While Gregory directed the transferring of the injured men to the better equipped launches, Dickie checked up the material damage inflicted upon the tonnage. [Pg 266]

On the *Curllew* Gregory encountered Hawkins. The newspaper man was jubilant. The victory over the aliens was just what he needed. He had anticipated the outcome and had already sent out a full account of the struggle with the aliens over the radio. The people of Port Angeles would be reading it in a couple of hours.

As Hawkins assisted Gregory in caring for the needs of the men, the reporter hinted that he was on the trail of a bigger story which would make all his former journalistic efforts pale into insignificance. But when questioned concerning the specific nature of his scoop, Hawkins became extremely reticent.

Dickie Lang's report upon the condition of the fishing-boats added materially to the cost of the victory. Four of the craft had been jammed in the mêlée and were leaking badly. How they ever

made port at all was a thing she could not understand. Three of the other vessels had sustained bent shafts and broken propeller blades. All the fleet were more or less battle-scarred but their defects could be remedied in the water. She had set the men to work already. There was a machine shop at Anacapa on the opposite side of the island and a marine railway large enough to take on the disabled craft. When the blow subsided, they could put in there for temporary repairs.

The girl's eyes glowed with happiness as she totaled the catch of the fishermen. Every boat was laden almost to its full capacity. With a storm coming on and in the face of a probable shortage of fish, the success of the night's work would reach a substantial figure. [Pg 267]

"It's worth more than you know," put in Hawkins. "Wait until my yarn gets into print and I'll show you." He smiled broadly and put out his hand. "Then I want my rake-off, Cap. Gregory," he concluded.

"I won't forget you, Bill," Gregory was quick to answer. "Nor any one else. I knew the boys would stand by to a finish. They sure came across to-night."

He turned quickly to Dickie Lang. "When can we start out with the fish?" he asked.

"Figuring to go at daybreak," the girl answered. "Better send Jack a message right away so he can be ready for them. They'll have to buck the blow so it will be afternoon by the time they get over."

She looked out across the faintly graying waters where brightening lights began to appear from the shadowy hulls of the fishing-boats. Then she inhaled the air hungrily.

"Look," she exclaimed. "The boys are getting breakfast. Let's go over to the *Snipe* and tie in with them. They've got a man there from the regular navy who can surely cook."

Gregory and Hawkins welcomed the suggestion and a moment later they were speeding away to answer to the first call for breakfast.

In the lea of San Anselmo, sheltered from the storm in the land-locked little harbor of Cavalan, the American fleet rested from its labors. The sailors gathered on the decks and greeted the new day over plates piled high with crisp slices of bacon and fried eggs. The night had been long, fraught with danger and fatiguing toil; but work and worry had endured only for the night and joy came with the morning. [Pg 268]

Silvanus Rock was nervous and ill-tempered. Consuming his third cup of strong black coffee, he rose from the breakfast table and walked to the French windows and glared out at the curling waves as they flung themselves upon the beach.

His devoted spouse gazed after him with a sigh. "Something is preying on father's mind," she whispered to De Lancy, the only son and heir to the Rock fortune. "He didn't sleep a wink last night."

De Lancy scowled. "That doesn't give him any license to take it out on me," he growled, as he pushed back his chair and lit a cigarette. "When I tried to interest him in that new racing car, he landed on me all in a heap and——"

His words were interrupted by the entrance of the maid.

"Some one to see Mr. Rock," she announced.

Rock whirled and hurried toward her. Then he caught a glimpse of the roughly garbed man who was standing by the desk in his den. Peters had arrived at last. The anxious lines deepened on Silvanus Rock's forehead and he made haste to join his visitor. [Pg 269]

Mrs. Rock pursed her lips as she noticed the stranger. "I can not understand why your father persists in having such disreputable-looking men visit him in his home," she confided to her son.

De Lancy sluffed the cigarette ashes into his coffee cup, before replying. "Well, whoever the 'low-brow' is, here's hoping he'll put the old man in a better humor."

In his wish De Lancy was not disappointed. For a short time the visitor remained closeted with Rock in the capitalist's den. Then Rock escorted his guest to the door and De Lancy noticed that the old man had opened up some of his best cigars. It was a good sign.

Silvanus Rock entered the sun-room, all smiles.

"I believe I'll try some of those waffles, mother, if they are still handy," he exclaimed. "My headache's passed off and I'm feeling quite myself again." He beamed on his son. "And now, De Lancy, you were telling me about that new car. It seems to me like a pretty stiff price but I guess you might as well go ahead and order it."

When the bank president reached his office some time later after a visit to the Golden Rule Fish Cannery, he greeted his employees with effusive good-humor. Leaving orders that he was not to be disturbed by any one except Mr. Peters, he passed into his private office, dropped heavily into a chair and began to figure. His pudgy fingers trembled about the pen as he scratched on the pad before him. Then he tore the paper containing his calculations into little bits, tossed them into [Pg 270]

the waste-basket and smiled benignly. His latest business venture had succeeded far beyond his fondest expectations.

A tap came on his door and Mr. Peters again made his appearance.

Rock surveyed him anxiously. "No mistake I hope, Peters, in the good news," he quavered. "Everything's all right I trust."

Peters nodded and drew up a chair close to Rock's side. "This one's about the fishing-boats," he said in a low voice. "They got into a scrap with the American boats off Northwest Harbor. Bandrist says that Gregory's fleet won out. Mascola's lay in at the harbor. The *Florence* burned up and a lot of his other boats are pretty well shot. He couldn't stop the other fellows at all and they loaded up."

Rock frowned at the news.

"Well, well," he ejaculated. "That is bad. Though not of course as bad as it might be. No answer to that one, Peters."

A few moments later when the financier was again alone in his office, the cashier entered. "The credit man from the Canners' Supply Company is here," he announced. "He's asking for information about the Legonia Fish Cannery. Thought I'd better refer him to you."

Rock's thick lips closed grimly. "Show him in," he ordered, and bit savagely at his cigar.

Mr. Booker made his appearance at once. "We have a little account with the Legonia Fish Cannery," he began. "As it is some time past due we were beginning to get a little anxious. A word from you will put us straight." [Pg 271]

"What's the amount of your claim?"

"Twelve hundred and thirty-five dollars."

The hopeful expression which had leaped to Rock's face gave place to one of gloom. Then he asked:

"What is the nature of your claim?"

"Machinery and the labor of installing," supplied Booker.

A gleam of hope entered Rock's beady eyes. "Between you and me, Mr. Booker," he said. "The Legonia Fish Cannery is pretty much involved at the present time. Their organization is one which might cause you some difficulty in securing the amount of your claim. If you care to assign it to me for collection I think I can handle the matter satisfactorily."

Booker did not notice the suppressed eagerness of the bank president's tone. He was new at the job, replacing the regular credit man who was away on his vacation. Perhaps it would be well to accept Mr. Rock's offer.

"What fee would you charge for your services?" he inquired warily.

Rock spread out his fat hands with a depreciatory gesture.

"Just between friends, Mr. Booker," he said warmly. "Your firm is too well-known by me to make even a nominal charge for so trifling a favor. Whatever I am able to do for you in this regard, is yours for the asking." Seeing that the credit man was wavering, Rock continued: "I am so sure that I can adjust the claim satisfactorily that if you desire I will give you my own personal check for the amount right away. Then you can forget the entire matter. Mr. Gregory is a personal friend of mine and though, as I say, his affairs are somewhat involved, I know that he will attend to the matter at once if approached in the right way." [Pg 272]

Booker hesitated.

"I'd better call on Mr. Gregory first," he said.

"That will be a hard matter," Rock interrupted. "Unless you care to go to the expense of making a trip to Diablo Island. Mr. Gregory left yesterday for a protracted stay in the deep-sea fishing grounds."

Booker considered. His firm was very desirous of having him return with the cash which was sore needed at the present time. Collecting the claim would be quite a feather in his cap. Rock's statements concerning the Fish Cannery, he noticed, were somewhat contradictory. But that was up to Rock. An account like this, the chances were, would not be worth much anyway. He could explain the whole matter to Dunham when he got back.

"All right, Mr. Rock," he said at length. "If you want to buy the claim outright, you can have it. I won't assign."

Rock reached for his check-book. A few moments later saw the deal closed. When Booker had left, Rock turned to the telephone. When he was in communication with the local judge, he said: [Pg 273]

"I'd like to see you as soon as possible, Tom.—Yes, it's important.—All right. I'll be right down."

Somewhat in advance of Silvanus Rock's breakfast hour, Mr. Dupont entered the White Front Restaurant at Port Angeles and made his way toward his accustomed table in the sunlit alcove. His favorite waitress pulled out his chair and handed him his morning paper with a smile.

"I have a special for you this morning," she announced, "which will make your mouth water."

Mr. Dupont smacked his lips with boyish enthusiasm. "What is it?" he inquired.

"Corn-fed mackerel from the new Service Market which opened yesterday."

Mr. Dupont raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and the girl explained:

"A lot of service men have started a fish stall in a corner of the old California Market around the block from here. They just put in a few yesterday but from the way they sold out, I'd say they'd need the whole building before long. Our manager got around just in time to pick up the last of yesterday's catch. I saved one of them for you."

While the girl attended to his order, the resident manager of Winfield & Camby turned his attention to his paper. When the waitress returned with the crisply browned fish, she was obliged to speak twice before she was able to gain Mr. Dupont's attention. [Pg 274]

Hovering about his chair, she watched her patron nibble at the carefully-prepared delicacy with his eyes fixed intently upon his newspaper. The dimples disappeared quickly from the girl's face as she noted that the mackerel were growing cold. Then she turned from the table with a sigh. Men did not care what they ate as long as they had their paper.

Mr. Dupont finished his perusal of the news and shoved back his chair, leaving the special scarcely tasted.

"That was fine," he ejaculated. "Wish I had time to finish it. But I have a number of things to 'tend to before going to the office. By the way, where did you say that new market was located?"

He rose as he spoke and as the waitress again gave him the location of the building he sought, he pressed a substantial tip into her hand and hurried to the street. At the entrance to the California Market, he mingled with the throng and elbowed his way through the crowd which packed a corner of the big building. Then he adjusted his nose-glasses and peered over their heads.

Behind a rudely constructed counter of rough boards three smiling young men were endeavoring to satisfy the demands made upon them for the rapidly disappearing contents of a number of fish-boxes behind the counter. All about them were hastily scrawled signs which the public read with interest. [Pg 275]

WE HAVE DECLARED WAR ON THE HIGH COST OF LIVING.—FRESH FISH AT FIFTY PER CENT. OFF.—WE ARE DEALING DIRECT WITH THE PEOPLE.—SHOOT SQUARE WITH US AND WE WILL SHOOT SQUARE WITH YOU.

While Mr. Dupont read, another sign made its appearance.

"SOLD OUT. COME AGAIN."

Winfield & Camby's office force were surprised to find the manager on the job when they reached the salesrooms.

"Send me Mr. Black."

Mr. Dupont's orders were crisp and the publicity man hurried to obey his bidding.

"Bring me those clippings on that Legonia Fish Cannery stuff, Black. Also the ads in to-day's papers. Have you read that story of the mix-up between the Americans and the alien fishermen at Diablo Island?"

Black admitted he had not.

"Get *The Times* and read it," snapped the manager. "Come alive, Black, and as soon as Dalton comes in, tell him I want to see him right away."

It was high noon at Cavalan when the *Pelican* reentered the harbor after cruising in the open sea to pick up any words that might come from McCoy over the radio. Gregory watched the progress of the *Pelican* from the deck of the *Albatross*. [Pg 276]

"Looks as if they'd picked up something at last," he observed. "Hope it's from the fleet, saying they arrived at the cannery all right."

"They've hardly had time to make it yet," objected Dickie Lang. "I wouldn't expect to hear from them at Legonia for at least two hours."

The wireless operator appeared on deck as the *Pelican* drew abreast of the *Albatross*. "Message for Mr. Gregory," he shouted.

Gregory took the paper and glanced eagerly at the message. It was from McCoy and it read:

Rock here with attachment papers to tie us up pending payment of claim bought by him from Cannery Supply Company. We have until four o'clock to answer. Wire what to do.

Gregory glanced at his watch as he handed the message to Dickie Lang. Jumping to the deck of the *Pelican* he found Tom Howard.

"Tom," he said, "I want you to put to sea at once. Travel a straight course for Legonia and keep the radio going all the time. We'll be alongside in the *Richard*. Give us the answer you get over the radio by megaphone. Perhaps then it won't be necessary for us to go all the way over. But if it should be, we've got to get there before four o'clock."

Turning to the radio man, he dictated a message to Farnsworth setting forth the situation and instructing the attorney to take whatever steps were advisable to stay the attachment. The message was to be forwarded to Farnsworth from the cannery. It would give the lawyer time to act if he got busy at once.

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Returning to the *Albatross*, Gregory went over his plans with Dickie Lang.

"I'm going, too," the girl announced. "You are all in. It will be no fun driving the *Richard* to-day. If you do have to go across, you haven't much chance of making it on time in weather like this. Especially if we have to lag along with the *Pelican*."

"I know it," Gregory answered. "But I'm not figuring we'll have to go very far. But if we do have to go all the way we've got to be at Legonia before four o'clock. We've beaten Mascola but we'll lose all we've gained if we don't beat Rock."

Hawkins sensed that something important was taking place and straightway determined to accompany the party. A few minutes later the *Richard* and the *Pelican* rounded the tip of San Anselmo and headed into the storm. Then Hawkins' professional curiosity got the better of him.

"What's the big idea?" he asked.

Gregory explained, concluding optimistically: "I'm not worrying much. Farnsworth can fix things up all right. Then we'll go back to Cavalan."

"If he doesn't you can put up a bond for double the amount of the claim," Hawkins advised. "That will stay the attachment until you can raise the cash. You'd have to get it in person though—and before four o'clock."

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He looked at his watch.

"You'll have to go some to do that," he said. "If you could cut loose from the *Pelican* it would be a cinch, but of course you've got to wait until you get an answer to your message."

For some time the two boats fought their way through the rising waves. Then the fishing-boat signaled the *Richard* to draw closer. Gregory listened intently for the words of the man with the megaphone as he appeared on the *Pelican's* deck. The operator's message came faintly to them above the roar of the wind.

Mr. Farnsworth left his office at noon to-day on motor trip to country. Not expected to return until Monday. Little hope of reaching him to-night but will keep trying.

McCoy.

Hawkins swore softly at the intelligence. It was one-thirty already. Not much chance of reaching Legonia in time to accomplish much to-day.

"Tell McCoy I'll be at the cannery before four o'clock."

Dickie flashed a glance at the clock on the *Richard's* dash at Gregory's words. Every minute was going to count. It was up to the speed-boat to show what she could do. Opening the cut-out, the girl began to get the speed-craft under way. With a roar which drowned out the wind, the *Richard* mounted to the white-capped swells and raced for the mainland. There was only one chance in a hundred of making it on time. She set her lips grimly and gripped the wheel. If it was only one in a thousand, she'd take it—for Kenneth Gregory.

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CHAPTER XXVI

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THE VALUE OF PUBLICITY

"What time is it?"

Gregory huddled to the floor of the cockpit and drew out his watch. "Two-thirty," he shouted above the frenzied snapping of the open exhaust.

Dickie hurled the *Richard* into a mounting wall of green water which tottered above them. Then she cried through set lips: "Just about half-way. We're over the worst of it though. The nearer we get to shore the better time we'll make. We're sure going to need it too."

Gregory nodded absent-mindedly. His mind was filled with the problem of what he was going to do if he did arrive at Legonia on time. Dickie had made a wonderful run thus far, had handled the *Richard* masterfully against wind and wave, had more than done her part. Soon her work would

be done. Then his would begin. And what was he going to do?

The sum to be raised would have once seemed trifling. What would twelve hundred dollars have amounted to three months ago? Now, it looked like a million. There was no chance of raising it to-day. He must secure a bond.

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Rock had played his hand well. The bank president had hit in some way upon a plan of injuring him while he was away. And Rock could injure him. A tie-up at such a time would rob him of all he had gained by beating Mascola at El Diablo. The fishing fleet were loaded to the gunwales with albacore. The fish must be worked up at once. A loss of even twenty-four hours would render them worthless.

Gregory reflected bitterly that he had other creditors. Had Rock obtained other due and unpaid accounts? Even if such were not the case, the shutting down of his plant might be the signal for other wholesalers to launch a similar attack upon his credit. He realized sharply that he was accomplishing nothing. Merely thinking in circles. Hawkins had suggested putting up a bond. The newspaperman was doubtless familiar with the procedure. Perhaps it could be effected if they arrived early enough to arrange the matter. He turned to his friend for enlightenment.

"How long would it take for me to get a bond?" he asked.

Hawkins' usually cheery countenance clouded, as he replied:

"Not long, if you could find a surety company agent in his office. But the trouble is this is Saturday. I didn't think of it until you got that wire from your attorney. It's a legal holiday for the courts and it's hard to find anybody around you want." Hawkins' frown grew blacker as he continued: "Then there's another thing. You've got to have the judge approve the bond, granting you're lucky enough to get it. And looking for a judge on Saturday afternoon is like looking for the proverbial needle."

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Hawkins placed a hand wearily over his eyes and lapsed into silence.

Jack McCoy was at his wit's end. The fishing fleet from Diablo had just arrived, loaded with albacore. The captains reported a rough trip all the way over. They had seen or heard nothing from Gregory since leaving Cavalan. McCoy paced up and down the dock while he superintended the unloading of the fish. What a haul they had made! But what good would it do them? The whole plant would be tied up in less than an hour.

He jerked out his watch and looked at it again. It was seven minutes after three. Walking to the bay-side, he shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed anxiously in the direction of the inlet. Granting that Gregory arrived within the next half-hour, what could he possibly accomplish in so short a time? All McCoy's efforts to confer with Rock had been fruitless. The bank president could not be located and had left but one word.

He would be at the cannery at four o'clock.

The low-lying clouds which hung about the entrance to Crescent Bay rifted sullenly and exposed the ragged line of rocks which made up the jetty.

"Right on the dot," Dickie Lang exclaimed. "I was afraid maybe I was too far down. What time is it now?"

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"Three-thirty," Gregory answered. "We ought to dock in ten minutes."

"We'll be there in five unless I run into something going down the harbor."

"Stop at the municipal dock first," Gregory instructed her. "I'm going to run ashore and try to get a bond. Then we'll go on to the cannery."

Hawkins roused himself from his lethargy as they sped down the bay.

"I can help you some," he announced. "I can go on your bond. I own at least three times the amount of the claim in real estate in this county. That will save us some time. We can get a blank form from a notary and have him fill it out. Then all we've got to do is to find the judge."

"Doesn't Rock have to put up a bond, too?" Gregory asked. "He's trying his best to damage me. Haven't I any come-back?"

"Don't bank on Rock's bond," Hawkins answered. "He has to put one up, but it's pretty liable to be 'straw.' Fellows like him generally have a strangle-hold on a little place like this and they are pretty sure of their ground before they shoot. The chances are Rock's in the clear with a 'dummy' or else his property is all under cover. I'm going to make it my business to look the old fellow up and see how he's fixed. Men like him don't do anything without a motive. I'm going to try to find out what Rock is up to."

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At the municipal docks Gregory and Hawkins debarked hastily and ran down the main street of the town. Contrary to the newspaperman's fears they were successful in finding a young notary in his office. Stimulated by the promise of an extra fee, the man made out the papers in record time.

"Where can we find the local judge?" Gregory asked quickly.

The notary shook his head.

"Hard telling," he answered. "He went out a while ago with Mr. Rock and one of the real estate men in this office to look at a piece of property. Haven't seen Joe back since so I suppose they're still out."

When Gregory arrived at the cannery it lacked ten minutes of being four o'clock. Hurrying to the office the party from the *Richard* encountered McCoy talking with a well-dressed stranger.

"Here's Mr. Gregory now," exclaimed the house-manager running over to meet his employer. "What luck?" he whispered.

A glance at Gregory's face, however, was all McCoy needed to answer his question. The boss had failed to stay the attachment. The plant would be shut down and all the fish from Diablo would rot on the docks.

The visitor stepped forward with a smile and introduced himself. "I'm Mr. Dalton, of Winfield & Camby," he said pleasantly. "I kind of stole a march on you people to-day. Came down to inspect at the firm's request and found you all so busy that I just sneaked into your warehouse and went to work without saying anything to anybody." He smiled, as he added: "We kind of like to do that. With a new firm especially. It prevents them 'stacking' on us."

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"Have you finished your inspection?"

Gregory put the question with suppressed eagerness.

Dalton nodded. "Yes," he answered. "I'm well enough satisfied. Your stuff is fully up to par. Perhaps a little better than some standards. If you are willing to hold to your schedule of prices which you gave Mr. Dupont I'm ready to tie up with you right now."

A gleam of hope flashed to Gregory's eye.

"Isn't it customary to make a part payment when the contract is signed?" he asked.

Dalton smiled and shook his head.

"Ten dollars is enough," he answered.

Gregory's eyes were fixed earnestly on the representative from Winfield & Camby.

"Listen, Mr. Dalton," he said. "I've got to have twelve hundred and thirty-five dollars by four o'clock or I'll lose thousands. I've got fifteen boats outside loaded to the water-line with albacore besides all the canned stuff on the floor. I own the building, machinery and twenty-five fishing-boats. There's not a dollar against any part of it. I guess you've looked me up already and you know I'm telling the truth. If you give me an advance of twelve hundred and thirty-five dollars I'll close right now and pay you any interest you want. But I've got to have the money right now."

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Dalton jerked out his watch.

"Hardly time," he answered. "Even if Dupont would O.K. it, which I doubt."

Gregory was already at the telephone.

"I'll get him for you. Can you let me have the money if he says it's all right?"

As Dalton nodded in affirmation, Gregory's eye fell upon the open watch upon the desk. It lacked five minutes of four o'clock.

Mr. Dupont was seated in his private office puffing contentedly at a long panatella when the door opened and the publicity man entered.

"What's new, Black? Anything?"

Black smiled and dropped into a chair.

"Nothing new," he said. "It's getting to be an old story. Every evening paper in the city copied that fellow Hawkins' yarn in *The Times* about the sea fight at Diablo Island. Why, that man Gregory has enough free publicity to elect him to Congress. And he's advertising on the strength of it, like a department store. I was around to his service market a few minutes ago and people were fighting to get within shouting distance of the counter. I'd say he was a mighty good bet right now, Dupont. That stuff has the town all lit up. If his output is anywhere near up to standard I'd say it would be good business to tie him up and beat the others to it."

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As Mr. Dupont was about to speak, the telephone bell interrupted.

"Yes," he answered. "On the phone. Hello, Dalton.—What's that?—Yes, I get you.—How's the stuff?—It is, eh? How's that?—I see.—What do you think?—You would?—All right, Dalton. Sure, go ahead. Drop in at the apartments when you get back. I want to have a look at that contract."

Mr. Dalton hung up the instrument and faced about. "You win," he exclaimed. "Caught the old man just right. He'd have given me a month's vacation on full pay if I'd have had the nerve to

have asked for it." He wrote the check hurriedly as he spoke and passed it over to Gregory with the words: "And now, don't forget that you still have the contract to sign."

Gregory took the check with shaking fingers, at a loss for words to express fittingly his appreciation of the favor.

A moment later the door opened and Silvanus Rock entered with two strangers. The financier was on time. In another few seconds the hands of the watch would be pointing to four o'clock. Rock's beady eyes opened wider as he took in the occupants of the room.

"I regret that circumstances have forced upon me a very unpleasant duty," he began, but Gregory cut him short.

"They haven't," he said. "You guessed wrong this time, Mr. Rock. You've come for your money. Here it is."

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Endorsing the check, he passed it over.

Silvanus Rock's fat fingers closed about the check and his small eyes glinted. For a moment his heavy jaw sagged and the flabby flesh gathered in rolls and pressed tightly against his white collar. At length he found his voice. "This check is not certified," he exclaimed hotly. "I refuse to take it."

Dalton smiled.

"I guess that check isn't worrying you much, Mr. Rock," he said easily. "We're both pretty well acquainted with Winfield & Camby's reputation and between you and me, I hardly think they would relish any inference like that coming from a man in your position here."

Rock gulped, as he recognized the representative of the big jobbers. Still he hesitated, rolling the check nervously in his fingers.

Then Hawkins pressed forward.

"Don't urge him to take that check, Cap, if he doesn't want to," he drawled. "In fact I think it would make a much better story if he turned it down in the presence of all these witnesses."

Rock confronted Hawkins angrily. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Hawkins introduced himself with a happy smile. "I've been wanting to meet you for some time, Mr. Rock," he said. "I'm with the Port Angeles *Daily Times*. Since coming to Legonia I have become much interested in the local fishing situation. As yet there are several things I'm not quite clear on. I believe you could enlighten me. What about an interview?"

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Rock's face purpled, then grew white. His beady eyes shifted nervously from one person to another, and focused at last on Kenneth Gregory.

"I'll take the check," he said thickly in a voice that shook with emotion.

It was some time later when the business of the day came to a satisfactory close. Winfield & Camby's representative had departed with his signed contract which McCoy had designated as a "gilt-edge proposition." The fish were all unloaded and the night-shift had already started to work on them. The events of the past two days were beginning to bear fruit.

Mascola had been beaten. Rock had been beaten. The sea itself had been beaten by Dickie Lang and the *Richard*. All of these things had been gone over again and again. Weak from the reaction of the continued strain under which they had labored, the quartette of principals in the cannery drama slouched deep in their chairs and conversation began to lag.

Then Dickie Lang broke the silence.

"We've all forgotten to eat," she exclaimed. "If you'll all come up to the house I know Aunt Mary will do her best for you."

Gregory, Hawkins and McCoy accepted the invitation in unison. As they followed the girl out, Gregory observed to McCoy:

"I can't understand why Winfield & Camby faced about so suddenly. Why, they saved our lives. Who would have thought it?"

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"I would," Hawkins cut in. "Anybody would who stopped to think." He slapped Gregory affectionately on the shoulder. "Didn't I tell you, Cap, that I'd have old Dupont eating out of your hand in less than a week?" he challenged. "Old leather-face has an ear to the ground. He's heard the rumble of my thunder and he wants to get to cover."

His face lighted with enthusiasm as he went on: "Just wait until the lightning begins to play around some of these birds. Then you'll see them scamper. I'm going to the city to-morrow to have a talk with the C.E. and I've just got a sneaking hunch that I'm going to start something."

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CHAPTER XXVII

TO SOLVE THE MYSTERY

The days that followed the return of the victorious cannery fleet from El Diablo were filled with sunshine for Kenneth Gregory. The effect of Mascola's defeat was far-reaching, and, magnified by Hawkins' publicity, gave to the Legonia Fish Cannery a place of prominence in the public eye.

Taking immediate advantage of the growing popular interest, Winfield & Camby entered into an extensive advertising campaign on behalf of Gregory's product. The brands of the local firm were flaunted on the bill-boards of a dozen western agencies. Whole states were placarded. Newspapers featured the cooperative enterprise of the service men and commented upon it in glowing terms. A current-news company took several hundred feet of film illustrative of the industry and the signal victory achieved by the Americans over the alien fishermen.

Basking in the reflected lime-light, the Service Market caught on like "wild-fire" and taxed the fishermen to their utmost to supply the ever-increasing demand for the fresh product.

Gregory's bank balance began to mount. The financial sky was unclouded. Success loomed bright upon the horizon. [Pg 292]

In the hey-day of prosperity, no one noticed the faint clouds which crept upward from the skyline. Storm-signals fluttered feebly and were passed by unheeded. Then Mr. Dupont, of Winfield & Camby, sounded the warning.

"You're not getting enough fish," he exclaimed on one of his periodical visits to Legonia. "I'm building up a demand for your product which is fast becoming national. The way things are going now, you will not be able to supply it. Then I'll be out of pocket for my advertising. I'm cutting into your surplus every day. In two weeks you'll be down to bed-rock. What are you going to do about it?"

As Gregory considered the question, Mr. Dupont answered for him: "You've got to have more boats. If you haven't the money to tie up in them right now, I'll back you and take a mortgage on your plant. I'm willing to stick by you and back you to the limit. But you've got to furnish the goods."

Gregory made up his mind quickly. Dupont was right. Things were coming his way with a rush. What was the use of losing all he had gained by pursuing a policy of playing safe and "shooting nickels"? Men who made fortunes on the sea had to take chances. It grayed their hair and seamed their faces with premature lines. But that was part of the game,—the toll which the sea demanded.

"All right," he said. "Let's get down to business. I'll go back to the city with you and we'll fix things up. I know of some boats I can lease while Barrows is building the others. Let's go." [Pg 293]

From the arrival of the new craft which went to make up the greater cannery fleet, misfortune stalked grimly in its wake. Fishing was universally poor. The boats were forced to cruise wide areas in order to supply fish enough for the cannery and Service Market. Areas which placed them beyond reach of the radio and gave Mascola his chance. The Italian struck without warning. Angered by the loss of his prestige, strengthened by his augmented fleet, he began to hector the extreme outposts beyond reach of the wireless.

Then ensued a long period of stormy weather. Owing to new and inexperienced crews and the increasing interference of Mascola's men, a number of Gregory's vessels were wrecked on the island shores and salvaged with great difficulty and expense. With the extended radius of his operations, overhead expenses mounted perceptibly, cutting down profits and adding to the multiplying worries of the young cannery-owner in countless ways.

At the close of one particularly trying day he sat alone in the cannery office and stared moodily at a wireless despatch which lay on the desk before him. It came from Diablo and reported the arrival of a portion of his fleet off the Hell-Hole.

The message was phrased in the most optimistic terms. Fish appeared to be plentiful. The weather was fine, the sea smooth. There was no sign of interference from any quarter. [Pg 294]

Yet the worried lines which creased Gregory's forehead deepened. It had been that way often of late at devil island. No matter how clear the sky appeared, the shadow of El Diablo bulked dark and sinister across the sunlit horizon. Something would happen out there to-night. He felt sure of it. He should have gone with the fleet. But how could he? He was far down the coast with the new boats when they left.

Diablo, he realized sharply, was getting on his nerves. Were the obstacles which he had encountered about the island due to something more than a mere defense of good fishing grounds? It was not the first time he had asked himself the question. There was something wrong at El Diablo. He could not shake off the feeling. As he sat down to wait for the evil tidings he felt sure would come, he took up an unopened letter from Hawkins which had been on his desk two days. A part of the letter caused him to read it the second time.

"So I got to nosing around and incidentally tumbled on to something which I think may

be of interest to you. Would it surprise you to know that Mascola does not own a single fishing-boat? It did me, though I might have known it if I had remembered the federal statute which prohibits any but American-owned fishing vessels from operating in American waters.

"Rock and Bandrist own the alien fleet. Mascola, you see, is an alien. Bandrist apparently is not. I wish by the way you'd tell me all you can of that bird. I'm looking up Silvanus myself. I'm on the trail of a pretty good story, Cap, if it works out all right. Shouldn't be surprised if I might not drop in on you any time. If I do, I'll want a boat to go over to Diablo. Keep this all under your hat. It isn't censored."

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For some time Gregory stared at Hawkins' letter. The information gleaned from its contents shed a new light upon El Diablo. Bandrist and Rock were in cahoots. Both were interested in keeping him away from Diablo. Something was wrong on the island. It was Mascola's job to keep strange craft from going there to find out. With the words strange craft, his mind flashed to a new tangent. To his half-closed eyes came a vision of a long gray hull, running dark, gliding through the water toward them like a destructive shadow. Bronson had said it looked like the *Gray Ghost*. What was the *Gray Ghost*? Where did she clear from? And what was her purpose in putting in in the dark to Hell-Hole?

The questions multiplied with the smoke-wreaths and in the blue haze which enveloped him, Kenneth Gregory beheld his vague and intangible suspicions gradually crystallizing into three fundamental hypotheses: Something crooked was being pulled off at Diablo. Rock and Bandrist were back of it. The isolation of the island was threatened by the increasing activities of the American fleet in that vicinity. Mascola's opportunity was only a means to an end.

Gregory's frown deepened. What Rock and Bandrist were doing at Diablo concerned him in itself, not at all. In so far as it related to Mascola's interference, however, it was all-important. Mascola was the one man who stood between him and his cherished dreams. If Rock and Bandrist were behind Mascola, as he imagined, would it not be pursuing a "cart before horse" policy to continue his expensive militant opposition to the Italian? Why not fathom the motive which lay behind Mascola's action? If Diablo held a secret, the guarding of which threatened his business existence, why should he not as an American citizen take the initiative and—

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His meditations were disturbed by a soft tap on the office door. Dickie Lang entered.

"I knew I'd find you here," she said. "Smoking yourself to death and worrying gray. I've come to take you outside for a while. You'll be sick if you go on like this. Forget for a while and come with me. The boys are having a mussel-bake on the beach and they've sent for you. If you have ever eaten kelp-baked mussels you'll not wait to be urged. The grunion should run to-night too, and I want you to see them."

Gregory drew his fingers through his tousled hair and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I can't go. I'm waiting for a radio from Diablo."

"Bosh!" the girl interrupted. "It won't take one of the boys five minutes to bring you the message if it comes while you're gone." She came closer and placed a hand on his arm. "Please come," she said. "Just to please me."

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Gregory had no alternative. Leaving word with one of the night men to send him any radio despatch at once, he followed Dickie to the beach, where the service men sat cross-legged about a blazing fire of drift-wood. Gregory sank to the sand beside the dark mound of dampened kelp and watched the operations of the chef as he busied himself in removing the heavy pieces of canvas which covered the sea-grass.

"It's nature's fireless-cooker," explained the girl as she took her place beside him. "You can cook most anything in an oven like that if you know how. It's simple enough too. All you have to do is to scoop out a hole in the sand and line it with rocks to hold in the heat. Then build your fire and let it burn for a couple of hours to get a good bed of coals. Cover them with a thin layer of damp kelp and put in the potatoes. Another layer of sea-weed, then the roasting-ears. After that come the fish, wrapped in paper. Then the mussels, clams or anything else you want. When you get them all in, cover the whole thing with a lot of heavy kelp and batten it down with a big piece of canvas. The whole trick is knowing just when to open the oven. Nothing can burn so it's better to leave it too long than to try to hurry things."

Gregory took the tin-plate, piled high with its smoking delicacies, and leisurely freed a succulent mussel from its shell. As he placed it in his mouth his eyes lit up with genuine pleasure and the anxious lines slowly disappeared from his face.

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"What do you think of them?"

He could only gasp his appreciation. Dickie smiled at the rapidly disappearing contents of his plate. He looked like a new man already. Nothing like a mussel-bake in the open air to make people forget their troubles.

About the dying drift-wood fire, the service men drew closer together and began to sing.

"There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams."

As their voices rose above the dull boom of the surf, Gregory's thoughts turned to the words of the song. The trail had been long. How long and how devious, he had never quite before realized. Perhaps it was because he was tired and the firelight made him think. The "land of his dreams" was still far ahead. Blocked from his vision for the time being by an intangible something which lay like a dark shadow across the path.

"Over there. Over there."

He started and looked involuntarily toward the phosphorescent line of breakers. Over there? Once it had meant France. Now it came to him with a new meaning. Beyond the gleaming waves he fancied he could see the jagged shore-line of El Diablo.

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"And we won't come back,
Till it's over, over there."

Gregory's eyes narrowed. When "it was over, over there," perhaps it would be over everywhere. Then, and only then, would he reach "the land of his dreams." He looked guiltily at Dickie Lang and was glad that she could not read his thoughts concerning the end of the long trail.

"What were you thinking of, just then? I never saw you look like that before."

It was the eternal feminine speaking.

Gregory shook his head. "I never did look like that before," he said. "Because I never thought quite that far. Some day perhaps I'll tell you what I was thinking."

The moon, which had shyly appeared over the low brown hills, grew bolder and mingled its rays with those of the fire in crowding back the shadows. Then a shout came from the water.

"Grunion."

The singing ceased abruptly and the service men scrambled to their feet and raced down the beach.

Dickie made haste to follow.

"Come on," she cried to Gregory. "And I'll show you the sight of your life."

Following the girl to the wet sands, Gregory was amazed at the spectacle. The silver waves were alive with glistening fish. Borne high on the crest of the tumbling breakers, they surged to the beach by thousands and lay quivering like quick-silver, stranded in the sand by the back-wash. With a deafening shout men scrambled to the water's edge and scooped them up in their hands. Dickie rushed to the water and returned with a small fish, somewhat resembling a sardine.

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"Grunion," she announced. "They come up at certain seasons of the year to spawn. There are only three places on the coast south of the Golden Gate where they run. For three or four nights now while the tide is high and the moon full they'll be swept up on this beach and left to lay their eggs in the wet sand. If you get closer you can see them standing on their tails. You'll never believe it unless you do see it. You've got to work fast to get them for they hop along the beach only for a second. Then the next breaker takes them out."

Handing him one of the little fish, she continued: "Take him up to the fire and look at him. Against a good light you can see clear through them. If you had a skillet hot on the coals and threw in a handful of grunion you could never have a finer dish. But they won't hardly keep over night. For that reason they are good for nothing, commercially."

She paused abruptly and listened. "I thought I heard some one calling," she said.

Turning about they saw three men standing by the fire.

"Maybe it's some word from the boys," Gregory exclaimed. "Let's go and see."

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At the fireside they came upon Hawkins with two strangers, whom he introduced as brothers of his craft. Drawing Gregory aside while Dickie conversed with Slade and Billings, he said:

"Listen, Cap. I want a boat and a man to run it who knows Diablo from the water-line up. I'm on the trail of the biggest kind of a scoop. I can't give you all the dope but I can tell you a few things that will open your eyes."

The two men drew farther into the shadows and conferred in low-pitched voices, broken now and then by Gregory's muttered exclamations. While they talked one of the night men from the cannery hurried on to the scene.

"Message for Mr. Gregory," he called.

Gregory took the message and drew nearer the coals. In the red glow of the fire, he read:

From: Launch *Snipe*
At Sea. Five miles off Hell-Hole.

Got into fight with Mascola about an hour ago. His boats drove ours from island. His men drunk and armed with shotguns. Some of boys pretty well filled up. *Curlaw* lagged with engine trouble and was cut in two off Hell-Hole Isthmus. Sunk in five minutes by

some big boat, running dark. *Albatross* picked up crew. All saved. Wire what to do. Twelve boats here. Others at Cavalan for repairs.

Jones.

Dickie's eyes shone angrily at the message. "Damn them!" she cried. "They got my *Curlew*." Grasping Gregory's arm, she exclaimed: "There's a bunch of the fleet off San Anselmo on the mainland side. There's some more a few miles down the coast from Cavalan. They can all make Diablo in two hours if you wire them right away. We can go over in the *Richard* and round them up and smash Mascola's whole fleet. What if they have shotguns? We have rifles. Come on. What are you waiting for?"

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Dickie Lang was breathless. Her cheeks glowed. Her eyes were shining.

Gregory shook his head slowly and looked at Hawkins.

"The *Gray Ghost* ran the *Curlew* down about an hour ago off the Hell-Hole Isthmus," he said.

The two strangers drew closer and listened intently to the news while Dickie chafed at Gregory's failure to get under way.

"That means we've got to be off," exclaimed one of the men. "How about going over in that speed-boat of yours?"

Gregory nodded. "That's what I was figuring on," he said. "I'm going to send a radio to all my boats within a thirty-mile radius of the island to reinforce the fleet and mix it with Mascola off the Hell-Hole Isthmus on the north side. While they're busy on that side, it will leave us a clear field on the other."

Dickie's eyes opened wide at his words. As they moved away together in the direction of the cannery, she cried: "I don't understand at all. Aren't you going to help the boys out?"

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Gregory shook his head and the grim lines tightened about his mouth.

"No," he answered. "Not this time. That is what Rock, Bandrist and Mascola think I am going to do. But I'm going to fool them. There's something back of all this that we can only guess at now. Diablo has a secret our fathers died to learn. I'm sure of it now. To-night I'm going to find out what it is."

CHAPTER XXVIII

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THE ISLAND'S PRISONER

Diablo was steeped in moonlight. For miles about the sea gleamed like a mirror. The grim mountains which guarded the shore were robed in saffron and checkered with black by the dark shadows of the towering peaks as they fell athwart the hillsides and mingled with the darkness which hugged the canyons.

From a small cave high up on a rocky canyon wall the figure of a man emerged and crept silently into the shadows. Picking his way with great caution along a winding sheep-trail, he reached the summit of the hill and looked about. The damp sea air fanned his long hair and caused him to look in the direction of the fleecy white clouds which were creeping upward from the horizon. Soon there would be fog. Then he could continue on his way to the brackish spring on the bluff-side overlooking the south shore. From there it was only a stone's throw to the beach where the mussels and abalones clung so thickly to the rocks.

The thought of the raw shellfish sickened him. For days he had had nothing else to eat. Shrinking closer into the shadows of the sage and cactus, he waited for the fog. Then he could go on on his nightly journey. How many months had he been a prisoner on El Diablo? He had lost all track of time. But what did it matter? Soon he would be dead. For warm food and a drink of pure water he would almost give himself up now.

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Borne on the fog-wind came cries and shouts from the other side of the island. Perhaps help was coming at last. But no, it was only the fishermen fighting among themselves off the Hell-Hole. He had heard them many times before across the narrow isthmus. They would only go away as they had always done and leave him to starve. The faint pulsing of a motor launch directed his attention to the sea.

In the paling moonlight, a gray blot clouded the water, moved slowly among the rocks and merged with the shadows. It was the same boat he had seen so often in the past. Always it came to the island at night, running dark. Once in the bright moonlight he had seen men land on the rocks and walk up the beach to a large cave which extended far into the cliff. As he had huddled closer into the scant shadows of the rock-mottled ledge, other men had come down the trail from the island and he had been forced to slide into the chilling waters of a grass-grown pool to escape detection. Mother of God, it had been a narrow escape.

The fog thickened and he continued on his way to the spring. Creeping noiselessly through the

brush he reached the trail which led downward to the beach. Then he stopped and listened. The soft grating of a muted chain caused him to drop lower in the grass and draw back. Silently he retraced his steps until he reached the cover of the heavier brush which fringed the hillside.

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The strange vessel was dropping anchor again in the little cove. He dared not run the risk of going farther down the trail. There were mussels and abalones around the next point. He would get them. By that time perhaps the men would be gone and he could return by the spring. The fog settled close about him, blinding his eyes and clinging to his shivering body. For a moment he stopped and sucked thirstily at the wet grass. Then he crawled on.

Planing high on the glistening waves, the *Richard* sped onward across the moonlit sea in the direction of El Diablo. At the wheel, Kenneth Gregory strove to concentrate his mind upon the quest which lay before him. But another thought obtruded with ever recurring frequency. Why had he permitted Dickie Lang to accompany the party to the island? There would be danger. There was always danger at El Diablo. Landing upon the island would be an added risk if Hawkins' suspicions had any grounds for fact. The girl's threat that she would withdraw her support from the cannery if not permitted to go with the expedition, was only a bluff: Why had he not remained firm? He knew the answer. There was a look in the girl's eyes which he could not withstand. Something in her voice which left him powerless to refuse as she had said:

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"Our fathers were not afraid. They died in one boat to learn Diablo's secret. We've fought together from the start. Don't leave me at the finish." She might have added: "If they get you, they might as well get me too."

But her eyes told him that. Well, it was too late now to change his mind. The girl was here and it was up to him to leave her in a place of safety if such could be found upon the island. While Hawkins conferred with his two friends, Gregory laid his plans.

He would leave Dickie with the *Richard*. She had her automatic and a rifle. They would lay in close to shore on the south shore, opposite the Hell-Hole. The island was narrowest there and it was generally in that vicinity that things had happened oftenest in the past. That was where the *Gray Ghost* put in, the place too where his father and Bill Lang had met their death. With the fishing fleet fighting Mascola's boats on the north side the opposite shore of the island might not be held in such rigid surveillance.

His thoughts turned again to the girl by his side. The rock-shadowed coves would afford a fair anchorage for the *Richard*, even on such a night as this. There Dickie could see without being seen. Should danger threaten while the landing party were ashore, she must put to sea. He must make that perfectly clear to her at once.

As he expected, he encountered stubborn resistance from Dickie Lang. If there was anything to be found out, she wanted to be there to see it. She was not afraid. She could shoot as well as a bunch of newspapermen. What was the idea of leaving her clear out of it? Gregory smiled at her slurring reference to Hawkins' two friends. Then he reflected that what the girl did not know concerning the real object of the mission to Diablo would cause her no worry. Until the party landed at least, he was in command of the expedition. And orders must be obeyed.

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"You'll have to do as I say," he concluded. "Whether you like it or not."

Dickie's lip curled and she turned her head away to hide her face. "All right," she answered. "I'll stay on the *Richard*." To herself, she added: "But I'll use my own judgment when it comes to running away."

In the silence of the fog the prisoner of El Diablo crept warily on. Deep ravines laced his path and yawned close about the trail. A misstep would hurl him to the bottom of the rock-lined gorge which was swallowed up in the mists at his feet. Suddenly he stopped and threw himself to full length on the ground. Far above him the solid whiteness of the fog wall was broken by irregular flashes of blue. To his ears came the sound of snapping spluttering flames.

Covering his head with his arms, he crossed himself. The devil was speaking from the hilltop. On two other occasions he had heard the crackling of the flames near the old sheep-herder's shack on the crest of the hill. He had taken the wrong trail. Had gone too far. Worming his way down the path he fled from the flashes of blue light.

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For some time he retraced his steps in silence, thanking his saints that the devil had spoken to warn him from the spot. Then the soft breathing of a motor-launch caused him to stop and listen. He was again at the bluff-side. Soon he would reach the rocks. The echoes of the motor-boat died suddenly away and he groped his way to the edge of the cliff and scrambled down the trail.

"You'd better take her now. The fog's getting pretty thick and I don't know the shore-line along here."

Dickie Lang took the wheel.

"I don't know it any too well myself," she admitted. "We'll have to go mighty slow and feel our way along."

Throttling to quarter-speed they skirted the south shore of the island and nosed their way along the coast. At length the girl suggested a halt.

"We ought to be nearly up to the Hell-Hole Isthmus by now," she whispered. "On the beach along here there should be a lot of tide-water caves if we're where I think. Around the next point is the goose-neck. We'd better go ashore and have a look. We may be too far down already."

Gregory agreed.

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"I'll take Hawkins and Slade and row ashore," he said. "Billings can stay with you on the launch."

Dickie's objections were quickly overruled and the canvas-wrapped anchor chain was lowered into the water while the dory was pulled alongside.

"Look along the base of the cliff for the caves," cautioned the girl in a low voice. "And watch out for your oars. Keep them in the water and be sure the wrappings fit tight in the locks."

Gregory nodded and took his place in the skiff.

"We'll be back in five minutes," he said. Then he shoved the dory out into the fog.

From the ledge of rock which bordered the cove, the half-starved man pulled the razor-backed mussels from the sea-grass and broke them open with his pocket-knife. For some time he ate rapidly. Then he ceased pulling at the shellfish and listened. A boat was coming to anchor in the cove. He could hear the soft slip of the chain through the chaulks. Perhaps they would land on the beach. Then he would be trapped on the ledge until they had gone.

Picking his way over the barnacled rocks he started for the beach. As he climbed from the ledge, he stopped suddenly and clung to the rocks. On the beach at his feet, and only a few feet away, he heard the pebbles grate beneath the bow of a boat. The men were already landing. Staring into the opaque wall of white, he saw it clouded by three dark blots. Followed the rattle of stones, the soft crunch of the sand dying slowly away into silence. The men had gone on up the beach.

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The man who clung to the rocks climbed noiselessly to the sand, his brain burning with one great idea. While the visitors were gone from the place he would steal their boat. In the fog no one could find him. He could row about the island and be picked up at sea in the morning by some fishing-boat. The great chance had come to him at last.

Perhaps the men had left another to guard the boat. The thought caused him to draw his pocket-knife. Grasping it tightly in his shaking fingers, he crawled silently over the wet sand, feeling for the sides of the dory with his extended arm.

Hope danced brightly before his eyes as he touched the boat. Weakened by hunger, he rubbed his shriveled limbs and tottered to his feet, waving his knife. Then he chuckled aloud. There was no one in the boat.

Throwing the knife upon one of the seats, he leaped again to the sand and began to shove. Mother of God, he had no strength. The bottom grated noisily on the pebbles. Then the dory slid into the water. Laughing to himself, he threw his body over the rail and felt about for the oars.

Men were running down the beach. He had not a second to lose. His hand closed upon the oars. He was saved. Tugging feebly at the heavy sweeps, he drew them through the water with all his might and the dory moved slowly forward. Again his weakened muscles responded to the fevered call of his brain. Suddenly he felt the dory strike a heavy object ahead. Thrown half from his seat by the impact he dropped an oar, regained it on the instant and pushed the skiff away from the launch as hands reached out to grasp it. Then he heard the low murmur of voices from the motor-boat. As he headed close in to the rocks he felt the stern of the dory dip sharply.

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Gregory whirled at the sharp rattle of oars and raced down the beach in the direction of the dory. Some one was meddling with their boat. When he reached the place where they had left the skiff, he found it gone. From the waters of the little cove came the creak of oar-locks. Plunging into the water, Gregory swam rapidly in the direction of the launch. Whoever had taken the boat was heading straight for the *Richard*.

A sharp bump sounded close ahead and Gregory redoubled his efforts to reach the side of the launch. Then he narrowly escaped being run down by the small boat which had turned and was heading in for the rocks. Grasping the stern of the dory as it moved by him, he hung for a moment while he regained his wind, striving vainly to ascertain how many passengers the skiff carried.

Suddenly he noticed that the oars no longer disturbed the water and the skiff had lost its way. Then he heard the sound of shuffling footsteps coming toward the stern. Releasing his hold, he swam along the side and caught the bow, dragged his body from the water and tumbled into the boat. The same instant a heavy oar crashed against the seat close to his head and a dark figure flung itself upon him.

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It was but the work of a moment for Gregory to overpower the thief of the small boat and bind him with the dory's painter. The man had fought desperately only for a moment, then collapsed, and gibbering with fear had allowed himself to be bound without a struggle.

Turning the skiff about, Gregory started for the launch. Had the man landed others on the *Richard*? Surely he had reached the speed-boat and had put about. Was he bent only upon stealing the boat or was he only one of many who would be down upon them any minute?

Arriving alongside the *Richard* Dickie hailed him softly.

"Some fellow tried to steal our boat," he explained to the girl. "If you'll get Billings to help me get him aboard I'll go back and pick up the boys."

Dickie's companion in the launch assisted him in lifting the prisoner to the *Richard's* darkened cockpit where he lay huddled in a heap.

As Gregory rowed away in the direction of the shore, Billings veiled an electric torch and allowed its tiny ray to fall full upon the face of the quivering prisoner.

"A greaser," he whispered to the girl. "Look. He's scared to death."

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Dickie looked quickly at the crumpled little figure. Then she fell on her knees close beside the man and peered intently into his shriveled face. For an instant she remained motionless staring into the face of the trembling captive.

"My God!" she whispered. "It's Mexican Joe."

CHAPTER XXIX

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UNDER ORDERS

"You have seen nothing of the speed-boat from Legonia?"

Mascola shook his head in answer to the question and reached for the bottle which stood on the table in Bandrist's ranch-house.

Bandrist jerked it away. "Cut that out," he said sternly. "You've had enough. To-night you have work to do. You must keep sober."

Mascola scowled, glaring angrily at the islander as he went on:

"Mr. Gregory left Legonia at ten-thirty with his speed-boat. There were five in the launch. Four men and Miss Lang."

Mascola drew in his breath sharply.

"That damned Lang girl," he began. "She is a——"

Bandrist slid from his chair with a quick movement which carried him wriggling about the table.

"Keep your tongue still," he gritted as he towered over the Italian. "You talk too much."

Mascola started from his chair, but there was a look in Bandrist's eyes which made him drop back. A sneering smile played about the Italian's lips but he said nothing. If Bandrist was a fool about a woman, what was that to him? He could not afford to quarrel with the islander. Not yet.

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"How did Peters know they were coming here?" he asked after a moment.

"He didn't," Bandrist answered shortly. "But it is only natural that they should come here. Their boats have been fishing along the north shore of the island. Your men failed to drive them off."

Mascola flushed.

"My men did drive them off," he contradicted hotly. "Only a few minutes ago they returned with other boats. I will drive those off too."

Bandrist smiled insultingly.

"Why don't you do it?" he challenged. "To-night is a time I must have something more than talk. I want you to go down and join your fleet at once, keep a close watch and if the speed-boat does not arrive within a half-hour, let me know immediately."

Mascola made no move to obey.

"Gonzalez is laying in at the goose-neck," he said. "I sent Rossi round to join him. The *Fuor d'Italia* lies in the little cove beyond."

Bandrist's blue eyes flashed. "I can tend to that," he exclaimed. "You do what you're told and quit meddling with my business."

"It's my business too," Mascola retorted doggedly. "Gonzalez is becoming angry at the delay. He will wait no longer."

Bandrist walked slowly to the window and stared out into the fog. When he faced about an automatic shone dully in his hand.

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"Do as I tell you," he ordered quietly. "And do it quick."

Mascola's face purpled. Still he made no move to do Bandrist's bidding. "Don't forget," he said thickly, "that there are others who know besides you and me. If anything happens to me at Diablo there is one who will tell what he knows. I have seen to that."

Bandrist's fingers tightened on the revolver. Then he slowly replaced it in his pocket. The Italian might only be bluffing, but it was best to take no unnecessary chances. Mastering his anger at Mascola's insubordination, Bandrist walked again to the table.

"Perhaps you are right," he said pleasantly. "Let us go on to the goose-neck."

When Gregory returned to the *Richard* with Slade and Hawkins he found Dickie Lang huddled close beside the crumpled figure of his captive. The girl was sobbing softly as she listened to the whispered words of the little Mexican.

Feeling his way to her side, he placed an arm about her, and drawing her away from the other man, waited for her to speak. Then she explained in a voice shaken by tears.

"It's Mexican Joe. He was with our fathers on the *Gull*. No one knew it at Legonia. He went out with them at midnight and reached Diablo a little before daybreak. They left him on the launch while they went ashore. He saw them murdered on the beach. The launch was run down a few minutes later. Joe was thrown overboard. He struck his head on the rocks. When he came to, he heard them searching for him but he hid in the sea-grass and escaped to the other side of the island. He's been living there ever since in a cave in the hills. It was he who stole the gun and provisions from the *Petrel*."

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Gregory held the girl close as she told the Mexican's story. For an instant tears dimmed his eyes, then melted away before the white-hot heat of the blood-lust which surged into his heart. His father had been murdered at El Diablo. By whom? He put the question.

The girl's fingers tightened on his arm and she placed her lips close to his ear.

"A number of men overpowered them on the beach and drowned them. Mascola was with them."

Gregory's jaws locked and the muscles of his body grew tense. Mascola had murdered his father and Bill Lang. Releasing the girl, he hurried over to the three men who were talking to the Mexican and grasped Hawkins by the arm.

"What are we waiting for?" he cried. "While you're talking the man may get away."

"Just a minute, Cap," Hawkins remonstrated. "Things are coming along fine. Billings and Slade are learning a lot from the Mex. As soon as they get him filled up with those sandwiches he's going to show us the wireless tower and the cove where the *Gray Ghost* put in to-night. He says there's a cave close by where he saw——"

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Gregory shook off his restraining arm.

"What is all that to me?" he flashed. "Don't you know that Mascola murdered my father? Let the men go where they will. I'm going after Mascola."

Hawkins started at Gregory's words.

"I didn't know, Cap," he muttered blankly. For a brief instant he strove to express his sympathy for his friend. Then he gave it up. "Brace up, old man," he said at last. "Take a grip on yourself. You can't do anything over here alone. Before morning we'll have the whole gang rounded up and Mascola with them. I guess the boys are ready to go now."

Gregory shivered in his wet clothes and Hawkins pressed his slicker upon him. While the men took their places in the skiff Gregory found Dickie Lang. The girl came into his outstretched arms and clung close to him in the darkness.

"Take me with you," she pleaded. "Don't leave me here. I can't stand it."

He released her gently and shook his head.

"No, dearest," he said softly. "If you were with us I might be afraid. And I can't afford to be afraid to-night. Stay close and keep under cover. If the fog lifts, pull the anchor and drift in to the shadow of the rocks."

"Why don't you tell me what you are going to do?" the girl asked. "You know that——"

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Gregory drew her closer.

"I'm going to get Mascola," he answered in a whisper. Then his voice changed suddenly. "And if I don't come back," he went on. "You'll know now that I love you."

For an instant his lips met hers. Then he climbed over the coaming and joined the men in the dory. Dickie listened to the soft creak of the oar-locks until the sound was no longer audible.

Mascola had killed her father and Richard Gregory. His son had gone to bring the Italian to justice. But what could five men do on the island against the hordes of Bandrist and Mascola? Who were the mysterious strangers who had accompanied them from Legonia? The questions

crowded close upon one another as they raced through her brain. Then her mind surrendered to a single thought,—a thought which warmed her heart and took possession of her being.

"You'll know now that I love you."

She whispered the words softly through lips which were still warm with the memory of Gregory's kiss. Hope surged into her heart. God was good. Breathing a prayer for the safety of the man she loved, she caught up her rifle and sat down to wait.

The men from the launch landed silently on the beach and hid the skiff among the rocks. Then they followed the Mexican up the trail. Crawling through the brush, they halted at length at their guide's direction.

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"From the top of the hill," he whispered, "the devil speaks."

Billings caught the Mexican by the arm.

"Come," he said. "Lead the way and the devil will speak no longer."

When the sheep-herder's shack loomed across their path, Slade commanded a halt. Then he gave orders to surround the building. As the men drew near the cabin the door opened suddenly and a man stepped out. Before he could close the door, Slade and Hawkins were upon him. Gregory and Billings darted for the open doorway as the light disappeared from within. From the fog-shrouded cabin came the sound of muffled blows, the quick breathing of men, the rasp of feet upon the creaking floor. A choking cry died away into silence. Silence broken after a moment by a sharp click. Then another. Slade relighted the lamp and turned to examine the two white-faced men who lay handcuffed on the floor.

"Look like 'snowbirds,'" he said. "The two of them haven't the strength of one healthy cat."

Passing the men over to Billings with instructions to search them, he walked to the radio switch-board and examined it carefully.

"They've got a regular set just the same," he said half-admiringly. "They could reach Encinitas with this one all right."

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Seating himself on a stool by the board he placed his hand on the key.

"I'm going to try to get the *Bennington*," he said.

Billings nodded. "She ought to be close along shore by now," he answered. "If they left when they said they would."

While the search went on the radio spluttered spasmodically. Finding nothing of value on the persons of his captives, Billings bared the arms of the two men and scrutinized the flesh intently in the yellow lamplight.

"Snowbirds," he announced. "One of them's punctured up one side and down the other. Other's not so bad. Good business I'd say for them to get hold of a couple of fellows like these. They're about the only ones they could get to stick in a God-forsaken hole like this and keep their mouths shut."

He rose as he spoke and began to move slowly about the room.

"Tell the Mexican to keep a good lookout outside," he instructed Hawkins. "Then you and your friend can help me go through the shack."

Gregory assisted mechanically in the search but with little interest. The sooner they were through the sooner they would go down to the cove where the *Gray Ghost* lay at anchor. Then he would find Mascola. A muttered exclamation from Hawkins caused him to look up quickly.

The newspaperman was handing Billings a cigar-shaped capsule half filled with a coarse white powder.

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"What's this, Jack?" he asked. "Looks like sugar. Found it in the grub-locker."

Billings poured the contents of the capsule into the palm of his hand. For a moment he scrutinized it intently. "That's the stuff we're looking for," he said quietly. "Though I never saw it in a package like that before."

Slade held up a hand for silence and pulled his head-set closer about his ears. For a moment his attention was held by the instrument. Then his hand again sought the key. When the sputtering of the radio had died away he announced:

"Got the *Bennington*. She's about a mile off the goose-neck. They're going to land in the next cove. The *Gray Ghost's* at anchor now off the isthmus cove. Mascola's speed-boat passed them in the fog about an hour ago. He's lying in somewhere farther down."

He rose as he spoke and began to wreck the radio set.

"Tie those fellows up good, Jack," he instructed Billings. "We don't want to be bothered with them down below. We've got to be on our way. The boys will be there by the time we get down the hill. What's that you've got there?"

Billings extended the capsule and Slade examined it curiously.

"Queer package," he said. "But it's the straight dope."

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Hawkins' eyes shone with excitement as he crowded closer to Slade. "What is it, Tom?" he asked.

"Heroin," answered Slade quickly. "A refined product of opium. Never saw it put up like this before though. When we hit the beach maybe we'll learn the idea."

Beckoning Gregory to his side, Slade took from his pocket a deputy shield of the United States Customs and pinned it on the young man's vest.

"For your own protection," he explained. Then he added: "You must act entirely under my orders from now on, Mr. Gregory. Do only what I tell you. Nothing more. You have been in the service of the government before. You know what it means."

A few moments later the four men followed the Mexican down the trail leading to the goose-neck.

Under orders. Do only what I tell you. Nothing more. The words echoed in Gregory's mind. Slade did not understand. Mascola was to the revenue man only one of many. A man to be arrested and tried. Perhaps acquitted on a mere technicality of law or a perjured alibi. Slade did not know the Italian. Had Dickie Lang not said that Mascola laughed at the courts? Gregory's jaw set tighter as he descended the trail. To-night, orders or no orders, he would bring Mascola to justice by the law of the sea.

CHAPTER XXX

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THE FIGHT IN THE CAVE

With the sands of the sea-beach gritting beneath their feet, Slade ordered a halt and conferred with the Mexican. Then he whispered to Billings: "This is the isthmus bay where I told the men to land. I know where I am now all right. Around the next point is the goose-neck. The cave Joe speaks of is at the far end of the cove. It has two entrances, one from the bluff and one from the beach. Jack Smith's been in it. I'm going to send him ahead. Take a look for the landing boats down by the water."

Billings disappeared on the instant and a moment later rejoined his chief.

"Everything's O.K.," he announced. "The men have landed and are standing by for instructions."

"Tell them to carry the dingies clear of the tide and join me here," Slade directed. "Send one boat back to the *Bennington* and have the skipper move her around to the goose-neck in ten minutes. Tell him to nail anything that's at anchor in the cove."

Billings returned in a few minutes accompanied by the men from the revenue cutter. Silently they grouped themselves about their chief and waited for instructions.

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Gregory crowded closer and listened while Slade gave the men their orders. The deputies were to be divided. A few of the best trained men, familiar with the local topography, were to scout on in advance, entering the cave from the bluff-side. The others were to move along the beach, surround the main entrance and cut off escape to the water. All were to challenge once. Then shoot to kill.

Slade selected his men carefully. When he came to Gregory he said: "Stay with the main body on the beach."

It was in Gregory's mind to argue. Slade was throwing him into the discard. What chance would he have of finding Mascola at the main entrance to the cave? The leader of the advance was already marshaling his men about him.

Gregory found Hawkins and the two men walked away from the others, whispering together. Hawkins returned alone. When the advance party had left Slade checked up the men who remained.

"I'm a man short," he announced. "What became of Mr. Gregory? I told him to stay here."

Hawkins shook his head blankly when questioned concerning the sudden disappearance of his friend. Gregory might have misunderstood. It was not like him to disobey orders. In any case Slade need not worry. His ex-captain was used to scouting and had received many citations during the war for crossing the enemy's lines. Gregory would be a help to the advance if he had gone with them, Hawkins stoutly maintained. Then he lied earnestly: "He knows that cave like a book."

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Joining the men detailed to enter the cave in advance, when they reached the top of the bluff, Gregory reported to the officer in charge.

"Mr. Slade sent me to join you," he said. "I brought him over from Legonia in my launch."

Jack Smith hesitated. "All right," he muttered after a moment. "Slade's the boss. Take off that

slicker. It'll catch on the brush. Follow after the others and stay close. Don't do anything until I tell you."

His manner was curt and plainly showed that he was not pleased with the latest addition to the party. But Kenneth Gregory cared little for that. If the *Gray Ghost* was at the goose-neck, the chances were that Mascola would be in the cave. And Mascola must be given no chance to escape.

As he followed after the others down the winding sheep-trail, before Gregory's eyes flashed a vision of his father's battered face staring up at him from the canvas bundle on the hatch. Then came the memory of Mascola's insolent look of triumph when he had first beheld Richard Gregory's son on the wharf at Legonia. Why had he not seen and understood before this?

But then, he had had no proof. He reflected bitterly that he had no proof now. Only a Mexican's unsupported word that Mascola had stood by while his father and Bill Lang were murdered by his men. That was not enough. Mascola might be convicted of smuggling but he would go clear on the charge of murder.

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Gregory shook his head slowly in the darkness. No, Mascola would not go clear. He would choke a confession from the Italian with his own hands. Somewhere below him in the fog, a girl waited for him to bring back her father's murderer. The girl he loved, had always loved, but had never known it before to-night. If he failed, he could never face Dickie Lang again. But he would not fail.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of sharp scuffling ahead. Rushing down the trail he came upon the deputies struggling with two men in the bottom of a small ravine. As he assisted the revenue men in securing their captives, he heard Smith whisper: "Down the gulch, men. Take it easy. It's steep. Stay with these fellows, Joe."

The air which sucked through the ravine grew colder as they descended. Then the dank atmosphere became strongly permeated with the odor of fish. Gregory felt a hand upon his arm.

"Go last," Smith ordered. "Watch the others. Do what they do. No more."

Foot by foot, the men wormed their way over the dry sticks which choked the entrance to the cave. Then Smith ordered a halt.

Leaving a half dozen men at the entrance he instructed them: "Watch this outlet. When you hear a shot inside, light the signal flares and throw them inside. Then you can see anybody that tries to get by you. They're going to do the same thing at the main entrance." Beckoning Gregory and the two remaining deputies to his side, he said: "We'll go on into the cave. Keep close behind me. When I give the signal by calling on them to give themselves up, each one of you pick a man and hang to him. They haven't a chance of getting out with both entrances lit up and guarded. Come on."

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The carpet of dried sea-grass thrown up by the high tides, deadened their footsteps as they crawled into the cave. For an instant they crept on through the darkness. Then a twist in the pathway brought a faint gleam of light ahead. Smith flattened to the kelp and wriggled nearer with the two men behind him following close. Gregory was the last to reach the surface of a table-like ledge of rock which ribbed their path and projected outward over the cavern. Crawling abreast of the deputies, he raised slowly to his elbow and looked down.

The floor of the cave lay only a few feet below, faintly discernible in the yellow light which issued from a hooded lantern. Gregory's eyes searched the grotesque shadows which fell athwart the rocky floor.

Were there no men in the cave?

For an instant no sound broke the stillness. Then, from the darkness beyond the lantern, came the shuffling of footsteps and three fishermen stepped out into the circle of light and dropped to their knees on the rocky floor.

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Gregory's eyes opened wider. The cavern floor was literally covered with fish. As he sought to fathom the strange actions of the fishermen as they passed silently up and down the long rows of albacore, the silence was broken by an angry snarl and the figure of another man leaped out from the shadow. Rushing upon one of the fishermen, he shook him roughly by the arm. Then the rays of the lantern fell upon his face.

Gregory's automatic was in his hand as he caught sight of Mascola. Holding the weapon close against his coat to muffle the click of the hammer, he cocked the revolver and shoved it forward over the ledge. For an instant the muzzle wavered, then drew steadily upward until the sights were in line with Mascola's waistband. What an easy shot it was. He couldn't miss. What was the matter with his trigger finger? His arm slowly relaxed. He couldn't shoot the man from the dark.

He'd shoot you quick enough.

I know he would, but—

He murdered your father. He didn't give him a chance, did he?

There was logic in that. The arm which held the automatic stiffened. The eyes which glinted over the sights, grew hard, then closed to blot out the hated visage. When they opened again, the

temptation had passed and Mascola was walking again to the shadow.

From the ledge above the cave a bright ray of light followed the figure of the Italian. Mascola leaped to cover behind a huge rock. [Pg 331]

The same instant the roar of a pistol shot deafened Gregory's ear. As Smith fired into the air to give the signal to the men without, he cried: "Hands up, men. You're prisoners of the United States."

The flash-light fell from the deputy's hand as an answering shot echoed from the darkness across the cave. Smith rolled to his side. "Nail 'em," he gasped, and tumbled from the ledge.

Gregory slid from the rocks and stumbled to the fish-covered floor of the cavern. The light from the lantern was suddenly extinguished. Dropping to his knee, he shot at the flash of a gun ahead. Dimly to his ears came the shouts of the posse fighting their way into the cave. Soon the vaulted walls reverberated with the rattle of firearms and the darkness was faintly illumined by the light of the signal flares burning at the entrances.

Brought into bold relief by the weird glow from the sputtering candles, a number of darting figures could be seen leaping to cover behind the rocks. From the shadows came bright jets of flame. Bullets whined through the cavern, clipping the walls and rattling the pebbles to the stone floor. Flattening his body against the slimy fish, Gregory wriggled foot by foot in the direction of the big rock which sheltered Mascola.

The game was up. Bandrist emptied his revolver in the direction of the advancing deputies and drew cautiously away from Mascola. The *Fuor d'Italia* lay at anchor in the cove beyond the gooseneck. The tunnel-like passage, which only himself knew, would lead him to the beach. While the Italian delayed the attacking party would be his chance to take to the boat. In the fog he could make his escape. By daybreak he could make the Mexican coast. Then he would be safe. Of Mascola he thought but little, save as a means to an end. It would serve the Italian right. [Pg 332]

Mascola faced about a few minutes later to find himself fighting alone. Then he heard the rattle of loose stones dropping from the cavern wall. Bandrist was leaving him. The Italian's blood warmed at the islander's treachery. Did Bandrist think he was the only one who knew the way out? His anger mounted as he climbed the wall and wormed his way through the narrow opening. So Bandrist thought to give him the slip, did he? Well, he'd show him.

When Bandrist reached the end of the tunnel he crawled out into the fog and listened intently. Some one was following from the cave. Jamming a fresh clip into his automatic he waited. Then he silently replaced his revolver. A shot would only draw pursuit. Perhaps there were men already guarding the secret exit. Huddling close to the cavern tunnel he waited for the figure of the man behind him to emerge.

When Mascola reached the end of the tunnel he felt himself grasped roughly by the arm and twisted to the rocks. Bandrist recovered his wits quickly when he recognized the Italian. [Pg 333]

"Quiet," he whispered. "You were a long time coming. There may be men on the beach already. Where is your boat?"

Mascola nodded his head in the direction of the beach.

"My skiff lies close to rocks by the point," he said. "The launch is close by."

Bandrist fingered his automatic nervously.

"We can wait no longer," he said.

As he spoke he began to crawl forward toward the water.

The blue light from the signal flares flickered about the rock behind which Mascola had gone into hiding. Gregory reached the shadow, revolver in hand. Raising his body to his elbow, he leaned forward and looked up. The space which lay between the rock and the cavern wall was empty. He was on his feet in an instant. Mascola had escaped. That much was clear. But how? Surely not through the main entrance to the beach. He would have no chance that way. The sound of the tumult at the mouth of the cavern told him that. Neither could the Italian have taken the other passage. He would have seen him as he passed.

He searched the floor carefully for a possible hiding-place which would shelter the man he sought. Then he raised his eyes to the cave wall. It was lined with irregular niches, some of which might be large enough to hide the body of a man. In the faint glow from the signal flares, he climbed slowly upward until he felt a cool rush of air fan his cheek. The air was heavy with fog; laden with the breath of the sea. The cavern held still another entrance. [Pg 334]

Forcing his body through a cleft in the rocks from whence the breeze came, he found himself in a tunnel-like passage. The dry sticks snapped beneath his feet as he felt his way through the impenetrable darkness, stopping at intervals to listen.

That Mascola had preceded him only a few minutes before, he felt reasonably certain. By the time he reached the end of the passage the Italian might have gained a place of safety. Why had

he not jumped from the ledge at first sight of his father's murderer? By now it would all be over. His thoughts turned quickly to Dickie Lang. Perhaps the *Gray Ghost* might have come upon the *Richard's* anchorage in the cove adjoining the goose-neck. Perhaps the speed-boat had been run down. Would the girl do as she was told and stay on the launch?

His mind a prey to conflicting thoughts and emotions, Gregory crawled on through the darkness.

When Bandrist and Mascola reached the *Fuor d'Italia*, the Italian kicked the dory adrift as the two men climbed aboard. "Pull the hook," he cried, "while I start the motor."

"No," Bandrist whispered. "You'd be a fool to do that. The cave was filled with revenue men. That means there's a cutter lying in around here somewhere. Perhaps at the goose-neck. She would spot you in a minute with her search. We must row the launch around the next point at least."

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Mascola growled his resentment at Bandrist's air of authority. Nevertheless he saw the wisdom of the suggestion and hastily brought out the long ash oars and fastened them in the brass locks. Bandrist pulled the anchor and took his place at one of the sweeps. For some moments the two men rowed silently into the fog. Then the islander ceased his labor at the oar abruptly.

"Head out," he whispered. "There's a launch ahead."

Mascola's eyes sought to pierce the fog where the dim outline of a motor-boat loomed dark across their course. Then he swung the *Fuor d'Italia* about and skirting the point rowed doggedly away from the darkened stranger.

The Italian's ugly temper was not bettered by the physical exercise. There was no need to row the launch as far as this. If Bandrist was going with him, he must learn he was to be only a passenger. The *Fuor d'Italia* did not belong to Rock and the islander. She was his own property. He would run her where he pleased and as he pleased. As he labored, he formulated his plans.

He would head straight for the Mexican line, keeping well out to escape the patrol off San Juan. Daybreak would put him in the little lagoon beyond Encinitas. There he would be among friends. He reflected suddenly that he had but little money. American gold in Lower California would buy much. Without it, even his friends would give him but scant comfort. Bandrist, he remembered, never trusted his money to banks, but paid his bills in yellow gold which he carried in the coin belt about his waist.

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The observation gave Mascola comfort. Bandrist had enough for them both. He would see that he received his share.

He ceased rowing.

"Far enough," he muttered.

"No."

Bandrist's reply was sharp and decisive.

"Your exhaust can be heard for miles," he said. "The wind is blowing in our faces. We must keep at the oars. Then they will think us still on the island. If you start the motor now you'll bring pursuit."

Mascola's hatred of Bandrist increased with the quiet tone of command with which the islander spoke.

"There is no boat that can catch mine with this lead," he bragged.

"Mr. Gregory's boat is faster than yours for one," Bandrist disputed quietly. "The new revenue cutters are faster for others. Why are you a fool?"

A hot argument began on the instant between the two men. An argument which ended by Bandrist's knocking Mascola to the cockpit.

Mascola lay where he fell for a moment, dazed by the blow. Bandrist was not rowing he noticed. Without doubt he had him covered with his revolver. Fuming with impotent rage, the Italian growled: "Well, you're the boss. It's up to you."

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As he struggled to his feet he made up his mind to get square with the islander. Again resuming his oars, he rowed steadily until Bandrist gave the order to start the motor.

The *Fuor d'Italia* leaped forward and the cool sea air fanned Mascola's flaming face. Settling quietly into his seat he turned his attention to the wheel.

He could afford to wait, but only a little longer.

Dickie Lang grasped her rifle tighter and leaned over the rail as she heard the soft dip of oars. Then her hold on the gun relaxed. Perhaps it was Gregory returning to the launch.

A glance into the gloom to starboard caused her to drop silently into the cockpit. Resting the rifle on the coaming she covered the approaching boat and waited in silence. To her ears came the low murmur of men's voices. Then the oncoming craft veered sharply and faded from view. For

some time the girl crouched upon the floor of the launch. At length the silence of the night was broken by the far-off pulsing of a high-speed motor.

She jumped to her feet, her eyes glowing with excitement. Even at the distance she could not be deceived. There was only one other craft about with an exhaust like that.

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Mascola was fleeing from Diablo in the *Fuor d'Italia*.

She sprang to the hood and began pulling on the anchor-chain. Then she stopped suddenly. The man she loved was still on the island. Perhaps he had been wounded. Maybe killed. And in the meantime, Mascola was escaping. For an instant love and hate fought for possession of the heart of Dickie Lang. Then the chain slipped through her fingers and the anchor dropped again to the bottom. Silently she returned to the wheel and sat down to wait. It was the hardest part of all to play. And it always fell to a woman.

When Gregory reached the end of the tunnel he could hear the shouts of men and the rapid discharge of firearms from around the point. He must be in the cove adjoining the goose-neck. Crawling rapidly through the brush he gained the beach. Then he stopped and listened. Mascola had evidently taken to the water.

A sudden fear gripped his heart at the thought and sent him racing down the beach in the direction of the *Richard's* dory. His fears for the girl's safety abated as he found the dory undisturbed among the rocks. Shoving it into the water he rowed hastily for the launch. As the skiff scraped the *Richard's* side, he sprang aboard and caught the girl in his arms. For an instant love alone dominated his heart.

"Mascola escaped in the *Fuor d'Italia*."

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Dickie's words recalled Gregory to his purpose. The next instant he was pulling at the chain.

"I'll take you around the point to the cutter," he called to her as he worked. "You'll be safe there until—"

"No." The girl's answer was spoken with a determination there was no gainsaying. "I'm going with you," she said in a low voice. "There were two men in the launch."

CHAPTER XXXI

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BENEATH THE WATERS

As the *Richard* cleared the point and plunged into trough of the swell, a thin column of light filtered through the fog astern and traveled slowly over the gray water.

Gregory put the wheel over and began to zigzag as he remembered that the *Bennington* was lying in at the goose-neck. At the distance the revenue cutter would be unable to distinguish friend from foe and would take no chances.

"Stay down," he called to Dickie. "It's the search from the *Bennington*. They may shoot."

The light moved shoreward as he spoke, carefully searching the rocks which fringed the coast. Gregory threw the wheel in the opposite direction and struck out at a tangent toward the sea. His speed would soon carry him beyond rifle range. Kicking open the cut-out, he advanced the throttle. The *Richard* shook with the sudden burst of power, then began to plane.

Gregory kept his eyes on the moving rays as he held the launch on her seaward tack. The light was moving nearer, but its beams were paling. The cutter evidently had not moved from her anchorage. Doubtless she would be kept fully occupied at the goose-neck. The next instant the fog-wall ahead dripped in the rays of the searchlight.

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Gregory's hand flashed to the spark as his foot released the throttle. The angry roar of the speed-boat died away on the instant and the hull dropped sullenly. Putting about, he started shoreward at right angles to his former course.

The whine of machine-gun bullets sounded over his head to the starboard. Then the leaden hail was drowned by the bark of the open exhaust.

He had done the right thing that time. To have tried to dodge at speed would have turned the *Richard* over. Now he was safe for a few seconds at least he reflected, as he watched the light traveling over his former course.

As the rays again bent shoreward he saw a long point projecting out into the sea. Beyond the jutting promontory he would be safe. Running a course which would carry him clear of the point by a narrow margin he settled low in his seat and dashed forward.

The fog-dimmed light hovered about the point as the *Richard* plunged boldly into the focus of its dripping beams. As the launch veered to make the turn, the waters astern were splashed by the steel pellets from the *Bennington's* machine-gun. Then the gunner of the revenue cutter began to

raise his sights. Splinters flew from the *Richard's* stern. The coaming was riddled as the deadly hail moved toward the bow.

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The gunner on the *Bennington* ceased grinding as the launch disappeared behind the point.

"I could have got that bird in one more second," he muttered ruefully. "If the old man would let us move, we can get him yet."

Gregory threw off the power and hurdled the seat.

"Are you hurt?" he called to Dickie as he hurried toward the stern.

Dickie Lang was not hurt. Only cut by a flying splinter. It was nothing. The girl made her way forward.

"Let me take her until we clear the coast," she said. "You gave me the shivers the way you grazed that reef off China Point."

As they inclined their ears into the gray mist which enveloped them, they caught the murmur of the *Fuor d'Italia's* exhaust.

Gregory surrendered the wheel.

The girl listened to the rapid-fire pulsations of the boat ahead.

"He's headed out to sea," she said. "And we're going to have to drive to catch him with this lead."

Her words were drowned in the thunder of the *Richard's* motor and the speed-launch bounded away to overtake her hated rival.

"The fog is lifting. Soon it will be clear. We must watch closely for pursuit."

Mascola grunted a reply to Bandrist's observations. Weather conditions meant very little to him at the present moment. His mind was occupied with matters of far more importance.

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It would be well to know just where Bandrist stood concerning a division of his money before they went farther. Now would be a good time to find out. He made the suggestion at once that the islander grant him an advance of funds until such time as he could obtain his money from Legonia and Port Angeles.

"I have no money to spare," Bandrist answered curtly. "You are foolish not to have been better prepared. Our business is one which should have taught you that. You will have a hard time now to get your money from the States."

An angry retort welled to Mascola's lips but he choked it back. Bandrist was speaking again.

"Here is one hundred dollars. You are welcome to that. But no more."

Mascola's eyes flashed at the smallness of the sum. A hundred dollars would be next to nothing, even in Mexico. Bandrist, he felt sure, possessed money in plenty. If there was not enough for two, there would be plenty for one.

Mascola made up his mind quickly. He would be the one. He had given Bandrist his chance. The islander had tried twice to-night to give him the double-cross. Would do it again if he got the chance. But Bandrist would have no more chances. Reaching out his hand, Mascola took the gold with muttered words of thanks. Then his fingers sought the switch and the noise of the motor died suddenly into silence.

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"Listen."

Mascola turned quickly in his seat and looked over the stern. At the same time his right hand sought his dagger.

Bandrist twisted about, his eyes searching the gray waters astern.

"I don't," he began. But his words ended in a choking gasp.

Mascola's knife had found its mark and the Italian's fingers were tearing at Bandrist's throat.

The islander struggled to reach his gun, but he felt his strength leaving him. The moonlight shimmered before his eyes, mingled with gray splashes of fog. A sharp pain laced his side. His mouth opened and he fought hard for air. Heavy darkness began to settle about him. From the far-off spaces he heard the sound of rapid breathing. Or was it the faint pulsing of a motor-launch? Then the murmur grew fainter until it trailed away into silence. Mascola pulled the islander roughly from the seat and dragged him along the floor of the cockpit. Then he sprang to the wheel and started the motor. There was no time now to get the money. The fog was lifting. And there was a boat following.

Clear of the Diablo reefs, Gregory took the wheel and plunged the *Richard* into the shifting wall of fog. Mile after mile he traversed in silence, stopping at intervals to listen to the faint pulsing of the boat ahead. At length the gray canopy lifted slowly from the water and he caught the outline of the *Richard's* broad hood rising staunchly above him in the gloom. He smiled grimly at the

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sight. The motor had not missed a shot since leaving the island. And they were overhauling the *Fuor d'Italia*.

He threw the switch again as his eye caught the gleam of the moonlight ahead. For some moments he listened intently. But only the soft slap of the waves against the hull of the launch disturbed the stillness.

Mascola had escaped him; had noted the clearing and heard the sound of pursuit; had doubled back into the fog bank. Anguish took possession of his heart at the thought as he reached for the switch. But neither Gregory nor Dickie Lang heard the rasp of the starting mechanism. The sound was swallowed up in a deafening roar which came from the moonlit waters ahead.

"Straight ahead," the girl shouted. "I see him."

Gregory had already thrown in the clutch. In a swirl of white water the *Richard* raised her head proudly, and snorting angry defiance, raced across the intervening waves which separated her from her primordial enemy. Gregory saw the *Fuor d'Italia* leap forward in the moonlight, noted that the craft had already changed direction and was heading off at a tangent, a course which would bring Mascola under cover of the fog bank.

Veering as sharply as her speed would permit, the *Richard* dipped like a gull and sped on to intercept the *Fuor d'Italia*. The shifting bank of blinding mist hung uncertainly above the shimmering waters less than half a mile ahead, dead ahead for Mascola, off Gregory's starboard quarter. For the Italian it meant safety. To his pursuer it spelled defeat.

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The *Richard* was gaining. Gregory measured the distance with a calculating eye. He was going to head the Italian off.

"Swing her to port. Catch him on the beam."

Acting at once upon Dickie's advice, Gregory saw the wisdom of it at once. His angling course would have put him into the fog before the *Fuor d'Italia* reached it. Now he would catch Mascola broadside, full on the beam. Or at least at an angle which would drive the heavier hull through the lighter one.

With seaman's instinct, Mascola sensed rather than saw the *Richard's* change of course. If he tried to make the fog he would be cut in two. If he deviated a hair's breadth at that speed he'd turn turtle. There was only one thing he could do.

He reached his decision in a whirl of the propeller.

Dickie Lang knew his answer.

"Hard a port. Throw your switch."

The words tumbled from her lips in a piercing shriek. Gregory obeyed on the second, thinking the girl had lost her reason. The *Richard* dipped with a swerve which threw him violently against the coaming. As he felt the heavy hull sinking down into the water he saw that the *Fuor d'Italia* had ceased to plane and was settling sluggishly.

A snarl of disappointment burst from Mascola's lips as he saw the *Richard* did not flash across his bow. A snarl, which changed quickly to a cry of rage as he noted that the two hulls were drifting sullenly toward each other. Robbed of his way, he could not escape. The *Richard* was already brushing the *Fuor d'Italia's* rail.

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In a frenzy of mingled fear and rage, Mascola whipped out his dagger and leaped to the cockpit to battle with the hurtling figure that sprang from the other boat as the two hulls scraped. Gregory caught Mascola's knife arm and twisted it backward, crowding the Italian to the rail. For an instant the two men were locked in a swaying, bone-racking embrace. Then Mascola felt the oak coaming pressing hard against his knees. He was being shoved over the rail by the fury of the heavier man.

Struggling in desperation, there came a gleam of hope. In the water Gregory's superior weight would not count. Strength would not count so much, without the weight. But a knife would count. Jerking his body backward, he lunged downward into the sea, dragging his antagonist with him.

As Gregory and Mascola fell to the water, Dickie Lang drew her automatic and covering the cockpit of the *Fuor d'Italia* with her flash-light, peered cautiously over the rail. Upon the floor of the launch sprawled the figure of a man. His face was turned away from her. The gray linoleum was dyed red with his blood. As she watched him, his extended fingers twitched convulsively. He was still breathing. But that was all. Seizing the rail of the *Fuor d'Italia* she began to work the *Richard* around the hull of the other craft. She dared not start the motor. The propeller might cut the men in the water to shreds. Reaching the stern of Mascola's launch she directed the rays of her light into the rippling waves.

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Gregory tightened his hold on Mascola's wrist as the waters closed over his head. The Italian struggled fiercely to free his right arm as he felt his body sinking deeper into the water. Then he noticed that his antagonist had freed his legs and was moving them slowly upward to his stomach.

Locking his knees about Mascola's waist-line in a scissors-grip, Gregory began to squeeze. Lashing the water with his feet the Italian jerked his head backward and forced it against

Gregory's chin. Then he freed his left arm and the fingers slid upward to his enemy's throat.

Under the steady pressure of the sturdy legs about his waist Mascola felt his strength going from him. With bursting lungs he tore at the corded muscles of Gregory's throat. But his fingers had but little power. Sharp pains seared his eyeballs. A deadly numbness was creeping over his entire body. Then he felt the hand which held his knife arm twist the wrist and forced it inward to his body.

Mascola writhed in terror. By a powerful effort he squirmed sidewise and checked the onward course of the knife as it came nearer to his side. The exertion sent the blood pounding to his temples, left him weak with nausea. For an instant his hold on Gregory's throat relaxed. Then his fingers dug viciously into the flesh as he felt his wrist being crowded closer to his body.

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The point of the dagger was scratching at his shirt. In another second it would be piercing his side. Mascola knew that the blade was sharp. The Italian released his grip on Gregory's throat. With a convulsive shudder he dropped his knife. He was beaten. At the mercy of his enemy. Better take chances with the courts than sure death at the hand of Kenneth Gregory.

Gregory felt the muscles of the Italian relax in a token of submission. For an instant his heart rebelled at the turn of the battle in his favor. Why not strangle Mascola beneath the surface? Who would ever know? The Italian had shown his father no mercy.

Why didn't Mascola fight like a man?

Gregory's fingers reached the Italian's throat. The law of the sea knew no mercy.

A feeling of utter helplessness seized Dickie Lang as she stared into the moonlit waters. The man she loved was battling for his life beneath the surface of the shimmering waves. And she could do nothing.

"God bring him up safe." She repeated the words again and again. Then a new fear assailed her.

Kenneth Gregory would never give up. If he came up at all there would be blood upon his hands. Justifiable blood. An eye for an eye. And yet, as the seconds trailed endlessly by, the girl was surprised to find herself amending her prayer.

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"Bring him up safe—and clean."

She uttered a choking cry as the bright rays of her light fell upon Kenneth Gregory's head. He was swimming slowly toward the launch, dragging Mascola after him.



The bright rays of her light fell upon Kenneth Gregory's head

"Hold his wrists."

She noted the lifeless tone of Gregory's voice as she made haste to comply with the order. Saw the fingers of the two men clutch the rail while they waited for strength to pull their bodies from the water.

Kenneth Gregory pulled himself weakly over the coaming. In silence he assisted the girl in dragging Mascola from the water. Huddling on the driver's seat of the *Richard*, the Italian leaned against the dash, fighting for breath. Gregory stumbled backward and sank to the floor of the cockpit, covering his face with his hands.

"I—failed," he gasped. "I had a chance.—But I passed it up.—I couldn't do it."

Dickie fell to her knees beside him and threw her arms about his neck. "You're a man," she whispered, "One in a million." Then her lips found his.

Mascola watched the two shadows blend into one. Silhouetted in the bright moonlight, he leaned against the coaming, his lips curved in a sneering smile.

From the darkened cockpit of the *Fuor d'Italia* came a bright jet of flame. Then another. Before the echoes of the two shots had died away Mascola's body slid from the seat and fell in a heap upon the floor. [Pg 351]

Dickie drew her revolver and sprang to the rail. Sweeping the darkness of the *Fuor d'Italia's* cockpit with the rays of her light, she drew back.

"Bandrist," she whispered to Gregory through whitening lips.

CHAPTER XXXII

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FOR ALL THE WORLD TO KNOW

Silvanus Rock was at the Golden Rule Fish Cannery at an early hour on the morning following the raid upon El Diablo. When Blankovitch entered the office, he noted at a glance that the face of the capitalist looked drawn and worried.

"Any news, Blankovitch?"

The words tumbled eagerly from Rock's thick lips as he caught sight of the ruddy countenance of the manager.

Blankovitch shook his head.

"Only the broken message a little before midnight," he answered. "You got that. Gonzolez landed. That's all we know."

Rock fidgeted while his eyes roved about the room. "You don't suppose anything went wrong?" he hazarded after a moment.

Blankovitch did not think so. The wireless had failed for some reason or other. But it had done that before. He was expecting Rossi in at any moment. There was no occasion for worry. Would Mr. Rock care for a drink so early in the morning? The bank president gulped down the brandy, and under the stimulus of the fiery liquor his wavering courage rallied perceptibly. [Pg 353]

"Had a bad night," he explained. "Didn't sleep a wink. Neuralgia."

The Slavonian nodded sympathetically and the two men lapsed into silence. After some time had passed a fisherman entered.

"Rossi's coming in," he announced.

Rock leaped to his feet with the youthful exuberance of a schoolboy.

"I feel like a new man," he confided to Blankovitch, when the messenger had gone out. "The brandy was just what I needed. Lack of sleep surely pulls a man down."

The manager agreed and together the two men went out to the receiving platform to await the arrival of the boat from El Diablo.

When Rossi drew alongside, Rock greeted him effusively.

"How is everything at the island?" he asked. "Have you plenty of fish?"

The fishing captain answered the bank president's greeting with his usual shrug.

"*Bonne*," he said shortly. "Everything's fine. I got some good fish."

Rock was jubilant. His fears had been groundless. Everything was quite all right. For had not Rossi given the accustomed signal to that effect?

Blankovitch had already taken the cue. [Pg 354]

"If his fish are first-class, we might put them up special for those A-1 orders," he suggested.

Rock nodded as he noted the stolid faces of the fishermen peering over the rail. Rossi had his regular crew. Still, one could never be too careful. For a moment he appeared to deliberate. Then he said:

"Good idea, Blankovitch, we're short on high-grade stuff."

The manager moved at once to the receiving-vat and pulled the grating over the traveling conveyer which carried the fish into the cannery. Then he opened a valve at the bottom of the tank.

"All right, Rossi," he said. "Dump them in."

Rock stood by for a moment watching the fish slide into the vat. Then he walked away in the

direction of the cannery office. Passing through the room where he had conferred with the Slavonian, he entered the manager's private sanctuary which lay beyond and closed the door.

In the far corner of the room was a small clothes-closet. To this Rock made his way hastily, and, fitting a key in the lock, passed within, slamming the door after him. In the darkness of the stuffy cubby-hole, his fingers found a small flash-light in the pocket of an old vest which hung from one of the hooks. Directing the rays of the light about him, he worked his way through the hanging garments and reached the end of the closet. For an instant his fingers slid along the inside wall. Then a cool draught of air fanned his face, strongly tinctured with the smell of the mud-flats.

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Swinging the panel shut behind him, Silvanus Rock descended the narrow stairway. When he reached the bottom he paused and drew his coat collar closer about his neck. The air was damp and cold and the waters of the bay were lapping softly against the pilings which supported the building.

Grasping the wooden rail of the gangway which led away from the bottom of the stairs, the capitalist crept on through the darkness until he reached the base of a big concrete storage-vat. Groping for the lock which secured the outlet-cleaning-door of the big tank, he unlocked it and passed within.

With the water-tight door closed behind him, he switched on the electric light. The cement floor of the vat was already partly covered with the fish which slid downward from the receiving tanks on the platform above.

Rock listened intently. But only the soft slip of the fish through the chute and the drip of the water from the draining-table, disturbed the silence. Then he heard the murmur of men's voices from the platform. The valve was still open. When Blankovitch closed that, no sound would penetrate the vat from the outside world.

He turned his attention at once to the fish. Drawing one of the albacore to one side, his fat fingers delved carefully into the fish's belly. Then they brought forth a large aluminum capsule and laid it carefully on a tin-topped table which stood conveniently near a small capping-machine.

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For some moments he repeated the operation until all the fish had been emptied of their contents and a double row of capsules covered the table.

The albacore, he noticed suddenly, had ceased to slip through the chute. He frowned at the observance. Surely Rossi had brought a larger cargo than this.

Walking again to the intake from the tank above, he listened. The valve was still open. There would be more or Blankovitch would close the chute and assist him below. Wiping his hands carefully on his handkerchief, he walked nervously about the tank. There was nothing he could do but wait. There would be no use to fill the cans at present or start the conveyer to carry the empty-bellied fish to the cannery floor. Both would necessitate the use of machinery, and even electric-driven power made some noise.

If the Slavonian was through, why didn't he close the valve and come down? The door of the storage-vat opened suddenly and Blankovitch's bulky figure staggered within. Rock drew back at the expression on the Slavonian's face. All color had fled from the manager's ruddy cheeks. His eyes were staring and his heavy jaw sagged.

Then Rock noted that the door was still open. As he made haste to close it before questioning the frightened Slavonian, he found the way blocked by three shadowy figures who sprang upon him.

"You are under arrest, Mr. Rock."

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Silvanus Rock wriggled vainly in the arms of the men who forced him back into the tank. In the struggle the light fell full upon the open vest of one of the strangers. Then Rock collapsed.

For years he had suffered this nightmare. In his troubled dreams he had seen the glittering shield of the revenue men winking at him from the darkness. Now it was a tangible reality. He was caught with the goods through the Slavonian's treachery. Glaring in sullen anger at his trembling manager, he opened his mouth to speak but no word came. Then one of the deputies who had made a cursory examination of the vat, began to speak:

"Well, Mr. Rock," he said, "it kind of looks like we had the man higher up. At the point of a gun, Mr. Blankovitch showed us the way to your little office down here. And Signor Rossi brought us all the way over from Diablo hidden away among his fish so we could have the pleasure of finding out where he sold his cargo. The little ride was worth as much to him as it was to us."

Turning to the man who was standing by the Slavonian, he ordered: "Better put the steels on him, Jack. I'll take this one while Joe stays down here with the stuff."

When the *Bennington* entered Crescent Bay followed by the *Richard* towing the *Fuor d'Italia*, excitement was rife at Legonia. And as the boats came to anchor off the Golden Rule Cannery a large crowd of curious village-folk collected on the dock.

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The consensus of opinion, in Silvanus Rock's absence, was expressed by the local postmaster. There had been another fight at El Diablo and "Uncle Sam had stepped in and 'pinched' the whole darned bunch." To that opinion, the crowd for the most part concurred though there were

some who thought otherwise.

It remained for Silvanus Rock himself to upset the truth of the postmaster's statement. Scarcely able to credit their sight, the villagers saw the magnate of Legonia led forth from the Golden Rule Cannery in the custody of strangers. Strangers who spoke and acted with an air of authority and displayed shining badges to part the crowd as they walked with their prisoner to meet the small boat from the cutter. Then came Blankovitch wearing hand-cuffs.

It was some time before the truth leaked out through the lips of a newspaperman who was aboard the *Bennington*. Even then there were some who doubted.

Mascola killed by Bandrist? Impossible. Bill Lang and Richard Gregory murdered at El Diablo and Mexican Joe who had been with them, found on the island?

Silvanus Rock a smuggler? Why the very thought was absurd.

But the postmaster was gifted with more sagacity. With an ear trained to catch the slightest drift of public opinion, he declaimed after hearing all the evidence:

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"I ain't much surprised. Kind o' had my suspicions of old Rock all along though I never said nothin'. But I allays did say that young Gregory was a comin' citizen."

Purple dusk settled closely about Legonia at the close of the most memorable day in the history of the village. For a time the streets were deserted as the fishermen sought their homes at supper-time to retail the latest bits of gossip which were current in the saloons.

Kenneth Gregory's name was upon every lip. No story was complete unless he figured in it. The Golden Rule Cannery had been closed until further notice. Gregory had bought all the fish brought in by the alien fleet. His wharves were piled high with fish-boxes. His vats were full of albacore. He was going to give everybody a chance if they "shot square" and became American citizens. Rock and Blankovitch had been taken with the men from Diablo Island to the jail at the county-seat. The body of Mascola was still in the custody of the local undertaker and Bandrist had been removed to a hospital. But of the men themselves little was said. An era of universal friendliness prevailed throughout the village.

At the Lang cottage Aunt Mary was striving vainly to assemble her guests about the table for the evening meal.

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"The biscuits will be ruined," she pleaded. "Leave the talk go. You've all talked yourselves half-sick now."

Jack McCoy protested as Miss Lang led him to the table.

"Remember, I wasn't there," he said. "And I've got a lot to find out before I get caught up."

Hawkins slid into a chair by McCoy.

"Well that's about all there is to it, Mac," he said. "Except that the *Gray Ghost* made a clean get-away in the fog. You see the Custom House has been wise to her for a long time but they never could catch her with the goods. For some time there has been a lot of dope floating around in tuna cans so they kind of laid it to some fish cannery. In talking it over with Cap. I began to look this fellow, Rock, up. And I found among other things, that he didn't have a dollar until a few years ago. He made his money quick, and as far as we knew, right here in town. Then, this Diablo stuff gave me a hunch."

Gregory looked up quickly at the mention of the island.

"Easy on the Diablo stuff, Bill," he cautioned. "Aunt Mary doesn't know much about that."

When supper was over, Jack McCoy rose hastily.

"I must be getting back," he said. "We have a big night-shift and fish to burn. And they will burn unless I'm on the job."

Gregory followed him to the door.

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"I'll be down pretty quick, Jack," he said. "I want to see Miss Lang a minute before I go."

A crooked little smile twisted the corners of McCoy's mouth and for a moment he looked deep into Gregory's eyes.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," he began somewhat uncertainly, and seeing that Gregory made no denial, he put out his hand. "I hope you'll both be happy," he said slowly.

Then he turned quickly and hurried out the door. Hawkins hurried after him.

"I guess I'll go down with McCoy," he explained. "I want to keep near a phone." Then he turned to Aunt Mary. "In to-morrow's *Times* you'll get the latest details of the secret of El Diablo," he said as he bade her good night.

When Hawkins had gone out and Aunt Mary had retired to the kitchen, Gregory exclaimed to Dickie Lang in a low voice:

"There's one secret she won't get in *The Times*. She won't have to wait that long. For I'm going to tell her now."

"You'd better not," answered the girl. "You would have to shout. She's unusually deaf to-night. All the neighbors would hear."

"That's what I want," Gregory cried as he walked to the kitchen with Dickie following close behind.

In the semi-darkness of the little pantry-closet he took the girl in his arms.

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"It's the only secret I'd never be able to keep," he confessed. "And I want the whole world to hear it."

Pushing aside the swinging-door, he went into the kitchen to tell Aunt Mary.



In the semi-darkness of the little pantry-closet

THE END

Transcriber's Notes

Illustrations (excepting frontispiece) have been moved from their original page locations to the paragraph which they illustrate.

Obvious punctuation errors have been corrected and hyphen usage made consistent. Printer errors have been changed, and they are indicated with a mouse-hover. Errors in foreign language spelling (*Gracious a Dios* and *Sangre de Christo*) have been retained.

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