

GREENSEA ISLAND

A MYSTERY OF THE ESSEX COAST

BY
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To
MARGARET

GREENSEA ISLAND

CHAPTER ONE

I was leaning over the starboard railing, waiting for a boat, when Ross, the ship's doctor, came sauntering along the deck, puffing contentedly at a large Manilla cigar.

"Hullo, Dryden!" he observed, in that pleasant drawling voice of his. "Busy as usual?"

Having just completed five hours' strenuous toil, supervising the unloading of cargo, I could afford to treat his effort at sarcasm with the contempt that it deserved.

"Are you coming ashore?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I'm not the second officer of the *Neptune*; I've got work to do. We are expecting another bundle of Dagoes on board at three o'clock, and I must be around to examine their beastly eyes." He knocked off the end of his cigar, which fluttered down into the blue water of Leixoes Harbour. "Besides," he added, "what on earth's the good of going ashore? There's nothing fresh to see in Oporto."

"There's probably something fresh to smell," I replied hopefully. "Anyhow, I'm going. I'm sick to death of the ship, and I want to stretch my legs."

His glance travelled ironically downwards.

"I should have thought they were quite long enough already," he said. "If you grow any bigger you will have to give up the sea,

or else join the White Star. There will be no room for you on the Planet Line."

"Well, I shan't break my heart about it," I returned, laughing. "I've had quite enough of the gay and bounding ocean to last me the rest of my time."

He nodded sympathetically. "It's a dog's life," he admitted. "I have often thought of chucking it myself and setting up as a Harley Street specialist. The only objection is my incurable honesty and truthfulness."

"In about a week," I remarked, "you would be packing up and bundling off to Timbuctoo or Yokohama or somewhere. You've not got a simple, restful nature like mine; you are one of those people who have to keep on wandering about because their consciences won't let them rest."

"It's not my conscience," he replied cheerfully. "I knocked the nonsense out of that years ago. It's nothing but a silly habit I've drifted into. If one paddles about the world long enough one gets a sort of taste for it into one's blood, and when once that happens a man's lost. It's worse than drink or opium." He leaned back against the rail and surveyed me with mock seriousness. "Let my fate be a warning to you, Dryden. If you feel any yearnings for a nice little wife, and some chickens in the back garden, and a corner seat in the parish church, you get out of this while you're still young and innocent. Otherwise, in a few years' time, you will be just such another case as I am."

"It's the horrible possibility of that," I explained, "that makes me want to go ashore."

He laughed good-humouredly. "Well, go ashore then; and while you're about it you might see if you can pick me up a new pipe. My old one's getting positively insanitary." He glanced down it at the boat which was coming alongside.

"By the way," he added, "you may come across the beautiful Miss de Roda if you're lucky. She went off about half an hour ago."

"What, alone?" I asked.

"Quite alone," he returned encouragingly. "Uncle's still too seedy to go bucketing about as a chaperon."

"Well, I wonder he allowed her on shore by herself," I remarked. "It's the last thing I should have expected considering the way he has bottled her up all the blessed voyage."

Ross smiled indulgently. "He probably thinks she's safe against ordinary temptations. I expect it's only romantic-looking second officers that he's frightened of." He walked with me to the head of the ladder. "I suppose you'll want a boat to fetch you," he added. "Don't forget we sail at six sharp."

"Oh, that will be all right," I replied, preparing to descend. "I'm not sure what time I shall be back, so I'll get one of those ruffians on the beach to bring me off."

I climbed down and took my place along with a couple of passengers who had also been seized with a belated desire to set foot on the soil of Portugal. A minute later we were moving rapidly across the harbour towards the long stone jetty.

All the way in, despite the chatting of my companions, my thoughts kept flitting persistently round the two people Ross and I had been discussing. One meets many and various types of humanity on a South American liner, but from the very first Señor de Roda and his niece had aroused my especial interest.

They had joined the ship at Manaos, and I had happened to be standing on the deck at the very moment when they had come on board. Two things had struck me about them instantly; one was the fact that de Roda himself looked wretchedly ill, and the other that his niece, on whose arm he leaned heavily as he came up the gangway, was quite the prettiest girl I had ever seen in my life. I am not much of a hand at describing anyone's appearance, but if you can imagine yourself coming face to face with one of Greuze's most lovely pictures, suddenly brought to life and a little sunburned, you will get some faint idea of my sensations at that particular moment. I am glad that no one was with me, for I know that I stood there gaping at her with a sort of stupefied admiration of which I should never have heard the last during the remainder of the voyage.

To de Roda, on the other hand, I had only devoted the briefest of glances. That, however, had left me with the impression of a tall, powerfully built man of middle age, prematurely bent by illness, and with a sallow face, from which two dark eyes looked out with a curious and rather forbidding intensity.

The next moment they had passed me, and with an effort I had jerked myself back into something like my usual self-possession.

Later on the same day, when I had happened to run across the purser, I had made some enquiries concerning the new arrivals.

Except for supplying me with their names, however, he had been unable to give me any information, beyond the fact that they had booked through for the full voyage to London, and that they had taken the two best cabins still available.

It was from Ross that I subsequently gleaned the few further particulars I knew about them. His medical services had been called in the first evening, and he had been in fairly regular attendance throughout the whole voyage from Manaos to Oporto.

From one or two remarks he let drop I gathered that de Roda was suffering from some form of heart trouble, and that although this might, and probably would, get better for a time, any permanent recovery was out of the question. The girl, it appeared, was his patient's niece, and, unlike her uncle, who was an obvious South American through and through, she herself was half English, and spoke the language as fluently and readily as she did Spanish or Portuguese.

Ross declared that she was as charming to talk to as she was beautiful to look at, but this was a statement that so far I had no opportunity of putting to a practical test. Throughout the entire voyage both uncle and niece had kept as strictly to themselves as any two people could possibly do on an ocean-going steamer. For the first day or so de Roda's state of health had rendered it advisable that all his meals should be served in his cabin, and it was not until we were half way across that either of them had appeared in the saloon. Even then they had made arrangements with the steward that they should have a private table, and so far as I knew they were only on the barest speaking terms with any of the other passengers.

Very occasionally they would stroll round the deck in each other's company, de Roda invariably holding his niece's arm and staring out in front of him with a sombre look that was distinctly discouraging to any casual advances. Now and then in the afternoons Miss de Roda would establish herself in a quiet corner with a book and a deck chair, but the few more intrusive spirits who had attempted to take advantage of this fact did not seem to have met with any startling success.

Personally, I had made no effort to follow in their steps. I will confess straight away that this was not due to any indifference on my part, for she occupied my thoughts in a curiously persistent and disturbing fashion. My duties, however, left me little time for talking to the passengers, and, apart from that, I had no wish to try and force my acquaintance upon a girl who so obviously desired to be left alone. At times I could not help wondering whether her attitude in the matter was not dictated rather by loyalty to her uncle's wishes than by any natural inclination for solitude; but still, that made no difference to the facts of the case, which were sufficiently obvious for any but the most thick-skinned individual.

So far as I was concerned, this slight touch of mystery only added to her attractiveness. In spite of our never having spoken to each other, I found that with each day of the voyage my interest in her increased rather than lessened, a circumstance which I had been at some particular pains to keep entirely to myself. As a rule I have not the least objection to being chaffed, but for once in a way I rather shrank from the raillery which Ross would certainly have indulged in if he had had the remotest inkling of my real feelings.

In the middle of these meditations of mine we came alongside the jetty, from which two or three nondescript longshoremen had

been eyeing our arrival with apathetic interest. For its size, Leixoes seems to contain a remarkable number of leisured citizens, whose only source of income appears to be the scanty earnings of their hard-working wives.

My two companions were anxious to have a look round the village before proceeding farther, so, leaving them to their own devices, I walked up the beach and boarded an electric tram which was just about to start for Oporto. Half an hour's run along the sandy road brought me to that straggling city, which, with its mediæval charm and shoddy, unfinished modern "improvements," gives one an illuminating picture of Portuguese history.

I descended in the old quarter on the quay, where the tall, tumble-down houses, with their quaint open fronts, still stare out picturesquely over the broad waters of the Douro. A glass of excellent iced beer in a neighbouring café washed away most of the dust which had collected in my throat, and then, feeling remarkably at peace with the world, I strolled off up the hill in the blazing glare of an almost tropical sunshine.

For perhaps an hour I wandered leisurely about the town, buying one or two things which I wanted—including Ross's pipe—and thoroughly enjoying the sensation of being once more on solid ground. Then, having nothing better to do, I turned my steps to the English Club, where, through the kindness of the members—a very genial and hospitable crowd—any officer of the Planet Line was always a welcome guest.

Here I found one or two old acquaintances, including the British Consul. All of them hailed me in the friendliest fashion. What with cigars and talk and more iced drinks, the time slipped

away so rapidly that I suddenly woke up to the fact that I was cutting things rather fine with regard to the return journey. I had intended to walk back to Leixoes, but this was out of the question now, so, bidding my kind hosts a hasty good-bye, I made my way to the celebrated Rolling Square, where I found another obliging tram waiting my convenience.

As I stepped inside, the very first person who met my eyes was Miss de Roda. For the time I had quite forgotten that she was on shore, and the spectacle of her sitting there quietly in the corner gave me such a start that with a sudden unintentional movement I trod heavily upon the conductor's toe. The explosion that followed, punctuated by my apologies, naturally attracted her attention. She glanced up with a half-suppressed smile quivering round the corners of her lips, and behind it I thought I could detect a faint trace of friendly recognition. Anyhow, I hesitated no longer. Taking my courage in both hands, I walked up the tram to where she was sitting and raised my cap.

"I hope you won't mind my introducing myself," I said. "I am the second officer of the *Neptune*, and I think that you are one of our passengers."

A slight but charmingly graceful movement of her head encouraged me to take the vacant seat beside her.

"My name," I added, "is Dryden—John Dryden—the same as the poet."

She looked at me with a faint gleam of amusement still lurking in the depths of her beautiful brown eyes.

"I know you by sight, Mr. Dryden," she said. "I have seen you on the ship." Then she paused. "You must be proud of your name," she added. "It is a very distinguished one."

"It was very nearly extinguished just now," I replied. "At least, judging by what I could understand of the conductor's remarks."

She laughed softly—a low musical laugh that gave me a curious little stab of pleasure.

"One can't blame him," she remarked. "You must be a dreadfully heavy weight to come down suddenly upon anyone's toe."

I could hardly explain to her the real reason for my clumsiness, so I took refuge in a piece of shameless dishonesty.

"I was in a hurry," I explained. "I had been talking to some friends in the English Club, and I suddenly realised I should only just have time to get back. Hence the catastrophe!"

She glanced at her watch. "We have left it rather late," she admitted. "I have been doing some commissions for my uncle, and they kept me a good deal longer than I expected." She looked up at me with a slight trace of anxiety. "I suppose there is really no danger of our missing the ship?" she asked.

I shook my head. "None at all. If there were I should have taken a taxi. We shall be at Leixoes by half-past five, and it's only a ten minutes' row to where the *Neptune's* lying."

"Provided that we can get a boat," she added.

"Oh, there'll be no difficulty about that," I said. "There are generally plenty on the beach, and if it came to the worst we could always signal to the ship."

My reassurances seemed to have the desired effect, for she leaned back in her seat with a relieved expression, and obviously dismissed the matter from her thoughts.

It is not an easy thing to carry on a natural and unbroken conversation in a Portuguese tram, handicapped as one is by the pace at which the vehicle travels and the perpetual gong-ringing in which all drivers so joyously indulge. Still, considering the difficulties under which we laboured, we certainly got along together remarkably well. Long before we reached Leixoes I was in full agreement with Ross's statement that my companion was just as charming to talk to as she was beautiful to look at, and all the way I was secretly blessing the lucky accident which had given me the chance of making her acquaintance.

One thing I noticed, however, and that was that although she talked freely about the voyage and about her impressions of Oporto, she made no further reference either to her uncle or to her own affairs. I need hardly add that I was particularly careful to avoid saying anything which might sound like an attempt to introduce either topic, but the fact only strengthened my previous opinion that her self-imposed solitude on board was due to some private reason rather than to any natural aversion to society.

This belief was increased by the faint but curious suggestion of reserve which seemed to linger in the background, even when she was speaking about the most unimportant matters. It gave me the impression that she regarded our conversation as a sort of

unexpected holiday—a holiday which for some mysterious reason she had no real right to indulge in. Its only effect, however, was to render her still more attractive, and I felt quite resentful against the unnecessary efficiency of the Portuguese tram service, when we gonged our way noisily into Leixoes five minutes after the appointed time for our arrival.

Disentangling ourselves from the rest of the company, we made our way down to the beach. Out in the harbour we could see the *Neptune* busily engaged in getting up steam, while a few trading boats still clustered round her side, making a final effort to coax money out of her now wary passengers.

As we reached the shore a swarthy and rather truculent-looking gentleman, decorated with silver ear-rings, came forward to meet us.

"You want to go to sheep?" he enquired, waving a dirty hand in the direction of the *Neptune*.

I eyed him with some disfavour, but there appeared to be only one boat on the beach, so it was no good being too fastidious.

"Bring her along to the edge of the jetty," I said, "and we'll get in there."

With a shrill whistle through his fingers he summoned another and equally unattractive individual to his aid, and the pair of them commenced to haul their boat down into the water.

Miss de Roda and I walked along the causeway.

"I'm sorry I can't find you a handsomer crew," I said, "but it's a question of Hobson's choice."

"Oh, they will do very well," she answered, smiling. "They are probably the most respectable people really." Then she paused. "It's a bad habit to judge by appearances," she added, with what seemed to me the least touch of bitterness in her voice.

I looked at her steadily. "Perhaps you're right," I admitted. "All the same, it's one of those bad habits that I'm rather a believer in."

To this remark she returned no answer, and the next minute the boat, with its two unprepossessing occupants, came drifting alongside. We took our places in the stern, facing the gentleman with the silver ear-rings, who was pulling stroke. At closer quarters I thought I had never seen a more sinister-looking rascal in my life, an impression which was in no way mitigated by a large, businesslike-looking knife, which he wore stuck in a sheath suspended from his belt.

At a very leisurely pace we moved away from the jetty and headed in the direction of the ship. Neither of the men appeared to be putting the least energy into his work, and at any other time I should have called their attention to the fact in pretty straight language. As it was, the prospect of spending a few more minutes in my companion's society reconciled me to their slackness, though the furtive way in which they kept glancing at us annoyed me almost beyond endurance.

We had covered about half the distance, and were still some two hundred yards from the *Neptune*, when, without any warning, both men suddenly ceased rowing and rested their oars on the water.

I looked up at them sharply. "What are you doing?" I said. "Get on at once."

The fellow with the silver ear-rings eyed me with provoking insolence.

"No—no," he said. "You pay us now. You pay us two pound and then we take you to sheep."

Now the proper fee for a harbour boat at Leixoes is two shillings, so for a moment the audacity of this demand almost took away my breath. I suppose my face showed what I felt, for before I could speak Miss de Roda leaned across and touched me on the arm.

"Please don't let my being with you make any difference, Mr. Dryden," she said. "Do exactly what you think best."

I had quite recovered myself by this time, and the cool way in which she accepted the situation filled me with secret pleasure.

I addressed myself to the leader of the mutiny.

"I shall pay you your exact fare," I said, "and if you take my advice you will go on at once."

He met my gaze with an expression of truculent defiance.

"Two pound," he repeated, "or we take you over there and leave you." He waved his hand in the direction of the desolate sandbanks which stretched along the farther side of Leixoes harbour. "You not get boat then," he added, grinning maliciously; "you stop there and lose sheep."

It has always been an axiom of mine that when you have got to have a row the quicker and more vigorously you start work the better. The man's face was only a few feet away from me, and, without a second's hesitation, I made a swift lunge forward, and

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