

The Mystery

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PART I: The Sea Riddle

Desert Seas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here and there in the sea a glint of silver, a patch of purple, or dull red, or a glistening apparition of black showed where the unintended victims of the explosion, the gay-hued

open-sea fish of the warm waters, had succumbed to the force of the shock. Of the intended victim there was no sign save a few fragments of wood bobbing in a swirl of water.

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

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

"What was she?" asked Ives.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The talk washed back and forth across the hulks of classic sea mysteries, new and old; of the *City of Boston*, which went down with all hands, leaving for record only a melancholy scrawl on a bit of board to meet the wondering eyes of a fisherman on the far Cornish coast; of the *Great Queensland*, which set out with five hundred and sixty-nine souls aboard, bound by a route unknown to a tragic end; of the *Naronic*, with her silent and empty lifeboats alone left, drifting about the open sea, to hint at the story of her fate; of the *Huronian*, which, ten years later, on the same day and date, and hailing from the same port as the *Naronic*, went out into the void, leaving no trace; of Newfoundland captains who sailed, roaring with drink, under the arches of cathedral bergs, only to be prisoned, buried, and embalmed in the one icy embrace; of craft assailed by the terrible one-stroke lightning clouds of the Indian Ocean, found days after, stone blind, with their crews madly hauling at useless sheets, while the officers clawed the compass and shrieked; of burnings and piracies; of pest ships and slave ships, and ships mad for want of water; of whelming earthquake waves, and mysterious suction, drawing irresistibly against wind and steam power upon unknown currents; of stout hulks deserted in panic although sound and seaworthy; and of others so swiftly dragged down that there was no time for any to save himself; and of a hundred other strange, stirring and pitiful ventures such as make up the inevitable peril and incorrigible romance of the ocean. In a pause Billy Edwards said musingly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Was that Ralph Slade?" asked Barnett.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"On deck, sir."

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

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

"What's it like?"

"Sort of a queer general glow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mirage, maybe," suggested Edwards.

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

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

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

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

Three minutes later the captain was on the bridge. The great ship had swung, and they were speeding direct for the phenomenon. But within a few minutes the light had died out.

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

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

The Laughing Lass

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

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

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

"Why so?" asked the paymaster.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where?" queried Carter.

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

"Are there many volcanoes hereabouts?" somebody asked.

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

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

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

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

"But it's a fact that these seas are constantly changing," said Barnett. "They're so little travelled that no one happens to be around to see an island born. I don't suppose there's a part on the earth's surface more liable to seismic disturbances than this region."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're on," said Carter.

"Let me in," suggested Ives.

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

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

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

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

betrayal of unusual eagerness. Hence the quarter-deck was soon alive with men who were wont to be deep in dreams at that hour.

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

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

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

"Sennett."

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

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

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

The vessel was some three miles to windward. She was a schooner of the common two-masted Pacific type, but she was comporting herself in a manner uncommon on the Pacific, or any other ocean. Even as Barnett spoke, she heeled well over, and came rushing up into the wind, where she stood with all sails shaking. Slowly she paid off again, bearing away from them. Now she gathered full headway, yet edged little by little to windward again.

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

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

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

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

"No, sir," came the answer.

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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