

"Keep her as she is," he said, and Tom took the wheel.

"Yes, sar," Tom said, "as she is," and he pointed toward the cabin. "Are they all sleeping down there, sar?"

"Yes," Bob said. "Why shouldn't they be?"

"Sar," Tom said, "I think they do act queer."

"Listen, boy," Bob said. "All rich people act queer."

"Someone go on tippy-toe," Tom said, "tippy-toe. Someone try the door up forward."

"What?" Bob asked. "In the forward bulkhead?"

"Yes, sar."

"You've got great ears," Bob said. "Forget it, boy. Maybe it was Oscar being lonely."

"Yes, sar," Tom said. "I think they want to kill us, sar."

For a moment Bob Bolles was so surprised that he did not answer. Then he gave Tom a sharp cuff.

"Don't be crazy," he said. "Call me if you want me."

He went forward, crawled into his bunk and lay staring at the beams above him, listening to the sound of the water close to his ear. That last idea of Tom's made an odd climax to the whole day. He would have thought it amusing if it had not exasperated him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A SHARP unfamiliar sound awakened Bob Bolles and pushed him into a sitting posture so suddenly that he had struck his head smartly upon the berth above him. The sun was coming through the open hatch. His oilskins were swaying on the hook by his bunk. He could tell from the sun that it was quite late in the morning. Tom must have let him sleep through a watch, as Tom did sometimes. Then he heard the sound again — the sharp report of a high-powered rifle — and he was on his feet almost without thinking, running up the ladder. The sweetish salt air of the Caribbean struck his face and he saw Tom standing at the wheel grinning. Mr. Kingman, dressed in orange-colored slacks and a striped shirt, was standing balancing a rifle, looking out to windward. Oscar in faded dungarees with his shirt open at the throat was holding an empty bottle and Mrs. Kingman in gray slacks and an olive-green shirt with little gray sailboats on it, bare-headed and with sun glasses, stood just behind him. As he watched, Oscar's heavy arm moved in an arc and he threw the empty bottle. It fell splashing on a blue wave, far out.

to windward, and Mr. Kingman raised his rifle and fired. *Crack*, it went; *crack, crack*.

"Ah," Mr. Kingman said. "Throw another, Oscar," and then he saw Bob Bolles climbing down into the cockpit.

It is not an easy thing to hit a bottle from a small boat with a rifle. Mr. Kingman certainly knew how to shoot. The whole scene was careless and pleasant.

"It's Mac's hobby," she said.

Mr. Kingman handed the rifle to Oscar.

"Take it away and bring up Mr. Bolles's breakfast. By Jove, this is the—the life, isn't it?"

Oscar brought up folding chairs and set up a table. All their clothes, all the equipment were like numbers in a sporting catalogue. Tom went forward and Bob took the wheel again while Oscar brought him orange juice and bacon and toast.

"You'd think that with those big hands of his that Oscar might be clumsy," Mrs. Kingman said, "but he isn't. Do you know what he's doing already? He's making a little ship to go in a whisky bottle."

Oscar grinned, but he made no comment.

"When you get it finished," Mrs. Kingman said, "you'll give it to Mr. Bolles, won't you, Oscar?"

Oscar's mild blue eyes moved down from the luff of the mainsail, stared at Bob for a moment and turned to Mrs. Kingman.

"Huh?" he said.

For some reason it seemed to Bob that Oscar's monosyllable was disturbing. He saw Mr. Kingman glance toward Mrs. Kingman sharply, as though he wanted to stop her, but Mrs. Kingman went right on.

"You will give it to him, won't you, Oscar?"

Oscar gave the wheel a little tug and something working in his mind seemed to amuse him.

"Ay tank so," he said, "if he should need a little ship in a bottle." Mr. Kingman moved impatiently.

"That is about enough from you, Oscar," he said.

"If Oscar's such an old sea dog," Bob asked, "why didn't you charter a boat without a master?"

Mr. Kingman had been gripping the arms of his chair, half leaning forward to listen, but now he relaxed.

"Oscar can't navigate," he answered. "And speaking of navigating, how about getting up the chart?"

"I'll fetch the instrument up too," Bob said. "I'm going to shoot the sun at noon."

"Oh," said Mrs. Kingman, "shoot the sun."

The cabin was more spick-and-span than he had ever seen it. When he opened the locker and took out his chart book and instruments, he could hear their voices outside.

"From now on," he heard Mr. Kingman say, "you keep your face shut, Oscar."

When he was up on deck again and had opened the chart on the folding table Mr. Kingman rose and leaned over, looking at it eagerly.

"Where are we now?" he asked.

"About here," Bob said. "I'll tell you accurately at noon."

"Oh," Mr. Kingman said, "I see our line. We're already quite a way from everything."

"Yes," Bob said. "It's a pretty lonely sea."

Mr. Kingman pointed farther down the page.

"And those dots — those are the islands there?"

Bob Bolles nodded.

"Those islands, have you anything that shows them larger?"

Bob turned the pages of the big book until he came to the plate marked "Winderly Group" and there they were.

"The big one is Mercator," he said.

Mr. and Mrs. Kingman crowded close to the table.

"That looks like a harbor," Mr. Kingman's voice sounded sharper. "Could a ship, an ocean liner, get in there?"

"Not enough water," Bob said, "too much reef. You can see the figures here."

"Those other two islands — what are their names?" Mr. Kingman asked.

He was pointing at two other bits of land which lay perhaps forty miles to the westward.

"Jacks Island," Bob Bolles said, "and St. Edith."

"Could an ocean liner touch at either of them?" Mr. Kingman asked.

Bob Bolles looked up from the chart.

"Not enough water," he said, "too much reef. But a ship with a light draught like this one can anchor in that bay at Mercator, though it looks like a tricky passage."

But Mr. Kingman's mind was still back with the ocean liner.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "a big vessel could stand offshore and send in a small boat, couldn't she?"

"Why, yes," Bob said, "of course. Do you know of a boat's calling there, Mr. Kingman?"

"Know of some boat?" Mr. Kingman said slowly.

"Mac," Mrs. Kingman said, "Mac."

Her voice made Bob look up from the chart. Something had made her face strained and white. Oscar was still holding the wheel, but he had moved in front of it.

"No," Mr. Kingman said, "do not bother, Oscar. What do you mean, Bob, I should know of some boat?"

"What's the matter?" Bob asked. "I didn't mean anything." That was the first time his mind had moved, putting things together. Mr. Kingman laughed.

"Of course you didn't, Bob," he said.

The *Thistlewood* was moving through fine weather, pushed on by a brisk fair breeze so steady that you hardly had to trim a jib from one day to the next.

All the first day out Mr. Kingman kept looking astern or going to the bow with his glasses, as though he expected to see something, but at the end of that time he gave it up. And there was nothing worth watching, except now and then a line of porpoises breaking the water and diving in unison, or the flying fish that darted off the bow and whizzed in a straight line through the air and popped into the sea again.

"They look as if they had been wound up with a key," Mrs. Kingman said.

The sea, Bob thought, was doing both Mr. and Mrs. Kingman good. Their faces had looked drawn and tired in Kingston, but now the lines had gone out of them. They shot at bottles sometimes or took sun baths or dozed on deck and every evening they asked Bob Bolles for dinner and bridge in the cabin. Sometimes it seemed to him that they were like himself, glad to forget who they were or where they were going, for they did not talk about their background any more than he did. They lived entirely in the present, and even Oscar grew mellow and agreeable.

Just as Mrs. Kingman had said, Oscar had the most amazing way of making things. He had picked up all those little skills which you associate with an old seaman who has been in sail. He finished his little ship with all her masts and yards laid flat and then he thrust it into the neck of a bottle and pulled a bit of silk thread and up came the masts and spars with all their standing rigging.

That idea of Tom's about murder and sudden death often amused Bob Bolles. He even asked Tom about it the third night out when Tom awakened him for his trick at the wheel.

"Anybody tried to kill you yet?" Bob asked, as he pulled on his sweater.

"No, sar," Tom answered. "But what for Mr. Kingman keep looking all the time," Tom asked, "like he's afraid someone is after him?"

"Rubbish," Bob Bolles said.

"And wherefor," Tom asked, "should Mrs. Kingman be afraid of him?" "Afraid of him?"

"Yes, sar," Tom said. "She makes eyes at him, afraid, when she talks to you, sar" — but she never talked to Bob alone again until the last night out.

The breeze seemed to be dying down that night, although they were making five knots when he had looked at the log. Standing alone in the cockpit, he kept turning his head so that the wind would strike his face. There was no doubt that the wind was dropping. By morning there might be a flat calm or a change of weather, but judging by the barometer and by his instinct he felt that the weather was going to hold. Nevertheless, the wind had shifted a point or two. He went forward and trimmed the jib and the mainsheet a trifle. When he came back a figure was standing near the wheel, and he saw that it was Mrs. Kingman.

"I shouldn't be up here," she said. "I can only stay a minute." Her words were quick and a little breathless. "He's asleep, but you can't be sure."

"Look here," Bob Bolles began. Nothing had seemed out of the ordinary for days until she appeared. "I've been hoping for a chance to talk to you. What's so mysterious now? What is it?"

"Don't," she said, "don't talk so loud. He's so — so jealous. He's a very queer man, very — but don't mind that. How far are we from land?"

The binnacle struck her face as she stood near him by the wheel. Her face looked drawn and pale.

"I don't know exactly," he told her. "There's always a certain element of gamble in trying to hit a little spot like Mercator on the nose. It's easier to navigate a plane than a small boat, I think." She did not answer and he went on. "If you want my guess, from the way the clouds looked at sunset and from the way the air feels, we should see something of the Winderly Group at dawn, probably the hill at Mercator."

"Then it's over," she said, "and we've hardly seen each other at all, have we?"

"Do you mind?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said, "I do. Do you?"

It wasn't right — talking to her so — and in the end it added up to nothing.

"Yes," he said, "I don't understand you. You're like —"

"Like what?" she asked.

"Like a frightened lady in the dark," he said. Her lips were half open and then she closed them and shook her head.

"You're wrong there," she said. "I'm never very much afraid. There was a moment in Kingston, when I screamed, but never mind about that."

"I've got eyes, you know," Bob said. "There's Mr. Kingman."

"Are you jealous of him?" she asked him. "You don't have to be."

"I didn't mean that," Bob answered. "You're afraid of Mr. Kingman, aren't you?"

She gave him a strange, quick look and shook her head.

"Don't say that," she said. "I hate it. I'm not afraid for myself, only for you."

"Never mind about me," Bob answered. "I can look out for myself, I guess. If you're not afraid of him, you don't trust him, do you? This isn't just a vacation on a boat, is it? I'm not a fool. There's something else."

"Yes," she said softly, "there's something else."

"Then, you'd better tell me," Bob said. "I'd be glad to help you."

He thought that she hesitated for a moment. She seemed to be weighing his offer very carefully, and then she shook her head and smiled at him.

"No, my dear," she said. "I've thought of it. It isn't your cup of tea." He started to speak, but she stopped him.

"No," she said, "don't interrupt me. You must understand this. You must. No matter what happens, it isn't for you. You're not the kind. That's why I like you. It may be very dangerous and I can't say too much. He — he won't stop at anything. I wish you'd understand."

"Then, you are afraid of him," Bob said. "Who is he? What are you doing here anyway?"

"Please don't ask," she answered quickly. "You mustn't ask. Perhaps I can tell you sometime, but not now. I suppose I'm a fool. I want to try to help you." She stopped, but she went on before he could speak.

"It's awful to be a woman. To be lonely — always lonely. You may hate me before this is over, but please, please, don't do anything. You can't understand. You're an American. I'm French. What —" She stopped again. "What are you looking at?"

"I can't make you out," Bob said. "I wish —" And then he glanced astern and rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. "I wish I knew what you're talking about."

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"I thought I saw a light," Bob said. "Yes, there it is."

Her hand fell on his arm and gripped it tight.

"I don't see anything," she told him. "Where?"

It was away off in the dark. It would bob up and disappear again, but he saw it distinctly a moment later.

"It looks like the light on the mast of a motor cruiser," he said. "What do you suppose she's doing out here? She's on our course. She's coming nearer."

"Are you sure?" she asked him.

"Reasonably sure," he asked. "Why, what's the matter now?"

Something was the matter, because she ran away from him and yanked

open the cabin door.

"Mac," she called, "Mac! There's a boat coming up behind us."

There was a scuffling noise in the cabin and then Mr. Kingman came running up the steps.

"Oscar," he called, "come on, Oscar! You say there's a boat? Where is it, Bob?"

"Look out," Bob said. "Don't barge into me like that."

But Oscar did not answer. He and Mr. Kingman were staring at the light.

It was easier to see now. It was clearly a motor cruiser, coming fast. He could see the light on the mast and the green and red running lights. Mr. Kingman was standing absolutely motionless.

"By God," he said, "it is coming! Oscar, go down and fetch the Brenn gun. No, wait a minute. Go forward and put out our lights."

"Here," Bob Bolles said. "You and Oscar can leave my lights alone."

It was just as though he had not spoken.

"Go ahead, Oscar," Mr. Kingman said, and Oscar jumped into the cockpit. Bob Bolles dropped the wheel and stepped in front of him. He was angry, perhaps unreasonably angry.

"You stay where you are," he said, and he saw Oscar, a vague white shape, lunge toward him.

"All right," he heard Mr. Kingman say. "Go on, Oscar."

Oscar was close enough so that he could see him more clearly by then. Bob took a quick step backwards, found his balance and drove his right fist with all his weight behind it straight to Oscar's face. He heard Oscar give a grunt and he knew that he had hurt him and he knew that it was better not to stop with that, now that he had started. He stepped in with his left, and then he sent in his right again, and he was lucky, because he must have caught Oscar on the jaw. Oscar sank down on his knees and put his hands in front of him, sprawling on all fours just above the hatch that housed the auxiliary engine. The *Thistlewood* had come into the wind and the boom bounced just above his head and the sails were making a roaring, snapping sound. Mr. Kingman was standing just in front of him. Mr. Kingman's voice was very steady. All the excitement seemed to have left it.

"You should not have done that," he said. "I think —"

"Mac," he heard Mrs. Kingman say sharply, "Mac! If we can see their lights they can see ours."

Mr. Kingman turned his head slowly.

"Helen," he said, "perhaps you'd better go into the cabin."

"No," she said, and her voice was quiet and very urgent. "Mac, stop that — and remember — *Suppose what we want isn't there.*"

"Oh," Mr. Kingman said, "oh, yes. Awfully sorry, Bob." His voice had

changed suddenly. It was warm and friendly. "Of course you are quite right, Skipper." He leaned down and slapped Oscar hard on the back. "All right, Oscar. Forget it."

"I don't know what the devil's the matter with you," Bob said. "But this is my ship. See?"

He had to speak loudly because of the slatting of the sails.

"Can you stop that noise, please?" Mr. Kingman said. "It's all right, Oscar. Go and fetch the Brenn."

Bob took the wheel again. The sails filled. The *Thistlewood* was back on her course. Oscar was on his feet, shaking his head.

"Fetch it up here. You — do you hear me?" Mr. Kingman said, and Oscar moved toward the cabin.

"Do you think that boat's going to come aboard us?" Bob Bolles asked. "Is that your trouble, Kingman?"

He was over being angry. He could even feel the contagion of Mr. Kingman's excitement, now that the lights were coming nearer.

"Yes," Mr. Kingman said, "exactly that."

"Well, she isn't," Bob said. "She's a half mile to starboard of us and she's keeping on her course."

"Oh," Mr. Kingman said. "Yes, I see." And he raised his voice: "Never mind, Oscar."

From the lights she was a big cabin cruiser and she passed them as though they were standing still. It was a long while before Mr. Kingman looked away from the lights.

"Well," he said, "she cannot be looking for us. What's she doing here, do you think, Bob? Is she on her way to Mercator?"

"No," Bob answered, and he meant it. "Nothing goes to Mercator. She'll be going south — Trinidad, perhaps."

Mr. Kingman stood silently thinking and no one said a word until he spoke again.

"If she stops at Mercator, of course we shall see her in the harbor."

"That will be the only place for her," Bob said, "but nothing stops at Mercator."

"We must be ready," Mr. Kingman said, "just in case. Call me if you see her lights again."

"Maybe it would be easier," Bob told him, "if you'd tell me what your trouble is — not that I give a damn."

Mr. Kingman laughed. Everything seemed better, now that the boat was gone.

"I don't wonder you ask," he said, "not a bit. I'll tell you how it is, Bob. You don't mind my calling you Bob, do you? I wish you'd call me Mac. I

keep asking you."

"All right. Go ahead, Mac," Bob said.

"You certainly could handle Oscar," Mr. Kingman said. "That was quite a sight!"

"Go ahead, Mac," Bob Bolles said again.

"All right," Mr. Kingman said. "Let's put it this way. It isn't really anything that need bother you at all. I'm representing a — a shipping company. There was some freight left on — on one of those islands." Bob Bolles felt his hands grip the wheel more tightly, but he did not speak.

"Let's let it go at that," Mr. Kingman said. "I guess you've been around a — a bit, haven't you, Bob?"

"Yes," Bob Bolles said, "quite a bit."

"You're a very — very nice guy," Mr. Kingman said. "How about a drink before we turn in? Oscar, bring us up some whisky."

CHAPTER EIGHT

A HALF hour later Bob Bolles lashed the wheel and went quietly forward, climbed down the hatch and closed the cover behind him, and lighted the lantern.

"Tom," he whispered, "Tom! Where are my guns?"

Tom pulled himself out of his bunk.

"On the upper berth, sar," Tom said. "Under the blanket yonder, sar."

Bob Bolles ripped the blanket away from the upper berth. There was nothing beneath it — not his rifle, not his shotgun, not his automatic pistol.

"What's the matter, sar?" Tom asked.

Bob Bolles's mouth felt as dry as flannel. A tingling sort of shiver moved up and down his spine, as though something unpleasant were just behind him, but he tried to tell himself that he was not afraid. He had always hated people who got rattled, but still the absence of those firearms of his was an inescapable shock, and all sorts of other impressions of the last days began drifting through his mind.

"Shut up," Bob whispered. "I want to think."

It was no longer a matter of suspicion, for everything in his mind came together — the first glimpse of the Kingmans, what Captain Burke had told him, even the way that Mr. Kingman tripped and hesitated over slang and colloquialisms. He was as convinced as though he had read it on a printed page in daylight that Kingman was looking for the same thing that the