

The MYSTERY

By Stewart Edward White
And Samuel Hopkins Adams

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[CONTINUED.]

Below us the bottom was clouded with black figures darting rapidly like a school of minnows beneath a boat. They darkened the coral and the sands and the glistening sea growths, only the occultations and brightenings succeeded each other much more swiftly.

We stared stupefied, our thinking power blurred by the incessant whirl of motion and noise.

Suddenly Thrackles laughed aloud. "Seals!" he shouted through his trumpeted hands.

Our eyes were expanding to the twilight. We could make out the arch of the room, its shelves and hollows and niches. Lying on them we could discern the seals, hundreds and hundreds of them, all staring at us, all barking and bellowing. As we approached they scrambled from their elevations and, diving to the bottom, scurried to the entrance of the cave.

We lay on our oars for ten minutes. Then silence fell. There persisted a tiny drip, drip drip, from some point in the darkness. It merely accentuated the hush. Suddenly from far in the interior of the hill there came a long, hollow boo-o-om! It reverberated, roaring. The surge that had lifted our boat some minutes before thus reached its journey's end.

The chamber was very lofty. As we rowed cautiously in it lost nothing of its height, but something in width. It was marvelously colored, like all the volcanic rocks of this island. In addition some chemical drip had thrown across its vividness long gauzy streamers of white. We rowed in as far as the faintest daylight lasted us.

This was beyond the seal rookery on the beach. Below it we entered an open cleft of some size to another squarer cave. It was now high tide. The water extended a scant ten fathoms to end on an interior shale beach. The cave was a perfectly straight passage following the line of the cleft. How far in it reached we could not determine, for it, too, was full of seals, and after we had driven them back a hundred feet or so their fiery eyes stared us out. We did not care to put them at bay.

The next day I rowed out to the Laughing Lass and got a rifle. I found the captain asleep in his bunk and did not disturb him. Perdosa and I, with infinite pains, tracked and stalked the sheep, of which I killed one. We found the mutton excellent. The hunting was difficult and the quarry as time went on more and more suspicious, but henceforward we did not lack for fresh meat. Furthermore, we soon discovered that fine trolling was to be had outside the reef. We rigged a sail for the extra dory and spent much of our time at the sport. I do not know the names of the fish. They were very gamy, indeed, and ran from five to an indeterminate number of pounds in weight. Above fifty pounds our light tackle parted, so we had no means of knowing how large they may have been.

Thus we spent very pleasantly the greater part of two weeks. At the end of that time I made up my mind that it would be just as well to get back to business. Accordingly I called Perdosa and directed him to sort and clear of rust the salvaged chain cable. He refused flatly. I took a step toward him. He drew his knife and backed away.

"Perdosa," said I firmly, "put up that knife."

"No," said he.

I pulled the saw barreled Colt's 45 and raised it slowly to a level with his breast.

"Perdosa," I repeated, "drop that knife."

The crisis had come, but my resolution was fully prepared for it. I should not have cared greatly if I had had to shoot the man, as I certainly should have done had he disobeyed. There would then have been one less to deal with in the final accounting, which strangely enough I now for a moment never doubted would come. I had not before aimed at a man's life, so you can see to what tensely the baffling mystery had strung me.

Perdosa hesitated a fraction of an instant. I really think he might have changed it, but Handy Solomon, who had been watching me closely, growled at him.

"Drop it, you fool!" he said.

Perdosa let fall the knife.

"Now, get at that cable," I commanded, still at white heat. I stood over him until he was well at work, then turned back to set tasks for the other men. Handy Solomon met me halfway.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Eagen," said he, "I want a word with you."

"I have nothing to say to you," I snapped, still excited.

"It ain't reasonable not to hear a man's say," he advised in his most conciliatory manner. "I'm talking for all of us."

He paused a moment, took my silence for consent and went ahead.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Eagen," said he, "we ain't going to do any more useless work. There ain't no laziness about us, but we ain't going to be busy at nothing. All the camp

work and the haulin' and cuttin' and cleanin' and the rest of it we'll do gladly. But we ain't goin' to pound any more cable, and you can kiss the book on that."

"You mean to mutiny?" I asked.

He made a deprecatory gesture.

"Put us aboard ship, sir, and let us hear the old man give his orders, and you'll find no mutiny in us. But here ashore it's different. Did the old man give orders to pound the cable?"

"I represent the captain," I stammered.

He caught the evasion. "I thought so. Well, if you got any kick on us, please, sir, go get the old man. If he says to our face pound cable, why pound cable it is. Ain't that right, boys?"

They murmured something. Perdosa deliberately dropped his hammer and joined the group. My hand strayed again toward the sawed off Colt's 45.

"I wouldn't do that," said Handy Solomon, almost kindly. "You couldn't kill us all. And w'at good would it do?"

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was a byproduct, a utilization of what life offered me. I had set sail possessed by the sole idea of ferreting out Dr. Schermerhorn's investigations, but the gradual development of affairs had ended by absorbing my every faculty. Now, cast into an eddy by my change of fortunes, the original idea regained its force. I was out of the active government of affairs, with leisure on my hands, and my thoughts naturally turned with curiosity again to the laboratory in the valley.

Darrow's "devil fires" were again painting the sky. I had noticed them from time to time, always with increasing wonder. The men accepted them easily as only one of the unexplained phenomena of a sailor's experience, but I had not as yet hit on a hypothesis that suited me. They were not allied to the aurora. They differed radically from the ordinary volcanic emanations and scarcely resembled any electrical displays I had ever seen. The night was cool. The stars bright. I resolved to investigate.

Without further delay I arose to my feet and set off into the darkness. Immediately one of the group detached himself from the fire and joined me.

"Going for a little walk, sir?" asked Handy Solomon sweetly. "That's quite right and proper. Nothin' like a little walk to get you fit and right for your bunk."

He held close to my elbow. We got just as far as the stockade in the bed of the arroyo. The lights we could make out now across the zenith, but owing to the precipitation of the cliffs and the rise of the arroyo bed it was impossible to see more. Handy Solomon felt the defenses carefully.

"A man would think, sir, it was a cannibal island," he observed. "All so tight and tidylke here. It would take a ship's guns to batter her down. A man might dig under these here two gate logs if no one was against him. Like to try it, sir?"

"No," I answered gruffly.

From that time on I was virtually a prisoner, yet so carefully was my surveillance accomplished that I could place my finger on nothing definite. Some one always accompanied me on my walks, and in the evening I was herded as closely as any cattle.

Handy Solomon took the direction of affairs off my hands. You may be sure he set no very heavy tasks. The men cut a little wood, carried up a few pails of water. That was all.

Lacking incentive to stir about, they came to spend most of their time lying on their backs watching the sky. This in turn bred a languor which is the stickest, most soul and temper destroying affair invented by the devil. They could not muster up energy enough to walk down the beach and back, and yet they were wearied to death of the inaction. After a little they became irritable toward one another. Each suspected the other of doing less than he should. You who know men will realize what this meant.

The atmosphere of our camp became surly. I recognized the precursor of its becoming dangerous. One day on a walk in the hills I came on Thrackles and Pulz lying on their stomachs gazing down fixedly at Dr. Schermerhorn's camp. This was nothing extraordinary, but they started guiltily to their feet when they saw me and made off, growling under their breaths. All this that I have told you so briefly took time. It was the eating through of men's spirits by that worst of corrosives, idleness. I conceive it unnecessary to weary you with the details.

The situation was as yet uneasy, but not alarming. One evening I overheard the beginning of an absurd plot to gain entrance to the valley. That was as far as detail went. I became convinced at last that I should in some way warn Percy Darrow.

That seems a simple enough proposition, does it not? But if you will stop to think one moment of the difficulties of my position you will see that it was not as easy as at first it appears. Darrow still visited us in the evening. The men never allowed me even the chance of private communication while he was with us. One or two took pains to stretch out between us. Twice I arose when the assistant did, resolved to accompany him part way back. Both times men resolutely escorted us and as resolutely separated us from the opportunity of a single word apart. The crew never threatened me by word or look. But we understood each other.

I was not permitted to row out to the Laughing Lass without escort. Therefore I never attempted to visit her again. The men were not anxious to do so. Their awe of the captain made them only too glad to escape his notice. That empty shell of a past reputation was my only hope. It shielded the arms and ammunition.

As I look back on it now the period seems to me to be one of merely potential trouble. The men had not taken the pains to crystallize their ideas. I really think their compelling emotion was that of curiosity. They wanted to see. It needed a definite impulse to change that desire to one of greed.

The impulse came from Percy Darrow and his idle talk of voodooes. As usual he was directing his remarks to the cullen nigger.

"Voodooes?" he said. "Of course there are. Don't fool yourself for a minute on that. There are good ones and bad ones. You can tame them if you know how, and they will do anything you want them to." Pulz chuckled in his throat. "You don't believe it?" drawled the assistant, turning to him. "Well, it's so. You know that heavy box we are so careful of? Well, that's got a tame voodoo in it."

The others laughed.

"What he like?" asked the nigger gravely.

"He's a fine voodoo, with wavery arms and green eyes and red glows."

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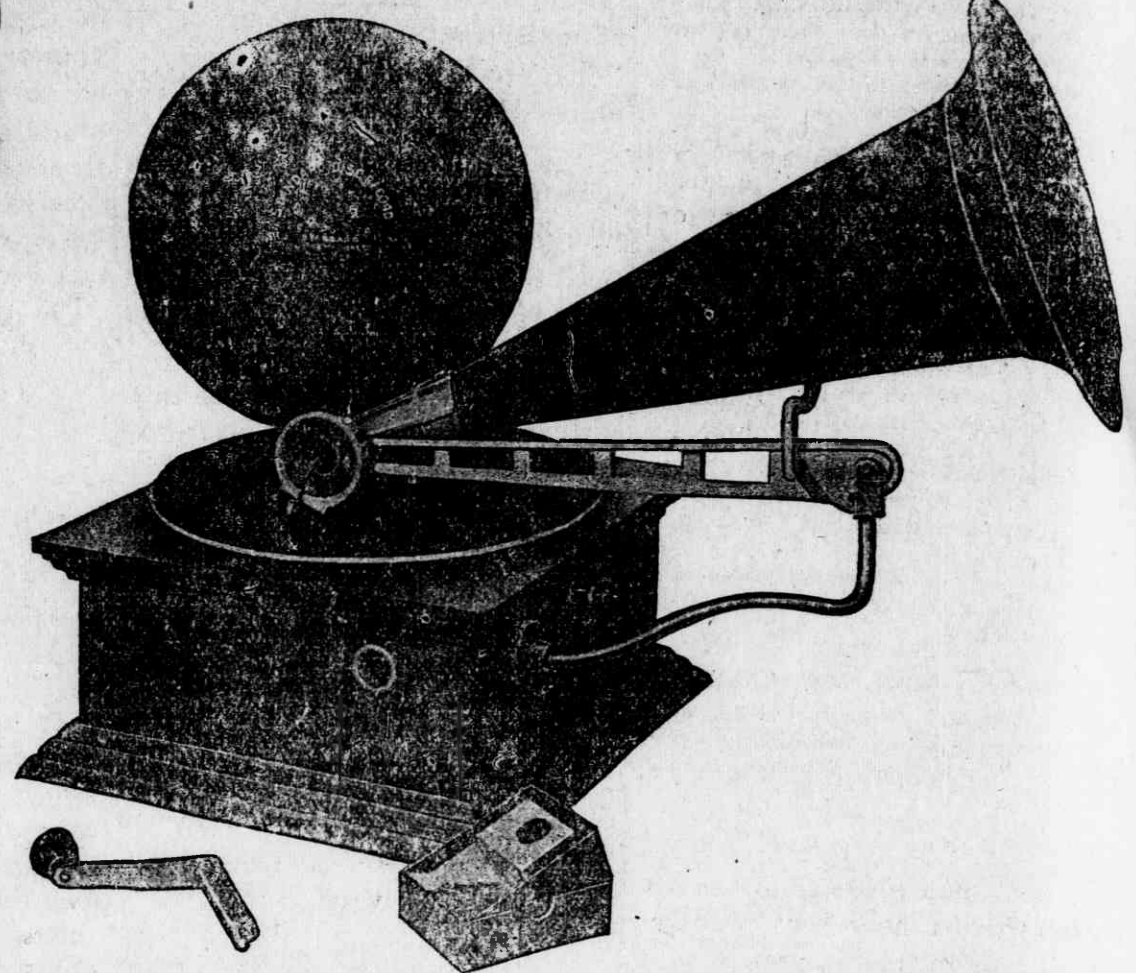
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Watching narrowly its effect he swung off into one of the genuine old crouching voodoo songs, once so common down south, now so rarely heard. No one knows what the words mean—they are generally held to be charm words only—a magic gibberish. But the nigger sprang across the fire like lightning, his face altered by terror, to seize Darrow by the shoulders.

"Doan you! Doan you!" he gasped, shaking the assistant violently back and forth. "Dat he King Voodoo song! Dat call him all de voodoo—all!"

He stared wildly about in the darkness as though expecting to see the night thronged. There was a moment of confusion. Eager for any chance I hissed under my breath: "Danger! Look out!"

I could not tell whether or not Darrow heard me. He left soon after. The mention of the chest had focused the men's interest.

"Well," Pulz began, "we've been here on this spot for a long time."

"A year and five months," reckoned Thrackles.

"A man can do a lot in that time."

"If he's busy."

"They've been busy."

"Yes."

"Wonder what they've done?"

There was no answer to this, and the sea lawyer took a new tack.

"I suppose we're all getting double wages?"

"That's so."

"And that's say four hunder' for us and Mr. Eagen here. I suppose the old man don't let the schooner go for nothing."

"Two hundred and fifty a month," said I and then would have had the words back.

They cried out in prolonged astonishment.

"Seventeen months," pursued the logician after a few moments. He scratched with a stub of lead. "That makes over \$11,000 since we've been out. How much do you suppose his outfit stands him?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you," I replied shortly.

"Well, it's a pile of money anyway. Nobody said anything for some time."

"Wonder what they've done?" Pulz asked again.

"Something that pays big." Thrackles supplied the desired answer.

"Dat chis"—suggested Perdosa.

"Voodoo"—muttered the nigger.

"That's to scare us out," said Handy Solomon, with vast contempt. "That's what makes me sure it is the chest."

Pulz muttered some of the jargon of alchemy.

"That's it," approved Handy Solomon. "If we could get it—"

"We wouldn't know how to use it," interrupted Pulz.

"The book"—said Thrackles.

"Well, the book"—asserted Pulz pugnaciously. "How do you know what it will be? It may be the philosopher's stone and it may be one of these other things. And then where'd we be?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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