

RED HAIR AND BLUE SEA



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WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Palmyra Tree, aboard the yacht Rainbow...
Next day, Burke and the brown man...

CHAPTER III

ENEMIES—AND FRIENDS

Some sixteen days later in Mrs. Crawford's cabin a conference was under way.

"But, my dear, my dear," Palmyra's mother was protesting, "how can you say everything's going right, when Palm spends most of her time listening to that, that miserable stowaway; that—human toad. Her father is beside himself with anxiety."

The man made a deprecatory sound.

"Events," said the hostess impressively, "have only too well shown that I, that I've intervened just in time. Your daughter was on the verge of falling in love with John Thurston."

The father uttered a protest. "I don't see we've gained anything."

"But where are your eyes?" demanded the hostess. "As I said in California, Van, with his refined personality, fits into the yacht's cabin like 'The Young King Charles' into a gilded frame. Thurston, on the contrary, is a great, robust being. He looks well enough ashore, but here, in these little compartments, on this narrow deck, his hands and feet seem in the way."

She paused to smile at them reassuringly.

"Surely, with John at his worst, Van at his best—need we fear?"

Meanwhile, Constance Crawford was forward at the Rainbow's bow, sailing through the tropic night upon enchanted waters.

When John Thurston presently joined Constance, she looked up with a frown. "I was just thinking," she explained, "that Palm Tree doesn't at all realize what Burke may be getting into his mind. To believe the little fraud's quite puffed up over the idea he's made something of a conquest."

Thurston answered rather absently. "Anyhow," he said, "Burke's over the side at Honolulu and gone forever."

She assented.

John was silent for some time. Then: "I'd like to go, too," he burst out. "I've been trying to tell you I've taken your advice: asked her to become my wife."

"Yes," she answered without moving. "I know."

"She told you?" he exclaimed.

"No. You did."

He was chagrined. "Suppose I do look like that," he said.

"On the contrary. You've been splendid." She glanced up friendly. "But I still think it was the right thing to do. A week or two hence—absolutely no hope. Oh, why didn't you speak in California? She originally liked you best. I'm sure of it. Does still, if she only knew. Or," Constance added ruefully, "would it they'd let her alone?"

He laughed with some bitterness. "Oh, I know what you mean."

He fell into a sudden petulance.

When Thurston spoke again it was apparently in an effort to get into a more cheerful vein.

"Seemingly," he said, "I have another well-wisher aboard."

With a pocket flashlight he made visible for her a small object of woven fibre: a bark cord wound round a packet perhaps two inches square. "When I came on deck this morning," he explained, "Olive incarnated herself before me. Looked about furtively, jerked my coat-tails up, fastened this round my wrist. Then he gave me a friendly grin and vanished."

"But," she puzzled, "what is it?"

"Inside there's a bit of fine mat, seven hairs and a tooth"—a good luck charm.

"But, but why...?"

"How should I know?"

She was thoughtful. "At any rate," she said finally, "he seems to be wishing you good luck."

She examined the amulet again with an absent attention. Then, the smile fading from her lips: "John, promise me you will not leave the Rainbow at Honolulu."

The yacht was pushing on at her best pace, setting up such a lively stir at her prow as to achieve the small, private rainbow for which she had been named.

Burke and Palmyra were on deck

Burke was quizzically regarding the pensive Palmyra.

As though defining her very thoughts, he spoke:

"Excuse me, Miss," he said. "Those others—a slightly contemptuous gesture. 'They're tame. That's what—tame. But you? Why, you're different. Y'sure wasn't intended for their little birdcage kind of life. Nature meant y'or something lively-like, something up and doing.'"

The girl laughed. "Nature," she said, "meant me for a pirate. It's in my blood," she affirmed. "First, a Norseman ravaging the coasts of England. Then, a British admiral ravaging everything else. And lastly, old Captain Ebenezer, with John Paul Jones, descending once more upon the coasts of England."

Burke grinned in admiration.

The girl turned to go; then paused, laughing back at him over her shoulder. "You, Ponape Burke," she said, "you and I—I'm afraid we were born too late."

At the rate the Rainbow was sailing, it was evident the yacht must soon make a landfall. Indeed, all ready eyes were peering through powerful glasses seeking for the first shadowy silhouette of the peaks of Oahu.

As the Rainbow raised the panorama of dead craters that stands rather barren, above the verdant town of Honolulu, none upon her decks was so expectant as Palmyra Tree. For from the chaff of Ponape Burke's narration she had winnowed the clean grain of beauty and ro-

Palmtree understood. For there in the advertisement was a palmtree. The unpraised hand had symbolized the palm—herself Olive had sought to give her a ring with her name upon it.

When the hour of leavetaking came, however, he seemed to have re-entered the silence, and the farewells devolved upon Ponape Burke.

As this little stowaway reached her in his round he achieved a simple eloquence of feeling. "You've been kind t'me miss," he said. "I ain't a-going t'forget it. Nor you."

She shook hands with an unassuming friendliness. "I'm sure," she said, "we shall see you again."

Sharply he glanced at her, as if eager to know whether she really had such a hope. Then he shrugged, island-wise. "It's a large ocean lady. With you and me it's just lights passing in the dark; a hail, and then—nothing."

A minute later Palmyra's pirates were swinging over the side into their boat.

Burke raised his head jauntily. But it was at the savage the girl looked. Over the white man's shoulder he seemed to be watching her to the end with that strangely expressionless but intent stare.

Palmyra faced abruptly away and snatched the ring from her finger. "Yes," she whispered, "I'm certainly glad to have seen the last of him."

One short week ashore and the good ship Rainbow was at sea again. Bound she was now for the heart of



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mance that is the life of this island world of the palm tree. Her imagination was a-glow.

Through the gateway of Honolulu she was to sail on into this world where happiness is queen.

She was to sail across the trackless sea as those brown mariners of old.

As the girl, thus deep in reverie, stood watching the distant peaks, she became aware of a presence at her side. Turning, she started upon encountering the brown man Olive.

He gave tongue to a few syllables paused perplexed, then fell back upon pantomime. The hour of departure had come. Soon Burke and he would go over the side and, forever, into oblivion.

Palmyra smiled. She tried to overcome her aversion, to respond to his attempted farewell. As he had done, she moved to speak, found herself helpless, returned the smile.

The brown man, thus countenanced, laid the square finger upon her own breast. Having thus identified the girl as the being of the drama he raised his hand, with extended arm, straight over his head. She thought he invoked the One above. But she gave this up when she saw that he wagged, fluttered the fingers.

When she shook her head, regretfully he abandoned the unpraised hand as futile. He brought out a ring—Palmyra Tree had never seen such a ring: tortoise shell inlaid with silver: There were letters on it; seemingly one word, thrice repeated and separated by discs—the word "Ni."

Olive pointed to the letters, then to the girl and once more held aloft the hand with the moving fingers. But again she shook her head.

The brown man stood baffled. Then, grinning anew, he hurried away forward.

The savage, presently returning, thrust into the girl's hand a lithograph, an advertisement of Egyptian cigarettes.

He pointed to the silver letters of the ring and pronounced the word "Ni," then to her with a second "Ni," and to the picture with a third. He dropped the ring into her fingers.

At last the girl who was named

Oceanica, the Equatorial isles of Micronesia. As the yacht was to put John Thurston aboard a Philippine transport at Guam, only a little southing, said the hostess, would take them in among the Gilberts, the Marshalls, the Carolines, that Milky Way of atolls along the line of which Ponape Burke had talked so alluringly.

What Mrs. Crawford did not explain was, that the real duty, as she saw it, lay in depriving Thurston's long legs of a chance, in this less cramped setting of Honolulu, to snap back to perspective.

By rejecting both her lovers—Van shortly after John—Palmyra had gained a reprieve from that question as to whether she were in love with one man or just dandy good pals with two.

The peaks of Oahu sank back into the moana, the deep, deep ocean, whence they had risen. One day, two days, four, six upon a temperamental sea; a whole week of heavy skies and rain and storm seemed to have carried the girl no further.

A second week came and went; a week of summer sea and lusty trades and flying yacht. But still no answer.

The third week came and neared its end. Intermittent now the breeze, for they touched the equatorial zone of light and variable airs. A whole day through, perhaps, the Rainbow would scarcely move.

Slowly, unconsciously, Palmyra had been responding to the conditions created by the wily Mrs. Crawford. As the breeze, with each knot of westing, had been sinking more dangerously into the doldrums, the breath of her on feeling had stirred, risen fresh, fair, constant, until it reached the deep sweep of a maiden's first acknowledged love.

Gladly she was confessing it now, this belated recognition of love for the man of her parent's choice, Van Buren Rutger.

And she must have treated John Thurston abominably. With each moment that she gave herself more convincingly up to live, her pity for Thurston grew.

But when, on the twenty-second

evening out from Honolulu—tomorrow they were to sight their first atoll—the hour came for the formal announcement of her betrothal, the girl was radiantly happy.

True, at the moment when Mrs. Crawford spoke, it was upon the face of John Thurston that Palmyra's eyes rested, and she could but wince at the flash of pain there revealed. But no girl in love, can on her betrothal night, long be unhappy over the face of a rejected suitor.

So it was, that night, as Palmyra lay asleep in her stateroom, her body gently moving with the lift and fall of the yacht in the mid-Pacific calm, there was a tender smile upon her lips.

And the tender smile was still lingering, in an alluring warmth and sweetness and beauty, when the Rainbow, caught all unawares by a sudden squall, came down with a crash upon the teeth of a reef—that should not have been there.

On a craft such as the Rainbow interest naturally centers about the navigation.

What better then for Mrs. Crawford in her amiable intrigue than to set up Van Buren Rutger as a "gentleman navigator"? How more pleasantly important than, handsome, graceful, jaunty in his white uniform he poised with sextant to take the sun or bent over the charts with Constance and the Wampolds and Palmyra?

In so featuring Van as a yachtsman—he was no more than a fairly competent amateur—the hostess had meant that Pedersen in the background should unostentatiously check up on his work at every point.

But... The sailing master was a man vain, self-important, jealous of his prerogatives, touchy as to his dignity.

Not understanding Mrs. Crawford's motive, he chose to regard the arrangement as an imputation upon his seamanship, his fitness—which he himself doubted—longer to command.

Van soon discovered then that this sick and sulky old man was only making an outward show; in reality having nothing whatever to do with the navigation, leaving the fate of the yacht absolutely in Van's own hands.

A certain inability to take a stand in anything unpleasant, difficult, to make up his mind and act in an emergency, kept Van at first from telling the hostess. Later he continued with an object. He knew she did not truly rely on him in this showy fraud of navigation; he suspected Palmyra was not deceived. Knowing his own weakness, he had the weak man's fear of seeing that knowledge reflected in the face of others. Therefore, he would, without aid, sail the Rainbow to and through the Line island groups. And then, when at last he told the girl, she could not but admire his performance.

On the night of the wreck, Van—really heroic in persisting against a quaking unconfidence that kept him often awake—had stolen on deck in the mid-watch to reassure himself. His first glance told him the clouds were gathering for a squall.

Like most unadventurous persons, Van rebelled at being thought timid. Before rousing the watch he paused to make sure the clouds meant wind. As he studied the sky he gradually became aware of a low sound as of an express train far away. Startled, he swept the sea; then laughed in self-contempt. More than once lately in dreams or waking he had sprung up at that fancied sound of surf. The yacht should not have land aboard until late the next day. To call out there was an island, a-lee, if there were none, would be to make himself absurd.

Staring now up at the blackening sky, again off into the gloom of sea, he stood, balanced in suspense between his fear of storm and leeshore, and his dread of ridicule. For this first time Van held life and death in his hands—and could not

decide what to do.

The sound of surf being at a minimum after two days' calm, the first breath of the squall was upon the yacht before Van was galvanised into action by discovering, broad on the port bow, a dim low-lying something against the sky—the silhouette of palms.

But even as the doomed Rainbow thus lay between hammer and anvil, she could have been extricated had not Captain Pedersen himself gone to pieces.

In the precious remaining moments a bewildered crew tried to execute incoherent orders, while the yacht was beaten down upon the waiting coral.

Following the crash upon the reef, Thurston picked himself up and scrambled to the deck just as a sea came roaring aboard. Saved by a spring to the rigging he waited a chance to reach Pedersen, whose condition he had sensed. Seizing the sailing master he whirled him round.

"You're drunk," he cried. "Or, or crazy."

The other quailed under the steady light in Thurston's eye.

"Get below."

"I'll take charge," Thurston announced.

The pumps showed that the wreck was taking water badly. Such boats as could be launched were got ready.

The men obeyed unquestioningly. The liked, respected Thurston. He knew little of ships but they recognized in his voice the quality of command.

During the hours which followed it might well have seemed to Palmyra that the wreck had been arranged for the sole purpose of bringing out the difference between John Thurston and Van Buren Rutger.

Where Van was soon sodden with cusing misery, Thurston's spirits were buoyant. The man was serene, methodical, buoy. And he had action at last; intense, vital. In fighting to save the woman he loved he could forget, for the moment, that he had lost her forever.

Where Van was soon sodden with fatigue, John seemed fresher with every hour.

It had been decided to leave the women in the cabin where they had been penned, rather than risk the ugly surf that broke about the after companion.

But Van, in his self-accusing frenzy, was conscious only that he had placed his betrothed in the hands of death, that he must save her.

He rushed toward the cabin companionway. Before anyone noticed, he had thrown it open in the face of another sea. A second later he was swept down its steps by the flooding water.

Catching up Palmyra he struggled back and out again on the deck. Only then, at a warning cry, did he seem consciously to perceive what force it was that delivered these blows. Stopping short, he looked back. A crest reared above the wreck, gathering itself like some animating beast for the spring. Van, horror stricken, started one way, another stood frozen in his tracks.

In an instant the sea would have been upon him. From that slippery listing deck both man and girl would in all chance, have been carried overboard to death.

In the blinding roar, all she knew was that Van's arms were round her, that he held her safe. Never did she suspect it was another pair of arms she owed her life.

Of all these revelations, these manifestations of the weakness of Van Buren Rutger, the strength of John Thurston, the girl noted none. On the night of her betrothal she would scarcely have been like, under any circumstances, to draw comparisons. And here darkness and groping confusion and the voice of waters inspired with Thurston himself to hide the truth.

Palmyra's love weathered the storm, unquestioning, serene.

(Continued next week.)



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