

THE MYSTERY

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE and SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS

Illustrations by Will Crawford.

IX.

The Achievement. For some moments Darrow sat gazing fixedly at the table before him. His cigarette lip glowed and faded. Someone suggested drinks. The captain asked Darrow what he would have, but the question went unnoted.

chemicals from Washington went wrong! I was washing my shirt in the hot water spring when he came bolting out of the laboratory, and looked me over. I came out pretty indignantly. Apologize? Not at all. He just sputtered. His nearest approach to coherence seemed to indicate a desire that I should go back to Washington at once and destroy a perfectly reputable firm of chemists. Finally he calmed down and took it out in entering it in his daily record. He was quite proud of that

place. They did not project from in the open when the light was to be produced. Once the experiment took a serious turn. The lights had flickered and gone. Dr. Schermerhorn had returned to his laboratory. I came up the arroyo as he flung the door open and rushed out. He was a grotesque figure, clad in an undershirt and a worn pair of trousers, fastened with an old bit of tarred rope in lieu of his suspenders, which I had been repairing. About his

the screening of gravity—does this sound like delirium? Sometimes I think it was. That night he turned over to me the key of the large chest and his ledger. The latter he had made me read. It was a complete jumble. You have seen it. We were up a good part of the night with our pet volcano. It was suffering from internal disturbances. So, the doctor would say indulgently, was a volcanic active rock, came bounding down our way. Little play-antics-to-exhibit now that the work is finished.

"In the morning he insisted on me leaving him alone and going down intending to send it aboard. I saved my life possibly; Solomon's bullet deflected slightly. I think, in passing through the heavy paper, Slade has told you about my flight. I ought to have gone straight up the arroyo. I did not see him again, the doctor. My last glimpse—the old man—I remember now how the grey had spread through his beard—had been growing old—it had been there at his laboratory door and the mountain spouted and thundered.

"We will a name-to-suit-propose-gift it, he said, as I left him. 'It shall make us as the gods. We will call it celestium.' "I left him there smiling. Smiling happily. The greatest force of his age—if he had lived. Very wise, very simple—a kind old child. May I trouble you for a light? Thanks."

"Nothing remained but to search for his body. I was sure they had killed him and taken the chest. I had little expectation of finding him dead or alive. None after I saw the stream of lava pouring into the sea. One saves his own life by instinct. I suppose. There I was. I had to do it. It did not matter much, but I continued to do it by various shifts. That last day on the headland the fumes nearly got me. You may have noted the rather excited scrawl in the ledger? Yes, I thought I was gone that time. But I got to the cave. It was low tide. Then the earthquake, and I was walled in.



"He Flogated the Model in the Tub."

element of mystery, of uncertainty, of underlying peril, gave a certain zest to the affair. In the periods of dullness I found some amusement in visiting the lower camp and baiting the Nigger. Slade will have told you about him; he possessed quite a fund of bastard Voodooism; he possessed more before I got through with him. Yes; if he had lived to return to his country, I fancy he would have added considerably to Afro-American witch-lore. You remember the vampire bats, Slade? And the devil-fires? Naturally I didn't mention to you that the devil-fire business wasn't altogether as clear to me as I pretended. It wasn't, though. But at the time it served very well as an amusement. All the while I realized that my self-entertainment was not without its element of danger. (To be sure, I remember glances not altogether friendly but always a little doubtful, a little awed. Even Handy Solomon, practical as he was, had a scruple or two of superstition in his make-up, on which one might work. Only Eagen—Slade, I mean—was beyond me there. You puzzled me not a little in those days. Slade, Well,

daily record and remembered to write in it on an average, of once a week. "Then the chest went wrong. Whether it had rusted a bit, or whether the chemicals had got in their work on the hinges, I don't know; but one day the professor, of his own initiative, recognized my existence by lugging his box out in the open and asking me to fix it. Previously he had emptied it. It was rather a complicated thing, with an inner compartment over which was a hollow cover, opening along one rim. That, I conjectured, was designed to hold some chemical compound or salt. There were many minor openings, too, each guarded by a similar hollow door. My business was with the heavy top cover. "It should shut and open softly, gently," explained the professor. "So, not with a grating-sound-to-be accompanied," he added, with his curious effect of linked phraseology. "Half a day's work fixed it. The lid would stand open of itself until tipped at a considerable angle, when it would fall and lock. Only on the outer shell was there a lock: that one was a good bit of craftsmanship. "So, Percy, my boy," said the doctor kindly. "That will with-sufficient-safety guard our treasure. When we obtain it, Percy. When it entirely-finished-and-completed shall be."

waist flickered a sort of aura of radiance which was extinguished as he flung himself headforemost into the cold spring. I hauled him out. He seemed dazed. To my questions he replied only by mumbblings, the burden of which was: "I do not understand. It is a not-to-be-comprehended accident. It appears that he didn't quite know why he had taken to the water. Or if he did, he didn't want to tell. "Next day he was as good as new. Just as silent as before, but it was a smiling, satisfied silence. So it went for weeks, for months, with the accession of depression and anger always rare. Then came an afternoon when, returning from a stalk after sheep, I heard strange and shocking noises from the laboratory. Strict as was the embargo which kept me outside the door, I burst in, only to be seized in a suffocating grip. Of a sudden I realized that I was being embraced. The doctor flung his hand above my head and flung with ponderous steps. The dismal noises continued to emanate from his mouth. He was singing. I wish I could give you a notion of the amazement, the paralyzing wonder which Schermerhorn; you would not understand. "We polkaed into the open. There he cast me loose. He stopped singing and burst into a rhapsody of disjointed words. Mostly German, it was—a wondrous jumble of the scientific and poetic. "Eureka! eureka! at intervals. Then he would leap in the air, it was weird, it was distressing. Crazy? Oh, quite. For the time, you understand. If any of us should suddenly become the most potent individual in the world,

"Such indifference as the doctor displayed toward the volcano I have never known. If I ventured to warn him he would assure me that there was no cause for alarm. I think he regarded that little hell's kitchen as merely a feed spot for his vast enterprise. He felt a sort of affection toward it; he was tolerant of its petty fits of temper. That he completed his work before the destruction came was sheer luck. Nothing else. The day before the outbreak he came to me with a tiny phial of complicated design.

"Percy, will you at-a-reasonable-price sell this to you," he said. "How much?" I inquired, responding to his playfulness. "A bargain," he cried gaily. "Five millions dollars. No! Shall I upon-a-need-friend hard-press? Never. One million. One little million dollars."

"I haven't that amount with me," I began. "Of no account," he declared airily. "Soon we shall have many more times as that. Give me your C. O. D." "My L. O. U.," I inquired. "It makes no matter. See I will give it to you gratis."

"He handed me the metal contrivance. It was closed. "Inside is a little, such a very little. Not yet less it arranged the motive power to give-forth. One

"The Doom. "Nothing remained but to search for his body. I was sure they had killed him and taken the chest. I had little expectation of finding him dead or alive. None after I saw the stream of lava pouring into the sea. One saves his own life by instinct. I suppose. There I was. I had to do it. It did not matter much, but I continued to do it by various shifts. That last day on the headland the fumes nearly got me. You may have noted the rather excited scrawl in the ledger? Yes, I thought I was gone that time. But I got to the cave. It was low tide. Then the earthquake, and I was walled in.

"Mr. Barnett's very accurate explosives—Slade's insistence—your risking your lives as you did, mites on the crust of a red-hot chesse—I hope you know how I feel about it all. One can't thank a man properly for the life."

"Oh, the pirates. Necessarily it must be a matter of theory, but I think we have it right. Slade and I built it up. For what it's worth here it is. Let me see; you sighted the glow on the night of the 2d. North day came the deserted ship. It must have puzzled you outrageously."

"It did," said Captain Parkinson, drily. "Not an easy problem, even with all the data at hand. You, of



The Finding of the Slabs.

more change-to-be-made that shall require. But the other phenomena are all in this little half-grain comprised. Later I shall tell you more. Take it. It is without price. He laid his hand on my shoulder. "Like the love of friends," he said gently. "Feeling in his upper waistcoat pocket, Darrow brought out a phial, saying that it rolled in the palm of his hand. He contemplated it, lost in thought.

"Radium?" queried Barnett, with the keen interest of the scientist. "God knows what it is," said Darrow, rousing himself. "Not the perfect product," the doctor said, "but when he gave it to me. If I could remember, one-tenth of what he told me that night! It is like a disordered dream, a phantasmagoria of extraordinary powers lit up with an intolerable, almost infernal radiance. This much I did gather that Dr. Schermerhorn had achieved what the greatest minds before him had barely outlined. Yes, and more, Becquerel, the Curies, Rutherford—they were playing with the letters of the Greek alphabet, Alphas, Gammas and I know, while the simple, gentle old boy that I served had read the secret. From the molten eruptions of the rickety earth he had taken gases and potencies that are nameless. By what methods of combination and refining I do not know, he produced something that was to be the final word of power. Control—control—that was all that lacked.

"Reduced to its simplest terms, it meant this: the doctor had a something much greater than radium as radium is greater than the pitchblende of which a thousand tons are melted down to the one ounce of extract. And the incredible energies of this he proposed to divide into departments of activity. One manifestation could be light. Light that would illuminate the world. Another was to make motive powers so cheap that the work of the world could be done in an hour of the day. Some idea he had of healing properties. Yes, he was to cure mankind. Or kill, if a no man had ever killed, did he choose. The armies and navies of the powers would be at his mercy. Magnetism was to be his state. Aerial navigation, transmutation of metals,

course, had none. On Slade's showing, Handy Solomon and his worthy associates thought they had a chest full of riches when they got the doctor's treasury; believed they owned the machinery for making diamonds or gold or what-not of ready-to-hand wealth. It's fair to assume a certain eagerness on their part. Dis- turbed weights they kept them busy until they're well out from the island. Then to the chest. Opening it, but so easy, I had the key, you know. He brought a curious and delicately wrought skeleton from his pocket. "Tipped see platinum," he observed. "Rather a gem of a key," I think. You see, there must have been some action, even through the keyhole, or he wouldn't have used a metal of this kind. But the crew was rich in certain qualities. It seems, which I failed, stupidly, to recognize in my acceptance when they were both Pulz and Perdosa appear to have been handy men where locks were concerned. First Pulz sneaks down and has his turn at the chest. He gets it open. Small profit for him in that; the next thing he knows he is scandalizing Handy Solomon by having a fit on the deck."

"That is what I couldn't figure out to save my life," said Slade-eagerly. "If you recollect, I told you of the professor's plunge in the cold spring, in a sort of paroxysm, one day," said Darrow. "That was the physiological action of the celestium. At other times, I have seen him come out and deliberately roll in the creek, head under. Once he explained that the medicine he worked in caused a kind of uncontrollable longing for water; something having none of the qualities of burning or thirst, but an irresistible temporary mania. It worried him a good deal; he didn't understand it. That, then, was what allied Pulz. When he opened the chest there was, as I surmise, a trifling quantity of this stuff lying in the inner lid. It wasn't the celestium itself, as I imagine, but a sort of by-product. The physiological and did effect the real thing and it had been set there on guard, a discouragement to the spirit of investigation, as it were. So, when the top was lifted, our little guardian

sets in its work, producing the light phenomenon that so puzzled Slade, and inspiring Pulz with a passion for the rolling wave, which is only interrupted by Handy Solomon's scolding him. As he had he must have pulled down the cover."

"He did," said Slade. "I heard the clang. But I saw the radiance on the clouds. And the whole thickness of a solid oak deck was in between the sky and the chest."

"Oh, a little thing like an oak deck wouldn't interrupt the kind of rays the doctor used. He had his own method of screening, you understand. However, this inconsiderable guardian affair must have used itself up, which true celestium wouldn't have done. So when Perdosa sets his genius for lock-picking to the task, the inner box, full of the genuine article, has no warning sign-post, no speak. Everything's peaceful until they raise the compound-filled hollow layer of the inner cover, which serves to interrupt the action. Then comes the general exit and the superior fireworks."

"This is when the rays ran through the ship," said Slade. "It seemed to follow the deck-lines." "The stuff had a strange affinity for tar," said Darrow. "I told you of the circle of fire about Professor Schermerhorn's waist the day he gave me such a scare. That was the celestium working on the tarred rope he wore for a belt. It made a livid circle on his skin. Didn't I tell you of his experiments with pitch? It doesn't matter. Where was I?" "At the place where we all jumped," said Slade. "Oh, yes. And you dove into the small boat, trying to reach the water."

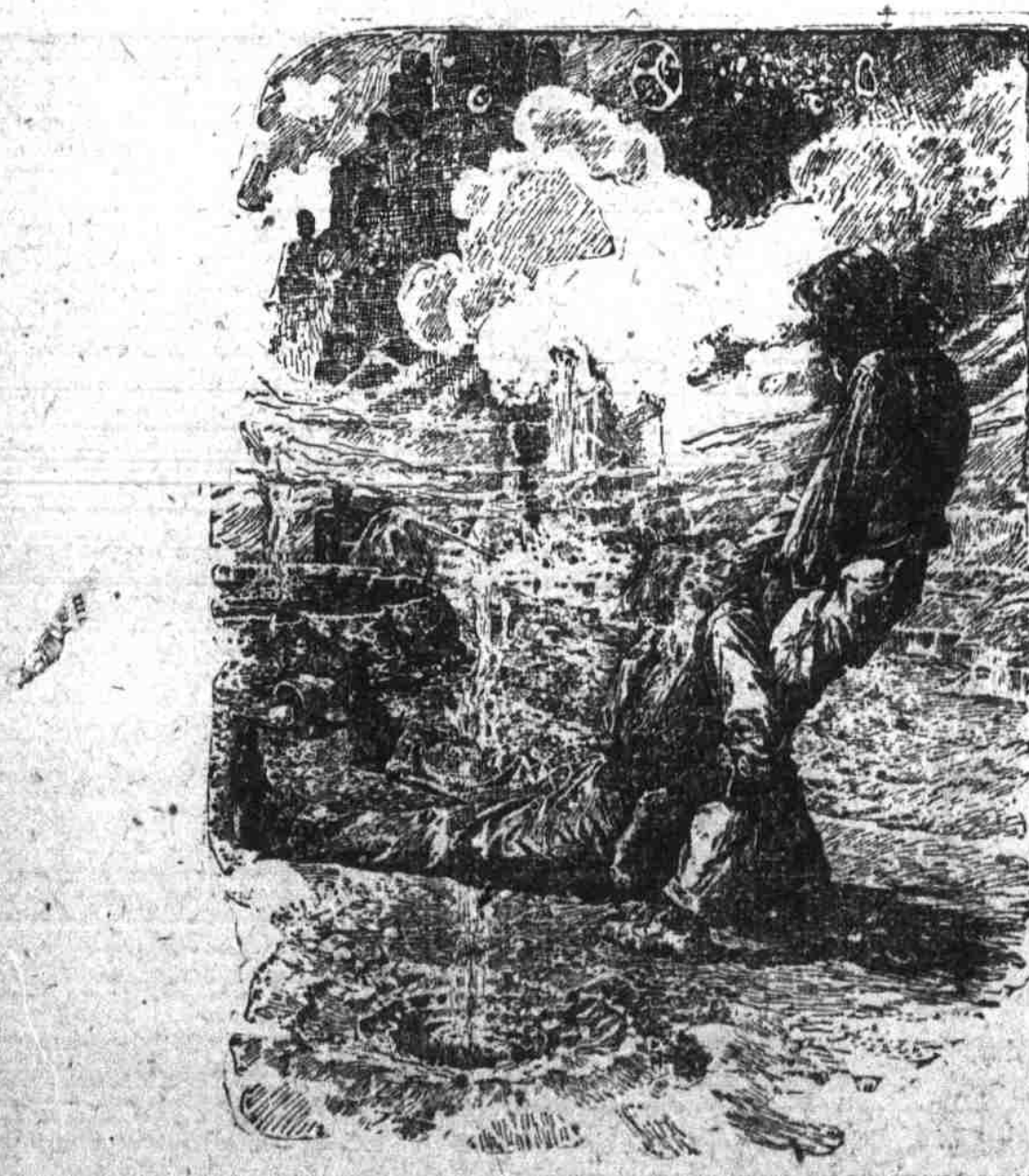
"Wait a bit," said Barnett. "If that was the exhibition of radiance we saw, it died out in a few minutes. How was that? Did they close the chest before they ran?" "Probably not," replied Darrow. "Slade spoke of Pulz taking to the maintop and being shaken out by the sudden shock of a wave. That may have been a volcanic billow. Whatever it was, it undoubtedly heeled the ship sufficiently to bring down both lids, which were rather delicately balanced."

"Yes, for Billy Edwards found the chest closed and locked," said Barnett. "Of course; it was a spring lock. No such experts as Pulz or Perdosa were in your crew. Consequently it took longer to get the chest open. When length the lid was raised, there was a repetition of the tragedy. Mr. Edwards and his men leaped. Probably they were paralyzed almost before they struck the water. Your boss, whom Slade picked up, was the only one who had time even to grab a life preserver before the impulse toward water became irresistible. There was no element of fright, you understand; no desertion of their post. They dragged as by the seven of a tornado. Darrow spoke direct to Captain Parkinson. "If there is any feeling among you other than sorrow for their death, it is unjust and unworthy."

"Thank you, Mr. Darrow," returned the captain quietly. "We found the chest closed again when the empty ship came back," observed Barnett. "Being masterless, the schooner began to yaw," continued Darrow. "The first time Slade picked up, would have heeled her enough to shut the chest. Now came the turn of your other men."

"Ives and McGuire," said the captain, as Darrow paused. "The glow came again that night, and the next day we picked up Slade," said Barnett. "You know what the glow meant for your companions," said Darrow. "But the ship, The Laughing Lass, man. She's vanished. No one has seen her since."

"You are wrong there," said Darrow. "I have seen her." "In a common impulse the little circle leaned to him. "Yes, I have seen her. I wish I had seen her. Let me bring my story to the cave on the island. After the volcanic gases had driven me to refuge, I sat near the mouth of the cave looking out into the darkness. That was the night of the 7th, the night you saw the light glow. It was very dark, except for occasional bursts of fire from the crater. Judge of my incredulous amazement when, in an access of this illumination, I saw plainly a schooner hardly a mile off shore, coming in under bare poles. "Under bare poles" cried Slade. "The halliards must have disintegrated from some slow action of the celestium. It could be destructive; terrifically destructive. You shall judge. There was the schooner, naked as your hand. Possibly I might have thought it a hallucination but for what came after. Darkness fell again. I supposed then that Handy Solomon's crew were managing—or mismanaging—the Laughing Lass without the aid of their leader, whom I had satisfactorily buried. I hoped they would come ashore on the rocks. Yes, I was vengeful then.



"It Was My Duty to Follow on and Drag Him Away When He Fell Unconscious."

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