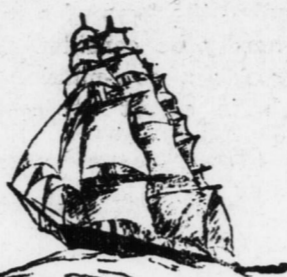


RED HAIR AND BLUE SEA



by **STANLEY R. OSBORN**
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CHAPTER I HAND OF THE GENI

When the square sun-browned hand with the lace mitt upon it was thrust from the outer darkness in through the port of her cabin aboard the yacht Rainbow, Miss Palmyra Tree had been lying for sometime, with eyes closed.

And then, when she opened her eyes at last, it was to discover the sinewy sun-browned hand with the black lace mitt upon it. The hand had come thrusting in from outside the yacht. The girl became aware only just in time to see it raised, seemingly in benediction. For an instant the hand remained thus. Then it receded, grasped the low edge of the opening as if supporting a body, let go and disappeared.

The girl sat back, seriously disturbed. Her first thought had been that a seaman was oversee on some dangerous duty, that he was swept away. She would have given the alarm. But she had restrained herself on a positive perception that the hand was not torn from its grasp. It had deliberately let go. And there had been no cry.

The girl laughed uncertainly in a growing appreciation of this last circumstance. The apparition had been silent as a ghost. Was it really a hand at all, or only a dream? It seemed very real, but she'd had only an instant . . .

Again Palmyra laughed; this time in musical mirth.

Yes, when one thought it over, the whole vision had borne that exaggerated impressiveness common to dreams. As she opened her eyes the hand appeared to be rising above her in a gesture, solemn, warning: a something of ineffable portent.

Palmyra shivered once again in the chill air. She slammed shut the port. Then she dived back into the covers; drew them up to her chin.

With the chiming of five bells of the morning watch—half past six o'clock—the girl awoke to a serious mood.

Why this voyage?

She could not doubt it had, in some way, to do with Van Buren Rutger, John Thurston. For she had seen a great deal of those two while the family, from Boston, had been in Southern California.

When Mrs. Crawford and the Wampold sisters and Dennis McCathy and Constance Crawford had come idling up the coast in the Rainbow, the girl had not suspected. But five days later her parents were bundling her aboard—without any explanation that explained—and the family was bound, at least for Honolulu, perhaps even Japan. Had Van alone been asked as a fellow voyager she would have understood. But with John also here, she was at a loss.

She was inclined to look upon this yachting as indelicate, brutal; penning her up, as on a stage, to play for them all an endless triangle of courtship.

As if in protest there rose from the main cabin the earnest voice of John Thurston, followed by the gay laugh of Van Buren Rutger. Before her the strong interesting face of Thurston formed itself. What a splendid quality of brain and will and courage; to have forced oneself up, at thirty, from nothing at all to recognition in one's profession. But shortly his features were replaced by the handsome highbred visage of his rival. Van, she defended, had done none of this because there was none to do. And her parents, in favoring him, had her happiness as their sole consideration.

Warned by the voices that it was time to dress, Palmyra jumped out. And only now, did she think of the hand she had seen.

She had dismissed the appearance as a dream, but it seemed so real now that when she had clothed herself, she climbed upon the berth for another look through the port.

Bending down to gaze out, she became aware of a something on the polished metal of the opening that caused her to start back in surprise: the print of moist and dirty fingers. She sat, astonished. The hand, then, had been no dream, but real flesh and blood?

Palmyra had an unexpected sense of evil. She jumped down and hur-

ried for the companionway to investigate.

The girl was only a moment in verifying her impression of the evening before.

She shot a glance toward Captain Pedersen's hands. Big and square enough, heaven knew, but fiery red and flaxen bristled. At the wheel stood one Johannsen, his huge paws gripped on the spokes. A scarlet ballet girl danced, disqualifyingly, on the back of one and of the other the index finger was missing.

Presently seven bells came, with breakfast for the whole crew, so that she was able to scrutinize, not only the men who had been on deck, but also those of the watch below.

"But Captain Pedersen," she asked at last—the apparition of the cabin had seemed very dark skinned—haven't we still a Jap or a Mexican aboard, or maybe a colored chef?"

The sailing master shook his head. The girl hurried away to her cabin to make sure those prints had been real. The normality of everthing on deck had quieted her alarm. She was glad now that some instinct had kept her from explaining. Of all on board, she alone knew.

Palmyra began to giggle in the most juvenile fashion. "Never before," thought she, "except in the theatre or between the covers of a book, have I come within hailing distance of adventure. But now, with the yacht scarcely out of sight of land, fascinating mystery makes its presence known."

In the not remote past this girl had been a devoted reader of Treasure Island. And today, startled by her sudden realization of responsibility in this new and adult problem of Van and John, she was in a mood to flee away back to those irresponsible days.

So, as she jumped up on the berth again, she was demanding that pirates lurk aboard. "Yes, undoubtedly," she affirmed, "they have mistaken the yacht for a treasure seeker."

The girl sat staring at the fingerprints. She was serious again.

Ought she to tell Captain Pedersen, Mrs. Crawford. She sat for a time, disturbed. Then, all at once, a laugh. Her expression became ominously mischievous.

"I must," she announced, "see our pirate chief at once and—lore, for a very special and secret reason."

Palmyra was searching the Rainbow. She had penetrated as far, in the 'tween-decks, as the space set aside for the heavy baggage of the guests.

Van and John and the Wampolds, who had followed her, stood clinging one to another, laughily puzzled at the way she had poked and peered into dark corners.

Van regarded her severely. "Really," he said; "really I marvel at anyone trying to examine the fabric of a yacht without a microscope. Such superficiality. Deplorable."

The others laughed, but not the girl.

As she had reached out for a big trunk a dip of the Rainbow drove her extended hand on and down over. Her fingers came, rather awfully, into contact with a something warm and furry, but solid. And—the something moved!

"Last night," she said a little breathlessly, "I felt like Aladdin. But now, now it's Ali Baba. Ali Baba, and a thief—I mean a pirate—behind every one of these trunks. Every one."

"A pirate?" Van was commenting. "Then, let's go. I shouldn't want to walk the plank till I'd had my tea."

The tone was light. But he was, for the second time in five minutes, dusting with a handkerchief at his hands. Born to the American aristocracy, he had an almost hereditary distaste for the dinginess and grime of the under places. Give him ever the prepared and proper stage of life. There, indeed, he could be a sure and gracious figure.

Palmyra assented. "I go," she said, "but I shall return. I like these low regions; so still, so dark, so mysterious. I shall return—" she paused significantly—"tonight. I shall come back . . ."

"She means," interpreted Van, "to sneak pickles and ham, chicken and

jam for one real uninterrupted . . ."

The girl laughed. "As you have said: with food and drink, I shall return at the sacred hour of midnight."

She gave them a covert glance. But, unaware of the hand, of that hidden presence, neither Thurston nor the others realized that her, to them, idle chatter held any purpose of return. They moved to go.

And once more there came from out the dark that stealthy wraith of sound—intimidating, sinister. Midnight.

Palmyra swung the bulkhead door open.

Now that she was alone, how different it was down here; the darkness menacing, alive with groaning whispers of sound, yet empty save for that unseen presence. She was, unexpectedly, a little afraid.

But she had her definite purpose.

Palmyra entered, placed sandwiches, a bottle of water, an electric torch on the deck. Then she shut the heavy door.

"Here I am," she announced cheerily.

Silence.

She got up, waited, the torch casting a moon of light upon the food and water.

In the center of the spotlight were two feet. They were small encased in button shoes. They dangled, juvenily, six inches from the deck. For a moment she thought that here was a boy.

But as the disk of illumination moved upward it revealed the body of a man, small plump; dressed in a way one night associate with the racetrack, ringside. The checked suit, fancy vest, bright tan gloves, above all the walking stick, were ludicrously unnautical.

The face now broke into a grin and the man said: "I ask you, lady, is it fair t'keep me hove to under yer light, when I can't make out a line o' yer rig?"

She took up the water and sandwiches and put these on the trunk next to that on which he sat. Then she backed away to a seat opposite, turned the torch upon them.

One of the gloved hands snatched up the water, and he drank eagerly.

"Not every lady," he went on admiringly, "would lay below at mid-t'ferret out a stowaway."

As the Rainbow drove into another sea there came again that fettered clink and clank of iron away somewhere in the dark. At the sound Palmyra stirred with a returning disquiet, vague but insistent, that could scarcely have been a response to anything in the man's tone.

She shifted the light to his face. "Why are you aboard?" she demanded.

He hesitated. "Because," he explained presently, "I'd sooner be here than in the cold, cold grave. Not," he added with a shiver which set the plump cheeks atremble, "that I ain't cold here, too."

"Grave?" inquired Palmyra.

"Bullet," explained the stowaway.

The girl smiled invisibly. She did not think anyone would feel it necessary to shoot such a plump little man.

"As for who I am," he continued, "I'm asking you, lady; do y'know the Line? The Line islands, I mean—the Gilberts, Marshalls, Carolines?"

She shook her head, then realizing he could not see, added a spoken negative.

"If 'ywas knowing t'the Line, lady, you'd savvy Ponape Burke. Named after the biggest o' the Carolines by admirers—" a titter—"and also them as is not so admiring. As I says before, I follow the sea. Master o' my own craft."

Palmyra was amused, sceptical. "But why . . ."

"I'm stowed away 'cause I had t'make my westing quiet! If this yacht puts back with me," he added, "I'm a corpse. That's why I thank you. Y'kept still and those hours counted. Now, she'll more likely hold her course."

The girl smiled delightedly. Once again, Arabian Nights, ahoy!

There had been, it seemed, a Chinese merchant of Bagdad—no, Honolulu—who was sending a cargo to California that would go under the hatches rice and tea, but come out coolies and opium. He wanted just the right sort of man along to smuggle them through, and Ponape

Burke, who had been idling about the town, was chosen.

"But, lady," he explained earnestly, "don't mistake. I sure meant to play fair and square with Uncle Sam. I planned both t'make a piece o'side money and do my plumb duty as a citizen by tipping off the contraband."

His countenance beamed with enjoyment of the intended coup; innocent of any slightest perception of the shame of bad faith.

As he went on, however, his features turned ugly with disgust. Uncle Sam had proved an unbelievable tightwad, and the Orientals had discovered Burke's attempt.

They had set gunmen after him. And "for a reason"—which the man did not explain—he was conspicuous. "I could of laid up ashore," he concluded, "but some olavale devil Shanghaies my bankroll and leaves me just plain on the beach. So I stows away here."

Palmyra thought it safe to believe he might really have been robbed. "So, then," she inquired in a tone of regret, "you're not, after all, a pirate? I felt you might have heard the Rainbow was seeking buried treasure."

Ponape Burke shot a look of interest in her direction. Then, apparently annoyed that, for even a moment, he could have taken her seriously, he voiced a protest.

Presently: "Miss, why did y'lay below her?"

She had lain below mischievously to consult a buccaneer. So, "I'm sorry you don't smack more of the Spanish Main," was what she said.

Then he asked: "But what did y'have in mind? Maybe we could do better'n y'think."

Palmyra shook her head invisibly. "Oh, no," she said, you're not at all the sort." But she explained. When she had found there was someone aboard, she recalled a popular comedy: a burglar entrapped, all unknown to the others, with a house party under guard in quarantine; no end of mystery, excitement, before he'd been discovered. "And I hoped," she concluded, "we could get up a little plot. Something piratical, thrilly. But," she added resignedly, "not a one would be scared at you."

From the dark there came a pro-

longed chuckle. "Well," hesitated Burke at length, "if y'insist on pirates. . . . But why not some stunt a little more genteel? A concert say? Know a lot o' native songs."

In sample he gave her a phrase; a chanting fragment, rhythm without music; low-voiced words, mellifluous, polysyllabic.

"There," he concluded with a touch of pride. "Something like that."

But the girl scorned minstrelsy.

He relapsed into the laugh—to her irritation. "Pirates it is," he assented. "And even if yer bunch ain't scart o' me, maybe we could frame 'em up a startle. Wouldn't be a bit surprised. Not a bit." He was much amused.

She remained unconvinced and he laughed again.

There was silence for an interval. Then, "D'y' know where the gangway is y'came in at?" he asked unexpectedly.

The girl looked puzzled, toward him; turned her gaze in the direction of the door. "Yes," she said wonderingly, "I know exactly where it is."

"Then," said Ponape Burke, "just give it one flash with yer torch."

The girl was, suddenly again, a little afraid. Hark? Was that a sound of Burke, moving?

Her thumb touched the torch. As a lightning flash, its ray shot forward, landed full upon the plump vest, the chubby infantile face. Burke still sat on the trunk.

Again darkness, impenetrable, intimidating.

Before Burke could have moved, she whirled toward the entry, switched on the light.

The shaft leaped across, and then in its circle, vivid against the door, there sprang into being a savage face. Wild, copper-hued, it held rigid as jungle lion caught photo-flashlight. Under a great mat of hair, fierce staring eyes, grinning lips drawn back from two rows of square teeth that clamped upon the blade of a ten-inch knife.

It was not the face of Burke.

It was not the face of a white man.

(Continued Next Week)

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