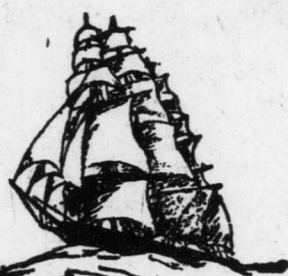


RED HAIR AND BLUE SEA



by
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CHAPTER VI

For two days she had had a knife. Now, in the mid-hours of the third night, she was again lying in the cabin awake.

She was thinking of a remark of Burke's several times repeated, which had assumed the significance of a threat. "Better volunteer that kiss while the volunteering's easy," he had warned, his grim good humor in the last hour or two, as she felt, growing a little thin. "For I can tell y'this: There won't be no evading the draft—once she clamps down."

What had he meant? When Palmyra came on deck on this, the fourth day of her captivity, she saw that Ponape Burke was in an ugly mood.

The man greeted her with alcoholic leer, his infantile features shocking in their age-old depravity.

When she shrank back into the companion he was amused. "Come, come, Queenie," he roared. "Are y'ready with that kiss? He bellowed with laughter. Then, when she did not advance, he changed to the quick anger of intoxication. "Have it yer way, Miss Aree—Miss Palm Tree," he said thickly. "But 'twon't be long before you're down on yer shins a-praying the Lord for just one chance t'beg me t'take the dam' kiss—and you sick with fear I won't want it."

Ponape rolled aft to the girl "Sweetheart," he said, "I'm going t'part with you."

She did not understand. "Dam' them Japs!" he exploded, his temper taking a new direction. "Twas their man-o-war we sighted last midwatch."

So that had been the cause of the alert watch, with its brief but real excitement.

The man's suggestion of parting with her, the possibility of Japanese intervention, had brought the color of hope to her cheeks.

But he, returning now, struck at that hope with malicious perception. "Oh, safe enough in three or four days," he reassured. "They'll be gone then for a good six months. It's only in the meantime we got t'lay low. But in the meantime—ruin everything you t'be caught aboard."

She tried to fathom his purpose. "I'm going t'jettison you. Y'shall stop ashore."

She stared at him. Incredible hope roused again, only to fall before his expression. He had not the slightest thought of relinquishing her.

Burke was amused. "Tis a bony isle," he said, "and you'll have naught t'do but sit and think o' me."

The girl's spirit rose. She did not question that this would be some depot of his, a place of servile natives. But, even so, her position would be bettered. Surely, among them all, must be those to understand, to respond to her plea for protection.

She was eager to go. But she thought it wise to seem indifferent. She waited until Burke turned away, then scanned the sea.

As the day wore on toward its close she worked herself into a passion of suspense, apprehension. Burke was still drinking; what if night should find her aboard?

And then, when it seemed she could stand no more, she discovered that the man Olive, grinning enthusiastically, was putting water, ship's biscuit and some other stores into a boat.

In surprise, she swept the sea again—and found it blank. "Why, when do we get there?" she asked of Burke.

He smiled sardonically. "We're there now," he answered.

She was completely at a loss. He handed her his binoculars. "Hard a-starboard," he directed.

Presently she made out, through the glasses, that which might be the crest of palms. The island seemed far distant.

But the Pigeon of Noah had held to her course for no great time when her master gave the order to heave to, and lower away the boat. "But it's so far," she hesitated.

Burke winked at Olive, already at the oars, then dropped over the side without reply. Palmyra, disdainful his proffered hand, followed. The savage bent to his

work and they were away, under the stare of the crew.

All too soon the girl saw why she had thought the island distant. As with each stroke of the oars, her heart sank. So small, so flat, its four cocoa-palms so stunted, it was well night invisible to the novice.

The moment her feet touched the sand she hurled herself at the white man.

"Belay there, sweetheart," he laughed, retreating. "Steady does it. Didn't I tell y' you'd have plenty o'time t' sit and think o' me?"

Y'got water and stores for six weeks or so and housekeeping'll be easy-like," grinned her despot. "Y'jets set in the shade and munch yer biscuit and think o' me."

"And then, sometime, maybe you'll sight the old Pigeon loafing by. And if you're tired o'yer own company, y'can hist yer hanky for a signal. And perhaps I'll be such a good kind gent as t'lay y'aboard again, me understanding what you're after is t'rush up and give me that kiss."

She clenched her teeth behind the closed lips.

He turned as if to go. Then, casually in a well-considered effect, he called Olive to fetch that of which the girl had not thought in days,—a pink silk parasol.

With a flourish Ponape Burke presented this gay trifle which, alone of all the world that she had known, had escaped the deluge. "For my queen," he said with mock ceremony. "Fresh completed folks has a tender skin. If queenie should show up offering a kiss all blistered like a biled lobster—why, maybe that kiss wouldn't so much be wanted. And, remember: 'tis a kiss, free given and free taken, pays a passage from this reef."

He sprang upon the stooping back of his fellow to be carried to the boat. He rode high, his legs, on either side of the brown torso, doubled, and supported by Olive's hand, under each shin, as a stirrup.

When the boat had cleared the reef, Ponape Burke rose to wave her a jaunty adieu.

When they were half way to the schooner, the girl uttered a sob and, flinging down the parasol, ran after them until she stood in the surf. Then, slowly, she turned and came back to the palms and threw herself upon the sand—prone.

And, oddly enough, as she lay, it was not the white man's cruel humor that revolted her so much as the brown man's mirth. For Burke had a purpose, but Olive's was a mere savage delight in pain.

She had said that in the whole world she alone was alive. Now, however, across the coral clinkers a something was coming, moving eccentrically, yet approaching at an alarming speed. A something alive? It was gay with red polka-dots; it ran with the exaggeration of a toy, seeming about to stumble at each step, yet zig-zagging over the clinkers in an astonishing ease and rapidity.

Unexpectedly, the girl laughed. This nursery beast would be presumably be no more than a land crab.

Somewhat intimidated, however, she backed a step further up the palm. The intruder on her island—or was she not rather the intruder?—hastened toward her, claws already half extended, as a hostess with hands out to greet a belated guest.

The polka-dotted crab went "polka-doddering" on its way. It had kept her mind, for the moment, from the fact that the sun was sinking at a frightful speed.

And then, there flashed back into her mind a word Burke had taught her, a native name for the monstrous robber crab. It was unga po—the night crab! In fright she sprang up, stared around. The very fact she had seen the one, presupposed presence of the other. To realize that her polka-dotted absurdity might now be blundering near in search of prey was sufficiently disquieting; proximity of its fierce cousin legitimately alarming. For, with claws more than a foot long, it could snap the strongest bonito line like a thread, crush the bones of a man's fingers, cripple for life the wrist of a well grown youth.

Horror returned upon her. She struggled back to her observation

post. She must sight a ship instantly—now, now! now!

By day the lowness of the land had brought the skyline closer than she had ever imagined.

She had thought of herself as the only living being in the whole world. Now she seemed the only living being in all the universe—with the eyes of that universe centered upon her.

But, suddenly, from out the darkness, there came a hoarse cry.

The girl doubled into a ball, automatically, as sometimes, one awakened by a crash of thunder.

An interval; then she sat up and laughed—janglingly but with a good courage. It had been only a bird.

As Palmyra had been caught unawares by the approach of night, so now, with the eastern skies aglow with the coming day, she was again unawares, lying deep in slumber.

The sun, at his setting, had paused to implant upon her cheek a good-night kiss. And it was not now until he had stolen clear round the world to bestow an awakening kiss upon the other cheek, had surmounted the Chinese wall of vapor raised against him by the morning bank, that her eyes opened.

As the girl stood watching the everchanging panorama, she became aware that the waters abounded in life.

The bit of water upon which her gaze chanced to be fixed rose up into a peak and there appeared a dark round object which resembled a head.

For a long minute she covered her eyes with her hands. Then she gathered courage at last to look. The head, bobbing up and down like a cork, was coming as fast as a boat. Presently, as she stared it reached the surf at a narrow opening of the reef. A few more strokes of arms, thick and brown, and the head of an islander rose dripping from the water.

And then it was that Palmyra uttered another cry. For she saw a copper face with great square teeth clamped on a knife—a knife that did not hide the ferocious grin which had haunted her since she first saw it thus under her spotlight; the face of the brown man Olive!

When the face of the savage Olive materialized to her view, the voice of the surf drowned that wail with which Palmyra Tree covered back behind her screen.

The swimmer, rising from the brine, paused knee-deep to shake himself like a dog. Then he plucked the knife from between his teeth, thrust it into the leather sheath on his belt and came splashing ashore. He did not hesitate, but made direct for her hiding place, the only cover.

The girl sprang away in flight. The brown man, beaming terrifically, followed. She ran, stumbling now and again on the coral clinkers, until she reached land's end, and then on, as far as she could, along the reef a-wash. Seizing from the water a broken knob of coral, she faced the savage. When he reached the edge of the sand, she hurled it at him. Then her hand rose toward her dress where her own knife waited.

Olive, at the missile, grinned none the less. Indeed, he seemed unaware of it, though it passed within a foot of his head. But it did, nevertheless, have an effect—one quite unexpected. For he sat down, cross-legged, on the sand. He broke into the animation of speech.

He stood up, and the girl's hand flew back toward her weapon. But he came no nearer. To her surprise, he turned and went strutting away toward the clump of palms. There he beckoned her to follow.

First, the savage pulled two of the half-grown cocoanuts. With his knife he cut through the two-inch green husk of one and exposed the lower end of the shell. From this, with three taps of the blade, he knocked a round cap. He took a big draft of the liquid within—cool, slightly acid, clear as water. Then he opened the second nut, brought it half way toward, left it upright in the sand. She was, it seemed, invited to drink.

Turning to the clump of pandanus, he hacked out a short slim pole. This he next, with cord from

her stores, lashed across the top of his uprights. Then he marched away toward the reef and, reaching out as one might to pick a kitten up by the neck, snatched a fish from a pocket in the coral. This fish, flopping vigorously, he bound to the crossbar of his dwarfed football goal.

The girl had been watching these moves breathlessly, wonder for the moment getting the better of fear. Not until he fetched the fish did she have any theory. The it flashed into her mind that barbarous peoples always propitiated their deities with food offerings. Could this be a sort of altar. Did the savage so seek to further his purpose?

But Olive gave no sign. With the last turn of the cord about the struggling fish, he strode away to the shade of the palms and, throwing himself down on his back, was almost instantly asleep.

Palmyra, crouching in the sun, stared at that figure. She was astonished. How was it physically possible for him thus to fall into slumber?

Whence had this man come, and—why? Could Ponape have sent him to terrorize her? Or had the savage . . .

She gave a shudder. She snatched the knife from her dress. She gripped its handle; she began to crawl toward that terrible figure.

But presently she hesitated, stopped. With a groan she sank down. She dropped the knife, buried her face in her hands. In resistance she could have fought like a tiger. But thus to creep upon a sleeping man?

For a time there seemed no alternative. Then she roused at the realization that, if she could not murder a sleeping man, she could at least disarm him. With Olive deprived of that knife, and her own retained, who could tell? She might have some shred of chance.

She put the blade into her dress and began again to crawl forward. She had got within a dozen feet of the savage, moving with caution, when unexpectedly, easily, almost as it seemed automatically, he opened his eyes and sat up. It was as if he had not been asleep at all; had, from the beginning, been waiting for her to do this thing.

The girl shrank back. Olive fixed

her with his strange eyes. Then he smiled expansively, as if it were a joke. He settled down once more, instantly returned to slumber.

Sudden, startling in that place of

solitude, there came a sound. It had not been Olive. She sprang up, circled land and water in a quick scrutiny.

(Continued next week)

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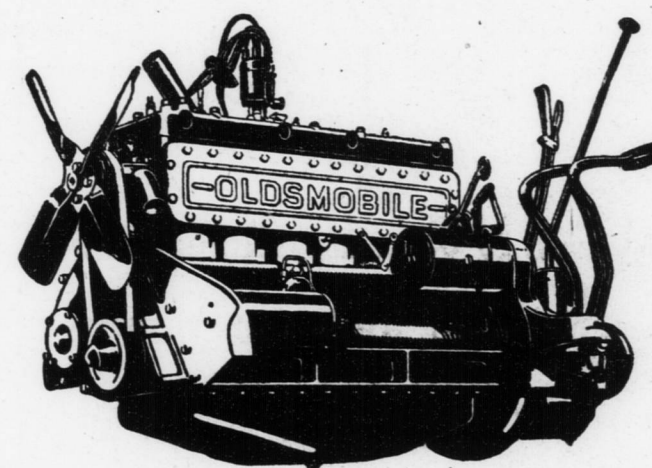
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