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## The IMPOSTOR

By FRANK L. PACKARD

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Stacey Wallen, first mate of the bark Upolo, in the Java sea, is the sole survivor of the crew and the victim of a yellow fever. Ting Wah, Chinese sailor, first mate of the Upolo, and five other Chinamen were sent aboard by Drink-House Sam, the notorious character of Singapore, to kill Wallen. The latter recalls his adventures which connect with the story of the impostor. Wallen enters in the story for the first time in a small boat and abandons the vessel in a small boat.

CHAPTER II.—Wallen's boat drifts to the island of Aru and a boatman there, Mackay, cares for him. Learning that a ship is port on the other side of the island, twenty miles away, Wallen tries for the land, but fails to reach it. He sets out but falls exhausted on the trail. There he is found by a man and woman who are from the ship he was trying to reach. Mott, first mate, and Helen MacKay, a passenger. They convey him to the vessel.

CHAPTER III.—The ship proves to be a small tramp steamer, the Moonlight, Capt. Layton. Layton tells Wallen the vessel had been chartered by Wallen's father to find him, the father knowing his son to be in grave danger because of a long-standing feud between the father and a notorious pirate, Ram Gulab Singh. Layton also informs Wallen of the death of his father, explaining that the fatality was believed to be an accident, but he instantly associates his father's death with the Chinaman's confession on the Upolo. He takes over the charter of the vessel.

CHAPTER IV.—Helen MacKay explains that she is on a visit to an aunt, Mrs. MacKay, near Singapore. She is determined to fathom the mystery of her father's death. Wallen, who is looking over his father's remains, which had been turned over to him, Wallen is startled by the bursting of a pipe and per beneath his cabin door. On the paper he traces a human hand. He is startled by the forefinger had been backed away. He recognizes it as of a native, connected with the death of his father.

CHAPTER V.

Drink-House Sam of Singapore. There are two harbors at Singapore; one opposite the town, which although little more than an open roadstead where the ships discharge by means of lighters, affords a safe and convenient anchorage; the other, land-locked, is fringed with wharves and warehouses, lies three miles west. It was already dusk when the Moonlight, finding a berth amongst a nest of junks, sailing and steam craft of all descriptions and all nationalities, dropped anchor in the roadstead at Singapore.

Wallen paused for a final word on the threshold of Captain Layton's cabin. "It's understood, then, Captain Layton," he said quietly, "No shore leave for anybody—and steam up. I'll only be ashore a few hours, and we'll be away from here again before morning."

Captain Layton was pulling doubtful at his chin. "Yes; and by morning the customs and quarantine officials will be looking for the ship that slipped out without any clearance?"

"I hardly think the Moonlight's arrival will create much of a furor," replied Wallen dryly. "I've a few hours' private business ashore, and then we'll get Miss MacKay right across to Sumatra—and I don't want a rowdy, drunken crew to do it with."

"All right!" said Layton. "Whatever you say, Mr. Wallen."

Wallen, with a nod, stepped aft along the deck, entering the stateroom preparatory to descending the companionway—and came face to face with Helen MacKay.

"Of course," she said demurely. "I think it's perfectly splendid that you are going to run the ship all the way to Sumatra on account of little me; but I think it's awfully selfish of you to go ashore all alone this evening when we're only going to be here for a few hours. Please, Mr. Yacht-Captain, won't you take me too?"

It was the first time he would have avoided her if he could have done so. "I—you—that is, well, you see, Miss MacKay—I—I—can't very well. Look here," cried Wallen impulsively—and caught her hands and held them. "I know you're more than half serious, and that you're keenly disappointed at not going ashore. It's true I've been worried a beast today; but I—I've been worried. This morning I had almost made up my mind to run to Sumatra, and I don't touch here at all; but—there's a little business that I felt I must attend to this evening, and—well, that's what I'm going ashore for. You—you understand, I'm sure, Miss MacKay."

Her eyes widened, partly in astonishment at this confession, partly in a puzzled way. "Oh!"—there was only bewilderment in her eyes now. "I—I'm not quite sure I understand. I thought it was quite settled when I left Pohl that we should come here."

"Yes, so it was," he acknowledged awkwardly. He bit his lips. He could not tell her that his brain was sick with the effort to grapple with a peril that he knew now beyond question lurked aboard the ship, and that, because it was unseen, because he could not identify it in the form of any one, or two, or all aboard the ship and fight it in the open, had made the hours since that morning like a hideous nightmare!

"I'll explain tomorrow, Miss MacKay," he said hurriedly. "You mustn't—" she laughed. "I'm only keeping you." And pushing him playfully toward the companionway, she ran out onto the deck. A moment later, Wallen, at the foot of the ship's ladder, was running his eyes sharply over the half score of shore boats that pushed and bumped against each other and the gangway's platform, and whose occupants at the prospect of a fare were screaming and yelling in a frantic effort to attract his special and undivided attention. A Malay boatman had the strategic position alongside the grating. Wallen unconsciously pushed the craft away with his foot, and beckoned to a Chinaman who was next in line. As he clambered into the boat he looked up. Helen MacKay was leaning over the rail of the boat deck. "Take good care of yourself!" she

called out merrily. "Singapore means the city of lions, you know. Don't run your head into one of their mouths!" And with a wave of her hand she was gone.

It brought a sudden, premonitory shock to Wallen—and then a grin, cold smile. The city of lions! It was only a joke with her, a little light-hearted fling—with him, God knew it might prove a ghastly reality!

At first, when he had found that paper on his cabin floor, he had thought, as he had told her, that he would take her straight to Sumatra, get her off the ship; and then second thoughts had convinced him that the danger which threatened him did not threaten her. She was safe there on board.

But this thing—it was not only the personal peril—it rose a shuddering, mocking barrier between them! Mocking? Yes!

He or they, the devil or devils who had murdered his father, were playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse! Why had nothing happened to him in those three days from Pohl, while he had been living in a fool's paradise of imagined security?

His lips thinned into a straight line. Well, perhaps they would play too long! He would settle it tonight. When he came back to the ship he would know—or there would be one less scoundrel in Singapore! That was what he was going for now—to Drink-House Sam of Singapore.

Who was it aboard the Moonlight who had put that paper under his cabin door? She had called him grumpy all that day—and all that day he had been studying the crew, cataloging in his mind every man aboard. It could not well be all—a plot involving the whole ship and crew seemed out of the question.

Not one of the officers had been any reason to suspect above the others! Though it was true, and a little disturbing, that Captain Layton, in turning over his father's effects, had not included the fatal pistol that if the story were true, was obviously his father's property—but that might readily have been an oversight.

There was Mott, who had grown more surly every day. Wallen shook his head. Mott's attitude was easily accounted for—the man, as witness the ride at Pohl, if it had not been glaringly evident on board since then, was attentive to Miss MacKay, and resented his, Wallen's, usurpation of what he evidently considered his prerogative.

What of the crew then? They were a hard lot and a polyglot one. The English and Americans amongst them had every appearance of being the sweepings of the slums of London, Liverpool, New York, and, for men of their ilk, the more vicious sentiments of the far East. The rest were of every nationality—two of the coolies were Chinese coolies, the steward was from the West Indies, the cook was a Frenchman from Port Said, and two Danes, a Swede, a Kanaka, from the Sandwich Islands, and three Japanese completed the roster.

Wallen looked up, and fixed his eyes speculatively on his Chinese boatman. They were almost at the landing. "You sabb Drink-House Sam?" he demanded abruptly.

The Chinaman smirked knowingly. "Me sabb," he replied. "All right," said Wallen. "You take me there. But first, you take me where?"

"Me sabb," he replied. "All same velly good guide."

He proved to be. Within half an hour after landing, Wallen had completed the purchase of an excellent automatic pistol and ammunition, and was following the Chinaman back along a dark street near the waterfront. Another few minutes of twistings and turnings, and the Chinaman had halted before an uninviting-looking hostelry in an equally uninviting-looking neighborhood.

"Drink-House Sam's," announced the guide. "Blimey! you all same go back ship?" Me was the Chinaman's reply. "No," said Wallen, as he paid the other. "That's all. Good-night, John!" The Chinaman disappeared.

Wallen surveyed the building before which he stood. It was one of those Eastern-European wooden structures, two stories high, the front rooms on the second story opening directly onto the veranda. With the general air of being disreputable at all, it bore all the earmarks of a sailor's boarding house of the lowest type.

Wallen stepped forward, pushed the bar-room door open, and entered. A bar ran down one side; a score of small tables occupied the main portion of the room, and around these were clustered some twenty-five or thirty rough-looking hands, evidently on shore leave from the harbor's shipping—and making the most of it.

Behind the bar were two men, one of whom Wallen made no doubt, was Drink-House Sam, proprietor—a big man in shirt sleeves, the sleeves rolled to the elbows over puffed, blue-veined arms, a man whose face was florid and hard-lined, with eyes close-set, and whose close-cropped hair, with little skin-spots showing where the clippers had done their work too thoroughly, lent a peculiarly repellent aspect to his general appearance. A steel-like glint held for an instant in Wallen's eyes—and vanished! Drink-House Sam of Singapore!

Wallen crossed to the bar, and confronted the big man in shirt sleeves. "Are you the proprietor here?" he

asked. "The man the coolies call Drink-House Sam?"

Wallen followed, but remained standing on the opposite side of the table. "That's me; Sam Marie, by rights," he admitted curtly. "What can I do for you, mister?"

"Well," said Wallen, lowering his voice, "I'd like a few minutes of your time, somewhere in private."

"What for?" demanded Marie. "Wallen leaned across the bar. "It's about the Upolo," he said confidentially.

The man stared at him for a moment, a curiously mingled expression of cunning and surprise creeping into the small, black, red-stained, shifty eyes—then he stepped abruptly out from behind the bar, led the way to an empty table at the end of the room by the rear door, and flung himself down into a chair.

Wallen followed, but remained standing on the opposite side of the table. "I can't say I call this very private," he protested.

"It'll do till I know more of your business!" granted Marie. "Take it or leave it. I ain't for snookin' off with the first stranger that comes in, and havin' every last one of these swine here get to figurin' I'm puttin' up some sort of a deal to shanghai his particular carcass. And sit down, mister—your sabbat more's necessary of your good clothes."

It was true. His standing there after the other had seated himself only served to attract further attention. A crowd at the next table was already indulging in voice, in uncompromising and drunk-offensive remarks.

"Now shoot the works!" prompted Drink-House Sam. "What about this 'ere Upolo?"

Wallen was casting about in his mind for what to say now. If he could play the man, arouse the other's fear—perhaps, or his curiosity that would be served by fear, or his cunning, or his interest sufficiently to get him some share alone without giving away his own hand.

"Ah! Yes, he had it now. Helen MacKay had unwittingly furnished the lead with her laughing reference to putting his head into the lion's mouth. If he said innocently that Ting Wah had sent him!

"Drink-House Sam would naturally include that the Chinese accented as still playing into his hand, and him Wallen back into the power of this rat-eyed murderer with the blotted face to complete the work that Ting Wah, for some reason or other, had been unable to accomplish.

Wallen's hands that were thrust into his pockets clenched fiercely. This man before him, just a few feet away with just the table top between them, was Drink-House Sam at last, the man who knew, the man he had dreamed of night and day in his long convalescence at Mackay's; and the man whose name he would treat as he would treat a poison snake!

Queer that he was seeing that screening, maddened wretch, Won Su, jump forward again. His mind seemed to grow almost ghoulish. That flabby neck of the man in front of him was Drink-House Sam's, the man who had loosed a pack of Chinese thugs upon him—how far in would his finger sink?

"Well, you get lookin'!" growled Drink-House Sam. "This 'ere Upolo, you was sayin'?"

"Yes," said Wallen, and smiled enigmatically. "It's a bit of a long story, but I'll cut it short with a word—low jack cleaned her out somewhere in the Java sea."

"Huh!" snorted Marie. "Everybody knows that. Most of us can read, mister. She was picked up by the gun-boat Phyllis a few weeks ago; and a 'ord mess she was, accordin' to accounts."

"Is that so? I hadn't heard she'd been picked up," said Wallen slowly. "But that's nothing to do with what brought me here. You knew a chink aboard her called Ting Wah, didn't you?"

The thrust was unexpected, as Wallen had meant it to be. Marie, with an involuntary start, leaped sharply forward over the table; and then, with a clumsy attempt to cover his agitation, spoke volubly:

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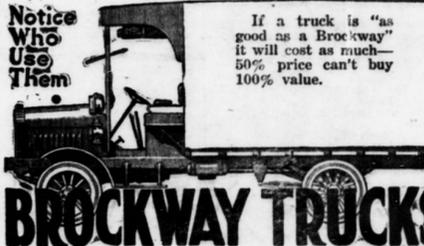
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