

# THE MYSTERY

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## Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

CHAPTER I.—The officers of the United States ship *Wolverine*, cruising in the Pacific, are mystified by a strange radiance which appears suddenly on the face of the sea and vanishes as suddenly. The officers discuss the strange disappearance, two years previously, of the schooner *Laughing Lass*, chartered by Dr. Schermerhorn, a scientist.

CHAPTER II.—The *Wolverine* picks up the *Laughing Lass*, with everything shipshape save that there is no living being aboard.

CHAPTER III.—Ensign Edwards is sent aboard the *Laughing Lass* with a prize crew.

CHAPTER IV.—The *Wolverine* sees the strange light again. In a volcanic eruption, a volcano in full eruption. The *Laughing Lass* vanishes again.

CHAPTER V.—The *Wolverine* picks up a dory belonging to the *Laughing Lass*. It contains Ralph Slade, a journalist known to have been with Schermerhorn, and the corpse of the *Wolverine*'s mate, who had gone with Edwards. Slade is in very bad condition from fever, thirst and exhaustion.

## CHAPTER VII.

BY the following afternoon Dr. Tregon reported his patient as quite recovered.

"Starved for water," proffered the surgeon. "Tissues fairly dried out. Soaked him up. Fed him broth. Put him to sleep. He's all right. Just wakes up to eat. Then off again like a two-year-old. Wonderful constitution."

"The gentleman wants to know if he can come on deck, sir," saluted an orderly.

"Waked up, eh? Come on, Barnett. Help me boost him on deck."

The two officers disappeared to return in a moment arm in arm with Ralph Slade.

Nearly twenty-four hours' rest and skillful treatment had done wonders. He was still a trifle weak and uncertain, was still a little glad to lean on the arms of his companions, but his eye was bright and alert and his hollow cheeks mounted a slight color. This, with the clothes lent him by Barnett, transformed his appearance and led Captain Parkinson to congratulate himself that he had not obeyed his first impulse to send the castaway forward with the men.

The officers pressed forward.

"Mighty glad to see you out." "Hope you've got your pins under you again." "Old man, I'm mighty glad we came along."

The chorus of greeting was hearty enough, but the journalist barely paid the courtesy of acknowledgment. His eye swept the horizon eagerly until it rested on the cloud of volcanic smoke billowing up across the setting sun. A sigh of relief escaped him.

"Where are we?" he asked Barnett. "I mean since you picked me up. How long ago was that anyway?"

"Yesterday," replied the navigating officer. "We've stood off and on looking for some of our men."

"Then that's the same volcano?" Barnett laughed softly. "Well, they aren't quite holding a caucus of volcanoes down in this country. One like that is enough."

But Slade brushed the remark aside. "Head for it!" he cried excitedly. "We may be in time! There's a man on that island!"

"A man?" "Another?" "Not Billy Edwards?" "Not some of our boys?" Slade stared at them bewildered.

"Hold on!" interposed Dr. Tregon authoritatively. "What's his name?" he inquired of the journalist.

"Darrow," replied the latter. "Percy Darrow. Do you know him?"

"Who in Kamchatka is Percy Darrow?" demanded Forsythe.

"Why, he's the assistant. It's a long story."

"Of course it's a long story. There's a lot we want to know," interrupted Captain Parkinson. "Quartermaster, head for the volcano yonder. Mr. Slade, we want to know where you came from, and why you left the schooner and who Percy Darrow is. And there's dinner, so we'll adjourn to the messroom and hear what you can tell us. But there's one thing we're all anxious to know—how came you in the dory which we found and left on the *Laughing Lass* later than two days ago?"

"I haven't set eyes on the *Laughing Lass* for—well, I don't know how long, but it's five days anyway, perhaps more," replied Slade.

They stared at him incredulously. "Oh, I see," he burst out suddenly. "There were twin dories on the schooner. The other one's still there, I suppose. Did you find her on the stern davit?"

"Yes."

"That's it, then. You see, when I left—"

Captain Parkinson's raised hand checked him. "If you will be so good, Mr. Slade, let us have it all at once, after mess."

At table the young officers at a sharp hint from Dr. Tregon conversed on indifferent subjects until the journalist had partaken heartily of what the physician allowed him. Slade ate with keen appreciation.

"I tell you, that's good," he sighed, when he had finished. "Real, live, after dinner coffee too. Why, gentlemen, I haven't eaten a civilized meal,

with all the trimmings, for over two years. Doctor, do you think a little of the real stuff would hurt me? It's a pretty dry yarn."

"One glass," growled the surgeon, "no more."

"Scotch highball, then," voted Slade, "the higher the better."

The steward brought a tall glass with ice, in which the new-comer mixed his drink. Then for quite a minute he sat silent, staring at the table, his fingers aimlessly rubbing into spots of wetness the water beads as they gathered on the outside of his glass. Suddenly he looked up.

"I don't know how to begin," he confessed. "It's too confounded improbable. I hardly believe it myself, now that I'm sitting here in human clothes, surrounded by human beings. Old Scrubbs and the nigger and Handy Solomon and the professor and the chest and the—well, they were real enough when I was caught in the mess. But I warn you you are not going to believe me, and hanged if I blame you a bit."

"We've seen marvels ourselves in the last few days," encouraged Captain Parkinson.

"Fire ahead, man," advised Barnett impatiently. "Just begin at the beginning and let it go at that."

Slade sipped at his glass reflectively. "Well," said he at length, "the best way to begin is to show you how I happened to be mixed up in it all."

The officers unconsciously relaxed into attitudes of greater ease. Overhead the lamps swayed gently to the swell. The dull thrub of the screw pulsed. Stewards clad in white moved noiselessly, filling the glasses, deftly striking lights for the smokers, clearing away the last dishes of the repast.

"I'm a reporter by choice and a detective by instinct," began Slade, with startling abruptness. "Furthermore, I'm pretty well off. I'm what they call a free lance, for I have no regular desk on any of the journals. I generally turn my stuff in to the Star because they treat me well. In return it is pretty well understood between us that I'm to use my judgment in regard to stories and that they'll stand back of me for expenses. You see, I've been with them quite awhile."

He looked around the circle as though in appeal to the comprehension of his audience. Some of the men nodded. Others slipped from their glasses or drew at their ears.

"I got around here and there in the world, having a good time traveling, visiting, fooling around. Every once in awhile something interests me. The thing is a sort of instinct. I run it down. If it's a good story, I send it in. That's all there is to it. He laughed slightly. "You see, I'm a sort of magazine writer in method, but my stuff is newspaper stuff; also the game suits me. That's why I play it. That's why I'm here. I have to tell you about myself this way so you will understand how I came to be mixed up in this *Laughing Lass* matter."

"I remember," commented Barnett, "that when you came aboard the North Dakota you had a little trouble making Captain Arnold see it." He turned to the others with a laugh. "He had all kinds of papers of ancient date, but nothing modern—letter from the Star dated five years back, recommendations to everybody on earth except Captain Arnold, certificate of bravery in Apache campaign, bank identifications and all the rest. 'Maybe you're the Star's correspondent and maybe you're not,' said the captain, 'I don't see anything here to prove it.' Slade argued an hour. No go. Remember how you caught him?" he inquired of Slade.

The reporter grinned assent. "After the old man had turned him down good Slade fished down in his war bag and hauled out an old tattered document from an old skin case. 'Hold on a minute,' said he, 'you old shoddik. I've proved to you that I can write and I've proved to you that I have fought, and now here I'll prove to you that I can sail. If writing, fighting and sailing don't fit me adequately to report any little disturbances your antiquated washbottle may blunder into I'll go to raising cabbages.' With that he presented a master's certificate! Where did you get it anyway? I never found out?"

"Passed as 'fresh water' on the great lakes," replied Slade briefly.

"Well, the spunk and the certificate finished the captain. He was an old squareigger himself in the civil war."

"So much for myself," Slade continued. "As for the *Laughing Lass*—"

## CHAPTER VIII.

COINCIDENCE got me aboard the *Laughing Lass*. I'll tell you how it was. One evening late I was just coming out of a dark alley on the Barbary Coast, San Francisco. You know—the water front, where you can hear more tongues than at Port Said, see stranger sights and meet adventure with the joyous certainty of medieval times. I'd been down there hunting up a man reported by a wharf rat of my acquaintance to have just returned from a two years' yabaling voyage. He'd been "shanghaied" aboard, and as a matter of fact

was worth nearly a million dollars. Landed in the city without a cent, could get nobody to believe him nor trust him to the extent of a telegram east. Wharf rat laughed at his yarn, but I believe it was true. Good copy anyway—

Just at the turn of the alley I nearly bumped into two men. On the Barbary Coast you don't pass men in narrow places until you have reconnoitered a little. I pulled up, thanking fortune that they had not seen me. The first words were uttered in a voice I knew well.

You've all heard of Dr. Karl Augustus Schermerhorn. He did some big things and had in mind still bigger. I met him some time before in connection with his telepathy and wireless waves theory. It was picturesque stuff for my purpose, but wasn't in it with what the old fellow had really done. He showed me—well, that doesn't matter. The point is, that good, staid, self-centered, or rather, self-centered, Dr. Schermerhorn was standing at midnight in a dark alley on the Barbary Coast in San Francisco talking to an individual whose facial outline at least was not ornamental.

My curiosity or professional instinct, whichever you please, was all aroused. I flattened myself against the wall.

The first remark I lost. The reply came to me in a shrill falsetto. So grotesque was the effect of this treble

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Adams & Marsh. Tell them it is for me. Provisions for three years anyhow. Be ready to sail tomorrow."

"Tide turns at 8 in the evening." "I will send some effects in the morning."

The master hesitated. "That's all right, doctor, but how do I know it's all right? Maybe by morning you'll change your mind."

"That cannot be. My plans are all—" "It's the usual thing to pay some thing."

"Ach, but yes. I had forgot. Darrow told me. I will make you a check. Let us go to the table of which you spoke."

They moved away, still talking. I did not dare follow them into the light, for I feared that the doctor would recognize me. I'd have given my eye teeth, though, to have gathered the name of the schooner or that of her master. As it was, I hung around until the two had emerged from the corner saloon. They paused outside, still talking earnestly. I ventured a hasty interview with the barkeeper.

"Did you notice the two men who were sitting at the middle table?" I asked him.

"Sure?" said he, shoving me my glass of beer.

"Know them?" I inquired.

"Never laid eyes on 'em before. Old chap looked like a sort of corn doctor or corner spellbinder. Other was probably one of these longshore abalone men."

"Thanks," I muttered and dodged out again, leaving the beer untouched. I cursed myself for a blunderer. When I got to the street the two men had disappeared. I should have shadowed the captain to his vessel.

The affair interested me greatly. Apparently Dr. Schermerhorn was about to go on a long voyage. I prided myself on being fairly up to date in regard to the plans of those who interested the public, and the public at that time was vastly interested in Dr. Schermerhorn. I, in common with the rest of the world, had imagined him anchored safely in Philadelphia, immersed in chemical research. Here he bobbed up at the other end of the continent, making shady bargains with obscure shipping captains and paying a big premium for absolute secrecy. It looked good.

Accordingly I was out early the next morning. I had not much to go by. Schooners are as plentiful as tadpoles in San Francisco harbor. However, I was sure I could easily recognize that falsetto voice, and I knew where the supplies were to be purchased.

Adams & Marsh are a large firm and cautious. I knew better than to make direct inquiries or to appear in the saleroom. But by hanging around the door of the shipping room I soon had track of the large orders to be sent that day. In this manner I had no great difficulty in following a truck to pier 10 nor to identify a consignment to Captain Ezra Selover as probably that of which I was in search.

The mate was in charge of the stowage, so I could not be sure. Here, however, was a schooner of about 150 tons burden. I looked her over.

You're all acquainted with the *Laughing Lass* and the perfection of her lines. You have not known her under Captain Ezra Selover. She was the cleanest ship I ever saw. Don't know how he accomplished it, with a crew of four and the cook, but he did. The deck looked as though it had been hystonized every morning by a crew of jacks. The stays were whipped and tarred, the mast new slushed and every foot of running gear coiled down shipshape and Bristol fashion. There was a good deal of brass about her. It shone like gold, and I don't believe she owned an inch of paint that wasn't either fresh or new scrubbed.

I gazed for some time at this marvel. It's unusual enough anywhere, but aboard a California hooker it is little short of miraculous. The crew had all turned up apparently, and a swarm of stevedores were hustling every sort of provisions, supplies, stock, spars, lines and canvas down into the hold. It was a rush job, and that mate was having his hands full. I didn't wonder at his language nor at his looks, both of which were somewhat mussed up. Then almost at my elbow I heard that shrill falsetto squeal and turned just in time to see the captain ascend the after gangplank.

He was probably the most disheveled and untidy man I ever laid my eyes on. His hair and beard were not only long, but tangled and unkempt and grew so far toward each other as barely to expose a strip of dirty brown skin. His shoulders were bowed and enormous. His arms hung like a gorilla's, palms turned slightly outward. On his head was jammed a linen boating hat that had once been white. Gaping away from his hairy chest was a faded dingy checked cotton shirt that had once been brown and white. His blue trousers were spotted and splashed with dusty stains. He was chewing tobacco. A figure more in contrast to the exquisitely neat vessel it would be hard to imagine.

The captain mounted the gangplank with a steadiness that disproved my first suspicion of his having been on a drunk. He glanced aloft, cast a speculative eye on the stevedores trooping across the waist of the ship and ascended to the quarter deck, where the mate stood leaning over the rail and uttering directed curses from between sweat-banded lips. There the big man roamed aimlessly on what seemed to be a tour of casual inspection. Once he stopped to breathe on the brass binnacle and to rub it bright with the dirtiest red handanna handkerchief I ever want to see.

His actions amused me. The discrepancy between his personal habits and his particularity in the matter of his surroundings was exceedingly interesting. I have often noticed that such discrepancies seem to indicate ex-

ceptional characters. As I watched him his whole frame stiffened. The long gorilla arms contracted, the hairy head sunk forward in the tenseness of a serpent ready to strike. He uttered a shrill falsetto shriek that brought to a standstill every stevedore on the job and sprang forward to seize his mate by the shoulder.

Evidently the grasp hurt. I can believe it might from those huge hands. The man wrenched himself about with an oath of inquiry and pain. I could hear one side of what followed. The captain's high pitched tones carried clearly, but the grumble and growl of the mate were indistinguishable at that distance.

"How far is it to the side of the ship, you hound?" shrieked the captain.

Mumble—surprised—for an answer. "Well, I'll tell you, you swab! It's just two fathom from where you stand. Just two fathom! How long would it take you to walk there? How long? Just about six seconds! There and back! You!" I won't bother with all the epithets, although by now I know Captain Selover's vocabulary fairly well. "And you couldn't take six seconds off to spit over the side! Couldn't walk two fathom! Had to spit on my quarter deck, did you?"

Rumble from the mate. "No, by God, you won't call up any of the crew. You'll get a swab and do it yourself! You'll get a hand swab and get down on your knees! I'll teach you to be lazy!"

The mate said something again. "It don't matter if we ain't under way. That has nothing to do with it. The quarter deck is clean, if the waist ain't, and nobody but a son of a sea lawyer would spit on deck anyhow!" From this Captain Selover went up into a good old fashioned deep sea "cussing out," to the great joy of the stevedores.

The mate stood it pretty well, but there comes a time when further talk is useless even in regard to a most heinous offense. And of course, as you know, the mate could hardly consider himself very seriously at fault. Why, the ship was not yet at sea and in all the clutter of charging. He began to answer back. In a moment it was a quarrel. Abruptly it was a fight. The mate marked Selover beneath the left eye. The captain with beautiful simplicity crushed his antagonist in his gorilla-like squeeze, carried him to the side of the vessel and dropped him limp and beaten to the pier. And the mate was a good stout specimen of a seafarer too.

Then the captain rushed below, emerging after an instant with a chest which he flung after his subordinate. It was followed a moment later by a stream of small stuff—mangled with language—projected through an open porthole. This in turn ceased. The captain reappeared with a pill and brush, scrubbed feverishly at the offending spot, mopped it dry with that same old red handanna handkerchief, glared about him and abruptly became as serene and placid as a noon calm. He took up the direction of the stevedores. It was all most astounding.

Nobody paid any attention to the mate. He looked toward the ship once or twice, thought better of it and began to pick up his effects, muttering savagely. In a moment or so he threw his chest aboard an outgoing truck and departed.

It was now nearly noon and I was just in the way of going for something to eat when I caught sight of another dray laden with boxes and crated af-

airs which I recognized as scientific apparatus. It was followed in quick succession by three others. Ignorant as I was of the requirements of a scientist, my common sense told me this could be no exploring outfit. I revised my first intention of going to the club and bought a sandwich or two at the corner coffee house. I don't know why, but even then the affair seemed big with mystery, with the portent of tragedy. Perhaps the smell of tar was in my nostrils and the sea called. It has always possessed for me an extraordinary allurements.

A little after 2 o'clock a cab drove to the after gangplank and stopped. From it alighted a young man of whom I shall later have occasion to tell you more, followed by Dr. Schermerhorn. The young man carried only a light leather "service" such as students use abroad, while the doctor fairly staggered under the weight of a square brass bound chest without handles. The singularity of this unequal division of labor struck me at once.

It struck also one of the dock men, who ran forward, eager for a tip. "Kin I carry 'er box for you, boss?"

He asked, at the same time reaching for it.

The doctor's thin figure seemed fairly to shrink at the idea.

"No, no!" he cried. "It is not for you to carry."

He hastened up the gangplank, clutching the chest close. At the top Captain Selover met him.

"Hello, doctor," he squeaked. "Here in good time. We're busy, you see. Let me carry your chest for you."

"No, no!" Dr. Schermerhorn fairly glared.

"It's almighty heavy," insisted the captain. "Let me give you a hand."

"You must not touch!" emphatically ordered the scientist. "Where is the cabin?"

He disappeared down the companionway, clapping his precious load. The young man remained on deck to superintend the stowing of the scientific goods and the personal baggage.

All this time I had been thinking busily. I remembered distinctly one other instance when Dr. Schermerhorn had disappeared. He came back indignantly, but within a week his results of aerial photography were public property. I told myself that in the present instance his lavish use of money, the elaborate nature of his preparations, the evident secrecy of the expedition as evidenced by the fact that he had negotiated for the vessel only the day before setting sail, the importance of personal supervision as proved by the fact that he—notoriously impractical in practical matters and notoriously disliking anything to do with business—had conducted the affair himself instead of delegating it—why, gentlemen, don't you see that all this was more than enough to wake me up, body and soul? Suddenly I came to a definite resolution. Captain Selover had descended to the pier. I approached him.

"You need a mate," said I.