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ALISTAIR MACLEAN

THE GOLDEN RENDEZVOUS



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Alistair MacLean

The Golden Rendezvous

Аннотация

A timeless classic of modern-day piracy from the acclaimed master of action and suspense. Aboard the SS Campari, all is not well. For Johnny Carter, the Chief Officer, the voyage has already begun badly; but it's only when the Campari sails that evening, after a succession of delays that he realises something is seriously wrong. A member of the crew is suddenly missing and the stern-to-stern search only serves to increase tension. Then violence erupts and suddenly the whole ship is in danger. Is the Campari a victim of modern day piracy? And what of the strange cargo hidden below the decks?

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ALISTAIR MACLEAN

The Golden Rendezvous

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Harper An Imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd 1 London Bridge Street London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1962

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Source ISBN: 9780006162599

Ebook Edition © FEBRUARY 2009 ISBN: 9780007289448

Version: 2015-04-17

Dedication

To A. A. Lamont

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I. Tuesday Noon–5 p.m.

My shirt was no longer a shirt but just a limp and sticky rag soaked with sweat. My feet ached from the fierce heat of the steel deck plates. My forehead, under the peaked white cap, ached from the ever-increasing constriction of the leather band that made scalping only a matter of time. My eyes ached from the steely glitter of reflected sunlight from metal, water and white-washed harbour buildings. And my throat ached, from pure thirst. I was acutely unhappy.

I was unhappy. The crew were unhappy. The passengers were unhappy. Captain Bullen was unhappy and this last made me doubly unhappy because when things went wrong with Captain Bullen he invariably took it out on his chief officer. I was his chief officer.

I was bending over the rail, listening to the creak of wire and wood and watching our after jumbo derrick take the strain as it lifted a particularly large crate from the quayside, when a hand touched my arm. Captain Bullen again, I thought drearily, and then I realised that whatever the captain's caprices wearing Chanel No. 5 wasn't one of them. This would be Miss Beresford.

And it was. In addition to the Chanel she was wearing a white silk dress and that quizzical half-amused smile that made most of the other officers turn mental cartwheels and handsprings but served only to irritate me. I have my weaknesses, but tall, cool,

sophisticated and worldly young women with a slightly malicious sense of humour is not one of them.

“Good afternoon, Mr. First Officer,” she said sweetly. She had a soft musical voice with hardly a hint of superiority or condescension when talking to the lower orders like myself, “We’ve been wondering where you were. *You* are not usually an absentee at apéritif time.”

“I know, Miss Beresford. I’m sorry.” What she said was true enough: what she didn’t know was that I turned up for apéritifs with the passengers more or less at the point of a gun. Standing company orders stated that it was as much a part of the ship’s officers’ duties to entertain the passengers as to sail the ship, and as Captain Bullen loathed all passengers with a fierce and total loathing, he saw to it that most of the entertaining fell to me. I nodded at the big crate now hovering over the hatchway of number five hold, then at the piled-up crates on the quayside. “I’m afraid I have work to do. Four or five hours at least. Can’t even manage lunch today, far less an apéritif.”

“Not Miss Beresford. Susan.” It was as if she had heard only my first few words. “How often do I have to ask you?”

Until we reach New York, I said to myself, and even then it will be no use. Aloud I said, smiling: “You mustn’t make things difficult for me. Regulations require that we treat all passengers with courtesy, consideration and respect.”

“You’re hopeless,” she laughed. I was too tiny a pebble to cause even a ripple in her smiling pool of self-complacency.

“And no lunch, you poor man. I thought you were looking pretty glum as I came along.” She glanced at the winch-driver then at the seamen manhandling the suspended crate into position on the floor of the hold. “Your men don’t seem too pleased at the prospect either. They *are* a morose-looking lot.”

I eyed them briefly. They *were* a morose-looking lot.

“Oh, they’ll be spelled for food all right. It’s just that they have their own private worries. It must be about a hundred and ten down in that hold there, and it’s an almost unwritten law that white crews should not work in the afternoons in the tropics. Besides, they’re all still brooding darkly over the losses they’ve suffered. Don’t forget that it’s less than seventy-two hours since they had that brush with the Customs down in Jamaica.”

“Brush,” I thought was good: in what might very accurately be described as one fell swoop the Customs had confiscated from about forty crew members no fewer than 25,000 cigarettes and over two hundred bottles of hard liquor that should have been placed on the ship’s bond before arrival in Jamaican waters. That the liquor had not been placed in bond was understandable enough as the crew were expressly forbidden to have any in their quarters in the first place: that not even the cigarettes had been placed in bond had been due to the crew’s intention of following their customary practice of smuggling both liquor and tobacco ashore and disposing of them at a handsome profit to Jamaicans more than willing to pay a high price for the luxury of duty-free Kentucky bourbon and American cigarettes. But then, the crew

had not been told that, for the first time in its five years' service on the West Indian run, the s.s. *Campari* was to be searched from stem to stern with a thorough ruthlessness that spared nothing that came in its path, a high and searching wind that swept the ship clean as a whistle. It had been a black day.

And so was this. Even as Miss Beresford was patting me consolingly on the arm and murmuring a few farewell words of sympathy which didn't go any too well with the twinkle in her eyes, I caught sight of Captain Bullen perched on top of the companionway leading down from the main deck. "Glowering" would probably be the most apt term to describe the expression on his face. As he came down the companionway and passed Miss Beresford he made a heroic effort to twist his features into the semblance of a smile and managed to hold it for all of two seconds until he had passed her by, then got back to his glowering again. For a man who is dressed in gleaming whites from top to toe to give the impression of a black approaching thundercloud is no small feat, but Captain Bullen managed it without any trouble. He was a big man, six feet two and very heavily built, with sandy hair and eyebrows, a smooth red face that no amount of sun could ever tan and a clear blue eye that no amount of whisky could ever dim. He looked at the quayside, the hold and then at me, all with the same impartial disfavour.

"Well, Mister," he said heavily. "How's it going? Miss Beresford giving you a hand, eh?" When he was in a bad mood, it was invariably "Mister": in a neutral mood, it was "First": and

when in a good temper—which, to be fair, was most of the time—it was always “Johnny-me-boy.” But today it was “Mister.” I took my guard accordingly and ignored the implied reproof of time-wasting. He would be gruffly apologetic the next day. He always was.

“Not too bad, sir. Bit slow on the dock-side.” I nodded to where a group of men were struggling to attach chain slings to a crate that must have been at least eighteen feet in length by six square. “I don’t think the Carracio stevedores are accustomed to handling such heavy lifts.”

He took a good look.

“They couldn’t handle a damned wheel-barrow,” he snapped eventually. “Can you manage it by six, Mister?” Six o’clock was an hour past the top of the tide and we had to clear the harbour entrance sandbar by then or wait another ten hours.

“I think so, sir,” and then, to take his mind off his troubles and also because I was curious, asked: “What are in those crates? Motor-cars?”

“Motor-cars? Are you mad?” His cold blue eyes swept over the white-washed jumble of the little town and the dark green of the steeply-rising forested hills behind. “This lot couldn’t build a rabbit-hutch for export, far less a motorcar. Machinery. So the Bills of Lading say. Dynamos, generators, refrigerating, air-conditioning and refining machinery. For New York.”

“Do you mean to tell me,” I said carefully, “that the generalissimo, having successfully completed the confiscation of

all the American sugar-refining mills, is now dismantling them and selling the machinery back to the Americans? Bare-faced theft like that?"

"Petty larceny on the part of the individual is theft," Captain Bullen said morosely. "When governments engage in grand larceny, it's economics."

"The generalissimo and his government must be pretty desperate for money?"

"What do you think?" Bullen growled. "No one knows how many were killed in the capital and a dozen other towns in Tuesday's hunger riots. Jamaican authorities reckon the number in hundreds. Since they turfed out most foreigners and closed down or confiscated nearly all foreign businesses they haven't been able to earn a penny abroad. The coffers of the revolution are as empty as a drum. Man's completely desperate for money."

He turned away and stood staring out over the harbour, big hands wide-spaced on the guard-rail, his back ramrod-stiff. I recognised the sign, after three years of sailing with him it would have been impossible not to. There was something he wanted to say, there was some steam he wanted to blow off and no better outlet than that tried and trusty relief valve, Chief Officer Carter. Only whenever he wished to blow off steam it was a matter of personal pride with him never to bring the matter up himself. It was no great trick to guess what was troubling him, so I obliged.

I said, conversationally: "The cables we sent to London, sir. Any reply to them yet?"

“Just ten minutes ago.” He turned round casually as if the matter had already slipped his memory, but the slight purpling tinge in the red face betrayed him, and there was nothing casual about his voice when he went on: “Slapped me down, Mister, that’s what they did. Slapped me down. My own company. And the Ministry of Transport. Both of them. Told me to forget about it, said my protests were completely out of order, warned me of the consequences of future lack of co-operation with the appropriate authorities, whatever the hell appropriate authorities might be. Me! My own company! Thirty-five years I’ve sailed with the Blue Mail Line and now—and now ...” His fists clenched and his voice choked into fuming silence.

“So there was someone bringing very heavy pressure to bear after all,” I murmured.

“There was, Mister, there was.” The cold blue eyes were very cold indeed and the big hands opened wide then closed, tight, till the ivory showed. Bullen was a captain, but he was more than that: he was the commodore of the Blue Mail fleet and even the board of directors walk softly when the fleet commodore is around: at least, they don’t treat him like an office boy. He went on softly: “If ever I get my hands on Dr. Slingsby Caroline I’ll break his bloody neck.”

Captain Bullen would have loved to get his hands on the oddly named Dr. Slingsby Caroline. Tens of thousands of police, government agents and American servicemen engaged in the hunt for him would also have loved to get their hands on him. So

would millions of ordinary citizens if for no other reason than the excellent one that there was a reward of 50,000 dollars for information leading to his capture. But the interest of Captain Bullen and the crew of the *Campari* was even more personal: the missing man was very much the root of all our troubles.

Dr. Slingsby Caroline had vanished, appropriately enough, in South Carolina. He had worked at a U.S. Government's very hush-hush Weapons Research Establishment south of the town of Columbia, an establishment concerned with the evolving, as had only become known in the past week or so, of some sort of small fission weapon for use by either fighter-planes or mobile rocket-launchers in local tactical nuclear wars. As nuclear weapons went, it was the veriest bagatelle compared to the five megaton monsters already developed by both the United States and Russia, developing barely one-thousandth of the explosive power of those and hardly capable of devastating more than a square mile of territory. Still, with the explosive potential of 5,000 tons of T.N.T., it was no toy.

Then one day—night to be precise—Dr. Slingsby Caroline had vanished. As he was the director of the Research Establishment, this was serious enough, but what was even more dismaying was that he had taken the working prototype of the weapon with him. He had apparently been surprised by two of the night guards at the plant and had killed them both, presumably with a silenced weapon, since no one heard or suspected anything amiss. He had driven through the plant gates about ten o'clock

at night at the wheel of his own blue Chevrolet station wagon: the guards at the gate recognising both the car and their own chief and knowing that he habitually worked until a late hour, had waved him on without a second glance. And that was the last anyone had ever seen of Dr. Caroline or the Twister, as the weapon, for some obscure reason, had been named. But it wasn't the last that was seen of the blue Chevrolet. That had been discovered abandoned outside the port of Savannah, some nine hours after the crime had been committed but less than an hour after it had been discovered, which showed pretty smart police work on someone's part.

And it had just been our evil luck that the s.s. *Campari* had called in at Savannah on the afternoon of the day the crime had been committed.

Within an hour of the discovery of the two dead guards in the research establishment an all inter-state and foreign air and sea traffic in the South-Eastern United States had been halted. As from seven o'clock in the morning, all planes were grounded until they had been rigorously searched: as from seven o'clock police stopped and examined every truck crossing a state border: and, of course, everything larger than a rowing-boat was forbidden to put out to sea. Unfortunately for the authorities in general and us in particular, the s.s. *Campari* had sailed from Savannah at six o'clock that morning. Automatically, the *Campari* became very, very "hot," the number one suspect for the gateway.

The first radio call came through at 8.30 a.m. Would Captain

Bullen return immediately to Savannah? The captain, no beater about the bush, asked why the hell he should. He was told that it was desperately urgent that he return at once. Not, replied the captain, unless they gave him a very compelling reason indeed. They refused to give him a reason and Captain Bullen refused to return. Deadlock. Then, because they hadn't much option, the Federal Authorities, who had already taken over from the state, gave him the facts.

Captain Bullen asked for more facts. He asked for a description of the missing scientist and weapon, and he'd soon find out for himself whether or not they were on board. Followed a fifteen-minute delay, no doubt necessary to secure the release of top classified information, then the descriptions were reluctantly given.

There was a curious similarity between the two descriptions. Both the Twister and Dr. Caroline were exactly 75 inches in length. Both were very thin, the weapon being only eleven inches in diameter. The doctor weighed 180 pounds, the Twister 275. The Twister was covered in a one-piece sheath of polished anodised aluminium, the doctor in a two-piece grey gabardine. The Twister's head was covered by a grey Pyroceram nose-cap, the doctor's by black hair with a tell-tale lock of grey in the centre.

The orders for the doctor were to identify and apprehend: for the Twister to identify but do not repeat *do not* touch. The weapon should be completely stable and safe and normally

it would take one of the only two experts who were as yet sufficiently acquainted with it at least ten minutes to arm it; but no one could guess what effect might have been had upon the Twister's delicate mechanism by the jolting it might have suffered in transit.

Three hours later Captain Bullen was able to report with complete certainty that neither the missing scientist nor weapon was aboard. Intensive would be a poor word to describe that search, every square foot between the chain locker and steering compartment was searched and searched again. Captain Bullen had radioed the Federal Authorities and then forgotten about it.

And in Kingston the blow had fallen. We had no sooner arrived than the harbour authorities had come on board requesting that a search party from the American destroyer lying almost alongside be allowed to examine the *Campari*. The search party, about forty of them, were already lined up on the deck of the destroyer.

They were still there four hours later. Captain Bullen, in a few simple well-chosen words that had carried far and clear over the sunlit waters of Kingston harbour, had told the authorities that if the United States Navy proposed, in broad daylight, to board a British Mercantile Marine vessel in a British harbour, then they were welcome to try. They were also welcome, he had added, to suffer, apart from the injuries and the loss of blood they would incur in the process, the very heavy penalties which would be imposed by an international court of maritime law arising from

charges ranging from assault, through piracy to an act of war: which maritime court, Captain Bullen had added pointedly, had its seat not in Washington, D.C., but in The Hague, Holland.

This stopped them cold. The authorities withdrew to consult with the Americans. Coded cables, as we learnt later, were exchanged with Washington and London. Captain Bullen remained adamant. Our passengers, 90 per cent. of them Americans, gave him their enthusiastic support. Messages were received from both the company head office and the Ministry of Transport requiring Captain Bullen to co-operate with the United States Navy. Pressure was being brought to bear. Bullen tore the messages up, seized the offer of the local Marconi agent to give the radio equipment an overdue check-up as a heaven-sent excuse to take the wireless officers off watch and told the quartermaster at the gangway to accept no more messages.

And so it had continued for all of thirty hours. And, because troubles never come singly, it was on the morning following our arrival that the Harrisons and Curtises, related families who occupied the for'ard two suites on "A" Deck, received cables with the shocking news that members of both families had been fatally involved in a car crash and left that afternoon. Black gloom hung heavy over the *Campari*.

Towards evening, the deadlock was broken by the skipper of the American destroyer, a diplomatic, courteous and thoroughly embarrassed commander by the name of Varsi. He had been allowed aboard the *Campari*, been gruffly asked into Bullen's

day-cabin, accepted a drink, been very apologetic and respectful and suggested a way out of the dilemma.

How would it be if the search were carried out not by his own men but by British Customs officials in the regular course of their duty, with his men present solely in the capacity of observers. Captain Bullen, after much outraged humming and hawing, had finally agreed. Not only did this suggestion save face and salvage honour to a certain degree, but he was in an impossible situation anyway, and he knew it. Until the search was completed, the Kingston authorities refused medical clearance, and until he had this clearance it would be impossible to unload the six hundred tons of food and machinery he had for delivery there. And the port officials could also make things very difficult indeed by refusing clearance papers to sail.

And so what seemed like every Customs official in Jamaica was routed out and the search began at 9 p.m. It lasted until 2 a.m. the following morning. Captain Bullen fumed as steadily and sulphurously as a volcano about to erupt. The passengers fumed, partly because of having to suffer the indignity of having their cabins so meticulously searched, partly because of their being kept out of their beds until the early hours of the morning. And, above all, the crew fumed because, on this occasion, even the normally tolerant Customs were forced to take note of the hundreds of bottles of liquor and thousands of cigarettes uncovered by their search.

Nothing else, of course, was found. Apologies were offered

and ignored. Medical clearance was given and unloading began: we left Kingston late that night. For all of the following twenty-four hours Captain Bullen brooded over the recent happenings, then had sent off a couple of cablegrams, one to the head office in London, the other to the Ministry of Transport, telling them what he, Captain Bullen thought of them. And now, it seemed, they in turn had told Captain Bullen what they thought of him. I could understand his feelings about Dr. Slingsby Caroline, who was probably in China by this time.

A high-pitched shout of warning brought us both sharply back to the present and what was going on around us. One of the two chain slings round the big crate now poised exactly over the hatchway to number four hold had suddenly come adrift, one end of the crate dropping down through an angle of 60 degrees and bringing up with a jerking jolt that made even the big jumbo derrick shake and quiver with the strain. The chances were good that the crate would now slip through the remaining sling and crash down on to the floor of the hold far below, which is probably what would have happened if two of the crew holding on to a corner guiding rope hadn't been quick-witted enough to throw all their weight on to it and so prevent the crate from tilting over at too steep an angle and sliding free. But even as it was it was still touch and go.

The crate swung back towards the side of the ship, the two men on the guide-rope still hanging on desperately. I caught a glimpse of the stevedores on the quayside below, their faces

twisted into expressions of frozen panic: in the new people's democracy where all men were free and equal, the penalty for this sort of carelessness was probably the firing squad: nothing else could have accounted for their otherwise inexplicably genuine terror. The crate began to swing back over the hold. I yelled to the men beneath to run clear and simultaneously gave the signal for emergency lowering. The winchman, fortunately, was as quick-witted as he was experienced, and as the wildly careering crate swung jerkily back to dead centre he lowered away at two or three times the normal speed, braking just seconds before the lowermost corner of the crate crunched and splintered against the floor of the hold. Moments later the entire length of the crate was resting on the bottom.

Captain Bullen fished a handkerchief from his drills, removed his gold-braided cap and slowly mopped his sandy hair and sweating brow. He appeared to be communing with himself.

"This," he said finally, "is the bloody end. Captain Bullen in the dog-house. The crew sore as hell. The passengers hopping mad. Two days behind schedule. Searched by the Americans from truck to keelson like a contraband-runner. Now probably carrying contraband. No sign of our latest bunch of passengers. Got to clear the harbour bar by six. And now this band of madmen trying to send us to the bottom. A man can stand so much, First, just so much." He replaced his cap. "Shakespeare had something to say about this, First."

"A sea of troubles, sir?"

“No, something else. But apt enough.” He sighed. “Get the second officer to relieve you. Third’s checking stores. Get the fourth—no, not that blithering nincompoop—get the bo’sun, he talks Spanish like a native anyway, to take over on the shore side. Any objections and that’s the last piece of cargo we load. Then you and I are having lunch, First.”

“I told Miss Beresford that I wouldn’t——”

“If you think,” Captain Bullen interrupted heavily, “that I’m going to listen to that bunch jangling their money-bags and bemoaning their hard lot from *hors d’œuvre* right through to coffee, you must be out of your mind. We’ll have it in my cabin.”

And so we had it in his cabin. It was the usual *Campari* meal, something for even the most blasé epicure to dream about, and Captain Bullen, for once and understandably, made an exception to his rule that neither he nor his officers should drink with lunch. By the time the meal was over he was feeling almost human again and once went so far as to call me “Johhny-me-boy.” It wouldn’t last. But it was all pleasant enough, and it was with reluctance that I finally quit the air-conditioned coolness of the captain’s day-cabin for the blazing sunshine outside to relieve the second officer.

He smiled widely as I approached number four hold. Tommy Wilson was always smiling. He was a dark, wiry Welshman of middle height, with an infectious grin and an immense zest for life, no matter what came his way.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“You can see for yourself.” He waved a complacent hand towards the pile of stacked crates on the quayside, now diminished by a good third since I had seen it last. “Speed allied with efficiency. When Wilson is on the job let no man ever——”

“The bo’sun’s name is MacDonald, not Wilson,” I said.

“So it is.” He laughed, glanced down to where the bo’sun, a big, tough, infinitely competent Hebridean islander was haranguing the bearded stevedores, and shook his head admiringly. “I wish I could understand what he’s saying.”

“Translation would be superfluous,” I said dryly. “I’ll take over. Old man wants you to go ashore.”

“Ashore?” His face lit up, in two short years the second’s shoregoing exploits had already passed into the realms of legend. “Let no man ever say that Wilson ignored duty’s call. Twenty minutes for a shower, shave and shake out the number ones——”

“The agent’s offices are just beyond the dock gates,” I interrupted. “You can go as you are. Find out what’s happened to our latest passengers. Captain’s beginning to worry about them, if they’re not here by five o’clock he’s sailing without them.”

Wilson left. The sun started westering, but the heat stayed as it was. Thanks to MacDonald’s competence and uninhibited command of the Spanish language, the cargo on the quayside steadily and rapidly diminished. Wilson returned to report no sign of our passengers. The agent had been very nervous indeed. They were very important people, Señor, very, very important. One of them was the most important man in the whole province

of Camafuegos. A jeep had already been dispatched westwards along the coast road to look for them. It sometimes happened, the señor understood, that a car spring would go or a shock absorber snap. When Wilson had innocently inquired if this was because the revolutionary government had no money left to pay for the filling in of the enormous potholes in the roads, the agent had become even more nervous and said indignantly that it was entirely the fault of the inferior metal those perfidious Americanos used in the construction of their vehicles. Wilson said he had left with the impression that Detroit had a special assembly line exclusively devoted to turning out deliberately inferior cars destined solely for this particular corner of the Caribbean.

Wilson went away. The cargo continued to move steadily into number four hold. About four o'clock in the afternoon I heard the sound of the clashing of gears and the asthmatic wheezing of what sounded like a very elderly engine indeed. This, I thought, would be the passengers at last, but no: what clanked into view round the corner of the dock gate was a dilapidated truck with hardly a shred of paint left on the bodywork, white canvas showing on the tyres and the engine hood removed to reveal what looked, from my elevation, like a solid block of rust. One of the special Detroit jobs, probably. On its cracked and splintered platform it carried three medium-sized crates, freshly boxed and metal-banded.

Wrapped in a blue haze from the staccato back-firing of

its exhaust, vibrating like a broken tuning fork and rattling in every bolt in its superannuated chassis, the truck trundled heavily across the cobbles and pulled up not five paces from where MacDonald was standing. A little man in white ducks and peaked cap jumped out through the space where the door ought to have been, stood still for a couple of seconds until he got the hang of terra firma again and then scuttled off in the direction of our gangway. I recognised him as our Carracio agent, the one with the low opinion of Detroit, and wondered what fresh trouble he was bringing with him.

I found out in three minutes flat when Captain Bullen appeared on deck, an anxious-looking agent scurrying along behind him. The captain's blue eyes were snapping, the red complexion was overlaid with puce, but he had the safety valve screwed right down.

"Coffins, Mister," he said tightly. "Coffins, no less."

I suppose there is a quick and clever answer to a conversational gambit like that but I couldn't find it so I said politely: "Coffins, sir?"

"Coffins, Mister. Not empty, either. For shipment to New York." He flourished some papers. "Authorisations, shipping notes, everything in order. Including a sealed request signed by no less than the ambassador. Three of them. Two British, one American subjects. Killed in the hunger riots."

"The crew won't like it, sir," I said. "Especially the Gôanese stewards. You know their superstitions and how——"

"It will be all right, Señor," the little man in white broke in hurriedly. Wilson had been right about the nervousness, but there was more to it than that, there was a strange over lay of anxiety that came close to despair. "We have arranged——"

"Shut up!" Captain Bullen said shortly. "No need for the crew to know, Mister. Or the passengers." You could see they were just a careless after-thought. "Coffins are boxed—that's them on the truck there."

"Yes, sir. Killed in the riots. Last week." I paused and went on delicately: "In this heat——"

"Lead-lined, he says. So they can go in the hold. Some separate corner, Mister. One of the—um—deceased is a relative of one of the passengers boarding here. Wouldn't do to stack the coffins among the dynamos, I suppose." He sighed heavily. "On top of everything else, we're now in the funeral undertaking business. Life, First, can hold no more."

"You are accepting this—ah—cargo, sir?"

"But of course, but of course," the little man interrupted again. "One of them is a cousin of Señor Carreras, who sails with you. Señor Miguel Carreras. Señor Carreras, he is what you say heartbroken. Señor Carreras is the most important man——"

"Be quiet," Captain Bullen said wearily. He made a gesture with the papers. "Yes, I'm accepting. Note from the Ambassador. More pressure. I've had enough of cables flying across the Atlantic. Too much grief. Just an old beaten man, First, just an old beaten man." He stood there for a moment, hands outspread

on the guard-rail, doing his best to look like an old beaten man and making a singularly unsuccessful job of it, then straightened abruptly as a procession of vehicles turned in through the dock gates and made for the *Campari*.

"A pound to a penny, Mister, here comes still more grief."

"Praise be to God," the little agent murmured. The tone, no less than the words, was a prayer of thanksgiving. "Señor Carreras himself! Your passengers, at last, Captain."

"That's what I said," Bullen growled. "More grief."

The procession, two big chauffeur-driven prewar Packards, one towed by a jeep, had just pulled up by the gangway and the passengers were climbing out. Those who could, that was—for very obviously there was one who could not. One of the chauffeurs, dressed in green tropical drills and a bush hat, had opened the boot of his car, pulled out a collapsible hand-propelled wheel-chair and, with the smooth efficiency of experience, had it assembled in ten seconds flat while the other chauffeur, with the aid of a tall thin nurse clad in overall white from her smart, starched cap to the skirt that reached down to her ankles, tenderly lifted a bent old man from the back seat of the second Packard and set him gently in the wheel-chair. The old boy—even at that distance I could see the face creased and stretched with the lines of age, the snowy whiteness of the still plentiful hair—did his best to help them, but his best wasn't very much.

Captain Bullen looked at me. I looked at Captain Bullen.

There didn't seem to be any reason to say anything. Nobody in a crew likes having permanent invalids aboard ship: they cause trouble to the ship's doctor, who has to look after their health, to the cabin stewards who have to clean their quarters, to the dining-room stewards who have to feed them, and to those members of the deck crew detailed for the duty of moving them around. And when the invalids are elderly, and often infirm—and if this one wasn't, I sadly missed my guess—there was always the chance of a death at sea, the one thing sailors hate above all else. It was also very bad for the passenger trade.

“Well,” Captain Bullen said heavily, “I suppose I'd better go and welcome our latest guests aboard. Finish it off as quickly as possible, Mister.”

“I'll do that, sir.”

Bullen nodded and left. I watched the two chauffeurs slide a couple of long poles under the seat of the invalid chair, straighten and carry the chair easily up the sparred foot-planks of the gangway.

They were followed by the tall angular nurse and she in turn by another nurse, dressed exactly like the first but shorter and stockier. The old boy was bringing his own medical corps along with him, which meant that he had more money than was good for him or was a hypochondriac or very far through indeed or a combination of any or all of those.

But I was more interested in the last two people to climb out of the Packards.

The first was a man of about my own age and size, but the resemblance stopped short there. He looked like a cross between Ramon Novarro and Rudolph Valentino, only handsomer. Tall, broad-shouldered, with deeply-tanned, perfectly-sculpted Latin features, he had the classical long thin moustache, strong even teeth with that in-built neon phosphorescence that seems to shine in any light from high noon till dark, and a darkly gleaming froth of tight black curls on his head: he would have been a lost man if you'd let him loose on the campus of any girls' university. For all that, he looked as far from being a sissy as any man I'd ever met: He had a strong chin, the balanced carriage, the light springy boxer's step of a man well aware that he can get through this world without any help from a nursemaid. If nothing else, I thought sourly, he would at least take Miss Beresford out of my hair.

The other man was a slightly smaller edition of the first, same features, same teeth, same moustache and hair, only those were greying. He would be about fifty-five. He had about him that indefinable look of authority and assurance which can come from power, money or a carefully cultivated phoneyess. This, I guessed would be the Señor Miguel Carreras who inspired such fear in our local Carracio agent. I wondered why.

Ten minutes later the last of our cargo was aboard and all that remained were the three boxed coffins on the back of the old truck. I watched the bo'sun readying a sling round the first of those when a well-detested voice said behind me:

"This is Mr. Carreras, sir. Captain Bullen sent me."

I turned round and gave Fourth Officer Dexter the look I specially reserved for Fourth Officer Dexter. Dexter was the exception to the rule that the fleet commodore always got the best available in the company as far as officers and men were concerned, but that was hardly the old man's fault: there are some men that even a fleet commodore has to except and Dexter was one of them. A personable enough youngster of twenty-one, with fair hair, slightly prominent blue eyes, an excruciatingly genuine public school accent and limited intelligence, Dexter was the son—and, unfortunately, heir—of Lord Dexter, Chairman and Managing Director of the Blue Mail. Lord Dexter, who had inherited about ten millions at the age of fifteen and, understandably enough, had never looked back, had the quaint idea that his own son should start from the bottom up and had sent him to sea as a cadet some five years previously. Dexter took a poor view of this arrangement: every man in the ship, from Bullen downwards, took a poor view of the arrangement and Dexter: but there was nothing we could do about it.

"How do you do, sir?" I accepted Carreras's outstretched hand and took a good look at him. The steady dark eyes, the courteous smile couldn't obscure the fact that there were many more lines about his eyes and mouth at two feet than at fifty: but it also couldn't obscure the compensatory fact that the air of authority and command was now redoubled in force, and I put out of my mind any idea that this air originated in phoneyess: it was the

genuine article and that was that.

“Mr. Carter? My pleasure.” The hand was firm, the bow more than a perfunctory nod, the cultured English the product of some Stateside Ivy League college. “I have some interest in the cargo being loaded and if you would permit——”

“But certainly, Señor Carreras.” Carter, that rough-hewn Anglo-Saxon diamond, not to be outdone in Latin courtesy. I waved towards the hatch. “If you would be so kind as to keep to the starboard—the right hand—of the hatch——”

“‘Starboard’ will do, Mr. Carter,” he smiled. “I have commanded vessels of my own. It was not a life that ever appealed to me.” He stood there for a moment, watching MacDonald tightening the sling, while I turned to Dexter, who had made no move to go. Dexter was seldom in a hurry to do anything: he had a remarkably thick skin.

“What are you on now, Fourth?” I inquired.

“Assisting Mr. Cummings.”

That meant he was unemployed. Cummings, the purser, was an extraordinarily competent officer who never required help. He had only one fault, brought on by years of dealing with passengers—he was far too polite. Especially to Dexter. I said: “Those charts we picked up in Kingston. You might get on with the corrections, will you?” Which meant that he would probably land us on a reef off the Great Bahamas in a couple of days’ time.

“But Mr. Cummings is expecting——”

“The charts, Dexter.”

He looked at me for a long moment, his face slowly darkening, then spun on his heel and left. I let him go three paces then said, not loudly: "Dexter."

He stopped, then turned, slowly.

"The charts, Dexter," I repeated. He stood there for maybe five seconds, eyes locked on mine, then broke his gaze.

"Aye, aye, sir." The accent on the "sir" was faint but unmistakable. He turned again and walked away and now the flush was round the back of his neck, his back ramrod stiff. Little I cared, by the time he sat in the chairman's seat I'd have long since quit. I watched him go, then turned to see Carreras looking at me with a slow, still speculation in the steady eyes. He was putting Chief Officer Carter in the balance and weighing him, but whatever figures he came up with he kept to himself, for he turned away without any haste and made his way across to the starboard side of number four hold. As I turned, I noticed for the first time the very thin ribbon of black silk stitched across the left lapel of his grey tropical suit. It didn't seem to go any too well with the white rose he wore in his button-hole, but maybe the two of them together were recognised as a sign of mourning in those parts.

And it seemed very likely, for he stood there perfectly straight, almost at attention, his hands loosely by his sides as the three crated coffins were hoisted inboard. When the third crate came swinging in over the rail he removed his hat casually, as if to get the benefit of the light breeze that had just sprung up from the

north, the direction of the open sea: and then, looking around him almost furtively, lifted his right hand under the cover of the hat held in his left and made a quick abbreviated sign of the cross. Even in that heat I could feel the cold cat's paw of a shiver brush lightly across my shoulders, I don't know why, not even by the furthest stretch of imagination could I visualise that prosaic hatchway giving on number four hold as an open grave. One of my grandmothers was Scots, maybe I was psychic or had the second sight or whatever it was they called it up in the Highlands: or maybe I had just lunched too well.

Whatever might have upset me, it didn't seem to have upset Señor Carreras. He replaced his hat as the last of the crates touched lightly on the floor of the hold, stared down at it for a few seconds, then turned and made his way for'ard, lifting his hat again and giving me a clear untroubled smile as he came by. For want of anything better to do, I smiled back at him.

Five minutes later, the ancient truck, the two Packards, the jeep and the last of the stevedores were gone, and MacDonald was busy supervising the placing of the battens on number four hold. By five o'clock, a whole hour before deadline and exactly on the top of the tide, the s.s. *Campari* was steaming slowly over the bar to the north of the harbour, then west-north-west into the setting sun, carrying with it its cargo of crates and machinery and dead men, its fuming captain, disgruntled crew and thoroughly outraged passengers. At five o'clock on that brilliant June evening it was not what one might have called a

happy ship.

II. Tuesday 8 p.m.–9.30 p.m.

By eight o'clock that night cargo, crates and coffins were, presumably, just as they had been at five o'clock: but among the living cargo, the change for the better, from deep discontent to something closely approaching light-hearted satisfaction, was marked and profound.

There were reasons for this, of course. In Captain Bullen's case—he twice called me “Johnny-me-boy” as he sent me down for dinner—it was because he was clear of what he was pleased to regard as the pestiferous port of Carracio, because he was at sea again, because he was on his bridge again and because he had thought up an excellent reason for sending me below while he remained on the bridge, thus avoiding the social torture of having to dine with the passengers. In the crew's case, it was because the captain had seen fit, partly out of a sense of justice and partly to repay the head office for the indignities they had heaped on him, to award them all many more hours' overtime pay than they were actually entitled to for their off-duty labours in the past three days. And in the case of the officers and passengers it was simply because there are certain well-defined fundamental laws of human nature and one of them was that it was impossible to be miserable for long aboard the s.s. *Campari*.

As a vessel with no regular ports of call, with only very limited passenger accommodation and capacious cargo holds

that were seldom far from full, the s.s. *Campari* could properly be classed as a tramp ship and indeed was so classed in the Blue Mail's travel brochure's. But—as the brochures pointed out with a properly delicate restraint in keeping with the presumably refined sensibilities of the extraordinarily well-heeled clientele it was addressing—the s.s. *Campari* was no ordinary tramp ship. Indeed, it was no ordinary ship in any sense at all. It was, as the brochure said simply, quietly, without any pretentiousness and in exactly those words, “a medium-sized cargo vessel offering the most luxurious accommodation and finest cuisine of any ship in the world today.”

The only thing that prevented all the great passenger shipping companies from the Cunard White Star downwards from suing the Blue Mail for this preposterous statement was the fact that it was perfectly true.

It was the chairman of the Blue Mail, Lord Dexter, who had obviously kept all his brains to himself and refrained from passing any on to his son, our current fourth officer, who had thought it up. It was, as all his competitors who were now exerting themselves strenuously to get into the act admitted, a stroke of pure genius. Lord Dexter concurred.

It had started off simply enough in the early fifties with an earlier Blue Mail vessel, the s.s. *Brandywine*. (For some strange whimsy, explicable only on a psycho-analysts' couch, Lord Dexter himself a rabid teetotaler, had elected to name his various ships after divers wines and other spirituous liquors.)

The *Brandywine* had been one of the two Blue Mail vessels engaged on a regular run between New York and various British possessions in the West Indies, and Lord Dexter, eyeing the luxury cruise liners which plied regularly between New York and the Caribbean and seeing no good reason why he shouldn't elbow his way into this lucrative dollar-earning market, had some extra cabins fitted on the *Brandywine* and advertised them in a few very select American newspapers and magazines, making it quite plain that he was interested only in Top People. Among the attractions offered had been a complete absence of bands, dances, concerts, fancy-dress balls, swimming pools, tombola, deck games, sight-seeing and parties—only a genius could have made such desirable and splendidly resounding virtues out of things he didn't have anyway. All he offered on the positive side was the mystery and romance of a tramp ship which sailed to unknown destinations—this didn't make any alterations to regular schedules, all it meant was that the captain kept the names of the various ports of call to himself until shortly before he arrived there—and the resources and comfort of a telegraph lounge which remained in continuous touch with the New York, London and Paris stock exchanges.

The initial success of the scheme was fantastic. In stock exchange parlance, the issue was over-subscribed a hundred times. This was intolerable to Lord Dexter; he was obviously attracting far too many of the not quite Top People, aspiring wouldbe's on the lower-middle rungs of the ladder who had

not yet got past their first few million, people with whom Top People would not care to associate. He doubled his prices. It made no difference. He trebled them and in the process made the gratifying discovery that there were many people in the world who would pay literally almost anything not only to be different and exclusive but to be known to be different and exclusive. Lord Dexter held up the building of his latest ship, the *Campari*, had designed and built into her a dozen of the most luxurious cabin suites ever seen and sent her to New York, confident that she would soon recoup the outlay of a quarter of a million pounds extra cost incurred through the building of those cabins. As usual, his confidence was not misplaced.

There were imitators, of course, but one might as well have tried to imitate Buckingham Palace, the Grand Canyon or the Cullinan diamond. Lord Dexter left them all at the starting gate. He had found his formula and he stuck to it unswervingly: comfort, convenience, quiet, good food and good company. Where comfort was concerned, the fabulous luxury of the state-rooms had to be seen to be believed: convenience, as far as the vast majority of the male passengers was concerned, found its ultimate in the juxtaposition, in the *Campari's* unique telegraph lounge, of the stock exchange tickers and one of the most superbly stocked bars in the world: quiet was achieved by an advanced degree of insulation both in cabin suites and engine-room, by imitating the royal yacht *Britannia* inasmuch as that no orders were ever shouted and the deck crew and stewards

invariably wore rubber-soled sandals, and by eliminating all the bands, parties, games and dances which lesser cruise passengers believed essential for the enjoyment of ship-board life: the magnificent cuisine had been achieved by luring away, at vast cost and the expense of even more bad feeling, the chefs from one of the biggest embassies in London and one of the finest hotels in Paris: those masters of the culinary world operated on alternate days and the paradisaical results of their efforts to outdo one another was the envious talk of the Western Ocean.

Other shipowners might, perhaps, have succeeded in imitating some or all of those features, although most certainly to a lesser degree. But Lord Dexter was no ordinary shipowner. He was, as said, a genius and he showed it in his insistence, above all, on having the right people aboard.

Never a single trip passed but the *Campari* had a Personage on its passenger list, a Personage varying from Notable to World-famous. A special suite was reserved for Personages. Well-known politicians, cabinet ministers, top stars of the stage and screen, the odd famous writer or artist—if he was clean enough and used a razor—and the lower echelons of the English nobility—travelled in this suite at vastly reduced prices: royalty, ex-presidents, ex-premiers, ranking dukes and above travelled free. It was said that if all the British peerage on the *Campari's* waiting list could be accommodated simultaneously, the House of Lords could close its doors. It need hardly be added that there was nothing philanthropic in Lord Dexter's offer of free hospitality:

he merely jacked up his prices to the wealthy occupants of the other eleven suites, who would have paid the earth anyway for the privilege of voyaging in such close contact with such exalted company.

After several years on this run, our passengers consisted almost entirely of repeaters. Many came as often as three times a year, fair enough indication of the size of their bankroll. By now, the passenger list on the *Campari* had become the most exclusive club in the world. Not to put too fine a point on it, Lord Dexter had distilled the aggregate elements of social and financial snobbery and found in its purest quintessence an inexhaustible supply of gold.

I adjusted my napkin and looked over the current gold mine. Five hundred million dollars on the hoof—or on the dove-grey velvet of the armchair seats in that opulent and air-conditioned dining-room: perhaps nearer 1,000 million dollars, and old man Beresford himself would account for a good third of it.

Julius Beresford, president and chief stockholder of the Hart-McCormick Mining Federation, sat where he nearly always sat, not only now but on half a dozen previous cruises, at the top right-hand side of the captain's table, next Captain Bullen himself: he sat there in the most coveted position in the ship, not because he insisted on it through sheer weight of weal, but because Captain Bullen himself insisted on it. There are exceptions to every rule, and Julius Beresford was the exception to Bullen's rule that he couldn't abide any passenger, period. Beresford, a tall, thin,

relaxed man with tufted black eyebrows, a horseshoe ring of greying hair fringed the sunburnt baldness of his head and lively hazel eyes twinkling in the lined brown leather of his face, came along only for the peace, comfort and food: the company of the great left him cold, a fact vastly appreciated by Captain Bullen, who shared his sentiments exactly. Beresford, sitting diagonally across from my table, caught my eye.

“Evening, Mr. Carter.” Unlike his daughter, he didn’t make me feel that he was conferring an earldom upon me every time he spoke to me. “Splendid to be at sea again, isn’t it? And where’s our captain tonight?”

“Working, I’m afraid, Mr. Beresford. I have to present his apologies to his table. He couldn’t leave the bridge.”

“On the bridge?” Mrs. Beresford, seated opposite her husband, twisted round to look at me. “I thought you were usually on watch at this hour, Mr. Carter?”

“I am.” I smiled at her. Plump, bejewelled, over-dressed, with dyed blonde hair but still beautiful at fifty, Mrs. Beresford bubbled over with good humour and laughter and kindness: this was only her first trip but Mrs. Beresford was already my favourite passenger. I went on: “But there are so many chains of islets, reefs and coral keys hereabouts that Captain Bullen prefers to see to the navigation himself.” I didn’t add, as I might have done, that had it been in the middle of the night and all the passengers safely in their beds, Captain Bullen would have been in his also, untroubled by any thoughts about his chief officer’s

competence.

“But I thought a chief officer was fully qualified to run a ship?” Miss Beresford, needling me again, sweet-smiling, the momentarily innocent clear green eyes almost too big for the delicately-tanned face. “In case anything went wrong with the captain, I mean. You must hold a master’s certificate, mustn’t you?”

“I do. I also hold a driver’s licence, but you wouldn’t catch me driving a bus in the rush hour in downtown Manhattan.”

Old man Beresford grinned. His wife smiled. Miss Beresford regarded me thoughtfully for a moment, then bent to examine her *hors d’œuvre*, showing the gleaming auburn hair cut in a bouffant style that looked as if it had been achieved with a garden rake and a pair of secateurs, but had probably cost a fortune. The man by her side wasn’t going to let it go so easily, though. He laid down his fork, raised his thin dark head until he had me more or less sighted along his aquiline nose and said in his clear high drawling voice: “Oh, come now, Chief Officer. I don’t think the comparison is very apt at all.”

The “Chief Officer” was to put me in my place. The Duke of Hartwell spent a great deal of his time aboard the *Campari* in putting people in their places, which was pretty ungrateful of him considering that he was getting it all for free. He had nothing against me personally, it was just that he was publicly lending Miss Beresford his support: even the very considerable sums of money earned by inveigling the properly respectful lower classes

into viewing his stately home at two and six a time were making only a slight dent on the crushing burden of death duties, whereas an alliance with Miss Beresford would solve his difficulties for ever and ever. Things were being complicated for the unfortunate duke by the fact that though his intellect was bent on Miss Beresford, his attentions and eyes were for the most part on the extravagantly opulent charms—and undeniable beauty—of the platinum blonde and oft-divorced cinema actress who flanked him on the other side.

“I don’t suppose it is, sir,” I acknowledged. Captain Bullen refused to address him as “Your Grace” and I’d be damned if I’d do it either. “But the best I could think up on the spur of the moment.”

He nodded as though satisfied and returned to attack his *hors d’œuvre*. Old Beresford eyed him speculatively, Mrs. Beresford half-smilingly, Miss Harcourt—the cinema actress—admiringly, while Miss Beresford herself just kept on treating us to an uninterrupted view of the auburn bouffant.

The courses came and went. Antoine was on duty in the kitchen that night and you could almost reach out and feel the blissful hush that descended on the company. Velvet-footed Gôanese waiters moved soundlessly on the dark grey pile of the Persian carpet, food appeared and vanished as if in a dream, an arm always appeared at the precisely correct moment with the precisely correct wine. But never for me. I drank soda water. It was in my contract.

The coffee appeared. This was the moment when I had to earn my money. When Antoine was on duty and on top of his form, conversation was a desecration and a hallowed hush of appreciation, an almost cathedral ecstasy, was the correct form. But about forty minutes of this rapturous silence was about par for the course. It couldn't and never did go on. I never yet met a rich man—or woman, for that matter—who didn't list talking, chiefly and preferably about themselves, as among their favourite occupations. And the prime target for their observations was invariably the officer who sat at the head of the table.

I looked round ours and wondered who would start the ball rolling. Miss Harrbride—her original central European name was unpronounceable—thin, scrawny, sixtyish and tough as whalebone, who had made a fortune out of highly-expensive and utterly worthless cosmetic preparations which she wisely refrained from using on herself? Mr. Greenstreet, her husband, a grey anonymity of a man with a grey sunken face, who had married her for heaven only knew what reason for he was a very wealthy man in his own right? Tony Carreras? His father, Miguel Carreras? There should have been a sixth at my table, to replace the Curtis family of three who, along with the Harrisons, had been so hurriedly called home from Kingston, but the old man who had come aboard in his bath-chair was apparently to have his meals served in his cabin during the voyage, with his nurses, in attendance. Four men and one woman: it made an ill-balanced table.

Señor Miguel Carreras spoke first.

“The *Campari*’s prices, Mr. Carter, are quite atrocious,” he said calmly. He puffed appreciatively at his cigar. “Robbery on the high seas would be a very fitting description. On the other hand, the cuisine is as claimed. You have a chef of divine gifts.”

“From all accounts, sir, ‘divine’ is just about right. Experienced travellers who have stayed in the best hotels on both sides of the Atlantic maintain that Antoine has no equal in either Europe or America. Except, perhaps, Henriques.”

“Henriques?”

“Our alternate chef. He’s on tomorrow.”

“Do I detect a certain immodesty, Mr. Carter, in advancing the claims of the *Campari*?” There was no offence meant, not with that smile.

“I don’t think so, sir. But the next twenty-four hours will speak for themselves—and Henriques—better than I can.”

“*Touché!*” He smiled again and reached for the bottle of Remy Martin—the waiters vanished at coffee-time. “And the prices?”

“They’re terrible,” I agreed. I told that to all the passengers and it seemed to please them. “We offer what no other ship in the world offers, but the prices are still scandalous. At least a dozen people in this room at this very moment have told me that—and most of them are here for at least their third trip.”

“You make your point, Mr. Carter.” It was Tony Carreras speaking and his voice was as one might have expected—slow, controlled, with a deep resonant timbre. He looked at his father.

“Remember the waiting list at the Blue Mail’s offices?”

“Indeed. We were pretty far down the list—and what a list. Half the millionaires in Central and South America. I suppose we may consider ourselves fortunate, Mr. Carter, in that we were the only ones able to accept at such short notice after the sudden departure of our predecessors in Jamaica. Can you give us any idea of our itinerary?”

“That’s supposed to be one of the attractions, sir. No set itinerary. Our schedule largely depends on the availability and destination of cargoes. One thing certain, we’re going to New York. Most of our passengers boarded there and passengers like to be returned to where they came from.” He knew this anyway, knew that we had coffins consigned to New York. “We may stop off at Nassau. Depends how the captain feels—the company gives him a lot of leeway in adjusting local schedules to suit the best needs of the passengers—and the weather reports. This is the hurricane season, Mr. Carreras, or pretty close to it: if the reports are bad Captain Bullen will want all the sea room he can and give Nassau a bye.” I smiled. “Among the other attractions of the s.s. *Campari* is that we do not make our passengers seasick unless it is absolutely essential.”

“Considerate, very considerate,” Carreras murmured. He looked at me speculatively. “But we’ll be making one or two calls on the east coast, I take it?”

“No idea, sir. Normally, yes. Again it’s up to the captain, and how the captain behaves depends on a Dr. Slingsby Caroline.”

"They haven't caught him yet," Miss Harrbride declared in her rough gravelly voice. She scowled with all the fierce patriotism of a first-generation American, looked round the table and gave us all the impartial benefit of her scowl.

"It's incredible, frankly incredible. I still don't believe it. A *thirteenth*-generation American!"

"We heard about this character." Tony Cerreras, like his father, had had his education in some Ivy League college: he was rather less formal in his attitude towards the English language. "Slingsby Caroline, I mean. But what's this guy got to do with us, Mr. Carter?"

"As long as he is at large every cargo vessel leaving the eastern seaboard gets a pretty thorough going over to make sure that neither he nor the Twister is aboard. Slows up the turn-round of cargo and passenger ships by 100 per cent., which means that the longshoremen are losing stevedoring money pretty fast. They've gone on strike—and the chances are, so many unpleasant words have been said on both sides, that they'll stay on strike when they do nab Dr. Caroline. If."

"Traitor," said Miss Harrbride. "Thirteen generations!"

"So we stay away from the east coast, eh?" Carreras senior asked. "Meantime, anyway?"

"As long as possible, sir. But New York is a must. When, I don't know. But if it's still strike-bound, we might go up the St. Lawrence first. Depends."

"Romance, mystery and adventure," Carreras smiled. "Just

like your brochure said.” He glanced over my shoulder. “Looks like a visitor for you, Mr. Carter.”

I twisted in my seat. It was a visitor for me. Rusty Williams—Rusty from his shock of flaming hair—was advancing towards me, whites immaculately pressed, uniform cap clasped stiffly under his left arm. Rusty was sixteen, our youngest cadet, desperately shy and very impressionable.

“What is it, Rusty?” Age-old convention said that cadets should always be addressed by their surnames, but everyone called Rusty just that. It seemed impossible not to.

“The captain’s compliments, sir. Could he see you on the bridge, please, Mr. Carter?”

“I’ll be right up.” Rusty turned to leave and I caught the gleam in Susan Beresford’s eye, a gleam that generally heralded some crack at my expense. This one, predictably, would be about my indispensability, about the distraught captain sending for his trusty servant when all was lost, and although I didn’t think she was the sort of a girl to say it in front of a cadet I wouldn’t have wagered pennies on it so I rose hastily to my feet, said “Excuse me, Miss Harrbride, excuse me, gentlemen,” and followed Rusty quickly out of the door into the starboard alleyway. He was waiting for me.

“The captain is in his cabin, sir. He’d like to see you there.”

“What? You told me——”

“I know, sir. He told me to say that. Mr. Jamieson is on the bridge”—George Jamieson was our third officer—“and Captain

Bullen is in his cabin. With Mr. Cummings.”

I nodded and left. I remembered now that Cummings hadn't been at his accustomed table as I'd come out although he'd certainly been there at the beginning of dinner. The captain's quarters were immediately below the bridge and I was there in ten seconds. I knocked on the polished teak door, heard a gruff voice and went in.

The Blue Mail certainly did its commodore well. Even Captain Bullen, no admirer of the sybaritic life, had never been heard to complain of being pampered. He had a three-room and bathroom suite, done in the best millionaire's taste, and his day-cabin, in which I now was, was a pretty fair guide to the rest—wine-red carpet that sunk beneath your feet, darkly-crimson drapes, gleaming sycamore panelling, narrow oak beams overhead, oak and green leather for the chairs and settee. Captain Bullen looked up at me as I came in: He didn't have any of the signs of a man enjoying the comforts of home.

“Something wrong, sir?” I asked.

“Sit down.” He waved to a chair and sighed. “There's something wrong all right. Banana-legs Benson is missing. White reported it ten minutes ago.”

Banana-legs Benson sounded like the name of a domesticated anthropoid or, at best, like a professional wrestler on the small town circuits, but in fact, it belonged to our very suave, polished and highly-accomplished head steward, Frederick Benson: Benson had the well-deserved reputation of being a very

firm disciplinarian, and it was one of his disgruntled subordinates who, in the process of receiving a severe and merited dressing-down had noticed the negligible clearance between Benson's knees and rechristened him as soon as his back was turned. The name had stuck, chiefly because of its incongruity and utter unsuitability. White was the assistant chief steward.

I said nothing. Bullen didn't appreciate anyone, especially his officers, indulging in double-takes, exclamations or fatuous repetition. Instead I looked at the man seated across the table from the captain. Howard Cummings.

Cummings, the purser, a small plump amiable and infinitely shrewd Irishman, was next to Bullen, the most important man on the ship. No one questioned that, though Cummings himself gave no sign that this was so. On a passenger ship a good purser is worth his weight in gold, and Cummings was a pearl beyond any price. In his three years on the *Campari* friction and trouble among—and complaints from—the passengers had been almost completely unknown. Howard Cummings was a genius in mediation, compromise, the soothing of ruffled feelings and the handling of people in general. Captain Bullen would as soon have thought of cutting off his right hand as of trying to send Cummings off the ship.

I looked at Cummings for three reasons. He knew everything that went on on the *Campari*, from the secret take-over bids being planned in the telegraph lounge to the heart troubles of the youngest stoker in the boiler-room. He was the man ultimately

responsible for all the stewards aboard the ship. And, finally, he was a close personal friend of Banana-legs.

Cummings caught my look and shook his dark head.

“Sorry, Johnny,” I’m as much in the dark as you. I saw him shortly before dinner, about ten to eight it would have been, when I was having a noggin with the paying guests.” Cummings’s noggin came from a special whisky bottle filled only with ginger ale. “We’d White up here just now. He says he saw Benson in cabin suite 6, fixing it for the night, about 8.20—half an hour ago, no, nearer forty minutes now. He expected to see him shortly afterwards because for every night for the past couple of years, whenever the weather was good, Benson and White have had a cigarette together on deck when the passengers were at dinner.”

“Regular time?” I interrupted.

“Very. Eight-thirty, near enough, never later than 8.35. But not tonight. At 8.40 White went to look for him in his cabin. No sign of him there. Organised half a dozen stewards for a search and still nothing doing. He sent for me and I came to the captain.”

And the captain sent for me, I thought. Send for old trusty Carter when there’s dirty work on hand. I looked at Bullen.

“A search, sir?”

“That’s it, Mister. Damned nuisance, just one damned thing after another. Quietly, if you can.”

“Of course, sir. Can I have Wilson, the bo’sun, some stewards and A.B.s?”

“You can have Lord Dexter and his board of directors just so

long as you find Benson,” Bullen grunted.

“Yes, sir,” I turned to Cummings. “Didn’t suffer from any ill-health, did he? Liable to dizziness, faintness, heart attacks, that sort of thing?”

“Flat feet, was all,” Cummings smiled. He wasn’t feeling like smiling. “Had his annual medical check-up last month from Doc Marston. One hundred per cent. The flat feet are an occupational disease.”

I turned back to Captain Bullen.

“Could I have twenty minutes, perhaps half an hour, for a quiet look around, sir, first? With Mr. Cummings. Your authority to look anywhere, sir?”

“Within reason, of course.”

“*Everywhere?*” I insisted. “Or I’m wasting my time. You know that, sir.”

“My God! And it’s only a couple of days since that Jamaican lot. Remember how our passengers reacted to the Customs and American Navy going through their cabins? The board of directors are going to love this.” He looked up wearily. “I suppose you *are* referring to the passengers’ quarters?”

“We’ll do it quietly, sir.”

“Twenty minutes, then. You’ll find me on the bridge. Don’t tramp on any toes if you can help it.”

We left, dropped down to “A” deck and made a right-left turn into the hundred-foot central passageway between the cabin suites on “A” deck: there were only six of those suites, three

on each side. White was about half-way down the passageway, nervously pacing up and down. I beckoned to him and he came walking quickly towards us, a thin, balding character with a permanently pained expression who suffered from the twin disabilities of chronic dyspepsia and over-conscientiousness.

“Got all the pass-keys, White?” I asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Fine.” I nodded to the first main door on my right, number one suite on the port side. “Open it, will you?”

He opened up. I brushed past him, followed by the purser. There was no need to switch on the lights, they were already on; asking the *Campari*’s passengers, at the prices they were paying, to remember to turn off the lights would have been a waste of breath and an insult.

There were no bunks in the *Campari*’s cabin suites. Four-posters and massive four-posters at that, with concealed and mechanically operated side-boards which could be quickly raised in bad weather; such was the standard of modern weather reporting, the latitude allowed Captain Bullen in avoiding bad weather and the efficiency of our Denny-Brown stabilisers that I don’t think those side-boards had ever been used. Seasickness was not allowed aboard the *Campari*.

The suite was composed of a sleeping cabin, an adjacent lounge and bathroom, and beyond the lounge another cabin. All the plate-glass windows faced out over the port aide. We went through the cabins in a minute, looking beneath beds, examining

cupboards, wardrobes, behind drapes, everywhere. Nothing. We left.

Out in the passageway again I nodded at the suite opposite. Number two.

“This one now,” I said to White.

“Sorry, sir. Can’t do it. It’s the old man and his nurses, sir. They had three special trays sent up to them when now, let me see, yes, sir, about 6.15 tonight, and Mr. Carreras, the gentleman who came aboard today, he gave instructions that they were not to be disturbed till morning.” White was enjoying this. “Very strict instructions, sir.”

“Carreras?” I looked at the purser. “What’s he got to do with this, Mr. Cummings?”

“You haven’t heard? No, I don’t suppose so. Seems like Mr. Carreras—the father—is the senior partner in one of the biggest law firms in the country, Cerdan & Carreras. Mr. Cerdan, founder of the firm, is the old gentleman in the cabin here. Seems he’s been a semi-paralysed cripple—but a pretty tough old cripple—for the past eight years. His son and wife—Cerdan Junior being the next senior partner to Carreras—have had him on their hands all that time, and I believe the old boy has been a handful and a half. I understood Carreras offered to take him along primarily to give Cerdan Junior and his wife a break. Carreras, naturally, feels responsible for him so I suppose that’s why he left his orders with Benson.”

“Doesn’t sound like a man at death’s door to me,” I said.

"Nobody's wanting to kill him off, just to ask him a few questions. Or the nurses." White opened his mouth to protest again, but I pushed roughly past him and knocked on the door.

No answer. I waited all of thirty seconds, then knocked again, loudly. White, beside me, was stiff with outrage and disapproval. I ignored him and was lifting my hand to put some real weight on the wood when I heard a movement and suddenly the door opened inwards.

It was the shorter of the two nurses, the plump one, who had answered the door. She had an old-fashioned pull-string linen cap over her head and was clutching with one hand a light woollen wrap that left only the toes of her mules showing. The cabin behind her was only dimly lit, but I could see it held a couple of beds, one of which was rumpled. The free hand with which she rubbed her eyes told the rest of the story.

"My sincere apologies, miss," I said. "I had no idea you were in bed. I'm the chief officer of this ship and this is Mr. Cummings, the purser. Our chief steward is missing and we were wondering if you may have seen or heard anything that might help us."

"Missing?" She clutched the wrap more tightly. "You mean—you mean he's just disappeared?"

"Let's say we can't find him. Can you help us at all?"

"I don't know. I've been asleep. You see," she explained, "we take it in three-hour turns to be by old Mr. Cerdan's bed. It is essential that he is watched all the time. I was trying to get in some little sleep before my turn came to relieve Miss Werner."

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "You can't tell us anything, then?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Perhaps your friend Miss Werner can?"

"Miss Werner?" She blinked at me. "But Mr. Cerdan is not to be——"

"Please. This might be very serious."

"Very well." Like all competent nurses she knew how far she could go and when to make up her mind. "But I must ask you to be very quiet and not to disturb Mr. Cerdan in any way at all."

She didn't say anything about the possibility of Mr. Cerdan disturbing us, but she might have warned us. As we passed through the open door of his cabin he was sitting up in bed, a book on the blankets before him, with a bright overhead bead-light illuminating a crimson tasselled night-cap and throwing his face into deep shadow, but a shadow not quite deep enough to hide the hostile gleam under bar-straight tufted eyebrows. The hostile gleam, it seemed to me, was as much a permanent feature of his face as the large beak of a nose that jutted out over a straggling white moustache. The nurse who led the way made to introduce us, but Cerdan waved her to silence with a peremptory hand. Imperious, I thought, was the word for the old boy, not to mention bad-tempered and downright ill-mannered.

"I hope you can explain this damnable outrage, sir." His voice was glacial enough to make a polar bear shiver. "Bursting into my private stateroom without so much as by your leave." He switched his gimlet eyes to Cummings. "You You there. You

had your orders, damn it. Strictest privacy, absolutely. Explain yourself, sir.”

“I cannot tell you how sorry I am, Mr. Cerdan,” Cummings said smoothly. “Only the most unusual circumstances——”

“Rubbish!” Whatever this old coot was living for it couldn’t have been with the object of outliving his friends; he’d lost his last friend before he’d left the nursery. “Amanda! Get the captain on the phone. At once!”

The tall thin nurse sitting on the high-backed chair by the bedside made to gather up her knitting—an all but finished pale blue cardigan—lying on her knees, but I gestured to her to remain where she was.

“No need to tell the captain, Miss Werner. He knows all about it—he sent us here. We have only one very small request to make of you and Mr. Cerdan——”

“And I have only one very small request to make of you, sir.” His voice cracked into a falsetto, excitement or anger or age or all three of them. “Get the hell out of here!”

I thought about taking a deep breath to calm myself but even that two or three seconds’ delay would only have precipitated another explosion, so I said at once: “Very good, sir. But first I would like to know if either yourself or Miss Werner here heard any strange or unusual sounds inside the past hour or saw anything that struck you as unusual: Our chief steward is missing. So far we have found nothing to explain his disappearance.”

“Missing, hah?” Cerdan snorted. “Probably drunk or asleep.”

Then, as an afterthought: "Or both."

"He is not that sort of man," Cummings said quietly. "Can you help us?"

"I'm sorry, sir." Miss Werner, the nurse, had a low husky voice. "We heard and saw nothing. Nothing at all that might be of any help. But if there's anything we can do——"

"There's nothing for you to do," Cerdan interrupted harshly, "except your job. We can't help you, gentlemen. Good evening."

Once more outside in the passageway I let go a long deep breath that I seemed to have been holding for the past two minutes and turned to Cummings.

"I don't care how much that old battle-axe is paying for his stateroom," I said bitterly. "He's still being undercharged."

"I can see why Mr. and Mrs. Cerdan, Junior, were glad to have him off their hands for a bit," Cummings conceded. Coming from the normally imperturbable and diplomatic purser, this was the uttermost limit in outright condemnation. He glanced at his watch. "Not getting anywhere, are we? And in another fifteen, twenty minutes the passengers will start drifting back to their cabins. How about if you finish off here while I go below with White?"

"Right. Ten minutes." I took the keys from White and started on the remaining four suites of cabins while Cummings left for the six on the deck below.

Ten minutes later, having drawn a complete blank in three of the four remaining suites, I found myself in the last of them,

the big one on the port side, aft, belonging to Julius Beresford and his family. I searched the cabin belonging to Beresford and his wife—and by this time I was really searching, not just only for Benson, but for any signs that he might have been there—but again a blank. The same in the lounge and bathroom. I moved into a second and smaller cabin—the one belonging to Beresford's daughter. Nothing behind the furniture, nothing behind the drapes, nothing under the four-poster. I moved to the aft bulkhead and slid back the roll doors that turned that entire side of the cabin into one huge wardrobe.

Miss Susan Beresford, I reflected, certainly did herself well in the way of clothes. There must have been about sixty or seventy hangers in that wall cupboard, and if any one hanger was draped with anything less than two or three hundred dollars I sadly missed my guess. I ploughed my way through the Balenciagas, Diors and Givenchys, looking behind and beneath. But nothing there.

I closed the roll doors and moved across to a small wardrobe in a corner. It was full of furs, coats, capes, stoles; why anyone should haul that stuff along on a cruise to the Caribbean was completely beyond me. I laid my hand on a particularly fine full-length specimen and was moving it to one side to peer into the darkness behind when I heard a faint click, as of a handle being released, and a voice said:

"It *is* rather a nice mink, isn't it, Mr. Carter? That should be worth two years' salary to you any day."

III. Tuesday 9.30 p.m.–10.15 p.m.

Susan Beresford was a beauty, all right. A perfectly oval-shaped face, high cheek-bones, shining auburn hair, eyebrows two shades darker and eyes the greenest green you ever saw, she had all the officers on the ship climbing the walls, even the ones she tormented the life out of. All except Carter, that was. A permanent expression of cool amusement does nothing to endear the wearer to me.

Not, just then, that I had any complaint on that ground. She was neither cool nor amused and that was a fact. Two dull red spots of anger—and was there perhaps a tinge of fear?—touched the tanned cheeks and if the expression on her face didn't yet indicate the reaction of someone who has just come across a particularly repulsive beetle under a flat stone you could see that it was going to turn into something like that pretty soon, it didn't require any micrometer to measure the curl at the corner of her mouth. I let the mink drop into place and pulled the wardrobe door to.

"You shouldn't startle people like that," I said reproachfully. "You should have knocked."

"I should have——" Her mouth tightened, she still wasn't amused. "What were you going to do with that coat?"

"Nothing. I never wear mink, Miss Beresford. It doesn't suit me." I smiled, but she didn't. "I can explain."

"I'm sure you can." She was half-way round the edge of the door now, on her way out. "But I think I would rather you made the explanation to my father."

"Suit yourself," I said easily. "But please hurry. What I'm doing is urgent. Use the phone there. Or shall I do it?"

"Leave that phone alone," she said irritably. She sighed, closed the door and leaned against it, and I had to admit that any door, even the expensively-panelled ones on the *Campari*, looked twice the door with Susan Beresford draped against it. She shook her head, then gave me an up from under look with those startling green eyes. "I can picture many things, Mr. Carter, but one thing I can't visualise is our worthy chief officer taking off for some deserted island in a ship's lifeboat with my mink in the sternsheets." Getting back to normal, I noted with regret. "Besides, why should you? There must be over fifty thousand dollars' worth of jewellery lying loose in that drawer there."

"I missed that," I admitted. "I wasn't looking in drawers. I am looking for a man who is sick or unconscious or worse and Benson wouldn't fit into any drawer I've ever seen."

"Benson? Our head steward? That nice man?" She came a couple of steps towards me and I was obscurely pleased to see the quick concern in her eyes. "He's missing?"

I told her all I knew myself. That didn't take long. When I was finished, she said: "Well, upon my word! What a to-do about nothing. He could have gone for a stroll around the decks, or a sit-down, or a smoke, yet the first thing you do is to start searching

cabins——”

“You don’t know Benson, Miss Beresford. He has never in his life left the passenger accommodation before 11 p.m. We couldn’t be more concerned if we’d found that the officer of the watch had disappeared from the bridge or the quartermaster left the wheel. Excuse me a moment.” I opened the cabin door to locate the source of voices outside, and saw White and another steward some way down the passage. White’s eyes lit up as he caught sight of me, then clouded in disapproval when he saw Susan Beresford emerging through the doorway behind me. White’s sense of propriety was having a roller-coaster ride that night.

“I was wondering where you were, sir,” he said reprovingly. “Mr. Cummings sent me up. No luck down below, I’m afraid, sir. Mr. Cummings is going through our quarters now.” He stood still for a moment, then the anxiety came to the foreground and erased the disapproval from his face. “What shall I do now, sir?”

“Nothing. Not personally. You’re in charge till we find the chief steward, and the passengers come first, you know that. Detail the stewards to be at the for’ard entrance to the ‘A’ accommodation in ten minutes’ time. One to search the officers’ quarters for’ard, another for the officers’ quarters aft, the third for the galleys, pantries, store-rooms. But wait till I give the word. Miss Beresford, I’d like to use your phone, please.”

I didn’t wait for permission. I lifted the phone, got the exchange, and had them put me through to the bo’sun’s cabin and

found I was lucky. He was at home.

“MacDonald? First mate here. Sorry to call you out, Archie, but there’s trouble. Benson’s missing.”

“The chief steward, sir?” There was something infinitely reassuring about that deep slow voice that had never lost a fraction of its lilting West Highland intonation in twenty years at sea, in the complete lack of surprise or excitement in the tone. MacDonald was never surprised or excited about anything. He was more than my strong right arm, he was deck-side the most important person on the ship. And the most indispensable. “You’ll have searched the passengers’ and the stewards’ quarters, then?”

“Yes. Nothing doing. Take some men, on or off watch, doesn’t matter, move along the main decks. Lots of the crew usually up there at this time of night. See if any of them saw Benson, or saw or heard anything unusual. Maybe he’s sick, maybe he fell and hurt himself, for all I know he’s overboard.”

“And if we have no luck? Another bloody search, sir, I suppose?”

“I’m afraid so. Can you be finished and up here in ten minutes?”

“That will be no trouble, sir.”

I hung up, got through to the duty engineer officer, asked him to detail some men to come to the passenger accommodation, made another call to Tommy Wilson, the second officer, then asked to be put through to the captain. While I was waiting, Miss

Beresford gave me her smile again, the sweet one with too much malice in it for my liking.

“My, my,” she said admiringly. “Aren’t we efficient? Phoning here, phoning there, crisp and commanding, General Carter planning his campaign. This is a new chief officer to me.”

“A lot of unnecessary fuss,” I said apologetically. “Especially for a steward. But he’s got a wife and three daughters who think the sun rises and sets on him.”

She coloured right up to the roots of her auburn hair and for a moment I thought she was going to haul off and hit me. Then she spun on her heel, walked across the deep-piled carpet and stood staring out through a window to the darkness beyond. I’d never realised before that a back could be so expressive of emotion.

Then Captain Bullen was on the phone. His voice was as gruff and brusque as usual, but even the metallic impersonality of the phone couldn’t hide the worry.

“Any luck yet, Mister?”

“None at all, sir. I’ve a search party lined up. Could I start in five minutes?”

There was a pause, then he said: “It has to come to that, I suppose. How long will it take you?”

“Twenty minutes, half an hour.”

“You’re going to be very quick about it, aren’t you?”

“I don’t expect him to be hiding from us, sir. Whether he’s sick or hurt himself, or had some urgent reason for leaving the passengers’ quarters, I expect to find him in some place pretty

obvious.”

He grunted and said: “Nothing I can do to help?” Half-question, half-statement.

“No, sir.” The sight of the captain searching about the upper deck or peering under lifeboat covers would do nothing to increase the passengers’ confidence in the *Campari*.

“Right then, Mister. If you want me, I’ll be in the telegraph lounge. I’ll try to keep the passengers out of your hair while you’re getting on with it.” That showed he was worried all right, and badly worried; he’d just as soon have gone into a cageful of Bengal tigers as mingle socially with the passengers.

“Very good, sir.” I hung up. Susan Beresford had re-crossed the cabin and was standing near, screwing a cigarette into a jade holder about a foot in length. I found the holder vaguely irritating as I found everything about Miss Beresford irritating, not least the way she stood there confidently awaiting a light. I wondered when Miss Beresford had last been reduced to lighting her own cigarettes. Not in years, I supposed, not so long as there was a man within a hundred yards. She got her light, puffed out a lazy cloud of smoke and said: “A search party, is it? Should be interesting. You can count on me.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Beresford.” I must say I didn’t sound sorry. “Ship’s company business. The captain wouldn’t like it.”

“Nor his first officer, is that it? Don’t bother to answer that one.” She looked at me consideringly. “But I could be unco-operative, too. What would you say if I picked up this phone and

told my parents I'd just caught you going through our personal belongings?"

"I should like that, lady. I know your parents. I should like to see you being spanked for behaving like a spoilt child when a man's life may be in danger."

The colour in the high cheek-bones was going on and off like a neon light that evening. Now it was on again; she wasn't by a long way as composed and detached as she'd like the world to think. She stubbed out the newly-lit cigarette and said quietly: "How would it be if I reported you for insolence?"

"Don't just stand there talking about it. The phone's by your side." When she made no move towards it I went on: "Quite frankly, lady, you and your kind make me sick. You use your father's great wealth and your privileged position as a passenger on the *Campari* to poke fun, more often than not malicious fun, at members of the crew who are unable to retaliate. They've just got to sit and take it, because they're not like you. They have no money in the bank at all, most of them, but they have families to feed, mothers to support, so they know they have to keep smiling at Miss Beresford when she cracks jokes at their expense or embarrasses or angers them, because if they don't, Miss Beresford and her kind will see to it that they're out of a job."

"Please go on," she said. She had suddenly become very still.

"That's all of it. Misuse of power, even in so small a thing, is contemptible. And then, when anyone dares retaliate, as I do, you

threaten them with dismissal, which is what your threat amounts to. And that's worse than contemptible, it's cowardly."

I turned and made for the door. First I'd look for Benson, then I'd tell Bullen I was quitting. I was getting tired of the *Campari* anyway.

"Mr. Carter."

"Yes?" I turned, but kept my hand on the door-knob. The colour mechanism in her cheeks was certainly working overtime, this time she'd gone pale under the tan. She took a couple of steps towards me and put her hand on my arm. Her hand wasn't any too steady.

"I am very, very sorry," she said in a low voice. "I had no idea. Amusement I like, but not malicious amusement. I thought—well, I thought it was harmless, and no one minded. And I would never never dream of putting anyone's job in danger."

"Ha!" I said.

"You don't believe me." Still the same small voice, still the hand on my arm.

"Of course I believe you," I said unconvincingly. And then I looked into her eyes, which was a big mistake and a very dangerous thing to do for those big green eyes, I noticed for the first time, had a curious trick of melting and dissolving that could interfere very seriously with a man's breathing. It was certainly interfering with my breathing. "Of course I believe you," I repeated and this time the ring of conviction staggered even myself. "You will please forgive my rudeness. But I must

hurry, Miss Beresford.”

“Can I come with you, please?”

“Oh, damn it all, yes,” I said irritably. I’d managed to look away from her eyes and start breathing again. “Come if you want.”

At the forward end of the passageway, just beyond the entrance to Cerdan’s suite, I ran into Carreras Senior. He was smoking a cigar and had that look of contentment and satisfaction that passengers invariably had when Antoine was finished with them.

“Ah, there you are, Mr. Carter,” he said. “Wondered why you hadn’t returned to our table. What is wrong, if I may ask? There must be at least a dozen of the crew gathered outside the accommodation entrance. I thought regulations forbade——”

“They’re waiting for me, sir. Benson—you probably haven’t had the chance to meet him since you came aboard, he’s our chief steward—is missing. That’s a search-party outside.”

“Missing?” The grey eyebrows went up. “What on earth—well, of course you haven’t any idea what has happened to him or you wouldn’t be organising this search. Can I help?”

I hesitated, thought of Miss Beresford, who had already elbowed her way in, realised I’d now no way of stopping any or all of the passengers from getting into the act if they wanted to and said: “Thank you, Mr. Carreras. You don’t look like a man who would miss very much.”

“We come from the same mould, Mr. Carter.”

I let his cryptic remark go and hurried outside. A cloudless

night, with the sky crowded with the usual impossible number of stars, a soft warm wind blowing out of the south, a moderate cross-swell running, but no match for our Denny-Brown stabilisers that could knock 25 degrees off a 30-degree roll without half trying. A black shape detached itself from a nearby shadowed bulkhead, and Archie MacDonald, the bo'sun, came towards me. For all his solid fifteen stone bulk he was as light on his feet as a dancer.

“Any luck, Bo'sun?” I asked.

“No one saw anything: no one heard anything. And there were at least a dozen folk on deck tonight, between eight and nine.”

“Mr. Wilson there? Ah, there. Mr. Wilson, take the engine-room staff and three A.B.s Main deck and below. You should know where to look by this time,” I added bitterly. “MacDonald, you and I will do the upper decks. Port side you, starboard side me. Two seamen and a cadet. Half an hour. Then back here.”

I sent one man to examine the boat positions—why Benson should have wished to get into a boat I couldn't even imagine except that lifeboats have always a queer attraction for those who wished to hide, although why he should wish to hide I couldn't guess either—and another to scour the top superstructure abaft the bridge. I started going through the various cabins on the boat-deck, chart-house, flag and radar cabins, and had Mr. Carreras to help me. Rusty, our youngest apprentice, went aft to work his way for'ard, accompanied by Miss Beresford, who had probably guessed, and rightly, that I was in no mood for her company. But

Rusty was. He always was. Nothing that Susan Beresford said to or about him made the slightest difference to him. He was her slave and didn't care who knew it. If she'd asked him to jump down the funnel, just for her sake, he'd have considered it an honour: I could just imagine him searching about the upper decks with Susan Beresford by his side, his face the same colour as his flaming shock of hair.

As I stepped out of the radar office I literally bumped into him. He was panting, as if he'd run a long way, and I could see I had been wrong about the colour of his face: in the half-light on the deck it looked grey, like old newspaper.

"Radio office, sir." He gasped out the words, and caught my arm, a thing he would never normally have dreamed of doing. "Come quickly, sir. Please."

I was already running. "You found him?"

"No, sir. It's Mr. Brownell." Brownell was our chief wireless operator. "Something seems to have happened to him."

I reached the office in ten seconds, brushed past the pale blur of Susan Beresford standing just outside the door, crossed over the storm-sill and stopped.

Brownell had the overhead rheostat turned down until the room was less than half-lit, a fairly common practice among radio operators on duty night watches. He was leaning forward over his table, his head pillowed on his right forearm, so that all I could see was his shoulders, dark hair and a bald spot that had been the bane of his life. His left hand was outflung, his

fingers just brushing the bridge telephone. The transmitting key was sending continuously. I eased the right forearm forward a couple of inches. The transmitting stopped.

I felt for the pulse in the outstretched left wrist. I felt for the pulse in the side of the neck. I turned to Susan Beresford, still standing in the doorway, and said: "Do you have a mirror." She nodded wordlessly, fumbled in her bag and handed over a compact, opened, the mirror showing. I turned up the rheostat till the radio cabin was harsh with light, moved Brownell's head slightly, held the mirror near mouth and nostrils for maybe ten seconds, took it away, glanced at it and then handed it back.

"Something's happened to him all right," I said. My voice was steady, unnaturally so. "He's dead. Or I think he's dead. Rusty, get Dr. Marston right away, he's usually in the telegraph lounge this time of night. Tell the captain, if he's there. Not a word to anyone else about this."

Rusty disappeared, and another figure appeared to take his place beside Susan Beresford in the doorway. Carreras. He stopped, one foot over the storm-sill, and said: "My God! Benson."

"No, Brownell. Wireless officer. I think he's dead." On the off-chance that Bullen hadn't yet gone down to the lounge I reached for the bulkhead phone labelled "Captain's Cabin" and waited for an answer, staring down at the dead man sprawled across the table. Middle-aged, cheerful, his only harmless idiosyncrasy being an unusual vanity about his personal

appearance that had once even driven him to the length of buying a toupee for his bald spot—public shipboard opinion had forced him to discard it—Brownell was one of the most popular and genuinely liked officers on the ship. Was? Had been. I heard the click of a lifted receiver.

“Captain? Carter here. Could you come down to the wireless office? At once, please.”

“Benson?”

“Brownell. Dead, sir, I think.”

There was a pause, a click. I hung up, reached for another phone that connected directly to the radio officers’ cabins. We had three radio officers and the one with the middle watch, from midnight to 4 a.m., usually skipped dinner in the dining-room and made for his bunk instead. A voice answered: “Peters here.”

“First mate. Sorry to disturb you, but come up to the radio room right away.”

“What’s up?”

“You’ll find out when you get here.”

The overhead light seemed far too bright for a room with a dead man in it. I turned down the rheostat and the white glare was replaced by a deep yellow glow. Rusty’s face appeared in the doorway. He didn’t seem so pale any more but maybe the subdued light was just being kind to him.

“Surgeon’s coming, sir.” His breathing was quicker than ever. “Just picking up his bag in the dispensary.”

“Thanks. Go and fetch the bo’sun, will you. And no need to

kill yourself running, Rusty. There's no great hurry now."

He left, and Susan Beresford said in a low voice: "What's wrong? What—what happened to him?"

"You shouldn't be here, Miss Beresford."

"What happened to him?" she repeated.

"That's for the ship's surgeon to say. Looks to me as if he just died where he sat. Heart attack, coronary thrombosis, something like that."

She shivered, made no reply. Dead men were no new thing to me but the faint icy prickling on the back of my neck and spine made me feel like shivering myself. The warm trade wind seemed cooler, much cooler, than it had a few minutes ago.

Doctor Marston appeared. No running, no haste even, with Dr. Marston: a slow measured man with a slow measured stride. A magnificent mane of white hair, clipped white moustache, a singularly smooth and unlined complexion for a man getting so far on in years, steady clear keen blue eyes with a peculiarly penetrating property, here, you knew instinctively, was a doctor who you could trust implicitly, which only went to show that your instinct should be taken away from you and locked up in some safe place where it couldn't do you any harm. Admittedly, even to look at him made you feel better, and that was all right as far as it went: but to go further, to put your life into his hands, say, was a very different and dicey proposition altogether for there was an even chance that you wouldn't get it back again. Those piercing eyes had not lighted on the *Lancet* or made any attempt

to follow the latest medical developments since quite a few years prior to the Second World War. But they didn't have to: he and Lord Dexter had gone through prep school, public school and university together and his job was secure as long as he could lift a stethoscope. And, to be fair to him, when it came to treating wealthy and hypochondriacal old ladies he had no equal on the seven seas.

"Well, John," he boomed. With the exception of Captain Bullen, he addressed every officer on the ship by his first name exactly as a public school headmaster would have addressed one of his more promising pupils, but a pupil that needed watching all the same. "What's the trouble? Beau Brownell taken a turn?"

"Worse than that, I'm afraid, Doctor. Dead."

"Good lord! Brownell? Dead? Let me see, let me see. A little more light if you please, John." He dumped his bag on the table, fished out his stethoscope, sounded Brownell here and there, took his pulse and then straightened with a sigh. "In the midst of life, John ... and not recently, either. Temperature's high in here but I should say he's been gone well over an hour."

I could see the dark bulk of Captain Bullen in the doorway now, waiting, listening, saying nothing.

"Heart attack, Doctor?" I ventured. After all he wasn't all that incompetent, just a quarter century out of date.

"Let me see, let me see," he repeated. He turned Brownell's head and looked closely at it. He had to look closely. He was unaware that everyone in the ship knew that, piercing blue eyes

or not, he was as short-sighted as a dodo, and refused to wear glasses. "Ah, look at this. The tongue, the lips, the eyes, above all the complexion. No doubt about it, no doubt about it at all. Cerebral hæmorrhage. Massive. And at his age. How old, John?"

"Forty-seven, eight. Thereabouts."

"Forty-seven. Just forty-seven." He shook his head. "Gets them younger every day. The stress of modern living."

"And that outstretched hand, Doctor?" I asked. "Reaching for the phone. You think——"

"Just confirms my diagnosis, alas. Felt it coming on, tried to call for help, but it was too sudden, too massive. Poor old Beau Brownell." He turned, caught sight of Bullen looming in the doorway. "Ah, there you are, Captain. A bad business, a bad business."

"A bad business," Bullen agreed heavily. "Miss Beresford, you have no right to be here. You're cold and shivering. Go to your cabin at once." When Captain Bullen spoke in that tone, the Beresford millions didn't seem to matter any more. "Doctor Marston will bring you a sedative later."

"And perhaps Mr. Carreras will be so kind!——" I began.

"Certainly," Carreras agreed at once. "I will be honoured to see the young lady to her cabin." He bowed slightly, offered her his arm. She seemed more than glad to take it and they disappeared.

Five minutes later all was back to normal in the radio cabin. Peters had taken the dead man's place, Dr. Marston had returned

to his favourite occupation of mingling socially and drinking steadily with our millionaires, the captain had given me his instructions, I'd passed them on to the bo'sun and Brownell, canvas-wrapped, had been taken for'ard to the carpenter's store.

I stayed in the wireless office for a few minutes, talking to a very shaken Peters, and looked casually at the latest radio message that had come through. All radio messages were written down in duplicate as received, the original for the bridge and the carbon for the daily spiked file.

I lifted the topmost message from the file, but it was nothing very important, just a warning of deteriorating weather far to the south-east of Cuba which might or might not build up into a hurricane. Routine and too far away to bother us. I lifted the blank message pad that lay by Peters's elbow.

"May I have this?"

"Help yourself." He was still too upset even to be curious as to why I wanted it. "Plenty more where that came from."

I left him, walked up and down the deck outside for some time, then made my way to the captain's cabin where I'd been told to report when I was through. He was in his usual seat by the desk with Cummings and the chief engineer sitting on the settee. The presence of McIlroy, a short, stout Tynesider with the facial expression and hair style of Friar Tuck, meant a very worried Captain and a council of war. McIlroy's brilliance wasn't confined to reciprocating engines, that plump laughter-creased face concealed a brain that was probably the shrewdest on the

Campari, and that included Mr. Julius Beresford, who must have been very shrewd indeed to make his three hundred million dollars or whatever it was.

“Sit down, Mister, sit down,” Bullen growled. The “Mister” didn’t mean I was in his black books, just another sign that he was worried. “No signs of Benson yet?”

“No sign at all.”

“What a bloody trip!” Bullen pushed across a tray with whisky and glasses on it, unaccustomedly open-handed liberality that was just another sign of his worry. “Help yourself, Mister.”

“Thank you sir.” I helped myself lavishly, the chance didn’t come often, and went on: “What are we going to do about Brownell?”

“What the devil do you mean ‘What are we going to do about Brownell’? He’s got no folks to notify, no consent to get about anything. Head office has been informed. Burial at sea at dawn, before our passengers are up and about. Mustn’t spoil their blasted trip, I suppose.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to take him to Nassau, sir?”

“Nassau?” He stared at me over the rim of his glass, then lowered it carefully to the table. “Just because a man has died you don’t have to go off your blasted rocker, do you?”

“Nassau or some other British territory. Or Miami. Some place where we can get competent authorities, police authorities, to investigate things.”

“What things, Johnny?” McIlroy asked. He had his head

cocked to one side like a fat and well-stuffed owl.

“Yes, what things?” Bullen’s tone was quite different from McIlroy’s. “Just because the search party hasn’t turned up Benson yet, you——”

“I’ve called off the search-party, sir.”

Bullen pushed back his chair till his hands rested on the table at the full stretch of his arms.

“*You’ve* called off the search party,” he said softly. “Who the hell gave you authority to do anything of the kind.”

“No one, sir. But I——”

“*Why* did you do it, Johnny?” McIlroy again, very quietly.

“Because we’ll never see Benson again. Not alive, that is, Benson’s dead. Benson’s been killed.”

No one said anything, not for all of ten seconds. The sound of the cool air rushing through the louvres in the overhead trunking seemed abnormally loud. The captain said harshly: “Killed? Benson killed? Are you all right, Mister? What do you mean, killed?”

“Murdered is what I mean.”

“Murdered? Murdered?” McIlroy shifted uneasily in his chair. “Have you seen him? Have you any proof? How can you say he was murdered?”

“I haven’t seen him. And I haven’t any proof. Not a scrap of evidence.” I caught a glimpse of the purser sitting there, his hands twisting together and his eyes staring at me, and I remembered that Benson had been his best friend for close on twenty years.

“But *I have* proof that Brownell was murdered tonight. And I can tie the two together.”

There was an even longer silence.

“You’re mad,” Bullen said at length with harsh conviction. “So now Brownell’s been murdered too. You’re mad, Mister, off your bloody trolley. You heard what Dr. Marston said? Massive cerebral hæmorrhage. But of course he’s only a doctor of forty years’ standing. He wouldn’t know——”

“How about giving me a chance, sir,” I interrupted. My voice sounded as harsh as his own. “I know he’s a doctor. I also know he hasn’t very good eyes. But I have. I saw what he missed. I saw a dark smudge on the back of Brownell’s uniform collar—and when has anybody on this ship ever seen a mark on any shirt that Brownell ever wore? They didn’t call him Beau Brownell for nothing. Somebody had hit him, with something heavy and with tremendous force, on the back of the neck. There was also a faint discoloration under the left ear—I could see it as he lay there. When the bo’sun and I got him down to the carpenter’s store we examined him together. There was a corresponding slight bruise under his right ear—and traces of sand under his collar. Someone sandbagged him and then, when he was unconscious, compressed the carotid arteries until he died. Go and see for yourselves.”

“Not me,” McIlroy murmured. You could see that even his normally monolithic composure had been shaken. “Not me. I believe it—absolutely. It would be too easy to disprove it. I

believe it all right—but I still can't accept it."

"But damn it all, Chief!" Bullen's fists were clenched.

"The doctor said that——"

"I'm no medical man," McIlroy interrupted. "But I should imagine the symptoms are pretty much the same in both cases. Can hardly blame old Marston."

Bullen ignored him, gave me the full benefit of his commodore's stare.

"Look, Mister," he said slowly. "You've changed your tune, haven't you? When I was there, you agreed with Dr. Marston. You even put forward the heart failure idea. You showed no signs _____"

"Miss Beresford and Mr. Carreras were there," I interrupted. "I didn't want them to start getting wrong ideas. If word got around the ship—and it would have been bound to—that we suspected murder, then whoever was responsible might have felt themselves forced to act again, and act quickly, to forestall any action we might take. I don't know what they might do, but on the form to date it would have been something damned unpleasant."

"Miss Beresford? Mr. Carreras?" Bullen had stopped clenching his hands but you could see that it wouldn't take much to make him start up again. "Miss Beresford is above suspicion. But Carreras? And his son? Just aboard today—and in most unusual circumstances. It just might tie up."

"It doesn't. I checked. Carreras Senior and Junior had both been in either the telegraph lounge or the dining-room for almost

two hours before we found Brownell. They're completely in the clear."

"Besides being too obvious," McIlroy agreed. "I think, Captain, it's time we took our hats off to Mr. Carter here: he's been getting around and using his head while all we have been doing is twiddling our thumbs."

"Benson," Captain Bullen said. He didn't show any signs of taking off his hat. "How about Benson? How does he tie up?"

"This way." I slid the empty telegraph book across the table. "I checked the last message that was received and went to the bridge. Routine weather report. Time, 2007. But later there was another message written on this pad: original, carbon, duplicate. The message is indecipherable—but to people with modern police equipment it would be child's play to find out what was written there. What *is* decipherable is the impression of the last two time figures. Look for yourself. It's quite clear. 33. That means 2033. A message came through at that moment, a message so urgent in nature that, instead of waiting for the routine bridge messenger collection, Brownell made to phone it through at once. That was why his hand was reaching for the phone when we found him, not because he was feeling ill all of a sudden. And then he was killed. Whoever killed him *had* to kill. Knocking Brownell out and stealing the message would have accomplished nothing for as soon as he would have come to he would have remembered the contents of the message and immediately sent it to the bridge. It must," I added thoughtfully, "have been a damned important

message.”

“Benson,” Bullen repeated impatiently. “How about Benson?”

“Benson was the victim of a lifetime of habit. Howie here tells us how Benson invariably went out on deck between half past eight and twenty-five to nine for a smoke, while the passengers were at dinner. The radio room is immediately above where he would have been taking his promenade—and the message came through, and Brownell was killed, inside those five minutes. Benson must have seen or heard something unusual and gone to investigate. He might even have caught the murderer in the act. And so Benson had to die too.”

“But *why*?” Captain Bullen demanded. He still couldn’t believe it all. “Why, why, *why*? Why was he killed? Why was that message so desperately important? The whole damned thing’s crazy. And what in God’s name was in that message anyway?”

“That’s why we’ve got to go to Nassau to find out, sir.”

Bullen looked at me without expression, looked at his drink, evidently decided that he preferred his drink to me—or the ill news I brought with me—and knocked back the contents in a couple of gulps.

McIlroy didn’t touch his. He sat there for a whole minute looking at it consideringly, then he said: “You haven’t missed much, Johnny. But you’ve missed one thing. The wireless officer on watch—Peters, isn’t it? How do you know the same message won’t come through again? Maybe it was a message requiring acknowledgment? If it was, and it’s not acknowledged, it’s pretty

certain to come through again. Then what's the guarantee that Peters won't get the same treatment?"

"The bo'sun's the guarantee, Chief. He's sitting in black shadow not ten yards from the wireless office with a marlin-spike in his hand and Highland murder in his heart. You know MacDonald. Heaven help anyone who goes within a Sunday walk of the wireless office."

Bullen poured himself another small whisky, smiled tiredly and glanced at his single broad commodore's stripe.

"Mr. Carter, I think you and I should change jackets." It was as far in apology as he could ever go and about twelve hours ahead of par. "Think you'd like this side of my desk?"

"Suit me fine, sir," I agreed. "Especially if you took over entertaining the passengers."

"In that case we'll stay as we are." Another brief smile, no sooner there than vanished. "Who's on the bridge? Jamieson, isn't it? Better take over, First."

"Later, sir, with your permission. There's still the most important thing of all to investigate. But I don't even know how to start."

"Don't tell me there's something else," Bullen said heavily.

"I've had some time to think about this, that's all," I said. "A message came through to our wireless office, a message so important that it had to be intercepted at all costs. But how could anybody possibly know that message was coming through? The only way that message could have come into the *Campari*

was through a pair of earphones clamped to Brownell's head, yet someone else was taking down that message at the same instant as Brownell was. Must have been. Brownell had no sooner finished transcribing that message on to his pad than he reached for the phone to get the bridge, and he no sooner reached for the phone than he died. There's some other radio receiver aboard the *Campari* tuned into the same wave-length and wherever it is it's not a hop, skip and jump from the wireless office, for wherever the eavesdropper was he got from there to the wireless office in seconds. Problem, find the receiver."

Bullen looked at me. McIlroy looked at me. They both looked at each other. Then McIlroy objected: "But the wireless officer keeps shifting wave-lengths. How could anybody know what particular wave-length he was on at any one moment?"

"How can anyone know anything?" I asked. I nodded at the message pad on the table. "Until we get that deciphered."

"The message." Bullen gazed at the pad, abruptly made up his mind. "Nassau it is. Maximum speed, Chief, but slowly, over half an hour, so that no one will notice the step up in revs. First, the bridge. Get our position." He fetched chart, rules, dividers while I was getting the figures, nodded at me as I hung up. "Lay off the shortest possible course."

It didn't take long. "047 from here to here, sir, approximately 220 miles, then 350."

"Arrival?"

"Maximum speed?"

“Of course.”

“Just before midnight tomorrow night.”

He reached for a pad, scribbled for a minute, then read out: “Port authorities, Nassau, s.s. *Campari*, position such-and-such, arriving 2330 tomorrow Wednesday. Request police alongside immediate investigation one murdered man, one missing man. Urgent. Bullen, Master.’ That should do.” He reached for the phone. I touched his arm.

“Whoever has this receiver can monitor outgoing calls just as easily as incoming ones. Then they’ll know we’re on to them. God only knows what might happen then.”

Bullen looked slowly first at me, then at McIlroy, then at the purser, who hadn’t spoken a word since I’d arrived in the cabin, then back at me again. Then he tore the message into tiny shreds and dropped it into his waste-paper basket.

IV. Tuesday 10.15 p.m.– Wednesday 8.45 a.m.

I didn't get a great deal of investigating done that night. I'd figured out how to start, all right, but the devil of it was I couldn't start till the passengers were up and about in the morning. Nobody likes being turfed out of his bed in the middle of the night, a millionaire least of all.

After having cautiously identified myself to the bo'sun to ensure that I didn't get the back of my head stove in with a marline-spike, I spent a good fifteen minutes in the vicinity of the wireless office relating its position to other offices and nearby accommodation. The wireless office was on the starboard side, for'ard, immediately above the passengers' "A" deck accommodation—old man Cerdan's suite was directly below—and on the basis of my assumption that the murderer, even if he didn't wait for the last few words of the message to come through, could have had no more time than ten seconds to get from wherever the hidden receiver was to the wireless office, then any place within ten seconds' reach of the wireless office automatically came under suspicion.

There were quite a few places within the suspected limits. There was the bridge, flag office, radar office, chart-room and all the deck officers' and cadets' accommodation. Those could be

ruled out at once. There was the dining-room, galleys, pantries, officers' lounge, telegraph lounge, and, immediately adjacent to the telegraph lounge, another lounge which rejoiced in the name of the drawing-room—it having been found necessary to provide an alternative lounge for our millionaire's wives and daughters who weren't all so keen on the alcoholic and ticker-tape attractions of the telegraph lounge as their husbands and fathers were. I spent forty minutes going through those—they were all deserted at that time of night—and if anyone had yet invented a transistor receiver smaller than a matchbox, then I might have missed it: but anything larger, I'd have found it for sure.

That left only the passengers' accommodation, with the cabins on "A" deck, immediately below the wireless office, as the prime suspects. The "B" deck suites, on the next deck below, were not out-with the bounds of possibility: but when I ran a mental eye over the stiff-legged bunch of elderly crocks on "B" deck, I couldn't think of a man among them who could have made it to the wireless office in under ten seconds. And it certainly hadn't been a woman: Because whoever had killed Brownell had not only also laid out Benson but removed him from sight, and Benson weighed a hundred and eighty pounds if he weighed an ounce.

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