

A SECRET OF THE SEA

By MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON.

Author of "Lady Mary of the Dark House," "His Grace," "Queen Sweetheart," "Behind a Veil," "Fortune's Sport," "A Woman in Grey," "The Barn Stormers," &c.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS. Sir Peter Markham is yachting in the Mediterranean with his daughter Eve, and his private secretary Dick Knight, a young man, but with no prospects. The crew, understanding the reticence of the girl, induces him to make love to her. Her father hears the confession, and she is a wealthy heiress. But there are signs of a crew, or indeed, of a departure from this peaceful ship. At last, however, attention is directed to a big package. This, the crew, being, affords a clue, but the mystery is deepened by the discovery of a large iron cage, broken open. Sir Peter Markham, who has been strangely moved, becomes terrified. He explains the reason. On the yacht he has found trace of a lady after whom his daughter Eve was named, and who disappeared on the day first for their wedding.

CHAPTER V.

What Knight Found Under the Table. The "inquest" on the Xenia was over, and nobody concerned was any wiser than before. Never had a verdict been so difficult to arrive at. It was impossible to say whether the passengers and crew of the yacht had been murdered, had committed suicide, whether there had been a bloodless mutiny, or whether one and all had been the victims of some tremendous and mysterious catastrophe.

The arrival of the delinquent and her almost incredibly strange story created a sensation at Gibraltar. Many people begged permission to go on board, and she would have become a sort of floating museum—a sea Chamber of Horrors—had not the captain of the port rigidly refused to allow anyone save persons having official business to visit the ship on the Xenia's deck. But those officials had tongues; and the magnificent appointments of the yacht, the wonderful jewels, the gold and silver, the precious stones, the fact that no papers were to be found, were soon the subjects of universal discussion. All sorts of theories were advanced, and the whole of the island was agog. A fortune presented an obstacle to this theory, but it was agreed by its adherents that the pirates might have taken alarm, and been obliged to leave the yacht without their spoils. Others advanced the idea that a monster octopus might have risen from the sea and seized with its great tentacles several of the people on board; whereupon, struck with horror at the awful sight, those who remained had gone mad and leaped overboard.

Some curiosity was felt concerning Dick Knight, but as no one knew very much about him, the story began to go round that he was a professional detective, engaged to ferret out the mystery. Dick had to make up his mind to indifference, until after the inquest on the yacht. But meanwhile his brain had been busy, and he was aware that the work at proving or disproving the truth of the idea which had leaped into his thoughts like a inspiration.

Literally, it saw merely the germ of an idea; and he was aware that, unless he found it could be freely fertilized by circumstantial evidence, the germ of a theory, and he would be left digging in more or less barren ground for any other more promising.

By his request everything aboard the Xenia had been left in exactly the same position or state in which he and Sir Peter Markham had found it when they had left their eventful first visit to the tossing derelict. Even the table remained untouched, and the galleries, with the remains of the feast, were as they had been. Unfruitfully analysed by a chemist of Gibraltar. No poison had been found, and the captain of the port, who from the first scouted the idea of poison, had had the satisfaction of saying, "I told you so." He was inclined to smile good-naturedly at the employment of an amateur detective, but, after all, that was not his affair. He occupied himself, now that the inquest was over, in efforts to ascertain facts as to the ownership of the yacht, from what port she had sailed, and where she had been built. While the captain of the port dictated telegrams and letters to various places, in the hope of receiving information by return. Dick Knight spent his time in wandering reflectively between the dining-saloon of the Xenia, her galleries and the storeroom, where the

packing case and the tins of fruit still stood undisturbed.

If there were anything in his idea, and if, indeed, it were really an inspiration, the meal which had apparently been in progress at the hour when mystery swooped down upon the yacht had not been dinner, but luncheon. Between the moment when the two inmates of the dining-saloon had dropped their serviettes and left the table, and the moment when the Xenia was first sighted by the Lily Maid, there would not have been time for the thing vaguely floating in Dick's mind to happen. Therefore he wished to prove to himself that the yacht had become a derelict early in the afternoon; and his first thought, when he was at liberty to do as he chose, was to take steps towards this goal.

The strawberries left on the plates were no longer round and ruby-like, but wilted and of a sickly, purplish tinge, so that their appearance could not help him to a decision. But he remembered nothing before his "inspiration" had come to him that the berries looked slightly over-ripe. Now he told himself that they might easily have been on the table for several hours, when he and Sir Peter first boarded the yacht. Somewhat anxiously, perhaps, he had bought a new notebook in Gibraltar; and now he put down his first entry: "Strawberries over-ripe. The next morning, however, in inspection of the dishes which had been served for the meal, and taken back to the galley with the changing of the courses.

Never dishes nor pots and pans had been washed, and Dick noted down in his book: "Soup, fish, chicken, potato croquette; entree of some sort; asparagus; remains of cream ice in freezer; jelly, cheese. More probably lunch, not courses enough for dinner." Then he half smiled as he read his own notes. "If a stranger opened the book at this page, he would take me for a cook," he said to himself.

On a shelf in the principal galley were a number of wine glasses, which had been used, and set aside to be washed. These, too, were of a sickly, purplish tinge, and bubbles of jeweled Venetian glass, intended for white wine; there were two for claret, but not for champagne; and the port glasses had been left by the plates on the table in the saloon. In the china cupboard, at which Dick presently arrived, there were various other sorts of glasses, enough to make up, including those which stood outside, unwashed, a dozen of each kind. This rule had, however, one exception. Dick counted the champagne glasses in the cupboard, and found only ten. Now, the question arose: had two champagne glasses been broken during the voyage, or had two been used during that last meal, and for some purpose destroyed?

On the table in the larger galley stood a slim bottle of Liebfraumilch, half empty, and a bottle of Chateau La Rose, scarcely touched. Evidently these had been the beverages of the last meal, and the steward, and in the dining-saloon, on a sideboard, the cobwebbed port still reclined in its basket. No need to say that the wine was of a sickly, purplish tinge. Where, but just as Dick was beginning to dismiss the thought of the two missing glasses, he came upon something which revived suspicion in his mind. He had left the galley, had returned to the saloon, and suddenly bethought himself of looking under the dining table. Curious search had been made there before, with the grim idea of finding hidden bodies, but now Dick peered carefully about, in the hope of coming upon some small object—a dropped handkerchief, perhaps, with a name or monogram on the gram, or possibly a forgotten letter.

What he looked for, he did not find; but something bright caught his eye, and with a slight exclamation of surprise he picked up a silver-headed corkscrew, deeply embedded in a champagne cork.

"So!" he said to himself, "they did have champagne. Now, why have the glasses and bottle disappeared?"

He sat down with the corkscrew in his hand, and began to think things over, sending his mind back to the time before the Xenia became a forlorn, mysterious derelict, and to the time when he and Sir Peter had left the yacht with passengers and crew.

"The owner of the yacht was a millionaire, and he was eccentric," Dick said to himself. "So much I may take for granted in the beginning; or circumstantial evidence is more than usually tricky if I'm deceived as to that. All the arrangements of the yacht and its appointments stamp show 'Money and eccentricity.' It's no use thinking that the yacht may have belonged to the lady and that the man was her guest. Instead of vice versa. The plainness of the stateroom and the magnificence of her show that he was the host, scolding luxurious personal surroundings, but lavish with his money and gorgeous with his taste for the benefit of others. Now, would such a man, rich, peculiar, fond of power, sport, perhaps, by prosperity—have been a pleasant master to serve? He set down with the corkscrew in his hand, and began to think things over, sending his mind back to the time before the Xenia became a forlorn, mysterious derelict, and to the time when he and Sir Peter had left the yacht with passengers and crew.

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of having strayed into a blind alley, just as he hoped that he had found his way out into the right road, fell coldly upon Knight. Still, there was this new clue; the champagne cork, rendered important by the fact that the bottle and glasses had mysteriously vanished.

If there had been poison in the champagne, that would account for their disappearance. A clever poisoner would wish to destroy all traces of his crime; he would not leave a single drop of the poison in the bottle; and the cork under the table—the one proof that champagne had been drunk at that last meal—might have been the dropped stich.

Knight began again, and determined to argue from the standpoint that the master of the Xenia and the woman who was with her, had been murdered by means of poison in the champagne. The cork under the table bore witness that the wine had been opened in the saloon, not outside, and this detail seemed to point to the dining-room steward as the poisoner. He or the chef were the only men who would have found it comparatively simple to get rid of everyone on board by means of a single glass of wine. But why should they have desired such wholesale slaughter; why had they disposed of their victims; how had they finally escaped in the end? These were the questions which he was now asking himself. But if either one of the yacht's boats was missing; and what connection had the packing case in the storeroom, and the broken champagne on the deck, with the extraordinary crime?

"Grant that some person unknown, by means of poison in the champagne, had committed the crime on the spur of the moment, still, still turning over the silver corkscrew between his fingers, 'would it be necessary for him to kill everybody else in order to escape suspicion? If he were known to have a grudge against the man it would, no doubt; or, if by his occupation alone, suspicion would be likely to fall upon him, as it would upon the cook or a steward, in case of murder by poison. Yet a cook steward would be the first men to be expected. But if either one had committed the crime on the spur of the moment, still, still turning over the silver corkscrew between his fingers, 'would it be necessary for him to kill everybody else in order to escape suspicion? If he were known to have a grudge against the man it would, no doubt; or, if by his occupation alone, suspicion would be likely to fall upon him, as it would upon the cook or a steward, in case of murder by poison. 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