

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 Spell," "A Woman in Grey," "The Barn Stormers," &c.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTER: Sir Peter Markham is yachting in the Mediterranean with his daughter Eve, and his private secretary Dick Knight, a clever fellow, but with no prospects. The girl, understanding the reticence of the old man, induces him to make love to her. Her father hears the confession, and the girl takes the responsibility. The father, who made his money in South Africa, however, discourages the idea, as Knight is neither rich nor a genius. It is arranged that the private secretary shall leave at Tangier. In the meantime, the yacht comes across a strange craft. There appears to be no one on board, and Sir Peter and the secretary, with volunteers from their crew, resolve to board this mysterious vessel. Dick leads the way. The yacht proves to be exquisitely furnished, and some of the cabins had lately been in the occupation of a woman. There is a mysterious watch with diamond mountings and some other belongings apparent of a wealthy gentleman. But there are no signs of a crew, or indeed, of departures from this secluded ship. At last, however, attention is directed to a big packing-case.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

The Spell of Silence.

For a few seconds he and Knight stood staring into the desk, which was absolutely bare. Not a book, not a paper, not even a stray envelope off a letter. After that brief pause of amazement the elder man stooped, and began opening first one drawer and then another. All were alike empty.

"What can it mean?" Sir Peter exclaimed. "Why should the man have a fine desk like this in his cabin and not use it? It isn't as if it were new. It's been in its place for some time; one can see that by the tarnish it is scratched. He did use it," said Dick. "The fact that the desk is empty is one more link in this night's mystery."

"But he may have had a fancy to keep everything in his locker," said Sir Peter, obstinately. "Anything, we'll have a look."

"The captain's wardrobe was neatly arranged in the locker, but the yacht's papers, the agreement with the crew, and all other things which they had counted upon for information were missing, and which, wholly unaccounted for, they had long since searched, peering into every cranny which could possibly contain anything worth finding, even under the mattress of the captain's berth."

"It'll be a look at Sir Peter. 'It belongs to look rather fishy for the captain, don't you think so?' What sort of crime has been committed? It's impossible to tell yet, but crime of some kind there must have been, to sweep the yacht clean of every human being. Why should the yacht's papers be missing unless there was a reason to make them disappear? And who but the captain should make the arrangements?"

"It's early to form a theory of that sort," said Knight.

"I see you don't agree with me about the captain," said Sir Peter.

"Well, sir, so far I've only one feeling to go on. I don't feel it was the captain. What motive could he have had to betray his master and get rid of every soul on board?"

"Every man has his price, it's said. The owner of this yacht evidently is or was a miser, and his appointments are superb. Why, the Lily Maid's a beggar-maid beside this strange Xenia. The motive may have been theft on a grand scale."

"Even a thief with grand ideas wouldn't be likely to despise such loot as that we saw below—gold dishes and jewelry enough for a king's ransom. 'I forgot that for the moment. Perhaps the fellow was mad; murdered everybody and got off himself in a boat.'"

"None of the yacht's boats are gone. I looked to see. And certainly, so far, we've come across no sign of violence."

"That is true. Whichever way we start out we seem to come up against a blank wall. I believe it will always be so. Only the sea could tell."

"Then the sea must be made to tell," exclaimed Knight, with a curious thrill in his voice which arrested the elder man's attention.

"He gazed steadily at his late secretary. 'You saw me looking into that watch in the cabin down below,' he said, slowly, 'and you heard me cry out.'"

"Yes, sir," Knight answered, quietly. "I confess to you, because of what I saw there—hardly able to believe my eyes at first—I would give my right hand—yes, and the arm with it, to turn the key you talked about in the case of this mystery. Because I want it so much, perhaps, I have no confidence in myself. It is an unusual feeling for me. I confess to you, Knight, that this means more to me than anything has meant for seven-and-twenty years. My very soul is uprooted by to-night's happenings, in a way you could understand if you knew a secret which I've kept for a quarter of a century." He stopped, a pale look of irresolution on his face, and a look on which it sat like an ill-fitting mask. For a moment the Knight believed that Sir Peter was making up his mind to confide in him; but he would not urge on the confession—if

confession it were. He stood silent, and presently the other raised his head with an impatient sigh. "Why do we waste time here?" he demanded, almost angrily. "The clue may be waiting—merely waiting for us to pick it up—somewhere else."

"They went to the first officer's cabin, and so on to the forecastle, but were no wiser than in starting, except for having seen that there was accommodation for twelve in the crew. Two afterwards, a cook, and an assistant. They were able to differentiate in this way by means of the clothing they found. Nevertheless, the mystery deepened with every step they took, for not only were the yacht's papers missing from the captain's cabin, but not a letter, nor a paper which could give a clue to the identity of any officer or member of the crew could be found."

So far as discovering where the Xenia had been built, whence she had sailed, who was her owner, or where she had been officered and manned, it might be Sir Peter desperately remarked—that she had sailed out of the moon, and that everyone on board had gone back there.

Having explored the forecastle, they went to the galley; one for the use of the head cook, in preparing meals for the saloon, a small one adjoining for the use of the second cook, and here they came upon the first sign of confusion which had not been explained by the search.

In itself, it was not much, and afforded no real clue. Sir Peter, uninterested, would have passed it with indifference; but Dick Knight paused, looking down contentedly at a huge, uncovered wooden packing case, half drawn out from under the lowest of a row of well-stocked shelves.

The case had the name of a celebrated firm of French wire merchants upon it. This fact in itself was something; but it was not that which arrested the young man's attention.

The use of the case on board the yacht had not been to hold wine bottles, for in the bottom lay a mass of common bed-ticking, clean and new, though crumpled, as if it had been wrapped round something. On this rested a wooden grating, tipped up against the side of the packing case, and on the floor, in front of the latter, were ranged a number of sealed tin containing fruit preserved by an English firm.

"Come along, Knight," said Sir Peter. "Let's find a lantern, and have a look in the hold. Who knows but we shall find a 'baker's dozen' of bodies huddled down there? Had you thought of that?"

"It's possible, sir; one feels here as if anything were possible," murmured Dick. "But he did not move, and the elder man saw that his mind was busy on something unconnected with his words."

"What are you staring at that big box for?" he demanded, impatiently. "I don't see that it has anything to say to us."

"I wonder what was in it?" said Sir Peter. "Look here, Sir Peter, this grating was intended to lie on these cross pieces of wood, nailed on about eight inches from the top. Upon that these bodies would be huddled, and he took one from the floor—there would have been just room for them under the cover. Now, what was kept underneath that grating, and why was it necessary to conceal it with a decoy layer of fruit tins?"

"I suppose we're most of us got something of it in us," said Dick, "if circumstances bring it out. 'Perhaps'—and he thought, on the other hand, when I'd a little bitterness left in it—'my 'genius' lies that way.'"

But Sir Peter did not laugh. "We were talking of genius, which could be useful to me," he said, "in the conversation which I presume you refer to. Well, I had little enough thought of this, then, when I spoke at random. As it has turned out in these last two hours, however, the genius which could best be in the world suit my purpose is precisely the detective genius. Prove that you have it by unearthing the whole of this mystery for me—mind, the whole of it—and I'll make you a rich man."

"You mean that you'll give me Miss Markham?"

"I'm talking about money, not love."

"But I work for love, not money."

"Good heavens! man, you can't afford to quarrel with fortune. Look here; find out for me not only what happened on this yacht to-day, but who the owner was, who was the woman with him, and the cause of the tragedy on board, working up from the beginning—whatever that may have been—and I'll pay you twenty thousand pounds for the information."

"But you won't give me your daughter?"

"Hang it all, Knight! If you turn out a genius, and your genius gets you rich, you'll still lack one of the essentials we talked of."

"A name."

"The one you wear sounds well enough. But you told me how you got it."

"I've tried as well as I could to live up to it, sir. But suppose I take you to your word. Suppose I give up my life to finding out all that you want to know. Suppose that, though others try, I'm the only one who succeeds. Why should I do the work for you, unless to earn a reward worth having?"

"Aren't twenty thousand pounds worth having?"

"Not when something else is the thing I want. Besides, there may be others who would pay as much as you to get to the bottom of the mystery. I'd rather take money from them and love from you."

"There's nobody on God's earth to whom this case means as much as to me. But you are very grasping."

"Can't I make my name one that you wouldn't be ashamed to let Miss Markham bear? At least, I am a gentleman, Sir Peter."

"What you are is all right. It's what you are not that I quarrel with. And besides this conversation is premature. You're not a detective. You may have a little more bent that way than many another amateur guided by an intelligent curiosity. My emotions have run away with me, rather, tonight. I confess the weakness. I have let myself be impressed with your confidence that the mystery could be worked out like a puzzle."

"You are right. And besides, the desertion of the yacht is not the thing which looms biggest to me. I will tell you this much, now. There's a mystery within a mystery, where I am concerned in this affair. And I have baffled all detective skill for many a long year."

"Oh, then you've proved the professionals failures?"

"You're quick to snatch at a straw. I've proved some of them failures. But what I was going to say is this: The whole mystery or nothing for me. Nothing else is worth paying for."

"I swear I'll find it out."

"Then you shall have twenty thousand pounds."

"I won't part with it for that."

"Talk of refusing to part, my friend, when you've got something to part with. I'll talk of it again, then, sir, if you'll give me the chance."

"You shall have every chance within reason. But meanwhile, some other chance, as I've said before, may lose the whole secret into my hands without your agency."

"Shall you stay in Gibraltar, sir, and try to work out the case?"

"No, I can't do that. I must get someone else."

"Do you expect to find a detective at Gibraltar, or will use authorities there as a snuff?"

"I should be sorry to put my case into their hands. They're too full of red tape already."

"Do you, then, commission me to undertake it?"

"For the twenty thousand pounds reward?"

"No, sir; for the chance—the mere chance—of showing myself a clever enough man to deserve that you change your mind about me for Miss Markham."

"What do you mean by the mere chance? Are you trying to bind me to anything concerning her?"

"For the chance that, if I distinguished myself in conducting an affair which seems to be of vital importance to you, sir, you might feel inclined to say, 'This Knight, who has been so useful to me, has been shown to be worth twenty thousand pounds if he chooses to take it; and therefore the name of Knight, unbacked by another's, is no longer to be despised.'"

"You would do your best, then, on the chance that the glory of your deeds might move me to such a decision; and on the other hand, when I'd a little bitterness left in it—'my 'genius' lies that way.'"

"Yes; I would do my best on that chance, no matter how hard the work might be, how many the sacrifices I should have to make, or how long the time I spent."

"By Jove, those words go with that square chin of yours. You ought to succeed in life, Knight, if it's dogged as does it."

"I'm going to try, if you say the chance is mine."

"Sir Peter paused for a moment. Then he said: "But Evie is only eighteen; an impulsive little thing, not much more than a child, and a spoil child at that. She fancies herself in love with you now, because she's been thrown with you for a fortnight or so. To-morrow, you part, and remember—at Tangier we are taking Lord Waverley and his sister on board. You know that. But you don't know that, Waverley wants to marry Evie. There was no reason why you should know it before; now it's only fair to tell you; for Waverley's a nice young fellow, and in every way 'eligible,' as the dowagers say. They've met several times; she can't help admiring him; all will do, I believe; and he's in love with her. On board the Lily Maid, together for eight or ten days, as they will be, you can see that she'll have opportunities of forgetting you, especially as on no account should I allow you to hint of any hopes for the future."

"I should not think of doing so, sir," answered Dick steadily; though the knife was turned round in his heart. All that Sir Peter said was true. The girl was very young and impulsive. And Dick had met the situation as large enough to hold the body of a very tall man; and there must have been (if one accepted the theory of wholesale murder) many bodies

"I am ready to work on the chance."

"Then we'll strike a bargain on those lines," exclaimed Sir Peter. "So now, since we've sorted out our plans, if you've done with that, the whole conversation, we'll go on to the hold, and perhaps at once upset all our own calculations."

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