

# WOLVES of the SEA.

By  
**RANDALL  
PARRISH**

## CHAPTER XVII.

### A Murder on Board.

To be certain of free space I extended one hand and my fingers came into unexpected contact with the back of a chair. Without moving my body I grasped this welcome weapon of defense and swung it above my head. Whoever the intruder creeping upon us might prove to be, he was certainly an enemy, actuated by some foul purpose, and no doubt armed. To strike him down as quickly and silently as possible was therefore the plain duty of the moment. I hid no other thought.

The slowness with which he groped his way forward indicated instantaneously with the apartment, although his direct advance proclaimed some special purpose. Clearly he had no fear of attack. I could determine almost his exact position as his advancing foot felt cautiously along the deck. He came forward inch by inch. I measured the distance as indicated by faint, shuffling sounds.

I could not see but I knew. With all my force I struck! Alas! as it had been delivered the blow hit false; there was a thud, an inarticulate groan, and the fall of a body upon the floor—beyond that nothing. I waited breathlessly for the slightest movement. I felt Dorothy touch my shoulder and caught the signal of her voice trembling at my ear.

"What is it? What did you do?"

"I struck him with a chair; he lies there on the deck. Wait where you are."

I bent over and touched him. The fellow lay in a heap with no perceptible heart-beat, no semblance of breathing. His fingers sought his face, and I could scarcely suppress a cry of surprise—he was not Estada. Who, then, was he? What could have been his purpose in thus invading this stateroom? All I could grasp was the fact that the fellow was not the Portuguese—his possession of a smooth face, long hair, and a much smaller man. I dragged the body where the light illumination from the after port fell directly on the upturned face. The features revealed were unfamiliar—those unquestionably of a half-breed Indian. Dorothy crossed to my side, her foot striking a knife, which came glimmering into the narrow range of light. She stared in horror at the ugly weapon, and then at the ghastly countenance.

"He came to murder! See, his knife lies there. Why should he have sought to kill me?"

"It is all mystery," I admitted. "What shall be done with the body? It cannot be left lying exposed here; no one would believe you killed him, and my presence must not be suspected."

"Could it," she suggested, "be dropped through the port?"

She shrunk back from touching the luminous figure, yet it required the combined efforts of both to force the stiffening body through the porthole. We could distinguish footprints on the deck above, but these were regular and undisturbed—the slow promenade from rail to rail of the officer on watch. Clearly nothing had been heard or seen to arouse suspicion.

"If you should be questioned tomorrow you had best know nothing," I said gravely. "I do not think you will be, for surely an attack can be no plan of Estada's. It could gain no advantage. The fellow was pilaging on his own account; if he is missed it will be supposed he fell overboard, and no one will care. You are not afraid to remain here alone?"

"No; I am not greatly frightened, but shall try and bar the door with a chair. I have no key."

"Then I'll leave you; half of my watch below must be gone by now. I'll take the fellow's knife along, as it must not be found here."

We parted with a clasp of hands, as I slipped out into the cabin. To my surprise the light over the table had been extinguished, rendering the cabin so black I had to actually feel my way forward. The lantern must have been put out since the body some comfort. After a moment of hesitation I found my way across to my own stateroom and pressed open the door.

The tilt of the knife in my belt attracted my attention, and I drew it forth, curious to learn if it bore any mark of ownership. My eyes were instantly attracted to a dark stain on both bill and blade. I held it to the light—it was the stain of blood, and my hands were also reddened by it. In that first instant of horror I hurried the weapon out through the open port into the sea. Blood! There had been murder committed on board, and the fellow I had struck down was seeking refuge, endeavoring to find concealment following his crime. Ay, but what about the light in the cabin? It had been extinguished after the floor-fighter had entered Dorothy's stateroom. Did this mean that the slayer had an accomplice? If so, then the killing was not the result of a mere personal quarrel, but the result of some conspiracy. I thought of Estada, and of Estada's plan to obtain control of the ship. Could this be his ultimatum? And was the Spaniard already lying dead in his cabin?

Nothing came of my thoughts—only confusion; nor did I dare investigate for fear of becoming more deeply involved in the tragedy. No, there was nothing to be done; my safety, and the safety of the girl depended on our apparent ignorance of what had occurred. Convinced myself of this, I waited the blood stains from my hands and lay down in the bunk fully dressed to await my call.

When called I exchanged but few words with LeVere. He went quickly to his room. Nothing of importance occurred during my watch.

The dawn came cold and gray but with clearing skies. I climbed into the main crossmast and swept the horizon with a glass. Not so much as a speck rewarded my efforts, and I descended the rattles, shouting to the boatswain to call the port watch. Watkins came aft to the wheel and I sent the fellow thus relieved down into the cabin to rout out LeVere. The two returned to deck together, the negro glancing about curiously without mounting the ladder.

"You call Senor Estada yet?" he questioned.

"No; I had no orders to do so."

"He told me call him at daylight. Here you, Amada! go wake up the senor."

The seaman disappeared, while LeVere crossed the poop deck and stood beside me looking out across the expanse of sea.

Amada emerged from the companion and stared up at us, shading his mouth with one hand as he spoke.

"He answer nothing, Senor LeVere."

"Was the door locked?"

"I know not, senor; I not try to open it."

"The wine," said LeVere, "I suppose I'll have to go myself."

"We'll go down together, senor," I said quietly. "Estada must be sick; I could hear the rumblings Amada kicked up even on deck here. No man could sleep through that racket."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A New Conspiracy.

The interior of the cabin appeared desolate in the gray light of dawn. I led the way directly to Estada's stateroom. My heart pounded like a hammer as I rapped on the wooden panels and waited some response from within. There was no answer, no sound of movement, and I rapped again more loudly, my questioning eyes seeking LeVere's face. He was listening intently as myself.

"There is something wrong, senor," he whispered. "For he was ever a light sleeper."

The door was unlocked, the latch yielding instantly to the hand, and I stepped within. A glared told everything. Estada lay in his bunk, with one leg dangling outside, and his head crooked against the side wall. His very posture was that of sudden death, even had it not been pictured by the ghastly face, and the dark pool of blood underneath. I heard an exclamation from LeVere and stood for an

instant utterly unable to move. I knew almost what I should find, yet I forced myself forward—he was dead, pierced with three knife thrusts. I stood up and faced the mullito, whose countenance was fairly gray with horror.

"What do you know about this, Senor LeVere?" I asked sternly. "Tell me more of it."



"Who Did It—and Why?"

man has been murdered, knifed. Who did it—and why?"

He could scarcely answer, gripping at the table for support, and never removing his gaze from the face of the dead man. Yet I believed his words; was convinced this was not the terror of guilt.

"My God! I cannot tell; I have never dreamed of this."

"Had the man enemies. Anyone you would suspect?"

"Remember! Ay, plenty of them; we all have. We expect that in our trade. This ship is full of devils ready enough to do such a job; but I could not name the one who did it. I know of no cause. I have heard nothing."

"I believe you, LeVere," I said. "What can we do, senor?"

"Do! We must talk that over first. We cannot meet this thing until we are prepared. There is more danger in hasty action than anything else."

I shut the door behind us and turned aside, even into that dismal cabin, beyond view of Estada's dead face. LeVere, who had evidently lost his nerve, sank into a chair.

"You fear an uprising, a mutiny?" I questioned. "When this is reported?"

"What will prevent?" he asked.

"The captain cannot stir; the mate is dead; the men already crazed because we take no prizes. They will murder us and take control. Those devils amiables."

"And who leads them? Who would be captain?"

"Manuel Estevan," he whispered. "I thought as much. Then it is Manuel Estevan we must secure first—before this know. Whatever his men may know of what has occurred they will make no move until they get his orders. We must stop the possibility of his issuing any. Without a leader the advantage is ours."

"You mean to kill him?"

"Only as a last resort. There is no good feeling between those quartered and the crew."

"No, senor; it is hate generally, although they are not all alike. The real sailors are mostly captured men; they serve to save their lives, and only for these others on board could not be held long. Your plan, senor, is to set the one against the other?"

"Yes, if possible. These sailor men are of all races. Can they be trusted?"

"Some might be, sir; it is hard to tell how many. It is not the race which counts so much, senor. There are those among them who would not care to return to loneliness."

"And you, LeVere?"

He spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "There is no hope of me; I was born to the free life."

"What then is it with you?"

"I know not, senor. I am with you."

"You pledge your word, Francisco?"

"I pledge it, senor."

"Good! And you have faith. Now to work—first Manuel Estevan, and then the men on deck."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### Laying the Trap.

Our first job was executed much more easily than I had anticipated. We caught Manuel sound asleep, and LeVere had snowy hands at his throat before the fellow could grasp a weapon. The narrowness of the stateroom prevented my taking much part in the affair, but the mulatto needed no help, as he dragged the cursing Spaniard from his bunk to the deck and throttled him savagely. Indeed he would have killed the fellow had I not intervened and twisted his hands loose, leaving Estevan barely conscious. A blanket ripped into strips served to bind him securely enough for the present, but I thought it best to lock the door and keep the key in my own pocket. LeVere would have killed him even as he lay there helpless, but for my threat and insistence. Once back in the cabin my eyes distinguished the frightened face of the steward peering forth at us from out the dark of the passage leading forward.

"Come here, Gonsales," I said sternly. "Stop! Look! I have something to tell you. Senor Estada has been killed during the night, and we

have just captured his murderer." I explained. "There is reason to believe this act was part of a conspiracy to seize the ship in connection with those fellows amidships. Does that change lead to their quarters?"

"It does, senor, but now there is a closed door of oak, studded with iron, not only locked, but barred on this side. There are but two keys—one for the captain and the other for him who commands the buccaniers."

I stood there a moment, considering this information. The only way the mutineers could reach the cabin then would be from the deck, descending through the companion. So long as they remained unaware of the capture of Manuel there was little danger of their taking such action.

"Very well, steward," I said. "You go on about your work, though nothing had happened. If any word of this affair gets to the crew, or to those fellows forward, I'll hold you responsible. You are not to leave this cabin without my permission, nor speak to anyone. LeVere."

The mulatto faced me respectfully enough, and I had a feeling he would obey orders, largely because he dare not rebel.

"They will be wondering why you are not on deck. It will be better for you to take charge of the watch at once, and keep the men busy. Release Watkins at the wheel and send the man down to me. He can choose the fellows who will stick better than you could, and then can circulate among them without arousing suspicion."

Watkins soon shuffled down the steps. He whipped off his cap and stood waiting.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Tom," I said soberly, "we are in the same boat, and understand each other. The chance has come for both of us. If we play the cards right, listen while I tell you the situation, and what I plan to do."

I told him briefly, wasting no words, yet relating every fact. He listened eagerly, but without interruption until the end.

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

"About what you do, sir. I know there was something of the kind going on—some of the men forward are in on it. You've got the ring-leader."

"Manuel, you mean. Who did he count on for help in the forecabin?"

"Cochise, and a handful of others, niggers and Spaniards, mostly. They meant to pull the affair off either today or tonight. Your plan gives us a fair chance, sir. A dozen good men on deck might do the business."

"But are there a dozen aboard to be trusted?"

"Well, yes, sir. I rather think there are. I'd say that in both watches there's maybe fourteen to be relied on."

"In my watch there's Jones, Harwood and Simms, either English or Welsh. They're all right. Then there's a nigger named Sam; Schmitt, a Dutchman, with his partner, whose name I don't know, and two Frenchies, Ravel and Pierre. That makes eight, nine counting myself. Then in the starboard watch I'd pick out Jim Carter and Joe Cole, two Swedes, Carlson and Ole Hallin, and another nigger. Then there are a couple of Finns

who ought to be with us, but I can't talk their lingo. That would give us sixteen out of thirty, and it's quite likely some of the others would take a hand with us, if they thought it was safe. I haven't any use though, sir, for Francois LeVere. There ain't a worse scoundrel aboard."

"I know that," admitted, "but he had to be used."

"This is my watch below, and it will be best for me to keep off the deck until all is prepared. You sound these men and get them together; wake up the eyes in the starboard watch you feel sure are not right, and have them slip quietly on deck. Then we'll get those acts in the rack here, and be ready for business—the rest will be done in a hurry. I'll wait here for your report."

At the very best Watkins could scarcely perform the task assigned him in less than an hour. The success or failure of our effort depended entirely upon taking these fellows by surprise. If it came to an open fight our cause was hopeless, for there would soon fourteen or fifteen men unarmed, pitted against over a hundred thoroughly equipped and trained fighters. Only by confining them below, with hatchets battened down, and a cannon trained upon them, would we be safe.

I sat where I could watch the stairs, and the entire forward part of the cabin. Gonsales lowered the table, and began preparing the morning meal. Finally he announced breakfast.

"Suppose you rap on the lady's door yonder, and ask if she will join me. Say your message is from Senor Gates."

She came at once and seated herself opposite me, and we spoke of the weather while Gonsales served. He was still hovering about, but my anxiety to have a word with her alone caused me to send him to attend Captain Sanchez. We waited until he disappeared within the after stateroom, bearing a tray; then her eyes suddenly lifted to mine, filled with questioning.

"Tell me what has happened?" She breathed eagerly. "I heard the noise of a struggle out here, and voices conversing. Why are you alone?"

I leaned over to speak in as low a tone as possible, and I told her the situation in detail and my plans.

She sat silently gazing at me across the table, her parted lips trembling to an unasked question. Before she could frame this in words, the door to the companion opened, and Watkins descended the stairs. At sight of her he whipped off his cap.

"You may speak freely," I said. "This is the young lady I told you about, and of course she is with us. Only talk low."

"Yes, sir," using a hoarse whisper, and fastening his gaze on me. "It's all right, sir."

(To be Continued Next Sunday)

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