

• SERIAL STORY

CARIBBEAN CRISIS

BY EATON K. GOLDTHWAITE

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MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

CHAPTER XVIII

AT dinner Talcott found himself seated at the chief engineer's table beside June Paterson. Two empty chairs were, he presumed, for MacDowell and Halsey. Professor Constantine, surrounded by books and pill bottles, was alone at a table by the stairs and apparently oblivious to his surroundings. Martha Swenson had made a new acquaintance and, it seemed, a conquest; the ship's physician was pouring his soul into her ear.

Talcott stowed away food and thought about his wireless message. From Lowell Byrd it was three words only, "On the job," in response to his transcription of events. But it lifted a great burden from his mind and at the same time reminded him that he had work to do. How could he, isolated on this ship, accomplish anything within the four days allotted to him before he must face acquaintances in New York? Where could he begin?

By paying court to June Paterson? Hardly. She had become tantalizingly desirable; had changed completely since the stormy hours on Abas. He was not blind to her glances, the mounting color beneath her translucent skin, the lingering pressure of her hand on his arm. But what could he do? With prison and possibly death facing him, what could he offer her?

Halsey came down to dinner finally, and Talcott was immeasurably relieved. Halsey was pale and rather stiff, but his clear eyes and thoughtful manner told that whatever fight he had held with himself he must have won. He spoke quite civilly to Talcott, occupied the chair on June Paterson's left. Talcott, taking advantage of the break, excused himself to look after MacDowell. And as he left the dining salon he felt her disappointed eyes follow him.

MacDowell was doing as well as could be expected. "This always happens to me," he groaned. "I'll be like this until we get to New York. I dunno why I let 'em talk me into it."

"You should get out in the air. This place is like a shoebox."

"You're tellin' me. Air. Well, maybe later I'll try it. Tell the skipper of this tub to decide which direction he wants to go."

Some instinct, sharpened to an incredible fineness in the past troublesome hours, warned Talcott. An out-of-place squeak, an almost inaudible scrape; whirling, he yanked open the door.

A MAN was there, gripping the door jambs to remain upright. An incredibly ugly man. There was not a single hair to his head; he had no eyebrows, no eyelashes; he looked, horribly, like some thing that had just been born. Yet he must have been all of 50. A flush extended over the full surface of his baldness and his red-rimmed little eyes were beady with the fright of discovery.

"Well?" Talcott demanded. "Excuse, please!"

"What the devil do you want?"

"My stateroom is the next—I make mistake—"

"Do you usually enter your stateroom on hands and knees?"

A feeble, baffled stare was his answer. And then, key in hand, the hairless one groped to the adjoining door and let him in.

Talcott watched long and thoughtfully. Certainly he had never seen this man before; impossible for memory to forget that ugly head. Yet something about him prodded memory. And the memory, whatever it might be, was not pleasant.

Perhaps it was of no consequence. Talcott shrugged and gave noncommittal answer to MacDowell's moaned question. Briskly he set off along the corridor, trying to shake the vision of that ugly, thing-like head from his mind. Halfway to the companionway he had to hold up to allow a steward to bring an armload of linen from a locker.

On impulse he asked, "Who is that passenger with the completely bald head?"

The steward frowned. "Bald—Oh, him! That's Mr. Webber. He's a tailor in New York. His first vacation in twenty years, he said. We had him on the down trip. He stayed over in Saint Thomas—He was on B Deck coming down. Got changed down here because there was too much noise—He's a good tailor. Measuring me for a suit. Funny, ain't it? On his vacation and still working, see what I mean?"

And that was that. Bald-head had been on the down trip and his stateroom was different going back. Which might account for his being in front of the wrong door, but it wouldn't account for his trying to enter the room on hands and knees.

TALCOTT moved forward. Mr. Webber could wait. More important business was at hand; the business of determining just what was in the "report" Struthers had given Halsey.

MacDowell had said that Halsey had stateroom K to himself. He went directly there and, receiving no response to his knock, tried the door. It was locked.

In annoyance he turned and in

that moment another steward was coming from another cabin, bearing a tray. Quite casually, Talcott said, "Oh, steward! Mr. Halsey left an envelope for me. Will you let me in please?"

There could be nothing wrong. An aristocratic-looking gentleman in evening dress who was a little put out at finding a door locked. Unfortunately that one gentleman could be so forgetful of another; was that a banknote in the aristocratic gentleman's hand? It was. The steward let him in and went whistling on his rounds.

Talcott moved swiftly, surveying the room. A regular bed here instead of bunk; Halsey's bags lay open and empty in the rack beneath the bed. An open wardrobe door swung gently with the motion of the ship, revealing neatly-hung suits. On the bureau were personal articles; military brushes, a strapwatch whose hands pointed to nine o'clock; film cartridges, a small camera, toilet articles.

Where was the most likely hiding place? Too bulky, that envelope, for Halsey to carry it with him. Talcott searched the bureau, found nothing; ran his hand over the clothing in the wardrobe, found nothing; pulled out the bags beneath the bed, found nothing.

He stood, scratching his head in vexation, and glared. It had to be somewhere. Beneath the pillow? No. Nor in the bed. Nor—Wait a minute! On a table magazines were piled in disorder. Somehow they didn't seem to lie just right; there was a bulge in the midst of one that didn't belong there. Talcott crossed swiftly, shuffled the magazines, and the envelope was in his hands.

It was sealed, of course; gobs of red wax along the flap. He had no time for experiments in deception; with Halsey's nail file he ripped the length of the envelope, and then stared incredulously.

Paper, plain blank paper was in his hands. Not a mark defiled its white surface.

He was going through it again, just to make sure, when he heard a noise at the door.

(To Be Continued)

HOLD EVERYTHING!



"No, you can't be commands—now get out of that mud!"

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UHLIG'S

THIS CURIOUS WORLD

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NO MATTER WHAT COLOR YOUR SUIT IS, IT LOOKS GREY TO YOUR DOG.

...ALL DOGS ARE COLOR BLIND.

T.M. REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.



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