

SERIAL STORY CARIBBEAN CRISIS

BY EATON K. GOLDTHWAITE

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CHAPTER XXV

BILL TALCOTT shed his coat and cleared the rail with a running headlong leap. Down he swept in a graceful arching dive with the startled cries of passengers and officers alike in his ears. After the clean, warm tub of the Caribbean, New York Harbor was chilling cold and foul. But it was water. He went deep, opening his eyes. In Anegada Passage he could have seen his quarry. He couldn't here. Kicking off his shoes he came up for breath.

The black head was bobbing a short distance away; the mug must have been cemented on. Webber-von Stampf was making a lot of motions but he wasn't making much time. There was a launch, though, that was taking more than casual interest in the proceedings. Its occupants were pointing and it began to swing in a wide circle.

Talcott went down again and shed his pants.

When he came up the launch was perilously near. Its purpose was evident; to come between him and his quarry. As with three points of a triangle, with the apex moving fastest, the launch closed in. And then from the rail a smoke puff showed and a shot zinged the water.

Talcott went under. Kicking, sweeping like a frog. He felt the pressure as the launch passed above him, and then directly ahead he saw the Nazi agent's thrashing feet. He was almost on them when the thrashing stopped, and the feet started upward. With a powerful kick he closed in with a smashing tackle about the knees.

The other must have been taking in a mouthful of air when his hand was wrenched from the boat-rail. Air bubbles followed him down. His struggles were violent, terrified. Talcott rolled him over. The old game Water polo in the best accepted style. Swimming tank mayhem—his fingers closed in the waist of the Nazi's trousers and he yanked them to his knees. Then he came up beside the launch for air.

A boat was coming from the Blue Petrel, another from the Quarantine cove. Shots from the launch were being answered, with interest, from both quarters. When a yell of surprise from the launch announced that Talcott's presence had been discovered, he went down again.

Constantine - Webber - von Stampf, he that could "come and go as he willed," was on the surface a short distance away, attempting to rid himself of the burgeoning pants. Bill Talcott gave him a new source of worry by hooking into his coat collar and starting to swim straight down.

Utterly powerless, the man who had offered June Paterson's life in exchange for paper, followed. His wig was gone. His eyes were distended in terror and great bubbles arose from his mouth. And as they went ever deeper, the ineffectual struggles ceased.

And then Talcott turned. The red bottom of the launch was gone; the white of the lifeboat had taken its place. Grinning, he grasped the baron's chin and pulled him to the surface.

WHEN Bill Talcott came up in dry clothing, she was waiting. And so was her cousin. Her cousin said something that sounded like "Beautiful offensive. Couldn't have done better myself."

But that didn't matter so much. What did matter was that she sighed and said, "You are wonderful," as though she'd lost an argument with herself.

And although Captain Pringle and Leonard Halsey too had come up by that time, it was mainly to hear that he said, "I suspected Constantine and Webber of being the same person when I realized that I had never seen the two of them at the same time. The night after I was attacked I came down from the boat deck and almost fell over him, supposedly asleep in a chair. 'He had come down from New York as Webber, a tailor on his first vacation in twenty years. Yet, instead of taking the trip through the Islands, he stopped over in Saint Thomas, that gave him opportunity to contact Martha Swenson—Swantzig, his agent in Martinique. In order to check up on Struthers the pair of them had Jackson, the smuggler, drop them at Abas Island to give credence to the girl's story that she was a refugee. But the professor's being there just didn't click, and I'd have suspected him then if I hadn't had a few things of my own to worry about."

"You see, he had taken advantage of a technician in the Federal Chemical setup, the business of having the auditor take over when a shortage was discovered. He worked it carefully, getting his operative in as Old Man Winters' private secretary; sending von Stampf down on a different boat to make contact at the island so that MacDowell and I could be disposed of on the way home. They wanted to make it appear as if I was so guilty I'd killed MacDowell and then jumped overboard to swim ashore. They killed Sebastian because they wanted him out of the way. They could brook no interference in what they planned to do on Abas Island."

HALSEY said, "I'm beginning to have an idea what that was. I recall that at the time I thought it was rather strange Struthers should order 500 barrels of oil before he'd even set foot on the island."

"Exactly. The plan was to make Abas Island a base. Acting as conservator of the company's assets, Struthers could carry on the business as usual. He could order double the amount of oil and food he needed and have Jackson transship the surplus to raiders living off the coast.

"Their biggest trouble was that they overdid it. Instead of making up some kind of a report which might have worried me plenty, he was so damned sure that Halsey would deliver the report straight to Winters' secretary he just filled the envelope with plans of defense works that had been traced in invisible ink by Martha Swenson—Swantzig. She didn't dare bring them into New York for fear of discovery, and Baron von Stampf could never be sure how long his disguise as Constantine would serve him. So Halsey was made the goat, and when I broke into his cabin and stole the report from him, they hit their second snag."

"From then on von Stampf had to get me, but he had to keep me alive until the plans were delivered. His other accomplice, the steward, was in irons and he needed help so he made his greatest mistake by putting the finger on Martha Swenson. Even his reappearance at the door as Constantine and his heroic disarming of her were unconvincing. She could have shot me a dozen times if she'd wanted to."

June Paterson murmured, "But of course she didn't want to. Not you, you big handsome Casanova!" Bill Talcott flushed to the roots of his hair. "I've taken just about enough from you, young lady! I'm going to turn you over my knee right now!"

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