

## CHAPTER II

Now people were running in from all over the ship as a kind of dire fatality settled over the crew. Everyone was thinking that bad luck had dogged the *Meteor* since she had left Nuku-Hiva and the captain's death was the start of a terrible tragedy they could feel looming over us.

"Who was the first to find the captain?" Dumont the first mate asked.

"Me, sir," Garcia answered, a sailor who served as steward. "I was coming back from my hour at the helm and was passing by the door here when I thought I heard a scream inside the cabin. Thinking the captain might've hurt himself, I opened the door... see, it wasn't locked like usual. And I saw the poor captain lying there and not moving. I walked in but he wasn't answering me either. So, I bent down over his chest and I could tell his heart wasn't beating."

"Sadly, you were right," the first mate said. "The captain is dead. Now we have to find out what caused this sudden death. I guess the doctor here might tell us."

Ardan quickly examined the body and confirmed the first mate's verdict. "An embolism? But that wouldn't explain the scream. Besides, there were no signs that Captain Gaillard suffered from a condition bad enough to cause sudden death." He turned to Garcia. "Did you see anyone coming out of the cabin?"

"No," the sailor declared firmly. "A skinny guy might get through the porthole but I'm sure I would've seen him when I came in."

"You went in right after the scream?"

"Yes... it couldn't have been no more than three or four seconds after."

Ardan looked down at the captain's body and seemed to ponder deeply. Suddenly he blurted out, "The captain was killed with extraordinary skill. There's a tiny hole there." He pointed to a minuscule red mark that was barely the size of a pinhead. "I'll try to probe the wound. Mr. Garcia, go get my bag from my cabin."

When the steward got back, Ardan examined the wound. Presently, he pulled out a long, thin, metal pin.

"Garcia didn't see the murderer escape," he declared, "because Captain Gaillard was killed by someone on the outside."

Utter amazement fell upon the room. Nobody really knew what he meant, so he held up the pin and showed the tiny notch at the end.

"This pin is, in fact, an arrow," he explained. "The murderer must've been outside and used a tiny bow to shoot it through the porthole. He was a skilled archer because the pin had to pierce the heart."

So there was someone on board who had no fear of murdering the captain in cold blood while he slept. Everyone shuddered at the thought that other victims would very likely follow.

But the one most disturbed was Doc Ardan who realized that there must be an organized gang on board ready and willing to commit murder.

He pondered, "This affair is obviously more complicated than I thought..."

The first mate gave orders. With the captain dead, he was in charge and everyone on board knew it. They organized a wake, then everything went back to normal because they had to get back to Nuku-Hiva to find the pirates on board and turn them in. The brutes had to be called this because their actions were apparently designed to take control of the yacht for some unknown reason.

Since there were still three hours until dawn, Ardan figured he should continue his surveillance. What had just happened was something that could cause talk that might prove interesting. Dropping the wireless station, which he saw occupied by the operator alone, he headed toward the bow to start a kind of patrol. He didn't know if he should begin with the hold or try the utility rooms. Chance decided for him.

As he was passing by an air-shaft he heard voices. He stopped and, making sure nobody was around, he listened.

A few scattered phrases came through. A few times he heard "*meteorite*" then the word "*Krakatax*". That was all it took for him to search for a better spot to hear.

He knew the layout of the *Meteor* inside and out, having studied it on his long trip from France. He knew that the air-shaft he was next to was ventilation for a compartment located near a coal bunker. Usually this compartment was kept empty and used to store coal that could be sent down from the deck directly through the shaft.

Without hesitating, he twisted the upper part of the shaft and popped it out of the fitting riveted to the deck. Then he got on the metal ladder and, when his head was level with the deck, he pulled the shaft back into place. Like this, no one would notice that someone had gone down it.

When he reached the compartment the young doctor realized that he could hear better, but he still couldn't understand what was being said. He realized, however, that he could loosen the bolts to the hatch connecting to the coal bunker and, through the crack, listen to the voices that were undoubtedly in the boiler room. He did this in record time and listened again. This time the conversation was clear and remarkably revealing.

“Anyway, hurricane-wise, that’s the best Krakatax has done,” someone said. “The folks on board only got suspicious when they saw us drifting north and now we’re heading back to Nuku-Hiva.”

“They would’ve got suspicious over a lot less. What more can I say? Billy stuck in the big meteorite rod while I was sure we only needed the small one. The big one was too strong and the compass started spinning round. But don’t worry, Billy didn’t miss the captain and I think in a little we’ll see something new.”

“What if they sent a wireless message?”

“Doesn’t matter now.”

And the conversation went on like this.

Ardan had heard enough. It was unquestionable now that these men were trying to take over the ship and the final attack would come soon. Under such conditions he figured he had to inform the authorities immediately. He sneaked back to the ladder and started to climb.

But he hadn’t gone far when one of the rungs snapped and he fell to the floor making a racket. That’s all it took to alert the men in the boiler room. They burst into the compartment and found Ardan scrambling back to the ladder.

One of the men grabbed him from behind. Ardan spun around and threw a punch that landed on his chin, but the other two were on him in no time.

“So, tough guy,” the man was rubbing his chin, “you were spying on us! You’re lucky we have orders not to kill you because otherwise, I’d have liked to toss you into the boiler as punishment. Anyway, we’ll keep you from getting in our way. Go on, lads, tie him up,” he said to his two cronies.

They bound the doctor quickly to the ladder.

“Like this,” the pirate sneered, “you’ll be able to listen all you want without bothering anybody. And you don’t have to worry about stopping us. You’ll never get out of this!”

And the three rats scurried away at once.

Left alone, Ardan sized up his situation. Unfortunately the bandit was right about not being able to escape. Moreover, all this pointed to the fact that the final blow was nigh.

“And to think that if that rung hadn’t snapped, I could’ve warned the first mate,” the prisoner groaned. “We certainly could’ve taken measures to foil their plans. I believe that putting those three in irons along with the wireless officer would’ve done the trick.”

He reflected on the revelations made previously when the villains didn’t know they were being overheard. The famous “he” and the mysterious Krakatax were apparently one and the same person. But who was this Krakatax who had his henchmen on board the *Meteor* and could lay claim to the extraordinary power of controlling the very elements themselves?

The young doctor thought: “Undoubtedly, this man Krakatax must’ve built up his power base in these parts and developed a kind of mystique surrounding his name. But from this to controlling the weather is a big jump. In any case, it seems he wishes me no harm since he expressly ordered his henchmen not to kill me. That means he plans to meet me. Well now, I do believe that, for the moment at least, scientific interests must come first. I came to clear up the mystery and so I will—if I get to meet Krakatax...”

His train of thought was cut short by the sound of gunshots overhead. He heard shouting, then intermittent explosions. Feet pounded over the deck. And then everything seemed to go back to normal.

Ardan didn’t doubt for a second what had happened. His fears were confirmed when he saw the pirate who had spoken to him a few hours earlier.

“Hey, hey,” the guy gloated, “I think everything’s in order now. We’re going to pay a visit to Professor Krakatax, whom you’re going to get to know very well. You came here, I guess, to solve the mystery of the hurricanes? You’ll get what you came for. Only, you won’t be going back to France. Ha! Ha!”

Ardan didn’t say a word.

“We’ve done some good work up there,” the creep snickered. “Anyone who didn’t want to obey us was thrown overboard. If found, they’ll just be a bunch of corpses chalked up to the last hurricane. And we’ve turned the *Meteor* around so we’re heading north again. At sixteen knots plus the current pushing us at twelve knots, altogether it’s a pretty good clip. With that, I’ll go get some shut-eye and I’ll have them untie you after plugging up the air-shaft. Then I’ll get some breakfast sent in.”

The pirate left and locked the door.

“If I’m not mistaken,” the young doctor muttered, “I’m going to be hanged soon enough.”