

Slow Boat From Marcellino

Perhaps I should have forgotten about it; but Captain Zakas mentioned it again. I had the idea that he was desperately anxious to convince me that it was a mistake on my part.

Jan moistened his lips. "Then you probably heard Stefan go over the side," he said slowly. "If so, Captain Zakas knew about it. Does that not prove that it was murder?"

"I'm not sure about proof," said Oliver. "Let us assume though, that it was murder, and that the captain knew about it. Perhaps Stefan was already dead, and it was only a matter of throwing the body over the side. Now then, why should Stefan have been murdered?"

Jan shook his head. "I don't know sir. I have driven myself silly trying to work that out."

"And who was the murderer? I feel that I can answer for Lacoote. I relieved him at midnight. He said that he was going direct to his cabin and that he was going to sleep until the fog blew away. There is Lubbe—but he would never kill anybody—unless they tampered with his engines. Captain Zakas was on the bridge. That leaves Dr. Rutter and Dr. Prinz."

"Both of them," muttered Jan. "He knew them, of course. It was Dr. Prinz who approached us and offered to take us away from France. We saw very little of Dr. Rutter. We went to a house along the Corniche—the night before he came aboard. There we were examined."

"Examined?" cried Oliver. "Yes, you see, Dr. Prinz revealed to us why we were being taken on the 'Connecticut Lass.' Part of the work the two of them were doing was for a charitable organization of Chicago, which was trying to assist displaced persons. But there was another reason. Dr. Rutter had an estate—somewhere in South America. He needed European workers; but there were difficulties with the authorities. However, he had been advised by influential friends that if he smuggled the labour into the country he would have nothing to fear from subsequent inquiries." Jan smiled bitterly. "So our chance of escape meant that we had to become members of a small labour force—although we were promised considerable freedom, good pay and satisfactory working conditions. It was necessary, though, to make sure that we were reasonably sound from a physical viewpoint. So there was a medical examination. They both took part, until Dr. Rutter had some sort of dizziness. Then Dr. Prinz completed it by himself. It was a strange examination."

"What makes you say that?" "Most of it was similar to that we had to pass when we were needed for the army. They wanted us badly, so all they had to do was to satisfy themselves that we were not actually dying. This was much the same—until it came to our eyes. They were tested very thoroughly. Dr. Prinz said something about making sure they would stand up to the glare of a warm climate. In the next cabin, Captain Zakas straightened up. He replaced a small square of wood in the partition between his cabin and the one occupied by John Oliver. His fingers shook and his face was ashen. Beads of sweat had gathered upon his forehead. He mopped at them with a handkerchief. Then he loosened his collar which had suddenly become too tight.

He tried to force himself into a calmer state without any noticeable effect. Then, unable to stand the strain of his new discovery any longer, he ran from the cabin and went in search of Dr. Prinz.

CHAPTER IX

"OLIVER MUST BE REMOVED"

Dr. Prinz opened the door of the captain's cabin. He stepped in and carefully closed it behind him. Zakas was at his small table. Apart from the evidence of an empty bottle and a glass, the glazed appearance of his eyes suggested that he had been drinking heavily.

"You have spoken to Dr. Rutter about it?" Zakas asked eagerly. "He is testing his lanchons," Prinz lied. It could not help matters to let Zakas know that Rutter was lying helpless in a drugged sleep.

"What does he say?" Zakas asked quickly. Prinz made an impatient gesture with his hand. "We will come to that in a minute," he said. "A plan has been drawn up and it is essential that every detail should go exactly as designed. There are to be no mistakes."

Zakas moistened his lips. His head was aching, and his throat felt on fire. But he made an effort to concentrate.

"I agree," he said, trying to return to his more usual blandness of manner. "With the position so serious... we are all threatened."

"You are certain that your report to me was correct? You made no additions to it? It represents exactly what was said in the next cabin?"

Zakas nodded his head. "I could not repeat it word for word," he explained. "But what I told you was an accurate summary."

"How was it that you came to be listening?" Prinz demanded. "I heard voices," Zakas explained. "At first I did not take much notice; but when it was clear that one of the speakers was very excited, I thought it my duty to discover what I could. There has always been a small square of wood in the partition between the cabins which could be removed."

He added quickly, as Prinz frowned: "It was necessary because Johnansen was rather difficult at times. It was advisable to watch him."

"I see," said Prinz. "It is clear, then that Oliver is a danger to us. He has all the stubbornness of his race—and he will not hesitate to interfere. More to himself than to Zakas, he continued: "It is regrettable. He is a most efficient officer. But our own safety comes first."

"What are we to do?" Zakas asked. "Suppose we get rid of the Pole who is causing trouble." Prinz lit one of his cheroots and crossed to the table. He shook his head.

"Too clumsy," he said. "That would only make the other passengers more uneasy—and Oliver more suspicious. It is Oliver who must be removed."

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