

RED HAIR AND BLUE SEA



by **STANLEY R. OSBORN**
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What's Happened Before

Palmyra Tree, aboard the yacht Rainbow, is startled by seeing a hand thrust through the port of her cabin. She makes a secret investigation and discovers a stowaway. She is disappointed in his mild appearance and tells him so. Obeying his command to glance at the door—she sees a huge fierce, copper-hued man—with a ten inch knife held between grinning lips! Burke, the stowaway, explains that it is a joke. But Palmyra is shaken. Next day, Burke and the brown man go up on deck. The stowaway entertains them with wild tales of an adventuresome life—which his listeners refuse to believe!

Palmyra spends more and more time with the stowaways to avoid Van and John, but when the stowaways are put ashore at Honolulu she decides she loves Van. The night the engagement is announced the Rainbow hits a reef. In the excitement which follows John rescues both Van and Palmyra—but Palmyra thinks it is Van who saved her. Now read on:—

CHAPTER IV

Daylight made clear two facts: the Rainbow had struck in such a way that it would be impossible to get her off; the island was uninhabited.

As the exploratory boat rounded a spur of reef that covered the passage into the lagoon, opened out the largest island from the sea, Palmyra burst into an exclamation of delight.

She turned to John and Van. "It is pretty," she said, "but—cruel." She felt a first little shiver of realization. "There is nothing upon it. No shelter, no food."

Van gave her a haggard look. "And," he said, "there's not one drop of water. When we've used what we bring ashore..."

Thurston whirled upon him. "Don't!" he cried. "Don't dare tell them that. We'll filter salt water through this sand or rig a condenser with junk from the wreck."

Palmyra had not been consciously aware of Thurston's leadership until hours after the catastrophe. Her attitude was typical of them all, perhaps even of Thurston himself. There had been something to do; the stronger nature had asserted itself. And the ship's company, acquiescing thus automatically, with scarcely any registered sense of change, paid him its highest compliment.

She had not thought to wonder why Thurston, rather than her fiancé, had been chosen. He had a reputation for efficiency in handling men. Van had had neither occasion nor opportunity.

Here spoke her good common sense. And, being unaware of Mrs. Crawford's original plot, she could hardly be expected to note that the wreck had reversed the situation; that where, before, John had been put to disadvantage now Van had been given the role he could not play.

The inevitable had occurred between these men. As Thurston had risen to leadership, so Van—had sunk to his place as a private in the ranks. Palmyra did not see, suspect.

They were easily cheered that first day. True, the island bore no sign of native visitation. But with their launch they could easily reach the nearest inhabited lagoon, or they could even build a sea-worthy craft from material of the wreck, were they not certain some passing sail would soon take them off.

Thus the first day. But when the second came and went and the third dawned upon an empty ocean, they began to despond. At night a beacon fire had blazed forth its appeal—they must soon turn to the Rainbow for fuel—and by day the launch waited to overhaul any passerby. But of what avail these upon a sea where no one seemed to venture.

And then, at midday, from the wreck across the lagoon, there boomed out the signal gun. A sail!—a sail!—a sail!!!

Rapidly the deliverer rose from the sea. A vessel of no great tonnage, she sailed with noticeable speed.

As the schooner bore down upon them she broke out the American colors. When she was abreast of their position she came about and then heave to in lee of the reef. A boat was lowered.

Palmyra, through her glasses, saw that three men got into this boat. Two of them were undoubtedly native seamen. The third, who had been reconnoitering from the crossbeams, appeared to be a white man.

She watched them as they pulled rapidly through the passage and across the lagoon. Then in astonishment, she lowered the binoculars to stare at Van Buren Rutger.

He was now dancing over the coral clinkers like a musical comedy buffoon.

"By the Great God Cash!" he cried. "If it isn't old Pirate Burke."

Almost from the moment Ponape Burke came running up the sands Palmyra perceived a difference.

Was it that the ridiculous humiliations of the Rainbow had given way to the starchy white of the tropical ship's master?

Or was it that she missed the obtrusive humility? No longer a stowaway, he spoke to Mrs. Crawford as one master of craft to another; a full note of equality.

Perhaps, after all, the fact might be no more than a juvenile sort of vanity in himself as master of that swift sail; a vanity bubbling over at unexpectedly finding its audience. And he must have had some vague hope of such a reunion as this. For he was saying now that, on the Rainbow, he'd withheld the fact he had a vessel of his own lying-up at Honolulu; withheld it on the chance of "surprising 'em somewhere out here."

There could be no question of his fond pride in that fast craft. And had they seen...

He interrupted himself with that oddly un-adult mirth of his.

Had they seen her name? Oh, they'd laugh when they did see. They'd never guess in a thousand years. Pigeon of Noah.

Van seized his hand with impulsive warmth. "Why then this must be... Why, Mr. Noah, I didn't recognize you now you've shaved."

Burke guffawed delightedly. "I sure will feel like Noah," he said, "a-taking you all on to the Ark, two by two."

He turned, presently, to the pile of salvaged stores and gear. The rest must be left under canvas and sent for.

Details were arranged. Burke would get back aboard at once to take charge on the schooner. The yacht's launch, with three of her own men, would tow Burke's boat out, both loaded with stores. While these were unloading at the Lupe-a-Noa, Thurston would get his other boats into the water, sort over the supplies.

"We'll stow the very best first," said Burke in conclusion, "and then see what space we got left for second rate cargo."

The launch hove a line to the Pigeon's boat and one of the native boys stood ready to carry his master out.

Now, however, Palmyra, unable to satisfy a youthfully poignant curiosity at long distance through her binoculars, spoke up eagerly. "Oh, Captain Burke, do please take me with you! I'd just love to be first aboard."

"Me, too," cried Constance.

The man was pleased, flattered.

"But—" he hesitated awkwardly—"the boat's heavy loaded and there won't be no room aboard while we're taking cargo. So I better invite only one this trip."

He winked at Thurston. "And Miss Tree she asked first, and seeing as how she was the best student I had for my South Sea lectures, seems as if she had ought t'be first 'lay aboard a genuine South Sea trader."

Thurston acquiesced. But as Burke was being carried down to the boats, John turned to Johannsen, acting mate, and said: "You yourself be one of our three men to go aboard and—stay."

The big sailor gave him a look to see if the order had more than routine significance, then lumbered after Burke.

In the boat the girl's mind was gradually brought back to the something in Burke's manner which she has not been able to analyze. For now it was so noticeably upon him that he was either constrained, absent or too painstakingly voluble.

"And how is Olive?" she asked in an awkward interval. "He's with you, of course?"

Ponape Burke assented. "Sort of in charge aboard," he explained. "I ain't got a mate. Still talking about you; yer name and yer—red hair."

The boat rounded the stern and then the girl looked up to find—as if his eyes had never ceased to follow—the grinning stare of the man Olive fixed upon her just as it had faded out at Honolulu.

His great naked body rose above the rail and a thick bare arm came extending itself down toward her, inexorably.

The square fingers closed and her own hand was swallowed, disappeared in that grip clear to the wrist. There came a pull, as if the arm were to follow the hand in, and then Palmyra found herself on deck and standing free.

Johannsen had already clambered to the deck.

"We got t'keep four boats moving," Burke explained. "One pulling ashore empty, one loading there, one coming out with cargo, one discharging here. Each o'yer boats' crews'll bring me a load and take back an empty at once. I'll clear the boat y'leve."

So now, you Rainbow boys, t'start her off, pass up the stuff in my own boat and take her ashore, while my kanakas tackle the launch."

The girl's voice rose in surprise: "Oh, but they're not going already?"

Burke looked, grinning, from her to the naked savages of his crew. "Sort o' wild like, eh?" he asked.

But Johannsen reassured her: "I'm ordered to stay, miss."

Burke shot him a glance. "Sure." Then to the other two: "Johannsen'll tinker up the motor so, next trip, the launch won't have t'be pulled in."

A minute later the boat had cast off and the sailors were settling to their work. Johannsen, watching them, stood negligently at the rail.

"Handle her gently, boys," called Burke. "She's getting old."

The boat was now clear by perhaps ten fathoms.

Suddenly Ponape Burke, with an agility unexpected in that plump body, leaped forward and lunged at the unsuspecting Johannsen's back. The next second the sailor was in the water.

Burke whirled, whipped out an order, sprang to the wheel. The kanakas worked like mad. Another order and the Pigeon of Noah was under way.

The man at the wheel burst into that tittering laugh of his, now strained, false, sharp-edged with excitement, exultation.

"Remember, girl?" he cried. "Below on the Rainbow—night black? Wanted t'scare 'em a bit, says you? Pirates, bucket o' blood?" his laugh rose into a crow of triumph. "Well, kid, what about this here? Give 'em a hell of a startle, eh Palmie?"

As the Lupe-a-Noa filled away, the girl ran to the rail and sent over the water a frantic cry.

In the boat the two sailors sat, rigid, their oars poised. The red face of Johannsen emerged from the sea, dripping, blank with incredulity, convulsed with anger. Ponape Burke's stratagem had deprived them of the launch in which they could have overhauled the schooner.

Ashore, the castaways stood perplexed, alarmed. Palmyra's action, rather than her voice, threw them into panic. They pointed, shouted, and here and there, futile, absurd.

To Van Buren Rutger rushed the girl's mother with something in her hands. It was a rifle. As one of his accomplishments, Van had won trophies on the range. But now, confronted by that violence his training had taught him never touched the life of a gentleman, he faltered, palsied in a fear of wounding the girl herself.

Then John Thurston snatched the rifle. There was a flash and a bullet struck the Lupe-a-Noa, shattering the glass on the binnacle. A second flash, and Burke himself staggered back.

But before the schooner could fall off, he clutched the wheel again with one hand. As his left arm hung, the spot of blood, spreading slowly on the white cotton, was like some brilliant blossom.

Burke bellowed his rage. He had swung the vessel over so that Palmyra, all unaware, stood in the line of fire. Thurston could not shoot again.

At this triumph, Burke regained his good humor. The wound had proved unimportant. "John's the only man in that bunch," he conceded amiably. "If he was stealing my girl I'd give him more than a sore arm."

Palmyra was desperate. Behind her, hand closed on an iron belaying pin. "You—you brute!" she cried. "Turn—this—vessel—back. Turn it back instantly!"

She jerked the pin from its socket; took a step toward him, her eyes aflame. "You go back to that island..."

From behind, a hand closed on her wrist. Olive, grinning, took the belaying pin from her fingers, as if they had been a baby's, and returned it to the rack.

Palmyra sank against the cabin, helpless.

Not by accident had the Pigeon of Noah risen from the sea upon the scene of their disaster. Back in the days before Honolulu this spider of a Burke had spun his web. He had talked of the atolls in the terms of a paradise until the voyagers were eager to behold. He had convinced Pedersen that, to take advantage of prevailing winds and current, he must lay his course from Honolulu first to the northern Gilberts—Bataritari or Apaiang—and thence make north and west into the Marshalls and the Carolines.

Burke had followed, then, holding back the yacht's pace. Fortune had favored.

Informed as to the lagoons they would make, their order, he had meant to outcall them to an anchorage and, lying there unsuspected, to seize the girl at some favorable moment ashore.

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