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CHAPTER XV QUARREL QUELLED

The captain acted at lightning speed. He shot between the two men, swerved and grasped Howe's hand. For a second or so they struggled, Crockett making no move to separate them. Then there was a cry of pain and the knife clattered to the deck. Wicks released Howe, who backed to the rail, nursing his injured wrist.

"Flick that knife up, Crockett!" Wicks ordered.

The man obeyed willingly enough. "Now drop it over the side."

Howe moved slightly as though to protest, but Wicks glared savagely at him and he drew back again.

Crockett, grinning broadly, threw the knife over the side and spat after it. Then he returned to the captain.

"Anything else, sir?" he asked.

Wicks looked him full in the face. "Pick the cards up," he commanded.

Crockett hesitated, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Pick them up!" Wicks repeated.

"What do I have to do with them, sir?" Crockett asked.

"That's my business. Pick them up."

For a few seconds the two men stared at one another, then Crockett stooped down and gathered the cards together. He glanced at them and then looked at the captain.

"Give them to me," Wicks ordered.

"They're mine!" Howe cried out.

Wicks made no comment. He reached out and took the pack from Crockett. He shuffled them thoughtfully and then looked at the man again.

"You played with these?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Crockett.

"More fool you. They're marked."

Crockett took a deep breath and then turned to Howe, who cringed against the rail.

"You dirty cheat!" he cried. "That proves it!"

"Be quiet!" Wicks snapped. He moved over and flung the cards away. They scattered and spread out as they reached the water. Soon they were left astern floating bravely for a short time before they vanished from sight.

"It wasn't my fault!" Howe exclaimed.

"They were the only cards we had. I didn't mark them. They were marked when I had them. We had to play with something!"

Wicks turned to Crockett.

"That will teach you to be more careful," he said briskly. "I'm not having trouble on board this ship. Time enough for that sort of thing when we reach our destination. You'd better get to work cleaning some of the brass. It will occupy your mind. I'll deal with Howe."

Crockett hesitated for the fraction of a second and then nodded his head.

"Very good, sir," he said, and moved away.

Wicks swung round and faced Howe.

"You'd better come below," he said quietly. "I'll put that wrist right for you. Come along!" He raised his voice sharply as Howe drew back.

He swung around and went towards his cabin, Howe following him sheepishly.

Peter, at the wheel, was thoughtful. It seemed to him that Gallop was right. Wicks had made a mistake in letting the men have some of the money. It was causing trouble already. This was only the first part of the quarrel. What would happen when Crockett and Howe came face to face once more.

But, surprisingly enough, there was no further trouble. Wicks made no reference to the incident, and neither of the men said anything about it to Gordon.

"It's been hushed up, wonderfully," Gallop confided. "I couldn't have managed it half as well myself. To give Wicks his due he can be exceedingly smart."

"He's smart enough," Peter declared. "He suspects you of plotting against him."

Gallop lit his pipe. This talk, like most of the others, took place in the tiny cabin which they shared.

"Of course, he suspects," he said. "He suspects me and I suspect him. You'll find it will become very difficult to balance on top of the fence much longer. One of these days there is going to be a show-down." He chuckled. "I'll lay a bet with you that I have the strongest hand when that day comes," he added.

"It doesn't look that way to me," Peter told him.

Gallop winked at him.

"I may have one or two cards up my sleeve," he hinted.

Peter nodded his head.

"That's always possible," he agreed.

"Main trouble is that Wicks may have similar ideas."

Gallop refused to answer. Peter stayed with him for a time and then went on deck. Wicks was on the bridge and Crockett was in the bows polishing up some brass work. It was getting late in the afternoon and there was a slight breeze which brought a refreshing coolness to the trawler.

"WOMAN IS ALWAYS A WOMAN"

Alla was aft, near the dinghy, leaning over the port rail and gazing into the distance. Peter joined her. She glanced up at him with a smile of welcome.

"It makes you feel almost afraid," she said thoughtfully. "There's so much sea. Doesn't it ever make you wonder if there is such a thing as the land? It seems to me that it may be something of which I dreamed years ago. Probably a long way back in another life."

Peter put a hand on her shoulder.

"I thought that when a woman became a captain she was all efficiency—from head to toe."

"Not so loud! Somebody might hear. I'm only a cook—and not a very good one at that. But you have strange ideas about women who do things. A woman is always a woman—at heart. You can't rely on change—not any more than you can change the sea."

Peter sighed.

"That was a sigh of relief!" he hastened to say. "I was afraid that you might be very different—especially after all your training."

"I went to sea because I was a wanderer, I suppose. But I haven't found what I want yet. Have you ever chased a dream? Not? Of course you haven't. You wouldn't do things like that. I expect you only believe in things if you can actually see them marked on a chart."

"Not always then!" Peter said with a laugh. "But I think I should like to know a bit more about chasing dreams. Will you tell me about it? It sounds a fascinating game to me."

Alla smiled at him and shook her head.

"You'll have to do it on your own," she said. "I expect you could manage it all right."

Gallop came on deck and joined them. He scowled at Peter, who gave no indication that he noticed it.

"Going to have good weather for some days yet," Gallop said loudly. "I'm glad. Being tossed up and down like a cork isn't good for engines—not even the best engines. Mind you—these aren't so bad. But I don't expect that I shall

have much more to do with them. I'm going to lead a different life after this. I always have wanted to settle down and do things the right way."

"Have you always been at sea?" Alla asked him.

Peter frowned. He thought the question unnecessary.

"Most of my life," Gallop said. "Always with engines, mind you. I was brought up to believe that a man should specialize in order to get on in this world. Up to now I've believed it."

"Then you do not feel so sure?" Alla questioned.

"I begin to feel uncertain," Gallop said. "I'm afraid that there are one or two things I've rather neglected."

Peter could not resist the opportunity of giving him a sly dig.

"Navigation being one of them?" he asked innocently.

Gallop scowled at him, and then grinned.

"Maybe. But I was thinking more of the social arts—if that's what they call them. A man ought to be able to do a lot of things. He should be moderately well educated. But it's hard to keep up with learning. It seems to me that each generation gets to know a sight more than the one before it. There isn't any standing still in life."

After a time he went away.

Alla moved slightly nearer to Peter.

"I feel a bit afraid of him at times," she said. "He's so big and strong. But I believe that I'm even more afraid of the captain, for all his pleasant manners when he speaks to me."

"They're both villains," said Peter in an uncompromising tone. "It would give me great pleasure to get them both arrested. And they know it."

"Which is rather a pity," Alla commented.

"I suppose I should have managed things better. But I didn't know what on earth to do. I can't trust either of them, so I thought my best plan was to admit it. It has made them both take considerable pains to win me over. But I'm still on the fence, despite all their efforts."

"The worst of fences is that they can be pushed over very easily," Alla said wisely.

Peter was going to ask her just what she meant, but it went four bells and it was time for him to relieve Wicks on the second dog-watch.

Wicks gave him the bearing and then hesitated.

"Has Gallop been talking to you?" he asked suddenly.

"He came aft when I was having a word with the cook," Peter replied diplomatically.

"I thought so. Crockett told me about it. We've got to keep an eye on that man, Mr. Drew. He's after my gold and your girl. I still think a partnership is suggested."

"I'll think it over," Peter promised him.

"IT'S A BOAT"

There were no further developments until they reached latitude 45 W, bearing due west in order to come up to the coast of Venezuela. The hands were heartily sick of the constant expanse of sea and the blistering heat. They were anxious for a spell ashore in order to be able to spend some of the gold and to have a good time. The nearer the trawler drew to the land the more impatient they became. Discipline was relaxed considerably, and it was by no means unusual for one of the men to come up on the bridge in order to find out the distance to the nearest land.

Wicks became rather grave.

"I don't like it," he confessed to Peter. "They haven't the sense to realize that we must keep as far away from Georgetown as we can. I think we'd better give them false information from now on."

"But you've taught Crockett a bit about navigation," Peter reminded him. "Do you think it will be possible to deceive him? I feel doubtful about it."

Wicks shrugged his shoulders.

"We shall have to try it," he said thoughtfully. "It's a good thing that he's the least troublesome. I notice that Gordon is getting nearly as impatient as Howe."

"It's a wonder they've stood so well," Peter observed. "Especially as they've had the gold to think about. That quarrel didn't help matters either."

Wicks cocked his head on one side.

"I don't worry about that," he said. "My concern is to keep them with us. They might take it into their heads to have a shot at pinching the gold and then make off in the dinghy. If they start scrapping among themselves I shall not bother to stop them. We can get along all right without one of them, anyway."

Peter knew that the captain was thinking of Howe, and he frowned.

"We may need them all," he said shortly.

Wicks hesitated before replying.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted. "There's plenty of time for us to run into dirty weather. Has Gallop had much to say for himself of late?"

Peter shook his head.

"Very little. He seems morose over something. The only subject about

which he will talk is the engine room." Wicks smiled.

"I don't think he's making good progress with the Russian girl," he said.

Two days later something happened which brought fresh worries on the shoulders of both Wicks and his mate. It was during the forenoon watch that Howe was in the bows sang out that he had sighted something on the port bow. Peter was on the bridge and he used his glasses in order to try and make out what Howe had seen.

Howe came running to him and he ordered him to take the wheel. The object which the man had sighted was being pitched up and down on the waves. It took Peter some seconds before he was able to focus it. Then, with a thrill of excitement he realized that it was a small boat.

"It's a boat!" he snapped. "We'll alter course and see if anybody is in her."

Howe scowled, but relinquished the wheel. Peter rang to the engine-room for full speed, an act which brought Wicks on deck within a few minutes.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"We sighted a boat about a mile away on the port bow," Peter explained. "She's right ahead now and about half a mile away. So far as I can tell there isn't anybody at the oars."

Wicks scowled and tugged at his beard. He took the glasses from Peter and focussed them on the small boat. It was carried up on the top of a wave. He lowered the glasses slowly and turned to Peter.

"There isn't anybody in her," he said gruffly. "You're off course, Mr. Drew.

I suggest that you remedy the defect." Peter looked him full in the face.

"In of the opinion, sir, that there is somebody in the boat," he remarked. "I feel that we ought to make certain before we alter our course again."

Wicks glared at him.

"I'm the captain of this ship," he said very quietly.

"I am aware of that," Peter told him. "That's why you must go nearer to that boat. As a captain you have to bear the responsibilities of your position."

Wicks shuffled uncomfortably.

"I'm aware of my responsibilities," he said sourly. "And I am also aware that I have some gold on board. We don't know if there is anybody in that boat—but if so, we do not want to add to our worries. You'll do as I tell you, Mr. Drew—or else leave the bridge."

Peter gripped the wheel firmly.

"I'm going to do what I think is my duty," he snapped.

Wicks took a step forward.

"Your duty is to obey orders!" he exclaimed. "You will leave the bridge at once."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Peter retorted.

Wicks flashed a hand towards his pocket. Peter knew what was his intention. Leaving the wheel he struck out at the captain. Wicks, groping for his gun, was at a disadvantage. The blow caught him on the chin and he staggered, lost his balance and fell. Alla, attracted by Howe's cry of amazement, ran to the bridge and took the wheel which was spinning over. Peter

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knelt by the side of Wicks and took the revolver from his pocket.

The captain, spluttering with anger, regained his feet. At first it seemed that he would dash forward, but he realized that Peter had the weapon pointing at him.

He glared for a moment, then forced a smile.

"It seems that you win," he observed. He glanced at the girl. "And it also seems that you know how to handle the wheel," he commented.

"Do we pick up the occupants of the boat?" Peter asked him.

Wicks shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid I have no option," he announced. "You'd better go ahead, Mr. Drew. I shall be in my cabin if you want me."

"Very good, sir," Peter said, giving the order for the engines to go at half-speed.

Alla glanced at him as Wicks left the bridge.

"It looks like open war from now on," she said quietly.

"I'm afraid so," Peter agreed. "He has another revolver tucked away somewhere. But he's hardly likely to give trouble just yet." He passed the revolver to her. "I think it might be better for you to have this," he said thoughtfully. "I shall expect you to rescue me if things become difficult. Alla took it from him.

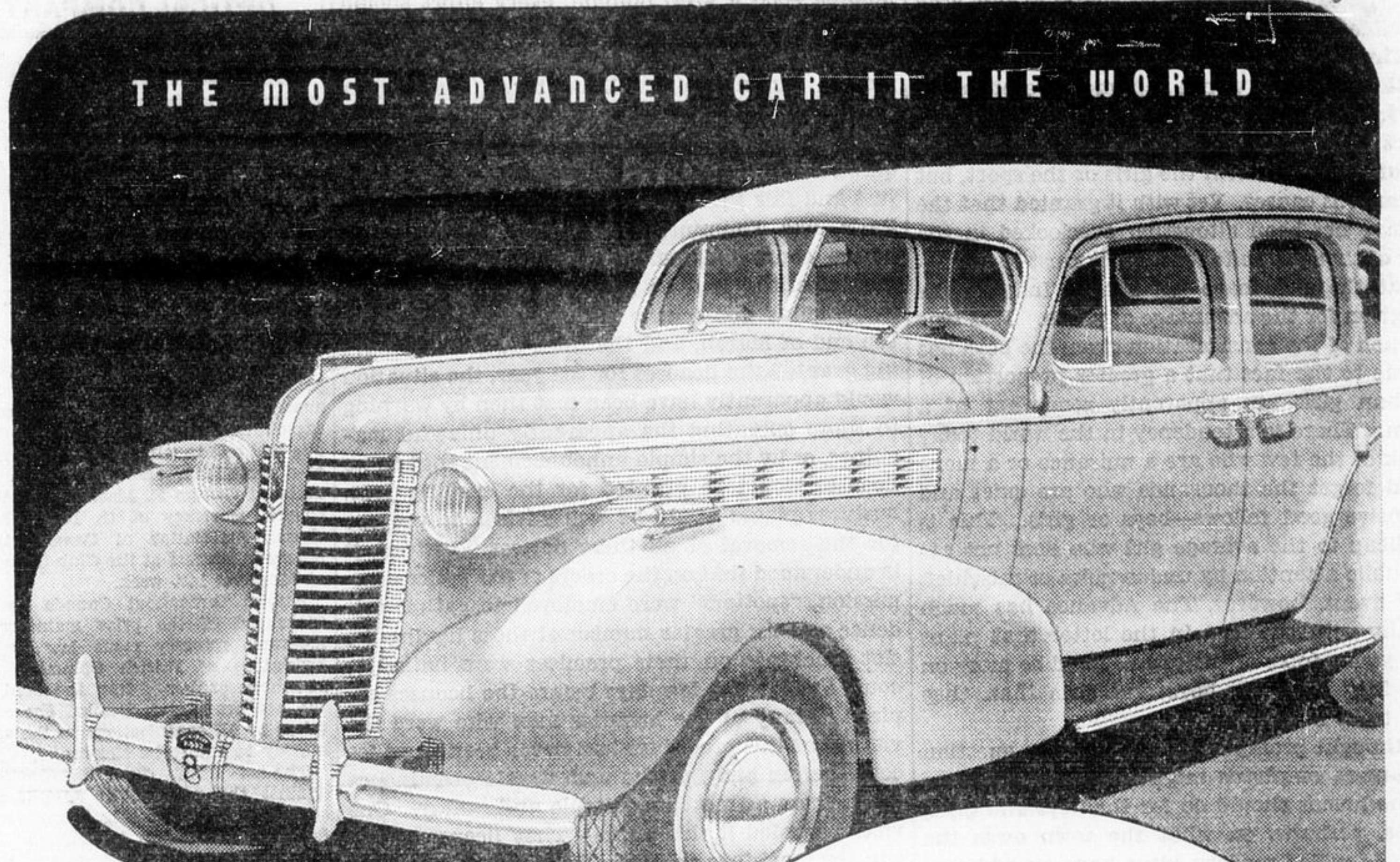
"It is a wise plan," she agreed. "Now what about this boat?"

"They were much nearer to the small craft. She raised the glasses and looked intently through them. Then she turned to Peter.

"There are three men in the thwarts," she informed him. "They are waving to us."

"Will you take the wheel again?" Peter asked. "I'll go and supervise picking them up."

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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