

# The SABLE LORCHA

By  
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SYNOPSIS.

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Phillip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The first prominent salient of the writer's power is a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the latter is in the room. Clyde has a theory that the portrait was mutilated while the work was under way. The head has been removed by means of a string, unnoticed by Cameron. Evelyn Grayson, Cameron's niece, with whom Clyde is in love, finds the head of Cameron's portrait nailed to a tree, with the string having been used as a target. Clyde pledges Evelyn to secrecy. Clyde learns that a Chinese boy employed by Phillip Murphy, an artist living nearby, had borrowed a rifle from Cameron's lodger, and had been killed. He pretends to be investigating alleged infractions of the game laws and speaks of finding the bowl of an opium pipe under the tree where Cameron's portrait was found. The Chinese boy is found dead, having been shot while visiting Cameron in his dressing room. A Nell Gwynne mirror is mysteriously shattered. Cameron becomes seriously ill as a result of the shock. The third letter appears muted only on Cameron's back. It makes direct threats against the life of Cameron. Clyde tells Cameron the envelope was empty. He gives Evelyn everything and plans to take Cameron on a yacht trip. The yacht picks up a man who is drifting helplessly in a boat. He gives the name of Johnson. Cameron disappears from yacht while Clyde's back is turned.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

"There's no other explanation," he decided, conclusively.

"You mean he committed suicide?"

"Call it what you like, sir."

"But there was no reason for him to do such a thing," I objected.

"I understand he's been pretty ill, sir."

"He was ill, yes. But he was on the road to recovery." And then, with the realization that I was speaking of Cameron in the past tense, as though it were already settled that I should never see him alive again, a shiver of horror swept over me. I know MacLeod observed it, for he said:

"There's been a drop in the temperature, in the last half-hour. It'll be more comfortable in my cabin, sir, if you don't mind coming in, and talking the thing over a bit."

"Good Heavens, MacLeod," I exclaimed, turning on him with nervous savagery, "do you expect me to sit down and talk calmly at such a moment? I can't. It's all I can do to stand still here, for a minute at a time. I feel I must do something. It's torture to have one's hands tied this way."

"I think I know how you feel, sir. But walking the deck will do no good, and if you could calm yourself enough to talk it over quietly, we might get down to something that would guide us, so to speak."

"Guide us?" I repeated.

"Yes, sir. It's not impossible, you know, sir, that when he went overboard he was picked up."

The light from his cabin porthole illuminated us both, and now as he looked at me he must have seen my perplexity.

"You said yourself, sir," he explained, "that you thought you heard the exhaust of some sort of craft not far away."

It was this reminder, I think, which brought back my wool-gathering wits and steadied me to a perception of the real importance of the captain's plea. Of one thing, at least, I was assured: Cameron was not a suicide. How he could have gone over the taffrail with out my seeing or hearing him, I should never be able to understand. But gone he was, and it lay upon me to discover by whose assistance this marvelous disappearance was accomplished. And so it came about that, controlling my futile unrest, I was presently seated in MacLeod's swivel chair, while he, from a place on the side of his berth, fired pointed questions at me, which I either answered as best I could or returned in kind.

"Now, maybe it's none of my business, Mr. Clyde, but in view of tonight's occurrence I think it's pertinent to know why there was such a thorough inspection of the Sibylla before we sailed, and such a lot of care regarding the crew." That was the first of his volley, and for a moment it staggered me. I recognized, however, that this was not a time for quibbling, and as MacLeod had been for years a staunch soldier in Cameron's army of employees, I saw no harm in letting him know the truth.

"I'll tell you," I returned, frankly, "but it's not to go any further. In the past nine weeks Mr. Cameron has been receiving a series of threatening anonymous letters. The last one came a week ago today; and in it this was named as the date for the climax."

"Climax?" he repeated, questioning.

"Yes. Today, the letter stated, Mr. Cameron would disappear."

The calm, phlegmatic young captain did not start. He simply narrowed his eyes in thought.

"That's odd," he said, gravely, "damned odd." And then, after a second's consideration, he asked: "Was that—but of course it was—why he took this cruise?"

"No," I told him. "That was not his reason; though it was mine."

I did not mean to be enigmatic, but I suppose I was, for MacLeod showed

plainly enough that he failed to understand.

"You see," I went on, in elucidation, "Mr. Cameron did not know about this last threat. He was ill when the letter came, and we kept it from him."

It was evident to me that the captain disapproved, but he held his peace.

"What were the previous threats?" he asked, presently.

"Nothing definite," I answered. "Simply that on certain fixed days the writers would demonstrate their power."

"And did they?"

"Most marvelously."

Again MacLeod was silent for a space.

"Under the circumstances, Mr. Clyde, don't you think it would have been better if you'd told me about this?"

"Mr. Cameron was very anxious that no one should know."

The captain compassed his right knee with his locked hands.

"All the same," he said, "he'd never have been spirited off this yacht if I'd a known what was in the wind."

This statement annoyed me, and I resented it.

"What could you have done?" I asked. "I was with him almost continuously."

There came a strange, half-meditative, half-bold look in the man's eyes, and I was wondering what it portended, when, quite ignoring my question, he began speaking:

"You see there oughtn't to be any misunderstanding between you and me, sir. This is too serious a business to be bungled because I am only captain of this yacht and you are the owner's friend. So, if I speak plainly, sir, you'll understand why, and not think me disrespectful!"

I smiled to reassure him, still puzzled, and added:

"Go straight ahead, captain. You are perfectly right."

"Well," he began, "I'll tell you, Mr. Clyde. Your story, as you told it to me, has some weak points in it. You say, for instance, that you were with Mr. Cameron, almost continuously. Now I'm not mentioning the little while you were in here, early in the evening, but during the last quarter of an hour before you gave the alarm, you weren't with him, either."

I stared at the speaker for an instant in absolute dumb amaze.

"I don't know why you say that," I said, at length, more hurt than angered. "I told you that from the moment I last spoke to him, seated beside him there on the after-deck, until I turned from the rail and found him gone—not more than two minutes elapsed. And that was God's truth."

"You said you were listening for what you thought sounded like a motor boat, didn't you?"

"Did."

"And you were leaning over the taffrail, looking for it, weren't you?"

"I was."

"But you didn't see it?"

"No, I didn't see it; and I couldn't hear it after the first few seconds."

The captain had fixed a gaze on me that seemed aimed to penetrate to my soul's fiber. After my answer he was silent a moment. Then he said:

"Where were you, Mr. Clyde, when that boat—motor, tug, or whatever she was—was crossed within ten feet of the dory we are towing?"

Had he struck me in the face I could not have been more dumfounded.

"What do you mean?" were the only words that came to me.

"I mean that the craft you have been talking about came up and went astern of us, ten or twelve minutes before you gave the alarm that Mr. Cameron had vanished under your eyes. I was on the bridge and saw it myself—just a black shape, without lights, and her exhaust muffled, just as you say. You tell me that you and Mr. Cameron had been sitting there for three hours, at least; that you heard seven bells strike; that it was not more than fifteen or twenty minutes after this that you got up and went to the rail, and that you only stood there two minutes."

"I told you all of that, and every word is the truth," I insisted, vehemently.

"And yet," he retorted accusingly, "and yet—eight bells had struck before you gave the alarm."

I had not thought of the time. In my panic it had not occurred to me, of course to ascertain the hour and minute. But Captain MacLeod knew. At sea they work by clock. At eight bells the watch had changed.

"My dear fellow," I exclaimed rising, "you certainly cannot for a moment suspect me of complicity."

He stood up, too; imperceptible.

"I just want those things explained, that's all," was his reply.

"And I can't explain them," I told him candidly. "You say you saw the boat. I didn't. You say it was after midnight when I came to you. It may have been. I don't know. It may have been nearer twelve, when I

went to the rail. My impression is that it was not. I'll admit it is mysterious. The whole awful thing is mysterious."

My candor seemed to relieve him. "Well, Mr. Clyde," he said, with equal sincerity, "maybe I was outspoken, but I wanted to know what you'd say to the points that were puzzling me."

"You did perfectly right," I told him. "As you have said, there must be no secrets between us." And then, as I resumed my seat, I asked: "What about the fisherman? He hasn't evaded his guard, has he?"

MacLeod sat down again too. "He's in where I put him now," he answered with a shade of reluctance, "but—I'm not sure; it's almost as mysterious as the other—but I could have sworn I saw him come up that for'ard hatchway and go sneaking aft while I was on the bridge."

"When was that?" I pressed, eagerly. "About a quarter of twelve."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, just then. I waited. And while I was waiting I saw that black, spooky craft come out of the dark, and go skimming astern of us. A little after eight bells I came down from the bridge—I stopped there for just a minute to have a word with Brandon when he came up—and then I went myself to look after Johnson and the man I'd set to watch him. The fisherman was in a bunk sound asleep, and the man swore he had been lying there snoring, for the past two hours. Who was it came up the ladder twenty minutes ago?" I asked. He looked at me as if he thought I was gone suddenly loony. "Before the watch changed?" he asked. I nodded. "Not a soul came or went," he said, "since I been here."

"And the boat without lights?" I questioned. "Did you inquire about her? Who else saw her?"

"I asked the lookouts; but—well, no, sir—and that's very strange to me—neither of them saw her. I gave them both a rating. If they weren't asleep I don't see how they could have missed her."

The thing was growing more and more baffling. MacLeod was the last man to be accused of imaginative fancies. He was thoroughly in earnest in what he had told me; and yet for neither of his statements had he the smallest corroboration. For my own part I was sure that, at the time he mentioned, no vessel of any description had passed anywhere near us.

"What did you make the craft out to be?"

"Well, sir, I couldn't say exactly. She was in sight only a minute, coming in range of our own lights. She looked more like a tug than anything else; but she had more speed than any tug I ever saw. She hadn't the lines of a yacht."

"She wasn't a pilot boat?"

"Oh, no, sir. New York pilots don't cruise this far east, and the Boston pilots wouldn't be so far away from home either."

I offered the captain a cigar, which he declined; filling his pipe in preference. When I lighted a cigar myself, I asked:

"I suppose you have some theory, MacLeod. You don't seriously think it was suicide?"

As usual he was slow to answer. After thoughtful second, he said:

"I'd be sorry to think that, Mr. Clyde. Taking into consideration what you told me about the threat, and connecting that boat with it, it looks—and then he paused, thoughtfully again. "It's not in possibility," he went on, after a second, "that they could have plucked him off with a line. But if that fellow I saw going aft—Oh, Lord, no, sir! It's past me to see a way out. All the same, we are keeping that craft in sight, and if we can only get thirty knots out of the Sibylla again, we'll find out what she is and what her business is, before morning."

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