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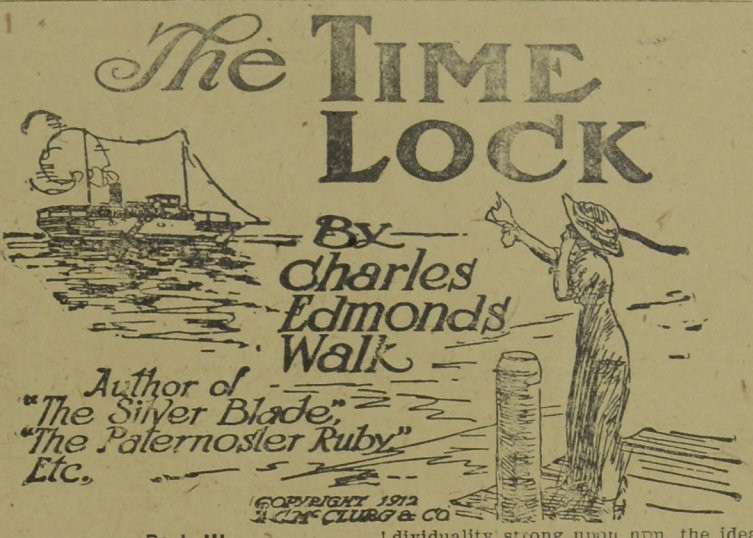
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Book III.

CHAPTER I—Tom Phinney gets a job as master of Brownlow's yacht Kohinur which has been chartered for some mysterious mission.

CHAPTER II—The charterer and his friends board the yacht at night and Tom hears the voice of the unknown girl and also of a man involved in his adventure of a few nights previous.

CHAPTER III—Tom finds the girl more beautiful than he had anticipated. The charterer turns out to be Max Willard.

CHAPTER IV—Willard assures Tom that his mission is honorable and intimates that a great wrong is about to be righted. He gives orders that no one is to leave or board the yacht without his permission. Della, the girl of the voice, insists upon going ashore and while Tom is explaining his orders Callis jumps overboard.

CHAPTER V—With Willard's consent Della goes ashore to telephone and returns to the yacht in great agitation.

CHAPTER VI—Tom accompanies Della and Jessie Willard ashore. Tom learns from Detective Flint that Willard has recently invented a powerful explosive.

CHAPTER VII—Van Vechten, recovering from injuries received in his fight with Callis, is visited by Jessie Willard, in whom he recognizes the girl who was the cause of the fight. He declares his love for her. She tells him that if his feelings have not changed one week from that day she will marry him.

CHAPTER VIII—A coffin-shaped box is taken aboard the yacht at night. Della tells Tom she really is Paige Carew and that she has been interested in him for years through the glowing accounts of Van Vechten.

CHAPTER IX—The coffin-shaped box is taken away in the night, apparently much heavier than when it arrived. Paige Carew is missing and a search of the yacht fails to reveal any clue to her whereabouts.

"Him-m-m-m," Cornelius mused, "that makes my position a bit difficult, doesn't it?"

"Not particularly so. All you have to do is play fair. If anything crooked shows up you can count on my assistance. But the orders are strict about going and coming, and you couldn't expect me to make an exception of you, Flint or anybody else. On my side, I shall say nothing to Willard about you."

Cornelius picked up both bill and letter, returning the first to his pocket and tearing the second into tiny bits.

"Flint will be all up in the air over not hearing from me," he remarked; "but if I can't, I can't. You have the dead-wood on me now. Have you any idea what was in that box they brought aboard last night?"

"Not the slightest," returned Tom. "It looked a whole lot like a coffin." Tom filled and lighted his pipe, while Mr. Cornelius sat and watched him intently. As the same idea had occurred to the first-named, he could not disprove it now. Cornelius broke the silence.

"Coffins, you know, are only used when there are dead people to put in them. Any cadavers around here that you've noticed?"

"You're a nice cheerful chap, believe me," retorted Tom. "No, there are none. It can't be Callis, because he's getting well—saw him less than an hour ago."

"Just suppose," Cornelius went on meditatively, "that Willard is expecting somebody to die—at a given time, say—"

"Hang it all!" Tom cut in. "You don't think the man is plotting deliberate murder, do you?"

Cornelius did not say what he thought. He sat considering.

"Well," he said at last, rising, "I guess I'll have to take your word for it that everything is all right until I see different. But a coffin!"—he shook his head dubiously—"it don't look good to me." Whereupon he took his departure.

Shortly after nightfall Tom saw Willard and the man Cornelius board the launch and go ashore, and he watched them with a quickened sense of anticipation.

"If that sleuth is worth a darn," he reflected, "now is his chance to get word to Flint."

He did not witness their return, but about an hour later he had a glimpse of Cornelius and one of the other young men, garbed in soiled and worn overalls and jumpers, like a pair of stevedores.

Somewhere around half-past nine, the coffin-shaped box once more appeared.

But now, instead of two men, all four of Willard's retainers were carrying it. Indeed, it would scarcely be too much to say that they staggered with it, so heavy had it grown, and so marked was the contrast between the ease and indifference with which it had been brought aboard, and the extreme caution with which it was being handled now.

Willard's patent explosive flashed into Tom's mind. After all, was it not possible that he was about to perpetrate some appalling disaster, and that Paige and Jessie had been won over to whatever extreme mistaken principles he justified his conduct by, so that they believed them to be right and him minded? With an imminent sense of the man's powerful individuality strong upon him, the idea, hideous as it was, was not altogether impossible.

Willard was himself superintending the box's conveyance with such anxious regard and solicitude that Tom's misgivings swept over him again, intensified a hundredfold.

With no clearly defined purpose in mind, he involuntarily stepped up to the gangway, as they began to negotiate the difficult descent of the accommodation-steps.

"You need more help there, don't you?" he demanded.

Willard barred his progress with a suddenly extended arm.

"No, no," he returned quickly. "These men have been carefully instructed; they know just what to do and how to do it."

Nevertheless it was with a disquieting feeling of apprehension that he watched the long box lowered carefully into the launch, which was immediately cast off and allowed to drift with the current into the darkness before the motor was started. None of the crew accompanied it on this trip, and as once before, it went down-stream instead of across to the landing.

What was the meaning of it all, anyhow? What strange operations were going on in his very presence that he should remain so ignorant of them?

He walked aft to the taffrail, upon which he leaned and stared into the night at the point where the launch had vanished, until roused by a touch upon his arm and the voice of Jessie Willard. She spoke with an agitation that had an electrifying effect upon him.

"Captain Phinney, do you know where Miss Carew is?"

"Why, I haven't seen her all evening," he returned. "I supposed she was in her room—or with you?"

The girl all at once seemed to shrink with a sudden unnerving fear. "She's not in her room!" she cried. "I thought she was, but she has not been. Neither have I seen her—since dinner." There was a pause.

"Didn't she go ashore?" Jessie presently faltered.

"No," Tom replied.

How long the ensuing silence lasted, while they stood staring helplessly into each other's eyes, and by degrees realized the significance of the girl's absence, neither of them afterwards ever knew.

They first looked into every likely place that might conceal a girl, terror and dread growing with each step that brought nothing to light. Tom scarcely noted an elderly lady who joined them and in a soothing manner, tried to compose the almost hysterical girl.

As for Tom, he was from the very first torn with an awful, unspeakable fear, but he acted with a dispatch and directness that left no possibility neglected.

Their own hurried but nevertheless quite thorough search proving ineffective, all hands were called, and the Kohinur had such a fine-combing as must have brought to light the smallest of lost articles, to say nothing of a young lady.

Then, in disregard of express instructions, both search-lights were brought into play, which explored with fingers of dazzling light every inch of the river's surface for miles downstream, while all the Kohinur's boats plied hither and thither in the quest.

But it was all of no use; not the slightest trace of the missing girl was

to be found. Yet Jessie, with her elderly companion, hoping in the face of despairing certainty, watched and waited until the last boat returned.

The girl's overwrought nerves gave way as Tom, haggard and almost frenzied, approached. Clinging to the other woman, she sank weakly into a deck-chair, her body convulsed with sobs.

"Aunt Jo," she gasped, "we must tell Mr. Phinney—everything."

"Yes, yes, we must tell him—take him fully into our confidence," she returned. "But you must try to compose yourself, my dear. Captain Phinney will assist you to your room."

"Oh, Aunt Jo! Aunt Jo!" moaned Jessie. "We shall never see her again! I can't stand it! Papa, oh, why—" The words were lost in a sudden uncontrollable fit of weeping.

At this juncture Tom was awakened from his hopeless lethargy, by a hail from the river. He ran to the head of the accommodation-steps, where Mercer was parleying with some one in a boat.

"Who is it?" demanded Tom brushing his first mate aside.

"That you, Phinney?" a familiar voice came up out of the darkness.

"This is Flint."

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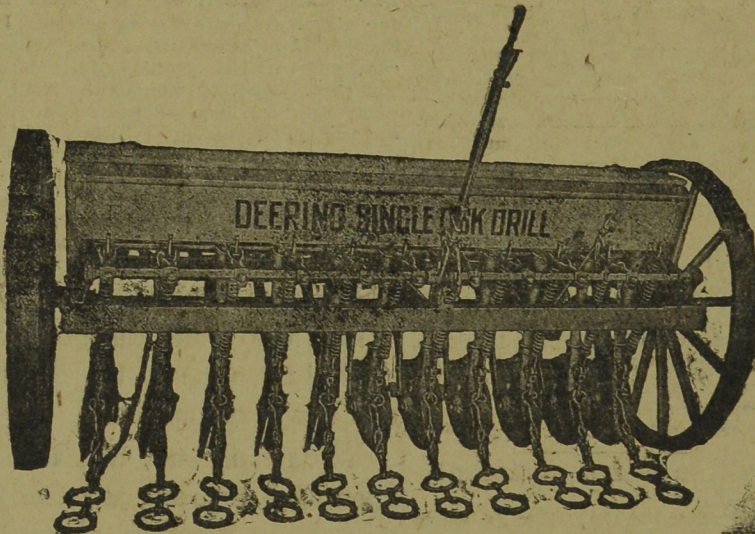
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