

Earl Derr Biggers



The Black Camel

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CHAPTER I

Morning at the Crossroads

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The Pacific is the loneliest of oceans, and travelers across that rolling desert begin to feel that their ship is lost in an eternity of sky and water. But if they are journeying from the atolls of the South Seas to the California coast, they come quite suddenly upon a half-way house. So those aboard the *Oceanic* had come upon it shortly after dawn this silent July morning. Brown misty peaks rose from the ocean floor, incredible, unreal. But they grew more probable with each moment of approach, until finally the watchers at the rail were thrilled to distinguish the bright green island of Oahu, streaked with darker folds where lurk the valley rains.

The *Oceanic* swung about to the channel entrance. There stood Diamond Head, like a great lion—if you want the time-worn simile—crouched to spring. A crouching lion, yes; the figure is plausible up to that point; but as for springing—well, there has never been the slightest chance of that. Diamond Head is a *kamaaina* of the islands, and has long ago sensed the futility of acting on impulse—of acting, as a matter of fact, at all.

A woman traveler stood by the starboard rail on the boat deck, gazing at the curved beach of Waikiki and, up ahead, the white walls of Honolulu half hidden in the foliage behind the Aloha Tower. A handsome woman in her early thirties, she had been a source of unending interest to her fellow passengers throughout that hot monotonous voyage from Tahiti. No matter in what remote corner of the world you

have been hiding, you would have recognized her at once, for she was Shelah Fane of the pictures, and hers was a fame equal to that of any president or king.

"A great piece of property" film salesmen had called her for eight years or more, but now they had begun to shake their heads. "Not so good. She's slipping." Golden lads and lasses must, like chimney-sweepers, come to dust, which is something the film stars think about when they can not sleep of nights. Shelah had not been sleeping well of late, and her eyes, as they rested on peaceful Tantalus with its halo of fleecy cloud, were sad and a little wistful.

She heard a familiar step on the deck behind her and turned. A broad, powerful, keen-looking man was smiling down at her.

"Oh—Alan," she said. "How are you this morning?"

"A bit anxious," he replied. He joined her at the rail. His was a face that had never known Klieg lights and make-up; it was deeply lined and bronzed by tropic suns. "Journey's end, Shelah—for you at least," he added, laying his hand over hers. "Are you sorry?"

She hesitated a moment. "Rather sorry—yes. I shouldn't have cared if we had just sailed on and on."

"Nor I." He stared at Honolulu with the bright look of interest that comes naturally to British eyes at sight of a new port, a new anchorage. The ship had come to a stop at the channel entrance, and a launch bearing the customs men and the doctor was speeding toward it.

"You haven't forgotten?" The Britisher turned back to Shelah Fane. "This isn't journey's end for me. You know I'm

leaving you behind here to-night. Sailing out at midnight on this same ship—and I must have your answer before I go."

She nodded. "You shall have it before you go. I promise."

For a brief moment he studied her face. A marked change had crept over her at the sight of land. She had come back from the little world of the ship to the great world whose adoration she expected and thrived on. No longer calm, languorous, at peace, her eyes were alight with a restless flame, her small foot tapped nervously on the deck. A sudden fear overwhelmed him, a fear that the woman he had known and worshiped these past few weeks was slipping from him for ever.

"Why must you wait?" he cried. "Give me your answer now."

"No, no," she protested. "Not now. Later to-day." She glanced over her shoulder. "Were there reporters on the launch, I wonder?"

A tall, handsome, hatless youth with a mop of blond hair waving in the breeze rushed up to her. His energy was a challenge to the climate.

"Hello, Miss Fane. Remember me? Met you when you went through here on your way south. Jim Bradshaw, of the Tourist Bureau, press-agent of beauty, contact man for Paradise. Our best aloha—and here's a lei to prove it." He hung a fragrant garland about her neck, while the man she had called Alan moved quietly away.

"You're awfully kind," Shelah Fane told him. "Of course I remember you. You seemed so glad to see me. You do now."

He grinned. "I am—and besides, that's my job. I'm the door-mat on the threshold of Hawaii, with 'welcome' written

all over me. Island hospitality—I have to make sure that my advertisements all come true. But in your case, I—well, believe me, it isn't any strain." He saw that she looked expectantly beyond him. "Say, I'm sorry, but all the newspaper men seem to be lingering in the arms of Morpheus. However, you can't blame them. Lulled as they are by the whisper of the soft invigorating trade-winds in the coco-palms—I'll finish that later. Just tell me what's doing, and I'll see that it gets into the papers. Did you complete the big South Sea picture down in Tahiti?"

"Not quite," she answered. "We left a few sequences to be shot in Honolulu. We can live here so much more comfortably, and the backgrounds, you know, are every bit as beautiful——"

"Do I know it?" the boy cried. "Ask me. Exotic flowers, blossoming trees, verdant green hills, blue sunny skies with billowy white clouds—the whole a dream of the unchanging tropics with the feel of spring. How's that? I wrote it yesterday."

"Sounds pretty good to me," Shelah laughed.

"You'll be some time in Honolulu, Miss Fane?"

She nodded. "I've sent for my servants," she told him. "They've taken a house for me on the beach. I stifle in hotels—and then, too, people are always staring at me. I hope it's a large house——"

"It is," Bradshaw cut in. "I was out there yesterday. They're all set and waiting for you. I saw your butler—and your secretary, Julie O'Neill. Speaking of that, some day I'd like to ask you where you find secretaries like her."

Shelah smiled. "Oh, Julie's much more than a secretary. Sort of a daughter—almost. Though of course that's absurd to say, for we're nearly the same age."

"Is that so?" said the boy—to himself.

"Julie's mother was a dear friend of mine, and when she died four years ago, I took the child in. One must do a good deed occasionally," she added, modestly looking down at the deck.

"Sure," agreed Bradshaw. "If we don't we'll never be tapped for the Boy Scouts. Julie was telling me how kind you've been——"

"I've been amply repaid," the star assured him. "Julie is a darling."

"Isn't she?" replied the boy heartily. "If I had my rhyming dictionary along, I'd give you a good description of the girl right here and now."

Shelah Fane looked at him suddenly. "But Julie got in only two days ago——"

"Yes—and so did I. Made a flying trip to Los Angeles, and came back on the same boat with her. The best crossing I ever had. You know—moonlight, silver seas, a pretty girl ——"

"I must look into this," said Shelah Fane.

Two of the passengers joined them: a weary, disillusioned-looking man whose costume suggested Hollywood Boulevard, and a dashing girl of twenty. Shelah yielded to the inevitable. "Mr. Bradshaw, of the Tourist Bureau," she explained. "This is Miss Diana Dixon, who is in my new picture, and Huntley Van Horn, my leading man."

Miss Dixon lost no time. She sparkled instantly. "Honolulu is an adorable place. I'm always so thrilled to come here—such beauty——"

"Never mind," cut in the star. "Mr. Bradshaw knows all that. None better."

"Always happy to have my ideas confirmed," bowed the boy. "Especially from such a charming source." He turned to the man. "Mr. Van Horn—I've seen you in the films."

Van Horn smiled cynically. "So, I believe, have the natives of Borneo. Has Shelah told you anything about our latest epic?"

"Very little," Bradshaw replied. "Got a good part?"

"It always has been a good part," Van Horn said. "I trust my rendering of the rôle will not impair its future usefulness. If it does, many of our leading studios will have to close. I'm a beach-comber, you see, and I've sunk lower and lower ——"

"You would," nodded the star.

"I'm wallowing in the depths, and quite comfortable, thank you," went on Van Horn, "when—if you can believe it—I'm saved. Absolutely rehabilitated, you know, through the love of this primitive, brown-skinned child."

"Which child?" asked Bradshaw blankly. "Oh, you mean Miss Fane. Well, it sounds like a great plot—but don't tell me, don't tell me." He turned to the star. "I'm glad you're going to take a few shots in Honolulu. That sort of thing makes us very happy at the Tourist Bureau. I must run along—one or two other celebrities on the ship. Fellow named Alan Jaynes—very wealthy——"

"I was talking with him when you came up," Shelah said.

"Thanks. I'll go after him. Diamond mines—South Africa—he sounds good. We're strong for the arts in Hawaii, you know, but as for money—well, when that appears in the harbor, then we really get out the flags. See you all later."

He disappeared down the deck, and the three picture people moved over to the rail.

"Here comes Val," said Huntley Van Horn, "looking like the man who wrote the tropics."

He referred to Val Martino, director of Shelah's latest picture, who was rapidly approaching along the deck. He was a short, stocky, gray-haired man, dressed in a suit of immaculate white silk. Above a flaming red tie loomed his broad heavy face. It was almost the same shade as the tie, suggesting that Mr. Martino had never concerned himself with such trivial matters as blood pressure and diet.

"Hello," he said. "Well, here we are. Thank heaven, Tahiti has been attended to. From this on, I'll take my tropics after they've been ruined by American plumbing. Was that a newspaper man you were talking with, Shelah?"

"Not precisely. A boy from the Tourist Bureau."

"I hope you laid it on thick about the new picture," he continued. "You know, we'll need all the publicity we can get."

"Oh, let's forget the picture," returned the star a bit wearily.

The *Oceanic* was drawing slowly up to the pier, on which a surprisingly meager crowd was waiting. Shelah Fane gazed at the group with interest and some disappointment. She had rather hoped for a vast throng of schoolgirls in white, bearing triumphal leis. But this had happened when

she went through before; she could not expect history to repeat itself—and it was, too, only seven in the morning.

"There's Julie," she cried suddenly. "There—near the end of the pier. See—she's waving." She returned Julie's signal.

"Who's that beside her?" Van Horn inquired. "Good lord—it looks like Tarneverro."

"It is Tarneverro," Miss Dixon said.

"What's he doing here?" the leading man wondered.

"Perhaps he's here because I sent for him," said Shelah Fane.

A quiet black-garbed maid stood at her side. "What is it, Anna?"

"The customs men, madam. They're going through everything. You'd better come. They want talking to, it seems."

"I'll talk to them," said the star firmly, and followed the maid into her suite.

"Well, what do you know about that?" Van Horn remarked. "She's sent for that phony fortune-teller to come all the way from Hollywood——"

"What do you mean, phony?" cut in Miss Dixon "Tarneverro is simply wonderful. He's told me the most amazing things about my past—and about my future, too. I never take a step without consulting him—and neither does Shelah."

Martino shook his great head impatiently. "It's a rotten scandal," he cried, "the way most of you Hollywood women have gone mad over voodoo men. Telling them all your secrets—some day one of them will publish his memoirs,

and then where will you be? A few of us try to lift the industry to a dignified plane—but, oh, lord—what's the use?"

"No use, my dear fellow," said Van Horn. He looked across the intervening stretch of water at the tall lean figure of the fortune-teller. "Poor Shelah—there's something rather touching in such faith as this. I presume she wants to ask Tarneverro whether or not she shall marry Alan Jaynes."

"Of course she does," Miss Dixon nodded. "She wants to know if she'll be happy with him. She cabled Tarneverro the day after Jaynes proposed. Why not? Marriage is a serious step."

Martino shrugged. "If she'd only ask me, I'd read her future quick enough. She's nearly through in pictures, and she ought to know it. Her contract expires in six months, and I happen to know—in strict confidence, you understand—it won't be renewed. I can see her taking a long journey by water then—going abroad to make a picture—the beginning of the end. She'd better grab this diamond king quick before he changes his mind. But no—she's fooling round with a back-parlor crystal-gazer. However, that's like you people. You won't grow up." He walked away.

The formalities of the port were quickly ended, and the *Oceanic* docked. Shelah Fane was the first down the plank, to be received by the eager arms of her secretary. Julie was young, impetuous, unspoiled; her joy was genuine.

"The house is all ready, Shelah. It's a knockout. Jessop is there, and we've found a Chinese cook who's a magician. The car's waiting."

"Really, dear?"

The star looked up into the dark deep-set eyes of the man at Julie's side. "Tarneverro—what a relief to see you here. But I knew I could depend on you."

"Always," said the fortune-teller gravely.

What the crowd lacked in numbers, it made up in noise and confusion. Anna, the maid, was overwhelmed with boxes and bags, and seeing this, Tarneverro went to help her. There was no condescension in his manner; he treated her with the same courtly grace he would have shown the star.

Alan Jaynes and Bradshaw appeared on the scene. The latter went over to greet Julie with as much warmth as though he had just arrived after a long hard voyage from some distant port. Jaynes stepped quickly to Shelah's side.

"I shall be damnably anxious," he said. "This afternoon—may I come then?"

"Of course," she nodded. "Oh—this is Julie—you've heard about her. Julie, please tell him the number of our house. We're just beyond the Grand Hotel, on Kalakaua Avenue."

Julie told him, and he turned back to Shelah. "I shan't keep you——" he began.

"Just a moment," said the star. "I want to introduce an old friend from Hollywood. Tarneverro—will you come here, please?"

The fortune-teller handed a couple of bags to Shelah's chauffeur, and came at once. Jaynes looked at him with some surprise.

"Tarneverro—I want you to meet Alan Jaynes," the star said.

They shook hands. "Glad to know you," remarked the Britisher. As he gazed into the other man's face, he experienced a sudden sensation of deep dislike. Here was power; not the power of muscle, which he had himself and could understand; but something more subtle, something uncanny, inexplicable and oddly disturbing. "Sorry, but I must dash along now," he added.

He disappeared into the crowd, and Julie led them to the waiting car. Tarneverro, it appeared, was stopping at the Grand, and Shelah offered to drop him there.

Presently they were bowling along through Honolulu's streets, under a flaming blue sky. The town was waking to another leisurely day. Men of many races languidly bestirred themselves; at the corner of King Street a boy offered the morning paper, and a fat brown-skinned policeman lazily turned a stop-go sign to let them pass. Shelah Fane, like all passengers newly descended from a ship at this port, felt rather dazzled by the brightness and the color.

"Oh, I shall enjoy this," she cried. "I've never stayed here longer than one day before. What a relief to be out of the South Seas."

"But they're romantic, aren't they?" Julie asked.

"The illusions of youth," the star shrugged. "I shan't destroy them. Only don't mention Tahiti to me again as long as I live."

"Not quite like the books," Tarneverro nodded. He sat, mysterious even in that bright world, at Shelah's side. "I discovered that for myself, long ago. You're staying here for some time, I take it?"

"A month, I hope," the star answered. "A couple of weeks still to go on the picture, and then, I trust, a fortnight's rest. I want it badly, Tarneverro. I'm tired—tired."

"You need not tell me that," he said. "I have eyes."

He had, indeed, eyes; eyes that were cold and piercing and rather disquieting. The car sped on past the old royal palace and the judiciary building, and turned off into Kalakaua Avenue.

"It was so good of you to come over here," Shelah told him.

"Not at all," he replied evenly. "I started the day after I got your cable. I was due for a vacation—my work, you know, is not precisely restful. Then, too, you said you needed me. That was enough. That will always be—enough."

Julie began to chatter about the islands: she mentioned the warm caressing waters of Waikiki, the thrill of haunting native music in the purple night, the foreign pageant of the streets.

"All of which," smiled Shelah, "sounds very much to me like James Bradshaw in one of his more lyric moods."

Julie laughed. "Yes, I guess I was quoting Jimmy. Did you meet him, Shelah?"

"I met him," the star nodded.

"He's really very nice," Julie assured her. "Especially when he isn't talking shop."

The pink walls of the Grand Hotel appeared at that moment through a network of majestic palms, and Shelah directed the chauffeur to turn in at the gates.

"I must talk with you very soon," she said to Tarneverro. "I have so much to ask you. You see——"

He raised a slim white hand. "Don't tell me, please," he smiled. "Let me tell you."

She glanced at him, a little startled. "Oh—of course. I need your advice, Tarneverro. You must help me again, as you have helped me so often in the past."

He nodded gravely. "I shall try. With what success—who knows? Come to my apartment at eleven o'clock—it is number nineteen, on the first floor. There is a short flight of stairs leading to my corridor just at the left of the hotel desk as you enter. I shall expect you."

"Yes, yes." Her voice was trembling. "I must settle this thing to-day. I'll be there."

Tarneverro bowed from the hotel steps, and as the car drove off Shelah was conscious of Julie's frank young eyes fixed on her with a disapproval that was almost contempt.

The head bell-man touched Tarneverro's sleeve. "Excuse. There is a man who waits to see you. This one."

The fortune-teller turned to perceive a bulky Chinese who approached him with an amazingly light step. The ivory face was wearing a somewhat stupid expression; the black eyes were veiled and sleepy-looking. Not a very intelligent Chinese, Tarneverro thought, wondering vaguely what this visit presaged.

The Oriental placed one hand on his broad chest, and achieved a grand bow despite his waist-line.

"A thousand pardons," he remarked. "Have I the undisputable honor to address Tarneverro the Great?"

"I am Tarneverro," answered the other bruskiy. "What can I do for you?"

"Permit that I introduce myself," continued the Chinese, "unworthy of your notice though I am. The name is Harry Wing, and I am humble business man of this island. Do I extend my remarks too far when I say I wish to see you alone?"

Tarneverro shrugged. "What for?"

"The matter is of pressing urgency. If I might suggest—your room——"

The fortune-teller gazed for a moment into that placid mask of a face, behind which life seemed nonexistent. He capitulated. "Come along," he said. Obtaining his key at the desk, he led the way.

Once inside the door of number nineteen, he turned to confront his odd visitor, who had followed on noiseless feet. The curtains of the sitting-room were drawn back as far as they would go, and the place was flooded with light. With his customary forethought, Tarneverro had selected an apartment on the mountain side of the hotel, and a restless cool wind from the Koolau Range swept in at the window and stirred the papers lying on a desk.

The countenance of the Chinese was still without expression, even under the piercing scrutiny the fortune-teller now gave it.

"Well?" said Tarneverro.

"You are the famous Tarneverro," began Harry Wing in a respectful singsong. "Among Hollywood people you have vast reputation as one who lifts dark veils and peers into uncertain future. Black as lacquer that future may be to

ordinary eyes, but to yours, they say, it is clear as glass. Permit me to add this reputation pursues you even to Hawaii, dogging like shadow at your heels. The rumor of your mystic skill floods the street."

"Yes?" put in Tarneverro shortly. "What of it?"

"I am, as I say, business man of small importance to everybody but myself. Now I begin to speak to you frankly that opportunity arouses itself in my path. I can amalgamate my business up together with that of my cousin from a north province. Future looks bright, but qualms assail me. Will the merge have success? Is my cousin honorable as cousin of mine should naturally be? Can I trust him? In fewer words, I desire dark veil lifted, and you are man to do the business. I stand ready to make generous payment for this lifting."

Tarneverro's eyes narrowed, and for a long time he stood staring at this unexpected customer for his wares. The Chinese waited motionless as a Buddha, with his hands in his trousers pockets, his coat thrown back. The fortune-teller's glance rested for a moment at a point just below the fountain-pen pocket on his visitor's waistcoat.

"Impossible," he said, with sudden decision. "I am here on a vacation, not to practise my profession."

"But rumor remarks," objected the other, "that you have already done work with crystal——"

"For one or two of the hotel managers—as a friendly gesture," Tarneverro cut in. "I received no fee of any sort. I will not do this kind of thing for the general public."

Harry Wing shrugged. "The matter then becomes sad disappointment for me," he answered.

A grim smile spread over the seer's dark face. "Sit down," he said. "I have spent some time in China, and I understand how great is the interest of your people in fortune-tellers. So for a moment, while you were telling me why you came, I thought you were speaking the truth."

The visitor frowned. "I am now rapidly failing to understand you."

Still smiling, Tarneverro dropped into a chair facing the Oriental. "Yes, Mr.—ah—er—Wing, I believe you said—momentarily I was deceived. And then a certain little gift of mine came to my aid. You have been kind enough to speak of my success. I have succeeded—why? Because I happen to be psychic, Mr. Wing——"

"Chinese people are psychic, too."

"Just a moment. As I stood there listening to you, a psychic wave swept over me. I had a feeling—a feeling of—what? Of stern men who sit in police stations and are sworn to enforce the laws. Of detectives pursuing evil-doers, landing them at last—and then, a court of justice, so-called, a learned judge. That, my friend, is the feeling I had. Rather amazing, don't you think?"

His visitor's expression had lost suddenly all its stupidity. The little black eyes snapped with admiration.

"Amazing smart act on your part, yes. But as for me, I do not think it was psychic feeling. A moment ago I beheld your eyes resting with fierce understanding on locality of my own waistcoat from which detective badge was recently removed. The pin has left indelible marks. You are number one detective yourself, and I congratulate you."

Tarneverro threw back his head and laughed. "*Touché!*" he cried. "So you are a detective, Mr.—er——"

"The name is Chan," said the bulky Chinese, grinning broadly. "Inspector Chan, of the Honolulu police—former times Sergeant, but there has been upheaval in local police department, and I am rewarded far beyond my humble merits. Trap which has just failed so flatly, I add in justice to me personally, was not my idea. I informed Chief it would not work unless you happened to be extreme dull-wit. Since you turn out clever beyond expectation, it did not. No bitter feelings. I pause only to call attention to local ordinance which says men like you must not practise dark arts in this town without obtaining permission. A word being spoken to the wise, I rise to accomplish my exit."

Tarneverro also stood up. "I am not going to practise among your townspeople," he announced. He had dropped the tense air of mystery which he evoked for the benefit of film stars, and seemed quite human and not unlikable. "It has been a pleasure to meet you, Inspector. As for my own detective prowess, I may say in confidence that it is rather useful in my work."

"Must be so," returned Chan. "But such skill as yours should be at service of public. Frequently in Los Angeles murder mystery leaps into print and never gets solved. I study them all with fiery interest. The Taylor case—what an amazing happening was there—*haie*, it is still mystery. And case of Denny Mayo, famous actor of handsome countenance, dead in his home at night. How many years—three and more—and Denny Mayo is still unavenged by Los Angeles police."

"And never will be," added the fortune-teller. "No, Inspector, that is not in my line. I find it safer to dwell on the future and soft-pedal Hollywood's past."

"In such course, wisdom may abide," agreed Chan. "None the less, how happily I would welcome your aid if some such worrisome puzzle stared into my face. I will say good-bye, Mr. Tarneverro. Memory of your cleverness will linger in my poor mind for long time to come."

He slipped quietly out, and Tarneverro glanced at his watch. With a leisurely air, he placed a small table in the middle of the room, and taking from a bureau drawer a gleaming crystal, stood it thereon. Then he stepped to the window and drew the curtains part way across, shutting out a goodly portion of the bright light outside. Glancing about the darkened room, he shrugged his shoulders. Not such an impressive stage-setting as his studio in Los Angeles, but it would have to serve. Sitting down by the window, he took out of his pocket a bulky letter and, slitting the flap of the envelope, began to read. The curtains, caught in the fierce grip of the trade-wind, swirled about his head.

At eleven o'clock Shelah Fane knocked on the door, and he ushered her into his sitting-room. She was gowned in white and appeared younger than she had at the dock, but her eyes were clouded with worry. Tarneverro's manner was professional now; he was cold, remote, unsympathetic. He seated her at the table behind the crystal; then, drawing the curtains all the way, plunged the room into almost complete darkness.

"Tarneverro—you must tell me what to do," she began. He sat down opposite her.

"Wait," he commanded. He looked fixedly into the crystal. "I see you standing at the rail on the boat deck of a steamer, under a brilliant moon. You are wearing a dinner gown—it is gold and matches your hair. There is a scarf of the same color about your shoulders. A man is standing at your side; he points, and offers you a pair of glasses. You raise them to your eyes—you catch the last faint glimmer of the lights along the front at Papeete, the port from which you sailed a few brief hours ago."

"Yes, yes," murmured Shelah Fane. "Oh, Tarneverro—how do you know——"

"The man turns. I can see him only dimly, but I recognize him. To-day, on the pier—Alan Jaynes—was that his name? He has asked you a question—marriage, perhaps—but you shake your head. Reluctantly. You want to say yes—yet you don't. You put him off. Why? I feel you love this man."

"I do," the star cried. "Oh, Tarneverro—I really do. I knew him first at Papeete—only a week—but in a place like that——The first night out—it was just as you say—he proposed to me. I haven't given him my answer yet. I want to say yes—to have a little happiness now—I've earned it, I think. But I——I'm afraid——"

He lifted his piercing eyes from the crystal. "You're afraid. Something in your past—you fear it will return to haunt you——"

"No, no," the woman cried.

"Something that happened long ago."

"No, no—it isn't true."

"You can not deceive me. How long ago? I can not quite determine, and it is necessary that I know."

The trade-wind mumbled at the curtains. Shelah Fane's eyes wandered helplessly about the darkened room, then came back to Tarneverro's.

"How long ago?" the man demanded again.

She sighed. "Three years ago last month," she said in a voice so low he had to strain to hear.

He was silent for a moment, his mind racing like an engine. June—three years ago. He gazed fixedly into the crystal; his lips moved. "Denny Mayo," he said softly. "Something about Denny Mayo. Ah, yes—I see it now."

The wind tore the curtains apart, and a wide strip of dazzling light fell across Shelah Fane's face. Her eyes were staring, frightened.

"I shouldn't have come," she moaned.

"What about Denny Mayo?" Tarneverro went on relentlessly. "Shall I tell you—or will you tell me?"

She pointed to the window. "A balcony. There's a balcony out there."

As one who humors a child, he rose and looked outside. He came back to the table. "Yes, there's a balcony—but no one is on it."

He sat down again, and his bold commanding eyes sought hers. She was trapped, and helpless.

"Now!" said Tarneverro the Great.

CHAPTER II

The House on the Beach

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After a brief twilight, the dark sweeps over Waikiki Beach like Old Man Mystery himself. In the hours before the moon, like a climbing torch, ascends the purple sky, the sense of hearing comes into its own. Blackness covers the coco-palms, yet they may be heard rustling at the trade-wind's touch; the white line of the breakers is blotted out, yet they continue to crash on that unseen shore with what seems an added vigor. This is night in the real sense of the word, intriguing, awe-inspiring, but all too short, for the moon is waiting an early cue.

A solitary floor lamp was burning in the huge living-room of the house Shelah Fane had rented at Waikiki. The paneled walls, the furniture and the floor, all fashioned of rare native woods, gleamed faintly in the half-light; the green of exotic plants was everywhere. The French windows that faced the street were closed, but those on the ocean side, leading on to a great screened lanai, stood wide, and through them at regular intervals came the roar of the surf, which was running high.

Shelah Fane came into the room. She walked with a quick nervous step, and in her eyes was a look of apprehension—almost of terror. It was a look that had been there ever since her return from that interview with Tarneverro in his apartment at the Grand Hotel. What had she done? She asked this of herself over and over. What had she done? What was the secret of this dark man's power that he had

so easily dragged from the inner recesses of her mind a story she had thought safely buried for ever? Once away from the strange influence of his presence she had been appalled at her own indiscretion. But it was too late then for anything save regret.

With her unerring instinct for the spotlight, she sat down under the single lamp. Many cameras had clicked in Hollywood since that distant time when, like a rocket, she had flashed into the picture sky, and nowadays the spotlight was none too kind to her. Kind to her hair, yes, which seemed to spring into flame, but not so considerate of the lines of worry about her eyes, about her small tense mouth. Did she know? Longer than most rockets she had hung blazing in the sky; now she must endure the swift lonely drop in the dark.

Her butler, Jessop, came in, a spare elderly Englishman who had also found in Hollywood the promised land. He carried a florist's box. Shelah looked up.

"Oh, Jessop," she said. "Did Miss Julie tell you? The dinner hour is eight-thirty."

"I understand, madam," he answered gravely.

"A few of the young people are going for a dip before we dine. Mr. Bradshaw for one. You might show him to the blue bedroom to dress. The bath-houses are dark and need cleaning. Miss Julie and Miss Diana will dress in their rooms."

Jessop nodded, as Julie came in. The girl wore an afternoon gown, and her face was innocent of make-up. She was enthusiastic, happy, young—a touch of envy darkened the star's fine eyes.

"Don't you worry, Shelah," Julie said. "Jessop and I have planned everything. It will be like all your parties—a knockout. What's that, Jessop? Flowers?"

"For Miss Fane," explained the butler, and handing the box to the girl, left the room.

Shelah Fane was looking about her, a frown on her face. "I've been wondering, Julie. How in the world can I arrange a good entrance on the party, in a place like this? If only there were a balcony, or at least a broad flight of stairs."

Julie laughed. "You might come suddenly through the lanai, strumming a ukulele and singing a Hawaiian song."

The star took her seriously. "No good, my dear. I'd be entering on the same level with the guests, and that is never effective. To make the proper impression, one must appear suddenly from above—always remember that, darling. Now, in Hollywood——"

The girl shrugged. "Oh, just come in naturally for once, Shelah. There's a lot in novelty, you know." She had torn the cord from the box of flowers, and now she lifted the lid. "Lovely," she cried. "Orchids, Shelah."

The star turned, without interest. Orchids were nothing new in her life. "Nice of Alan," she said languidly.

But Julie shook her head. "No," she announced, "they're not from Mr. Jaynes, evidently." She read the card aloud. "'With love from one you have forgotten.' Who could that be, Shelah?"

"Who couldn't it be?" smiled the star a bit wistfully. She rose with sudden interest. "I wonder—let me see the card." She glanced at it. "'With love from one——'" Her eyes

lighted with quick understanding. "Why, it's Bob's writing. Dear old Bob! Just fancy—with love—after all these years."

"Bob?" inquired the girl.

Shelah nodded. "Bob Fyfe—my first and only husband, dear. You never knew him—it was long ago. I was just a kid, in the chorus of a musical show in New York, and Bob was an actor, a legitimate actor—such a good one, too. I adored him then, but along came Hollywood, and our divorce. And now—with love—I wonder? Can it be true?"

"What's he doing in Honolulu?" Julie asked.

"Playing in stock," Shelah replied. "Leading man at some theater here. Rita Ballou told me all about him, this morning when I called her up." She took the orchids. "I shall wear these to-night," she announced. "I never dreamed he would even speak to me. I—I'm touched. I'd like to see Bob again." A thoughtful look crossed her face. "I'd like to see him at once. He was always so kind, so clever. What time is it—oh, yes——" She glanced at a watch on her wrist. "Seventy-two. What was the name of that theater? Rita told me. The Royal, I think she said—"

The door-bell rang briskly, there ensued a snappy bit of dialogue in the hall and Jimmy Bradshaw burst through the curtains. He was, it seemed, in a light-hearted mood.

"Here we all are," he cried. "Everybody who really matters. Well, Miss Fane, how does it feel to be foot-loose and care-free on a palm-fringed shore—way down in the warm southern seas?"

"It's really very restful," Shelah smiled. She nodded at Julie. "I'll be back in a moment. I want a pin for these flowers."

She disappeared into the hall, and Bradshaw turned quickly to the girl.

"You're looking great," he cried. "It's the climate. Not that you didn't look fairly good at the start——"

"Tell me," she cut in. "What do you think of Shelah?"

"Shelah?" He paused. "Oh, she's all right. Nice and friendly but—a bit artificial—a good actress, on and off. In the past two years I've met enough screen stars to start a Hollywood of my own, and what I always say is—doffing my hat to southern California—you can have 'em."

"You don't really know Shelah," protested the girl.

"No, I guess not. She's been kind to you, and that makes her aces up with me. But my own preference in women—and I've looked very carefully over the field——"

"Oh, you have, have you?"

"My ideal—since you've asked me, and I'm glad you have—is a rather different sort. Lovely, of course, young, innocent, ingenuous—and pretty crazy about yours truly. That—and you may quote me freely—is the girl for me."

Diana came suddenly through the curtains. She, too, still wore an afternoon gown.

"Hello, big boy," she said. "You ready for that swim with me?"

"Sure," replied Bradshaw. "With you—and anybody else who wants to come along." He looked at Julie. "Let's go. Before the moon rises is my idea. It's the best time. Any one else going—or is it just—the three of us?"

Julie shook her head. "No one else, I guess. The others are afraid of spoiling their make-up."

"Which is one advantage of youth over doddering age," the boy returned. "Well, come along——"

Shelah appeared, wearing the orchids on her shoulder.

"Just about to dip into the world-famed waters of Waikiki," Jimmy informed her. "Won't you join us?"

"Some other evening," she told him. "You know, I'm hostess to-night."

"You are missing," said Bradshaw impressively, "one of the thrills of a lifetime. The silken surf beating on coral sand, the dark, star-strewn sky above, perhaps the pastel loveliness of a lunar rainbow—boats run from Los Angeles and San Francisco once a week, and the fare is within the reach of all——"

The door-bell rang again. Accompanied by Shelah, the young people went out into the hall.

"Get your suit," Julie said to the boy. "I'll show you where to change. Let's make it a race. The first one into the water gets a prize."

"I'll win it," answered Bradshaw. "I'll name it too." They clattered up the polished stairs.

Again the bell sounded. Shelah was just beside the door, but she did not open it; she considered such an act beneath the dignity of a star. Instead she returned to the living-room and waited for Jessop to do his duty. After a brief delay, he did it, and two new guests appeared in the living-room. Shelah advanced to meet them—a dark, rather faded woman of thirty, followed by a big blond man who had an air of nonchalant authority.

"Rita Ballou," the star cried. "Why—it's ages! And Wilkie—I'm so glad."

"Hello, darling," said the woman she called Rita.

The man came forward. "Look here, Shelah. What time did you say dinner was to be?"

"Eight-thirty—but it doesn't matter——"

Ballou turned to his wife. "Good lord—can't you ever get anything straight?"

"What's the difference?" the woman replied. "We can have a chat with Shelah before the others come." She turned to the star. "So sorry we missed you when you went through before. We were on the mainland."

"Haven't missed you this time, thank heaven," added Wilkie Ballou. "By gad, you're as blooming as ever."

"How *do* you do it?" inquired Rita sweetly. Her cold eyes flashed green with envy as she looked at Shelah.

"She's found the fountain of youth," suggested Wilkie admiringly.

"I've always heard that was in Hawaii," smiled the star. She looked hard at Rita. "But it isn't," the look added.

Rita understood. "Not at all," she said grimly. "It's in the beauty shops of Hollywood, and you know it. Over here, women fade quickly——"

"Nonsense," protested Shelah.

"Yes, they do. Oh—I've learned my lesson—too late. I should have stayed in Hollywood and gone on with my career."

"But, my dear,—surely you're happy with Wilkie?"

"Of course. The way I would be with the tooth-ache."

Wilkie shrugged. "Overlook it, Shelah," he said. "We've been rowing all the way out here. Rita's nerves, you know."