

THE SARGASSO SEA.

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TO make anything like a proper, coherent tale of this extraordinary business, I must piece together, as if it were for a patchwork quilt, odds and ends and ill-related fragments that I have got from many sources. Part of the story I had from Sol Saradine, the Jew who wears gold earrings, and was Drury's mate on both voyages, part I had from the log of the *Aida*, part from Drury's diary, which he called his private log, other parts from certain neighbours of Margaret Inch at Fairford, and the rest I have had to fill in from imagination, though that is but stray bits here and there—connecting links, if you like.

Still, I mean to give you, as well as I can, all the essentials, holding back nothing that matters, save one thing—the bearings of that spot, away to the south in the Sargasso Sea, where two bare masts slant up above the heaving weed, and a fortune lies below. The latitude and longitude of that infinitesimal speck upon the waste are known to me, and will never, I think, be forgotten, but I have promised Sol Saradine that no one else shall know them, and no one else ever shall. That I swear.

Those drowned doubloons have done harm enough already.

After an absence of twenty years, during which time he had sailed all the seas of this world, and traded in most of the ports thereof, Abner Drury came back to Fairford, the sleepy fishing village of his birth. He came standing upon the white deck of the big schooner *Aida*—but he pronounced it "Ada"—of which he was master and owner, for he had prospered in these twenty years; and he had in his pocket a chart, hand-drawn on parchment, annotated in several different scripts, both Spanish and English. It looked very much like other buried treasure charts, even to the age-browned ink and the occasional

rusty spots that might have been blood-stains; and the bearings set down in one corner of the parchment were the latitude and longitude of a theoretical pin-point in the Sargasso Sea.

Drury came to Fairford like Diogenes, looking for an honest man, only, more exigent than the Greek cynic, he wanted two men instead of one. To be plain, there is reason to believe he expected to find his nephew, young Piers Drury, whom he had never seen, but whom he knew he had adopted the profession of diver; and, further, he wanted a mate who should be at once intelligent, trustworthy, and acquainted with gasoline propulsion, for the *Aida* was equipped with an auxiliary engine.

This paragon he discovered almost at once in Sol Saradine, the Jew who wore gold earrings; but young Piers, who, contrary to his uncle's expectation, did not live in Fairford, but out Gloucester way, was busy about his own work, and couldn't turn up for ten days.

On the second day, Drury seems to have made an important discovery. A girl-child whom he quite possibly may have seen toddling about Fairford twenty years before had grown to womanhood. Drury saw her leaning over the gate of her front garden, stopped to stare, and presently asked one of her neighbours who she was.

I have seen a photograph of Margaret Inch taken by an itinerant "artist," which, judging from supplementary verbal description, I believe to have been a ghastly libel. Still, not even the best efforts of this wandering criminal could quite disguise the girl's grave beauty. I don't wonder Abner Drury stopped to stare, not though he was past forty, and reckoned a hard man. I know little about his early life, but I have never heard that women had any part in it, and it is my guess that they never had.

In any case, the middle-aged sailor seems to have been, as the phrase goes, "hard hit," and to have made no effort to disguise it.

The girl's part in this suddenly initiated romance is less easy to reconstruct. She was,

they tell me, very gentle and sweet, tender with children, an angel of mercy in the sick-room, universally beloved, but incredibly silent about her own thoughts and affairs. She was alone in the world, her father having been lost at sea long back, and her mother dead these two years—no brothers, no sisters. So, as you see, it is little I know of Miss Inch's feelings towards Abner Drury at this period, save that she certainly allowed him to spend a great deal of his time in her fragrant garden, where the pinks and sweet-williams and mignonette and larkspurs grew, or on the shady porch of the little house, whence, looking down the green hill, you saw the masts of the fishing-boats in the harbour, and the *Aida* among them.

He can hardly have been, I should think, the figure to evoke romantic fancies in a maid—a square, middle-aged man, with a square face and a scrubby beard that was beginning to grey. He had no humour at all, and I was going to say no imagination, but I take that back. Unimaginative men do not go a-seeking Spanish treasure. Also, I mind what Sol Saradine said of him—that Drury was a species of volcano—what he really said was “sleeping dog”—and when roused was terrific. I think women scent that sort of thing in men, and like it, on the ground that it promises excitement, and generally fulfils its promise.

On the tenth day, young Piers Drury turned up in answer to his uncle's summons, and on the fourteenth the *Aida* set sail for the south. Four days is a brief period of time, but in a far briefer there may be, as Sol Saradine says, “the devil to pay.”

And yet there can never have been a more innocent trouble-maker. A big, fair lad young Piers was, with yellow hair and blue eyes, a few freckles across the bridge of his straight nose, the thick neck and large arms of a gladiator—a little vain of his strength, he seems to have been, and given to showing it off in feats—a sunny smile for everybody, and the heart of a child. The boy wouldn't consciously have hurt an earth-worm, but before he had been twelve hours in Fairford he was leaning across Margaret Inch's garden gate. His uncle saw him there, looked black, and passed by.

Now, it is certain that no living soul will ever know exactly what passed between this young woman and these two men during the four days prior to the *Aida*'s departure. That Miss Inch continued to see a good deal of Cap'n Drury is well established, and it is no secret that young Piers was often in her

sweet garden also, but never the two together. It is impossible to acquaint the girl of coquetry in some degree, and I shall not try; but that there was any harm in her, or that she realised what she was stirring up with her inexperienced little finger, I, for my part, refuse to believe.

Her leave-taking from Drury Cap'n Salisbury's wife blundered in upon, and described afterwards as featureless. The two shook hands, Margaret Inch wished Drury good luck and a safe return, and Drury thanked her. Following that, he glowered upon the girl hungrily for a space, made as if to say more, but turned with an abrupt movement and went away.

Whatever that unuttered speech was, he seems to have thought it would “keep.”

But very late that evening a next-door neighbour, descending into her back-garden for some obscure reason, glanced across the top of the low party-wall, and saw two rapt young people a-kissing in the moonlight.

At break of day the *Aida* set sail for the mysterious Sargasso Sea and the sunken galleon there.

It seems they encountered foul weather three or four days out, and put into Savannah to let the storm blow over. And once again they made port—at Nassau—but this time by intention, to take on water and fresh provisions. Drury's private log proving featureless, I have asked Sol Saradine about the two men's behaviour during this early part of the voyage, and he says that young Piers was his habitual gay and cheery and light-hearted self, but that the skipper seemed gloomy, and held himself apart. He unbent only of an evening, when the three sat in the cuddy with their heads bowed over the parchment chart. The Jew says he often left the other two together there, poring over that yellow document, when he went on deck to stand his watch.

It was, I believe, almost immediately after the *Aida* left the Bahaman coast that young Piers fell ill with a fever. Drury was at first for turning back; but the lad protested loudly, and the attack looked a very light one—as, indeed, it turned out to be—so in the end they held their course, and fed their invalid with quinine, and came presently to the margin of that heaving swamp—the tract of mystery and death, the grave of ships.

Here the *Aida* furled her wings, and, under bare poles, with the little auxiliary engine coughing and spluttering, the treasure-seekers turned their backs upon blue water, and

wound their tortuous way into the Sargasso Sea.

Twice in that dreary waste they passed derelicts—wooden ships, dismasted, whitened, weed-hung, surrounded by masses of vegetation, so that they were the centres of insecure islands, roosting-places for sea-fowl—and often they saw wreckage, spars, or planks, or a waterlogged boat. The wind died, and it was fiercely hot. Young Piers complained of it, tossing on his cot under the deck awning, but he grew better even in that tropical furnace glare, and it was plain that in a week's time he would be quite himself again.

So they came, under Abner Drury's careful guidance—for he had already been there without a diver, to make sure—to the spot where the two bare masts of an earlier and unfortunate seeker slanted up above the heaving weed, and they dropped anchor.

The invalid wasn't strong enough to dive at once, or so his uncle, against young Piers's protests, decided, and they waited three days in the merciless, still heat. Then he went down to explore, found nothing in the dense undersea forest, tried again, working inward in concentric circles, and at the end of the second day made out the galleon lying in three fathoms of water, and rent asunder by what appeared to have been a dynamite blast. The earlier seekers, whose schooner canted a few yards apart, had made his labours easier for him. He brought up with him in his pouch a handful of doubloons—no, they were pieces-of-eight; one of them lies before me now as I write—and the work was over for the day.

Sol Saradine says the three of them, who berthed aft, drank champagne with their dinner, and that young Piers, being still pretty weak, got a trifle tipsy.

That night Abner Drury saw red.

What occurred I transcribe in his own words from the "private log," which he always kept locked away, and which had, written on the cover of it: "To be read only after my death."

How in the world a sane man could commit the incredible, the fantastic folly of putting such a confession into written words, when he meant to keep it a secret for the remainder of his life, I know no more than you. It is beyond me.

The entry in the private log seems to have been made on the day following the event. It begins—

"June, 28, -02.

"Last night, the devil having entered into me, his black angels standing round about,

and God being absent, I, in a fit of passion, slew my nephew, my brother Jonadab's son, Piers Drury, by throttling him with my hands, he being weak from fever and tipsy from drink, and so not able to defend himself. Nobody saw what I done, for the crew were below in their bunks, and the look-out asleep at the other end of the deck.

"And when he was dead, I put the body overside, and it sank, the face looking up at me.

"He had a locket round about his neck, hung on a cord. I saw it for the first time, and asked what it was. It was Margaret Inch's likeness.

"I asked him by what right he wore her likeness, and he laughed at me, telling me they loved each other. Then I heard a rushing wind, and saw a red haze with bright stars shooting through it, and I done what I done.

"His face looked up at me in the moon-light before he sank out of sight.

"So I have committed murder in black passion, and my soul will be damned for it eternally, and I shall burn in hell. But not yet awhile. Give me first ten years of life, Lord, or five, or two, or even one, and Margaret Inch with me, and I hereby promise not to complain... So be it... Amen!"

Sol Saradine says that, when he went to the skipper's bunk early the next morning, and told him that young Piers could not be found, he had to wake the man from a sleep so sound that it was like a stupor.

It was a species of stupor, I fancy, for, in so far as I can learn, he never slept soundly again to the very end of his life.

By an odd coincidence, it was Cap'n Salisbury's wife who, a month later, witnessed the first encounter between Margaret Inch and Drury on the morning of the *Aida's* return to Fairford. She says she had gone over to Miss Inch's house to diagnose, out of her wealth of knowledge, an illness which had befallen the campanulas in the front garden. (The symptoms indicated too much moisture and a lack of sun.)

A fisherman passing up the leafy street called in to the two women that Cap'n Drury's *Aida*—"Ada"—had anchored in the harbour half an hour back, and, as the two women stood at the front gate, Drury himself hove in sight, mounting the hill.

Ignoring the elder, he spoke a "Good morning" to Margaret Inch, who greeted him with pink cheeks and a shortened breath, but looked over his shoulder down the hill. She

asked if he had brought back the Spanish treasure to dazzle Fairford with, and Drury, in a heavy voice, said "No."

The girl continued to look over his shoulder, and presently, when he did not speak again, she asked—

"Where is your nephew Piers?"

Still Captain Drury did not speak, and she asked again—

"Where is he?" Drury's eyes must have told her, for Margaret Inch gave a dreadful scream and clapped her two hands up over her mouth. Young Piers's murderer bent upon the girl such a look, says Mrs. Salisbury, "as I never see before and hope never to again," turned abruptly, and walked away.

That would seem, more or less naturally, to be the end of Abner Drury's wooing, but it wasn't—not by a good deal. He was a determined and, from what we already know, I may well say desperate man. It was his way to get what he wanted, though, to be sure, he failed to bring back the Spanish treasure; it always had been his way. He had returned to Fairford late in August. On the eve of All Souls—or, in other words, the 31st of October—he was married to Margaret Inch, spinster, and the two took up their residence in his wife's home.

Sol Saradine, who was present at the wedding, says that the bridegroom's face was as white as new sail-cloth, and that he had grown noticeably thinner within the past three months, but that his eyes burnt like the eyes of a man in high fever. Margaret Inch, it seems, looked spiritless and ill.

The "private log" is not expansive on the subject. The entry for the day says—

"October 31, -02.

"This day I was married to Margaret Inch at Fairford."

And that is all.

Yet, upon this rather cheerless beginning, there followed several months—four, to be exact—of something that had all the outward marks of quiet contentment if not of wild rapture. For that matter, rapture, or at least, the expression thereof, would ill have become a middle-aged seafaring man like Drury, and nobody expected ecstatic rhapsodies from his tongue-tied wife. That wouldn't have been like her. They might, however, have expected redder cheeks and more frequent smiles, and, in the man, a higher head and a brighter eye.

Sol Saradine says that Drury complained to him of sleeplessness, and I know Margaret

several times said to her neighbours that her husband slept ill, and muttered in his sleep, or got up and walked the floor. His general health suffered from it, after a time, and he went to the old village doctor, who, with exquisitely unconscious irony, bade him rid his mind of any worries or troubles he might be brooding over.

I wonder what Drury said to that?

It was four months and four days after the wedding when the sword at last smote down between the two. I know the exact date, because the private log chronicles the event very briefly.

"March 5, -03.

"Last night I talked in my sleep, and she knows."

It seems Drury awoke, some two or three hours after midnight, in a curious state of inexplicable uneasiness—awoke, as it were, with a sense of calamity and shivering. His wife was gone from his side. He waited a few moments, still shivering without apparent reason, then went to look for her. She was not in the house, but the back door of the kitchen was open, and a bitter wind was driving the snow in along the floor. Drury pulled something round his shoulders, went out into the night, and found his wife at the bottom of the orchard, crouched upon the ground, with the snow drifting against her body. She was in a state of nervous anarchy that was practically madness, but her moaning speech was all about one fact, and her husband knew that she knew.

She screamed when he spoke to her, and struck at him—even bit and scratched—but somehow he got her into the house and into her bed, where she fell quiet once more, save for continued moaning, and except when he tried to touch her. Then she screamed.

She was up and about the next day, though with sunken cheeks and staring eyes. She did her household work, and prepared her husband's meals, but herself ate nothing. Drury waited stolidly for her to rush to the neighbours, or to the village constable, and denounce him; but she did nothing of the sort—only moved about her home in that strange and staring apathy, and paid no heed when spoken to. And when he touched her, she broke out into a seemingly uncontrollable paroxysm of screaming.

So it went on for some days—a week—a fortnight—this intolerable state of affairs. For a while, I think, shame and a sense of deadly guilt and remorse held the man's hand, but



"Cap'n Drury went on in that odd gait, stumbling and leaning back."

he was a hard man, and accustomed to dominate. More than once the neighbours heard Margaret Drury screaming horribly by night, and it wasn't long before all the village knew of it, and said that something must be done. In the end, a sort of deputation waited upon Abner Drury—the old parson, Doctor Saltonstall, and two of the elders of the church, all ancients, wagging white beards. They indicated that women do not scream as in deadly agony for a half hour at a time, and repeat it night after night, unless something is wrong, and, without much beating about the bush, they demanded an explanation.

Drury looked at the row of old men fiercely, and the red swept up over his face—perhaps before his eyes again. Then his head dropped, and the spirit broke in him for ever. He said he would give them his answer in two days' time, and meanwhile there would be no more screaming.

The answer proved to be the sailing of the *Aida* in the teeth of winter for ports unknown. Sol Saradine, who had money laid by, and toiled only when he felt like it, shipped again as mate. He says he doesn't even now quite know why.

They laid a southerly course, and put in at Miami, afterwards Nassau, thence a long leg to Galveston, where they remained idle for a fortnight. Drury had once plied a profitable trade between here and certain Cuban ports. He said something about taking it up again, and perhaps would have done so but for what shortly occurred.

I have asked Sol Saradine how Drury bore himself during these weeks, and the Jew says he was a man crushed, but not broken—which speech you may interpret as suits you. He complained, I know, of sleeping ill, if at all, and was often on his feet the night long, pacing the *Aida's* deck. He never spoke of his wife, and Sol Saradine, who possesses tact, and who, in common with the rest of Fairfield, knew there was some unhappy mystery there, took pains never in any fashion to refer to her.

The private log is written up through these days, but it is a mere transcript of the ship's log without personal additions.

So now we come to the reason why Drury gave up his idea of carrying coffee between Galveston and Cuba. They had been at the former port nearly a fortnight when Sol Saradine and the skipper returned late one evening to where the *Aida* lay in her berth in the harbour.

The cuddy ports shone bright and cheery

through the darkness as they approached, and Drury growled something angry about that fool of a cabin-boy, for he was a careful man, and didn't like to see good oil wasted. They went on board, and Sol Saradine pointed out to the skipper a trail of wet footprints and little pools of water that led across the deck to the cabin companion. It looked as if the boy had been swimming in the harbour before lighting that lamp below.

"I'll take it out of him to-morrow!" Drury said, as they stooped to go under the companion-hood. Sol Saradine observed that the steps here were wet, too, and cautioned the skipper, who was ahead of him, not to slip. But at the bottom of the companion Cap'n Drury halted suddenly, gave a hoarse cry, and flung up one arm over his face, recoiling so that he lurched heavily against Sol Saradine's knees. The Jew bent down to stare over the other man's shoulder into that little brightly-lighted enclosure, and he says that the place was unoccupied, the three bunks, like sepulchral niches in the wall, untouched, the oilcloth-covered table in the middle of the cabin bare, save that Drury's parchment treasure chart, which usually never left his person, and was guarded like his life, lay open there—an astonishing piece of carelessness. There were tiny pools of water beside it on the oilcloth, as if wet arms had rested there. Sol Saradine says he saw them quite distinctly in the bright light of the swinging lamp.

Without taking his eyes from the table, Captain Drury put one hand behind him as if to thrust his companion away, and the hand was shaking violently. He said in a kind of whisper—

"Go! Leave me alone with him!" And at those inexplicable words the Jew says the back of his head turned suddenly cold, and he felt his hair beginning to bristle. He cannot explain it, and he betrays keen shame over it, but he was seized all at once by a blind, shivering horror. He turned about, scrambled in mad haste up the steps of the companion, ran across the deck, and leapt ashore. Then he ran again until he had reached the friendly lights of the nearest bar, which was also a sailors' lodging-house, and there he spent the remainder of that night.

Some time during the dark hours Drury seems to have written up his private log, for I find inscribed there—

"March 30, -03.

"This evening young Piers Drury, my nephew, came aboard—him that I killed in

the Sargasso Sea—and we talked about recovering the Spanish gold."

In the morning, Sol Saradine, heartily ashamed of his fears, and ascribing them to the last unnecessary drink of the evening before, went on board the *Aida* to make his peace. But the skipper did not seem to realise that he had been absent. Cap'n Drury, looking quite himself—indeed, with a more peaceful face than he had shown in many a month—sent him ashore again to order a quantity of gasoline, saying that he meant to sail before noon, in ballast. The Jew asked where. The skipper smiled upon him—Drury smiled—and said—

"To the Sargasso Sea."

The following nine days of that voyage eastward remain even now, I can see, in Sol Saradine's mind, a sort of nightmare. He doesn't like to talk about them. It wasn't that Cap'n Drury was difficult to get on with; he was less difficult than ever before—softer-spoken, more considerate of those about him, almost gentle in his bearing. But in the evening, when the swinging lamp was lighted over the stripped, oilcloth-covered table, then Drury would sit down with the treasure chart before him, and talk earnestly for hours to the empty air across the table.

Further, the place was always wet and cold. Little pools of water stood on the floor and on the table. When mopped up, others came in their place.

Sol Saradine bore it to the breaking-point, then slung a hammock between decks under the main hatch, and berthed there. The skipper made no comment on the change—if, indeed, he ever noticed it, for he was very absent-minded of late. However, when the cabin-boy had hysterics, and refused to enter that chill, damp place again, Drury awoke from his apathy, flogged the youth soundly, and thereafter, without further complaint, the meals were served, the slops were emptied, and the bunk—yes, *two bunks* were made.

So on April 8—bear that date in mind—they came once more to the dismal weedy sea, furled their sails, and entered it. Once more they passed the melancholy, dismantled hulks that had been ships, and were now roosting-places for pelagic fowl. The wind dropped, and the air was heavy with the reek of corruption. Towards the end of the third day they made out the two bare masts, approached them, and anchored there. The sun went down, I am told, in a torn welter of blood, and round the *Aida*, as dusk came on, the sea-birds wailed incessantly.

Sol Saradine, it appears, asked the skipper if he wished the diving gear brought up out of the hold and made ready for use. Drury regarded him with the mild bewilderment latterly characteristic, and said "Yes." So the Jew spent what remained of the daylight over this task, and afterwards walked the deck in some perturbation of spirit. He took it that the skipper himself meant to go down, since there was no one else on board who had even so much as tried on a helmet, but he was quite sure Drury was in no state for such difficult and exacting work. The man was about half crazy, Sol Saradine considered, and he wondered if it mightn't be held justifiable to clap him in irons and make straight for the nearest consular port.

He says he tramped the deck for some hours, considering these matters, screwing up his courage almost to the point of action, and then losing hold of it again, cursing himself for having shipped on board the *Aida*, for not having demanded a discharge at Galveston. He walked and pondered alone there until late in the night, when the crew were long asleep in their bunks, and the look-out forward was asleep, too, bent over the anchor windlass.

He says he was just about to take himself to his hammock, when he saw Drury emerge from the cabin companion and walk aft along the deck in the moonlight. He walked, it seems, in a peculiar fashion—two or three hurried steps, then a halt and a hanging back, as if he went reluctantly. It was, says Sol Saradine, exactly as an unwilling little child is dragged along by the hand—only Drury seemed to be alone.

The Jew keeping as well as he might under cover, followed that fantastically progressing figure down the deck, and once called aloud to it, for he thought the man might be walking in his sleep. Cap'n Drury paid no heed to the hail, but went on in that odd gait, stumbling and leaning back, with so extraordinary an appearance of being dragged by a force greater than his own that the mate stared and rubbed his eyes, and at last called out again, in a louder voice this time.

The stumbling figure, with the mate hovering uncertainly some distance behind, came at last to a break in the rail where the dinghy lay at the bottom of a sea-ladder, and halted there with what looked like a violent effort. He had so far been silent, though breathing hard and fast; but when he came to that break in the rail, quite suddenly he threw up his arms and cried his wife's name—

"Margaret! Margaret!" He seemed to

he calling upon her for help in utmost need, and his voice screamed out upon the still night with a shocking clamour—hoarse, dreadful shrieks that seemed to tear their way out of his throat. The awakened water-fowl began to screech, too, round about the schooner in the darkness.

Sol Saradine dashed forward with a shout, but before he could reach the spot where the skipper stood, the man was gone with a swift, unnatural violence—not, says the Jew, as if he had fallen or leaped from the deck, but as if he had been jerked away by a rope about his body. There was a great splash at the bottom of the sea-ladder, a final bubbling cry, and then no more.

The look-out, thoroughly awake now, came running aft along the deck, and he and Sol Saradine sprang into the dinghy and pushed off from the schooner's side. They rowed round and round, watching the still surface of the sea, for half an hour or more, then

went back on board. The mate looked at his watch, and it was half-past eleven.

That is about all I have to tell. Sol Saradine brought the *Aida* back to Fairford and turned her over to the authorities there. He kept in his possession the parchment treasure chart, which he had found on the floor of the cuddy, but I doubt if he will ever make use of it, for he has retired from the sea now, and cultivates his garden; also, the very sound of the name Sargasso makes him shiver.

Margaret Drury is dead, and I have a queer thing to tell about that, which I got from old Mrs. Saltonstall. She passed away on the night of April 8. She had been asleep for some hours, and old Mrs. Saltonstall, her volunteer nurse, was nodding in her chair. She says that, while the hall clock was striking eleven, Margaret Drury suddenly awoke, laughed aloud, and died.

Eleven o'clock on the night of April 8.

