

Chapter One

In The Harbor

NOW THE FOG WAS CLEARING AND THE MIST WAS lifting, and the bright sunshine was struggling to penetrate the billows of damp vapor and touch with its glory the things of the world beneath. In the lower harbor there still was a chorus of sirens and foghorns, as craft of almost every description made way toward the metropolis or out toward the open sea.

The Manatee, tramp steamer with rusty plates and rattling engines and a lurch like that of a drunken man, wallowed her way in from the turbulent ocean she had fought for three days, her skipper standing on the bridge and inaudibly giving thanks that he was nearing the end of the voyage without the necessity for abandoning his craft for an open boat, or remaining to go down with the ship after the manner of skippers of the old school.

Here and there showed a rift in the rolling fog, and those who braved the weather and lined the damp rail could see other craft in passing.

A giant liner made her way past majestically, bound for Europe, or a seagoing tug clugged by as if turning up her nose at the old, battered Manatee.

Standing at the rail, and well forward, Sidney Prale strained his eyes and looked ahead, watching where

the fog lifted, an eager light in his face, his lips curved in a smile, a general expression of anticipation about him.

Sidney Prale himself was not bad to look at. Thirty-eight he was, tall and broad of shoulder, with hair that was touched with gray at the temples, with a face that had been browned by the weather. Sidney Prale had the appearance of wearing clothes that had been molded to his form. He had a chin that expressed decision and determination, lips that could form in a thin, straight line if occasion required, eyes that could be kind or stern, according to the needs of the moment. A man of the world would have said that Sidney Prale was a gentleman of broad experience, a man who had presence of mind in the face of danger, a man who could think quickly and act quickly when such things were necessary.

He was not alone at the rail—and yet he was alone in a sense, for he gave no one the slightest attention. He bent over and looked ahead eagerly, waving a hand now and then at the men on passing craft, like a schoolboy on an excursion trip. He listened to the bellowing sirens and foghorns, drank in the raucous cries of the ship's officers, strained his ears for the land sounds that rolled now and then across the waters.

"It's great—great!" Sidney Prale said, half aloud.

He bent over the rail again. A hand descended upon his shoulder, and a voice answered him.

"You bet it's great, Prale!"

Sidney Prale's smile weakened a bit as he turned around, but there was nothing of discourtesy in his manner.

"You like it, Mr. Shepley?" he asked.

“Do I like it? Does Rufus Shepley, forced to run here and there around the old world in the name of business, like it when he gets the chance to return to New York? Ask me!”

“I have my answer,” Prale said, laughing a bit. “And judge, then, how I like it—when I have not seen it for ten years.”

“Haven’t seen New York for ten years?” Rufus Shepley gasped.

“A whole decade,” Prale admitted.

“Been down in Honduras all that time?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you live to tell it? You are my idea of a real man!” Rufus Shepley said.

Shepley took a cigar from his vest pocket, bit off the end, lighted it, and puffed a cloud of fragrant smoke into the air. Rufus Shepley was a man of fifty, and looked his age. If human being ever gave the appearance of being the regulation man of big business affairs, Rufus Shepley did.

Sidney Prale had held some conversation with him on board ship, but they had not become very well acquainted, though they seemed to like each other. Each man seemed to be holding back, waiting, trying to discover in the other more qualities to like or dislike.

“Ten years,” Sidney Prale went on thoughtfully. “It seems a long time, but the years have passed swiftly.”

“I always had an idea,” Rufus Shepley said, “that a genuine white man who went to one of those Central American countries turned bad after the first year and went to the devil generally. But you don’t look it.”

“The idea is correct, at that, in some instances,” Prale admitted. “Some of them do turn bad.”

"They get to drifting, eh? The climate gets into their blood. Do you know what I think? I think that, in seven cases out of eight, it's a case of a man wanting an excuse for loafing. I knew a chap once who went down to that part of the world. Got to drinking too much, threw up his job, used to loaf all the time, married some sort of a half-black woman who had a bit of coin, and went to the dogs generally."

"Oh, there are many such," Sidney Prale admitted. "But the majority of them are men who made some grave mistake somewhere else and got the idea that life was merely existence afterward. A man must have an incentive in any climate to make anything of himself—and down there the incentive has to be stronger."

"I assume that you—er—had the proper incentive," Rufus Shepley said, grinning.

"I don't know how some persons would look at the propriety of it. I wanted to make a million dollars."

"Great Scott! Your ambition was a modest one, I must say. And you managed to win out? Oh, I beg your pardon! It isn't any of my business, of course!"

"That's all right," Prale answered good-naturedly. "I don't mind. I'm so happy this morning that I'm willing to overlook almost anything. And I don't mind telling you that I've won out."

"A million in ten years," Shepley gasped.

"Yes; and with an initial capital of ten thousand dollars," Sidney Prale replied. "I'm rather proud of it, of course. I suppose this sounds like boasting——"

"My boy, you have the right to boast! A million dollars in ten years! Great Scott! Say, would you consider being general manager of one of my companies? We need a few men like you."

Sidney Prale laughed again. "Sorry—but I'm afraid that I can't take the job," he replied. "I am going to have my little holiday now—going to play. A million isn't much in some quarters, but it is enough for me. I don't care for money to a great extent. I just wanted to prove to myself that I could make a million—prove it to myself and others. And, ready to take my vacation, I naturally decided to take it in New York—home!"

"Ah! Home's in New York, eh? Old friends waiting at the dock, and all that!"

Sidney Prale's face clouded. "I am afraid that there will be no reception committee," he said. "I didn't let anybody know that I was coming—for the simple reason that I didn't know whom to inform."

"My boy!"

"I have a few old friends scattered around some place, I suppose. I have no relatives in the world except a male cousin about my own age, and I never communicated with him after going to Honduras. There was a girl once——"

"There always is a girl," Shepley said softly, as Prale ceased speaking.

"But that ended ten years ago," Prale continued. "I stand alone—with my million."

"You advertise that fact, my boy, and there'll be girls by the regiment looking up your telephone number."

"And the right one wouldn't be in the crowd," Prale said, the smile leaving his face again.

"Well, you are in for a fine time, at least," Rufus Shepley told him. "There have been quite a few changes in New York in the past ten years. Yes, quite a few changes! There are a few new boarding houses scattered around,

and a new general store or two, and the street cars run out farther than they used to."

"Oh, I've kept up to date after a fashion," Sidney Prale said, laughing once more. "I'm ready to appreciate the changes, but I suppose I will be surprised. The New York papers get down to Honduras now and then, you know."

"I've always understood," Shepley said, "that there are certain gentlemen in that part of the world who watch the New York papers very closely."

"Meaning the men who are fugitives from justice, I see," said Prale.

"I didn't mean anything personal, of course."

"It does look bad, doesn't it?" said Prale. "I went straight to Honduras when I left New York ten years ago, like a man running away from the law, and I have remained there all the time until this trip. And I have been gone ten years—thereby satisfying certain statutes of limitation——"

"My boy, I never meant to insinuate that——"

"I know that you didn't," Prale interrupted. "My conscience is clear, Mr. Shepley. When I land, I'll not be afraid of some officer of the law clutching me by the shoulder and hauling me away to a police station."

"Even if one did, a cool million will buy lots of bail," Rufus Shepley said.

The fog was lifting rapidly now. Here and there through the billows of mist could be seen the roofs of skyscrapers glistening in the sun. Sidney Prale almost forgot the man at his side as he bent over the rail to watch.

"Getting home—getting home!" he said. "I suppose no man ever gets quite over the home idea, no matter how long he remains away. Ten years ought to make

a change, but I find that it doesn't. I'll be glad to feel the pavements beneath my shoes again."

"Sure!" said Rufus Shepley.

"Confound the fog! Ah, there's a building I know! And there are a few I never saw before. We're beginning to get in, aren't we? Ought to dock before noon, don't you think?"

"Sure thing!"

"A hotel, a bath, fresh clothes—and then for hour after hour of walking around and taking in the sights!" Prale said.

"Better engage a taxi if you expect to take 'em all in before night, my boy," Shepley said.

"I forgot! We haven't any too many taxis in Honduras. I had a car of my own, but sold it before I came away."

"You let the busy auto agents know that, and you'll have a regiment of them——"

"And there!" Sidney Prale cried. "Now I know that I am home! There is the Old Girl in the Harbor!"

Prale removed his cap, and a mist came into his eyes that did not come from the foggy billows through which the ship was plowing. The sun was shining through the murk at last, and it touched the Statue of Liberty. The great figure seemed like a live thing for a moment; the mist made it appear that her garments were waving in the breeze.

"Now I know that I am home!" Sidney Prale repeated.

"She sure is a great old girl!" Rufus Shepley agreed. "Always glad to see her!"

"Well, I've got to get ready to land; I'm not going to waste any time," Prale said. "I'm glad that I met you—and perhaps we'll meet again in the city."

"Hope we do!" said Shepley, grasping Prale's hand.

"Our factories are out in Ohio, but the company headquarters are in New York, of course. Here's my business card, my boy. And I generally put up at the Graymore."

Sidney Prale took the card, thanked Rufus Shepley, and hurried down the deck toward his stateroom, one of the best on the ship. Rufus Shepley looked after him sharply.

"Went straight to Honduras and stayed there for ten years, eh?" Rufus Shepley said to himself. "Um! Looks bad! I never put much stock in those Honduras chaps—but this one seems to be all right. Never can tell, though!"

Sidney Prale, still smiling, and humming a Spanish love song, reached his stateroom and threw open the door; and just inside, he came to a stop, astonished.

Somebody had been in that stateroom and had been going through his things. The contents of his suit case were spilled on the floor. A bag was wide open; he had left it closed and in a corner less than an hour before.

Prale went down on his knees and made a quick inspection. There did not seem to be anything missing. A package of papers—business documents for the greater part—had been examined, he could tell at a glance, but none had been taken.

"Peculiar!" Prale told himself. "Some sneak thief, I suppose. No sense in complaining to the ship's officers at this late hour, especially since nothing has been stolen. Makes a man angry, though!"

He put the suit case on the table and began repacking the things that had been scattered on the floor. Then he gathered up his toilet articles, bits of clothing he had left out until the last minute, a few souvenirs

of Honduras he had been showing a tourist the evening before. He turned toward the berth to pick up his light overcoat.

There was a sheet of paper pinned to the pillow, paper that might have been taken from an ordinary writing tablet. Sidney Prale took it up and glanced at it. A few words of handwriting were upon the paper, words that looked as if they had been scrawled hurriedly with a pencil that needed sharpening badly.

"Retribution is inevitable and comes when you least expect it."

The smile fled from Sidney Prale's lips, and the Spanish love song he had been humming died in his throat. He frowned, and read the message again.

"Now what the deuce does this mean?" he gasped.

Chapter Two

The Girl On The Ship

SIDNEY PRALE FOLDED THE PIECE OF PAPER CAREFULLY and slipped it into his wallet. Winning a fortune in ten years in a foreign country had taught Prale many things, notably that everything has its cause and effect, and that things that seem trifles may turn out to be of great importance later.

He finished his packing, locked the suit case, put on coat and hat and went out upon the deck. The Manatee was docking. A throng was on the wharf. Prale glanced at the buildings in the distance and forgot for the time being the scrap of paper, because of his happiness at being home again and his eagerness to land. Returning to New York after an absence of so many years was in the nature of an adventure. There would be exploring trips to make, things to find, surprises at every turn and on every side.

The passengers were crowding forward now, preparing to go ashore. Sidney Prale picked up his suit case and started through the jostling crowd. Already those on board were calling greetings to relatives and friends on the wharf, and Prale's face grew solemn for a moment because there was nobody to welcome him.

"Not a friend in the world," he had said to Rufus Shepley that morning.

"A man with a million dollars has a million friends," Shepley had replied. "The only trouble is, you can't enjoy that sort of friends except by getting rid of them, unless you happen to be a miser."

Well, that was something, Sidney Prale told himself now. He had ample funds, at least, and perhaps he could enjoy himself after ten years of battling with financial sharks, of inspecting and working mines, of cutting through dense forests and locating growths that could be turned into wealth.

Prale put his suit case against the rail to wait until he could move forward again. He looked down at the throng on the wharf, and up and down the rail at his fellow passengers. Then he saw the girl again!

He had seen her before. The first time had been at Tegucigalpa, at a ball given by some society people for charity. He had known her at once for an American, and finally had obtained an introduction. Her name was Kate Gilbert, and she lived in New York. It was understood that she was of a wealthy family and traveling for her health. She was accompanied only by a middle-aged maid, a giant of a woman who seemed to be maid and chaperon and general protector in one.

That night at Tegucigalpa, Prale had talked to her and had danced with her twice. He judged her to be about twenty-eight, some ten years younger than himself. She was small and charming, not one of the helpless butterfly sort, but a woman who gave indication that she could care for herself if necessary.

Prale had been surprised to find her aboard the Manatee, but she had told him that she was going home,

that her health had been much benefited, and that she felt she could not remain away longer. It had seemed to Prale that she avoided him purposely, and that puzzled him a bit. He could not understand why any woman should absolutely dislike him. His record in Honduras was a clean one; it was known that he did not care much for women, and surely she had learned that he was a man of means, and did not think he might be a fortune hunter wishing to marry a prominent heiress.

He had not spoken to her half a dozen times during the voyage. She made the acquaintance of others aboard and, for the first few days, had been busy in their company. The last three days had been stormy ones, and Kate Gilbert had not been much in evidence. Prale judged that she was a poor sailor.

Now she stopped beside him, the middle-aged maid standing just behind her.

"Well, we're home, Mr. Prale!" she said.

"I suppose that you are glad to get home?"

"Surely!" she replied. "And I'll be angry if there are not half a dozen to meet me when I land. I've been trying to spot some friends in that crowd, but it is a hopeless task."

"I hope you'll not be disappointed," Prale said.

As he spoke, he glanced past her at the middle-aged maid, and surprised a peculiar expression on the face of the woman. She had been looking straight at him, and her lips were almost curled into a sneer, while her eyes were flashing with something akin to anger.

Prale did not understand that. Why should the dragon be incensed with him? He was making no attempt to lay siege to the heart of Miss Kate Gilbert. He was no fortune hunter after an heiress. The expression

on the face of the maid amused Prale even while he wondered what it could mean.

"Picked your hotel?" Kate Gilbert was asking.

"Not yet, but I hope to get in somewhere," Prale told her. "May I be of assistance to you when we land?"

"Marie will help me, thanks—and there will be others on the wharf," she answered.

A cold look had come into her face again, and she turned half away from him and looked down at the crowd on the wharf. Sidney Prale looked straight at her, despite the glare of the middle-aged maid. Kate Gilbert was a woman who would appeal to a majority of men, but there seemed to be something peculiar about her, Prale told himself. He knew that she had avoided him purposely during the voyage, and that she had spoken to him purposely now, yet had asked nothing except whether he had chosen a hotel.

Why should Kate Gilbert wish to know where he was going to stop? Perhaps it had been only an idle question, he explained to himself. In her happiness at getting home, she had merely wished to speak to somebody, and none of her shipboard friends happened to be near.

He turned from her and glanced at the maid again. She was not the sort to be named Marie, Prale told himself. Marie called up a vision of a petite, trim woman from sunny France, and this Marie was nothing of the sort. She appeared more to be a peasant used to hard labor, Prale decided.

And he could not understand the expression on the woman's face as she looked at him. It was almost one of loathing.

"Got me mixed up with somebody else, or somebody

has been giving me a bad reputation," Prale mused. "Enough to make a man shiver—that look of hers."

Kate Gilbert, apparently, did not intend to have anything more to do with him. Smiling a little at her manner, Prale lifted his hat, picked up the suit case, and turned away. Once more he tried to force a passage through the jostling crowd. He had not taken three steps when Kate Gilbert touched him on the arm.

"Pardon me, Mr. Prale, but there is something sticking on the end of your suit case," she said.

Prale glanced down. On one end of the suit case was a bit of paper. It had been stuck there by a drop of mucilage, and the mucilage was still wet.

He thanked Kate Gilbert and picked the paper off, but he did not throw it over the rail into the water. He crumpled it in his hand and, when he was some distance away, he smoothed it out.

There was a single word written on it, in the same handwriting as that of the note he had found pinned to the pillow in the stateroom—"Retribution."

Sidney Prale glanced around quickly. Nobody seemed to be paying particular attention to him. Kate Gilbert and her maid had passed him and were preparing to land. Prale put the piece of paper into his coat pocket and picked up his suit case again. That bit of paper, he knew well, had not been on the suit case when he had left the stateroom. It had been put there as he had made his way through the crowd of passengers along the rail. Who could have stuck it there—and why?

Now the passengers were streaming ashore, and Sidney Prale stepped to one side and watched them. Perhaps he had some business enemy on board, he

told himself, some man he had not noticed, and who was trying to frighten him after a childish fashion. He searched the faces of the landing passengers, but saw nobody he had known in Central America, nobody who looked at all suspicious.

"Either a joke—or a mistake," Prale told himself again.

He started ashore. He saw Kate Gilbert just ahead of him, the bulky maid at her heels. An elderly man met her, but did not greet her as a father would have been expected to do. Prale saw them hold a whispered conversation, and it seemed to him that the elderly man gave him a searching glance.

"I must look like a swindler!" Prale mused.

Finally, as he went out upon the street to engage a taxicab and start for a hotel, he saw Kate Gilbert and her maid and the elderly man again, getting into a limousine. The girl held a piece of paper in her hand, and was reading something from it to the elderly man. As she got into the car, she dropped the piece of paper to the curb.

The limousine was gone before Prale reached the curb. He put his suit case down and picked up the piece of paper. There was nothing on it except a couple of names that meant nothing to Sidney Prale. But his eyes bulged, nevertheless, as he read them.

For the paper was similar to that upon which had been written the note that he had found on the pillow in the stateroom—and the coarse handwriting was the same!

"What the deuce——" Prale caught himself saying.

Had Kate Gilbert written that message about retribution and had her maid leave it in the stateroom? Had Kate Gilbert written that single word and had her

maid paste it on his suit case as he passed, or pasted it there herself?

Why had Kate Gilbert—whom he never had seen and of whom he never had heard until she appeared at the ball in Tegucigalpa—avoided him in such a peculiar manner? And why had the misnamed Marie glared at him, and expressed loathing and anger when her eyes met his?

“What the deuce——” Prale asked himself again.

Then a taxicab drew up at the curb, and he got in.