

MURDER WITH A SCENT

Milton Lowe

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The harbor-patrol cutter, lights out, engine muffled, crept silently through the fog-bound waters. At the helm, Skipper Ace Jackson peered into the gray, swirling mist, relying upon dead reckoning and his knowledge of the port to bring him alongside the abandoned boathouse.

A minute later the boathouse loomed ahead, looking more like an apparition than a two-story structure. Ace switched off the engine, allowed his craft to drift with the tide while he waited, hawser in hand. Almost immediately the cutter's prow nosed against the wharf, rubbed abeam.

Ace leaped, cleared the deck and landed on the wharf. Quickly looping his line around a cleat, he tugged it fast.

Lips taut, eyes straining, he raked the fog to see if anything stirred. But the night was too black, the fog too thick for him to make sure.

He knew that his side-kick, Ben Callan, was around somewhere, probably in the building waiting for him, Ben's phone message to headquarters hadn't been informative. It had merely told Ace to be at the boathouse at nine o'clock, and to bring along the cutter. Nothing else.

Wondering what, if anything, Ben had tumbled to in his trailing of Jeff Wessel, Ace went forward on his toes. Wessel, the self-appointed czar of the Fishermen's Protective Association, had been riding high, trampling opposition in all but one instance. That was against the Cooperative Group.

Perhaps the long-overdue showdown between the rival factions was in the offing.

Jackson reached the side door, turned the knob and pushed inward with his knee. Hinges squeaked and a dank, musty odor wafted out from the interior. Ace waited a second, glanced around cautiously, then stepped across the threshold.

"Ben," he called softly.

A whispered answer said: "Here."

Ace walked in the direction of the voice. Loose boards groaned underfoot. The sound of labored breathing reached him, causing him to stop. A frown creased his forehead, widened his eyes.

"What's all this about, Ben?" he inquired slowly.

"You got my message, didn't you?"

Ace Jackson's lips tightened at the corners, surprise filtering into his mind. Ben Callan's tone conveyed bitterness, as though angered because Ace was a little late. The tall skipper shrugged, choosing to ignore Ben's attitude.

He replied casually: "Yes, I got your message. Headquarters radioed it to me not twenty minutes ago. I was out on patrol and couldn't get here faster because of the fog."

"Then you don't know about Wessel's scheme?"

"Your message didn't tell me anything, unless you sent a second one that I didn't receive. What about Wessel?"

"He's out to get Salvatore Pario and Joe Neely, Harry Reed and Luke Carson—the whole Co-operative mob." He paused, adding: "Tonight!"

Ace whistled low. He came closer to Ben, aware of a sweetish smell. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am of leaving this place alive!"

An icy shaft rammed up Ace's spine, freezing him to the spot. His mind ran riot. Things just didn't click. He moved still closer to Ben, his hand dipping instinctively to the Colt in the pocket of his tunic.

"When does Wessel begin his massacre?"

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Ben Callan laughed shrilly, as though it were a joke. Amazed, Ace stared toward the spot Ben was standing. Suddenly the laugh was cut short. Ben coughed and choked! His breath expelled like a deflating balloon. There was a rasping wheeze from Ben Callan as he lurched forward, groping, his hand stretching out and touching Jackson's face.

The fingers felt slimy across Ace's chin. That sweetish odor reeked in his nostrils, but he wasn't thinking of anything but Ben and what that wheeze meant. He seized Callan, kept him from slumping to the floor. Ace's left arm circled the man, propped him up. Something warm and sticky wet his hand! Ace knew it was blood instantly. He explored the area with his fingers, touched something solid protruding from between the shoulder blades.

It was a knife, plunged to the hilt!

Ace's brain reeled, his pulse rocketed. The whole set-up flashed through his mind with astonishing clarity. All the time Ben had been talking, a knife had been pressed against him.

The killer was still there!

Ace let the limp body slump to the floor. He sprang over it, gun held rigidly in front of him. A sound to his right prompted him to veer sharply. He leveled his Colt, but before he could trigger he was blinded by a flashlight beam. It came from the opposite side, making him an easy target.

Noise had been a decoy, cleverly done by the killer to distract him. Wheeling, Ace pumped his gun. Flame belched through the darkness as the flashlight was doused. The killer was moving away, going toward the door.

Ace launched himself to intercept him, came to a stop, but not of his own volition. A club the size of a baseball bat cracked him on the chest, flooring him. He leaped up instantly, darted in, arms flailing. Again the club nailed him, this time on the shoulder. Pain rifled down to the fingertips of his right hand. He transferred his gun to his left, dropping to his knees as he heard the club swishing once again.

It was hard to tell from what point the club was being wielded. His one chance was to move in fast at the end of the swing. He followed the action, bringing his gun into position at the same time as he fired.

He knew he missed when the bat clouted him from behind, slashing down to his left elbow. It cracked against the joint, paralyzing his arm. Ace yelped once, was forced to drop his gun. It clattered to the floor near him, and he dove for it.

The yelp and his dive relayed his whereabouts. He was socked hard across the back, pancaked on his stomach. Anger seethed through him, made him ignore the pain and agony in his body. He leaped up, throwing his fist piston style.

He tagged his man with a hook to the jaw, an uppercut to the chin. It sent the killer back on his heels, cursing. Ace followed up his advantage, relentlessly driving in. They collided as the killer rushed at him, arcing the club.

Both of them went to the floor, rolling over and over, panting hard. Sweat burned in Ace's eyes as he plastered his punches wherever he could. His left dug into his foe's middle, glanced off; the right aimed for the same spot, also skidded off.

The reason dawned upon Ace as he shifted his attack to the head: The killer wore oilskins!

He jabbed a stiff right to the man's mouth, felt the teeth against his knuckles. Then the club smashed against the side of the skull. An infernal din unleashed itself in his head, threatening to drive him mad. A sick sensation welled up from his stomach.

Faltering, he shook his head, struggled to clear it, regain his feet. He heard his man scrambling up, tried to do the same. Again the flashlight knifed the darkness. It revealed the young skipper on his hands and knees.

A gloating cry burst from the killer. Ace glanced around, glimpsed the bat coming at him. He started to go down as it landed on the small of his back. By going away from the blow he saved himself from a broken spine.

The killer was shifting around for the final wallop! Squirming. Ace Jackson attempted to thwart the next blow. But it came too rapidly. It chopped at his shoulder blades, flattening him. His arms flapped by reflex action as agony branched throughout his body.

A wave of blackness settled over him. For a second he thought the killer had again doused the flashlight. He was wrong, but had no way of knowing it.

He was out cold!

His bones ached and his head throbbed maddeningly when he returned to consciousness. At first he couldn't remember what had happened. He tried to sit up, couldn't. Pain doubled him up on the floor and he groaned aloud.

He touched something soft, clawed at it. An arm, outstretched, lay inertly near him. Then in a rush he

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remembered his fight in the darkness with Ben Callan's killer.

It gave him the impetus he needed. It shunted aside his own aches and pain, knotted his fists and put starch into his limbs. With a major effort he managed to get up, staggered uncertainly. By spreading his legs apart he was able to stay that way until strength returned to him.

Fumbling in his pocket he found matches. Striking one, he held it so he could look around. He couldn't see his Colt, but he did see Ben Callan.

A vow slipped from Ace's lips. He wouldn't rest until he caught the killer, made him pay for Ben's death.

Lightning another match he surveyed the dead harbor—patrol officer. Ben's face was covered with gore; his hair was matted and caked where the blood had dried. It told Ace that Ben Callan had been slugged long before the knife had been driven into his heart.

Then Ace got another whiff of the scent he had smelled earlier. He remembered that the odor had been most pronounced when Ben had pitched forward right after being stabbed at the time one of Ben's hands had grazed Ace's chin.

Swiftly, the young skipper examined the left hand. It was black with dust. Ace had to light a third match to study the right hand. A grayish discoloration on the index finger and thumb riveted Ace's attention there immediately.

He lifted the hand, sniffed. The odor was unmistakable. Ace felt the thumb. It felt as if fat had been rubbed on the skin.

Even in death, Ben Callan was offering him a clue!

It was apparent that Ben had been careful to preserve that bit of evidence. Had he used his right hand to battle the killer, the fatty substance would have been wiped away. But what was it?

It all added up to one thing:

The killer, knowing Ben Callan had phoned headquarters, had been anxious to learn what had been said. It explained why Ben had been forced to inquire about the message, though he himself had sent it.

The Jeff Wessel angle annoyed Ace, however. Wessel was too astute to employ gangster methods. His tactics were more subtle, but just as effective. He could close a market to a fisherman, put the screws on until the victim would be glad to agree to almost anything.

Wessel had been smart enough to form the Fishermen's Association, stay within the law, and still reap big profits. There would be no sense in jeopardizing that set-up. And if he were going to finish the Cooperative Group, it would have been done along similar lines—not with the use of a knife and club.

Another point occurred to Ace Jackson. As long as the Co-operative Group continued it afforded a safety valve against Federal prosecution under the monopoly statutes. If he got rid of the Group some other outfit would have to take its place,

And that, Ace decided quickly, was illogical.

It left one alternative; one which Ben Callan had hoped to convey with his final words. He had been speaking at the time about Wessel going after members of the Co-operative Group, "as sure as I am of leaving this place alive!" His exact statement.

A chill coursed through Ace Jackson. Callan wasn't leaving the boathouse alive. He must have known he wouldn't and with his final utterance had contrived desperately to tell Ace to look for the murderer in another quarter—not Wessel's. But where—who?

Suddenly Ace gasped, his brain seared by the slant he had overlooked completely until now. He had to be certain. He struck a match, once again examined the grayish matter on Callan's thumb and forefinger. This time Ace knew what it was!

"Good heavens!" he murmured. "What a blind idiot I've been."

His eyes glinted with a peculiar light, his lips curved in a sardonic smile. He knew he was right. Once before in his life he had seen that smelly, grayish substance. So vivid was the recollection, now, that it left no room whatever for doubt.

Ace was on his feet, pivoting for the door. The killer had a big start on him, would have to be headed off before he could carry through his campaign of murder.

Most of the Co-operative fishermen lived close to the water front. The cutter was the fastest way to reach them. Ace left the boathouse on the run, going to the end of the wharf. Fog obscured the water and he had to get

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close to the edge. He stared blankly.

The cutter was gone.

Whipped by anger, he pinwheeled, began to spring toward the street. He reached the cobblestoned thoroughfare as a pair of truck headlights, aided by a fog lamp, rushed into view. Ace jumped out in front, waved his arms for the driver to stop. Hydraulic brakes ground, wheels skidded on the wet stones.

Ace sped up to the cab, cried out: "Harbor-patrol police! I've got to get down to one of the shanties at once."

The following instant the truck was rumbling along, Ace in the seat beside the truckman, giving directions.

In comparatively little time they came to the fishermen's village. Ace leaped down, thanked the driver, then sped toward a single-story cottage near the loading jetty.

A light shone in the rear window. He ran down the path, vaulted the low picket fence and crossed to the kitchen door. He omitted the formality of knocking, twisted the knob and entered.

No one was in the room. A cup and saucer on the wooden table were mute testimony that Joe Neely had recently been drinking coffee. Ace crossed the linoleum to the hall leading out of the kitchen. Premonition was riding his spine.

To the right was a small room, in darkness. Ace cocked an ear to the drip-drip coming from there. He thought of a leaking faucet, then frowned. This sound was strangely different. He ran his hand over the wall inside the door, pressed the light button a second later.

He recoiled, horror cropping into his eyes, a lump crowding his throat. He had seen gruesome sights, but this was tops! He had to turn away, gather himself for the next look. That strange sound was caused by blood rolling down Joe Neely's body from the neck and dripping off his toes into the bathtub.

Steeling himself, Ace looked around. A shark hook had been yanked through the man's neck, the gory point curving outward and up. The body was held suspended over the tub by the hook. Its forged eyelet had been jammed onto the shower fixture. From appearances, Ace figured the crime had been committed about fifteen minutes before.

He backed out into the hall, thinking hard. Neely's murder bolstered Ace's theory. Others, then, were in equal danger of losing their lives. Ace growled under his breath. He couldn't be in at least three places at the same time.

Then he spotted the telephone, leaped down the hall to it, seizing it hungrily. He dialed the Fishermen's Protective Association, got a drowsy-voiced man on the other end. Ace poked life into him with the opening shot.

"Get Jeff Wessel on the wire! Harbor patrol calling."

"Huh?" The man sounded incredulous. "Why, Jeff left for the Co-op offices more'n an hour ago to meet one of you guys. There was goin' to be a powwow."

Ace's blood pounded in his temples, "Jeff go there alone?"

"Yeah! He don't need a bodyguard when he's meeting Ace Jackson—not even his lawyer." The man laughed, was cut short by Ace's retort.

"Even his lawyer wouldn't help, now," he snapped. "An undertaker might."

He clicked off before the other man could gather his wits, then to check his own hunch he tried the Co-operative office.

No answer.

With a snort Ace rang off, dialed headquarters and spoke tersely to the lieutenant on the desk. He obtained information he needed to find the homes of Harry Reed, Salvatore Pario and Luke Carson.

Reed's place was the nearest. Ace hustled down the road, located a three-room shingled shanty. The mist cleared for a few seconds as he drew up to the front yard. Riding at anchor, a short distance off the property, he could see a sloop, lights barely visible. It was one of the two fishing craft owned by the Cooperative Group.

Seeing the sloop, Ace guessed that Harry Reed must be home, asleep. The windows were dark, the house silent. Ace strode up to the door and knocked loudly.

The door opened and the broad, deeply lined face of Harry Reed poked out, surveyed Ace blinkingly.

"Ace Jackson!" said the old fisherman. "Come on in. What brings you here this time o'night?"

"Official business, Reed," said Ace, following the hulking figure into the living room. "I'm checking the fishermen. You were home all night?"

"Yes." He squinted. "You mean 'cause of that blasted fog?"

"Bad, eh?" Ace declared.

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"Not so bad," the old-timer said. "When I was younger I could navigate these waters in a fog twice as mean."

"The Co-op's other sloop is out, isn't she?"

"I wouldn't worry none about her. Be in tomorrow. Luke Carson and Sal Pario can handle her easy."

Ace's muscles bunched. Presumably, Carson and Pario were eliminated. Then Reed was the only other Co-op fisherman ashore that night who was still alive. With a wry smile Ace inquired:

"Who's been causing the trouble in the Group, Reed? Somebody trying to chisel—get away with something?"

"What—what's that?" Reed jutted his jaw. "How'd you know about that?" His brows were elevated. "Say, Ace, what's on tap? You don't seem friendly at all—"

"I just found Joe Neely—murdered. Before that my side-kick, Ben Callan, was knifed in the back. One of you Co-ops are behind it. You were the only other man of them ashore, by your own admission. Talk, Reed! Who's been spoiling for the hangman's rope?"

"Not me," rasped from the old fisherman. "But, by the stars, Ace, I got me a good idea who. That's why Luke—"

He didn't get any further. The room reverberated with a revolver crack. Reed slapped a hand to his head, swayed on his heels. Then he collapsed, sprawling his length on the floor. Blood flowed from the bullet wound in his right temple.

Ace spun almost as soon as the gunshot registered on him. He saw the pane of glass through which the bullet had come. The killer had witnessed the scene between Reed and himself; probably had overheard what was said.

Ace darted through the house to the front door, yanking it wide, and bolting outside. A figure was disappearing into the fog, going toward the next house; the one in which Carson lived.

He could hear his quarry crashing through the hedge, but couldn't see him. Ace pounded after the killer, shoe sinking deep in the soft soil. He reached the hedge a few seconds later, fell over them, scratching his face and hands.

He was up almost immediately, trying to remember the layout of the house in relation to the water front. Then he caught the throb of an engine coming from his right. It gave him his bearings, sending him toward the small landing platform he knew to be there.

It was closer than he had judged and he slipped down the steps, skidding along. He twisted around, clawing with his hands. But what saved him from a ducking was the motorboat moored against the platform. It acted as a bulwark.

Getting up, quivering with rage, he tensed. He recognized the purr of the engine. It belonged to his cutter. And from the sound, the cutter was gathering way, pushing off for open water.

For a split second the motorboat suggested a chase. Then another thought restrained him. It lent weight to his reconstruction of the night's crime.

Leaping aboard the motorboat Ace slipped behind the wheel. He turned on the ignition and kicked the starter. The engine responded at once without so much as a false stutter. Ace grunted with satisfaction. Only a warm engine would turn over that easily.

"One more stop," he said to himself, "then for the Co-op sloop out there in the bay."

Fifteen minutes later the motorboat was chugging through the waters of the bay. The fog was thinning out, being scattered by a furious southeaster.

Ace Jackson handled the speedy craft expertly, skimming it along at a nice clip. He swerved and dodged in and around the anchored ships, hunting for the sloop owned by the Group. He had no fear of missing or mistaking the vessel. He knew that the patrol cutter would be alongside.

Spray showered over the speedboat's bow, soaking him to the skin, but it felt good against his hot temples. He twirled the wheel, swung the boat under the prow of a two-masted schooner, skirted the starboard. Then seeing an anchor light not far off as the mist shifted, he zoomed toward it.

His heart pumped faster and faster as he came closer to the sloop. It seemed to be the one he was seeking, felt positive of it as the fog cleared momentarily. But where was the cutter?

Ace wheeled wide, fanning his backwash into ruffles; then he pointed for the windward side of the sloop. A few seconds before he spied the cutter up forward, he heard shots. Standing upright, hands rigid, fingers coiled stoutly on the wheel, Ace stared ahead.

He saw figures scurrying around the sloop's deck. Flashes from a gun punctured the darkness! A cry of

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anguish interrupted the chase. Then the figures vanished for an instant only to reappear, racing frantically aft.

Ace's eyes glistened like quartz, his face seemed to be granite as he sent the speedboat toward the cutter. He killed the engine with a deft movement, let the boat slide along the side of the sloop. It wedged between the cutter and the bigger craft.

Springing to the cutter, slinging the speedboat's line around the hawser stretched to the sloop's deck, Ace catapulted himself over the side. He came down hard on his toes, whirled.

What he saw froze him in his tracks. A shaft of steel was being rammed into a human back. A bloodcurdling scream filled the air, was cut off as suddenly as it had erupted. The stricken man pirouetted; a gun fell out of his hand.

Ace bounded forward, almost tripped over another body lying across the deck. He launched himself at the harpoon wielder. The man heard him coming, turned a frightened Oriental face at Jackson. The man was a Jap—and seemed to be scared silly.

He was squealing in a high-pitched voice, retreating and waving his arms like windmills. Ace scooped up the gun from the deck, glimpsed it, then stared. It was his own Colt, the one taken from the boathouse!

Leveling it, he advanced, looked at the harpooned body. It was Jeff Wessel!

Doubts crammed Ace's mind. It certainly looked as though Jeff had been behind the night of murder. Ace started for the Jap. The man was gesturing frantically aft toward the hatch, babbling faster than ever.

Another man was attempting to rise. Ace shoved the Oriental toward the hatch, went after him. The Jap spun and began to assist the man to his feet. Ace recognized Salvatore Pario despite the blood oozing from the forehead gash and spilling down his face.

"You win, Meester Wessel," Pario mumbled, apparently mistaking Ace for the racketeer. "I sell out like you want."

"No—no!" croaked the Jap. "No Wessel, boss. Him somebody come on board."

Ace Jackson frowned. "You know me, Pario. Seems like you had a nice party going on."

Brushing the blood from his eyes the fisherman stared at Ace Jackson, then exclaimed in relief: "Harbor cops—you catch Wessel?"

Ace's lips were grim as he wagged his head. "Nope! Your cook took care of Wessel. Suppose you tell me what happened."

"One minute—I find Luke—"

"It's no use. I almost fell over his body back there." Ace thumbed over his shoulder.

Pario sagged, seemed to be overwhelmed with grief. Then in a choked voice he related that he and Luke Carson had been waiting for the fog to clear so they could make port.

"Then we hear the cutter and it comes here. We think it is you fellas from the patrol, but instead Jeff Wessel comes aboard. He sticks a gun at me and Luke and wants we should sell our shares in the Co-op. We say no, and Wessel says he'll kill us. Luke makes believe he will sell, then jumps on Wessel."

"And Wessel shot him," put in Ace as Pario paused. "Then what?"

"I grab knife from rack and throw it. I miss Wessel and he runs after me, shooting all the time. I turn once and the bullet hits me—here." He put a hand to his forehead. "That's all I know until now."

Ace Jackson shook his head. "You're wrong, Pario. You know a lot more. Only you think I'll fall for your hooley. Stand, both of you. I'll kill you, sure!"

"But . . . but—" pleaded Pario.

"Forget the buts," countered Ace quickly. "Ben Callan was watching Wessel and when Jeff went out, supposedly to meet me at the Co-op offices, Ben went along. You knocked out Wessel and took him to your house. Callan discovered what you had up your sleeve. You saw him but didn't let on. When he phoned headquarters you realized the game was up unless you got rid of him. But you had to learn how much he told headquarters. You beat him to the boathouse, slugged him when he arrived and forced him to act as your information bureau."

"That's a lie!" yelled Pario.

"Cut that chatter," rasped from Ace. "That wound on your forehead was a nice gag, but it didn't take. After you thought you'd finished me you took my cutter and made the rounds, murdering Neely and silencing Harry Reed before he could point the finger at you. But I guessed what Reed wanted to say. That Luke Carson was sent

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out with you because the Group had come to distrust you."

Pario laughed suddenly, a shrill, confident laugh. His hand went under his shirt. A snub-nosed gat came out. Ace triggered. The hammer fell on an empty shell!

Pario laughed again.

"You're a smart fella, Jackson," he said venomously. "But me, I'm smarter. I made sure that gun was empty. And, now, I make it look like Wessel killed you."

He started toward the patrol officer, beady eyes mirroring his hatred. "First though you tell me how you know so much."

Ace Jackson's muscles became corded. He restrained the urge to barge in. Pario and the Oriental were separating, each coming toward him from opposite sides. Swiftly, Ace estimated his chances.

"Look," he said in a confidential tone. "I can fix it so you don't have to worry, Pario. But we go fifty-fifty on everything."

The killer hesitated. That was what Ace wanted. The empty gun zipped from his hand, straight at Pario's head! The instinct to duck overcame the killer's studied caution. His head bobbed sidewise, his snub-nosed gun wavering.

Ace propelled himself at the man, his right lashing out. The Jap closed in, knife flashing. The point raked Ace's sleeve, tore the cloth. Pario fired too hurriedly. The slug whizzed past the patrol officer, found a target in the Jap behind.

A jarring left ripped into the killer's midsection, doubling him. Ace rocketed his right. Pario triggered! This time a bullet hit Ace in the thigh, half-twisted him around. Pario grunted and tried to bring the gun on a line with Ace's head.

It was now or never for the sea cop. He catapulted himself, hands like talons. He hooked them on Pario, dragged him down. They plopped on the deck, Pario using his knee. It buried itself in Ace's groin.

Agony mushroomed throughout the cop's frame. But he didn't let go. He bashed a fist into the killer's mouth, added another punch to the jawbone. Pario cursed, fought to get away, to stand up.

Ace tackled him, saw the gun aimed at his skull. With a mighty heave he hurled Pario back. The gun blasted! Powder scorched Ace's face, the bullet whined within an inch of his skull,

He leaped at the killer, crashed his fist to the nose, bringing blood. Pario lost his head, rushed in, jabbing with the gun.

Ace Jackson swung his arm, chopping it across Pario's. The gun sailed out of the killer's grasp. The killer reached for a knife, failed to get it.

A left hook, packing all of Jackson's hundred and eighty pounds, rifled out. Pario took the blow on the chin, staggered back. Ace drove in, plastered successive rights and lefts to the head. The killer tottered near the railing, his purpose evident.

"No, you don't!" cried Ace.

He collared the killer, threw an uppercut. It carried Pario off the deck and slammed him against the hatchway. His body twitched convulsively and he lay motionless.

Not until then was Ace Jackson aware of great activity aboard the sloop. He pivoted. Men, guns gripped for use, hurried toward him! Their uniforms brought a grim smile to his lips.

"The harbor patrol has arrived," he murmured, "and finds the situation already well in hand." He thumbed toward Pario. "There's the murderer, captain."

The stern-faced Captain Demming gave a curt order. Two of the men took charge of the unconscious Pario.

"Those shots told us where to find you, Ace," said Demming. "What's it all about?"

Ace winced as he tried to put his weight on his wounded leg. He balanced himself against the sloop's boom, then related what had occurred from the time he had received the radio message to meet Ben Callan. He told of Pario's attempt to blame Jeff Wessel.

"He even brought Jeff aboard, alive. When I came near the sloop Pario and his Jap staged a gun battle for my benefit. Carson, who had been a prisoner aboard while Pario was ashore, was shot and killed. At the right minute the Jap finished plunging the harpoon into Wessel. The gun planted in Wessel's hand made it look like the McCoy."

"But—" Demming frowned. "From what you said it could have been Jeff Wessel."

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"You overlook one thing, captain," said Ace. "The same thing Pario overlooked. And that is, only a capable pilot could row himself ashore through a fog. Wessel wasn't even a seaman. Besides, there were only two men who knew where this sloop was anchored. One of them was Luke Carson; the other was Pario himself."

"But what was the motive?"

"Plenty! Under the Co-operative by-laws anything brought in aboard the sloops would have to be shared equally. Pario hauled in a veritable fortune by accident while on the fishing sloop."

Quickly Ace told about the smelly, fatty substance Ben Callan had gotten on his thumb and forefinger at Pario's place.

"At first I didn't realize what it was; but once I caught wise, the whole campaign of murder unfolded itself and I was able to figure out what was in the wind."

Puzzled, the harbor patrol captain asked: "You mean that Pario rowed ashore with that—that veritable fortune of smelly, fatty stuff? Well, what is it, Ace?"

"You'll see for yourself. I stopped off at Pario's house and found it before coming here. It clinched my case against him."

A few minutes later, with Pario revived and standing sullenly by, the burly patrol officer returned with a heavy wooden box. He puffed from the exertion as he set the box down on deck.

Captain Demming played his flashlight at the glob of thickish substance inside. His eyes widened.

"Great Scot!" he cried. "It's ambergris! The rare base for the most expensive perfumes."

"Right," said Ace lightly. He turned to the killer. "At a thousand dollars a pound, that boxful ought to net fifty thousand dollars. Splitting that dough four ways was too much, eh, Pario? But now you end up with nothing more than a scent—a bad one, at that!"