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# The Buccaneers of Boya

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# THE BUCCANEERS OF BOYA

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# CHAPTER I

## The S.Y. "Paloma"

The yacht agent shook his head.

"Absolutely nothing of that tonnage is to be chartered, Mr. Heatherington," he declared. "The present industrial dispute has prevented all craft of any size being fitted out. There are numerous yachts up to forty tons, but I presume one of these would be too small for your purpose?"

Mr. Heatherington indicated that it would, and turned to meet the disappointed gaze of his son.

"It's rough luck, Kenneth," he remarked.

Kenneth, a tall, strapping youth of sixteen, tried to conceal his dismay, for the yacht agent's announcement was of the nature of a shattering blow to his hopes.

Mr. Heatherington had planned to charter a large steam-yacht for a three months' trip to the South Pacific. It was to be a combined pleasure and business undertaking. Kenneth's father had, several years previously, obtained authentic information of the existence of a coral island, Talai by name, where black pearls, that would fetch fabulous prices in London, were to be found; and it was only now possible for him to undertake the task of chartering a vessel and making a special voyage to Talai, with the object of gaining possession of sufficient black pearls to give a good return on his outlay.

Although it was only late in June, Kenneth was having a holiday. The school at which he was a boarder had been closed owing to an epidemic of measles; and, if the truth be told, the lads hailed measles with a fervour that would have shocked and horrified their parents. To the former the epidemic came as a direct gift of good fortune; to the latter as a catastrophe likely to upset the entire domestic arrangements of many a home for weeks to come.

As the school was not to reassemble until the end of September, Kenneth had the best part of three months' holiday. In ordinary circumstances, Mr. Heatherington would have been worried to know what to do with his son for such a long period. In fact he was beginning to wish that there were no such things as epidemics in schools, when it occurred to him that now was a most excellent opportunity for him to undertake the expedition to Talai, and at the same time enlarge his son's mind and develop his body through the medium of travel.

Naturally Kenneth jumped at the idea, but suggested tentatively that it would be better fun if he had a chum of about his own age. Mr. Heatherington considered the proposal, and, realizing that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, thought that perhaps the matter might be satisfactorily arranged.

"None of your harum-scarum chums," he added. "I want you to have a sensible sort of a companion, and not one who will take up the best part of my time in getting him out of foolish scrapes. Whom have you in mind?"

"Arkendale—Peter Arkendale," replied Kenneth. "Don't you remember? I introduced him to you last Sports Day. He won the hurdles and the mile."

His father admitted the statement. In point of fact he had been introduced to about a score of Kenneth's chums, had taken the whole crowd of them to a tuck-shop. But there his recollection ended. He could not visualize Kenneth's special chum Arkendale.

"All right," he said, "I'll write to his people. He has parents, I suppose?"

"No; he lives with his uncle when he's at home," corrected Kenneth.

"Simplifies matters, then," continued Mr. Heatherington. "There might have been difficulty in getting his parents' consent if they were alive. In the case of an uncle it's different. He's not so likely to imagine that a trip to the Pacific is a sort of desperate adventure. Do you know Arkendale's uncle's address?"

Within forty-eight hours, Mr. Arkendale's letter was received, expressing thanks for Mr. Heatherington's kind invitation, and stating that he was perfectly willing to entrust his nephew to the capable hands of Kenneth's father.

And now, when everything seemed to be running smoothly, came the unexpected set-back. A series of visits to well-known yacht agents all produced similar results. Owing to a prolonged strike in the ship and yacht industries, there was hardly a steam-yacht in commission and not one available for charter.

"There are at least twenty large steam- and motor-yachts lying in mud-berths up the river," declared the agent. "In ordinary circumstances they would have been afloat early in the summer. We usually have half a dozen on our books for charter, but now——"

He gave an expressive gesture with his hands.

"Of course, if we hear of anything at all suitable, we will inform you at once," he added.

"I don't feel disposed to wait on the off chance of something that might possibly materialize about next Christmas," observed Mr. Heatherington with asperity.

"Don't blame me," protested the agent. "We suffer from the ill-effects of this deplorable strike as much as anyone. I'm sorry——"

At that moment his partner, who had been a silent participator in the meeting, touched him on the shoulder.

"There is the *Paloma*," he said.

"Oh, yes, the *Paloma*," echoed the senior partner. "I hadn't forgotten her, but she wouldn't be suitable, I feel sure."

"What is the *Paloma*, in any case?" asked Mr. Heatherington.

"She's not a British owned yacht," was the reply. "She is owned by a Spanish Count—Count Cristoval Xarifa. He was cruising on her when he was recalled to Madrid on urgent business. Her master's English, I understand, but the rest of the officers and crew are Spaniards. We were asked to put her on our books for charter, but you will understand, sir, that no one wants to hire a foreign yacht with a foreign crew."

"Possibly not," admitted Mr. Heatherington. "But although people don't want to do a good many things they have to all the same. In my case I'd naturally prefer a British owned and manned yacht; but, since that is at present out of the question, I'll have to make the best of a bad job and take what I can find. What is the *Paloma*? Is she in Lloyd's?"

"She is not on Lloyd's list, sir," was the reply. "She's a 750 ton steel-built craft, schooner rigged. Her speed is, I believe, seventeen knots, but for protracted cruising her economical speed is twelve. At the present rate of exchange the terms asked are very reasonable."

Kenneth looked hopefully at his parent, but Mr. Heatherington, although apt to be impulsive, had a cautious side to his nature.

"I'll think it over," he declared, "and let you have my decision within the next forty-eight hours. Meanwhile you might give me an order to inspect the vessel."

"Certainly, sir," replied the agent. "She's lying in the harbour. If you let me know at what hour you propose going on board, I'll have a boat waiting at the town quay."

"Do you think she'll do, Pater?" asked Kenneth, as father and son walked up the High Street.

"She might, but I don't like the idea of a foreign crew," replied Mr. Heatherington. "The difficulty is that when we arrive at Talai we must keep all knowledge of the existence of the pearling grounds from the men. If they found out they'd probably help themselves and flood the market. Black pearls are rare, but if the Talai find becomes public property the market will be flooded and the price in consequence will fall. 'Tany rate we'll have a look at the *Paloma* and see if there's any chance of paying off the present crew and shipping a British one."

That same afternoon, Mr. Heatherington and Kenneth went on board the *Paloma*. She looked a wholesome, weatherly craft in spite of her obvious foreign build, while her accommodation was both extensive and luxurious. Evidently the Count was fond of making a lavish display when afloat.

"Where is the captain?" asked Mr. Heatherington, of a swarthy young officer who met the visitors at the head of the

accommodation ladder.

"He's not aboard, señor," was the reply. "He return will ver' soon. We show you ze ship."

Kenneth had expected to find the vessel manned by a piratical-looking crowd of Dagoes, rigged out in picturesque garb, each man wearing earrings and carrying a formidable knife in the sash that did duty for a belt. What he did see was a crew differing little in appearance from that of a British yacht. The men wore canvas jumpers and trousers and scarlet stocking-caps. Instead of being fat and reeking with garlic, they were for the most part slim and alert. Only their olivine complexions, crisp, curly hair, and their speech betrayed their nationality, while apparently their supply of garlic had ran out, for the yacht reeked of nothing but oakum and the oily fumes from the engine-room.

Mr. Heatherington had hardly begun his tour of inspection when a boat came alongside with the *Paloma's* skipper. He was a short, thick-set Englishman, with a square firm jaw and choleric blue eyes.

"Good afternoon, Captain," said Mr. Heatherington. "I have an order to inspect the yacht. I don't know your name."

"Gregory, sir; George Gregory is my tally. Extra Master, at your service. Very good, Lopez," he added in Spanish, addressing the Third Officer. "You can go; I will show these gentlemen round."

"Is she a good sea-boat with all that top-hamper?" asked Kenneth's father, indicating the towering bridge and high-decked houses.

"Fairish," admitted Captain Gregory. "She rolls a goodish bit, I admit, but for a Dago-built craft—she was built back in '09 in Barcelona—she's not so dusty."

"What made you take command of a Spanish yacht, might I ask?"

Captain Gregory shrugged his massive shoulders—a gesture he had acquired by reason of his association with an Iberian crew.

"Too many Masters for too few billets in the British Mercantile Marine," he observed. "Case of had to, sir. The Count isn't a bad sort as foreigners go. He got me so as to lick his crew into shape. I reckon I've done it," he added grimly.

"Troublesome?" queried Mr. Heatherington.

"Bit at first," admitted Captain Gregory. "One fellow threatened me with a knife—me, an Extra Master, mind you. He felt sorry for himself by the time I'd finished with him. Now the hands are as mild as lambs and skip like young rams when they're ordered to. Thinking of chartering the *Paloma*, sir? Business or pleasure cruise?"

"Pleasure," replied Kenneth's father briefly. "By the by, do you think you could send the crew home and sign on a British crew?"

"I'd do it like a shot, sir," was Captain Gregory's reply, "only the Count wouldn't hear of it. They won't give any trouble, sir; and when you get used to them——" he broke off, racking his brains to find words in his vocabulary to complete his remarks. "You just will," he concluded.

The next day Mr. Heatherington signed the documents agreeing to charter the S.Y. *Paloma* for three months; and a week later the vessel weighed and proceeded on her lengthy voyage to the South Pacific.

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## CHAPTER II

### Danger Ahead

"So this is the Pacific," remarked Peter Arkendale, as the *Paloma* cleared Panama and shaped a course across the rock-infested bay of that name. "Don't think much of it."

Peter Arkendale was a broad-shouldered youth, only half an inch shorter than his chum Kenneth.

"Why, what's wrong with it?" asked the latter.

"Nothing, except that it's like the Atlantic," was the reply. "I imagined quiet water, blue skies, lagoons, coco-nut palms, an' all that sort of thing. We don't seem to strike any adventures, old son."

Kenneth had to agree to that. The voyage had been comparatively uneventful. Moderate weather had been experienced; the crew were patterns of civility and seemed well up to the work; routine had been carried out without a hitch. The monotony of the whole business, except for the novel experience of passing through the stupendous Panama Canal, had become thoroughly irksome. Kenneth frankly admitted that Peter's companionship alone saved him from wishing that he had not left school.

"Catch!" suddenly exclaimed Kenneth, throwing his chum a tennis ball.

Peter missed it.

"Butter-fingers!" ejaculated young Heatherington, as the ball, slipping through Peter's hands, lodged on top of the boiler-casing.

"The roll of the ship put me off," declared Peter, who prided himself on being one of the best fielders of the school First Eleven. "Where did it go?"

"Up there," replied Kenneth. "Give me a leg-up, and I'll get it."

The *Paloma's* boiler-casing was a steel structure nearly ten feet in height, being considerably higher than is the case in most vessels of her size. In the after-end were two small metal doors through which access to the boiler-room was gained by means of vertical ladders. On the top of the casing were "fidleys" and skylights, and a wide seemingly unbroken expanse of steel plating extending the whole width of the structure. In ordinary circumstances access to the top of the boiler-casing would be possible by means of iron rungs bolted to the wall. There were none, but there were evidences that at one time there had been the usual means of gaining the top of the casing.

Clambering upon Peter's shoulders, Kenneth prepared to spring. Before he could do so, Lopez, the Third Officer, appeared upon the scene.

"Not allowed, señores," he exclaimed, as he peremptorily clutched Kenneth's wrist and compelled him to descend. "It ver' dangerous to climb up dar."

"Rot!" ejaculated Kenneth scornfully. "We've lost a ball, and I'm jolly well going to find it."

Lopez, hitherto suave, gave the lad a vindictive glance.

"You no go up dar," he reiterated. "Eef you vish I send man to seek-a ball—but not you."

At the moment the missing object settled the business by rolling over the edge of the casing. With a smile, Lopez picked it up and handed it to his present employer's son.

"What got his rag out, I wonder?" asked Peter, as the Third went aft. "I don't see why we shouldn't climb the beastly thing if we want to. I vote we do."

"After dinner, then," agreed his chum. "Grub's ready now."

The meal over, the two lads returned to the deck, but their plans were already thwarted. A couple of hands were busily

engaged in painting the casing, slapping on the paint so lavishly that there seemed no likelihood of its drying for days.

"I scent a mystery here," declared Kenneth. "If it didn't look like sneaking, I'd mention it to the skipper."

"We needn't do that," rejoined Peter. "You wait till the paint's dry, and we'll get Lopez's rag out by dancing on the top of his precious boiler-casing."

They remained for some time watching the two Spaniards at work, obviously to the men's annoyance. Presently Lopez passed, and said something to the hands in a low voice and went for'ard. In about an hour the casing had been painted from the deck to a height of about five feet. Then the men knocked off.

In the afternoon watch on the following day work was resumed. This time the upper portion of the casing was liberally bedaubed with paint, while on the third day the lower portion received a second coat.

"The blighters are doing this to try and keep us off," declared Peter. "Let's put on some old togs and risk it. It'll make Lopez pretty wild."

"Right-o," agreed Kenneth.

As they went below they encountered Mr. Heatherington, who had just been having a conversation with Captain Gregory.

"I want to see you fellows," remarked Kenneth's father. "Come to my cabin."

They followed him in. Mr. Heatherington shut the door and drew a curtain over it.

"Have either of you had your gear meddled with?" asked Mr. Heatherington abruptly. "No? You're not sure? Well, someone has been going through mine. I've just been speaking to Captain Gregory about it. I placed three books in a certain order in one of my cabin trunks. When I went to it again, the books had been removed and replaced in a different order. Gregory was very apologetic about it. He maintains that some light-fingered Spaniard couldn't resist his natural curiosity. That's all very well, but I'm not satisfied. You haven't discussed the subject of the black pearls in anyone's hearing, have you?"

"We've never mentioned it since we came on board," declared Kenneth.

"Good; I'm glad of that. Even Gregory doesn't know anything on that matter. What's that?"

With a rapid, noiseless movement, Mr. Heatherington drew aside the curtain and opened the door. At the end of the alley-way a steward was carrying a tray. His rope-soled shoes pattered as he moved.

"Eavesdropping," declared Kenneth's father. "How do I know? He never made a sound with his feet until I threw open the door. Well, I don't suppose he's learnt much."

"We had rather a rummy experience," remarked Kenneth. "We didn't mean to say anything about it. Didn't seem important; but now——"

"Fire away," rejoined his parent.

Kenneth did so, relating the incident of Lopez and the boiler-casing, Peter chipping in to bear out his chum's statement.

"By Jove! That's a bit of confounded cheek on the part of Señor Lopez," declared Mr. Heatherington. "I'll get Gregory to tick him off."

He touched a bell. One of the stewards answered the summons.

"Tell Captain Gregory I wish to see him," ordered Mr. Heatherington.

The man looked at him with a puzzled expression. The order was repeated.

"No onnerstan', señor."

That was a lie, and Mr. Heatherington knew it. The fellow possessed sufficient knowledge of English to realize the nature of the order, but for some unknown reason he professed ignorance of his employer's words.

"Have you lost any money?" asked Mr. Heatherington, in a matter of fact tone.

The steward clapped his hands to his pocket, reassured himself and tried to resume his former air of ignorance.

Kenneth and Peter burst out laughing. The man, his face darkening with anger and mortification, knew that he had been fooled.

"Do what I tell you—at once," said Mr. Heatherington sternly.

The man obeyed.

"Look here, Captain Gregory," began Mr. Heatherington, when the skipper appeared, "I don't want to complain, but the last few days we've been subjected to a lot of petty annoyances both from the officers and men. It will have to stop. For instance, is there any reason why Lopez should get excited because my boy tried to climb on the boiler-casing? And what is the object of having the thing continually painted?"

"I don't know, sir," replied the skipper. "I never gave orders for the work to be done. I'll see about it. As for Lopez, he's a peculiar cuss in some respects. I've had to shake him up before to-day."

"Is there anything in connection with that structure that justifies Lopez's action?" persisted Mr. Heatherington.

"Not that I know of, sir; but I'll inquire."

"I wish you would, please. And tell Mr. Third Officer that if he has cause to prohibit my son and his friend from any part of the ship he must do so through you."

Captain Gregory made a gesture of assent. Although he meant to "haul Lopez over the coals", he rather resented being ordered about by a passenger, even though the passenger were the charterer of the yacht.

"I hope it's nothing," remarked Mr. Heatherington, when the captain had left the cabin, "but several minor but somewhat disquieting incidents have occurred recently. I didn't say anything to you fellows, but in future we'll have to keep our eyes skinned. Not that there's any danger. These Spaniards are simply getting a bit out of hand for some reason, and their resentment takes the form of what is known in the army as 'dumb insolence'. Why, I know not. It may be that they've got some inkling of the real nature of the voyage, or perhaps they're kicking at the *Paloma* being taken so far from her usual cruising grounds. Of course, if there's any serious trouble, I'll have the whole crew of them put under arrest at the first port we touch and sign on another crew—a British one."

"It would be——" began Peter, but the sentence was never completed, for above the muffled roar of the engines came a shriek of mortal pain, followed by the rush of feet and the roar of angry voices.

A heavy body thudded against the locked door.

"Let me in, sir!" exclaimed a voice, which the lads hardly recognized as that of Captain Gregory. "Let me in! They tried to murder me, the villains!"

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# CHAPTER III

## Mutiny

On leaving the cabin, Captain Gregory went on deck. For the moment he was undecided as to what course to pursue—whether to tackle his Third Officer at once or to make investigations concerning the boiler-casing. Now that Mr. Heatherington had drawn attention to that structure, the skipper was bound to admit that there was something out of the ordinary as far as it was concerned. Its height was out of all proportion for the work it was supposed to perform. A pantechnicon might be accommodated under it even with the boilers in position, while the absence of scuttles indicated that the space was not required to be lighted except by artificial light—an expensive and unnecessary business when the walls of the structure were in the open.

As Captain Gregory made his way for'ard he noticed that a couple of the hands were just about to give the casing another coat of paint. Had the fact not been called to his notice he would not have paid any attention to it, the Chief Officer being directly responsible for work of this nature.

"Who told you to repaint that?" demanded the skipper.

"El teniente, Señor Capitán," replied one of the men, indicating that he had received his instructions from the Chief Officer.

"Then do not paint any more until I have seen the Chief," ordered Captain Gregory. "Bring me a ladder."

The seamen hurried off, but once out of their skipper's sight made no haste to execute their orders.

While Captain Gregory was waiting he noticed that several of the hands were hanging about eyeing him curiously. As it was the second dog-watch, and the men were at liberty to stand easy there was nothing in that to cause the skipper to send them off. Presently he caught sight of Lopez partly screened by one of the ventilators.

"I sent a couple of hands for'ard to get a ladder, Señor Lopez," shouted Captain Gregory in English. "Lay for'ard, will you, and see what they're doing."

Lopez hurried past his skipper without saying a word, and disappeared behind the deck-house under the bridge. More men strolled up to watch the proceedings, while Pedro Mendoza, the Chief Officer, having exchanged signals from the bridge to the Third, strolled to the weather side of his elevated post and surveyed the scene in which the Captain was the central figure.

A whistle sounded shrilly. Gregory swung round at the noise to find Lopez and half a dozen men approaching.

"You are a prisoner!" exclaimed the Third Officer. "Put up your hands!"

"I'll see you to blazes first, you mutineering dog!" shouted the Captain, making straight for his would-be captor.

Before the skipper had taken a couple of steps, a knife hurtled through the air and buried itself to the hilt in the Englishman's left shoulder. Maddened by the pain, for the wound felt like a stab with a hot iron, Captain Gregory spun round. Only a tremendous effort of will-power kept him from falling. He was almost surrounded by men whose manner and appearance were unmistakably hostile. Evidently they meant to capture and not to kill. The knife had been thrown with the unerring accuracy for which Spaniards are noted; had the owner intended to murder the skipper the blade would have pierced his heart or severed his jugular vein. By transfixing Gregory's shoulder the thrower meant to disable his victim.

In a trice the Captain made up his mind. It was his duty to warn and defend—as far as lay in his power—his employer. Could he but regain Mr. Heatherington's cabin, it might be possible for the four Britons to hold out against the mutineers for days, and perhaps communicate the news of their plight to a vessel that chanced within visual signalling distance.

Even as the ring of mutineers closed in upon their captain, the wounded Englishman made an impetuous irresistible rush.

With the knife still blade-deep in his shoulder, Gregory was severely handicapped, yet so impetuous was his onslaught that one of the men who attempted to bar his way was lifted clean off his feet by a staggering right that caught him fairly

and squarely upon the point of his chin.

In his fall the mutineer brought down one of his companions, Gregory plugging a third on the solar plexus and sending him to leaven the whole lump.

Another Spaniard, knife upraised, made a determined attempt to stab the intrepid captain. The point missed by a hair's breadth. The dealer of the blow, unable to recover his balance, presented a face that formed an easy and tempting target. One short, sharp jab, and the mutineer was sent reeling with the loss of four of his front teeth.

So sudden and unsuspected had been Gregory's dash that the mutineers behind him had no time to act. They could not throw their knives without running a great risk of transfixing their compatriots, and by the time the British captain had burst through the cordon and gained the head of the companion-ladder it was too late for a display of knife throwing.

Gregory never knew how he got down the flight of brass-treaded steps. He was so faint and weak from loss of blood that he seemed to have no feeling in his lower limbs, while his brain reeled and his sight grew dim.

He was dimly conscious of hammering upon the door of Mr. Heatherington's state-room, and bellowing an almost incoherent warning; then the door was unbolted and he fell unconscious into the arms of the charterer of the *Paloma*.

Mr. Heatherington's first act was to place the inert body of the Captain upon the floor. He then locked the door and thrust home the bolts. Already the foremost of the mutineers were crowding down the companion-way, shouting, cursing, and uttering ferocious threats against their intended victims.

Kenneth's father gave a quick glance at the two lads, but it was enough to reassure him. Although pale, Kenneth and Peter showed no signs of panic. Either would have fully admitted to himself that he "had the wind up badly", but even the immediate prospect of death by violence would not have made him own up to it to anyone else.

"Barricade the door, lads, while I get my automatic," exclaimed Mr. Heatherington, as he opened the top drawer of a chest fitted under the bunk.

He found the weapon, which he invariably kept with the magazine fully charged; fumbled for a packet of spare cartridges, failed to find it; tried the second drawer with equal lack of success. By this time Kenneth and Peter had piled up every suitable article of furniture—scanty enough—that could be detached and used to secure still further the massive teak door.

"Keep clear," cautioned Mr. Heatherington. "They'll probably start throwing knives through the jalousie."

The jalousie was a sort of louvred ventilator, which, although admitting air, prevented anyone from seeing directly into the cabin. On the other hand it was possible that a missile could be projected through the openings and stand a fair chance of striking any of the occupants who happened to be immediately behind the door.

For a full minute the mutineers hammered upon the woodwork. Had the barricade not been in position not even the lock and the stout bolts and hinges would have withstood the onslaught. The jalousie was splintered but none of the ruffians dared to show his face at the aperture.

Then the uproar ceased. Ensued a period of a long-drawn out half minute, when no sound broke the silence save the deep breaths of the mutineers, the gentle pulsations of the engines, and the splash of water against the yacht's sides.

To Kenneth the silence was decidedly uncanny. It was far more trying than the clamour that had hitherto prevailed. As for Peter, who not so very long ago had bewailed the fact that the voyage was lacking in adventure, he realized that now peril was thrust upon him with the utmost lavishness. As things were going it seemed too sudden to realize fully.

"Keep well away from the door," cautioned Mr. Heatherington again. "Watch that opening, and crack the skull of the first one who shows himself."

The silence was resumed. Peter and Kenneth, one armed with an ebony ruler and the other with a rather heavy Malacca cane, kept on the alert, one on either side of the door; while Mr. Heatherington, with his automatic cocked and the safety catch released, waited for the onslaught to be resumed.

"It's no use, Ingleses!" exclaimed a mocking voice, which the lads recognized as that of the Chief Officer, Pedro

Mendoza. "Open ze door an' surrender, den we give you your lifs; put you on ze leetle boat an' you fetch ze land in leetle no time."

That Mendoza was the leader of the mutineers, or even one of them, came as a surprise to the besieged Englishmen. The Chief Officer had previously been most polite, although he had professed complete ignorance of English. He seemed to be of a quiet, unassuming disposition, and to be a keen and conscientious navigator. To Mr. Heatherington's knowledge, Mendoza, unlike Lopez the Third Officer, never spoke on terms of intimacy with the rest of the crew. Now he was showing himself in his true colours as a mutineer and would-be murderer.

"Sorry I cannot entertain your offer, Señor Mendoza," replied Mr. Heatherington. "For one thing I don't like being in little boats; for another I don't propose to leave the *Paloma* at present, since I've paid for the chartering of her. Apparently in your diabolical schemes you overlooked the fact that we are in possession of a small wireless set. We will soon call up every vessel within fifty miles of us, explain that the *Paloma* is in the hands of mutineers, and in a very short time you will be prisoners on board an American cruiser. How does that strike you?"

Mendoza bluntly gasped with consternation. He had not counted upon such a possibility. The *Paloma* was fitted with wireless, but the installation was in the hands of the mutineers.

"We can do ze interruption, señor," he replied. "Ze ship's wireless it make—how you call it? Caramba! Make ze jam."

"That won't prevent us sending out signals," declared Mr. Heatherington.

A babel of excited voices held sway for the next few minutes. Mendoza had to explain the situation to his fellow mutineers, and apparently the information was extremely disconcerting.

Then Lopez took up his parable.

"You tink you bluff, eh?" he exclaimed mockingly. "You have-a not got wireless. I know all 'bout what you got. An' you talk to discharge Spanish crew an' sign on Ingleses, ah? Palaver ended."

The Third Officer's remarks came as a bit of a staggerer. Apparently he was conversant with the personal contents of Mr. Heatherington's state-room. He knew that the latter's threat to make use of wireless was sheer bluff. More, he had contrived to overhear the conversation between the charterer and the captain of the yacht, which had taken place behind closed doors. Consequently it was fairly safe to assume that Lopez had been eavesdropping when the matter concerning the black pearls of Talai had been discussed.

"One minute!" continued Lopez. "What you tink of dis?"

He held a small black box through the shattered jalousie. Unsuspectingly Mr. Heatherington stepped into the direct line of sight. In an instant the treacherous Spaniard threw the box and its contents full at the Englishman's face.

Kenneth's parent had barely time to close his eyes before he received a quantity of red pepper hurled with considerable force. It left him gasping, while Lopez and those of his companions who could see the result of the cowardly act roared with laughter.

Immediately the onslaught was renewed, the mutineers using crowbars and capstan bars in their attempt to force the door. One man incautiously thrust one hand through the open jalousie and attempted to throw aside part of the barricade. Kenneth dealt him such a numbing blow that the fellow yelled and danced with pain.

The reply was a knife thrust, the blade being lashed to a pole. The point missed Kenneth's head by a bare inch, but before the improvised lance could be withdrawn Peter seized the pole and with a powerful twisting movement wrenched it from the wielder's grasp.

Hitherto, Mr. Heatherington had hesitated to make use of his automatic. Although his face was smarting terribly and his eyes were watering, he could see how the attack progressed. Unless something were done to prevent it, the barricaded door would be forced before many seconds.

Again the grinning features of Lopez appeared in view. Levelling his pistol, Mr. Heatherington fired at point-blank range straight at the head of the mutineer. In the confined space the report sounded like a thunder-clap. Lopez, giving a howl that would not have disgraced a member of the lupine family, dropped out of sight.

"That's settled Mr. Third Officer!" thought Mr. Heatherington, but to his astonishment and dismay, Lopez reappeared with a diabolical leer upon his olivine features. So close had he been to the muzzle of the pistol that his face was pitted with grains of burnt powder. Knife in hand he thrust again and again.

Stepping back a couple of paces, Mr. Heatherington raised his automatic.

"She evidently threw a bit high before," he said to himself. "I won't miss this time, by Jove!"

Aiming at the Spaniard's throat he pressed the trigger. Even as Mr. Heatherington did so, Lopez held his wrist in front of his eyes. Almost before the echoes of the report died away, the mutineer lowered his arm and grinned at his antagonist.

"Pistol no good!" he exclaimed. "Lopez he see dat so long ago."

Then and only then did Mr. Heatherington realize the cold-blooded preparations of the mutineers. Probably the outbreak had been precipitated by Captain Gregory, but it had been prepared, for all that. Lopez, or one of his satellites had explored the state-room during the Englishman's absence, and had removed the bullets from the cartridges in the magazine of Mr. Heatherington's automatic and had taken the unopened packet of ammunition from the chest of drawers.

Darting from his place of concealment, Kenneth gripped the Third Officer by his curly locks and began hammering his face with his fist. It was Lopez's turn to be taken aback. His hands were fully occupied in trying to prevent his head being pulled through the jalousie, while in his frantic struggle he lashed out with his feet and thus kept his companions from going to his assistance, otherwise Kenneth presented an easy target for a hostile knife-thrust.

When the Third Officer did break loose he left a double handful of hair in Kenneth's grasp, and ran howling along the alley-way with blood dripping from a badly battered nose.

Under Mendoza's direction the attack was not resumed. The mutineers withdrew.

"We've beaten them off!" exclaimed Kenneth.

"Let's hope so," rejoined his father. "I doubt it. They're planning some dirty work, I'm afraid. Unship that folding table, Peter, and let's see if we can secure it over the jalousie."

This was done. The besieged slaked their thirst, and stood by, Mr. Heatherington unloading the magazine of his automatic and fitting short lengths of aluminium rod into each unexpended cartridge to take the place of the extracted bullets.

"I fancy the people who made this photographic tripod never knew to what purpose it was finally put," he remarked as he completed his task. "Even a small chunk of aluminium will stop a man at close range. Stand by, Kenneth, and keep your ears on the alert while I see how poor Gregory is faring."

The Captain was still unconscious, which was perhaps a fortunate thing for him, for the knife was not only deep in his shoulder but it had made a jagged wound; possibly in his headlong dash, Gregory had caught the haft of the weapon against some obstruction.

It took quite a strong effort to withdraw the blade. Then, having washed the wound and applied iodine in liberal quantities, Mr. Heatherington bandaged the injured shoulder, and placed the still unconscious man upon a settee.

"Hark!" whispered Kenneth.

The mutineers had returned. They were apparently securing something to the outside of the door. The sound of a gimlet boring into the hard teak was followed by a slight succession of jars that might well be caused by a screw-driver getting home a stubborn screw.

Mr. Heatherington said nothing but thought a lot. The new move on the part of the mutineers was a sinister one.

A few minutes later the state-room grew dark. Over the two open scuttles sacks filled with junk were lowered. Simultaneously the air-intake of the ventilator was stopped up.

"They're trying to smoke us out, lads!" exclaimed Mr. Heatherington. "Get hold of that pole, Kenneth, and clear that scuttle."

Kenneth tried to do so, but ineffectually. Even when his chum came to his aid the obstacle refused to be moved. The mutineers had seen to that, for the sacks were pressed tightly against the scuttle by means of capstan bars secured to eyebolts in the yacht's side.

Then the unmistakable sound of an auger biting through the woodwork became audible. Even in this the mutineers showed deep cunning, for they chose a spot for the hole to be bored that was not accessible from within.

A faint sickly smell assailed the nostrils of the imprisoned men.

"Chloroform!" muttered Mr. Heatherington.

"Yes, it is chloroform," echoed the mocking voice of Pedro Mendoza. "In ver' few minutes we have you prisoner. Den we let you revive, jus' to let you know who win; den we t'row you to der sharks!"

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## CHAPTER IV

### Gassed

For a space of about thirty seconds, Mr. Heatherington and the two lads stood inactive. The mutineers gave no sound of their presence except for the gentle hiss of the pump, as the nauseating fumes were injected into the cabin.

"Lads!" exclaimed Mr. Heatherington, pointing to a couple of Pyrenes hanging against a bulkhead. "Hang on to those. Clear away that stuff"—indicating the barricade—"and we'll make a dash for it. Anything's better than being slowly chloroformed. With these fire extinguishers we'll gas a few of the villains and my automatic will settle——"

The fumes of the sickly chemical caught Mr. Heatherington's throat, and prevented the sentence being completed. All three realized that unless they acted promptly it would be too late to avenge themselves upon the rascally crew before they "went under".

Desperately the chums tackled the barricade, hurling the things aside until only the locked and bolted door was between them and their enemies—and fresh air.

Holding his automatic ready for instant action, Kenneth's father drew back the bolts and prepared to unlock the door. The lads, with their impromptu weapons ready to project a stream of oxygen-destroying liquid upon the mutineers, awaited the opening of the door, while gasping under the steadily increasing volume of chloroform fumes.

The key turned in the lock. Mr. Heatherington tried the door. It was secured on the outside. Hitherto all the efforts of the occupants of the cabin had been directed to keep the mutineers out; now they were striving to get out themselves—to fight to the last in the pure salt-laden air rather than perish like dogs in a lethal-chamber.

"Heave—both of you," gasped Mr. Heatherington.

Peter put down his Pyrene apparatus, grasped the gun-metal door-handle and pulled his hardest. The door refused to budge. He turned his head to see what Kenneth was doing, and found his chum sitting on the floor with his fingers clutching his throat.

Placing the muzzle of his automatic against the upper panel of the door, Mr. Heatherington fired five times in rapid succession. The improvised bullets perforated the woodwork, but failed to penetrate a sheet of steel which the mutineers had used to secure the door.

The weapon dropped from its owner's hand. Mr. Heatherington, overcome by the fumes, made a frantic leap in a vain attempt to find pure air overhead. Then he collapsed, still fighting for breath, across the body of his son.

Peter only partly realized what was happening. The whole horrible business seemed quite impersonal as far as he was concerned; he might have been watching a film on the screen. His senses were failing, yet at the present moment he was feeling little or no inconvenience.

Then, as the suffocating sensation assailed him, he was seized with a rebellious, resentful feeling. He made a desperate attempt to force the unyielding door and hurl himself upon the miscreants without—hammered with his bare fists upon the panels—sank into utter oblivion.

"All of them are unconscious, Capitán," reported one of the mutineers, who had been a close observer of all that was taking place in the reeking cabin. Unknown to any of the occupants, Lopez had several days previously bored a hole in the partition between Mr. Heatherington's cabin and the one adjoining, and could thus hear and see all that was transpiring.

Pedro Mendoza, erstwhile Chief Officer and now elected captain of the mutineers, thereupon gave orders for the door to be opened. Deftly half a dozen screws which had held the steel plate in position, were removed, and the door swung open with the gentle roll of the ship.

Waiting only till the suffocating fumes had wafted away, half a dozen Spaniards entered the cabin and unceremoniously dragged the senseless bodies of the unsuccessful defenders into the alley-way and thence to the waist.

"Overboard with the dog at once," ordered Lopez, giving the apparently inanimate form of Captain Gregory a vindictive kick.

Two of the mutineers grasped the skipper by the ankles and were about to carry out the officer's orders, when Mendoza intervened.

"He will be more useful alive than dead, Lopez," he said. "Let him lie till he recovers."

"But——" expostulated Lopez.

"Obey!" thundered Mendoza, and his subordinate, cursing the new captain under his breath, had no option but to do what he was told.

The unconscious Englishmen were then subjected to a thorough pilfering of their personal effects. Mr. Heatherington's automatic fell to the lot of Capitán Mendoza, who was already in possession of the missing packet of ammunition. Even the smallest article was removed from their pockets. A gold hunter—a presentation to Mr. Heatherington from the Trinity Brethren—was annexed by Lopez. The silver wristlet watches worn by Peter and Kenneth were appropriated by the bos'un and the carpenter. Captain Gregory's timepiece went to the late Second Officer, Miguel Fe, who was now promoted to Chief in place of Mendoza on the latter's assumption of the rank of captain of the mutineers. Other articles of lesser value were distributed amongst the crew.

The disposal of the spoil was still in progress, when Kenneth showed signs of returning consciousness.

Reluctantly the men suspended their engrossing task of disposing of the loot. They were as yet unused to the new conditions. By becoming mutineers they imagined that they had acquired absolute liberty of individual action; they had yet to learn that in no state of society does such a condition exist. In throwing off the yoke of Captain Gregory they were about to place their necks under that of Pedro Mendoza. If Gregory had figuratively chastised them with rods (more than once he had literally chased them with a rope's end), Mendoza was about to keep them under strict discipline by more effective means than chastising with scorpions.

"Lash up the prisoners, hand and foot!" commanded the mutineer captain. "Hasten, or some of you will feel sorry for yourselves."

"There is plenty of time," protested one of the hands. "I, for one, am going to take my share of plunder below, before I start work."

Before any of the objector's comrades could support his protests, Mendoza acted with a promptitude that indicated that he had a streak of northern blood in his veins.

Whipping out the automatic he had taken from Mr. Heatherington, he took three steps in the direction of the objector, and without a word coolly and deliberately blew out the man's brains.

"Now, amigo, you may argue as much as you like," he remarked, addressing the corpse. "You others, get to work at once; secure the prisoners."

The men obeyed with the utmost haste—fear—not enthusiasm driving them on. In a very short space of time Mr. Heatherington and the two lads were trussed up hand and foot, while Captain Gregory was secured by the ankles only.

"What are we to do with this, Señor Capitán?" inquired an elderly seaman pointing to the corpse of the shot mutineer.

"Let it stop where it is," replied Mendoza. "Now, all hands on the duty watch will proceed with the routine under Chief Officer Miguel Fe. Those in the watch below go for'ard. Señor Lopez, you know the new course—to the bridge and keep a sharp look-out for vessels."

The hands, having learnt their lesson, hurried off either to "stand their tricks" or to stand easy and discuss matters in the fo'c'sle.

Lopez ascended the bridge, fuming with rage at Mendoza for having ordered him out of sight and hearing of the prisoners. Already he distrusted his new skipper. He felt certain that Mendoza had deliberately got the others, including himself, out of the way in order to come to terms with the Englishmen or, what was more likely, to attempt to terrorize

them into agreeing to his proposals. This was precisely what Mendoza intended doing.

Lighting a cigar, Mendoza leant against the poop ladder, and waited for the prisoners to recover from the effects of the chloroform. Waiting, an idea occurred to him. He went for'ard to the foot of the bridge ladder and called to Lopez to come down.

"A word in your ear, Lopez," he began condescendingly, when the recently promoted Second Officer descended from his elevated post. "Come aft, where we shall neither be seen nor overheard."

The two men walked aft in silence.

"You know how obstinate this Englishman and the two youths are," began the Captain. "Threats do not seem to intimidate them. We must resort to other methods if we are to wrest the much-desired secret from them. They must be lured into revealing the actual locality of the pearling grounds. You could not do it. They hate you like poison, Lopez. That is why I sent you away. Now I am going to express sympathy with them, swear that I was compelled against my will to join you in taking possession of the ship, and so on. Properly managed we ought to discover the secret and then, amigo, we can hold the Englishmen to ransom. The man can pay: he must be made to do so."

Lopez nodded. Mendoza's explanation seemed plausible and feasible; but he was not altogether satisfied. His naturally suspicious nature asserted itself.

"That is as you say," he replied, "I agree to your suggestions. I will keep out of the way, but one or two trusted members of the crew must be with you in order to—to——"

"To see that I do not cheat you, Señor Lopez; is that not so? But that will not do. The secret I wish to obtain—and I swear that Miguel Fe and you will have your fair shares—is too precious to be imparted to a pair of low-born Barcelona sailor-men. The crew would soon get to know of it, and then where should we be? Now, back to your post, Lopez, I see that the two youths are beginning to take notice."

Again Lopez went for'ard.

"Perhaps that dog Mendoza is right," he muttered. "But I'll watch him very carefully, and if he plays me false, my knife is sharp and my arm is strong and sure."

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## CHAPTER V

### The Perfidy of Mendoza

When Kenneth opened his eyes he was too dazed with the effects of the chloroform to realize his surroundings. He was dimly conscious that he was in the open air. Everything seemed to be whirling round and round. His throat was parched, his head throbbed like the piston of a motor. He was under the impression that he was in the playing-fields at school, and had been "downed" in a scrum. Labouring under that delusion he clawed the deck. Instead of moist grass his fingers encountered hot teak planking. That puzzled him still more.

A violent fit of sickness followed. Then he felt someone's arm assisting him to rise to a sitting position. A pannikin filled with lime-juice was held to his hot lips. He drank feverishly, and the cooling liquid tasted like perfect nectar.

The mist cleared before his eyes. He looked into the face of his benefactor, and recognized the oily features of Pedro Mendoza.

"You better-a?" asked the mutineer captain. "Do not fear. I your friend. Shut your eyes an' go sleep."



**"I AM YOUR VERY GOOD FRIEND" *Page 543***

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Kenneth closed his eyes but not for the purpose of going to sleep. He felt horribly tired and weak, but the sight of Mendoza led his thoughts back into a fairly accurate channel. Laboriously he traced out the tangled skein of events into a connected train of argument, until his facts came to an abrupt termination at the recollection of seeing his father and his chum struggling to open the tightly-closed door.

Where were they? he asked himself, and in his anxiety he raised himself on one elbow and gazed around.

A few feet from him lay Peter, breathing stertorously. Propped up against a skylight was Mr. Heatherington with Mendoza in attendance, acting to perfection the part of a Good Samaritan. The Spaniard had already bandaged Mr. Heatherington's head, for in falling the latter had received a nasty gash on the forehead, which was still bleeding freely.

On the deck on the other side of the skylight lay Captain Gregory, so motionless that Kenneth was under the mistaken impression that he was dead.

"Soon be all right, señor," declared Mendoza, with monotonous reiteration. "I, Pedro Mendoza, am your ver' good friend."

Kenneth was frankly puzzled. He now remembered only too vividly the part the former Chief Officer of the *Paloma* had played in the attack upon the occupants of his father's cabin. He could not account for the baffling change in Mendoza's attitude. The more he thought about it the more his bewildered head throbbed, until in sheer exhaustion he lay back and fell into a fitful slumber.

It was night when he awoke. The short tropical twilight had given place to darkness, but the electric lamp under the break of the poop had been switched on.

Peter had recovered consciousness and had drawn closer to his chum. Mr. Heatherington and Mendoza had just begun a discussion, and it was their voices that had aroused Kenneth from his uneasy sleep.

"I tell you, señor," declared the Spaniard. "I tell you I am your ver' good friend. I do all I can to help you all, but my position—a ver' difficult."

"You're right there, at all events," remarked Mr. Heatherington grimly. "Your conduct will require a tremendous lot of explanation when the *Paloma* puts into port."

Mendoza shrugged his shoulders.

"Mutiny—yes," he admitted. "But how could I help it? If I not join in den I am made prisoner. So I pretend—only pretend, señor—to agree to the villain Lopez an' seize the ship. By an' by I talk with certain of der men, den we put Lopez in irons and all is well—what you call all plain sailing—a!"

Mr. Heatherington had not the slightest doubt but that Mendoza was acting his part with an ulterior motive. He decided to humour the man, to pretend to accept his explanations.

"It's jolly good of you to do your best to help us, Mendoza," he said. "You'll not find me ungrateful for that. Naturally, you expect to be rewarded for what you have done?"

The Spaniard grinned.

"That is so, señor," he agreed.

"And you'll get your deserts in good time, you villain," thought the Englishman, then aloud: "In that case it's not much use beating about the bush, Señor Mendoza."

"Beating der bush, what dat mean?" asked the mutineer suspiciously.

"Figure of speech," explained Mr. Heatherington, who was beginning to relish the little comedy.

"Figure of money—dat is far more important beesness," retorted Mendoza.

"Precisely what I tried to imply," added Kenneth's father. "I presume, acting upon the assumption that almost every man has his price, that you have yours. What do you want to set us ashore in no worse condition than we are at present in a fairly civilized port?"

Mendoza pretended to consider the suggestion. He was deluded into the idea that Mr. Heatherington firmly believed in his declaration of friendship, yet it puzzled him to account for the docile manner in which the prisoner behaved. He had expected to have to deal with an angry, blustering Englishman, who would probably be as stubborn as a mule. On the contrary, Mr. Heatherington seemed only too anxious to come to terms and gain his freedom—which was the very last thing Pedro Mendoza desired. To release all or any of the captives meant a speedy and effective termination to Pedro

Mendoza's activities.

No, Señor Heatherington must be hoodwinked, threatened if necessity arose, and even forced to reveal his secret. Once that were wrested from him he and his companions would put to a practical test the proverb "Dead men tell no tales".

Mendoza in his heart blamed Lopez for precipitating the mutiny. His original plan was to wait until the Englishman had found the pearls, and had placed them on board the yacht. Then the rest of the business would be a fairly simple matter. However, he decided, the Englishman Heatherington was giving indications that he believed in his protestations of friendship, and in that case the black pearls were as safe as if the original plan had been adhered to.

Pedro Mendoza was too crafty to reply at once to Mr. Heatherington's pointed question.

"Señor, you are still weak from the effect of chloroform," he observed. "Night is here. To-morrow we will discuss. I regret that I must treat you as prisoners or the villain Lopez and the others will be suspicious. It is necessary that you and the two youths shall be separated."

With that Mendoza blew a double blast on a whistle. Half a dozen men, all armed with revolvers and knives, appeared. The mutineer captain gave a curt order, and in less than a minute Kenneth and Peter found themselves under lock and key in a small cabin just abaft the main saloon.

"We've had adventure shoved on to us with a vengeance, this time, old son," remarked Kenneth ruefully.

"That's a fact," agreed his chum. "The adventure part's all right, but we've lost all along the line. The blighters did us properly."

"If it hadn't been for that beastly chloroform, they wouldn't," declared Kenneth. "But what puzzles me is: why did they go to all that trouble when they could have shot us down?"

"I thought of that, too," said Peter. "During the scrap not a shot was fired by any of the mutineers, yet those chaps who shoved us into this place were wearing holsters with revolvers in them. I could see the butts of the pistols. And they didn't even shoot Gregory."

"They knifed him; that was just as bad."

"I don't think much of that Mendoza fellow," continued Peter, but Kenneth interposed.

"Shut up!" he exclaimed cautiously. "As likely as not there's someone listening."

"Someone is listening," echoed a voice, which the lads recognized as that of Miguel Fe.

The door of the cabin was opened noiselessly and the Chief Officer of the mutineer vessel *Paloma* slipped through, shutting and locking the door behind him.

Up to the present moment the two chums had not the slightest idea that Miguel Fe understood English, let alone spoke it. Previous to the outbreak he had given the impression that he was a silent though punctiliously polite Spaniard, who, if spoken to, relied upon Captain Gregory as an interpreter. Now he was speaking English with hardly a trace of a foreign accent.

"No need for you to apologize, young gentlemen, for refusing to discuss such a rascally person as Pedro Mendoza," he remarked. "I have taken this opportunity of putting you on your guard. I cannot communicate with your father, Mr. Kenneth, but you will no doubt be able to convey to him the information I am about to impart to you."

"It's very good of you," rejoined Kenneth.

There was a pause. Miguel Fe studied the faces of the two lads intently, as if to analyse their attitude towards him. He learned little; the features of both Kenneth and Peter were as imperturbable as waxen masks.

"I am your very good friend," continued the Spaniard.

"Just the same words that Mendoza used," thought Kenneth. "I wonder what his terms are?"

Suddenly Fe started and began to listen intently. Obviously he was in great fear lest his presence be discovered. A sound of shuffling footsteps overhead died away. Miguel Fe moistened his lips and resumed in a low voice:

"I cannot run risks without adequate reward," he remarked tentatively. "You observe, señores, the position is this: Mendoza has the plan of Talai, showing the lagoon where the black pearls are to be found."

"He stole it from my father, I presume," rejoined Kenneth.

"That was precisely what the villain did," agreed Miguel Fe.

Young Heatherington could hardly conceal a chuckle of satisfaction. The Spaniard had given himself away entirely. Mr. Heatherington had no such plan on board. He had purposely refrained from being in possession of any document likely to assist unauthorized searchers for the rare bivalves and their precious contents. Consequently Mendoza was ignorant of the precise locality. So was Miguel Fe. By attempting to enlist the sympathies of Kenneth and Peter the men hoped to cajole them into revealing the secret.

"Then he'll probably gain possession of the pearls," said Kenneth.

"Caramba!" exclaimed Fe heatedly. "It is casting pearls before swine! Listen, Mendoza must be foiled. It is I, Miguel Fe, who will baulk him; but your father must allow me one-half share of the treasure. Better for him to receive one half and his life and liberty than nothing at all. Come, now; you must know where the spot in the lagoon is. Give me that information and I swear by the saints that Mendoza and the other mutineers will be foiled."

"I'm not a free agent in the matter," replied Kenneth. "Am I, Peter?"

Peter Arkendale vigorously supported his chum.

"In which case," continued Kenneth, "I must mention the matter to my father. Better still, why don't you ask him yourself?"

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## CHAPTER VI

### To the Sharks!

For the rest of the night nothing unusual occurred. But for the fact that the Englishmen were under lock and key, and were still feeling considerably out of condition owing to the effects of the chloroform, they might have been with one exception as comfortable as if they were in their own respective cabins. The exception was Captain Gregory. He was in a high fever, brought on by loss of blood and the reaction following his encounter with the mutineers. One of the stewards had been sent to attend to him, but the displaced skipper's attitude towards him was so angry that the fellow fled in terror.

The mutineers now kept the *Paloma* on her former course, and made no attempt to increase speed. Under Mendoza's orders, supported by the fate of the mutineer he had shot dead, perfect discipline was maintained, the usual tricks and watches being kept with the same precision as when Captain Gregory was in command. Mendoza realized that if his carefully laid plans were to materialize successfully they could only do so by the aid of most rigid discipline.

At eight bells in the forenoon watch, Lopez "took over", relieving Fe on the bridge. The latter went below and turned in. As soon as Mendoza realized that his second-in-command was sound asleep, he posted a sentry over the cabin with instructions to inform him directly Miguel Fe awoke.

Mendoza then ordered a good breakfast for three to be sent to Mr. Heatherington's cabin—or, rather, the cabin he had been forced to occupy. The mutineer captain reckoned that an appetizing meal would go a long way towards putting his principal captive in a reasonable frame of mind. It would also tend to impress upon him the "very good friendship" of the villainous Spaniard. He then gave instructions for Kenneth and Peter to be taken to Mr. Heatherington's cabin.

An hour later—he purposely gave the prisoners time—Mendoza unlocked the door of the cabin and presented himself to Mr. Heatherington with a courtly bow.

"I trust, señor, that you are feeling well," he said.

"Thank you," replied the Englishman. "I'm feeling quite chirpy."

"Chirpy?" echoed Mendoza, not sure of his ground. "What does that mean?"

"Well, feeling considerably bucked," declared Mr. Heatherington jauntily.

"Bucked? What is bucked?" questioned the mutineer captain, feeling pretty certain that the Englishman was "pulling his leg". "One minute! Let me see!"

Producing a small dictionary of slang from his pocket the Spaniard rapidly turned over the pages.

"Ah! Chirpy—full of good spirits, eh? Very well. You are confident, then, that I am your friend. Now let us set to business. Listen: I will undertake to set you safely ashore on condition that you give me the exact position of the spot where the oysters with the black pearls are to be found. Furthermore you will give me a certificate to the effect that I have done everything in my power to prevent the mutiny."

"That's rather a big price to have to pay for liberty when in all probability a United States or a British warship will do the same merely for the gratification of dealing effectively with a crowd of rascally mutineers, isn't it?" replied Mr. Heatherington. "It's hardly necessary to add that I absolutely decline to accept your offer."

For some moments Mendoza looked completely taken aback. He had his doubts about forcing his captive to disclose the information. He might try force as a last resource. He could well afford to make concession in the bargaining business, since he fully intended that neither Mr. Heatherington nor his companions would ever be in a position to obtain possession of the coveted gems.

"I make a mistake," he said. "One half of the pearls I meant to say. One half—that is a fortune in itself. One half, with life and liberty."

"I have received a precisely similar offer from another of your fellow-murderers," observed Mr. Heatherington dryly. "It



seems that you have a rival in business."

"You lie!" shouted Mendoza, losing control of himself. "Who is the traitor?"

"Since you doubt my word, it is unnecessary to discuss the matter further."

"No, no!" almost shrieked the excitable Spaniard. "I know now it is no lie. Who is the rascal who would cheat me?"

"That is my business," said Mr. Heatherington.

"I know! It is Lopez. Lopez is the traitor. I will deal with him in good time. I retract my offer. You will reveal the secret of the black pearls, or I will throw all three of you, and Gregory too, to the sharks."

"And add murder to mutiny: rather doubling your risk of testing a six-foot drop, isn't it?" remarked Mr. Heatherington coolly.

"Murder? What do I care about killing a man?" retorted Mendoza. "You will see."

He rushed from the cabin, shouting to some of the crew. Four of the mutineers hurried up, seized all the prisoners and led them on deck. As they stood blinking in the dazzling sunlight Mendoza gripped Mr. Heatherington by the shoulder.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, and pointed to the corpse of the mutineer he had shot down. "Look there! That man died by my hand. I, Pedro Mendoza, declare it. Have you seen enough? Good! Now listen. I give you all three five minutes. If at the end of five minutes you do not reveal the secret of where the black pearls lie then I swear to throw you to the sharks."

The armed seamen led the prisoners to the lee rail. Other mutineers at Mendoza's order lifted the body of their comrade and launched it over the side. Before the corpse had been left more than twenty yards astern the water was tinged with blood as a number of voracious sharks fought for their prey.

"Five minutes!" announced Mendoza. "Do you consent?"

"No," replied Mr. Heatherington.

"Overboard with that one first," ordered the mutineer captain, carelessly indicating Peter Arkendale.

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## CHAPTER VII

### The Skipper of the "Svend"

"Keep together, lads!" exclaimed Mr. Heatherington. "Make a fight for it!"

The three, facing outwards, confronted the crowd of mutineers. Better, as Mr. Heatherington had hinted at, to fight to the last than to be bound and thrown overboard to feed the ravenous sharks.

For several seconds there was a pause. The Spaniards hesitated to hurl themselves upon the three unarmed but resolute Britons. Even Mendoza took good care to stand behind a couple of his myrmidons, but his olivine features stopped a crashing blow from the fist of one of his captives.

Several of the mutineers drew their revolvers, but forbore to shoot. It was poor sport, they argued, to put a bullet through a man's head when they might extract considerable amusement out of prolonging his agony. They looked inquiringly at Mendoza for instructions, but the mutineer-in-chief hesitated to order his men to close with and overpower the trio.

As a matter of fact Mendoza had no intention of putting his threat into execution. With Heatherington and his youthful companions dead the secret of the black pearls would be lost for good. It was quite possible, he hoped, to terrorize them into revealing the exact locality where the beds were situated. Delicately handled, the problem ought to be solved, especially if he could play off one prisoner against another. Failing that, he might extract a good ransom, and then, having obtained the money, get rid of his victims on the principle that dead men tell no tales.

But the present difficulty was how to rescind his order without loss of so-called dignity. His hot blood had cooled sufficiently for him to realize that, and he upbraided himself for having lost his temper at such an early stage of the proceedings.

An excited hail from one of the look-out men provided a timely diversion. A sail had been sighted emerging from a slight haze at a distance of about a mile on the *Paloma's* starboard bow.

Mendoza gave an order. The mutineers surrounding Mr. Heatherington and the two lads formed a semi-circle, leaving the prisoners free to make for the companion ladder.

"I will not throw you to the sharks this time," announced Mendoza. "Go below. Stop in your cabin and give no trouble. Then you will be safe."

Fully anticipating another act of treachery, the three prisoners backed slowly towards the companion-ladder. By way of contrast to the dazzling sunshine the hatchway with its brass-treaded teak ladder looked black and forbidding. It was easy for one of the mutineers stationed below to slash at their legs as they descended; but once below they realized that they could put up a tougher resistance than if they were on deck.

The way was clear. No hostile hand delivered a recreant blow. Physically unharmed yet morally shaken by the reaction of the last quarter of an hour the three regained the cabin which had been allotted to them as a place of detention.

The moment they were inside they slammed and bolted the door, a precaution that was duplicated by the mutineers, who promptly placed a handspike across the door-post and passed a lashing round it and through the gun-metal handle on the outside.

There were three scuttles opening out on the starboard quarter, but although commanding a wide view they did not embrace the quarter of the sea where the strange sail was sighted.

It was a perfectly calm day. The sea was like a sheet of glass, unbroken save for the ripples caused by the bow wave and the frothing wake of the yacht as she forged ahead at a modest eight knots.

"What do you make of her, Miguel?" asked Mendoza, who, having rejoined his second in command on the bridge, was keeping the approaching craft under observation by means of binoculars.

"Pearler," replied Miguel Fe laconically.

Mendoza nodded thoughtfully. There were, he knew, hundreds of pearling schooners amongst the islands. They were almost invariably manned by Kanakas under the command of a white man, who generally was a drink-sodden beachcomber. He decided to close and communicate. If the stranger had pearls on board, her cargo would be acceptable booty. If she had not, that was to be deplored; but in that case he would not hesitate to take off her native crew. Kanakas were generally inoffensive, docile creatures, invaluable in working a ship in the tropics, and, what was more, skilled in diving for the treasure of the lagoon.

The schooner was rolling almost imperceptibly in the gentle swell. Her sun-bleached and salt-stained canvas hung idly from her yards. Her headsails had been stowed. Over the low bulwarks leaned half a dozen bronze-hued natives who were regarding the yacht with languid interest.

For a pearler the schooner was remarkably kept. Her sides were well painted and, as she rolled, it was seen that her bottom was coppered and well scrubbed. Her standing rigging was well set up, and generally she had the appearance of being a well-found craft.

"Port another point, quartermaster," ordered Mendoza.

The alteration in helm brought the *Paloma* bows on to the stranger—a manoeuvre that caused the Kanaka crew to evince considerably more interest in the yacht than they had previously shown.

Under the mutineer captain's orders a dozen of the crew, armed with revolvers and knives, concealed themselves under the poop. Others, outwardly unarmed, hung about the waist.

At a sign from Mendoza the yacht was given more port helm, Peruvian colours were hoisted on the yacht's ensign-staff, and the international signal ID, signifying "Heave-to or I will fire into you" was displayed from her foremast head. Simultaneously the *Paloma's* engineers received the order to ease down, followed by "stop".

Although the yacht's signals were not understood by the Kanaka crew, the latter were by now fully aware that something out of the usual was taking place. One of them was observed to go to the skylight and give the alarm. Presently the skipper of the schooner appeared on deck with a roll of coloured bunting under his arm.

Mendoza could not restrain a gasp of astonishment at the appearance of the captain of the pearler. He was a giant in stature, being at least six feet four inches and with a girth in proportion to his height. He wore a yachting-cap, with a spotlessly white cap-cover, perched with a slight rake upon his flaxen-coloured hair. His eyes were of a light blue that contrasted vividly with his brick-red complexion. He sported a heavy moustache and pointed beard of a tawny yellow hue. His white duck uniform fitted him so precisely that his general sartorial appearance was that of the captain of a racing-yacht rather than that of a pearler. Shorn of his uniform he would have been an artist's ideal of a Viking.

The captain of the schooner stalked aft, bent the ensign to the peak-halliards and sent it aloft, where it hung listlessly in the still air.

"What flag is that?" demanded Mendoza, turning to Miguel Fe.

"Tonga, I think," replied the second in command. "Or, perhaps—yes it is Tonga."

"He's a long way from his home port, then," commented Mendoza. Then he waited until the *Paloma*, gradually losing way, crept within hailing distance of the schooner.

"Ahoy! What ship is that?" hailed Mendoza in broken English.

"*Svend* of Tonga," was the reply.

"What cargo?"

"Yams and copra. We have had bad luck with the pearl fishery."

"Are you sure you are not the *Tolima*?" shouted Mendoza. "We are on the look out for her and your description seems to tally. We are the Peruvian Government fisheries protection vessel. Bring your papers on board."

"This is a British registered ship and I am a Danish subject," protested the skipper of the schooner. "Why should I show

my papers?"

"Merely to prove that you are not what I think you are," replied Mendoza in a conciliatory tone. "We have the right of search."

The Dane made no audible reply, but the Kanakas quickly hoisted out a dory. Into her dropped a couple of hands followed by the skipper with the ship's papers.

Already the *Paloma's* accommodation ladder had been lowered, and as soon as the dory ranged alongside Mendoza made a pretence of descending the bridge to greet his involuntary visitor.

The accommodation ladder creaked and groaned under the weight of the ponderous Dane. All unsuspecting he gained the deck, took three paces forward, smiling tolerantly at the idea that he had been mistaken for a maritime poacher.

At a signal from the Spanish captain, one of the hands standing behind the Dane dealt him a violent blow across the top of his head with a short length of armoured hose. The blow would have been sufficient to stun any ordinary man, and probably would have crushed a thin skull like an egg-shell.

Taken entirely by surprise the captain of the *Svend* staggered, recovered himself and swung round like an infuriated lion. Before the Spaniard could repeat the blow the Dane had him by the throat. The fellow's eyes started from their sockets. He went black and blue in the face. Still the Dane maintained his remorseless, avenging grip, while others of the mutineers, rushing to their comrade's aid, rained blows upon the giant's unprotected head.

In the end numbers told. The Dane, with the fingers of his muscular hands still maintaining a bull-dog hold, toppled inert and senseless to the deck. With difficulty his original assailant was released, but it was too late. His spinal cord had been broken under the terrible strength of the Dane's grip.

"Never mind about Pedro," shouted Mendoza to the horrified mutineers, "lash the big man up securely before he recovers his senses, and then pass him below. You, Lopez, get the handcuffs and post a sentry outside the cabin."

"What made you do that, Señor Mendoza?" inquired Miguel Fe. "Surely we have enough on our hands already without saddling ourselves with a powerful man like that. He'll give no end of trouble, mark my words."

"Will he?" retorted the mutineer captain sneeringly. "You'll see. Dios! We want an experienced pearler, and these Kanakas will serve us well. Order those two men in the boat alongside to come on board. Tell them they won't be harmed if they obey orders."

"And the boat?"

Mendoza gave a careless glance over the side. The boat was a serviceable one, but the *Paloma* was well equipped in that respect. A boat, he argued, was evidence, and in that case undesirable.

"Sink her," he replied curtly.

Meanwhile the *Svend* was still becalmed at a distance of roughly a cable's length off. Her crew could see nothing of what had occurred, although it was certain that they must have heard the noise of the unequal struggle. Yet they showed no signs of either apprehension or curiosity, merely gazing apathetically at the relatively enormous hull of the *Paloma*.

"Hurry, there!" shouted Mendoza, noting the reluctance on the part of his subordinate to execute the order.

"It is a good boat," expostulated Miguel Fe. "We could dispose of her for many pesetas to a passing vessel."

"That we could!" agreed several of the crew within earshot. Although they valued human life lightly they were strongly averse to destroying an article that might bring even a small amount to add to their individual profit.

For twenty seconds Mendoza hesitated—and was lost. He lacked the courage and determination to enforce his command because the objectors were many. In the case of the Spaniard whom he had so wantonly shot down, he knew that the fellow was unpopular with his companions and that the risk of his drastic action was slight. To attempt to force his men over the simple matter of a boat was a different matter.

"Hoist her inboard, then," he countermanded, "and stow her away out of sight."

As soon as this was done Mendoza rang down for half speed ahead, and directed the quartermaster to lay her alongside the *Svend*.

It was not until the mutineers, armed to the teeth, leapt from the *Paloma's* rail upon the deck of the pearler that the Kanakas bestirred themselves, by taking to their heels and disappearing below. Thereupon Miguel Fe, addressing them, explained the situation according to his lights, adding that the Danish captain had entered into partnership with the supposed Peruvian officers, and that the crew of the *Svend* were to tranship to the *Paloma*.

The harangue, delivered in broken English, was not understood by the majority of the pidgin-English-speaking Kanakas, and until the situation was still further explained and enlarged upon by the schooner's bo'sun—a hulking brown-skinned Polynesian only a few inches shorter than his skipper—pandemonium reigned below decks.

Finally the Kanakas emerged, looking considerably scared and clambered on board the *Paloma*.

The cargo was then overrun. A quantity of yams—or sweet potatoes—was taken on board the mutineer, but copra, being of little use, was left alone. The Danish captain's cabin was ransacked and everything of value removed. Then a couple of hands went below and started some of the *Svend's* planks, returning to the *Paloma* with the information that the water was pouring in like a mountain torrent.

"Cast off!" ordered Mendoza, at the same time telegraphing for easy ahead.

The yacht gathered way, leaving the sinking schooner wallowing drunkenly in her frothing wake. In less than ten minutes from the time of starting the leak, the *Svend* kicked up her heels and slithered, amidst a smother of foam, to her last resting-place on the bed of the Pacific.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### The Arrival at Talai

Owing to the change of helm Kenneth and Peter had been unseen spectators of the outrage to the inoffensive pearling schooner. They could do nothing. Even if they had hailed the Danish captain through the scuttle no good purpose would have been served. True, they might have placed him on his guard, but that would only have protracted his resistance with the worst results to himself.

Of the gallant resistance of the Dane they could see nothing; they could only surmise what had taken place. They witnessed, however, the seizure of the *Svend*, the indiscriminate orgy of looting and the first phases of her destruction. Of her final disappearance they saw nothing, as the schooner bore slightly on the *Paloma's* port quarter when she sank.

Throughout the whole business, Mr. Heatherington was in the deep sleep of utter exhaustion, and the lads wisely forbore to awaken him.

"What do you think the blighters are going to do to us?" inquired Peter.

Kenneth shook his head.

"I hardly know," he replied. "As a matter of fact I don't think they'll go to extreme measures."

"They went quite far enough when that brute Mendoza threatened to start on me as sharks' meat," declared Peter with a shudder.

"But he didn't," added Kenneth. "I suppose he could have had us all thrown into the ditch if he wanted to. It was sheer bluff."

"Tany rate he won't get much change out of us," said his chum resolutely. "For one thing I don't know where the spot is where the black pearl oysters are, and I don't suppose you do."

"I don't," agreed Kenneth. "What's more, I don't want to know while I'm in this galley. If we can put a spoke in old Mendoza's wheel we will."

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. At regular intervals one of the mutineers appeared with meals for the three captives; but it was evident that the Spaniards took no chances with their prisoners, for a couple of armed seamen were always posted just outside the cabin.

On the following morning the steward appeared looking very scared.

"Are you a doctor, señor?" he inquired in quaint English, addressing Mr. Heatherington.

"No—why?" rejoined Kenneth's father.

"Because, señor, there is sickness on board. One of the firemen, José Nundico, is very ill with smallpox. Señor, I tremble for myself."

"And what does Mendoza think?"

"Señor, he is in a terrible fright. We have medicines on board, but no one knows how to deal with the case. Capitán Mendoza has given orders for José Nundico to be isolated. Someone must attend upon him. May the saints forfend that I should be one chosen for that office."

"If you are, I hope you won't bring us our meals," said Mr. Heatherington bluntly.

The steward, looking very white, went out.

"This may prove to be a blessing in disguise, lads," remarked Mr. Heatherington. "I don't suppose any of the Spaniards have ever been vaccinated. With ordinary care we should be immune even if the disease runs through the ship. I don't like to be vindictive, but there are limits to one's benevolence towards people of Mendoza's type."

Just before noon Mr. Heatherington and the two lads were brought on deck, each with his arms secured at the wrists behind his back. Captain Gregory had also been taken from his place of detention. He was still very weak, and owing to the uselessness of his arm no attempt had been made to bind his hands.

Most of the crew were present, together with Mendoza and Lopez. Miguel Fe was on duty on the bridge. Apparently Mendoza was about to give his men a little amusement at his captives' expense.

Presently the mutineer captain gave an order, and four men appeared hauling at and pushing the gigantic form of the Danish skipper of the *Svend*. He was fettered at the wrists, and in addition a stout chain was fastened round both ankles with sufficient play to enable him to take short steps.

The Dane looked curiously at his fellow prisoners.

"You are English, I take it," he remarked in a low tone. "I suppose you cannot speak Danish?"

Mr. Heatherington shook his head.

"I have a slight knowledge of German," he replied, adding in that tongue. "My son has told me of how your craft was seized by these rogues. What is your name, might I ask?"

"Asger Holbaek," announced the Dane, and was about to supplement the statement when Pedro Mendoza interposed angrily:

"No talking. This is not an occasion for plotting. You are here for a purpose."

"Precisely," agreed Mr. Heatherington. "You brought us here, I take it, to give us the information that smallpox has broken out on board, and to ask my advice as to its treatment. I fancy you are rather late in the day——"

"It is yet morning," interrupted Mendoza.

"Figure of speech," rejoined Mr. Heatherington coolly. "What I meant to imply is that you ought to have taken precautions earlier. Anyone with experience in such matters can see that nine-tenths of the crew, including yourself, are in the preliminary stages of the disease."

The mutineer captain's face paled to a ghastly grey. He positively shook. Kenneth's father, realizing that he was able to apply pressure upon the moral thumb-screws, did so.

"You'll all have it badly," he continued. "I might be able to give good advice, but at my price."

"And what is that?"

"Liberty——"

Pedro Mendoza made an angry gesture.

"No, no!" he interrupted. "Until you reveal the secret——"

"Which will be of no use to a dead man," rejoined Mr. Heatherington significantly. "But you did not wait to hear my terms. I demand liberty of action and speech while on board the vessel, the same to apply to Captain Holbaek, Captain Gregory, and these two lads."

The Spaniard glanced at the gigantic Dane.

"He is too big; he is dangerous," he objected.

"I am," agreed Asger Holbaek grimly. "I give no promise. Make what terms you like with this villain," he added, speaking to Mr. Heatherington in German. "It will be just as well but do not include me in the bargain. I mean it. You have those two boys to consider."

Mendoza signed to some of the hands to remove the Danish captain.

"I agree," he said, addressing the other captors. "You will not be molested. You must, however, be locked in a cabin at

night. Now, what precautions ought we to take?"

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"Well, lads, we've gained a respite," observed Mr. Heatherington after the interview, and the three were alone in one of the state-rooms. "I played on his fears. He's in a mortal funk about the outbreak of smallpox."

"But has he taken it?" asked Peter.

"Not to my knowledge," replied Mr. Heatherington. "It was pure bluff on my part. As likely as not he'll have it. He's that type of person who would develop an illness simply through thinking about it. At any rate, he'll be a bit civil until he thinks the danger's past."

"I'm sorry we couldn't work it with Captain Holbaek," said Kenneth. "He's a proper white man."

"I fancy he's got something up his sleeve," observed Mr. Heatherington. "They'll probably treat him better in order to keep in with us."

During the next few days the captives had things much their own way. Whenever they wished, they went on deck. The few simple precautions that Mr. Heatherington had advised were scrupulously carried out by the crew, with the result that no fresh case appeared. Mendoza, finding that the prospect of a devastating epidemic was averted, began to pluck up courage and to think out a plan to wrest the secret from his prisoners.

In the small hours of the morning, Kenneth was awakened by a decided alteration in the revolutions of the propeller. For days and nights past the *Paloma* had maintained easy steaming with practically unvarying speed. Kenneth was in the habit of sleeping soundly, and was thoroughly accustomed to the monotonous pulsations of the engines. The unusual variation had the effect of rousing him instantly.

Instinctively his eyes sought the tell-tale compass on the ceiling. The course was now nor'-west by north, or nine points different from the course hitherto held by the *Paloma* since leaving the Bay of Panama.

Slipping out of the bunk, Kenneth went to the open scuttle. It was a bright starlit night, with no moon. Broad on the port-beam was a long unbroken line of white water, showing ghost-like in the starlight at a distance of not less than three-quarters of a mile. A low rumble like that of far-away thunder greeted the lad's ears. It was the noise of surf breaking upon the coral reefs.

"Hallo, old son!" exclaimed Peter drowsily. "What's up?"

"You awake too!" rejoined Kenneth.

"Yes, something seemed to wake me," declared young Arkendale. "What's that noise?"

"Breakers," replied Kenneth. "I fancy they nearly piled the yacht on the reefs. We've altered course, but goodness only knows why we've slowed down."

"It's enough to make any vessel slow down," declared Peter, as he caught sight of the long line of foam.

"But we aren't heading for it now."

"Possibly there are other reefs ahead," suggested Peter. "Well, if they do put the ship on the rocks, I hope they'll remember to unlock this door. Hallo! We're altering course again."

Slowly the *Paloma* turned sixteen points to starboard and retraced her course. A similar performance took place every half-hour until dawn paled in the east, revealing a lofty, coco-palm covered island, with a series of rugged, barren peaks standing out clearly against the growing light.

"We're putting in there," declared Kenneth. "They were dodging about all night until it was light enough to see the passage through the reefs. I'll wake the Pater up and tell him."

When aroused Mr. Heatherington went to the scuttle.



"Now the fun commences, lads," he remarked. "This is Talai."

"I wish they'd unlock the door," said Kenneth. "We can't see much as her head's pointing just now."

"It's not eight by a long way," Peter reminded him.

The mutineers evidently knew their work, for a man had been sent aloft to the foremast cross-trees to con the yacht through the channel. The leadsmen were in the chains, heaving the lead at frequent intervals, while by the sounds from the fo'c'sle it was obvious to the prisoners that preparations were being made to stream the buoy and to range the cable preparatory to letting go the anchor.

Presently the engines stopped. Then, with a rush and a roar, the cable rattled through the hawsepipe. The *Paloma*, carrying way until she snubbed at the restraining chain, swung round and rode head to wind in the shallow lagoon.

"By Jove, lads!" exclaimed Mr. Heatherington in a low voice. "The rogues are hot! They've brought up within two hundred yards of the black pearl oyster beds."

Punctually at eight, the cabin door was unlocked, and the captives were allowed to go on deck before breakfast was served.

Mendoza was on the bridge. He gave Mr. Heatherington a shifty, triumphant glance, as if to indicate that he was well on his way to the attainment of his quest. Miguel Fe, leering with excitement, was standing just abaft the mainmast. Lopez, who had been superintending the letting go of the anchor, was gazing steadily at the island—an occupation shared by most of the hands—who by this time had an idea that Talai was a veritable El Dorado.

Mr. Heatherington and his companions had hardly been on deck more than a minute before Captain Asger Holbaek, with his wrists still fettered, appeared, escorted by half a dozen armed mutineers.

The Dane sniffed the air, gave a quick glance in the direction of the island, and then resumed his progress as if too dejected to take any interest in his surroundings. One of his guards uttered a gibe in broken English, but the Dane paid no heed.

Suddenly, when just abreast the mainmast, Captain Holbaek gave his guards the shock of their lives.

With a quick jerk of his powerful arms he snapped the steel links of the handcuffs, as if they were made of thread. Turning with the agility of a whippet the Dane delivered two blows in rapid succession at the men previously behind him. They crashed like logs to the deck, but before they had measured their length, Holbaek had swung round and had seized the foremost pair of Spaniards in a grip of steel. Before they realized what had happened, they were swung apart and then swung together with terrific force, their skulls meeting with a sickening thud.

A moment later Asger Holbaek leapt upon the low bulwark and plunged into the placid waters of the lagoon.

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# CHAPTER IX

## A Dash for Freedom

A howl of rage burst from the Spaniards when they realized the Dane's desperate attempt to escape. Mendoza rushed to the lee side of the bridge, and blazed away with the automatic. Those of the crew who had their firearms handy also opened fire with an erratic and wasteful expenditure of ammunition.

Asger Holbaek was a magnificent swimmer and diver. He made no immediate attempt to break surface but swam with long, easy powerful strokes at a depth of about twenty feet. Although in the marvellously transparent water every movement of the Danish captain could be clearly discerned, he was immune from the hail of bullets provided he kept well down.

The surface above and beyond him was churned by the ricochetting nickel. On and on he swam until Kenneth, anxiously watching his progress, began to marvel at the Dane's lung capacity. Nearly two minutes from the time he plunged over the side Holbaek came to the surface at a distance of about eighty yards from the anchored yacht. At that distance it was out of the question to aim with any degree of accuracy, yet the infuriated mutineers kept up the fusillade, feverishly reloading and emptying their weapons at the fugitive.

All around the swimmer's head the water was torn by bullets. To Kenneth it seemed impossible for all the missiles to miss their objective.

"He's hit!" exclaimed the lad involuntarily, as Holbaek slipped beneath the surface; but the next instant Kenneth saw that the swimmer was still going strongly, although, owing to the oblique angle of the spectators' vision it was now no longer possible to obtain a clear view of his movements.

The firing died away, the Spaniards waiting for the head of the swimmer to reappear above the surface. The mutineers jabbered and gesticulated. Above the babel Mendoza's voice could be heard shouting for someone to bring him a rifle and ammunition. In the turmoil no one seemed to obey.

Again the blonde hair of the Dane appeared above the surface. The fusillade broke out once more, the bullets flying wide of their mark. This time, realizing that he had put a fairly safe distance between him and his enemies, Holbaek showed no great haste to dive. When he did he kept only a few feet below the surface.

The mutineers ceased fire. Mendoza, having been baulked in his wish to obtain a rifle, was about to utter a string of maledictions when he suddenly gave a shout of fiendish exultation. From his elevated post on the bridge his keen eyes caught sight of a vee-shaped ripple on the water, the apex of the vee terminating in a dark triangular object—the dorsal of an enormous shark.

The tiger of the deep had marked its intended prey.

Asger Holbaek was now on the surface swimming strongly with a powerful overhand stroke. He was still two hundred yards from the sandy beach. Whether he saw his ferocious pursuer or not remained an unanswered problem. If he did he gave no sign. He neither quickened his pace nor looked behind him but maintained his easy yet sturdy strokes.

Kenneth wanted to shout a warning, but no cry came from his lips. His throat was as dry as a lime-kiln. He could not utter a sound. He could only watch with an unaccountable fascination the preliminaries to what would appear to be a ghastly drama.

A strange silence fell upon the hitherto noisy mutineers. They, too, expected to see the Dane seized by the enormous maw of the shark.

The brute was now within half a dozen yards of the swimmer. It began to turn on its back, to make the best use of its triple row of teeth. Asger Holbaek disappeared. So did the shark. There was a violent upheaval of foam—foam tinged with blood.

Twenty yards from the centre of the agitated patch of water, the Dane's head reappeared. He had boldly attacked the shark, using as a weapon one of the jagged ends of the broken chains that were still secured to his wrists. The shark,

bleeding profusely from a deep gash nearly thirty inches in length, was in no mind to persist in its endeavours to seize such a formidable prey. It disappeared, leaving a trail of oil and blood to mark its flight.

The Dane was now in shallow water. Finding his feet he waded shorewards, ponderously, slowly, majestically, until he gained the edge of the glistening sands. Then for the first time during his dash for freedom he turned and looked in the direction of the *Paloma*, and then resumed his way towards the coco-palms.

Suddenly the undergrowth appeared to be alive with practically naked nut-brown natives. Thirty or forty of them rushed towards the white man, but whether with demonstrations of friendship or hostility, Kenneth could not determine. Half-way across the stretch of beach Holbaek held up his hand. The natives gave vent to shouts of welcome, and surrounded by a body-guard of exuberant islanders the Dane disappeared from sight behind the dense scrub.

Almost at the same moment, Lopez, standing on the fo'c'sle gave a shout to attract Mendoza's attention and pointed dead ahead. The lagoon was dotted with the heads of swimmers. Taking full advantage of the diversion caused by their captain's successful dash for liberty, the Kanaka crew of the *Svend* had slipped quickly over the off-shore side of the *Paloma*. With praiseworthy discretion they did not make a direct line for the island, but swam parallel to the beach until they were out of pistol-range. Then, and only then, did they change direction and head for the island.

Wild with rage at the Dane's escape, Mendoza went almost mad with anger at the wholesale desertion of the Kanakas. He had set great store by the native crew of the *Svend*. They would have been invaluable when the time came for diving operations to secure the greatly desired black pearls. So docile had they been during their stay on board the *Paloma*, that Mendoza and the other mutineers never had any doubts regarding the willingness of the Kanakas to do their bidding.

The mutineer captain shouted an order. Men rushed to the after side of the boiler-casing, fumbled with and wrenched at levers. Down dropped a large portion of the steelwork, revealing a 75 centimetre quick-firing gun with mounting complete, together with a rack containing fifty rounds of light armour-piercing shell.

The secret of the boiler-casing—an attempt to probe which had been responsible for the premature outbreak of the mutiny—was revealed. The *Paloma*, although classed as a private yacht, was an armed buccaneering craft. Her absent owner, Count Cristoval Xarifa, was doubtless fully acquainted with the fact that the vessel was armed, and had chartered the craft with her original crew, mainly with the idea of kidnapping her charterer, who, judging by the sum he was able to afford for the charter, would be at least a moderately wealthy man.

In point of fact Xarifa, although a titled grandee, dared not show his face in Spain. He had been implicated in an anarchist plot at Barcelona. Financially at a low ebb, he had been an active partner in the "Spanish Prisoner" swindle, until the credulity and cupidity of his intended victims had been countered by a well-organized Press campaign in almost every civilized country on the face of the globe. His next "stunt" was to pose as a patriot, and to raise a sum of money to purchase and equip a war-vessel to assist in the war against the Riffs. He obtained the money, bought the vessel—the *Paloma*—and promptly left Spain for good. The engagement of an English skipper was part of the game of bluff; while Count Xarifa, although he professed his willingness to charter his craft for pleasure-cruising anywhere, took good care to instruct his agents to decline all offers until he received one that would mean sailing the *Paloma* to the Pacific. He had particular reasons for choosing the Pacific for the furtherance of his cunning and desperate scheme.

Even in his fury Mendoza had the sense to realize the futility of firing shell at a few wretched Kanakas swimming across a lagoon. He ordered the quick-firer to be loaded and trained on the beach. Then he waited.

The Kanakas were now making straight for the spot where Captain Asger Holbaek had landed. No sharks appeared to attempt to seize the swimmers, possibly because the fugitives were now making a tremendous splash and shouting at the top of their voices. Could Mendoza and his men but understand the native song they would not have felt flattered, for the Kanakas were shouting an impromptu doggerel in which they ridiculed the Spaniards for the way in which they had been utterly fooled.

Hurrying to the bridge Miguel Fe went up to Mendoza, spoke rapidly in a low voice, and pointed first to Mr. Heatherington and his companions and then to the gun.

The mutineer captain shrugged his shoulders—a gesture that indicated he had "let the cat out of the bag". Then, having watched the Kanakas gain the beach and disappear in the scrub, Mendoza gave orders for the gun to be secured and the screens placed in position.

He realized that in the case of the *Svend* and her captain he had cut rather a sorry figure.



# CHAPTER X

## Miguel Fe's Offer

"Smart chap that Captain Holbaek," remarked Kenneth, when the two chums regained the seclusion of their cabin. "But, by Jove! I had the wind up when that shark went for him."

"I missed that part," observed Peter.

"What?" exclaimed Kenneth. "You didn't see the Dane tackle the shark? What were you doing then?"

"I was busy."

"About what?" persisted his chum.

Just then Mr. Heatherington rejoined the two lads. Kenneth, unable to account for his chum failing to witness the conflict between the man and the shark, turned to his father.

"Fancy Peter not seeing it," he said. "He told me he was busy."

"So I was," reasserted his chum. "While almost everyone on board had his attention fixed, I took the opportunity of pinching this."

He held up a small but powerful six-chambered revolver and a packet containing twenty-five cartridges.

"Then take care Mendoza doesn't find the thing on you," said Mr. Heatherington. "Where did you find it?"

"It belonged to one of the men who were floored by Captain Holbaek," replied Peter. "Judging by the state of the fellow's head I don't think he'll require a revolver again—unless the use of firearms is permitted in the infernal regions. I would have bagged two more only I thought they would be sure to be missed. One might not. 'Tany rate, I hope it won't. I say, that quick-firer in the boiler-casing looks a bit fishy, doesn't it?"

"It does," agreed Mr. Heatherington. "And it's rather remarkable that Gregory didn't twig it, when he was in command of the vessel. He smelt a rat when it was too late."

"After we had put him on to it," added Kenneth.

"In any case they meant to seize the vessel," said Mr. Heatherington. "Up to now I felt inclined to treat the business lightly. I thought that Mendoza was a bit of a ruffian—in fact I still think so—but that he was only bluffing to try and wrest the secret of the black pearls from us. Now I'm inclined to think that he's not only a ruffian but a black-hearted villain with some desperate purpose in view. He's as mad as anything over Holbaek's escape, and in all probability he'll vent his anger on us."

Further conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the steward.

"Bad news, señores," announced the man. "José Nundico died half an hour ago."

"I rather expected that he would," said Mr. Heatherington. "You might tell Señor Mendoza from me that it would be advisable to dispose of the body as soon as possible, and burn everything that it has come in contact with. All that part of the ship should be sealed up and disinfected with burning sulphur."

"I will tell him that, señor," replied the steward, "but I hope that he will not entrust me with the task."

Luncheon was barely over when Miguel Fe entered the cabin.

"Mendoza has gone off in one of the boats to locate the oyster beds," he declared. "Perhaps, señores, you would care to watch the operations from the bridge? There are good marine-glasses available."

"We will do so," replied Mr. Heatherington.

"Of course, he will not find the spot," continued Miguel Fe insinuatingly. "Come now, señor. Tell me the secret, and,

while Mendoza is away, I will have you all sent ashore in one of the boats. You will be safe with the giant Dane. Afterwards I will return with some trusted men—Mendoza and Lopez will not be of the party—fish up the black pearls and take you back to either Panama or Callao, where the treasure will be faithfully divided. Is not that a fair proposition?"

Mr. Heatherington gave no indication of agreeing to the proposal, but looked the Spaniard full in the face.

Miguel Fe shifted his feet uneasily.

"Come, señor, it is a generous offer," he said wheedlingly.

Without a word of warning the Englishman sprang at the double-faced rascal, and pinned his arms to his side before Miguel had time to grasp either the hilt of his knife or the butt of his revolver.

"Cover him, Peter!" exclaimed Mr. Heatherington.

Peter Arkendale needed no second bidding. In a trice the muzzle of his revolver was pointed straight at the centre of the Spaniard's forehead. For a moment Mr. Heatherington wondered whether in his excitement the lad would press the hair-trigger; but Peter kept a cool head and a steady trigger-finger.

"Now, then," continued Mr. Heatherington sternly. "You made your offer. I will make mine, but I'm afraid there'll be no option on your part. You'll accept it without question. You will accompany us to the bridge. There you will give orders to the remainder of the crew to weigh and proceed. If there's no time to weigh, then the cable must be slipped. If there's sufficient coal to take the *Paloma* to Panama, to Panama we will go. If not, we'll signal the first vessel we meet and get her either to give us a tow or wireless for a tug. If you can prove that you are not one of Mendoza's crowd, and that force of circumstances brought you into this unsavoury business I'll pay you the sum of five hundred pounds, but, remember, the treasure will not be divided under any conditions—at least between you and me. Is that clear?"

"It is, señor," replied Miguel Fe.

"Skip across and warn Captain Gregory, Kenneth," said his father. "We can't leave him down here if the rest of the mutineers give trouble. We'll win through yet."

When Gregory joined the party Mr. Heatherington, who meanwhile had taken possession of Miguel's revolver and knife, gave orders for the Spaniard to lead the way.

"Señor, I have a bad head," expostulated Miguel, when they reached the foot of the companion-ladder.

"No need to tell me that," rejoined Mr. Heatherington. "Lead on."

"I feel faint," declared the Spaniard, and by the look on his face, it seemed as if the man was really on the verge of a collapse.

"Faint when you reach the bridge," said the Englishman bluntly. "There's plenty of fresh air up there to revive you."

Miguel did not fall in with the suggestion. Instead, he promptly collapsed, foaming at the mouth.

"Confound the fellow!" ejaculated Mr. Heatherington. "Bear a hand, Kenneth; we'll carry him up."

Thrusting the revolver into Captain Gregory's hands, for the skipper's wound prevented him lifting any heavy weight, Mr. Heatherington gripped the Spaniard under the arms while Kenneth took hold of his legs.

It was now an awkward predicament. There were several of the hands on deck. Had Miguel been all right they would have had no suspicions, but since the man had to be carried there were good grounds for interference on the part of the mutineers.

Yet as the little band moved for'ard towards the foot of the bridge-ladder the men did not appear to take any heed of the unconscious second in command—a fact that struck the Englishmen as being decidedly ominous.

"Be on you guard, Gregory!" whispered Mr. Heatherington warningly.

Before Gregory could as much as nod in acquiescence there was a sudden rush of mutineers from fore and aft. Peter raised his revolver. It was knocked out of his hand. Mr. Heatherington and Kenneth, dropping their burden, turned to face the nearest of their assailants. As they did so, Miguel Fe, abandoning his well-simulated ruse, gripped Mr. Heatherington by the ankles. The Englishman stumbled, capsizing Gregory as he did so.

Twenty seconds later the four were seized and secured. Facing them stood Pedro Mendoza with a leer of fiendish satisfaction on his oily features. Instead of being away in the boat, as Miguel Fe had declared, Mendoza had schemed to lure his captives into a trap—and he had succeeded.

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# CHAPTER XI

## The Ambush on the Shore

Too late Heatherington and his companions in misfortune realized that they had been played with like a mouse in the claws of a cat. They had staked their all on the chance that Mendoza and Miguel Fe were antagonists—each trying to best the other and at the same time pretending to be loyal comrades in villainy. Actually Miguel's proposals were the direct result of an understanding between him and his superior officer. Mendoza had not gone off in the boat. He had been hiding, waiting for Miguel Fe either to announce that he had cajoled the Englishman into revealing the secret bed of the black pearl oysters, or failing that to incite the prisoners into an act that in Mendoza's estimation would justify him in proceeding to extreme measures.

Since it was no longer necessary for him to play the part of Mendoza's rival, Miguel Fe ranged up alongside of his chief.

"He offered me a thousand pounds in English money to take the *Paloma* to Panama," reported Miguel. "You, Pedro, were to be left in the boat at the mercy of the natives of Talai, to say nothing of the wrath of the Dane, Holbaek."

"I'll have a great deal more than a thousand pounds out of him before I've finished with him," declared Mendoza. "And as for Holbaek, I'll have him in my power before the setting of to-day's sun. We'll have those pearls even if we have to search every inch of the bed of the lagoon. Now, Miguel, I'm going off with the boats to search for the Dane. I'll take one of those English youths with me as a hostage for Heatherington's good behaviour. The other youth you'll keep on deck. For the present Heatherington and Gregory will be kept close prisoners. I'll scare Heatherington into revealing the secret before many hours have passed. You know what to do while I am away."

Miguel Fe nodded significantly.

Armed men seized Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory and led them aft. Kenneth and Peter attempted to go with them, but were sternly ordered to remain.

"Now, you young whelps," exclaimed Mendoza in broken English. "You will do as you are told. If you refuse you will suffer for it—not you only but the other prisoners as well. You"—indicating Kenneth—"will go with the landing-party in the boats. Your friend will remain under the care of Teniente Miguel Fe. If one of you gives trouble he will be punished and his friend as well. Is that clear to you?"

Kenneth and Peter gave a grudging assent. Being separated was a contingency that they had not hitherto taken into consideration. It was useless to kick or even to protest. All they could do was to "knuckle under" and bide their time when a favourable opportunity of circumventing the mutineers presented itself.

Already three boats had been hoisted out, one a "twenty-foot" motor-launch, which was to take the two whalers in tow. Into the launch went Mendoza, taking Kenneth with him. Lopez was in command of the first whaler, the second being in charge of the bos'n. With the exception of Kenneth everyone was armed to the teeth.

Mendoza's intention was not to seek for the pearl bed at present, but to recapture Asger Holbaek. He realized that with the Dane at large, there would be an important witness against him should his plans go awry. It was also essential that the Kanakas should be brought on board again, not only because they might inform a warship of the *Paloma's* piratical acts but they were necessary in their capacity as divers. None of the Spanish crew, although for the most part expert swimmers, could vie with the South Sea Islanders in keeping long enough under water to bring the oysters to the surface. More than once Mendoza regretted that he had not the foresight to purchase diving dresses before leaving Panama. Had he done so he would have been independent of Kanaka labour, and the reasons that prompted him to seize and scuttle the *Svend* would not have existed.

Slowly the motor-launch and her tow approached the sandy beach, the men ready at the first alarm to open fire upon any of the natives who might resist their landing.

Not a man was visible, which was an ominous sign. Usually the natives, either through irresistible curiosity, or with a desire to barter with the crew of any visiting ship, would crowd down to the beach and even swim off to welcome the arrivals.



Mendoza argued that there must be a village somewhere on the island. This he meant to seize and, under threat of burning it to the ground, compel the natives of Talai to give up the Kanakas and their white leader. Overhearing scraps of conversation between Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory before the mutiny had occurred, he had learnt that the inhabitants of the island were inoffensive and good-tempered natives, and not likely to give any trouble unless they were allowed on board—in which case they would pilfer any article of value or otherwise which took their fancy.

The motor-launch grounded on the sand about her own length from the beach. The whalers, being of less draught, overran their tow and brought up within leaping distance of the dry sand, with their sterns close to the bows of the launch, thus forming a convenient double gangway for the crew of the latter to jump ashore dry-shod.

Quite in ignorance of the nature of the operations—for he was under the impression that Mendoza was going to undertake preliminary soundings in an attempt to locate the pearl-beds—Kenneth was about to land with the others, when the mutineer captain ordered him to remain in the launch with the two boat-keepers. One man was also left in each whaler to keep her stern-on to the slight swell.

Confident that he had an easy task, Mendoza led his landing-party along the beach to a gap in the undergrowth, the seaward termination of a foot-path leading to the village.

Suddenly a drum boomed out a threatening note. Almost simultaneously the scrub seemed to be alive with brown figures. Stones and arrows hurtling through the air.

Had the natives followed the advice of their white guest, Asger Holbaek, they would have waited in ambush until Mendoza and his men were helplessly entangled in the scrub and coco-groves; but discipline was not the islanders' strong point. Having got the "black-birders" within range of their missiles, they could not refrain from opening a premature offensive.

Nevertheless Mendoza and his followers were in a tight corner. Three or four dropped badly wounded. Almost all the others were hit by stones. In the confusion that resulted the Spaniards let fly an erratic and ineffectual volley of small-arms, which did little more than check an impetuous charge by their assailants.

Mendoza, dazed by a stone that had inflicted a glancing blow on his temple, turned and staggered back to the boats. Lopez promptly followed his example. Those of the landing-party who possessed any degree of pluck stood their ground, blazing away with their revolvers, while their wounded comrades made good their escape. Then, their courage deserting them, the remaining Spaniards took to their heels.

A swarm of natives rushed in pursuit, brandishing spears and clubs, the latter being formidable weapons of hard green wood. It looked as if the fleet-footed islanders would overtake and brain their assailants before the latter could cover the distance between them and the boats.

Kenneth found himself wondering what would happen to him. It certainly seemed rough luck to be brained by a native under the impression that he was a foe. He could see no signs of Holbaek and the Kanakas in the irregular ranks of the defenders of Talai. Had they been present they might have recognized him, and saved him from the vengeance of the natives, who, after all, could not be blamed for treating every occupant of the boats as an enemy.

"Push off!" shouted Mendoza frantically, as he tumbled over the bows of the whaler. The boat-keepers tried to carry out the order, but already so many fugitives were crowding over the bows that both whalers remained immovable. The mechanic in charge of the launch fumbled feverishly with the starting handle, but the engine obstinately refused to fire. Europeans and natives, the former discharging their fire-arms at point-blank range, the latter clubbing and thrusting with their spears, surged and jostled in a confused mêlée.

So far the motor-launch, being wedged between the whalers and farther from the shore, had come off lightly. The mechanic, green with terror, was feebly fumbling with starting handle and controls, his efforts being still further impeded by Mendoza's frantic entreaties to get the motor running.

A burly Spaniard leapt from the stern of one of the whalers into the launch. As he did so a spear transfixed his back. He fell forward, hurling Kenneth upon the stern-gratings. Winded by the blow the lad remained pinned down by the Spaniard's ponderous and inert bulk, fully expecting to find himself the victim of the club and spears of the now thoroughly infuriated natives.

Suddenly above the turmoil of the hand-to-hand struggle came the crash of a shell. Another and another, splinters of shrapnel flying perilously close to the cluster of boats.

Miguel Fe, watching the rout of his comrades, had opened fire with the *Paloma's* gun.

The rapid shell-fire turned the scale. Although the missiles burst at a considerable distance in the rear of the defenders of Talai, the natives were terrified by the deafening crashes. To them shell-fire had been hitherto unknown. It savoured of the super-natural.

They broke off the fight and ran helter-skelter for the undergrowth, where the devastating shells took a heavy toll.

Lopez was amongst the first to grasp the new phase of the situation. Mendoza, for the moment, was incapable of doing anything except to urge the mechanic to start the motor. Most of the survivors of the landing-party, all wounded more or less seriously, sat breathlessly in the boats. The *Paloma* still continued to shell the undergrowth, increasing the range in order to keep the fugitives within the danger zone of the flying shrapnel.

"Trim the boats!" ordered Lopez. "Get aft, you men. She'll float off easily if you do. Juan and Leon," he added, addressing two of the hands who had come through the conflict almost unscathed, "jump ashore and bring off a wounded savage—one not too badly wounded. Do you hear what I say? Then hasten."

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## CHAPTER XII

### Lopez's Plan for Reprisals

Mendoza was too bewildered to question his subordinate's orders to bring off one of the wounded natives. For the present he was trying to realize that he had escaped from the ambush, and that he had come off considerably more lightly than had the rest of the landing-party. He had received only a few contusions, but the moral shock had given him a nasty jar. Not only had he failed signally to achieve his purpose of recapturing Captain Holbaek and the Kanaka crew of the *Svend*; he had a fair proportion of his crew temporarily incapacitated through wounds received in a fight that was nothing less than a gross error of judgment on his part.

Meanwhile, the launch's engine had been started. The mechanic, ignoring Mendoza's frantic appeals to back, kept the reverse gear in the neutral position, thus enabling the whaler on her starboard side to remain with her forefoot grounding on the sand.

The two hands told off by Lopez jumped ashore, and made their way to the spot where one of the *Paloma's* shells had burst with devastating results. It took them some time to make their selection, for those of the natives who were able to drag themselves away had done so. Those who were unable to do so were for the most part too badly wounded to be of use.

Finally the two mutineers discovered a native whose injuries consisted of a badly lacerated leg, portions of shrapnel having torn the tendons and prevented him from making good his escape.

There was no consideration for their prisoner on the part of his captors. They dragged him by his arms down to the boats. The jolting must have given him excruciating pain, but the native preserved a stoical demeanour and hardly a groan escaped from him.

"He'll do," commanded Lopez, giving the prisoner a casual glance. "Secure his arms in case he gives trouble, and drop him on the bottom boards. All ready? Easy astern, then."

The motor-launch backed away from the beach, towing the whalers with their complement of groaning, cursing and dejected mutineers. It was not until the boats were nearly alongside the *Paloma* that Mendoza showed signs of reasserting his authority.

"Hoist up and turn-in the boats, Miguel," he ordered addressing his second in command. "We'll wait until to-morrow before we start and search for the pearls."

"Will it be safe to do so with the natives hostile to us?" asked Miguel Fe. "The quick-firer filled them with terror; but that won't prevent them interfering with the diving operations if they've sense enough to avoid crowding together in the open. Besides, where are our native divers? That is not one, I hope?"

Mendoza glanced in the direction of Miguel Fe's outstretched arm, and noticed for the first time with any degree of comprehension the wounded islander.

"No, sir," replied Lopez.

"Then why have you brought him off to the ship?" demanded the mutineer captain.

"I have a plan," was the reply. "If we can discuss it between ourselves—you, Miguel, and me—I think it ought to settle the problem of how to settle with the natives. Then we can get to work with the pearls without being interrupted."

In the captain's cabin, Lopez unfolded his scheme. He began by pointing out that up to the present all attempts to gain possession of the secret of the pearl beds were fruitless. Heatherington had refused either to be frightened or to be cajoled into revealing the position of the beds; they could not search for them without native divers; even if any were available, there would be considerable risk of attack on the part of the inhabitants of Talai, especially as they appeared to be guided by the gigantic Dane, Holbaek. Meanwhile, Lopez pointed out, the crew of the *Paloma* were becoming discouraged. They had not bargained for wounds and disappointments. They had anticipated a sort of get-rich-quick business, with very little risk and every chance of making good their escape. And coal was running short. Unless the

*Paloma* could rebunker within the next few days she would be useless to remove the treasure even if it were located.

Mendoza and Miguel Fe reluctantly admitted the truth of Lopez's assertions.

"But what, then, is your plan?" asked Mendoza. "What has the wounded native to do with it?"

Lopez hesitated. An unscrupulous young villain, even he had his doubts as to how his superior officer would regard his suggestion.

"I am waiting," said Mendoza.

"Señor, José Nundico is dead," announced Lopez.

"That I know," rejoined the mutineer captain with a shudder, "and I have no wish to be reminded of it. Also I fail to see what connection there is between Nundico and the wounded savage."

"It is proposed to throw the corpse of José Nundico overboard," continued Lopez. "My suggestion is that the body be placed in the dory we took from the *Svend* and that the native be sent away to bear the corpse of José company. The savage will to a certainty make for the shore; the Kanakas will recognize the dory and run to take possession of it. You know how smallpox decimates the South Sea Islanders. In a month's time Talai will be deserted. Those of the inhabitants who have not succumbed to the disease will have taken to their canoes, and made for one of the islands to the west'ard. Then we shall have an uninterrupted opportunity to search for the pearls."

"But what will happen to us, with Talai teeming with smallpox?" asked Mendoza dubiously.

He had not the faintest hesitation to put Lopez's scheme into execution, but for the possible consequences that might with poetic justice recoil on him.

"There will be no risk—or at least not so much as we are running at present with a bad case of the disease on board," replied Lopez. "We need not land: we can conduct all our operations from the boats and give the beach a wide berth."

"That's all very well," interposed Miguel Fe, who had hitherto been a silent listener to the conversation, "but what are we to do during the month's wait? The men will be out of hand; we're short of fuel, and unless we are uncommonly fortunate we are not likely to obtain any. Isn't that so, Capitán Mendoza?"

The Spaniard addressed nodded moodily.

"There's no reason why we shouldn't help ourselves from any vessel we fall in with," resumed Lopez. "I know of an island less than eighty miles to the south-east—we can make it easily with the coal still in our bunkers—where we can be as snug as you please. It's an ideal hiding-place. No vessel would dream of approaching it, because of the reefs and the barren aspect of the island. I was there some years ago, when I was serving on board a Chilean collier."

"I thought you said no vessel would risk making the island?" interrupted Miguel Fe, eagerly seizing at the chance to catch his rival tripping.

"Yes, but you see we were on special charter," explained Lopez. "We were taking a cargo of coal to the island to rebunker the German cruisers from Kiau-Chau. We waited there a week or more but they didn't arrive. Afterwards we learnt that they were in danger of being trapped by a Japanese squadron; they went south and round the Horn, and were finally destroyed by the British off the Falklands."

"So you took the coal back," remarked Mendoza.

"No, Señor Capitán, we did not," declared Lopez. "Our instructions were to remain there for a definite period. If, at the end of that time, the German cruisers did not appear, the cargo was to be sent ashore to await their coming. We landed it in the ship's boats and by means of rafts—and a horrible, back-breaking job it was, I well remember."

"And the coal should still be there?" asked Mendoza.

"It should be," replied Lopez.

"You know the approach?"

"I could take the *Paloma* in with safety," asserted Lopez confidently. "She draws one and a half fathoms less than the *Monoz* when carrying a full cargo of coal."

"Good!" commented Mendoza. "Fetch me the chart, Miguel. What is the name of the island?"

By this time Mendoza's mercurial temperament had risen from zero to blood-heat. Already his lively imagination was figuratively sweeping him off his feet.

"The island is named Boya, Señor Capitán."

"Then," declared Mendoza, striking an attitude, "behold us—the Buccaneers of Boya!"

The hands—or rather those who were not kept to their hammocks by reason of their wounds, received in the encounter with the natives of Talai—were thereupon mustered on deck. Mendoza, supported by Miguel Fe and Lopez, harangued them, outlining in rosy terms a scheme whereby they could enrich themselves and have plenty of adventure until the unavoidable delay in the search for the black pearl beds became a thing of the past.

The mutineers hailed the proposal with acclamation and gestures of assent. Given a guarantee that Mendoza would attempt no piratical act against a vessel likely to turn the tables on them, they were only too keen to try their hand at buccaneering. The audacity of the business was a factor in its favour. They were determined and unscrupulous ruffians who would knife a man through sheer wantonness, or make him walk the plank just to afford themselves a little amusement. Provided their sinister, cowardly work was performed in a neat and effectual manner, and care was taken completely to cover their tracks, they could raise Cain in the Pacific for a couple of months, and then disappear from the High Seas before suspicion was aroused on the part of the maritime powers on account of ships failing to reach their destined ports.

As soon as the muster was dismissed, steps were taken to put the first part of Lopez's plan into execution. This time no protests came from the mutineers against the disposal of the dory. The boat was man-handled from 'tween decks and placed on the starboard side ready to be hoisted out. Two of the hands, clad in loose garments saturated with strong disinfectants—their appearance resembling that of the "familiar" of the Holy Inquisition—brought the corpse of José Nundico from below, and dumped it into the boat with more caution than ceremony.

The wounded native was then told by means of signs that he was at liberty to go ashore. His idea of how to do so differed vastly from Mendoza and Co.'s plans; for in spite of his badly injured leg he made preparations to dive overboard and swim to the beach.

"That will not do!" exclaimed Lopez. "Pass a chain round the savage's sound ankle and shackle it to the thwart."

The native submitted to the treatment without protest. Outwardly his features were calm and expressionless. Apparently he had not the slightest notion of the risk he was running by being in almost actual contact with the dory's gruesome cargo.

As soon as the boat was afloat the painter was cast off, and the native told to make for the island. Using one of the oars as a paddle, he made good progress against the light off-shore breeze until the dory was about a hundred yards from the yacht. Then, without any apparent effort he slipped his foot from the securing chain and dived into the water. The dory, with the corpse of José Nundico rolling sluggishly with every movement of the boat, began to drift seawards.

"Let us hope the savage will carry the infection," quoth Lopez.

"The salt water will act as an antidote," declared Miguel Fe, who never lost an opportunity to belittle his immediate subordinate's remarks. "What say you, Capitán Mendoza?"

Mendoza shrugged his shoulders, strode to the foreside of the bridge and shouted for steam to be brought to the capstan.

Ten minutes later the stockless anchor, its flukes glistening with particles of pulverized coral, was weighed and secured. The *Paloma*, gathering way, glided through the gap in the reef and settled on her course for the island of Boya.

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## CHAPTER XIII

### The Reefs of Boya

"Do you think they've chucked the idea of finding the pearls?" asked Peter.

Kenneth shook his head.

"Can't say, old son," he replied. "These dagoes are too deep for me. You never know what infernal schemes they have up their sleeves, so to speak. I don't suppose they are taking the *Paloma* out for a joy-ride and are putting back to Talai to-night. Perhaps Mendoza's got the wind up over that scrap ashore. It put the wind up me, too, you take my word for it! I thought I was done for when the natives started to rush the boats."

"And the sight made me feel a bit queer," admitted Peter. "Of course, I wouldn't have worried the faintest little bit if all the mob of mutineers had been done in, but for the fact that you were there. In fact I was jolly glad when old Miguel Fe gave orders for the gun to open fire, even though it meant death to dozens of the islanders. It saved the situation—and you."

The chums were yarning on the fo'c'sle. Two hours had elapsed from the time the *Paloma* weighed anchor, and they were still ignorant of her destination. One thing, however, was clear enough. They were being treated with scant consideration. The sort of pact between Mr. Heatherington and Mendoza was evidently dissolved, for the former was kept under lock and key in one of the cabins, and the two chums were not allowed to rejoin him.

"You will work, see?" exclaimed Mendoza, addressing the lads in broken English. "You will take your turn at performing whatever duties you are called upon to do. If you refuse—then no food."

"Unfortunately we aren't cut out for hunger-strikers," remarked Kenneth to his chum. "Mendoza's got us cold on that stunt."

"Strikes me the blighter's got to wind'ard of us," observed Peter moodily, after the mutineer captain had delivered his ultimatum. "If your Pater kicks, Mendoza takes it out of us. If we kick he docks our grub. What's to be done?"

"Knuckle under and don't give trouble," counselled Kenneth. "We must wait our opportunity: it will come, sure enough. When it does then we must seize it with both hands."

"I'd rather seize that oily swab," muttered Peter wrathfully.

"Same thing," rejoined Kenneth.

"What's that fellow doing?" inquired Peter, pointing to one of the crew, who was ascending the bridge-ladder with four lifebuoys under his arm.

The sailor took his burden to his skipper. Mendoza bent over the buoys. The canvas screen prevented the lads from seeing what he was doing, but they guessed—and guessed rightly—that he was writing something on the buoys.

At intervals he handed one of the lifebuoys to the seaman who promptly heaved it overboard. When the four were thus disposed of a party of men swung out one of the whalers, which had had her gunwale badly damaged during the fight on the beach. The boat was then lowered bows foremost, so that she promptly filled. She was then cut adrift and was left rolling sluggishly in the *Paloma's* wake, and kept from sinking only by her copper air-tanks.

The yacht herself was then subjected to drastic alterations. Her name was painted out, and a fictitious one substituted. Her whole upperworks were painted a dull grey, her buff funnel became red with a black top. Her topmasts were struck and secured to the lowermasts, so that the whole resembled a pair of stumpy masts with the characteristic derrick of a tramp steamer. Finally the hull was partly covered with squares of red-lead to give the impression that the ship had left port hurriedly before she could be properly painted.

It was Mendoza's idea of covering his tracks. The lifebuoys and the whaler all bore the name "*Paloma*—Barcelona". In due course some of them might be sighted by a passing vessel and duly reported. What the inference would be, he knew—the *Paloma* would be posted as overdue and missing.

The task of transforming the yacht was hardly completed when land was sighted dead ahead—a single, uninviting, cone-shaped peak rising above the horizon. As the *Paloma* closed with the island its aspect became more and more forbidding. North-east and south-west of the highest peak rose others of a subsidiary nature, each being about four hundred feet high, or two hundred less than that of the culminating point. Except on the lower slopes and fringing the water's edge the island was destitute of verdure. The hills were undoubtedly of volcanic agency and of no remote date, judging by the size of the few coco-palms in evidence. At distances varying from one to three miles jagged reefs—partly volcanic, partly of coral—showed like sharks' teeth, just above the surface, their seaward fringes thrashed by the ceaseless surf of the Pacific rollers. Viewed from the offing there appeared to be no clear entrance whatsoever, the milk-white foam extending in an unbroken line between the extreme visible points of the shoals.

This was Boya—the one-time secret coaling base of the German Pacific Squadron. To a stranger and indeed to those acquainted with that part of the Pacific it presented no attractions. Apart from the menace of the reefs there was nothing on the island to merit the attention of traders—not even coco-palms in sufficient quantities to provide a remunerative cargo of copra for a small schooner.

The island of Boya bore a sinister reputation, for on three occasions during the present century pearling vessels embayed during a sudden hurricane were smashed to matchboard in a few minutes with the total loss of their crews.

Amongst the Kanakas there was a firm belief that the island was inhabited by the *manes* of departed evil-doers—a belief that added to the reluctance of trading vessels, partly manned by natives, to risk the intricate passage through the reefs.

"Surely the mutineers aren't making for that dismal, one-eyed show!" remarked Peter.

"Looks like it," rejoined his chum. "Though why, I haven't an earthly. Some new form of villainy, I guess. They've done with the black pearls, so they are trying another wheeze."

"Making up on the swings what they lose on the roundabouts, eh?" exclaimed Arkendale. "Well, it strikes me, old son, that you and I will have to swim for it if she holds on this course much longer—and a precious poor chance we'll stand in that broken water."

On the bridge, Mendoza was anxiously studying the expanse of reefs through a pair of powerful marine-glasses. At frequent intervals he lowered the binoculars and addressed a string of feverish questions to Lopez, who, confident enough as the *Paloma* raised the island, was beginning to feel "rattled" by the nervous demeanour of his superior officer.

"Have you picked up the leading-marks yet?" demanded Mendoza for the twentieth time. "What if they have been removed?"

"If they have been we're doomed, unless we retrace our course," replied Lopez, adding with thinly-veiled sarcasm, "though it is hardly to be expected that anyone would go to the trouble to remove a fifty-ton boulder just for the pleasure of piling us upon the reefs."

A long pause—horribly nerve-racking to the highly-strung Mendoza—and Lopez gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"I've spotted it!" he exclaimed. "Port five, quartermaster—meet her—at that!"

"I can't see any leading-marks," said the mutineer captain querulously. "Where are they?"

"Over there," replied Lopez airily, indicating an indefinite arc of the land. "Please don't interrupt or I'll make a mistake."

Lopez was now sure of the course, but he was determined to keep the information to himself unless anyone else on board possessed sufficient astuteness to discover the secret bearings. He realized that, like himself, Mendoza was a crafty villain, and, if occasion arose, would not hesitate to murder his Third Officer. Between the mutineer officers there was a hardly concealed rivalry. Neither would scruple to plot against the other, if there were a practically certain chance of success.

By keeping the knowledge of the channel to Boya Island to himself, Lopez realized that he held a strong card. It made him indispensable. Once the *Paloma* reached the anchorage she would not be able to leave it except at enormous risk, if Lopez were not on board to act as pilot; and when Mendoza grasped this fact it would compel him to keep on amicable terms with his youthful but no less crafty subordinate.

The *Paloma* had now eased down to five knots—a speed sufficient to enable her to maintain complete steerage-way and yet to gather stern-way under reversed engines in less than twice her own length. Leadsman were assiduously heaving the lead. This was a precaution taken at Mendoza's behest. Lopez smiled to himself, because he knew that no bottom was to be found until the vessel was within a cable's length of the outermost reef, when the water shoaled with remarkable abruptness to six fathoms.

Silence now fell upon the group of officers on the bridge. Mendoza, realizing that the matter was helplessly out of his hands, contented himself by gazing at the expanse of foam on either side and ahead of the vessel. Miguel Fe, guessing Lopez's intentions, was endeavouring to find out for himself the leading-marks. Incidentally he was scheming to enter into a compact with Lopez over the business, with a view to supplant Mendoza when the favourable moment arrived.

Meanwhile Lopez kept his binoculars levelled, at one time ahead, at another on the starboard beam. Occasionally he made a gentle movement with his hand to let the quartermaster give the ship a few degrees of the helm.

Suddenly he straightened himself and replaced the binoculars in the case.

"Port eight, quartermaster!" he ordered.

Round swung the *Paloma* to starboard, until she settled down on a course at right angles to that she had previously held. The channel was now only about eighty yards wide, foaming breakers on both sides and a barrier of jagged rocks ahead. It was on one of these inconspicuous rocks in line with the north-easternmost bluff of Boya that Lopez steered. To edge off the mark more than ten yards meant disaster, while to add to the dangers the high freeboard of the yacht being broadside on to the wind caused her to make considerable leeway and necessitating consequent compensation of helm.

At the end of this apparently blind channel the water widened and deepened into a natural basin giving sufficient room for the *Paloma* to turn through ten points, or more than she actually required.

Motioning to the quartermaster to step aside, Lopez took the wheel, glanced shorewards with apparent indifference, waited, and then put the helm to starboard. His quick eyes had detected the next marks: one a small, weather-beaten board that had once been tarred but was now a rusty brown hardly distinguishable from the coco-palm trunks. This he brought almost in line with a rock resembling a dog's head. Almost, because had he done so the *Paloma* would have crashed upon a half-tide reef; but by keeping the rock its own width wide of the board a clear course was assured.

Followed an anxious five minutes. Although the surf was not so heavy and broken it still surged on one side of the channel. On the other the water was so clear that Mendoza, gazing over the lee rail of the bridge, could easily discern the fantastic coral formations thirty feet down, their sides as steep as the wall of a house, and their upper edges as sharp as a timber-feller's saw.

At length Lopez gave the wheel a careless spin, toyed with the spokes with his left hand, while with his right he wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"Is this the anchorage?" inquired Miguel Fe, breaking the prolonged silence.

"Not yet," replied Lopez. "Will you go for'ard and stand by to let go?"

Miguel Fe went without a word, at his subordinate's bidding. Standing by to let go the anchor was a duty that fell to the lot of the junior officer. He wanted to dispute the point until he remembered that it was policy to keep in with Lopez if he hoped to carry out his plan. Besides, Lopez was virtually in charge of the ship in his present capacity of pilot and navigating officer.

Mendoza, too, was beginning to take a livelier interest in things. He no longer studied the bed of the lagoon—possibly because the danger of making final and speedy contact with it was a thing of the past—and transferred his attention to the forbidding face of the island, now less than a cable's length away and towering high above the yacht.

Kenneth and Peter were fascinated by the stupendous mass of rock. Although from a distance it had the appearance of being rugged, closer acquaintance revealed the fact that the steep slopes were deeply pitted and scarred by clefts in the old lava. In some of the shallow depressions where soil had been deposited a scanty herbage grew, but as a general rule vegetation was confined to a strip extending from the water's edge to an average height of fifty feet, although in several places the cliffs rose sheer from the lagoon.



Presently the two lads were aware that the *Paloma* had ported helm, and was now pointing straight for the cliffs. Leaning over the bulwarks, they saw, however, that there was a chasm looking far less in width than the yacht's beam.

"Surely they aren't going to run the *Paloma* in there?" exclaimed Kenneth.

"Unless they mean to beach her," added his chum.

As the yacht drew nearer the chums realized that they had been victims of an optical delusion. The chasm was narrow enough, but the enormous height of the wall of rock had tended to decrease the apparent width.

Dead slow the *Paloma* glided through the gap, her wash rippling against the granite-like wall of rock, and the muffled pulsations of her engines echoing like distant thunder in the confined space. At one point the width contracted to such an extent that had not the boats been swung in they would have been smashed to pieces against the sheer faces of the chasm. At another the face of the cliff overhung to a degree that had the yacht had her topmasts up they would have fouled and no doubt carried away. In spite of the brilliant tropical sunshine the shadows cast by the cliffs were so black that the yacht was enshrouded in gloom.

At the end of the gorge the *Paloma* emerged into a natural basin nearly a quarter of a mile across in its widest part and nowhere less than half that distance. On all sides the ground rose to a height of two hundred feet, the beach being steep-to almost everywhere except on the south side where the ground shelved gradually. Here on a beach of light grey sand a pier projected into the water. Judging by its weather-worn appearance it was in the last stages of decay. At the shoreward end of the pier were four store-houses or huts built of timber faced with coral cement. From one of these a line of rusty tram-lines led to the pier head. All around the buildings coarse grass and hibiscus plants grew breast-high, the scarlet flowers presenting a riot of colour that tended to compensate for the derelict condition of the place.

Stepping to the engine-room telegraph Lopez rang for "stop", then "easy astern".

"Let go!" he shouted.

The cable surged through the hawse-pipe. The vessel strained at her securing chain and began to forge ahead.

Lopez gave the word: "Finished with the engines", turned abruptly and after the manner of his race bowed courteously to Capitán Mendoza.

"Señor Capitán!" he exclaimed. "The secret harbour of the Island of Boya."

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# CHAPTER XIV

## The Secret Base

As soon as the yacht was "snugged down", and moored and the fires drawn, Mendoza and Miguel Fe went ashore, leaving Lopez in charge.

Of the three Spaniards, Kenneth and Peter detested Lopez more than the rest, and tried to avoid him as much as possible. On this occasion they found it impracticable to get out of his way. The cabins to which Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory had been taken were locked so that no communication with them was possible. The other state-rooms were barred to the two lads. They had been informed that in future they were to sleep for'ard.

"Ho, you English dogs!" exclaimed Lopez in his vile lingo, "now you will have to work for your living. You are part of a pirate crew. You will have to take part in the fight when we engage a likely prize. I'll make you wade in gore, with a knife between your teeth, but no pistol. No pistol! They are not safe in boys' hands."

He chuckled horribly, and drew his finger across his throat with an expressive gesture.

"If you refuse to fight," he continued, "then we will make the Englishman Heatherington pay for your disobedience. But you will not refuse. You will fight with a rope round your necks, for if you are captured then you will be hanged as pirates. So make the best of it."

"We'll see about that," replied Kenneth oracularly.

"So that's the wheeze, is it?" remarked Peter, when Lopez had swaggered aft. "Foiled as thieves of the black pearls, they are taking to piracy."

"Have already done so," corrected Kenneth. "Remember the *Svend*. That was out and out piracy, if ever there was. There's no doubt about it: we're in a fine old hole. They're trying to get us into the swim; to implicate us in this low-down business. I hope to goodness a British or a Yankee cruiser butts in and spoils their little game."

"Hardly likely yet awhile," said Peter. "The rogues have laid their plans only too skilfully. This island is an ideal buccaneer's lair. No one would expect to find such a snug anchorage tucked away in an island and absolutely invisible from seaward. They've laid a false trail to give the impression that the *Paloma* has been sunk. They've disguised the yacht. Until some intended victim escapes to give information I don't see how the existence of these pirates is to be suspected."

"I'm hoping that our chance will come from inside," said Kenneth. "Meaning that the mutineers will have a jolly old bust up between themselves."

"And they'd probably cut our throats in the process," added Peter grimly. "Well, we're properly in the soup, but that doesn't mean that we're not going to wriggle out of it if we've the chance."

Just before sunset Mendoza and his subordinate returned on board, looking very pleased with themselves. They had discovered the coal, nearly three thousand tons of it being stored and another five hundred tons stacked in the open. There were also a number of detonators and explosive charges, presumably intended by the Germans to send captured merchantmen to the bottom without having recourse either to torpedoes or guns. There were also stacks of clothing, but the latter had rotted through exposure to the weather. Finally a number of air-tight tins of Australian mutton in fair condition. In a few cases the tins had rusted through, and the stench of their contents left no room for doubt as to their perishable nature; but in the majority of instances the tinned foodstuffs still retained their quality.

That night, after a coarse and meagre supper, the two chums slept on deck, sheltered from the heavy dew by a piece of canvas. Nothing could induce them to turn in on the lockers in the fo'c'sle, where the hands existed in an atmosphere of cigarette fumes, card-playing and profanity, with not infrequent quarrels ending in drawn knives and ferocious scowls. The disputants never went further than that, for Mendoza had threatened that, in the event of one of the crew stabbing another, the assailant would be summarily thrown to the sharks.

Early next morning part of the watch fell in for duty ashore. Kenneth and Peter were ordered to go with the party.

On the boats running alongside the pier, the lads noticed that the structure was far more solid and substantial than it had appeared when viewed from the yacht. It was constructed of ferro-concrete, and, although the guard rails and chains had rotted through exposure and neglect and the massive bollards were thick with rust, the pier itself was capable of bearing almost any weight without danger of collapsing.

On arriving at the coal stack, each man was served out with a canvas sack and a shovel. As soon as about a hundredweight of coal had been placed in the sack, the man who had filled it carried it down to the pier and placed it in one of the boats. It was a laborious task, and could have been lightened considerably if the tram lines and rolling stock had been in serviceable condition.

Kenneth and Peter worked with the rest. They could not well do otherwise, since refusal meant punishment and stoppage of their none too plentiful and unappetizing fare. They were kept at it so hard and continuously that they had little opportunity to study the nature of their surroundings.

During the extreme heat of the day work was suspended, the Spaniards indulging in their customary *siesta*. With blistered hands and aching backs the chums were only too glad to follow the men's example. Late in the afternoon work was resumed and maintained at high pressure till sunset. This went on for three days before the rebunkering of the *Paloma* was completed.

At the same time men were told off to prepare one of the empty storehouses as quarters for the prisoners, the building being surrounded by a high fence of barbed wire. When the task was finished to Mendoza's satisfaction, Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory were conveyed ashore.

Kenneth saw his father approaching. Dropping his sack of coal he hurried towards him, heedless of the angry shouts of the bos'n, who was acting as overseer of the coaling-party.

"What are they going to do with you, Pater?" asked his son anxiously.

"I haven't the faintest idea," replied Mr. Heatherington. "Mendoza has been breathing out threatenings and slaughter, but as usual he's got precious little change out of me. Take care of yourself, my lad, as well as you can. I'll be——Look out, Kenneth!"

The lad turned at the warning. Bounding towards him was the bos'n, brandishing a heavy stick and shouting excitedly in Spanish. Up went the stick to deliver a ferocious blow. Kenneth realized that the fellow meant mischief. He stood his ground until the blow was almost on the point of falling upon his shoulder. Then, side-stepping with the agility of a matador, Kenneth let the stick swish through the air within an inch of his arm.

With a snarl the Spaniard made ready to repeat the blow. The lad deliberately retreated a couple of paces, the bos'n pressing him hard. Then, without the flicker of an eyelid to denote his purpose, Kenneth rushed in, planted the fellow a straight right on the point of the chin and sent him sprawling on the ground.

The guards escorting Mr. Heatherington stood stock-still with astonishment. They had never seen a man knocked clean off his feet by a blow with a fist. A knife-thrust was more in their line to settle an argument. They made no effort to molest the bos'n's victor, possibly because they had no liking for the man with his hectoring methods.

"I'll come along with you, Pater," said Kenneth quietly. "Peter's up there."

The party moved on, Kenneth walking between his father and Captain Gregory, the Spaniards forming their escort offering no objection.

"How is young Arkendale sticking it?" inquired Mr. Heatherington. "I feel sorry for him—inviting him to get mixed up in this business."

"He's all right, so far," replied Kenneth. "Lopez has promised to make the pair of us into pirates or something of that sort. He hasn't done so yet, and he never will. Hallo, there's Peter."

Arkendale dropped his spade and came to meet them. Like the rest of the working-party he was perspiring profusely and covered with coal-dust. He made an attempt to force a cheerful smile, but the result was anything but a success.

More mutineers, desisting from their labours, strolled up and joined the armed guard, but no attempt was made to

interrupt the conversation between the captives. Kenneth's drastic resentment of the bos'n's treatment had created a favourable opinion of him amongst the lawless mob. They might have admired the youth's pluck: they certainly were glad that the bos'n had been floored.

Suddenly the guard stiffened. The man in charge of the party motioned to the two chums to stand back, and to Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory that they should resume their progress. The reason was soon apparent. Mendoza had just come ashore.

Saying a hasty good-bye, Peter picked up his burden and made towards the pier, Kenneth walking by his side until he came to the place where he had deposited his load of coal.

"Stop!" ordered Mendoza, addressing Kenneth. "What do you mean by knocking down the bos'n?"

"He threatened me with a stick and I had to defend myself," declared the lad.

"That is no excuse," said the mutineer captain.

"Isn't it?" retorted Kenneth. "What would you have done in the circumstances? The attack was unprovoked, and I merely used my fist against a man with a cudgel."

Mendoza nodded.

"So?" he ejaculated. "Well, we will see how you can fight with and not against us. For the present I say no more."

"What does he mean, I wonder?" remarked Kenneth, after the mutineer captain had passed out of earshot. "Is it a threat?"

"I rather fancy he thinks he'll make pirates of us," suggested Peter. "If he does he'll find out his mistake. Look here, old son; what's to prevent us doing a bunk? The island isn't very big, but it's honey-combed with hiding-places."

"Might," admitted Kenneth dubiously. "But what then? We can't get away from the place. We've no food, unless we can exist on coco-nuts. And if the blighters didn't find us they'd make it doubly hot for my father and Gregory. 'Tany rate the idea's worth considering. We'll have to find out how the land lies."



But the opportunity was not yet; for on the following day the chums were not allowed to land. They were kept hard at work on board, trimming the coal in the bunkers, under the orders of a swarthy, ill-tempered individual, who held the rank corresponding to that of chief stoker in the British Navy.

There was no doubt about it: Mendoza was "hustling some". The *Paloma* was being prepared for sea at high pressure. The hands were regularly drilled at small-arms practice and with the quick-firer. Each man had his battle-station, most of them being out of sight until the moment came for the vessel to reveal herself as a modern corsair. Those of the crew who were not sufficiently recovered of their injuries received at Talai were sent ashore to undertake light duties, such as providing guards for the prisoners. Day and night operators were listening-in on the *Paloma's* wireless, endeavouring to intercept messages from shipping in the vicinity that might give a clue to a possible prize. With coal in abundance the vessel could now bank fires ready to work up to forced draught as soon as it was necessary to weigh and proceed.

At three in the morning, a week after the *Paloma's* arrival at Boya, Mendoza was roused from his sleep by the news that a message had been intercepted from the S.S. *Talca* of Valparaiso, homeward bound from Nagasaki with a general cargo. She had taken a cargo of nitrates to Japan, this being her maiden voyage. According to the wireless message, which gave her position, the S.S. *Talca* had broken her tail-shaft, and was appealing for aid in the form of a tow into the nearest port, where the requisite repairs could be effected.

Leaping from his bunk, Mendoza began to dress hurriedly. The buccaneers of Boya were about to fall upon their unsuspecting prey.

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## CHAPTER XV

### Compulsory Pilotage

According to the latitude and longitude reported by the *Talca's* wireless, the distressed vessel was only eighty miles from Boya—little more than five hours hard steaming. During that time the call might be answered by other ships in the vicinity; but up to the present the *Paloma's* operator had not picked up any such message. So far everything was in the buccaneers' favour.

Lopez, in a very bad humour at being called for duty after having only just turned in on the completion of his "watch-on", came surlily up to the bridge where Mendoza was already at his post. In the small hours of the morning even the prospect of easily-gotten booty paled before the knowledge that his night's rest had vanished. He began to realize that being in sole possession of the secret of the channel through the reefs had certain disadvantages.

"We must wait till daylight before we get under way," he declared.

"There is plenty of starlight," countered Mendoza. "And, if necessary, we can run the searchlights."

"Bearings look totally different by night," objected Lopez with a shrug.

"Nevertheless we proceed," declared his superior officer. "Come, now; do your duty. Our prize is waiting."

"Let her wait," retorted Lopez insolently. Confident in his own exclusive qualifications he added: "If you want the *Paloma* taken through the reefs take her yourself. It's my watch below."

Mendoza realized that Lopez had the advantage of him. By daylight he might have risked the passage, sending boats on ahead to take soundings. It would be a slow, laborious task and one fraught with danger, for more than likely the boats would be capsized in the breakers. Yet his subordinate's studied insolence stung him to ungovernable fury.

Without warning he hurled himself against the younger man and bore him to the deck, his hands clutching at Lopez's windpipe with relentless violence.

"Pig! Son of a pig!" spluttered Mendoza. "I'll teach you a lesson. Juan! Enrico! Come here and secure the rascal."

The quartermaster and one of the hands went to the captain's assistance. Between them they bound the now terrified Lopez hand and foot and bundled him down the bridge-ladder.

Mendoza then addressed the mutineers on deck, pointing out that their chance of gaining a rich and easy prize was being jeopardized by Lopez's refusal to pilot the vessel out to sea. Naturally the men's sympathies were not on the side of the defaulter.

"He will pilot us all the same," concluded Mendoza. "Take him for'ard and lower him from the cathead. If the vessel strikes the rocks he will be the first to show the way to the sharks!"

The commotion as the wretched Lopez was dragged for'ard aroused Kenneth and Peter, who, worn out by their prolonged and arduous task, were sleeping soundly under a tarpaulin on the fo'c'sle.

"Lopez is properly in the soup," declared Kenneth.

"Serves the brute right," rejoined his chum. "Wonder what he's been up to?"

"I hope they don't murder him," said the other lad, who, although he had suffered many indignities at Lopez's instigation did not carry his animosity to such an extent as to wish to see the Spaniard put to death.

"No fear," asserted Peter confidently. "They're merely putting the wind up him. He's too valuable as a pilot, although he may be an utter wash-out as a pirate."

The crew had by this time fastened a bowline round the luckless Lopez's waist, and had him dangling midway between the cathead and the surface of the water. Already the fellow's bombastic attitude had deserted him. He was completely cowed. In frantic accents he appealed to be allowed to speak to el Capitán Mendoza.

"What does he want to say?" demanded Mendoza, when the request was conveyed to him. "Ask him that."

Presently the messenger returned to the bridge.

"Señor Lopez is quite willing to give all information concerning the pilotage," he reported. "Only he wishes to point out that, since stern-bearings are necessary, he cannot get them in line from his position over the bows."

"That is so," agreed Mendoza. "I quite see the point of his argument. Nevertheless he will remain where he is until the vessel is clear of the reefs—and longer if I deem it advisable. He will give the correct courses from time to time, and that information will be transmitted to the bridge, when I will act upon it. What are those English boys doing on the fo'c'sle, Manuel? Order them right aft: tell them to keep below until they are called to fall in with their proper watch."

Already Manuel, the sailor who was to act intermediary between the captain and the counter-mutineer, was scurrying down the bridge-ladder. In the din caused by the hiss of escaping steam he failed to hear the latter part of the captain's instructions and merely ordered Kenneth and Peter aft.

By this time one anchor had been weighed and the cable of the other hove short. On either side of the bridge searchlights were playing dead ahead to enable the *Paloma* to feel her way between the side of the gorge that formed the approach channel to the secret harbour.

Almost at the last moment before the vessel got under way a boat ran alongside with Miguel Fe. It had been Mendoza's original plan to leave Miguel Fe on the island in charge of the buccaneers' base; but Lopez's defection had made it necessary for another officer to be on board.

"What has happened to Lopez?" inquired Peter of one of the English-speaking seamen—the man who had previously acted as cabin steward to Mr. Heatherington, and who was rather inclined to treat the lads with a certain amount of consideration.

"He refused to pilot the ship," replied the man. "Therefore the Capitán Mendoza make him. He will have to shout his directions so that all will know and the secret will be secret no longer."

"Pity we don't understand Spanish," said Peter, when the two chums found themselves alone just for'ard of the taffrail. "If we learnt the leading marks the information might be jolly useful later on."

"Although we don't speak Spanish, there's no reason why we shouldn't keep our eyes open and see what the ship is steering for," declared Kenneth. "But I must admit that we can't see where she is heading for from here."

"Quite so," admitted Peter. "As a matter of fact no one on board will. They took bearings ahead when they brought the *Paloma* in: I'm positive of that. If they have to use the same marks for going out, they'll either be astern or abeam, so we are in the right place to see. Hallo, we're forging ahead."

The passage through the gorge by day was a nerve-racking experience; by night it was still more so. Right ahead the jagged walls looked like masses of glistening silver in the rays of the twin searchlights. Aft the bridge the darkness was intensified to such an extent that the cliffs even at five yards distance were invisible, yet their presence could be felt and heard. The mass of rock radiated heat stored up during the day; it magnified and threw back the sounds of the vessel's engines till the noise became almost deafening. Once there was a rending of woodwork as the *Paloma's* port quarter ground against a projecting bluff, the shock, although she was going dead slow, causing her to list violently to starboard until she rasped past the obstruction.

In saner moments Mendoza would have hesitated to undertake the passage perilous; but so eager was he to snap up the tempting and helpless prize that he ran risks with the utmost recklessness. The attitude was typical of the man. In moments of less danger he had been unnerved and panic-stricken. Possibly because darkness hid most of the dangers his mercurial temperament was well above blood-heat. At all costs he determined to gain the offing and start in search of his quarry.

Standing aft the two chums had the most unpleasant place on board with the exception of the luckless Lopez, who, strictly speaking could not be considered as being on the ship. He was dangling over the bows, running the risk of being crushed like a fly should a false movement of the helm send the *Paloma's* stem crashing into the wall of the gorge.

The coal with which the *Paloma* had rebunkered had not improved with keeping. Inferior in the first instance when it was brought from South America for the use of the German Pacific squadron, it was now emitting dense volumes of smoke that hung low in the tropical air and eddied sluggishly in the vessel's wake, until the atmosphere which Kenneth and Peter breathed was like that of an ill-ventilated railway tunnel. They were not sorry when the *Paloma* emerged from the narrow passage and curtsied to the gentle heave of the breakers on the still distant reefs.

The ominous booming of the surf announced that the buccaneers of Boya were not yet roving on the high seas. In the starlight the spectacle of the heaving, tumbling, breaking waters over the chaos of uncharted and for the most part submerged reefs, was an awesome one.

Presently one of the searchlights was trained abeam until it played upon the coco-groves. The *Paloma* began to swing to starboard under full port helm, but the beam continued to be directed on a particular spot ashore.

"I've got it!" ejaculated Peter. "Look!"

"Not so loud," cautioned Kenneth, "what is it?"

"There's a board fixed to a palm trunk. See it? Evidently that's a mark of some sort. We've been keeping it dead astern for the last half minute."

"You're right, old son," admitted Kenneth. "If we find out nothing else we've learnt something. Hallo, they're reversing engines."

Quickly the *Paloma* lost way, the second search-light the while frantically sweeping the jungle of jagged rocks to port.

Lopez's directions had not been understood. Mendoza realizing the danger, had promptly taken way off the ship, and had ordered the pilot to be released from his ignominious position and to be brought up to the bridge.

After a seemingly interminable delay, during which the vessel was drifting to leeward and in dangerous proximity to the reefs in that direction, Lopez arrived on the bridge; managed to collect his wits sufficiently to indicate which of the half-tide rocks were the proper leading marks, and once more the *Paloma* forged ahead.

"We're done this time," confessed Peter. "The blighters have some sort of bearing on this course, but I'm dashed if I can twig it."

"Same here," agreed his chum. "It takes some knowing to make sure which of those chunks of rock are to be kept in line astern. Lopez is some pilot whatever else he might be."

"I wish I had his chances," sighed Peter.

"And what then?"

"I'd put the helm hard over and run the old hooker hard on the rocks," replied young Arkendale. "That would put the lid on Señor Mendoza."

"And ourselves as well, I fancy," said Kenneth. "No, I know a better plan than that."

"What is it?" inquired his chum.

Kenneth told him. Peter agreed whole-heartedly that the scheme was absolutely top-hole.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### A Compact of Piracy

With the suddenness characteristic of the Tropics, dawn broke just as the *Paloma* was clear of the reefs of Boya. Speed was increased to fifteen knots, and a course shaped to bring the buccaneering craft to the position indicated by the distressed *Talca*.

Mendoza was in high spirits. For the present he felt inclined to be tolerant with his insubordinate officer; and when Lopez, now thoroughly aware of the enormity of his offence, apologized profusely and craved forgiveness, Mendoza, with his tongue in his cheek, accepted his assurances of loyalty.

"When we return after capturing the *Talca*," he added, "I will pilot the *Paloma* through the channel between the reefs. You will stand by me and correct me if I make an error; but with the information you have imparted, I do not think my navigation will be much at fault."

"Assuredly not, Señor Capitán," replied Lopez, with well-assumed humility. "It is necessary, after all, that someone, other than myself, should know the channel. I might be put out of action, for instance."

"Quite possible," rejoined Mendoza, with brutal candour.

"And so might you be," thought Lopez. "You will be if I see a chance!"

Going to the wireless cabin, Mendoza inquired if there were any reports received concerning the S.S. *Talca*.

"Wireless her and inform her that she need not send out further S.O.S. appeals," he ordered. "Inform her that the Peruvian S.S. *Mendex* is coming to her assistance and will tow her into port. Keep in touch with her at intervals and give her our position every half-hour."

Rapidly the *Paloma* drew near the spot where the *Talca* was in distress. A look-out man was sent aloft to scan the horizon in case other vessels might be bearing down in response to the S.O.S. signals; but no sign of another craft was to be seen.

"What have you done with the English boys?" demanded Mendoza of Miguel Fe. "To what action station have you posted them?"

"They refused to fight," replied the second in command. "I could see that it was useless to compel them to do so—or even to induce them to handle the ammunition. I believe they would warn the *Talca* if they had the slightest opportunity; so I sent them to the stokehold."

"I'll send them to a hotter place than that before I've done with them," remarked the captain angrily. "Can't you realize, Miguel, that if we compromise them we'll have a tremendous lever to use against that mule-headed Heatherington. Bring them along——"

Before Mendoza could complete his orders, the look-out reported a sail on the port bow, adding that the vessel appeared to be a steamer, but was not making way.

"She's the *Talca*!" ejaculated Mendoza. "All hands to stations!"

In order to avoid suspicion, for a supposed tramp would not be expected to do fifteen knots, speed was reduced to a mere eight. Peruvian colours were then hoisted and the International Code Signal XYP, signifying: "Have a tow-line ready", was toggled to the halliards, to be hoisted when within visual signalling distance. Fenders were put out ostensibly to mitigate damage, should the vessels touch during the preparations for taking in tow. Actually they were for a very different purpose.

A number of the crew were stationed in conspicuous positions, as if to undertake the task of bringing the towing hawsers to the bitts; but by far the greater portion of the hands lurked under the lee of the dummy boiler-casing, where the quick-firer with its gun's crew waited its opportunity should the intended prize offer a strenuous resistance.

It was not Mendoza's desire to force a fight. His crew were none too numerous to risk further losses. The affair on the beach at Talai had been a lesson. He reckoned on taking the Chilean vessel completely by surprise, and scoring an easy and practically bloodless victory. If so, well and good; if not, he would sheer off and pump shell after shell into the *Talca's* bridge and upperworks until she surrendered.

The two craft were now but half a cable's length apart, when the *Paloma* gave three blasts on her syren to indicate that her engines were going full astern. Still carrying way she ranged up alongside the *Talca* with the apparent idea of getting a towing hawser passed from the Chilean vessel's bow to her quarter.

Suddenly, above the hiss of steam, came the shrill blast of a whistle blown three times in rapid succession. Mendoza's pre-arranged signal to board was two blasts. His men, puzzled by the three, became irresolute. Some of them sprang from their place of concealment, and with brandished knives and flourished revolvers sprang for the ship's side to find that a good ten feet separated them from their would-be prize. The prospect of leaping short and tumbling into the sea to be either crushed between the two hulls or to be devoured by sharks acted as an effectual cold douche to their ardour.

But the surprise of the buccaneers was greater still when they found themselves covered by four machine-guns mounted on the *Talca's* upperworks. Simultaneously the latter's upper deck was crowded by a swarm of desperate-looking ruffians clad in red shirts, loose blue trousers, and scarlet caps, each man armed with an automatic pistol and a keen-edged machete.

The surprise was mutual. Each vessel had imagined that the other was a harmless merchantman; both were piratical craft.

"Surrender yourselves!" shouted the Chilean captain.

"Surrender yourselves!" retorted Mendoza, at the same time frantically thrusting the engine-room telegraph to "Full ahead". At the same time, Miguel Fe yelled to the crew of the concealed quick-firer to drop the screens.

The Spaniards manning the gun, unable to see what was going on and thinking that the supposed Chilean tramp was giving trouble, lowered the dummy portion of the boiler-casing and swung the gun abeam. As they did so, the *Paloma* forged ahead. So did the *Talca*, gathering way with more celerity than her antagonist. Far from being a disabled merchantman with a broken tail-shaft, she was a twin-screw vessel capable of doing twenty knots with ease.

The result was a deadlock. Not a shot was fired, although it wanted but the pressure of a finger to start the combat. The captain of the pirate *Talca* knew that he could rake the *Paloma's* decks with machine-gun fire; but that would be futile if the *Paloma* sent his lightly-built craft to the bottom with one shell from her quick-firer discharged at point-blank range at the *Talca's* water-line. Mendoza, on his part, was aware that he was out-manœuvred in speed, and even if he sent his rival to the bottom, the machine-guns of the latter would take heavy toll, and reduce the already none too numerous crew of the *Paloma* to a mere handful, most of whom would be killed or wounded by the hail of bullets.

The opposing captains were ready to wound and yet afraid to strike—because they feared to be wounded themselves. Their hot-blooded Spanish temperaments cooled with remarkable rapidity under the stern argument of an evenly-balanced combat, in which neither side had a decisive advantage, and one that might well result in both vessels going to the bottom of the Pacific. The *Paloma* could not outstrip the *Talca* in speed; nor could the latter hope to elude the former, without being raked by the powerful quick-firer's shells as she attempted to do so.

"I see that I have made a slight mistake," shouted the captain of the *Talca*.

"So you have," replied Mendoza. "And I, too, for that matter."

The rivals laughed. The laughter became infectious, and the two Spanish-speaking crews exchanged ribald jests.

"It would be well to come to an amicable understanding," continued the captain of the *Talca*. "Get way off your ship and let us discuss matters."

"Certainly," agreed Mendoza, ringing down for "Stop", and at the same time cautioning the gun's crew to stand fast in the event of treachery.

Both vessels lost way and rolled sluggishly in the long Pacific swell, at a distance of a cable's length from each other.

Through a megaphone the Chilean skipper shouted an invitation to Mendoza to come aboard; Mendoza courteously refused and suggested that the other should visit him. At length they compromised matters by agreeing to meet at mid-distance.

Promptly the *Paloma's* gig was lowered and manned. The crew were unarmed, but Mendoza carried his automatic in his coat pocket. With equal smartness the *Talca* lowered one of her boats, the crew of which bent to their oars as they made the little craft slip through the water to the rendezvous.

The boats met and were soon rubbing their fender-protected gunwales together. The rival captains offered each other cigarettes and proceeded to get to business.

"I did not know that there was another gentleman of fortune in this part of the Pacific, Señor," began the captain of the *Talca*.

"Neither did I," rejoined Mendoza. "It was a strange trick to lure me all this way."

"Equally strange for you to do so," rejoined the other. "I was under the impression that you were the *Corada*. No, this is not the *Talca*. It is a name I borrowed. The real *Talca* was sighted three days ago, going east; but as there was a cursed Yankee cruiser barely hull down, we had to let the *Talca* slip through our fingers. My name, Señor Capitán, is Hernando Paquilla, otherwise known as 'The Mystery man of Valdivia'. And yours?"

Mendoza told him.

"There is not scope for two corsairs working at cross-purposes," remarked Paquilla tentatively. "Acting in concert they might do much—very much."

"That is so," agreed Mendoza.

"But on the other hand," continued Paquilla, "the greater the number of participators the smaller the individual share of the booty. Where is your base?"

"Boya," replied the captain of the *Paloma*.

"Boya!" ejaculated the other. "*Caramba!* Do you mean to tell me that you shelter yonder vessel at Boya? Why, a pearler couldn't find enough water between the reefs."

"We can," declared Mendoza vain-gloriously. "And where is your base?"

"I have none," admitted Paquilla. "When I have to rebunker and reprovision I have to take what I can find on the high seas. Look at my craft: observe she is well down to her water-line. That is her cargo of valuable booty. I have had to start tons of water ballast to make space for my loot, and now the difficulty arises how am I to dispose of it?"

"That is an easy matter if you know the way," remarked Mendoza. Then he broke off abruptly, thinking hard the while. "Come to Boya," he continued. "Accept the hospitality of my secret base. Since you suggest it, working in partnership will be a satisfactory business for us both."

Paquilla stretched out a slim but horny hand. Mendoza grasped it.

"May the hand rot if I play you false," declared Paquilla.

"And mine also," rejoined Mendoza.

"And now for Boya, Señor Capitán," said Paquilla. "Before nightfall may we drink together at your base to the success of our joint enterprise."

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## CHAPTER XVII

### The last of the "Het Volk"

Down below the water-line in the stokehold of the *Paloma*, Kenneth and Peter were kept hard at work by the chief stoker. They had little time for conversation. As they toiled they could not help wondering what was going on on deck. The experience was very similar to that of the "black squad" of a warship during action. Although the possibility of being sent to the bottom was in this instance fairly remote, there remained the natural anxiety as to what was taking place between the two vessels.

They could hear little in the terrific din of the engines; they could see nothing beyond the limits of the steel bulk-headed boiler-room. Occasionally the sonorous clang of the engine-room telegraph-bell, followed either by an acceleration or slowing down of the machinery, told them that the *Paloma* was manœuvring. They expected to hear the crash of gunfire, the shouts and shrieks of the combatants—failed to do so and were still further mystified. The while they toiled, grasping warm shovels that blistered their hands as they shovelled fuel into the rapacious maws of the furnaces.

At length their trick came to an end with the arrival of their reliefs. Stripped to the waist, oozing perspiration at every pore, covered with coal-dust and with their hands galled and blistered, and every muscle aching under the effect of the strenuous work in a confined space, the chums literally dragged themselves up the vertical steel ladder and gained the deck.

By the position of the sun they realized that the *Paloma* was practically retracing her course for Boya. About a mile astern was another vessel—the craft that had assumed the name of *Talca*. Naturally the chums concluded that she was a prize, although they were puzzled to see her afloat. They expected that when the merchantman had been systematically looted she would be sent to the bottom with all hands, except those who volunteered to join the buccaneers.

Still in the dark as to the real nature of the developments, Kenneth and Peter made their way to the salt-water pump where, as best they might, they removed most of the effects of their two hours' trick in the stokehold. Then they donned the clothing they had wisely discarded before going below. As they put on their coarse and grubby shirts and jumpers, they remembered with whole-hearted regret the bountiful supply of garments they had brought with them—now lost to them for ever; and contrasted the hardships and discomforts of the fo'c'sle with the lavishly fitted state-rooms that had been at their disposal before the mutineers showed their true colours.

Then to a meal, helping themselves to the remains of the coarse fare which their boorish mess-mates had left in the stew-pan; eating under conditions that would have appalled them but for their hunger. The while the mutineers were chattering vociferously, discussing the new phase of the proceedings; but owing to their total ignorance of Spanish, the chums were unable to gather any idea of what had taken place.

There were no fresh faces amongst the crew, so the theory that recruits had been obtained from the prize was knocked on the head. Nor did there appear to be any reduction in the numbers of the buccaneers. That pointed to a bloodless capture, which was another remarkable item. It could hardly be possible for the crew of a vessel like the *Talca* to surrender tamely—yet not a man in the *Paloma's* fo'c'sle bore signs of even so much as a recent scratch.

The meal over, the chums kept out of sight of the bridge as far as possible. Quite naturally they did not want to catch the eye of Captain Mendoza and his subordinates. Had they done so, they would be given another task to perform, and already they were feeling utterly worn out. They were too dog-tired even to discuss the presence of the *Talca*, which was still following the *Paloma* at an almost unvarying interval.

Shortly after one bell in the first dog watch, a sail was reported hull down on the starboard bow. A hurried exchange of signals by semaphore between the *Paloma* and the *Talca* took place, in which Paquilla suggested that Mendoza should close and investigate the stranger, and, if deemed prudent, attack. The *Talca* meanwhile was to steam away, and by virtue of her superior speed, circle and come up to the stranger while the latter's attention was attracted by the *Paloma*.

Again the buccaneers were ordered to action stations. In the bustle and confusion Kenneth and Peter escaped notice, and, having no wish to be sent to the stokehold again, they took refuge in the lamp-room—a compartment under the bridge, from which they had a fairly extensive range of vision through the scuttles.

The *Paloma* "made her number"—a purely fictitious one. The stranger replied, announcing that she was the Dutch S.S. *Het Volk*, of and from Batavia, and bound for Rotterdam via the Panama Canal.

"Be careful," cautioned Miguel Fe, addressing Mendoza. "She may have Dutch troops on board. They often send small detachments home from Batavia in craft of this description. In any case these Dutchmen fight like dogs at bay."

"If she has soldiers on board, she'll be bound to have a doctor," rejoined Mendoza.

"We will quickly find that out. Signalman! Make a signal requesting medical assistance!"

The flags WP, meaning "Will your doctor come on board?" were hoisted; to which the *Het Volk* replied with WM—"No doctor available".

Having gained one useful piece of information, Mendoza signalled to know whether the *Het Volk* could take off an injured passenger. To this the Dutchman replied that she had no accommodation for passengers.

By this time the two vessels were only half a mile apart, and if their respective courses were maintained, they would pass, port to port, within a quarter of a mile of each other. The *Talca* was now hull down and commencing to turn in order to come up under the Dutchman's starboard quarter.

Raising his whistle, Mendoza gave a long shrill blast. Up to the *Paloma's* foremast rose the signal letters ID—"Heave to; or I will fire into you". Simultaneously the screens concealing the quick-firer were dropped, and the powerful weapon trained upon the *Het Volk's* bridge.

It took the stolid Dutch skipper a considerable time to grasp the significance of the peremptory command. After the manner of his countrymen he was slow to act, but when he did act, he did so with a set and grim purpose.

Thrusting his helm hard-a-port he steered the ponderous *Het Volk* straight for the *Paloma* with the intention of ramming her amidships. Manœuvre and counter-manœuvre could be likened to a huge Frisian bull charging a first-class toreador.

Round swung the *Paloma*, her relatively small turning circle enabling her to avoid the *Het Volk* with half a cable's length to spare. The quick-firer barked viciously, sending a shell at point-blank range into the Dutchman's upperworks. Chart-house, wheel-house, and the greater part of the bridge vanished in a cloud of acrid-smelling smoke, from which fragments of charred woodwork were hurled in all directions. With the bridge went the gallant Dutch skipper, the quartermaster and two of the hands. Others of the crew were wounded by slivers of metal from the bursting projectile.

The gun's crew saw red. Shell after shell they planted in the *Het Volk's* upperworks, shattering boats, ventilators, deck-houses, derricks, and other top-hamper, and riddling the funnel like a sieve. Regardless of Mendoza's frenzied orders to cease fire they continued to work the gun until the upperworks of the Dutchman were blazing furiously.

The *Het Volk* lost way and came to a standstill, broadside on to the wind. Either one of the surviving deck officers had given an order for the engines to be stopped, or else the demolition of the bridge had resulted in the engine-room telegraph indicator being set to "stop".

"Away boats!" ordered Mendoza. "Look lively and bring off everything of value before she's burnt out. *Dios!* She must be a rich prize or they would have surrendered at once."

With Miguel Fe as boarding officer, about twenty buccaneers all armed to the teeth went away in the boats and headed for the victim. Even then, although not one of the Dutchmen possessed a firearm, the crew of the *Het Volk* put up a desperate resistance. Fire-men, no longer required in the stokehold, joined in the defence, hurling firebars and scraps of iron at the boarding-party, while the deck-hands, wielding capstan-bars, boat stretchers, and other improvised weapons, prepared to give a warm reception to the first Spaniard who came within reach.

Thrice under the cover of a volley of revolver shots the buccaneers attempted to gain the side of the *Het Volk*. Each time they were repulsed, for after the first onslaught the hot-blooded Spaniards learnt to respect their stolid opponents, and pressed the attack with less impetuosity. Even the presumption that the Dutchman carried a valuable cargo ceased to be an attraction when the boarding-party realized that in the attainment of Mendoza's plans they might not be left alive to participate in the distribution.

The boat backed away, most of the buccaneers bearing marks of the encounter, Miguel Fe losing interest in the business

owing to a painful and permanent parting from four of his front teeth.

The moment the attackers sheered-off the Dutchmen promptly took cover, the steel bulwarks of the *Het Volk* being proof against either rifle or revolver bullets. Yet sooner or later they would be compelled to give in or else perish in the steadily increasing flames.

Watching from the bridge the discomfiture of his men, the pirate captain almost cried with rage and mortification. But for the belief that the Dutchman was a highly valuable prize he would have sunk her by gunfire. He dared not run the *Paloma* alongside and board by reason of the fire that was consuming the *Het Volk's* upperworks. Her wireless had been amongst the first things to be knocked away, but there was always the possibility of other vessels, attracted by the cloud of smoke, hurrying to the spot to render aid. And if one of those succouring vessels happened to be a warship—. Mendoza heartily cursed the Dutchman and his unsuccessful boarding-party with the utmost impartiality.

He dared not steam off and leave the *Het Volk* afloat. He must sink without a trace, acting on the principles adopted by the Huns in their submarine warfare. The Pacific was not the Atlantic in the vicinity of the British Isles. A ship could be utterly destroyed without the risk of the cowardly act being witnessed by aircraft or swift coastal motor-boats. Still he hesitated, his decision influenced by the prospect of lucrative booty even from a fiercely burning ship.

Mendoza's outburst of rage was in full blast when the *Talca* came pelting up at full speed. Her appearance was hailed with joy by the surviving Dutchmen, who imagined her to be a haven of refuge from the assaults of the buccaneers, especially as the *Paloma* began to steam away. They crowded to the bulwarks cheering and waving to their supposed rescuers, until half a dozen machine-guns sprayed death and wounds amongst the hapless men.

The surviving Dutchmen, with the exception of three too badly wounded to move, rushed below, where they prepared to sell their lives dearly.

"Help yourself to what is left!" semaphored Paquilla to his partner in piracy.

This time Mendoza went off in the boats, leaving Lopez in charge of the *Paloma*, since Miguel Fe was still too dazed to undertake any responsibilities.

Gaining the well-deck, Mendoza surveyed the scene. Amongst the wounded was a junior officer, whose legs had been riddled with bullets, as he stood on the bulwarks in order to signal to the supposed friend in need.

"Do you speak Spanish?" demanded the buccaneer.

The Dutch officer maintained silence.

"English? Do you speak English?"

Still no reply.

"French, then? Young man, you are obstinate. Let me see if this will make you open your mouth."

He levelled his automatic at the wounded officer's head. The Dutchman never flinched, although he was suffering acutely from his wounds.

"No matter," continued Mendoza, lowering the weapon. "It would be too easy a death for a mule-headed fellow like you. Wait till the flames devour you."

This possibility had a chastening effect upon the wounded man.

"I speak Spanish and five other languages," he announced. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are the ship's papers?" demanded Mendoza.

"They went when the bridge and captain's cabin were demolished."

"What cargo have you?"

"Jute."

"And what else?"

"Nothing. All our holds are packed with jute."

Mendoza uttered a furious oath. Jute! What was the use of jute to him? It was a valuable cargo, but even if he was able to break bulk and remove most of it from the *Het Volk's* holds it would be labour wasted. It would be practically impossible to dispose of the stuff without risk of almost certain detection.

"Take anything of value, men!" he ordered. "All the food you can find. Be sharp! The fire's gaining rapidly."

Already the hatches were closed and battened down upon the luckless Dutchmen who had survived the *Talca's* machine-gunfire. Braving the smoke the buccaneers ransacked the after cabins and the spirit and provision rooms. Beyond a fair quantity of food there was little of value to reward their efforts.

"A good haul, I hope?" inquired Paquilla, who had just come over the side.

"A good haul!" repeated Mendoza wrathfully. "She carries nothing but jute. I'll be hanged if I touch a Dutch craft again. If they resist like this over a cargo of jute what will they fight like if they carry a rich cargo?"

Paquilla shrugged his shoulders.

"Fortunately there are few Dutchmen in these waters," he observed. "You've burnt your fingers, amigo Mendoza, and I have burnt much coal in standing by and finishing off the business for you. I'll have to sample some of the German coal at Boya. After that we'll cruise in company, starting from the island with empty holds and returning thither with bulging hatches. Let us be going, unless you wish to roast in a Dutch oven."

Mendoza recalled his men, and the buccaneers lowered themselves into the boats and returned to their respective vessels. By the time the boats were hoisted up and swung in, the *Het Volk* was a mass of flames from stem to stern.

The captain of the *Paloma* took no chances over the blazing vessel. He gave an order. The quick-firer was again manned, and a number of shells were plastered amidships and on the water-line of the doomed craft. Five minutes later she plunged to the bottom, leaving a pall of smoke trailing miles to lee'ard of the spot where she had disappeared.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### Lured to her Doom

The two pirate craft made the outer reefs of Boya without sighting any other vessel. Mendoza's chief anxiety was not the doubt of his ability to find his way through the intricate channel, but the question whether the *Talca* had sufficient coal to enable her to make the lagoon under her own steam.

He was loth to have to tow Paquilla's vessel. That would seriously interfere with his sinister plans, for already Mendoza had determined that the *Talca* would never drop anchor at his secret base.

The run had been decidedly disappointing and unprofitable. First the fiasco over the *Talca*, and then that of the *Het Volk*. He blamed Paquilla for the whole business. Paquilla had lured him out under false pretences: Paquilla would have to foot the bill. He, Mendoza, did not want to act in concert with another piratical craft; still more was he reluctant to play second fiddle to the captain of the *Talca*. And the dominating factor of Mendoza's schemes was the knowledge that the *Talca* was chock-a-block with rich booty.

Mendoza had no scruples over the dastardly, treacherous plan. He had not the faintest doubt that Paquilla would not hesitate to despoil the *Paloma* if she carried a considerable quantity of loot and the *Talca* had none.

It was a fine, windless afternoon when the two vessels approached the outer fringe of reefs. Although the sea broke heavily over these, there was hardly any disturbed water in the inner channel. Consequently Mendoza realized that if his plan were to be successful he would have to act before the *Talca* was fairly within the outer barrier.

According to a previous arrangement, the *Paloma* was to precede the *Talca* by half a cable's length, the former signalling to the latter when a change of course became necessary.

"I will make a wider sweep round the bends in order to give you more room to manœuvre," added the captain of the *Paloma*. "We draw five feet less water than you and can afford to borrow on the shoals."

"That is very kind of you," semaphored Paquilla in reply.

"I wonder whether he means it or whether he is sarcastic," thought Mendoza. "If he has suspicions there will be trouble in store for me; but one thing, when he's inside the outer reefs, he's at my mercy."

The two vessels closed to the pre-arranged distance, and reduced speed to eight knots. Mendoza was on the bridge, conning the *Paloma*, with Lopez standing by to check any error on the part of the captain. At each extremity of the bridge were stationed signal-men, whose duty it was to semaphore alteration of helm and compass course for the *Talca* to make.

As the *Paloma* passed between the narrow gap in the outer reef, Mendoza's heart began to thump violently. He had plenty to occupy his mind. He had to observe the correct leading marks and give the necessary directions to the quartermaster. He had also to keep an eye on the *Talca*, and to use his judgment when the critical moment arrived.

There was no doubt that Paquilla was also feeling the strain. Nevertheless, although dependent upon his partner in piracy, he left nothing undone that a good seaman should do in similar circumstances. The leadsmen were in the chains, and a look-out man stationed aloft to give warning when the change of colour of the water indicated an otherwise unseen alteration in depth.

Once the *Paloma* increased speed to nine knots, Mendoza hoping that the vessel astern would not notice the change; but the alert Chief Officer of the *Talca* noticed the decrease of the mast-head angle by means of his sextant. Almost immediately the *Talca* gathered speed and regained the half-a-cable's interval between the two craft.

Presently Mendoza moistened his parched lips and addressed the signalman on the port side of the bridge.

"Signal the *Talca* eight points starboard helm!" he ordered.

"But it is too soon," protested Lopez.



Mendoza snarlingly told the interrupter to remain silent, and repeated the order. At the same moment the *Paloma* began to turn eight points to port.

All unsuspecting, Paquilla gave the signalled order to his quartermaster. Both vessels swung round simultaneously, the *Paloma* missing the angle formed by an abrupt change of channel by about ten yards on her port beam, while the *Talca* headed bows on to the reef.

Too late her masthead look-out shouted a warning. At that point the surf broke well beyond the reef, giving no indication to those on the *Talca's* bridge of the peril that awaited her.

At the agitated warning, Paquilla, realizing that something was amiss, rang for full speed astern. Promptly the order was executed, but the vessel carried too much way to gather sternway. With a dull rending crash she piled herself up hard against an almost perpendicular wall of coral, tearing out her keel plates to the extent of between twenty and thirty feet before she came to a standstill. Lifted by the huge sullen rollers she ground and pounded upon the vice-like reef, the while water poured into her like a gigantic sluice.

This much Mendoza saw. Then his whole attention swung back to his own piece of intricate navigation. Under the lee of a right-angled bend of breakers, scraping by a few mere yards the outflung spurs of jagged coral, the *Paloma* held on. Once and once only did the pirate skipper have any doubts, and that was when he brought the vessel's head on with one of several almost identical rocks. He glanced inquiringly at Lopez.

"Excellent, Señor Capitán!" exclaimed his subordinate fawningly.

Mendoza said nothing. Mentally he made a confirmatory note of that inconspicuous leading-mark. He would know it all right next time, without having to refer to Lopez.

After that, the channel was comparatively simple to follow, for Mendoza knew when to look for the board fixed to one of the palm trunks. Five minutes later, the *Paloma* lost way and brought up in the outer lagoon.

Mendoza had no intention of taking the vessel into the inner and secret harbour until he was able to assure himself that the *Talca* was properly accounted for, and that none of her crew escaped.

Already the wrecked pirate craft was breaking up under the relentless pounding of the terrible breakers. The stern was below water, the midships portion was already awash, while the bow remained constantly visible above the breaking seas. On the fo'c'sle were about thirty men, hanging on like grim death. The others had disappeared. Attempts had been made to get away the boats. The first was crushed like an eggshell against the ship's side. Another swung out, but before she could be lowered a swarm of frantic pirates rushed at her, fighting desperately in their efforts to tumble into the boat. Knives and pistols were used with deadly effect, and when at length the boat was lowered she shared the fate of the first.

A third managed to get clear, but instead of keeping head on to the seas and making for the open her crew tried to pull for the island. The trough of a big but not broken wave dropped her on top of a jagged rock. She split asunder, throwing her crew into the water. Not one gained the sheltered lagoon. The eddying water and the knife-like reefs accounted for them all, although the last to perish managed to struggle to within a hundred yards or so of the *Paloma*, when he threw up his arms and disappeared.

Just before high water, the breakers attained their maximum violence. While water poured ceaselessly over the *Talca's* foredeck—with each receding wave the number of survivors diminished until at length the last of the Chilean pirates went to his doom.

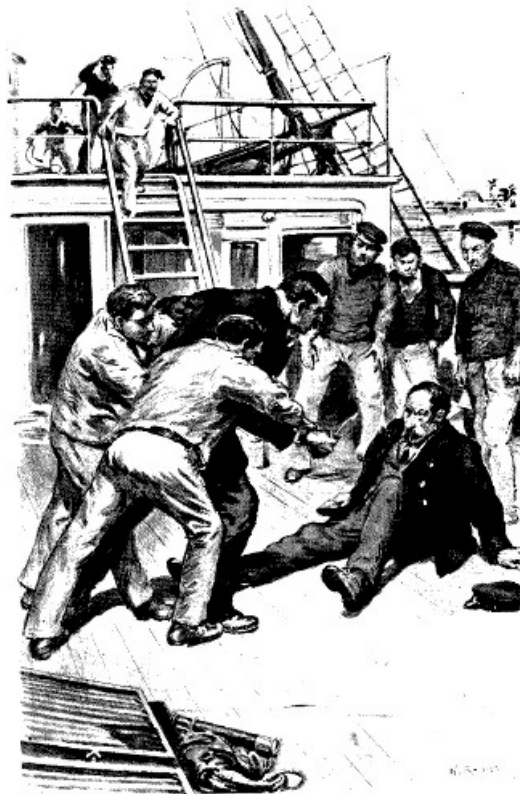
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## CHAPTER XIX

### Lopez's Attempt upon the Captain

During the final scene of the destruction of the *Talca*, the buccaneers on board the *Paloma* gazed awe-stricken at the grim tragedy. They could not understand the motive that prompted their captain deliberately to run his consort on the reef. They were fully aware that he had done so, and their perplexity grew more and more as they realized that Mendoza was gloating over his treacherous act.

Mendoza, although he was satisfied with his work of destroying the *Talca*, was far from confident over the question of recovering most of her precious cargo. He had hoped that the *Talca* would pile herself aground so firmly that the greater portion of the hull would remain embedded on the reef. Even if she split asunder, the valuable contents of her fore and main hold would be spread over the rocks, when the booty could be recovered at low tide. He was now not so sure that the major portion of the wreck was fairly atop of the reef. The bow part certainly was, but from the relative position of the *Paloma* and the remains of the *Talca*, it was difficult to observe with any degree of accuracy the actual condition of the shattered hull.



**"TACKLE HIM LOW!" EXCLAIMED KENNETH**Page 180

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It then occurred to Mendoza that some explanation ought to be made to the crew.

He addressed them from the bridge:

"Men," he exclaimed, "you are wondering why I put yonder craft ashore. She was supposed to be our consort. The arrangement was not of my seeking nor was it my wish. Paquilla, I discovered, had a scheme to make us a cat's-paw. He meant to use our reserve of coal, to appropriate Boya as his base, and to still further enrich himself as the result of an

enterprise against shipping of all nations.

"Sooner or later either Paquilla or myself would have to go under. My opportunity to score against a dangerous rival arrived, and I took it. To-morrow, if the weather holds fine—and there is every indication of it so doing—we will commence operations at low water on the wreck and help ourselves to Paquilla's hoard."

A cheer greeted the announcement, although in the silence that ensued one of the hands remarked in an audible tone that a precious lot they'd find after the hammering the wreck was getting.

A dark flush overspread the features of the pirate captain. For a moment or so he looked as if he meant to deal severely with the dubious man; but holding his feelings under control, Mendoza turned to Lopez and ordered him to take the *Paloma* into the inner harbour.

As soon as the vessel cleared the cañon-like entrance, Kenneth looked in the direction of the huts, hoping to catch a glimpse of his father. He was disappointed, although he derived some small measure of consolation from the fact that armed guards were patrolling in front of the building, which had been surrounded by barbed wire and was obviously intended as a sort of prison. Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory were the only two captives on the island when the *Paloma* sailed in quest of the *Talca*, and as it was improbable that other prisoners had been brought to Boya, Kenneth concluded that his father was still alive and in captivity.

The two chums were in a condition of utter perplexity over the events of the last few days. The inexplicable alliance between the *Paloma* and her intended prize, their joint attack upon the *Het Volk*, the deliberate wrecking of the *Talca*, and Mendoza's jubilant speech on the return of the buccaneers formed a tangled skein that was past Peter's and Kenneth's skill to unravel.

They were so utterly in the dark in a figurative sense that they were unable to form any plans to extricate themselves from their unhappy plight. As far as they were concerned, they were helpless. They realized that Mendoza, by keeping before them the threat to make Mr. Heatherington suffer for their delinquencies, held them as firmly as if they were bound hand and foot. They were willing enough to run risks on their own account in an attempt to regain their freedom; but the responsibility for Mr. Heatherington's safety acted as an effectual check to their activities. The ruthless manner in which Mendoza had destroyed first the Dutch vessel and then the *Talca* made the lads realize that they were "up against" a gang of desperate ruffians to whom the crime of murder was of no account.

The *Paloma* had hardly completed mooring when a sudden commotion attracted the chums' attention.

Lopez, having left the bridge, was still pursuing the conciliatory attitude towards his skipper, although his wish to revenge the insult when Mendoza ordered him to be lowered over the side was as fierce as ever. There was hardly the slightest doubt that the pirate captain read his subordinate's thoughts, and when Lopez, smirking and frowning, offered to congratulate him on having brought the *Paloma* safely through the shoals, Mendoza sarcastically admitted that he knew all that was required concerning the secret approach to Boya.

"And since you are no longer useful in the capacity of pilot," he added, "you can sling your hammock in the fo'c'sle with the *other* hands. And mark well: the next time you refuse to carry out my orders or those of the officers, including the one I am about to appoint in your place, you'll dangle from the cathead again—with a running noose round your neck instead of a bowline round your waist. Is that clear?"

Kenneth and Peter, standing within twenty paces of the two pirates, were quite unprepared for what was about to take place. Mendoza had spoken without raising his voice, and, in their ignorance of Spanish, the chums merely thought he was giving customary orders to his subordinate.

A sudden scuffle riveted their attention. Lopez, with the snarl of a wolf, had drawn a knife and had hurled himself upon his captain. To a certain extent Mendoza had expected the attack, for the moment Lopez leapt the skipper threw his cap at his assailant's face, and, taking advantage of the temporary check to the distracted officer's movements, gripped him by the wrist.

A brief struggle ensued. Several of the hands were standing by, but made no attempt to go to their captain's assistance. Lopez, being younger and more active than Mendoza, bore the latter to the deck, although the captain maintained a strong hold on the other's wrist, and prevented him dealing a fatal thrust.

Neither Kenneth nor Peter would have shown much compunction had Mendoza been killed by any other hand than that of Lopez; but of the two pirates, Mendoza was the less disliked. Existence on board under Mendoza was a dog's life as far as the chums were concerned; under Lopez it would be infinitely worse.

"Tackle him low!" exclaimed Kenneth. "Mind the knife!"

The chums rushed to separate the combatants, Peter gripping Lopez round the waist, while Kenneth with a twisting movement seized Lopez's wrist and compelled him to drop the knife. Relaxing his hold, Kenneth picked up the weapon and threw it over the side. Then he proceeded to drag Mendoza farther away from his assailant, at the same time preventing the captain from taking advantage of Lopez's helpless condition.

For helpless Lopez was. For the first time he realized the strength of the English lad who held him in a vice-like grip—a hold learnt on the playing fields at school and developed by dint of hard, forced manual labour during his detention by the buccaneers of Boya.

"Keep him back!" panted Peter, observing that Mendoza, quickly aware of the powerless state of his attacker, was about to wreak vengeance upon his subordinate.

Pluckily Kenneth diverted the pirate captain's designs, kept him at bay, while half a dozen of the hands relieved Peter of his task and carried Lopez to the hatchway.

"That's right!" shouted Mendoza. "Keep him secure. Put him in irons. Death is too easy a punishment for a mutineering dog. I'll deal with him in due course."

Possibly it never occurred to the pirate captain to realize what he said. His sense of humour failed to grasp the fact that he too was a "mutineering dog".

Suddenly, he turned to the two British lads, but not to thank them for undoubtedly saving his life.

"Perdition take you for baulking me!" he exclaimed, in his quaint and broken rendering of the English tongue. "What do you mean by laying hands on me? In future, for your presumption, you will work double shifts while the *Paloma* remains in harbour. That will teach you a lesson not to interfere when I wish to punish a traitor."

The chums made no reply. It seemed useless to point out that had they not acted promptly, Lopez might be reigning in Mendoza's stead. Mendoza seemed to have forgotten that part of the incident, and remembered only the fact that he had been forcibly withheld by one of the lads from either knifing or shooting Lopez out of hand.

Early next morning at three-quarters ebb the *Paloma's* boat proceeded to the scene of the wreck of the *Talca*. Even with the tide low and in fair weather the boat had a hazardous passage, and, when they reached the spot, they found that any attempt to close the battered remains of Paquilla's craft meant certain destruction. No boat could live in that constantly breaking sea, and even at dead low water, tremendous crested waves surged in chaotic masses of milky foam over the highest part of the ledge. Only a few feet of the bows of the ship remained. The rest, including Paquilla's ill-gotten booty, had been swept far and wide, to find a secure resting place fathoms deep in the jagged fissures in the coral reefs.

The disappointment hit Mendoza heavily. So far the buccaneering business had failed dismally. The only bright spot, according to his views, was that he had rid himself of two rivals—Paquilla and Lopez. Both were dangerous in different ways. The *Talca* was out of the running for all time; the disgraced officer of the *Paloma* was in Mendoza's power; he would make Lopez bitterly rue the day when he sought to usurp the command of the piratical crew.

He had also to deal with a growing sense of discontent amongst the hands. They knew that the promised guerdon of unlimited wealth had not materialized. They had worked hard, run risks, and had nothing to show as the result of the unlawful endeavour. A shortage of provisions tended to add fresh fuel to the smouldering fires of discontent. Yams and taro-roots grew on the island, but not in sufficient quantities to feed a swarm of men with healthy appetites; besides, yams and taro-roots with a somewhat bounteous supply of coco-nut formed a diet that was bound to pall unless it was varied by more staple food. There were no pigs on the island. Fish were caught, but some of those cooked and eaten proved to be of a distinctly unwholesome kind, and many of the crew were taken ill with a mild form of blood-poisoning. After that the hands drew the line at fish except those recognized as non-poisonous.

Food had to be procured. The idea of looting the island of Talai, where provisions were abundant, occurred to Mendoza,

but he remembered that to his belief the whole population was infected with the germs of small-pox. Talai was *tabu*. Until the danger of infection was over neither the foodstuffs nor the black pearls of Talai were open to the pirate's activities.

In the circumstances Mendoza decided to replenish coal-bunkers and put to sea again, with the intention of capturing one of the comparatively slow and small vessels homeward bound from either Australia or New Zealand, with cargoes of frozen meat. One such haul would provision Boya Island for months; and with an abundance of coal the buccaneers' lair would be a secure base for further operations.

Meanwhile the crew of the *Paloma* tightened their belts and thought longingly of the flesh pots and olive groves of sunny Spain—their native land whence they had voluntarily banished themselves on a chimerical quest for easy-gotten gold.

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## CHAPTER XX

### A Dash for Freedom

"I'll take jolly good care not to make another voyage in the rotten old *Paloma*!" exclaimed Kenneth resolutely. "Look here, Peter, old son; what's to prevent us doing a bunk and lying doggo until the yacht sails? There are dozens of secure hiding-places in the island."

"What about your Pater?" inquired his chum. "Mendoza will be as wild as anything when he finds we've given him the slip. 'Sides, if we escape from the yacht, how do we get clear of the island?"

"We might be able to release the Pater and Captain Gregory," replied Kenneth. "You see, there are only five men left to look after things ashore while the *Paloma's* out on a raiding expedition. Four against five isn't long odds by any means, especially as we have the element of surprise on our side. I've been observing things pretty closely since we came ashore."

"And it strikes me that the pirates are observing us pretty closely," rejoined Peter, as he prepared to resume his arduous work. "Get a move on, old thing, or they'll suspect we're up to some dodge or other."

It was the second day following Mendoza's unsuccessful attempt to retrieve the *Talca's* precious cargo. Replenishing the depleted coal bunkers of the buccaneering vessel was in full swing, and, as before, Kenneth and Peter had to perform more than their fair share of filling and transporting sacks of coal from the store to the pier-head.

Of Lopez they saw or heard nothing from the moment when he was unceremoniously bundled below. Of his fate they were in complete ignorance. Whether Mendoza had caused the would-be superseder to be shot, or whether he was carrying out his dark threat to wreak a terrible vengeance upon the man was a question that the chums had no means of solving.

During the long working hours, they had little opportunity for conversation. It was only when they passed and repassed each other that they took the risk of placing their burdens on the ground and exchanging a few words.

Although Kenneth kept a watchful eye upon the store-house that, judging by the presence of a triple line of barbed-wire fencing, evidently was used as a prison, he saw nothing of his parent or Captain Gregory. The prisoners never appeared at the barred windows facing the coal depot; if they were allowed out for exercise it was never during the hours in which the working-party was on the island. Except for the armed guards who constantly patrolled the now well-worn path surrounding the prison hut, there was nothing to indicate that the building contained prisoners against whose escape special precautions were taken.

Mindful of Peter's warning, Kenneth shouldered his sack of coal—he had now learnt the art of transferring it to his back with the minimum of effort—and tramped stolidly towards the beach; while his chum, laden with a number of empty coal-sacks, trudged up the hill towards the steadily diminishing but far from exhausted stack of fuel.

As Kenneth continued his way, he covertly studied the land. Instinct prompted him to make for the highest of the three peaks when the time arrived for the chums to risk a dash for freedom, or at least a brief spell of restricted liberty. Caution urged him to keep to the lower ground. There were hiding places in scores amongst those volcanic fissures. Their pursuers, presuming that the flight were discovered before the *Paloma* unmoored and proceeded to sea, would devote their energies to overrunning the high ground and more than likely leave that part of the island nearer the harbour out of their calculations. At any rate, he decided, it was sound reasoning.

The ideal hour for making the attempt was in the bustle that took place just before the *Paloma* got under way; only it seemed improbable that Mendoza would again risk a night passage through the reefs, since he was not hurrying to intercept a supposed easy prey. It seemed a forlorn hope to attempt to swim ashore in broad daylight.

At length the last sack of coal required to fill the bunkers was sent off, and the working-party was ordered to return to the ship. Peter and Kenneth made their way to the pile together, under the watchful eye of the bos'n; who, judging by his demeanour, was still anxious to get even with the English lad who had caused him to bump the back of his head upon the hard ground.

As the chums passed over the side they were greeted by Miguel Fe.

"You will keep middle watch in the stokehold," he ordered curtly.

Peter gave his chum a lugubrious glance at the information. The *Paloma* was about to raise steam. It looked as if the chums were to engage upon another involuntary cruise.

"Very good," replied Kenneth. "Are we sailing at once?"

The question was put so naturally that Miguel Fe was taken off his guard.

"No," he replied. "At daybreak."

After partaking of the unappetizing supper served out to the hands, the chums stole off to their sleeping quarters under a winch tarpaulin on the fo'c'sle. They made no attempt to sleep. They discussed in low tones their plan of action.

At a quarter to four the reliefs were mustered for the morning watch, the deck hands and firemen falling in separately. Kenneth and Peter took their places with the latter: half a dozen ruffianly-looking men whose sole clothing consisted of a pair of canvas trousers and rope-soled shoes.

The chief fireman read off the names, each one answering with a curt *sí*, and the roll having been called the watch tumbled down the vertical steel ladder leading to the hot, ill-ventilated stokehold.

The next hour passed slowly, the chums toiling with shovel and rake to keep the furnaces burning well and to ensure the removal of clinker and cinders. So painstaking did they appear that the leading stoker had no cause to complain, and left them to themselves to attend to the furnace of No. 3 boiler, which happened to be nearest to the ladder leading on deck.

At a quarter to five—it was still pitch dark without and dawn would not break until twenty minutes past the hour—Kenneth and Peter deserted their post. Unseen by any of the other toilers in the steam-laden atmosphere of the stokehold they darted up the ladder, paused only to see that the deck in their vicinity was deserted, and stole cautiously under the lee of the dummy boiler-casing.

Five yards away was the accommodation-ladder, which for some reason had not yet been topped-up and secured. Close to the grating at the head of the ladder stood a figure faintly silhouetted against the phosphorescent light from the placid waters of the harbour. It was Mendoza. The pirate captain was standing almost motionless and peering shorewards.

For a seemingly interminable time he remained cutting off the lads' path to freedom, but at length with an exclamation of impatience, he went aft. The chums heard him shout an order. Above the hiss of escaping steam came the sound of many footsteps.

"Quick!" hissed Kenneth.

With their hearts thumping violently the fugitives crept across the intervening space of deck between the casing and the accommodation-ladder. Down they stole, the suspended structure swaying and groaning at every step, until they gained the platform at the foot of the ladder.

Fifteen feet above them, and on the very part of the deck they had just left were the hands summoned by Mendoza. The tackle supporting the accommodation-ladder was violently jerked, as if preparation were being made to hoist up. Simultaneously others of the crew were swinging out a pair of empty davits.

Above the turmoil came the sound of oars. One of the *Paloma's* boats was returning to the ship from the shore. Judging by the sound she could not be more than ten times her length from the accommodation-ladder, for which she was making.

"We're clean bowled!" thought Kenneth.

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# CHAPTER XXI

## Scaling the Cliffs

"Lower yourself and hang on!" whispered Peter, and without hesitation he dropped feet foremost into the black water, edged round to the underside of the lower platform of the ladder and waited.

Kenneth followed with more haste than discretion, sending up a shower of phosphorescence as he took the water. For a few moments the chums waited breathlessly, expecting that they had been spotted by the buccaneers on deck; but either the sound of the splash was deadened by the commotion on board or else the phosphorescent swirl was mistaken for the splash of a fish.

With a bump that made the accommodation-ladder shake violently the boat came alongside. Between the treads the chums could see the head of the bowman's boathook obtaining a hold on the teak grating within eighteen inches of their faces. The boat forged ahead a few feet. Two men stepped out and ascended the ladder. The boat then dropped astern, so that the remaining members of the crew could be discerned with far too much clearness to be appreciated by the chums, as they hung on with only their heads above water. But the Spaniards in the boat were far too busily engaged in hooking on the lower blocks of the fall to notice them.

An impatient voice hailed the boat from the ship. A necessary reply was given and the boat rose to the davit-heads, dropping a shower of luminous water from her keel.

"Now for it!" whispered Peter. "Keep close alongside until we're round her stern, but look out for the prop.!"

The warning was fully justified, for almost at that moment the *Paloma's* propeller began to churn the water. To be caught in the suction of that powerful screw meant death; to strike out frantically away from the ship's side meant detection.

Fortunately the fugitives had not to choose either alternative. Just as Kenneth thought resentfully, "So they call this getting under way at daybreak!" the revolutions of the propeller ceased. Mendoza had ordered a few turns of the screw to assure himself that all was well in the engine-room.

Nevertheless the chums gave the stern a wide berth. It was fairly safe to do so, since most of the hands were busy preparing to unmoor and shorten in both cables before weighing.

"No hurry!" whispered Peter. "Don't splash."

Using the breast-stroke and keeping their hands below the surface, the two lads struck out for the shore, moving at a funeral pace, lest the ripples in their wake might attract notice. The water was very warm: they had no fear of cramp. It was so salt that the swimmers were surprised at its unaccustomed buoyancy. Foot by foot, yard by yard they drew clear of their floating prison. Occasionally a fish, breaking surface, would cause a phosphorescent swirl on the dark waters. Big fish, some of them. Vaguely Kenneth wondered whether they might be sharks. He had not seen sharks in their enclosed anchorage. There were plenty in the outer lagoon, and there was no guarantee that some of these tigers of the deep might not find their way into the inner harbour. He remembered being told that in the event of being attacked by a shark the best thing to do was to flounder violently and splash with arms and legs, but in the present circumstance silence was highly desirable. It depended, he thought, on self-discipline, and whether the risk of being recaptured by the *Paloma's* crew did or did not outweigh the peril of being seized by a ravenous shark.

The while both lads swam strongly and with slow, deliberate strokes. The *Paloma* was quite invisible in the darkness. Ahead, and most deceptive as to distance, could be discerned the summit of the low cliffs nearly surrounding the anchorage. The rest of the rocky walls was in utter darkness. It was impossible to gauge with any degree of accuracy how far the beach was, or whether there was any beach at all at the point for which the swimmers were making.

Suddenly Peter uttered a surprised cry. His bare foot had struck against a slimy object. For the moment he thought a fish had attacked him, until he discovered that it was a trailing length of seaweed he had encountered.

A few yards farther on and the chums found themselves in a kelp-bed. There were slippery and yet tenacious tendrils of seaweed everywhere, through which the swimmers must make their way if they were to gain the shore, unless they were compelled to make for the pier-head.



"We're nearly there!" exclaimed Kenneth. "Keep your feet up and don't get flurried. If you do you'll get caught up."

"Easier said than done," replied his chum breathlessly, as he stopped to disengage a particularly adhesive tendril from his left ankle. "Think we'll get through it?"

"Course," rejoined Kenneth, but after a few more strokes, he too found the formidable nature of the kelp-bed. Heedless of his own advice he commenced to struggle. The more he strove to shake off the tendrils, the more they hampered his movements.

"Peter!" he exclaimed. "I've stuck!"

Moving cautiously, young Arkendale swam to his friend's assistance.

"I'll hold you!" he said reassuringly. "Put your hand down and try to free your ankle."

Kenneth attempted to do so. Failing, he kicked violently. His bare foot came in contact with hard ground. The water was only four feet deep.

By this time dawn had broken with characteristic swiftness of the Tropics.

"It's quite shallow," announced Kenneth.

"And about time too," added Peter, as he too was glad to rest his feet upon the firm bottom. "Be careful, don't raise your head too much. Look behind you!"

Standing out distinctly against the reddish hue that stole over the crests of the peaks of Boya was the *Paloma*. Her foredeck was enveloped in steam as the capstan performed the task of "Breaking-out" the remaining anchor. Mendoza had lost no time in getting under way at daybreak.

"Keep your head down, you ass!" cautioned Kenneth. "Close to the weed. They might take your hair for seaweed, but they won't if they see your face."

For Peter in his eagerness to see what the pirate vessel was doing had neglected to take the precautions that he had only a few seconds before urged upon his chum.

Amidst the broad expanse of dark-brown kelp, the lads' hair could hardly be distinguished unless any of the crew were on the look-out for them and were sweeping the surface of the harbour by means of binoculars; but apparently the flight of the two British "firemen" had not been discovered, for none of the crew paid any attention to matters beyond those in connection with their duties on board.

The *Paloma's* anchor, covered with weed and shedding gallons of water, was hauled up and stowed snugly in the hawse-pipe. Her propeller gave a few flicks astern, stopped and then began to revolve steadily. The ship gathered way, steadied on her helm and headed for the narrow, cliff-bordered channel leading to the outer lagoon. A few minutes later, the intervening rocks hid her from view, although the pulsations of her engines, the sound enormously increased by the confined space between the walls of stone, remained audible for a considerable time.

"Tide's rising," declared Kenneth.

"It's slow: only about seven feet rise in six hours," rejoined his chum. "Think it safe to carry on?"

"Yes," said Kenneth. "No: hold on—look up there—a little more on your left."

Seated on a ledge of rock were four men, gazing indifferently in the direction of the departing *Paloma*; for from their elevated position they could command a view of the greater part of the outer lagoon, and the channel through the reefs.

Four men! That meant that a larger number had been left ashore than on the previous occasion, since one, or possibly two were supposed to be constantly on guard over the huts and storehouses. The odds were increasing.

"Think they've been warned to keep a look-out for us?" asked Peter.

"Hardly; they haven't once looked this way since we first spotted them," replied his chum. "They're merely basking in the

early morning sun, bless them! I wish they'd get a move on. We can't land till they do."

"Why not?"

"Cause we'll leave a watery trail, and on their return to the huts they're bound to cut it somewhere. Ten to one they'll keep close to the cliffs."

"We might chance it," urged Peter. "Once we can get to the base of the cliffs we are safe from observation."

"From that direction—yes," admitted Kenneth. "But supposing the guards spot us? We've cut things a bit finely. I didn't bargain on dawn so soon."

"Let's chance it, then," suggested the other. "We'll have to start swimming through the stuff if we wait much longer."

Slowly and with the utmost caution, both against being seen and being entangled in the kelp, the fugitives progressed towards the shore. After covering about twenty yards they found that the water deepened considerably, but with the compensating advantage, that the bed of weed ended abruptly. They had still about fifty yards of sunlit water to cover, with great risk of discovery should the four Spaniards happen to look in that direction.

The men, however, continued to evince a careless interest in the *Paloma*. They seemed in no hurry to move from their resting-place; nor did they appear to be engaged in conversation. They merely sprawled, each smoking the inevitable cigarette.

At length the swimmers reached the base of the cliffs. Here they were screened from observation, but a fresh difficulty confronted them. The water was several fathoms deep, the wall of rock rising sheer from the bed of the harbour. Although the wall was rugged and scarred by innumerable vertical fissures, there was nothing to afford means of scaling the cliff.

By this time the lads were feeling rather exhausted by their prolonged stay in the water, and by their efforts to extricate themselves from the kelp-bed. They were glad to hang on to a projection and rest.

"What now?" asked Peter. "Make for the pier-head?"

"Must; unless we can find a way up," replied his companion. "The trouble is that the nearer we get to the beach, the more likely we are to be spotted. Those fellows up there can overlook the landing-place."

"Risk it," exclaimed Arkendale. "I'm not a cross-Channel swimmer."

Again they struck out, keeping almost within arm's length of the rocks on the left. Before they had covered another fifty yards they noticed a deep but narrow cleft in the cliff, somewhat resembling what is known to mountaineers as a "chimney". There were numerous irregular projections that gave promise of a means of ascent.

"It mightn't lead to the top," objected Peter.

"P'raps not," agreed Kenneth. "Tany rate it will take us clear of the water. After all, there's no hurry."

"Isn't there?" rejoined his chum. "I want my breakfast—even if it is only taro. Right-o: I'll go first. You keep clear in case I come a cropper."

Using hands and feet and occasionally obtaining assistance by placing his shoulders against the opposite side of the "chimney", Peter clambered up for a height of nearly twenty feet. Then he disappeared from his companion's gaze.

"All right up there?" asked Kenneth, in a low voice hardly above a husky whisper.

"Top-hole," replied Peter. "It's quite a decent sort of dug-out. Up you come."

Kenneth scrambled up, barking his knees against the hard and rugged stone, until wellnigh breathless he flung himself down upon a broad, natural bench formed by a deep horizontal recess in the cliff. The floor was roughly thirty feet in length and about ten in width at its widest part, ending flush with the face of the cliff. In one part the rock was green with lichen and moss, and there was a suspicion of a faint trickle of water.

"This is all right," declared Kenneth, "but there's no grub. We can't stay here indefinitely."

"It's all right for the present," said Peter, as he wrung the salt water from the legs of his dilapidated pair of canvas trousers, which, with a threadbare singlet, comprised his entire wardrobe.

For the next half-hour hardly a word was exchanged. The chums were content to sit down and rest, secure in the knowledge that nothing short of a freak of chance would reveal their hiding-place.

Kenneth was the first to stir. Rising, he walked cautiously towards the southern end of the ledge and peered in the direction of the hill on which the four Spaniards were seated. He could just catch sight of their heads and shoulders. They were still there, but had abandoned their indolent attitude and were deeply engrossed in a game of cards.

"They'll keep that up for hours," thought the lad, who by this time was fully aware of the absorbing interest a Spaniard finds in card-playing.

It was now growing insufferably hot. Although the ledge was sheltered from the direct rays of the sun, which were now rapidly increasing in power, the whole of the rock seemed to radiate heat. The chums' saturated clothes were dry again. They had passed through a chilly period, during which the garments were drying, and now they were feeling the extreme heat; and with the heat came a terrible thirst—a thirst rendered still more acute by reason of the salt water they had swallowed in small quantities during their swim from the ship.

To a certain extent they quenched their thirst by chewing lumps of moss, but this had not the same satisfying result as if they had drunk fresh water. A diligent examination of the rocks failed to discover the precious liquid. In fact the moss had dried considerably since the chums had taken up their quarters on the ledge.

"I believe there's a trickle of water every night and that during the day it dries up," declared Kenneth. "Otherwise the green stuff wouldn't grow."

"Rough luck if we have to wait till to-night for a drink of water," added his companion. "What are those fellows doing? Still playing poker?"

"Yes, and likely to carry on with it," replied Kenneth, after another brief glimpse at the card-players. "Their eyes seem glued to the cards. What do you say? Ready for another move?"

"Move where? We can't climb up."

"No; but we can take to the water again. There may be a better means of ascent farther along. In any case there is the beach by the pier. Our best plan is to make for the coco-groves. Then, after we've had something to eat, we can keep the huts under observation. You see, if we find out the habits of these fellows, we may discover a means of communicating with my Pater and Captain Gregory."

Peter nodded.

"M'yes," he admitted grudgingly. "How many pirates are there on the island, I should like to know? If those fellows are some of the armed guard, they don't seem in any hurry to relieve those on duty. It strikes me that Mendoza has left a tidy mob here this time."

"Not more than he could possibly spare," said Kenneth. "He's short-handed as it is."

"And more so than he thinks," added Peter with a grin. "I wonder whether he's discovered he's two firemen short? Well, if he has, he hasn't troubled to put back and look for us."

"Unless he thinks we're hiding away on board. Ready?"

The chums tackled the descent of the "chimney". It was a far more difficult business than that of the ascent. One false step—and this cleft was too narrow to enable them to see the footholds—would mean a plunge into the water, which in itself meant little, but there was a risk of sustaining a broken limb by coming into violent contact with the granite-like projections.

Taking to the water once more they struck out, skirting the cliffs in the direction of the beach and pier. The harbour, being

roughly circular in outline, made it certain that beyond a definite point the swimmers would be in full view of the card-playing Spaniards. The lads knew the risk and took it, staking their chances on the intentness of the gamblers upon their game blunting their senses as far as everything else was concerned.

Presently Kenneth, who was swimming a few yards in front of his companion, trod water and pointed to another gap in the cliffs. This was of a similar nature to that of the "chimney" they had just descended, but with one important difference. The fissure extended to the summit of the cliffs instead of terminating at a broad bench midway 'twixt base and edge.

"Try it!" prompted Peter, and without delay Kenneth essayed the ascent. It was easier than the former, the projections being more frequent and giving a firmer foot- and hand-hold.

With very little exertion Kenneth gained the summit of the cliff, threw himself down in a slight hollow and waved to his chum to follow.

Peter was within a few feet of the summit when Kenneth, chancing to turn his head, was astonished and dismayed to find a tall, heavily-built pirate standing at about twenty paces away, and facing the spot where the British lad crouched in the slight depression by the side of the fissure.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### Across the Danger Zone

Startled by the sight, Kenneth was for a few moments unable to act. All his senses seemed benumbed. He stared dully at the unwelcome figure, striving, but in vain, to collect his scattered wits. Some vague impulse urged him to warn his chum, but he could do nothing but keep perfectly still and gaze.

At last his vision became less blurred. His brain was beginning to act, and answering to the dictates of caution he signalled to Peter to stop.

Fortunately Arkendale obeyed without asking the reason. Propped up against one of the walls of the "chimney" and with his feet firmly braced against the opposite side, he remained perfectly quiet, watching with considerable anxiety the partly averted face of his chum.

Kenneth, taking stock of the unwelcome interrupter of their flight, noticed that the Spaniard was tall, burly and particularly ill-favoured. He had discarded the canvas clothes usually worn by the crew of the *Paloma*, and was dressed in a blue cotton shirt, loose trousers reaching to midway between his knees and ankles, and a yellow scarf tied round his head. He was barefooted. He also appeared to be unarmed, although he might have had a knife or pistol concealed in his sash, unless the heavy stick on which he leant could be described as a weapon.

Even as Kenneth looked, the man prodded the hard rock with his stick and shouted: "Enrico! Enrico!"

At the hail, Peter, guessing that his chum had been spotted, scrambled up the remaining portion of the fissure and rejoined Kenneth. Neither spoke, but the same thought flashed through their minds: that it would be better to tackle the fellow at once before Enrico, whoever he might be, came to the pirate's aid.

Before the opportunity offered to close with the Spaniard, the latter turned half round and shuffled a few steps, sounding the while with his stick.

"Enrico!" he shouted again, in an impatient tone. The point of his stick rasped the rocky edge of a deep hole. He stopped and sounded with increased vigour.

The chums understood. The man was either stone blind or his vision was so seriously impaired that he could not see objects more than a few inches from him.

A voice shouted in reply to the man's appeal. The fugitives stole silently away, and crouched in a sheltered fissure close to the brink of the cliffs.

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## THE FUGITIVES CROUCHED IN A SHELTERED FISSURE *Page 208*

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They were not a moment too soon. Hurrying in the direction of the blinded man was another of the pirate crew. His right arm was in a sling, while a strip of dirty, blood-stained linen was fastened round his head. The newcomer was more to be feared than the other, for, although his right arm was disabled, he wore an automatic in his sash in a convenient position to enable him to grasp it with his left hand. And what was more, the fellow had piercing, alert-looking eyes, and during the time he was talking to the blinded man he seemed to look about him as if searching for something.

Talking rapidly as he approached—he was evidently chiding his comrade for his foolhardiness in straying so close to the edge of the cliffs—the newcomer took the other by the arm and led him away.

"More of them," said Kenneth, when the sound of the Spaniard's voice died away in the distance. "We've struck a sort of hospital recreation ground. My word! That blind chap gave me a stiff scare. He appeared to be looking right at me."

"Jolly good thing we didn't make a noise," remarked Peter. "And a lucky thing for us the man was blind. Sort of 'what's one man's meat is another's poison'. Wonder what the gamblers are doing?"

Cautiously Peter raised his head and peered between two adjacent boulders.

"Thank goodness, they're off!" ejaculated Kenneth fervently. "The island's stiff with them. Now, suppose we make a dash for the coco-groves?"

Peter measured the intervening distance with his eye, noted the almost total absence of cover for quite a hundred yards, and decided to sit tight.

"We'll have to stick it until those card-playing rascals clear out," he declared. "We might escape detection from the huts—most probably we shall—but if those fellows——"

"They're moving," interrupted Kenneth.

It was the rapidly growing heat of the sun that made the four pirates abandon their exposed perch. Listlessly they began to descend the hill, and to make their way back to the buildings.

They passed within twenty yards of the fugitives, but never once did they glance in the direction of the hollow sheltering the two lads. Each Spaniard was armed with a pistol or revolver, and a short bayonet-like knife. In addition two had electric torches slung by a cord over the shoulder. These were apparently the guards who had been relieved at day-break and had taken advantage of the opportunity for a game of cards before going to sleep in the heat of the day.

Kenneth and Peter watched them gain the path leading from the pier, ascend the now well-trodden path to the huts, and disappear from view. Presently one of the four came out, paced up and down before the barred windows for a few minutes, lit a cigarette, and sat down upon a pile of sacks under the veranda.

Very soon the same cause for the card-players' change of position made it painfully necessary for the chums to follow suit. The hollow was becoming an oven. Not only were the sun's rays beating fiercely down upon the hard rock, the ground was throwing out heat.

"It will be a case of sunstroke for the pair of us if we stop here," declared Kenneth, after a vain attempt to shield his head and neck with his hands. "I think it's safe to make a dash for it."

Peter grunted assent. He was feeling too hot and his throat was too parched to talk.

Taking full advantage of every bit of available cover, often crawling snake-like on their stomachs; dragging their thinly covered bodies and limbs over the sun-scorched rock; never daring to raise their heads more than a few inches from the radiating rocks, the fugitives made slow progress until they reached the belt of open ground. To gain the coco-groves this belt had to be covered. There was only one alternative: to skirt it on their right, but that meant having to approach within a few yards of the path between the pier and the huts and within full view of the latter.

It was literally *adhaesit pavimento*. The lads would have given almost anything for the delight of rolling in the mud of a football ground at home in exchange for that horrible nerve-racking crawl across the volcanic-dust-covered terrain.

They were about half-way across when the stillness of the sultry air was rent by the whip-crack report of a rifle. A bullet whined so close to the fugitives' heads (that is what it seemed to do) that they ducked and brought their faces in actual contact with the dust.

"Spotted!" thought Kenneth, and a similar thought flashed across his chum's mind. Both were seized by an almost irresistible desire to leap to their feet and sprint across the remaining distance of about fifty yards to the shelter of the palms.

But before the impulse could be acted upon a heavy whirring sound almost overhead caused them with imprudent recklessness to look up.

Immediately above them was a huge bird, a member of the eagle family. It was the first feathered creature the chums had seen since their arrival at Boya, but it was no stranger to the pirates who had been left to take charge of the island during the *Paloma's* absence. Already the men had suffered from the depredations of the bird of prey, for it had flown off with a half-empty sack of maize on one occasion and, on another, with a bag of tobacco. The loss of the latter had roused the buccaneers to action, and they vowed vengeance upon the bird that had despoiled them of a much-prized luxury.

"Keep flat!" exclaimed Kenneth. "They're not potting at us!"

It was indeed fortunate that the fellow on guard outside the prison-hut had seen the bird, for the latter, flying silently, had been hovering over the two fugitives with the intention of attacking them, should the prone figures give promise of an easy prey.

Startled by the report and the whirr of the bullet the creature flew off, beating the air with its powerful wings. Followed by two more equally unsuccessful shots, it disappeared from sight behind a spur of a cliff.

Quick to take advantage of the situation and realizing that the man using the rifle was concentrating all his attention upon his winged target, Kenneth and Peter lost no time in crawling across the danger zone and gaining the shelter of the coco-palms.

For quite half an hour, they were too exhausted to speak or move. All they could do was to stretch themselves at full length on the comparatively cool earth, and enjoy to the full the grateful shelter afforded by the foliage.

They were thirsty. There was no water to be had. The growing coco-nuts contained plenty of cool and refreshing liquid, but as the nuts were thirty feet from the ground and the chums had not the strength to essay the difficult task of shinning up a trunk absolutely devoid of branches, the nuts were merely tantalizing objects.

Slight relief to their parched throats was obtained by chewing plucked herbage. A quarter of a mile away yams grew in fair quantities, together with a few taro roots, which, known to Canadians as sweet potatoes, formed an appetizing meal—only, like the coco-nuts, they were for the present unapproachable. To get to them meant traversing another belt of open ground within view of the huts.

"Think it safe to go to sleep?" inquired Kenneth.

"Yes; if we don't snore," replied his chum bluntly. "Bad habit of yours at times."

"You can't talk," retorted Kenneth. "'Tany rate, we'll risk it."

Crawling under a clump of brushwood, the two lads lay down and were soon in a dreamless slumber.





## CHAPTER XXIII

### A Good Night's Work

The shadows had lengthened considerably when Kenneth awoke. Peter was still slumbering serenely, oblivious of the fact that he was in an almost destitute condition on an island in the hands of a band of unscrupulous ruffians.

Kenneth did not attempt to rouse his chum. He still felt so drowsy that he was inclined to go to sleep again, with the slight comfort of knowing that he would not be unceremoniously turned out to stand a trick in the hot, confined stokehold of the *Paloma*.

As he lay gazing up at the tangled brushwood overhead, he noticed what appeared to be a detached mass of green foliage entangled in sun-dried scrub. It was a coco-nut. Kenneth could have sworn that it was not there when the chums crawled to their sleeping-place in the undergrowth.

Overjoyed at their good-fortune, Kenneth woke his companion. Peter took the nut, stripped off the enclosing leaves and regarded the green husk dubiously.

"It's like having a tin of bully-beef and no opener," he remarked. "How are we going to get at the thing?"

"Break it against a stone," suggested Kenneth.

"And lose the milk. That won't do at all," protested his chum.

"I can't think of any other way," rejoined young Heatherington. "If we had a knife——"

"No use wishing," said Peter. "Smash the thing, then. We may save some of the juice, and there's the nut to eat."

Without further delay, beyond reassuring themselves to the best of their belief that no one was about, they pounded the nut against a piece of rock. At the third attempt the shell broke. They saved about half a pint of the liquid, looked for the nut and found nothing! Accustomed to coco-nuts as sold at home they were not aware that in its growing state the shell contains nothing but milk.

"Rotten swiz!" exclaimed Peter disappointedly.

"Better than nothing," replied his companion, as he finished his share of the refreshing liquid. "Next time we'll have a knife to work the oracle."

"Knife!" ejaculated Peter. "What do you mean?"

"I said 'a knife'," declared Kenneth deliberately. "As soon as it gets dark, I'm going to pay a visit to the huts. All we've got to look out for is the sentry, and ten chances to one he'll be asleep. They don't seem to have been warned we're adrift, so the *Paloma* sailed without our disappearance being discovered."

"Bit risky, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Kenneth soberly. "But we can't hang on here indefinitely without things. If I can find a bag of meal—I know where the provisions for the shore-party are kept—the pirates will find it missing in the morning."

"I'm on it," said Peter.

"You're not," protested his chum. "You can stand by. It's a one man show. Two run more risk of being spotted, and besides I know the place better than you do, I fancy."

"I don't like the idea," remarked Peter.

"Neither do I," agreed Kenneth. "But that's neither here nor there. I'm going to have a jolly good shot at it."

For the rest of the remaining hours of daylight the fugitives kept a watch upon the collection of huts. Most, if not all, of the buccaneers left on the island were lounging in the open, enjoying the cool of the day. All were smoking, including the

man on guard over the prison hut, while most of them were either playing cards or a game resembling dominoes.

Just before sunset a couple of men strolled down to the pier-head and descended a ladder on the side farthest from the watchers. Presently a boat with the same men put out from the pier.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Peter. "I didn't know there was a boat here."

"One of the *Paloma's*," said Kenneth. "By Jove! I'd like to collar that boat, and make a dash for it."

"And get collared by the *Paloma* on her return run," added Peter caustically. "Now what are those fellows up to? Are they going to spoil our night's entertainment?"

The chums watched the boat move slowly towards the centre of the secret harbour. One of the men threw overboard a large stone to which was attached a grassline. Having thus anchored the boat, its occupants proceeded to fish.

"They may be all night at that game," hazarded Peter.

"We'll hear them coming back, never fear," said Kenneth. "In any case there are two men the less up at the huts."

"What! Do you mean to say you're going to tackle the others?" asked his chum.

"My lad! There's a time to fight and a time to lie doggo," replied Kenneth. "It all depends upon opportunity and circumstance. For the present we'll have to go slow and see how the land lies."

While daylight lasted the watchers could see the two pirates hauling up fish at frequent intervals. Even then they found time to play cards.

"The island's a regular poker-den," observed Peter. "Well, that's in our favour. They'll start quarrelling before long; out knives and all that sort of thing. We'll win through yet."

"We'll have to carry out our plans before the *Paloma* returns," added his chum. "That is, within the next week."

Darkness fell. Within ten minutes of the setting of the sun, the night was as black as pitch. Not a star was visible. The air was heavy and motionless. The branches of the palm trees no longer sighed softly in the breeze. Only the ceaseless booming of the surf upon the far-flung reefs broke the silence.

A light appeared in one of the buildings—a steady yellow glare, obviously from a kerosene lamp. A few minutes later a dancing white light played upon the outside of the prison hut. One of the guards, carrying an electric torch, was perambulating the building. The perfunctory inspection finished, the torch was switched off.

The chums waited another hour before attempting a visit to the buildings. There were no signs or sounds of the men in the boat—not even the glimmer of a lighted cigarette.

Before setting out, Kenneth gave his final instructions, at the same time sticking to his resolution to undertake the hazardous task alone.

"You can wait in that shallow cave half-way between the pier and the barbed-wire fence," he said. "You know the place. I pointed it out when we were lugging that coal down to the beach. I may be gone an hour. Whatever happens, don't leave the spot except if it's necessary to make off away from the huts. I won't be longer than I can possibly help."

Without being disturbed by suspicious sounds, the two lads crossed the open expanse and struck the beaten track. A few minutes' stealthy walk brought them to the cave, which was little more than a recess formed by a violent disruption of the rocks. It was about twenty feet in height and six at the base, the width diminishing to a few inches at the apex of the triangular-like entrance. In daylight it would be useless as a hiding-place; by night it served admirably as such.

"Cheerio!" whispered Kenneth.

"Good luck!" whispered Peter in reply.

Treading softly and with the utmost caution, Kenneth followed the path until he came to the nearest building, where a light was still burning. From within came the sounds of voices. It sounded as if a dispute were in progress and that

someone was making an attempt to pacify the opposing parties.

Giving that building a wide berth, Kenneth continued his way until in the darkness he almost blundered into the barbed-wire fence. Bearing away to the left he followed the rectangle of fenced enclosure. The gate, usually left open during the day, was secured by a massive padlock and chain. He concluded that the fellow on guard must have been locked in until relieved by the next for duty.

Presently Kenneth almost stumbled over a dark object lying on the ground. It was the sentry, fortunately sound asleep. The lad threw himself flat upon the hard, grassless soil and waited, fervently hoping that the pirate was not a light sleeper. Lying close to the ground, Kenneth could discern the fellow fairly clearly. He was face-downwards, his head supported on his arm. His rifle and bayonet were by his side, while hanging from his belt was his electric torch.

Then Kenneth did a risky and seemingly unnecessary thing. Why he did it, he knew not. It might have been the result of sudden impulse, or an irresistible desire to bring back some tangible proof of his adventure.

On hands and knees he cautiously approached the sleeper and deliberately opened the spring-hook that fastened the torch to the man's belt. Thirty seconds later, Kenneth regained his feet with the torch in his possession.

"Now, if that had been a pair of wire-cutters, it would have been worth collaring," he thought, as he resumed his walk round the outside of the formidable fence.

For formidable it was, standing quite eight feet in height, with double rows of horizontal wires concealed by a criss-cross of subsidiary wires all bristling with aggressive spikes. It was unscaleable, impenetrable, and set too firmly in the rock to afford any means of tunnelling under it. In the circumstances it seemed as if the presence of a sentry were totally unnecessary: possibly the sentry thought so too, or else he would not have slept at his post. Also, it occurred to Kenneth that discipline must be lax amongst the pirates left behind on Boya Island, otherwise the fellow would not have run the risk of being discovered asleep.

"Does he keep the keys, I wonder?" thought the lad.

As if in answer to his question a torch gleamed in the distance. The beam drew nearer. Someone was approaching—more than likely the relieving sentry.

Again Kenneth threw himself flat. He was then about thirty yards from the still slumbering guard. On his left were the remains of a corrugated iron hut that had fallen into decay since it had been erected by the men who constructed the secret base for the German Pacific fleet. Towards the debris the lad made his way, and, sheltering behind the rusty sheeting, awaited developments.

The newcomer did not seem at all surprised to find the sentry sleeping. There was no vehemence in the manner in which he roused the fellow.

The sentry stood up, bent and fumbled for his rifle, and the two pirates made their way towards the gate. Here, they paused, and although the distance between them and Kenneth had increased considerably, he was still near enough to see the sentry produce a bunch of keys and hand them to his relief.

It was not until then that he missed his torch. The two retraced their steps, the new sentry flashing his torch on the ground in the hope of finding the missing article.

Arriving at the scene of the man's slumbers, his companion began flashing the torch in all directions, the pair talking excitedly the while, as if their suspicions had been aroused.

Kenneth began to wish that he had not taken the torch. Its loss was giving rise to complications. Still more did he regret the action, when the electric ray played upon the heap of rusting corrugated iron behind which he lay.

At length the search was abandoned. Still arguing the pair went to the gate, unlocked it and threw it open. The new sentry entered, while the other made his way in the direction of the hut from which a light still showed. Kenneth could hear him cursing, as he stumbled over the uneven ground in the darkness.

In a few minutes, having made a casual examination of the barred window of the prison building, the sentry on duty came out of the gate, locked it, and made his way to the spot where the other had slept. He too, lay down, and was soon

snoring.

"He's safe for the next four hours," thought the lad. "Now for some grub. Let me see; how does the store bear from here?"

In the darkness, Kenneth lost his sense of direction. Had it been starlight he would not have blundered; but blunder he did, for, instead of making for the store, he found himself in the open space where the coal was stacked.

Making a fresh start he eventually found the object of his search—a long, low building with one end in a ruinous state. The doors were shut but not bolted or locked. In the sub-division nearest to a double-door the provisions were kept. He had previously seen men going in and out while the coaling of the *Paloma* was in progress.

The stock was low. It was all that Mendoza could spare from the ship's stores, and consisted of half a dozen sacks of maize, flour and rice.

Kenneth was discriminating on his choice. Neither he nor Peter cared for rice; besides, they had no means of boiling it. Flour would be acceptable if they could make bread and bake it—but a fire was out of the question. Maize, pounded and mixed with coco-milk or yams, would make an appetizing and sustaining meal.

Modestly contenting himself with about twenty pounds weight of maize, Kenneth prepared to rejoin his chum. He felt well satisfied with his night's work; not only had he gained possession of an electric torch and sufficient food to last the pair for at least ten days; he had gained valuable information concerning the lax routine carried out by the guards on the prison hut.

"Have those fellows come back?" he asked, when he rejoined Peter in the cave.

"No; at least I haven't heard or seen anything of them," was the reply.

"Then we'll have to be very much on the alert," rejoined Kenneth, reshouldering his booty.

Without interruption the chums regained their shelter under the brushwood, and made a satisfying repast from the maize and taro, and were about to go to sleep, when the stillness of the night was rent by a hideous yell of agony.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### Freeing the Captives

The chums hurriedly left their shelter and peered through the darkness, their ears strained to catch any sounds that might give a clue to the reason for the blood-curdling scream. They heard nothing but the thunder of the surf.

"Wonder what it is?" asked Kenneth.

"It came from down there," said Peter, pointing towards the harbour. "Those fellows in the boat, I should imagine. Well, it's all quiet now; let's turn in."

In spite of his night's activities, Kenneth awoke with the first shaft of sunlight over the peaks. Curiosity prompted him to creep to the edge of the scrub and peer into the harbour, the greater portion of which was visible from the spot the lads had chosen for their retreat.

Four of the pirates were standing on the beach and looking in the direction of the boat in which their comrades had gone fishing. The boat was adrift, and within twenty yards of the shore. It would be quite an easy swim to get to her, but none of the men attempted to do so. Then Kenneth saw the reason that daunted their efforts to take to the water.

Lying on the shore was the body of one of the two who had taken the boat—or, to be more accurate, the trunk, head, and arms. The legs were missing. They had been bitten off by a shark, and the brute was still swimming round the boat. Kenneth could see its dorsal fin and the shadowy outline of the enormous body.

Shudderingly the lad recalled the fact that he and Peter had been swimming in the harbour and exposed to the same peril. In their case ignorance was bliss, for during the *Paloma's* stay not a shark had been seen in the secret anchorage. The crew had bathed at all hours without being attacked; and it was on this fact that the chums based their faith in their ability to swim ashore without risk of falling victims to these ferocious fish.

Presently the pirates began to hurl stones into the water with the intention of scaring the shark; but the brute merely dived and continued to circle the motionless boat as if seeking more food.

One of the men then hurried back to the huts. He moved with more haste than any of the crew had previously done while ashore.

Returning he brought with him a coil of light line. To one end he attached a stone, which he whirled round and round until it acquired sufficient impetus to carry as far as the drifting boat.

At the third attempt the weighted line fell athwart both gunwales. Cautiously the Spaniard hauled until the derelict grounded.

Her painter was secured. Two of the men scrambled on board and lifted some object from the stern gratings. It was the companion of the man who had fallen a victim to the shark. He, too, was dead; killed by a knife thrust under the lower rib.

The pirates appeared to take the business lightly. Without ceremony they dug a hole in the sand, and, having taken from the bodies everything likely to be of value, bundled the victims into the hastily constructed grave and filled it in. Then, having hauled the boat out and washed the gratings, they returned to their quarters.

Kenneth found Peter awake on his return.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the latter drowsily, "where have you been. I was just coming to look for you."

Kenneth told him.

"Well, there are two villains the less," commented Peter. "I suppose they quarrelled and had a scrap. One stabbed the other, but how did the second fellow get nabbed by the shark?"

"Probably the other chap knocked him over the head at the same time as he received the knife-thrust," hazarded Kenneth.

"If this sort of thing goes on, we'll have a walk over."

"When do you suggest tackling the prison hut?" asked his chum.

"To-night," replied Kenneth. "If we can free my father and Captain Gregory, we can collar that boat and be on our way through the reefs before sunrise."

"That's all very well," objected Peter. "But we'll have to provision and water the boat. It's a long way to Talai; and if Mendoza's taken it into his head to go there to look for the pearls, we'll be out of the frying-pan into the fire with a vengeance."

"But we'll be able to spot the *Paloma* before she sights us in a small boat," persisted Kenneth. "At any rate, once we release the Pater and Gregory, we'll not spend another minute longer than we can help on this horrible island."

"You seem pretty sure about it," remarked Peter. "I hope we'll pull it through all right; but what happens if the *Paloma* returns before we've carried out our plans?"

"She won't," replied Kenneth confidently. "It will be a week or more before she shows up again. By that time we'll be miles away."

The morning passed quietly. The chums could see the pirates either strolling round and about the buildings or else indulging in their all-absorbing poker playing. They made no attempt to scale the steeply rising ground whence they could command a view of the sea—a fact that confirmed Kenneth's belief that the *Paloma* was not expected to return.

During the extreme heat of the day the Spaniards disappeared from view. The chums took advantage of the pirates' *siesta* to make for the palm-groves. There it was cooler than in the scanty shade of the undergrowth, and Kenneth, agilely swarming up a tree, managed to secure half a dozen coco-nuts.

After that the lads slept till nearly sunset.

It was a dark, starless night, much the same as the previous one. The air was heavy with moisture. Not a leaf moved. The off-shore breeze would not be likely to spring up until well after midnight. When it did the stars would be visible—and that would be unfavourable to the proposed operations.

At ten o'clock—that was the hour the lads took it to be—the sentry was relieved to the accompaniment of the usual display of torch-flashing. A period of tedious and uneventful watching ensued, until once more the flicker of an electric torch announced that the guard for the two hours from midnight was being posted.

"All ready?" asked Kenneth.

"Quite," assented his chum.

Armed with short heavy sticks, the two lads set out upon their nocturnal adventure. All was quiet at the huts. Although a light still burned in the pirates' living quarters the sound of revelry had died away, and the twanging of the guitars had ceased.

Treading softly and cautiously with their bare feet, the lads gained the pile of rusty ironwork that had sheltered Kenneth on his previous expedition. It was so dark that it was impossible to discern the figure of the sentry, but Kenneth staked his chances upon the probability of the fellow being asleep in his customary spot.

A reddish glimmer destroyed that belief. The fellow was awake and was smoking a cigarette. Moreover, by the fact that the glowing end of the cigarette was visible, he was either facing the spot where the chums lurked or else he was side-faced to them. His back was to the fence, and in that case it was impossible to spring upon him from behind.

"Isn't the fellow ever going to finish smoking?" thought Kenneth. It seemed as if more than an hour of the sentry's time for duty had passed, although in reality he had been "on" only twenty minutes.

At last a parabolic curve of light told the watchers that the Spaniard had thrown away the burning end of the cigarette. He did not light another, but after a brief pause he switched on his torch.

The light revealed the fact that the man was now sitting down and that he was consulting a watch. Finding that he had got

nearly an hour and a half to complete his turn of sentry-go, the fellow lay down to snatch a brief rest.

Kenneth touched Peter on the shoulder. Together they began to crawl towards the spot where the man was—crawling so slowly and silently that Kenneth could feel his heart thumping against his ribs.

The Spaniard was breathing heavily, but whether he was actually asleep the chums were unable to discover, nor were they aware of the distance they had traversed until Peter's hand came in contact with the sentry's rifle.

By this time their eyes had grown so accustomed to the darkness that they could make out the huddled figure of the man; but not until they were within a yard of him did they spring to the attack.

Kenneth struck hard. He could afford to take no chances. He wanted to stun the fellow. He did. Without a groan the sentry rolled over on his side, and with the utmost dispatch the chums bound his ankles and wrists with his belt and scarf.

Holding his torch close to the man's face Kenneth switched on the light.

"By Jove! I believe I've killed him!" he muttered.

"No fear; he's too tough," said Peter, as he removed the Spaniard's knife and revolver. "Where are the keys?"

"I've got them," announced Kenneth, holding up a bunch consisting of one large and five smaller keys. "Hold on a minute while I gag the chap."

This little service performed, the chums groped their way to the gate, found the right key and swung the barrier open.

The outer door of the hut gave more trouble. The lock was stiff and obstinate. The hinges creaked dismally, but at last the chums found themselves inside the heavily-barred building. Closing the door, they switched on the torch, and found that they were in a sort of ante-room from which a corridor ran the whole length of the building and separated two rows of cells.

One key fitted each of the locks. The first cell was empty; so was the second. As the key was inserted into the lock of the third cell someone could be heard moving about.

"Don't make too much noise," said Kenneth warningly. "It's Peter and I."

The door swung open. Kenneth flashed his light into the dismal place, and in his surprise he nearly dropped the torch. The prisoner was neither Mr. Heatherington nor Captain Gregory.

Looking as terrified as a trapped rabbit was the chums' pet antipathy, Lopez!

Unable to recognize the two British lads—he was too agitated to grasp the fact that they had spoken to him in English—Lopez literally grovelled in the dust. Aroused in the dead of night he felt convinced that he was being summoned to execution.

Hitherto under the impression that Lopez was a prisoner in the *Paloma*, Kenneth was at a loss how to deal with the villain. At the same time the thought flashed through his mind that all the hazardous work the chums had done might be thrown away. The guards on the building might not have been posted on his father's and Captain Gregory's account, but solely to make sure that Mendoza's doubly-treacherous lieutenant was in safe custody. The real objects of the lads' quest might not be in the building, or even on the island.

"Pull yourself together, Lopez!" exclaimed Kenneth. "We aren't going to harm you!"

At the sound of young Heatherington's voice, the Spaniard looked up, blinking in the dazzling beam. Kenneth swung the light round and shone it upon his own features.

"*Dios!*" ejaculated Lopez.

Words failed him. He writhed like a stranded carp, trying to make up his mind how to bargain with the lads he had so vilely abused.

"Where is my father?" demanded Kenneth.

"In here—somewhere," replied the Spaniard. "Let me help, I will assist."

"No doubt," rejoined young Heatherington drily.

"Yes," continued Lopez, plucking up courage. "I will have revenge. Help you fight. I am no pirate. As for Mendoza, if I find him I will cut his throat."

"Lock him up and let's try our luck with the other cells," suggested Peter. "We've none too much time."

"Señores, believe me: I am your very good friend," said Lopez.

"Dry up!" interrupted Peter. "We've heard that yarn before."

"All the same I mean it. Let me go free and I swear by all the saints I will help you to regain your liberty. If I remain here then I must reveal everything to Sancho and the others."

"Very well, then," agreed Kenneth. "Clear out and make yourself scarce. I'd advise you to keep out of Mendoza's way. He'll be in a very bad temper when he finds us gone."

Kenneth held open the door. Lopez waited for no second bidding. He went.

"Isn't it rather unwise?" asked Peter. "He may give us away in order to curry favour with the other pirates."

"He's too much afraid of meeting Mendoza again to risk that," declared Kenneth. "Now for the other cells!"

The next two were empty, but on unlocking the door of the fourth to Kenneth's joy he found Mr. Heatherington sleeping soundly.

His son roused him.

"Come along, Pater," he exclaimed. "We've a lot to do and not much time to do it in. Where's Captain Gregory?"

"I'm here," replied the British skipper from the adjoining cell.

Peter released him. Gregory, his wounded shoulder almost healed, seemed none the worse for his detention. In fact he was physically fitter than when he had been sent ashore from the vessel he had once commanded.

Briefly Kenneth outlined the situation, and his future plans.

"If the boat's seaworthy, I'll navigate her to Talai," declared Captain Gregory confidently. "I suppose the rogues haven't removed her compass? There was one in the stern locker."

"That I can't say," replied Kenneth. "But we must be on the move. We have to provision and water the boat, and get clear of the island before daybreak—or rather make for the outer harbour and lie there until it's light enough to see our way through the reefs."

"But why make for Talai, Kenneth?" asked his father.

"Cause the black pearls are there."

"Bother the black pearls," exclaimed Mr. Heatherington. "They are the cause of all this unfortunate business."

"It's a pity to miss the opportunity," persisted his son. "Now that we are so near, we may have a shot at getting hold of them. Besides there's that Dane. He's rather a decent fellow. I'd like to meet him again."

"We aren't there yet," observed Peter Arkendale. "And we won't reach there, if we stay here talking. Now for the provision store."

The four left the building, and found their way to the still open gate in the barbed-wire fence.

"I'll have a look at the sentry, and see if he's coming to," said Kenneth, who felt rather sorry for the Spaniard he had



felled.

He made his way to the spot where the sentry had been stunned, bound, and gagged. He flashed his torch into the fellow's face and immediately recoiled. The man's head had been battered in with his own rifle-butt.

"That's Lopez's dirty work," thought Kenneth. "Well, that proves anyway that he's not going to betray us. I wonder where the rascal is?"

Unchallenged the four Britons gained the hut in which the provisions were stored. They helped themselves liberally, for when contemplating a long voyage in an open boat it was necessary to lay in enough food for an ample margin against risk of starvation. They also took two breakers of fresh water, each containing about five gallons, and heavily laden they continued their way to the beach.

When they arrived at the place where the little craft had been hauled up high and dry, Kenneth gave an exclamation of dismay.

The boat was no longer there.



## CHAPTER XXV

### Their Retreat Cut Off

Feelings akin to consternation assailed the four adventurers. Kenneth and Peter were particularly dismayed. They had seen the boat high and dry on the beach at sunset. No one, apparently, had left the hut and proceeded to the harbour up to the time the chums set out to free Mr. Heatherington and Gregory.

In the intense darkness, it was impossible to see more than a few yards, and it was extremely hazardous at this stage of the proceedings to switch on an electric torch.

"Sure this is the place?" asked Captain Gregory.

"Positive," replied Kenneth. "It was close to these stumps."

"Was she tied up to them?" inquired the Captain.

"That I cannot say," answered Kenneth.

Gregory said nothing at the time, but kneeling down he groped in the sand.

"Wet," he announced at length. "Tide's made up well above where we are standing. It's even levelled the bed she made for herself."

"But the tide never comes so high as this," declared Kenneth. "We've watched it. It doesn't run more than a few feet, and there's nearly ten yards between high-water mark and the boat's heel. Isn't that so, Peter?"

"That's correct, old son," replied Arkendale.

"You're both wrong," said Captain Gregory flatly. "It's been an extraordinary high tide, or, if you like, a tidal wave. They aren't rare in these parts. Some people maintain that they are the effect of a submarine volcanic disturbance. At all events \_\_\_\_\_"

Gregory's explanation was interrupted by a rifle shot, followed by others in quick succession.

"They've missed us!" declared Mr. Heatherington. "They're raising an alarm."

"Then we must make a dash for our hiding-place," declared Kenneth. "This way."

He was about to set off across the sands in the nearest direction to the lads' lair in the brushwood, when Peter gripped him by the shoulder.

"They'll spot our footprints in the sand," he exclaimed. "Make for the hard rock before you start in that direction."

The whole nest of pirates was disturbed. A regular fusillade of rifle and pistol shots disturbed the stillness of the air. It was quite impossible to judge with any degree of accuracy from how far off the sounds came—whether from the huts or from some point between them and the beach. The flashes were directly invisible, although there was a succession of reddish lights in the sky as the fusillade continued.

It required a considerable amount of self-restraint for the fugitives to make straight in the direction of the firing; but everyone of the little band realized the soundness of Peter Arkendale's warning.

Hurrying along the well-beaten track they left it at the nearest point where the volcanic rock converged upon the path. Here their footsteps left no distinguishable impression upon the barren ground. A skilled tracker might have been able to follow their "spoor", but it was unlikely that any of the pirates possessed sufficient knowledge of the art of following up a faint trail.

"Here's our cubby-hole, Pater," announced Kenneth, when the party were snugly in possession of the hollow under the dense scrub.

"And very nice, too," said Mr. Heatherington appreciatively.

"But it's too dark to see anything," added Peter, with a chuckle. "So you cannot admire our furniture."

"I can be thankful for the surroundings as they are," rejoined Mr. Heatherington gravely. "When a man has been cooped up within four walls he can appreciate to the fullest extent the joys of liberty, even though in a restricted sense. You see we aren't out of the wood yet. What do you propose to do, Kenneth? This is your undertaking, you know."

"We'll have to hang on till daylight to see how things are shaping," replied his son. "Losing the boat is a bit of a staggerer. No doubt, the rascals removed it."

"Why should they?" asked Peter. "They hadn't any reason till they discovered your governor and Captain Gregory were missing. That was after we were clear of the huts."

"They are such cunning fellows that one doesn't know how much they do know," said Kenneth. "Lopez might have given the show away: it's just the sort of thing a rotter like that would do. And, of course, the pirates might have spotted us and decided to play with us like a cat with a mouse."

"If it comes to the worst we must fight for it," declared Captain Gregory.

The others agreed.

"We've a revolver, a knife, and an unlimited supply of bludgeons," reported Kenneth. "There are four of us. Goodness only knows how many Spaniards there are on the island. We thought there were only half a dozen. Two were killed in the boat. The sentry's dead. Yet there were at least seven strolling about yesterday."

"I can't help you to form an estimate," observed Mr. Heatherington. "We never saw more than two men at one time during our imprisonment. What was Lopez doing there?"

Kenneth explained, relating his account of the struggle between Mendoza and the counter-mutineer.

"You ought to have let 'em fight it out," declared Gregory bluntly. "There would have been one villain the less, at any rate."

"Possibly Mendoza would have gone under," rejoined Kenneth. "Of the two I prefer him. In any case I couldn't stand by and see a man knifed."

Captain Gregory shrugged his shoulders. His feelings towards Mendoza and company were decidedly of a vindictive nature.

"It would have saved a length of brand new hemp," he remarked.

By this time all was quiet in the vicinity of the huts. The lamp in the men's sleeping quarters had been extinguished. No torches flashed their inquiring beams. Evidently the mutineers had abandoned their search for the missing prisoners until daybreak.

"You lads had better turn in," suggested Mr. Heatherington. "And you, too, Gregory. I'll keep watch. I've had a decent sleep already. You haven't. You've two and a half hours before dawn."

"You'll be sure to wake us then?" asked Kenneth.

"Certainly."

The chums needed no second bidding. They were feeling the reaction of the previous few hours, which, combined with the lack of sufficient sleep, had made them feel decidedly worn out.

With the first flush of dawn, the sleepers were aroused. Cautiously the four emerged from their retreat and surveyed the island in the direction of the huts. All was quiet.

They then made their way towards the cliff from the top of which a clear view of the inner harbour was obtainable.

"There's the boat!" exclaimed Peter.

Looking in the direction of Arkendale's outstretched hand the others could see the missing boat. She had floated off on the top of an extraordinary spring tide, and had drifted across the circular basin. The receding waters had left her high and dry on a fairly flat-topped ledge of rocks, within twenty or thirty yards of the deep natural cutting that formed the approach to the secret harbour. To get to her by water meant a detour of nearly a mile and a quarter, ending with a scramble down the cliffs and the risk of a hundred yards' swim in water now known to be the haunt of at least one ferocious shark.

"We'll have to get her soon or the pirates will spot her," declared Kenneth. "It's a pity she's there, 'cause our water and provisions are on this side of the harbour."

"Lucky for us she's there at all," said Peter. "Our best plan, I think, is to get the boat afloat, bring her back and load up here."

The four set out. Provided they could cross the open expanse bordering the track between the pier and the huts, they were sheltered from observation in that direction for almost the entire distance. On the other hand the pirates, aware of the escape of the prisoners, would doubtless be keeping a strict watch upon the landing-place. In fact, Mr. Heatherington remarked upon their apparent lack of enterprise in neglecting to send an armed guard down to the harbour already.

In single file the adventurers made their way through the coco-groves and across the boulder-encumbered barren ground, until they descended almost to the level of the path. Kenneth led the way, choosing a sheltered track between two almost parallel ledges of old lava rock, which terminated in a six-feet drop upon the actual roadway.

Suddenly Kenneth halted and held up his hand. The others stood stockstill until the guide motioned them to proceed cautiously.

Then he pointed over the edge of a rock.

Ten feet beneath them was the villain Lopez.

He was sitting on the ground with his shoulders hunched and his arms clasping his knees. His head was bent, his eyes fixed upon the dry sand at his feet. It was hardly the attitude of a hunted man.

Well beyond reach of his hand and resting with its muzzle against a rock was the rifle he had taken from the unfortunate sentry. Close to it were four leather cartridge pouches bulging with ammunition—a thing that struck Kenneth as being decidedly significant.

The pirate was bare-headed. His red shirt was turned down at the neck and up at the sleeves. Just below the left shoulder was a dark stain that was hardly distinguishable from the colour of his soiled and ragged clothing.

"He's tried to stop a bullet," thought Kenneth.

The four exchanged glances. Here was a problem that required careful handling. They could not trust Lopez, especially as he had a small magazine of cartridges and a rifle. The affair looked like developing into a three-cornered contest between Lopez, the other pirates, and the four Britons. No doubt Lopez would be agreeable to a temporary alliance with Mr. Heatherington's party; but the presence of the villain would be a source of continual anxiety. Even if they succeeded in getting clear of the island, they would feel it their moral duty to take Lopez with them, away from the vengeance of Mendoza and the crew of the *Paloma*; but what then? In a civilized country Lopez would be brought to trial. Would he risk his neck? Hardly. The chances were that he would seize the first opportunity of murdering the Englishmen, and attempt to hide himself in one of the South American republics.

Holding the revolver handy in case of resistance, Mr. Heatherington raised his head and shoulders above the intervening ledge of rock, and called the pirate by name.

Lopez looked up listlessly. He seemed utterly worn out. His sallow features were drawn, his eyes blood-shot. Dust and dry blood matted his face and hair.

"Finished!" he exclaimed in a harsh, croaking voice. "Finished! Lopez has won the fight. Pirates up there all dead. Lopez shot them."

"Good heavens!" muttered Mr. Heatherington involuntarily.

It was one solution to a part of a tangle of difficult problems upon which he had not reckoned. Lopez, armed with the rifle taken from the gagged and bound sentry, had surprised the rest of the pirates in their sleeping quarters. Apparently resistance had been made, but taken by surprise the rascals had fallen victims to their compatriot's deadly skill with a magazine-rifle.

"Wounded—badly," added Lopez listlessly.

Need for further concealment for the present at an end, the four descended the low cliff and gathered round the Spaniard.

"It's slight," declared Mr. Heatherington, after a brief examination of a clean puncture of the pirate's left arm. "You'll be all right in a few days, especially if we can find medical stores, or even a first-aid outfit up there."

Lopez shook his head.

"That is nothing," he declared. "This is what matters."

He pointed to a small dark stain just above his belt. Quickly Mr. Heatherington examined the tiny dark blue mark, where a bullet had entered the man's body just below his ribs. He realized that nothing could be done: Lopez was mortally wounded. He was bleeding internally.

"I die," said the Spaniard. "I know it. Ramon, he fired the shot. Ramon is dead. Now Lopez die and Mendoza still lives."

Ten minutes later, Lopez had gone to his last account. Almost to the end he muttered regrets that Mendoza had escaped his vengeance. That was his sole concern, and with a curse on his lips against the pirate captain of the *Paloma*, Lopez died.

"Another villain the less," said Gregory. "And he took good care to send a crowd of black-hearted ruffians on ahead to pipe the side for him."

"And we have the island to ourselves," declared Kenneth.

"Until the *Paloma* returns," added the cautious Peter.

"The sooner we clear out the better," said his chum. "Come on, let's get the boat back to the beach. We can provision her with anything we want from the store, and make a start well before sunset."

The four were now in high spirits. They were able to walk with freedom. No longer had they to crouch and move like hunted animals. They were, temporarily at least, lords and masters of an island domain. The two chums ran, leapt, and shouted with sheer exuberance of youth from which a heavy load had been lifted.

To reach the spot nearest to the boat they were obliged to take to the top of the cliffs, as the beach ended abruptly at a short distance from the pier. Beyond that the wall of rock rose sheer from the water.

At length the adventurers arrived at the summit of the highest of a series of hills from which a view to seaward could be obtained.

It was Captain Gregory's experienced eyesight that detected a faint smudge of smoke on the otherwise unbroken horizon.

"There's a vessel making for the island!" he declared.

The others looked first at the smoke and then at each other.

"P'raps it's a craft passing a long way out," suggested Peter.

"Let's hope so," added Kenneth.

Gregory made no remark until he had watched the smoke for some time.

"She's making this way," he announced. "The smoke's going up pretty straight. It's a craft end on to us."

The four made no attempt to move. Half-hoping against hope they waited until the vessel showed above the horizon. A few minutes later they were no longer in doubt.

The *Paloma* was returning to Boya.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### The End of the "Paloma"

"To the shore!" exclaimed Kenneth, breaking into a run.

The others followed, wondering what possessed the lad to make for the water's edge rather than seek shelter in the rugged interior. Even Mr. Heatherington was content to let the leadership of the party rest with his son. Kenneth had done so well up to the present that his father realized the lad had a natural gift for initiative combined with sound judgment.

Kenneth had not made up his mind on the spur of the moment. Already he had worked out a plan—a desperate one that was only to be taken in dire necessity, should the *Paloma* and her villainous crew put in an appearance before the four Britons got away.

That plan had to be executed now!

What was more, it must succeed entirely. There could be no half measures. Short of absolute achievement the result would recoil with dire consequences upon the instigator and his companions. It was the Rubicon of their adventure.

A quarter of an hour's strenuous exertion, involving climbing and descending precipitous ravines and forcing their way through patches of undergrowth, brought the four to the beach fronting the outer lagoon, and about half a mile to the north-east of the channel between the rocks leading to the inner harbour.

"Keep out of sight," exclaimed Kenneth. "Let the palm trunks screen you."

They looked seaward. Already the *Paloma* had slowed down before attempting to negotiate the intricate and winding passage between the outer reefs. From her foremasthead was displayed a three-flag hoist of signals.

"What does that mean?" asked Kenneth appealing to Captain Gregory.

"Can't say," replied the skipper. "It may be an International Code signal, but without a code-book I'm done. Asking if it's O.K. to come in, I should think."

"I never counted on that," thought Kenneth. "Since that signal will remain unanswered the pirates may smell a rat."

"What are we waiting here for anyway?" asked Peter.

Kenneth, lying flat on the ground and peering along the fairly regular line of palm trees, had found what he was looking for.

"You'll see in half a shake, old son," he replied. "We're going to shift the position of one of the leading marks. See that tarred board? As it now is, they keep in line with yonder rock, and that takes the *Paloma* through the narrowest part of the channel. If we shift it ten yards—not more—they'll pile the yacht on the reefs."

"Good business!" ejaculated Peter. "My word, Kenneth, you're a terror!"

"Am I?" rejoined his chum. "Come on. There's a lot to be done, and precious little time to do it."

Arriving at the spot where the board was fastened to one of the palm trunks, the four found that the task of shifting the leading mark was easier than they expected. The salt air had rotted the iron fastenings. The board came away at the first wrench.

"How are you going to secure it again?" asked Peter.

The question was a poser. Kenneth had counted upon using the original spikes.

"We'll have to take turns to hold it," he declared. "If you keep behind the trunk and hold the edge of the board they won't spot the difference."

"With a good glass they'd pick up your fingers at two miles distance," said Captain Gregory. "Stick the knife into the

back of the board and hang on to that. Five minutes spell for all hands ought to do it."

Preparations were barely completed when the *Paloma* appeared in sight again, for a projection of the cliff had hidden her from view during one part of her course.

Evidently she had decided to come on notwithstanding the fact that her signals had been ignored. Already she was abreast of the heap of scrap iron that marked the spot where the *Talca* had piled herself upon the rat-trap-like ledges.

"Mendoza's got some pluck to attempt it on a day like this," observed Peter. "It's blowing fairly hard."

"No one but a fool would try it," declared Gregory. "It's a good thing we didn't get away in the boat. She'd be matchwood by this time."

During the last twenty minutes the hitherto flat calm had given place to a stiff on-shore breeze that could hardly be considered dangerous to a vessel, except when steaming slowly in a narrow channel and with the wind broad on the beam. As it was, the whole expanse of reef was swept with white-crested breakers, which presented a spectacle calculated to cause the greatest anxiety to the most experienced mariner. Yet, in spite of the adverse conditions, the *Paloma* was coming in.

With her generous top-hamper she was rolling heavily. Now and again she had to be given lee helm to bring her head up to meet the staggering blows from the rollers that swept over the reefs to wind'ard.

At last she successfully passed through the most intricate and dangerous part of the channel. Under ordinary circumstances she would starboard helm and, with the wind astern, make straight for the outer lagoon, keeping the leading marks in line until within a cable's length of the beach.

Confident of having won through, the captain of the *Paloma* rang down for increased speed. Still wallowing in the following sea the ship swung round and steadied on her course—keeping the rock and the purposely altered leading mark ashore in line.

Breathlessly three of the party hidden in the palm-groves watched the *Paloma* rushing to her doom. The fourth, who happened to be Kenneth, was unable to watch the scene of destruction. It was his turn to support the decoy board, and resisting an almost overpowering desire to peer round the edge of the woodwork, he stuck gamely to his task, although he found himself wishing that the *Paloma* would not strike before his spell of duty had expired.

A succession of heavy crashes announced that the pirate vessel had run almost bows-on upon the rocks.

"She's done for!" exclaimed Mr. Heatherington.

Kenneth threw the board to the ground. It had served its purpose. Concealment was no longer necessary.

The impact had broken the back of the comparatively lightly-built yacht. Her bows were high above water. From the foremast the rest of the vessel had already dipped back and disappeared in deep water. Her funnel and mainmast had gone by the board when she struck. Terrific rollers were breaking over her fore deck, sending clouds of spray fifty feet or more into the air.

Of her crew not one was to be seen. Most of the pirates had gone down with the major part of the ship. Those who happened to be for'ard at the time of the impact had been swept overboard by the irresistible force of the waves.

The four remained patrolling the beach for the next two hours in order to render assistance should any of the *Paloma's* crew contrive to reach the shore alive. Wreckage—in spite of the comparatively small quantity of wood used in the construction of the vessel—drifted to the island, but nothing sufficiently intact to be of service. Even the stoutly-built boats were shattered, either when they were wrenched from the davits or else during their passage across the multiple ledges of breaker-swept coral.

"It's no use hanging on any longer," declared Captain Gregory. "They never had a dog's chance in that sea. A fine craft gone, although she was built foreign; but as for the rascals in her——"

Words failed him.



The others showed no signs of elation. They had gained freedom. Their victims were ruthless pirates who did not hesitate to commit cold-blooded murder; yet there was a kind of sentiment—it could hardly be termed regret—over the tragic end that had overtaken the villains.

The four were on the point of returning to their hiding-place—for nothing would induce them to make use of the buildings—when Mr. Heatherington turned to his son.

"I suppose you don't want to remain on the island of Boya for the rest of your natural life, Kenneth?" he remarked.

"Rather not, Pater."

"Then, in the circumstances, perhaps it would be as well if we replaced that mark in its original position," continued Mr. Heatherington.

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## CHAPTER XXVII

### The Perils of the Reefs

After a satisfying meal, eaten in the open air and without having to copy the furtive habits of a wild animal in constant dread of being surprised by a pitiless foe, the task of regaining possession of the boat was discussed.

"We'll have to get her before to-night's tide," declared Gregory. "I don't suppose it will rise high enough to float her off, but we can't afford to take chances."

"Then let's go at once," suggested Kenneth.

Mr. Heatherington did not view the proposal with particular enthusiasm. Both he and Captain Gregory were feeling the effects of their activities after days of captivity. Their feet were blistered and swollen, and their muscles ached with the strenuous exercise of scrambling over rough and hilly ground.

"Why not get to her by water?" asked Mr. Heatherington.

"Sharks," objected both lads.

"Not by swimming," resumed Kenneth's father. "There are several empty barrels in one of the huts. We could knock up a rough-and-ready raft for the purpose."

The idea of a raft appealed to the chums immensely.

"Right-o, Pater!" exclaimed Kenneth. "Peter and I will roll four barrels down to the beach—won't we, old son? You and Captain Gregory can stand easy. It won't be at all hard getting the things down. It's a steady slope all the way down."

Accordingly the chums set off on the now well-known track between the pier and the storehouses. Arriving at the huts, curiosity prompted them to look into the building formerly used as the pirates' living and sleeping quarters. A hurried glance was quite enough. Lopez had done his work only too thoroughly. Seven corpses lay in various attitudes upon the dried earth that formed the floor. Of these only two had firearms when they were shot down; the others had been slaughtered as they tumbled from their beds.

In another building the lads found the barrels, but a brief examination revealed the disappointing fact that they were totally unfit for the purpose of providing buoyancy. The hoops had rusted, the wood was dry, the seams gaped.

"It seems as if this is a wash-out," remarked Kenneth.

"We may find some water-tight ones," said Peter, optimistically. "Even if we have to empty their contents. Hallo! How will these do?"

He pointed to a tier of oil drums made of iron, each holding about ten gallons.

"Just the thing!" declared Kenneth. "Give me a hand and we'll roll this outside."

The next problem was to get at the contents. The drum was provided with a metal screw-plug, with an hexagonal recess for the purpose of inserting a key. In vain the chums tried to coax the stubborn plug to turn. They searched for a suitable implement, but nothing was to be found.

"Hang on a minute!" exclaimed Kenneth.

Leaving his chum, Kenneth made his way to the pirates' quarters and took possession of a rifle and bayonet.

"Going to drill a hole with a bullet?" asked Peter when Kenneth rejoined him.

"No fear," replied his friend, fixing the bayonet to the rifle.

Peter watched him curiously.

Inserting the point of the bayonet between two timbers of the hut Kenneth gave the blade a sharp jerk. It snapped off

within a couple of inches of the point.

"Now hang on," said Kenneth, placing the pointless bayonet in the recess of the plug. "Twist. That's doing it. Here it comes!"

The plug was removed. A stream of oil flowed from the drum.

"Best lubricating oil, by Jove!" exclaimed Peter. "What a waste! And to think I may have to buy oil for my motor-bike within the next two months!"

"You'll be lucky to be able to use the bike at all," rejoined Kenneth with a laugh. "Now, another barrel!"

Having emptied the contents of six drums, they rolled the empty cylinders down the path with hardly any exertion, beyond an occasional push with their feet.

Arriving on the beach they found that Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory had not been idle. From a locker on the pier they had obtained an axe and some cordage. They had felled four palms, and had also prised up half a dozen planks from the decking of the pier.

All hands now set to work to construct the raft. Strength in its construction was not necessary, since it was to be employed for a few hours only and on sheltered water.

When completed the raft took the united efforts of the four men to launch her, but once afloat the structure rode lightly and could be propelled with slight effort by means of a couple of short planks.

"She'll only carry two," declared Kenneth.

"She'll take the lot of us," affirmed Captain Gregory. "Sixty gallons represent six hundred pounds or thereabouts, and we don't top the scale at that."

"You aren't taking into consideration the dead weight of the metal, Captain," said Mr. Heatherington. "Suppose we split the difference and let one of us remain?"

The arrangement was agreed upon, Mr. Heatherington stopping ashore. Even then the raft had quite as much as it could comfortably support.

Arriving at the ledge on which the boat rested, they found the craft undamaged beyond a slight chafing of one of the bilge keels. She was almost balanced on the edge of the rock, the water being only four or five feet below her keel.

"Do you think the tide will make much higher, Captain Gregory?" asked Kenneth.

"Matter of a few inches at most," was the reply. "It's not much use waiting on the off chance of it rising above ordinary high-water mark. We'll have to topple her over."

"Won't she be damaged?" inquired Peter.

"No fear," affirmed Captain Gregory. "She's strongly built and full in the bows. She may ship a drop of water but not much. We'll take the gear out of her to give her a chance."

They removed oars, mast, and other articles of her equipment.

"Where's her canvas?" asked Captain Gregory. "She had a couple of sails—nice light ones they were, too—when I had her. Don't say the rogues have cut them up to make shirts."

A search in both lockers failed to find the missing sails. Captain Gregory was almost beside himself with rage. In his eyes the destruction of the boat's canvas was the greatest crime the pirates had committed during their brief and inglorious career.

"Perhaps they're stowed away in one of the huts," suggested Peter.

Captain Gregory snorted.

"You don't catch a crowd of rascally Dagoes going to that trouble," he exclaimed. "They'd sooner let 'em rot. Now, lads! Use the loom of that oar to prise her forefoot up a bit. Stand by with the painter, Mr. Arkendale. Ready? Off she goes!"

The boat trembled in the balance until, aided by a vigorous shove with Peter's broad shoulders, she slid over the edge of the rock into the water. Beyond taking in a few gallons she took to her native element without a hitch.

"How about the raft?" inquired Peter, after the boat's gear had been reshipped. "We don't want her now, do we?"

"We never know," rejoined his chum. "It may come in handy and it's no trouble to tow. Suppose the boat breaks adrift again?"

"She won't," affirmed Captain Gregory, with deep conviction. "You can trust me to see to that, Mr. Heatherington."

Kenneth was content to leave matters of this description in the hands of the experienced master-mariner. His own experience of boats and their management was limited, and although he had good reason to pride himself upon the way he had extricated his companions out of a great many difficulties, he had the sound sense to realize that seamanship was not a strong point with him.

Taking the raft in tow the boat made for the pier, Kenneth and Peter manning the oars, and Captain Gregory steering. The latter was bemoaning the loss of the sails all the way across the harbour.

Meanwhile Mr. Heatherington had not been content to sit down and watch the progress of the operations. He had been busily engaged in collecting coco-nuts, yams, and taro roots; and on the return of the others proposed a visit to the store-houses to obtain "dry" provisions, and an adequate supply of fresh water.

This task was put into operation and until sunset all hands were hard at work collecting stores and carrying them down to the pier-head. In addition to the provisions they discovered the boat's compass, but although an exhaustive search was made in every likely spot no trace of the sails was discovered.

As a slight compensation for the loss an old tent was brought to light. The canvas was far from being in a good condition, but Captain Gregory, critically handling the weather-worn fabric, opined that "it might do barring half a gale".

Early next morning the four were astir. While Kenneth prepared breakfast Captain Gregory cut out a rough-and-ready suit of sails, using the existing cordage as a luff-rope. In the absence of needles and sewing twine it was out of the question to do the work properly.

"It's not the needles that are the stumbling-block," explained Captain Gregory. "A fish-bone would make a fairly good substitute. I've seen Esquimaux do quite fancy stitching with a chunk of bone and skein of twine. It's the twine that kippers the contract."

However, before the heat of the day the Captain had made a fairly presentable suit of sails which in a light breeze would aid the boat considerably. He also constructed a sea-anchor, doubling the canvas to ensure it standing a heavy strain.

While the others continued their labours, bringing down fresh water from the only known spring on the island, and drawing upon the best of the stores landed from the *Paloma* for the use of the shore-party. The boat was also thoroughly cleaned out, turned keel uppermost and scrubbed with canvas and sand in order to remove the thick deposit of marine growth that had adhered to her during her comparatively short time afloat in Boya harbour.

At length every possible preparation that human agency could provide from the limited resources at the adventurers' disposal having been completed, the departure from the island was fixed to take place at daybreak on the following morning. Everyone realized the gravity of the undertaking—a long voyage on the open sea to the island of Talai—but with a firm faith in Providence they felt no doubts concerning their ability to win through. There was every indication of a prolonged spell of fine weather. The severe gale that had reached its culminating point on the day following the disaster to the *Paloma* had blown itself out. Even the breakers on the reefs seemed less formidable than at any previous time since the *Paloma* first essayed the dangerous and intricate channel.

It was still dark when the little band, none of whom had slept well, rose from their beds of grass spread under the shelter of the palms. As the grey dawn showed in the eastern sky, they launched the boat, manned the oars and headed for the outer lagoon.

Soon the dismal passage between the towering walls of frowning cliffs was negotiated, and the boat began to lift to the gentle swell that undulated the clear water of the outer lagoon.

"Let's hope that was our last view of the pirates' lair!" exclaimed Kenneth, as the boat, altering course, shot out the inner harbour by one of the projecting bluffs. "'Where every prospect pleases' doesn't hold good as far as Boya is concerned."

"We aren't clear of the accursed place yet," declared Captain Gregory, giving an anxious glance to wind'ard. "Don't put so much beef into it, Mr. Arkendale. You'll be wanting all your strength when it comes to pull through the broken water."

Thus cautioned Peter eased off his stroke, greatly to the relief of the harassed Kenneth who was pulling stroke. Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory sat aft, both awaiting their turn to relieve the two lads at the heavy ash oars.

Twenty minutes' steady pulling brought the boat over the spot where the unfortunate *Paloma* had slipped off the rocks into deep water. Here there was hardly any swell to speak of, and fathoms deep the crew of the boat could discern the battered, broken-backed hull in the clear water, as she lay on her beam-ends in the white sand.

Half a mile beyond came a drastic alteration of course. Hitherto the boat had kept the replaced mark-board and a certain rock in line on a stern bearing. Now the channel turned abruptly to starboard and almost parallel to the northern shore of Boya Island.

She was beginning to feel the effects of the heavy breakers on the outermost reef. Rollers of lesser magnitude were sweeping across the channel and pounding themselves into masses of foam upon the shoal to lee'ard. Hidden ledges of sharp coral lay to port and starboard, like traps yawning for their prey. Ever and anon the boat's helm had to be put down to enable her to meet a particularly menacing comber that had swept almost resistlessly across the reefs and athwart the narrow channel.

Presently Captain Gregory and Mr. Heatherington, who had taken a brief turn at the oars, relinquished that task to the two chums. It was a case of youth having the advantage of middle age in a matter of strength. Gregory's partly healed wound, too, did not give him a chance to exert much physical strength; besides, his superior knowledge of the art of handling a boat was now to be brought to a supreme test.

"Now!" exclaimed the skipper, bawling to make his voice audible above the roar of the surf. "Easy stroke until I give the word, then put your backs into it and pull like blue blazes even if it breaks blood-vessels."

Having thus expressed himself, Captain Gregory deliberately unshipped the rudder, which would be of little use in a breaking sea, and taking up one of the spare oars placed it in the sculling-notch in the transom. Bracing his feet firmly and widely apart on the stern-gratings the skipper appeared to toy with the heavy oar, the while his keen eyes, deep-set beneath beetling brows, were fixed alertly upon the danger ahead.

Fortunately for the chums, they "kept their eyes in the boat", and did not turn their heads to see what was coming. It was bad enough to catch a glimpse out of the corners of their eyes of the huge menacing masses of water not so very far away on the boat's port quarter. Considering the stillness of the air, it seemed weird that such enormous rollers could fling themselves upon the reefs. Viewed from the deck of the *Paloma* they had appeared formidable enough; from a boat with a freeboard of a couple of feet, the stupendous height was enough to appal anyone.

"Pull!" roared Gregory, at the same time putting his weight against the steering oar. "Eyes in the boat! You aren't watching a boxing bout!"

For Kenneth, in his anxiety, had glanced over his shoulder, and the sight almost caused him to miss his stroke. Bearing down, upon the boat was an enormous wall of water. Quite fifty feet in height, it seemed to the lad; actually it was about fifteen.

Up reared the boat's bows. Water—gallons of it—poured aft, carrying a medley of gear with it. The little craft seemed to be standing on end—seemed like remaining there indefinitely, according to Kenneth's tortured senses.

With his whole attention centred upon the task of keeping the boat dead-on to the breakers, Captain Gregory gripped the steering oar in a vice-like grasp—a deft turn of his wrists—a quick twisting movement of his tautened arms—a long-drawn moment of suspense—then victory.

The boat slid down the reverse slope of the wave and out into the comparatively deep water beyond.

"Pull!" urged Gregory, for the danger was not yet over.

Peter was visibly tiring. Mr. Heatherington facing forward, assisted him by pushing against the loom of the heavy oar. Kenneth was faring better, although the sweat rolled in rivulets down his face.

"Pull!" roared the skipper again. "Keep her going for Heaven's sake!"

A second roller was on the point of breaking, its majestic progress temporarily impeded by the bows of the luckless *Talca* which still remained a few feet above the surface.

Gregory realized that it was another case of touch and go. The boat's sole chance lay in being able to surmount the wave before the breaking part, which was moving rapidly along the crest, reached the point for which the little craft was being urged with all the relatively puny efforts of the oarsmen.

Climb it she did, with white water within twenty yards of her. Slid down the slope, her bottom boards awash, and her crew almost too exhausted to lift the blades clear of the water.

"Easy now!" ordered Gregory. "We're nearly through!"

The worst part of the passage was successfully accomplished. An hour later the boat drew clear of the reefs and gained the open sea.

"Boat oars!" ordered Captain Gregory. "There's a breeze coming up astern."

Thankfully the chums laid in the heavy ash oars, and flexed their stiff and blistered fingers. The masts were stepped, rudder reshipped, canvas hoisted and sheeted home. The water rippled gleefully against the stem and gurgled aft, leaving a trail of bubbles in the boat's wake.

"She'll do," declared Captain Gregory. "Take her, Mr. Heatherington, please. Course, north twenty west. I'm feeling a bit done up—my shoulder, I think."

Even as Mr. Heatherington grasped the tiller, the staunch old skipper slipped from the stern-bench and collapsed inert upon the gratings.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A Warm Reception at Talai

Again the tiller changed hands, Mr. Heatherington telling Kenneth to take command while he attended to the insensible Captain Gregory.

It did not take him long to discover the reason for the skipper's collapse. His old wound had broken out afresh. Although he must have suffered terribly during the last hour or so, Gregory had stuck grimly and uncomplainingly to his task, never relinquishing the steering oar, and later the tiller, until the boat was under sail and free from danger.

All that could be done for the present was to re-bandage the wound, bathe the patient's head and neck, and leave him as comfortably placed as circumstances permitted upon the stern-gratings, with a piece of canvas to screen him from the now fierce rays of the morning sun.

At a modest three knots the boat held on her course for the distant island of Talai. Gradually Boya dropped astern, until by mid-day the highest of the triple peaks dropped beneath the horizon. Ahead lay a seemingly unbounded, trackless expanse of blue water, without land, vessel, or even a smudge of distant smoke to break the circular rim of the sky-line.

The wind having veered a point or two, now blew steadily on the port quarter. With sheets freed and canvas drawing without a shake the boat footed it merrily.

The chums enjoyed the sensation immensely. It was their first experience of open boat work at sea, and, as the sun climbed until it reached the zenith, they had nothing to indicate the direction in which they were going except the compass card. In previous trips they had made, they had been always within sight of land. They had fixed objects on which to keep the boat's head. Now the situation was different. They had to rely solely upon the little compass.

At length Captain Gregory recovered consciousness. Almost his first words on opening his eyes and seeing Kenneth at the helm were: "How's her head?"

"North twenty west," replied the lad.

"Good," rejoined Gregory. He muttered a few unintelligible words, and feebly asked for water.

Mr. Heatherington supplied his wants, and told him to sleep if he could.

"Ay, sure," exclaimed the skipper. "Keep her as she is, sir. Mind you, I can't swear to the variation, but I think it's about right. Hang on to the course, and we won't miss Talai by more than a few miles."

With this somewhat cryptic utterance Captain Gregory lay down and dropped into a sound sleep.

"What did he mean, Pater?" asked Kenneth.

"I rather fancy he referred to that perplexing quality that affects compasses: variation, or the difference between true north and the magnetic north as indicated by the compass needle," replied Mr. Heatherington. "According to the compass we are heading practically N.N.W. Actually we may be steering anywhere up to twenty degrees of that bearing, owing to the variation being easterly. What the difference really is, I don't know. We can only hope that Gregory does and has made allowances accordingly. If not, and we miss the group of islands in the vicinity of Talai, we've two thousand miles of open sea before we knock chips off the South American continent."

The rest of the day passed almost without incident. In the absence of any mechanical means of knowing the time the three able-bodied members of the boat's crew took approximately two hours' trick at the helm. Meals they had whenever they felt really hungry; and they adhered strictly to the maxim: "no drink between meals", although the drink was merely plain water. In spite of the torrid temperature, they contrived to keep the water cool by the simple expedient of covering the breakers with cloth constantly steeped in salt water.

Kenneth and Peter were radiantly happy. They were afloat, although their argosy was hardly the craft they would have chosen to undertake an ocean voyage. No longer the menace of the rascally Mendoza and his villainous crew hung over their heads. They were free—free through their own efforts.

Throughout the day the wind held true, but as night fell the favouring breeze petered out into a flat calm.

It was a perfect tropical night. The surface of the sea was as smooth as a sheet of glass. Overhead the stars shone brightly, while the water danced with the scintillating reflections of heaven's lights. The dew-sodden canvas hung idly from the yards, while—the one fly in the ointment—the pleasurable kick of the helm was no longer felt.

Taking turns at keeping watch lest a sudden squall should sweep down upon the motionless boat, the three spent the night in comparative comfort, until at about half-past five in the morning grey dawn showed in the eastern sky.

Then Captain Gregory awoke, declaring that he felt as fit as a fiddle, and insisted on taking charge of the useless tiller.

"There's no saying how far we've drifted during the night," he declared. "Miles, maybe, if we're within the influence of the North Equatorial Current. By Jove! I wish I had my sextant and a chart."

He realized that he was lost without his "tools". In the absence of proper navigating instruments he was unable to fix the position. He was uncertain as to the boat's drift and leeway; even the compass might be grievously in error, not only as regards variation but deviation as well. In his mind he knew that the chances of making Talai were as remote as finding the proverbial needle in a bundle of hay, but having once expressed his misgivings as to the boat's drift, he maintained an outward show of cheerful confidence.

Soon after sunrise the welcome breeze sprang up again, blowing from the same quarter. The dun-brown canvas changed to grey as the dew dried under the strengthening rays of the sun. Again the rippling wake and the gentle vibration of the rudder served to indicate that the little craft was steadily increasing the distance between her and Boya Island.

Towards midday the breeze died away, stifled under the terrific heat of the sun. It was then that the chums realized to the full the discomforts of open boat work. On board the *Paloma* even on the hottest day, the motion of the vessel set up a cooling draught. Double awnings served as an efficient protection from the sun's rays. There were deck-chairs in which to lie at one's ease (that was, of course, before the mutineers gave trouble); room to walk about; iced drinks to quench their thirst. In the *Paloma's* boat none of these conditions existed. They were cooped up, scantily clad, exposed to the direct glare of the sun, stifled almost by the radiation from the mirror-like sea. In addition they developed a salt water rash, in spite of the fact that for days past they had been exposed to the open air and the salt-laden breezes.

The bare thwarts grew so hot as to be almost unbearable to the touch. The paintwork, already worn by usage and neglect, blistered in the heat, the reek of the oil combining, with decidedly unpleasant results, with the smell of the stagnant salt water in the bilges.

After three hours of this torment the wind piped up, continuing to blow steadily until sunset, when it again fell to a flat calm until dawn. In these conditions progress was tediously slow, and it was not until about nine in the morning of the fourth day that the welcome cry of "land on the port bow" roused the remaining sparks of the chums' waning enthusiasm.

Two hours later the boat approached the island sufficiently to enable Captain Gregory to affirm that it was not Talai, but one of the outermost of the group.

"Our destination is twenty miles to the west'ard," he declared. "Dead to wind'ard too. Down canvas, lads! Out oars! Bless me, in this light breeze, twenty miles is nothing under oars. We'll make Talai in a matter of four hours."

At last the island of their endeavours and hopes appeared above the horizon. Their discomforts forgotten, the chums pulled lustily at the oars, each being relieved in turn by Mr. Heatherington. Nevertheless, it was late in the afternoon before the entrance to the lagoon could be discerned in the otherwise unbroken line of surf that thundered unceasingly upon the reef.

Making for the lagoon was a small dug-out canoe, with an outrigger and manned by a couple of dusky natives.

"So that rascal Lopez hasn't succeeded in killing off all the inhabitants," observed Kenneth. "Those chaps look healthy enough!"

He waved a greeting to the natives. No friendly gesture was received in reply; but with every appearance of frantic haste the two islanders plied their paddles and steadily increased the distance between the boats.

"I expect they've got the wind up or something," remarked Captain Gregory. "I wonder why? They surely can't take us for



blackbirders."

It was an easy passage through the gap in the reefs, and presently the boat entered the tranquil waters of the lagoon. Viewed from seaward the prospect was alluring. A greater contrast to the inhospitable cliffs of Boya could hardly be imagined. The luxuriant foliage, the dazzling white sands, the limpid blue water, as clear as a sheet of glass, all tended to present a picture of perfect tranquillity.

The only living creatures to be seen were the two natives, who, having beached their catamaran, were stolidly watching the approach of the slower craft. Presently they disappeared into the cover afforded by the thick undergrowth, leaving the canoe with half a dozen others high and dry above high-water mark.

"There's one village just behind that bluff," said Mr. Heatherington, pointing to a palm-topped crag about a mile to the nor'ard of the entrance to the lagoon. "The other is almost in the centre of the island. The question is: where shall we land? Here, opposite the path leading to the principal village, or farther along abreast of the waterside one?"

"I suppose the natives will be all right?" remarked Kenneth, mindful of the attack upon the *Paloma's* boats when Mendoza attempted to land.

"Quiet as turtle-doves," declared his father. "Naturally, if they are rubbed up the wrong way they'll kick. It's a wonder to me why the whole village hasn't shown up on the beach to give us a welcome."

"P'raps the smallpox has played havoc with them," suggested Peter.

"Stroke ahead, lads!" exclaimed Captain Gregory. "It's no use hanging on to the slack."

The boat glided gently towards the beach.

"Way 'nough," ordered the skipper, raising his hand to shade his eyes from the slanting rays of the sun.

Suddenly the silence of the apparently deserted island was broken by the roar of a hundred voices. From the scrub appeared swarms of dark-brown natives, brandishing spears and clubs, and yelling their loudest.

For a few moments the little band were too taken aback to grasp the situation. The cries might be shouts of welcome, although they did not sound as such. Then a volley of stones settled all doubts on that score. The water was churned by the missiles, most of which fell short.

"Back her out!" shouted Gregory, at the same time grasping an oar to assist in the task.

It was no easy matter to check the boat's way and go astern. Already the lithe and muscular natives, abandoning their stone-throwing, were charging down the beach.

Raising a revolver, Gregory fired the contents above the heads of the mob. The natives hesitated. They already had good cause to respect the weapons of the white man. Then, finding that the shots had done no harm—and it was a grotesque sight to watch the islanders looking inquiringly at each other, in order to ascertain possible casualties—the pursuit was continued.

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### **"BACK HER OUT!" SHOUTED GREGORY**Page 280

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Already the boat had backed several yards from the beach. Dozens of the natives plunged into the water and swam in pursuit. Backed, the heavy boat stood little chance of eluding the powerful swimmers. Forge ahead she might, but the turning operations would take up valuable time.

Round swung the under-manned craft, Gregory menacing the foremost natives with his empty revolver. One man succeeded in grasping the gunwale on the port quarter, but a sharp blow from the butt of the captain's weapon made him relax his grip.

Another attempted to scramble in over the bows. Kenneth thrust his oar into his father's hand, swung round and dealt the native a straight left between the eyes, with the result that the man turned and swam for the shore, yelling the while like a frightened child.

By this time the boat's head had been turned seaward. Double-banking the oars the four rowed desperately and outdistanced their pursuers.

"Unfriendly set of beach-combers!" ejaculated Captain Gregory. "Now what's to be done? Try and parley with them or make for the open sea? It's a long run across to Panama or South America."

"I don't know how we can bring that crowd to listen," observed Mr. Heatherington. "Frankly, after our reception, I'm not at all keen on making the experiment. What is the island we sighted this morning?"

"Tofua," replied Captain Gregory, "I don't go much on that. A bad reputation, according to what I've heard. It's not inhabited, I understand; but it's a sort of meeting-place for cannibal-inclined natives. Occasionally Uncle Sam's gunboats show up to keep an eye on things, but so far they haven't been able to catch the natives red-handed."

"Let's make for Tofua, then," suggested Mr. Heatherington. "We must take our chances with the natives. They may not be there. There may be a likelihood of being picked up by a vessel."

"Too late, sir, I'm afraid," declared Captain Gregory quietly. "Look over there!"

Coming round a projecting bluff and making towards the entrance of the lagoon were eight large canoes packed with armed savages.



## CHAPTER XXIX

### Hospitality

There was no mistaking the natives' intentions. While one section attacked the boat as it approached the beach—and only a lack of generalship prevented the natives waiting until the white men had actually landed before taking them by surprise—another, manning the huge war canoes, put off and paddled at a great pace to intercept the fugitives.

It was an awe-inspiring sight to watch the eight canoes, with their lofty prows ornamented by grinning heads with enormous eyes, leaping through the tranquil water, each urged by the regular, almost mechanical, beats of thirty paddles.

Dry-throated, Kenneth watched the approaching peril, wondering if, after all the little band had gone through, this was to be the end. He knew well enough the fierce character of the natives of Talai when aroused; and yet he could not understand why they should be so aggressive. According to reports they were an inoffensive crowd. Mendoza had given them good cause to attack his landing-party, but that hardly seemed justification for the massacre of a hapless boat's crew. It was certainly rough luck, reflected Kenneth, to have to pay for Mendoza's ill deeds.

His thoughts were interrupted by Captain Gregory shouting to his companions to fight to the last.

"We'll sell our lives dearly," he added, as he hurriedly reloaded his revolver. The rest followed his example, for they had with them two rifles and several revolvers taken from the pirates' armoury at Boya.

With faultless precision and at equal distances apart the canoes took up a semi-circular formation, with the object of their attention in the centre of the arc. For a brief instant the paddles beat the water in a reverse direction in order to check the canoes' way. Then came a dead silence, the eight canoes lying motionless, with only the rapidly spreading wavelets set up by the paddles to ruffle the mirror-like surface.

The whole manœuvre was obviously executed with the idea of spectacular effect to subject their victims to a display of ruthless menace before closing to settle the unequal encounter. At any rate the four white men found the period of silence far more nerve-racking than the din raised by the swarm of natives on the beach.

"Pick off that chap in the white feather cloak, sir," exclaimed Captain Gregory. "I'll drill a hole through that chap with the cock's feathers. There'll be a few vacancies for headmen before we go under. Don't fire until they attack."

Quietly and composedly—he was surprised at his own coolness that followed the period of dry-throated agitation—Kenneth set the back-sight of his rifle to three hundred yards, thrust a cartridge into the breech, closed the cut-out to the magazine, and placed a handful of cartridges on the thwart beside him. Until the natives came to close quarters he would keep the magazine intact and rely upon single loading.

"Why don't they make a move?" exclaimed Peter, hardly conscious that he had voiced his thoughts.

A whistle sounded shrilly from the beach. The noise seemed absolutely incongruous. It reminded Kenneth of the referee's whistle on the playing fields at school. It was almost the last thing he expected to hear in a Pacific Ocean lagoon.

The signal was promptly obeyed. Each canoe turned and paddled away from the boat, but the natives took care not to leave a loophole of escape open. They brought up in a compact formation right across the entrance to the lagoon.

But the four white men paid scant heed to them. Their attention was attracted to a small outrigger canoe putting off from the beach. It was the same craft which they had fallen in with on nearing the island. Two natives—probably the same who had previously manned her—plied the paddles. Aft sat a huge man dressed in white. His face was tanned to the colour of red mahogany, but his beard was sufficient to enable the four to recognize him.

It was Captain Asger Holbaek, the Danish skipper of the *Svend*.

"Good day, Mr. Heatherington!" he exclaimed, as the canoe came within easy hailing distance. "There is nothing to fear now. My subjects were under a wrong impression, and until I recognized you through my glasses I was also misled. I hasten to make amends."

"It certainly was rather a warm reception," replied Heatherington.

"And if I may be allowed to say so, it was your fault," rejoined Captain Holbaek. "It was the boat that caused the mistake. The natives recognized it as one belonging to the pirate ship, and concluded, very naturally, that the villains were returning for the third time."

"For the third time?" echoed Kenneth's parent.

"Surely. Once just after I succeeded in escaping; the second occasion was about a week ago. The *Paloma* put in—"

"She won't do so again," interrupted Kenneth. "Sorry, I didn't mean—" he ended apologetically.

"Why will she not?" asked the Dane.

"Because she's a total wreck. There were no survivors. Mendoza's dead."

Holbaek threw back his head and laughed boisterously. The others looked at him in astonishment, surprised that he should show such unrestrained glee at the news of the pirate captain's fate, villain though he was.

"He tried to wipe out the natives and myself," said Holbaek. "He tried to send ashore the corpse of a man who had died of a virulent disease. Sent him, mark you, in my own boat, and with one of the natives. The Kanaka jumped overboard and swam ashore. That was a possibility that Mendoza had overlooked. He had forgotten that salt water is a good disinfectant. Directly I found out what had happened, I quarantined the Kanaka, but nothing happened."

"Then Mendoza came again. He began to sound the lagoon. Seized half a dozen of the islanders to work for him as divers. This I would not permit. We fell upon the men in the boats and rescued the captives. Then the pirate vessel went off. But, gentlemen, I am neglecting the common courtesies of hospitality. My house is at your service."

Again the Dane blew the whistle. From the shore a hundred men or more plunged into the water and swam off to the boat. This time they were unarmed, and their faces were wreathed in smiles.

"Throw them your painter," exclaimed the Dane, who had meanwhile stepped from the canoe into the stern sheets of the boat.

A dozen swimmers took hold of the rope. Others grasping the gunwales struck out with one arm, until propelled by a human motor of uncalculated horse-power the boat became the centre of a triumphal procession to the beach.

To anyone not acquainted with the simple, almost childish moods of the South Sea Islander, the sudden change of demeanour seemed incomprehensible. Gone were the fierce shouts, the savage gestures, the formidable display of weapons. Good-natured smiles, friendly greetings, and songs of welcome were everywhere in evidence. Many of the natives presented garlands to the now dead-beat arrivals; but—somewhat to Kenneth's and Peter's pleasurable disappointment—there was no attempt on the part of the islanders to rub noses.

These demonstrations continued until the Dane and his guests arrived at the former's hut, for such he termed it. Actually, it was quite a spacious bungalow-like building, standing on sloping, open ground, about a hundred yards from the village. It was constructed of stone set in a kind of cement made from coral. The roof was thatched with palm leaves; a wide veranda surrounded it. The windows were innocent of glass, but when required could be closed with jalousied shutters. The building looked glaringly new; in fact it was not yet completed, having been constructed by native labour under Holbaek's supervision since the latter's arrival at Talai only a few weeks ago, but already flaming hibiscus and luxuriant creepers were doing their best to clothe the glaring white walls in a lavish mantle of vegetation.

"One moment!" exclaimed the Dane, as they reached the shade of the veranda. "I know you are most fatigued, but it would be well to say a word to my subjects."

A blast on the whistle transformed the wildly excited mob into an orderly gathering. Addressing the natives on behalf of the newly-arrived white men, Holbaek explained why they had come in one of the boats belonging to the pirates and blackbirders who had so seriously interfered with the even tenor of the islanders' existence. Told them that, thanks to their guests, the *Paloma* would never return to trouble them with her unwelcome presence; that the four white men were blood-brothers of his and must be treated with the utmost friendliness, adding significantly that their belongings were *tabu*. That meant that their goods were safe from the almost unpreventible depredations of these simple natives who, from infancy, exhibit an utter disregard for the elementary rules about *meum et tuum*.

The address ended, the natives gave a terrific shout of acclamation, and dispersed quietly to their huts.

Captain Holbaek led his guests into his home, ordered native servants to prepare baths and a meal.

"I am sorry I have no wardrobe to place at your disposal," he said apologetically, as he noticed the ragged, salt- and rust-stained garments of the four men. "I am reduced to the one suit in which I came ashore. I reserve that for special occasions, such as the present. Usually I wear native costume. Believe me, it has its advantages when one gets accustomed to it."

When the four guests sat down to an appetizing meal, they were rigged out in loin-cloths, and a sort of loose cloak, their own clothing being handed over to a native with instructions for it to be washed. The chums were obliged to admit that the clean native-woven linen was far more comfortable than the ragged and soiled rough canvas, which had been their sole garment for longer than they cared to remember.

"Now you must be longing for a sound and refreshing sleep," said their host.

There were no dissentients. Kenneth and Peter were hardly able to keep from nodding. Mr. Heatherington had difficulty to refrain from yawning, while Captain Gregory, whose greater allowance of sleep during the run from Boya had been set-off by the physical weakness owing to the reopening of his wound, actually fell asleep before the meal was over.

It was a comfort to the two chums to be able to rest on wicker couches, to have a roof over their heads, and, more than anything, to know that they were safe in the care of the genial Dane, whose personality had won for him the obedience, amounting almost to veneration, of the natives of Talai.

"Seems almost too good to be true, Peter," remarked Kenneth drowsily, as he adjusted the mosquito curtains.

There was no reply. Peter Arkendale was lost to the world in the kindly arms of Morpheus.

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# CHAPTER XXX

## Retribution

The chums awoke to find themselves in a darkened room, but judging by the noises without, Captain Holbaek's establishment was up and about.

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Peter. "Do they work by night at Talai? Or is there a riot going on?"

"Dunno," replied his chum drowsily. "Where's my torch?"

He found the instrument close to the side of his couch, switched it on and looked round the room. One thing he noticed in particular. The jalousied windows had been carefully covered by thick mats so arranged as to admit a free current of air.

Getting out of bed, Kenneth went to the window and pulled aside one of the coverings. He was almost blinded by the glare of the sun.

"By Jove!" he ejaculated, noting the fact that the palms threw almost vertical shadows. "It's close on midday. We are lazy hogs!"

"Holbaek's been looking after us well, then," declared Peter. "Those mats over the jalousies weren't there last night. He evidently meant us to sleep as long as we could. I say! What a jolly place Talai is, our rough reception notwithstanding! Different from Boya!"

"If Boya is a specimen of a Pacific paradise——" began Kenneth, but was interrupted by a knock on the door-post—the door itself being made of rushes woven on bamboo frames.

Captain Holbaek appeared.

"I heard you talking," he said apologetically, "so I took the liberty of coming in. Is there anything you require? Your father and Captain Gregory are still asleep. I thought I would mention this in case you disturb them. Do you think you will like our native dress?"

The chums thought they would. It was rather good fun going about in a loin-cloth and a sort of light cloak. At any rate the "rig" suited the Dane to perfection. It set off his massive form and powerful, muscular limbs.

They bathed and dressed, the latter operation taking less than a couple of minutes, and made their way to the living-room, where a meal, consisting chiefly of plantains and mealie-cakes, awaited them.

"I wonder why Captain Holbaek warned us about disturbing the Governor?" remarked Kenneth. "There's a good deal of noise outside anyhow."

"Give it up," rejoined his chum, as he proceeded to attempt to satisfy a healthy appetite.

The meal completed, they went out on to the veranda. Then the reason for the commotion became apparent. Placed in orderly formation on the ground in front of the entrance were the whole of the belongings of the four guests. Not a thing was missing. The natives had even brought along three or four empty cartridge-cases, and a couple of rusty preserved-meat cans which had been used as balers. Owing to Holbaek's orders that the things were *tabu* the natives had moved each article by means of cleft sticks. Nothing would have induced them to lay a finger on any item of the white men's property.

Presently Mr. Heatherington and Captain Gregory appeared.

"My word!" exclaimed the former, when he saw his son and Peter in native attire. "You two are going in for the simple life!"

"Jolly comfortable any old way, Pater," replied Kenneth. "And streets above the rotten old canvas suits that Mendoza graciously permitted us to wear. How do you feel, Pater, after your night's rest?"

"Quite all right," replied Mr. Heatherington. "Well, lads, here we are, fixed up in comfortable quarters; but we can't

remain indefinitely. The question is: how are we to get back to civilization?"

"I'm in no hurry," said Kenneth. "We've struck a *pukka* coral island at last."

"My bright boy seems charmed with your place, Captain," remarked Mr. Heatherington, to the Danish skipper, who had just come in.

"Indeed? Yes. Talai has its advantages. I, personally, shall be sorry to leave; yet I am hoping some day to return to my native land."

"It is some years since you last saw Denmark, then?" inquired Mr. Heatherington.

"Ten years," replied Captain Holbaek. "I was hoping to do so this year; but as you know my schooner the *Svend* was destroyed by those villains. She was not insured; and more than likely my goods in Tonga have been disposed of, since it is reasonable for the authorities there to think I am dead. So I must go on working," he concluded.

"Is there much of a commercial value in Talai?" asked Kenneth's parent.

"To a certain extent, yes," declared the Dane frankly. "Copra mostly. I am now building another vessel. My Kanakas are handy fellows, and the natives themselves are quite intelligent."

"Are there any pearl fisheries?"

"Not of a paying proposition," replied Captain Holbaek. "There are some under the lee of that part of the reef, but these are of poor quality. The yield is not worth the labour and risk. Now, gentlemen, are you prepared for a short tour of my domain? The sun is still fierce, but perhaps, even as I, you are now hardened to tropical heat."

The others, with the exception of Gregory, who had an objection to using his feet more than was absolutely necessary, agreed to the proposal with alacrity.

Of the four, only Mr. Heatherington wore foot-gear, consisting of a pair of plaited grass sandals, for by now the two chums were quite inured to going about barefooted. Captain Holbaek, too, was quite at home without shoes, and expressed his doubts as to his ability to be comfortable in leather only again.

Passing through the village—which at that hour was tenanted only by smiling women busily engaged in such occupations as making rush mats, grinding maize between stones resembling the old Saxon *quaern*, and weaving flax-cloth—the party reached the outskirts of a large coco-palm wood. Here pigs in semi-wild condition roamed in large numbers, while numerous fowls were to be seen scuttling through the undergrowth. It was evident that the inhabitants of Talai did not live in fear of starvation.

Beyond the palm-groves ran a small tidal creek. Here were kept the canoes that had given the Britons such a disconcerting reception. Viewed at close quarters they appeared to be stout, weatherly craft, depending upon stones for ballast. In this respect they differed from the canoes used for fishing and other peaceful occupations, the latter being provided with outriggers after the style of a catamaran. Most of the natives at work on the canoes had manned them when they sallied out for the purpose of cutting off the retreat of the boat; and they greeted their former quarry with the utmost good will.

"That old fellow," announced Holbaek, pointing to a much tattooed and wrinkled native squatting on the top of a rock overhanging the creek, "that old fellow claims to be nearly a hundred years of age. He was an out-and-out cannibal until twenty years ago or thereabouts. There used to be almost continual warfare between the natives of Talai and those of Boti, but they never invaded each other's islands. They have a custom of going over to Tofua—you can see the island on a clear day—and having a general battle every New Year's Day, which with them is on the first new moon following the beginning of the rainy season. The victors then have a gorgeous feast on the bodies of the victims, celebrating the event by a dance in honour of the god whose statue is still standing there. At least, I saw it when I visited the island two years ago. Now, watch the old fellow."

The ancient native who, after a greeting to the white men, had remained gazing steadfastly into the water, had just taken up a small bow which with a number of arrows lay on the rock beside him.

Fitting one of the arrows which had a barbed detachable head, he drew string. With a twang the bow-string tautened. The



arrow struck the water at a wide angle. Almost before the ripples had time to form, a large fish rose to the surface transfixed by the formidable missile. Scrambling to his feet the old man dived, secured his trophy and swam to the bank.

"He's a game chap," remarked Kenneth.

For a moment Holbaek looked puzzled. The word "game" in the sense the lad implied was a stranger to him.

"Yes," he agreed, when the meaning was explained, "he provides most of the fish for a certain section of the community. Old people here work almost up to the time they die. That is, I take it, the result of an old custom. In their purely savage days the natives used to eat their relations when they grew too old or infirm to work. Consequently industry amongst the ancient men became a habit. Now, this way. Mind the tendrils. Some of them have poisonous spikes. The wounds they cause are not fatal, but have most unpleasant results."

The sounds of energetic hammering grew louder and louder, until at length the party came upon a clearing, fronted by a wide expanse of the creek they had previously struck.

Here on a slipway of recent construction was the hull of a vessel of about eighty tons. She was already planked up, and a swarm of Kanakas were engaged in fitting and laying down the deck-planks. Natives of the island were hard at work caulking the seams with cotton, "paying" them with a mixture of oil and coral dust, since pitch was not available.

"This is my new schooner," announced Captain Holbaek proudly. "Considering the difficulties of construction she is turning out remarkably well. For instance, there is an almost complete absence of ironwork. All the timbers are secured to the keelson and keel by trenails. The planks, too, are held in place by wooden spikes, clamped on the inside by wedges. Each plank had to be rough-hewn and then finished off by native tools, but the men are very skilful with their crude implements."

The vessel was certainly strongly constructed. Her underwater planks were laid "clinker-fashion", each overlapping the one below it. Above the load-line they were "carvel", the topside presenting a flush surface.

"She will at least serve me—and you also, I hope—for a voyage—either to Callao or Panama," continued Captain Holbaek. "With a cargo of copra she will provide me with sufficient funds to go back to my native Denmark. And then —? Well, if I have not amassed wealth I have done even better. I have gained health. Would you believe it? When I completed my studies at the university I was so weak, in spite of my huge frame, that none of my friends thought I would live another year. I came out to Australia, found my way to Tonga, and took up trading amongst the islands. Soon I hope to return home and astonish my friends—if there are any who remember me—not by my wealth but by my health."

He stopped speaking and beckoned to one of the Kanakas—the bos'n of the *Svend*. In answer to a question the man pointed aft and replied in a tongue that the three Britons naturally failed to understand.

"They are fitting the bulkheads and the after cabin," announced Captain Holbaek. "Perhaps you would care to inspect the interior arrangements, although they are not far advanced."

The Captain's guests boarded the schooner by means of an inclined plank, walked circumspectly along the partly-laid decks, and gained a hatchway abaft the aperture left open for the reception of the mainmast.

At the foot of a rough ladder Holbaek stepped aside and pointed to a door.

"See what it is like inside," he remarked.

Kenneth opened the door. The place was being painted out with a mixture of mastic varnish and yellow ochre. The "decorator" was a white man. He was kneeling down with his back turned to the door. Somehow his crisp, curly hair and gold earrings seemed familiar.

It was one whom Kenneth and his companions had up to that moment pictured lying a mangled corpse somewhere amidst the reefs of Boya, for, as the man turned his head, they knew him to be Mendoza, the pirate captain of the *Paloma's* rascally crew.

There was no sign of recognition in the Spaniard's lustrous brown eyes. He merely glanced disinterestedly at his former prisoners, and went on with his work.

Kenneth and the others promptly beat a retreat.

"It hardly seems possible!" exclaimed Mr. Heatherington, as the four regained the deck.

"It is, all the same," rejoined the Dane. "He's quite harmless. He's mad—mad as a hatter, as the English have a way of expressing it. The natives beat off the *Paloma's* boats and captured their leader. I'm afraid he was roughly handled until I came upon the scene. Since he can work I put him to it. It is poetic justice. He destroyed my old schooner, and it is but right that he should employ his time in helping to build my new one. Generally he is quite content, but occasionally he breaks out. Not that he is dangerous. No. He never attempts violence, but his mania takes the form of raving a lot of nonsense about black pearls."

"Really!" ejaculated Mr. Heatherington.

"Of course, I take no notice," continued Captain Holbaek. "It is just a form of madness."

"Perhaps he's not so mad as you think," soliloquized Mr. Heatherington.

"What do you propose to do with him?" asked Kenneth.

"Take him with me when I leave the island," was the reply. "It would not do to leave him to the mercies of the natives. They're a peaceable crowd, but they have long memories. I hope to find a means of sending him back to Spain. No doubt he has friends, and it is no wish of mine to persecute a rogue whom Providence has already punished by depriving him of reason."

"Then Miguel Fe was in command of the ship when we wrecked her," said Peter.

"Perhaps it was a good thing for us that he was," rejoined his chum. "Mendoza might not have gone into the trap so innocently. I don't mind admitting that I felt doubtful about it myself until the *Paloma* actually struck."

The four made their way back to the bungalow almost without another word. The sight of the wretched Mendoza had cast a shadow over their spirits. His punishment was a heavy one—far greater than that which had overtaken his comrades in lawlessness. They were resting on the bed of the sea; his was a living death. A body capable of action, but devoid of reason. In his madness he was "lower than the beasts of the field".

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## CHAPTER XXXI

### "Tabu"

Several days passed in almost unalloyed delight as far as Kenneth and Peter were concerned. They "had the run of the place", did almost exactly as they liked, and enjoyed the novelty of a typically beautiful Pacific island to their heart's content. The only fly in the ointment was the presence of Mendoza. They could not help feeling sorry for the fellow's terrible state, his past record notwithstanding.

"It's about time we took steps to locate the pearl beds, lads," observed Mr. Heatherington one morning. "I've been thinking over the affair considerably, to know the best course to pursue. Black pearls are remarkably rare. Here are sufficient to swamp the market and bring the price down, in which case the enterprise will not repay our expenses; they have been heavy enough in all conscience. I want to set Captain Holbaek on his feet financially, for he's been a thundering good sort, but how? We can't very well dive for pearls without his knowledge. If he discovers their value he may—mind you, I don't say that he will—he may obtain a quantity on his own account. In that case the market's done for."

"But he's got sense enough to dispose of them to the best advantage," said Kenneth.

"Yes; but there are the natives under him to be taken into account. We'll suppose Holbaek is let into the secret. His Kanakas will do the diving part of the operations, but it will be a matter of difficulty to keep the knowledge of the discovery from the natives of Talai. Directly we leave they'll start diving on their own account and barter their finds for a few yards of cloth or some rubbishy trade goods to the first pearler arriving off the island."

"Why not take Holbaek entirely into our confidence?" suggested Kenneth. "He'd see your point. He could *tabu* the beds as far as the natives were concerned. They wouldn't dare touch them. Remember how careful they were in bringing our gear up from the boat."

Accordingly the subject was broached to their host. Captain Holbaek was frankly sceptical.

"I tell you there are beds," he observed, "but they are valueless. As for black pearls, there are none in these parts. Certain traders have shown me so-called black pearls, but they were obviously artificially treated. However, we shall see. My Kanakas are at your disposal."

Even Captain Gregory displayed no enthusiasm when he was let into the secret with a promise that he should share in the proceeds. He was, as he expressed it, absolutely fed up with kicking about ashore, and his greatest wish was to be on his way back to England.

For some considerable time they discussed plans. Finally it was resolved to commence diving operations on the following morning, and steps were taken to provide the necessary gear and equipment.

The *Paloma's* boat was launched and taken round to the creek. In her were placed short planks, ropes, weighted baskets for sending down to the oyster beds, heavy stones to serve as moorings for the boat fore and aft, and rifles and ammunition in case the divers were molested by sharks.

Soon after dawn the five white men, accompanied by half a dozen Kanakas, embarked and pushed off from the natural jetty by the creek. Twenty minutes steady pulling brought the boat over the spot where, according to his best recollection, since he had no chart, Mr. Heatherington thought the precious beds were located.

It was a sheltered basin, although fifty yards to lee'ard the surf pounded heavily upon the reefs, which, owing to the tide being at three-quarters ebb, rose a couple or three feet above the surface.

Anxiously the occupants of the boat peered over the gunwales into the limpid depths beneath. The bottom was of firm white sand with a few trailing weeds of vivid scarlet and amber and blue. Not a sign of a bivalve was to be seen.

A few strokes of the oars and the boat gathered way. The oars boated, the ripples died away. Only the dark shadow of the little craft moving over the sandy bottom indicated a sense of motion. Presently the water deepened. The bed was invisible. Right beneath the boat's keel was a submarine ravine, black with dense marine growth—a locality that the

hardest and pluckiest diver would take good care to avoid.

"If the oysters are down there it is hopeless," commented Captain Holbaek. "Perhaps the farther shoal will prove more successful."

He ordered the Kanakas to give a few more strokes. The gulley was only about twenty yards wide. Beyond the water shoaled to five fathoms, the sand being mingled with numerous almost indistinguishable shells to which marine growth adhered.

"Bad lands!" exclaimed the Danish skipper. "These oysters are not of the pearl-bearing kind."

"This is somewhere about the spot," declared Mr. Heatherington. "I'm right on one bearing, but I wasn't sure about the other. Let the men try, anyway."

Captain Holbaek smiled tolerantly and gave the necessary order.

Over the side four weighted baskets were lowered until they rested on the bottom. Two of the Kanakas, each armed with a stone knife, poised themselves on the edge of the diving boards placed across both gunwales, and with hardly a splash dived overboard.

The chums could watch their movements with the utmost clearness. Arriving within a foot or so of the bottom, the men swam in wide circles, deftly "un-anchoring" the oysters, and at the same time avoiding the horny lips of the bivalves. To be caught by the fingers meant a quick choice between severing the digits or being drowned; to be held by the arm or leg would result in death by asphyxiation, for human power was unavailing to force apart the vice-like shells of the mammoth oysters.

The divers seemed to remain below for a very long time. In reality they were slightly less than two minutes, although, had necessity arisen, they might have remained nearly twice that space of time. Making sure that they were over a clear spot they brought one foot sharply down to the hard sand and by a vigorous kick shot to the surface like arrows. Barely had they clambered over the gunwale before another pair descended, repeating the performance until the baskets were laden with the trophies of the deep.

Placing the firmly-closed oysters in one end of the boat, the Kanakas unmoored and shifted their position another thirty yards; dived and brought up another generous sample, which they put carefully aside from the other lot.

The operations lasted the best part of two hours, and although a strict look-out was kept for sharks, the divers were able to work unmolested save by a few curious but inoffensive fish.

The two chums expected to see a reassuring result of the work there and then; but they were to be disappointed. Should any of the oysters contain pearls the forcible opening of the bivalve would render the precious contents almost valueless. They had to be taken ashore and laid in the sun until the oyster died and the vice-like jaws automatically relaxed.

It was not until about four in the afternoon that the opening process took place. Kenneth and Peter, warned of the consequences of watching the operation from close quarters, kept their distance, while the Kanakas under their master's supervision deftly examined the spoil.

Oyster after oyster was scrutinized without the anticipated result, until Holbaek hurried across to where Heatherington and the boys stood.

"Here is something," he announced, and held out a black pearl about the size of a pea.

"And it could not have been artificially coloured," added Mr. Heatherington. "Well, that proves the pearls are there. How——?"

The question was interrupted by a loud shout from one of the Kanakas. Regardless of the nauseating smell the five white men hurried to the spot. The native had found a flawless black pearl of about the size of a pigeon's egg.

"How much is it worth?" asked Kenneth.

"Anything from £2000 to £5000," replied his father.

"Hanged if I'd care to give that for a thing like that," rejoined the lad.

"And yet in our efforts to obtain it we have risked something far more valuable than that sum," added his father. "By Jove! Holbaek! Another half-dozen of that size and you'll go back to Esbjerg a rich man."

"I am glad to hear it," said the Dane sedately. "But our departure will not be possible until I have built my ship. Now that you know how to set to work and have located the beds, it would be as well if I devoted my energies to my work and left you to carry on with yours."

"Quite," agreed Mr. Heatherington. "And when we have found sufficient pearls then we can give you a hand with the ship-building. That is, if you can keep Mendoza out of the way."

"Talking of Mendoza; he had rather a violent outbreak yesterday," said Captain Holbaek. "He attacked one of the natives, so we had to lock him up. He'll be better to-morrow, and go back to his work quite docilely until he has another bout."

For the next fortnight work on the oyster beds proceeded almost uninterruptedly, though slowly, since two Kanakas only were available to act as divers, and for politic reasons the natives of Talai were not enlisted for the task. The results were fair. Half a dozen small black pearls were obtained during the first ten days, but it was not until the end of the fortnight that the work was rewarded by the discovery of five large and flawless specimens.

"That will be enough," declared Mr. Heatherington, and the others, including Captain Holbaek, concurred. Altogether the proceeds ought to result in each of the five white men receiving at least eight thousand pounds.

"That will be quite enough for the present," said Heatherington. "If we want more another expedition can be fitted out. Someone else can take charge of it, though. We can float a company, provided we take precautions against overstocking the market. That reminds me, Captain Holbaek. Are you going to *tabu* that part of the lagoon?"

"It might be quite safe to do so, although I cannot answer for it after we have gone," replied the Dane. "Tabu, in Talai, consists of two forms: one a prohibition placed on a certain thing by a chief; the other a kind of superstitious fear of a place or object owing to its associations with the dead. For instance, if a chief were to be eaten by a shark and the locality were known to the natives, the part of the lagoon would be *tabu* for generations. There is a grove on the east side of Talai. No native will go within a spear's throw of it. He'd sooner kill himself. The reason for that is, I found out, that over two hundred years ago a chief was killed by lightning whilst presiding at a tribal dance."

"We'll try your powers of *tabu* then," said Mr. Heatherington, laughing. "It's hardly worth while inducing one of the chiefs to throw himself to the sharks."

The precious articles having been carefully packed in down and placed in a strong case, Captain Holbaek solemnly announced at a general gathering of the natives that a part of the lagoon was to be henceforth *tabu*. This declaration was received in silence. No one questioned the reason, or, if he did, it was after the assembly dispersed.

Day after day passed in strenuous work. Slowly but surely the schooner approached completion. Her masts were stepped, spars fitted, and canvas, consisting of strong native flax cloth, bent to yards and booms. Chain being out of the question, a heavy coir rope was woven and stowed in the cable-tier, while for an anchor a formidable-looking contrivance of wood weighted with flat stones woolded with canvas and rope to hold them firmly in position, promised to carry out any ordinary duty in the way of mooring that it might be called upon to perform.

One afternoon after the day's work was accomplished, Kenneth and Peter were fishing off the rocks at the entrance to the cave when they noticed a small catamaran proceeding in the direction of the reef. To their surprise they saw that the occupant was Mendoza.

He had been extremely docile of late, and in consequence his movements had not been so closely watched, so that he had seized an opportunity to slip away, make for the beach, and launch one of the canoes.

Dashing along the shore the chums raised the alarm that Mendoza was escaping. Captain Holbaek was quickly upon the scene, followed by Mr. Heatherington. In obedience to an order from the former half a dozen canoes were manned and started in pursuit.

"A mad freak," declared the Dane. "He cannot hope to clear the reefs in that direction."

"By Jove! He's making for the pearl beds!" exclaimed Kenneth.

Observing the activity ashore, Mendoza quickened his pace, paddling rapidly yet unskilfully, his awkward efforts throwing up showers of spray and nearly capsizing the frail catamaran, not once but a score of times.

Undoubtedly Kenneth was correct in his surmise. Perhaps the Spaniard had been watching the diving operations from the island, and with the animal cunning of the maniac had guessed the reason for the presence of the *Paloma's* boat with his former prisoners amongst her occupants.

The pursuing canoes were overhauling their quarry hand over fist, yet not once did the Spaniard turn his head in their direction after the first glance that had warned him of their chase.

From their position on the beach, it was a difficult matter for Kenneth and his companions to gauge with any degree of accuracy the distance separating the catamaran from the foremost of the pursuers. It seemed as if the latter were almost level with Mendoza's craft, when the natives suddenly gave up the pursuit and backed vigorously with their paddles until the canoes remained almost motionless.

Mendoza held on.

"What have they stopped for?" asked Peter, addressing no one in particular.

It was Kenneth who supplied the information.

"Cause that part of the lagoon is *tabu*, of course," he replied.

Such indeed was the case. Even although they had started to recapture the Spaniard on the direct orders of their paramount chief, Captain Holbaek, nothing would induce them to cross the imaginary line that formed the pale to the prohibited expanse of lagoon.

Mendoza's immediate actions were unhindered. Even if the white men launched the boat and made for the spot, nearly twenty minutes would elapse before they could arrive on the spot which the brown men feared to approach.

The Spaniard ceased paddling. Standing delicately poised upon the gunwale of the catamaran nearest the outrigger, he was peering down into the water.

"Yes, he's after the pearls," exclaimed Mr. Heatherington.

Even as they watched those on shore saw Mendoza disappear over the side. The empty canoe tossed in the disturbed water, and drifted rapidly from the spot under the impetus given it by the diver. The ripples dispersed. The surface of the lagoon resumed its mirror-like aspect. The luckless Spaniard did not reappear.

Back paddled the canoes, their crews looking awe-struck and terrified. To them the fate of Mendoza was a direct fulfilment of the curse that they firmly believed would overtake anyone reckless enough to violate the *tabu*.

In death Mendoza had performed the one and only good service he had ever rendered to the men he had so treacherously used. He had set for all time the seal of secrecy upon the black pearl beds of Talai.

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## CHAPTER XXXII

### And Last

"What happened to him, do you think?" asked Peter. "Did a shark get him?"

Captain Asger Holbaek shook his head.

"No; if a shark had seized him, there would have been a commotion on the surface. I've questioned the natives. They swear they saw no blood. I think he must have been caught by one of the oysters. I remember we lost a diver out amongst the Gilbert Islands some years ago. We recovered his body with one foot flattened out between the bivalve's jaws. But I will not satisfy my—and your—curiosity. If I did I would break the *tabu* I have laid upon the place. If you have any imagination, it does not require much to reconstruct the scene."

At length, amidst scenes of great rejoicing on the part of the natives (for they did not yet know that their white chief was about to leave them) the new *Svend* was launched and towed round to the lagoon to complete fitting out and stowing cargo. Viewed afloat she looked very little different from the hundreds of pearling schooners that frequent "the islands". She was a triumph of patience and ingenuity, riding on an even keel and hardly making any water through her well-caulked seams.

Ballasted with stones and brought down to the load line with a good cargo of copra, provisioned for a three months voyage, the *Svend* was at last ready to spread her brown wings to the favouring south-east Trades.

It was an affecting scene when at a palaver attended by every man, woman, and child on the island, Captain Holbaek announced his intention of relinquishing the chieftainship and leaving Talai. A chorus of lamentation rent the air, and when at length the five white men made their way to the waiting boat, they had to force their way through the crowd, who lavished upon them garlands, until, as Peter remarked, they looked like walking maypoles.

Already the devoted Kanaka crew were on board. Sails were set, the unwieldy anchor broken out. Heeling gracefully to the off-shore breeze, the *Svend* slipped through the tranquil waters of the lagoon, curtsied to the swell on the bar, and gained the open sea.

Two hours later Talai disappeared from sight beneath the misty horizon.

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Five weeks later the party embarked at Panama on a homeward-bound liner. The copra had been disposed of at a fair profit. The Kanakas had departed for Tonga in the *Svend*, which, having performed her required task, had been presented by Captain Holbaek to his loyal crew.

From London the Dane returned supremely happy to his native country, with the knowledge that a draft for nearly nine thousand pounds awaited him at a banker's at Copenhagen.

Peter Arkendale, now rich beyond his wildest dreams, went back to school to "swot up" for Sandhurst.

Kenneth Heatherington went "up" to Cambridge, there to study for the Law, but Adventure is a persistent wooer, and it will not surprise any of his friends to hear that at some future date he will revisit the haunts of the Buccaneers of Boya.

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Transcriber's note: Hyphen variations left as printed.

[The end of *Buccaneers of Boya* by Percy F. Westerman]