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# ANNESLEY'S DOUBLE

BY

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'PETREL'" "SCOUTS OF SEAL  
ISLAND" "THE SEA MONARCH"  
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# ANNESLEY'S DOUBLE

## CHAPTER I

### THE INTERRUPTED RITE

"Come in!" exclaimed Peter Annesley, Prefect of the Lower Fifth, at the sound of a timorous knock upon the door of his study. "Oh, it's you, is it, you little tick? What have you come to speak to me about now, eh?"

The "little tick," otherwise Eric Mond, stood irresolutely in the doorway, blinking with bulging eyes at the Prefect.

Peter Annesley, a big-framed lad of sixteen, shrugged his broad shoulders with a show of bored disinterestedness. Popular with the majority of the scholars at Broadwinton School, his antipathy to young Mond was shared by almost every other boy. Eric, a little, preposterously fat kid, lacking those characteristics that fall naturally to the lot of a healthy, normal British schoolboy, was notoriously addicted to the deplorable habit of sneaking to the masters and prefects whenever an opportunity occurred. It seemed hopeless to snub him. It was impossible to impress upon him the fact that sneaking is one of the worst offences imaginable against the schoolboy code of honour. More than once young Mond had been booted and cuffed by his justly indignant form-mates, but the habit of tale-bearing was so strongly ingrained upon the boy's character that corporal chastisement as administered by the rank and file of Broadwinton School had no appreciable effect.

"Get it off your chest, do," pleaded Annesley.

"If you please, I have come to report——" began Mond, speaking with the slow deliberation and choice of words that he had acquired by contact with grown-ups. Until he had entered Broadwinton School two terms previously he had never come in close contact with children of his own age.

"I could have guessed that," interrupted Peter grimly. "Cut that out and get to rock-bottom."

"If you please, I have come to report," reiterated Eric stubbornly, "that there is a most remarkable odour coming from Li Fan's study. Unless I am greatly mistaken, I imagine that he is burning."

"Burning what?" demanded the Prefect, his interest in his official capacity being aroused. "Himself or something?"

"Something, I think, Annesley," replied the "little tick" demurely. "That's all, Annesley: good-night."

Shutting up the book he was reading, the Prefect went to the door and waited until Mond had shuffled down the corridor. Satisfied that the informer should not enjoy the fruits of his enterprise, Annesley made tracks for the study occupied by Li Fan.

Li Fan was a Chinese lad of about fifteen. It was his first term at Broadwinton, whither he had been sent to improve his knowledge of English before entering a public school. His father was a member of the Chinese Embassy in London, having recently relinquished the Governorship of the province of Nan-ngan.

Everything considered, Li Fan was not having a bad term at Broadwinton School. He was docile, easy-going, and intelligent. At cricket he was a rotten bat, but his agility as a fielder more than atoned for his shortcomings with the willow. As a bowler he showed promise of becoming a regular demon. Equally at home with the right hand and the left, he could deliver swift bowls that had a disconcerting knack of finding the middle stump, or provokingly slow ones that invited a terrific "swipe" on the part of the disillusioned batsman, whose amazement at finding that he had eluded the "leather" was only excelled by his chagrin at the sight of the bails lying on the ground.

It had taken some time to get Li Fan out of the habit of bowling at the batsman, but once he had conquered that homicidal tendency and decided that there was almost as much fun to be got out of knocking over the stumps as there was in delivering the ball in the midriff of the flannelled young gentleman guarding the wicket, then he made rapid strides. As a bowler who could—and did—accomplish the hat-trick, Li Fan was a much-desired acquisition to the Broadwinton First Eleven, and on that account he was spared the indignity that schoolboys thoughtlessly show towards foreigners, especially those of a different colour.

Arriving outside the door of Li Fan's study, Annesley waited, listening and sniffing. It was part of his job to check all irregularities in the various studies. He did so with the utmost impartiality; but rarely, very rarely, did he have to take the extreme step of reporting delinquents to the Head. The Prefect had a firm and compelling way with him. Usually a caution was sufficient. If a culprit showed signs of resentment to the Prefect's authority and refused to take a hint, then Peter went a step further, inflicting temperate corporal punishment. If that failed to attain the desired result, the delinquent was reluctantly obliged to present himself in the Headmaster's room.

Through the closed door Annesley could hear Li Fan talking softly in a strange tongue. A waft of sickly-smelling incense assailed the Prefect's nostrils. Evidently, he decided, Li Fan was smoking scented tobacco, and smoking was a grave offence at Broadwinton.

The Prefect tapped on the door. Then he waited. He wanted to give the culprit a chance.

He knocked again. There was no reply. Li Fan was crooning away in utter indifference to the impending invasion of his study.

With a quick movement Annesley threw open the door. Then he stood stock-still, rather mystified at the sight that met his eyes.

Li Fan was squatting on a small square of carpet in the centre of the room. Over his European clothes he was wearing a short jacket with wide sleeves, the whole fashioned out of diminutive lengths of bamboo threaded together. On his head was a cap somewhat resembling a saucepan lid. In front of him was a little Chinese cup and saucer, three ivory sticks about four inches in height and square-sectioned, a fan, a pipe with a bowl no bigger than an acorn, and a brass bowl. In the latter, something was smouldering and emitting a not altogether unpleasant and somewhat sleepifying odour.

Li took not the slightest notice of the interruption; or if he did, he betrayed neither interest nor resentment at the Prefect's presence. He was crooning softly to himself, his obliquely-set eyes fixed vacantly on the brass bowl.

"What are you fooling about with?" demanded Peter sharply. "You're smoking, Li. That's not allowed, you know."

Still no answer.

"Wonder if the young ass has got hold of some opium?" thought the Prefect. "He seems completely off his rocker. Li, you idiot," he said aloud, "pull yourself together. Fat lot of good you'll be in the match to-morrow. Get up at once."

This exhortation meeting with no response, Peter felt fully convinced that Li was helpless under the influence of dope.

With a quick, decisive movement, Annesley grasped the young Chinaman by the waist and placed him on the bed, scattering the ivory pillars and the other articles as he did so. Li offered no resistance, and since he weighed seven-stone-three to Peter's ten-stone-nine, the latter had a comparatively easy task. Then, grasping a water-jug, the Prefect flooded the smouldering contents of the brass bowl, and having satisfied himself that there was no risk of fire, he went out and shut the door.

Li Fan lay motionless. He was far from being doped. His brain was working rapidly.

"If I live for a hundred thousand years," he muttered in the flowery language of the Far East, "I will never forget the insult offered to the spirits of my illustrious ancestors by this foreign devil."

A hundred plans for revenge flitted across his mind as he lay outwardly impassive upon his bed. He, a high-class Chinaman, son of a mandarin of the Yellow Button, had been subjected to the deepest indignities by a foreigner. How could he, Li Fan, be admitted into the Inner Circle of the Celestial Chi-Ka unless he had wiped out the insufferable insult?

Meanwhile Peter Annesley, in happy ignorance of the hornet's nest he had disturbed, returned to his study.

"I won't report this to the Head," he decided. "I'll see what Li has to say about it in the morning, when he's slept off his fat head."

A moment or so later Peter's particular chum, Marsden, "blew in."

"Hello, old son!" exclaimed the newcomer breezily, "that little sneak Mond has been spinning a yarn that you've caught Li Fan smoking, or something like that. Is that so?"

"Sort of," admitted Peter. "I had to tick him off."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing," replied Peter, and proceeded to describe what had taken place.

"It strikes me, old son," remarked Marsden, "that you've interrupted young Li in the midst of his religious exercises. Don't know for certain, mind you; but if you have, there'll be trouble."

Annesley looked a bit concerned.

"Never thought of that," he admitted. "P'r'aps you're right. But there's no getting away from the fact that he broke the rules by messing about with fire in his study. What's the use of making rules if that little Chink can break 'em with impunity? If I've trodden on his corns about his religion, I'm sorry. I'll apologise to him in the morning for *that*, but he'll have to understand that Broadwinton isn't Peking, or wherever he hails from. So that's that."

But Peter Annesley had no opportunity for apologising to Li Fan in the morning.

At roll-call the young Chinaman was missing. He never again showed up at Broadwinton, and the only explanation for his departure was a courteous letter from his father—His Excellency, Hai Ling—stating that unavoidable circumstances had compelled him to remove his son from the school.

And at the end of that term, Peter Annesley answered for the last time to his name at Broadwinton. He left to join one of the noted training-ships for officers of the Mercantile Marine.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GOLDEN VASES

"So it's Chinaside, eh, Peter?" exclaimed Major Annesley, tossing aside the evening paper with latest Naval Appointments. "A rather good station, I believe, though I haven't been to the Far East myself. 'Fraid you won't be here for your twenty-first birthday."

"'Fraid not, pater," agreed his son, although he hadn't the faintest notion why such a stress should be laid upon his absence from home.

Nearly five years had passed since Peter Annesley's one-sided interview with Li Fan. In point of fact, the

circumstances had almost faded from his mind. They had been five strenuous and adventurous years. It had been Peter's ambition to enter the Royal Navy through the recognised channel—Dartmouth College. He had failed in the entrance examination. That was a bitter pill. As an alternative, he was sent on board a training-ship for the Mercantile Marine.

Here another chance to attain his ambition presented itself. The Admiralty offer two direct appointments per annum to be competed for amongst the Mercantile cadets. Peter, improved vastly both physically and educationally during his period of training, was one of the successful candidates, and at the age of twenty, having served the customary time as midshipman, he found that he had been promoted to sub-lieutenant and appointed to H.M.S. *Hermione*, protected light cruiser of 9700 tons, which had lately relieved the *Proberis* on the China Station.

"In that case," resumed Major Annesley, "I'll take the opportunity of anticipating the day upon which you legally come of age, by letting you into a family secret. You've heard me mention my grandfather, Colonel Richard Annesley, late of the 49th Regiment?"

"I have," replied the Sub, his interest aroused. "Bit of a tough nut in his way, wasn't he?"

"We Annesleys all are inclined that way," rejoined his father, with a grim smile. "But to proceed. The event to which I am about to refer took place in 1841. In that year we had a little war with China. To be brief—I'll let you read the lengthy dispatch at your leisure—Dick Annesley, then a lieutenant, took part in the landing at Tao-Lung, after the *Nemesis* and other British warships had smashed up a numerically superior Chinese fleet. Apparently the naval scrap was an easy business, in spite of the fact that the Chinese employed fire-ships; but the land operations were not altogether a joy-ride.

"However, during the advance—it was over open ground composed of paddy-fields—the 49th were strongly opposed, but before the day they had captured a strongly-fortified village after a hand-to-hand fight. It was here that your great-grandfather and another officer named Purvis saved the life of a mandarin, for the 49th, owing to having discovered the mutilated body of one of their comrades, were giving no quarter.

"The mandarin was, I take it, grateful. At any rate, he presented Annesley and Purvis each with a gold vase, which he had succeeded in concealing when the village was looted. Apart from the intrinsic value of these vases they were of great antiquity, and even in those days were estimated to be worth £8000 apiece.

"Then arose a difficulty. There had been issued a short order against individual looting, although the authorities did not draw the line at wholesale looting, provided the spoils were placed at the disposal of the British Government. That meant that if a Tommy annexed even a roll of silk from a captured building he was guilty of looting; but if thousands of yards of the same material were taken and placed on board one of Her Majesty's ships, then that was a perfectly legitimate act from an official point of view.

"In this case the two lieutenants had been given these valuable vases. Naturally they wanted to get them safely home. But the question arose: How were they to convince their Commanding Officer of the genuineness of the gift? The mandarin had been sent to the base. They didn't even know his name. They couldn't continue the advance with their company and lug the vases about with them; if they sent their prizes back to the ship, even if men could be spared for that task, there was a considerable risk that the precious objects would be 'mis-laid.'

"Finally they decided to bury the vases. This they did secretly in the midst of a paddy-field. First they took bearings with a compass. Your great-grandfather lays particular stress upon the fact that while so doing they laid aside their swords and pistols lest the metal should affect the sensitive magnetic needle. Speaking from memory, although I feel fairly confident on the matter, they found that a turret on the extreme eastern part of the wall of Tao-Lung bore N. 10° E. distant about two miles, and an isolated pagoda to the west of the fort bore N. 0° W.; but you'll find it set down in black and white, Peter, in Dick Annesley's own hand-writing, although the black has by this time turned to a rusty brown.

"At this spot they dug a deep hole and buried the two vases, after protecting them in wrappings cut from a tent. Next morning at *réveillé* the advance was resumed; but as has frequently happened in our little wars, the strength of the enemy was greatly underrated.

"A sudden storm swept down upon the troops. Their flint-locks—this was about the time when the flint-lock musket was being superseded by the percussion rifle—were rendered useless by the wet. Two companies of the 49th were cut off. All they could do was to form square and use their bayonets, which were at a disadvantage against the long spears of the Chinese. In addition, the latter were armed with weapons resembling shepherds' crooks attached to long bamboos. With these, several unfortunate men of the 49th were pulled over and immediately dispatched with swords. During this affray, Lieutenant Purvis was killed, and Dick Annesley received a spear-thrust that nearly cost him his life.

"At this critical juncture relief came in the shape of two companies of Royal Marines, whose percussion muskets were practically unaffected by the terrific downpour. Your great-grandfather was carried back to the base in an insensible condition. When he recovered consciousness he found himself on board H.M.S. *Wellesley* on passage to Hong-Kong. During the rest of his military career he was never nearer China than Bengal. Consequently he had no opportunity of retrieving his buried treasure. Neither did your grandfather, who, although with close on forty years' sea-service, never saw the Pacific. I hadn't any luck in that direction. Now is your opportunity. Presuming the treasure is still where Dick Annesley hid it, it's up to you, Peter, to try and recover it as a family heirloom."

"I'll have a thundering good shot at it," declared Peter.

A week later he left Tilbury in the P. & O. s.s. *Naldera* for Singapore.

## CHAPTER III

### LI FAN HEARS NEWS

Heralded by a crash of cymbals and the ear-splitting beat of drums, His Excellency, Li Fan, Deputy-Governor of Nan-ngan, entered the Hall of Justice of the city of Tao-Lung.

From a European standpoint it would be difficult to estimate his age. He certainly did not look old, although his ungainly body and fat, unemotional face gave him the appearance of being at least forty. He was attired in native costume, although, in common with the majority of Chinese since the establishment of a republic, he had dispensed with the pigtail. In point of fact, he was a few months over his twenty-first birthday. That is to say, he was, according to Occidental reckoning, twenty years of age, but in China a child of the age of twelve months celebrates its *second* birthday, and in consequence is reckoned to be two years old.

Stiffly acknowledging the salutations of the officials of the court, who bowed low and shook hands with themselves as the Deputy-Governor appeared, Li Fan waddled to the seat of justice—waddled, because of the fact that in addition to his ungainliness he was wearing high-heeled boots of native manufacture.

"Let the business of the court proceed," ordered Li Fan, after he had gone through the ceremony of offering obeisance to the spirits of his ancestors.

The first case was a plaint by a widow. The Deputy-Governor cut her short.

"This woman," he declared, "has made a habit of using her voice to utter grievances of no weight. Take her away, and see that she is given in marriage to No-Ping, the sandal-maker. Perchance these two will lacerate each other's ears with their voices instead of inflicting pain upon the ears of the citizens of Tao-Lung."

The onlookers applauded vigorously, and uttered fawning shouts of admiration at the sagacity of the Deputy-Governor, until Li Fan, signing for silence, called up the next case.

A young man wearing a basin-shaped straw hat, loose blouse, and very short "shorts" stood up, holding his sandals in token of humility. Having broken a saucer—the Chinese manner of taking the oath—he complained that he had bought



a sampan from one Shi-Fung for two hundred taels. On taking possession of the boat he discovered that the hull was rotten, and that the rice-thatched roof leaked so badly that it was impossible for him and his family to live on board.

"Did you ask Shi-Fung for a guarantee?" inquired Li Fan.

"No, illustrious."

"Then why complain?" continued the Deputy-Governor. "Not troubling to find out whether the sampan was built of teak or sandal-wood, you are disappointed to discover that she is nothing but soft wood that rots. You have no redress, but since Shi-Fung has overcharged he must refund one hundred taels."

"Ten thousand thanks, most noble Lord!" exclaimed the plaintiff.

Li Fan held up his hand.

"The money to be paid into the public treasury," he added.

A roar of merriment rose from the spectators. They knew what that meant—a hundred taels into the purse of the Deputy-Governor. Before the discomfited parties could say another word they were bundled out of court.

"Tao Ching—accused of piracy!" read out the clerk of the court.

Li Fan gave a start. Here was something of absorbing interest. Tao Ching was a desperate character who had defied the Southern Armies of the Republic for the last two years. He was reported to be as brave as a tiger and as cunning as a snake.

But no Tao Ching appeared.

"Excellency," explained the Chief of Police, bowing obsequiously and smiling in smug satisfaction at having satisfied justice, "I crave leave to report that Tao Ching, admitting his crimes, was executed this morning."

"Tao Ching executed!" repeated the Deputy-Governor wrathfully. "By whose authority?"

"Mine, Excellency," stammered the official.

"I am of a mind to make you lose your head," thundered Li Fan. "For exceeding your duty you will pay a fine of five hundred taels."

The Chief of Police knelt and placed his head on the ground.

"A word in private, most noble Li Fan," he mumbled.

For some moments the Deputy-Governor kept his subordinate in suspense. Then he curtly bade the man follow him into an adjoining room.

"Excellency," exclaimed the Chief of Police, "Tao Ching was duly executed by deputy."

Li Fan nodded gravely. The news did not surprise him in the slightest. It was quite a common occurrence for a wealthy criminal condemned to death to hire a substitute.

"And where is Tao Ching?" demanded Li Fan. "You have not let him go free?"

"Assuredly not, most excellent Li Fan," was the reply. "He gave me this letter for you, charging me to hand it to your Excellency in person. Naturally I have kept him in custody awaiting your reply."

With unwonted eagerness Li Fan took the proffered roll of rice-paper and broke the seals.

"Most illustrious Li Fan," he read, "I have learnt on excellent authority that the foreign devil An-Sli (Annesley) has arrived at Singapore and is proceeding by the Japanese ship *Hakodate Maru* for Hong-Kong. Ning Kwo and Hwei-fu have shadowed him in the ship *Naldera* from London to Singapore. Not once but many times have they had opportunities of executing the vengeance of Li Fan, but acting upon the most illustrious lord's instructions they forbore to do harm to An-Sli. As the said An-Sli is now approaching Chinese waters your most insignificant slave requests fresh instructions."

"You did well to bring me this," remarked Li Fan to the Chief of Police. "Now listen. For yourself keep the hundred taels forfeited by Shi-Fung. Where is Tao Ching now?"

"In the riverside prison, Excellency."

"Good! Now listen: at sunset to-night meet me outside the tea-house of Fi Tu. I shall be disguised as an overseer of coolies. You will take care that no one at the prison will recognise me. I would have speech with Tao Ching in private."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PIRATE TAO CHING

Almost to the moment when the sun sank to rest behind the seemingly boundless expanse of paddy-fields, Li Fan stole cautiously from his official residence. He was enveloped in a long loose cloak, while a broad-brimmed straw hat was drawn well down over his eyes. He carried a large bamboo stick shod with iron—a weapon sported by the coolie class against aggression—while hidden in a sash was a modern automatic.

By the time the Deputy-Governor arrived at the rendezvous—the tea-house of Fi Tu—the brief tropical twilight had deepened into night. Here and there paper lanterns were being hung out, their kaleidoscopic gleams contrasting forcibly with the powerful electric lights of the rich quarter of the town.

The city of Tao-Lung presented a striking example of East meeting West. Of comparatively recent growth, having sprung up around the old fort that had figured so prominently in the China War of 1840, Tao-Lung possessed electric tramways, electric lighting, telephones, and a wireless station. There were even picture palaces, where swarms of Chinese coolies crowded to gaze with impassive features upon scenes of "high life" in the United States, thereby increasing rather than diminishing their contempt for foreigners. Up to the present no railway line connected Tao-Lung with the seaports, but on the brown and sluggish Kin-lung-ho fast motor-boats tore to and fro past the hundreds of junks and sampans that housed the huge floating population of the city.

And yet, in spite of these up-to-date Western importations, there were to be found evidences in plenty of non-progressive China. Pagodas, temples, squalid huts tenanted by people who employed hand-loom of a type dating back for ten centuries, primitive water-power mills, and, in short, all the implements of a bygone civilisation, existed side by side with modern institutions and inventions. East mingled with West, but the mingling can only be compared to that of oil and water. Even the veneer of Western civilisation affected by a certain class of Chinaman failed to eliminate the hatred and distrust of the white man. Underlying the toleration or, rather, cultivation of Western ideas was the bedrock spirit that took as its motto, "China for the Chinese."

Greeting the Chief of Police, who was also wearing disguise, Li Fan accompanied his guide through the labyrinth of the coolie quarter, discreetly followed by three armed policemen. Presently the two officials arrived at the iron-studded gate of the prison, in which criminals of the lowest class were confined.

Even though it was night the courtyard of the prison was crowded with manacled delinquents. Several of the more dangerous criminals were wearing the "kang"—a wooden collar broad enough to enable the luckless wearer's hands to be secured through gaps in the wide disc.

To these Li Fan paid not the slightest attention. Sights of this description were far too common. It was the pirate Tao Ching he desired to see, and in a few minutes his wish was gratified.

The interview took place in the pirate's cell, a small, low-ceilinged apartment beneath the ground-level and lighted only by a couple of candle-lanterns.

Tao Ching was a tall, powerfully-built man, standing quite six feet two inches. His bulk exceeded that of Li Fan; his ironlike ribs, sinews, and huge muscles contrasted forcibly with the latter's flabbiness. His features, of a pronounced Mongolian type, showed no sign of emotion. Although his mind was as active as his body, he shielded his thoughts behind a mask of imperturbable stolidity.

"Leave us alone," commanded Li Fan, addressing the Chief of Police.

The latter obeyed without uttering the thought that was in his mind that if Tao Ching took it into his head to do so he could crush the life out of the Deputy-Governor as easily as killing a fly.

For some moments Li Fan kept silent. Then with a deft movement he threw open the door, half expecting to find the Chief of Police in the act of eavesdropping. Fortunately for that individual he had walked to the far end of the corridor.

"Now, headless one," began Li Fan, referring in grim jest to the fact that, according to Chinese law, the pirate had suffered the extreme penalty—by proxy, "how comes it that you are here? Did I not straitly charge you to devote all your efforts and attention to my demands?"

"Excellency," replied Tao Ching coolly, "if the gods dangle opportunity before my eyes, who am I to thrust aside the gift? It was only a small vessel and owned by Japanese, but with a very rich cargo. She struck on a sandbank twenty miles down the river. I went to her assistance ... when I had finished getting her off there were no Japanese left.... So what else could I do?"

"For one thing, you might have taken care not to let yourself be caught," rejoined Li Fan grimly. "But, apart from that, you are risking my chances of success. Did I not engage you in the matter of the Englishman, Annesley?"

"There is plenty of time for that," countered the pirate. "Have I not written to inform you that he is sailing for Singapore? If needs be, I can arrange that he be killed before the ship arrives at Hong-Kong."

The Deputy-Governor made a gesture of annoyance.

"No, no, Tao Ching!" he exclaimed. "How many times have I impressed upon you that I want the Englishman delivered here alive?"

"That is easily done," said the pirate. "Ten of my men are even now on board the *Hakodate Maru*. I can take my ship, the *Chen Su*, hold up the *Hakodate Maru* off Hainan Island, and remove the foreign devil."

Again Li Fan shook his head. The scheme was feasible, but he feared complications. In common with his compatriots he feared and hated the Japanese. Between the two yellow races there has always been bitter rivalry; but Japan, getting into her stride half a century earlier, had completely eclipsed the land of the Dragon. It was far too risky to molest a vessel flying the flag of the Rising Sun.

On the other hand, Li Fan could afford to play a waiting game as far as Peter Annesley was concerned. The unintentional insult that he had suffered at the English schoolboy's hands—Peter had almost forgotten the incident—had to be avenged. Throughout the intervening years Li Fan had never lost touch with his would-be victim. Regularly his emissaries in London had kept him well informed of his enemy's movements. By some inexplicable intuition, Li Fan felt sure that some day Annesley would come to the Far East, and when a cablegram in cipher reached him with the information that the young Englishman was appointed to H.M.S. *Hermione*, Li Fan had rubbed his hands in satisfaction. Port by port, as the *Naldera* voyaged eastward, Annesley's progress was reported by Li Fan's secret agents. Every thud of the ship's engines brought the Englishman nearer the clutches of his vindictive enemy. And now Annesley was either in or very close to Chinese waters.

Without the flicker of an eyelid the pirate Tao Ching heard his employer's rejection of his scheme.

"Then, Excellency, how will this do?" almost whispered the pirate.

"Now you talk sensibly, Tao Ching!" exclaimed Li Fan, when the pirate disclosed his alternative plan. "You will be set free this night. In twenty days' time, or even sooner, I shall expect you to be back with Annesley as your prisoner—alive and unharmed."

For the first time Tao Ching bowed his head to the Deputy-Governor.

"Son of your illustrious father!" he exclaimed. "By the shades of my unworthy ancestors it shall be done."

## CHAPTER V

### FOILED!

It was night when the Japanese liner *Hakodate Maru* passed through the Sulphur Channel and dropped anchor in Victoria Bay, the principal roadstead of Hong-Kong.

To Peter Annesley the scene appeared a veritable fairyland. Overhead the black sky was powdered with myriads of twinkling stars, their reflected light scintillating upon the placid waters of the bay. Shoreward more lights of every conceivable colour, rising tier upon tier from the terraces of houses comprising the capital of Britain's only possession in Chinese waters.

The young sub-lieutenant was preparing to get ashore. Now that his long voyage in the capacity of a passenger was over, he was keen to report for duty on board H.M.S. *Hermione*. To a man of active habits it was a tedious business having to spend his time in enforced idleness as he had done on the passage out. He was anxious to bear his part of the Empire's burden, although merely in the humble capacity of a junior naval officer.

His cabin trunk, packed and locked, was in charge of a Japanese steward. The rest of his gear would not be removed from the baggage hold until the following morning.

Already the ship was surrounded by sampans and other shore craft, but there were no signs of a tender coming alongside to take off those of the passengers who were desirous of landing that night.

Addressing one of the officers, Annesley inquired when the Company's tender would be available.

"Me very sorry, sir," replied the courteous little Jap, with a beaming smile. "It is not permitted; will the honourable gentleman be pleased to project his optic on this?"

Peter complied to the best of his ability, directing his attention to a typewritten notice fixed by wafers to a board:

S.s. *Hakodate Maru*,

7/7/192.

Tak pleas notis: no landing is permit til Port athorities grant pratique.

Bi order.

NENOHI TUNAGI (Captain).

"Well, that's torn it!" exclaimed Peter. "It's no use disputing the Hong-Kong port authorities. I must make the best of a bad job."

It was such a beautiful evening that Peter "cut" dinner and lingered on deck. In the roadstead a warship, indistinguishable in the darkness, was using a masthead signalling lamp. The message, being in code, conveyed no meaning to Annesley, but he found himself wondering whether the vessel was the *Hermione*. Across the water came the subdued strains of a ship's band. In twos and threes the sampans, their owners disappointed at losing the chance of a fare, disappeared shorewards until only one native craft remained, maintaining a discreet distance from the lowering hull of the *Hakodate Maru*.

A shuffling sound attracted Peter's attention. Turning, he found a white-jacketed steward standing with a lacquered tray on which was a cup of coffee.

Annesley took the cup. The Oriental, with a deep bow, backed away and disappeared.

Selecting a deck-chair, Peter sat down under the awning. Then, before tasting the coffee, he placed the cup and saucer on the deck and lighted a cigarette.

Just then another passenger, M'Phail, a Scottish official of the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Bank who was returning from home leave, sauntered up.

"Hello, Annesley!" he remarked. "Very fine night, isn't it?"

"Awfully," agreed the Sub, tending his cigarette-case. "I was hoping to be ashore by this time."

"So was I," rejoined the other. "In my case, it's home. I've been living here for nearly fifteen years. Don't forget to look me up when you're in port here. You have my address. Dash it all, sir, what are you doing?"

The latter part of his remarks were addressed to an Aberdeen terrier which he had brought out with him. The little animal had already been sampling Peter's cup of coffee.

"Awfully sorry!" exclaimed the Scot. "Let me get the steward to fetch another cup."

"Don't bother," protested Annesley, laughing. "Your dog was evidently far more thirsty than I. I don't want any coffee—really I don't."

The two men remained yarning until most of the shorelights had vanished and six bells tolling from the anchored warships announced that it wanted but an hour to midnight.

"I'll turn in, I think," remarked Peter, stifling a yawn. "If I don't, I'll be as limp as a rag to-morrow.... And I've got to interview my new skipper."

Annesley occupied a single-berth cabin 'midships on the upper deck, where the first-class European passengers were accommodated. His was the after one of a block of ten, and on that account possessed the advantage of a large scuttle in addition to the square port and jalousied door. But in spite of the generous system of ventilation, aided by an electric fan overhead, the cabin seemed hot and stuffy. For one thing, the ship being at anchor on a perfectly calm night, there was no refreshing draught of air as was the case when the *Hakodate Maru* was under way.

Having partly unpacked his cabin trunk, Peter undressed and turned in. Making sure that no mosquito lurked within the curtain, he switched off the light and composed himself to sleep.

In vain he sought oblivion. Usually a sound sleeper, he found himself lying with closed eyes, yet unable to slumber. The whirr of the electric fan, the subdued purr of the dynamos half a dozen decks below, the chatter of the condenser apparatus, and a dozen other disturbing noises all tended to keep him awake. Half-hourly he heard the bells of the

anchored warships and the reassuring "All's well" of the various sentries. Then "Boat ahoy!" with the curt, crisp response, "Night guard!" reminded Peter of the ceaseless vigilance of the British Navy.

Three bells (1.30 a.m.) found Annesley as wide awake as before. Although he was lying perfectly motionless, sleep seemed utterly impossible.

Suddenly above the usual chorus of ship-noises he heard the handle of the cabin door being cautiously turned. Suppressing his first impulse to challenge the would-be intruder, Peter lay quiet. Perhaps it was a belated passenger who had forgotten his bearings. Mistakes of that sort were usual during the initial stage of the voyage, but by this time the passengers had "shaken down" to their quarters.

"The door's locked and bolted, anyway," he soliloquised. "Whoever it is, he can't get in."

A minute or so later the Sub was not quite so certain on that point. A slight scratching noise warned him that the intruder was tampering with the jalousie.

Noiselessly Peter drew back the mosquito-curtain and slipped out of his bunk. The starlight was sufficient to enable him to discover that a thin piece of hooked metal had been thrust between the slats of the jalousie and was being used to pull back the small bolts keeping the shutter in its place.

"There's a gentleman looking for trouble," mused Annesley, softly massaging the biceps of his brawny right arm. "And he'll get it."

The Sub's plan was to let the intruder get inside the cabin before he started reprisals; but, unfortunately, the cabin was so small that concealment was out of the question.

"Tany rate," decided Peter, "I'll leave my trade-mark on him. Then I'll fix him in the morning."

By this time the bolts had yielded to the gentle and skilfully applied persuasion of the steel rod. Then, in almost uncanny silence—for during this period of tension Peter was insensible to the ordinary ship-board sounds—the jalousie was lifted from its frame.

Annesley made no movement. He felt perfectly calm. He meant to have a good look at the features of the intruder before he began to "leave his trade-mark" on the fellow's face.

Again there was a pause in the operations. Peter took advantage of the delay to roll up the sleeves of his pyjama coat. Then, with his left hand resting gently upon the electric-light switch, he watched the jalousie being raised by a pair of hands that showed ghost-like in the faint starlight.

The latticed shutter was withdrawn. With a deft movement Peter switched on the light. Fortunately for him the lamp was behind him. His eyes were shielded from the brilliant glare that showed full upon the face of the startled miscreant.

It was, as the Sub had expected, a face of pronounced Oriental type—that of a Mongolian. But whether the features were those of a Chinaman or a Japanese, Peter in his inexperience of the Far East was unable to determine. All that he was aware of was a face of the colour of yellow parchment, obliquely-set eyes, and a wide mouth displaying two hideous rows of pointed and blackened teeth.

Before the fellow could recover from his surprise, Peter let drive with a straight right. Had the blow fallen where Annesley had meant it to, the intruder would have lost all interest in his surroundings. With a deft movement the Chinaman ducked. Peter's fist, instead of getting home on the point of the fellow's chin, landed heavily on the bridge of his nose.

Back staggered the discomfited man into the arms of another Chinaman, who had hitherto been hidden from the Sub's vision by his companion.

In a trice the pair took to their heels along the deck.

Without a moment's hesitation Peter took a flying dive through the aperture where the jalousie had been. To have to fumble with locks and bolts would mean a delay, during which the rascals could get clean away.

Many a time Annesley had performed a similar feat in the gym, but on this occasion there was no convenient mat to receive the human avalanche. He landed on the deck on all-fours, sprang to his feet, and dashed in pursuit.

Even as he dashed aft, the two Chinamen leapt nimbly upon the rail and dived overboard.

In the heat of the chase Peter was almost on the point of following, but the prospect of a thirty-feet dive into the black waters of Hong-Kong Harbour checked his ardour. Gripping the taffrail, he watched two phosphorescent trails that marked the progress of the swimmers until they vanished in the darkness.

In a very brief space of time Peter was joined by a crowd of Japanese officers, deckhands, and stewards, who, roused by the commotion, had hurried aft. It took the Sub some time to explain. Finding a passenger in pyjamas, they somewhat naturally concluded that he was either out of his mind or contemplating suicide—or both. By the time Peter contrived to explain to an English-speaking third officer, the fugitives were too far away for a boat to be lowered with a chance of picking them up.

Since nothing more was to be done, Peter returned to his cabin, replaced the jalousie, and turned in to sleep soundly until awakened by the band of the British flagship playing "God save the King" as the colours were hoisted.

Almost at the same moment Al Lee and So Kiang, the emissaries of the pirate Tao Ching, were dejectedly boarding the latter's craft, the *Chen Su*, to explain to their master why they had not returned with the object of their quest—the drugged person of the English "foreign devil," Peter Annesley.

## CHAPTER VI

### M'PHAIL'S WARNING

During breakfast, Peter said nothing concerning his nocturnal adventure to the English passengers. The sole topic of conversation was speculation as to how soon they would be permitted to land and whether the Port Medical Officer would put them all in quarantine. But before the meal was over, a message from the Captain was read to the effect that passengers for Hong-Kong would be able to land at eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

Having completed the packing of his cabin-trunk, Peter went on deck. It was an interesting sight—the panoramic view of Victoria, backed by the lofty Mount Gough. But the Sub's chief interest centred upon the *Hermione*, lying about a quarter of a mile away and looking spick and span in her new coat of battleship grey. Fore and aft she spread double awnings and side-screens—necessary precautions against the heat of the tropical sun; while the only display of contrasting colour was the white ensign hanging limply from the ensign-staff and the Union Jack at her jack-staff. Evidently she was not on the point of "weighing and proceeding," for no smoke was issuing from her funnels, and her boats were hoisted out and made fast to the lower-booms.

It was Peter's first impression by daylight of the vessel that—Providence permitting—was to be his home for the next two years.

"Mornin', Annesley!"

Peter turned to find his acquaintance, the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Bank official, standing close to him.

"Don't think me inquisitive," continued M'Phail, when the Sub had returned his greeting, "but did you drink any of that coffee before my dog began lapping it up?"

"I didn't," replied Annesley. "Why do you ask?"

"Cause the stuff was drugged," declared the Scot soberly.

"What!" ejaculated Peter incredulously.

"Man, it's a solemn fact I'm telling you," said M'Phail. "The poor little beast is still insensible. I've just had the ship's doctor to look at him, and he declares that the animal has taken a dose of opium."

"But how do you know that it was in the coffee?" asked the Sub. "Your dog might have picked up the stuff anywhere on board."

"Cause he hadn't a chance," replied the Scot. "You'll remember I ticked the little beggar off for stealing your coffee. After that he never left my heels till I was on the point of turning in. Then I noticed he looked a bit dour. Ten minutes later he was sound asleep, and he hasn't stirred since. Look here, Annesley. Don't be offended if I put a blunt question: have you any enemies on board?"

"Not to my knowledge," answered Peter. "I might have had two, but they aren't in the ship now."

With that Annesley related the episode of the attempt to break into his cabin.

M'Phail looked grave.

"I don't like that at all, Annesley," he declared. "Without a doubt you were to be drugged. For what reason?"

"Robbery, perhaps."

"Hardly," rejoined M'Phail. "If you possess means you haven't been bragging about it while you've been on board, like that ass Hunter, for instance. Now if they'd tried to drug him I could understand the motive. The fellow has pots of money, and doesn't hesitate to try and impress people what a big swell he is. You haven't, I hope, figuratively trodden on the corns of any of the Japs on board?"

"Far from it," replied Annesley. "Personally, I've found the Japanese—both officers and men—jolly decent little chaps. In fact, Captain Yunagi has already expressed his regrets that such an outrage should have taken place on board the *Hakodate Maru*."

"How about the fellow who brought you the coffee?" pursued M'Phail. "Would you recognise him again?"

"Might," said Peter dubiously. "You see, they're much of a muchness these chaps.... Hello, sir! what can I do for you?" he added, addressing a Japanese officer who was discreetly awaiting an opportunity to speak.

"Most honourable Mr. Annesley," began the Japanese, "Captain Yunagi has inquiry caused to be made. Two of steward-staff absent make, but they no Japanese. They Chinamen are."

He spoke with the characteristic contempt of a subject of the Mikado for a race similar in colour but vastly inferior, judging by his criterion of efficiency.

"Chinamen, eh!" remarked M'Phail, after the Japanese officer had gone aft. "Look here, Annesley; I hope you haven't been rubbing any of those chaps up the wrong way?"

"Now you mention it, I did," admitted Peter. "It was years ago—at school. I'd almost forgotten it. There was a kid called Li Fan. His father was a big-pot mandarin. I forget what part of China he came from. Well, I booted him."

"Who—the mandarin?"

"No, his son. I suppose I oughtn't to have done so, but I thought he was playing with fire in his study. Afterwards it was suggested to me that Li Fan was performing some religious stunt."



"You'll have to be careful," said M'Phail warningly. "This affair last night may or may not have something to do with the matter you mention. The Chinese are a weird crowd. I've lived out here for years, but I don't pretend to fathom the depths of the Celestial's mind. No European can. But there's one thing I do know. The average Chinaman can be very vindictive and hide his animosity under an impenetrable mask until the opportunity arrives for him to get his own back. An Italian vendetta isn't in it. Take care of yourself, laddie. The safest place for you in the Far East is on board the *Hermione*. Even there you'll have to be jolly cautious."

With the self-assurance of youth, Peter Annesley felt inclined to dismiss the theory of revenge as an absurdity. But during the interval before going ashore the problem was uppermost in his mind. In vain he sought a solution for the outrage. Robbery, no doubt; but why, as M'Phail had pointed out, should he be the one selected as a victim when there were other European passengers whose wealth was a tempting prize? It was not a pleasant feeling to know that he might be shadowed in a place where there were thousands of Chinese alike as peas in a pod.

"Tany rate," he reflected, "I've left my mark on one of 'em. I'd know him again until he's cured of his bruises. P'r'aps, after all, there was nothing in it—I hope so."

Peter and M'Phail went ashore together. At the latter's suggestion, Annesley's gear was sent down to the dockyard to be put on board the *Hermione*, while Peter took advantage of the Scotsman's offer to come up to his bungalow, have lunch, and change into naval uniform before reporting for duty.

Seated with M'Phail in a 'ricksha', Peter made his first acquaintance with the streets of a Chinese town, for although Hong-Kong is a British possession, it still retains the characteristics of the Far East. The narrow streets were crowded with yellow faces. Here and there were Europeans—white-helmeted soldiers, civilians in white clothes and wearing "topees," and a fair sprinkling of bluejackets in tropical rig. Practically every shop was run by a Chinaman, and although there were signboards in quaint English, the majority of announcements were displayed in Chinese characters.

Up and up toiled the 'ricksha' until it stopped outside a neat bungalow on a slope overlooking part of Victoria and the roadstead beyond.

M'Phail's establishment was staffed entirely by Chinese, who greeted their master's return with no outward display of joy or otherwise. Everything appeared to run like well-oiled machinery, and by the time Peter had bathed and changed into white drill naval uniform a tempting lunch in which roast quails figured conspicuously was awaiting M'Phail and his guest.

"Aren't you ever afraid that your coffee will be drugged?" inquired Peter, as the pair lingered over their cigarettes and liqueurs.

The Scotsman shook his head.

"For why?" he asked, with a chuckle. "I haven't kicked a Chink for burning joss-sticks. If I did, I'd deserve all I got, I'm thinking."

## CHAPTER VII

### THE CAPTAIN'S DOUBTS

The *Hermione's* second cutter, with a sun-helmeted midshipman in charge, slowed down as she approached her parent ship. In her diminutive engine-room a bell clanged loudly. Froth bubbled under her transom as the engines were reversed. Losing way, she came to a standstill alongside the accommodation ladder. Her youthful skipper gave a searching glance aft, with the air of a man who has done his job smartly and expects credit for it.

Stepping out of the stern-sheets of the steamboat, Sub-lieutenant Peter Annesley ascended the massive yet swaying ladder, punctiliously saluting the quarter-deck as he came over the side.

Seven bells had just been sounded off. The deck was practically deserted, save for a corporal of the gangway and two side-boys. Through a wide-open skylight came sounds of revelry—one indication that the officers were enjoying "seven-bell tea."

From behind the gun-shield of the after quick-firer appeared a tall, raw-boned officer wearing a sword-belt over his frock-coat but no sword. Under his arm he carried a telescope.

This was Wilson, the officer of the watch.

For a moment he eyed Peter with a look of astonishment.

"By Jove, old son!" he exclaimed, after Annesley had reported himself. "You gave me a bit of a turn. I had to look twice at your shoulder-straps before I realised you weren't Forsyth—our paymaster-lieutenant. You're as alike as two peas in a pod."

"Is that so?" rejoined Peter.

"Fact," declared Wilson; then, breaking off at a tangent, he inquired: "Are you a Rugger man by any chance?"

"I am considered fairly good at the game," admitted Annesley modestly.

"Colours?"

"Yes."

"How perfectly priceless!" ejaculated the officer of the watch enthusiastically. "We've a fairly hot team, but we can do with a bit of gingering up. We're out to pull off the Squadron Cup, you know. Right-o; I'll introduce you to the Commander. The Owner's on the beach at present. He'll see you in the morning."

Peter's interview with the Commander—familiarly known on board as The Bloke—was of brief duration, but the Sub formed the opinion that Commander Bolton was "proper jonnick." In that respect Annesley's judgment was not at fault. The Commander was dead-nuts on discipline, but off duty he was one of the mildest-mannered, genial men going.

Within twenty minutes of the time of joining the *Hermione* Peter found himself installed as Sub of the Gun-room—the senior officer of the bear-garden allotted to junior officers and midshipmen. Here again he felt at home. His messmates seemed awfully jolly fellows, without showing any signs of frigid aloofness that Englishmen are apt to display when dealing with strangers.

At eight o'clock next morning Peter "fell in" with the other officers and men on the quarter-deck for the daily "ceremonial" of hoisting the colours. The *Hakodate Maru* had sailed thirty minutes earlier, and was still within sight as she steamed slowly past Kellett's Island and through the eastern channel. The harbour was dotted with junks under sail—a sight that gave the Sub food for reflection. He wondered whether the two Chinamen who had attempted to break into his cabin were in one of those unwieldy craft or whether they had contrived to resume their interrupted service on the s.s. *Hakodate Maru*.

Divisions over, Peter was "standing easy" with several other junior officers when a messenger approached and saluted.

"The Captain wishes to see you, sir," he announced. "He's in his cabin."

The sentry on the Captain's cabin stood stiffly at attention as Peter knocked discreetly upon the white-enamelled door.

"Come in," exclaimed a deep voice.

Annesley opened the door and drew aside the heavy baize curtain. As far as he could make out at the first glance, the only occupant of the cabin was a man in the uniform of a paymaster-lieutenant. He was standing at a knee-hole desk littered with papers. His back was towards the door, so that Peter could not see his face.

"That point is cleared up, then, Forsyth," said the deep voice. "Bring the other papers for me to sign at six bells. Bless my soul——"

The exclamation ended abruptly. Peter, standing rigidly at attention, looked at his Captain. The latter was glancing with unconcealed surprise first at his secretary, the paymaster-lieutenant, and then at the newly-joined sub-lieutenant.

The Captain was reclining in a cane chair underneath an open port, his slippered right foot resting on a cushion owing to an injury he had received in a hockey-match on the previous day.

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated again. "You two might be twin brothers. Are you related by any chance?"

Annesley looked at Forsyth. The paymaster-lieutenant looked at him. The resemblance was truly remarkable. It seemed to Peter that he was looking at himself in a mirror. In height, build, feature, and uniform the two men were almost identical, the only difference being the fact that Forsyth wore a thin white strip of cloth in conjunction with his gold "curl and ring" to denote that he belonged to the Accountant Branch.

The two men smiled and shook their heads.

"Box and Cox in real life," commented the Owner, with a breezy laugh. "We must be prepared for complicated situations.... Carry on, Forsyth. Yes, at six bells, please."

The paymaster-lieutenant gathered up a sheaf of documents and left the cabin.

There was no mistaking the fact that the skipper of the *Hermione* took a deep personal interest in his officers. He questioned Peter closely concerning his previous service and his qualifications.

"By the bye," he remarked, "do you by any chance happen to be any relation to the Annesley who fought in China in the 'forties?"

"Richard Annesley of the 49th, sir?"

"Yes."

"He was my great-grandfather, sir."

"Then we have interests in common," continued the Captain. "My great-grandfather, Tom Purvis, was also of the 49th, and took part in the operations before Tao-Lung."

"So I've heard, sir," rejoined Peter. "Lieutenant Purvis was wounded there—after a mandarin had given him a gold vase."

"You've heard that yarn, eh?" exclaimed Captain Purvis. "How did you get hold of it?"

"My father gave me a copy of Richard Annesley's log in case——"

"In case you had a chance to recover your worthy ancestor's share of the treasure, eh? Well, we've a joint interest in the business, Mr. Annesley, but I warn you it's a wash-out. I took the opportunity of going up to Tao-Lung soon after I was appointed to the ship. The whole show has undergone enormous changes since the 'forties. In those days Tao-Lung was a fort with a few joss-houses and huts, and quite five miles from the Kin-lung-ho. Now the river has changed its course—it is always breaking down its banks—and flows close to the walls of the city that has grown up round the old fort. Even as late as ten years ago a vessel drawing twenty-five feet of water could ascend the Kin-lung-ho for eighty miles above

Tao-Lung. To-day it is impossible for a craft drawing more than fifteen feet to approach within fifty miles of the place. However, I suppose I am right in assuming that you would like to have a look at the place. If an opportunity occurs, no doubt you can arrange matters. Just now, owing to the trouble between the rival republican parties in China, to say nothing of the activities of various crowds of bandits, Nan-ngan Province is not exactly healthy for Europeans. Later on, perhaps, when matters have calmed down, you can have a few days up-country. There's awfully decent snipe-shooting to be had, I believe."

"Jolly decent—the Owner," thought Peter, when he left the Captain's cabin. "But I hope he's mistaken over the treasure stunt. I'll have a thundering good shot at finding the place if I've the ghost of a chance to go up to Tao-Lung."

## CHAPTER VIII

### IN COLLISION

At noon the same day the *Hermione*, having filled up with oil fuel and taken on board the necessary stores, "weighed and proceeded in execution of previous orders," namely, to cruise northward along the coast of China and putting in to Amoy and Shanghai.

The voyage promised to be of the nature of a "joy trip." British men-of-war on the China Station had very little serious work to do, for although there were two chief rival factions at war in the Chinese Republic and half a dozen lesser parties flying at each other's throats, British interests in the ports of the Celestial Republic were scrupulously respected by the belligerents. Occasionally there were instances of pirate junks carrying out a little scoop by seizing small British steam-vessels, officered by Englishmen but manned by Chinese, who as often as not were in league with the buccaneers. But the pirates, having a wholesome respect for warships flying the White Ensign (and also for those displaying the Rising Sun of Japan), and possessing a highly intelligent espionage service, took good care to commit their unlawful acts when the warships were hundreds of miles away.

At one bell in the first watch (8.30 p.m.) Peter went on deck, when a number of officers off duty were enjoying their after-dinner cigars and pipes. It was a pitch-dark night. The sky was overcast. The galaxy of stars—a sight never to be forgotten when seen in the China Sea—was not on view. Hardly a ripple disturbed the surface of the dark water, save for the frothing wake of the swiftly-moving ship. A light off-shore breeze bore with it the subtle perfumes of the East, even although the nearest land was fifty miles away on the port hand.

"Hello, Annesley!" exclaimed his double, the paymaster-lieutenant, catching sight of Peter in the gleam of the electric lamp over the after-door of the battery. "I've been on the look out for you. Have a cigarette?"

"Thanks," replied Peter, accepting a "smoke" from the proffered case.

Then came a prolonged pause. It was not one of those intervals of silence that makes a man feel awkward. Both Annesley and Forsyth were quite at ease—one of the best indications of a newly-formed friendship.

"'Tisn't often a fellow butts up against his double," remarked Forsyth, breaking the silence. "It's rather funny that we should find ourselves messmates. But it's a rum world.... Do you play bridge?"

Probably the paymaster-lieutenant was prompted to put this question by the fact that through the open skylight could be seen the almost rigid forms of the card-players in the mess-room.

"Not keen," replied Peter.

"Neither am I," rejoined Forsyth. "I have quite enough mental gymnastics over the ship's ledgers without that. I'm rather keen on outdoor sports, though; are you?"

"Rather," replied Peter enthusiastically.

"That's great," continued Forsyth. "Footer, boxing, running, motor cycling (I know a chap in the Shanghai Club who will lend us a mobike and sidecar), shooting—but not fishing: too jolly slow."

"I'm not particularly fond of fishing, either," agreed Peter. "Boxing, now."

"I say, are you a handy man with the gloves? Let's both train for the junior middleweights. You will? Right. Let's rout out old G. P. Band."

"Who is he?" asked Annesley.

"Who is he?" repeated Forsyth. "Why, G. P., otherwise known as Gutta Percha Band, is our physical training expert. By Jove! He'll simply fall on your neck when he hears you're a bit of a lad with the gloves."

They found Lieutenant Band in his cabin, where he was engaged in making up a list of articles required to complete the gymnasium equipment.

The physical instructor was a lightly-built man of about thirty. Of middle height, he gave little outward indication of his profession when in uniform. He was one of those quiet, unassuming people whom bullies find out to their cost that it is decidedly distressing to interfere with. He had been known to pick up and throw a fifteen-stone man as easily as if he were a tailor's dummy. He could drive his fist clean through the panel of a door, while one of his exhibitions after mess was to take up a poker and strike it heavily against his left forearm. The poker would be bent to the shape of a sickle, but G. P.'s muscular arm showed no effect from the contact of the iron. He was the only officer on board who did not smoke. He alone only knew the tremendous effort it cost him to abstain from the soothing weed. His duties—in which he took a whole-hearted interest—were to "sweat down the fat," tone up the muscles, and improve the wind of some four hundred individuals comprising the ship's company of H.M.S. *Hermione*.

"Well, my pair of heavenly twins," began the physical training lieutenant, "what is it?"

"Recruit for the Middle Weights, G. P.," replied Forsyth. "I've discovered him; you've got the job of licking him into shape, and we'll share the kudos when he's pulled it off."

Band pushed aside his papers and stood up. He was quite four inches shorter than Peter. His keen eye looked the Sub up and down, like a horse-dealer considering a likely animal.

"Might make something of you," he remarked. "How about you, Pay?"

"I'm going into training too."

"Right-o," rejoined the physical training expert. "When? The competition comes off in six weeks, remember."

"Soon as you like," declared Forsyth. "We're ready; aren't we, Annesley?"

Peter nodded.

"No time like the present," said Band cheerfully. "Start at once. 'Do it now,' as the Yankees are so fond of quoting. On deck both of you, finish your cigarettes, fill your lungs with air, and don't touch baccy in any shape or form for the next forty-three and a half days. Is that a deal?"

The two aspirants glanced at each other. They realised that no light sacrifice was demanded of them, but were hardly prepared to begin right away by renouncing allegiance to My Lady Nicotine.

The physical instructor noticed the mute exchange of inquiry.

"Give you half an hour to think things over," he resumed. "If you're both game, I'll do my utmost to get you into the pink of condition. But," he added, with a grim smile, "there'll be considerable trouble if you have even one lapse during

the next six weeks or so. Is that clear? Sheer off, then, and think it over."

The new chums retired to consider their verdict.

"It'll take a terrific lot of doing," said Forsyth tentatively. "I tried knocking off smoking once before—kept it up for three days. Felt absolutely rotten. Why couldn't he limit us to, say, three cigarettes a day?"

"S'pose it's his system," remarked Peter, "and there are no gains without pains. I'll try it."

He paused to weigh over the possibilities of the strenuous time ahead.

"And won't it be dashed funny if we find ourselves in the final?" he exclaimed. "Can you imagine us—both alike—dodging round and round the ring? Seconds puzzled to know which is which; referee tied up in knots—can't tell t'other from which."

"It would be a bit of a mix up," admitted Forsyth. "But if it did come to that, it would mean that, whoever won, the shield would be held by the ship. That's the thing that matters. Yes, old son, I'm on it."

He stepped to the rail to throw overboard the end of the last cigarette he was to enjoy until after the Squadron Cup Final. As he did so, the light cruiser gave a lurch, barely sufficient to throw him off his balance. There was the sickening sound of woodwork being smashed. A hoarse, almost unintelligible hail from the forebridge, followed by a concentrated yell of terror, was borne on the night air.

A few seconds later a dark, towering mass drifted past. The pale rays of the starboard light glinted on the thing—it was the major portion of a junk with the mat-sail still slatting in the breeze.

The *Hermione* had collided with one of the numerous sea-going junks that abound off the Chinese coast—unwieldy vessels that, with utter disregard for their own safety and the safety of other craft, hardly ever display the recognised navigation lights.

"Stop both!" shouted the navigating officer.

The telegraph bell clanged loudly as the order to stop the engines was transmitted to the engine-room. Then, "Half speed astern!" followed by the shrill trill of the bosun's mate's pipes and the stentorian order, "Away, sea-boat's crew!"

In a trice, half a dozen agile bluejackets had swarmed into the boat. Annesley, prompt to take action, clambered into the stern-sheets of the sea-boat. For a brief instant the coxswain fumbled under the displaced grating to make sure that the plug was in position.

"All correct, sir," he reported.

Already the "gripes" holding the boat against the griping-spar of the davits had been cast off. Dozens of eager hands were tending the falls.

"Lower away!" ordered Peter.

Fortunately the sea was calm, and way had been taken off the ship. With a resounding smack the sea-boat came in contact with the natural element. The disengaging gear was slipped, and to a loud "Give way" the cutter bounded off on her errand of mercy.

Guided by the frenzied shrieks of the terrified Chinamen, for the wreckage of the severed junk was lost to sight in the darkness, Annesley steered towards the spot where he hoped to find the survivors. Before the sea-boat had covered twenty lengths, two brilliant beams flashed from the *Hermione's* after-bridge. For a short space the searchlights swung their beams until, caught by the concentrated rays, the junk showed up, resembling a fairy castle fashioned of glittering silver.

By this time the sorely-stricken junk—or the part that yet remained—was heeling at a dangerous angle. Her lofty, cumbersome stern was high out of the water, her poop-deck slanting so steeply that it would be impossible for any one to find a foothold. Hanging on to the fantastically-carved taffrail were four human beings, who, seeing that help was approaching, had ceased their cries of terror and had relapsed into the typically characteristic imperturbability of the Oriental.

"Way 'nough!" ordered the Sub, at the same time putting his helm down and allowing the sea-boat to lose way at fifty yards from the foundering junk. To run alongside was to court disaster, for not only was there a danger of the cutter being swamped, but there was a great risk of her being smothered and taken down by the enormous mat-sail that was still set on the steeply-inclined mast.

"Jump and swim for it!" shouted Peter.

The Chinamen, although they might not understand English, could not fail to comprehend the young officer's gesture. With their waxen features thrown into strong relief by the cold rays of the searchlights, they looked more like corpses than livings beings.

The junk lurched violently, then recovered itself, although full six feet lower in the water. The end was not far off.

"Utter idiots!" muttered Annesley. "Why don't they jump?"

Unable to give himself a satisfactory explanation, the Sub decided on a hazardous manoeuvre.

"Back her in, lads!" he ordered.

Stern foremost, the cutter approached the wreckage, until the junk's taffrail actually overhung the rescuing craft. Two of the Chinese crew took advantage of the opportunity, and, lowering themselves over the rail, dropped like sacks of flour into the stern-sheets of the sea-boat. One of them in his descent narrowly missed Peter's head and shoulders; the other crashed heavily across the stroke thwart, clearing the oarsman by less than a couple of inches, and collapsed inertly upon the bottom boards.

"Come on!" shouted Peter, beckoning to the two remaining on the junk.

The Chinamen made no movement. Impassive and motionless as statues they stood, gripping the taffrail and peering down into the boat.

"She's going, sir!" exclaimed the bowman warningly.

There was not the slightest doubt about *that*. The inrush of water could be plainly heard. Already the cutter was feeling the influence of the dreaded suction.

"Give way," ordered Peter.

The men bent to their oars with a will. At a distance of a hundred yards from the junk the Sub gave the word to "Lay on your oars!"

Even as he turned his head to watch the end, the junk disappeared in a smother of foam, resembling a silvery fountain, as the search-light played upon the scene. Annesley had a momentary glimpse of the two Chinamen rigidly grasping the rail and making no effort to jump clear. Then the head of the sail dipped beneath the surface, leaving the agitated water covered with flotsam and debris.

For half an hour the sea-boat hovered over the spot where the remains of the junk had disappeared, but there were no signs of the two Chinamen. For some reason they had elected to go to their deaths rather than make the faintest efforts to save themselves.

Then, having made sure that there were no more survivors, the cutter returned to her parent and was hoisted in and

secured. Within an hour of the collision the *Hermione* resumed her interrupted course.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE BURNING JUNK

At midnight, Annesley "took over his trick" as junior watchkeeper. From Grahame, who was Officer of the Watch, he learned that when the junk had been rammed one of the Chinamen had made a spring for the *Hermione's* bows, and had succeeded in clambering aboard.

"He seemed to be the only Chink who exerted himself to save his life," commented Peter. "We got a couple of them, but two more simply let themselves go down with the craft. Quaint lot these chaps. Has the Owner interviewed the survivors?"

"Yes," replied Grahame. "He had Wun Li, the wardroom messman—'One Big Lie' we call him—to interpret. The skipper asked the Chinaman why his junk didn't show any lights, and got the astonishing reply that the junk's eyes were ill! Wun Li explained that the native vessels have eyes painted on their bows—sort of mascot, I suppose, or else a kind of superstitious belief. 'Tany rate, the junk had been in a slight collision earlier in the night. Fouled another junk, I understand. She had her eyes bunged up. Consequently the fellow who was in charge of the junk attributed her misfortune to that, and didn't blame us in the least for cutting her in two."

"Light on the port bow, sir!" shouted one of the look-out men.

Grahame and Annesley each levelled their night glasses in the direction indicated. It took them several seconds to locate the pin-prick of luminosity, which to the naked eye bore a resemblance to a red occulting light.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the O.W. "It's a vessel on fire ... starboard five, quartermaster.... Messenger, inform the Captain that we've sighted a burning ship."

He raised his glasses again, then turned to his companion.

"Who says we don't see life?" he remarked. "Unless I'm greatly mistaken she's a junk, too. Call away the sea-boat's crew, Annesley."

In less than a couple of minutes Captain Purvis gained the fore-bridge. By that time speed had been increased to twenty-eight knots and the *Hermione* was rapidly closing with the doomed craft.

"We're too late, I fear," declared the skipper. "She's burnt almost to the waterline. All right, Mr. Grahame; get way off the ship and keep her to wind'ard."

Almost before the *Hermione's* speed was appreciably reduced the sea-boat's crew were at their posts, while the falls were manned ready to lower away. Again the searchlights swept the face of the waters, their powerful rays barely holding their own against the ruddy glare of the fiercely-blazing junk.

Fascinated, Peter watched the scene, as the cutter bore towards the burning hull. But before the boat approached within two hundred yards of the object of her humane endeavours, the junk disappeared from sight in a smother of smoke and spray.

Over the spot where the junk had sunk, the *Hermione's* boat hovered in the oval patches of silvery light thrown by the light cruiser's searchlights, while the bowman could be seen prodding with his boat-hook at the floating debris in the hope of discovering any survivors.



"They've found some one, I think!" exclaimed Peter. "Yes; I'm sure of it."

A limp object was carefully hauled over the gunwale. The boat resumed her search until the *Hermione* made the signal for recall.

"One survivor!" hailed the officer in command of the boat. "He's pretty well done for, though!"

Quickly the cutter was hoisted in the davits. The ship's surgeon-lieutenant and several of the sick-bay staff were awaiting the patient, who was not only half-drowned but terribly burnt. His scanty clothing was scorched to such an extent that the calcined and saturated fabric could hardly be distinguished from the poor fellow's skin.

"Unconscious when we found him," volunteered the bowman. "Floatin' on his back, he was, restin' like on a bit o' plank."

Tenderly the sorry specimen of humanity was taken below. Once more the *Hermione* was set on her former course, and for the rest of the Middle Watch nothing more outside the usual run of routine occurred.

Seventeen hours after leaving Hong-Kong the *Hermione* dropped anchor off Amoy. The three survivors of the rammed junk were sent ashore, and arrangements made to receive the still unconscious Chinaman rescued from the burning craft.

It was not until after dinner that Lieutenant Grahame took the Commander considerably aback by bursting unceremoniously into the latter's cabin.

"By Jove, sir!" exclaimed Grahame excitedly, "we've let a badly-wanted Chink slip through our fingers. That big fellow—the one who came aboard over our bows, you'll recollect—is the pirate Tao Ching."

"Where did you get that cock-and-bull yarn from, Grahame, old lad?" inquired the incredulous Commander.

"From Wun Li, the messman, sir," replied Grahame. "The old villain sidled up to me and asked if I knew who 'Big size Chinaman' was. He told me it was Tao Ching. 'Why on earth didn't you say so this morning, Wun Li?' I asked. 'No makee ask me,' replied the oily rascal. 'You tellee me one-time mindee own business. Officer-mans all tellee me to shutee mouth an' no talkee. 'Sides, Tao Ching in shipee, Wun Li not safe: no can do. Tao Ching back in China-sidee, Wun Li him speakee an' officer-mans givee Wun Li muchee dollar.' Now, what can one do with a fellow like that, sir?"

"Let's hope he's wrong," rejoined the Commander. "Send him along to me, Grahame. I'll try to get to the bottom of this."

In due course the messman was shown into the Commander's cabin. Wun Li's usually bland features looked decidedly worried. He hardly expected when he metaphorically threw a bomb at Lieutenant Grahame that he would have to interview the formidable Commander.

Wun Li stuck to his story. He swore by his ancestors and declared himself ready to break a saucer—the most solemn rite of swearing an oath that a Chinaman can make—that the man in question was Tao Ching.

A message was promptly sent to the Chief of Police at Amoy, warning him of the presence of the notorious pirate. After a prolonged delay a reply was received suggesting that the honourable Captain commanding the English warship must be labouring under an unfortunate delusion, as Tao Ching had been captured by the Governor of Nan-ngan a month ago, and had suffered death by decapitation.

Captain Purvis accepted the statement without question. He had never heard of the Chinese custom of executing criminals by proxy. He sent for the Commander and "ticked him off" for his part of the incident. The Commander, in turn, was down upon Lieutenant Grahame; while that officer, smarting under the rebuff, soundly rated the luckless Chinese messman. Meanwhile, Tao Ching was lying low in the native quarter of the city of Amoy.

It was not until a couple of days later that the Chinaman rescued from the burning junk recovered consciousness.

Then he told his tale.

He was the owner and skipper of a junk running a cargo of edible birds' nests from Formosa to Swatow. Shortly after sunset on the second day out his craft was in collision with another junk. The crew of the latter boarded him, cut the throats of his three men, and batted him below. The pirates then looted the junk and set her on fire. After frantic efforts the Chinaman succeeded in releasing himself, but, unable to remain on board owing to the fierceness of the flames, he jumped into the water and swam to a spar, to which he clung until rescued by the *Hermione's* boat.

The light cruiser had left Amoy before the Chinaman told his tale. Consequently her officers and crew were in ignorance of the depredations made by the pirate junk which was acting in concert with Tao Ching's torpedo boat, the *Chen Su*. Neither were they aware that the junk they had rammed and sunk was the one that had plundered the craft they had subsequently discovered in flames.

Peter Annesley had seen two of the pirate crew sink with the rammed junk without making the slightest effort to save themselves. He had wondered at their utter indifference, but he would not have done so had he known that the two Chinamen were his assailants on board the Japanese liner *Hakodate*. In the glare of the searchlight they had recognised him, and, rather than risk detection, they preferred to go to their death in the waters of the Pacific. But before they went they told their comrades the name of the English officer in the boat. In turn, the rescued men informed Tao Ching. The pirate grunted with satisfaction at the news, but decided that his opportunity was not yet. He could afford to wait until he could strike silently and effectually at his unsuspecting prey.

## CHAPTER X

### MISSING

During the run up to Shanghai, Gutta Percha Band kept his protégés on the top-notch line. Patient and painstaking, he spared no effort to bring both Peter and Forsyth to the highest pitch of efficiency. Every trick at ring-craft that came within the rules of legitimate boxing he taught them, always with the sound advice never to lose their tempers.

On their part, the two chums played the game thoroughly and conscientiously. It was little short of purgatory to have to renounce smoking. The first three days of their self-accepted abstinence from cigarettes well-nigh reduced them to abject misery, but on the fourth day they discovered that the craving had passed.

In the dog-watches the pair donned the gloves and sparred with any of their messmates who cared to stand up to Annesley's powerful "left" or the paymaster-lieutenant's lightning-like "jabs." But the physical instructor took care not to put the two chums against each other. If, by chance, they found themselves friendly rivals in the final, then the better man would presumably win; but it would be a contest well worth watching. In that case, the Squadron Cup would already have been won by the *Hermione*, although the encounter would lack none of its zest.

Skipping, vaulting, moderate exercise with light dumb-bells, and, in short, every exercise that could be carried out on board that would assist in toning up the keen athletes, were vigorously pursued. The chums lost weight appreciably, but in return they developed muscle and brawn, and acquired a suppleness of limb and staying powers that gladdened the eyes of their exacting instructor.

"Go steady," cautioned Lieutenant Band, when the light cruiser dropped anchor off Shanghai. "I know you won't act the giddy goat ashore. If you've a chance, get into shorts and running-shoes and take a steady jog-trot somewhere into the country."

"Just what we thought of doing," rejoined Forsyth. "I have one or two things to square up in the office, but we ought to be able to go on the beach at seven bells.... I tell you what, Annesley: suppose you push off now and have a look round the place? You haven't been ashore at Shanghai before—I have."

"I'll have to wait till this afternoon," objected Annesley. "The laundry-man hasn't brought back my running-shorts, and I haven't any others fit to wear."

"Don't worry about that, old son," said Forsyth. "You cut on. I'll bring your gear ashore, and we can change at the Club. By the bye, you might lend me your suit-case. The ants played up with mine at Singapore, and I haven't had a chance to get another one."

To this proposal Annesley agreed, and ten minutes later he was speeding shorewards in the steam-cutter in the company of half a dozen other junior officers.

At four in the afternoon Peter hired a 'ricksha' and ordered a coolie to take him to the Club. Here he waited Forsyth's arrival, and waited in vain. Six o'clock struck. In less than another hour darkness would set in, and the Sub knew perfectly well that a jog-trot over the inferior and unfamiliar country outside the city was out of the question.

"Ten to one Forsyth can't get his ledger to balance," thought Annesley, who knew that to-morrow the ship's company was to "muster by open list" for payment, and that the paymaster-lieutenant had to have the coins placed in readiness for the monthly event. "It's no use my waiting any longer. I'll go back to the ship."

"Off already, Annesley?" inquired Dowell, the engineer-sub-lieutenant, who was sitting in a cane chair under the verandah and was nursing a tennis racket.

"Going aboard," announced Peter.

"There's no boat before three bells (7.30 p.m.)," responded Dowell. "If there were I'd be off too. Nothin' doin' in this dog-box. I don't play billiards and I'm dead off bridge. And you are, too, Richards, old thing?"

The "old thing"—he was a midshipman of eighteen—stretched his long limbs and yawned without restraint.

"Fed up to the back teeth," he replied. "Can't we go shares in a sampan?"

"Let's," agreed Dowell. "I don't mind telling you fellows I haven't as much as a red cent on me, or I shouldn't be here. Thanks be it's close on the end of the month. I'll square up with you on pay-day, Annesley."

It was nearly a quarter of an hour's walk from the Club to the landing-steps. At the latter place Dowell, who had experience in such matters, haggled with a villainous-looking Chinese boatman for the hire of a sampan to take the three officers off to the ship.

By this time the short tropical twilight was setting in. There was hardly any wind—barely sufficient to allow the huge mat-sails of several unwieldy junks to draw as they slowly crept seaward, down the tidal Hwang-pu.

"Ahoy, there!" suddenly shouted Peter, as a large yellow junk, propelled by huge sweeps, shot under the stern of a tramp-steamer and threatened to nip the sampan between her sides and the wharf wall.

"You put the wind up those chaps, Annesley," observed Dowell, as the junk swung ponderously to starboard to the accompaniment of shrill yells from her crew. "I thought they were going to jump overboard when you hailed."

Presently the outlines of the light cruiser loomed up in the starlight, for in less than ten minutes night had fallen.

"Boat ahoy!" came the look-out's hail.

"Aye, aye!" shouted Dowell in reply, as the sampan ran alongside. "You square up with the boatman, Peter, old son. I'll settle with you later. If he starts chewing the rag tell him, 'No can do.'"

As it happened, the sampan man seemed perfectly satisfied with the money Peter gave him. It was not until long after that the Sub made the discovery that he had paid the fellow exactly four times the fare agreed upon.

Going below, Peter made his way to the ship's office to commiserate with Forsyth upon having to work by electric

light in a stuffy cabin. Somewhat to his surprise he found the place locked up. In reply to his inquiry, a petty officer informed him that the paymaster-lieutenant had gone on the beach at seven bells (3.30 p.m.).

"Missed him somehow," soliloquised Annesley. "Don't see how I could, though."

At ten o'clock the liberty men returned. A little later the last boat for officers came alongside, but there was no sign of Forsyth. Thinking, perhaps, that he had been misinformed, and that his chum hadn't gone ashore, Peter went to the paymaster-lieutenant's cabin. Switching on the light, he soon made the discovery that the place was untenanted. Forsyth's name, he knew, was not in the leave-book—which it would have been had he intended to sleep ashore.

That night the air was hot and stifling. Most of the officers had brought their bedding on deck and were sleeping under the still-spread double-awnings. Rather perturbed at his chum's absence, Peter lay awake, listening to the half-hourly notes of the ship's bell and the monotonous "All's well!" of the sentries, until well into the Morning Watch he fell asleep.

"Commander wishes to see you, sir," announced a messenger while Peter was at breakfast.

Snatching up his cap, Annesley hastened to The Bloke's cabin. With the Commander was the Paymaster-Commander. Both men were looking very grave.

"Mornin', Mr. Annesley," exclaimed the Commander, acknowledging the Sub's salute. Then abruptly he demanded, "What's happened to Mr. Forsyth?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Didn't he go on the beach with you?"

"No, sir," replied Peter. "We arranged to meet at the Club. I waited more than an hour and he didn't show up."

"Do you know anything of his plans?" pursued the Commander.

Annesley explained the nature of the agreement with Forsyth.

"H'm," exclaimed The Bloke. He touched a bell. Presently a side-boy appeared.

"Pass the word for the corporal of the gangway," ordered the Commander.

The petty officer, when questioned, could only give the information that Mr. Forsyth had gone ashore, and that he carried a suit-case with the initials P.A.

"My suit-case, sir," explained Peter.

"What did it contain, do you know?"

"Shorts and running-shoes, sir."

The Commander remained silent for nearly half a minute.

"Carry on," he said, addressing the corporal of the gangway. "Now, Mr. Annesley, I had hoped that you would be able to throw light upon Mr. Forsyth's movements. He did not, I presume, make any other communication respecting his plans?"

"No, sir."

"Very well; that is all, Mr. Annesley."

Peter saluted and withdrew.

The Commander turned to the Accountant Officer.

"Strange case," he remarked. "Forsyth seemed a perfectly straightforward fellow, but one never knows. I remember when I was in the *Philada* in '04 an assistant paymaster deserted at Vladivostock. Goodness knows why. His accounts were O.K. Some sort of kink, I suppose."

"Forsyth's accounts are perfectly in order," declared the Paymaster-Commander. "Personally, I don't for one moment imagine that he has deserted. I'm inclined to the theory that he's been set upon by Chinese."

"Pooh, pooh!" scoffed the Commander. "Broad daylight—European quarters of the town—wide streets with dozens of white men about: that theory's impossible."

"Time will prove that, Gregory," rejoined the Paymaster-Commander. "Meanwhile, what do you propose to do?"

Essentially a man of action, the Commander outlined his plan. Placards both in English and Chinese were to be prepared and displayed in various parts of the city, offering a reward of 500 dollars for information leading to the recovery of the missing officer. An enlarged photograph of Forsyth, from a group of officers taken at Hong-Kong, was to be made, and lithographed reproductions attached to the placards. Telegraphic descriptions would be sent to all the neighbouring ports, and the Chinese Customs officials warned to keep a sharp look out on all outbound shipping.

"Seems all right," commented the Paymaster-Commander. "But it'll be rough luck on Annesley if he goes ashore again. He'll be held up before he goes fifty yards. That's one of the obvious disadvantages of having a double."

## CHAPTER XI

### HOW FORSYTH FARED

At seven bells on the previous day Paymaster-Lieutenant Forsyth had gone ashore with the express purpose of carrying out the proposed cross-country run with Peter Annesley.

He was in plenty of time, so instead of hiring a conveyance he strolled leisurely across the Garden Bridge and along the Bund.

"Now that I have a half-filled suit-case," he thought, "I may as well buy a few knick-knacks for my people at home. They'll stow easily—the knick-knacks, not my people, of course. I remember there is an old curiosity shop just inside the Chinese city. It won't take me half a shake."

With this resolution, Forsyth traversed the narrow belt comprising the French settlement and entered the native quarter. Here the streets were narrow, dirty, and crowded—a distinct contrast to the well-kept thoroughfares of the European district.

He soon found the shop he wanted—one of those dismal rooms, long and narrow and simply crowded with wares. Most of the stuff was absolutely worthless from a European's point of view, but stored away amidst the welter of rubbish were to be found almost priceless Ming ware, inlaid brasswork, lacquered and richly-carved boxes, and coral ornaments that, being hand-worked, must have represented a life's toil on the part of the poorly-paid craftsman.

Forsyth wandered through the place, a gravely-smiling Chinaman—one of the proprietors—at his elbow. Conversation consisted of two phrases, "Can do" and "No can do," according to the offer of dollars in payment for various articles. Bargaining consisted of Forsyth pointing to anything he fancied, and the Chinaman holding up his fingers to represent the number of coins he demanded.

In this manner the paymaster-lieutenant lost count of time. A keen judge of Chinese wares, he soon acquired several bargains, although he had already traversed a narrow passage some two hundred feet in length between the weird display of goods.

"By Jove! I'm cutting things pretty fine," he exclaimed, as he glanced at his watch. "Feenish, John, see you allee same sometime."

Retracing his steps, as he thought, Forsyth found himself in a narrow and seemingly deserted alley.

"Hello!" he muttered. "Must have taken a wrong turning. Don't remember this show. No matter. If I keep straight on I'm bound to find the main street."

The next moment a thick, sickly-smelling cloth was thrown over his head. Before he could raise his hands to free himself his arms were gripped from behind. At the same time, a rope was passed round his ankles and pulled taut.

For a brief second, Forsyth struggled desperately. Then, gasping for breath and inhaling volumes of nauseous vapour, he lost consciousness.

"Very neatly done, my brothers," exclaimed a short, keen-featured Chinaman, addressing three others as villainous-looking as himself. "There is no need to tie his limbs. Be quick, in case some meddlesome persons come this way."

Deftly they lifted the listless, unresisting Forsyth and carried him through an adjacent doorway into a dark and evil-smelling den.

One of the men lighted a lamp, knelt down, and placed his right ear against the floor. In the silence of the room could be heard the subdued gurgling of water.

"All is quiet," he reported.

A trap-door was then removed, revealing in the faint glimmer of the lantern the outline of a boat fretting at her tow-rope in a steady-running subterranean stream. Two of the men dropped into her, while the others lowered their captive into their outstretched arms. A third man—the one holding the lantern—followed; while the fourth remained.

"May good fortune attend you!" were his valedictory words as he noiselessly closed the trap-door.

The waterway was too narrow to permit the use of oars. One man in the bows and another in the stern propelled the unwieldy craft along by thrusting against the walls of the gully. For nearly a hundred yards they proceeded thus, until further progress was impeded by the hull of a junk moored to a rotting staging and athwart the entrance to the enclosed ditch.

Drawing a knife, the bowman struck the side of the junk with the haft—six deliberate taps. The signal was almost immediately answered by a voice answering that all was clear.

After a little delay the junk was sheered off for a couple of feet from the side of the wharf, and a large bamboo mat was dropped from the deck into the boat. With the mat rolled again and again round him, so that no part of him was visible, Forsyth was unceremoniously hurried on board the junk and carried aft. The boat was dropped astern and secured by a painter. Then, with the least possible delay, the junk hoisted her towering mat-sails; the securings were cast off, and, assisted by the heavy sweeps, she glided gently down the canal and gained that comparatively wide waterway—the Hwang-pu River—that flows past the quays and wharves of Shanghai to merge into the waters of the Pacific.

The Chinese crew were on tenterhooks. More than once during the passage to the open sea their nerves failed them. They knew the risk they ran of being overhauled by the Customs officials, and although the junk carried no cargo of a contraband nature, they knew that if the presence of the bound and insensible Englishman on board was discovered they would find themselves in a very awkward predicament. And when a stentorian "Ahoy!" startled them almost out of their wits, and they saw three "foreign devils" in a sampan close alongside, they were almost upon the point of leaping overboard. Little did Annesley know that he was within twenty yards of his luckless and unconscious chum.

Day had dawned before Forsyth regained his senses. That operation was of a gradual nature. Slowly his wits began to work. He felt horribly ill and weak. His throat seemed like a limekiln. His cramped limbs were incapable of following the dictates of his brain. When they did, he made the discovery that his ankles and wrists were bound with rice-grass rope.

Even then he could not reconcile himself to his surroundings. He was under the hazy impression that he was lying in his bunk and that some of his messmates had been playing a practical joke upon him.

At length he made the discovery that he was lying on a bare floor. In place of the round scuttle in his cabin on the *Hermione* there was a square port heavily barred, through which the grey morning light danced with every heave of the vessel. Then he realised that he was afloat and at sea.

Still racking his brains, he at length remembered his last conscious movements—a desperate, futile struggle against unseen assailants in the squalid alley in the native quarter of Shanghai.

"Shanghai—I've been Shanghaied this time," he muttered, and contrived to raise himself into a sitting posture. "I've been doped and smuggled off to sea. What for, I wonder?"

Intense resentment surged in his mind. Forsyth was not a man to knuckle under in adverse circumstances. Essentially a man of action, his first step was to regain the use of his muscular limbs and clear his lungs of the nauseating fumes of the chloroform.

Rolling over the floor until he reached the side of the cabin immediately under the port, he struggled into an upright position and drew in copious draughts of salt-laden air. Through the port he could command a fairly large expanse of sea and sky. There was land far away on the starboard hand. That knowledge, coupled with the position of the sun, told him that the vessel, whatever she was, was bound south.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a bolt being shot back. Instantly he dropped upon the floor, closed his eyes, and feigned unconsciousness.

The door opened. Forsyth raised his eyelids the merest fraction of an inch and looked.

The newcomer was a wiry, undersized Chinaman bearing a metal bowl filled with water. Bending over the apparently senseless Forsyth, he placed his clawlike fingers over the Englishman's heart. Satisfied that he was still breathing, the Chinaman left the bowl of water beside him and went out, locking the door behind him. "Good enough," thought Forsyth. "I'm on a junk. That Chink is armed. I'll swear that was a pistol he had hidden in his sash. Wonder how many of these precious rascals there are on board?"

Drinking sparingly of the liquid—he would have liked to have gulped the lot but for the suspicion that it might be drugged—Forsyth began to take steps to release himself from his bonds. The fact that his arms were bound behind his back gave him considerable misgivings. There was no rough projection in the cabin against which he could chafe the lashings. Impotently writhing for some time convinced him that it was hopeless to rid himself of the bonds in this way; he was only exhausting himself needlessly.

Then the bowl gave him an inspiration. It was made of thin brass. He felt the rim. It was too smooth to answer the purpose he wanted. The next step was to break the bowl. This he did by placing it against the bulkhead and squashing it with his feet until he was in possession of a jagged piece of metal about six inches in length—a rough-and-ready saw.

Wedging the strip of metal in a crevice between the door and its frame, Forsyth set to work to chip through the rope that secured his wrists. It was a long, awkward, and uncertain task, performed solely by the sense of touch, since his arms were bound behind him. Again and again he rasped his hand against the rough edge.

"If it's cutting the rope as easily as it's cutting my skin I don't mind at all," he soliloquised.

For quite half an hour he persevered, although obliged to desist at intervals to rest his aching muscles. Again and again he had to wedge the brass more firmly. Then, almost before he realised that the work was accomplished, the cords

snapped asunder. His arms were free.

It was now a simple matter to unlash his ankles. Then withdrawing the jagged strip of brass, he hid the fragment of the basin in the darkest corner of the place and proceeded to massage his chafed and bruised wrists and ankles, until once more the blood circulated freely and power came back to his hitherto benumbed limbs.

Softly pacing the limited floor space, Forsyth kept straining his ears for the first indication of another visit from his gaoler. More than an hour elapsed before he heard the Chinaman's footsteps shuffling along the deck.

Lying flat on the floor, the paymaster-lieutenant wrapped several separate strands of rope round his ankles and folded his arms behind him. The door was unbolted and the Chinaman entered.

Fearful lest the fellow should examine the lashings, Forsyth had all his work cut out to simulate unconsciousness. His heart was thumping violently when the Chinaman bent over him.

With a grunt the Oriental stood up. Evidently he had not noticed that the bowl of water had vanished. He shuffled towards the door.

In a trice Forsyth regained his feet—so noiselessly that the unsuspecting man was unaware of the danger that threatened him. Then, with all the power at his command, the Englishman drove a straight right at the Chinaman's head. His fist caught the fellow fairly behind the right ear. He dropped like a felled ox, Forsyth catching him ere he crashed upon the bare planks with blood welling from his nose and ears.

"Thought so," muttered Forsyth, as he drew a pistol from the man's sash. "Automatic. Nice little weapon this.... Yes; magazine fully charged. Now for it."

Releasing the safety-cord and cocking the weapon, Forsyth went out through the wide-open doorway. He found himself in a sort of wide alley-way under the steeply inclined poop-deck. From thence he could command a view of the waist and towering fo'c'sle of the junk. Against the foremast were three Chinamen so engaged upon a game of fan-tan that they had no attention for anything else. No one else was visible on deck, but Forsyth knew perfectly well that at least one man was aft at the helm.

Forsyth had to make up his mind quickly. If he directed his attention to the three fan-tan players he would lay himself open to a near attack from the Chinaman or Chinamen on the poop. On the other hand, if the poop was well manned he might expect a fierce resistance, and before he could clear the after-part of the junk the three gamblers for'ard would doubtless go to the assistance of the rest of the crew, and Forsyth would still be threatened with a shot or a stab in the back. In any case, he meant to take the initiative and attack. It would never do to barricade himself in one of the cabins under the poop-deck and await a concentrated rush on the part of the crew.

Cautiously he stole from under the break of the poop and gained the foot of the ladder. The fan-tan enthusiasts were still intent upon their game.

At the massive tiller stood a tall Chinaman. He was stripped to the waist; his huge chest and arms were knotted with enormous muscles. He looked the picture of brute strength. Right aft, seated on the taffrail, was an equally tall but cadaverous-looking fellow with an armoury of pistols and knives in his voluminous sash.

The moment Forsyth's head appeared above the edge of the poop the helmsman uttered a warning yell, abandoned the tiller, and rushed towards the "foreign devil."

## CHAPTER XII



## THE FIGHT ON THE POOP

Levelling his automatic, Forsyth fired at the Chinaman's head. The man pitched forward, his body twitching convulsively.

The next instant the lean man drew a revolver and fired. The bullet whizzed perilously close to Forsyth's head. Before the Chinaman could let rip with a second shot, Forsyth fired twice in quick succession. The man threw up his arms, toppled backwards against the taffrail, and fell with a resounding splash into the creamy wake of the swiftly-moving craft.

"Two of 'em," chuckled Forsyth grimly. "I've cleared the poop, at any rate."

But his elation was shortlived. Underrating the natural cunning of the Oriental, he had jumped to the conclusion that his first shot had taken instant and fatal effect, and that the huge Chinaman was as dead as mutton. On the contrary, the bullet had gone wide of the mark, and the helmsman had feigned death.

Even as Forsyth turned to see what the men for'ard were doing, the great Chink threw himself upon him. Taken unawares, the Englishman was hurled to the deck, his automatic flying from his grasp, his assailant's powerful hands gripping his throat.

Grasping the Chinaman's wrists, Forsyth strove vainly to relax the suffocating pressure. Fortunately he kept his wits about him to realise that further effort in that direction was futile. Bringing up his knees sharply, he dealt his opponent a sharp blow in the pit of the stomach. The man, temporarily winded, rolled over on his side, still holding on grimly to Forsyth's throat. The Englishman, with a short, heavy jab, dealt the man a paralysing blow on the point of his chin. His grip relaxed. The combatants rolled apart, each lying gasping for breath upon the deck.

Forsyth was the first to recover his feet. The Chinaman attempted to follow his example, until with a crashing left the Englishman sent him down. Even then the fellow showed a grim tenacity.

Shielding his head, he made an effort to crawl within reach of the automatic. Forsyth checkmated this move by forestalling him. Regaining possession of the pistol, he settled the business by putting a bullet through the Chinaman's head.

He was only just in time. Alarmed by the conflict, the fan-tan players had bolted down the fore-hatch, to reappear with half a dozen other ruffians. It was now a battle of one against nine.

Forsyth had now six cartridges in his automatic. He had no more ammunition. The Chinaman he had shot at the beginning of the affair had fallen overboard and his armoury with him. There were no more firearms available on the poop; while, on the other hand, the Chinks for'ard did not appear to possess weapons other than knives.

A knife thrown with unerring arm hurtled through the air. Had not Forsyth leapt nimbly aside he would have been transfixed with the weapon. As it was, it missed him by inches, burying itself four inches deep into the deck.

Two more followed in quick succession, one ripping Forsyth's sleeve. He promptly took cover behind a chest secured to the skylight. With that the nine Chinamen rushed aft and stormed up the poop-ladder. Keeping cool, the Englishman waited until the foremost were almost on the top step—for the ladder was wide enough to accommodate three men abreast—and then fired two shots in rapid succession. By aiming low, the result justified the expenditure of ammunition. The foremost Chinaman was shot through the groin, the bullet passing completely through him and killing a man immediately behind by striking him in the throat, while another received a mortal wound through the lungs.

"Four cartridges left—five Chinks to be dealt with," said Forsyth to himself.

Wisely withholding his fire, for his remaining adversaries had given back and were no longer in a position for a raking shot, Forsyth awaited the next phase of the attack. He kept well back in order to be out of range of those cleverly-thrown knives, and also he was not at all sure whether the four Chinamen huddled across the break of the poop were really dead. "Playing 'possum," he knew, was one of the accomplishments of the Oriental.

Meanwhile the five had disappeared from view. Forsyth concluded that they were sheltering under the poop and mustering up their courage for another rush, in which he was disagreeably surprised. A knife lashed to a bamboo was thrust through the open skylight. Its vicious jab just missed his legs.

"Would you!" he exclaimed, and with a bound jumped upon the wooden frame of the skylight. As he expected, his weight carried away the brass supports, the hinged flap closed, nipping one of the Chinamen as neatly as a rat caught in a trap.

The glass splintered to fragments. He could see the back and limbs of the wretched man, his legs jerking violently and scattering the remaining three right and left. Taking advantage of a sure shot, Forsyth accounted for another of his antagonists, sending the last two scuttling for safety. Then, waiting until he was satisfied that the man trapped in the skylight was permanently out of the running, he backed away and leant against the taffrail to recover his breath and decide upon his next plan.

During this time the junk, being left to her own devices, had run up into the wind. The mat-foresail, taken aback, was slatting violently. Fortunately there was only a slight breeze blowing, or the unwieldy craft would either have been dismantled or capsized. As it was, she merely drifted bodily to lee'ard.

It was now a case of stalemate. The two Chinamen under the poop-deck could not venture out without becoming an easy mark for the Englishman's automatic. On the other hand, Forsyth could not take the initiative without running a grave risk of being stabbed as he descended the ladder, to say nothing of laying himself open to a knife-thrust if he attempted to enter the gloomy cabins in which the desperate men were lurking. So far, the honours of war rested with him; but he had the disconcerting knowledge that his assailants—desperate and cunning devils—might be hatching some diabolical scheme to win the day.

The heat of the encounter passed away, and Forsyth began to be conscious of a terrific thirst. There was no fresh water to be had, the tanks being in the hold. The Chinamen could quench their thirst; he could not.

The idea of making junk out of ropes' ends, setting it alight, and dropping it down the skylight entered his head. He still possessed matches. If he could smother his antagonists out of it, the result would be speedily decided. But on reflection he realised that smoking out had its disadvantages. Supposing he set fire to the vessel she would burn like tinder, in which case he would almost literally be out of the frying-pan (the poop—it resembled one in the pitiless rays of the sun) into the fire. He had no desire to emulate the example of Casabianca.

"If I hang on long enough," he decided, "I'll be bound to sight a vessel. We ought to be right in the steamer track. Then I can hoist a signal of distress."

He took to pacing the poop, maintaining a respectable distance from the broken skylight and keeping a sharp look out both for an attack via the ladder and for indications of approaching vessels.

Shortly after noon—judging by the position of the sun—a faint blur of smoke appeared away to the sou'-west. Half an hour later the outlines of a long, low-lying craft with two squat funnels appeared. Somewhat curiously Forsyth remarked that she was heading straight for the drifting junk.

"Torpedo-boat she looks like," he decided. "She's showing no ensign. She's not one of ours. Jap, perhaps. 'Tany rate, she'll answer the purpose."

The torpedo-boat—a very old type of Yarrow boat—approached to within a cable's length, slowed down, and made a complete circle round the junk. Forsyth could make out that her crew were rigged out in some sort of blue uniform, and that they were yellow men. One or two were studiously keeping the junk under observation by means of binoculars.

Presently the torpedo-boat began to close. Men were standing by with heaving lines and fenders. Forsyth signed to them to come aboard, but refrained from abandoning his post of vantage on the poop.

Admirably handled, the torpedo-boat brought up alongside. Half a dozen men sprang on board, and, evincing no

surprise at the ghastly corpses, made their way aft. One of them, evidently the leader, although his dress bore no distinction, advanced with outstretched hand.

Unhesitatingly Forsyth tendered his. Without the slightest warning, the fellow gripped Forsyth's wrist in a vice-like hold. Three others flung themselves on the unprepared Englishman and bore him to the deck.

Forsyth was in the power of the notorious pirate, Tao Ching.

## CHAPTER XIII

### MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Forty-eight hours later the pirate torpedo-boat, *Chen Su*, dropped anchor off the city of Tao-Lung. Tao Ching was exceedingly elated over the success of his mission. As soon as he had gone ashore at Amoy from the *Hermione* he had taken train south until he could without risk communicate by wireless with the *Chen Su*. A few hours later he was on board. His next step was to hasten to a secluded rendezvous within a few miles of Shanghai, when he instructed some of his numerous satellites to hire a junk and to shadow Peter Annesley when, as he probably would, he went ashore. Their orders were to kidnap the English officer without using undue violence and convey him to the junk. The *Chen Su* would be cruising in the offing ready to tranship the captive and take him to Tao-Lung, where he would be handed over to his enemy, Li Fan, Deputy-Governor of Nan-ngan.

So far, he thought, Tao Ching had scored in spite of the Englishman's bold effort to regain his freedom. But there was one point upon which the pirate was woefully adrift. He was under the delusion that he had captured Peter Annesley—a delusion that had been bolstered up by the fact that Peter Annesley and Forsyth were as alike in appearance as it was possible to imagine.

Tao Ching took no risks with his captive. On board the *Chen Su* he was kept under lock and key, an armed seaman being posted day and night outside the door. In addition, Forsyth's arms and legs were secured with steel fetters. Otherwise he was not ill-treated, the pirate showing no animosity for the slaughter of several of their number on board the junk.

Under cover of night Forsyth was conveyed ashore and taken to the waterside prison. Here he was shut up in the same cell that had been occupied by the convicted Tao Ching only a few weeks previously. Now Tao Ching was not only a pardoned criminal: he was the trusted emissary of the powerful Li Fan, the virtual ruler of the Province of Nan-ngan.

It was close on midnight when Li Fan received a telephonic message from the prison that the English prisoner had arrived. Within twenty minutes Li Fan, rubbing his fat hands with glee, was secretly admitted within the portals of the grim building where, as he thought, his enemy lay at his mercy.

Feeling utterly bewildered and exhausted, unable to find out why he had been deprived of his liberty, Forsyth was trying to fall asleep on his rough couch. He had never lost hope of release. His unbounded faith in the far-reaching power of the British Navy had not deserted him. The circumstances were confusing. He had been kidnapped by nondescriptly garbed Chinamen; his captors on the torpedo-boat were wearing uniforms. Supposing he had been kidnapped, in the first place, with an eye to ransom, how came it that he was now in a large and apparently official prison? He was certain that he had not committed any breach of the law of the Chinese Republic. Why, then, was he being held in rigorous confinement?

His perplexing thoughts were interrupted by the sound of bolts being shot back. The door was flung open and a corpulent Chinaman, wearing native dress and attended by a couple of armed men, entered the cell. Hitherto in total darkness, the place was now illuminated by two candle lanterns.

Feeble though the glimmer was, the sudden transition from darkness to light was so blinding that for some seconds Forsyth could distinguish hardly anything. Gradually he became aware of the fact that he was being intently scrutinised by the corpulent visitor.

"You recognise me?" demanded Li Fan, speaking in tolerable English.

"No, I do not," replied Forsyth.

"Look again," continued the Chinaman. "Perhaps I alter. You—you have not so very much."

Forsyth nodded in agreement. He felt absolutely certain that he had never before set eyes on his inquisitor. Evidently there was a mistake, but a spice of devilment in Forsyth's composition, coupled with a sense of burning resentment at his arbitrary treatment, urged him to "chip the fat old blighter."

"I alter since I be at English school," continued Li Fan; then, hastening to correct the impression that he meant a mission school at one of the old Treaty Ports, he added, "In England. Remember when you at Broadwinton School?"

Forsyth had never been there. He knew the school well by name. His first impression that the Chinaman was labouring under a delusion was confirmed.

"What then?" he asked, in pursuit of his determination to do a little "leg-pulling." Later on, he would prove his identity, and then, he felt convinced, would come release with ample apologies.

"I am Li Fan!" announced the Deputy-Governor of Nan-ngan majestically.

He paused, expecting to see consternation written large over his captive's face.

"And you," he continued, pointing an accusing finger—the nails of which were six inches in length, giving it a claw-like appearance—"and you are Annesley."

Forsyth did not reply. His brain was working rapidly. Up to a certain point he was prepared to treat the conversation as a joke. Now he realised that there was something very sinister behind it. The Chinaman had evidently gone to very great length to get the supposed Annesley into his clutches. His reference to their schooldays pointed to the fact that there was something of the nature of a feud of long standing. Annesley was Forsyth's chum, but he had never mentioned anything of a quarrel with a Chinese youth. And solely because he was Annesley's chum, Forsyth was prepared, if necessary, to deceive Li Fan and screen Peter from his animosity.

"If you say I'm Annesley——" he began.

"You are," interrupted Li Fan, his voice rising almost to a screech. "Years ago you makee mock of the spirits of my illustrious ancestors. You makee me place myself in the dust! Now I gettee revenge."

"Carry on, then," rejoined Forsyth calmly, although, having heard of various refinements of Chinese cruelty, he felt a chill sweep through him.

"Oh yes, I carry on," resumed the now infuriated Li Fan, his command of English becoming confused in his anger. "Before I finish you shoutee mercy. Execution-sword muchee too kind."

Li Fan turned to his attendants and gave them certain instructions. Then, with a malevolent glance at his captive, he swept out of the cell.

Forsyth's experience of torture commenced forthwith. Fettered and chained to the wall, he was left with a bowl of water and a dish of roast-meat just beyond his reach. For twenty hours he remained thus, until acute hunger and a burning thirst reduced him to alternate periods of frenzy and despair.

Shortly after sunset on the day following the Deputy-Governor of Nan-ngan's interview with his victim, Li Fan

prepared for another journey to the waterside prison.

Just as he was on the point of leaving his palace, a servant appeared bearing a number of newspapers, both English and Chinese. Anxious to read of the English officer's disappearance and of the theories concerning his mysterious spiriting away, Li Fan turned at once to the pages of the *Shanghai Bulletin*.

He read—and gradually his eyes began to bulge. There was a photograph of the missing officer—it was a striking likeness of his prisoner—but the name given was not Annesley but Forsyth.

In hot haste he telephoned through to Pi-li Chan, a town about twenty miles distant, whither the pirate, Tao Ching, had retired to his house to enjoy the proceeds of his coup, for the kidnapping of Forsyth had resulted in a sum of a thousand dollars paid out of Li Fan's private purse.

Tao Ching had a few hours previously heard of the mistake he had made, but he expressed neither surprise nor regret when he heard the voice of his master upbraiding him.

"If I have made a mistake, Most Excellent Deputy-Governor Li Fan," he replied, "then I will make ample amends by securing the other Englishman. To-morrow I will take the *Chen Su* to Shanghai and await my opportunity."

"Do so," rejoined Li Fan curtly, and hung up the receiver.

The wily pirate, Tao Ching, smiled grimly. He had already decided to "await his opportunity." South China was getting a bit too hot for him. With a civil war in progress, he realised that he stood a better chance by throwing in his lot with the Northern forces, who looked like inflicting a crushing defeat upon their opponents. There was also another inducement. At Shanghai he would open negotiations with the captain of the British ship, *Hermione*, offering to reveal the whereabouts of the missing Forsyth and to betray Li Fan—provided he was granted immunity and a large monetary reward.

Li Fan was now faced with the proposition what to do with his captive. The easiest solution was to put Forsyth to death; but, on consideration, the Deputy-Governor of Nan-ngan decided that in all probability he could use Forsyth as a decoy to lure Annesley into his clutches. The more he thought of the suggestion, the more it appealed to him. He therefore gave orders that the English prisoner was to be given restricted liberty, and to be well fed and treated with certain consideration. For the present the time was not ripe for Li Fan to make his proposals to Forsyth to lure Peter Annesley to the city of Tao-Lung.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE SEARCH FOR THE TREASURE

Three days after Forsyth's disappearance the *Hermione* left Shanghai in execution of previous orders. The mysterious event had cast a deep gloom over the ship's company, since it could only be concluded that the paymaster-lieutenant had met his death either by accident or foul play. Annesley, especially, was very downhearted at the loss of his chum, since they had planned to meet one another ashore on the very day of Forsyth's failure to return to the ship.

After a brief visit to a Japanese port, the *Hermione* was ordered south, and in due course found herself off the mouth of the Kin-lung-ho, where she was to remain till further orders to protect British interests in the impending operations between the rival armies of the Chinese Republic.

One forenoon Captain Purvis sent for Annesley to report in his cabin.

"I'm going to send you up the river on a surveying job," announced the skipper. "The knowledge may come in very

useful. Just at present things are a bit quiet. The Northern Army has had a set-back, so it is unlikely that there will be any scrapping in this part of the country for some months. I've arranged matters with the mandarin of the district, although he's none too sure that his authority will be recognised up-country. At any rate, there's your permit to conduct sounding operations in the Kin-lung-ho. You'll take away the picket-boat and make all necessary arrangements."

"Very good, sir," replied the Sub.

"And," continued Captain Purvis, with the suspicion of a wink, "if you choose to do a little scratching on your own account somewhere in the paddy-fields around Tao-Lung I'll raise no objection. Nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse."

"Thank you, sir."

"Nothing to thank me for, Mr. Annesley," protested the Owner laughingly. "In a way we're jointly interested in a certain matter. But don't run needless risks for the sake of a phantom treasure. You'd better get authority from the Governor at Tao-Lung to dig. He'll probably raise no objection if you show him the mandarin's letter. That's all, I think. No; there's one more thing. Report progress by wireless at 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. daily."

Annesley took the proffered documents, saluted, and withdrew.

He welcomed the task. It was something to occupy his mind beyond the usual routine on board. It might help him to smooth over his grief concerning the loss of his chum, although to forget was beyond his power.

At two bells in the afternoon watch the picket-boat, manned and armed, got under way, her complement consisting of Sub-Lieutenant Peter Annesley in command, six bluejackets, two engine-room ratings, and a Chinaman who acted as cook and interpreter. Each man had his rifle and bayonet stowed away in the fore-cabin, while a 3-pounder quick-firer was carried out of sight lest its presence on its mounting might ruffle the susceptibilities of the Chinese.

For the first twenty miles all was plain sailing, for that part of the river was well charted and carried a depth of not less than four fathoms. Beyond that point, although the Kin-lung-ho maintained a fairly uniform width, it shoaled considerably, the channel being badly marked as it wandered between invisible mud-banks.

Running aground with monotonous frequency was the order of the day, coupled with engine trouble owing to the water intakes becoming choked with mud. It was terrifically hot in spite of double awnings, while at night myriads of mosquitoes added to the discomforts of the picket-boat's crew.

Nevertheless, it was interesting work. Every cast of the lead had to be recorded, reduced to mean tide level, and the result "plotted" on the chart. Objects ashore—the banks were lined with buildings, including dozens of pagodas—had to be noted whenever they formed reliable "leading-marks," while the strength of the tidal current and the rise and fall had to be duly observed for future use.

At length the picket-boat dropped anchor on the port-hand side of the river abreast of the city of Tao-Lung. It was then close on sunset, and too late for Peter to pay a ceremonious visit to the Governor. So, during the short twilight, Annesley sat on the cabin-top feasting his eyes upon the scene and trying to reconstruct the action in which his great-grandfather had played no mean part. He tried to imagine the British warships—mostly sailing-craft with a few grotesque paddle-steamers—belching out shot-shell from their muzzle-loading ordnance upon the stockaded fort of Tao-Lung. In the 'forties the river must have been considerably deeper than at present.

Then the landing of the red-coated, shakoed troops, advancing literally shoulder to shoulder against a straggly fire of jingals and arrows, the men carefully protecting their flint-locks from the blinding downpour. They had to advance miles before they rushed the Chinese defences. To-day Tao-Lung, grown from a mere village to a teeming city, had crept right down to the banks of the river. More than that, a considerable portion of the population had taken to living afloat, and tier upon tier of junks lined the water-front.

Drawing the copy of his great-grandfather's diary from his pocket, Peter tried to identify the marks given for the recovery of the buried gold vases. The turret on the extreme eastern part of the wall of Tao-Lung—where was that? Was

it simply blotted out by the seemingly endless vista of roofs? Or had the fort been razed and another structure built on its site? Then, again, the isolated pagoda to the west of the fort: how was one to recognise that? There were pagodas by the score—to the uninitiated as like as beans on a beanstalk.

"Talk about a Chinese puzzle," thought Peter. "This is one with a vengeance. It will be an interesting bit of work trying to unravel the clues. Now I'm here, I'll have a jolly good shot at it."

Soon after daybreak, Annesley was up and about. The crew breakfasted, the boat was cleaned up and down, and made shipshape. Then, in his white drill uniform, the Sub steered the picket-boat alongside a stone jetty and, accompanied by the coxswain and the interpreter, stepped ashore to pay his respects to the chief official of the city of Tao-Lung.

Crowds of curious Chinese had gathered at the landing, for Europeans were rare in those parts. Forsyth, it will be remembered, had been conveyed secretly ashore and under cover of darkness. Only a dozen or so strictly secretive men knew of his presence in the city.

Through the interpreter Peter gathered that the Governor of Nan-ngan was away on a visit to the President of the Southern Republic at Canton, and that the Deputy-Governor was indisposed. That statement was, to a certain extent, correct. Li Fan, alarmed at the arrival of the British picket-boat, refused to stir out of his room. Quite erroneously, he had jumped at the conclusion that the bluejackets were there to make inquiries after his prisoner, Paymaster-Lieutenant Forsyth.

Had he wanted, Li Fan could have ordered his men to seize the foreign devils, or even massacre them in cold blood. But it was no easy matter to hide all traces of such an act, and Li Fan had a decided horror of the far-reaching arm of the British Navy. So he laid low, and ordered the Chief of Police to receive the English officer and inquire what he wanted.

The Chief of Police was almost as alarmed as was the Deputy-Governor, for he was responsible to Li Fan for Forsyth's safe custody. But his terror of his master was greater than his fear of the handful of "foreign devils," and with obsequious kow-tows he greeted Annesley to the city of Tao-Lung.

Producing his credentials, Peter requested permission "to set up an observation station ashore" to assist in improving the navigation of the Kin-lung-ho, and thus bring European sea-borne trade to the very gates of Tao-Lung city.

"And where does the honourable officer propose to set up his observation station?" inquired the Chief of Police through the interpreter.

"Over there," replied Peter, giving a vague wave of his hand in the direction of the paddy-swamps on the other side of the river.

The Chinese official, feeling greatly relieved to think that the Englishman's visit had nothing to do with his companion in the waterside prison, promised to put the application favourably to the Deputy-Governor and to let him have a reply with the least possible delay.

Left more or less to his own devices, Annesley improved upon the delay by getting the interpreter to question the onlookers as to various buildings in the city. Did the old fort still remain? Were there any pagodas that were not of recent date?

Aided by a judicious distribution of coin, Annesley got practically all the information he required. He was told that the fort remained much in the same state as since it was first built four hundred years ago, only that a wireless station had recently been constructed on the walls. Concerning the pagodas, these were all modern, with two exceptions. The latter were pointed out and their peculiarities described.

In less than half an hour, the Chief of Police returned with the intimation that the Deputy-Governor had no objection to the honourable officer's proposal, but in view of the fact that Tao-Lung was within the war-zone (a piece of bluff, for the rival armies were at least 400 miles away), he was sorry to have to refuse permission for the Englishman to land

again at the city of Tao-Lung.

"Many thanks to the Deputy-Governor for his kindness and consideration," replied Peter. "Please inform him that we will strictly conform to his conditions."

With that Annesley re-embarked. He had got all he wanted. There was nothing to be gained by wasting precious time in this comparatively modern Chinese city.

Ten minutes' steaming was sufficient to enable the picket-boat to back away from the steps, thread her way between tiers of moored junks, and to cross the muddy river. Arriving within twenty yards of the malodorous flats fringing the opposite bank, the boat's head was pointed upstream while Annesley examined the shore for a suitable landing-place.

At length he found what seemed likely to serve his purpose—a decaying pier fashioned of bamboo poles and a platform of camphor-wood planks. Soundings alongside the pierhead gave a depth of eight feet, sufficient to allow the picket-boat to remain afloat at all states of the tide, for, although Tao-Lung was a long distance from the sea, the influence of the tide was felt for nearly thirty miles above the city.

"All right, coxswain," said Peter, satisfied with his investigations. "We'll lay out a kedge for'ard in case of accidents. See that the fires are banked, although we won't do any steaming for a couple of days, unless unforeseen circumstances crop up."

"Very good, sir," replied the imperturbable coxswain, although in his mind he could not help wondering what possessed his officer to bring up off that desolate shore. For desolate it was. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing to be seen but rice-fields. There was no sign of human habitation. The coolies who usually tended the crops were evidently employed elsewhere, for it wanted some weeks to harvest. With the exception of a low, whale-back eminence about a mile from the landing-place the whole country was as flat as the Fens of Old England.

Telling off some of the crew to carry the surveying instruments, shovels, and picks, together with a tent, provisions, and cooking utensils, Peter prepared to go ashore.

"Be careful, sir," cautioned the coxswain. "Them piles seem none too good."

"I'll be careful," Peter reassured him, adding that if any of the boat's crew wanted a run ashore they could do so, provided two hands remained on watch.

Peter's first step was to take a bearing with a prismatic compass upon the old pagoda. He found that he was 17° out. Skirting the beach until the reading gave N. 40° W., he now found that he was considerably closer to the town than he should have been. In other words, the second bearing—that of the tower on the wall of the fort—gave an angle of 63°. That meant he would have to go inland, keeping on the line of the first bearing, and taking observations at regular intervals until the second bearing gave N. 10° E. When that occurred, he would be on or very near the spot where the gold vases were buried eighty odd years ago.

For nearly a mile and a half the men forced their way through the tenacious grass. Frequently they were knee-deep in mud and water. They had not the foggiest notion of their young officer's object, for Peter had decided not to state the reason for this arduous tramp through the paddy-fields. Should success attend his efforts, then he would take care that the bluejackets would reap some reward for their share in the enterprise.

Gradually the sextant angle diminished until it recorded the required 50°. Then light dawned upon Peter's mind. He found himself standing upon the side of the ridge of comparatively firm ground that took the form in plan of an elongated lozenge, with the greatest diameter parallel to the direction of the river. At some time since 1840 the Kin-lung-ho had burst its banks and had flooded miles of country. The rising ground had escaped the inundation, and when the river found a new bed it had been considerably diverted from its former course by the wedge-shaped obstruction. Consequently, the spot where Richard Annesley had buried the gold vases had been unaffected by the flood, but where the British Fleet had anchored to bombard the Chinese position was now nothing but a reeking swamp.

Carefully checking his observations, Peter set the example by a vigorous piece of spade-work, assisted by the



bluejackets. For three hours they toiled in relays. The sun was scorchingly hot. The ground, although swampy, was encumbered with a network of tenacious roots, while the enervating heat caused a dank vapour to rise from the moist earth until the conditions were similar to toiling in a hothouse.

At four feet the diggers encountered water. Such a contingency never occurred to Annesley. His great-grandfather's journal never mentioned the fact; so Peter considered it safe to conclude that he was wide of the mark.

"No deeper," he ordered. "Now start cutting a trench in this direction."

The men carried on, still metaphorically "at sea" as to the reason for the operation. Peter, although a bit disappointed, was not sanguine enough to expect to strike his gold mine at the first attempt.

During the afternoon they had one visitor. An old, bent, and weather-beaten Chinaman came plodding along. His curiosity raised by the sight of the foreigners, he turned aside and looked on. He was clad in a ragged cotton shirt, and wore a kind of boots made of straw. Over his shoulder he bore a long bamboo pole balanced horizontally. At one end was a basket; at the other four cormorants—birds that in China are tamed and employed to catch fish for their master.

"Rum old chap that, sir," remarked one of the bluejackets. "Fancy 'im a-rearin' cormorants. Down where I come from—Poole way—they pays a couple o' bob a head for every cormorant wot's shot. I 'eard tell as 'ow a cormorant eats seven pound o' fish a day. Seems a bit curious about us, 'e do."

"Hardly to be wondered at," replied the Sub. "What do you think an English farmer would say or do if a party of Chinamen appeared and began digging in his field?"

At last the Chinaman shuffled off and was lost to sight in the grass. Peter gave no further thought to him; but he little suspected who the fellow was.

When well out of sight, the Chinaman straightened his bent back, the wizened look on his face vanished. He set off at a smart pace towards the river.

He was none other than Tao Ching. The redoubtable pirate had earlier in the day been on his way down the river in his sampan to board the *Chen Su* in order to carry out his intention of clearing out of Tao-Lung and going to Shanghai to join the Northern Army. Quite by accident his sampan passed close to the *Hermione's* picket-boat. He recognised the officer in command as Annesley.

That discovery temporarily altered his plans. He immediately went ashore and sought an audience with the Deputy-Governor, Li Fan.

Li Fan's astonishment was great when he learnt that his old enemy was in the neighbourhood of Tao-Lung; but he was very dubious as to how to proceed to get Annesley into his power. He was far too cautious to attempt to seize the English officer and his men.

"Let Your Excellency's mind be at rest," declared Tao Ching. "For two hundred dollars I will guarantee to bring the English officer to you a prisoner. And none of his fellow-countrymen will know what has befallen him. Is that a bargain, Excellency?"

Li Fan hesitated. Then his faith in the pirate's cunning got the better of his doubts.

"It is a bargain, Tao Ching," he replied.

Tao Ching's next step was to wireless the *Chen Su*, ordering her to draw fires, as the projected voyage had been indefinitely postponed. Then, having disguised himself as a fisherman, he set out to discover a reason for Peter Annesley's movements amidst the paddy-fields beyond the Kin-lung-ho.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE TYPHOON

"'Tain't 'arf a swot!" exclaimed one of the bluejackets, wiping the perspiration from his face and gloomily eyeing the results of the day's work. "Talk about a bloomin' coolie. 'E's got a soft job compared with ourn."

The men had knocked off for the day. They were sitting on boxes and were engaged in consuming a well-earned meal. Their officer, having seen that they were provided for, was again taking compass-bearings to make doubly sure that his previous observations were quite accurate.

"That's a fact," agreed another seaman. "But, say wot you like, Mr. Annesley 'e don't spare himself. He's been sloggin' in like the rest of us, though it beats me wot it's all about." He glanced at his blistered palms—blistered notwithstanding their usual state of horniness. "Talkin' of diggin', that reminds me of when——"

The bluejacket's reminiscences were interrupted by Annesley's voice.

"We'll camp here to-night, lads," he announced. "Then we can resume to-morrow before the sun's too high. Get the tent rigged up. Jenkins, I want you to return to the picket-boat. It's now a quarter to five. You'll get there well before six. Tell the coxswain to send a wireless to *Hermione*: 'Land operations progressing. No result to date.' Have you got that?"

"Yes, sir," replied the man, and repeated the message to show that he had. Then, donning his canvas jumper and putting on his belt and sidearms, he picked up his rifle and set off towards the landing-stage where the picket-boat lay.

The rest of the party had quite a jolly evening. The tent was rigged up, a fire lighted—for with the setting of the sun the air was decidedly chilly, especially to men who had toiled and sweated for hours in the hot sunshine. The men yarned, sang, and smoked. Peter joined in, although he still conscientiously kept off tobacco. This was one of the many occasions when he was sorely tempted to indulge in "just one cigarette."

At ten o'clock "lights out" was ordered. Watches had been set, Peter taking middle watch—the most trying of the hours of darkness, since it cuts into a man's spell of sleep.

The stars were shining brightly when Peter took on. It was hardly a formal task. Although there was no danger to be anticipated, there might be wild animals prowling around, to say nothing of thieves who might be tempted to make off with some of the valuable instruments or even the rifles from the sides of the sleepers.

Annesley had not been on watch for more than half an hour before he became aware that the sky had become rapidly overcast. The stars vanished from sight; a low moaning noise presaged the approach of a violent wind. In less than ten minutes it was raining heavily. The heavens appeared to be pouring out water in solid sheets, the hiss of the terrific downpour sounding simply deafening.

The occupants of the tent had to turn out and slacken off the guy-ropes and drive in the pegs, only to find on their return that the water was a couple of inches deep on the floor.

Peter was drenched to the skin, but he hardly heeded the fact. His chief anxiety was for the picket-boat. It was bound to blow a gale—a hurricane, most likely—after the rain. Should the tent be blown down, that would occasion no little inconvenience and a slight loss of His Majesty's stores; but if the picket-boat came to grief the consequences would be disastrous.

Too late the Sub regretted his choice. He ought to have returned to the boat. The coxswain, experienced though he was in the handling of the craft, might not realise the danger of the boat being moored in a hazardous position. The lives of the men in her were at stake, while the bluejackets encamped on the ridge ran very little risk. He wondered whether the coxswain had already taken the precaution to raise steam. If so, the picket-boat stood a chance of battling her way

into midstream, where she stood a far better chance than in the shallow water close inshore.

"I'll find my way down to the boat," decided Peter.

At first thoughts he meant to take the landing-party with him. Then he reflected that perhaps it would be better if they remained to secure any gear that might be blown away.

"Smith," he exclaimed, addressing a leading seaman, "I'm off to the boat. You'll take charge till I return."

"Think you'll find your way down, sir?" asked the man dubiously.

"Of course," replied the Sub. "I've my luminous compass and a torch—and I can't get wetter than I am at present. And I ought to pick up the boat's riding-light before I've gone four hundred yards."

Wishing the seaman "Good-night," Peter set out, "shaping a course" by the aid of his pocket compass. Already the water was more than ankle-deep, and flowing steadily down the gentle descent. Flashes of vivid lightning threw an almost continuous glare upon the saturated ground, so that a torch was hardly necessary; but between the flashes the darkness was so intense that the Sub could only stumble on blindly.

Suddenly a furious blast, the forerunner of a terrific typhoon, almost swept Annesley off his feet. Staggering and recovering his balance, he broke into a run, until brought up by another stupendous gust.

"The picket-boat!" exclaimed Peter. "She'll be blown away."

Before he had covered another hundred yards he plunged nearly waist-deep into water. The fierce wind lashed the surface into a regular turmoil of spray that, mingling with the terrific downpour, completely obliterated every object beyond a radius of five or six feet, even in the glare of the lightning.

Struggling gamely, Peter hoped, but hoped in vain, that he had encountered a depression in the ground, and that by carrying on he would soon reach a spot where the depth of water would be considerably less. A few more steps convinced him of his error. The water was not only getting deeper—it was more than waist-deep by this time—but it was moving.

Planting his legs as firmly as the soft nature of the ground permitted, the Sub consulted his compass. He was all right for direction, but the disconcerting fact remained that when, a brief half-hour ago, there was an expanse of paddy-field it was now a healthy young torrent. The Kin-lung-ho had overflowed its banks.

To proceed was impossible. He could hear nothing but the gruesome shrieking of the wind and the hiss of the raindrops as they mingled with the foam-flecked flood. He could feel the steadily increasing pressure of water threatening to sweep him away. His lungs were charged with spray-laden air, while the force of the wind buffeting him in the face almost took his breath away.

Yet he attempted the impossible. He pictured the picket-boat straining at her kedge anchor in the furious torrent. At all costs he must get to her if humanly possible.

Gasping and struggling, he staggered onwards, sagging to leeward like a crab. Before he had covered half a dozen yards a mighty wall of water swept down upon him. Unable to see or hear the peril that threatened him, he was caught by the curving crest, swept off his feet, and forced fathoms deep—so it seemed—beneath the surface.

With desperate strokes Peter fought against the torturing pressure. Unable to hold his breath any longer, he swallowed a mouthful of turgid water. His lungs felt like bursting, his temples throbbed like pistons.... His frantic struggles ceased. A whole train of thoughts flashed across his mind—practically his life's history—then merciful oblivion.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE PICKET-BOAT'S ORDEAL

"Best close that hatch," said the coxswain of the picket-boat, as heavy raindrops began to patter down upon the deck.

One of the men rolled out of his bunk on one of the lockers and made his way through the dense cloud of tobacco-smoke to the ladder of the fore-hatch.

"Crikey!" he exclaimed. "'Tain't half comin' down. Thank goodness we've a deck over our heads, not like Mr. Annesley and those blokes up yonder. Think it'll blow after this?"

The coxswain thought that it might.

"But we're snug under a weather shore," he added. "We're right as rain.... Don't forget now, Wiggy: you relieves Jackson at eight bells."

With that the coxswain drew his blanket over his head and was soon sound asleep, oblivious of the thunder of the heavy downpour upon the deck thirty inches above him.

Just before midnight, Able-Seaman "Wiggy" Bennet bestirred himself, drew a sticky oilskin from one of the lockers, and groped for his pair of sea-boots.

"Ain't fit for a dawg, this ain't," he soliloquised.

He was on the point of going out to take his trick when the man he was about to relieve slid back the hatch.

"Ridin'-light's out," he reported laconically. "Can't get a match to burn nohow. Take the lamp below, Wiggy, and get her going. It ain't harf blowin'."

"Don't see no use for the perishin' thing," grumbled Wiggy Bennet, although he nevertheless relit the lamp and passed it up. "Wot's likely to fall foul of us? We ain't in the fairway."

Awkwardly he clambered through the hatchway and crouched on deck, hanging on to the gun-mounting as the picket-boat's bows rose and fell in the now howling wind. Somehow things did not strike him as being so safe as when he was below.

"We ain't draggin', are we?" he bawled into the ear of his "raggie." "Where's that there pier?"

Both men waited until a flash of lightning threw a bluish glare upon the scene. In the trough of a wave the tops of the bamboo piles showed for a brief instant ere they were covered by the succeeding crest.

"We're not draggin'," he declared, "but the blessed pier's either washed away or else the perishin' ditch is in flood. Best tell the cox'n, Ted."

Jackson did so. The coxswain, none too sweet-tempered at being roused, came on deck. Then he, too, realised that all was not well with the picket-boat.

"Wind's backed an' blowin' like blue blazes," he muttered. "We're close on a lee-shore, too. If that there kedge starts a-draggin' ... Below there! All hands."

The men responded with alacrity. The leading stoker battled his way to the engineroom to raise steam for emergencies. Hands were ordered to veer out more cable—a task that was attended by no little risk, since at frequent

periods the picket-boat's foredeck was swept completely by the rapidly-rising waves—until she strained and plunged to a scope of forty fathoms of three-eighth-inch chain.

It was now "blowing great guns." Flashes of lightning revealed the fact that instead of lying close inshore the picket-boat was out of sight of land, although she had not dragged her anchor. The paddy-fields, being flooded to a depth of from six to fifteen feet, were simply covered by a swiftly-moving torrent.

With the shift of wind floating debris began to drift down past the boat—uprooted palm trees, overturned sampans, and shapeless masses of timber that had a little time before been houses ten feet above the normal level of the river.

"Is she holding?" inquired Bennet anxiously of the now alert coxswain, who was at the helm giving the boat a sheer to avoid a collision with a half-waterlogged junk.

"She won't if we get a biff from the likes of her," replied the coxswain, as the ponderous mass swept past to lee'ard.

The engine-room hatch was thrown back, and through the rectangle of ruddy light appeared the head and shoulders of the leading stoker.

"Workin' pressure!" he reported laconically, and promptly disappeared to stand by lever and throttle in the hot, reeking atmosphere of the engine-room.

With a grunt of satisfaction, the coxswain rang for "Easy ahead," to relieve the tension upon the straining cable.

For another forty minutes the picket-boat held her own, dodging, thanks to Providence and the alertness of the coxswain, a hundred dangers that threatened her in the shape of drifting and waterlogged wreckage. Upturned craft swept past, in many instances with utterly panic-stricken natives holding on. Corpses of men, women, and children, horses, cattle, dogs, and fowls were tossing in the agitated water, plainly visible in the vivid glare of the lightning. A faint ruddy hue, visible through the driving rain, gave an unmistakable indication that a considerable part of the city of Tao-Lung was in flames—for fire and flood go hand in hand in China.

Suddenly a jar shook the boat. A piece of wreckage had fouled the propeller, completely stripping the blades. The leading stoker, guessing what had happened by the continuous racing of the engines, shut off steam.

The coxswain muttered darkly. He knew that now the cable alone bore the terrific strain of the picket-boat.

"Look out!" bawled a voice in his ear. "Vessel dead ahead!"

A flash revealed the near presence of an enormous junk lying completely over on her beam-ends and drifting with incredible rapidity across the picket-boat's hawse.

With set jaw and the perspiration pouring out of his forehead, the coxswain spun the wheel, trusting that maximum port helm would sheer the picket-boat clear of the impending danger.

It was a noble yet hopeless effort. The junk, speeding with wind and current, crashed upon the boat's cable. The next instant the picket-boat leapt forward as the cable snubbed as if to meet her fate. For a long-drawn interval she seemed to be standing on her head with her stern high out of the water. Then the cable snapped. The picket-boat, released from bondage, swung round under the lee of the beam-ended junk. Together they drifted to lee'ard like a scrap of paper in a strong breeze.

Hanging on like grim death, the men waited for what the Fates had in store for them. They could do nothing more. At any moment the sides of the picket-boat might be stove-in by the grinding pressure of the enormous junk, which was acting as a sort of floating breakwater. If, on the other hand, the boat parted company, she would be thrown broadside on to the vicious waves and be swamped.

The end was not long in coming. With a sickening crash the junk took the ground. A heavy sea, pouring completely over her, swamped the stern-sheets of the picket-boat and flung her bodily to lee'ard. Fully expecting to find their craft

founder under their feet, the crew prepared for a struggle for dear life "in the ditch." Again there was a crash. The picket-boat had been flung broadside-on into a clump of palms—the only trees for miles on that side of the river.

She bumped and bumped over and over again, growing more lifeless as the seas poured over her, until, groaning like a creature endowed with the sense of feeling, she settled down, firmly wedged between the pliant trunks of the palms.

Throughout the rest of the night the crew, hungry and drenched to the skin, stuck to the boat. With the first streaks of dawn the wind dropped as suddenly as it had sprung up, the rain ceased, and with almost startling rapidity the flood began to subside, until in a very short while the picket-boat lay high and dry.

"She's done in for keeps, lads," declared the coxswain, critically regarding the broken back and the gaping rents where the diagonal planking had been shattered. "Save what you can of your duds, you fellows. We'll do what we can with the gear later."

"'Tain't 'arf a lash-up," remarked another of the crew, as he directed his attention to the opposite bank, where the water-front of the city was strewn with wreckage. "Reckon as 'ow a few thousand Chinks 'as gone West. What's the next move, P.O.?"

"Get in touch with Lieutenant Annesley," replied the coxswain. "Ten to one the other chaps have got some dry grub and baccy. Get your rifles, lads. 'Twon't do to leave 'em adrift."

Armed, and carrying their scanty personal kit, the bluejackets set out for the camp. It took an hour's hard tramp through the devastated paddy-fields to bring them within sight of the rising ground. The tent had vanished, but the men who had been landed the previous day were diligently plying with pick and shovel until they caught sight of their comrades from the picket-boat.

"Where's the officer?" shouted one of the diggers, resting on his spade and wiping his brow.

"Ain't 'e with you?" demanded the coxswain.

"No," replied the first speaker. "He set out to find you just after the storm broke."

"Well, he never fetched us," rejoined the coxswain gloomily. "Strikes me there's another good fellow gone to Davy Jones."

The terrible news seemed to "take the wind out of his sails," for Annesley, although not a "Popularity Jack," was well liked by the ship's company. For some moments the coxswain seemed incapable of saying or doing anything. Then his glance fell upon the now fairly extensive trench.

"Wot are you blokes a-doin'?" he inquired.

"Diggin'," was the reply. "If you wants to know why, ask me another. Meanwhiles, we're just carryin' on."

## CHAPTER XVII

### FORSYTH'S ESCAPE

From a turret window in the waterside prison Forsyth watched the progress of the typhoon.

Li Fan had done a lot to mitigate the hardship of his prisoner following the discovery that it was not Annesley, but

Annesley's double, who had been placed in his power. Short of unconditional release, Forsyth had a fair amount of liberty of action. During the day he could go practically where he liked within the prison walls, including the spacious garden belonging to the Chief of Police. He could send out for various little luxuries he required, although precautions were taken to prevent him communicating with his friends. Nevertheless, his movements were closely watched, so that he soon realised the impossibility of attempting a dash for freedom unless unexpected opportunity occurred. At night he was locked in a room in one of the towers overlooking the river.

He had seen at a distance the *Hermione's* picket-boat. He wondered what she was doing there, hoping in vain that her presence had something to do with demanding his release. It was with a certain amount of satisfaction that he realised the ship was somewhere in the vicinity; but he was absolutely in the dark as to the name of the town or the river that flowed past it.

From his elevated perch Forsyth watched the rain descend. In the glare of the lightning he saw that the river was rising rapidly, causing great commotion amongst the crowded floating population. Already, before the first blast of the devastating wind swept down, the level of the turgid stream had overflowed the quays and was sweeping past the buildings on the lower part of the city.

"That shook the old place up a bit," he soliloquised, as a terrific gust struck the stone turret.

Maintaining with difficulty his post at the barred window, Forsyth waited and watched. He had a clear bird's-eye view of the work of destruction. Roofs were stripped in a flash; several of the lightly-built houses were demolished like a pack of cards. The river was a furious, wind-torn torrent, in which sampans, junks, rafts, and a variety of debris were swirling down in compact masses, jostling, lurching, and whirling round and round in chaotic destruction. In several parts of the town, fires had been started, possibly by lightning, or else by the upsetting of lighted lamps as the fragile woodwork collapsed. In the brief intervals between the almost incessant peals of thunder could be heard the shrieks of the affrighted Chinese mingling with the savage roar of the devastating flood.

"I hope to goodness the water won't undermine the foundations," he muttered anxiously, when the whole place trembled more violently than hitherto.

The next instant a terrific roar almost burst his ear-drums. The stone floor collapsed under his feet. He felt himself falling amidst a shower of masonry.

He landed on a pile of rubble. For some moments he lay at full length, just conscious that he was exposed to the uninterrupted onslaught of wind and rain.

Then a vivid flash of lightning stabbed the inky darkness, revealing the nature of his surroundings. The whole of one face of the tower had vanished. Either it had been torn away by lightning or else the rush of water had swept away part of the foundations of the place. In any case, Forsyth was lying on a heap of rubble that fell away steeply to the already submerged quay. Fortunately for him the roof had not collapsed, otherwise he would have been buried beneath an avalanche of stones; but, judging by its grotesque appearance, it seemed only a matter of moments before the roof contributed to the mound of debris upon which Forsyth was lying.

His first step was to get clear of the overhanging crag of masonry. No thought of escape entered his head. Regaining his feet and bracing himself to withstand the terrific wind pressure, Forsyth began to scramble down the shelving heap of rubble. It reminded him of the time when, as a budding assistant paymaster, he had descended the Great Pyramid in company with a few reckless midshipmen—a feat that he had undertaken with hardly a thought of the risk he ran, although afterwards the reminiscence made him shudder.

Projecting beams hampered his descent. Huge stones threatened to slide under him as he cautiously negotiated the treacherous incline; smaller ones slid noisily as they preceded him to splash into the foaming torrent.

"Now what's to be done?" thought Forsyth, as he gained the water's edge. To attempt to find a foothold on the submerged quay would be madness, although the water was barely three feet deep. He would be swept away like a feather. To stay where he was was courting disaster, for at any moment the tottering roof might descend like an avalanche

upon him.

Working his way round the back of the mound, Forsyth found that if he could but skirt about twenty yards of the outer wall he would be able to gain a strut running at right angles to the river. It seemed feasible. The out-flung mass of rubble formed a kind of breakwater. Beyond it the water lost much of its violence, although it eddied strongly along the whole length of that twenty yards of solid wall. Provided he kept close to the masonry, he stood a fighting chance; but once he encountered the direct current he would be swept into the foaming stream.

A few tons of masonry hurtling down the mound of rubble hastened Forsyth's decision.

"Anything rather than be pulped," he thought, and, taking his courage in his hands, plunged boldly into the water.

Foot by foot he fought his way, slithering on the slimy ground and buffeted by the stinging rain and wind. When about half the distance had been traversed, he saw by the glare of a lightning-flash a large native boat borne by the furious wind straight towards him. It looked as if escape were impossible: he would be squashed like a fly between the towering mass of woodwork and the wall.

Resisting a strong impulse to stop—for the oncoming boat fascinated him—Forsyth ducked his head and staggered almost shoulder-deep. The lofty bows of the boat appeared to leap in the air. Caught by the counter-eddy, the massive prow swung round a mere trifle, but just sufficient to clear the Englishman's head. With a rending and splintering of wood the boat crashed against the stonework and filled like a sieve.

It was a blessing in disguise. The wreckage not only diverted the current: it formed a screen from the almost irresistible wind. Half a dozen strokes—for in the slack water Forsyth was able to trust to swimming—and the immediate danger was past.

Breathless and fairly exhausted, Forsyth dragged himself under the lee of a wall. Even in the street the water was ankle-deep, sweeping furiously down the incline and joining the foaming river. But he was safe so far. He now had time to think of what was to be done.

Then he realised that he was outside his prison. No one had seen his escape. The guards were sheltering from the storm, terrified by the display of Nature's fury. By the same token the street was deserted. The inhabitants of the lower part of the city had abandoned their houses, which were threatened by one of two perils—fire or flood.

"I'll make a dash for it," decided Forsyth grimly.

He fully realised the difficulties that beset him. Instinct prompted him to make for the coast. How far away it was he had no idea, but he knew that if he followed the course of the river, sooner or later, if he evaded recapture, he would gain the sea. There he stood a chance of sighting the *Hermione*, since one of her boats had been off the city the previous day. He found himself wondering what had befallen the latter—whether she had survived the typhoon.

He must get clear of the town before daybreak. Previous observation had taught him that he would have to traverse at least a mile of streets. He was uncertain whether the place was walled. More than likely it was; in which case he would have to run the risk of getting through one of the gates. He could not make his way along the line of riverside wharves. They were flooded and impeded by the wreckage of hundreds of native craft. Then, supposing he got safely outside the city—what then? A foreigner, hungry and footsore, he would be an object for suspicion in a strange country. A thousand-to-one chance was against him; but Forsyth, with the indomitable courage of his race when up against seemingly unsurmountable difficulties, was ready to throw down the gauntlet to Fate.

He set off at a rapid pace through a narrow and deserted street that ran parallel to the river-front. The wind still continued to blow with hurricane force. Showers of tiles were continually flying past his head. The rain descended in solid sheets, while the lightning, reflected by the ankle-deep water, seemed to turn the air into a sheet of bluish flame. Suffocating clouds of smoke, too, mingled with the rain-laden wind, while dominating all other sounds was the incessant crash of thunder.

Once Forsyth had to make a wide detour to avoid a large block of fiercely-burning houses. Apparently no effort had



been made to check the conflagration or to save the contents of the buildings. The inhabitants had either perished or fled. For a length of about a hundred yards nothing remained but a low mound of blackened embers that still emitted smoke and steam as the torrential downpour beat upon the smouldering debris.

At length the fugitive came in sight of a portion of the city wall pierced by a gateway. The wall was at least twenty feet in height, with a wide platform protected on the outer face by a loopholed breastwork. The gate was closed and barred. There were no signs of any guards, but more than likely there were armed men sheltering in a low stone building by the side of the archway.

Cautiously Forsyth approached. No one appeared to bar his way. Looking to the right, he noticed a ruined building abutting upon the wall. To this he made his way, scaled the jagged masonry, and with a desperate leap gained the paved walk on the wall itself.

Here he had all his work cut out to prevent himself being blown over by the force of the wind. It was only by crouching behind the breastwork that he could make any progress until he reached a fairly wide embrasure.

Looking over, the prospect was not an attractive one. In the glare of the lightning it looked considerably more than a twenty-foot drop to the ground outside the wall. It was an unspoken invitation to risk a broken ankle.

Happening to look along the top of the wall, Forsyth gave an exclamation of satisfaction. Luck was with him. A few yards away, lying in the angle formed by the platform and the parapet, was a broken flagstaff. It had been snapped off by the wind, the fracture occurring about three feet from the base. The halyards still remained, but they looked too thin to bear a man's weight. Even if they were cut into three lengths and made up into a rope there remained another problem—the rope would then be far too short.

But the pole itself would serve the purpose. About twenty-five feet remained. That was ample to rest on the ground and against the parapet.

It was a strenuous task to set the pole in position. The wind-resistance was enormous. More than once, when Forsyth attempted to lift it, the pole swung round like an exaggerated turnstile, one end bringing up against the stonework with a jerk that well-nigh capsized him.

At the fourth attempt, Forsyth succeeded in thrusting the pole through the embrasure and allowing one end to rest upon the ground. Then, after a rest in order to recover his breath, he slid down in safety.

"The Chinks'll think their old flagstaff has toppled clean over the wall," he thought, as he jerked the pole clear of the masonry. "Now, full speed ahead. Another couple of hours to dawn, worse luck!"

It was fortunate that the land on the left bank of the river was fairly high in contrast to that on the right bank, which was of a marshy nature. It was ankle-deep in mud; every depression had become a miniature watercourse; but there was no danger of being trapped in a hideous bog.

Keeping within sight of the river, Forsyth trudged on. The wind was at his back. The terrific downpour of rain no longer buffeted him in the face. The lightning was diminishing in brilliance and frequency. There were signs that the typhoon was blowing itself out.

Dawn found the fugitive a good eight miles from his place of captivity. By this time the rain had ceased, the heavy clouds had dispersed, and the wind had died down. The slanting rays of the rising sun revealed a scene of desolation.

Trees had been snapped off in all directions. Here and there were the remains of houses levelled flat by the irresistible force of the wind. The river, still swollen, was covered with derelict junks, while the wreckage of hundreds of others formed an almost continuous line along the banks of the stream. Glancing behind him, Forsyth could discern a thick pall of smoke rising from the devastated city. Not a single living human being was within sight. It was easy for the fugitive to imagine that he was the sole survivor in an utterly desolated country. Already vultures were gathering in hundreds to feast upon the bodies of the drowned, for already the receding waters had left uncovered thousands of corpses, both of man and beast.

Forsyth had little fear of being pursued. The inhabitants of the city were too busy with their own losses. It was more than likely the guards of the prison had assumed that the foreign prisoner had been killed by the collapse of the building. His chief dread was that he might be seen by some of the natives of the surrounding country and be detained or perhaps murdered.

During the forenoon he investigated a ruined farmhouse. Here he found water and some rice bread—sufficient to ward off the pangs of thirst and hunger. Amongst other things, he discovered a coolie's hat and cloak, fashioned of straw. These he put on, not without a certain feeling of repugnance, not only as a disguise, but as a protection from the rapidly-increasing heat of the sun.

For the rest of the day he hid himself in a deserted pagoda. At sunset he resumed his flight, still keeping in touch with the river.

Already there were evidences of water-borne activity. Junks that had escaped destruction were once more under way, their clumsy hull and grotesquely-cut sails showing up clearly in the moonlight. But Forsyth's hope of seeing the *Hermione* ascending the river was doomed to disappointment.

At dawn, having covered an additional distance of twenty-five or thirty miles, including several detours to avoid waterside villages, Forsyth took refuge in a fisherman's hut built on piles jutting out into the river. The place looked as if it had not been used for some considerable time, for the open door was covered with a network of spiders' webs, while the floor was covered with birds' nests. Against the staging lay a worm-eaten boat secured by a length of rotting rope. The edge of the track of the typhoon had not passed within twenty miles of the spot. There was a clearly-defined line of demarcation: on one side a wide belt of devastated buildings; on the other, even the frailest bamboo hut had been absolutely untouched either by wind or flood.

Clearing a space on the floor, Forsyth threw himself down in a state of utter fatigue. He was so completely exhausted that he hardly cared if his presence were discovered. Almost as soon as he pillowed his head upon his arm he was sound asleep.

He awoke with a start to find that it was broad daylight. For some moments he lay staring dully at the decaying palm thatch overhead, unable to comprehend his surroundings.

Then he sat up and listened intently. He could hear voices—English voices—singing in a deep bass unison.

Leaping to his feet, Forsyth hurried to the edge of the platform. Less than a hundred yards away a large sampan was laboriously moving downstream, propelled by half a dozen oars that rose and fell with the clockwork regularity that characterises a trained naval crew. The men were bluejackets. More, Forsyth recognised them as belonging to the *Hermione's* ship's company.

"Ahoy!" he hailed.

His shout remained unanswered. The voices of the men drowned his appeal for aid.

Waving his Chinese hat, Forsyth shouted again. The men lay on their oars and stared incredulously at the grotesque figure on the fishing-stage. The chorus faltered and died away.

"Pull starboard! Easy port!" exclaimed the coxswain. "Bless me if it ain't Mr. Annesley!"

Forsyth made no effort to correct the wrong impression. All he could do was to clutch the bamboo rail and wait until the unwieldy craft ran alongside the stage. Then, as a couple of the crew grasped him and hauled him into the boat, he gave a little choking sob and fell unconscious into the arms of his preservers.

Four hours later the crew of the wrecked picket-boat fell in with the *Hermione*, which was slowly groping her way up the Kin-lung-ho. They had a tale of dogged heroism to relate: how they had refloated a stranded but otherwise undamaged sampan, stripped the picket-boat of everything of value, and had paddled miles down the wreck-encumbered river; how they had lost their officer and had picked him up (as they thought) in a dazed condition fifty miles from the

spot where he had been last seen.

"In rags he were, sir," reported the coxswain to the Surgeon-Commander, as Forsyth, still unconscious, was carried below to the sick-bay. "An' wearin' a Chink's 'at an' all."

And when Forsyth did recover consciousness, he was unable to correct the error. He was in the throes of brain-fever.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### ADRIFT ON THE KIN-LUNG-HO

On the morning after the typhoon, the swollen waters of the Kin-lung-ho presented a sorrowful appearance. The yellow swirling current was covered with debris—junks, some floating buoyantly, others listing and waterlogged; masses of bamboos that had once formed parts of houses; domestic articles and implements of husbandry and handicrafts; trees and bales of hay and rice-grass; corpses of men and animals floated downstream in a hideous jumble.

Lying face upwards upon a raft-like structure—it was a section of a partly waterlogged pontoon—was a figure dressed in the saturated tropical uniform of an English sub-lieutenant. It was Peter Annesley. In his last moments of consciousness he had been tossed by a wave upon the mass of debris. There he had lain throughout the night in a precarious position upon the slightly-inclined and heaving platform as it bumped and jostled on its blind course against objects both large and small, dipping, lurching, and twirling as it did so. Yet by little short of a miracle Annesley's helpless body had not rolled off, although his feet were dangling helplessly in the swirling torrent.

He opened his eyes. He was not long in collecting his scattered wits. He tried to rise, but the effort was beyond his power. Not only was he weak and exhausted by a night-long exposure to the fury of the elements, but the raft, in colliding with some other lump of wreckage, had given his legs a nasty nip just below the knees.

Hot throbbing pains swept through his head. His throat was burning like a lime-kiln. Turning on his side, he dipped his hand into the river and lapped the water eagerly. Although muddy, the water was fresh—after a fashion. Peter might have hesitated had he thought, or had he seen, what was floating all around him.

Then he lay back racking his brains with perplexing questions. The safety of the picket-boat was a paramount thought. He wondered what had happened to her, whether she had been swept away and overwhelmed by the roaring flood. And the men whom he had left at the camp: how were they faring? Was the ground sufficiently elevated to rise above the devastating torrent? If not, what chance had they? Was it worth it, this digging for a problematical treasure? Was it playing the game to risk men's lives over an enterprise in which they had no personal concern?

Gradually sensation began to return to his limbs. Warmed by the sun, his blood began to circulate freely through his veins. The rapidly-increasing heat was life itself. Presently he was just able to sit up and look around.

He was far away from the spot where the picket-boat had brought up on the evening preceding the typhoon. The city of Tao-Lung was out of sight. On the left bank of the river he could see the rising ground swept bare by the wind. The right bank was invisible. As far as his eye could see, there was nothing but miles and miles of flood where a few hours previously the ground had been covered with rolling fields of rice.

He directed his gaze on objects in his vicinity. About fifty yards away a junk was drifting broadside on to the current. Beyond being dismasted, she was apparently undamaged. Clustered right aft upon the steeply-inclined poop were half a dozen Chinamen looking listlessly over the side at a waterlogged sampan, to which two men and a woman were clinging. It would have been a simple matter for the men on board the junk to throw a coil of rope to their compatriots. They did nothing. They stood looking on in complete apathy, although the sampan was almost alongside.

Nor did the three in the water make any effort to find a refuge on board the junk, although a rope trailed over the latter's side. They continued to hang on until one by one they relaxed their hold and sank.

That was but one of many similar instances. It was not mere apathy to save life, but a trait in the character of a Chinaman not to interfere with fate on another's behalf. If he did so, he would be henceforth responsible for the livelihood of the man he had rescued. More than that, he would have to provide for his protégé's family.

Annesley, even though he was anxious to help the struggling wretches, was unable to render aid. He was so weak that he could scarcely crawl about his limited domain. To attempt to swim to any of the drowning men was absolutely beyond him.

He was hungry. There was nothing to eat. His thirst he could assuage by drinking the river-water, but the more he drank, the more acute became the pangs of hunger. Although land, where food might readily be procured, was only a couple of miles away, the raft showed no tendency to drift towards the banks. The derelict junks, their tall sides offering considerable resistance to the wind, were scudding before the breeze. Annesley's raft, being almost awash, was not so affected; consequently, when the wind sprang up again after a period of calm, the Sub was alone upon the waters of the Kin-lung-ho, save for a quantity of debris in a waterlogged condition.

Drowsiness again overtook him. He lay at full length, with his patrol-jacket over his face to protect his head from the now terrific glare and heat of the sun.

He fell to thinking again about the buried treasure. So far, his efforts had met with utter failure. He had dug carefully on and around the spot indicated in his great-grandfather's journal, but without the desired result. He recalled his Captain's remark: "I warn you—it's a wash-out." And yet the skipper had encouraged him to make the attempt. Perhaps Captain Purvis, when he visited the spot, had dug there and had met with failure.... If he could only prove that the skipper's caution was wrong! ... But, he reflected, the opportunity was past. Never would he be able to obtain permission to use a boat's crew after what had occurred. But perhaps the men he had left behind had succeeded in their efforts. Even if they had, he might not survive to hear of it.

Opportunity! The word kept dinning in his ears. Had he grasped opportunity with both hands? Had he done everything that was humanly possible in the attempt to achieve his object?

Suddenly an idea flashed across his brain. Even in his drowsy state the thought roused him to mental activity. The keystone of the failure was represented by one word—Variation.

"And I reckon myself a navigating officer!" he exclaimed bitterly. "I took the compass bearings all right, but I clean forgot the variation of the compass. Here at the present day it is two degrees East of true North. The variation is and has been decreasing about five minutes annually. Consequently, my great-grandfather's bearings by observation were five and a half degrees different from what they are to-day. I'm an ass not to have thought about it. There's one consolation: the skipper has evidently fallen into the same error."

Still pondering over the altered situation, Annesley threshed out the problem. He was still doing so when he heard the muffled thudding of a propeller. Removing his jacket from his head, he raised himself. For some moments he saw nothing but a blur of red mist that swam before his eyes. Then the noise grew louder and louder.

"I believe I'm blind!" he exclaimed aloud. "I can't see a thing. If that's the *Hermione*, will she spot me?"

In a minute or so the red mist dispersed. Peter could discern the black hull of a steam-vessel approaching rapidly in his direction. She was not the *Hermione*, but a much smaller vessel. Viewed from bows-on, she presented only a lean, knife-like stern surmounted by a turtle-back deck, a short mast, and a funnel. If she had more than one of the latter, the rest were masked by the foremost one. On a small circular platform, immediately in front of the mast, stood half a dozen men in dark blue uniforms. They were regarding the raft intently. One of the men was using a pair of binoculars, for Annesley could see the sunlight reflected from the lenses.

"Chinks—that's what they are," decided Peter. "She's a Chinese torpedo-boat. Well, any craft in preference to this. Hope they'll stop and pick me up."

The torpedo-boat blew a single blast on her siren. Annesley acknowledged the warning by feebly waving one arm.

Reversing her engines, the oncoming craft gradually lost way, coming to a dead stop within a couple of feet of the raft. Men swarmed over her sides. Two of them, armed with boat-hooks, kept the raft alongside, while others, knee-deep in water, for the derelict platform had but little reserve of buoyancy, grasped Annesley by his shoulders and ankles, and passed him over the rail into the arms of others of the crew.

Without further delay, the men on the raft scrambled back on board the torpedo-boat. The latter backed away, then with helm hard-a-port forged ahead, setting down on a course in exactly the opposite direction she had been following. She was returning to the city of Tao-Lung.

Apparently none of the crew spoke English. They talked earnestly and rapidly amongst themselves, the subject of their conversation being the Englishman they had picked up. Neither had Annesley any inkling of the name and character of the torpedo-boat. If he had, he would not have felt so easy in his mind.

He was a prisoner on board the *Chen Su*, his captor being the crafty pirate, Tao Ching.

## CHAPTER XIX

### IN THE CLUTCHES OF LI FAN

Tao Ching was in high spirits. He was firmly under the impression that he had effected the recapture of Li Fan's former prisoner, Forsyth. The latter's escape had been reported to the Deputy-Governor of Nan-ngan by some villagers who had seen him in flight. Li Fan, who hitherto had shared in the belief that Forsyth had perished when part of the prison collapsed, was thrown into a state of consternation at the news. He feared the consequences should Forsyth succeed in getting away and rejoining his ship. His first step was to send for Tao Ching, whom he ordered to defer his scheme for Annesley's capture and to proceed in the *Chen Su* in pursuit of the fugitive, Forsyth.

Tao Ching had fallen into an error that others had done before. He had mistaken Annesley for Forsyth.

Peter, little suspecting what was in store for him on his arrival at Tao-Lung, found himself for no apparent reason unceremoniously marched off to prison. He was given food, which he devoured ravenously. Then he was stripped of his uniform and given native clothing. His captors, on "going through" the prisoner's pockets, discovered amongst other things a saturated copy of the diary of Richard Annesley, late of the 19th Regiment.

This the Chief of Police hurriedly submitted to the Deputy-Governor. Li Fan, who could read English fluently, glanced at the manuscript, but when he noticed the name "Annesley," his interest was immediately aroused.

"You may leave my presence!" he exclaimed, addressing the Chief of Police.

"I crave humble permission of quitting the honourable presence, Most Illustrious," rejoined the official in the flowery language of the East. "Yet I would with all humility direct Your Excellency's attention to the fact that in execution of his esteemed commands the ignoble Tao Ching awaits without."

Li Fan gave a deprecating wave of his bejewelled hand.

"Inform Tao Ching that when he has carried out all my previous orders to my satisfaction," he replied, "then I will pay him the just reward for his services in bringing back the prisoner Forsyth."

The pirate, hanging about in the ante-room of the Hall of Audience, gnashed his teeth with rage. He dreaded the task of capturing the English lieutenant, whom he supposed to be still digging in the paddy-fields across the river. The

prospect of falling foul of an armed boat's crew did not appeal to him. He had made up his mind to secure the reward offered by Li Fan for Forsyth's recapture and then carry out his previous plan of going over to the Northern Army of the Chinese Republic—which was again reported to be marching against the rebels of the South. And now, so deep was his cupidity, he was compelled to embark upon another enterprise before he could reap the fruits of a task already performed.

Dismissing his attendants, Li Fan sat down to read the interesting document. This he did thoroughly, systematically. When he had finished reading he had learnt, amongst other things, why his enemy, Peter Annesley, had been digging—and, as far as he knew, was still digging—on the high ground that was still rising like a whale-backed island above the flooded paddy-fields.

But one problem puzzled him. How came that diary in Forsyth's possession? Li Fan felt convinced that his prisoner did not possess it during the first period of his captivity. Had he since been in communication with Peter Annesley?

His doubts upon that point were speedily dispelled by a report from one of his subordinates.

The "foreign devils" who had recently obtained permission from His Excellency to conduct observations across the river had abandoned their task and had departed. How or when was not known, but the wreckage of their steamboat had been found a long distance down the river.

The news did not improve Li Fan's state of mind. He was so agitated that he set off at once to the prison to interview his captive, in order, if possible, to ascertain how much he knew with regard to Annesley's movements.

"What is your name?" demanded Li Fan, when Peter was brought into his presence.

"Peter Annesley, sub-lieutenant of His Majesty's ship, *Hermione*," was the reply, given without hesitation. "And I should like to know by what authority I am detained here."

A grim smile flitted over the Deputy-Governor's oily and flabby features. The announcement was most gratifying to him. His lifelong enemy had been delivered into his hands. For the moment, Forsyth's escape was of minor consideration.

"You are detained here, Peter Annesley," he rejoined, with pedantic deliberation, "by virtue of my authority. If you wantee reason," he continued, relapsing into pidgin-English in his rapidly rising excitement, "then lookee at me."

"I've been looking at you," said Peter coolly, though absolutely at a loss to see the drift of the Chinese official's remarks.

"You remember Li Fan at Broadwinton School, 'way long back'?" pursued the other. "Li Fan—that me. You did insult me; offer insult also to the spirits of my illustrious ancestors. Now I have revenge I have waitee long for. So I kill you."

He paused to observe the effect of this intelligence. If he expected Annesley to cringe and beg for mercy, he was mistaken.

"Suppose Chinaman make noise in English church while Englishman sayee prayers?" continued Li Fan. "What will Englishman do?"

"The Chinaman would probably get six weeks' imprisonment for brawling," replied Peter. "But they wouldn't be killed for that offence. Look here, Li Fan, I booted you not because you were conducting a religious rite, but because you were breaking the rules of the school. As a matter of fact, your reason for burning joss-sticks never occurred to me. When some one suggested what you were about I meant to apologise in the morning, only you cleared out in a hurry. Don't think I am sorry for giving you a tanning for breaking the rules of the school, because I'm not."

Li Fan looked curiously at his captive. He could detect no sign of fear on Annesley's face.

"I have taken opportunity to study this," he remarked, holding up the still sodden copy of Dick Amnesley's journal. "It is greatly interesting. From it I learn the reason you have been digging over across the river. It was to recover some gold plate given to your ancestor by a mandarin. I think I will cause more digging to be made and recover the vases. It happens that the mandarin was an ancestor of mine—one of the ancestors whose spirit you have so greatly insulted and angered."

"My great-grandfather saved his life," rejoined Peter. "So apparently had it not been for my ancestor's good turn you would not be here to threaten me."

"That is so," agreed Li Fan. "Already I know it. On that account I have decided not to put you to torture, but to have you executed.... But not yet. Before you die, I will show you the gold vases for which you have placed yourself in my power."

With that Li Fan signed to his attendants to remove the prisoner.

Annesley submitted quietly, although inwardly raging. It required a tremendous effort of will-power on his part not to hurl himself upon the fat and unwieldy form of his former schoolfellow. One straight left on the point of Li Fan's chin would have put the Chinaman out of the running; but was it worth it? There was little satisfaction to know that Li Fan was knocked out if he, Peter, were to be immediately cut down by the Chinese guards. Li Fan had threatened him with death, but had added that the sentence would not be carried out for some time. There was hope in delay, for Annesley had a supreme faith in the far-reaching arm of the British Navy to feel sure that help would speedily be forthcoming.

In the solitude of his cell, Peter remembered M'Phail's grave warning before joining the *Hermione* at Hong-Kong. He recalled the mysterious circumstances of his chum Forsyth's disappearance, and for the first time the suggestion occurred to him that Forsyth might have been mistaken for him when misfortune overtook him, and that he had fallen a victim to Li Fan's agents. Viewing things in that light, Peter felt far from being composed.

He had no intention of "knuckling under" if by any chance he could effect his escape. In fact, he lost no time in shaking off his despondency and taking preliminary steps to get clear of his prison.

Quickly he discovered that his cell was a hard nut to crack. It was on the opposite side of the building in which Forsyth had been placed, and had not suffered any damage during the typhoon. The walls were of solid stone blocks set in cement, with narrow windows heavily barred. The floor was of stone-paving, so that it sounded to be solid when Peter tested it by hitting it with a wooden stool. The roof was concave on the underside, and also of stone, that formed the floor of a similar room overhead. The door was of teak, studded with metal knobs and criss-crossed with stout strips of iron.

Directing his attention to one of the windows, which he could easily reach by standing on a stool, Peter found that the bars were in good condition and were firmly set in the stonework. By using the legs of the stool as levers, he might be able to bend the bars sufficiently to enable him to squeeze through. But what then?

As far as he could make out, the window was at least fifty feet above the ground—or perhaps the level of the river. He could not tell which, as he had no direct view of the outside wall of the building. If the water lapped the base of the tower and was sufficiently deep, he would risk taking a header, since he was an expert high-diver; but he drew the line at the prospect of a headlong drop upon hard ground.

Making a rope was out of the question. Even if he unravelled every bit of material at his command there would be insufficient stuff to make up a rope. There was very little chance of being able to procure one by bribing his guards. For one thing, he was ignorant of the Chinese language; for another, he possessed nothing of value by which he might induce his gaolers to betray their trust.

Nor did he overlook the almost insurmountable difficulties he must encounter in the unlikely event of breaking out of his prison. A European could hardly hope to make his way unnoticed through a city teeming with Chinese, who would be only too ready to carry favour with the authorities by effecting his recapture.

So, everything considered, Peter decided that he was up against a tough proposition; but he did not despair on that

account. He believed in the old proverb: "Never say die till you're dead."

On the day following his interview with Annesley, Li Fan exerted himself more than he had done since his return to China from England. He took a boat across the Kin-lung-ho, and, dispensing with the luxury of a sedan-chair, trudged over the rice-fields to the spot where the still yawning excavations indicated Annesley's fruitless operations. A number of coolies were already at work, widening and deepening the trench which ran in a north and south direction. The British bluejackets left behind when Peter had made his ill-starred attempt to reach the picket-boat had carried on their task in this direction, and although they were no nearer to success when they abandoned work, their efforts resulted in putting Li Fan completely off the scent. Instead of starting another trench at right angles to the former one and in a westerly direction, the coolies were no more successful than were their predecessors.

It was not on account of the monetary value of the golden vases that Li Fan pursued his investigations. He was rich enough to get rid of gold to ten times the intrinsic value of the buried treasure without impoverishing himself. His eagerness was due to a superstition to the effect that the person who found the missing vases of Chi-li-Kin would be endowed with power second to none in China. And although he had no proof, he entertained a firm conviction that the vases his ancestor had given to Dick Annesley over eighty years previously were identical with those reputed to possess supernatural powers, and which had formerly belonged to the high and mighty Emperor, Chi-li-Kin.

It was dusk before Li Fan, raging at the thought that he had been baffled in his quest, returned to the Deputy-Governor's palace. His favourite dish of peacock's brains and birds' nests remained untouched; he hurled a goblet at the head of his cup-bearer when the obsequious menial tendered a draught of rare wine. For a full hour he sat moodily in his ivory chair, drumming his talon-like nails upon the delicate inlaid work as he grappled with the perplexing difficulty of how to discover the treasure. He held the key according to the Englishman's directions in his journal; so did Peter Annesley, but apparently the written instructions were not sufficient. Perhaps his prisoner had other and more concise information: if so he, Li Fan, must wrest it from him.

At length he ordered Tao Ching to be brought to him. The summons went forth by methods new and old. Wireless telephony, visual signalling, and mounted and foot messengers were employed, until in less than twenty minutes the pirate Tao Ching, who had been asleep in his cabin on board the *Chen Su*, presented himself before the Deputy-Governor of Nan-ngan.

"Tao Ching, where is the English warship from whence came the steamboat that drove ashore?" asked Li Fan.

"At least six hundred *li* away, Most Illustrious Excellency," replied the pirate, giving the distance as equivalent to two hundred miles.

Li Fan grunted, as if the intelligence (which happened to be utterly misleading) was quite satisfactory.

"Listen," he said. "It was not the escaped prisoner, Forsyth, whom you brought here, but the much-wanted Annesley."

Tao Ching inclined his head. The news was most reassuring. Instead of having to undertake the difficult and hazardous task of capturing Annesley, he found that he had already done so, although ignorant at the time of the English officer's identity. It also meant that, although he had lost the reward offered for Forsyth's recapture, he had won a far greater one by handing Annesley over into the clutches of his vindictive enemy. Once he got possession of that sum, he would "cut his losses" over the Forsyth business and go north in the *Chen Su*.

But Li Fan's next words came as a most unpleasant shock.

"I have decided to still retain the reward owing to you, Tao Ching," he continued, "until both Englishmen are in prison in Tao-Lung. Listen! I know that this Forsyth is in flight down the Kin-lung-ho. He is on a sampan with several Englishmen who brought the steamboat up to the city. These are my instructions: you are to overtake the fugitives, remove Forsyth from the boat, and then shoot the rest of the foreign devils. Bring Forsyth to me with all dispatch."

Tao Ching kotowed and withdrew, cursing his astute paymaster. He seriously considered the possibilities, from a financial standpoint, of abandoning all claims upon Li Fan and offering to give information to the Captain of the



*Hermione* concerning the English officer in Li Fan's clutches; only he was not at all certain of his reception, and whether the money he got from the British Government would repay him for his losses in other directions.

Finally he decided to take the *Chen Su* down the river. If he could recapture Forsyth without difficulty, he would, and then return to Tao-Lung to get the double reward. Failing that, he would stand on until he met the *Hermione*.

## CHAPTER XX

### A BATTLE OF WITS

Li Fan's state of mind did not compose itself to any great extent after the pirate captain's departure. Like a caged tiger he paced the Hall of Audience, pondering over the situation.

He had Annesley in his power. That was a great coup. He had lost Forsyth. That was a decided set-back. Should Forsyth regain the *Hermione*, Li Fan's position would be shattered. If, on the other hand, Tao Ching succeeded in recapturing the escaped prisoner, Li Fan could feel fairly safe from interference with his plans. And, what was more, he was in a position to force Annesley to disclose all he knew concerning the buried treasure.

At last Li Fan felt that he could wait no longer. He would employ the art of bluffing. Like most Orientals, he excelled in that direction.

Although it was past midnight, the Deputy-Governor ordered his palanquin, and, attended by torch-bearers and runners, set off for the prison.

Peter Annesley was sound asleep when he was roughly wakened by his gaolers. Not knowing whether he was to be taken out to the place of execution, but thinking that such was the intention of the guards, he controlled his feelings as well as he could. If he were to die, he decided, he would face the end with courage. However much he regretted having to part with life—and, being young, he prized it highly—he was not going to show his captors that he was afraid.

Descending a staircase in the double wall of the tower and traversing several stone corridors, Peter was unceremoniously pushed into a large and well-lighted room, two men armed with broad-bladed, pointless swords standing beside him.

At the other end of the apartment sat Li Fan, attended by a number of Chinese officials in native costume, while standing conspicuously on the left of the attendants was a gigantic Mongol, stripped to the waist and holding an enormous executioner's sword.

"Peter Annesley," began Li Fan, speaking in English—a language of which all the other Chinamen were ignorant, "I have thought much about you. I have decided to spare your life on conditions. To-morrow you must go to the place where the golden vases are buried. There you will dig until you find them."

"I have dug there already, but without success," replied Peter.

"So you have," agreed Li Fan. "But perhaps you have not tried at the right place. Perhaps you have made an error which upon careful consideration you can correct."

"I wonder how much the fellow knows," thought Annesley. He had no desire to give his former schoolfellow any assistance, even at the gift of life. He realised perfectly well that even if Li Fan did keep his word in that respect—he was not at all sure that he would—it was very doubtful whether he would release his captive. And Peter had no wish to be kept a perpetual captive and possibly be carried off to work as a slave in the mines of Se-Chuen, more than a thousand miles from the coast, and in a district where no European had been known to have visited and to have returned.

"What are the conditions?" he asked. "Do they include allowing me to be sent back to my ship?"

"Yes," replied Li Fan, but somehow the word did not ring true.

"Will you swear by taking the oath of the broken saucer?" pursued Peter, knowing that this form of declaration was one that no Chinaman would perjure himself by breaking.

"I will not," replied Li Fan.

"Then neither will I bear a hand in helping you to find the treasure that belongs to my people by right of gift," said Peter firmly.

The Deputy-Governor silently pointed to the executioner. The fellow, with a look of pleasurable anticipation upon his oily features, waited Li Fan's commands, while at the same time he caressed the keen edge of the blade with his thumb.

"Are you afraid?" sneered Li Fan.

"No," replied Annesley; "not of you. By killing me you will not improve your chances: rather the other way about. Other Englishmen, friends of mine, know the secret you are trying to wrest from me. The vases will never come into your possession. I shouldn't be at all surprised to hear that in a very short time you will either be a prisoner on board a British man-of-war or else a fugitive."

"How do you know that?" inquired Li Fan uneasily.

"I do not propose to enlighten you," rejoined Annesley contemptuously.

Li Fan's face wore a baffled expression. He had failed entirely to intimidate his prisoner. He had yet to play his trump-card—his piece of deliberate and colossal bluff.

"I promised to spare you from torture," he said, with slow emphasis.

It was Peter's turn to feel afraid. The threat of torture was the thing he dreaded most. He had heard tales—authenticated tales—of the terrible nature of torture as practised by the Chinese, who were past-masters of the art. The Red Indians of a hundred years ago were mere novices at the game compared with the Chinese. The former tormented their captives and then ended their sufferings by death; the latter applied excruciating tortures and yet denied their victims the release of death. They kept them alive in lingering agony.

"And I will keep my promise," continued Li Fan. "But"—he paused again—"but I have made no such promise to your great friend, Forsyth."

"What!" exclaimed Annesley, taken completely aback by the announcement. Although he was prepared to hear that Forsyth had been murdered by Li Fan's agents, it came as a complete surprise to hear his chum referred to as being not only alive but in the Chinaman's power.

"Yes," pursued Li Fan, lying handsomely. "Forsyth is also within the walls of this prison. You will ask me how I know you two were such close friends—chums, as they say in England. I reply to you in your own words: 'I do not propose to enlighten you.' Now, listen: to-morrow you will do your utmost to find the exact spot where the golden vases are buried. You will find them. If you refuse, then I will put Forsyth to the torture in your presence, and continue to do so until you submit to my demands."

Peter's heart sank. Li Fan had found a vital spot in his armour. He listened in dismal despair while the Chinaman, gloating over the success of his bluff, recounted the various diabolical cruelties he proposed to inflict upon the helpless and inoffensive Forsyth. Not for all the gold in the world would Annesley allow his chum to suffer if he were able to prevent it.

"All right," he exclaimed thickly. "You've won, Li Fan."

The Deputy-Governor chuckled. It was like the croak of a raven.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "Now I will send you to your cell. At sunrise you will be ready to resume work."

Li Fan gave an order. The executioner, with marked reluctance, kotowed, picked up his sword, and went out. The gaolers, grasping Peter by the arms, began to lead him to the door.

But the Sub's brain was working rapidly. He was not at all satisfied with Li Fan's guarantees. In fact, he had considerable misgivings.

With a sudden movement he shook off his guards and faced his erstwhile schoolfellow.

"I've something more to say!" he exclaimed.

The gaolers, astounded at the audacity of their prisoner, were about to throw themselves upon him and drag him from the Deputy-Governor's presence when Li Fan, confident that he had crushed his captive's spirit, signed to them to desist.

"Well, what is it?" he said, fully expecting that Peter was about to reiterate his willingness to reveal everything for his chum's sake.

"I am willing to carry out my part of the bargain, Li Fan," declared Peter, "but I insist upon guarantees from you. You must swear not to harm Forsyth in any way and to release him when I have fulfilled my contract."

"That I will do," agreed Li Fan, only too readily.

"And," continued Annesley, "I must see Forsyth. I'll have to get him to promise not to give any information about me, so that you need not hesitate to give him his liberty. Then, when he is safe on board the *Hermione*, he will send me a letter by one of your men to that effect. When I am assured on that point I'll be quite ready to complete my contract."

Li Fan realised too late his false move in so promptly agreeing to the first part of his victim's demands. Unless he could produce Forsyth he could not count upon Annesley's all-important though enforced co-operation. Without that, his chances of recovering the prized Chi-li-Kin heirlooms were most remote. Everything, then, depended upon the success of Tao Ching's expedition down the river in the *Chen Su*. If he were successful in effecting Forsyth's recapture, then the golden vases were in Li Fan's grasp.

"But—" began Li Fan hesitatingly.

Annesley, quick to realise that he, too, held a strong hand, gave his captor no opening.

"Until then I'll do nothing," he declared stoutly. "You know my terms. I know yours. That's all I have to say."

Presently Peter was taken back to his cell. He was not awakened at dawn that day, nor the next. Nor for several days. That was because Li Fan, feverishly awaiting Tao Ching's return, was doomed to disappointment.

## CHAPTER XXI

### NEARING A SOLUTION

"How's the patient, doctor?" inquired the Paymaster-Commander, as the M.O. walked into the wardroom on the

morning following the supposed Annesley's return to the *Hermione*.

The doctor shook his head.

"Interesting case, very," he replied. "From a professional point of view, of course. Short of giving him an overdose of morphia, I've done everything to induce him to sleep. Never came across an instance of a man with such a temperature.... I'll have to send a report to the *B.M.J.*[#] And the curious part is that he's continually raving——"

[#] *British Medical Journal*.

"That's not so very curious, is it, Pills?" interrupted Band, the physical training lieutenant, whose chief concern was owing to the fact that he had lost two most promising boxers for the Squadron Cup.

"Yes, it is," replied the M.O. somewhat testily, for the best part of a night's vigil in the sick-bay of a cruiser in the Tropics is apt to fray the edge of a man's temper before breakfast. "It is: have you ever heard of a man in a delirium calling for himself??"

"What d'ye mean, Pills?" asked the Paymaster-Commander.

"What I say. During the best part of the middle watch he was shouting, 'Annesley, old son, come here!' and 'Annesley, is that you? Sorry I missed you,' an' all that sort of thing."

"I suppose there isn't a mistake and it's Forsyth who's in the sick-bay?" suggested Gutta Percha Band.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the M.O. "'Course it's Annesley. Didn't his own boat's crew bring him back?'"

"But he wasn't in uniform," persisted the physical training officer. "He was rigged out like a scarecrow when he was slung up over the side."

"Well, if his boat's crew don't know him, who would?" countered the doctor. "Pass the marmalade, please. Is all the toast down your end of the table?"

"Look here, my merry sawbones," said the Paymaster-Commander. "Any objection to Gutta Percha and this child having a squint at your patient?"

"What for, Pay?" inquired the M.O. "Do you want to touch him for his month's mess bill? And Old Band wants to put him through a course of physical jerks, eh? Nice treatment for a mental case, I don't think! All right, then. Anything for peace and quietness. If he calms down before noon, I'll let you have just one peep, you doubting Thomases."

Accordingly, after Divisions, the two officers were admitted into the sick-bay. There, in a swinging cot enclosed in a mosquito curtain, lay the individual under discussion. To the doctor's intense satisfaction he had fallen into a peaceful slumber. His left arm rested on the coverlet. The sleeve of his pyjama coat had slipped up, leaving the bronzed skin bare to the elbow.

Without a word the two visitors crept from the ship's sick-quarters. Not until they gained the head of the ladder to the aft-deck did they break the silence.

"It's Forsyth," declared the Paymaster-Commander.

"'Course it is," agreed his companion. "Did you notice that tattoo mark on his arm? Annesley hadn't any such marks. I ought to know. They've both 'peeled' before me many a time."

Quickly the astonishing news spread. Captain Purvis sent for the Commander, who in turn interviewed the crew of

the picket-boat. The result of this investigation was that the light cruiser was ordered to get under way and proceed as far up the Kin-lung-ho as her draught would permit, and then a systematic search was to be made for the missing sub-lieutenant by means of the ship's boats and the helicopter seaplanes, of which the *Hermione* carried two.

"No," decided the Captain, in reply to a suggestion that the news of Forsyth's mysterious reappearance should be transmitted to the Admiral at Hong-Kong for the information of the paymaster-lieutenant's relatives at home. "No; not at present. The good news will keep for a few days longer. Until Forsyth recovers sufficiently to give an account of his adventures, it will be policy, I think, to keep the matter dark."

"I agree, sir," rejoined the Commander. "But might I ask whether you have formed any idea of what has occurred?"

"I'm not good at speculating," replied Captain Purvis. "I like to work on facts—not theories. Until I've something definite on which to base my opinion, I'd rather keep silence. But have you any suggestion?"

"Except, perhaps, that Annesley knew something concerning Forsyth's movements, and for some reason kept it dark. Then——"

"No, no," interrupted the skipper. "You'll not get me to believe that."

"Then I'm baffled, sir," declared The Bloke. "But it will require a lot of explaining how the picket-boat went away from the ship with Annesley and lost him, her crew returning with Forsyth, who has been given up as missing."

At considerably less than half speed the *Hermione* began to resume her ascent of the Kin-lung-ho. In ordinary circumstances she would have been unable to proceed farther, as the latest Admiralty chart gave depth only a foot or eighteen inches more than her maximum draught. But, owing to the immense volume of water descending the river, not only was the level of the water higher, but a considerable amount of mud had been scoured away from the bed of the stream.

It was a tedious task. Leadsman were constantly on the chains; steamboats were sent ahead to find and buoy the tortuous channel; while by compass and sextant bearings the navigating officers contrived to chart the dangers of the comparatively unknown waterway, since none but Chinese craft of light draught had used the river since the last occasion on which it had radically changed its course.

On the fore-bridge, their eyes smarting with the dazzling glare of the sun, alert signalmen kept their telescopes upon every craft that came within sight—for the most part cumbersome, unwieldy junks drifting rather than sailing downstream, since flat calms were the order of the day. A sharp watch was also kept upon the left bank of the river in case any figure resembling that of the missing sub-lieutenant might be sighted. As for the right bank, it was still half a fathom under water as far as the eye could reach, except a certain place where the storm-swept land showed up a few feet above the surface of the muddy river.

Forsyth slept well for several hours. The M.O. strictly opposed any suggestion that his patient should be awakened and questioned. Impatient though the rest of the officers were to hear the returned absentee's explanation, they had to wait until Nature's demand for rest had been satisfied.

"Think he'll still be light-headed, Pills?" asked the Commander anxiously.

"If he is," retorted the M.O., "I won't let any one see him for the next twenty-four hours. I'm not going to risk my patient's life to satisfy your curiosity concerning his past."

"But surely if he can throw any light upon Annesley's movements——" began the Commander.

The doctor shook his head.

"This is my department," he replied. "I'm responsible for the patient. I'll promise that when he's fit to be questioned he will be—not before."

So the Commander, fuming over the delay, had to report to the Captain that, as far as Forsyth was concerned, the mystery still remained unsolved.

Forsyth slept soundly for twelve hours. He awoke naturally. His pulse was almost normal, while his temperature was "up" only two degrees.

He spoke rationally, relating at considerable length his adventures from the time he left the ship to go ashore at Shanghai until he was rescued by the picket-boat's crew in the sampan. At first Captain Purvis was incredulous. He doubted the story that the notorious pirate, Tao Ching, was at large. On the face of it, considering the man had been reported by the Chinese authorities as having been executed, the statement seemed an impossible one. He was inclined to suspect that Forsyth was still light-headed.

But when the paymaster-lieutenant recounted his dealings with Li Fan and how the latter had been under the impression that he had taken Annesley captive, the skipper began to realise that Forsyth was in possession of his faculties.

The mere fact that a highly-placed Chinese official, the Deputy-Governor of the province of Nan-ngan (which embraced the spot where the golden vases had been hidden during the operations against Fort Tao-Lung), had gone to extreme measures to kidnap Annesley, pointed to some connection with the quest for the buried treasure. Peter Annesley had gone to Tao-Lung to search for the vases. It was just possible that Li Fan had taken advantage of Annesley's presence by seizing him.

Captain Purvis decided to act promptly. To have to report to the Admiral at Hong-Kong and then perhaps have to await official sanction from Home meant a delay that might prove fatal. Acting upon the precedent when British bluejackets and marines landed at Amoy in 1923 and occupied the town in consequence of the murder of the Vice-Consul, the skipper of the *Hermione* made up his mind to send an armed force to Tao-Lung and occupy the city. He might find his missing sub-lieutenant; he might not. In any case, there was sufficient justification in taking possession of the city of Tao-Lung by reason of the insult offered to the British flag by Li Fan's action in kidnapping and imprisoning Forsyth.

There was another factor in the Captain's favour. All the foreign Powers interested in the affairs of the Chinese Republic had recognised the Northern Government. The rebels in the south, by committing various outrages on foreigners, had forfeited all sympathy. The civil war had been raging with varying success on both sides for more than six months. But now the tide had turned in decided favour of the Northern Government. The armies of the latter were pouring into the southern provinces, and, if the steady advance were maintained, Nan-ngan would soon be overrun by the victorious troops who owed their allegiance to the President at Peking.

Thus, in the midst of the civil war, the British could occupy Tao-Lung without being opposed by the already hard-pressed southern rebels, while the northern troops would welcome any outside demonstration against their foes as a means to bring the long-drawn-out struggle to an end.

There was one difficulty that gave Captain Purvis considerable thought. Even though he took great risk in proceeding so far up the river with the *Hermione*, he was still unable to get the light cruiser within twenty miles of Tao-Lung. Consequently, it was impossible to land bluejackets under the guns of the ship. The only way that seemed at all practicable was to send the boats up to the city—and a landing in boats is always a hazardous enterprise unless supported by big gun-fire.

The executive officers were discussing the matter when a signalman reported that a torpedo-boat was descending the river.

It could be none other than the pirate Tao Ching's craft, the *Chen Su*. The rebels possessed no warship of any description, the few of which they originally had control having been destroyed in a series of encounters with their opponents in the earlier stages of the civil war. Since the *Chen Su* was a pirate-craft she was liable to be sunk without warning.

"Sound off 'Action Stations,'" ordered the Captain of the *Hermione*.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE END OF THE *CHEN SU*

It seemed a ludicrous proceeding to clear deck for action—a modern light cruiser preparing to fight an obsolete little torpedo-boat. On the one hand was the *Hermione*, armed with 6-inch guns and torpedo-tubes and manned by a highly-trained crew of British seamen. On the other the *Chen Su*, with two 3-pounder quick-firers of antiquated pattern, and a pair of torpedo-tubes which for the last fifteen years had never been occupied by a "tin-fish." But Captain Purvis was taking no unnecessary risks in that respect. The *Chen Su* might have been able to procure some torpedoes from the rebel arsenal at Nai-po. Tao Ching was known to be a desperate and bloodthirsty character, who would not hesitate to stoop to the blackest treachery if he found himself in a tight corner.

Chivalrously, Captain Purvis decided to give the *Chen Su* a chance. Instead of sinking her at sight, he would summon her to surrender unconditionally, although he had his doubts whether the pirate crew would prefer capture to resistance to the death.

During the passage down from Tao-Lung, in pursuit of the fugitive Englishman, Tao Ching's resolution had changed. He had thought seriously of going on board the British light cruiser and of betraying the plans of his employer, Li Fan. Had he fallen in with Forsyth he would have handed him over to the *Hermione*, in the hope not only of gaining a monetary reward, but of clearing himself of any suspicion of hostility to the British.

But when he remembered his previous record—for he had pillaged and sunk several junks belonging to Hong-Kong merchants and flying the Red Ensign—he came to the conclusion that it was a very unhealthy proceeding to attempt to temporise with the Captain of a British cruiser. His latest plan was to slip past the *Hermione* under cover of darkness—an easy matter, since the *Chen Su* could navigate many of the shallow and intricate channels, while the *Hermione* was restricted to the main stream—and gain the open sea. Then he would proceed north and join the forces of the Northern Republic.

Unfortunately for Tao Ching he had not counted upon finding the *Hermione* so far up the Kin-lung-ho. The hot air rising from the turgid river was so hazy that he was well within range of the light cruiser's guns before he discovered his mistake.

To turn and attempt to regain the shelter of Tao-Lung was courting instant disaster. The moment the *Chen Su* showed her beam as she ported helm would result in a destructive salvo from the *Hermione's* guns. The only course open to him—and that was a risky one—was to hold on, hoping that the *Chen Su* would not be recognised as the pirate-craft.

"She's hoisting Chinese colours, sir," reported the yeoman of signals on the *Hermione* fore-bridge.

Levelling his binoculars, Captain Purvis saw the emblem of the Chinese Republic fluttering in the light air, while the *Chen Su* altered helm with the obvious intention of passing the light cruiser on a widely divergent course. Whatever thoughts he had of placating the Captain of the *Hermione*, they were completely knocked on the head when he came within sight of the ship. There was something majestic in the stark and grim warship that compelled him to realise the folly of attempting to bargain for the safety of his hide.

For a brief instant a doubt flashed across the mind of the British Captain. He might have been misinformed as to the disappearance of the southern division of the Chinese Navy; and to open fire or even send a shot across the bows of the torpedo-boat flying Chinese colours might result in international complications. An error of that nature would result in his being cashiered and dismissed the Service.

But only for an instant.

"Hoist the International 'ID,'" he ordered. The bunting fluttered in the faint breeze—a peremptory signal to heave-to under pain of being fired upon. The *Chen Su* could not fail to observe the message; but Tao Ching feigned to ignore it. He gave the torpedo-boat more helm, bringing her stern-on to the light cruiser, and in such a position that a shell from the latter might end up its flight by pitching into a village on the banks of the river.

"That fellow's no fool," muttered Captain Purvis.

He knew perfectly well that the *Hermione* was incapable of giving chase. Although possessing an enormous supremacy of speed she could not take the intricate and shallow channel through which the *Chen Su* was steaming. In fact, the main channel was so narrow that there was hardly room for the *Hermione* to turn without risk of running her bows into the soft mud.

The while the *Hermione's* guns were trained upon the *Chen Su*, wanting only a touch upon an electric push in the director-station to let loose an annihilating salvo upon the pirate-craft, Tao Ching was pinning his faith to the fact that he was in territorial waters. He had ignored the proviso that the *Chen Su*, being a pirate vessel, could claim no such protection and was liable to be sunk at sight.

"Supposing he's got Annesley on board, sir," suggested the Commander. "He's held Forsyth."

"I thought of that," rejoined Captain Purvis gravely. "Fortune of war—or piracy. It's our duty to sink the ship."

"Or capture," supplemented the Commander. "An affair of boats. We could cut her off. There's enough water over the mud flats."

"It will be a sanguinary business," objected the Owner. "Those fellows will fight like demons. And if Annesley is a prisoner on board they'll probably cut his throat before the boats run alongside."

He gave another look at the *Chen Su*. She had eased down. Either the subsidiary channel ended abruptly or else turned sharp to starboard. In the latter case, the pirate-craft would not only be broadside on, but would no longer have the advantage of a village under her lee.

The *Hermione's* steamboats were ahead of the cruiser, engaged upon the task of taking soundings. These were recalled, while orders were given to lower the pulling-boats.

In a very short space of time the boats were manned and armed, the steam-cutters taking the others in tow. With the propellers churning up the mud, the towing-craft headed straight for the *Chen Su*, each with their boats astern.

This was not what Tao Ching had expected. He nevertheless prepared to resist to the last. The half-naked Chinamen manned their 3-pounders; others, armed with rifles, automatic pistols, and formidable-looking knives, lay prone on the deck and opened a fusillade at a full eight hundred yards.

The first shell from the *Chen Su* was accurately aimed as regards alignment, but the elevation was a little too much. Whizzing over the funnel of the cutter, it pitched in the sternsheets of the rearmost boat of the far-strung line. Had the missile exploded, the result would have been disastrous, but Chinese ammunition is notoriously defective. Without bursting, the shell crashed through the boat's transom, shattering the stern-post.

The boat partly filled. Only the strain upon the lowing-hawser kept her bows out of water. Knowing that the additional drag of the waterlogged craft would seriously affect the speed of the rest of the boats, the midshipman in charge ordered the hawser to be slipped.

Directly this was done, the boat filled until her gunwales were awash. With the utmost sang-froid her crew hung on, with only their heads above water, cheering their more fortunate comrades.

That was the last shot fired from this particular quick-firer; for the cutter's 3-pounder replied with such precision that the weapon and its crew were blown from the *Chen Su's* deck.



In spite of a furious fusillade that caused several casualties amongst the bluejackets, the *Hermione's* boats ran alongside. The hand-to-hand conflict was short and sharp. For the most part the pirates, disdaining quarter, were cut down.

Tao Ching, fighting desperately, gave back foot by foot. It would have been a simple matter to have shot him down, but either for motive of chivalry or through a desire to take the pirate captain alive, the British seamen refrained from shooting him. His automatic pistol was empty, his right arm was disabled, yet the desperate pirate resisted strongly, as he laid about him with his sword, for, like many of his countrymen, he was ambidextrous.

Gradually the semicircle of foes drove him back, until he realised that further resistance was hopeless. Already he had guessed his opponents' intentions to take him alive. A lieutenant, already bearing a wound in the cheek from Tao Ching's blade, ordered his men to fall back, and signed to the pirate to lay down his arms.

For a moment Tao Ching hesitated. Then, hurling his empty pistol full in the face of the British officer, he turned and leapt overboard.

A pulling-cutter started in pursuit, but before she got within a boat's length of the fugitive she stuck on the mud. Tao Ching, swimming in less than eighteen inches of water, continued his flight until there was not sufficient depth to float him. Between him and the shore was an expanse of fathomless black mud nearly a mile in width.

"Come out of it, you silly blighter!" shouted the midshipman of the cutter, holding up a line to throw to the pirate.

Tao Ching's reply was to shake his fist at his would-be rescuer; then, throwing up his feet, he deliberately dived into the slime. In less than a minute he disappeared entirely, swallowed up by the all-devouring mud.

Meanwhile all resistance had ceased on board the *Chen Su*. Three pirates had been taken alive—two of them badly wounded before they threw down their arms. A rigid search was immediately made below deck, but no signs of Peter Annesley were to be found.

The *Chen Su* was making water rapidly. Either she had been holed by shell-fire or else Tao Ching had deliberately ordered her underwater valves to be opened when escape was hopeless. The victors had just time to remove their prisoners and their own wounded when the pirate-craft sank stern foremost.

She settled in eight feet of water with a slight list to starboard, but before the boat returned to the *Hermione* only her funnel-tops and mast remained visible. She was still sinking in the mud that had swallowed up her desperate and bloodthirsty captain, the notorious Tao Ching.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### HARD AGROUND

As soon as the three survivors of the *Chen Su* were brought on board the *Hermione*, the unwounded pirate was subjected to a severe cross-examination. Wun Li, the messman, rose to the occasion nobly in his capacity as interpreter. It was a good thing, perhaps, that Captain Purvis did not understand all the blandishments and promises the wily Chinese messman showered upon his compatriot; but in a few minutes the scowling pirate was transformed into a smiling and communicative being.

"He makee allee tell one chop-chop," reported Wun Li, with the air of a conjurer who has brought off a neat bit of work. "You kickee him—him no can do. You no kickee—him can do"—a statement which, rendered into English, signified that the pirate could be led but not driven, and that, if promised immunity, he would be willing to disclose everything he knew that might prove of service to his captors.

"Ask him, Wun Li," ordered the skipper, "if he knows where Mr. Annesley is."

The pirate replied through the interpreter that he did. He remembered distinctly that the English officer was picked up by the *Chen Su* and taken up the Kin-lung-ho to Tao-Lung; that he was taken ashore under an armed guard and handed over to the native police. Beyond that he knew nothing, as Tao Ching had not given the crew any information concerning the Englishman's fate.

"That looks as if Li Fan has a finger in the pie," commented Captain Purvis. "There is a strong similarity between the two cases—Annesley's and Forsyth's. We're getting on, gentlemen. Now, Wun Li," he continued, "ask the prisoner if he knows this river well."

The prisoner replied that he did, seeing that before he took service with Tao Ching he had been in charge of a junk plying on the Kin-lung-ho. And whenever the *Chen Su* went up to Tao-Lung, and often above the city, he was always told off to pilot her up and down the river.

"He say no can do this shipee here," added Wun Li. "No water this channel. Back 'long topsides muchee water right up to city. Him makee shipee can do."

The messman pointed away on the port beam. The pirate nodded vehemently to signify that yonder was a much deeper channel than the one the *Hermione* was so slowly following.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquired Captain Purvis of the navigating lieutenant. "Apparently the yellow blighter maintains that we are in a sort of blind alley, and that if we take a certain channel we'll be able to get the ship right up to Tao-Lung. Our guns trained upon the place will prove a convincing factor to bringing Li Fan to reason."

"He may be right, sir," replied the navigator. "Our charts are, of course, not to be relied upon. It doesn't follow that because a deep-water channel is not shown on the chart it doesn't exist. At the same time, sir, I'm responsible under you for the safety of the ship. With due precautions, perhaps——"

"Exactly," interrupted the skipper. "We'll take due precautions, but I'm inclined to trust the fellow."

"Very good, sir," rejoined the navigating lieutenant.

Further inquiries of the captured pirate resulted in the information that to gain the unknown channel it would be necessary for the *Hermione* to retrace her course for nearly five miles before arriving at the junction of the two waterways.

"A delay, of course," remarked Captain Purvis, "But we may gain in the long run. Have all the boats hoisted in with the exception of the steam-cutter. I'm going to send her on ahead with an ultimatum to Li Fan."

By the time the boats were hoisted in and the *Hermione* turned sixteen points—a manoeuvre rendered possible only by going easy ahead with the port engine and easy astern with the starboard one, so narrow was the channel—the letter to Li Fan was composed. In it the officer commanding H.M.S. *Hermione* demanded the immediate release of Sub-Lieutenant Peter Annesley. There was no mention of reparations. The question could be dealt with later, the Captain's chief anxiety being to recover his missing officer safe and sound.

At full speed the steam-cutter departed on her errand, under the charge of the coxswain of the ill-fated picket-boat. There was no need to follow the channel. Her light draught, coupled with the flooded state of the river, enabled her to take liberties with the mud-banks that would spell disaster to any craft drawing more than six feet.

With the prisoner stationed on the navigating bridge to direct the helmsman, the *Hermione* entered the secret channel without mishap. Soundings gave a depth of thirty feet—enough for a super-dreadnought, and far more than Captain Purvis had expected to find so far up the river.

At ten knots—her minimum speed without sacrificing her manoeuvring qualities—the light cruiser held on. The decided confidence of the Chinaman tended to put the somewhat perturbed navigatory lieutenant more at his ease, yet not

for one moment did the latter relax his vigilance, taking cross-bearing and sextant angles, so that if necessity arose he could take the ship down to the open sea.

The depth remained fairly constant. No longer did the propellers churn up the slime, leaving a muddy trail. Her wake was as clear as if the ship were at sea. Everything seemed to be going as smoothly as clockwork.

An hour's steady steaming against a three-knot current brought the *Hermione* a good seven miles nearer her goal. In another hour or so, if all went well, she would be lying off the city with her guns trained at point-blank range upon Li Fan's palatial residence.

Suddenly the pirate, who had been intently looking at some object ashore, straightened himself and tapped the helmsman on the shoulder. Then in dumb show he ordered the wheel to be put hard over. The helmsman hesitated, looking appealingly at the navigating officer.

"He say makee quick one time turn," announced Wun Li, who had been told off to continue to act as interpreter.

"Hard-a-port," ordered the lieutenant. "Ease to ten! ... 'Midships...."

Whether it was an act of treachery on the part of the late quartermaster of the *Chen Su*, or whether it was on account of the helmsman's hesitation, was for the present a matter for subsequent investigation. What was more to the point was the fact that the *Hermione* took the ground, running hard and fast upon a submerged mudbank, and came to a standstill with her normal waterline showing a good five feet above the water for'ard and almost correspondingly down by the stern.

The pirate, frantically grasping Wun Li round his neck, was gibbering wildly, swearing by all his gods that it was through no fault of his that the catastrophe had occurred. The lieutenant, white beneath his tan, sprang to the telegraph indicators and rang down for full astern. Above the babbling of the two Chinamen came the clatter of mess-traps and the shouts of the astonished crew, for the hands had been piped to dinner, and the crowded mess-deck was covered with struggling men and capsized gears.

The vessel's hull vibrated under the action of the reversed engines, but she gave no sign of slipping out of the grip of the tenacious mud.

All hands, officers and ratings alike, were chafing under the situation. They realised that before the *Hermione* could be got off she would have to be lightened—a strenuous and back-aching task under a tropical sun.

Again the boats were hoisted out, and into them were piled everything of a weighty yet portable nature. Anchors were laid out on either quarter, their steel hawsers being brought to the steam capstans, the while the engines running at full astern. This took hours of unremitting toil, with no satisfactory result. Nothing short of commandeering several large junks and loading them with every description of stores and gear would seem to be of any use in extricating the stranded light cruiser, which in the present circumstances was anything but light.

In the midst of the feverish preparations, the steam-cutter returned. Her coxswain reported that the city was filled with armed men, and that the boat had had anything but a pleasant reception. But he bore a sealed missive—Li Fan's reply to the ultimatum.

When Captain Purvis broke the seals his face was a study. The reply was written in Chinese characters. No one on board could read it—not even Wun Li, who declared that the hieroglyphic characters were unknown to him.

"Li Fan's trying to pull my leg," declared Captain Purvis. "He's had an English education, so I'm told. At any rate, he speaks English well. He's trying to gain time for some reason. What do you suggest, Commander?"

"I'd send the thing back, sir," was the reply. "Tell him you want an answer in English, since he knows how to write it, I believe. Of course, sir, we must be prepared for a defiant reply. He's bound to get to know that the ship's hard and fast aground."

Again the steam-cutter set off upstream for Tao-Lung. With luck she might perform the double trip of forty miles and get back before dark. A lot depended upon the time taken in obtaining Li Fan's reply.

In point of fact, it was nearly midnight before the steam-cutter returned to the ship. She bore Li Fan's reply; and her coxswain reported that she had been subjected to a heavy rifle-fire about three miles below the city. The boat was hit several times, but there were no casualties, owing possibly to the failing light.

This was disconcerting news. It might mean that Li Fan intended offering armed resistance. On the other hand, the firing might have been opened by Chinese troops under the impression that the steam-cutter belonged to the rebel forces.

This time Li Fan's reply was written in fair English. He stated in very blunt terms that he had no intention of complying with the Captain of the *Hermione's* ultimatum, but signified his readiness to release Sub-Lieutenant Peter Annesley on certain conditions. These were: that all possible information should be given to Li Fan to enable him to locate the golden vases which, according to his statement, were heirlooms, and consequently not disposable by gift. Secondly, that Annesley and all foreign persons interested in the said vases must renounce all claim to them; thirdly, a ransom of 20,000 dollars must be paid for Annesley's release; fourthly, that the *Hermione* must proceed to sea forthwith, and that no subsequent operations should be conducted against Li Fan. Failing the acceptance of these terms, Li Fan would not hold himself responsible for Peter Annesley's safety after the expiration of twenty-four hours.

"Reading between the lines," commented Captain Purvis to the assembled officers, "it seems that Annesley hasn't succeeded in his quest, and that Li Fan has been trying to get him to reveal what he knows about the treasure. Apparently Annesley has refused to disclose the secret. Well, we shall see. High water to-morrow is at 6 a.m. With decent luck we ought to be able to lighten ship sufficiently to get her off by then.... Mr. Carfax, you will please be ready to report to me at one bell in the forenoon watch."

"Very good, sir," replied the officer addressed.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### LI FAN'S REVENGE

As hour after hour passed and no sign of the *Chen Su's* return, Li Fan got more and more uneasy. Unless he could produce Forsyth as evidence of good faith towards Annesley, the chances that the latter would stubbornly refuse to divulge the secret of the hiding-place of the golden vases became less and less, till at length Li Fan had to admit that Tao Ching had failed him. Even then he expected the pirate's return.

Things were looking pretty black as far as Li Fan was concerned. Strong evidence that he was actively engaged in supporting the rebel army had reached Peking, with the result that he was declared outlaw. That in itself mattered little while the rebel troops were more than holding their own. But when the tide changed and the southern troops were being forced back by the now irresistible forces of the Northern Government, Li Fan's position was becoming desperate. Already the van of the retreating rebel army was falling back on Nan-ngan province, and there was every likelihood that before many more days had passed the city of Tao-Lung would be in the hands of the army that owed allegiance to Peking.

Li Fan had already decided on taking flight, but before he left Tao-Lung he meant to do his utmost to gain possession of the golden vases, for according to an old legend the house of the great Chi-li-Kin—from whom Li Fan was a lineal descendant—was secure and prosperous while the vases remained in the province of Nan-ngan. Buried, they still fulfilled the conditions of the legend; but should they be recovered by a "foreign devil" and taken out of the country, the loss would result in the disappearance of the Chi-li-Kin dynasty.

Then came the news of the destruction of the *Chen Su* by the British light cruiser, *Hermione*. Li Fan was thrown into a panic, especially when it was reported that the warship was well on her way up the Kin-lung-ho to the city of Tao-

Lung. But for the fact that he had figuratively burned his boats when he caused Forsyth to be kidnapped and had taken Annesley captive, he would have welcomed the *Hermione* as a haven of refuge from the advancing troops from the north. His wholesome respect for the cruiser's guns, coupled with his anxiety to regain the golden vases, prevented his putting his prisoner to death.

But when a subsequent report reached him to the effect that the *Hermione* was aground—a wreck, according to the sampan man who bore the news—Li Fan recovered some of his composure, especially as the rebels had gained a success against their opponents on the banks of the Kling-ho, about eighty miles from Tao-Lung.

He determined to stop at nothing to compel Peter Annesley to reveal the exact position of the hiding-place of the treasure.

Accordingly at daybreak, on the morning following the rejection of Captain Purvis' demands, Annesley was awakened by an armed guard. With his hands bound behind his back the prisoner was escorted to the water-front and put on board a sampan.

Across the river he was taken, and landed close to the bamboo pier to which the picket-boat had been moored during the typhoon. Already the floods had subsided sufficiently to allow the upper portions of the pile-work to show above water.

Surrounded by his guards, Annesley was forced to wade knee-deep over the devastated paddy-fields. He knew his destination, but with grim determination he resolved to refuse to give any information concerning his secret.

At length Peter found himself upon the site of his previous exploration. The trench still remained open. He noticed that it had been considerably lengthened, but whether by his picket-boat's crew or by the Chinese under Li Fan's order, he knew not. There was no little satisfaction in the knowledge that the excavation had been made in the wrong direction—north and south instead of west. Had the trench been curved a few yards at right angles to the line of the original excavation the searchers, whoever they might be, would almost to a dead certainty have solved the baffling problem.

Peter was left standing surrounded by his guards, who had thrown themselves upon the ground. From his elevated position, the Sub could command a vast expanse of country. He could trace the course of the river for several miles until sky and water blended in a sun-drawn haze. Vainly he looked for any sign of a British craft, large or small. There were junks and sampans moving slowly, for the most part filled with refugees and their belongings, for the exodus of rebel sympathisers had already begun.

Nearly an hour passed before the captain of the guard gave an order. The Chinese stood up with a certain amount of alertness, the while maintaining their circular formation around their prisoner.

Presently Li Fan came upon the scene in a gorgeous palanquin and attended by a number of officials. Descending awkwardly from his man-borne conveyance, he approached his capture.

"Where is the exact spot?" he demanded abruptly.

"How should I know?" countered Peter, reluctant to goad Li Fan to anger if other methods could prevail. "Is it likely that I should have wasted time digging here if I knew the vases were buried somewhere else?"

"I agree," rejoined Li Fan, with a cunning look. "But since then you have learnt the exact place. Now, where is it?"

Although he strove to conceal it, Annesley was dumbfounded at the statement. By what uncanny method had Li Fan read his mind, Peter wondered. There was no doubt of the fact that the Chinaman had either found out or had made a shrewd guess. Peter wondered whether he had babbled in his sleep, and that Li Fan had been somewhere within earshot. He had no faith in hypnotism, but this demonstration of thought-reading was enough to convey the impression that Li Fan was a master of the Black Art.

Fearing to give himself away, Peter kept silent.

Li Fan repeated his question.

Peter kept silent.

"Listen," continued his captor; "you will do as I tell you. Turn your head and cast your eyes on the spot where the vases are hidden."

There was such a curious ring in Li Fan's voice, for, contrary to his previous interviews with Annesley, he showed no indication of anger, that Peter felt almost compelled to look. There he stood, surrounded by yellow-faced, slant-eyed men, all of whom, seemingly by Li Fan's unspoken command, were looking fixedly at him. Li Fan, too, was using his eyes much as a python hypnotises a rabbit.

The tension was acute. It took the last effort of will-power to prevent Peter obeying the dictatorial behest. Had he but given one glance at the trodden-down rice-grass twenty paces to the west of the central cavity—where he felt certain the given compass bearings made sixty years ago would have curved—the bone of contention would be within Li Fan's jaws within the next twenty minutes.

With a determined effort, Annesley turned his thoughts into another channel. He remembered Li Fan's threat to put Forsyth to torture in his chum's presence. Li Fan had failed to produce Forsyth. Therefore, concluded Peter, the Chinaman had lied. Forsyth was not in his power.

Peter laughed and shook his head.

Li Fan realised that his efforts, although very near to success, had failed. He tried another way.

"Look here, old chap," he began, employing a phrase he had picked up in those far-off days at Broadwinton School, "let us come to terms. It is of the greatest importance that I recover those vases. They are heirlooms, descended through my house for hundreds of years from the illustrious Chi-li-Kin. My great-grandfather was no doubt ignorant of their sentimental value when he did give them to your ancestor. He had no right to do so, nor would he have so done had he known the personal value of those vases to our house. To you they mean nothing but something of money value. Now, listen: suppose I give you liberty, give you five times their weight in gold, will you in return to me disclose the hiding-place of the Chi-li-Kin vases? Also, I say no more regarding insult offered to the spirits of my ancestors you gave at Broadwinton School."

Annesley thought well before replying.

Li Fan's offer seemed fair enough, but what of the man? Was he to be trusted? Would his promise hold good? Was it only a skilfully-baited trap to induce his captive to yield up the secret? Having seen Li Fan in his true colours—a furious, bloodthirsty barbarian in spite of a thin veneer of Western civilisation—Annesley had no confidence in the former schoolfellow's seductive proposal.

"Now that my friend Forsyth is free," he remarked, taking for granted a piece of information for which he had no proof, "you will probably have to consider the probability of a visit from a British punitive expedition. I shouldn't be at all surprised to hear that one is on the way up the Kin-lung-ho at the present moment. For my own part, I'm inclined to agree to your proposal, but, frankly, Li Fan, I don't trust you. You've threatened me. You've threatened Forsyth in order to make me give in. But it's no go, Li Fan. As far as I'm concerned, I'm willing to make a deal, but you must first send me back to my ship. I will then give you all directions I know to assist you in recovering your Chi-li-Kin heirlooms. When you've done so, you can send me the gold to the value named. How's that?"

It was now Li Fan's turn to consider matters. Annesley's warning about the presence of a British armed force had shaken him up considerably, all the more so because his captor seemed confident that Forsyth had escaped and had rejoined his ship. That was news. Hitherto in the exchange of communication between the Captain of the *Hermione* and the Deputy-Governor of the province of Nan-ngan, Forsyth's name had not been mentioned. Consequently Li Fan had harboured the thought that Forsyth, although he had made his escape from Tao-Lung, had perished in the typhoon, and that the coolies who had reported his rescue by the picket-boat's crew in the sampan had, like Tao Ching, mistaken Annesley for his chum.

Nor was Li Fan inclined to waste time on recovering the vases. There was little satisfaction in regaining them when the British light cruiser was lying off the city, and Annesley was safe from his vengeance; for, in spite of his promises, Li Fan had not forgiven that incident in his study at Broadwinton. His object was to get possession of the Chi-li-Kin heirlooms with the utmost dispatch. Then he could attain a triple aim—settle with Annesley, make off with the treasure, and escape the peril that threatened him both from the *Hermione* and the victorious Chinese troops from the north.

"I have too much time lost," he exclaimed in an outburst of anger. "You will be made tied to post and put in the hole you have dug. Then you stop until vultures peep eyes out and worms eat through miserable carcase—unless you tell me quick."

Annesley pretended to ignore the threat. He knew that Li Fan was capable of putting it into execution. That was rough luck after Peter had so nearly gained his point.

Turning to the captain of the armed guard, Li Fan gave a string of orders. The men, hearing him, grinned diabolically. After all, they were not going to be disappointed of the spectacle of a "foreign devil" undergoing torment.

Half a dozen of the Chinese guards, setting down their rifles, set to work to dig a hole in the floor of the excavation. Into this they drove a stout bamboo, ramming the earth about its base and leaving the top level with the surrounding ground.

Then, at an order from the captain of the guard, two stout fellows gripped Peter by the shoulders, while a third cast off the cords that bound his arms, apparently for the purpose of using the same rope to secure the prisoner to the post.

The moment Annesley felt his arms free of the cords a frenzy of desperation took possession of him. If he had to die, he would die fighting like a man, and not by being buried alive. He literally saw red.

With a sudden, totally unexpected heave, he wrenched himself clear of the men grasping his shoulders. His powerful hands closed upon their necks like a vice. The next instant he dashed their heads together, and before they had fallen insensible to the ground, Peter had wrenched a sword from the man who had been standing between him, at the same time planting a straight left full on the point of the fellow's chin, whereby he lost all interest in the subsequent proceedings.

The possession of a keen blade gave Annesley a peculiar sense of elation. He was a man armed, even though the weapon was a pointless sword, three inches wide at one end and tapering to two inches next to the hilt, and unprovided with a guard of any description. It was a weapon of a type peculiar to the Chinese, and a skilled hand was capable of decapitating a man with a single blow without the use of very great force.

Brandishing the sword, the Sub dashed straight for Li Fan, determined that if humanly possible his diabolical enemy should go before him into the Great Beyond.

In spite of his adiposity, Li Fan leapt backwards, upsetting two of his attendants and subsiding upon the pancaked remains of his gorgeous palanquin. But before Peter could get within striking distance the captain of the guard barred his way.

The Sub's blade glinted in the sunlight as it descended with terrible force upon the captain's skull. So terrific was the blow that the luckless Chinaman's head was split from crown to chin.

The fury of the cut was Annesley's undoing. Unable to extricate the steel, he was overpowered by a concentrated rush of about a dozen guards and hurled to the ground. Yet, in spite of their captain's death and Li Fan's ludicrous consternation, the Chinese guard remembered their previous instructions not to injure the prisoner without express orders.

Peter lay upon the moist ground, conscious that he had failed to get even with his enemy and expecting momentarily to receive a sword-cut or a rifle-bullet to end his torment. Gradually he began to realise that his attempt had failed to attain its object. He was not to die fighting, but to be retained for a lingering death.

Presently some resemblance of order was restored. The victims of Annesley's brief spell of triumph were removed.

Li Fan, his yellow features turned into a greenish hue, had been assisted to rise from his undignified resting-place upon the wreckage of his palanquin; and had sufficiently recovered from the shock to his dignity and courage to be able to resume control of the proceedings. Nevertheless, he kept his distance from the now securely-held Annesley.

Realising that further resistance was impossible, Peter resigned himself to his fate. He had no wish to die. He clung to life with all the zest of a clean-living young Englishman; but now that he was doomed to a hideous death, he would meet it with all the fortitude at his command.

The Chinese guards lowered him into the pit and secured him to the post. Then they began shovelling in the moist earth.

"Now free yourself if you can, Annesley," said Li Fan jeeringly, when his victim was turfed to the neck. "Here you will remain and die miserably. Mind you, you will be a long time dying. For one day I will leave two of my men to scare away the vultures—but they cannot stop the worms. If, however, you change your mind about the hiding-place, one of the men will bring me word. Consider and be wise before it is too late."

With that Li Fan turned his back and walked away, accompanied by his numerous retinue. Even in his desperate plight, Peter could not help feeling some slight form of elation to see his corpulent enemy plodding ponderously through the beaten-down rice-grass and jolting against his umbrella-bearer at every other step. But the emotion soon passed when Peter found himself alone, encased to his chin in earth, save for the stolid figures of the two Chinese guards as they squatted on the ground a good twenty paces off, watching him like a cat before pouncing upon a cornered mouse.

Higher and higher rose the sun, its steadily-increasing rays pouring down upon the Sub's unprotected head. The earth, in settling, gripped his body and limbs as in a vice. The faintest movement was impossible. His extremities were numbed by contact with the clay-like soil; his throat burned like a lime-kiln, while his swollen tongue caused him exquisite torment. And in his torment he prayed for a speedy release.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE HELICOPTER TO THE RESCUE

Lieutenant Reginald Carfax, having tested the controls of his command, signed to a boat to approach. Then, boarding her, he was ferried across to the still stranded *Hermione*.

"All correct, sir," he reported to his skipper.

"Very good," rejoined Captain Purvis. "You know your orders—carry on."

Carfax was a man of action, but of few words. Saluting, he turned and hurried aft, where his crew—the complement of one of the *Hermione's* helicopter-seaplanes—had fallen in on the quarter-deck.

The seaplane had been hoisted out early in the morning, and now lay moored on the edge of the fairway at about fifty yards from the light cruiser's starboard quarter. She was one of the very latest type of aerial scouts, with a fifty-foot fuselage of bullet-proof steel, two long but wide planes, and three elongated floats. Twin engines, driving metal propellers bracketed outside a fuselage, comprised her motive-power, while above the upper plane were two huge fans—four-bladed and resembling the arms of a windmill—that could be revolved on a vertical axis. In the bows of the fuselage, protected by a steel shield, was a machine-gun. A weapon of similar type was mounted aft. Midships was the bomb-dropping gadget, wireless room, and the photographic apparatus, for the helicopter-seaplane was intended for independent action: to combine the qualities of attack and defence with those of reconnaissance.



"Party—'shun. All correct, sir," reported the petty officer in charge of the seaplane's crew. He was the same individual whom Peter Annesley had left to proceed with the excavation on the night when the Sub made his desperate but unsuccessful attempt to regain the picket-boat.

Having read out his instructions—a necessary step in the event of his being disabled—Carfax ordered the men to board the seaplane. He, by virtue of his rank, was the last to step aboard. Even as he did so, the hitherto silent motors sprang to life, roaring with open exhausts at the touch of a button actuating the self-starters.

No taxi-ing was necessary. A quick pull on a lever and the twin helicopters began to revolve, slowly at first and then with gradually increasing velocity, until the seaplane rose horizontally from the surface, shedding a cascade of water from the underside of her triple floats.

Up and up she went, until at a height of one thousand feet the *Hermione* looked no bigger than a toy ship on a model boating lake. Then the twin propellers took up the tale, and the seaplane leapt forward at a speed that soon attained a hundred miles an hour in the direction of the city of Tao-Lung.

Flying at a great height, and with her engines now most effectively silenced, the seaplane was not likely to be detected by the noise she made, while, being between the city and the dazzling sun, she stood little chance of being spotted by any of the inhabitants, who for the most part were too busy preparing for the general exodus to gaze skywards. Noisy aeroplanes they were used to, for on both sides the Chinese armies possessed a fairly efficient air service; but the stealthily and silently approaching British seaplane was as yet unknown to them.

At five thousand feet the propelling gear was disconnected and the helicopters again brought into play. The machine was now practically stationary, hovering over Tao-Lung while Carfax made his observations and took a number of aerial photographs which would be of extreme importance should the *Hermione* have occasion to bring her guns to bear upon the public buildings.

The place was emptying rapidly. Along the banks of the river swarms of people, accompanied by all kinds of vehicles piled with baggage, were hurrying to take refuge from the victorious army of Peking. Others, crowding into junks and sampans, were making their way upstream. In several quarters of the city the rebel troops were engaged in looting the deserted premises of their sympathisers, while now and again came the sharp reports of rifle-fire, showing that the soldiers did not hesitate to add the crime of murder to that of pillage.

Carfax was engrossed in his task of watching the scene through a pair of binoculars when the C.P.O. touched him on the arm.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man, "but what do ye make of that over yonder?"

The lieutenant looked in the direction the chief petty officer had indicated.

"Seems like a bean-feast crowd crossing the river," he replied.

"Yes, sir," continued the man. "They're in the only boats crossing over to the town—an' they're a-crossin' from the place where we were a-diggin' along of Mr. Annesley. S'posing, sir, they've been an' took Mr. Annesley over to point out the spot?"

"They haven't got him in any of the boats," replied Carfax, who had kept the little flotilla under observation during the conversation. "There's a fat old Chink under an umbrella. Mandarin, most likely, crossing to try and restore order. The others are Chinks, too. I swear there's no European in that crush. Where is the place you were digging, anyway?"

"There, sir," said the chief petty officer. "See that bit of a pier? Hold your arm out at full length, sir, fingers extended on a bearin' sou'-west. There's a hummock somewhere thereabouts, only up here it all looks as flat as a bloomin' pancake. Got it, sir?"

The lieutenant looked, lowered his glasses to wipe the lenses, and looked again.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, after a brief glance. "There is some one there. Trench, too, filled up in the middle.... There are two fellows there, but they're Chinamen."

"With rifles, sir," supplemented the chief petty officer. "Now if that ain't decidedly fishy. 'Tain't jonnick, sir."

"We'll investigate," decided Carfax, signalling to the motor-room to slack up the propellers.

Immediately over the partly-filled-in trench—the chief petty officer remarked that more digging had been done since he had been at work there—the helicopters were again brought into action and retarded until the seaplane descended vertically to within eight hundred feet of the ground. Even on that comparatively low altitude it was a difficult business to see clearly, for the heated air gave objects on the ground a quivering appearance. It was like looking at a picture through the hot air above a lighted gas-jet.

"By heavens, sir!" suddenly exclaimed the chief petty officer. "They've cut off Mr. Annesley's head, the murderous swine! There it is a-lyin' on the ground."

The perspiration oozed from Carfax's forehead and his hands shook as he heard the terrible news. Then, seized by an inspiration, he raised his binoculars. If Annesley had had his head cut off, for what purpose were the two armed Chinamen waiting?

"You're wrong," he declared, after a brief examination. "He's buried up to his neck. He's still alive. Stand by with the machine-gun, there, Johnson. Directly those yellow blighters bolt give 'em a tray."

Slowly the seaplane descended. The Chinamen, still oblivious of the presence of danger, were chattering and pointing at the tortured features of the helpless Englishman. They were too near him for the machine-gunners to risk opening fire.

At last the guards heard the whirr of the helicopter fans. For a few moments they sat petrified with fear. Then, with yells of terror, they ran for shelter; but not a vestige of shelter was available in that expanse of paddy-fields.

The machine-gun spat viciously. A hail of bullets kicked up a shower of mud at the heels of the fugitives. Deliberately the gunner elevated the weapon, which was still pumping out picket at a rate of five hundred rounds a minute. The Chinamen stumbled a few paces and collapsed, riddled with the avenging bullets.

With diminished velocity the seaplane descended vertically. Already the emergency buffers, designed to project below the underside of the floats, had been brought into position. With hardly a suspicion of a bump the seaplane made contact with the ground.

Never before had her crew abandoned her without orders, but now all hands clambered out and rushed to the spot where Annesley was buried.

"He's dead, sir," declared one of the men.

"Hope not," rejoined Carfax, seizing a spade, of which several had been left upon the ground. "Dig like blue blazes, men; only be careful you don't hit him."

At length Peter was gently lifted from the hole and placed upon the ground. With feelings of relief, Carfax found that his brother-officer was still breathing. He chafed the Sub's hands and moistened his swollen lips with brandy, until after a quarter of an hour his efforts were rewarded by seeing Peter open his eyes.

"You're all right, old son," said Carfax soothingly, for there was a look of acute apprehension on the Sub's face, that spoke volumes for the ordeal through which he had passed.

Peter nodded feebly. He seemed to accept the assurance, but there was evidently something on his mind.

"Best get him aboard, sir," suggested the chief petty officer.

But this proposal did not please the rescued man. He beckoned to Carfax to come nearer. The lieutenant bent to try and catch Annesley's whisper.

"What is it?" he inquired gently.

"Dig fifty yards due west from here," said Peter feebly. "Not far down ... five minutes ought to do."

"Right-o," replied the mystified lieutenant, thinking that Annesley was wandering in his mind.

"Best 'umour 'im, sir," said the chief petty officer in a low voice. "I'll take a couple of hands an' start scratchin'.... Crickey, if this 'ere ain't a rum go," he added to himself. "Never could get to the rights of what we were doin' here afore. Come along, you lads, an' do a bit o' gardenin'. Nothin' comes amiss to the Handy Man, you know."

Three of the seaplane's crew, armed with spades discarded by Li Fan's minions, set to work on the spot Peter had indicated. They had not dug down more than four feet when one of the spades struck a metallic substance.

"Brass pot of sort," declared one of the men.

"Brass pot, my foot!" retorted the chief petty officer contemptuously. "Yer knows well as I do brass goes green. 'Tis gold. All together, my beauties. Heave away—up she comes!"

The long-buried vase came to light, little the worse for its sixty years' sojourn in the earth. The second soon followed.

Staggering under the weight of the precious objects, the bluejackets approached the recumbent Sub. Peter raised his head. The effort caused a sharp pang to his tortured frame; but at the sight of the golden prizes a wan smile spread over his haggard features. Then his head fell back and his eyes closed. Merciful oblivion had again banished pain and anguish from the rescued victim of Li Fan's thwarted vengeance.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE FATE OF THE GOLDEN VASES

"Look alive, my lads, and get Mr. Annesley on board!" exclaimed Lieutenant Carfax briskly. "The armed boats are abreast the city and we've our observation business to do. Yes; dump these gewgaws aboard too."

Very gently the men lifted the unconscious form of the Sub and placed him in the body of the seaplane. With scant ceremony the vases of Chi-li-Kin were dumped aft. To the seamen they conveyed little. They regarded them merely as loot, being ignorant of the difficulties and dangers that, in the attempts to recover them, had had to be encountered and overcome.

Carfax, giving an embracing glance to make sure that all was in order, raised his hand. The motor-mechanic actuated the self-starters and engine of the helicopter gear. With a jerk, like the sudden starting of a lift, the sea-plane leapt skywards, until she hovered eight hundred feet above the city of Tao-Lung.

"First cutter! First cutter!" sang out the leading telegraphist into the voice-piece of the wireless telephone.

"Aye, aye!" came the reply through three hundred yards of space.

"Inform Senior Naval Officer we've got Mr. Annesley.... Yes, alive. The swine turved him up to his neck.... Yes, Li Fan; we spotted him crossing the river an hour ago. He's probably making for his palace. You'll nab him if you look

lively. Square C 4's the map reference."

The flotilla, crammed with armed bluejackets, ran alongside the quay fronting the principal thoroughfare leading to the Governor's palace. There was no opposition. A few of the rebel troops were still in the city, but were too busily engaged in looting to offer any resistance to the British landing-party.

From their elevated post of observation the crew of the seaplane could follow the progress of their comrades to the city. The advance of the latter was conducted with celerity and caution, men with machine-guns being halted at every cross-road of importance to act as supports should the advance guard and main body be ambushed.

"They'll have to get a move on if they are to lay Li Fan by the heels," exclaimed Carfax to the chief petty officer. "Look, there's the old villain coming out of his palace. See that motor-car waiting by those stone steps?"

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the chief petty officer. "Those Chinks with him are carrying bundles and shovin' 'em in. His week's washin', I'll allow," he added jocularly.

Even as the observers watched the hurried preparations for flight on the part of Li Fan, the avenging bluejackets swung into the square facing the residence of the Deputy-Governor.

The car leapt forward. Before it had travelled thrice its own length it disappeared in a cloud of dust and smoke. A deafening detonation was borne to the ears of Carfax and his companions.

Slowly the smoke dispersed. Where Li Fan's motor-car had been was a gaping cavity in the paved square. The Government troops had started to shell the city at a range of twelve thousand yards, and the first missile had, by a freak of fate, struck the fugitive Li Fan's equipage, blowing it and its occupants to pieces.

The bluejackets halted and ordered arms. An officer, accompanied by an interpreter, advanced and questioned one of the Chinese onlookers who had been wounded by fragments of flying metal. The man was emphatic that it was Li Fan who had just been blown to bits. Amidst the débris thrown up by the explosion were shattered fragments of gold. Li Fan had attempted to carry off the golden vases of Chi-li-Kin, which had always been in the possession of that Emperor's descendants. The delay in placing them in the car had cost him his life.

With the shelling of the rebel city the British bluejackets withdrew. A civil war was no concern of theirs. The object of the expedition had been achieved: Annesley had been rescued, and his fiendish captor had been slain. By this time the bombardment had become general. The artillery fire was fairly accurately timed, most of the shell falling in the crowded buildings. But, Carfax noted, a large percentage of the shells failed to explode.

The last of the British landing-party had re-embarked when Carfax, his task accomplished, prepared to return to the *Hermione*. The twin propellers had hardly been in action for ten seconds when, unaccountably, the starboard motor ceased functioning. The seaplane, spinning like a bird with one wing, began to fall. Quick to act, the mechanic declutched the propeller and brought the helicopter into action. The erratic descent was checked, and with hardly a splash the seaplane alighted within fifty yards of the *Hermione's* steam-cutter.

In response to the hail the steamboat backed and prepared to take the seaplane in tow.

"Hello, Pills!" exclaimed Carfax, noticing that the medical officer was in the stern-sheets of the cutter. "Busy?"

"No, thanks be," ejaculated the medical officer. "Not a single casualty. Better not boast, though—we're not out of the business yet."

"Then come aboard," invited Carfax. "You might be able to do something for Annesley. He's too weak to be shifted yet. We'll have our work cut out to hoist him over the ship's side when we get alongside.... Hold on; half a minute."

The lieutenant remembered that the capacity of a seaplane, even when water-borne, is limited. The *Hermione's* surgeon-lieutenant was not a featherweight by any means, and the seaplane, being in fighting trim, was already overloaded by the weight of the rescued Sub and the two recovered trophies.

"I've two brass pots aboard," he announced to the officer in charge of the steam-cutter. "Do you mind taking 'em aboard you? Right-o, thanks, old son.... Now, then; gently with 'em."

The two golden vases were handed from the seaplane into the cutter and stowed in the latter's little cabin between the stern-sheets and the engine-room. This done, the medical officer transhipped to the seaplane, and the latter dropped astern in tow. During the operation the steam-cutter had become the rearmost of the string of armed boats as they made the return journey to their parent-ship.

The medical officer, in the midst of his labours, turned to speak to Carfax.

"Perhaps it's as well our people didn't collar that devil, Li Fan," he remarked. "It's all very well to preach about 'love your enemies,' but there are limits. Annesley has——"

The sentence remained unfinished. With a shrill whine, the noise preceding the comparatively slow-moving missile, a 6-inch shell came hurling through the air. Instinctively Carfax ducked his head. There was a crack of shattered wood, but no ear-splitting detonation of the exploding shell. He looked up, just in time to see the steam-cutter, her back broken, disappearing beneath the agitated surface of the Kin-lung-ho.

"Cast off there!" he shouted.

The towing-hawser was slipped just in time to prevent the seaplane being drawn down by the foundering steamboat. The crew of the latter, including the leading stoker, who had succeeded in scrambling through the engine-room hold, were swimming about dazed, but otherwise unharmed.

"Near thing that," commented the surgeon-lieutenant.

"Yes, dud shell," supplemented Carfax. "If it weren't, we wouldn't be here, old son."

He went for'ard to superintend the passing of a towing-hawser to another steamboat that had come to the rescue. As he did so, he noticed the *Hermione* rounding a bend of the river. The light cruiser had been refloated and was coming up to give support, now unnecessary, to the landing-party.

Five minutes later the seaplane, with Peter Annesley still in a state of insensibility, was waddling astern of the second cutter. Eighteen feet beneath her, and steadily sinking into the fathomless slime, was the broken-backed boat in whose cabin were the two golden vases.

The heirlooms of the Chi-li-Kin were fated never to leave the province of Nan-ngan; but the old prophecy had proved false. Li Fan, the last of the house of Chi-li-Kin, was no more.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE WINNING OF THE CUP

One evening, three weeks after Peter Annesley's rescue, there was great excitement amongst the ship's companies of the China Squadron assembled at Hong-Kong.

It was the occasion of the Squadron Boxing Competition, the events taking place on board the flagship.

On a raised "ring," with no other roof than the vault of heaven and brilliantly illuminated by electric arc-lamps, various would-be champions had met, until by the usual process of elimination there remained only the finalists.

Much to their mutual regret, Peter Annesley and his chum Forsyth were not to be pitted against each other. Forsyth tried his utmost to prevail upon the medical officer and Gutta Percha Band to let him enter for the competition. Although the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak, which was hardly to be wondered at after a severe bout of fever. Consequently the paymaster-lieutenant had to stand down in favour of a hulking young midshipman, who failed to scrape through the preliminary heat. Annesley, thanks to his splendid constitution, had literally fought his way through, up to and including the semi-final, in spite of a narrow squeak in the second heat. Upon him rested the hopes of the officers and men of the *Hermione* to bring to the ship the coveted challenge cup.

Surrounding the ring were two tiers of chairs filled with officers of the squadron in mess-uniform, their bronzed features contrasting vividly with their white waistcoats, which for the most part were resplendent with miniature medals and decorations. Behind the officers were hundreds of marines, bluejackets, stokers, and other ratings, some bundled together on mess-stools, others perched upon every available object from which they could command a more or less uninterrupted view of the resin-powdered boards enclosed by a triple line of ropes. Through the steadily-mounting cloud of smoke from well over a thousand pipes and cigarettes came the low rumble of voices as the spectators discussed the chances of the respective finalists and many other topics in general.

"You had a pretty strenuous time up the Kin-lung-ho, I hear, Purvis," remarked the skipper of the *Bellandra*, one of the light cruisers which had been on a special mission to various Japanese ports and had returned to Hong-Kong only a few hours previously.

"Yes," assented Captain Purvis. "We had a bit of a tussle getting the old *Hermione* off the putty. Never came across such mud in all my experience—and I've served a commission on the West Coast. You'd hardly credit it, but when we got well afloat and we sent divers down to examine the bottom, they found the keel and bilge plates burnished like silver."

"What were you doing up there, anyway?" continued the Captain of the *Bellandra*. "I heard some rumour that you were after buried treasure."

"One of my Subs was—Annesley—the man we're about to see in the final," replied Captain Purvis. "I'll admit I had a sort of sleeping partnership in the deal. Oh yes, we recovered the stuff—a couple of beautifully chased gold vases. There's a history attached to them. Some day, if you're curious to know, I'll spin the yarn."

"Where are they?" inquired the other, proffering his cigar-case.

"I can give you the exact spot within a couple of yards," declared Captain Purvis, with a laugh. "If you're willing to take over my share, I'll renounce all claim in your favour for a fiver. As a matter of fact——"

The explanation was interrupted by the flagship's Commander entering the ring and holding up his hand for silence. The babel of voices ceased with uncanny suddenness to any one not acquainted with that perfected machine—Naval Discipline.

"Final of the Squadron championship contest," announced the Commander, in a deep voice that carried easily to the rearmost of the dense throng of fascinated spectators. He glanced over his left shoulder. Immediately the two contestants slipped under the ropes, followed by their seconds with the usual towels and sponges.

"Sub-Lieutenant Annesley—H.M.S. *Hermione*," announced the flagship's "Bloke" by way of introduction. "Engineer-Lieutenant Carstairs—H.M.S. *Thalis*. Should any of their performance merit your praise, make no remarks, but signify your approbation by placing together the palms of your hands."

To this time-honoured intimation the audience responded by clapping vigorously. Lieutenant "Gutta Percha" Band, Peter's second, took advantage of the din to whisper: "Remember—defensive for first half-dozen rounds. He won't last. After that, force the pace and you'll get him cold."

Peter nodded. He was feeling none too happy. Being in the limelight in a double sense gave him a sensation akin to being stage-struck.

"Seconds out of the ring!"

The dense mass of human heads, each with their eyes focused on the roped-in space, deserted now save by the referee, the two figures in singlets and shorts, seemed horribly disconcerting—a thousand or more strangely silent spectators, each either for or against the success of the *Hermione's* representative.

The gong ripped out its dominant note.

Carstairs advanced from his corner. A second's hesitation and Annesley followed suit. Gone was all his self-consciousness. He was aware only of the lithe figure of his opponent gliding forward with a confident smile on his bronzed features.

Like a timid child touching a nettle, each man extended his gloved right hand. It was an apology for a handshake, to be followed up almost immediately by a blow—and before now a contest has been decided by the swiftness of an onslaught following immediately upon the exchange of courtesy and good faith.

For the next fifteen seconds the only audible sound was the thudding of the padded gloves and the scraping of the boxers' feet upon the resined boards.

Borne back by the strenuous attack, Peter had all his work cut out to preserve his defence and to avoid being forced against the ropes. Suddenly Carstairs lowered his guard. It was a tempting opening. Annesley let out with a straight left, accurately timed to land upon the engineer-lieutenant's prominent jaw.

Without shifting his feet, Carstairs threw his head and body backwards enough and no more for the terrific punch to fall short by a hair's-breadth. Before Peter could recover, his opponent countered by a powerful body-punch that sent the Sub reeling to the ropes.

For the rest of that round Annesley kept strictly on the defensive. He realised that he was up against not only a powerful but a wily opponent.

Quivering with badly-suppressed excitement, the *Hermione's* physical training instructor followed every move of his principal. All his hopes were centred upon the man on whom he had devoted hours of patient teaching. Every aboveboard trick of the ring he had shown him, and now Peter looked like forgetting everything.

Yet Gutta Percha Band, as he vigorously fanned the heavily-breathing Annesley, gave no sign of his disappointment, nor did he reiterate his words of caution. Peter would either have to go his own gait or else remember his second's previous caution. In no case would the physical instructor "rattle" his principal by telling him what he ought to have done.

But the lesson had not been wasted. Strictly on the defensive, Peter went through the next five rounds. He had not come off lightly. His left eye was badly bruised. There was a thin trickle of blood from his forehead before the gong sounded at the end of the sixth round. His opponent, showing no outward trace of punishment, was breathing heavily. As Band had prophesied, Carstairs lacked staying power.

"Now force the pace," whispered Peter's second. "He's had about enough."

The opponents faced each other with grim smiles. Carstairs resumed his determined onslaught, to be met, greatly to his surprise, by strenuous counter-tactics. Throwing his waning energies into the round, the engineer-lieutenant both took and gave punishment. Once he forced Peter against the ropes, until a sobering left landed him in a corner. Quick to follow up his advantage, Annesley had his opponent at his mercy when the gong clanged for the termination of the sixth round.

The respite gave Carstairs time to pull himself together. He was very wary now. More than ever he craftily lowered his guard, but Peter had been taken in before with that inviting trick. It was then that the engineer-lieutenant abandoned his former tactics and tried the effect of in-fighting. That was his undoing. Two jabs in quick succession glanced almost unheeded from Peter's iron ribs. Carstairs' temptingly-exposed chin was now within easy reach. There could be no backward movement to withdraw beyond reach of the Sub's powerful left.

With a thud that sounded like the blow of a sledge-hammer to the silent and alert throng of spectators, Peter's gloved fist smote hard and true cleanly upon the point of his adversary's jaw.

Staggering backwards, Carstairs bounced into the ropes, hung for a brief instant supported by his arms, and then collapsed inertly upon the floor.

"One ... two ... three..." and then "ten" sounded the level tones of the voice of doom.

Peter, swaying slightly, heard the last word of the count-out. Then, amidst a frenzied outburst of cheering and handclapping, he stooped to assist his dejected opponent to his feet.

Of what happened during the next few minutes he retained but a very hazy recollection. Borne shoulder-high by a mob of deliriously-elated supporters, he at length found himself in the dressing-room, with Forsyth shaking him by the hand and Gutta Percha Band capering about like an Indian on the warpath.

"Well done, Annesley," shouted the physical training instructor. "You've won the cup for the old *Hermione*."

"That's good," replied Peter, with a grin that gave him cause to recollect that both eyes were closing rapidly, and that he had a painful thick lip. "Got a cigarette, anybody? Haven't had one for six weeks, and I think I've earned it!"

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