

WHITE WINGS
AND BLUE WATER

Geo. E. Rochester

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What the Story is about:

Fifteen-year-old Arthur Buckley Brown, otherwise known as Buck, is flying from London to Sydney to join his father. When an American girl, Beth Carson, joins the plane at New York she and Buck soon become firm friends. The only other child on board is the very spoilt son of an American millionaire.

When the plane is several hours out from San Francisco, four of the passengers produce revolvers and obtain control of the aircraft. It soon becomes clear to Buck that they intend to kidnap the millionaire's son and hold him up to ransom, and to steal all the jewellery belonging to the other passengers.

The plane is forced down near a small, lonely island. Beth and Buck evade the gang and make off with the millionaire's son, who proves a great trial to them.

The unusual story of their adventures at sea in a tropical storm, and with unscrupulous traders, makes very exciting reading.



THE FLYING BOAT ROARED LOW OVER THE BLAZING VESSEL.
White Wings and Blue Water p. 253

Geo. E. Rochester

**WHITE WINGS
AND BLUE WATER**

*A Story of Adventure in
the South Seas*



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CHAPTER I

OUTWARD BOUND

LESS than half the tables in the big breakfast room of the hotel at San Francisco airport were occupied when fifteen-year-old Arthur Buckley Brown walked in. He stood looking about him for a moment, then made towards a table at which a pretty, curly-headed girl of about his own age was seated.

“Come on, slacker!” she greeted him gaily. “Breakfast is nearly over. I suppose you’ve just got up?”

“Oh, no, I haven’t,” said Buck, seating himself. “I’ve been up for hours. I’ve been out on the airfield, looking at the aircraft.”

He was flying from London to Sydney by way of New York, San Francisco and Samoa, to spend the school summer holidays with his father, Group-Captain Brown of the Royal Air Force, who was temporarily attached to the Royal Australian Air Force.

The aircraft on which Buck was travelling was a big four-engined Falcon amphibian of British Atlantic & Pacific Airways, and his companion at the breakfast table had joined it at New York.

She was an American girl named Beth Carson. She had been on holiday in New York and was now on her way out to Samoa to rejoin her father, who was an island trader.

Both she and Buck were travelling alone and, being the only two youngsters on the passenger list, they had chummed up and become firm friends during the flight from New York to San Francisco, for Beth was a tomboy and possessed of a sense of humour which appealed vastly to the cheerful and light-hearted Buck.

“You’ve got exactly twenty-six minutes before we’re due to take off,” she told him, glancing at the wall clock as Buck tackled the grapefruit which the waiter placed in front of him.

“Which gives me bags of time in which to get through the bacon and eggs,” remarked the boy. “I’m not the faddy type who toys with his food, you know.”

“So I’ve noticed,” said Beth, as the last of the grapefruit vanished. “One day, when you’re older, you’re going to have the most awful indigestion, eating at that rate.”

“Not me,” said Buck. “It’s just a healthy appetite, that’s all. Do you mind pouring me out a cup of coffee?”

Beth made no reply. She was staring fixedly past him.

“Do you see what *I* see?” she demanded.

Buck looked at her, then turned his head to follow the direction of her stare. As he did so he, too, stared. For at a nearby table, in the company of a big, burly, broad-shouldered man, a fat, puddingy-faced boy of about twelve years of age was sitting with his tongue thrust out at Beth.

“What’s the matter with him?” demanded Buck.

“I don’t know,” said the girl.

“But don’t you know him?”

“No, of course I don’t,” said Beth. “I’ve never seen him in my life before.”

“Well, he seems to know you,” remarked Buck. “And he doesn’t seem to think an awful lot of you, either.”

Across the table the burly, broad-shouldered man was remonstrating with his small companion, whose tongue was still protruding.

“Now, now, Ogden, that ain’t nice,” the burly one was chiding. “Honest, it ain’t. The young lady ain’t done nothing to you that you should go for to stick your tongue out at her thataways. C’mon now, stoppit!”

For all the notice Ogden took of this, he might just as well have been deaf.

“Do you think he’s crackers?” asked Beth, turning to Buck.

“He could be,” was the reply.

“He *must* be!” declared Beth, looking at Ogden again. She raised her voice loud enough to carry to the others’ table. “He’s a poor little idiot boy travelling with a keeper,” she said pityingly.

“There, d’you hear that, Ogden?” rebuked the burly man. “The young lady says you must be crazy, and you sure can’t blame her, you sitting there like that. Aw, c’mon now, stoppit!”

Ogden withdrew his tongue.

“Shan’t!” he cried shrilly, then his tongue promptly protruded again.

Buck pushed back his chair and rose. Ogden watched warily as the boy approached him.

“What’s the matter with you?” demanded Buck.

Ogden withdrew his tongue and pulled a face at him so hideous and grotesque that Buck stared with astonished interest, then enquired:

“Would you like a smack round the ear?”

“Don’t hit him!” cried the burly man hastily. “It’s just his fun. You don’t wanna take no notice of him.”

“Who is the little wart, anyway?” enquired Buck.

“He’s Ogden Pugg, son of Silas P. Pugg,” replied the other.

“And who might Silas P. Pugg be when he’s at home?” asked Buck.

The man regarded him in amazement. “D’you mean to say that you ain’t never heard of Silas P. Pugg, the multi-millionaire?” he ejaculated.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well!” gasped the other, as though he couldn’t believe his ears. “If that don’t beat the band! Never heard of Silas P. Pugg! Say, where’re you from, anyways?”

“England,” said Buck. “London.”

“Aw, I get you!” exclaimed the man, as though Buck’s ignorance was now fully explained. “From England, hey? But even over there I reckon they must’ve heard of Silas P. Pugg. Why, he’s the biggest pickle-maker in America. Yes, sir, you betcha! Pugg’s Perfection Pickles, they’re called. You see ’em advertised everywhere. In every noospaper and magazine and in electric light signs on Broadway and everywhere. Pugg’s Perfection Pickles is on every table in America—or most every table.”

“Is that so?” said Buck. “Still, in spite of his millions, it must be pretty rotten for Mr. Pugg to have a lunatic son.”

“Aw, Ogden ain’t a looney,” explained the other. “He’s just kinda sassy, that’s all _____”

He broke off, as, slewing round on his chair, Ogden aimed a sudden kick at Buck which missed its mark.

“Don’t hit him!” cried the big man in alarm, half rising from his chair as Buck raised his hand. “For Pete’s sake, don’t hit him, else he’ll tell his Pop and I’ll most likely lose my job!”

“What *is* your job?” demanded Buck.

“I’m his bodyguard,” explained the man. “My name’s Bowker—Jake Bowker. I was on the detective force in Chicago before I got this job. That’s how I got the job, me having been in the police, see?”

“Yes, I see,” said Buck. “But what does the little lout want a bodyguard for?”

“In case any wrong-minded guys try to kidnap him,” replied Mr. Bowker. “He’s been kidnapped once and the guys what done it got fifty thousand dollars out of his Pop as ransom money before they handed him back.”

“My Poppa’s got millions of dollars!” piped Ogden triumphantly at Buck. “He’s got millions an’ millions an’ millions of dollars. I bet your Pop hasn’t got millions an’ millions an’ millions of dollars. I bet your Pop’s poor!”

“Oh, well, we can’t all sell pickles, you know,” said Buck pleasantly. “But here’s a present for you, my little man.”

With the words he stretched out his hand, picked up the marmalade dish from the table and crammed it upside down on Ogden’s head. Then, ignoring that youth’s howl of rage and Mr. Bowker’s hoarse and alarmed protest, he turned on his heel and went back to his own table.

“I’m very glad you did that,” said Beth, smiling approvingly, as he seated himself. “I was hoping you’d do something to the little wretch. Who is he, anyway?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Buck, tackling the plate of bacon and eggs which was waiting for him. “I can’t talk now, there’s no time.”

“Righto, I’ll go and collect my travelling case,” said Beth, rising. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

The marmalade-pated Ogden and his bodyguard were already leaving the breakfast room. Not that Ogden was going willingly. On the contrary, he was kicking, struggling and squealing as he was forcibly propelled towards the exit by the muscular Mr. Bowker, who was expostulating:

“Stoppit now! Quit kickin’, will you? You’ve gotta get that marmalade off’n your hair afore the aircraft leaves, an’ if we don’t move mighty quick we’re gonna miss her. Yes, sir, we’re gonna miss her!”

“I don’t care if we *do* miss her!” screamed Ogden, struggling more violently than ever. “I want to kick that nasty boy on the shins. Whaffor did you let him put marmalade on my head, you great goop? You should’ve hit him! That’s what Pop hired you for. I’ll tell Pop about you, that’s what I’ll do. You lemme go!”

But Mr. Bowker didn’t let him go. Instead he propelled him from the room and Ogden and his squeals receded along the corridor in the direction of the gents’ wash-room.

Buck, who had been an interested spectator of the scene, quickly finished his breakfast, collected his suitcase, and was joined in the lobby by Beth.

Leaving the hotel, the two set off along the tarmac in the direction of the hangars, Buck in school blazer and grey flannels, Beth in plum-coloured slacks and yellow pullover.

The morning was gloriously fine and the vast airfield was echoing and re-echoing to the roar of mighty engines being run up on test preparatory to the great air-liners and powerful freight-carriers being handed over to their respective pilots and crews.

“Who was that little shocker?” demanded Beth, harking back to the subject of Ogden and raising her voice to make it audible above the roar of engines.

Buck told her and explained the relationship between Mr. Bowker and Ogden.

“So he has a bodyguard in case someone tries to kidnap him, has he?” said Beth. “My goodness, one would think his parents would be only too pleased to be rid of him instead of paying enormous sums in order to get him back.”

“Parental affection is a very queer thing,” remarked Buck sagely, out of the wisdom of his fifteen years.

“It must be,” said Beth.

By this time they were approaching the big silver-coloured Falcon amphibian, which was standing with her four engines ticking over. On the tarmac beside her were intending passengers, officials and employees of the Company, luggage porters and three or four of the inevitable newshounds, who were invariably around when long-distance aircraft were leaving or coming in.

“Hallo, there’s Raynor, the senior pilot!” exclaimed Buck, nodding towards a tall, lean-faced young man who was standing talking with one of the officials.

Glancing in their direction, Raynor saw them and gave them a cheery wave of his hand. A few moments later he came towards them.

“Well, and how are you this morning?” he greeted them, smiling.

“Fine, thanks,” said Buck and Beth.

They chatted a few moments, then Raynor said: “I don’t think you’re going to find this particular stage of the flight very interesting. It’s sea, sea all the way except for a few scattered islands, so you’d better take some magazines with you.”

“We won’t be bored,” declared Buck. “What time are we due in at Samoa?”

“We should touch down about six o’clock this evening,” replied the pilot. “You’d better be getting aboard now. We’ll soon be off.” Then, as he moved with them towards the Falcon, he said with a smile: “We’ve got quite an important passenger with us today.”

“Have we?” said Beth, with interest. “Who?”

“His name is Ogden Pugg,” replied Raynor. “He’s the son of Silas P. Pugg, the multi-millionaire, and sole heir to the family fortune.”

“Oh, him!” exclaimed Beth, crinkling her nose in disgust. “We know him. We met him at breakfast this morning. What’s he travelling with us for?”

“He’s flying out to Samoa, where’s he’s going to join his father’s ocean-going yacht, which is pleasure-cruising in the Pacific,” explained Raynor. “Ferguson, our traffic manager, has just been telling me about him. He’s been ill with mumps, or measles, or something, which is why he’s just joining the yacht now. But you’ve met him, you say?”

“We certainly have,” said Beth. “He was very rude to Buck and me at breakfast this morning, so Buck emptied a dish of marmalade over his head. He seems a perfect little horror!”

“Yes, Ferguson was saying he’s a bit of a handful,” laughed Raynor. “Apparently some of the more atrocious of his antics, such as trying to blow up one of his many tutors with a concoction of gunpowder, have got into the newspapers. The Press reporters simply love him. As copy, of course. I must hear about this marmalade business later. At the moment, however, you’d better get aboard.”

CHAPTER II

BOWKER'S BURDEN

"IF OGDEN PUGG is coming with us, he's not aboard yet," said Beth, as Buck followed her up the steps into the big, luxuriously furnished passenger saloon. "At least, if he is I haven't seen him."

"No, nor I," said Buck. "Old Bowker is probably still trying to get the marmalade out of his hair."

"He'll need a pretty good shampoo to get that out," laughed Beth.

She turned to Miss Hayward, the smartly uniformed air hostess of the Falcon, who chatted pleasantly with them as she escorted them to their seats.

"There seems quite a number of new faces aboard this morning," commented Buck, who, having been with the aircraft since she left London airport, had no difficulty in spotting any newcomers.

"Yes, we have eight new passengers," said the air hostess. "Two of them haven't turned up yet, though, and we're due to take off within a few minutes.

"That'll be Ogden Pugg and his pal, Mr. Bowker," observed Buck. "Will the aircraft wait for them if they're late?"

"She might wait a few minutes," replied Miss Hayward. "It rests entirely with Mr. Ferguson, the traffic manager, whether he holds her or not. But we like to fly strictly to schedule on this company."

She moved away for'ard towards the open doorway of the saloon. On the tarmac, Mr. Ferguson, a tall, spare, grey-haired gentleman, was anxiously consulting his watch.

"He's wondering whether or not to wait for Ogden," said Buck, watching him through the saloon windows. "He knows who Ogden is, of course. Raynor's just said so. So he'll probably stretch a point and keep the kite waiting a bit."

"But why should he?" demanded Beth. "Who's Ogden Pugg, anyway, that the whole lot of us should be kept waiting just for him?"

"He's the son of a multi-millionaire," replied Buck, with a grin. "And, in case you don't know it, multi-millionaires are terrifically important people. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Old Man Pugg could buy up the whole of this air company and give it to Ogden as a present."

"Then, if he's all that rich it's a wonder he hasn't got his own private aircraft," said Beth.

"He very probably has," said Buck. "But I don't suppose he likes the idea of letting Ogden loose aboard her, in case he sets her on fire for a joke, or something.

"You've got something there," agreed Beth.

She broke off as she and her companion were suddenly joined at the window by a well-dressed man with handsome, clean-cut features, of somewhat swarthy hue.

Glancing at him, Buck saw that he was one of the new passengers who had joined the Falcon only that morning.

Taking not the slightest notice of him and Beth, the man stood staring out of the window, his thin lips compressed in a grim-looking line. Then suddenly he swung on his heel, so abruptly that his elbow caught Beth, and strode away from the window.

Staring after him, Buck saw him rejoin three other men, who had also boarded the aircraft only that morning, and the four of them plunged immediately into a low-voiced conversation, not sitting in their seats, but standing grouped close together.

“If you ask me,” said Buck, “that fellow is rather peeved about something.”

“It’s already past the time for taking off, so perhaps that’s why,” suggested Beth. “But, whoever he is, he’s got no manners. He never even said ‘sorry’ when he caught me that dig with his elbow just now.”

“No, he should have done,” agreed Buck. “But, as I’ve said, he looks as though he’s got something on his mind. Hallo, he’s coming back!”

The man had left his three companions and was returning to the window, his swarthy face and tight-lipped mouth more grim-looking than ever.

“We’re pretty late in taking off,” said Buck conversationally, as the other stood looking out of the window.

The remark was completely ignored.

“We’re waiting for a couple of passengers,” went on Buck unabashed. “But I don’t know just how long we’ll wait. It’s up to Mr. Ferguson down there on the tarmac——”

“Here they come now!” rapped the man.

“So they do!” chuckled Buck.

It was an interesting party that was legging it frantically towards the waiting Falcon. In the forefront, a dozen or more paces ahead of the rest of the field, sprinted a long-shanked hotel porter, a suitcase in each hand. Behind him pounded the burly figure of Mr. Bowker, yanking the scuttling and loudly protesting Ogden along by the hand.

Close on the heels of this leading trio came the main body of the field, consisting of airport officials, newshounds, a couple of Press photographers and a miscellany of highly interested spectators who had joined in the race *en route*.

Maintaining his lead, the long-legged porter reached the Falcon, bounded up the steps to the open doorway of the saloon and pantingly thrust the two suitcases into the hands of the air hostess, who was waiting to receive them and the two belated passengers.

Jumping down from the steps, the porter pocketed the substantial tip which the puffing and perspiring Mr. Bowker handed him, then stood watching with the rest of the party as Mr. Bowker thrust Ogden unceremoniously up the steps in front of him and vanished into the saloon, followed by the vastly relieved Mr. Ferguson.

A few moments later Mr. Ferguson reappeared, ran quickly down the steps and cried:

“All right! Clear away the steps and let her get off!” Then to Raynor, who was watching him from one of the open windows of the control room: “Get airborne, Raynor, as soon as the steps are cleared. Flying Control has already given you the ‘all-clear’ for take off. The runway’s all yours.”

“Righto!” acknowledged the pilot.

He withdrew his head into the control room and the window slid shut. Seating himself at the controls, he opened up the main throttle. As he did so, the drone of the quietly running engines rose to a deafening, pulsating roar and the huge silver-coloured Falcon swept along the runway to lift and go soaring up and up into the cloudless blue of morning.

Meanwhile, in the saloon, Mr. Bowker and the podgy Ogden were sitting puffing and blowing and getting their breath back after their desperate dash to catch the aircraft. Mr. Bowker mopped at his great red face with a big, multi-coloured handkerchief.

Not yet had the pair of them had time to take stock of their fellow-travellers; but as the Falcon thundered over the teeming docks and crowded waterfront and headed westwards out over the glittering blue waters of the Pacific, climbing as she flew, Ogden got sufficient of his puff back to take a good stare all around him.

He did not remain seated in order to do this. There was no shyness of that sort about Ogden. He got to his feet and his dull, gooseberry-like eyes proceeded to travel steadily and inquisitively around the saloon.

“Say, this is a British aircraft, ain’t she?” he demanded of Mr. Bowker.

“Sure!” wheezed that gentleman, still mopping at his perspiring face.

“She looks like an ol’ cab,” sneered Ogden.

Nothing could have been more unjust, for the furnishings and fittings of the aircraft were modern, lavish and luxurious.

Ogden’s scornful gaze travelled on until it came to the well-dressed, swarthy-faced man, who was now sitting playing cards at one of the tables with his three companions.

“Hey, lookit them card-sharps!” he cried shrilly, pointing an accusing and podgy finger. “I bet one of them guys is gonna get skinned good an’ plenty before the other three is through with him.”

“Shut up and siddown, will you?” ordered Mr. Bowker hastily, as the swarthy-faced man turned his head and stared. “Them gents ain’t card-sharps!”

“Ain’t they?” cried Ogden. “All smart-dressed guys what play cards aboard ships is card-sharps. Pop told me, and *he* knows. Yes, sir, Pop knows!”

“But this *ain’t* a ship!” protested Mr. Bowker.

“That don’t matter!” cried Ogden. “Card-sharps use aircraft same as ships, Pop says, and *he* knows!”

The four men had paused in their play and were eyeing the boy coldly and threateningly. Mr. Bowker, noting this, shifted in his seat and grabbed Ogden by an arm.

“For Pete’s sake, shut up and siddown!” he pleaded.

“Shan’t!” squealed Ogden, struggling to release himself. “I can stand up if I want to. Anybody can stand up if he wants to. Leggo my arm, will you? Leggo my arm,” yelled he.

With a piteous glance at the four card-players, Mr. Bowker gave up the unequal struggle and released him. Rubbing his arm, the triumphant Ogden allowed his gooseberry stare to move on around the saloon. Then abruptly he stiffened, glowering in rage and incredulous astonishment at Buck and Beth, who were watching him with undisguised amusement from their seats.

Ogden wheeled on Mr. Bowker.

“Hey, d’you see who’s there?” he yelled, flinging out a podgy, pointing finger again. “D’you see who’s sitting there? It’s that nasty British boy that put the marmalade on my hair. Go and hit him! Go on, go and hit him!”

Before Mr. Bowker could commence to argue, however, Miss Hayward, the air hostess, arrived on the scene.

“What’s the matter?” she enquired pleasantly.

“It’s none of your business!” retorted Ogden, scowling. “Go away!”

He tried to push the girl away, but she stood her ground.

“What exactly is the matter with him?” she enquired of the unhappy Mr. Bowker; then to Ogden, who was still savagely pushing at her: “Will you please stop that?”

“No, I won’t!” cried Ogden. “I don’t want you butting in. If you don’t scram I’ll kick you on the shins!”

“You had better not,” warned the air hostess.

Next instant she gave a cry of pain as Ogden caught her a vicious crack on her silk-stockinged leg. And then it was that history was made, for there rang through the saloon the sound of a passenger’s ears being most soundly boxed by an air hostess, a thing which had never happened before in the whole records of the company.

CHAPTER III

OVER THE PACIFIC

“BOO-HOO-HOO-OOO!” bawled Ogden, holding his ringing ears. “Aw-ww, dear—boo-hoo-hoo-ooo!”

“You asked for it, kickin’ the young lady thataways,” growled Mr. Bowker. “You oughta be ashamed of yourself. I’m sorry, miss,” he apologised to Miss Hayward.

“Can’t you control him?” she asked, rubbing her shin, her eyes watering with pain. “He’s in your charge, isn’t he?”

“He is, but he ain’t so easy controlled,” sighed the bodyguard dismally. “You dunno the half of it. Times are when I figger I’d be better off as a wild beast tamer. He’s spoilt, that’s his trouble. Spoilt, petted an’ pampered by his Mom and his Pop. Howsumever, I’ll see he behaves himself from now on so long as we’re aboard this here aircraft.”

He grabbed the sobbing Ogden by the arm and yanked him roughly down into the seat beside him.

“Now sit here!” he ordered. “And if I have any more of your sass I’ll give you a crack myself, even if it does cost me my job. I’m wearied to death with you and I ain’t gonna stand much more of it, so get that into your silly fathead and get it straight!”

“But she hur-hur-hit me!” blubbered Ogden.

“Sure, she hit you,” agreed Mr. Bowker unfeelingly. “And that British boy, he pomaded your hair with marmalade. And for why? Because you was sassy, that’s for why. Jumpin’ jiminy! won’t you never learn that your sass only gets you into trouble? I keep telling you it does, but you won’t never lissen. Well,” he added with dark satisfaction, “now you’re beginning to learn, I reckon.”

“Try to make him behave for the sake of the other passengers, won’t you?” said the air hostess, preparing to move away.

“Yes, ma’am, I will,” promised Mr. Bowker.

The girl limped away. As she reached where Buck and Beth were sitting, the latter said sympathetically:

“Did the little beast hurt you very much?”

“Yes, he did, rather,” said the air hostess. “I’ve got quite a bruise. I’m going along to put some ointment on it.”

“I’m jolly glad you boxed his ears, anyway,” said Buck admiringly. “That was just the job.”

“Yes, but it might cost me my position,” said the air hostess. “It will, if a complaint is made and if the company take a serious view of it. I don’t as a rule lose my temper with passengers—I haven’t done so until now—but when he kicked me on the shin something seemed to snap inside me and”—with a shrug of her shoulders—“well, that was that!”

“You won’t lose your job over it, don’t you worry,” said Buck. “We all saw what happened and I bet everybody aboard is right in your corner. I know Beth and I are. I’ll sound a few of the others and, if necessary, I’ll get ’em to sign a round robin saying that you did the only thing possible and were acting in the best interests of the company and the passengers in squashing the little pest.”

“She was acting in self-defence as well,” put in Beth.

“Yes, in self-defence as well,” agreed Buck. “We’ll put that in the round robin along with the rest of it.”

“No, please, don’t trouble to do anything of the sort,” said Miss Hayward. “It’s extremely good of you and I appreciate it very much, but it’s not necessary. Really, it isn’t.”

“Yes, but it might be if old Silas P. Pugg starts kicking up a fuss, which is quite likely the way he seems to dote on Ogden,” argued Buck. “Anyway, it’ll do no harm you having a statement signed by all the passengers saying you were in the right. You leave this to Beth and me.”

“No, *please!*” begged the girl.

“We’re going to do it, just to be on the safe side,” declared Buck. “What do you say, Beth?”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Beth promptly.

Seeing they were determined, the air hostess argued no further, but continued aft to attend to the bruise on her leg. Producing his fountain pen and assisted by Beth, Buck commenced to draft out the round robin on the back of an envelope which Beth took from her handbag.

By this time the Falcon was far out over the Pacific; above her, as she thundered on through the high air, the vast and boundless vault of blue; below her, another limitless and glittering expanse of blue, which was the sea.

After many crossings-out and alterations, Buck and Beth finally produced the following statement, neatly written on the back of a menu card in Beth’s best handwriting:

“We, the undersigned, having witnessed the completely unprovoked attack made on Miss Hayward, air hostess, by Ogden Pugg, do hereby declare that Miss Hayward was acting solely in self-defence and in the best interests of the passengers and the Company in boxing Ogden Pugg’s ears.

“Signed”

“It reads jolly well, you know,” said Buck. “I bet a lawyer couldn’t have put it more clearly, and if there is any trouble it ought to see Miss Hayward all right. I’ll get it signed.”

He rose and approached the swarthy-faced, well-dressed man, who was still playing cards with his three companions.

“Excuse me!” he said politely. “I don’t like to butt in, but I wonder if you gentlemen would mind signing this?”

“What is it?” snapped the swarthy-faced man as Buck proffered him the menu card.

“It’s a round robin,” exclaimed Buck. “There’s quite a chance that Miss Hayward, the air hostess, might get the sack for boxing Ogden Pugg’s ears, but this will help her. At least, we’re hoping it will.”

The four men exchanged glances; then, taking the card, the swarthy-faced one read it aloud to the other three. Having come to the end of the statement, he laughed and again the four of them looked at each other.

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t sign it,” he said. “It’ll do no harm even if it does no good; and, after all, the little squirt did call us card-sharpers.”

Taking his fountain pen from his pocket, he signed the statement, then shoved it and the pen across the table to the nearest of his companions.

“Thanks, awfully!” said Buck when the other three had appended their signatures. “This will help no end. What I mean to say is, it’ll encourage the rest of the passengers to sign.”

“Okay. Beat it!” said the swarthy-faced man curtly, picking up his cards.

There was a rudeness about the summary dismissal which angered Buck. But he had got what he wanted, so he moved away from the table. As he approached the next passenger, an elderly, angular and expensively dressed lady, he glanced at the four signatures. Written one below the other, they read:

“H. Stubbs.
William Fenton.
J. Cooper.
Hiram K. Shaw.”

So the swarthy-faced man’s name was Stubbs, reflected Buck. Not that it really mattered what his name was, but he was an unpleasant type.

“Excuse me, but I wonder if you would mind signing this?” said the boy, proffering the card to the elderly lady.

He explained just what it was. As he did so, she studied the document through a pair of old-fashioned lorgnettes.

“Yes, most certainly I will sign it,” she cried. “An atrocious child! A most abominable boy! He might have lamed the poor girl for life. Give me your pen!”

Buck did so and the lady signed fiercely and with a flourish.

“I am Miss Angela L. Butterworth of Baltimore,” she cried, handing Buck back his pen. “I have influence in certain quarters and if there is any trouble about Miss Hayward having boxed that odious little wretch’s ears, she may refer the company to me. I saw it all and I have never known a child behave more disgracefully. If necessary, I shall instruct my lawyers to take up the case on Miss Hayward’s behalf.”

“Thank you very much indeed,” said Buck gratefully, thinking that he had certainly struck oil here so far as Miss Hayward was concerned.

“Look at him now!” cried Miss Angela L. Butterworth. “Look at him pulling the most dreadful faces at us. He makes me feel quite nervous. He does, indeed. Do you think the boy is quite *sane*?”

“Oh, yes, he’s sane enough,” said Buck, staring at Ogden, who, seated a little way in front of them, had screwed himself round in his seat and was pulling the most extraordinary faces at them. “He’s completely spoilt, that’s all——”

“Hey, what’s that writing you’ve got there?” cut in Ogden shrilly.

“It’s about *you*, you wicked, ill-mannered boy!” cried Miss Butterworth. “Turn round at once and sit properly in your chair and stop pulling those ridiculous faces——”

“I wanna know what that writing is!” yelled Ogden.

“You’re not gonna get to know what the writing is,” roared the goaded Mr. Bowker, jerking him violently round in his seat. “Can’t you keep that nasty, vexatious trap of yours shut just for two minits on end? If you don’t sit quiet and shut up, I’ll land you that crack what I promised you, and I don’t mean maybe!”

He looked so fierce that for the moment even Ogden quailed and sat in sulky, pouting silence until at length he summoned sufficient courage to mutter:

“You dare! You dare *hit* me an’ you’ll see what my Pop’ll do to you. My Pop won’t stand for you hitting me. You just try it, thassall. Just you dare try it, thassall——”

“Lissen, Poison!” said Mr. Bowker, his voice trembling with suppressed fury. “I’m quitting this job and I’m quitting it mighty quick. I’m gettin’ an old man before my time, lookin’ after you. But before I do quit I’ll give you such a doggone-leatherin’ that you’ll never forget it for as long as you live. So just chew over that, you lard-faced little runt, because, by hokey! I mean it, if I never meant anything in my life before!”

He did mean it. Even Ogden could see that and he relapsed again into sulky, glowering silence, sitting with his hands plunged deep in his jacket pockets. Suddenly, however, a slow, triumphant grin appeared on his puddingy face; a grin which broadened as his fingers closed on a round, hard object in one of his pockets.

Meanwhile, Buck had completed his tour of the saloon and rejoined Beth.

“Everybody’s signed,” he reported triumphantly. “I felt rather like one of those canvassers who go from door to door, but I didn’t mind. It’s all in a good cause and it’ll put Miss Hayward right on velvet if Old Man Pugg does start anything.”

“Here, she’s coming,” said Beth.

The air hostess was coming along the saloon. Buck gave her the signed menu card.

“There’s every signature on it except, of course, Ogden Pugg’s and Mr. Bowker’s,” he told her. “I could hardly ask Ogden to sign it. It would be rather like asking Charles the First to sign his own death-warrant. And I didn’t ask Bowker to sign it for the same reason.”

“Well, thank you very much, indeed,” said Miss Hayward. “It’s very good of you both and I shall certainly produce it if I find myself on the carpet when the aircraft gets back to London——”

Abruptly she broke off as there came a sudden bang and the saloon began to fill with dense and acrid smoke.

“*Fire!*” screamed the voice of Ogden through the choking murk. “*The crate’s on fire!*”

Women screamed, men shouted, but above the hubbub and the panic the bull-like voice of Mr. Bowker roared:

“Keep calm, folks, keep calm. ’Taint a fire. It’s just a smoke-bomb—a harmless smoke-bomb from a toy shop let off by this polecat of a kid on purpose to scare you all!”

The stewards leapt to open the air-vents and ventilators and the saloon began to clear quickly of the smoke. Above the coughing and choking of the streaming-eyed passengers the furious voice of Mr. Bowker was heard again.

“This is the finish!” he roared, grabbing Ogden by the scruff of the neck. “You’re more’n human flesh and blood can stand, an’ I’m through! I’m quitting right now—this very minit. But before I do quit I’m gonna give you that hidin’ what I promised you!”

He slumped down in his seat and yanked the frantically struggling Ogden across his massive knees. By this time the smoke had practically cleared from the saloon and, balm to the ears of the outraged passengers and stewards, there now sounded a mighty slapping noise; a tireless, regular, heart-warming sound that was only partially drowned by the yells and howls of the hapless Ogden as Mr. Bowker’s ham-like hand rose and fell heavily and remorselessly on that portion of his anatomy where it would do least harm and most good.

“There!” panted Mr. Bowker at length. “I’ve bin wanting to do that the whole six weeks I’ve been your bodyguard. I was warned about you. I was told that tougher guys than me had packed the job in and had woke up screamin’ at nights for weeks after. But I won’t scream none. Nossir, I’ll sleep peaceful an’ happy. An’ for why? Because I’m through! I’ll hand you over to your Pop at Samoa and then I quit. I’ve quit now, but I’ve gotta go on to Samoa with you whether I like it or not, ’less I jump outa the aircraft!”

With that he deposited the bawling, howling Ogden roughly in that hapless youth’s chair, then hoisted himself to his feet.

“Ladies an’ gents,” he announced, “I’ve gotta apologise for all the commotion an’ fright an’ unpleasantness what this obnoxious li’l critter has caused you all this morning. But it ain’t been my fault. I done my best to keep him quiet, but it’s more’n any one man can do. Howsumever, I’ve quit now an’ what I’m aimin’ to say, ladies and gents, is that I hope none of you will hold it ag’in me for what he’s done.”

“No, no!” murmured his hearers. “It wasn’t your fault. We quite understand!”

In fact, so sympathetic were they towards Mr. Bowker and in such high favour was he with them because of the truly majestic thrashing he had administered to Ogden that, when he sat down, there was some talk of taking up a collection on his behalf.

“I think we ought to,” said Miss Angela L. Butterworth to her immediate neighbour, a Miss Golightly. “After all, the poor man will now be out of employment. And just think what a frightful strain it must have been having to look after that dreadful child.

Yes, I for one will certainly contribute to any collection which might be made for him. We must talk about it after lunch.”

The tables had already been laid for lunch and the serving of it commenced. By that time the Falcon was more than fifteen hundred miles out over the Pacific, booming on and on through the boundless blue.

“As Raynor said, there’s nothing at all to see except sea, sea and then more sea,” remarked Buck when, lunch over, he and Beth sat sipping their coffee. “Still, I suppose you’re quite used to it, living on an island with your father like you do.”

“Yes, and I love the sea,” said Beth. “I liked being in New York, of course, but I’m terribly glad to be going back home.”

“But don’t you find it very quiet there?” asked Buck.

“No, of course not,” laughed the girl. “Our island’s a perfect little paradise. It is, really. And what with swimming and sailing—I have my own boat—and helping father, the days simply fly past.”

“I expect you’re a pretty good swimmer?” remarked Buck.

“Not bad,” replied Beth modestly. “I ought to be a good swimmer. I’ve swum almost since I could walk——”

That was as far as she got when, without warning, a voice rang harshly and menacingly through the saloon:

“Hold everything! This is a stick-up! We’ll shoot the first one that moves!”

CHAPTER IV

THE HOLD-UP

BUCK and Beth swiftly turned their heads. As they did so, they tensed in their seats. For the well-dressed, swarthy-faced Stubbs and his three companions, Fenton, Cooper and Shaw, were standing in the middle of the saloon, each with a pair of pistols which were covering the petrified passengers and stewards.

“We mean it!” gritted Stubbs, his narrowed eyes watchful and aglitter. “One move and we’ll shoot—and shoot to kill!”

The hold-up could not have been better timed, for the stewards and air hostess were in the saloon, clearing the luncheon tables, which meant that there was no one aft in the crew’s quarters and kitchen except the chef.

What was more, Barnes, the engineer officer, and Atkins, the second pilot, were also in the saloon finishing lunch, which meant that there were only three men in the control cabin—Raynor, senior pilot, Pembroke, the navigator, and Tupworth, the radio operator.

That the hold-up had been carefully planned and that each man knew exactly what he was to do also became quickly apparent. For the man, Shaw, stepped swiftly to the open, sliding door which connected with the crew’s quarters and kitchen, slid it shut, then turned and stood with his back against it so that he was facing along the saloon, his pistols raised.

When Shaw had taken up his position, Stubbs, Fenton and Cooper moved swiftly for’ard along the saloon to the closed sliding door which gave access to the control room. Here they turned so that the passengers and stewards were menaced by three pairs of pistols covering them from for’ard and Shaw’s pistols covering them from aft.

“Okay, Fenton, hold them!” ordered Stubbs harshly. “Shoot the first man or woman who moves!” He looked at Shaw at the other end of the saloon and called: “Okay, Shaw?”

“Okay!” assented the other.

Stubbs turned on his heel, pulled open the sliding door which connected with the control room and stepped swiftly through. Cooper, following at his heels, slid the door shut behind them.

In the control room Raynor was standing gazing out through the for’ard look-out windows, for the controls were locked. With him was Pembroke, the navigator. Tupworth, the radio operator, was seated at his transmitter and receiver.

All three had their backs to the door. Nor did they turn round as they heard the door slide open and shut, for they assumed that it would be their colleagues, Barnes and Atkins, returning from lunch.

“*Up with your hands—the three of you!*” grated Stubbs.

Raynor and Pembroke spun round. Tupworth swung swiftly round on his chair. All three stared in blank astonishment at the blue-black muzzles covering them unwaveringly and at the two gunmen. It was Raynor who spoke.

“What’s the idea?” he rapped.

“Hoist your hands—that’s the idea!” retorted Stubbs harshly. “This is a hold-up!”

“You’re crazy!”

“Hoist your hands or I’ll drill you!” gritted the gunman, his eyes venomous.

Raynor tensed. Next instant he whipped into action, hurling himself forward at Stubbs. But, quick though he was, Stubbs was quicker. One of his two pistols cracked viciously and, as he stepped swiftly aside, Raynor pitched forward, to crash heavily to the floor where he lay a limp and huddled heap.

“You hound!” choked Pembroke, white to the lips.

“You’re next unless you hoist your hands!” rapped Stubbs. “I’ll give you just two seconds!”

Already his finger was tightening on the trigger. Pembroke slowly raised his hands. It would have been suicide to have done otherwise. Cooper had stepped swiftly to the seated Tupworth. He had pocketed one of his pistols, but the remaining one was pointing straight at the wireless man’s head.

“Stand up and get away from that radio!” he ordered.

Tupworth felt sick inside. This was Death and he knew it, for, true to his calling, he had no intention of deserting his post.

Swinging swiftly round on his chair, he switched on the transmitter. But before he could voice even the first word of a desperate call for help, the butt of Cooper’s swiftly clubbed pistol crashed down with sickening force on his head, sending him slithering from his chair to thud heavily and unconscious to the floor.

Next instant, using the butt of his pistol as a hammer, Cooper was smashing the valves of the radio gear and tearing out the leads with his other hand. The wrecking was devastating and complete and, when he had finished, he said with grim satisfaction:

“There won’t be no more radio signals go out from this kite!”

“Fine!” said Stubbs.

His eyes flickered from Pembroke to the huddled, motionless forms of Raynor and Tupworth, then back to Pembroke again.

“You can help carry these two guys out of here into the saloon,” he said.

“You’ll hang for this!” said Pembroke unsteadily through dry lips.

“Oh, no!” said Stubbs. “Your pal’s not dead, if that’s what you’re thinking. I didn’t shoot to kill. I’m a crack shot and the bullet took him on the side of the head, like I meant it to. It nicked a bit of bone, I guess, and knocked him flat out. But don’t get any wrong ideas,” he warned harshly. “Next time we’ll shoot to kill! That shot was a warning to the whole bunch of you aboard this craft. There’s none of you will get a second chance from now on. Now, come on. Help carry ’em out!”

Cooper had pocketed his pistol and, between them, he and Pembroke carried first Raynor and then Tupworth into the saloon, Stubbs accompanying them, his pistols in his hands.

The passengers and stewards, still being guarded by Fenton and Shaw, stared in fear and horror at the limp forms of the senior pilot and the radio operator, for they had heard the shot in the control room and were quite certain that one, or both, of the officers were dead.

“Anybody giving trouble?” demanded Stubbs of Fenton and Shaw.

“Not one,” grinned Fenton. “Shaw and me’s got everything under control.”

“Okay!” said Stubbs. “You can let the air hostess get the first-aid kit and she can attend to these two guys. She’ll be trained in first-aid, I guess. Most air hostesses are. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He returned to the control room with Cooper and stood watching as the latter sat himself down in the pilot’s seat and studied the gleaming array of dials and gauges on the instrument panels in front of him.

“Can you manage her?” he asked.

“Sure, I can,” replied Cooper. “They’re perfectly straightforward controls with nothing fancy about ’em. I could fly this kite blindfold, I reckon.”

“Yes, you’re a first-class pilot, I’ll hand you that,” said Stubbs. “And you can raise the island okay?”

“Yes, easy,” said Cooper, unlocking the controls. “I’ll swing her off course now, then I’ll lock the controls again and have a look at the chart. It’s spread out there on the navigator’s table.”

His foot moved on the geared rudder bar and he turned the wheel of the control column with strong and confident hands. As he did so, the great white-winged and white-hulled Falcon swung smoothly southwards off her course.

“Gosh, she takes it like a bird!” he ejaculated admiringly, his eyes on the swinging compass. “They can certainly build aircraft, those Britishers.”

He levelled up, holding the thundering Falcon on a course a few degrees east of southerly.

“If you’re certain everything’s okay I’ll get back to the saloon,” said Stubbs.

“You get back,” said Cooper. “Don’t let me keep you!”

Leaving him at the controls, Stubbs returned to the saloon where the air hostess, assisted by Pembroke, was tending the hurts of Raynor and Tupworth, who were beginning to show signs of returning consciousness.

Apart from that, the scene in the saloon had not changed. The passengers were still seated, the stewards were standing where they had been at the moment of the hold-up, and the pistols of Fenton and Shaw continued to dominate the scene.

“Everybody behaving themselves?” asked Stubbs of Fenton.

“Yeah, just like a Sunday School,” said the other, grinning.

Stubbs' hard, dark eyes travelled slowly over the motionless and apprehensive prisoners, all of whom were watching him.

"Well, folks, you didn't expect this," he said almost pleasantly. "But let me tell you, right away, that so long as you don't start anything you'll come to no harm. At least, not much. My friend here"—he indicated Fenton—"is now going to search you for weapons. With the possible exception of Mister Jake Bowker, I don't suppose any of you are carrying a gun. But we've got to make sure."

His eyes rested on the burly Mr. Bowker, who was sitting watching him, apparently unmoved.

"You got a gun, Bowker?" he demanded.

"You know blamed well I've got a gun, seeing I'm the kid's bodyguard," retorted Bowker. "Don't ask fool questions!"

"Well, I'm glad you had the sense not to pull your gun," sneered Stubbs.

"I'd have pulled it quick enough if I'd bin alone with the four of you," growled Bowker. "But a gun battle in here would mean innercent folks gettin' hurt, incloodin' the ladies. But don't kid yourself none. I ain't skeered of you. I've met your sort before when I was in the police——"

"Okay. Spare us your life story; we don't want to hear it!" snapped Stubbs, his swarthy face flushing with rage. "We want your gun. Are you going to hand it over?"

Bowker made no reply, but his hand went slowly to his hip pocket. As it did so, Stubbs, Fenton and Shaw tensed, their pistols covering him unwaveringly.

"There she is," said Bowker and flung his pistol with a clatter on to the table in front of him.

There was nothing of cowardice in the surrender, for that was something of which Mr. Bowker had never been guilty during the whole course of his tough career. It was merely as he had said. To have started a gun battle in the saloon would certainly have resulted in some innocent person, or persons, being wounded or killed, for some of the shots were almost certain to fly wide. So Bowker took what was, for him, the harder course and surrendered his pistol.

"Get that gun!" Stubbs ordered Fenton. "Then you can start searching the rest of 'em!"

Pocketing one of his pistols, Fenton stepped quickly forward, picked up Bowker's gun and slipped it into his pocket. As he did so, Miss Angela L. Butterworth, glaring at Stubbs, cried furiously:

"Perhaps you will have the goodness to explain the object of this criminal and murderous outrage!"

Stubbs' thin lips twitched in a fleeting grin.

"You'll learn that later," he said. "For now just you sit quiet and keep quiet."

"But I demand to know——"

"You're not going to get to know!" shouted Stubbs. "Not yet. Now shut up, or I'll have you gagged!"

That he was quite capable of carrying out this threat was only too apparent, so, her eyes blazing, Miss Butterworth relapsed into impotent silence.

“Okay, Fenton, get cracking!” ordered Stubbs. “Shaw and I have got ’em covered!”

Fenton’s search of the prisoners for weapons was swift and methodical. He made the men stand up one by one, then ran his hand expertly over them and took the precaution of feeling for concealed shoulder-holsters. He also made them open any small travelling cases they had in the saloon with them and rummaged thoroughly through the contents.

When he came to deal with the ladies, he confined himself to examining the contents of their handbags and cases. For, as he remarked pleasantly to Miss Angela L. Butterworth when turning out her handbag:

“Ladies don’t as a rule carry guns like some of the men-folk do. ’Leastways, not real nice, high-toned ladies like what we have aboard here.”

“You’ll go to prison for this, you scoundrel!” blazed the indomitable lady.

“Sure, sure!” agreed Fenton sardonically. “But don’t let it upset you none.”

He moved on and would have ignored Ogden had not Stubbs called:

“You’d better see if that kid has any more smoke-bombs on him. We don’t want him setting one off and making a smokescreen.”

Ogden had no more bombs on him. A quick search of his pockets satisfied Fenton as to that and he moved on, coming eventually to Buck and Beth.

“I don’t suppose you kids are armed?” he enquired pleasantly.

“No, of course we’re not,” snapped Buck. “What’s the idea of this hold-up, anyway?”

“I’ll write and tell you,” grinned Fenton.

“You’ll not get away with it, of course!”

“Won’t we?” mocked Fenton. “Now, ain’t that just something to know?”

He gave the pair of them a quick search and moved on. A few minutes later, the search over, he reported to Stubbs that, apart from Bowker, no one had been in possession of a gun.

“A nice, peaceful, respectable bunch, eh?” laughed Stubbs. “Well, that’s how I figured it would be, but we had to make certain.”

Raising his voice, he addressed the prisoners again.

“As I’ve already told you,” he said, “so long as you keep quiet and behave yourselves you won’t come to no harm. But I’m taking no chances with you, so I’m going to have all the gents’ hands tied behind their backs. They’ll then sit on the starboard side of the saloon and the ladies will sit on the port side. Has anyone any objections?”

The majority of the gentlemen had the very strongest objections and they said so in voices which ranged from the nervous to the indignant. Mr. Bowker was one of the few who remained silent. But when the chorus had died down, he growled disgustedly:

“You’re only wasting your breath, you crazy mutts! He don’t give a hoot whether you object or not. He’s just laffin’ at you.”

Which was quite correct, of course; for, backed by the menacing guns of Stubbs and Shaw, Fenton proceeded to lash the wrists of the male prisoners behind their backs with lengths of adhesive tape which the gangsters had brought with them obviously for this very purpose.

The chef, fetched by Shaw from the kitchen in which he had been lurking, was included in the pinioning. So were Ogden and Buck, Stubbs remarking:

“One of these kids, meaning Ogden, is as cunning as a low-bred monkey and the other doesn’t look any sort of a fool to me, so they’re safer tied.”

The pinioning completed, the furious but helpless party were forced unceremoniously into the starboard seats, the ladies taking the port ones.

“Needless to say,” warned Stubbs, “if any of you ladies do start anything you’ll be tied up same as the men. I’m telling you that because we’re now going to relieve you of your jewellery, cash and valuables.”

“So that is the meaning of this hold-up, is it?” cried Miss Angela L. Butterworth. “Just plain, armed robbery!”

Stubbs grinned. “It’ll do to be goin’ on with,” he said.

Mr. Bowker, who was now seated next to Buck, muttered:

“So I was right. I knowed all along I’d got it figgered out right.”

“What do you mean?” asked Buck with interest.

Mr. Bowker, his eyes on Stubbs, muttered from the corner of his mouth:

“Didn’t you hear what that skunk just said? Grabbing all the cash an’ jewellery will do to be goin’ on with, he said. Sure, it’ll do to be goin’ on with. It’ll do mighty fine to be goin’ on with till they’re ready to clear off somewheres with the main article of loot what they’re after.”

“And what’s that?” demanded Buck.

“Ogden Pugg, of course!” muttered Mr. Bowker. “I reckoned it was Ogden they was after from the very first minit of the stick-up, and now I’m certain of it!”

CHAPTER V

SOUTHWARDS

BUCK stared at him in astonishment. Taking his eyes from Stubbs, Mr. Bowker looked at him.

“You seem kinda surprised,” he said. “You don’t have to be. You’ve gotta remember that Ogden’s worth fifty thousand dollars and more to any guys what can grab him and get him away and hold him somewheres until his Pop comes across with the ransom money.”

“But they’ve scarcely taken any notice of Ogden at all,” argued Buck.

“That don’t signify a thing,” growled Mr. Bowker. “Whaffor should they take any special notice of him? They got him where they want him, ain’t they? He can’t run away. They’ll show their hand when they’re ready, you betcha!”

Buck was silent a moment, pretty certain that Mr. Bowker’s theory was correct.

“You might be surprised that, being suspicious like I was, I didn’t do nuthin’,” went on Ogden’s erstwhile bodyguard. “But what could I have done? They’ve got eight guns. I had *one* and they’d never have given me a chance to pull it. They know I ain’t quite dumb an’ they was paying partic’lar attention to me. I saw that, even if you folks didn’t. An’ suppose by some chance I *had* pulled my gun and got one of ’em? What good would that have done? There’d have been three of ’em left, all pumping bullets into me just as fast as they could work their triggers. Nossir, I didn’t have a chance!”

“You didn’t, I quite agree,” said Buck.

By this time the robbing of the passengers was well under way. Directed by Stubbs, Fenton and Shaw were relieving the ladies of their money, rings, brooches, bracelets and all other jewellery which they were wearing or carrying in their handbags and cases.

The pinioned male contingent were next, and their wallets, watches and all other valuables were taken from them. There was, however, one exception—one who was allowed to keep his wallet intact—and this, curiously enough, was Bowker. For when Fenton reached him, Stubbs said sardonically:

“Okay, Fenton, you can pass Bowker up. When the poor old goat reaches Samoa—if ever he does—he’s going to be out of a job. He said so this morning, so you can let him keep his dough. He’s going to need every cent he’s got, for folks are just naturally against employing fat, broken-down ex-policemen and I just couldn’t bear to think of him starving.”

Instead of being grateful for this kindly consideration, however, Bowker growled:

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to waste none of your sympathy on me. You’re gonna need it all for yourself, you yaller-livered skunk, afore I’m through with you!”

Stubbs' swarthy face flushed and his eyes glittered. But his anger was only momentary, for he was so completely master of the situation that it required very little effort on his part to keep his temper.

"Don't kid yourself, Bowker," he sneered. "Before you're through with me you're going to be the biggest laugh the American newspapers have ever had. Now shut your trap, or I'll shut it for you!"

"Which would be easy and would suit you fine to do it, seein' my hands is tied," said Bowker.

Stubbs ignored him and turned to watch the progress being made by his allies. A few minutes later the robbing of the male prisoners was finished and the loot taken from them was piled on a table near Stubbs beside that already taken from the ladies.

"Seems we've done even better than we expected," said Stubbs with lively satisfaction, pocketing his gun and commencing to examine the glittering heap of jewellery. "At a rough guess, I'd say there must be mighty near twenty to thirty thousand dollars' worth of stuff here, apart from the cash."

"There's all that, I reckon," agreed Fenton.

"And we've still got their heavy luggage to go through," put in Shaw. "There ought to be some good stuff there."

"Yes, come on; you and I will go through it now," said Stubbs. "You stay here on guard, Fenton."

He and Shaw set off in the direction of the luggage compartment, which was situated aft of the saloon. Fenton, lounging on guard, turned to the air hostess, who was standing beside the seat on which the bandaged Raynor was lying.

"How's that guy doing?" he asked.

"He's none too good," replied the girl coldly. "Another fraction of an inch and the bullet would have killed him."

"Oh, well, so long as it didn't why worry?" returned the man. "He'll pull through okay, I reckon. He looks fit enough and tough enough."

He glanced at Tupworth who, with head heavily bandaged, was leaning weakly back in a seat.

"How're you feeling, bud?" he enquired.

Tupworth looked at him with pain-filled eyes.

"Rotten!" he said.

"Well, don't you worry," counselled Fenton. "I've no doubt the company will give you a real handsome reward for defending their interests to the best of your ability, in proof of which you can show 'em your bust head. You'll likely come out of this little affair with promotion, leave and a fat wad of dough."

"While you and your three friends will come out of it with life sentences," put in the air hostess. "Just where are you taking this aircraft, anyway?"

"It's a secret," grinned Fenton, "and Mister Stubbs has made us promise we won't tell."

“I suppose you think that funny?” snapped the girl. “You realise, of course, that we have been completely out of radio contact with our call stations and elsewhere ever since you smashed the radio gear?”

“And so what?” demanded Fenton, staring.

“Just that it will be realised already that there is something seriously wrong with the Falcon and all aircraft and shipping will be warned by radio to keep a look-out for her,” replied the girl.

“You don’t say?” ejaculated Fenton in well-simulated alarm. “Aw, gee! Now, ain’t that awful? I’m feeling real terrified. I’m all of a tremble!”

The girl flushed and, biting her lip, turned her attention to Raynor again.

“You’ll be all of a tremble all right before you’re through,” promised Tupworth weakly, focussing his painful gaze on Fenton. “If you’d wanted to draw attention to the Falcon one of the surest ways of doing it was to silence her radio. I don’t reckon you’re quite so hot as you think, you and your pals.”

“No, but we’re hot enough, bud, don’t you worry,” returned Fenton, unperturbed. “We know what we’re doing, all right.”

He had been conscious during the past few minutes of a steadily rising angry babel of voices amongst the prisoners and now he wheeled on them.

“Stop that row!” he shouted. “Stop it, d’you hear?”

But the prisoners did not stop it. For by this time they were recovering from the unexpected shock of the hold-up and from their fear caused by the murderous violence which had been shown to the pilot and the radio operator.

And with the passing of shock and fear was coming rage, which was being fanned into fiercer flame by the bitter knowledge of the sorry part they had played in allowing themselves to be herded like cattle and bound and robbed.

The fact that death, swift and sudden in the form of a bullet, would have been the certain fate of any one of them rash enough to defy the gangsters did nothing at all to lessen their mortification, for now it seemed that that threat had passed.

Moreover, the unspeakable Stubbs had left the saloon and, with the withdrawal of his sinister and dominating presence, the passengers suddenly found it surprisingly easy to voice their rage and resentment. So easy, indeed, that they were quite surprised they had not done so before, at least in such furious and persistent volume.

So, ignoring Fenton’s order to be quiet, they proceeded to hurl threats at him and demands for their immediate release, each gaining more and more courage from the shouts of the others.

Only two amongst the male contingent refrained from joining in the furious chorus. They were Mr. Bowker and Buck.

“It’s a pity they didn’t show some of the same rarin’, tearin’ spirit when the stick-up started,” said Mr. Bowker disgustedly. “I might’ve bin able to do something if I could’ve relied on ’em to back me up, but I knew doggone well I couldn’t. They’re like a bunch of silly sheep. But just wait till Stubbs comes back. You’ll see ’em fold up, mighty quick.”

“Here he comes now,” said Buck.

His dark face darker still with fury, Stubbs came back into the saloon almost at a run.

“What’s the trouble?” he shouted at Fenton. “What the blazes are they making this row for?”

“Dunno!” shouted the gunman. “Seems like as if they’re getting some of their nerve back. I’ve tried to shut ’em up, but they won’t stop it!”

Stubbs never hesitated. Wheeling on the nearest prisoner, who in the excitement had risen to his feet, he drove his clenched fist with sickening force full into the man’s face, sending him reeling, sick and dazed.

“Any more of you want any?” he panted, his glaring eyes travelling over the faces of the now silent prisoners. “You’ve just got to say and you can have it!”

No one spoke. Stubbs waited a few moments, then with a harsh, contemptuous laugh he swung on his heel.

“That’s the way to handle that trash, Fenton,” he said. “Either that, or plug one of ’em with a bullet. Either way they’ll calm down mighty quick.”

“I’ll say!” grinned Fenton. “How are you and Shaw getting on with the luggage?”

“We’re through and we’ve picked up some real good stuff,” replied Stubbs. “Shaw will be bringing it along soon as he’s got it packed. He’s bringing a case to put that nice little lot in, as well.”

He nodded towards the pile of cash and jewellery.

“I’m going in to Cooper,” he went on. “If this bunch start getting fresh again, hit ’em or plug ’em. Okay?”

“Sure,” said Fenton.

Stubbs stepped past him and went into the control room where Cooper was still seated at the controls.

“How’s she going?” he asked.

“Fine!” replied Cooper. “We’re dead on course and I reckon to raise Kalpao in another forty minutes or thereabouts.”

“As soon as that?”

“Yeah, as soon as that,” affirmed Cooper, with a triumphant grin.

“How’s she off for fuel?”

“We’ve got enough. None to spare, mind you, but enough.”

“Well, if everything keeps on going as smoothly as it’s gone we’ll have nothing to complain about,” said Stubbs. “The only snag we’ve struck was that fool of a pilot and the radio op. Even Bowker had sense enough not to start anything.”

“Do you think he suspects our real lay?” asked Cooper. “Bowker, I mean?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” said Stubbs. “It’s hard to know just what does go on inside his fat head. But if I had to bet on it I’d say, yes, I think he does suspect what we’re really after.”

“But he ain’t showing it, eh?” laughed Cooper. “Maybe he’s lying low, hoping that he’ll get a break and a chance of fixing us.”

“He couldn’t fix a mouse-trap, that mutt,” grinned Stubbs.

He remained talking with Cooper, the pair of them continually staring through the look-out windows in front of them, their eyes searching the vast expanse of glistening sea which, twenty-five thousand feet below, stretched away until it merged with the far-distant and downward-curving vault of blue which was the sky.

Suddenly Cooper stirred in his seat. Taking a pair of powerful binoculars from their rack beside him, he pressed them to his eyes and commenced slowly to sweep the glittering waters ahead and to port and starboard.

“Getting near, are we?” demanded Stubbs.

“By my reckoning we are, and I know I’m right,” replied Cooper.

The minutes passed. The huge, white-winged Falcon drove swiftly on and Cooper continued to sweep the sea ahead with the powerful glasses.

Suddenly he became motionless, the glasses riveted on some object far distant on the starboard bow and invisible as yet to Stubbs’ naked eye.

“*Kalpao!*” he ejaculated, his voice triumphant.

Lowering the glasses, he handed them to Stubbs. As the latter pressed them eagerly to his eyes, Cooper pushed forward the control column and, throttling back, began to lose height in a long dive, swinging the Falcon with nose down towards the tiny, distant speck which was the island of Kalpao.

“Yes, that’s it all right,” exclaimed Stubbs.

He lowered the glasses from his eyes and clapped Cooper exultantly on the shoulder.

“You’ve done it!” he cried. “I’ve got to hand it to you, Cooper, you’re one mighty fine pilot! And now I’d better go and acquaint our dear friends in the saloon with the fact that we’re going down to land.”

CHAPTER VI

THE ISLAND

HIS dear friends in the saloon—the prisoners, in other words—knew by the downward tilt of the floor that the Falcon was rapidly losing height, which indicated that their journey's end might be near.

Consequently it was in somewhat fearful expectancy that they stared at Stubbs as he stepped out of the control room into the saloon.

“Well, ladies and gents,” he said pleasantly, “the flight is over and we are going down to land. You want to know where, of course? I propose to tell you. We are landing at a delightful little island named Kalpao, where I am quite sure you will all be exceedingly happy.”

“Will you kindly explain yourself?” cried Miss Angela L. Butterworth angrily. “Why should we be exceedingly happy at this Kalpao place? Are you intending to disembark us from the aircraft there?”

“I am!” said Stubbs, with a sudden hard change of tone. “We’re going to put the whole bunch of you ashore and I’m warning every one of you, here and now, against giving any trouble while we’re doing it.”

“But does anyone live on this island?” cried Miss Butterworth. “Are there any civilised amenities about the place?”

“No, there’s not,” retorted Stubbs. “It’s a desert island and no one lives there at all, unless it’s a few parrots or something. The island is hundreds of miles off the main shipping and air routes. That’s why I chose it to dump you folks on. You’ll be quite safe there until you’re found and picked up.”

“And suppose we are not picked up, you scoundrel?” cried Miss Butterworth.

“Then that’s going to be just too bad for you,” sneered Stubbs. “But you *will* be picked up,” he went on. “As soon as the Falcon is reported missing there’ll be aircraft out searching for her. All you’ve got to do is keep a signal fire burning, smoky by day and burning bright and clear at night.”

“And what do you intend we shall live on, may I ask, if this is a desert island?”

“There’s plenty of fruit there and you can have all the stores, the water, and all the bottled drinks from the aircraft,” said Stubbs. “You won’t starve, not if you ration yourselves properly.”

“And how long do you think the small amount of stores the aircraft carries is going to last at least forty people, no matter how sparingly we share them out?” demanded Miss Butterworth acidly.

“That’s *your* headache, not mine,” retorted Stubbs.

Turning on his heel, he strode back into the control room. As he did so, the Falcon touched smoothly down on the water within half-a-mile of the island.

“How close in do you want me to take her?” asked Cooper as, with engines ticking over, he took the Falcon cruising steadily in towards the island.

“Lie off the lagoon and we’ll put ’em ashore in the rubber dinghies,” said Stubbs.

The island was shaped like a crescent. It was about three-quarters of a mile in length and half-a-mile across. It was densely timbered. The ends of the crescent, where they ran into the sea, continued to curve towards each other in the form of a sea-washed reef, making a big, oval-shaped lagoon, entry to which was gained through a wide gap in the centre of the reef.

Waiting until the Falcon was riding at anchor off the gap, her engines switched off, Stubbs returned to the saloon followed by Cooper, and the transporting of the prisoners from the aircraft to the beach was got under way.

It turned out to be a slow and laborious job. The only means of transport were the big rubber dinghies which the Falcon carried and, as Stubbs was not taking the risk of freeing the men’s wrists, the prisoners had to be assisted down the ladder into the boats and ferried ashore in batches.

Moreover, there were only Fenton and Cooper to do the ferrying, for Stubbs insisted upon Shaw remaining on the beach on guard over the prisoners already landed, while he himself remained aboard the aircraft to keep a watchful eye upon those awaiting their turn to be paddled ashore.

Mr. Bowker was in one of the first batches to leave. As Stubbs took hold of him to help him down the ladder into the dinghy, Mr. Bowker looked him coldly in the eye and said:

“You won’t be sending Ogden?”

“Now, what makes you say that?” enquired Stubbs, grinning.

“Because I know it,” retorted Bowker. “I’m wise to your game, Stubbs. But you’ll have more than Old Man Pugg after you this time. You’ll have the British and American navies, air forces and police forces after you, because this ain’t just a kidnapping, Stubbs. It’s piracy and that’s an International crime. You’re a mug!”

“Is that so?” sneered Stubbs, his swarthy face darkening with rage. “Well, you ought to know a mug, I guess, seeing that you long ago earned the title of King Mug. Now get going, Bonehead, before I push you into the water!”

Mr. Bowker went and Stubbs turned his attention to quietening the outcry which had arisen, particularly amongst the ladies, at the startling disclosure that he and his gang meant to add to the enormity of their crime by kidnapping Ogden Pugg.

“Shut up! It’s a lie! The feller’s crazy!” shouted Stubbs. “Stop that row, will you?”

Normally, he wouldn’t have troubled to deny it, but what he wanted at the moment was to pacify them and get them off the aircraft just as quickly as possible. For already the setting sun was touching the far horizon and he knew that the swift, tropical darkness was going to be upon them before the last of the prisoners and stores were ashore.

Buck should have been amongst the next batch to leave, but Stubbs waved him back.

“Not you,” he said. “Not yet!”

The boy eyed him in surprise, then joined Beth, who was still aboard awaiting her turn to go ashore.

“Now, what do you think he meant by that?” he demanded.

“I don’t know, unless he means to kidnap you as well as Ogden Pugg,” replied Beth. “Was Mr. Bowker serious about that? I saw you sitting talking to him. Are they really going to kidnap Ogden?”

“Bowker is absolutely certain of it,” said Buck. “And I bet he’s right. If he isn’t, why haven’t they sent Ogden ashore with the others?”

“Well, he doesn’t seem to be worrying about it very much,” replied Beth, looking across the saloon at the puddingy-faced Ogden who, with his wrists still pinioned, was sitting in his seat, swinging his feet and looking singularly unconcerned.

“Perhaps he hasn’t taken it in yet, he’s so thick in the head,” said Buck. “But I wonder why that rotter Stubbs has put me back?”

He did not discover the reason until the very last batch of prisoners was leaving the aircraft. Beth was amongst them, but Stubbs said to her:

“No, not you. I want you and that other school kid to help collect the stores.”

He waited until the laden dinghy had pushed off and was being paddled slowly shorewards by Cooper. By that time the last red arc of the sun had vanished below the horizon and at any moment tropical darkness would come flooding swiftly in across the lonely sea.

Switching on the lights in the saloon, so as not to be taken unawares by the swift descent of darkness when it did come, Stubbs told Beth to release Buck’s wrists. While she was doing so, he crossed to where Ogden was sitting, pulled out a handkerchief and lashed it tightly around that youth’s ankles.

“What’s that for?” demanded Ogden who, to Buck’s and Beth’s surprise, had shown not the slightest resistance or even resentment.

“It’s in case you get to walking about when I’m not in the saloon,” explained Stubbs.

“Are you really gonna kidnap me like what ol’ Bowker said?” demanded Ogden.

“You’ve got the tense wrong,” said Stubbs. “You’re kidnapped now.”

Instead of showing either fear or alarm, Ogden grinned.

“When Spider Mullins an’ his gang kidnapped me they treated me real good,” he said. “They gave me comics an’ candy an’ cakes, an’ ice cream an’ chocolate, an’ most anything I wanted. Are you gonna treat me good?”

“Yes, if you behave yourself we will,” promised Stubbs.

“All Spider Mullins wanted was the ransom money out of my Pop,” went on Ogden. “Is that all you want? Just the ransom money out of my Pop?”

“That’s all we want,” Stubbs assured him. “Just the ransom out of your Pop.”

Ogden grinned happily. "Jus' like Spider Mullins," he said. "I got mighty fond of ol' Spider. He let me smoke, which is more'n my Momma will. I wish you was Spider come back again," he added, his grin fading somewhat.

"Well, I'm not," said Stubbs. "But I'll try to live up to the high standard of host which he seems to have set. Now you sit there and don't move."

He turned on his heel and rejoined Buck and Beth, who had been listening in astonishment to the odious Ogden.

"Did you hear him?" he demanded.

"We did," said Buck.

"I wonder his Pop, as he calls him, ever wants him back at all," said Stubbs.

"I've been wondering the very same thing from the first moment I met him," said Beth.

"And to think that one day he'll inherit the Pugg millions," said Stubbs. "It makes you sick. But come on; let's get the stores."

He led the way aft to the kitchen and the store room where he and his two young assistants commenced to collect all the food there was, both tinned and otherwise, together with crates of mineral waters and other bottled drinks.

"I'd have set you two kids on this job before to save time," said Stubbs. "But I daren't let you loose in here on your own, in case you took it into your heads to set the aircraft on fire or something."

"And I suppose the reason you've picked on us to help you is because we're the youngest and the easiest to handle should we suddenly try to jump on you?" said Beth.

"That's it exactly," agreed Stubbs. "But you won't try to jump on me, not if you know what's good for you."

He helped them to carry the stores into the saloon, ready to be put aboard the dinghies and shipped ashore. At Beth's suggestion, a useful assortment of cooking utensils was added to the pile. The first-aid kit was also included for the wounded pilot and radio operator.

Fenton, arriving back from the beach, ahead of Cooper, took the bulk of the load and commenced to paddle slowly shorewards with it. Cooper took the remainder, carrying also Buck, Beth and Stubbs, for the gangster leader wished to view for himself the situation ashore.

"Do you think it's safe to leave that Pugg kid alone aboard the aircraft?" demanded Cooper, as the dinghy crept slowly shorewards through the darkness, for by this time the tropic night had descended over the lonely sea.

"Yes, quite safe," said Stubbs. "He's tied hand and foot and he can't do a thing."

He was standing beside Cooper, who was wielding the broad-bladed stern paddle. Buck and Beth were standing for'ard of them, as far away from them as possible; the boy's slim body was tensed.

"Listen, Beth!" he breathed. "I've got an idea. You can swim, can't you?"

"Yes, I've told you I can," she whispered.

In a few brief, breathed words totally inaudible to Stubbs and Cooper, Buck began to outline his plan. Suddenly Beth's fingers closed on his arm.

"I understand!" she whispered. "I'm coming with you!"

"I thought you'd want to," muttered Buck. "It's worth trying, anyway. Righto. Get ready!"

By this time the slowly creeping dinghy was half-way across the lagoon. Stubbs and Cooper, standing in the stern, were engaged in low-voiced, earnest conversation.

Then suddenly and without warning the dinghy rocked violently, throwing Stubbs off his balance so that he almost fell against Cooper. Simultaneously there came a splash. Actually there were two splashes, but they came so close together that they sounded like one.

Recovering himself with an oath, Stubbs glared about him in the darkness. As he did so, Cooper yelled:

"They've gone—the two kids—they've gone overboard!"

"But what in thunder for?" shouted Stubbs, switching his glare to the darkened water. "D'you mean they've gone over on purpose?"

"Yes, when the dinghy rocked I saw them dive!" cried Cooper. "I'm certain I did. That's what made her rock. They dived together. It wasn't an accident!"

"But what have they done it for?" screamed Stubbs. "What's the sense in it. There's nowhere they can swim except to the beach!"

"What about the aircraft?" shouted Cooper. "What if they're making back there? If they set her on fire we'll be marooned here ourselves."

Stubbs glared at him in the darkness, his face fiendish in its fury.

"You might be right!" he burst out with an oath. "We've got to stop them, just in case. Can you swim?"

"No, not much," admitted Cooper.

"I can!" gritted Stubbs, whipping off his jacket and flinging it down. "Turn the dinghy and follow me as fast as you can make it. Throw all this junk overboard, if it'll help you any!"

Next instant his arms whipped up and he dived, his lithe, strong body cleaving the water as cleanly as a fish. Coming to the surface well astern of the dinghy, he struck out for the gap in the reef, swimming with such desperate, powerful strokes that one might have thought his very life depended on it.

And indeed his freedom did. For, should anything happen to the aircraft, should she be set on fire by Buck and Beth, then he and his three colleagues would be marooned on Kalpao as effectively as the prisoners and would be forced to stay there until the whole party were sighted and picked up.

True, he had the two rubber dinghies. But the nearest island to Kalpao was one hundred and seventy miles away and it would be hopeless to attempt to reach it in the small boats.

Little wonder, then, that the raging Stubbs swam with desperate, powerful strokes, driving through the water with every atom of the strength which lay in his well-muscled arms and powerful legs.

In his heart was fear. For he knew that these were shark-infested waters. Did those two brats know it? he wondered furiously. They must, if they had any sense. And they *had* sense, all right. They weren't that dumb!

Well knowing there were sharks around, they were obviously prepared to take the risk. And, that being so, it was a risk which Stubbs himself perforce had to take. But the taking of it, and the cold fear it occasioned, only added to his rage and fury.

He was through the gap in the reef by now and a hundred paces ahead of him lay the Falcon, a bright oblong shaft of golden light streaming out into the darkness through the open doorway of her lighted saloon.

But were the boy and girl really ahead of him? Were they making for the aircraft or the beach? Those were the questions to which Stubbs dearly wanted an answer. He wasted no time in trying to spot the pair, however, but swam frantically and almost blindly for the Falcon.

And he was taking the right course, for Buck and Beth *were* ahead of him. To make a swift dash back to the aircraft had been the first step in the plan which Buck had swiftly and briefly outlined to Beth. He was a first-class swimmer, but, fast though he was, he had not the speed of Beth who, born and bred in the Islands, was like a fish in the water.

She made no effort to outdistance him, however, but kept pace, swimming alongside him. Buck had shed his blazer shortly after diving from the dinghy, for he knew the urgency of the task and knew, also, that pursuit was inevitable.

Nor were he and Beth relying upon being pursued by Stubbs and Cooper in the slow-moving dinghy. They were fully alive to the fact that one, or both, of the men might be good swimmers, so they made for the Falcon at the fastest speed of which Buck was capable.

And it wasn't only fear of pursuit which took them driving through the water at Buck's best possible pace. Beth had warned Buck that there might be sharks around and that in itself was more than sufficient to galvanise that young gentleman into a frantic and desperate effort to reach the aircraft just as quickly as ever he could.

Suddenly Beth forged ahead of him, then turned and trod water, peering back the way they had come. As she did so, her face became set, for visible to her keen, searching eyes was a faint, phosphorescent splash following swiftly and relentlessly in their wake and moving faster than was Buck.

It wasn't a shark. Beth knew that. A shark would be moving swiftly, silently and without any splash at all. This was a man coming—Stubbs or Cooper!

Breasting the water again, Beth rejoined Buck.

"For goodness sake, spurt!" she warned him anxiously. "We're being followed. It's either Stubbs or Cooper, but whichever one it is, he's gaining on us!"

"How far is he behind us?" panted Buck, making a desperate effort.

“About thirty yards,” said Beth, keeping pace with him. “We’ll just make it if you keep going. Don’t talk. Just keep going!”

Buck maintained his spurt. In fact, by a prodigious effort, he succeeded in improving on it.

“That’s fine!” encouraged Beth. “Keep that up and we’re there!”

The aircraft was very close now, less than fifty paces away. Turning, Beth trod water again, her eyes searching for the phosphorescent, pursuing splash. She quickly found it, for it was no more than twenty paces behind them now and gaining on them hand over fist. She turned and rejoined Buck for a moment.

“Keep going!” she urged. “I’m just behind you—*and don’t talk!*”

Instead of asking if their pursuer was gaining on them, as he had been about to do, Buck saved his breath and expended it on forcing his almost pumped-out lungs and agonized muscles to even greater demands on them.

He thought Beth was behind him. She was, but not where he imagined. For she had dived deeply, away from the line of swim being taken by pursuer and pursued. She cautiously broke water some fifteen paces away, then immediately went under again.

When next she came to the surface she was almost directly behind Stubbs. As for that individual, he had never even seen her. He knew by now that the boy and girl were ahead of him, but he was still swimming desperately and blindly for the aircraft. For the one thing that mattered most was that he should reach the Falcon and get aboard her before the two brats. He would have plenty of time to deal with them later.

Beth closed in on him from behind. The first that Stubbs knew of her presence was when his ankle was seized, throwing him completely out of his stroke and causing him to flounder so heavily that he got a mouthful of salt water, most of which he swallowed.

Just what it was that had seized him, he did not know. It might have been the tentacle of an octopus, or the sucker mouth of some huge tropical fish. He lashed out savagely with his legs, coughing out sea water and drawing great, choking breaths into his tortured lungs; for he had been swimming at the very peak of effort, forcing muscles, lungs and sinews to the very limit of their endurance in his frantic effort to reach the Falcon.

The moment she had stopped him and left him floundering, Beth had dived again and set off at top speed in pursuit of the still desperately swimming Buck.

Whether it was Stubbs or Cooper she had stopped, she did not know; but she did know that she had gained for Buck the respite he needed, the few precious moments of grace which were absolutely essential if he were to reach the aircraft ahead of the gangster.

Blissfully unconscious of all that had been going on behind him, Buck made one final spurt and reached the ladder which was hanging down the side of the hull from the open, lighted doorway of the saloon. Grabbing one of the rungs to support himself, he gasped urgently:

“*Go on—you first!*”

The words were addressed to Beth, whom he imagined to be just behind him. But there came no answer. Buck turned his head in search of her. As he did so, she came swimming swiftly into the shaft of light streaming down from the open doorway above them.

“Don’t say I left you behind?” gasped Buck incredulously.

It was no time for explanations, for Beth knew that the gangster would be coming on again as fast as ever he could move.

“For goodness sake, get aboard!” she cried. “*Quick!*”

There was that in her voice which galvanised Buck into rapid action. Taking a fresh grip on the rungs, he heaved himself out of the water and clambered quickly up into the saloon. Beth followed, little rivulets of water streaming from her soaking pullover and slacks.

“Let’s get the ladder up quick!” she cried.

They stooped to grab it and haul it up. But they were too late. For the raging Stubbs had swum into the golden shaft of light streaming down from the doorway and already his hands were gripping the lower rungs of the ladder.

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE NIGHT

“LEAVE this to me!” panted Buck, thrusting Beth firmly aside. “He’ll not get aboard!”

Stubbs, panting and blowing, was coming up the ladder. Buck had kicked off his shoes after diving from the dinghy and was barefooted. Stubb’s head appeared above the top of the ladder. As it did so, the boy kicked him, a savage smash with his bare heel full between the eyes.

Stubbs swayed backwards on the ladder, but still retained his grip on the top rung. Buck kicked him again with his heel, this time a smash to the nose which almost flattened it and brought the blood spouting from the gangster’s nostrils. Simultaneously Beth beat madly at the man’s hands with a small brass fire-extinguisher which she had snatched from its rack and, releasing his grip, Stubbs plunged heavily backwards into the sea.

He hit the water with a great splash and went right under. Before he could come to the surface again, the ladder was being frantically hauled up by Buck and Beth.

“There, he can’t get aboard now!” panted Buck. “I hated to have to kick him, but there was nothing else for it. He’d have got aboard if I hadn’t and if you hadn’t walloped him on the hands with the fire-extinguisher. That was jolly smart of you.”

“Something had to be done!” said Beth breathlessly. “Look, there he is!”

Stubbs had broken water. He glared up at the two in the lighted doorway and swore furiously, but, fortunately, chokingly and unintelligibly owing to the amount of water he had swallowed.

“He’s all right!” exclaimed Buck. “What I mean is, he’s not too badly damaged. He’ll be able to swim back to the island, or to the dinghy. Come on, let’s get the saloon door shut!”

He commenced to slide the door to. As he did so, Stubbs’ voice came in a thick and furious yell:

“Don’t shut that door, curse you! By thunder! I’ll get you for this——”

The door slid shut, cutting short his oaths and blotting out the bright, golden oblong shaft of light which had been streaming out into the darkness.

“We don’t want to listen to him,” said Buck. “And we’ve got to get away from here. Let’s get cracking!”

Ignoring the pop-eyed stare and the excited, inquisitive cries of the trussed Ogden, who was still sitting where Stubbs had left him, he dashed into the control room followed by Beth, switched on the light and dropped down into the pilot’s seat.

“Can you manage her, do you think?” demanded Beth anxiously.

“I’m certain I can,” said Buck, his eyes moving swiftly over the instrument panels and the controls. “I was in here nearly a couple of hours with Raynor on the way out

from London to New York and he showed me how everything functioned. Apart from that, I've grown up on airfields and with aircraft, and I know plenty about them."

There was nothing of boasting in the words, but just plain fact. For it was as Buck had said. He had grown up on Royal Air Force stations amongst aircraft and pilots and, having a natural love of flying inherited from his father, he had learned everything he could about planes, for when he left school he meant to join the Service and become a pilot.

"The anchor is raised by an electric motor," he told Beth, his eyes ranging swiftly over the gleaming array of dials and gauges. "It's only a light riding-anchor. Here's the switch."

He pressed it and a small but powerful electric motor hummed into life. As it did so, the thin steel cable of the anchor commenced to coil itself smoothly around a revolving drum.

"It's coming up!" cried Beth triumphantly.

The motor suddenly clicked and was silent, switched off by its automatic control, token that the anchor was up. Buck pressed another switch and a tiny red light glowed on the instrument panel, the signal that the main power was now on.

Buck's fingers hovered over the four push-buttons which were the respective power-starters of the four engines.

"I've turned the fuel on and I believe I've got the throttles set right," he said a trifle unsteadily. "So here goes!"

He pressed the starter button of the outer starboard engine. Out in the night the propeller commenced to revolve, then the engine burst into life with a roar which shattered the stillness and echoed far across the darkened sea.

Quickly and exultantly, Buck pressed the remaining three starter buttons and the night vibrated to the roar of all four engines running under one-quarter throttle.

"We're moving!" cried Beth excitedly.

"You bet we're moving!" exulted Buck.

Under the pull of her whirling propellers, the Falcon was surging steadily forward over the calm, night-enshrouded waters. Buck gave a turn to the small wheel which operated the under-water rudder. As he did so, the Falcon swung her high, white tail towards the reef off which she had been lying and cruised steadily away into the night, ahead of her the vast and boundless expanse of the Pacific.

Levelling up the rudder, Buck throttled back until the speedometer steadied at nine knots.

"I wonder what Stubbs thinks of this effort?" he said, with a grin.

"He'll be nearly crazy, I guess," laughed Beth.

She was perfectly correct in her guess at the raging Stubbs' state of mind. When the outer starboard engine had started up, the man had been swimming round the Falcon trying to find some way of getting aboard her, and the sudden shattering roar of the engine had given him such a shock, not of fright but of fury, that he had nearly gone under again.

He had not discovered that the anchor was up and his first conclusion had been that the reckless brats were amusing themselves by playing about with the engines.

He swiftly abandoned this idea, however, when the other three engines started up and he realised that all four were running under even and regulated power.

This was no idiotic fooling about with engines. There was some competent hand at the controls. The frantic Stubbs realised that only too clearly. But whose hand could it be? There was only Ogden Pugg and the British boy and the American girl aboard the aircraft.

It certainly wasn't Ogden Pugg, decided Stubbs. And it was scarcely likely to be the girl. So that left the British boy. Yes, it could be him, decided the almost demented man. Nearly all boys these days had a mechanical turn of mind and it was quite astonishing the things some of them knew about cars, radio and aircraft.

Stubbs then made another discovery. The Falcon was moving. Under the pull of her propellers she was beginning to slide smoothly forward through the water.

Screaming and yelling like a madman, he clawed at the white hull sliding steadily past him in the darkness. But nowhere could he find a finger-hold along the hard, white surface. The Falcon swung, sweeping him aside and almost submerging him beneath her as she turned her nose towards the open sea and her high, white tail towards the island and the reef.

Treading water and completely exhausted now by his frenzy, Stubbs watched her go, his glaring, blood-shot eyes fixed on her until her white, ghost-like shape merged with and was swallowed up in the darkness. With murder in his heart, Stubbs turned and commenced to swim slowly back the way he had come. In his mind was now the one maddening, frenzied question—*what was he to do?*

Ogden Pugg, whom he had meant to hold to ransom, was aboard the aircraft. So, also, was every cent's worth of the loot. And, on top of that, he and his three colleagues were now marooned with their victims on the little island which he had specially chosen because of its loneliness and remoteness.

And all this had happened when everything had been going so beautifully and according to plan. Stubbs swore again, blackly and evilly. Nor was his state of mind improved by the thought of what Cooper, Fenton and Shaw would have to say about this.

The dinghy, propelled by Cooper, loomed up in the darkness near him. Gripping it, Stubbs heaved himself aboard. As it rocked under his weight, Cooper peered at him to see who he was, then cried hoarsely:

"It's you, is it? What'n heck's happened? Where's the aircraft off to?"

Stubbs got to his feet. He told him the sorry tale. Cooper listened in growing fright and fury.

"But where can they be taking her?" he burst out when Stubbs had finished. "Those kids can't fly her. You can't tell me that. What are they going to do with her?"

"How the blazes do *I* know?" replied Stubbs savagely. "All I know is they've got her! The question is, what are *we* going to do?"

“Yeah, what?” growled Cooper, staring at him hard in the darkness. “I’m wanting to know, Stubbs. You’ve been outsmarted and we’re in one mighty bad jam. What’re you going to do about it?”

But to that question Stubbs had no immediate answer. What he said was:

“We’ll get back to the beach. We’ll fix something!”

“We’ll *have* to!” said Cooper ominously, beginning to wield the paddle again. “Because if we don’t, Stubbs, we’re booked for a mighty long stretch in prison and there’s nothing more sure than that!”

Meanwhile, aboard the Falcon, having set the course due north, Buck locked the controls and rose from the pilot’s seat.

“Well, we’ve done it!” he said to Beth, his voice trembling with triumph and excitement.

“Yes, isn’t it marvellous!” cried the girl, her eyes shining. “We’re quite safe now!”

“Yes, we are,” agreed Buck. “All we’ve got to do is to keep her cruising northwards until we either sight a vessel, or are sighted by some aircraft out in search of us.”

“And you’re sure you can manage her?”

“Yes, now I am,” said Buck. “There’s nothing in taxi-ing an aircraft, nothing at all. I’ve taxied dozens of ’em on stations before Dad went to Australia. It was all strictly off the record, of course, but the pilots were decent fellows and they used to let me do it so long as they were with me to keep an eye on me. That’s why I knew that if we could get back to the aircraft before Stubbs or Cooper could catch us, we’d have a jolly good chance of getting away.”

“It was an absolute brain-wave,” said Beth. “I wonder just whereabouts in the Pacific we are?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea, except that we’re somewhere well south,” replied Buck. “I know we’re south, because the sun was to starboard of us practically the whole time the gangsters were flying the kite. I took special notice of that. And that,” he explained, “is why we’re heading back north now towards the main shipping routes.”

He broke off as, from the saloon, there came a shrill and furious howl.

“Ogden’s getting impatient,” he said with a grin. “He’s been bawling for some time now. He’ll be wanting to know what’s happening, of course. But we’ve got to get out of these soaking wet things,” he went on. “Our luggage is still aboard, so we’re all right for dry things. You go first; then, when you’ve changed, you can come back here and keep an eye on things while I change. All right?”

“Yes, of course,” said Beth, ignoring a further angry and impatient howl from the saloon. “There’s no sense in our slopping about in these things all night. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

She moved towards the saloon. After a quick glance out through the for’ard look-out windows, Buck followed her. He knew the Falcon would be perfectly all right for the next few minutes at least, for nine knots was no great speed for her on a calm and empty sea.

“Say, didn’t you hear me hollerin’?” cried Ogden, as Beth came into the saloon followed by Buck. “What are you two smarties doing, anyway? Who started them engines up and why don’t you untie me? D’you think I like sitting here, tied up like as if I was a parcel or something? An’ where’s Stubbs? Did he say you could start them engines up? Because if he didn’t he won’t half be mad!”

“Dear child!” murmured Beth, as Buck commenced to release him from his bonds. “Do you realise, Buck, that we’re going to have it with us the whole time we’re aboard?”

“You mean Ogden?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, we’ll cope with Ogden all right,” said Buck cheerfully. “It’s wonderful what a smack round the head can do!”

“Then, I’ll leave you to it and go and get changed,” laughed Beth.

As she moved away along the saloon in the direction of the luggage compartment, the scowling Ogden demanded of Buck:

“Why are you and that girl all wet? Have you been swimming with your clothes on?”

“Yes, we have,” said Buck.

While he released Ogden from the last of his bonds he told that incredulous youth what had happened and explained that all they needed to do now was to keep cruising northwards until they were sighted by some vessel or searching aircraft.

“You’re kiddin’!” cried Ogden. “You’re telling fibs! Stubbs ain’t so dumb as to let you and that girl grab this ol’ aircraft and ride her away. No, *sir*, you can’t tell me that!”

“I *am* telling you,” said Buck.

“Yeah, sure you’re telling me!” jeered Ogden. “I can hear you telling me. I’m not deaf, am I? I’ve gotta pair of ears, ain’t I? But you telling me don’t mean that it *is* so. No, *sir*, it don’t mean that it *is* so!”

“Then, what do you think Beth Carson and I are doing aboard this aircraft, with all the loot and you into the bargain?” demanded Buck.

“I dunno what you’re doing,” cried Ogden. “But I guess ol’ Stubbs is somewheres around. Ol’ Stubbs is far too smart a guy to let you and that girl grab this ol’ aircraft and run away with it. You can’t tell me that. I’m not that silly.”

“No, you’re just about the cheekiest little blister I’ve ever met in my life,” said Buck coldly. “And now I’m going to tell you something else. If you don’t behave yourself aboard this aircraft, if you put just one foot wrong, I’ll give you such a hiding that the one you got from Mr. Bowker this morning will seem like a friendly little pat. So get that, because I *mean* it. I’ve got plenty on my plate as it is without being bothered by you!”

“What plate?” demanded Ogden, either naturally or wilfully dense. “What you talking about?”

“Oh, shut it!” snapped Buck and, turning on his heel, he went back into the control room.

Ogden glowered after him for a moment, then followed him and stood watching as Buck checked the compass and revolution and temperature gauges. Satisfied that everything was in order, Buck turned to the look-out windows, but there was nothing to be seen out there except the starry sky and the vast, flat immensity of the starlit sea.

“Can I sit in the pilot’s seat and drive her along for a bit?” asked Ogden with surprising meekness.

“No, you can’t,” said Buck. “And you keep out of here. I won’t have you interfering with anything. Go and see if you can find us something to eat.”

It struck him then with sudden dismaying force that the Falcon had been cleared not only of her stores, but of her water, as well, for the use of the marooned prisoners.

“Go on!” he ordered sharply, as Ogden lingered. “Have a good look round and see if there’s anything at all left to eat or drink. I don’t believe there is, but see if you can find something.”

Ogden withdrew, for he had had nothing to eat since lunch and was beginning to feel hungry. What was more, he hadn’t yet been aft of the saloon and it would be quite something, he reckoned, to go poking around in the kitchen and places with nobody to stop him.

So off he went and, left to himself, Buck pondered on the unpleasant prospect of their being without food or water.

“But what’s it matter?” he told himself cheerfully. “We’ve got the aircraft and that is the one thing that matters. And we’ll soon be sighted and picked up come morning. We’re bound to be!”

So certain was he of that, that he commenced to whistle and he was still feeling quite confident and light-hearted about it when Beth arrived back at the control room in a dry sports shirt, slacks and shoes.

“I’m sorry I’ve been a long time,” she said, “but you ought to see the baggage room. Those men simply ripped and forced the luggage open and flung everything about all over the place. It took me ages to find anything of my own.”

“If it’s as bad as all that I’d better let my things dry on me,” laughed Buck.

“No, you go and change,” urged Beth. “You’ll find something and you’ll feel a lot more comfortable. Where’s Ogden, by the way?”

Buck told her and added that in all probability there was nothing at all to eat aboard the aircraft and nothing to drink.

“Yes, I’d forgotten that for the moment,” said Beth thoughtfully. Then, cheering up: “Never mind, we’ll manage. We’ll come through all right.”

“Yes, that’s what I say,” agreed Buck. “Well, I’ll go and get changed. All you’ve got to do is to keep a look-out. The controls are fixed and the engines are running nicely, but if anything goes wrong come and call me.”

He went off in the direction of the luggage compartment, leaving Beth on duty. As he had said, the engines were running smoothly and the Falcon was cruising

northwards through the night at a steady nine knots.

With hands in pockets, Beth stood gazing out through the for'ard windows. She wondered what was happening back there at the island and she smiled at the thought. It would be something to know, she reflected, just how Stubbs was handling the situation now that he and his three fellow-gangsters were marooned there with their victims.

Suddenly, as she stood gazing idly ahead through the look-out windows, an uneasy expression crept into her eyes. Taking her hands from her pockets, she peered intently into the night and she was still scanning it when, behind her, the voice of Ogden cried shrilly and querulously:

“Say, there ain't a thing to eat aboard this silly ol' crate!”

Beth turned to him. “I know there isn't,” she said. “But are you sure you've looked properly?”

“Sure I've looked prop'ly,” cried Ogden. “I've looked everywhere an' there ain't nothing. What are we gonna do for eats?”

“Nothing,” said Beth. “There's nothing we can do. We'll just have to grin and bear it and tighten our belts.”

“I ain't wearing a belt,” said Ogden.

“I was speaking figuratively not literally,” said Beth.

“I dunno what you mean,” complained the American boy, scowling. “Why don't you talk so's I'd know what you mean? I s'pose you think you're mighty smart, talking so's I don't know what you mean.”

“Not at all,” said Beth. “It's not my fault if you're suffering from arrested mental development. But in future I will try to remember to talk in words of one syllable.”

“Whaffor?”

“So that you'll know what I mean,” said Beth. “Don't you go to school?”

“No, 'course I don't go to school!” snorted Ogden. “I got tutors. I did go to school one time, but it took on fire, so my Pop took me away.”

“It wasn't you, by any chance, who set it on fire, was it?” enquired Beth.

Ogden's scowl deepened. “Well, it wasn't my fault,” he said. “I didn't mean to set the ol' place on fire. I was jus' burning some nasty ol' books in the classroom one night—another boy an' me—an' we poured some petrol on them to make them burn prop'ly, an', gosh-gee! you should've seen the blaze, an' the whole place took on fire, an' the fire-engine come tearing up lickety-spit and they said it was a wonder some of the boys wasn't burned to death in their beds, an' the next day my Pop come and took me away. He said the Principal had telephoned for him, but I dunno why, because there was no harm in jus' burning some nasty ol' books, and we didn't mean to set the place on fire, the other boy an' me. It jus' sorta happened!”

“Yes, of course,” said Beth sardonically, then turned to Buck, who came into the control room in dry sports shirt, flannels and plimsolls. “So you found your things?” she said.

“Yes, after the dickens of a hunt,” replied Buck. “The place was just like a wrecked junk shop, as you said. How’s Ogden behaving?”

“All right at the moment,” said Beth, “He’s just been telling me part of his life story, also that there is nothing to eat aboard.”

“Well, we knew that,” said Buck. “But I was hoping he might find something. I’ll have a look myself after I’ve checked the instruments.”

“There’s something else I want you to take a look at when you’ve checked them,” said Beth.

Buck glanced at her quickly, disturbed by something in her voice.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“Come here and take a look ahead!” said Beth.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FATEFUL HOURS

BUCK swiftly joined Beth at the look-out windows.

“What is it?” he repeated.

“Look ahead there,” she said. “Do you notice anything?”

Buck peered intently into the night, but could distinguish nothing in the inky-black darkness.

“No, I can’t see anything,” he said, puzzled. “What’s wrong?”

“Just the fact that you can’t see anything,” replied Beth seriously. “The stars have gone, completely blotted out. And haven’t you noticed how stiflingly hot it’s become in here? I thought at first that it might be because the engines were running, then I knew it couldn’t be that. If you ask me, Buck, we’re in for a storm!”

“We might be,” said Buck uneasily. “You know far more about this sort of thing than I do. I’ve never been in this part of the world in my life until now, but I’ve read about Pacific storms and how quickly they can blow up. Some of them can be absolute brutes, I believe?”

“They can,” said Beth. “I’ve seen them and I know.”

“And it is stifling hot in here, as you say,” went on Buck. “It’s just like an oven. Let’s have the windows open for a bit. It’ll not only let some air into the place, but it might give us a better idea as to just what is happening outside there.”

He slid open the windows to their fullest extent. But it was no cooling breeze which flowed in; the air was so hot that it brought no relief at all to the stifling atmosphere of the control room.

“Look at the water, how queer it is,” said Beth.

In the brilliant golden light streaming from the open windows, the sea was the colour of dull copper and looked treacly and sluggish like viscid oil.

“It’s a storm, all right,” said Beth. “I know the signs. I don’t know how long it will be in coming, but it *is* coming. We might be lucky and just get the fringe of it—*My goodness, look there!*”

A violent blaze of violet-coloured lightning had split the darkness ahead of them, momentarily illuminating the oily sea and lowering sky in eerie, ghastly light.

“Yes, it’s coming, all right,” said Buck grimly. “We’ll close the windows in case it hits us suddenly.”

He and Beth withdrew their heads and he slid shut the windows.

“What do you think the Falcon’s chances are of riding a storm?” asked Beth uneasily. “A real violent storm, I mean?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” replied Buck. “She’s solidly built and she’s metal-hulled. Her wings are high-slung, which might help a bit, too, but just how she’ll take it, I don’t know. I only wish I knew how to fly her!” he added fervently. “If I did, I’d take her off and chance it. But I daren’t. I’d crash her for certain and that would be the end of us.”

“So we’ll just have to stay down here and face it,” said Beth. “She’s light enough, anyway, which might help her to ride heavy seas. There’re only the three of us aboard her.”

“Yes, and her fuel tanks are very low, which means that she’s not carrying much load there,” said Buck. “And that is something that has been puzzling me,” he went on. “About her fuel, I mean. Stubbs and his pals must have known that she hadn’t much left, yet they were going to fly off in her. They couldn’t have been meaning to fly very far.”

“Unless they intended to refuel somewhere,” said Beth.

“Then, it must have been somewhere within about three hundred miles of the island,” said Buck, “because, by my reckoning, that’s just about all the fuel she’s got left. Anyway, we’re not going to worry about that now. We’ve got plenty of other things to think about.”

“I’ll say so,” agreed Beth. “Do you think she can be made absolutely watertight? Along her upper structure, I mean, in case any heavy seas wash over her?”

“I expect she can,” said Buck. “I’ll have a look. If you’ll stay here on watch I’ll go and see that all the windows, ports and air-vents are shut. I’ll slide the metal crash-shutters across the outside of the windows, as well. That’ll help tremendously, if we’re in for a bashing——”

“Say, what’re you two talking about?” cried Ogden shrilly. “D’you see that lightnin’? She sure is sizzling! Gee-whizzikins! Jus’ lookit that!”

The night outside blazed luridly with violet light, revealing the motionless sea and the lowering, black sky.

“It’s coming closer,” said Beth. “You’d better go and see that everything’s securely fastened, Buck.”

“I will,” he said.

He left the control room and stepped into the brightly lighted and deserted saloon. He stood a moment looking about him and, as he did so, he was conscious of a strange, momentary feeling of unreality.

It seemed incredible to him that he, Beth and Ogden Pugg could be alone aboard this great, luxurious air-liner, down on the sea, and that he was in command of her.

For he was virtually in command of her, he told himself grimly, and her safety was very probably going to depend entirely upon how he handled her.

He loved aircraft, for to him an aircraft was something which lived; a graceful, powerful thing possessed of a life and a being of its own. And now, as he gazed round the silent, deserted saloon, he murmured:

“All right, old girl, we’ll see you through. We’ll come through all right.”

He lowered his head and his lips moved in a simple, earnest prayer to God to help them and to be with them in whatever was to come.

It came quite naturally to Buck to utter that humble prayer, for he had a simple and unswerving faith in the Power and Goodness of God: a faith which had gained strength from his association with the quiet-voiced, level-eyed pilots—many of them war veterans—amongst whom he had grown up.

For, although they did not speak of it much, they were men of deep religious feeling as must be all who, like them, have flown the high skies and touched the boundless realms of space and been awed by the Wisdom and the Power of the Divine Hand which created it and all things.

As Buck stirred and moved towards the nearest air-vents to see to their fastenings, he noticed two suitcases standing on the floor and recognised them as the cases in which the gangsters had packed the loot taken from the passengers and from the rifled luggage.

He hesitated a moment; then, deciding to leave the cases where they were for the time being, he crossed to the air-vents and made certain that they were securely closed and fastened.

As he moved on to the next ones, he felt the floor of the saloon slowly rise and fall as the Falcon rode a long, sluggish swell.

“It’s coming!” he muttered grimly and quickened his tour of the saloon.

When he was satisfied that everything was closed and fastened, he stepped to a main switch for’ard. As he pressed it, steel crash-shutters slid smoothly across the outside of the windows, completely covering them.

That done, he went swiftly aft, closed and shuttered everything there and switched off the lights. On his way back towards the control room, he switched off the lights in the saloon, for there was no sense in wasting power.

“I’ve made everything tight and ship-shape,” he reported when he had reached the control room. “How’s it look outside now?”

“Pretty grim!” said Beth, turning from the windows. “The lightning is almost incessant now and the Falcon’s beginning to roll. But you’ll have noticed that?”

“I have,” said Buck. “I suppose when the storm does hit us it’ll come all of a sudden, won’t it, with a sort of *wham*? What I mean to say, there won’t be much *real* warning, will there?”

“No, scarcely any,” replied Beth. “It’ll be on us with a rush, and the first we’ll know of its arrival will be when it hits us.”

“That’s what I thought,” nodded Buck. “And what I’m trying to figure out is the best way to meet it. I don’t know whether to keep her at her present speed, or throttle her back to dead-slow. I’m not keen on the dead-slow idea. I think she ought to have a decent amount of way on her and some power behind her.”

“So do I,” agreed Beth. “It’ll help to hold her. If she’s going dead-slow she might be whirled round when the storm hits her and then goodness knows what will happen.”

“Right, we’ll keep her as she is, then,” said Buck. “And all we can do now is to wait for it to come. If only we had something to eat we could put in the time by having a meal.”

“It’s too hot to eat,” said Beth. “I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling absolutely baked. What I could do with is a jolly good drink of water.”

“I’ll see if there’s any left in the drinking tank in the kitchen,” said Buck. “There may be a few drops, if we didn’t drain it dry for those other people. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

He ran from the control room, switched on a single unit of the saloon lights, and sped aft to the kitchen. Within a few minutes he was back, grinning triumphantly and carrying a big jar filled to the brim with some snowy-white and wetly glistening concoction.

“What on earth is that?” demanded Beth.

“Ice cream!” declared Buck.

“*Ice cream?*” almost yelled Beth.

“ICE CREAM!” screamed Ogden. “Oh, goody, goody, goody!”

“Where on earth did you get it?” gasped the girl.

“It was in the ice cream-maker,” explained Buck, grinning. “I suddenly thought there might be some in the thing, so I had a look and there it was. We never thought about the ice cream-maker when we were collecting the stores with Stubbs. Not that it would have mattered if we had. Ice cream wouldn’t have kept long on the island, so we’d probably have given it a miss.”

“What a blessing you thought about it, anyway,” said Beth fervently. “Did you remember to bring any spoons?”

“I did,” said Buck triumphantly.

He placed the jar on the chart table, then produced three spoons from his pocket. Next instant he caught Ogden a smart cuff across the ear and cried:

“Stop sticking your grubby little paw into the stuff. You wait your turn. It’s ladies first. Go on, Beth, first dig to you!”

“Have we got to eat it out of the jar?” asked Beth.

“That’s the idea,” admitted Buck. “Under the circs. I didn’t bother to bring any plates.”

“I don’t mind eating it out of the jar a bit,” said Beth; “only it’s rather revolting if Ogden Pugg’s going to keep sticking his spoon in. It’s not that I’m unduly particular or faddy,” she explained, “but there *are* limits, you know.”

“Yes, quite!” chuckled Buck. “Okay, I’ll dollop Ogden’s share on to some of this graph paper.”

Taking a couple of sheets of graph paper from a small, neat pile on the chart table, he doled out a generous portion of the ice cream on to the makeshift plate and said to the scowling Ogden:

“There you are, my little man, that’s yours. You can pretend you’re Jack Horner, if you like, and take it into a corner and enjoy yourself.”

“I’m gonna eat it here!” declared Ogden, greedily digging in his spoon.

“You can eat it where you like, so long as it’s not out of the jar,” said Beth.

Ogden made no answer. He was much too busy gulping down the ice cream, which he did with astonishing swiftness. Then, taking the graph paper in both hands, he held it up, carefully licked it, and looked expectantly at Buck.

“I’m ready for some more!” he announced.

“Why, you greedy little hog!” began Buck, “I gave you far more than your share _____”

“*Listen!*” cut in Beth tensely.

Buck became rigid. As he did so, above the muffled drone of the engines there came to his ears a swiftly mounting, menacing roar.

Dropping his spoon, he reached the controls at one bound and, flinging himself down into the pilot’s seat, unlocked the controls and gripped the wheel, bracing himself for what was to come.

The roar had increased to a deafening, terrifying tumult of sound. Beth, her face pale, was gripping the edge of the chart table. Ogden, his gooseberry eyes staring, was whimpering terrified questions inaudible above the mounting roar of the elements.

A quiver ran through the Falcon from stem to stern. Then she was still. But it was an ominous stillness, accompanied by creakings and groanings of her structure as though she were being subjected to some intolerable, agonizing strain.

She had no way on her. In spite of her engines she seemed to have stopped. The night outside blazed with lurid, blinding lightning, which dimmed the powerful radiance of the electric bulbs, and suddenly there came an appalling crash which stunned the very senses.

Instinct alone caused Buck to yank open the main throttle. Next instant the storm struck with an increased, terrifying roar and the Falcon reared wildly, almost perpendicularly. For moments which seemed an age she hung as though standing on her tail. Then her nose dropped steeply and dizzily, and she went plunging down and down into the vast abyss of water behind the towering, rushing wave which had hit her.

Buck throttled swiftly back, his face white, certain in his heart that she was plunging to her doom and could never live to rise again.

But she did. She soared wildly and sickeningly, hung, then plunged again, and past the control room windows poured the roaring, racing seas as they buried her almost hull-under in their raging fury.

“That first wave was the worst one, Buck!” Beth had hauled herself into the vacant seat beside him and was shouting in his ear. “It nearly always is. We won’t get another one like that!”

“We don’t *want* one!” shouted Buck to make his voice audible above the roar of the storm and the crash of the thundering seas. “The ones we’re getting now are quite bad

enough. She's kicking like a mad mule. She'll have my arms out of their sockets in a minute!"

"Can't you lock the controls?" cried Beth, as the sorely-stricken Falcon soared and plunged again.

"No, I've got to keep hold of her," bawled Buck, his hands gripping the wheel of the control column until the knuckles showed white through the skin. "We seem to be heading right into the thick of it at the moment, but if the seas start hitting us from port or starboard I'll have to try to swing her nose to meet them."

"Have you got steering way on her?"

"I don't know for certain, but I think so. I've locked the air-rudder dead centre and that's helping to keep her nose into it. What's Ogden doing?"

Gripping the arms of her seat so that she wouldn't be thrown out of it by the rollings and plungings of the Falcon, Beth looked round.

"He's curled up on the floor under the chart table, hanging on to one of the legs and being sick," she reported.

"That'll keep him occupied, then!" bawled Buck.

Except for occasional swift glances out into the screaming, lightning-riven night, his eyes were fixed on the glittering dials and gauges in front of him. Suddenly he jerked his head towards them and shouted:

"D'you see that? The outer port engine has packed in. Her instruments are showing at zero. Those are they on the left. She's as dead as mutton!"

Beth stared at the instruments in dismay.

"The engine casings are supposed to be weather-proof," shouted Buck. "But she's getting such a bashing that water must have got in somehow. It's either that, or her power or fuel leads have gone."

"Is it going to make much difference?" cried Beth.

"Not at the moment; we can still keep going," bawled Buck. "But if one engine has packed in, the others might do the same."

Beth made no response, but she knew only too well what would happen should the three remaining engines fail. With no power behind her to keep her head-on into the storm, the Falcon would be completely at the mercy of the roaring seas, which would whirl her broadside on, battering and pounding her as they poured over her until at length some part of her tortured structure gave way. And when that happened, the seas would rush into her and she would fill and go down like a stone.

Beth looked again at Buck. His pale, set face was wet with perspiration, his body tensed as, desperately, he hung on to the kicking, bucking control column. And constantly his eyes were roving swiftly over the gleaming dials and gauges of the three engines which were still running.

Beth turned her frightened, helpless gaze to the look-out windows in front of her. But there was nothing to be seen there now, for the windows were lashed with flying spume and blinding, driving rain.

Should the storm suddenly veer—and that it could veer with appalling swiftness, Beth knew only too well—then its change of direction might not become apparent to Buck and her until it was too late to swing the Falcon to meet it.

Beth's lips moved in silent, earnest prayer. They were in God's hands, alone on those raging waters, and He alone could save them.

Another terrific sea struck the Falcon, pouring right over her and forcing her down and down beneath the immensity of its rushing, roaring weight. She quivered and was motionless, as though yielding to the death blow. Then the wave passed and, groaning and creaking in every joint and rivet, she slowly lifted again, rolling heavily.

But the huge wave had exacted its toll, for the inner starboard engine was now out of action. Buck drew Beth's attention to the dead instruments. She nodded, signifying that she understood.

Buck opened up the main throttle a little, giving the two remaining engines more power, for now they had to do the work of four. But for how long would they keep running? Another sea like the one which had just passed might easily put them both out of action and strike the death-knell of the stricken aircraft.

Slowly the time dragged by and still the Falcon battled her way slowly on through the raging seas, now soaring high on the curling crest of some mighty roller, now plunging down and down into a black abyss of water so vast and deep that it seemed as though she must surely be engulfed.

But she was watertight and buoyant and always she rose again, slowly and heavily, but still afloat and with her two remaining engines still running, token of the superb skill and craftsmanship which had gone into their design and construction.

Then suddenly and without warning there came a lull. The scream of the hurricane passed and the driving, blinding rain ceased to lash the windows. The seas were still running wild and high, but save for structural creakings a curious stillness settled on the control room.

"Is that the end of it, Beth?" demanded Buck hopefully. "Has it blown itself out, or passed on somewhere?"

"We daren't bank on that, Buck," she replied. "It might start again at any moment from another quarter. That's the way these storms often behave.

"Oh, confound it!" groaned Buck. "I was hoping we'd seen the back of it."

"We might have done," said Beth. "But we can't rely on that yet—*Look out!*" she screamed.

With an ear-piercing shriek the hurricane struck again, howling in from the port quarter. The Falcon reeled under the terrific impact, rolling half-over so that Beth was thrown violently against Buck who, white-faced, was hanging on desperately to the control wheel.

The starboard windows were under water and roaring seas were pouring over the almost horizontal port ones. She would never right herself, could never right herself. Beth was certain of that. Her starboard wing was right under, her port wing rearing itself high from out the raging inferno of boiling sea.

But her structure held, her rounded hull offering no obstruction to the seas which poured over her. Then the roaring cascade passed and slowly, miraculously, the Falcon began to right herself, her streaming white hull staggering up from out the waters which had almost engulfed her.

“Outer starboard engine’s gone!” shouted Buck. Beth said nothing. She had been expecting that, for the starboard wing, carrying the engine, had been completely submerged. The surprising thing would have been if the engine had not gone dead.

“The inner port engine is still running,” shouted Buck. “It must have lifted clear of the seas when we rolled. But d’you know what?”

“No, what?”

“We’re facing dead into it again. I’m certain we are. The air-rudder must be holding and the wind hitting it has swung her nose round into the teeth of the storm!”

He opened up the throttle still further to give their sole remaining engine more power and help to hold the Falcon head-on into the hurricane.

“Buck, she’ll never ride this for long!” cried Beth, as the labouring, rolling aircraft soared and plunged in the boiling seas. “Something’s going to give. But we’ve done our best. It’s not our fault it’s ending like this.”

Buck glanced at her. The girl’s face was white beneath its tan, but her eyes, meeting his, were calm and steady now.

“We’re not done yet!” cried Buck. “We’re still afloat and we’ve still got one engine left. Lots of fellows have come in on a wing and a prayer, and we’ll come in on one engine and a prayer!”

“I’ve said my prayers,” Beth told him.

“So have I,” he said. “And we’ll be all right, you’ll see. I *know* we will!”

He turned again and peered out through the streaming, storm-lashed windows. Then, after a while, he cried:

“Am I just imagining, or is the wind dropping again?”

“No, it’s dropping, Buck,” replied Beth. “I’ve been listening to it. And it’s dying gradually this time, not stopping all of a sudden like before. Buck, oh, Buck,” her voice was trembling, “I honestly believe it’s blowing itself out!”

She was correct. Although the sea was still running high, the wind was steadily dropping and through the spray-lashed look-out windows could be seen ragged patches of starry sky, which grew larger and more clear as the last remnants of the storm clouds swept on southwards.

“Oh, Buck, it’s over! It really is,” cried Beth fervently.

“Thank God for that!” said Buck, and the words were a devout and solemn thanksgiving which came from his very heart.

“Yes, and I say that, too,” said Beth.

She rose from her seat and gripped the back of it to steady herself against the rolling and plunging of the Falcon.

“How’s Ogden?” asked Buck.

“Passed out completely, by the look of him,” said Beth.

Buck looked round. Ogden was still lying under the chart table, his arms clasped round one leg of it. His tear-stained face, what Buck could see of it, was deathly white and he was lying quite still.

“You’d better see if he’s all right,” he said.

Keeping her balance as best she could, Beth crossed the rolling, pitching floor and stooped over Ogden.

“Here, wake up!” she said, prodding him gently with her hand. “Everything’s all right now.”

Ogden stirred, whimpered, then his gooseberry eyes slowly opened and he looked up at her.

“Aw-www!” he groaned piteously. “Aww-www—I *do* feel bad!”

“You’ll be all right if you go and curl up in the saloon,” said Beth. “Come on, I’ll help you to get up.”

“I’ve bin sick,” whimpered Ogden.

“Yes, I know,” said Beth. “But you’ll feel much better in the saloon. Come on!”

She took him by the arm to help him to rise. But Ogden weakly resisted, kicking feebly and clutching the table leg the tighter.

“Lemme alone—go away!” he whined. “I’m bad—aww-ww, dear, I’m awful bad! Why don’t that boy stop the nasty ol’ crate from jumpin’ about?—Aww-www!”

Beth looked across at Buck.

“Short of forcibly carrying him into the saloon there’s not much I can do with him,” she said.

“All right, leave him there for just now,” said Buck. “He’ll be all right. He’s only been seasick, hasn’t he?”

“That’s all, I think,” said Beth, straightening up and rejoining Buck at the controls. “How are we going now?”

“Fine!” said Buck cheerfully. “The sea seems to be going down a bit. I don’t think she’s rolling and pitching as much as she was. How long is the sea likely to continue rough, do you know?”

“It might be for hours, or it might go down quite quickly,” she replied. “It’s hard to say just what it will do unless, of course, one is an experienced seaman.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Buck. “We’ve got the worst over, and if she’ll ride what she has done she’ll ride this all right. I’m going to ease the port engine a bit. We’ve got to nurse it now, seeing it’s the one and only engine we’ve got left.”

He throttled the engine back, studied the temperature and pressure gauges for a few moments, then locked the controls and commenced to rub his aching arms.

“There’s not much more we can do at the moment,” he said, “but I’ll have to stay here with her until the sea has gone down a lot more. You go and lie down somewhere and try and get some sleep.”

"I couldn't sleep," said Beth.

"You might if you try."

"I couldn't, I tell you. I'm as wide-awake as anything."

"Then, I'll tell you what," said Buck. "Have a look round and see if she's okay. That she's not taking in water anywhere."

"Yes, I'll do that," said Beth quickly.

She left the control room and set off on a tour of the Falcon, switching on the lights in the saloon and in the other compartments as she proceeded aft. But, apart from movable furnishings and other articles which had been hurled about all over the place, the interior of the aircraft had suffered no damage that she could see and was still watertight and intact.

She returned to the control room and reported the good news to Buck, much to his satisfaction and relief.

"That's grand!" he said. "She must be beautifully built to have stood up like this to such a bashing. Being an amphibian, she was designed on the lines of a sort of flying boat, of course, but, all the same, she must be a smashing fine craft."

"She certainly is," agreed Beth, then added: "The storm is bound to have hit the island and I bet Stubbs and company are certain we're drowned. They know we're out in the thick of it."

"Unless Stubbs has the impression that I can fly the kite," chuckled Buck. "I wonder how they're getting along on the island? It must be a weird sort of a party."

"With the passengers getting all the laughs," said Beth, laughing herself. "I'd like to be there to see it. Not really there, I mean, but I'd like to see what's going on."

"So would I," grinned Buck.

They talked a while longer, then Beth took another look at Ogden, who was still lying curled up beneath the table.

"He's sound asleep," she said.

"Is he?" said Buck. "Righto, I'll put him in the saloon. He'll be better there and the kite will take no harm for a few minutes. If you ask me, the sea is going down fast now."

He rose stiffly from his seat, stretched himself for a moment or two, then crossed to Ogden.

"Poor little rich boy!" he murmured, looking down at Ogden's tear-stained, pasty-white face and rumpled clothes. "The trouble with this kid is that he's lonely as well as spoilt. He ought to be sent off to a pretty strict boarding-school and given a shilling a week pocket money and no more. That would knock some of the nonsense out of him pretty quick."

"He's been at a school, but he set it on fire," said Beth. "He was telling me about it while you were changing out of your wet things. He didn't do it on purpose, he says. He and another boy were burning some books in a classroom and the whole place took fire."

“And what happened to him?” asked Buck with interest.

“His Pop, as he calls him, came and took him away. And paid for the damage as well, I guess.”

“Yes, he’d have to, I suppose,” said Buck. “I reckon Ogden’s life story would make pretty interesting reading. For anyone who prefers the lurid and sensational, that is. Well, here goes. I’ll try not to wake the little cherub.”

Stooping, he gathered the sleeping Ogden very gently in his arms and carried him into the saloon, where he laid him on one of the cushioned seats.

“He’ll be all right there,” he said, straightening up. He turned to Beth, who had followed him into the saloon. “And now *you* get some sleep!” he ordered.

“No, you first,” said Beth. “You must be just about worn out.”

“I’m nothing of the sort,” denied Buck sharply.

“Well, you look it, anyway,” said Beth, studying his pale, tired face. “*You* lie down first and I’ll keep watch.”

“No!” snapped Buck. “I’m not going to argue about it. We’ve got to get some sleep, both of us, and you’re going to take the first spell.”

“All right,” capitulated Beth. “But you’ll wake me, won’t you? In two hours, shall we say?”

“Yes, I’ll wake you in two hours,” promised Buck.

He waited until Beth had curled herself up on one of the seats, using a cushion as a pillow. Then he switched out the lights in the saloon and returned to the control room.

Sinking down into the pilot’s seat, he studied the instruments of their one remaining engine. Satisfied that all was still well with the engine and that it was running smoothly, he relaxed in the seat.

The rolling and pitching of the Falcon had considerably lessened, token that the sea was going down fast. But the strain of the night, both physically and mentally, had exacted a far greater toll on Buck than he realised and he found himself nodding, his mind becoming dreamy and confused.

He pulled himself together with a jerk and sat bolt-upright in the seat. But outraged Nature would not be denied and again he relaxed in the seat, his eyes so heavy with weariness that he could scarcely keep the drooping lids open.

He fought against it, but everything became confused again and, after a while, his head lolled and he slept.

CHAPTER IX

OGDEN'S EXPLOIT

BUCK awoke with a start. Sunlight was streaming into the control room and his eyes blinked painfully against the brightness of the light. For a few moments he scarcely knew where he was; then, as recollection came flooding back on him, he stirred and quickly sat up.

“Hang it, I’ve been asleep!” he exclaimed in dismay.

He looked swiftly and anxiously at the instruments of the inner port engine. To his utter relief they were showing that the engine was still running.

He raised his eyes and looked at the surrounding sea. It was flat calm by now, glistening like silver in the rays of the early sun, which had cleared the horizon and was mounting in a sky of cloudless blue.

Buck throttled the engine back to the absolute minimum in order to cool it down a bit. He would have stopped the engine altogether, only he was afraid that he might not be able to start it again and he dared not take the risk.

He checked the course and found it was a few degrees east of north. He turned the small wheel of the under-water rudder and slowly the almost imperceptibly moving Falcon swung on to a direct northerly course. Then, locking the wheel, Buck rose stiffly from his seat.

He was desperately hungry, and thirsty as well. The jar containing the ice cream had been hurled from the chart table to the floor during the storm and the melted contents had flowed out of it. Buck knew that there was a small quantity of the stuff left in the ice cream-maker, but, apart from that, there was nothing at all on board with which to quench thirst or to stay the pangs of hunger.

“We might be sighted and picked up to-day,” he consoled himself. “I sincerely hope so, anyway, for Beth’s sake, if for nothing else.”

He slid open the windows of the control room and through them flowed the fresh, clean air of morning, laden with the salty and invigorating tang of the sea.

Having filled his lungs with the refreshing air, Buck turned and stepped into the saloon. The crash-shutters were still drawn across the outside of the windows and he pressed the switch which operated them. As he did so, the shutters slid back and the bright light of morning streamed into the saloon.

Both Beth and Ogden were still asleep. But, as though disturbed by the sudden light, Beth stirred and her eyes sleepily opened. Not so Ogden, however, who slumbered heavily on.

“Why, it’s morning!” exclaimed Beth. She sat drowsily up and swung her feet to the floor. “Oh, excuse me!” she said and yawned prodigiously.

“I shouldn’t have wakened you up yet,” said Buck contritely. “I’m sorry.”

“What on earth are you sorry about?” demanded Beth. “I’m glad you did wake me up. I bet I’ve had more than my two hours.”

“I don’t know at all,” he confessed. “I’ve been asleep myself.” He coloured as he made the shameful disclosure: “I fell asleep at the controls.”

“Did you?” said Beth sympathetically. “I’m not a bit surprised at that. You were just about out on your feet, only you wouldn’t admit it. How’s everything, anyway?”

“Fine!” said Buck. “Our one engine is still running and we’re heading northwards across a calm, flat sea and under a blue sky. If you ask me, to-day is going to be a proper scorcher, a first-class day for flying, so there’s every chance that we’ll be sighted and picked up. An air search for the Falcon is bound to have been started by now, and every available kite will be on the job.”

“Yes, but we’re a long way off the route on which she was flying,” said Beth soberly. “I’m not being pessimistic, Buck, but it’s better to face facts. We are a long way off her route.”

“I know we are,” agreed the boy. “But searching aircraft will cover a jolly wide area and we’re heading towards that area. Apart from that, there’s always the chance of our being sighted by some sort of a ship. The only snag is that we haven’t any food or water.”

“And not much fuel, you said,” added Beth. “What exactly is the fuel situation?”

Buck was silent a moment, then he said: “I reckon we’ve got about enough for another hundred to a hundred and twenty miles. That’s a safe estimate. We can do that distance all right, I’m certain.”

“And then what?” asked Beth. “Come on, Buck; it’s much better if we face the situation squarely. Suppose our fuel runs out before we’re sighted and picked up—what then?”

“Well, then we’ll just have to drift, I suppose, until we are sighted,” said Buck.

Beth nodded slowly. “Yes, that will be all we can do,” she said.

Abruptly she rose, smiled, and said with a sudden brisk change of tone:

“Well, we know now what we’re faced with, but there’s no sense in meeting trouble half-way and we’ve a jolly lot to be thankful for. We’re still alive, we’re still afloat, the aircraft is sound and we’re heading north. It could be a jolly lot worse.”

“I know it could,” agreed Buck.

“I see Ogden’s still asleep, bless him!” said Beth, stepping to the nearest window. “Don’t let’s wake him.”

“I haven’t the slightest intention of doing so,” Buck assured her.

Beth stood a few moments gazing out at the smooth, calm sea which glistened like burnished silver in the rays of the mounting sun.

“I’d simply love a swim,” she said, turning from the window. “It would freshen us up no end. But we can’t. For one thing, goodness only knows where our swimming kit is in that awful mess Stubbs and his friends have made of the baggage room; and, apart from that, there’s always the risk of sharks.”

“Which washes a swim right out!” declared Buck. “It wouldn’t be so bad if we could only get a decent wash.”

“We can do that, all right,” said Beth. “At least, a sort of wash. If you fix the Falcon so that she goes dead-slow, we can let the ladder down and take our turn in dabbling our legs in the water and bathing our faces. It’ll help to freshen us up.”

“It will,” agreed Buck. “And the kite is going dead-slow now. I’ve throttled her right back to get the engine cooled off a bit. I’ll let the ladder down for you and after you’ve had a go, I will.”

“No, you first,” said Beth.

“Ladies first!” he retorted firmly.

Crossing to the sliding door in the side of the saloon, Buck opened it and the clean, fresh air of morning flowed into the saloon. Then he let down the ladder and turned to Beth.

“There you are, it’s all ready for you,” he said. “I’m going into the control room to have a look at the engine. You can take over for a bit when you’re ready.”

He returned to the control room and, having checked the temperature, revolutions and oil-pressure of their one engine, which was running dead-slow, he was standing gazing out of the for’ard window when he heard Beth come in quickly from the saloon.

“It hasn’t taken you long,” he said, turning to her.

“I haven’t been down the ladder yet,” said Beth. She had her hands behind her back, her eyes were smiling, and there was an excited, almost triumphant, look on her face. “Guess what I’ve got?” she cried.

“Well, what?” demanded Buck, mystified.

“Guess!” urged Beth gaily.

“I can’t!” said Buck. “I’m no good at guessing. What have you got?”

Beth brought her hands from behind her back. In them were several thick and delightful-looking, paper-wrapped slabs of chocolate.

“Where on earth did you find those?” he gasped.

“In the saloon!” cried Beth triumphantly. “And I bet there’s more of it. I had a sudden brain-wave. Stubbs wouldn’t let the passengers take their travelling cases ashore with them, if you remember, and it suddenly occurred to me that there might be chocolate or candy in them. Lots of folks do carry that sort of thing on a journey, you know, so I had a look. I opened three or four cases and I found these slabs. And I bet we’ll find some more in the rest of the cases and perhaps amongst the luggage, if we look!”

“Good for you!” cried Buck elatedly. “My hat, it certainly was a brain-wave! Chocolate will keep us going for quite a while. It’s supposed to be full of vitamins and all that sort of thing, isn’t it? At least, the adverts say it is. But we’d better not let Ogden get hold of it, or even know where we found it, otherwise he’ll be through those cases like a terrier after a rat. We’ll dole it out properly and sparingly.”

“Have some now!” invited Beth.

“I most certainly will!” accepted Buck with alacrity. “What about you?”

“No, I’ll wait until I’ve had a wash,” said Beth. “Then I’ll have some, don’t you worry.”

She departed, leaving Buck munching hungrily at some of the chocolate. Rolling her slacks above her knees, she descended the ladder and let the sea flow around her legs. Then, gripping a rung, she scooped the water up with her other hand and splashed it refreshingly over her face.

Feeling much better after these makeshift ablutions, she climbed back up the ladder and popped her head into the control room.

“I’m just going along to the air hostess’s cabin,” she said. “There’s a towel and a comb there and she won’t mind my using them. I won’t be long.”

“There’s no hurry,” said Buck. “The kite can look after herself all right while I have a wash. The chocolate’s in the chart table drawer here when you want it, but don’t let Ogden get his paws on it.”

“I won’t!” promised Beth, laughing.

She went off aft in the direction of the air hostess’s little cabin-cubicle. Knowing that the slowly moving Falcon would be perfectly all right for a few minutes, Buck stepped into the saloon, kicked off his shoes and rolled up his trouser legs. As he did so, Ogden’s voice enquired sleepily and querulously:

“What you doin’?”

“I’m going to have a wash,” said Buck. “You’d better do the same. It’ll buck you up.”

“There ain’t no water,” said Ogden.

“There’s plenty in the sea,” said Buck.

“Phooey! I ain’t gonna wash myself in nasty sea water,” retorted Ogden.

“Please yourself,” said Buck.

Leaving Ogden sitting up on the cushioned seat watching him, he stepped to the doorway, then went down the ladder. Ogden stared around the deserted saloon, then rose, crossed to the doorway and called down to Buck:

“Hey, where’s that gel?”

“Oh, she’s around somewhere,” replied Buck, dabbling his legs in the sea.

Ogden withdrew into the saloon and from there went into the deserted control room. He had half-expected to find Beth in there. But she wasn’t. So, his eyes gleaming and a triumphant grin on his face, he crossed to the controls and slumped himself quickly down in the pilot’s seat.

This was the chance he had been wanting. Now he could drive the “ol’ crate” himself without that nasty boy and that interfering girl being there to stop him.

Ogden’s fat fingers closed on the throttle handle. He moved it, wondering expectantly just what would happen. What did happen was that the drone of the quietly running engine rose with exciting and satisfying swiftness to a deep-throated, thunderous roar and the Falcon commenced to surge quickly forward through the water.

Buck, still down the ladder, heard the sudden deafening noise of the engine. He was in the act of splashing his face with water when he heard it and he turned swiftly.

Too swiftly, alas! for in his frantic haste his foot slipped off the ladder. He hung a moment, one hand desperately gripping a rung; then the surging, mounting bow-wave sweeping along the side of the hull tore him from his hold and he was in the sea, floundering in the wake of the now quickly moving aircraft.

“Stop!” he yelled furiously, that frantic, futile order half-choked by the sea water he had swallowed; then he set off swimming desperately in the wake of the rapidly receding Falcon.

He knew perfectly well what had happened, of course. That loathsome little Ogden had got at the controls and opened up the throttle. Why, oh why, he asked himself furiously, had he allowed the little blot even two minutes’ freedom aboard the craft? He might have known that something like this would happen!

In the air hostess’s little cabin, Beth, combing out her curls, had also heard the sudden, mounting roar of the engine. For a moment she thought it must be Buck. Then it flashed upon her that Buck would not run the engine under full throttle unless something unforeseen had suddenly happened.

Flinging down the comb, she turned, darted from the cabin and ran through the deserted saloon to the control room. And there she was greeted by the highly alarming spectacle of Ogden occupying the pilot’s seat, his podgy hand on the throttle.

It did not take one split-second for the alert-minded Beth to realise the horrifying truth. If Buck was aboard the aircraft he would never have allowed this to happen. Then, obviously, he couldn’t be aboard. He must be still clinging to the ladder down which he had gone to have a wash. Either that, or he had fallen off it into the sea.

“Get away from there, you little wretch!” yelled Beth, hurtling across the control room.

Next instant she had seized Ogden and sent him spinning from the seat with a violence which left him sprawling. Then swiftly closing the throttle, so that the roar of the engine died down to its former quiet drone, she wheeled on Ogden.

“Where’s Buck?” she cried. “Where is he, you dangerous little beast?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and dashed from the control room to the open doorway of the saloon. Her heart sank with fear and dismay as she saw the empty ladder; then, leaning perilously out, she scanned the sea astern.

Almost at once she spotted Buck’s head and his frenzied splashing and, giving him a reassuring hail, she ran back into the control room, dropped down into the pilot’s seat and spun the wheel which controlled the under-water rudder.

She knew how to do it all right, having sat at the controls with Buck through the tense and dangerous hours of the night; and when the now slowly moving Falcon had come about and was nosing her way gently back in the direction of Buck, she levelled up the wheel, locked it, then rose from the seat.

“Get out of here, you little horror!” she cried angrily at the glowering Ogden. “Buck might have been drowned, you starting up the engine like that! Go on, get out!”

I'm not leaving you in here by yourself!"

She made a grab at him, but Ogden eluded her. She made another dive for him and this time she caught him. Next instant, however, she skipped wildly with a cry of pain as Ogden caught her a kick on the shin.

"Lemme go!" he yelled as, still retaining her grip on him, Beth held him off at arm's length. "If you don't lemme go, you great stupid, I'll kick you again!"

Beth let go with one hand just long enough to catch him a stinging smack across the head with it. Then, twisting him round, she ran him, howling and screaming, from the control room and gave him a thrust which sent him staggering on along the saloon.

Regaining his balance, he turned his head blubberingly to see if she was still pursuing him. Beth made a menacing movement towards him, and, with a howl, he bolted on along the saloon to vanish somewhere in the after quarters.

Knowing that he could not return without her seeing him, Beth limped to the open doorway in the side of the hull in search of Buck. She spotted him at once, close in now to the slowly returning Falcon.

"Are you all right?" she called.

"Yes," cried Buck.

The gap between him and the Falcon steadily closed and, reaching the ladder, he clutched it and clambered drippingly and pantingly aboard.

"Where is that little pest?" he gasped breathlessly, glowering about him.

"He's gone aft into hiding somewhere," Beth told him. "But what happened? I mean, how exactly did you come to be in the sea?"

Buck told her.

"I'll get the kite back on to her course," he went on, making towards the control room. "Then I'll find young Ogden and give him the licking of his life! I'll have to get changed again as well, unless I let my things dry on me."

He swung the Falcon back on to her northerly course. Then, checking the instruments and finding them in order, he locked the controls again and rose.

"That was a jolly fine effort of yours to throttle her down and turn her round," he said appreciatively. "There're not many girls could have done it."

"It was easy enough," said Beth. "I knew just what to do through watching you last night."

"It was a jolly good show, all the same," he repeated. "If you hadn't done it, I might have been drowned. I did a terrific spurt to catch up with the kite, but I couldn't. I pulled out everything I've got, the same as I did last night when I left you behind. You know, when Stubbs was after us."

"Yes, I know," chuckled Beth.

Buck, noting her amusement, eyed her closely.

"Just what is the joke?" he demanded.

"Nothing," said Beth.

“Yes, it is, it’s something!” persisted Buck. “Come on, tell me!”

“Well, it’s that spurt of yours last night when you say you left me behind,” explained Beth. “It was a jolly good one, I’ll admit, but it wasn’t so hot as you think.”

“Oh!”

“No,” said Beth. “You see, Stubbs was coming along at such a terrific rate that he would have caught us. So I dropped behind and, when he passed me, I grabbed him by the ankle and threw him off his stroke.”

Buck regarded her in blank astonishment.

“Is that true?” he ejaculated.

“I’m afraid so,” dimpled Beth.

“But why didn’t you tell me before?”

“We’ve had other things to think about.”

“Well!” ejaculated Buck, still staring at her. “Well, I’ll be jiggered! So that’s why the rotter didn’t catch me up, was it? And I’ve been kidding myself that I not only out-distanced him, but you as well.”

He eyed the mirthful Beth for a moment longer, then said wistfully: “If only you were a fellow I’d give you something for this.”

“For what?” demanded Beth.

“For making me feel such a complete ass.”

“There’s no need for you to feel that way about it at all,” said Beth.

“But I do,” cried Buck. “You should have told me at the time and then I’d have known. Anyway it was a jolly plucky thing to do,” he said. “My hat, it was! But all the same I’d like to dot you one for not telling me about it before. I would, as well, if you weren’t a girl.”

“Don’t let that stop you, if that’s how you’re feeling about it,” challenged Beth, her eyes dancing.

“It *does* stop me,” said Buck. “I don’t scrap with girls.”

“All right, Sir Galahad!” she mocked.

“And not so much of the Sir Galahad, or I will do it,” threatened Buck.

“You couldn’t!”

“I couldn’t, eh?”

“No!”

Buck turned to the chart table and picked up a ruler, which was lying there.

“What are you going to do with that?” asked Beth suspiciously.

“Look for Ogden,” replied Buck.

“Oh, I thought for one moment that you were going to use it on me,” said Beth. “Give me six of the best, like prefects do at boys’ schools. Or, at least, so I’ve read.”

“No, this is for Ogden,” said Buck, moving towards the saloon. “I’ll deal with you later.” He paused in the doorway to say: “Don’t forget, the chocolate’s in the chart table

drawer. And honestly, Beth, joking apart, I do appreciate what you did in stopping Stubbs. It was a jolly plucky thing to do and you know I'm not really grouching about your not telling me until now."

"Yes, of course I do," said Beth cheerfully. "Now you go and find Ogden and give him a jolly good spanking. It's not that I'm heartless, but he does deserve it, and he really has got to be stopped from playing the giddy goat. You can give him an extra couple with the ruler for a hack on the shin which he gave me when I pulled him away from the controls."

"Did he do that?" demanded Buck.

"Yes, he did," said Beth. "Look!"

She pulled up the leg of her slacks to reveal a livid bruise on her shin.

"Right!" said Buck grimly. "He'll not do that again, I bet!"

He went aft, armed with the ruler. But nowhere could he find Ogden. He did discover, however, that the ice cream-maker, a portable one, was missing from the kitchen and he discovered, also, that one of the compartment doors was locked, apparently on the inside.

The compartment was the air hostess's small cabin-cubicle. Buck didn't know that. All he did know was that it was the only door aft which was locked and it did not require, therefore, a towering intellect to conclude that Ogden was somewhere on the other side of it.

"Open this door!" cried Buck, rattling it. "Do you hear me? I know you're in there, so you'd better open it—and quick!"

There came no response, neither sound nor movement from the other side of the door.

"Open this door, will you?" bawled Buck, pounding on the panels. "What are you doing in there, anyway?"

Still there came no response.

"Very well, it'll be all the worse for you when you *do* come out!" threatened Buck. "And you'll have to come out sometime!"

With that he strode heavily away, then tip-toed quietly back, hoping that Ogden, having heard his retreating tread, would be lured into opening the door and peeping out.

But Ogden wasn't to be lured. Knowing that Buck would be after him on vengeance bent, he had searched for a hiding place, found the cubicle, and before locking himself in had carted the ice cream-maker from the kitchen.

Sitting on the bunk with which the cubicle was fitted, he had finished the ice cream, and when Buck first banged on the door he was standing in front of a mirror engaged in the interesting and highly diverting occupation of painting his face like a Red Indian's with a lipstick which he had found lying on the dressing-table.

Buck's knock had made him jump, but that was all. He certainly wasn't coming out, not for a long time. Not until the beast's temper had had time to cool off, anyway. He was quite comfy in the cubicle and he was safe in there, too. What was more, the beast

couldn't really *know* he was in there. He could just guess he was, but he couldn't see him, not through the door.

So Buck lurked in vain out in the corridor. He gave it up at length and went to the luggage compartment, where he found himself some dry clothing into which he changed. He was on his way back when he heard a sudden urgent cry from Beth from the direction of the control room:

"Buck, quick! Come here!"

CHAPTER X

THUNDERING BILLY

BUCK reached the control room at a run. Beth was standing at the for'ard look-out windows, the Falcon's binoculars pressed to her eyes.

"What is it?" he cried.

"There's something over there on the port bow," said Beth quickly. "I can't quite make out what it is. It looks like the hull of a ship, but if it is, she's dismasted. I can't make out any spars."

Taking the glasses which she handed him, Buck focussed them on the tiny black speck which she indicated on the far horizon. He gazed long and earnestly, then said:

"Yes, whatever it is, it's got no masts or sails and I can't see a smoke-stack. It looks like a small hulk to me." Then he added excitedly: "But d'you know what? If it is a derelict there might be water and stores aboard her."

"Yes, that's quite possible," agreed Beth. "But I'll tell you what she might be. She might be a schooner or something that got caught in the storm last night and blown off her course and dismasted."

"It could be!" exclaimed Buck. "Yes, by Jove! It could. We'll close with her and have a look at her, anyway."

He handed the glasses to Beth and slumped down into the pilot's seat. Unlocking the controls, he opened up the throttle to increase the speed, then swung the nose of the Falcon in the direction of the distant speck.

Beth, standing with the glasses pressed to her eyes, said after a while:

"I think she's in a very bad way. She's very low in the water, and seems to be down at the head. I can see what looks like the stump of a foremast. She must have had a terrific buffeting during that awful storm last night."

"Can you see any signs of life aboard her?" asked Buck.

"No, not yet; we're still too far away," said Beth. She lowered the glasses. "How did you get on with Ogden?" she enquired. "I hope you used the ruler with good and corrective effect?"

"I didn't use it at all," replied Buck. "He's locked himself in one of the compartments with the ice cream-maker and I couldn't get at him."

"I thought I didn't hear any squeals of anguish," remarked Beth. "I was wondering why. Still, it'll keep for him."

"That's right," agreed Buck. "And he'll have to come out sometime. He can't stay in there for ever—*Hallo, what's that?*"

A thin trail of white smoke was soaring swiftly up from the distant hulk. It described a high arc and burst in a shower of crimson stars.

“It’s a rocket, a distress signal!” exclaimed Beth, whipping the glasses to her eyes. “There’s somebody aboard her, all right, and it’s us they’re signalling to. It must be. There’s no other craft anywhere around that I can see. There goes another!”

A second rocket was soaring up into the blue to burst as the previous one had done.

“All right, we’re coming!” said Buck, opening the throttle a little more to increase the speed still further.

“She’s a trading schooner, by the look of her, and she’s definitely sinking,” reported Beth, studying her through the glasses. “She’s right down by the head. I bet I was right when I said she was blown off her course by the storm and dismasted.”

“I think you were,” agreed Buck. “You know much more about this sort of thing than I do, of course. But I say, what are we going to do about these people? On the schooner, I mean. If she’s sinking they’ll probably want us to take them off.”

“Yes, I suppose they will,” said Beth thoughtfully. “They mightn’t, of course, when they learn the jam we’re in ourselves—only one engine, precious little fuel, and no stores or water. The stores won’t worry them, of course, because they can bring their own. But the rest of it might make them prefer to take to their boats—that is, if the boats haven’t been carried away in the storm, which is more than likely.”

“Well, I know jolly well which I’d prefer to be adrift in if I had to choose between a big, comfortable, seaworthy amphibian like the Falcon and a small open boat,” said Buck. “I’d plump for the aircraft every time.”

“So will they, probably,” said Beth. “I can’t think of anything much grimmer than being adrift in the Pacific in a small open boat.”

“So it looks as though we’re going to have company,” remarked Buck. “Well, the more the merrier, and so long as they bring some decent grub with them and some water they’ll be quite welcome.”

As the Falcon drew steadily nearer to the ship and began to close with her, he and Beth studied her with interest. She was a small, wooden-built, black-hulled island trader, completely dismasted except for her broken stump of a foremast, and so deep in the water for’ard that her bows were almost submerged.

Gathered aft, watching the approach of the aircraft, was a group of six men. Two of them, clad in dirty white singlets and ducks, seemed to be white men, one of the pair being a huge, burly, broad-shouldered man with a great bushy black beard.

The other four men were copper-coloured, semi-naked Kanakas, one of them wearing a dirty, floppy white sun hat.

“What do you make of them?” asked Buck.

“A typical island trader crew,” replied Beth. “A white captain and mate and four Islanders.”

“And all nice people, let’s hope,” remarked Buck, closing down the throttle, as the Falcon surged slowly in towards the sinking ship.

She lost practically all way close in to the ship and directly abreast of her, and Buck rose from the controls.

“Come on, let’s talk to them!” he said.

Beth followed him from the control room to the saloon doorway in the side of the hull, which was still open. The two white men and the Kanakas were crowded against the side of the ship and, as Buck and Beth appeared in the doorway, the big burly man with the bushy black beard bellowed in a startlingly mighty voice:

“Ahoy there, what aircraft are you?”

“British Atlantic and Pacific Airways air-liner, disabled and down on the sea,” shouted Buck. “What craft are you?”

“Island trader, *Maid of Tahu*, blown off course, dismasted and sinking!” bellowed Black Beard. “How badly disabled are you?”

“We have only one engine functioning and no stores or water, but we’re still sound and seaworthy!” shouted Buck.

“Have you radioed for assistance?” bawled Black Beard.

“No, the radio’s smashed!” shouted Buck. “But we’re expecting assistance. We’ve been down off our course since yesterday and aircraft will be out searching for us!”

Black Beard turned to the other white man. They had a brief discussion, then he turned to the Falcon again.

“Can you take us aboard you?” he bellowed in his mighty voice. “Our boats are gone—stove in and swept away—and the water’s gaining on the pumps. We can’t keep afloat more’n another hour at best!”

“Yes, of course we’ll take you aboard,” shouted Buck. “Can you bring some stores and water?”

“Aye, aye!” bellowed Black Beard heartily. “We’ve been making a raft, but you might have a rubber raft or a dinghy you can send across.”

The Falcon carried six big, deflated rubber dinghies, which packed into a small space and became inflated by gas cartridge the instant they were thrown into the water. Two of them had been taken by Stubbs and company, but the remaining four were still aboard.

“Yes, we’ll send you a dinghy,” shouted Buck. “A couple if you like. You’ll need two for transporting the stores. Stand by!”

He and Beth turned to set off aft in order to get the dinghies from the compartment in which they were stored. As they did so, however, Buck gave a violent start and Beth gave a stifled cry of astonishment and alarm.

For, standing glowering at them, was a small but weird and podgy figure, draped in a blanket and with a face grotesquely streaked with strange designs in greasy, vivid crimson.

“Why, it’s Ogden!” gasped Beth.

“So it is,” said Buck. “I thought for one moment it was a painted gargoyle.” He turned to Ogden: “What’s the idea? What the thump have you been doing?”

“I’m a Red Indian an’ if I’d gotta tomahawk I’d scalp you!” cried Ogden. “But, say, what’s that ship out there? Is it ol’ Stubbs’ ship?”

“No, it isn’t old Stubbs’ ship,” replied Buck. “What on earth put that fatheaded idea into your thick head?”

“‘Cos ol’ Stubbs must be somewhere around,” cried Ogden. “I bet it *is* his ship an’ you won’t tell me. He’s caught you up an’ he’ll be so mad at you and that girl runnin’ away with this ol’ crate there’ll be no saying what’ll he do to you.”

“That’s lipstick on his face,” said Beth, looking at him closely. “I know where he’s got it from, as well. I bet the compartment he locked himself in was the air hostess’s cabin. I changed in there last night from my wet things.”

“Well, we haven’t time to bother with him now,” said Buck. “If he cares to doll himself up like a Guy Fawkes, that’s his look-out. Come on!”

“I dunno any guy called Forks!” Ogden yelled after them, as they pushed past him and went through the saloon. “What guy you talkin’ about? There ain’t no guy called Forks. Yah! *Phooey!*”

He pulled a grimace and stuck out his tongue at their retreating forms. Then, adjusting his blanket, he turned and moved to the open doorway in the side of the hull.

“Hey, is ol’ Stubbs there?” he screamed at the trader.

Black Beard and his crew were staring at him in astonishment across the short intervening stretch of water.

“Is ol’ Stubbs there?” screamed Ogden again. “I wanna talk to ol’ Stubbs!”

“Ain’t no feller called Stubbs aboard this craft!” roared Black Beard in his mighty voice. “Who’re you?”

“Ogden Pugg!” screamed that youth. “But why ain’t ol’ Stubbs with you? He must be somewhere around. Has he sent you?”

“No!” roared Black Beard. “I’ve never heard of him. I dunno what you’re talking about. What’s the matter with you? Are you sick, that blanket wrapped round you and your face all red?”

“I’m a Red Indian!” screamed Ogden. “I’ve got my warpaint on. What you doin’ there, anyway, in that dirty ol’ ship?”

Black Beard made no reply. He said something to the other white man. The Kanakas were laughing and jabbering excitedly amongst themselves, and the whole party continued to watch Ogden with the greatest of interest.

“Get away from here!” ordered Buck, suddenly appearing behind that youth and carrying a deflated dinghy. “Go and wash your beastly little face. We’re going to have company. And if you dare to set just one foot inside the control room,” he added warningly, “I’ll give you such a thrashing that you’ll not sit down for a week! You’ve already got one good hiding coming to you, as it is.”

He thrust him aside and tossed the dinghy down into the sea. As it struck the water, its cartridge exploded and it filled instantly with gas. The dinghy which Beth had brought followed; then Buck shouted across to the ship:

“Can a couple of your fellows come and get them, or do you want us to do it?”

“No, we’ll pick ’em up!” bellowed Black Beard heartily.

In response to his order a couple of his Kanakas, clad only in loin-cloths, scrambled up on to the side of the schooner and dived overboard, their lithe, copper-coloured bodies cleaving the water as cleanly as knives.

Swimming to the light and buoyant little craft, they pushed them to the schooner, propelling them in front of them, then swung themselves agilely aboard and seized the two ropes which came snaking down to them.

“All right?” called Buck.

“Okay, fine!” bawled Black Beard. “We’ll soon be aboard ye!”

As Buck and Beth watched from the saloon doorway, they saw stores and gear being lowered from the schooner into the dinghies.

“Well, there’s one thing,” said Buck cheerfully. “We’ll be eating very shortly.”

“And I can do with it,” said Beth. “It’s a blessing for these people that we sighted them. And a blessing for us, as well, seeing they have stores and water. Hallo, there go the bearded man and the other white.”

Black Beard was swinging himself down into the spare dinghy and both Buck and Beth noted that, despite his great bulk, he did so with surprising agility.

He was followed by his companion, who cast off, unshipped the paddle from its fastenings, and commenced to propel the dinghy towards the Falcon’s saloon ladder with dexterous and seamanlike strokes.

When it reached the ladder, Black Beard gripped the rungs and came scrambling nimbly up. A moment or two later he was standing in the doorway of the saloon, beaming at Buck and Beth and displaying broken, tobacco-stained teeth through his great tangle of beard.

“Here we are, then!” he boomed heartily, thrusting out a huge, calloused, teak-like hand. “And it’s mighty glad I am to meet you. Kale’s the name. Cap’n William Kale, generally known as Thundering Billy, owner and master of that there hulk, the *Maid of Talu!*”

Viewed at close quarters, Captain William Kale, or Thundering Billy as he had called himself, was anything but a prepossessing-looking character. His bushy, black beard was matted and uncombed, he had a great bulbous, fleshy nose and his little beady black eyes were almost hidden behind great hairy eyebrows.

He was wearing an old, broken-peaked nautical cap, which he had pulled on before leaving the schooner, and his dirty, sweat-stained singlet displayed his hairy chest and the massive, bulging muscles of his thick, bare arms, which were tanned the colour of dark mahogany.

“We’re very pleased to meet you, Captain Kale, and to be of assistance to you,” said Buck, taking the outstretched hand and wincing slightly at its powerful grip. “My name is Buck Brown, and this is Beth Carson.”

“How d’you do, missy?” beamed Thundering Billy, and Beth, too, winced at the power of his grip. “I’m real glad to meet you. And where’s all the other folks aboard this here craft?”

“There aren’t any other folks,” replied Buck. “Except, of course, this!”

He indicated Ogden, who was standing a few paces away, regarding the distressed mariner with a fixed, unpleasant scowl. Thundering Billy glanced at him, then looked at Buck again.

“No other folks aboard except the three of you, d’you say?” he demanded in amazement.

“That’s right,” affirmed Buck.

“But you’re only kids!” ejaculated the captain in greater amazement than ever.

“I know,” said Buck cheerfully. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you about it when you’ve got the stores and gear and your men aboard.”

“Aye, I’d like to hear it,” growled Thundering Billy, fingering his beard and staring at him intently. “I’d like to hear it,” repeated he. “But what’s happened to the other folks that were aboard? There must’ve been other folks here, I s’pose?”

“There were,” assented Buck. “They’re on an island called Kalpao. You may know it?”

“No, I can’t say that I do,” growled Thundering Billy, continuing to tug thoughtfully at his beard the while he stared at Buck with puzzled eyes from behind his matted tangle of eyebrows. “I might have heard of it, but I can’t recollect it—not at the minute.”

He turned to his companion of the dinghy, who had climbed up into the saloon and was standing listening, his bony jaws moving rhythmically on a chew of tobacco, as he stared with undisguised curiosity at Buck and Beth.

“D’you hear that, Egg?” he demanded. “There ain’t nobody aboard this here aircraft except these three kids.”

“Yeah, I heard,” said Egg laconically. “Seems kinda queer to me.”

He was a short, sparsely-built, lean-featured man, with sunken cheeks and pale, watery blue eyes. Thundering Billy turned to Buck and Beth again.

“This is Egg,” he explained by way of introduction. “He’s my mate. His proper name is Homer Egg, but I don’t call him nothing more than Egg. I don’t like Homer. It’s a fool sort of name for a mate. But Egg sounds all right. Just plain Egg.”

“Like ol’ Humpty Dumpty!” jeered Ogden, suddenly breaking his silence. “He! He! He!” he squealed. “Why don’ you call him Humpty Dumpty? I bet that’s what you *do* call him—ol’ Humpty Dumpty. He! He! He!”

Thundering Billy stared at him. The lean-jawed Egg, completely unmoved, continued his phlegmatic chewing. Thundering Billy looked at Buck again.

“Is he often taken like that?” he enquired, nodding his head in the direction of the mirthful Ogden.

“Quite often,” replied Buck. “He’s what is known in some circles as a problem child.”

“Meanin’ he’s crazy?”

“Well, no. More cheeky than crazy,” explained Buck.

"I know how to cure him of that," growled Thundering Billy, staring at Ogden again. "A rope's-end can work wonders. What's the matter with his face?"

"If you mean its puddingy sort of shape, that's through over-eating," said Buck. "But if you mean the weird sort of decorations on it, that's just part of his general craziness."

"Here's the stores!" put in Mr. Egg.

The other dinghy, manned by a couple of the Kanakas, had arrived at the ladder laden with a small water butt and a pile of stores from the schooner.

"Okay, let's get 'em aboard!" said Thundering Billy briskly.

For the next half-hour he, Egg, and the Kanakas were fully occupied in transferring their gear and stores from the schooner to the Falcon. During that time, at Beth's murmured request, she and Buck withdrew to the control room to have a private conversation.

"What do you think of that man?" she asked.

"You mean Thundering Billy?" said Buck. "Oh, he's all right, I reckon. A bit tough, perhaps, but that's nothing. It's easy to see why he's called Thundering Billy," he added with a grin. "It's his voice. It sounds like a foghorn."

"I don't like him!" declared Beth.

"You don't?" exclaimed Buck, surprised at her emphasis. "Why not?"

"I don't know, but I just don't," said Beth. "There's something about him I wouldn't trust. It's not going to be very nice having him and that Egg and the Kanakas aboard."

"Yes, but there's nothing else we can do about it," protested Buck. "We had to let them come aboard. We couldn't leave them to drift about on the raft they were making."

"I know we couldn't," agreed Beth. "We had to save them and I'm very glad we've been able to. But that doesn't alter the fact that it's not going to be particularly nice having them with us. I bet that Thundering Billy tries to take charge of everything."

"He can't!" returned Buck promptly. "He knows nothing about aircraft—at least, I don't suppose he does—so we've got him there."

"His knowing nothing about aircraft won't stop him from trying to take charge, you'll see," predicted Beth. "Everything is going to be different now, I know that. It was rather exciting you and I having the aircraft to ourselves, particularly after the storm was over, even if we did have Ogden with us. It was rather fun, if one didn't think too much about being a bit hungry and thirsty and about the possibility of our one engine suddenly conking out. But it's not going to be like that any more now."

"Oh, come on, cheer up!" laughed Buck. "We won't have Thundering Billy and his crew with us for long, anyway. We're bound to be sighted and picked up—probably today sometime—and then all our troubles will be over."

"Yes, if we *are* picked up," said Beth. "Until then we'll have to suffer our guests gladly, I suppose, and, as you say, at least we can eat now. But I'll never like Thundering Billy, no matter how hard I try——"

She broke off as, from the direction of the saloon, there came a sudden startled howl, followed almost immediately by the sound of a splash.

“Ogden!” ejaculated Buck and ran from the control room followed by Beth.

The lean-visaged Mr. Egg, his bony jaws still moving rhythmically on his chew of tobacco, was leaning against the framework of the open doorway in the side of the hull, gazing tranquilly down at the water from whence was coming a most prodigious splashing.

Of Thundering Billy there was no sign, but a couple of the Kanakas were standing in the doorway beside Mr. Egg, laughing and jabbering excitedly as they stared down at the water.

“What’s the matter?” cried Buck, thrusting his way between the semi-naked Islanders. “What’s happening?”

“Your little fat pal tripped and fell head-first into the water,” explained Mr. Egg, unmoved.

Buck looked down. Struggling and spluttering and, apparently, too full of sea water and too short of breath to be able to emit more than piteous bleats, the half-drowned Ogden was being supported in the water by a grinning Kanaka, who, getting him as far as the ladder, proceeded to haul him up it as unceremoniously as though the wretched lad were a sack of potatoes.

“How did it happen?” demanded Buck of Mr. Egg.

“Aw, reckon he just sorta tripped over my foot,” said that gentleman laconically. “Might be that one of the boys accidentally pushed him.”

“Was he being a nuisance?” demanded Buck suspiciously.

“Well,” drawled Mr. Egg, “if you call interfering and getting in the way and sassing the Kanakas, then I’ll say, yeah, he *was* sorta being a nuisance.”

“I see,” said Buck grimly. “And I’m very glad one of them did push him into the water. He’s been asking for something like that for a long time. Let’s hope it’s damped his impudence a bit.”

By this time Ogden had been hauled up into the saloon and was bellowing with fright and temper in the middle of a rapidly growing puddle from his streaming clothes. He was minus his blanket, which was floating in the water.

“I hate to suggest this,” said Buck, turning to Beth, “but can you possibly take him somewhere and find him some dry things? If somebody doesn’t, he’s going to be a worse pest than ever, standing there bawling his beastly little head off!”

“It’s a lot to ask, you know,” said Beth, “But I suppose somebody’s got to look after him. I’ll see what I can do.”

“It’s jolly decent of you,” said Buck gratefully.

“No, merely silly of me,” corrected Beth. Then to Ogden: “Come with me, angel child!”

Such was the frantic and half-drowned Ogden’s state of mind that, without protest, but still blubbing and bawling, he suffered Beth to lead him aft to the air hostess’s

cubicle, where she told him to take off his soaking wet things and found him a towel with which to dry himself.

“I suppose all your other clothes are somewhere in the luggage compartment?” she said, as Ogden tearfully undressed. “I’m certainly not going to hunt around there for them amongst all that litter. Wrap a towel round yourself and go and look for something.”

“Shan’t!” snivelled Ogden.

“What do you propose to do then? Walk about naked?” demanded Beth. “I wouldn’t put it past you, you revolting little horror. Go on, go and find yourself some clothes!”

“Shan’t!” blubbered Ogden.

“Very well; then I’ll see what I can find in here, because you are certainly going to wear something,” said Beth determinedly. “I’ll see to that!”

She looked in vain, however, for something which Ogden could wear. There was nothing at all except one or two dresses, a couple of pairs of slacks and other clothing belonging to the absent air hostess, and Beth certainly wasn’t going to attempt to cut them down—and ruin them—solely for the benefit of Ogden.

She decided, therefore, to improvise. So, taking the pillow-slip from the bunk and finding a pair of nail-scissors in a drawer in the dressing-table, she cut a hole at one end of the slip through which Ogden could insert his head and a hole at each side through which he could insert his arms.

But when, after much effort and struggle, she had managed to get this weird and makeshift garment on to him, Ogden was anything but pleased about it.

“I won’t wear it!” he screamed, stamping his feet with passion. “I won’t—I *won’t*—I WON’T! I look silly—I look perf’ly hid’jous! I look like a boy with a long, sissy, white nightgown on!”

As the pillow-slip reached almost to his bare feet there was quite a lot of truth in this frenzied assertion.

“You look very nice,” said Beth, her mouth quivering and her eyes watering with mirth. “Perfectly sweet. And if you’ll let me rub your face for you and get some of that lipstick off, you’ll look an absolute little picture. Just like a cherub, without the wings.”

“No, I won’t!” screamed Ogden. “I don’t look like a cherub. I look plumb crazy. I look like sum’pin’ out of a circus. I look like as if I was wearing a long, silly gel’s nightgown without any arms in it. I look awful in this hid’jous thing. I’m gonna take it off——”

“Oh, no, you’re not!” cut in Beth, seizing him and propelling him forcibly towards the door. “At least, not in here, you’re not. You can do what you like outside!”

She bundled him, kicking, struggling and squealing, from out of the cubicle. Then, resisting his frantic efforts to rush in again, she took the key from inside the door and turned it in the lock on the outside.

“There, you’ll not get in there again!” she said, slipping the key into the pocket of her slacks. “And if you don’t like that lovely white robe which I’ve fixed for you, you

can go and find some of your own clothes among the luggage. You were pretending to be a Red Indian a little while ago, so now you can pretend that you're an Arab."

"I don' wanna pretend I'm an Arab!" howled Ogden, hopping frantically about. "Whaffor would I wanna pretend I'm an Arab? I wanna wear sum'pin' proper, not this silly, white, sissy thing. What d'you think them Kanakas are gonna say when they see me like this?"

"Laugh themselves sick, I imagine," said Beth. "Come on, come and let them see you!"

But the outraged Ogden refused this invitation, so, leaving him where he was, Beth went for'ard through the saloon.

By this time the last of the schooner's gear and stores were aboard the Falcon and Thundering Billy was coming up the ladder after a final visit to the hulk, which by now was so low in the water that her for'ard part was completely submerged and her stern was slowly but perceptibly lifting.

"Aye, she won't be long now," growled Thundering Billy, sorrowfully, as he stood in the open doorway of the saloon with Buck, Beth and Mr. Egg, watching the doomed *Maid of Talu*. "She's been a mighty fine little craft, staunch and trim, and her and me's been together through storm an' sunshine for many a long year. But now her v'yages is over and like the pore, tired, wore-out thing what she is, she's goin' to her rest."

Mr. Egg shot a squirt of tobacco juice down into the water and eyed him sardonically.

"Sorta changed yore opinion about her, ain't you?" he observed. "It was only yesterday that you was cussin' her upsides for a rollin', rat-ridden, timber-sprung, lumberin' old tub."

"Words spoke in the heat o' the moment don't never signify," said Thundering Billy, shaking his head. "Times was when I have cussed her an' it's sorry an' ashamed of it I am now. But she knows I never meant it. She knows I allus loved her like a—like a——"

"Rattlesnake," suggested Mr. Egg.

Thundering Billy ignored this levity. "Like a wife," he said. "Aye, like a wife an' a sweetheart. She's been everything to me and I'll never forget her!"

"Me, neither," said Mr. Egg. "'Specially the rats and the cockroaches."

"Where were you bound when the storm hit you?" put in Beth.

"From the Marquesas for the Californian Gulf," said Thundering Billy. "It catched us fair an' square, dismasted us and sprung the old gel's timbers. It was a miracle we was still afloat come mornin'——"

"There she goes!" exclaimed Mr. Egg.

The fore-part of the schooner was already deep in the water. Her stern was rising, clear of the sea. Thundering Billy solemnly bared his head. Then slowly the *Maid of Talu* slid beneath the water and was gone, a swirling eddy and some floating wreckage marking the spot which was her grave.

Thundering Billy sighed deeply. Replacing his old, broken-peaked cap on his head, he growled:

“Okay, Egg, get the dinghies inboards, then tell them Kanakas to rustle some grub. I reckon these kids is needing to eat, seeing they’ve been out of stores.”

He turned to Buck.

“C’mon, let’s go where we can talk,” he said. “I’m mighty curious to hear just what happened to this craft an’ to the folks what was aboard her.”

CHAPTER XI

UNEASY COMPANY

BUCK led the way into the control room and there he told Thundering Billy the whole story, Beth interposing an occasional comment or reminder.

As the bearded skipper listened, his face expressed the whole gamut of emotions from surprise to sheer blank amazement. But, save for an occasional question, he confined his interruptions mainly to explosive ejaculations indicative of his astonishment.

“Sink me!” he burst out when Buck had concluded. “I’ve never heard anything to beat it, blowed if I have! And you say them gangsters are still at Kalpao, along with the passengers and crew what they robbed and then marooned there?”

“Yes, they must be, unless they’ve tried to get away in the rubber dinghies,” said Buck. He started, struck by a sudden thought. “My goodness, if they did try that last night they’d get caught in the storm and that would be the end of them!” he exclaimed. “I’ve never thought of that until now.”

“I don’t think they would try to sail away in the dinghies last night,” put in Beth. “Not when it was dark. If they did intend to use them, I think they’d wait until daylight.”

“Aye, you’re right,” growled Thundering Billy. “Being landlubbers, they wouldn’t dare risk sailing in the dark, not aboard light an’ awkward craft like them dinghies. Leastways, not unless they was real des’prit they wouldn’t.”

Stroking his beard, he looked thoughtfully at Buck.

“And when they had robbed the passengers and was putting them and the crew ashore, did they take the loot with ’em?” he enquired. “It’s a point you sort of forgot to mention just now.”

Buck hesitated. “No,” he said slowly. “No, they didn’t take it with them.”

“Then, it’s still aboard this here aircraft, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

Again Buck hesitated. He didn’t care for this sort of question at all.

“Whereabouts is it?” repeated Thundering Billy, eyeing him intently. “You don’t want to leave val’able stuff like that lying around, not with these Kanakas aboard. If they get their hands on it there’s no knowing where they’ll hide it, and they’ll swear till all’s blue that they ain’t never seen it. They just can’t resist jool’ry and watches and bracelets and fancy gee-gaws like that. It’s their na’tur. The stuff oughta be fetched in here where we can keep an eye on it. Or is it in here?”

“No, it’s in the saloon, packed in a couple of suitcases,” replied Buck.

“Then, we’ll have it fetched in here where it’ll be safe,” announced Thundering Billy. “I dunno much about aircraft, but I reckon in here will be as safe a place as any, eh?”

“Yes, it will be,” said Buck.

“Okay, and now about this Ogden Pugg kid,” went on Thundering Billy. “You say he’s the son of Silas P. Pugg, the multi-millionaire, and that the gangsters was aimin’ to hold him to ransom and to keep him until Old Man Pugg had handed over the dough?”

“Yes, that was their idea,” affirmed Buck.

“Then, the pore little feller’ll have to be returned to his father just as soon as ever we’re rescued,” declared Thundering Billy. “An’ I have no doubt that old Silas P. will come across with something real handsome to you an’ this young lady for having saved his blue-eyed boy from them nasty kidnapers.”

“We don’t want anything for that,” said Buck. “Not a cent. We were much more concerned with getting the aircraft away and diddling Stubbs and his pals than we were in saving Ogden. In fact, I don’t think we gave him a thought. He just happened to be aboard the aircraft when Beth and I got her away, so he was lucky.”

“Yeah, but you an’ Miss Beth grab anything what Old Man Pugg offers you,” counselled Thundering Billy. “You don’t never want to refuse good money. It’s crazy!”

He hoisted himself to his feet and took a turn or two up and down the floor, tugging thoughtfully at his beard. Then he turned to Buck again.

“If this guy Stubbs put all the stores an’ water ashore on Kalpao,” he said, “he and his pards couldn’t have been aimin’ to fly very far in the aircraft. That looks pretty plain to me.”

“Yes, and it does to me, too,” said Buck. “It has done all along because, apart from Stubbs stripping the Falcon of all her stores and water, she hadn’t enough fuel left in her tanks to take her more than about three hundred miles from Kalpao at the very most.”

“Is that so?” said Thundering Billy, looking at him keenly. “Is that so?” repeated he. “Now, that’s real interestin’. And just because she had enough fuel left in her tanks to take her three hundred miles don’t nohow signify that this Stubbs guy was aimin’ to fly all that distance. No, I reckon he’d leave hisself quite something in hand. Which means that he was aimin’ to fly somewheres well within a radius of three hundred miles of Kalpao. That’s as plain as daylight, that is.”

“Yes, I agree,” said Buck. “But does it really matter?”

Thundering Billy surveyed him in astonishment.

“Does it really matter?” he repeated. “I’ll say it matters. Ain’t you interested in just where that guy was aimin’ to fly the aircraft to?”

“Yes, of course I am,” said Buck. “But even if we knew where he and his pals had intended to go, there’s nothing much we could do about it. Not at the moment, I mean.”

“Stubbs might have had a ship waiting somewhere to refuel him,” put in Beth.

“Then why wasn’t she waiting at Kalpao to do it?” demanded Thundering Billy. “Why should she wait somewheres out at sea to refuel him? What would be the sense

to that?”

“I don’t know,” said Beth.

“No, and another thing,” went on the black-bearded captain. “Why did Stubbs give the folks off’n the aircraft all the stores and water? Was he such a tender-hearted guy that he’d go short himself just for them?”

“No, he certainly wasn’t,” admitted Beth.

“No, I’ll say he wasn’t, from what I’ve been hearing about him,” declared Thundering Billy. “There was only one reason why Stubbs got rid of them stores an’ water an’ that was because he wasn’t wanting ’em any more. And why wasn’t he wanting ’em any more? Because he was going some place where there was plenty of stores an’ water. And that place was somewheres well within three hundred miles of Kalpao. I’m going to have a look at Kalpao on the chart. I’ve got my charts with me. They’re in the saloon. I’ll go get ’em.”

“There are plenty of charts here,” said Buck, moving towards the chart table.

“Okay, we’ll use them,” said Thundering Billy.

He found the one he required, spread it out on the table and he, Buck and Beth bent over it.

“Here we are!” he exclaimed, stabbing at the chart with a horny, broken-nailed forefinger. “Here’s Kalpao. And there ain’t another island within five hundred miles of it except this little dot here”—his finger moved across the chart—“which is an island called Reef Point. It’s about one hundred and seventy miles nor’-nor’-east of Kalpao, and I’m willing to bet a million dollars to a dime that it was to Reef Point that Stubbs was aimin’ to fly.”

“To refuel and to pick up stores?” questioned Buck.

“Sure!”

“But why couldn’t he have had fuel and stores waiting for him at Kalpao?” argued Beth. “Why have them at Reef Point?”

“I dunno,” said Thundering Billy. “There must’ve been some reason. No, Reef Point’s the place and I’m goin’ to have a look at it.”

“You’re *what*?” exclaimed Buck.

“I’m going to have a look at it,” repeated Thundering Billy. “Before the *Maid of Talu* went down, I took our position by the sun and I reckon we’re not more’n sixty to seventy miles from Reef Point at this very minute, so all we’ve got to do is to alter course for it.”

Buck and Beth exchanged glances. Then Buck looked at the bearded mariner again.

“But Beth and I don’t want to go to Reef Point,” he said.

“Why not?” demanded Thundering Billy.

“Because we want to keep on cruising northwards towards the main shipping and air routes in the hope that we’ll be sighted and picked up,” said Buck.

“We’ll have just the same chance of being sighted and picked up even if we do alter course for Reef Point,” retorted Thundering Billy. “It’s only a few degrees off’n a dead

northerly course—just a little east of it, that’s all—and if an aircraft does happen to come along it ain’t gonna miss us just because we’ve altered course that little bit. I dunno much about aircraft, but when they’re flying high they must have a mighty wide range of visibility, I’d say.”

“They have,” agreed Buck. “But what do you want to go to Reef Point *for*?”

“To have a look at the place, I tell you,” replied the man, “and to see if I’m right when I say that that’s the place Stubbs an’ his pards was aimin’ to fly to.”

“And supposing you are right and there happens to be a whole gang of Stubbs’ pals there?” demanded Buck. “What then?”

Thundering Billy grinned. “There won’t be no big gang there,” he said. “Stubbs ain’t one of them pirates like Cap’n Morgan what sailed the seas hundreds of years ago an’ had their island bases. No, Stubbs is just a city slicker from the side-walks. He ain’t got no rarin’, tearin’, cut-throat gang waiting for him at Reef Point.”

“What’s he got, then?” demanded Buck.

“Mebbe one or two fellers lookin’ after his fuel and stores,” replied Thundering Billy. “That is, if the way I figger it out is c’rect, and I’m plumb certain it is. And there’s another thing what I’d like to mention.”

“What’s that?”

“You say you’ve got mighty little fuel left. Well, s’pose an aircraft or a ship don’t happen to come along an’ we run out of fuel. What’s going to happen then? We’ll just have to drift helpless and with no way on us. An’ s’pose another of them hurricanes blows up like it did last night. We’ll be in a mighty nice fix then. But at Reef Point there’ll be dry land and shelter and we can keep a big signal fire burning day an’ night till we are sighted and picked up.”

“But if you’re right about Stubbs,” put in Beth, “and if he really has got some men at Reef Point, what are we going to do about them?”

Thundering Billy gave a deep, rumbling laugh and squared his mighty shoulders.

“We’ll take care of ’em,” he promised. “Me an’ Egg and them four Kanaka boys of mine. You’ve got to remember that if there are any guys waiting there for Stubbs, they’ll be expecting him arriving in this here aircraft. That being so, if we work it properly, we can take ’em by surprise and jump on ’em afore they discover that we ain’t Stubbs an’ his pals.”

He paused a moment, looking at his two hearers, then said earnestly:

“I’m far older than either of you and I know the ways of the sea, and I tell you we’d be clean crazy not to make for land, for Reef Point, while we’ve got the fuel to get us there. Aye, clean crazy to burn our fuel till it runs out and we’re left driftin’ an’ helpless in the middle of the Pacific. D’you agree, or don’t you?”

“Well, yes, I do; the way you put it,” said Beth after a pause.

“And what about you?” demanded Thundering Billy of Buck.

“Yes, you’re right, I suppose,” said the boy slowly. “But, personally, I’m prepared to chance it and keep on cruising north.”

Thundering Billy frowned. “It wouldn’t be that you’re skeered of going to Reef Point, would it?” he sneered. “Skeered in case some of Stubbs’ men might be there, I mean?”

“No, of course it isn’t!” cried Buck angrily. “That possibility doesn’t scare me a bit!”

“’Course it doesn’t!” boomed Thundering Billy, clapping him on the shoulder. “Not a lad like you. I knowed that. Then, that’s settled,” he went on heartily. “We’ll alter course for Reef Point and see what’s happenin’ there and make camp. I’ll just check our bearings again by the sun, then I’ll give you the course. I knowed you’d agree!”

Buck hadn’t agreed. The decision to alter course for Reef Point had been Thundering Billy’s entirely. Buck looked at Beth.

“What do you think?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s so difficult to say,” she replied. “I’d like to keep on cruising north but, as Captain Kale says, it might be pretty grim if we’re not sighted by the time our fuel runs out. How much have we got left?”

“We might make about another hundred miles, but certainly not more,” said Buck.

“And what’s a hundred miles on a sea like the Pacific?” cried Thundering Billy. “It ain’t nothing—nothing at all. No, Reef Point’s the ticket an’ that’s where we’re going an’ no more argying about it!”

Beth was still looking at Buck. She nodded.

“Yes, Buck, we’ll go to Reef Point,” she said.

Thus they capitulated, and when Thundering Billy had checked their bearings Buck swung the aircraft on to her new course.

“That’s fine!” grinned the captain, rubbing his horny hands as the Falcon cruised steadily across the calm and glistening sea, her one engine running under three-quarter throttle. “An’ now I’ll have a look at the loot. We’ll have it fetched in here from the saloon——”

He broke off as the lean-visaged Mr. Egg inserted his head into the control room to say:

“Grub’s all ready for them what want it. It’s laid in the s’loon.”

“Come on, Buck!” cried Beth, with alacrity.

“I can’t unless somebody stays here and keeps an eye on the compass to see that she doesn’t get off her course,” said Buck.

“I’m staying,” said Thundering Billy. “What do I have to do?”

“Nothing except just to keep an eye on the compass,” replied Buck. “This wheel here operates the under-water rudder—the rudder we’re using now. You’ll be able to manage that all right. It works on exactly the same principle as a ship’s. You don’t need to touch the throttle or anything. Anyway, you can always give me a call, if you want me.”

“That’s right,” said Thundering Billy. “But I’ll manage okay. There don’t seem nothing to it. Now you an’ the young lady go and get your eats. But first, you’d better show Egg the suitcases what the loot’s in. Go with ’em, Egg, and bring the cases in here.”

“What cases?” asked Mr. Egg.

“The ones they’ll show yer,” said Thundering Billy, grinning.

Looking somewhat mystified, the mate accompanied Buck and Beth into the saloon. Buck indicated the two cases. Mr. Egg picked them up and carried them into the control room, leaving Buck and Beth to tackle the substantial repast of bacon and eggs, fried potatoes and freshly brewed coffee which had been prepared for them by the Kanaka who had been cook aboard the schooner.

But Buck and Beth were not the only ones to be partaking of late breakfast in the saloon. Seated at one of the tables, by himself and plying knife and fork at a prodigious speed, was a small, podgy figure clad in a weird, one-piece, shapeless white garment.

“Why, it’s Ogden!” ejaculated Buck, stopping short before seating himself, and staring in astonishment. “What on earth is he wearing?”

Beth mirthfully explained.

“But why doesn’t the little fathead go and hunt for some of his own clothes in the baggage room?” asked Buck, laughing.

“It’s too much trouble, I suppose, after he’s been used to being waited upon hand and foot all his life,” said Beth; then she added mischievously; “But don’t you think he looks rather sweet?”

“That is the very last word I would choose,” chuckled Buck, as Ogden favoured them with a ferocious scowl. “He looks to me more like a particularly savage-minded junior member of the Ku Klux Klan than anything else.” Then, raising his voice, he called: “How are you doing, Ogden?”

“Shurrup!” cried Ogden fiercely. “If you come near me, I’ll throw some coffee over you!”

He shot out a paw and snatched up his cup. He did it with such clumsy haste, however, that some of the steaming hot contents slopped over on to him.

“Aw-www—aw-www—I’m scalded!” he screamed, dropping the cup and bounding to his feet to leap wildly about, the while he clutched at his flapping, coffee-soaked garment. “Aw-www—that nasty smarty’s made me burn myself! Boo-hoo-hoo-ooo!”

“Poor Ogden, always in trouble!” laughed Beth, seating herself at the table which had been laid for her and Buck. “Come on, sit down and have your breakfast, Buck. I’m not going to talk for a few minutes. I’m going to concentrate solely on eating. I never realised until now just how really hungry I am.”

“That goes for me, too,” said Buck.

They ate in silence until they had taken the first keen edge off their healthy young appetites. Then, with a cautious glance about her to make certain that none of the Kanakas were within earshot, Beth lowered her voice and said:

“I don’t like the idea of Thundering Billy having the loot in the control room with him.”

Buck stared at her.

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because I don’t trust him,” said the girl.

“Do you mean he’ll pinch it?” demanded Buck.

“I think he might, if he gets the chance,” said Beth.

“Oh, rot!”

“That’s what you say,” returned Beth. “But I think differently.”

“But how can he pinch it?” went on Buck. “We’re all together aboard the Falcon and we’ll still be together when we’re sighted and picked up. We’re bound to be. And when we are picked up the first thing we’ll do is to hand over the loot to be returned to its rightful owners. And that goes, even if we’re camping on Reef Point when we’re sighted. Thundering Billy can’t get away with anything.”

“I’m not saying he can,” replied Beth. “I’m only saying that I think he’d like to if he could.”

She broke off as Mr. Egg appeared from the control room and sauntered across to their table.

“How d’you find the eats?” he enquired laconically, his bony jaws moving on the inevitable cud of tobacco.

“Lovely, thanks, and beautifully cooked,” said Beth.

“Yeah, that Jim Crow’s a pretty smart hand around a cookin’ stove,” agreed Mr. Egg. He changed the subject: “We’ve just bin checkin’ our bearings ag’in. If we keep up our present speed and don’t have no breakdown, we reck’n to reach Reef Point an hour afore sundown.”

“And what do you think we’ll find when we get there?” asked Buck.

Mr. Egg shrugged his shoulders. “Search me!” he said.

“You know why we’re going there, of course?” put in Beth.

“Yeah, Cap’n’s told me,” said Mr. Egg. “Seems like you two kiddos pulled a pretty smart play with them crooks. I’m still laffin’.”

“I don’t notice it,” said Beth. “You laughing, I mean.”

“Naw, but I’m the kinda guy what laffs inside me,” said Mr. Egg. “You’d be serprised!”

He drifted away from their table, back towards the control room.

“Yes, and I wonder just what he *is* laughing at inside him!” said Beth suspiciously, her eyes following the man. “They’re birds of a feather all right, he and Thundering Billy, even if they do look so different from each other.”

“Well, I still say they can’t pinch the loot, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Buck.

“And *I* still say that they’d like to, if they get the chance,” retorted Beth.

“But how can they get the chance?” demanded Buck. “As I told you before——”

“I know what you told me before,” she put in, “and I quite agree with you that, so far as we can see, there is going to be no chance at all of their pinching any of the valuables. But you never know. Not with people like that.”

“Let’s have a look what they’re doing with the stuff, anyway,” suggested Buck.

“Yes, come on; but we won’t let them see that we’re suspicious of them,” agreed Beth, rising.

“That *you* are, you mean!” corrected Buck.

Together they walked from the saloon into the control room. Thundering Billy had had the loot spread out on the chart table and Buck and Beth were just in time to find him repacking the last of it back in the suitcases.

“Been having a look at the stuff?” asked Buck casually.

“Aye, aye, you betcha!” boomed Thundering Billy heartily; and the gleam in his eyes behind his hairy tangle of eyebrows was not lost on Beth. “And a proper haul it was. Sink me! There must be thousands an’ thousands o’ dollars’ worth o’ stuff here. I bet that Stubbs feller’s as sick as a yaller dawg at losin’ it an’ bein’ marooned on that there island an’ all the rest on’t. Ho! Ho! Ho! Guess he’d give summat to git hold o’ ye both!”

“Yes, I expect he would,” agreed Buck. “But the loot’s safe now, that’s the main thing.”

“Sure, sure! Safe as if it was in the Bank of Ameriky!” beamed Thundering Billy. “But now that you’re here, mebbe ye’ll check up on this engine, will ye, just to see that it’s runnin’ okay?”

Buck crossed to the instrument panel and studied speed, temperature and oil gauges.

“Yes, she’s all right,” he reported.

He raised his eyes and looked out over the vast, unbroken expanse of sea and sky.

“All we want is for an aircraft to come over sometime to-day,” he said.

“That’s it, that’s just what we want!” agreed Thundering Billy heartily, but to Beth’s alert and suspicious mind his tone seemed both forced and unconvincing.

CHAPTER XII

REEF POINT

THE morning passed and the day became blisteringly hot as the Falcon cruised steadily on across the smooth and glistening sea beneath the scorching, blazing sun.

Beth had abandoned the control room to Thundering Billy and Mr. Egg, for she could stand neither the rank and pungent smoke from the former's black cheroots nor the way in which Mr. Egg most disgustingly squirted streams of tobacco juice about the floor.

Taking a cushion from one of the seats in the saloon, she placed it in the open doorway in the side of the hull and spent most of the morning there with some magazines she had found scattered about in the saloon.

Continually, however, her eyes swept the sea and the brassy sky for some sign of hull or aircraft, and her ears were constantly attuned to catch the first faint drone of any aero engine.

But no ship was seen and no aircraft heard as the Falcon cruised slowly on over the calm and glittering sea. From time to time Beth was joined by Buck, who came to talk to her, and on one of these occasions she asked him where Ogden was.

"In the kitchen with the Kanaka cook," said Buck. "He's persuaded the cook to make him some toffee and, at the moment, he's as happy as a hungry cat with a kipper. But it won't last, of course, sooner or later he'll do something to earn him a thundering good hiding. He just can't help it."

"Is he still wearing his pillow-slip?" asked Beth, with interest.

"Yes, but the cook's made it into a sort of sarong for him," laughed Buck. "And I can't say it's an improvement. He looks perfectly revolting in it, with his bulging tummy and fat limbs."

"I can quite imagine it," said Beth. "A ghastly sight! But I envy him his sarong," she went on. "This heat is just like an oven and it's getting worse."

"Yes, it's a proper scorcher," agreed Buck. "And we're not cruising fast enough to make any breeze for ourselves. We could go faster, of course, but I've got to nurse that engine and our juice, as well."

"What are Thundering Billy and Egg doing?" asked Beth.

"Just lounging about in the control room and keeping a check on our course," said Buck.

"Have they said any more about the loot or anything?"

"No, not a word. They wouldn't, of course, in front of me. That is, if they really are planning some monkey business. But honestly, Beth, I can't see what they can be planning."

“You never know with people like that,” said the girl darkly. “I wouldn’t trust either of them as far as I could see them. If it wasn’t for the food and water they’ve brought with them, I should wish we’d never seen them. We’d be much happier by ourselves.”

“How d’you mean, happier?” asked Buck, puzzled.

“Well, somehow they seem to have taken possession of the whole aircraft,” replied Beth. “And it was we who got her away from Stubbs and we who saw her through the storm in the night, and now somehow we seem to be elbowed out. Do you know what I mean?” she demanded.

“Yes, of course I do,” said Buck. “But, as you say, they brought food and water with them and that was quite something. But I do understand how you feel, Beth, and I guess I feel the same about it, in a way. However, there it is,” he added philosophically. “And they’re still dependent upon me to run the aircraft for them, don’t forget.”

“I’m not forgetting it,” said Beth. “It’s the one thing that gives us any pull at all aboard now. They can’t manage her without you and that might be useful, Buck, if they do start any funny business.”

“I have that in mind,” he returned. “But I don’t see how it is going to help us a lot, because the moment our fuel is done, then the aircraft’s useless.”

“Yes, but if Stubbs really has got fuel at Reef Point, as Thundering Billy thinks he might have, we’ll be able to carry on using the aircraft,” pointed out Beth. “And that means that you’ll still be the sort of pilot.”

“Yes, that’s quite true,” admitted Buck. “If we can refuel at Reef Point there’s nothing to stop us cruising on northwards towards the main shipping and aircraft routes.”

“Nothing except Thundering Billy,” said Beth.

Buck stared at her. “Meaning just what?” he demanded.

“Meaning that he might want to cruise in some other direction,” said Beth. “Somewhere where he can get away with the loot.”

“My goodness, but you *are* suspicious of him!” ejaculated Buck.

“I am,” she said. “I just can’t help it!”

“But if he does try to go off with the loot, what do you think is going to happen to us?” demanded Buck.

“That,” said Beth, “is what I keep wondering.”

“Do you mean he might try to bump us off or something?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him, if it suits him,” said the girl.

Buck stared at her. “Now, look here!” he expostulated. “You’re just brooding about this and working yourself up into a state of jitters!”

“Oh, no, I’m not!” returned Beth calmly. “I’m not a bit jittery. Not yet. I’ve just been looking at this business from every possible angle and, if Thundering Billy *is* up to something, then it might be just too bad for you and me and Ogdén. After all, nobody knows we’ve picked him and his crew up. Nobody knows we’re still alive.

Nobody knows a thing about us since we left Kalpao. Do you think Thundering Billy hasn't realised all that?"

"Yes, perhaps he has!" protested Buck, shocked and incredulous. "But you're—you're making the man out to be a possible murderer!"

"I'm making him out to be a possible villain," replied Beth. "And how do we know just to what lengths his villainy might go? You think I'm being ridiculous, I know," she went on earnestly. "But I've lived all my life in the Islands and I know from my father and from others just how wicked and unscrupulous some of these tough, bucko trading skippers can be. Some of them are jolly decent men, but there are others who are really bad men and who will stick at nothing!"

"Well, my goodness, this is a bit grim!" muttered Buck uneasily.

"It is!" said Beth. "Of course, I may be quite wrong about Thundering Billy and his pal, Egg, and I hope to goodness I am. But we've got to be ready for trouble and don't you let them bluff you. They won't bluff me, I'll bet! To me, until it's proved otherwise, Thundering Billy's grin is the smile on the face of the tiger."

She broke off as Mr. Egg appeared from the control room and came lounging towards them.

"Kinda hot!" he remarked.

"It certainly is!" agreed Beth.

Mr. Egg expectorated expertly past her into the sea.

"Cap'n wants ye to check the injun, see she's okay," he said briefly to Buck.

"Righto!" said the boy.

He moved away towards the control room. Mr. Egg lingered where he was, gazing out over the glittering, mirror-like sea with his pale and watery blue eyes.

"I suppose," said Beth enquiringly, "that if we do find fuel at Reef Point we'll fill up the tanks and cruise northwards—what?"

"Guess so!" said Mr. Egg.

"What do you mean, you guess so?" demanded Beth. "That's what we *will* do, isn't it? It's the most sensible thing to do?"

"Yeah!" said Mr. Egg.

His voice was wholly non-committal. Beth persevered.

"But if there is fuel at Reef Point," she went on, "there will very probably be someone guarding it. Some of Stubbs' men, and that will mean a fight."

"Sure!" agreed Mr. Egg.

"It doesn't seem to be worrying you very much?" said Beth, staring up at him.

"It ain't!" said Mr. Egg. Then added as he turned away: "Fights don't skeer me!"

He drifted back towards the control room. Beth stared after him.

"No, I don't suppose they *do* scare you," she said to herself. "Nor Thundering Billy, neither. I guess the pair of you have been in too many for that."

Despite her suspicions concerning the pair, however, she knew there was nothing she could do about it at the moment. So after lunch, shunning the control room and the stifling heat of the saloon, she retreated to the air hostess's little cubicle which, like the rest of the aircraft, was as hot as an oven in spite of the open port-hole.

Locking the door, she tried to find some relief from the scorching heat by slipping off her sports shirt and slacks and stretching herself out on the bunk. But even then she felt sticky and clammy and she thought longingly how marvellous a swim would be.

But that was impossible just now and after a while she found herself dozing off. Relaxing more comfortably, she yielded herself to her growing sleepiness and knew nothing more until she was suddenly awakened by someone knocking at the door.

She awoke with a start, wondering for the moment where she was. Then, as recollection came flooding back on her, she sat up, swung her feet to the floor and cried:

“Yes? Who is it?”

“Me, Buck!” answered that young gentleman's voice.

“I'll not be a minute!” called Beth.

Quickly donning her shirt and slacks, she opened the door.

“Sorry to disturb you!” said Buck grinning. “But we're approaching Reef Point and I've brought you a cup of tea.”

“My goodness, have I slept as long as all that?” she exclaimed in dismay, taking the cup which he had brought her.

“You have!” affirmed Buck. “It'll be sundown within the hour.”

“Well, come in and tell me what's been happening,” said Beth. “Thanks very much for the tea. Is anything to be seen at Reef Point?”

“No, not yet,” said Buck. “We're not close enough in yet for that.”

“Well, what else has happened?” demanded Beth, sipping her tea. “Anything?”

“Nothing at all,” answered Buck. “We've sighted neither ship nor aircraft. If anything had happened I'd have wakened you. Oh, yes, but something *did* happen!” he added, with a grin.

“What?” demanded Beth.

“Thundering Billy gave young Ogden the hiding of his life,” said Buck. “Ogden was ill-advised enough to scoff at Thundering Billy's whiskers. He said—I'm quoting his own words—that they made Thundering Billy look like a hid'jous ol' polecat eating the stuffing of a horse-hair sofa. So Thundering Billy grabbed him, up-ended him across his knee, borrowed Mr. Egg's belt and whammed into him good and hearty. He wasn't sore about it. He did it just like some jovial ogre basting a plump but howling little victim.”

“Poor Ogden!” laughed Beth. “Where did this happen? In the control room?”

“Yes,” said Buck. “Ogden came in full of grub and cheek, and that was that.”

“And have you found out anything further about what Thundering Billy and Egg intend to do?” she asked anxiously.

“Not a thing,” said Buck. “I’ve tried pumping them, without letting them see we’re suspicious, of course, but all I can get out of Thundering Billy is that everything largely depends upon what we find at Reef Point.”

“Come on, then; let’s have a look at the place!” said Beth.

Leaving the cubicle, she and Buck went for’ard to the control room, where Thundering Billy was standing at the open look-out windows, his binoculars pressed to his eyes.

Mr. Egg, standing beside him, was using the Falcon’s binoculars and both pairs of glasses were focussed on Reef Point, a small, sparsely-timbered atoll with a strip of beach and a lagoon.

The little island was less than half-a-mile away by now and Buck and Beth studied it with interest. There were no signs of life there, so far as they could see, but suddenly Thundering Billy demanded:

“D’you see what *I* see, Egg?”

“Yeah!” said Mr. Egg.

“Seems like I was right, then,” declared Thundering Billy, triumph in his voice.

“Seems like it,” agreed the mate, unmoved.

Thundering Billy lowered his glasses and turned to Buck and Beth.

“There’s a schooner lyin’ in the lagoon,” he informed them. “You’ll maybe not have spotted her yet, her hull being hidden behind the outer reef an’ her bare poles being ag’in the background of timber way back up the beach yonder—Here, have a look!”

He handed the glasses to Buck, who directed them on the lagoon. Focussing them, the boy saw the bare, upper spars of a small schooner.

“See her?” demanded Thundering Billy.

“Yes,” said Buck.

“Now, what d’you figger she’s doing there and who can she belong to?” went on the captain, as Buck lowered the glasses and handed them to Beth. “Reef Point’s a desert island. Nobody lives there an’ there ain’t no trade there. So d’you know what I say?”

“Yes, that the schooner has something to do with Stubbs,” replied Buck. “That she’s waiting there for him, or something.”

“That is exactly what I *do* say!” cried Thundering Billy triumphantly. “That is exactly what I *do* say,” repeated he. “It’s proved that my figgerin’ of this morning was correct. That schooner’s lying there waitin’ for Stubbs and his pals. I’ll lay my bottom dollar on that!”

“Then why wasn’t it waiting for him at Kalpao?” put in Beth. “When I suggested this morning that he might have a ship waiting for him somewhere, you said that if there was a ship it would be at Kalpao.”

“I know I did,” admitted Thundering Billy. “But it seems like I was wrong. I can’t be right all the time. But where I was right,” he cried, “was in saying that we’d find

something at Reef Point, because, by hokey! we've found it."

Mr. Egg had lowered his glasses. He turned to Thundering Billy.

"What you aimin' to do about that craft?" he enquired.

"I'm gonna tell you," said Thundering Billy, grinning. "She's a small craft. I bet she ain't got more'n a few men aboard her. Four or five or maybe half-a-dozen at the most. Why should she have more? As I've said before, Stubbs ain't no pirate like Cap'n Morgan. He's gonna work with as small a gang as he can. Okay?"

"Yeah," agreed Mr. Egg.

"Okay, then," went on Thundering Billy. "Now, who are them guys aboard the schooner expecting? They're expecting Stubbs. And they're expecting him arriving in this here aircraft. And they ain't got the slightest reason for suspecting that us folks ain't Mister Stubbs and party. D'you get that?"

"Yeah," said Mr. Egg.

"Well, then, what we're gonna do is this," went on Thundering Billy, grinning more widely than ever. "We're gonna lie off the entrance to the lagoon and drop anchor just as though we was the real Mister Stubbs an' party arriving. Then we'll open the saloon door in the side of the hull an' we'll wait, but we'll keep out of sight. And then what will happen?"

"You tell me," said Mr. Egg.

"I'm goin' to," said Thundering Billy. "What'll happen is this. Them guys from the schooner will come rarin' and tearin' along in their boat to welcome Big Boss Stubbs and to give him greetin's. It's the natural thing for them to do. They'll come alongside the aircraft and the moment they do we'll jump on 'em—you and me and the Kanakas. We'll be on top of 'em and we'll down 'em before they know just what it is that's hit 'em!"

"Yes, but what if they aren't Stubbs' men?" put in Beth.

Thundering Billy surveyed her impatiently.

"Still arguing about that, are you?" he demanded. "Well, even if they ain't Stubbs' men we'll still jump on 'em. Jump first and argue afterwards is my motter. But I'm saying they is Stubbs' men—I'm plumb certain of it—and I'm taking no chances. Not with characters like them."

He turned to Buck.

"Take the aircraft in to about a hundred yards from the entrance to the lagoon yonder," he ordered; "then stop her and drop anchor!"

"Righto!" assented Buck.

He settled himself down in the pilot's seat. There was no reason at all, so far as he could see, why he should refuse to obey the order. For there was quite a chance that Thundering Billy was perfectly correct in his deduction that the schooner had been chartered by Stubbs, even if that rascal did not actually own her.

So, throttling back, Buck took the Falcon nosing her way gently in towards the entrance of the lagoon. As he did so, Thundering Billy strode from the control room

and Buck and Beth heard him bawling orders to the Kanakas. Mr. Egg remained in the control room, gazing steadily ahead through the open look-out windows.

Beth, standing beside the pilot's seat, suddenly nudged Buck with her elbow. He looked at her enquiringly; then, following the direction of her gaze, he looked at Mr. Egg.

That gentleman had taken a pistol from his pocket. He snapped it open and, as Buck and Beth watched, he took several cartridges from his pocket and commenced leisurely to insert them in the chamber.

That done, he turned the chamber for a few moments with his finger, as though to test the smoothness of its action. Then, snapping shut the pistol, he returned it to his pocket and resumed his watch through the window.

The whole proceeding had been done openly and casually, with no attempt at all to hide from the others just what he was doing.

"Do honest sailormen carry pistols?" Beth breathed in Buck's ear.

"I wouldn't know," murmured Buck, with a grin. "I guess Old Egg's a tough egg—Joke!"

"And a perfectly rotten one!" muttered Beth.

"Which, the joke or the egg?" grinned Buck.

"Both," said Beth, then turned as Thundering Billy came striding back into the control room.

"The Kanakas are all fixed," Thundering Billy informed Mr. Egg. "They know just what to do and they'll have you an' me to lead 'em." Then to Buck: "How're we going, kiddo?"

"All right," replied Buck. "Shall I stop her and drop anchor now?"

"Aye, aye, we're close enough in!" said Thundering Billy.

Buck switched off. Then, as the slowly moving Falcon began to lose way altogether, he pressed the switch which released the riding-anchor and it plunged down with a splash into the clear, still water.

"Okay. Now listen!" ordered Thundering Billy. "A boat from the schooner will be coming any minit. There's nothing more certain than that, whether she's Stubbs' craft or not. So you two kids will keep out of sight. That's all I want. You'll keep right out of sight until it's all over. D'you understand?"

"Yes," said Buck and Beth.

"Okay!" nodded Thundering Billy. He turned to his mate. "Egg, go and open the saloon door—the one in the side of the hull what we came in by this morning—and let the ladder down. When you've done that, keep yourself and them Kanakas well back out o' sight of any approaching boat. G'on! Jump to it!"

Mr. Egg could scarcely be said to have jumped to it, but he left the cabin moving more quickly than Buck and Beth had seen him move before.

"What have you done about Ogden Pugg?" enquired Beth of Thundering Billy.

That burly, bearded gentleman grinned.

“Aw, him! I’ve fixed him,” he said, staring watchfully through the look-out windows. “He’s tied up in the kitchen. Not that it would matter if these characters from the schooner did see him. They’re maybe expecting him to be aboard. Bound to be expecting it, I’d say, seeing that they’ll know Stubbs was aimin’ to kidnap him. But he might let out a holler, an’, what with that silly nightshirt thing he’s wearing, they might easy wonder just what *is* happening aboard this here craft.”

While he was talking he had taken a heavy pistol from his pocket and was standing with it hanging loosely from his great horny hand.

“Mr. Egg also has a pistol,” said Beth bluntly. “Do the pair of you usually carry pistols?”

“Sure we do!” growled Thundering Billy. “There’s some mighty tough characters knockin’ around the Pacific and times are when it pays to have a gun nice and handy.”

He broke off, stepping abruptly back from the window, his hand tightening around the butt of his weapon.

“Here they come!” he exclaimed. “Just like what I said they would. Rarin’ and tearin’ and workin’ away at their oars just like as if they was in a race.”

Buck and Beth moved a cautious pace forward so that they could see through the windows without themselves being seen from the water. A schooner’s boat with four men in it, each of them industriously plying an oar, had appeared through the entrance to the lagoon and was heading rapidly towards the Falcon.

“Okay, I’ll go join Egg!” said Thundering Billy quickly. “You keep back from the winders and don’t let any of them nice, high-minded gents out there see you!”

He strode from the cabin, leaving the two to themselves. The oncoming boat was very close now, the four men in her continually looking round over their shoulders at the Falcon as they surged in towards her.

“They must be wondering why no one is giving them a hail,” said Beth. “That is, if they really are Stubbs’ men.”

“If they are, they’re probably assuming that Stubbs and his pals are collecting their gear, or something,” said Buck. “If they’re not Stubbs’ men, they won’t necessarily be expecting a hail.”

He and Beth lost sight of the boat as it drove in towards the aircraft below their visual range from the windows.

“Come on, let’s see what happens!” Buck said.

He and Beth stepped to the doorway of the control room. Crouched, tense and motionless, on each side of the saloon doorway were Thundering Billy and his men. He and Mr. Egg were at one side, their guns in their hands. The semi-naked Kanakas were at the other side, each armed with a gleaming, wicked-looking knife.

“This is going to be grim!” muttered Buck uneasily.

Thundering Billy glared at him, savagely shaking his head, signalling him to be silent. The splash of oars and the creak of rowlocks were very close by now. From the boat there came a hail:

“Hey, where are you all aboard, there?”

Next moment the boat bumped against the ladder.

"Here we are, you wharf rats!" roared Thundering Billy.

He jumped from the doorway, crashing down feet-first almost on top of one of the startled four in the boat. Next instant he was lashing out savagely with an iron-hard fist and the butt of his gun. Mr. Egg had already jumped down into the mêlée and the excitedly yelling Kanakas were pouring down the ladder with the nimbleness of monkeys.

Actually, there was no fight at all. Taken completely by surprise and overborne by sheer weight of numbers and by the swift, savage ferocity of the attack, the four men in the boat were clubbed and battered into groaning, half-stunned helplessness almost before they could realise what was happening.

There followed a swift search of them for weapons. Each was carrying a pistol which he had had little or no time to draw and certainly no chance to use. They were disarmed. Then their arms were jerked behind their backs and their wrists were pinioned.

"Who were ye expectin' aboard the aircraft?" bawled Thundering Billy, glowering down at one of the prisoners, who was lying face-upwards in the bottom of the boat. "Come on, speak up, ye toad! Who were ye expectin'?"

The man spat out an oath and writhed frantically in his bonds, his bruised and battered face malignant in its helpless fury.

"Answer me, will you?" roared Thundering Billy and kicked him in the ribs. "By thunder! If ye don't speak up, I'll stave your ribs in for ye! Who were ye expectin'?"

"Crayshaw!" gasped the man.

"Crayshaw?" bellowed Thundering Billy. "Who in tarnation thunder is Crayshaw? It wouldn't be another name for a nasty, low-down character called Stubbs, would it?"

"Yes!" gasped the man, squirming desperately away as Thundering Billy raised his foot as though to give him another kick. "Crayshaw's his real name."

"Aw, so Crayshaw's his real name, is it?" boomed Thundering Billy triumphantly. "I might've knowed that a crook like him would have a phoney name what ain't his real 'un. And you and these other gutter-rats was waitin' here with the schooner to meet him, wasn't you?"

"Yes," admitted the man.

Thundering Billy raised his foot again.

"Now tell the truth!" he ordered threateningly. "Because, by hokey! if ye lie they'll be the last words ye'll ever utter! How many of you are there with the schooner? How many of you are there altogether, here at the island?"

"Us four!" gasped the man. "Just us four on my oath!"

"Sure?"

"Yes, it's the truth. I swear it!"

Thundering Billy lowered his foot and turned to Mr. Egg and the Kanakas, who were still crowding the boat.

“Okay. Get ’em aboard the aircraft, all four of ’em!” he ordered. “Then you, Egg, take a couple of the Kanakas and have a look at the schooner. And make it snappy. It’s gonna be dark soon!”

CHAPTER XIII

ABOARD THE SCHOONER

THE four bruised and pinioned prisoners were quickly hauled aboard the aircraft and dumped on seats in the saloon. Then, while Mr. Egg and two of the Kanakas went off in the captured boat to inspect the schooner, Thundering Billy proceeded to question the captives, Buck and Beth being silent spectators of the scene.

The captain quickly got the whole story, extracting it by means of cuffs and blows when he considered there was the slightest hesitation in answering his questions.

And quite a simple story it was. The four prisoners were members of Stubbs' gang. They had arrived at Reef Point three days ago with the schooner to wait there until Stubbs and his three henchmen, Fenton, Cooper and Shaw, should arrive in the Falcon from Kalpao.

The Falcon was then to be sunk off the island and Stubbs and the whole party, in the guise of seamen, were to sail away aboard the schooner, taking Ogden Pugg and the loot with them.

"D'you get the idea?" demanded Thundering Billy, swinging on Buck and Beth. "It was mighty smart. By thunder, it was! By sinking the aircraft, this feller, Stubbs, would completely cover his tracks, because who would think of looking for him an' his gang aboard a little, no-account trading schooner? And even if the schooner did happen to be hailed by a ship or an aircraft out searching for the missing Falcon, all that Stubbs needed to say was that he hadn't seen her. And I betcha he'd pretend to be mighty horrified an' grieved to hear that an air-liner had been lost with all the pore souls aboard her. Aye, it was clever!"

"Yes, it was," agreed Buck.

"And he'd have got away with it, as well, if Buck hadn't put a spoke in his wheel," interposed Beth.

"And you!" corrected Buck. "I'd never have reached the aircraft at all when we swam for it, if it hadn't been for you."

"You both did marvellous!" declared Thundering Billy. "And if you was kids o' mine I'd be mighty proud of you. Yes, sir, and I don't mean maybe."

He beamed at them for a moment, then went on:

"But I was right, you see, the way I figgered out that mebbe Stubbs was using Reef Point. Him giving the stores and water away off'n the aircraft and having mighty little juice left all pointed to it, just like as I said. I've got brain!"

"You have," agreed Buck. "But what are we going to do now?"

"That depends on what the schooner's like," replied Thundering Billy.

He broke off as someone came scrambling up the outside ladder and Mr. Egg appeared, followed by his two Kanakas.

“What’s the schooner fixed like?” demanded the captain.

“Trim, ship-shape, well-found and ready for sea,” reported Mr. Egg. “She’s gotta auxiliary engine and plenty of stores and fuel.”

“Any sign of any other guys around?” asked Thundering Billy.

“Nary a sign!” replied the mate. “There ain’t no other guys.”

“Okay!” said Thundering Billy. “C’mon along here. I want to talk to you!”

He took Mr. Egg by the arm and led him away along the saloon, the pair of them disappearing somewhere aft.

“What have they gone into secret conference about, do you think?” demanded Beth of Buck.

“I just haven’t a clue,” replied Buck.

“They might have let us in on it, anyway,” complained Beth. “I don’t like this secrecy.”

“Perhaps Thundering Billy doesn’t want these fellows to hear what he and Egg are talking about,” said Buck, nodding towards the bound and glowering prisoners.

“Rightly or wrongly, I got the impression that he didn’t want you and me to hear what he is talking about,” retorted the girl. “My goodness, did you see how he kicked and lashed out in the boat? He was just like a wild animal!”

“Yes, I know,” said Buck. “But he wasn’t taking any chances.”

“There was no need for him to be as brutal as he was,” said Beth. “If you ask me, he was absolutely revelling in knocking these men about——”

“Here he comes!” cut in Buck warningly.

Thundering Billy was striding back along the saloon. He was followed by Mr. Egg and two of the Kanakas. The other two natives—the pair who had been to the schooner with Mr. Egg—were still lounging in the doorway at the top of the ladder. Mr. Egg spoke to them, then he and all four Kanakas went quickly and in single file down the ladder into the boat.

“Come in here!” said Thundering Billy to Buck and Beth.

They followed him into the control room. He turned and faced them.

“Well, it’s all settled what we’re gonna do,” he informed them. “Egg and me’s just settled it. Egg and the Kanakas are gonna bring the schooner out of the lagoon by her auxiliary engine afore it gets dark, which’ll be in a few minutes; then we’ll go aboard her and set sail nor’ards towards the shipping routes. That suit you kiddos?”

“Yes, but what about the Falcon?” demanded Buck.

“You’ll take her into the lagoon as soon as the schooner’s come out and she’ll ride snug at anchor there until her owners have her fetched,” explained Thundering Billy. “There’s nothing else we can do with her. Her fuel’s mighty near done, you’ve said, and we can’t take her in tow behind the schooner. It’d be too dangerous if it comes away in another hard blow or a storm.”

“Yes, that is quite true,” agreed Buck after a moment’s thought.

“Okay, then get the anchor up and get the engine started up and stand by to take her in as soon as Egg’s bringed the schooner out,” ordered Thundering Billy. “He won’t be more’n a few minits, seeing he’s bringing her out by her engine.”

“I hope he won’t,” said Buck, dropping into the pilot’s seat. “The sun’s gone down and it’s going to be dark any moment now, and I don’t fancy taking her through in the dark. If I foul the opening in the reef I might easily hole her or damage her.”

“Not you!” boomed Thundering Billy heartily, clapping him on the shoulder. “You’re far too smart a kiddo for that. Anyway, she’s metal-hulled, ain’t she, and even if you do have to take her in in the dark you can take her in dead-slow and sort of scrape and feel your way in. You’ll manage, I betcha!”

He stepped to the look-out windows.

“Here comes the schooner now,” he said. “So you can get under way.”

As the schooner crept out of the lagoon and stood slowly away from the opening in the reef, the Falcon nosed her way in, dropping anchor just as the tropic darkness came flooding swiftly in across the lonely sea.

“Luv’ly!” exclaimed Thundering Billy, as, having switched everything off and closed the oil supply and petrol feeds, Buck rose from the controls. “All you’ve got to do now is to wait until Egg comes with the boat to take you and the young lady and Ogden Pugg and the loot to the schooner. He’ll be here in a few minits, so if you’ve got any kit you want to take with you, you’d better hustle around and collect it.”

Buck and Beth departed quickly in the direction of the baggage room to gather what things they could in the short time at their disposal.

“I say, this is quite a break, you know, finding a schooner here!” exclaimed Buck as, having switched on the light in the baggage compartment, he and Beth hunted swiftly about. “We haven’t half turned the tables on Stubbs and Company in every possible way. I bet he’d be raving mad if he knew we’d arrived here and got his schooner!”

“He certainly would,” agreed Beth.

“And I think you’re finding your suspicions of Thundering Billy quite unjustified,” said Buck. “He’s leaving the aircraft here at safe anchorage and we’re going to sail north towards the shipping routes, so what more could he do?”

“Nothing, provided he does it,” said Beth.

“What d’you mean, provided he does it?” demanded Buck.

“Just what I say,” she retorted. “If he does sail north towards the shipping routes, then I’ll be the first to admit that my suspicions of him have been all wrong. But he hasn’t done that yet, although he says he’s going to.”

“Look here, Beth, just exactly what are you getting at?” burst out Buck.

“I’m getting at this,” she replied. “Thundering Billy has a well-found schooner and he has the loot, so if he takes it into his head to slip away somewhere with both the schooner and the stuff, what’s to stop him?”

“Everything!” cried Buck. “He’s bound to be caught sooner or later!”

“He might be prepared to risk that.”

Buck stared at her for a moment, then said:

“My golly! You *are* suspicious of him!”

“I know I am,” agreed Beth calmly. “I can’t help it. He’s a tough nut and I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could see him. I may be wrong about him and I hope I am, but I don’t think so.”

“But if he really *is* up to something, what’s going to happen to us?” demanded Buck.

“That’s just what I’m wondering,” said Beth.

She broke off as a distant bellow from the direction of the saloon cut in on her words.

“That’s him calling us,” she said, quickly ramming the things she had collected into a suitcase. “Come on!”

A prey to uneasy thought, Buck returned with her to the saloon, where Thundering Billy was impatiently awaiting them.

“Come on, come on, you’re holdin’ up the sailing!” boomed that gentleman heartily, as the pair appeared. “Egg’s here with the boat, ready to take you and the Pugg kid to the schooner.”

“Righto! Hang on a jiffy!” said Buck. “I want to get something from the control room.”

He darted into the control room, leaving Beth in the saloon with Thundering Billy and the four prisoners, who were still sitting there in their bonds.

“What are you going to do with these men?” asked Beth.

“Bring ’em aboard the schooner and hand ’em over to justice,” replied Thundering Billy promptly. “Egg’s coming back for them and me after he’s put you kids and the loot aboard the schooner. There ain’t room in the boat for all of us.”

“I would say there was,” said Beth.

“And I say there ain’t!” snapped Thundering Billy, scowling. “Not with comfort, anyway.”

Buck reappeared from the control room and he and Beth climbed down into the boat, which was waiting at the foot of the ladder. Ogden was already in the boat, sitting muffled in a voluminous black oil-skin, evidently provided by Thundering Billy or Mr. Egg.

At an order from the mate the two Kanakas who were manning the boat bent to their oars and the little craft surged away from the Falcon, heading across the darkened waters of the lagoon towards the gap in the reef.

“Well, Ogden, we’ll soon be home now,” cried Buck cheerfully, deliberately closing his mind against Beth’s dark suspicions concerning Thundering Billy. “I bet you’re glad!”

“No, I’m not,” snorted Ogden from out of the enveloping folds of the big oil-skins. “I wanna see ol’ Stubbs. Where’s ol’ Stubbs?”

“What’s he keep harpin’ on about Stubbs for?” enquired Mr. Egg with interest. “He was askin’ for the feller this morning when you laid the aircraft ’longside the *Maid of Talu*. Don’t he know that Stubbs was aimin’ to kidnap him?”

“Oh, yes, he knows that all right,” replied Buck. “But apparently he doesn’t mind being kidnapped.”

“Whaffor not?” demanded Mr. Egg with greater interest than ever.

“Because his kidnapppers, so he says, let him smoke and read comics and do things which he’s not allowed to do at home,” explained Buck.

“Is thasso?” said Mr. Egg. “Well, he can smoke hissself sick for all I care. I ain’t stopping him.”

He turned his attention to the schooner, which was looming up ahead of them in the darkness. A few minutes later Buck, Beth, Ogden and the two suitcases containing the loot were aboard and the boat was on her way back to the aircraft.

“What did you go into the control room to get?” asked Beth, as she and Buck stood by the schooner’s side awaiting the return of the boat.

Buck drew from each pocket of his trousers a thick, cardboard-encased cylinder.

“These signalling flares,” he said. “Aircraft are certain to be searching at night, as well as by day, for the Falcon because they’ll know she’ll burn distress flares if she can, and I thought these might come in useful.”

“Yes, it’s a good idea,” said Beth. “But why didn’t you tell Thundering Billy what you were getting?”

“Because, if your suspicions of him are correct, he’d have stopped me,” explained Buck. “That’s pretty certain. As it is, he evidently thought I was just popping into the control room to get something belonging to me.”

“Well, you keep those flares out of sight and don’t let him know you’ve got them,” counselled Beth.

“I’m not going to let him know,” said Buck, returning the two thick magnesium cartridges to his pockets. “Here’s the boat coming back.”

The boat came alongside the schooner, bringing with it Thundering Billy and some gear which had been aboard the *Maid of Talu*. But of the prisoners there was no sign.

“I thought you said you were going to bring the prisoners with you?” Beth said challengingly to Thundering Billy, as that burly mariner came aboard, followed by Mr. Egg and the Kanakas, who commenced to haul the boat up from the water.

“I’ll tell you about that in a minit when we’ve got under way,” growled Thundering Billy.

He brushed past her and strode away along the darkened deck. Beth turned to Buck.

“I don’t like this a bit,” she said uneasily. “He said he was going to bring the prisoners aboard and hand them over to justice, but he hasn’t. What do you think he’s done with them?”

“I don’t know at all,” muttered Buck in a troubled voice. “He can’t have bumped them off. He’s not that bad.”

"I'm not so sure," said Beth, her face pale and set in the darkness. "He was like a maniac when he was fighting them in the boat. I believe he's capable of anything."

"Perhaps he's marooned them," suggested Buck. "Left them behind on the island."

"But why should he leave them behind, if we're going to sail northwards towards the shipping routes?" demanded Beth. "What would be the point in it?"

"I don't know," admitted Buck. "There's none that I can see. But I don't think he's bumped them off. We didn't hear any shots and we couldn't help but hear them on a still, calm night such as this."

"They had their hands tied," Beth reminded him. "He could have dropped them into the lagoon."

"Oh, my goodness, don't say that!" ejaculated Buck, startled and appalled at the very thought.

"Then where are they?" she persisted. After a pause she went on: "No, I was right, Buck. Thundering Billy's a bad lot and he's up to something. What I'm wondering is what is going to happen to you and me."

"Aboard this schooner, you mean?"

"Yes, because, if you ask me, we've jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Out of the Falcon into the hands of Thundering Billy."

"Yes, but listen," argued Buck. "If he's meaning us any harm, why did he tell us to collect some kit before we left the Falcon? If he's meaning to bump us off, or something, he wouldn't have worried about our bringing any kit."

"No, that is a point, of course," agreed Beth. "But he's got something in his mind, I'm certain."

By this time the schooner was under way. There was not a breath of wind and she was cruising steadily through the darkness under the power of her auxiliary engine. One of the Kanakas was lounging at the wheel. Thundering Billy and Mr. Egg had disappeared below. From the lighted galley were coming the shrill, piping tones of Ogdén.

"He's in there with the Kanaka cook, stuffing himself and as happy as a pig in clover," Buck reported to Beth, returning from having taken a look into the galley.

"Is he still wearing his pillow-slip?" enquired Beth.

"Yes, and he's still got it pinned round him like a sort of sarong," replied Buck. "I suppose he likes the way the Kanaka fixed it for him—hallo, here's Egg!"

Mr. Egg had appeared from below and was approaching them across the darkened deck.

"The cap'n wants you," he said briefly. "C'mon!"

He turned and led the way down the companion-ladder to a small, stuffy cabin illumined by a hanging oil-lamp and heavy with the fumes of cigar smoke and a strong odour of rum.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BEACON

THUNDERING BILLY, a big black cigar between his bearded lips and a glass and a bottle of rum in front of him, was seated at the table, on which was piled in a glittering heap the jewellery and other valuables which Stubbs and his gang had taken from the passengers of the Falcon.

“So here ye are!” said the captain genially, as Buck and Beth approached the table and faced him across it. “Well, now, you and me is going to have a nice little talk.”

“What about?” demanded Beth.

“About lots o’ things,” said Thundering Billy, waving his cigar. “In the first place, Mister Egg and me ain’t probably what you think we is. Mister Egg and me have had a very tough an’ hard life. Ain’t we, Egg?”

“Sure!” said the mate.

“Aye, Mister Egg and me has known what it is to be pore an’ hungry an’ without a cent in our pockets,” went on Thundering Billy. “And now just lookit there on the table. Lookit all them trinkets and gee-gaws what mean a fortin when they’re turned into cash. It ain’t fair to put temptation like that in the way of pore, hard-up critters like Mister Egg and me.”

“If that’s how you feel about it, you’d better resist temptation,” said Beth warningly.

“Ar, but I can’t!” leered Thundering Billy, shaking his great head. “Ar, but I can’t!” he repeated. “I’d like to, but I’m just a pore, weak critter and no hand at all at resistin’ temptation, ’specially when my ol’ pard, the Demon Rum, keeps egging me on not to resist it.”

He splashed himself out a glass of the Demon and downed it at a gulp.

“Jus’ take this mornin’,” he went on, wiping his bearded lips. “This mornin’ I lost my schooner an’ I had nothing in the world ’cept what I stood up in. Then I found a fortin, in the shape o’ them trinkets and gee-gaws, stuck right under my very nose. And now I’ve found a trim and ship-shape schooner. It’s askin’ too much o’ mortal man such as me to refuse ’em. Fact is, I reckon it would be flying in the face of Providence to refuse ’em.”

“You mean, you’re going to keep them?” demanded Buck. “The jewellery and the schooner?”

Thundering Billy grinned and shook his head.

“Naw, I ain’t gonna keep ’em, I’m gonna *sell* ’em,” he said. “Mister Egg an’ me is gonna make for a nice, quiet little port where we’ll sell the schooner an’ no questions asked. I know the place. Then we’ll clear off with the jool’ry an’ sell that, as well. I

know where I can plant it; then Mister Egg and me'll be set up for life. Ain't that so, Egg?"

"Sure thing!" agreed Mr. Egg.

"And you think you'll get away with it?" cried Buck hotly.

"Sure, we'll get away with it," nodded Thundering Billy. "There's nobody knows I've got the jool'ry and the schooner 'cept you two kiddos and them four guys of Stubbs' back yonder on Reef Point."

"What did you do with those four men, anyway?" demanded Beth.

"Left 'em on Reef Point," grinned Thundering Billy. "They can't get away in the aircraft 'cos she ain't got no fuel left. And when the aircraft is sighted and they're picked up they won't tell the truth about her, for their own sakes. Naw, they'll say they know nothing about her 'cept that she comed drifting ashore and they moored her in the lagoon. And they'll say they're shipwrecked sailors off'n some craft what hit the reef and broke up. Aw, they'll know what to say, all right. They won't be nohow dumb, those guys, when it comes to protecting their own skins."

Both Buck and Beth saw the ingenuity of this argument. For the last thing in the world that the men on Reef Point would want to admit was that they were members of the Stubbs gang.

"Naw, they won't blab on me," went on Thundering Billy, replenishing his glass. "They can't without blabbin' on themselves. But that same don't apply to you two kiddos an' Ogden Pugg."

"It certainly doesn't," said Beth bravely.

"That's so," nodded Thundering Billy affably. "And it must be plumb plain to you both that Mister Egg and me can't take you to the port with us where we're aimin' to sell the schooner. We ain't that crazy."

"Then, what do you intend to do with us?" demanded Beth.

"We're gonna put you ashore on a nice little island where there ain't nobody else," said Thundering Billy. "You two and Ogden Pugg. We'll leave you plenty of stores and water and one day you'll be sighted and picked up. We'll leave you some tools from the carpenter's chest, as well, so's you can build yourselves a sort of hut, if you want to. Sink me! it'll be a proper holiday for you!"

Beamingly he expanded his theme.

"Just think o' it!" he boomed. "No nasty school to go to and no plaguey schoolmarms to chivvy you around. An' all the bathing and fishing and lazing around that you want. Why, it'll be a proper picnic an' you'll have heaps an' heaps o' fun. You oughta be real grateful to Mister Egg an' me for giving you a holiday like that. Some guys would've just knocked you on the head and dropped you overboard. But not us. We're kind-hearted, Mister Egg and me. Ain't we, Egg?"

"Sure!" agreed the laconic mate.

"Where is this island that you're going to maroon us on?" demanded Beth of Thundering Billy.

“You’ll see when we get there,” grinned that gentleman. “We’re heading for it now an’ we’ll raise it to-morrow towards sundown—maybe sooner. It’s got a nice beach and a lagoon and plenty of fish around for you to catch and to cook. Aw, you’ll have the time o’ your lives! Now get up on deck and behave yourselves till we reach the island, and everything’ll be jake. Egg, get this jool’ry put back in the suitcase. We don’t want it lying around loose with them Kanakas around. Can’t keep their thievin’ fingers off’n nothing.”

Buck and Beth looked at each other. Then Beth said:

“Come on, let’s go!”

When they had regained the deck, she said:

“It was no use staying down there trying to argue with him. It wouldn’t have done any good. If you ask me, we’ve got off lightly.”

“What, being marooned?” exclaimed Buck.

“Yes, as he said, he could easily have knocked us on the head and dropped us overboard,” said Beth. “I told you all along that I didn’t trust him and now he’s shown himself in his true colours.”

“But isn’t there *anything* we can do about it?” burst out Buck. “Surely, we can think of something?”

“How can we?” demanded Beth. “Both Thundering Billy and Egg are armed and so are the four Kanakas. That’s six armed men against you and me and Ogden. No, if you ask me, Buck, we’ve had it!”

There was silence between them for a while as, each deep in thought, they leaned against the side of the schooner. Then Buck said:

“And this has happened after all we’ve come through. It’s pretty sickening.”

“Yes, but we haven’t failed,” said Beth consolingly. “Not by a long chalk. For one thing, we’ve saved the Falcon. Stubbs was going to scuttle her, but now she’ll be found riding at anchor in the lagoon at Reef Point. And we’ve stranded Stubbs and his three pals on Kalpao with the passengers, so they’ll be caught. So all we’ve really failed to save is the passengers’ jewellery and stuff, and that’s not terribly important. I guess they can afford to lose it. If they can’t, that’s their worry. And we still have Ogden with us. Stubbs was going to kidnap him. So we’ve saved him, as well.”

“Don’t remind me,” said Buck. “The very thought of being marooned on a desert island with Ogden gives me the willies! We’ll have to mount a permanent guard over the grub.”

They were still discussing the situation and trying in vain to find some way out of it when, some time later, Mr. Egg appeared on deck. He informed them that they could eat in the cabin, but that they and Ogden would have to sleep on deck.

“There’s only one cabin,” he said. “It’s got two bunks. Me and the cap’n is gonna use ’em. The Kanakas have the fo’c’sle. But it’s a fine night, you’re young, and to sleep on deck won’t hurt you.”

“We’d prefer it,” said Beth coldly. “We’d also prefer to eat on deck instead of down in that stuffy little cabin with you and Thundering Billy.”

“Suit yourselves!” said Mr. Egg unconcernedly.

“It’s no use telling you, I suppose, that the pair of you will finish up in prison for this job?” said Buck.

“No use at all,” said Mr. Egg. “ ’Taint true, anyways!”

He shot a squirt of tobacco juice overside, then turned and went below again. Buck and Beth lingered where they were until supper was ready. They ate it seated on the cabin skylight in the yellow illumination which streamed out from the galley.

An hour later they turned in on the hard deck, refusing the mattresses which one of the Kanakas brought them from the fo’c’sle. They thought the deck boards would be cleaner.

Ogden did not refuse a mattress. He complained loudly and bitterly, however, at having to sleep on deck until a well-directed cuff from Thundering Billy, who had come up from below for a breath of fresh air and to look at the night, effectively silenced him, at least for the time being.

Having visited the Kanaka at the wheel and checked the course, Thundering Billy went below. A little while later Buck saw the cabin skylight suddenly darken, token that the lamp down there had been turned down to a glimmer.

Both he and Beth were still wide-awake. For, apart from the hardness of the deck, their minds were still actively engaged in trying to find some way out of the apparently hopeless position they were in.

So they lay awake beneath the stars, sometimes silent, sometimes talking in low, guarded voices until suddenly Buck tensed, then raised himself swiftly on his elbow.

“*Listen!*” he said tersely.

Beth listened. As she did so there came to her ears, from somewhere high in the night sky, a faint and distant drone.

“It’s an aircraft!” said Buck swiftly. “I thought it was. By golly! I’ll light a flare that she can’t help but see!”

He had turned in fully dressed and, leaping to his feet, he whipped from his pockets the two signal flares, which he had brought with him from the Falcon.

One bound took him to the dark and deserted galley a few paces away. Lighting the fuse of one of the flares, he hurled it into the galley. Then, continuing on along the deck and lighting the fuse of the second flare as he ran, he hurled it into the fo’c’sle where two of the Kanakas were sleeping.

“Grab Ogden, Beth!” he yelled, racing back along the deck. “Hold him till I join you!”

The Kanaka helmsman had left the wheel and was coming rushing for’ard, shouting the alarm. Buck dived down the companion-ladder to rouse Thundering Billy and Mr. Egg.

“*Fire!*” he yelled. “*The schooner’s on fire!*”

Turning, he dashed back up the ladder. As he reached the deck, Thundering Billy and the mate came charging madly up from below. Not now was the moment for them

to enquire as to how the fire had started. All they knew, as they reached the deck, was that the bone-dry galley and the fo'c'sle were two swiftly mounting columns of roaring, crackling flames which leapt high into the night.

With a dreadful oath, his bearded face convulsed with fury in the illumination of the leaping flames, Thundering Billy bellowed:

“Get the boat launched! Jump to it, you yaller scum!”

As the Kanakas leapt to obey, Thundering Billy charged madly down to the main cabin again to get the loot taken from the Falcon. By this time Buck had joined Beth, who was struggling desperately with the screaming, terrified Ogden.

“We’ve got to get overboard, Beth, and take him with us!” he cried. “We *must* take him—they might leave him behind in the panic! Come on!”

Gripping the screaming, struggling Ogden, he rushed him across the deck, hoisted him up on to the side of the schooner, wrapped his arms tightly around him, then jumped overboard.

The pair of them went well under, Buck clinging desperately to Ogden. As they came to the surface, Buck sensed rather than saw that Beth was beside him in the water.

“Can you manage him?” she cried. “The boat’s coming down!”

The schooner’s boat, coming down at a run, hit the water with a terrific splash. By now the doomed schooner was a roaring, terrifying holocaust of flame, which leapt higher and higher into the night. In the eerie illumination Buck and Beth shoved the half-drowned Ogden aboard the boat at the same moment as a couple of the Kanakas swarmed swiftly down into her.

“Come on, Beth!” panted Buck. “She can pick us up later. We mightn’t want her to!”

They turned and struck away from the boat and the blazing schooner.

“Can you hear the aircraft?” demanded Buck.

“No, not above the roar of the flames and all the row that’s going on,” said Beth breathlessly.

“It’s not only the roar of the flames that you’re hearing,” panted Buck triumphantly. “It’s the aircraft—she’s heading this way and she’s coming with nose down!”

It was quite true, for a few moments later a big, four-engined flying boat roared low over the fiercely blazing vessel, then banked steeply and came about to touch down on the water.

As she lost way out of range of any flying sparks from the schooner, Buck and Beth swam strongly towards her. A few minutes later they were being hauled aboard her and great, indeed, was the astonishment of her captain and crew when Buck’s first gasped-out words were:

“There’s a boatload of men out there. Don’t let them board you. They’re armed and they’re dangerous!”

Swiftly and briefly he poured out something of his and Beth’s story. The flying boat was out searching for the missing Falcon, and before Buck had finished his story her

radio operator, at the order of the captain, was calling their base at Samoa, asking for an armed aircraft to be sent immediately to their assistance.

Thundering Billy and Mr. Egg couldn't understand at first why, instead of taking them aboard, the flying boat continued to cruise around them, playing a searchlight on them. At length, however, the truth dawned on Thundering Billy and he roared:

"It's them blamed kids, that's what it is! They've got aboard and they've blown the gaff! They must've done, else why is she actin' thataways?"

"What we gonna do?" enquired Mr. Egg.

"Do?" bellowed the raging captain. "What'n thunder can we do, adrift in an open boat? There ain't nothing we can do!"

There wasn't and, with the dawn, he surrendered to an armed flying boat, which touched down on the water beside the one which had picked up Buck and Beth.

"Don't believe no lies!" boomed Thundering Billy heartily, as he climbed aboard. "Don't believe a blamed word what them two kids aboard that other aircraft say! I've got all the jool'ry here what was stolen from the passengers aboard the Falcon. I was taking it along to be gived back to its rightful owners. I've got Ogden Pugg here, as well, the pore li'l feller what was kidnapped. I 'spect I'll be gettin' a real handsome reward for this."

His bluff and bluster did not work, however, and the only reward he got was a term of imprisonment for attempted robbery on the high seas. Mr. Egg received a similar reward.

But their punishment was nothing compared to that meted out to Stubbs and his gang, who were picked up and arrested at Kalpao and Reef Point.

As for Buck and Beth, they were quite embarrassed, not only by the publicity which the newspapers gave to their exploit, but by the exceedingly handsome cheques which they received from British Atlantic and Pacific Airways and from Mr. Silas P. Pugg. Their fellow passengers who had been marooned at Kalpao were delighted to find their jewels intact, and showered the pair with many presents, and their heartfelt thanks.

"My goodness, I could nearly buy an aircraft of my own with all this money!" exclaimed Buck to Beth before they parted at Samoa.

"Do!" chuckled Beth. "Then one day you can fly in and visit father and me at our island."

"Yes, and I might easily do that!" declared Buck.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *White Wings and Blue Water* by George Ernest Rochester]