THE SCARLET STRIPE

"TAFFRAIL"

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a https://www.fadedpage.com administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at https://www.fadedpage.com.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Scarlet Stripe--being the adventures of a naval surgeon

Date of first publication: 1932

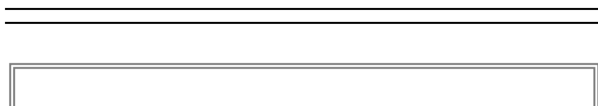
Author: Henry Taprell Dorling (as "Taffrail") (1883-1968)

Date first posted: Sep. 24, 2020

Date last updated: Sep. 24, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200967

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Chuck Greif & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net



THE SCARLET STRIPE:
CHAPTER I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX, XXI, XXII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV.

OTHER BOOKS
BY THE
SAME AUTHOR

NAVAL NOVELS

Pincher Martin, O.D. (1916)
The Sub. (1917)
Michael Bray. (1925)
Shipmates. (1929)
Pirates. (1930)
Kerrell. (1931)

NAVAL SKETCHES, STORIES, AND REMINISCENCES

Carry On! (1916)
Stand By! (1916)
Of Shore. (1917)
Sea, Spray, and Spindrift. (1917)
Minor Operations. (1917)
The Watch Below. (1918)
A Little Ship. (1918)
H.M.S. 'Anonymous.' (1919)

NAVAL AND NAUTICAL HISTORY

Sea Venturers of Britain. (1925)
Sea Escapes and Adventures. (1927)
Men o' War. (1929)
Endless Story. (1931)

MISCELLANEOUS

Ribbons and Medals. (1915)
Oh Joshua! (1920)
The Lonely Bungalow. (1931)
Cypher K. (1932)

THE SCARLET STRIPE

BEING
THE ADVENTURES OF A NAVAL SURGEON

BY
TAFFRAIL
(CAPTAIN TAPRELL DORLING, D.S.O., R.N.)

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON
MCMXXXII

Made and Printed in Great Britain for HODDER AND STOUGHTON LTD.
by T. AND A. CONSTABLE LTD., Printers, Edinburgh

TO

F. H. D., I. D., AND ‘LIFF’

NOT TO MENTION

NIPPER, SPOT, SAM
AND PUDDA

TOGETHER WITH

SARAH AND NEBUCHADNEZZAR

ALL OF

T H E   C R O U C H

THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY

DEDICATED

FOREWORD

THE persons and ships mentioned in this book exist only in my imagination. Nevertheless, it is not entirely fiction.

The main incidents of the sinking of a ‘Q Ship’ by an enemy submarine, and the subsequent boat journey of 150 miles to the Irish coast by some of the survivors, are true. The Surgeon Probationer, R.N.V.R., or Surgeon Sub-lieutenant, as he would be called nowadays, *was* in charge of the boat with the number of men mentioned in my story, and served with me in destroyers both before and after the incident. His own and his shipmates’ obituaries *did* appear in the official casualty list, and were cancelled two days later.

Moreover, frequent piracies of coasting steamers in the China Seas have occurred on the lines of that described in subsequent chapters. Truth is stranger than fiction, and I would refer incredulous readers to the seizure of s.s. *Sunning*, on November 15, 1926, and of the *Haiching* on December 8, 1929—two instances among many.

On October 22, 1926, the sloop *Valerian* sank with heavy loss of life during a hurricane off Bermuda. I have taken the liberty of shifting the scene of the disaster through some 170 degrees of longitude. Typhoons in the China Sea and hurricanes in the Western Atlantic have much in common.

TAFFRAIL.

1932.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER I

WAR stories are out of fashion in these days of peace, disarmament, and perfervid internationalism, so let me say at the outset that this is *not* a war story pure and simple.

All the same, this book is to be more or less the story of my life up to date, so how can the war be excluded altogether? Moreover, the really interesting part of my existence—interesting to me, that is—started in 1914, and the war had a great deal to do with my joining the Navy, in which I still serve as a surgeon lieutenant-commander.

I am neither brave nor brainy. I do not intend to go into the details of what fighting I saw at sea; but one adventure of mine during the war was sufficiently agonising and unusual to cause me occasional bad dreams even now.

I am not as a rule troubled with nerves. On the contrary, I am 'too fat and phlegmatic,' as my wife—whom heaven preserve!—sometimes tells me, by which she means I am inclined to be lazy in the matter of violent exercise, and am sufficiently easy-going to be twiddled round her little finger.

My experiences between 1914 and 1918 were no more thrilling than hundreds of other people's. But it is not everybody who has found himself adrift in an ordinary ship's lifeboat with twenty-two men about 150 miles out in the Atlantic off the west coast of Ireland. Our ship, a 'Q Ship,' had been sunk by a submarine. We had in the boat as provisions one tin of corned beef, one box of ship's biscuit,

and a small wicker-covered rum-jar of water. There were three oars, some odd pieces of timber, but no rudder or compass. We made a sail of shirts and any odd stuff we could find, and steered to the eastward as best we could. The voyage took eight days, during which we weathered two heavy gales with the huge breaking seas rolling up from astern and threatening every moment to overwhelm us. When it was not blowing during the day the pitiless sun blazed remorselessly overhead. The nights were bitterly cold. Two men died of thirst and exposure on the way, and we had to heave the bodies overboard. Another man went off his head and tried to open a vein with a razor.

When we did finally make the land, we could only crawl on our hands and knees up the steps cut in the rock leading to a lighthouse. Our tongues and throats were so swollen we couldn’t swallow or articulate. Our chins and noses all raw and bleeding from licking up the dew that fell on the thwarts of the boat during the nights. Even so it tasted of the salt from the falling spray which seemed to have dried into the wood.

I was the only officer in the boat, and our allowance of water, which I was careful to ration from the start, amounted to about a full wineglass a day. I dreamt of water whenever I fell off into an uneasy doze, and woke up thinking of it. We prayed for rain; but no rain came.

The twenty-one of us who staggered or helped each other ashore and crawled up those steps could not have lasted much longer. Our water had given out three days previously. If the ship had been sunk thirty or forty miles further out at sea we should probably never have got through.

Yes. In various experiences during and since the war, that eight-day adventure in an open boat when I was twenty-five

overshadows all others. So in trying to write about myself I may perhaps be forgiven for describing it later in some detail.

After all, even in these piping times of peace, ships may still be wrecked and people cast away in open boats to suffer the awful torments of raging thirst. And I know what thirst means—thirst, when you have no means of quenching it.

There must have been a good many people in the war who read of their own deaths in the official lists of casualties issued during the war by the Admiralty and War Office; but, believe me, the experience is rather thrilling. I still treasure cuttings from *The Times* in which, on one day, my name appears as 'Missing (Feared killed),' and, two days later, as 'Previously reported Missing. Now reported not Missing.' It gives me quite a peculiar sensation to read them. Moreover, it is the only occasion in my life on which I have ever succeeded in diddling the authorities at Whitehall and proving them wrong, and that on unimpeachable evidence in the shape of my own person. Nevertheless, some tuppenny clerk in one or other of the departments tried hard to dock two days' pay for the reason that I was not officially in existence to earn it.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER II

I HAD been four and a half years a medical student at Westminster Hospital when war broke out. My age was 22½, and I had passed everything except my finals.

My people were not altogether pleased when I announced my intention of joining up. I suppose their objections were only natural. I was an only son and my parents weren’t any too well off. They had denied themselves a good deal to pay my school bills and for my medical training, for I hadn’t the brains to win scholarships. I was approaching the time when I might expect to find myself launched out into the world as a full-fledged doctor. Looking back, I can understand their anxiety when they saw the chance of my career and future livelihood knocked on the head for the time being.

On the other hand there was a war on, and I naturally wanted to see something of it. Some people even said it might be over by Christmas, and lots of our students had joined the Army in the ranks immediately it started. Many of the staff had also appeared in the uniform of the R.A.M.C., and, disappearing one by one, had been relieved by older men.

War, I argued, was a young man’s job, and this might be the only war that I should ever see. I didn’t feel particularly brave. Most certainly I didn’t want to be killed; but if I waited until I qualified assuredly I should miss it.

It was a tougish business to bring my people to my way of thinking; though after a lot of persuasion they eventually

relented. I felt a selfish beast at insisting, particularly when my mother wept and persuaded herself that I should be killed.

But what could a fellow do? Hundreds of men of my age were joining up every day. I felt ashamed to be seen about in the streets in civilian clothing. Every recruiting poster seemed to scream at me. I went about in mortal terror of being given a white feather by one of that band of misguided females who at that time paraded London looking for victims. Why shouldn't I join?

It was my ambition to get into the Navy; but the question was how to set about it. No doubt I could have joined as a bluejacket, while the fact that I had been in the O.T.C. at my public school and had got the usual certificate, might even help me to get a commission in the R.N.V.R. as a sub-lieutenant. To tell the truth, though, I didn't want to lose touch altogether with my future profession. I wished to go to sea with something to do in the doctoring line. The stumbling block was that I wasn't fully qualified.

Here again I was rather at cross purposes with my father. Himself a physician in Hampstead, he wanted me eventually to join him and to take over his excellent practice when he retired. He certainly didn't want me to enter the Navy permanently, which afterwards I did. For some strange reason he seemed to regard the naval medical profession as a dead end, a comfortable sinecure for the unambitious and the lazy. He frequently warned me against it, maintaining that one got no real experience afloat, and that one lost touch with the latest developments.

I don't know why these prejudices should exist, for prejudices they certainly are. I have found as many good and keen doctors in the Navy as out of it, and to my mind a naval

surgeon has advantages which are by no means to be sniffed at. He may be subject to a good many rules and regulations, though I doubt if there are many more restrictions afloat than there are ashore. But the pay of the naval doctor is not so bad, he sees something of the world for nothing, mixes with pleasant people, and, when he eventually retires, receives a pension. Keeping up to date with the latest developments of his profession must surely depend upon himself to a great extent. I'd sooner be a naval surgeon any day than a G.P. with a practice in a poor district.

But I am aware that an idea exists that, as a class, we are men of little ambition, which only shows how little most people know about the Service. Speaking of this reminds me of the tale of two young women, one of whom had a medical friend who had suddenly announced his intention of joining the Navy.

"My dear!" said one of them in imparting the news. "What do you think! My Bobby's decided to become a naval doctor."

"Oh!" replied the other, "I do hope he'll be able to earn a living. They do specialise in some funny things nowadays, darling, don't they?"

The last speaker, apparently, can never have heard of a *naval* doctor; but then, comparatively few people have. Doctors never by any chance figure as the heroes in any of the naval novels I have ever read, and Marryat's naval surgeons were a peculiar sort of people addicted to the bottle and other vices.

However, my mind was made up. I heard that the Admiralty were calling for volunteers from among senior medical students for service as surgeon probationers R.N.V.R. in small ships. I didn't know what the devil a surgeon

probationer might be; but a man called Farquharson, one of my lot, told me he had already sent in his name. I followed suit, and two days later was told to present myself at the Medical Director General's Department at the Admiralty. They hustled things about in those days.

I arrived at the Admiralty to find a good many other fellows on the same lay, some from my own hospital. I needn't describe my interview with rather a fierce-looking old gentleman in naval uniform with four gold stripes on his coat sleeves and red in between them. I was very polite and called him 'Sir.' He asked me all about myself and what I had done, grunted once or twice, and then asked me to sign a paper and said I'd do if I passed the medical exam. There was nothing much to be frightened of in that, merely the usual chest-tapping, and coughing, and saying ninety-nine. A week later, having received my outfit allowance, I was as proud as a peacock in naval uniform.

With the thin wavy line of gold and scarlet on the cuffs of my new monkey jacket, brass buttons with the crown and anchor, and naval cap, I was a surgeon probationer of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. I had to salute senior naval officers when I met them in uniform, and was subject to all the pains and penalties of the Naval Discipline Act, whatever that might be. Henceforward I had to comport myself as an officer and a gentleman, though I must confess this important fact rather slipped my memory on my last night in London with some friends before taking up my first appointment in an armed yacht based upon Grimsby. If I remember rightly, they removed my trousers.

I don't propose to say anything very much about my month's service in the *Carola*, commanded by a retired lieutenant-commander R.N. She was an old steam yacht taken

over by the Admiralty. Armed with a couple of 6-pounders she was used for patrol work off the East Coast, our general routine being three or four days' lolloping about at sea followed by thirty-six hours in harbour, during which we coaled.

The *Carola* rolled and pitched like nothing on earth, far worse than any destroyer, and she certainly taught me not to be seasick. The time, however, hung heavily on my hands. Apart from a cut finger or two, and a case of pneumonia which we packed off to hospital the moment we returned to harbour, I had practically nothing to do in the doctoring line. Instead, I used to spend hours at a time on the bridge, where the skipper, and the two sub-lieutenants R.N.R. who kept 'watch and watch,' taught me a certain amount about navigation and chart-work. That sort of thing had always interested me, and often I wished I had been able to join as an executive officer instead of as an embryo doctor.

Doctors, I believe, are really supposed to be non-combatants, and I think I've seen it somewhere that they're liable to be shot if found by the enemy with arms in their possession. Rather a one-sided business I always thought it. I know jolly well that both in the Navy and the Army doctors aren't any more immune than other people.

Early in October I was sent to the *Phoenician*, a destroyer in one of the flotillas based on Harwich and afterwards in the Firth of Forth. I was in her for a year and a month; but I needn't say much of our many comings and goings in the North Sea. We had all sorts of weather, good and otherwise; but the fogs, gales of wind, and heavy seas seemed to predominate. We also had our fair share of excitement—the Dogger Bank scrap in January 1915; many excursions to the Heligoland Bight to round up enemy minesweepers and

outpost boats; hunting submarines; and, of course, our everlasting screening work whenever the big ships went to sea. With the rest of our flotilla we left Harwich for the Firth of Forth in March 1915, and thereafter were attached to Sir David Beatty's battle-cruiser squadron. He kept us pretty busy.

But North Sea destroyer work has been described so often, and by people far better qualified than myself, that I needn't mention it here. After all, I'm only a doctor and I don't profess to have the gift of the gab or to be able to write about things naval without committing an occasional solecism.

However, I can say something about my messmates in the wardroom—our fire-eating little skipper, Cassidy, who was as strong as a horse, but so short that he had to stand on a wooden stool to see over the canvas spray-dodgers on the bridge. He had the most remarkable flow of language I've ever heard, and heaven help any one who ran foul of him when he was feeling peevish. He'd 'have his guts for a necktie,' right enough. Cassidy usen't to drink anything at sea, unless it was a small tot of rum and water after he'd been hours on the bridge in vile weather. But he had occasional 'busts' in harbour, and sometimes started breaking up the wardroom furniture and volunteering to fight the lot of us. After a particularly hectic evening, it might take the first lieutenant, the gunner, and myself to put him to bed in his cabin. However, I liked Cassidy well enough, and I must say he was a star turn at handling the ship.

Darley, the first lieutenant, was a quiet fellow and much liked by us all. The men loved him too, and I don't really know how the ship would have got on without him. He seemed to run everything, and even had the knack of keeping

the skipper in order when his fits of belligerency came over him.

Martin, the engineer lieutenant, and Carlton, the sub, were both charming people. The way that 'the chief,' as we called Martin, drove the ship and kept her in running order was a marvel to me. We never seemed to have the engine and boiler-room mishaps from which some of the other ships suffered, and the chief was always at his best in any emergency. The sub used to run our sailors' band, which was decidedly a home-made and noisy affair of drums and trumpets.

But once he got us into trouble. Our depot ship never went to sea, but always lay at a buoy in the Firth of Forth. Once, when her moorings were lifted, she had to raise steam to shift billet. To do this she had to pass down one side of a line of destroyers and up the other. We blew the usual whistles and stood to attention as she passed down, and then, when she had sounded the 'Carry On,' our band suddenly broke into 'A Life on the Ocean Wave.' We were rather amused.

About twenty minutes later, after circling round the end of the trot, the depot ship passed us again on the other side on her way to pick up her new buoy. The band, as before, was quite ready, and this time played 'Rolling Home to Merry England.'

We looked upon it as rather a good joke, but the captain of the depot ship didn't. Lacking any sense of humour at all, he made a signal, 'Captain repair on board,' and gave little Cassidy a proper dressing-down in his cabin for what he said was disrespect to a senior officer. The yarn, of course, was soon round the flotilla and lost nothing in the telling. It didn't increase Captain Carp's popularity.

But the *Keyham* was not much use to us as a depot ship. She took weeks to do any small job that meant a good deal to us and our comfort and efficiency at sea, and I remember one rather hectic row because some of the destroyers had each to send half a dozen men to clear out one of her storerooms.

No. The *Keyham* was not the mother to us that some depot ships were to their flotillas. She seemed to do as little as she could, though the men seemed to be falling over each other on board her and getting in each other's way. It is the little things that make a difference. For instance, instead of sending us our fresh provisions, stores, and mails in a steamboat when we returned after three or four days at sea, we generally had to collect them in our dinghies or whalers. It often meant a pull of about three-quarters of a mile in beastly weather and a sluicing tide. It didn't seem to occur to Captain Carp or his officers that our fellows got practically no sleep when the ship was at sea, and certainly had no chance of taking their clothes off.

Little Mr. Eyers, our torpedo gunner, was a great character. No taller than the captain, he also had to stand upon a stool when keeping watch on the bridge, but he was a cheery customer and a little terror for getting things done. Moreover, he was the biggest scrounger I ever met. If we wanted extra paint or stores that we weren't really entitled to, Mr. Eyers was the man who was sent to the dockyard or the depot ship by the first lieutenant. How he did it I never discovered; but he invariably came back with a boat-load, more than we really needed. He once stole three drums of white enamel of some special brand that had been issued to the depot ship for trial. Mr. Eyers saw it lying in the gangway unattended and promptly purloined it. When the loss was discovered, signals flew here, there, and everywhere asking if any one had seen

the missing stuff. Nobody had. It came in very useful next time we painted out the mess-decks and wardroom.

In his spare time the gunner used to do joinery in his cabin with wood he'd stolen from somewhere. I still possess an ingenious little folding chair he gave me.

As there was no cabin for me, I used to sleep on one of the settees in the wardroom. Every night at sea a bottle half-full of rum used to be put in one of the racks in the sideboard, so that the officer coming off watch wet and cold could help himself to a tot before he turned in. One morning, soon after four o'clock, I was woken up by the deuce of a commotion. I opened my eyes to see Mr. Eyers lying back in one of the armchairs, cursing and groaning.

"What the deuce is the matter?" I asked, sitting up in my blankets.

"Matter!" he exclaimed, very indistinctly. "I've been and gone and poisoned me ruddy self!"

What had happened was that the sub had been amusing himself tittivating the wardroom furniture with some of that quick-drying, mahogany-coloured combined stain and varnish. It, also, had been put in a bottle in the wardroom sideboard, and the gunner, taking it for rum, had helped himself to a hearty dollop without troubling to use a tumbler.

The result may be imagined. The stuff congealed in his mouth and inside him, and after removing his false teeth he was pulling out long streamers, for all the world like a conjuror, blaspheming as he did it. I, of course, laughed like a fool, which made him angrier and more incoherent still.

"Can't you do nothin' to help 'stead o' sittin' there grinnin' like a blinkin' gargoyle?" he demanded, full of rage. "I'm full

o' the perishin' muck. I'm poisoned, that's what I am! Where's your ruddy stummick pump?"

I hadn't a stomach pump, and if I had I shouldn't have dared to use it. Instead, I gave him stiff doses of castor oil and calomel out of the medicine chest. He was a bit pale and wan next day, and complained bitterly of lack of sleep; but at the end of thirty-six hours was more or less his own cheery self again. I guarantee Mr. Eyers never heard the end of that particular incident. It was all over the ship in two hours, and all round the flotilla in forty-eight. I even heard him spinning the yarn, with suitable embellishments, against himself. But if I dared to mention it he glared at me like a wild beast. I was the villain of the piece.

Mr. Eyers had a fund of quaint information. It was he who gave me what he declared was an infallible recipe for becoming gloriously hilarious on a single glass of weak whisky and soda. Neither Mr. Eyers nor myself was the least given to the bottle; but no doubt he thought the tip might one day be useful to me. If he were to be believed, it was a recipe which was much favoured by chorus girls when they were feeling down in the dumps, though what the gunner knew about ladies of the chorus I never really discovered. He was a married man with a numerous progeny. Anyhow, the dodge was to drop cigarette ash into an ordinary tumbler of whisky and soda, which was then drunk in the usual way. Purely from curiosity, I tried it—indeed, we all tried it. Nothing whatever happened. The cigarette ash merely spoilt an otherwise passable tipple.

Another dodge of Mr. Eyers's was the drinking of a wineglass of ordinary olive oil before one went on a prolonged 'binge' or 'bust' in London or elsewhere. Taken

beforehand, he said, the oil floated on top of the liquor and prevented the fumes thereof from reaching one's brain.

What was the advantage, you may ask?

Well, Mr. Eyers said it enabled one to assimilate at least double one's ordinary allowance of alcohol without ill-effects, though what particular joy there was in that I never quite found out. But just to see what would happen I tried the olive oil recipe. What did happen was immediate and disastrous. I was violently sick. Never again!

Yes, the thirteen months I spent in the *Phoenician* were happy ones. I liked the ship and I liked my messmates, though I must confess the amount of time we spent at sea in beastly weather sometimes made things rather irksome.

It was in November 1915 that I was appointed to the *Merlin*, one of the new 'M' class destroyers in the 10th Flotilla at Harwich. She was altogether a bigger, better, and faster ship than the old *Phoenician*, and again I got on well with my messmates and the ship's company.

Most of our jaunts were in the North Sea and escorting the traffic to and fro between Orfordness and the Hook of Holland. Occasionally we had little excitements with enemy submarines and destroyers, while sometimes we did a spell at Dover, which we hated, and once or twice were sent to assist with the escort work in the Channel. I think we did our fair share of sea-time and duly earned our pay.

But I should like to say a word or two of the *Merlin's* ship's company, for they were a good and cheery crowd. I am reminded of them by a letter I received only the other day from one of our old A.B.'s, a man called Rennard who joined up for the war. I think I had better quote it at some length. It conjures up a host of memories.

“I tried many times to turn over to carpenter or shipwright,” he writes, “but left the service an A.B. I acted as far as tools and materials would allow as carpenter’s crew, with a bit of sign-writing to fill in the spare time. You say you remember ‘Doggo’ Pearson’s face. We used to call him ‘Doggo’ or ‘Ugly.’ He was a rough diamond but good-natured, and did not resent it in the least. I remember when going on leave once he and Brockwell—the coxswain of the motor-boat—had had a drop too much and went for a shave and clean up in London, and said ‘yes’ to all the barber’s proposals. It cost them fifteen shillings; but in ‘Doggo’s’ case it was well spent. He came out quite handsome—face clear of spots and pimples; hair, which was naturally nice, well-trimmed, and really looking good. I often wonder if he ever reached the height of his ambition, for he confided to me several times that when his time was up in the Navy he wanted to be a brewer’s drayman, and to this end he used to ride about on a dray when on leave and help with the beer down the cellar. You may not be aware, sir, that the custom is that the drayman gets a pint at each house of call.

“Petty Officer Nason was a grand chap. I believe he kept his widowed mother nearly all his Navy time. He was good to get on with if you did your corner. The coxswain, Von Yules as we called him (Chief Petty Officer Ewles), was another good one who did much to make the *Merlin* as happy and comfortable as she was. ‘Pincher’ Martin, Chief Stoker, had a stock phrase for all deck hands when they appeared at the hatch to his storeroom wanting something or other—‘Ain’t got none.’ This was before he was even asked for anything. When stores were drawn he served out waste, etc. with a lavish hand, and then in a few days—‘Ain’t got none.’ He was a likeable chap, though. I was in his good books, and

could use his vice and bench and fill his store with sawdust and chips without a protest. I was sorry when he went sick and left the ship.

"On looking back I seem to be doing a review of the troops, so will carry on with it. It may interest you to see some of the chaps from another angle. I wonder how they would cut me up? There was Dempster, A.B., a dour Scotsman, who came near to Harry Lauder's Scotsmen. He used to pick up all the bargains in the 'pusser's' list, buy them on his slop-chit, and then send them home to his family. Stoker Camp was a bank-clerk in private life. I think he should be able to shovel coppers into bags. Stoker Parrish, always smiling, was in the *Cressy* when she was lost. I don't think he ever got over the shock to his nerves. A.B. 'Cock' Faulkner, a happy-go-lucky, cheery messmate, was afterwards killed in a raid on Chatham Barracks by aircraft. Stoker Petty Officer 'Daisy' Adams; a cheerful, talkative man made Chief Stoker, and the job seemed to get him under. Chief Petty Officer 'Oxo,'—I can't remember his proper name—the torpedo gunner's mate; he and I were in the same watch on the torpedo-tubes for night cruising for two years. He always took lookout in his turn, and I lived a commission in the Behring Sea many times over with him.

"Leading Seaman 'Gus' Razzell—a good torpedoman, I believe, who, had he made the going when it was good during the war, would have done well in the Navy. Ordinary Seaman 'Brigham' Young, a country lad who was reputed to say once when trying to give a date—'Let's see. It will be two years next dung-spreading time!'

"Petty Officer Mercer, a good chap in every way. A.B. Crisp, a quiet chap, very humorous in a dry way. Signalman Stone, very quiet, could look with such scorn at any

misguided soul who asked 'What's the buzz?' he, as a signalman, being supposed by us to have inside knowledge of everything. Able Seaman Bertie ('Beery') Kinshott, a curious chap like the book Chinamen. He seldom smiled, and never got rattled or vexed. I have seen him lose a considerable sum gambling without seeming to be even interested. Leading Seaman 'Western Ocean' Greasley had been in the merchant service. He had quite a sergeant-major's style when calling the hands in the morning. Able Seaman Smalls, rather a mean sort. He used to run a Crown and Anchor board, and would bank lots of money from the *Merlin*. A.B. 'Paddy' Welch was lost in the *Ariadne*, a minelayer. A.B. 'Snowy' White, a quiet chap who could read signals and used to have many jokes with new hands reading signals and pretending they meant 'Enemy in sight,' and so on.

"To conclude, I don't regret my time spent in the Navy. It was an education that I have not lost by. I wonder what became of Mr. Crocker, the torpedo gunner? He was a man I liked very much. I sometimes go for lunch to a small hotel kept by an R.N.R. engineer. He was in the *Vindex*, the aircraft-carrier that used to lie near us at Harwich. (Since the war I have been many times in her to the Isle of Man.) Well, this engineer was telling us all about the air-raid on Sylt, and didn't know I'd been in the Navy. I said I knew the *Vindex* very well, and always thought she was the supply ship for petrol for the destroyers' motor-boats. Then I sprung the old yarn about her being moored up to her buoys for so long that, when moved, she had to be towed off a pile of her own empty jam and milk tins. I don't think it went down very well at the time!"

How well I remember them all.

But it is not my early time in destroyers that I want to write about. The unrestricted German submarine campaign started in February 1917, and in April an Admiralty memo came round asking for the names of surgeon probationers who would volunteer for 'special service.' We knew more or less what that meant. Among other anti-submarine measures they were commissioning decoy ships, ordinary merchantmen with naval crews and hidden guns. The idea was that these 'Q Ships,' tramps and coasters some of them, should go about disguised as bait for submarines. If necessary they should let themselves be torpedoed. Then, when the submarine came to the surface at close range, the supposed tramp would break the White Ensign, disclose her hidden guns, and open fire. It was a risky business for those who went to sea in them.

I turned over the idea in my mind for a day or two before asking the *Merlin's* skipper to put in my name as a volunteer. He stared at me in amazement.

"Why the blazes d'you want to go in for a job like that?" he asked. "Aren't you seeing your fair share of the war in destroyers?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Then why d'you want to leave?" he demanded. "Don't you like being here?"

"It's not that, sir," I told him.

"Then what is it?"

"It's a change, sir," I tried to explain. "It sounds rather exciting, and all that."

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "I should jolly well think so! All the same, much as I admire your spirit, I wish to heaven you'd reconsider it. I can't stand in your way, of course; but

we shall all be damned sorry to lose you. Have you really made up your mind?"

I told him that I had.

"Very well, doc," he said. "I think you're rather an ass; but I'll send in your name."

And three weeks later I was ordered to report at the Admiralty. They dined me in the wardroom the night before I left, and the skipper made a pretty little speech to which I had to reply. I felt unutterably mouldy when I left the *Merlin* next morning, and all hands and the cook came on deck to say good-bye.

The *Merlin* had a crew of about ninety all told, and as we were a happy ship we were like a large family, knowing each other far more intimately than was ever possible in a big ship. The officers knew all the men by name, and all about them, and I've no doubt the men knew all about us and discussed us on the mess decks.

They were a darned good crowd. I nearly wept when I left them. Almost I regretted my decision.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER III

I HAD rather a shock when I joined the *Parham* at Devonport. She was a comparatively new cargo coasting steamer of about 1300 tons gross, taken over for service as a 'Q Ship,' and carried a concealed armament of one 4-inch gun and a couple of 12-pounders, besides a ·303-inch Maxim and some Lewis guns. I think she also had depth-charges fitted astern, and that her bulkheads had been strengthened and her holds stuffed with wood to make her more or less unsinkable. As a merchant ship she would have carried a crew of thirty at the outside. As a 'Q Ship' she had 9 officers and 50 or 60 petty officers and men, all of the R.N., R.N.R., or R.N.V.R. The accommodation was squeezed almost to bursting point.

Everybody must have heard of the 'Q Ships' used during the war, or 'Q Boats,' or 'Mystery Ships' as the public usually called them. At one time or another all sorts of vessels were used for the purpose—mail-steamers and tramps, coastal colliers, small passenger steamers, steam trawlers, small sailing craft like fishing smacks and the topsail-schooners one sees round the coast, and convoy sloops. The first of them were used in about the middle of 1915, by which time the German submarines had started sinking our merchant ships. Two years later, when I joined the *Parham*, the 'Q Ship' service was more or less established. It was also infinitely more dangerous than it had been in its earlier days.

The really intensive effort of the German U-boats, the 'unrestricted submarine campaign,' started in February 1917. Broadly speaking, this meant that every ship, British, Allied, or neutral, sighted within a certain prescribed area off the British Isles was liable to be torpedoed and sunk without warning. April 1917 was the worst month of the whole war, when 430 merchantmen with a total gross tonnage of 852,000 were sent to the bottom. Of these 430 ships, 196 were British and 108 flew Allied flags. On April 19th, the blackest day of the war, 11 British merchantmen and 8 fishing craft were sent to the bottom. Throughout that month, one out of every four ships that left the British Isles never returned.

I, personally, did not know all this at the time. Neither was I aware that ships were being sunk faster than they could be replaced, and that the German submarines were being built faster than they were being sunk. Starvation, indeed, stared us in the face and, if these sinkings had continued at the same rate, August or September would have seen the war won by the enemy submarines. With all our raw material and food held up and sunk, we should have had to sue for peace. It was the Convoy System, started in May 1917, that really won the war for the Allies, and to me it is surprising how few people, even now, seem to realise it.

The Convoy System, however, is outside my province. I am only concerned with *one* of the methods used to fight the submarines in their own element—the 'Q Ships.'

The first of them, as I've already said, appeared in 1915, and it didn't take the Germans long to discover that not every merchant ship was as innocent as she was painted. Various unsuccessful actions in which decoy vessels had disclosed their hidden armaments and the submarines had escaped, taught the latter to be more wary. They would appear on the

surface and open fire at long range, in which case, with their greater speed and heavier guns, they were more than a match for the 'Q Ships,' most of which were steamers of 10 knots or so. As an alternative method of attack if they could get into a favourable position under water, the submarines would use their torpedoes.

In 1917 it was extremely unlikely that an U-boat would ever run the risk of using the old method of coming to the surface near a merchantman, summoning her to stop by a shot across the bows, and then, after ordering the crew into their boats, sinking her by explosive charges or opening the inlets. That sort of manœuvre was far too dangerous. *Any* merchant vessel might be a 'Q Ship,' and, provided fire was not opened except under the White Ensign, it was a perfectly legitimate *ruse de guerre* for 'Q Ships' to be disguised as neutrals, with the Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish or other colours emblazoned on their sides and queer-sounding names written in large white letters for all the world to see.

At the time I joined the *Parham* it was necessary that a decoy ship should first take a torpedo, or else that she should allow herself to be shelled at long range. The ship was then 'abandoned' in the boats by what purported to be her merchant-service crew. We always referred to this as the 'panic party,' since the men forming it were carefully drilled to run about in a confused sort of way and to lower the boats lop-sided—in short, to behave as though they were an undisciplined rabble unaccustomed to strict naval routine.

But on board the 'Q Ship,' meanwhile, the guns' crews remained hidden by their concealed weapons. The submarine might then approach submerged and cruise round the ship with her periscope showing. Seeing no signs of movement, or nothing suspicious in her victim, she might then come to the

surface to take prisoners out of the boats, and to find out details of the vessel attacked. This was the chance for which every ‘Q Ship’ captain wished. If the submarine appeared in a position where his guns would bear, up would go the White Ensign, down would go the flaps or dummy boats and deckhouses concealing the guns, and crash would go the first rounds.

In order that they should remain afloat after being torpedoed, all the later decoy ships had their bulkheads strengthened and carried a buoyant wooden cargo. This saved a good many of them, though not all.

Nevertheless, it was a horribly risky and cold-blooded business. It was not like an honest fight between, say, two destroyers recognising each other as hostile, where they mutually hammered each other until one either sank or ran away. ‘Q Ship’ actions were generally a game of bluff, the wits and ingenuity of the decoy ship’s captain being pitted against that of the submarine. It was all on the lap of the gods who won, and though, as I have since been told, twenty-two submarines were sunk by ‘Q Ships’ of various types during the war, twenty-two of the latter were put under by German U-boats.

On joining the *Parham* I had speedily to drop all my previous ideas of naval discipline. As we were supposed to represent a merchant ship, we not merely behaved like one; but adopted even the merchant service lingo. Moreover, we wore plain clothes at sea, the more disreputable the better, with mufflers instead of collars. It was truly comic to see some of the men lounging about smoking and spitting in conspicuous positions throughout the ship, wearing bowlers or grimy felt hats, and garments that looked as if they had been bought from a rag-and-bone merchant’s barrow.

Incidentally, as we necessarily hadn't time to change into uniform if we went suddenly into action, I sometimes wondered what would happen to us if we were made prisoners in plain clothes. Should we be shot out of hand as *franc-tireurs*, or should we be saved by the facts that we had fought under the White Ensign and our names duly appeared in the Navy List? The main thing, of course, was *not* to be captured.

As our ship's company was unduly large for a merchant ship of our size, and a crowd of men on deck would inevitably give us away as a 'Q Ship' to any submarine, not all the crew could be allowed on deck in daylight in any positions whence they were visible from outside the ship. Every little detail of this sort had to be thought of, and when washed underclothes were hung up to dry, for instance, care had to be taken that none of the distinctive naval 'flannels'—in other words, the flannel shirts bound with blue jean round the neck—figured amongst the laundry.

Then, after dark, we sometimes altered the appearance of the ship. Spare ventilators or cowls might be fitted here and there, the positions of boats altered, the appearance of the masts changed by fitting crosstrees or topmasts, or painted strips of canvas lashed here and there to alter the silhouette of the ship from outside. We also carried a dummy deck cargo of wood, which looked all right from outside; but was really a mere skin of planks or pit-props piled up on either side of the forward and after well-decks. The large neutral markings we sometimes showed on our sides—blue with a yellow cross for Sweden; red with a white cross for Denmark; red, white, and blue horizontal for Holland, and so on—were either painted on large wooden flaps hinged in the middle, or on canvas. In either case, I believe, we were not supposed to open fire with

these neutral markings showing, even if the White Ensign had been hoisted in place of the neutral colours.

We weren't very long at Devonport, and soon after I joined we were ordered to Queenstown, our new base. Thence, after twenty-four hours or so in harbour, we sallied forth with orders to cruise up and down on the trade route along the south coast of Ireland to a position about 200 miles west of the Fastnet, off Cape Clear. This was where most of the traffic passed to and fro between England and America, and where enemy submarines were unusually active.

We generally arranged to be steaming eastward during the day, as if homeward bound. At night, when the submarines might be expected to be on the surface charging batteries or giving their crews a breath of fresh air, we turned out to sea again. During the hours of darkness we generally disguised the ship as already described, sometimes merely by altering our appearance, or else by adopting neutral colours or markings. I imagine our skipper, who was a lieutenant-commander R.N., had a pretty free hand in what he did.

Steaming to and fro at our best speed of 9 knots was a bit monotonous after the 20 knots we had invariably used in destroyers. We seemed literally to be crawling. All the same, the time didn't hang heavily on my hands. There wasn't much for me to do in the doctoring line, so I spent a good many hours on the bridge, and helping the paymaster with the mess accounts. The other officers, apart from the lieutenant-commander in command, comprised two lieutenants, one sub-lieutenant, three engineers, a paymaster—all of the R.N.R.—and my own humble self. The little mess was a bit crowded; but we were a happy, cheery lot, and so were the men.

Almost every day our wireless intercepted reports of ships being attacked or sunk. Sometimes they were twenty miles away, sometimes fifty, sometimes as much as a hundred. It seemed absolutely certain that our turn would come sooner or later, and at dawn each morning, when we had turned our bows homeward, the officers forgathered on the bridge or on deck anxiously scanning the sea through their binoculars for the peculiar black hump which might be the conning tower of a submarine. It was rather nervy work this, watching and waiting hour after hour, day after day, and, though I never dared to say so, I felt rather like the tethered calf or kid used as bait for a man-eating tiger. One consolation, however, was that the weather was pretty good, with no sea to speak of.

Dawn came as usual on our fifth or sixth day out on patrol, and found us steaming eastward as an ordinary British tramp steamer. Like all the other officers, I never took off my clothes at sea except for an occasional wash, and daylight found us all on deck for our usual scrutiny of the horizon. There was nothing in sight, so after a bit I went below again for another short sleep, and then got up and washed and had breakfast. The old ship was lurching about a bit, and when I went on deck for a smoke the sea was choppy and flecked with white horses, so that it would have been very difficult to see the flutter of spray thrown up by a submarine's periscope. Patches of light mist were hanging about the horizon, and the visibility alternated, I should imagine, between 5000 and 8000 yards.

At about ten o'clock, when I was in the saloon with the paymaster, he writing up his store accounts and myself censoring some of the men's letters which we hoped to post three or four days later on our arrival in harbour, we heard the din of the alarm-gongs sounding throughout the ship. We

knew what that meant. A submarine was in sight. Grabbing our caps, we bolted.

The guns' crews, keeping out of sight, were rushing to their stations at the 4-inch in the dummy deckhouse aft, and the two 12-pounders mounted either side amidships in small cabins with collapsible sides. I had no particular action station; but was ready to go to either of the dressing stations in case we had any one wounded. One of these was amidships under cover, and the other aft. I visited them both in turn to see that the first-aid parties were ready with all the paraphernalia, and then went on deck to see what was happening.

The ship was still jogging along on her course, and about two miles away, just before the starboard beam, was a grey submarine on the surface. Looking at her through glasses I could see the water washing over her low hull, the conning-tower and superstructure amidships with men upon it, and, just before it, what looked like a 4·1-inch gun. Apparently she had only just appeared, for even as I watched I noticed men making their way forward towards the gun. I saw them slew it round and cock up the muzzle in our direction, and knew what was coming next. We were about to be shelled. I had rather a sickish feeling as I waited for the first round. Our ship was a pretty big target, and we couldn't retaliate until we were fairly certain of hitting at closer range. That chance wouldn't be likely to come until we had been hit ourselves.

It seemed an age before I saw the red flash and the cloud of brown cordite smoke which showed that she had fired. Minutes seemed to pass until, simultaneously with the boom of the report, a great fountain of spray leapt out of the sea about 200 yards short of the ship, and the projectile,

ricochetting off the water, went sailing over our heads with a fiendish whistle.

She fired again, and this time the shell came closer. Our own ship, meanwhile, was still steaming ahead, and was gradually edging in towards the U-boat. Old man Fritz, however, was wily. He seemed to realise we were a decoy ship, and, while still firing his gun, was moving ahead to keep at a respectable distance. I could see the water breaking over his bows, and realised that he was travelling at about 12 or 13 knots to our 9. In other words, he had the legs of us on the surface.

It was our job to tempt him into close range where every shot would hit, for a submarine at 4000 yards is a very difficult target. The only way to do this was to stop our ship and to send the 'panic party' away in our boats while keeping the guns' crews on board. This might deceive him into thinking that the old *Parham* had been abandoned, when perhaps he would approach to have a look at the boats.

What orders were passed from the bridge I do not know; but the submarine still kept his distance and continued to fire. The shell came closer and closer, splashing the sea all around us. Then I heard a thud and a clang, followed by the roar of an explosion, as one landed somewhere forward.

The blighter had got the range accurately, and though we were doing our level best to close him, he still managed to keep his distance.

The next round whined over our heads and dropped into the sea about 20 yards on the other side of the ship. The next hit, and so did a third and a fourth. Things were getting too warm to last. We should be shelled to blazes before we could do anything to retaliate.

I was just going below in case we had any wounded, when an order came down from the bridge. I heard men shouting, and saw the White Ensign at our fore-masthead. Then the hinged sides hiding our guns rattled down, and the weapons came into action. I was lying flat on the deck not far from our midship 12-pounder, and was nearly deafened by its reports as it fired round after round.

Looking out I could see shell splashes fairly close to the U-boat, which seemed to have increased her speed and to be moving away from us. I put my glasses up, and noticed her men leaving their gun and running aft towards the conning tower. Our shell continued to plop into the sea all round her; but I didn't see the ball of red flame and gout of smoke which showed that she had been hit. Accurate shooting, however, must have been very difficult for our chaps. The ship was wobbling about a lot, and the submarine, fully two miles off, was a very small target.

Then she disappeared altogether. She had dived.

We hovered about the spot for some time looking for further signs of her; but saw no trace. It was mortifying to think that she had escaped scot-free, while we had been hit four times. We had no casualties among the men, which was pure good luck. A shell, however, had burst in one of the storerooms, and missing our last case of whisky had smashed up a case of condensed milk and another of pickles. 'Bingo,' our mongrel dog, who happened upon the mess and greedily lapped it up, was violently sick in consequence.

We repaired damages, and, while steaming to the northward, spent the afternoon disguising the ship. It seemed safe enough, as the mist had thickened and the submarine was out of sight. I remember we transformed ourselves into a

Swedish timber ship, by arranging the suitable markings on our sides and red-leading a few plates here and there to alter our appearance, while erecting our dummy deck cargo of wood. This latter job was rather a lengthy one, for all the baulks and planks had to be passed out of the hold and erected on either side of both well-decks in a sort of barricade.

And while we sweated and cursed and got splinters into our fingers, old man Fritz, whose under-water speed was practically the same as our full speed, must have been watching through his periscope and chuckling to himself. Indeed, he was stalking us, waiting for his opportunity.

It wasn't long in coming!

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER IV

MY impressions of what happened during the evening are very blurred and indistinct, for events followed each other so rapidly and I had so much to think about that I lost all sense of time and sequence. Moreover, my wrist-watch stopped when I subsequently found myself swimming about in the water.

It must have been at about seven o'clock, however, when the steward had reported our evening meal ready and I was in my cabin washing my hands, that I heard men shouting and running about on deck. *I* whipped on my coat and cap and made for the door; but before I got there I was flung backwards by the ship giving a sudden heavy lurch.

It is rather difficult to describe it. It felt as if a giant had taken a running kick at her with an iron-shod boot, or had belted her with a huge hammer. She shook and shuddered and quivered, and simultaneously with the shock there came the muffled, tearing thud of a heavy explosion. The sound was in no sense sharp or ear-shattering like the report of a gun; but it didn't need that to tell me we had been torpedoed. The detonation of about 400 lb. of high explosive alongside a small ship like the *Parham* is felt far more than in a big vessel like a liner or a battleship.

I felt half-dazed, very confused, and unhappy, rather as if I had suddenly woken up in a bed ashore to find the house tumbling down over my head. I remember picking myself up from the floor, cramming a few oddments into my pockets,

and then making my way on deck. It is peculiar how one behaves on the spur of the moment in an emergency when one isn’t really thinking. Among the useless things I afterwards found in my pockets were a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, and a tin of talcum powder!

On reaching the deck I noticed the ship was heeling over to starboard and very much down by the bows. She had, indeed, been torpedoed forward. There was a crowd of men on the fore well-deck and more were coming aft from the forecastle. One or two were being carried, and realising I might be of some use I went down the ladder towards them. I seem to remember that at this time one of our boats, all of which were amidships abaft the bridge, was being lowered with men in her, though of this I can’t really be certain. Also, I recollect looking hurriedly out to starboard without seeing any signs of a submarine or her periscope.

Climbing down the slippery iron ladder I went forward towards the group of men. Some of them were laughing at one fellow who was dyed bright vermilion almost from head to foot. I thought at first it was blood until I noticed that the colour was all wrong and heard the chap’s blasphemy as he tried to scrape the stuff out of his eyes and mouth. It appeared that he had been mixing a drum of liquid red-lead when the explosion took place almost beneath and sprayed the beastly stuff all over him.

It was about the only thing we found to laugh at, however, for another poor fellow had a broken leg and two more were badly smashed up. Realising that the ship might sink and that it was useless to take them below, I told the bearers to put them down on the deck and sent some one off for a first-aid bag, splints, and dressings.

I don't know how long I took doing what I could for those three injured. It may have been five minutes, ten, or even twenty. But I was just shoving a morphia tablet into the mouth of one of them and was telling him to keep it under his tongue and not to swallow it, when there came another thundering, deafening crash which seemed to compress the air. The ship appeared to lift bodily and shake herself.

I was on my knees at the time and looked aft over my shoulder to see a huge column of whitish-grey water, mingled with black smoke or coal-dust, go shooting up into the air from our starboard side abreast of the engine-room. I watched it, fascinated, as it mounted up for fully a hundred feet. Then it curled over, hung for a moment, and seemed to quiver before crashing down with the noise of a mighty waterfall. We were all fairly drenched.

I remember hearing the men's startled ejaculations, and thinking to myself that this was the end of us. Some one from the bridge shouted, 'Abandon ship!' I got hold of some fellows to carry the injured to the boats.

But there was no time to do anything. The ship, still shuddering, seemed to fling herself over on her side until the starboard edge of her deck was under water. The sort of zareba-like erection on that side of the well-deck, our dummy deck cargo of timber, had been flung all over the place by the first torpedo, some of it on deck, some into the sea. I managed to clutch one of the injured men with the idea of trying to help him to safety, but the very next moment the ship tilted still further over and slid us both down the iron deck into the sea. I could not be certain, for I had no time to look; but I think that by this time the *Parham's* bows were practically under water, if not wholly submerged.

I caught my knee a frightful crack as I went overboard with the man in my arms. I went right under the water for an instant and let go of my man so that I could swim. There was plenty of timber in the sea, and bobbing up alongside a short baulk I managed to get it under my arms. The fellow I had tried to save broke surface near me. He was gasping and spluttering and I managed to grab him by the collar. The bit of wood gave ample flotation for us both.

The poor chap was dazed, but finding his breath he kept on asking me: “Will we be all right, sir?”

I said: “Of course we will! Kick out if you can. Let’s get away from the ship. We’ll find a boat presently.”

I was thinking of what I had always heard of the suction created by a sinking ship. I didn’t dare look round for fear of what I might see, and had an awful vision of the ship rolling over on top of us, and dragging us to the bottom entangled in the rigging. That, or the suction, or wreckage shooting up from below when she sank, seemed the immediate dangers, so I kicked out with my feet and persuaded my companion to do the same. He wasn’t much use, poor chap.

We carried three largish lifeboats, so far as I can remember, barely sufficient to accommodate all our officers and men, and then only with a tight squeeze. One boat was already in the water, for I could see her about forty yards away with some men in her. They were pulling others out of the sea. I tried to attract their attention, but they were far too busy to worry about us. There seemed to be dozens of men swimming about, and I could see no signs of other boats.

While I swam, I remember wondering what would become of us, myself in particular. The last time I had looked at the chart, soon after tea, we were well over a hundred miles from

the nearest land. It seemed unlikely in the extreme that I should ever reach *terra firma* on a baulk of wood.

Should we be picked up?

This depended upon what other ships were in our vicinity, and whether our people had managed to get off a wireless signal asking for help. That I had no means of knowing.

I realised that our prospects were anything but rosy. Some submarines had a habit of coming to the surface and machine-gunning survivors in the water. I hoped fervently that our submarine commander was one of the more humane kind. Even so, we might be left floating on the wreckage until we dropped off one by one from exhaustion to perish by drowning. What did it feel like to drown?

What a bloody, wasteful business war was. I wouldn't have minded being cleanly and decently killed in action; but where was the sense or justice in drowning us by slow degrees? I felt rather exasperated. I wasn't conscious of having done harm to any one.

The ship must have sunk without so much as a gurgle, for when I looked round perhaps five or ten minutes later there were no signs of her at all. There was a bit of a swell from the south-west, which made it difficult to see much with my head only just above the surface; but when I was lifted for a moment I could see the water covered with wreckage and the heads of swimmers. The boat was still busy picking up people.

Fifty yards away from me, in the place where the ship had sunk, another boat floated bottom up. A boat, even a capsized one, offered more security than a piece of timber, and, encouraging my companion to fresh efforts, I turned round and started to paddle towards it. As we slowly approached, I

saw some other men swimming in the same direction. That was all to the good. With any luck, we might be able to right her and bale her out.

All the same, we stood a pretty poor chance. We were over a hundred miles from the land. What about water and food; compass, masts, and sail; oars and rudder, and all the necessary things to sustain life and to propel ourselves in case we were not rescued?

The sea, thank heaven, was not unduly cold, though it was hardly the temperature for voluntary bathing. My clothes, for I still had everything on, made swimming rather difficult, though I think they helped to keep me warm.

I didn't much like the look of the weather, however. Sunset would not come for an hour or more; but there were heavy, leaden-looking clouds banked up on the western horizon. They seemed to presage wind, and plenty of it. An Atlantic gale was the last thing we wanted, though I rather prayed for wind from the right direction—a breeze from the west or south-west that would blow us towards the land, instead of away from it.

After what seemed an eternity, eight or nine of us, of whom I was the only officer, were hanging on to that overturned boat and holding a sort of mothers' meeting as to how to get her right side up. Some were for doing one thing and some another, while at least three were past caring.

Old Bingo, the dog, was there too, still looking very sick and sorry for himself after his unholy forenoon meal of condensed milk and pickles. Some one had hoisted him on to the more or less flat bottom of the boat for safety, where, hanging on with his claws, with his tongue hanging out, a wild look in his eye, and his sandy-coloured hair all plastered

to his peculiar-shaped body, he looked less like a dog than ever.

God only knows who Bingo's father and mother were, poor old hound! We had wanted a dog to give ourselves an air of verisimilitude as a tramp steamer, and Bingo fitted the rôle to a nicety. One of our men had picked him up in a pub. in Devonport for half-a-crown and a pint of beer, and one can't expect a pedigree for that. All the same, he was a likeable beast, and dogs always appeal to me. The more pathetic they look the better.

We were still arguing as to how the boat should be righted when we saw the submarine's conning-tower break surface about 600 yards away. We stopped doing anything to watch what she would do, and at that moment we must all have been thinking the same thing.

The game was in her hands. She had won. Would she do the dirty on us, or would she not?

We watched her anxiously as the conning-tower rose higher and higher out of the water and the long hull broke surface in a swirl of white water. Then the lid opened, and I saw men clambering out, one after the other. Some of them went forward to the gun on her fore-deck, and several seemed to have rifles.

Our other boat had drifted some distance away from us, and the U-boat moved towards her on the surface. Then she stopped, and our boat was called alongside. There was some confabulation; but no shooting. I saw two figures leave the boat and go on board the submarine, and knew what that meant. As there was no room in submarines for an unlimited number of prisoners, they generally contented themselves by

taking as specimens the captain and the chief engineer of any ship sunk. They had evidently done so in this case.

What would they do to the rest of us?

I felt horribly anxious as I saw our boat shove off clear and the submarine go ahead at full speed and steam in our direction. For a moment or two I thought she was about to ram our overturned boat to destroy it; but when within a couple of hundred yards she suddenly swerved, and shot past us at a distance of little more than fifty feet. Her deck and conning-tower were crowded with men who had come up for an airing. They saw us all right, for they gesticulated and shouted derisively. If I had known any German I should have asked for some food and water, though I doubt very much if it would have been any use. I suppose, really, we were lucky to get off without being fired upon in the water. I had heard of submarine commanders who had done that, or was it exaggeration?

Anyhow, this particular U-boat—I could see no number on her conning-tower—steered off to the southward. Within ten minutes, by which time we were again busy about our boat, she was out of sight. I didn't quite know whether to be glad or sorry.

Some more men came swimming towards us and, after a hard tussle, we eventually managed to get the boat right side up. Then, after making certain the plug was in and well hammered home, we proceeded to bale her out. That took a long time, for there was no bucket or proper baler. We had to use our sea-boots and an empty fruit tin we found in one of the stern lockers.

All our boats were properly provisioned when on board the ship, but most of the contents of this one had been spilled out

when she capsized. There was a single 6-lb. tin of corned beef in a locker, a large air-tight case of ships' biscuit lashed under one of the thwarts, and a 2-gallon wicker-covered rum jar of fresh water. I took these under my charge at once.

There was no rudder or boat's compass; but two oars and a boathook still remained lashed to the thwarts. We managed to find another oar floating about in the water, and picked up several short pieces of timber which might be useful.

It was dusk by the time we got the boat moderately free of water and everybody on board. Counting myself there were twenty-three all told; twenty-three men and Bingo, the dog.

The other boat, on board of which were three officers and eight men under the command of the first lieutenant, came pulling towards us. We held a consultation as to what had better be done, and arranged to stick together during the night. We also went into the matter of water and provisions, but she was no better off than we were for the number of men on board. However, we agreed to share and share alike if the worst came to the worst.

The captain and the second engineer had been made prisoners by the submarine, the first lieutenant told me, the poor old chief engineer having been killed or drowned with a good many men when the torpedo exploded in the engine-room. But one good bit of news he gave us was that a wireless signal had been got off after the first torpedo hit us. It had been answered by a destroyer, so provided we didn't drift too far away from the spot in which the ship had sunk we had a fair chance of being saved next morning. The worst of it was we had no lanterns or fireworks to attract attention after dark.

The night came down as black as the inside of a cow. It had started to breeze up soon after sundown, and at what I should

think was about ten o'clock, the swell began to break. We were wet through and chilled to the bone, and sat huddled together with our teeth chattering. It was the acme of misery.

I doled out a driblet of water to each man and a minute fragment of corned beef, together with half a ships' biscuit. They wanted more water, poor chaps, and God knows, I did too. I had to talk to them like a Dutch uncle before they realised that we were properly up against it if help didn't come in the morning.

I buoyed myself up with the hope that help would come. It *must* come.

The night passed slowly enough. Sometimes I found myself dozing off a little, only to wake up again with the uneasy jerky motion of the boat, or a whiff of spray splashing in my face. Old Bingo, who seemed to have taken a fancy to me, lay across my knees. I think we acted as each other's hot-water bottles.

My clothes gradually dried on me; but I was stiff and sore and numb with cold when, at the first gleam of daylight low down on the eastern horizon, I staggered to my feet to look for the other boat. It was difficult to see at first, for it wasn't properly light and the sea had risen, so that at one moment we were buried in a hollow, and the next were balanced on the top of a breaking sea.

The light grew and grew. The horizon became yellow, then pink, then vivid scarlet with the glow of the sunrise. Then the sun burst over that edge of the sea looking like a gigantic blood-orange, and every cloud in the sky became suffused and shot with rose colour and gold.

Magnificent though it was, however, I wasn't noticing the sky. I was anxiously gazing round the whole three hundred

and sixty degrees of the horizon as the boat lifted on each successive breaking swell.

And at last, with a feeling almost of physical sickness, I realised the bitter truth. The other boat was nowhere to be seen. Somehow or other we had parted company during the night.

I searched the edge of the sea again for the hull or masts of a ship. The visibility was extreme but not a thing broke its monotony—not even the faintest pencil of smoke from some distant steamer.

We were alone in that horrible greeny-grey expanse flecked with white horses. We were over a hundred miles from the nearest shore—twenty-three of us, with something less than two gallons of water!

We had no mast and sail, and only three oars. We must improvise some sort of a sail if we wished to get anywhere.

Call it a hundred and twenty miles to the land to be on the safe side. Suppose, with what we could improvise in the way of a sail, we made good one knot in the right direction. That would mean one hundred and twenty hours—five days.

Two gallons of water, rather less in reality. But two gallons of water was eight quarts, or sixteen pints. Call it fifteen pints. That would mean three pints a day for the twenty-three of us. Was that sufficient to keep us alive? I doubted it.

I prayed for rain, but looking round the sky the light clouds, torn and fretted into streamers, seemed only to portend wind, and plenty of it.

Then it was that I felt utterly despondent.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER V

IT is difficult to know how to begin to write of the eight awful days that followed.

Even if I had had the inclination, I had no means of keeping a record, for though some of us had old letters or odd scraps of sodden paper about our persons, there wasn't such a thing as a pencil among us. Nor was there a going watch in the boat, which meant we could only tell the time roughly by the sun. To keep count of the days, I amused myself by carving a nick in the gunwale of the boat each evening at sundown.

What with our thirst and hunger, our gradually increasing exhaustion, our cold and stiffness during the bitter nights, the blazing heat of some of the days, the soreness caused by the incessant movement of the boat and the sea water drying on our bodies, our swollen joints which soon made it an agony to move, and the lack of proper sleep, we seemed to lose count of time. I know my thoughts wandered strangely. When I dozed off for a few minutes I sometimes dreamt of food and drink, though more often I woke myself up in a sort of horrible nightmare. The men, too, talked and raved in their sleep. I was often light-headed. It needed the greatest concentration of will-power to retain a grip of oneself, or to take any interest in what went on around us.

I suppose I had better try to start at the beginning. Our first preoccupation when we found ourselves alone was to make some sort of mast and sail. As we had only three oars, and

needed one of them for steering instead of the missing rudder, and the other two for pulling in case it fell flat calm, we used the ash boathook for a mast, and managed to split up some of the bottom-boards for a yard. Luckily there was a certain amount of cordage in the boat in the shape of her painter, and a heaving line that we found in one of the lockers. In another locker we found the usual boat's bag which, among other things, contained a small ball of spunyarn, a whole reel of sailmaker's twine, and some sailmaker's needles.

The chief difficulty was the material for our sail. Having surrendered my own shirt, which was in pretty good condition, I asked the men who had most clothing to volunteer theirs also. We got more than enough, so selecting those that looked strongest, I carefully ripped up one of the side seams of each, cut off the arms, and put one of the men on to sewing them together with twine.

It took most of the forenoon to finish that sail, and the result was pathetic. It looked like a patchwork quilt, or Joseph's coat of many colours. It bulged where it shouldn't, and had various odd bits of material hanging loose. All the same, when we had stayed the mast, fitted sheets and halliards, and hoisted the sail, it bellied out bravely in the breeze. We rigged out an oar over the stern for steering, and, if our mouths hadn't been so parched, could have shouted for joy when the heavy old boat actually gathered way and started to move ahead.

I doubt if we travelled at more than a knot or a knot and a half with a stiffish breeze behind us. Moreover, we could only run before the wind. All the same, we had started to travel in the right direction, for the wind, so far as I could tell from the bearing of the sun, was about south-west.

I soon realised, however, that if it came on to blow really hard we should have to furl our home-made sail altogether to save it from being blown into ribbons. Shirt material is flimsy at the best of times, and our stitches were not calculated to stand much pressure without tearing away from the material. My chief dread, however, was lest the breeze should fly round to the eastward, in fact, to any direction between north and south passing through east. If it did, I could see no hope of *ever* making the land. We should be blown out to sea willy-nilly, where, unless we were sighted and picked up by some passing ship, a not altogether likely occurrence, we should either be swamped and drowned in a gale of wind, or perish miserably by thirst and starvation.

The prospect wasn't at all rosy; but I was glad to remember that the prevailing winds in the area were westerly. I naturally didn't say anything of my fears to the men. I didn't want to make them more despondent than they already were.

The breeze increased slightly during the day, and there was a moderate breaking sea rolling up from astern which helped us along on our course but made steering difficult. But there was no real vice in either wind or sea, and we hardly shipped a drop of water.

The sun was abominably hot in the middle of the day, and we were all parched with thirst. Some of the men asked about the water, so once more I went into the question of food and drink and explained to them what I intended to do. We would serve out the merest suspicion of a drink twice a day, roughly a tablespoonful at about noon, and another at sundown. At noon, too, each man would receive a small shred of corned beef out of our 6-lb. tin. The thick ships' biscuits, I calculated, could be served out at the rate of one and a half per man per day. At first they were fairly popular; but as our thirst

increased we found them too hard and too dry to masticate and to swallow with the almost complete absence of saliva in our swollen mouths. We tried soaking them in sea-water until they were soft and pulpy. This made them slightly more palatable, while, rather to my surprise, the slightly salty flavour did not seem to increase our thirst.

Bingo, the dog, shared and shared alike with the rest of us throughout the trip, though it must have been on the fifth or sixth day that one of the men suggested eating him after collecting and drinking the poor beast's blood. I had heard of shipwrecked people cast away in boats drawing lots as to who should be killed and eaten to keep the others alive. There was the case of the men of the yacht *Mignonette* in 1884, who, after eighteen days in an open boat, and having been without food for a week and water for five days, killed and ate the boy, who would have died in any case.

But somehow I couldn't imagine myself eating our poor old hound, and I could see the proposal wasn't very popular with most of the men, famished and nearly mad with thirst though they were. Indeed, there were the makings of a row when the subject was broached. So I solved the difficulty by putting it to the vote. Two men only were in favour of Bingo's execution, and all the rest of us were against it.

And I'll swear that Bingo knew what was happening. If ever a dog grinned with gratitude when the verdict was given he did. He lived to reach the shore with the rest of us, and I hope survived to a good old age to dream over his adventures in the Irish farm where we left him. Incidentally, when our water failed entirely during our fifth day in the boat, it was Bingo who gave us the idea of licking up what little dew fell in the night. I don't honestly know that it did much to help matters.

From the very first, realising that the lack of water would be our worst privation, I advised the men to adopt the time-honoured dodge of dipping their clothes in the sea and putting them on wet. We all did this during the heat of the day and I think it helped. So did sucking buttons, which seemed to encourage the flow of saliva.

While on the subject of thirst, I may say I was very glad we had no means of smoking. Most of us had pipes and tobacco or cigarettes, which could easily have been dried; but there was no method of lighting them. Our matches were completely sodden and useless, and though we dried them in the sun, their heads came off as soon as we tried to strike them. We had no burning glass either, and though I tried to use my watch glass, it wouldn't function. I know I felt an intense craving for tobacco all the time, thirst or no thirst. If I could have smoked, assuredly I should have. Some of the men tried chewing tobacco, but soon gave it up. It merely made them sick.

The second night came down after a glaring sunset of bright copper-colour and sickly yellow which overtopped the masses of purplish cloud piled up on the horizon. I didn't like its appearance. The colour was too harsh and glaring and the clouds looked ominous and hard-edged, almost as if they had been cut out of cardboard with scissors.

But we drove on during the night with our sail set, steering as best we could with the oar over the stern, and keeping an approximately steady course by keeping the Pole Star, whenever we could see it, somewhere on the port beam.

Mawson, a petty officer, kept the first watch, during which I lay stretched out in the stern and managed to doze off occasionally with the sound of the wind and rushing water in

my ears. He roused me when he thought it was midnight, and, after massaging my legs and trying to flap some warmth into my numbed carcass, I relieved him at the steer-oar.

"What d'you think of the weather?" I asked.

"I don't like it, sir," he whispered. "Sea's getting up, so's the wind."

"Ought we to get the sail down?"

After all, he was a professional seaman. I was not.

"No, sir," he answered. "I should hang on a bit. Give me a shout if it comes on worse."

He coiled himself up at my feet and in five minutes was fast asleep. I envied him. I could never sleep as Mawson did. And what a good fellow he was, a veritable tower of strength, full of ideas and common-sense. I should have been like a child without him to back me up.

I had my work cut out to keep the boat more or less before the wind, and by the time the first grey light of dawn appeared over the horizon ahead things looked very nasty. The wind had increased and the paling stars overhead were all but obscured in streamers of flying scud driving in from the westward. The sea, too, was steeper and more threatening, each great rolling hummock topped with yeasty white. At one moment, poised on a foaming crest, the boat shot forward like an arrow with the makeshift sail full. Then, as the sea passed on under us, we seemed to be slipping backwards down an interminable slope until we subsided into a great valley between two walls of water with the sail flapping and useless.

The motion was horrible, a sort of everlasting see-saw and switchback combined. Spray was already starting to break on board, and every time the stern started to lift I gazed anxiously aft at the breaking wave behind us, expecting to be

overwhelmed. But, thank heaven, it was a fairly long sea, with a hundred feet or more between successive crests, and the boat responded nobly. I should explain, perhaps, that she was an ordinary merchant ship's lifeboat, something over twenty feet long with a sharp bow and stern. Very broad in the beam, she was fitted with air-tanks forward and aft and along the sides under the thwarts. Though heavy, she was remarkably buoyant.

I made up my mind to hold on for a bit, for we were certainly travelling fast in the right direction.

The sky was rapidly becoming overcast. Most of the men still slept in queer contorted attitudes in the bottom of the boat with their heads on each other's bodies. One or two of them groaned and talked incessantly in their sleep. Their pinched, unshaven faces looked ghastly in the growing daylight. They reminded me of corpses.

I was feeling damnably hungry and thirsty myself, and so far we had been only about thirty-six hours or so without a proper meal—from tea-time the day before yesterday.

What should we look like at the end of five days or a week? It might take us all that to reach the land if we weren't picked up beforehand. Moreover, I had the chart in my mind's eye. With the wind in the south-west we were travelling about north-east, or diagonally towards the land, not by the shortest route. This meant that from 100 miles the distance might be lengthened to as much as 150, or half as much again. It was a doleful prospect.

I don't know what time it was that the wind started to blow in fierce squalls and the fag-end of a breaking sea crashed over the stern. But it woke Mawson, and after a brief consultation we decided to take the sail off the boat and to

make some sort of a sea-anchor with what timber we possessed. We should probably have broached to and swamped if we had carried on.

Mawson went forward and lashed all our spare wood and bottom-boards together like a rough raft. We didn't use the oars for this purpose, as we couldn't risk losing them. After nearly three-quarters of an hour's work, however, he had finished making his bundle and secured it to the long painter in the bows. The difficulty now was to get the boat head on to the wind without being capsized or swamped in the process.

We lowered the sail and got an oar out each side to turn her, while I stood up in the stern to heave away on the steer-oar when the time came. Then we waited until the boat started to sink into a hollow between the great seas.

"Stand by, sir!" Mawson shouted. "Now, sir!" Helped by a couple of men he dropped the sea-anchor over the side.

It drifted slowly astern, while we laboured at the three oars to turn the boat end for end as quickly as we could. By the time she was about half-way round we started to climb the next watery slope, and, as I laboured, I remember looking over to starboard to where, perhaps thirty feet away over our heads, our moving hillock terminated in a crest of frothing white. It seemed to hiss and to roar as it bore remorselessly down upon us. Terrified at the sight, for I made certain we were about to be swamped, I tugged at the steer-oar with all my strength, while the men amidships did the same—one oar pulling and the other backing.

It was touch and go. The wave-top came closer and closer as we rose, and the boat seemed sluggish and heavy, reluctant to move through the last forty-five degrees. But I had forgotten the sea-anchor. The painter suddenly tautened out

with a jerk that sent me sprawling, and the stern spun round—just in time. She seemed to toboggan through the broken water on the crest and into the next grey valley without really shipping much water, though the men forward were drenched.

We brought every one as far aft as they could be crowded to keep the bows of the boat as high as possible out of the water. Throughout the whole of that miserable day and until nearly midnight, when the wind went down and we were able to sail on, we lay at our sea-anchor slowly drifting to leeward. We were wet through and chilled to the bone, and at least half-a-dozen times, when an unusually heavy sea broke over the bows and flooded us nearly to the thwarts, we had to bale for our lives with anything we could lay our hands upon. We were weakening fast, and the only bright spots in that interminable day came at noon and again at sundown, when we served out those precious drops of water. The clouds scurried overhead, and once or twice I thought we were going to have rain. But no rain came, nothing but driving spray.

It was blowing, I should think, a moderately strong gale, and only those who have experienced an Atlantic blow can have any possible conception what it meant to us in that open boat. Sitting in the stern sheets as the boat rose and fell in a perpetual switchback motion, gazing alternately at the grey sky and the deep grey-green hollows, with the thunder of breaking water and the patter of falling spray constantly in our ears, was a sort of waking nightmare. The seas seemed as high as houses. Time and time again, watching their smoking crests driving towards us, I made certain we were about to be overwhelmed. But as often the boat rode through it with nothing worse than a burst of heavy spray.

Had we possessed more strong rope in the boat we should have veered the sea-anchor further ahead. But this wasn't

possible. Even so, I was in terror that the painter would chafe through where it passed over the bows, and at least a dozen times Mawson made his way forward to serve it over with rags of clothing and spunyarn. If it had carried away we should have been hurled broadside on to the sea and nothing could have saved us.

During that dismal day we had occasional bursts of sunlight, when it was rather wonderful to see the blue-green translucence of the seas with the sun behind them, and the lace-like pattern of foam on their sloping sides. To tell the truth, however, we weren't in the mood to admire anything. Our bodies were sore with the constant chafe and movement. We had difficulty in moving our joints. Our throats were parched, and our tongues swollen. It was an effort even to talk.

On the third day, when we were again travelling to the north-eastward under our rag of a sail, now sadly frayed, we sighted smoke broad on the port quarter. It rose straight into the air like a pillar before drifting to leeward in a long layer, which showed that the steamer making it was moving in much the same direction as ourselves, that is, before the wind.

Buoyed up by the hope of being rescued, we tied coats to the two oars and hoisted them aloft. The smoke became more distinct, and the look on the haggard faces of the men as they watched it baffles description.

Then, as we lifted on the swells, we saw first a smoking funnel and two masts, and then the hull of a ship. She was an ordinary tramp steamer, at a distance, I should think, of about six miles.

She was steaming a slightly divergent course to the northward, and we headed in the same direction to try to cut

her off. For an hour we waved our home-made flags, did all we could to attract her attention. But she passed us unseeing at a distance of about five miles, and within an hour was getting further and further away on the port bow. In another half-hour she was completely out of sight. Nothing remained but her tantalising smoke trail on the horizon.

Words cannot describe our feelings when we realised she hadn't seen us. On first sighting her our hopes had been lifted sky-high as we realised help was at hand and our agony might be over. Then came an interminable period of suspense, when, every moment, we expected to see her turn in response to our frantic signals. Then, as she drew further away and we realised she was going, we felt numb with despair and disappointment. Our weakness, our helplessness, seemed a hundred times worse than before as we watched her fade gradually out of sight. Some of us prayed, some wept, others blasphemed.

And on that third day, when doling out the evening ration, I discovered that the water was not holding out as it should. I had to tell the men that in future the daily allowance would be the equivalent of about one tablespoonful served out at noon. They accepted the situation without a murmur, poor fellows. There was nothing else for it. But we were all weakening fast, and I had my eye on two of them who seemed worse than the others, and were hardly able to stir. Another poor chap, an able seaman, kept talking to himself in a way I didn't quite like. There was a peculiar wild look in his eyes as though he were going mad. Mawson noticed it too.

"I don't like the looks o' Strangeways, sir," he croaked under his breath. "Looks to me he's goin' potty. D'you think, sir, we'd better lash him up an' search his pockets? Maybe he's got a knife."

But somehow I didn’t like the idea of violence, and vetoed the suggestion.

“Let’s hang on a bit,” I said. “He can’t do much harm as he is.”

Two days later I wished that I had taken Mawson’s advice.

On the fourth day it was practically flat calm. The breeze had dropped and we were barely making headway under our sail. The sun blazed overhead in a cloudless sky, and the sea shone like burnished metal. We took off our shirts and vests, dipped them in sea-water, and put them on again. All the same, the baking heat made our thirst excruciating. There was a vile taste in our mouths. Our tongues were furred and horrible, and the mere driblet of water served out at noon did little to alleviate the agony.

On that day the strongest of us took spells at the oars to help the boat in the right direction. But we had no strength for pulling, and how many miles we travelled I shouldn’t like to say. I made up my mind that if the calm continued, another forty-eight hours would see the end of us. We seemed to have reached the limit of human endurance. The men’s faces, though burnt brick-red by the sun, were gaunt and hollow-cheeked. With the dark rings under their eyes, their bloodless lips and heavy growth of stubble, they looked ghastly. Their eyes followed me pathetically, as though I, being the only officer present, had the power of life or death over them. But what could I do to make things better? I was as helpless and as impotent as they were.

Strangeways sat crouched up in the bottom of the boat with his head in his hands, mumbling and muttering to himself. The other two men I had noticed as being worse than the others lay stretched out in the bottom of the boat like corpses.

Just before sunset, when the breeze sprang up from the south-west again and we hoisted the sail, Mawson came aft and whispered in my ear.

"Will you come forward and have a look at Butler, sir," he said in an awed voice.

Sick at heart I crawled forward, felt Able Seaman Butler's pulse, and put my hand over his heart.

He was dead!

I noticed one or two of the others eyeing the corpse in a furtive horrible kind of way when I made my pronouncement. I realised what was in their minds; but starvation was better than *that*. I called Mawson forward. We removed the identity disc, leather belt, boots, and a few things from the trousers pockets. Then, while I repeated what I could remember of the Funeral Service at Sea, we lifted the body and slid it over the side. We had no weights; but sinking slowly in a little trail of bubbles it disappeared astern. I wondered which of us would be the next.

All through the night we sailed on under a starry sky and a freshening breeze; but next morning the sea again started to rise. At about noon, when it was blowing half a gale, we were forced once more to heave our sea-anchor overboard. It was more difficult this time, for we were all very weak. The wind seemed stronger than before and the seas steeper and more menacing, and during the ten hours that we lay thus we were often baling like grim death with the boat nearly full of water.

It was at noon on this fifth day, after serving out the water, that I made the horrible discovery that we had no more than an inch of lukewarm, dirty-looking liquid left at the bottom of the rum jar. It was just sufficient to wet our lips the next day, no more.

On the sixth day, Strangeways, in a fit of delirium, tried to open the veins in his wrist with a razor. He raved and shouted and threatened to kill us all when we tried to disarm him, and undoubtedly would have done himself or some one else a mischief if one of the stokers, getting him round the neck from behind while he wasn't looking, hadn't borne him backwards. The others managed to take away his razor and to throw it overboard, whereupon Strangeways, shouting incoherencies, tried to follow it. He fought with the strength of three ordinary men when prevented, and it was a job to overpower him. I still had my pocket medicine case, and the drugs in the little glass bottles were undamaged by water. So I slipped a morphia tablet under his tongue. It soon quietened him.

During the seventh day, on which the heat was overpowering and we had no water at all, we suffered the torments of the damned. Our bones and our bodies ached. Our joints, our limbs, were swollen and painful to touch, so were our throats and tongues. We could scarcely articulate. But the sea remained moderately calm and the fair breeze held, so that we made tolerably good progress. Watching the red sun disappearing over the edge of the sea, however, I found myself wondering if I should ever see another sunset. To tell the truth, I didn't much care.

The wind fell during the night and at dawn on the eighth day the sun rose in an almost cloudless sky. Looking over the bows I thought I saw a thin purple smear on the eastern horizon. I rubbed my eyes and looked out again, and sure enough, when the sun had risen a few degrees, I realised that I was looking at the tops of mountains peeking up over the edge of the sea. They were fifteen or twenty miles away; but

having given up all hope, nobody except myself can ever realise what I felt at that moment.

"Land, Mawson! Land!" I managed to say, stirring him with my foot.

He woke up with a groan, pulled himself wearily to his feet and peered ahead.

You should have seen the faces of the men as he told them the joyful news. They sat up, one after the other, with their poor anxious faces gazing wistfully to the eastward. But one man, poor Williams, one of the stewards, still lay in the bottom of the boat. He had died during the night. We committed his remains to the sea.

It was flat calm without a breath of wind; but getting out the oars we took turns at pulling to the eastward. The men, forgetting their privations, seemed endowed with new strength, and the heavy boat foamed along as I had never seen her travel before. Some of them even tried to sing in their poor croaking voices. Even old Bingo sat on his haunches and sniffed the morning air. I saw his poor nose, cracked like a bit of old black indiarubber, quivering with excitement.

Very soon we saw a ruffle on the water out to sea. The breeze was coming, and eventually it reached us—a fine spanking breeze in the right direction. We laid in the two oars, made more sails out of our clothes, hoisted them aloft on the oars, and spread them to the wind. Our speed increased. As I sat at the steer-oar with my heart full of thankfulness I could hear the little bow-wave rippling round the forefoot.

The coast became more and more distinct as the day wore on, and our hunger and thirst was forgotten in the excitement. Some time during the afternoon we saw the slender white

pillar of a lighthouse between us and the shore. It was perhaps six miles away.

We reached it just before sundown, and saw the swell creaming round the edge of the buttress of rock upon which it stood. Then we heard the voices of the three lighthouse keepers as they came down the steps towards us. They looked fat and cheerful and well-favoured to the emaciated scarecrows about me.

How we worked that boat alongside I don't pretend to know, neither do I remember disembarking. But I do recollect climbing painfully on all fours up some steps covered in green weed behind a line of men in similar attitudes. We were weak with fatigue and exposure. Our faces, hands, and feet were blistered and swollen, our chins and noses raw and bleeding from licking up the dew in a vain endeavour to assuage our raging thirst. Every movement, every bending of the joints, brought sharp, stabbing twinges of agony.

Not one of the twenty-one men who crawled up those steps and passed in through the heavy bronze doorway of that lighthouse will ever forget his first drink of cool, clear water at the hands of the keepers. It was difficult to make them sip it slowly to start with; but common-sense and persuasion eventually prevailed. Even old Bingo sometimes stopped drinking to breathe.

And the next afternoon, by which time we were in a fair way to recovery, we were landed on the mainland by an armed trawler that had been summoned by wireless. The lighthouse at which we had left our boat was Black Rock, about seven miles north-west of Achill Head, and ten miles out from the entrance to Blacksod Bay, on the coast of County

Mayo. From the spot in which the *Parham* had been torpedoed, it was every inch of 150 sea miles.

Four days later, after being kitted up with seaman's clothes at the nearest naval base and parting from the men, I was back in London with my people. I found it difficult to sleep in a bed, and strange to think that I could eat and drink as I liked. It was stranger still to read of myself as 'Missing. Feared Killed' in *The Times*, and to see the official cancellation two days afterwards.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER VI

I AM not going to say much more about the war. After six weeks' leave, however, I was again appointed to a destroyer, the *Thais*, with the same commanding officer and first lieutenant with whom I had served in the *Merlin* at Harwich.

Commander Duffle, I discovered on joining, had written to some one at the Admiralty applying for me to be sent to his new ship the moment he saw the cancellation of my death in the newspapers. I was glad to be back with two old friends, and they, I think, were glad to see me. They certainly killed the fatted calf at dinner the night of my arrival.

The *Thais* was a brand new ship just out from her builders on the Clyde, and her West-Country ship's company, though many of them had served in destroyers before, were all strangers to me. They were a likeable crowd. Indeed, these wartime destroyer crews, brought together into one small ship from the four corners of the earth, seemed to get on with, and to know, each other and their officers in a way that is never quite possible in peace.

Their collective war experience was amazing. Officers and men had served in battleships, battle-cruisers, light-cruisers, and small craft all over the world. Several had been present at the battles of the Heligoland Bight, the Dogger Bank, and Jutland. Others had been at the capture of Tsingtau by the Japanese, in the Cameroons, in the naval operations in East Africa, with the gunboats in Mesopotamia, or in destroyers or

monitors off the Belgian Coast. At least one, in the *Glasgow*, saw the sinking of the *Good Hope* and *Monmouth* on that eventful evening off Coronel, while four had been present at Sir Doveton Sturdee's victory off the Falkland Islands.

We had several R.N.R. men, Scottish fishermen, who had spent most of the war minesweeping, and a sprinkling of 'hostility men,' volunteers from the shore who had joined the Navy for three years, or the duration of the war. Among these latter were a Welsh schoolmaster, a North-Country miner, a Yorkshire policeman, an architect's pupil, and a man who had been apprenticed to a coffin-maker and knew all about elm and oak caskets with brass fittings and leaden shells. His name was Fox, and I remember he once told me that the rapid spread of cremation was putting a good many skilled craftsmen out of business. However, Fox was very useful on board—not for making coffins, but for mending locker-lids and doing other odd jobs in the carpentry line.

There was also the young fellow who had been an odd-job man in a licensed victualler's business, the victuals, I afterwards discovered, being mainly liquid. He, when I really got to know him, provided a fund of information on beer and the wiles of publicans.

The war careers of the seven officers in the wardroom had been as diversified as those of the men. The skipper and the engineer lieutenant-commander had spent most of their time in destroyers, while the first lieutenant, Bob Preston, had been at the Battle of the Falklands and in the Dardanelles. Even our R.N.V.R. midshipman, Oswald Bray, had been blooded before joining the Navy. Escaping from school with or without the consent of his people, and still too young to join up, he had driven an ambulance belonging to a British Red Cross Unit serving on the Italian front. If some professional scribbler

with a little imagination could have written down the yarns I heard from our officers and men, he would have had material for many books.

The *Thais* nominally belonged to the 13th Destroyer Flotilla based on Rosyth and attached to the Battle-Cruiser Fleet. I say 'nominally,' because most of the time we were detached from the flotilla. The ship was a giddy hermaphrodite, convertible at a few hours' notice from a destroyer into a fast minelayer by the simple process of whipping out the after 4-inch gun and after pair of torpedo-tubes, and substituting forty mines on their sinkers on the sort of tram-lines bolted along the after end of our upper deck. When we were actually laying mines at night, it was my job to stand aft with a stop-watch and to give tongue at the proper time for each mine to be dropped over the stern. So far as I can recollect, they had to be laid 150 feet apart, and the time interval between each depended upon the speed we were steaming.

Sometimes we were used as a destroyer pure and simple, and sometimes for laying eggs in the Heligoland Bight or off the Belgian Coast. We had our fair share of filthy weather, and a good deal of excitement in one form or another. Apart from minelaying expeditions, however, the chief destroyer incidents I remember were a running fight in November 1917, when British battle-cruisers, light-cruisers, and destroyers met a force of Germans sixty miles north-west of Heligoland; an expedition round the Skaw right into the Kattegat to mop up any enemy patrols we found there; and a perfectly stinking spell of duty patrolling a long line of anti-submarine nets in the middle of the North Sea.

On the first of these occasions our ship polished off, and rescued the crew of, an enemy outpost-boat which had

already been in action. The chief thing I remember about this was the readiness with which our prisoners exchanged their buttons and cap-ribbons for cigarettes and soap. In the Kattegat affair, in which we had expected great things, we were bitterly disappointed by meeting only a couple of enemy trawlers and a patrol-boat, which were duly sunk by some of our destroyers after their men had been made prisoners.

During the ten days we spent patrolling the line of anti-submarine nets in the North Sea, half-way between the Firth of Forth and the Skagerrack, we had the most abominable weather I think I have ever experienced in a small ship—a full-blooded gale from the north-west with a truly mountainous sea. It was during this period that we saw two burning sailing ships on the same night, neutrals bringing pit-props to England which had been set on fire by a German submarine earlier in the day. They were blazing like volcanoes, alight from end to end, with their masts, rigging, and what remained of their sails picked out in flame like set-pieces at a firework display. With the ships drifting slowly before the wind, the tongues of flame must have been leaping a full hundred feet into the air, while clouds of rolling smoke, their upper surface black against the dark sky, and their undersides tinged orange and scarlet and pink with the glare, went hurtling to leeward on the wings of the wind. Those two flaming beacons and the glare in the sky must have been visible for seventy miles, and every breaking wave-top was dyed a bright red. It was the most magnificent display I have ever seen—but what ghastly waste!

We managed to rescue the crew of one of these ships, which, more or less by luck, we discovered in an open boat about seventeen miles to leeward of their vessel. It was blowing a full gale at the time, with our ship rolling anything

up to forty-five degrees either way. After some difficulty we managed to get them on board—sixteen Swedes and a huge Norwegian elk-hound which subsequently became our property. They had been in their boat for over ten hours and had given themselves up for lost. In another hour or two they would have gone, for their boat was nearly full of water and they themselves were numb and helpless with cold when we dragged them on board with ropes. Remembering my own experience of seven months before I could sympathise from the bottom of my heart, and could fully understand their gratitude when we gave them dry clothes and filled them up with corned beef, ships' biscuit, and stiff tots of Navy rum.

Speaking of rum, however, reminds me that the Swedish skipper had with him two bottles of 'aquavit,' a most potent spirit made, he told me, from fermented potatoes. All I can say is, it tasted like it, though it was certainly very warming when swallowed.

Our really eventful time, however, came early in 1918, when we minelaying destroyers formed a flotilla of our own at Immingham, on the Humber, and sometimes did two or three trips a week to lay mines in the enemy's swept channels in the Heligoland Bight after dark. The work of the 20th Flotilla, however, together with various of the other incidents I have mentioned, have been described elsewhere,[1] and in greater detail and with more accuracy than I could ever hope to do it. I need not attempt it again here. Indeed, it would be presumptuous.

The war had lasted a good deal longer than any one had expected. My twenty-sixth birthday came in March 1918, and I hadn't yet qualified as a doctor. The future had to be thought of, and rather against my will I had to send in my application to be released from the R.N.V.R. in order that I might pass my

‘finals.’ The Admiralty must have had other cases of the same sort to consider, for almost at once I was granted permission. So in April I left the *Thais* and went back to the old, old grind at the hospital in London among a completely new set of faces.

I can’t say I cared for it. I was considerably older than most of the other students—in fact, rather an anachronism. But it was something of a relief to be allowed to wear uniform, and to think that my name still figured in the Navy List. If I had appeared in plain clothes when practically every other healthy man of my age was in uniform, I should have had a difficult job to explain that I wasn’t a war dodger. As it was, the Admiralty still gave me my pay and retained a partial hold upon my services, for the moment I qualified I should be entered willy-nilly in the Navy as a surgeon lieutenant. However, the armistice came long before I was a fully-fledged doctor.

I will not describe my work at the hospital; but a rather amusing thing happened when I went up for one of my *viva voces*. It happened that two years and three weeks after the date on which the *Parham* had been sunk, I was awarded the naval Distinguished Service Cross, presumably because I was the only officer in the boat which reached Ireland. I do not mention this in any boastful spirit; but merely because the rather aged and very eminent surgeon who examined me happened to spot the letters D.S.C. after my name.

“A Doctor of Science, young gentleman?” he asked, giving me a queer searching look over the top of his glasses as though I were some sort of impostor. “A D.Sc! Surely you are very young for that—— er, distinction?”

I had to explain that I was not a Doctor of Science, and could see that his opinion of me as a budding doctor of any sort fell considerably when he had asked me a few questions in the subject in which I was being examined. All the same, the description of the sinking of the *Parham* and our boat journey that he made me give him took up a good many minutes which he might otherwise have spent in probing my lamentable lack of knowledge even more fully than he did.

"Dear me!" he said, staring at me and clicking his tongue. "A hundred and fifty miles from land—one hundred and fifty miles!—But tell me, young gentleman, why did you not kill and eat the dog?"

I had to explain that Bingo was Bingo, and that, in any case, he was probably inedible.

But my distinguished examiner would not have it.

"No, no, young gentleman," he said solemnly, wagging his head and putting his finger-tips together. "The animal, partaken raw, might have been strongly flavoured; indeed, rather unpalatable. Nevertheless, dog-flesh may be perfectly wholesome and sustaining. I am told that the Chinese regard it as a delicacy, yes." He paused.

"So next time, young gentleman," he suddenly continued, "be damned to your sentimentality!—Eat the dog!"

I sincerely hoped there would be no next time; but it was quite evident to me that the learned professor hadn't seen old Bingo. Nobody in his senses would have thought of eating him.

I just succeeded in scraping through that particular ordeal, which assuredly I should not have done at that time if my examiner had not got so hot and bothered over the poor old hound.

My knowledge was not profound. I had found it so hard to start learning afresh. It *was* difficult to get one's nose to the grindstone after all the excitement of destroyer life in wartime. Concentration was impossible.

In the middle of 1921, some time after qualifying, and after holding various odd jobs in the medical line which led to nothing, I finally joined the Navy as a surgeon lieutenant. Three months later, after a course at Haslar Hospital, I was appointed to a ship in the Atlantic Fleet, where I spent two uneventful years punctuated by the usual visits to Devonport to give leave at Easter, Midsummer, and Christmas; the usual cruise to Gibraltar and the Mediterranean in the spring; a trip to the Baltic one summer; the invariable visits to seaside resorts, where we were invaded by crowds of sightseers; and the autumn sojourn at Invergordon for exercises at sea in the Moray Firth. The post-war Navy, I soon found, was exceedingly strenuous. We were kept hard at it.

In those days I was still a giddy bachelor and pitied those officers whose wives trailed round from port to port after their husband's ships. With no settled homes of their own, they seemed to live in one set of furnished rooms after another, billeting themselves on their parents when the babies started to arrive.

It struck me that most naval officers, particularly those with nothing but their pay, married extraordinarily young, and generally to girls without a bean in the world. But N.O's., I think, who are generally caught young and spend their lives among men, are inclined to regard any presentable young woman as an angel without wings. The girls, on the other hand, seemed to think they would have a good time by marrying naval officers. No doubt some of them did; but it

was pitiful to see the screwing and scraping that sometimes went on to make two ends meet.

I had had no serious affairs with women and had no illusions on the subject. Experiences in my student days had shown me something of the seamy side of life and I had learnt a good deal from my own two sisters—earnest, hard-bitten females without a spark of gaiety or romance about them. I think they rather took after my mother, who was very severe and puritanical. As children we were never allowed to read secular books on Sunday, and well I remember those Sabbath gatherings in the drawing-room after tea, when, with my mother at the piano, the three of us sang through the contents of a little book called, *Divine Songs for Children*. I can remember some of the verses now, particularly those dealing with 'Obedience to Parents':—

'Have you not heard what dreadful plagues
Are threatened by the Lord,
To him that breaks his father's law
Or mocks his mother's word?

'What heavy guilt upon him lies!
How cursed is his name!
The ravens shall pick out his eyes
And eagles eat the same.'

We were brought up to regard God as a cruel, unforgiving Omnipotence who would not hesitate to strike us dead if we dared to misbehave. To tell the truth, however, I rather saw the funny side of the verses just quoted, and remember asking my mother why the ravens should be so obliging as to pick out naughty children's eyes as a *bonne bouche* for the eagles. I can't remember what she replied.

The same little book was also very severe against lying:—

‘The Lord delights in them that speak
The words of truth; but ev’ry liar
Must have his portion in the lake
That burns with brimstone and with fire.

‘Then let me always watch my lips,
Lest I be struck to death and Hell,
Since God a book of reck’ning keeps,
For ev’ry lie that children tell.’

I remember my awful feelings of remorse after an episode with a pot of strawberry jam in the store cupboard which the three of us filched and ate at a sitting. We lied like troopers, and somehow managed to get away with it. I suppose the Lake of Fire and Brimstone awaits us yet.

This book, however, is not the story of my childhood, but of my later life; and June 1924 found me in the P. & O. mail steamer *Mangalore* on my way out to China as medical officer of the sloop *Peony*, already on the station. My age was thirty-two.

It was in the *Mangalore* that I first met Hermione.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER VII

TO a seasoned traveller my voyage out to Hong-Kong in the 10,000-ton *Mangalore* would probably have been described as dull and uneventful. To me, however, who had never been in a mail steamer before, it was full of interest.

We called at the usual places—Gibraltar, Marseilles, Port Said, Suez, Aden, Colombo, Penang, and Singapore—where we went ashore for an hour or two, saw the usual sights, and were pestered to buy the usual rubbishy ‘curios,’ ostrich feathers, jewellery, and photographs, by hordes of persistent hucksters—white, brown, black, coffee-coloured, and yellow—who wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.

We had the usual fiercely hot weather in the Red Sea, when we either grilled in our cabins at night, or else tried to sleep on deck, only to be awakened at cockcrow covered in smuts from the funnels when the lascars came to scrub decks with their brooms, buckets, and hoses. We got the full benefit of the South-West Monsoon, with a heavy sea on the starboard quarter, throughout the whole of the long passage from Aden to Colombo and part of the way on to the Straits of Malacca. I thought a destroyer could roll; but the *Mangalore* rolled nearly as badly. Her ventilation was not so good as it is in the more modern ships, and lying in one’s oscillating bunk watching the sky and the green water alternately framed through the glass of the tightly-shut scuttle, was a veritable penance.

For my sins I occupied a two-berth cabin with a man going back to Colombo, something or other in the Colonial government. He was pleasant enough to meet on deck in the ordinary way; but in the close confinement of an apartment measuring perhaps eight feet by six, he was an unmitigated nuisance. We spent most of our time getting in each other's way as we dressed, shaved, changed, and undressed. He liked a 'fug,' while I liked fresh air with the door and scuttle open. He liked reading at night long after I wanted to sleep, and made my life a misery by striking matches and smoking foul tobacco in a pipe that bubbled. Moreover, he talked, grunted, and hiccoughed in his sleep. I can only hope that my habits were as obnoxious to him; but two-berth cabins, except for married couples, should be abolished by Act of Parliament. Nobody in his senses would ever dream of sharing a tiny room in a hotel ashore with a complete and total stranger. Why should it be insisted upon in certain ships?

We had the usual boat drill once a week, when we mustered on deck and tried not to look foolish in our bulbous lifebelts with tapes that none of the younger and more attractive women ever knew how to tie without male assistance; the usual sweepstake on the daily run; the deck tennis, quoits, and bull-board; the sports; the fancy-dress dance; the usual altercations over our morning and evening baths when newly-joined passengers tried to usurp our regular times; and the inevitable concert. This was only saved from disaster by some really wonderful conjuring on the part of an irrepressible subaltern who produced an assortment of apples, oranges, bananas, nuts, and chocolates from the evening cloak and person of an austere and haughty lady of uncertain age, who never tired of telling us that she was the wife of an 'important Government official' at Singapore.

Her name, according to the passenger list, was Mrs. Reginald Mallory, though we called her the 'Queen of Singapore.' She insisted on sitting at the captain's table, much to the skipper's annoyance; looked down her nose at all and sundry as 'common' or 'not a *real* lady,' and became furiously angry with the wretched deck steward if her chair, which she occupied for perhaps half-an-hour a day, and at other times marked with a novel and work-bag, was moved by so much as a foot. Playing bridge with her was a nightmare. Her 'post-mortems' were acrimonious and devastating.

When the spirit moved her Mrs. Mallory could be very arch and girlish. Between Gibraltar and Marseilles she took rather a fancy to me, until I purposely told her a story which had been told me by the purser, who was full of yarns, ribald and otherwise. This particular tale concerned a steward, who, on rather a rough day, stumbled when carrying a trayful of cups of eleven-o'clock soup, and shot the contents of one into the lap of an old lady asleep in her deck-chair. With the greatest tact and *savoir faire* he woke her up with the remark—"I hope you are feeling better now, madam."

No. On second thoughts it was not the yarn of the steward that upset things. It was one of my own about a short-sighted old lady, rather given to good works, who went to stay with her married niece. It had been arranged that the vicar should come and call; but on the morning of his visit Auntie, declaring she had appendicitis, took to her bed. So, unknown to the aunt, the niece cancelled the vicar and sent for the doctor.

Ushered into the bedroom, he stayed there for twenty minutes, finally to come downstairs to say that he had pommelled the invalid all over, and what she thought was appendicitis was nothing more nor less than indigestion.

"There's nothing serious the matter with her," he said before leaving the house. "She'll be as right as rain to-morrow."

Very relieved, the niece saw him off the premises, and went up to the bedroom. "Well, Auntie," she asked; "how did you like your visitor?"

"My dear!" the old lady chuckled, "he was quite the most unconventional and delightful clergyman I've ever met!"

My sense of humour may be rather perverted; but Mrs. Mallory, when I told her this tale, behaved like Queen Victoria, and said she was 'not amused.' Ever afterwards, she avoided me as a lewd fellow of the baser sort, which was precisely what I wanted her to do.

From the way she treated us all, ship's officers and stewards included, one would have imagined her to be royalty travelling incognito. Instead of that, I was told her people hailed from Balham, and that she had been a *mannequin* until her face and figure got beyond it. She was too 'refained' and ladylike—unbelievable unless you met her. Moreover, her husband, who met her at Singapore, was a little squirt of a man a good deal younger than herself, with a yellow face, a tooth-brush moustache, and a furtive downtrodden manner. So far from being an 'important Government official' in daily consultation with His Excellency, as she had led us to believe, he had something to do with the waterworks or sewage disposal. I can't remember which.

I was the only naval officer on board, and sat at the table presided over by the chief officer, a cheery fellow with an illimitable fund of droll stories who had served in the R.N.R. throughout the war and had finished up by commanding a destroyer. The other people at our table included two planters returning to the Malay States; a minor Government official

from Hong-Kong; a major and his wife going back to Hong-Kong after leave in England; a lady medical missionary who had spent most of her life in the wilds of China; a grass widow with a small girl of eight who should have been a real widow but wasn't; and Amelia Haynes, the well-known novelist, who was on her way to Japan to write a book about something or other.

I had never met a novelist before, particularly a novelist who wrote best-sellers. And Amelia was a fascinating person. She had dark sleek hair cut short and brushed like a man's, soulful black eyes which seemed to gaze through one, wonderfully pencilled eyebrows and carmine lips, and a figure like a houri's. Rumour said she was either married or living in sin with some one at home in England; but rumour often lies. Anyhow, she was a dashing creature with an apparently endless wardrobe. I don't believe she wore the same evening-dress twice during the voyage, and each was more daring than the last—more daring even than her looks. She had a beautiful back, and knew it.

Various men tried to make up to her; but she never became really friendly with any one, never danced, never played games, and never took any exercise except to walk round the promenade deck with her woman secretary, a small, furtive-looking female rather like a mouse whom Amelia would not have at our table. For the rest, Amelia never drank cocktails; but confined herself to beer and brandy and soda, and plenty of both, though I never saw her the least bit elevated. She had one of the best cabins on the upper deck, where she used to sit cross-legged on the settee until two o'clock in the morning smoking cigar after cigar while she dictated to Miss Johnson. No wonder the secretary looked jaded and harassed, for she was expected to produce the typed copy of the nightly

outpouring at eleven o'clock each morning, when Amelia was called with a grape-fruit and a cup of coffee.

Yes. Amelia Haynes was an inscrutable person who interested me very much. We had various casual conversations on deck and at meals, and once, at eleven o'clock at night, she sent for me to her cabin to elucidate some rather knotty medical problem she wished to bring into the novel she was writing. Otherwise, she was completely self-centred and aloof. You can imagine my surprise when, the day before our arrival at Hong-Kong, she presented me with a leather-bound copy of her latest novel, *Deliverance*, with an inscription on the fly-leaf—'To Robert Spry, in gratitude from the author, Amelia Haynes.' I have never set eyes on her since, though I often see her name on the screen at cinemas. She migrated to Hollywood, where, I understand, she makes thousands a year writing scenarios for one of the big combines.

It was surprising how all we passengers ignored each other the first day or two out from England; but how rapidly we thawed out afterwards and seemed to have known each other all our lives. Indeed, before we had even reached Gibraltar, various couples had instinctively paired off, and used to spend their evenings talking in whispers in what secluded places they could find, or gazing at the moon or stars with rapture in their souls and their hands in each other's. The widows, grass and otherwise, seemed to set the pace, and the most prosaic of men and women appeared to be smitten with a sort of sea-madness.

It was surprising, too, the mistakes we made about each other. The sharp-looking, foxy-faced man in the fifties, always immaculately turned out, whom we had taken for a card-sharper, was really a professor of something or other in

the University at Tokyo. The badly-dressed, down-at-heel scrubby little man with long hair and baggy grey flannel trousers that we sized up as a commercial traveller, was a very big pot in a very big business at Hong-Kong. The real commercial traveller, a blustering, ginger-headed creature with prominent teeth and a peculiar accent, took upon himself the duties of 'The Life and Soul of the Ship,' and a damned nuisance he was. A firm believer in the motto 'Business First,' he was for ever 'getting up' things—digging us out of our afternoon naps for hopping races; organising 'sing-songs,' charades, and tournaments; trying to persuade us to get up at six o'clock in the morning to run round the promenade deck. I could have slain the ugly blighter. He wouldn't leave us alone, and, having a hide like an armadillo, couldn't be snubbed, not even by Mrs. Mallory.

Amelia Haynes succeeded in squashing him, however. Pestered, after many refusals, to take part in a potato-race, a silly sort of game wherein one had to rush frenziedly to and fro along the deck dropping potatoes into a bucket, she merely gave him a look from those eyes of hers, removed the long jade cigarette-holder from her lips, and drawled—"Really, Mr. —— er, I'm sorry I don't know your name, but is there any particular reason why I should waste my time and make a fool of myself?"

"Come, come, Miss Haynes," poor Barker replied, "I'm merely gettin' up the race to oblige. We want to practise for the sports, you see, and I've been elected sports secretary."

"Indeed," said Amelia, raising her eyebrows. "Why?"

"I suppose it's a case of the right man for the right job," Barker smirked effusively.

"No, no," Amelia flashed. "It can't be that, I'm sure."

“What is it, then?” he asked unguardedly.

“It’s because you’re an interfering busybody who won’t mind his own business,” she drawled. “Please don’t bother me again, Mr. —— er, whatever your name is, or I shall be really rude. *Good* afternoon.” She turned on her heel and walked majestically off, leaving Barker speechless and white with anger.

I heard that passage of words myself, and Barker, a little drunk, gave me his version of the incident, and his opinion of Amelia, in the smoking-room the same evening. And though I felt she might have been a little kinder, I could not help feeling glad that he had been put in his place. All the same, he was as officious and blatant as ever by the next morning, though I noticed he handed our lady novelist the frozen mitt for ever afterwards.

I suppose the passengers were a fairly typical crowd, and I can’t possibly describe them all at this length of time afterwards. But Mrs. Sayers, an attractive young woman with a boy of three going out to join her husband in Ceylon, I certainly remember. Because I happened to pass the time of day and admired her precocious infant merely for something to say, she asked me if I’d mind looking after the brat for a few minutes while she fetched something from her cabin. She was away twenty minutes, during which her little fiend had tried to crawl overboard through the berthing railings, and howled blue murder when I seized him by the slack of his knickers and dragged him back.

“What’s the nasty man been doing to my little Ronnie, then?” she said, coming back while the trouble was at its worst, clutching the little beast to her bosom and eyeing me like a virago. “Diddums hurt it, then?”

She had the grace to apologise when I explained, and the next day, just to show there was no ill-feeling, I looked after her offspring again—for three-quarters of an hour this time. After a day or two it became a habit with her to leave me in charge of Ronnie as a temporary nursemaid, and finally the ordeal lengthened out into an hour and three-quarters. I got fed up then, and handing the kid over to an unattached female who no doubt longed to have babies of her own, went to the verandah place abaft the smoking-room for a cocktail. And who should I see there but Ronnie's mother drinking iced lager with those planter fellows from the Malay States—iced lager, if you please, when she had handed her limb of Satan over to me with the excuse that she wanted to be away for just half-an-hour to wash some of his undergarments!

That's what comes of being one of those complacent, trustworthy-looking sort of people of homely appearance that every young mother likes to think is kind to children and animals, and with whom every middle-aged mother is prepared to trust her daughter after dark!

Hermione Fletcher, who joined the *Mangalore* at Marseilles, was my favourite among the women passengers. Twenty-three years old, golden-haired, blue-eyed, and very lively, she was the only child of a big bug of some sort in Shanghai, a man who was obviously very well off and spared his daughter nothing. But beyond a casual word or two, I worshipped from afar to start with. Having been put in the captain's charge, she sat at the captain's table with all the 'high-ups,' including the professor from Tokyo and his wife; the big pot with the disreputable grey flannel trousers from Hong-Kong; an archdeacon and his wife; an unknown female with a mouthful of teeth and a face like an indiarubber

guinea-pig; and Mrs. Mallory, who had squeezed herself in as a sort of honorary member.

They were not a cheery table like ours, though the skipper did his best to liven them up. And later on, when I came to know Hermione better, she confessed to me that she felt unutterably bored at meals, and vituperant when the Queen of Singapore tried hard to constitute herself a sort of unofficial Mother in Israel.

“Are you certain you shouldn’t be wearing your cloak, dear?” Mrs. Mallory used to say, or, “Be careful not to get overheated,” or, “Don’t you think you’ve danced enough for this evening? The dear captain asked me to keep an eye on you, and you young things,” wagging a playful finger, “are *so* apt to overdo it.”

Mrs. M. was calling Hermione ‘dearest’ by the time we were in the Straits of Malacca, but what Hermione said about Mrs. M. I daren’t repeat, without running the risk of a libel action. Hermione had a pretty caustic tongue when she took a dislike to people.

All the way through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea—indeed, until two days before we reached Colombo, Hermione was surrounded by a crowd of young men whenever she appeared on deck, though I was glad to see she had no preference for any one of them. I didn’t get a look in to start with, and don’t think I should ever have had a look in if Packer, the ship’s doctor, hadn’t gone sick, and Hermione hadn’t tumbled on the slippery deck while the ship was rolling and hurt her knee.

Being the only other doctor on board, the captain asked me to deputise for Packer, which I did for more than a week. One

or two of my jobs were not exactly pleasant; but I must confess I liked having Hermione as my patient.

Confined to her upper deck cabin for the first day with her swollen knee swathed in bandages, but otherwise perfectly well, she pretended she was too ill to be visited by her many admirers, who soon found consolation elsewhere. The captain, one or two of the more elderly female passengers, Mrs. Mallory, and myself were her only visitors, and Mrs. Mallory wasn't exactly popular.

"If that woman comes near me again, I shall scream," Hermione declared. "I endured an hour and a half of her this morning, and she said she was coming again this afternoon. You must keep her out."

"But how can I?" I protested, aghast at the idea.

"I'll send the stewardess for you the moment she comes," Hermione announced. "You'll have to pretend you want to dress my old knee."

"But—but——"

"There's no 'but' about it," she said, smiling sweetly. "You're a doctor, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then it's your job to keep your patients cheerful. That woman's a vampire. She sucks everything out of me."

Hermione's knee certainly had to be attended to every four hours or so, which afforded me some excuse for clearing Mrs. Mallory out whenever she put in an appearance. But on the second day we solved the difficulty by carrying Hermione out of her cabin and putting her into a deck-chair on the little strip of deck at the fore end of the boat deck just outside the captain's cabin. This holy of holies, just under the bridge ladder, was sacred to the captain and officers, and not even

Mrs. Mallory could invade it. Several times she sent up messages to ask if she could see my patient; but as often, at Hermione's request, I sent back a reply to say that she was asleep. Eventually, feeling herself snubbed, Mrs. M. gave up the quest in disgust and contented herself by glaring at me whenever we met. I have reason to believe, too, that she tried to spread reports that I was pressing my attentions on Hermione. But it didn't really matter. Mrs. Mallory had few friends.

I do know that I spent a good deal more time in Hermione's company than the nature of her injury really demanded. She insisted upon it. When the captain wasn't available, and he was a busy man, I must stay and amuse her.

I don't know if my conduct in the matter was 'unprofessional'; but what can one do when one's patient insists upon one's company, and one has no legitimate excuse for withholding it? Once or twice I tried to run away, hinting what people might say.

"Damn what people say!" Hermione laughed. "Haven't I a perfect right to choose my own friends? Isn't the captain a perfect chaperon?"

Anyhow, we got to know each other very well, and by degrees she wormed the whole of my life story out of me, including all my tales of the war. Her damaged knee was soon better, and by the time Packer had recovered and she was fit to go about again, most of her young men were either busy in other directions, or else she fended them off.

We spent a good many hours with each other, and during that wonderful calm starlit evening, the night before we arrived at Hong-Kong, we remained up long after most of the other passengers had retired to their cabins. We ... well, I

don’t think I will say anything about that. Anyhow, we vowed eternal friendship. She *was* a charming person, quite the most charming I had ever met.

All the same, I couldn’t help realising that I was a poor devil of a naval doctor without a bean beyond my pay, while Hermione’s father had more money than he really knew what to do with. Somehow I didn’t think he would fancy a mere surgeon lieutenant as a possible son-in-law.

But then I hadn’t proposed to her.

I hadn’t dared to do that.

Damn money! Or rather, damn the effects brought about by the lack of it!

THE SCARLET STRIPE
CHAPTER VIII

ON arriving at Hong-Kong, I reported myself on board the depot ship *Tamar*, only to discover that my journey was not at an end. My new ship, the *Peony*, was at Wei-Hai-Wei, the British naval station some 1500 miles away in North China. As no man-of-war was going there, I was told that arrangements would be made for my passage in the next Batterby and Myre steamer leaving Hong-Kong for the north. The same day I was given my orders, being told to embark in s.s. *Nanning*, sailing three afternoons later for Swatow, Amoy, and Shanghai. At Shanghai I was to transfer to another ship which would take me on to Wei-Hai-Wei.

I had been initiated into the ways of China the very morning of my arrival.

Before lunch, in the *Tamar's* wardroom, I had made friends with a lieutenant nicknamed 'Shorty,' a sunburnt, hard-bitten little wisp of a man who seemed all skin and bone and sinew. He soon discovered where I was going.

"D'you want to buy a pistol, Doc?" he asked, as we sat drinking our iced gin and bitters before lunch.

"Lord, no!" I replied. "Whatever should I do with a pistol?"

"Pirates!" he grinned. "You may get held up on your way north. As you're nice and plump, they may fancy you as a hostage."

"Get along with you!" I laughed, thinking he was pulling my leg.

"I'm going home in three days, thank God!" he continued with a sigh of satisfaction. "I want to do a deal. You can have my three-two automatic and over a hundred rounds of ammunition for—well, call it fifteen dollars. It's a handy little thing you can carry in your pocket without its being noticed. What d'you say?"

I laughed and shook my head. Why should I give something like thirty shillings for an utterly useless pistol? After all, this was the twentieth century. Was Shorty trying to frighten me with his pirates?

"You'd better take it, Doc," some one else chipped in. "Shorty's not having you out for a trot. His gun's worth every cent of fifteen dollars. I'll buy it myself if you don't."

Shorty nodded in agreement.

"Yes," he said. "I'm letting it go for nothing, merely because it's no good to me in England.—But honestly, Doc," he continued, his voice serious, "you wouldn't catch me taking passage in a coasting steamer without a shooter of some sort."

"But do you mean to say there really *are* pirates?" I enquired innocently.

"God!" chortled a subaltern of marines, an immaculate-looking, pink-faced young man with a few silky hairs on his upper lip, rather prominent blue eyes, and the tightest of tight white overalls. "Here's a new chum just out from England who's never heard of pirates!"

"No, Hindenburg," said Shorty, turning on him in a flash. "And *you'd* never heard of 'em until a month ago, you post-war baby!—Don't butt in when your betters are discussing things, damn your eyes!"

The young marine looked sheepish.

"I wish you'd explain," I said, realising that Shorty was in earnest and that I'd made rather an ass of myself.

They soon enlightened me.

Piracy, it appeared, had ever been a profitable side-line in China, and one might as well expect a leopard to change his spots as a Chinese coast-dweller to abandon one method of earning a living if the opportunity came his way.

In the old days of sailing ships, Shorty told me, a pirate junk sighting a likely-looking merchantman would pretend to be in distress. Bearing down to the rescue, the unsuspecting newcomer would find herself boarded not by distressed Chinese seamen, but by a gang of bloodthirsty ruffians armed to the teeth, who would overpower the crew, seize the ship, and carry her off to some lonely bay where she would be looted at their convenience. Resistance would result in the killing of the entire crew and passengers.

With the advent of steamers things became rather more difficult for the pirates. Nevertheless, many steamers plying in the West River between Hong-Kong, Macao, Canton, and other ports, had been seized by gangs of armed desperadoes embarking as passengers acting in conjunction with other parties on shore. They would not take life if the officers and crews submitted; but resistance turned them into the most vindictive devils imaginable. Shorty told me of a case, only two years before, where over two hundred men, women, and children were ruthlessly massacred in cold blood or drowned in retaliation for the shots fired in their defence by the officers of the ship and an armed Indian guard. Since the war, with the absence of any settled Government at Canton, affairs in the Canton Delta had gone from bad to worse.

"I know what I'm talking about," said Shorty, a touch of bitterness in his voice. "I've just finished two blinkin' years in a gunboat up the river, and I'm glad, damned glad, to be going home! People talk about the Shiny East, and the romance of it—pah! I've had the time of my life—rotten time that is! We were working in Chinese territory, so to speak; but we couldn't open fire, or take any action, unless we caught pirates red-handed."

"Then who is supposed to suppress 'em?" I asked.

"The Chinese Government," he replied. "But there's been no settled Government at Canton since the war, what with their own civil war and one War Lord superseding another every time the bell strikes. Being so busy scrappin' among themselves, they've had no time to worry about pirates, even if they really wanted to. To make things worse, they never seem to pay their soldiers, which means that the whole of the south is overrun with disbanded troops who have to pick up a living somehow. They stick at nothing in the process." He paused to light a cigarette.

"What's the solution?"

"Solution," he went on. "The only solution, short of forcing the Chinese Government to do its own dirty work, is to use the British Navy. If we could have a really free hand and were allowed to smoke out the pirates in their nests, we'd clear up the whole mess in three months and put the fear of the Lord into 'em. God knows I'm not a war-monger, but the Chinese don't understand gentleness. This is one of the cases where a little force might be used for the benefit of mankind.

"But what happens? We don't get a chance to do our job. Our hands are tied by the cursed politicians and pacifists at home, who won't allow us to take reasonable measures for

fear of offending Chinese susceptibilities. Chinese nationalism must be respected; China for the Chinese—and all the rest of that sort of bunk! The people at home don't know China, and don't understand the Oriental mind, and our letting them do as they like is merely interpreted as a sign of weakness. I believe Englishmen used to be respected and feared by the natives; but now we're merely laughed at because they know damn well our politicians are all out for conciliation. In other words, we've 'lost face,' to use a colloquialism.—To hell with conciliation, say I, when people are being murdered or shot up every month or two because there *is* no Chinese Government and we're too herring-gutted to land a few men now and then to wipe out a pirate village or two!"

Shorty waxed hot and strong on the subject, and went on to tell me of hostages who had been carried off inland by the pirates after the seizure of some ship. They were generally Chinese merchants or natives of the better class, and if the heavy ransoms demanded for their release were not immediately forthcoming, ears and fingers and noses might be hacked off and sent to their friends as an earnest of what would happen. If the ransoms failed to materialise, prisoners would be put to death, often after the most revolting tortures.

The tales he told me of some of these outrages made it clear that for cold-blooded cruelty and barbarism they were far and away worse than anything that had ever taken place during the war. Hostages would be flayed alive and roasted over slow fires. Babies would be impaled before their mothers' eyes. One female pirate, delighting in the name of 'One-eyed Ying,' cut out a prisoner's liver and had it cooked for breakfast.

Sheer barbaric savagery—and the hands of the Navy were tied because, to the panjandrums sitting in their padded chairs in comfortable offices at Whitehall, China, with its stark beastliness, was out of sight and out of mind.

What did it matter in far-away England if some dozens of miserable Chinese, some of them British subjects, were done to death every year? Even if a ship were held up on the high seas and a British officer or two were shot, it only meant a few questions in the House of Commons, an apology from an irresponsible Chinese Government who promised to take the necessary steps to prevent a recurrence but never did, and possible compensation for a few widows.

Were all our responsible people at home utterly spineless and incompetent Shorty demanded passionately. Was Great Britain still the greatest nation in the world, and, if so, were her inhabitants content to see their foreign affairs run by a set of weak-kneed, pop-eyed, mealy-mouthed, gutless place-seekers who couldn't see beyond their noses and were prepared to swallow any insult from a country that couldn't govern itself?

We had utterly lost our prestige in China, he kept on saying. If the British were ever to be respected again, deeds were required, not words.

Many coasting steamers plying between Hong-Kong and the north had also been attacked by gangs who had embarked as ordinary passengers and rushed the bridge, engine-room, and wireless office at their own selected moment. Having overcome the resistance of the officers and armed guards, they would force the master at the pistol's point to steam his ship into some secluded anchorage, where she would be pillaged and hostages taken for ransom. Afterwards, she

might be allowed to go on to her destination. Bias Bay, some forty miles up the coast from Hong-Kong, together with Hong-hai and Hie-chi-chin Bays, the next two bays to the north, were hotbeds of piracy. All of them were in Chinese territory.

The pirate bands were as cunning as they were dangerous, Shorty told me. For months some of their men might travel to and fro in the same ship as passengers, observing the habits of the officers, ingratiating themselves with the crew, perfecting their arrangements. Then, when the ship had embarked a valuable cargo, probably including specie or bullion, they would pounce at some suitable moment when their onset was least expected. The attack would be made by as many as fifteen or twenty armed men who had come on board as passengers, and it was impossible not to wonder at the excellence of an organisation which enabled gangs to board ships at, say, Tientsin, a port on the Peiho River, in the Gulf of Pechili, and Singapore, not far from the Equator, places nearly three thousand miles apart, and to synchronise the arrival of captured vessels at Bias Bay, for instance, with the movements of confederates ashore.

"What do the merchant service officers think of it?" I asked.

"Think of it!" Shorty guffawed. "They're blasphemous because our Government doesn't do a hand's turn to help them! Many of them are chucking their hands in and going home.—Piracy had become fairly common even before the war, and in nineteen fourteen, I think it was, the Hong-Kong Government set up a Commission to suggest some means of dealing with it. They produced a set of rules and regulations called the 'Piracy Prevention Ordinance,' which laid down, among other things, that the officers and men of a pirated ship

should resist to the utmost, and an utterly fatuous, impracticable, and footling system of defence which interfered with the working of the ship and threw the officers to the lions. The responsibility was put on them, and the four armed Indian guards carried in each ship, whereas an hour's bombardment of the pirates' villages by the Navy after each piracy, followed up by a small landing party, would damn soon make 'em realise the game wasn't worth the candle.—I tell you, Doc, it makes me fair sick to think of the namby-pamby way we carry on!"

Afterwards I found out more about the anti-piracy rules and regulations, which conferred wide powers of search among intending passengers upon the Hong-Kong police; provided that vessels trading from Hong-Kong should carry armed Indian guards and be fitted with grilles for the protection of bridge and engine-rooms, as well as to restrict the free movement of the native passengers. The ships were to carry rifles, pistols, and signal rockets, while the officers, who were always to be armed, were to resist piratical attack by every means in their power.

The merchant service officers themselves were very bitter, and pointed out that these regulations were utterly unfair to them, as indeed they were. They had nothing to gain by fighting and everything to lose, in the shape of their own lives. Their widows got no pensions if they were killed.

And every naval officer I met in China at that period said the same. The hands of the Navy were tied by the sentimentalists at home, the lives of peaceful merchant seamen jeopardised to spare the nobler feelings of professional politicians and publicists who paid lip-service to the cause of world-wide peace and good fellowship. Though I hate to say it of my own Service, the Navy 'lost face' through

no fault of its own. For once it was not permitted to carry on its traditional function of safeguarding the merchant navy by every means in its power.

But as the result of that first conversation with Shorty—I forget his real name—I bought his pistol.

In the sweltering heat of the early afternoon three days later I embarked in the *Nanning*, a typical China coasting steamer of between 2000 and 3000 tons. Though her passenger accommodation was hardly comparable with that of a P. & O., it was none the less comfortable, the first-class European passengers being accommodated in cabins amidships, and the saloon being underneath the bridge structure, but slightly before it, with a skylight opening on to the deck, side scuttles, and some more barred scuttles looking on to the fore well-deck. There was also a small smoking-room and bar at the after end of the superstructure. Among the first-class passengers were a Roman Catholic priest, an Englishman in the Chinese customs service, and the American representative of some oil company. So far as the saloon was concerned, we would not be overcrowded, while I should have a sizeable two-berth cabin to myself, one of the stewards told me.

The Chinese cabin passengers of the better class, fat, prosperous-looking merchants, some in European dress, and some in silken Chinese robes reaching to their ankles, with horn-rimmed spectacles and felt hats, were accommodated under the poop in the stern.

I watched the last of the cargo being hoisted on board from the junks and lighters alongside, and the embarkation of fifty or sixty deck passengers, men, women, and children. They came chattering on board with their boxes, bundles, and baskets, and soon staked out their claims on the after well-

deck where they would remain until they reached their destination. Within ten minutes they had built themselves awnings and shelters wherever they could find room, and were busy cooking rice and some awful stuff which smelt like decayed fish over their little charcoal braziers. It was strange to see the members of each family surrounded by a zareba of luggage, squatting solemnly on their haunches round the primitive cooking appliances. Father might be stirring the ghastly-looking mess, while mother, with a grave-faced, tawny-coloured, black-haired infant without a stitch of clothing tied to her back, fanned the glowing charcoal into activity.

They seemed a silent, mournful-looking lot of people who rarely talked except in grunted whispers, though now and then the monotony was enlivened by a sudden gabble of shrill, excited conversation. Two of the women, in particular, seemed on the verge of a serious quarrel, and hurled spasmodic objurgations at each other's heads at a range of twenty feet or more. What it was all about I do not pretend to know, but the men paid no attention.

Nobody smiled, while one fellow, propped cross-legged against a hatch-coaming, played a doleful tune on a musical instrument not unlike a penny whistle. Occasionally he burst into song—a high, piercing falsetto like the miaowing of several cats.

They were strange, inscrutable folk, their faces utterly expressionless. One could not guess what was in their minds. To me, unfamiliar with the East, they came as a complete surprise. I always thought that Chinamen were merry and bright. These weren't. They were positively eerie in their aloof mournfulness. It was depressing to watch them.

Perhaps they were thinking about pirates, as I most certainly was. I could feel the little automatic in the hip-pocket of my trousers. It was loaded with a fresh clip of cartridges with the catch to 'safe,' though, unfamiliar with pistols, I had a lurking suspicion that it might go off at any moment to the detriment of my own stern. Also, it made things rather uncomfortable when I wanted to sit down. However——

The first things I had noticed on boarding the *Nanning* were the grilles extending right across the ship at the after part of the midship superstructure, thus separating the after-part of the vessel, where all the Chinese passengers travelled, from the quarters occupied by officers, crew, and first-class passengers, and the bridge, wireless room, and hatches to engine and boiler rooms. The grilles were formed of iron bars, too close together to be climbed through, and, I should think, quite unclimbable. On either side of the ship there was a hinged wing projecting outboard. It terminated in spikes and was tangled with barbed wire, to stop anybody climbing round it. There were two doors in this curious structure, each fitted with a snap lock and guarded by a turbaned Indian sentry with a loaded rifle and revolver. I was told we carried four sentries, two always being on watch at a time, one at the only grille door which was kept open at sea, and the other at the foot of the bridge ladder. They belonged to the Hong-Kong police.

The whole arrangement was surprising in the extreme. Personally, looking through the iron bars, I felt like a monkey at the zoo. It only wanted a crowd of sightseers presenting us with nuts and bananas to make the illusion complete.

Just before we sailed an important-looking white steam-launch fussed alongside the gangway. She had an awning, so

that I couldn't see who was on board; but one of the ship's officers went down the ladder and helped a lady out.

You can judge my surprise when I saw it was Hermione Fletcher. She was followed by a middle-aged man in a light flannel suit, and a lot of luggage was passed out after them. So they were coming as passengers. I must confess I felt happily excited at a few more days of Hermione's company. Evidently I was in luck's way, and prayed secretly that Hermione's parent, if the man with her was her father, wouldn't take a dislike to me on the spot.

It wasn't until twenty minutes later, by which time the *Nanning* had slipped from her buoy, circled round, and was steaming through the man-of-war anchorage on her way towards the Lyemun Pass and the open sea beyond, that Hermione came on deck.

"Well!" she exclaimed in surprise, recognising me at once and coming forward with a pleased smile. "You, of all people! This is a bit of luck; but what on earth are you doing here?"

I told her, and asked the same question.

"Father's got business in Amoy," she explained. "This ship will stay there for twelve hours, and we're going on to Shanghai in her.—Father!" she called, as her dapper-looking little parent stepped out on deck. "Father, come here!"

"This is Surgeon Lieutenant Spry," said Hermione, when he joined us. "You remember. I told you I met him on the way out."

Mr. Fletcher removed the cigar from his mouth and shook hands.

"So *you're* the young gentleman," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Thank you for looking after my girl. I hope she obeyed orders?"

I assured him that Hermione had been quite the best patient I had ever attended.

"You must come and look us up in Shanghai, and Onie shall show you all the sights," Mr. Fletcher continued. "Have a cigar. And what d'you think of Hong-Kong in the summer?"

We talked. Mr. Fletcher was very pleasant. I began to think I had a chance after all.

Half-an-hour later the *Nanning* had steamed through the Lyemun Pass, and was travelling through a sea like glass, dotted with becalmed junks with their brown matting sails hoisted to catch the least breath of wind. It was all very calm and peaceful. The cool breeze caused by the ship's movement was refreshing after the almost intolerable summer heat in the landlocked harbour—that damp, enervating clamminess which took all the stuffing out of one, brought out the cockroaches in veritable swarms, and grew a sort of horrible green mildew on one's shoes in forty-eight hours.

"That's the last I shall see of that place for a twelve-month, thank heaven!" Mr. Fletcher murmured, watching the mountains of Hong-Kong gradually receding astern as the *Nanning* chugged her way north-eastward.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER IX

THE first night on board the *Nanning*, in an excess of caution, I slept with a loaded pistol under my pillow. I needn't really have worried. Nothing whatever disturbed me except the invasion of an army of cockroaches and flying ants which crawled and clustered round the electric light, and the creaking of the ship as she rolled to and fro in the slight swell.

Swatow, our first port of call, was only about 220 miles, which meant that we reached it in the early forenoon on the day after sailing from Hong-Kong. The ship was to discharge some passengers and cargo and to embark more, being due to leave again at six in the evening for Amoy, another Treaty Port something over a hundred miles further up the coast.

Almost as soon as we anchored at Swatow a steam-launch came alongside for Mr. Fletcher and carried him off ashore to see his agents, though not before he had committed Hermione to my charge.

"Doctor Spry," he said, coming up to me on deck in a great hurry. "Are you thinking of going ashore?"

I said I was.

"I wonder if you'd mind—er, taking my daughter with you?"

On the contrary, I told him. I should be delighted.

"Then I'd be most grateful if you would," he went on. "I shall be busy most of the day. She's been here before, but I'd rather she didn't go about by herself. Give her tiffin and tea,

and this—er, this is for your joint expenses." He thrust some notes into my hand and trotted off to the gangway and down into the steam-launch before I could expostulate.

I could have paid for Hermione's meals and have been glad of the opportunity. I didn't like the idea of taking money from some one I had known for less than a day. But I dare say that as Mr. Fletcher himself had suggested the expedition he didn't want me to be out of pocket on his account, which was good and thoughtful of him. He was always a generous and kind-hearted man, not the least like some of these very rich people who seem to count every cent. I was rather glad, too, that I had been chosen as Hermione's guardian, though that young woman was perfectly capable of looking after herself. It legitimised my position, so to speak, for the only other English passenger on board, and the American representative of the Oriental Oil Company, had both been making eyes at her. However, they didn't get much forrarder.

I liked being with Hermione, seeing what sights there were, giving her tiffin at a hotel, and afterwards going on to see a friend of hers, where we stayed to tea. Through an altercation with a rickshaw coolie, who took us for tourists and tried to bilk us over the fares, I discovered that Hermione was pretty fluent in Chinese, or whatever particular dialect of that many-sided language Swatow calls its own. It was amusing to see the man's discomfiture as she upbraided him in his own tongue, until he finally broke into a broad smile and acknowledged himself beaten.

Swatow wasn't much of a place to my way of thinking. The European settlement was on an island, and I thanked my lucky stars I was not one of its permanent residents. Not that the few English families who lived there didn't succeed in

having a pretty good time; but the heat was appalling, and China wasn't the place it used to be for foreigners.

Hermione's friend, whose name I forget, was the wife of a man in the tea business. For years, she told us, but particularly since the war, there had been trouble with the natives, who were absorbing all the worst traits of western civilisation. There had been strikes and riots and anti-foreign boycotts, most of them fomented by young men of the student type who couldn't see beyond their noses, and egged on the ignorant coolie class to demand this and that of the hated foreigners. The real hotheads clamoured for the expulsion of the foreigners and the destruction of their property. The European residents seemed to live on the edge of a volcano, and once or twice, but for the presence of a man-of-war in the harbour, the worst might have occurred. It was wonderful, apparently, what a quietening effect the White Ensign flown by even the smallest of ships had upon the mob.

Trade was rapidly going from bad to worse owing to the disturbed conditions on the mainland and in the interior, where civil war had been raging for years and the local government passed from one war-lord to another with startling rapidity. The general with the most money for the time being secured the allegiance of the troops, and the rest, with no means of keeping themselves, became brigands.

No. Hermione's friend, who looked tired and harassed, and whose two children were safely at school in England, was longing for the day when her husband retired and they could embark for home. "I never know from one day's end to the other that our servants aren't going to be intimidated into deserting in a body," she said. "They've done it before, and no doubt will do it again. I've learnt to do without them by this time; but it is exasperating when some local trades union

issues an edict that no food is to be sold to foreigners on pain of death."

That doleful tale only bore out what dozens of other residents told me during my time in China.

Hermione and I went on board the *Nanning* again at half-past five, and an hour later, when Mr. Fletcher returned, the ship sailed. He was evidently so big a noise in the business world that he could afford to keep ships waiting when it suited him.

The *Nanning* had accommodation for about sixteen first-class passengers, so far as I recollect, but on this particular trip was an empty ship with only six. The captain, chief officer, and second officer messed with us in the saloon, though one of the two latter was always on watch on the bridge, while the captain did not always appear if we were making the land or expecting to sight lights. The second and third engineers had their meals elsewhere; but the chief engineer, a delightful Northcountryman called Veale, with a profound sense of humour and a stock of the drollest stories I had ever heard, generally fed with us.

The saloon, as I have said, was in the midship structure underneath the charthouse and bridge. It extended the full width of the ship and had its large skylight opening out on to the small promenade deck overhead, a row of large scuttles on either side, and more scuttles, with barred openings, looking out over the fore well-deck. I have drawn a rough plan to make it clearer; but at the after end of the saloon, on the port side of the ship, came the pantry, serving-hatch, and sideboard. The only door was on the starboard side aft, and there was a piano, a couple of writing-tables, a stove which was not in use, and the usual broad-bladed electric fans in the

ceiling. The seating accommodation for meals consisted of two short tables in the after end, and, further forward, a longer table athwartships. As there were so few passengers, only the long table was in use. I have shown our seats in my rough drawing; but a word or two as to the passengers and officers may not be out of place.

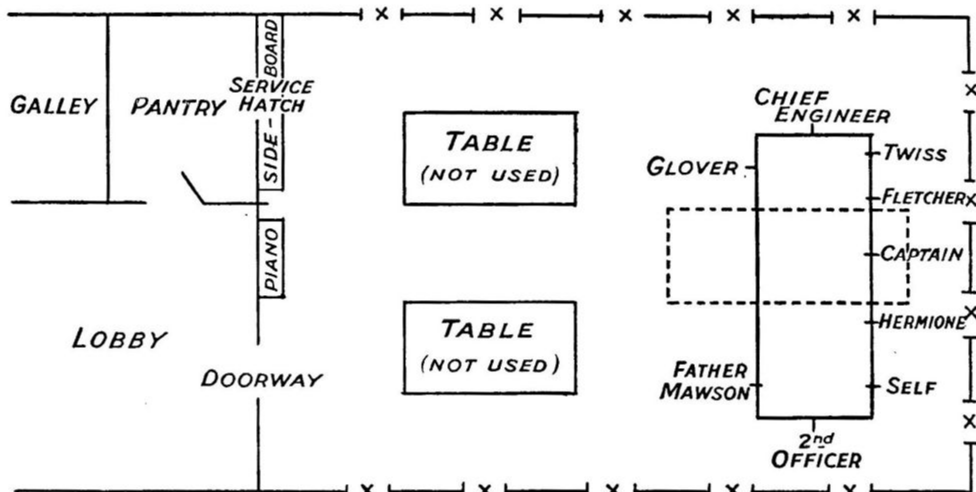
Mr. Fletcher, who sat on the captain's right, and Hermione, on his left, I have already described. I sat on Hermione's left, while the chief or second officer, according to who happened to be off watch, was at my end of the table.

Captain Hutson, short, broad, red-faced and burly, looked more like a heavyweight boxer than a seaman. He didn't speak more than necessary, and confided to me that he disliked all women, that he was a bachelor, and would never be anything else. With beetling eyebrows and a firm jaw, he looked the sort of man who would stand no nonsense from any one. I suspect he had a fiery temper.

Baker, the chief officer, some years older than the skipper, was tall and lanky and miserable-looking. I have a suspicion that he had been passed over for promotion in one of the larger steamship companies because of some scandal, for he was undoubtedly a soured man who was only putting in time before going home to his wife and family in England. I didn't much care for Baker. He laboured under a perpetual grievance that was rather tiring, and lost no time in telling me his opinions of the Navy and naval officers. The latter he regarded as stuck-up snobs.

Apart from the chief engineer, little Willett, the second officer, a fellow about my own age, was the cheeriest and most companionable of the officers. He had been trained

ROUGH PLAN OF NANNING’S SALOON.



Dotted line shows rough limits of skylight overhead.
X X X etc. show side scuttles.

in the *Conway* and was an officer in the R.N.R., having served through the war. He regretted very much that his people hadn’t been able to afford to put him into the Navy. Willett told me he was only marking time in China coasters before transferring to some larger line. Full of enthusiasm and very much ‘all there’ at his job, we found much in common to talk about and got on very well. Incidentally, it was Willett who was sitting at my end of the table at dinner the night we sailed from Swatow.

Opposite me came Father Mawson, a middle-aged Roman Catholic missionary who had spent nearly all his life in China, and knew the country and its people inside out. He was rather mournful until one got him talking, when he was one of the most interesting men to whom I have ever listened. He had lived for years as a native in the wilds of North China without ever seeing one of his own countrymen, and, until he told me, I had no idea of what the R.C. missionaries were expected to

put up with or how miserably they were paid. I give them full marks.

I wish I could remember all his stories; but as well as his missionary work, he apparently acted as a sort of medical officer for a pretty extensive district, though he had no sort of medical training beyond his own experience and common-sense. The natives, steeped in superstition, did not hesitate to consult him. I recollect he told me one yarn where, dragged out of his bed in the middle of the night, he rode over twenty miles on a donkey in a snow blizzard with the temperature at minus 15° (47° of frost) to attend an ancient Chinese woman who was said to be dying. Arriving more dead than alive, with his nose, fingers, and toes frost-bitten, he found the old crone suffering from nothing worse than a severe tummy-ache. Her relations, dozens of them in one tiny room, had been dosing her with a vile mixture made of slugs collected during the summer, dried and powdered, mingled with something even more unsavoury which I cannot mention. Father Mawson, after being thawed out, gave her a jorum of castor-oil and brandy, and by the next day the toothless old dame was as merry as a cricket slating her great-great-grandchildren. They were a marvellous race, those northern Chinese. In spite of famines and pestilence, of the fierce heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter, they were as tough as nails and lived to a ripe old age. Father Mawson, for all his dreamy eyes and soft voice, was a tough nut himself. One had to be in his particular line of business.

The young Englishman in the Chinese Customs, who was going to Amoy, did not interest me much. His name, I think, was Glover, and he had teeth rather like a rabbit and suffered from adenoids. Our American passenger, Mr. Quentin K. Twiss, was good-hearted, honestly vulgar, and the noisiest

feeder to whom I have ever listened. I could hear him ingurgitating soup from my end of the table, and it was all I could do to keep a straight face when Hermione caught my eye, winked, and murmured some impolite remark about suction.

Twiss's conversation, when one couldn't escape, was overpowering. In addition to booming like a fog-horn, he punched one heartily and heavily at regular intervals on the back or chest, and prefaced nearly every observation with "Yes, *sir*!" just as some of his countrymen seem to do in the 'talkies.' He started off by addressing me with "Say, 'lootenant,' " and then, when he thought he knew me better, as "Say, cousin." This caused Hermione to ask if he really *was* related to me. I didn't actually dislike Twiss—but preferred him at a respectable distance. He was too hearty altogether. His thumps were shattering.

It was delicious to be at sea again after the heat and smells of Swatow, and getting clear of the land we steamed on up the coast through a sea just ruffled by the faintest breeze from the north-eastward. It wasn't properly dark when the dinner-bell went at seven forty-five, and we forgathered in the saloon. The skipper was rather a stickler for punctuality, so it must have been at about seven-fifty that we sat down in our places.

It all seemed very calm and peaceful—the flowers on the table, most of the electric lights burning, the fans twirling overhead, and all the scuttles open to catch the breeze. The old ship was rolling very gently, so gently that one only noticed the movement by watching the alternate sapphire sea and a sky suffused with every colour of the rainbow, framed in the scuttle openings.

The meal started as usual—*hors d'œuvres*, soup, fish. The fish, indeed, was being handed round by the Chinese 'boys,' and I was pondering over the wine-list, wondering whether I should order my usual iced lager, or suggest splitting a bottle of Liebfraumilch with Hermione, when I heard a scuffle and thud on the deck overhead. It sounded as though some one had fallen, and conveyed nothing whatever to me. Captain Hutson, however, sitting on the other side of Hermione, abruptly broke off what he was saying, gazed rather apprehensively at the open skylight overhead, and half rose from his chair. At the same moment the Chinese 'boy' behind him handed him a sauce-boat on a silver salver. The skipper sat down again and helped himself, making some remark in the vernacular to which the Chinaman replied.

I don't know to this day why I noticed the incident, but the 'boy,' who was really a man of between thirty-five and forty, seemed to be the captain's personal steward and always stood behind him at meals, though occasionally he condescended to hand things to other people on the same side of the table. He had the usual sleek black hair, well brushed back and shiny with oil; the inevitable long pale-blue silk robe well below his knees with baggy white trousers tied in at the ankles; and black, white-soled Chinese shoes. To me, who knew nothing of Chinamen and couldn't tell t'other from which, he was exactly like hundreds of others except for an old scar just below his left cheek-bone.

I heard the four double strokes of the bell forward striking eight bells—eight o'clock. This must have been the signal, for almost simultaneously there came the sound of a shot and some one shouting. The noise seemed to come through the skylight from the direction of the bridge. The first report was followed by the rattle of several others.

Startled, I jumped to my feet. I heard the angry voice of the captain, and the demand of Twiss to know what 'in hell' was happening. But it all took place so suddenly that my recollection of events is rather hazy. I realised we were being pirated, and cursed the stupidity that had caused me to leave my pistol in my cabin when I changed for dinner. Perhaps, though, it was just as well. If I had possessed my weapon I might have been tempted to use it.

About half-a-dozen gabbling Chinese with pistols, some in ordinary coolie clothes, others dressed as stewards, burst in through the saloon door and rushed towards us. I think we all must have risen, for Hermione stood up looking very frightened, as did Father Mawson opposite, and Willett at my end of the table. The latter was wearing a white mess-jacket and blue uniform trousers. Mouthing imprecations with a furious look in his eyes, he had his right hand behind his back tugging at the pistol in the hip-pocket of his trousers.

He didn't have a chance. A tall Chinaman standing behind him, one of the stewards from his appearance, was pointing an ugly-looking automatic at his head. He said something in Willett's ear, whereupon the second officer abruptly sat down again and put his hands over his head. The Chinaman, still keeping him covered, put his left hand down and relieved Willett of his revolver. Willett's face was very white.

Captain Hutson, on Hermione's right, was covered with an automatic held by the steward behind him, the man with the scarred face I had already noticed. Veale, the chief engineer, at the other end of the table, also had an armed Chinaman at his elbow. Only the passengers remained unguarded, but not for long. The party coming in through the door sorted themselves out, and in a few seconds we were all sitting down with our hands ignominiously in the air.

Opposite me, leaning across the table on Father Mawson's left, was an evil-faced, grinning fellow in greasy coolie clothing. The muzzle of the automatic clutched in his right hand was within eighteen inches of my chest. The man's hand was shaking, and I'll swear his finger was trembling on the hair-trigger. I stared fascinated at the little ring of polished steel round the pistol's muzzle, expecting every instant to see the spurt of flame which would mean the end of me.

I wondered what it felt like to be shot at close range. Should I see the flash and hear the report before the heavy bullet tore its way through my body? I felt horribly sick.

Hermione, deathly pale, sat beside me with her arms up. She was covered by a man behind me, so close, indeed, that I could smell the horrible garlic-like stench of him. For a wild moment I had the idea of jumping to my feet and attacking the fellow.

But what would have been the use of it? It could not have saved Hermione, for we were powerless and outnumbered by armed and desperate men. I should merely have been shot out of hand.

The attack had been wonderfully well planned, and the armed Indian guards and protective grilles had done nothing to prevent it. The piracy had evidently occurred from *inside* the grilles, and the pirates who had embarked as passengers were in league with the native crew, or at any rate with some of the stewards and cooks who attended to the passengers and officers. At least five of the stewards had suddenly produced weapons, and the man behind Captain Hutson, who gave orders to the others, was probably the leader of the gang. And he, if you please, was the skipper's personal steward, supposed, no doubt, to be eminently trustworthy!

The piracy had been well timed, too, for at eight o'clock the passengers and all the officers except the officer of the watch and two engineers would be congregated in the saloon at dinner. It was far simpler to round up the nine of us in a body, so to speak, than to hold us up individually in our cabins or scattered about the ship.

I could picture in my mind what must have happened. The armed Indian guard stationed at the grille must have been attacked from behind, and the grille door opened to permit the rest of the gang, who were aft among the passengers, to reach the engine-room, bridge, and saloon. That thump we had heard overhead just before eight o'clock must have been the second Indian guard, at the foot of the bridge ladder, being sandbagged or scragged from behind. While some of the pirates then rushed the bridge, for we had heard the shooting, others must have attacked the engine-room and wireless-office.

Beyond those first few shots I had heard no further firing. Moreover, it wasn't quite dark, and by the change I detected in the ship's movement, and the altered appearance of the sea and sky outside the saloon scuttles, I realised that the *Nanning* had altered course from about north-east to south-west. This seemed to point to the fact that the pirates were in possession of the bridge and engine-room, and, with revolvers at the officers' heads, were steaming the ship back to their lair somewhere along the coast to the southward.

A pretty kettle of fish, in all conscience!

I wondered how far we had to go, and what were our chances of rescue. If we arrived at our new destination during the night, or at early dawn, we seemed to stand little chance of being sighted by passing ships. But even if the *Nanning*

were sighted, how would other vessels know that something was amiss? The pirates would take full precautions to prevent communication.

There were no destroyers in China in those days. What was our chance of being seen by a cruiser, a sloop, or perhaps a submarine, coming up the coast from Hong-Kong? I realised, however, the immensity of the China Sea, and that the comparatively few men-of-war we had out there were scattered all over the station. Unless we had managed to get off a wireless message, the odds were a hundred to one against our being rescued by the Navy. I had my doubts about that S.O.S. signal. The wireless-office was generally one of the first places the pirates made for. Our Chinese telegraphist was probably cowering at the point of a pistol with his instruments out of action.

What would happen if the pirates succeeded in taking the ship to their base?

I didn’t exactly know, but presumed they would pillage the cargo for what they wanted, loot any specie or bullion that happened to be in the strong-room, despoil the passengers, and decamp with several well-to-do hostages for ransom. After that, the gutted *Nanning* would probably be allowed to return to Hong-Kong.

The ignominy of it!

I don’t know how long we sat there with our hands over our heads while our captors grunted and gabbled among themselves. They were discussing what to do with us, and the captain’s ‘boy’ seemed to be doing most of the talking and giving orders to the others. Presently, when the rogues had decided upon a course of action, we were waved away from our places at the table with pointed pistols, and taken to the

after end of the saloon near the doorway. Here we were searched. I nearly saw red as the leader handed his pistol to another man, passed his hands over Hermione's body, felt her evening-cloak, and opened her bag to look through its contents. They found no weapons on any of us, and Mr. Fletcher and Twiss were both allowed to retain their well-filled wallets.

The examination finished, the captain and chief engineer were taken off under escort, probably to the bridge and engine-room respectively. This left the pirate leader with about eight others guarding Hermione and her father, Father Mawson, Twiss, Glover, Willett, and myself. The leader, having motioned to us to sit down on the settee running along the side of the ship under the scuttles, said something to Mr. Fletcher. The latter, looking very puzzled, shook his head.

"That's a dialect I don't know," he said. "D'you catch what he's saying, Father?"

Father Mawson nodded, and gabbled something in Chinese. The leader grinned and replied, and then, gesticulating, broke out into a torrent of sing-song conversation. After a bit Father Mawson held up his hand to stop him, and turned to us.

"I am asked to tell you all," he exclaimed, "that this gentleman and his friends are in full possession of the ship, and that they're taking her back to a bay down the coast where they expect to arrive early to-morrow morning. I am to say that no great harm will come to any of the European passengers if they obey orders. But if there is any attempt to retake the ship, or if any one tries to attract the attention of any passing vessel, the worst will occur. What this man says is 'your fate is our fate,' which presumably means that if he

and his friends are not interfered with, no great harm will come to us."

"The damned insolence of it!" Fletcher muttered, spluttering with indignation. "Does this fellow realise we shall probably meet a gunboat, and that he and his friends will be hanged as pirates?"

Father Mawson translated. The Chinaman replied shortly.

"He says that if a gunboat appears, nobody will remain alive," the priest interpreted. "Any interference with their plans will result in death."

Fletcher ground his teeth in impotent rage, while the rest of us looked sheepish or frightened. I stole a glance at Hermione, who was sitting next to her father. Her lips were tightly closed and her face white; but her expression told me nothing.

Twiss, the American, calmly took his cigar-case from his pocket, selected a smoke, and lit up.

"Waal," he drawled. "I guess I've heard of pirates before; but this is a noo experience on me. Yes, *sir*! And I'm an American citizen travelling in a British ship. To think——"

Willett, the second officer, suddenly chipped in.

"Haven't you any gunmen way back in the States, Mr. Twiss?" he enquired innocently.

"Not in the state I come from, Mr. Willett. No, *sir*!"

"That's nothing to do with what we're up against now!" Mr. Fletcher exclaimed. "I want to know what's going to happen to us—I demand to know!"

"And so do I," said young Glover, suddenly finding his voice. "Does this man know I'm an official of the Chinese Government?"

Father Mawson shook his head.

"I'm afraid that won't help you, Glover," he replied gently. "You must realise, we must all realise, that he means all he says. For them it's a matter of life or death, we must understand. I've told you what he said—'Your fate is our fate.' Nothing could be plainer. If they're not interfered with, we shall probably not be harmed. If anything happens to them, I'm afraid we shall suffer."

Mr. Fletcher muttered something under his breath. I saw Hermione say something and pat his hand. She caught my eye, and tried to smile. It was not very successful.

"I want to go to my cabin," said Fletcher to Father Mawson. "Tell him, please."

Father Mawson translated. The gang leader answered.

"He says we are all to be kept under guard in the captain's cabin," the missionary interpreted. "He will have no objection to your going to your cabin if one of his men accompanies you, Mr. Fletcher."

But the Chinaman was speaking again, and Father Mawson replied. They were at it for two minutes. The leader seemed to be giving orders, and the missionary to be arguing, expostulating—hopelessly, from the look on his face.

"I'm afraid things are rather worse than I thought," Father Mawson had to confess at last, licking his dry lips. "This man says no harm will come to us; but—but——" he paused, to pass a thin hand across his forehead.

"But what?" Fletcher demanded.

"There are conditions attached. He intends to take some of us as hostages for ransom."

“But this is an outrage!” Fletcher exploded. “Tell him—tell him that if he dares to molest Europeans he’ll—he’ll be wiped off the face of the earth! Does he think the British Government will allow any cut-throat gang to hold British subjects to ransom without retaliation?”

The little man glared at the pirate leader as though he would have attacked him then and there. The Chinaman, toying with his pistol, smiled in reply. He had us completely in his power, the wretch. With this gang of devils at his back he could dictate his own terms, do anything. What the blazes did he care for threats of the British Government? We were at his mercy.

Father Mawson was talking again.

“I’m to be one of the hostages,” he said resignedly. “You, Mr. Twiss, are to be another. Our friend points out that your firm is a very rich firm. They think very highly of you, he says, and will be prepared to pay a substantial sum for your safe return. I wish I could say the same for my society,” he added, with the faintest suspicion of a smile.

“Waal, waal, waal!” Twiss murmured, his face taking on a mournful expression for the first time that evening. “If this don’t lick creation!—And me an American citizen. Why can’t you darned Britishers clear up this state of affairs? Maybe you want the American Navy to do your job, eh?”

Willett, who detested Twiss, made a vulgar noise of derision.

“Did you say something, Mister Officer?” Twiss enquired, turning upon him.

“I did not, Mister Twiss. I merely cleared my throat. I’ve a peculiar affection of the throat.”

“So it seems, Mister Willett. Maybe you gargle too much.”

"And what in hell d'you mean by that!" the second officer demanded, flaring up.

"Don't wrangle, you two," Fletcher broke in angrily. "This is no time for arguments.—Father Mawson," he continued, "will you be good enough to tell this—er man that he's treading on very dangerous ground. The British Government is all-powerful when it really makes its mind up, and it'll see he doesn't escape. Personally, I shall leave no stone unturned. I have influential friends everywhere."

Father Mawson shrugged his shoulders. "It's no use, Mr. Fletcher," he pointed out. "I've used every argument. The fellow's determined, and desperate. I can't move him, and the British Government can't help us now. But—but, well, I'd like a word in your ear, Fletcher," he added, his voice serious.

Father Mawson was sitting between Mr. Fletcher and myself, with Hermione the other side of her father. Willett was on my left, with Twiss beyond him.

Leaning forward, the missionary muttered something in Fletcher's ear. He spoke rapidly in one of the native dialects, which I naturally couldn't understand; but the effect was instantaneous.

Hermione overheard and understood what was said. I saw her blench, shut her eyes, and flop backwards against the padded back of the settee as though she were going to faint. Fletcher himself went a grey ashen colour and seemed to gasp for breath, opening and shutting his mouth like a fish. He took out a silk handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"But good God, man!" I heard him mutter in English. "This is monstrous—monstrous!—Why doesn't he take me?"

"He thinks he'll get more for your daughter," Father Mawson whispered, his face beaded with perspiration. "I've

tried to persuade him it's very unwise on his part; but it's useless!"

Then I understood. The pirate leader was demanding Hermione as a hostage!

Hermione in the hands of those inhuman Chinese devils to do with as they liked—— My God!

I felt hot and cold in turns with anxiety and agitation; but there seemed little I could do to help. I didn't even know pidgin-English, let alone any Chinese dialect.

Willett nudged me in the ribs.

"We'll have to get Miss Fletcher out of this," he muttered in my ear, without moving his lips.

"How?" I managed to ask.

"Retake the blinkin' ship," the fire-eating little second officer murmured. "We can't let 'em take Miss Fletcher ashore, that's certain!"

I agreed; though how the blazes we were to set about recapturing the *Nanning* from a gang of well-armed men who were already in full possession and would stick at nothing, was completely beyond me. Perhaps Willett had some idea. Assuredly I hadn't.

Tears had started to trickle down poor little Fletcher's face. Hermione opened her eyes and saw him.

"Don't worry about me, old dear," she said bravely, patting his hand and trying to smile. "I shall be all right. I can look after myself." Her mouth was quivering. I knew what was in her mind.

"If he won't take me, tell him I'll pay the ransom now!" Fletcher burst out, his voice agonised. "I'll give him what he asks without question—anything, anything!"

Father Mawson translated.

The pirate leader replied.

"He asks how much money you have with you?" the missionary interpreted. "He wants cash, he says, not promises."

"I've about eight hundred dollars here with me," Mr. Fletcher said.

Father Mawson passed on the information.

"He says he will have your eight hundred dollars anyhow," he continued after another short conversation. "He wants a separate ransom for your daughter, insists upon it."

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand dollars," said Father Mawson. "He says you are a very rich man."

Mr. Fletcher gasped. So did the rest of us. Twenty thousand dollars—approximately two thousand pounds sterling! It seemed a prodigious sum.

"Tell him I'll send the money as soon as I can get back to civilisation," Mr. Fletcher moaned. "I'll ask no questions, on my solemn word of honour!"

"He won't trust you, Fletcher," the priest replied, after another talk. "He wants cash. Failing that, he insists on taking Miss Fletcher."

"Then let him take me instead!—My daughter among these savages!—God, man, it's unthinkable, horrible!" He shuddered.

"I know, Fletcher," Father Mawson continued, with a helpless shrug of his shoulders, "but what can we do? The man's serious. I've argued; but I can't make him see reason.

—Perhaps it’s as well I’m going too. I may be able to keep an eye on Miss Fletcher.”

He was interrupted by the leader himself impatiently waving his pistol towards the saloon doorway and giving some orders in his own language.

Our escort, fingering their weapons, closed in upon us. We filed out of the saloon into the lobby and started to climb the companionway leading up to the captain’s cabin, our place of imprisonment.

Willett managed to slip alongside me.

“Doc,” he whispered in my ear, without being noticed by any of our guards, “are you out to give me a hand?”

“Of course,” said I.

“Got a shooter?” he asked under his breath.

“In my cabin,” I murmured.

“Then keep your eye on me, old man,” he muttered. “I think I see daylight—Lordy, Lord!” he added in his natural voice, as one of the Chinese looked suspiciously in our direction. “What a life! What a hell of a life!”

Willett seemed fairly cheerful.

I felt supremely miserable.

I was thinking of Hermione.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER X

IT was a party of very unhappy people which forgathered in the captain's cabin abaft the charthouse with a truculent-looking Chinaman, armed with a Winchester carbine taken from one of the Indian guards, lounging outside the door watching our every movement.

Fletcher, Hermione, Father Mawson, and Twiss had evidently made up their minds to the worst. None of us was in the mood for conversation, and even if we had felt like talking we could hardly have discussed the possibility of recapturing the ship. The watchful pirate outside the door looked far too intelligent to be trifled with. For all we knew, he might understand English. Once he realised what was in the minds of Willett and myself, the fat would be properly in the fire and the best-laid schemes would come to nothing.

Willett, from the look of rapt concentration on his face, and the way he screwed up his eyes and stared fixedly at the bulkhead opposite, was evidently turning some plan over in his mind. I was prepared to help him to the best of my ability when he decided what was to be done. The initiative, however, must rest with him. He knew the layout of the *Nanning*, and I did not.

I fully realised the difficulties. If he hit upon a likely scheme he would have to communicate it not merely to us in the skipper's cabin, but to the captain and chief officer on the bridge, and the engineers below. The pirate gang might consist of as many as thirty or forty men, who would stick at

nothing. It was sheer suicide to try retaking the ship unless all the three separate parties of Europeans acted in unison.

Whatever happened, the whole business seemed hideously risky. Apart from the difficulty of communication, we had to get hold of weapons—firearms for preference. Where were there any firearms? I had a pistol in my cabin if I could get hold of it; but what of the others? One faulty step might lead to discovery and the whole lot of us being murdered out of hand.

Were we justified in trying to retake the ship and running the risk of failure and probable death for us all? Would it be better to leave the pirates undisturbed, to let them take the *Nanning* to their lair and allow them to decamp with their hostages?

The latter, no doubt, *would* be set free when their ransoms had been paid, while the pirates must be well aware that they would be drawing a hornets' nest about their ears if they allowed an Englishwoman, an English missionary, and an American to be harmed.

Indeed, the idea of taking English and American hostages seemed very risky from their point of view. The mere fact of their being carried off would cause a popular hullabaloo which would *force* the British and United States authorities to take drastic action, irrespective of the Chinese Government. The news of an English girl being captured would inflame public opinion to boiling-point. I could almost imagine Hermione's photograph and the headlines in the English newspapers.

But the very thought of Hermione, or any white woman, in the hands of the Chinese made me see red and feel prickly all over. She might, of course, come to no harm. On the other

hand, one never knew what the inhuman brutes would do. They didn't look upon women as we did, and I remembered those dreadful stories of rape and torture that I had been told on board the *Tamar*. I don't know what Fletcher or Hermione thought about it at the time, but I would sooner have seen Hermione killed outright before my eyes than mauled about and carried off by those devils!

No. Whatever happened, however great the risk, we couldn't allow her to be taken off without putting up a fight for it. I, personally, should have felt a craven-gutted hound for ever afterwards if we had sat still and done nothing.

There was nothing else for it. We *must* fight!

Who could be counted upon to stand in with Willett and myself when it came to a scrap?

Fletcher undoubtedly would fight, and so would Twiss. Glover also would come in, though I doubted if he would be much use in a scrap. What of Father Mawson? He was a brave man, I knew, but had he any religious scruples against the shedding of blood in a righteous cause?

I felt a little doubtful about Baker, the disgruntled chief officer, and knew nothing of the second and third engineers. But Captain Hutson did not seem the type of man to give up his ship without a struggle. Nor did Veale, the chief engineer. Would any of the loyal members of the Chinese crew come in on our side?

Reckoning up, however, I came to the conclusion that there were eight probable fighters among us, with the possibility of half-a-dozen more. That, at the outside, meant fourteen of us against a gang which might number thirty or forty.

The prospects were not rosy. We could not fight without weapons, and how were we to set about collecting them?

Upon my soul, I didn’t know. It seemed hopeless.

We cannot have been sitting in the captain’s cabin for more than ten minutes when Dawson, the third engineer, was thrust in upon us. To my consternation, he was clutching a shiny black case containing a musical instrument.

“Where the blazes have you sprung from, Jim?” Willett demanded.

Dawson explained that having been relieved in the engine-room shortly before eight o’clock, he had gone to the bathroom and was lying in his tub when the piracy occurred. Emerging when the coast seemed to be clear, he had darted to his cabin and dressed, to be dragged out a few minutes before when a house-to-house search was made of all the cabins by armed Chinese.

“I’ve brought along my ukulele with me,” he explained to Willett, with a portentous wink. “I thought a bit of music might cheer us all up.”

“You and your blinkin’ music!” Willett grunted, as Dawson sat himself on the cushioned locker beside him with the instrument case on his knees.

Fletcher looked up with a miserable face.

“Music?” he said. “D’you realise what’s happened?”

“Sure I do, sir,” Dawson answered, shrugging his shoulders, glancing at the door to see if the sentry’s back was turned, and flicking open the ukulele case. Removing the instrument inside, he carefully handed the case to Willett alongside him and started to tune up.

The watchman at the door heard the unusual sound, and turned to see what had caused it. Satisfied that nothing was amiss, he again presented his back and resumed a guttural conversation with some one outside and invisible to us.

The lid of the ukulele case was open towards the door, so that its contents could not be seen by the Chinaman on watch. But, sitting close to Willett, I saw what reposed on the green baize lining at the bottom.

It was a small automatic pistol and three clips of cartridges. I noticed the electric light winking on the wicked-looking nickel bullets. To avoid appearing interested, I instantly averted my eyes.

The sentry's back was still turned, and with his eyes upon him Willett managed to transfer the weapon and ammunition to the settee behind him. Thence he smuggled them into his hip pocket. It was very neatly done. It looked as though he were merely scratching himself.

I was lost in admiration for the resource and bravery of the homely-looking Dawson, with his pale face and rather protuberant green eyes. Those few minutes in his cabin had not been wasted. The Chinese would be unlikely to suspect any harm in a ukulele case; but if Dawson *had* been discovered with that pistol in his possession nothing could have saved him. He was a very gallant fellow.

Having tuned his instrument, he started idly to pick at its strings, and presently to croon. Willett beat time with a finger.

The sentry looked round again with an expressionless face, stared for a moment, and then broke out into a grin. Willett grinned back.

"Music, Johnny," he said. "Music all lite."

"All can do," the Chinaman grunted. "You makee sing, velly good, I tink."

He turned his back again, and lit a cigarette.

So our sentry did understand a certain amount of English, at any rate pidgin-English. That was something worth

knowing. It showed it would be dangerous to discuss any plans in his hearing, or even to whisper to each other.

Fletcher, Hermione, and the others stared in amazement at our two musicians. Obviously they thought them soft in the head. In the circumstances in which we found ourselves, how could any sane person feel sufficiently cheerful to warble that simple melody ‘John Brown’s Body’?

And the way Willett beat time, and Dawson rolled his eyes like a demented negro, made them look madder still. The whole effect was utterly ludicrous, though nobody felt like laughing. Indeed, I could see from their expressions that Fletcher and Twiss were both getting ready to lodge a protest. This was no time for unseemly levity on the part of the ship’s officers, they would say.

Then I suddenly realised there was method in their apparent madness. Though whispered conversation was too dangerous to be indulged in under the very eyes of the sentry, sung conversation could hardly be suspected. And the words Dawson put to the familiar old tune I had so often heard roared over a cracked wardroom piano at after-dinner sing-songs, were quite original to me. Intended primarily for Willett, they didn’t even rhyme or scan; but certainly conveyed information.

Dawson sang:—

> “John Brown’s body, mind that pistol’s loaded, Bob,
> John Brown’s body, I’ve another in my pants.
> John Brown’s body, ask to get your saxophone,
> And get your shooter from your cabin.”

Willett, tumbling instantly to what was going on, replied with a verse of his own. His voice was even less tuneful than Dawson’s:—

“The dirty dogs have already pinched my shooter, Jim,
What we really ought to do is to open up the arms locker.
We’re sitting on the bally thing and the blighters haven’t noticed it,
But Lord knows how to get the key.”

Dawson strummed on as Willett continued:—

“The key’s in captain’s pocket and he’s up on the bridge,
The mate is up there with him with them there blasted Chinks,
They won’t let us go near him ’cos they will smell a rat,
As we go marching on.”

It all sounded very absurd and childish. They sang verse after verse of ‘John Brown’s Body’ to a most unappreciative audience, who didn’t at all realise what was going on, and then broke into some other tune. Nevertheless, before long, I was able to gather roughly what had already happened, and what was in Willett’s mind.

Of our two Indian guards on watch when the attack came, one had been shot dead and the other wounded. The two others, in their cabin, had been surprised and disarmed, one having been badly beaten about the head with a pistol-butt. The wireless-office had also been raided and the instruments damaged before any S.O.S. signal could be sent off, which meant that we were very unlikely to get any help from outside. Two pirates, Dawson said, were on the bridge guarding the captain and mate, two more were watching us in the skipper’s cabin, while three or four were in the engine-room keeping guard over the chief and second engineers. The rest of the gang were aft holding up the Chinese passengers, going through their property, and selecting hostages for ransom.

How Dawson had discovered all this, I don’t pretend to know. All the same, it was valuable information. If we could

only slam the two grille doors at the after end of the midship superstructure and isolate the pirates busy among the Chinese passengers, we might conceivably be able to tackle the seven or eight that remained in the centre portion of the ship. The grille doors, I knew, had the usual snap locks.

The arms chest, kept in the chartroom in some ships, was in the captain's cabin in the *Nanning*, where, with a cushion on top, a valance reaching almost to the floor and close up to the after bulkhead, it served as an extra settee. The pirate leader, who had acted as Captain Hutson's steward at meals only, not as his personal servant, did not know its whereabouts. Otherwise, it would have been one of the first things he would have made a dart for.

So as it turned out, Willett, Dawson, and myself were actually seated on a large chest containing four rifles, at least half-a-dozen pistols, a 12-bore shot-gun, and a quantity of ammunition. The information was a little disturbing. I suddenly felt as though I were seated on the top of a powder magazine which might explode at any moment and hoist me through the roof.

Willett's general idea was to get hold of the key of the arms chest from the captain on the bridge and arm every one in the cabin. Simultaneously, the two grille doors must be slammed to prevent the pirates being reinforced from aft. Having armed ourselves, we would deal with the fellows guarding the cabin and bridge, and then hunt down the others in the engine-room. Once in possession of the midship structure containing the bridge and engine-room, we were in virtual control of the ship.

It all seemed delightfully easy in conversation; but the scheme really bristled with difficulties.

It was Dawson, for instance, who pointed out that even if we obtained the key from the captain, we could hardly open the arms chest in full view of the guard outside. The moment the fellow realised what was happening we should be shot out of hand. Dawson suggested that it would simplify matters if the lights were extinguished throughout the ship by the simple expedient of stopping the dynamo in the engine-room. A mêlée in the dark would give us more chance of success, he thought.

Both Willett and myself demurred. We pointed out that a rough-and-tumble in pitch darkness would cause hopeless confusion, and probably end in our shooting each other. Moreover, if there was no light to see by, how on earth could we open the arms chest, help ourselves to its contents, and load the weapons? And how were we to communicate with the engine-room to tell them to stop the dynamo?

Willett was all for boldness. He had one pistol and Dawson had another. The guards outside our cabin door were gradually becoming less suspicious. Having obtained the key of the arms chest from the captain, Dawson and himself would surprise and shoot the sentries while their backs were turned.

Hearing the shots, the two pirates guarding the captain and mate on the bridge might rush down to see what was happening. If so, Willett would hold them off with his pistol, while the others in the cabin armed themselves. In any case, the moment the sentries were disposed of, Dawson must dart out, rush aft, and slam the grille doors.

It was I who suggested that the pirates on the bridge might turn their weapons on the captain and mate the instant they heard the shots below and realised an attempt was being made

to recapture the ship. Was it not advisable that we should smuggle a loaded pistol to Captain Hutson or Barker—a pistol each if we could manage it? Then they could defend themselves.

That was all very well, Willett said; but where the devil were the pistols coming from? At present there were only two between us, and these, in the hands of Dawson and himself, were both necessary to his plan. Then I told him of the weapon in my cabin. Could I not get to my cabin on some pretext or other and arm myself? Willett seemed rather doubtful.

The first step, we all agreed, was to get hold of the key of the arms chest from the captain. That wanted some doing, Willett thought, unless he himself could find some way of getting on to the bridge. Maybe old Baker, who had nothing to eat since tea, would soon be clamouring for food, and he, Willett, might get a chance of relieving him.

The strumming of that infernal ukulele, under the sound of which we discussed matters in sing-song voices, was getting on my nerves. I was keyed up with excitement; but the moment food was mentioned I remembered that I also was hungry, and that the others must be feeling the same. My dinner, until it was so rudely interrupted at the fish course, had consisted of a squashed sardine, a slice of tomato, some chopped-up egg, two olives, and a plateful of clear soup with some bits of carrot in it.

I was about to suggest that some sandwiches and drinks would not come amiss, when Chief Officer Baker, looking more woebegone and harassed than ever, appeared in the doorway. He was attended by an armed Chinaman.

“We’re going back along our tracks,” he said mournfully to Willett. “We’re running off the chart up topsides. The old man wants you to bring up the new ones.”

Willett, I should explain, was the *Nanning’s* navigator, or at least he was responsible for the charts.

“Has the old man got the key of the chartroom drawers?” Willett asked. “I left it locked this evening. My key’s in my room.”

“You’d better go and ask him,” Baker said.

“But what about these blokes?” Willett wanted to know, nodding towards the two Chinamen in the doorway.

“That’s all right,” the chief officer replied. “They’ve been told its O.K. They’ll keep an eye on you, that’s all.—Mr. Spry,” he went on to say, turning his mournful gaze on me, “Captain Hutson would like to see you on the bridge for a minute.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” said Baker. “He wants you to have a look at a couple of wounded, if you’re willing.”

“Of course,” I replied, rising.

I noticed a peculiar expression flicker over Willett’s face as he jumped up and took me by the arm.

“Wounded!” he said almost cheerfully, looking at me. “That means you’ll want the key of the medicine chest in the chartroom. It’s on the old man’s bunch he always wears. Don’t forget to ask for his keys, Doctor.”

He winked almost imperceptibly. He was giving me a hint.

Keys, I thought to myself—first the key of the chartroom drawers, and now the key of the medicine chest. Why had Willett stressed the word *keys*? In a flash, I realised what he

was driving at. The key of the arms chest was in the captain's possession. It was probably on the same bunch as the others!

I hardly dared to meet Hermione's eyes; but with a backward glance at her and the others, I allowed Willett to walk me across the cabin.

Mr. Fletcher and Twiss, who had been conversing together for some time, had started a three-cornered conversation with Baker—something about opening negotiations with the pirate leader. I didn't hear exactly what was said, for Willett halted by the cabin doorway.

"I think I'll just borrow one of these," he said, his eye falling on some of the captain's coats and oilskins hanging near the entrance. "It'll be cold up top."

He selected a dark blue raincoat. I helped him into it.

"Thanks," he nodded. "This mess-jacket's a bit draughty.—Come on, Doctor."

The night was almost intolerably close and airless. So far from being a necessity, an overcoat of any sort must be uncomfortable. But I saw through Willett's little manœuvre. In his short white mess-jacket the slight bulge made by the pistol in the hip-pocket of his blue trousers was too conspicuous to be pleasant. It was lucky he had remembered it in time. If I had spotted it from behind, others assuredly would have done the same. I admired his coolness. I was feeling all hot and bothered with anxiety and excitement.

We passed out of the cabin, along a short alleyway past the companion leading to the saloon and cabins below, out on to the deck, and up the starboard ladder leading on to the bridge. Nobody followed us. Baker's Chinaman remained with him in the captain's cabin, and the two others were still on watch outside the door. Lulled into a sense of security by our

inactivity, our guards were gradually becoming less suspicious—indeed, rather casual.

I noticed the usual bridge awning had been furled. It was a calm night with a sea like black velvet and an indigo sky powdered all over with stars except to the west, where traces of the sunset still lingered on the horizon. What little breeze there was must have been almost astern. The air was practically stagnant, and the reek of our Japanese coal ascended vertically from the funnel-top in a thick black column. In my thin evening-shoes I could feel the layer of gritty smuts on the bridge planking almost like gravel.

The ship steamed through the night with no further sounds than the swish of parted waters and the muffled beat of her engines. The wrinkled face of the Chinese quartermaster at the wheel in the tail of the bridge, dimly illuminated in the glow of the binnacle as he peered down at the compass, reminded me of the face of a graven image. It looked inexpressibly sad. I wondered of what the old man was thinking as he stood there, silent and unwinking, with his hands knotted round the spokes. The whole atmosphere was strained and eerie. I rather think I shuddered.

The red and white lights of a steamer on an opposite course were in sight at some distance on the port bow. She would pass us, I judged, at a distance of fully two miles. It wasn't really dark when one's eyes became accustomed to it, and Captain Hutson, whom I recognised in the semi-darkness by his white cap-cover and mess-jacket, was standing on the starboard wing of the bridge looking through his night-glasses at a flashing light fine on the starboard bow. Close beside him, smoking a cigarette and gazing in the same direction, was one of the Chinese. Hearing our approach, he swung round to peer into our faces, his right hand in his jacket

pocket and his attitude menacing. I didn't like the look of things until Captain Hutson turned and said something in Chinese, which appeared to satisfy the fellow as to our *bona-fides*. He wore ordinary dark native dress with an European felt hat and horn-rimmed spectacles, and was a stranger to me, not the man who had taken charge of operations in the saloon.

"Which charts do you want, sir?" Willett asked in a nonchalant voice.

The captain told him.

"Then you might let me have your keys, sir," the second officer said. "I locked the chartroom drawers before we sailed.—My own keys are in my room."

Captain Hutson hesitated for a moment, grunted something in reply, and felt in the left pocket of his trousers. Fishing out his key-ring, he unhooked it from the chain and handed it over. The sentry seemed quite indifferent.

"Let's have 'em up as soon as you can, Mr. Willett," the captain said, his voice irritable.

"Aye, aye, sir," the second officer replied, though without making any effort to move. "I've brought the doctor up, sir."

"So I see," Captain Hutson grunted. "Thanks—I want those charts, Willett."

But Willett did not take the hint. He was obviously playing for time. I went hot and cold in turns as I saw him put his right hand in the pocket of his raincoat.

I realised what was passing through his mind. We were three to one. He was considering the idea of attacking the solitary pirate on the bridge then and there. I prayed hard that he wouldn't!

It was no good unless the man were killed outright, and it would take Willett longer to get the little weapon out of his hip-pocket than for the Chinaman to produce his. Besides, even if we did kill him and get his pistol, we couldn't have held the bridge against all comers with only two weapons and a very limited supply of ammunition. Part of our plan was to shut the grille doors. They were still open, and the first shot would have brought the whole gang rushing forward. The people in the cabin below would have been at their mercy. It was a mad idea—suicidal.

I heaved a sigh of profound relief when Willett's hand reappeared without the pistol. For all the Chinaman's seeming indifference I distrusted those sharp eyes of his.

But Captain Hutson was speaking again.

"Two of the Indian guards have been wounded, doctor. Will you have a look at them?"

"Certainly," I answered. "You've a medical chest in the chartroom, haven't you?"

"Yes. You'll find bandages there and most of the things that you'll want. Mr. Willett'll show you. The key's with the others."

"You've no instruments, I suppose?"

He shook his head.

"Then I'd better get my own from my cabin," I suggested. "What about—er, shall I be interfered with?"

Captain Hutson said something in Chinese to the man beside him, to which the latter replied.

"He says it's all right," the captain told me. "You can have the run of the ship so long as you don't get into mischief."

"I shall want hot water and so on," I pointed out.

"Ask Mr. Willett for what you want," said the captain shortly. "He'll see to it. The Chinks won't worry about you, doctor. It's the ship's officers they've got their eyes on. You're considered harmless."

Harmless, indeed!

It rather hurt my sense of pride to be considered harmless, even by Chinese pirates—damn their eyes!

Did I really look a simpleton?

Evidently Captain Hutson did not know about Hermione, Twiss, and Father Mawson having been selected as hostages. But this was no time to enlighten him. The less said the better. That Chinaman alongside him might know English. His hat and horn-rimmed glasses, incongruous though they might be on a full-blooded pirate, looked suspiciously British or American.

Willett and I went below to the charthouse, where he unlocked the long drawer, hauled out a pile of charts, and proceeded to sort them out. The bunch of keys he handed to me, after pointing out the medical chest in a corner.

I filled the pockets of my dinner-jacket with bandages, dressings, and whatever else I thought I should want, and enquired what I should do next. Provided we didn't shoot, we could talk with freedom. The two sentries on the other side of the alleyway, outside the door of the captain's cabin, were holding an animated conversation of their own. Something seemed to have amused them.

Willett put some charts back in the drawer, and rolled up three or four others into a long bundle before he replied to my question.

"Leave me the keys," he whispered. "Then go to your cabin and get your instruments, not forgetting the most important of

the lot. Then see your wounded, and come back to the old man's cabin as quick as you can. I'll be there."

He moved silently towards the door and looked out. The coast was clear, for he came back again to murmur in my ear.

"I'll try to put the others wise, and if I were you, Doc, I'd wear an overcoat. It makes things easier. I'm going to try to slip my shooter to the captain with the charts.—Stand by the door a minute and talk. I want to shift the damned thing to a more convenient pocket."

Half in and half out of the doorway with some bottles of disinfectant in my hands, I carried on a one-sided conversation in my ordinary tone of voice. What I said I can't remember. The two Chinese, outside the captain's cabin about ten feet to my left, eyed me incuriously and continued their talk. I must confess to a thrill of excitement as I watched Willett transfer the pistol and ammunition to the pocket of his raincoat. It seemed ages before he completed the job to his satisfaction.

"Well, I suppose I'd better be getting along," I said. "There's nothing else, I think."

"Right you are," Willett replied. "So long!"

I went down the companion to the deck below, and along the starboard alleyway to my cabin. Not a soul was about, and nobody seemed to have been in my cabin since I had left it before dinner. My day clothes, indeed, were still on the spare bunk where I had thrown them, and my shoes on the floor.

I put on my raincoat, and unearthed my pocket-case of instruments from a suit-case. Then, creeping to the door, I looked out. There was no one about. Thirty seconds later my pistol and three clips of ammunition were in my inner coat pocket. With my heart beating like a sledgehammer, I left the

cabin, went up the companion again past the watching Chinese, and stepped out on to the deck.

The Indian guards lived in a small cabin aft by the grille, and I was walking in that direction when a figure came from the side of the ship to meet me. The deck was fairly well lit, and to my unspeakable horror I recognised the man who had presented the pistol at the captain's head during dinner.

"Where you go?" he demanded sharply, pushing the muzzle of his automatic hard into my stomach.

"I am doctor," I explained, feeling physically sick. "I go to see wounded."

If the fellow took it into his head to search me it would be all up.

"What b'long?" he enquired, nodding at the instrument case in my hands.

I opened the case to show him. That, and the bottles I carried, with a couple of rolled-up bandages produced from my pocket as an afterthought, seemed to convince him.

"You b'long doctor?" he asked.

"Yes, doctor," I replied, nodding vehemently.

"All lite, can do," he said, withdrawing his beastly pistol and stepping outside.

How I walked aft I don't know to this day. My knees felt like jelly.

There was little enough I could do for the Indian guards. Of the four we carried, one had been killed outright when the pirates attacked, and another wounded. The latter, poor chap, had since died, leaving me only the man off watch at the time who had been clubbed over the head with a pistol-butt.

He was not badly damaged. I cleaned, dressed, and bandaged his wound, then put him off to sleep with an injection. Twenty-five minutes, at the most, saw me back in the captain's cabin with the others.

Drinks and sandwiches were on the table.

"Here, Doc," said Willett, who was apparently acting as host, "have something to eat and a spot."

I fell to.

There was a look of triumph on Willett's face, and the others looked more cheerful than before. There was colour in Hermione's cheeks. She actually smiled, bless her brave heart!

The time by the clock on the bulkhead was ten minutes to ten.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XI

TEN o'clock found Hermione, her father, Twiss, Father Mawson, Glover, Willett, Dawson, and myself still under guard in the captain's cabin. Dawson and myself had pistols, and Willett the key of the arms chest on which some of us were sitting. The two sentries outside the door were far less alert and suspicious than before, spending most of their time smoking cigarettes and jabbering to each other with their backs turned.

Captain Hutson, to whom Willett had managed to pass his pistol while delivering the charts, was on the bridge with Baker. They were guarded by two, possibly three, pirates. The chief and second engineers, also watched, were down below in the engine or boiler rooms. It had been found impossible to communicate with them without running the risk of giving the show away.

We soon found that we could talk freely without exciting suspicion, though we were careful not to speak in furtive whispers, and to keep on smiling as though we were cracking jokes. And in a very few minutes Willett, by dint of acting the polite host, and handing round drinks, sandwiches, and cigarettes, managed to sound all the others as to their readiness to fight. All, except Father Mawson, were willing to do so. He refused to be armed when the time came, but raised no objections to our trying to recapture the ship, and said he'd take his chance. Realising what manner of man he was, I am convinced that this had nothing whatever to do with any lack

of pluck. On the contrary, he was probably the bravest man present. It was merely against his religious scruples to use a lethal weapon, and I could not help admiring his decision.

Willett, the chief organiser, had made some slight alterations in his plans. Dawson was to kill the sentry nearest the door by shooting him through the head. I, being the only other person armed, was to dispose of the second man. I suppose the expression on my face showed that I didn't quite relish the idea, for Willett immediately said that if I didn't care to undertake it, I'd better hand my automatic over to him. This was more than I could stomach. However much I hated the job, I couldn't let him think me a coward.

Dawson, as soon as the guards were disposed of and he could get out of the cabin door, was to rush aft and slam the grille doors, shooting down any one who tried to prevent him. If he succeeded in doing this, he was to reconnoitre the engine-room to see if he could liberate the chief and second engineers.

The rest of us, meanwhile, were to shut and lock the cabin door, and to arm ourselves from the chest. Willett, with a chair on the table underneath the skylight, was to climb through it on to the tail of the bridge, for the double purpose of assisting the captain and mate, and to prevent our being fired upon through the skylight. He was to be armed with my pistol.

I was to arm the party in the cabin, to see that they knew how to load their weapons, and to get them on to the bridge, either through the skylight, or through the door and up the starboard ladder in the ordinary way, depending upon the circumstances. Whatever happened, Willett said, I must leave

no weapons in the arms chest, and see that we all took as much ammunition as we could carry.

On the first shot being fired by Dawson, the captain and chief officer on the bridge were to do their utmost to dispose of the two or three pirates up there. This was the riskiest part of our plan, for only the captain was armed. Baker had nothing but his fists, for there was no available weapon with which we could provide him. Hence the reason for Willett leaping up through the skylight in an endeavour to tackle the pirates from behind before it was too late.

To add to the danger, Captain Hutson had told Willett that he was most carefully watched, a pirate being always at his elbow. This was only natural. The Chinese knew nothing of navigation and couldn't even read a chart. They regarded the skipper as the only man who did. If he weren't carefully guarded and intimidated, he might take the ship to some place other than Bias Bay, or run them straight into the arms of a British gunboat.

Captain Hutson, however, was not the type of man to flinch at danger. Boiling with rage at the ease with which the ship had been seized, he longed to pay the pirates back in their own coin and had welcomed Willett's scheme. But I felt sorry for Baker, who was without a weapon.

For no particular reason, a quarter past ten by the clock in the captain's cabin had been decided upon as zero time. As the minute hand crept slowly on, the suspense became almost intolerable. My frayed nerves seemed all of a jangle, and any little courage I possessed was slowly oozing out through the soles of my shoes.

The whole arrangement was damnably cold-blooded, and I began to see a good many holes in our organisation. The

captain and Baker might be shot before we could help them. Dawson and I might be unable to kill the two sentries. Dawson might be unable to get aft to the grille doors, or to shut them when he got there. And what of the chief and second engineers down below? Unavoidably, for we had been unable to communicate, we seemed to have left them in the lurch, poor chaps!

There were dozens of ways in which our plan might be defeated. If we failed, I saw no hope for any of us. The devils would give no quarter.

We still kept up a flow of casual conversation, and at twelve minutes past the hour, Dawson, who was to open the ball, casually left his seat and went over to the table. He had already transferred his automatic to his jacket pocket, and standing facing us with his back to the door and perhaps six feet from it, he had poured himself out a stiff whisky and soda and was calmly biting into a sandwich.

Ten thirteen by the clock.

“Have another spot, Doctor,” said Willett casually, motioning towards the table. “Help yourself, won’t you?”

The sentry, after an indifferent glance in our direction when Dawson moved, had again turned his back and was leaning negligently against the edge of the doorway. His companion was out of sight.

Feeling like death, I dragged myself to my feet, went over to the table by Dawson, and poured myself a drink. I badly needed it.

Dawson was between me and the door, with his eyes on Willett. I had time to swallow my whisky, and to get my right hand round the butt of the pistol which I had transferred to the

pocket of my raincoat, when I heard a sudden movement outside the door.

I looked round guiltily, to see, standing in the doorway eyeing us with malevolent curiosity, the tall figure of the Chinaman with the felt hat and horn-rimmed spectacles that I had seen alongside the captain on the bridge. He probably had a weapon, though both hands were out of his jacket pocket, and empty.

I felt sick all over. Instead of the odds being equal, they were now three to two!

Willett shouted. Out of the tail of my eye, as I turned towards the door, I saw him hurl himself towards us. But before he reached us Dawson spun round, pistol in hand. I heard no report, but saw the incredulous look of astonishment in the tall Chinaman's eyes as, fumbling at his pocket, he crumpled at the knees and flopped to the deck in the alleyway outside.

Almost simultaneously, I fired at the other man and missed. Unable to reach his Winchester in time, he whipped out an automatic and pulled the trigger. I saw the flash. But, as nervous as myself, he did not hit me. I heard the bullet smash into the after bulkhead.

Hermione screamed.

I fired again, twice, and saw my man drop his pistol and clap a hand to his shoulder. He was hit, staggered back a pace, and seemed to be swaying, when a heavy glass water carafe from the table, hurled, as I afterwards discovered, by Willett, hit him full in the face and sent him sprawling backwards.

In another moment both Dawson and myself were outside the door. He took a flying shot at the blue back of the third Chinaman just disappearing through the port door of the

alleyway, with what result I don't know. Then I saw that the tall fellow on the deck wasn't dead by any means. Wriggling over on his side he had a pistol in his hand, and was bringing it up to shoot Dawson from behind.

My blood was properly up by this time. I brought my pistol up and fired at the man's head at a range of little more than five feet. I saw a sudden spurt of blood just over his left eye. He grunted and collapsed, dead this time. It was the first time I had ever killed a man. I badly wanted to be sick.

Then Dawson rushed out of the port door, and disappeared on deck. I heard a report, and saw Willett alongside me in the alleyway. Picking up the fallen pistol, he had finished off the man I had wounded.

The whole affair cannot have lasted more than six or seven seconds. Two Chinese were dead, and one had escaped. We had recaptured one Winchester carbine, fully loaded, and two automatic pistols. Fortune seemed to have smiled upon us.

Trembling with excitement, I watched Willett search the body of the man he had just shot. He found two or three clips of ammunition, which he stuffed in his pocket. Then, possessing himself of the other pirate's weapon, he searched him also. More ammunition was forthcoming.

There was an excited hubbub going on inside the cabin. Mr. Fletcher, white-faced, appeared in the doorway. Hermione, still in her evening-dress, her eyes bright with excitement and her hair very tousled, was behind him.

"What do we do? What do we do?" Fletcher kept on saying in an agitated way, wringing his hands.

"Take this!" Willett exclaimed roughly, thrusting the spare pistol and ammunition into his hands.

“Take it, you fool!” he shouted angrily, as Fletcher, thoroughly dazed, hesitated nervously with a helpless look on his face. “Don’t stand there gibbering!”

I heard Hermione’s horrified gasp as she caught sight of the two dead bodies. There was some blood. In their queer, contorted attitudes, they were not a pretty sight.

I had heard no shooting from the bridge; but now, above the sound of excited conversation, there came the popping of pistol shots from somewhere aft. Dawson was busy, or in trouble.

The sound seemed to galvanise Willett into fresh activity, not that he needed much goading.

“I’m going to the bridge!” he hissed to me. “Arm every one down here, and wait till I come back! Clear everything out of the chest! I’ve opened it!”

He shot out of the starboard door leading to the deck.

Twiss seemed to have his wits about him, so I handed him the loaded Winchester carbine, posted him outside the cabin door, and told him to shoot any armed Chinaman who appeared. He seemed quite pleased with the idea. Myself, I went inside the cabin, and opened up the arms chest. It contained four more Winchester carbines, three automatic pistols, a couple of ·45-inch Webley revolvers, a 12-bore shot-gun, and a considerable amount of ammunition. I started to serve out the weapons, and showing people how to load them.

Long before I had finished my task, Willett reappeared. Breathless with excitement, he explained that the single pirate remaining on the bridge had been brained by Captain Hutson when our attack started.

It was not until afterwards that I heard the details. The other Chinaman, the one with the felt hat and spectacles whom we had shot, had left the bridge with the idea of searching the captain's cabin, and sending up one of the guards in his place. By sheer luck, his arrival synchronised with our attack, with the result already described.

The single pirate left on the bridge, meanwhile, had hesitated. Apparently he was in two minds whether to shoot Captain Hutson, whom he had threatened with his pistol, or to help his friends below. Deciding on the latter course, he incautiously turned his back and made for the starboard bridge ladder. This gave the skipper his chance. In the excitement of the moment he forgot his pistol; but it so happened that the strip of coconut matting on the bridge was kept from flapping in the breeze by a spare deep-sea lead. It weighed nearly 30 lb., and picking it up, the captain brought it down with a full-armed swing on the pirate's head. The man's skull cracked like celluloid. Pitching forward, he fell head first down the bridge ladder and crashed on to the deck ten feet below. In the flurry and noise of our own little battle we had not heard the thud of the impact.

To cut a long story short, however, the bridge was now in our possession, and we were well armed. What we now had to do was to find out if Dawson had succeeded in slamming the grille doors and isolating the after part of the ship, to rescue all three of the engineers, and to regain control of the engine-room.

The firing aft had ceased, but I could still hear a confused babel of shouting coming from that direction.

Willett wasted no time on ceremony. After telling us to collect all the weapons and ammunition, he bundled us out of

the cabin and out on deck. It was all I could do to help Hermione into the captain's uniform greatcoat, before he seized her by the arm and dragged her off.

"Get on to the bridge!" he shouted to the others, as he saw them hesitating in a bunch at the foot of the starboard ladder peering down at something.

"Oh, hell!" he added, dropping Hermione's arm as he realised they were looking at the huddled corpse of the man the captain had brained. "Miss Fletcher, please go back to the cabin for a moment!—Doctor, you come with me! I've forgotten that blasted Chink." Elbowing the others aside, he got hold of the dead Chinaman by the arms, and told me to take the legs.

"What are you going to do?" some one asked.

"Put him over the side," Willett replied impatiently. "Lift, Doctor, lift, can't you!"

Very unwillingly I complied. With the horrible limp burden sagging between us, we sidled crab-fashion towards the rail.

The place was tolerably illuminated by the electric lights overhead. There was a ghastly pool of blood at the foot of the ladder. I didn't dare to look at the end of the body which Willett clutched.

"But you can't do that!" Mr. Fletcher objected. "Perhaps he's not dead."

"No time to worry about that!" Willett growled angrily. "If he's not dead, he damn soon will be!—Up with him, Doctor!"

We balanced the corpse on the broad teak rail. Willett gave it a push. Arms and legs whirling, it disappeared with a splash.

"It's no time to be squeamish," said the second officer hurriedly, wiping his bloodstained hands on his raincoat.

"Now, sir," he added to Fletcher. "You and Father Mawson will go on the bridge, please, and look smart about it!—Doctor, you get hold of Miss Fletcher and send her up there too.—The rest of you pass up the guns and ammunition, and for God's sake, hurry!"

Beyond telling Hermione that the bridge was the safest place in the ship, I had no time to answer her anxious questions as I ran her out of the alleyway and pushed her up the ladder after the other two.

"Thank God!" Willett exclaimed. "Now, Doctor, and you, Mr. Twiss and Mr. Glover, are your guns ready?"

"Yes, *sir*!" the American replied, a nasty-looking pistol in his fist.

"What d'you want us to do?" Glover demanded nervously, fingering a Winchester carbine.

"Fight, my son, fight!" the second officer said grimly. "I'm going aft. I want you to come with me. There'll be shooting. Any one rather not come?"

"Go ahead, Mr. Officer," Twiss said. "I'm game."

Glover also murmured his assent and so did I, though in point of fact I'd had quite enough to do with killing and corpses for one night.

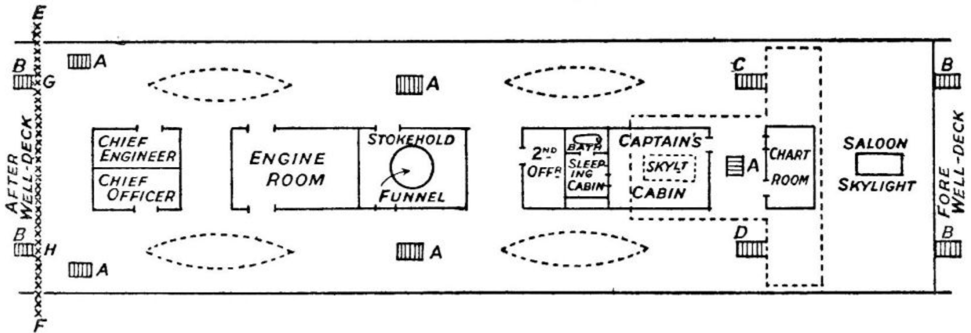
"What's going on down there?" came the captain's testy voice from the darkness of the bridge overhead.

"I'm taking a party aft, sir," Willett explained hastily. "The chief and the two engineers are below. I'm going to see to the grille doors and clear the engine-room, if I can."

“Then don’t get taking risks,” Captain Hutson growled. “If you’re shot at, come back here. We can hold this blinkin’ bridge until hell freezes.”

Willett, who was fully alive to the situation and in no mood for suggestions, muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath about ‘the old man,’ and briskly

ROUGH PLAN OF NANNING’S MIDSHIP STRUCTURE.
(Drawn from memory.)



Dotted lines show rough positions of boats, and limits of bridge overhead.

A, A, A, A, A. Companion-ways to deck below.

B, B, B, B. Ladders leading from superstructure to fore and after well-decks.

C, D. Bridge ladders. That marked C was barred at sea. Armed guard was stationed at foot of D.

E, F. Grille extending for about 6 feet outboard.

Grille doors at G and H. That marked G was usually locked at sea, and an armed guard was stationed at H.

said, “Aye, aye, sir.” When he got on the loose by himself I couldn’t imagine him following any advice of the captain’s. He was far too independent for that, and a regular fire-eater besides.

“Come on!” he added to us.

We moved off after him, to come to a halt amidships in the space between Willett's own cabin and the stokehold casing. There he gave us our operation orders.

Twiss and myself were to go aft on the port side keeping under cover as far as possible. We were to have a look at the port grille door—that marked *G* on my plan—which was supposed always to be closed at sea. If we found it open, we were to do our best to shut it. If it were closed, we were to join Willett and Glover on the starboard side of the deck if we heard shooting or shouts for help. They, I should add, were going to examine the starboard grille door, the one marked *H* in my sketch.

If the port grille door were shut, and we heard nothing to indicate that Willett and Glover were in trouble, Twiss and myself were to retreat to the port door of the engine-room casing, to go inside, and to await Willett's arrival. Some of us would then go below, clear the engine-room and stokehold of pirates, and rescue the engineers.

We must be careful, Willett warned us, to take all possible cover when near the grille. The after well-deck and poop were still in possession of the pirates, and probably the engine-room also.

Were we ready?

We were.

Whispering good luck to the others, Twiss and I crept out on our errand and started to move cautiously aft, keeping as close as possible to the stokehold and engine-room casing. I was thankful there were no overhead lights switched on on our side of the deck to show up our figures in silhouette. We were in the deep shadow of the awnings and boat-deck. Provided we were reasonably cautious in passing the two

areas of illumination cast out through the open door of the stokehold and engine-room casings by the electric lights within, it was unlikely that we should be seen from aft.

These two openings had coamings about eighteen inches high to prevent the entry of water washing across the deck in bad weather. Considerably impeded by our weapons—I carried the 12-bore loaded with buckshot in my right hand, and in the pocket of my raincoat a dozen more cartridges together with an automatic pistol and ammunition—we lay flat on our stomachs, and wriggled like snakes past the two lighted openings. Twiss was behind me. I could hear him grunting and muttering profanely under his breath. Without much trouble we reached the athwartships passage between the after-wall of the engine-room casing and the chief engineer's cabin. There we paused for a breather.

The breeze seemed to have increased, and was blowing fairly strong from the port quarter. Looking out at the sea, I noticed its dark surface was flecked with white horses. The *Nanning* seemed to be rolling a little more than before, and more jerkily. I suddenly realised why. The regular throb of the engines had ceased. We were no longer moving through the water!

I remember wondering to myself whether this meant that the engineers had been killed by the pirates below, when there came another outburst of jabbering from aft. It was accompanied by the clinking noise of a hammer on metal.

Willett and Glover had vouchsafed no sound, so cautioning Twiss to remain silent, I put my head round the angle of the chief engineer's cabin with my gun ready.

The grille was within twenty-five feet of me. I could see its stout lattice-work outlined against the blue sky beyond. And

on the other side of the grille door two dark figures, working between the bars, were pounding away at the lock with a hammer and cold chisel.

I didn’t wait to see more. Bringing the gun to my shoulder I fired both barrels, one after the other. It was impossible to miss. The two men disappeared in a chorus of shrieks and screams.

Reloading hastily, I told Twiss to remain where he was, and darted towards the grille door. I heard the popping of firearms as I ran; but reaching the door, gave it a tug, and saw it was still locked.

There came a flash as some one in the huddle of jabbering figures below me on the after well-deck fired in my direction. The bullet came nowhere near me, or, if it did, I was far too excited to notice it. I didn’t dare to retaliate. Buckshot spreads, and most of that crowd consisted of innocent Chinese passengers, with women and children among them. I didn’t want to kill them, so turned and ran back to Twiss, breathless but quite unharmed.

Within a very short time all four of us had made our rendezvous on the gratings inside the engine-room casing, where Willett, in a few hasty sentences, told us that the starboard grille door was safely shut, and that he had had a shot at some one trying to open it.

Dawson had done his work well. The pirates in the after part were safely isolated. Meanwhile, what had happened to him, and to the chief and second engineers?

The engines had stopped. Not a sound, apart from the regular clacking of a pump, and the whining of a dynamo came up through the gratings—only the stench of oil, hot metal, and an intolerable heat which made me gasp for breath.

We looked at each other with questioning glances. There was a hard look on Willett's face. His lips were pursed. Evidently he thought the worst had happened.

"I'm going below!" he said suddenly, clicking a fresh clip of cartridges into the butt of his automatic. "Mr. Glover, you'd better come with me.—Doctor?"

"Hullo!"

"You'd better stay up here and keep watch with Mr. Twiss. One of you keep a look-out aft. If those devils start monkeying with the doors, let 'em have it. The others had better remain outside on the deck near this door. If you hear us yell, come down and give us a hand."

Willett had just started to descend the vertical iron ladder when I heard hurried footsteps on the deck outside. I lifted the muzzle of my gun at the doorway, only to lower it again when I saw Captain Hutson's red face in the opening. Behind him was Baker. They were both armed.

"What in hell's been happening, Mr. Willett?" the captain demanded angrily, coming inside. "The blasted ship's stopped!"

"I know, sir," the second officer replied, his voice testy. "I'm just going down to see."

"What's all the shooting been about?" the skipper wanted to know.

Willett explained, very briefly. He was annoyed. He hated interference, and now Captain Hutson seemed inclined to butt in on his arrangements.

"Mr. Willett, you and I will go below," the skipper decided. "Mr. Baker, you remain up here in charge, and see they don't force the grille doors."

“Very good, sir.”

“Hadn’t three better go below, sir?” Willett suggested. “We don’t know what we’re up against.”

The captain agreed.

“Then we’ll take the doctor, sir,” Willett said at once. “He’s a bloomin’ gladiator—proper fire-eater!”

I was pleased to hear Willett’s good opinion of me, but should have preferred to decline the honour.

However, I couldn’t very well refuse. Handing my shot-gun and cartridges over to Baker, I drew my pistol and followed the captain towards the ladder leading below.

I was sick of all this excitement; sick of pirates; sick of China; sick of everything!

Why in hades hadn’t My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty sent me to the Mediterranean or New Zealand?

And here I was climbing down a greasy iron ladder into a place which stank of oil and felt as hot as hell!

Heaven alone knew what we should find at the bottom.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XII

POOR old Veale, the chief engineer, lay sprawled out on the oily floor-plates near the foot of the engine-room ladder with a nasty-looking gash on the left side of his skull and his grey hair sticky with blood. From the look of it, some one had belted him cruelly over the head with a pistol butt.

The blow would have killed many a man; but his tough cranium had saved him. His pulse was still going, and no bones were broken. It was merely a case of mild concussion, and in half-an-hour or less he might recover consciousness with no further ill-effects than the inevitable nausea and a severe headache. But that scalp wound required cleaning. It also wanted a stitch or two, by the look of it.

“We ought to get him up to his cabin,” I said to Captain Hutson, who was gazing round the empty engine-room with his pistol ready.

“Can you leave him another five minutes?” the skipper asked, going on to point out that the pirates must have driven the engineers and greasers through the alleyway into the stokehold, and that we had better ‘dig ’em out,’ as he expressed it.

I told him that five minutes would make no difference to Veale’s chances of recovery. His damage was more spectacular than serious.

Willett, who had been prowling round looking behind the condensers and in every likely hiding-place, reported that he had found nothing.

“Come on, then!” grunted the skipper. “I’ll lead, Mr. Willett, and you stick close behind.—Doctor, you’ll be astern of the second officer.”

In the low narrow passage leading from the engine-room into the stokehold, we came upon the body of a Chinaman lying on his face. Shot from behind, he was quite dead.

Willett unceremoniously rolled him over to look at the face.

“He’s one of the blokes who was doing sentry over us in the cabin,” he explained in a low whisper.

“Let him be!” Captain Hutson hissed, moving on. Treading like a cat on a wet pavement, he led the way into the stokehold and halted, peering round with his weapon ready for use.

At first, after the glare of the brilliant electric light on the white paint and burnished metal in the engine-room, I could see nothing in the semi-obscurity of the stokehold, lit only by a couple of dim electric bulbs high overhead. Then my eyes focussed themselves, and I realised we had come into the stokehold through a passage beside a pair of boilers placed side by side. I saw another pair of boilers facing me, each with its three furnace doors. Two of them were open, and, swinging to and fro with the roll of the ship, the red glow from the blazing coal within winked in and out over the dirty floor-plates for all the world like the blinking of a lighthouse.

On either side of the ship, between the two pairs of boilers, were the sliding doors leading to the bunkers, each with a tumbled heap of coal on the floor-plates in front of them. A pump somewhere out of sight clanked and groaned dismally. The fires roared. Steam wheezed and throbbed through a multitude of invisible pipes. The place was infernally hot and smelt abominably—the mingled odour of coal-dust, hot metal,

oil, steam, and Chinamen. I could see no sign of anything human.

Captain Hutson, trying to see through the obscurity, advanced a step. His foot slithered as the ship rolled, scratching across the corrugated metal floor. Slight as was the sound, some one heard it.

“Who’s that?” demanded a startled voice from the darkness on the far side of the compartment.

“That you, Dawson?” the captain called.

“Yes, sir. I—— Stay where you are, sir!” he broke off in a tone of the greatest anxiety, as the captain advanced a step. “I’ve got three of the ——s (an uncomfortable word) inside the bunker here! They’ve got pistols!”

The bunker door, as I could see, commanded most of the stokehold.

“Then shut the bloody door and keep ’em there!” Captain Hutson growled. “Where’s your sense, Mr. Dawson?”

The third engineer had the temerity to be amused.

“But I can’t move, sir,” he laughed. “I’ve been pipped through the leg.”

“Hell and scissors!” the skipper grunted angrily. “Where’s the second engineer, and the greasers and firemen, Mr. Dawson?”

“God knows, sir. On top of the boilers, maybe, or else in the opposite bunker. When I——”

Willett, who had been fidgeting with impatience, pushed past the captain and made towards Dawson. He half-slid across the floor-plates as the ship rolled deeply to port. I heard his muttered profanity as he fetched up against the coal-heap and sprawled over it.

"For God's sake keep clear of that door!" I heard Dawson exclaim. "You're straight in their line of fire, damn it!"

Willett picked himself up, and fired a round at random through the bunker door. In the more or less confined space, the report seemed magnified almost to the sound of a gun. He scrambled hurriedly over the coal-heap. A moment later I heard the sound of a ratchet being worked furiously.

The captain and I went forward to help him. No shot, no sound whatever, came out of the bunker. Dawson, I saw, was sitting behind the coal-heap.

The bunker door was a heavy plate of steel about three feet by five, which slid up and down between metal flanges and was operated by a ratchet and lever at one side. In less than a minute we had it shut to within eight inches of the deck, as far, indeed, as we could close it without shovelling away the coal lapping over the sill. Then, and not till then, the pirates within seemed to realise what was happening. They started to shout and scream.

"You can damned well stay there till we've time to attend to you!" Willett muttered savagely, panting after his exertions.

"Won't they suffocate?" I ventured.

The captain snorted derisively.

"None too good for 'em if they did!" he replied. "How's the coal in that bunker, Mr. Dawson?"

"About half-full, sir."

"Then they've plenty of coal-dust to breathe. Twelve hours of it in darkness without food and water'll teach 'em manners, the swine!"

I had little real sympathy for the three poor wretches inside, whose cries and yells sounded more and more strident and

pitiful, even with the door shut.

“Grrr! Let ’em howl!” Willett muttered. “How in hell did you come to be hit, Jim?”

Dawson explained.

On leaving the captain’s cabin, he had chased the escaping sentry along the deck until the latter had bolted down into the engine-room. Dawson, after slamming to the starboard grille door and being fired upon in the process, then hurried below to find his man jabbering to two other pirates near the foot of the engine-room ladder. The chief and second engineer, and two Chinese greasers, were also there. A shot or two had been exchanged without result. Then, as Dawson still came on, one of the pirates had knocked out Veale with his pistol butt, and the whole bunch, driving the second engineer and greasers before them, bolted through the alleyway into the stokehold. Dawson, pursuing, had shot one man dead on the way.

More shots had been fired, and Dawson had been hit in the thigh, though not before he had succeeded in driving the two remaining pirates from the engine-room, and another from the stokehold, into the port bunker. Unable to walk, he had crawled painfully over the coal, and, reloading his pistol, had sat himself down within six feet of the door, but to one side of it, with the idea of killing any man who tried to emerge. Twice he had fired as some one poked out a cautious head; but no determined attack had been made. It was as well. If the three of them had had the courage to come out at once, nothing could have saved him. He knew, he said, that some one would eventually turn up to help him; but the watching and waiting, with his nerves on edge, his ears strained for the slightest sound, and his wound throbbing painfully, had seemed a veritable eternity.

I could quite believe it. James Dawson, twice during that night, proved himself a most gallant and resourceful fellow. If it had been war, some one would probably have recommended him for the V.C. As it was, he got nothing but good-natured chaff at his bad luck in having been hit. His wound was more painful than serious.

In the darkness and confusion, the second engineer, the two greasers, and the three firemen from the stokehold, had managed to hide themselves. It was the wisest thing they could have done in the circumstances. They had no weapons.

They soon emerged, sheepish and rather ashamed, and the captain, after consulting me, gave orders for all the wounded to be taken forward to the saloon, where I had light and space to deal with them. I now had three invalids on my hands.

There was no chloroform on board. I tried probing for Dawson's bullet with no more satisfactory anaesthetic than a shot of morphia. He bore it wonderfully, though finally I had to give it up as a bad job. My other two patients were doing well, and the chief engineer soon recovered consciousness, though, as he explained, he felt as though a steel wedge had been driven into his skull.

The ship, meanwhile, was again underway, steaming back towards Hong-Kong. With any luck we might expect to arrive at about three o'clock next afternoon.

I felt easier in my mind, and positively happy when Willett told me that the Chinese wireless operator had been unearthed from one of the boats where he had hidden himself. The pirates hadn't wrecked his instruments as well as they might. The cadaverous-looking Mr. Chang, or Wang, or whatever his name was, had managed to get them working again, and just before midnight got off a signal to Hong-Kong. A sloop was

being sent out to meet us. We might expect to meet her at daylight, or soon after—the best bit of news I had heard for some hours.

Leaving my patients to Father Mawson, who had volunteered to help, I went on deck for a short breather. Wind and sea had risen. It was blowing quite hard from the port quarter, and a lumpy little sea from the same direction made the *Nanning* quite lively enough to be uncomfortable.

I should have liked to have had a talk with Hermione, being anxious to apologise for the brusqueness with which Willett and I had dragged her out of the captain's cabin and made her go on the bridge. But there were no signs of her. Mr. Fletcher, Twiss, and Glover had also disappeared, and were probably in their cabins getting what sleep they could after the excitements of the night.

I felt lonely. More with the idea of finding some one to talk to than for any other reason, I went up the ladder to the bridge, where Captain Hutson was stumping gloomily up and down.

For some time he affected not to notice me. Then, making up his mind, he suddenly came to a standstill with his hands in his overcoat pockets.

"What d'you want up here?" he demanded in a surly voice.

To say that I was surprised at his rudeness was an understatement. I was dumbfounded—knocked flat aback.

"I asked you what the hell you were doing up here?" he demanded again. "Don't you know the rules of the ship—no passengers on the bridge?"

He spoke even more truculently than before. Considering I had attended three wounded people belonging to his ship, free, gratis, and for nothing, considering also that I had been

of some little use to the ship's officers in other directions, I expected to be treated with ordinary civility, if not to be given a word of thanks. The man was nothing but a boor.

I succeeded in keeping my temper.

"I merely came to tell you that the patients are getting on well, Captain Hutson," I said with what dignity I could muster.

He grunted by way of reply.

"You asked me to attend to them, didn't you?" I went on to say. "Perhaps it's as well you had a doctor on board."

"You needn't get giving yourself airs on that account!" he retorted. "We all know you're in the Navy—the perishin', blinkin' Navy that swings round its buoys in harbour instead of doin' its job at sea! What good is the bloody Navy to us, I should like to know? Tell me that, if you can!"

I had difficulty in controlling myself, and all but hit him in the face. Then, as he swayed towards me with a lurch that was not accounted for by the movement of the ship, I smelt whisky on his breath. Captain Hutson was drunk.

Realising it wouldn't do to quarrel with an intoxicated man, I turned and went down the ladder. He shouted some obscenity at my back.

On my way to the companion I saw Willett doing something in the charthouse. Shaking with anger, I stepped inside, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"I think you'd better have a look at the captain."

"What's up?" he queried, swinging round to fix me with his shrewd eyes.

"Up? He's not fit to be in charge of the ship."

"Hell! D'you mean he's sozzled, Doctor?"

I nodded.

"Oh, God!" Willett exclaimed. "This always happens when anything goes wrong!"

It was in no very peaceful frame of mind that I went below to the saloon and persuaded Father Mawson to go to his cabin. To avoid a long explanation, I did not tell him of this latest incident. But the sooner I left the *Nanning*, in fact the sooner we all left the *Nanning*, the better. Fletcher seemed to have some influence with the ship's owners. I would tell him in the morning what had happened, and perhaps he would be able to do something. I didn't want to ruin Captain Hutson's career; but a drunken captain in command of a passenger ship was a bit too thick! Moreover, from the way Willett had talked, his drunkenness did not consist of an occasional bout in a harbour. That might have been forgiven.

The wounded were asleep or dozing. Fully dressed, I lay down on a settee so as to be ready in case of need.

It was five and twenty minutes to one by the clock on the saloon bulkhead. I could hardly realise that less than five hours before we had been peacefully sitting down to dinner. It seemed an eternity.

THE SCARLET STRIPE
CHAPTER XIII

I HAVE been a light sleeper ever since the war. I don't know what time it was when I woke up with a start at the sudden sound of a shot from overhead.

I sat up rubbing my eyes, to see that the chief engineer, with a bandage round his head, was on his feet talking excitedly to Dawson, who was wide awake and sitting up. While I had been asleep some one had turned off all the lights in the saloon except a couple near the doorway. The wounded Indian guard had vanished.

I asked what had happened.

"Sounds to me as if they're at it again!" Veale answered.

Almost as he spoke there came the throaty bellow of the syren. It wheezed, then roared—a succession of long blasts; the pirate alarm of the ship!

"We'd best get Jim up topsides!" the chief exclaimed hurriedly. "He can't walk by himself!"

"You go up!" said I. "I can manage Dawson."

The third engineer was no heavyweight, and gathering him into my arms I carried him towards the door, just as Willett, pistol in hand, appeared at the entrance.

"Every one on the bridge!" he shouted.

"What the hell's happened?" Veale demanded.

"Can't stop. I must see to the passengers!" the second officer cried. "Hurry, for God's sake!" He darted off.

Negotiating the corners with some difficulty, I managed to get Dawson up the companion, out on to the deck, and up the ladder to the bridge, where I deposited him on a life-belt locker. He was none the worse and instantly demanded one of the Winchester carbines he saw stacked in a corner.

“If I can’t stand,” he said grimly, “I can still shoot.”

I gave him a rifle and a pocketful of cartridges.

Baker, who had armed himself with the shot-gun and was looking aft, was alone on the bridge with the helmsman and another Chinese seaman. I saw no signs of Captain Hutson.

Sounds of jabbering and screeching came from aft, but little or nothing could be seen from our lofty position, where our view was impeded by the boats and awnings.

“What *has* happened?” I asked the mate.

“The devils have got through the grille and into the engine-room!” he exclaimed, his voice trembling. “They’ll rush us next!”

I had no time to ask *how* the pirates had penetrated the grille; but it appeared that one of the firemen had rushed forward with the news that they were again in the engine-room and stokehold. It seemed criminal folly on someone’s part that the grille had not been properly guarded.

I saw my pistol fully loaded and dropped it back into my pocket. “Where’s the captain?” I asked.

“In his cabin,” grunted Baker. “Dunno where else he can be.”

I persuaded him to take a Winchester and to lend me the shot-gun and some ammunition, telling him it was my intention to help Willett to get the passengers on to the bridge, and then to call Captain Hutson. My first anxiety was for

Hermione, and a shot-gun, I thought, would be better for stopping a possible rush than a pistol or rifle. Baker handed me the gun without any remark and pulled out his automatic.

Going down the bridge ladder, I halted for a moment at the bottom and looked aft. A crowd of men were still jabbering and yelling at the far end of the promenade deck. They showed no signs of moving forward, so I went in through the alleyway and down the companion, where I met Willett shepherding the passengers on deck. Hermione, I was thankful to see, was warmly dressed.

"Well," she said, as she saw me, "so we're on the warpath again. We *are* making a night of it!"

Willett was anxious to know what had been happening on deck during his absence. I told him that as far as I knew there were no further developments, and asked if I should dig out the captain. How the latter could have managed to sleep through the bellowing of the syren was more than I could fathom.

Willett agreed, and entering the cabin I found Captain Hutson sprawled out on his settee, snoring and grunting like a pig.

I shook him roughly by the shoulder and told him to wake up.

He opened his eyes, blinked once or twice, and began to gasp like a fish out of water.

"Hell!" he muttered thickly. "What's the matter now?"

Then he stared, seemed to recognise me and sat up.

"God!" he exclaimed with an air of great surprise. "If it isn't our blasted Sawbones again! And what the liquid hell d'you want, hey?"

“Don’t waste time with your insults!” I retorted. “The pirates are through the grille....”

“Through the grille, hey?” he repeated, laughing as though it were a great joke. “Through the purple perishing grille! I always said the blinkin’ grille reminded me of a monkey-cage, and we’re the bleedin’ monkeys, hey?”

The man was still drunk and unfit for duty; but it wasn’t in my heart to leave him. If that mob of Chinese did come surging forward they would shoot him out of hand.

“For God’s sake collect your wits and come on the bridge!” I shouted angrily.

“All ri’, Mister Sawbones,” he leered, shambling to his feet and nearly falling as the ship lurched. “All ri’! All ri’! Cap’en Hutson isn’t the man to allow any one else to command his ship, nor no lousy Chinks to climb through his grilles! Blast me, no!—I’ll have their blinkin’ guts for a necktie!” he added in a drunken shout, diving his hand into his pocket, producing a pistol, and waving it dangerously in my direction. “You show me the muckers! I’ll teach em!”

How I got him out of the cabin I don’t know, but it took the united efforts of Willett and myself to push him up the bridge ladder. Once in his familiar surroundings he seemed to sober up a little—or at any rate his wild shouting and blaspheming ceased.

The port bridge ladder was always barred off at sea with rope looped to and fro between the treads and hand-rails. It could not be rushed, and provided some one remained at the top with a weapon no access to the bridge could be gained that way. The principal danger-points were the starboard ladder and the after end of the bridge, which latter the pirates

could reach by coming forward along the awnings and boat deck.

The captain being in no condition to take charge, the main responsibility for the scheme of defence fell upon Baker and Willett, the latter principally. Anyhow, I know that he thrust weapons into every one's hands and gave them their stations. Even Hermione was provided with a pistol. Luckily she knew how to use it.

I, with the shot-gun ready, was told to lie flat on my stomach at the top of the starboard bridge ladder to stop the first rush. In my prone position I could see under the awning and perhaps seventy feet along the dimly-lit promenade deck. The ship, meanwhile, had stopped.

I don't know how long I lay there, in a most uncomfortable position with my buttons digging into my anatomy and the breeze whistling up my trouser legs. It may have been five minutes or ten minutes—then the electric lights flickered once and went out, to fling the ship into Stygian darkness.

"Looks to me as if they'd jiggered up the dynamo!" Willett muttered behind me. "Can you see, Doctor?"

"I think so," I answered.

The jabbering aft had ceased, and a few minutes later, silhouetted against the lighter background of the deck and the dim phosphorescence of the breaking seas, I saw what looked like a crowd of men creeping silently forward.

"They're coming!" I said.

"Then let 'em have it!" Willett replied.

I pressed the trigger. The gun roared and kicked. A charge of buckshot swept aft. I fired the left barrel—reloaded.

A chorus of howls and shrieks and groans greeted both shots. Then a voice yelled out in English—"Don't shoot! They've got me in front of 'em!"

It was the voice of the second engineer.

"Break away if you can!" Willett hailed back. "Come up here!"

I saw a dark figure come running forward, followed by a splutter of pistol shots. Then more figures followed the first.

The second engineer reached the bridge ladder and scrambled breathlessly up it, unhurt, fortunately. The three or four others who had followed him darted past the foot of the ladder and disappeared forward.

"You damned near corpsed me with that blasted gun o' yours!" the second engineer muttered angrily. "The swine dragged me and the greasers and firemen up from below and pushed us in front of 'em as a screen!"

"How the hell did they get through the grille?" Willett demanded.

"God knows! First thing I knew was when half-a-dozen arrived in the engine-room!—They wanted the key of the kerosene tank; but I bunged it away!—I saw 'em belt the tap off and help 'emselves!—Kerosene, so look out!"

My heart quailed as I realised what that meant. Kerosene—they were going to burn us out!

For the next few minutes I was so busy shooting every time I saw any signs of movement aft, that I had no time to worry about anything else. An occasional pop and spurt of flame showed that my fire was being returned; but the marksmanship, thank Heaven, was execrable! No bullet came anywhere near me. On the other hand, I could see the figures of several men stretched out on the deck. It was good to think

that I had done some execution. Buckshot is deadly at close range.

A heavy fire from Willett, Fletcher, and some of the others beat off an attack from some more pirates who tried to work forward along the boat-deck and awnings. Then we had some breathing time. What would happen next? Would they try another mass attack, or would they try burning us out?

Willett, Baker, and the captain, who seemed to have become sobered by the excitement of the last few minutes, were holding an animated conversation. I couldn't hear all that was said, but gathered the two mates were trying to persuade the skipper to let go the anchor. Captain Hutson seemed inclined to disagree.

I saw what Willett and Baker were thinking of. The breeze was blowing moderately fresh from the port quarter and hardening every minute. The ship, with her engines stopped, was drifting slowly before it. If a fire were started, the flames would work forward and force us from the bridge. If, on the other hand, the ship anchored, she would probably ride head to wind and the fire would drive aft, though in this case I found myself wondering what would become of the many Chinese passengers huddled together in the after well-deck.

Before they came to any agreement, however, I smelt the unmistakable stench of kerosene—we all smelt it. Then a stream of pungent black smoke came sweeping forward. It thickened rapidly. I saw an evil tongue of orange flame leap up aft. It ran along the awning, licking up the dry canvas. In a moment the whole after part of the promenade deck as far as the funnel was a regular sea of fire. Fanned by the wind, it drove rapidly forward.

It was obvious what had happened. Finding their attack foiled, the pirates had brought up mattresses and any combustible material they could find, soaked it with oil and kerosene, and started a bonfire at the after end of the promenade deck.

Then, and not before, Captain Hutson realised the gravity of the situation. In the sudden blaze I saw him pick up his megaphone and roar to the forecastle to let go both anchors. Some one heard him—the Chinese boatswain, as I afterwards discovered. The order was obeyed. After an agony of suspense, during which the flames leapt nearer and nearer, and we were nearly blinded with smoke and flying sparks, I heard the frenzied clink of hammers followed by the hollow rattle of the cable running out through the hawse-pipe.

With her anchor on the bottom and her cable tautening out, the *Nanning* started gradually to swing head to wind. The movement at first was almost imperceptible. Indeed, to us on the bridge, with our nerves all anyhow, she seemed hardly to be moving at all. Nevertheless she was.

But was it already too late? Those leaping tongues of flame were drawing nearer, crackling, roaring fiendishly. The awnings on the starboard side of the ship, the boat deck, the two starboard boats, all seemed to be ablaze. The fire leapt from point to point as though it were moving along a train of gunpowder. The wooden superstructure was as dry as tinder after years of sun. Very soon the after end of the captain's deckhouse, where Willett had his cabin, was blazing redly. Enveloped in horrible black smoke which made us cough and retch, the heat on the bridge was gradually becoming intolerable.

In the blackness of the night, with the ship rolling and pitching like an inanimate thing, it was a ghastly sight. The fire was soon a raging inferno. Sparks and long streamers of flame went flying to leeward. Above the crackle of burning woodwork and the roar of flames I could hear the panic-stricken cries of the Chinese women and children in the after well-deck.

We could do little to quench it. There was nobody in the engine-room to start the pump for the fire-main, nobody to connect up hoses. I heard Captain Hutson, Baker, and Willett shouting forward for some one to man a hand-pump, and for others to run the hoses along and to bring buckets of water. To the best of my belief no hose was rigged until some time later. As for buckets—one might as well have expected to put out a volcano by spitting down the crater.

But the ship was slewing, faster and faster, and the smoke and flame, instead of coming forward, were soon driving out to starboard, which at least gave us on the bridge an opportunity to breathe. And at last the *Nanning* was head to wind, and the fire swept aft on to the pirates themselves. Through the blaze we could see them rushing for safety pursued by tongues of leaping fire. I noticed some of them scaling the grille and dropping down the other side. Though we had rifles, we did not open fire. We had too much else to think about.

The tables had been definitely turned on the pirates that remained alive; but we were by no means out of the wood. Marooned on the bridge in a sea of fire, it seemed that nothing could save us from being frizzled alive. The wind, of course, was now blowing from forward, but the fire still crept inexorably forward, licking up the dry woodwork like so much paper. The after end of the bridge was soon blazing

from the burning deckhouse beneath. Removing our coats, we beat out the flames until we were breathless and exhausted. Then some one had the idea of lowering buckets into the sea on log-lines and signal-halliards from the ends of the bridge. We spilled more water than we pulled up, but that little helped.

I don't know how long we fought that fire. It was not long, however, before sections of the upper deck started to fall in with a crash, to send showers of sparks shooting skywards like fountains of golden spray. The steel beams and stanchions sagged and twisted in the heat, and ominous gaps, their edges smouldering redly, started to appear in the planking of the bridge itself. It felt like walking on the shell of an egg, with the yolk a mass of incandescence. The painted canvas weather-screen of the bridge started to blaze, so that we had to cut it adrift and throw it overboard.

It was still quite dark, with the *Nanning* blazing like a beacon and casting her red glare over acres of sea, when we saw the lights of a ship approaching from the northward. She seemed to alter course immediately towards us, as for some time we saw the green, white, and red pointed triangle formed by her bow and steaming lights. She could not be the sloop sent out from Hong-Kong, for she was coming from the wrong direction. Nevertheless, our hopes soared. Help was coming. Whoever that ship might be she would at least take off the Chinese women and children, and, if we could persuade her to leave, Hermione. The rest of the passengers, the able-bodied men, could remain and try to save the *Nanning*.

When within a mile we saw the stranger's red light shut out as she altered course. We watched her until she drew abeam.

“Why don’t she come closer?” I heard Captain Hutson growl.

“I don’t believe she’s stopping, sir,” Willett said. “There’s her stern-light. She’s altering course away, the craven-gutted swab!”

I can’t repeat what some of us said as we watched the light gradually receding—it is unprintable. But that ship steamed off and left a blazing vessel and every soul on board her to its fate. Her officers may have guessed we had been pirated, and may have been unwilling to run their precious heads into danger. I hope they were not British; but under whatever ensign they sailed, the pusillanimous curs disgraced it and were unworthy of the name of seamen.

Hardly had that steamer gone on her way, speeded by our blasphemy and heartfelt curses, than we noticed the two boats from the poop were being lowered. The pirates, having played their last card and lost, had elected to leave the ship. We were at least ten miles off the nearest shore. The breeze was still rising and there was a nasty little jabble of a sea. I hoped fervently they’d capsize on the way.

The Chinese passengers, crowded in the after part of the ship, saw the boats being lowered and tried to rush them. We were too far off to see details, added to which the fire was between us and the poop. But above the roar and crackle of the flames and the whistling of the wind we heard the unmistakable popping of firearms accompanied by demoniacal screeching.

It was with a feeling of intense relief that we saw both boats leave the ship and crawl across the lurid sea. With their oars waving and dipping, they looked like two gigantic spiders strolling across a patch of blood. I wanted to open fire

on them with a rifle. But Willett wouldn't let me. The pirates, he pointed out, might have taken hostages from among the passengers. So we let them go unscathed. They disappeared into the outer darkness.

The first signs of dawn were soon glimmering over the rim of the eastern horizon. By dint of getting a hand-pump rigged somewhere forward and a hose passed up, we had managed to check the fire so far as the bridge was concerned. Further aft, however, the promenade deck was still blazing.

It was Willett who had the idea of lowering the foremost boat from its davits on the port side of the ship just abaft the bridge. It seemed to have been more or less untouched by the flames.

"And what in hell d'you want to go boating for?" Captain Hutson demanded.

"I'll take a party of the crew from forward, sir, go alongside aft, get aboard, and get the hand-pump rigged. We may as well try to put it out from both ends."

"All right!" grunted the skipper, with an ungracious shrug of his shoulders. "Get busy about it if you think there's a chance. But don't blame me, Mr. Willett, if anything goes wrong."

"I shouldn't dream of doing so, sir," said the second officer quietly.

"And what the hell d'you mean by that?" Captain Hutson blazed out.

"Nothing, sir. Nothing at all."

"You're too fond of taking charge over other people's heads, Mr. Willett!"

“Aye, aye, sir!” Willett replied, turning away. “Come on, some of you. Give us a hand to lower the boat, and watch out where you step if you don’t want to be cremated!”

We managed to get that port lifeboat turned out and into the water somehow, though the after fall, badly charred, carried away when she was half-way down. Luckily there was nobody in her at the time, though, hung by the bows, her oars and most of her gear went splashing into the sea.

A party of the crew embarked in her from forward and managed to get on board again aft. And while we fought the fire from forward, they fought it from aft. Even the Chinese passengers were pressed into service with rice-bowls, buckets, and tins. Little children contributed their share with teacups, and Willett afterwards told me on his most solemn word of honour that one venerable old Chinese grandmother staggered solemnly to and fro with an enamelled iron utensil with a handle more suited to a bedroom than for use as a fire-fighting appliance!

As daylight came and we saw our efforts were meeting with success, we felt positively cheerful—singing as we passed the buckets from hand to hand, and tore down smouldering woodwork to throw it overboard. It was good fun working with an axe and being able to indulge in one’s bent for destruction in a good cause—rather like ‘Smashing up the Happy Home’ at a fair, when one chucks wooden balls, seven for sixpence, at dressers piled high with crockery.

The flames died down to give way to smoke and steam as our hoses and buckets got to work. Our cabins were no longer cabins, but mere charred boxes open to the sky. What portion of their contents wasn’t ruined by fire was spoiled by sea-water. Most of the deck above the saloon had fallen in, and

the upholstery and woodwork was putting up an evil-smelling smoke-screen. But some one managed to unearth beer—plenty of beer. Some one else achieved sandwiches. Lord, we wanted them!

You should have seen our faces! They were as black as the pots. Hermione looked like a negress, and seemed to enjoy it. Old Fletcher reminded me of a comic negro comedian, and so did Twiss, who worked steadily while declaring at intervals he'd write direct to the President or some one to send the whole 'God-darned American Navy' to wipe out all the pirates in China.

Incidentally, the two boats with the pirates on board hadn't got very far. We could see them bobbing about rather helplessly within three-quarters of a mile of the ship. We hoped they wouldn't be out of sight before the sloop arrived. We hoped also that their occupants would be seasick. Perhaps they were. It was no weather for boats.

A Japanese steamer coming down from the north was the first to stand by us soon after daylight. She sent a boat across with an officer and men to help with the fire, and a crate of beer with her captain's compliments. She also broadcast a message by wireless. Half an hour later another ship of our own company, the *Yingchow*, appeared from the southward, followed, within a very short time, by the sloop *Helenium*.

The Japanese steamer went on her way, and while the *Yingchow* sent a hawser across and made preparations for taking us in tow, the *Helenium* put an armed guard of marines on board the *Nanning*, and then went off and picked up the boats. I heard afterwards they captured sixteen pirates, several of whom were wounded.

We found nine more suspected pirates left on board and sent them over to the sloop for safe custody, together with Dawson and a couple of the more seriously-wounded Chinese passengers. I attended the others.

The fire, which had been kept confined to the midship structure, was definitely mastered, though not before the centre of the ship was practically gutted. It was still smouldering when we arrived at Hong-Kong early next morning.

The moment we arrived the police boarded the ship and went through our Chinese passengers with a fine-tooth comb, selecting several more whom they regarded as having been in league with the pirates. Then we had to run the gauntlet of the reporters and a host of persistent people with cameras. None of us had had a wink of sleep for thirty-six hours. We hadn't even washed. Damn all newspaper men, thought we!

"You'll come and be my guest at the Prince Edward Hotel, Doctor," said Mr. Fletcher, just before he landed. "Hermione—my daughter—er—said I was to be sure to ask you."

I protested, saying that I should have to report myself to the Senior Naval Officer and make arrangements for buying myself a new kit, for every rag I possessed had gone west by fire or water.

But he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, and after reporting myself I was given a week's leave and an advance by the paymaster to get my new outfit. The Admiralty eventually refunded it, I am thankful to say.

Then, for the second time in my life, I stepped ashore a distressed British subject with nothing to my name but the clothes in which I stood up.

The week ashore at Hong-Kong, during which I lived on the fat of the land in a hotel at the Peak, was very pleasant, in spite of the almost intolerable heat. I saw a great deal of Hermione, so much, indeed, that quite a number of people thought we were formally engaged. But nothing of that sort had ever been mentioned between us. I would willingly have married her if I had had the chance; but somehow I was too diffident, too shy of asking. Besides, she probably wouldn't have had me. She was much sought after, and in a position to pick and choose.

Every afternoon we went to see Dawson in the hospital, taking him flowers, and books, and things to eat. Willett dined with us twice, and looking back on it I think that he and Dawson were primarily responsible not merely for saving the *Nanning*, but also for saving Hermione and the others from being carried off into captivity as hostages. I know Mr. Fletcher made presents to all the officers of the *Nanning*, even to Captain Hutson. He also gave me a most opulent-looking pair of gold cuff-links, so expensive that I was almost frightened to wear them, though this did not prevent my losing one of them. Why is it I can never keep umbrellas, a complete set of front studs, or a pair of cuff-links?

But if you gave me all the cuff-links in the world, a silver salver and tea service 'suitably inscribed,' together with a marble clock and anything else you may fancy, I never wish to be pirated again. It was far too exciting—more exciting even than war.

Besides, Hermione was on board the *Nanning*, which made things a thousand times worse. I was fond of Hermione, though, like the nervous fool that I was, I felt far too frightened to tell her so. I have never been a 'cave-man' so far as women are concerned.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XIV

I EVENTUALLY joined the *Peony* at Wei-Hai-Wei five weeks later, having been detained at Hong-Kong to give evidence when the pirates were put upon their trial. My testimony, except in so far as it applied to what had happened, cannot have been of much use. I was a newcomer to the East, and hadn't picked up the knack of distinguishing one Chinaman from another. To me they all looked so alike that I refused to identify any one of them on oath. But others did. I believe they hanged over a dozen of them, including several who had been wounded and were carefully nursed back to life in hospital.

Wei-Hai-Wei, or 'Way High,' as we called it, was a pleasant spot. Originally a Chinese naval base, it had been captured by the Japanese in 1895, and was handed over to us three years later as a recuperating station for the British squadron in China. The leased territory consisted of the island of Liu-Kung-Tau, the harbour, and a considerable slice of the mainland.

During the summer, when it was cool compared with the heat of Hong-Kong and Shanghai, the hotels on the island and mainland were filled to bursting with visitors. There was a good club for officers on the island; lawn-tennis on hard courts, cricket on matting wickets, and golf-links at the far end of the island with tees and 'greens' of hard-baked mud. There was good snipe-shooting on the mainland, and, for those who wanted it, plenty of 'poodle-faking' in the shape of

dances, gymkhanas, and mixed bathing picnics. Personally, I rather steered clear of the social whirl and confined myself to games.

There was no doubt that Wei-Hai-Wei flourished exceedingly under British rule, and that the Chinese were happy and prosperous. The results of trying to convert some of them to Christianity, however, had peculiar results. I remember my little golf caddie, a boy of perhaps ten or eleven, who was very proud of his English, and never tired of airing it.

"Jesus-loves-me-this-I-know-God-damn-and-blast-your-bloody-eyes!" was the somewhat unorthodox remark he brought out at intervals, with the most angelic of smiles upon his copper-coloured countenance.

What this little lad had learnt from his Christian teacher had become rather mixed in his mind with the lurid vernacular of some of the seamen, which only showed the utter folly of trying to din Christianity into the heathen Chinee poll-parrot fashion. To my mind their conversion should walk hand-in-hand with common-sense.

I was sorry when we left Wei-Hai-Wei for a cruise to some of the ports in the Gulfs of Pechili and Liao-tung. It made me feel quite sad when, not so very long ago, I read in the newspaper that it had been handed back to the Chinese. If anybody can spoil a place by incompetence, maladministration, bribery, and corruption, it is the average Chinese official appointed by this new-fangled Government of theirs, which, except in name, is no Government at all.

We visited Taku, where the forts were captured by the Allies during the Boxer business of 1900, and then went on to Shanhaikwan, where the Great Wall of China comes down to

the sea. This stupendous piece of work stretches 1500 miles across the country to the westward, and was built in about 220 B.C. by an all-powerful Chinese Emperor to prevent the Tartar invasions from the north. Provided with square watch-towers every hundred yards or so, on which the Chinese troops lit fires and beat gongs to warn their friends of the approach of the enemy, its average height was about twenty feet, while it had a roadway along its top wide enough to allow six horsemen to ride abreast. In common with most of our other officers, I took off one of the large grey bricks as a curio.

Shanhaikwan was swarming with tatterdemalion Chinese soldiers armed with modern rifles, some of which were of French, Russian, and German manufacture. The troops, which I understood were concentrating for an attack on some other army, were friendly enough provided one took no liberties. But they were a bloodthirsty crowd really.

With our skipper and the first lieutenant I went to call upon the local generalissimo, whom I was told was a successful ex-bandit of some repute. He received us at his headquarters in queer-looking khaki uniform, elastic-sided 'Jemimas,' and a locally-made Sam Browne belt draped round his portly stomach. His face was fat and oily, his tight yellow skin seeming to exude great drops of perspiration. Occasionally he took off his gaudy uniform cap to mop his forehead and closely-shaven skull with a handkerchief of purple silk. He had dark, ferrety-looking eyes with a curious glint in them. He reeked of scent and wore many rings, and showed an almost childish pleasure in exhibiting a gold repeater watch and a clockwork canary in a cage which sang when he pressed the button. He gave us sweet biscuits, sweet champagne, and cigarettes, and in the intervals of nibbling, sipping, and

smoking it was painful to have to listen to his internal rumblings and eructations. He was a very windy gentleman.

What surprised us more than anything was his fluent English, spoken with an American accent. Before becoming a bandit, and then a commander-in-chief, he told us he had been at college in the United States. He was most suave and hospitable, and even pressed us to stay to lunch. After the meal, he told us, he would show us something worth seeing in the shape of an execution. Fifteen wretched men of a defeated army were to be decapitated by the official headsman attached to his headquarters.

Rather to the general's disappointment, our commanding officer hurriedly declined the honour on the score of having to get back to his ship.

"I am sorry, captain," the general said. "But never mind, never mind. You will come another day, perhaps. We have plenty of executions. My present executioner is very dextrous with his two-handed sword. It is pretty to watch him at work. He gets much practice, you see.—My last executioner was a very bad man," he went on to say, rolling his eyes to the ceiling and clicking his tongue. "He stole chickens from my cook, my chickens; so when my cook reported, the executioner must be paid in his own coin. That was most funny, I think. What you call a good joke, eh?"

He laughed gustily. People have different ideas of humour. God forbid that a Chinese general should ever be funny at my expense!

Nobody's life seemed safe in China in times of civil war and rebellion. Immunity 'taxes' were imposed upon innocent farmers and villagers by bands of roving brigands, and if the

money wasn't forthcoming the villages were burnt out and their inhabitants butchered.

One generalissimo, anxious to raise the wind, imposed a tax upon cabbages. The local farmers, stirred to indignation, banded themselves together to the number of several scores. Each armed with a cabbage—much larger and weightier cabbages than we have in England—they marched in a mob to the tax-collector's office. Guarding all the exits so that the man couldn't escape, they hurled their cabbages through the door and windows. The tax-collector expired of suffocation.

This is a true tale, as is the story of what happened when the same general put a tax upon fish. An office was erected on the jetty where the junks and sampans landed their catches, and three officials were appointed to collect the tax. This time the fishermen rose in their wrath, and the police, hearing an uproar, arrived on the quayside to find the three tax-collectors being sewn up in sacks preparatory to being dumped into the harbour.

But even the generals were here to-day and gone to-morrow, and things in China to-day are as bad as they ever were. It was only the other day I was talking to a friend home from China, a man who knows that distressful country inside out.

In one province, he told me, Chinese regular troops were supposed to be suppressing the Communists and bandits, and none of the soldiers beneath the rank of colonel had received any pay at all for over nine months. Before that time they had received only a small percentage of what was due to them, though they knew for certain that their generals and senior officers carried with them sufficient money to pay them up to date. These troops occupied a town which the Communists

had evacuated, whereupon the Communists, knowing the mutinous condition of the regulars, launched an attack. The disgruntled regulars laid down their arms without firing a shot, and the rank and file of both parties proceeded to fraternise freely. The Communists paraded the troops and asked what they wanted done with their general, pointing out that they did not want to kill unnecessarily, and that they were prepared to spare good men. Was their general a good man? They ordered those in favour of his death to hold up their hands. The whole division held up both hands, and the general was hacked to pieces before their eyes.

"Corruption and callousness among the senior officers of the regular Chinese army has been responsible for most of the dilatory methods used against the Communists," my informant went on to tell me. "Peaceable Chinese in the province of Kiangsi told me again and again that the Government campaign was nothing more nor less than a method of providing the Communists with more arms. This sort of rottenness exists all through the Chinese army, and until it's checked there's nothing to stop the Communists, without exerting themselves in any way, from getting more and more troops come over to their side. Finally, they'll become the most powerful party in the Yangtse valley, where most of the trade is."

"What will that mean?" I asked.

"Mean!" he snorted. "It means that all talk of 'open doors' in China will be pure bunk. The door to foreign trade and enterprise will be tight shut, and China will be in utter chaos. The worst of it is, the more hot-headed sections of the Chinese don't see that foreign co-operation is to their advantage, as well as to ours. They can't handle their own produce, but won't realise it, can't see their own

incompetence. Our trade's pretty well gone to hell as it is," he added bitterly. "I know dozens of firms at Shanghai and other places which have gone phut, and for every one that's gone, more and more Chinese have become destitute. If the Communists get into power more foreign firms will have to shut up shop, and the situation will be worse than ever. The vast majority of Chinese are peace-loving small farmers and merchants. They only want to sell their produce to eke out a bare livelihood—to live and let live. But what with the civil wars, and the armies and bandits preying on them right and left, they've been bled white."

He went on to speak of a Military Tax Protection Bureau which had been opened at Hankow to collect a tax upon all merchandise moving up and down the Han River. The idea was to pay the military for protecting the cargoes against bandits. If this had been the only tax, and real protection had been afforded, the merchants would have paid up cheerfully. But it wasn't. There were ten similar tax offices along the banks of the river, and their exactions more effectively stopped the commerce than any bandits could have done.

In another province, Shensi, the armies under General Feng swept the country bare of grain. The peaceful farmers were compelled to supply the troops with wheat, and 70,000,000 bushels of grain were either eaten or carried away by these military locusts. The wretched inhabitants were thus left at the mercy of famine.

"In Central Honan," he went on to say, "some thirteen thousand bandits, with six thousand rifles, slaughtered more than a thousand peaceful villagers in fifty days. A chap who was there told me it was pitiful to see the burning farms and houses, and the dead bodies, women and children among them, lying everywhere and being worried and dragged about

by packs of starving dogs. The only people to be seen on the once crowded roads were the go-betweens who visited the bandit chiefs to redeem prisoners by paying ransoms. But the greater number, poor devils, hadn't any ransoms to give, and the hostages were put to death.—The Government," he added, "don't do a damned thing to stop this sort of business unless it suits 'em. Either they're frightened of the bandits, or else they daren't trust their own troops because the generals have pinched all the money and the poor devils haven't been paid. That's China all over."

He went on to talk of the students, who, with their veneer of learning and 'Nationalism' as their watchword, were, and are, largely responsible for fostering the anti-foreign boycotts.

Poor fools! They cannot see that peace and the resumption of trade is as much to their advantage as it is to that of the foreigners which they hate—indeed, that China *cannot* get on without foreign capital and foreign assistance in the matter of her export and internal trade. And the worst of it is that the Government are literally in the hands of the student class, and daren't squash them for fear of becoming unpopular with a section which possesses considerable political power.

This is what happened at Swatow, one of the Treaty Ports in the south.

The children and young people in the primary and secondary schools demanded to be represented on the committee of the 'Association for resistance to Japan,' in other words, the boycott of Japanese goods. It was at first decided to exclude them, whereupon they formed their own association and worked independently. Before long, stories began to circulate to the effect that some of the officers of the general association had been feathering their nests in a most

sumptuous way by means of the opportunities that their position afforded. The figure mentioned was between one and two thousand dollars, and the indignation of the boys and girls vented itself in the demand that the delinquents should be severely dealt with, and that they—the scholars—should be given representation in the association to see that such things did not happen in the future.

They expressed their feelings also in a parade, which included a visit to the headquarters of the association. Finding nobody at home, they proceeded to smash the place and to destroy the records. They went on to demonstrate threateningly at the municipal offices, until one of the guards fired a shot into the air. Then there was a general stampede.

The matter being referred to Canton, party headquarters sent down an official to investigate. He got so far as to recommend that the pupils of the middle schools should be allowed to become members of the association; but not the primary school-children. This decision the schools would not accept. The official, however, soon became a shadowy figure in the background, his main concern being to conceal his whereabouts from the indignant boys and girls.

All the pupils then went on strike until official sanction was given for the primary school-children to be represented on the anti-Japanese association. The heads of the schools held a meeting and appointed some of their number to reason with the malcontents, but without effect. Then the brigadier-general in command, who had been ordered from Canton to deal with the matter, talked to the school leaders and told them to send the pupils back to their books. Nothing happened, and for weeks Swatow was treated to the ludicrous spectacle of the educational authorities and all officialdom powerless when defied by a crowd of children.

The incidents I have quoted are typical of scores of others, yet China is a nation which we are expected to treat more or less as an equal in the affairs of the world—the nation to which we have surrendered our Concessions and treaty rights.

The Chinese Government is no real government, and never has been since 1911, when the Republic started with such a flourish of trumpets. It can't look after its own affairs, let alone deal with foreign Powers with any real authority behind it. Bribery, corruption, peculation, banditry, piracy, robbery, arson, bloodshed and murder are rampant, and yet we treat the Chinese as though they were 'civilised' according to our own standards.

Armed intervention of the sort recently indulged in at Shanghai by the Japanese, intervention which was brought about by economic pressure and the desire to end the boycott of Japanese goods by force of arms, is utterly useless. What is needed is for the Chinese themselves to keep the 'students' in order, and to realise that they cannot get on without foreign assistance.

The Chinese railways, built by foreign enterprise and capital; the Postal Service, established and run by foreigners; and the Chinese Maritime Customs, supervised and staffed by foreigners, are the only public and Government services which have functioned throughout these years of strife and chaos. There would be others, but for the arrogance and amazing self-confidence of those who seek to govern a vast country with its population of about 400 millions and are utterly incompetent to do it.

One thing I did learn very soon after arriving in China was never to talk pidgin-English to a better-class Chinese until I knew for certain he couldn't talk proper English.

I am reminded of the painful episode that once happened at a big official banquet at Shanghai or Canton, attended by some members of the Chinese Government and a deputation of visiting M.P.'s from England. One of the latter found himself sitting next to a very high-up Chinese, and anxious to break the ice and to make himself friendly, opened the conversation at the soup stage by asking, "Likee soupee?" The Chinese rather ignored the Honourable Member for the rest of the meal, at the end of which he got up and delivered a speech in fluent and cultured English. Sitting down again amid the applause, he turned to the M.P. beside him and asked, "Likee speechee?"

Speaking of which reminds me once more of the famous *faux pas* said to have been made by the charming foreign wife of a well-known naval officer, who was on the China Station at the same time as myself. The lady was not always quite certain of her English, and one evening when she happened to be dining with the Governor of Hong-Kong, she found herself sitting next to Sir Charles Po-Tung, a very enlightened Chinese gentleman of good education, who was also a British subject and a J.P. and LL.D. to boot. In the middle of a deathly silence, so the story goes, she turned to her neighbour and asked in her clear voice: "Tell me, Sir Charles—are you married in the ordinary way, or do you keep a porcupine?"

History does not relate what Sir Charles replied, though I've no doubt it was very polite. He was suavity itself.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XV

I HAVE said nothing as yet of the *Peony* or my shipmates on board her.

The ship herself was nothing much to look at, merely a 1200-ton, war-built, single-screw sloop armed with a couple of 4-inch guns and a few 3-pounders. She had two straight funnels and a couple of tall masts, and though perhaps a more habitable ship than a destroyer in really hot weather, she rolled heavily and was a bit of a pig in anything approaching a seaway. From what the skipper sometimes said, I discovered she was also a beast to handle at slow speed in a breeze. This was accounted for by her shallow draught and single screw.

Her full speed was a fraction over 16 knots, though we generally cruised at not more than 12 to eke out our fuel. Like the rest of her class, she burnt coal instead of the more modern oil, and most heartily we cursed it. We usually coaled by native labour, but this did not prevent the ship from being practically uninhabitable while the dismal operation was in progress. It was rather a trial in really stifling weather. If one went on deck for fresh air one became as black as the pots, for the ship was generally lying head to wind and the clouds of coal-dust drifted aft. If one stuck below one sat and stewed in one's own juice with all the side-scuttles and skylights shut to keep out the grime. Even so, the powdery blackness seemed to find its way everywhere, even into our food. However, coal-dust is clean dirt.

As there was nothing much to do when we were coaling by coolie labour, most of the officers managed to go ashore. But I couldn't. There was some regulation or other which said that the doctor must remain on board at such times in case of accidents. Nothing that I can remember ever happened to call for my services during coaling, and I used to be mighty annoyed when the shore-goers returned in the evening to find the ship tolerably clean again, but me with traces of coal-dust still lingering about my ears and eyes.

At Nagasaki, in Japan, we were actually coaled by Japanese women, which somehow upset my ideas of propriety. It was peculiar to see them passing the filled baskets from hand to hand in long chains, many of them with babies strapped on their backs and jogging uncomfortably to and fro as they moved. Occasionally the mothers took a stand-easy, squatted down amidst all the coal-dust at the side of the lighter, and unconcernedly fed their offspring in the way that Nature intended them to do. This was all right. What offended me was to see the Japanese men idling about smoking cigarettes while the women slaved like beasts of burden.

Commander George Maddick, D.S.O., our commanding officer, was one of those untiring little men full of energy, earnestness, and a determination to get on. He had been a navigator, and slow and painstaking in his methods rather than really clever, never really came to any decision, however trivial, in a hurry. I must say, however, that his decisions were unusually sound. "Now let's get to the root of the matter," was one of his stock expressions.

He had married money, and was the proud father of three children, which, with his wife, were at home in England. He was short and stout, meticulous about his personal appearance, and had one of those jerky, consequential sort of

walks with the knees straight, the toes turned well up, and the chest pushed out. With his sunburnt, brick-red face, brown eyes, and distinctive walk, he rather reminded me of a robin. I don't think he was really pompous, but beyond a very occasional appearance in the wardroom for a decorous rubber of bridge after dinner, he rather kept aloof from the rest of the officers, living alone in his large cabin on the upper deck. He was very much the commanding officer, rarely unbent, and seemed to know the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions almost by heart. We rather had to mind our p's and q's with him on duty; but he was essentially just and a good C.O. We always knew exactly where we stood, and he was not one of those men who blew hot one moment and cold the next. Moreover, I never knew him excited, and never saw him lose his temper.

His official reports and letters, like himself, were extraordinarily precise. So was a voluminous journal he kept of our wanderings. It was full of the strangest statistics—the number of people who had died of cholera or bubonic plague at every place we visited; the number of births, deaths, and marriages; the average rainfall; the local industries and commerce, and the like. His verbiage was always very correct. A dictionary and Roget's *Thesaurus* always stood upon his desk. He would never use the same word twice in the same sentence.

For the rest, he read a great deal, though never anything so frivolous as a novel; was firmly convinced that Japan was a menace to the peace of the Pacific; harried his Chinese cook, steward, and valet; and was rather given to be faddy in his diet and particular over the patent food to give him what he called his necessary 'roughage.' I know his breakfast sometimes consisted of a few dried raisins, a handful of nuts,

and a cup of sugarless tea. And he never quite forgave me for once trying to dose him with calomel. Nobody who took proper care of himself and considered his digestion as he did ever needed calomel, he asserted.

Channing, our boisterous first lieutenant, was one of the merriest of souls and certainly kept us alive in the wardroom. He never cared if it snowed ink, and though he kept a smart ship and was a taut hand with the ship's company, they all loved him. He was tall and curly-headed to look at, was good at most games, and could vamp on the piano and sing a decent song. He ran the ship's football, cricket, and water-polo teams, organised concerts, and, in places we visited where there were no facilities for games, took the men ashore for cross-country runs or paper-chases.

He once made me take part in one; but never again! I didn't fancy toiling up stony hillsides, tearing my way through prickly undergrowth, and splashing through swamps, paddy-fields, and rivers, arrayed in a skin-tight vest and a pair of inadequate running shorts, all for the sake of 'working up a good healthy sweat,' as Channing called it. One sweated quite enough without encouraging it artificially. No. I preferred my exercise to be more sedate, as befitted my figure and my nickname, which was 'Arbuckle.'

Mortimer, the navigator, or 'Pilot,' as we called him, was quiet, unassuming, and intensely zealous and hard-working. He already knew French and Italian, and was busy teaching himself Spanish by means of little books sent out by some correspondence school in England. He apparently learnt by ear, and besides using a gramophone with special records, used to go about muttering long strings of connected words which he called 'catenations.'

He was devotedly in love with some young woman at home, to whom he wrote every day, and was always much concerned as to what time the next mail from England was due to arrive. If his dear one hadn't written as often as she should, he became quieter than ever—positively morose at times. Number One used sometimes to chip him in the mess, and could always get a rise by saying that married men were the bane of the Service, and that no naval officer under the age of forty had any right to be married at all. From which it may be inferred that Channing himself was not a Benedick. However, he had plenty of women friends. I think they rather liked him for his good looks and unwillingness to be lured into anything deeper than the most casual of platonic friendships.

Young Ronny Cleeve, our sub-lieutenant, was tall and dark and rather foreign-looking, with smarmed hair and black eyes like a cinema hero. He once tried to cultivate side-whiskers, until we forcibly removed them one night after dinner. Rather lackadaisical in his manner, rather affected in his way of talking, the sub's clothes were almost too wonderful to be true —Heaven knows what he spent upon them! Almost every mail brought fresh parcels from home.

Cleeve was a prize 'poodle-faker' and a bit of a lounge-lizard, the sort of fellow who prided himself on his dancing, and his ability to make small talk at a tea-party. Our means of entertaining were small; but if we felt like showing some hospitality to the British residents at any of the more out-of-the-way places we visited, Cleeve used to be sent ashore to spy out the land. Within twenty-four hours he'd know all the families in the place, and, as regards the women, would have sorted out the married from the unmarried, the 'peaches' from the 'passables,' and the 'passables' from the 'horse-faced.'

The skipper didn't care for women, but considered it his duty to entertain now and then for the honour of the ship. Cleeve acted as his social A.D.C., as it were, and would be put on to organising a dinner-party followed by an impromptu dance. We had an amateur jazz band got up by the lower-deck, and though there was little deck space for dancing, the guests always seemed to enjoy our little parties. I suppose they came by way of a contrast to the monotony of life ashore, and never seeing a fresh face except a yellow one.

I noticed that on these occasions the sub usually contrived to monopolise the most beautiful of all the local peaches, while the skipper, who never danced if he could help it, sat with a face like a sea-boot trying to make polite conversation to the senior married lady present. Girls, unmarried women, widows, and grass widows he seemed to regard as definitely dangerous. He didn't appear to realise that even the married ones with husbands might sometimes have their fling. It was the funniest sight to see our poor little 'owner' being deliberately vamped by a dashing, dark-haired beauty with plucked eyebrows, made-up eyes, a borrowed complexion, and the reddest of red lips, while her husband was drinking iced whisky and soda in the wardroom.

Until I had a few words with him on the subject, Cleeve always tried to palm me off with a heavyweight, one of the hot and streamy sort, as a rule. He thought I liked them fat, he said; but I wasn't standing for that. I told him so—straight.

There was no doubt about it, the sub was a great social success, and did much to popularise the ship. And on board, though sometimes vague and irresponsible, he was easy to get on with and pretty good at his job. His hair-oil, sent specially out from England, was rather odoriferous, and the ship's company called him 'Cuthbert.' But he was a nice lad, really,

and had more good points than bad. He had an opulent father and more money than most of us, and must have spent every penny of it. But there was no denying his generosity. If a man was in trouble financially through his wife at home being ill or anything of that sort, the sub would often help him out without saying a word about it. I only heard of this by accident through my sick-berth petty officer, who had the ear of the men.

Our little coterie in the wardroom was made up by Mr. Blast, the commissioned gunner, and Mr. Smale, the commissioned engineer. Both these dear fellows had started life on the lower-deck, and we couldn't have wished for better messmates.

Mr. Blast played an excellent hand at bridge and was much liked by the men. Mr. Smale spent most of his spare time making model ships and steamboats, repairing clocks and watches, and turning out things on the lathe in his workshop. Both were married and had families, and as they hadn't too much money they didn't go ashore so often as the rest of us. We made a point of dragging them out of the ship on bathing picnics and shooting parties whenever we could, and apart from that, it was their invariable custom to land together after lunch on Sundays and to go for a long walk into the country. At places like Hong-Kong and Wei-Hai-Wei they had friends ashore; but at the more outlandish spots it was rather difficult for them to meet people. However, we did our best for them.

Our ship's company numbered ninety-eight all told, a typical Chatham crew, which meant that a fair number of them were Cockneys. It takes many sorts to make the crew of even the smallest of one of His Majesty's ships, and we certainly had our fair proportion of talent. Beyond saying that our men were a keen, cheerful crowd with not more than half-

a-dozen scallywags among them, I needn't describe them in any detail. I know that our punishment returns were very small, and that, to judge from his inspection reports and the way he sent us off on independent cruises, the Commander-in-Chief regarded the *Peony* as one of the best of his sloops. In short, we were a happy ship, and, I hope, an efficient one.

As for myself, I had written three letters to Hermione since leaving Hong-Kong, and had had two replies. She and her father had duly arrived at Shanghai, and had intended to go north again after a bit to avoid the heat.

But whether or not they went, I never heard. Hermione didn't answer my last letter, from which I gathered she had better things to do than to worry about me. After all, I was only a casual steamer acquaintance with whom she had been friendly. She knew nothing of me really, nor I of her, and though we had promised to write regularly to each other that night before arriving at Hong-Kong ... well, a man and a woman alone, a calm, starlit night, and a ship throbbing gently through a glassy sea is sometimes responsible for a good many things that are best forgotten in the morning.

I had been a fool, perhaps, ever to imagine that I was really fond of her, or that anything could ever possibly come of it. She, or rather her father, was rich, and Hermione had been brought up in an atmosphere of wealth. I had no money beside my pay, and somehow I didn't fancy living as a sort of glorified lap-dog at my wife's expense. Moreover, if we married and I subsequently got an appointment to some ship at home, I couldn't imagine Hermione trailing round after my ship and living in boarding-houses or furnished rooms like many of the naval wives I had met. She would have to have done that if she had wanted to see anything of me.

All the same, I was anxious to meet Hermione again, and hoped that we should be ordered to Shanghai later in the year. Mr. Fletcher had given me his address, and had insisted that I must come and see them, and stay with them, if ever my ship went there. There was no Mrs. Fletcher. Hermione ran the house.

Assuredly I would go. But I'd take damned good care not to take young Ronny Cleeve with me.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XVI

OUR next place of call after Shanhaikwan was Newchwang, or Yingkow, as I suppose it should really be called, a Manchurian Treaty Port at the head of the Gulf of Liaotung. The native city of Newchwang is thirty miles or so up the Liao River; but we lay alongside a wharf in the International settlement about fourteen miles from the river mouth. The muddy yellow stream was perhaps a quarter of a mile wide, winding tortuously to and fro between flat uninteresting country which seemed to consist almost entirely of swamps. The approach to the settlement was one of the most dreary and monotonous I think I have ever seen. There was nothing to catch the eye except a few Chinese villages, occasional clumps of low trees, and a line of low hills away to the eastward.

The settlement, which stretches like a sort of narrow ribbon for about three miles along the river bank, was not particularly inviting. There was one European hotel, several Japanese semi-European places where one could get a tolerably good meal, and any number of restaurants and eating-houses. But the mosquitoes were virulent and hungry, and the smells in the river overpowering.

However, it was a fairly busy place, with regular steamers running between it and other places in China and Japan, and with railway communication with Peking and the main Mukden-Dairen line of the South Manchurian Railway, a Japanese concern. There were a few British residents,

including the Englishman in charge of the Chinese Maritime Customs, with whom we exchanged civilities; but most of the foreign residents were Japanese, in whose hands seemed to be most of the trade.

Newchwang is a place with rather a chequered history. During the Chino-Japanese War of 1894-95 it was occupied by Japan and was actually ceded to her in the peace treaty, only to be handed back to China under the pressure of Russia, France, and Germany. During the Russo-Japanese War ten years later, it was first occupied by the Russians and then by the Japanese, finally to be handed back to China at the end of the war.

Japan, as recent events have shown, has always had a special interest in the rich territory of Southern Manchuria by reason of its economic importance to her and the huge sums of money she has sunk in its railways and industries. She has special treaty rights with China, and there have always been a considerable number of Japanese settlers scattered over the southern portion of the country. However, it is a fallacy to suppose that Japan regards Manchuria as a dumping-ground for her surplus population. The Japanese Government has made every effort, by bonuses, free land, and free transportation, to persuade more of its nationals to settle in the country, where it holds a ninety-nine-year lease. But the effort has failed. Every effort to encourage Japanese emigration to a land where the climate is more rigorous than at home has failed. It is rigorous, without a doubt. Newchwang itself is usually frozen in for three or four months during the winter.

And though until recently Manchuria was nominally under Chinese control, for years past Japan has exercised a controlling influence in the southern portion of the country, where the presence of Japanese troops in the railway zone has

been the chief factor in the maintenance of peace while the rest of China was in the throes of civil war.

Of the more recent events, of China's attempted repudiation of Japan's treaty rights, of the boycott of Japanese goods, of the violence and insults to Japanese subjects, and of the lawlessness, brigandage, and outrages which the Chinese Government was either powerless or unwilling to suppress, I need not speak. All that Japan wanted was a stable Government in Manchuria, and in the face of China's inability to provide it she stepped in, landed more troops, drove the Chinese troops out of the country, and created Manchuria an independent state. Mr. Henry Pu-Yi, who had become Emperor of China in 1908 under the regency of his father, to be deposed on the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1912, was constituted the nominal ruler of Manchuria under the protection of Japan. That Mr. Henry Pu has now been proscribed as a rebel and an outlaw by the Chinese National Government in Nanking, cannot cause him much uneasiness, however unenviable may be his job as nominal head of the new state.

To my mind Japan has only done in Manchuria what we British should have done since the war, and that is to have taken a really firm hand with China. Our surrender of treaty rights, and of the British concessions at Hankow, Nanking, and other places on the Yang-tse, have done irretrievable damage to our trade and prestige in the East. Moreover, we are the only nation who has surrendered its concessions, and the Chinese don't respect us for it. On the contrary, half-hearted measures of this sort are regarded by them as signs of timidity and weakness.

The Chinese can't govern their own country, let alone deal with foreigners. And now they are clamouring that we should

renounce the rights of ex-territoriality enjoyed by British subjects in China; in other words, that any British subject committing an offence shall be dealt with not by his Consul, but according to Chinese law.

God forbid that this should ever come to pass! No European could live for long if he had to suffer the barbarities, the filth, the starvation, and the diseases of a Chinese prison. I have heard of a Chinese chauffeur to a foreigner who accidentally ran down and killed a child near Shanghai. Tried for the offence, he was executed. Chinese law knows no mercy.

Dozens of people who have lived in China for years and know the country inside out have told me that Englishmen are no longer respected as they used to be. In other words, we have 'lost face' because we have dealt too gently with the Chinese, and they merely regard this as a sign of impotence.

It comes of entrusting the direction of our foreign affairs to politicians who in many cases are ignorant of the countries they deal with except by hearsay. They, and they alone, regard as responsible a government which is really no government at all, and takes no steps to set its house in order because of the rottenness, corruption, and every other form of incompetence that permeates its official classes, particularly its army.

It takes a long time before the average foreigner penetrates even the first layer of the Oriental mind. The ways of all Easterns are strange and inscrutable, and if I had my way the cabinet ministers who deal with British policy in China should first serve apprenticeships of at least five years in that country. Then, perhaps, they would see things for themselves, and would not be so ready to give away with both hands that which it has taken decades to acquire, and to sacrifice their

fellow countrymen and British trade in the Far East on the altars of Internationalism and the Equality of Nations.

When we visited Newchwang the civil and military administration were Chinese. But it was easy to see that the Japanese were predominant. They must have outnumbered all the other foreign nationalities combined by 100 to 1. The folk we were really sorry for were the White Russians, men and women who had no nationality because of the revolution in their own country, and were treated by the Chinese officials as pariahs and outcasts, people to be bullied and subjected to every indignity upon every possible opportunity. They had no government to represent them, and the threat of deportation was always held over their heads by the Chinese, and deportation into Siberia meant speedy death at the hands of their implacable enemies the Bolshevists.

There weren't so many of these poor wretches at Newchwang as there were at Mukden, Harbin, and other towns inland. But we saw and met a few of them, and heard true stories of their terrible privations and sufferings. There were people of all sorts among them—ex-naval and military officers with their wives and families, ex-merchants and shopkeepers, educated people and ne'er-do-wells. There were widows whose husbands had been butchered by the Bolshevists, sons and daughters whose parents had been killed before their eyes.

All these people were existing in a state of utter want and destitution, literally begging for scraps of food at the doors of the other Europeans, their tattered clothing dropping off their gaunt bodies. There was the ex-Cossack colonel with the haggard face with three St. George's Crosses for bravery in action, who tried to make ends meet by tuning pianos, was pathetically grateful for a meal, and lingered as long as he

could simply for the pleasure of hearing his own music. A tall bearded man hawking newspapers, cigarettes, and matches in the gutter was pointed out to me as an ex-general of the Czar's army. Other Russians tried to earn the price of their keep by scavenging the streets, or by acting as waiters or dish-washers in restaurants which catered for Chinese.

The Russians are naturally musical, and some had formed themselves into jazz bands and balalaika orchestras. I am not easily moved; but the mournful music sometimes played by these pinched-looking, hollow-eyed men, dressed up in sheepskin caps and tawdry, fantastic travesties of Cossack uniforms, somehow reminded me of the moaning of a lost people—a people with no home or nationality.

And the women—who shall talk of the women?

Those that were no longer young, titled and educated women among them, strove to live by sewing, by keeping small shops, by taking in washing, by becoming waitresses. Some starved.

Many of the younger and prettier ones were forced to become members of the oldest profession in the world to obtain the wherewithal to live. After passing their prime they drifted steadily downhill, to end their days in houses which catered for low-class Chinese. Many died of unnamable diseases.

These poor wretches of either sex were harried and hunted unmercifully by Chinese officialdom. One regulation was made ordering all White Russians to provide themselves with identity papers at the hands of the Chinese authorities. The fee was ten dollars—approximately £1—a fabulous sum to those who lived from day to day, and from hand to mouth, and never quite knew how they would get their next meal. After a

certain time all those without identity cards were put across the border. Many, through lack of means, had been unable to buy them. They were deported—to suffer the usual fate on arriving in Siberia.

It was Cleeve who was the cause of my first meeting Irina.

After rather an aimless walk one Sunday afternoon the sub said he wanted tea, and persuaded me to try a little restaurant kept by a Russian refugee officer and his wife. Irina was the waitress, and I don't know if Cleeve had heard of her beforehand. From the moment I saw her, however, I realised she hadn't been a waitress all her life.

The room we entered was scrupulously clean and tidy, with a white matting floor that it seemed a shame to walk upon with outdoor shoes, walls painted with bright-coloured figures and landscapes, gay lampshades, and polished wooden chairs and tables, the latter set out with vases of flowers, and small tablecloths in chequer patterns of red and blue and green, with white.

The proprietor hurried forward as we chose our table. He seemed almost pathetically glad to see us.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said in English, with only the faintest trace of a foreign accent. "You require tea, or perhaps something more substantial?"

We asked for tea, Russian tea, and something to eat. He repeated our order in Russian to the pretty little slip of a waitress hovering in the background. Then he hesitated, lingering by our table as though unwilling to leave us.

He was a man of average height with square shoulders, greyish hair brushed straight back off his temples, and a small clipped moustache. He was somewhere between forty and fifty, I guessed, and a hint of authority still seemed to linger in

his steel-grey eyes, his straight mouth, and determined jaw. He had the unmistakable look and carriage of a soldier. His face had once been tanned, but the sunburn had faded, to leave it jaundiced like old parchment, seamed and criss-crossed with a myriad tiny wrinkles, and a forehead deeply furrowed. He had a furtive, hunted expression, and a look of infinite sadness in his eyes. He was painfully thin, and reminded me of a half-starved, beaten dog of good breeding who had fallen into evil ownership.

My eyes strayed to his clothing. His ill-fitting dark lounge suit, badly worn and patched with some different material on one elbow, had been made for a bigger man. One of his well-polished shoes was cracked between the laces and toe-cap, and a heavy gold signet ring, with a blood-red stone on the little finger of his left hand, seemed rather out of keeping with his frayed shirt and collar. Notwithstanding his clothes and his look of semi-starvation, here was a man, a gentleman, who was doing his utmost to keep up appearances in the face of privation and adversity. He was scrupulously clean. His hands were well kept, with the finger-nails carefully cut and manicured.

"You will pardon my asking; but you gentlemen are English?" he enquired, eyeing us with interest.

"Yes," I replied.

"Are you visitors?"

"Not exactly," I said. "We are officers of the British man-of-war in the river. This is the sub-lieutenant," I added, introducing Cleeve by name. "I am the doctor."

"British officers. I am glad," he answered warmly. Then his tone changed to one of sadness. "I also was an officer. Allow me to say my name—Major Dubassoff, late of the Imperial

Russian Army.” I have forgotten the name of the regiment he mentioned.

“I lived for some time in England, where I was extra attaché to our Embassy in London,” he went on to explain. “I know your London well. I was there in nought-seven and nought-eight, after our war with Japan, before I became married. I used to be acquainted with some British Army officers at your War Office, and I attended your Army manœuvres. Yes, I know England fairly well; but London best.—You will permit me to shake hands?”

We rose, returned his bow, and shook hands in turn.

“Won’t you sit down, sir, and have some tea with us?” Cleeve said.

I could have hugged the sub for his tact in slipping in that ‘sir.’ Dubassoff noticed it too. He smiled and flushed with pleasure, but shook his head.

“No,” he replied, “I must keep the rule not to sit with my customers. You see, I am no longer an officer. Things have changed in my country. I cannot go back. Instead, I try to earn a living by ... by this.” He sighed and made a wry face. “It is difficult, sometimes, very difficult.”

“But surely, sir, you could have some tea with us?” I protested. “What’s wrong with that?”

“It is kind of you, but I cannot. Suppose another customer comes, and he sees me? Maybe he does not understand, and he thinks it improper that the restaurant keeper sits with his clients. That is bad for business.”

“But that’s all nonsense!” the sub exclaimed impulsively. “Why shouldn’t we have tea with each other if we want to?”

Dubassoff shrugged his shoulders; shook his head.

"I have said the reason," he explained. "It is bad for business. But, gentlemen, it is a pleasure for me to speak to Englishmen—English officers. Maybe you will accept my poor invitation to supper some night with Madame Dubassoff and myself?"

"It's very kind of you," I murmured politely, wondering what we had let ourselves in for. And I didn't quite like the idea of accepting hospitality from a man who obviously hadn't a penny to spare.

"If we come to you, Madame Dubassoff and yourself must come and have a meal with us on board the ship," Cleeve put in, giving voice to my thoughts.

Dubassoff looked down at his clothes and hesitated before replying.

"But I fear no," he said, shaking his head. "My very old dress is not good for company. Besides, Madame my wife—what will she wear? We are very poor people—now."

"But that doesn't matter," I put in hurriedly, to save him the trouble of explaining. "We quite understand."

"Then maybe we can come," he said, with a smile. "We should be very pleased. We must arrange later. When does your ship go?"

"Not till to-morrow week," I told him.

"That will give time. When I was in London, I went out much—the Savoy, the Ritz, the Carlton, and maybe you know Simpson's, in Piccadilly?"

"In the Strand," I corrected.

"Ah yes, I forget. In the Strand, of course," he went on to say. "We had good times in London, we military attachés. Not too much work; but plenty of amusement. And now," he

added, with a shrug of his shoulders and a hopeless gesture of his hands, “now we stay here in Newchwang and try to live. Times are changed. Since the revolution we loyal Russians are very poor people, nearly beggars. Our country is not for us. We are what you call outcast, homeless. It is still dangerous to be here, for there are many Bolsheviki in China. They are friends with some Chinese. Many of us get killed, many die. Some day we die too.” His voice was very low and mournful.

“Why don’t you go and live somewhere where you’d be safe?” I suggested. “What about England?”

“Wherever we go we are outcast, people of no nationality,” he answered, his voice full of bitterness. “And you say England, my friend. I know the English are fair people; but what must we pay to get there, what can we do when we arrive? Here, we can just manage to live, Madame Dubassoff, Irina, and me. In England, what can we do?—Nothing, except maybe Irina, who is still young.”

“Irina?” I queried.

“Irina lives now with us. She is daughter to my brother officer who was shot by Bolsheviki in Siberia in nineteen-twenty, while fighting with our Admiral Kolchak. Her mother is dead beforehand. Irina is at Vladivostok, then she comes here. We take her in. She is waitress here in day-times. Some night-times she dance and.... Ah! She comes now!”

So Irina—‘Ereena,’ as he pronounced it—was the pretty waitress.

I had time to look at her as she came forward with our tray laden with its plates of weird-looking little cakes, a small glass dish of sliced lemon, another of sugar, and amber-

coloured Russian tea in two long thin tumblers with spoons in them.

She was about twenty-two, I imagined, a slender little slip of a thing, with a pale oval face, dark eyes, and wavy black shingled hair. She knew how to make the best of herself, though her make-up was not obtrusive. Her hands, as I noticed when she put down the tray, were carefully manicured.

She wore a black pleated dress of some sort of silk stuff reaching just below her knees, and an inadequate silk apron, also black, embroidered in many-coloured silks. Her silk stockings encased a well-shaped leg—so far as I am a judge of female legs—and her high-heeled black patent shoes looked new and expensive.

I am no great hand at summing up a woman's appearance, and am no judge whatever of prettiness. But in spite of Irina's petulant mouth, and sad, embittered expression, she was undeniably attractive.

She wore no jewellery of any sort, but took obvious pains with her appearance and was well dressed. But perhaps Dubassoff and his wife saw to this because she attracted custom. Looking at her, and noticing her thinness and general appearance of sadness and fragility, I hoped fervently she did not have to eke out a livelihood in the usual horrible way.

Dubassoff introduced us, explaining that Irina, though she could talk French and Chinese as fluently as her own native Russian, knew only a few words of English.

And when she held out her hand and smiled, her face completely changed. It lost its mask-like expression of brooding melancholy and seemed suddenly to light up, to become vivacious and charming. Her voice, when she said

something to Dubassoff in her own language, was low and musical—absurdly low for so small a person. Dubassoff made some reply that made her gurgle with laughter while looking at me. It was a pleasure to listen to her, until I heard what she was amused at.

"What's the joke?" I enquired innocently.

Dubassoff looked a little confused.

"Irina is a naughty girl," he replied at last. "I tell her always not to make the personal remark."

"But what did she say?"

"She says—how must I tell it? It is awkward.—Well, she says how nice to see the English officer with so young a face and so plump a body."

Cleeve burst out laughing.

"That's one up on you, Doc," he sniggered.

I felt a fool. My adiposity was rather a sore subject; but it was impossible to be really angry.

During the ten days that we remained at Newchwang we saw a good deal of the Dubassoffs and Irina. They came on board the *Peony* several times to meals, and twice we had supper with them. But they were not exactly free agents. I never quite discovered their routine, however, for sometimes their restaurant seemed to close at eight o'clock, sometimes at eleven, but at least once it was still open at 1 A.M. with a band going full blast, the tables cleared from the centre of the floor, and dancing in progress. On that occasion, attired in a scarlet evening-frock, Irina was in the highest of spirits and was much in request as a partner. She tried to drag me round; but Russian mazurkas, or whatever they were, were utterly beyond my powers.

Another night, when I was dining at the hotel with the first lieutenant, I saw Irina in evening-dress having a meal with a nasty-looking bit of work in a dinner-jacket and flashy-looking diamond studs who was obviously a well-to-do Chinaman in European clothes. They were drinking champagne together, and when she refused to catch my eye or even to recognise me, I instantly suspected the worst. They were discussing something, and she kept on shaking her head, while he tried persuasion, and then seemed to be threatening her. I didn't at all like the look on the Chinaman's face, added to which he was a little drunk. If Irina had once looked in my direction, and had given me the least hint that she was in trouble, I think I should have interfered. Perhaps it was as well that she did not.

At about half-past nine they started to clear the floor, the balalaika orchestra gave way to the inevitable jazz band, and a party of expectant-looking young women with painted faces and wearing exiguous evening-frocks forgathered at two of the tables. One or two were Chinese; but all the rest were Europeans—Russians, by the look of them. They sat there trying to catch the eyes of the unattached man, waiting to be hired.

The music started. With disgust in my heart I watched Irina revolving in the arms of her Oriental. Looking unutterably sad and tired, she still refused to catch my eye. I hated the way her man pawed and held her, his cheek and mouth practically touching her head. I longed to drag her out of his arms, to bash that yellow grinning face of his, to remove that self-satisfied smile with a bleeding nose and a broken tooth or two. The fellow seemed so sure of himself, so disgustingly possessive.

But it was up to Irina to give some sign that she wanted to be rescued, and never once did she glance in my direction. She purposely cut me dead.

The coffee-coloured Portuguese proprietor, seeing us sitting alone, came bustling across to our table.

"The gentlemans would like to be introduce to ze dance partners?" he enquired, with an oily smile, anxious no doubt to improve his business by the champagne we should have to order for the ladies' refreshment. "Plenty nice gal to dance wiz—Russian gal, ver' nice." He nodded towards the gradually diminishing group on the other side of the room near the band. Their eyes, I noticed, were all on us.

"What about that lady in the blue dress?" I asked, nodding covertly in Irina's direction as she swept past with her eyes averted.

"Zat lady?"

I nodded.

He shook his head.

"I fear, no goot. She engage already, engage ze whole evening. But plentee more gal, goot gal to dance wiz."

"Who's that she's dancing with?" I demanded.

"You not know heem?" said the proprietor, with an air of great surprise. "Heem very rich gentleman."

"But he's Chinese, dammit!"

The man nodded.

"Ssh!" he hissed, glancing apprehensively over his shoulder. "You not talk too loud, plees. Not goot for heem to hear."

"Who in hell is he?" I demanded impatiently.

"Heem Chinese gentleman, nephew to army general, ver' beeg man. Heem mooch money, ver' goot customer."

"But is that any reason why he should monopolise the lady?"

"Zat lady hees friend. Heem always dance wiz her when he come Newchwang. Heem buy plenty champagne, and give her mooch money, I think." He sniggered suggestively.

Channing went off and was introduced to a sinuous female wearing a sheath-like dress of green and brown and gold sequins, with practically no back down to the waistline and all slit up one side. She seemed to undulate rather than walk, and reminded me of a glittering snake. He brought her back to our table when the dance was over. She had a knobby backbone, poor dear, but was pretty, in a hard, brazen sort of way, reeked of scent, and knew only enough English to order champagne—on which she probably got a commission—and to say: "How mooch money you give me? You veree rich, I tink."

Channing knew no Russian, and for some time I sat there listening to them trying to understand each other in French, while occasionally the lady chipped in with her "How mooch money you give?" Then she electrified me by asking him, "You come my house?" She seemed desperately anxious.

I saw he was in for an expensive evening, and that he was perfectly capable of enjoying himself without any help from me. Nor did I wish to act as a wet blanket on his amusements, whatever he chose to do. Realising, moreover, that there was no chance of getting Irina out of the clutches of her Chinaman, I excused myself, slipped away during the next dance, and went back to the ship.

I felt moody and depressed, utterly sick at heart. Irina was nothing to me, beyond the fact that I liked her a little and was

sorry for her. But I loathed and detested the idea of her in the arms of that yellow-skinned, black-haired Oriental, with his sensuous face and horrible air of proprietorship. The fact that he was rich while Irina was poor, desperately poor, made it all the worse.

Why had we ever been sent to Newchwang, dammit? Why was I soft-hearted enough to feel torn in two and utterly disgusted because yet another Chinaman had a white girl as his mistress? I felt convinced that Irina *was* his mistress.

CHAPTER XVII

I HAD been asked to supper by the Dubassoffs next evening, and couldn't very well get out of it without giving offence.
All the same, without being too inquisitive in an affair that didn't really concern me, I had made up my mind to find out what Dubassoff knew about Irina and her goings on. I realised the poor little wretch must live; but she might have been rather less promiscuous.

I went alone to the restaurant, as the sub, who had been invited also, had the 'day on' and couldn't get away. I arrived soon after eight, to find Irina tidying up. She had the grace to look rather ashamed of herself as she murmured 'Good evening' in broken English. However, I had no chance of talking to her, for Dubassoff, who was there as well, at once took me into his little office at the back. I realised from his expression there was something on his mind.

"Irina told me she saw you last night," he began uncomfortably, after carefully closing the door, waving me to a chair, and offering me the usual cigarette.

I nodded.

"She asked me to say to you how sorry she was not to recognise you. But the man she was with is most jealous. If she talks to you, she fears he may kick up a row." He paused, licking his lips.

"Is it absolutely necessary that she should be seen about with a Chinaman?" I asked.

"You know who he is?"

“Yes, I was told he was very rich, if that’s what you mean.”

Dubassoff looked supremely miserable.

“It is worse than that,” he said, wringing his hands. “Much worse. His uncle is the Chinese military governor. He has much power. We live here in Chinese territory, you must understand. If Irina refuses to meet him, the general makes much trouble for us. He will have us arrested by his police. We shall be sent to Siberia, Irina as well. That means we shall be shot by the Bolsheviki—paf!” He flipped his fingers.

“But.... Good God, man! You don’t mean he’d have you expelled for personal reasons? You’re doing no harm here!”

“I do!” Dubassoff nodded, his pathetic eyes on mine. “Chung, the man you saw with Irina, is a cruel devil. He has much influence with his uncle, the general. Once, twice, he has had Russian families expelled because the daughter refuse to become his mistress. Another time, the daughter consent, to save her people. He took her up country, and then gets tired of her. He says she must go to the devil. She, who was Russian baroness in her own right, is now a common prostitute in Harbin!”

“God!” I muttered, aghast.

“And how would you like that to happen to some one you are fond of, your own sister perhaps?” Dubassoff asked. “Your own sister, with Chinamen!”

I did not reply. I was thinking of Hermione, some of the girls I knew at home in England, of Irina herself.

“But is Irina ...” I hesitated.

“I know of what you think,” he broke in, biting his lips and looking away with tears in his eyes. “Irina is clean. I tell you that, on my honour as a Russian officer.”

“Thank Heaven for that!” I murmured, my heart full of relief.

“But that’s not all,” he continued. “As I say to you before, Irina is daughter to my brother officer. She is like daughter to me, because he was my greatest friend. We love Irina, Madame Dubassoff and myself.... This man Chung know her now for nearly three months, and all the time he presses her to become his mistress. Irina will not consent; but last night—last night ...” He paused.

“Last night?” I prompted.

“Last night Chung starts to threaten. If she does not say yes, he will have us expelled and shot, Irina too. She has a week to think which she does.”

“But he can’t mean it!” I burst out. “Surely to God he doesn’t mean it! I thought the Chinese considered themselves civilised! They can’t treat Europeans like so much dirt and get away with it. Why don’t you appeal to the Chinese Government?”

“Because I, being White Russian, have no country,” Dubassoff whispered, an agonised expression in his eyes. “Chung’s uncle *is* the Chinese Government here, and we live on Chinese land. He can do what he like. We are Europeans; but there is nobody to fight our battle. As for Chinese Government ...” He shrugged his shoulders.

“What about the British or the Japanese?” I suggested.

“They can do nothing, nothing!” he replied pathetically. “What can they do? Suppose all the Russian refugees in Manchuria go to them and say ‘look after me,’ what can they do to help?—People may give us money, some food, some old clothes, privately; but their Governments can’t interfere

and say to the Chinese they must treat us properly, not like starving curs to be hunted and ... and killed!”

Dubassoff broke down completely. The tears had already been trickling down his cheeks, and now he held his head in both hands and I saw his shoulders shaking.

I felt so overcome that I felt like weeping myself. Watching somebody else’s grief was a hundred times worse than being sick and sorry for oneself.

But what could I do to help? What in the name of all that was holy could I suggest as a possible way out?

“Can’t you get rid of this restaurant and leave Newchwang altogether?” I asked, after an awkward pause. “They can’t stop you going, all three of you.”

There was the question of money, Dubassoff pointed out. He had borrowed money from a Chinese merchant to start his business, and was paying it back in instalments out of his profits. Profits weren’t very large, and he still owed a good deal. If once the Chinaman knew he contemplated leaving, Dubassoff would be arrested for debt and flung into prison. I asked him how much he owed. He named a figure that, according to my rough calculations, worked out at between £80 and £100 in English money.

“If you leave here, whereabouts would you go?” I queried, an idea simmering at the back of my mind.

It had always been his idea to get to Shanghai or Hong-Kong, he said. He had friends in both places, and they could probably put him in the way of earning a living. But finally he had always hoped to save enough money to reach France or England, at any rate some civilised country, far away from China.

I asked him how much he would require to leave Newchwang, to pay for the passages for himself, his wife, and Irina to, say, Hong-Kong, and to tide them over until they found something to do. He thought for a minute, and then mentioned the equivalent of about £180.

"Then if any one would be prepared to lend you about £200, you could leave to-morrow?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"And—er, could you pay it back?" I asked awkwardly. I hate discussing money matters, and could see that he did too.

"I would work my fingers to the bone until I had repaid every cent," he said solemnly, looking me full in the eyes.

I believed him.

"How long would it take you to settle up everything here in Newchwang?" I asked.

"Two or three days," he said.

"And when does the next steamer sail for the south?"

"I think on Monday; but I should have to make certain."

It was Thursday now. We had three clear days to fix up everything.

About eight months before an aunt, who was also my godmother, had died at home in England. She had left me a sum of between £500 and £600. It had taken some time to settle her affairs, and only a few weeks before I had had a letter from the lawyers telling me that some of my legacy had been paid into my banking account in London; but that £300 had been placed to my credit with the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Bank at Hong-Kong.

It was my idea to lend the Dubassoffs £200 of this, to trust to its being paid back. No doubt it was foolish and quixotic. I

had no security, nothing but Dubassoff's word, and I knew nothing of him but what he himself had told me. He might bilk me quite easily, and I should have no redress. Poor old Aunt Caroline would have turned in her grave if she had known what was in my mind. She was always so businesslike and thorough.

But it was my money to do as I liked with. If I chose to throw it into the sea nobody could say me nay, however much of a fool they might think me. Yes. I would take the risk of Dubassoff being honest.

"Now, listen," I said. "To-night, as soon as I can, or to-morrow if it isn't possible to-night, I'm going to telegraph to my bank at Hong-Kong. I shall tell them to telegraph me money to a bank here, all the money you will want."

Dubassoff looked up with amazement written on his face, incredulous amazement.

"But, my friend," he started to say, "I cannot see...."

"Do let me finish and hear what I have to say!" I broke in. "That money should be here to-morrow or the day after, that is, by Saturday at the latest. To-morrow you must arrange to get rid of this restaurant. Tell the Chinaman you owe that money to that he'll be paid in full, and that I'm responsible. When you've done that, go to the hotel and take rooms for all of you.—Yes, I mean it," I added, as Dubassoff stared at me with his lips working and his eyes nearly popping out of his head. He was shaking all over with excitement. From the look on his face I didn't know whether he was about to laugh or to cry.

"To-morrow, also," I concluded, "take your passages in the next steamer going south. I'm going to lend you the money

you want, Dubassoff. You can go to Shanghai or Hong-Kong, which ever you like."

For a moment he hardly seemed to grasp what I had told him. Then he suddenly burst into tears.

I gave him a minute or two to recover himself, and then got up and shook him by the shoulder.

"You'd better come and show me the way to that telegraph office," I said severely. "Come on, man. Pull yourself together."

He rose, flung his arms round my neck, and unexpectedly and most embarrassingly kissed me on both cheeks, murmuring his incoherent thanks with the tears rolling down his face. Then, releasing me, he went to the door and shouted for his wife and Irina.

All three of them gabbled excitedly in Russian, the two women staring at me in astonishment. Then Irina whinnied like a pony and jumped into the air, while Madame Dubassoff advanced upon me like a battleship under way. Pinned against a writing-table, I could not escape. I felt myself enveloped in her arms, pressed tightly against her bosom, and kissed all over my face.

Next came Irina's turn. I liked that much better. She smelt rather nice.

We all three went to the telegraph office in the settlement, unearthed a sleepy clerk, bribed him heavily as it was after office hours, and managed to send off my telegram.

Then we bought food and drink, and returned to the restaurant to celebrate.

Lord, it was a night!

What with being embraced by one or other of the women every few minutes, what with champagne and a precious bottle of vodka unearthed by Dubassoff, I didn't know whether it was Christmas or Easter, and didn't care either. They were happy, bless their hearts! I was happy. That was all that mattered for the time being. I didn't care if it snowed ink or rained caterpillars.

It must have been very late when Dubassoff walked arm-in-arm with me back to the ship.

I remember reaching the wharf, going along it towards the brow leading to the *Peony*, and asking him to come and have a whisky and soda to top up the evening.

"No," said he, with a wild laugh. "I have too much already. I must go home." He started to thank me again, until I implored him to desist.

"I wonder what Chung will say when he hear Irina has gone?" Dubassoff asked.

"To hell with Chung!" I guffawed, releasing his arm and beginning to walk up the sloping brow. "Good night, old Dubassoff!"

The night was calm and peaceful, but the old *Peony* seemed to be cutting the wildest capers, as though she were at sea in a gale of wind. The brow, too, seemed to be developing a peculiar corkscrew motion—most disconcerting and unusual.

"You're a fine fellow, I must say!" came the sub's disapproving voice, as I trod on to the heaving deck and tried to raise my hat. "What the blazes have you been up to?"

"Britons never will be slaves! Kiss me, duckie!" I am reputed to have answered, flinging an arm round Cleeve's neck to the scandalised astonishment of the quartermaster.

The sub had some difficulty in undressing me and getting me to bed, he asserted afterwards. I was alternately loving and quarrelsome.

Damn that unaccustomed vodka—so harmless to look at, so flavourless to drink, so direful in its effects!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE *Peony* was due to sail down the river early on Monday morning as soon as the tide served. The steamer *Yentai*, on board of which Dubassoff, his wife, and Irina were to embark on Tuesday night, would leave Newchwang after us. We were bound straight for Wei-Hai-Wei. The *Yentai*, after touching at half-a-dozen coastal ports, would eventually arrive at Hong-Kong.

But the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday were by no means uneventful. I must tell the story of what happened in some detail.

The money from the bank at Hong-Kong reached me by telegram on Friday evening, and after giving Dubassoff sufficient to pay off all he owed, I booked the passages for all three of them to Hong-Kong. Having packed up their belongings, Madame Dubassoff and Irina had already gone to the hotel in the settlement, where I dined with them—the elder lady voluble, full of her past history and future plans, Irina subdued and apparently nervous. I noticed she toyed with her food and looked anxiously over her shoulder every time any one came into the dining-room.

Dubassoff, looking very worried and harassed, joined us at about ten o'clock, when we were sitting in the smoking-room. He had discharged all his debts, he told me, and had handed the restaurant back to its Chinese proprietor, though not without some argument. There had been some difficulty over the lease, and realising Dubassoff was in a cleft stick, the

Chinaman had demanded more than he was really entitled to. Dubassoff had had to pay up to avoid trouble.

But that wasn't all, by any means. Something else was in the wind. Some one must have got news of Dubassoff's impending departure. His restaurant, in Chinese territory, had been visited by a posse of Chinese police a few minutes after his departure. He had been told by a friendly shopkeeper, and warned on no account to return.

"But what can they want?" I asked, speaking in a whisper. There were other people sitting near us. It was advisable we shouldn't be overheard.

"I do not know," he answered, with the inevitable shrug of his shoulders. "I owe no money—thanks to your generosity, my friend."

"Hadn't your wife and Irina better go to their rooms while we discuss it?" I suggested.

He nodded, and said something to the women in Russian. They rose obediently, stood talking for a minute or two, and then said good-night.

"What *is* the matter?" I asked him when they had disappeared.

"That devil Chung," he replied anxiously. "I think he hears we are going. He wants Irina, so he says to his uncle we must be stopped."

"But how can he stop you? If you've paid all your bills and there's nothing owing, he *can't* prevent your going!"

"Chung can do anything. He wants Irina. I believe he sends the police to arrest us so that we cannot go."

It sounded too utterly fantastic to be true; but I could see that it *was* true.

"But what can you be arrested for?" I asked. "You've done nothing."

"Suppose they say our papers are not in order? There are many things they can say to stop our going.—It is Chung, I tell you. I am certain it is Chung! He fears to lose Irina. If Irina goes to him, we can go. If not—well, anything may happen!"

"But you're outside Chinese jurisdiction!"

"I beg your pardon?" he queried.

"You're in the settlement," I explained. "The Chinese can't touch you here."

"But if the Chinese officials tell the police in the settlement I have committed a crime, we shall be arrested and handed over," he declared. "We have no consul here to help us. Nobody cares what happens to us White Russians. Also, I fear for Irina. Suppose they take her?"

He knew more about the habits of the Chinese than I did, and I could see he was in deadly earnest. Evidently Chung was the sort of man who would stick at nothing to get what he wanted. Not only did all our plans seem likely to be frustrated at the eleventh hour, but the three of them were in deadly peril—unless Irina acquiesced. That was unthinkable.

Madame Dubassoff, Irina, and myself had dined, as I have said, in the ordinary dining-room, not in the hotel restaurant where there was dancing. People were dancing now, and from where Dubassoff and I sat in the smoking-room I could hear the mournful wailing of a saxophone.

I was still turning the matter over in my mind, and wondering if I could do any good by going to Commander Maddick, putting the whole story before him and asking him to use his influence with the British Consul to prevent this

ghastly piece of injustice, when I heard Dubassoff draw in his breath with a sharp little hiss. I looked up.

Chung was standing in the doorway. Wearing his dinner-jacket and diamond studs, he was idly smoking a cigarette in a long holder. Standing there like a graven image he was regarding us intently. His expression was inscrutable.

Seeing my eyes upon him, he came across the room.

"Good evening, Dubassoff," he said in English, halting by our table with a smile that showed the gold stoppings in his front teeth. "Please introduce me to your friend, the English doctor."

The Russian replied to his salutation, half rose from his chair, and mentioned my name. Chung bowed at me, and I bowed back at him. He did not volunteer to shake hands, and if ever there was a look of deadly enmity in a man's eyes it was in his. I could see he hated me. Assuredly I hated him. What is more, my face probably showed it. I am not good at hiding my feelings.

Chung pulled over a chair, sat down, crossed his legs, and proceeded gently to stroke his left ankle with his dark eyes on Dubassoff's. I noticed he was wearing black silk socks, and that his narrow, olive-coloured hands looked as soft as a woman's. His tapering fingers and abnormally long nails were like talons. He stank of scent or hair-oil, or both—a pungent, cloying smell which sickened me.

For a moment or two he remained silent, sitting there rubbing his instep with a rasping sound that irritated me almost beyond endurance. He was so sleek and oily, so prosperous-looking and well-fed, so utterly self-satisfied. Again I had that overmastering desire to hit him in the face.

"I have something to discuss with you, Dubassoff," he said at last, still using English. "It is private. Your friend," with a glance at me and a negligent wave of the hand, "perhaps he would be good enough to leave us?"

It was more than a hint for me to make myself scarce, but I wasn't taking hints from Chung. I stifled a yawn, settled myself more firmly in my chair, and waited.

"Perhaps you did not understand what I said," Chung observed after a pause, looking at me again.

"I understood perfectly."

"Then perhaps you will leave us alone, Doctor."

"Why?" I asked, my expression as innocent and childlike as I could make it.

Chung's eyelids flickered.

"Because I ask," he replied suavely.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because Dubassoff and I have a leetle matter to discuss, quite a leetle matter—but private, you understand."

"I don't understand," I retorted stubbornly. "Dubassoff is my friend. If he wants me to go, I'll go. If he wants me to stay, I stay, and that's all about it.—Which is it to be, Dubassoff?"

Chung looked surprised, and so did Dubassoff. But the Russian did not answer me directly. Instead, he looked at Chung.

"The doctor is my friend," he replied after an awkward pause. "I do not mind if he hears what you say to me. There is nothing between us that I am ashamed for him to know, nothing."

"Then I'll stay and hear what this—er—gentleman has to say," I put in.

Chung glared at me with an angry glitter in his dark eyes. If looks could kill, I should have been a dead man. It was war between us, war to the knife.

I knew at the back of my mind what it was all about. He had discovered that I was friendly with Irina. He wanted Irina for himself. He had found out that she was leaving with the Dubassoffs because of what I had been able to do to help them. He had determined to stop it, and, without a doubt, had been responsible for that police visit to the restaurant.

"It's getting late," I said as casually as I could. "Hadn't we better get on with this conversation?"

With another venomous look at me Chung uncrossed his legs, rose from his chair, and brushed some imaginary cigarette ash from the exaggerated silk lapels of his dinner-jacket.

"There will be no conversation," he replied, his voice vaguely threatening. "I have wanted to speak to Dubassoff alone; but I am prevented.—Well," he went on, looking at the Russian, "I have tried to be friendly. I warn you, Dubassoff, that you must now be prepared for the other thing."

"And what, precisely, do you mean by that?" I enquired, beginning to lose my temper and with difficulty restraining myself from jumping to my feet.

"That need not be discussed," said Chung with exaggerated politeness. "Dubassoff will understand.—Good night, gentlemen. Perhaps we shall meet again."

He turned on his heel and left the room.

"What the blazes does he mean?" I asked in a whisper when he was safely out of earshot.

"Mean," said the Russian, his face the picture of anxiety. "He will do everything in his power to stop us going. He will tell lies, anything. He is dangerous, most dangerous! I do not like it, Doctor. I am frightened of what may happen." He certainly looked it.

"To Irina?"

"Yes, to us all."

"Will you be safe for to-night?" I asked.

"I think so," he replied nervously. "Madame Dubassoff and I have our room next door to Irina's. Besides, this is an European hotel. I think he cannot do anything here. It is outside."

"Then for God's sake don't leave the hotel until you hear from me!" I besought him.

"It is when we try to go into the ship he will make the trouble," Dubassoff said.

"To-morrow's Saturday," I pointed out. "You've forty-eight hours before you sail, and you've got to be careful! D'you think anything desperate could happen in the settlement, which isn't Chinese territory?"

"I do not know," he replied, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. "If the Chinese say we have done some crime for which we must be arrested, what will happen then?"

It was more than I could tell him; but my mind was fully made up. The next morning, as soon as ever I could manage it, I would tell our skipper the whole story and ask him to pull every string that he could. I would even go to the British Consul, the English Commissioner of the Chinese Maritime Customs, the chief of the settlement police, all of whom I knew slightly. Nothing must be left to chance.

I told Dubassoff as much, and though he would keep on saying that none of the people I mentioned could do anything to help, he was profoundly grateful.

It was in no very happy frame of mind that I found my way back to the ship shortly before midnight. I am phlegmatic, and by no means nervous or excitable. All the same, I took the precaution to walk in the middle of the road, and carefully steered clear of all doorways and dark shadows in which some one might be lurking. More than once, hearing what I thought was a soft, padding footfall behind me, I quickened my pace and looked behind me, only to realise that my imagination was playing tricks. I was not followed, though all the time I half expected to be slugged from behind or to feel the point of a knife between my shoulder-blades.

It was with a feeling of profound relief that I finally stepped on board the *Peony* to find Mr. Blast, whose 'night on' it was, solemnly marching up and down in his overcoat and rubber-soled shoes.

"Well," he said, screwing up his cheery little face as he returned my salute in the glare of the yard-arm group illuminating the gangway. "So here we are again!"

I could have hugged the little man. He was so typically British—unperturbed and dependable.

"Had a good time?" he asked.

"Oh, all right," I said casually. "I'm feeling a bit under the weather, though."

"And you look it, I must say," the gunner laughed. "What you want, if I may say so, is a good lie in and a couple of your own Number Nine pills. You've been overdoin' it, Doc—been on the razzle ever since we came to this blinkin' place, full of its stinks and garbage and what-not. I never could abide these

outlandish parts full o’ yellow-bellied, yellow-faced heathens,” he rambled on. “Give me Pompey—good old Pompey, with me missus and me kids and me home comforts! Pompey’s civilised, which is more than what this place is. It fair gives me the creeps and shudders, what with its smells and prowlin’ smug-faced Orientals!”

“But you take my tip, Doc,” he went on after a pause. “You try having a gargle out o’ one o’ your own bottles, and try leadin’ the simple life a bit, same as me. Get up every mornin’ at quarter-past six and try skippin’ on the fo’c’sle, same as me and the first lootenant. It keeps me fit, that skippin’ does.”

I agreed with him, bade him good-night, and retired to my cabin. He’d have kept me yarning and giving me good advice until the small hours of the morning if I’d given him any encouragement. Mr. Blast was a dear soul, and I loved him greatly. But, by George, he could talk when the mood was on him!

Skipping at a quarter-past six. The simple life, indeed!

How the blazes could I hope to lead the simple life for the next two days, with all this fresh complication on my hands?

What with Irina, the Dubassoffs, and the detestable Mr. Chung, I was in it properly—right up to the neck.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XIX

SATURDAY was another busy day so far as I was concerned.

As the skipper was going shooting with some friends of his I buttonholed him early, while he was still having his breakfast. He was urbanity itself, listening with patience to all I had to tell him.

"God knows why you want to mix yourself up with these confounded Russians!" he grunted when I had finished. "They're born intriguers. How d'you know this Dubassoff isn't a revolutionary of some sort?"

"I don't, sir, except that I trust him."

"I'd as soon trust a crocodile," he sniffed dubiously. "And I think you're a prize idiot to lend him your money. You've no security. You'll never see it back."

"I think I will, sir," I felt bound to say.

"Humph! You're too soft-hearted.—Anyhow," he added, wrinkling his brow and gazing reflectively at the ceiling, "now you've got mixed up in the business I suppose I'd better do what I can. But let's get to the root of the matter. I've heard all about this Chung, and he's a nasty bit o' work, from all accounts. Tell me some more about the young woman. Is she all that she should be?"

"Of course, sir!"

"Pretty and fascinating, I suppose?" he queried, with the ghost of a smile lurking round the corners of his mouth.

I told him all I knew of Irina. I could see very well that he regarded me as an amiable, susceptible sort of fool.

"Well," he said when I had finished. "I'm not out for letting Europeans be bullied and harried by these blasted Chinese. However much I distrust these White Russians, I'm sorry for 'em, poor devils!—I'll tell you what I'll do, Doctor. I'm going up to the Consulate at half-past nine, and I'll have a word with the old boy. You'd better come along too."

I thanked him.

"And for mercy's sake be tactful!" he went on to warn me. "Russians aren't British subjects, remember. We've no *right* to do anything, and I'll be shot in little pieces before I mix myself up in an international imbroglio, however ravishing the young woman may be."

I quite understood that, and told him so.

We went on to talk of the Dubassoff's embarkation in the *Yentai*, which to my mind was the most risky part of the whole business, the time at which Chung was most likely to pounce.

Rather to my surprise the skipper knew all about the *Yentai*. She was a British ship, he pointed out, and was due in the next morning, Sunday, and was coming to the berth astern of the *Peony*. Moreover, he knew the *Yentai's* master, Captain Sanders, and would go over and have a yarn with him. Sanders might be able to suggest some way of getting the Dubassoffs on board earlier than the other passengers, say on Sunday night. That would lessen the risk.

I thanked him and withdrew, profoundly grateful. Commander Maddick was behaving like a perfect brick. I had hardly dared to hope for his wholehearted co-operation.

The Consul, when we saw him, was inclined to pooh-pooh the whole business, and said that nobody could legally stop the Dubassoffs from leaving provided their identification papers and so forth were properly in order. Officially, of course, he could do nothing, for it was none of his business. Unofficially, there were a few strings he might pull to circumvent any attempt at abducting Irina. He knew Chung pretty well, and referred to him as "that damned nuisance." The Japanese authorities, it seemed, were interested in his goings-on, and he, the Consul, would ring up some friend of his and put him wise. The Japanese didn't stand any nonsense in *their* settlement, he added cryptically.

So on the whole the Consul was decidedly helpful, and so was the chief of police, to whom he sent me with a note. Things were beginning to look up. Chung, for all his wealth and influence, was not quite so omnipotent as Dubassoff imagined.

Almost the skipper's last words to me were that he would be away until late in the evening, and that I might borrow his cabin. I didn't like the idea of the Dubassoffs being cooped up in their hotel all day, and still less did I fancy Irina venturing out alone. There was always the chance that Chung might make himself obnoxious.

So as soon as I had seen my few invalids in the sick bay I went up to the hotel in uniform and brought the Dubassoffs and Irina back to the *Peony*. They were pleased enough to come, poor souls, and nothing more had happened since the night before.

They had lunch, tea, and dinner on board that day, filling in the intervals by playing the skipper's pianola and gramophone, while Madame Dubassoff and Irina took turns at

running up a door curtain and a pair of scuttle curtains for my cabin on a sewing-machine borrowed from one of the seamen. Made of some beautiful old embroidered Russian stuff that was much too costly and decorative for the purpose to which it was being put, it was their gift to me. The sub, pretending to help Irina with her machining, was jealous when he realised what she was doing. So was Channing. They didn't see why I should be the favoured one, for naturally I hadn't let on about the money.

It was quite like a family gathering. Number One, the navigator, the sub, Mr. Blast, and Mr. Smale—the two latter with some diffidence—all drifted in and out of the cabin as the spirit moved them. The pilot was anxious to air his foreign languages, while Mr. Smale insisted upon taking Irina for a tour of his engine-room and stokeholds, though they hardly understood a word of what the other was saying. Dubassoff and I went with them.

Mr. Smale acted the part of host very nicely, helping Irina down the steep iron ladders in the most approved way, and giving her copious explanations as to how everything functioned.

"Now those things, Miss Irina," he would say, pointing them out, "those are the cylinders. The steam comes in through that pipe from the boilers when we open the throttle, and by means of a device I needn't explain, exerts its pressure on the top and bottom of the piston in turn, and moves it up and down. D'you understand?"

"Yes, yes," said Irina in her husky voice, smiling very sweetly, though she really hadn't grasped a word of what he was telling her.

“Good!” he continued. “The piston moves up and down, transmitting movement to the piston-rod and connecting-rod. The bottom of the connecting-rod is fastened to the crank, you’ll understand, and it’s the crank that imparts the rotary motion to the propeller-shaft. The shaft itself is ...” etcetera, and so forth.

He explained the engines, the pumps, the boilers, and bunkers, and anything else he could think of. Dubassoff and I deserted them after a quarter of an hour, and when Irina and Mr. Smale came up on deck again about forty minutes later, the gunner, vaguely jealous, suggested that she should see his guns and storerooms. This proposal was instantly vetoed by Cleeve, who wanted Irina to teach him some new-fangled dance or other.

Then Channing did his conjuring tricks and gave his impersonation of George Robey, Nellie Wallace, and other artistes. These latter always brought down the house at our ship’s concerts; but on this occasion they fell rather flat. Neither Dubassoff, his wife, nor Irina understood his witticisms. They laughed politely; but I noticed them glancing at each other as though they thought Number One was a little soft in the head. He was a bit mad sometimes.

“I tink he ver’ fonney man,” said Irina in her limited English, when Channing finally subsided. “Every day he make laugh the sailors, I tink.”

I did my best to explain that Number One was not our official buffoon, but the executive officer of the ship. She did not seem to be able to grasp that he could play the fool at one moment, and be a strict disciplinarian the next.

What with one thing and another the day passed very quickly, until, soon after ten in the evening, Cleeve and I

escorted our guests back to their hotel. Nothing had happened during their absence. Chung seemed to be lying low. After what he had said the night before, however, I couldn't believe he had piped down altogether and given up all idea of Irina. Dubassoff and I were still apprehensive, and should never be quite easy in our minds until he and the two women had finally shaken the dust of Newchwang from off their feet and were safely at sea.

Came Sunday morning.

The *Yentai* arrived early and secured to the jetty astern of us. Boarded at once by gangs of half-naked, yelling coolies, she at once began to work cargo.

Maddick kept his promise. As soon as he had finished breakfast, he took me across to see Captain Sanders, the *Yentai's* skipper. He received us with iced lager or coffee, which ever we preferred. We chose the latter. Coming to the real point of our visit, he said he wasn't really authorised to embark any of his passengers before the scheduled time on Monday morning. However, as Maddick was a personal friend of his, he wouldn't mind winking the other eye if the Dubassoffs arrived on Sunday evening. He would see that everything was ready for them. When I asked him if the Chinese police were likely to interfere with incoming passengers, he seemed rather amused.

"They can't interfere with 'em if their papers are in order and they've paid their passage money," he said.

"But could they arrest them on the wharf?" I went on to enquire.

"We don't allow Chinese police on the Company's wharf," he replied, scratching his grizzled head. "If any one had to be arrested they'd have to get the settlement police to do it, and I

expect that'd have to be authorised by the Consul or some one. I'm not very well up in these legal conundrums, Doctor; but what I've said sounds right, doesn't it, Captain?"

Commander Maddick agreed.

We had our usual Sunday morning 'Divisions' at nine-thirty, when all hands and the cook fell in in their clean whites and were inspected by the captain. Two men with enormous quiffs in front were ordered to get their hair cut in a proper seaman-like fashion, while another with an incipient boil on the back of his neck was told to present himself at the sick-bay for treatment.

As usual, the skipper retired to his cabin after 'Divisions' to sign the usual weekly returns and documents. Paperwork in the Navy has always baffled me. The number of forms, returns, and documents that have to be made out, signed, and rendered weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annually exceed computation. I cannot conceive who reads them when they have been sent in. When it amounts to seven or eight signatures being required on one document before a man can be supplied with a set of artificial teeth at Government expense, it is time somebody started a bonfire.

At eleven o'clock we had church on the quarter-deck, the service being taken by an English padre the skipper had made friends with ashore. The padre's wife, the Consul and his wife, an Englishman from the Chinese Maritime Customs with his wife and daughter were present also. Maddick was giving a farewell luncheon party afterwards, which Number One and the pilot had also been summoned to attend.

In spite of the awnings and side-curtains, church was overpoweringly hot. There was a complete absence of breeze, and the stench from the muddy river was even more ghastly

than usual. Our hymns and responses, moreover, were drowned by the clatter of cranes and winches, and the infernal caterwauling of the coolies from the *Yentai* close astern. The parson literally had to shout to make his sermon heard. However, I’ve no doubt that Maddick revived him with one of those potent Bacardi cocktails of his—if the reverend gentleman wasn’t a teetotaller, that is.

I had sent up a message to Dubassoff telling him it would be all right for him and his party to embark in the *Yentai* that evening. He had come on board for a few minutes to see me, and we had arranged that Cleeve and myself should go up to their hotel after dinner and escort them to the ship.

Then he rather horrified me by saying that they had arranged to pay a round of farewell visits during the afternoon. They had various Russian friends, refugees like themselves, who would never forgive them if they went off without a word.

The idea struck me as foolish. I should have preferred him to have kept the news of his departure as secret as possible, not to have broadcast it all over the place. It still lurked in my mind that Chung was up to some devilment or other, and the more they showed themselves abroad, the more risk they ran. Irina might even be abducted.

But Dubassoff, after being in the depths of despair, had now jumped to the opposite extreme. Full of optimism, he had persuaded himself that nothing could possibly go wrong now. He would be very careful where he went, he said, and would take no risks. But he *must* see his beloved friends.

It was more than I could do to persuade him that it would have been wiser to lie ‘doggo,’ so I gave it up as hopeless. After all, it was no business of mine.

After lunch, as I couldn't sleep in a long chair on deck because of the skipper's luncheon-party, I retired to my stuffy little cabin below. Here I removed most of my clothes, switched on the electric fan, and stretched myself out on my bunk for my usual Sunday afternoon caulk, an institution which seems to be as much honoured in the Navy as hot roast beef and Yorkshire pudding is for Sunday lunch ashore in middle-class England. In spite of the almost tropical heat and the infernal trumpeting of the mosquitoes, I was very soon asleep.

That same evening after supper Ronny Cleeve and myself went up to the Dubassoffs' hotel to escort them on board the *Yentai*, more from politeness than anything else. However, I still felt rather suspicious of Chung, and as we were to be ashore after dark and I had visions of being knifed or slugged on the head, I took the precaution of slipping my loaded automatic into my pocket before I left the *Peony*. I don't know what the pains and penalties may be for carrying firearms in a place like Newchwang; but as after events proved, it was as well I took my little weapon.

Dubassoff, his wife, and Irina had paid a long round of farewell visits during the afternoon. Nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened, and they had seen no sight of Chung, whereat I felt vastly relieved.

Dubassoff, wildly excited and talkative, looked to me as if he had been celebrating his departure. Madame Dubassoff, tired and overcome by the heat, seemed nervy and tearful and rather loath to go now that the moment had come. Irina, her face flushed and her dark eyes sparkling, was desperately anxious to be on the move. She jumped and fidgeted about like a cat on a hot pavement, and once or twice put her arm

through mine and gave it a little squeeze of gratitude. I could almost hear her purring.

Dubassoff, with whom I was distinctly annoyed, insisted on ordering a final bottle of champagne with which we all solemnly drank each others' healths. It was paid for with my money, no doubt, but that didn't worry me so much as the delay. We must have wasted at least twenty minutes over that precious bottle of 'fizz,' and all the time I was on tenterhooks. There was a lurking suspicion at the back of my mind that Chung was waiting to pounce, and that, by dallying, we were playing into his hands.

Dubassoff had ordered a car for a quarter-past nine. However, time is as nothing to Russians and Spaniards, and it was not until twenty minutes to ten that we finally made a move to the hotel door. The Dubassoffs' luggage, such as it was, had been sent on to the *Yentai* beforehand. They had nothing with them but a small patent-leather suit-case and hat-box of Irina's, so all that remained was for us to take our places and to be off.

But then there came another delay, for Dubassoff and the chauffeur at once entered into a heated discussion in high-pitched Chinese. The chauffeur was angrily objecting to something. What in hades could be biting them now, I thought to myself.

"He say he was only ordered for three passengers and five have come," Dubassoff translated.

"Tell him not to be such a fool!" I retorted. "There's heaps of room for the lot of us. I'll pay extra if that's what's worrying him."

The car was a good-sized American saloon with a spare seat beside the driver, ample room on the back seat for three

people if they ‘sat familiar,’ and a couple of folding-up seats besides. The Chinese chauffeur’s objection to five passengers was merely fatuous!

But, when Dubassoff translated, the chauffeur shook his head vehemently and broke into another torrent of Chinese. The gist of it was that he had been chartered for three people, and three was all he intended to take.

“He only have licence for three passengers,” the Russian explained, when they had ceased to scream at each other in the local vernacular.

“That’s all bunk!” I exclaimed, beginning to lose my temper; “there’s room for at least five people besides the driver!”

“That’s what he say,” Dubassoff replied, with the inevitable shrug of his shoulders. “If he take more than three people he lose his licence.”

“Hell!” I exploded. “Let’s get another car!”

But Dubassoff shook his head. Cars were rare in Newchwang, apparently, and another could not be obtained at this time of night. He had only got this one with difficulty.

Then the chauffeur’s stupid obstinacy began to strike me as suspicious. If his car had seats for five passengers, why should it be licensed for only three?

There was something fishy about the whole business. Every day I had been ashore I had seen cars filled to bursting with Chinese, eight or more of them crammed tight into one antiquated Ford with a dot-and-carry-one engine, a body long past redemption, and the whole outside of the rackety machine festooned with parcels, bundles, bamboo baskets, household belongings, hen-coops, and even live pigs tied on with rope and string. And here was this fellow with a large car

objecting to carrying five people with nothing to speak of in the way of luggage!

One thing I had been quite determined upon all along was that I wasn't going to allow the Dubassoffs and Irina alone in any car with the chauffeur. I intended to sit alongside the driver, where I could take a hand in the proceedings if things started to go wrong. I wasn't trusting any Chinaman. I had visions of the whole party being driven off at full speed into the country into the clutches of the detestable Mr. Chung.

My suspicions being definitely aroused, it would have been as well, perhaps, if we had paid off the car then and there and walked to the *Yentai*. It wasn't really far, and the sub and myself could easily have carried Irina's suit-case and hat-box. But I had a certain amount of pride. I wasn't going to let any confounded Chinaman see that I was frightened of him. Moreover, I was really curious to see what would happen. Maybe there was nothing in my idea at all.

So eventually we arranged that Dubassoff and Cleeve should walk to the *Yentai*, while Madame Dubassoff and Irina came with me in the car. I bundled them in at the back, and myself climbed into the spare seat alongside the chauffeur's.

There was some further discussion over that, for the Chinaman wanted me at the back with the others and tried his damnedest to make me go there. But I insisted, and after shoving a dollar into the fellow's hand he rather surlily gave way. Climbing into the seat beside mine, he started his engine and let in his clutch. We rolled off.

For five hundred yards or so the car travelled the usual way along the road leading to the wharves where the *Yentai* and *Peony* lay alongside. We should have gone on for nearly three-quarters of a mile before turning right. But suddenly I

realised the chauffeur was slowing up to take a turning on our left, *away from the river*.

Some chickery-pokery was going on! The fellow was taking us into a maze of mean streets where presently we might find ourselves held up.

I shouted in English, telling the man to drive straight on. Grunting something in reply, he turned the wheel to the left, and the car began to slow up to take the corner. At the same moment Irina shouted out in her broken English that we were not going the right way. She seemed genuinely frightened.

There was no time to do much. Whipping out my pistol with my right hand I jammed its muzzle into the chauffeur's head, at the same time stretching out my left and turning off the ignition switch, which I had located beforehand. In the feeble glow of the light on the dashboard I saw the Chinaman's look of startled astonishment as he looked in my direction. He seemed to realise at once that I held a pistol, and if ever sheer fright was registered in a man's eyes it was in his. The car came to a standstill, assisted by me with the hand-brake, which was between the two front seats, not on the driver's right.

What should we do next?

I couldn't very well hand the chauffeur over to the police, even if I could find a policeman. It would mean endless explanations and more delay, and besides, with what could I charge the fellow?

But the chauffeur settled it for me. Opening his door, he was out in the road with the agility of a jack-rabbit, and before I could count two had started to run up the dark, narrow road up which the car was pointing. When I say he ran, I mean he tore as though the devil were after him. In the

white glare of the headlights I could see his arms and legs working. Then his cap fell off and he didn't stop to pick it up. Probably he expected a bullet or two to whizz after him. It was really rather amusing.

But most certainly that chauffeur had a guilty conscience. There was now no doubt in my mind that he was in Chung's pay. Otherwise, why had he deliberately turned *left* when he should have gone straight on for a bit and then turned *right*?

I wasn't going to trust myself driving that car on to the *Yentai*, added to which they might have trumped up a charge that I had tried to steal it if I had done so. Dubassoff and Cleeve, however, on their way to the ship, were not more than a few hundred yards behind us on the main road out of which we had turned, so skipping out of my seat, I bundled the startled women out of the back, took Irina's belongings, and set out to join them.

We found them without trouble, and at ten minutes past ten, or thereabouts, the whole party arrived on board the *Yentai* without further incident. When I say I was supremely thankful to see the three of them safe in a British ship under the Red Ensign, with burly old Captain Sanders as their chaperon, I don't in the least exaggerate. However much I liked Irina, looking after Dubassoff and his wife was too exhausting to be pleasant.

As for Mr. Chung, I would cheerfully have wrung his yellow neck for landing me in all those complications!

We exchanged addresses with the Dubassoffs, received their further protestations of gratitude and eternal friendship, and arranged to say our last farewells on the jetty at seven-thirty next morning, the *Peony* being due to sail at eight and the *Yentai* half-an-hour later.

Then, in the first-class smoking-room, with a Chinese steward lurking in the background, Irina, who had suddenly become tearful, flung her arms round my neck, kissed me ardently on the lips, and rubbed her wet little face against mine.

Poor little dear! I rather liked being kissed by her, and I think I kissed her in return. All the same, it was rather embarrassing, particularly as she didn't volunteer to embrace young Cleeve, who looked on rather jealously. I could imagine the capital he might make out of it if he described the incident in the *Peony's* wardroom. I'd never hear the end of it, and already he had pulled my leg about my attachment for Irina. It was quite useless to tell him I wasn't in love with her—that I merely liked her and was sorry for her. Nevertheless, she *was* attractive, though a perfect little termagant when angry. I'd once seen her lose her temper with Dubassoff about something or other which happened at the restaurant. With her eyes flashing and her whole little body tense and quivering, she spat and snarled like a hell-cat, and Dubassoff wilted away. Ten minutes later, when she had recovered, she was rubbing herself against him like a remorseful kitten, trying to make up for her outburst. Whoever married her would have a pretty thin time unless he did the 'cave-man' business from the very beginning.

At eleven o'clock, after a final whisky and soda, Cleeve and I left the *Yentai* and walked back to the *Peony*. We turned in at once.

It was at ten minutes to seven next morning, just after my servant had put my early morning tea and the Glauber salts by the side of my bunk, that the quartermaster of the morning watch inserted his head in through the doorway of my cabin.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said; "there's that Russian gentleman up topsides enquiring for you."

Damn Dubassoff! We had arranged to meet on the jetty at half-past seven. Why in heck should he come worrying me now?

"What does he want?" I asked.

"He didn't say, sir. He wanted to see you, he said. He looked a bit startled like, hardly able to get his words out so that I could understand 'im."

"Please send him down here," I said, hurriedly swigging down my tea, swinging my legs out of the bunk, dropping to the floor, and arraying myself in my dressing-gown.

Dubassoff, when he appeared, certainly looked 'a bit startled like.' His face was distraught, agonised. It was with difficulty that he spoke at all.

"Irina!" he managed to get out. "She has gone!"

"Gone?" I exclaimed. "Where?"

"I do not know," he replied, with a gesture of despair. "A short time ago my wife goes to Irina's cabin. Irina is not there. Instead, she find this." He thrust a letter into my hand.

I withdrew the sheet of notepaper from its envelope, which was addressed to Dubassoff.

But what was written on the paper was written in Russian. I couldn't make head or tail of it, so handed it back.

"I can't read this. What does she say?"

Dubassoff gave me the gist of it.

"She write we must not trouble about her," he told me. "She go somewhere quite safe, and will join us soon at Hong-Kong. We must not be unhappy because of her. She is what you call all right."

"Gosh!" I ejaculated. "What's it mean, for the love of Mike?"

"I do not know."

"Is it her handwriting?"

"Yes," he said.

"D'you think Chung made her write it and then carried her off?" I asked, sick at heart.

"I do not know. Why does she say she join us at Hong-Kong soon?"

It was more than I could tell him.

The hour or so before we sailed was pretty hectic, what with Dubassoff and his wife running about questioning every one as to whether they had seen a girl leave the *Yentai*, or a suspicious-looking Chinaman come on board. Considering the whole place was swarming with Chinese, the latter interrogation was rather futile. Captain Sanders was roped in to help. He questioned the police on the jetty and the men who had been on watch in his ship, without any result. They even searched the *Yentai* in the short time available. The only facts they discovered were that Irina's bunk had been slept in, and that the small black suit-case I had carried the night before was missing.

Commander Maddick, who had been informed of what had happened, advised me to tell Dubassoff to communicate with the chief of police; but on no account to miss his own passage in the *Yentai*. Irina, he seemed to think, had not been abducted by Chung. He felt confident that she was off on some wild-cat scheme of her own.

"I'll bet you she'll eventually turn up in Hong-Kong as she says," he said. "And if you take my tip, Doctor," he concluded rather severely, "you'll regard this as a lesson *not* to go

befriending Russians. They’re not to be trusted, particularly the women.”

I left him, rather sick and sorry for myself, and punctually at eight o’clock, with the pilot on board, the *Peony* cast off her wires and started to steam downstream.

Irina was still missing.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XX

BY ten-thirty on that Monday morning we were clear of the smelly Liao River on our way south towards the Liau-ti-shan Promontory. We were bound to Chinnampo, a Japanese port on the west coast of Korea, where we were due to arrive some time on the Wednesday morning. It was a distance of about 375 miles, and as there was ample time we were jogging along at a leisurely crawl of eight knots. We were to stay at Chinnampo for three days, after which we were to return to Wei-Hai-Wei.

It was a hot, windless day with a brazen sun in a cloudless sky, and a sea like a sheet of polished metal. But after the smells and stagnant air up the river it was good to be at sea again, to feel the old ship gently pitching to the slight southerly swell, and to enjoy the gentle breeze caused by her movement. We felt revivified, rejuvenated, though on my own account I couldn't banish Irina from my thoughts.

What had become of her? Had she been abducted by Chung and carried off into the interior, or was she off on some scapegrace racket of her own? I knew she was a wilful little devil, and it was quite on the cards that she had saved money of her own and had elected to cut herself adrift from the Dubassoffs. I tried to persuade myself that that note of hers had not been written under compulsion, and that her statement that she would join the Dubassoffs at Hong-Kong was perfectly genuine. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling anxious as to what might have happened.

We rounded Liau-ti-shan—or the 'Old Iron Mountain,' as the Chinese call it—at about seven-thirty on the Tuesday morning. It stands practically at the extreme end of the Kwang-Tung Peninsula, at the south-western corner of the circle of hills surrounding Port Arthur, and being fifteen hundred feet high forms the most prominent feature of a barren and desolate-looking coast-line. The rugged slopes of the mountain, destitute of all vegetation, formed rather an impressive picture in the light of the morning sun. It could not be called beautiful, as the foreground of mud-coloured sea had insufficient life to show off the dull greys and purples of the coast it encircled.

All the same, I could not help looking at it with a feeling akin to awe. The great peak, and the hills beyond, overlooked the harbour of Port Arthur, which had been given this name by Admiral Seymour when a British fleet concentrated in the neighbourhood in 1860 during one of our many wars with China. (It was christened, in point of fact, after Lieutenant Arthur, of H.M.S. *Algerine*, who had spent some time surveying it for use as a fleet anchorage.)

In 1894, during the Chino-Japanese War, Port Arthur was captured by the Japanese. Its permanent occupation by Japan having been objected to by Russia, France, and Germany, it was returned to China, only to be acquired by Russia in 1898 by subtle diplomacy. The Russo-Japanese War started six years later, and on 2nd January 1905, Port Arthur, which by this time had been converted into a supposedly 'impregnable' fortress, and sheltered various ships of the Russian Pacific Fleet, was again captured by the Japanese after a terrific siege lasting about seven months and some of the bloodiest fighting on record. Yes, the hoary-headed 'Old Iron Mountain' had seen more fighting than I am ever likely to.

I remember that Tuesday morning well, for it was at breakfast in the wardroom that the first lieutenant told me that our energetic little skipper intended making his fortnightly inspection of the storerooms, magazines, and so forth at ten-thirty. It was one of my jobs to accompany him, for, as medical officer, I was the *ex officio* tracer of strange smells and honorary eradicator of cockroaches, rats, and other vermin. It was a job I did not altogether care for. Maddick was very particular about the storerooms and spaces below decks. He had a nose for smells like a foxhound, and an eye for dirt like a 'blinkin' 'awk,' as our chief boatswain's mate expressed it. I suppose it was all part and parcel of his *penchant* for getting to the root of things. Anyhow, judging from the ghastly odour I had noticed emanating from the potato-locker the day before, I foresaw trouble for some one. I had told the first lieutenant about it, as a matter of fact, whereupon Channing asked me if I expected the potato-locker to smell like a lady's boudoir. I replied that I did not; but that our potato-locker smelt as if a large fish had died inside it.

Punctually at ten-thirty the procession started, with Commander Maddick in front, Number One astern of him, then myself with a notebook, the Master-at-Arms with an electric torch and a lantern in case the torch went wrong, and the skipper's messenger in the rear.

The potato-locker was on the upper deck, and, as I expected, the skipper made a bee-line towards it. The man responsible got it properly in the neck. Every blessed potato, and there must have been some thousands of them, was to be removed and inspected, after which the locker was to be scrubbed out with disinfectant. In future it was to be inspected daily. How could the ship's company be decently fed if the potato-locker was an abomination? If the man responsible

didn’t watch it, he’d have every one in the ship down with plague, beri-beri, or some other loathsome disease! The skipper was thoroughly in his element—enjoying himself hugely.

Nothing much else happened until we came to the canteen store, where Ah Foo, the canteen manager, was standing the rounds as usual.

“Place looking very neat,” said the skipper approvingly, glancing round at the tins of sardines, fruit, jams, biscuits, and goodness knows what neatly ranged on the shelves.

Ah Foo beamed all over his fat face.

“What’s that?” the captain suddenly demanded, cocking his eagle eye at one of the upper shelves.

I followed the direction of his gaze. He was looking at a small black patent-leather suit-case pushed neatly out of sight. It was a woman’s suit-case, an article strangely out of place in one of His Majesty’s ships.

“That b’long you, Ah Foo?” Channing asked suspiciously.

I saw the Chinaman’s eyelids flicker.

“No, sah. Dat b’long fliend. I makee take Wei-Hai-Wei for fliend, you savvy.”

“Friend!” grunted the skipper. “What friend?”

“He b’long all same fliend,” Ah Foo started to explain. “All same my wife piecee uncle. He b’long lich man. Live sometime Newchwang, sometime Wei-Hai-Wei, sometime Hong-Kong. Three day ago he say....”

A child could have seen that he was lying. Ah Foo was a bad dissembler.

“Let’s have a look at it!” the captain broke in. “Lift it down, some one.”

“No can do!” Ah Foo howled. “Dat no b’long me!”

But it was no use. The Master-at-Arms pushed him roughly aside, reached up for the suit-case, and placed it on the deck at the captain’s feet.

“Shall I open it, sir?” he asked.

By this time the skipper and Channing had made up their minds that Ah Foo was smuggling opium, or something of the sort. But looking at that suit-case I suddenly felt rather sick. If it wasn’t Irina’s I was a Dutchman!

“Shall I open it, sir?” the M.A.A. asked again.

Maddick nodded.

The two little snaps were nicked back and the lid was opened. Before I realised what had happened I saw the Master-at-Arms holding up a pair of diminutive female knickers in jade-green silk—very natty.

I felt myself blushing. I heard Channing titter behind me.

“Good God!” the skipper exclaimed, aghast at the sight. “What else?”

There was a good deal else. A black silk frock that I recognised as Irina’s; an exiguous, intimate garment in pink I’d never seen before; a whole selection of other silken underwear in mauve and pink and yellow; more thin frocks; some stockings; two pairs of shoes; a box of powder; hairbrushes; a manicure set; and one of those waterproof bags containing a sponge, toothbrush, and a whole lot of little bottles. It’s wonderful the amount of stuff a woman can pack into a suit-case measuring about 24 inches by 12 by 12.

Even with my eyes shut I should have known those garments as Irina’s. The scent she used was unmistakable. It

was nice scent. But what in the name of goodness was Irina's suit-case doing in the canteen of the *Peony*?

"Are you a damned thief, Ah Foo?" Maddick demanded angrily. "Where did you steal these?"

"I no b'long teef, cap'ten, sah!" the Chinaman wailed, clasping and unclasping his fingers with a look of utter misery on his yellow face. "I b'long honest man!"

"Then your wife's uncle wears the most peculiar clothes I've ever seen!" the captain snorted. "Those things belong to a woman, a European woman by the look of them!" He suddenly bent down and felt the sponge and the toothbrush in turn. "I thought so!" he added grimly. "They've both been used recently!—Have you been smuggling some one on board, you wicked old rascal?"

I started. Irina on board!

Ah Foo squirmed, and looked anywhere but at his inquisitor.

"I'm going to have the truth!" the skipper continued sternly. "Have you smuggled a woman on board, you damned old reprobate?"

I saw a twinkle in his eye as he spoke. The quivering of his mouth also rather gave him away. While inwardly bursting with laughter, he was doing his utmost to be severe. After all, concealing a woman on board of His Majesty's ships at sea was rather a serious crime in the naval calendar.

"I no savvy he b'long woman!" Ah Foo explained shrilly. "I tink he all same boy, all same son my fliend Newchwang. Lesterday I find he b'long woman.—Aie yah! I nearly makee die!" He rolled his eyes and cast them up towards the ceiling with a comical expression of despair.

So Irina was on board!

“Does any one else know anything of this?” Maddick demanded, gazing in turn at Channing and the Master-at-Arms.

“No, sir,” they both answered.

“Then how the blazes did this woman come on board without some one knowing?”

Number One explained that we had a good many Chinese stewards and cooks already in the ship, also a few ‘cheesis,’ or small boys, for work in the captain’s and wardroom pantries and the canteen. One small Chinese boy more or less would not be noticed, for they were not borne on the ship’s books. Moreover, all Chinamen looked very alike.

The skipper grunted and turned to me.

“D’you know anything about this, Doctor?” he asked severely. “This—er—lady must be your Russian friend who was missing when we sailed yesterday morning.”

I was able to tell him that I knew nothing whatever about it. He believed me, thank goodness; but how lucky it was that he had heard of Irina’s disappearance before we sailed, had seen all the fuss and bother, and had even talked to me about it.

“First Lieutenant,” he ordered, his face still set and solemn. “That suit-case is to be sent up to my after-cabin now. Its owner is to be produced as well. D’you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Channing.

“And you, Doctor, had better come with me,” Maddick continued. “I refuse to interview any female alone.”

“That damned old villain, Ah Foo!” he said, permitting himself to relapse into a grin of amusement as soon as we were safely out of sight in his cabin. “I suppose he was got at, bribed!”

"Obviously, sir," I agreed.

"D'you think he really didn't know she was a woman?"

"I don't know, sir," I said. "But I do hope you don't think I'm in any way responsible for her being here?"

"No. I don't think that for a moment. But if you hadn't been foolish enough to befriend her and that Russian and his wife, I'm damn certain it would never have occurred to the girl to stow herself away on board this ship."

"But I didn't suggest she should come on board, sir!" I objected.

"No. I know that. But why the blazes does she want to come here at all? What's she got to gain by it?—It'll mean a deuce of a lot of bother and explanation. I'll have to report it to the Commander-in-Chief by wireless, and if he cuts up rusty there'll be hell to pay, dammit!—In the meanwhile, what are we going to do with the girl? She can't go on living in the canteen, or wherever it was she stowed herself, poor little devil! I suppose she'd better have her bed made down in this after-cabin of mine. I'll sleep in my sea-cabin under the bridge."

"I was hoping you'd suggest that, sir," I put in.

The skipper grunted.

"As we haven't a spare cabin it's all we can do," he answered. "But you'll have to entertain her, Doctor."

"I'll see to that, sir."

"And for the Lord's sake keep her out of sight in harbour!" he added, obviously alarmed at the prospect. "What about my reputation if some one comes on board to call, as they inevitably will at Chinnampo, and finds a ravishing Russian

in my cabin? Lord, the Japanese will think I'm in the habit of travelling round with a harem!"

I couldn't help smiling at the idea of our staid and respectable little commanding officer in such an unsavoury predicament. And what would Mrs. Maddick say if she heard of it? I glanced furtively at her photograph on the writing-table. She was an austere-looking lady with few tender moments, I should imagine.

"Don't laugh!" he growled. "I can't see anything funny in...."

He broke off as a knock came on the door.

"Come in!"

Channing appeared. He was trying hard to keep a straight face.

"I've brought the lady, sir."

"Then bring her in.—I shan't need you, First Lieutenant."

Number One retired, rather disappointed. The tell-tale suit-case was handed in by a messenger and deposited by the door. Irina followed; but a very different Irina to the girl I had last seen two evenings before.

She was wearing the short white drill jacket and trousers of native cut similar to those worn by our Chinese stewards as a sort of undress uniform. Her black hair was oiled and carefully plastered back. She had done something to her eyes to give them an Oriental appearance, and her face, either through the absence of cosmetics or because she had stained it, had the correct yellowish tinge. Looking at her casually, I would never have taken her for anything but a rather pretty-looking Chinese boy of sixteen.

She halted nervously by the doorway, twiddling her fingers and looking anxiously at Maddick. Then, catching my eye, she gave me a wistful little smile.

Poor little thing! I felt mightily sorry for her. She knew she'd done something she shouldn't.

But the skipper, as I knew he would, behaved as a perfect gentleman. Going across the cabin, he bowed, shook hands, and said he was glad to see her, almost as though he were welcoming a cherished guest.

"I'm afraid I don't know your name," he said, looking at her.

"My name Ereena," she replied, smiling and rather more sure of herself.

She didn't mention her surname, and at that time I couldn't supply it. If I had ever known it I'd forgotten it. To me she'd always been Irina.

I shook hands after Maddick, and noticed that she clung to me for a moment, rather as if she needed my protection. I gave her hand a little squeeze, just to let her see I understood.

"The question is, what are we going to do with you?" the skipper said.

"What you say?" she queried, looking up and wrinkling her forehead.

"Try her in French, sir," I suggested.

Maddick gabbled something I couldn't quite understand and picked up the suit-case. Irina replied cheerfully, and he led her across the cabin to his little sleeping-cabin at the fore-end of it. It had a bathroom attached. Ushering her inside, he retired after a few words and closed the door behind him.

“I’ve told her to get into her proper rig,” he said. “I can’t bear to see her dressed up like a Chinaman. She’ll feel more at home in a skirt.—D’you think she’d like a cocktail, or is it too early?” he went on to enquire.

It was barely twenty minutes past eleven. The sun was not over the foreyard; but I told him I thought a cocktail an excellent prescription, a cocktail with a cherry in it.

“And what about food? Lord knows what she’s had to eat lately.”

Without waiting for an answer he rang the bell for his steward and ordered cocktails and sandwiches—*pâté de foie gras* sandwiches.

Ye gods and little fishes!

Things were progressing better than I expected. I had been inclined to regard Maddick as a hard-hearted little man. I had expected him to treat Irina not perhaps really unkindly, but rather as a stern parent chiding an erring daughter. But here he was doing his best to put her at her ease, to make her feel she was a welcome and honoured guest instead of the confounded little nuisance she really was.

The sandwiches and cocktails arrived, and a few minutes later Irina came out of the sleeping-cabin.

Wearing a white silk frock, she was once more her normal self, thank Heaven! Her eyes were round again, instead of mere elongated slits. Her face had lost its yellowish tinge, and she had used powder and lipstick. She had fluffed out her hair. Even in full daylight she was undeniably attractive.

“Pour vous,” the skipper said, handing her the tray with the cocktails.

“Pour moi? Mais merci!” she replied, laughing as she took the glass. “A votre santé, mon capitaine! A toi, Monsieur le

Médecin!” bowing to us in turn and giving me an impertinent wink.

I frowned at her, not to damp her good spirits, but just to let her see that I didn’t at all approve of her goings-on. After all, she still had to explain her presence on board, and as far as I could see it would need a deal of explanation.

The skipper gave her a chair and handed her the sandwiches, which she gobbled like a hungry little cat, talking in French and gesticulating between mouthfuls, occasionally gurgling with laughter. Maddick replied. Though I couldn’t quite follow everything they said, I gathered enough to understand what had happened.

She had arranged the whole business through a friendly Chinese shopkeeper at Newchwang, a shopkeeper who knew Ah Foo, our canteen manager. For the sum of twenty dollars Ah Foo had consented to smuggle her on board as his ‘makee learn’ canteen assistant.

“The damned old villain!” the skipper murmured, looking at me. “I’ll keelhaul the ugly blighter!”

The disguise was quite easy, she went on to explain, and having spent most of her life in the East she could speak Chinese as well as her own native Russian.

How had she managed to slip out of the *Yentai*? That was perfectly simple. She had changed into her Chinese clothes after Cleeve and I had left the ship and the Dubassoffs had retired to bed, and had crept out of her cabin as soon as the coast was clear. Coolies were still busy about the cargo. It had not been difficult to get ashore, to meet Ah Foo at a quarter to midnight as arranged, and then to go on board the *Peony* with him. Nobody said them nay.

"The damned old scoundrel!" Maddick muttered again, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"But *why* did you want to come to my ship?" he asked her in French.

"Because I wanted to leave Newchwang."

"But why didn't you go in the *Yentai* with your friends?"

"Because I wanted to go in *this* ship," she replied, after a moment's hesitation.

The skipper sighed and looked very perplexed.

"But why *this* ship?" he asked. "Don't you realise that this is a man-of-war and we aren't allowed to carry lady passengers?"

No, said Irina. She didn't know that. She didn't know the ways of 'la Marine britannique,' and thought one ship was as good as another. In any case, if she hadn't been discovered, she had intended to disclose her presence sooner or later. She was sorry if she had done wrong and given people trouble. She was really most contrite, she added, and proceeded to look the part, sniffing a little and pretending to be on the verge of tears.

Little deceiver! I knew her quite well enough to realise she was laughing at us inwardly, and was busy twiddling Maddick round her little finger—Maddick, the unsusceptible.

The poor little skipper, unable to get a satisfactory answer to his question, looking supremely unhappy and uncomfortable.

"But why was it so necessary that you should come to this ship?" he asked again.

Irina had the grace to blush. She cast down her eyes to the carpet.

“Why?” she murmured. “You ask me why?”

“Yes,” the skipper said.

“And you do not know already?” she asked. “Nobody has told you?”

Maddick looked surprised.

“Why should any one have told me?” he demanded rather testily.

“I thought everybody must see,” she whispered.

“See what?”

“That I am in love with the dear doctor,” she had the brazen effrontery to say, looking at me in an adoring way from beneath her eyelashes. “I love him, ver’, ver’ mooch,” she added in English.

If the deck could have opened and precipitated me into the bowels of the ship I should have welcomed it.

“Good God!” I heard the skipper gasp, while I went hot and cold in turns.

The worst of it was that Irina seemed to be in earnest.

THE SCARLET STRIPE
CHAPTER XXI

MADDICK looked at me with an expression of mingled irritation and astonishment.

"It's not my business to poke my nose into your private affairs," he sighed at last. "Nor can I very well ask you if you've given the lady any encouragement to suppose...."

"I assure you I haven't, sir!" I broke in heatedly. "It's absolutely monstrous of her to suggest it."

"But she didn't suggest it," the skipper pointed out. "She merely said she was—er—fond of you, hence her presence here. Putting two and two together, I assumed you must have given her some reason to ... to...."

"That's quite wrong, sir," I said stubbornly. "I don't dislike her; but certainly never led her to suppose that—er—I intended anything else."

"I see," said Maddick in a non-committal voice, leaning back in his chair with his lips pursed and the tips of his fingers together, so that he rather reminded me of a schoolmaster. Whatever else he was thinking, I could see that he thought me a damned nuisance.

I did my best to glare at Irina, who carefully avoided my eye. She sat there looking very coy and demure with her gaze still fixed on the carpet. Then I saw her mouth quivering, and not with distress. She was amused, drat her!

Amused, when I felt I could cheerfully have put her across my knee and spanked her like a naughty child for steering me

into this intolerable situation! I didn't feel at all charitable just then.

However, I liked her well enough when she behaved herself, though assuredly I didn't love her. She wasn't the sort of girl I should have asked to marry me, that is. I wanted a placid sort of wife, one of the companionable kind, not a fidgety, nervy little creature who seemed to be made of a mixture of T.N.T. and fulminate of mercury and liable to blow up at any moment. Whoever married her would have the deuce of a time until he'd tamed her; that I could clearly see. I certainly wasn't prepared to undertake the responsibility.

Encouragement—had I given her any encouragement? I had certainly kissed her several times; but only after she had kissed me. I couldn't very well have avoided it without giving offence, for she was one of those impulsive, affectionate girls who seemed to expect it. Kissing's a rotten game, usually; but I had to admit that I did not dislike kissing Irina in a protective uncle-ish sort of way. But I had no ulterior motive, none whatever.

She suddenly raised her head and looked at me with a smile.

"Bobbee," she said in her absurd broken English. "I tink you are ver' fonney man."

"I fail to see it," I replied with what dignity I could muster.

"But I tink so," she nodded. "You always take things so ... so seriouse."

"Why?" I demanded, remembering she understood more English than people generally supposed.

"Because you become so ... so gauche when I sometimes try to make you love me," she explained unblushingly. "You are too much cold, like ice-house."

"Thank Heaven for that!" I muttered, noticing Maddick's grin of amusement.

"And I not really love you ver' mooch, Bobbee," she added, shaking her head. "Just a leetle, because you are so kind. Ver' few mans is kind to me in Newchwang," she said, her voice hardening. "Zen you come. I feel safe wiz you, Bobbee."

So she felt safe with me, did she? I was cold and unresponsive, I suppose, and could therefore be relied upon not to make a nuisance of myself while she played around and twiddled me round her little finger. Evidently I wasn't dashing enough to be regarded as a dangerous Don Juan. I didn't quite know whether to feel annoyed at my evident lubberliness in the amatory line, or relieved because I was too cold to have caused her really passionate devotion.

"Then why on earth did you say what you did just now?"

"What I say?" she queried innocently, looking at me with raised eyebrows.

"That you loved me very much," I replied, beginning to wonder how the skipper was enjoying this rather personal conversation. I could see he was impatient from the way he was jigging one foot.

"Oh, zat," she answered, with a smile and a shrug of her shoulder. "I say zat to see what you say, Bobbee."

"You little dev ... monkey!" I exclaimed.

She laughed gaily.

"You not say mooch, Bobbee. Bot your face!—It look mos' frighten."

"It was very wicked of you," I chided, beginning to forgive her in my relief.

The skipper cleared his throat.

"Do you mind telling me why you chose to come to this ship?" he asked. "Was it because you thought you'd feel safe with us?"

That was one reason, she explained. But there was another reason as well. She had discovered that Chung had booked a passage in the *Yentai*. At all costs she had to avoid him.

Why she hadn't told us about this straight away without first making an utter fool of me in front of my commanding officer by pretending she loved me, goodness only knows! Either she'd done it from sheer mischief, or through some inexplicable feminine curiosity to see how I should react in a very awkward situation.

She deserved slapping; but it wasn't really in my heart to be severe. For all her brightness, her occasional fits of sulks, and her hard, sophisticated outlook on life, she seemed so small and frail and helpless.

"I hope we're still friends, Irina," I ventured to say.

"Oh yess," she replied. "You too kind not to be friends. I ver' sorree if I make trouble for you. I no want to do zat."

"Then that's settled," I said thankfully.

"Yes, but it isn't settled what's to become of you," Maddick put in. "That's what *I'm* anxious to know."

They proceeded to discuss it. Irina said she would like to be disembarked at Wei-Hai-Wei, whence she could find her way in some British steamer to Hong-Kong to join the Dubassoffs. Hearing this, the skipper pursed his lips and looked solemn. It would mean her being on board for nearly five days, and he wasn't at all sure that the Commander-in-Chief would consent. In any case, her presence must be reported by

wireless. It might so happen that she would have to be put ashore at Chinnampo.

"Chinnampo?" she said, pricking up her ears. "Where Chinnampo?"

"The place we're going to, in Korea," the skipper explained. "It's Japanese."

Irina made a wry face and looked pathetic.

"I no like zat," she said, shaking her head. "Japanese not good. And how I go away? I have got money; but zere is ship at Chinnampo to take me to Hong-Kong? I no tink so. No, I like zis ship wiz nice kind capten and ... and Bobbee, who is so frozen."

Little flirt! She was ogling the skipper now.

"Well, I'll do what I can," he said. "But you mustn't blame me if I don't succeed. It rests with the Admiral, you understand."

"Is Admiral nice kind mans like you and Bobbee?" she enquired with an air of supreme innocence.

"He's all right," Maddick replied, his voice a little doubtful.

"Zen I can send him message," said Irina brightly, but in all seriousness. "I say to him, Engleesh sailors ver' nice, so charmeeng wiz ladies. Zen he say yess, I must go anywheres I like in zis sheep. I tink that good, eh?"

"God forbid!" Maddick exclaimed in horror.

"Admiral not like girls, zen?"

"I've never had occasion to ask him," he parried.

I hadn't met Admiral Sir Trevelyan Barker, K.C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O., in person; but I'd seen his photograph and knew him by reputation. He was a tight-lipped martinet of the tough old school. I could imagine his scandalised rage and astonishment

at receiving an affectionate message by wireless from a female Russian stowaway on board one of His Majesty's ships.

"I must go on to the bridge," said Maddick, rising from his chair and taking his cap from the table. "Meanwhile, Miss—er—Irina, I'll leave you in the doctor's charge."

"Zat will be ver' nice," she put in mischievously, turning her eyes upon me.

"You must treat this cabin as your own.—Explain to her, Doctor," he added to me. "She'll have that little cabin to sleep in, and the bathroom beyond to herself. My steward will have to look after her. Tell her she's to ring if she wants anything.—I'll be down to lunch at half-past twelve, and you'd better join us. Au revoir."

He bowed to Irina, put his telescope under his arm, and marched out of the doorway.

Irina, the little minx, kissed her hand at his retreating back.

I saw a copy of the wireless signal that was presently sent off to the *Northumberland*, Sir Trevelyan's flagship, at Wei-Hai-Wei.

"*Submit. At 10.45 this morning while on passage Chinnampo Russian lady unmarried aged about 22 daughter late officer Russian Imperial Army discovered on board dressed as Chinese having embarked Newchwang. Am investigating circumstances and making arrangements proper accommodation. Lady states preference disembark on arrival Wei-Hai-Wei if exigencies service permit. Request permission grant this observing lady wishes proceed Hong-Kong. I understand steamer service from Chinnampo indifferent and may entail delay. Her presence on board no inconvenience. Ends. 1147.*"

The answer came back during the afternoon.

"*Your 1147. Approved for lady to remain on board as suggested. Her full name and particulars should be ascertained. Written report as to circumstances to be forwarded to me on your arrival here. I shall probably wish to see her. It is presumed she is not fugitive from justice. Ends. 1515.*"

Irina chirruped with delight at the idea of being solemnly interviewed by the Commander-in-Chief. I suppose she thought she could wangle him as she appeared to wangle most other men—the skipper and myself included. The only thing that really seemed to depress her was the thought that the wretched Ah Foo, the canteen manager, might get into trouble on her account. Several times she begged Maddick to be lenient, and Maddick had to consent to do the best he could. In any case, as Ah Foo was a civilian, he couldn't really be punished under the Naval Discipline Act. The worst that could happen was that he would be thrown out of his job. However unscrupulous a rogue he might be, he was too good a man to lose.

Irina very soon made herself at home on board the *Peony*, and the officers and men were soon her devoted slaves. She went anywhere and everywhere as the spirit moved her, down in the engine and boiler rooms with Mr. Smale, into the wardroom, and on to the men's mess-decks. She seemed interested in everything, even the cutting up and serving out of the meat from the refrigerators.

One afternoon at one bell—12.30—when they piped 'Hand of a mess for grog,' I found her at the grog-tub helping to serve out the rum to a line of grinning men waiting with their 'fannies.' It seemed to fascinate her, and as she kept up a

running commentary in her broken English it certainly kept the sailors amused. I told her she really shouldn't do these things; but should content herself with looking on. But all she did was to screw up her face, put out her tongue, and murmur something uncomplimentary in Russian, whereat I hastily retired.

Occasionally she appeared on the bridge, where she insisted on trying to steer the ship, to look through a telescope, or to take a sight with a sextant. I even found her poring over the chart, trying to probe its mysteries. Insatiably curious, she wanted to know the why and wherefore of everything.

She visited my sick-bay and chattered gaily to two invalids, and spent several hours with old Coggins, our chief boatswain's mate, making her hands in an unholy mess with tarred rope as she wrestled with knots and splices. I heard part of their conversation.

"Now this here's a sheep-shank, miss," old Coggins said, busy with his fingers. "We uses it for shortening a rope."

"What you call heem?" Irina asked, her forehead wrinkling.

"Sheep-shank, miss."

"But why sheep-shank? I tought sheep was animal."

"So it is, miss."

"Zen what is shank?"

Coggins scratched his head. Her questions were getting beyond him.

"A shank's another name for a leg, miss. When we talks about shank's mare, we mean a man's walkin' on foot."

Irina, looking more puzzled than ever, flicked the hair out of her eyes with the characteristic little toss of her head.

“But I not onderstand. Is dis ting you make call sheep-shank?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Zen it is ze same as sheep-leg. It not look like sheep-leg to me.”

“No, miss. That’s just its name, you see.”

“Zen who is shank who walk? Is he sheep too?”

Coggins went off into a long and very confused explanation, only to be interrupted by Irina, who demanded to know if sheep and mutton were not the same thing. Anticipating being dragged into the discussion, I strolled hurriedly away. Coggins, poor man, was beginning to feel quite hot and bothered.

“She may be a little ray of sunshine,” he confessed to me later. “But Lawd ’elp us pore sailors when she starts askin’ questions. She ’as me frazzled, tied up in ’eaps, an’ that’s a fact.”

Another day, when she was missing at tea-time, she was discovered strumming a mandoline and singing to the occupants of the stokers’ mess-deck. They were rather disappointed when she was dragged forth to tea in the captain’s cabin. Social distinctions and the strict etiquette of the Navy meant nothing to her. She appeared faintly surprised when told it was not *convenable* for a lady to sit among a lot of men wearing little but singlets and trousers. She retorted by saying she loved their hairy chests and tattoo marks, which I think rather shocked Maddick.

Every one liked her. Her gaiety was so spontaneous and infectious, and for once I think she was really happy. Never once during her stay in the *Peony* did I see any signs of her fiery temper. And she most certainly kept us alive, for we

never knew what she could be up to next. Indeed, she had to be forcibly prevented from going aloft to see what the ship looked like from a new angle. Reading the Riot Act, as the skipper called it, was quite useless. She merely pretended ignorance.

But besides amusing herself in the oddest ways and keeping us amused, she more than earned her board and lodging. Going into the captain's cabin one afternoon to consult him on some Service matter, I found her surrounded by a pile of his shirts and pyjamas that needed repairing. She was sitting cross-legged on the deck like a Chinese tailor putting a patch in a silk pyjama jacket, while Maddick, who had quite got over his antipathy to being left alone with her, wrestled with his official correspondence at the writing-table. It was quite a scene of domestic bliss.

" 'Ullo, Bobbee!" she called, waving the garment as I entered. "How you like dis?"

Having been through the skipper's wardrobe and spring-cleaned his chest-of-drawers and hanging cupboards, she started in on mine and the first lieutenant's. She would have done every one's if time had permitted.

Looking back on that period I have often thought what a civilising effect a woman has upon a ship. I know we were all very careful about our language and appearance while Irina was on board, and so were the men. It would be a good thing, I sometimes think, if every ship in the Navy had an official female repairer of socks and undergarments borne on the ship's books. I feel certain she'd earn a good living. She would have to be horse-faced, however. If she were at all attractive some simple sailor would be certain to snap her up. However, one might institute a heavy fine if she got married

before the end of the commission, and a smaller fine for flirtations lasting longer than twenty-four hours. Clandestine kisses, if discovered, might be paid for at the rate of a shilling each, half this sum being paid to the informer, and the other sixpence going to the Sports Fund.

But all good things come to an end some day, and so did Irina.

Having spent only three days at Chinnampo, we went back to Wei-Hai-Wei, arriving early on the Sunday morning. At eleven-thirty, after the flagship had hauled down her Church Pendant, Maddick went over to the *Northumberland* to pay his respects to the Commander-in-Chief. Shortly afterwards the boat came back without the skipper, with orders to take Irina to the flagship. For the first time since her arrival she looked rather nervous, so I thought this would be a good opportunity to make my number on the flagship's P.M.O. and to write my name in the C.-in-C.'s book.

We arrived on board together, and while Irina was conducted to the Admiral's cabin by the flag-lieutenant, I went to the wardroom ante-room and absorbed sherry and bitters with the surgeon commander and a crowd of other officers. The news of Irina's escapade had become public property. They were all intensely curious to hear about her, particularly when the officer-of-the-watch burst in for a hasty cocktail with the report that she was 'a bit of a peach.'

Then a message came to me to tell me that Irina and Maddick were staying to lunch with the Admiral. I was pressed to stay to lunch in the wardroom.

Irina told me afterwards what happened in the cuddy. Sir Trevelyan, she said, was 'mos' charmeeng' and sympathetic; but the person she had really fallen for was the tall, good-

looking flag-lieutenant, with the golden aiguillettes, the blue eyes, the crinkly hair, the silky voice, and the smile that was ‘ravissant.’ She’d have liked to have seen more of ‘flags,’ I think. But her whole opinion of the Royal Navy was most complimentary, embarrassingly so.

She left us that evening and went to the hotel ashore, preparatory to embarking for Hong-Kong in a steamer that sailed on Tuesday afternoon. She wept a little when she departed, and we all felt down in the dumps when she went ashore.

We felt sadder still when, on the Tuesday afternoon, the *Soochow* steamed out of the harbour with a tearful, forlorn white-clad little figure fluttering a handkerchief over the taffrail. We waved until she was out of sight. We were sorry to see her go.

It was two days later that we heard an interesting piece of news. The *Yentai*, in which of course were the Dubassoffs and the detestable Mr. Chung, had been pirated somewhere in the south and taken into Bias Bay.

What made it more interesting still was that the opulent Mr. Chung had been carried off into the interior as a hostage for ransom. I howled with delight when I heard that. Instead of getting Irina, the blighter had been hoisted with his own petard. He had been altogether *too* clever.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XXII

I AM not going to describe the next fifteen months of our wanderings in any great detail. If I wrote fully of all the places we visited it would read like a guide-book. Moreover, my journeyings in the *Peony*, I expect, were those of dozens of other naval officers who have served in smaller ships on the China Station. But the station is a vast one, and I saw more of the world than I had ever seen before.

The *Peony* was rarely in company with any other British man-of-war, and as Maddick was *persona grata* with the Commander-in-Chief, he was sent off on the most interesting independent cruises. We covered immense distances, and looking back on those days most of our time seems to have been spent at sea.

Since we did not winter in the north, we had no really cold weather, with ice and snow and sleet. But we experienced nearly everything else—occasional gales of wind, with a heavy sea, flat calms, rain, and fogs innumerable. Tropical heat predominated, and what that meant in a small ship must be experienced to be understood. We gasped and sweltered, and drank copious quantities of iced lime-juice and water, which immediately oozed out in perspiration. We wore nothing at sea but sun-helmets, singlets, and shorts; but even so we felt stifled. We could not bear our naked hands on any exposed metalwork, and a hundred or more miles away from land the air seemed full of the mingled odours of spice and

vegetation from sun-baked, steaming jungles and plantations far away out of sight over the brazen rim of the horizon.

The heat brought out the cockroaches in swarms, and I had a busy job trying to exterminate them, together with the mosquitoes, flying ants, and other winged pests that invaded the ship.

And when it rained, it rained properly—none of your dribbling English rain. The clouds seemed literally to split open, to discharge their contents in a warm deluge. But we rather liked it. Sloping the awnings to prevent them from being burst by the weight of water, we donned our bathing-dresses and stood out in the open, tolerably cool for once. It was surprising how suddenly the rain came in the tropics, and how suddenly it went. We would see a dense black cloud gathering on the horizon, and watched a line of whitened, rain-whipped sea coming nearer and nearer as we steamed towards it. Then the deluge burst upon us with a roar, so thick and impenetrable that it was worse than being in a fog. In ten minutes or less it would have passed away, and the blazing sun would be licking up the moisture from our decks in little clouds of steam.

It was down south, of course, that we got the heat and the tropical rain. But in the north we visited one or two places in Korea, and Nagasaki and Kobe in Japan. We did not go to Yokohama, the one place in Japan that all British ships on the China Station seem to visit sooner or later. This was probably because of the disastrous earthquake of September 1923, which had killed many thousands of people in the Tokyo and Yokohama districts, practically obliterated the latter place, and played havoc with the harbour works.

Shanghai, Ningpo, Foochow, Amoy, and Hong-Kong, where we went into dockyard hands for a refit, all came in their turn. Then a visit to Manila, where we made 'whoopee' with the Americans to the extent of nearly killing ourselves, and were glad to get away. Then on to Kudat, Jesselton, and Labuan, all in British North Borneo, to show the flag. We had a certain amount of shooting, cricket, football, tennis, and golf, together with endless hospitality from the British residents. They were pleased to see a British man-of-war and a few new faces, and we did what we could to entertain them by giving our usual little parties and dances. I think we upheld the honour of the White Ensign. Anyhow, we were always implored to come again. But it did tell rather heavily on our mess-bills. Entertaining, even in a mild way and with drinks 'duty free,' costs more than the average naval officer can afford if it has to be done at a succession of places. However, I am not complaining. Our hosts ashore went 'all out' to give us a good time.

We crossed the Equator with the usual ceremonies, during which I, as a novice, after having been plastered with some filthy compound and then shaved with rusty hoop-iron by Father Neptune and Amphitrite, his enormous 'wife,' was more than half-drowned in a canvas bath by the 'bears.' I could have retaliated upon 'Neptune' a week later, when Petty Officer Samuel Coggins came to me with a nasty-looking boil on the back of his neck which eventually had to be lanced. However, I desisted, treating him as gently as a babe.

Passing through the Carimata Straits and the Java Sea, we went to Sourabaya and Batavia, in Java, where we entertained and were entertained by paunchy, thirsty Dutchmen and their wives. Some of their daughters were quite charming; but looking at their mountainous mothers with their pendulous

chins and vast palpitating bosoms, we naturally steered clear of anything more than a little mild flirtation under the tropic moon and the palm trees—with the daughters, I mean. I believe in heredity; but it is surprising how Europeans unaccustomed to exercise or playing games either grow monstrously fat in the tropics, or else skinny and shrivelled up like mummies.

Steaming north again through the Banka Straits we came to Singapore, where we rested awhile before going on to Malacca and Penang. In the course of our wanderings we visited numbers of other remote little islands and anchorages whose names I have long since forgotten. The sights and sounds and smells at nearly all of them were different. Even now the pungent smoke of a wood fire, the smell of an oozy swamp, or a particular scent, or soap, or flower, will sometimes cause me, by shutting my eyes, to imagine myself back near the Equator east of longitude 100° east. Opening them, I almost expect to see the brazen sun beating down from the heavens, a glassy sea, and, within a few hundred yards, a green island set with palms and thick jungle, with a few thatched huts, a whitewashed building or two, a pier and a flagstaff in a clearing on the foreshore, and, in the distance, a line of blue mountains stretching up into the sky.

Yes. In those fifteen months we covered thousands of miles and saw much of the Shiny East and its so-called glamour and romance. I didn't see much romance about it; but a good deal of squalor and beastliness.

I met one Englishman in the wilds of Borneo who had married a native wife, a handsome Dyak woman as straight and slim as a lance, who had borne him three children called by English names. But he hadn't 'gone native' in the true sense of the word. He still shaved twice a day and changed for

dinner, besides having dozens of newspapers and new books sent out from home. He never intended to return, he told me rather wistfully. There was a tragedy of some sort in his life, poor chap, though he was neither a drunkard nor a ne'er-do-well. Besides his books, one of his most treasured possessions was a large framed photograph of an English country house with a party of men and women in tennis kit having tea on the lawn. The name and address of the photographer in the corner had carefully been obliterated with stamp-paper. He saw me looking at it; but didn't attempt to explain. But it was pathetic to see the sort of yearning look in his eyes. He obviously wanted to go home, but couldn't. I wondered why. He was too gentle, and cultured, and well-spoken to be a real criminal. Perhaps he had been mixed up in some scandal.

Our wanderings became rather monotonous after a bit, and rather exhausting. The days that the English mails reached us were red-letter days, and often I found myself yearning for home. I could well understand how some of the British who had been in the East for years on end suffered from a sort of recurrent nostalgia, and asked endless questions about Piccadilly, the Strand, Shaftesbury Avenue, Leicester Square, the London theatres and music-halls, and some of those comic little restaurants in Soho I had been to as a medical student. London, for all its grimness, is truly the hub of the British Empire. It has the power of inducing a sort of home-sickness in most Englishmen abroad. I can understand Scotsmen feeling the same for their Edinburgh.

Looking back upon that time, I realise I wouldn't have missed it for a lot. It was a great education, if it did nothing else than make me understand how much we at home owe to these scattered little colonies and communities of British men

and women who live most of their lives and keep the flag flying in the uttermost parts of the world.

I met Hermione again at Shanghai, when Mr. Fletcher, true to his promise, asked me to his house in Jessfield, outside the settlement, for a long week-end. But Hermione, though still very affable and charming, seemed to have changed since our last meeting. When I was the only man on the spot under a certain age, she had been content enough to spend most of her time with me. Now, however, busy with her many social activities and games, her golf, tennis, riding, dances, swimming picnics, cocktail parties, and goodness knows what, surrounded everywhere by a cohort of eligible men, slimmer, better dressed, and better looking than my own ungainly self, she showed no preference at all for my company. We never did anything alone, just the two of us together. We were always in a crowd, a noisy, rather cocktail-drinking crowd who talked an unfamiliar slang and called each other by their nicknames. I, as a sort of hanger-on, was rather out of it, and realised that Hermione's sort of life was not mine. It was altogether too strenuous and expensive, too artificial. She was a sort of society butterfly, good to look at and with plenty of brain behind that pretty face of hers, but seemed to live in a whirl of amusement and admiration. As straight as a die and as hard as crystal, she had no illusions whatever.

I suppose that I, on the other hand, was too conventional and 'sticky,' and too inclined to put all women on a pedestal. Nevertheless, whatever the reason, we had definitely lost touch. We had none of those pleasant *tête-à-tête* talks I had so much enjoyed on the way out in the P. & O., and I think most of her friends regarded me as something of a curio. I heard

one bright young thing with a pretty painted face refer to me as 'that funny fat doctor.'

It was Fletcher, Hermione's father, who was kindness itself and went out of his way to entertain me. He took me to lunch or dinner at the club, for an occasional sedate round of golf, to watch the polo, or for leisurely runs in one of his cars. I tried to return the hospitality by asking them both to lunch on board the *Peony*, but Fletcher was too busy, and Hermione too full of engagements. To tell the truth, I wasn't really sorry when we finally sailed and I knew that Shanghai would see me no more for a bit.

Off and on, we spent a good deal of time at Hong-Kong, where I saw a lot of the Dubassoffs and Irina. Dubassoff and his wife, after dallying with the idea of starting another restaurant, opened a shop of their own. They specialised in carpets, old furniture, porcelain, embroideries, *bijouterie*, and strange little ornaments and knick-knacks which seemed to cost a mint of dollars to buy. They seemed perfectly happy and must have been making money, for they lived very comfortably. Moreover, by the end of the first year Dubassoff had paid off the equivalent of £105 of the money he had borrowed from me. As I was in no real need of it at the time, I suggested lending it for a further term at the usual rate of interest, if it pleased him, and that he should use it for extending his business. But he wouldn't hear of it.

Irina, too, had become a real business woman and was doing well. After serving about six months' apprenticeship, she and three other girls had started what I suppose is called a 'beauty parlour,' where they charged fabulous prices for face treatment, shingling, permanent waving, shampooing, manicuring, and whatever else women have done to their faces, hair, and hands to make themselves more attractive and

alluring. I know that Irina's establishment, which was guarded by a huge ex-Russian officer dressed as a colourful Cossack, soon became fashionable among the European community. This was rather a nuisance to me, as the High Priestess herself seemed to be busy all day and half the night so that I couldn't see as much of her as I should have liked. It was rarely that I succeeded in making her take a day off.

I suggested that she should start a barber's shop for men. If it were staffed with attractive young women, I pointed out, it would draw a lot of the custom from the other haircutting places, which were mostly run by Portuguese. But she didn't cotton on to the idea. The other establishment took up all her time and was just about as much as she could manage.

Irina seemed to be happy at last, and had become more placid and contented. She had lost her nervous jumpiness, and though still rather inclined to fly into a paddy about nothing at all, seemed less hard and bitter in her outlook. However, she never lost her temper with me.

"Are you still fond of me, Irina?" I asked one romantic evening.

We had been dining with friends and were sitting in the warm fragrance of a garden half-way up to the Peak watching the lights twinkling in the harbour at our feet. It was very calm and peaceful. I don't know whether it was Irina's proximity, the good dinner, or the surroundings that suddenly made me feel sentimental; but assuredly I did.

"Fond of you, Bobbee?" she replied in that husky little voice of hers. "I tink so." Then, after a little pause, "Why you ask, Bobbee?"

"I don't know," I said fatuously. "I was only wondering."

She laughed, and patted my hand. I put an arm round her waist. She didn't seem to mind.

"Are you cold?" I whispered, my heart beginning to throb a little faster.

At that very moment, by the cursed contrariness of fate, I heard footsteps on the path behind us. Then the voice of our hostess.

"Are you two *never* coming in? We're waiting to start."

Damn their silly card games, thought I, hurriedly disengaging myself.

The *Peony* was sailing early next morning, and this was probably my last chance of seeing Irina alone for some months.

I wanted to ask her a question, the usual question that a man asks the woman he loves. Instead of that I had to go indoors and play some stupid game. 'Slippery Sam,' I think it was called. It was rotten bad luck being baulked at the last moment, when one had keyed oneself up to saying something very important.

However, thinking things over, I thought I might have an opportunity of seeing her alone when I went back to the Dubassoffs' house. He invariably asked me in for a final night-cap, and more than once I had noticed him eyeing Irina and myself with a sort of fatherly bless-you-my-children look on his face. He obviously suspected that something was in the wind between us. I might give him a hint that we wanted to be left alone, and all would be well.

But that scheme was also nipped in the bud, for at eleven-thirty a messenger arrived with a note from the ship. It was from Channing. One of our men had smashed himself up.

Another doctor could not be found. Would I please return on board at once.

To all intents and purposes it was an order. I had to say some hurried good-byes and dash off. There was no chance of asking Irina the question, the answer to which meant so much to me and my happiness.

But having attended the invalid, who had nothing worse than a scalp wound requiring a few stitches, I sat down in my cabin and wrote Irina a long letter. It took me a long time to finish it, to say all that I wanted to say, so that she, with her still rather limited knowledge of English, would understand. The dawn was actually breaking when I addressed the envelope and took it on deck to the quartermaster of the watch with orders that it was to be sent ashore in and posted by a boat which I knew was leaving the ship at six a.m.

Half an hour later, at six-thirty, the *Peony* slipped unobtrusively out of Hong-Kong harbour.

Mails to His Majesty's ships in out-of-the-way places are apt to be erratic in China, and for three weeks I waited in trepidation. Then one afternoon when we were lying in Nimrod Sound, not far from Ningpo, I had Irina's answer. It was laboriously written in quaint, misspelt English, much as she spoke it. I can't attempt to reproduce it, but it said, in effect, that she loved me very much, and that, if I *really* wanted to marry her, she'd be only too happy to oblige. When was the marriage to take place, she wanted to know?

Transported to the seventh heaven of happiness, I passed the port that night after dinner in the wardroom. Channing made a facetious speech in which he pointed out that he had foreseen the happy event for months. They drank Irina's health and mine, to which I made some incoherent and

fatuous reply. And the next day, having heard the news, the skipper invited all the officers into his cabin and broached some of his best champagne. There were more healths drunk and more speeches, after which Maddick sprung his surprise.

"I may as well tell you all," he said, "that I've had a wireless signal from the C.-in-C. to say that our cruise is off. When we leave here in two days' time we'll go straight back to Hong-Kong.—I suppose that little tit-bit will excite you, Doctor," he added, looking slyly at me.

Excite me, indeed! Lord, I could have burst with happiness! It meant that in less than a week I should see Irina again—Irina, who now meant almost more to me than life itself.

"How long shall we be staying there, sir?" I managed to ask.

"Search me," Maddick replied, shrugging his shoulders. "I expect the C.-in-C.'s decided we shall go into dock. We're due for our refit, anyhow."

Dock! This meant a month or more of comparative idleness. What luck!

"I suppose we'd better start thinking of the usual whip round of a day's pay for the wedding present," Channing put in, affecting to ignore me. "What shall we give 'em—silver salver, tea-set, canteen of knives, forks, and what-nots, or has any one else any suggestions? It'll have to be suitably inscribed, *of course*."

"Will you stand in with us, sir?" he went on to ask Maddick. "Or will you do something on your own?"

"I shall have to consider the matter," the captain replied with his usual deliberation. "As we stand *in loco parentis* to the bride, however—I mean, as she was our guest on board for a bit, I think it'll have to be a joint present to them both."

“Something to improve their minds,” Cleeve suggested with a mischievous grin. “I plump for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. We can buy that on the instalment system, complete with mahogany bookcase, and once they’ve got to the stage of feeling bored with each other, they’ll be kept busy for months reading about the Pyramids and things. What d’you say, Gunner? Any suggestions?”

Having been promoted to lieutenant nine months before, Cleeve was no longer our ‘sub.’ But in spite of his two stripes I was much tempted to retort. However, I contented myself by trying to glower.

“There you have me bamboozled,” Mr. Blast was forced to admit. “Weddin’ presents are a bit out o’ my line nowadays. But we’ll all have to learn the drill for makin’ an archway of swords, I’m thinkin’. And I heard a buzz this mornin’ that the ship’s company wants to have a hand in the weddin’ when it does come off. They’ll be pullin’ the carriage containin’ the happy couple through the streets, likely as not, with the senior sick-bay ratin’ sittin’ on the box doin’ the duty of coachman.”

“God help the happy couple if it’s Simpson!” the navigator grunted. “Simpson couldn’t drive a hearse, let alone fifty fat and lusty sailors!”

My sick-berth petty officer, Simpson, was, I must admit, a bit erratic at times. At some port or another, where he’d tried to ride a pony, the brute had run away with him. Falling off, he’d nearly broken his neck. He was equally unlucky on a bicycle.

But I could picture the wedding in my mind’s eye.

Myself in uniform, feeling an utter fool and very self-conscious. Irina in white satin with a bouquet nearly as large as herself, and her veil thrown back to show her face. She

would be perfectly self-possessed and mistress of herself, and would come down the church steps on my right, no, my left, arm. These six dear people, my shipmates, now so anxious that things should be done properly, would be waiting, three on either side, with their swords drawn and raised, and the points touching overhead. We should pass beneath them.

Who should be my best man, and would Irina have bridesmaids? Now I came to think of it, I didn't even know what religion she belonged to. Perhaps we'd have to undergo some weird ritual at the hands of a Russian priest before we were truly man and wife. Should we have to be married twice over? Awful prospect!

And would the ship's company really insist on dragging us through the streets in our car? I supposed they would. I should feel an awful ass sitting in the back beside Irina and trying hard not to look a fool!

Where should we have the reception, and where, oh where, should we spend the honeymoon?

It made me almost delirious with happiness to think of it.

Five more days—one hundred and twenty hours before I saw her again.

Would that I could put myself to sleep, to wake up again in Hong-Kong.

Roll on, time—roll on!

CHAPTER XXIII

TWO days later, early in the morning, we weighed our anchor and put out to sea. The sea was calm and the weather brilliant, and as we threaded our way through groups of little barren islands to give ourselves sea-room before steering to the southward for Hong-Kong, there cannot have been a man on board who had any idea of the cataclysm that was to burst upon us in less than thirty hours.

Afterwards, of course, there were the usual stories in the newspapers that some one in the *Peony* had written to his wife at home in England saying that he had long thought the ship was unseaworthy, and that he had had a presentiment that something awful was going to happen. But in the case of every maritime disaster there is always somebody on board the ship concerned who asserts afterwards that he had dismal forebodings. To my mind these yarns are invariably bunk and poppycock.

The *Peony*, at any rate, was not unseaworthy. She was sometimes a bit of a beast in a seaway, that is all. To say she was unsafe, however, is a libel. Maddick, moreover, was a consummate seaman who knew how to handle her. It was through no fault of his, or of any one else's, that we came to grief. Circumstances were against us, circumstances over which nobody had any control. I should like some of the fireside, armchair critics, who write learnedly to the newspapers to point out that such and such a thing would not

have happened if *they* had been present, to see what the wind and the sea can do when they really put their minds to it.

The glass started to go down a little during our first day at sea; but there was nothing whatever in its behaviour to indicate anything more than a spell of tolerably bad weather. A bit of a swell from the eastward rose during the afternoon. It increased after dark, so that by eleven o'clock, when I turned in, we were rolling rather heavily. But it wasn't anything unusual. We were quite accustomed to it. The old ship was always inclined to be lively and skittish in anything more than a lop.

It was between half-past five and six next morning, however, when the daylight had already begun to filter through my curtained scuttle, that I suddenly awoke with a start. We were not rolling any worse than we had been the night before when I went off to sleep; but pulling the curtain, I sat up in my bunk and looked out through the glass-covered opening in the ship's side. It was dipping well under the water every time she rolled, so that at one moment I was looking at close range into the grey-green translucence of sea, and the next at a circle of sky framed by the brass scuttle-rim.

The sky, I remember, was most peculiar. I can only describe it as a sort of heavy, leaden-looking olive colour streaked with wisps of white and lighter grey. It looked ominous and threatening. The sea, too, seemed dull and lifeless, and the summits of the smooth swells had started to topple over and break in little gouts of yeasty foam. Altogether, it was a depressing picture.

All the things in my cabin—the boots in the rack overhead; a pair of binoculars and a camera in its case hung on a hook by the doorway; the bottles, shaving-brush, and other articles

in the rack over the washstand; the few pictures and photographs I had on the bulkheads—were jarring and clattering in their usual effusive way.

The copper can of cold water, which my marine servant had left on the deck overnight, had also capsized its contents all over the little strip of carpet, and was making an infernal clatter as it rolled to and fro between the drawers at the foot of my bunk and the door-coaming. Occasionally it cannoned into the washstand or chest-of-drawers, whence, after pausing for a moment to gather breath as it were, it resumed its mad and noisy progress.

Vaguely irritated because of the sodden carpet, I remember watching that can while making mental bets with myself as to whether it would leap out through the doorway into the flat outside. I'd have a word to say to Cotter, my faithful marine, I thought to myself. He was an excellent fellow in many ways, but forethought was not his strong point. I'd told him before about that blessed water-can.

However, I am a sound sleeper as a rule, and it was not the jarring and rattling and the inevitable groaning of a deeply rolling ship that had caused me suddenly to wake up. It was something quite different. Yawning and rubbing my eyes, feeling rather unhappy because of the unaccustomed stuffiness of my cabin, I realised what it was.

We had been steaming at about twelve knots the night before, a speed to which I had long since become accustomed. I knew the particular vibration it set up, and the regular, swishing 'chuck-chuck—chuck-chuck—chuck-chuck' of our single propeller almost by heart. One heard and felt it in one's inner consciousness.

But now, both the sound and the vibrations had changed. I detected a sort of unusual wheezing note. Half listening, half by instinct, I judged we were steaming something between six and eight knots. Why had we eased down?

I was unlikely to drop off to sleep again with all the noise and clatter. However, it was more from a sense of curiosity than from the idea that anything was wrong, that I hurriedly put on a coat over my pyjamas and went on deck.

There was no sun. The whole sky was overcast. Both it, and restless, heaving sea, had become suffused with a baleful, greenish-yellow light, which made them look jaundiced and unnatural, almost uncanny. Far away on the horizon those heavy-looking cloud masses that I had seen before were slowly mounting into space. Something between deep olive and purple in colour, they seemed to be drawing in upon us. Overhead in the zenith the garish sky was streaked with wisps and streamers of torn, bedraggled-looking cloud travelling fast on the wings of some upper air-current. On the surface of the sea, however, the wind, though freshening, was blowing no more than a moderate breeze. But it was not an ordinary refreshing sea-breeze. It felt hot and lifeless, as oppressive as though it were blowing straight from a gigantic smelting works somewhere out of sight over the rim of the horizon.

I knew nothing of meteorology, and was not a reliable weather prophet, but it did not need much science to tell one that something very unusual was happening. I had never before seen sky that uncanny colour, nor clouds so dark and so menacing.

Swaying to the heavy rolling of the ship, I was saluted by a little dollop of spray as a sea reared itself up alongside and the

fag-end of it broke over the bulwarks. I retreated further amidships.

Seamen on the flying deck, I noticed, were putting extra lashings on the boats, which were, of course, turned in on their crutches. Another little group were busy turning in the whaler, which was always kept turned out on its davits at sea ready for instant use if any one fell overboard. A party in sea-boots and oilskins came sliding and tumbling aft to unship the brass stanchions and canvas canopy over the hatches leading to the wardroom and cabin flats.

"What's up?" I asked the leading seaman in charge.

"We've orders to remove this lot in case they gets carried away, sir," the man replied. "Come on, boys!" he added to his men. "Smack it about unlacin' that canvas!"

"Bad weather?" I queried, rather unnecessarily.

"Yes, sir," he answered, sucking his teeth and pointing at the ominous-looking clouds on the horizon. "That lot's wind and rain, both maybe. We'll be coppin' it afore long. Shan't half be turned upside down by the looks on it. The sky don't look natural, some'ow, an' the sea's gettin' bigger an' more confused like."

It was true. The sea was no longer running in orderly undulations, but from several directions at the same time. And the ship, not quite knowing what to make of it, unable to suit her movement to the confused turmoil, had developed an awkward corkscrew motion, half pitch, half roll, but wholly disconcerting.

"You'd best be gettin' into your oilskins an' sea-boots, sir, if you wants to keep dry," Leading Seaman Peters added, glancing at my pyjama-trousered legs and bedroom slippers. "S'trewth, sir," he rambled on, wiping his red face with the

sleeve of his oilskin jacket. “Ain’t it perishin’ ’ot! Sort of steamy-like. Can’t hardly breathe without gaspin’!”

I asked him why we’d eased down, but Peters didn’t know.

Channing, sea-booted and oilskinned, came aft along the upper deck. I tackled him on the subject.

“We’ve had to slow down because of a hot bearing in the engine-room,” he replied hurriedly, his expression very worried. “They’ve got hoses on it now.”

“Peters!” he added, casting his eyes round the quarterdeck.

“Sir?”

“When you’ve unrigged that hatch, stow all the loose gear out of harm’s way, and put lashings on everything else. Be careful of those bollard gratings. If they go over the side I’ll never forgive you.” He pointed to the ornamental wooden gratings covering the two pairs of iron bollards at the after end of the quarterdeck. Especially made in Hong-Kong, he had paid for them himself.

“What do you suppose is going to happen?” I whispered in his ear, as he turned to go forward.

“Happen?” Channing laughed wryly. “The glass has gone down with a bang, the sea’s getting up, and there’s a bunch of trouble on the horizon. In half-an-hour or so you’ll wish you’d never been born, my merry Sawbones.”

“Is it as bad as all that?”

“You said the other day you’d never seen a typhoon,” he told me, sinking his voice so that the men couldn’t hear. “Well, you’ll see one before you’re much older, my boyo. If you take my tip, you’ll get properly dressed and come on deck.”

I nodded.

"And while you're below, you might tell the wardroom steward to send some biscuits and coffee to the bridge, like a good chap. Don't dally with your dressing. We may have to batten down aft before long. I've warned all the others."

He turned on his heel and staggered forward. The ship was corkscrewing worse than ever. The sea was momentarily increasing and becoming more confused. Great leaden-looking masses of water, topped with yellowish foam, jostled each other in all directions. The wind was increasing, the clouds becoming darker and more ominous. That curious yellowness still prevailed. I had never seen anything like it. Vaguely apprehensive for the first time, I went below to my heaving cabin and started to struggle into some clothes.

We were in for a typhoon, Number One had said, and on top of it all there was a hot bearing in the engine-room. This meant we couldn't steam at our normal speed without running the risk of breaking down altogether. It didn't need much knowledge of seamanship to make me realise that the prospects for the next few hours were remarkably unpleasant.

I had given Channing's message to Ah Chee, our wardroom steward, whom I had found in the pantry with all his myrmidons, their faces pea-green with funk or seasickness. And after putting on sea-boots and oilskins, and cramming a brandy flask, some biscuits, and a tin of cigarettes into my pockets, I went back on deck.

I cannot have been below more than five or seven minutes, but even in that short time things had got rapidly worse. It had become much darker, and both wind and sea had increased. The waves were breaking riotously in all directions, and heavy spray was hurtling high over our boat-deck in a constant shower, so heavy that one couldn't face it with open

eyes. I could feel the old ship pounding and quivering as the seas smashed at her sides and sometimes broke on board. Indeed, I only saved myself from being drenched to the skin by clawing my way hurriedly forward under the lee of the captain's cabin as a leaden-coloured hillock reared itself up alongside, curled over, and broke on board in a cataract. Some of the water must have found its way below, for a half-drowned, seasick-looking Chinaman crawled out of the wardroom hatch, missed his footing, and slid on his stern into about three feet of water in the lee scuppers. Watching my opportunity when the ship was comparatively steady for a moment, I went over, pulled him to his feet, and sent him scuttling forward out of harm's way. The poor devil, drenched to the skin, was breathless and gibbering with fright.

Cleeve, attired as I was, came up from below. Dodging a breaking sea, he half ran, half slid, to where I was hanging on to a hand-rail on the lee side of the captain's cabin.

"Gosh!" he howled in my ear. "This is a bloody business!"

I agreed. There was a fierce note in the gale, a sort of booming roar in which one couldn't hear oneself talk without shouting. The *Peony* was still pitching and rolling and jerking and pounding; but such was the strength of the wind against her masts, funnels, and superstructure that she never seemed to roll back beyond the vertical. All the movement was to starboard, so to speak. The wind was giving her a permanent list.

Cleeve howled something in my ear about clearing the after compartments of men and battening down the hatches. I agreed. If much more water found itself below it might be serious. He went forward to collect some men. I followed. There were two mild cases of dysentery in the sick-bay which

were rather on my mind. I had kept them in their cots as a precautionary measure. Finding my way below, I told them to get up and put on their clothes.

"What's it like up topsides, sir?" Simpson, the sick-berth petty officer, asked me. Poor chap, he was looking mightily seasick.

"Bloody awful!" was all that I could tell him.

It was even worse below. The mess-deck was stale with the stench of hot humanity, wet clothing, and frowst, added to which some of the men had obviously been too seasick to move. From the sick-bay I could hear bottles crashing and falling about in the little dispensary next door. Mingled with the other smells there was a horrible reek of iodoform. But I was past caring about broken bottles. It was the men I was thinking about.

"Get all our fellows and the two sick out of this and up on deck," I told Simpson.

"On deck, sir?"

"Yes," I replied. "We'll find a place where they'll be under shelter. I'll wait and give you a hand."

The ship was creaking and groaning horribly, quivering as the seas struck her. I could hear the rush of water overhead, and from the mess-deck outside came the noises of crashing crockery and tinware. It was as though an elephant were running amok in a china shop. Accompanying the din came the more dismal sounds of retching and muttered objurgations.

It was at about a quarter-past seven by the sick-bay clock that we finally got the two dysentery cases dressed, wrapped up in blankets, and helped on deck. I found them a fairly dry and comfortable billet inside the lee door of the foremost

boiler-room, which opened out on to the deck from the superstructure. It was the best I could do for them for the time being; but one of the poor fellows was in throes of violent nausea. I did what I could to alleviate it, and then battled my way on to the bridge to report to the captain. The word 'battled' was literally true. Out in the open the wind was terrific. Crawling up the starboard ladder to the bridge I expected every moment to be pitched from my hand-hold and blown overboard to leeward.

The *Peony*, with her engines just jogging ahead, was practically hove-to with the wind three or four points on the port bow. Though the movement was still violent, she seemed, if anything, to be a little steadier than before. The list to starboard still persisted with the weight of the wind in her top-hamper.

The seas were so confused, heaped up, and irregular that there was no avoiding them. They crashed over the bows, amidships, and over the stern all at the same time and without ceasing. I noticed that the port end of the bridge had been burst upwards, to leave the planking in splinters, the stanchions awry, and the painted canvas weather-screens torn and flapping to ribbons in the wind. Two of the boats on the port side, turned in on their crutches, had been stove in. The two tall topmasts, which carried the wireless aerial, were bending like fishing-rods, their weather rigging bar taut and the lee rigging hanging in bights.

The air was full of flying spray—great drops of water, as hard, as solid, and as painful to face as hail. The wind, if that were possible, had increased in its fury. I had seen a gale or two in my time at sea, but never a blow like this. The whole sea was whipped to a yellowy whiteness, its tumultuous surface all but obscured in sheets of spume as thick and as

opaque as soapsuds. The clouds had met overhead. The whole arch of the sky was shrouded in a sort of olive-coloured darkness, streaked with frayed-out streamers of thinner cloud travelling like lightning.

I fought my way to the skipper, who was in the steering-shelter on the lower bridge with one eye on the compass and the other on the man at the wheel. Channing and the navigator were with him. Shouting at the pitch of their voices to make themselves heard above the roar of the wind and sea, they were carrying on a three-cornered conversation—something to do with a wireless signal having been sent off and answered.

"Are you sure that position of yours is correct?" I heard Maddick howl to the pilot.

"Absolutely, sir, within a mile or two," Mortimer roared back. "I got star sights this morning before it clouded over."

"Then in that case she ought to be within forty miles. The question is, what speed will she make good in this weather?"

"God knows, sir!" said the navigator.

I could only imagine that the 'she' to which the skipper had referred was some ship to which we had signalled for help. In short, things must be looking pretty black.

"Is there any more news from the engine-room?" Maddick shouted, to Channing this time.

"No, sir," Number One answered at the top of his voice. "Mr. Smale says he thinks he can keep her going at this speed. He's got hoses on the bearing; but if he increases to any extent there's a risk of running the white metal. If that happens, we'll stop automatically."

I felt rather sick. If once we came to a standstill nothing could save us.

But Maddick did not look perturbed. He merely nodded and shouted something about doing one's best to keep her jogging along until it blew itself out.

So there was hope, after all. I felt a little better.

Then the skipper turned and saw me. To my surprise he laughed in my face.

"Hullo!" he bellowed, patting me on the shoulder and putting his mouth close to my ear. "What brings our giddy young Lothario up here so bright and early?"

I told him what I had done about the two sick men.

"Good fellow!" he roared back. "You've done quite right! Nice little drop of weather we're having, aren't we?"

Before I had time to reply we were struck by a fiercer gust than usual. I felt the ship heel over to starboard until she lay at an angle of about thirty degrees from the vertical with her quivering hull buried in heavy spray and broken water. It seemed an age before she slowly righted herself. She felt dull and lifeless, as though she had lost buoyancy and were ready to give up the struggle.

Then another squall came howling down upon us, heavier than before. Again she heeled over; but this time, above the uproar, I heard a twang like a breaking harp-string followed by the splintering crash of wood.

A shroud had carried away. The fore-topmast, breaking off at the cap and taking the fore end of the wireless aerial with it, tore itself free from its rigging and came down horizontally from aloft, to fall half on deck and half overboard. In another moment the movement and heel of the ship had pulled the broken spar into the sea and the wreckage was trailing slowly aft.

I heard Maddick shout something about fouling the screw. Channing hurriedly left the bridge to collect some men to cut away the tangle.

But before he had reached the foot of the bridge ladder the fore-topmast had providentially floated clear. Still attached to the main-topmast by the remains of the wireless aerial and the triatic stay, however, it exerted just enough pull to complete the destruction of that stick also. I saw the stays carry away one after the other, and the topmast pulled over to an angle of nearly forty-five degrees. Then it broke away at the cap, to curve gracefully through the air and to splash overboard, its stout butt landing somewhere on deck before it too disappeared into the sea.

"So that's good-bye to our wireless!" howled Maddick, with a fatalistic shrug of his shoulders. "Well, well.—We'll have to do our best without it!"

"It looks to me as if the heel of it's gone through the roof of your cabin, sir," the navigator remarked.

"Damn my cabin!" the skipper grunted, turning to look at the compass. "It's the ship I'm thinking about!—Watch that course, quartermaster!" he went on to shout. "You're all over the shop!"

"Sorry, sir," the leading seaman replied, his sodden, puffed-up hands gripping the spokes of the wheel until his knuckles were whitened under the strain. "I can't hold her, somehow. She's hardly got steerage way."

For the first time I detected a sudden look of anxiety pass over Maddick's face, but it vanished almost at once.

"That's all right, Jeans," he said. "I know it's a tough job, and that you're doing your best. Stick at it. You'll be relieved before long."

A grin came over Jean's face.

"Aye, aye, sir," he answered. "I'm all right, sir. I don't want nobody to relieve me."

"Stout fellow!" the skipper laughed back. "That's the spirit."

The skipper's demeanour was altogether admirable, though by this time he must have realised that we were properly up against it. It surprised me how he could remain so outwardly unperturbed, almost nonchalant, in the face of this horrible danger. He might almost have been taking the ship into harbour on some calm sunny day, instead of battling in a partly broken-down vessel against all the might of the elements.

Those fierce gusts were beating down upon us with greater frequency than ever. It was blowing like the wrath of God.

I think little Maddick was a very brave man. And so were most of the others I came across on that unforgettable morning.

As for myself, I trust my face did not show the terror that I felt in my heart. I was mortally frightened. What is the use of denying it?

THE SCARLET STRIPE
CHAPTER XXIV

THE dreadful morning wore on.

The telegraphists, helped by some of the seamen, rigged a makeshift aerial between the masts, so that we should not be entirely cut off from communication with the outside world and the ship which had been asked to stand by us. After the greatest difficulty because of the tearing wind, they managed to get it hoisted. I never heard if any signals were sent off or received, but very much doubt it.

We managed to serve out a picnic meal of a kind to those who wanted it, though most of us were far too busy or too anxious really to think about food.

The wind seemed to increase as time rolled on. The gusts simply beggared description, the battered ship lying over to an angle of about fifty degrees and being literally bombarded with solid water filched from the tops of the seas. At such times the visibility shut down to a few hundreds of yards.

From somewhere out of sight a ship of some sort was coming to our assistance. I didn't know what manner of vessel she was, or when she might be expected to reach us. Moreover, it never occurred to me that if she did arrive, no boats could possibly have lived in the sea that was running. All that we could have done would have been to take to the water in lifebelts on the offchance of being picked up, and the captain would never have given the order to abandon ship until every hope of saving her had vanished.

But I remember gazing anxiously round the rim of the visible horizon whenever the squalls eased down a little and allowed one to face to windward with open eyes. Nothing appeared to alleviate the monotony of that distracted ferment of leaping water—no welcome hull or smoking funnel penetrated through the greyish murk of spindrift which overlay the maddened sea.

I felt horribly depressed and anxious. If only another ship had been in sight it would have been some comfort. We seemed so hideously alone and helpless.

Our engines were still moving, and down below in the engine-room and stokeholds Mr. Smale and his men must have been suffering the tortures of the damned. I could imagine them sliding about the greasy floor-plates as the ship flung herself violently to and fro, up and down, without ceasing. Every shovelful of coal had to be flung into the furnaces by hand. The fires had to be raked over and prodded with unwieldy slices six or eight feet long. How the sweating stokers managed to keep it up until the very end, how those in the engine-room managed to keep the propeller from racing every time the stern lifted to leave the screw revolving in air, baffles my comprehension. My praise may not really be worth having; but Mr. Smale and every man Jack of the engine-room department behaved magnificently. But the engine-room personnel of His Majesty's ships invariably do. I've never known them to fail.

On this occasion all the engine-room artificers and stokers off watch went below of their own accord to give a helping hand to their mates. They needed it. Sometimes a black-faced, sweating demon with a bare hairy torso and huge tattooed arms appeared on deck to gulp down a few mouthfuls of fresh air to revive himself after the heat of the inferno below. At

such times we gave them nourishment, water and oatmeal tinged with good old Navy rum. The spirit had been added at my suggestion and with the skipper's permission. They deserved it, poor chaps.

"Gosh, sir!" exclaimed one of them gratefully, swallowing a mouthful of the concoction after swilling it round his mouth. "This is a drop of something like! Mother's ruin ain't in it!"

Beneath his veneer of sweat and coal-dust I recognised the man as Stoker Caslon, rather a bad-hat in his way, and a little too prone to break his leave and to get drunk ashore. But he was a magnificent worker on board the ship, and, having been under my charge in the sick-bay, was rather a friend of mine. Some of the tales he told me were quite unrepeatable.

"What's it like below, Caslon?" I asked.

He swallowed what liquor remained in the cup, adroitly blew his nose with his thumb and forefinger, and expectorated twice.

"Like, sir?" he grinned, having completed these operations to his satisfaction. "D'yer really want to know?

"Then it's like 'ell, sir—perforated 'ell with the lid off. All the perishin' fire from them blinkin' furnaces 'oppin' out every time you opens the door an' the old ship takes charge an' tries to stand on 'er 'ead!—You should see us bein' chased round the stoke'old by red'ot fire a' singein' of our legs if it gets 'arf a chance.—Gawd! Dancin' the De Alberts isn't in it!—Roll, yer ruddy old trollop!" he added in a growl, as the ship gave a deeper wallow than usual. "Roll yer blinkin' guts out an' 'ave done with it!—I shan't mind if I never sees a ruddy ship again after this little lot, sir, an' that's a fact.—Well, s'long, sir. I'd best be gettin' back."

Caslon's language was always freely interlarded with oaths and profanity, for he had not been brought up in a Sunday school. I suppose really I should have restrained him in speaking thus to an officer, though no disrespect was intended. It was merely his way of expressing himself, and of showing, perhaps, that he regarded me more as a friend than as one of the brass-bound fraternity from the after-end of the ship.

After all, I had attended and done my best for him through an intimate but not uncommon complaint. I think he was grateful in his own peculiar way, for however great a scallywag he may have been on the official conduct sheet attached to his parchment certificate, he had a heart of pure gold.

I never saw him again.

It must have been soon after eleven o'clock that the first of a series of really frightful squalls burst down upon us. I never knew that the wind could blow with such violence. It seemed as if the end of the world had come, a cataclysm of the elements—annihilating, deadening, utterly stupefying to the senses. One could neither think, nor see, nor hear.

Literally beaten over, the ship leant over to an angle of fully sixty degrees. I was on the starboard side of the upper deck at the time, and felt the water surging first about my knees, then about my waist. Wrenched from my handhold I was carried aft in a flood with several other men, to bash my knee cruelly against some projection and my head against something else. Gasping and spluttering for breath, I managed to hang on to something—the heel of a davit, I think—until some one else clutched me round the body and I was wrenched free. Then the ship slowly began to right herself,

and the flood of broken water subsided. Half-stunned, I realised I had been floated on to the boat-deck. Another man was with me. Unconscious for the time of the roaring wind, the thudding and crashing of seas, the heavy spray beating at our backs, and the vague sound of some one shouting orders, we sat up and looked at each other, blinking like fools.

"Gawd!" the fellow suddenly shouted, a look of terror in his eyes and the fingers of his right hand exploring his left forearm. "I believe me arm's broke!—What'll I do, sir?"

"Hang on where you are," I told him. "You're better here than anywhere."

My head and my left knee were both very painful. I felt more or less half drowned and full of sea-water. I rather wanted to be sick.

"I believe she's goin', sir!" he shouted again. "Supposin' she rolls clean over?"

How we heard each other above the roar of the wind and sea I can't imagine; but hear each other we did. Moreover, his terror was having its effect upon me. It seemed infectious. Every ounce of courage I ever possessed seemed to be oozing out of me.

"Shut up, you damned fool!" I heard myself howl, seized by a sudden fit of angry impatience. After all, why should this man try to make me feel frightened? Why couldn't he keep his thoughts to himself?

He stared at me as though I were mad.

"Of course she won't roll over!" I went on. "You stay here, and you'll be all right. You're not the only one, anyhow."

I had thought of my two invalids down below in the boiler-room casing. They must have been flooded out when the ship heeled over. Whatever happened I must look after them.

“You stay where you are!” I shouted to the man beside me. “I’ll come back and attend to you when I can.”

There was a vertical iron ladder leading down from the boat-deck to the upper deck. I crawled towards it on my hands and knees, and, waiting for the roll, got my feet on the second rung and started to descend. I was still feeling rather dizzy, and my left leg hurt abominably.

To cut a long story short, I never reached the upper deck. I heard the demoniacal roaring of wind and the crash of breaking seas. At the same time the ship listed towards me, over and over, as though she would never stop. The water came higher and higher up my legs, while I hung on like grim death, my feet all but horizontal with my body and my face staring up into the sky. Then a monstrous sea, breaking on the weather side of the ship, came sluicing across the steeply inclined deck like a cataract and wrenched me from my hold. I felt myself floated free.

Another wave burst over my head, to leave me coughing and spluttering as I tried to tread water. I have a vague recollection of seeing the ship perhaps thirty feet away from me. She lay over on her beam ends, her deck nearly vertical and her masts and funnels practically parallel with the water. A cloud of black smoke and steam rose from amidships, and the figures of a few men could be seen amidst the heavy spray breaking over her port side, which now lay uppermost. Under her lee the water was fairly calm, dotted with the heads of swimmers, strewn with planks, wreckage, and the broken remains of boats washed off the booms.

I remember the frantic efforts I made before I finally succeeded in getting rid of my oilskins and sea-boots. I must

have swallowed pints of water in the process, for I went clean under twice.

I don't know how long it took; but while I was still busy there came the muffled thump of an explosion, one of the boilers, as I afterwards discovered.

When I looked again for the ship there were no signs of her at all—merely an oily patch on the water, a good deal of floating coal-dust, a large Carley float, some odd wreckage, and the heads of many swimmers.

I don't know to this day how I managed to reach the Carley float, a large oval lifebuoy perhaps ten feet long and six feet wide with lifelines all round it and a grating in the middle. But I remember being dragged half on to it with my legs still in the water, in which position I was violently sick.

When I recovered a little, I found there were no less than twenty-eight of us supporting ourselves on this one float. Three more men near by were holding on to part of a wooden ladder. Another that I could see had his arms and shoulders through an ordinary ship's lifebuoy.

The only officers visible were the captain, who looked nearly dead, and the navigator, both of whom were on the float with me. Counting heads, I realised with a shock that Channing, Cleeve, Mr. Blast, Mr. Smale, and between fifty and sixty men must have gone down with the ship! It was dreadful to contemplate.

But perhaps they were fortunate to die quickly, for ours must be a lingering agony. The chances of survival seemed remote indeed. What hope had we of being picked up, or of living in the awful sea and the sheets of wind-flung spray that would break upon us and around us the moment that oily patch drifted away to leeward and dispersed? I could see no

hope at all. We should be swept off one by one as we became exhausted.

Even if some of us managed to hang on until the weather moderated it would be only to have a pitiless sun beating down upon us. Without food or fresh water, we should die of starvation and thirst. From what I remembered of our course the last time I had looked at the chart, we were miles from the nearest land.

The chances seemed a thousand to one against any ship or Chinese junk sighting us. True, we had exchanged wireless signals with some vessel earlier in the morning. But supposing our respective positions were a mile or two out? Even if she found the precise spot where the *Peony* had foundered, what were the prospects of her sighting our solitary, storm-tossed Carley float in this waste of maddened, leaping water?

I made up my mind that rescue was not merely unlikely, but altogether impossible. It was a rotten business to drown like this after surviving the war and that experience of mine after being torpedoed in the *Parham*. But that episode, bad as it was, seemed child's play to this. There we had a sizeable ship's lifeboat, and a certain amount of food and water. Here we had nothing better than an overladen Carley float, and no food and water at all. The lack of water was what would eventually finish us off, even if we retained sufficient strength to hold on until the weather moderated.

How strange it was that the names of both the ships in which I had suffered disaster started with the letter P. If, by any remote chance, I did survive, I could request the Medical Director General's Department at the Admiralty never again to send me to a ship whose name began in this way.

What did it feel like to drown? I had heard it was not unpleasant, though Lord knows how any one really knew. Would it be better to slip off and drown at once in order to get it over quickly, or to hold on until one became too exhausted to hold on any more?

There was only one answer to that question—to hold on until the end. While there's life there's hope. I remembered the Latin motto—*dum spiro, spero*—that I had seen displayed in a conspicuous position on board a small and very ancient destroyer during the war.

I wondered vaguely what my people and Irina would think when they read of our loss in the newspapers. There would be the usual headlines, the usual sensational newsbills, newsboys shouting "Terrible naval disaster!" the inevitable remarks in the press about 'the price of Admiralty' and 'our gallant seamen,' and perhaps the raising of a special fund for the widows and orphans.

What waste it seemed that we should have to die in this miserable way—what damnable waste!

Poor little Irina! I had so hoped to make her happy, and now she would have to find some one else to care for her. I hoped she *would* find some one, and that he would be the sort of man I should have liked, not one of those overdressed, smarmy, side-whiskered lounge-lizards reeking of scent and affectation.

God! But it was bitter to think of Irina with some one else when she meant so much to me.

I don't know how to describe those hours of mortal agony on the float. I haven't the words. Still suffering from that bash on the head and a painful knee, I think I must have spent two-

thirds of the time in a state of semi-coma, though I had occasional spells of acute consciousness.

The water, luckily, was fairly warm, but all the time we had that cruel tearing wind, a terrific steep sea, and clouds of driving, stinging spray. If the seas weren't curling and breaking over us, to leave us gasping for breath in a rush of water, the weight of them battered the strength out of our bodies. There was no alleviation.

Time after time the float was capsized and the men were wrenched from their handholds. Man after man was swept away to leeward, never to reappear. I vaguely remember getting hold of one ginger-haired fellow, an able seaman named Soames, whose head was already under water. I pulled him back to the float by the hair of his head, put an arm round his body, and did my utmost to hold him up. Another man helped me, and for what seemed an eternity we strove to make Soames look out for himself. But every time we put his hands on the life-line running round the raft his nerveless fingers refused to grip, and the next sea washed his hands away. His head wobbled horribly, as though his neck were broken. It must have taken me several minutes to realise we were trying to save a man who was already dead. In our extremity there was no possible hope of restoring the apparently drowned by the usual methods of resuscitation.

"It's no use," I managed to gasp to my companion. "He's gone."

"Poor ole Ginger!" my helper returned. He was pretty far gone himself.

There was no sense in cumbering up the float with corpses. It already supported more men than it was intended for. We let

the body go. The last I saw of it was spread-eagled on the back of a foaming wave.

Twelve times that infernal float capsized before I lost count, and on nearly every occasion it happened one or two men were swept away. How any of us managed to regain it and to hang on I cannot imagine, for after the first two hours or so I felt as weak and as nerveless as a tiny baby. Some one, a petty officer, I think, tried to keep up our spirits by singing and joking whenever he had the breath to do it. Somebody started to sing 'Tipperary' until his efforts were stopped half-way through the first verse by the usual upset and fight for life.

I can't recollect half the incidents that occurred, but do remember sometimes trying to look round the visible horizon whenever we were lifted on the crest of a sea, hoping against hope that some ship might be in sight. But nothing was there —nothing but curling seas and sheets of blinding spray.

The curious yellowness in the sky had gone. It was still mainly overcast, with streamers of white cirrus flying across its leaden surface. Here and there, however, there appeared occasional patches of a pale watery blue. I think the sight of them put new heart into us, though the wind on the surface had not abated.

But it was not for long. The afternoon gave way to evening and the clouds to the westward became tinged with copper-colour, a garish yellow, and a horrible bilious-looking green as the invisible sun dipped beneath the horizon. That was a bad sign, I remember thinking. It meant more wind.

Dusk came over the heaving sea. Before we realised it, night had drawn in upon us. In our misery we had lost all count of time.

Don't expect me to describe our feelings of utter anguish and helplessness when darkness finally came. I don't even know how I spent the night. Most of the time I was only semi-conscious. But in my lucid intervals I remember the float capsizing again and again, and the struggle for life that ensued. There was a partial numbness in my body and limbs. My hands and fingers, though they still functioned, seemed to belong to some one else. My brain seemed numbed also and incapable of clear thought. I think I must have been light-headed. Some of the others certainly were. I remember awakening from a sort of stupefied torpor to hear one of the men shouting in delirium. It was horrible to hear his ravings. It seemed to destroy what little strength and will-power remained in me. I suppose, really, my exhaustion was getting the upper hand.

I recollect the dawn coming out of the east in a blaze of colour. The sky overhead was much clearer, and the sea, though still heavy, was not breaking so badly as before. The spray, too, was less, for the wind had gone down considerably. There were no more of those fierce gusts which drove the water into our mouths every time we tried to breathe.

We were all more or less comatose, half dead from exhaustion, though at that time I don't remember feeling any actual pain. Only sixteen men, among whom were still Maddick and Mortimer, the navigator, remained on or around the float. That meant that a dozen had been swept away and drowned since soon after the *Peony* had foundered.

I have a vague recollection of one of the seamen, wearing his flannel and trousers, trying to lash one of the short paddles to the inside of the raft to form a sort of mast. He had tied his jumper to the top of it. That won't be much use as a sail, I thought to myself. Then I realised it was merely a signal to

attract the attention of any passing ship. The visibility, thank heaven, was good.

When next I came to my senses it was to find myself lying half across one side of the float with my body, from the waist downwards, trailing in the water. The sun was well up over the horizon. My legs were still numb; but a grateful warmth was trickling through my body. I felt desperately sick and weak.

I don't know how long later it can have been that in a vague, subconscious sort of way I heard men shouting and talking excitedly. I was really past caring what happened; but lifting my head I saw a steamer within perhaps a hundred yards of us. She was actually lowering a boat.

Hardly able to believe my eyes, I stared at her in amazement.

Was she real, or a mere figment of my fevered imagination?

I rubbed my eyes and stared again.

By God! She was real—a small weather-beaten passenger steamer flying the Japanese flag.

The sea had gone down still more and was hardly breaking at all. I could see a crowd of interested spectators on the steamer's promenade deck. Even as I watched I saw her boat splash into the water and come pulling towards us.

My heart surging with happiness, I tried to shout with joy. The only sound that came was a feeble croak, the mere effort causing me to bring up about half a pint of sea-water.

I remember the rattle of oars as the boat came driving towards us, and being dragged unceremoniously on board and deposited in the stern-sheets with my head on someone's feet and somebody else lying across my legs.

Twelve of us in all were rescued from the Carley float, four more having slipped away since daylight. Five others were saved from pieces of wreckage floating in the vicinity. They had clung on to them for nearly twenty-four hours.

Of the little ship's company of the *Peony*, four officers and eighty-one men had perished.

God rest them. I never met a better or more likeable crowd of shipmates, and Channing, Cleeve, and the two warrant officers were sterling fellows and the best of messmates.

Thus, at the eleventh hour, were we picked up by the *Kurota Maru*. She was just in time. In another few hours, by which time the heat of the sun would have added to our misery, I doubt if half of us would have been left alive.

We were treated very kindly. I found myself undressed in a bunk in a clean, white-painted cabin with the sun coming in through the scuttle and a fat little Japanese doctor in uniform bending over me. A white-coated assistant hovered in the background.

"Ah!" the little man exclaimed, hissing between his teeth and rubbing his hands. "He feel the moch strong now—sss! Soon, I tink very strong—sss!—He, like me, are docta', I tink—sss! Soon, I tink, he all right. Yesss!"

He tapped me playfully on the chest with a finger, smiling at me in friendly fashion with his dark eyes twinkling.

I tried to engage him in conversation. But Doctor Tamaoka's English was as sketchy as my Japanese. Moreover, with seventeen of us to look after, he was a busy man.

We arrived at Hong-Kong two days later, by which time all of us except two, who had to be sent to hospital for a week, had recovered from our experiences.

Maddick had sent off a wireless signal soon after our rescue reporting briefly what had occurred. We were met by a naval boat and taken to the *Tamar*, once more to be besieged by a crowd of newspaper reporters. Most of them we succeeded in booming off; but for several days it was as much as our peace of mind was worth to set foot ashore in our borrowed clothing. They seemed to know us by sight and by name. I was even pursued into the Hong-Kong Club, and when I went to see Irina.

Dear Irina! We had plenty to talk about and to discuss, particularly as it had been arranged that all the survivors should go straight home by P. & O. after the usual court martial on the loss of the ship.

This meant that I should soon be carrying her off to England, and it was in my mind that we should be married first.

It was not until a few days after our arrival at Hong-Kong that I discovered that the wind during the typhoon which struck us had been blowing at an estimated speed of 130 miles an hour. Apparently it had travelled on to the mainland, where, besides doing untold havoc, the force of the wind during squalls had been carefully noted by some meteorological station.

One hundred and thirty miles an hour! It takes some believing; but I am convinced that this was no exaggeration, and Maddick and Mortimer will bear me out.

I compared notes with them afterwards, to discover that by the 'Beaufort Scale' a wind blowing at 75 miles an hour or more is numbered 12 on the scale, the highest possible, and is called a 'hurricane,' to which a sailing-ship could show no canvas whatever.

I know nothing of sailing-ships, nothing at all; but a wind of 130 miles an hour is a good deal more than a hurricane, which, after all, is first cousin to a typhoon. The name merely changes according to the locality. But a wind of 130 miles an hour travels roughly 200 feet a second and exerts a pressure of something like 84 lb. to the square foot. Imagine that on your body, or on the large area represented by the hull, upperworks, funnels, masts and rigging of a ship!

This is what we and the *Peony* had been up against—not an ordinary storm, not even an ordinary typhoon; but a roaring, raging cataclysm of the elements which seemed to blow the heart out of creation, to rip the very covering from one's brain by its shattering immensity and to leave one dumb, and blind, and stupefied.

THE SCARLET STRIPE

CHAPTER XXV

WOMEN can sometimes be a confounded nuisance when their fits of contrariness are upon them, and Irina was no exception to the rule. I loved her overwhelmingly, but am forced to admit that there were moments when she was altogether exasperating. At times I could cheerfully have planked her across my knee and smacked her with a slipper.

First she made up her mind to fall in with my suggestion that we should be married in Hong-Kong and go home together as man and wife. A day or two later, however, she had thought out another scheme—that we should be married in Hong-Kong; but that I should remain out there on leave for three or four months while she wound up her business.

It was useless for me to point out that I should have to ask Admiralty permission to remain abroad for the period she suggested, and that it was quite possible it would be refused.

The Admiralty, indeed authority of any kind, meant nothing to Irina. She was accustomed to waltzing through rules and regulations, and to getting what she wanted by merely smiling upon people, looking utterly forlorn and helpless, and talking nineteen to the dozen in her absurd broken English. I suppose she thought that I only had to adopt the same procedure to wangle anything on earth.

I had some difficulty in disabusing her, her argument being that the Admiralty in London and the Admiral on the China Station were practically one and the same. If she had

successfully vamped Sir Trevelyan Barker, in short, why couldn't I do the same?

Gosh! Imagine me trying to get off with the Commander-in-Chief by sheer charm of manner, or sending loving messages by cable to the Medical Director General at the Admiralty.

Anyhow, I was quite firm over the matter. Whatever else happened, I would not stay behind in Hong-Kong for three or four months. If she particularly wished it, however, I would try to arrange with the naval authorities who booked our passages that 'urgent private affairs' made it desirable that I should leave a fortnight or three weeks after the others. However, even this might be refused. I was by no means an important person.

Was her business so confoundedly important that it entirely swamped her affection for me, I wanted to know.

"No, no, Bobbee!" she replied rather tearfully, rubbing herself against me like the little cat she was. "You know eet ees not. I love you ver' mooch."

"Then if that's the case," I retorted, putting an arm round her, "why not sell the business and have done with it? Why should the beastly business stand in our way?"

"Eet ees not beastly beezness!" she exclaimed, flaring up and trying to push me away in a sudden fit of petulance. "Eet ees good beezness, you know zat. If we cut man's hair and massage his face, you say how clever you are, Ereena, vat nice shop you have—so clean, so comfortable, how preety are your asseestants. But because ladies com', you are not interest. You say 'go-to-hell' jost like dat, because you tink weemen silly, Ereena also."

"I think nothing of the sort," I objected. "I never thought you were silly. I know you're a little devil; but all the same, you're...."

"Devil!" she snorted. "I am devil, eh?"

"Adorable little devil," I corrected myself hastily. "But why not sell the blinkin' business and have done with it? It's a going concern. You ought to get a goodish sum for it."

She clicked her tongue and stamped her foot.

"I tell you plentee time nobody will buy," she proceeded to explain. "Beezness ver' eemportant now. I lose mooch money eef I sell quickly.—You do not like Ereena to lose mooch money, Bobbee?"

"No. Of course not. All the same, it's a cursed nuisance."

"Bot vat you vant, Bobbee?"

"You know perfectly well, you contrary little monkey. I want you. I want to take you straight home with me when I sail in about a fortnight."

"I know, Bobbee," she answered in her husky little voice. "An' eef I no come, you find somebodee else?"

"Don't talk bunk!" I retorted. "There isn't any one else."

As a matter of fact, with her mind hopping about between me and her business, I don't think she really knew what she *did* want.

But I realised it would have been unutterably selfish of me to have insisted upon her selling her beauty parlour, or whatever she called it, at a loss simply on my account. No, I could not insist upon that.

All the same, it was bitterly disappointing to think that she would not come home in the same ship with me, which I had so much looked forward to. If she came to England alone

three or four months later, I should have finished my three months' foreign service leave and have been appointed to some other ship. I think, too, I had a lurking suspicion that she might change her mind when I had sailed, and *never* come at all. That business of hers seemed mightily important and absorbing.

However, we eventually fixed it up that I should go home in the *Surat* with the others, and that she would follow the moment she could get away. She swore by all the saints in her calendar she wouldn't change her mind, and that she'd be in England in five months at the latest. I had to be content with that.

There came the day of the court martial, when the *Surrey* fired the 'one gun salute' at eight o'clock and hoisted the Union Flag at her peak to show that the court was about to assemble.

The real business started at nine-thirty, when we—Maddick, Mortimer, myself, and the fourteen other survivors—were shown into the captain's fore-cabin of the *Surrey*. Our judges comprised four post-captains and one senior commander sitting solemnly round the long table with blotting-pads, paper, pens, ink, and pencils in front of them. A paymaster commander officiated as Deputy Judge-Advocate. Courts martial are always public, and one end of the cabin had been roped off for spectators. The little space was quite crowded, and I recognised quite a number of friends among the lookers-on. The newspaper gentlemen, busy with their pencils and notebooks, were also present in force. The loss of the *Peony* was 'news,' and that evening the cables would be busy transmitting the gist of the day's proceedings to England. On the morrow, millions at home would be reading

of what was about to happen within the steel walls of this cabin.

The exact wording of the charge, I remember, was—"To enquire into the loss of His Majesty's Ship *Peony*, and to try Commander George Maddick, D.S.O., and the surviving officers and crew for their conduct on that occasion." We were, so to speak, all upon our trial, though the captain and navigator were naturally the people most affected.

But from the very outset the members of the court, even the post-captain who had been told off to act as prosecutor, were kind and sympathetic. I think they had practically made up their minds, after reading Maddick's report, that everything possible had been done to save the ship, and that nobody was really to blame. After all, what could any one have done against a wind blowing 130 miles an hour and a sea that could only be described as frightful?

I cannot remember the exact procedure, and even if I could it would be wearisome to describe it in detail. Maddick, asked if he had anything to add to his report, retold the story in slightly fuller detail, was questioned by the members of the court, and cross-examined by the prosecutor. I don't think any new evidence came to light.

Mortimer came next, and was asked many technical questions about the position of the ship, the state of the barometer, the condition of the sea and wind, the behaviour of the ship during the storm, and what he knew about the laws of revolving storms. Most of the questions were far over my head; but so far as I could see the pilot answered them all satisfactorily.

My turn to go through the hoop came next, and all I could say was what I had seen and felt, indeed an abbreviated

version of what I have already written in this book. The prosecutor didn't even trouble to cross-examine me, whereat I was rather relieved.

We adjourned at twelve-thirty for luncheon, which we three officers had in the wardroom and the men somewhere on the lower deck. The tribunal continued throughout the afternoon by the men being questioned one after the other. Nothing that we didn't already know came to the surface, though there was one comic interlude when a seaman would keep referring to his trousers. He rambled on something like this:

"Seeing that a disaster was about to take place, I says to myself, sir, I says, Jones, you'd better remove your trousis, you'll be swimmin' before long. So I unbuckles my belt, sir, puts it round my neck...."

"Your neck!" the President interrupted. "Why round your neck?"

"Because I've got me money in the pocket of the belt, sir," Jones replied with an air of great surprise. "I didn't want to lose 'im."

"I see," said the President, smiling. "Go on."

"Well, sir, I undoes my belt, and then takes off my trousis, thinkin'...."

"That will do about your trousers, Jones," the President broke in. "What happened when the ship rolled over and you found yourself in the water?"

Able Seaman Jones explained at length, and in great detail, mentioning his now vanished trousers at least five times. The loss of them seemed rather to prey on his mind, and I afterwards discovered why. It was not because his posterior had become sunburned, as I thought might have been the case; but because he was a huge man, and the pair of nether

garments given him by some kind-hearted Japanese seaman on board the ship that had rescued us, were far too small for his gigantic limbs. He had been forced to make himself a sort of divided skirt out of a blanket, and a photograph of him wearing this strange garment had appeared in the local press. He was in mortal terror that the *Daily Sketch* or *Daily Mirror* would get hold of it.

The court was finally cleared at about 6.30 p.m. while our judges considered their verdict. It did not take them very long. At about five minutes to seven we were ushered into the cabin again, to see the President and four members sitting with their caps on. On the long table the single sword, borrowed for the occasion by Maddick, had its hilt pointing towards him. So I knew that all was well. If the point had been towards him it would have meant that he, and possibly Mortimer as well, had been found blameworthy.

"The Court and spectators will stand while the verdict is read," the President announced.

Every one stood.

The Deputy Judge-Advocate cleared his throat and read:

"After a full and impartial investigation we are satisfied that the ship was in a seaworthy condition, and that orders to abandon her were given at the last possible moment and were necessary. We are of the opinion that there were no errors in navigation or procedure, that nothing the commanding officer could do would have averted the loss of the ship, and that no blame is attributable to any of the surviving officers or men, whose conduct throughout was exemplary. The survivors are formally acquitted, and the Court takes this opportunity of expressing their deepest sympathy with the relatives of those who have perished."

I heard Maddick's little sigh of relief. I must say that I was mightily thankful that neither he nor the pilot had in any way been held responsible. I longed to pat them both on the back.

"I have great pleasure in handing you back your sword, Commander Maddick," the President went on, holding out the borrowed weapon. "And I should like to congratulate all your officers and men."

"Thank you, sir," said our little skipper.

"The Court is dissolved," said the President. "That is all, gentlemen."

But not quite all. While the spectators and others filed out, Captain Fairfax, now no longer the President of a court martial but the captain of the *Surrey*, removed his cap and came over to us.

"I hope you and your officers will stay behind for a few minutes and join us in a glass of sherry or a cocktail in the after cabin," he said, taking Maddick by the arm. "Meanwhile, come and have a cigarette.—God! You must have had a hell of a doing!"

Captain Fairfax was a 'proper white man,' as the sailor would express it. He even had the forethought to provide beer from his own pantry for our fourteen men, which I believe is strictly against the regulations. He also made a little informal speech to cheer them up. It went down exceedingly well, particularly when he advised Able Seaman Jones, the next time he was shipwrecked, to stick at all costs to his trousers.

Three days later, early in the morning, we all embarked in the *Surat* for passage home to England. The 'Blue Peter' was flying, and leaning over the rail moodily watching the last of the launches and sampans being ordered away from the ship, I felt unutterably sad and lonely.

I had said good-bye to Irina the night before, and it had been a dreadful business. Most depressing. She wept, and I found myself gulping. In leaving Hong-Kong I was leaving her, the one person in the world I loved better than myself. She had promised to come to England as soon as she possibly could. I trusted her and believed her, but couldn't very well blame her if she changed her mind.

Suppose I never saw her again? Suppose she found some one she liked better than myself? Hong-Kong was full of unattached young men, too full. Some were eligible and some were not; but suppose she *did* find some one else?

The slip-rope splashed into the water, the buoy shot ahead, and I felt the *Surat's* engines moving. We started to creep ahead, faster and faster, towards Green Island, which stands in the western entrance to Hong-Kong harbour.

The city of Victoria was gradually slipping astern. In another hour Hong-Kong would be completely out of sight. I felt very sad and miserable. The breakfast bugle had gone; but I didn't want any food.

Most of the other passengers had gone below to feed or to unpack. I was practically alone on the promenade deck, leaning with my arms on the teak rail looking at the slowly receding island.

What was Irina doing now, I wondered? She might be looking at the *Surat* as she steamed out to sea. On the other hand, being a practical, hard-headed little business woman, she might be nibbling her usual meagre breakfast of dry toast and fruit before beginning the day's work at that confounded beauty shop of hers.

What did it matter what she was doing? What difference did it make? I was a sentimental, love-sick fool, old enough to

know better.

A light footstep sounded on the deck behind me, came closer.

“ ’Ullo, Bobbee!” said a husky, laughing little voice.

I turned in utter amazement.

Irina!

“I ’ave com’, Bobbee dear,” she said, smiling. “You no vant me?”

“But last night you said, you said.... God knows what you said!” I exclaimed, hardly able to believe my eyes.

“Lars’ night we say many tings. Zen, when you go, I tink and tink. I tink I change my mind, so I go to ze telephone, and I ring up ze steamer office. I say, have you got cabin for one small lady by herself. Zey say, yes, of course. So I com’ wiz you, Bobbee.”

“And what about the shop?” I demanded.

Irina grinned.

“The shop he go poof, I tink. I tell Dubassoff and Madame zey must look after shop. I no care.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“You little devil!” I murmured, taking her in my arms and rubbing my nose in her hair before I kissed her. There was only one Lascar in sight on the promenade deck, and he wasn’t looking.

“Not so much devil,” she objected.

“Adorable angel, then.”

“Zat better,” she whispered as best she could. “Ow, Bobbee! Don’t make ze squeeze so hard!”

So we went home an engaged couple, and were married on arrival in England.

There was, I'll admit, a certain amount of coolness with my people because I had taken unto myself a Russian wife. Perhaps they thought Irina had Bolshevist leanings. Anyhow, as I took good care to explain, Irina wasn't Russian through and through. She had had an English grandmother.

Have I ever regretted it?

The answer is emphatically in the negative.

She has her bad moments, of course, and sometimes, when she's really exasperating, I do really feel inclined to put her across my knee. But, as she is sometimes careful to point out, I have a good many faults and failings of my own, so perhaps we're quits.

Anyhow, she is still Irina.

THE END

WOKING,
January-June 1932.

FOOTNOTE:

[1] See *Endless Story*, by 'Taffrail.' Hodder & Stoughton. 21s.

[The end of *The Scarlet Stripe--being the adventures of a naval surgeon* by Henry Taprell Dorling (as "Taffrail")]