

IN THE CLUTCHES
· OF THE DYAKS ·



PERCY · F · WESTERMAN

*** 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 contact 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: In the Clutches of the Dyaks

Date of first publication: 1927

Author: Percy F. Westerman (1876-1959)

Date first posted: Aug. 5, 2021

Date last updated: Aug. 5, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210814

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>



“DOING HIS BEST TO CHOKE TREVOR INTO A STATE OF INSENSIBILITY”

[p. 44

“DOING HIS BEST TO CHOKE TREVOR INTO A STATE OF
INSENSIBILITY”

[p. 44

IN THE CLUTCHES OF THE DYAKS

BY
PERCY F. WESTERMAN

AUTHOR OF
"THE SECRET BATTLEPLANE," "TO THE FORE WITH THE
TANKS," "THE AIRSHIP GOLDEN HIND," "THE MYSTERY
OF STOCKMERE SCHOOL," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
F. MARSTON

Publishers
PARTRIDGE
London

MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN

CONTENTS

| CHAP. | PAGE |
|--|--------------------|
| I. "MAN OVERBOARD!" • • • • • • • • • • | 7 |
| II. THE PERILS OF THE REEF • • • • • • • • • • | 14 |
| III. A FORETASTE OF TRAGEDY • • • • • • • • • • | 22 |
| IV. THE HEAD-HUNTERS • • • • • • • • • • | 28 |
| V. TREACHERY • • • • • • • • • • | 37 |
| VI. A RACE FOR LIFE • • • • • • • • • • | 44 |
| VII. AT BAY • • • • • • • • • • | 52 |
| VIII. DANGER FROM WITHIN • • • • • • • • • • | 61 |
| IX. THE SECOND ATTACK • • • • • • • • • • | 70 |
| X. A TIGHT CORNER • • • • • • • • • • | 77 |
| XI. THE SECOND MATE'S SECRET • • • • • • • • • • | 86 |
| XII. THE LAST STAND • • • • • • • • • • | 93 |

BUT FOR WIRELESS

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| I. A STRANGE CONCERT • • • • • • • • • • | 107 |
| II. RAMMED! • • • • • • • • • • | 115 |

IN THE CLUTCHES OF THE DYAKS

CHAPTER I “MAN OVERBOARD!”

“ANOTHER forty days and we shall be in England, worse luck!”

“Why, ‘worse luck,’ Jack? Surely you will be glad to see home again?”

“Of course, but at the same time I cannot help feeling sorry that I’m leaving all this behind,” and Jack Trevor waved his hand with a comprehensive sweep towards a group of coral islands a mile or so on the starboard quarter of the *Karrawangee*.

The *Karrawangee*, a tramp steamer of 3,200 tons gross register, was laboriously forging her way through the tranquil waters of the Flores Sea. In addition to her cargo she had accommodation for twenty passengers, and seven of her cabins adjoining the apartment bearing the high-sounding name of state-room were occupied.

There were two Dutch merchants bound for Batavia, a coloured missionary, three Queensland farmers, and Ned Lindsay and Jack Trevor.

Ned Lindsay was the eldest son of a wealthy Australian, living in the Kimberley District of Western Australia. At the age of seventeen he was on his way to visit some distant relative in England, and his father, knowing Captain Thomas of the *Karrawangee*, had arranged for a passage on the tramp as far as Batavia, where the regular Dutch mailboat would take the lad on to Southampton.

Jack Trevor had accompanied his father on a trading expedition to British New Guinea, but circumstances had arisen necessitating his return to England. A small “pearler” had taken him across the Torres Strait to Somerset, where the *Karrawangee* had put in before calling at Palmerston.

At the latter port Lindsay had joined the tramp, and being nearly of the same age the lads struck up an acquaintance that rapidly developed into

staunch comradeship.

“Of course, I’m used to this sort of thing,” remarked Lindsay, pointing to the tropical foliage that covered the low-lying islands. “But all my life, as long as I can remember, I’ve been looking forward to a voyage to the Old Country.”

“Then I hope you won’t be disappointed, old chap. Personally, I shall be sorry when the voyage is over. You see, this is the pater’s last visit to New Guinea. He comes home in less than a twelvemonth, so I think it’s very unlikely that I shall be back in this part again.”

“You never know,” replied Lindsay oracularly.

The deck was deserted save for the two lads. Away on the lofty, canvas-screened bridge the second mate and the two Malay quartermasters stood by the wheel, their heads just visible from the spot where the youths were engaged in conversation.

Forward, the crew—for the most part lascars and natives of the Archipelago—were keeping “watch on deck.”

As the sun dipped below the horizon the shrill cry of the native quartermaster brought the watch tumbling up from the fo’c’sle. For a few moments all was activity till the steaming lights were shipped and the usual sunset routine carried out. Then all became quiet, and only the rhythmic thud of the propeller and dull swish of the bow-wave broke the stillness of the night.

“Rattling fine evening!” exclaimed Trevor enthusiastically, as the two friends watched the phosphorescent water bubble past the tramp’s rusty side.

“It is,” assented Lindsay. “But be careful, old man! Mind you don’t lose your balance.”

“Trust me for that,” replied Jack, laughing as he turned one of his canvas-shod feet round the ankle of the other.

Even as he spoke a dark form dropped from the boat slung from the davits overhead, and a large monkey, Captain Thomas’s pet, landed heavily on the young Britisher’s shoulders. Instinctively he raised his hands; the animal, to avoid chastisement, gripped Jack’s wrists and the next moment Trevor fell backwards over the bulwarks.

Ned Lindsay was not slow to act. With a bound he gained the place so lately occupied by his chum. His powerful hand seized Jack’s ankle, but ere he could make sure of his grasp the shoe was wrenched from Trevor’s foot,

although not before the brute that had caused the mischief had regained the bulwarks and had shambled off to a secure retreat.

The next instant a heavy splash told Lindsay that the unfortunate Trevor had struck the water. Raising a shout of "Man overboard!" Ned seized a lifebuoy and unhesitatingly leapt over the side.

Owing to the vessel's motion the plucky young Australian dived obliquely, plunging several feet beneath the surface. When he reappeared he shook the water from his eyes and looked around.

Within ten yards floated the lifebuoy, its white-painted canvas looming as it rose and fell with the faint undulations of the phosphorescent sea.

"This way, old man," yelled Ned, placing one hand upon the buoy and striking out to meet his comrade in distress.

Prompt as the young Australian's action had been, there was now a considerable distance between the two lads, while up to the time of Lindsay's hail Trevor had imagined that he was alone upon the wide sea.

Fortunately both lads were active and powerful swimmers, and ere long they met.

"What's to be done, Ned?"

"Why, keep cool and wait for the *Karrawangee* to lower a boat."

"I'm keeping cool; but there are no signs of the vessel stopping."

For those on board of the *Karrawangee* were in ignorance of the plight of the two chums. The hiss of the steam steering gear as the lascars altered the vessel's helm had drowned Lindsay's cry of alarm. In the saloon the three Queensland farmers, engrossed in a game of cards, had paid no heed to the unusual shout, while to the stolid Dutchman the appeal for help was unintelligible. For'ard the crew keeping watch heard not a sound, so unswervingly the *Karrawangee* held on her course, till the lads saw her stern light vanish in the darkness.

Towing the lifebuoy behind him Lindsay began to swim with long, easy breast strokes, Trevor keeping a couple of yards on his right. For nearly a quarter of an hour they continued in silence, fearing to exhaust themselves by needless conversation.

"Ned, old chap, how do you know that we are not swimming in a great circle? Where are we making for?"

"For those islands we passed at sundown. We're on the right tack."

Trevor asked no further questions on the subject. His confidence in the Australian was unbounded. As a matter of fact, Lindsay had taken his bearings by the position of the Square of Pegasus. Providing their strength was maintained, Lindsay had little doubt that they would strike one of the chain of coral groups betwixt the Islands of Celebes and Flores. Almost automatically the swimmers stuck to their task.

“Hark! What’s that?” whispered the British lad after a brief interval, fearing to raise his voice lest the sound would drown a faint distant roar.

“Hurrah!” was the Australian’s reply. “Jack, that’s the sound of surf beating on a reef. Another couple of miles and we’ll be safe. Can you manage without the lifebuoy? If so we can get along quicker.”

“I think so.”

“Then let it go—now, gently does it.”

Both lads knew full well that ere they reached a place of safety they must pass through a great ordeal. Weakened by their efforts, numbed by their prolonged submersion in the sea, they had yet to face the perils of the reef.

Suddenly a splash in the starlit water, barely audible above the roar of the surf, caused Lindsay to look behind him. As he did so a thrill of horror swept over him. Cleaving the water was the black dorsal fin of a huge shark.

CHAPTER II

THE PERILS OF THE REEF

IN the moment of dire peril all sense of fatigue seemed to leave the resolute young Australian. As yet Trevor was unconscious of the impending danger, as with his head immersed almost to his mouth he gamely persevered towards the still invisible reef.

Lindsay noticed that the monster was making for his chum, who had divested himself of the greater part of his clothing and thus offered a tempting bait to the tiger of the deep. Fortunately Lindsay, finding himself but slightly encumbered by his clothes, had not thrown off his light flannel shirt and trousers, and in his belt he carried a long and keen-bladed knife—the tried and trusted comrade of many an adventurous day in the Australian bush.

Trevor's yell of terror told Ned that his companion was aware of the threatened peril, and, redoubling his energy, Jack strove to escape his relentless attacker. As well might a sheep attempt to outstrip a greyhound.

Taking a long breath, Lindsay dived, knife in hand. Above him he saw the pale green belly of the huge monster glide swiftly through the water; then, with a rapid thrust, the Australian lad aimed a strong blow at the body of the shark.

For a moment it seemed as if the steel would be wrenched from his grasp, but the next instant he was aware that the keen blade was gashing the horn-like skin. Swept sideways by the impetus of the shark's motion, Ned felt himself brought into contact with the rough scales as the monster's tail lashed furiously in its death agonies.

Then in the midst of a sea of mingled blood and water Lindsay rose to the surface, still grasping his ready knife. But there was no need to repeat the stroke. The shark had received his *coup de grâce*.

Yet there was no time for elation over the victory. The reaction told heavily both upon Trevor and Lindsay. The former, though unharmed, had received a severe shock to his nerves; while the latter's limbs trembled so much that the knife almost slipped from between his fingers, nor could he trust himself to guide the blade into its sheath.

Both lads were too exhausted to speak. Feebly they struck out. The sound of the breakers became more and more distinct.

Four hundred yards—three hundred—one hundred. Now they felt the heave of the backwash, while the roar of the surf grew deafening. Were they, after all, to be doomed to a terrible death by being dashed to pieces upon the pitiless reef?

On the summit of a huge billow the exhausted swimmers were urged onwards with irresistible force and swiftness. Then, with a smother of foam, the breaker was lashed into a broken water upon the sharp white rocks. Ned felt his left leg grow powerless, and, weighed down by the overtaking wave, he sank. Down and down he went, too helpless to struggle, yet keeping his lips firmly closed. It seemed hours ere his head emerged above the surface. Then, as he began to repeat the downward plunge, he felt himself grasped by the hair.

Throwing his remaining strength into a final effort, Jack Trevor, holding his comrade with one hand, turned on his back and struck out across the comparatively calm expanse of water within the lagoon, till both lads sank utterly exhausted on a sandy, tree-fringed beach.

How long they lay there in a semi-torpid state they knew not. The sun was well above the horizon ere Jack opened his eyes, blinked vacantly for a few moments, then staggered to his feet, only to fall beside the prostrate body of his comrade.

With an effort he sat up and shook Ned by the shoulder. It was like pushing a log. The Australian lay on his side, his head pillowed on his arm, while the water-soddened clothing from left hip to knee was stained with blood.

Jack Trevor let him sleep. He had the satisfaction of knowing that he was not alone, though the wound on his companion's limb caused him some anxiety.

Once more the British lad struggled to his feet, this time with success, and looked about him. Under other circumstances he might have imagined himself to be upon an enchanted island.

Right and left ran a belt of pure white sand, terminating in two low headlands. Landwards the strand was bounded by a belt of dense, tropical vegetation, the coco-nut palms swaying softly in the growing land breezes that tempered the already strong rays of the early morning sun. Seaward the clear blue waters of the placid lagoon were separated from the apparently

boundless ocean by the reef over which the castaways had been swept on the preceding night, an almost unbroken line of milk-white foam marking the course of the partly submerged ledge of coral.

In vain Jack looked for a sail or the thin haze that denoted the smoke from a passing steamer, but seaward the horizon was unbroken. Neither did the island appear inhabited. Everything appeared in a primeval state, a veritable garden of tropical luxuriance.

Soon Trevor became aware of the shortcomings of his wardrobe. The sun's rays were beginning to beat fiercely upon his bare back and unprotected head, while he had a difficulty to withstand the dizziness caused by his prolonged submersion and the comparatively sudden transition from the coolness of the night to the heat of the day.

Then he thought of his helpless companion. "It won't do to let him lie there," he thought. "I must find some sort of a shelter under the trees."

After several attempts Jack succeeded in rousing his comrade, but walking was almost beyond Lindsay's power. Utter weakness, combined with the stiffness of his wound caused by being thrown across the jagged coral reef, had deprived him of all sense of feeling.

Leaning heavily upon Trevor's shoulder, Lindsay began his painful journey, both lads swaying and lurching as they struggled to the shelter of the trees. Here in the shade Ned was made as comfortable as possible, while Jack went in search of water.

For a long time his quest was unavailing, and the horrible thought flashed across his mind that perhaps there was no fresh water obtainable, and their escape from a watery grave was merely a respite ere the agonies of thirst terminated their existence.

Yet, Jack argued, with this profusion of foliage, water must be found somewhere. The tropical dews, heavy as they were, could not possibly provide sufficient moisture to nourish the vegetation; while the almost total absence of rain for months at a time pointed to the likelihood of water at no great distance beneath the surface. At any rate, he might try to dig a well, but without tools the work would be slow and laborious.

Just as Trevor was about to dig, a heavy object, thrown from above, struck the ground close to where he was kneeling, missing his head by a few inches. It was a coco-nut, green, and consequently full of liquid, but how it came to be severed from the stem seemed to be a mystery.

Shading his eyes, Jack looked upward, but amid the cluster of nuts and branches that crowned the group of lofty palm trees, no sign of the agency that had severed the nut was visible.

“A bit of luck, anyway,” commented the lad, and, making his way back to where he had left his comrade, he broke the husk and poured some of the liquid down Ned’s parched throat. Then, after taking a copious draught himself, Jack felt refreshed and considerably stronger.

Having carefully bandaged Lindsay’s wound and made him as comfortable as circumstances allowed, Jack sat down to rest till his comrade had recovered from the effects of his exertions.

“I’m afraid your estimate of forty days will be a bit out,” remarked Ned, as he awoke from a refreshing sleep. “More likely it will mean forty weeks. Seen any signs of inhabitants?”

“No, but a strange thing happened when I went to look for water. That coco-nut was thrown from the top of the tree.”

“Monkeys at work, no doubt.”

“I don’t think so; had there been I should have heard their chattering.”

“Strange. But, I say, hadn’t we better make a move and see if there’s a village or trading-station on the island? I feel fit to get about.”

“Before we do so, we may as well take stock of our belongings, Ned. It won’t take long.”

“Two pairs of flannel trousers, one vest and one alpacca coat, also two pairs of socks and one canvas shoe between us.”

“You have forgotten the sheath-knife and the contents of our pockets.”

The examination of their pockets revealed the presence of a leather purse containing three Australian sovereigns and ten shillings and six-pence in silver, a metal match-box, fifteen matches spoiled by sea water, two handkerchiefs, and the long focus lens of Trevor’s camera that the lad had omitted to place with the rest of his photographic gear.

“A fine stock-in-trade!” remarked Trevor, with a suspicion of sarcasm.

“It might be worse, old man. See, with this lens we need not want means for obtaining a fire, while the matches can be dried and put away for an emergency. As for the money, that may come in useful, though at present I don’t quite see how.”

Keeping to the sandy shore, and taking every advantage of the shade of the overhanging foliage, the lads set out on their tour of inspection, keeping their eyes and ears open for any sign of the presence of other human beings upon the islands. Thanks to the staying properties of the coco-nuts, the pangs of hunger had been temporarily averted, yet food and drink must be procured ere long—but how?

The explorers had barely traversed one hundred yards before an intervening spur or low headland hid the shore from their view, but on clambering over a ledge of rocks they saw that the land receded, forming an extensive bay.

Suddenly both lads came to a standstill. At a short distance from where they stood the hitherto smooth white sand was scoured by hundreds of shallow trenches running from the water's edge to the wooded land. For a while neither spoke. Jack, failing to understand the significance of this unnatural displacement of the sand, glanced at his comrade. The Australian's face was set, and between his clenched teeth came the words:

“What an escape!”

CHAPTER III

A FORETASTE OF TRAGEDY

TREVOR looked at his companion with undisguised astonishment. Why the sight of a number of slight furrows in the sand should have caused Ned to utter an exclamation of horror passed his comprehension. But the young Australian knew.

“Jack, old fellow, these are the tracks of a crowd of crabs.”

“Crabs? Well, what of it?”

“Not the crabs we are accustomed to, but great ferocious creatures that can climb a tree like a cat, and rend a man’s limbs asunder with their powerful nippers. Think of it, Jack, they might have come ashore at the very place where we were lying, dead to the world.”

Jack shuddered. He felt the force of Ned’s remarks.

“Ten to one it was a belated crab that hurled the coco-nut down. I’ve heard that the males ascend the trees and nip off the young nuts. However, we’ve been warned, so we must take steps to secure ourselves from this peril when we fix our camp for the night.”

Resuming their way towards the headland, the lads used their eyes to good purpose. Though up to the present they had failed to discover fresh water, they knew that with the profusion of coco-nuts they were in no immediate danger of starvation. Ned also pointed out the presence of sago palms and betel-nut trees.

“We’ve done enough tramping for to-day, Jack,” said Lindsay. “What with the heat and the effect of our struggle to the island, we’ll be knocked up if we go much farther.”

“All right,” assented Jack, glad to fall in with the suggestion that for some considerable time he had wished to make. “Let’s go inland for a short way.”

Forcing a passage through the rice stalks that grew considerably higher than a man’s head, the two comrades emerged upon a comparatively clear space at the foot of a low hill; while on their left grew an immense banyan tree, its multiple roots occupying a distance of nearly a hundred paces round.

“Capital!” exclaimed Ned. “We can rig up a sort of camp under the shelter of this tree. Come on, let’s make ourselves snug.”

After a satisfying meal of nuts and breadfruit, the lads set about the construction of a shelter for the night. Long flexible tendrils were to be found in abundance, and a number of these were soon cut and brought to the site of the camp.

Under Ned’s direction, Jack swarmed up one of the trunks of the banyan, and, selecting a suitable spot where the tree formed a natural arch, soon contrived to construct a hanging shelter, about twenty feet from the ground.

“That’s excellent,” commented Lindsay. “We ought at any rate to be safe from any prowlers.”

“But what if there are snakes in the tree?” asked Jack doubtfully.

“We must risk that, though I don’t expect danger in that direction. In any case it will be advisable for us to keep watch by turns.”

“How about a fire? Isn’t that the usual method of scaring wild beasts?”

“It is; but I think we ought to do without one for the time being—at least, until we make sure that the island is uninhabited. A blaze would bring a swarm of natives about us in less than no time.”

Just as the sun dipped behind the belt of dense vegetation the two lads clambered into their aerial retreat, the operation causing Lindsay acute pain, as the strain of climbing was thrown upon the injured limb.

“I’ll keep watch for the first two hours,” said Ned.

“For the first two hours?” replied Jack dubiously. “How can you reckon the time?”

“By the motion of the stars, old chap. The nail joint of the little finger held at arm’s length from the eye covers about one degree of the horizon, so by taking a bearing by means of two convenient branches of the trees I can roughly calculate the distance a certain star will move in a couple of hours. Make the best of your time, and I’ll turn you out in due course.”

For a considerable time Trevor could not sleep. The peril and fatigue he had undergone, the strange stillness of the forest, and the unaccustomed surroundings, all combined to banish slumber, till, thoroughly worn out, he dropped into a fitful doze.

Meanwhile Lindsay, lying full length upon the frail platform, kept faithful watch, peering through the starlit gloom, while his ears were

strained to catch the first sound of approaching man or beast.

Away on the reef came the constant roar of the surf, while an almost metallic sound denoted the fact that the land-crabs were on the march to their haunts in the coco-nut palms. Ever and anon the scrunch of the brutes' powerful nippers could be heard, followed by the dull thud of a weighty nut as it fell from the tree-top.

Thus the night watches soon passed, till, without warning, Lindsay saw a sight that caused his heart to beat violently. For several seconds he could hardly believe his eyes, then, realising that danger was at hand, he gently roused his sleeping companion.

"Hist! Not a sound," he whispered cautiously as Trevor stirred uneasily, and was on the point of demanding what was wrong.

From the sombre gloom of the dense palm-grove six sinister-looking figures emerged into the starlit glade. At first the lads knew not whether they were human beings or gigantic apes. Bending till their drooping arms nearly touched the ground, the intruders advanced, gliding with a swaying motion across the grass-covered clearing.

As they drew nearer the faint light glistened—not upon the hairy coats of the powerful gorilla of the Malay Archipelago, but upon the oiled bodies of a party of Dyaks. They were naked save for a loin-cloth of dark-coloured cloth, into which were stuck three or four formidable knives, while each man bore in his right hand a keen-bladed kriss, the wave-shaped steel of which glistened in the semi-darkness like a fiery sword.

As the two lads watched the approach of the natives, Ned loosened his knife in its sheath, while Trevor clenched his fists, for the Dyaks were heading straight for that portion of the banyan over which the castaways were hidden.

Yet without raising their faces the six men continued their way, as if bent upon some unswerving search. Their bare feet fell noiselessly upon the coarse grass, while in utter silence they followed an unseen trail.

Suddenly a blood-curdling yell broke from the lips of the foremost Dyak, and struggling furiously he was borne to the ground by an invisible agency. Of what happened during the next few moments the watchers in the banyan had but a hazy notion. The krisses flashed in the starlight; there was a short, sharp yap of pain, and the Dyak who had fallen a victim to a lurking animal was hurled unceremoniously from the bed of tangled reeds into which he had fallen.

The man had ceased to cry out. He lay on the ground groaning dismally, while his companions gathered around. To aid the wounded victim was no part of the Dyaks' business. A hasty examination showed that the man was incapable of continuing his journey. Once more the krisses flashed ere they were buried in the body of the unfortunate Malay. Then, seemingly unconcerned, the remaining five continued their way and vanished into the palm-grove, leaving a sinister object lying in the grass to mark the scene of the tragedy.

CHAPTER IV

THE HEAD-HUNTERS

DURING the remainder of the night sleep was entirely out of the question. Jack and Ned lay side by side upon their frail platform, keeping anxious vigil and conversing in low tones upon the subject of the midnight tragedy.

“They are Dyaks, I feel certain,” remarked Lindsay. “Though how they happen to be upon an island many miles from Borneo seems a puzzle. It’s a good thing that we didn’t light a fire, or by this time it would have been all up with us, I fancy.”

“What do you propose to do?” asked Jack, who trusted to his companion’s superior knowledge of bush life.

“Do? Why, sit tight till we find the coast clear. Then—well, I hardly know what to do, though I hope to be able to find a native canoe close to one of the villages. If so we might manage to make off under cover of darkness, and trust to a passing ship to pick us up—for we cannot be far from the usual track of vessels bound eastwards from Batavia. However——”

“What’s that?” whispered Jack, pointing in the direction of the dead Dyak.

As he spoke the corpse moved as if seized by some powerful agency, while a dull, metallic rattle was borne to the ears of the watchers.

“The land-crabs!” ejaculated Ned. “When daylight comes we’ll be able to see what we missed when we were unconscious on the shore.”

When, with the suddenness peculiar to the Tropics, night gave place to day, the lads were able to see the result of the previous tragedy. The crabs had retreated to their haunts, leaving the Dyak’s body horribly mangled, while within a few paces was the carcass of an animal resembling a cheetah.

“Now what’s to be done?” asked Ned. “I’m precious hungry, but I hardly like moving from here till we find out where those greasy gentlemen are who nearly called upon us last night.”

“I’ll tell you what,” replied Jack. “See that fellow’s kriss? I mean to have that, so here goes.”

“Be careful!” exclaimed Lindsay. “I think it would be well if we both went.”

“I don’t think so,” remonstrated his companion. “With that gash in your leg you are handicapped, whereas I am fairly fresh. Trust me to keep a sharp look out.”

Quickly and silently Jack descended from his lofty perch, and running across the intervening belt of grass, took possession of the wavy piece of steel. The sheath he could not bring himself to take, since it was still attached to the strip of hide that encircled the Dyak’s waist.

“We’ve doubled our armoury, Ned,” exclaimed Jack, as he regained his comrade. “What a fine piece of steel!”

“It is, but mind how you handle it. These beggars don’t hesitate to poison their weapons in case a slash from one should not be sufficient. Well, let’s see about breakfast, then we’ll make a start.”

Fortunately the lads had laid in a stock of coco-nuts and fruit, so that there was no necessity to descend to earth in order to gather more, and by the time the meal was over the sun was well above the tree-tops.

“Now we’ll make a move,” announced Ned. “The coast seems clear. You go first, and I’ll drop the knives down to you. I don’t fancy climbing down a tree with a razor-blade for company.”

Trevor was about to descend when a babel of voices from no great distance was heard.

“Lie still, Jack,” whispered Ned. “The Dyaks are returning.”

Once more the five natives emerged from the palm-grove and began to cross the open glade. This time there was no stealthiness about their movements. Each man walked erect, a fierce look on his face, while his loin-cloth was distended by a spherical object that the fabric failed entirely to conceal.

Like a miniature victorious army the head-hunters—for such they undoubtedly were—strode past the body of their slaughtered comrade, giving it a side glance of disdainful curiosity. Fortunately, none of them thought about the dead man’s knife, neither did they chance to look up to where the lads’ bower was conspicuously perched under the banyan, and with a sigh of relief the castaways saw the Dyaks disappear in the gloom of the farthest portion of the forest.

“Now what’s to be done?” asked Ned, when it was safe to indulge in conversation. “If we follow those brutes we shall in all probability lose our heads.”

“It’s the best thing we can do.”

“What—lose our heads?”

“Well, hardly. What I mean is this. If we go in the direction whence these Dyaks have come we’ll no doubt stumble across the village those fellows have raided. They will, I’m afraid, hold us responsible for the night’s work. On the other hand the head-hunters, satisfied with the result of their expedition, will hold a sort of feast in which arrack and bhang—two potent beverages—will be freely consumed. Under the influence of the liquor the Dyaks will be half stupefied, and we stand a good chance of borrowing one of their canoes and making our escape.”

“I see your point,” replied Jack. “But how’s your leg?”

“A bit stiff, but a steady tramp will soon work the stiffness off,” replied Ned. “So quick march, but keep your eyes skinned.”

The track left by the head-hunters was not difficult to follow, the trodden-down reeds giving a tolerably easy guide. The route was one of surprising beauty. Amid the dense, luxuriant tropical foliage humming birds and gaudily-marked butterflies darted hither and thither, while in the glade the shade was sufficient to temper the powerful rays of the sun.

Presently the gladdening sound of trickling water was heard, and a few steps brought the travellers to a brook that ran swiftly down a steep rock-bedded defile.

“No need for the alum test here,” exclaimed Lindsay, kneeling down and plunging his head and shoulders into the water, an example that his companion was not slow to follow.

“Rather not,” added Jack. “The water is as fresh as anyone could wish for. But what if the Dyaks are resting on their return march? We might easily stumble on top of them.”

“I’ve taken that into consideration,” replied Ned. “But anyone used to the bush can tell that those reeds have not been broken less than a couple of hours ago. Besides, they won’t rest till they reach their village with those horrible trophies. If we can manage to arrive within sight of the place at about midday, in all probability the Dyaks will have had plenty of arrack, and will be sleeping off its effects during the heat of the day.”

“Do you think they are proper inhabitants of this island, or only here temporarily?”

“Goodness only knows! The whole island seems out of place. Here we are east of the boundary known as Wallace’s line, that separates the flora and fauna of Malaysia from that of Australia; yet, although the line of demarcation is supposed to be most rigid, we find a mixture of each of these divisions, both as regards animals and vegetation.”

On resuming their way the lads found that the track ascended a long gentle slope, still covered with reeds and long grass.

Presently Ned, who was leading, stopped as the dull glint of a metal object caught his eye.

“A cartridge case, by Jove!” he exclaimed. “And one belonging to a modern type of rifle.”

“It’s not a British one,” remarked Jack, taking the brass cylinder and examining it. “The only marks on it are 93 and F.N.”

“No, it’s Mauser ammunition, and must have been fired by white men, unless——”

“Unless what?”

“These Dyaks have looted some ship or store. Look, by George, there are more of them, and——”

With an exclamation of horror Ned stopped short and pointed to what looked to be a heap of dirty canvas lying in the grass.

Horror-stricken, the two comrades drew near. The canvas suit covered the headless skeleton of a man. Ants had left only the bones, while the boots and belt of the unfortunate victim had been removed. Scattered around the corpse were nearly fifty empty cartridges showing that the man had made a desperate stand against overwhelming odds.

“Those head-hunters have been at it again,” ejaculated Lindsay. “Some poor brute of a Dutch soldier has evidently been cornered here. Good heavens, they’ve given us plenty of warning of what to expect if we fall into their hands.”

“Is it safe to continue?” asked Jack with a shudder.

“Safe? Of course it isn’t; but at the same time it’s far worse to hide in the bush without taking any definite steps to get clear of this ghastly island. So

come on, it's fairly certain that the coast is clear for a few hours yet, at least."

Thus encouraged, Trevor followed his chum with a growing confidence in his judgment, although the ordeal that they had undergone during the last thirty hours was quite sufficient to last him for a lifetime.

"We are nearly at the summit of the hill," continued Ned. "So we must be extra cautious. You hide in these bushes while I have a look over the other side. And mind, if I fall into a trap and there's no chance for me, you sit tight till the coast is clear. If there is a chance I'll shout to you. You quite understand?"

"But I say——" protested Jack.

"It's no use arguing with me," replied Ned firmly. "I'm only supposing that there are Dyaks prowling around within a few hundred yards or so. In all probability there are none. I hope to be back in a quarter of an hour."

The next moment Lindsay had gone, and Jack was left alone. It was one of the most unpleasant quarters of an hour he had ever spent. Unable to judge the time, it seemed as if an hour had elapsed ere Lindsay appeared from behind a bend in the path and beckoned to him to follow.

As Trevor drew near he saw that Ned's face was aglow with excitement. Without a word he turned and made his way swiftly towards a clump of trees that crowned the crest of the hill. As Jack, panting with the heat and exertion, caught up to his comrade he saw a sight that raised his hopes to a high pitch.

At a distance of about four hundred yards from where they stood, and surrounded by a wide expanse of long grass, lay the Dyak village, a collection of huts enclosed by a palisade of pointed bamboos. Neither in nor around the village were any signs of movement. Away to the left was a broad sheltered creek, and in the centre, swinging easily to her cable, was the *Karrawangee*.

CHAPTER V

TREACHERY

“**H**URRAH!” exclaimed Jack. “She’s put in here to look for us. We’re safe now.”

“Not so much noise, old chap. I’m not so sure about it,” replied Ned in a whisper. “It looks fishy—mighty fishy. It may be all right, but honestly I don’t like the look of things. I’ve been watching the ship pretty carefully for some time. She hasn’t steam up; that’s strange. I can’t see any Europeans on her deck, though the natives swarm all over and around her. They are unloading some of her cargo into those large canoes lying alongside, and I know that it was not Captain Thomas’s intention to discharge cargo this side of Batavia.”

“Then some mishap has occurred?”

“Undoubtedly. She may have scraped against a rock or broken her main shafting, and has crawled into this creek for repairs. But what I fear is that she has been boarded by Malays, in which case her crew has been murdered, and when the ship has been looted she will be scuttled in deep water.”

“We’re in a tight corner, Ned.”

“Not worse than if you hadn’t fallen overboard, Jack. We must stick to our original plan and sit tight till nightfall. There are plenty of small craft lying on the shore. Most of them are far enough away from the village to be taken without raising the alarm.”

Ensconcing themselves in the shelter of the coco-nut palms, the lads awaited developments. Although the heat of the sun’s rays was terrific, the shade of the foliage and the light breeze blowing towards the sea made the temperature of their retreat fairly endurable, and having satisfied their hunger with a meal of fallen nuts, the two comrades lay still, keeping a close watch upon the village and the creek.

For more than an hour utter stillness brooded over the village. Afloat the scene of activity continued till, apparently at a given signal, the fleet of canoes along the tramp sheered off and paddled towards the shore.

Their arrival caused the seemingly deserted village to teem with life; women and children rushing down to the shore to meet the men-folk, for every able-bodied male had taken part in the work afloat.

Presently three men emerged from the gateway in the stockade, and began to make their way straight for the grove in which the lads were hidden. Two of the men were Dyaks, while between them walked a Chinaman, dressed in loose jacket and trousers of dark blue cloth, and black shoes with white uppers.

“Here, what’s their little game?” exclaimed Ned anxiously. “We shall have to make a bolt for it.”

“I say, Ned, I believe that yellow fellow is the ship’s cook, Yen Chow,” said Jack, who was hastily collecting the tell-tale fragments of their repast.

“I think he is, but these Chinks are all alike,” replied Lindsay. “However, let’s get a good hundred paces in the rear, and then we can see what these rascals are going to do with the Chinaman.”

Cautiously moving through the long grass, the two lads made a circuitous route till they had put a fairly safe distance between them and the advancing trio, while at the same time the latter’s movements could be clearly followed.

The two Dyaks were differently attired from those who had set out on their head-hunting expedition on the previous night. Both wore light cotton garments, with a red scarf round their waists. Into the folds of this voluminous girdle were thrust a kriss and a revolver.

The Chinaman—Yen Chow, for Jack’s surmise was correct—carried a spade over his shoulder. He was talking volubly.

The leading Dyak then stooped and drew a rectangular plan upon the ground, and giving the Chinaman orders to dig, and significantly pointing to his revolver at the same time, the man sauntered back towards the village, his companion following after he had repeated the former’s stern warning.

Left to himself, Yen Chow began his task leisurely and without the faintest sign of fear, turning over the sandy soil and heaping up the displaced earth with deliberation.

“Look here,” whispered Jack, “I’ve spoken to that fellow several times on board the *Karrawangee*. I’ll have a word with him.”

Lindsay assented, and Trevor made his way back through the long grass till he came within ten paces of the Chinaman.

With Oriental imperturbability the Chinaman paused in the act of thrusting home his spade, and looked round.

“Well, Massa Trebor?”

“What are you doing here, Yen Chow?” was all that Jack could bring himself to say.

“To-day me dig for pilate man; to-morrow pilate man he cut my throatee,” replied the ship’s cook as calmly as if he were announcing dinner was ready in the galley.

“What’s happened to Captain Thomas?”

“Cap’n Thomas, he live to die to-morrow. Seven of the crew alee same. Ollers dey die so,” and Yen Chow drew his long-nailed forefinger across his throat. “Cap’n Thomas and men dey tied up in hut.”

“Which hut?” asked Jack anxiously.

“Number one size hut alee samee one side dis end,” replied Yen, pointing to the village.

“You were speaking to those Dyaks just now,” continued Jack. “They might not kill you, after all.”

The Chinaman’s slanting eyes narrowed.

“Me know; velly nice to-day; velly much kill to-morrow.”

“Look here, Yen. You say they are all right with you now. Could you manage to take a message to Captain Thomas from me?”

“Yen Chow havee dig hole. If Yen Chow havee no spade he no dig, savez?” And before Jack could grasp the meaning of the Asiatic’s remarks the Chinaman had broken his spade.

“Now me go fetchee spade. Heap spades in hut where Cap’n Thomas be kep’ prisoner. What talkee you him say?”

“Tell him we—I mean—I—am here. And, Yen, are there any firearms—revolvers lying about down in the village? Can you get hold of two for me?”

“Me see what my hand kick ‘gainst. But how wantee two?” added the Chinaman.

“One for you and one for me,” replied Trevor hastily. “And bring cartridges.”

“Alee samee. Two six-bang fire; me try,” and throwing down his broken spade Yen Chow walked stolidly towards the village.

Quite an hour elapsed before the Chinaman appeared carrying another spade upon his shoulder, while his jacket was distended by a suspicious-looking bulge.

“Lie low for a little longer, Ned,” said Jack, as he prepared to meet the messenger. “This is my call, you know. . . .”

“Well, Yen?”

“Hab got, Massa Trebor,” replied the Chinaman, fumbling inside his jacket, and produced two Webleys and half a dozen packets of cartridges.

Before Jack could grasp the prize the two revolvers slipped from Yen’s hands and fell upon the ground. The Chinaman stooped. His fingers closed over one of the weapons, and in an instant a loud detonation, as the bullet whizzed harmlessly skywards, awoke the stillness of the sultry air.

Ere the echoes of the report died away, Yen Chow grasped the astonished Trevor by the ankles, and with a powerful heave of his little muscular arm threw the English lad to the ground.

At the same moment, in reply to the pre-arranged signal, a horde of Dyaks poured through the stockade and raced headlong towards the spot where the treacherous Celestial held Jack at his mercy.

CHAPTER VI

A RACE FOR LIFE

NED LINDSAY, with his varied Colonial experience, was fairly well acquainted with the characteristics of the yellow race. Years of close contact with the Europeans will not erase the cold-blooded, diabolical instincts of the almond-eyed Mongolians. Under a veneer and conformity to the laws and customs of the West lurks the intense hatred of the Chinese for the “foreign devils.”

With this knowledge Ned thought fit to disregard his chum’s request, and carefully to stalk Jack while he was engaged in conversation with Yen Chow.

While the latter was doing his best to choke Trevor into a state of insensibility, so as to hand him over alive to the Dyaks, Ned, forgetting his wound in the lust for vengeance, sprang upon the Chinaman. Bending over his victim, and totally ignorant of the fact that Jack was not alone, Yen Chow went down like a felled ox before a terrific swinging blow of the Australian’s fist.

“Make a dash for it!” shouted Ned, dragging his comrade to his feet, and, picking up the revolvers and ammunition, Lindsay ran along the beaten track by which they had come in sight of the village, Trevor following at his heels.

When thirty yards had been covered Ned stopped, and, carefully parting the thick growth of bamboos and grass, told Jack to go ahead. In a few moments both lads were worming through the brushwood in the direction almost at right angles to the beaten track, while the shouts of the exultant Dyaks grew louder and louder.

For a brief space the fugitives halted, while Ned handed one of the revolvers to his friend.

“Jack,” he whispered, as he threw open the chambers to make certain that the weapon was loaded, “there is only one thing to be done. We must risk everything and rush straight for the village. More than likely all the warriors have left it in pursuit of us. If Captain Thomas and the rest of the passengers and crew are alive we must liberate them and make the best of our way to the ship.”

“I’m game,” replied Jack, resolutely. “Lead on.”

Cautiously edging towards the belt of short grass, whence a view of the stockaded cluster of huts could be obtained, the lads pursued their way. Suddenly the shouts of triumph gave place to cries of rage and amazement as the foremost of their pursuers stumbled across the senseless body of the Chinaman.

The head-hunters lost no time. Their yellow-skinned captive had promised to deliver another white man into their hands. He had failed. Yen Chow had hoped to save his life by his treachery, but his blunder had one good result. Instead of being kept for purposes of torture, he met with a swift end, for, as he lay unconscious on the ground, a muscular Dyak severed his head with a single blow. Then, having done this act of vengeance, the savages streamed along the path in pursuit of the white fugitives.

“Thank heaven!” exclaimed Ned fervently, as the sounds of the pursuers grew fainter and fainter. “Now, make a dash for it!”

With their revolvers in their hands, the two lads ran stumblingly through the short grass straight for the village. Wellnigh breathless, and blinded by perspiration, they lurched and panted across the intervening stretch, barely two hundred yards in width, that separated the jungle from the stockade.

Fortunately, as Ned had predicted, all the able-bodied males had started in pursuit, and, up to the present, none had given up the chase.

Through the gateway the twain passed without opposition, and, shouting the captain’s name as loudly as their lungs would permit, they made their way towards the hut indicated by the treacherous Celestial.

Women and children, terrified by the apparition of two desperate white men, ran screaming to their huts. There was one exception. A naked Dyak lad, who could not have been more than ten years of age, barred their path with a brandished kriss.

Even though success to their plan might depend upon it, neither of the fugitives could bring himself to shoot down the plucky little savage. Yet the young Dyak, armed with a keen-bladed weapon, was not to be ignored.

Rushing straight towards the copper-skinned imp, Jack raised his revolver. Dauntlessly the savage stood his ground. When barely five paces from the young Dyak, Trevor fired as close to the boy’s head as he could trust himself to do.

Partially stunned by the report, and blinded by the flash of the heavy weapon, the Dyak lad staggered, and ere he could recover himself, Jack with a charge acquired by former practice on the football field, sent him spinning.

It was a strange sight that greeted the lad's gaze as they threw open the rough door of the hut. At first their eyes were temporarily blinded by the sudden transition from the dazzling glare of the tropical sun to the gloom of the darkened hut.

Lying in a circle on the floor, like the spokes of a wheel, were seven motionless figures clad in European clothing. For a moment the chums thought they were too late, till a gruff yet faint voice hailed them in English.

“Help us if you can, but get clear away before those murderous devils come back.”

Gradually the lads were enabled to distinguish objects within the hut, and the reason for the immobility of the captives became apparent. Each prisoner was lashed to a bamboo pole—stout thongs securing him by the neck, waist, and ankles—so that movement was an impossibility.

With their knives Jack and Ned hurriedly set about to sever the lashings and to assist the prisoners to their feet. So stiff and cramped were the survivors of the *Karrawangee's* crew that, at first, it seemed as if they would be incapable of walking a yard, much less running to the shore.

“I wish we knew where the arms are stored,” gasped Ned, as he assisted Captain Thomas along the narrow passage between the rows of huts.

“So do I,” replied Trevor; “but there is no time to be lost.”

Yet, even in their frantic haste, the sight of an earthenware vessel full of water was irresistible to the captives, and with a mad rush they struggled between themselves to slake their burning thirst.

The liquid, though lukewarm, revived their flagging energies, and, with increased determination, the party resumed their hasty flight towards the creek, their departure being greeted by a babel of cries and shrieks from the women and children who had emerged from their huts to witness, in utter helplessness, the white men's bid for freedom.

“Thank heaven those rascals are still following a false trail!” exclaimed Ned, as the fugitives drew upon the sandy shore. “Now, Captain Thomas, what had we better do? Take the largest canoe and stand out to sea, or board the *Karrawangee*?”

“Board the *Karrawangee*, Mr. Lindsay,” replied the skipper, who had now somewhat recovered himself. “We may have to fight for it, but, once aboard, those villains won’t be able to play the same trick with me, I’ll warrant. You see, if we put to sea in one of their praus we shall only have about an hour’s start, and these Dyaks can paddle their canoes at a tremendous rate. Even if we could shake off pursuit, we are without provisions and water, and it may be days before we fall in with a ship, even though we are but a few miles from the recognised trading sailing tracks.”

Both lads realised the force of Captain Thomas’s remarks. Once aboard the *Karrawangee*, they could hold her lofty iron sides against a swarm of Dyaks, and at a favourable opportunity they could raise sufficient steam to get under way.

Fortunately the paddles were lying in most of the canoes. Selecting a small craft the fugitives prepared to launch her, while Ned, with considerable foresight, collected the paddles from the other praus and threw them in a heap upon the bottom of the craft.

“Give way!” ordered Captain Thomas, grasping the steering paddle. Once more afloat, his natural habit of command reasserted itself, while blank despair gave place to renewed hope.

Awkwardly the canoe, propelled by its unaccustomed crew, began to gather way and headed for the *Karrawangee* that lay at anchor in the centre of the creek, barely a quarter of a mile from the shore.

The lads had now, for the first time during their flight, an opportunity of recognising the survivors of the ill-fated tramp. In addition to Captain Thomas there were Tarlton, the second mate; Scott, McQuarie, and Vincent, the Queensland farmers; Van Huyt, one of the two Dutch merchants; and Strawbridge, the quartermaster. Concerning the fate of the rest of the passengers and crew the lads knew nothing, though they could give a shrewd guess.

“Stand by!” shouted the captain as the canoe ran alongside the tramp, and Strawbridge made a grab at the many ropes that festooned her lofty sides and trailed in a most unshiplike manner in the tideless water. The quartermaster was about to swarm up the rope as well as his strength would allow, when Jack gave a warning cry.

“Look out!” he yelled, for the head of a demoniacal-looking Dyak, with a gleaming kriss between his teeth, appeared over the ship’s rail, while a revolver shot whizzed unpleasantly close to the captain’s ear.

At the same moment a roar of angry voices from the shore announced that the pursuers had returned from their fruitless search and were preparing to take to their canoes.

The survivors of the *Karrawangee* were caught betwixt two fires.

CHAPTER VII

AT BAY

REALISING that it would be sheer madness to attempt to board the tramp with a well-armed, bloodthirsty Malay awaiting them, Captain Thomas ordered the canoe to be backed under the *Karrawangee's* stern, where, screened from the revolver fire, the nine men could hold a hurried consultation.

Something must be decided, and that quickly. Flight would be hopeless; defence in a frail canoe equally forlorn. Their only hope of safety lay in gaining possession of the ship.

"I wish we had taken two canoes," said Captain Thomas. "We could then board from both quarters. Some of us would, no doubt, get a dose of lead, but we should have to take that chance."

"We have two revolvers, sir," exclaimed Jack, fired by a sudden inspiration.

"Well?"

"I propose that I slip overboard, and swim round the *Karrawangee's* bows, holding one pistol clear of the water. It would be a fairly easy matter to board by the cable. Meanwhile the rest of us can make a feint attack on this side, keeping the fellow's attention attracted by an occasional shot. We haven't much ammunition to spare, but I don't think it will be utterly thrown away."

"Well thought out, Mr. Trevor. The sooner the better, for those brutes ashore have got hold of some paddles and are pushing off. Are you a good shot, Mr. Lindsay?"

"A tolerably fair one, Captain Thomas."

"A tolerably fair one, eh?" exclaimed McQuarie. "You should have seen him potting bottles during the voyage."

"All right; you do the shooting business, Mr. Lindsay," continued the skipper.

Cautiously lowering himself into the water and holding the Webley above his head, Jack swam silently along the ship's side, while the canoe pushed off to enable Ned to exchange compliments with the Dyak.

Without interruption Jack gained the bows and grasped the heavy iron cable. Gripping the butt of his revolver between his teeth, the lad swarmed up the rusty chain till he reached the hawse-pipe. Here, finding a temporary foothold on the sloping metal, Trevor paused to regain his breath, then grasping the base of one of the fo'c'sle rail stanchions, he gained the deck.

It was a strange sight that met his eyes. Lying in every conceivable position on the deck and over the partially opened hatchways were nearly twenty Dyaks, each with his kriss lying close at hand.

At first sight Jack thought that this was part of a deep-laid scheme to lure the white men on board and then to rush them by weight of numbers. But the deep, irregular breathing and the unnatural postures banished this idea.

Restraining his desire to slip back by the way that he had come and warn his comrades, Jack stepped noiselessly toward the nearest Dyak, his revolver held ready for instant use at the first sign of resistance.

The caution, though prudent, was unnecessary. The Dyak, as were the rest of his prone companions, was deep in the sleep of insensibility produced by an excess of arrack. Only one—the native who had barred the boarding-party—retained his senses, and with his back turned to the Englishman, was crouching behind the bulwarks, ready to open fire at the first attempt on the part of the white men to come over the side.

Jack was sorely puzzled as to how to act. Creeping cautiously behind the line of deck-houses, he came close to and immediately behind the unsuspecting Dyak. Without compunction Trevor would have shot him down there and then; but the fear that the noise of the report might arouse the sleeping natives deterred him.

The lad knew that a shot had already been fired without any effect upon the senseless Dyaks; but at the same time he knew not what would be the result of another report.

Retracing his way, Jack took possession of a heavy spanner. Then, with, his pistol in his left hand, he returned to tackle the vigilant Malay.

Even though Jack's bare feet trod softly upon the hot deck, the quick ear of the Malay detected the almost imperceptible sound. Wheeling suddenly the Dyak raised his revolver; but he was the fraction of a second too late. Trevor pressed the trigger of his weapon. The native sprang a full three feet in the air and pitched forward on his face. His revolver barked twice as his fingers convulsively jerked the trigger.

Apprehensively Jack glanced at the recumbent figures littering the deck. Even the deafening detonations had been insufficient to rouse them from their sleep.

“All clear!” he shouted joyously to his comrades.

“You ought to find a rope ladder abaft the funnel casing,” sang out the captain. “Drop it over the side.”

Trevor seized the required article, and having made one end fast, allowed it to unroll itself. Without its aid it would have been almost an impossibility for the fugitives, weak and stiff by their privations, to come over the side; but at length the last of the survivors gained the *Karrawangee's* deck.

“What have we here, by smoke?” ejaculated Captain Thomas, pointing to the unusual litter of deck cargo.

“They’re helpless enough,” replied Jack. “But we can’t run any risks, so overboard with ’em.”

It was stern necessity. One by one the senseless Dyaks, relieved of their arms, were unconsciously hauled to the gangway and dropped overboard. If the sudden plunge revived them, well and good, since every man could swim like a duck; otherwise they perished unconsciously.

But there was no time for moralising. Already seven large praus, crowded with armed men, were midway betwixt the ship and the shore.

“I’ve a couple of revolvers, a magazine rifle and a shot gun in my cabin,” announced Captain Thomas. “That is, if the brutes haven’t rummaged it,” he added grimly.

The officers’ and passengers’ cabins had been ransacked, but not completely so. Evidently the plunderers had desisted in their work, intending to return and complete the business, for in a locker under his bunk Captain Thomas discovered the small arms and five hundred rounds of ammunition, of which only seventy were rifle cartridges.

“It’s a pity,” remarked the “old man” as he counted the packets of ammunition; “we could do a lot if we had more to fire with this,” and he tapped the Lee-Enfield with his finger.

“Vat sort is it?” asked Van Huyt, and taking one of the metal cylinders he gauged it with his forefinger and thumb.

“I tink I haf mooch like dis,” he continued. “I go and make look.”

Two minutes later he returned with nearly a thousand rounds of Mauser cartridges.

“Where did you get them from?” demanded Captain Thomas.

“They was in my cabeen, sir,” replied the Dutchman.

“You rascal!” continued the captain, shaking his head in mock anger. “Do you know, sir, that by the company’s regulations you are liable to a fifty-pound fine for smuggling ammunition aboard instead of handing it over to the care of the ship’s officers? Well, well, I’m right glad of it; the cartridges will fit, though the bullets will not carry as far as the proper ammunition. Now, gentlemen, the fun is about to commence.”

“Hadn’t be better load the two signal guns with old nails and give them a dose the moment they gain the deck, sir?” asked Tarlton.

“No,” replied Captain Thomas shortly. “There must be no gaining the deck. Once those rascals set foot on these planks it will be all up.”

With the weapons belonging to the Dyaks that had been collected on their owners’ abrupt departure, every man on board was well armed, and lining the starboard quarter they opened a rapid fire on the leading prau.

Every man was a good shot, Ned and the other Queenslanders particularly so, and at that easy distance the execution with the rapid-firing weapons was great.

Though in a sinking state and littered with dead and dying, the canoe gained the shelter of the *Karrawangee’s* stern, while the others, profiting by the diversion, ran alongside with but little loss.

The trailing ropes had already been removed, but from the praus long ropes of coco-fibre, terminating in hooks not unlike grapnels, were flung with the utmost skill, and, engaging in the ship’s stanchions, formed an easy means of ascent to the bloodthirsty Dyaks.

Wielding their arms with tremendous activity, the defenders sheered through the ropes as quickly as they were cast, while on both sides a continuous fire was maintained till the air was thick with the pungent fumes of smokeless powder.

Foiled in their attempt at boarding, the Dyaks desisted, and lying close alongside kept up a heavy though erratic fire whenever one of the defenders tried to get in a shot at their savage foe.

“Lindsay!” exclaimed Captain Thomas, during the temporary lull. “Bear a hand with the gig, and when I give the word pass a knife through the falls.”

Hanging inboard from the davit was the twenty-two feet gig, weighing eight hundredweights. Lindsay was no novice at getting out a boat, and with a lusty heave the craft swung outboard.

“That’s it!” ejaculated the captain, taking a hasty squint over the bulwarks and dodging back in time to escape a volley of small arms. “Now.”

Ned was a trifle quicker with his knife than the captain. The gig, held by the after falls, dropped into nearly a vertical position, then as Captain Thomas cut the remaining fall the ponderous mass of wood crashed into the native craft immediately beneath it.

There were very few survivors in that particular prau, and the other craft, all more or less in a sinking condition, paddled madly for the shore, followed by a rapid fire and a hearty cheer from the defenders.

“That’s good enough for the present,” cried Jack, throwing down his hot rifle and wiping his brow with his shirt sleeve. “Now for a good drink of water.”

“Ay, we could do with it,” exclaimed Captain Thomas, for now the heat of the action was over the agonies of thirst were beginning to assert themselves. “Cut below, Strawbridge, and bring up a small barrico.”

The quartermaster vanished down the companion, while the wearied defenders threw themselves down in the shade to enjoy a well-earned rest.

They had not come out of the ordeal scathless. Van Huyt was swearing over the loss of a little finger that a bullet had neatly amputated at the second joint; Scott had received a wound through the fleshy part of his left shoulder; Tarlton’s face was lacerated by a splinter from the rail; while Jack Trevor found that he had sustained a clear cut between his ribs. How or when it occurred he had no recollection. Ned suggested that the wound had been received when Jack tackled the Dyak lad in the village, and Trevor was forced to accept his friend’s theory as fact.

At last the quartermaster reappeared, his bronzed face grey with excitement.

“The villains have started every blessed tank, sir,” he announced.

“What!” exclaimed Captain Thomas. “And the fresh water from the boilers?”

“Every drop, sir,” replied Strawbridge.

Blank dismay was apparent on the faces of the forlorn band. In addition to perils from the bloodthirsty Dyaks they were threatened with the tortures of unquenchable thirst.

CHAPTER VIII

DANGER FROM WITHIN

“I ’LL HAVE a look below myself,” exclaimed Captain Thomas. “Perhaps things are not so black as they appear to be. Mr. Trevor, you too, Mr. Lindsay, can accompany me. The rest of you will kindly arrange to keep a sharp look out and call us at the first sign of danger.”

Taking a hand-lamp from the quartermaster, the captain descended the ladder, the two friends following him.

It wanted but a cursory examination to prove the truth of the quartermaster’s assertion. The brass taps of the huge fresh water tanks had been ruthlessly wrenched off, and the precious fluid had been allowed to run into the scuppers.

“The lubbers!” was all that the dumb-founded captain could exclaim as he surveyed the damage.

The boiler supply tanks were in an equally bad plight. Even the copper feed pipes had been removed, while the condensing apparatus, on which the crew depend when the tank supply runs short, had been mutilated beyond repair.

“Let’s have a look at the engine-room,” suggested Ned. “I’m not an engineer, but I reckon I can raise enough steam to get the pistons to move. Besides, we can devise some means of collecting and condensing the steam.”

The explorers did not require to descend the steep iron ladder into the engine-room to discover that the Dyaks had already been at work in that part of the ship. Nearly every brass and copper pipe had been removed, while the headless bodies of the engineer and his assistant showed that these officers had died at their posts.

“What a ghastly sight!” exclaimed Trevor, horror-stricken at the scene of butchery. “How did it occur, Captain Thomas?”

“Don’t ask me,” replied the skipper, shielding his eyes with his hand, as if to ward off the recollections of the tragedy. “Later, perhaps—that is, if we get out of this mess with our lives—I’ll tell you.”

“We’re done as far as moving the ship is concerned,” muttered Ned.

“What’s that? Who said done?” queried the captain with new-found energy. “Don’t I know how to set canvas on her?”

“But the anchor? We can’t weigh that without steam to the capstan.”

“A bower anchor won’t stop me,” replied the captain grimly. “If that were all ’twould be a small matter. But it’s water we want—water, I say.”

“Perhaps there’s some in the stokehold,” suggested Trevor. “The firemen might have left some in their pannikins.”

“That’s quite possible,” rejoined the skipper hopefully. “Now, be careful,” he added as the two came to a door in the bulkhead, “we don’t want broken legs in addition to our other troubles.”

The lamp threw a fitful glare upon the ends of the two huge cylindrical boilers, the furnace boxes of which still felt warm to the touch, while the floor plates were ankle deep in ashes. Apparently the native firemen had surrendered tamely, and had been led on deck to be ruthlessly slaughtered, since there were no traces of a struggle, as in the case of the engine-room.

Holding the lamp in front of him, since there was not room to raise it above his head, the captain adroitly clambered over an iron knee and made his way towards a side bench. The light flickered upon two tin pannikins.

“Hurrah!” exclaimed the captain. “Here’s water sure enough. But we must play the game and share and share alike. Here, Mr. Lindsay, hold it carefully, and pass it on to Mr. Trevor. Gently now.”

With the precious fluid a few inches from their lips the temptation was wellnigh irresistible, but with a great effort the lads withstood the ordeal, and the pannikins were placed safely under the stokehold ladder, while the explorers continued their search.

Suddenly a snarl like that of a wild beast aroused the echoes of the dismal stokehold. Ned caught a momentary glimpse of flashing steel as a little, brown, naked body threw itself upon the captain.

The lantern fell upon the iron floor with a crash and was instantly extinguished, while Captain Thomas’s voice was distinguished above the din.

“Help, lads!” he shouted, and the appeal ended in a shriek that trailed away into a long-drawn groan, followed by a dull thud.

In the inky blackness Ned hurled himself in the supposed direction of the captain's assailant. The palm of his hand came into contact with the razor-like blade of a kriss, cutting it to the bone. The next instant the Australian's brawny arms had encircled the eel-like body of his antagonist, and tripping over the captain's prostrate body, Ned and the Malay—who hitherto had hidden during the fight on deck—fell upon the floor.

Meanwhile Jack had joined in the fray. Although armed with a revolver, he dared not fire, fearing to harm friend as well as foe. Empty-handed he joined in the *mêlée*, groping for the eel-like body of the Dyak.

“Got you, you brute!” yelled Trevor, finding his fingers come in contact with a human throat.

“Knock off, Jack!” gurgled Ned's voice; “it's my neck you're twisting.”

“Have you fixed him?” asked Jack, relaxing his grip.

“Fairly well. Look out for his kriss. I've made him sit on it, but he might wriggle loose at any moment. I wish we had a light.”

Cautiously feeling his way, Trevor found and held the Malay's ankles. The man was motionless. Whether he had been killed by his own weapon, or strangled by the Australian's powerful grip, or merely “playing possum,” neither Jack nor Ned knew. What the latter did know was that the palm of his hand was paining horribly, and the thought flashed across his mind: “Was the kriss poisoned?”

“We can't afford to take chances, Jack,” continued Ned breathlessly. “I'm afraid the brute has done for poor Captain Thomas. I'll put the screw on a little longer. You try and get that ugly knife away from him. Be careful!”

Trevor recognised that there was necessity for caution, and slowly, almost gingerly, he passed his fingers over the Malay's oiled body, expecting every minute to come into contact with the crooked, razor-like blade.

“Captain Thomas, sir!” shouted a voice from above. “Come on deck, please. The Dyaks are returning.”

“Is that you, Tarlton?” replied Lindsay. “Can you pass a light down? We've had a bit of a mess in the stokehold.”

“I'll be with you,” replied the voice of the second mate, “but for goodness' sake look sharp, they'll be alongside in a jiffy.”

It seemed hours ere Tarlton appeared at the head of the stokehold ladder, holding a hurricane lamp in his hand.

“Snakes in Egypt!” gasped the astonished second mate, using his favourite expression, as the dull yellow light flung its beams upon the indistinct forms lying under the wing of one of the furnaces. “What’s up?”

“It is all right now,” replied Jack. “Bear a hand, will you? Captain Thomas has been stabbed. Mind the water.”

Trevor’s warning came too late. Tarlton’s boot, slipping on the lowermost rung of the ladder, came in violent contact with one of the pannikins, and in an instant a quart of the precious fluid was hopelessly lost.

But it was not time for idle regrets. Every available man was required on deck, but ere the occupants of the stokehold could leave the scene of gloomy horror it was necessary that the unfortunate captain should be removed and his wound temporarily attended to.

The Dyak was stone dead. But he had not died by strangulation, though Ned’s grip would have been sufficient. In falling he had run his own kriss deeply into his side, the wound being instantly mortal.

Between them Jack and the second mate contrived to lift the body of the luckless skipper and bear him to the upper deck, while Ned, regardless of his wound, that caused him intense pain, followed, carrying the lamp and the remaining water-can.

Eagerly the eight defenders gathered round the pannikin. The pint and a half of brackish, lukewarm water, tasting like nectar to their parched throats, was scrupulously served out, a double portion being retained for the unfortunate captain.

The attackers were still a fair distance off. Five large praus, crowded with men, comprised the second flotilla, but with apparent irresolution the canoes hesitated to advance with the same impetuous dash that had characterised the first assault.

“I wish they would come on. I don’t like this confounded hanging about; it looks fishy,” observed Jack, as he bound up the cut in his chum’s hand.

“Well, Van Huyt, how goes it?” he continued, addressing the Dutch merchant, who, possessing considerable surgical skill, had applied himself immediately to the captain’s injuries.

“De captain is vot you call ‘hard as nail’; Plenty blood lost, but knife it miss liver ver’ mooch fine,” replied Van Huyt. “He be all vat he call sheep-

shape in early goot time.”

“What are those fellows up to?” asked Tarlton, as he thrust a fresh charge into the magazine of his rifle. “They’ve some devilish scheme afoot. By the by, do you think that there are any more of those greasy reptiles aboard, Mr. Trevor? I think it would be a good plan to secure the hatchways and companion until this business is over. If we come out of it we’ll make a thorough search down below and make sure.”

“Your suggestion is admirable, Mr. Tarlton. We’ll get Scott and Vincent to bear a hand right now.”

Beginning with the saloon companion, the four men began to batten down. It was a work of some difficulty to secure the heavy hatches over the fore and aft holds, yet they stuck bravely to their task, expecting every moment to hear the alarm raised that the Dyaks were advancing to the attack.

“That’s good!” ejaculated the second mate, as the last of the heavy coverings was forced into position by means of handspikes, “now for the fore-peak.”

Even as he spoke, the head and shoulders of a ferocious-looking Malay appeared above the coaming of the hatchway of the hitherto unexamined fo’c’sle, and with a bound the native, knife in hand, rushed towards the white men two others following him in quick succession.

Things happened quickly.

Tarlton neatly dropped the first with a well-aimed shot, the second lurched forward on his face, scrambled to his knees and attempted to continue his mad rush till Jack gave him his quietus. The third, who evidently lacked the fanatical bravery of his companions, turned and leaped over the rail, both Jack and the second mate firing after him as he did so. One, if not both, of the shots took effect, for the Dyak never appeared after his plunge.

“We’ve routed out a nest of them, by Jove!” exclaimed Tarlton. “I wonder if there are any more? Stand by, you fellows, while I clap the hatch on.”

As the young officer advanced towards the aperture a thin wreath of vapour eddied slowly from the fore-peak, followed by a dense column of smoke, emitted with considerable violence.

“They’ve fired the ship, by George!” shouted Vincent, while at the same time, as if expecting the signal, the Malays in the praus sent up a deafening yell, to the accompaniment of the splash of a hundred paddles.

The survivors of the *Karrawangee* were threatened with dire peril both from without and within.

CHAPTER IX

THE SECOND ATTACK

“LOOK sharp!” shouted Vincent. “Fill those buckets.” The Queensland farmer had had plenty of experience in fighting bush fires, and in the face of the new danger his courage and coolness did not desert him.

There was no time to be lost. Already, dull red flames were mingling with the clouds of black smoke, the fiery tongues licking the edges of the coamings and spurting several feet above the deck.

In an incredibly short space of time salt water was thrown into the fore-peak, then, regardless of the smoke and heat, Jack and the second mate contrived to clap on the hatch and cover it with a tarpaulin.

“Keep the deck soused,” continued Vincent. “Can you tell me, Tarlton—can the air get to the source of the fire?”

“The deadlights are closed,” replied the young officer. “There’s only the ventilating cowl. Bear a hand and we’ll unship it.”

“That’s all we can do at present,” said the former as the deck-plate was placed over the aperture left by the removal of the cowl. “We can only hope that the fire will burn itself out for want of air. Now, stand by, the Dyaks are close alongside.”

Already the other members of the defending party had opened fire, and the crackle of a brisk exchange of shots rose high above the subdued roar of the furnace beneath the fo’c’sle.

This time the Malays took good care not to run alongside. Maintaining a respectful distance they yelled and kept up a rapid fire, while one of the smaller canoes made a sudden dash for the comparative security afforded by the overhanging stern.

This craft was laden with combustible material, and having fastened her to the ship’s rudder pintle, the Malays set fire to her cargo and leapt overboard. At the same instant showers of inflammable missiles—balls of cotton saturated with resinous liquid and containing quantities of sulphur—were hurled on the tramp’s decks.

Wellnigh stifled with the noxious fumes that eddied along the deck, the desperate defenders realised that a new peril threatened them, till Jack, Van Huyt and McQuarie, seizing handspikes, tossed the impromptu bombs overboard, although the burning sulphur, falling from the jettisoned material, still continued to emit choking odours.

“We’ll pay them back,” shouted Trevor. “Have you any rockets handy, Tarlton?”

“In a tin case in the chart-house,” replied the second mate, who was engaged in binding his handkerchief round his wrist.

The Dyaks caught sight of the young Britisher as he left the shelter of the bulwarks and ascended the unprotected ladder leading to the bridge. A shower of bullets greeted him, some whizzing close to his head, others knocking splinters from the ladder. But unharmed he gained the chart-house, lowered the rocket-box by means of a length of signal halliard and regained the deck, breathless but unscathed.

“You know how to work these things better than I do,” exclaimed Jack, handing the box to Tarlton. “Let ’em have it.”

The first rocket whizzed harmlessly over the largest canoe, struck the water and darted off like a miniature hydroplane, till it burst with a loud report a good hundred yards from the ship.

The second was more successful. Fairly on the bottom of the prau it struck, where, after fizzing and spluttering between the legs of the terrified Dyaks for about half a minute, it exploded with a deafening detonation. The crew, abandoning their arms, sprang overboard and swam for the nearest prau.

“That’s drawn their teeth!” exclaimed Jack, delighted with the success of his plan. “Now let the others have a taste.”

But the remaining canoes did not wait to participate in the white men’s generosity; they promptly sheered off, leaving the *Karrawangee* with a furnace raging in her fo’c’sle and a fire licking her quarters.

“That burning canoe can do us but little damage,” remarked Tarlton, pointing to the column of smoke that enveloped the ship’s stern. “Steel plates afford no hold for the flames, but it’s more serious for’ard. By the by—anyone hit?”

“You are,” replied McQuarie.

“Oh, that’s nothing. I mean, has anyone been wounded?”

No. Beyond a few scratches and burns, the whole of the defenders had come off lightly from the last attack.

It needed little to tell the crew that the fire in the fore-peak was raging furiously. The iron deck was too hot to walk upon; steam arose from the saturated tarpaulins, while an examination of the bulkhead of the fore-hold showed that the terrific heat was causing the stout metal wall to bulge ominously. Once that gave way the ship would soon become a veritable volcano.

The tarpaulin over the hatchway could be kept well soused, but any attempt to throw water upon the almost glowing bulkhead would cause the metal to contract, burst and release the imprisoned flames.

“We can but hope for the best,” said Ned as the sun sank beneath the horizon and the tropical night closed in with hardly any perceptible twilight. “I wonder if any vessels in the straits have heard the sound of the firing? If so they might possibly alter their course in order to investigate.”

“There is a chance,” agreed Jack.

“How about fresh water?” asked Ned anxiously.

“We might possibly find some more to-morrow,” replied Tarlton. “That is, if we are not burnt out by then. To-night we can find some relief by moistening our throats with the dew. As for food, we have no cause for anxiety. The bread-locker and the steward’s pantry are untouched, except that the spirits have been carried off.”

“We may as well set watches,” continued Tarlton. “I know we all are badly in want of sleep, but that can’t be helped. We’ll draw lots—four to keep watch below, the others to keep watch on deck and to see that the tarpaulins are wetted at frequent intervals.”

This was accordingly done, the four who drew “watch below,” having succeeded in allaying their thirst, turned in, leaving Jack, and Ned, Vincent and the second mate to do duty for four more weary hours.

“The Dyaks seem quiet enough now,” observed Lindsay, indicating the direction of the invisible shore with a jerk of his thumb. “No lights and no noise. Yet all the time they may be on their way to a surprise attack.”

“With two reverses they will doubtless fight shy of us,” replied Tarlton. “We seem quite able to hold our own against them. But the fire on board worries me.”

“And no water on board is what worries me,” added Vincent. “To-day we’ve had a drink, to-morrow we’ll have none, as far as I can see.”

“Look here,” remarked Jack quietly, “I’ve thought of a plan. It might come off all right and it might not.”

“Carry on,” replied the second mate enthusiastically, for he had good cause to thank Trevor for his initiative on more than one occasion.

“I know the country better than any of you—though that’s not much. Of course, I don’t mean that you don’t, Ned, but with your wounded hand you’re out of it. What I propose is this: I’ll disguise myself as a Malay, and take a beaker ashore in the skiff and fill it in the stream that I’ve noticed falls into this creek on the east side. If all goes well I can be back before sunrise.”

“Better wait till to-morrow night,” objected Tarlton. “We may come across some fresh water aboard.”

“There’s no time like the present,” replied Trevor. “So here goes. You fellows might put a beaker into the skiff and lower her into the water while I’m rigging out—or rather unrigging myself.”

Jack’s companions, though they realised the hazardous nature of the errand, knew full well that it would be hopeless to attempt to dissuade him. They could only trust in Providence and in the lad’s good judgment to bring him safely through the ordeal.

Five minutes later Jack appeared, smeared from head to foot in a mixture of oil and soot; while his sole garment consisted of a dark-coloured loin-cloth. In addition to the beaker, a revolver and fifty rounds of ammunition and a boat’s compass had been lowered into the skiff, the rowlocks of which had been carefully greased and the oars muffled.

Then, having shaken hands with his comrades in peril, Jack slid noiselessly down into the little craft, and, shipping the oars, pulled steadily and silently towards the shore.

CHAPTER X

A TIGHT CORNER

SLOWLY the long hours of vigil passed, but though eyes and ears were strained to detect the faintest sign of the daring adventurer, nothing occurred to disturb the intense stillness of the night.

At the end of the four hours Tarlton cautiously awakened the four sleepers below, and heavy with the effects of disturbed slumber the new watch came on deck.

“How’s the cap’n, sir?” asked Strawbridge, pointing to the motionless figure lying under a hastily rigged awning.

“Still insensible,” replied the second mate.

“He will peck ver’ soon,” announced Van Huyt. “Eight hours—sen he will come to his goot senses.”

“The kriss was not poisoned, was it, Van Huyt?” asked Ned.

“Poisoned? Ah no. Eef it be poisoned, der captain he be dead corpse long ago.”

“Thank heaven for that,” ejaculated Lindsay fervently. He had a double reason for thankfulness, since the kriss that had caused the captain’s injury had also lacerated his hand. Nevertheless, his solicitude for Captain Thomas was none the less sincere.

“Where’s your other man?” asked McQuarie suddenly.

In a few words Ned told the reason for Jack’s absence.

“By George! He’s a plucky youngster,” exclaimed the Queenslander. “I hope he’ll turn up trumps. But, you fellows, I’ve had a dream—I dreamt that we had rigged up a still and were turning out fresh water by the gallon.”

McQuarie’s audience was dumfounded, for there were the appliances ready to hand, yet no one had thought of that expedient.

But ere another word could be spoken the silence was broken by six shots fired in rapid succession, followed by a babel of shrieks and shouts.

Grim and silent, the defenders, with rifles at the ready, took up their positions along the bulwarks, their hearts filled with sad forebodings at the

fate of their devoted comrade.

In the meanwhile, Jack, seated in the stern bench of the skiff, propelled the little craft steadily towards the shore. By adopting this position he could keep a lookout ahead and also read the compass-card by means of the phosphorescent needle.

After a quarter of an hour's steady and silent work at the oars the boat's fore-foot grounded softly on the sand. Trevor sprang ashore, and looked about him. His range of vision was limited to a few yards, but there was no sign of the estuary of the little river.

He listened. Beyond the faint rustle of the long grass in the light land breeze and the distant roar of the surf beyond the creek no sounds were audible. Walking a few paces up the shore, Jack reached hard ground, where, kneeling and placing his ear to the earth, he again strove to detect the noise he desired.

"That's it," he muttered. "It's the babbling of the brook, and not far off either."

Returning to the skiff, he pushed off, and keeping parallel to the shore, he was rewarded by the unmistakable and welcome sounds of running water.

Fifty yards farther he ran the boat ashore where a fairly rapid stream, passing over a miniature, stone-encumbered bar, mingled with the waters of the land-locked creek.

Passing the painter round a projecting boulder, Jack stepped out of the skiff, and bearing the beaker under one arm, waded cautiously up the stream, keeping in the shadow of the tall reeds and grasses that fringed the banks.

Dipping his hand in the water, Jack raised it to his lips. Thank heaven, the liquid was sweet and fresh. Eagerly he drank his fill, then, removing the plug from the beaker and opening the top, the lad forced the cask beneath the surface. The gurgling water, as it flowed through the aperture, sounded like soft music to his ears. If he returned in safety his comrades would be spared the agonies of thirst for some days to come.

Having filled the beaker, Jack listened ere retracing his way. Up-stream came the sound of bull-frogs, their discordant croaking mingling with the rustling of the reeds. Once or twice he caught the distant metallic sound that had greeted his ears during his long vigil in the banyan.

Just as Jack was about to shoulder the heavy beaker the moaning of the wind and the croaking of the frogs ceased and a strange silence brooded over the night.

Suddenly the lad became aware of the fact that he was being watched. His keen eyes, now accustomed to the darkness, could distinguish a short, thick-set figure on the bank, its outlines standing out clearly against the gloom.

Jack came to an abrupt halt, his heart throbbing like a steam engine, and silently placing the keg in the water he grasped his revolver and waited.

One shot, he knew, would alarm the village. True, he might wing the savage who was obviously about to bar his way, and under cover of darkness there was a fighting chance of regaining the ship.

Perhaps, after all, he had not been spotted. Acting upon this thought Jack sat down in the stream, the cool water flowing almost to his chin. What with his natural buoyancy and the effort to prevent the barrico from being swept from his grasp, the lad was wellnigh capsized. By dint of a great effort he contrived to recover his balance, and, holding his revolver clear of the water, he took careful aim at the figure on the bank.

"I can only hope that he is alone," thought Jack, his finger pressing lightly on the trigger, but even as he expressed his wish another form, walking with an ungainly gait, appeared from the cover of the rushes.

A guttural cry from the new arrival caused the first savage to turn, then dropping on all fours he rushed towards the other, who as promptly bolted into the jungle.

The danger for the moment was over. Jack, wet from his shoulders downwards with water, and his face clammy with perspiration, rose to his feet. The intruders were not men, but a pair of gorillas.

Jack realised that he had passed through another peril for, once aroused, these ferocious animals are as much to be feared as the most wily savage, their strength being prodigious, and their vitality, even when badly wounded, lasting in the extreme. At length the adventurous youth regained the skiff and depositing the beaker on the bottom boards cast loose the painter and stepped on board.

A hasty, yet careful, look around reassured him; everything seemed peacefully quiet. With renewed hope he dipped his sculls and, taking a compass course, urged the boat steadily and silently in the direction of the *Karrawangee*.

On and on he paddled, using his eyes in an endeavour to detect the tramp's sides, while ever and anon he verified his course by means of the luminous needle.

"Surely I ought to pick her up now," he muttered, resting on his oars and looking anxiously around. He was sorely tempted to give a hail, but, resisting that desire, took to rowing once more.

"There she is!" he exclaimed, as a dark outline became barely discernible in the night, but the next moment Jack gave an involuntary gasp of something akin to terror.

The object he sighted was not the *Karrawangee* but a large prau.

Urged by a score of paddles, moving so rhythmically and silently that neither splash nor sound betrayed the movement, the great canoe was pointing nearly straight for the frail craft. Under cover of darkness the Dyaks were making yet another attempt to rush the few white men who had so far defied their efforts to capture them.

In an instant Jack softly placed his oars on the thwarts and crouched on the skiff's bottom boards, praying yet scarcely daring to hope, that in the darkness the lynx-eyed Malays would overlook the diminutive craft floating idly upon the placid water of the natural harbour.

As ill luck would have it a twist of the steersman's paddle caused the prau to swerve, and the broad blade of one of the rowers struck the gunwale of the skiff.

Instantly there was a general chorus of "waus" of astonishment, and dropping their paddles the Dyaks crowded to the towering sides of their canoe, causing it to dip till her gunwale was within a few feet of the water, while a score of muscular arms were stretched out to grasp the little craft.

Jack was cornered. His soot-stained face was not sufficient disguise, and the natives attempted to grab him as he lay on the floor-boards of the boat. It was literally neck or nothing. Without rising he aimed his revolver point blank at the horde of savages. In six seconds he had fired as many shots and had ejected the empty cartridge-cases from the chamber.

Feverishly he reloaded, the shouts and shrieks of the Dyaks ringing in his ears. Come what may, he meant to die hard.

But to his astonishment the prau was no longer to be seen, although its crew continued to make a hideous din. Terrified by the rapid fire, discharged apparently from an empty boat, several of their companions killed and

wounded (for the heavy Webley bullets were not to be stopped by one body), the Malays frantically resumed their paddles and backed away from the apparently death-dealing instrument of destruction.

Seizing his oars, Jack rowed vigorously—he knew not whither. All he wanted was to place as great a distance as possible between him and the prau he had mishandled.

Scarcely had he made fifty strokes when the welcome sound of a hearty British hail sounded in his ears, and looking over his shoulder Jack saw a lantern showing above the *Karrawangee's* bulwarks, barely twenty yards away.

“Stand by!” shouted Tarlton, dropping the rope ladder over the side. Trevor grasped the means of communication and made a hasty dash for safety; then, remembering the water beaker he sang out for a whip to be lowered as quickly as possible.

It was useless to disguise the fact. Jack Trevor, plucky lad that he was, was in a “blue funk.” Furtively glancing seaward, he passed the bight of the whip round the beaker, then, grasping the painter of the skiff, swarmed up the swaying ladder.

“What’s happened?” asked Ned anxiously. But Jack could not reply, he was trembling like a leaf.

Tenderly Lindsay helped his chum below, while the others speculated as to the reason of the lad’s terror.

“He’s real grit,” observed McQuarie, “but it’s enough to upset his nerves, falling athwart a canoe-load of Dyaks.”

“I agree with you,” replied Tarlton. “It’s all very well to boast, but when I hear fellows yarning about being absolutely fearless——”

“You can safely put them down as——?”

“Ananias,” replied the second mate.

CHAPTER XI

THE SECOND MATE'S SECRET

THE remainder of the night passed off without interruption. Whatever plans the Dyaks had, their attack upon the *Karrawangee* under cover of darkness had been nipped in the bud, and daylight showed the natives busily engaged in repairing several of the canoes that were drawn up on shore.

Jack Trevor was sleeping the sleep of utter physical and mental exhaustion. Captain Thomas had recovered consciousness, but was too weak to take any part in the work of defence. As for the others, they were too weary and stiff from the effect of their wounds, for whether slight or otherwise, insufficient attention had caused their injuries to prove far more painful than they would otherwise have been. On the other hand, the water that Jack had secured under such gallant circumstances had had a most beneficial effect upon the parched members of the party.

The fire still raged in the fo'c'sle, but whether it was slowly and surely gaining or whether it was smouldering itself out, no one could safely say. Nevertheless, the tarpaulins over the deck were kept well moistened, a task that required almost constant attention.

McQuarie was busily engaged, with Van Huyt's aid, in rigging up a still. In other conditions it would have been laughable to watch the stolid Dutchman's antics as he tried to explain to the Queenslander his idea of what ought to be done.

Nevertheless, the result of McQuarie's experiment was anxiously awaited by the rest, since it was natural to conclude that the water would not last more than a few days.

As for Tarlton, he had taken out the magazine rifles, and, perched upon the poop under a temporary awning, was indulging in "pot-shots" at the Malays on the shore. The range, barely 600 yards, was easy, and after a few rounds the Dyaks bolted, leaving their praus on the sand.

The second mate could have dropped bullets very neatly into the village, but, like the rest of his companions, he was a strict humanitarian where the danger of hitting women and children was concerned, and on this account the cluster of bamboo huts was left severely alone.

But the advantage gained by Tarlton's action was not to be underestimated. Until their canoes could be repaired the *Karrawangee* was practically immune from attack, and scattered by the rifle-fire the Dyaks could take no steps to make their praus seaworthy.

During the day a systematic search was made of those parts of the ship that were accessible, with the gratifying result that no more lurking Dyaks were discovered on board.

"It's doubly unfortunate, this fire for'ard," observed Tarlton. "In the first place we cannot get to the shackle of the cable. In the second there is a strong possibility that the base of the foremast has been weakened by the fire. And consequently we are unable to get under way and make a dash for it."

"Exactly."

"But isn't the mast made of steel?" asked Scott.

"It is, but that is no proof against fire. The expansion of the metal under the heat is likely to buckle the mast," replied Tarlton.

"Couldn't we file one of the links of the cable through?" suggested McQuarie. "A cold chisel and a sledge-hammer would also be of use."

"It's not the cable that will give us the trouble, but the mast," replied the second mate. "But in any case, I mean to try the first time the land breeze is strong enough."

Even as Captain Thomas had resumed command the moment he boarded his ship, the responsibility had fallen upon the shoulders of his sole surviving officer from the time that the unlucky skipper had been struck down by the Dyak in the stokehold. Though Tarlton was but a youngster recently promoted, his powers were equal to the occasion, and with coolness and resolution he cheerfully carried out his responsible duties.

"I haven't heard how the *Karrawangee* came to be taken by the Malays," said Ned, as he rejoined the second mate after the examination of the holds. "Captain Thomas hinted that he would, but at present there seems little chance of getting the yarn out of him."

"As far as I am concerned, I can tell you little," replied Tarlton. "It was my watch below. I remember hearing the engines being stopped, and shortly after that the Dyaks poured all over the ship, shouting and yelling like fiends. I believe they sent two praus, attached by a stout hawser, across our bows, and thinking that a collision was imminent, Jackson, our first mate,

gave orders for our engines to be reversed. While the *Karrawangee* still gathered way she fouled the hawser, causing the two praus to bring up one on either side.

“Hearing the shouts, I slipped into my clothes and made a rush for the deck, but the moment I gained the alleyway I was seized and bound by half a dozen of the copper-coloured brutes. Some shots were fired—by the ‘old man’, I believe—but in a trice the trick was done. Some of the officers and passengers were made prisoners, but the others and the native crew, well _____”

And the second mate broke off abruptly.

“How did they get the ship into harbour?”

“Goodness only knows. Towed her in, or hoisted one of their huge square sails. The wind was dead astern, I think. But we’ve to get out again somehow, and I mean to have a good shot at it.”

As was expected, the Dyaks made no attempt to molest the *Karrawangee* during the day. Ere nightfall McQuarie had completed his experiment and had put it to the test, but the water he obtained was discoloured and unfit for use.

The Queenslander put this down to the fact that he had used copper piping, and having proved that he could remove the salt from the water, he energetically proceeded to construct another still, using steel pipes in place of the copper ones.

Thus the day passed, followed by a night of anxiety. Yet, though the noise of the Dyaks on shore could be distinctly heard by the watch on deck, no actual assault upon the *Karrawangee* was made.

Daylight put a different aspect upon the chances of the respective parties. By dint of great manual labour, the Dyaks had hauled their damaged canoes for a distance of nearly a hundred yards, so that they were protected from rifle-fire by an intervening hillock.

This was particularly annoying to the defenders of the *Karrawangee*. Sooner or later the native craft would be put into a state of repair, and a general attack, whether by night or day, would be inevitable.

But the discovery was comparatively unimportant to the sight that met the defenders’ gaze as they looked seaward in the faint hope that a friendly vessel might be visible. Under the lee of one of the natural arms enclosing

the creek lay eight praus, their brown, mat-like sails flapping idly in the light air.

“We’re in for it this time!” exclaimed Scott, dolefully. “They’ll be swarming over our sides within the next two hours.”

“Let ’em,” said the second mate, resolutely. “We’ll meet them half-way. There’s a fairly steady breeze ruffling the water to wind’ard of us, so I mean to cut the cable, hoist fore and aft sails, and make a dash for it.”

“Hurrah!” shouted the three farmers, while Ned and Jack, hearing the sound, came on deck.

“Here are files, cold chisels, and a sledge-hammer,” continued Tarlton, addressing the enthusiastic Australians. “Will you get for’ard and make a start with one of the links? Meanwhile I’ll get Strawbridge to bear a hand in bending the stay and try-sails.”

Directly the three amateur blacksmiths went for’ard, Tarlton looked steadily about him to make sure that no one was within earshot except Trevor and Lindsay.

“I say, you fellows,” he began in a low voice, “you can keep a secret, I know. We are going to make a dash for it. Those Johnnies in the fo’c’sle think it’s because of the arrival of the canoes yonder, but it isn’t. I’d rather fight it out here than trust to steering this old hooker under sail alone through an uncharted channel.”

“Out with it!” exclaimed Ned, encouragingly; “we’ll stick to you in any case.”

“Well, it’s this: the fire is certainly gaining, though up to the present it’s confined to the fore-peak. At any moment the bulkhead might go, and then it would be Hades let loose. But that’s not all. I’ve just had an opportunity of looking through the ship’s papers, for I was ignorant of the contents of the holds, since Jackson, our first, had the storing of the cargo. See, here is the manifest.”

The two chums seized the document, while the second mate pointed to one line with his little finger.

“Four cases of blasting powder, marked G.L. 1, 2, 3 and 4, each containing two hundred and one pounds. Consigned to Thomas and Co., of Singapore, by Dunville Bros., of Sydney.”

“Great Scott!”

“Ay,” replied Tarlton, gravely; “and I haven’t the faintest idea where it is stowed. Now, once again, let me ask you not to breathe a word to anyone; but the fact remains that we are existing upon a mine that threatens to blow us sky-high without a moment’s warning.”

CHAPTER XII

THE LAST STAND

“COULDN’T we find the stuff and throw it overboard?” asked Jack, when he had recovered sufficiently from the shock of the second mate’s announcement.

“That’s out of the question,” replied Tarlton. “In the first place, we don’t know where it is stowed; secondly, we carry a full cargo, and it would take a strong gang of stevedores and a week’s hard work to shift it, although the Dyaks have been at it already. No, we must make a dash for it, and trust to Providence. If we get clear of this harbour we stand a good chance of being picked up by a passing steamer before the fire gets to the blasting powder.”

Unfortunately, as Tarlton uttered these words, Van Huyt appeared from behind one of the deck-houses. In spite of his apparent stolidity, the Dutchman’s ears were sharp.

“Vat?” he shouted excitedly. “Vat? Blasting powder on ze sheep? Mein Gott!” And waving his arms above his head Van Huyt began to run for’ard, wildly shouting the unwelcome news in his terror.

“Stop him!” yelled Tarlton, and with the aid of Jack and Ned the demented Dutchman was overpowered and locked in one of the cabins, just as the three Queenslanders, hearing the noise above the clatter of their work, came aft to see what was taking place.

“Van Huyt’s off his head. Sunstroke, I fancy,” announced Ned coolly. “We’ve been obliged to lock him up.”

“Wonder we aren’t all touched,” remarked McQuarie. “It’s rotten work slogging away at that cable.”

“How’s the work progressing?” asked Tarlton.

“About half-way through,” replied Vincent, holding up a pair of rust-discoloured hands, as if to emphasise the fact that he had not been idle.

“And the sooner it’s done the better,” added Tarlton. “This wind won’t last long, I fancy.”

Gamely the three Australians returned to their arduous task, while Jack and Ned assisted the second mate and the quartermaster in bending the

staysail on the forestay and sending up the “stopped” trysail.

This done, Strawbridge, taking his revolver with him, ascended the bridge and stood by the wheel, while Tarlton and his two assistants went for’ard to help at the work of cutting the cable.

At last the stout steel link was severed, and with a rush and a roar the end of the cable disappeared through the hawse-pipe and plunged beneath the waves.

“Swing her up roundly, lads!” shouted Tarlton laying hold of the staysail halliards. Smartly the stiff canvas rose and bellied out before the breeze. Slowly the *Karrawangee’s* head paid off as she gathered way. Her dash for safety or destruction had begun.

As Tarlton coiled away the fall of the halliard, he placed his hand upon the foremast, then glanced significantly at his two confidants. The lads understood; the hollow mast was hot by reason of the confined furnace below.

There was no time to be lost. The trysail was soon set and sheeted home, then, during their brief spell of ease, the crew had time to survey their surroundings.

The instant their flight was discovered there was a scene of renewed activity ashore, the Dyaks frantically hauling their canoes from behind the shelter of the sand dunes in order to join in the pursuit.

Without the harbour, the newly-arrived praus, lowering sail, paddled for the entrance with the intention of cutting off the labouring tramp, while two of the largest craft were joined by a long coil of rope, so as to repeat the tactics that had been so successful when the *Karrawangee* was boarded before.

“See those beggars playing the Siamese twins trick, Strawbridge?” sang out Tarlton, indicating the hawser connecting the praus.

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Then carry on till I give the word—then hard a starboard and let ’em have it fairly amidships.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

At the most, running on the wind, the huge tramp was doing less than three knots.

She had not only to force her way betwixt the low headlands that bounded the narrow entrance to the harbour, but also to negotiate the intricate passage through the outlying reef, marked only by a break in the milk-white lane of surf.

Anxiously, though with well-feigned indifference, the lads watched the fo'c'sle, where smoke was mingling with the vapour from the well-watered planks, while fifty feet above the deck a thin wreath of bluish haze was rising from the base of the mast.

Nearer and nearer to the intercepting praus crept the *Karrawangee*, the immense bulk heeling to the now stiff breeze. The weather shrouds of the foremast were as taut as bow-strings, but abnormal sagging of her lee shrouds announced to the trained nautical eye that the disaster Tarlton had feared was on the point of taking place—the base of the steel spar was collapsing under the action of the fire.

From the moment of gathering way till the *Karrawangee* came within a cable's length of the hostile canoes dead silence had been maintained on both sides. An ominous hush prevailed everywhere.

Then, like the roar of a hurricane, an ear-splitting war cry came from the Dyaks in front, that was immediately taken up by those in the rear, who, having launched their canoes, were rapidly overhauling the wallowing tramp.

Right athwart the *Karrawangee's* course lay a stout fibre rope, its bight kept above the water by the contrary forces of the two praus to which it was attached.

Unswervingly the tramp headed for the middle of this obstruction. Apparently the Dyaks thought that it was the intention of the white men to override the cable, and redoubling their efforts they increased the strain upon the rope.

“Stand by and let 'em have a good dose,” exclaimed Tarlton, as the defenders took up their position under cover. The white men were now perfectly cool. Van Huyt had recovered from his mad outburst, and, on being liberated, slipped quietly into his place, revolver in hand and a pile of cartridges lying within easy reach. Even Captain Thomas, though weak and unable to walk, had been laid on deck close to the companion ladder, where, grasping a formidable Webley, he was ready to shoot down the first Dyak who showed his head above the poop rail.

“Hard a starboard!” shouted the second mate.

“Hard a starboard it is, sir,” replied the quartermaster calmly, as he rapidly turned the large steering wheel.

To the accompaniment of the crackling discharge of volleys, the *Karrawangee* altered her course, slowly yet surely. Ere the occupants of one of the harnessed canoes could change their position, for in the confusion some were paddling ahead and others astern, the bluff bow of the tramp sheared through the side of the prau.

A hearty cheer broke from the lips of the defenders, only to be checked by the new phase of the evolution. The ship’s way had been insufficient to carry her clear through the situation, and held up by the resistance of the waterlogged canoe, she began to swing broadside on to the wind.

Then with an appalling crash the foremast went by the board, and through the gaping rent in the deck a column of smoke and flame burst forth fifty feet in the air. The for’ard bulkhead immediately gave way, and with a rush and a roar the hitherto bottled-up flames poured into the fore-hold, and from the hatchways the fire leapt with irresistible fury.

“Come aft, all of you!” shouted Tarlton.

The *Karrawangee* was doomed, but if the vessel could be kept off the wind the danger would be averted for a brief space of time.

Half stifled and blinded by the smoke the determined defenders made their way to the poop, where, in spite of the new peril that threatened them, they maintained a smart fusillade upon the yelling Dyaks, who, assured of their victory, yet doubtless full of fury at being baulked of their rich booty, kept a respectful distance to windward of the floating furnace.

Suddenly, with a jar that shook the ship like the blow of a steam hammer, the *Karrawangee* took ground. Ere she slewed head to wind her keel struck upon a rock, and remaining hard and fast she began to settle by the head as the water poured in by the rent in her shattered plates.

“Courage, lads!” shouted Tarlton. “We may yet save ourselves.”

There was, indeed, a bare chance. The wind, still abaft the beam, served to keep the fire confined to the fore-part of the vessel. Head up by the rocks aft there was little fear of the poop being submerged, while if the fore-part of the ship settled in deep water there was a possibility of the flames being extinguished, and the danger of being blown sky-high by the explosion of the blasting powder averted.

It was to be a Titanic duel between fire and water, with an accompaniment of musketry to add to the horrors of the scene.

Slowly the *Karrawangee's* bows settled, while a series of nerve-racking tremors aft showed that the ship was straining on the rocks. If the jagged pinnacle failed to hold her, the hull would slip off into deep water.

Attended by a succession of minor explosions as the water poured into the heart of the furnace, the conflict continued, vast columns of steam being mingled with the eruption of smoke and flame; yet it was evident that though the sea was gaining the mastery below, the flames were none the less surely sweeping towards the poop.

“Bring that beaker aft!” shouted Ned. “Be careful, those rascals are on the lookout.”

It was indeed a hazardous expedition, for as McQuarie ascended the poop-ladder with the barrel under his arm he was greeted by a heavy fire. Yet the Queensland farmer seemed to bear a charmed life, for though the bullets whizzed past his head or struck the ladder under him he carried out his work.

“Keep it this end up,” he exclaimed. “The rogues have put in an extra bung-hole”—he pointed to a clean bullet-hole close to the head of the beaker.

But before the others could assist him and place it on deck, McQuarie dropped the precious cask.

“Sorry,” he said, “but my arm feels horribly numb. I must have knocked my funny-bone as I came up the ladder.”

“Snakes in Egypt, man!” exclaimed Tarlton. “You’ve been hit.”

The second mate was right. A small calibre bullet had passed completely through the plucky Queenslander’s fore-arm as he bore the water up the poop-ladder.

“That’s nothing,” he remarked. “Here, Jim, tie this bit of rag round my elbow—tighter; that’s it, thanks.” And picking up a revolver McQuarie returned to the shelter of the bulwarks.

“It’s lucky she’s settling on an even keel,” observed Jack. “Otherwise we should have precious little protection if she listed. But what about the explosives in the hold?” he added in a low voice.

“Hopeful,” replied Ned. “The fore-hold is already flooded, so if the stuff’s there it’s safe enough. That does away with half our risk from that source. If it’s in the after-hold, the flames have still to pass the engine-room. But there’s no denying the fact, we’re cornered, and unless some vessel puts in this way to see what’s the meaning of the fire, I’m afraid we won’t see tomorrow’s sun.”

“They won’t take me alive,” said Jack, then in a lower tone he added: “Promise me, Ned, if I’m hit and cannot look after myself in the last rush, keep a shot for me, won’t you?”

“I promise—on mutual terms,” replied Lindsay. “Though I hope we won’t have to come to that.”

The Dyaks had now withdrawn, and beyond an occasional long-distance shot they were content to await developments.

Late in the afternoon, midst a deafening succession of crashes, the *Karrawangee* parted amidships, the fore-part sliding into deep water, a dense column of smoke and steam marking the scene of its disappearance. Then, with a sickening lurch, the after-part heeled till the decks sloped at an angle of forty-five degrees, and the lee rail stood barely a foot above the surface of the water.

The defenders were now unprotected from the fire of their foes, while to add to the horror of their situation the flames had obtained a firm hold upon the portion of the hull that still remained above water.

Instantly the Dyaks set up a loud shout and began to paddle their praus towards the wreck.

“It’s a case, now, lads,” exclaimed Tarlton, as he sat on the sloping deck, with his feet propped against the equally inclined bulwarks. “Let’s show the devils how Englishmen can fight to the last.”

“And men of Holland, too,” added Van Huyt.

Even in the extreme moment of peril the men could not forbear to give the Dutchman a cheer as he slid down the deck beside his comrades.

On came the praus, their crews keeping up a heavy fire and brandishing their formidable krisses. Even the hot reception given them by the band of desperate defenders seemed to have no effect upon the bloodthirsty Dyaks. In another moment the high-sided canoes, towering above the lee side of the wreck, would pour a horde of reckless warriors literally on top of the doomed white men.

Suddenly the paddles ceased to thresh the water. The leading praus carried way for a few yards, when, with a common impulse, the Dyaks made panic-stricken for the shore. Somewhere from aloft came a succession of sharp detonations, and in an instant three of the canoes were shattered to fragments.

Hardly daring to trust their senses, the white men sought to discover the meaning of the timely interruption. They were saved.

Barely discernible through the drifting clouds of smoke a huge airship floated overhead at a height of less than four hundred feet. Her quadruple propellers had ceased to revolve, while her crew were busily engaged in manning four quick-firing guns. Of her nationality there was no doubt, for from a staff aft floated the White Ensign—the emblem of freedom and protection on all the known waters of the globe.

“Get your boats and put to windward!” shouted a white-clad officer through a megaphone. His words were barely distinguishable above the crackling of the flames.

Boats! There remained but one or two, and those holed in several places.

Scrambling up the sloping deck, Tarlton gained the weather rail.

“Ay, ay, sir,” he shouted. “But for Heaven’s sake get well to windward.”

But the second mate’s powerful voice was lost in the roar of the conflagration, for the officer on the airship merely motioned to the survivors of the *Karrawangee* to take to their boats.

There was no time to be lost. Already their limited shelter was almost unbearable. Quickly the most seaworthy of the remaining boats was swung outboard and the men scrambled into her, having first rescued the helpless Captain Thomas, and, baling vigorously, the survivors rowed slowly to windward. When a good four hundred yards from the remains of the doomed ship, and within fifty yards of the now deserted shore, they rested on their oars. Then, like a gigantic eagle swooping down upon its prey, the airship slowly descended to within fifty feet of the water.

“Stand by, below there, and make fast,” shouted a hoarse voice, and a coil of rope descended from the long platform of the aerial cruiser.

Once more the huge aluminium propellers began to revolve, and the airship, gathering way, towed the boat swiftly through the water, well to windward of the wreck.

Outside the harbour the order was given to cast off, and the rescuing craft descended till her platform was less than six feet from the surface of the placid sea.

The helpless skipper was the first to be hauled up to safety, then the rest of more or less wounded members of the *Karrawangee's* passengers and crew.

“We are just in time,” exclaimed Wing Commander Sinclair of H.M. Airship *Kestrel*, as the aerial craft rose to a height of four hundred feet, and with propellers running at full speed, headed in a south-easterly direction.

Hardly had he uttered these words than a lurid streak of flame shot upwards, followed by the sound of the explosion. The blasting-powder had completed the destruction of the *Karrawangee*.

The *Kestrel*, lately presented by the Imperial Government to the Commonwealth as a nucleus for the proposed aerial fleet in Australasian waters, was on her long voyage to Victoria.

Shortly after leaving Singapore, the tail of a typhoon drove the *Kestrel* well to the northward. In the act of regaining her course the airship sighted a dense column of smoke and presently the rattle of musketry became audible.

Suspecting that something was amiss, Commander Sinclair ordered the vessel's head to be pointed in the direction of the smoke, and unobserved and unheard in the din, the *Kestrel* came within easy range of her six-pounders before the Dyaks, intent upon their savage work, discovered the presence of the terrifying apparition.

Thanks to the assiduous care of the airship's surgeon and the healing effects of the high atmosphere, the wearied and worn survivors of the *Karrawangee* made rapid strides towards recovery, and when on the ninth day following their rescue the *Kestrel* descended in the vicinity of Melbourne, even Captain Thomas was able to stand on deck and watch the vast throng of excited Victorians as they welcomed the arrival of the Imperial gift.

Jack Trevor lost no time in taking a passage home, while Ned Lindsay, who stubbornly refused to be cheated out of his holiday in the Old Country, accompanied him. In due time they went their different ways, but the parting served to cement the friendship that began on board the ill-fated *Karrawangee*, and was fostered during those adventurous days when they faced death at the hands of the head-hunters.

BUT FOR WIRELESS

I

A STRANGE CONCERT

THE tail-end of the typhoon had passed, leaving in its wake a long, heaving swell under a cloudless sky. The sun was on the point of sinking in a blaze of crimson glory—a pleasing contrast to the copper-coloured clouds that for the last twelve hours had obscured the heavens.

The *Cygnets*, an eighty feet ex-M.L., was forging ahead at a modest eight knots. For the best part of a night and a day she had been battling against the elements, shipping green seas as far aft as her wheel-house as she nose-ended the breaking waves, rolling the while like a barrel and “making good” less than a couple of miles during the period of the typhoon.

Now for the first time for twenty-four hours the crew of the *Cygnets* could—and did—partake of a substantial, sit-down meal.

The *Cygnets's* complement consisted of nine men—rubber-planters from the Federated Malay States. They were all amateurs, although three—Forbes, Sinclair and Standish—had temporarily abandoned their amateur status to take up commissions in the R.N.V.R. during the Great War.

The remainder of the company—Mellor, Trehearn, Browning, Stockdale, Miles and Kemp—were too young to take part in that unpleasant business. Forbes, the senior, was now nearly twenty-nine, while Kemp, the youngest of the party, was “rising eighteen.” The average age of the crew was twenty-one years and six months.

Taking advantage of a slack period, the little party of rubber-planters determined to have a holiday afloat, and, being ambitious and venturesome, their inclination led them to attempt a voyage from Port Dickson, in Negri Sembilan State, to Hong Kong.

It was a long trip for a motor-launch, but the *Cygnets* had proved herself to be an excellent sea boat. Forbes had bought her in England before the worms of the Hamble River had played havoc with her planking.

She had been brought out to Singapore on board a steamer. Here she was reconditioned. Her bottom was sheathed with copper, her canvas wheel-house replaced by a substantial teak affair, while her twin petrol engines—which consumed petrol so extravagantly as to put them beyond the means of anyone but a millionaire—were scrapped in favour of a pair of paraffin motors of considerably less power.

A four-valve wireless set enabled her to send out and receive messages up to a hundred miles by day and more than twice that distance by night.

“Now, you fellows,” remarked Sinclair, the second in command, when the belated meal was finished, “what’s the programme?”

Forbes was on deck, taking his trick at the wheel; Mellor was on duty in the engine-room. The rest of the crew were “standing easy” until midnight, when they would either turn in or turn out, according to the names on the *Cygnets* watch-bill.

“Rubber of bridge,” suggested Browning.

With one accord the others rose to their feet, each man pointing an accusing finger at Browning.

“He stands drinks all round when we arrive at Hong Kong,” announced Sinclair.

“What for?” demanded Browning.

He knew perfectly well the reason. Before the *Cygnets* left Port Dickson each member of the crew was unanimous in declaring that the word “rubber” was to be *taboo* for the whole of the trip under dire penalties should the resolution be broken.

“You know without being told,” replied Sinclair, carefully avoiding the prohibited word.

“But it was in connection with bridge that I used the word,” said Browning doggedly.

“Can’t be helped,” was the rejoinder. “You’ve done it, my lad, so you pay. Any more suggestions to fill in a slack evening?”

“Listening-in,” proposed Miles.

“What’s the use?” objected Trehearn. “All we’re likely to pick up are Morse signals from ships. Eavesdropping, I call it, listening to messages that are no concern to anyone except the people for whom they are intended—

that is, if you're smart enough to follow the dash-dot business, which I doubt."

"There's a concert being broadcasted from Saigon," declared Miles, sticking doggedly to his proposal. "Band of a French regiment of Zouaves amongst other items. I saw the announcement in the *Singapore Times*. Starts at eight-thirty."

"My dear old lad!" exclaimed Stockdale. "Much as I should like to join with you in listening to the merry strains of a military band, I'm afraid it's no go. We're 250 miles from Saigon and our set isn't good for more than a hundred."

"I'll have a shot at it, any old way," said Miles as he glanced at the clock. "The concert ought to be in full swing—850 metres wave-length."

"Get on with it, then," said the doubting one good-humouredly.

The "watch-below" were in what was originally the fo'c'sle, since the ward-room was too small to accommodate seven long-limbed men.

The wireless set had been removed from the compartment it occupied during war-time and had been installed on a fixed table against the after bulkhead.

Connecting up the "lead-in," which during the typhoon with its attendant display of forked lightning had been "broken" as a matter of precaution, Miles set to work to "tune-in."

A discordant braying sound filled the place. The rest of the occupants began to sit up and take notice. The operator was getting something when they expected to hear nothing.

A slight adjustment and the confused scratching sound gave place to a perfectly modulated rendering of a selection from *La Bohème*.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Stockdale.

"Shut up!" hissed Trehearn, like an indignant grown-up reproving a noisy child during the course of a lecture.

The seven listened intently, their heads nodding in time to the entrancing strains until with a characteristic crescendo the far-distant instruments were stopped. Then came a quick, almost unintelligible announcement spoken in French.

"What's he——?" began Trehearn.

He paused abruptly as a voice unmistakably British exclaimed:

“Not bad, eh? There’s to be five minutes’ interval. Ah Ling, bring me a whisky and soda.”

The listeners could hear the voice of the Chinaman as clearly as if he stood close to them instead of at least fifty miles away.

“That’s not Saigon,” whispered Standish.

“’Tis and it isn’t,” said Miles. “I think I can explain. Saigon’s broadcasting. Some vessel has picked up the concert items and has transmitted them on. I suppose they’re anticipating Mackenzie’s experiment.”

“What’s that?” inquired Trehearn.

“Mackenzie, a New York radio expert, proposes to establish a chain of low-power wireless stations round the world—both ashore and afloat—at about two hundred miles interval. Then he hopes to send out a message and receive it himself after it has travelled a distance of between 25,000 and 28,000 miles.”

“What’s the object?” asked Browning.

“Something to do with the alteration of pitch, I believe,” said Miles. “Supposing a sound is sent out by wireless telephony from New York, will it be a semi-tone higher or lower when it gets back after passing through about a hundred and twenty intermediate stations? Of course, it won’t be instantaneous.”

“Why not?” inquired Trehearn. “I thought the speed of electricity was practically the same as that of light?”

“It will take nearly one second for each note to travel round the earth,” declared Miles. “The distance between the receiving and sending sets of each of the hundred and forty stations has to be taken into account, remember. I rather fancy the experiment is to deal with sending radiogrammes along a relatively narrow path, so that listeners-in not in the direct route, so to speak, won’t hear anything. Hello, the five minutes is up! They’re starting again!”

The next item was a violin solo. Although beautifully rendered, the notes were mingled with a variety of subsidiary sounds that had previously been deadened by the powerful strains of the military band.

The thud of a ship's propeller, the splash of the waves against her sides and the subdued sounds of footsteps on deck-planks served to confirm Miles's theory that the wireless concert broadcasted from Saigon had been picked up and re-transmitted by a vessel within radio range of the *Cygnets* set.

Suddenly a pistol shot rang out with startling intensity. Instinctively the listeners in the *Cygnets*' fo'c'sle turned and looked up the hatchway, firmly convinced that Forbes had fired for some unaccountable reason.

Then came another—two more in rapid succession—followed by the thud of a falling body. There was a sound of shattering wood. A door was slammed violently. Still the notes of the "Valse Triste" continued.

"Good heavens! What's happened?" exclaimed Browning.

As if in answer to his inquiry came a man's voice:

"The Chinks are running amok. The Old Man's been shot down. Look sharp there! Pile up that gear against the door. Get the women and children out of it. Make 'em lie down. There'll be bullets flying this way in a brace of shakes. If any of you fellows have guns get hold of 'em. It's a fight to a finish and no surrender!"

II RAMMED!

“ASK FORBES to come below, Trehearn!” ordered Sinclair. “You carry on on deck a bit. Look alive!”

Trehearn departed somewhat reluctantly. The unseen drama fascinated him as it had done the others; but he had the sense to realise that the skipper’s presence was desirable.

In less than a minute Forbes gained the fo’c’sle. Briefly Sinclair explained the situation.

“Can’t we call her up?” asked Forbes. “Try your hand, Miles.”

At last the operator got in touch with the unknown vessel. The listeners could hear the splintering of woodwork, the crash of shattering glass, mingled with the howling of the Chinese assailants as they strove to batter the door that separated them from their intended victims.

For fully five minutes pandemonium reigned. Then came a lull, and the last, long-drawn wailing notes of the “Valse Triste” could be heard.

“Hello, hello!” sang out Miles, taking advantage of the brief interval of quietness.

“By Jove!” exclaimed a man’s voice. “Someone’s calling us up. Hello, there! Who’s speaking?”

“Motor-yacht *Cygnets*,” replied Miles. “What’s the trouble?”

“Trouble enough. Mutiny or worse. We’ve shipped a crowd of Chinese pirates disguised as coolies and they intend to kill every white aboard. Captain and second officer are dead. The chief’s here with a bullet through his shoulder. There are seven of us holding the saloon, ‘sides women and children.”

“What’s your position and present course?” asked Forbes, gently pushing Miles aside.

“I’ll find out from the chief officer,” replied the voice. “Hold on a minute.”

Taking advantage of the pause, Forbes sent Stockdale to fetch a chart of the South China Sea and a pair of dividers and parallel rulers.

“Twenty—fifteen north; a hundred and fifteen—twenty-two east,” replied the unknown voice. “That’s our last observed position. By the tell-tale we’re steaming west by south. I’ll keep you informed if there’s any alteration.”

“Can’t you send out a general S.O.S.?” asked Forbes.

“Sorry, we can’t. The ship’s wireless cabin is in the hands of the Chinks. I’m using a supplementary set for telephonic experiments. How far are you off?”

“Roughly forty-five miles,” replied Forbes. “I’m altering course to close with you. By the way, what’s the name of your vessel?”

“*Rubber Prince*, of Penang. Bound to Singapore from Amoy. Hold hard a minute. Those yellow fiends are——”

With startling abruptness the conversation was broken off. No sound came through the trumpet of the *Cygnets* wireless telephony set.

“Now what’s up?” inquired Sinclair in an awed voice. “Have the brutes rushed them and done them in?”

“Goodness knows,” replied Forbes. “I don’t think so. It was the apparatus that stopped—not the speaker. If it hadn’t we’d be bound to hear the noise of the scrap. P’r’aps a bullet has smashed the gear. Ah, well, it’s no use hanging on to the slack. Stand-by in case communication is resumed, Miles. We’d better be making preparations for our share in the scrap, lads. With luck we ought to sight the *Rubber Prince* in five or six hours. I don’t suppose the Chinks will show navigation lights, though, and ten to one they’ll alter course.”

Having told Kemp to relieve Mellor in the engine-room, Forbes mustered all available weapons on board. They formed a miscellaneous collection. Almost every man had an automatic.

In addition, there were sporting rifles, shotguns and even a breech-loading duck gun. The latter was brought up on deck and mounted on an iron oil-drum, so that it made a good counterfeit impression of a seven-pounder Q.F.

It was now a bright starlit night. All available hands were on deck. Sleep, in the circumstances, was out of the question. With night-glasses or prismatic binoculars the crew swept the horizon, since there was no knowing whether the *Rubber Prince* might have altered course and was steaming towards the *Cygnets*.

If, on the other hand, she had turned northward, then it would be a stern chase and a long one at that.

One bell (12.30 a.m.) had just sounded off when Miles thrust his head and shoulders out of the fore-hatch.

“We’re in touch with the *Rubber Prince* again,” he reported.

Forbes and three others went below.

“Hello, *Rubber Prince!*” exclaimed the skipper. “How goes it?”

“All right so far,” came the reply. “The Chinks disconnected our lead in. Had to rig up a temporary double-wire aerial in the saloon. No insulators available, so had to make do with broken tumblers. No scarcity in that line, I give you my word. We’ve been steaming west-nor’-west the last hour. From scraps of conversation I overheard the pirates are making for Li-nai-chu, on the north of Hainan. They are expecting to fall in with a couple of junks. When they’ve finished looting the *Rubber Prince* the ship is to be scuttled and, on the principle that dead men tell no tales, we’re to be batted down and drowned like rats in a trap. So, for Heaven’s sake, look sharp!”

“We mean to,” rejoined Forbes. “How many Chinks are you up against?”

“There were fifty,” replied the unknown grimly. “At a generous estimate I should say there are now thirty-five. They aren’t quite so careless as they were earlier in the night. And there are only eight of us left.”

“Only eight?” repeated Forbes. “Thought you said there were seven?”

“Three of the original seven are down and out,” explained the unseen speaker. “Four of the lady passengers are bearing a hand—and they aren’t doing so badly. How far away are you, do you think?”

“Thirty miles—not more,” replied Forbes. “And overhauling you at at least five knots on a converging course. Look out for us at day-break.”

Slowly the hours of darkness passed. At intervals Miles turned over to wireless telegraphy in an attempt to get in touch with other vessels within radio distance.

Once he succeeded in attracting the attention of a Japanese ship, but failed to make himself understood. Just before dawn he picked up signals from a British vessel and succeeded in getting into communication with her; until the operator, realising by Miles’ method of signalling that he had an amateur to deal with, abruptly closed down.

When at length dawn broke with a rapidity common to the tropics the *Rubber Prince* was discerned at less than two miles away on the *Cygnets*' port bow.

The former had lost way, although she still had steam up. Just on the point of running alongside was a large junk crowded with men. Another, with her mat sails hanging idly in the now still air, was approaching her prey under the efforts of her yellow crew straining at the sweeps.

"Got 'em cold!" exclaimed Forbes with the glint of battle in his eyes. "Arms all ready and loaded? Good! We'll put the wind up 'em!"

So intent were the pirates that the crew of neither junk noticed the approach of the *Cygnets* until she was within half a mile of them. Instantly there was a mad rush on the part of the Chinamen on board the *Rubber Prince* to seek a futile refuge on the junk alongside. Hastily they cast off the securing warps and pushed off.

It was the worst thing they could have done for themselves. Had they stuck to the steamer and gone ahead at full speed, the *Cygnets* would have been left astern.

On board the unwieldy junk they were helpless, since in the absence of a breeze they could only sweep her along at about a couple of knots.

"Lie down, you fellows!" cautioned the skipper of the *Cygnets*. "They'll start firing in a trice. We'll hail the *Rubber Prince* first. Then I'll ram the pirates. Thank goodness they built M.L.'s with metal stem and bulkheads."

Handling the *Cygnets* as coolly as if he were going alongside a jetty, Forbes brought her within twenty feet of the *Rubber Prince*'s port quarter.

"Ahoy, there!" he hailed.

"Hello!" replied an unnautical voice through one of the scuttles. "Thank heavens you're in time!"

"Have the chinks taken any of you prisoners?" asked Forbes anxiously. "Women and children all right?"

"All present," was the reassuring answer.

Ringling for easy astern, Forbes backed the *Cygnets* clear of the *Rubber Prince*. By this time the nearest junk was a cable's length away—hardly sufficient distance to enable the M.L. to work up to full speed. It was not until she had increased the distance to half a mile that the *Cygnets* began to forge ahead.

“Give it to her all out!” shouted Forbes to the two men in the motor-room. “Hang on like grim death when we bump.”

The Chinamen in the nearest junk realised their danger. They were panic-stricken. A few opened an erratic rifle fire. Most of the pirates jumped overboard and began swimming for the second junk.

On the deck of the *Cygnets* Forbes was the only man standing. The others, with rifles and pistols ready to hand, were lying prone on either side of the deck-house.

The little craft was now making a good twelve knots, her lightly-built hull quivering under the rapid pulsations of the twin engines.

Already Forbes had made up his mind where to ram the pirate junk. Her least freeboard was about twenty feet from the bows, and here the *Cygnets*' sharp stem stood the chance of inflicting the greatest damage to her foe with the least risk of injuring herself.

Then came the impact. With a rending of planks the steel stem of the *Cygnets* simply crashed completely through the junk's port side. Her way carried her on until she came to a dead stop with her bows only a couple of feet from the starboard side of the pirate craft.

“Hard astern!” telegraphed Forbes.

The motor-clutches were promptly placed into the astern position. A double stream of frothy water swept past her sides, yet the *Cygnets* showed no inclination to back away from her huge, unwieldy victim.

Had the pirates stuck to their craft they might have made things decidedly uncomfortable, since the towering stern of the junk completely commanded the deck of the M.L., where there was no protection from a modern high-velocity bullet.

Two or three desperadoes, armed with knives and revolvers, did attempt to gain the *Cygnets*' deck, but dropped almost as soon as their heads appeared above the rail.

Still the *Cygnets* remained interlocked with the junk, which was foundering rapidly.

Forbes began to realise that he was not having things all his own way. There was the great danger of the *Cygnets* being carried down with her victim; for as the junk settled, her jagged planks gripped the M.L.'s bows like a pair of titanic jaws.

Already the *Cygnets* was well down by the head, while her propellers, half out of water, were racing madly and throwing up huge columns of foam.

Suddenly the M.L. wrenched herself clear. The junk, flinging her stern high, disappeared bows first, leaving the *Cygnets* gathering sternway amidst a turmoil of seething water in which broken planks and other flotsam were tossing in all directions.

“Phew! Bit of a tight squeeze that,” commented Forbes. “Nip below, Standish, old son, and see if we’re making any water.”

While Standish was engaged upon his errand the skipper brought the *Cygnets* again alongside the *Rubber Prince*.

By this time the imprisoned passengers had secured their release, only three of whom had come through the ordeal unscathed.

Leaving Sinclair in charge of the *Cygnets*, Forbes boarded the rescued vessel, taking Mellor, Browning and Stockdale with him.

Upon inquiry he found that the native engine-room staff were still at their posts, the pirates having compelled them to keep up steam. All the European officers were either killed or wounded.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Forbes savagely as he caught sight of the mutilated bodies of the captain and another officer lying in the scuppers at the foot of the bridge-ladder. “I meant to let those hounds stand a chance to save themselves. I’ve altered my mind, lads. ‘Tany rate, it’ll save the executioners a job. Sinclair, old son,” he cried to the figure on the *Cygnets*’ deck, “cast off and keep in our wake. I’m going to send the second junk to the bottom.”

Ascending the bridge, Forbes gave a warning ring on the telegraph. The Chinese engineer responded promptly.

Directly the *Cygnets* sheered off Forbes ordered full ahead. Quickly the new skipper of the *Rubber Prince* got the hang of the ship’s steam steering-gear. Steadying her on her helm he made for the second junk, describing a wide semi-circle in order to bring her broadside on.

The bluff bows of the *Rubber Prince*, towering quite ten feet above the junk’s bulwarks, made short work of the second pirate craft.

With hardly a perceptible jar the ponderous steel-built hull of the steam vessel penetrated the side of the junk like a knife jabbing a hole in a sheet of brown paper.

Never stopping, the *Rubber Prince* cut her victim completely in two, the bow portion sinking like a stone, the after part floating for about five minutes before it, too, disappeared beneath the waves.

“Take her, Browning,” said Forbes, relinquishing the wheel. “Course N.E. by N. We’ll have to ease down a bit; if we don’t we’ll run away from the old *Cygnets*.”

Taking a pair of hand-flags, Forbes signalled to the M.L., receiving from Sinclair the reassuring reply that the *Cygnets* was still as tight as a bottle.

“Righto!” semaphored Forbes. “Keep station astern, old man. It’ll be a long trick, but we’ll make more money out of the *Rubber Prince* than we’ll ever do out of a rubber estate.”

* * * * *

Sixty hours later the *Rubber Prince* and the *Cygnets* arrived at Hong Kong, a place that none of the former’s passengers ever expected to see again. Forbes, having handed over his prize and reported the circumstances to the senior naval officer, returned on board the *Cygnets*, where the remainder of the crew had foregathered.

“Good bit of work, that,” he announced. “We’ll have to remain here until we gather in the shekels. Meanwhile I’m going to turn in.”

The rest, with one exception, agreed to do the same. They had had, on an average, less than six hours’ sleep in seventy-two hours.

The exception was Browning. Long after the others were fast asleep he was scribbling steadily.

When at length Forbes awoke he was somewhat astonished to find a note pinned to his clothes. It was an intimation that he had to stand drinks all round several times.

The others each received similar demands, ranging from four to twenty “rounds.”

“What’s all this?” asked Sinclair. “It’s your fist, Browning.”

“It is,” admitted Browning coolly. “You nailed me for a *rubber* of bridge. I’m getting my own back on ‘*Rubber Prince*.’ I’ve been keeping a tally. What’s sauce for the goose, you know.”

“Precisely,” agreed Forbes. “Precisely. As skipper of this hooker it’s my privilege to lead off. Since the nature of drinks isn’t specified, I’ll stand a round of tea.”

THE END

PRINTED BY PURNELL AND SONS
PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *In the Clutches of the Dyaks* by Percy F. Westerman]